

Poetry Series

Nizar Sartawi
- poems -

Publication Date:
2018

Publisher:
Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

Nizar Sartawi(February 16,1951)

Nizar Sartawi is a poet and translator. He was born in Sarta, Palestine, in 1951. He holds a Bachelor's degree in English Literature from the University of Jordan, Amman, and a Master's degree in Human Resources Development from the University of Minnesota, the U.S.

Sartawi is a member of the Jordanian Writers Association, General Union of Arab Writers, and Asian-African Writers Union. He has participated in poetry readings and festivals in Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Kosovo, and Palestine.

He is currently working on a translation project, Arab Contemporary Poets Series. Sartawi's poems and translations have been anthologized and published in books, journals, and newspapers in Arab countries, the U.S., Australia, Indonesia, Italy, the Philippines, and India.

Sartawi lives with his family in Amman, Jordan. He has one son, three daughters, and four grandchildren.

Another Annum

Another annum
of my life
some friends come
and stay within our heart
others come
and go
sometimes vanishing
like a mass of fog
a buff of wind
or smoke
a mirage
or an illusion
as though they've never been

And in the end
we too vanish
but we never see them again
whether in Heaven
or in Hades

Nizar Sartawi

Between Two Moments

When passion roars
in our bosoms
for riding on horseback
that breaks through fortresses
or mounting a cloud
to plant in its whiteness
the banners of madness
or ascending a star
to break in its space
the barriers of silence
it's alright to search for a myth
in whose folds we tuck
a few details that
make known our presence
that they may
give a couple of sparks
or light up a couple of candles
or add a couple of sentences
to the lines of our life, confined
between two moments of the spirit's manifestations

the moment of its rise
in a dumbfounded embryonic lump
and the moment of its convulsion
in a conquered heartbeat.

Nizar Sartawi

Blank

Blank

Nizar Sartawi

He's asking us
to fill the blank
(.....)
Is he frivolling
Or mocking?

And how to fill the blank?
(.....)
And what is it that fills the blank?
(.....)

What's the blank?
A frenzied whirlpool swallowing man
a black hole gulping space and time.

Nizar Sartawi

Children Of The World

What is the difference?

Whether you snatch their lips away
from their mother's tits
and lock them up
in tender age
shelters
or pack them into a cage -
a new Guantanamo
inaugurated
for babies and toddlers

or shoot their mama
papa
sisters
brothers
and then allow them to go
free

or send your tanks
and jets
and drones
to blow their houses
- and bodies too -
to smithereens

or drop barrels of poison gas
or white phosphorous
upon their homes

or burn them alive
inside a gas chamber?

What is the difference
whether they are
from Mexico or from Yemen
Iraq Somalia Afghanistan
Syria Gaza or Myanmar

Whether Buddhists Christians Hindus
Muslims or Jews
yellow white or black
Rohingya Kurdish Or Latino?

It all catapults
to the center of the human heart
if there be left a human heart

Nizar Sartawi

Containment

My sails are wandering aimlessly.
I've never thought my passion would be lost
for the sands of the shore
hidden in the grip of fate,
that the waves would rob me of my sensibility
the spray would capture my eyesight
my memory would go obscure
and all my nostalgia will melt
for swords and bridges,
for shops, for taverns and women,
for terrains,
fields
seasons
moons
and ancient monuments.

And I've never reckoned
as the engulfing hurricanes swooped on the boat
that I'd I feel numb,
my limbs would shrink thus,
my features would be erased,
and I'd be contained by the moment of mist
the moment of presence
between the soaring of seabirds over my head
and the swirling of whales under my skeleton

(Translated from Arabic by Nizar Sartawi)

Nizar Sartawi

Diabolical Truce

This time
the Synagogue and the Mosque
were resolutely reconciled:

They both agreed...
YES They Agreed
it was a great offense
for this young Jewess
to be in love
with that young Arab from Palestine
or that same Arab
to be in love
with this same Jewess.

Mosque and Synagogue
concurred without hesitancy
that
it was a deadly sin...
A Deadly Sin
for this Arab
and that Jewess
to be wedded,
a deadly sin for them
to live under a single roof,
a deadly sin
to share one bed,
a deadly sin to kiss
to touch
to talk
or even wave,

that at all costs
this
Will Not BE...

Self-willed,
the young couple eloped
to seek asylum
in the Church

they knocked and knocked
on the locked church gate
One click...
and the gate was now securely
double-locked.

The Denouement:
Two corpses lying on the ground
facing the open space
trying to make
some sense
out of a senseless world!

(to be continued... in the afterworld)

Nizar Sartawi

For Sale: A Wheelchair

(For Ibrahim Abu Thuraya)

For sale: a wheelchair
in good condition.
The seat is black
wide, warm
and clean (blood stains
washed off) :
the two push handles: soft and comfy;
they have been held with love
and care;
the armrests rarely have been used;
footrest and footplate -
still brand new.

The owner used it for the last time
when he left the Shati refugee camp
to join the crowds
who hailed Jerusalem as their own
and hurled stones - their live ammunition -
across barbed wires
that circled Gaza.

The 29-year-old amputee,
jumps off the wheelchair
falls on his knees;
he crawls towards the prison fence
his right hand holding
a Palestinian flag,
his left-hand fingers making a V.

A sniper on the other side
smiles
as he takes aim...
and whizzz...
the bullet finds the stubborn head
and
he
falls

dead!

~ ~ ~ ~

For sale: a very special wheelchair
with a history extraordinaire
lying there
like a question mark above
the Homeland
The price: your blood...
his blood
her blood
or mine...!

* * * * *

Nizar Sartawi

For Zulfa

Awakened
by her fragrant breath
her warm whispers
floating above my face
her hands
holding mine
I touch her fingers
one
by
one
passing my lips
on the soft skin.

The smell of the hot coffee
fills the room
I take
a deep breath
as the morning sunshine
brightens the olive green curtains.

? ? ?

Nizar Sartawi

How...?

How did you droop
like a captain horrified by a storm
when in your horizons
flocks of white clouds passed
tickling the eyelids of the sun,
and close to your vacant eyes
ecstatic daffodil tresses
went swaying in rapture
at the edges of the stream
sipping wine from the golden horizon
and pouring drunken ghosts
in the mirror of the staggering water?

How did you slacken
like the leaves of autumnal age
when at the brightening of the moment
a choir of children
were born
who rose from the sleeves of flowers
like night lovers
and their legs, tattooed with henna,
slim like desert antelopes,
went running after the shadows of the clouds
to catch the rainbow arc
lying between the threads of the sun
and learn magic from him?

How did you disappear
like a terrified squirrel
when from the lobes of clouds
came into sight
from whom sighs resounded
revealing the passions of the gypsy body
running away from the passageways of tramping,
veiled, out of fear,

with the fog of dawn
wet with rain drops,
drowned in the pains of memory?

How did you miss the light dwelling in your niche,
the fresh joy in your times,
the promising hope in your mirror,
love flowing on your papers,
the wide-open door before you
and the spray of April's gentle breeze
embracing your dreams,
scattering flowers in your pathways?

How did your colors spill,
your melodies regress,
and your beaches depart?
Woe to you!
You've wasted the years of life like scattered dust
and dug a grave for your heart.

(Translated from Arabic by Nizar Sartawi)

Nizar Sartawi

Leaf

Little lonely leaf
knocking on the glass door
with your whole feeble
form
gaping at me
begging for
refuge!

Poor purplish fragile fugitive
Tired -
of running away
from nook to nook
threatened -
by the ruthless autumn wind
and unheralded rain?
Frightened -
by the heavy plodding pedestrian feet
the hideous hooves
and horrendous hoops?

Come in
tiny timid tramp!
Let's sit
side by side
to tell silently our sad story
and voicelessly lull each other
to sleep.

... For I too
am but a deciduous
leaf
counting the days
before its fall

Nizar Sartawi

My Shadow

Oh my shadow how you tire me out
you, the deformed ghost
of the agony dwelling within my ribs...!
How you push me to hide in the dark for fear
of you...!

When your ominous emaciated
gloomy image
chases me
or your clumsy silhouette□
painted on my path
paces ahead of me
I feel I'm trotting
in front of you
or after you
against my will
that you are pricking my neck
or pulling me by the nose
And if you beside me walk
I feel a monster lying in ambush

about
to
rise up
on his feet
like a ghoul,
and leap
upon me
and put me
to death

All day long I tell
myself:
When my hour comes tomorrow
or after tomorrow
no doubt the angel of death will come
for me alone
and forget you...
and you will attend my funeral

and take part in my burial

And when I'm laid inside the earth
and all my buddies depart
you'll linger a while above my grave
to gloat over my misfortune
and laugh out loud
then go away

Who knows whom you will go with
after me!
to whom the bad luck will be passed!□
a human like me, haunted with his premonitions
or a ferocious monster...?

Nizar Sartawi

Obstinate Leaves Haiku

a november storm
leaves hang on obstinately
the chagrined autumn

Nizar Sartawi

Onions - Haiku

her eyes filled with tears
but she goes on singing
and cutting onions

Nizar Sartawi

Ragnarök

We're born in the ice lands of Ragnarök*
neither complaining nor wailing
bearing sword and flames in our hands
we fight the ice and the Giants
and push away the colossal death.
The women who fly in the space -
to bear our dead to Valhalla** -
never come
Glory never dances in our eyes
The gods do not heal the wounds in our bodies
We drink no wine in the skulls of the enemies

Ice and Giants march on
swords freeze in our hands
blood freezes in our veins
we drown in ice
After Ragnarök we turn into a block of ice

1975

(Translated from Arabic by Nizar Sartawi)

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* Ragnarök, in Norse mythology, was the predestined death of the Germanic gods. A three-year winter led to a final battle on the Vigrid Plain, where the gods and the frost giants fought the epic final battle. Ragnarök marks the end of the old world, and the beginning of the new, current world.
Many of the Germanic peoples believed that the same type of battle would again occur.

** Valhalla is the great hall of the heroic dead. Warriors who died in glorious battle wait in Valhalla until Ragnarök. Valhalla was the heaven of the Vikings - a large hall where wounds healed quickly and meat was readily available. A constant routine of fighting and feasting ensured that the warriors were at their physical peak when Ragnarök came.

Rendezvous - Haiku

in the afternoon
his rendezvous with her
and her shadow too

Nizar Sartawi

Solstice

He calmly stepped out
from his golden dwelling
in the great Okeanos
as Eos of the saffron-colored robe
opened the gates of heaven
with her rosy arms.

He leafed
through the tome of Time,
and took a glance
at the charts of the cosmos.

With his Titanic hands

he balanced the aureole of the sun
around his head,
ascended he his gilded chariot,
seized the reins
and beckoned his wingèd steeds
to race across the space.

~ ~ ~ ~

O Helios,
Great Lord of the skies
scion of old Uranus:
Your humble vassals,
beseech your grace:
As you adjust the solar clock
to bring about the blessed solstice
let not your heavenly stallions
veer downward

and set the earth ablaze

Nizar Sartawi

The Bedouin's Song

i'm just a bedouin:
i live in a tent -
cozy an' fair
its fabric woven
from rough goat-hair -
a shady cover
in the summer
a rain-proof shelter
in the winter

my possessions:
a single garment - a tall black robe
that I call a thobe
a pair of worn out sandals
a coffee kit
and other little things
i put in a sack
that may not fit
with countrysiders' appetites
or urbanites'

my homeland:
all this infinite expanse
of deep beige sands

my sole companion:
a faithful camel
who carries me
and all my stuff
and together we cross the endless desert
and when i sing
some cameleer song
he gets so light
out of delight
and makes as if to fly
towards the sky

* * * * *

Nizar Sartawi

The Execution

Here they come
the frequent trespassers of this terrain
in their tattered truck
The heavy black boots
step down

Their helmets on
and safety glasses
their ear muffs
thick face shields
and Kevlar chaps
they march forward
with calculated steps

There she stood –
a lone giant Lizzab tree
an old green fortress –
as the gang approached

They sized her up
they measured and marked
and then the
saw
so big so sharp
whirring
whining
grinding
until the mountains quivered with dread at
the cracking
the crashing
the crunchy bone breaking

Nizar Sartawi

The Last Whisper

Farewell
lest the cells of feelings die
as this moon
will go away
leaving me
for the beasts of the dark
and I've woven for him
from the hymns of my heart
love scarves
that the wind flung on the roads
tattered and bleeding

Farewell
for my path is long...
long
Its end is the peak of the impossible
And standing here
under the midday sun
will turn me into
a mass of ash
And I must sit in the shadow...
of a straw
to keep in myself some sense
equal to a straw

Farewell
that I may find me a companion
to sell him
what's been left
of the legends of an old love
in return for a whisper
a smile
a word
a glance
laugh
any price

1970

(Translated from Arabic by Nizar Sartawi)

Nizar Sartawi

The Wind And The Olive Tree

The vengeful wind of autumn roared

threateningly

at the olive tree:

"I've come again

for you old witch

I'll unravel your dark green dress,

stitch by stitch

I'll break your limbs

I'll crush your bones

until the skies hear your moans

I'll spill you blood

until the dry dirt in these fields

turns into mud."

"I know, "

replied the thick rough trunk,

"you told me so

twelve months ago."

Nizar Sartawi

Turtledove Of The Green Land

Dedicated to Tunisian poet, Huda Hajji

O Witch!

O Lady of the meadows of golden spikes and dark olive groves
on the foothills of Atlas Mountains
How you amaze the lining of the azure sky
with the glamour of the Earth
when its flaccid grass
beneath the flames of the sun
turns in your petit fingertips
into braids
of rainbows
and necklaces of emerald, rubies, and pearls!

Ah, turtledove of the Green Land! *
I see the alphabets shimmer through your veins
whispering brooks
of love spittle
pouring in your great sea,
that tyrant whose waves
bubble in your depths
and whose spray, perfumed with musk,
ascends with your breath
to quench the thirst of roses.

O Fairy coming from the Thousand Nights!
who will describe the buds of your passions
as they fly like ghosts
dancing in the heart of the clouds
squabbling with comets
waving to the galaxies
and igniting the heart of the jealous moon?

Ah, shepherdess of deer!
on the banks of Medjerda**
you of whom Ishtar*** is jealous
and Aphrodite
regards your rosy cheeks
with an envious eye
O friend of the nymphs!
O spoiled child of the angels!
O beloved of the Gods
When you hold the lute to your bosom
and your fingertips flirt with its winged strings
my old, wretched heart,
in whose chambers
all the sorrows of the world have settled,
rises up
to dance its awkward dance
like a circus bear.

July 28,2010

(Translated from Arabic by Nizar Sartawi)

* The Green Land refers to Tunisia.

** A Tunisian river that springs from Algeria and pours into the Mediterranean Sea

*** Assyrian and Babylonian goddess of fertility, love, war, and sex.

Nizar Sartawi

Two Sparrows And My Heart

All alone,
peering out the window
before sunrise,
I return the greetings:
Two sparrows, ash-colored,
tinted with clouds,
turn their eyes to me
and say: 'good dawn sir'
and fly with the breeze
far away... far away...
and my heart leaps
and I cry...
and cry...
and cry...

(Translated from Arabic by Nizar Sartawi)

Nizar Sartawi

Vision Inside The Train

All of a sudden
the wall melts

And from the sides of the train
wedding processions come into sight
pretty women arrive
singing, dancing,
playing the melodies of a reckless guitar
A water brook flows
on whose banks groves swing
In their shade lovers meet
Glasses are passed around
that spin the heads
and the past and future meet
in the passing moment

And all of a sudden, too,
the wall returns
and the click of the wheels,
and the train goes on.

(Translated from Arabic by Nizar Sartawi)

Nizar Sartawi

You Are In Baakleen

Hey you passer-by!
Linger awhile
Adjust the handles of your watch
on the rhythm of the things around you
The sun slows down his pace
when he passes from here
to fill his eyes with the Chouf foothills

Stop, O passer-by!
Adjust the beats of your heart.
Here the Chouf peaks
hug the clouds
Here the brides of cedar
feed from the breasts of the sun
Here is the ascension of love and ecstasy
Here the gods pour their aged wine
in the mouths of poets

Dismount O passer-by!
Take off your sandals
for you are in Baakleen*

January 21,2011

(Translated from Arabic by Nizar Sartawi)

- - - - -

*Baakleen is a city located in Chouf Mountains,45 kilometers southeast of Beirut,
Lebanon.

Nizar Sartawi

Zeit And Za'atar

I'm hungry mamma!
Here sweetheart, she said
sit down!
I sat on a mattress on the floor
at a low round table.
She placed before me
a bowl of olive oil,
a tiny saucer filled with thyme,
a loaf of bread hot from the taboon
and a glass of water.
Now see, she smiled,
we break a tiny piece of bread,
dip it in the zeit
and slowly slowly lift it up.
See how the zeit is dripping!
We brush it against the edge,
so that the drops won't stain our clothes
We let it touch - just touch - the za'atar
and lift it up to our mouth.

She lifted it towards my mouth
I took it in and chewed and swallowed

Said she: the za'atar, son,
is blessed by the soil
the land's gift to its people
The olive tree is blessed by Allah.
It's Allah's gift to the holy land
and to the people
of Palestine.

Nizar Sartawi