

Classic Poetry Series

Tarafah ibn al Abd
- poems -

Publication Date:

2004

Publisher:

Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

Tarafah ibn al Abd(543 - 569)

Tarafah ibn al 'Abd ben Sufyan ben Malik al Bakri of the tribe of the Bakr ben Wa'il was born in 543 AD in Bahrain on the Persian Gulf. His father died when he was still a child. His maternal uncles, bound by law and custom to take him in, were greedy and scornful men who neglected his education and robbed him of his rightful inheritance. Tarafah took to women, wine and gambling as soon as he was old enough angering his tribe so much with his excesses that they ordered him to leave.

After leaving the tribe he wandered from country to country perhaps venturing even as far as Abyssina (present day Ethiopia). Most of the truth of his life is obscured by stories and legends. Tales have it that he alternated between wild sprees of womanising and drinking and meditating on the meaning of life in the desert. Once he attempted albeit unsuccessfully to reintegrate with his tribe. After this he went back to his nomadic ways and began to write poetry as well, though according to some stories he wrote poetry from the age of seven.

One day he came upon the city of Hira which was ruled by Amr ben Hind. Hira at that time was rich and opulent and like all great cities drew people from all over. The King Amr bin Hind heard that Tarafah was a poet and received him at court and treated him with respect. At the court Tarafah met his uncle Al Mutalammis and his brother-in-law, Abd Amr ben Bichr (who was married to his sister the poetess Al Khirniq) both poets. Tarafah though had been a nomad too long to have the diplomacy and manners required at the court. He was not afraid to speak his mind and his outspokenness ruffled many feathers at court, and antagonised many important people. He angered his brother-in-law, by accusing him of ill treating his sister. Then he composed a satire on king Amr himself and on the latter's brother, Prince Qabus. The enraged brother-in-law used the occasion to turn the king against Tarafah. The royal revenge against the poet was not long in coming. Tarafah and his uncle received letters from the king to be taken to the latter's governor in Bahrain. On the road Al Mutalammis became suspicious, broke the seal and read the letter: it was his death warrant. He tore it to pieces and told his nephew to do the same, but Tarafah refused to even open his letter. When they reached Bahrain they went to see the governor who happened to belong to the Bakr, Tarafah's own tribe. The governor read the letter and told Tarafah to get out as fast as his camel could run. The nomad-poet refused so the governor has him thrown in jail and he wrote to the king to name another governor as he refused to have the young man executed. The king complied with this request, naming a new governor who belonged to the tribe of the Beni Taghli who had long lived in enmity with the Bakr.

The new governor told Tarafah that he had to have him killed but he could choose the way he preferred to die. Tarafah's answer was to fill him with wine all the way up to the throat. Then to bleed him to death. Which is what happened. That was in 569 AD, and Tarafah wasn't thirty yet. His tribe bemoaned his death and his sister, Al Khirniq, composed a glorious ode in his memory.

The Ode Of Tarafah

A young gazelle there is in the tribe, dark-lipped, fruit-shaking,
flaunting a double necklace of pearls and topazes,
holding aloof, with the herd grazing in the lush thicket,
nibbling the tips of the arak-fruit, wrapped in her cloak.

Her dark lips part in a smile, teeth like a comomile
on a moist hillock shining amid the virgin sands,
whitened as it were by the sun's rays, all but her gums
that are smeared with colyrium -- she gnaws not against them;
a face as though the sun had loosed his mantle upon it,
pure of hue, with not a wrinkle to mar it.

Ah, but when grief assails me, straightway I ride it off
mounted on my swift, lean-flanked camel, night and day racing,
sure-footed, like the planks of a litter; I urge her on
down the bright highway, that back of a striped mantle;
she vies with the noble, hot-paced she-camels, shank on shank
nimble plying, over a path many feet have beaten.

Along the rough slopes with the milkless shes she has pastured
in Spring, cropping the rich meadows green in the gentle rains;

to the voice of the caller she returns, and stands on guard
with her bunchy tail, scared of some ruddy, tuft-haired stallion,
as though the wings of a white vulture enfolded the sides
of her tail, pierced even to the bone by a pricking awl;
anon she strikes with it behind the rear-rider, anon
lashes her dry udders, withered like an old water-skin.

Perfectly firm is the flesh of her two thighs--
they are the gates of a lofty, smooth-walled castle--
and tightly knit are her spine-bones, the ribs like bows, her
underneck stuck with the well-strung vertebrae,
fenced about by the twin dens of a wild lote-tree;
you might say bows were bent under a buttressed spine.

Widely spaced are her elbows, as if she strode carrying the two
buckets of a sturdy water-carrier;

like the bridge of the Byzantine, whose builder swore
it should be all encased in bricks to be raised up true.

Reddish the bristles under her chin, very firm her back,
broad the span of her swift legs, smooth her swinging gait;
her legs are twined like rope untwisted; her forearms
thrust slantwise up to the propped roof of her breast.

Swiftly she rolls, her cranium huge, her shoulder-blades

high-hoisted to frame her lofty, raised superstructure.

The scores of her girths chafing her breast-ribs are water-courses
furling a smooth rock in a rugged eminence,
now meeting, anon parting, as though they were
white gores marking distinctly a slit shirt.

Her long neck is very erect when she lifts it up
calling to mind the rudder of a Tigris-bound vessel.

Her skull is most like an anvil, the junction of its two halves
meeting together as it might be on the edge of a file.

Her cheek is smooth as Syrian parchment, her split lip
a tanned hide of Yemen, its slit not best crooked;

her eyes are a pair of mirrors, sheltering
in the caves of her brow-bones, the rock of a pool's hollow,
ever expelling the white pus more-provoked, so they seem
like the dark-rimmed eyes of a scared wild-cow with calf.

Her ears are true, clearly detecting on the night journey
the fearful rustle of a whisper, the high-pitched cry,
sharp-tipped, her noble pedigree plain in them,
pricked like the ears of a wild-cow of Haumal lone-pasturing.

Her trepid heart pulses strongly, quick, yet firm
as a pounding-rock set in the midst of a solid boulder.

If you so wish, her head strains to the saddle's pommel
and she swims with her forearms, fleet as a male ostrich,
or if you wish her pace is slack, or swift to your fancy,
fearing the curled whip fashioned of twisted hide.

Slit is her upper lip, her nose bored and sensitive,
delicate, when she sweeps the ground with it, faster she runs.

Such is the beast I ride, when my companion cries "Would I might ransom you,
and be ransomed, from yonder

waste!"

His soul flutters within him fearfully, he supposing
the blow fallen on him, though his path is no ambushade.

When the people demand, "Who's the hero?" I suppose
myself intended, and am not sluggish, not dull of wit;

I am at her with the whip, and my she-camel quickens pace
what time the mirage of the burning stone-tract shimmers;
elegantly she steps, as a slave-girl at a party
will sway, showing her master skirts of a trailing white gown.

I am not one that skulks fearfully among the hilltops,
but when the folk seek my succour I gladly give it;
if yo look for me in the circle of the folk, you'll catch me.

Come to me when you will, I'll pour you a flowing cup,
and if you don't need it, well, do without and good luck to

you!

Whenever the tribe is assembled you'll come upon me
at the summit of the noble House, the oft-frequented;
my boon-companions are white as stars, and a singing-wench
comes to us in her striped gown or her saffron robe,
wide the opening of her collar, delicate her skin
to my companions' fingers, tender her nakedness.

When we say, "Let's hear from you," she advances to us
chanting fluently, her glance languid, in effortless song."

Tarafah ibn al Abd