

POETRY / SUFISM

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COLEMAN BARKS is one of the premier translators of Rumi at work today. He teaches poetry at the University of Georgia.

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THE ESSENTIAL
Rumi
BARKS

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Rumi

TRANSLATIONS BY
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The shepherd repented and tore his clothes and sighed
and wandered out into the desert.

A sudden revelation
came then to Moses. God's voice:

*You have separated me
from one of my own. Did you come as a Prophet to unite,
or to sever?*

*I have given each being a separate and unique way
of seeing and knowing and saying that knowledge.*

*What seems wrong to you is right for him.
What is poison to one is honey to someone else.*

*Purity and impurity, sloth and diligence in worship,
these mean nothing to me.*

*I am apart from all that.
Ways of worshiping are not to be ranked as better
or worse than one another.*

*Hindus do Hindu things.
The Dravidian Muslims in India do what they do.
It's all praise, and it's all right.*

*It's not me that's glorified in acts of worship.
It's the worshipers! I don't hear the words
they say. I look inside at the humility.*

*That broken-open lowliness is the reality,
not the language! Forget phraseology.
I want burning, burning.*

*Be friends
with your burning. Burn up your thinking
and your forms of expression!*

*Moses,
those who pay attention to ways of behaving
and speaking are one sort.*

*Lovers who burn
are another.*

*Don't impose a property tax
on a burned-out village. Don't scold the Lover.
The "wrong" way he talks is better than a hundred*

"right" ways of others.

Inside the Kaaba
it doesn't matter which direction you point
your prayer rug!

The ocean diver doesn't need snowshoes!
The love-religion has no code or doctrine.

Only God.
So the ruby has nothing engraved on it!
It doesn't need markings.

God began speaking
deeper mysteries to Moses. Vision and words,
which cannot be recorded here, poured into
and through him. He left himself and came back.
He went to eternity and came back here.
Many times this happened.

It's foolish of me
to try and say this. If I did say it,
it would uproot our human intelligences.
It would shatter all writing pens.

Moses ran after the shepherd.
He followed the bewildered footprints,
in one place moving straight like a castle
across a chessboard. In another, sideways,
like a bishop.

Now surging like a wave cresting,
now sliding down like a fish,
with always his feet
making geomancy symbols in the sand,
recording
his wandering state.

Moses finally caught up
with him.

"I was wrong. God has revealed to me
that there are no rules for worship.

Say whatever
and however your loving tells you to. Your sweet blasphemy
is the truest devotion. Through you a whole world
is freed.

Loosen your tongue and don't worry what comes out.
It's all the light of the spirit."

The shepherd replied,
"Moses, Moses,

I've gone beyond even that.
You applied the whip and my horse shied and jumped
out of itself. The divine nature and my human nature
came together.

Bless your scolding hand and your arm.
I can't say what has happened.

What I'm saying now
is not my real condition. It can't be said."

The shepherd grew quiet.

When you look in a mirror,
you see yourself, not the state of the mirror.
The flute player puts breath into a flute,
and who makes the music? Not the flute.
The flute player!

Whenever you speak praise
or thanksgiving to God, it's always like
this dear shepherd's simplicity.

When you eventually see
through the veils to how things really are,
you will keep saying again
and again,

"This is certainly not like
we thought it was!"

JOY AT SUDDEN DISAPPOINTMENT

Whatever comes, comes from a need,
a sore distress, a hurting want.

Mary's pain made the baby Jesus.
Her womb opened its lips
and spoke the Word.

Every part of you has a secret language.
Your hands and your feet say what you've done.

And every need brings in what's needed.
Pain bears its cure like a child.

Having nothing produces provisions.
Ask a difficult question,
and the marvelous answer appears.

Build a ship, and there'll be water
to float it. The tender-throated
infant cries and milk drips
from the mother's breast.

Be thirsty for the ultimate water,
and then be ready for what will
come pouring from the spring.

A village woman once was walking by Muhammad.
She thought he was just an ordinary illiterate.
She didn't believe that he was a prophet.

She was carrying a two-month-old baby.
As she came near Muhammad, the baby turned
and said, "Peace be with you, Messenger of God."

The mother cried out, surprised and angry,
"What are you saying,
and how can you suddenly talk!"

The child replied, "God taught me first,
and then Gabriel."

"Who is this Gabriel?
I don't see anyone."

"He is above your head,
Mother. Turn around. He has been telling me
many things."

"Do you really see him?"

"Yes.

He is continually delivering me from this
degraded state into sublimity."

and sees the wide freshwater of the Tigris.
He bows his head, "What wonderful kindness
that he took my gift."

Every object and being in the universe is
a jar overfilled with wisdom and beauty,
a drop of the Tigris that cannot be contained
by any skin. Every jarful spills and makes the earth
more shining, as though covered in satin.
If the man had seen even a tributary
of the great river, he wouldn't have brought
the innocence of his gift.

Those that stay and live by the Tigris
grow so ecstatic that they throw rocks at the jugs,
and the jugs become perfect!

They shatter.

The pieces dance, and water . . .

Do you see?

Neither jar, nor water, nor stone,

nothing.

You knock at the door of reality,
shake your thought-wings, loosen
your shoulders,
and open.

29 ~ Jesus Poems:

The Population of the World

ON JESUS

There's a strong connection between Jesus and Rumi. I'm told a Christian church in Shiraz (Iran) has a quatrain from Rumi carved in stone over its door:

Where Jesus lives, the great-hearted gather.

We are a door that's never locked.

If you are suffering any kind of pain,
stay near this door. Open it.

A sweet inclusiveness and healing mercy are felt around both. The Friendship of Rumi and Shams has no parallel in the great aloneness of Jesus' life, but the relationship with children and with society's outcasts is very similar. Rumi showed deep consideration for the least-recognized members of his thirteenth-century Muslim small town. He would always stop to bow to children and old women, to bless and be blessed by them. One day an Armenian butcher, a Christian, was passing. Rumi stopped in the road and bowed seven times to him. Another day he came upon children playing a game. He acknowledged each as he would have an adult. And there was one little boy far away running across a field. "Wait, I'm coming!" Rumi stayed till the boy had come close, bowed, and been bowed to.

I called through your door,
"The mystics are gathering
in the street. Come out!"

"Leave me alone.
I'm sick."

"I don't care if you're dead!"
Jesus is here, and he wants
to resurrect somebody!"

JESUS ON THE LEAN DONKEY

Jesus on the lean donkey,
this is an emblem of how the rational intellect
should control the animal-soul.

Let your spirit
be strong like Jesus.

If that part becomes weak,
then the worn-out donkey grows to a dragon.

Be grateful when what seems unkind
comes from a wise person.

Once, a holy man,
riding his donkey, saw a snake crawling into
a sleeping man's mouth! He hurried, but he couldn't
prevent it. He hit the man several blows with his club.

The man woke terrified and ran beneath an apple tree
with many rotten apples on the ground.

"Eat!

You miserable wretch! Eat."

"Why are you doing this to me?"

"Eat more, you fool."

"I've never seen you before!

Who are you? Do you have some inner quarrel with my soul?"

The wise man kept forcing him to eat, and then he ran him.

For hours he whipped the poor man and made him run.

Finally, at nightfall, full of rotten apples,
fatigued, bleeding, he fell

and vomited everything,
the good and the bad, the apples and the snake.

When he saw that ugly snake
come out of himself, he fell on his knees
before his assailant.

"Are you Gabriel? Are you God?"

I bless the moment you first noticed me. I was dead
and didn't know it. You've given me a new life.
Everything I've said to you was stupid!
I didn't know."

"If I had explained what I was doing,
you might have panicked and died of fear.
Muhammad said,

'If I described the enemy that lives
inside men, even the most courageous would be paralyzed. No one
would go out, or do any work. No one would pray or fast,
and all power to change would fade
from human beings,'

so I kept quiet
while I was beating you, that like David
I might shape iron, so that, impossibly,
I might put feathers back into a bird's wing.

God's silence is necessary, because of humankind's
faintheartedness. If I had told you about the snake,
you wouldn't have been able to eat, and if
you hadn't eaten, you wouldn't have vomited.

I saw your condition and drove my donkey hard
into the middle of it, saying always under my breath,
'Lord, make it easy on him.' I wasn't permitted
to tell you, and I wasn't permitted to stop
beating you!"

The healed man, still kneeling,
"I have no way to thank you for the quickness
of your wisdom and the strength
of your guidance.

God will thank you."

WHAT JESUS RUNS AWAY FROM

The son of Mary, Jesus, hurries up a slope
as though a wild animal were chasing him.
Someone following him asks, "Where are you going?"

No one is after you." Jesus keeps on,
saying nothing, across two more fields. "Are you
the one who says words over a dead person,
so that he wakes up?" *I am.* "Did you not make
the clay birds fly?" *Yes.* "Who then
could possibly cause you to run like this?"

Jesus slows his pace.

*I say the Great Name over the deaf and the blind,
they are healed. Over a stony mountainside,
and it tears its mantle down to the navel.*

*Over non-existence, it comes into existence.
But when I speak lovingly for hours, for days,
with those who take human warmth
and mock it, when I say the Name to them, nothing
happens. They remain rock, or turn to sand,
where no plants can grow. Other diseases are ways
for mercy to enter, but this non-responding
breeds violence and coldness toward God.*

I am fleeing from that.

*As little by little air steals water, so praise
dries up and evaporates with foolish people
who refuse to change. Like cold stone you sit on
a cynic steals body heat. He doesn't feel
the sun. Jesus wasn't running from actual people.*

He was teaching in a new way.

~

Christ is the population of the world,
and every object as well. There is no room
for hypocrisy. Why use bitter soup for healing
when sweet water is everywhere?

~

THERE'S NOTHING AHEAD

Lovers think they're looking for each other,
but there's only one search: wandering
this world is wandering that, both inside one
transparent sky. In here
there is no dogma and no heresy.

The miracle of Jesus is himself, not what he said or did
about the future. Forget the future.
I'd worship someone who could do that.

On the way you may want to look back, or not,
but if you can say *There's nothing ahead*,
there will be nothing there.

Stretch your arms and take hold the cloth of your clothes
with both hands. The cure for pain is in the pain.
Good and bad are mixed. If you don't have both,
you don't belong with us.

When one of us gets lost, is not here, he must be inside us.
There's no place like that anywhere in the world.