

In Which We See Our Selves

American Ghazals

by Eric Torgersen

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Of Ghazals

*Call me Ishmael tonight.
—Agha Shahid Ali*

*Can you hear it somewhere, Shahid, this groundswell of ghazals?
You, who put us under the spell of ghazals?*

*At Iowa they're set to sweep the prizes.
Even at Brown, a sleeper cell of ghazals.*

*Is it just the "oriental" that we love,
the faintly foreign taste and smell of ghazals?*

*Many an aging empire has produced
a flowering, before it fell, of ghazals.*

*You were not taken till you'd made your generous,
mortal, lasting last farewell of ghazals.*

*Eric strokes the lamp and makes his wish:
sing in me, lost Ishmael, of ghazals.*

My Dream

Tell me this morning, how did that murderer find my dream?
Through some dim passage hidden back behind my dream?

Expect no gain in all the waking world
from these long nights in which you've wined and dined my dream.

I'll not go gentle into that bad night
to which your manifestos have consigned my dream.

America, I've loved you through it all;
you've Halloweened and Valentined my dream.

These come back, and these, and these, and these;
with hooks, with ropes and chains they seek to bind my dream.

That night I dreamed I could forgive you all.
Awake, I blamed you all again. How kind my dream.

There you stood; you smiled; your eyes were wet;
we loved within the silken walls that lined my dream.

Reader, I'm Wrecker, I'm Ergit, I'm Eric the Derrick;
do not dare think your presence has defined my dream.

Birds

Consider, o my soul, the fate of bluebirds.
Here to stay, alas, are frightful new birds.

These may be fine and feathered, and may fly,
but in the strictest sense they are not true birds.

In sorrow I return your kindest gift,
this lovely flock of Asian avian flu birds.

One you may account a gift of the gods,
but woe be unto you if you kill two birds.

Yes, I must admit, your Mr. Stevens
was able to imagine quite a few birds.

It's said that once, when birds failed to return,
they planted music, and the garden grew birds.

The sunbirds rose in splendor in the East
and wrought their gentle havoc on the dewbirds.

The Eric birds long faithfully from afar
for hope of some encounter with the you birds.

Holy

Whitman felt his ribs and found the fat holy.
Poor mad Smart found Geoffrey the cat holy.

Growing up on Yankee turf I found
a Mickey Mantle Louisville Slugger bat holy.

A grown man now, I do confess to finding
one pose you strike on your new blue yoga mat holy.

I have not one objection to your calling
the old man in the robe and pointy hat holy.

No reason, if it helps you stalk the tiger,
not to call its trim and pungent scat holy.

Would you please shut that squalling monster up
(although in theory I find the little brat holy)?

I still recall how Allen lightened up
the crowd at the reading by saying, "It's not all *that* holy."

Should we agree to stop calling every last thing
that makes our little hearts go pitter-pat holy?

Perhaps someday I'll take the begging bowl
and call each last flea, tick and gnat holy.

Don't be so pleased with that so-called self of yours, Eric,
till you call the fires of the Benares ghat holy.

The Moon

Climb a tree and snare the moon.
Drop your clothes and wear the moon.

Share my feelings? Not tonight.
Suppose instead we share the moon?

We climbed the tower in a dream:
beyond the highest stair, the moon.

When he went out to end it all
he saw, beyond despair, the moon.

What ever happened to that boy
who thought he could outstare the moon?

Even in the light of day,
just to know it's there, the moon—

such pale rice paper on the blue
a careless child could tear the moon.

Pale and cold. The sun is *G-d*.
Not everyone can bear the moon.

Come away, she says; she has
such pale and lovely hair, the moon,

but there's a dark side, Eric. Feel it
call to yours. Beware the moon.

Back Then

I was just an average Joe back then.
I had no plans or dough back then.

Family gone, no friends to speak of—
I was feeling pretty low back then.

I started hanging out too much.
I had no place to go back then.

I don't remember making choices;
you just went with the flow back then.

It wasn't that strange to move in with people
you didn't really know back then.

I think I might have been okay—
some things were touch-and-go back then—

but I started getting into stuff.
I never could say no back then.

To feel like you were keeping up
you did a lot for show back then.

What little I had going for me,
I lost it in the snow back then.

America, it wasn't you.
I did it. Long ago. Back then.

Out Here

Are you picturing endless rows of corn out here?
Drooling at all the innocents you could suborn out here?

You're not the first and won't be the last, but know
we're not all sheep just waiting to be shorn out here.

The world has found us—no, we were never lost.
We've got our grounds for feeling fucked and forlorn out here.

As everywhere else on this planet mislaid by the gods,
there are many some prophet must come to warn out here.

We've got the well-heeled whiners, dogeared doubters,
godsucking zealots addicted to internet porn out here.

But the open ears, the eager eyes, the minds
like bright blank slates my poems might adorn out here. . . .

Of course by now I'm so far from Long Island
the neighbors never doubt I was born out here.

Oh, shut up, Eric. Once an Easterner, always.
We don't like people tooting their own horn out here.

Locked

Children tattooed, pierced and studded, dreadlocked;
parents panicked, indecisive, deadlocked.

Mother to daughter: live as you must, if you must;
for just a bit longer, keep the door to your bed locked.

Son to father: teach me what you know,
but I won't agree to keep the door to my head locked.

Mother to father: where have you been, and where
have you kept your thoughts and all you might have said locked?

They'd come so far, and then she saw, in him,
the door to their life, their home, their daily bread locked.

One night in a fiery panic dream he ran
and found the door toward which he'd wildly fled locked.

They learned too late the cost of keeping that cellar
full of truths that could not be gainsaid locked.

Eric, old friend, as you try each door in the mind,
will you wake one day to find the heart instead locked?

Hands

So now the blood of your slain ideals is on my hands?
Mine, who lived so long with clean and dry hands?

You'd bind them, burn them, skin them, strike them off
by verdict of some judge you've bought to try hands?

Tyrants-in-waiting gather in the dark
in search of binding truths with which to tie hands.

Raising windows, turning keys in locks—
are these not acts that rightly occupy hands?

The fingertip's caress, the palm's enfolding—
are these among the pleasures you'd deny hands?

Such bodies wait inside such tidy homes
in such fine clothes for guests who would apply hands.

Creator Spirit, be among us now,
and lend a hand to all those cursed with shy hands.

Might *Eric* in some language signify
him of subtle gestures, him of sly hands?

Strangers

The hills, the rocks, the sun—the strangers.
Up here we have our fun with strangers.

The hills, the rocks, the sun are ours.
We won't be overrun by strangers.

Accommodations might be reached
with our kind, sure, but none with strangers.

We trust you won't be taken in
by tales of suffering spun by strangers.

We're patient people, to a point,
but ready to be done with strangers.

Now please step back, out of the way—
this business was begun by strangers.

We warned you, Eric. The hills are ours
that with our blood we won from strangers.