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## Banat Su'ad: Translation and Interpretive Introduction

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BĀNAT SU‘ĀD:  
TRANSLATION AND INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

In *Bānat Su‘ād*, a poem traditionally admired as an exemplar of the classical Arabic *Qaṣīda*, Muḥammad appears as the *mamdūh*. This appearance and its historical implications cannot be ignored even in a discussion focused upon the poem’s interior poetic qualities. The implications are explored at length in the frame-story that has accompanied the poem. Ka‘b ibn Zuhayr ibn Abī Sulmā has not accepted the new religion of Islam and may have composed satires against its prophet. His brother Bujayr, who has joined the circle of the *rasūlu llāh*, urges him to make peace with the new order. Ka‘b responds in a short poem expressing wonder that his brother would take up mores (*khuluq*) unknown to their father and mother. Bujayr responds in turn with a poem announcing that Allāh only, not ‘Uzzā or Allāt, is the source of safety on a day when only the “pure of heart, the muslim, will be

<sup>1</sup> With the exception of some single-word variants, I have based my translation upon the *Dīwān* version and have for the most part followed the verse order given in Tadeusz Kowalski, *Le Diwan de Ka‘b ibn Zuhair*: Edition Critique, Krakow: Nakladem Polskiej Akademii Umiejętności 1950. Also consulted were: G. W. Freytag, *Caabi ben — Sohair: Carmen in Laudem Muhammedis Dictum*, Bonn: 1822, which includes text and Latin translation; J. W. Redhouse, *The Burda (mantle) Poems of Ka‘b, son of Zuhayr and of El-Buṣīrī*, Private Printing, 1881—translation only; Theodor Nöldeke, *Delectus veterum carminum arabicorum*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1961; A. Raux, *Bānat Soād*, Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1904; René Basset, *La Bānat Su‘ād, publiée avec une Biographie due Poète, une Traduction, deux Commentaires inédits et de Notes*, Alger: Typographie Adolphe Jourdan, 1910; Husain M. Hidayat, “Bānat Su‘ād of Ka‘b bin Zuhayr”, *Islamic Culture* 1 (1927), 67-84, text and English translation; R.A. Nicholson, *Translations of Eastern Poetry and Prose*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1919, translation only; Mustafā Muḥammad ‘Imārah, *Al-Is‘ād: Sharḥ Bānat Su‘ād*, Cairo: Maṭba‘at ‘Isā l-Bābī 1950; ‘Abū Zakariyya Yaḥyā ibn ‘Alī al-Khaṭīb al-Tibrizī, *Sharḥ Qaṣīdat Ka‘b bin Zuhayr*, ed. Salāh al-Dīn al-Munaḥjīd, Dār al-Kitāb al-Jadīd 1971; Giuseppe Gabrieli, *Al-Burdatān*, 2nd. ed., Rome: Istituto per l’Oriente 1972; Abū l-Barakāt ibn al-Anbārī, *Qaṣīdat al-Burdah li Ka‘b ibn Zuhayr*, Jiddah: Maṭbu‘āt Tihāmah 1980; ‘Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baghdādī, *Sharḥ Bānat Su‘ād*, Kuwait: Maktabat al-Falāḥ 1981; Faḥr al-‘Arīf, *Sharḥ Qaṣīdah Bānat Su‘ād: Ḥaḥrat Ka‘b bin Zuhayr*, Karaci: Ec. Em Sa‘īd Kampanī 1981; and from the *Sīra*, ‘Abd al-Malik Ibn Hishām, *Kitāb sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, ed. Ferdinand Wüstenfeld, Göttingen: Dieterichsche Universitäts-Buchhandlung 1858-60; Abū al-Fadā’ Ismā‘īl ibn al-Kaṭhīr, *Al-Sīra al-Nabawīyya*, ed. Mustafā ‘Abd al-Wahīd, vol. 3, Cairo: Maṭba‘at ‘Isā l-Bābī 1965, 699-709; Ibn Hishām, *Al-Sīra al-Nabawīyya*, vol. 4, Cairo: Al-Azhar, Dār al-Tawfiqīyya 1978, 100-112; ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Suhaylī, *Al-Rawḍ al-Unuf fī Sharḥ al-Sīra al-Nabawīyya li Ibn Hishām*, ed. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Wakīl, vol. 7, Dār al-Kutub al-Ḥadītha n.d.; Hidayat, p. 71, lists 18 classical commentaries on the poem, including those of al-Tabrizī (d. 502/1109) and Ibn Hishām al-Anṣārī (d. 761/1360) listed above. Redhouse, p. 9, mentions one collector who knew by heart 700 variations of the poem, and another who knew 900.

saved”. The religion of Zuhayr is “nothing”, he announces, the religion of Abī Sulmā is proscribed.

When Ka‘b finds no one willing to grant him protection, he realizes the *jāhili* ethos has broken down and hastens to make peace with the prophet. He infiltrates the camp, sits next to the prophet, puts his hand in his, and asks him if he would forgive Ka‘b were Ka‘b to ask forgiveness. On hearing an affirmative reply Ka‘b announces himself and presents the *Qaṣīda*, narrowly escaping the wrath of his old enemies of Yathrib. According to some versions of the story, Muḥammad removes his cloak, which was associated with his prophetic inspiration, and presents it to Ka‘b as a mark of protection.<sup>2</sup>

To do justice to the frame story would require a complete investigation of the relationship between the poets and the prophet at the birth of Islam. Yet the bare-boned version recounted here should be enough to intimate its range of symbolic and historical implications. In this brief introduction, I will focus upon the poetic qualities of *Bānat Su‘ād*, alluding to the frame story where it is relevant to the interpretive perspective presented here. That perspective is based upon a reconsideration of the allegedly descriptive or purely objective quality of the classical *Qaṣīda*.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> After Ka‘b’s death the *burda* is alleged to have been purchased by Mu‘āwiyya and to have remained with the Umayyads until it was seized by the Mongol Hulugu. Later it was said to have been taken to Egypt and finally to Istanbul where it was preserved as the *khirqā-i-sharif*. The biography of Ka‘b, with its various versions of the *burda* episode, is recounted in Basset, pp. 15-62. There is no mention of the *burda* episode at all in Ibn Hishām, and Ibn Kathīr treats it with skepticism: “And this is an extremely widespread story, but I find nothing of it in the more widely circulated collections with an *isnād* that I would trust”: Ibn Kathīr, vol. 3, 707.

<sup>3</sup> In introducing any particular *Qaṣīda*, the translator is faced with a dilemma. It is necessary to acknowledge those critical concepts that grew out of the process of translation and, conversely, helped guide that process. Yet to argue any particular critical point would require extended comparisons with other poems, comparisons that would distract from the poem at hand. I present here briefly a number of concepts that I develop elsewhere in more detail: the dissembling simile, semantic overflow, the dialectical interplay between sense fulfillment and purification in the *nasīb*, the dialectic between monumental and dynamic, subjective and objective in the presentation of the *nāqa*, and the tragic sense that in the very act of celebrating the *jāhili* ethos of *karam* the poet announces its dissolution. For a discussion of the theories of pure description this interpretation is meant to counter, see M. Sells, “The *Qaṣīda* and the West: Self-Reflective Stereotype and Critical Encounter”, *Al-‘Arabīyya* 20 (1987): 307-337. For an application of the critical suggestions made here to other poems, see *idem*, *Desert Tracings: Six Classic Arabian Odes by ‘Alqama, Shānfara, Labīd, ‘Antara, Al-‘A’sha, and Dhu al-Rūmma* (Middletown Ct: Wesleyan University Press, 1989). For detailed, comparative arguments, see *idem*: “Guises of the Ghūl: The Dissembling Simile in the Classical Arabic *Nasīb*”, forthcoming in Suzanne Stetkevych, ed., *Toward a New Poetics: Studies in Arabic and Persian Poetry*, a paper presented under a slightly different title at the American Oriental Society, Atlanta, 26/3/90; and “Bashāma’s Dromedarian: Simile, and Symbol Worlds in the *Nāqa* Sections of the Early Arabic *Qaṣīda*”, a paper to be presented at the Middle East Studies Association, San

*Bānat Su‘ād* contains three well balanced sections: a *nasīb* centered around similes comparing the beloved’s wet mouth to a draught of wine and her flightiness to the shiftiness of the *ghūl*; a journey section that is made up almost entirely of the *nāqa* depiction; and a *madīh* in which the warrior virtues of the *rasūlu llāh* are praised in traditional *jāhili* fashion.

The extended simile involving the beloved’s mouth and a draught of wine is a known topos from the early *Qaṣīda*.<sup>4</sup> As is often the case in the classical *Qaṣīda*, the simile overflows its original descriptive point, in this case into a series of dependent similes that trace the wine and water through various manifestations. Though the original simile may be justified as a means of describing the beloved’s mouth, the continual extension of the simile outruns the descriptive logic. We have here a classic example of the dissembling simile: the simile sets up an original likeness, but overflows that likeness as it follows erotic logic more associative than descriptive. Ultimately, what is actually described in the *nasīb* simile-images is not the beloved, but one or more elements of the her symbolic analogue, the lost garden: running water, lush vegetation, or wild animals at peace.

Su‘ād is then compared to a *ghūl* shifting through various guises. A subspecies of the *jinn*, the *ghūl* of the *Qaṣīda* tends to be female, protean in her ability and proclivity to change form, and less easy to please than the *ghūl* of Arabic folklore. Of special interest here is *talawwun*, the shifting through various forms, images, and guises. The *talawwun* of the *ghūl* could be associated with the shifting moods of the beloved, with the deceptive quality of *dahr*, with the mirage-like transformations of the desert that lead the *raḥīl* traveler to his destruction. The connection of the *ghūl* with *talawwun* was strong enough to engender for the *ghūl* the epithets *dhātu alwānin* or *dhū lawnayni*, and the entire mythic complex of meanings could be evoked through a play upon such epithets, and the resonance of such play across the various sections of the *Qaṣīda*.<sup>5</sup>

Antonio, 11/90, forthcoming in Wolfhart Heinrichs and Gregor Schoeler, eds., Ewald Wagner Festschrift, in *Beiruter Texte und Studien*. Coincidentally, S. Stetkevych has recently offered another interpretation of the *burda* poem, one that integrates into the analysis anthropological discussions of gift exchange: “Pre-Islamic Panegyric and the Poetics of Redemption: *Mufaḍḍaliyyah* 119 of ‘Alqamah ibn ‘Abadah and *Bānat Su‘ād* of Ka‘b ibn Zuhayr”, also presented at the Atlanta meeting of the AOS and forthcoming in the *New Poetics* volume.

<sup>4</sup> For another fine example of the topos, see the *Qaṣīda* of Muraqqish the Younger, no. 55 in the *mufaḍḍaliyyāt: Al-Mufaḍḍaliyyāt*: ed. Aḥmad Shākir and ‘Abd al-Salām Hārūn, Cairo: Maṭba‘at al-Ma‘ārif 1944, vol. 2, p. 42, verses 8-11.

<sup>5</sup> An example of such resonance occurs at the end of Dhū al-Rumma’s ode *A manzilata mayyin*. There the allusion to the *ghūl* encompasses the fickleness of the beloved, the twists of *dahr*, and the disequilibrium and delirium of the journey which has just been depicted:

أَبَى الْقَلْبُ إِلَّا دَكْرَ مَيٍّ وَتَرَحَّتْ بِهِ ذَاتُ الْوَأْنِ تُجِدُّ وَتَمْرُخُ

The appearance of *ghūl* here might be seen as one of those moments of poetic transparency where what is being said mirrors the process of signification. The poet asks “What was Su‘ād but...?” The expression of a lover’s disappointment refracts onto another level as a literal comment upon the nature of the dissembling simile. What is Su‘ād but a series of would-be descriptions that, despite all the rhetoric and apparatus of description, never really describe the beloved at all. Like the *ghūl*, the *nasīb* simile dissembles. It offers the promise of the likeness, but it shifts directions, from the wet mouth of the beloved, to the stream at the bottom of the gorge, to the white foam brought from the rains of the night-traveling cloud. Within this progression is an interplay between the sense fulfillment conjured by the original reference to the beloved’s mouth and by the imagery of the churning, foaming water, and purification, evoked through terms such as *ṣāfin* (for the water) and through the depiction of the winds cleansing the waters of every impurity (*tajlū r-riyāhu l-qadhā ‘anhu*).<sup>6</sup> The language of purification contrasts with later verses of disillusion, with their references to impure blood (*qad sīta min damihā*) and the mixing of colors and forms (*talawwun*).

The *raḥīl* of *Bānat Su‘ād* forms one of the more sustained *nāqa* sections within classical *Qaṣīda* tradition. It is constructed upon a dialectical interplay between monumental and dynamic perspectives on the *nāqa*, and between the *nāqa* as an objective entity and as an index of the subjectivity of the poetic voice. The first part of the section stresses the monumental and freezes the *nāqa* as an object of compartmentalized description. The *nāqa* remains stationary as the descriptive perspective moves about the animal’s form, giving us views from the side and the

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The heart refused everything/but memory of Mayya  
She-with-many-guises, playful and serious/troubled it.

See Dhū al-Rumma, *The Diwān of Ghaylān ibn ‘Uqba*, ed. by Carlile Henry Hayes Macartney, Cambridge 1919, p. 92, poem no. 10, verse 62.

<sup>6</sup> This dialectic of sense-fulfillment and purification occurs within a wide variety of extended similes in the *nasīb*, and indicates the combination of freedom and inner logic that governs the dissembling simile. We find a precise lexicon of purification across a wide variety of images that are links in a chain of similes going back to the beloved. For example, the “pure and clear” (*nāsi‘ l-qaṭirāni as-ṣirf*) balm upon the camel that draws the water that is compared to the tears of the poet as he remembers Salmā (in ‘Alqama’s *hal mā ‘alimta*); the untouched, unknown garden (*rawḍatan unufan, laysa bi ma‘lami*) and pure, virgin cloud (*bikrin hurratin*) in ‘Antara’s *Mu‘allaqa*; the pure sands (*ḥurra r-ramli*) split by the camomile and the pure-colored sunlight (*naqiyyi l-lawn*) in Ṭarafa’s *Mu‘allaqa*. Compare the expression (*naqiyyi l-lawn*) to the impurity implied in the *talawwun* of the *ghūl*. In moments of the highest poetic tension, the gushing of water can be read in terms both of sexual allusion and purification. See *Al-Mufaḍḍaliyyāt*, ‘Alqama’s ode, no. 120, p. 198, verse 10; al-Zawzanī, *Sharḥ al-Mu‘allaqāt al-Sab‘*, ed. Muḥammad Manīr al-Dimashqī (1352 H), pp. 176-79 (verses 13-19) of ‘Alqama’s *Mu‘allaqa* and pp. 55-57 (verses 5-10 of Ṭarafa’s *Mu‘allaqa*).

rear, in silhouette and in close-up. In their economy, precision, and evocativeness, these images must have been fine-honed through generations of traditional performance of the *nāqa* section. Thus, for example, the nature-to-culture simile in which the head of the *nāqa* is likened to a stone pickaxe:<sup>7</sup>

كَأَنَّهَا فَاتٌ عَيْنَيْهَا وَمَذْبَحَهَا مِنْ حَطْمِهَا وَمِنْ اللَّحْيَيْنِ بِرَطِيلُ

nose ridge and jaw  
jutting down  
past her eyes and throat  
like a stone pickaxe.

The depiction of the *nāqa* here is tied to an emphasis, strong even by the standards of the traditional *nāqa* section, upon blood lineage.<sup>8</sup> The turning point in the section is the presentation of the tick sliding off the lubricated hide of the *nāqa*. At this point the sense of objectivity becomes most precise, with the focus of depiction sharpened to include the smallest detail.

Yet it is also at this point that the monumental quality of the *nāqa* begins to dissolve. As in other *nāqa* sections, the sweating of the *nāqa* is the beginning of a transformed depiction of the animal. No longer the monumental object of a descriptive gaze, the *nāqa* now becomes increasingly identified with her motion. Here, as elsewhere, that motion is associated with images of fluids and fluidity, and culminates in the depiction of the churning forelegs of the *nāqa*. At this point the *nāqa* is transformed from the external vehicle of the poet to the expressive vehicle of the poet's feelings. In other odes, the camel's forelegs are compared

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Ṭarafa's *Mu'allaqa* (al-Zawzanī, p. 65):

وَجُمُجْمَةٌ مِثْلُ الْعَلَاةِ كَأَنَّهَا وَغَيِّ الْمُلْتَفَى مِنْهَا إِلَى حَرْفٍ مَبْرَدٍ

A skull like an anvil/two sides welded  
to a jutting point/like the edge of a file.

<sup>8</sup> Thus verse no. 18 in the *Dīwān* versions:

حَرْفٌ أُخْرُوهَا أَبُوهَا مِنْ مُهَجَّتَيْهِ وَعَمَّهَا خَالَهَا قُودَاءُ شِبْلِيلٍ

The commentators have gone to great lengths to trace a blood line that would result in the father being the brother and the maternal uncle being the paternal uncle. See the diagram in Gabrieli, p. 14, note 20. In translating this verse, I have used the expression "in-and-in-bred twice", as one that most closely relates the various stages of in-breeding and the general concern with blood lineage, but does not sacrifice the poetry to a list of terms (father, brother, paternal uncle, and maternal uncle) which in English would be poetically awkward.

to the arms of a drowning man.<sup>9</sup> In other odes too, we find that grief—the explicit expression of which is not appropriate to the *jāhili karīm*—is expressed through a dissembling simile involving lamenting women. Shanfarā, for example, compares the twang of his bow and the howling of famished wolves to the wailing of child-bereft women, allowing an expression of grief within a surface rhetoric of bravado that would deny any such emotion.<sup>10</sup> Ka‘b’s use of this simile is more sustained than usual, containing within it a complex but necessary enjambement unusual in the classical *Qaṣīda*. In the five verses of extended simile, the heat of the desert (the chameleon twisting like iron in fire) and the grief of the child-bereft women are developed simultaneously, achieving a singular intensity through the intertwining.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> See *Al-Mufaḍḍaliyyāt* 1:56-57, poem no. 10 (*hajarta umāmata*), verses 26-27. The swimmer metaphor closes the most famous of the *nāqa* sections, that of the *Mu‘allaqa* of Ṭarafa: see Zawzanī, p. 68, verses 36-37. In Dhū al-Rumma’s *A manzilatay mayyin* it appears in a revealing variant form that indicates the range of possible comparison and the importance of the underlying association with water: the arms of the camel characterized as *mutammatih*, the activity of someone pulling water from a well (Macartney, p. 90).

<sup>10</sup> Thus in verse 11 of the *Lāmiyya*, the poet compares the twanging of his bow to the moaning of bereaved women:

إذا زل عنها أسنهم حنت كأنها      مرزاة عجلت نرث وتغرول

And when it lets the arrow slip/it twangs  
like a child bereft mother/grief-struck, who moans and wails.

In verse 32 of the same poem, the howling of famished wolves becomes the occasion for a simile introducing bereaved women with vocabulary that resembles the terms *nawwāḥatun* and *mathākīlu* from verses 29 and 30 of *Bānat Su‘ād*:

فضج وضجت بالبراح كأنها      وأياه نوح فوق غلياء نكل

He howls in the empty spaces/they howl/  
as if they and he were bereaved women/on the high ridge, wailing.

See Al-Shanfarā, *Lāmiyat al-‘Arab*, ed. Muḥammad Badī‘ Sharīf, Beirut: Dār Maṭba‘ at Al-Ḥayā 1964, 32-34, 44. The similes are not extended into digressions, but they can still be considered dissembling in that the particular image chosen, bereavement, is in direct tension with the surface semantics of the poem through their bravado emphasis upon a denial of vulnerability. Were the poetry concerned with pure, objective description, a range of other similes could have been chosen to bring across the sound qualities at issue without evoking such emotions.

<sup>11</sup> In this one case I have diverged from the order of Kowalski, choosing the order of other versions (e.g., Freytag, Basset, al-Tibrizī, Hedayat, al-Baghdādī, al-Anbārī, ‘Arīf, and ‘Imāra) in which the chameleon verse is placed within the extended simile comparing the forelegs of the camel to the arms of the bereaved women. Thus, the order and number of the verses in my translation are the same as that of Kowalski with the inversion of verses 26-27. The embedding of the desert depiction within the extended simile can make this section of the poem difficult to follow on first reading. Yet it also gives it its extraordinary power. In the translation I have used italics to clarify the poetic syntax at this point.



In the *madīh*, the prophet is portrayed in classical fashion, with an extended comparison to a lion feeding on its victims, rolled in the dust and torn to pieces. Mecca and the lion lair are linked through the expression “in the belly of” that is applied to each. At the center of the section is a reference to the *Hijra*. A common motif of the classical *fakhr* and *madīh* is the defense of any action that might be interpreted as retreat from danger,<sup>12</sup> and the poem here seems to be treating the withdrawal of the prophet and followers from Mecca along similar lines. Mention of the *Hijra* is then followed by a warrior boast in a powerful ending which, taken from its context, could not be distinguished from any other pre-Islamic ode.

Of special interest is a verse found in some versions of the *Sīra* of Ibn Hishām, but absent from the *Dīwān*:<sup>13</sup>

مَا زِلْتُ أَقْطَعُ الْبَيْدَاءَ مَدْرَعًا جُنْحَ الظَّلَامِ وَتَوْبُ اللَّيْلِ مَسْبُورٌ

I cut through the empty regions,  
my armor the darkness,  
when the cloak of night  
had fallen.

The following verse is:

حَتَّى وَضَعْتُ يَمِينِي لِأَنَارَعُهُ فِي كَفِّ ذِي نَقَمَاتٍ فِيْلُهُ الْفَيْلُ

Until I put my hand,  
not to withdraw it,  
in the hand of the vengeful,  
whose word is law.

The image of the *thawbat al-layl* forms, as it were, a second *rahīl* within the midst of the *madīh*, with the poet-hero emerging from his night-journey to place his allegiance with the *rasūl*. The companion verse, with its depiction of the poet placing his hand in the hand of the *mamdūh*, exists as well in most of the versions that omit the *thawbat al-layl* verse. There,

<sup>12</sup> For another example, see the *Mu‘allaqa* of ‘Antara where the poet defends his turning away from the enemy. See al-Zawzanī, p. 194. I have translated the words used in connection with the reference to the the *Hijra*, *lammā aslamū*, as “when they gave themselves”. Ka‘b, unlike Bujayr, expresses no clear idea of what it means to be a Muslim in the religious sense, and seems to be using the root here in its more general sense of giving (oneself) to another as a mark of allegiance—along the lines argued by M.M. Bravmann, *The Spiritual Background of Early Islam*, Leiden: Brill 1972, 7-26.

<sup>13</sup> The verse appears in the version of the poem found in Wüstenfeld’s edition of Ibn Hishām, the version used as a basis for the translation of J.W. Redhouse, p. 14, and in the version and translation given by Hidayat, p. 81. I have translated the verse and have put it in brackets to indicate that it does not exist in the *Dīwān* version.

it concludes the extended simile comparing Ka'b's fear of the prophet to that of an elephant shaking in terror. However, a verse depicting the poet placing his hand in the hand of the prophet would seem to follow more logically from the *thawbat al-layl* verse than from the elephant simile. In the latter context, the grammatical subject switches abruptly within the same sentence from the third-person reference to the elephant to the poet's first person reference to himself. Though abrupt changes of person are common in early Arabic poetry, the combination of such a change with the sudden dropping of the elephant simile seems jarring. Though the term *burda* is not used, the symbolic and thematic implication of the *thawbat al-layl* verse and the fact that it appears in the *Sīra* version that omits the *burda* story proper, raises the possibility that it might serve as an interior, poetic counterpart to the *burda* story. Here the cloak would be interior to the poem itself, and would refer to a final night journey through which the classical modes of the past (including the night journey) were subsumed into new forms.

Such an interpretation brings us back to the frame story, only from a perspective that looks out upon the legend from within the poem. From such a vantage point, it is hard not to hear the complaint against the fickleness of the beloved as a complaint as well against the unreliability of a *jāhilī* ethos of *karam* that left the poet bereft of protection. The outburst of grief brought in at the end of the journey through the mourning women can be heard as the grief for a lost *jāhilī* world. The concern for *nasab* resonates throughout the poem and the frame-story: from the obsessive concern with blood lineage in the *rahīl*, to the taunt (bastards—literally, fatherless ones) levelled at the beginning of the *madīh* against his enemies, to the exchange between Ka'b and Bujayr over the religion of their father. In the images of women mourning the death of their children one might even hear—on one level—the reaction of a poet to the cutting of the bonds of *nasab*, or as Ka'b says in his poem to Bujayr, the bonds of *hudā*.

The poem is not a typical example of conversion literature. Unlike Bujayr, who in his missive to Ka'b alludes to the Qur'ānic *yawm ad-dīn*, Ka'b's allegiance is personal, with praise focused upon the *rasūl*'s qualities as a warrior. The Qur'ān is mentioned only vaguely. Ka'b has submitted to a new order, but he has done so by appropriating it within a last expression of the old. The adoption of the poem by the classical *Sīra* places this double gaze at the heart of the story of Islam. As such, it reflects the larger paradox: the extraordinary efforts taken in the first centuries of Islam to preserve the classical heritage of the *Qaṣīda*, the emblem of the *jāhilī* ethos that was to be abolished. The sense of the tragic within *Bānat Su'ād* and dramatized in the frame story is to be found less

explicitly, but no less centrally, within a number of classical *Qaṣīdas*. As they celebrate the heroic ethos, the *jāhili* poets, like the singers of the Homeric epics, intimate its breakdown. Yet in doing so, they secure its appropriation by and survival within a new cultural form.<sup>14</sup>

SuĀd is gone,  
     my heart stunned,  
 lost in her traces,  
     shackled, unransomed.

    What was SuĀd  
     the morning they set off,  
     but a faint song,  
     languor in the eyes, kohl,

Revealing as she smiled  
     side teeth wet  
 as a first draught of wine  
     or a second,

    Mixed with the hard cold  
     of a winding, backsloped,  
     gorge bottom stream, pure,  
     cooled in the morning by the north wind,

Filtered through the winds,  
     then flooded  
 with rains of a night traveler,  
     flowing white and over.

    Misery she  
     who might have been a friend  
     had she kept her promise,  
     had a well-meant word been taken.

Some friend. In her blood  
     brew trouble and lies,  
 the withdrawal of vows,  
     the trade-in of lovers.

    From form to form,  
     she turns and changes,

<sup>14</sup> This combination of celebration and tragic intimation can be found in the *MuĀllaqa* of ʿAntara and in al-Aʿshā's famous *Qaṣīda, waddiʿ hurayrata*. See also the discussion of the parallel tension between *muruwwa* and pessimism in J.E. Montgomery, "Dichotomy in *Jāhili* Poetry", *Journal of Arabic Literature* 17 (1986), 1-20.

like a ghou! slipping  
through her guises.

She makes a vow,  
then holds it  
as a linen sieve  
holds water.

The promises of ʿUrqūb  
were for her a model,  
tall-tale promises,  
empty talk.

Here I am hoping,  
still again,  
for a bit of her affection.  
I don't imagine you've brought us any.

Don't be fooled  
by what she offers.  
Desires and dreams  
are delusions.

\* \* \*

Dusk, SuĀd is travelling  
a land unreached  
except by champion,  
old-blooded, easy pacers,

Beyond reach,  
except for a dromedarian thick-neck,  
still shim-stepping  
though fatigued, or ambling.

She sweats,  
back of the ear-gland streaming,  
her range the signless,  
wayless, unknown spaces,

With the eyes of a lone-stag,  
white-on-white,  
watching the hidden corners,  
roughlands and crest dunes blazing,

Thick where haltered,  
meaty where shackled,  
carriage of clear excellence

among pure-studded mares,

Worn to an edge,  
in-and in-bred, twice,  
from a full-blooded sire,  
long-necked and agile.

A tick crawls along her chest  
and flanks,

only to slip  
from her glistening hide,

Hard as a wild ass,  
wiry along the thigh ridge,  
fore-elbow from the rib-cage  
twisted wide,

Nose-ridge and jaw  
jutting down  
past her eyes and throat  
like a stone pickaxe,

Tail like a bristled  
palm frond, leafless,  
lashing down over udders  
that no milk flow gives away,

Hook-nosed,  
ears of clear pedigree—  
for one trained to see—  
cheeks-polished,

She strides into her gallop,  
legs like lances,  
rawboned, flying,  
barely meeting the ground,

Tawny along the hoof-pads  
where they split the shale  
over bare rock ridges,  
unshod,

*As if the churning of her forelegs,*  
when the sweat flows,  
when the mirage haze  
wraps itself around the flattop mountains,

A day the chameleon  
 burns in the glare,  
 sunward side straightening  
 like iron in fire,

When the trailsman calls out,  
 as the locusts,  
 ashen in the midday sun,  
 twitch at the rocks: "break trail

for the midday heat!",  
*were the arms of a woman,  
 long-necked, mid aged, who rises  
 and is answered by child-bereft mourners.*

*She wails,  
 upper arms limp,  
 her mind, as they cry out  
 the death of her eldest, loosening.*

*She tears at her chest,  
 hands open,  
 bodice ripped ragged  
 from the collar bones.*

\* \* \*

They scurry at the flanks,  
 the lie-smiths, saying  
 O Ibn Abī Sūlmā,  
 you're as good as dead!

Every friend I thought I had,  
 saying: you won't find me  
 looking you up.  
 I'm busy.

I said: out of my way,  
 bastards!  
 let whatever the Compassionate decrees  
 be done.

Every woman's son,  
 long safe,  
 will one day be carried off  
 on a curve-backed bier.

They say God's messenger  
threatens me.

Before the messenger of God  
one hopes for pardon.

Go easy,  
guided by the one  
who gave you the Qurʾān  
and spelled out its warnings.

Don't take me at the word  
of the lie-smiths.  
Though talk of me spreads,  
I did no wrong.

If an elephant  
stood in my place  
and heard  
what I hear

It would shake in terror  
and stay shaking  
until it received the messenger's grace,  
God willing.

{I cut through the empty regions,  
my armor the darkness  
when the cloak of night  
had fallen,}

To put my hand,  
not to withdraw it,  
in the hand of the vengeful,  
whose word is law.

That one was more terrible  
when I addressed him  
and was questioned  
and my lineage examined,

Than a prey-snatcher,  
mawler of the lion's lair,  
his den in the belly of ʿAtham,  
ringed with thickets,

That sets out at dawn  
to feed twin cubs

with human flesh thrown in the dust,  
dismembered.

When he confronts his equal,  
he cannot,  
by sacred law,  
leave him unbroken.

In fear of him the wild ass  
starves to the bone,  
shunning forage.

Men do not cross his wadi,

Except for the brave and bold one there,  
the shreds of his garments  
and his weapons about him,  
carrion for beasts of prey.

The messenger is a sword  
lighting the way,  
forged in India,  
a sword of God, unsheathed.

Among a band of Quráysh  
someone spoke,  
in the belly of Mecca  
when they gave themselves—away!

They left, and left behind  
arrows with broken heads,  
the weak in battle,  
the leaners, the unarmed.

Eagle-nosed vanquishers  
clothed in Davidian weave,  
through the dust of war  
their chain-mail

Brilliant, streaming  
in double arrays of coils  
like the branches of the shrivel-vetch,  
coil on doubled, twisted coil.

They side like white camels  
protected by a hard blow  
when the enemy, stunted, dark-faced,  
run away.



They don't parade their satisfaction  
when their spears strike home,  
nor do they cut and run  
when they take the blow.

Spear thrusts land  
at their throats.  
At the pool of death  
they have no plans to flee.

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