Banat Su'ad: Translation and Interpretive Introduction

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BANAT SU'AD:
TRANSLATION AND INTRODUCTION

In Bānat Su'ād, a poem traditionally admired as an exemplar of the classical Arabic Qasīda, Muhammad appears as the mamādāh. 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. ʿAbd 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. ʿAbd 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 ʿUzzā or Allāt, is the source of safety on a day when only the "pure of heart, the muslim, will be

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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 jāhilī 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'ab to ask forgiveness. On hearing an affirmative reply Ka'b announces himself and presents the Qasīda, 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.2

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 Qasīda.3

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2 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 khiroq-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 insād that I would trust”: Ibn Kathīr, vol. 3, 707.

3 In introducing any particular Qasīda, 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 overflight, 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 jāhilī ethos of karam the poet announces its dissolultion. For a discussion of the theories of pure description this interpretation is meant to counter, see M. Sells, “The Qasīda and the West: Self-Reflective Stereotype and Critical Encounter”, Al-'Arabiyya 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, Shānfarā, Labīd, 'Antara, Al-'A'sha, and Dhu al-Rūmā (Middletown Ct: Wesleyan University Press, 1989). For detailed, comparative arguments, see idem: “Guises of the Ghāl: 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 Qasīda”, a paper to be presented at the Middle East Studies Association, San
Banat Suʿād 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 madīḥ in which the warrior virtues of the rasūlu llāh are praised in traditional jāhilī fashion.

The extended simile involving the beloved’s mouth and a draught of wine is a known topos from the early Qaṣīda. 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 her symbolic analogue, the lost garden: running water, lush vegetation, or wild animals at peace.

Suʿād 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 rāḥil traveler to his destruction. The connection of the ghūl with talawwun was strong enough to engender for the ghūl the epithets dhāṭ alwānīn or dhā ṭ alwānīn, 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.

Antonio, 11/90, forthcoming in Wolfhart Heinrichs and Gregor Schoeler, eds., Ewald Wagner Festschrift, in Beiträge Texte und Studien. Coincidentally, S. Stetkevych has recently offered another interpretation of the ṣūrda poem, one that integrates into the analysis anthropological discussions of gift exchange: “Pre-Islamic Panegyric and the Poetics of Redemption: Mufaddalīyyah 119 of ʿAlqamah ibn ʿAbdah and Banat Suʿād of Kaʿb ibn Zuhayr”, also presented at the Atlanta meeting of the AOS and forthcoming in the New Poetics volume.

For another fine example of the topos, see the Qaṣīda of Muraqqish the Younger, no. 55 in the mufaddalīyyah: Al-Mufaddalīyyah: ed. Ahmad Shākir and ʿAbd al-Salām Hārūn, Cairo: Mashaʿat al-Maʿārif 1944, vol. 2, p. 42, verses 8-11.

5 An example of such resonance occurs at the end of Dhū al-Rumma’s ode A manzilatay mayyun. 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:

أَيُّ البِلْدُ إِلَّا دُخْنُ يُ هَوَى مَّرَحُهُ بِذَاتِ الْعَيْنِ نَهْبًَ وَنَمْرُوْ
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 yāfīn (for the water) and through the depiction of the winds cleansing the waters of every impurity (tajīr r-ryāhū l-qadīhā ʿanhu).6 The language of purification contrasts with later verses of disillusion, with their references to impure blood (qad sīta min damīhā) and the mixing of colors and forms (talawwun).

The rahīl 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

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


6 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’’ (nāṣī l-qāṭirān as-sīr) balm upon the camel that draws the water that is compared to the tears of the poet as he remembers Salmā (in ʿAlqama’s hal mā ʿalima); the untouched, unknown garden (raudatan unufan, laysa bi maʿlamī) and pure, virgin cloud (bikrin hurratin) in ʿAntara’s Muʿallaqa; the pure sands (hurra r-ramī) split by the camomile and the pure-colored sunlight (naqqīyi l-lawn) in Tarafa’s Muʿallaqa. Compare the expression (naqqīyi 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-Mufaddalīyyat, ʿAlqama’s ode, no. 120, pp. 198, verse 10; al-Zawzānī, Sharh al-Muʿallaqāt al-Suhī, ed. Muhammad Manir al-Dimashqī (1352 H), pp. 176-79 (verses 13-19) of ʿAlqama’s Muʿallaqa and pp. 55-57 (verses 5-10 of Tarafa’s Muʿallaqa).
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:

كَأَلْما فَاتَ خَيْبَتَهَا وَمُذْبَحَهَا مِنْ خَطْمَهَا وَمِنْ الْخَيْبَتَيْنِ بِطَيْلَ

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. 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

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7 Cf. Ţarafa’s Maʿallaqa (al-Zawzani, p. 65):

وَمُذْبَحَةُ قُلُبُ الْعَلَا تَأْلَمَا وَعَيْنَ الْقُنْضَيْنِ مِنْهَا إِلَى حُرَفِ مُرْدَ

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

8 Thus verse no. 18 in the Diwan versions:

حُرَفَ أَعْوَاهُ أَوَّاْهَا مِنْ مُهَيْجٍ وَعَيْنَهَا خَالِفَهَا فَوَادَاءُ شَبَالِ

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. In other odes too, we find that grief—the explicit expression of which is not appropriate to the jähili karim—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. Ka'b's use of this simile is more sustained than usual, containing within it a complex but necessary enjambement unusual in the classical Qašída. 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.

9 See Al-Mufaddaliyyāt 1:56-57, poem no. 10 (ḥajarta umāmata), verses 26-27. The swimmer metaphor closes the most famous of the nāqa sections, that of the Mu'allaga of Tarafa: see Zawzani, p. 68, verses 36-37. In Dhū-al-Rumma's A mansasilatay mayyi 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).

10 Thus in verse 11 of the Lāmiyya, the poet compares the twanging of his bow to the moaning of bereaved women:

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 nauwākatun and mathāẖītu from verses 29 and 30 of Bānat Su'ād:

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 Sharif, Beirut: Dār Maḥbā 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.

11 In this one case I have diverged from the order of Kowalski, choosing the order of other versions (e.g., Freytag, Bassel, al-Tibrizi, Hedayan, al-Baghdādi, al-Anbārī, ʿArīf, and ʿImāra) 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 *madīḥ*, 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 *madīḥ* is the defense of any action that might be interpreted as retreat from danger,\(^\text{12}\) 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 *Diwān*:\(^\text{13}\)

\[
\text{مَا رَّفِّقَ الْطَّيْفَ الْبِيْدَاء، مَدْرَعًا جَمَعَ الْظَّلَامَ وَزَوَّرَ الْلَّيْلَ مَسْتَبِيلَ}
\]

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

The following verse is:

\[
\text{حَتَّى وَضَعْتُ بِجِبِيَّةً لَأَناَرْمَةً فِي كَفِّ دِي نَفِمَتْ فِيْلَهَا الْقَبْلِ}
\]

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 *raḥil* within the midst of the *madīḥ*, 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 *mamdūḥ*, exists as well in versions of the poem that omit the *thawbat al-layl* verse. There,

\(^{12}\) For another example, see the *Muṣallaqa* of ḤAntara where the poet defends his turning away from the enemy. See al-Zawzānī, p. 194. I have translated the words used in connection with the reference to the the *Hijra*, *lamā aslami*, 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.

\(^{13}\) 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 *Diwān* 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 is appears in the Sira 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 jāhili 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 jāhili world. The concern for nasab resonates throughout the poem and the frame-story: from the obsessive concern with blood lineage in the rahilī, to the taunt (bastards—literally, fatherless ones) levelled at the beginning of the madiḥ 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 yaum 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 Qasīda, the emblem of the jāhili 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
explicity, 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.¹⁴

Su'ād is gone,
my heart stunned,
lost in her traces,
shackled, unransomed.

What was Su'ād
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,

¹⁴ This combination of celebration and tragic intimation can be found in the Ma'allaqa of 'Antara and in al-Â‘shâ’s famous Qaṣīda, waddi? hurayrata. See also the discussion of the parallel tension between muruwâwa and pessimism in J. E. Montgomery, "Dichotomy in Jâhili Poetry", Journal of Arabic Literature 17 (1986), 1-20.
like a ghoul 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, Suʿād 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 Abi 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 Qur’ān
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 ‘Atham,
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.

Haverford College Translated by Michael A. Sells.