

AZIZ TASHFROM THE COLLECTION *At 22* (2004)**POEMS AND SHORT STORIES****METAPHYSICS OF THE BRIDGE**

1.

The road traveled will be beaten further; my feet get weaker, shortening the steps and lengthening the time, which may soon run out on me. Farewell bruises stretch the skin, and mark the road for my next return—one of many over the decades. I try not to step on the bruises: they remind me that I was the one who left them.

2.

At twenty-two, they say, he reached the river. At thirty-three he finally managed to cross it-- over the bridge, which--so they say-- he built, using his only arm and many river stones. "My missing arm's a bridge," he used to say. And then he used to stand right on the edge, staring at the other side: Next to his only arm, he felt the straining muscles of the other.

3.

We are having a physics lesson. My arm is going numb. "If an object is in a state of equilibrium, and--when disturbed-- returns to that state without the intervention of other forces, then its equilibrium is stable." I manage to copy this down.

The chalk is the point where the writing on the board converges with the lines inscribed upon my palm, and with my fixed stare. I imagine that the teacher--her equilibrium disturbed, and without the intervention of other forces--is returning to her desk. With every step her complexion gets swarthier and then, right behind my back, I hear the voice of the Gypsy: "Little will I take from you, much you will learn!" And she glances furtively at the chalk. Then—taking into account the difference in the relative mass of the chalk before and after the writing on the board, the intensity of my stare, and the palm in my pocket—she quickly calculates that the old man has at least sixteen more minutes left.

4.

They say that he repeated the words about the bridge to himself every day. He used to live between the bridge and the village closest to it. The villagers knew that he managed to cross the river at thirty-three. They did not know when he took to the road, nor where he started from; how he lost his arm, or why he had farewell bruises, (and) whether his one hand knew about the other.

5.

No wonder they are asking so many questions about the old man. They are puzzled by his abandon (and also perhaps by the bruises). His straining muscles and his restraint are puzzling. Imagine for a moment forcing someone to live for years on end between the bridge and the village closest to it.

I am erasing "without the intervention of other forces". One feels the restraint, the straining muscles, and the intervention of other forces.

6.

"As for the bridge. God gave the bridge the purest of shadows. And gave a river to the bridge. And to the river--a bridge. Then He took some of the shadow of the bridge, and gave it to the river. In the name of God, most benevolent, ever merciful."

God makes the heavenly bodies move. The shadow of the bridge moved with them also: the bridge caressed the waters of the river. God created the heavenly bodies to deepen the shadows. And to the river he gave the shadow of the bridge. Before that shadow, the waters felt impure. They kept passing under its veil, and--seeing the wedding ring placed there by the old man-- they sped on with the hope that some day, after a torrent upstream, they'll stop parting with the bridge before they depart. On that day, they would reach the shadow purified and heavy with the greetings of all waters unable to attend.

7.

And also: What makes him set out, every morning, after the communal prayer, towards the river (with the words): "In the name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful, if you see me coming back again-- if you see me coming back without having crossed the bridge-- then kill me with the stones." And--so they say-- he would point to the pile of river stones, heaped in the middle of the village. By these stones the villagers kept track of the days. Each stone marked a day after the building of the bridge. The villagers measured by them the passage of time, while the old man measured by them his powerlessness.

At twenty-two -they say- he reached the river. At thirty-three he finally managed to cross it, over the bridge, which he built with his only arm, and with many river stones.

The bridge itself, however, he failed to cross. Because the road ends with a bridge; because that road ended with the bridge. So when he crossed, he reached the opposite bank. But then the opposite bank was not the opposite side.

8.

"In the beginning were the prayers for rain. Thus they hoped to shorten the distance between them, and how could one know what the river and the bridge knew? After some torrent, she could ask the bridge: 'Do you take me to be your river?' And if the bridge nods--a nod would be enough-- the two would set out together. And people would say: 'The river swept away the bridge.'

Somewhere along the way, the river would cross the bridge for the first time, would cross its bridge for the first time, would cross my bridge for the first time. And on the next day, people would say: 'Damn the rains, and damn that river.' And God would sent them twenty-two years of drought."

9.

The teacher puts her hand in my pocket, and the Gypsy puts her hand in my pocket. Then she repeats: "Little will I take from you, much you will learn!"

The sixteen minutes have long since elapsed, but that physics lesson is far from over. The Gypsy squints and stares fixedly at something on my hand: "Little will I take from you, much you will learn!" But instead of the formulas, penned surreptitiously on my palm, her lips utter (the lines read by her swarthy fingers): "The pile is growing. Your feet grow weaker, shortening the steps and lengthening the time, which may soon run out on you. The trees by the road are growing taller. On the way back you go down to the water, bend your back to shoulder the next stone, cup your hand, and take a scoop of river-water and bridge-shadow. Sometimes the stone falls, marking the road with yet another bruise. But your outstretched hand remains steadfast. And every day, the water cupped in its palm nourishes the roots of the roadside trees. The pile grows. So do the trees, and the shadows upon the road. Because the shadows are dissolved in the river-water, and pour out along with it from the cupped hand of the old man. And the old man bends his back again to shoulder the fallen river stone: The village is expecting the next stone."

10.

"An arch he ordered, raised above the river like the vault of heaven (.) Out of gratitude, he built a lofty bridge, and freed from hardship and travail rich and poor. The world is a bridge; the roads of kings and beggars pass across that bridge. And those who thread the just and righteous path, will find their salvation with God Most High (.) And when I saw the bridge completed, I (the poet) offered a prayer to the almighty God, and uttered the words inscribed herewith." (An inscription on an Ottoman bridge from the end of the 16th c.)

11.

And yet again he headed for the bridge, talking to the trees along the road. And yet again he headed for the bridge. I was telling them when and where I started on my way, what happened to my missing arm, and why trees are good listeners.

You don't remember this, but long ago, when I first met you and your shadows were still untamed, I did not know yet how to walk the road.

Tomorrow the bruises will start to disappear. The road (stretched between you), though, must never disappear. That was what I taught you, for years on end: a tree should never ever fall upon the road. And let your shadows be with you: for they will help you mark the passage of time.

12.

They say the pool under the bridge was deep: yes, deeper still for those with only one arm. Till that day, the bridge had stood between them. Till that day, fear held the old man back. But on that day he stood right on the edge, and--a step or two before departing--said, "My missing arm, my missing arm's a bridge." And--so they say-- he started walking lightly upon the waters. Next to his outstretched arm, he felt the straining muscles of the bridge. The river, the old man, and the bridge.

The missing bridge was now his missing arm. The river slowly drew the contours of the-man-and-bridge. "The river slowly draws the contours of the old man and the bridge."

13.

The villagers expected him to return with yet another river stone. And often, every now and then, they'd say: "The old man's missing." They gathered, all of them, and set out for the bridge. But when

they reached the river, the bridge was gone. "The river has swept away the bridge," they kept repeating. And seldom, only now and then, they'd add: "The old man's missing." One of the villagers suddenly proposed, that on the way back each should take a stone.

The following night, they say, the pile disappeared. One single stone remained in the middle of the village. A rumor spread among the villagers that--one by one--the old man had returned the stones to the river. With each stone--so they say--he got younger. At thirty-three he managed to go across: to cross the bridge which he had built with his only arms [sic.], and with all river stones, carried from the village. He did not set foot on the shore across, but went his way upon the road beyond.

14.

When he started out and where to--ask the trees along the road. But if someone doesn't know yet how to walk the road, better come and find me. Little I will take from him, much you will learn.

TO MEA

I'm exploring the abyss.
If it is double-bottomed,
I'll be back
for you.

DOORS

When God slammed shut the last of wounds,
which you forgot to close
when you were leaving, He said:
Knock, and I'll open.

I knocked and knocked, clenching a knife in my fist.
The doors swung open one after another,
but behind each one I found only myself,
with a knife stuck in my back.

*

The clouds
are the innocent victims
of our prayers for rain.

*

Since we stopped praying
the clouds have been forced
to commit suicide.

*

"Water is life,"
they said to the drowned man.
And he
burst into tears.

*

They asked the lowest of the seven heavens:
Do the other six weigh you down?
It looked up, then down again:
No they don't,
but you do.

A DEFINITION FOR SURFACE

Earth-
an infinite outlet
to the sky.

GROUNDS FOR A SKY

The sky
is black and blue
from a collision with the Earth
in an attempted
suicide.

*

To Boyko Lambovski

AFTER A FLOOD

The sky was floating upwards yet again,
riding on drowned bodies...
when we protested, that without fire
the carcass of the sun is ashen-gray...

Our requests remained unspoken,
and coals... and sulphur... molten metal too.
We had barely crawled out of the water -
and had to drag our bodies back again.

The fishes then collected all of us
in their rainwater coffins
again to feed their gods with our men
and in the women to conceive their spawn.

How to slaughter a fish:
Poke out one of its eyes
and show it to the other.

“LET THERE BE LIGHT”

The distance between you and me is 300 km.
You are just one-thousandth of a light-second away.
But will I live to see you shine...

RAIN APOCRYPHA

1.

The mountain did not go to the prophet: He himself came to the Rhodopes, caressed the stones, and fell asleep in their arms. When he awoke, the Gypsy maiden was leaning over him, reading quietly the lines on his palms. The prophet looked at her. He didn't even lift a hand to check on his ribs, for he was sure that she was a part of him. And then I understood the saying about Mohammed and the mountain: The mountain always wanted to come, but first he had to tear it away from his eyes, in order to see it and to understand that he was a part of it.

2.

They say that her father was a stonecutter. When God created the Rhodope mountains, He sent him to carve hands for all the stones. I used to gather them since I was a child. I roamed the cemeteries believing that if someone took the tombstones, the tombs will simply disappear. And soon all cemeteries around disappeared.

3.

And when the mountain was covered with hands, along came the prophet. He lifted his hands and asked the stonecutter's daughter to sing a Rhodope song for him. That was how we held our prayers for rain. The mountain lifted its hands towards the advancing clouds and waved farewell. And my daughter was afraid that the clouds would fall victim to our prayers for rain. She did not reproach me, but whispered quietly the prayer for the dead, which I used to say in my childhood, over the puddles left after a heavy rain.

4.

All clouds die. But the ones that are gathering above have followed our song here at their own free will. And if it rains after a while, they'll simply give us back what they have gathered from the song on their way here. Neither the clouds, nor the prayer are the cause of the rain; rather, it is caused by the will to help us. The prophet stopped. He couldn't recall why they had held the prayer. And it was not the first time, either. He had been gathering stones throughout his childhood. I learned from them how to read and write. They taught me, that if death came, you weren't there. I learned to be a stone. (If they take me, will the tomb disappear too.) But I could never recall why I gathered stones: I used to gather them, and I continue gathering them still.

5.

A stranger asked me how to get to the Rhodopes. I didn't know where he was going, but I felt it. He was a fellow traveler. I felt that I could not but help him. The stranger told me that he had been looking for the mountains all his life. I didn't know whether this was long or short, but I could see the sores on his feet and the gray in his hair. I bent down and took the last tombstone off my back. (That is how they took down the crucified one. He grew ripe on the cross. And in my dreams I saw human multitudes crucified on needles' eyes. He plucked me off, so that I would not fall. The prophet does fall far from the cross. And then he, too, was taken down.)

I turned to the piles of stones gathered over the years and said: I know each and every stone of the Rhodopes. But I did not know the mountain. So I turned away and tore it from my eyes. But that fruit had fallen behind me, and I didn't turn back to see it. I was on my way. In search of a thing I had been looking for all my life. I didn't know whether that was long or short, but the road took me

to the Rhodopes. No, the traveler wasn't a stranger. And I knew I should not turn round, for I wouldn't recognize myself. One of the stones was missing.

6.

The stonecutter couldn't believe his hands, for every thing he touched turned into a tombstone. He was blind.

I was so happy that I wanted to kiss the boy's hands. He stretched his arm out to him, but then he realized that he would turn the boy to stone too. Then he started to think: Maybe the stones have hands too, but no one sees them. He sat down, took out his stone-cutter's burin--the only thing he possessed--and set out to help people with weak eyesight. So I taught the stones how to pray: "In the name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful". And the mountain was covered with kissed hands.

7.

The rain is one for clouds and for people--said the Gypsy and sent his daughter.

8.

She loved reading palms. She couldn't wait for the stonecutter to finish working on a stone, and then her long dark fingers ran over the curved lines inscribed upon it.

From her the stones learned what had transpired, and what was their past. And with each passing day their hands grew warmer and warmer at the touch of the long dark fingers. The lines twitched, and the veins that even the stonecutter hadn't noticed grew deeper and deeper into the carved stone. Sometimes she was so frightened by what she read upon their palms that she beseeched the stonecutter to change or erase some of the lines.

9.

The prophet cannot foretell the future. He possesses pure knowledge and her long dark fingers. When the fingers touched the stonecutter, they divined that he had a daughter and he knew he was a part of her. They knew about the missing stone.

10.

I can't explain why or how, but the lines on his palms are moving. I read them. I see how they throw stones at the messenger. I see how he gathers the stones and builds a temple. How he brings into it the ones who want to repent for the murder. The prophet enters. The temple reaches out for his hands: to ask forgiveness. In the name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful. The hands are pointing at the walls: Not me, it was them that you stoned. The walls are covered with forgiveness and kissed hands. The prayer has never been interrupted. The prophet is late for the meeting with his next murderers. Will they repent. The prophet cannot foretell the future. He possesses pure knowledge and her long dark fingers. Will they repent if I tell her... I looked at her.

11.

Six days on end it rained without stopping. The rain was streaming down the veins. The stonecutter who regained his sight with the first drops of rain looked at his daughter. The rain is one for clouds and for people.

12.

When the rain stopped, the Rhodopes were gone. The stones never went to the mountain. They only gather it. They tear it away from themselves to call themselves people of the mountain. The

people of the mountain are the true roots of the mountain. They don't have to look for their roots in it. I know where the roots are. And so do they. We all go to the missing stone.

FROM *RAIN APOCRYPHA* (2004)

THE DERWISH, HIS JUGULAR VEINS, AND...¹

To Mesha Selimovic

1.

I swear upon the revolving orbit, the footsteps, and the road; I swear upon the dervish's dance; upon creation, the Uncreatable and the created, both; upon the dervish who revolves and turns, coiling creation around his jugular veins; I swear upon the road, which turns and winds upwards—from the feet towards the sky, towards a sky the road to which remains still untrodden. That's why the dervish would rather dance--the road winds and remains untrodden, untrampled by his feet. The dervish moves lightly. His jugular veins point the way towards the moving target, and the target dances in sync with the swelling tide of roads. From below and downwards.

2.

Down below, the Sufis continue dancing till the trance sends them flying towards the target, and--merging with it--they fall motionless: The soul, dashing out of their exhausted bodies, plunges itself into their jugular veins. Meanwhile, creation does not stop revolving.

3.

One of the Sufis stirs, arises, and sees, that all disciples are already seated around the standing master.

"Master, forgive my boldness," says the Sufi, lifting to his face the scriptures kept in the abode of dervishes. "Here it is written, that 'the night does not precede the day,' but also that "(God) shrouds the day with night, which follows it ..."²

4.

They say that when God shrouded the day with night, he asked the brothers not to light the oil-lamps. He stood inside the temple and -- as was his wont--invited the Sufis to prayer with the sound of his flute. And only when he felt the breeze of the approaching robes, he lit the oil lamp, damp with rusty glow.

"In the name of the Beneficent, the Merciful. Now the day shines on your faces. But if you revolve in an orbit around your jugular veins, after a step or two your day will turn to night, and the night shrouding your backs will turn to day. If your eyes would rather seek the day--you need to take another step or two. You'll find the day, but then you'll lose the night. And only if--towards the end of prayer, swept by the whirlwind of the dance--your soul succeeds in dashing forth to take a glimpse beyond you, then you will see what you have read already: 'the day is not preceded by the night'; for you, the oil-lamp, and the entire universe, it will be simultaneously day and night.

¹ See Quran 50:16 "We verily created a man and We know what his soul whispereth to him, and We are nearer to him than his jugular vein." (Tr. M. M. Pickthall)

² See Q 36:39 "It is not for the sun to overtake the moon nor doth the night outstrip the day. They float each in an orbit."; and Q 7:54: "He covereth the night with the day, which is in haste to follow it, and hath made the sun and the moon and the stars subservient to His command." (Tr. M.M.Pickthall)

5.

Day and night the dervishes stay in the Temple-of-the-day-and-night. The night does not hide its darkness, but the brothers light their oil-lamps, trying to hide it in the temple.

6.

In order not to blind those rushing at the target—some from below and some downwards--during prayer the dervishes shroud in darkness the lamps of their bodies. The prayer has no words, only a feeling, and premonition of gratitude...

In the name of the Beneficent, the Merciful. If left without water, bread, or light, the dervish tries to forget the roads that could lead to them, because he knows that the Almighty has prescribed for him healing thirst, healing hunger, and healing darkness. At such a time, there is nothing more insulting than to pray to the Almighty for water, bread, or light.

Pray that your prayers be bereft of words. You need the verbal prayers only so, that through them your soul and body could reveal to you the things that you have wished for (in)advertently. Instead of forwarding such prayers on to God, you better hurry to forget them. Forget them--all but one: the one received from heaven.

7.

Quran 24:35: "God is the light of the heavens and of earth. The semblance of His light is that of a niche in which is a lamp, the flame within a glass, the glass a glittering star as it were, lit with the oil of a blessed tree, the olive, neither of the East nor of the West, whose oil appears to light up even though fire touches it not,--light upon light."³

8.

When shrouded in darkness, the oil-lamp does not stop registering the passage of light-years; the light--already radiated-- travels on until the moment when someone notices it. And when that happens, the one who caught a glimpse of the light, embarks upon the road leading to the oil-lamp. His wish is-- once he arrives--to light it up. But only those arrive, who realize that not the oil-lamp, but they themselves are shrouding and shrouded in darkness.

The dervish knows that the oil-lamp is hidden in his body. That is why he seeks the light with his eyes closed. If he finds it, he shrouds himself in darkness. But this is not the sort of darkness which remains unpierced by the eyes of those shrouded in it. It is the darkness of the night--the night, which turns into a day with step or two, but only if you have decided to revolve in orbit around your jugular veins . . .

³ The translation of this segment is by Ahmed Ali. It was chosen because the Bulgarian original refers to God rather than Allah, perhaps in order to convey the universality of the message. For comparison see M. M. Pickthall's translation: "Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The similitude of His light is a niche wherein is a lamp. The lamp is in a glass. The glass is as it were a shining star. (This lamp is) kindled from a blessed tree, an olive neither of the East nor of the West, whose oil would almost glow forth (of itself) though no fire touches it. Light upon light, Allah guideth unto His light whom He will. And Allah speaketh to mankind in allegories, for Allah is Knower of all things."

A COPY OF THE SEA'S WILL

1.

I fill my shoes with sea-salt, walk along the shore and imagine that I've crossed the desert between our seas barefoot. I say: "My sea is sending to your sea the salt that's in my shoes" and then I step into the water, take off my shoes, and wait for the salt to dissolve. And the water's getting saltier. And the sea's getting saltier: my sea, not yours, for you and your sea are beyond the desert.

2.

My shoes walk upon the waves, and the sky crosses the sea with them. Barefoot, I walk in the opposite direction and I think to myself: The desert, you, and I have come down from the sky (I've been told that the Earth was formed when the primordial sky hearkened to the commandment "Let there be." Its particles whirled, it grew pensive and introspective. By the time it grasped the meaning of the words "Let there be," its particles had already turned to dust. And so the primordial earth came into existence. The heavenly particles went on hearkening to the commandment and even now they continue discovering its secret meanings: Be water. Be man. Be just the way you are, or maybe different . . .) All of us--the desert, you, and I-- have heard the command "Be." The desert still remembers it, and wants us to recall it too, but ever since we separated, we have been accusing the desert of dividing us.

3.

In fact, the desert is not a divider. It is a gatherer. The desert gathers sand. It has gathered these sands for years: the number of the sand grains is so great that should all the watches of the world turn into hourglasses, they would not contain them. And the years? The years, the rivers, the seas all help the desert. When the last hour of a sea draws near—a sea in which innumerable rivers, centuries on end, have emptied their sands--the sea signs with its last drops two copies of its will -- the parched bottom, and the sky – and leaves its sands to its only heir: the desert . . .

4.

But how to cross the desert barefoot. Do I have to go through every single grain of sand? Or I could just touch one and feel all the others. And not because they are all the same: the truth is that I am just the same as them. Were it not so, I'd say "But how to cross the desert barefoot" and the desert will become even more impassable. (I pass over in silence . . .)

I set out through the desert and the grain of sand that once I'd called "the one and only" sends its reflections (through the heavenly particles) to someone who's aware of the fact that mirages don't lie: they reflect real objects: Grains of sand, grains with different names: oasis, sun, sunset over the desert, desert, she. But she and her sea: they are not beyond the desert. The sea dried up long ago: your sea, not mine, for my sea and I are grains of sand in the desert that was left after it.

5.

I'll go through every single grain of sand. And not because I cannot find the one from the mirage. It is in my palm (you are in my palm), but because with every grain of sand I become more aware of its value, and I hear more clearly His word, and you hear more clearly His word.

FROM THE COLLECTION *GROUNDS FOR A SKY*: (1993)

DEFINITION OF ETERNITY

A stretch of time
shot dead
while trying to escape
by running clockwise.

DOOR

Do not put your finger in the wound
for if it heals,
you'll have to open it
again.

*Translation from Bulgarian: Michael Beard with Aziz Tash,
and with Marta Simidchieva*
