Poems by Akbar Ilahabadi
Translated by Miriam Murtuza

Note: I have put in quotations marks those words which were expressed in English in the original poems; I have done so in order to distinguish them from words which were expressed in Urdu in the original poems but which I have translated into English. For ease of reference, I have titled untitled poems “Untitled A,” “Untitled B,” and so forth.

1 Beside the calls to prayer, there is the waking whistle of the “engine”; About this very [issue] the Sheikh has beaten his breast.


3 Thus now are gone the days of sherbet in front of friends, O Akbar; sometimes [it] is “soda,” sometimes “lemonade,” sometimes “whiskey,” sometimes “tea.”

1 I translated these poems as part of a class I was taking on Urdu satire, taught by Syed Akbar Hyder. Although I initially translated the poems myself, I revised my original translations based on our discussion of the poems in class. Thus my translations here are indebted both to Dr. Hyder’s and my classmates’ translations. Additionally, Dr. Frances W. Pritchett and Dr. Rupert Snell kindly offered some corrections after I presented these translations as part of a presentation at the 2007 Annual Conference on South Asia in Madison, Wisconsin.

2 The Pioneer was an English-language newspaper founded in Allahabad in 1865 by Englishman George Allen. Rudyard Kipling worked for The Pioneer from 1887 to 1889. The newspaper was later moved to Lucknow and continues to be published today in Lucknow, Delhi, and other Indian cities. “I.D.T.” is presumably the name of another English-language newspaper.
1 Understand the “relation” between life and Judgment Day [in this way]:
Understand the former [as] “college,” and the latter [as] “convocation.”

2 Those who have the power to appoint and implement laws
Consider only them to be nations in the ranks of communities (aquaam).

3 From sighs and complaints [it] will not come under control, beloved;*4
Understand the burning of the heart as the Bengal “agitation.”*5

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*4 Alternately, this line could read, “From sighs and complaints, the beloved will not come under control.”
*5 The poet is alluding to the partition of the province of Bengal in 1905 under Lord Curzon and the resistance movements (referred to as the “agitation”) which Curzon’s decision sparked.

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*3 “Sherbet” is a kind of drink traditionally served to guests in India. Guests are now being served English beverages instead of sherbet.
خوا حافظ مسالمت کا اکثر

سیاں تو ان کی نقصان مال کے سے پاس

سیاں تم کو کہ فضیلت حیف

کیا یہ من نے جس کو زیری یقیتا

کیا جمع کسے بیلی کی مان نے

کہ یہاں تو آگ کر کے ایم اے پاس

تفریحا بیها دوں لیا کی کو بھی بے

پتھری تو جیاں بن جیاں جیاں نتی ساس

کب جیاں نے یہ اپنی سانی

کب عاشق، کبی کا کی بواکس

ہی یہ نظری بونس طبیعت

گیا تھونی پولی دوسری کا اسکا

حیرت آپ کو کہ کیا بھگیا بے

پن بھی لادی جانی تو کی جوں گھاکس?

پر ایکی تقدری آپ نے کی

میہ بھی جس دی ہے کو یہ چڑک داس

دل اپنا خوان کر نے کو پول موجود

نینی ضرور مغری سر کا آکاس

ہی تھومزے ہو شونا جول اسیل

تو استغفا مر بنا حتی پاسیا
May God [be] the protector of Muslims, O Akbar; I despair over their prosperity.

These are the sweethearts of the goal, but they will not go near effort.

Shall I tell you a fictitious joke which I have made the adornment of a piece of paper?

Leila’s mother said this to Majnun: “Son, if you take your ‘M. A. Pass,’”

Then I would immediately marry Leila to you; Without hesitation I would become your mother-in-law.

Said Majnun, “You’ve spoken this well; Where is the lover? [And] where is the idle talk of college?

“Where is this natural passion of temperament? [And] where is the stuffed feeling of matters?

“Old woman, what has happened to you? Can grass ever be loaded on a deer?

“You have esteemed me well; [You] have understood me as some Harcharan Das.

“I am ready to sacrifice myself, [But I] do not accept such swelling/tumor of the head/brain.

“[If it is] decided that this is the condition for union with Leila, Then accept my resignation [of my suit] with despair and dismay.”

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6 They love attaining an end goal, not the process of attaining it.
7 which I have written down.
8 Leila and Majnun are famous ill-fated lovers of Persian folklore. The cultural resonance of their story for readers of Urdu poetry is akin to that of Juliet and Romeo for readers of English literature.
9 If you receive an M. A. degree
10 What does college have to do with a lover? How can you compare the two, when the latter is so much more important than the former?
11 A diploma, something received by those educated in the West, is stuffed in one’s hand. How can you compare the lover’s passion with a student’s arrogance?
12 Deer like to run wild, not carry loads of grass on their backs.
13 Harcharan Das is perhaps the name of some Hindu person the poet considered a toadie to the British. The name literally means feet of Shiva.
14 Literally: I am ready to shed the blood of my heart.
Qatah

1 I said, “[I] know very many languages/tongues. For a long period of time I have taken exam after exam.

2 “[I have] command of German, French, Latin, and English; My perfection has been proven to the entire world.”

3 One saucy-tempered “Miss” showed [her] tongue/language to me; There was lightning in clouds, [and] the moon [was] in the sky.

4 [She] said, “You will remain unaware of life’s flavor/sweetness If you do not master this tongue/language.”

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15 A qatah is a genre of short poem. Qatah literally means a cutting or portion.
یفرق کے کیسے

ریس مس سے کیسے دعا کیا حسن دوجا ہے اس حسن میں ہے گشت کہ حسن کی خصوصیت دوجا اہم کا ہے

زلفی پرناي میں دوجا گمشد کہ خود میں مہدی تیکر گرنا ہے میں نہیں کیا ہے تیکر میں کیا ہے شہچر دوست دوجا زودن کہ دوجا کی کہ شہچر کو دوجا پہلا کہر

دل سے ہے کا ناپا کہ ستارہ گرگا کو دل سے ہے کا ناپا کہ بھگا بھگا ہے دل سے ہے کا ناپا کہ بھگا بھگا

آتش دوسری سے تقوی کو بلا اے وائل

جبلیال نطق تبسم سے گرگا اے وائل

ورس کی کیمی نک جا کے گلشن فنکر میں بھرہا ہوا دعا دو دعا دعا دو ایمان ترے تدوع پہ نشتر

6. تو گر عمرو دا باندھ کے میسری پرچالے

7. ساری دنیا سے میں قلب کو تیری پرچالے

8. شوق کے نہاس بہی کو نہیں ہے ہا بہی ہیں ہا بہی ہیں ہا بہی ہیں

9. نیا کم ہے میں اس سلسلے سے

10. ہوا خور آئی سے سا ترے ترے ترے ترے ترے ترے ترے
ملکہ پوکو کی کوئی کرکے بہر دیگہ نہ ہو
پھر پانچ ایک کی گو گو گو ان کی اثر خون کی جہاد
غضب کی معیا سے چکا اسے لدیہ بائیں راستے میں
اب زندہ پہ نیسی سے انہا آدمی ہوئی
اف کیہ انہی سے لوغی
بھی کہانی نہیں باتی سے براہ و رفہ
کہ کہنے سے گنجی سے ہی تھوڑا سے قوم کی آتیں کی طرف
تم کی بات نہیں اب فتیال بانگزا کا رنگ
دل پہ نالاب چہ فقط حافظ چیراز کا رنگ
جب میرے جیہا پہندے تے اپنے پہ نماز
نواد انسان کا تہ دیکھے گھومو پہ نماز
موعہ کوئی کہ انسان آب پہ شہ ہم بانگ کا گرد
ہم تو تمینہ ہم جوئے پہ شہر کا شاگر
مجرہ چہ چھوڑ چہ چھوڑ گت گت کو آس پاس ہے جان نہیں
نام یہ نام ہے وردہ بہ مسلمان نہ ہی
جب چاہے صاف یہ میں نے کہا ہم بھی اچھی فهم
تو کلا دل ناکز سے یہ سبسہ شہبہ یہ دم
مرہ اسلام کو گر قفقا قافق پاک گھو
میں کے بولی کہ تے چوپر مرہ کو گرفتار راضی گھو
One night I was meeting with that “Miss” in the Church; O that beauty, that forwardness, that delicacy, that voluptuousness.

The appearance of her curly locks was such that even the demons were [her] devotees. There was such graceful motion in her swaying gait that even Judgment Day became [her] martyr.

Those eyes, mischief of time, that shall make sinners, That cheek, brilliance of dawn, that the angels love

[Her] alluring gait/manner is such that [it] makes the stars falter. [She is] that very one to whose insolence of coquetry the “governor” submitted.

From the fire of beauty, she burns/inflames the pious; From the elegance of [her] smile she causes lightning to fall.

I humbly stated, “O bloom of nature’s garden, Good fortune and honor and faith [are] scattered at your feet.

“If you, having tied the knot of fidelity, should become mine, My heart will be more satisfied than if I had the entire world.”

In the heat of desire when I spoke that language, In the manner of flirtatious behavior, having frowned, she spoke:

“For me, affection with Muslims is impossible; I smell blood coming from the legends of this race.

“Why should anyone be content that they are good and pious [When] they still have in their veins the influence of the blood of jihaad?”

I humbly replied, “O life’s delight, spirit’s source of pleasure, The effects of Adam and Noah are no more left upon the present time.

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16 Or, alternately, “Lightning Generated by the Church.” This title alludes to baraq-e-tajali, the burning bush encountered by Moses.
17 Demons are associated with the color black.
18 Judgment Day is something certain, unalterable, yet even it has been swayed by her. Or, people have forgotten about Judgment Day because of her.
19 The angels being male slaves (malak) in heaven, the counterpart of female houris.
20 In the Urdu ghazal universe, the beloved’s gait is usually compared to the stars because of their movement.
21 Literally: promise
22 Literally: In the heat of desire when I opened my tongue
23 Jihaad, which means “justified struggle,” is often translated in the West as “holy war.”
“Now where in the mind do Buraaq and Rafraf remain? The stare/gaze is fixed in the direction of the “engine” of the people.

“In us no longer remains the color of Khaalid the Brave. The heart is overwhelmed by the color of Haafiz of Shiiraaz.

“The polish of the mujaahid’s sword may be sacrificed on your eyebrow. The light of religion may be sacrificed for the mirror of your countenance.

“Where is the surge of Kauser now? In my garden. Thus I am cultured, student of the saint of the magian.

You have no reason for displeasure with me, O beloved. A name is only a name; otherwise, I am not a Muslim.”

When I plainly said this, “[You] who should be insightful, [You] should remove from this delicate heart all this doubt, this anxiety/superstition.

[You] should think of my Islam as a tale of the past.” Laughing, [she] said, “Then you should also consider me willing/agreed.”

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24 Buraaq and Rafraf are the names of the Prophet Muhammed’s horses.
25 Khaalid the Brave is known, especially to Sunni Muslims, as a determined warrior, a “sword of Islam,” and is associated with the color red. Haafiz of Shiiraaz, who was the equivalent of the poet Ghalib in the Persian ghazal tradition, is associated with wine drinking. Thus, according to the speaker, the color red is now tied to red wine rather than the blood of jihaad.
26 A mujaahid is one who carries on jihaad [justified struggle]. In the Urdu ghazal universe, the beloved’s eyebrow is often compared to a sword, bow, or crescent moon because of its shape.
27 A river and fountain in paradise.
28 A magian, in this context, means the head of a Christian or Zoroastrian fraternity, who, unlike pious Muslims, drinks in a tavern. The implication of this couplet is that the speaker has traded heavenly pleasure for earthly pleasure.
29 In the first half of this line the speaker could be asserting that he is a Muslim in name only, and/or that his Muslim name is just a name, something that should not bother her. In the second half of the line, he could be vouching for the validity of what he has just said by swearing upon his Muslim-ness, and/or asserting that he would not be Muslim if he had to be of the old-fashioned, jihaad-waging sort (and thus unappealing to her).
30 Literally: possessor [saahib] of intellect/knowledge/understanding
علٰم مَغْبَر شَبوهَ کے پَوَنِ گی اسی تَوَرمِ بیبِیال
بیبِیال شَبوه سُبِیل گی اور شَبوه بیبِیال
20 - کا بِنگل کیا کرَی گی عَلٰم پَہچ کر بیبِیال
بول گی سُبِت۶ سے لے کر بِنگل بیبِیال
31 - آئی کیا کِیتے جِیوان کے سَراپِھ کہیاں گی
جب پی یان جائیں گی سِیہ ہسن کر بیبِیال
32 - ان کے دام وِمکِر سے بَنُنا اکن دَشوار سِہ
اور آئت شِیاہ گی سِیہ پَہچ کر بیبِیال
33 - ہُن کا نگر تَسِلیم سے یہ فانِدہ ہوگا خوُرد
ہُنگ یہ کیلَی ہے مَا ہے من جا کے نِکا بِیبِیال
34 - بُن کے مَکابِل فانِدہ گز مَکْل کی بَنی تَمیت نَہِین
35 - ہُن کا نگر تَسِلیم سے یہ فانِدہ ہوگا خَود
ہُنگ یہ کیلَی ہے مَا ہے من جا کے نِکا بِیبِیال
مرَکَی عَلٰم نُواً پؤَن، بیبِیال کی بِھر بیبِیال
After having studied the science/knowledge of the West, wives/ladies will become [so] headstrong
[That] wives will become husbands and husbands, wives.

What should I say, what will I do? Having studied science/knowledge
All the wives [in their professions] will range from “deputy” to “governor.”

What thing is [a] man [who] will tyrannize beasts?
Having worn their own shadows, wives should/might become fairies.31

From their net and craftiness it is difficult [for us] to be saved right now,
And having studied “science,” wives will bring calamity.

Yes, but from education there will certainly be this benefit:
Having gone to the Christian “mission,” wives will become servants.

Those who do not even have the capacity to five yards of muslin32
Wives will spread on their heads the cloth of protection.

Yes, but they [wives] certainly need such education;
They may become the companions of husbands/men, the guides of children.

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31 This line has something to do with women becoming spirits. Spirits are believed not to cast shadows.
32 the very poor