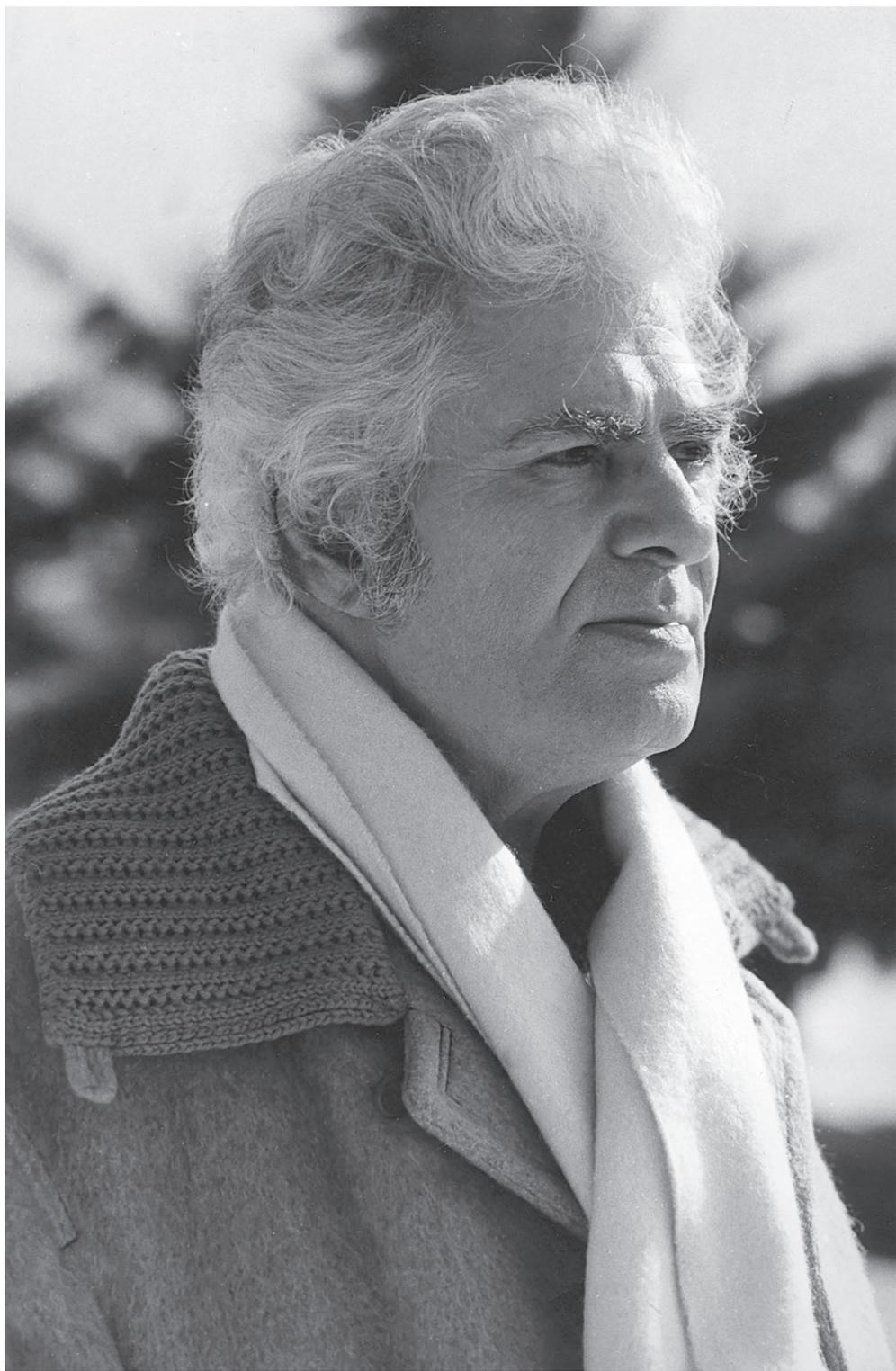


BORN UPON
THE DARK SPEAR

SELECTED POEMS
OF AHMAD SHAMLU

Translated by

Jason Bahbak Mohaghegh



SELECTED POEMS
OF AHMAD SHAMLU

شبانہ
کوچہ ہا باریکن

دُکونا

بستہ س

خونہ ہا تاریکن

تاقا

شیکستہ س

از صدا

افتادہ

تار و کونچہ

مُردہ می برن

کوچہ بہ

کوچہ

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Alone ...

Now they carry me to the sacrificial altar
Listen, all of you, who sit beholding the spectacle
For when counted, your idiocies far exceed my uncommitted sins!

—With you I have never shared any bond.

Your heavenly wish, which was to drag me across the hellish fever
of an inconclusive waiting, will turn to ashes; that I might take
a souvenir of such grand fire from your awful hell, whose flare
will make the poor hell-dwellers swallow down their blazing
environment like some refreshing drink.

For anything that is aligned with you, anything that has shared
a bond with you, I damn:

Upon my children

and upon my father

On your rank breast and

on those hands of yours that squeezed my hand

in such great deceit.

On your wrath and on your kindness

and on my own self

that unwanted, bears an outward physical resemblance

to your bodies.

I am in terror from both near and far.
Your gods would grant forgiveness to the tyrant Sisyphus
but I am the defeated Prometheus
from whose wounded liver
I have spread a feast for fateless crows.

My pride rests in my eternal pain
such that, in your every greeting and praise, I feel
the beak of a vulture in the vicinity of my liver.

The sting of a lance across the torn slit of my liver would have
been more intoxicating than a kiss from your lips, for from your
lips I have never heard anything spoken other than dishonesty.

And a thorn in the pupil of my eyes would have been more
pleasurable than your buyer's look, for nowhere was your look
toward me anything but that of a master toward his slave ...

To your men, I prefer murderers
To your women, I prefer prostitutes.
In the wake of a God who would open the doors of his paradise
to your kind,
I would be happier with eternal damnation.
Sitting among the virtuous and sleeping among untouched girls,
in such a paradise: let this be your cheap gift!

I am the defeated Prometheus
from whose wounded liver has spread an everlasting feast
for fateless crows.
Listen, all of you who sit beholding
the spectacle of this stranger's sacrifice that is I — :
With you I have never shared any bond.

Behind the Wall

How it burns, the bitterness of this confession,
that a man hostile and furious
behind the stone walls of beating legends,
pained and feverish, has fallen to his knees. —

A man who at night, every night, amidst the jagged stones,
would carve out flowers
And who now
throws his heavy sledgehammer to the wayside
so as to give his hands, devoid of love and hope and future,
a command:

“Cut short this nonsense, for its persistence is depressing
like some foolish discussion about nothing going nowhere ...
Cut short this chronic storytelling that each night, by comparison,
gathers at the bottom like the black slime of a marsh!”

I was gnawed upon
And alas, within the teeth of such ferocities
And a thousand regrets for this, that I willingly withstood
the torment of their gnawing
For I was thinking in this vein, that in this year of famine
I would make a meal from my own body's flesh
for the hungry companions.

And to this torment I became enlivened
And this vitality was nothing more than a deception;

Or it was a submergence in the swampland of my noble nature
Or an opportunity extended to the mercilessness
of the devious ones.

And these companions were nothing more than enemies
were nothing more than falsifiers.

I was the workman of my own death
And ah, how regrettable, for I enjoyed life!

Was my struggling entirely for that,
to make the bell-toll of my own death even louder?

I did not fly
I only flapped my wings!

Behind the stone walls of my epics
all my suns have set into dusk.
On this side of the wall, a man is alone
with his unstriving sledgehammer,
he stares at his own hands
and his hands are devoid of hope and love and future.

On this side of the wall, a hollow universe, a motionless and
uncreeping universe, spreads out for all eternity
A calm cradle, in which darkness fluctuates from one galaxy to
another galaxy, filling the cold void with the extract of death
And behind his proud epics
 a solitary man
 weeps for his own cadaver.

In the Far Distance

In the far distance, there is a fire though without smoke
Along the gaping shore of the cold sea of night
it glistens full of flames.

What has happened?
Is it a towering palace that burns?
Or a harvest stack — that has been left behind in rancor
amidst the fire of discord — ?

Nothing has happened here!
In the far distance, there is a fire though without smoke
which blazes on the gaping shore of night;
and here, beside us, it is a night of terror
our mouths warm
and well-informed of the situation.
It is a grudge that, with whatever stands before it,
turns the black-surfaced thing
even blacker.

Yes! Around this way
nothing has happened:
In the far distance, there is a fire though without smoke
And this smoked-out place is not the consequence
of a single light!

On the Stone Walkway

The unacquainted companions
like burnt-out constellations
collapsed cold in such numbers upon the unlit earth
that one would say
 hence
 the earth
 for all time
 remained a starless night.

And then
 I
 who was
the owl of the silence of his own pain's dark nest
placed to one side
the ghastly, string-severed harp
I raised the lantern and went out into the thoroughfare
I searched among the street of people
with this outcry upon my ember-spattered lips:
 "Hey!
Look from behind the glass windows at the street!
See the blood upon the stone walkway!...
You might think it is the blood of daybreak
upon the stone walkway,
that it's the heart of the sun that throbs this way
in its droplets..."

A rushing wind passed by
the dirt-sleeping ones,
it overturned the deserted nests of the raven
from the naked branch of the garden's aged fig tree ...

"The sun is alive!
In this pitch-black night (whose black-surfaced obsidian
has turned its entire spirit head-to-toe into a mouth
so that it can chew on hatred's rubber)
I have heard
the hardened song of the sun's heartbeat
clearer
madder
with harsher blows than ever before ...
Look from behind the glass windows at the street!

From behind the glass windows,
look upon the street!

From behind the glass windows ..."

The first new leaves of the sun
have grown across the ivy of the ancient garden's door
The playful lanterns of the stars
have been hanged upon the terrace of the sun's passageway ...

I returned from the road,
my whole spirit in anticipation
my whole heart pounding.
The ghastly, string-severed harp
I restrung
Beneath the windows
I sat down

And through the melody
 that I sung impassioned
the goblets of the cold lips of the martyrs of the street
with the drunken laugh of conquest
I shattered:

“Hey!
You might think it is the blood of daybreak
upon the stone walkway,
that it’s the heart of the sun that throbs this way
in its droplets...”

Look from behind the glass windows at the street!
See the blood upon the stone walkway!
See
the blood upon the stone walkway!
The blood
upon the stone walkway ...”

The Penalty

Here there are four prisons
In each prison several tunnels, in each tunnel several quarters,
in each quarter
several men in chains ...

Among these chained, one body, in the dark fever of accusation,
murdered his wife
with the blow of a dagger.
Among these men, one, in the afternoon of the burning summer,
moistened the bread of his children
with the blood of the hardened, greedy-toothed bread-seller.

Among these, a few in the privacy of one gutter-like day
sat in the path of the money-lender
Those who in the silence of the street would jump
from short walls upon rooftops
Those who at midnight, in fresh graves, would break
the golden teeth of the dead.

But I have killed no one upon a dark and storm-filled night
But I have not tied a path to that of the money-lender
But I at midnight have not jumped from rooftop to rooftop.

Here there are four prisons
In each prison several tunnels, in each tunnel several quarters,
in each quarter
several men in chains ...

Among these chained there are men who love women's corpses.
Among these chained there are men whose dreams each night are
of hearing a woman scream from her depths in the fear of death.

But I uncover no such thing in women — if I were to find
that kindred soul one day suddenly ...

Silence —

No, I ... in the aerial core of my own dreams nothing is heard
but the cold echo of the bitter song
of these desert weeds that grow, and rot, and wither, and fall.
If only I did not have these shackles, perhaps Daybreak,
I could have passed over
the remote and sliding memory of the cold, lowly dirt
of this level ...

This is the crime!
This is the crime!

Sketch

The night
 bloody-throated
 has cried out
 a long while.

The ocean
 is seated coldly.

One branch
 in the blackness of the forest
 towards light
screams.

Poverty

I have tired from an agony not my own
I have sat upon an earth not my own

I have existed with a name not my own
I have wept from a pain not my own

I have extracted life from a pleasure not my own
I have entrusted life to a death not my own.

A Scream

There is no greater wish left for me
than to ascend in search of a forsaken scream.

In the company of a shattered lantern
or without its company,
anywhere in this land
or anywhere in this sky.

A scream that one midnight
emanated from some unknown necessity,
unfamiliar to my existence
and fled toward an invisible sky...

Oh, all you gates of the universe!
Aid me
in the recovery of my forsaken scream!

Nocturnal

Dim-lit night
wakeful night
overflowing night
the most beautiful night to die.

One could say that the sky, from the brilliance of its stars,
has handed me a dagger.

Night
immanent night
 in its totality
remains sleepless before the epic of its sea of instigations.

The vacant sea
the depleted sea ...

Midnight

The cold claw of the wind has no harm in mind
And yet I am distraught:
You might say that like a black-clothed noblewoman
the catastrophe
 in advance
weeps along the roof of the house.

And the uncaring claw of the wind
in this empty satchel
is in pursuit of something.

A people,
and a cry from the depths:
—We are not pieces!
 We are not pieces!

Petition

From all vantages,
from the four directions,
from that vantage where the early morning mist appears
 agile and mercurial
and even from that other vantage where nothing is
no panting drought of the wasteland
no tree and no curtain of illusion from the gods' damnation, —
from the four directions
the escape route is blocked.

The duration of time
with my own chain-piece
 I measure
And the weight of the sun
with the black sphere of the shackle
 I configure within two scale-pans
And existence
in this unavailing strait
 passes with such idleness!

The judge of the predestined
has done an injustice to me.
Who will mediate between us?

I have damned all gods
just as they have done to me.
And in that prison from which there is no hope of flight
amid malevolent thoughts
 I have been innocent!

Garden of the Mirror

A light in my hand
a light across from me
I go to war with blackness.

The cradles of exhaustion
 have halted
 the back-and-forth of their rocking,
and a sun from the depths
illuminates galaxies turned ash-grey.
Subversive blasts of the lightning —
all the while hail
 in the hyperactive womb of the cloud
 is conceived.

And the imperceptible hurt of the vine —
as small, unripe grapes
sprout at the outer end of its long, coiling boughs.

My scream was aimed entirely at the evasion of hurt
for I would, in the most appalling of nights, seek out the sun
with a disheartened prayer.

You have come from the suns, have come from the daybreaks
you have come from the mirrors and from the silken cloths.

In an abyss without God or fire, I sought out your gaze and your
confidence with a disheartened prayer.

A serious matter
in the breach between two perishings
in the void between two solitudes —
(your gaze and your confidence is of this caliber!)

Your delirium is merciless and exalted
your breath within my bare hands is rhapsody and greenness

I arise!

A light in my hand
a light in my heart
I polish the rust off my soul
and place a mirror across from your mirror
so as to create an eternity of you.

Between Staying and Going

Between staying and going we told a story
that passed openly into the fold of symbolism.
Our chance rested on nothing more than this tight endowment
and, regrettably
we spent all our funds in payment of this story.

There is Nothing to be Said ...

What should I say? There is nothing to be said.

It blows from the height of anticipation, a breeze,
and yet, until a murmur plays
across the entire barren desert
 there will be no elm trees along its path.

What should I say? There is nothing to be said.

From behind slammed doors
the night full of daggers and enemies
 rests
conspicuously muted.

The rooftops
 beneath the pressure of night
 cave inward

The street
 from the coming and going of the unyielding, evil-eyed night
 has grown weary.

What should I say? There is nothing to be said.

Throughout this entire barren city,
there is no voice but that of a rat tearing at a death-shroud.

And in this darkened space
there is nothing but the lamentations of a widow.

And if a breeze does stir
 there is no elm tree
 along its path
 to commence the whisper.

What should I say? There is nothing to be said.

Nocturnal

The one who knew, kept his mouth closed.
And the one who spoke, did not know ...

Such a sorrow-drenched night it was!
And the traveler who passed in that quiet darkness
and who roused the dogs with the sound of his horse's hooves
upon the stones
without for one instant it having crossed his thoughts
that the night's descent,
 one might say
was all just a fever-dream.

Such a sorrow-drenched night it was!

Nocturnal

The streets are narrow
 the shops
 are closed,
the houses are dark
 the roofs
 toppled downward,
the sound
 has fallen
 from the tar and kamancheh³
they carry dead bodies
 from street to
 street.

Look!
 The dead
 will not pass
 into deathliness,
nor even
 into a life-entrusting candle
 will they pass
They resemble
 lanterns
 that even when extinguished
appearing to be without oil
 still
contain a world of oil within them.

Assembled people!
 I no longer
 have any
 patience

For “the good”
 I have no hope
 and for “the evil” no complaint.

Although
 I am at no
 distance
 from the others,

I have
 no business
 with the workings
 of this caravan!

The streets are narrow
 the shops
 are closed,
 the houses are dark
 the roofs
 toppled downward,
 the sound
 has fallen
 from the tar and kamancheh
 they carry dead bodies
 from street to
 street ...

The Inception

Timelessly, spacelessly
In estrangement
In an age not yet fulfilled —

Hence I was born amidst the woodlands of creatures and stone,
and my heart
in an abyss
began to pulsate.

I renounced the cradle of repetition
in a land without birds or spring.

My first journey was a return from the hope-eroding landscapes
of sand and thorn,
on the first untested steps of my own inexperience
without having gone far.

My first journey
was a return.

The far-off distance
was teaching no hope.

Trembling
upon the legs of an untraveled one
I faced the smoldering horizon.

I realized there were no good tidings
for a mirage stood in between.

The far-off distance was teaching no hope.
I knew there were no good tidings:
This boundlessness

was a prison so titanic

that the soul

from shame of frailty
in tears

would hide itself.

On Death

Never have I dreaded death
though its hands were more brittle than banality itself.
My concern — anyhow — is entirely that of dying in a land
where a grave-digger's wages
exceed the worth of human freedom.

To search
to discover
and then
to choose of one's will
and to project the essence of oneself into a fortress —

Even if death could bring a higher price than all this
I deny, and again deny, that I have ever dreaded death.

Nocturnal

A sliver of evil in your nature
A sliver of evil in my nature
A sliver of evil in our nature ... —

And everlasting damnation descends upon the human race.

A small drain-pipe in each shelter —
no matter whether it be the private hideaway of some love —
is enough to set the city in a cesspool.

Anthem for the One Who Left and the One Who Stayed Behind

Across the low breakwater
saturated with the salt of the sea and the blackness of nightfall
 we stood once more;
Thrashed
tongues bound in our mouths
disillusioned with ourselves, creeping within ourselves
pulsating within ourselves
tired
breath-sunken
 by the deeds of those who stayed upon the road.

In the salt-lipped darkness of the coast
we listened near and far to the relapsing syllables of the waves.
And in this instant
the shadow of the storm
 little by little
obscured the mirror of the night.

Amidst the proud debris of the night
a voice emerged
that was of neither bird
 nor ocean,
and all the while
a disturbing boat

with amorphous, mist-cloaked contours
 docked itself
 which was a nightmarish combination
 of a bed and a coffin.
 It was all an overruling dominion and command
 as if
 unafraid of the volatile restlessness of the waves and tides.

It was not what one would think it to be,
 a boat on the expansive sea
 but rather a mountain
 formidable
 embedded in a lowland plain.
 And in the heart of the tarred night
 the command of the dark
 was so flagrantly manifest toward it
 that it was as if no trust existed between them;
 and thus fluidly
 it slinked across
 like a coffin
 carried on a thousand hands.

Thus
 my father
 called out to the rower
 with a voice infused
 of neither hope
 nor question;
 it was as if
 his cry
 was not an address
 but a reply;

“Behold,
 two bodies
 are we
 both hard-worn
 bruised
 for we have lain our footsteps
 all across the uneven.
 And I was in this kind of night
 estranged from the dawn
 (where everything in this thrown-down beach
 had rebelled
 against the tall sun.)

Anyhow —
 We
 were informed
 from the outset
 of how this journey would conclude.
 And this knowledge
 means the same thing
 as acquiescence,
 such that we knew and
 offered our necks in submission.

And with honor, nevertheless
 amidst such mortifying and unwarranted combat
 in resistance
 we pressured ourselves to remain long-standing
 (as the high rampart of a stronghold under siege
 which unwavering
 remains secure.)

So it is in this interlude
that we cannot stand to tolerate ourselves.
The territory of our exaltation
has been this same ruined beach,
and alas that
 our power and our time
were consumed by the many coarse wars
 that had arisen.

And now
much like the outcast prostitutes
 we go to bed
holding ourselves in revulsion
and loathing our own bodies.

In this ruined darkness
 no longer
can we stand to be detained.”

The rower said once more:
“Only one.
The one who is more tired.
This is the instruction.”

And he lifted the ragged sackcloth which had been draped
across his bony shoulders,
as if he was tormented by the fog that had swelled
along the agitated, rancid arena of the ocean.

And at this point my gaze passed through the warped fabric
of the darkness
and settled on his visage
and I saw that his eye-sockets were hollow of eye or stare

and that drops of blood
poured from the dark cavities of his eyes upon his skeletal cheeks.
And the crow that sat atop the rower's shoulder
its talons and beak
were covered in blood.

And all around us
on the low breakwater of the shore
every massive boulder
embodied the silence of consent.

My father once again
rose to speak
this time
as if he were addressing himself:

“Dwindling
to dwindle
diminishing
diminishing from within ...”

I was astounded that a military man, hand always on the sword
could so
strikingly pass the test and
measure the fathomed value of
the fineness of words:

And he
henceforth
was engaged with himself:

“Diminishing
diminishing from within
a basin
to carve out a basin within oneself
to dig a well within oneself
a well
and to enter into oneself
in search of oneself...

Yes,

it is precisely here that
the disaster
commences:

to enter into oneself
and wander
in the realm of darkness.

And good fortune —
such pain
such pain
such pain
is nothing more
than another wandering
in another realm:
between the two poles of stupidity
and brazenness.”

Then a bitter curse rose up on his tongue and he cried out:
“although in this entrapping pit there is no fated hope
of the dawn,
for the victor of the cheap and draining wars
the dawn
is a dangerous thing
and such a vast one:

to be recognized
 and to be passed along on the hands and tongues,
 and the masses snarling
 such that (“there goes the victor
 and there the victor’s commander!”)
 if the disgrace comes not from the masses
 well then what can be done with the disgrace of oneself?

As a consequence, before the night turns toward daylight
 I must
 traverse this abyss of horror and distress.”

And then he stepped from the boat
 which was a nightmarish combination
 of a bed and a coffin
 and
 unafraid of the volatile restlessness of the waves and tides.
 Thus he leaned the oar
 against the water’s rim
 and the boat
 with fluidity
 glided across the dark sea,
 fluid and agile
 as if it were a coffin
 carried on a thousand hands...

I
 was left standing alone and perplexed
 on the low breakwater
 all around which
 every stone-ridge
 was silence and consent.

consciousness
as a term
means the same thing as neck-offering submission
and consent.

Amidst the proud debris of the night, a voice emerged
that was of neither bird nor ocean.

And hence I felt the full burden of my race's exhaustion
upon my own sunken shoulders.



COLOPHON

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Chasm. Mist. Dark Song. Hour of Execution. Behind the Wall. These are just some of the poetic titles of Ahmad Shamlu (1925–2000) that together form the cipher to one of the most powerful figures in modern world literature.

Brought together here in translation for the first time, these selected works provide a gateway to the paradoxical imagination of an author who traverses immense distances of oblivion & light. On the one hand, Shamlu is known as a poet of night-raids and prison cells, dead-ends and burial orations, one for whom endlessly doomed horizons always keep him close to themes of martyrdom, fatality, rage, atrocity, & struggle. Yet, he is also the writer immortalized under the pen-name “Daybreak,” a figure of illumination & ecstatic intensity who once declared himself the “vanguard of the sun” and who threatened to “hang the devil’s lantern from the porch of every hidden torture chamber of this oppressive paradise.”

In a space caught between honor-codes and devastation, futility and apotheosis, one finds the poetic verses of Shamlu as among the first in a bloodline unbound-by-world.

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