

THE DREAM
OF THE POEM



HEBREW POETRY
FROM MUSLIM AND CHRISTIAN SPAIN

950–1492

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THE PEN

Naked without either cover or dress,
 utterly soulless, and hollow—
 from its mouth come wisdom and prudence,
 and in ambush it kills like an arrow.

IF YOU'D LIVE AMONG MEN

If you'd live among men on earth forever,
 if your soul's afraid of the steel fires of hell,
 despise what the world rushes to honor
 and don't be swayed by fame, family, or wealth.

Let neither shame nor poverty distract you.
 Die childless, like Seled, Judah's kin.
 And know your soul as well as you can:
 it alone will last of your sinew and skin.

I AM THE MAN

I am the man who harnessed his spirit
 and will not rest with his promise unkept:
 a man whose mind has been split by his mind,
 whose soul has sickened of its dwelling in flesh.

5 From earliest youth he held to wisdom
 though tried seven times in the furnace of Fate,
 which razed all that he built
 and uprooted all that he planted,

as it broke through all his defenses.
 10 As misfortune burned he'd approach it—
 even as destiny hemmed him in—
 seeking the limits of wisdom and discipline,

wanting the source of knowledge's treasure:
 know, however, that no one will ever
 discover the mystery's secrets 15
 until his flesh begins to give way . . .

I'd gained a grain of discernment,
 when Time came on and exacted its price—
 and now for as long as I live I'll ride
 out in search of wisdom, 20

even if Fate won't saddle my mount.
 My heart, I vow, won't weaken with time,
 or break its vows; it will follow them out.
 And know, my friends, I've feared what was coming,
 and nothing comes that fear doesn't bring . . . 25

★

It was night and the sky was clear,
 and the moon was pure at its center
 as it led me along discernment's sphere,
 teaching me by its light and direction—

though as my heart went out to that light 30
 I feared extended misfortune,
 like a father's feeling for his firstborn son.
 The wind sent a cover of clouds across it,

wrapping its face in a mask—
 as though craving the currents inside them, 35
 it leaned on the clouds till they ran.

And the sky was clothed in darkness,
 and it seemed that the moon had died
 —its grave a vapor . . .

Then the thickened heavens wept for it, 40
 like the nation of Aram weeping

for its prophet Bilaam,
 and the night put on its mail of gloom
 and the thunder stabbed it with lightning,
 which flew out toward the horizon 45

as though it were laughing,
 obeying the thunder's commands:
 it spread its wings like a bat,
 and the ravens of darkness fled when they saw it.

50 So the Lord closed in on my thoughts
 blocking my heart's desire inside it,
 holding my heart in cords of darkness,
 like the warrior bound, who'd stir and break free.

55 I no longer hope for the moon, my friend,
 which thickest dark has replaced,
 as though the clouds had envied my soul,
 and taken its light away from me—

but when its face appears I'll rejoice
 like a servant recalled by his lord.

★

60 As a soldier in battle has his sword destroyed
 and falters as he runs, then stumbles,
 so is man who is hounded by struggle,
 though Venus be home to his shrine.

HEART'S HOLLOW

And heart's hollow
 and wisdom is blocked;
 the body apparent
 but soul obscured:
 those who wake in the world
 for gain come to corruption.
 On earth a man rejoices in nothing. . . .

YOU LIE IN MY PALACE

You lie in my palace on couches of gold:
 Lord, when will you ready my bed
 for the one with the beautiful eyes you've foretold?
 Why, my fine gazelle,
 why do you sleep while the dawn rises
 like a flag over the hills?

Ignore the mules and asses,
 and see to your guileless doe:
 I'm here for one like you—and you for one like me.
 Who enters my chambers
 finds my treasure: my pomegranate, my myrrh—
 my cinnamon, my nectar.

From KINGDOM'S CROWN

*Through my prayer a man might profit
 from the study of truth and merit,
 and in its lines I've concisely told
 of the wonders of the living God:
 over all of my hymns it deserves renown—
 and I call it the kingdom's crown.*

I

Your works are wondrous and I know it acutely:
 Yours, Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory,
 the splendor and majesty.
 Yours, Lord, is the kingdom exalted over all.
 Yours is all wealth and honor;
 all beings above and below you bear witness
 that they will perish, while you endure.

Yours is the strength within whose mystery
 our minds eventually fail;

10 your force exceeds their intensity.
 Yours is the hidden chamber of power—

of form's secret and matter;

yours the Name that eludes the wise,
 and the might to bear the world in its void,
 15 and the craft to bring what's hidden to light.

Yours is the kindness that infuses creation,
 and the goodness veiled
 for those who hold you in awe.

Yours is the secret no notion contains,
 20 and life that destruction will not bring down,
 and the throne raised higher than height's idea,
 and the hidden hall in the heavenly mansion;

yours is the real which becomes existence
 in light's reflection

25 and in whose shadow we live;

yours the two worlds and the border between them,
 one for action and one for reward . . .

yours the reward
 reserved for the righteous in spirit
 30 for whom it was hidden:

You saw it was good and concealed it. . . .

VII

You are the light of the upper regions,
 and the eye of every soul that's pure
 will take you in—

and the clouds of sin
 in the sinner's soul will obscure you.

Your invisible light in the world
 will be seen in the world to come
 on the mountain of God:

You are the light everlasting the eye
 of the mind longs to behold
 and may yet glimpse in extremity—
 but the whole of will not see. . . .

IX

You are wise,
 and wisdom is a fountain and source
 of life welling up from within you,
 and men are too coarse to know you.

You are wise, 5
 and prime to all that's primeval,
 as though you were wisdom's tutor.

You are wise,
 but your wisdom wasn't acquired
 and didn't derive from another. 10

You are wise,
 and your wisdom gave rise to an endless desire
 in the world as within an artist or worker—
 to bring out the stream of existence from Nothing,
 like light flowing from sight's extension— 15

drawing from the source of that light without vessel,
 giving it shape without tools,
 hewing and carving,
 refining and making it pure:

He called to Nothing—which split; 20
 to existence—pitched like a tent;
 to the world—as it spread beneath sky.

With desire's span he established the heavens,
 as his hand coupled the tent of the planets
 with loops of skill,
 weaving creation's pavilion,

the links of his will
 reaching the lowest
 rung of creation—

the curtain
 at the outermost edge of the spheres . . .

X

Who could put words to your power,
 splitting the globe of earth in your making
 half of it land, and the other water?

The wheel of the wind you established
 over the sea, which it circles in circuits,
 as the wheel of it rests in that circling,

and over the wind
 you established the sphere of fire.

These foundations are four,
 though sharing a single foundation,
 source and font,
 from which they emerge renewed
 and then through a fourfold font diverge.

XIV

Who could fathom your mysteries
 in surrounding the second sphere
 with the glowing circle of Venus,
 like a queen overlooking her armies,
 like a bride adorned with her jewels?

In eleven months' time she traces her compass,
 one thirty-seventh of earth in its mass
 as its mysteries' initiates know.

With the Lord's will in the world she renews
 quiet and all tranquility,
 gladness and winning gaiety,
 song and wordless melody—
 and the wedding canopy's joy and spell.

She ripens the fruit of the land and its wheat:
 the choice fruit made sweet by the sun
 and the fruit brought forth by the moon.

XVI

Who could contain your magnitude
 in your setting the sun up as a sign
 to measure the days and the years,
 and the seasons' appointed times—

in sending its light to grow fruit-bearing trees 5
 which blossom beneath the Pleiades,
 and under Orion grow heavy
 with seed that ripening swells?

For six months it moves to the North,
 warming the air and water, 10
 the trees and soil and stones;
 and then it approaches its border

and the light lingers, and the season slows,
 and it reaches the place where a day
 expands for the full six months of the cycle, 15
 according to faithful accounts;

and then it moves on to the South
 in a given series of circles,
 reaching the place of night's extension
 for six months' dark—as the proofs 20

of astronomers show; and so
 the Creator is known in his aspects,
 a small part of His power in shown,
 a fraction of His strength and wondrous effect—

for the servant's greatness mirrors his master's
 to those discerning in knowledge—
 as the worker defines his castle's honor,
 for he holds the worth of his lord in his hand.

XXIV

Who could make sense of creation's secrets,
 of your raising up over the ninth sphere
 the circle of mind,
 the sphere of the innermost chamber?
 The tenth to the Lord is always sacred.

This is the highest ring,
 transcending all elevation
 and beyond all ideation.

This is the place of the hidden
 for your glory above in the palanquin . . .

You formed its frame from the silver of truth;
 from the gold of mind you created its matter;
 on pillars of justice you established its throne:
 its reality derives from your power;
 its longing is from you and for you,
 and toward you ascends its desire.

XXVII

Who could accomplish what you've accomplished
 in establishing under the Throne of Glory
 a level for all who were righteous in spirit?

This is the range of pure soul
 gathered in the bond of all that's vital.
 For those who've worked to exhaustion—
 this is the place of their strength's renewal,
 where the weary will find repose;
 these are the children of calm,

of pleasure that knows no bound in the mind: 10
 this is the World to Come;
 a place of position and vision for souls
 that gaze
 into the mirrors of the palace's servants,
 before the Lord to see and be seen. 15
 They dwell in the halls of the king,
 and stand alongside his table,
 taking delight
 in the sweetness of intellect's fruit
 which offers them majesty's savor. 20
 This is the rest and inheritance
 that knows no bounds in its goodness and beauty,
 flowing with milk and honey.
 This is its fruit and deliverance.

XXVIII

Who could uncover the things you've concealed
 in fashioning chambers on high and their treasures,
 some too tremendous to speak of
 and others matters of valor—
 stores of life among them
 for those who lived in innocence;
 and also stores of salvation
 for those given over to penitence;
 and stores of sulfur and rivers of fire
 for those who break their covenant; 10
 and burning stores of gorge-like pits
 whose flames will never be smothered—
 where those abhorred of the Lord will descend;
 and stores of whirlwind and storm,
 of heavy clouds and blackness; 15
 of hail and ice, of drought and snow;
 of heat and flooding waters;

of smoke and rime and fog;
and gloom and thickened darkness.

20

All you prepare in its time
and employ for judgment or mercy—
for correction in a world you designed.

XXIX

Who could grasp your intensity
in forming the radiance of purity
from the great glow of your glory,
from a rock the Rock has hewn,
from the hollow of a clearness withdrawn?

You sent the spirit of wisdom along it
and gave it the name of soul,
and formed it out of the fire
of intellect's ardor
whose spirit burned on inside it;

and you sent it out through the body
to serve it and guard it—

and you watch as it acts like a flame within it,
though the body isn't consumed.

It was formed from the spark of soul
and brought into being from nothing
when the Lord came across it in fire.

XXXI

Who could return your goodness
in sending breath through the body
to invest it with life,

in revealing a way of life to guide it
and save it from evil's contrivance:

Out of the ground you formed it,
 and into the blood breathed soul—
 and you sent the spirit of wisdom along it,
 which sets us apart from swine,
 and allows for ascent on high . . .

You've shut us inside your world,
 while you look in from beyond and observe;
 and all that we try to conceal
 within or without you reveal.

XXXIII

I'm ashamed, my God,
 and abashed to be standing before you,
 for I know that as great as your might has been,
 such is my utter weakness and failing;

as exalted as your power has been and will be, 5
 such is the depth of my poverty;
 as whole as your perfection is,
 so is my knowledge flawed.

For you are one and alive;
 almighty, abiding, strong and wise; 10

You are the Lord my God—
 and I am a clod of dirt and a worm;
 dust of the ground and a vessel of shame;
 a speechless stone;

a passing shadow; 15

a wind blown-by that won't return;

a spider's poison;

a lying heart uncut for his Lord;

a man of rages;

a craftsman of scheming, and haughty, 20
 corrupt and impatient in speech,
 perverse in his ways and impetuous.

What am I or my life?
 What is my might and righteousness?
 25 Throughout the days of my being I'm nothing
 and what then after I die?

I came from nothing and nothing pursue;
 against instruction I come here before you
 with insolence and impure notion—
 30 and impulse that strays to its idols
 and greed as it calls—
 and a soul that hasn't been cleansed—
 and a heart that's lost and alone—
 and a body afflicted with swarms of desire
 35 ceaseless within their resistance.

XL

I've known, my God, that those who implore you
 have excellent action to speak for their fate
 or virtue they've helped in creating,
 while I have nothing—
 5 am hollow and shaken out—
 a ravaged vine,
 and in me is neither
 honor or what seems right;
 affection or candor of heart;
 10 not prayer and not supplication;
 not purity, faith, or simplicity;
 not fairness or honest measure;
 neither repentance nor service.
 Let it therefore be your merciful will,

my God and the God of our fathers,
Sovereign Lord of all worlds— 15

to be near and have mercy upon me;

to remember me in the call of your will;

to lift the light of your face across me,
and conceive for me your graciousness— 20

and not repay me for all I've done
and make me an object of scorn for the base,

or take me away in the midst of my days,

or obscure your face before me;

to cleanse me of all transgression— 25
not to cast me away from your presence;

to quicken my being with dignity,
and lead me into honor.

And then, when you withdraw me
from the life of the world we know, 30

bring me to peace
in the life of the world-to-come,

and call me to rise;

place me among the righteous,
with men who among the living were summoned 35
to life ever after;

and cleanse me with
the light of your countenance;
return me to life from the earth's depths

and on that day, as today, I'll say: Lord, 40

I'm grateful that when you were angry
you softened your wrath and took pity on me.

Loving-kindness is yours
in all the good you've done me,

45 and until I die will do. . . .

For all this I'm bound to thank you,
to glorify, laud, and extol you:

May you be praised in the mouth of creation
and be hallowed by words of sanctification;
50 be known as One by those
 who seek to know you in oneness;
be extolled by those who extol you
and lifted by those who would lift you
 up in song;

55 and may you be raised in the mouth of those who pray—
for among the gods none is like you,
and nothing, my Lord,
 compares with what you have done.

60 May the words of my mouth and my heart's meditation
 before you be pleasing—
 my rock—
 and my redemption.

From *THE BOOK OF THE LETTER*

And the letter is longing,
 and sky desire
 to know the will
 that moves Him and lends
 grace to spirit 5
 and mercy to power
 to rectify action,
 Kingdom now foremost
 and Law behind,
 now Law foremost 10
 and Kingdom behind—
 and the letter and vowels
 and song reveal
 the mystery of blood . . .

★

And YHVH spoke to me when I saw His name 15
 spelled out and merged with the blood in my heart,
 separating blood from ink and ink from blood:
 and YHVH said to me: Behold,
 blood is the name of your soul, and ink the name of your spirit:
 your father and mother are vessels for my name and a sign. 20
 And then I fathomed the tremendous difference between
 my spirit and soul, and a great joy came through me.
 For I knew my soul was dwelling in the redness as blood,
 and my spirit was dwelling in the blackness as ink.
 And there raged a war in my heart between 25
 the blood and ink: the blood from the wind
 and the ink from dust, and the black ink
 over the blood was victorious—
 as the Sabbath subdues all the days of the week.
 And so my heart rested within me—and I offer 30
 praise to the Lord, to the Name in my heart forever.

★