

Ghazals · *Alicia Ostriker*

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*If a raindrop enters the ocean, good.
It is where it yearned to be.*

*If it enters the soil, good.
Let's hope something will grow.*

They thought like this for thousands of years
While the clean dead refreshed the ground.

Heroes lay with the ash-spears through their brains
And Homer sang of them, striking the harp.

Stomachs of girls forgot the hours of childbirth
Under the lawns, in the cool tombs.

The skin of the deeply old, among stones,
Kept helping the lovers to kiss.

Today even the rainstorms are poisoned—
Green dust, a sterilized lake, infected prairies—

Ghostly buffalo stand in your car's headlights
And you drive right through them.

Something exciting is kicking through the sperm,
The arteries, the plasma, and now it's home.

They love this house! They've dusted and polished, they've brought
Their own expensive silver.

The committeemen loosen their neckties, there ought to be
A law, they say. They shuffle their papers.

Hath the rain a father? Shall we seal the border?
Nature is a law also, like *need*, like *night*.

Like a needle, the word *death*
Is easily mislaid. The word *pestilential*.

Ripe bloodspots, there and there, on the moon's face,
Make her a swollen whore, and no more maiden.

Three-deep along the leather bar, a jacket, a hip, a saxophone
Wails and rotates on its gummy axle.

For sticks and rags, try looking at a puppet
When the master removes his hand.

Now your old teacher and friend
Is traveling the highway backward.

Straight as a yardstick, it runs toward a canal
Where a boat bumps gently against logs.

Billboards wing past, offering salutations,
Two crows alight on a telephone wire.

Palaces, churches, a glorious morning
Ripens toward noon, even in narrow alleyways.

He is trying to hold his head high
As the water smell approaches.

He is pink
And hairless, like a newborn mouse.

Are you ready to pray yet? Are you ready to light candles?
Closer. Come on closer. Are you ready to go to the concert?

for Suzanne Vega

Whatever doesn't suffer isn't alive.
Student number one, will you kindly comment?

Increased consciousness: potential for charm and sanity,
For acute pain, for self and others. Your choice.

A holier healing, a more efficient torture—
Remind me if this is the dance of Shiva.

I'm trying to remember something. Wasn't it illumination,
The crests of sex?

Girl of ice at the party, you stand at the bathroom sink,
Throwing up your bitterness, along with your last drink.

Papa, you gave her a silk dress from Saigon,
Saying, "Don't ask me where I got it from."

"The exalted mirror can go to hell," say the courtesans
Of Greece, and Italy, and imperial China.

Where there's life there's hope. We bequeath this hope
To our children, along with our warm tears.

*And I won't even mention the crying of orphans
that reaches up to the throne of God and
beyond, making
a circle with no end and no god.*

—Yehudah Amichai

Not having found you in music or mathematics
They look for you, my God, on the battlefield.

Blind fiery hope propels them,
A Promethean gift, an illusion.

“You can't see anything through the fire
But the fire itself, and it's so smoky.”

“And the intense heat when you approach
Hurles you backward, but it's so marvelous.”

Bodies of brothers are dropping like soot.
High in the air, gunfire rattle and cannon hoot.

Ecstasy of pain, drawn across the dirt
Into which it is coughing blood, to the Red Cross station—

Clad in ironic olive, on both sides
Boys fight, who have scarcely learned to shave—

At last they feel alive! They have discovered
What they were made for, from the very cradle.

Amid the carnage they are altogether joyous
For they believe they see you striding there.

Is it true, is it true, are you a champion?
Does your smeared forehead out-top the gracious mountains?