

The Riddle of Qaf

ب

ba
2nd letter
as a number, 2
in a sequence, the 2nd
first letter of بكارة, hymen, and باب, door

*Two types write:
those with no memory;
those with no words.
(Anonymous)*

The journey that brought the poet, author of *Qafiya* and this novel's hero, to solve the riddle of Qaf, was the same as that which gave him the love of Layla. I cannot, therefore, deny a place in eternity to the camel skin that first recorded this story, although I know that there are few who truly value its knowledge and beauty.

Of her, of Layla, there might not be much that has remained. But at least I shall bestow immortality on the name of the poet al-Ghatash and on the tribe of Labwa, I shall reconstitute the most beautiful of the poems, I shall reveal the interpretation of the most fascinating of the riddles, I shall dispel legends of the skills of genies and the power of gods. Because it has to be thus; those free of vanity do not write books.

I learnt the legend of al-Ghatash while still young, while sitting

at the foot of my grandfather's rocking chair, alone with him, in the old clothing factory in the depths of the huge house on Rua Formosa, in Campos dos Goytacazes. Old Naguib recited to me, in Portuguese, that which I assume was his personal adaptation of *Qafiya*.

From the first time I heard it, I was fascinated by this story of a poet who crossed the desert in search of an unknown woman, of a riddle that told of a fabled circular mountain, of a blind and cross-eyed genie who could travel through time.

I remember well my grandfather's emotion in that rocking chair. I sensed that he believed in the legend of the riddle, in the possibility of men like us, men of flesh and blood, returning to the past. Whenever I began to doubt, he would look at me, deadly serious, and would point to a dusty instrument, which I later came to discover was a small telescope.

My grandfather Naguib died before teaching me what a telescope was. I grew up with the poem ingrained in my memory – that is obvious. But I wanted it in a written version. I turned the house on Rua Formosa upside down, searched through trunks, opened each one of the five thousand volumes on the bookshelves, I even knocked over the telescope, and all I found were a few loose pages, which bore the handwriting of Naguib and recorded only brief observations on Arabic literature, with no mention of the adventure of al-Ghatash or the blind, cross-eyed genie.

There was also a sketch of our family tree – tracing us back to descendants of the tribe of Labwa, settled since the fifth century in the deserts that surround the hills of Hebron.

It was this desire to salvage the lost fragments and to give written form to *Qafiya* that inspired me to learn classical Arabic, Hebrew, the myriad Syrian dialects, and even the extinct epigraphical idiom of Yemen. I also immersed myself in the archaeology of the Middle East; I pored over the geography of the deserts of Syria and Arabia; I studied Bedouin ethnology; and practically learnt pre-Islamic poetry by heart.

But it was only when I dedicated myself to the science of the stars, in the primitive fashion that arose among the Chaldeans, that I could reconstruct the original poem and come to solve the riddle of Qaf.

parameter:

Imru al-Qays

For a large majority of scholars, the most ancient recognised Arab poet is Imru al-Qays, and not al-Ghatash.

There are some important distinctions between them: Al-Qays was the son of the powerful chief of the Kinda tribe; as for al-Ghatash, we do not know who his father was. Al-Qays is not linked with any female figure; while al-Ghatash was obsessed with Layla. It was al-Qays' spirit that received and guided the prophet Muhammad on his visit to the circles of hell; al-Ghatash would not have had any such patience.¹

Al-Qays was reckless. There are those who say he had the eyes of a year-old calf and that, with these eyes, he seduced countless women. While in Constantinople, he even made love to the virgin daughter of Caesar himself, between the very palace walls and under the noses of the Byzantine guards. He crept into encampments at night to kidnap lovers. He was particularly fond of surprising naked girls while they bathed in the oasis. Al-Qays possessed true passion.

At the beginning of his Suspended Poem, he enumerates various abandoned encampments, where he would stop and cry at

1. It has been said that the Florentine plagiarist Dante Alighieri profusely studied Muslim eschatology before writing his Comedy, and that he gave Imru al-Qays the Latin name of Virgil.

the memory of a woman and of tents, searching for footprints erased by the desert winds.

He never gives the name of the beloved who inspired him, as convention of the genre determines. Critics assume he is referring to a Bedouin woman who moved on to inhabit the locations mentioned. But no: at each stop in the desert there was another love for al-Qays.

It was his own father who banished him from the tribe, on learning that his son had been caressing what throbbed beneath his own cousin's tunic, after jumping on his camel and bursting into the palanquin.

And I said: go ahead, free the rein, but do not take from me this fruit that shall harvest double...

This adventure was, in one sense, the last straw. It seems that the poet's father was already enraged by some verses that were circulating and revealed the sexual exploits of al-Qays. The scene in which he has his way with a pregnant girl at the same time as she breastfeeds a baby has a disgusting beauty.

In the erotic prelude common to all classic poems, it is rare for a poet to exceed a dozen or so verses. Al-Qays composed more than forty.

But this sexual hypertrophy did not lead to a disregard of other traditional motifs: the glorification of the horse, the sacrifice of the camel, the hunting scenes, the description of the desert. Certain images are impressive, like that of nightfall, compared to the chest of a black charger that jumps and tumbles over the horseman.

The originality of al-Qays' poem lies, moreover, in the description of the enveloping storm which is, according to some, a foreshadow of the Apocalypse. In the midst of the fury of the elements, where the mountains are the heads of weaving spindles, the drowned wild animals are onion roots, the fallen trees are paprika powder, Imru al-Qays' most beautiful verse resounds:

In Tayma not a palm tree was left standing; and among the structures of stone, only cliffs.

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In these passages, one perceives that al-Qays was a man of great solitude. In vain they have tried to discover if there was not a woman, at least one, whom he had loved more profoundly.

They searched for traces in the Suspended Poem itself, trying to recompose the picture of the Bedouin woman whose hair adorns her back, thick and black, like a cluster of dates on a heavily laden palm tree; whose waistline is a fine cord; whose legs are reeds of papyrus on the marsh; whose fingers, when they move, are white larvae, or fine twigs.

And I ask: would women of the desert be beautiful if they were not just like this?

I believe that the most beautiful verse of poetry in all the universe could be this, attributed to al-Qays:

When the constellation of Pleiades appeared in the sky like a necklace of shining pearls,

I entered, suddenly, the tent; and she, before the curtain, undressing, for bed, except for the most intimate garment...

and I pressed myself against her – and a skirt slid to sweep away the tracks we left behind...

I am still the only person on this earth to doubt the authenticity of these verses. They have already asserted that this is spite on my part, that I attempt to make of al-Qays that which others have made of al-Ghatash. They are liars. I am quite familiar with the personality of al-Qays. It does not seem right to me that he would allow the footsteps of that woman to be swept away, notwithstanding the risk of being discovered by the girl's uncles. They say that he was passionate about form. He loved the imprint of a body in the sand more than he loved the woman who had been lying there.