

OMAR IBN AL-FARID (Egypt)

Omar ibn al-Farid (1181-1235) was born in Cairo, lived in Mecca for a while, and died in Cairo. Every Friday people still gather at his tomb there to listen to readings of his poetry in Arabic. He is considered one of the great visionary ecstatic mystics. While Omar was in law school in Cairo, he had a strange and transformative experience with a greengrocer. He heard the man saying prayers out of their normal order and tried to correct him. The man turned and said "Omar, you will never be enlightened in Egypt. Only in Mecca." Farid realized that the man spoke from some real authority. He said "But I cannot go to Mecca now." The grocer then gave him a vision of Mecca, so powerful that Farid left immediately on hajj. As he entered Mecca, he entered enlightenment. It came upon him wave after wave and it never left. Omar al-Farid stayed in Mecca for fifteen years. He returned to Cairo because he heard that same vegetable seller calling him back for his funeral. They said their farewells and at the funeral Omar claimed to have a vision of "a great green bird" that flew down and "gobbled up the corpse of the grocery man." He had several such visions; a lion knelt before him and asked him to ride, Muhammad came in a dream and talked to him, and once he saw a man floating down the side of a mountain. He sometimes went into ecstatic states. He once threw off his clothes and began dancing in the middle of the market bazaar. Many others joined him. He would sometimes remain in a trance for ten consecutive days without eating or drinking water, or speaking or hearing outside noises. He would alternately stand, sit, or throw himself down on his side. When he came to, his first words would be lines of inspired poetry. Many consider Farid the greatest mystical poet in Arabic. His work is barely known in the West.

The beauty of the taste of wine has long been explored by mystical poets as a metaphor for the mysterious mixing that happens between earth and sky. A particular grapevine's hold on a piece of ground and the kind of rain and weather that comes over it in a season has

everything to do with the taste of those grapes and of the wine made from them. And there is something like wine that rises in a person's eyes. There is a night that holds an ecstatic lover with such strength that lover and beloved and night become a single living being. There is a blending of the taste of "this world," the wine itself, and the taste of sacredness, the blessing of a presence. Then there is some ineffable dissolving of the one into the other that is being praised here and lived within.

– Coleman Barks

How It is With Wine and Me

(Translator's Note: This is considered *khamariyyah* or "wine poetry," and this poem is sometimes called "The Wine Ode.")

Some people drink wine
trying to forget.

I drink to remember
the love I felt
before any grapevine made grapes.

The full moon then
was a glass of wine,
a turning light-circle
of the sun that blinded
us to ourselves (almost).

But look now: galaxies of stars
smiling in the night.

Who knows? I don't.
How I found that particular
roadside tavern.

Maybe it found me,
drawing me with fragrance
and the appeal of pure color.

All I know for sure
is that when I came to,
I had lost everything,
except the feel of a final kiss,
breath inside my breath,
deep in my brokenopen heart.

So that now whenever I feel that secret,
the feel of those lips on these,
I lose myself all over again,
without ever tasting wine.

I cannot tell you
where I came from, how I got here,
or what my name used to be.

When I try to be sober and clear about this,
I find I have nothing to think with.

There is nothing
in this ravaged, lovesick self
but pure joy.

How it is with wine and me
is this: without even uncorking one bottle,
these eyes fill to their brims
with rare, ancient vintage.

I cannot say for sure
if I am dead or alive,
with my body one place,
my head in another.

Is there any cure
for this predicament?

I have scattered the pieces
under the vineyard leaves
hoping that shade
will cool and heal them.

I cannot get to my feet and walk,
but I will get back to you,
to that roadside tavern we found
if I have to crawl there on my knees.

I can't—I can't—I start
to slur my words,
but if I were with you,
I would sing a clear,
perfect song all night.

I will tell you a secret.

Sometimes the smell of wine
makes me want to vomit.

But with this other drunkenness,
the vomit retch-taste
in the back of my throat
has a hint of roses.

My hand begins to tremble.
I lose my hold on the bottle.

I cannot pour anymore,
but still this night holds us
with such strength
that we become one being.

I cannot see straight,
but when I close my eyes,
I see you smiling into me.

With my ears ringing
I cannot hear anything

in this place
except your voice,
your laughter.

I know I drink too much.
They say I am killing myself.
But I do not want to stop.

Can you kill yourself
with loving too much?

Some people look away.

Others stare.

They say, That's a pity.
He has lost his mind.

We have names for people like that:
lover, Sufi, drunkard, and worse.

I'll tell you what. I do not care anymore
what they say.

Whatever they decide this condition is,
I will agree.

I am certainly
the perfect example
of something outrageous.

TRANSLATED FROM ARABIC BY COLEMAN BARKS IN COLLABORATION
WITH IMAM BILAL HYDE

ROWBOAT

POETRY IN TRANSLATION



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