

---

## **In Memoriam of Ahmad Shamlu: a Friend of the People**

All deaths are sad and mournful. But they also remind us of a paradise lost. They remind us of our mortality if, while here, we squander the opportunity to shine a light on the paths to bliss for our fellow travelers. Fortunately, Ahmad Shamlu did not squander his opportunity. He left us with a gift that will last forever and ever.

Ahmad Shamlu was a man of the people who, through his words, enables us visualize our hopes and aspirations. He helps people to come in touch with their values. With his mastery of words, he provides imageries through which people could see, feel, and touch their emotions. Because of his interconnectedness with his environment, he spoke of the real and relevant issues that people face. His poems provide solace, comfort, and aid to the disenfranchised and deprived; a guiding light for the novice and learned.

In the passages that follow he and his works are remembered by those who knew him. Cyrus Bina's poem: "A Radiant Passage," is followed by Kamran Dadkhah's translation of one Shamlu's poems. There are a few translations of poems that are done expertly as the translation of the "Paria: the Fairies" by Ghanoonparvar and Wilcox. This translation is followed by a poem by Ahmad Ghazinoor entitled "The Life and Art of Ahmad Shamlu." Finally, Hillmann and Katouzian, students of Persian literature and friends of Shamlu, provide a few words about him, his work, his stature, and his place in the hearts and minds of those acquainted with his legacy and contributions.

### **A Radiant Passage<sup>1</sup>**

Cyrus Bina<sup>2</sup>

I weep at the crossroads of the shooting stars  
that carried you throughout your nightly passage—  
I weep at the trace of your grace  
that was left vividly on my mind.

I weep behind the wall of Time  
—behind the tempting shadow of mortality—  
searching for you:  
in every nook and cranny of the land  
that is immersed in your humanity.

I look at the wild amber of sorrow in the grass,  
in search of a glimpse of you;  
And I weep with the grieving wind.

I weep with the mother of time,  
at the threshold of your humanity.

□□□

On Earth,  
you've brought the gods to their knees  
and made them worship  
the splendor of the earth  
—particle by particle, limb to limb—  
in humility.  
You—the upright son of Adam.

On the face of your life,  
The Sun gleamed in glory.  
On the face of your death,  
Life shrivels in envy.  
Your commencement has just begun!  
You've arrived—and in this arrival:  
Dignity embraced Beauty.  
You—bold n' brave.  
**You—the upright son of Adam.**

□□□

You spoke of death  
to the last butterfly of the garden.<sup>3</sup>  
You spoke of death  
—as the death of a *fountain*,  
whose very last breath yet enlivens the garden.<sup>4</sup>

You asked us: “return me to earth,  
naked, from head to toe,  
just as when we kneel before Love  
—without the concealment of a cover—  
for, I want to passionately embroil the earth.”<sup>5</sup>

O' earth, pour down lightly o'er his tranquility;  
O' Sun, shine brightly upon his name;  
O' grief, tumble down—tumble down through my heart;  
O' earth, pour down—pour down on my head.

□□□

“In the passage of gentle breeze,

in the passage of rain,  
in the passage of a shadow:  
[you've] made of rising waves  
a song, much more vibrating than soul.  
[You've] made of love  
a rhythm, far more resonating than death.  
[You've] made of death  
a rhythm, much more beating than life."<sup>6</sup>  
You—the upright son of Adam.

□□□

"If I were to live this virtuous, [you thought],  
I'd be so disingenuous, if I shall not found  
an eternal mountain of memory—from my faith,  
o'er the Earth's mortal face."<sup>7</sup>

Your awesome presence has never left us:  
the brooks of majesty are in flux,  
the mountain of immortality is erect  
—and your commencement has begun.  
You—you, the upright son of Adam.

September, 2000  
Minnesota, USA

---

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Ahmad Shamlou (A. Bamdad), one of the best poets in contemporary Persian literary history, passed away on July 23, 2000 in Tehran.

<sup>2</sup> Cyrus Bina is the author of *Khorshid-o-Khak* (The Sun and the Earth), Poems, Los Angeles, 1998. He teaches at the University of Minnesota, Morris.

<sup>3</sup> Shamlou's poem: "*as marg, man sokhan goftam* [I Spoke of Death]."

<sup>4</sup> Shamlou's poem: "*tamseal* [Proverb]."

<sup>5</sup> Shamlou's poem: "*daramikhtan* [Embroiding]."

<sup>6</sup> Shamlou's poem: "*man, marg r*, [I Made of Death ...]."

<sup>7</sup> Shamlou's poem: "*boudan* [To Be]."

#### Kamran Dadkhah

*If one has to live in such a dishonor  
How corrupt would I be if I do not hang, in disgrace, the lantern of my life  
On the tall dead pine of the dead end street*

*If one has to live so pure  
How impure would I be if I do not erect from my faith, like a mountain*

*An eternal memorial on the ephemeral surface of earth*

On July 24, **Ahmad Shamlu** died. All his life he wrote and fought for human dignity and freedom. The Center for Iranian Research and Analysis (CIRA) shares in the sorrow of all Iranians, friends of Iran, and lovers of Persian literature for the loss of one of the greatest Iranian poets of all time. Beholding to **Shamlu's** ideals, we can sing along with him for:

*The day that every lip is a music  
So that the shortest song is a kiss*

*The day you arrive, and stay forever  
And kindness and beauty unite  
The day that again we throw birdseeds for our pigeons ...*

*And I expect that day  
Even when  
I no more exist*

M. R. Ghanoonparvar

When at the MESA conference last year, Bahman Maghsoudlou's documentary video film, *Ahmad Shamlu: Master Poet of Liberty*, was shown, the absence of any mention of one of Shamlu's most successful popular early poems, "Pariya" [The Fairies], perhaps indicated that the poet himself had distanced himself not necessarily from the subject matter but from the style of his earlier work. Nevertheless, the importance of this poem that gave rise to other less successful attempts by other well-known twentieth-century poets, in terms of style and execution, cannot be overemphasized. "The Fairies" is a remarkable literary collage of Persian folk tales, nursery rhymes, and popular verses used in children's games, which Shamlu has skillfully woven together to produce this revolutionary poem about freedom. In terms of production of sounds, "The Fairies" can be described as a symphony in words. It was perhaps for this reason that when Shamlu recited this poem at an international poetry festival in 1997 at the University of Texas, it was enthusiastically received by the audience, especially prominent poets from various cultures, the majority of whom did not know Persian. At that time, there was no English translation of the poem available, and the only clue to the story of the poem was provided in the one-paragraph summary, which was projected on the screen. What attracted the audience to the poem was undoubtedly its system of sounds, and of course the unique delivery by Shamlu himself. The translation that follows was in fact completed within a year after the festival. It is an attempt at capturing some of the various aspects of one of Shamlu's significant contributions to modern Persian poetry.\*

### **The Fairies**

Once upon a distant time

Under the sky of a distant clime  
Stark naked, as the day was done,  
    sat three Fairies all alone  
Bitterly, bitterly cried the Fairies  
Like clouds of spring cried the Fairies  
Their pitch black hair as long as a lasso  
Blacker than pitch  
Longer than a lasso.  
Before them lay the far-off city  
    filled with slaves in captivity  
Behind them stood, black and cold,  
    the Castle of the Legend Old.  
From the distant horizon came  
    the jingle-jangle sound of chains  
From the tower behind them came  
    the constant sound of nightly pains.

"Fairies, are you hungry?  
Fairies, are you thirsty?  
Fairies, are you weary?  
Are you like birds in captivity?  
What is this ah, ah-ing of yours,  
Wailing of yours, oh, oh-ing of yours?"

The Fairies said nothing  
Bitterly, bitterly cried the Fairies  
Like clouds of Spring cried the Fairies

"Oh, dear, dear Fairies, sweet  
Why do you so bitterly weep?"

In this far-off desert here  
Now that sunset is so near  
Aren't you scared that it might snow?  
Aren't you scared that it might rain?  
Aren't you scared that a wolf might come and eat you up?  
Aren't you scared that a monster might  
    gobble you up all in one bite?  
Aren't you afraid, Fairies three?  
Won't you come to our town with me?  
You can hear the sound of our town,  
You can hear the sound of its chains ...

Fairies!

Take a look at my lofty height  
At my proud horse of purest white  
A white horse with silver shoes  
Its mane and tail of honey hues  
My steed of lightning speed  
My gazelle with veins of steel!  
Take a look at its neck and shanks  
At its head held high, its mighty flanks!  
Tonight the town will be all lit up  
The house of the monsters all split up,  
To town the villagers as guests will come  
To the beat, beat, beat of the festive drum,  
On drums and tambourines they'll play,  
They'll dance and make dance in gay display,  
They'll laugh and grin from ear to ear  
And fill the desert with joy and cheer,  
They'll yea  
    They'll hooray:  
    'The city is ours!  
    The people feast, the monster is vexed  
    The world is ours, the monster is vexed  
    Whiteness is king, the monster is vexed  
    Blackness is shamed, the monster is vexed...'

Fairies!

The day has almost turned to night  
The gates of the Castle are shut tight  
If you get up while there is time  
And upon my horse you climb  
We'll reach the people's town.  
    Listen! You can hear the sound  
The jingle-jangle sound  
    of slave-chains dropping down.  
Yes! Costly chains, link by link, fold by fold  
Drop down from hands and feet  
They fall apart, corroded, old  
The monsters' misery is complete:  
If they set off into the forest,  
    they'll find the forest a field of thorns  
If they set off into the meadows,

they'll find a barren desert of salt.  
But in our city ... (Ah! If you only knew, Fairies!)  
The doors of the towers will be opened wide,  
the slave-keepers will be put down  
The chains of the slaves will be thrown aside,  
and each ruin become a prosperous town  
Sorrow and sadness will no longer be  
As mats become carpets, and captives free  
The captives want revenge  
They'll take up their sickles  
They'll become floods--whoosh, whoosh, whoosh--  
They'll become fire--crackle, crackle, crackle--  
Deep in the heart of the ugly night  
Fireworks are such a pretty sight.  
Fire! Fire! So pretty! Wow!  
And it's almost sunset now  
Nightfall is oh so near  
The heat of fever is almost here.  
Jumping up and jumping down  
Jumping into the Silver Pond.  
The slaves, they wait with torches to light  
To bust up darkness in the heart of night  
To saddle Uncle Chain-weaver and  
Bring him into the square to stand  
Instead of bringing joy to his eyes  
Show him up, cut him down to size  
Grab each other by the hand  
Dance around the fellow and  
Play 'The Little Bath Has Little Ants,  
All Sit Down and All Stand Up'  
Play 'It's Got Locks and a Little Box,  
All Sit Down and All Stand Up'

Fairies! Enough of this ah, ah-ing of yours,  
Wailing of yours, oh, oh-ing of yours ...!"

The Fairies said nothing  
Bitterly, bitterly cried the Fairies  
Like clouds of Spring cried the Fairies

"Oh, pretty, pretty Fairies fair  
With naked bodies, feet A bare!

On winter solstice nights so black  
Which at the korsicrack, crack, crack  
We ate melon seeds and the sound of rain  
Could be heard rushing through the drain  
Nanny told us tales so queer  
In riddles that were never clear--  
The tale of the Green Fairy  
The tale of the Golden Fairy  
The story of the Patient Stone  
Of the Little Goat on the roof alone  
The story--such a pretty thing--  
Of the daughter of the Fairy King ...  
Are you those Fairies, the very same,  
Who into this world of ours you came  
To find yourselves fretting  
    That our world is upsetting  
        Silently anguished that it is marred,  
            With sorrow and suffering it is scarred?

Our world wasn't just a tale  
A riddle message to unveil,  
Our world is open so that he  
Who wants to know can come and see:  
Our world is filled with many a thorn  
Snakes fill its desert parts  
And those of us who're in it born  
Know about it in our hearts.  
This world of ours, you see, is vast,  
With wolves and jackals it is cast.  
This is our world--yea, yea, yea!  
Chasing fire--hop, hop, hop!  
If you want fire, jump and play  
Till your heels crack and pop ...  
Our world is just the way it's set,  
What you see is what you get!

Well, Fairies of a fairy tale!  
Broken-winged birds who sit and wail!  
You had enough to drink and eat,  
With tea and waterpipes at your feet,  
Who told you to come to this world of ours  
To this topsy-turvy world of ours  
To leave your story castle behind

And get yourselves in such a bind?"

The Fairies said nothing  
Bitterly, bitterly cried the Fairies  
Like clouds of Spring cried the Fairies

I touched them on their shoulders  
To send them on their way--  
The Fairies screamed, they screeched, became magic, turned to smoke,  
went up, turned to warp, came down, turned to weft,  
turned old, became cries, turned young, became laughter,  
turned to masters, turned to slaves,  
turned to chickens without heads,  
turned to fruit, turned to pits,  
turned to secret treasure jars, turned to hope,  
turned to despair, turned into three ominous stars ...

When, as they could plainly see,  
The stars had no effect on me--  
I disregarded all I saw,  
Just watched the game and showed no awe,  
I wasn't dazed by what was shown,  
Nor by their magic turned to stone--  
One turned into a jug of wine  
One turned into a great big sea  
One turned into a mountain range  
Stretched to the sky in front of me ...

I gulped down the wine  
And straightened my spine  
Then jumped to the sea  
Till it covered me  
Came up once again  
Then I ran and ran  
Straight up in a streak  
To the mountain peak ...  
From the other side came the sound of song  
As music was played and folks sang along:  
"Jingle, jingle--we are glad  
We're free of the injustice we had.  
Lady Sun is shining bright  
She's soaked a lot of rice over night!

Lady Sun, oh Lady, dear!  
Come on down and join us here!  
We have done in tyranny  
Freedom shall our Mecca be  
Since the masses have risen thus  
Life itself belongs to us  
We'll never be too full of glee  
And never more we'll captives be.  
Up we jumped and down we jumped  
Into the Silver Pond we jumped!  
The Golden Apple that we found  
We Plucked and got home safe and sound ...”

Up we went into the sky  
My Nanny's tale was all a lie,  
Down we came and then we knew  
That our story all was true.  
Now our story is all done--  
Wasn't it a pretty one?  
Eeny, meeny, miney, mo,  
Put up the chains and off we go.

\* This translation by M. R. Ghanoonparvar and Diane L. Wilcox first appeared in *Literature East and West*, Volume XX (1976, actually published in 1980). The summary at the festival was by Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak. For a discussion of the poem, see M. R. Ghanoonparvar, *Prophets of Doom: Literature as a Socio-Political Phenomenon in Modern Iran*, (University Press of America, 1984), “Chapter V: Didacticism or Escapism.”

## **The Life and Art of Ahmad Shamlu**

Ahamd Ghazinoor

*Your name is the morning light that passes on the forehead of the sky.  
Blessed be your name!*

Ahmad Shamlu was born in Tehran in 1925. Due to his father's military career, he spent his childhood and adolescent years in different Iranian cities. At the age of seventeen he started his politically activities, which earned him several spells in prison including a 21 months in Allies' detention camp in 1943. As a result he never finished high school. Shamlu married twice: first, in 1947 from which he had four children, and again in 1962 to Ida, his soul mate and companion to the end of his life. All his life, Shamlu advocated freedom of speech and human dignity, which did not endear him to the powers that be. In 2000 he passed away in Tehran due complications from diabetes.

Shamlu was an untiring and versatile man of letters who worked in many fields. He wrote short stories and screenplays, edited journals, did research on Iranian folklore, mythology, and ancient texts. Shamlu had a voice as rich and graceful as his words and recorded many of his own poems as well as those of other Iranian poets.

His international fame, however, owed to his poetry for which he was nominated for Nobel Prize in literature in 1984. At the start Shamlu wrote his poems in the tradition of Nima—the father of modern Persian poetry. But soon he found his own way with the free form poems that came to be known as *sepeed* (white). In this kind of poetry the internal music of the poem replaces the externally imposed classical Persian meters and rhymes. Thus, the dichotomy between prose and poetry disappeared in his poems and the language was reintegrated into one whole. He had a way to turn words into notes of a melody, and to combine these melodies into a symphony. In an interview, he likened a poem to a torrent, composed of joining drops of water that poured out of the cloud's heart. To impose an external form on a poem, he contended, is to decree that the water should follow a designated path and to form a river according to a blueprint.

And now that Shamlu is gone, there can be no more eloquent language than his own words eulogizing another poet.

In search of you  
I cry at the foot of the mountain  
At the threshold of the sea and grass ...

In search of you  
I cry at the passageways of the winds  
At the crossroad of seasons;  
At the broken window  
That is an old frame  
To the cloudy sky.

In expectation of your likeness  
How long, how long  
The pages of this empty book  
Will be turned?

Accepting the blowing of the wind  
And the love  
Which is a sister to death  
And which let you in on  
Its secret of immortality.  
So you turned into a treasure  
Enchanting and enticing,  
Such a treasure  
That has made attachment to a land and place  
Pleasurable!

Your name is the morning light that passes on the forehead of the sky.  
—Blessed be your name! —  
And we continue to follow  
The night and the day  
And ever ...

Michael Craig Hillmann

In late 1996 a textbook of mine appeared with this "Dedication":

Although no texts in *Persian Newspaper Reader* deal with or feature the by-line of Ahmad Shamlu, his name immediately comes to mind when I think of Persian language journalism. Poet, critic, editor, translator, and thinker, Ahmad Shamlu has figured in the news more than any other Iranian literary figure in the 1990s. Hundreds of articles, letters to editors, editorials, and other newspaper reports have debated a speech which he gave at The University of California at Berkeley in April 1990. In that speech, which I flew from Austin to hear, Shamlu asked Iranians to rethink revered parts of their cultural heritage. The debate stimulated by his talk, the most famous speech by an Iranian literary figure in history, will likely continue for years.

I first met Ahmad Shamlu in 1977 when he came to Austin for an international poetry festival at The University Texas, where he mesmerized audiences with readings from his poems. I most recently saw him in Karaj in 1996, busy as ever with writing and translation projects and thinking about his culture and literature. There was talk in Tehran then of submitting Shamlu's name for consideration for the Nobel Prize in Literature. If ever a Nobel Prize Committee were to turn a spotlight on Persian literature, Shamlu would richly deserve to be in it. I dedicate *Persian Newspaper Reader* to him in admiration for his poetry, his magazines, his editing of texts, and his published views on literature and culture during the last forty years, and in appreciation of his friendship.

A new edition of *Persian Newspaper Reader* is about to go to press, and Ahmad Shamlu is no longer with us. I'll sadly change some tenses in the "Dedication" and delete the Nobel Prize comments and ask my editor how to add tears to it. And maybe I'll add a sentence or two about listening to classical music at The Shamlus' house in Princeton, talking over chicken kabob Ayda suddenly produced half an hour after our unannounced visit to their house in Karaj, and hearing echoes of "The Fairies" at our house for months after Shamlu recited it at a Texas barbecue there.

Homa Katouzian

There is a risk that writing an obituary for a distinguished poet, or a note on his art immediately upon his death, may turn into a fruitless exercise: it may be so time-bound as to render an appreciation of his poetry look bland, uncritical, obsequiously flattering or sanguinely hagiographic. And the risk rises in proportion if he is not just an outstanding poet of his time, but one who was also a cult figure over a long period of his life, a man whom

large numbers of men and women - especially those who grew up with the idealisms of their generations - identify as their own poetical voice, as the lyricist of their hopes and the declaimer of their despairs; and, who - at the same time - was a poet's poet, a writer whose work is bound to add to the lasting sum of literature, and be subjected to learned and critical studies long after the personal adulation has faded from the minds of his future readers.

Yet, there is a sense in which such immediate notes, comments or appraisals carry with them precisely the freshness of the moment, which may not be readily available to future reflections on the poet's words, forms, poetics and pronouncements.

Ahmad Shamlu was one of the most original Persian poets of his time. He was one of the few early followers of Nima's modernism who, from the very beginning, understood its logic, the logic of its forms and the climate of its landscape. He wrote in broken metres, in free verse, and - occasionally - in classical prosody, normally in the newer form of the connected couplets. His political poetry matured to become one of the most subtle of his time. His moods, laments and existential reflections displayed the sensitivity of a wondering mind, at least as it affected the gravity of the human predicament and the wonderousness of the Iranian experience. But his lyricism of both fulfilled and unfulfilled love was almost unique among his contemporaries, and - although it might have surprised himself - was reminiscent of Sa'di's lyrics and odes to love of the flesh, which, unlike much Persian love poetry, both classical and modern, expressed joy or sadness, but scarcely indignation, despair or depression. The majority of Shamlu's admirers probably love his poetry in its social context. But he wrote some of the subtlest love poems of his time.

---