

## Gold is the Deepest Love: Translating Rumi in Contemporary Times by Haleh Liza Gafari

From the introduction to *Gold by Rumi*, translated from the Farsi by Haleh Liza Gafari, published by NYRB Classics.

Rumi was a preacher before he was a poet. Born into a line of Islamic theologians, he was a celebrity delivering sermons to hordes of followers by the time he was thirty-eight. Eloquent and magnetic, dressed in a crown turban and silk robe, he evangelized in mosques and theological institutions throughout Konya. Disciples and admirers from Nishapur to Damascus to Mecca called him Molana—our Master.

He was growing weary of fame. It was a trap, he would later suggest in his writings, as was dogma, as were the obsessions with title, rank, and prestige that plagued the religious and scholarly milieu. While touting self-transcendence, sheikhs and scholars pined for robes of honor and, as size indicated status, some stuffed their turbans with rags. Rumi longed for release from this stifling world, for a friend and seer unfettered by its concerns, for honest and intimate conversation. He hungered to actually feel what he called for in sermons: liberation from the cramped shell of self, union with a shoreless Love, with God.

This was when Rumi encountered Shams, a scruffy vagabond and rebel in a coarse felt robe, 22 years his elder. Shams was a free thinker, an independent scholar, and a well-versed mystic who worked as a hired hand. Content to remain on the fringes of spiritual and scholarly circles, he occasionally chimed in at gatherings or engaged in private discussions. He had a sharp tongue, an unabashed love for music, and a talent for piercing through artifice. Some dismissed him as rude and blasphemous. Others found his honesty refreshing and sought him as a sheikh. But Shams had no interest in followers. He wrote, “They kept insisting, take us as your disciples, give us robes! When I fled, they followed me to the inn. They offered gifts but I wasn’t interested and left.” Moving from town to town whenever he felt the urge, Shams earned himself the nickname “Parandeh”—bird.

Just as Rumi was wearying of celebrity, Shams was growing tired of solitude. “I was bored with myself,” he said. “I wanted to find someone who shared my level of devotion . . . I wanted someone with a deep thirst . . .” It was providence, Shams would claim, that led him to travel to Konya and search for Rumi, of whose intelligence, eloquence, devotion, and talent he had heard. The two men met on an afternoon in November 1244 in a crowded bazaar. They had hardly stopped talking when Rumi descended from his mule and, leaving his entourage and social conventions behind, walked off with the dervish, his “doorway to the sun.” The meeting was no less meaningful for Shams, who said, “I had become a stagnant pool . . . Molana’s spirit stirred mine and the waters began to pour forth . . . joyously and fruitfully.”

Shams set Rumi an array of challenges. He demanded that Rumi put his books aside and quit reciting passages from them. "Where's your own voice? Answer me in your own voice!" Shams insisted. On one occasion, Shams ordered Rumi to buy a jug of wine, which good Muslims were expected to shun, and carry it home in plain sight. If Rumi was to be liberated from the shackles of convention, he needed to let go of his good name.

Shams also introduced Rumi to the practice of sama, or deep listening. Conventionally understood, sama referred to the practice of listening to a book read aloud with the goal not only of acquiring knowledge but also of strengthening concentration. The successful student would receive a certificate called the ijazateh sama. Shams understood sama in a radically different sense. For him, the object of attention was not scholarly texts but music and poetry, which he saw as a means of arriving at mystical trance, revelation, ecstasy, and divine intoxication. Shams and Rumi kept company with musicians and spent countless hours listening to music. It was an act of defiance to conservative religious authorities, for whom music, apart from singing passages from the Koran, was at best a distraction and at worst a sin.

Sama also came to mean the whirling dance, a demanding and joyous devotional practice to which Shams introduced Rumi. In sama, the dancer whirls counterclockwise around the axis of the left leg, turning forever toward the heart. With arms extended, the right palm turned up to the sky and the left down to the ground, the dancer becomes a conduit between heaven and earth, engaging in a 360-degree embrace of creation. As Rumi would say, "Sama is the food of lovers . . . In sama the dream of union is realized . . . The roof of the seventh heaven is high. Sama's ladder reaches far beyond it."

Shams broke Rumi open. When outraged former disciples succeeded in driving the dervish from town, Rumi was devastated. This was when he composed his first poems, love letters to the absent Shams, who, on receiving them, returned. From that point on, Rumi would compose poems, while sometimes whirling to drums as friends wrote down his words. Beyond Shams' bold invitations, mystical insight, and guidance, the heartbreak Rumi experienced when Shams died only two and a half years into their friendship shattered and remade him. Ego death, union, and divine intoxication—states of being central to Sufi mysticism, and, previous to Shams, mere concepts in Rumi's mind—became lived experience. "You shattered my cage," he said in praise of Shams. "You brought my spirit to a boil, turned my grapes to wine." The sober preacher had become an ecstatic poet.

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Rumi wrote some 65,000 verses, which are collected in two books: the Masnavi, a didactic and narrative poem in rhyming couplets, uncovering "the roots of the roots of the roots of religion," as Rumi described it; and the Divan-e Shams-e Tabrizi, a vast gathering of lyric quatrains and ghazals. Here Rumi speaks as humble seeker, demanding sage, kind elder, and ravaged, ecstatic lover. With one exception, the Divan-e Shams-e Tabrizi is the source of the poems in *Gold*, a book of my translations of Rumi's work, published by New York Review Books Classics.

The ghazal is a sumptuous and demanding form, consisting of a string of five or more couplets, each one closing with a single refrain, or less commonly, with a single rhyme. Though linked by repetition, the couplets stand as discrete units, and their tone, imagery, and perspective are meant to vary and astonish. The word ghazal, the Oxford English Dictionary tells us, is etymologically linked to gazelle and like a gazelle, the ghazal moves by leaps and bounds.

Because each couplet of a ghazal is complete in its own right, it has long been customary for reciters, singers, editors, and translators, whether Iranian or not, to pick and choose freely among them. In *Gold*, I have worked in this tradition. Some of the poems here present Rumi's text complete; others reproduce the couplets that I felt spoke most urgently and powerfully. In a few cases, I found a couplet or line so resonant, I singled it out to stand on its own

The languages of Farsi and English possess quite different poetic resources and habits. In English, it is impossible to reproduce the rich interplay of sound and rhyme (internal as well as terminal) and the wordplay that characterize and even drive Rumi's poems. Meanwhile, the tropes, abstractions, and hyperbole that are so abundant in Persian poetry contrast with the spareness and concreteness characteristic of poetry in English, especially in the modern tradition. As a translator, I seek to honor the demands of contemporary American poetry and conjure its music while carrying over the whirling movement and leaping progression of thought and imagery in Rumi's poetry.

Translation, especially of poetry, is always a form of interpretation. Sometimes Rumi's lines lend themselves to literal transcription. Elsewhere his meanings baffle even the most well-versed readers of Farsi. At *shab e shers*, Persian poetry nights, it is not uncommon to hear people arguing about one or more of Rumi's couplets, offering their different interpretations. Perhaps it is his elusiveness, his leaps and paradoxes, the challenges of them and the invitations they offer, that attract so many readers and translators to his text.

"Gold," the title of my book, is a word that recurs throughout Rumi's poetry. Rumi's gold is not the precious metal but a feeling-state arrived at through the alchemical process of altering consciousness, of burning through ego, greed, pettiness, and calculation, to arrive at a more relaxed and compassionate state of being. In sum, the prayer of Sufism is "teach me to love more deeply." Gold is the deepest love.

Rumi lived to the age of 66. He didn't return to preaching, though he remained active in the community of Konya, helping to resolve conflicts between townspeople, offering guidance and solace, writing letters to royalty to help poor students and others in need. And of course, he continued to write poetry, his greatest service. He spent the last years of his life finishing the *Masnavi* and writing the remaining quatrains and ghazals for the *Divan-e Shams-e Tabrizi*. Even on his deathbed, he was composing poems.

The final couplet of the ghazal typically introduces the poet's name, as a kind of signature. In all of his work, however, Rumi never includes his name. Often he invokes Shams or he simply calls for silence, *khamoosh*. He was, above all, a devotee of the mystical state of *beenaame*, selfless namelessness, and a believer that anything worth saying emerges from silence.

I hope Rumi's spirit lives on in these translations and that his love, wisdom, and devotion to liberation move you.

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Join an Awakin Call this Saturday with Haleh, "The Alchemy of Love: Translating Rumi and Timeless Poetry." More details and RSVP info [here](#).