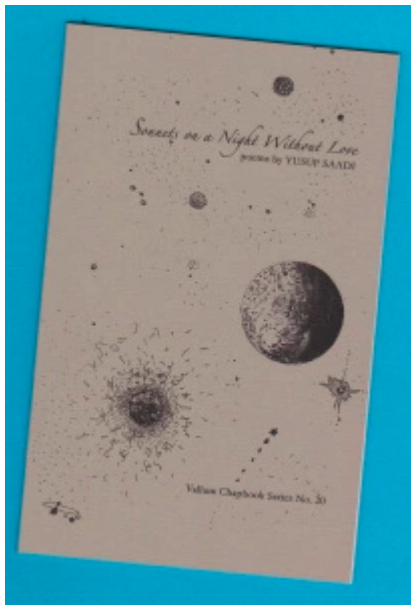


Word Music

Reviews of Chapbooks

Heaven's Gates

JANUARY 1, 2017JANUARY 3, 2017 / CHAPBOOKLOVE



Yusuf Saadi, *Sonnets on a Night Without Love*. Montreal: Vallum Society for Education in Arts & Letters, 115 copies, 2016.

<http://www.vallummag.com> (<http://www.vallummag.com>)

The other day I tried a little experiment. I stopped ten strangers on the street and asked each if he or she knew of any poetic forms. Four came up with haiku and a whopping eight offered the sonnet.

All right, this did not actually happen. But I suspect that if I were really to accost ten strangers about their knowledge of poetry, the results would be pretty close. Many people in the west think of haiku as something children write but the sonnet—that's the delightful form that Shakespeare used as an address of love. The extraordinary thing is that poets still love the sonnet form; one finds

it used and re-invented and turned on its head all the time. It's a favourite way of connecting to the tradition even while making it new.

Yusuf Saadi's chapbook has two parts, the first of which consists of five sonnets. Each has fourteen lines and there are some rhymes but (at least as far as I can tell, my knowledge being hardly perfect) otherwise Saadi doesn't feel too rule-bound. Some begin with a trivial premise, others are more serious from the start, but all of them are gorgeous things, rich in rhythm and sensual language and ideas. Here are the first lines of the first, "Love Sonnet for Light, which is exactly what it is called:

*I know a star in Andromeda broke
every colour in your heart. That you
shivered yourself to sleep in a meteor's
crevice or moon's crater whose dust
is now my skin. Beyond my finitude
you dream a wave and particle at once.
Know I love the way you warm my fingers
and pour gilt on my hardwood floors.*

This infusing of the self's mind and body into the larger universe is a common strategy for Saadi. There is the love song to an actual person, "Pedagogy," in which the love object's rather common, monosyllabic name gives a sentence its surprisingly abrupt, down-to-earth stop:

*Ghosts stalk our thoughts at two a.m. Silence
shawls the temporal: night wraps a black sari
around your skin. I memorize each strand
of your hair, Jess.*

Other poems have a wonderful sense of play as they meld formal tradition with easy casualness, the high with the low. There's a sonnet to a "Forgotten Twix Wrapper" which, ironically, sounds the most Shakespearean, and one to sound that reminds us that Chopin, a child's screams, and a flushing toilet are all perceived with the same sense.

The best, though, is "Love Poem for Nusaybah's Hijab. I'm fascinated by the way it combines the subject matter of Islam with a western poetic form (the sonnet was born in Italy). I had to look up Nusaybah to learn that she was a female companion of Muhammad and a "warrior of Islam" and that Uhud was the site of a battle between the Muhammad-led Muslims and the Meccans in 625. It opens with a word worthy of Joyce but its mix of erotic sensuality with the result of violence almost overwhelmed me with its sickening beauty. I take the liberty of quoting it in full.

*Cloudflesh gaped, and skies above Uhud
revealed the moon's kneecap. Survivors
crawled among the dead—eyes salivating.
Your cotton hijab was caught in windmoans:
it spelled its threnodies in Arabic
calligraphy, while angels rolled the moon
across the sky. Behind you, mountains flexed
their muscled arms among the shadows dark
as pubic patches. Yet no stare had claimed
your body. Pupils slithered down your cotton
veil, their gazes scrambling for a form to fix you.
Even I can't write your hair, each strand
a bridge to heaven's gates. Although
I glimpse your heart which nearly blinds me.*

The chapbook contains another section of five poems and while I read them, the sonnets were still too much in my thoughts to make much sense of them. I look forward to reading them, and the sonnets again, as well as any more poems by Yusuf Saadi that I can get my hands on.

-C.F.

Uncategorized

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