“As You Are Now”: Ibn Isrā’il’s Elegies for His Daughter

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Abstract

The 7th/13th century Damascene poet Muḥammad Ibn Isrā’il (d. 677/1278) was noted for his dedicated discipleship to the controversial Sufi ‘Alī al-Ḥarīrī and for his elegant mystical Arabic verse. Based on his belief in Divine Oneness, Ibn Isrā’il claimed that all of his poems were in praise of God. This article will closely read two elegies that Ibn Isrā’il composed following the tragic death of his adult daughter. In them, Ibn Isrā’il drew from both the classical Arabic elegiac tradition and Muslim beliefs in immortality to forge a rhetoric of transformation, which denies the ultimate finality of his daughter’s death and reaffirms her continued life in God’s presence, where they may yet meet again. Moreover, these elegies for a daughter are indicative of new trends in Arabic poetry in the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods—namely, a focus on more personal matters—only rarely seen in pre-Islamic or classical Arabic verse.

Keywords

Ibn Isrā’il – ‘Alī al-Ḥarīrī – Ibn al-Khiyamī – Ibn al-Fāriḍ – *rithā’* – elegy – daughter – poetry of the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods

Muḥammad Ibn Isrā’il (d. 677/1278) was a noted Sufi poet from Damascus, who followed Ibn al-Fāriḍ in composing Arabic verse on mystical themes. Among his many poems on love, union, and divine oneness, however, are two elegies that he composed on the death of his adult daughter, which have largely gone unnoticed. Elegies for a daughter are rather rare in pre-Islamic and classical

Arabic poetry, but by the seventh/thirteenth century, a number of poets of the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods included laments for daughters among the subjects appropriate for Arabic verse. The more personal tone of such poems may suggest a new trend, though Ibn Isrā'īl still relied upon the elegiac tradition of classical Arabic poetry to find his voice. Moreover, by invoking Muslim beliefs regarding immortality, he conjured a rhetoric of transformation, which turned his daughter's death into her departure to Paradise where, God willing, they will be together again for eternity. What follows is the first close reading and translation of Ibn Isrā'īl's two elegies for his daughter.

Death & Daughters

Rithā', or "elegy," is one of the oldest genres of Arabic poetry, probably arising out of pre-Islamic Arab lamentations for dead male warriors and chiefs.¹ During the early Islamic period, poets continued to compose elegies for important male public figures, such as caliphs, viziers, emirs, and their brothers and sons, and these elegies served as a type of eulogy offering condolences to survivors. Gradually, during Abbasid times, the genre was extended on occasion to women, including grandmothers and mothers, aunts and sisters, wives and concubines, but only rarely to daughters, the depositories of family honor. In his long chapter on death and mourning in *al-Iqd al-farīd*, the Andalusian litterateur and anthologist Ibn 'Abd Rabbih (d. 328/940), cites over 30 elegies for sons, but only one for a daughter. This is an elegy composed by the noted Abbasid poet al-Buḥturī (d. 284/897) for the daughter of a prominent member of an Arab tribe. Al-Buḥturī opens his poem with a traditional lament against the ravages of time and the inevitability of death, and he praises the father for his bravery, only to chastise him for mourning over a daughter:

1 Concerning Arabic elegy see al-Mubarrad, *Kitāb al-Ta'āzī wa-l-marāthī*, ed. Muḥammad al-Dībājī (Damascus: Majma' al-Lughah al-'Arabiyyah bi-Dimashq, 1976); Ibn Rashīq, *al-'Umdah* (Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, n.d.), 2:147-58; Shawqī Ḍayf, *al-Rithā'* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1955); Muṣṭafā al-Shūrī, *Shi'r al-rithā' fi ṣadr al-Islām* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1986); Pieter Smoor, "Death, the Elusive Thief: The Classical Arabic Elegy," in *Hidden Futures*, ed. J.M. Bremer, et al. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1994), 150-76; and Magda al-Nowaihi, "Elegy and the Confrontation of Death in Arabic Poetry," in *Transforming Loss into Beauty*, ed. Marlé Hammond, et al. (Cairo: American University In Cairo Press, 2008), 3-20.

أَتَبْكِي مَنْ لَا يُنَازِلُ بِالسَّيِّ
فِ مَشِيحًا وَلَا يَهْرُ اللَّوَاءَ
وَالْفَتَى مَنْ رَأَى الْقُبُورَ لِمَنْ طَا
بَ بِهِ مِنْ بَنَاتِهِ أَكْفَاءَ
لَسَنَ مِنْ زِينَةِ الْحَيَاةِ لِعَدِّ آلٍ
لَهُ مِنْهَا الْأَمْوَالُ وَالْأَبْنَاءُ

Are you asking others to weep over someone
who never swung a sword with skill
nor carried a banner into battle?
A real man regards the grave
as good enough for daughters
who pleased him.
They are not "the ornament of life"
No, God considers that to be
property and sons!²

Al-Buḥturī goes on to denounce daughters for squandering the tribe's property on outsiders who marry them; moreover, daughters may eventually give birth to sons who may become enemies of the tribe. On this note of chastisement, al-Buḥturī brings his poem to a close:

وَلَعَمْرِي مَا الْعَجْزُ عِنْدِي إِلَّا
أَنْ تَبَيْتَ الرِّجَالَ تَبْكِي النِّسَاءَ

I swear, such weakness,
that you of all men should pass the night
weeping for women!

Al-Buḥturī's poem is less an elegy of consolation for a deceased daughter than a scornful invective against women in general. Still, his ode echoes a popular Arab

2 Ibn 'Abd Rabbih, *al-Iqd al-farīd*, ed. Aḥmad Amīn, et al. (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 1982), 3:226-311, esp. 282-83, my translation, and also translated in *The Unique Necklace*, tr. Issa J. Boullata (Reading, UK: Garnet, 2011), 3:151-226, esp. 200-201. Also see al-Buḥturī, *Dīwān*, ed. Ḥasan Kāmil al-Ṣayrafī (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1963), 1:39-41, and 1:382 for a similar elegy; and Arie Schippers, "Abu Tammam's Unofficial Elegies," *Acts of the 10th Congress U.E.A.I. Edinburgh 1980* (Edinburgh: n.p., 1982), 101-06. For property and sons as "the ornament of life" (*zīnat al-ḥayāh*), see Qur'ān 18:46.

adage: "Burying daughters is a blessing."³ Other classical Arabic poems, however, speak more affectionately of women including, in a few instances, daughters and nieces, a trend that continued.⁴ Following the classical models of Arabic elegy, later poets recited elegies on sultans, generals, and other important men of state. But these poets also composed many elegies for men of the pen, including religious scholars, secretaries, and litterateurs. These elegies were often composed by colleagues and students, who praised the deceased for learning, piety, and generosity, and for their pens' benefits to the Muslim community. As in the classical period, elegists offered consolation to the bereaved by lauding pious efforts, depicting the deceased as alive and well in heaven, while leaving behind a living legacy on earth in the form of students and children.⁵

Poets of the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods also composed elegies for deceased members of the household, not only their own, but, especially, those of their colleagues, which might include parents, siblings, wives and concubines, and children. These elegies were publicly recognized forms of condolence exchanged among the learned and ruling classes of society and, as such, an important means of social discourse about life and death, love and friendship.⁶ Further, a noteworthy development of the period appears to be that elegies for sons had become more common than those for brothers. This trend may

- 3 Abū Tammām, *Sharḥ al-Ḥamāsah*, ed. Aḥmad Amīn and 'Abd al-Salām Hārūn (Cairo: Lajnat al-Ta'lif wa-l-Tarjamah wa-l-Nashr, 1951), 1:284; and see Werner Diem, *The Living and the Dead in Islam: Studies in Arabic Epitaphs* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2004), 1:434-36, 442-43.
- 4 Ḍayf, *al-Rithā'*, 92-95; Schippers, "Abu Tammam," 101-06; and Th. Emil Homerin, "A Bird Ascends the Night: Elegy and Immortality in Islam," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 59 (1991) 4:247-79, esp. 248-55. Also see Michael Winter, "Content and Form in the Elegies of al-Mutanabbī," *Studia Orientalia Memoriae D.H. Baneth Dedicata* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1979), 327-345; Smoor, "Death, the Elusive Thief"; Pieter Smoor, "Elegies and Other Poems on Death by Ibn al-Rūmī," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 27 (1996): 49-85; and Pieter Smoor, "Ibn al-Rūmī: His Elegies and Mock-Elegies for Friends and Foes," *Quaderni di Studi Arabi* 15 (1997): 93-118.
- 5 Shawqī Ḍayf, *Tarikh al-adab al-'Arabī* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1983-84), 5:589-92; 6:219-24. Regarding elegy in the Mamluk period, see: Rā'id Muṣṭafā Ḥasan 'Abd al-Raḥīm, *Fann al-rithā' fi al-shī'r al-'Arabī fi al-aṣr al-Mamlūkī al-awwal* (Amman: Dār al-Rāzī, 2003).
- 6 Th. Emil Homerin, "Reflections on Arabic Poetry in the Mamlūk Age," *Mamlūk Studies Review* 1 (1997): 63-85, esp. 74-75; Thomas Bauer, "Communication and Emotion: The Case of Ibn Nubātah's *Kindertotenlieder*," *Mamlūk Studies Review* 7 (2003): 49-95, esp. 51-53, 63-66; and Adam Talib, "The Many Lives of Arabic Verse: Ibn Nubātah al-Miṣrī Mourns More Than Once," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 44 (2013): 257-292, esp. 262-66. For a comparable situation among Jewish poets of Andalusia, see the work of Arie Schippers, especially his "Hebrew Andalusian Elegies and the Arabic Literary Tradition," in *Hidden Futures*, 177-94.

reflect changes in Arab, Muslim society as it moved further away from tribal life, in which brothers were valued allies, toward more urban living and the increasing importance of the nuclear family, in which sons were crucial to the preservation of a family's lineage and fortune. Often in these poems, a son who died prior to puberty was praised for a sinless life of innocence, while older and grown sons were eulogized for their fine stature, learning, and virtue.⁷

Alongside these elegies for sons appeared laments for deceased daughters, though such elegies were comparably rare; consider the following verses by Muḥammad Ibn al-Khiyamī (d. 685/1286) for his daughter who appears to have died very young:⁸

<p>بِكَ فِي الْكَرَى خَوْفَ الْفِرَاقِ الثَّانِي كَمَّةً بِهِ وَالْدَارُ بِالسُّكَّانِ لَا تَسْتَحِقُّ أَسَى عَلَى الْفَقْدَانِ فَضَلْتُ بَكَارَ جَوَارِحِ الْإِنْسَانِ مَأْوَى الْعُلُومِ وَمَنْزِلَ الرَّحْمَانِ تُحْنِي الضُّلُوعُ لَهُ عَلَى الْأَحْزَانِ مَنْ لَمْ يَسِيَءْ يَدٍ وَلَا بِلْسَانٍ تَمَلَّأَ لَهَا صَدْرًا مِنَ الْأَضْغَانِ</p>	<p>إِنِّي لِأَكْرَهُ أَنْ أَنَامَ فَأَلْتَقِيَ وَيَلْذِي لِي سَكْنُ الثَّرَى إِذْ صِرْتُ سَا وَيَقُولُ خَالُ الْقَلْبِ: تِلْكَ صَغِيرَةٌ يَا صَاحِبَ إِنَّ الْعَيْنَ وَهِيَ صَغِيرَةٌ وَالْقَلْبُ يَا هَذَا عَلَى صِغَرٍ بِهِ وَأَيْكَ إِنَّ أَحَقَّ مَفْقُودٍ بَأَنَّ وَيَعْرِفُهُ عِنْدَ مَخْلَفِهِ الْعِزَا لَمْ تَكْتَسِبْ إِثْمًا لِجَارِحَةٍ وَلَمْ</p>
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I don't like to sleep anymore;
I'm afraid I might meet you in a dream
and lose you again.
My only pleasure is to stay by the grave
where you dwell now,
for home is where the heart is.
My dear uncle tells me:
"She was so very little.
You need not grieve her loss."

7 'Abd al-Raḥīm, *Fann al-rithā'*, esp. 1-37; and Bauer, "Communication and Emotion," 49-95. Also see Diem, *Living and the Dead*, 1:208-46.

8 Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-'Umarī, *Masālik al-abṣār*, 12:93, quoted in 'Abd al-Raḥīm, *Fann al-rithā'*, 177-78, and also see, 167-96.

But, my friend, the eye is small,
 yet it is so much better
 than bigger human limbs,
 And the heart, so insignificant in size,
 is still the seat of wisdom
 and the house of the merciful Lord.⁹
 I swear to you,
 the most devastating loss
 bends the ribs round grief and pain,
 While mourning holds dear
 one who passed away,
 one who never said or did an evil thing:
 Never did her limbs know sin,
 never did she hold hatred
 in her heart.

There is some solace in the fact that such little ones were innocent of sins and so now dwell in a heavenly home, as implied in Ibn al-Khiyamī's verses for his little daughter.¹⁰ By contrast, when children survived to die as young adults, elegies for them were generally more substantial, as was the case for Ibn Isrā'īl's two elegies on the passing of his daughter.¹¹

Ibn Isrā'īl

Muḥammad ibn Sawār Ibn Isrā'īl (603-77/1206-78) was a well-known Sufi poet of Syria and Egypt during the sixth/thirteenth century.¹² He was born

- 9 Literally, *manzil al-rahmān*, "the descending place of the Merciful." Here Ibn al-Khiyamī alludes to a divine saying popular among the Sufis: "My heavens and earth do not embrace Me, but the heart of My faithful servant does embrace Me!" See 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī, *Iṣṭalāḥāt al-ṣūfiyyah*, ed. A. 'Abd al-Khāliq (Minyā, Egypt: Dār Ḥarā, 1980), 115-16.
- 10 Ibn Rashīq, *al-'Umdah*, 2:154-58; Schippers, "Abu Tammam," 103-04; Avner Gil'adi, *Children of Islam* (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 1992), 67-119; Bauer, "Communication and Emotion," esp. 63-70, 86-90; Talib, "Many Lives," 257-62; and Diem, *Living and the Dead*, 1:428-34.
- 11 Cf. Abū Ḥayyān's (d. 745/1344) elegies for his daughter Nuḍār, in Homerin, "A Bird Ascends the Night," esp. 255-74; Homerin, "Reflections," 80-85; and Homerin, "I've Stayed by the Grave": An Elegy/*nasīb* for Nuḍār, in *Literary Heritage of Classical Islam*, ed. Mustansir Mir (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1993), 107-18.
- 12 For a useful survey of Ibn Isrā'īl's life and work, see Muḥammad Adīb al-Jādir, "Introduction," in *Dīwān Najm al-Dīn ibn Siwār al-Dimashqī*, ed. Muḥammad Adīb al-Jādir (Damascus: Majma' al-Lughah al-'Arabiyyah bi-Dimashq, 2009), 5-45.

in Damascus in 603/1206, where his family had lived since 2/634, when an Arab ancestor joined a Muslim military campaign into Syria. Ibn Isrā'īl's father Sawār (or Sawwār or Siwār) was, at times, a courtier of the founder of the Ayyubid dynasty, Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Yūsuf (Saladin, d. 589 /1193). Sawār looked after his son's education, and among Ibn Isrā'īl's early teachers was Zayd ibn al-Ḥasan al-Kindī (d. 613/1214), a poet, litterateur, and *ḥadīth* scholar. While still a boy, Ibn Isrā'īl was initiated into Sufism by the celebrated scholar and mystic 'Umar al-Suhrawardī (d.632/1234), and Ibn Isrā'īl undertook several spiritual retreats under al-Suhrawardī's supervision, perhaps during the latter's visits to Damascus in 612/1215 and 614/1217.¹³ Ibn Isrā'īl may have read al-Suhrawardī's Sufi manual *Awārīf al-ma'ārīf* with him, as well.¹⁴

Several years later in 618/1221, Ibn Isrā'īl became a disciple of the Sufi shaykh 'Alī al-Ḥarīrī (548-645/1153-1248). Al-Ḥarīrī was a charismatic and controversial figure who attracted a large following among the youth of Damascus, and he encouraged the use of music during meditation rituals (*samā'*) at his Sufi lodge. Not surprisingly, he ran afoul of more conservative scholars, who accused him of unbelief and ignoring the *shar'iah*. Al-Ḥarīrī was imprisoned for a time, until the Ayyubid governor of Damascus, al-Ṣāliḥ Ismā'īl (d. 643/1245), released him, on condition that al-Ḥarīrī never enter Damascus again. Ibn Isrā'īl remained loyal to al-Ḥarīrī throughout the years of this ordeal, and until his master's death in 645/1248.¹⁵ By then, Ibn Isrā'īl was over forty years old, with his own household to support, including his wife Fāṭimah bint Ibrāhīm al-Zu'bī (d. 688/1289). Sources describe her as a pious, intelligent, and spiritually perceptive woman, who related *ḥadīth*, assisted the poor, and had some authority among the followers of 'Alī al-Ḥarīrī.¹⁶

13 Louis Pouzet, *Damas au VII/XII siècle* (Beirut: Dar El-Machreq, 1988), 209.

14 Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, *Līsān al-Mizān* (Hyderabad: Maṭbaʿat Majlis Dāʿirat al-Maʿārīf al-Nizāmiyyah 1911), 5:195-97.

15 For more on 'Alī al-Ḥarīrī, see al-Dhahabī, *al-ʿIbar fī khabar min ghabar* (Kuwait: Maṭbaʿat Ḥukūmat al-Kuwayt, 1966), 5:186; al-Ṣafaḍī, *al-Wāfi bi-l-Wafayāt*, ed. Sven Dederling, et al. (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1981), 20:565-73; al-Kutubī, *Fawāt al-Wafayāt*, ed. Iḥsān ʿAbbās (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1974), 3:6-12; and Ibn Abī Ḥajalah, *Ṣarāʾih al-naṣāʾih wa-tamyīz al-ṣāliḥ min al-ṭāliḥ*, ed. Abū ʿAbd Allāh ʿIzzat ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Salafī Mutaṭabbib (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 2003), 86-91. Also see Alexander Knysh, *Ibn ʿArabi in the Later Islamic Tradition* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), 62-65; and al-Jādir, "Introduction," 9-11.

16 Al-Ṣafaḍī, *al-Wāfi*, 23:699; Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāyah wa-l-nihāyah*, ed. Aḥmad Abū Muḥim, et al. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1985), 13:333; al-ʿAynī, *Iqd al-jumān*, ed. Muḥammad Muḥammad al-Amīn (Cairo: al-Hayʾah al-Miṣriyyah al-ʿAmmah lil-Kitāb, 1988), 391; and al-Jādir, "Introduction" 17-18.

By this time, too, Ibn Isrā'īl was a respected poet, and he taught the literary arts to several students, including the historian and litterateur Mūsā ibn Muḥammad al-Yūnīnī (640-726/1242-1326).¹⁷ Al-Yūnīnī was also certified to recite and transmit Ibn Isrā'īl's verse, and he praised Ibn Isrā'īl as an eloquent poet. Nevertheless, al-Yūnīnī questioned Ibn Isrā'īl's excessive reverence for 'Alī al-Ḥarīrī, while noting that others criticized his leanings toward the mystical verse of 'Umar Ibn al-Fāriḍ (d. 632/1235).¹⁸ Ibn Isrā'īl greatly admired Ibn al-Fāriḍ, and while a young man, Ibn Isrā'īl read poems with Ibn al-Fāriḍ and others of his circle in Cairo. At one literary gathering, another rising poet, Muḥammad Ibn al-Khiyamī accused Ibn Isrā'īl of plagiarizing one of his poems. To adjudicate the matter, both men turned to Ibn al-Fāriḍ, who requested that each claimant compose verses in the same rhyme and meter as the contested poem. Based on these verses, Ibn al-Fāriḍ awarded the poem to Ibn al-Khiyamī. Some at the gathering wondered why such a gifted poet as Ibn Isrā'īl would ever need to borrow from another's verse, to which Ibn al-Khiyamī curtly replied that this was not a case of borrowing a phrase or two, but of stealing an entire poem.¹⁹ Apparently, Ibn Isrā'īl did not contest the verdict, and he later returned to Damascus, where he continued his career as a Sufi and poet.

Al-Yūnīnī states that Ibn Isrā'īl composed panegyrics for emirs, nobles, and other men of distinction, yet Ibn Isrā'īl's surviving verse collected in his *Dīwān* contains very few such poems.²⁰ Instead, the vast majority of these many poems address love themes. For instance:²¹

تِهْ يَا غَزَالَ الْمُنْحَى فَالْحُسْنُ أَعْطَاكَ الْمُنَى
وَاجْنِ فَلَسْتَ بِالَّذِي يَخَافُ عُقْبَى مَا جَنَى

17 Li Guo, *Early Mamluk Syrian Historiography* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 1:1-21, 68-69; and al-Jādir, "Introduction," 11-14.

18 Al-Yūnīnī, *Dhayl mir'āt al-zamān* (Hyderabad: Dā'irat al-Ma'ārif al-'Uthmāniyyah, 1960), 3:405-32. Also see al-Ṣafaḍī, *al-Wāfi*, 3:143; Ibn al-Fūrāt, *Tarikh Ibn al-Fūrāt*, ed. Quṣṭanṭīn Zurayq (Beirut: al-Maṭba'ah al-Amīrkāniyyah, 1942), 7:131; Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāyah*, 13:299; and Ibn Ḥajar, *Lisān* 5:195.

19 Al-Yūnīnī, *Dhayl*, 4:300-06; al-Ṣafaḍī, *al-Wāfi*, 4:50-61; Th. Emil Homerin, *From Arab Poet to Muslim Saint*, 2nd ed. (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2001), 22-24; and al-Jādir, "Introduction," 23-27.

20 Al-Yūnīnī, *Dhayl*, 3:405-06; and al-Jādir, "Introduction," 18-23.

21 Ibn Isrā'īl, *Dīwān Najm al-Dīn ibn Siwār al-Dimashqī*, ed. Muḥammad Abīb al-Jādir (Damascus: Majma' al-Lughah al-'Arabiyyah bi-Dimashq, 2009), 305-06.

وَمُلِيسِي ثَوْبَ الضَّنَى	يَا سَالِي طَيْبَ الْكَرَى
لَكَ إِلَيَّ إِلَّا مُحْسِنَا	كُنْ كَيْفَ شِئْتَ فَمَا أَرَا
تَرَاهُ عِنْدِي هَيْنَا	وَدَمِي إِذَا رَضِيتَهُ
لَنَا عَلَى خَيفٍ مَنَى	أَمَّا وَأَيَّامٍ مَضَتْ
إِلَى عِطْفَاءِ لَيْنَا	أَيَّامٍ تُدْنِي أَبَدًا
وَالدَّهْرُ لَمْ يَشْعُرْ بِنَا	وَإِذْ أُعَاطِيكَ الْهَوَى
لَوْ ذَاقَ طَرْفِي الْوَسْنَا	إِنَّ الْخَيَالَ مُعَتَتِي

Be proud, you supple gazelle,
 for loveliness endowed you with rare gifts.
 Take what you want
 without fear of what's to follow.
 You've already plundered my pleasant sleep
 and left me dressed in grief.
 So do as you will;
 I know you mean me well.
 My blood is of no value to me
 if you want it.
 How sad that our days together
 at Khayf and Minā have passed away,
 Days when you were always near me,
 ready and willing,
 When I gave you love,
 while time knew nothing of us,
 Where a phantom would have haunted my dreams
 had my eyes ever tasted sleep.

In this and other poems, Ibn Isrā'īl lauds love and beautiful lovers, while lamenting the painful separation and heartache that ensue after fleeting moments of joyous union, which, in this case, occurred during the pilgrimage to Mecca at the holy sites of al-Khayf and Minā. While much of this poetry may be read as amorous verse for an earthly beloved, Ibn Isrā'īl's frequent use of Sufi motifs and terminology, and his explicit references to poems by Ibn al-Fārid,

intone a mystical resonance.²² Similar to Ibn al-Fāriḍ, Ibn Isrā'īl believed that everything reveals, in its own particular way, aspects of the divine creator, who can be witnessed during moments of mystical union. In one long ode, perhaps inspired by Ibn al-Fāriḍ's famous poem the *Naẓm al-sulūk* ("Poem of the Sufi Way"), Ibn Isrā'īl details how God is reflected throughout creation, especially in earthly beauties below and celestial events above, in the arts and revelation, in the realm of power, from where divine decrees and life's hardships appear, and, finally, in manifestations of divine perfection, where union and oneness rule.²³ Some critics, however, confused this monism with blasphemous doctrines of incarnation, as was said to have occurred once during a poetry reading, where a chanter sang the following verse by Ibn Isrā'īl:

وما أنت غيرُ الكونِ بل أنت عينُهُ ويفهمُ هذا السرَّ مَنْ هو ذائقُ

You are all creation, no, you are its source!
One with taste knows this secret.

A man leaped up and shouted at Ibn Isrā'īl: "You are an infidel! You are an infidel!" To which Ibn Isrā'īl responded, "I am not an infidel. Clearly, you do not understand!"²⁴ For Ibn Isrā'īl, only God truly exists, as the ephemeral world of multiplicity, with its relative pleasures and pains, passes away into God's primordial oneness:²⁵

ولا فرقَ عندي بين أنسٍ ووحشةٍ ونورٍ وإِظلامٍ ومُدنٍ ومُبعدي

For me, there is no difference
between intimacy and loneliness,
light and dark, being near or far away.

22 Cf., Ibn al-Fāriḍ, *Dīwān Ibn al-Fāriḍ*, ed. G. Scattolin (Cairo: IFAO, 2004), 152-53, 164; Th. Emil Homerin, *From Arab Poet*, 4-9; and al-Jādir, "Introduction," 19.

23 Ibn Isrā'īl, *Dīwān*, 87-99; and see Ibn al-Fāriḍ, *Dīwān*, 66-143, esp. vv. 537-75; and tr. Th. Emil Homerin, *ʿUmar Ibn al-Fāriḍ: Sufi Verse, Sainly Life* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), 67-291.

24 Al-Kutubi, *Fawāt*, 3:384.

25 Ibn Isrā'īl, *Dīwān*, 98, v. 87.

Ibn Isrā'il openly declared creation to be God's self-manifestation (*tajallī*), and perhaps for this reason, he claimed that all of his verse was in praise of God.²⁶ This mystical view of existence, however, would be sorely tested when Ibn Isrā'il composed two elegies on the death of his daughter.

"She Left to Be With God:"

- وقال أيضاً يرثي ابنة له انتقلت إلى جوار الله تعالى:²⁷
كأس الحمايم على الأنام يدور	والعمر مهما طال فهو قصير
والموت حتم لا يرد وخيله	أبدًا على سرج النفوس تغير
يستزل الأروى من النيق الذي	في جانيه للأنوق وكور
وينازل الحيتان في دأماها	لم يغن عن مهبج بهن بحور
ويهاجم الملك المنيع حتى ولم	يمنع حماه معاقل وقصور
والناس كالشئ الهوامل راتع	وليبيهم بحياته مغرور
في غفلة عمت فأعمت عن هدى	وعليهم سيف الردى مشهور
تخفي الردى أحبابهم تحت الثرى	فكأنما ذاك الخفاء ظهور
أبدًا يذكر بعضهم بعضًا ولا	تعصى لهم أن ينفع التذكير
ويفارق الرجل الحميم حميمه	وكأن غيبته لديه حضور
ناس كفرط الناس منه هنية	وتراه وهو مودع مسرور
أها على السكن الذي فارقه	فالقلب فيه على السكون نفور
ولى وقد ولى علي صباة	وأسى له بين الضلوع سعيور
يا راحلاً رحل السرور وراءه	تبعاً فإلى لا يغيب سرور

26 Al-Kutubī, *Fawāt*, 3:389.

27 Ibn Isrā'il, *Dīwān*, 551-54. I have followed the order of the two elegies, with their headings, as found in his *Dīwān*.

- 15 فخرى بعكس محافتي التَّقديرُ
 قبلي وكان برغمي المحذورُ
 مذْ بِنْتٍ وهو بأدْمي ممطورُ
 دمعٌ تجودُ به الجفونُ غزيرُ
 لَمْ يَقْضَ لي مِنْ بعدكِ التَّأخيرُ
 20 وجمالُ وجهكِ في الثرى مقبورُ
 ما خَلْتُ أَنْ مِنَ القبورِ خدورُ
 قَدْ مَدَّ حُزْني عمرُكِ المقصورُ
 كانتْ عليه مِنَ الحياءِ سُتورُ
 زمنٌ وغيرُ محلِّكِ المهجورُ
 25 عندي فما الرزءُ الكبيرُ كبيرُ
 تَدَّ البقاءُ فكلُّها محظورُ
 زمنٌ بِقُرْبِكَ والمساءُ مُنيرُ
 في الأرضِ بعدكِ مذهبٌ ومورُ
 في حفرةٍ إِنِّي إِذَا لصبورُ
 30 إِنِّي إِذَا ذُكِرَ الوفاءُ غدورُ
 عيشٌ بعيدُ كلِّه تكديرُ
 تَدْني الغرامَ وَأَنَّهُ وزفيرُ
 أَضْحَى وفي كُلِّ الصَّخورِ فُطورُ
 أَمْرٌ إِلَيْهِ وَمَنْ سِوَاكِ نصيرُ
- قد كنتُ أَخشى أَنْ يروَعَكِ مصري
 ولكمَّ حذرتُ بَأَنْ يُقَدِّمَكِ القضا
 عَجَبًا لِعُصْنِ الجِسمِ يذويه الأسي
 لنارِ قلبي لَا يُبْرِدُ حرَّها
 أُخْزْتُ بعدَكَ لِلشَّقاءِ فليتنى
 أَسْفَى عَلَيْكِ وهل يُعيدُ تَأْسَفِي
 يا دَرَّةَ الحَدَرِ المنيعِ جنابُهُ
 وعقيلةَ الحَيِّ الطِّوالِ رماحُهُ
 سَرَّ الثَّرَى عَنِّي مُحْيَاكِ الذي
 وهجرتُ رَبْعَكَ راغِمًا ولقد مضى
 أَبْنَيْتِي هَوْنَتْ كُلُّ مُصِيبَةٍ
 وحظرتُ لَذَاتِ الحَيَاةِ عَلَيَّ ما ام
 وجعلتُ صَبْحِي كالْمَسَاءِ وقد مَضَى
 لَمْ أَوْفِ رِزْءَكَ حَقَّهُ كَلَّا ولي
 أَطَأُ التُّرابَ وَأَنْتِ فِيهِ رَهِينَةٌ
 وَأَرَى الفُضَاءَ وَأَنْتِ لَسْتَ تَرِيْنَهُ
 لَمْ أَقْتَعْ بِالْعَيْشِ بعدُ وَإِنَّمَا
 لي عِنْدَ ذِكْرِكَ عِبْرَةٌ مَسْفُوحَةٌ
 وَأَسَى لَوْ أَنَّ بَقَاسِيُونَ أَقْلَهُ
 ولقد تَحَقَّقَ مِنْ مُصَابِكِ أَنَّهُ

- 35 28 عنها وسِرُّكَ بالبقا معمور²⁸ فارقتِ دُنْيَاكَ الدَّيْنَةَ رَغْبَةً
واللهُ للعبدِ السَّعِيدِ يَحْيِي²⁹ واختارَ خَالِقُكَ ادْخَالَكَ نَحْوَهُ
تَقْوَى عَلَى صَفْحَاتِ وَجْهِكَ نُورٌ قد رُحِتِ طَاهِرَةٌ مِنَ الْإِدْنِاسِ لِلَّهِ
هو للبريةِ رَاحِمٌ وَغَفُورٌ وَنَزَلَتْ أَكْرَمَ مَنْزِلٍ فِي ظِلِّ مَنْ
يَلْقَى التَّزْيِيلَ نَوَالُهُ وَيُحْيِي³⁰ وَغَدَوْتَ جَارَةً رَبِّكَ الْمَلِكِ الَّذِي
40 يَحْيَا بِهَا أَرْجَاؤُهُ وَيُسِيرُ فَسَقَى ضَرْيَمَكَ عَارِضٌ مِنْ رَحْمَةٍ
ولها رَوَاحٌ دَائِمٌ وَبُكُورٌ وَتَقَدَّمَ مَتَكَ تَحِيَّةٌ لَا تَنْقُضِي

An Elegy for a Daughter Who Left to Be With God

The cup of death goes round among the human race,
and life, no matter how long, is cut short.
Death is the final decree; there is no repelling it
or its horsemen who raid the flocks of grazing souls.
Death brings down the goats from the mountain top
to the foothills where vultures and hornets dwell,
And death dives down against the whales in the deep,
for the seas need their life blood.
Death attacks the mighty, well protected king;
his stronghold of walls and towers cannot save him.
People, like mindless sheep, are grazing,
oblivious to death alive among them.
They are heedless, all, blind to guidance,
as the sword of death hangs over them.
Death hides their loved ones beneath the ground,
though that secret is known to all.

5

28 Here, Ibn Isrā'il may also allude to al-Bayt al-Ma'mūr (Qur'an 52:4), "The Much-frequented House," or "The House of Life," which, according to tradition, the prophet Muḥammad saw during his heavenly ascension; see *Tafsīr al-Tustarī*, tr. Annabel Keeler and Ali Keeler (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2011), 210.

One often reminds another of this fact,
 and you can't deny this warning, tried and true.
 So a kindly man departs from his best friend, 10
 who feels his absence ever present.
 But after a while, he forgets him, like most people do,
 as you see him happily bid adieu.
 O for the comfort that I have lost,
 for my heart has no peace!
 God placed a love in charge, in charge of me,
 and grief burns within my ribs.
 O dearly departed, my joy followed after you,
 and what is left me is lost to any happiness.
 I used to fear my death would frighten you, my daughter, 15
 but fate decreed a more awful thing, indeed.
 How I looked after you fearing death would take you before me,
 but in spite of me, trouble came.
 How strange, since you left, my living body
 is withered by grief though watered by my tears.
 Tears cannot cool the burning flame within my heart
 though my eyes well up and pour.
 After you, I was left behind in misery;
 why was I made to stay alive after you?
 I sprinkle dust over you, but how can this dispel my grief 20
 when your lovely face lies beneath the earth?
 O my pearl, hidden and out of reach,
 I never imagined the grave would be your secluded room.
 You were the best woman from a tribe of tall warriors,
 but your life was cut short and draws out my grief.
 Now, fresh earth conceals your face from me,
 a face once so full of life.
 I left your home reluctantly, and as time passed,
 more than your abode stands empty.
 My dear daughter, you made all my misfortunes 25
 seem easy, and heavy losses were not so bad.
 But you denied me the joy of a longer life with you,
 so, now, all of life is gone.
 You've made my dawn like dusk,
 though time spent near you made night aglow with light.
 I could never cover the cost of losing you, no,
 even if, after you, I was free to seek my fortune.

I step on the soil under which you lie in a grave;
 I must be patient now.
 But I see an abyss you cannot see, 30
 and when I hear of fidelity, I feel deceived.
 I can never be content with life again;
 life is so far away, all of it so troubling.
 When I remember you, I shed tears,
 and sigh and moan from passion's pain.
 Were my distress to fall on Mt. Qāsiyūn, it would crumble,
 as even stone has points of stress.
 Yet, your misfortune proved to be a divine decree
 to help you and others, too.
 You left this world below with little taste for it, 35
 as your heart was set on eternal life.
 Your Creator chose to bring you to Him,
 and God always favors His blessed servants.
 You flew up, free of all impurities,
 with piety and a light upon your face,
 And came to rest at the most lofty place in the shade of Him
 who gives mercy and forgives all creation.
 You became a hand-maiden to your Lord and Master,
 who favors and protects His guests.
 May a shower of mercy fall gently on your tomb 40
 bringing life and blossoms to your grave,
 Greeting you, morning and evening,
 with never-ending salutations of eternal life!

Following the centuries-old Arabic elegiac tradition, Ibn Isrā'īl opens this elegy with the near archetypal image of the cup of death that comes round for all to drink. Death cuts short even the longest life, as Ibn Isrā'īl imagines death as the destroyer who swoops down unimpeded with his raiders upon the flocks of living souls.²⁹ Neither humans nor any other living thing can escape death, whose grasp reaches from the highest mountain to the deepest sea (vv. 1-4). All humans, king and slave alike, are equal in the sight of death. Still, people move about as if death were nowhere to be seen, though it is ever-present, waiting to strike. Suddenly, survivors are reminded of death's inevitability, and for a

29 For this and other metaphors for time and death, see George Lakoff and Mark Turner, *More Than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 1-56.

while, at least, they appreciate life's brevity. Soon, however, the old familiar ways take hold, and people go about their business heedless as before (vv. 5-11).

But this is no longer possible for Ibn Isrā'īl, as his meditation on death now becomes more urgent and personal. Death has snatched away one he loved so dearly; his happiness and joy were taken too, and only grief remains. This was no ordinary love, but one entrusted to him by God: the love of a parent for a child (vv. 12-14). Underscoring the intimate nature of his sorrow, Ibn Isrā'īl now speaks directly to his daughter, telling her how he had feared that he would die first and leave her bereft, and how he tried to protect her from death, but to no avail (vv. 15-16):

قد كنتُ أخشى أن يروءك مصري فجري بعكس مخافتي التقدير
ولكم حذرتُ بأن يُقدّمك القضا قبلي وكان برغمي المحذورُ

I used to fear my death would frighten you, my daughter,
but fate decreed a more awful thing, indeed.
How I looked after you fearing death would take you before me,
but in spite of me, trouble came.

Ibn Isrā'īl knows he is not the first to suffer such a loss, as he alludes here to a much earlier verse by Ishāq ibn Khalaf (fl. 3rd/9th c.) on the death of a beloved niece:³⁰

قد كنتُ أخشى عليها أن تُقدّمني إلى الحمام فيُبيدي وجهها العدمُ

I used to fear for her that death would take me first
and her face be bared by want.

This tragedy has left Ibn Isrā'īl stunned, and he can do nothing to assuage his grief; his daughter's body lies nearby in the grave, but she is so far away. He had hoped to keep his beautiful daughter unsullied from the world, like a pearl cherished and hidden away for safe keeping. In Arabic poetry, the pearl is often a metaphor for the young maiden, whose virginity is treasured and protected to insure the future lineage of the tribe.³¹ But with the death of his daughter,

30 Sayyid ibn 'Alī al-Marṣafī, *Ragħbat al-āmil min kitāb al-Kāmil* (Tehran: Maktabat al-Asadī, 1970), 8:150-51; and Homerin, "A Bird Ascends the Night," 253-55.

31 Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-'Arab* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, n.d.), 1:150, 4:282, 9:335-36; al-Zawzanī, *Sharḥ al-Mu'allaqāt al-sab'* (Damascus: n.p., 1963), 16-17, 105; and Homerin, "A Bird

Ibn Isrā'īl's living legacy through progeny appears in doubt.³² Moreover, the pearl's white luminescence is often likened to the beloved's face, yet, ironically, Ibn Isrā'īl never suspected that the grave would be the hiding place for his precious pearl, with the earth as her protective veil (vv. 17-22).

Ibn Isrā'īl will never see his daughter's vibrant face on earth again, and just as her home is empty, his heart is empty too. When she was alive, life was a joy, but how quickly that changed when she left, and the light went out of the world (23-27). The cost of her death is too high, and there can be no compensation (v. 28):

لَمْ أَوْفِ رِزْءَكَ حَقَّهُ كَلَّا وَلِي فِي الْأَرْضِ بَعْدَكَ مَذْهَبٌ وَمَرُورٌ

I could never cover the cost of losing you, no,
even if, after you, I was free to seek my fortune in the world.

Here, Ibn Isrā'īl echoes the sentiment from an earlier poem on daughters by Khaṭṭāb ibn al-Mu'allā (fl. 231/845):³³

لَوْلَا بَنِيَاتُ كَرْغَبِ الْقَطَا رُدِدْنَ مِنْ بَعْضٍ إِلَى بَعْضٍ
لَكَانَ لِي مُضْطَرَبٌ وَاسِعٌ فِي الْأَرْضِ ذَاتِ الطُّولِ وَالْعَرْضِ
وَإِنَّمَا أَوْلَادُنَا يَنْتَنَّا أَكْبَادُنَا تَمْشِي عَلَى الْأَرْضِ

If not for dear daughters,
like the downy chicks of a grouse,
refused, rejected, passed from hand to hand,
I would have wandered
far and wide
in the great and wondrous world.
But, then, among us
our children are our hearts
walking upon the earth.

Ascends the Night," 262. Regarding the symbolism of the pearl also see Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (New York: New American Library, 1961), 125-50.

32 See Robert Jay Lifton, *The Broken Connection: On Death and the Continuity of Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), esp. 17-23; and Peter M. Sachs, *The English Elegy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 16-17, 27-29.

33 Abū Tammām, *Sharḥ al-Ḥamāsah*, 1:285-88; and Homerin, "A Bird Ascends the Night," 252-53.

For Ibn Isrā'īl, too, fame and fortune are nothing without his daughter, and he knows now that nothing can bring her back. So, Ibn Isrā'īl tells himself to be patient. Yet, when he hears others' consoling words about fidelity or divine recompense (*waḡfā'*), he feels cheated. He descends ever deeper into an abyss of depression (vv. 28-33).

However, Ibn Isrā'īl's reference to patience, as prescribed by the Qur'ān (e.g. Q 12:18), foreshadows a solution, and as he speaks to his daughter in this elegy, he reasons that while his life remains one of anguish and misery, she has gone to a better place. Her misfortune has proved to be a blessing in disguise for near her end, she no longer cared for this world of sorrow, but looked forward to a new life in the next world. Leaving the body behind, her spirit soared like a bird, heavenward, her face refulgent with light, as will be the case for those who enter Paradise on the Judgment Day (e.g. Q 3:107; 80:73). But his daughter need not wait till then. For her spirit, in the form of a bird, has already alighted in the trees of the heavenly garden, suggesting that she died a martyr, and so is already in the presence of God (e.g. Q 22:58-59; 3:169-71).³⁴ As with all martyrs, God has forgiven her sins, and He has chosen her to be among His immortal handmaidens. For a moment, at least, Ibn Isrā'īl has regained his composure and prays that God will shower His mercy gently upon his daughter's grave so that it will break forth in flowers intimating her eternal life (vv. 34-41).³⁵

In his second elegy, Ibn Isrā'īl forgoes any stoic introduction regarding the ravages of death and proceeds directly to his grief:³⁶

وقال أيضاً في المعنى يرثيها:
قَسَمْتُ طَرَفِي بَيْنَ الدَّمْعِ وَالْأَرْقِ
يَا شَمْسَ خَدِرِ غَدَتِ وَاللَّحْدُ مَغْرَبُهَا
قَد كُنْتُ أَفْرَقُ أَنْ تَأْسِيَ عَلَيَّ وَلَمْ
هُونَتْ عِنْدِي مُصِيبَاتِ الزَّمَانِ فَمَا

وَالْقَلْبَ بَيْنَ الْأَسَى وَالْوَجْدِ وَالْحَرْقِ
وَالصُّبْحُ بَعْدَكَ فِي عَيْنِي كَالْغَسَقِ
أَعْلَمُ بَائِي مِنْ هَذَا الْأَسَى فَرَّقِي
أَخَافُ بَعْدَكَ أَنْ يُفْنِيَ الْأَسَى رَمَقِي

34 Ignaz Goldziher, "L'oiseau représentant l'âme dans croyances populaires des Musulmans," in *Études Islamologiques d'Ignaz Goldziher*, ed. and tr. G.-H. Bousquet (Leiden: Brill, 1962), 77-80; and Homerin, "A Bird Ascends the Night," 270-71.

35 Regarding the metaphor of "people are plants" that grow, flower, and die to rise again in spring, see Sachs, *English Elegy*, 20-21, 30-33; and Lakoff and Turner, *More Than Cool Reason*, 12-13.

36 Ibn Isrā'īl, *Dīwān*, 554-56.

- 5 كَرِبٍ يِقَاسِيهِ صَبٌّ بِالْبَقَاءِ شَقِي
وَلَيْتَ أَنَّ الَّذِي قَد فَاتَ كَانَ بَقِي
مَذْغِبَتِ عَيْتِي وَلَا حَزَنِي بِمُفْتَرِقِ
دَعَاءِ مُصْطَبِجِ بِالْحُزْنِ مُغْتَبِقِ
لَكِنَّ مِثْلَكَ مَمْنُوعٌ مِنَ التُّنْقِ
كَمَا سَكَتَ سَكُوتًا مُوجِبًا قَلْقِي
10 لَكِنَّ أَفْقَتُ وَمَنْ فَارَقْتُ لَمْ يُفَقِ
فِيهِ وَأَظْلَمَ عِنْدِي نِيرُ الْأَفْقِ
وَأَنْتِ فِي بَاطِنٍ لِلْقَبْرِ لَمْ يَضِقِ
وَرُحْتُ رَاحَ الْقَذَى بِالذَّلِّ مُعْتَبِقِي
يَأْتِيكَ مِنْهُ نَوَالٌ جَدُّ مُسْتَبَقِ
15 فَالْقَلْبُ فِي حَرْقٍ وَالْطَّرْفُ فِي عَرَقِ
وَفِي شَغَافٍ فَوَادِي لَيْلَةِ الشَّدَقِ
قَضَى سَكُونُ فَوَادِي الْوَاجِفِ الْقَلْقِ
زُرُونِ بِنَارِ فِرَاقِ الْإِلْفِ مُحْتَرِقِ
20 بِهِ الْمَقَادِيرُ مِنْ حَزْنٍ وَمِنْ حَرَقِ
قَلْبُ الْكَيْبِ وَبَاتَ الدَّهْرُ مُعْتَرِقِ
فَلَيْتَهُ جَاءَنِي وَالْحَتْفُ فِي نَسِقِ
مَا لَقِيتُ مِنَ الْأَوْجَاعِ وَالْقَلْقِ
بِلَطْفِ خُلُقٍ كَرِيمٍ غَيْرِ مُحْتَلَقِ
25 سِيَاقِ غَبْتٍ كَمَا يَجْرِي عَلَى الصَّعِقِ
سُكُونٍ يَزْدَادُ ذَاكَ الْفَكْرُ مِنْ حَرَقِ
- يَا شِقَّةَ النَّفْسِ إِنَّ النَّفْسَ بَعْدَكَ فِي
يَا لَيْتَ أَنَّ الَّذِي أَبْقَى الْجَمَامُ قَضَى
لَا أَكْذِبُ اللَّهَ لَا صَبْرِي بِمَجْتَمِعِ
أَدْعُو وَدَارُكَ مَتِي غَيْرُ نَازِحَةٍ
فَلَا أَجَابُ وَلَمْ أَعْهَدْ لَدَيْكَ جَفًّا
صَمَتَ صَمْتًا بَدَثَ الْحُزْنِ أَنْطَقَنِي
وَقَدْ لَقِيتُ الَّذِي لَا قِيَتَ مِنْ عُصَصِ
وَضَاءَ مُظْلَمٍ لِحْدٍ أَنْتِ سَاكِنَةٌ
وَضَاقَ مَذْغِبَتِ ظَهْرُ الْأَرْضِ فِي نَظْرِي
جَاوَرَتِ رَبًّا عَزِيزًا جَارُهُ أَبَدًا
وَبَتَّ فِي رَحْمَةِ اللَّهِ وَاسِعَةٍ
وَبَتُّ بَيْنَ نَقِصِي لَوْعَةٍ وَأَسَى
أَمَوَاهُ نِيرَانِ عِيدِ الْقَبْطِ فِي بَصْرِي
يَا رَاحَتِي رَاحَتِي وَلَّتْ وَيَا سَكْنِي
لَهْفَنِي عَلَيْكَ وَمَا يُجْدِي تَلَهُّفُ مُحِ
الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ تَسْلِيمًا لِمَا حَمَلْتُ
شَكْلٌ عَلَى كِبَرٍ قَدْ ذَاقَ لَوْعَتَهُ
وَالْهَمُّ لِلْهَمِّ دَاءٌ لَا دَوَاءَ لَهُ
أَبْقَيْتَ عِنْدِي أَوْجَاعًا تَزِيدُ عَلَى
مِنْ الْأَصَاغِرِ تَرَاعَاهُمْ وَتَكْتَفُهُمْ
إِذَا تَذَكَّرْتُ مَا لَا قِيَتَ مِنْ كُرْبِ السَّ
وَإِنْ تَفَكَّرْتُ فِيمَا أَنْتَ فِيهِ مِنَ السَّ

يا زهرةً في رياض الدِّينِ قد نبئتَ
 لو كان يدفعُ فضلُ المرءِ عنه لما
 أعائدُ زمنٌ قد كان يجمعنا
 هيئات ميعادنا يومُ المَعادِ لدى
 وغصنَ بانٍ بأموهِ العلومِ سُقي
 غشَى جَيِّتِكَ كُربُ الموتِ بالعَرَقِ
 في ظلِّ عيشٍ منَ الأيامِ مُسْتَرَقِ
 ربِّ رحيمٍ بعبدٍ مُدَنِّفٍ فَرَقِ

An Elegy for His Daughter

I have given up my eyes to tears and sleeplessness,
 and my heart to sorrow, grief, and agony.
 The sun of womanhood has gone and set in her grave,
 so after you, my daughter, dawn looks like dusk to me.
 I used to fear you would mourn for me,
 not knowing such grief would haunt me instead.
 You made time's misfortunes so much easier for me,
 but after you, I'm not afraid as sorrow ends my life.
 O piece of my soul! After you, my soul is in torment, 5
 and my love will ever after suffer in pain.
 If only he who death spared had died,
 and she who vanished had stayed.
 I will not lie to God. Since you left, I've no patience
 with human company, no worries about being alone.
 I call out to you, and your home is not far from me,
 anxiously calling you to morning and evening tea.
 Yet, I hear no answer, though you never shunned me before,
 but, then, one as you are now is forbidden to speak.
 You lie still in silence that speaks to me of sorrow's grief, 10
 just as you rest so calmly causing me anxiety.
 I faced the sickness you suffered, but I revived,
 while the one I lost did not survive.
 The dark tomb in which you lie glows with light,
 while the light in the sky grows dim to me.
 When you left, I felt the wide world crash down on me,
 yet you lay inside a grave that does not oppress you.
 For you drew near the mighty Lord, His hand-maiden forever,
 while I was forced to drink the wine of dust in despair.
 You settled down in God's vast mercy, 15

where you received great favors prepared for you.
 While I settled in the sheer agony of grief,
 my heart aflame, my eyes drowned in tears.
 So deep in my heart, the fire festival burns bright at night,
 while in my eyes are waters
 to douse the flames on Coptic New Year's Day.
 My peace of mind, my peace of mind turned away
 as my comfort and tranquility left my troubled heart.
 I miss you so, but mourning's grief does little good
 for one consumed by the fire of losing one so loved as you.
 Praised be to God for His protection 20
 from what the fates decreed to me of sorrow and affliction:
 To mourn the loss of a child in my old age, with a broken heart
 that has tasted this bitter grief as time devours me bit by bit.
 An old man's anxiety is a disease without a cure;
 if only death had taken me first as is natural and right.
 Instead, you left behind for me more heart-ache,
 adding to what I already faced of cares and anxiety
 For the little ones you were raising and cared for
 with your kind and gentle ways.
 When I recall the troubles you faced, one after another, 25
 I am at a loss like one struck dumb,
 And when I think of where you are lying quietly now,
 that thought pains me more.
 O flower from the fields of faith,
 O elegant willow nurtured by learning's dew,
 If only manly virtue could have defended you
 when the pangs of death crept over your fevered brow.
 If only the days could return when we were together
 in the shade of a life stolen from time.
 O for our promised meeting on the day in the life to come, 30
 before the Lord who has mercy
 on a servant taken by a frightful disease.

This elegy prolongs Ibn Isrā'īl's lamentations for his dead daughter and illustrates poignantly the numbing depression of mourning. Feelings of personal loss, abandonment, isolation, and self-absorption predominate, evidenced by the repetition of the pronoun "my" in the opening verses, and in his repeated references to agony and suffering (vv. 1-5):

يَا شِقَّةَ النَّفْسِ إِنَّ النَّفْسَ بَعْدَكَ فِي كَرْبٍ يَقَاسِيهِ صَبٌّ بِالْبَقَاءِ شَقِيٍّ

O piece of my soul! After you, my soul is in torment,
and my love will ever after suffer in pain.

In this poem, too, Ibn Isrā'īl compares his unbearable sorrow to the despair of others by alluding, again, to Ishāq ibn Khalaf's elegy for his niece:³⁷

يَا شِقَّةَ النَّفْسِ إِنَّ النَّفْسَ وَالْهَيَّةَ حَرَىٰ عَلَيْكَ وَدَمْعُ الْعَيْنِ مُنْسَجِمٌ

O piece of my soul! My soul grieves,
thirsting for you while tears flow.

Ibn Khalaf, Ibn Isrā'īl, and similar mourners are traumatized by death, and feel an unbearable guilt that they still live after their loved one has passed away (vv. 5-6).³⁸ Ibn Isrā'īl has no patience for those who would offer platitudes for consolation, preferring to be left alone with his broken heart. Overcome with grief, he calls out to his daughter, but she does not answer, as only the living can speak. Ibn Isrā'īl must admit that his beloved daughter is gone. Then he recalls the illness that afflicted both of them, but whereas he recovered, she did not. She is dead now, while he lives to suffer in a helpless, hopeless state (vv. 8-11).

Here, as elsewhere in this poem, Ibn Isrā'īl contrasts his anxious, miserable condition with his daughter's calm repose; grief has crushed him and his world has gone dark, while his daughter rests in a spacious grave, illuminated by a spiritual light (vv. 12-13). Ibn Isrā'īl turns to Islam for consolation, in this case to traditions of the prophet Muḥammad that promise heavenly reward for Muslims who have suffered death from an agonizing illness. The graves will not constrict their bodies, and they will be aglow with light; those who die of plague die as martyrs, their souls flying straight to heaven to be with God.³⁹ God has so blessed Ibn Isrā'īl's daughter that He admitted her into Paradise as one of His handmaidens, to dwell with Him forever (vv. 14-15). This was also the conclusion to Ibn Isrā'īl's earlier elegy, which closed with a sense of peace and solace. Yet in his second elegy, Ibn Isrā'īl suffers still, contrasting his daughter's

37 Al-Marṣafī, *Ragħbat al-āmil*, 8:150-51; and Homerin, "A Bird Ascends the Night," 253-55.

38 Lifton, *Broken Connection*, 163-79, 187-89, 194.

39 E.g., al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1983), 973, 987, 1069-69; al-Qurṭubī, *al-Tadhkirah fī aḥwāl al-mawtā wa-umūr al-ākhīrah* (Beirut: Dār Ibn Zaydūn, 1986), 1:173-89, 201, 218-30; and Jane Idleman Smith and Yvonne Haddad, *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1981), 41-50, 157-82.

blissful life in heaven with his living hell on earth (vv. 16-19). Perhaps, not wishing to blame God directly for his daughter's death, Ibn Isrā'il prays to God that others not share his fate, as he sums up his sorry state (vv. 20-22):

به المقاديرُ من حزنٍ ومن حرقٍ	الحمدُ لله تسليماً لما حملتُ
قلْبُ الكئيبِ وباتَ الدهرُ مُعْتَرِقِ	ثُكْلٌ على كِبَرٍ قد ذاقَ لوعتهُ
فليتَّهْ جاءني والحتفُ في نسقٍ	والهمُّ للهَمٍّ داءٌ لا دواءَ له

Praised be to God for His protection
 from what the fates decreed to me of sorrow and affliction:
 To mourn the loss of a child in my old age, with a broken heart
 that has tasted this bitter grief as time devours me bit by bit.
 An old man's anxiety is a disease without a cure;
 if only death had taken me first as is natural and right.

Ibn Isrā'il bewails the fact that his daughter has died before him, which was not "natural and right," and so it would seem that he has been deprived of one of the most basic forms of symbolic immortality, living on through one's children. But then we learn that his daughter has left behind her own children in his care (vv. 23-24). While his grandchildren should offer some solace, Ibn Isrā'il is clearly conflicted, for he fears for their safety too, since their caring mother is gone. Ibn Isrā'il is overwhelmed, especially when he recalls his daughter's great suffering, which eventually led to her death (vv. 25-26). He compares her life and premature death to a fragile flower, which bloomed only to wither and die, while he stood impotently by her bedside, unable to relieve her fever and pain (vv. 25-28). Ibn Isrā'il is left to long for the happy days he once spent with his daughter, and he prays for God's mercy, while awaiting his own death in the hope that he may join his daughter in eternal life (vv. 29-30).

A Rhetoric of Transformation

In both of these elegies, Ibn Isrā'il sought to convey his personal bereavement for his daughter. Numb and deep in sadness, he joined his voice with those who had suffered similar losses before him, and so his poems conform to many earlier Arabic elegies; what was appropriate to say at this stressful time took precedent over what was creative or original. Nevertheless, he knew, as a

poet, that clichés and truisms might fall short of this task. Turning to his own experience, he likened his unsettling distress to the earthquake at the end of time, which will destroy all mountains, including Mt. Qāsiyūn outside of his native Damascus. Likewise, he compared his raging grief to the bonfires lit on the eve of Coptic New Year, which he would have seen in Cairo; their blazing flames could only be doused by his endless tears.⁴⁰ These particular images aside, Ibn Isrā'īl's elegies echo poets of the past and retrace the pattern of earlier Arabic laments, and the laments of many other traditions too, as they set about the work of mourning.⁴¹

At the outset, they acknowledge the broken connection, the separation between the living and the dead. Again and again, Ibn Isrā'īl speaks to his daughter, but she does not reply, revealing her absence; her body lies mute in the grave below, as he stands distraught above. A sense of despair dominates both poems, compounded by the fact that the natural order has been subverted with the death of a child, a traumatic event that calls into question any continued purpose or joy for life for Ibn Isrā'īl. Moreover, he is powerless in his questioning of fate and his protests against death, for he could not protect his daughter from her bitter end; he could do nothing to reduce her pain and suffering. As Ibn Isrā'īl wrestles with his daughter's death, he makes sense of his irreparable loss, and re-establishes some sort of connection with her.

As with so many before and after him, Ibn Isrā'īl struggles to confront death and loss within a capacity to feel, love, and hope, even though, as her father, he feels that he has failed his daughter. But God did not. For "the mighty Lord and Master," who decreed her death, is also "the Lord who has mercy on a servant taken by a frightful disease." God's death decree has proven to be a merciful gift relieving the suffering and anguish of Ibn Isrā'īl's ailing daughter. In both elegies, Ibn Isrā'īl turns from his lamentations, however briefly, to invoke other symbols and formulas to deny the ultimate finality of death and to re-affirm the continuity of life. He performs this task through the mediation of language, forging symbolic connections between the living and the dead with a rhetoric of transformation, as death becomes sleep, a journey, and a gateway to transcendence.⁴² Ibn Isrā'īl's perception of his daughter as a martyr is

40 Regarding Cairo's festival of *Nawrūz*, see Boaz Shoshan, *Popular Culture in Medieval Cairo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 40-51. For further examples of innovation in Mamluk elegies, see Talib, "Many Lives."

41 Lifton, *Broken Connection*, 1-35; and Sachs, *English Elegy*, 1-37, esp. 24-27.

42 Lifton, *Broken Connection*, 13-23, 92-99, 115-24; Sachs, *English Elegy*, xiii, 4-5; Lakoff and Turner, *More Than Cool Reason*, 1-14; and Douglas Davies, *Death, Ritual and Belief* (London: Cassell, 1997), 1-22, 121-24; also see Diem, *Living and the Dead*, 1:424-26.

essential to her transformation. In the prime of life, she gave herself up to an excruciating illness in submission to the will of God. Then, as a soul bird, she ascended to Him and immortality in heaven. Therefore, Ibn Isrā'īl holds fast to the Qur'ān and the prophetic traditions that promise parents the chance to live again "with children who were virtuous" (e.g., Q 13:23). In the end, Ibn Isrā'īl's mystical vision of divine oneness accommodates his elegies, as God's power and death decree are subsumed within His mercy and the grace of eternal life. Nevertheless, sadness pervades these elegies and this ephemeral world below, where a father's love for his daughter, his lost pearl, endures in these poetic pearls that he strung for her.