



Jihad Elzein

**The Poem of
Istanbul**

Translated by Raghid Nahhas

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The Poem of Istanbul
(Qassidat Istanbul)
Poetry by Jihad Elzein

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Foreword

Jihad Elzein, a prominent Lebanese journalist, surprised his colleagues and his Lebanese and Arab readers when he published *Qassidat Istanbul* (The Poem of Istanbul), his first poetry book, in 2002. No one had known that Elzein wrote poetry, let alone that it was of high calibre.

A political columnist who has been working for prestigious newspapers in Lebanon, Elzein is known to many Arab readers as well. His analyses of events has been the product of years of first-hand experiences that took him to many countries and exposed him to various cultures, but above all it was his deep understanding, in my opinion, of the

innermost of human behaviour that added an important touch to his political commentary, namely a dimension that can be classified as “literary” due to the emotions he exposes in his subject matter, weaknesses and strengths, of victims and victimisers in an array of interactions, conflicts or merely the conduct of political business.

Some of the poems in the current book have parts written in prose. This is indicated in italics. Elzein’s poetry, however, is modern with fine use of metre. It is sophisticated and highly intellectual, musically constructed to reveal his deep passion and appreciation of the beauty and misery of nature, humans and civilisation. He combines his admiration of what he sees, such as oil paintings, with his

understanding of the events behind them and the association with this and the immediate life around him. The outcome is often an intelligent and imaginative piece of poetry.

“The Poem of Istanbul” is a poem of ten ships loaded with the passion of a historic and remarkably modern city, which is itself a poem: a song of a land located at a vivacious part of the world, divided and united by waters that has stood witness to long and continuous human endeavours.

Raghid Nahhas

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أَخْبَرْتَنِي

زَوْجَةَ الْبَحَّارِ

فِي

اسْطَنْبُولَ . . .

The First Ship

The sailor's wife in Istanbul
has told me that the sea is not water.
All those who thought it was,
drowned...

The sailor's wife has told me that
the sea is colour and space,
violations of colour and
passions of pearl...

It derives from the dust of the earth,
carried on vain waves.

Submersed up to the wrists
in its illusions!

It clarifies, creates and sparkles,
like water.

Oh, sea that reaches Istanbul an old man...

Oh, sea that leaves Istanbul a sultan
whose concubines are dust!

Here is history's rattle...

And the passion embellished with
the seductions of heaven.

Things in Istanbul exude with
the scent of extinction.

Passion preys upon a knight and
throws him on the horseback of
another god...
another language on
the horseback of another god...

Oh, master: how you
conquer with languages!
How you seduce me with
the breath of the deserts
and the seas,
then you let me down...

When the horses became
dissatisfied with

the repulsiveness of the deserts,
they summoned their knights
among the tents
and went north.

The land was monotonous:
the knights were bored
by its invasions and
by the river's apple and
the woe of peace!

Desires ceased to differ,
stabs were no longer varied.
They turned their tyranny
unto themselves to discover
their journey within.

When they found
no prophet in their midst,
they were stunned:
their bodies exposed with
the vanity of words.

She spoke to me wearing
her Roman caftan and
a shawl heated by the
pleasant Anatolian mornings!

The sailor's wife at the door...
This door is my assured abode.

An empty harbour hallucinating,

whistling in my veins,
drowning in the depth of
the room...

And the door is far away and
stubborn!

But the light strikes the door-gap
like a knife cutting
the fragile timber,
slightly pushing and
the shawl disappears
behind the door...

This door is my assured abode:
every scent will come
from your departure.

The first herds of
a million ibexes,
coming each by each,
departed my yearning...

They crawled towards me
through the rugged path
from the tips of
the mountains of wakefulness.
At the end of the room,
under the timber
roofed with tiles,
from the shore of
the Asian strait,
the blue spread dark

like a shade
when the Bosphorus released it
in preparation for the afternoon.

The sailor's wife sets out between
the narrowness of the coast
and life, and in my fractures.

Two centuries of
passion and lushness
and embankments
for my bridges
lie at the end of the room where
my satisfaction floats in
the bed of time.

Under this timber
grassed with lust,
I am the happiest corpse
in the universe:
how a blond woman could
strike at my roots.

At the door, there is
a deer of royal lineage
bred by the inland shepherds...
How come she does not know
this sea is the conquest of
the inland plains?

It knows the sea and

the ceremonies of noble betrayals.
It knows the northerly wind and
the northerly temptations,
then it cries whenever on
the waves a gasping captive appears:

Salonika... Salonika...¹
Don't say "A Roman land"
betrayed the salt, but say it charmed it...

It assembled its primary fragments
and went on a mysterious roaming...
I am Istanbul O Master!
My names, like my graves,

¹ Currently part of Greece, but was once a famous Ottoman city.

shall drift away
from the sea in which I
entrusted all the cunning of gods.
All my names carry the blood of gods
the mood of gods
the stubbornness of gods.

يَا زَوْجَةَ الْبَحَّارِ

رَدِّي

خَمْرَكَ الْمَسْفُوحِ

The Second Ship

The Lover:

Oh, sailor's wife,
return your wine
spilled from the fish of words...
Now I paint your two shores, and
in the heart's bay there is
a saline gale and
the wrecks of the fantasy of arrival.

How happy are
the ships that arrive!

How happy are
the ships that beckon and go!
How miserable are
the ships that arrive!
How miserable are
the ships that beckon and go!

Istanbul:

My legs are dancing in
the waves that dance with me
and I, I am my own splendour,
my much-trodden road and
the flirting of my steps.

My love impassions me and
throws me away,
so I do not give birth.
I, the captive,
head of the nobility:
tremble...
Obsessed,
my love Impassions me and
splits me in half:
I become one.

The Lover:

Vanish... as though you have

never been in the silk of
my torment
so that I sleep in difficult times to
bring you back to my prospects.

A Third Voice:

In this vice market,
there is a fountain of virtue:
water is its wing and its source
and water then water is
its infidel and infidel.

Istanbul:

Don't we call you "civilisation" when
you flee to your skies?

And I... I Istanbul...

How could you paint me young,
and abandon me old?

Is it true that

you are leaving me

a blue hell and voiceless minarets
to stand witness to your charm?

My ships are tired of

fighting the others

under your light.

Remove this defiant curse

off the fates' back,
so I could sleep
without your garment!

The Third Ship

In the proximity of the blind stock market, and its walls clamorous with the fall of its metallic horses inside the calls of the minarets of the end of the century, my technical question, darling, is how do I include numbers in a gleaming poem?

Modernity died after it had aged in the casks of the twentieth century, and here I am, mature and not embryonic, asking myself about the wind: the wolf and the forbidding darkness in the Anatolian winter and its soothing book, similar to an atmosphere devoted to eternal discretion.

Am I the bored combating nations,
I the arrival, *I* the obstruction?
The oil ship tied you to
the ends of modernity.
Pale wax seeped off
your breasts
without your death
without your death
without your d...ea...th...

If only the sailor's wife
had told me about the poem's beast,
about the barbaric fear in
the language: aberration!
The letters before I pronounce,

letters that sounds cannot utter,
and all the orphaned letters...
Who would shelter in
this virginity of the women's dictionaries?
And who would burn
the prudent forest in
the rhythm of its words?

امرأة

ستغزف

في سراياه

The Fourth Ship

A woman thinking²... in the dark!

Do words address her desire or
read the forbidden man?

Goethe is alone in the harem.³

Goethe is alone in the forbidden.

The bridges of fear alighted
among their forgiving grounds:
doves spread.

² This is the title of a painting by Omar Adel at the Museum of Ankara.

³ The painting by Prince Abdülmecid, titled *Goethe in the Harem*. The prince was the last crown prince of the Ottoman Sultanate, and the last caliph when the sultanate was abolished in the beginning of the republican era. The artist prince left Istanbul for Italy, for the rest of his life.

The cooing-unbosoming
spread in their pain.

The body spread...
A woman says I am
the unbosoming goddess
and everyone else is an extension,
a mere extension.

The flesh of flesh:
unbosoming flesh,
forbidding unviolated flesh.

A woman shall pass.
How did she, Hamdi Bey, disappear and
you did not paint her shadows in

some corner of the shady souk and
in every corner of the
whispers of manly resources?
Has your brush quenched its thirst
with its “weapon,”⁴
or is it that your soul’s confession
never darkened by the
confession of the flesh?

Istanbul... You are
the adulterator of pure languages,
but your “Ü” stays put
like an ethnic mark,
or as the blond in *Boga*⁵
one evening told me:

⁴ The painting *The Arms Merchant* by Osman Hamdi Bey.

⁵ The name given by the Turks to the Bosphorus.

“This strait is like my
faintly lit necklace,
cross its awesome intersection...’
I crossed the blackness of
its water and hurt its noble notion!

Sir, Abdülmecid, how could
elegance be complete
without a violin?⁶
I mean without the oil
migrating in the canvas,
without those subdued
orphan nations.
A sadness the “fog”
shall spread over nations.

⁶The paintings by Prince Abdülmecid.

I mean alone...
with impotent indifference
painting oil with oil.
I mean and I mean all
what he means⁷...
The city and the poem and
the intimate one.

A woman shall play
in his *saray*...
Fire blows all over her.
The prince to the prince stretched a hand:
he alone is a host and a visitor.

⁷ A slang expression used similarly in Turkish and Arabic.

واسیتقظی

علی

لہاتی

The Fifth Ship

Times do not change!
They fall on the steps of *Bay Uglu*
rolling to the abyss of sadness...
What a sadness, oh, Istanbul!
And what a perpetual playing of
an agonizing game:
to be or to be.
I love you as if
you are not what you are:
sad and weak and vast.
I love you as you are:
stronger than me and

more capable of
estrangement.

Put my blame between
your mature bewildered breasts
and wake up on my panting.

Oh, woman!

You are not what you are...

Fake and genuine,
rather genuine fake!

Near *Galata Saray*,
this old Greek shall ask me why
I cross not the sea to Crete and
I shall say to him what you have
drawn for my eyes:

I do not see a sea,
but a blue space in watercolours...
You were, oh, sailor's wife,
a silent onlooker
on the other street of *Taqseem*⁸
as if you were a slave from
the middle ages watching
a graduation ceremony
from later centuries...
Return to your holy water...
Return to your defiant outrage
and I shall wait for my ship.
I, the wicked leaver from
another wicked generation.

⁸ The most crowded square in Istanbul.

Time does not change...
It falls slain and you must
preserve its stunning corpse:
this infidel nonsense is
only acceptable in Istanbul...
The frightened, ugly,
magnificent, wooden, stony,
watery-without-metal courage is
enough to quench her dreams...
And for us to believe her as
we should and as we should not.

Istanbul! Oh, workshop for
the memory of monotheistic nerves!
Oh, tree drinking from

the language of the desert
and water thirsty in water!
What an astounding deviation
in whose womb you were delivered
to be what you are not, what you are...

Istanbul! Oh, transparent veil
of narrow lanes,
the necks of your buildings
crane up in a final game
started two hundred years ago and
still goes on...

Istanbul! Oh, transparent veil
behind which crowded shoulders

stretch in a demonstration
that has forgotten itself
whilst drinking my coffee
at *Pera Palace*⁹ composed,
that morning, in the midst of
elegant spectra of crime and revolution.
Agatha Christie and
her burning eyes,
and the disappointments of
the retired Trotsky...

⁹ This is the oldest of the large hotels in Istanbul, with its particular historical character. It was built towards the end of the nineteenth century. The doors of each of its rooms carry the name of a famous personality who was once a guest in that particular room, such as Trotsky and Agatha Christie.

In two days, you will be
suddenly struck by
the reverence of Ramadan¹⁰...
And he who has failed to
notice you,
will strike you
like a mad celebration
in a mad season:

Istanbul is fading and
unrestrained and
prostrate and
sinning
exuding its longing
in the light...

¹⁰The Islamic fasting month.

The evening burns.
Angst flirts with her and
breaks her as if its defiance is
the sky's ceramics.

Spread your futile being, so
I see my pain and
dance salt upon the salt of
wound and healing.
The salt of wound and
healing without healing!

The Sixth Ship

All tremors¹¹ are not going to
make my head bow,
for it is inflicted with
fighting fantasies.

Too great to retract my cunning
off the banks of the blue greenness of
the deceitful sea of Marmara
or near the timeless *Bogaç*.

¹¹ After the earthquake of *Admeet*, the inhabitants of Istanbul are anxiously awaiting the next earthquake predicted by science. Some rich people have already sought alternative residence in areas inside the city, predicted to be less affected by future earthquakes.

And I am beautiful to
remain the princess of
contemporary angst
around the Dardanelle,

I am writing the history of
my archipelago,

I am mounting
my concerns.

And this boat,
solely consecrated to me,
will come carrying my body to me
so that I kiss me...

Do you hear the cries of
the earth in my soul,

and the sufferings of
the earthquakes in my undulations?
Would you carry me
like another panic
that comes and saves me from
the panic that I have fashioned
for my blood?
Come, let us collect
the rubies off my breast,
send them to the
depth of the dream
after the propagation of
the tremor in my flesh.

ويكونُ

لا سطنبولَ

حلمِ آخرِ

The Seventh Ship

What I know of the bygone centuries, and the twentieth is its most ancient, is that the poem is a celebration of candles which grandly opens the dark corridors of the soul or lovingly closes its lit halls.

Istanbul knows that she is the borderline between two poems of two continents. However, since she has become the head carriage in the train of sufferings of bygone centuries, she does not know that she is the foremost martyr of the eternal doomsday of some frightened nations.

Oh, inhabitants of
the suburb of modernity!
History shall have
an arch at the gate of the ocean.
People shall line up
in two rows...
Everyone shall insert his tomorrow
inside his travel ticket.
Here are the applications
being completed at
the embassies of the high lands
and I see a lavender-like princess,
her face is the moon of the seas
dying in the horror of noontime.

Prisoners in what to come
keeping their spirits gasping
changing by a stronger place,
changing by the *Seen*'s¹² stakes...
I mean it shall kill these spirits and
give them birth again
and the jailor,
that giant of a warden,
shall come to them,
ask them,
embrace them and
saddle them free among the stars...

¹²“*Seen*” is the Arabic letter (similar to “S”) used in the beginning of words indicating the future.

Oh, inhabitants of the
suburb of modernity!
History shall have a
shut door to the ocean.
The door is unseen and
those who escape
roam the land of the embassy:
pirates spread hope and
announced their paradise as
we lingered in our hell.
There will be a shut door,
pale wax.
There will be a bewildered sea, and
there will be another dream for Istanbul...

Oh, inhabitants of the able suburb:
a language has died in our desert
and the forgotten poet
has become bored with
the dens of expression.
The songs of the night
have become silent
as ripe as virgin palm dates.

The language of
all our languages was
his roaming
his pilgrimage
his phonetic ray in modern times:
the words spreading themselves

in the closed ocean.

The queen of languages and
all the rest become
a convoy of slaves
arriving from the south.

Do we see a new epoch
carried on the back of
this pilgrimage to our
coming century?

Shall I reiterate, as we
make our seventh circle,
the omens of triumph

between Boston in the north and
its green fire are glittering
for the pilgrims?

The symmetrical metal
bewitches the figure of words
and returns it a language of a paradise,
too difficult to attain
in these modern times
as its neighing resonates
in the deep heart of Boston.

Oh, head of my convoy
and all its doubts...
Ink of its death bed.

Sleep Istanbul so
I see you killed,
not a killer!

The Eighth Ship

The sailor's wife told me
something about
the longing of
the left breast:
the pain of
mysterious evenings.

She said solitude
comes like snakes
biting the joint
from within.

Beyond what fire permits,
beyond what fear dictates,
in the pastures...
Bring moist and dampness
unto yourself.

Oh, fear!
I am the desire of
a sailor who went over the limits.
How would I then let him remain
the prince of my sail
on the waves?

Give me my days'
lawful bright weather
and let my arm caress
a brighter body.

Where are you now?
In which nervous domain
or which common grounds?

Depart this idea
for the sea.

I see drowned tombs,
coral coffins and the
dead shining and
spreading.

I see the gold of the sun:
fragments of a great idea
on water and the
theology of a ray.

Oh, headache of the soul in Istanbul!
I reinforced my own captivity.
The sailor's wife in her igneous blue is
as seductive as warm oysters,
islands with untamed spirits,
the incantations,
the sails.

She said: 'I am bitter with desire...
Bitter on my lower lip,
don't turn away from
some immature wine...'

And she disappeared
behind the veil of
the cunning dusk

draping Istanbul's balcony
like a truce between two lovers.
The killing has matured...
Who would now save you
if my eyes capture
your sorrows
in their forest and
defile them?

Denude yourself through me,
your heart beats,
you resist sleep and
you let yourself be
the grapes of my maturing:
grapes for the sound,

bells for the arm of the night,
femininity upon feminine ruins and
the bewilderment of the
wood of my demise.

This strange sea
mystifies calamities!
The city soars.
A breakage in the wood
excites the timber sea-breaker.
What temptations created
this language of fertility?
Which city-women did
not have pity on the
death of the stranger?

Istanbul has returned to me...

A mover of a

torrent of concerns...

And of equivocal glow.

تعالى إلى

مهجع الشوق

يردك في حالتيه

The Ninth Ship

Granada:

I am dead indeed... absolutely!
Why then don't you
die as I have;
a deserved,
painful,
multiple
death?

Istanbul:

My defeat is too deep
for me to vanish.

Your geography is lamentation.
My geography is disablement.
My fight is over a heaven
you shall never see...
How come you
allowed your death
to settle?

Granada:

I have Ibn Siraj,¹³ the prince of fading,
hanging over the uninhibited veranda.

¹³ A knight from a distinguished family of knights in Andalusia. The story goes that he was accused of an affair with one of the wives of the caliph in Alhambra Palace. Consequently, 36 knights from his family were executed at the same time in one of the palace's halls that became known as the Hall of Ibn Siraj.

Istanbul:

I am in deep water
against you,
Abdulhamid¹⁴ is no longer generous.
This despotic dreamer is in shock
and the harem women
lost their flirtation

Granada:

Then we are two waves of
passion...

Istanbul:

And verily our two panting rhythms
differ in defeat.

¹⁴The Sultan.

Granada:

My body is my moment
how I wash it with
my lover's mirrors
and come to it
anointed with escape.
I come to my body.
I feared death
before my arrival.
Ibn Siraj was straddling the water,
refusing to cry for help.
I shall take refuge in him as he
gathers the peril of
many nights on his shoulders...

Istanbul:

Why blame the caliph for
his two desires?

There is killing in love and
love in killing.

Come to the bed of longing and
it will strike you in either case!

His hands... And your
chaotic silence in them:

the bliss of these roses
withered over the space of water,
cut by the axes dwelling in his lungs.

Granada:

Lorca shall shout: it is poetry,
the land of the rebels...
The land of syntax...
He shall extend his vision to
al-Buhturi's¹⁵ White¹⁶ and
his eyes are fixed in
The Palace¹⁷ burning my soul
with poetry and
painting me with my own dewy redness.
'Death is manifest, though
it will stealthily creep.'¹⁸

¹⁵ One of the most important Arab poets (820-897AD).

¹⁶ Described in the famous "S" poem by al-Buhturi, this is the palace of Khosrow Anūshirvan, the Persian king who ruled the Sasanian Empire (531-579AD). He was renowned for his justice and love for culture and the arts.

¹⁷ Alhambra in Granada

¹⁸ Adapted from the same "S" poem by al-Buhturi, referred to in 16 above.

His sadness shall catch up
with him after his wandering
and he shall know
the S of silence and
the S of the sordid.¹⁹

Istanbul:

Our days have mastered
the throes of death:
without dying.
We renew our sorrows every day
to stop glorifying them
like the marble of palaces,
to stop “marblizing” them in time.

¹⁹ Ibid.

من عريها

تترنح الدور

The Tenth Ship

To the poor of Istanbul
and all great wild cities

Don't let ideas eat into your timber. The smell of moving bones spreads like bare olive fruits, from abandoned country languages away in that rusty Istanbul environment.

Perform your ritual ablution using only your admonishment of your pain, or your forgotten violence which is also ready like the worm of poverty spoiling your unwritten soul.

No banquet for darkness with the beans of wrinkles. No calmness in the tea of silence. That neighbour, congested in the mountain, shall be granted nothing from a coastal town whose pettiness and savagery are being eaten by tasty fish.

Oh, neighbour, son of a gun, you are really tasty! And you, strong dirty young lads, someone will come to select from among you the city's great scholars, thieves and fighters. Surely, there will be a poet between one massacre and the other, or between one bewilderment and another.

The fish of Istanbul are far away from those country folks who still accumulate over the black sand where Anatolia starts or finishes. Anatolia always starts or finishes at the last point drawn by

the destitute before they enter into the future of Istanbul.

Keep this dish of magnanimity away from my malicious eyes. I am the subdued whose subjugation has but one name: surviving. I have no connection with any ideological fruit. I know my god and I see him against all the gods of others, against the god of Jawdat, our lame neighbour, whose home is without a lavatory.

How does the timber of the congested hills break, and how does the “Ü” become as vast as the cemeteries mapping the villagers of the city’s renewed borders! Is this a free misery, or is it a cheap one in an internal market, or is it part of a misery driving the world’s progress?

*I salute you, oh, misery! I bow heartless before thee.
Oh, great misery, I shall deeply think of you so I
may kill you in my soul. You are stronger than I
am, but I am cleverer. You are a beast creeping into
my individuality like a coward insect, and like
black rain assaulting my plurality:*

Swells of boisterous
blindness in their dens:
a rat, a belle and a sparrow.
Swells of passion...
and the spiders of desire
when their abodes
become cobwebs.

Tin plates pulsate by
their radiant poisons
and the inhabitants' lungs
feverishly shudder.

The harm of gloomy lust
is higher than
gloomy lust...
The air is its fence.

A den I readily
call a home...
Homes sway with
their nakedness.

*The press machine revealed the digit's hoof taken
from the fire of fallacy and the indolence of a reality
perpetually absent, particularly this Thursday
afternoon at the cafeteria of Marmara Hotel.*

*Those rejoicing at this misery revealed
themselves! What chance has fresh meat among the
toil shacks and its black soil, neither wet nor dry,
on the hills of either the beginning or the end of the
city at its top bottom, where ants play music on
beaches not acquainted by the sea, nor know it at a
maritime city?*

*Oh, human waves on these reckless, not
brainless, hills!*

*Oh, religious scholars submissive to the ants
of submission!*

*You are happy with less than the song of
metallic insects and their giants freshly growing in
the trap of a dreaming blueness, a few kilometres on
the way east.*

*Why does the way to the east and south
turn black? Why would the “Romelians” hold their
breath, coherent and inherited from the victory of
defeated courts?*

*The mighty have-nots, the spiteful have-nots,
have not commenced their offensive yet. They have
not stolen the toothbrushes from the modest calm
abodes.*

*The barracks of the beautiful army shall
move them to the limits of their stars. They shall
enter their iron ascent, so that the sun of modernity
may rise, as it does, from the metallic intelligence
arriving from graceful oceans.*

This is a land of torrents of fear
from the dampness of the *amkaf*,²⁰
each turban is a secret!

The “Hanif” rain shall not fall
on the fragility of its people...
The sea shall not prostrate.

The sun is riper than usury,
and those walking on
the sweat of their brows
shall receive cherished honey
for ablution.

However they go

²⁰ Religious Endowment

or commit to
tolerant acumen,
or argue,
their darkness shall shine
like the shadow of fertile fire.

The essence of what is to come
shall gather on the echo
carrying the wind...
And they shall choose!
They shall choose.

**Other English Translation Books by
Raghid Nahhas**

Your Name is My Memory, Translations of Poems by
Khalid al-Hilli, Papyrus Publishing, Melbourne 2012.

Arabesque of Love, Translations of Poems by Maher
Kheir, Papyrus Publishing, Melbourne 2010.

Friday, Sunday: the Story of a City on the Mediterranean
by Khalid Ziadé. Kalimat Publications, Sydney 2005.

Where the Wolf Is (with Noel Abdulahad). Translation
of a collection of poems by Shawki Moslemani. Kalimat
Publications, Sydney 2004.

Papers of Solitude (with Noel Abdulahad). Translation
of a collection of poems by Shawki Moslemani. Kalimat
Publications, Sydney 2004.

*The sailor's wife in Istanbul
has told me that
the sea is not water.*

*All those who thought it was,
drowned...*

*The sailor's wife has told me that
the sea is colour and space,
violations of colour and
passions of pearl...*

*It derives from the dust of the earth,
carried on vain waves.*