

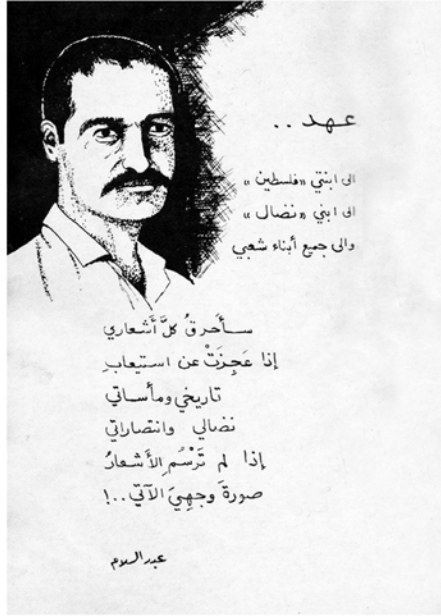
CANTATA

for a desert poet

Sharon Lopez Mooney



New York



A Promise

To my daughter Falastine, to my son Nidal
and to all the children of my people

I will burn all my poems if I fail to
embrace my history and tragedy,
my struggles and my victories, if my poems do
not paint the picture of my emerging self!

Abdulsalam

Salam Khalili

P R E F A C E

Cantata for a Desert Poet commemorates a wish of Mohamed Abdulsalam Khalili, who was a Palestinian journalist, painter, poet, and peace activist before, during, and after the Six-Day War in 1967. In 1973, as a chief editor at Jerusalem's weekly newspaper *El Fajr*, he published an article with evidence that the war had been preplanned, prearranged, and agreed upon by Israel and Jordan. Because he did not first get permission to publish, he was taken as prisoner by Israel, tried, given a twenty-five-year sentence, and subsequently tortured for seven years. He was then put under house arrest for three years more before a small group of western journalists pressured Amnesty International to step in and fight for his freedom.

Subsequently, Salam was exiled from Palestine by Israel, and he and his family were then relocated to the United States by a concerned and generous sponsor. Twenty years after his arrest, the truth in his article came to light.

He spent the rest of his life engaged in California wherever he could be, working to encourage and support the development of an agreement between Palestine and Israel to find a compromise and share the land they all love in peace and equality. He welcomed into his home many young immigrant Arab men as well as others dispersed by the terrors in the Middle East. In his later years, he became a frequent speaker at Spirit Rock Meditation Center on forgiveness, building peace and cooperation, and other personal spiritual topics. He and Jack Kornfield became friends, and Buddhism offered him a practice of solace for his aching soul.

Salam and I met in California, where he settled and we became intimates. He continued to try to paint but was never able to regain his brush. He tried writing, but was never able to find his poet's way into written English although he remained a master Palestinian poet and a poetic storyteller in oral English. He asked me to tell his one man's story in my own original poetry for him. He laid his hope of sharing his truths in my hands, believing them the same struggles as so many affected by war. The storylines of these poems are inspired by stories he gifted to me, and I have considered it a sacred charge from this political and spiritual poet. Salam died in 2016 at the young age of 64 without he or his two adult children ever being allowed to return to their beloved Jerusalem. The struggle continues on many fronts.

This book is admirably dedicated to
Salam Khalili.



HUMAN COLLATERAL

a lament

PREFACE

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As part of Salam's imprisonment, more than 125 paintings and an immeasurable count of books, documents, and papers were incinerated by the authorities.

With each chapter heading is a section of the one poem written in his own hand from among the few papers secreted away by his family. Salam describes a Palestinian girl on a windy day, crying as she is walking to school. He saw the girl from the window of the police car the day he was arrested.

The poem is incomplete, ending abruptly on the last page, and it is clear that there are more stanzas, but those are missing. We have included these pages to give his poet's voice and artist's hand one more chance to be heard.

Sharon Lopez Mooney

Chance encounter

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حَتَّىٰ غَيُّونَكَ الْحُلُومِ
بِالْحُزْنِ طَفْحَانِينِ
وَحَبَّاتِ لَوْلُو مَفْرَطَهُ عَالِخَدٍ؟
شَوْ صَارَ حَتَّىٰ تَمْرَمَغِ الْمَرْيُولِ
هَالْأَزْرَقِ الْمَبْلُولِ
وَأَنْقَطَعَتِ الشَّنْتِي؟
يَمَكِنِ تَرْحَلَقِي
- دَسْتُورِ! -

فِي هَالطَّيْنِ
مِنْ كَتْرَ مَا كِنْتِي
عَمَّ تَرْكُضِي ..
وَالْمَدْرَسِي بَعِيدِي؟

California – Alchemy of a life

Exiled from Jerusalem, his belongings stamped illegal, a few paintings saved in the downdraft as he fled, his poems became dust in the left behind. He never found his poet's voice on pieces of western paper, but found me, a northern California poet, who he caught in his web of magical storytelling. We, he and I, became one heart in many achingly delicate, late night shadows of his home in a warehouse's echo – his refuge hidden off a dim industrial side-street of an urban landscape.

He composed a symphony of tales that had not been erased, etudes of memory that caressed his heart each rising sun, and were extinguished again each night by the scars of those who could still reach across the decades. This Desert Poet whispered stories so I could be his pen, the song he would never sing, and share his journey in the sunshine and neon city where finally he release into death.

Our first evening

"I really like brass washers" he says putting the dirty metal screw through the hole of his shiny new invention
he's always inventing a new machine to exercise his creativity
words pass in spirals slipping and sliding through hidden feelings
that circle but sometimes I see them at the edges of his eyes laughing
I am sure he can sense my hunger although I have learned to be quiet

I say provocative lines he answers quick easy and I think he knows
we are nimble in our dance yet we trip and fall entangled
in words and meanings and messages unstated and full of the poetry
he pours out into the room drawing images and stories ripe with longing
thick with undercurrents piled up next to the six brass washers
I pick them up and slide them around in the smooth of my palm
we keep finding each other eye to eye with silent messages
the other cannot hear in this crowded noisy room filled with silence

I long to hear him pour out words that can reveal what he wants
from me and why I am here, but I don't even think to ask because
we have already learned to read the silent signals that so
voluptuously slide between us, our words like washers on the table
scatter and our forming thoughts dissolve in the flurry of clatter
and people coming into the pregnant room it is time to stop. He
carries our attraction to his private treasure box I sweep our left over
disarranged words into my pockets so I can go over them again and
again later alone. Someone reaches out turns off the light

Soul of his people

He opens the soul of his people to me
reliving his time on the sultry rooftops
of his cherished Jerusalem.

I smell lamb and spices, the sweat of hard labor,
the exuberance in children stealing giggles
safely behind garden gates.

In his cluttered workshop in this foreign country
he paints landscapes of Jerusalem on the floor
where he teaches me to rest
as we become desert meeting sky
lying on concrete broken into melodic memories.
Music makes love to us as I watch him work.

*I've become keeper of his soul
his homeland
his treasured secrets.*

His humming fuses us into one moment
refracted dark, moist, fecund bittersweet past
where he becomes the words he weaves
composing life with images that run through
us like the wild war horses he saw
crossing hot sand at dusk.

Gliding back and forth
between harsh brilliant days of the Sinai Desert
and cool silence of Northern California drizzle
he sketches the casualties of war, the cries
of innocence lost in the hearts of children
along my horizon.

*I've been given his voice, his awful truths,
and asked to give birth to this requiem.*

Oh, Children of War!

I want to read something to you. I will translate. Salam laid the newspaper clipping on the desk. He read the list of boys, none over twelve, shot by soldiers in the West Bank of Palestine, twelve in all in twenty months of the "Intifada". He painfully read their names, ages, how they died. In the middle of the list was Ahmad, he the youngest, six.

Wafa and I sat still as photographs while Salam translated the small article about this youngest victim, his fingers slowly moving across the lines of type, right to left, as though they were trying to soothe the pain. He continues loosely translating...*the very day Ahmad died, his mother gave birth to a new son and they named the baby after him.* Salam read how she would not lay the baby down.

Since Ahmad was four, old enough to be out in the hard alone, he carried a stone in his closed fist or pocket, never without a stone, even inside the house, always a stone. Last year on vacation, his parents turned to find him throwing stones at a passing police car and rushed to tell him the police in Egypt were friendly, he was safe, no need for stones. But even then he kept a small stone tucked in his little clenched fingers because in his little life shooting and death were constant, were heard on all sides every day, because being wounded and dying happened to his uncle, his neighbors, his friends.

That morning, now that he was six, his father had sent Ahmad to the store to buy cigarettes. As he came out of the shop, bigger boys on the roof above him were hurling stones at the patrolling Israeli soldiers. The soldiers splayed the street and buildings with rubber bullets and Ahmad was shot in the head and killed.

Earlier Ahmad had made a game to play with his father. He would run into the house and say, *Baba, Baba, Ahmad has been shot, Ahmad has been shot!* His father would fall to the floor pretending to cry and wail for his son. The six year old boy would spring out, throwing himself on his father gleefully and cry, *No, no I am alive! Ahmad is alive!* And they would dance and celebrate.

Salam looked up from the paper and saw Wafa with his face tipped downward, fidgeting with his watch. He lifted his head and spoke in Arabic.

Go then! Go in the other room and pray, it is fine. Salam returned to the news clipping.

Is it really prayer time, Salam? I wiped my eyes as I watched Wafa bow into his prayer through the doorway. *Doesn't it ever make you cry?*

Not much anymore. One cries for so many deaths, so many years, so many children the sorrow is so deep that the tears grow far away. In the late afternoon silence, over and over he caressed the names with his fingers, Ayman 11 years, Hani 12 years, Ahmad 6 years old...

A life of walls

He was a curious child to them,
their passionate dreamer
small boy poet, their son,
hours alone, stubby pencil to scrap of paper
hiding his hunger in words,
his heart so delicate,
there was no safe place
in the strange jordanland of escape,
so he hid his poems in sand walls.

When he came of age, he returned
to the heart of his country's history,
burying his soul in a deep grave
alongside those of his peoples, laid down
on that embrace of land, exposed war secrets
in daily print news, promised his life
to regain the peoples' freedom, allowing fire
to consume his years in the agony
of prison walls built for lies and torture.

In the dark of pain and bars
held in place by bloody bricks of loss
one remembers promises like that,
news comrades learned of his trial by conflagration,
fought for his freedom to only beget
his sequestered living behind invisible walls
surrounding his home, converting it
to a political territory, blocking his friends,
his voice, trying to destroy their dream.

Finally, in the crux of expulsion from his motherland,
sponsors chose a distant new home for him
and his children, into an unfamiliar life
of abundance with more invisible barriers he did not
make, with no passage back to his desert love,
with her soiled lands strewn with the victor's
dirty tricks, where they burned his poems
shredded his paintings.

Exhausted, he drew in breath
in this new city offering freedom
and readied himself to build again,
against his intuition of what really lay ahead
he unfurled their dreams into new potential futures
for them all who would never see home.
And the price this time also was great,
they found new unspoken barriers, hidden deceits,
but this time to restrain their souls.

Gift from Father

He rolled over on the single bed turning his face away from me. His voice was deep with fatigue, tone brooding as he reached for another memory.

I was traveling my way back from the newspaper office. The street was hushed, radiated heat. In one explosive moment I knew I had been shot, the searing came long before I heard the shot. Lying as still as possible, I listened. Nothing. Where were the others? Could I stand up? I rolled over twice, slowly, the pain so intense it shot down my legs cramping them. Swallowing my scream and with great effort I edged my way up against the building. Was I safe? Yes. I was not visible from the street, there was no movement anywhere. But it was late afternoon, there would be many hours before the safety of dark.

Slowly, hesitatingly, I looked down to the pain in my abdomen, immediately slamming my eyes shut. *Shit!* My mind tripped over itself. Shaking beyond control, I opened my eyes and again began the cautious descent to my midsection. I could not believe what I was seeing. It appeared my stomach was missing, just an empty hole of blood. If I made noise vomiting, the soldiers would find me, so I held my breath, closed my eyes, pressed my head against the hot wall swallowing revulsion and waited.

I knew I was dying. There was no way I could get up, no way to make any sound for help, no way to live without a stomach. I will die. Just then there was a confusion of soldiers and even my thoughts froze.

Nothing to do. I made myself as small as possible. How does one prepare to die? Fear cramped my mind. Pushing through, I looked down to my wound again, but noticed a spot of blood on the knee of the pants my father had given me. I had taken such great care to only wear them on special occasions. And now, blood! A stain of blood...if it dried, it would never come out. I was frantic. What could I do?

I looked around for something, a rag, a scrap, when I saw my shirt tail hanging out. With all my strength and with slow deliberate moves I tore off a piece of cloth, raised it to my mouth ignoring the fire racing through my body. I slowly pushed the pain out of my way, wet the blue cotton with saliva and reached down to the bloody spot.

Straining every nerve and muscle, I worked with tense focus, before it dried. It was as though I moved outside my body to some safe ground where I could work wetting the cloth, rubbing, rewetting, rubbing in slow motion. I had to get it out. If it dried, if it dried there would be no hope at all. I fought against the difficulty of making enough saliva from my dried lips. With total focus I rubbed and spit and rubbed and gradually a small tip of the spot began to lighten. I was filled with hope, I could save the pants! I continued, concentrating like a doctor saving lives.

Off to the side there was a whisper. *Here he is! He's been hit! Come help me get him out of here! Salam, it's alright now, forget the pants. Salam! Salam forget the damn pants!*