

# Nineteen Imitations of Abu Nowas

by Hakim

Abu Nowas al-Hassan ibn Hani Hakami (145-199 A.H./762-814 A.D.) was a contemporary of the celebrated Caliph of Baghdad, Harun al-Raschid. Abu Nowas was born in Ahwaz, in Iran, of mixed Persian and Arabic heritage. In the city of Basra, working as a perfumer, his poetic talents were discovered by several leading Abbasid literary figures; finally he was drawn into the circle of the Barmicides, the Persian family of vazirs to the Caliphate. He was also patronized by Harun al-Raschid himself, and his son the Caliph al-Amin; however, both of them also had the poet thrown into prison at various times, either because of his nasty satires, or perhaps at the bidding of religious authorities. Abu Nowas, like many noble souls of the time and region, loved both women and boys, and wrote poems to them (and to wine, and to his hawks). Stories told about the poet in *The Thousand Nights and a Night* may not be true – but the poetry is authentic: a combination of bawdiness and high sensibility, at one moment direct, the next arabesque to the point of preciousness; a mixture of authentic eroticism and highly ironic parodying of earlier Classical Arabic literary models (such as the ode on the ruined abode of so-and-so). Herewith, a selection of imitations of Abu Nowas – with no apologies for bringing him up to date.

## I

A pound of meat, a few loaves of bread,  
A jug of wine, at least one willing boy,  
A pipe of hashish. Now the picnic's spread  
My garden beggars paradise's joy.

## II

Like willowbranch cascading  
on moonlit sand-dune:  
what rare beauty, rarified slenderness.  
Suppose one day you were about to die  
& suddenly saw him (even at a distance):  
you'd revive at once.  
His fletched words & glances alike  
pierce the heart infallibly...no, no!  
Forget the metaphorers & similes.  
Oh you who are carved from the  
primordial Truth & Beauty,  
can you not share with me  
(in my prideful sinfulness)  
some of your own  
sweet sin?

## III

They call me "Molester"? So?  
Don't expect me to wither with shame.  
If I stored up in myself chastity's withered complaints  
I'd have only myself to blame.

## IV

I could code a letter to you in my  
tears (invisible ink)

Bring medicine, for my heart is captured  
in the razzia of rising stars

Your face a full moon reflected  
in the eyeball of a desert fawn

your throat a summer gazelle seen

amongst a herd of common winter deer

you tease like a girl. A boy's body  
but girlish enough in bed

your cheek smooth enough to light the shadows  
of the garden where we begin to drink

the saltiness of pleasure.

## V

The doctor said he took my pulse  
temperature & pressure of blood,  
“It's not anorexia that's eating you  
but the voraciousness of your soul.  
I've no doubt of the proper prescription:  
that little lute player you lost –  
get him back.”

## VI

In love the earliest drinker  
enjoys the coolest & sweetest wine

submit, drink from his hand,  
that boy so generous with his slenderness

a gazelle: as if Allah had dressed him  
in mother-of-pearl fawn-hide

## VII

I am in love with...  
but no, censor the name!  
(surely no one else goes

in such fear of a boy?)  
When I think of the ocean  
that separates us  
my hand despairs;  
when I think how I love him  
I clutch my head  
to check if it's fallen off.

## VIII

Go, take a message to the boy  
with the world's softest buttocks  
(Come, let me probe my unconscious  
& unlock my repressed desires)  
Tell him: you with the childish body  
but the brain of a seasoned con-man  
you who are so often on my mind  
but so seldom in my embrace  
little commander, why do you despise your  
amorous flunkey, your loving valet?  
I have no life but you. Come,  
rejoice in my existence.

## IX

Before I emerged from the woodwork  
& started loving boys  
I knew neither calm nor pleasure.  
But now the conspiracy's burst  
& the mind-police on my tail  
snarling in outraged puritan shock.  
Now that I've dared to speak the name  
of my particular love, shall I repent?  
No by Allah No by Allah No by Allah!  
Even though scandal swamps me  
I'll never give up boys.

## X

Can't be arrested just for *looking*.  
Eyes, feel free to enjoy his face,  
his lazy exquisite pliancy.  
Pure glances, dart about the public park.  
No one will grill my eyes with  
“Why do you gawk & wander  
after every bright-eyed boy?”  
So... I let them ocularly browse  
the Garden of Beauty, & ruminate its blooms.  
I am the collector of desires,  
my heart a fish in a sea of suppositions.  
He passes by... never to rejoice my heart  
with his love; never to taste  
my tricks & weaknesses.  
I gaze, almost speak  
of my chaste heart  
& the sweetness of my narrative.

## XI

Time stings me with reptilian fangs.  
I have relapsed: love of you now  
is my only possession, like a dervish's rug.  
Desire has become my alchemic quintessence.  
Ah, I was a monk in my devotions  
but now I snore through morning prayers  
& hock my holy books. My brain  
dysfunctions, I reason only in snatches.  
My eye must have sinned...  
was that not sin? To see the Sun  
at Midnight shining from the boy's bed,  
& to say, “Light of my eyes,  
this certifiable insanity is for you  
& yours the only therapy: bite me,  
lick me with your mouth...”

## XII

Last Friday night I encountered a mob  
of wildly milling men all yelling

“Judgement! The Last Hour's upon us!

The return to Allah! The prophets say  
a sign of the End shall be  
the Sun at Midnight! Here it is!

We tremble! We submit!”

I laughed & said, “This is no Sun  
that rises as a star, but only

my friend, young Ahmad, brightening

the velvet canopy with his crystal track,

the Dogstar on his forehead, Venus on his cheek.”

## XIII

Footloose party-goer I return

to this musical camaraderie. How the fawns'  
eyes stare at us, virtuous, delicious.

A punch in the snout for all ugly restraint!

So each of us turned to embrace one  
soft guru-of-love, so tender their skin  
even a glance might bruise it.

Mine wore a cross around his neck

to distinguish him from his little brothers.

Hugging each other close, mano-á-mano

we churned the mill of pleasure once,  
twice, three times.

## XIV

I died I tell you

(all but the last gasp)

for that darkeyed white fawn

who tapers to such a narrow waist  
& such nether proportions –  
the loveliness between pubes & perineum.  
In silhouette there stands out  
from his graceful geography a peninsula  
of the most exquisite horizons.  
When he appears the eye *snaps* to that  
region at once, drawn by its beauties,  
unable to glance away: a bridled horse.

## XV

Once I loved a boy  
who loved me. We were so happy  
that I never doubted him  
when he was away,  
& vice versa.  
And if I should happen  
to want a tongue-kiss from him  
in the middle of a public crowd,  
he'd do it, & no stare  
would deter him from  
granting my wish.

## XVI

I'm in love with two cup-bearers at once  
but particularly with the smaller of them  
who runs about without a shirt  
& whose curls escape like scorpions  
from beneath his cap, who urges me  
smiling to drink more & more  
who bends close to me in silence  
as he pours, & I can smell  
the perfume he uses in his hair.

## XVII

Son of Sayyar, singing-boy  
(and to me a star already)  
I cannot for the moment think  
of anything beautiful as you.  
My imagination seeks out poems  
for you but my tongue falters –  
as if you were something that had  
locked up all my meanings.

## XVIII

*W'allah!* What a dream last night  
ambuscaded me from dreary sleep  
& embraced me like ropes from the stars.  
Your face: like a moon riding  
above a cypress grove. My seducer,  
most charming of youths. Why come  
only in dreams? I register official complaint  
in the usual terms: your “cruelty”,  
my request for just one embrace,  
Hyperbole about my weeping in solitude, etc.  
“Mad pervert!” Oh, it's true,  
a boy has ruined my once-keen literary taste.  
No more odes on the ruined abode of so-and-so  
abandoned by the banal wheel of Time!  
No no no more panygyrics to camels!  
No more *verse*. I'll not work at all  
except to describe your beauty.

## XIX

No point in bragging about his beauty  
which no words can describe.  
There exists an entire heresy of Beauty  
in his cheeks – but I grow weary

of hermeneutics. If *things* could only understand his beauty, all creation would celebrate him. Oh, if only the universe can survive till it comprehends his beauty!