

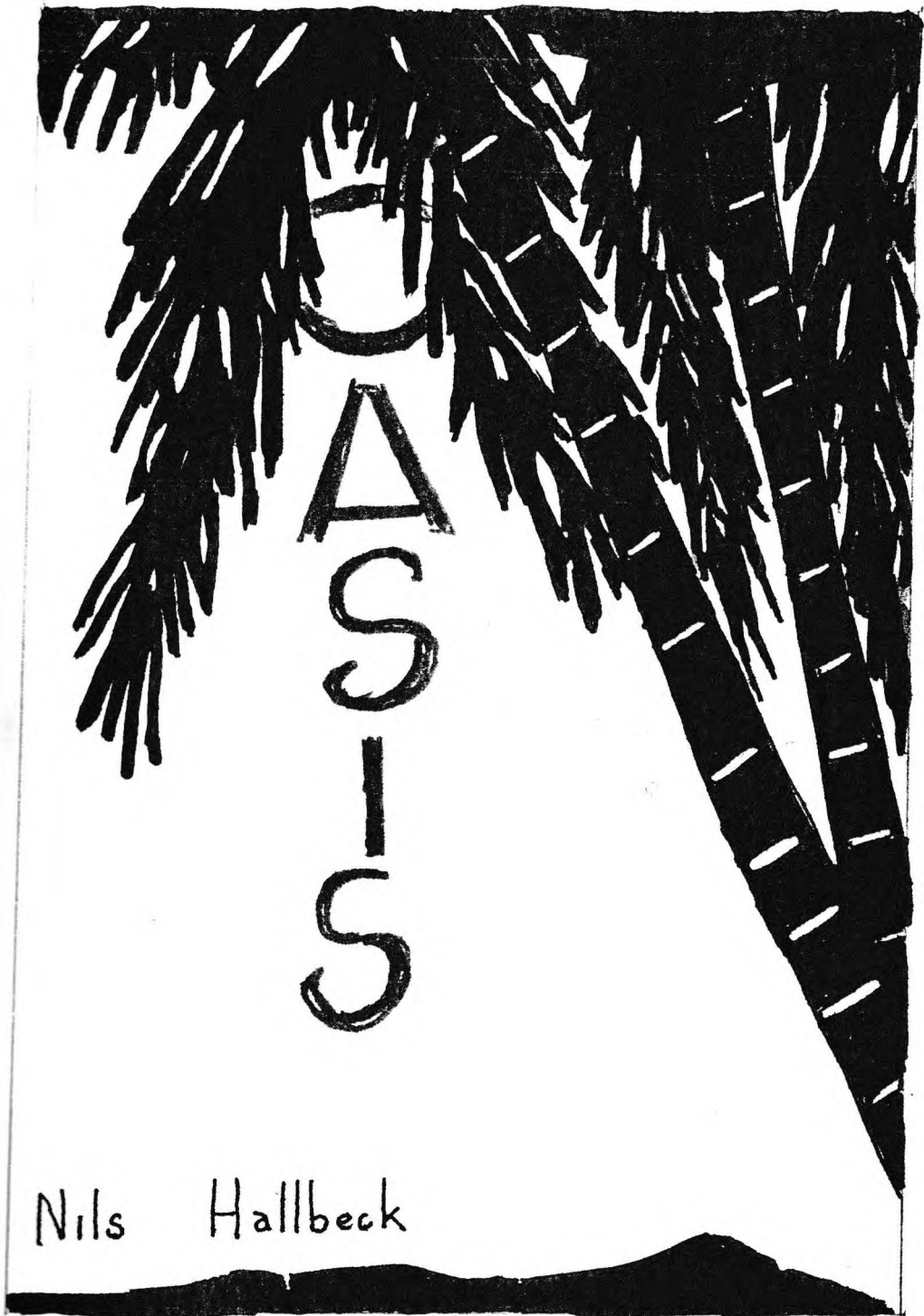
OASIS

34 Poems by

NILS HALLBECK

Verse Translations by

ANTHONY REID



Nils Hallbeck

OASIS

by

NILS HALLBECK

English Verse Translation

by

ANTHONY REID

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by

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NILS HALLBECK (1907-1998)

As a scholar, fluent in ten languages, Hallbeck graduated from Lund University with a double first. He then pursued a career as teacher, journalist, editor and writer.

Over the years he contrived to travel in more than thirty countries. During the same period he published 36 books, all devoted to aspects of homosexuality. These comprise 12 novels, 10 books of verse, 8 works on sexology, and 6 translations.

Steeped in the lore of classic Greece, he brought to Scandinavia its first general understanding of homosexuality, at the same time overcoming prejudice and promoting sexual reform.

The remarkable originality, variety and merit of his boy-poems (unknown outside Sweden) will establish his reputation as one of the greatest gay poets of the twentieth century.

For nearly twenty years Anthony Reid was a close friend of the writer, who checked and approved his English verse translation of all ten books of poetry.

I DEDICATE
THESE POEMS
TO MY FRIEND...

Voices with danger in them,
vaguely malicious looks -
a jungle instinct
warns me to beware.

If caught alone
by their sharp knives,
daggers with venom-tips,
I could be killed.

Your body rescues me,
your armour - soft and red
tenderness of warm kiss,
true friendship without guile.

No scorn from the whole world
can strike me down,
provided I am sure
you are always near.

·FRUITS OF THE EARTH.

Date-wine I bring,
the desert's twilight sounds,
exhilarating flute
and naked dance.

Sheer love I bring,
joyous and unashamed,
with bodies wantonly
conjoined in lust.

Stupor of sun I bring,
abandoned mirth
and every ecstasy
of human life.

THE OASIS.

Tall eucalyptus soar,
acacia branches shade;
dark-green, in red-earth ruts,
life-giving water flows
so parched palm-roots may drink.

Over the park, framed by mimosa bloom,
I see rose-coloured hills
and sad, squat squalid huts
with earth floor, palm-leaf roof:
homes of black Africa.

Here strong stone properties
stand for the rich.
Women, I see, in veils;
men in burnous, half-naked kids
and idlers chatting amid dreams.

The donkey's high-pitched bray
mingles with hucksters' shouts
and beggars' pleading cries.
Here, in the desert's festering hot-bed,
love's green oasis springs.

BOY IN THE GREEN OASIS.

Boy in the green oasis,
its for you
I search the sands.

Your slender limbs are those of a gazelle;
your olive skin exudes the olive's blood;
your glance is cooler than the desert dawn,
but hinting at a love with hidden fire.

Boy in the green oasis,
its for sleep
I search the sands.

Boy with lips garnet-red,
with white acacias in your hands and hair,
moisten my sand-parched mouth.
Kiss me oblivion. Kiss death. Kiss life.

Boy in the green oasis,
its for myself
I search the sands.

AT THE WELL.

Standing at water's edge, the boy
slips out of his burnous.

Then, as he bathes in the green everglade,
drinks from a conduit pipe.

Seeing me stare, he laughs quite unashamed,
and indicates the jet.

Yes, lad, you have guessed right -
I thirst and long to drink.

But all the tasteless water in the well
cannot content me, boy.

This thirst of mine can only be assuaged
by nectar from your spring.

PAN IN THE DESERT.

A dried-up wadi where a herd of goats,
foraging dusty grass,
graze in oppressive heat;

And, poised upon a grey outcrop of rock,
a practically naked Arab boy
stands like a slender bronze.

His loving lips appear to kiss the flute,
while coaxing from it sounds as magical
as some soft night-bird song.

His fingers tenderly, bewitchingly,
with curious quick runs
draw mystic desert music.

In a nostalgic dream the playing boy,
with bleating goats for his accompaniment,
makes love-sick melody.

A watching stranger, by the fig-tree's shade,
is held enthralled, and murmurs fervently:
"Oh, Pan! Oh, panacea!"

MOSQUE.

In the Mosque-courtyard I,
half-unbelievingly,
catch a forbidden look.

White-galabiahed boys,
piously listening,
are seated in a ring.

A mullah in their midst,
grey-bearded, wise,
speaks with uplifted hand:

"The fate of every man,
so the Koran declares,
is fastened round his neck."

I catch, among the eyes
of twelve most lovely boys,
a quick forbidden look.

CATAMITE.

Blazing Sahara sun;
laden with rich oasis merchandise,
twelve camels plod.

Last in the caravan there rides,
in blue-black Tuareg veil,
Ahmed, sex-boy.

During hot days, cool nights,
his lovely, lustful frame
services camel men.

There, over all the emptiness of sand,
beyond horizon's line,
proud eyes find grace.

MOHAMMED.

"Salaam aleikum"
from big lilac mouth,
juicy and soft as melon;
black swallow's eyes -
dark earth with placid pools.

"I will get camels;
be your desert guide;
show you oasis secrets;
clean your shoes to shine
like lion's nose."

"I am Mohammed,
number one camel-boy,
best walad in the desert.
I have served all the world.
Look at my references!"

"And if you need a partner in bed,
here in the desert when the dark descends,
I am best bed-boy in the oasis;
couched with Mohammed close
you'll be a scorpion basking in the sun."

"I am Mohammed.
I am your slave and friend.
I give you smiles from enticing eyes,
smiles from a yielding, luscious melon mouth.
I give you all my body and my soul."

KISMET.

"From desert-sand I can discern
your destiny.

Listen, effendi. Very clear
tonight

An ample hiding-place
I see;

Desert camp-fires amid the dark
give light,

And on the sand-dunes fragrant
flowers wait.

A single coin, effendi, buys
your fate."

The old man fumbles at his sand
and chants:

"The Garden of Allah affords
hot love:

Naked, upon the desert sand,
boys dance.

RED LIGHT DISTRICT.

"ALI!" an Oulad-nail, with naked breasts,
shouts from a brothel-balcony, above
men waiting in the crowded moonlit way.

ALI, in Yankee-jacket and red fez,
runs up the narrow stairway, bearing drinks,
prelude to houri love.

"ALI!" I call out to those velvet-soft
dare-devil eyes, bronzed cheeks,
red willing lips.

"ALI, pubescent, with soft loving mouth
suck out the fever from my pulsing veins;
surrender young hot loins."

BLUE NIGHT.

The moon: a blood-red disc
where tropic desert blooms.

Blue night: when palm-trees sigh,
murmuring songs of love.

Torrid sirocco: sand
blown over moving dunes.

Love-naked, the young djinns
in blood-hot dagger-dance.

Phallic, the minaret
yearning toward open sky.

Loving, blood-lustful night:
my body yearns, hot for
the young caouadji.

PURIFICATION.

A Turkish bath recess:
prone on stone slab;
firm, probing hands
massage my flesh.

Boy with bare, oiled skin:
dim, through the steam -
flash of white teeth,
eyes that entice.

Glances that give assent:
soft, agile fingers glide
till I feel purified
by naked skill.

MEMENTO MORI.

Bleached bones of a dead camel
remind the traveller of all-present Death.

Life-hungry, I survey my young boy guide:
a look that means "Let us make love! Here! Now!"

He smiles, and willingly throws off
vest ... baggy trousers ... stands superbly nude...

Bares to the sun his lust-desiring limbs ...
laughs ... falls ... and lies inviting on the sand.

Beside the skeleton my sun-bronzed boy
provides a pleasure-salve for surging lust.

MOORISH CAFE.

With ardent eyes half-closed,
playing his flute, Lassif
like a nostalgic dream
awakens sexual urge.

Sheer negro-black, Ashour
beats hot boy-hands
hard on the drum he holds
between bare knees.

Orange-turbanned Bachir
stark-naked, olive-skinned,
dances for men inert
in drunken hashish-thrall ...

He twirls sharp-pointed knives
above his joyous head,
proffers his body's all,
with untamed desert lure.

TRUTH.

This, gentle Lassif said,
is desert's limpid truth:
"Avoid all ways of life
that kindle lies and grief."

This, clever Bachir said,
is sand's translucent truth:
"Forget restraints of shame
if you would savour joy."

This, lovely ^{Ashour}~~Bachir~~ said,
is oasis love-truth:
"Never need you be sad
if you make frank, wild love."

GODS OF THE NIGHT.

Make love, keep making love till sunrise, boys.
Be utter slaves to love's utmost desire.

Madden us, Lassif, with your plaintive flute;
Ashour, draw life out of the dark drum's skin;
Dance, Bachir, dance to set our limbs afire!

Rest in my lap your lovely head, Bachir,
I lay my dance-coin on your brow's blue mark.
Now, Ashour, bring sweet magic to my lips.

Ashour

Make me drunk, ~~Lassif~~, with your mouth's palm-wine.
Let Allah and the Koran be forgot,
And Eros, Dionysus be our gods.

Play, Lassif! Drum on, Ashour! Dance, Bachir!
Till sunrise let us honour Gods of Night.

DREAM.

On the far side of the Kabyle tent
I can hear wild dogs howl.
Lassif, who thinks I sleep,
awakens me with many a gentle kiss.

Its almost time for him to slip away,
for dawn brings jealous eyes.
His people disapprove of foreigners
and, if they see us - death.

Like coupling beasts our lithe limbs intertwine;
eyes glow bright in the dark,
as do the eyes of ardent animals
which wound - but bitter-sweet.

Your coming to me, like this in my tent,
this gift of happy dream,
this bond of our uniting bodies here,
may even bring Mohammed back to birth.

PASSION.

Oh, Lassif,
how avidly I read
the captivating legends in your eyes.

Oh, Lassif,
how thirstily I drink
your lips' sweet lies.

Oh, Lassif,
how helplessly I burn
in your embrace's fire.

LOVE-SKILL.

Cease, Lassif, or I die
crazed by your skin's caress.

Where did you ever learn
such wild, joy-sweet love-play?

His sly lips at my mouth
whisper: "From desert djinns."

BACHIR'S SONG.

I love so much, in vain,
the oasis houri queen
that my soul drowns in depths
of dune's oblivion.

Daylong I plod the sands;
nightlong drowse on tired back;
I see dark sky, bright stars,
and close my eyes.

Ashour, more fair than girls,
ghost-whispers in my ear:
"Come, pick the desert-rose.
Take hot love-kisses here."

DREAM.

On the far side of the Kabyle tent
I can hear wild dogs howl.
Lassif, who thinks I sleep,
awakens me with many a gentle kiss.

Its almost time for him to slip away,
for dawn brings jealous eyes.
His people disapprove of foreigners
and, if they see us - death.

Like coupling beasts our lithe limbs intertwine;
eyes glow bright in the dark,
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which wound - but bitter-sweet.

Your coming to me, like this in my tent,
this gift of happy dream,
this bond of our uniting bodies here,
may even bring Mohammed back to birth.

HAPPINESS.

Bachir, it is not merely love I feel
for your wild-creature's body, but
sheer lust.

When your exotic eyes,
unfathomable pools,
seek mine;

When your soft tantalising lips
excite my mouth
and flesh;

When your love-pulsing heart
pounds at my breast and hurts
my heart;

When I am lying in your shameless arms
with all my nerves a-tingle, all
joy-drunk;

Then finally, my dancing-boy, I am
for that brief moment utterly
content.

LOVE'S LAW.

Neurotic culture, Bachir, does not count;
nor ethical decrees
against one's sex-instinct.

There is no binding law, but only this:
if two men feel an impulse to make love,
they may do so, quite free.

Oh, my Bachir, in all your raggedness,
in your starvation and your poverty,
you are so admirable.

LEGENDS.

Now, Ashour tells me very seriously,
I will recount
stories of desert love,

so that our newborn love,
sun-hot, may grow
strong as the palm.

THE LION.

On sick-bed in the sand,
I hear a pattering sound.
Who slinks by night?

Is it the king of beasts
scenting my flesh afar
who slinks by night?

Or vulture's greediness,
sensing my death is near,
who slinks by night?

Beside me stands Ajam,
my friend, protector from
who slinks by night.

With drawn bow, arrow firm,
his gaze is watchful for
who slinks by night.

(contd.)

THE LION. (contd.)

His nearness keeps me safe
though I must sleep, despite
who slinks by night.

I wake with starling's call
and see the dawn, which shows
who slinks by night.

Ajam is by the pool
bathed in his blood, slain by
who slinks by night.

Ajam will kiss no more,
killed by the lion's fang,
who slinks by night.

THE LUCK OF THE HUNT.

A sturdy, splendid lad
went coursing through burnt scrub
to hunt his prey

And found, by thorn-trees and the sharp agaves
fringing a pool, no water-buck -
but pretty girl.

From the pool's surface rose an ugly head,
a hippo's image with red-writhing hair
like jaitha-snakes:

"Jambo," the head invited, "Take your bride!"
and, with hyena-laugh, the vision sank
in water's depth.

Both sat upon the ground and the young bint
gave meat of antelope, sugar-cane-ale
from calabash.

But, as the lad fondled that body close,
his searching fingers found a boyish zab,
hard as bamboo.

And so they coupled, smiling, in the grass
inebriated by the joys of youth
until day broke.

FOOD FOR THE GODS.

From an oasis in Sahara sands
men took a captive boy
into Egyptian thrall.

The lad was so love-sweet,
like a blood stallion,
that he attracted Gods.

They thrilled at the display
when this boy smiled on them
in his stark-naked dance;

With curled hair diademed,
with peach-soft satin skin,
warm lips like glowing coal.

Sex with Asrah, boy-slave,
exhilarated Gods
there in Egyptian land.

Lust for that splendid youth,
whom no man could resist,
obsessed the world.

REVERIE.

Gently upon my breast
rests the boy's lovely brow;
his warmly smiling lips
breathing a kiss.

One hand caresses flesh
in a love-dream.
Night of serene delight:
beside me - bliss.

.BY THE OASIS.

As twilight dims to night,
the desert's hide turns gold,
palms rustle in the breeze
and white doves coo.

Cicadas chirrup in the tamarisks;
grasshoppers serenade;
soft dulcet sounds of flute
prelude night's joy.

Ashour's deep velvet eyes
are twinkling crimson stars:
like glowing phosphorus
my heart takes fire.

SIROCCO.

Biting sirocco-breeze,
searing the Spring's cool night,
making the palm-fronds sigh.

Sweaty, eyes red with sand,
Ashour, with wine-sweet mouth,
comes to love's rendez-vous.

I am possessed by the vast desert's spell;
in night's sirocco-heat
we make sirocco-love.

BLACK DUNES.

I sought
in the Sahara
to forget
lost love.

I found
red-night-oblivion
in his form's
black dunes.

MORNING.

Through open window I
hear palm-trees sway
in gentle breeze;

The desert-glow returns;
sky flickers yellow-red,
and starlings call;

A fragrance of Spring flowers,
refreshed by nightfall dew,
perfumes our bed of love;

His skin black ebony,
Ashour slowly awakes,
lovely as desert dawn;

His crimson-rose tongue-kiss
draws all the torpor from
night's drowsiness.

PARTING.

The boy is coming with me to the bus;
then pauses in a sub-way to the halt.

"I would give you each night
forbidden fruit and every desert joy."

Alas, commitments force me to depart,
to go, and forgo joy.

"If you leave the oasis, your Ashour
will languish in the desert all alone."

The boy attempts to smile, but bitter tears
are coursing down his cheeks,

And, trembling in his white burnous, he falls
forsaken on the sand.

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