

the Very Selected: Mimi Khalvati

by Mimi Khalvati

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ISBN 978-1-912196-89-6

34 pages, £7.50

David Ferry, introducing his excellent translation of ‘The Odes of Horace’, notes that the Odes are ‘expectable’ That is, they deal with topics that are known, comfortable, and unsurprising. However, the ‘expectable’, Ferry continues, also

focuses our attention on performance; it provides recognisable configurations within which the unexpected can occur in interesting ways and in interesting kinds of tension with the familiar... a kind of discipline...

Mimi Khalvati’s poetry is, in the best sense’, ‘expectable’. She writes about love, memory, ageing, and the natural world. Many of her poems are in disciplined forms that still surprise and delight the reader.

Consider the ghazal, four of which appear in this collection of twenty-four poems. In her hands, the ghazal, a couplet form that originated in 7th century Arabia (and is perhaps Khalvati’s ‘signature’ form) is perfectly rendered. Both lines of the first couplet, and the second line of subsequent couplets end with a repeated refrain (the *radif*). A rhyming word (the *qafia*) immediately precedes the refrain. In the last couplet the poet’s name (actual or disguised) is presented. We may ask why this form should be slavishly followed in English. Indeed, many fine English-language ghazals deviate from these strictures, in the way the sonnet — originally Italian — can show up as a plain 14-line poem without any particular rhyme scheme or meter. But that’s the point: the classic mastery Khalavati demonstrates is ‘expectable’, “a kind of discipline”, making the poem all the more vivid when it most surprises.

Here is an example following the discipline of the form; and in iambic pentameter, the underlying rhythmic breathing.

Ghazal

after Hafez

However large earth’s garden, mine’s enough.

One rose and the shade of a vine’s enough.

I don’t want more wealth, I don’t need more dross.

The grape has its bloom and it shines enough.

What can paradise offer us beggars
and fools? What ecstasy, when wine's enough.

Look at the stream as it winds out of sight.
One glance, one glimpse of a chine's enough.

Like the sun in bazaars, streaming in shafts,
any slant on the grand design's enough.

When you're here, my love, what more could I want?
Just mentioning love in a line's enough.

Heaven can wait. When we're under one roof,
no heaven however divine's enough.

I've no grounds for complaint. As Hafez says,
isn't a ghazal that he signs enough?

The surprise comes in the final couplet when we realise Khalvati has all along been
ventriloquizing the voice of Hafez ¹.

The majority of the poems in *the Very Selected* are not composed in strict forms. But
Khalvati's discipline is still revealed in nine poems written in unrhymed couplets that
approximate free verse, driven by repetition and echoic sounds. To take one example:

What it was

It was the pool and the blue umbrellas,
blue awning. It was the blue and white

life-size chess set on the terrace, wall of jasmine.
It was the persimmon and palm side by side

like two wise prophets and the view that dipped
then rose, the swallows that turned the valley.

It was the machinery of the old olive press,
the silences and the voices in them calling.

¹ Hafez (1315-1390) is one of the most highly regarded classical Persian poets, best known for his
collection (divan) of over 400 ghazals. Khalvati was born in Iran.

It was the water talking. It was the woman
reading with her head propped, wearing glasses,

the log pile under the overhanging staircase,
mist and the mountains we took for granted.

It was the blue humped hose and living wasps
swimming on the surface. It was the chimneys.

It was sleep. It was not having a mother,
neither father nor mother to comfort me.

The poem is tenderly nostalgic throughout, until an abiding pathos is unfolded within the
final couplet. A heart-stop moment. We trust this poet.

Norbert Hirschhorn
30 May 2018

Published in London Grip: <https://londongrip.co.uk/2018/05/london-grip-poetry-review-mimi-khalvati/>