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Enduring Scars by Ahmad al-Safi al-Najafi

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B. N. Faraj
Enduring Scars

Ahmad al-Safi al-Najafi
جِرَاحٌ لَا تَنْدَمِلُ

In jail I feared if freed
I'd never be at peace
And madness would precede
The day of my release

So on the day I left
My faithful cell to gain
My freedom, it just felt
Like being jailed again

Commentary

Ahmad al-Safi al-Najafi (1897–1977) was an Iraqi poet who travelled throughout the Middle East. I met him when I was a child in Lebanon during some of his visits to my maternal grandfather. I was too young to appreciate the specifics of poetry, but old enough to be awed by it and wise enough to recognize that poets are a cut above all others. In the case of al-Najafi, the cut was literal. He slit his *dishdasha* from ankle to knee to gain more freedom of movement. Freedom to him, in every respect, was more than a state of mind; it was life itself. So the image of that slit in his *dishdasha* stayed with me all this time as a simple, Diogenesque manifestation of how a person can choose to exercise his personal freedom in defiance of all societal norms. In other words, he lived his life in poetry and, as I was to discover later, in poverty. As I got older (that is, by the 5th grade), I became enamoured with poetry and poetics. So it was only natural that I allayed my early poetic affliction with a good dose of al-Najafi's poetry. Its ease of flow was remarkable, as was its conciseness. And the wit it delivered in an unrelenting tempo was enough to ensure its mnemonic quality.

He was jailed a number of times for doing what a conscientious poet does—agitating against an oppressive occupier. The chosen poem was written in 1941 when he was imprisoned in Lebanon by the French at the behest of the British for participating in a demonstration against the British. It appears in his *diwan*, *Hassad al-Sijin (The Prison Harvest)*—the fortunate, unintended outcome of his imprisonment—the undeniable failure of the oppressor's attempt to silence him.

This short poem is reminiscent of Byron's closing lines in "Prisoner of Chillon," where the prisoner confesses that "My very chains and I grew friends," and shocks us with "even I / Regain'd my freedom with a sigh." The poem is written in *al-bahr al-khafif* (light meter), which has no exact equivalent in English. The translation is presented in two iambic trimeter quatrains. It is felt that the trimeter captures, to the extent possible, the rhythm of the original poem.