The Battle of Karbala
A Marthiyaa of Anis,
translated into English verse
by David Matthews, Rupa Co.

The sun had run his journey o'er the night;

Unveiled, the Dawn revealed her glorious face.

The King who rides the heavens saw her light

And called his brave companions to their place.

'The time has come at last; to God give praise;

Arise! In fitting prayer your voices raise.

Brave hearts! For strife and slaughter dawns this day;

Here the blood of Muhammad's race will flow.'

Zahra's darling, honoured, seeks the fray;

The night of parting fades 'neath union's glow.

'We are those for whom the angels weep;

To live this day we sacrificed our sleep.

This morning brings an evening ever blessed;

We who depart for Paradise will slake

Our thirst by Kawthar's spring, and there find rest.

May God exalt our names for honour's sake.'

Unequalled, each of them to joy gave birth.

'Let martyrs rise in glory from this earth.'

At this the faithful friends rose from their beds,

And donning glorious raiment combed their hair;

Then tying turbans on their noble heads,

They faced the peerless Lord and gathered there.

Wrapped in coloured cloaks, their fear grew less;

Rose perfume, musk and civet filled their dress.

Brave warriors dwarfing heaven with their height,

In battle Solomons, in Sheba lions;

The bravest fighters bowed before their might;

No pangs of hunger pained these stalwart scions.

For their great hearts the world was less than nought;

To the vastness of the sea they gave scant thought.

Their dry lips sang the praise of God; and light

Shone on their faces; fear was put aside.

No grief or panic clouded o'er their sight;

They joked and laughed and shared their skills with pride.

Their charming accents gladdened every ear;

Each word they uttered was a joy to hear.

Beyond compare the figures of their speeches;

Each point they made with rare magnificence.

Their rhetoric the art that knowledge teaches;

Their dry tongues shed the honey of eloquence.

Arabian poets marvelled at their art.

Lips like pistachios gently prized apart.

Laughing voices, faces like the rose,

Their bodies smelt as sweet as Joseph's cloak;

Devout, abstemious; their saintly pose

In Heaven's slaves would servitude provoke.

Such rubies are not found, such pearls are rare.

'They are angels', cried the Houris, 'born of air.'

There was no water for the heavenly crowd;

Before the prayers they washed in shining sand.

Their faces gleamed like sunrays through a cloud.

Sons of the Father of the Dust, this band

Became as radiant as the silver moon;

Their faces mirrors in a hazy noon.

The kinsmen of the King stepped from their tent,

Fatima's darlings all of beauteous face;

Qasim the fair and Akbar heaven-sent,

Aqil and Muslim, Ja'far's valiant race.

Their countenances lit the sky around.

The flower of eighteen suns stood on the ground.

That morning 'neath the shadow of the stars!

If Moses, who called God on Sinai,

Had seen their light that with the vision jars,

He would have swooned. Celestial majesty

Was echoed by the birds' song in the bowers

Of the desert valley filled with fragrant flowers.

That dancing brilliance wafted by the breeze!

The russet satin sky was put to shame.

Rosy dew-drops hung on swaying trees;

Diamonds were abashed and pearls found blame.

Each bush was crowned by glittering diadems;

The leaves of every tree wore precious gems.

How fine the art of the Creator's pen!

On every leaf embellishment was shown;

A skill beyond accomplished poets' ken,

Which to the simpler mind remained unknown.

All stood in awe of the Lord of Servants' craft;

Enamelled richness o'er the valley laughed.
The light, the fresh, cold desert and the sky!
The pheasant, quail and peacock made their call;
The sweet-voiced birds intoned their plaintive cry;
The morning breeze brought coolness to the soul.
Red petals clothed the trees and sought their arms
Then gathered in the- ditches round the palms.
The desert and the morning breeze that blew
Amid the branches swaying in the bowers,
Scattering on the blooms rare drops of dew;
One nightingale addressed a thousand flowers.
The primroses of Zahra's garden drank
The dew, collected on the rosy bank.
The ring-doves gathered round the cypress tall;
The pigeons cooed: 'The Lord alone holds sway!'
Then came the cry: 'Our God is blessed by all.'
The birds pursued their worship in their way.
Not only flowers sang their adulation;
The tongues of thorns gave praise in exultation.
Lifting up its hand, the ant cried out:
'Oh Cherisher of the weak, who rule our fate!'
'Eternal One! Almighty!', came the shout,
'There is one God, and He alone is great.'
The deer called in the woods, the birds in the air;
The jungle lions roared within their lair.
And here amid the thorns the Prophet's flowers
Imparted fragrance to the desert lands;

The house of Fatima faced its last hours

In the garden planted by Muhammad's hands

This garden cut down in those ten sad days,

By traitors wasted, cruelly set ablaze.

Ah God! The autumn and the flowers of spring!

Muhammad's sons could scarcely hold their breath.

Like bridegrooms they had dreamed of joy to sing;

But their red garlands were the blooms of death.

Awake all night, their eyes were drunk with sleep.

Their perfumed smiles caused closed bud's' hearts to leap.

The glory of that russet-coloured tent!

A fresh sky o'er the earth had been unfurled.

To the canopy no pole's support was lent;

This ancient house! Faith's pivot in the world.

For Allah's loved-ones dwelt beneath this sky

Like stars in the empyrean on high.

The desert land smiled mocking at the skies;

The seventh heaven thought it dwelt above.

Its curtains were the veils of beauties' eyes,

And heaven plucked its stars from it with love.

The morning thought the sun a wretched sight

When it compared it to that desert's light.

Then suddenly the dawn's white light came in;

To lead the prayer the King came from his throne.

All stood behind the Lord of Men and Jinn;

Ali Akbar called the prayer in Hasan's tone.

The eyes of everyone were filled with tears.

As if the Prophet's voice fell on their ears.

The birds fell silent; trees in ecstasy

Rocked to an' fro; their buds and fruit sang praise.

The towns and deserts joined in harmony,

And ocean-beasts emerged to hear their lays.

The darling of Shabbir to all lent weight;

O'er land and sea they cried: 'Our God is great!'

The women of the King wept hitter tears;

While Bano of renown stood silently,

Zainab repeated blessings with her prayers:

'My muezzin, I give thy life to thee!

They call in praise of God; oh, hear their joy!

As beautiful as Joseph is my boy.

He reads from the Quran; what majesty!

His grandsire once for speaking held the prize.

Ah, may his voice remain eternally!

The strains of David, who was called The Wise!

Those melodies like petals of a flower!

A nightingale chirps in the Prophet's bower.

Let someone take these blessings on my part;

May God protect him from the evil eye!

His eloquence would capture any heart,

Although for two long days his throat is dry.

In foreign lands misfortune strikes Husain.

Three days of hunger torment him with pain.'

'Make ready for your worship!', came the cry.

'The King of all Creation leaves his seat.

In ranks of light the Leader passes by;

Salvation's path bows down to touch his feet.

His radiance in the highest heaven will reign.'

The Quran became a prayer-mat for Husain.

The company's prayers were verses from that age;

Like bismillah the King stood at their head;

The ranks were lines of writing on the page,

And proudly stood behind the one who led.

The dawn blinked at the whiteness shown between

The rows of words that Ali once had seen.

They magnified the Lord in glorious tune;

All heaven's angels blessed them for their sake.

In faith their faces shone bright as the moon;

In fear of God their limbs began to quake.

Their necks were bowed in humble adulation.

Like the crescent moon they folded in prostration.

Haidar's scions, Muhammad's noble kin,

Eighteen brave young men stood in one place;

All peerless, righteous, humble, free of sin,

The friends of the Imam in wisdom's grace.

Theirs the praise of God in all directions.

Theirs the beads that told their benedictions.

They stood, then bowed; their prayers flew to the sky;

To the One Existing Lord they showed devotion.

Prostrate upon the ground, their time passed by;

Their hands, their arms, their feet betrayed no motion.

But of their own dire plight. they made no word.

They prayed beneath the shadow of the sword.
They raised their heads and pointed to the air;
The gates of heaven received their adulation.
Their hands, the pinions of the bird of prayer,
To the trembling sky sped on their supplication.
In humble pose they fell upon the ground;
In Gabriel's domain their words passed round.
The prayer of the King of Men was now complete;
His thirsty friends came forth to shake his hand.
One kissed his cheek, another touched his feet;
What stalwart spirits had this hungry band!
His soldiers pledged their faith with every breath;
Embracing on the feast-day of their death.
Here one fell upon the ground in thanks;
Here the Quran was read in doleful strains.
Praise of the Prophet echoed in their ranks;
Here power to the Almighty 'mid their pains.
Husain cried out: 'Have pity on our plight;
On us who thirst and hunger in our flight!'
Here sad laments and pleading supplication;
But there oppression, cruelty, wicked deeds.
Umar, son of Sa'ad cried, 'Keep your station!
Watch the river, guard the banks and meads !
Husain is without water for two days.
Let him not drink a drop until he pays.'
The Celestial King gave orders from his place,
When arrows suddenly began to fall.

Towards the evil foe he turned his face.

Weighing his sword Abbas obeyed his call.

Like moths around the torch of the Imam,

They rallied to protect Husain from harm.

To Ali Akbar he made this behest:

'On treachery our evil foe is bent.

Life of my soul, go where the women rest,

And lead them from the forecourt to the tent.

Through negligence let no child come to grief;

For Asghar's neck is the target of the thief '

The Sky-Throned King had thus addressed his son,

When Fazza cried from the porch: 'Behold our plight!

Oh Lord, now where may Ali's daughters run?

The children have been crying through the night.

Suffocated by the heat they weep,

But now in the morning breeze they go to

Baqir rests, Sakina is in a swoon;

This feverish heat our babies has oppressed.

In tears they sleep, their faces like the moon,

Weak from hunger. Where to give them rest?

Theirs is no fault. Why do these arrows rain?

They seek the coolness of the breeze in vain.'

Hearing her voice, the Heavenly Lord arose;

'Neath shields his comrades took him to the porch.

He cried: 'We part for battle with our foes.

Prepare the horses. Light our righteous torch!

May our hearts rejoice in Paradise today;

Make haste to force this issue in the fray.
With these brave words, the King of Land and Sea
Went over to the women. In the ranks
His men prepared. Abbas, renowned and free,
Paced to and fro, a lion with armoured flanks.
The lightning of his face flashed on the sand;
His shield aloft, his sword gripped in his hand.
Solomon's crown was humbled by his helm;
The wings of Huma were envious of its plumes.
His gauntlets would fair Victory overwhelm;
God save us from his anger when it looms!
When a brother wards off tyranny and wrong,
Will not his brother's heart feel safe and strong?
The King beheld the womens piteous state;
Their hair hung loose, their faces pale and white.
Zainab made a prayer: 'Oh God Most Great!
Save Fatima's darling in this awful fight.
May Bano's crop be green and fresh with sap;
And may she nurse new offspring in her lap.
At Karbala the traveller is undone!
An assault upon a Sayyid, loved by all!
In foreign lands can battle e'er be won?
Have mercy on these babes so frail and small.
They die of hunger; thirst has plunged its sword.
They are Your Holy Prophet's family, Lord!
Neither Ali nor the Prophet has been kept
To lead this house so cruelly laid to waste;

For Fatima we mourned, for Hasan wept;
Husain alone remains in kingship placed.
Have mercy! Spare the Refuge of our band!
Our company is lost without his hand.'
Drawing near, the Lord of Heaven spoke:
'Be not thou troubled. All thy prayers are heard.
Our cursed foe all faith and pledges broke,
And now they will learn justice at my word.
This is no time, my sister, for thy tears.
Bring forth the holy relics. Cease thy fears.'
Zainab brought the clothes the Prophet wore
When he went to Heaven on that night.
Husain put on his turban, and once more
He donned the cloak to which he had the right.
Those holy garments fitted perfectly;
The scarf of Fatima, his legacy.
The glorious turban-flaps hung down unfurled;
Like jasmine-perfumed locks they graced his race,
And on his shoulders rested black and curled.
Cathay and far Khotan renounced their place.
Musk and ambergris could not compare
With the scented spikenard twisting in his hair.
The Prophet's fragrance wafted from his train.
No bridegroom knew such perfume from a bride.
Haidar, Fatima, Hasan, Husain.
The scent of the Holy Five on every side
Was squandered on the vale; the swaying flowers!

In Paradise Rizwan rocked in its showers.
The King of Time had donned this fine array;
His sister, blessing him, began to weep:
'Ah Haidar, Hasan! Where are you today?
We roam abroad; where does our mother sleep?
My sweetest Joseph now from us will part;
I die; ah, may the Prophet bless his heart!'
The box of arms was opened by the King;
Zainab, chaste and holy, beat her breast.
The armour wrought in heaven began to sing
The prayers inscribed upon the Leader's chest.
The beauty of its jewels shone out afar
And every link was like a gleaming star.
When Zulfiqar, the mighty sword, appeared,
The King of Heaven kissed its hilt with love.
He weighed it in his hand, and Glory cheered:
'I bow to thy magnificence above.
May victory be thy lot, may triumph flow,
And may thy strike fall squarely on thy foe!'
He fixed the sword that he alone could wield;
The crescent moon grew frantic in the sky;
Up to his shoulder mounted Hamza's shield,
Whose dignity increased when raised on high.
The mark of Prophethood was its proud gain
From being on the shoulder of Husain.
The Lord of High and Low in arms was dressed;
The Sayyid's standard stood before the hand.

The women, hair dishevelled, were distressed;
His sister clutched the pole with trembling hand.
With swords bound to their waists, on battle bent,
The sons of Zainab came before the tent.
Those rosy-cheeked young boys with valour trod.
Their cloaks tucked in and sleeves rolled up for war.
The might of Ja'far and the Lion of God;
In stature small, hut valiant all the more.
They rubbed their eyes upon the flag and sighed.
In ecstasy to clasp the pole they tried.
They eyed the standard, looked with hopeful eyes
Towards their mother, praising loud the King;
Then taking counsel, sure to win the prize
Quietly said: 'From thee we ask one thing.
Who carries Ali's emblem to the fray?
Who bears our grandsire's standard there today?
For when the King takes counsel, let him know
We have the right, although we dare not ask.
Politeness tells us that we should be slow
In coming forward for this glorious task.
We love and serve the Master of Creation,
But also hope to gain our reputation.
Great heroes in the Prophet's army fought,
But Ja'far gained the greatest honour then.
On Khaibar's field all great distinction sought,
But Ali took the standard of his men.
We may be thirsty, but we fight like lions.

Of Ali and of Ja'far we are scions.'

Zainab answered: 'What is this to you?

Can I advise or sway the Lord of Men?

Please know your place. Accept that which is due.

I shall he angry if you speak again.

Now stand aside, clasp hands and show respect.

Ali Akbar stands alone through your neglect.

Move aside. Go by the standard. There!

Make sure our Heavenly Master does not see.

You come and drive me mad. Now is that fair?

Your behaviour is not good. Please let me be!

You cry, but I can do no more nor less.

As far as I'm concerned that's childishness!

You're babies. Still you crave the highest place.

Well, find a way of putting on some years.

But I admit there's courage in your face.

No one can match you from amongst your peers.

This issue must be weighed up carefully.

No one receives what is not meant to be.

The standard was not made for hands so small.

You are the youngest, though you think you're wise.

Before the Prophet's Grandson you must fall.

This is your duty; here your glory lies.

You wish to fight, but what can be attained?

Today in death alone is honour gained.

What if your forebears won that rich reward?

Do you think it good to steal their reputation?

Real qualities are those shown by the sword.

Let Haidar guide you; aim at Ja'far's station.

You do have Ali's blood, but do not boast.

Be worthy of that title midst the host.

How did the Winged Ja'far gain renown?

The standard was the Prophet's gift he took;

And when he drew his sword and brought it down,

The lands of Syria and Turkey shook.

And when he lost his life that Son of Kings,

Instead of arms God gave him jewelled wings..

For three whole days their army faced defeat;

Then Ali bore the standard to the field.

The Lion of God put Marhab to retreat;

The foe within the fortress would not yield.

Put he broke down that door of infamy

As if it were a leaf plucked from a tree.

Now, Ali's noble son, in ambush caught,

Beholds our mother's garden laid to waste.

And you forget to ask why I'm distraught.

Incensed by rank and honour you make haste

To win for your own name a reputation.

For me you spare such scant consideration.'

The rose-faced boys in deference clasped their hands:

'Oh, Sister of Husain! Control thy wrath.

No further talk of standard on these sands,

But thou wilt see our worth when we go forth

To rout the foe, then sleep where martyrs fall.

You will say we were the bravest of them all.'
Her loving sons thus spoke; she drew her breath,
And then as the tears welled up within her breast,
She cried: 'You give me tidings of your death;
But wait and by your mother's hand be blessed.
You scorn your mother's words before you part.
Why do you plunge this dagger in my heart?'
The King drew near to Zainab and thus spoke:
'My sister, didst thou hear what thy boys said?
They are the lions which fearsome spirits broke.
13y such unequaled hearts are armies led.
Compared to the bravest ones who passed before,
Their frown is different and their courage more.
Just ten years old! What purpose they display!
Such stubbornness in ones so young is rare.
May dearest fortune smile on them today.
At whose breast were they suckled? 13y whose care
Were they brought up to grace the Prophet's name?
But they are young. How can I meet their claim?
The bearer of the standard is thy choice.'
'The King of Heaven must choose.' Zainab replied.
'Thou wert declared our mother with one voice',
Answered Husain, 'the day that Fatima died.
So now must thou decide; for thee to say
Which one will hear the standard to the fray.'
Zainab answered: 'I can do no more.
For thou art Leader of the Strong and Weak,

And after the Quran thy word is law.

But if it is thy will that I should speak,

Then I would choose the brave Abbas. For me

In valour no one stands as high as he.

He loves thee; he is thine obedient slave;

A younger brother who will give his life

For thee, and fight with strength among the brave;

A worthy son in time of war and strife;

A lion-hearted general, good and fair.

With his great courage no one can compare.'

The King who has no equal found his voice,

As tears came to his eyes: 'To thee my thanks.

My sister, thou hast uttered Ali's choice.

Go call Abbas, the terror of the ranks.'

Akbar called his uncle reverently:

'The King awaits. My aunt has chosen thee.'

Abbas came in the presence of the King.

'Go to thy sister', said Husain. 'She chose. '

Zainab placed the standard in the ring.

Taking the flag the Lord of Heaven arose:

'Here is the standard thou alone mayst lift.

For thee the Holy Ones reserved this gift. '

He clasped the pole and to his Master bowed,

Then filled with glory touched his sister's feet.

She blessed him, saying: 'Brother I have vowed

My life to thee. Protect me from the heat

Of battle. Go and bring us peace today,

And guard thy brother in this awesome fray.'

Abbas addressed his sister: 'While my head

Remains upon my neck, be not distressed.

Though a hundred-thousand swords on us be sped,

They will not pierce this shield,-my stalwart breast.

The sons of the Lion of God to action rise;

They fight with lions and tear out their eyes.'

To Ali's tomb he turned his noble face:

'Behold each atom has become a sun!

Ah, Lord of Dust! Have mercy on thy race.

Before Husain to martyrdom I run.

My head will fall to save thine only peer;

My blood and sweat are shed upon Shabbir.'

Hearing this, Abbas's wife drew nigh.

At first, she looked with coyness at her spouse.

She blessed Husain and Zainab with a sigh,

And said: 'These sufferings my grief arouse.

But such reward that you have now bestowed

Makes great the honour which we are not owed . '

Zainab laid her head upon her breast,

And said: 'I pray thy womb may e'er give life.'

She answered: 'May my Lady's name be blessed.

Let children be thy fortune as a wife.

May Ali Akbar pass his wedding night

Here 'neath the stars that make this heaven bright.

May destiny ensure their safe return.

Let the cry go up in Yathrib for the Lord.

May dear Umm al Banin with honour burn.

My joy on Ali Akbar's bride be poured.

May henna red his hands and feet adorn.

May his wedding greet the shadow of the morn.'

The little girl, Sakina came and said:

'Where is my uncle? Tell me, why this throng?

Let me place my blessings on his head.

May he be saved by God from harm and wrong.

He takes the standard; may his fame be mine;

For he is Ali's glory, Ali's sign.'

'Come, my dear', Abbas smiled through his tears.

'You're thirsty, and I did not stop to think.'

Sakina answered: 'No, allay thy fears.

Thou hast the standard now, but we must drink.

Go, fill my water-skin. No other boon

I crave from thee. Bring water. Bring it soon!'

Hearing her words, the Sayyid women cried.

Qasim came near and called to the Imam:

'The Syrian army masses with its pride

And fast approaches, bent on doing harm.'

Husain replied: 'No cause for fear this day!

Abbas will bear our standard to the fray.'

Standard in hand, Abbas to action fell.

The barefoot women ran with hair disheveled.

The Lord cried: 'Brood of Mustafa, farewell!

We part. 'Tis time the scores were duly levelled.

This is the morning of the night of sorrow.

Our fading stars unite to greet the morrow.'

Grief-stricken, Zainab fell before Husain;

And Bano, stumbling, fell before her son;

Trembling, Kulthum fell, her heart in pain;

Sakina, Baqir fell down one by one.

The garden was despoiled, no gay flowers danced;

The standard like a funeral-bier advanced.

The celestial Lord Abbas with firm intent

Strode out; the soldiers said their last farewell.

The King of Both Worlds left the women's tent,

But Zainab's piercing shrieks he could not quell.

His heart was pained; tears washed his eyes anew,

As when a sun-flower's face is washed with dew.

Just like Muhammad, mounted on his steed,

Husain attached his quiver to the rein.

The tongues of men and Jinn cried out: 'Indeed,

The Prophet's horse descends to earth again!

His graceful movement shames the mountain-quail;

His face that of a bride beneath her veil.

Behold the way his eyes flash, stern and bold!

How proudly struts and sways the noble horse!

His limbs were fashioned in a perfect mould.

He stops and pricks his ears up in his course.

His neck the fairies' hands would fain caress.

Swift as Huma he sports his comeliness.'

The wind began to blow; the horse advanced

With joy towards the desert, gaining strength;

The cavalry took their reins; their horses pranced

The standard, like a cypress fair in length,

Came forth to Iram's garden midst its bowers-

To Karbala, the land of desert flowers.

The five pronged emblem's radiance robbed the sight;

Its gleaming was reflected on the sand;

It lit the high empyrean with its light

A bridegroom's face veiled in a golden strand.

The emblem and the sun shone in both ways,

Entangling in the air their brilliant rays.

God's chosen army of magnificence!

The infamous enemy flags began to droop.

Brave Hashimites with rare munificence,

Adornment of the earth, an honoured troop.

Each one the seed of Ali, each in price

Was dearer than the groves of Paradise.

Those eight young boys, fair-faced, straight-backed and wise

With awesome strength and grit were Haidar's scions.

Black locks entwining their narcissus eyes,

With little knives they were a match for lions.

Their moon-like breasts for arrows were the snare

They came like bridegrooms to a place of prayer.

The houris from their windows in delight

Called out: 'Bless the Imam and bless his sword.

The earth this day presents a wondrous sight,

For he resembles Mustafa, our Lord.

The banner of Abbas goes forth unfurled.

The company of the Prophet rules the world

For when the Holy Prophet left his place,

We thought the world bereft of beauty's charm.

But let the old bent sky now hide his face!

Ali Akbar lives to he Husain's right arm.

Just see his comely looks and know his worth.

Muhammad in Heaven; his shadow on the earth.

Suddenly arrows rained upon the horde.

Husain advanced and pleaded with his foe.

His thirsty friends came to protect their Lord;

They struck the Syrian force and laid it low.

With swords held high, the fight w as underway

All strove like Malik Ashtar in the fray.

The King's companions, bent on Holy War,

Raised cries; the earth began to shake with fear.

Fierce lions against foxes to the fore!

The cursed foe in panic to the rear!

To north and south fell lightning on the flanks

And pierced the black clouds of the Syrian ranks.

Now Ali's grandsons fought with might and main.

Their daggers had the force of Zulfiqar.

On shield and shoulder savage blows would rain.

The wounded, dead and dying lay afar.

They proved themselves to be the Prophet's scions;

Nursed by the milk of Zainab, they were lions.

Those tiny little hands, those wrists so white;

Their speed created havoc in the field.

The enemy bowmen broke their ranks in fright,
And pleaded with the Prophet's men to yield.
In them Muhammad's strength was manifest.
'Twas Zainab's milk that fed their lion-like breasts.
Qasim, Hasan's son, so bravely fought;
Surrounded, he roared like an angry beast.
Three days of thirst and hunger were as nought.
With unveiled face no bridegroom to his feast
E'er ran so hard as he attacked his foes
And dealt the Syrian Arzaq hefty blows.
The sword of brave Abbas flashed with such power
That Gabriel sought protection from his Lord
The son of Sa'd there faced his final hour
'Midst shieldless corpses scattered-by the sword.
As lions spring to gain the river banks,
Abbas swam through the waves of serried ranks.
The guards of the Euphrates lost their heads
And like the river's current flowed away.
Black-hearted foes were tossed into its beds;
Their life-breath burst like bubbles in its spray.
Abbas, dry-lipped, took water for his men,
As if the Prince of Arabs fought again.
Ali Akbar seized his victims with a frown,
Like a hungry lion pouncing on its prey.
The proud were vanquished, mighty men put down;
His adversaries o'er the desert lay.
Their heads were severed; no one dared to pass

Beyond the lines defended by Abbas.

On both sides swords rained down till past midday.

The earth and skies resounded with the crash.

With folded wings the angels looked away.

No more the shouts, no more of swords the flash.

The shields were spent; the spears now joined the fight;

By afternoon the army was in flight.

Husain brought back the corpses of his nation;

No martyr's head was severed by the foe.

May no man suffer such dire tribulation!

He cried: 'Alas! Where do their spirits go?

The weight of mountains has been thrust on me.

Such fine array men's eyes will no more see.'

'Mid dead and dying stood the lone Imam.

The Prophet's cloak was soaked in crimson gore.

Rejected, anxious, thirsty, in alarm,

He heard their victory drums; the enemies' roar

Proclaiming slaughtered martyrs broke his heart;

It pierced his spirit like a poisoned dart.

Only he who grieves can understand.

The garden of life's toil now wasted lay.

No rest from lamentations cruel hand

The lamps were out that once burnt bright as day.

Scattered limbs exposed to seering heat;

On Ali Akbar's corpse there was no sheet.

The King of the Age moved slowly to the tent;

He could not bring his thirsty lips to speak.

Lifting the flap, he cried: 'My heart is rent!
My sister, it is Asghar that I seek.
Now bring him from his cradle to the door.
I long to see his moon-like face once more.'
Muhammad's women ran to him unveiled,
And Zainab brought the baby in her arms.
He took the child, by pangs of love assailed,
And kissed him, overcome by infant charms.
The knife of grief cut through Husain's sad breast;
His holy knee afforded Asghar rest.
He cradled Asghar in his warm embrace.
Outside in ambush lurked black Kahil's son,
Who fired a three-pronged arrow from his place;
It's target was the neck of the little one.
The baby writhed in pain; the Leader cried;
The tiny child was slaughtered by his side.
The baby died, and in the earth about
A little grave w as fashioned by the sword.
The child was buried, and Husain cried out:
'Oh Holy Ground, he mindful of thy ward!
This love of Ali, keep him in thy care,
Ali's pledge and Fatima's treasure rare!'
He spoke and donned his shining arms once more;
His eyes were bloodshot, and his face was red.
Clothed in the Prophet's cloak, now went on w war,
With Hamza's shield alone to fight he sped;
With Zulfiqar, that sword of might and fame;

Muhammad's armour graced his noble frame.

Was it Rust clothed in armour or his steed?

The fiery, faithful horse was swift and fleet.

A bridle, gold and silver, was its lead;

Elixir was the dust raised by its feet.

The blood of Duldul far pulsed through its veins;

Submissive when the Master took its reins.

The days of summer heat defy description.

My tongue burns like a candle if I try.

God save us from the blast of its inception!

The field was red, and yellow burnt the sky.

Cold water was the wish of this poor band,

As flaming winds poured fire upon the sand.

The vehemence of the sun, its cruel glare!

The face of day was burnt and black as night

The Alqama dried up; its banks were bare;

Its bubbles burst and from the heat took flight.

The spring of life was dry; its work was done.

The Euphrates steamed and boiled beneath the sun.

Four-footed creatures sheltered in the lake;

With fish the salamander made its home;

The deer were languid, cheetas would not wake;

The molten rocks became a waxen foam.

The red flew from the rose, green from the glade;

In wells the water dropped in search of shade.

There was no tree that still bore flowers or fruits;

The date-palms were on fire like the chenar.

No smiling rose drew moisture from its roots;
Thorns grew on branches burnt as black as tar.
No limb could stir, no beating heart would race;
All nature bore a pale, consumptive face.
The beasts cowered in the places that were wet;
Birds hid themselves within the forest trails.
The pupils of the eye were bathed in sweat,
And would not peep outside their eyelash-veils.
If one glance came to stand upon the street,
A thousand blisters formed upon its feet.
The lions would not emerge from their wild dens;
Dust hung, around the hazy sun's wide girth.
Gazelles all sought the refuge of the fens.
The firmament caught fever from the earth.
From pain of heat it uttered mournful sound.
Seeds roasted if they fell upon the ground.
The whirlpool on the water spun with flame;
From burning bubbles sparks of fire would leap;
The tongues of waves were dry; no solace came
To crocodiles which languished in the deep
The rivers blazed as if on Judgement's Day,
And roasted fish upon their billows lay.
The mirror of the sky was scorched with heat,
And lightning dashed for shelter in the cloud.
Hot-tempered men could scarce stand on their
For morning's camphor cried the sun aloud.
The dome of elemental fire burnt red,

And clouds to even colder regions sped.

In that great heat the King of Nations stood;

The standard's shade, the Prophet's arms no more.

His sighs were flames, his tongue was hard as wood,

His lips were grey, his hack was bent and sore.

Three days deprived of water, now he stuttered;

His tongue tripped over every word he uttered.

The enemy riders let their horses drink;

They led their camels to the watering-places;

The birds refreshed themselves upon the brink,

And water-boys rushed moisture on their faces.

A pious act to care for bird and beast!

Husain, so thirsty, looked upon their feast.

A golden parasol for Ibn Said!

His servants fanned him as he sat; and now

The ground was splashed with water by his guard.

But for Husain no shade to cool his brow.

The blazing sun beat down upon his back;

His blessed countenance was burnt and black.

The son of Said called: 'Lord of Heaven, think!

Give me allegiance, for I mean no harm.

A cooling draught shall I give thee to drink.'

Husain replied: 'Ah wretch, respect Islam!

The son of Ali takes no gift from thee.

From thy hand water is but dust to me.

For if I asked, then Abraham would come

And fill my cup from the fount of Salsabil;

Woulds't thou give me to drink, oh filthy scum?

With avaricious tyrants would I deal?

Thy very shadow causes flowers pain.

If thou art cut, no blood pours from thy vein.

And if I called, Jamshed would give his cup;

The Prophet would tell Gabriel to bring

A draught from Kawthar's spring for me to sup;

On earth the angels would my victory sing.

At my command the world would cease to be.

Iraq and Syria sink beneath the sea.'

He spoke and gazed on Zulfiqar's bright blade.

The son of Sa'd fell back, alarmed and shy.

From enemy ranks an arrow-charge was made;

The sound of war drums sped across the sky.

The horsemen massed; their spears were poised for war-

Black flags adorned the black-faced army's roar.

The clamour of the drums, the trumpets' cry!

The angels' ears were deafened by the din.

And from its senses all the earth did fly,

As armoured soldiers with their spears moved in.

With shields upon their heads came this vile band,

Like rain-clouds swooping on the desert sand.

Intoning martial verses, Ali's scion

Advanced with Gabriel's hand upon his shoulder.

Onward he advanced a male lion,

With sleeves rolled up; each step he took grew holder

The bride of battle was in splendour wreathed;

Husain's intrepid sword was now unsheathed.
The flaming sword was wrenched out of its cover,
As moonbeams fly, as perfume leaves the rose,
As a comely maiden taken from her lover,
As breath departs the breast, as red blood flows.
When thunder roared and all the air did swell,
Laila swooned and from her litter fell.
Husain swooped like an eagle from on high,
As lions in the jungle pounce on deer.
The heavens flashed; the clouds began to cry;
His horse rushed down like water swift and sheer.
The sharp sword cut the foe with thunderous crash;
They fell like mountains 'neath the lightning's flash.
The sparks flew from the sword that cut and thrust,
Heads were severed in the wind that blew.
It beat upon the armour, raising dust.
The wings of Gabriel stretched out and flew.
Those wings were like a charm that all men saved,
For on them Ali's name stood out engraved.
The foe on whom the sword fell split in two;
The blade came down again to make him four.
The path it took was the one Death pointed to;
However hard its task, it craved for more.
No rider in his saddle could be found;
The armour's chains lay scattered on the ground.
Its strike beheaded that tumultuous horde;
Assembled ranks were shattered by its flight;

Each body's castle fell beneath the sword,

And houses crumbled 'neath its torrent's might.

Whoever struck the scimitar fell dead;

Its lustrous sharpness made the streams run red.

Ah God, the river and the sheet of flame!

Fire on water, water set ablaze!

The sword sped onwards, whispering God's name;

Its current woke the still pools from their daze.

It quivered and the evil spate was snared.

With Zulfiqar's keen sharpness nought compared.

The centre, flanks and wings, both left and right

Of the murderous army by Husain were crushed.

The earth v. as spinning as the sword took flight.

From lifeless bodies all the spirit gushed.

Their souls left like those guests that part in haste;

The market closed; the city was laid waste.

The horsemen bore the sword's almighty speed;

It cut them through and split their horses' girth.

It thirsted after blood and did its deed.

And bloody corpses choked the heavens and earth.

No need it had for grindstone or for flint;

From land to sky all space shone with its glint.

This sword of autumn spoiled the garden's bloom.

Torn from its scabbard now it craved no home.

Faithful has for faithlessness no room.

Do those exalted with the lowest roam?

Straightness in its curve, and sharp its tongue;

The power to cut upon its breath was hung.
It struck the breast, the heart was bathed in blood;
The fingernails of Death plunged in the flesh.
The cry 'God save us!' poured out in a flood.
It cut down honour, then it struck afresh.
Ten steadfast men could not brook its attack;
Its flaming fire turned all their faces black.
Ranks collapsed on ranks where'er it struck,
Now this way, that way, dashing through the air.
'Where has it gone?' 'Which warrior did it pluck?'
The cries came: 'It is here!' 'No, it is there!'
The archers could not find the way to go.
If heads were severed, bodies did not know.
Those by the water washed their hands of life,
And hands of headless riders lost the reins.
A hand was struck; a heart was plunged in strife.
No hands were left to grab their horses reins.
They fain would hide their faces in their hands;
But, shamed, their feet took off across the sands.
Ah, how they feared the Lion of Creation!
The stream of the Euphrates turned to bile.
Their cruel hearts were racked with consternation;
They could not run, nor could they stay awhile.
'Run!', came the cry, 'before it is too late.'
The river of God's wrath was in full spate.
Although the watery fish were armour-clad,
They hid themselves in fear, mouths open wide.

In whirlpools spun the shields; the waves were mad; .

The crocodiles sought corners dark to hide.

The river would escape the sword's white heat.

But bubbles formed like blisters on its feet.

Divine destruction was the sword's swift blow.

'God help us!', came the cry. 'What can we do?'

Through helmets, then through breastplates it would go,

Then on through saddles, slicing steeds in two.

And when the sword into the ground was thrust,

The Earth cried: 'Save me, Ali, Lord of Dust!'

The bowmen, pressing hard, died in the fray.

Their arms hung loose; their bow strings still were taut.

The horn was cut, their arrows flew away;

One step onto the field and they were nought.

The bird of vain imagining took flight;

The notches on their arrows gaped in fright.

All those who were in archery renowned

Could find no place of refuge but the grave.

And those whose target-shot was always sound

Groped blindly for the life they could not save.

Those archers of perdition, sore misled,

Mistook the arrow's notches for its head.

The lines fell upon lines, and flanks on flanks;

Riders fell on riders, steed on steed.

For five that fled, ten fell among the ranks,

And heralds were despatched with awesome speed.

The army broke and tyranny was dashed.

So rare to see a foe so cruelly lashed.

The Lion of Karbala was now enraged.

To Karbala for refuge wolves had fled.

What war in Karbala the sword had waged!

At Karbala fell many a severed head.

The villages became abodes of ghosts.

Mounds of corpses towered above the hosts.

The Warrior King struck panic in his foe,

And turmoil broke beneath the ancient sky.

The bowstrings looked for refuge in the how;

For help the bow to arrow-heads made cry.

The ruthless sword drove on, and everywhere

The enemy sought a respite from its glare.

From twanging bowstrings arrows sped like rain;

Hurtling from the Syrian cloud they poured.

The piebald horses, chestnut steeds in pain

Whinnied as the sweltering hot winds roared.

The hatred of the desert was. on fire;

Husain alone withstood its clamorous ire.

Water-carriers came and called their wares:

'The market-place is brisk!' 'Come cool your hearts!-

The wicked, mindful only of their cares,

Rushed to the water-boys like poisoned darts.

A blazing fire consumed the world of pain.

All drank their fill except the Lord, Husain.

Such thirst assailed him 'neath those burning skies;

He masked his face and cried in desperation.

The sun's sharp glare assaulted his poor eyes,

But still he leapt and fought with exultation.

Rare beads of sweat poured down his holy face;

Pure pearls cascaded on the battle-place.

But those who slaked their thirst just slunk away.

The sword of Ali led the fight alone.

It flashed upon the scalp in full array.

Stopped by neither shields nor iron nor stone.

The blade of the Creator knew no thirst;

In front of it the helmets' blisters burst.

The enemies were confused, and could not tell

An arrow from a bow, such was their plight.

The archers seeking refuge fled to Hell;

Their quivers shuddered as they took to flight.

No sooner had they tried to grip their bow,

Their heads were off; their bodies were laid low.

The horses jostled riders when they saw

The sword flash by; in fear they jumped and leapt.

Not one in thousands stood this battle raw;

Among the ranks there was no order kept.

From every side the shout of 'Scatter!' 'Flee!'

Swords turned their faces from the misery.

From the stamping of the horses sand flew up;

The firmament filled like an hour-glass.

The dark-blue sky became a dusty cup,

And blackness spread o'er valley, hill and pass.

The glow that lights the world was lost from sight;

The afternoon at once had turned to night.
The prowess of the Lord against his foes!
With sunlight on his swarthy face he strode.
His dry cracked lips were petals of the rose;
Like Ali borne by Zuljanah he reode.
Came clamour from the battle, fierce and harsh:
'Run off!. An angry lion stalks the marsh.'
'Husain! Make haste to save us!', came the cry.
'Husain contests the banks; the swamp he takes.
Husain fights with the wrath of God on High.
The world is his; in him God's spirit wakes!
Husain saved Noah from the dreadful flood.
May we be saved by Ali Akbar's blood!'
The name of Ali Akbar reached his ears;
His heart was pierced; he pulled his horse's rein.
And as he stopped, his eyes were filled with tears;
He addressed the spot where his dead son had lain:
'Life of my soul! They call you from afar.
The battle ends; I lay down Zulfiqar.'
Ibn Said cried out and slapped his knee:
'Ah shame! His victory becomes defeat!
Behold! the hero! Such brave men as he
Should never lead themselves to base retreat.'
Then one of Ibn Sa'ds strong men cried out:
'This prize is mine! I'll put Husain to rout!'
He was gigantic, ugly, fat and dark,
And larazen-bodied with a waist of iron;

Of Death his quivered arrows bore the mark;
His shield had smashed the teeth of many a lion.
His heart was evil and his soul corrupt;
At his every step a mountain would erupt.
Another giant like him in form and height,
With brushy, beetling brows and dark-blue eyes.
Stood by his side, depraved and full of spite.
In battle he slew foes of wond'rous size.
One boasted of his club and one his sword.
They girded up their loins to slay the Lord.
To paint this awesome fight I need resolve;
To gain my enemies' praise the power of speech;
A sword-sharp tongue its hardness to dissolve;
A pen of steel its forcefulness to teach.
To draw the battle-ranks amassed for war
The inkpot needs the flash of Zulfiqar.
The anguished soldiers stood, their faces white;
The bravest of them trembled, for they feared
Husain might bring his sword into the fight.
Could Marhab stand his ground if Ali dared?
Could Antar keep his head in such a fray?
Who has defeat or victory today?
A voice from Heaven cried out: 'In Allah's name!
Oh Lord! Oh Darling of the Arab race!'
The King was mounted, mindful of his fame;
His sword rose up and showed its gleaming face.
The shameless giant pressed onwards like a flood,

But Zulfiqar was thirsty for his blood.

In battle stalwart soldiers staked their lives,

And evil frowned upon the earth beneath;

Their thunderous shields, their lightning-flashing knives

Were drawn against the horse that gnashed its teeth.

It beat its hooves; those cowards sought retreat.

The earth-supporting cow shook on its feet.

The selfish giant came brandishing his spear

Against Husain, lout little served his might.

At once the sword was raised into the air;

The tyrant's arrows from its strike took flight.

They might have hit a rock; their heads were dashed:

The string that fired them broke; the bow was smashed.

The tyrant raised his club in fresh attack;

The Scion of the Dusty One saw red.

He beat his hands in wrath; the giant fell back,

As lightning struck upon his angry head.

Defeat for evil! Victory for the just!

His head now severed fell upon the dust.

Confused and scared he tried to run away,

And groping took his sword in his left hand.

But Death's cold hand will always find its prey.

And Zulfiqar sliced through him on the sand.

A miracle the way the sharp sword flew!

The rider and his horse were cut in two.

The second giant approached; the King called out:

'Hast thou not seen the power of Zulfiqar?'

The wretch came on, regardless, with a shout.
But Death already called him from afar.
Summoned by the voice that knows no laws,
Another victim for the lion's jaws.
The King of Faith towards his rival turned,
As if a hungry lion had joined the fray.
With nonchalance the enemy's sword was spurned.
The sky was split; the heavens spun away.
The giant sank in the saddle without a sound;
His mighty horse was pressed into the ground.
The peaks of Qaf sped from the fairies' sight;
The Jinn were lost; the lions strayed from home;
The denizens of the deep dashed to the light;
The hawk and partridge fled where pythons roam.
The mountains huddled, hiding, from the roar,
And eagles fell from eeries where they soar.
A voice came from the sky: 'All hail, Shabbir!'
This sword was made for him. Shabbir, all hail!
All hail! To him was battles honour dear.
Nursed at his mother's breast, how can he fail?
God gave him mastery o'er all creation.
For he alone could fight to save his nation.
But now enough! No more, Husain! No more!
'Tis time to rest. The horse pants from the heat.
The time for prayer draws nigh. The battle's roar
Is over now for thee. No more! Retreat!
No one can fight thus, thirsty in the throng.

Attend to thy dear kin, and soothe their wrong.'

Sheathing his sword, the King; cried: 'I obey!'!'

The Day of Judgement came upon the world.

The enemy stood like animals at bay.

Their arrows fixed, their standard's flag unfurled.

Husain stood helpless. See and you will know

Your helpless Lord alone before his foe!

Ten thousand arrows dashed upon his chest;

A hundred at one time sought out their prey.

The spears transfixed his side and pierced his breast;

Ten stuck for every four he pulled away.

The Shadow of the Lord was filled with spines,

Like needles in the backs of porcupines.

From all directions arrows poured like rain;

Assassins rushed with spears and daggers bared.

Such pain befell Husain. Such pain! Such pain!

The one who on the Prophet's lap was reared.

No one to pluck the arrows from his chest.

No one to lift him to his place of rest.

Midst thousands, one afflicted stood, alas!

The noble son of Fatima, alas!

Shabbir was struck by tyrants' spears, alas!

And arrows pierced his holy skin, alas.

That ragged, angry army, honour's bane,

Poured out its bristling quivers on Husain.

Those who had fled from battle now returned;

One took a stone and aimed it at his head.

The blow struck home; his fevered forehead burned;;

Then to his throat a three-pronged arrow sped.

He touched his forehead, clasped his throat and sighed.

The arrow flew out from the other side.

This arrow had three heads, so it is told;

It pierced the Lord, not stopping in its track.

His breathing stopped; his eyes wide open rolled;

He tried to pull the shaft out from his back.

His final breath emerged an angry flood;

The palm placed on his wound was filled with blood.

A'var Salami, an enemy of the King,

A foe of true Islam, now played his part.

He split his forehead with a mighty swing;

Sinan, the son of Uns, speared through his heart.

Another plunged his stomach with a hook.

The grave of the Prophet's Refuge sighed and shook.

Husain falls from his mount calamity!

His holy foot falls from the horse's girth.

His side is gaping open misery!

He swoons; his turban drops upon the earth.

The Quran has fallen headlong from its stand.

The Ka'aba's walls have crumbled into sand.

Far from the wastes came Fatima's pure voice:

'Muhammad! See our family despoiled!

Now who will save our friendship and rejoice?

Against what tyranny our Leader toiled!

Full nineteen-hundred wounds were on him thrust;

Ah Zainab! Come! Husain writhes in the dust.'

Now Zainab moved the curtain of the tent

And came with unveiled face and heaving breast.

Her limbs were trembling and her back was bent.

She cried: 'Ah Karbala, where is thy guest?

From- thirst I suffer; guide me with thine eyes,

And bring me to his corpse, to where it lies.

The whole world is in darkness at my feet.

For Allah's sake, stay with me at my side.

Where lies our Sayyid writhing in the heat?

Ah mother, lead me to the place he died!'

Her sighs consumed her blazing heart with flame.

A voice was heard: 'Who moans and calls my name?'

Who called: 'Oh sister! Do not come this way!

The time for thy departure is at hand.

For Allah's sake, go home! Lost is our day.

May Ali save the ship of this poor band.

Let not Husain be left in this cruel waste.

To drape his corpse let Fatima make haste.'

Her head uncovered, Ali's daughter walked

To the place where Ali's darling son was slain.

She ran, though by the evil enemy balked,

And reached the spot, clutching her breast in pain.

Ignoring every danger, she drew near,

And saw her brother's head stuck on a spear.

Then Zainab, overcome with sorrow, cried:

'Ah Sayyid! Let me bless thy blood-soaked face.

My brother's throat was slit. See how he died!

Dids't thou forget thy sister's healing grace?

Our house is robbed; the promise was not kept.'

His moving lips took God's name as she wept.

'Thy sister greets thee, brother. Answer me!

Hear the cry of Haidar's daughter's strife.

With thy dry tongue give answer! Hear my plea!

Should Zainab cling to this accursed life?

For Death alone can end this separation.

No one is left to give me consolation.

My brother, can I bring thee back once more?

What can I do? Where can I tell my woes?

To whom can I recount the pain I bore?

Our city is now ruled by evil foes.

The world has been destroyed beyond belief.

How can I live within this house of grief?

Why did this wretched waif not die before?

Come tell me how the dagger ripped thy breast?'

A voice cried: 'Do not ask the pains I bore!

For all that came to pass was for the best.

Now from all tribulations I am free,

But ah! the wound to be apart from thee!

For even now the foe is bent on plunder.

Give nought but thanks to God for thy dear life.

When tyrants come to set our home asunder,

Take care of poor Sakina in her strife.

Protect my daughter in thy warm embrace;

Let no one look in anger on her face.'

Enough, Anis! Your very limbs are quaking.

This monument you built with glory rings.

Such verses written while your hands were shaking

Will fire the world and please the hearts of kings.

Their harvest is this gathering of mourning

The spring-like pleasure of the autumn's dawning.