



TLC SHOWCASE

Ali Al-Jamri

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Introduction to *Assorted Poems*

I'd been writing poetry since 2015, having turned to the form as I found it was a way for me to express a lot of my tumultuous feelings in my early twenties. But it took a long time before I considered myself a poet, rather than a dabbler. I received a review and feedback from some of my work with the TLC Free Read in 2021, and it was an important boost to understanding my own work, what I was trying to say and who I was responding to.

Ancestry and legacy is the topic that I keep returning to. It's there in the literal level -- you will read poems about my forebears, both real and imagined, below. But it's also there on a technical level. I draw great inspiration from the classical metered Arabic forms. My *The Legend of the Looms* is my most ambitious lyrical poem to date. Its metre and form are inspired by Bahraini dialect poetry and 19th century ballads from Lancashire and Manchester. It's a fusion I'm most proud of, and it asserts the folk 'debate poem' tradition from my homeland into the language I work with.

Rhythm continues to be important, and I explore it in my free verse too, as with "Ifar at the Great Sea City, 2123". Lyrical or free verse, I am also continuously intrigued by the use of narrative in poetry and this has been an interesting shift from the work I was writing when I received support from TLC, as I think I was as far removed from sensical narrative as I had been. But perhaps that was also a reflection of the pandemic, when all narratives seemed to stop. Since then things have changed. I pull from the past and try to make it modern. Of these, the imagined story in "I Carried My Father to Uruk", which explores migration experiences through the imagined migrant to Gilgamesh's city, is an attempt to separate myself from the 'lyrical I', to find truths that exist beyond my own personal experience, while still rooted in my own received legacies.

The Legend of the Looms forms the text of the film by the same name (2025), but its text has not yet been published in full.

I Carried My Father to Uruk first appeared in *Rowayat* (2024)

Ifar at the Great Sea City, 2123 first appeared in *The Markaz Review* (2023).

Extract from *Assorted Poems*

The Legend of the Looms: The Weavers' Debate (Extract)

You ask me how I found myself mixed up between these weavers?
In a house in Rossendale, I lived the war of weavers:

In the manor of the handloom lord, I failed to see the pain
Of a worker who'd once lost himself to his profession's strain.
I wish I'd caught my tongue—thought of my forebears in Bahrain!
Instead I said, "Who cares today? We've left behind these weavers."

Sudden as a careless tear of cloth from off the loom
The house went dark, the floorboards shook, there spread a ghostly gloom,
I, rooted to my spot, was struck! I glanced around the room,
On the workman's throne, a shape took form: it was a weaver's spectre.

The shuttle in its grip was as ghostly as its hand,
The phantom boat moved back and forth by his subtle command,
The workman turned, his face was pale, ready to reprimand,
At last the livid spirit growled, "How dare you speak so vulgar?"

"This is my house, I'll have you know, in every brick's my blood.
My sweat has seeped and soaked into this dear loom's frame of wood,
And as for tears, all were spent by children wanting food,
I still lament their passing now—get out! And take your slander!"

That should have been the end of that. I turned to run away
But the scarf around my neck took flight, a voice compelled me: 'Stay!'
What I saw walk up the stairs made midnight of midday:
That man—I knew it with one look—he was my own ancestor.

“Do not speak to this child of mine,” the ghostly forebear said,
“What sweat? What blood? What tears were shed? What spine-tingling dread?
In the workshops by the date groves, where we wove our thread,
A landlord’s call on us could send far worse than just a shiver:

A friend of mine (God rest his soul) was driven to a craze—
A noble client spied the daughter serving dates, fixed his gaze,
Then took her. This weaver, to the end of his days,
Cried out: ‘Her kohl-lined eyes! Has anyone seen my daughter?’

That’s just one neighbour. There’s another who had to flee
When a noble’s falcon took flight and left, forever free.
His thugs attacked one weaver who sought safety across the sea
All for what that bird had shed on his shop’s roof: one feather.

Here’s another: this cloth merchant was dragged to debtor’s prison,
The poor man’s son wove and wove to raise his father’s ransom—
All these folk alike were punished for senseless reason,
The weaver’s toil was made the toy of noble superiors.”

From his high throne, the other spectre said, “We faced far worse!
Our fathers were unhindered by industrialism’s curse.
But this heirloom—no way of wealth—was, for us, a hearse,
Our wages fell and fell again, life grew grave and graver.

You’d work until your back was bent and not have cash for bread.
Our wives wanted food! Starvation snaked with countless heads
And every winter’s passage thawed on a family starved dead,
All to blame was the government and the new factory owners.

The factories ate our children first, uncalled for, unjust.
Fourteen-hour days for lungs to drown in cotton dust,
A powerloom would chew a child’s fingers up with rust
And still at home we broke our bread with Poverty and Despair.”

“Find God,” my forebear said, dismissive of this plight,
“For He alone can bear us through this pain into the light,
And all the pain a lord inflicts shall tremble at His might.
Our village weavers, knowing this, were poets first, and preachers.”

The house-bound ghost stopped his movement to recite this poetry:
“Parent of the wide creation, we would counsel ask of thee,
Look upon the mighty nation rousing from its slavery!’
So wrote Samuel Bamford, silk weaver, Radical leader—

You see, many amongst our folk write poems to entertain,
We set our words to music’s time to scrub away pain’s stain,
Comedies and tragedies all in a slang which kings disdain,
Our written rhymes outlast Owd Time, who settles life’s true score,

Owd Time settles scores like a lender of gold,
Comes knocking, ignores protests, won’t ever be told,
But in our rhymes our kid Tom and Nanny grow old.
Thus through our songs we can rebalance fate’s ledger!

Here’s a poem Samuel Bamford wrote down:

‘I stoode beside Tim Bobbin’ grave ‘at looks o’er Ratchda’ teawn,
An’ this owd lad ‘woke within his yerth an’ sed, ‘Wheer arto’ beawn?’
So Bamford and Bobbin live on! ‘Gainst words, Owd Time’s th’ loser.”

“Ahmed gathered us round to have coffee and a chat,
I’ve called you, he said, to discuss that ludicrous rat—’
You’re the rat to my ship’s captain—Mulla Atiyya wrote that!
We’ve comedy and life in our dialect, wordplay and laughter

They coexist with graver things: our tragedies of passion,
Mulla Atiyya also wrote ‘Haider Ali Has Fallen’
And ‘Where Are Your Hands?’, dirges still recited, still in fashion.
So the poets born of weaving prove to hold a special power.

I Carried My Father to Uruk

My father taught me how dates,
gathered in enough numbers,
left to age and turn to syrup,
will become wine in time.

He taught me how to enter the temple,
the manner of ablutions at the spring,
what offerings to give Enki,
what words to say at the idol's feet.

He, who in my memory

(and there alone)

is fully divine,
named every hill and valley for me,
taught me the story behind each waterway
and the histories of the farmers

squabbling since their twelfth ancestor.

He planted his own feet in the soil

to hold mine on his shoulders
and raise me to the height of the trees.

My inner voice never wandered farther than our shore,
yet my feet, uncertain in the orchard, were fins in the sea,
my oar-bearing arms the sinews of a dream
for which his earthy contentment became a map's edge.

In my heart I carry him into the life I built in Uruk.

Father, what would you know of this land,
where the wine we pressed is the drink of the divine?

Would you find words fit for a river-king's gods,
where the sea is a clay-baked fable?

You left me without a pen
to complete my maps.

Plant a kiss on the tip of my chin
where sorrow wobbles,
lend me your sweaty scent
mixed with honeyed date wine
and the comforts of Dilmun's autumn.

Iftar at the Great Sea City, 2123

Kneading dough from dust,
mother bakes our Iftar bread.
We're off to watch the prime-time show:
the Great Sea City.

You see, without the electronics
Grandma tells of in her tales
and without the Ramadan serials
she recounts like episodes of Kalila wa Dimna,
we watch the emptied city crumble
and make our playful bets:
this residential tower or that mall?
Every evening, we play this game
to forget hunger and thirst.

By my side kneels my strange uncle.
Palms open, he recites the names of fish:
Safi, Chan'ad and Hamoor
Um Ar-Rubyan and Abu Salbukh,
Baaliq and Baalul,
Jamjaam and Khaakhun,
the Captain's Donkey,
the Bride's Brush,
Safi, Chan'ad and Hamoor

He repeats these dimly-learned words
as if his head was bowed beneath the schoolmaster's cane
—then mother shouts down his horrible voice.

Bit by bit...

Pane by pane...

Pillar by pillar...

The empty city crumbles into the empty sea,
and tonight, it is the residence that collapses.

I eat my prize: a date as big as a grape.

Grandma tells of the plump dates of her childhood.

My uncle quietly finishes his prayer and prostrates.

The city's silence mourns the fallen tower.

Behind us, the sun snuffs her lantern.

Hunger raises his voice.

The deaf sea licks at the barren city.

About the Writer

Ali Al-Jamri is a Bahraini writer and educator. He is one of Manchester's inaugural Multilingual City Poets (2022-2025), a role in which he wrote and translated for the city. His poems, translations and essays have been published in journals and websites including ArabLit, Modern Poetry in Translation, Rowayat, The Markaz, Poetry Birmingham, Harana and in anthologies. He has co-authored teacher texts with HarperCollins and is the editor of *Between Two Islands: Poetry by Bahrainis in Britain* (No Disclaimers, 2021) and *ArabLit Quarterly: FOLK* (ArabLit, 2021). His Arts Council England-funded short film, *The Legend of the Looms* (2025), is a ghost story celebrating dialect poetry and folk culture of Lancashire and Bahrain.

