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RAFAL MALESZYK

# Something Missing In My Heart

## DANIEL LADINSKY ON THE GOD-INTOXICATED POETRY OF HAFIZ

ANDREW LAWLER

**A** New Orleans Mardi Gras parade clattered joyfully by the bookstore windows. Inside, Daniel Ladinsky paused while reading poems from his latest book, *The Purity of Desire: 100 Poems of Rumi*, so that his audience could dash outside to catch beads and candy and enjoy the spectacle of floats and drag queens and trombones and tubas. He was already prepared for the celebration: on one wrist sparkled purple and green bracelets.

If each holiday were assigned to a poet, Fat Tuesday would belong to Ladinsky. His “renderings” of the verse of ancient Persian poets are filled with wolf whistles, backwoods stills, and dance floors, and include a reference to a moon that “might fling a beehive into your undies” — which, he adds, should wake you up.

In the past two decades the sixty-four-year-old poet has attracted a swarm of admirers while stirring up a nest of angry critics. Ladinsky’s half dozen books are perennial bestsellers in the poetry category, earning widespread praise for popularizing the mystical verse of medieval Muslims among modern English-speakers of many faiths. They have also earned the ire of others who consider his work to be an act of charlatanry or spiritual opportunism and say he is dishonoring Iranian culture and Islamic tradition.

Most of Ladinsky’s work draws on Hafiz, a fourteenth-century court poet who lived in the Persian city of Shiraz. Little is known about Hafiz’s life, but his works celebrate the Divine as a dearly beloved, rather than as a remote being. His poems — rich with taverns flowing with wine, sensual nocturnal moments, and sunny gardens perfumed with flowers (the word *paradise* is of Persian origin) — were collected in a volume that is today as common in most Iranian and Afghan households as the Koran, and his tomb attracts pilgrims from around the world.

One such admirer of Hafiz was the spiritual teacher Meher Baba, whose name means “compassionate father” in Persian.

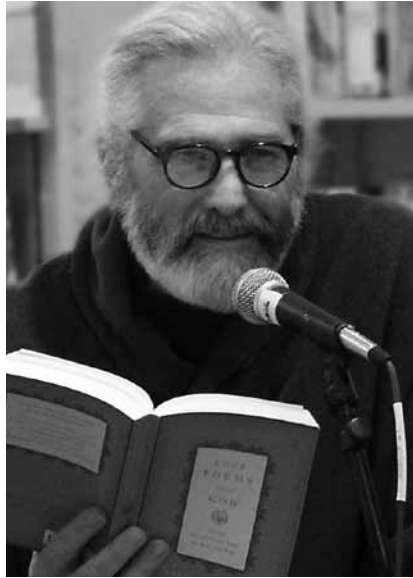
Raised as a Zoroastrian in India at the turn of the last century, Meher Baba was influenced by both Islam and Hinduism and became a respected mystic. He began to visit the West in the 1930s and established several centers around the world to perpetuate his teachings, which focused on charitable works, abstinence from drugs, and remembrance of God. The Who’s rock opera *Tommy* is dedicated to Meher Baba, who died in 1969, the year it was released. Meher Baba’s famous quote “Don’t worry, be happy” inspired posters, bumper stickers, and a hit song.

Ladinsky visited Meher Baba’s ashram, Meherabad, off and on for two decades beginning in the late seventies. At one point he lived there for six years, working at the free dispensary and spending time with Meher Baba’s inner circle. He ultimately left the intensity of that life — “I was feeling too much heat,” he says — and now lives next to the Meher Spiritual Center in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, when he is not at his farm in the Ozarks. His poetry and spiritual life, he says, are inseparable. More than once he told me, “If it weren’t for Meher Baba, my books wouldn’t exist.” Under the guidance of one of Meher Baba’s close disciples in the early 1990s, Ladinsky began to work on English renderings of Hafiz’s poems. In 1996 he published *The Subject Tonight Is Love: 60 Wild and Sweet Poems of Hafiz and I Heard God Laughing: Renderings of Hafiz*. Since then he has added *Love Poems from God: Twelve Sacred Voices from the East and West*; *The Gift: Poems by Hafiz, the Great Sufi Master*; and *A Year with Hafiz: Daily Contemplations*. Last year he published *The Purity of Desire*, a collection of Rumi renderings. “I’m probably one of the most successful poets in the world,” Ladinsky says in a manner that somehow does not come across as boastful.

One of his close friends told me that Ladinsky wakes up spouting poetry, and in conversation, when prose fails, he begins reciting verses by heart, growing still and closing his eyes.

*"Someone asked me why I close my eyes when I read my poems," he told me. "I said, 'Who makes love with their eyes open?'" There is an untamed quality to Ladinsky, a feral shyness. He is not a scholar, has trouble spelling, and is self-conscious about a slight stutter. He is clearly wounded by criticism of his work and was hesitant at first to speak to me at length. The interview was on and then off and then on again. Occasionally he will drive solo into the country in his Land Rover, hiking by day and sleeping in the car at night.*

*His once-black hair is still long but graying, and he has a beard that, with his kind eyes, gives him the look of a Santa Claus in Carhartts. He can swing abruptly from reserved and solitary to gregarious and giving. Before our first chat, at a coffee shop following his Mardi Gras reading, he apologized to three teenagers for inadvertently cutting in line. Though they protested that he hadn't, he pressed a few dollars into their hands and later inscribed two of his books to them as gifts, chatting affably, asking their birthdays, and reading each one the appropriate poem from A Year with Hafiz.*



DANIEL LADINSKY

**Lawler:** Do you always engage the world like that?

**Ladinsky:** Rumi and Hafiz can have a great effect on the young. They can safeguard them and point them in the right direction. They are like that Emmylou Harris song: "I would swim the sea for to ease your pain." They are pain eaters. I see fine poems, whether by Rumi or Hafiz or Mary Oliver or [Rainer Maria] Rilke or Walt Whitman, as baby salvations.

I think so many people in the West are fragmented, and if I hadn't been so fragmented when I was young, I would have felt the miracle of all this beauty that we are immersed in. The average person suffers all day long, and it is a rare moment when I'm not doing battle. If I have thirty minutes of peace in a day, that's a lot. And even then it comes in snatches of five minutes here and five minutes there. All creatures are doing everything they can to have a sense of well-being. Rumi and Hafiz can help you in those battles.

**Lawler:** What do you mean by "battles"?

**Ladinsky:** Rumi says:

Great lions can find peace in a cage.  
But we should only do that as a last resort.

So those bars I see that restrain your wings,  
I guess you won't mind if I pry them open.

Every single poem by Rumi and Hafiz offers people more freedom. What is freedom? It is not suffering from the tyranny of the past or the future, from the anxiety about tomorrow or the unresolved things of yesterday. It is seeing something of

the wonder of this moment. It is not a dull experience. The freer one becomes, the more magical the world. And if there is any sanity in us, all we care about is love. We want to be in love, because that is the greatest freedom in this mad, mad, mad world.

**Lawler:** So what is the obstacle to freedom?

**Ladinsky:** People are bruised from events in their lives, and bruises, whether physical or emotional, take time to heal. A serious bruise can impair the way you walk, talk, and feel. But you can use, say, a broken heart as a way to be present. Or you can be afraid to give up that heartache, because then the present will seem empty.

**Lawler:** Has your heart been broken?

**Ladinsky:** Yes, by two events. I lost two creatures I was closest to: a woman I was with for ten years, and my dog. I don't want to lose the memory of that which I love most. Who wants that, even if it causes heartache? Once you love something, you can't forget about it. And it might transform you. Hafiz says:

How did the rose ever open its heart and  
give to the world all of its beauty?

It felt the encouragement of light against  
its being, otherwise we all remain too  
frightened.

**Lawler:** How do you reconcile your commercial success with your spiritual pursuits?

**Ladinsky:** I have to be balanced. I sometimes have a couple of books in the top ten in Germany or Australia or the United States. It is amazing how Coleman [Barks, renderer of Rumi] has changed things. For fifty years *The Prophet*, by Khalil Gibran, was the king on the throne of spiritual classics, but recently Hafiz and Rumi — especially Rumi — are often at the top of the inspirational-and-religious category. And it's a tough category.

**Lawler:** So how is your ego doing?

**Ladinsky:** I don't think I have too much of a problem with it. My house is falling apart, my body is starting to fall apart, I have a broken heart, and I'm overwhelmed — though it's a fortunate problem to have — with opportunities I can't really manage. The books get rushed, and there are poems that aren't perfect. I have an ego. I can get nuts sometimes, and other times I can find equilibrium. Just today I went to get milk and lay there in the Land Rover and looked up at the sky and said, "I don't give a damn about this poetry reading tonight. I just want to lie here and look up at the sky. I don't want to be Danny. I'm glad the books are there, but it doesn't matter that my name is on them."

The six years I spent at Meherabad in India have been a fantastic aid. I had remarkable intimate contact with Eruch Jessawala [one of Meher Baba's disciples, who died in 2001]. I considered him a living saint, and he still affects my every hour. He was a genuine teacher. He was so profoundly, naturally humble. He's a part of me. He used to quote an ancient poet, saying that a person's pride and ego can be so hidden that it is like trying to see the black foot of an ant on a mountain a mile away. That is how careful one should be about saying one has no ego and pride, because they are so deeply concealed.

**Lawler:** You were born in the Midwest. How did you end up in India?

**Ladinsky:** After fooling around at a couple of small colleges, I enrolled at the University of Arizona when I was about twenty. I tooted down there in a Jaguar XK Roadster — my father was a wealthy developer in St. Louis, Missouri. I wasn't a serious student. I took nine hours of classes, smoked a little grass, and messed around in Mexico.

I started to spend a lot of time alone. In the desert outside Tucson I heard a persistent voice — it was nothing weird — saying, "What do you really want?" Given a choice, I knew I wanted what gave me the greatest pleasure, and that was being in love. In high school being in love had given me a sense of life and enthusiasm. So I wanted to love someone or something deeply, and somehow God got factored into this. I became my idea of a good boy, a virtual monk, quite the opposite of how I had been living. And out in the desert I experienced sublime beauty for the first time in my life. Amazingly, when I stopped all chemical ingestion, the experience didn't go away. It lasted continuously for more than two years. I was in a blessed state.

At one point I came across the book *God Speaks*, by Meher Baba, as well as my first Rumi poems. I wanted to find a living teacher to integrate this feeling, to go deeper. On the back of *God Speaks* were the addresses of five centers. I sent letters to all of them but got only one reply, from a sweet woman in Australia. That was too far away, so instead I traded in my Jaguar for a Jeep and outfitted it with gas cans. I felt drawn to the Andes Mountains and planned to drive there. But first I thought I would take a little detour, a thousand miles or so out of my way, to visit the center listed in South Carolina.

I pulled up at a motel in Myrtle and asked the guy behind the desk if he knew about a spiritual center, and he said it was just down the road. I parked on the highway outside the center and walked in the half mile or so. It's a beautiful place — five hundred acres on the ocean. I arrived in the winter, and it seemed deserted. Finally a woman asked me what I was doing. I said I was looking for someone who knew about life, love, and God. "Oh," she said, "you'd better talk to Kitty." Kitty Davy was a woman in her seventies who had spent fifteen years in India with Baba. We talked on the phone for a minute, and she invited me to her office. When I was ten feet away from her, I felt a huge wave of love hit me. I knew this was a person who knew about life, love, and God. I began weeping and even got down on one knee; she let me kiss her hand. Then she told me to sit down, asked if I was hungry, and ordered cheese sandwiches. She told me to just watch her work until the food came,

clearly as a way to ground me. I stayed for three or four months at the center and then got a place in town. She told the others that she had never seen someone in the West who was so God-intoxicated without any kind of meditation or other practice.

But I didn't become grounded, and after a few more months she called me in. Normally, she said, she would send someone like me, with no financial or emotional obligations, to India. "But you, Daniel, are in a rare state. The best thing you can do is go back to your family and get a job with your hands." She wanted to bring me down into the world. So that is what I did. I went back to my crazy family. I told my father I wanted to become a carpenter, and he said fine, he'd get me into carpentry school.

I got a job with a remarkable tyrant. I thought I could do this for the rest of my life: put me out on a subfloor, and I could

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nail forever. I had an enormous amount of endurance. One day I was nailing a huge roof that went on for what seemed a hundred yards, and I thought, What more could I want? I started whistling. My boss said, "This isn't any hootenanny out here. You can't whistle on the job!" And I thought, Boy, they are really trying to bring me down.

**Lawler:** You say you came from a crazy family. What was your experience as a child?

**Ladinsky:** I grew up in the St. Louis suburbs, and the woods became a real salvation for me. Maybe there was too much red meat and white bread and parents influenced by Frank Sinatra and Marilyn Monroe in my home. These are more lethal and burdening on young wings than we know. I would retreat to the woods alone with my dog, build a fire, and feel restored. Then I would go back inside. When I was thirteen or fourteen years old, I would just go out and sit in the doghouse. It was like a sweet little cave, a refuge.

**Lawler:** Was there much of a spiritual life in your family?

**Ladinsky:** I had no religious training, though I was baptized Catholic and circumcised Jewish. Before I graduated from high school, I don't think I heard the word *God* in our house more than

ten times, and then I was the one who'd brought it up. Sometimes, on my own, I would walk to the Catholic church when it was empty and say prayers. I just liked the quiet. My mom did once take my two brothers and me to a Unitarian church. As a teen I wanted for all of us to go to church once in a while.

**Lawler:** How did it affect your spiritual path to have both Catholic and Jewish identities in your family background?

**Ladinsky:** I think all people with a Jewish-sounding last name experience at some juncture in their lives, or perhaps at many, the poison of prejudice. It might be a certain look or something in the person's tone of voice. This experience affected me deeply. It made me want to counter prejudice from the core of my being. It is just at this moment becoming clear to me that as I worked with the poetry of the great ones, I probably looked for every opportunity I could find to counter hate and ignorance. Yes, I felt there must be other, truer beliefs than those I experienced from adults while growing up.

**Lawler:** What was your return home like as a twenty-something?

**Ladinsky:** A few years after the carpentry job, I started working for my father in his investment company and living a very worldly life. I wasn't angelic anymore. And for the first time I started to think that I wouldn't care if I died. I wasn't suicidal, but my life seemed empty. So I went back to the center in South Carolina. Kitty told me how good I looked, but I told her I wouldn't care if the moon fell on me. She said, "Do you really feel like that?" I said yes. She said that I was now ready to go to India. So I went in 1978 and met Meher Baba's sister and Eruch Jessawala, who became deeply significant to me. They changed my life. But though I'd planned to stay for months, I lasted only two weeks. It was like being locked in a room with [psychologist] Carl Jung, who wouldn't let you get away with any bullshit. They didn't do it consciously; it was just what happened when you were around them. And as soon as I got home, I knew I had to go back.

**Lawler:** What was your relationship to your teacher?

**Ladinsky:** Eruch was a low-key guy who wore baggy pants and a t-shirt. He never had private time outside his room or a small prayer hall, except when he went for a daily walk for an hour or two. He allowed me to walk with him hundreds of times, and he probably initiated conversation only twenty or thirty times. The first walk I took with him, he said, "Danny, I can't really speak candidly to Westerners, since they would be hurt. But since you are going to be staying with us over the years, I will tell you something I don't want you to forget: There is absolutely nothing I want to say and absolutely nothing I want to hear. If something stirs deep inside of you, and you need to spit it out, please make sure it comes from a sincere part of yourself."

Another time, walking on a gravel road lined with overhanging trees, he turned to me and said, "Danny, it's a shame you can't hear the sweet things the trees are saying this morning." I felt he was able to know things that weren't possible to know.

He was God's watchdog. And he'd been one of the most intimate disciples of someone who'd said he was the Avatar — Jesus and Buddha come again. Eruch was a perfect servant

of the Master — not words we like to use in the West. What does that servant want? To give 1,000 percent of his attention to the Beloved. I felt he was sticking his head in the toilet being with me, because to Eruch I wasn't real; there was only God. I was illusion, a mirage. Sitting with him one day, I had a distinct feeling that this guy was somehow more me than I was. It was startling. Yet I felt relief, as if all the weight was shifted onto him. It was as if you had a powerful friend who could do almost anything. I felt no concern. He was as close to a perfect teacher as I have come across. Only once out of the hundreds of times that I initiated conversation did he say, "Danny, I have a lot on my mind this morning. I'll get back to you." Only once! He almost apologized.

**Lawler:** It sounds as if Eruch helped you find the path to the poems. How did the relationship evolve?

**Ladinsky:** When one spends time around a true saint, a wedding begins to be planned in the saint's mind. At this juncture the one who has the grace to be hanging out with the saint may know nothing about the astounding great fortune that is waiting for him or her if he or she can just hang in there, be of at least a little service, and become a trusted friend. I feel married to my teacher, and a divorce is really impossible. I can draw upon him whenever I want. Our vows allow that. And I feel he can still give to me in remarkable ways, and even give to people who have not physically met him. If you google the name Eruch Jessawala, you can watch a five-minute video of him and form your own impression of this person who has affected every single poem I have ever written, including some four thousand original mutant haiku I scratched out in a one-year period. I have written some eight thousand poems. Praying like hell helped a bunch!

Here are a few words from a prayer that Eruch wrote, a prayer I said every day for seven years before picking up my pen in the morning: "Guard me, guide me, help me." I still try to say them every day. Why not?

**Lawler:** In one of your poems, you suggest that the litmus test for teachers is to hold them upside down over a cliff for a few hours. If they don't wet their pants, maybe you have found a real one.

**Ladinsky:** Yes, that's a Kabir rendering in *Love Poems from God*. What helped me accept Meher Baba's extraordinary claim to be the Avatar, since I did not personally meet him, was meeting Kitty and some men who'd spent their entire lives around him. I saw that these people were operating in another dimension. They would say it was because Meher Baba just boiled them down.

**Lawler:** Your poem also suggests a disillusionment with gurus — fleets of cars, sex scandals, and such. When does a teacher become an impediment to God?

**Ladinsky:** The real teacher? Never. This is tricky, because how many real ones are there? How do you know? One of the safeguards is that the teacher should be celibate or morally impeccable and seem to have no interest in monetary gain. Those are general rules that can help with an evaluation. I think there are genuine saints in the world, and one of the greatest things that can happen to you is to have a personal



relationship with someone like that — someone who not only cares about you but feels a deep responsibility for you. To jerk someone around sexually or financially — genuine spiritual teachers would die if they did that.

One of the famous saints of India is Sai Baba of Shirdi, who died in 1918. When people came to him, he supposedly would say right off, “Give me all the money in your pockets.” He wore rags. He didn’t care about your money. He would take it and give it away or throw it away. He was doing that for you.

**Lawler:** How did you reconcile the traditional beliefs of an Indian teacher with your own liberal-minded, American way of thinking?

**Ladinsky:** I’ll give you an example of how Eruch operated. One day someone asked him what Meher Baba thought about homosexuality. He answered the question in the most conservative fashion, the way Billy Graham or Jerry Falwell would on TV. He worked me into an internal frenzy. I felt like shaking him and saying, “How could you possibly talk like that?” Then

he said, “That’s what some people might have *thought* Meher Baba said. But what’s my own personal experience of having been with him for more than thirty years? There is just one luminous existence; there is just one sacred well from which all thoughts and acts happen, and any interaction between human beings, especially that of romance and affection and giving comfort, is holy. All action between human beings is holy.”

**Lawler:** Consciously submitting to another person is not something that comes naturally to most people in our society. How did you do this?

**Ladinsky:** In 1978, on one of my first visits to India, I came across three couplets of Hafiz that Meher Baba particularly liked — this was years before I knew I would be working with Hafiz. I thought that I could walk off to the mountains with one couplet and spend the rest of my days contemplating it and living the words. I saw in the words a golden key to unlock a lot of doors: “Whatever my Master does / is of the highest benefit

to all concerned.” Most people don’t know that all of Rumi’s and Hafiz’s poems are intimately connected with the Master, or God, or the Beloved. To me this couplet means that whatever happens is of the highest benefit to all concerned. That is, whatever God does is of the highest benefit. And I think there really is just one doer pulling all the strings. Because if there is a God — and I want my words to be exact — if God is a reality, if God’s attributes are infinite knowledge, infinite power, and omnipresence, then there is nothing outside of God. Period. Teachers have used couplets like this for centuries to shift the focus from them to God. Imagine your teacher reading you this poem by Hafiz:

Don’t surrender your loneliness so quickly.  
Let it cut more deep.

Let it ferment and season you as few  
human or even divine ingredients can.

Something missing in my heart tonight  
has made my eyes so soft,

my voice so tender, my need of God  
absolutely clear.

This moves the attention from the teacher to Hafiz.

I think the smartest thing you can do is fucking chain yourself to that real teacher and let him kill you.

**Lawler:** How did Eruch encourage your work with Hafiz?

**Ladinsky:** I would go so far as to say that my teacher choreographed my work with these poems. It takes a lot for me to get up and read these poems in public, and to butt heads with a few so-called scholars who have given me some horrible reviews, or to take a single line from Hafiz and turn it into a twelve-line poem. I could do that only with the sanction of my teacher.

He had the closest thing I’ve found to a perfect ear. I would bounce poems off him, usually reciting them as we walked. One night I was working off Henry Wilberforce-Clarke’s nineteenth-century translations. A twelve-line poem might have forty or fifty or sixty lines of explanation. I came across half a sentence in a poem, and images began to come to me, and I thought, This could turn into a whole poem. I wrote it out longhand and became excited. I decided to risk disturbing Eruch, and rather miraculously he was sitting by himself on a porch, listening to the BBC. It is so enchanting there at night, at this desert oasis. I read the poem, and he said, “Let me see that,” and he put on his glasses. “This is pretty good, Danny, but there’s one place in which Hafiz would have said it differently.” He switched one word to focus more on the Beloved. “That would have been Hafiz’s preference,” he added. All of Hafiz’s poems, like Rumi’s, are deeply rooted in the love of his Master.

**Lawler:** Hafiz is Iran’s most beloved poet. Have you had second thoughts, as an American, about putting your name together with his?

**Ladinsky:** Twenty years ago I read my first Hafiz ren-

dering to Eruch. He said, “Aren’t you from a Jewish family?” I said, “I have a Jewish name, and my father was Jewish.” He said, “Danny, you would be risking your life tampering with one of Islam’s literary treasures.” My response was that my life isn’t worth shit. I had the sense that this work was about more than me.

Another time I read him this poem:

I know the one you are looking for.  
I call that man Muhammad’s twin.

You once saw him, so now your eyes  
are weaving a great net of tenderness

that will one day capture God.

Eruch playfully said that people weren’t going to like the suggestion that Muhammad had a twin. “They might kill you for that — but it would be worth it.”

On the verge of my first book coming out — *I Heard God Laughing: Renderings of Hafiz* — I told Eruch it would create a stir. People would ask him why he’d allowed me to put Hafiz’s name on this book. I asked if he would stand behind me. He said a remarkable thing: “Danny, if someone comes to me and says you are crazy and asks why didn’t I stop you, I will say to them that all the poems have passed through the most discerning regions of your heart. I will say more than that — that all of Danny’s poems have come from *my* heart. You can say anything you want, and I will stand behind it.” That was a most remarkable statement. When he was dying, I called and said I would like to come and take care of him. He said no, I should stay in the U.S. and do the work that he’d given me. That was more than a decade ago, and I haven’t been back to India.

**Lawler:** What has the reaction been in Iran to your books?

**Ladinsky:** When *The Gift* came out, a copy reached Iran, and a publisher there bootlegged the book — they reprinted it and only took out part of the introduction. Then they were called before the inquisition, and the book was banned from Iran. But I’m told there are Iranians who love it. I have a copy of that bootlegged publication, and it is a charming, lovely little hard-bound book.

**Lawler:** Do you get much feedback from your readers?

**Ladinsky:** Sure. You witnessed what happened with those young people just now. And recently I’ve had a request from an author to reprint a poem that was very helpful to her as she cared for her dying mother. Another writer, I just learned, plans to include in her book a poem from *I Heard God Laughing* because she credits it with saving the life of her daughter, who had stopped eating because of psychological problems and was heading toward death. Somehow this poem “got in” and helped when nothing else seemed able to. The poem goes:

There is a beautiful creature living in  
a hole you have dug,

so at night I set fruit and grains,  
and little pots of wine and milk,

beside your soft earthen mounds, and  
I often sing to you,

but still, my dear, you do not come out.

I have fallen in love with someone who  
is hiding inside of you.

We should talk about this problem, otherwise  
I will never leave you alone!

**Lawler:** So where does Hafiz end and Daniel Ladinsky begin?

**Ladinsky:** You remember the movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*? I have had a close encounter with Hafiz in the most extraordinary way. I don't know why he picked me out of billions of people, but he put something into me that has affected every single poem I have written. And I pray like hell for help. Is it Hafiz or Danny? I don't know. Does it really matter? All I know is, there is something in my books that many feel is of wondrous value and that may help those who are drowning.

His original work would be far more stunning than any rendering. My teacher said that what Hafiz in part did was to put the Koran, which he knew by heart, into unique poetry for the average Persian-speaker. But there are so many blanks with Hafiz. We don't even really know when he was born or died. There are, I hear, different versions of his poems in Persian. Some argue that there are around five hundred poems; others, close to a thousand. There is not, I believe, one single poem in his handwriting, although it's accepted that he was a professional copyist. As far as I know, all we have is his signature on a document. There probably are a lot more questions about attribution with Hafiz than we have about, say, Shakespeare. Some Muslim clergy would have been keen to eradicate words that were so liberating. My poems are based on what I think is the genuine spirit of Hafiz, something he could have said. Sometimes, by the time I'm finished with one poem, there are poems within poems that can come from one line. That of course makes them in no way translations.

**Lawler:** Such as your "Moses and the Pinup Girl"?

**Ladinsky:** It's a wild rendering. A friend of mine who has researched Hafiz says that just the way Saint Francis found Jesus through the perfect denial of the senses, so Hafiz — in absolute discipline under the guidance of the Master — found God by exploring every single desire that a human being might have. Now, a Muslim scholar might get frantic over this poem, but it presents an undeniable truth: "Who is to say that Moses was not sweet on a local pinup girl, and pinup boy, / and when Moses was not acting like a religious wild man / they often appeared as a damn cute / threesome?"

Yeah, who *can* say? So, scholars, lighten up!

**Lawler:** Some modern scholars argue that your poems are

nothing more than your own work, couched as Hafiz's.

**Ladinsky:** Yes, some people say that there isn't a single poem of mine that can be documented as Hafiz. That's ridiculous. A serious scholar could never say that. "See the kind nature of the tavern master / In his loving eyes, everything we rowdy drunkards do is beautiful." My rendering is: "Know the true nature of your Beloved. / In His loving eyes, your every thought, word, and movement is always, always beautiful."

**Lawler:** When the Canadian prime minister recited one of your Hafiz poems, no one could find anything similar in the traditional Hafiz canon.

**Ladinsky:** "Even after all this time / the sun never says to the earth, / 'You owe Me.' / Look what happens with a love like that, / it lights the whole sky." If that isn't in the spirit of Hafiz, I don't know what is! I've come to believe that the deeper one studies Hafiz, the less of a foundation there is to have an intelligent debate about what he actually said.

And some of my greatest critics have come from my community, like Rick Chapman, who wrote *Stealing Hafiz*. He says

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in his introduction that he is jealous of my work. He sent me a signed copy of the book with a cordial greeting. I thought he'd lost his mind. Lots of books with the name Hafiz on them are available, and I think there is a reason mine do as well as they do. The beautiful, sacred, and vital truths won't die. When captured in words by grace, they will take root.

**Lawler:** Do you feel there is any validity in critiques of your work?

**Ladinsky:** Hafiz is one of the literary treasures of the world, and a jewel in the crown of Islamic and mystical verse. I began working with Hafiz by studying Persian, but then I started to rely almost entirely on English translations of Hafiz in the public domain. I feel I have seen Hafiz's soul as probably very few have, and I feel he has sanctioned my work in profound ways. How could it then not happen that some scholars — or anyone with a great love for Hafiz via the Persian language — would not be tremendously challenged by my claims and work? It is to be expected, and I am sure it will continue.



**Lawler:** What kind of person was Hafiz?

**Ladinsky:** As I said, not much factual information about his life exists. But Meher Baba and Eruch were able to say some things that, to me, rang very true and were thus a big help to my work. Imagine a great poet-saint and realized being who has all the trimmings, who emits an intoxicating aroma, as well as light, and who can play great bluegrass and jazz; someone who can crank anyone's party way, way up. He is an atmosphere so pure, one that we long to breathe.

**Lawler:** What is the difference between the poetry of Rumi and the poetry of Hafiz?

**Ladinsky:** With Rumi, we can see a true shadow of him in English. The only way we can see that shadow with Hafiz is to take great liberties, and that is going to create a big ruckus.

When you work with Rumi you have the luxury of walking into an existing building, a magnificent skyscraper. And you can move around the furniture or paint a wall or open up another window. I feel that so much has been lost of Hafiz and his true genius that sometimes you are working off incomplete blueprints. You are gluing together bricks, building from the foundation up, and that is going to create a certain controversy. And I wouldn't be able to bear it without the backing of a teacher who I felt had some authority, and unless I felt some inner sanction. I wouldn't be able to bear the cruel, cruel interactions with some people about it.

**Lawler:** But how do you think Hafiz and Rumi differ as poets?

**Ladinsky:** To any fully enlightened soul there is only God, or divine light and infinite knowledge. Any perfect poet — and I feel both Rumi and Hafiz were — experiences existence non-dualistically. They live as one. I don't think they would see *any* difference between themselves. Any difference we might see is due to our transitory and distorted perception. Rumi, Hafiz, you, me — these are just costumes that came to life when the Beloved wiped his lips with us for whatever drunk, wild reason.

**Lawler:** How do you think Hafiz and Rumi would react to your renderings? They were, after all, living in devoutly Islamic societies far removed from our modern age.

**Ladinsky:** I had four remarkable dreams or visions connected to Hafiz. In one I saw something many would call "God." I had just gotten to about the thousandth rendering of Hafiz, and this was before any of my Hafiz books were published. In the vision God said, "I thank you for doing this work for Me. You have removed a headache. May your verse always be sweet." My guess is, Hafiz might say, "Right on, cowboy." I don't think either he or Rumi would shoot me.

**Lawler:** Why do Rumi and Hafiz seem to strike such a chord with modern Westerners?

**Ladinsky:** In some ways we are all like very hungry dogs. The intelligent person of faith needs a special kind of gourmet nourishment for emotional, psychological, and no-bullshit spiritual support. Hafiz and Rumi are the masters at providing this. I have seen renderings of Kabir that also do the same. And then there are stunning poems by Rilke and many others, some of whom I have also worked with. But Hafiz and Rumi, for now, seem to be the rightful reigning kings, cooking and serving the

best royal grub.

**Lawler:** What does it mean to "render" a poem? Is rendering a poem that's already been translated from a foreign language a kind of spiritual exercise for you?

**Ladinsky:** My connection to Hafiz is something far, far deeper than anything to do with what might be called a "rendering" of his work. The relevant definition of *render* here is "to interpret." I have done that creatively with what's available in the English language. And I have prayed hundreds of times for help with this. Of course working with the poetry of the great ones is a spiritual exercise, one I take very seriously. I typically begin in the early morning after doing some yoga and saying some prayers.

**Lawler:** Do you have a particular spiritual practice?

**Ladinsky:** I've always felt that if I could sit long enough and quiet enough, I would deepen my awareness. And I hope someday to get more serious about that, although meditation is not really emphasized in my spiritual community. We are mostly into study and selfless service and internal remembrance — repetition of whatever is one's most cherished name of God. On Meher Baba's tomb it says: "Mastery in Servitude." I would say that I've served this work with all my heart and mind for about twenty years. I've personally packed and shipped forty thousand copies of my first book, when it was still self-published. Even today I packed a book to a friend's Tibetan teacher. I packed it as if it were the only book I would ever pack in my whole life. If there is a God, and someone ever said to me, "Danny, do you think God ever asked you to do something?" I would say he asked me to do this work, to write my poems!

**Lawler:** Why did you leave India?

**Ladinsky:** At one point while we were walking, Eruch turned to me and said, "Danny, tell me the truth. Aren't you just counting the days until you can leave me and this place?" I said, "Yes, this place is killing me. I'm dying here. It is turning me inside out." He said, "I just wanted to hear your response." He said, "That is the nature of being around real teachers: they are going to annihilate you, kill you. Kill you." Baba said that the more dead you are to yourself, the more extraordinary your experiences become. The more dead you are to yourself, the greater your awareness and power. It is one of the great ironies. And to be boiled down to gold is no joke. I'm not gold, but I know something of this process. It can be living hell. Most of the pyrite is gone. Sometimes I'm silver.

**Lawler:** You used that phrase "boiled down" earlier. What does it mean?

**Ladinsky:** A lot of the so-called teachers these days are not fully cooked themselves. A trusted friend or teacher who has some wisdom and your best interest at heart can be a treasure. I feel that the real teacher, though, at some point will cease playing patty-cake and break you in two. This can be an excruciating process and the start of a marvelous transformation that may then go on for the rest of one's life. It is said Hafiz was ground to dust by his Master over a forty-year period and thus became nothing. But, oh, what a glorious nil that is: "I am a hole in a flute / that the Christ's breath moves through / — listen to this music," says a line in one of my Hafiz books. And

# POEMS BY HAFIZ

versions by DANIEL LADINSKY

## With That Moon Language

Admit something: Everyone you see, you say to them, "Love me."

Of course you do not do this out loud, otherwise someone would call the cops.

Still, though, think about this, this great pull in us to connect.

Why not become the one who lives with a full moon in each eye that is always saying,

with that sweet moon language, what every other eye in this world is dying to hear?

## Two Giant Fat People

God and I have become like two giant fat people living in a tiny boat.

We keep bumping into each other and laughing.

*"With That Moon Language" is reprinted from Love Poems from God: Twelve Sacred Voices from the East and West, by Daniel Ladinsky. Copyright © 2002 by Daniel Ladinsky. "Two Giant Fat People" is reprinted from The Gift: Poems by Hafiz, the Great Sufi Master, by Daniel Ladinsky. Copyright © 1999 by Daniel Ladinsky. Both books are published by the Penguin Group. The poems appear here by permission of the author.*

— Ed.

what is more nothing than being a hole in something else? But look what can happen then. Look what one can then give. I am boiled or distilled some, but there is still a lot of Danny lurking here and there. I often feel far from enlightened.

**Lawler:** You once said that all acts and thoughts are inherently selfish. What did you mean?

**Ladinsky:** There are, in a way, only selfish acts. But at some point one's acts become more intelligent. For me a saint is someone who acts from a place of intelligent selfishness. They benefit themselves *and* others. The person operating from ignorant selfishness and fear often hurts themselves and those close to them.

The small man shackles everyone he can.  
While the sage, who has to duck his head  
when the moon is low,

keeps dropping keys and jeweled hacksaws  
all night long — for us beautiful rowdy  
prisoners.

That's a Hafiz poem. Someone put it on a greeting card.

**Lawler:** Do you enjoy the writing?

**Ladinsky:** At times tremendously. But there are excruciating hours, mainly in the later stages of a book. I would say that with 90 percent of the poems I have published, the rough drafts were written as fast as I could write. That was often intoxicating and wonderfully consuming. I literally rock back and forth at times, since I can't fully control all the energy that passes through me. After that, I can spend hours and hours trying to fine-tune those drafts. All that labor seems natural. In these twenty years maybe only four or five times have I encountered what might be called "writer's block." When it happened, it would seem so absolute and insurmountable, I'd feel like I would never write again. It would bring me to a place of surrender, and I would wonder how I wrote so much in the first place. And then a few words would come to mind, usually within a few minutes, and I would see a poem in them.

**Lawler:** What are you working on now?

**Ladinsky:** If the moon doesn't fall on me, I am going to crank out another twenty books before I die. Very wishful thinking, but I'm going to try. I have an idea for a series of haiku books. And I am working on a novel called *For a Tender Heart*.

**Lawler:** Do you turn to your published poems on occasion?

**Ladinsky:** Some of the best mornings in my life have been spent reading verses from my own work. I can begin to laugh and weep in gratitude, as I hear others have. Just yesterday I started clapping and screaming the words of Hafiz and Rumi in a kind of ecstasy. I was in a safe place to do that, where no one would call 911. That can be the effect of great poetry — which hopefully includes some of my work — on the open-minded reader. But I really don't think of them as "my" poems. My published works are beyond what my little brain could come up with. They are what they are: a mickey God slipped into this world. ■