



# THE PROPHET



## I. THE ARRIVAL OF THE SHIP

**A**lmustafa, the chosen and the beloved, who was a dawn onto his own day, had waited twelve years in the city of Orphalese for his ship that was to return and bear him back to the isle of his birth.

And in the twelfth year, on the seventh day of lelool, the month of reaping, he climbed the hill without the city walls and looked seaward; and he beheld the ship coming with the mist.

Then the gates of his heart were flung open, and his joy flew far over the sea. And he closed his eyes and prayed in the silences of his soul.

But he descended the hill, a sadness came upon him, and he thought in his heart:

How shall I go in peace and without sorrow? Nay, not without a wound in the spirit shall I leave this city.

Long were the days of pain I have spent within its walls, and long were the nights of aloneness; and who can depart from his pain and his aloneness without regret?

Too many fragments of the spirit have I scattered in these streets, and too many are the children of my longing that walk naked among these hills, and I cannot withdraw from them without a burden and an ache.

It is not a garment I cast off this day, but a skin that I tear with my own hands.

Nor is it a thought I leave behind me, but a heart made sweet with hunger and with thirst.

Yet I cannot tarry longer.

The sea that calls all things unto her calls me, and I must embark.

For to stay, though the hours burn in the night, is to freeze and crystallize and be bound in a mould.

Fain would I take with me all that is here. But how shall I?

A voice cannot carry the tongue and the lips that give it wings. Alone must it seek the ether.

And alone and without his nest shall the eagle fly across the sun.

Now when he reached the foot of the hill, he turned again towards the sea, and he saw his ship approaching the harbor, and upon her prow the mariners, the men of his own land.

And his soul cried out to them, and he said:

Sons of my ancient mother, you riders of the tides, How often have you sailed in my dreams. And now you come in my awakening, which is my deeper dream.

Ready am I to go, and my eagerness with sails full set awaits the wind.

Only another breath will I breathe in this still air, only another loving look cast backward,

Then I shall stand among you, a seafarer among seafarers.

And you, vast sea, sleepless mother, Who alone are peace and freedom to the river and the stream,

Only another winding will this stream make, only another murmur in this glade,

And then shall I come to you, a boundless drop to a boundless ocean.

And as he walked he saw from afar men and women leaving their fields and their vineyards and hastening towards the city gates.

And he heard their voices calling his name, and shouting from the field to field telling one another of the coming of the ship.

And he said to himself:

Shall the day of parting be the day of gathering?

And shall it be said that my eve was in truth my dawn?

And what shall I give unto him who has left his plough in midfurrow, or to him who has stopped the wheel of his winepress?

Shall my heart become a tree heavy-laden with fruit that I may gather and give unto them?  
 And shall my desires flow like a fountain that I may fill their cups?  
 Am I a harp that the hand of the mighty may touch me, or a flute that his breath may pass through me?  
 A seeker of silences am I, and what treasure have I found in silences that I may dispense with confidence?  
 If this is my day of harvest, in what fields have I sowed the seed, and in what unremembered seasons?  
 If this indeed be the hour in which I lift up my lantern, it is not my flame that shall burn therein.  
 Empty and dark shall I raise my lantern,  
 And the guardian of the night shall fill it with oil and he shall light it also.  
 These things he said in words. But much in his heart remained unsaid. For he himself could not speak his deeper secret.  
 And when he entered into the city all the people came to meet him, and they were crying out to him as with one voice.  
 And the elders of the city stood forth and said:  
 Go not yet away from us.  
 A noontide have you been in our twilight, and your youth has given us dreams to dream.  
 No stranger are you among us, nor a guest, but our son and our dearly beloved.  
 Suffer not yet our eyes to hunger for your face.  
 And the priests and the priestesses said unto him:  
 Let not the waves of the sea separate us now, and the years you have spent in our midst become a memory.  
 You have walked among us a spirit, and your shadow has been a light upon our faces.  
 Much have we loved you. But speechless was our love, and with veils has it been veiled.  
 Yet now it cries aloud unto you, and would stand revealed before you.  
 And ever has it been that love knows not its own depth until the hour of separation.  
 And others came also and entreated him.  
 But he answered them not. He only bent his head; and those who stood near saw his tears falling upon his breast.  
 And he and the people proceeded towards the great square before the temple.  
 And there came out of the sanctuary a woman whose name was Almitra. And she was a seeress.

And he looked upon her with exceeding tenderness, for it was she who had first sought and believed in him when he had been but a day in their city.  
 And she hailed him, saying:  
 Prophet of God, in quest for the uttermost, long have you searched the distances for your ship.  
 And now your ship has come, and you must needs go.  
 Deep is your longing for the land of your memories and the dwelling place of your greater desires; and our love would not bind you nor our needs hold you.  
 Yet this we ask ere you leave us, that you speak to us and give us of your truth.  
 And we will give it unto our children, and they unto their children, and it shall not perish.  
 In your aloneness you have watched with our days, and in your wakefulness you have listened to the weeping and the laughter of our sleep.  
 Now therefore disclose us to ourselves, and tell us all that has been shown you of that which is between birth and death.  
 And he answered,  
 People of Orphalese, of what can I speak save of that which is even now moving your souls?

*[tarry – zögern; embark – aufbrechen; bound in a mould – gefangen ohne Entwicklung; exceeding tenderness – übergroße Zärtlichkeit]*



Then said Almitra, "Speak to us of **Love**."  
 And he raised his head and looked upon the people, and there fell a stillness upon them.  
 And with a great voice he said:  
 When love beckons to you follow him,  
 Though his ways are hard and steep.  
 And when his wings enfold you yield to him,  
 Though the sword hidden among his pinions may wound you.  
 And when he speaks to you believe in him,  
 Though his voice may shatter your dreams as the north wind lays waste the garden.  
 For even as love crowns you so shall he crucify you. Even as he is for your growth so is he for your pruning.

Even as he ascends to your height and caresses  
your tenderest branches that quiver in the sun,  
So shall he descend to your roots and shake them  
in their clinging to the earth.

Like sheaves of corn he gathers you unto himself.  
He threshes you to make you naked.

He sifts you to free you from your husks.

He grinds you to whiteness.

He kneads you until you are pliant;

And then he assigns you to his sacred fire, that  
you may become sacred bread for God's sacred  
feast.

All these things shall love do unto you that you  
may know the secrets of your heart, and in that  
knowledge become a fragment of Life's heart.

But if in your fear you would seek only love's  
peace and love's pleasure,  
Then it is better for you that you cover your na-  
kedness and pass out of love's threshing-floor,  
Into the seasonless world where you shall laugh,  
but not all of your laughter, and weep, but not all  
of your tears.

Love gives naught but itself and takes naught but  
from itself.

Love possesses not nor would it be possessed;  
For love is sufficient unto love.

When you love you should not say, "God is in my  
heart," but rather, I am in the heart of God."

And think not you can direct the course of love, for  
love, if it finds you worthy, directs your course.

Love has no other desire but to fulfil itself.

But if you love and must needs have desires, let  
these be your desires:

To melt and be like a running brook that sings its  
melody to the night.

To know the pain of too much tenderness.

To be wounded by your own understanding of  
love;

And to bleed willingly and joyfully.

To wake at dawn with a winged heart and give  
thanks for another day of loving;

To rest at the noon hour and meditate love's  
ecstasy;

To return home at eventide with gratitude;

And then to sleep with a prayer for the beloved in  
your heart and a song of praise upon your lips.

*[beckon - rufen; yield - hingeben; pruning - be-  
schneiden; thresh - dreschen; sift - sieben; grind -  
mahlen; knead - kneten; husk - Spreu; pliant -  
geschmeidig/gefügig; brook - Bach]*



Then Almitra spoke again and said, "And  
what of **Marriage**, master?"

And he answered saying:

You were born together, and together you shall be  
forevermore.

You shall be together when white wings of death  
scatter your days.

Aye, you shall be together even in the silent  
memory of God.

But let there be spaces in your togetherness,  
And let the winds of the heavens dance between  
you.

Love one another but make not a bond of love:  
Let it rather be a moving sea between the shores  
of your souls.

Fill each other's cup but drink not from one cup.

Give one another of your bread but eat not from  
the same loaf.

Sing and dance together and be joyous, but let  
each one of you be alone,

Even as the strings of a lute are alone though they  
quiver with the same music.

Give your hearts, but not into each other's keep-  
ing.

For only the hand of Life can contain your hearts.

And stand together, yet not too near together:

For the pillars of the temple stand apart,

And the oak tree and the cypress grow not in each  
other's shadow.

*[lute - Laute]*



And a woman who held a babe against her  
bosom said, "Speak to us of **Children**."

And he said:

Your children are not your children.

They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing  
for itself.

They come through you but not from you,

And though they are with you, yet they belong not  
to you.

You may give them your love but not your  
thoughts.

For they have their own thoughts.  
 You may house their bodies but not their souls,  
 For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow,  
 which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.  
 You may strive to be like them, but seek not to  
 make them like you.  
 For life goes not backward nor tarries with yester-  
 day.  
 You are the bows from which your children as  
 living arrows are sent forth.  
 The archer sees the mark upon the path of the  
 infinite, and He bends you with His might that His  
 arrows may go swift and far.  
 Let your bending in the archer's hand be for  
 gladness;  
 For even as he loves the arrow that flies, so He  
 loves also the bow that is stable.



Then an old man, a keeper of an inn, said,  
 "Speak to us of **Eating and Drinking.**"  
 And he said:  
 Would that you could live on the fragrance of the  
 earth, and like an air plant be sustained by the  
 light.  
 But since you must kill to eat, and rob the young  
 of its mother's milk to quench your thirst, let it then  
 be an act of worship,  
 And let your board stand an altar on which the  
 pure and the innocent of forest and plain are  
 sacrificed for that which is purer and still more  
 innocent in many.  
 When you kill a beast say to him in your heart,  
 "By the same power that slays you, I to am slain;  
 and I too shall be consumed.  
 For the law that delivered you into my hand shall  
 deliver me into a mightier hand.  
 Your blood and my blood is naught but the sap  
 that feeds the tree of heaven."  
 And when you crush an apple with your teeth, say  
 to it in your heart,  
 "Your seeds shall live in my body,  
 And the buds of your tomorrow shall blossom in  
 my heart,  
 And your fragrance shall be my breath,  
 And together we shall rejoice through all the  
 seasons."

And in the autumn, when you gather the grapes of  
 your vineyard for the winepress, say in you heart,  
 "I to am a vineyard, and my fruit shall be gathered  
 for the winepress,  
 And like new wine I shall be kept in eternal ves-  
 sels."  
 And in winter, when you draw the wine, let there  
 be in your heart a song for each cup;  
 And let there be in the song a remembrance for  
 the autumn days, and for the vineyard, and for the  
 winepress.

[inn - Schenke; fragrance - wohltuender Duft; slay -  
 töten; sap - Lebenssaft; buds - Knospen; vessels -  
 Gefäße]



Then a plowman said, "Speak to us of  
**Work.**" And he answered, saying:  
 You work that you may keep pace with the earth  
 and the soul of the earth.  
 For to be idle is to become a stranger unto the  
 seasons, and to step out of life's procession, that  
 marches in majesty and proud submission to-  
 wards the infinite.  
 When you work you are a flute through whose  
 heart the whispering of the hours turns to music.  
 Which of you would be a reed, dumb and silent,  
 when all else sings together in unison?  
 Always you have been told that work is a curse  
 and a labor, a misfortune.  
 But I say to you that when you work you fulfil  
 a part of earth's furthest dream, assigned to you  
 when that dream was born,  
 And in keeping yourself with labor you are in truth  
 loving life,  
 And to love life through labor is to be intimate with  
 life's inmost secret.  
 But if you in your pain call birth an affliction and  
 the support of the flesh a curse written upon your  
 brow, then I answer that naught but the sweat of  
 your brow shall wash away that which is written.  
 You have been told also life is darkness, and in  
 your weariness you echo what was said by the  
 weary.  
 And I say that life is indeed darkness save when  
 there is urge,

And all urge is blind save when there is knowledge,  
 And all knowledge is vain save when there is work,  
 And all work is empty save when there is love;  
 And when you work with love you bind yourself to yourself, and to one another, and to God.  
 And what is it to work with love?  
 It is to weave the cloth with threads drawn from your heart, even as if your beloved were to wear that cloth.  
 It is to build a house with affection, even as if your beloved were to dwell in that house.  
 It is to sow seeds with tenderness and reap the harvest with joy, even as if your beloved were to eat the fruit.  
 It is to charge all things you fashion with a breath of your own spirit,  
 And to know that all the blessed dead are standing about you and watching.  
 Often have I heard you say, as if speaking in sleep, "he who works in marble, and finds the shape of his own soul in the stone, is a nobler than he who ploughs the soil.  
 And he who seizes the rainbow to lay it on a cloth in the likeness of man, is more than he who makes the sandals for our feet."  
 But I say, not in sleep but in the over-wakefulness of noontide, that the wind speaks not more sweetly to the giant oaks than to the least of all the blades of grass;  
 And he alone is great who turns the voice of the wind into a song made sweeter by his own loving.  
 Work is love made visible.  
 And if you cannot work with love but only with distaste, it is better that you should leave your work and sit at the gate of the temple and take alms of those who work with joy.  
 For if you bake bread with indifference, you bake a bitter bread that feeds but half man's hunger.  
 And if you grudge the crushing of the grapes, your grudge distils a poison in the wine.  
 And if you sing though as angels, and love not the singing, you muffle man's ears to the voices of the day and the voices of the night.

*[plowman – Pflüger; reed – Schilf; affliction – Bürde; brow – Stirn; marble – Marmor; blade of grass – Grashalme; grudge – Groll/Widerwille; grapes – Weintrauben]*



Then a woman said, "Speak to us of **Joy and Sorrow.**" And he answered:

Your joy is your sorrow unmasked.  
 And the selfsame well from which your laughter rises was oftentimes filled with your tears.  
 And how else can it be?  
 The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain.  
 Is not the cup that hold your wine the very cup that was burned in the potter's oven?  
 And is not the lute that soothes your spirit, the very wood that was hollowed with knives?  
 When you are joyous, look deep into your heart and you shall find it is only that which has given you sorrow that is giving you joy.  
 When you are sorrowful look again in your heart, and you shall see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight.  
 Some of you say, "Joy is greater than sorrow," and others say, "Nay, sorrow is the greater."  
 But I say unto you, they are inseparable.  
 Together they come, and when one sits alone with you at your board, remember that the other is asleep upon your bed.  
 Verily you are suspended like scales between your sorrow and your joy.  
 Only when you are empty are you at standstill and balanced.  
 When the treasure-keeper lifts you to weigh his gold and his silver, needs must your joy or your sorrow rise or fall.

*[carve – graben; soothe – besänftigen; suspend like scales – in der Schweben wie Waagschalen]*



Then a mason came forth and said, "Speak to us of **Houses.**"

And he answered and said:  
 Build of your imaginings a bower in the wilderness ere you build a house within the city walls.  
 For even as you have home-comings in your twilight, so has the wanderer in you, the ever distant and alone.

Your house is your larger body.  
 It grows in the sun and sleeps in the stillness of the night; and it is not dreamless. Does not your house dream? And dreaming, leave the city for grove or hilltop?  
 Would that I could gather your houses into my hand, and like a sower scatter them in forest and meadow.  
 Would the valleys were your streets, and the green paths your alleys, that you might seek one another through vineyards, and come with the fragrance of the earth in your garments.  
 But these things are not yet to be.  
 In their fear your forefathers gathered you too near together. And that fear shall endure a little longer. A little longer shall your city walls separate your hearths from your fields.  
 And tell me, people of Orphalese, what have you in these houses? And what is it you guard with fastened doors?  
 Have you peace, the quiet urge that reveals your power?  
 Have you remembrances, the glimmering arches that span the summits of the mind?  
 Have you beauty, that leads the heart from things fashioned of wood and stone to the holy mountain?  
 Tell me, have you these in your houses?  
 Or have you only comfort, and the lust for comfort, that stealthy thing that enters the house a guest, and becomes a host, and then a master?  
 Ay, and it becomes a tamer, and with hook and scourge makes puppets of your larger desires.  
 Though its hands are silken, its heart is of iron.  
 It lulls you to sleep only to stand by your bed and jeer at the dignity of the flesh.  
 It makes mock of your sound senses, and lays them in thistledown like fragile vessels.  
 Verily the lust for comfort murders the passion of the soul, and then walks grinning in the funeral.  
 But you, children of space, you restless in rest, you shall not be trapped nor tamed.  
 Your house shall be not an anchor but a mast.  
 It shall not be a glistening film that covers a wound, but an eyelid that guards the eye.  
 You shall not fold your wings that you may pass through doors, nor bend your heads that they strike not against a ceiling, nor fear to breathe lest walls should crack and fall down.  
 You shall not dwell in tombs made by the dead for the living.

And though of magnificence and splendor, your house shall not hold your secret nor shelter your longing.  
 For that which is boundless in you abides in the mansion of the sky, whose door is the morning mist, and whose windows are the songs and the silences of night.

*[mason – Maurer; bower – Laube; twilight – Dämmerung/Zwielicht; grove – Hain; garment – Gewand; hearth – Feuerstelle; summit – Gipfel; stealthy – heimlich; tamer – Bändiger; hook and scourge – Haken und Peitsche; jeer – höhnen; mock – verspotten; funeral – Begräbnis]*



Then a hermit, who visited the city once a year, came forth and said, "Speak to us of **Pleasure.**" And he answered, saying:  
 Pleasure is a freedom song,  
 But it is not freedom.  
 It is the blossoming of your desires,  
 But it is not their fruit.  
 It is a depth calling unto a height,  
 But it is not the deep nor the high.  
 It is the caged taking wing,  
 But it is not space encompassed.  
 Ay, in very truth, pleasure is a freedom-song.  
 And I fain would have you sing it with fullness of heart; yet I would not have you lose your hearts in the singing.  
 Some of your youth seek pleasure as if it were all, and they are judged and rebuked.  
 I would not judge nor rebuke them. I would have them seek.  
 For they shall find pleasure, but not her alone:  
 Seven are her sisters, and the least of them is more beautiful than pleasure.  
 Have you not heard of the man who was digging in the earth for roots and found a treasure?  
 And some of your elders remember pleasures with regret like wrongs committed in drunkenness.  
 But regret is the beclouding of the mind and not its chastisement.  
 They should remember their pleasures with gratitude, as they would the harvest of a summer.  
 Yet if it comforts them to regret, let them be comforted.

And there are among you those who are neither young to seek nor old to remember;  
 And in their fear of seeking and remembering they shun all pleasures, lest they neglect the spirit or offend against it.  
 But even in their foregoing is their pleasure.  
 And thus they too find a treasure though they dig for roots with quivering hands.  
 But tell me, who is he that can offend the spirit?  
 Shall the nightingale offend the stillness of the night, or the firefly the stars?  
 And shall your flame or your smoke burden the wind?  
 Think you the spirit is a still pool which you can trouble with a staff?  
 Oftentimes in denying yourself pleasure you do but store the desire in the recesses of your being.  
 Who knows but that which seems omitted today, waits for tomorrow?  
 Even your body knows its heritage and its rightful need and will not be deceived.  
 And your body is the harp of your soul,  
 And it is yours to bring forth sweet music from it or confused sounds.  
 And now you ask in your heart, "How shall we distinguish that which is good in pleasure from that which is not good?"  
 Go to your fields and your gardens, and you shall learn that it is the pleasure of the bee to gather honey of the flower,  
 But it is also the pleasure of the flower to yield its honey to the bee.  
 For to the bee a flower is a fountain of life,  
 And to the flower a bee is a messenger of love,  
 And to both, bee and flower, the giving and the receiving of pleasure is a need and an ecstasy.  
 People of Orphalese, be in your pleasures like the flowers and the bees.



**A**nd a poet said, "Speak to us of **Beauty**."  
 Where shall you seek beauty, and how shall you find her unless she herself be your way and your guide?  
 And how shall you speak of her except she be the weaver of your speech?  
 The aggrieved and the injured say, "Beauty is kind and gentle.

Like a young mother half-shy of her own glory she walks among us."  
 And the passionate say, "Nay, beauty is a thing of might and dread.  
 Like the tempest she shakes the earth beneath us and the sky above us."  
 The tired and the weary say, "beauty is of soft whisperings. She speaks in our spirit.  
 Her voice yields to our silences like a faint light that quivers in fear of the shadow."  
 But the restless say, "We have heard her shouting among the mountains,  
 And with her cries came the sound of hoofs, and the beating of wings and the roaring of lions."  
 At night the watchmen of the city say, "Beauty shall rise with the dawn from the east."  
 And at noontide the toilers and the wayfarers say, "we have seen her leaning over the earth from the windows of the sunset."  
 In winter say the snow-bound, "She shall come with the spring leaping upon the hills."  
 And in the summer heat the reapers say, "We have seen her dancing with the autumn leaves, and we saw a drift of snow in her hair."  
 All these things have you said of beauty.  
 Yet in truth you spoke not of her but of needs unsatisfied,  
 And beauty is not a need but an ecstasy.  
 It is not a mouth thirsting nor an empty hand stretched forth,  
 But rather a heart enflamed and a soul enchanted.  
 It is not the image you would see nor the song you would hear,  
 But rather an image you see though you close your eyes and a song you hear though you shut your ears.  
 It is not the sap within the furrowed bark, nor a wing attached to a claw,  
 But rather a garden for ever in bloom and a flock of angels for ever in flight.  
 People of Orphalese, beauty is life when life unveils her holy face.  
 But you are life and you are the veil.  
 Beauty is eternity gazing at itself in a mirror.  
 But you are eternity and you are the mirror.



And an old priest said, "Speak to us of **Religion.**"  
And he said:

Have I spoken this day of aught else?  
Is not religion all deeds and all reflection,  
And that which is neither deed nor reflection, but a  
wonder and a surprise ever springing in the soul,  
even while the hands hew the stone or tend the  
loom?  
Who can separate his faith from his actions, or his  
belief from his occupations?  
Who can spread his hours before him, saying,  
"This for God and this for myself; This for my soul,  
and this other for my body?"  
All your hours are wings that beat through space  
from self to self.  
He who wears his morality but as his best gar-  
ment were better naked.  
The wind and the sun will tear no holes in his skin.  
And he who defines his conduct by ethics impris-  
ons his song-bird in a cage.  
The freest song comes not through bars and  
wires.

And he to whom worshipping is a window, to open  
but also to shut, has not yet visited the house of  
his soul whose windows are from dawn to dawn.  
Your daily life is your temple and your religion.  
Whenever you enter into it take with you your all.  
Take the plough and the forge and the mallet and  
the lute,  
The things you have fashioned in necessity or for  
delight.  
For in revery you cannot rise above your  
achievements nor fall lower than your failures.  
And take with you all men:  
For in adoration you cannot fly higher than their  
hopes nor humble yourself lower than their des-  
pair.  
And if you would know God be not therefore a  
solver of riddles.  
Rather look about you and you shall see Him  
playing with your children.  
And look into space; you shall see Him walking in  
the cloud, outstretching His arms in the lightning  
and descending in rain.  
You shall see Him smiling in flowers, then rising  
and waving His hands in trees.

