

The pun works even better visually: short vowels and doubled consonants are not usually indicated in Arabic script, so *brghwth* and *br + ghwth* look identical on the page.

Do not hate the flea [*burguth*], for its name is *birr* [kindness] and *ghawth* [assistance] for you, if you only know: Its “kindness” is to suck corrupt blood, and the “assistance” is to wake you for the dawn [prayer].

As in law, so in poetry: The spirit is as important as the letter. Here is an attempt to catch that spirit in a non-literal translation. Having failed to

find suitable plays on the English word *flea*, I looked up the scientific name of the insect, and found it belongs to the order *Siphonaptera*:

A flea by any other name would drive you hopping mad,  
But call it “siphonapteran”—you’ll see it’s not all bad:  
It comes to *siphon* off bad blood that tends to cause us harm,  
And as a dawn-prayer wake-up there’s no *apteran* alarm.

Perhaps the pun is indeed the lowest form of wit. It is certainly the lowest form of poetry. Some of the other verses on minor perils of the night

quoted by Kibrit do, however, hit a more elevated poetic note. This one is also unascribed.

mosquitoes quaffed my blood to an accompaniment  
Of all the themes and variations their choir sings.  
And for this diverse night-music their instrument  
Was *me*—a human violin with veins for strings.

Of course, the slow and dangerous business of travel was filled with many greater perils than insects, no travel more than the pilgrimage to Makkah. Ibn Jubayr of Valencia, who recounted his own 12th-century pilgrimage in what is perhaps the most brilliantly written

travel book in the language, described the crossing of Egypt’s Eastern Desert to the port of ‘Aydhah on the Red Sea. One arrives there, he said, “looking like a corpse resurrected from its shroud.” But worse was to come on the sea crossing to Jiddah:

The conduct of the people of ‘Aydhah toward the pilgrims is governed by unholy laws. For they pack them into the *jalbahs* so tightly that they end up sitting on top of each other, and the boats resemble crowded chicken-coops. The reason for this is the shippers’ greed for fares, which is such that the owner of a *jalbah* will aim to recoup the cost of his vessel in a single trip; after that, he cares nothing at all about what happens to the boat on later voyages. They say, “We’ll look after our hulls, and the pilgrims can look after their souls,” and this is a well-known proverb among them.

The *jalbah* was a medium-sized vessel used to carry goods and passengers. The word is obscurely connected to the old English term “jolly-boat.”

Sea perils are, of course, more often natural than man-made. Here is one of the greatest Arabic descriptions of a storm—one experienced by the Algerian-born writer al-Maqqari on a voyage to Egypt

in the early 17th century. I have tried to catch something of the flavor of the original rhyming prose:

What with the din of storms and waters, we abandoned hope of getting out alive and well—// may God give neither life nor succor to that fearful swell! // The waves applauded when they heard the voices of the winds, and raved, and came to blows, // as if they’d drunk a draft that sent them into frenzy’s throes—// now far, now near they rose, // waves in squads at odds with one another, // clapping and slapping, dashing and clashing with one another, // until you’d think the hands of the air // had grabbed them by the hair // and dragged them from their deepest lair, // and you’d all but see the bed of the sea between those waves laid bare, // and their crests flying high to wrest the clouds from the sky in their snare, // till fear and illness made each soul confront destruction’s stare, // and all resolve threatened to dissolve in despair, // and imagination conjured up the worst that could be feared, // as death in every shape before our

Felicitously, the word for “swell”—here *hawl*—more usually means “terror,” as in Abu ‘l-Hawl, “the Father of Terror,” the Arabic name of the Sphinx.

700 years later, dhow skippers on the Red Sea crossing were still unscrupulous in their dealings with pilgrims. “Only too often,” recalled Laurence Grafftey-Smith, a British diplomat in Jiddah in the 1920’s, “the skipper would land them in the wilds, a hundred miles and more south of Jiddah, and leave them to die there, telling them that Jiddah was but a mile or two away.” I too have heard horror stories about the crossing, from Somali refugees in Yemen.