Al-Sayyab was an Iraqi poet who transformed the course of modern Arabic poetry with his experimentation of style and structure. In the fifties he is accredited with being one of the first Arab poets to ever use free verse. He is also known to have been one of the most notable Arab poets to use myth, specifically in his poem “Rain Song”. He revolutionized all the elements of poetry during his career and the poems he wrote were also very personal and involved political and social viewpoints. He started his career as a Marxist, but later transitioned to being strongly nationalistic; these political affiliations can be noted in many of his poems. Badr Shakir al-Sayyab and Nazik al-Mala’ika are two poets most commonly refered to when speaking about the Taf’ila Movement in Arab poetry, and because of their political commitments, both poets suffered persecution and exile. Because od this Al-Sayyab wrote profusely about nostalgia for his homeland, to which, even though he always resided relatively nearby on the Arab gulf, he always longed for and felt distant from. While Al-Sayyab was in his thirties, he was struck by degenerative nervous disorder which eventually lead to his death. He produced seven collections of poetry. Some of his greatest poetic influences were Aragon, Edith Sitwell, and T.S. Eliot.

Badr Shakir al Sayyab was born in Jaikur, a small village near Basra in southern Iraq; this was the subject of his poem “Shadows of Jaikur”:

1. Jaikur, your shadows of palm trees
2. Are as fresh as the dawn
3. Rising over the clouds and water sleeping on a beach.
4. Your shadows are like the eyelashes of a boy tired of playing.
5. I wish my eyes were jetting the moonlight of your fountain
6. So I could feel the shiver of a dream springing in my soul.
7. You are a fountain of shadows, of flowers and birds.

8. Jaikur, your shadows are springs running in my mind,
9. Watering my thirsty soul
10. Under your shadows
11. I dream of travelling, of the wind and the sea
12. With the high waves your shadows light the eyes of swordfish
13. Like fragments of a falling star,
14. Like the lamps of the dead in the hands of mermaids.

15. Jaikur, pick up my bones,
16. Shake the dust off my shroud
17. And in the stream
18. Cleanse my heart, a window opening to fire.
19. My country, had it not been for you
20. My strings would have found no wind to carry my sighs and poems;
21. Had it not been for you
22. God’s face wouldn’t have been my fate.

Line 2-3: Jaikur is personified here as a refreshing and intensely beautiful place, you can sense Al-Sayyab’s love of his villages’ beauty.

Line 5-6: There is a strong desire here to “feel the shiver of a dream springing in [his] soul”. It is clear tat Al-Sayyab is longing to see/feel his homelands influence on him.

Line 9: “Watering my thirsty soul” provides the reader with a powerful insight on how much longing Al-Sayyab feels and how the memories of Jaikur keep him going metaphorically. Here we can also see the repeated connections Al-Sayyab makes with water and cleansing, this provides the poem with a ‘refreshing’ undertone.

Line 15: Again here with “pick up my bones”, we see that Al-Sayyab is really brought to life by the memories of his homeland and by the passion and longing he feels to be back.

Line 18: here is also, again, the use of water, “Cleanse my heart” indicates the rejuvenation Al Sayyab longs to have Jaikur invoke in him.

Line 19: Here we see the local/village longing and love shift to a wider national connection, Al-Sayyab attributes his success to his country, almost suggestion his poems would have no life, no height, without his nations “wind”. This connects back to Al-Sayyab’s Taf’ila movement connection and political and social involvements that made him more aware of the issues that plagued his nation.

Line 22: A powerful religious reference, “God’s face wouldn’t have been my fate”, suggests that Iraq had enlightened Al-Sayyab, allowing him to see God.