



The Blind Owl:
A Literal Translation

1974, 2026

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Translator's Note

The following is a literal translation completed in 1974. Since then, the study of *The Blind Owl* has advanced considerably, yet I have continued to find that this early translation retains a value of its own. The present edition therefore revises the language for clarity while preserving the literal character of the original translation.

The circumstances under which this translation was prepared are relevant. Certain features of the novella—particularly its atmosphere and Hedayat's use of the word *nāg*—led me to the *Buddha-carita* (Acts of the Buddha). Continued study revealed recurring narrative patterns that appeared to parallel episodes in the life of the Buddha. Further research led me to recognize a broader structural correspondence with the architecture described in the *Bardo Thödol*. These discoveries were made over many years and subsequently became the basis of the analytical interpretation presented in the author's *Hedayat's Ivory Tower: Structural Analysis of The Blind Owl*.

The Blind Owl contains no chapter divisions or headings. The headings in this edition have not been added to alter Hedayat's text or to impose an external structure upon it. They serve only as navigational markers, identifying major stages of the narrative and assisting readers through a work whose sequence of events often appears fragmented and discontinuous.

The revised headings also reflect a central premise underlying this edition: that Sadeq Hedayat constructed *The Blind Owl* with exceptional precision and according to an underlying narrative design. The apparent disorder of the novella is therefore not assumed to be accidental. Rather, it is understood as the result of deliberate artistic compression, in which essential relationships among characters, events, places, and historical periods are frequently left implicit. Readers are invited to discover these connections through the narrative itself.

Throughout the translation I have attempted to remain as faithful as possible to Hedayat's language, imagery, and state of mind. Literalness has not meant mechanical word-for-word substitution; rather, it has required selecting English expressions that preserve the semantic force of the Persian. Wherever possible, I have chosen words that reflect not only



the denotative meaning of the original but also its psychological atmosphere and narrative function.

One example occurs at the end of Part One. The English wording is intended to convey the narrator's despair at having succumbed to the seductive gaze of his ethereal double, his failure to bring down the wine flask in time, and the consequences of that failure: the opportunity it affords his double to carry the black lily to the old man across the brook. More significantly, the translation seeks to preserve the narrator's realization that he is condemned to undergo rebirth together with his double.

Lexical choices have likewise been made with particular care. Hedayat deliberately employs the term *nāg* ("nāg-serpent") rather than *mār-e kobrā* ("cobra-serpent") or simply *kobrā* ("cobra"). I have retained this distinction because the term constitutes an important textual clue. It was this word that first prompted my investigation into the literary and religious traditions that, in my view, illuminate the novella's deeper structure. Accordingly, I have preserved Hedayat's terminology without anticipating or explaining its larger significance within the narrative.

A similar consideration governs my translation of *lakkāteh* as "Whore" rather than "Bitch." The choice was made after considering a range of English equivalents—including *prostitute*, *harlot*, *strumpet*, *streetwalker*, and *call-girl*—together with their Persian counterparts. In the context of the novella, Hedayat's characterization of the narrator's nemesis—her familial relationships, her motivations, and above all her narrative function—corresponds more closely to the semantic range of "whore" than to any of the available alternatives.

This translation is intended for readers who wish to encounter *The Blind Owl* as closely as possible to the original Persian while exploring the narrative craftsmanship that has made it one of the most challenging and enduring works of modern Persian literature. If the chapter headings and the accompanying analytical framework encourage readers to look beyond the novella's apparent discontinuities and to consider the possibility of an underlying narrative architecture, they will have fulfilled their purpose.



Introduction

Sadeq Hedayat was an exacting craftsman. Although *The Blind Owl* has long been regarded as one of the masterpieces of modern Persian literature, it has also acquired a reputation as an elusive and ultimately inexplicable work. Characters appear and disappear without warning, chronology is repeatedly disrupted, and relationships among people, places, and historical periods often remain unstated. These apparent discontinuities have encouraged generations of readers to regard the novella as a psychological dream narrative whose mysteries resist systematic explanation.

The present study proceeds from a different premise. Rather than treating the apparent disorder of *The Blind Owl* as evidence of narrative incoherence, it regards that disorder as a deliberate artistic strategy. Hedayat frequently omits transitions, suppresses explanations, interrupts chronology, and leaves essential relationships for the reader to infer. The resulting mystery is therefore not merely psychological; it is structural. Beneath the fragmented surface lies a carefully organized narrative whose coherence becomes visible only when its concealed connections are reconstructed.

Like the *ghazals* of Hafiz, *The Blind Owl* may be appreciated on more than one level. It may first be read simply as an extraordinary work of modern Persian literature, remarkable for its poetic language, haunting imagery, and psychological intensity. Yet, as with Hafiz's poetry, a second reading reveals relationships that are not immediately apparent. In the Sūfī *ghazals*, individual verses acquire fuller meaning when viewed within the successive stages of the mystical journey toward the Beloved. Hedayat employs a comparable artistic principle. Instead of distributing meaning through individual verses, he distributes it across the succession of narrative events. Episodes that appear isolated or even contradictory assume new significance when viewed as parts of an integrated narrative design. This translation has been prepared for readers who wish to examine that design.

The investigation that eventually led to the present interpretation began during the preparation of the literal translation itself. One detail in particular—Hedayat's deliberate use of the word *nāg* rather than the more ordinary Persian terms for "cobra"—suggested that the choice was intentional rather than incidental. That observation prompted an



investigation into literary and religious traditions in which the *nāg* occupies a significant role. The inquiry first led to the *Buddha-carita* and, through further study, to the ritual sequence described in the *Bardo Thödol* (The Tibetan Book of the Dead). Over time, these investigations suggested that they offered not merely thematic parallels but a structural model capable of explaining many of the narrative relationships that otherwise appear disconnected.

The interpretive framework presented in this volume therefore draws upon the sequence described in the *Bardo Thödol*. The comparison is not intended to suggest that *The Blind Owl* is simply a Buddhist allegory, nor that Hedayat mechanically reproduced a Tibetan religious text. Rather, the *Bardo Thödol* provides a structural model through which the organization of the novella may be examined. Read from this perspective, many episodes that initially appear contradictory or inexplicable assume coherent places within the larger architecture of the narrative. Two examples may illustrate the method.

The narrator appears to experience two births. One occurs in India during the episode in the dungeon. The child is then taken to the flourishing medieval city of *Rayy*, where he grows to maturity, becomes a painter of pen-case covers, and eventually dies. Elsewhere in the narrative, however, another birth appears to precede the first. This second birth occurs near *Rayy* during the late Qajar period, when the ancient city has long since fallen into ruin. Read sequentially, these events appear irreconcilable.

Within the structural framework proposed here, however, they become complementary rather than contradictory. The first birth belongs to the narrator's original earthly existence. Following his death, he enters an intermediate state whose successive experiences closely resemble the stages described in the *Bardo Thödol*. Having failed to attain liberation, he is reborn. Because rebirth is not constrained by ordinary historical chronology, his second earthly life begins centuries later, near the ruins of *Rayy*, where he gradually recovers fragments of his former existence. What appears to be chronological inconsistency thus becomes a continuous cycle of birth, death, intermediate existence, and rebirth.

A similar pattern may be observed in the narrator's relationship with his uncle. During the dungeon episode, two brothers could have fathered the narrator. One raises the child, while the other descends into madness and thereafter seems to disappear almost entirely from the narrative. Within the interpretive framework developed here, however, that disappearance proves to be only apparent. The uncle continues to participate in the narrator's experience, although under forms and identities that are not immediately recognizable. The relationships among these figures become intelligible only when the concealed structural sequence is taken into account.



Such examples illustrate a broader principle that operates throughout *The Blind Owl*. Characters disappear only to reappear under altered circumstances. Identities overlap. Historical periods intersect. Causes are disclosed long after their effects have been presented. Hedayat rarely explains these relationships directly. Instead, he entrusts the reader with the task of reconstructing the hidden framework from the fragments provided by the narrative itself.

One further feature of the novella deserves particular attention. Hedayat repeatedly introduces elements whose significance is deliberately left unexplained. Among these, the *nāg*-serpent occupies a central place. Within the interpretation proposed here, the omission is not accidental but forms part of the novella's larger strategy of controlled disclosure, whereby essential information is withheld until the reader has acquired sufficient evidence to reconstruct the underlying design.

It is precisely this method that gives *The Blind Owl* its enduring power. The reader senses throughout that something essential has been withheld. That uncertainty arises not from narrative confusion but from deliberate artistic economy. Hedayat reveals enough to sustain the story while withholding enough to compel the reader's active participation in reconstructing its architecture. The mystery of the novella lies not in obscurity for its own sake but in the disciplined management of information.

The purpose of this Introduction is therefore limited. It does not seek to resolve every interpretive question raised by *The Blind Owl*, nor does it claim that the analytical framework presented here is the only possible reading of the novella. Its purpose is to identify the principles underlying the present translation, to explain the rationale for the chapter divisions introduced in this edition, and to invite readers to consider the possibility that beneath Hedayat's fragmented narrative lies a remarkably coherent literary design.

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1. The Air-hole¹

There are wounds in life that, like a canker, slowly consume the soul in solitude. One cannot speak of these sufferings, for people habitually dismiss them as the consequence of rare and extraordinary experiences. Thus, any attempt to describe or record them is inevitably met with skeptical, sarcastic smiles. So far, mankind has found no remedy for these afflictions except oblivion through wine or the artificial sleep induced by opium and other narcotics. Unfortunately, the effects of these drugs are transient; they intensify the pain rather than diminish it.

Will man one day unravel the mystery of these supernatural experiences—the reflection of the soul's shadow that appears in a coma-like limbo between sleep and wakefulness?

I shall relate one such experience in which I myself was involved—an experience that shook me to my depths, one I shall never forget, and whose ominous mark will poison my being from beginning to eternity, beyond human understanding. I said *poison*; what I meant was that I have borne, and shall always bear, its scar.

I shall try to write down all that I can remember—that is, all the links that connect the events. Perhaps I may pass a final judgment upon them—no, not that; only to gain some assurance, or perhaps to persuade myself to believe them. It is of no consequence to me whether anyone else believes them or not. I fear I may die tomorrow before I come to know myself.

For in the course of a lifetime I have discovered the terrifying abyss that separates me from the rest of mankind. I have realized that I must remain silent and keep my thoughts to myself. If I have decided to write, it is only to introduce myself to my shadow—the shadow that leans upon

¹ The original Persian text of *The Blind Owl* does not include any subsection titles. On the basis of a detailed analysis of the work, these subsection titles (1-16) are added by the analyst/translator to make the story more accessible to those interested in a more involved reading of the novella.

the wall as though swallowing everything I write. This experiment is for that shadow; perhaps we may come to know one another better. Ever since I severed myself from the company of mankind, I have longed to know myself more fully.

Futile thoughts! You may say so. Yet they torment me more than anything else. Are these people who resemble me, who seem to share my desires, created only to deceive me? Are they merely a handful of shadows brought into being to mock and beguile me? Is everything I feel, see, and ponder nothing but illusion, utterly remote from reality?

I write only for my shadow on the wall. I must introduce myself to it.

.....

I thought that, for the first time in this wretched, poverty-stricken world, a ray of sunlight had fallen upon my life. But alas, it was no sunbeam. It was a fleeting shooting star that appeared before me in the guise of an angel. In that instant of light, I beheld the immensity of my misfortune, only to see it vanish immediately into the dark abyss for which it had been destined. No, I could not keep that fleeting ray of light for myself.

Three months—no, in fact, it was two months and four days ago. Since then I have lost all trace of her. Yet the memory of her magical attraction and her condemning eyes has remained with me forever. How could I forget her when she has become so inseparable from my very being?

No, I shall not call her by name. She, with her ethereal body—slender and mist-like—and those great, shining, wonder-stricken eyes beneath whose gaze my life slowly burned away, no longer belongs to this lowly animal existence. No. Her name must not be sullied by earthly things.

After that I withdrew completely from the company of fools and lackeys. To find oblivion, I sought refuge in wine and opium. My life passed within the four walls of my room. It still does. Indeed, my whole life has been spent within these four walls.

Throughout the day my only occupation was painting pen-case covers. All my time was devoted to painting pen-cases and consuming wine and opium. I had taken up the absurd profession of decorating pen-cases merely to distract myself, merely to kill time.

Fortunately, my dwelling lies outside the city, in a quiet and secluded place, far from the maddening crowd. It stands entirely apart from its surroundings and is encircled by ruins. Only beyond the ditch and the low mud-brick houses does the city seem to begin. God alone knows who built this house in some forgotten age. When I close my eyes, I can not only picture every crack and crevice of it as though it stood before me, but I can also feel its weight pressing upon my shoulders. It is a house that might itself have been painted upon one of those ancient pen-cases.



I ought to write all these things down to assure myself that they are not mere figments of my imagination. I ought to explain them to my shadow on the wall.

Before this incident, only one satisfaction remained to me. I spent my days painting pen-cases within the four walls of my room. It was by means of this absurd occupation that I passed the time. But after I saw those eyes, after I saw her, every action lost its value and meaning. The strange and astonishing thing is that I cannot understand why every one of my paintings should always depict the same scene. I invariably painted a cypress tree beneath which a bent old man sat squatting on the ground, wrapped in a cloak in the manner of an Indian *yogi*.¹ A *shalmah*² was wound about his head, and he held his index finger of his left hand to his lips as though astounded by some event. Opposite him stood a girl in a long black dress, bending forward to offer him a lily, while a brook flowed between them.

Whether I had ever seen such a scene before, or whether it came to me by inspiration in a dream, I cannot say. All I know is that whatever I painted returned to this same scene and the same subject. My hand drew it involuntarily.

The strangest thing, however, was that there were always buyers for these pictures. I even used to send some of the painted pen-cases to my uncle in India. He sold them there and sent me the money.

Whenever I think of that picture, I lose all sense of time and distance. I can no longer remember clearly.

Now something has occurred to me. I said that I intended to write my reminiscences. Yet this incident took place much later and has no direct bearing on what I am relating. It was, nevertheless, because of that very incident that I abandoned painting forever.

Two months ago—no, it is now two months and four days. It was the thirteenth of *Farvardīn*.³ Everyone had gone out into the countryside. Wanting to paint without interruption, I had closed the window of my room. It was near sunset, and I was absorbed in my work when the door opened and my uncle entered—or rather, the man who claimed to be my uncle.

¹ A person who is a master of *yoga*, disciplined mental, and spiritual practices that originated in ancient India.

² *Shālmah* is a turban worn by some Indian *yogis*.

³ The first month of the Persian year begins on March 21st. The 13th of *Farvardīn* is called *Sīzdahbedar*. It is the last day of a thirteen-day holiday. On this day, people leave their homes and go to the countryside partly for a picnic and partly to ward off any evil that might befall them on this ominous day. For further details, see <https://irajbashiri.com/Nowruz/PersianNewYear.html>



I had never seen him before, for he had departed on a long journey while still a young man. It seems he had been a ship's captain. I assumed he had come on some business matter, since I had heard that he was also a merchant.

In any event, my uncle was a bent old man with an Indian *shālmah* wrapped around his head and a tattered yellow cloak over his shoulders. His head and face were covered with a scarf. His collar hung open, exposing his hairy chest. The sparse hairs of his beard protruded beneath the scarf, so that one could count every one of them. His eyelids were inflamed and red, and one of his lips had the appearance of a leprous sore. He bore a remote and almost ridiculous resemblance to me, as though my own reflection had been cast into a magic mirror. I had always imagined my father looking something like him.

The moment he entered, he went and squatted in the corner of the room. I thought I ought to prepare something for him to eat or drink. I lit the lamp and went into the dark closet adjoining my room. I searched everywhere for something an old man might enjoy, although I knew perfectly well there was nothing in the house, for neither wine nor opium remained even for myself. Suddenly my eyes fell upon the built-in niche beneath the roof. As though inspired, I remembered the ancient wine-flask I had inherited. I believe the wine had been made to celebrate the occasion of my birth. The flask still stood there in the niche. Until that moment I had completely forgotten that such a thing even existed. To reach the niche, I placed the stool beside me under my feet. But the instant I stretched out my hand toward the wine-flask, my eyes were caught by a scene beyond the little air-hole in the niche. I saw, in the field behind my room, a bent old man squatting beneath a cypress tree; and before him stood a young girl—no, a heavenly angel—bending forward to offer him a black lily with her right hand. The old man was chewing the index finger of his left hand.

The girl stood directly opposite me, yet she seemed wholly unaware of her surroundings. She looked without truly seeing. An unconscious, involuntary smile rested upon the corner of her lips. It seemed as though her thoughts were fixed upon someone far away.

It was through that little air-hole that I saw her enchanting eyes—eyes that were at once terrifying, alluring, and reproachful. Toward the radiant, expressive pupils of those anxious, threatening, inviting eyes, the single ray of my life was drawn, utterly absorbed and annihilated. That captivating mirror drained me of my entire existence. Those slanting Turkmen eyes,¹ with their intoxicating supernatural radiance, inspired both fear and attraction. It seemed that, through those eyes, she had witnessed supernatural happenings beyond the reach of mortal sight. Her

¹ The descendants of the Oguz Turks now living in Turkmenistan. The reference is to the beauty of the eyes and the way they are framed by the planes of the face.



cheekbones were high, her forehead broad, her eyebrows thin and joined together, her lips full and half parted. They seemed as though they had just emerged from a long, passionate kiss that had left them still unsatisfied. Her loose, unruly black hair framed her silvery face, and a single tress clung to her temple. The delicacy of her limbs and the unselfconscious grace of her ethereal movements revealed the transience of her being. Only a dancing girl from an Indian temple could have possessed such harmonious movements.

Her serenity, touched with an inexplicable sadness, set her apart from ordinary human beings. There was nothing ordinary about her beauty. She appeared to me like a vision born of an opium dream... She awakened within me the same fevered passion inspired by the mandrake.¹ Her body was slender and tall, a single harmonious line uniting her shoulders, arms, breasts, hips, and legs, as though she had been severed from her destined companion—exactly like the female mandrake separated from its mate.

She wore a wrinkled black dress that clung closely to her body. It seemed to me that she wished to leap across the brook that separated her from the old man, but she could not. The old man burst into a hysterical laugh. It was a dry, repellent laugh that made one's hair stand on end. Although it was a strange, mocking laugh, the expression on his face did not change. It seemed like the echo of laughter rising from the depths of a hollow.

Still holding the wine-flask in my hand, I leaped down from the stool in terror. I do not know why I was trembling. It was a trembling in which fear and delight were strangely intermingled. I felt as though I had suddenly awakened from a delightful nightmare. I set the wine-flask on the floor and buried my head in my hands. How many minutes passed? How many hours? I do not know. When I came to myself, I picked up the flask and returned to my room. My uncle was gone. He had left the door half open, like the gaping mouth of a corpse. The echo of the old man's laughter still rang in my ears.

Darkness had fallen, and the lamp was beginning to smoke. Yet the effects of that terrible and delicious shudder still lingered within me. That moment marked the turning point of my life. One glance had been enough. In a single glance, that ethereal being had penetrated my whole existence.

I had lost control. It seemed that I had known her name from somewhere. The fire in her eyes, her complexion, her scent, and her movements were all familiar, as though my soul had bordered upon hers in the life before this life. Since we were of the same origin and essence,

¹ Traditionally the mandrakes were imagined as male and female humanlike forms. In ancient Iranian lore, they are the original ancestors of the human race.



we were doomed to be united. Now, in this life, I had to live with her. I never wanted to touch her. The invisible beam that emanated from our bodies and mingled together was enough. Was not this frightful event, which seemed familiar to me, the same feeling experienced by two lovers who believe they have met each other sometime before? That a mysterious bond had existed between them? In this lowly world, I wanted her love. No one else's love would do. Was it possible for anyone else to affect me so deeply? That repulsive laughter of the old man—that ominous laughter—had broken the bond between us.

All through the night I thought about this. Several times I intended to go and look through the air-hole, but I was afraid of the old man's laughter. The next day I thought of nothing else. Could I deliberately forget her forever? The following day, in utter fear, I decided to put the wine-flask back in its place. But when I pushed aside the curtain in front of the closet, I saw a dark black wall before me—the same darkness that had obscured my vision all my life. There was no hole, no crevice, no inlet to the outside world. The square hole was completely closed and had become part of the wall, as though it had never existed. I pulled the stool forward, but the more frantically I struck the wall with my fists, listened, and searched it with the light, the less I found any sign of an opening in that thick wall. It had become a solid mass of lead.

Could I give all this up? But it was beyond my control. From that moment on I was like a tortured soul. I waited, I watched, I searched—all to no avail. I wandered all around our house, not for one or two days, but for two months and four days. I was like murderers who return to the scene of the crime. Every day, toward sunset, I wandered around our house like a chicken with its head cut off, until I recognized every rock and pebble in the area. There was no trace of the cypress tree, the stream of water, or the people I had seen there. Many nights I knelt before the moon and begged the trees, the rocks, and all creatures to help me, but I saw no sign of her. At last I realized there was no use in such efforts, because she did not belong to worldly elements. The water with which she had washed her hair must have come from some unique and unknown spring, or from a magical cave. Her dress was not made of ordinary wool or cotton sewn by ordinary human hands. She was a chosen creature. I realized that those lilies were not ordinary lilies either. I was certain that if she were to wash her face in ordinary water, it would wither; or if she were to pluck ordinary lilies with her slender fingers, her fingers, too, would wither like flower petals.

I discovered all these things. This girl—no, this angel—was the source of an indescribable wonder and inspiration for me. Her substance was delicate and untouchable. It was she who awakened in me the impulse to worship. I am certain that even the gaze of a stranger, of an ordinary human being, would defile her and make her wither.

From the moment I lost her, from the moment that heavy wall—that damp wall of lead without an opening—was built before me, I have felt



that my life became useless and was lost forever. Although the glance I stole and the pleasure I derived from seeing her were entirely one-sided—she had never seen me—I needed those eyes. A single glance at her was enough to solve all my philosophical and theological riddles. One glance from her, and no mystery would remain for me.

I increased my intake of opium and wine. But unfortunately, instead of paralyzing my thoughts, these hopeless drugs revived her image so that days, hours, and minutes materialized her body and face more intensely before me.

How could I forget? Whether my eyes were open or closed, whether I was asleep or awake, she stood before me. Through the square air-hole in the closet, like the night that has enshrouded all mortal logic, through the square window to the outside world, she stood before me.

I could not rest. How could I rest? I had acquired the habit of taking excursions at sunset. I do not know why I wanted, in fact insisted, on finding the stream of water, the cypress tree, and the lily plant. My addiction to these excursions was like my addiction to opium. It was as though some force compelled me to go on these walks. Throughout the journey I thought only of her—the memory of that first glimpse. I wanted to find the place where I had seen her on the thirteenth of *Farvardīn*. If I could find that place, if I could sit beneath that cypress tree, some measure of repose would enter my life. But unfortunately, there was nothing there except hot sand, dust, the rib cage of a horse, and a dog sniffing at the trash. Had I really met her? I had only caught a furtive glimpse of her through a miserable hole in my closet. I was like a hungry dog that sniffs and rummages through a heap of refuse, but as soon as more refuse is thrown onto it, runs away and hides in fear. Only later does it return to search for the scraps it prefers. I was in the same situation. But the air-hole had now been closed. To me she was like a fresh bouquet of flowers thrown onto a heap of refuse.

On the last evening of my customary walk, the air was dark and heavy with the promise of rain. A dense mist had spread everywhere. In rainy weather, which softens the sharpness of colors and the harshness of the outlines of things, I felt a strange freedom. It was as though the rain washed my thoughts away. That night, what should never have happened, happened. I wandered aimlessly in every direction. During those lonely hours—those moments whose duration I can no longer recall—her vague yet terrifying face emerged from behind the clouds and the mist with greater force than ever before. Her vacant and expressionless face appeared like the figures painted on pen-case covers.



2. The Painting

When I returned, I think it was later than midnight. A dense fog hung in the air. I could not see clearly before me. But, out of habit, out of a special sense that had awakened within me, I kept moving forward. When I arrived in front of my house, I saw the figure of a woman clad in black. She was sitting on the platform in front of my house.

I struck a match to find the keyhole, but somehow, involuntarily, my eyes fell upon the figure in black. She had two oblique eyes: two large black eyes set in a slender, silvery face. I recognized those eyes that stared without seeing. Even if I had never seen her before, I would still have known her. No, I was not mistaken. This figure in black was she. I was like a person who is dreaming and knows he is dreaming, but when he wants to wake up, he cannot. I stood there in astonishment. I was petrified on the spot. The match first burned itself out and then burned my fingers. Suddenly I came to myself and turned the key in the lock. The door opened. I stepped aside. Like someone familiar with the place, she got down from the platform and passed through the dark corridor. She opened the door to my room, and I entered after her. Hurriedly I lit the lamp. She was already lying on my bed. Her face was in shadow. I did not know whether she could see or hear me. She showed no sign of fear, inclination, or resistance. It seemed as though she had come involuntarily.

Was she ill? Had she lost her way? She had come here involuntarily, like a sleepwalker.

No living creature can imagine what I went through. I felt a sweet, indescribable pain. No, I was not mistaken. It was that same woman. That same girl had entered my room without astonishment and without uttering a word. I had always imagined our first meeting taking place in just such a way. This state was like being in a very deep sleep. To have such dreams, one must sink into the deepest sleep. The silence was like eternal life. At the beginning of creation no one can speak.

To me she was a woman with something supernatural about her. Her face reminded me of the wondrous oblivion on the faces of certain people, so much so that as I looked at her I began to tremble and my knees gave way. At that moment I saw my entire miserable life reflected in her large—immensely large—moist, glistening eyes, which resembled black diamonds bathed in tears. In those eyes I found the eternal night and the dense darkness for which I had been searching. I plunged into their terrifying darkness and felt as though they were drawing some force out of my body. The ground trembled beneath my feet. Had I fallen to the ground, I would have drawn an indescribable pleasure from it.

My heart stopped. I stopped breathing. I was afraid that my breath might make her disappear like a wisp of cloud or a puff of smoke. Her silence was like a miracle. It seemed as though a glass wall had been built between us. This moment, this hour, this eternity was suffocating me. Her



tired eyes, as though they had seen something extraordinary unseen by others, as though they had looked upon death, slowly closed. Her eyelids came together. And I, like a drowning man who, after much struggling, rises to the surface of the water, trembling and burning with fever, with the edge of my sleeve, wiped the perspiration from my forehead. Her face retained the same calm and motionless expression, but it seemed to have grown thinner, as though it had lost some of its flesh. As she reclined, she was chewing on her index finger of her left hand. The color of her face was silvery, and beneath her tight black dress the outline of her entire body—her legs, arms, and breasts—was visible.

Since her eyes were closed, I bent over to look at her more closely. But the more I looked at her face, the farther away it seemed. Suddenly I felt that I had never had access to the secrets of her heart and that no bond whatsoever existed between us.

I wanted to say something, but I feared that her ears, accustomed to a gentle, heavenly music, might come to abhor my voice.

I thought she might be hungry or thirsty. I went to the closet in my room to find something for her, although I knew there was nothing in the house. Then, as though inspired, I remembered that on the niche, I had an old flask of wine that I had inherited from my father. I climbed onto the stool and brought the flask down. Slowly I approached the bed. She was sleeping like a tired child. She was in a deep sleep, and her long eyelashes lay together like velvet. I opened the flask and, through her clenched teeth, poured a cup of wine into her mouth.

For the first time in my life, a sudden tranquility came over me. It seemed that because those eyes had finally closed the cancer which had tormented me, and the nightmare that had been crushing me from within, had become quiet. I brought my chair and placed it beside the bed, and looked at her. What a childlike face! What a strange disposition! Was it possible that this woman, this girl, this angel of torment—as I did not know what to call her—could have lived a double life? Such tranquility? Such unaffectedness?

Now I could feel the warmth of her body and smell the dampness of her heavy black locks. I do not know why I raised my trembling hand. The hand with which I caressed her hair was no longer under my control. The hair that was always plastered on her temple. Then I sank my fingers into her hair. Her hair was cold and damp. Cold—utterly cold. It seemed that she had died several days before. I was not mistaken. She was dead. I passed my hand before her chest, then placed it upon her breast and over her heart. No heartbeat could be felt. I brought a mirror and held it before her nose. There was not the slightest trace of life in her.

I wanted to warm her with the heat of my own body—to give her my warmth and receive the coldness of her death. Perhaps in this way I could breathe my own soul into her body. I took off my clothes, climbed onto the bed, and lay down beside her. We clung together like the male and



female mandrake. Her body was like that of the female mandrake severed from its male, yet still possessed of the same burning love of the mandrake. Her mouth was acrid, with a slight bitterness. It tasted like the stem end of a cucumber. Her whole body had grown cold like hailstones. I felt the blood freezing in my veins and the cold penetrating deep into my heart. All my efforts were in vain. I got off the bed and put my clothes back on. No, it was not a lie. She had come into my room and surrendered her body to me. She had given me both her body and her soul.

While she was alive and her eyes were full of life, only the memory of those eyes tormented me. But now, cold, without feeling or emotion, and with closed eyes, she had come and surrendered herself to me. With closed eyes!

She was the very one who had poisoned my life—or perhaps my life had always been susceptible to poisoning, and no other kind of life had ever been possible for me. Now, here in my room, she had given me both her body and her shadow. Her transient, fragile soul, which had no connection with the world of earthly beings, slowly left her wrinkled black dress, left the carcass that had tormented it, and joined the world of wandering shadows. I think it took my shadow with it as well. Her body, motionless and without feeling, lay there. Her soft, limp muscles, her veins, her skin, and her bones were waiting to rot. Thus a delicious feast had been prepared for the worms and mice beneath the earth. I had to pass a long, cold, endless night beside a corpse in my small, adversity-stricken, miserable room, which was like a grave, in the eternal darkness of the night that surrounded it and seeped into its walls. I had to remain with her corpse. It seemed to me that, since the dawn of creation, since the beginning of my own existence, a cold, unfeeling corpse had shared my dark room with me.

At this moment my thoughts had frozen. A unique, singular life was born within me. My life became bound to all the beings around me. It was bound to all the shadows that trembled around me. I had formed an inseparable, profound relation with the world, with the movement of creatures, and with nature. An invisible, mind-disturbing current had been established between me and all the elements of nature. No thought or image seemed unnatural to me. I could understand the mystery of ancient paintings with ease. The same was true of the secrets of difficult philosophical treatises, as well as the eternal foolishness of all forms and species. For at that moment I took part in the revolution of the earth and the other celestial bodies, in the growth of plants and the movement of animals. Past and future, far and near, had all become united with my sentient life.

At such times one takes refuge in a powerful habit or scruple acquired over the course of life: the drunkard goes off to get drunk, the writer writes, the stonecutter cuts stone. Each gives vent to his anguish by retreating to the stimulant of his life. It is at such times that a true artist can create a



masterpiece. But I—I was a poor, tasteless painter of pen-case covers. What could I do? What could I create from my lifeless paintings that might become a masterpiece? Yet throughout my whole being I felt an extraordinary talent and warmth. It was a peculiar memory and sensation. I was going to paint on paper those eyes that were now closed forever and keep them for myself. This idea compelled me to put my feelings into action. I should say that it was not voluntary, especially when one is imprisoned with a corpse. The very thought of it filled me with happiness.

At last I extinguished the smoky lamp, brought two candlesticks, and lit them beside her head. Her face appeared more serene. In the trembling light of the candles, and in the half-darkness of the room, it assumed a mysterious, ethereal aspect. I took my paper and my painting tools to the side of her bed. The bed belonged to her now. I wanted to paint this form, condemned to gradual disintegration, freely, and record its essential lines on paper. I wanted to choose those lines that affected me most. However simple the painting might be, it had to possess a soul. I, who was accustomed to painting printed designs on pen-case covers, now had to begin thinking, and thus materialize before myself the imaginary creature that the impression of her face had created within me. I wanted to look at her, then close my eyes and put down on paper the lines I had chosen from her face. Perhaps in this way I could find an antidote for my tortured soul. At last I took refuge in the world of motionless lines and forms.

The subject had a peculiar affinity with my lifeless painting—painting a corpse. I was a painter of corpses.

But the eyes—her closed eyes. Did I need to see them again? Were they not already deeply imprinted upon my mind and my thoughts?

I cannot remember how many times I painted her face, but none of the pictures satisfied me. I tore each one up as soon as I had finished it. The work did not tire me. Nor did I feel the passage of time.

It was about daybreak. A dull light had entered the room through the window. I was busy with my last painting, which was better than the rest. But her eyes? Those reproachful eyes that accused me as though I had committed some unforgivable sin. I could not put those eyes down on paper. Suddenly all life, and the memory of those eyes, vanished from my recollection. My efforts were in vain. No matter how intently I looked at her face, I could not remember its expression. Then, suddenly, I saw her cheeks redden. They turned liver-red, like the meat displayed in front of a butcher's shop. She came to life, and her eyes opened wide in astonishment—eyes in which all the brightness of life had gathered, now glimmering with a sickly light. Her reproachful, sickly eyes slowly opened and looked directly into my face. This was the first time she had looked at me. It was the first time that she paid attention to me, looked at me and then closed her eyes. The whole event lasted only a moment, but it gave me enough time to capture the expression of her eyes and paint them. I painted them with my brush, and this time I did not tear the picture up.



Then I rose and slowly approached her. I thought she was alive—that she had come back to life. I thought my love had revived her corpse. But when I reached her, I smelled the decomposition of her body. Small worms were wriggling over her flesh, and two golden flies circled before her in the candle light. She was completely dead, and yet her eyes had opened. How could this have happened? I do not know. I do not even know whether it was a dream or whether it happened in real life.

I hope no one will ask me, but the most important thing was her face—no, her eyes—which I now possessed. I possessed the soul of her eyes on paper. Her body was no longer of much use to me. The body that was condemned to annihilation and destined to nourish worms and the mice beneath the earth.

From that moment on she belonged to me. I was no longer under her dominion. Whenever I wished, I could look into her eyes. Very carefully I took the painting and placed it in the tin box where I kept my earnings. I hid the box in the closet of my room.

The night was gradually departing, as though it had rested enough. Distant voices could be heard. Perhaps a passing bird was dreaming. Perhaps the plants were growing. The pale stars were disappearing beneath the massive clouds. I felt the cool morning breeze on my face. It was then that the cock began to crow in the distance.

3. The Journey

What could I do with her dead body? The body that had already begun to decompose? At first I thought I would bury it beneath the floor of my room. Then I thought of taking it out and throwing it into a well—a well around which black lilies had grown. But all this, so that no one sees, required a great deal of effort and skill. Besides, I did not want any stranger to look at her. I had to do everything myself, with my own hands. The hell with me. What was life to me after her? But she? Never—never—should the glance of any ordinary man fall upon her. She had come to my room alone and had surrendered her cold body and her shadow to me so that no one else might see her, so that she would not be defiled by the gaze of strangers. At last a thought occurred to me. If I cut her into pieces and put her into my old suitcase, I could carry it to some distant place, far from people, and bury it there.

This time I did not hesitate. I fetched the knife with the bone handle from the closet. Very carefully I first removed her thin black dress, which had imprisoned her like a spider's web. It was the only thing that had covered her body. She seemed to have grown taller; indeed, she looked taller than before. Then I severed her head. Drops of clotted blood flowed from her neck. Then I cut off her hands and feet and arranged her torso and limbs inside the suitcase. Afterward I covered her with her black dress.



I locked the suitcase and put the key into my pocket. When I had finished, I felt relieved. I lifted the suitcase and weighed it. It was heavy. Never before had I felt such fatigue. No. I could never have carried that suitcase by myself.

Once more, clouds covered the sky, and a light rain was falling. I left my room to look for someone who could help me carry the suitcase. Not a soul was to be seen anywhere. Squinting into the fog, I saw a stooped old man in the distance, sitting beneath a cypress tree. His face, over which he had thrown a white scarf, could not be seen. Slowly I approached him. Before I could say anything, the old man, letting out a hair-raising, hybrid, dry, repulsive laugh, said,

"If you are looking for a porter, I am ready. I also have a corpse-carriage. Every day I take the dead to *Shāh- 'Abdol- 'Aẓīm*¹ and bury them there. I also make coffins. I have coffins made to the exact measurements of almost everyone. I am ready, right now!..."

He laughed so hysterically that his shoulders trembled. I pointed toward my house, but before I could utter a word, he said,

"It isn't necessary. I know where you live. Right now?"

He rose from where he had been sitting, and I returned to my house. I went into the room and, with great difficulty, carried the dead suitcase to the door. An old, ramshackle corpse-carriage, to which two thin, black, skeleton-like horses were hitched, stood before the door. The old man sat hunched over on the driver's seat. He held a long whip in his hand, but he did not turn to look at me. With difficulty I placed the suitcase in the special compartment in the middle of the carriage, the place intended for the coffin. I, too, climbed in and lay down where the coffin was usually placed. I rested my head on its edge so that I could see outside. Then I pulled the suitcase onto my chest and clung to it tightly with both hands.

The whip whistled through the air. The horses, breathing heavily and steaming like chimneys in the rain, began to move. Their slender forelegs, like the hands of thieves whose severed fingers had been plunged into hot oil, touched the ground slowly and without a sound. In the damp air, the bells around their necks had a strange resonance. From head to toe an indescribable comfort filled me. Except for the weight of the suitcase upon my chest, I could feel nothing moving either within me or around me.

Her dead body. Her corpse. It seemed that this weight had always pressed upon my chest. A thick fog covered the road. The carriage passed mountains, plains, and rivers with effortless speed. The landscape around me was new and unique, something I had never seen, either in dreams or in waking life. The mountains were jagged and strange. Suppressed, accursed trees lined both sides of the road. Among them stood triangular,

¹ *Shāh- 'Abdol- 'Aẓīm* is a religious complex near the ruins of Rayy.



cubic, and prismatic houses with dark, low windows. The windows resembled the dizzy eyes of someone burning with delirious fever. There was something in the walls that transmitted a chill to the heart. It seemed that no living being could inhabit those houses. Perhaps they had been built for the shadows of ethereal beings.

Either the carriage driver was taking me along a special road, or he was traveling on some unmarked highway. In some places there were only hacked tree trunks and crooked trees on both sides of the road; beyond them stood high and low geometrical houses: some conical, others truncated cones, all with crooked windows from which black lilies protruded, climbing over their doors and walls. Suddenly the whole scene disappeared beneath a thick mist. Pregnant, heavy clouds had sandwiched the mountain peaks between themselves and were pressing down upon them. Fine drops of rain, like dust, floated in the air. After a long journey, we finally arrived at the foot of a high, arid mountain. The corpse-carriage stopped. I slid the suitcase aside and got up.

Behind the mountain there was a quiet, serene, pleasant place. A place I had never seen before. A place I did not recognize, yet which seemed familiar; it was not beyond my imagination. The ground was covered with scentless black lilies. It seemed that we were the first people ever to have set foot there. I put down the suitcase. The old carriage driver turned toward me and said, "This place is near *Shāh-‘Abdol-‘Azīm*. There is no place better for you than here. Not even a bird can be found here!..."

I put my hand into my pocket to pay the carriage driver. All I had were two *qerāns*¹ and one *‘abbāsīs*.² The carriage driver, letting out his disgusting laugh, said, "That's all right. Pay me later! I know where you live. Anything else I can do for you? Let me tell you, I am quite skillful at digging graves. Don't feel bad about it. Let's go over there, by the river, by the cypress tree. I will dig a ditch for you the size of the suitcase, and then I shall take my leave."

Then, with an agility I could never have imagined in an old man, he jumped down from the seat. I picked up the suitcase, and together we went to the tree beside the dry riverbed. He said, "Is this a good place?"

Then, without waiting for an answer, he began digging the ground with the shovel and spade he had brought with him. I had set down the suitcase and stood watching him in astonishment. In spite of his bent back, the old man proved remarkably skillful at digging graves. While digging, he uncovered something that resembled a glazed jar. He wrapped it in a dirty handkerchief, stood up, and said, "Here's the ditch. Exactly the size of the suitcase—not a hair off!"

¹ *Qerān* is a relatively recent coin not used before the Safavid period.

² *‘Abbāsī* is a relatively recent coin not used before the Safavid period. It is worth about four *shāhīs* or twenty *dīnārs*.



I put my hand into my pocket to pay him. All I had were two *qerāns* and one 'abbāsī. The old man, letting out a ghastly laugh, said, "Forget it! It's on me. I know where you live. Besides, for my fee, I found a vase. It is a *Rāq*¹ vase from the ancient city of *Rayy*." ²

Then he burst into laughter. His body doubled over. His shoulders shook. He tucked the jar, wrapped in the dirty handkerchief, beneath his arm. He went to the corpse-carriage and, with astonishing agility, climbed onto the driver's seat.

The whip whistled through the air. The panting horses began to move. In the damp air, the bells around their necks had a strange resonance. The carriage disappeared into the mist.

Left alone, I felt relieved, as though a heavy weight had been lifted from my chest. A pleasant calm came over me. I looked around. The place was enclosed by jet-black hills and mountains. Along one of the mountain ridges could be seen the remains of ancient buildings made of thick bricks. Nearby, the bed of a dried-up river stretched across the landscape. It was a secluded, peaceful, intimate place. I was extremely happy, thinking that those dark eyes, when they awoke from that earthly sleep, would find this place suited to their nature and appearance. Besides, she had to be buried away from people—away from the people's dead—as her life itself had been secluded, apart from the lives of other people.

I picked up the suitcase gingerly and placed it in the middle of the ditch. The ditch was exactly the size of the suitcase—not a hair off. At the end, I wanted to look into the suitcase just one more time. I looked around. Not a soul was to be seen. I took the key out of my pocket and opened the suitcase. At last, when I pushed aside the folds of her black gown, amid the clot of blood and the wriggling worms, I saw a pair of black eyes fixed upon me. My life had sunk into the depths of those eyes. I quickly closed the suitcase, covered it with earth, and pressed the dirt down by walking on it. Then I picked some scentless black lilies and planted them upon her grave. Finally, I scattered rocks and sand over the grave to make it indistinguishable. Her grave was so well camouflaged that I myself could no longer distinguish it from the surrounding ground.

When my work was finished, I looked at myself. My clothes were dirty and torn, and a black clot of blood clung to them. Two golden fly-bees circled around me. Small worms clung to my body and writhed. I wanted to remove the bloodstain from my coat, but the more I moistened my sleeve with my saliva and rubbed at it, the larger and more vivid the stain

¹ *Rāq*—of or belonging to the ancient city of *Rayy*.

² The city of *Rayy* (also referred to as *Rhages*) was Iran's capital under the Seljuqs (11th and 12th centuries). As a Silk Road city, *Rayy* was host to both merchants and invaders. It was sacked and razed by the Mongols in 1220. Attempts at its restoration were not successful.



became. It spread over my whole body, and I could feel the chill of that jelly-like blood.

It was near sunset. A light rain was falling. Involuntarily, I began following the tracks of the corpse-carriage, but as soon as darkness fell I lost them. Unintentionally and without thought, I walked toward an unknown destination. It grew darker and darker, and I did not know where I would end up. From the moment I had seen those large eyes, I had been walking in the darkness that had engulfed my entire life. The two eyes that had been the light of my life had been extinguished forever. For me, it no longer mattered whether I reached any place or not.

It was as silent as the grave. It seemed that everyone had abandoned me. I took refuge among lifeless things. A relationship had been established between me, nature, and the darkness that had settled into my soul. This silence has a language that is beyond our understanding. Its intoxicating power was so overwhelming that I grew dizzy. I felt that I wanted to vomit. I walked on until I reached the graveyard and sat down on a tombstone. Bewildered, I buried my head in my hands. Suddenly I heard a dry, repulsive laughter. When I turned, I noticed a figure sitting beside me, with a scarf wrapped around his head and face. Something wrapped in a handkerchief lay beneath his arm. He turned toward me and said, "You probably wanted to go to the city and lost your way, eh? Perhaps you are asking yourself what I am doing in the graveyard at this time of night. Don't panic. I work with dead bodies. I am a grave-digger. Not a bad job, eh? I know every inch of this place. For example, today I dug a grave, and this vase came out of the ground. It is a *Rāq* vase. It is from the ancient city of *Rayy*, eh? Suppose I give it to you as a souvenir from me!"

I put my hand into my pocket and took out two *qerāns* and one *‘abbāsī*. He let out a hair-raising laugh and said, "Never, that is nothing. I know you. I know where you live, just around the corner. I have a corpse-carriage, too. Let me take you home, eh? It's only a couple of steps away!"

He placed the jar in my lap and got up. He was laughing so violently that his shoulders shook. I picked up the jar and followed the stooped old man. At the bend in the road stood a ramshackle corpse-carriage drawn by two meager black horses. With astonishing agility, the old man pulled himself up onto the driver's seat. I climbed into the carriage and lay down in the place specially built for coffins, resting my head on its edge so that I could see the landscape around me. I placed the jar upon my chest and held it tightly.

The whip whistled through the air. The horses set off, panting. They took long yet effortless strides. Their hooves touched the ground slowly and without a sound. The bells around their necks had a strange resonance. The stars, like bright eyes torn from their sockets and set among clots of blood, watched the earth. Except for the jar that pressed upon my chest like the weight of a corpse, a pleasant calm filled my whole being. The



intertwined trees, with their crooked, twisted branches, locked arms as though trying to support one another in the engulfing darkness. Along both sides of the road stood strange houses of geometrical design, with a few forlorn black windows. A sickly, dim radiance emanated from their glowworm-like walls. The awe-inspiring trees passed by us in clumps, one after another. Yet it seemed that the stalks of black lilies became entangled around their feet, causing them to stumble and fall. The smell of death, the smell of decaying flesh, filled my total being. The smell of death had penetrated my entire body, as though all my life I had lain in a black coffin, carried through mist and passing shadows by a stooped old man whose face I could never see.

The corpse-carriage stopped. I picked up the jar and jumped down. I was standing before the door of my house. I hurried inside and placed the jar on the table. Then I fetched the tin can that served as my piggy bank from its hiding place in the closet and returned to the door. I intended to give it to the old man in payment for his labor. But he had disappeared. There was no trace of either him or his carriage.

Disappointed, I returned to my room, lit the lamp, removed the jar from the handkerchief, and wiped the dust from it with my sleeve. The jar was covered with an ancient, brilliant purple glaze that now shimmered like the broken wings of a golden bee. One side of it was shaped like a diamond, bordered by a band of black lilies. In the middle...

Her face was painted in the middle of the diamond... the face of a woman with large black eyes, eyes larger than ordinary—reproachful eyes, as though I had committed some unforgivable crime unknown to myself. Spellbinding eyes that were at once anxious, bewildered, threatening, and inviting. Eyes that were fearful, yet irresistible, from whose depths a supernatural radiance shone. She had prominent cheeks, a high forehead, slender joined eyebrows, full half-open lips, and disheveled hair, with a single strand clinging to her temple.

From the tin can I took out the picture of her that I had painted the previous night. I compared it with the painting on the jar. There was not the slightest difference. They were images of one another, both painted by the hand of the same unfortunate pen-case painter. Perhaps, while I had been painting, the spirit of the painter of the jar had replaced my own spirit and taken possession of my hand. One could not distinguish between the two except that mine was painted on paper, whereas the image on the jar possessed an ancient, brilliant glaze that imparted to it a mysterious, singular soul. In the depths of her eyes a restless soul sparkled. No. It could not be believed. Those same large, thoughtless eyes. The same withdrawn, yet free expression. No one can understand what I felt. I wanted to run away from myself. Was such a thing possible? Once more all my misfortunes materialized before my eyes. Were not one person's eyes enough in my life, that now two people were looking at me through the same eyes? No. It was utterly unbearable. Those same eyes that lay buried



in that distant place near the mountain, beside a cypress tree, by the dry stream, where I had planted the black lilies—the same eyes that lay amid clotted blood, worms, beasts, and other creatures feasting around her, the same eyes into whose sphere the roots of grasses were penetrating to draw out their sap—were now looking at me in the fullness of life!

I had never imagined myself to be so unfortunate and accursed. In spite of the murderous feeling hidden within me, I felt a strange, unfathomable happiness. For I had discovered that I had an ancient companion. Was not the man who had painted the picture on the jar, hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of years ago, my fellow sufferer? Had he not gone through the same experience that I had gone through? Until then I had believed myself to be the most wretched of creatures. Now I realized that beyond those mountains, in those ruined houses and villages built of heavy sun-dried bricks, there had once lived a people whose bones had now rotted away, their substance becoming the bodies of black lilies. Among them there had lived an afflicted, accursed painter, perhaps an unfortunate painter of pen-case covers, just like me. Now I understood that he, too, had burned and melted in the presence of two large black eyes, exactly as I was doing. This thought comforted me.

At last I placed my painting beside the painting of the man who had painted the jar. Then I prepared my special fire-pot. When the fire was ready, I placed it before the paintings and took many pulls from the opium pipe until I reached a state of ecstasy. I stared at the two pictures. I was trying to gather my thoughts—a state of mind that only the ethereal smoke of opium could create for me.

4. The Portal

I smoked all the opium I had until the strange concoction drew aside the curtain before my eyes. It dispersed those distant, dense, gray memories. At last I reached the state for which I had been waiting. It even surpassed my expectations. Gradually my thoughts became more precise, more expansive, and more enchanting. I was in that state between sleep and half-consciousness.

Then I felt the weight upon my chest lifted. It seemed that the laws of gravity no longer applied to me, and I could fly after my thoughts, which had become vast, delicate, and precise. A deep, indescribable ecstasy filled my whole being. My body had been relieved of a heavy burden. It was a quiet world filled with enchanting shapes and colors. Soon my thoughts dissolved into those colors and shapes. I floated among thoughts that were gentle and ethereal. I could hear the beating of my heart. I could feel the movement of blood through my veins. This state was, for me, full of meaning and ecstasy.



From the depths of my heart I longed to surrender myself to forgetfulness and sleep. My wish could be fulfilled only if that forgetfulness became possible, if it endured, if my eyes could close and pass beyond sleep into nothingness, so that I could no longer feel my own existence; if it were possible for me to become part of an ever-expanding black stain, a musical note, or colored rays in which no trace of my being could ever again be found.

Gradually a state of torpor and numbness overtook me. It was like a pleasant weariness, like gentle waves flowing from my body. Then I felt my life receding backward. Little by little I became aware of the successive events and stages, the obliterated, forgotten memories of my childhood. It was not merely that I saw these things—I was participating in their formation. I felt myself becoming smaller and smaller until, suddenly, my thoughts grew dark and indistinct. It seemed that my whole being hung from the end of a thin hook suspended over the depths of a dark well. Then I came loose from the hook and fell freely—without obstacle—into a never-ending abyss of eternal night. After that, vague, obliterated veils appeared before my eyes. I experienced a moment of complete oblivion. When I came to, I found myself in a small room, in a particular position that seemed strange, yet at the same time entirely natural to me.

I was thoroughly familiar with the surroundings and the ways of the world into which I had opened my eyes. It was so familiar that I can even say I felt more at home in this world than in the one in which I had previously lived. It seemed like a reflection of my real life. It was another world; yet it was so close, so intimately bound to my being, that it seemed I had returned to my natural surroundings. I had been born into an ancient, yet more natural, world.

Dawn was just breaking. A tallow-lamp¹ burned on the mantel in my room. There also was a bed in a corner. But I was awake. I felt that my body was burning, and that bloodstains clung to my cloak and scarf. My hands, too, were stained with blood. Yet, despite my fever and dizziness, a strange excitement and agitation possessed me, overshadowing any thought of wiping away the traces of blood or of fearing that the magistrate might come to arrest me. Come to think of it, I had long been waiting for them to come and take me away. But first I had resolved to drain the entire poisonous cup of wine that stood on the niche. The urge to write had become a duty. I wanted to drag out the fiend that had been tormenting me from within. I wanted to set my complaints down on paper. At last, after a moment's hesitation, I drew the tallow-lamp toward me and began to write:

.....

¹ A small lamp fueled by rendered animal fat (tallow), with a wick set in the fat and burned to produce a dim, smoky light.



5. The Dwelling

I have always thought that silence is the best of things. I thought it was best for a man to spread his wings like a bittern¹ on the seashore and sit there alone. But things are no longer under my control. What should not have happened has happened. Who knows? Perhaps now, perhaps an hour from now, a group of drunken night watchmen will come to apprehend me. I am not willing to save my carcass. Besides, there is no room left for denial, even if I obliterate the traces of blood. But before they lay their hands on me, I shall drink a cup of that wine—my inherited wine—which is on the niche.

Now I intend to take my whole life into my hands; like a bunch of grapes, press it and, drop by drop, pour its juice—no, its wine—like sacred water into the dry throat of my shadow. But before I go, I want to write down all the pains that, like leprosy or contusion, have eaten away at me in the corner of this room. In this way I can better organize my thoughts. Do I intend to write a will? Never, because I have no property that can be confiscated by the government, nor do I have any faith that Satan can take away from me. Besides, what on earth could have the least value for me? As for "life," I have already lost it. I let it be lost. When I leave this world, I do not give a damn whether anyone reads my tattered notes. I am writing because writing has now become a necessity for me. I have to; more than ever before, I need to relate my thoughts to my imaginary creature. This ominous shadow, bent upon the wall before the light of the tallow-lamp, reads whatever I write and swallows it. This shadow surely understands better than I do! I can hold a good conversation only with my shadow. It is my shadow that makes me speak. Only my shadow can know me. It surely understands... I want to pour, drop by drop, the juice—no, the bitter wine—of my life into the dry throat of my shadow and say to it: "This is my life!"

Whoever had seen me yesterday had seen a broken, sick young man; but if he looked at me today, he would see a stooped old man with white hair, sore eyes, and a split lip. I am afraid to look out the window of my room or to look at myself in the mirror, because everywhere I see my own reflection. But in order to explain my life to my stooped shadow, I must tell a story. Oh, how many stories there are about childhood, love, copulation, marriage, and death. None of them is true. I have become tired of telling stories.

I shall try to press this cluster, but whether there will be any truth in it, I do not know. I do not know where I am, nor whether the patch of sky

¹ Bittern is a bird from the heron family. A wading bird, it tends to be more secretive than the rest of the members of this family.



above my head or the ground on which I am sitting belongs to Nishāpūr,¹ Balkh,² or Banāras.³ In any case, I trust nothing.

I have seen so many contradictory things and heard so many contradictory words; my eyes, this same thick yet hard tissue behind which the soul abides, have passed over so many surfaces that I believe nothing. I even doubt the weight and substance of things; I doubt the plain, visible facts of this very moment. If I touch the stone mortar in the corner of our courtyard with my finger and ask, "Are you stationary and firm?" and it answers yes, I still do not know whether to believe it.

Am I a distinguished, singular being? I do not know. But when I looked in the mirror a little while ago, I did not recognize myself. No, that former "I" has died and decomposed, yet there is no barrier between us. I should tell my story, but I do not know where to begin. All life is stories and tales. I should press the cluster of grapes and pour its sap, spoonful by spoonful, into the dry throat of this old shadow.

Where should it begin? For all the thoughts in my head now belong to this moment. There is no hour, no minute, no date. Something that happened yesterday may seem more ancient to me than an event that took place a thousand years ago.

Perhaps I am surrounded by old memories simply because I am cut off from the world of the living—past, future, hour, day, month, year are all the same to me. The stages called childhood and old age are meaningless to me. They make sense only to ordinary men, the bums—yes, that's the word, bums: B-U-M-S—whose way of life accepts prescribed stages and limits. They make sense to them because they live in the temperate zone of life. But my life, throughout, has had only one season and one state. It seems that my whole life has passed in a cold place, in eternal darkness; yet at the center of my body a constant flame burns and melts my being.

Within the four walls that make up my room, and within the barrier that surrounds my life and my thoughts, my life gradually melts away like the life of a candle. No, I am mistaken. My life is like a wet stump of firewood beside a boiling pot. It has become scorched and charred by the fire of other wood, yet it has neither burned nor remained wet and fresh. It has been choked by the smoke and steam of others. Like all rooms, my room is built of sun-dried and baked bricks upon the ruins of thousands of ancient houses. Its interior is white, with a strip of inscription. It looks

¹ A metropolis in Khurāsān that was destroyed by the Mongols in 1220. Khayyām, indirectly referred to earlier as the painter of the *Rāq* jar, comes from Nishāpūr.

² A major center of Zoroastrianism and Buddhism in medieval times that was destroyed by the Mongols.

³ The city of Banāras or Banāres is important in relation to the life of the Buddha. It was near Banāras that the Buddha started his preaching of the *Dharma*. [For further discussion, see Humphreys 1955; 25ff.]



exactly like a grave. The smallest details of my room, like the spider in the corner, are enough to occupy my thoughts for long hours. Since I have become bedridden, no one attends to my affairs regularly. The horseshoe nail in the wall is the nail from which the swinging cradle that held my wife and me was suspended. Later it could have borne the weight of other children. A little below the nail, the plaster has fallen away. From the exposed interior comes the smell of the things and the people who once occupied this room. A smell so strong that no current of air or wind has been able to disperse these stagnant, sluggish, heavy odors: the smell of bodily sweat, old illnesses, bad breath, sweaty feet, the acrid smell of urine, rancid oil, rotten mats, burned omelets, fried onions, homemade medicines, the smell of mallow and baby diapers, the smell of the room of a boy just reaching puberty; vapors that drifted in from outside, as well as the odors of the dead and the dying. All these smells are still alive and have preserved their distinct qualities. There are many other smells whose origins are unknown, yet they too have left their traces.

My room has one closet and two openings onto the outside, onto the world of the bums. One looks into our own courtyard and the other onto the street; the latter connects me with the city of *Rayy*, the city called the Bride of the World. It is a city of thousands of alleyways, hidden houses, *madrasahs*,¹ and caravanserais.² The city—the greatest city in the world—breathes and lives beyond my room. When I close my eyes here in the darkness, the city's vague and confused shadows—its mansions, mosques, and gardens, all that has affected me—materialize before my eyes.

These two openings connect me with the outside world, the world of the bums. But in my room, on the wall, hangs a mirror in which I see my face. In my limited world, that mirror is more important to me than the world of the bums, which has nothing to do with me.

Of all the sights of the city, a small butcher's shop stands directly before the opening of my room. Every day it sells two sheep. Whenever I look out the opening, I see the butcher. Early every morning, two gaunt, sickly black packhorses, coughing heavily, bring the sheep carcasses to the front of the shop, a carcass on each on side. Their lean forelegs end in hoofs, as though some cruel law of nature had decreed that their hands be cut off and the stumps plunged into boiling oil. The butcher strokes his hennaed beard with his greasy hand. First he appraises the carcasses with a buyer's eye, then he selects two of them. He weighs the fat in their tails in his hand, then hangs them on the hooks in his shop. The packhorses,

¹ *Madrasah* (also *madreseh*) is a theological seminary in which the *Qur'ān* and the *Sunnah* are taught and discussed. Outwardly a *madrasah* might resemble a mosque but it lacks most of the distinctive features of a mosque. It has rows of small rooms that accommodate the students of Islamic theology studying there.

² A caravansary is a stopping place where caravans stayed for the night to rest and to be protected from the bandits that roamed the desert.



breathing heavily, move on. Then the butcher caresses those bloodstained, headless bodies, their staring eyes and bloody eyelids protruding from the middle of their black skulls. Next he takes up a bone-handled knife, carefully cuts them apart, and smilingly sells the meat to his customers. What pleasure he takes in all this! I am certain he enjoys it. That yellow, thick-necked dog, which has claimed our neighborhood as its own and constantly watches the butcher's hands with greedy yet innocent eyes, knows this too. Even that dog knows the butcher loves his work.

A little farther away, beneath an archway, sits a strange old man before whom a canvas sheet is spread. Upon it lie a sickle, two horseshoes, several kinds of colored beads, a long-bladed knife, a mouse trap, a rusted pair of pliers, tool for putting water in inkpots, gap-toothed comb, a trowel, and a glazed jar covered with a dirty handkerchief. I have watched this old man through the the opening for hours, days, months. He always sits in the same position. He wears a dirty scarf and a cloak woven in Shūshtar,¹ through the open collar of which the white hair of his chest protrudes. A talisman is tied to his arm, and his eyelids are sore, as though eaten away by a stubborn, shameless disease. Only on Thursday evenings does he read the *Qur'ān* through his yellow, or missing, teeth. Perhaps this is how he earns his living, for I have never seen anyone buy anything from him. It seems that his face has appeared in most of my nightmares. What persistent, weed-like thoughts grow in that close-cropped head, with its protruding bump wrapped in a yellowish turban? There seems to be a special relationship between his assortment of wares and his life. Several times I decided to go and speak with him or buy something from his display, but I never dared.

My nanny told me that this man had been a potter in his youth and had kept this one jar for himself. Now he earned his living as a peddler.

These were my links to the outside world. Now, in my inner world, there was a nanny and a whore of a wife. But the old woman was her nanny as well. She was the nanny of both of us. For not only were my wife and I relatives, but the nanny had nursed us both at her breast. One might even say that her mother was my mother too, for I never knew my own father or mother. It was her mother, that tall woman with gray hair, who brought me up. It was she whom I loved as my own mother, and it was because of that same affection that I married her daughter.

6. The Dungeon

I have heard several contradictory stories about my parents. But in my own imagination I believe that only one of those stories—the one the

¹ Shūshtar is an ancient fortress city in Khūzestān Province of Iran well known for its woven handicraft.



nanny told me—must be true. The nanny said that my father and my uncle had been twin brothers. They were identical in build, appearance, and temperament. Even their voices had been the same. Their resemblance was so complete that it was difficult to tell one from the other. Besides this, there existed between them a mysterious bond of sympathy, so that if one of them fell ill, the other would become sick as well. As people say, they were like an apple cut in half. Eventually, both chose commerce as their profession and, at the age of twenty, went to India. They took goods from *Rayy*—shot silk, painted cloth, cotton fabrics, *jubbahs*,¹ shawls, needles, ceramics, fuller's earth, and pen-case covers—to India and sold them there. My father settled in the city of Banaras and sent my uncle to other Indian cities on trading journeys. After some time, my father fell in love with a virgin *Būghām Dāsī* girl,² a dancer at the Temple of the *Līngā*.³ Her duty was to perform the ritual dances before the great idol and to attend to the temple. She was a warm-blooded girl with olive-colored skin, lemon-shaped breasts, large slanting eyes, and narrow eyebrows that met in the middle, between which she wore a red beauty mark.

Now I can imagine *Būghām Dāsī*, my mother, dancing quietly and harmoniously to the music of the *setār*,⁴ drums, lute, cymbals, and horns. She wears a gold, open-breasted, embroidered silk *sārī*,⁵ a brocade headband, and her heavy black tresses, recalling eternal night, are knotted behind her head. Bracelets encircle her ankles and wrists; a golden ring pierces her nostril; her large, languid, slanting eyes and brilliant white teeth complete her beauty. She dances to the monotonous, gentle music played by bare-chested men wearing *shālmahs*—a meaningful music in which all the mystery, magic, superstition, lust, and suffering of the people of India are summed up. Through rhythmic ritual and voluptuous gestures—holy movements—*Būghām Dāsī* unfolds like the petals of a flower and folds herself together again, shaking her shoulders, bending her body, and rising erect. What effect these speechless yet eloquent movements, each with its own meaning, could have had on my father, especially when the acrid, peppery smell of perspiration mingled with the fragrance of champac⁶ blossoms and sandalwood oil, intensified the sensual power of the scene. My father's long-forgotten memories must have been awakened by a scent like the fragrance of distant trees, reviving

¹ *Jubbah* is a tall gown or cloak.

² *Būghām Dāsī* means a slave to pleasure.

³ *Līngā* (also *Līngām*) is a stylized phallus often depicted in conjunction with its opposite, the *yonī*. The *Līngā* connotes maleness, vitality, and creative power.

⁴ A musical instrument with three strings resembling a mandolin which is favored by Indian musicians.

⁵ *Sārī* is a strip of unstitched cloth, worn by women in the Indian Subcontinent. It ranges from four to nine yards in length and is draped over the body in various styles.

⁶ An evergreen timber tree native to India and having fragrant orange-yellow flowers that yield an oil used in perfumery.



suffocated feelings from far away—the smell of a medicine chest, the smell of Indian drugs kept in the rooms of infants. Perhaps these unfamiliar oils from a land filled with meaning, tradition, and ancient rituals bore the same scent as my own homemade concoctions. My father became so completely ensnared by his love for *Būgām Dāsī* that he embraced her religion, the cult of the *Līngā*. But when she became pregnant, she was expelled from the service of the temple.

I had just been born when my uncle returned from his trading journeys to Banaras. His taste and capacity for love apparently being the same as my father's, he fell deeply in love with my mother and eventually seduced her. His striking resemblance to my father, together with the mysterious bond between them, made this easy. When the truth was uncovered, my mother declared that unless my father and my uncle underwent the trial by cobra, she would leave them both. Whoever survived the trial would possess my mother.

The conditions of the trial required that my father and my uncle be shut in a dark room, like a dungeon, into which a *nāg*-serpent¹ had already been released. It was taken for granted that the one stung by the cobra would naturally cry out, thereby signaling the snake charmer to enter the room and rescue the other. *Būgām Dāsī* would belong to the survivor.

Before they were thrown into the dungeon, my father asked *Būgām Dāsī* to perform the temple dance once more before him. My mother granted his request, and in the light of the flames, to the accompaniment of the snake charmer's flute, she performed her measured, meaningful, gliding movements, twisting herself like a *nāg*-serpent. Then they shut my father and my uncle in the special chamber with the *nāg*-serpent. Instead of a terrified scream, however, there came a groan mingled with a hair-raising peal of laughter—the laughter of a madman. When they opened the door, my uncle emerged from the room, his face ravaged and aged, his hair turned white from the terror inspired by the sound of the cobra's body sliding and hissing, by its glittering round eyes, its poisonous fangs, and its body—a long neck ending in a spoon-shaped hood beneath a small head. According to the terms of the trial, Bugam Dasi belonged to my uncle. Yet one dreadful fact remained. The man who survived the trial could have been either my father or my uncle.

Because the ordeal had deranged the survivor's mind, causing him to forget his former life, he could no longer recognize the child. For this reason it was decided that the survivor must have been my uncle. Is not this whole story bound up with my own life? Does not the echo of that

¹ *Nāg* (also *nāg*-serpent) is a snake-spirit with long fangs and a slit in the middle of the upper lip. In Buddhistic lore it is the life force that determines birth and rebirth and hence it is connected with the wheel of life. The legend of the Buddha tells how the *nāg*-serpent wound itself around his body seven times, but, since it could not crush him, it turned into a youth bowing low before Gautama.



hideous laughter and the terror of that trial still bear upon me? Is not all this connected with me?

From then on, I was merely an intruder—another mouth to feed. Eventually, the survivor—my uncle or perhaps my father—returned to the city of *Rayy* on business, accompanied by Bugam Dasi. He brought me with him and left me in the care of his sister, who is my aunt.

The nanny went on to say that, when my mother bade us farewell, she entrusted my aunt with a wine flask in whose deep red wine the poison from the fangs of the *nāg*, the Indian serpent, had been dissolved. What other keepsake could a Bugam Dasi leave her son except deep red wine, the elixir of death that brings eternal peace? Perhaps she too had pressed her life like a cluster of grapes and handed me its wine. Some of the same venom that had killed my father was dissolved in it. Now I understand the high value of the gift she left me.

Is my mother still alive? Perhaps, at this very moment as I write, she is dancing in some remote city of India, twisting and bending her body like a serpent beneath the light of flaming torches in a *maydān*.¹ She bends and twists as though a *nāg*-serpent had bitten her. Women, children, and curious half-naked men surround her, while my father—or my uncle—white-haired and stooped, sits in a corner watching her, recalling the dungeon, the hissing, and the sound of the enraged serpent's body gliding across the ground as it raises its head, its eyes glittering, its neck spreading into the shape of a hood, and the gray spectacle-like markings appearing behind it.

In any case, I was still an infant at the breast when they placed me in the arms of the nanny. She had also nursed my cousin—the whore, my wife. I grew up under the care of my aunt, the tall woman with gray hair at her temples. I grew up in the same house as her daughter, this same whore.

7. The Enchantment

Ever since I can remember, I have looked upon my aunt as my mother and have loved her. I loved her so deeply that I married her daughter, my own foster-sister, because she resembled her mother.

In fact, I had to marry her. She gave herself to me only once. I shall never forget it. It happened beside her mother's deathbed. It was quite late at night, and everyone was asleep when I entered the dead woman's room in my pajamas to bid her farewell one last time. Two camphor candles were burning at the head of her bed. They had placed a *Qur'ān* upon her

¹ *Maydān* also *meydān*—an open multipurpose field in which most of the social gatherings of the community is held.



stomach to prevent Satan from entering her body. When I lifted the cloth that covered her face, I saw the dignified and attractive face of my aunt. It seemed that all earthly ties had dissolved from her face. There was an expression upon it that filled me with reverence, for the sight of her face made me realize that death is a normal, natural occurrence. A faint, ironical smile had dried upon the corner of her lips. I wanted to kiss her hand and leave the room when, turning my head, I saw—to my astonishment—the same whore who is now my wife. She entered the room and, right before the body of her dead mother, pressed herself hard against me. She pulled me toward her, kissing me passionately. I was ashamed and bewildered, uncertain what to do. I would rather have sunk into the ground than watch the dead body, its teeth exposed, mocking us. It seemed to me that the quiet smile on the dead face had changed. Involuntarily, I drew her into my arms and kissed her. At that very moment, the curtains of the adjoining room were drawn aside, and my aunt's husband—the father of that same whore—entered. He was stooped and wore a scarf around his head.

He burst into a hideous laugh that made one's hair stand on end, and his shoulders shook violently. He did not even look at us. I wished the ground would swallow me up, or else that I could strike the dead body so it would stop mocking us in that way. What a disgrace! I fled from the room in terror. It was because of that same whore. She must have contrived the whole scene to force me to marry her.

Although we had been brought up as foster brother and sister, I had to marry her simply to save their reputation, which was now at stake. Besides, she was not a virgin. I did not know it then. I could never have known. There had been rumors, of course.

On our wedding night, when we were finally left alone, she ignored all my pleading and entreaties and refused to take off her clothes. "It's the wrong time of the month," she said. She would not even allow me near her. She put out the light, went to the opposite corner of the room, and slept there. She trembled like a willow, as though she had been thrown into a dungeon with a dragon. No one would believe it, and indeed it is hard to believe: she never allowed me so much as to kiss her cheek. The second night was no different from the first. I did not dare touch her and slept on the floor. I slept there for many nights. Who would believe it? For two months—no, for two months and four days—I slept apart from her and did not dare approach her.

The token of her virginity had already been prepared. I do not know whether she had sprinkled a handkerchief with the blood of a partridge, or whether it was the very kerchief she had used on the first night of her intimacy and was now displaying it to mock me even more. Those who congratulated me would wink at one another, perhaps saying to themselves, "The poor fellow must have found out last night!" But I ignored it all. They were laughing at me. They were laughing at my stupidity. I had resolved that one day I would write all this down.



After I discovered that she had lovers of every sort, I thought perhaps she did not love me because a *mullāh*¹ had placed her under my authority by reciting a few Arabic phrases. Perhaps she wanted to be free. At last, one evening, I decided to invade her bed, and I carried out my decision. But after much struggling in bed, she got up and left. I contented myself with spending the night rolling about in the bed that still held the warmth of her body and smelled of her. That was the only night I ever slept well. After that night, she separated her room from mine.

In the evenings, when I returned home, she would still be out. In fact, I did not know whether she had come back or not. Truthfully, I did not want to know, because I had been condemned to loneliness and death. No one would believe it, but I tried by every means to establish contact with her lovers. I watched for the ones who had caught her fancy; then, in order to gain their acquaintance, I humbled myself by flattering them and eventually guided them to her bedchamber. Do you know who her lovers were? Tripe-peddlers, jurists, liver-peddlers, the police chief, a *muftī*,² a merchant, and a philosopher. Yet, although they bore different names and titles, they were all apprentices of the man who sold boiled sheep's heads. She preferred every one of them to me. No one would believe the extent to which I humiliated myself. I was afraid I might lose my wife. I wanted to learn the mannerisms that attracted her to her lovers, but instead I became a miserable pimp, mocked by fools. How could I ever learn the ways of such bums? I know now that she loved them because they were shameless, foolish, and foul-smelling. Her love was inseparable from filth and death. Did I really want to sleep with her? Was it her outward appearance that attracted me to her, or her hatred of me? Was it her whole manner of being, or my lifelong love for her mother—or was it all these things together—that drew me to her? No. I do not know. I know only one thing. I do not know what potion this woman, this whore, this witch had poured into my soul that made every atom of my being long for her atoms. My whole being cried out for her with desperate necessity and longed to be with her on some remote island where no other people existed. I wished that all those bums outside my room, who breathed, ran about, and amused themselves, would be swept away by an earthquake, a storm, or a tornado, so that only she and I would remain alive.

Even then, would she not prefer some other creature—an Indian serpent or a dragon—to me? I wished that we might spend one night in each other's arms and die there and then. That seems to me the supreme culmination of my existence.

¹ *Mullāh*—an official who follows and interprets the Islamic law—the *sharīʿa*. He usually wears a turban and a long robe.

² *Muftī*—a canon lawyer, related to *fatwā*, the formal opinion of a canon lawyer.



8. The Paralysis

It seemed that this whore took pleasure in torturing me, as though the pain that was already consuming me were not enough. At last, I could no longer work or move about freely. I had become, I should say, a walking corpse. No one knew the secret that existed between her and me. My old nurse, who was now witnessing my gradual death, reproached me. It was because of that same whore that people whispered behind my back: "How does this poor woman endure such a mad husband?" They were right, too. The extent of my degeneration was incredible.

I wasted away day by day. When I looked into the mirror, my cheeks were the color of the meat at the butcher's—red. My body burned with fever, and my eyes were languid and sunken.

I was pleased to see my altered appearance because I could already discern the dust of death in my eyes, and I knew that I had to go.

At last they sent for the physician—the physician of the bums, the physician who, in his own words, had raised us all. He entered the house wearing a yellowish turban and a long beard. He took pride in having given my grandfather medicines to strengthen his virility, and in having poured homemade remedies down my throat and cassia down my aunt's. In any event, as soon as he sat beside my bed, he felt my pulse, examined my tongue, and ordered me to drink ass's milk and barley water. I was also to fumigate myself twice a day with mastic and arsenic. He gave my nurse a number of lengthy prescriptions consisting of decoctions of herbs and various strange oils: hyssop, olive, licorice preserve, camphor, maidenhair, chamomile oil, bay oil, linseed, fir-tree seeds, and other such rubbish.

I grew worse. My nurse, white-haired and aged, who had also been her nurse, was the only one who sat beside my bed. She placed cold cloths upon my forehead and brought me herbal infusions. She also talked to me about the events of my childhood and about that whore. For example, she told me that, while still in her cradle, my wife had the habit of chewing the fingernails of her left hand until they became sore. Sometimes she told me stories. I remember that these stories carried me back into childhood and produced in me a child's state of mind because they belonged to that time—the time when I was very small, lying beside my wife in a double cradle in the same room. I remember that she used to tell those same stories then. At the time, I could not believe some of their episodes, but now those very episodes seemed perfectly natural to me.

My illness had created a new world within me—an unfamiliar, vague world, full of forms, colors, and desires unimaginable to a healthy person. I could feel within myself the struggles of the characters in those tales. I felt that I had become a child, and I experience that feeling even now, as I write these words. All those feelings belong to the present and have nothing to do with the past.



Perhaps the transmission of the behavior, thoughts, desires, and customs of the ancients to later generations through those tales was one of the necessities of life. For thousands of years people have said the same things, committed the same acts of copulation, and suffered the same childish predicaments. Is not life itself, all of it, a curious tale, an incredible story? Am I not writing my own story, my own myth? Stories are nothing but an escape from unfulfilled desires—desires imagined by successive storytellers according to the limitations of their inherited mentality.

I wished I could sleep peacefully again, as I did in the days when I was an ignorant child—a tranquil sleep from which I would awaken with cheeks as red as the butcher's meat, my body burning with fever, coughing. What dreadful coughs! Coughs that seemed to rise from none of the hollow places within my body. Like the coughing of the horses that, early in the morning, brought the carcasses of sheep to the butcher.

I remember clearly that one night, when it was completely dark, I lay in a state of trance. Before sleep overtook me, I was talking to myself. At that moment I felt—indeed, I was certain—that I had become a child again and was lying in my cradle. I sensed that someone was near me. Everyone had long since gone to sleep. It was almost daybreak. Those who have been ill know that at such an hour life passes beyond the limits of this world. My heart was beating violently, but I was not afraid. My eyes were open, yet I could see no one because the darkness was thick and impenetrable. Several minutes passed, and a sick man's thought crossed my mind: "Perhaps it is she." At that very moment I felt a cool hand upon my burning forehead.

I shuddered. Two or three times I asked myself: "Could this be the hand of the Angel of Death?" Then I fell asleep. When I awoke in the morning, my nurse told me that her daughter—I mean my wife, that whore—had come to my bedside, placed my head upon her lap, and rocked me like a child. Perhaps some maternal feeling had awakened within her. I wish I had died at that very moment. Perhaps the child with which she was pregnant had died. Had her child already been born? I did not know.

In this room, which was steadily growing narrower and darker than a tomb, I constantly waited for my wife. But she never came. Was not my present condition of her making? I am not joking when I say it was three years—no, two years and four months. But what are months and days, anyway? They have no meaning for me. What significance can time have for someone living in a grave? This room was the grave of my life and my thoughts. All the bustle, noise, and outward signs of life belonging to the others—the bums, who are all cast in the same physical and mental mold—had become strange and meaningless to me. Since I had fallen ill, I had awakened to a strange and incredible world and no longer had any



need of the world of the bums. It was a world full of the unknown. It seemed as though I had to search every hole and every crevice in it.

During the nights, when my being floated between two worlds, at the moment before I sank into a deep, hollow sleep, I would dream. In the twinkling of an eye I entered a world distinct from my own. I breathed a different atmosphere and was far away. It was as if I wanted to breakaway from myself and change my fate. When I closed my eyes, my own real world appeared before me. These imaginary images possessed a life of their own. They appeared and disappeared freely, as though my will had no effect upon them. But even that is uncertain, because the visions that materialized before me were not ordinary dreams. I was not yet asleep. In silence and stillness I used to separate these images and compare them. It seemed to me that until then I had never known myself, and that the world had lost its accustomed meaning. It had been replaced by the darkness that ruled over it. No one had ever taught me to look at the night and love it.

I do not know whether, at such times, my arms were under my control or not. I used to think that if I left my hand to itself, it would begin to move without my willing it. The same was true of my body. It too could perform unexpected acts if I were not, unconsciously, controlling it. For a long time I had been possessed by the idea that I was undergoing a living decomposition, a gradual disintegration. At times I thought things that I myself could not believe. At times I experienced feelings of pity for which my reason reproached me. Often, while engaged in conversation or occupied with some task, I would continue speaking on various subjects while my mind was elsewhere. Afterwards I reproached myself for it. I was a mass in the process of decomposition and disintegration. Perhaps I had always been like this and would remain so forever—a strange compound of incompatible elements...

The unbearable fact was that I felt utterly remote from the people among whom I lived, although there existed between us a superficial resemblance, a vague and distant kinship. We shared only the ordinary necessities of life, and that alone lessened my sense of astonishment. The resemblance that pained me most was that the bums desired the whore, my wife, exactly as I did. But she preferred them. I am certain that something was wrong with one of us.

I called her *the whore* because no other name suited her. I do not wish to call her my wife, because no husband-and-wife relationship ever existed between us, and to do so would be to lie to myself. From the very beginning I always called her *the whore*. Yet the name itself held a peculiar attraction. If I married her, it was because she came to me first. That, too, was one of her devices. No, she had no love for me. I cannot imagine it. How could she love anyone? She was a sensual woman who needed one man to satisfy her lust, another to play the gallant, and yet another upon whom she could inflict torture. I do not think these three categories exhausted her needs, but she had certainly chosen me for torture. She



could scarcely have made a better choice. I married her because she resembled her mother, and because she bore a distant resemblance to myself. I not only loved her, but every atom of my being desired her—especially the middle of my body. I do not wish to conceal a true feeling beneath the fanciful veil of love, affection, and theosophy. Nor do I care for literary euphemisms. I imagined that a pulsation—a kind of aureole, like the halos painted around the heads of saints—throbbed in the middle of my body. It seemed that my sickly, diseased aureole was searching for hers, striving with all its might to draw hers toward itself.

9. The Excursion

When I felt better, I decided to leave the house. I decided to go away and lose myself—like a dog afflicted with leprosy that knows it must die; like birds that hide themselves when the time of their death approaches. Early in the morning I got up, took the two biscuits from the niche, and, making sure that no one saw me, ran away from the house. I fled from the adversity that had afflicted me. Aimlessly I wandered through the lanes among the bums who, with greedy faces, pursued money and lust. I had no need to look at them. One of them represented all the rest: a mouth leading to a mass of entrails ending in a sexual organ.

Suddenly I felt lighter and more agile. The muscles of my legs began to move with a speed and quickness that astonished me. I felt that I had been freed from all the fetters of existence. I raised my shoulders. It was a natural gesture for me. As a child, I always used to raise my shoulders whenever I felt released from some burden or responsibility.

The sun was high and blazing. Now I found myself in a deserted alley. Along my way stood gray houses of strange, solitary, geometric forms: cubic, prismatic, and conical houses with low, dark windows. Their windows, without shutters, seemed ownerless and temporary. It appeared impossible that any living creature could inhabit such houses.

The sun, like a golden knife scraping the edge of the shadows, was steadily diminishing them. The alleys stretched among ancient whitewashed walls. Everywhere was quiet and motionless, as though every element observed the sacred law of burning air and silence. It seemed that a mystery lay hidden everywhere, and my lungs scarcely dared breathe the air.

Suddenly I realized that I had passed beyond the city gate. The heat of the sun, as though with a thousand sucking mouths, drew the sweat from my body. Under its blazing rays the desert bushes had turned the color of turmeric. The feverish eye of the sun, from the depths of the sky, poured its burning heat upon the silent, lifeless landscape. The soil and vegetation of the place possessed a distinctive fragrance so powerful that, as soon as I breathed it, I remembered the hours of my childhood. It not only revived



that period in my memory, but made me experience it again for an instant, as though it had happened only yesterday. I felt a pleasant dizziness, as though I had been reborn into a lost world. The feeling intoxicated me. Like an old, sweet wine, it flowed through my veins and sinews and permeated my whole being. In the desert I recognized the thorns, rocks, tree stumps, and little shrubs of wild thyme. I could distinguish the familiar scent of the vegetation. I remembered my own distant past, yet those memories seemed magically remote, as though they possessed an independent existence of their own. I was nothing more than a distant, helpless witness. I felt that a deep whirlpool separated me from those memories. There was a hollow in my heart and the shrubs had lost the magical fragrance of those bygone days. The distance between the cypress trees had increased. The hills were drier. The being that I had once been no longer existed. If I were to summon him before me and speak to him, he would neither hear nor understand me. He would be like someone I had once known who had never been me nor a part of me.

The world seemed like an empty, sorrowful house. My heart was filled with apprehension, as though I had to walk barefoot through every room of that house. I passed from one interconnected room to another, but whenever I reached the last room and confronted that whore, the doors behind me closed of their own accord. Only the trembling shadows of the walls, whose corners had dissolved away, stood guard over me like black slaves.

When I reached the Suren River, a dry, barren mountain rose before me. Its hard, arid body reminded me of my nurse. I do not know what connection existed between them. I passed the mountain and came to a small green enclosure surrounded by mountains. The ground was covered with black lilies, and upon the summit stood a tall fortress built of heavy bricks.

By then I was tired. I sat down on the sand beneath the shade of an ancient cypress beside the Suren River.

It was a lonely, secluded place. It seemed that no one had ever set foot there. Suddenly I noticed a little girl emerging from behind the cypress trees. She was walking toward the fortress. She wore a black dress, probably made of fine, light silk. She was biting the fingernails of her left hand and moved so lightly that she seemed to glide as she passed. It seemed to me that I had seen her before and that I knew her. But beneath the intense sunlight I could not tell how she had suddenly disappeared.

I remained petrified where I sat. I could not move in the slightest. This time I had seen her with my own physical eyes. She had appeared—and disappeared. Was she a real creature or merely a figment of my imagination? Had I been dreaming, or was I awake? The more I tried to remember, the less I succeeded. A strange shudder ran down my spine. It seemed that all the shadows of the fortress upon the mountain had come



to life, and that the little girl had been one of the ancient inhabitants of the city of *Rayy*.

The scene before me suddenly struck me as familiar. I remembered that as a child I had come here on a *Sīzdah* outing with my mother-in-law and that whore. We chased one another around those cypress trees for God knows how long; then a group of other children joined us. I cannot remember exactly. We were playing hide-and-seek. Once I chased that same whore to the Suren River. She slipped and fell into the stream. They pulled her out and took her behind a cypress tree to change her clothes. I followed them. They held a *chādor*¹ between us, but I peeped. From behind the tree I could see her whole body. She was smiling and biting the finger of her left hand. Then they wrapped her in a white cloak and spread her black silk dress out in the sun to dry.

At last I lay down on the fine sand beneath the cypress tree. Like broken, unintelligible murmurs heard in a dream, the sound of the water reached my ears. Involuntarily, I sank my hands into the warm, damp sand. I squeezed the warm, damp sand in my fist. It felt like the firm flesh of a girl who had fallen into the river and whose clothes had just been changed.

I do not know how much time passed. When I rose to my feet, I began to walk without intending to. Everywhere was quiet and still. I walked without knowing where I was going. Some force over which I had no control was moving me. All I was aware of were my footsteps. I was not walking but gliding, like the girl in black. When I came to myself, I found that I was in the city, standing before my father-in-law's house. I do not know why I happened to pass his house. His little son, my brother-in-law, was sitting on the platform. He and his sister were like two halves of the same apple. He had slanting Turkmen eyes, prominent cheekbones, a wheat-colored complexion, a lustful nose, and a thin, firm face. As he sat, he had the index finger of his left hand in his mouth. Without thinking, I stepped forward, took the biscuits from my pocket, and gave them to him, saying, "*Shājūn* has sent these for you." He used to call my wife *Shāh Jān*, instead of calling his own mother by that name. With his slanting Turkmen eyes he looked strangely at the biscuits, holding them uncertainly in his hand. I sat down beside him on the platform and drew him close and pressed him to myself. His body was warm, and the calves of his legs resembled those of my wife. He had the same unaffected manner that she had. His lips were like his father's. Yet what filled me with disgust in the father possessed attraction and charm in the son. It seemed that his half-open lips had just emerged from a long, warm kiss. I kissed those half-

¹ *Chādor* is a cover worn by women, it is a large piece of cloth used as a combination head covering, veil, and shawl by Muslim and Hindu women and girls. It is worn in a way that only the eyes can be seen when the garment is held by the inside edges.



open lips that resembled my wife's. His lips tasted like the ends of cucumbers—bitter and acrid. Perhaps the whore's lips had the same taste.

At that moment I saw his father—the stooped old man with the scarf around his head—come out of the house. He passed without looking at me. He was seized with convulsive laughter. It was a dreadful laugh that made one's hair stand on end. His shoulders shook with it. I was so ashamed that I wished the earth would swallow me. Sunset was approaching. I got to my feet as though trying to flee from myself. Without realizing it, I made my way home. I saw nothing. You might say that I was passing through an unknown and unfamiliar city. Around me stood scattered strange houses of geometric form, with black, deserted windows. It seemed impossible that any living creature could inhabit them. Their white walls shone with a pale light. What was most astonishing was that whenever I happened to stand between one of those walls and the moon, my shadow appeared upon the wall large, dense—and headless. My shadow had no head. I had heard that whoever casts a headless shadow dies before the end of the year.

Terrified, I entered my house and took refuge in my room. At that very moment my nose began to bleed, and after losing a great deal of blood I fell unconscious upon my bed. My nurse began to care for me.

Before lying down, I looked at my face in the mirror. It had grown old, pale, and utterly lifeless. It was so colorless that I scarcely recognized myself. I lay down beneath the quilt, pulled it over my head, and rolled. Turning toward the wall, I drew up my legs, closed my eyes, and continued my ruminations—those threads that wove together my dark, sorrowful, terrible, yet delightful destiny. The place where life and death meet, and distorted images are born, where dead desires, obliterated desires, strangled desires come back to life and cry out for vengeance. At such moments I was severed from nature and from the visible world, and was ready to dissolve myself in the eternal current of things. Several times I murmured, "Death, death—where are you?" This calmed me, and my eyes closed.

As soon as they were shut, I saw that I was in Mohammadiyah Square. A high gallows had been erected, and the odds-and-ends seller who usually sat in front of my room had been hanged. Several drunken watchmen sat drinking at the foot of the gallows. My mother-in-law, her face glowing with anger—just like my wife's when the color drained from her lips and her eyes became round and terrifying—held my hand and pushed her way through the crowd, pointing me out to the executioner in red suit, saying, "Hang this one too..." Terrified, I sprang awake. I was burning like a furnace. My body was drenched with sweat, and my cheeks glowed with fever. To escape the nightmare, I got up, drank some water, and sprinkled some over my face and head. I returned to bed, but I could not sleep.

In the dim light of the room I stared at the water jar on the niche. It seemed to me that as long as the water jar remained there, I would never



be able to sleep. I had an irrational fear that it was about to fall. I got up to steady it, but under the influence of some impulse of which I was completely unaware, I deliberately struck it. The water jar fell and shattered. I squeezed my eyelids shut, but felt my nurse had awakened and was looking at me. I clenched my fists beneath the quilt. Nothing extraordinary happened. In a half-conscious state I heard the front door open, followed by the dragging sound of my nurse's slippers across the ground. She went out to buy bread and cheese for breakfast.

Then the distant cry of the street vendor reached my ears: "Mulberries are good for bile!" No. Tedious life had begun again, just as before. The light gradually grew brighter. When I opened my eyes, I saw the flickering reflection of a patch of sunlight on the pond dancing upon the ceiling through my window. The dream of the previous night seemed very distant—an excursion in my childhood. My nurse brought me my breakfast. Her face seemed reflected in a magic mirror. It looked thin and elongated. There was an incredibly comical expression upon it, as though some unseen weight were pulling it downward.

10. The Nanny

Although she knew that the smoke of the water-pipe¹ was bad for my health, nanny still insisted on smoking in my room. The truth was that unless she smoked, she could never be herself. She had spoken so much to me about her house, her son, and her daughter-in-law that by now I almost felt I shared in their sensual pleasures. How foolish! At times, for no apparent reason, I found myself thinking about the people in nanny's household. Yet, for some reason, everything connected with the lives and happiness of others filled me with nausea. I knew that my own life had reached its end and would soon be extinguished tragically. What had the lives of those fools and bums to do with mine—those who lived well, ate well, and fucked well, who felt not the slightest sympathy for my suffering, and upon whose faces the wings of death had not yet cast their shadow?

Nanny treated me like a child. She wanted to know everything. Even then I still felt shy before my wife. Whenever I entered my room, I would cover the phlegm I had spat into the basin. I would comb my hair and beard and straighten my nightcap. But with my nurse I felt no embarrassment at all. Why had this woman, who was no relation of mine, had involved herself so deeply in my life? I remember now the winters

¹ Water-pipe is an instrument for smoking tobacco whereby the smoke passes over water in a jar at the bottom of the device. In English it is also referred to as a hubble-bubble or hookah.



when they set up the *korsī*¹ in this very room above the cistern. My nurse, the whore, and I would all sleep around the *korsī*. In the dim light, whenever I opened my eyes, the embroidered curtain hanging in the doorway seemed to come alive. What a strange and terrifying curtain! The picture woven into it showed a stooped old man resembling an Indian *yogi* wearing a turban. He sat beneath a cypress tree with a *setār* in his hands. Before him stood a beautiful young girl who resembled a temple *Būgām Dāsī* dancer. Her hands were bound in chains, and it seemed that she was compelled to dance for him. I used to think to myself that this man, whose hair and beard had turned white, must also have been thrown into a dungeon with a *nāg*-serpent.

It was one of those Indian curtains embroidered with gold thread, probably sent by my father or my uncle from some distant land. Whenever I gazed at that picture for a long time, it frightened me. I would wake my nurse. With her coarse black hair and her foul breath, she would clasp me tightly in her arms. This morning, when I awoke, she looked exactly the same, except that the lines on her face had become deeper and harsher.

To forget everything—to escape from myself—I would recall my childhood. I hoped that by doing so I might forget my illness and imagine myself healthy again. I still felt that I was a child and that there existed another being who pitied me—pitied this child who was destined to die. In moments of distress, the quiet face of my nurse—her pale face, her dark, motionless, sunken eyes, the thin wings of her nostrils, and her broad, bony forehead—revived those memories within me. Perhaps some mysterious emanation flowed from her that brought me comfort. On her temple there was a fleshy mole covered with hair. This was the first time I had ever noticed it. Never before had I looked at her so closely.

Although outwardly nanny had changed, inwardly she had not changed at all. Her desire for life had grown stronger, and so had her fear of death, like the flies that invade a house at the beginning of autumn. My own life, however, was changing from day to day, indeed from minute to minute. It seemed to me that the course of events through which ordinary people passed in years had been compressed a thousand fold in my case. By contrast, whatever pleasure I derived from life was approaching zero—indeed, less than zero. There are people who begin their struggle with death while still in their twenties. Others are extinguished like a tallow-lamp after it has consumed its last drop of fat.

At noon my nurse brought my lunch. I overturned the bowl of soup and screamed. I screamed with all my strength. Everyone in the house

¹ *Korsī*: a device for heating houses in the winter. It consists of a low table, a brazier which is placed under it, and a quilt which covers the top of the table and hangs loose on the sides. The family usually sits around the table with the legs and lower part of the body covered by the quilt.



crowded before my room. That whore came too, but immediately went away again. I looked at her belly. It had grown larger. No. Her child had not yet been born. They sent for the physician. Secretly, I was delighted to have disturbed the whole foolish lot.

The physician arrived with his long beard and made me smoke opium. What a precious medicine opium was for the sufferings of my life! After smoking it, my thoughts became vast, subtle, magical, and exalted. I traveled in a world different from the ordinary one.

My thoughts were freed from the weight of earthly gravity and soared toward an empyrean peace and stillness. It was as though I had been placed upon the wings of a golden bat and I strolled through a radiant, empty world without hindrance. The experience was profound and delightful. It surpassed even death.

I left the brazier and walked to the window that opened onto our courtyard. Nanny was sitting in the sunlight cleaning vegetables. I heard her talking to her daughter-in-law. She was saying, "We have all lost heart. I wish God would kill him and put him out of his misery!" apparently the physician had told them my disease was incurable.

As for me, I was not surprised at all. How foolish people are! She had said all that, yet when, an hour later, she brought me my herbal extracts, her eyes were swollen and bloodshot from excessive weeping. Yet she forced herself to smile in front of me. They were putting on an act, but they were very poor actors. Did they think I did not know?

Why, after all, was this woman so devoted to me? Why did she think herself the companion of my sufferings? All she had done was thrust her bucket-like, black, wrinkled breasts into my mouth for pay. I wished leprosy would consume those breasts. Now, merely looking at them fills me with nausea; even the thought that I once sucked the sap of her life from them, that the warmth of our bodies mingled and became one, revolts me. Should she now treat me with the familiarity of a widow simply because, when I was a child, she rubbed my body all over? Because she once held me over the latrine, she still treats me like a child. She might even have taken me for her lesbian partner or for one of those adopted sisters that some women choose for themselves.

She did "take care of me," as she put it, with great curiosity and attention. Had my wife—that whore—attended me, I would never have allowed nanny to touch me. In my estimation, my wife's refinement of mind and sense of beauty surpassed nanny's, or perhaps it was lust that had made me shy and self-conscious before her.

For that reason I felt less embarrassed with nanny, and that is why she alone took care of me. Perhaps nanny believed that fate, or her star, had arranged matters this way. Using my illness as an excuse, she told me every intimate detail of her family's life—their joys, their quarrels—and revealed every corner of her simple, cunning, beggar-like soul. She complained that she could not get along with her daughter-in-law, as



though the young woman were a second wife who had usurped her son's love and desire. She spoke of it all in an indescribably vindictive tone. Her daughter-in-law must be a beautiful girl. I have seen her through the opening overlooking the courtyard. She has hazel eyes, blond hair, and a small, straight nose.

Sometimes my nanny spoke to me about the miracles of the prophets. She thought her stories comforted me, while in reality I merely envied her simplicity of mind and her foolishness. At other times she came to gossip. Several days ago, for instance, she told me that her daughter (that whore, I mean), at an auspicious hour, had been sewing a resurrection garment for her child. Then, as though she knew exactly what she was talking about, she tried to comfort me. For her own child. Sometimes she wandered about the neighborhood, bringing me medicines from them. She discussed my condition with the magician, the fortune-teller, the cupper, and the augur. On the eve of the last Wednesday of the year,¹ she went eavesdropping and returned with a bowl filled with onions, rice, and rancid oil. She claimed she had begged them for the sake of my recovery; later, when I was not looking, she stealthily fed all that rubbish to me. In between, I had to swallow the herbal extracts prescribed by the physician—the same accursed concoctions: hyssop, licorice extract, camphor, maidenhair, chamomile, bay oil, linseed, fir-tree seeds, starch, London-rocket seeds, and a thousand other kinds of trash...

Several days ago she brought me a prayer book covered with a thick layer of dust. But neither the prayers of the rabble nor any of their books, writings, or thoughts were of any use to me. What could I possibly gain from their nonsense and their lies? Was I not myself the product of countless generations, with all their inherited sufferings lodged within me? Was not the past itself alive in me? Never had any of these—the mosque, the call to prayer, the ritual ablutions, the noisy spitting, the bowing and prostration before an Almighty Creator with whom one could converse only in Arabic—ever had the slightest effect upon me.

Even when I was healthy and went to the mosque several times, my efforts to bring my thoughts and feelings into harmony with those of the others were futile. My eyes wandered instead over the glazed tiles and the intricate designs upon the walls. Those designs released me from the obligations of the mosque and carried me away into a world of delightful dreams.

¹ During the evening of the last Wednesday of the solar year, called *Chārshanbeh Sūrī*, a big fire is made. People jump over the fire and say, “My yellowness for you, your redness for me.” Afterwards, they sit in a corner at the crossroads and listen to passersby. This method of looking into the future is followed by still a third element—gathering alms for the sick. This last, however, seems to be more Indic than Iranian.



During the prayer I closed my eyes and buried my face in the palms of my hands. Within this self-created darkness I recited the prayers as though they were meaningless words uttered in a dream. My lips pronounced them without the least inward conviction, for I would rather have spoken to a friend—or even to an acquaintance—than to God, or to an Omnipotent Being. God was simply too much for me.

As long as I lay in my warm, damp bed, none of these questions interested me in the least. I did not care whether God existed, or whether He had been created as the embodiment of the wishes of earthly rulers, to sanctify their authority and make it easier for them to rob those they ruled. In other words, was God merely an imaginary image of the miseries of this world projected onto the heavens? At that stage of my life I wished to know only one thing: whether I would survive the night.

Compared with the frightful reality of death and the heart-rending state that I was experiencing, creed, faith, and belief seemed weak and childish to me, little more than a childish diversion for me. Beside the terrifying reality of death and the decay of my own body, everything I had ever been taught about heavenly reward and punishment and the Day of Resurrection appeared to be nothing more than a tasteless, deceitful illusion.

No, the fear of death would not leave me alone. Those who have not experienced suffering will not understand these words. The urge to live grew so intense within me that the smallest spark of pleasure compensated for many hours of palpitation and anguish.

I recognized the existence of suffering, but it was devoid of sense and meaning. Among the bums, I had become a rare breed. They had even forgotten that at one time I had been one of them. It was a dreadful sensation to see myself neither fully alive nor completely dead. I was a moving corpse, having no relation to the world of the living and deriving no benefit from the quietude and tranquility of the dead.

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11. The Butcher

When I moved away from the opium fire pot, I looked out of the opening. I could see a black tree and the shuttered door of the butcher's shop. Dark shadows had merged into one another. I felt that everything was empty and temporary. The dense black sky overhead resembled an old black tent pierced by a myriad of shining stars. At that moment I heard the *mu'azzin*.¹ It was an untimely call to prayer. A woman—perhaps that

¹ The *mu'azzin* is the man who calls out the hour of daily prayers from the minaret of a mosque.



whore—was on the bricks, giving birth to a child. Interspersed with the call, I could hear the barking of a dog. I thought to myself: "If there is any truth in the saying that everyone has a star in the sky, my star must be remote, dark, and meaningless. Perhaps I have never had a star!"

Just then I heard the voices of a group of drunken night watchmen passing through the alley. As they walked along, they played obscene practical jokes on one another. Then, together, they sang in chorus:

"Let us go and drink wine.
Rayy wine is incarnadine.
Only today's mine and thine!"

In terror, I drew back. Their singing had a peculiar resonance. Slowly their voices grew fainter until they disappeared altogether. No, they had nothing to do with me. They did not know... Once more darkness and silence filled the place. I did not light the tallow-lamp in my room. I wanted to sit in the dark. Darkness, this dense, yet fluid substance that penetrates every place and every thing. I had become accustomed to darkness, this dense, fluid liquid that permeated everything. It was in the darkness that my lost ruminations, my forgotten fears, and my terrifying, incredible thoughts—for which I knew no source within my mind—came alive, moved about, and mocked me. The corner of the room behind the curtain and beside the door was inhabited by these thoughts—these threatening, formless figures.

There, beside the curtain, a frightening figure was sitting. It did not move. It was neither gloomy nor cheerful. Whenever I turned my head toward it, it gazed directly at me. I was familiar with its face. It seemed that I had seen that face when I was a child. It was on the thirteenth of *Farvardīn*. I was playing hide-and-seek with the other children. The same figure had appeared to me. It had appeared together with other figures, short in stature and harmless. Its face resembled that of the butcher across the opening from my room. It was obvious that this person had been involved in my life and that I had seen much of him. Perhaps it was the shadow of my double confined within the restricted circuit of my life...

As soon as I got up to light my tallow-lamp, the figure disappeared. I went to the mirror and stared at my face. The reflection in the mirror was unfamiliar to me. It was incredible and horrible. My reflection seemed stronger than I was, and I had become like the reflection in the mirror. It seemed to me that I could not remain in the same room with my own reflection. I was afraid that if I ran, it would pursue me, like two cats confronting each other before a fight. I raised my hand and held before my eyes to create an eternal night in its shadow. Often the feeling of terror produced a peculiar state of intoxicating pleasure. At such times I felt dizzy, my knees gave way, and I became nauseous. Suddenly I realized that I was standing on my feet. This was like a miracle to me. How could I be standing on my feet? I felt that if I moved one of my legs, I would



lose my balance. A peculiar dizziness overcame me. The earth and its creatures seemed very far away. In order to be born into a quiet, bright world, I found myself vaguely hoping for an earthquake or a tornado.

When I lay down in bed, with closed lips I repeated several times, "Death... death." I was afraid of my own voice. I seemed to have lost my original courage, like the flies that invade a house at the beginning of autumn: lean, lifeless flies frightened by the sound of their own buzzing. They cling to a corner. As soon as they discover that they are still alive, they fling themselves recklessly against doors and walls until their dead bodies fall scattered about the room.

As soon as my eyes closed, a vague world appeared before them—a world created by myself in accord with my thoughts and observations. It was a far more real and natural world than the one I inhabited while awake. It was as though no obstacles or barriers confronted my thoughts and imagination; time and place had lost their power. This feeling of murdered lust created by dreams was the creation of my own hidden needs. It materialized incredible yet natural forms before me. Even at the very moment of awakening I remained doubtful of my own existence. I had no sense of time or place. It seemed that I had created these dreams with prior knowledge of their interpretation.

It was late at night when I fell asleep. Suddenly I found myself walking freely through the alleyways of an unknown city lined with strange geometrical houses—prismatic, conical, and cubic—with low, dark windows. Their doors and walls were covered with climbing ivies. I breathed freely. Yet all the people of the city had died a strange death. They had become petrified where they stood. Two drops of blood had flowed from their mouths and run down their clothing. Whoever I touched, his head broke off and fell to the ground.

I came to a butcher's shop. There I saw a man who resembled the odds-and-ends seller who sits in front of our house. A scarf was wrapped around his neck and face, and in his hand he held a long-bladed knife. He stared with red eyes whose lids seemed to have been cut away. I tried to take the knife from his hand; his head broke off and fell to the ground. Overcome with fear, I began to run. I ran through the alleys. Everyone I saw had become petrified where he stood. I did not dare look back. When I reached my father-in-law's house, I saw my brother-in-law, the whore's little brother. He was sitting on the platform. I put my hand into my pocket and took out two cookies. I tried to give them to him, but when I touched him, his head broke off and fell to the ground. I shrieked and woke up.

Dawn was just breaking. It seemed to me that the ceiling was pressing upon my chest and choking my heart. The walls had grown thicker. My chest was about to burst. My vision had become dim. For some time I stared at the posts supporting the ceiling, counting and recounting them. When I pressed my eyelids together, I heard the door. Nanny had come to clean my room. She had brought my breakfast upstairs. I went upstairs and



sat before the sash window. From that height I could not see the odds-and-ends man but I could see the butcher on the left. His movements, which had seemed frightening, grave, and measured from my room, now appeared helpless and almost comical. It seemed that he was not truly a professional butcher but merely pretending to be one. They brought in the black, lean mares, coughing a hollow, deep cough, carrying two sheep carcasses. The butcher stroked his beard with his greasy hand and appraised the sheep with a buyer's eye. Then, with some effort, he lifted the carcasses and hung them from the hooks in his shop. He rubbed his hand over the thighs of the sheep as though caressing them. Who knows? Perhaps at night, when he takes his wife's limbs into his hands, he thinks of the sheep. He may even think of the profit he would make were he to kill her.

When the cleaning was finished, I returned to my room and made a decision. It was a dreadful decision. I went to the closet and took the bone-handled knife from the souvenir box. I wiped the blade with the skirt of my long front-opening garment. Then I placed the knife beneath my pillow. This was an old decision, but there was something in the butcher's actions—as he chopped up the legs, weighed them, and looked at them with admiration—that made me involuntarily want to imitate him. It was necessary for me to experience that pleasure. From the opening in my room I could see, among the clouds, a deep opening of blue sky. It seemed to me that to reach it I would have to climb an exceedingly tall ladder. The horizon was covered with thick, deathly yellow clouds weighing heavily upon the entire city.

The weather was horrible, yet intoxicating. I do not know why I felt drawn toward the floor. In weather like this I always thought of death. But now that death, with its bloody face and long hands, was pressing upon my throat, I finally resolved—I should say, I had resolved—to take that whore with me, so that afterward she could not say, "May God have mercy on him. His troubles are over!"

At that moment they carried a coffin past the opening in my room. It was covered with black draperies, and candles had been lit upon it. The cry of *lā ilāha illā Allāh*¹ struck my ear. All the tradesmen and passersby stopped and followed the coffin for seven steps. Even the butcher, performing this ritual act of piety, followed the coffin for seven steps before returning to his shop. But the odds-and-ends seller did not leave his display. Everyone looked solemn. Perhaps they were thinking about the other world and the philosophy of life and death. When my nurse brought me the herbal extracts, she too seemed thoughtful. She passed the beads

¹ *Lā ilāha illā Allāh* "there is no god but God" is an Arabic term denoting the act of professing the Islamic faith.



of a large rosary through her fingers while praying. Then she stood behind my door and recited her prayers aloud: "*Allāhumma... Allāhumma...*"¹

I felt that I had been commissioned to forgive the sins of the living! But all this buffoonery had no effect on me. On the contrary, I was pleased that, even if only temporarily and by cunning, the bums were thinking along the same lines as I. Was not my room a coffin? Was not my quilt colder and darker than a tomb? That evenly spread quilt which constantly invited me! Many times I had thought that I was lying in a coffin. At night my room seemed to shrink and press in upon me. Do not the dead experience the same feeling? Does anyone know what it feels like after death?

It is true that at the time of death the blood ceases to circulate and that after twenty-four hours certain parts of the body begin to decompose. Yet the hair and nails continue to grow for some time. But what of sensations and thoughts? Do they, too, die when the heart stops, or do they continue to live a vague existence, nourished by the remaining blood in the smaller vessels? The very feeling of dying is terrifying, let alone the feeling of being dead! There are old people who die with a smile upon their faces; one could say that they pass from one sleep into another. They are like a tallow-lamp that simply burns itself out. But what of a robust young man who dies a sudden death? What are his feelings when all the powers of his body are struggling against death?

I had reflected upon death and upon the decomposition of my body's components, and it no longer frightened me. In fact, I earnestly wished to die and cease to exist. What frightened me, however, was the thought that the atoms of my body might mingle with those of the bums. I could not bear the thought. Sometimes I wished that after death I had long hands with great fingers by which I could gather together the atoms of my body and keep them to myself, so that they would not become mixed with those of the bums.

Sometimes I thought that those lying on their deathbeds see the same things that I saw. I had lost all anxiety, awe, fear, and zeal for life. Rejecting the beliefs they had instilled in me gave me a sense of relief. The only thing that consoled me was the hope of nonexistence after death. The thought of another life frightened and exhausted me. I was still not accustomed to this world in which I was living; what good would another world do me? I felt that this world had not been made for me. It was made for a band of shameless, diabolical, rude, beggar-like mule drivers, hungry for both spectacle and wisdom, forever boasting of knowledge they had never possessed. This world was created for those who suited it best: those who, like the dog wagging its tail for a morsel of offal before the butcher's

¹ Initial words of "Praise be to Muhammad and his family!"



shop, flatter the mighty and the powerful of both earth and heaven. The thought of a second life frightened and wearied me. No, I had no desire to see all these nauseating worlds and repulsive figures again. Had God only recently acquired His collection of worlds that He should wish to exhibit them to me? I do not wish to tell lies. If I had to live a second life, I would wish it to be one in which my thoughts and feelings were dull. A life free from fatigue, in which I could breathe freely and live beneath the shade of the columns of a *Līngā* temple. A world in which I could run about without the sun hurting my eyes. People's voices and the bustle of life hurt my ears.

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12. The Fears

No matter how deeply I withdrew into myself, like animals that hide in their burrows during winter, I could still hear the voices of other people with my ears, while I heard my own voice only in my throat. The loneliness and solitude hidden deep within me were as dense as eternal night. Nights with a sticky, dense, persistent darkness, waiting to collapse upon empty cities filled with lustful, vengeful dreams. But I was no more than a kind of absolute, mad protest against the throat that I had become for myself. The pressure that binds two people together at the moment of copulation is the result of a similar madness that exists in everyone. It resembles a feeling of remorse that gradually tends toward the depths of death...

Only death does not lie.

The presence of death annihilates all superstitions. We are the children of death, and it is death that saves us from the deceits of life. It is death that calls us to itself from the depths of life. At an age when we are still unable to comprehend other people, if at times we interrupt our play, it is in order to hear the voice of death... It is death that points to us. Is it not a natural phenomenon that people might suddenly plunge so deeply into thought that they lose all sense of time and place? That it takes a second effort for him to rejoin his current of superficial life. This is the voice of death.

In this damp bed, smelling of sweat, when my eyelids grew heavy and I was prepared to surrender myself to nothingness and eternal night, my lost memories and forgotten fears came alive: I feared that the feathers in the pillow might become dagger blades, or that the buttons on my frock might grow as large as millstones; or that the piece of bread that falls on the floor might shatter like glass. I was afraid that, should I fall asleep and the oil from the tallow-lamp spill onto the floor, the whole city might go up in flames. I was afraid that the paws of the dog in front of the butcher's shop might sound like the hooves of a horse; that the old odds-and-ends



seller might burst into laughter while sitting at his display, laugh so hard that he loses control over himself; that the worm in the footbath by the pond might become an Indian serpent; that my quilt might turn into a hinged gravestone, lock its marble teeth together, and bury me alive; that I might suddenly lose my voice, and the more I cried, the less I could be heard...

I longed to recall the days of my childhood, but whenever I succeeded and relived those times, they were as grim and painful as ever.

Coughs sounding like those of the lean black horses in front of the butcher's shop; forced spitting and the fear of seeing blood in it—blood, that tepid, salty liquid which emerges from the depths of the body and which, of necessity, must at last be vomited forth—the constant threat of death, which irrevocably shatters all thought: none of these was without fear.

Coolly and dispassionately, life reveals to each person his own masks, as though everyone carries within himself a number of masks. Some people constantly make use of the same mask. Naturally, their mask becomes dirty and wrinkled. These are conservative people. Others preserve their masks for their children. Still others keep changing their masks until they realize that they have grown old and have run out of masks. It is when this last mask wears out that the real face appears.

There was something in the walls of my room that poisoned my thoughts. I was certain that, before his death, a madman—a lunatic in chains—must have lived in this room. Nor was it only the walls of my room. That butcher, the old odds-and-ends seller, my nurse, that whore, and all the other people whom I used to see—even the bowl from which I ate and the clothes upon my body—all had conspired to create those thoughts within me.

A few nights ago, when I took off my clothes in the bathhouse, my thoughts took a new direction. Later, when the bath attendant poured water over my head, I felt my black thoughts were being washed away. In the bath chamber I saw my shadow upon the steamy wall. It was as frail as it had been ten years earlier, when I was a child. I remembered it perfectly. My shadow used to fall upon the steamy wall in exactly the same way. I looked at my body. My thighs, my calves, and the middle of my body revealed a lustful yet disappointing condition.

They too had preserved their shadow exactly as it had been ten years earlier, when I was a child. I felt that my entire life had passed like a wandering shadow, like the flickering shadows upon the walls of the bathhouse—without aim, without destination. But others were heavy, solid, and robust. Perhaps their shadow would fall on the steamy wall of the bathhouse larger and denser and would linger for a while longer, whereas mine would disappear instantaneously. When I returned from the bath chamber to dress, my thoughts once again changed direction. It was as though I had entered a new world—the very world in which I had been



born and which I hated. In any case, I had acquired a second life. It was a miracle to me that I had not dissolved like a lump of salt in the bathing pool.

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To me, my life seemed as incredible as the design on the pen-case I am using. Some crazy, whimsical painter must have painted this picture upon the pen-case. Often, when I look at the design, it seems strangely familiar. Perhaps it is because of this very design... Perhaps it is this very design that makes me write. Upon it is depicted a cypress tree, beneath which an old man, like the Indian *yogi*, is squatting. He wears a *shālmah* upon his head and has wrapped a cloak around himself. He has placed the index finger of his left hand upon his lips in astonishment. Opposite him, a girl in a long black dress, with an unusual gesture—perhaps a *Būgām Dāsī*—is dancing before him. She holds a lily in her hand, and between the two of them a brook flows.

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13. The Odds-And-Ends Seller

At the side of the brazier, I dispersed all my dark thoughts amid the subtle, heavenly smoke of the opium. At that moment, it was my body that was thinking; it was my body that was dreaming, gliding as though set free from the dirt and contamination of the air. It soared through an unknown world filled with unknown colors and shapes. Opium had breathed a vegetable soul, a sluggish vegetable soul, into my body. I had become part of a vegetable world. Had I turned into a plant? For some reason, as I dozed in front of the fire pot, on the leather ground-sheet, with my cloak over my shoulders, I recalled the odds-and-ends seller. He, too, used to sit in this very position before his display. The thought frightened me. I rose, threw off my cloak, and stood before the mirror. My cheeks were glowing with the color of the meat hanging in front of the butcher's shop. My beard was disheveled, yet it had a spiritual and attractive expression. My sickly eyes looked tired, offended, and childlike. It was as if all heavy, earthly, and human attributes had dissolved within me. I liked my face. I drew from it a certain lustful intoxication. Standing before the mirror, I said to myself, "Your pain is so deep that it has settled at the bottom of your eyes... If you cry, either tears will come from behind your eyes, or no tears!..."

Then I said again, "You fool. Why don't you finish yourself? What are you waiting for?... What more are you expecting? Isn't the wine flask in the closet of your room? Take a gulp, and there you go!... Fool... you are a fool... I am talking to empty air!"



There was no connection among the chain of thoughts that came into my mind. I could hear my voice in my throat, but I could not understand the meaning of the words. These sounds blended with other sounds in my mind. As when I had a fever, my fingers looked longer than usual. My eyelids were heavy. My lips had become thick. When I turned my head, I saw my nurse standing in the doorway. I burst into laughter. My nurse's face remained motionless, and her lifeless eyes stared at me. She showed no trace of surprise, anger, or sorrow. In general, foolish acts create laughter, but my laughter was deeper than that. This great stupidity, as well as of all those elusive things for which no explanation can be found, were related to each other. The thing that was lost in the darkness of night—a superhuman phenomenon—death. My nurse picked up the fire pot and slowly left the room. I wiped the sweat from my brow. The palms of my hands were covered with tiny white flecks. I leaned against the wall and pressed my head against the bricks. I felt better. Then I recalled this familiar tune from somewhere and began to sing:

"Let us go and drink wine.
Rayy wine is incarnadine.
Only today is mine and thine!"

I could always foretell the approach of a crisis. It usually made me depressed and uneasy. It was like a knot around my heart, or the stillness before a storm. Then the real world would leave me, and I would live in a shining world—a world immeasurably distant from the earthly world.

At such times I was afraid of myself. I was afraid of everyone. Perhaps this had something to do with my illness. It may also have been the reason for the weakness of my thoughts. When I saw the odds-and-ends seller and the butcher in front of my window, too, I was terrified. I do not know what there was in their actions and gestures that frightened me. My nurse told me something terrifying. She swore by the prophets that on certain nights she had seen the odds-and-ends seller go into my wife's bedroom, and that, listening behind the door, she had heard my wife say, "Take off your scarf!" It is indeed incredible. It was either the day before yesterday or the day before that. When I shrieked and my wife came to my door, upon her cheek, I could see the marks of the old seller's dirty, yellow, decayed teeth, from between which Arabic verses from the *Qur'ān* flowed. Why was it, after all, that ever since my marriage this man had been lingering about my house? Had he forsaken the world for her sake? I remember that on that very day I went over to the old man's display and asked him the price of his jar. From behind his scarf, beneath the slit of his lips, two decayed teeth appeared. He laughed. It was a hollow, hideous laugh that made one's hair stand on end. He said, "Don't you check before you buy? Never mind the price of the jar—take it, young man. I hope it brings you luck!" His voice had a peculiar tone as he said, "Never mind the price—I hope it



brings you luck!" I put my hand into my pocket, took out two *dirhams*¹ and four *peshīz*,² and placed them on the corner of the display. He laughed again—a loud, hideous laugh that made one's hair stand on end. I could have sunk into the ground with shame. I covered my face with my hands and returned home.

All the objects on his display had the rusty, filthy smell of discarded junk rejected by life. Perhaps he intended to display the things that life itself had rejected. To show them to people. Was he not himself old and rejected? Everything on his stand was dead, dirty, and useless; yet the stand itself possessed a strange, persistent life and meaningful forms. These dead objects affected me more deeply than living beings.

But my nurse had informed me and everyone else... With a filthy beggar! My nurse told me that my wife's bed had become infested with lice and that she herself had gone to the bathhouse. What kind of shadow did she cast upon the steamy wall of the bathhouse? Perhaps a lustful shadow, full of confidence in itself. Yet this time I did not disapprove of my wife's taste. The odds-and-ends seller was not an ordinary, flat, insipid man like those stud males who attract foolish women with their excessive desire for copulation. Perhaps the man himself was unaware of it, but these sufferings, these layers of misfortune encrusted upon his head and face, the universal misery that emanated from him—all these had transformed him into a demi-god. That filthy display before him was the very personification of creation.

Yes, I had seen upon my wife's cheeks the marks of two decayed teeth, from between which issued Arabic verses. She was the same woman who would not admit me, who belittled me; and yet, despite all this, I loved her. Yet, so far, she had not allowed me to kiss her cheek even once!

14. The Whore

The sunlight was pale and yellowish. I heard the touching sound of a kettle-drum, an impressive sound of entreaty and supplication that awakened all inherited superstitions and the fear of darkness. The crisis, whose approach I had already foreseen and for which I had been waiting, arrived. I was burning from head to toe. I was suffocating. I went and threw myself onto the bed and closed my eyes. The intensity of the fever made me see everything enlarged and with fringes. The ceiling, instead of sinking, had risen. My clothes pressed against my body. Without any reason I sat up in bed and murmured, "It is not possible anymore... It is

¹ *Dirham* was a silver coin used in the Islamic lands since the 8th century A. D. It weighed one *dirham*.

² *Peshīz* was a medieval coin with relatively small monetary value.



unbearable...." Then suddenly I became silent. Then again, aloud and slowly, as though mocking myself, I said, "More than this..." Then I added, "I am a fool!" I was not aware of the meaning of the words I was using. I was merely amusing myself by listening to the vibration of my own voice. Perhaps I was talking to my shadow to dispel my loneliness. Then I saw an incredible thing. The door opened and that whore came in. It seemed that, at times, she thought of me. There were still reasons to be grateful. She, too, knew that I was alive, that I was suffering, and that I would die. There were reasons to be grateful. Only I did not know whether she knew that it was for her that I was dying. If she knew, I would die happy and content. At that moment, I was the happiest man on the face of the earth. When the whore entered my room, all my evil thoughts fled. I wonder what rays emanated from her body that made me feel at ease. This time she looked healthier. She was plump and mature. She was wearing a cloak made of *tūsī* gusset cloth. She had plucked her eyebrows, painted a beauty spot, dyed her eyebrows with woad, and used white powder, rouge, and collyrium.¹ In short, she entered the room fully made up. She seemed content with her life. Involuntarily, she put the index finger of her left hand into her mouth. Was this the same graceful woman, the slender, ethereal girl who used to wear a black crinkled dress? Was she the girl who played hide-and-seek with me by the Suren River, the girl with the carefree, childish gait, whose provocative, sensual calves showed beneath the hem of her dress? Until then, whenever I looked at her, I had never noticed them. But now, as though a curtain had been lifted from before my eyes—for some reason I was thinking of the meat hanging in the butcher's shop—she had acquired the qualities of a lump of lean meat and had lost all her former attraction. She had become a mature, grave, painted woman. All she thought of was life. A genuine woman! My wife! I realized with fright that my wife had grown up and acquired reason, while I had remained a child. To tell the truth, I was ashamed in her presence, especially before her eyes. She was the woman who yielded her body to everyone but me. While I consoled myself with the mere fanciful recollections of her childhood, when she had a simple, innocent face with dreamy, fleeting expressions; the time when there were still no traces on her face of the teeth of the odds-and-ends seller from the alley. No, this was not the same person.

She asked me in a sarcastic tone, "How are you?" I answered, "Are you not free? Are you not doing whatever you wish? Why bother about my health?"

¹ An antique term for a lotion or liquid wash used as a cleanser for the eyes, particularly in diseases of the eye.



She left and slammed the door. She did not even turn around to look at me. Perhaps I had forgotten how to speak to the people of this world, to those who were alive. The very woman whom I had thought incapable of feeling had taken offense at my act! Several times I decided to go to her, fall at her feet, weep, and tell her that I was sorry. Yes, weep. Because I thought that if I could weep, I would feel better. I do not know how many minutes, hours, or centuries passed. I was like a madman taking pleasure in my own suffering, an ecstasy beyond human conception, an ecstasy that only I could experience. Even the gods, if they ever existed, could not experience such ecstasy. At that moment I discovered that I was superior. I discovered that I was superior to the rabble, to nature, and to all the gods—gods created through human lust. I had become a god. I was even greater than a god, because within myself I felt an eternal, infinite flux...

...but she returned. She was not as cruel as I had thought. I got up, kissed the hem of her skirt, and coughing and crying, fell at her feet. I rubbed my face against her calves and several times uttered her real name. It seemed as though her real name had a special resonance. But in my heart, in the depths of my heart, I kept repeating, "Whore... whore!" I embraced the muscles of her legs, which tasted like cucumber-ends: rather bitter and acrid. I cried and cried. I do not know how much time passed, but when I came to myself she had already left. For one brief moment I experienced all the pleasures, caresses, and sufferings of mankind. I remained before the smoking tallow-lamp like the odds-and-ends seller sitting at his display of wares. I did not move. I stared at the smoke of the tallow-lamp. Particles of soot, like black snowflakes, settled on my hands and face. When my nurse brought me a bowl of barley broth and chicken *pilaf*,¹ she screamed in terror, stepped back, and dropped the tray. I was delighted to have frightened her. Then I got up, adjusted the wick of the tallow-lamp, and went to look at myself in the mirror. I rubbed the soot into my face. What a frightening face! With my fingers I pulled the muscles beneath my eyes and let them go, tugged at the corners of my mouth, puffed out my cheeks, pulled the tip of my beard upward and twisted it, making all sorts of faces. My face possessed a talent for every kind of frightening and comical expression. Through these grimaces I could see the traces of all the hidden, incredible, horrible, and comical faces that existed within me. I recognized them; indeed, I could actually feel these states, and yet they appeared comical. All these faces were in me and were of me. Murderous, horrible, comical faces, all at the mercy of a single fingertip. Within myself I saw the *Qur'ān* reciter, the butcher, and my wife, as though their reflections were inherent in me. All these forms were within me, yet none was mine. Was not the substance and expression of my face the result of some

¹ A steamed rice dish often with meat, shellfish, or vegetables in a seasoned broth.



unknown impulse brought about by quibbles, copulations, and inherited disappointments? Was I not merely the hereditary guardian of this conglomeration, persuaded by some comical, mad impulse to preserve all these expressions within myself? Perhaps, at the moment of death, these quibbles would leave me and allow my face to assume its natural form.

Would not these comical grimaces, at that final moment, prove to have become so deeply engraved upon my face that they could never be effaced? In any event, I knew my own capabilities. I knew what I was capable of. Suddenly I burst into laughter. It was a hideous, terrifying laughter that made one's hair stand on end. I could not recognize my own voice. It was alien to me—a laughter reverberating in my throat, echoing in the depths of my ears.

At that moment I coughed, and a clot of bloody phlegm—a piece of my liver—fell upon the mirror. I traced it across the mirror with my finger. When I turned around, I saw my nurse. Her face was pale, her hair disheveled, and her eyes lifeless. Frightened as she was, she held in her hand another bowl of barley broth like the one she had brought before. She stood staring at me. I covered my face with my hands, went to the closet, and hid behind the curtain.

When I tried to sleep, I felt a ring of fire pressing around my head. My nose was filled with the smell of the sandal oil that I had poured into the tallow-lamp. It had the scent of my wife's body and the taste of cucumber-ends—a mild, bitter flavor. I rubbed my hands over my body, comparing my thighs, calves, and arms with those of my wife. I imagined before me the lines of her thighs and buttocks. It was even more compelling than materialization. Because it appeared as a necessity. I felt that I wanted her body beside me. A single movement, a single decision, would have been enough to dispel this lustful temptation. But the ring around my head grew tighter and more burning until I was plunged into a sea of vague, confused, and horrible forms.

It was still dark. The voices of a group of drunken watchmen passing through the lane woke me. They were playing practical jokes on one another. Then they all sang together:

"Let us go and drink wine.
Rayy wine is incarnadine.
Only today is mine and thine!"

I remembered—or rather, I was inspired by the fact—that I had a flask of wine in the closet of my room, a wine to which poison from the fangs of a *nāg*-serpent had been added, a wine of which a single cup annihilated all the nightmares created by life... But that whore...? The very word intensified my desire for her. It made her seem warmer and more alive.

What image could be better than this? I would give her a cup of that wine and drink one myself. Then both of us would die in the throes of convulsions. What is love? For all the rabble, love is an obscenity, a



passing vulgarity. One must seek the love of the rabble in their obscene ditties, in prostitution, and in the filthy phrases they repeat while swaying between sobriety and drunkenness. They speak of making love as "shoving the donkey's foreleg in the mud" or "putting dust upon the head." My love for her was something altogether different. It is true that I had known her for many years: those strange slanting eyes, the narrow half-open mouth, the choked, quiet voice. All these were filled with painful, distant memories. Among all these things I searched for that one thing of which I had been deprived. I was seeking something that belonged to me but had been taken away from me.

15. The Decision

Was I deprived forever? The very thought produced in me an even more dreadful sensation—a strange pleasure that compensated for my frustrated love. It had become a necessity. For some reason I kept thinking of the butcher across from my room, who would roll up his sleeves, say *Besmillāh*,¹ and cut the meat. His expression and manner were always present in my mind. At last I, too, made a decision. A dreadful decision. I got out of bed, rolled up my sleeves, and took the bone-handled, long-bladed knife from beneath my pillow. Then I stooped and threw a yellow cloak over my shoulders. I wrapped my head and face with a scarf. I felt that I had assumed a combination of the characteristics of the butcher and the odds-and-ends seller.

Then I tiptoed to my wife's room. Her room was dark. I opened the door slowly. She seemed to be dreaming. Aloud she was saying to herself, "Take off your scarf!" I went to her bedside and bent my head toward her gentle, quiet breathing. What a pleasant, life-giving warmth! It seemed to me that if I inhaled that warmth long enough, I would come alive again. For how long had I imagined that everyone else's breath must be as hot and burning as my own? I looked carefully around the room to see whether another man was there, whether one of her lovers was hiding nearby. She was alone. I realized that everything they had said about her was slander. How did I know that she was not still a virgin? I felt ashamed of all my superstitious thoughts about her. The feeling did not last long. From outside I heard someone sneeze. Then I heard a muffled, mocking laugh that made my hair stand on end. The sound seemed to pull every vein from my body. Had I not heard that sneeze and that laughter, I would, just as I had resolved, have cut her flesh into pieces and given it to the butcher across from our house to sell to the people. I myself would have given a piece of her thigh to the *Qur'ān* reciter as religious dues. Then I would

¹ Initial words of "In the Name of Allāh, the Compassionate, the Merciful."



have gone to him the next day and asked, "Do you know whose flesh you ate yesterday?"

Had he not laughed! Perhaps I should have carried out the deed at night, so that I would not have had to see the reproachful eyes of that whore. Instead, I picked up a piece of cloth that lay in my way and hurried out of the room. I threw the knife onto the roof, because that long-bladed knife had given rise to all these murderous thoughts within me. I rid myself of the knife that resembled the butcher's.

When I reached my room and looked in the light of the tallow-lamp, I saw that what I had picked up was her dress. It was a soiled dress that had lain against the flesh of her body. It was a soft silk dress made in India, scented with champac perfume¹. Something of the warmth of her body, of her very existence, still remained in it. I smelled it, placed it between my legs, and fell asleep. Never had I slept so peacefully. In the morning I awoke to the sound of my wife's cries. She was lamenting the loss of her dress. She kept repeating, "A brand-new dress!" although it was not really new. One sleeve was torn. I had no intention of returning the dress, even if blood were to be shed over it. Did I not have the right to possess one old dress that had belonged to my wife?

When my nurse brought me donkey's milk, honey, and bread, she had also placed a bone-handled, long-bladed knife beside my breakfast tray. She said she had seen it among the wares of the odds-and-ends seller and had bought it. Then, raising her eyebrows, she added, "It might come in handy!" I picked up the knife and examined it. It was my own knife. Then my nurse added in an offended, querulous tone, "Well, my daughter"—that is, that whore—"at this early hour of the morning claims that you stole her dress last night! I don't want to answer for anyone's sins... but yesterday your wife told me that she had seen streaks of blood... We knew the child... She said that she had become pregnant in the bathhouse. Last night I went to massage her back. Her arm was covered with black-and-blue marks. She showed it to me and said, 'Late last night I went to the seller, and you-know-who pinched me.'" Then my nurse asked, "Did you know that your wife has been pregnant for a long time?" I laughed and answered, "Perhaps the child resembles the *Qur'ān* reciter. She must have been looking at him when the child first stirred in her womb!" My nurse left the room angrily. She had not expected such an answer. Immediately I got up, took the bone-handled knife with trembling hands, placed it in the souvenir box in my closet, and closed the lid.

No. There was no possibility that the child had first stirred while she was looking at me. Surely it had stirred while she was looking at the odds-and-ends seller.

¹ Champac is an Asian tree with usually yellow fragrant flowers.



In the afternoon, the door of my room opened and her little brother—the little brother of that whore—entered, chewing his nails. Anyone who saw them could tell that they were brother and sister. Such a striking resemblance! A small, narrow mouth; fleshy, moist, lustful lips; languid, heavy eyelids; slanting, astonished eyes; prominent cheekbones; disheveled, date-colored hair; and a wheat-colored complexion. He was exactly like that whore and possessed something of her satanic spirit. It was one of those Turkmen faces—unfeeling, spiritless, fashioned to struggle against life. A face that would do anything in order to survive. It seemed that nature had fashioned such people in advance. Their ancestors had lived under sun and rain and had struggled against the forces of nature. Their endurance, lust, greed, and hunger were innate. I knew the taste of his mouth. It was like cucumber-ends bitter and mild.

When he entered the room, he looked at me with his astonished Turkmen eyes and said, "Shājūn says the physician said that you are dying. We will get rid of you. How do people die?"

I answered, "Tell her I have been dead for a long time."

"Shājūn said, 'If I had not lost my child, the whole house would become ours.'"

Involuntarily I burst into laughter. It was a hollow, hideous laughter that made one's hair stand on end. A laughter so horrendous that I could not recognize my own voice. The child fled from the room in terror.

At that moment I understood the pleasure the butcher felt as he wiped his knife on the thighs of the sheep. It was the pleasure of cutting lean meat in which the dead blood had clotted like mud, while blood and water dripped from the sheep's windpipe. The dog before the butcher's shop, the severed head of the cow lying on the floor with its dim, staring eyes, the heads of all the sheep upon whose eyes the dust of death had settled—they too knew.

Now, at last, I understood that I had become a demigod. I was beyond the petty desires of ordinary people. I could feel the eternal, infinite flux. What is eternity? For me, eternity was playing hide-and-seek with that whore on the banks of the Suren River. It was hiding my head in her lap and closing my eyes for a brief moment.

Suddenly I realized that I was talking to myself—and in a strange way. I wanted to speak, but my lips had become so heavy that they could not move. Yet, without moving my lips and without hearing my own voice, I knew that I was speaking to myself.

In this room, which, like a grave, was becoming smaller and narrower with every passing moment, night, with its dreadful shadows, surrounded me. My shadow, cast upon the wall by the smoking tallow-lamp, together with the sheepskin, the cloak wrapped around me, and the scarf I wore, stretched across the wall.

My shadow on the wall was more substantial and more exact than my real body. My shadow was more real than I was. Perhaps the old odds-



and-ends seller, the butcher, my nurse, and my whore of a wife had all been my shadows—shadows among whom I had lived as a prisoner. I had become like an owl, but all my lamentations remained trapped in my throat, emerging only as clots of blood that I spat out. Perhaps the owl, too, suffers from such an illness. Perhaps that is why it thinks as I do. My shadow on the wall looked exactly like an owl. It was reading my writings carefully. Without doubt, it understood them well. Only it could understand. Whenever I looked at my shadow from the corner of my eye, I was frightened.

It was a silent, dark night, like the night that surrounded my life. It was filled with terrifying forms making grimaces at me from the doorway, the walls, and behind the curtain. Sometimes my room became so narrow that it seemed I was sleeping in a coffin. My temples were burning, and my limbs could not make the slightest movement. A weight pressed upon my chest. It was like the weight of the corpses they carried on horseback to the butcher's shop.

Death was quietly murmuring its song. Like a mute person who must repeat every word, and who, after reaching the end of a line of poetry, must return and read it again and again. The call of death, like the rasping of a saw through flesh, penetrated my body. It would shriek—and then suddenly choke.

I had scarcely closed my eyes when a group of drunken night watchmen passed through the lane, playing practical jokes on one another and singing:

"Let us go and drink wine.
Rayy wine is incarnadine.
Only today is mine and thine!"

I said to myself, "What the hell! Eventually the magistrate will catch me anyway!" Suddenly I felt a superhuman strength within me. My forehead became cool. I rose, threw my yellow cloak over my shoulders, wrapped my scarf two or three times around my head, stooped, took the bone-handled, long-bladed knife from the souvenir box where I had hidden it, and tiptoed toward that whore's room. When I reached it, her room was in complete darkness. I listened carefully. I heard her say, "Are you here? Take off your scarf!" Her voice had a pleasant resonance. It was like the voice of her childhood, as though she were unconsciously murmuring in her sleep. I had heard that voice once before, in a deep sleep. Was she dreaming? Her voice was muffled and husky, like the voice of the little girl who used to play hide-and-seek with me on the banks of the Suren River. I hesitated for a moment. Again I heard her say, "Come in! Take off your scarf!"

Slowly, in the darkness, I entered the room and took off my cloak and scarf. I took off my clothes, but for some unknown reason I climbed into bed with the bone-handled, long-bladed knife still in my hand. The warmth



of her bed gave me new life. Then I embraced her pleasant, warm, damp body, thinking of the little, slender, pale girl with the innocent, large Turkmen eyes who had once played hide-and-seek with me on the banks of the Suren River. No. I attacked her like a savage, starving beast. I loathed her from the bottom of my heart. I felt that love and hatred had become one. Her cool, silvery body—my wife's body—opened itself and enclosed me as a *nāg*-serpent coils itself around its prey. The perfume on her bosom was intoxicating. The flesh of her arm, wrapped around my neck, had a pleasant warmth. I hoped that my life would end at that very moment. For at that instant all the hatred and desire for revenge that I had felt toward her disappeared. I struggled to keep myself from weeping. Without realizing it, I found that her legs had locked around mine like the mandrake, while her arms were clasped behind my neck. I could feel the pleasant warmth of living flesh. Every atom of my burning body drank in that warmth. I felt that she was drawing me into herself like prey. Ecstasy and terror became one. Her mouth tasted acrid, like cucumber-ends. I was drenched in sweat amid that blissful pleasure, and I was losing consciousness.

Like my body, every atom of my being cried aloud its song of victory. I was condemned and helpless upon a shoreless sea, surrendering everything to the whim of the waves. Her hair, fragrant with champac, clung to my face. A cry of anguish and joy burst from the depths of our being. Then I felt her bite my lip savagely and split it open. Did she bite her own finger in the same way? Or had she realized that I was not the odds-and-ends seller? I tried to free myself, but it was impossible to make the slightest movement. Every effort was futile. The flesh of our bodies had been fused into one.

I thought she had gone mad. In the midst of the struggle, I involuntarily jerked my hand and felt the knife, which I was still holding, sink somewhere into her body. A warm liquid poured over my face. She shrieked and released me. I clasped the warm liquid that had collected in my fist and threw the knife away. Then I passed my free hand over her body. It was utterly cold. She was dead. At that moment I burst into a fit of coughing. But it was not coughing. It was a hollow, hideous laughter that made one's hair stand on end. In terror I threw my cloak over my shoulders and returned to my room. In the light of the tallow-lamp I opened my fist. Her eye lay in the palm of my hand. My whole body was covered with blood.

I went to the mirror. Filled with terror, I covered my face with my hands. I saw that I was like—No. I had become the odds-and-ends seller. The hair of my head and beard had turned white, like that of someone who had escaped alive from a room into which a *nāg*-serpent had been released. My lip was split open like the old man's. My eyelids had no eyelashes. A tuft of white hair had grown upon my chest. A new spirit had taken possession of my body. I thought differently. I felt differently. I could not



free myself from the clutches of the demon that had awakened within me. As I held my hands before my face, I burst into laughter. A laughter even more violent than before. A laughter that shook me from head to toe. It was so profound that I could not discover from what hidden cavity of my body it arose. It was a hollow laughter that merely echoed through the hollow of my throat. I had become the odds-and-ends seller.

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16. The Jar

The intensity of the anguish felt as though I awoke from a long, deep sleep. I rubbed my eyes. I was in my old room. The dawn was breaking and mist had covered the window panes. The crow of a rooster came from afar. The red fire in the fire pot had changed into ashes and could not withstand even a single breath. I felt that my thoughts, too, like the fire in the pot, had turned to hollow ashes and could not withstand a single breath.

The first thing I looked for was the *rāq* vase that I had taken from the old corpse-carriage driver. But the vase was not there. I looked around. At the door, I saw a bent figure, no, a stooped, old man with a scarf around his neck, carrying something which looked like jar wrapped in a dirty handkerchief. He was laughing. The hollow, hideous laughter that made one's hair stand on end.

The moment I decided to move, he left my room. I got up to run after him and take the jar, bundled in the handkerchief, but the old man, with a peculiar agility, had disappeared. I returned and opened the window of my room, which opened on the alley. I saw the stooped figure of the old man, his shoulders shaking as he laughed. He had a bundled handkerchief under his arm. He trudged along until he disappeared in the mist. I turned and looked at myself. My clothes were torn and I was covered, from head to toe, with clotted blood. Two golden fly-bees were flying around and small, white worms were wiggling on me. The weight of a dead body was pressing on my chest...

