

The Hermit's Song: Acid, Habibiyya, God

Note by Zulfikar Ali Lobsang, scholar emeritus and archivist of the narratives of the trans-Tibetan plateau and surrounding regions.

Zarra, daughter of Natshab Ali of Sheh, sang this song only in the winter and then, only when she was alone in the empty places, the high pastures and silver deserts that nestled beneath the awnings of the glacier and across whose expanses she travelled, riding on the back of a donkey, from one village to the next. The song would take the form of trochees and dactyls and it took so long to complete, that whenever she sang it, its effect would be to send hyags, xlangs and blue goats off to sleep as they grazed by the glacier's keen edge. What dreams they might have had – visions of previous lives, perhaps – remain unknown. Metaphors tend to translate poorly from one language to another and too assiduous a translation often ends up turning a living tongue into a bizarre, exotic and awkward circus attraction. This is particularly the case when one is dealing with languages written in different scripts and especially so when the tradition being transcribed is from the oral to the written. It is also something which countless Hindustani writers seem not to have realised when, like lemmings (or Gadarene swine), they followed Juan Nepomuceno Carlos Pérez-Rulfo Vizcaíno of Mexico, immigration agent extraordinaire, over the edge of a cliff known as 'magical realism'. The self-styled 'ironic distance' which at least at the start, was liberatory in Latin America, in the context of, for example, Bharat and all her offshoots, all too often falls across the face, as just another aspect of the muslin veil of Orientalist imperialism; the haute bourgeois travel writer's omniscient, objective, native-elite colonial eye gazing with amusement upon the subjective antics of the natives. In short, an extra-mural outreach of the British Class system. It is no surprise that after a while, this defunct style became simply 'magical realism-by-numbers', as in a child's colouring-in book, in which everything, for example, achieved by Islamic cultures is at best, minimised, at worst, deprecated and gratuitously mocked and all this, under the swaggering niqaab of 'free speech', while the normative absolutes of self-defined 'Western' culture are essentialised, made discrete and raised to a pinnacle so high, one easily could mistake them for the stylistic presence of the transcendent God. Accordingly, the Ladakhi here is translated freely so that it is the essence of the story which comes through, rather than its colourful, but ultimately deceptive and derivatory, reflection. Therefore, perhaps for the purposes of entering this translation, the term, 'ironic closeness' would be more appropriate, since as stated by the Chinese Sufi, Wang Chi, it is through immersion in the common stream of humanity and the world, and not through the atomising and fractionating of this stream, that we most fruitfully gain knowledge.

Jhak Kuning na jhak chik,

You are Zulfikar Ali Lobsang and I am Zarra, the daughter of Natshab Ali of Sheh and this is the tale of the Green Hermit of Anchan Khanqah. This tale was composed by my great, great, great grandfather, Hussain Ali Namgyal from diaries mistakenly left behind by the Hermit. Mistakenly, because as a dedicated anthropophagist, he had eaten all his other works and had intended to consume these as well but was prevented from doing so by the thief who stole them. This 'thief' was your narrator. It is said that the Hermit, whose manifold identity has become conflated with that of the trickster, Apo Zed-Zed from Ladakh, has also eaten the gold mined by marmots on the Deosai Plain and that he has drunk of the limpid waters of the Fawwara of Iskander, whose location remains unknown. It is said that he is immortal and that though, while in a trance, he is able to speak countless languages, both living and dead,

yet no-one still extant has ever heard the Hermit speak. Nonetheless, a few wanderers and lamas have spotted his form as a tiny, black dot moving stealthily along the line of cairns that lie up on the high peaks or else between the chortens scattered across the Valley of the Khanqah – a valley, which it is rumoured, appears only to the enlightened and then only once a month on the night of the fifteenth moon. This is the story of Father John.

For several decades, beneath a sapphire sky, up in an isolated valley of Western Tibet, a group of bone fide, big-jowled, original Sixties hippies, the tattered, manic-eyed remnants of a musical commune, had made a good living on charas biscuits and marijuana pesto. Anyone who knows the inhabitants of that place will know that the people themselves resemble Western hippies and so after a couple of seasons, the casual traveller would have assumed that these psychedelic voyagers, who called themselves, ‘the people of love’, were simply a bunch of locals. It is often said by Outsiders that Ladakh and Baltiyul are barren places, from whose soil, as thin as skin, it is possible merely to scrape the barest of livings, yet I, Zarra, daughter of Natshab Ali of Sheh, say that this is a falsehood, a distortion born from a combination of ignorance and the needs of those same Outsiders to set up something against which to compare themselves. The truth is, in this place that once was the Kingdom of Women, the farmers have developed ingenious ways of drawing life from the soil during the four months of summer and also the means of storing and re-using everything in a manner of which no Outsider could possibly conceive, unless they open their minds and learn. I have seen a hundred years or more of life and death in these, my sometimes green valleys, and while I would not claim that our society is perfect, yet I say, let us take what is good from the world outside and what is beneficent from our lives here, and conjoin the two!

However, this group of hippies had indigenised themselves so deeply, they had become, even in physical form, virtually indistinguishable from the local population, for after all, is not the local population derived from the seeds of many different travellers, conquerors, mystics, poets and merchants? Did not Amir Kabir Sayyid Ali of Hamadan come through these high lands and was he not buried here? Did not the Shagari, the old Greeks, move northwards from Kasperia and rule for many long years as the Dukes of Skardu? Did not the abbots of the iron mountain, the taliban of Wang-Tai-yu and the jawanmardin of the Chen-hui Lao-jen, the Old Man of Islam, come here to teach - or rather, to imagine - the great learning of the pure and real? And were they not followed by the followers of Liu Chih, who balanced truth along the doctrine of the mean between the four teachings, a doctrine which drew on the land, the rivers, the sky, the poem of God?

And like these earlier taliban, yogins and sufis, the hippies, too were learning again how to be people, since they had escaped from a place where the utmost rewards were given to those who allowed the memory of their humanity to slip into oblivion. They had learned that a holm-oak tree can grow in one particular place and be watered by a single soil and yet that its precursors and descendents, the acorn from which it sprang, the water through which it is nourished and the seeds, flowers, spores, fruit and wood which it sends out, may well encompass the entire world. Knowledge does not issue from one branch, alone. Countless stories, woven together across time and made foliate, living, practised, go to constitute what we know as truth, as has been inscribed through the Heavenly Classics, and this manifold truth, some call, Islam, others, Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Paganism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism, Jainism, Judaism, Zoroastrianism and so on. These branches render the fruit, yet the tree is one. The hippie had learned that to sculpt the beauty of character is the greatest of all tasks and one which had engaged all the heroes, the martyrs, the saints and the

prophets, from the human ancestor to Zhul Qarnayn to Gyalpo Kesar to Shams to the son of Joseph to the Utmost Sage.

This did not happen overnight, but was a gradual process, beginning for some, perhaps, in the year 1966 of the Christian Era when they first dropped sugar lumps into which had been infused some lysergic acid diethylamide. The hippie who would later become known as the Hermit, in those days was a divinity student at London University, who up until then had tried some cannabis, but little else. His preferred groups were mod soul and pop art bands like The Action, The Eyes, The Birds, The Creation and The Small Faces and usually a group of students – from the Faculties of Divinity, Art and Social Sciences – would visit clubs and other venues together. Then, one swirling night of fast, beat dances and (if he was lucky) deep, eye-liner kisses, someone gave him a cube.

At this point, Zarra, daughter of Natshab Ali of Sheh slipped into a first person narrative and there was a change in the key in which she was singing, so that her voice became much deeper than before and at times, her eyes would roll and the lids, quiver, her arms flail about and the ends of the fingers would curl and twist in the air as though she were performing a flamenco dance or else having some kind of seizure. But it was simply that she was acting out what she perceived to be the part of the hippie and his miraculous transformation. Yet she was engaging in this process so avidly and with such prodigious feats of memory, it was as though she had adopted, wholesale, the persona of the subject of her song, the Green Hermit of Anchan Khanqah, a subject whose life had become immortalised into one of the great cycles of epics that diffuse through the thin air of that vast land of steppes punctuated by clear rivers and emerald lakes which lies between Siberia and the Great Himalaya, the Taklamakan and the Carpathians.

Did she say it was not sudden? The spiritual understanding may have taken place over many subsequent years, but the full, intimate experience occurred that night and it emerged from a single lump of sugar – and from the music. Which group was playing? Perhaps it was The Kaleidoscope, an almost Mediaevalist outfit whose oeuvre, in recent months, had begun to turn very strange indeed. It was a rather unusual act for a Mod soul beat club, but you see, in those days, the divisions between these things were less rigid than they are now or than they are perceived now as having been, then. Things are not divided into neat little parcels of time or essence - and I'm not talking here about the hyper-seconds of Buddha-time or any of that stuff. I'm alluding quite simply to our own human time, the one we know all too well and in which we dwell. I tend to resist such codifications, as confining oneself to them tends to limit one's understanding of what are in fact often complex and parallel, rather than simple and sequential, processes. Furthermore, I refuse to conform to marketing technique. Fuck product.

Well, that night amongst the big, swanking chord progressions and the plaintive refrain of the wooden dulcimer, a white light began to emanate from the crown of the guitarist's head and from the ends of his fingers. At first, I thought that it was just some new strobe effect – bands in those days were constantly experimenting with these things – but then I realised the anatomical and technological impossibility of such a dynamic. The light was akin to that which I had seen in illustrated manuscripts of monks from the Middle Ages, emerging from the gold-leaf bodies of Seraphim, the high-ranking angels who carry God's throne, and it seemed to spread all over the hall and to make my whole body tingle as though a mild electric current was passing through my flesh. Simultaneously, time began to slow down, people's movements and their words slowed right down as though they were on a reel-to-reel tape that had been switched to the slow cycle. Furthermore, the music itself seemed to be issuing from

an enormous, wooden boom-box and the sounds, the individual frequency cycles, seemed to be emanating from some very ancient place, a reedy river, a frozen mountain or a desert hermitage. There was a girl with fox-coloured hair standing next to me and she had on a necklace strung with turquoises that had been cut in the shapes of horses and as I watched, each of the semi-precious stones began at first to glow and then to neigh and move of their own accord as though they were chess-pieces on the white board of her skin. Then, everything exploded, or imploded, or transploded, and I had an image of a thousand gods with the heads of pachyderms and then of ten thousand goddesses, each with eight arms and then of a hundred thousand bodhisattvas, chanting a mantra in C Major.

Suddenly, I was no longer in the club, but was standing on top of a breezy hill, somewhere in woodland and it was night and the night had no stars and yet it was a place and time where every shade of every colour was clearly defined and there were even some colours which I had never seen before. Then all these gods and other demi-beings, who had been spinning slowly around me as though they were on a 33-speed record, virtually stopped moving altogether and there was just the echo of the music, deep in the background and it was not one particular part of the music, but rather, it was as though all the music was being played at once – the entire concert, all the songs within which it had been contained, and indeed, which it had constituted, as though that great, but temporal, circle of invisible notes and signs that had been spinning around me, had become eternal, infinite, omnipresent. I found that simply by focussing my mind on one particular section, I could listen, for example, at normal speed to a song that had not yet been played, and to new songs which had not even been composed or released. I can't tell you how incredible this was. I was at the moment of here-and-now, the point of the absolute present and in that moment, I no longer felt that I existed. I began to see everything in fractals, or as one giant, interconnected web. It was ecstasy and enstasy, both together in a single second, and I began to laugh and cry at the same time. And from out of the tangle of the web, I saw, coming towards me, a bearded figure dressed all in green. He was smiling and was holding out his hands, as though I was a long-lost friend. I took his hands and they felt warm and I felt my palms tingling a little as though he was slightly electric and thus, gradually he led me towards the centre of the web. And then, as the music swept up towards heaven, we, too lifted off and began to fly. We flew over smoky old London which now suddenly seemed immensely magical and verdant, and then we accelerated so that lands and seas seemed to merge into one, or to be more accurate, seemed to splay like the arms of a giant fan into bands of white light. Every so often, I would see little blue figures poke their heads out from either side of us, but they did not say anything. It was as though they were simply witnessing our passage and I wondered whether, perhaps, they were the near-translucent ghosts of alpinists. The green man did not speak as we travelled, he did not even look at me – though we were standing side-by-side, facing in the same direction. Then, after what seemed like maybe fifteen or twenty minutes, but may well have been a lot longer - as I said, time was not what it seemed - we came to a garden at the centre of which was a waterfall. I knew that after this, there would be no retuning from this realm of white light to the old life, that the ecstatic sickness which I had caught – or rather, which had caught me - would pull me on forever.

Zarra, the daughter of Natshab Ali of Sheh switched back at this point to a higher-pitched level of singing and also reverted to the third person.

Do you want to hear more? she asked.

Yes, yes, tell us more! shouted the hippies.

One-by-one, each of the hippies gained such a degree of enlightenment, they were elevated first to the caves and outcrops of the Queen's Mountain and then to the higher realms of the demi-gods and poet-emperors (*a*), until at last there was only one left. This man had been bewitched, it seemed, by a lha-maung, a piri of the mountains, who lived in the glacier, far above the khanqah. The piri was beautiful of countenance and had long, golden hair and skin so white that like a snow-leopard, she could travel through the ice and snow and not be seen. In fact, some said that she was a snow-leopard who took human form only in order to bewitch the unwary, the intoxicated, the desperate, the dying. As they (*b*) say, the closer one gets to enlightenment the more dangerous and fragile one's state of consciousness and the more easily one can be led astray by the simplest of things – a whiff of musk, eyebrows like the arc of a yew bow, the cool bouhairaat of kohl angh, or even the melody of an engaging song. He followed the lha-maung, whose name was Marzia Stakpa-pong, up into the halls of the glacier, and into a city known as the green city of Yavanika and there he lived with her as man and wife for forty days and forty nights and there he beheld many wondrous things and every night he watched the dance of the fairies and heard their high-pitched song, and he found that he was unable to draw himself away.

After the allotted period, Marzia Stakpa-pong vanished along with the fairy city and for the rest of his life, the hermit was doomed to pine for his lost love. In order to regain some semblance of sanity and also to try and recoup his place in the karmic order, he began to study the unpublished writings of Liu Chih and he became an expert in the concept of 'li' and on the subject of metaphysical diagrammata; from great distances he would converse with sages such as Ma Lian-yuan Luqman of Canpur and would sing and dance with a mad poet known locally as 'The Nún Rustic', who, it was said, was an acolyte of an unknown disciple of Ch'a-mi and who dressed in a chu-pa and who sang only when intoxicated with either beakers of arak or jams of chhaang which he would sometimes mistake for inkwells so that many of his works were written in either spirit or barleycorn which either way became invisible. The only way to read these manuscripts was to set them on fire. This sha'ir had become so crazed with barley ergot one night that he had begun to consume his own flesh, claiming that it had therapeutic properties. It was said that while under the grainy influence of the kykeon, he regularly did battle with the serpent-eaters and the spirits who had beautiful faces and terrifying backs and that he was a master of the masked Cham dance. And the Nún Rustic instructed the hermit on these techniques so that by degrees, the latter, too became a master of the steps that spanned two days and with every pace of the dance, the hermit recalled steps from previous lives, going back to before Mediaeval times. He also conferred with the spirit of Corporal Jonson, the Dogra Wazir, who taught him the skills of mountaineering without recourse to equipment and he gained glimpses of that fiery river of separation which men have named Sambatyon, and even, it is said, through the imprint in stone of a curved spine, intimations of the essence of the Great Yogin of the Cave.

One day, as the hermit was walking along a deserted path on a chalk hill in the middle of a barren wilderness, he saw, in the distance, a bearded man dressed all in green. The hermit stopped in his tracks, partly because of surprise and partly to get a better view. Every time the man in green took a step, verdant shoots and brightly coloured flowers sprang up from the ground beneath his feet, so that as he progressed across the land, the wilderness dust-bowl turned gradually into a fertile valley, whose scents grew rich and dark, so that the hermit felt himself begin to swoon.

When he awoke, he found that he was in a vast garden and for a moment he imagined that perhaps he was dead and was in Paradise, but then he noticed that both his garments and his

body had become green and that his mind was replete with new memories. Furthermore, his right thumb now was boneless. He continued his wanderings and everywhere he went, he became known by different names. In some places, he was known as Saint George, the Green Knight or the Green Angel Guide, in others, Gilgamesh, Rabbi Joshua ben Levi (c), Elijah, Ilyas, Idris, Phineas, Khizir, Khidr, Hudr, Kisir, Hizir, Hermes, Hormux or else the Wandering Jew. Sometimes he would appear in green, sometimes in white. Sometimes, he would wear a woollen scarf on his head and a woollen cloak on his body, while at other times he would be naked as a saadhu. Sometimes he would appear as a young man, sometimes as an old crone. And indeed whenever he passed through a certain land where the folk attributed to him, peculiar qualities and a singular name, he would seem to acquire the attributes of that persona, as though, as he journeyed, his soul continually slipped into the armour of different pupi, in each of which forms he then cast handfuls of stories, like grain, across the fields, terraces, moors and cities, from the land of Tara in Ireland to the land of Tara in Tibet. People recognised him by the fact that he was able to travel along rivers and across lakes and seas by means of stepping onto the backs of large fishes so that sailors and travellers, alike adopted him as their patron saint. The hermit was able also to swim across time as though time itself had ingested some weird entheogen, so that one day might be spent discoursing the parables of El Khadoras with Hazrat Musa and the next, seeking the fountain of eternal life with Zhul Qarnayn (*d*) or appearing to Jalaluddin in the bard's deepest dreams and also to magi such as Michael Scot of Durham Kirk (this was how the Great Magus of the Borders learned to cleft mountains in two, for just as Alexander had poured molten iron and brass into the gap between the peaks of the Caucasus in order to forge giant gates against the Yajuj-Majuj, so Michael of Bal'harm, by means of a spell taught him by the sabz hermit, one morning cleanly clove the Eildon Hill of Roxburgh) and to artists such as Giuseppe Ayala, Laila Sciacca Asunsi, Petrus Dihdo Labokla and Zulfikar Ali Lobsang. And perhaps also it was the hermit, in the form of Rujari d'Ali, who had appeared to Alexander Wolfe that sunny morning in the Glasgow Barras and had fashioned the lute from the wood of the holm-oak tree, for just as, even in the high deserts of Baltistan and the rusted streets of Glasgow, there is much unexpected greenery, so it is that in this life that exists in the midst of death, there lives on, at its very heart, the tree of hope.

And because they reminded him of Dhul Qarnain, the golden-haired Makedonian, the hermit became the friend of all goats, especially of those with horns. He climbed the mountains whose shoulders straddled the land like mathematical triangles and there, at the top of the world, he gazed into a glass mirror at the wing of the Simurgh and at the verses of Farid-uddin Attar which appeared in the sky as though written by the quills of that beauteous white bird (e) whose feathers were letters and whose body was a book.

And one afternoon, while gazing into the side of a glacier, the hermit saw reflected in the clear ice, the head of a goat which began to talk in Ancient Greek and the goat claimed that he was Menander of Pataliputra and Menander began to discourse with the Hermit on the nature of structures.

And then one day, while conversing with the wondrous poet, Nurad-Din Abd ar-Rahman Jami who left the world those beauteous tracts, *Yussef va Zoleikha*, *the Iskandernama* and *Layli va Majnun*, the hermit saw, over the poet's sceptical left shoulder, a vision of the Tomb of Yusuf which lay, not in a single place, but like the court of Frederick of Sicillia, in a thousand, from the deserts of Al Misr to the summits of Kashyshaya mountains to the depths of Shagari caves. And it was in one of these mountain caves, which in the time before the continents collided, had been the house of the fata beneath the sea, that the hermit built the

khanqah on the ruins of an old chous-hrtin, an ancient Buddhist site, and as he caused the new monastery to rise, the cave seemed to expand and the area around the tomb became filled with stone discs upon which were carved miniature hieroglyphs, which when translated, turned out not to represent words at all, but musical notes derived, it is said, from either the Apocalypse of Elias or the Kitaab of Idris that had been lost for so long, that had been secreted in a weeping, unglazed surahi in Abyssinia and which could be seen and heard only when under the steadying influence of the warm balm of the Gnostic sacraments of Ethiopia.

And the hermit became the key keeper, the guardian of the Tomb of Yusuf and at the climax of this Song of Amran, a pillar of fire would be seen ascending from the glistening altars of the khanqah towards the pyramid of heaven. Yet there was a piece missing from the tomb and even the hermit did not know where it had gone, nor who had taken it. He thought that perhaps it had been the old Russian, Nicolas Notovitch who had lived in a gompa and who allegedly had seen the lost scrolls of Ladakh, or else that the thief had been that other Russian, the juggler of Heera Mundi, who, as both sun and crescent moon together run from the chadur of night, had escaped with his musician wife across the mountains from the dark house of Joseph Stalin's regime (f). From time-to-time, the hermit would have visions of these scrolls and of other, even more mysterious things and as increasingly, he came to exist more in the world of phantasmagoria than in that of flesh and blood, so his physical body wasted away until especially when wearing white and walking out upon the glaciers, like the old Kalani, he could have passed for invisible. And in this form, he became known to the mountaineers and their guides, to the Gypsy singers and their musicians as, 'Abba Yahya', Father John, the Naga man who lived at the edge of the world.

Many tales grew up around this figure, including the one about the old, decapitated corpses which he was able to re-animate. There is a story of one such, a British soldier, whose body thus was resurrected and caused to wander through the gates of the Hebrew Fort at the Khyber Pass and across the mountains and plains of Afghanistan, all the while singing sweetly, zejels, ghazals and madrigals of his lost Yusufzai love (g). Another story cycle, recounted by the elders of Rumiya in the *Kitaab of the Wasp*, was known to the old Saxons as 'The Saelig Tales' and to the Hindustanis of Hodu as one of the Rishinamas and concerned transfiguration by the banks of particular rivers (h). Yet other stories, spread possibly by a group of Siqilliyans in Roh or else Spartans in Punjab, suggested that Old John (or Paagal Yahya, as he was sometimes known) was kidnapped by a group of beat-heads who attempted to ransom him for a large black yak and failing to do so, cut him up (alive) into small pieces and turned his skin around oak branches to fashion a boat, from which state, upon striking the white waters of the Sindh he then was reconstituted, thus accounting for his magical powers. Some said that he possessed twelve fingers and a boneless thumb and that with these various peculiar phalanges he was able to levitate rocks and even to deliver unto the mountains, infant glaciers. Yet all of the accounts were in agreement upon this: that between tanzih, or yang and tashbih, or yin, through comprehending and reconciling the incomparability and similarity of the divine and by wading through the rivers of history and trance, Father John the lhaba-shaman, had attained a state of ecological Sagehood in which finally, he had learned how to be human. He had learned how to be the Word.

This is the end of my tale of passion and beauty, the epic of Zuleikha, Iskander, Idris and Yusuf, a story in camphor and ink which over the course of many nights and days has carried you from the dear green place to the lochs of old Argyll to the fields and forests of Danelaw to the dark castles and holy cubes of Siqilliya to the Streets of the Kings in Lahore to the glacier khanqah of Baltiyul. I am Zarra, daughter of Natshab Ali of Sheh. Next, I will recite

the tale of Diodorus the Sicilian and the Epic of the Poison-girl who killed Poros, King of the Indians. Yet, good listeners, you must remember that as with rivers, gardens or the threads of carpets, every story in the world is linked to every other story. For in the clear light of truth and love, it can be seen that there is no end to this tale...

(a): *Bahadur Shah Zafar, Frederick II of Sicily and Frederick's illegitimate son, King Enzo of Sardinia, or, by takhallus, 'Zafar', 'Rex Fredericus' and 'Enzo'.*

(b): *'They' include luminaries such as Santa Teresa, that great sufi poetess of Ávila, who was born, Teresa de Cepeda y Ahumada, with her shimmering tales of seven castles, for a modern transmutation of which, please see: 'The Burning Mirror', Polygon, Edinburgh, 2001, pp. 131-164.*

(c) *To read a tale of the Levi, see:*

<http://www.arts.gla.ac.uk/ScotLit/ASLS/SWE/TBI/TBIIssue3/TheSpanishHouse.pdf>

(d) *It was the hermit, posing as Alexander's cook, who, guided by the Archangel Rafael, sought out the dark well at the world's end, Yusuf's Well that lies beyond the White Mountains in the place beneath the Pole Star, the well that some say is more like a dark cistern. The cook fooled al-Sikander by swallowing some of its water himself and then carrying some more in a flask to the great emperor's daughter, whom he proceeded to seduce. But when Iskander bent to try and drink from the very same spring, the water turned at once to sulphur. Thus did Abba Yahya demonstrate to the two-horned kesar, the ephemeral nature of worldly power, wealth and learning and also the indubitable fact that he, the hermit, was one of the afrad, the ones who become illuminated from the divine source with no requirement for human intermediaries. This fountain, its stone and water, both, is as white as snow and is located at Kataragama, where to this day the people worship Skanda, the two-horned God of War. www.katargama.org*

(e): *There are many different versions of this poem, some, faithful renderings, others, out-and-out travesties. An example of the latter is reproduced here and is said to have been composed in far northern parts by the hermit while under the influence of either arak, peyote, chang or mescaline. It is said that the recitation of the original draft of this version of the poem will transform the land of Alba into that of Yuh, the earthly paradise of the sun and that for this reason, the true version of the epic is kept under strict guard in a garden, hidden from human sight. For this reason, as documented by Major General John Briggs in his masterly study of the lost book of P'o Na-Ch'ih, from Ben Nevis to Mongibello to the river of Bazigha to a particular oasis in the land of Yarkand, the hermit is also known by the epithet, 'The Lord of the Cave' since it is in the cave that the principle of all things is to be found.*

MANTIQU-UT-TAIR: A MODULATION FOR ALBA

*On the 1st day of the seventh month,
The birds of the world gathered together
To seek out a queen
One by one, in feathered disorder,
The birds of field and forest, lake and mountain
Flew up, flocked, clamoured
One hundred thousand
Chattering voices, beating wings, sharpening talons
In the land of broken time.*

*One among them was silent and still:
Ciconia ciconia, the snake-eater, the white stork,
Who had flown over the narrowest of straits and the broadest of rivers
And the tallest of mountains
All the way from the lands of the pure to the land of ice-white cliffs.
Once before had the stork come this way,
Gille-copain chasing the gazelle
Wrapped in a goatskin cloak*

They called on the white stork:

*“Over your shoulder, you carry the black scapular and upon your bill
You bear the red Symbol of Solomon’s Glance
And you have drunk from the fountain of the lovers’ graves,
From minaret to minaret, you have soared with the saeta,
And have sounded the bells from the steeples of stone kirks,
Across deserts and cities you have flown on wind pagodas,
And have skirted the rugged coasts of granite bone isles
You be our guide.
With slow wing-beats, show us the way
To that throne of which we have heard,
That we may find the Simurgh, our glorious queen!”*

The white stork whispered:

*She is ever close to us, yet we are far from her.
Veils merciful of light and darkness,
More than one hundred thousand
Screen the throne from our sight.
That which I have seen is not even the thousandth reflection of a reflection
Of the Simurgh.
Should I go alone, I would travel in a circle,
Ending where I began
For there is no path,
Save within the heart
We must search for the Simurgh together.*

*First, from his wild musk briar, out flew the nightingale
And in full-throated flute warbled
Of rose nectar and murder and asked:
“Why should I leave, jug-jug, bul-bul,
When this love is my pain that all birds crave,
One night of one with silk touch and favour, then laughter, silence?”*

The stork replied:

*“O swollen dog-throat, the shahzadi smiles and mocks you,
Her thorns pierce your ignorant breast
At the ice note of winter’s edge, babble, love, blood, reed
All choke and burn and wither.”*

From the banjar zameene of Paradise, strode the peacock:

*“My longing, held in every jewelled dewdrop,
Is to return to lake and palace and tree
Your queen holds no weight in my memory;
The gold of the rocks is a surer trail to the heart.”*

The stork replied:

*“O false-footed bird! One moment, you are Khizr-the-Green, muse of prophets,
The next, a feather-tail horn’d ‘gainst an ebbing tide.
On this journey, O martinet, remember only the sound of your hideous voice:
Mor! Mor!”*

From the mud-flats of the loch, backward-circled the duck.

*“I am pure already, washed clean by the waters which I turn.
My wheel is the hub of life,
I am humbled in its liquid span.
What use have I for your queen’s throne?
Besides, I am too weak and fat. I cannot leave the water.”*

The stork replied:

*“O duck of the dunghill, you are corn on the shoreline and pepper in the sky.
The world is a pond bubble; the Seen swarms on its surface:
Iron to water to dream.”*

*On the spine of the mountain wind, the raven’s shadow dreamed itself into existence.
“I have glanced across seven thousand miles,
I have been perfect knight and kingmaker; the path is mine to cut.
I have blinded the sun, I have courted the dead. I am free.”*

The stork replied:

*“What value bells and hood, when the king is a heap of dust?
This queen is beyond the sun. Her path cannot be carved, torn or courted.”*

*Through a hole in the hoolet mosque, with mouse eyes the owl stared into the night,
Searching ever for yellow dirt, and hooting:*

*“Once, I was a monarch’s daughter.
Now, I am persecuted, poor and old.”*

The stork replied:

*“Leave worldly ruins empty and steadfast idols, unworshipped.
Abandon stupidity: become foolish!”*

*The rising bones of the lark trilled in forgetful, melodic insanity,
Boasting crystal pride among the empty vaults:*

*“I am the shadow of a saint, moving across heaven’s blue valley.
My arc is perfect nastaliq; I have no need of journey.”*

The stork replied:

*“O empty quill! Your close flight and vain tremolo will not save you from the dust.
Fall silent, and ponder!”*

*From another’s nest, the yawling cuc-koo arose, sucking hard on sweet eggs.
“From no-breath like Green Robin do I wander through destiny’s dense forest.
I ride the waves of time; I have no need of trammel or guide.”*

The stork replied:

*“O toad bird! Stonechat parrot!
A drop of devil’s blood renders your oracle, useless babble,
Your fate, a sparrow’s flight through a crowded room.
Die, and become breath!*

*And many birds, some hundred thousand or more,
Beaked their winged excuses
And all were answered thus by the white stork.
One by one,
Souls in stone
They lowered their heads and fell silent
Until at length, the hubbub had ceased and they were ready to begin their journey.*

The white stork told them of the seven valleys from which no-one returns:

*In the Valley of the Quest, you will drink whisky from the clay cup,
And you’ll forget both worlds
Be an atom, since you’re not the sun
On the other side of the gate, there is neither faith nor infidelity,
Neither ‘me’ nor ‘I’
In the Valley of the Sireadh, there is only dust.
Be more than a walking skin.
Measure the wind, sleep only in your cist.
When cranes migrate, bad weather cannot be far off*

*One must first be made of fire to exist in the Gorge of Muhabbat
Ishq is the fire, reason, the smoke
By the odour of love is every atom in the universe intoxicated
Once you have seen beneath the skin of your beloved's face,
How can you wear any garment other than skin?
Go featherless!*

*This Valley of Gnosis has neither beginning nor end
There are no two paths alike, and there is no dogma for the inner light*

*History has no words, only music
Seek not the quill, but the marrow
Weep tears from the black crag, sprinkle breathing coals upon your head.*

*Everything in the Vale of Separation is but frozen snow upon seven hills,
From fish-breath to moon,
All that is, will be, has ever been, is
But one atom in the vanishing sun's shadow
Split like the cell
A horoscope drawn on sand: it is; it is not
Detachment is the flame that burns creation*

*In the Canal of Wahdat, gone are number, death, eternity
It isn't me who speaks, it isn't you
It is a place of loneliness and long austerity,
Where all heads draw from the same collar
The world is made of wax; kaaba, church, pagoda;
This is not the oneness locked in singularity
You and I, sitting here in the same nook,
Are at this moment
Both in the land of the pure
And on the edge of the white cliffs*

*The Gill of Raivelment is a place of pain and gnawing discontent;
The key to thought is lost.
You know not for whom, or what, you weep and sigh;
Between 'you' and 'no', you've lost your way.
In this pit, bewilderment seems endless, infinite
Ask: "What shall I do?"
Reply: "Do not do what you have done."*

*The Vale of Poverty and Nothingness has the steepest slope of all:
Forgetfulness, dumbness, deafness and distraction
An unclean object, falling into an ocean of rosewater, remains impure
But oil, consumed by fire, transcends the grossness of its existence;
And when the sea arises, what can save the patterns on the surface of each wave?
Burn like the moth in the candle's flame!
Be drawn whole by the breath of the whale*

*The white stork paused,
Listened to the sky
Beneath the arc of truth,
The birds trembled
Shadows on the journey
From here to there, from there to here*

*Some perished before the beginning
Others drowned in sorrow or burned with pride,
Or withered with thirst and hunger*

*Some committed suicide, or paused to gaze at marvels on the way,
Some took pleasure's path*

*Only thirty reached the Great Garden,
Exhausted, wretched, broken things,
Sans feathers and riddl'd with agony*

*In the nowhere place,
There grew a great hollow tree
With rings, chambers, veils
Numberless
And branches intertwined
It was the first, the oldest, tree*

*A kingfisher herald counselled them to turn back,
Lest their souls burn in the Queen's glance
Humbled at last, the thirty agreed;
They begged to burn anyway*

*The herald unlocked the door, and through
 rings, chambers, veils
Led them into the heart of the tree,
Gave the birds, each one
A page of wood, the size of a door,
Runelled with letters of sap and wave
A small, dark book, hidden
In the library of the heart's deepest chamber
The worm that reads the green fig
With dismay, they found flowing thereon,
The concourse of their lives, their actions,
Dark desires cowered 'neath bright feathers
Moon, cloud, leaf, wind,
Ten-and-twenty grains, the breath they had sold.*

*The herald beat wing upon duf,
The writing faded, vanished
From the heart's deepest chamber
Arose a great tongue of flame
And the birds were blinded
On the edge of all that is and is not, the tree quivered
 holding space in the vertical, in the inner and the outer, and so
Turned into a palace of mirrors round*

*The souls of the thirty rose free, as One, into the light, into the bodhran mirror
Whence they saw, reflected, a great palace shaped like a quaich and on the Throne
 thirty birds,
 the Queen*

and they yelled:

*"I am the Simurgh!
 I am the Truth!"*

And then dissolved into silence

Who doesn't approach with disbelief, won't see the face of paradise

*This pearl, this fana, cannot be pierced,
You have no knowledge of what lies ahead
So sip dark whisky from the quaich of baqa,
Be nothing first!*

*Only then, will you exist
 Huu*

(f): *Joseph Stalin – the King of the Dark House. Dzugashvili, the Poet Laureate of Parnoa.*

(g): *One version of this song claims that the lovers, Mountstuart Vigne and Bibi Anjila, found each other amid the bones and clay of an ancient chorten and were married by the re-animated flayed skin figure of Moroka amidst the ruins of the Punjabi metropolis of Taxila. For many years, repeatedly this track was bootlegged until finally, in 2002, it was officially released by Sabe Music, on license from Blue Cliff Records: SM 62777.*

(h): *See Magic Afoot, The Saelig Tales, Textualities, Main Point Books, Edinburgh, 2006.*

<http://sarmed.netfirms.com/suhayl/NEW/books/saelig/index.htm>

Apocrypha:

1: *ISI: Inter-Services Intelligence. On the rent-an-assassin scale, the ISI is the poor man's Mossad. Or, as the contemporary Sindhi river-song goes,*

*Tra-la-la-la-lai-lai-lai
O, the good old ISI-I-I
She used to be a bitch of the USA,
But nowadays
She has gone freelance – opens her cunt for everyone
Or so they say
Tra-la-la-la-lay-lay-lay*

2: *There have been reports of individuals who had travelled on trains running both ways between India and Pakistan, masquerading as Christians or even, ironically, as Jews when in fact they had belonged to the Hindu or Muslim faiths. They would carry, in their cases, a single, leather-bound Bible, which as the border areas approached, they would whip out and pretend to read. They would be clean-shaven and would name themselves, Thomas or John or perhaps even Peter and so, when the rabid, yet very ordinary, boys-next-door leapt onto the train ferociously branding swords, scimitars, sabres, machetes, axes, daggers, hammers, chisels, screwdrivers and erect penises, they would assume the guise of a native Trinitarian, and thereby survive, even as, all around them, their real co-religionists - men, women and children alike - were being plucked from their seats and taken outside into the most empty part of the Thar Desert and summarily executed (sometimes, if they were female, they would be gang-raped first, just for good measure and/ or sometimes their breasts would be severed and howling like pigs in the verdant fields of Punjab, or else strolling through the golden sands of Rajasthan/Sindh, they then would be left, to bleed to death). All in the name of holy, holy, holy truth. At the end of it all, the killers had returned to their houses and once again, had become boys-next-door with clean-cut hair, something which they have remained ever since, may the combined and tender mercies of the lord and lady gods of all religions and none be upon their heads. Amen.*

3: *During the early part of the twentieth century, a certain white mother appropriated the skills of the madaris and natchnewalis, yet attributed to them, absolutely no credit. She became an icon; they ended up as oddities, or worse, nonentities, on the street. Little has changed. The window-dressing is flashier, but the shop remains the cornucopia of empire.*

4: *Mr Ramo Samee brought juggling to London in 1819, during the end-years of the reign of the lunatic, porphyric king, George III. He performed for all the crowned heads of Europe, during the performance, passing through a series of evolutions, with four hollow brass balls, the size of oranges, but who had died in such abject poverty, in 1851, that his wife and a fellow-juggler had publicly to beg for the money to have him buried, since up until then, the family had received a few shillings only, from two Jews, a bishop and a bird.*

5: *In a long pocket in the left side of a chair in the house of Petrus Labokla, there lies a slim, ancient-looking book entitled, 'The Whole Art of Legerdemain or Hocus Pocus' by Sena Sama and Hamed Ben-Alla, published by N.C. Hafis in New York City, 1833.*

4: *The volcanic inhumation of San Giuseppe ru Casteddu Nivuru was not reported outside Italy. No surprise, there. If it had happened on the Via Veneto, the Avenue des Champs-Élysées or anywhere at all in London, New*

York or Los Angeles, it would've been front-page news on every cable, satellite, web and print media organ in the world. But who had ever been interested in the submerging of an obscure West Sicilian village? Such things had been happening for seven hundred years, villages, towns, cities and entire families had been swallowed up by either macalube lava, white concrete or the lupara bianca and if you were among the consumed, it mattered, but little, which of these it had been. Such things always had been merely footnotes in the histories of power. Abusivismo.

5: The poem below was found inscribed, in its entirety, in the stone of an apricot that had been buried along with a single, Sicilian tart, both of which appeared untarnished, in a glove in a secret compartment in the wall of the guest house in Garden Town, Lahore, some ten years after Zuleikha and Alexander had stayed there. The author remains anonymous, but it is thought that it may have been written by one of the Deputy Assistant Police Commissioners of Lahore (or else by one of the Assistant Deputy Sub-Inspector Generals) on the occasion of the death of the respected thespian, Mohammad Ali, in the month of Safar, 1427 and that because of its obvious left-wing nature, the nasri nazm was never published, broadcast or even read in public. This was confirmed by a man, a servant, who once had been Waheed Murat's batman, who claimed that he had witnessed the poem being written. However, the cop may simply have appropriated it from some junior officer in order to aggrandise himself as, say, 'The Poet of Asia', 'The Poet of Europe' or indeed, 'The Poet of Tristan da Cunha'. In any event, the identity of the real author remains obscure and to some extent, irrelevant. The poem is here reproduced in full.

'Dooriyan'

Bismillah ar Rahman ar Rahim

Ali bhai,
You are a burning flame in a world of ice and war
Hero, villain, shaman, you slip with elegance and mellifluous skill
Into the nafs of another, less and more
Shahenshah-e-Jazbaat! We are alive!

You began as a Hyderabadi song, a voice invisible,
Valves, wood, crackling static
Radio days were hard, enigmatic

Then you crossed the River of Fire
And films came in a flood,
A lifetime of lantern magic, O Burning Star!
You followed the path of the old hud-hud

Yet beneath the fame,
The game you left when it turned sour
You toiled and sweated with heart's blood and ishq
For the ordinary people, the folk of the hour
The porters, the farmers, the women of city, field and village
To these, your real co-stars, your Friends on the Path,
You gave with a spirit opened with the song of Islam, the greatest of the naath

Ali bhai,
Your name is honesty, keen as the blade of Haider Ali
Your awards glitter like jewels in the great cup of heaven:
Kaneez, Saiqa, Wehshi, Aas, Aaena, Insaan aur Aadmi, Doorriyan...

But alas!
The sun has left the sky
And all around, darkness flies
We will never see your like again
Yet we will always see your likeness
Up there, in the celluloid river of dreams,
Far beyond the world of beasts and men

Ali bhai,
Please accept our salaams and dua
For you, our Friend and for all the Friends who have led the way,
Pyar, mohabat, ishq, for the urva
For Waheed and Alauddin and Noor Jehan
Tell them we poor mortals sing and dance and sway
With their songs, their images that flicker with life, breath
Score-upon-score, scene after scene, every day,
In mohalla, haveli and peasant farm

Remember, Ali bhai
You owe seventeen rupees to the cafeteria!
We will keep the record straight - for our sake
Remember, Pakistanis
That we owe Ali Bhai
A glimpse of the Path, the Word, the Song, all the Worlds!
Love is at stake!

But look now! Look up beyond the camera lens,
Through the looking-glass portal
At last, the sun is rising – mubarak ho!
Mohammad Ali Rohtaki lives on!
Listen, then, to his voice
Echoing softly through the darkness of time:
“Khamosh na raho, khamosh na raho...”

6: *Some said that ‘the north’ began at Havelian, or in the context of Hebrew Pakistan, Havilah, which was where the railway ended, while others located it further north at the bridge over the Darya-e-Sindh at Thakot and still others scented the liminal even in the green hills of Margalla which overlooked the nation’s capital. However, since like the northern end of Scotland the northern end of Pakistan is rising year-on-year, it seems likely that eventually the line will draw itself up along the glass-and-stone cosmic spaceship that is the Faisal Masjid in Islamabad.*

7: *“My heart is not happy in this despoiled land
Who has ever felt fulfilled in this transient world?”
Bahadur Shah Zafar (1775-1862 CE)*

8: *It may have been this daughter, named Kale, whom Archie had heard singing that night long ago on the edge of the aerodrome a) and also who may have guided both Lord Jack on his journey through the high peaks and Peppe on his quest to restore the cube. As a consequence of drinking the elixir, which had been given to her by a duplicitous cook, she was banished by Sikander to the deserted places, where she became known as the Beautiful One of the Mountains, a veritable siren of the air and the land.*

a) <http://www.scotiareview.org/files/downloads/SSaadi.pdf>

9: *Zulfikar left his painting in the glacier. For all anyone knows, it may still be there. Although he found himself unable to recall, afterwards, exactly what it was he had painted, it is thought that it was a face, perhaps that of the lha-mo or else, of some other imagined visage of perfect beauty. A legend seems to have sprung up, which states that anyone, woman or man, who gazes upon the painting, will be turned instantly to ice. Another version of the story, adapted recently into a khuda’i-glu, a love song to God, claims that in fact Zulfikar painted a two-headed woman, one of the heads being unimaginably beautiful and the other, fearsomely ugly. Yet it is the beauteous, the silent, one that turns men and women into ice crystal and the ugly head, which sings the ghazal to the Almighty, the Merciful, the Sustainer of the Worlds.*

10: *‘The Epistle to Kabul’ is an apocryphal text, allegedly penned by Hakim Rabbani Obadyah, scribe to one Yusuf of Markola. The epistle takes the form of a Sepher Toledot which traces the genealogical descendancy of the Royal Family of Afghanistan from King Saul of the Tribe of Benjamin and indeed of many of the box-carrying, amulet-wearing, Star of David-wielding Pushtun and Kashmiri clans from the ‘lost’ tribes of Israel, the Beni Israel, the Yusufzais, Afridis, Muhammadzais, Sadozais, the Asheriya, Gaddi, Tella, Zartan and all the rest, as well as Ephraim and Manasseh, the fruitful, forgetful sons of Joseph and Potiphera who at one time or*

another were exiled to the Persian province of Khurasan. This story was transmuted into music for the classical Arabic oud by the renowned master of that instrument, Shuraqui Zafrani.

11: The 'Mahsan-i-Afghani' was published in 1635 and details the lineage from Saul onwards. The book was completed, it is said, in the ninth year of the ninth decade of the ninth century after the Hejira.

12: Another intriguing tome, for those who are intrigued by such things, is entitled, 'An historical account of the ten tribes, settled beyond the river Sambatyon in the east with many other curious matters relating to the Israelites in various parts of the world', and it was published in London in 1836 by the Moroccan, Musa ben Ishaq Edrehi, 1774-1842.

13: Sefer ha-Yashar.

14: 70

15: Give 'em what they want! It is said, by those who know what they are talking about, that in order for their authors to prosper, the titles of novels by someone like the author either need to contain one of the words, 'Islamist', 'Jihadist', 'Fundamentalist' (these form especially potent recipes when juxtaposed with the words, 'former', 'reformed', 'redeemed', 'reluctant', 'duped', 'stupid', 'phoney', et al), or else and in addition should be written with a central ethos constructed to appeal to a marketing segment known as, 'white, middle-class women in the West'. Here is a suppressed excerpt – one of several, in fact, but the only one which remains extant – depicting a conversation between Zuleikha MacBeth and her best pal, Ruqa Farrell:

Okay, Zulie, so describe this man to me.

The light brown circles around Ruqa's neck stretched like the concertina folds of an accordion as she tilted back her head and positively swigged at the coffee mug.

Zulie glanced down at the table.

Alex. Alex is his name.

Ruqa nodded.

Alexander.

Yes, I suppose so.

The door of the café blew open. Zulie wheeled around to look. It was odd, because there was no wind. Then she realised that the door had been swung open by a group of students. At first, the noise level doubled, but soon the wave of their voices had sunk into a constant, low hubbub. This place was just one branch of a self-consciously wacky chain, Australian, probably, or maybe Canadian, where the armchairs were fashioned in the shapes of brightly-coloured fruit. Zulie was in an orange; Ruqa, in a watermelon. Her friend's insistent tone startled Zulie.

Well, how did you meet?

At the river's edge. Yeah. I was going for a walk, early one morning.

Sounds like the beginning of a song!

Ruqa's long face meant that her eyes were set, somewhere at the level of Zulie's hairline.

One of your early morning walks.

Exactly.

Zulie's eyes were in Ruqa's mouth.

And he was coming in the opposite direction. And you ran towards each other and the waves were rising and falling in violins...

Fuck off.

Ruqa laughed and drank again.

So, how old is he?

I don't know. Around thirty-five, I guess.

You guess? You mean, you didn't ask him?

He's a widower.

Any kids?

Zuleikha shook her head.

Ah. Parfaitment!

I don't know, Zulie said, doubtfully.

What does he do?

I don't know.

That's a good sign.

Some office thing.

Not knowing, I mean.

Zulie sighed. The coffee left a slightly bitter aftertaste at the back of her mouth, just at the place that was hard to get at. She wished she'd asked for a glass of water. Ruqa leaned forwards, and whispered.

Look, Zulie. It's been so bloody long since you had a man. Years, right?

Zulie looked at the silver coffee machine.

I think he's between jobs. He's an only child.

Ruqa pursed her lips and formed her expression into one of mock sorrow.

Aw, shucks. Only, lonely, lonely, lonely, only...

Then she swung back against the cushioned backrest.

No kids, right?

Zulie shook her head again.

So he's after your money, then.

What money?

Well, woman – you're a doctor, a positive catch. A whale, you might say. Ablinah.

Thank you so much.

No, I mean. I'm a shark, yeah? But if the housing market collapses, or the economy, then bang goes my job, my pension, all that. You, on the other hand... People will always need a medic. It's like undertakers.

And whores.

Medicine is the second-oldest profession.

I don't know what he's after. I don't even know if he's after anything.

Men are always after something. Usually, one thing.

The background music had changed, and was now some stupefying 1970s disco thing. Slick, fake metal.

How long?

How long, what?

How long has he been a widower? Single, I mean. Whatever. What a silly title: widower. It makes them seem a hundred-and-ten years old.

Just a few weeks, I think.

Ruqa let out a long, slow breath.

What is this? Some kind of rebound? Are you the shoulder to grieve on? Doesn't he even have a mother?

No, I don't think so. Not any more, I mean. I don't know, actually.

I mean, it's very sad. Tragic... how did she die, by the way?

Car crash.

Oh.

They both hid behind their coffee mugs.

Ruqa leaned forwards again. Zulie was aware of a man, watching them, from somewhere off to her right.

Does he give you friction-burns on your knees?

What?!

Look. It just seems strange. His wife is barely cold in her grave, and already this... this Alex-man is cavorting with other women. I mean, it's a bit bizarre. Don't you think?

He's not cavorting. I don't know what his interest is. We just bumped into each other, down by the river's edge. I've invited him for a meal. There's nothing else going on.

Yeah, it's a rock song: One mornin, down by the river's edge... Is he still wearing black?

Zulie thought for a moment.

I think so. I mean, he was when he came round. But I think that maybe he always wears black.

He's already come round?!

Just for a short time. Just to drop something off.

What?

A tool. Nothing.

The man to her right was peeling off her clothes. Or maybe he was peeling off Ruqa's clothes. It was difficult to know, at that angle and she didn't want to look directly at him. Might encourage him. Or discourage him.

What religion is he?

What?

It does matter, you know. I mean, if he were Hindu, he might believe in some kind of transmigration of souls. Maybe he thinks his wife's soul has slipped into your body or something freaky like that. Colonised you.

He's not Hindu.

OK. So Jewish, then. I know your tastes.

No, no. I think he might be an ex-Catholic.

Listen, kiddo. There is no such thing as an ex-Catholic. Lapsed, yes. Ex, no. Once you're in the arms of the Virgin Mary, Mother of God, once you've inhaled the incense and sipped the wine, once the dry, musty taste of communion wafer has seeped through the tremulous skin of your outstretched tongue, you are bound for life,

for eternity. Your words, your emotions, your every breath. Your body and your blood. Once a Catholic, always a Catholic. You can become one, but you can't leave. You can only pretend.

How do you know so much?

My mother was one – remember? She never forced it on us, but there are things you can't avoid. I mean she was from Karachi, and she'd got hold of this enormous statue of Jesus – red robes and all – which she placed on a table in the sitting-room. Imagine bringing boyfriends home to that! About three feet high, he was. Jesus, I mean. Okay, it was a beautiful statue - well, no, it wasn't, actually - but whatever it was, it was meant for a church, y'know? Not a home. Roman Catholicism is not the sort of religion you can rationalise to nothing. Infallibility, virgin birth, endless hierarchies of heaven and hell and everything in between. Gold and sinew and nail-clippings. It's too physical to ignore. It becomes a part of your flesh, and to get rid of it, you would need to tear off your right arm, or your left breast, your gut, or something.

He plays the lute.

What?

Zulie mimed.

He plays the lute.

The guitar, you mean.

Zuleikha shook her head, slowly.

That was a signal for Ruqa to explode with laughter.

You're joking? He's told you that?

Zuleikha nodded.

The lute?!

What's so funny.

Ruqa nodded slowly, as though she had just deduced the secret of the universe.

You see, that figures. It fits in.

What d'you mean?

The lute is his escape. From Catholicism, from his dead wife, from himself most probably.

It's his hobby. Anyway, he might not even be RC. And he did it before she was dead. Played, I mean.

What, you mean it killed her?

Ruqa was shaking her head, and was pirouetting her empty mug on her middle finger as though it were a cigarette-holder. Stupid woman. What was she saying? And she wouldn't stop.

This man is obsessed. Invite him to dinner, fine. Let him play his lute to you. Let him mourn. But don't get entangled with him, Zulie. I smell a rat.

Zuleikha smiled, in spite of herself.

Not a whale? Or a shark?

No, most definitely, I see...

With her mug, Ruqa drew the letters through the air.

R A T

16: To read more about the fate of Zuleikha's estate-agent friend, Ruqa Farrell, see 'The Black Mirror.' This is an exotic novella of deepest England and was inspired by concepts from a particular kind of paganism. It appears here, courtesy of Professor Zulfikar Ali Lobsang, PhD (Cam) and the Beaconsleaf Institute.

http://sarmed.netfirms.com/suhayl/NEW/short_stories/black_mir/index.htm

17. RIDDLE II:

Voiceless

Through doors I slipped

On love's breath

Did I return, singing

And now, I am everywhere

Who am I?