

The Tale of the Sufi: A Death, a Wife and a Journey

Dawn. The tough outer wall of an acorn cracks open and through the jaws of the fissure, a white cowrie shell forms and rolls. At first, the shell rocks on its axis and then slowly comes to rest on the dust ground of the high place. The hardened brown leather boot of a soldier kicks the shell and like a small ball, the shell spins as it flies. A thousand metres it falls and when it lands it crushes the skull of a wandering, lunatic goat which has been brought there by a fake deo who has ridden it all the way from Khaplu. Or perhaps, it does not crush the skull, but merely enters into it, fuses with the spirit therein, enmeshes itself in that of a life which can be known only through songs brayed from the edges of cliffs, songs whose notes loop, sink and eventually quieten but which never quite fade into silence.

The deo had been sitting on the edge of this, lower, cliff and had been chewing mulberry seeds which he had been drawing from a small pouch at his side. Every so often, he would dart a glance sideways to make sure that no-one was watching and then, quickly, from somewhere in his voluminous green robe he would remove a silver pistol, and putting the mouth of the gun to his lips, he would throw back his neck and drink deeply. The moon was a pallid disk in the southern sky and his breath turned to steam in the air. During the jagged, winter days of Baltistan, sun and moon darted between the shoulders of mountains as though shy of their own light, as though there were some form of forgotten, tribal shame associated with the nakedness of high noon. And it is true that in this season, the men would secrete themselves behind the great, granite boulder which some mortal deity had cast down from the sacred plateau, and would bathe naked in the cold waters of the fast-flowing river.

After he had sated himself with wine, the Deo gazed upon the valley that was stretched out beneath him like the skeleton of an old god. The long, triangular ridges, juddering across the valley floor, reminded him also of the spines of so many men who had forsaken the sweep of their existence in pursuit of lower truths, in the general quest for lies and slanders that is the lot of humankind, and he found himself enjoying the albuminous quality of the sun's light as it bathed the sparse terraces of the Jangali Mutch, the place where only the poorest plants could grow. The lank, disparate shadows reminded him of the figures of slaughtered farishtas. War in Heaven, the Deo thought, was simply the result of a confusion concerning two truths. Does this mean that both must be false? Or is there some as yet undiscovered, underpinning doctrine that will somehow bring the most obverse concepts together in a dissonant harmony like the whirling flute music of the pirya up on the highest slopes of the White Mountain?

It was at this moment that the cowrie shell landed on the aperture that lay at the crown of the skull of his goat.

The White Deo knew that this was about to happen, yet he did not leap up in slow motion and shove his beast to one side, nor did he yell in thirty languages at the goat to get a move on, but instead, he knelt down and stretched his palms out along the mountain's black seam, and as the sun rose over the lip of the horizon, he touched his forehead to the cold stone and began to pray *I*.

And in any case, the goat was having a vision of its own and so there is no guarantee that it would have responded to its master's command, even if one had been issued. But more of that later.

The White Deo knew that the search for truth must begin, not on the peaks of mountains but in the depths of the sea and in the mantle beneath the earth's bedrock. And in search of these truths, he had travelled across oceans and deserts and plains and had dwelt in cities, villages, jails, temples, asylums and now, in his old age, at last he had returned to the land of his youth, to the sacred peaks of the piriya, since the ultimate truth, he reasoned, surely must reside in one's own source. He had not come back before, in part because he had known that to tear off all veils and to gaze into the mirror can lead only to madness. It might end with one perching, high up on an intermediate buttress, munching mulberry seeds and drinking red grape blood, and contemplating the ogee curves and flowered pinnacles of triangular mountains and further, to imagining that one really were the White Deo and further still, that one might be able to predict the moment of impact of a cowrie shell upon the boned vault of a goat. Perhaps it would have been better, the White Deo thought, to have directed one's energies along the five paths, rather than into the oxbows and dark places of this world. But the epicentre of truth surely must lie outside the walls of that which is well-trodden. Beyond the shadows of the pillars and vaults of successive civilisations; there must lie some other, unseen point at which all of this frenetic dancing must be aimed. Like the chants of the Friends, however, the journey towards that point must remain unpunctuated.

In pursuit of this invisible place, the White Deo had cloaked his body in green and had gone on the cardinal pilgrimages of hajj and umrah, both, and had moved between the triumvirate of holy cities, Makkah, Madinah and Al Quds Ash Sharif. Along with the other pilgrims, he had cast stones at the Pillars of Satan and in the month of Rajab, he had risen from the sand place on a cold night journey during which he had seen the wax faces of the dead and of those not-yet-born, and he had stood upon the Domed Rock and had heard the sound of masons chiselling out the singing spaces of the old Temple of Hazrat Sulaiman. And he had prayed at the fluted tomb of the Great Bactrian of the Masnavi line, and he had opened his eyes and had allowed the Verse of Light to flood the skins of his retinas, aleph-lam, and in the garden of roses he had danced in the dhikr of the eyes, the ears, the tongue, the hands, he had read the Kamil az-ziyara and the Makhan-i a 'ras and had visited the wedding tombs of all past saints, remembered and forgotten, and indeed, of those yet to be revered. And in his travels, the White Deo had acquired a certain veneer of humanity, so that to passing herdsmen, ceramic firers and suchlike, he would appear as anyone might, had they remained fixed at around sixty-three years of age and had they clad themselves in tattered, antique, green robes and sported on their heads, a typical, triangular, piebald Khirgyzian topi. The White Deo had resided in human frame for so long, he had largely forgotten what it had felt like to exist, along with music, truth and devotion, in form energetic. The situations in which he had found himself had not required the use of his original template and so, he had grown familiar with the line and seam and pulse of a human being, much as a djinn, imprisoned for untold aeons in a jar, knowing its imperfections, will don not merely the shape, but also the characteristics and even the skin, whether ceramic, earthenware or Persian glaze, of the temporal container 2.

As, however, he bent down to pray (for even deos know their Creator) he sensed the skull of the demon goat, the brain-pan of his companion of standing, long if not high, eggshell beneath the terminal planetary weight of the white cowrie, and so, without so much as blinking an eyelid, the White Deo allowed his soul to become subsumed through the Great Aperture into the form of that of the goat. In other words, the horny goat-demon who had been raised from the pyre on the summit of the Green Mountain now became a man, or at least, assumed the semblance of a man. However, the shock of the impact, combined with the translocation of being, the mingling of phenotypes, genotypes and meridional chakras led to a

certain confusion and a loss, or shall one say, an obfuscation, of past existences and also to a peculiar fluidity in the quality of gender. Notwithstanding, within a few years, this wise, emergent, chimaeric, trans-substantiated entity became known in those sparsely-inhabited parts as, 'The Sufi'.

The Sufi belonged to an unseen order, or rather, he belonged to no recognised order; neither the Naqshabandi nor the Qadiri, neither the Mevlevi nor the Chishti, would admit him to their halls, and even joyously heretical sects like the Hurufis had disclaimed him as one of their own; and yet always he had claimed to be guided by Khawaja Khizr, the Man-in-Green whom some thought to be a prophet, others, a spirit of sorts and still others, an erstwhile companion of Iblis who had grown tired of the rents in Jahannum (and as any bent estate-agent will tell you, the rents in boomtime Hell rise even faster than do those in either that vibrant, cruel and unnameable metropolis by the Thames or the viridescent, fish-suppered City of Glasgow). Yet though he was beyond them and spent his hours studying the infinite meanings of the *Fou-ching*, he revered all of these Orders, and in many ways had been created through their words, their songs, their chants, their spinning communion and had made pilgrimages to the high-hat tombs of their saints and pirs, where he had spun like a moon cymbal, counter-clockwise, his feet turning on wood and his right palm raised in greeting towards God 3. He had performed the wuzu and had prayed beneath the domes of countless mosques, from the dust lands of Mali to the mountains steeped in dragon green tea and pink hibiscus to the rock node point of ascension of Yang-sa-lo. The Sufi had journeyed, on foot and by sea, from the ice wastes of Ostrov Rudolfato to the Eternity Range of Antarctica.

It is incumbent upon one who assumes such a role that he commit either miracle or murder, or sometimes both, and so this Sufi of the Demon of Yarkand moved across land and sea, living at times in the manner of an ordinary man with jostling wife and family (three daughters and two sons living as well as five others, deceased in infancy) and winning bread for the heavy table by setting up as a merchant on the great caravan trails of Asia Major or else as a tax-collector for the third-generation and somewhat effete Mongol who had assumed the uncertain, and definitely risky, mantle of local potentate. He would not await the deaths of his children, but would wander off into the desert on nights of dreams, or else up into the mountain-ranges which backboned across the swathe of land between the Kara Deniz and the cool, marble palaces of Hindustan. And so did the Sufi wander through the long, holy darkness of the Leilat ul-Qadr until it began to seem to him as though the seventy or so years of his existence amongst figures of clay was merely the dream of total solitude which punctuated and divided one life from the next, and that in truth this substrate of revelatory darkness was the only reality. And during various centuries, pre- and post-Hijira, the Sufi played out the roles of courtesan, scientist, master of astrolabes, mullah, hooker and slave. And even, on one occasion, as volcanic cantati castratu at the esteemed Court of Siracusa. And perhaps it was during this particular life, his voice raised almost to dog-tone levels, his freshly-severed balls having been boiled in a crude iron vat and fed to the rabid Court hounds, that the Sufi met with the Grand Pir of *The Poor Fellow-Soldiers of The Messenger Isa and of the Temple of Hazrat Suleiman in Al Quds Ash Sharif*, who was, he said, on his way to meet the Rex of Cathay. After the event, he retained little, if any, memory of any of these incarnations, yet each one left something, a scent, a complexion, a repository of possible tongues, a peculiar metaphysical hierophancy, manifesting largely through day and night dreams, which tended, if nothing else, to allow him to perceive the elliptical nature of time and being.

Once again, he had dwelt for seventy years upon that dusty earth filled with the blood and bones of prophets and rabbinic high-kickers, and once again, it was Shubb Lailat ul-Qadr. As he had spent the last sixty of those years as a castratu, a eunuch, his voice was pitched an octave higher than one might have expected from his wrinkled, albeit beardless, demeanour. He could tell by the smell of the moonlight upon the crops and by a certain stillness of the air that it was time for him to pay a visit to the old rock.

When he reached the site, high in the northern mountains, the Sufi found that in the rock's place was a small, wooden house. He was puzzled as to why anyone would want to build a house this high up, in a location that was so utterly deserted. A shrine might have been understandable, but a house? And this was no shrine, or if it was, then the dead wali must have had need of warmth, since a thin column of smoke rose from the hole in the ceiling. Curious, he knocked on the door. After a few moments, a small, somewhat rotund woman answered. She had a face like a wrinkled kharbooza, and no teeth.

'Ah, you're back,' she said, with a smile.

'Am I?' he said, hesitantly.

She swung open the door turned her back on him and walked into the room. It was obvious that she had been expecting him. But her manner made it seem as though he had been away for only a few hours. He followed her inside, and closed the door behind him. He was wearing the clothes of a mountain kafir.

'Indeed, madam, it is very good of you to invite me in, but I was really only looking for directions.'

She was laying a table with various earthenware pots filled with food and steaming jugs of what smelled like hot wine, though the Sufi couldn't be sure. She looked up, and again smiled at him. Her bearing was so warm and hospitable that he couldn't help but return her smile. The last object she brought to the table was a large, wooden jaam. She beckoned him to sit and proceeded to fill the jaam with the steaming, bubbling liquid. The Sufi saw no harm in accepting her hospitality, even though it seemed clear that she had mistaken him for someone else.

They partook of the meat; lamb, chicken and some other type of joint which the Sufi had never seen before, but which tasted a little like a cross between sheep and gazelle, or else, goat and antelope; a variety of bread; leavened loaves, flatbread, horned bread; and fruits; kharboozae, tarboozae, sharifay, apples, plums, oranges, and many more, until, with this veritable banquet, he began to feel as though his belly would surely burst. The thing was, the food was so appetising, he was unable to stop, and he began to wish that like a cow, he carried several stomachs rather than just one. And since the old woman was eating with as much, if not more, alacrity than he, the Sufi did not feel like a guest who was abusing his privileges. At length, she paused, and licked her lips. He finished chewing the morsel he was on, and swallowed. He swung back against his chair. The light had altered. They must have been eating for almost two hours. The Sufi was exhausted, and sweat covered his brow. She reached across the table and handed him the jaam.

'You drink first,' she said, quietly.

He took the cup and examined its sides. Then, he glanced back at the old woman. He knew her eyes, though he couldn't place them. He had seen them before. The cut of her eyebrows, too, seemed familiar. The hill of her forehead.

The jaam was made of wood, and across its surface were carved strange, curling symbols, the like of which the Sufi had never before set eyes upon. Not in the caves of the Fathers of the Scetes Desert of Egypt, nor in the gompas of Bod, nor even in the massed, ecstatic khanqahs

of Khurasan had he read such a bizarre script. He had no idea what it meant. Some of the symbols resembled stunted trees, or outstretched hands, while others were like human features. But what features! The mouths had been slashed open so that they seemed to express a terrible anguish, and the eyes dripped tears of blood. The noses were often absent, as though they had been torn off at the root and in their places, were gaping holes, through which the curvatures of the brains were clearly visible. Some of the faces looked more like chimaerae: lion and man; gazelle and woman; snake and tortoise; eagle and witch. And then there were other figures which the Sufi simply could not place. Intricate, winding patterns that might have been letters, but which might just as easily have been the trunks and branches of unimaginably ancient trees. He was aware that the old woman's eyes were upon him. He looked up and smiled, but she was no longer smiling. Her eyes were neither brown nor blue, nor even green, but red, and they glowed like coals, like the liquid that filled the jaam and whose heavy, sweetness rose into his nostrils. Not even from the thighs of the concubines of Bukhara and Dimishq, had the Sufi smelled such powerful scents. And yet, it induced in him a terrible melancholy, a yearning which he did not understand. There was something about her face and the shape of her shoulders. He wondered why she had offered the cup first to him. Yet still, he felt compelled to drink. By now, the liquid had cooled a little, and the Sufi put the rim of the jaam to his lips.

The fluid was hotter than soup and it tasted of aniseed. Yes, it was not dissimilar to something he remembered having consumed in the courts of exiled Valencian notables, a beverage called anís, only this was ... more, somehow. The fluid warmed his throat, his chest, his belly. And then it spread rapidly through the tissues of his entire body. He could feel it slip along his sinews and course along his blood vessels. He took another sip, a larger one this time, and felt it go straight to his head. He was aware that the room had begun to sway a little, yet it was not an unpleasant sensation. He continued to sip away, until he had emptied more than half the contents of the jaam. When at last, he put the jaam back down on the table, the woman seemed to have vanished. Alarmed, he shot glances to right and left. Then he felt two strong hands on his shoulders and he heard music, or perhaps it was a voice, smooth as honey, thick as malt. The pressure was soothing, and it billowed from his shoulders, down over the whole of his body. He closed his eyes, and listened.

‘My husband, you have returned to me after so many years. I knew that you would come back. Even when the eagles of the high peaks had lost all hope, and were whispering in my ear, as I slept, that you had been lost to the comforts and delusions of this world, to the gleaming white bodies of dead armies and the glittering gold of conquest, I knew that you would return. Do you remember our son? Do you remember Daoud? He, the Golden Boy who was fated not to live beyond the age of nine months and by whose lips a few, miraculous letters, a handful of wondrous notes, had yet passed, do you remember his smile, his laughter, the touch of his tiny body on your palm? Your hair was black as a slave-girl's then, my love, and your lips were bellows, blowing fire in my belly.’

The Sufi felt a great heat erupt in his face, and a sharp pang in the rear of his mouth, and then he realised that he was crying. His shoulders were rising and falling beneath the palms of the old woman, whose voice was like silk in his ears. He did not open his eyes, for fear that when he did, she would be gone. Her words had turned wholly to music, so that they were no longer words at all and yet, the Sufi found that he was able to comprehend their meaning.

‘Once, you were a lover, and then a father. But then Daoud – our Daoud – died in the middle of the night. On the next day, a warm summer's day, by the limen of the pretty woods, we buried him, you and I, with bleeding hands we dug his tiny grave and we wrapped his white body in a linen cloth and we covered his eyes with red earth. Then we placed him in a

box cut from the sacred oak and we lowered the box into the hole in the cave. You wept so much, your tears became a river. And then you went away. You journeyed, night and day, as man and goat and man, and through itinerant storytellers I heard that at length you had travelled west, and that you had married again, this time to a cream-skinned Sicilian woman, but that you had grown restless and had become a soldier and that you had marched across the marches in the army of the Great Yunani, and that on your dusty campaign you must have passed this way. You left her as you left me, though for different reasons. You slept in the dowry brothels of Lydia and you almost won the hand of another in the land of the Medes. You rose to the rank of general and conquered vast swathes of Bharat almost to the borders of Bengal and in a cave you conversed for many nights with the Naked Philosophers and with the saffron sages of the Buddhist Way 4. In truth, my husband, you whirled through the ovals of the maqams, through the lands and the ages and the women and what did you learn with all that travelling?’

‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘Do we ever really learn anything? We make sacrifices which we do not intend, and then what? We spend the rest of our lives, doing penance.’

‘Perhaps. I have sacrificed most things.’

The old woman was silent, and her face grew sad, and the Sufi noticed that outside the house, the birds, the leaves, even the breeze, had also fallen silent.

At length, she looked up again.

‘I heard these things in the music which the wind played through the leaves of the tree. I do not know whether or not they are true. Even though I am illiterate, I read it in the whorls of the wood. I knew that you had come to re-conquer that land which had betrayed our son. Perhaps you imagined that you might be permitted to begin anew. But we only get one chance, Yusuf. Did you not know this? Did you ever return, borne on the notes of the night breeze, while I was sleeping? Did you pass through all the doors and did you enter my chamber and look upon my face and did you kiss my clasped lids? I dreamed that you did. But it must have been a dream, because if you really had come back, then you would have discovered that the cave no longer existed, or rather that it did, but that I had built in its cold, dark belly, a house - this house - and that over the grave of our son I had placed a human heart. And that the heart had grown into a tree, an oak that will live for ten thousand years or more. It is a tree that is unlike any other that has ever been in the whole world. It will bear fruit, and animals. Lions and fish, gazelles and goats, tumbleweed and hyacinth. Aiai! I culled its bark, and drank its sap, and I made paper from its timber. I bound whole tomes of its substance with the skins of sacred goats, and in chiromancy I wrote eighteen volumes of an opus without end. Then I buried thirteen of the books in a cave at the end of my world 5. Aiai! When I opened the grave of our son, I found that his skeleton had vanished. There was only a single sheet, a papyrus from the most ancient of days, and on the papyrus were scrawled the lines and dots of a naqsheh. It is the map of your journey, my One, it is the voyage of the seven doors 6. And the journey has just begun. And this ... this is the yield of the tree that we have been eating, my husband. It is the liquid of my heart that you have been drinking, my soldier. It is the blood of our love.’

‘I ... I tried to run away.’

‘You cannot run. Or if you do, you will run in ellipses, arabesques, majuscules and your flight will become wrapped and coiled in knots, impossible to disentangle.’

‘I buried myself in the khanqahs of Baghdad and the monasteries of the Egyptian desert, I sought out knowledge from the green men of the far west and the white-haired women of the land of Kashyap Rishi, from the great tale-tellers of Kush and the mad people who circle the rim of the ocean.’

‘There is no khanqah, monastery or desert deep enough to hide you, my love. You will run in nastaliq spirals. I touched the curve and grain of your stone, that was tightly wound around the turban mosques of Khurasan. And I carved this jaam from the oak tree and I gave it many names: pandoura, ‘ud, lute, turban, kobza, tanbur, theorbo, oud, nefer, bîn, pandor, barbat, bandura, bandurka, cetera, poliphant and many more. And I poured into its belly, the music of the worlds. When spiders dance, the world turns. When the ‘ud plays, the world dreams.’

And at that, the room was filled with music so loud it manifested in a light of many colours. The light was blinding and the Sufi closed his eyes and cast his hands over his face. But he could not close his ears and in the depths of the music, the Sufi made out the words of a song, though he was unable to discern its source.

*I travelled west, west and north
I heard your voice, screaming in my bones
I crossed the cold seas of the dragon-men
I held up my hand, and caught your feathers in the smoky skies
I cavorted with whores
I placed gold in the flesh of their mouths*

*I swam to the green hollows of the world
I sought you, through the veins of the earth
I found you, washed-up by the river’s edge*

*I wore the green robe of Khizr, and I moved invisibly through the bellies of
cities
I clothed myself in the ornaments of the saints and the robes of the stars,
I drowned myself in the lake of night
I cut my feet with the blades of reeds, that I might drown*

*Then, there was only death
Nothing was real
Now, there is only love
Everything is truth
And ‘I’ is no more.*

The music swelled to a crescendo and then fell silent. When he opened his eyes, the Sufi raised his head and he saw that he was alone in a forest.

He was standing in a clearing at the centre of which was a large, red, cube-shaped house, whose shadow fell on one side. The house had no door, yet suddenly and without warning, its wall opened and two monks, both dressed in the long, green robes of Judas Thomas (otherwise known as Didymus Thomas of Socotra, Tau’ma of Kerala and Saint Twin-Twin of Edessa) walked out, the first, tall, the second, very short. Both then disappeared into the foliage that lay to the right side of the house. From the crack in the wall whence they had come, a white light shone briefly, but then, as the fissure became sealed again, the light vanished. Then he saw that the clearing was on a small island in the middle of a forest.

The Sufi walked slowly towards the house. He placed his palms over the wall where the fissure had been. The stone felt warm and was soft like pumice. He saw that there were

millions of tiny holes in the stone, but none of these ran all the way through or if they did, then the tunnels which they formed were too convoluted for the light to penetrate. He pushed against the wall, but nothing happened. He backed up, and ran at it with his shoulder, but all that happened was that his shoulder began to ache. He raised his boot and kicked it, but ended up hopping around in agony. The stone was harder than it seemed. And anyway, he thought, pumice stone is meant to be white, or at least, light-grey. Then he noticed that in each of the holes, there was a scroll. One-by-one, the Sufi removed each tiny scroll and sitting on a rock, he unfurled them and began to read. Some of the scrolls were of paper, others, of papyrus and yet others, of parchment. Yet they all seemed to have been written by the same hand. There were thousands of scrolls and the Sufi knew that it would take him years to read them all and he began to despair.

The sun was touching the far horizon and the light was fading rapidly so that he could barely see to read. Just then, issuing from somewhere in the trees, he heard music akin to, yet distinct from, the natural sound of the human voice. He thought that perhaps it might be an obscure tarana coming from a group of dihqans returning from the harvest, it held something of that peasant quality of the seasons and of the laying down of flesh into earth and he was about to follow the sound, when out of the forest, there emerged a goat. The animal was horned and around the horns had been tied a series of strings. When the goat moved its head, the motion of air upon the strings resulted in the most beautiful music the Sufi had ever heard. The music did not follow any particular melody, at least, none that he could recognise, yet even in its dissonance, it produced in him that most pleasing sensation of flying which he knew was the first, ecstatic, stage in the dastgah of lunatics, saints and prophets, a stage known as, hal. He noticed that there was another string tied around the goat's neck and that suspended from this much looser cord was a taaviz. Cajoling the beast, the Sufi gained its confidence and then, avoiding its sharp horns, he reached out and removed the taaviz. The amulet had been fashioned from a silver-coloured metal that did not seem like any grade of silver the Sufi had ever seen before. He unscrewed the small, cylindrical container, but instead of a scroll of Quranic verse, what he found inside it was a glass phial containing a green liquid. Then the goat began to turn its head again and its movement seemed to follow a particular pattern. It was now dusk and so the Sufi couldn't be sure whether what he heard next came from the goat's mouth or from the strings attached to its head. It was a song, in a language in which he was illiterate, but which he seemed to comprehend nonetheless.

The Sufi followed the instructions in the song, removed a sharp knife from his khirqa and once again cajoled the singing goat into moving closer to him. Gently, he induced it to rest its head on a stone and then, in one, swift movement, he made a clean incision over the goat's internal carotid artery. The animal was still singing as it died and its song was of such beauty, the notes, of such purity, that the Sufi knew that in that precious minute-and-a-half, it must surely have glimpsed, through the leaves of the lote tree of the boundary, carried on a gleam of the Grace that exists between past and future, the very arks of paradise. And he was sure that the goat must have seen the arks sail towards the black light which shines from behind the divine throne. Once the body had stopped twitching, the Sufi removed the goat's head - whose strings still gave out the beautiful music - and as per its instructions, scooped out the flesh innards of the skull - the brain with its membranes in which, it is said, even after death, fragments of the spirit yet linger. Then, breaking off the top of the glass phial, he added its contents to the blood and interstitial fluids remaining in the skull's vault. It was now quite dark and the stars poked like pins through the fabric of the sky. There was a powerful aroma coming from either the house at his back or else from the forest; so strong was the smell that it transformed the stink of dead flesh into that of night jasmine. The Sufi raised up the skull,

tilted back his head and drank deep. As he did this, he felt the music that was still playing from the head, enter him. And when he looked down again at the scrolls he found that he was able to read and comprehend each one a hundred times faster than before and that as he read, his knowledge grew to such an extent that time itself began to accelerate. It were as though he had been blind and the scent and taste of the liquid had rendered sight unto him. The tracts bore titles such as, *A Mirror for Princes*, *The Red Intellect*, *Recital of the Occidental Exile* and *The Book of Opposites*, though he noted that a number of the works remained unfinished or else seemed to have been lost, so that only their titles remained.

And when he had pulled the last scroll from the wall, and when he had read the last letter of the last word on that scroll, the horned head lay, silent and dead at his side. Yet his own body, every pore of his skin, every follicle of hair, each orifice of every viscus, was singing the goat's song as though each layer of tissue had been unfolded, exposed to the light and then hung like a fleece from the branch of an oak tree. The notes of the song caused a door of the house to open, and this door was in a quite different place from the first. And from the doorway thus formed, came the Father of the Knights and the Sufi saw that he was dressed in a long, green robe and that he was nearly eight feet tall. And this figure came towards him and girded his loins with a silver girdle and then led him into the house. And in the house, which he saw now was a mosque, crimson inside as well as out, the Sufi began to turn on the spot and sing and as he did so, three hundred-and-sixty doors opened, each set beneath an arch and each, at a different angle, and in the shape thus formed, he saw that the house was guarded by a particular link in the silsila, the great chain of Masters that went right back to the men of stone and mud and the Mother of Lands, to Khurasan, Balkh and the high peaks that lay to the north of Kashmir. And in this hal, through this karama, by means of this miraculous, ecstatic state, the Sufi found that he could see, hear and understand the contents of all the lost and unfinished works and even of those, hidden in the forests of the far west and the tea-houses of the deep east, which had yet to be written and even then, after all this, he knew that as yet only one of the eighteen surahis had been opened to humanity. The jawanmard danced like a bear and sang like a monkey and in that City of a Thousand Days that had been built by Hazrat Yusuf, the great Psomthaphanicos of Misra, the Sufi told tales to the walls of the Crimson Church in the languages of termites, griffins and salamanders. *Alf-yaum, alf-yaum, alf-yaum...* And then the walls themselves began to sing all the stories that had ever been told and from this great cacophony, octave-upon-octave, one maqam into the next, each dastgah spiralling through its successor, there issued a single, pure note that held within it, the music of all the worlds.

1: On his travels, the Deo had discovered a quick way of learning new tongues. There is not space here to expostulate a full academic disquisition of this process; for that purpose, please refer to the Ziyaratnama , Vol. 3, Chapter 25. Courtesy of the Library of Bomboret, Chitral District, North Pakistan (acknowledgement rendered to the Hellenic Aid of the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs and especially to the Greek Teachers organisation). However, here is a summary of the process, or perhaps it would be more accurate to refer to it as a progression, since, in all but the auditory modes, it resembles a tract of invisible, yet immanent, music such as the maqam. Through the ingested combination of the three pure liquids; wine, water and milk; as well as fasting and retreat to a deep, dry well in the middle of a pine forest, the White Deo had moved into a trance state from whence he had reached the conclusion that at some level, all languages bear the same imprints of rhythm and that therefore, if one could pin down these calligraphic trajectories; jeem, sheen, seen, kaf, and so on; then one might be able to project one's brain and tongue muscle around those of any other language. Or, to put it another way, language was a tree whose roots stretched long and deep, but not deeper than the pine well, and one had to become, as it were, a globule of wine and through this mystical heat, to ascend through the sap channels, both living and dead, of the trunk's substance and one thence might come to know many ways of speaking and thinking. But remember, this is just a brief, and therefore inaccurate, summary tendered in the

somewhat pallid form of analogy. It is important never to confuse metaphor with reality. Which is precisely why the Deo did not attempt to save the shell of the goat which once had been his metaphor.

2: By just such a route did the name, 'Beryl' enter into the English language, having been brought over the white cliffs by a certain djinn masquerading as a Frankish Crusader. This involved the djinn not bathing himself for a minimum of three years and six months, as well as the unlearning of ninety percent of his knowledge and the parallel acquisition of at least five separate and distinct versions of the variegated venereal diseases that existed in the virginal, pre-syphilitic world. Originally, in Arabic, a word very like 'beryl' meant 'crystal', yet by the time it had reached the gleaming, white-washed bed-sits of Brighton, the name connoted little more than a portly suburban matriarch who might seek orgasmic sublimation through the musics of Vera Lynn and Glen Miller rather than those of Benny Goodman and Django Reinhardt, and who invariably would cross her ballot paper for the hoary god-barons of the First Estate. Thus, Beryl was a djinn who had forgotten herself and her's was a dance of the lost fractal.

3: According to scrolls recently discovered beneath the demolished chapel of Saint John the Baptist in Garngad, Glasgow, there is another order of Sufis, one hitherto unknown save in the most erudite circles and in the locked cells of the furthest-out of the asylums of this world (that term being employed here in its original sense, and not the mentally-ill etymology of late Victoriana, which merely preceded and foreshadowed that of the failed priest and wannabe poet, Dzbugashvili). This order, or rather, this group of loosely affiliated souls, has no name, or if it has, then like a spell or mantra or like the name of God, such cannot be spoken or printed. The found documents, which consisted of a number of scrolls as well as some double-entry account books and the sort of paraphernalia which one might associate with any self-respecting clandestine organisation, had been penned in a mixture of languages and scripts, a selected list of which is given in the table below:

<i>Akkadian</i>	<i>Irish Gaelic</i>	<i>Ogham</i>	<i>Persian</i>
<i>Swahili</i>	<i>Bamanankan</i>	<i>Mandarin</i>	<i>Aramaic</i>
<i>Modern Western Syriac</i>	<i>Chaldean Neo-Aramaic</i>	<i>Assyrian Neo-Aramaic</i>	<i>Hebrew</i>
<i>Ladino</i>	<i>Mandarin Chinese</i>	<i>Sanskrit</i>	<i>Malayalam</i>
<i>Arabic</i>	<i>Yiddish</i>	<i>Etruscan</i>	<i>Scots Gaelic</i>
<i>English</i>	<i>Polish</i>	<i>Classical Latin</i>	<i>Liturgical Greenock</i>
<i>Balti</i>	<i>Spanish</i>	<i>Japanese</i>	<i>Turkish</i>
<i>Romasche</i>	<i>Slovak</i>	<i>Magyar</i>	<i>Slovenian</i>
<i>Classical Greek</i>	<i>Amharic</i>	<i>Modern Greek</i>	<i>Mediaeval Latin</i>
<i>Cantonese</i>	<i>Heptanesian Greek</i>	<i>Lusitano-moçárabe</i>	<i>Balti</i>

4: This story was found in manuscript form in a cave in Bihar. It was discovered, quite by accident, by a peasant woman who had sought shelter from the sudden onslaught of the monsoon. In a recess at the rear of the cave, the entrance to which had been sealed by a large boulder, the woman found a tall, stoppered ceramic jar. Once the Hebrew script had been deciphered, there turned out to be several versions of the same story, with considerable sections missing. Most of the missing parts were complementary, but some were common to all three manuscripts. The stories had been handwritten in Aragonese Morisco aljamiado, but with strong Castilian overlay. Somewhat enigmatically, since in the extant text there was no mention of this character, the piece was entitled (in varying forms, depending on the branch of Aljamia, the language of the foreigners, or

perhaps, depending on the particular dialect of Mozarabic), 'El Poema de José', El Poema be Yuçuf or 'Las Coplas de José'. A composite version is here presented, but it should be understood that even this is by no means complete. Unfortunately, the peasant woman did not comprehend the importance of her find and before she was intercepted, quite by chance, by an itinerant saadhu, already she had fed several sheafs to the family cow. On account of this, the cow began to be worshipped by the villagers in the area, its every snort and bellow, hung upon as though it were a celebrity or a prophet, and after some time, the animal came to be known as, 'The Storyteller'. No-one, later, seemed to know the name of the woman, its owner, though it may have been either 'Mina' or 'Zaliqa'. The saadhu, who earlier in his life, had been a physics scholar, but who knew enough about linguistics to recognise the script in the manuscripts as Arabic but the language as something different, eventually managed to contact an anonymous tzaddik from the Children of Menasseh who was living in the city of Aizawl, Mizoram State, who confirmed the script as aljamiado – Spanish, written in Hebrew (or else, Arabic) letters.

5: No-one, save the Cailleach, knows what happened to the other five volumes.

6: The scholar Junayd wrote a treatise in the Eleventh Century, in which he claims, albeit with no corroborative evidence, that the Old Woman is here referring to the lahn, the buried solecisms of Bishr Häfi. These consisted of eighteen large tomes, which had been bound in the tanned, treated skins of sacred goats seduced and captured by naked maidens in the high mountains which at that time lay to the east of the great, coruscating city of Khurasan. The content of these volumes remains disputed, and since they have never been re-discovered, it is likely that the uncertainty will remain for the unforeseeable future. However, there is an alternative hypothesis, proposed by Zabīdī (d. 1205/1790), that this vast body of literature is in fact the original version of the Taj al-'arūs, the vast, cyclopaedic dictionary devoted to the subject of silence.