

The Tale of the Servant: The Prince, the Saint and the Dancer

The town hung precariously over the edge of the cliff as though it had been established by a presumptuous juggler who had wanted to defy all the forces of nature at once. For months, the sun had baked the land a uniform greyish-brown so that the earth had come to resemble nothing more than a giant mound of pumice. The Poet had understood that she had been travelling for these many months across Persia, Syria and the blue expanse of the Sea of Rome in search of a land of plenty, since, in numerous monasteries, khanqahs and caravanserais, she had been told that such a place would be found in an isula of fruit, flowers and fountains. But the moment she had stepped ashore amidst a fleet of gleaming, pitch-black boats, she had been met by a spume of sulphurous smoke. On peering through the smoke (*Nusf al-dunya*, the half-world of the vessel from which she had just disembarked having sped away faster than a trireme), she had made out a giant mountain whose purple summit, shrouded in cloud, reached so far into the sky that her neck hurt just looking at it. She had thought that perhaps this might be Mount Kaf, since although that mythical place was supposed to be in the Kaukaf Range which lay far to the east of here, yet such mountains were magical and could move as adroitly as the breeze, could follow the souls of doubters, just as this breeze that was blowing poisonous fumes into her face and causing her to cough and retch, could scatter people and animals alike to the four – no, the three – corners of Trinacria. Though it could hardly have been worse than the sea-sickness from which she had suffered as the navi had passed through the rough straits shortly before landing. It had taken them several hours to negotiate those narrow, swirling waters and such had been the crew's fear that the Captain had ordered the sail to be cut since it could not be unfurled. As she stumbled through the dust and smoke, the Poet realised that she was only just recovering.

Once she had followed the mass of people and escaped from the burning air of the volcano, the Poet found herself on the outskirts of a town. There were houses, mosques, synagogues, alleyways, churches, everything, in fact, that she would have expected a town to have had. Yet there were no people. How strange, she thought. Like the ground, the buildings had been uniformly coated in ash from the volcano, so that every one of the houses had been turned to a shade of greyish-black that reminded her of the iron from which church bells were forged. The lower slopes of the mountain were covered in a dense forest of pine, fir, cork, chestnut and holm-oak. She spotted an eagle with golden feathers which glided over the tops of the trees before it alighted on a cliff-edge. She asked a passer-by, who like her had come here from the ship, where she was, and the passer-by, a woman with reddish-brown hair and a face, etched with lines of rust, replied,

Are you an idiot? Do you not know? This is the Island of Siqilliya, set right in the middle of the Behr-i-Rum. Here, everything is a mirror of everything else and everything except truth is as it seems. Seek goodness and expect evil.

And the Poet replied that no, she was not an idiot and that she had expected a more fertile landscape, a more populous metropolis, but the redhead was not interested in continuing the conversation and instead hurried along, muttering something about having to get home to the *Maredolce Buheira* before dark.

So the poet left the deserted, volcanic town and following a country track, came to a plain filled with crenellated white pillars. On each of the pillars had been inscribed words in various scripts, including Arabic, Latin, Greek and seraphic phlegm, yet these modern letters seemed to overlie other, older, scripts. And wandering among the plane trees and glowing Corinthian pillars was a white goat with spiralling horns, bright blue eyes and slashes of brown across its skull. The Poet recognised the animal and addressed it,

How did you come to be here, so far from the land of your origin?
And the goat replied, in finest Toledan Aljamiado,

I was bought by a monk of the Order of Nestor, who was journeying towards Micklegarth and who sold me to a Spanish merchant named Geronimo Mediana who carried me overland to the Thessalonika Trade Fair, where I was purchased by an admiral in the Caliph Yusuf's Moroccan fleet, a cousin of the late Yahya, the Emir al Behr. A combination of storm and siren blew his vessel onto rocks close to the Great Volcano and I was the sole survivor, save for this surahi. Anyway, I could ask you the very same question. And as the goat turned his back towards her, the Poet saw, dangling from a leather rope that had been tied around the lower part of his chest, a ceramic burnia, decorated in the style of Ch'ang-an, the famous terminus of the Silk Road.

Can you show me the way to the Mahal of Malik Rujari, khalada-llah mulka-hu'? the Poet asked. I may be able to find work there. I hear the sultan is very fond of poets and cuntastorie. Indeed, I hear that he enjoys the work of all the precious pearls of the island and that since he writes only with white ink, he is known as the King of Light.

The goat opened its mouth and its bellowing laugh echoed through the pillars and caused the Poet to clap her hands over her ears. But the smell from the goat's throat was so foul, worse even than had been the stench from the volcano, that the Poet did not know which orifice to seal and instead, in utter confusion, she closed her eyes.

Why are you laughing? I am a poet. Wherever I go, I need to sing and recite tales, kharjat, qasa'ed and muwash'shahat, otherwise my breath will dry up and my flesh will turn to dust.

The goat closed its mouth and calmed itself, though every so often, its body would quiver as though mirth were fermenting along with the grapes, papyrus scrolls and gundelia in its voluminous and very catholic stomach.

Sultan Rujari, the Great Roger of the Middle White Sea lies within a marble house in the city of Bal'harm.

Marble house?

He has been dead for hundreds of years. 'alamat Rujari, his beloved wife, Elvira the daughter of Zaida of Sevilla and Castilla, the Sultans Frederici and Manfredi and Ahmed es-Sikeli, all of them lie in porphyry tombs, beneath elegant Arabic draperies they are all dust or possibly, in the view of the enlightened ones, sweet-smelling corpses. Did you not know? Clearly, Poet (and again the goat repressed laughter), all this time, you have been reading the wrong sorts of books! Do you not know that you should believe only half of what's recounted and that the less you believe, the better you'll do?

The Poet's face fell and sitting on a broken pillar inscribed with the second half of *Sorfarina*, the old tale of the girl imprisoned in a deep well, she began to weep. Her tears rolled down onto her robe, and the symmetry of their shape, the clarity of their substance and the plaintive sound of the Poet's voice reminded the goat a little of the magical tears of the Virgin which it had seen with its own eyes, one Saint Joseph's Day many years earlier, rolling, nay, cascading, down the nivure cheeks of the tall, dolorous statue of the Madonna.

Come, I will take you to the house of my master, Riccardo di Lucera. He will know what to do, he may even be able to find work for you. Do you play the lute?

Through the distorted glass of her tears and through the haze of the noon heat, the Poet thought she saw, in place of the goat's head, the face of a man.

I play upon the oud.

The crapa shrugged its shoulders and this movement caused the man's face to disappear and the burnia hanging beneath the goat's belly to jig about.

Same thing, the goat muttered.

The Poet rose and followed the goat as though once again she was an obedient child, following her mother to the hammam. And after enduring two weeks on the high seas and now this stinking, volcanic day beneath the face of the sun, she felt that she did indeed deserve a long, luxuriant bath. She was just about to ask the goat whether it knew of such a facility in the locality of its master's abode, when she began to hear the sound of music, played very softly. She looked all around to try and make out from where the sound was coming. And though by now they had left behind the Valley of the Pillars and had entered the side of a cliff that formed a gorge at the bottom of which flowed a gushing torrent, it was only as they reached the other end of the cliff path that the Poet realised that the music had been issuing from the surahi and that the mere action of the goat's trotting seemed to be eliciting, no doubt by some ingenious mechanical arrangement, the notes of a four-course oud. And after a while, the Poet felt quite transfigured by the conjunction formed by the rhythm of the tune as a whole and the purity of each individual note. The dastgah had turned into a maqam and it was the maqam bayati of Al-Kindi, the great master of music himself, for the lowest note of the maqam and the other strings of the oud both had been tuned to the lowest note his own voice had been able to reach. The Poet was familiar with *The Compendium of Music on the Composition of Notes and the Construction of the Oud*, which of course had been merely one of Al-Kindi's many volumes on the subject of musiqā.

Now she noticed a profundity of cherry and orange trees, heavy with ripe fruit and red and white oleander bushes which gave off a promiscuous scent which made the Poet feel as though she was entering some butana's bedchamber, except that here, an army of insects seemed suddenly to have discovered the travellers and descended all at once as though upon coveted treasure. Muschi, muschugliuna, mantises all flew down and to the Poet's horror, simultaneously, devilish creatures with far too many legs, or else no legs at all, writhed upwards through the baked earth, so that after only a short time, the goat and the poet were being followed down the length of the naturally-formed pergola by a legion of arthropods and other invertebrates. Yet though the flying insects circled around her head and the tiny beasts of the soil swarmed around her feet, not one landed in her hair or tried to suck blood from her skin. She asked the goat about this.

They know that you are protected by Signor Riccardo, the goat replied, without slowing his pace. So long as you keep to the path and stay close to me, you will be safe.

As the ground began to rise, the creatures began to thin out and finally to turn back and the Poet found herself almost losing sight of the countryside amidst the tall ampelodisa grass, which grew on both sides of the track and which was so tough, it would have been impossible to have walked through. The land here was less sheltered with trees and the full heat of the sun poured down upon the earth, fissuring the soil and thinning and wilting the vine leaves. Even the sorb apples looked thoroughly burnt, so that they had come to resemble large, yellowish-brown nuts.

No-one has picked this fruit, the Poet said to the goat. Why is that?

The goat took a long time to reply, so that the Poet thought that perhaps he hadn't heard, or else that she had said something wrong. Perhaps her words meant something quite different here. But at last he spoke.

The people have left the land, he explained. For centuries, they planted, watered and looked after these trees and the other fruits of the earth as though the groves were shrines and the land, their nave. These men and women had their feet planted, deep in the mud, but in recent times, since Don Riccardo's... illness, they have fled to the coast and beyond.

Your master is ill?

He has not been seen for many years.

For the first time, the Poet began to worry. She thought for a moment and then said,
But his house is still there, I mean, that is where you are taking me, is it not?
Assuredly.

The goat did not elaborate and the Poet's attention began to wander over the hills and rivers, the hollows and occasional wells, around which greener patches of land, marshes that were hidden from the fiery light of the sun, seemed to beckon her dry palate, her wordless tongue. And over to the east, from at least half-a-dozen places on the slopes of the great mountain, yellow smoke billowed and curled and turned into clouds which dissolved into the morning. Far away, walking slowly along a country lane, she made out a hunched figure dressed in a black sciallu. At this distance, the Poet was unable to see whether it was a man or a woman, but every so often, the figure would pause, lean on their stick and seem to look up at the path along which the poet and the goat were travelling. The land here was barren and had been punctured by large caldere from which cinders and noxious white smoke poured upwards, coalescing into a veil over the sun. But this merely intensified the heat and both goat and poet hurried along, eager to leave the mountain of fire and its sulphurous valley.

They came to a forest of umbrella pine and silver fir and then to a plain where the fields had been harvested and where fires had been lit which had burned the land down to a rough, black stubble. They passed through cicada villages surrounded by Saracen trees and pungitopo where the peasants sat, shelling almonds and firing ceramic jars the size of women, firing them perfectly until they rang like church bells.

And as she walked alongside the goat, the Poet felt the weariness of her journey slip away from her limbs, she felt it seep away like water into the ground. And she quickened her stride in anticipation of meeting the great Riccardo, Knight of Lucera of whom she had heard absolutely nothing, save that he was the master of this humble, yet unmistakably musical, goat. The maqam bayati was the form of love, female love, and since the Poet was partly female, this was one of her favourite modes. And then, as she became increasingly ecstatic, she noticed that the very formations of the landscape were arising from older structures, simply by means of the music. It was as though each section of the melody was attached to a particular place, so that one phrase would result in a copse of almond trees springing up as though from nowhere, while another seemed to cause to erupt, dwarf palms and enormous mulberry bushes bearing black and white fruit, citrus groves in full flower, fragrant cedars, araucarias, basil, broom, eucalyptus, ilex, laurel, sage, until the entire land, which previously had been as bare as the deserts of Maka in the land of the Baluches, now bloomed with the colours of spring, but with summer flowers and autumn fruits. There was even some winter lavender and hawthorn laden with bulbous, red berries dotted along the roadside. And then it was as though, while the names of the notes remained the same, the melodies altered and the sayr evolved differently, as though the notes were being played simultaneously through many different maqamats, from bayati to sikah to rast, from jouissance to love to pride. This is impossible, she thought, earth does not move so quickly and what I am seeing, what I am feeling, must be a jujube distortion, a mushroom dream, a cantastoria of some sort. Nonetheless, it is nothing if not pleasant and so I am happy to tread the path which it reveals to wherever it may take me. And it was clear now that they were following the course of a river – this, at the beckoning of a Bayati tetrachord, had gushed from a sciacca in the hard-baked earth and now flowed north-westwards - and the road which they were on seemed to run in parallel with the ever-widening nahr. And finally, as though in some great cacophony of creation, flocks of eagles, hawks, rooks and swallows poured out from the earth's fissures and soared so high, they came to resemble little more than specks of pepper in the sky.

The land began to grow at first gently undulating and then definitely hilly. At length, they began to ascend a particularly steep hill covered with grass and dotted with pale asphodels. As they reached the crest of the hill, there opened up a vista so broad, it seemed to take in half the island. Immediately before them was a lake of light-blue water and the lake was surrounded by villas cloaked in clusters of eucalyptus trees. Beyond the lake, in the far distance, lay a great city set in a bay and she could just about make out the campaniles and minarets as they caught the edges of the light, the light that rose, lapis, turquoise and gold, from the waters of the bay. Yet even though the beast had ceased to walk, the music did not fall silent. And now, rising like steam from the sea, the Poet saw, outlined in the sky, great letters that took the forms of aleph, bey, peh, thé and on, all the way to yae, and these letters danced before her eyes and then, one-by-one, sank down into the cool, still waters of the lake.

This is the Lagu di Pergusa, said the goat. My master's house lies on the north bank. It is said that as Saint Joseph's ship sailed across the sea, it came to the city of Bal'harm and because eventually even the vast sea must end but God's power is infinite, the ship rose up and sailed over the land. It sailed all the way across Sicilia and as it did so, every so often droplets of sea-water dripped from its hull onto the ground. This is how the lagu was formed.

As gradually, they descended towards the lake, the music began again though now it seemed gentler than before, melancholy even, and the Poet recognised the strains of the maqam hijaz.

The House of Signor Riccardo was enormous, almost a palace, the Poet thought, and it had been constructed of a white-coloured stone which, the wise goat told her, had been quarried in the Mountains of Maryam that formed a natural barrier running west-to-east across the north of the island. This goat seems to know everything, the Poet thought. It has acquired far more wisdom than I since our separation at the foot of the cliff. Its gnosis ranges from east to west and north to south. It holds within its quizzical features, the tongues of Chiin and the languages of the prophets. It knows of serpent pearls, spirit markets and asbestos cloth, of flowery groves, nets of iron and the long waters of the west, of the jewel that shines at night and the luminous religion of Nestor. And it knows, too of Bartiniyah, Yang-sa-lo and the Fou-ching. It is as though the beast has communed with Hazrat Suleiman, Rabia al Basri, Shams-i-Tabriz and Liu Chih all at the same time. Perhaps this beast was the real author of the Daily Chonicles, the *Jih-li* that had been bound together in five thousand volumes into the great cyclopaedia called *T'u-shu-chi-ch'eng*, of the words of wisdom and the tales of flying sands, weak water and white jade hills, tales which were kept secret even from the kings and their ministers and which told of the miraculous happenings in the lands of Po-si, T'iao-chich and Ta-tsin, alternatively known as Persia, Babylonia and Syria. Perhaps it is the burnia which renders unto this dumb animal, the powers of falsafa and suf, alike. Perhaps, there is a djinn in this jar. And an evil plan began to form in the Poet's mind.

By the time they reached the house, which was shaped in the style of the old Greeks, the crapa had grown tired, and without speaking to the Poet, it folded its legs beneath its body, lay down and fell asleep on a beautiful divan upholstered in Chinese silk. As though already the goat was having wine-dreams, its coglioni, pendulous on the journey, now swelled like udders and almost burst the thin black skin of its scrotum which lay like a great, leathery flask on the cream-coloured, silken material. How horrible! thought the Poet, whose heart by now was as black as that of Old Paulu. How disgusting that Don Riccardo, gallant and chivalric jawanmard that he is, should allow a stinking wild goat, horns, balls, zob and all, to recline upon such a fine piece of furniture in such wondrous marble-and-tile surroundings. They appeared to be in the gynaikonitis of the house. Mind you, thought the Poet, nothing has

remained fixed and so it is quite possible that what once had been the women's chambers now might be something quite different. And removing from her robe a small dagger, the Poet reached out and with the utmost precision, cut through the leather rope which held the surahi to the goat's underbelly.

The sides of the giara were cool as though it had just been plucked from the lake and she saw that the ceramic had been fired with images of women playing the oud, the rebec, the tanbur, women who were surrounded by grapes, pistachio fruit and plane trees. The pattern on the burnia's surface was divided into four sections with, running between these sections, four rivers. The rivers converged as they flowed up the neck of the burnia until the Poet could see that had they been permitted to continue, they would have joined up right at the opening. But the opening had been stoppered with a hard, thick plug of lignu and hemp which had been soaked in olive oil to make it even more difficult to remove. I will take out this bung and then I will possess all the music, she thought. I will possess the power to create the land, the seas, the rivers and the birds. I will know everything the goat knows, and more. For am I not a poet, a sha'iri from the mountains, and can I not pen my own verses, can I not play the oud and sing them, too? So saying, with the maqam rast, the maqam of pride, ringing in her ears, the Poet pulled as hard as she could on the bung. Yet it proved impossible to dislodge. Exhausted, she slumped down on the marble floor, clutching the surahi between her knees. Goat and Poet remained in their respective positions for half-an-hour or perhaps a little longer, but at any rate, the sun was now low in the sky and the birds of the evening had emerged to sing their romantic muwashshah choruses, the verses which enticed the bashful moon to draw itself up, remove its niqaab and display its pockmarked, lighted face to the world.

That's it! the Poet almost shouted, startling herself and checking that her ejaculation hadn't woken the Goat. I am a sha'iri and I will sing the surahi open. But how to sing and not waken the sleeping beast? I will sing silently. My notes will be whispers, exhalations, the merest vibrations of air and light. It will be the maqam of silence, the hidden maqam, the Old Man of Maqamat and it shall be the one which will open up the splendours of the worlds to me! Perhaps this goat shall indeed vomit gold! Kun. Begin.

And still sitting cross-legged on the cool floor, the Poet began to sing, her mouth opening and closing in the precise formulations which she had learned in the mountaintop monasteries of Media and Chaldea and in the black khanqahs of the Kaukaf, she breathed in and out to the exact measurements, no less, no more, of the Hidden Maqam. In this mode, the notes which were inaudible to human ears but which could be heard by certain breeds of wild dog, nocturnal chickens, giant, singing tuna fish and the Mother of God of Automunti, consisted of intervals rather than notes and the intervals could be expressed as functions of one particular letter, taking into account the entire corpus of the possible geometries of that letter, its backslashes, cursive figures, accents, ligatures, dots, diacritics and variations, and since it is the function of a storyteller to spin out single letters into something which becomes, in the mind of the listener, reader or redactor, a good deal more than it was and then a good deal more than that, the Poet ended up reciting, in complete silence (save for the ears of the aforesaid creatures) a poem. Here, with the benefit of hindsight and foresight both, and without permission of any kind, it will be reproduced, though it is important to bear in mind that much tends to be lost in the translation of, especially, poetry.

*In the Castle of Vases, there was a spell
Which only the Wisest of the Wise could tell*

*And it came from a man hidden in a jar
Who once was a soldier who went to war*

*Master Giuseppe spoke only in words that were dead
Embalmed in the pupi of the solfara and the fasces of the sun
With these windings of the underwood, he set the gintuzza to sing
To become the fountainhead of all that is light*

The sha'iri recited the Hidden Maqam seven times and at the close of the seventh recitation, there was a loud popping sound and the bung flew across the room and hit a vase full of red roses, knocking it over. The bowl smashed and the goat woke up. The Poet braced herself for whatever was coming, from the mouth either of the goat or the burnia, but when she looked back at the animal, in its place was a young man with the face of a saint. The saint sat up and spoke and to the sha'iri's ears his voice sounded like music, specifically, the mellifluous maqam, Rahat El Arwah.

I am Giuseppinu, son of a famous qaina named al-Ajfa and as my father was an ogre, I, too was a dravu once, but was changed into the form which you see by bathing in the lake and by learning to play all the maqams contained within both the Kitaab of Alkindus and the great opus of Abu Nasr Muhammad ibn al-Farakh al-Farabi. I learned to play the oud at my mother's knee, though because of my ugliness, the other students constantly used to make fun of me. But I knew that I was the best of them all. You are seeing me now in my true form, yet to all others, I appear as a goat. You have presumed to play the Hidden Maqam which should be played only at the moment of death and so you must die.

At this, the sha'iri cowered between a massive jardinière and an astrolabe, when from behind her, from out of the surahi, there crawled a seven foot-long snake. The sha'iri did not notice the snake until it tapped her on the left shoulder with its tail. At first, she thought that perhaps one of the plant fronds had caught in her hair, but when she tried to flick it away it came back with seven times the force. Or at least, the head came back with seven times the force. The Poet leapt aside. Now she was really terrified. She was stuck between a saint and a snake. Then the snake rose up on its long belly and began to speak and far from being inordinately sibilant as she might have expected, its voice was lucid and plangent and reminded the sha'iri of the clear, echoing sound which an eagle feather makes as it strikes a goat-gut string wound with iron.

I am Prince Scursini and I have been imprisoned in this surahi for ten centuries. In that time, I have journeyed across countless lands and have lived with twenty-three generations of women. I have fathered most of this island and the others in the Behr-i-Rum besides.

But, interrupted the sha'iri, somewhat lulled by the sweet tone of the Snake Prince's voice, if all this time you have been imprisoned in the giara, how have you been able to father all those children? How could you travel anywhere at all?

The snake wheeled around and because he was seven feet long, the turn of his wheel encompassed much of the room. Now he was staring straight into the eyes of the Poet.

There are worlds, and there are worlds, and each world dances upon a separate tail, a different maqam. And yet, they are all linked through the neck and body of the oud and the hands of the player. He swayed a little from side-to-side as though to exercise the muscles of his long back. The saint resumed his tale.

Al-Ajfa, my mother. She was a fata and with her power, though her music, she brought all of this into being, this Thrinakie. This Sikelia, this Siqilliya, this Sicilia, this Land of the Fava Bean. With her oud, she conjured up everything that you see, hear, smell and

taste, and much that you do not. A long time ago, by the shores of this very lake, she was worshipped as a goddess, but now all the people have forgotten their mother. They no longer hear the delicate strains of the Hidden Maqam. Yet within this poor body of mine, there are musical instruments of every kind. When I take a stroll, symphonies fly from my feet, when I open my mouth to eat, raags, maqamat and concertos sail out upon the air and when I lie down, a dastgah rises like smoke and spreads across the sky.

But I thought that Al-Ajfa was a real woman, a woman of flesh and blood, a gifted virtuoso, granted, but a mortal being nonetheless.

In those days, the fata were among us. There were no fissures between beings, no cracks of the soul. So you see, my mother was a real woman and she was also a piri. Just as my good friend, Scursini here...

Prince Scursini, if you please.

Exactly, just as my good friend, Prince Scursini here is both snake and man, rolled, as it were, into one.

Rising full-length onto his tail, the Prince trilled, in broadest Palermitan Sicilian of the Albergheria quarter, opera dei pupi-style,

*Within a snake there is a man and within a man there is a snake.
It seems it is part of a plan
If I could but escape from this palazzu
And seek my love in Girgenti!
I would shed this skin
And become again a man.
Bramante! Bramante! Bramante!*

Scursini turned again to the sha'iri.

And you ... how did you know the words and silences of the Hidden Maqam, while we, who have sojourned here for so many centuries beneath the burning Qurlayun sun, must wait our turn or perhaps, must wait until eternity's trumpet sounds? O Israfil, where is the justice? Where is the harmony? My Friends, thine instruments are out of tune!

The poet inhaled deeply and realised that the serpento's breath tasted of roses.

Yes, answer well, or it shall be your last breath, thief! shouted Giuseppinu the Saint.

I, too am from the lignu of the holm oak from which the first 'ud was hewn.

She turned to Giuseppinu.

Do you not remember, Little Joseph? We were companions, though we were two, we were as one and then I saved your life, Giuseppuzzu, by assuming your skin. We went through many shape-changes through the ages until now, in this land of Sicily, we find ourselves in these forms.

She drew her palms down over her robe, which was of a two-tone, bluey-green colour, though one would not really have described it as, turquoise.

Saint Giuseppinu raised his hand to his forehead.

... so many shape-changes, you say? There is something, yet my memory fails me... then he let his hand fall. I think that you are a clever wordsmith and a great liar. I should have this serpent kill you with one thrust of his jaw. His teeth are sharper than the sharpest Dimashq steel and each one is large enough to take the head off a soldier. But until my memory recovers sufficiently, I shall spare you.

The sha'iri dared not breathe.

But you will be my slave.

Servant, the prince of snakes said.

Serpent? The saint misheard.

No, servant. Serbu. I am Saint Joseph.

My decision is final. The Poet will be a schiavu. She shall sing and play for us whenever we desire.

Prince Scursini turned towards the sha'iri.

Beni e mali, 'n cera pari. What's wrong? Your looks betray your thoughts.

But the sha'iri ignored the snake prince.

I thought you were a saint, she protested.

I will only remain one if I do things. Effect small miracles on a daily basis, especially on 19th March. Not all saints are close to God. Look at Mastru Paulu.

The snake broke into a strange, nasal song.

I met a man the other day

Said his name was Master Paul

I asked this man, 'What do you do?'

He told me he knew all about the Fall

I said to him, 'Who are you, Master Paul?'

He replied,

'Once I was a king but now I am traveller, nothing more'

The saint sighed, wearily. Once, I, too used to sing in sunnari that were both excellent and popular like those of the pueti who dreamed an entire language into being. But now, they expect it, you know. Idiot songs! All the penitenti, the sinners, the politicians, the Mafiosi. Deafening voices, fingers clawing at my body, tearing off my clothes, fast, furious and chaste nuns using me as a dildo, and the others wanting really to eat me as daily they eat...

Then it was Scursini's turn to reminisce.

With your lost songs, your pastorelle and constrati, you summoned me from a thousand years of a certain kind of life, just as they drew Dante Alighieri up from the meaningless mud. But you cannot free me from this form.

What? You mean, you're not a snake? the sha'iri asked.

I... was not always so.

The snake began to slither towards the opened windows.

And until someone finds a way of writing and playing the Lost Maqam of the Kaaba, of the Casteddu Nivuru, of the Black Castle, I will remain trapped in this despicable, slithering body!

Because of his physiognomy, the snake was unable to cry, but the intense melancholy of his voice brought the sha'iri almost to tears.

Perhaps, good Principe, I will find it, she ventured. Ah! A slave, the snake moaned, a slave has even her language stolen from her! How can such a person find a lost tongue, if she cannot anchor her own?

Perhaps, snake-tongue, what you say is true. But wait a moment, I feel a thought coming down, or perhaps up, from the mirror of your lake.

Guivanni scrivi

Cu manu suttili

Modu di donna

Ca mi fa muriri 1

Carnations! Scursini moaned. I smell carnations!

Pink carnations, the saint corrected him, then, turning to the sha'iri, he said,

He's been in love for nine hundred-and-thirty-six years. The problem is, he fell in love with a maga, a beautiful sorceress. He discovered that she had cast a spell on him and so he cut off her head and put it in a zimmili of raffia, which he nailed above her window, deep in the Nebrodi Forest, but the head was irrepressible and continued to cast spells and to sing pizzica and so he has been caught up in her spider-dance ever since. Hence...

And at this point the diminutive Saint Joseph moved his hands in the shape of a snake.

Hence, he has remained trapped in the body of a scursunazzu.

How dare you! shouted the snake. Why does he insult me?

Or perhaps, a serpini.

Look at me, you oaf! The prince turned again to the Poet. I am not little. Am I?

No, she said, you are definitely not little.

Very well, concurred Giuseppinu, let us say then that you are a scursini and be done with it.

Be done with it then, replied the snake.

O sha'iri from al Mashriq, if you can sing the Hidden Maqam, then perhaps you can also find this magara's caput and somehow destroy it, and if you do this, then I will give you a little piece of land to call your own.

Latifondo! hissed the sha'iri.

Joseph the Just looked askance at the Prince, who seemed a little ashamed.

Well, perhaps a big swathe of land.

The servant bowed before the saint and said,

I am your servant, O Good Giuseppinu. I will be obedient to your will and...

She turned to Prince Scursini and bowed also before his serpentine form.

I kiss your hands, good prince...

There was an awkward pause. She went on.

I pray that I shall be able to find the house of the mavara and that I shall be able to silence the evil skull forever and thereby redeem you from this scaly existence. And thus, through this journey, she went on, again addressing Zu Giuseppe, shall I hope to gain the experience to light another of the lamps of the Way. But first...

The sha'iri lifted her dusty, bare foot and displayed the sole to the saint.

... I will need a good, strong pair of shoes in which to undertake my duties as servant, as traveller. I know that my Master Giuseppe is a very clever shoemaker, the cleverest in the world.

The saint smiled and raised his right hand and immediately a slave brought in a basket, carving knife, shoe tree, awl and a long sword and within minutes, a pair of iron shoes appeared on the sha'iri's feet. Then the saint offered the sha'iri a goblet made from apricot wood and she saw that in the goblet there was a grainy, sand-coloured liquid that smelled of barley. She drank, leaving not even a drop in the receptacle and then, singing the words of *Chiovu Abballati* mixed with the tune of a song she had heard while on the ship, she set off on her journey.

*Abballati, abballati, fimmini schetti e maritati,
E s'un abballati bonu, nun vi cantu e nun vi sonu*

In these shoes, the Servant journeyed slowly across the Island of Siqilliya, telling tales as she went, always keeping an ear open for possible news of the maga. From the Lake of Riccardo, she walked westwards across the hills towards the city of Marsa Ali and on her journey she took the poetic name of Sorfarina although in some places she was better known as Zafarana. And Sorfarina was the slave of love. She would stop in the middle of nowhere and begin singing her tales in the appropriate maqam and as the goatherds and stone-breakers heard the

sounds of her oud falling like fresh rainwater upon the parched land and her powerful, full-throated, if quarter-toned, voice echoing across the olive groves, they would follow these sounds and would find Sorfarina in her iron shoes sitting beneath a date palm or else a carob tree. And they would see that her feet and ankles were bleeding from the terrible friction of the iron on her soft skin and they would take pity on her and bring her rose-water and chestnut wine and frutta di martorana. And the people of the empty places would gather in huddles around her to listen to the latest episode of the honey-and-sukkar mannequin of Messina or the haunting and salty adventures of the ghosts of Trapani, and everywhere she went she was followed by a beautiful green bird who would accompany her song. But when she told them her own story, they danced the dance of the nail as though it was harvest-time and they clapped with joy, for they realised that her penance had been ordered by Uncle Joe himself and that even though his penances were not as severe as those of Santu Paulu, the rewards of fulfilling the terms of the penance would be likely to be far greater. Not all saints are close to God.

In time, the servant, Sorfarina walked from Marsala, on the far west cost of Sicilia all the way to Siracusa and from Messina by the siren straits to Sciacca on the gentle sea of Ifriqiya. She visited the Church of the Raven and the Pillars of the Jinns, she climbed the slopes of the Jabal-an-Nar and watched as the fire mountain discharged from its summit, whole blocks of stone. But nowhere she went had anyone heard of the maga, far less, a witch with her head in a basket. Having played all the maqamat of which she knew, including the Hidden Maqam (one of many hidden maqamat) that had conjured into being, both Prince Scursini and San Giuseppinu, having danced with all the pupi di cena, the paladins, peasant-girls and ballerinas, yet with not even a whisper of the whereabouts, or even the existence, of the witch, Sorfarina began to despair. She would end every tale with the words,

Me and me, we just sit here and gaze at each other, and our day is spent.

or

And then they all lived happily and content, but we were left without a cent.

And even if there were no people left listening to her morose finale, the trees and stones would seem to her to nod and sing their assent, so that it was as though the melancholy which afflicted her arose from the land itself, from its aquifers and lava-flows, its fire and sulphur buried deep in black rock.

In a place known as, San Japicu, amidst a land of smoking ovens, atop a mountain of yellow fire she found the most desolate place in Siqilliya and there she laid down her oud, sat on a black stone the size of an elephant and began loudly to weep. Her feet were so ragged from the constant contact with the rusty metal of her shoes that her blood had mingled with the rust and now her legs up to her knees had turned to iron. She knew that if she did not find and destroy the witch soon, her whole body would become metal and that one morning she would rise and walk and then freeze like a statue, caught in mid-stride. She wept for three days and three nights and yet still her tears were not exhausted though with all her wandering she herself had grown so thin and dry that passers-by remarked that Zafarana had become little more than skin, bone and voice and that she more closely resembled an old drum than a woman. Some goatherds wondered aloud whether in fact the penance she had been set had been a trick pulled by Old Mastru Paulu, who travelled deserted country lanes at night accompanied by a single black dog and who sometimes impersonated monks, hermits and even saints. They carried all manner of gifts up the mountain to try and assuage her grief, but in vain. They presented her with great golden platters of castrated goats' meat and pearl

goblets of Ascension Night sea-water and they set before her wasted visage, geometrically perfect pyramids of sweet scéusa. They pulled the best flax from the ground and mixed it with silk from Xinkiang worms and they spun the threads into golden blankets which they laid at her bleeding feet, yet she acknowledged neither blankets nor benefactors and these beauteous gifts soon were torn to bits by a forest of red spiders. They descended into the very deepest of wells, cisterns which had been dug by artisans from Qurtuba and which were miraculously connected with the holy springs of Medina, and they hauled up enormous buckets of zamzam water which they decanted into the skulls of singing goats and which they tendered thus to her parched lips, yet even at the risk of blasphemy, she would not drink and instead, the water was sipped by an eel. They brought her the little red meat they had, yet even at the risk of spurning their hospitality she refused to eat and the meat was taken by an eagle. In time, even the most patient of her followers left her, muttering about madness and ingratitude. And still, she continued to weep and her oud remained silent by her side. She wept so much, that the iron boots rusted all the way up to her chin and only her head remained human.

At dawn on the fortieth day of her great lament, even the stone beneath her felt the depth of her wild sadness and burst into a million fragments. The volcano was erupting and rock was turning to hot, red liquid which cascaded down the mountainsides faster than a galloping horse. Yet as Zafarana raised her head to begin the day's wailing, she spotted, running along on top of the lava-flow, a white horse with no rider. As the horse drew near, she saw that its hooves and body were unscathed by the plumes of burning smoke and flame which leapt from the rock and that its mouth was open, its saliva streaming across the white skin of its jaw and that the horse was singing a pizzica in the Lydian mode with Arabic ornamentation. The horse's voice was possessed of a powerful rhythm and the animal seemed able to sustain notes beyond human capacity and as it galloped towards her, it used its hooves as tamburelli.

*I Cavaddra are the best dancers
With each hoof, they carry beauty
The sound of four hooves on the hard earth
Reminds me of death knocking joy like bolts into the Saracen door*

*I served under all the noble crests of Siqillia, I travelled far and wide
Alimusa, Al-fahd, d'Alì, Arif
I marched under the moon with St Anthony's cavalieri
With black stones on my back, I climbed the flaming mountain of the Simurgh*

*At night, I sang of the broken ones
And of the blooded furrows in each field
The limoni lunarie, which, cut, drip with golden blood
The women who are ghosts, shadows along the wall*

*When I sing, I offer you sweet pears
Opened by the scimitar of my voice
My breath that sucks death from the mouths of martyrs
Sons and daughters of Alì, the scream of dust fountains*

*Sweet Yossiph, purveyor of dreams, you have deserted
This grutta that is called, fondly, Siqilliya
The place where the oil lamp flickers, always, and then*

Beautifully, like your face, sinks into a dark sleep

As the zabbàri roll stupidly on through the smoke of jasmine

Like constellations lost in the sky

With no horse to guide them

The bird-sellers wander into the belly of the Black Madonna

I am Iuxà, also known as Giufà, also known as Guhâ, also known as Riccardo of Lucera and I have come to take you to the river of two heads. It is bad luck to engage in a tarantella alone, so you must come with me. But first, you must pretend that you are clad all in black and whisper buon giorno to the dead. Then they will not see you.

Another Riccardo? Two heads? Tarantella? Black? Buon giorno?

Quannu amuri è capitanu, la muntagna pari chianu. Jump on my back. Then we will be two heads. When there's love, mountains seem like plains. Quick, there is not much time!

Raising herself with some difficulty (so weak had she grown from forty days of fasting and so heavy with iron), the Servant scrambled up onto the horse's back and no sooner had she done this, than they were off. The Servant held onto the end of Giufà's mane and rested her head on his neck and with the rhythm of his hooves and the melody of his sinews and inhaling the sweet sweat of the white horse, she fell asleep. Just before she closed her eyes, however, she glanced around at the volcano and saw that the place where she had been lying, just a few moments earlier, now had been consumed in a raging fire and that the black rock which had wept hot tears at her plight had turned to sulphur, which gave off foul, yellow smoke. For a moment, as it rose into the sky, Sorfarina thought she saw the smoke gather into the form of an old man wearing the cloak of a wanderer, but when she thought about this later, she wasn't sure whether or not by that time she had already fallen asleep.

Her whole body was iron, yet her mind remained human and she dreamed that she was climbing down a spiral staircase inside a huge tower which had no windows but only an opening at the top. Growing up the inside of the tower were thousands of white flowers, each flower bearing either three or else four petals. The staircase went on and on and gradually she seemed to go down into the earth until the light that came from the top of the tower had shrunk to the size of a single white grape seed. When she looked down again, she realised that she was standing on the floor at the bottom of the tower and that before her was a great, iron door, carved with tall, looping Thuluth letters in Trapanese Arabic: *Garufi: Arif. The cruel one, the one who knows* and the inscription was signed, 'Al-Atrabanishi'. She raised her right hand, the Saracen door melted and she passed through the opening. She entered a chamber thronged with priests dressed in long, white robes. The priests were singing a disharmonic song, which she recognised as a funeral song while from far above, there came the doleful sound of the death bells. Zafarana moved among the priests, who seemed oblivious to her presence. At the centre of the room lay a coffin and in the coffin was a man with the most beautiful face she had ever seen or imagined. His eyes were closed and wrapped tightly around his neck was a bright green snake. The caid was standing at the dead man's head and in his right hand he held a black book, in his left, a white book, both of which bore covers cut from ash wood. Behind the bishop there grew a date tree with a rough, whorled zuccu, on one side of which the dates were white and on the other, black. Then Sorfarina saw that they were in the middle of a forest and that at the top of the date tree there perched a raven. When she looked back down into the coffin, the man had disappeared and in his place was a set of bagpipes. The High Priest opened his mouth, but his voice was that of the horse.

This young man was a poet who fell in love with a blonde of the Banu al-Asfar. Unfortunately, he died before his time and was buried in the sand on the beach at Agrigento. A shepherd's dog found him, and the shepherd dug him out and let his body dry in the sun. From his skin and bones, we made this set of bagpipes. Yet his soul is restless and will not leave the pipes. And still, he sings to his beloved, she of the white dress and the red veil. They have become his place of refuge, his *ma fia*. *Guhâ* must play the pipes by the River of Two Heads and you, *Zafarana* must dance the tarantella with the young man's spirit. But first, a spider!

The *caid*, who, *Sorfarina* now saw, was a woman, rolled the sleeve of her robe up above her elbow, took out a knife and with a single, expert thrust, slit the underside of her own wrist. She let the black *libbru* fall open and held her bleeding arm over its opened pages. *Zafarana* saw that although the pages seemed blank, as soon as the bishop's blood dripped onto the paper, first, letters, and then words, appeared until the whole was filled with wondrous scripts that resembled the trail left by a black wolf spider. And then the curves and dashes, the vowels and consonants, the musical notation marks, began to dance over the book and the form they assumed was that of the spider. The spider crawled towards *Sorfarina* and when it had reached the edge of the black *libbru*, it leapt off and landed on her chest. She did not dare breathe. It was the size of her fist. Millimetre-by-millimetre, advancing, one leg at a time, across her wheaten skin, the spider reached her neck. Her mouth closed and her neck strained upwards as, from its first to its eighth leg, the spider spanned the full length of her collarbone. Then it smiled at her, lowered its octagonal black head and bit. Just before she sank into unconsciousness, *Zafarana* saw that the title of the book was *Il Canzoniere: The Song of Ibn al-Qatta*.

She woke up with the sensation of water splashing over her body. The horse and she were on a ford and were crossing a river, broader than any the *Servant* had ever seen. As it had flowed straight from the high places of the *Madonie Mountains*, the water was cold and as they moved slowly towards the middle of the *guida*, the water became so deep that at times they were almost submerged, so that only their heads were visible above the water. Halfway across, the *wadi* turned red. *Giufà* said to her,

This is not the River of Two Heads. How can it be? I do not see two heads anywhere! But the *Servant* pulled on his reins and shouted through the foam and spray,

Iuxà! Giufà! Guhâ! Can you not see? One half of this great *guidda* flows with water, the other half, with blood. Both are of the land, but they arise from different heads. And here are we, travelling through the water, and only our two heads remain above the world of fishes and water spirits. And can you not feel that as we cross the river, my body is turning again to flesh and that from being an iron statue, I am becoming again a woman?

Giufà replied,

If I do not see two heads, I will not stop, fancy words or no fancy words. Words mean, only what they say they mean. Words cannot mean more than one thing at a time. Otherwise, we would all be mad!

Then the *guida* murmured to *Sorfarina*,

Beware! If even a drop of my water enters your body, you will turn into a *scorzone*. For the *Witch* has cast this spell upon me. And the *Witch* sits upon my two heads.

And *Zafarana* yelled,

Giufà! Carry me up the *White Mountain* to the source of the river!

And so *Giufà* turned and began to gallop upstream and just as earlier he had walked upon the surface of the lava and had not been burned, so now, remaining quite dry, he ascended over the swelling mountain torrent that led to the *wadi's* source.

After four days' travel through lands scattered with olive nets, poppy plantations and orange-groves, high in the mountains they reached the stream which was the source of the great river, and Sorfarina saw that even though now it was merely a tiny rivulet springing forth from between two black rocks, it was still divided into two – half-water and half-blood. The horse tapped his right hoof on one of the rocks and at once, it rolled aside. Then he tapped his left hoof on the other rock and it, too moved away. Lying before them was a well with no bucket.

Down we go, cousin! yelled Giufà, and again the Servant had no choice but to cling onto his mane and lower her head onto his strong neck.

They galloped down the well for what seemed like hours but may have been only a few minutes and as they passed, the waters parted and then closed again after them so that not even a drop touched her skin and when they reached the bottom, there was neither water nor mud, but simply a Saracen door that had been cut in wood and silver and set in a sharply-pointed archway. The wooden panels had been carved with scenes from various tales and the Servant saw that one of the panels was blank. The door was open and beyond was a garden filled with the fruits and flowers of every season and through whose trees and bushes - holm-oak, pine, mulberry – there floated the strains of an ancient music. And as they followed the music, Zafarana realised that it was actually the sound of someone singing and that it was the voice of the Mother of the High Mountain and that she was grieving for her son who had been turned by the Witch into a bagpipe. At length, they came to a grutta whose entrance was covered with thorns and as they peered through the opening, they saw, inside the cave, a stone shaped like a man. Then the stone spoke.

I am Crivòliu and I was born in the town of Enna of a heinous sin, a terrible coupling between brother and sister. My penance is to sit here in this grutta, partaking of neither food nor drink, until released by the Saint of the Beauteous Face. And as they looked, they saw that Crivòliu had spent so long kneeling that his knees had grown roots and he had become attached to the ground. His eyebrows had turned to moss and his beard had grown till it trailed along the floor and up the walls. Just then, a white bird flew down and landed on his head and he was turned into a saint and immediately ascended to heaven in the body of the bird. Then a fire erupted in the cave and all the moss and beard hair was quite burned away. Sorfarina saw that all that was left of the saadhu was a warm, red heart. She reached into the grutta, lifted up the heart and found that it had the aroma of the Seraphiel. She brought it to her lips and ate it. The heart burned inside her and then she had a vision of San Giuseppuzzu in which the saint spoke to her in her own voice, thus:

“We shall see each other again when the dead man speaks with the living.”

And then the saint vanished and Sorfarina found herself holding an oud in her arms, cradled as though it were a baby and she also saw that the bird had dropped a single, white feather and she picked up the feather, turned the oud around and using the feather as a plectrum, began to play, slowly at first but then faster and after a while, a voice came from far away, from the depths of the forest. The voice was the most beautiful she had ever heard and mounting on his back, she commanded Giufà to follow while she continued to play the maqam sabah, which was the maqam of melancholy and pain.

At length, within a glade formed by a copse of holm-oaks and filled with dancing fire-flies, Zafarana saw a large raffia basket suspended from a branch. She stood on Guhâ's back and she saw that in the basket was the double-head of a Witch. One head was unimaginably ugly, so that even as she looked upon it, the Slave felt as though she would vomit with such force that she would lose her innards, while the other was possessed of a terrible, Luciferine beauty which made the world seem not merely dull but utterly devoid of hope and which made her

swoon so that she almost fell off her horse's back. The Witch was singing at the top of her voice through both of her mouths at once and even though Zafarana stopped plucking the strings of the oud, it seemed that the Witch could not stop singing. The dravu was a cuntastorie. Sorfarina gathered the fire-flies in her hand and lit the basket and yet even as they burned, the heads continued to sing their strange duet.

... Cui fa carteddi, nni fa lèidi e nni fa beddi...

Who makes baskets, some ugly and some beautiful, Zafarana repeated.

But Giufà whispered to Sorfarina,

A cursa longa lu bon cavaddu pari. Remember, O gentle Schiavu, in a long race the good horse wins. Believe only a little of what you see and nothing that you hear.

And with that, the Slave tightened her grip on the stallion's mane and gathered her wits about her and thus did she resist the tyrannies of both beauty and its opposite. When silence at last had fallen, Zafarana gathered up the ashes, crushed some amber from a nearby stone, mixed the ashes with the amber dust and placed the resultant mixture in a pouch which she tied around her waist. When Guifà looked around, he saw that the forest was in the Nebrodi Mountains, a region which he knew very well and so he galloped back west towards his own palazzu. They crossed the guidda, which now had reverted to being wholly clear water. And as they crossed the river, its waves parted as had those in the well and from this wall of water which bore such stillness it appeared to Sorfarina like a glass mirror, there now emerged the face of a woman with long, walnut-brown hair and the woman spoke to her:

I am Rosalia, daughter of the Lord of Roses, cousin of the 'alamat Rujari, and it was the dust of my heart that you took into your body and that now you carry wrapped around your belly, as had Crivòliu before you. Henceforth, no matter where you go, like the *Ragionamenti* of Aretino, you will carry me in your soul. For I am older than any church and I appear in many guises. I make baskets, some ugly and some beautiful. Then Rosalia began to sing and her words formed into a sunnari:

*For seven hundred years have I slept in this well
In the darkness of temptation has my soul turned to bone
Through God's love and this little song, at last all is well
Though never will I return to flesh and blood and bone
Such is the turning path of the beatified through water and well
You have freed me from the witch, ragged wing and dry bone
Time runs along a different stream, madly it doth pool and well
O woman and horse, pray thou to San Giuseppe, relic, pupa and bone*

*Only in dream can we all exist
The slave turn to master, the priest, to juggler!
This mortal shell is but a cist
Know this, and rise, else sink into the Devil's parlour*

With the sonnet echoing in their ears, they set their course for home. Or at least, for the home of Signor Riccardo di Lucera. The Goat and the Snake were overjoyed at their safe return and they greeted Guifà as an old friend. The saint gave her an ancient skull, lined with gold and instructed Sorfarina to mix the fata's ashes in Mamertine wine and when she had done this to the satisfaction of both saint and prince, in turn they each drank of the wine. Then they ordered her to dance but she told them that she did not know how and so they brought a large,

red wolf spider, dipped it in the dregs of the wine, set it upon the marble floor and told her to follow its movements.

The spider took three gallop steps to its right, then slid one of its feet forwards and then repeated this sequence, thrice. The same movement was undertaken by each of the spider's eight feet. Then it seemed that the spider was waiting for her to be its partner and so she obliged and they began to undertake *ajetté*, *fouetté*, *temps levé*, *chasse* and *échappé* steps and then to gallop, leap and spin around each other, she and the black spider glissading, turning to left and right and tapping out, in tandem with each of the spider's legs, the entire range of the compass, though this was somewhat tiring for the Slave since she had only two feet. Yet still, she danced faster than she had ever danced, so that she and the *carantola* appeared to Prince Scursini and Saint Joseph as a blur of arms, legs and reddening skin, a haze that shone like bronze so that in its sheen they were able at last to see their own beauty. And since, as the old *sha'ir* of Ibla said, life and beauty, together from a looking-glass through which no-one can pass, then it follows that all lovers are *tarantata*, all lovers are *assassini fanatici*.

As she watched, Shahzada Scursini shed his last skin and turned back into a handsome prince with long, silken, black hair that reached to his waist, owner of a hundred pink *palazzi* across the land from San Giuseppe ru Casteddu Nivuru all the way to Siracusa. A moment later, from the flank of the white horse emerged Guifà, otherwise known as Don Riccardo of Lucera, the Keeper of the Golden Books of Puglia, Calabria, Sicilia and Salento, who once again became their host. The goat, once and finally, became Saint Joseph, patron saint of lost causes. The two men, now freed, joined in the whirling dance and the prince stretched the discarded snakeskin over the wooden frame of the saint's chair to form a giant, gleaming *tamburello* which the saint began to beat with a growing frenzy. The *tamburello* spoke only in Arabic of the Thuluth style, loud, graceful, resonant words that were almost sung, the frequency of each enunciation depending on which part of the drum was being struck. When at length, exhausted and semi-conscious, Zafarana and her companions fell to the floor, they did not notice that the spider had disappeared.

When the four of them awoke, it was morning. The men thanked the Servant profusely and promptly gave Sorfarina her freedom along with a piece of snake skin, a single goat's horn, a small *libbru* written in Naskh script and a statuette, carved from black, volcanic stone, of San Giuseppe, and carrying all of these in a voluminous leather bag strapped to her back, once again, Zafarana resumed her journey, this time on foot. No sooner had she left the safety of Don Riccardo's estates, however, than she was captured by a group of *la stessa cosa* from Salemi who lived in an enormous palace of sacred thorns set on cliff overlooking a sand quarry and there she was turned by degrees into a Qurlayuni dancing girl and juggler and as the books now were well and truly open, into the flamboyant, psychedelic mistress of the local lemon-grove Beat Head, otherwise known as 'The Strangler'. He and his band of friends were descended from black and white wolves and they dwelt amidst choreic fireflies in the densest areas of woodland which were hidden behind the dark shadow cast by a fearsome rock. Wherever The Strangler went, he would leave behind blind singers and eyes on plates. The Slave's speciality was *kykeon*, the liquid of trance which was brewed from the fields of swaying barley which at that time, before the jackals had taken over, covered the island of Siqilliya from coast to coast. With her *khamriyyat* she was a truly fanatical assassin of love. Because, as is known to village idiots, the world over, even blood has a song. Or at least, that was her cover.

RIDDLE I

*On the 24th day of the fourth month in the year 819,
Through doors I slipped
Voiceless
Among crowds of bone beggars
I hissed seed of fig into mouth of goatskin stone.*

*In sahn of Ishq, did I return
Singing
Across gazelle and fig tree and forge
And now, I am everywhere.*

*What am I?
Huu*

*1: Giuseppe walks to the writing stand
and writes with a fine, exquisite hand
He's got a woman's style and way
and makes me lovesick the entire day.*