



I

Analyzing and Translating
The Blind Owl
1974 – 2020

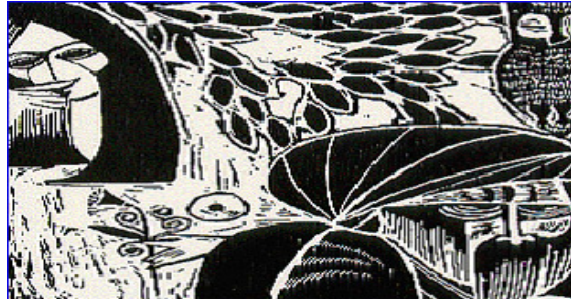
II

A Literal Translation
of
The Blind Owl
1974

by Iraj Bashiri
The University of Minnesota

Bashiri Working Papers on Central Asia and Iran

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Analyzing and Translating *The Blind Owl: 1964-2020*

By
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I. Analysis of *The Blind Owl*

Introduction

My acquaintance with *The Blind Owl* happened in 1964 when I met Bahram Daneshpour at the Liverpool library. He talked about Hedayat's book, which I knew about but had not yet read. In Iran, families would not allow reading *Buf-e Kur* (the blind owl) because some young people had committed suicide after reading it. I borrowed D. P. Costello's 1957 translation from the library.¹ It was a difficult read, not so much the translation, but the *novella* itself. Years passed. In 1972, I became a visiting Assistant Professor at the University of Minnesota. One of my assignments was to teach Persian fiction. In order to offer a viable course, I did not have any option but to include the work of the preeminent writer of Iran, Sadeq Hedayat, in the syllabus and, of course, to read the *novella* in its original language and present an analysis of it.

On Analyzing *The Blind Owl*

When reading *Buf-e Kur* in Persian for the first time, here and there, I encountered the phrase *mar-e nag* (*nag-serpent*). As far as I could recall in Costello's translation there was not any mention of a *nag-serpent*. He used "cobra" instead. Perhaps he assumed that his English readers did not need the exact word to understand the story, which is a curious assumption given the involvement of the English in the Indian subcontinent.

In any event, as is well known, the *nag-serpent* has a special place in Buddhist literature. Since the dungeon scene in the middle of the story in *The Blind Owl* takes place in India, I thought it would be worthwhile to look into the roles played by the serpent, the Bugam Dasi temple dancer, in particular, and Indian motifs, in general.

¹ Costello, D. P., *Buf-e Kur* (the blind owl), London: Calder Press, 1957.

In order to seek help from other scholars in the field of Iranian studies who were interested in *The Blind Owl*, especially to assist those who were not familiar with the Persian text of it, I presented a literal translation along with my initial reaction to the story. At the time, the *novella* was regarded as an impossible enigma to describe. I thought an understanding of the Indian aspect of the *novella* would provide a path to understanding the causes that create the obscurity.

Colleagues at The University of Texas at Austin reacted to the literal translation and the analysis by writing *Hedayat's 'The Blind Owl' Forty Years After*, which attacked the translation, especially my addition of subsection titles to the text to guide the analysis. There was no sign of cooperation, however.² Studying the Buddhist and Hindu texts increasingly convinced me that understanding the role of the *nag*-serpent was crucial to understanding the structure of the *novella*. Furthermore, application of structural analysis, I thought, would not only facilitate understanding *The Blind Owl*, but also some of the poetic texts that I had included in a different course on Persian poetry. The *Sufi* poetry of Hafiz, for instance.³

Talking about structural analysis and the *ghazals* of Hafiz, something interesting comes to mind. When I applied structural analysis to the *Sufi ghazals*, a colleague characterized the application this way. Bashiri creates a structure of his own and forces the literary piece into that structure. Then he explains how the author of the piece has included the structure that he (Bashiri) had created in his literary piece. That would be true if Bashiri had the ability to create the specific stations and states of *Sufi* thought and place them in a particular manner in the minds of Hafiz or Jami to include in their “Shirazi Turk” and “Perfect Man,” respectively.⁴ Some colleagues have referred to structural analysis as “pseudo scholarship.” That, too, is an opinion that I respect.

The same discussion applies to present-day reaction to the use of ancient Indian stories and Buddhist rituals as subtext in *The Blind Owl*. Once the readers, become familiar with the intricacies of Indian culture, especially with the areas on which Hedayat focuses, they will find that the rituals are not as complex as they appear at first sight. They also discover that Hedayat’s use of those rituals is both calculated and systematic. More importantly, it would look less likely that Bashiri had created them and put them in Hedayat’s mind to further his own hypotheses.

On Translating *The Blind Owl*

I am not a translator in the true sense of the word but, whenever my work has required, I have provided translations from Persian and Tajiki languages into

² Hillmann, Michael C. (ed.), *Hedayat's 'The Blind Owl' Forty Years After*, University of Texas at Austin, 1978.

³ Cf., Bashiri, "Hafiz' Shirazi Turk: A Structuralist's Point of View," *The Muslim World*, Part I, LXIX, No. 3, 1979, pp. 1788-197; Part II, LXIX, No. 4, 1979, pp. 248-268.

⁴ See Bashiri, 'Abd al-Rahman Jami's Perfect Man, https://www.academia.edu/10968331/Abd_al-Rahman_Jamis_Perfect_Man



English. These contributions include translations of poetry, fiction, and historical documents. In recent years, I have been asked repeatedly about the stages that my study of *The Blind Owl* has gone through, especially with regard to the translation of the *novella*. These materials are to be used as data only for evaluation purposes. *Hedayat's Ivory Tower: Structural Analysis of The Blind Owl*, of which the literal translation that is presented below is the third chapter, has been out of print for many years. Therefore, to help those researchers with their studies, I am posting my original 1974 literal translation. After all, that was the intent for which the literal translation was created in the first place.

While on the subject of translation of complex texts, be it a *Sufi ghazal* or a short story like Hedayat's "*Se Qatreh Khun*" (three drops of blood), I would like to mention a few significant points.⁵ It is important for the translator to stay as close to the author's text as possible and, where required, add notes to help the reader navigate the culture. For instance, without access to the actual words "*mar-e nag*," in *Buf-e Kur*, I would never have had reason to read and analyze *The Buddha-Karita* of Asvaghosha⁶ or *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.⁷ Nevertheless, those words led me to study those texts among others and evaluate their contents carefully; well enough, I should add, to discover how Hedayat could have used them as a subtext for his story.⁸

The translator must pay close attention to the thought processes of the author. That is not possible if the storyline that the author follows is not clear enough in the mind of the translator to replicate it. In the case of *The Blind Owl*, the signposts in the Tibetan materials led me to understand the significance of winning and losing in the reincarnation battle that a Buddhist experiences in purgatory. It showed how precisely the activities of the individual on the earth-plane are reflected as his or her deeds in the afterlife. In fact, without access to Hedayat's thought processes, I would not know that the setting of the first part of the *novella* is the Buddhist purgatory (see below). The Tibetan materials also made me realize that Hedayat's protagonist that I had assumed all along to be a Muslim or a Zoroastrian was undergoing an actual Buddhist death ritual.

More importantly, in *The Blind Owl*, Hedayat confronts us with a number of strange characters in unfamiliar settings in a bizarre atmosphere. He manipulates time sequences and juxtaposes scenes. All these can create confusion in the mind of the translator. Confusion that must be obviated before a final translation is made. Again, the Tibetan materials solved that problem for me. For instance, in the Tibetan materials, the moment when, in purgatory, the soul realizes that his quest for salvation has failed and that he will be reborn, is described in great detail and the intensity of the anxiety that the soul undergoes is

⁵ For an analysis of Hedayat's short stories, especially "Three Drops of Blood," see Bashiri, *The Fiction of Sadeq Hedayat*, Mazda Publishers, Lexington, KY, 1984, pp. 61-105.

⁶ <https://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/sbe49/sbe4902.htm>

⁷ Evans-Wentz, W.Y. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, Causeway Books, 1973.

⁸ See Bashiri, "Buddhist Subtext,"

["https://www.academia.edu/30937868/The_Buddhist_Subtext_of_Sadeq_Hedayats_Blind_Owl"](https://www.academia.edu/30937868/The_Buddhist_Subtext_of_Sadeq_Hedayats_Blind_Owl)



fully documented. To his credit, Hedayat reflects the same intensity when his protagonist comes to the same realization. It is the translator's task, therefore, to convey to the reader, through selection of appropriate definitions a) that the protagonist is unhappy to have allowed himself to be attracted to the seductive eyes of the ethereal being; b) that he has failed to bring down the wine-flask in time causing his soul to carry the wrong color of lilies to the old man across the brook from her; and c) that he is devastated because he is doomed to rebirth. It is of course essential that the ideas be conveyed without any overt discussion of the subtext. In fact, it is crucial that, unless the translation is for analytical purposes, the translator safeguard the integrity of the author's use of subtext and not divulge the subtext beyond what the author allows.

In sum, Hedayat advisedly used the word "nag-serpent," as opposed to *mar-e kobra* (cobra-serpent), or simply "cobra," to alert his reader that there were subtle levels to his *novella* that were masked from the eyes of the casual reader. Those lead words created a totally different interpretation of Hedayat's *Blind Owl* in my mind than I had envisaged many years before in Liverpool after reading Costello's translation.

Neither are those the only words. Consider Costello's translation of *lakkateh* as bitch. Bitch is a belligerent woman, especially one who is quarrelsome when it comes to defending her rights. Some degree of sexual misconduct might also be involved. In Persian, such a woman is referred to as a "jendeh." *Lakkateh*, on the other hand, which is the same as *fahesheh*, is a woman who sleeps with any man for pay. More importantly, unlike the *jendeh*, she is not mindful of her honor either at the family or the community level. In the subtext of the *novella*, too, the counterpart of the wife is Mara or desire. Mara openly lures individuals off their path in the same way that a *lakkateh* does. The more acceptable translation, therefore, is "whore" as opposed to "bitch."

The translator should not confuse structural analysis with either analogy or interpretation. Structural analysis is a device for the researcher to discover the covert make up of a story or a poem. Its ultimate goal is to reveal those thought processes of the author that are not overtly stated, but which, through signposts, play a significant role in distinguishing levels other than the ordinary. Without such a device, a *Sufi* understanding of "The Shirazi Turk" *ghazal* of Shams al-Din Hafiz, "The Perfect Man" of Abd al-Rahman Jami, or a critical understanding of "The Three Drops of Blood" of Sadeq Hedayat and his *Blind Owl* would be impossible. The significance of the application of structural analysis to complex texts also lies in the fact that it assists the translator to choose appropriate definitions for words and phrases from among a spectrum of semantic connotations presented for the same word. In the long run, a correct use of appropriate semantic connotations helps the reader to place the work within the author's desired social and cultural category. In the case of *The Blind Owl*, it reveals Hedayat's zeal in educating his contemporaries by making them understand the distinction between "making a judgment" and "making an informed judgment."



Needless to say, the researcher's rendition of events in the text, achieved through the use of subtext, might appear different from a casual reading or, indeed, a literary interpretation of the text. When compared, however, it becomes clear that the explanation presented through the use of subtext does not have any of the obscurities that the casual reading of the text presents. It also shows that the literary analyst would rather allow the text to keep some of those obscurities. After all, that is what helps the text to retain some of its thrill.

Of course, not all stories need a structural analysis. Only complex stories do. *The Blind Owl* is one such story, and the person who becomes involved in navigating its complexity must commit himself/herself to becoming familiar with Hedayat's learning, knowledge, wisdom, craft, and thought processes.

Finally, a lot of comparisons have been made between the Costello and Bashiri translations of *Buf-e Kur*. Before getting into that, a word about Costello. Desmond Patrick "Paddy" Costello was born in New Zealand in 1912. He was educated at Auckland Grammar School. He also attended Auckland University College of the University of New Zealand and the Trinity College of Cambridge University. He was a linguist, a soldier, a professor, and a diplomat-cum alleged KGB agent. He was fluent in French, German, Italian, Spanish and Greek. To that he added Gaelic, Russian, and Persian at a later time. Costello died in 1964.

Returning to the comparison, the objective of the comparison has been to determine which translation is better. A more logical approach to the question, however, should be which translator more clearly conveys the depth of the author's knowledge, his foresight and aspirations, and most importantly, his message. And which translator allows the culture of the language being translated to blend into the culture into which the text is translated. This latter concern brings two other related factors into play. Is the translator intimately familiar with the languages and cultures at work on both sides of the translation effort? If, for example, he/she is translating a complex text from English into Persian, is he/she fully familiar with the English language, literature, and culture? Similarly, is he/she fully familiar with the Iranian languages, literatures, and cultures? If the author uses materials or images borrowed from other cultures, is the translator familiar with the necessary background information about those materials? If the answer to any part, or parts, of those questions is in the negative, then the translation under consideration is lacking in particulars by that much.

Let me also add a word about the importance of the availability of the translation of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* to Hedayat while he was working on *Buf-e Kur*. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* was translated into French by the Secretary of *Les Amis du Bouddhisme* Madame M. La Fuente. It was published as *Livre des Morts Tibétain* in Paris in 1933. This is four years prior to the publication of Hedayat's *Buf-e Kur* in India. In other words, Hedayat, who knew French very well, could have read the book when it appeared and, in India, could have discussed its contents with *lamas* and others. In either case, the translation of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* into French and/or discussion of its contents were instrumental in the organization and presentation of Hedayat's *Blind Owl* in 1937.



On the Research

After I became acquainted with the original text, the following are the phases that my study of the *novella* underwent. In 1972, after I determined that the Indian motifs in the *novella* should be investigated, I looked at the significance of the *nag*-serpent in the life of the Buddha and, subsequently, the importance of the life of the Buddha to an understanding of the life of the protagonist in *The Blind Owl*. Liberation, individually and collectively, was the message that emerged from the chaos in the text.⁹ Diverse images in the *Buddha-Karita* corresponded with images in *The Blind Owl*, documenting direct involvement of the content of the *Buddha-Karita* in the *novella*. What was not apparent was how Hedayat might have connected those images together in a meaningful manner. While the text of the *novella* read, sounded, and was chaotic on the outside, increasingly, on the inside, it appeared to be organized meticulously and written dexterously. The idea that it was written by a lunatic under the influence of drugs (the idea prevalent at the time) could no longer be supported. A preliminary assessment accompanied by a literal translation was presented in 1974.

As I said, I read the *novella* in order to teach a course on fiction. So, as I developed my understanding of the *novella*, I shared my thoughts and feelings about the *novella* with my students. In one session, when discussing the protagonist's obsession with the ethereal being, I digressed, "Now," I said, "That is what happened to the narrator of *The Blind Owl*. Let me tell you what happened to me as a result of reading *The Blind Owl*. I, too, became obsessed with that same scene, albeit for a totally different reason. I felt that if I were able to find the prototype that Hedayat might have used in writing that scene, I would be able to understand the *novella* and put it aside.

- Well, did he? Did he have a model? Asked an impatient student.

- Now you are wrecking my story, I said smiling, and we all laughed.

"Now," I continued. "If there was a prototype and it was within Hedayat's reach in the 1930s, given the technological advances since then, I was sure I should have no problem finding it. The only difficulty, of course, was that Hedayat was an avid reader, especially in French. As a result, I had to cast a wide net.

"I approached the situation with this thought in mind: It is not important how much a person reads, but it is important what he or she reads. As time went by, I read most of the literary and cultural materials that were available to Hedayat in the 1930s. These included ancient Zoroastrian texts, medieval Islamic materials, even Finno-Ugrian mythology. But I could not find the faintest resemblance between the contents of those works and what I was seeking. I read European and even Native American cultural materials that I felt might be relevant to the scene, but none showed the degree of correlation that could make

⁹ Here, for instance, there is a wealth of information useful to the social analyst interested in Reza Shah's Iran.



them viable bases for further study.

“It is unbelievable to me, looking back at those days after three decades, that I could have been so obsessed with a scene. Every movie I saw, every painting I looked at, every miniature I examined, this scene was in the forefront of my mind. I looked at everything with the notion that it might lead to a clue to the meaning of the scene that the narrator repeatedly painted on the narrow covers of pen-cases. In other words, at that time, anything and everything was a potential contributor to the resolution of my hypothesized prototype of the enigmatic scene.

“My search, I should add, was not totally fruitless. Along the way, I discovered that Hedayat had incorporated concepts, at times even copious passages, from the works of 'Umar Khayyam, Rainer Maria Rilke, Franz Kafka, and the *Buddha-Karita* in *The Blind Owl*. But none of those works, influential as they were for an understanding of Hedayat's eclectic mind, contributed to the final resolution of my dilemma. Rilke's powerful imagery appears in many places in *The Blind Owl*, but none comes even close to the enchantment that the scene that I was obsessed with commands. Similarly, the *Buddha-Karita* charts the infrastructure of the *novella* and relates its message to the life of Gautama Buddha, but it does not touch upon the parts of the *novella* that are centered on this pivotal scene.

“I should also add that during those same years, I bought many books. Some of them not directly related to my job that, at the time, was that of an Assistant Professor of Iranian studies and Turkish. But, as I said, I was casting a wide net with the theory that an understanding of this particular scene might provide a clue to Hedayat's thought processes and consequently his message. The message concept was paramount in my mind because in his other stories, like "The Stray Dog," he had used particular scenes to highlight social or political problems. In the case of "The Stray Dog," for instance, as you recall, he highlighted the plight of the Iranian student returnees, including himself, from Europe.

“Among the books that I had bought there was a copy of the *Bardo Thodol*, also referred to as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. In my office, it took its appropriate place beside *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*. The contents of neither book were attractive to me, yet given the morbid atmosphere of the *novella*, either had the potential of containing the solution to the riddle of the owl that I was seeking.

“One late afternoon, sitting in my office, I decided to read the *Bardo Thodol*. Strangely, that afternoon I felt that that book had the answer I was seeking. But from the very start, the *Bardo Thodol* proved to be a difficult read. The very first paragraphs filled me with a feeling that is best expressed by the narrator of the *novella*: 'an experience that I shall never forget.' Never before had I read a book as morbid as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

“As I read on with apprehension, the feeling of fear that had crept into my consciousness, and stayed there, increased. I felt I was an untrained *Lama* attending a corpse laid out in front of me. The whole atmosphere in my office felt



erie. By the time that the discussion in the book reached the stage of setting the corpse 'face-to-face' with the Clear Light, I could no longer bear reading. I gave up. I felt it was too much of a price to pay. In fact, I convinced myself that, like the other books I had read, this one, too, would be of little help and would yield no substantial information. So convinced, I closed the book, placed it back on the shelf beside *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* where it belonged, and called it a day.

“Ironically, three years later, after reading many more books, examining more paintings, correlating more images, and delving deeply into Central Asian and African shamanistic rituals, I found myself sitting in my office, looking at the shelf holding *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Again, that same overwhelming feeling of three years ago, the feeling that had motivated me to read the book in the first place, emerged. This time, however, my research, too, pointed to the *Bardo Thodol*. I stilled myself, picked up the book and sat deep in my chair. No matter how difficult, I said to myself, I should read this book from cover to cover.”

- May I ask what time period all this is taking place? A student asked.

- Roughly between 1973 and 1983, I replied.

“I had hardly read past 'setting face-to-face,' where I had quit last time, when I came across a rather long discussion of the activities of the soul in the nether regions, activities that I have discussed in a number of places and you can read for next time. ...¹⁰

“After reading this discussion, I was elated. I felt like a miner who after many years of working in a dark mine hits a large streak of gold or lapis-lazuli. I sat back and thought about this new scene. I read it again. Then, in my mind, I carefully compared it with the scene in *The Blind Owl*. The similarities that came through, especially when sifted through symbolism, were unmistakable. The tension that had kept me in its grip for all those years relaxed. I saw, for the first time, what role the ethereal girl played...”¹¹

Phase two happened after I discovered the connection discussed above between *The Blind Owl* and *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Unlike the situation with the *Buddha-Karita* and the disparate images taken from it, the Tibetan materials showed a road map that accommodated the disparate images from the *Buddha-Karita* within a story of its own. In 1984, I published the results of my analysis in *The Fiction of Sadeq Hedayat* and followed it with a revised translation of the *novella* in 2013. After that translation, I thought I was done with analyzing *The Blind Owl* any further. Here are my thoughts at the time as I expressed them to the reporter of the *Abyss*. He writes, Iraj Bashiri, one of the two English translators of this book, comments that:

"The translation and the analysis of the works of Sadeq Hedayat occupied me for over ten years. That was some twenty years ago. It is wonderful

¹⁰ Bashiri, https://www.academia.edu/30937871/The_Blind_Owl_A_Summary_of_the_Story, p. 3.

¹¹ Iraj Bashiri, *Blindowl* 2013 (8) PDF, pp. 71-73.



that Time heals what Times bring us. Otherwise, life itself would become the burden Hedayat speaks about. Hedayat's is a dark world when you are in it. It haunts you for some time after you leave it. But eventually, it leaves you alone, if you leave it alone."¹²

As is evident, I continued working on the application of subtext analysis to the text. In the third phase, I tried to understand Hedayat's use of the Tibetan materials as subtext. It became clear that the only life in the story that has actual earth-plane reality is when the protagonist is in India, and later in *Rayy*, in pre-Mongol times. At that time, he is a painter. When he dies, he undergoes a Buddhist death ritual. The rest of the story is partly in purgatory, depicted as a mélange of Buddhist and Iranian imagery in the context of an altered Tibetan narrative. This is followed by a second life that is lived near the same area in the early years of the twentieth century.

In sum, none of the things that I have explained, and will discuss further below regarding my understanding of *The Blind Owl*, would have happened, if I did not have access to the Persian text. Costello's translation did not equip me with some crucial information.¹³

The Structure of *The Blind Owl*

1. Image and Narrative Sources

- a. *The Buddha-Karita*. Striking images from the life of the Buddha are interspersed throughout the text.¹⁴ They provide the narrative with an underlying message of liberation.
- b. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. This text is used, among other things, for event sequences, contribution to the systematic development of message, and atmosphere.¹⁵
- c. *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*.¹⁶ Like the *The Buddha-Karita*, this work, and the works of Franz Kafka, are used for image enhancement. The latter also create a balance between ancient and modern times.
- d. Iranian (Zoroastrian and Shi'ite) locations, symbols, and images are used to mask Buddhist subtext.
- e. The *Ruba'iyyat* (quatrain) of Khayyam is used to emphasize the inevitability of the passage of time and to enhance the concept of *carpe diem*.

¹² The Chapel of the Abyss, January 14, 2013, <https://www.librarything.com/topic/54451>

¹³ For details, see the brief summary provided after a short structural analysis.

¹⁴ See, Bashiri, *Hedayat's Ivory Tower*, pp. 136-166.

¹⁵ See, Bashiri, https://www.academia.edu/30937868/The_Buddhist_Subtext_of_Sadeq_Hedayats_Blind_Owl, pp. 11-17.

¹⁶ Rilke, Rainer Maria, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, trans. M. D. Herter Norton, W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., New York, 1949; Bashiri, *Hedayat's Ivory Tower*, pp. 175-187.



2. Character roles

- a. Unchanging character: Nanny. She ages but her attitude does not change
- b. Changing characters:
 - i. Dominating ethereal being (part one); reborn as dominating whore/wife (part two).
 - ii. The painter, despondent imitator (part one) reborn as an inquisitive, discerning, sick young man (part two).
 - iii. The painter's liberated uncle assumes various roles: captain, merchant, carriage driver, grave digger (part one), butcher, odds-and-ends-seller (part two). His mission is to help his nephew liberate himself.

3. Time

- a. Life span of the painter:
 - i. On the earth plain: childhood in India, dejected painter in *Rayy*, death
 - ii. In purgatory: failure at judgment, rebirth
 - iii. In the next life: childhood, sick young man married to a whore, becomes aware of the ruses of his wife, experiences death for the last time as a consequence of a life-long illness, a liberated man
- b. Life span of the brother/uncle:
 - i. On the earth plain: childhood in India, victory in the dungeon, liberation. He assists his nephew to liberate himself.
- c. Historical time:
 - i. Pre-Mongol (part one)
 - ii. Early 1920s (part two)

4. Setting

- a. Other worldly; enchanting and incredible (part one)
- b. Normal, but bizarre (part two)

5. Atmosphere

- a. Generally gloomy (part one)
- b. Uplifting (part two)

6. Attitude

- a. Negative and increasingly cynical (part one)
- b. Hopeful and increasingly liberating (part two)



7. **Literary Technique**¹⁷

- a. Deliberate distortion of time and space for special effects
- b. Juxtaposition of scenes for special effects
- c. Repetition of scenes in full, or in part, as required by the story
- d. Borrowing images from Indian and European sources for narrative enhancement

8. **Symbolism**¹⁸

- a. Imitation, improper use of the life force, leading to doom is symbolized in painting pen-case covers
- b. Observation and acquisition of wisdom leading to liberation is symbolized in an inquisitive, sick young man
- c. Black lilies symbolize failure
- d. Bone-handled long-bladed knife symbolizes concentration needed to destroy desire, symbolized in:
 - i. The ethereal girl (part one)
 - ii. The wife/whore (part two)
- e. Odds-and-ends-seller symbolizes a liberated individual

9. **Message**

- a. A stagnant life, enmeshed in ignorance and driven by alcohol, drugs, and avarice necessarily ends in doom (part one)
- b. Innate ability, acquisition of wisdom/knowledge, concentration, and control over desire leads to liberation (part two)

* * *

Brief Summary with the Aid of Subtext

What is presented below is a special retelling of the story in *The Blind Owl*. It takes into account both what Hedayat wrote and what, in the analyst's mind, he might have had in the forefront of his thought as he wrote. In other words, what Hedayat wrote, what knowledge he might have gathered from his investigation of sources, and artistic consideration that led him, skillfully and advisedly, to keep some information, often very crucial information, from the reader are all taken into consideration. This kind of retelling fills in the missing information that sheds light on the darker areas of the narrative, or on ideas that might appear farfetched. For example, it provides compelling information regarding the causes that make the protagonist lose consciousness upon seeing the color of the lilies that the girl carries. After all, by itself, seeing the color of black

¹⁷ Bashiri, *Fiction*, pp. 92-105.

¹⁸ Bashiri, *Fiction*, pp. 106-131.



on a bunch of lilies does not produce enough angst to make a man lose consciousness. With that said, here is a brief summary of the story.

* * *

In India, identical twin brothers, one of whom had converted to the religion of the *Linga*, sleep with the same Bugam Dasi dancer. The Bugam Dasi bears a child. To determine the identity of the father, the brothers undergo trial by cobra. They are put in a dungeon in which a *nag*-serpent is let loose. The *nag*-serpent bites one of the brothers and gives him a slit lip. The brother with the slit lip then walks out of the dungeon. He is deranged. The other brother leaves the dungeon unharmed. Although the determination regarding the identity of the father of the child remains uncertain, the child is given to the brother who was not harmed by the *nag*-serpent.

Those familiar with Buddhism know that the *nag*-serpent helps the Buddha free himself from worldly concerns and achieve enlightenment. Hedayat, as a novelist, takes this key notion for granted. The only thing that he allows is the identity of the serpent. He allows that in order to assist those readers who look for clues to the mystery that the story creates in their minds. The informed reader then, by putting together the *nag*-serpent, the slit on the lip of the deranged man, and his deranged state of mind—he does not recognize the child—can gather the reason for his turning into an odds-and-ends man. This might sound strange but, in Buddhist terms, such a being has attained a sublime state. He is free, ubiquitous, strong, and in control.

It is important to emphasize Hedayat's knowledge and dexterity. We must equip ourselves with Hedayat's knowledge at the time that he wrote the story. Without knowing what he might actually have read and observed in India, it would be difficult to decipher his story accurately. This does not mean that we have to launch a search to prove what exact books he read or what exact rituals he saw and where and when. The text conveys that. We need to find the *raison d'être* for his using a particular piece of information, at a particular point in his story, and in a particular manner. We might not measure up to his standards and might not be able to explain everything, but that is our responsibility and our shortcoming.

The story continues. In time, the father, Bugam Dasi, and the boy move from India to the town of *Rayy* in Iran. There they live in a house on the outskirts of the town. *Rayy* at the time is a prosperous city indicating that the time of the move is some time before the Mongol invasion. In *Rayy*, the little boy grows up, becomes a painter, and uses one of the rooms as his studio. He refers to that part of the house as "his dwelling." As a painter, he remains in touch with his uncle. His uncle helps him sell his paintings in India and, whenever circumstances



require, in various disguises, he appears ubiquitously and helps him out. The uncle's main objective, it turns out, is to liberate his nephew (see below).

The painter describes his paintings as monotonous and uninspiring. In the context of the subtext, however, they depict a crucial moment in the afterlife of the Buddhist faithful. In the Buddhist purgatory, on judgment day, the soul of the deceased presents the deeds of the deceased on the earth-plane to the lord of death. The deeds are symbolized as pebbles. White pebbles mean salvation and movement to *Nirvana*. Black pebbles mean failure and movement to the place of the wombs to be reborn. Hedayat uses lilies instead of pebbles.

By keeping this picture before their eyes, the Buddhists keep themselves on guard against the ruses of desire. The painter's art work shows the fate of the individuals who have fallen victim to the ruses of desire and whose soul carries black pebbles to the lord of death. Hence, the reason for the existence of a market for the painter's paintings in India.

There is one more point in relation to the painting that must be understood. A Buddhist viewing the painting knows that point already. The reason for the color of the pebbles being black is that the individual moving to trial has already been distracted, has lost his concentration on the object of his quest, and is doomed.

With that in mind, let us return to the story. The painter is in his dwelling busy painting. Outside his dwelling, the townspeople are celebrating the thirteenth day after the Persian new year. Out of the blue, the painter's uncle comes to the dwelling to visit the painter. This is how the painter describes his uncle:

Through his red, fistulous eyelids and leprous lip, he bore a distant and ridiculous resemblance to me, as if my reflection had fallen on a magic mirror. I had always envisaged my father as looking something like that.¹⁹

The uncle, in the manner of the *lama* who comes to guide the soul of the deceased in purgatory, goes and squats in a corner and inspires the painter—"as if inspired"—to bring a special wine-flask from his closet. The wine-flask is in a niche high up in the closet. The painter uses a stool to reach it. His effort is interrupted by a pair of eyes that emerge from a non-existing air-inlet in the wall and enchant him.

Here is what happens between the painter leaving his uncle to get the wine-flask, and the moment that he sees the enchanting eyes. The uncle continually inspires the painter to avoid being distracted by outside images and concentrate on bringing the wine-flask down quickly. He also warns the painter of the consequences of allowing outside thoughts to appear to him. His soul, the uncle tells him, would carry black lilies to the judge who sits under a cypress tree across a brook from her. The consequence of all that, his uncle warns him, would be

¹⁹ Bashiri, https://www.academia.edu/7961787/The_Blind_Owl_by_Sadeq_Hedayat_translated_by_Iraj_Bashiri, p. 18.



rebirth. Hedayat, however, for whatever reason takes all that for granted and presents the reader with a *fait accompli*.

What the reader actually sees is that the painter is confronted with a pair of eyes so beguiling that he forgets about bringing the wine-flask down in time. The reader also sees that the painter's object of love carries black lilies to the old man. When she tries to hand them over, she falls in a brook. Without knowing what the painter knows about those images, no logical connection can be made between the eyes, the black lilies, doom, and the intensity described. Nevertheless, the scene impacts him so intensely that he temporarily loses consciousness. The reader, too, is similarly stunned. And the story goes on...

The Contribution of Structural Analysis

What is the contribution of structural analysis to this process, one might ask? In the case of *The Blind Owl*, structural analysis leads the reader to a distinction between two brothers who are thrown in a dungeon in which a *nag-serpent* is let loose. The question being asked is this: Which of the two identical twins is responsible for the birth of a child? In other words, which of the two brothers is mortal? The *nag-serpent* marks one of the brothers as innocent and lets him go free. The subtext identifies this brother as liberated. The other brother remains in the dungeon which, by extension, denotes the world. He is likely to bring other children into the world. The structural analyst then evaluates the characteristics of the various participants in the story in light of this distinction. He can evaluate the assertions and actions of the main characters, and those around them, with a degree of accuracy. He can even relate the situation obtaining to affairs in families, communities, and the society at large. With regard to Hedayat's era, for instance, he can point to the relevance of freedom, more precisely a lack of freedom, in Reza Shah's Iran, a subject that is outside this discussion.

Structural analysis shows us that the son of the mortal brother, the painter in *Rayy*, is inherently flawed and, therefore, prone to involuntarily bring about his own downfall. That reality dawns on him after the fact. In other words, the analysis shows that the painter had every intention to bring the wine-flask down as quickly as he could. He had every intention to see his soul carry white lilies to the old man. Every mortal does. But that did not happen. The beguiling eyes of an ethereal being, appearing from nowhere, undermined his determination. There and then, he realized that he had made a fatal mistake. The black color of the lilies confirmed that he had involuntarily doomed himself. Hence his state of mind.

There are many statements throughout the *novella* that seem out of context. Structural analysis imparts meaning to those vague assertions and contextualizes them by removing the devices used for narrative enhancement, devices that prevent the reader access to the semantics of the text. In countries like Reza



Shah's Iran, the ability to mask intentions provided the author the ability to speak out against authoritarian rule without fear of the censures.

More than anything, structural analysis reveals Hedayat's dexterity in the art of story telling. It shows how he creates appropriate unearthly settings, and how he populates them with unearthly characters to alert us to concerns beyond the affairs surrounding us, to our human condition. He imposes Iranian (Zoroastrian and Islamic) and European cultural traits on Buddhist prototypes to create strange, at times, bizarre and shocking tales to move us out of our comfort zone.²⁰ In what follows, we shall analyze a statement that appears very early in the *novella*, a foundational statement that on the face of it appears as a grievous complaint, a complaint nevertheless:

“I thought in this base world, full of poverty and misery, for the first time in my life, a ray of sunshine shone on my life. But alas, instead of a sunbeam it was a transient beam, a shooting star that appeared to me in the likeness of a woman or an angel. In the light of that moment that lasted about a second, I witnessed all my life's misfortunes, and discovered their magnitude and grandeur. Then that beam of light disappeared into the dark abyss for which it was destined.”²¹

At the level of the literary analyst, the statement describes an episode in the past life of the protagonist. It is about an event that has shocked him to the core, to the level of despondency. The paragraph is located at the end of a few similar paragraphs. After those statements, a long search begins. The object of the search is vague: a “shooting star” that had disturbed his life. The image that comes through is that of a protagonist who is deeply in love with an ethereal being—a shooting star—that he has mistaken for a sunbeam. That mistake, the author says, has turned the protagonist's world upside down. Hence the enigma for the reader centered on love between a real human being and an ethereal being.

To begin with, some readers and interpreters, do not distinguish between the author of the *novella* and the protagonist, hence our use of “human being.” In books and articles about *The Blind Owl*, we come across depictions of Hedayat, in silhouette, with his *fedora* hat, reflected on a wall as the person who makes the introductory remarks mentioned. There is no indication that the protagonist is a medieval Persian painter, one who has just experienced a traumatic trial in a reincarnation court (see below).

The structural analyst, with hindsight, and with an eye to the subtext of the story (i.e., the fact that the protagonist is on a sojourn to find liberation), asks this question: Could the sunbeam symbolize the wine in the wine-flask to which poison from the fangs of the *nag*-serpent had been dissolved? If that is the case,

²⁰ For explanation, see Bashiri, *Hedayat's Ivory Tower*; Bashiri, Summary of *Blind Owl*; Bashiri, Buddhist Motifs; Bashiri, Summary of *The Blind Owl*.

²¹ Bashiri, https://www.academia.edu/7961787/The_Blind_Owl_by_Sadeq_Hedayat_translated_by_Iraj_Bashiri, p. 17.



then could the shooting star symbolize the ethereal being that appeared to him from nowhere and prevented him from bringing the wine-flask to his uncle on time? After all, if the protagonist had succeeded, would he not have drunk from the wine and would he not have freed himself from the poverty and misery that he complains about? If that premise is acceptable, then we can investigate the causes that brought about the mistake that made his experience so traumatic. Those questions and answers, at the end, bring the analyst to this conclusion: by seeing the black lilies, he realized that what should not happen has happened. The ethereal being has succeeded in undermining his concentration and he is being dispatched to *Shah Abdul Azim* to be reborn. Hence the setting of the second part of the *novella*.

Neither is what was explained above the only difference between the interpretation provided by the literary analyst and the one provided by the structural analyst. The literary analyst thinks that the protagonist was despondent because he could not possess the eyes of the ethereal girl before they disappeared from his sight. The structural analyst concludes that the protagonist is despondent because he involuntarily allowed the eyes of the ethereal being to appear to him at all. More importantly, he is despondent because the eyes had the power of dashing his hope for getting rid of the base world, full of poverty and misery that dominated his existence.

That was looking at the protagonist as an unhappy individual facing defeat. There is also a cosmic meaning involved. We shall attend to it shortly. But first this question: How did the mistake happen and why didn't the protagonist prevent it? Because, he says, "[It was] a shooting star that appeared to me in the likeness of a woman...and disappeared in the dark abyss for which it was destined." The words "appear" and "disappear" connote a lack of control on the part of the individual, first in seeing something and then being affected. They are both related to a third word, "control." The protagonist complains that he was destined to make the mistake that he made. Later on in the story, he laments this lack of control that he believes constitutes a part of the make up of his being:

"It was as if ... I had passed all my life lying in a black coffin, being carried about amid mist, and hovering shadows by a stooped old man whose face I could not see."²²

On a grand scale, in the statement being analyzed, the protagonist complains that all along he had been the victim of shooting stars that have appeared in his life, destroyed his tranquility, and departed. He complains that he does not have any control over either their appearance or disappearance. He does not have control even over his own obsession. More grievously, he finds himself inextricably attached to them and is punished for his attachment. In fact, a decade later, he says the same thing in his "*Payam-e Kafka*" (the message of Kafka,

²² Bashiri,
https://www.academia.edu/7961787/The_Blind_Owl_by_Sadeq_Hedayat_translated_by_Iraj_Bashiri, p. 30.



1948). “Man is helpless against society, time, and other forces and is as obedient to them as a dog.” He further lamented, “Man must die like a dog at the hand of those unknown forces because he does not have the ability to control them.”²³

The sunbeam at the end of the proverbial tunnel for the protagonist is nothing but the glimmer of hope for salvation that exists in the heart of every mortal. While living, mortals assume that when the time comes, somehow, they will be able to bring the wine-flask down on time and gain the white lilies required for salvation. But when the time comes, they find themselves lacking. They somehow, unknowingly or involuntarily, fail to keep the eyes at bay, keep the color of the lilies white, and prevent the issuance of a judgment of doom.

As can be seen, this introductory paragraph summarizes the events in the first part of the *novella* in a nutshell, and provides both a personal and a cosmic setting for them. Translating paragraphs such as this, therefore, must convey the connotations that Hedayat could have had in mind for words like “appear” and “disappear.” They must denote “control” in the cosmic conundrum that dominates the uncomfortable circumstances in which the protagonist finds himself. Here is Costello’s rendition of the same paragraph:

“In this mean world of wretchedness and misery I thought that for once a ray of sunlight had broken upon my life. Alas, it was not sunlight, but a passing gleam, a falling star, which flashed upon me, in the form of a woman—or of an angel. In its light, in the course of a second, of a single moment, I beheld all the wretchedness of my existence and apprehended the glory and splendour of the star. After, that brightness disappeared again in the whirlpool of darkness in which it was bound inevitably to disappear. I was unable to retain that passing gleam.”²⁴

The Rest of the Story

To return to the story, when the uncle sees that his nephew has failed to bring the wine-flask down on time, he leaves the dwelling. As for the painter, still under the charm of those eyes, he begins an unending search for the owner of those eyes.²⁵

After a long search, the painter and the girl with enchanting eyes meet. The girl, assured that the painter is under her control, dies. The painter, making sure that she would not interfere in his future anymore, dismembers her body and puts the limbs in a suitcase. When he closes the suitcase, her eyes are still alive. In order to bury the suitcase in a desolate place far away from his dwelling, he is assisted by his uncle who ubiquitously appears and helps him not only to move the suitcase, but also to bury it, without any charge.

²³ Cf., Bashiri, *Fiction*, p. 10.

²⁴ Costello, D. P. edpf.pub/the blind owl.

²⁵ For further information, see Bashiri, *Fiction*, pp.169-171.



* * *

The painter and the ethereal girl, who caused his downfall, are reborn near *Shah Abdul Azim*, which is located near the ruins of ancient *Rayy*. The time is early 1900s. In part two, recollections of the past life are erased. Only some echoes remain and often jog the protagonist's memory:

“My life appeared to me as unnatural, uncertain and incredible as the design on the pen-case I am using at this moment. It seems that a painter who has been possessed, perhaps a perfectionist, has painted the design on the cover of this pen-case. Often, when I look at this design, it seems familiar; perhaps it is because of this design that I write or perhaps this design makes me write.”²⁶

The painter is reborn as a sick child, and the object of his desire is a beautiful little girl. Both are suckled by the same nanny. The sick boy grows up and becomes a perpetually sick young man. The girl becomes a dominating voluptuous woman. He is madly in love with the woman and, even though he knows she sleeps around, he marries her.

The second part of the story is involved and, because it is discussed extensively elsewhere, it is not dealt with in any detail here.²⁷ Suffice it to say that his (read painter turned sick young man) uncle, in spite of the intervening centuries, has not abandoned him. He appears in various guises, exposes the ruses of the whore, and guides him to distinguish between what seems valuable and what *is* valuable. Consider the following statement by the odds-and-ends seller to the protagonist when he inquires about a jar on his display:

“I recall that on that same day I went over to his display and asked him for the price of the jar... with a laughter that made one's hair stand on end, he said to me, ‘Don't you look at what you buy?!’”²⁸

Fortunately, unlike the painter, who was stationary and blind to the dynamics of the world surrounding him, the sick young man is mobile, observant, and very inquisitive. In addition, the more he discovers about the ruses of his wife, the more he wants to know. He talks to Nanny about his parents and his wife. He observes Nanny's daughter-in-law. He even questions his wife's little brother about her.

The main difference between him and the painter is that the more the painter thought about the ethereal being, the more he desired her. But, the more

²⁶ Iraj Bashiri, *The Blind Owl* translated by Iraj Bashiri, https://www.academia.edu/7961787/The_Blind_Owl_by_Sadeq_Hedayat_translated_by_Iraj_Bashiri, p. 56.

²⁷ Bashiri, https://www.academia.edu/30937868/The_Buddhist_Subtext_of_Sadeq_Hedayats_Blind_Owl

²⁸ *The Blind Owl* translated by Iraj Bashiri, https://www.academia.edu/7961787/The_Blind_Owl_by_Sadeq_Hedayat_translated_by_Iraj_Bashiri, p.



the sick young man learns about the ruses of his wife, the more he despises her. Eventually, he seeks physical distance from her, an act that was unthinkable for the painter. As a result, the whore loses her grip on him. Here is another echo of his past life. It appears at the culmination of his search for discovering the source of his wife's dominance over him:

“Was she the gentle lady, the delicate, ethereal girl who wore a wrinkled black dress, who played hide-and-seeK with me on the banks of the Suren River, the childish, transient and free girl whose provocative, sexy calves were visible through her skirt? Until now, whenever I looked at her, I was not aware that she was that same ethereal girl, but now, as if a curtain was removed from before my eyes, for some reason I was reminded of the sheep in front of the butcher's shop and that she resembled a lump of lean meat. All the traces of her inherent attractiveness had been lost. She was a mature, grave, made-up woman who was preoccupied with the thought of life! A complete woman!”²⁹

At the end of his search, his uncle equips the sick young man, through Nanny, with a special knife, a bone-handled, long-bladed knife. He takes the knife with him to the dark bedchamber (cf., the dungeon and the judgment scene) and, without allowing anyone or anything to interfere with his concentration, kills the whore, taking out her eye in the process. Before she dies, the whore slits the sick young man's lip and turns him into another odds-and-ends man.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 59.





A Literal Translation
of
The Blind Owl
1974

by Iraj Bashiri
The University of Minnesota

II

Bashiri Working Papers on Central Asia and Iran

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II. A Literal Translation of *The Blind Owl*

*The Blind Owl*¹

1974

(Literal Translation for analytical purposes only)

1. THE AIR-INLET²

There are in life caustic wounds that gradually erode the soul and diminish it in solitude. One cannot discuss these pains, as these unbelievable pains are habitually considered as parts of some rare and singular happenings. Thus any attempt at relating or documenting such sufferings is necessarily accompanied by sarcastic, dubious smiles. To these, as yet, man has found no remedy but recourse to oblivion through wine and artificial sleep using opium and other narcotics. Unfortunately, the effects of these drugs, being transitory, increase rather than decrease the pain.

Will it be possible for man, one day to unravel the mystery of these supernatural happenings: the reflection of the shadow of the soul that appears in a coma-like limbo between sleep and wakefulness?

I will relate one of these happenings in which I personally was involved—a happening that shook me, which I will never forget and the ominous brand of which will poison my being from its beginning to eternity, beyond human understanding. I said poison, well, I meant I have and will have its scar on me forever.

I will try to write down all that I can recall, that is, all the relations that connect the events. Perhaps I can pass an absolute judgment on it, no! only to obtain assurance or else to bring it upon myself to believe it. It's immaterial to me whether other people believe it or not. I fear that I may die tomorrow before I get to know myself. Because in the course of life-long experience I have discovered the awesomeness of the chasm that separates me from the rest of mankind; I have realized that I should keep silent and confine my thoughts to myself. If I have decided to write, it is simply for introducing myself to my shadow—the shadow that is bent on the wall as if gulping up all that I put down. This experiment is for

¹ This literal translation is Chapter Three of Iraj Bashiri's *Hedayat's Ivory Tower: Structural Analysis of The Blind Owl*, Manor House, 1974, Pp. 52-135. It is reproduced here as an aid for analytical purposes only.

² The original Persian text of *The Blind Owl* does not include any subsection titles. On the basis of a detailed analysis of the work, these subsection titles (1-16) are added by the analyst/translator to make the story more accessible to those interested in a more involved reading of the *novella*.



that shadow: perhaps we can know each other better. Since the time I severed myself from the company of mankind I have wanted to know myself better.

Futile thoughts! You may say that. But they torture me more than anything else. Aren't these people who resemble me, who appear to share my desires, created to deceive me? Aren't they a handful of shadows created solely to mock and beguile me? Is all that I feel, see, and deliberate upon imaginary and thus far distant from reality?

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

I thought for the first time in this low, poverty-ridden world a ray of sunlight shone on my life. But alas, it was not a sunbeam; it was a transient shooting star appearing to me in the form of an angel. It was in that instantaneous light that I saw the immensity of my misfortunes: the moment right after the light disappeared in the dark abyss for which it was destined. No, I could not keep that transient ray of light for myself.

Three months—no! In fact, it was two months and four days ago. Since then I have lost her trail. But the memory of her magical attraction and condemning eyes remained in me forever. How can I forget her while she is so very relevant to my being!

No! I will not call her by name. Because she, with her ethereal body: slim and Misty; with that pair of shining, wonder-stricken, large eyes beneath which my life was gradually burning away, no longer belongs to this low, animal existence. No. Her name should not be polluted with earthly things.

After this I withdrew myself totally from the company of fools and lackeys. To obtain oblivion I took refuge in wine and opium. My life used to pass within the four walls of my room. It still does. All my life has passed within these four walls.

Throughout the day, my amusement had consisted of painting on pen-case covers. My whole time had been devoted to painting pen-case covers, consumption of alcohol and opium. I had chosen the ridiculous job of painting on pen-cases in order to confuse myself, in order to kill the time.

Luckily, my dwelling is outside the city. It is located in a quiet, secluded spot far from the maddening crowd. It is entirely separated from its environs, and is surrounded by ruins. It is only from beyond the ditch and the low mud-brick houses that the city appears to begin. God knows who has built this house in forgotten times. When I close my eyes, I not only can make out all its crevices as if materializing them in front of my eyes, but I can also feel its pressure on my shoulders. It's a house that could only have been painted on ancient pen-cases.

I should write these to make sure that they are not figments of my imagination. I should explain these to my shadow on the wall—well, before this incident, there had remained only one satisfaction for me. I used to paint on pen-cases while living within the four walls of my room. It was with this ridiculous amusement that I passed the time. But after I saw those eyes, all movements lost their value and meaning. The strange and unbelievable thing is, however, that I



cannot figure why the setting for all my paintings should be identical throughout. I used to paint a cypress tree under which a stooped old man squatted on the ground shrouding himself in a cloak in the manner of Indian *yogis*. He wore a *shalma* around his head and had his index finger on his lips as if perplexed. Opposite him a girl in a long, black dress was bending to offer him a lily—because between them a brook intervened. Whether I had seen this setting before, or whether it was inspired to me, I cannot tell. All I know is that whatever I painted was on this same theme. My hand would draw it involuntarily. The most curious thing, however, was that there were customers for this picture. I even used to send some of these pen-case covers to India to my uncle who sold them and send me the money.

In relation to this picture, I sometimes lose all sense of distance. I cannot remember correctly—now something crossed my mind—I said I should write my reminiscences. But this event happened much later and is not related to the subject. It was due to the same event that I quit painting for good. Two months ago, no! it is now two months and four days. It was the 13th of *Farvardin*.³ Everybody had come to the countryside. In order to paint undisturbed, I had shut the window of my room. It was around sunset and I was busy painting when the door opened and my uncle entered—that is to say, he himself said he was my uncle. I had never seen him; because from his early youth he had gone on a distant journey. It seems he was a ship captain. I thought he had some mercantile business with me, because I had heard that he is a merchant as well. In any case, my uncle was a bent old man with an Indian *shalma* around his head, and a yellow torn cloak on his shoulders. He had covered his head and face with a scarf. His collar was open and his hairy chest could be seen. One could count the hairs in his thin beard, which were protruding from under his scarf. He had red, fistular eyelids and a leprous lip. He bore a very distant and ridiculous resemblance to me as if my reflection had fallen on a magic mirror. I had always imagined my father's form to be like that. As soon as he arrived he went and squatted in the corner of the room. I thought I should prepare something and offer it to him. I lit the light and went into the dark closet of my room. I searched everywhere to find something that an old man would like to have. Although I knew there was nothing in the house, because there was neither any opium nor any wine left for me. Suddenly, I looked up at the built-in niche below the roof. As of inspired, I recalled the ancient wine-flask that I had inherited. I think they had made this wine on the occasion of my birth. It was on the niche. I never thought of that. In fact, I had totally forgotten that such a thing existed in the house. In order for my hand to reach the niche, I put the stool that was near me under my feet. But as soon as I reached for the wine-flask, a scene outside, through the air-inlet in the niche, caught my sight. I saw that in the field behind my room, a bent, stooped,

³ The only mass outing in Iran during each calendar year is on the thirteenth of *Farvardin*—thirteen days after the Persian New Year. During this day almost all families leave their houses and go to the countryside to dispel the ominousness of the thirteenth day of the year.



old man was squatting under a cypress tree, and the young girl, no! a heavenly angel was standing in front of him, bending to give him a black lily with her right hand. The old man was chewing on his left index finger.⁴

The girl was exactly opposite me; but it seemed as though she was not aware of her surroundings. She was looking without having looked. An unconscious, involuntary smile had dried on the corner of her lip. It seemed as though she was thinking of some absent people. It was through that air-inlet that I saw her charming eyes which seemed at the same time dreadful, enchanting and reproachful. It was on the shining and meaningful balls of those worried, threatening and inviting eyes that my single beam of life was attracted, entirely mixed and annihilated. This attractive mirror sucked me out of my entire existence. Those curved *Turkmen*⁵ eyes with their intoxicating supernatural beam would frighten as well as attract. It seemed, with her eyes, she had witnessed supernatural happenings which no mortal could see. Her cheeks were high, her forehead wide, her eyebrows thin and connected, her lips meaty and half open. It seemed as though they had just finished a long, warm kiss with which they were not yet satisfied. Her disheveled, unset, black hair had framed her silvery face. A tress of it was stuck on her temple. The tenderness of her limbs and the heedlessness of her ethereal movement bespoke her transient nature. Only a dancing girl at an Indian temple could have her harmonious gait.

Her placid form and her sorrowful happiness distinguished her from normal human beings. Her beauty was not at all normal. She appeared to me as though in an opium hallucination... She produced in me the same heated love as that of the mandrake. A slim and tall body with a symmetrical line dividing her shoulders, arms, breasts, buttocks and shins—it was as though they have separated her from her mate. Exactly like the female mandrake separated from its mate.

She had a wrinkled, black dress which stuck to her body. When I saw her it seemed that she wanted to jump over the brook which separated her from the old man, but she failed. The old man laughed hysterically. He had a dry and repulsive laughter, which made one's hair stand on end. It was a hybrid, mocking laughter for which no facial expression existed. It was the reflection of a laughter produced by a hollow.

With the wine-flask in my hand, I jumped off the stool out of fright. I do not know why I was shaking. It was a shiver in which fright and enjoyment were intermingled. I felt like I had jumped up from a pleasant, nightmarish dream. I put the wine-flask on the ground and held my head between my hands. How many minutes, hours? I do not know. When I came to, I took the flask and entered the room. My uncle was not there. He had left the door ajar, like the open mouth of a corpse. The ring of the old man's laughter still echoed in my ears.

⁴ For Buddhist values for lilies, see Qotbi, 1972; Kamshad, 1966.

⁵ *Turkmen* is a term used to designate the million and a half descendants of the Oguz Turks who invaded Iran in the 10th century. They inhabit a portion of the Central Asian steppe along the Iran0-Sovirt border, Afghano-Soviet border, and the Amu Darya (Oxus) river.



It was getting dark and the light was giving off smoke. The effects of that frightful, yet pleasant shiver, however, were still present. This was the turning point of my life. One glance was enough. In one glance that ethereal being had penetrated my whole existence.

I had lost control. It seemed that I had known her name from somewhere. The fire in her eyes, her color, her smell and her movements were all familiar, as though my soul and bordered on her soul in the life before this life. Since they were of the same origin and essence, we were doomed to a union. Now in this life. I had to live with her. I never wanted to touch her. The invisible beam that went out of our bodies and intermixed was sufficient. Isn't this frightful event which seemed familiar to me the same feeling as that of two lovers who feel they have met each other at some earlier time? It creates a mysterious feeling between the two. In this lowly world I wanted her love. No one else's love would do. Was it possible that someone else could affect me as much? That repulsive laughter of the old man; that ominous laughter had broken our relation.

All through the night I was thinking of this. Several times I intended to go and look through the air inlet; but I was afraid of the old man's laughter. The next day I was thinking of the same thing. Could I deliberately forget her forever? The next day, in total fear, I decided to put the wine-flask back in its place. But when I pushed the curtain in front of the closet aside to look, I saw a dark, black wall in front of me. The same darkness that had obscured my vision all my life. There was no hole, crevice, or inlet to the outside world. The square window was completely closed and had become part of the wall. As if it never existed. I pulled the stool forward, but the more madly I hit my fists against the wall, or listened or searched with the light, the less I found a sight in that thick wall. It had turned into a piece of lead.

Could I give all this up? But it was out of my control. From here on I was like a tortured soul. I waited, I watched, I searched, all to no avail. I traversed all around our house, not for one or two days, but for two months and four days. It was like the murderers who return to the murder site. Everyday, towards sunset, I walked around our house like a chicken with its head cut off. This, to the point that I could recognize all rocks and pebbles around there. There was no sign of the cypress tree, a stream of water or the people I had seen there. Many nights I kneeled in front of the moon and begged the trees, the rocks and all creatures to help me, but I have seen no sign of her. Finally, I did not see any use in such activities because she was not associated with worldly elements. The water in which she had washed her hair must have come from a special, unique and unknown source or some magical cave. Her dress was not of ordinary wool and cotton sewn by ordinary human hands. She was a chosen creature. I realized that those lilies were not ordinary lilies either. I was sure that should she happen to wash her face in ordinary water it will wither, or else, if she would pluck ordinary lilies with her slim fingers, they too, like flower petals would wither.



I found out all these things. This girl, no! this angel was the source of an unspeakable astonishment and inspiration. Her substance was delicate and untouchable. It was she who created the sense of worship in me. I am sure that the look of a stranger, an ordinary human being, would make her dirty and withered.

Since the time when I lost her, since the time a heavy wall, a damp dam of lead with no holes was built in front of me, I have felt my life has become useless and lost forever. Even though the look I took and the pleasure I drew from seeing her was one-sided and had no response to it—she had not seen me—I need those eyes. One glance at her was enough to solve all my philosophical and theological riddles. One glance from her and there will remain no mystery for me.

I added to the amount of my opium and drinks. But unfortunately, instead of paralyzing my thought, these hopeless drugs revived her body, decreasing days to hours, hours to minutes.

How could I forget? Whether my eyes were open or shut, whether asleep or awake, she was right in front of me. From the air-it let in the closet, like the night that has enshrouded all mortal logic, through the square inlet that opened to the outside world, she was in front of me.

I could not rest. How could I have rest? I had formed the habit of going on excursions at sunset. I don't know why I insisted on finding a stream of water, a cypress tree and a lily plant. My addiction to this excursion was like my addiction to opium. It was as though some force made me go on these walks. All I thought of, on the way, was her—the memory of that first glimpse. I wanted to find the place where I had seen her on the 13th of *Farvardin*. If I could find that place; if I could sit under that cypress tree, some repose would be generated in my life. But unfortunately, there was nothing there but hot sand, dirt, the rib-cage of a horse and a dog sniffing the trash. Had I really seen her? I only stealthily saw her through a hole in my closet. I was like a hungry dog that sniffs and investigates the trash, and as soon as they bring more trash runs away and hides himself out of fear. It is only later that he comes and searches for his favorite pieces. I was in a similar situation. However, this air-inlet had become closed. For me she was like a fresh bouquet of flowers thrown on the trash heap.

The last night I took my routine walk, the air was dark and it felt like rain. A thick mist had spread all around. In the rainy weather, which decreases the sharpness of colors and the rudeness of the lines of objects, I felt a kind of freedom. It was as though the rain was washing my thoughts away. During this night what should not have happened, occurred. I was going in all directions without really intending to do so. During these lonesome hours, during these minutes, the duration of which I cannot recall, her vague and shocking face appeared from behind the clouds and smoke much more vigorously than ever before. Her motion an expressionless face appeared to me like the painting on the pen-case covers.



2. THE SUITCASE

When I returned, I think it was later than midnight. A dense fog was hanging in the air. I could not see in front of me with ease. But, out of habit, out of a special sense which had been awakened in the, I was advancing. When I arrived in front of my house, I saw the figure of a woman clad in black. She was sitting on the platform of my house.

I struck a match to find the keyhole, but somehow, involuntarily my eyes caught sight of the figure in black. She had two oblique eyes: two large, black eyes in a silvery thin face. I recognized those eyes which stared without seeing. If I had not seen her earlier, I still would know her. No, I was not deceived. This figure in black was she. I was like a person who is dreaming and cannot wake up when he wants to. I stood there astounded. I was petrified on the spot. The match first, burnt itself, and then my fingers. Then, suddenly, I came to and turned the key in the lock. The door opened. I drew myself to one side. Like someone who is familiar with a place, she got off the platform and passed through the dark corridor. She opened the door of my room and I entered after her. Hurriedly I put the light on. She was lying there in my bed. Her face was in the dark. I did not know whether she could see or hear me. She showed no sign of fear, inclination, or resistance. It seemed as if she had come involuntarily.

Was she sick? Had she lost her way? She had come here involuntarily just like a sleep-Walker. No living creature can imagine the stages I went through. I felt a pleasant, unspeakable pain. No, I was not deceived. It was that same woman. That same girl had entered my room without astonishment and without uttering a word. I had always thought of our meeting happening in a similar way. This state was like being in a very deep sleep. To have such dreams one has to go into a deep sleep. The silence was like an eternal life. No one can talk at the beginning of creation.

For me, she was a woman who had something supernatural about her. Her face reminded me of the stunning oblivion on the faces of other people. This to the point that upon watching her I started to shake and my knees gave way. At this moment, I saw all my miserable life behind her large, extremely large, wet and glistening eyes which resembled black diamond balls thrown in tears. In her eyes I found the eternal night and the dense darkness that I had been looking for. I drowned myself in their awesome darkness and felt as if they were pulling some force out of my body. The ground was shaking under my feet. Had I fallen to the ground, out of that I would have drawn and unspeakable pleasure.

My heart stopped. I stopped breathing. I was afraid that my breath might make her disappear like a piece of cloud or a puff of smoke. Her silence was like a miracle. It seemed as though they had built a glass wall between us. This dampness, this hour of eternity was choking me. Her tired eyes, as if seeing something extraordinary not seen by others, as if seeing death, were closed. They closed gradually; her eyelids were closed. I was like a drowning man who, after much struggling comes to the surface of the water. Shaking and in an intense,



feverish condition, I wiped the perspiration off my forehead with the edge of my sleeve.

Her face had the same calm and motionless expression, but it seemed that it had lost some flesh and was thinner. As she was reclining she was chewing on her index finger. The color of her face was silvery and all her body: legs, arms, and breasts were visible under her tight, black dress.

Since her eyes were closed, I bent myself to see her better. But the more I looked at her face, the more it seemed to be distant from me. Suddenly, I felt that I had had no access to the secrets of her heart and that there existed no relation whatsoever between the two of us.

I wanted to say something, but I feared that her ears, being used to a soft, heavenly music, might cause her to abhor me.

I thought she might be hungry or thirsty. I went to the closet of my room to find something for her, although I knew there was nothing to be found in the house. Then, as if inspired, I recalled that I had an old flask of wine up on the niche. I used the stool and brought the flask down. Slowly, I approached the bed. She was sleeping like a tired out child. She was in a deep sleep and her long eyelashes were put together like velvet. I opened the flask and through her locked teeth I poured a cup of wine in her mouth.

For the first time in my life there appeared a sudden tranquility. It seemed that the cancer that tortured me and the nightmare that was pressing me from inside had become quiet because those eyes had eventually closed. I brought my chair, put it beside the bed and looked at her. What a childish face! What a strange disposition! Was it possible for this woman, this girl, or this angel of torture (as I did not know what to call her) to have a double life? That much quiet? That much unaffectedness?

Now I could feel the warmth of her body and smell the dampness of her heavy black locks. I don't know why I raised my shaking hand. The hand with which I caressed her hair was not under my control. Then, I sank my fingers in her hair. Her hair was cold, and damp. Cold, totally cold. It seemed that she had died several days ago. I was not mistaken. She was dead. I passed my hand in front of her chest, and put it on her breast and heart. No heart beat could be felt. I brought the mirror and held it in front of her nose. There was not a trace of life in her...

I wanted to warm her with heat of my own body: give her my warmth and received her coldness of death. Perhaps, in this way, I could blow my own soul into her body. I took off my clothes, climbed onto the bed, and lay down beside her. We had stuck together like the male and female mandrake. Originally, her body was like that of the female mandrake severed from its male and had the same burning love of the mandrake. Her mouth was acrid and bitterish. It tasted like the stem end of the cucumber. All her body had turned cold like hailstones. I was feeling the freezing of blood in my veins and the penetration of cold deep in my heart. All my efforts were useless. I got off the bed and put my clothes back



on. No, it was not a lie. She had come right here in my room and given up her body to me. She gave me both her body and soul!

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

This was the same person, who had poisoned my life, or else my life had been susceptible to being poisoned and I could not have had any other type of life. Now, here in my room, she gave me both her body and shadow. Her transient, brittle soul, which had no relation to the world of earthly beings, slowly left her wrinkled black dress, left the carcass that tortured it, and joined the world of wandering shadows. I think it took my shadow with it as well. Her body, motionless and without feeling, was lying there. Her soft, lax muscles, her veins, skin and bones were waiting to rot. A delicious food was thus prepared for the worms and mice under the ground. I had to pass a long, cold, endless night at the side of a corpse in my small, adversity stricken, miserable room that was like a grave; and that, in the eternal darkness of the night which had surrounded and was sinking in the walls. I had to be with her corpse. It seemed to be that from the dawn of creation, since the beginning of my existence, a cold corpse, devoid of feeling had shared my darkroom with me.

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

At such times one takes refuge in a strong habit or scruple he has developed in life: the drunkard goes and becomes drunk, the writer writes, the stone-cutter cuts stones; each giving vent to his wrath by escaping to their lives' stimulant. It is at such times that a true artist can create a masterpiece. But I, I was a poor, tasteless painter of pen-case covers. What could I do? What could I create out of my lifeless pictures to become a masterpiece? But in my whole being I was feeling an excessive talent and warmth. It was a special memory and sensation. I was going to paint on paper, the eyes which were now closed forever, and keep them for myself. This idea forced me to put my feeling into action. I should say it was not voluntary, especially when one is imprisoned with a corpse. The thought of it filled me with happiness.

Eventually, I extinguished the light which was giving off smoke, brought two candlesticks and lit them over her head. Her face appeared more reposeful. In



front of the trembling light of the candles, and in the half dark light of the room, it assumed a mysterious ethereal mode. I took the paper and my working tools to the side of her bed. This bed was hers now. I wanted to paint this form which was condemned to gradual disintegration freely and record its main lines on the paper. I wanted to choose those lines that affected me. No matter how simple it may be, the painting should have a soul. I, who was used to print-painting on pen-case covers, now had to start thinking, and thus, materialize in front of myself the imaginary creature which the impact of her face had created in me. I wanted to look at her, then close my eyes and put down on paper the lines that I had chosen from her face. Perhaps in this way I could find an antidote for my tortured soul. Eventually, I took refuge in the life of motionless lines and forms.

The subject had a special relevance to my dead painting—painting a corpse—I was a painter of corpses. But the eyes, her closed eyes; did I need to see them again? Were they not imprinted enough in my mind and thoughts?

I cannot remember how many times I painted her face, but none of the pictures satisfied me. I tore them up as I finished painting them. This work did not tire me. Neither did I feel the passage of time.

It was about daybreak. A dull light had entered the room through the window. I was busy with my last painting, which was better than the rest. But, her eyes? Those reproachful eyes, which blamed me as if I had committed some unforgivable sin. I could not put those eyes down on paper. Suddenly, all life and the memory of those eyes had left my recollection. My attempts were of no avail. No matter how hard I looked at her face, I could not remember its expression. At this time, suddenly, I saw her cheeks reddening; it was a liver-red color like the color of the meet in the front of the butcher's shop. She came to life and her exceedingly open and astounded eyes—eyes in which all the brightness of life had gathered to glimmer now in a sickly light; her blameful sickly eyes slowly opened and she looked me in the face. This was the first time that she looked at me. She looked at me and then closed her eyes. This event took only a moment, but it gave me enough time to capture the state of her eyes and paint them. I painted the picture with the paintbrush, and this time I did not tear up the painting.

Then I got up and slowly approached her. I thought she was alive, that is, had come back to life. I thought my love had revived her corpse. But, upon reaching her I could smell the decomposition of her carcass. Small worms were wiggling on her body and two Golden fly-bees were flying around her in front of the candle. She was completely dead yet her eyes opened. How could this happen? I don't know. I even don't know whether this was a dream or was happening in real life.

I hope no one will ask me, but the most important thing was her face, no! her eyes which I now possessed. I had the soul of her eyes on paper. Her body was no longer of much use to me. The body that was condemned to annihilation and was to nourish worms and underground mice! From now on she was in my possession. I was not under her rule anymore. Whenever I so desired I could see



her eyes. I took the painting very carefully and put it in the tin can in which I kept my profits. I hid the can in the closet of my room.

The night was gradually leaving, as if it had rested enough. There were some distant voices; perhaps a passing bird was dreaming; perhaps the plants were growing. The pale stars were hiding beneath the massive clouds. I felt the cool morning breeze on my face. It was at this time, too, that the cock began to crow in the distance.

What could I do with her dead body? The dead body that had already started to disintegrate! First I thought I would bury it under the floor of my room. Then, I thought of taking her out and throwing her in a well; in a well around which black lilies had grown. But all this entailed a lot of trouble and dexterity! Furthermore, I did not want any stranger to look at her. I had to do all this alone and by my own hands. The hell with me. What was life to me after her? But she? Never, never, should any ordinary man's glance fall on her. She had come to my room alone and had surrendered her cold body and shadow to me so that no other person may see her and in order not to be polluted by strangers' looks. Eventually, a thought occurred to me: if I would chop her up and put her in a suitcase, my old suitcase, I could take it out with me to a faraway place, away from the people, and bury it there.

This time, I no longer hesitated. I fetched the knife, which had a bone handle, from the closet. Very carefully, first I tore off her thin, black dress which had imprisoned her like a spider's web. This was the only thing that had covered her body. It seemed that she had grown taller; because she looked taller than usual; then I severed her head. Drops of clotted blood poured out of her throat. Then, I cut off her hands and feet and arranged her torso and limbs in the suitcase. Then, I covered them with her dress. I locked the suitcase and put its key in my pocket. When I was done, I felt good. I picked up the suitcase and weighed it. It was heavy. I have never felt that much fatigue before. No. I could never carry that suitcase alone.

3. THE JOURNEY

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

"If you are looking for a porter, I am ready. I also have a corpse-carriage. Every day I take the dead to a *Shah-Abdol-Azim*⁶ and bury them there. I also make

⁶ *Shah-Abdol-Azim* is a religious complex including the tomb of Reza Shah which is situated among the ruins of Rayy [see also Morris et al. 1969: 200-201].



coffins. I have coffins for almost every person's perfect measurements. I am ready, right now!..."

He laughed so hysterically that his shoulders were trembling. I pointed towards my house, but without letting me utter a word, he said:

"It's not necessary. I know where you live. Right now?"

He got up from where he was sitting, and I returned to my house. I went into the room and with great trouble took the dead suitcase to the door. An old, ramshackle corpse-carriage to which two thin, black, skeleton-like horses were hitched, was in front of the door. The old man was hunched over, sitting up on the seat. He had a long whip in his hand. But he did not turn to look at me at all. With difficulty, I put the suitcase in the carriage in the special place in the middle which was intended for the coffin. I myself, too, climbed in and lay down in the place where the coffin is usually put. I put my head on the edge of it so I could see the outside. Then, I pulled the suitcase on my chest and with both hands hung on to it tightly.

The sound of the whip whistled in the air. The horses breathing heavily, fuming like chimneys in the rain, started to go. Their slim forelegs which were like the hands of thieves whose severed fingers are plunged in hot oil, slowly and noiselessly touched the ground. In the damp air, their bells had a special ring to them. From head to toe an unspeakable comfort had filled me. Except for the weight of the suitcase on my chest, I could not feel anything moving in or about me.

Her dead body. Her corpse. It seemed that this weight had always pushed in on my chest. A thick fog had covered the road. The carriage passed mountains, plains and rivers with speed and comfort. The view around me was new and unique; something that I had not seen either in dreams or otherwise. The mountains were jagged and strange. Suppressed, cursed trees were on both sides of the road. From among the trees triangular, cubic and prismatic houses with dark, low Windows were seen. The windows resembled the giddy eyes of one who is experiencing a delirious fever. There was something in the walls that transferred the chill to one's heart. It seemed that no living being could inhabit those houses. Perhaps those houses were built for the shadows of ethereal beings.

Either the carriage driver was taking me on a special road, or else he was traveling on some unmarked highways. In some places there were only hacked tree trunks and crooked trees all around the road; behind these there were high and low geometrical houses: conic for some, truncated cones for the others, all having crooked windows through which black lilies had protruded, climbing their doors and walls. Suddenly, the whole scene disappeared under a thick mist. Pregnant, heavy clouds had sandwiched the mountain peaks among themselves and were pressing them. Sprinkles of rain, like dust, were floating in the atmosphere. After a long trek, we finally arrived at the foot of a high, arid mountain. The corpse-carriage stopped. I slid the suitcase aside and got up.



Behind the mountain there was a quiet, serene and pleasant place. A place I had never seen before. A place I did not recognize, yet, seemed familiar: it was not beyond my imagination. The ground was covered with scentless, black lilies. It seemed that we were the first people to have set foot on this ground. I put the suitcase down. The old carriage driver, turning towards me, said:

"This place is near *Shah Abdol Azim*. There will be no place better for you than here. Not even a bird can be found here!..."

I put my hand in my pocket to pay the carriage driver. All I had was two *qerans* and two *Abbasis*.⁷ The carriage driver, uttering his disgusting laughter, said:

"That's all right. Pay me later! I know where you live. Anything else I can do for you? Let me tell you that I am quite skillful in digging graves. Don't feel bad about it. Let's go right there, by the river, by the cypress tree. I will dig a ditch for you the size of the suitcase, then I will take my leave."

Then, with an agility the like of which I could not imagine in an old man, he jumped down from the seat. I picked up the suitcase and together we went to the tree which was at the side of the dry river. He said:

"Is this the right place?"

Then, without waiting for an answer from me, he started digging the ground with the shovel and spade he had brought with him. I had put the suitcase down and was watching him with astonishment. The old man, in spite of his bent back, proved to be quite skillful in grave digging. While digging, he found something that resembled a glazed jar. He wrapped it in a dirty handkerchief, got up, and said:

"Here's the ditch. Exactly the size of the suitcase, not a hair off!"

I put my hand in my pocket to pay him. All I had was two *qerans* and one *Abbasi*. The old man, uttering a ghastly laughter, said:

"Forget it! It is a *raq* vase from the ancient city of *Rayy*."⁸

Then he was laughing. His figure was doubled up! His shoulders were shaking. He had put the jar which was wrapped in a dirty handkerchief, under his arm. He went to the corpse-carriage, and with amazing agility, sat down on the seat.

The sound of the whip was heard. The panting horses began to go. In the damp air their bells had a special ring to them. The carriage disappeared in the mist.

When alone, I felt relieved; as if a heavy weight had been taken off my chest. I felt a pleasant comfort. I looked around myself. It was an area confined to jet black hills and mountains. On one of the mountain ranges, one could see remnants of ancient buildings made from thick bricks. In that vicinity a dried up

⁷ Both *qeran* and *Abbasi* are worthless coins emphasizing the lack of value in worldly things. They are worth 5d. and 1d., respectively. For further detail, see the analysis, see also Qotbi 1972: 64 for a different interpretation of the meaning of these coins.

⁸ *Raq*—of or belonging to the ancient city of *Rayy* [see also Qotbi 1972: 65]



river could also be seen. It was a cozy, secluded, quiet place. I was extremely happy, and I was thinking that those dark eyes, when they woke up from that earthly sleep, would find this place suitable for their structure and appearance. Besides, she had to be buried away from the people: away from the people's dead, as her life was secluded and away from other people's.

I picked up the suitcase gingerly and put it in the middle of the ditch. The ditch was exactly the size of the suitcase, not a hair off. At the end, I wanted to peek in the suitcase only one more time. I looked around myself, not a soul could be seen. I took the key out of my pocket and opened the suitcase. When eventually I pushed the edges of her black gown aside, amid the clot of blood and worms that were wiggling, I saw a pair of eyes fixed on me. My life had sunk below, at the bottom of those eyes. I closed the suitcase quickly and put some dirt on it. Then I picked some black lilies and put on her grave. Finally, I strewed some rocks and sand on the grave to make it indistinguishable. Her grave was camouflaged so nicely that I myself couldn't distinguish it from the rest of the ground.

When my work was finished, I looked at myself. My clothes were dirty and torn and a black clot of blood was stuck to it. Two golden fly-bees were flying about and around me. Small worms were stuck to my body and were wiggling. I wanted to clean the blood stain on my jacket, but the more I wedded my sleeve and rubbed it on the stain, the more expanded and colorful the blood stain became. It was covering all my body and I was feeling that chill of the jelly-like blood.

It was near sunset. A light rain was falling. Involuntarily, I started to follow the tracks of the corpse-carriage, but as soon as it grew dark I lost the trace of the carriage tracks. Unintentionally and thoughtlessly, I was walking towards an unknown destination. It was growing darker and I didn't know where I would end up. Since the moment I had seen those large eyes, I was walking in the darkness that had submerged all my life. The two eyes that served as light in my life had become extinguished for good. In my case, it was not important whether I would reach any place or not.

It was as quiet as it is in the grave. It seemed to me that everyone had abandoned me. I took refuge in lifeless beings. A relationship was established between me, the nature and the darkness that had sunk into my soul. This silence has a language that is not comprehensible to us. The intoxicating effect of it was so strong that I felt dizzy. I felt I wanted to vomit. I proceeded to the graveyard and there sat on a tombstone. Bewildered as I was, I took my head in my hands. I then saw a figure with a scarf wrapped around his head and face sitting beside me. Something wrapped in a handkerchief was under his arm. He turned his face toward me, and said:

"You probably wanted to go to the city and lost your way, yea? Perhaps you are asking yourself, what am I doing in the graveyard this time of night? Don't panic, I work with dead bodies. I am a grave-digger. Not a bad job, yea? I



know every inch of this place. For example, today I went and dug a grave. This vase came out of the ground. It is *raq* vase. It is from the ancient city of *Rayy*, yea? Let's say I give it to you as a souvenir from me!"

I put my hand in my pocket and took two *qerans* and one *Abbasi* out of it. He gave a hair-raising laughter and said:

"Never, that is nothing. I know you. I know where you live, right around the corner. I have a corpse-carriage, too. Let me take you to your house, yea? It's only a couple of steps away!"

He put the jar in my lap and got up. He was laughing so violently that his shoulders were shaking. I picked up the jar and followed the stooped, old figure. At the bend in the road, there stood a ramshackle corpse-carriage with two meager black horses. With amazing agility, the old man pulled himself up on the corpse-carriage and sat down on the seat. I went in the carriage and lay down in the place which was specially built for coffins, putting my head on the edge of it to be able to see the view around me. I put the jar on my chest and held it tightly.

The whip whistled through the air. The horses set off panting. They were taking long, yet smooth steps. Their hooves touched the ground slowly and noiselessly. The sound of the bells on their necks had a special ring to them. The stars, like bright eyes pulled out of their sockets and put amid blood clots, were watching the earth. A pleasant relief had filled all my being. The jar was pressing on my chest like the heavy weight of a corpse. Intertwined trees with their crooked, wry branches had inter-locked arms as though trying to support each other in the enshrouding darkness. On the sides of the road, there were located strange houses in geometrical designs with few, forlorn, black windows. A sickly, dim radiance emanated from the walls of the glow worm-like houses. The awe inspiring trees were passing by us in clumps and groups escaping, one after another. However, it seemed that lily stalks were entangling their feet and causing them to fall down. The smell of death, the smell of decomposing flesh had filled my life and soul. The smell of death had penetrated throughout my body, as though I had been lying in a black coffin all my life, being carried around amid mist and transitory shadows by a stooped, old man whose face I could not see.

The corpse-carriage stopped. I picked up the jar and jumped down. I was in front of the door of my house. I hurried into the house and put the jar on the table. Then, I fetched the tin can, which served as my piggy bank, from its closet hiding place and returned to the door. My intention was to give the tin can to the old man for his labor. But he had disappeared. There was no trace of either him or his carriage. Disappointed as I was, I returned to my room, lit the lamp, took the jar out of the handkerchief and, using my sleeve, cleaned the dust off it. The jar had an ancient, brilliant purple glaze, which now appeared like a broken-up golden bee. One side of it looked like a diamond with a strip of black lilies around it. In the middle of it...

In the middle of the diamond figure I could see her face... the face of a woman with large, black eyes. Eyes larger than usual, reproachful eyes—as



though I had committed some unforgivable crime—were painted on the vase. Spell-binding eyes, which at the same time were worried, perplexed, threatening and inviting. The eyes were afraid, yet attractive, with a supernatural radiance beaming from their depths. She had prominent cheeks, high forehead, slender, connected eyebrows, full, half-opened lips and disheveled hair, a strand of which had stuck on her temple.

From the tin can I produced her picture that I had painted the previous night. I compared it with the picture on the jar; there was not the slightest difference. They were pictures of each other; both painted at the hand of the same unfortunate painter of pen-cases. Perhaps, at the time of my painting, the spirit of the painter of the jar had replaced my spirit and, in the process, had taken possession of my hand. One could not distinguish the two except for the fact that my painting was on a piece of paper, while the painting on the jar had an ancient, brilliant glaze, which imparted a mysterious, singular soul to the painting: in the depths of her eyes a restive soul sparkled. No. It cannot be believed. The same large, thoughtless eyes, the same introvert, yet free expression. No one can understand the feeling I had. I wanted to run away from myself. Was such a thing possible? Once more, all my misfortunes materialized in front of my eyes. Weren't one person's eyes enough in my life that now two people were looking at me through her eyes? No. It definitely was unbelievable. Those same eyes, which were buried in that faraway place near the mountain, at the side of a cypress tree, near a dry stream, the place on which I put the black lilies—the same eyes, which were amid a clot of blood, worms, beasts and other animals, which had a party around her—the same eyes in the sphere of which grassroots were penetrating to suck the sap out, were now staring at me in full life!

I had never imagined myself being so unfortunate and cursed. In spite of the murderous feeling which was hidden in me, I felt a strange happiness, the reasons for which were unknown to me. I had found out I had an ancient companion. Wasn't the person who had painted the picture on the jar hundreds, perhaps even thousands of years ago, my fellow sufferer? Until now, I thought myself to be the most wretched of creatures; then I recalled the time when over those mountains, in those ruined houses and villages built of heavy sundried bricks, a people had lived whose bones now have rotted, their ingredients forming the body of black lilies. Among these, there had lived an afflicted, accursed painter, perhaps an unfortunate pen-case cover maker just like me. Now I could understand that he, too, had been burning and melting in the midst of two large black eyes, exactly like me. This comforted me.

Eventually, I put my painting beside the painting of the man who painted the jar. Then, I prepared my special pot of fire. When the fire was ready I took the fire pot, placed it in front of the paintings; I then gave many pulls to the opium pipe, until I reached a state of ecstasy. I stared at the pictures. I was trying to collect my wits, which state of mind only the ethereal smoke of the opium could create for me.



I smoked all the opium I had until the strange concoction pushed aside the curtains that were in front of my eyes. It dispersed all those far away dense, grey recollections. Finally, I reached the state I was waiting for. It was beyond my expectations: gradually my thoughts grew more accurate, large and enchanting. I was in the state between sleep and half-coma.

Then, I felt that the weight on my chest was taken away. It seemed that the rules of gravity had lost their value for me and I could fly after my thoughts which were now large, delicate and precise. A deep, unspeakable ecstasy had filled my being from head to toe. My body had been relieved of a heavy burden. It was a quiet world full of enchanting and delectable shapes and colors. Soon my thought processes were broken and dissolved in the colors and shapes. I was floating amid thoughts that were ethereal and caressing. I could hear my heart beat. I could feel the movement of blood in my veins. This state was, for me, full of meaning and ecstasy.

From the bottom of my heart, I desired to give myself up to forgetfulness and sleep. I would achieve my desire only if this forgetfulness could become possible, if it could be durable, if my eyes could close and pass beyond sleep into nothingness so that I could not feel my being, if it were possible for me to become part of an ever-growing black stain, a music note or some colored beams in which my being could never be retraced.

Gradually, a state of torpor and numbness overtook me. It was like a pleasant fatigue or like tender waves emanating from my body. Then I felt my life pass into retrogression. Gradually, I could perceive the events and stages; the obliterated, forgotten reminiscences of my childhood. It was not that I was only seeing these things; I was taking part in their formation. I could feel that I was getting smaller and smaller until suddenly my thoughts became dark and vague. It seemed to me that all my being hung at the end of a thin hook hanging at the bottom of a dark, deep well. Then I was unhooked to fall freely—without any obstacle—down a never ending abyss in eternal night. After that, vague, obliterated curtains appeared in front of my eyes. I experienced a moment of utter oblivion. When I came to, I found myself in a small room, in a special position which seemed strange, yet was quite natural for me.

* * *

4. THE REBIRTH

I was well acquainted with the environs and ways of the world in which I had opened my eyes. It was so familiar that I can even say I felt more at home in this world than the world in which I had previously lived. It seemed like a reflection of my real life. It was a different world, nevertheless, so near, and relevant to my being that it seemed to me that I had returned to my natural environs. I had been born in an ancient, yet more natural world.



The dawn was just breaking. A tallow-burner was burning on the mantle of my room. There was also a bed, spread in the corner of the room. I was still awake. I felt that my body was hot and that blood stains were stuck to my cloak and scarf. My hands, too, were bloody. But, in spite of fever and giddiness, a special excitement and agitation was generated in me which overshadowed the thought of obliterating the traces of blood, or the fear of the magistrate coming to pick me up. Come to think of it, I had been looking forward to being picked up for a long time now. But I had decided to finish the whole content of the poisonous cup of wine which I had on the niche. It was the urge to write that had turned into a duty for me. I wanted to drag out the fiend that had been torturing me from inside. I wanted to put my complaints down on paper. Eventually, after a momentary hesitation, I pulled the tallow-burner to myself and began to write:

* * *

5. THE DWELLING

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

Now I intend to take my whole life in my hand; like a bunch of grapes press it and, drop by drop, pour its juice, no, its wine, into the dry throat of my shadow. But, before going, I want to write on paper all the pains that, like cancer, have eaten away at me in the corner of this room. In this way I can better organize my thoughts. Do I intend to write a will? Never, because I have no property that can be confiscated by the government, nor do I have any faith that Satan can take away from me. Anyway, what on earth can have the least value for me! What is "life" I have already lost? I let it be lost. When I leave this world, I don't give a damn if anyone reads my tattered notes. I am writing because now writing has become a necessity for me. I have to; more than ever before I need to relate my thoughts to my imaginary creature. This ominous shadow that is bent on the wall in front of the light of the tallow-burner and reads as though swallowing carefully whatever I write. This shadow definitely understands better than I do! I can hold a good conversation with only my shadow. It is my shadow that makes me speak. Only my shadow can know me. It definitely understands... I want to, drop by drop, pour the juice, no, the bitter wine of my life into the dry throat of my shadow and say to it: "This is my life!"

Whoever had seen me yesterday, he had seen a broken, sick young man; but if he looked at me today, he would see a stooped, old man with white hair,



sore eyes and a split lip. I am afraid to look out of the window of my room or look at myself in the mirror, because all over the place I see my own reflection. But, in order to explain my life for my stooped shadow, I should narrate a story. Oh, how many stories exist on the subject of childhood, love, copulation, wedding and death. None of them is true. I have become tired of telling stories.

I will try to press this cluster, but whether there will be truth in it, I don't know. I don't know where I am, and the patch of sky above my head, or the ground on which I am sitting belongs to *Nishapur*, *Balkh* or *Banaras*.⁹ Anyway, I don't trust anything.

I have seen so many contrasting things and have heard so many contrasting words; my eyesight has traveled over so many surfaces—this same thick, yet hard tissue behind which the soul abides—I do not believe anything. I even doubt the weight and proof of things; I doubt the plain, visible facts belonging to this very moment. I don't know if I touch the stone mortar in the corner of our courtyard with my finger, and ask: Are you stationary and firm? If it says yes, I don't know whether to believe it or not.

Am I a distinguished, singular being? I don't know. But when I looked in the mirror a little while ago, I did not recognize myself. No, that previous "I" has died and decomposed, but there is no dam or hindrance between us. I should narrate my story, but I don't know where to begin. All life is stories and tales. I should press the grape cluster and pour its sap, spoon by spoon, in the dry throat of this old shadow.

Where should it begin? Because all thoughts in my head now belong to this moment. There is no hour, minute or date. A happening of yesterday can be more ancient for me than an event that happened a thousand years ago.

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

In the middle of the four walls that create my room and the wall which surrounds my life and thought, my life melts away gradually, like the life of a candle. No, I am mistaken. My life is like a wet fire-wood stump at the side of the boiling pot. It has become scorched and charred by the fire of other wood, but has neither burnt nor remained wet and fresh. It has become choked from the smoke and steam of others.

⁹ The city of *Banaras* is important in relation to the life of the Buddha. It was near Banaras that the Buddha started his preaching of the *Dharma*. [For further discussion, see Humphreys 1955; 25ff.]



Like all rooms, my room is built of sun-dried and baked bricks on the ruins of thousands of ancient houses. It has a white interior with a strip of inscription. It looks exactly like a grave. The smallest details of my room, like the spider in the corner, are enough to occupy my thoughts for long hours. Since I have become bedridden, no one attends my affairs regularly. The horse-shoe nail in the wall is the supporting nail for the swinging cradle that held my wife and me. It could have supported the weight of other children later. A little distance below the nail, the plaster has come off. From the exposed interior the smell of things and beings which had previously occupied this room can be detected. A smell so strong that no air currents or wind has been able to dispel these stagnant, lazy, dense odors: the smell of bodily sweat, past sicknesses, bad breath, sweat of feet, the sharp smell of urine, rancid oil, rotten mats, burnt omelets, fried onions, homemade medicine, smell of mallow and baby diapers, smell of the room of a boy just reaching the age of puberty; steams that have come from the outside as well as odors of the dead or the dying. All these smells are alive and have kept their distinctive qualities. There are many other smells the origins of which are not known but have left their traces.

My room has one closet and two windows to the outside, to the world of the bums. One of them opens to our own courtyard and the other to the street: this latter links me up with the city of *Rayy*. The city which is called the bride of the world. It is a city with thousands of alleyways, suppressed houses, *madrasas*, and *caravanserais*. The city, which is the biggest city of the world breathes and lives behind my room. When I close my eyes here in the dark, vague and scrambled shadows of the city: as much as it has affected me—its mansions, mosques and gardens—all materialize before my eyes.

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

Of all urban views of the city, a small butcher's shop is in front of the window of my room. Daily it sells two sheep. Whenever I look out of the window, I see the butcher. Early every morning two gaunt, sickly pack-horses, which cough heavily and whose lean forelegs end in hoofs, as if a severe natural law has decreed their hands to be cut off and the stumps plunged in boiling oil, appear in front of the shop carrying a sheep carcass on each side. The butcher strikes his hennaed beard with his greasy hand; first he appraises the carcasses with a buyer's eye, then he selects two of them. He weighs the fat in their tail in his hand, and then takes them and puts them up on the hooks in his shop. The pack-horses, breathing heavily, begin to go. Then the butcher caresses these bloodstained headless bodies, their staring eyes and bloody eyelids protruding from the middle of their black skulls. Then he brings a bone-handled knife, carefully cuts them up and sells the meat to his customers smilingly. What a pleasure he takes in doing all this! I am sure he derives pleasure from this. That



yellow thick-necked dog which has preserved our locale for himself and who is constantly looking greedily, yet innocently, at the hands of the butcher; he also knows all this. Even that dog knows that the butcher loves his work!

A little farther away, under an archway, a strange old man in front of whom is spread a canvas sheet is sitting. On his cloth a sickle, two horseshoes, several types of colored beads, a long-bladed knife, a gap-toothed comb, a trowel, and a glazed jar over which he has thrown a dirty handkerchief. I have watched this old man through the window for hours, days, months. He always sits in the same position and wears a dirty scarf, a cloak made in *Shushtar* through the open collar of which the white hair of his chest has protruded; a talisman is attached to his arm, and his eyelids are sore as if being eaten away by a stubborn, shameless disease. Only on Thursday evenings he reads the Koran through his yellow or missing teeth. This could be how he makes his living, for I have never seen anyone buy anything from him. It seems that his face has appeared in most of my nightmares. What weed like persistence, foolish thoughts grow in his close-cropped head on which there is a protuberance and around which he has wrapped a yellowish turban? There seems to be a special relation between his assortment of wares and his life. Several times, I decided to go and talk to him or buy something from his display, but I did not dare.

My nanny told me this man had been a potter in his youth, and has kept this one jar for himself. Now he earns his living as a retailer. These were my links to the outside world. Now, in the inner world for me, there was a nanny and a whore for my wife. But granny is her nanny, too. She is the nanny of the two of us. Because, not only my wife and I were relatives, but nanny had breast-fed us simultaneously. Let us say her mother was my mother as well, for I have never seen my mother and father. Her mother, that tall lady who had grey hair, brought me up. It was her mother whom I loved like my mother and it was due to the same affection that I married her daughter.

6. THE BIRTH

I have heard many stories about my parents. But, in my own imagination, I believe only one of those stories—the one nanny told me—must be true. Nanny said that my father and uncle had been twin brothers; both had the same forms, appearance and temper. Even their voices had been identical. This resemblance had been to the extent that any distinction between the two created difficulty.

Besides this, there had existed between the two a mental bond of sympathy, so much so that if one of them fell ill the other one would fall sick as well. As they say, they were like an apple cut in half. Eventually, both of them chose commerce for their profession and at the age of twenty went to India. They used to take *Rayy* goods like shot silk, painted cloth, cotton cloth, *jubbas*, shawls, needles, ceramics, fuller's earth and pen-case covers to India and sell them there. My father had been in the city of *Banaras* and had been sending my uncle to other



Indian cities for the purpose of commerce. After some time, my father falls in love with a virgin Bugam Dasi girl, a dancer at the Temple of the Linga. This girl's work had been the performance of ritual dance in front of the big idol, as well as attending the temple. She had been a warm-blooded girl with olive color skin, lemon shaped breasts, large slanted eyes and narrow connected eyebrows between which she wore a red beauty spot.

Now, I can imagine Bugam Dasi, my mother; dancing quietly and harmoniously to the tune of the *setar*,¹⁰ drums, lute, cymbals and horns, in her gold, open breasted, embroidered, silk sari, her brocade headband, wearing her heavy black tresses which recalled eternal night, knotted behind her head; with her wrist and ankle bracelets, her golden ring that pierced the nostril, her large, languid, slanting eyes, and her brilliant set of teeth. She had been dancing to a monotonous, soft music played by bare men wearing *shalmas*—a meaningful tune in which the mystery of all magic, superstition, lusts and suffering of the men of India is summed up. In rhythmic ritual and lustful gestures—holy movements—Bugam Dasi unfolded like flower petals and re-folded in the process shaking her shoulders, bending her body, and standing upright. These speechless, yet eloquent movements with their special meanings must have affected my father, particularly when the acrid, pepperish smell of sweat mingled with *champac*¹¹ scent and sandalwood oil, had increased the lustful sense of this scene. My father's long last forgotten memories had been awakened by a scent similar to the smell of faraway trees reviving choked, distant feelings, the smell of a medicine box, the smell of drugs from India that are in rooms for infants. Perhaps these unidentified oils of a land which is full of meaning, tradition, and ancient rituals had had the smell of my home-made concoctions. My father becomes so ensnared in the love of Bugam Dasi that he embraces her religion, the cult of the Linga. But when the girl becomes pregnant, they expel her from the service of the temple.

I had just been born when my uncle returned from his travels to *Banaras*. His taste and sense of love apparently being the same as that of my father, he fell deeply in love with my mother and eventually seduced her. His apparent resemblance and mental correspondence to my father made that easy. When the truth was uncovered, my mother declared that unless my father and uncle undergo the trial by cobra, she would leave both of them. The survivor of the trial would own my mother.

The details of the trial indicated that my father and uncle should be thrown in a dark room, like a dungeon, in which a cobra had already been let loose. It was taken for granted that the person stung by the cobra would naturally shout, which process would signal to the snake charmer to enter the room and save the other. Bugam Dasi would belong to him.

¹⁰ A musical instrument with three strings resembling a mandolin which is favored by Indian musicians.

¹¹ *Champac* is an Asian tree with usually yellow fragrant flowers.



Before throwing them in the dungeon my father asks Bugam Dasi to repeat the temple dance in front of him. My mother accepts this request, and in the light of the flames, and in harmony with the flute of the snake charmer, she performs the meaningful, measured, gliding movements, twisting herself about like a cobra. Then, they threw my father and uncle into a special room with a *nag*-serpent.¹² Instead of a terrifying shriek, a moan mixed with hair-raising peal of laughter is heard: the laughter of a madman. When they opened the door, my uncle comes out of the room. His face ravaged and old, his hair white due to the terror aroused by the sound of the body of the cobra sliding and hissing with its round glittering eyes, its poisonous fangs and its body comprising a long neck, terminating in a spoon-shaped form and a little head.

In accordance with the terms of the trial, Bugam Dasi belongs to my uncle. The frightful fact, however, remains. The man who survived the trial could be either my father or my uncle. Because the "trial" had deranged the mind of the survivor making him forget his past life, he could not recognize the child. This was the reason for the decision that the survivor must have been my uncle. Isn't this entire tale relevant to my life? Don't the reflection of that hideous laughter and the terror of this trial bear on me? Isn't this all related to me?

Henceforth, I had been a mere intruder: an extra mouth to feed. Eventually, the survivor (my uncle or father) accompanied by Bugam Dasi returned to the city of *Rayy* on business. He brought me with him and left me with his sister, who would be my aunt.

My nanny continued that my mother, when saying goodbye, handed my aunt a wine-flask, in the red wine of which, poison from the fang of the *nag*, the Indian serpent, had been dissolved. What other keepsake can a Bugam Dasi leave her son except deep red wine, the elixir of death which brings about eternal peace. Perhaps she, too, had pressed her life like a cluster of grapes to hand the wine of it to me. Some of the same venom that killed my father. Now, I recognize the gift she had left for me!

Is my mother alive? Perhaps this very moment as I write she is dancing in a remote city in India, twisting and bending her body like a serpent under the light of flames in a *maydan*.¹³ She bends and twists as though a *nag*-serpent has bit her. Women, children and naked, curious men surround her while my father or uncle, white-haired and stooped, is sitting in a corner watching her, recalling the dungeon, the hissing and the sound of the sliding body of the angry serpent as it holds its head high, his eyes glitter, its neck takes the form of a scoop and a grey line looking like spectacles appear behind its neck.

Anyway, I was a nursing child when they put me in the arms of nanny. Nanny had also nursed my cousin; the whore, my wife. I grew up under the

¹² For the significance of the *nag*-serpent see the analysis in chapter four of this text.

¹³ *Maydan*—an open multipurpose field in which most of the social gatherings of the community is held.



supervision of my aunt, the tall lady whose hair was gray on her temple. I grew up in the same house with her daughter, this same whore.

7. THE MARRIAGE

Ever since I can remember, I have looked upon my aunt as my mother and have loved her. I loved her to the extent that I married her daughter, my very foster-sister, because she looked like her mother. In fact, I had to marry her. She gave herself to me only one time. I will never forget that. It happened at the bedside of her mother. It was quite late at night and everyone was asleep when I entered the dead woman's room in my pajamas to say goodbye for the last time. Two camphor candles were burning at the head of her bed. They had put a Koran on her stomach to prevent Satan from entering her body. When I pushed the cloth which covered her face, I saw the dignified and attractive face of my aunt. It seemed that all earthly ties had been dissolved in her face. There was an expression on her face that made me respect her, as seeing her face made me realize death is a normal, natural happening. A faint, ironical smile had dried on the corner of her lips. I wanted to kiss her hand and leave the room when turning my face, to my astonishment, I saw the same whore who is my wife now. She entered the room and right in front of the dead mother, her mother, she pressed herself hard against me. She was pulling me to herself, kissing me passionately. I was ashamed and bewildered as to what I should do. I preferred sinking to the ground rather than watch the dead body with its visible teeth mock us. It seemed to me that the quiet smile of the dead body had changed. Involuntarily, I pulled her into my arms and kissed her. At this same moment, the curtain drapes of the adjacent room were drawn and my aunt's husband, the father of the same whore, entered the room. He was bent and was wearing a scarf.

He burst into a hideous laughter that made one's hair stand on end; and his shoulders shook violently. He did not look at us. I preferred sinking to the ground or else if I could slap the dead body so it would not mock us like that. What a disgrace! I ran out of the room in terror. For the sake of the same whore. She must have brought about this scene to make me marry her.

In spite of our being foster brother and sister; I had to marry her simply to save their reputation, which was now at stake. Besides, she was not a virgin either. I did not know this. I never could know. There were rumors going around. For example, on our wedding night when we were left alone, to all my begging and imploring, she did not heed and did not take her clothes off. "Wrong time of the month," she said. She even did not allow me at her side. She put the light out and went to the other corner of the room and slept there. She was shaking like a willow tree, as if she had been thrown in a dungeon with a dragon. No one believes this and it is hard to believe, she did not allow me even once to kiss her cheek. The next night, too, like the first night, I did not dare touch her and slept on the floor. I slept there for many nights. Who believes this? Two months, no, two months and four days, I slept away from her and did not dare go near her.



Her virginity token had already been prepared. I don't know whether she had sprinkled the blood of a partridge on a handkerchief, or else, it was the very kerchief she had used the first night of our gallantries and was now revealing it to mock me still more. People who congratulated me would wink at each other perhaps saying to themselves: "the poor chap must have found out last night!" but I ignored all that. They were laughing at me. They were laughing at my stupidity. I had decided to write all this down one day.

After I found out that she has all sorts of lovers, I thought maybe she does not like me because a *mullah*¹⁴ had put her under my authority by reciting a couple of Arabic phrases. Perhaps she wanted to be free. Eventually, one evening I decided to invade her bed and I carried out my decision. But after a lot of struggle in the bed she got up and left the bed. I satisfied myself to spend the night rolling in the bed that had the warmth of her body and smelled like her. That was the only night that I ever had a good night's sleep. After that night she separated her room from mine.

In the evenings, when I came back to the house, she would still be out. In fact, I did not know whether she had come back or not. Truthfully, I did not want to know; because I had been condemned to loneliness and death. No one would believe this, but I tried at all costs to establish contact with her lovers. I would watch for those who had caught her fancy; then, in order to win their acquaintance, I would humiliate myself flattering them, and eventually guiding them to visit her bed-chamber. Do you know who her lovers were? Tripe-peddlers, jurists, liver-peddlers, the police chief, a *mufti*,¹⁵ a trader and a philosopher. But even though they had assumed different names and titles, they were all apprentices of the man who sells boiled sheep's heads. She preferred all these to me. No one will believe the extent to which I humiliated myself. I was afraid that I might lose my wife. I wanted to learn the mannerisms that attracted her to her lovers, but I ended up as a sorry pimp, mocked by the fools. How could I learn the ways of the bums? I know now that she liked them because they were shameless, foolish and smelly. Her love was inseparable from dirt and death. Did I really want to sleep with her? Was it her outward features that had attracted me to her, or her hatred towards me? Was it because of her general behavior or my life-long love for her mother, or all of these combined, that had attracted me to her? No. I don't know. I know only one thing. I do not know what potion this woman, this whore, this witch had poured in my soul that made all the atoms of my being desire her atoms. My whole being shrieked its necessity for her and desired earnestly that I be with her on a remote island where there are no people. I wished that all the bums outside my room who breathed, ran around and had fun would be struck by an earthquake, a storm or a tornado, so that only she and I would remain alive.

¹⁴ *Mullah*—an official who follows and interprets the Islamic law—the *shari'a*. He usually wears a turban and a long robe.

¹⁵ *Mufti*—a canon lawyer, related to *fatwa*, the formal opinion of a canon lawyer.



Even then, wouldn't she prefer some other animal, an Indian serpent or a dragon, to me? I wish we could spend one night in each other's arms and die there and then. This seems to be the sublime culmination of my existence and life.

8. THE SICKNESS

It seemed that this whore enjoyed torturing me, as though the pain that was eating into me was not enough. Eventually, I could no longer work or move about freely. I should say, I became a moving corpse. No one knew the secret which exists between us. My old nurse, who was now the witness to my gradual death, reproached me. It was for the sake of the same whore that behind my back and around me people whispered: "how does this poor woman put up with this lunatic husband?" They were right, too. The degree of my degeneration was incredible.

I wasted away day by day. When I looked in the mirror, my cheeks were the color of the meat at the butcher's—red. My body was hot and my eyes were languid and depressed. I was pleased at seeing my changed appearance because I could see the dust of death in my eyes and I had realized that I had to go.

At last they sent for the physician—the physician of the bums, the physician who, in his own words, had brought us all up. He entered the house. He was wearing a yellowish turban and a long beard. He was proud of his having given my grandfather drugs to strengthen his virility, and that he had poured home-made drugs down my throat and cassia down my aunt's. Anyhow, as soon as he sat at my bedside he felt my pulse, looked at my tongue and ordered me to drink ass's milk and barley water. I also had to fumigate twice a day with mastic and arsenic. He also gave a number of lengthy prescriptions to my nurse. These consisted of drugs extracted from boiled plants, weird and strange oils like hyssop, olive, licorice preserve, camphor, maiden hair, chamomile oil, oil of bay, linseed, fir-tree seeds and other such trash.

I grew worse. My nurse, white-haired and old, who was her nurse as well, was the only person who used to sit at my bedside. She dabbed cold cloths on my forehead and brought me herbal extracts. She also used to talk to me about the events of my childhood and that whore. For example, she would tell me that in her cradle my wife had had the habit of chewing on her left hand fingernails until they would become sore. Sometimes she told me stories. I recall that these stories took me back in age and produced a childish state in me because they related to those times. The time when I was very little lying beside my wife in a double sized cradle in a room. I recall her telling the same stories. Then, I could not believe some of the episodes in those stories, but now those same episodes are natural happenings for me.

The illness had created a new world in me. This was an unrecognizable, vague world full of shapes, colors and desires unimaginable to a healthy person. I could feel in me the struggles of the characters in those tales. I felt that I had become a child, experiencing even this moment when I am writing. All those



feelings belong to the present and have nothing to do with the past.

Perhaps the transfer of the behavior, thoughts, desires and customs of the ancients to later generations through the medium of those tales, had been one of the necessities of life. For thousands of years they have said these things, have done the same fuckings, and have had these same childish predicaments. Isn't life itself, all of it, a funny tale, an incredible story? Am I not writing my own story and myth? Stories are only a way of escape from unfulfilled desires; unfulfilled desires imagined by various story makers according to their own inherited, narrow mentality.

I wish I could sleep quietly like the days when I was an ignorant child. A comfortable, tranquil sleep from which I could wake up with red cheeks, the color of the meat at the butcher's, my body hot and coughing. What horrifying coughs! Coughs which could not be traced to any of the lost hollows in my body. Like the coughs of the horses that, early in the morning, bring sheep corpses to the butcher's.

I recall clearly when it was totally dark; I was in a state of trance. Before sleep took me, I was talking to myself. At this moment, I felt, in fact, I was sure, that I had become a child and was lying in the cradle. I felt someone was near me. It was a long time since everyone had gone to sleep. It was around daybreak. Those who are sick know that, at such hours, life leaves the limits of this world. My heart was beating hard, but I was not afraid. My eyes were open, but I could not see anyone because the darkness was thick and dense. Several minutes passed and a sick man's thought crossed my mind. I said to myself, "perhaps it is she!" At this very moment I felt a cool hand on my burning forehead.

I shuddered. Two or three times I asked myself: "hasn't this been the hand of the angel of death?" Then I went to sleep. When I awoke in the morning my nurse said her daughter (I mean my wife, that whore) had come to my bedside and had put my head on her knee, rocking me like a child. Perhaps the maternal feeling had been awakened in her. I wish I had died that very moment. Perhaps the child she was pregnant with had died. Had her child been born yet? I did not know.

In this room, which was steadily growing narrower and darker than a tomb, I was constantly waiting for my wife. But she would never come. Wasn't my present condition of her making? I am not joking when I say it was three years, no, two years and four months; but what are months and days anyway? They have no meaning for me. What significance can time have for a person living in a grave? This room was the grave for my life and thoughts. All the hassle, noises and apparent life symbols of the others, the bums who are all cast physically and mentally the same, had become strange and meaningless for me. Since I had become sick, I had been awakened to a strange and incredible world and had no need for the world of the bums. It was a world full of the unknown. It seemed as if I had to search every hole and crevice in that world.



During the nights, when my being was floating between the two worlds, a moment before I would submerge in a deep, hollow sleep, I would dream. In the twinkling of an eye, I would enter a world distinct from my own. I was breathing in a different atmosphere and I was far away. I closed my eyes, and my own real world would appear to me. These imaginary pictures had a life of their own. They appeared and disappeared freely, as if my decisions had no effect on them. But that is not sure either, because the sights that materialized in front of me were not ordinary dreams. I was not asleep yet. In silence and quietude, I used to separate these pictures and compare them. It seemed to me that until then, I had not known myself and the world had lost its usual meaning for me. It was replaced by darkness which ruled over it. They had never taught me to look at the night and like it.

I don't know whether at such times my arms were under my control or not. I used to think that my hand, if I left it to itself, would start to move without my instruction. My body, also. It, too, could do unexpected things, if I were not involuntarily controlling it. It was a long time since I have conceived the idea that I was undergoing a living decomposition and disintegration. At times I used to think of things that I could not believe. At times I experienced a feeling of pity for which my reason reproved me. Often when engaged in a discussion, or when doing something, I used to talk on various topics while at the same time my mind was elsewhere. This made me reproach myself. I was a mass in the process of decomposition and disintegration. Perhaps I have been like this from the start and will remain as such—a strange compound of incompatible elements...

The unbearable fact is that I felt to be quite distant from the people I saw and lived with, yet there was a superficial resemblance, a vague and remote relatedness between us. We had only the routine necessities of life in common and this used to diminish my sense of surprise. The resemblance that was most painful for me was that the bums liked the whore, my wife, exactly as I did. But she liked them better. I am certain that there was something wrong with one of us.

I called her the "whore" because no other name will fit her description. I do not want to call her my wife, because the husband-wife relationship did not exist between us, and thus, I would be telling myself a lie. I have always called her the whore, from the very first day. But this name had a special attraction. If I married her it is because she came to me first. That also was part of her tactics. No, she had no love for me. I cannot imagine it. How could she love anyone? She was a sensual woman who needed one man to quench her lust, one to play the gallant and one to undergo torture. I don't think these three categories exhaust her list, but she had definitely chosen me for torture. She could have no better choice. I married her because she resembled her mother; and because she had a distant resemblance to myself. I not only loved her, but every atom of my being wanted her: especially the middle of my body. I do not want to hide true feeling under the fanciful veil of love, fondness and theosophy. I don't like literary euphemism either. I thought that a pulsation—a kind of aureole, like those they draw around



the head of the saints—was wallowing in the middle of my body. It seemed that my sickly, diseased aureole was seeking hers, striving with all its might to attract hers to itself.

9. THE ESCAPE

When I felt better, I decided to leave the house. I decided to go and lose myself: like a dog afflicted with leprosy who knows he should die; like the birds who hide themselves at the time of their death. Early in the morning I got up, picked up the two biscuits from the niche; then making sure that no one saw me, I ran away from the house. Aimlessly I walked in the lanes and wandered among the bums who, with greedy faces, were in pursuit of money and lust. I did not need to see them. One of them was representative of the rest: a mouth leading to a wad of guts terminating in a sex organ.

Suddenly, I felt that I had become more agile and lighter. The muscles of my feet had started to operate with a quickness and speed that I could not imagine. I felt that I have been freed from all the fetters of existence. I raised my shoulders. This was a natural movement for me. As a child, I always used to raise my shoulders when I felt free from some burden or responsibility.

The sun was high and burning. Now I was in a depopulated alley. On my way there were grey houses with strange, singular, geometrical shapes: cubic, prismatic, conic houses with low, dark windows. The windows which had no shutters looked to be without owner and temporary. It seemed that no living being could ever inhabit those houses.

The sun, like a golden knife scraping the edge of the shadows, was diminishing them. The alleys were spread among the ancient, white-washed walls. Everywhere was quiet and still as though all elements were observing the sacred rule of the quietude of burning air and silence. It seemed that a mystery was hidden everywhere and my lungs did not dare inhale the air.

Suddenly I realized I had left the city gate. The heat of the sun, as if with a thousand sucking mouths, was drawing sweat out of my body. The desert bushes had turned the color of turmeric under the blazing sun. The feverish eye of the sun, from the bottom of the sky, was casting its burning heat on the silent, lifeless scene. The soil and plants of this area had a special aroma. It was so strong that upon inhaling the air I recalled my childhood hours. It not only materialized that stage in my memory, but it made me feel it for a moment; as if it had happened yesterday. I felt an agreeable giddiness as if I had been reborn in a lost world. This feeling had an intoxicating effect; like an old, sweet wine it went through my veins and sinews and affected my very existence. In the desert I could recognize the thorns, rocks, tree stumps and tiny shrubs of wild thyme. I could detect the familiar smell of the vegetation. I recalled my own remote times, but these recollections were magically distant as if living an independent life of their own. I was nothing but a distant, helpless witness. I felt that between me and those recollections a deep whirlpool was dug. I felt a hollow in my heart. The shrubs



had lost the magical smell of those bygone days. The distance between the cypress trees had increased. The hills were drier. The creature that was I then, no longer existed. If I materialized him in front of me and talked to him he would neither hear nor understand me. He would be like someone I had known before who had never been me or part of me.

The world seems like an empty, sorrowful dwelling. My heart was filled with trepidation, as if I had to look into all the rooms in this house with bare feet. I was passing interconnected rooms, but when I would reach the last room to face that "whore", the doors behind me would close of their own accord. Only the trembling shadows of walls the corners of which were obliterated, like black slaves, were guarding me.

When I reached this *Suren* river, a dry, empty mountain appeared in front of me. Its dry and hard body reminded me of my nurse. I don't know what relation existed between the two. I passed the mountain. I reached a small, green enclosure surrounded by mountains. The ground was covered with black lilies and on top of the mountain, stood a tall fort made of heavy bricks.

At this time, I felt tired. I went and sat on the sand under the shade of an ancient cypress tree by the *Suren* river. It was a lonely, secluded spot. It seemed that no one has ever set foot on this place. Suddenly, I noticed a little girl who emerged from behind the cypress trees. She was going to the fort. She had a black dress probably made a fine, light silk. She was biting her left hand nails and moving freely, as if sliding, as she passed. It seemed to me that I had seen her and that I knew her; but under the intense light of the sun, I could not see how she suddenly disappeared.

I was petrified in my place. I could not move even slightly. This time I had seen her with my own physical eyes—she appeared and disappeared. Was she a real creature or a figment of my imagination? Was it a dream, or was I awake? The more I tried to recall, the less I succeeded. I felt a special tremor down my spine. It seemed that all the shadows of the fort on the mountain had come alive and that the girl had been one of the ancient citizens of the city of *Rayy*.

The scene in front of me suddenly struck me as familiar. I remembered that as a child I had come here on a *sizdah* outing along with my mother-in-law and that whore. We ran after each other around those cypress trees for God knows how long, then a group of other children joined us. I cannot quite remember. We were playing hide and seek. Once I chased this same whore to the *Suren* river. She slipped and fell into the river. They helped her out and took her behind the cypress tree to change her dress. I followed them. A *chador*¹⁶ intervened between us but I peeked. I could see her whole body from behind the tree. She was smiling and biting the finger of her left hand. Then they clad her in a white cape and spread her black silk dress under the sun to dry.

¹⁶ A cover worn by women, it is a large piece of cloth used as a combination head covering, veil, and shawl by Muslim and Hindu women and girls. It is worn in a way that only the eyes can be seen when the garment is held by the inside edges.



Finally, I lay down on the fine sand at the foot of the cypress tree. Like interrupted, unintelligible murmurings in a dream, the noise of the water reached my ear. I sank my hands involuntarily in the warm, damp sand. I was pressing the damp, warm sand in my fist. It felt like the firm flesh of a girl who had fallen in the water and whose clothes have been changed.

I do not know how much time passed. When I got on my feet, involuntarily, I started to walk. Everywhere it was quiet and still. I was going without seeing my whereabouts. A power over which I had no control was moving me. All I cared for were my steps. I was not walking but sliding my feet, like the girl in black. When I came to, I saw that I was in the city in front of my father-in-law's house. I don't know why I happened to pass my father-in-law's house. His small son, my brother-in-law, was sitting on the platform. He and his sister were like two halves of the same apple. He had slanting *Turkmen* eyes, prominent cheeks, wheat-colored complexion, lustful nose and a thin strong face. He had his left index finger in his mouth. Involuntarily I went forward, took the biscuits out of my pocket, and gave them to him saying: "*Shajun* has sent these for you." He used to call my wife *Shajun*, instead of his own mother. With his slanted *Turkmen* eyes, he cast a strange look at the biscuits that he held doubtfully in his hand. I sat on the platform and pressed him tightly to myself. His body was hot and the calves of his legs were similar to those of my wife. He had the same unceremonious manners as she. His lips were like those of his father. But whatever in his father used to create disgust in me, in his possession it created attraction and charm. It seemed that his half-open lips had just finished a long warm, kiss. I kissed his half-open lips which were like my wife's. His lips had the taste of cucumber ends: bitterish acrid. Probably the whore's lips had the same taste.

At this moment, I saw his father—the stooped, old man who wore a scarf—come out of the house. He passed without looking at me. He was laughing convulsively. It was a dreadful laughter, which made one's hair stand on end. His shoulders were shaking because of it. I was so ashamed that I would rather have sunk into the ground. I got up on my feet as if intending to run away from myself. Involuntarily, I headed for home. I did not see anything. You can say I was passing through an unknown, unfamiliar town. Around me there were scattered a number of strange, geometrically built houses with black, deserted windows. It seemed that no creature could inhabit them. Their white walls were shining with a faint light. What was incredible was that whenever I happen to stand between one of these walls and the moon, my shadow would appear on the wall big and dense, but headless. My shadow did not have a head. I had heard that whoever was a shadow that has no head dies before the year's end.

Terrified as I was, I entered my house and took refuge in my room. At this same time, I had a bloody nose and after losing a lot of blood I fell unconscious in my bed. My nurse began tending me.



Before going to bed I looked at my face in the mirror. My face was aged, colorless and without any spirit. It was so colorless that I did not recognize myself. I went on the bed, under the quilt. I drew the quilt over my head. I rolled and faced the wall. I curled up my legs, closed my eyes and continued my ruminations—these fibers, which constituted my dark, sorrowful, terrible, yet delightful destiny. The place where life and death meet and distorted images are created; past, dead desires, obliterated, choked desires come to life again and cry aloud for vengeance. At such moments I was severed from nature and the visible world and was ready to annihilate myself in the eternal flow of things. Several times I muttered: "death, death—where are you?" This calmed me and my eyes closed.

When my eyes were shut, I saw that I was in the *Mohammadiye* square. They had set up a high gallows and had strung up the odds-and-ends seller, who usually sat in front of my room. Several drunken watchmen were drinking at the base of the gallows. My mother-in-law, her face glowing with anger, just like the face of my wife as her lips lose color and her eyes become round and terrifying, had my hand in hers and ploughing among the crowd was pointing me to the hangman saying: "string this one up, too..." Terrified, I jumped up from sleep. I was burning like a hot oven. My body was wet with sweat and a burning heat was glowing on my cheeks. To save myself from this nightmare, I got up and drank some water and sprinkled some on my face and head. I went back to bed, but I could not go sleep.

In the light of the room I was staring at the water jar, which was on the niche. It seemed to me that as long as the water jar was on the niche I could not sleep. I had a groundless fear that the water jar was going to fall down and I got up to secure it, but due to some unknown stimuli of which I was not aware, I hit the water jar on purpose. The water jar fell and broke. I pressed my eyelids together, but I was struck with the thought that my nurse had got up and was looking at me. I clenched my fists under the quilt, but nothing extraordinary happened. In a state of coma, I heard the front door open followed by the footsteps of my nurse's slippers as she dragged them on the ground. She went and bought bread and cheese for breakfast.

Then the far-off cry of the street vendor was heard: "mulberries are good for bile!" No, tiresome life, as usual, had begun. The light was growing brighter. When I opened my eyes I saw the flickering of the reflection of a patch of sunlight on the pond falling on the ceiling through my window.

10. THE NURSE

Now the dream of the past night seemed very distant. It was as if I had had it when I was a child. My nurse brought my breakfast. It seemed that her face was reflected on a magic mirror. It looked very thin and elongated. It had an incredibly funny expression, as if some weight was pulling her face down.



In spite of her knowledge that water-pipe¹⁷ smoke was bad for my health, nanny still kept smoking in my room. It was a fact that unless she smoked she could never be herself. She had talked so much about her house, her daughter-in-law and her son to me that by now I was actually taking part in her lustful delights. How foolish! At times, without any reason, I used to think of the people at nanny's, but for some reason everything related to the lives and joys of others made me nauseous. I knew, however, that my life had come to an end and will be tragically extinguished. What did the lives of the fools and bums, who lived well, ate well and fucked well, who did not have the slightest feeling for my pains and on whose faces the wings of death had not been robbed, have to do with my life?

Nanny treated me like a child. She wanted to see everything. I still felt shy before my wife. Whenever I entered my room, I used to cover my own phlegm which I had spat in the basin. I would comb my hair and beard. I would set my nightcap straight. But with my nurse I did not feel shy at all. Why had this woman, who had no relationship with me, involved herself so much in my life? I recall now the winters when they used to set up the *korsi*¹⁸ in this same room which is above the cistern. My nurse, myself and the whore, all three used to sit around the *korsi*. In the dim light, when I opened my eyes, the design on the embroidered curtain hanging in the doorway would come alive. What a strange, horrifying curtain! The picture depicted on the curtain consisted of a stooped, old man resembling the Indian *yogis* with a turban. He was sitting under a Cypress tree. In his hand he had a *setar*. In front of him there was a beautiful young girl who looked like a Temple Bugam Dasi dancer. Her hands were in chains and it seemed that she had to dance for him. I thought to myself, this man whose beard and hair have turned white must also have been thrown in a dungeon with a *nag-serpent*.¹⁹

It was one of those gold-embroidered Indian curtains which were probably sent by my father or uncle from far-off lands. If I focused my attention on this picture for a long time, it used to frighten me. I used to awaken my nurse. She, with her bad breath and coarse black hair, would hug me tightly. When I awoke in the morning she still looked the same except for the lines on her face, which were now deeper and harder.

In order to forget everything and to run away from myself, I used to recall my childhood. This was to help me forget my sickness and make me feel I was healthy. I still felt that I was a child and that there was a second being that would have pity for me—pity for this child who will die.

¹⁷ Water-pipe is an instrument for smoking tobacco whereby the smoke passes over water in a jar at the bottom of the device. In English it is also referred to as a hubble-bubble.

¹⁸ *Korsi*: a device for heating houses in the winter. It consists of a low table, a brazier which is placed under it, and a quilt which covers the top of the table and hangs loose on the sides. The family usually sits around the table with the legs and lower part of the body covered by the quilt.

¹⁹ For the reasons for the changes in the components of this picture, see pages 136-1137 of the analysis.



In my moments of distress, the quiet face of my nurse: her pallid face, her dark, motionless, sunken eyes, her thin nostril wings and her wide bony forehead, used to revive those memories in me. Perhaps some mysterious waves emanated from her which brought me comfort. On her Temple there was a fleshy mole covered by hair. This was the first time I ever saw her mole. Never before, whenever I looked at her, did I look so closely.

Although outwardly nanny had changed, her thoughts had not changed at all. Her desire for life had increased, so had her fear of death: flies which invade the house at the beginning of autumn. My life was changing by days, even by minutes. It seemed to me that the course of events which usually took other people years to go through had been speeded up a thousand times for me. Conversely, the pleasure I derive from this was tending to zero, even sub-zero degrees. There are people who start their struggle with death when they are only twenty. Then, there are others who are extinguished like a tallow-burner which has run out of fuel.

When at noon time my nurse brought my lunch, I upset the soup bowl and I shrieked. I shrieked with all my might. All the people in the house crowded in front of my room. That whore also came but went away quickly. I looked at her belly, it had swelled. No. Her child had not been born yet. They sent for the physician. I was inwardly delighted to have troubled this foolish lot.

The physician, with his long beard, came and had me smoke opium. What a valuable drug opium was for the pains of my life! Upon smoking opium my thoughts would grow large, subtle, magical and elevating. I traveled in a world different from the ordinary. My thoughts were freed from the weight of earthly gravitation and soared towards an empyrean tranquility and quietude. It was as though I was put on the wings of a golden bat to roam a radiant, empty world unimpeded. This experience was profound and delightful; it even surpassed death.

When I was done smoking, I went towards the window, which opened to our courtyard. My nurse was sitting under the sun cleaning vegetables. I heard her as she was saying to her daughter-in-law: "We all have lost our hearts; I only wish God would put him out of this misery!" I think the physician had told them that I could not be cured.

As for me, I was not surprised a bit. How foolish they are! She was saying these things, while an hour ago; she had brought me boiled herbal extracts. Then her eyes were swollen and red because of excessive crying. When she saw me she forced a smile. They were play-acting in front of me and that how clumsily! Did they think I did not know it? Anyway, why was this woman so very fond of me? Why did she deem herself a companion of my sufferings? Once she had been paid and she had thrust her bucket-like, black, wrinkled nipples in my mouth. I wish her breasts were struck by leprosy. Now, looking at her breasts, I felt nauseous at the thought of having sucked the sap of her life out of those breasts while our body temperatures had blended. At that time, she used to handle me all over for the same reason, now, too, she treated me with a boldness that suited only a



widow. She still regarded me as a child simply because she had held me over the latrine. Who knows! Perhaps she had used me as her lesbian partner as well, just like adopted sisters that women choose for themselves.

Now, too, she did not miss a thing when she took care of my, as she put it, "intimate concerns." If my wife, that whore, would attend me, I would never allow nanny to touch me. Because I thought that my wife's scope of thought and feeling for beauty was superior to that of my nurse, or else my feeling of bashfulness and shyness were created by lust.

For such reasons, I felt less bashful with my nurse. She was the only one who looked after me. I suppose my nurse believed that fate had arranged things this way, and that her star had put my responsibility on her shoulder. Using my sickness as an excuse, she would tell me all about her family: their joys, their quarrels. She revealed to me all corners of her simple, cunning beggar-like soul. She was not happy with her daughter-in-law whom she regarded as a rival wife. Nanny thought that her daughter-in-law stole some of the love and lust of her son from her. All these were said in an inexpressible, vengeful tone. Her daughter-in-law must be beautiful. I have seen her through the window which opens to the yard. She has hazel color eyes, blonde hair and a small, straight nose.

Sometimes my nurse talked to me about the miracles of the prophets. She thought she could console me, but I envied her low, foolish way of thinking. Sometimes she came to me with some pieces of gossip. For example, she told me several days ago that in an auspicious hour her daughter (meaning the whore) had been making a resurrection garment for the child, for her child. Then, as if knowing about it all, she sympathized with me. Sometimes she goes around the neighborhood and brings some drugs for me. She goes to the magician, the fortuneteller and the cupper. She consults them as well as the holy book for my condition. On the last Wednesday²⁰ of the year she went eavesdropping. She came back with a bowl full of onions, rice and rotten oil. She said that she had begged these for my health and later secretly made me eat the crap. At regular intervals, she would pour the physician's herbal extracts down my throat. These were the same unholy extracts that he had prescribed: hyssop, extract of licorice, camphor, maidenhair, chamomile, oil of bay, linseeds, fir-tree seeds, starch, and a thousand other kinds of trash.

Several days ago she brought me a prayer book with half a span of dust on it. But I did not need either the bums' assortment of books or their writings and thoughts. What did I want their nonsense and lies for? Wasn't I myself the result of a series of past generations? Weren't their experiences inherent in me? Did not

²⁰ During the evening of the last Wednesday of the solar year, a big fire is made. People jump over the fire and say, "My yellowness for you, your redness for me." Afterwards, they sit in a corner at the crossroads and listen to passersby. This method of looking into the future is followed by still a third element—gathering alms for the sick. This last, however, seems to be more Indic than Iranian.



the past exist in me? The rituals: the mosque, the *mu'azzin*,²¹ the ablution, the noisy spitting, the bow and prostration in front of an Almighty who can be communicated with only in Arabic, all of these have not had any effect on me.

Earlier, when I was healthy, several times I had been forced to go to the mosque. I even tried to harmonize my thoughts and feelings with the other people. But I would stare at the glaze and designs on the walls of the mosque, which transported me into a delightful dream world. When praying I used to close my eyes and hide my face behind the palm of my hands. I used to utter my prayers in this self-created night. My prayer words were uttered with the same mental irresponsibility as the words repeated in a dream. The pronunciation of these words was not whole-hearted. I preferred to speak to a friend or acquaintance instead of a God, an Almighty. God was too much for me.

As long as I was lying in a warm, damp bed I did not give a damn about these problems. In fact, I did not want to know whether there was a God in existence or if He was created by the rulers on the earth, who wanted to fortify their defined position, which helped them rob their subjects: they have reflected an earthly picture to the skies. All I wanted to know was whether I could bring night into morning. When faced with death, religion, faith and belief seemed inconsistent and childish. They seem like mere play-toys for the healthy and the lucky. Now, in my desperate condition, and faced with death as a reality, all I have been taught on the subject of spiritual reward and the resurrection day were but tasteless, deceitful notions. Even the prayers they had taught me were wholly ineffectual.

11. THE BUTCHER

No, the fear of death would not leave me alone. Those who have not experienced suffering will not understand these words. The urge to live is intensified in me to the extent that the smallest spark of pleasure compensates for many hours of palpitation and anguish. I recognized the existence of suffering, but it was void of sense and meaning. Among the bums, I had become a rare breed. They had even forgotten that at one time I was part of their world. It was a dreadful sensation to see myself neither totally alive nor completely dead. I was a moving corpse who had no relation to the world of the living and who derived no benefit from the quietude and tranquility of the dead.

* * *

When I left the opium fire pot, I looked out of my window. I could see a black tree and the shuttered door of the butcher's shop. Dark shadows had blended in each other. I felt that everything was empty and temporary. The dense black sky above resembled an old black tent pierced by a myriad of shining stars. At

²¹ The *mu'azzin* is the man who calls out the hour of daily prayers from the minaret of a mosque. Nowadays, he is being replaced more and more by the loudspeaker.



this time, I heard the *mu'azzin*. It was an untimely call to prayer. Perhaps a woman, maybe that whore, was on the bricks, giving birth to a child. Interspersed with the call I could hear the bark of a dog. I thought to myself: "if there is any truth in the saying that everyone has a star in the sky, my star must be remote, dark and meaningless. Perhaps I have never had a star!"

At this time, I heard the voices of a group of drunken night watchmen who were passing in the alley. As they were passing there were playing obscene, practical jokes on each other. Then together, they sang in chorus:

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

In terror, I pulled myself aside. Their singing had a special ring to it. Slowly their voices grew faint till they faded away. No, they had nothing to do with me. They did not know... Once more darkness and silence filled the place. I did not like the tallow-burner of my room. I wanted to sit in the dark. I had become accustomed to darkness, this dense liquid which permeates everything. It was in the dark that my lost ruminations, my forgotten fears, and my terrifying, incredible thoughts, for which I knew no source in my mind, came alive, moved about and mocked me. The corner of the room, behind the curtain and at the side of the door was inhabited by these thoughts—these threatening formless figures.

There, beside the curtain a frightening figure was sitting. It was not moving. It was neither gloomy nor cheerful. Each time that I turned my head in its direction, it was gazing directly at me. I was familiar with his face. It seemed that I had seen that face when I was a child. It was on the 13th of *Farvardin*. I was playing hide-and-seek with the children. The same figure had appeared to me. It appeared to me along with other figures, which were short in stature and harmless. Its face was similar to that of the same butcher across from my room. It was obvious that this person had been involved in my life and I had seen a lot of him. Perhaps it was the shadow of the spirit produced at my birth and was thus within the restricted circuit of my life...

As soon as I got up to light my tallow-burner, that figure disappeared. I went to the mirror and stared at my face. The reflection in the mirror was not familiar to me. It was incredible and horrible. My reflection was stronger than myself and I had become like the reflection in the mirror. It seemed to me that I could not remain in the same room with my own reflection. I was afraid that if I ran, it would chase me, just like two cats that encounter for a fight. I lifted my hand to create an eternal night in its palm. Often the feeling of terror brought a special state of intoxicating pleasure. At such times, I felt giddy, my knees gave way and I felt nauseous. Suddenly I realized that I was standing on my feet. This was like a miracle for me. How could I be standing on my feet? I felt that if I moved my legs, I would lose my equilibrium. I had a special giddiness. The earth



and its creatures were very distant from me. In order to be born in a quiet, bright world, I was vaguely hoping for an earthquake or tornado.

When I wanted to enter the bed, with closed lips, several times I repeated, "death... death." I was afraid of my own voice. I seem to have lost my original courage like the flies who invade the house at the beginning of Fall: lean, lifeless flies which are scared of the sound of their own buzzing. They cling in a corner. As soon as they find out that they are alive, they fling themselves recklessly against doors and windows and their dead bodies fall around the room.

As soon as my eyes closed, a vague world would appear in front of my eyes. A world created by me to fit my thoughts and observations. It was a much more real and natural world than my world when I was awake. It was as though there were no obstacles or barriers facing my thoughts and imagination; time and place had lost their effect. This purged feeling of lust, which produced sleep was in itself created by my hidden needs. It used to create incredible forms and events. Even at the very moment of awakening, I was still doubtful of my existence. I had no sense of time and place. I must have created these dreams with prior knowledge of their interpretation.

It was late at night when I fell asleep. Suddenly I found myself walking freely in the alleyways of an unknown city with strange geometrical houses: prismatic, conic and cubic with low dark windows. Their doors and walls were covered with lotuses. I was breathing freely. However, all the people of the city had died a strange death. They all had become petrified in their places; two drops of blood had come out of their mouths and run on their clothes. Whoever I touched, his head broke off and fell down.

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

The dawn was just breaking. It seemed to me that the ceiling was pressing on my chest and choking my heart. The walls had grown too thick. My chest was about to burst open. My eyes had become dim. For some time, I stared at the posts supporting the ceiling, counting and recounting them. When I pressed my eyelids together I heard the door. Nanny had come to clean my room. She had taken my breakfast upstairs. I went upstairs and sat in front of the sash- window. From that high up I could see the butcher on the left. His movements, which seemed frightening, grave and measured from my window, now seemed helpless and comical. It seemed that he actually was not a professional butcher, but was



pretending to be one. They brought the black, lean mares which coughed a hollow, deep cough, and carried two sheep carcasses. The butcher stroked his beard with his greasy hand, appraised the sheep with a buyer's eyes; then, exerting some effort, he took two and hung them on the hook in his shop. He was rubbing his hand on the thighs of the sheep as if caressing them. Who knows he does not think of the sheep at night when he takes his wife's limbs in his hands! He might even think of the profit should he happen to kill her.

When the cleaning was done, I returned to my room and made a decision. It was a frightful decision. I went to the closet of my room and took the bone-handled knife I had in a souvenir box. I wiped the blade with the skirt of my long garment, which was open in the front. I put the knife under my pillow. This was an old decision, but there was something in the action of the butcher as he chopped up the legs, weighed them and looked at them with praise that made me involuntarily want to imitate him. It was necessary for me to experience this pleasure. From the window of my room, I could see among the clouds, a deep hole of blue in the sky. It seemed to me that in order for me to reach there I would have to climb a very tall ladder. The horizon was covered with thick, deathly yellowish clouds, which weighed heavily on the entire city.

It was horrible, yet intoxicating weather. I don't know why I was bending towards the floor. In weather like this, I always thought of death. But now that death with its bloody face and long hands was pressing on my throat, only now I decided, I should say I have decided to take that whore with me so that later she could not say: "May God have mercy on him. His troubles are over!"

At this time, they were carrying a coffin in front of my window. They had covered it with some black drapes. On the coffin they had lit candles. The cry of *la ellaha elalah*²² struck my ear. All the trades-people and passersby halted and followed the coffin for seven steps. Even the butcher, performing a ritual good deed, followed the coffin for seven steps then returned to his shop. But the odds-and-ends seller did not leave his display. Everybody looked serious. Perhaps they were thinking of the other world and the philosophy of life and death. When my nurse brought the herbal extracts for me, she was thoughtful. She was passing the beads of a large rosary between her fingers and praying. Then she came and said her prayers behind my door saying: *allahoma, allllahoma...* aloud.

I felt I was commissioned to forgive the sins of the living! But all this buffoonery had no effect on me. On the contrary, I was pleased that, even if temporarily and cunningly, the bums were thinking along the same lines as I. Wasn't my room a grave? Wasn't my quilt colder and darker than a tomb? The evenly spread quilt which constantly invited me! Many times I had thought that I was in a coffin. At night, my room seemed to shrink and press on me. Don't the dead experience the same feeling? Does anyone know about the feeling after death?

²² *La ellaha elalah* "there is no god but God" is an Arabic term denoting the act of professing the Islamic faith. It usually has "Muhammad is His prophet" added to it.



It is true that at the time of death blood ceases to circulate and after twenty-four hours some parts of the body start to decompose, yet the hair and nails keep growing for quite some time. What about sensations and thoughts! Do they, too, die when the heart stops or do they keep on living a vague life using the remaining blood in smaller vessels? In itself the feeling of dying is frightful, let alone feeling dead! There are old people who die with a smile on their face; you can say they go from one sleep to another. They are like a tallow-burner which burns out. But a robust youth who dies a sudden death, what are his feelings when all his bodily powers are fighting death?

I had thought about death and decomposition of my body components, and it no longer frightened me. In fact, I wished earnestly to die and cease to exist. However, what frightened me was that the atoms of my body might blend with those of the bums. I could not bear this thought. Sometimes I wished myself to have long hands with big fingers by which I could gather the atoms of my body and keep them to myself so that they would not mix with those of the bums.

Sometimes I thought that those in their death beds see the same things that I saw. I had lost all anxiety, awe, fear and zeal for life. Rejecting the beliefs that they had imparted to me, made me feel good. The only thing that consoled me was the hope of nonexistence after death. The thought of another life frightened and tired me. I was still not used to this world in which I was living; what good would another world do me? I felt that this world was not made for me. It was for a bunch of shameless, diabolical, rude, beggar-like mule-drivers who were hungry for both sight and wisdom and who are constantly bragging of the knowledge they never had. This world was created for those who suited it best; those who like the dog which wags its tail for a bit of offal in front of the butcher shop, flatter the mighty and the powerful of both the earth and sky. A thought of the second life frightened and fatigued me. No, I had no need to see all these nauseating worlds and repulsive figures. God had not acquired his collection of worlds recently to want to show them to me? I do not want to tell lies. If I had to live a second life, I wished it to be one in which I had dull thoughts and feelings. A fatigueless life in which I could breathe freely, live under the shade of the columns of the Linga temple. A world in which I could run around without the sun hurting my eyes. People's voices and the bustle of life hurt my ear.

* * *

12. THE FEARS

No matter how deep I plunged into myself, like animals who hide in a hole in winter, I still could hear the voices of other people with my ear and my own voice only in my throat. The loneliness and solitude that was hiding deep in me was as dense as the eternal night. Nights that have a sticky, dense, persistent darkness waiting to collapse on empty cities full of lustful vengeful dreams. But I



was no more than a kind of absolute, mad proof against the throat that I was for myself. The pressure that sticks two persons at the time of copulation is the result of a similar madness which exists in everyone. It is likened to a remorseful feeling which tends gradually toward the depth of death...

Only deaf does not lie.

The presence of death annihilates all superstitions. We are children of death and it is death that saves us from the deceits of life. It is death that calls us to itself from the depths of life. At ages when we are still not able to comprehend other people, if at times we interrupt our play, it is in order to hear the voice of death... It is death that point at us. Isn't this a natural phenomenon whereby people would suddenly plunge into thought to such depths that they lose track of all time and place? It takes a second effort to rejoin the current of the superficial life. This is the voice of death.

In this damp bed smelling of sweat, when my eyelids grew heavy, and I was prepared to surrender myself to nothingness and eternal night, my lost memories and forgotten fears came alive: I feared that the feathers in the pillow might become dagger blades, or the buttons on my coat would grow as large as millstones; or the piece of bread that falls on the floor might become glass and break. I was afraid that, should I fall asleep and the oil from the tallow-burner spill on the floor, the whole city might go up in flames. I was afraid that the paws of the dog in front of the butcher's shop might sound like the hooves of a horse, that the old odds-and-ends seller might laugh while at his display, so much that he cannot control himself, that the worm in the foot bath by the pond might become an Indian serpent, that my quilt might turn into a hinged gravestone and lock its marble teeth together and bury me alive, that I would suddenly lose my voice and the more I cried the less I could be heard...

I yearned to recall my childhood days, but when I succeeded and felt those times, they were grim and painful as ever before!

Coughs sounding like those of the lean, black horses in front of the butcher's shop, forced spitting and fear of seeing blood in it—blood, that tepid, salty liquid which emerges from the depths of the body—which out of necessity had to be vomited at the end—the constant threat of death, which irrevocably smashes all thoughts; all these, were not without fear.

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

There was something in the walls of my room that poisoned my thoughts. I was certain that before his death a madman, a lunatic in chains must have lived in this room. It was not the walls of my room alone; that butcher, the odds-and-



ends seller, my nurse, that whore and all other people that I used to see, even the bowl from which I had my food and the clothes on my body, they all had conspired to create those thoughts in me.

A few nights ago when I took off my clothes in the bathhouse my thoughts took a new direction. Later, when the bath-attendant was pouring water on my head, my black thoughts were washed away. In the bath-chamber I saw my shadow on the steamy wall. It was as brittle as ten years ago when I was a child. I could remember perfectly. My shadow used to fall on the esteemed wall in exactly the same way. I looked at my body. My thighs, my calves and the middle of my body revealed a lustful but disappointing state. They, too, had kept their shadow as it was ten years ago when I was a child. I felt that all my life had passed like a wandering shadow, like the flickering shadows on the walls of the bathhouse: no, without an aim, without a destination. But others were heavy, sturdy and robust. Perhaps their bigger and denser shadows on the steamy wall of the bathhouse lingered a while longer while mine disappeared instantaneously. When I returned from the bath-chamber to dress, once more my thoughts change direction. As though I had entered a new world: the same world in which I had been born. In any case, I had acquired a second life. It was a miracle for me to see that I did not dissolve like a chunk of salt in the bathing-pond.

* * *

To me, my life seemed as incredible as the design on the pen-case which I am using. A crazy, whimsical painter must have painted this picture on this pen-case. Often, when I look at this design, it seems familiar to me. Perhaps it is because of this same design... Perhaps this same design makes me write. Depicted on it are a cypress tree under which an old man like the Indian *yogi* is squatting. He has a turban on his head and has wrapped a cloak around himself. He has put his left index finger on his mouth in astonishment. Opposite, a girl in a long, black dress and with an unusual gesture, perhaps a Bugam Dasi, is dancing for him. She has a lily in her hand, and between the two of them a brook of water intervenes.

* * *

13. THE ODDS-AND-ENDS SELLER

At the side of the brazier, I dispersed all my dark thoughts amid the subtle, heavenly smoke of the opium. In this instant, it was my body that was thinking, it was my body that was dreaming, gliding as if set free from the dirt and contamination of the air. It was soaring in an unknown world full of unknown colors and shapes. Opium had breathed a vegetable soul, a sluggish vegetable soul into my body. I was part of a vegetable world. Had I turned into a plant? As I was dozing off in front of the fire pot and the leather ground-sheet with my cloak on



my back I recalled the odds-and-ends seller. He, too, used to sit in this position before his display. This thought created some fright in me. I got up, threw the cloak away and stood in front of the mirror. My cheeks were glowing and had the color of the meat in front of the butcher's shop. My beard was disheveled, but had a spiritual and attractive expression. My sickly eyes were tired, offended and childish. All heavy, earthly and human attributes had dissolved in me. I liked my face. I drew a certain lustful intoxication from myself. In front of the mirror I said to myself, "Your pain is so deep that it is stuck at the bottom of your eyes... If you cry, tears will either come from the back of your eyes or else it is not tears that come out!..."

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

There was no relationship among the string of thoughts that came to my mind. I could hear my voice in my throat, but I could not understand the meaning of the words. These sounds blended with other sounds in my mind. Like the time when I had a fever, my fingers looked longer than usual. My eyelids were heavy. My lips had become thick. When I turned my head I saw my nurse in the doorway. I burst into laughter. The face of my nurse was immobile and her lifeless eyes were staring at me. She showed no trace of surprise, anger or sorrow. Generally, the cause of all stupidity, as well as all other elusive things, for which no solution is suggested. It was what is lost in the darkness of nights—a superhuman phenomenon—death. My nurse picked up the fire pot and slowly left the room. I wiped the sweat off my brow. The palms of my hands were covered by some white flecks. I leaned against the wall and pressed my head against the bricks. I felt better. Then I recalled this familiar tune and started to sing:

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

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

At such times I was afraid of myself. I was afraid of everyone. Perhaps this had something to do with my illness. This is also the reason for the weakness in my thought. When I saw the odds-and-ends seller and the butcher in front of my window, then, too, I was terrified. I do not know what frightening thing there was in their actions and gestures. My nurse told me a frightening thing. She swore by the prophets that some nights she had seen the odds-and-ends seller go to my wife's bedroom and listening from behind the door she had heard my wife say,



"Take off your scarf!" It is indeed incredible. It was the day before yesterday or the day before that, when I shrieked and my wife came to my door, I could see, on the cheek of my wife, the marks of the old sellers dirty, yellow and decayed teeth from between which Arabic verses of the Koran flow. Why was it, anyway, that since my marriage this man has been hanging around my house? Had he forsaken the world for her sake? I remember I went over that same day to the old man's display and asked him the price of his jar. From behind his scarf, under the slit in his lips, there appeared two decayed teeth. He laughed. It was a hollow, hideous laughter that made the hair stand on end. He said, "Don't you look at what you buy? Don't mention it, take it young man. I hope it brings you luck!" His voice had a peculiar tone as he said, "Don't mention it, hope it brings you luck!" I put my hand in my pocket, took out two *dirhams* and four *peshiz*²³ and put them at the corner of the display. He laughed again. A loud, hideous laughter the made one's hair stand on end. I could have sunk into the ground with shame. I put my hands up in front of my face and returned home.

All the articles on his stand had the rusty, dirty smell of discarded junk refused by life. Perhaps he intended to show people the things which were rejected by life. Wasn't he, himself old and rejected? All the articles on his stand were dead, dirty and unserviceable, yet his stand had a special persistent life and meaningful forms! These dead articles had more effect on me than living beings.

But it was nanny who told me and later on spread the news... With a dirty beggar! My nurse told me that my wife's bed became infested with lice and she had gone to the baths. What kind of a shadow does she cast on the steamy wall of the bath-house? Perhaps a lustful shadow, very hopeful of itself. But this time I did not disapprove of my wife's taste. The odds-and-ends man was not a commonplace, flat, insipid man like the stud-males who attract foolish women with inordinate desire for coition. Perhaps the man himself was not aware of it, but these sufferings, these layers of misfortune encrusted on his head and face, the general misery that emanated from him, all these had created of him a demi-god. That dirty display in front of him was a personification of the creation.

Yes, I had seen on my wife's cheeks the traces of two decayed teeth from between which Arabic verses came out. The same woman, who would not admit me, who belittled me; yet, in spite of all this, I loved her. She had not allowed me to kiss her cheek even once!

14. THE WHORE

The sunlight was pale and yellowish. I heard the touching sound of a kettle-drum. An impressive sound of entreaty and supplication, which awoke all inherited superstitions and fear of darkness. The crisis, the approach of which I had already foretold, and for which I was waiting, arrived. I was burning from head to toe. I was suffocating. I went and threw myself on the bed and closed my

²³ *Peshiz* and *Abbasi* are both medieval coins.



eyes. The fever made me see things bigger and with margins. The ceiling instead of sinking had gone up. My clothes were pressing on my body. Without any reason I sat on my bed and murmured: "It is not possible anymore... It is unbearable..." Then I became silent. Then again aloud and slowly, as if mocking, I was saying, "more than this..." Then I was adding, "I am a fool!" I was not aware of the meaning of the words I was using. I was merely amusing myself by listening to the vibration of my voice. Perhaps I was talking to my shadow to dispel loneliness. Then I saw an incredible thing. The door opened and that whore came in. It seems that sometimes she thought of me. There were still reasons for being grateful. She, too, knew that I am alive, that I am suffering and that I will die. There were reasons to be grateful. Only I didn't know whether she knew that it was for her that I was dying. If she knew, I would die happy and content. Then, I was the happiest man on the face of the earth. When the whore entered my room all my bad thoughts fled. The rays which her body emanated made me feel comfortable. This time she felt better. She was fat and mature. She was wearing a cloak made of *Tusi* gusset material and had plucked her eyebrows, painted a beauty spot, died her eyebrows with woad; she had also used white powder and rouge on her face and collyrium on her eyelashes. In short, she entered the room all made up. She seemed happy with her life. Involuntarily, she put her left index finger in her mouth. Was this the same graceful woman, the slim, ethereal girl who used to wear a black crinkled dress? Was she the girl who played hide-and-seek with me near the *Suren* river; the girl with a free, childish gait and provocative, sexy calves showing from under the skirt of her dress? Until now when I looked at her I had not noticed them. But now, as if removing a curtain from in front of my eyes—for some reason, I was thinking of the meat at the butcher's shops—she had acquired the properties of a lump of lean meat and had lost all her past attraction. She had become a mature, grave, painted woman. All she thought of was life. A genuine woman! My wife! I realized with fright that my wife had grown up and acquired reason, while I had remained a child. To tell the truth, I was ashamed in her presence, especially before her eyes. The woman who yielded her body to everyone but me. I could console myself with only the fanciful recollections of her childhood when she had a simple, innocent face with dreamy, fleeting expressions. The time when there were still no traces on her face of the teeth of the odds-and-ends seller from the alley. No, this was not the same person.

She asked me in a sarcastic tone: "How are you?" I answered: "Aren't you free? Aren't you doing whatever you wish? Why bother about my health?"

She left me and slammed the door. She even did not turn around to look at me. Perhaps I had forgotten how to talk to the people of the world, to those who were living. The same woman who I thought had no feeling took offense at these words! Several times I decided to go to her, fall at her feet, cry, and say I was sorry. Yes, cry. Because I thought if I could cry, I would feel better. I do not know how many minutes, hours, or centuries passed. I was like a lunatic experiencing



pleasure in my own suffering. An ecstasy which was beyond human conception. An ecstasy which only I could experience. Even gods, if they ever existed, could not experience such ecstasy. At that moment, I discovered that I was superior. I discovered that I was superior to the bums, nature and all gods. Gods that are created through human lust. I had become a god. I was even bigger than a god; because in myself I was feeling an eternal, infinite flux...

... but she returned. She was not as cruel as I had thought. I got up, kissed her skirt and coughing and crying fell at her feet. I was rubbing my face against her calves and several times pronounced her real name. Her real name had a special ring to it. But in my heart, in the bottom of my heart I was repeating "whore... whore!" I embraced her leg muscles that tasted like cucumber ends: fairly bitter and acrid. I cried and cried. I don't know how much time elapsed, but when I came to, she had already left. For a very short moment I felt all the pleasures, caresses and sufferings of mankind. I had remained in front of the smoking tallow-burner, like the odds-and-ends seller in front of his display. I was not moving at all. I was staring at the smoke of the tallow-burner. The soot particles, like black snowflakes, settled on my hands and face. When my nurse brought me a bowl of barley-broth and chicken pilaf, she screamed in terror, backed away and dropped the tray. I was delighted to have frightened her. I got up, fixed the tallow-burner wick, and went to look in the mirror. I was rubbing the soot into my face. What a terrible face! With my fingers, I pulled the muscles under my eye and let go, tugged at the corners of my mouth, puffed out my cheeks, pulled the tip of my beard upwards and twisted, made all sorts of faces. My face had the talent for all sorts of frightening and comical expressions. I could, by means of these grimaces, see the indications of all hidden, incredible, horrible, comical faces which existed in me. I recognized, and in fact I could feel these states, yet they seemed comical. All these faces were in me and of me. Murderous, horrible, comical faces all at the mercy of one fingertip. In myself I saw the Koran reciter, the butcher, and my wife. As if their reflection was inherent in me. All these shapes were in me, yet were not in my possession. Wasn't the substance and expression of my face the result of an unknown stimulus brought about by quibbles, fuckings and inherited disappointments? Wasn't I, the inheritor guard of this conglomeration, persuaded by a comical, crazy feeling to keep these expressions in myself? Perhaps at the time of death these quibbles would leave me and allow my face to assume its natural shape.

Wouldn't these comical gestures at that very last moment, prove to be deeply incised in my face never to be effaced? In any case, I had knowledge of my capabilities. I knew what I could do. Suddenly, I burst into laughter. It was a hideous, frightening laughter, which made one's hair stand on end. I could not recognize my own voice. It was alien to me; a laughter that reverberated in my throat. It resounded at the depths of my ear, and in my ear. At this moment I coughed and a clot of bloody phlegm, a piece of my liver, fell on the mirror. I traced it on the mirror with my finger. When I turned around I saw nanny, her



face pale, her hair disheveled and her eyes lifeless. Frightened as she was, she had a bowl of barley broth like the one she had brought before, in her hand. She was staring at me. I covered my face with my hands, went to the closet and hid myself behind the curtain.

When I wanted to sleep, I felt a ring of fire around my head. My nose was filled with the smell of sandal oil that I had put in the tallow-burner. It had the smell of my wife's muscles and tasted like cucumber-ends, a mild bitterish taste. I was rubbing my hand on my body comparing my thigh, calves and arms with those of my wife's. I envisioned the lines of thighs and buttocks of my wife in front of me. It was even stronger than materialization. It was a necessity. I felt that I wanted her body near me. One movement, one decision was enough to dispel this lustful temptation. But this ring around my head got so narrow and burning that I was plunged into a sea of vague and mixed horrible shapes.

It was still dark. The voices of a group of drunken watchman passing in the lane woke me. They were playing practical jokes on each other. Then they all sang in unison:

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

I remembered, or rather, I was inspired by the fact that I had a flask of wine in the closet and of my room. A wine to which they had added poison from the fangs of a *nag*-serpent. A wine, one cup of which annihilated all the nightmares created by life... But that whore...? This word intensified my desire for her. It showed her to be more warm and lively.

What could be a better image than this. I give her a cup of that wine and gulp one myself. Then, both of us would die in the throes of a convulsion. What is love? For all the bums love is an obscenity, a transient vulgarity. One should look for the love of the bums in their obscene ditties, in prostitution and foul phrases. They repeat when they are swaying between sobriety and drunkenness. They think of making love as "showing the donkeys foreleg in the mud," or "putting dust on the head." Love towards her was a different thing for me. It is true that I knew her for many years now: strange, slanted eyes, narrow half-open mouth, a choked, quiet voice. All these were full of painful, distant memories. Among all these things I was looking for the thing I had been deprived of. I was seeking something that belonged to me but had been taken away from me.

15. THE DECISION

Was I deprived forever? The same line of reasoning caused a more frightful sensation in me. A separate pleasure that I was experiencing in compensation for my disappointed sense of love. It had become a necessity. For



some reason I was thinking of the butcher in front of my room who used to roll up his sleeves, say *bismillah* and cut the meat. His expression and attitude was always present in my mind. Eventually I, too, made a decision. A frightful resolution. I got out of my bed, rolled up my sleeves, and took the bone-handled, long-bladed knife from under my pillow. I stooped and put a yellow cloak on my back. Then, I wrapped my head and face with a scarf. I felt that I had acquired a composite of the characteristics of the butcher and the odds-and-ends seller.

Then, I tiptoed to my wife's room. Her room was dark. I opened the door slowly. She seemed to be dreaming. Aloud she was saying to herself: "Take off your scarf!" I went to her bedside and put my head against her mild, quiet breath. What a pleasant, life-giving warmth! It seemed to me that if I inhaled this heat for some time, I would become alive again. For how long had I thought others' breath should be as hot and burning as my own! I looked around carefully to see if any other man was in her room; to see if any of her lovers were there. She was alone. I realized that all the things they said about her were slander. How did I know she was not still a virgin? I felt ashamed because of all my superstitious thoughts about her. This sensation did not last long. From outside, I heard someone sneeze. Then, I heard a stifled, mocking laughter, which made my hair stand on end. This sound pulled all my veins out of my body. If I had not heard this voice and the laughter, I would, as I had decided, have cut her flesh into pieces and given it to the butcher in front of our house to sell to the people. I personally would have given a piece of her thigh to the Koran reciter as religious dues, then I would have gone to him the next day and said: "Do you know whose flesh you ate yesterday?"

Had he not laughed! Maybe I should have performed this act at night to avoid seeing the reproachful eyes of that whore. Eventually, I picked up a piece of cloth which was in my way and fled in haste out of the room. I threw the knife on the roof, because this long-bladed knife had created all these murderous thoughts in me. I got rid of the knife which was similar to that of the butcher's.

When in my room, in the light of the tallow-burner, I saw that I had picked up her dress. It was a dirty dress which had been on the flesh of her body. It was a soft silk dress made in India and it smelled of her smell of *champac* perfume. There was something of the heat of her body, of her existence in that dress. I smelled it, put it between my legs and slept. I have never slept so comfortably. In the morning, I awoke to the sound of my wife's clamors. It was about losing her dress. She was repeating: "a brand-new dress!" while it really was not new. It had a tear in its sleeve. I was not going to hand back the dress even if there were to be bloodshed over it. Didn't I have the right to an old dress of my wife's?

When nanny brought ass' s milk, honey and bread for me, she had also put a bone-handled, long-bladed knife at the side of my breakfast tray. She said she had seen it in the display of the odds-and-ends seller and had bought it. Then, raising her eyebrows up she said: "It might come in handy!" I picked up the knife and looked at it. It was my own knife. Then nanny in an offended querulous tone



added: "Well, my daughter (that is, that whore) at this early hour of the morning, claims that you stole her dress last night! I don't want to answer for anyone's sins... But yesterday your wife told me that she had seen streaks of blood... We knew the child... She said that she had become pregnant in the bathhouse. At night I went to massage her back. Her arm was spotted black and blue. She showed it to me and said: "Late last night I went to the seller and you-know-who pinched me!" Nanny said, "Did you know that your wife has been pregnant for a long time?" I laughed and said: "Perhaps the child looks like the Koran reciter. She must have been looking at him when the child first moved in her womb!" Nanny left the room in anger. She did not seem to have expected this answer. Immediately, I got up, took the bone-handled knife and with shaking hands, put it in the souvenir box in my closet and closed the top.

No. There was no possibility for the child to have stirred when she was looking at me. Certainly it had stirred on the odds-and-ends seller!

In the afternoon, the door of my room opened and her little brother, the little brother of that whore, entered the room chewing his nails. Whoever saw them could tell that they were brother and sister. That much resemblance! Small, narrow mouth; meaty, wet, lustful lips; languid, heavy eyelids; slanted, astounded eyes; prominent cheeks; disheveled, date-color hair and a face the color of wheat. He was exactly like that whore and had a bit of her satanic spirit. It was one of those *Turkmen*, unfeeling, spiritless faces built to fight life. A shape that would do anything to continue living. It seemed that nature had foreseen these. Their ancestors had lived under sunshine and rain, had fought the natural phenomena. They had inherent in them their endurance, lust, greed and hunger. I knew the taste of his mouth. It was like cucumber ends.

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

I said, "Tell her I have been dead now for quite some time."

"*Shajun* said, 'If I had not lost my child, all the house would become ours.'"

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

At this moment, I could understand the reason for the butcher's pleasure as he wiped his knife on the thighs of the sheep. It was the pleasure of cutting lean meat in which dead blood, like mud, had clotted. Blood and water that was dripping off the windpipe of the sheep. The dog in front of the butcher's shop, the severed head of the cow on the floor with its dim, staring eyes, the heads of all the sheep with eyes on which the dust of death had rested, they, too, new!

Now, finally, I understood that I had become a demigod. I was beyond all people's low, petty desires. I could feel the eternal, infinite flux. What is eternity? For me eternity was playing hide-and-seek with that whore on the shores of the



Suren river. It was hiding my head in her lap and closing my eyes for a short while.

Suddenly, I realized that I was talking to myself, and that in a strange way: I wanted to talk to myself, but my lips were so heavy that they could by no means be moved. But even without my lips moving or hearing my own voice, I felt that I was talking.

In this room, which like a grave was growing smaller and narrower by moments, night with its horrible shadows had surrounded me. My shadow in front of a tallow-burner which was smoking, with the sheepskin and the cloak that I had wrapped around myself and the scarf I was wearing was reflected on the wall.

My shadow on the wall was more profound and exact than my real body. My shadow was more real than myself. Perhaps the old odds-and-ends seller, the butcher, nanny and my whore of a wife had all been my shadows. Shadows among whom I had been a prisoner. I had become like an owl, but all my laments were caught in my throat, only to come out in the form of blood clots, which I spat out. Perhaps the owl also has an illness—it thinks like me. My shadow on the wall was exactly like an owl. It was reading my writings carefully. Doubtless he understood well. Only he could understand. When I looked at my shadow from the corner of my eyes, I was afraid.

It was a silent, dark night, like the night surrounding my life. It was full of frightening forms making grimaces at me from the door, the wall and behind the curtain. Sometimes my room became so narrow, as if I were sleeping in a coffin. My temples were burning and my limbs were not ready for the slightest move. A weight was pressing on my chest. It was like the weight of the corpses which they carried on the horses to the butcher's shop.

Death was quietly murmuring its song. Just like a dumb person who has to repeat each word, and when he reads a line of poetry to the end has to go back and read it a new again and again. The call of death, like the reverberations of a saw in flesh penetrated my body. It would shriek, and then, suddenly choke.

I had hardly closed my eyes when a group of drunken night watchman passed my room playing practical jokes on each other. They were singing together:

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

I said to myself: "What the heck! I will eventually be caught by the magistrate anyway!" Suddenly, I felt a superhuman feeling in myself. My forehead became cool. I got up and threw my yellow cloak on my shoulders, wrapped my scarf two or three times around my head; stooped, took the bone-handled, long-bladed knife from the souvenir box where I had hidden it, and went on tip-toes to that whore's room. When I reached there, her room was in utter



darkness. I listened carefully. I heard her say: "Are you here? Take off your scarf!"

Her voice had a pleasant ring to it. It was like her childhood days, as if unconsciously murmuring in her dream. I had heard this voice once before in a deep sleep. Was she dreaming? Her voice was muffled and thick, like the voice of the girl who used to play hide-and-seek with me on the shores of the *Suren* river. I hesitated a moment. Again I heard her say: "Come in! Take your scarf off!"

In the dark and slowly, I entered the room. I took off my cloak and scarf. I took off my clothes, but for some unknown reason entered the bed with the bone-handled, long-bladed knife still in my hand. The heat in her bed gave me a new life. Then I embraced her pleasant, damp and warm body thinking of the little, slim, pale girl with innocent large *Turkmen* eyes who used to play hide-and-seek with me on the shore of the *Suren* river. No, I attacked her like a savage, hungry beast. I loathed her from the bottom of my heart. I felt that love and hatred were mixed. Her cool, silvery body, my wife's body, opened up and enclosed me in itself like a *nag*-serpent coiling around its prey. The perfume on her bosom was intoxicating. The flesh of her arm, which coiled around my neck had a pleasant warmth. I was hoping my life would cease at this very moment. Because at this instant, all the hatred, and vengefulness that I felt for her disappeared. I was trying to keep myself from crying. I was not aware of it but her legs were locked behind mine, like the mandrake, and her arms were behind my neck. I could feel the pleasant warmth of the fresh flesh. All the atoms of my burning body were drinking this warmth. I felt that she was drawing me in herself like a prey. My senses of ecstasy and fear were mixed. Her mouth tasted acrid, like cucumber ends. I was sweating amid this pleasant pleasure and I was losing consciousness. Like my body, all the atoms of my existence ruling me shouted aloud their song of victory. I was condemned and helpless amid the shoreless sea, giving everything up to the whims of the waves. Her hair, which had the smell of champac, was stuck on my face. A cry of anguish and joy burst out of the depths of our being. Then, I felt that that she bit my lip savagely and slit it open in the middle. Did she chew her own finger like this, or did she realize that I was not the odds-and-ends, man? I tried to save myself but it was impossible to make the slightest move. All my attempts were futile. The flesh of our bodies had been soldered into one.

I thought she had gone mad. Amid the struggle, involuntarily, I jerked my hand and felt the knife, which I was still holding, as it sunk somewhere into her body. A warm liquid poured on my face. She shrieked and let go of me. I held to the warm liquid, which had accumulated in my fist and threw the knife away. I ran my hand, which was free now, across her body: it was utterly cold. She was dead. At this moment I burst into a fit of coughing. But it was not a cough. It was a hollow, hideous laughter that made one's hair stand on end. In terror, I threw my cloak over my shoulders and went back to my room. In the light of the tallow-burner, I open my fist. Her eye was in the palm of my hand and all my body was



covered with blood.

I went to the mirror. But filled with terror, I covered my face with my hands. I saw that I was like, no, that I had become the odds-and-ends seller. The hair of my head and beard were white like someone who had just walked out alive from a room in which a *nag*-serpent had been let loose. My lip was split open like that of the old man. My eyelids had no lashes and a bunch of white hair had grown on my chest. A new spirit had taken over my body. I had a different way of thinking. I was feeling differently, and was not able to release myself from the clutches of the demon that was awakened in me. As I held my hands in front of my face, I burst into laughter. Laughter more violent than the previous one. A laughter that shook me from head toe. It was such a profound laughter that I could not trace it to any lost hole in my body. It was a hollow laughter that merely echoed in my throat out of a hollow. I had become the odds-and-ends seller.

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16. THE JAR

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

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

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

