



Selections  
from Saadi's

**BUSTAN**

Translated by  
Richard Jeffrey Newman

International Society for Iranian Culture

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TRANSLATED BY  
RICHARD JEFFREY NEWMAN

Based on G. M. Wickens' 1974 translation.

Global Scholarly Publications

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*For Niloufar Talebi*



## *Acknowledgments*

This is the second of five translations I will publish with the International Society for Iranian Culture (ISIC) and Global Scholarly Publications (GSP). It is also the second book of translations I have ever done and so it represents both what I have learned since I published my *Selections from Saadi's Gulistan* in 2004 and what I have yet to learn about what it means to bring a literary text from one language into another. While I of course need to thank in this book many of the same people I thanked in the previous one—my wife Maryam and my son Shahob for their continuing support and patience, Iraj Anvar, Mehdi Faridzadeh of ISIC, Parviz Morewedge of GSP—there are new thanks I need to offer up as well.

A sabbatical from Nassau Community College gave me the time I needed to complete this work.

My father-in-law, Taghi Taherzadeh Samani, typed in Persian the original versions of those poems I submitted to literary journals.

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Paul Catafago of Movement One: Creative Coalition—on whose advisory board I unfortunately no longer sit—whose efforts helped to bring *Selections from Saadi's Gulistan*, and therefore classical Persian literature as a whole, both to an audience in my community that it might not otherwise have found and to the attention of other people whose excitement about this work and whose encouragement and support and have become important to me.

And Niloufar Talebi, executive director of The Translation Project, to whom this book is dedicated, whose initial challenge to me as a translator of Persian who is not fluent in and neither reads nor writes the language has blossomed into a professional friendship, and a working relationship, that has deepened my own sense of why I do this work and helped me to place it in the much larger context of the Persian literary tradition as a whole. Her commitment to the intellectual and creative integrity that is necessary for translation to do the cross-cultural work it is supposed to do sets a standard to which anyone who presumes to translate should aspire.

## *Author's Note*

Regarding the quotations from the Quran given in the footnotes: Since I assume that most English-speaking readers of this text are, like me, unlikely to have read much of the Quran, I have quoted in the footnotes the entire passage within which the verses quoted by Saadi appear. I do not mean to imply by this any particular interpretation of either the verses from the Quran quoted by Saadi or the passages in the *Bustan* where Saadi quotes them. I simply wanted to give readers a quick taste of the text that Saadi was quoting from. As in *Selections from Saadi's Gulistan*, I have used Ahmed Ali's translation of the Quran.

Instead of numbering the stories in the *Bustan*, as Wickens did, and labeling them with a phrase that summarizes the content of the story, I have chosen to give my versions of these poems titles, as if this were a book written and published today. Since Saadi did not himself give titles to his poems, however, I did not want to impose titles completely of my own invention on his work. Each of my titles, therefore, is a direct quote from the poem it frames.



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## *An Invitation*

Earlier this month in Montreal, at the annual conference of the American Literary Translators Association (ALTA), I was one of three translators on a panel called “Scheherazade on the Verge of a Makeover? Creating Contemporary Translations of Iranian Poetry.”<sup>1</sup> My talk focused on how creating contemporary versions of Saadi required me to be aware of how Saadi’s works in particular, and classical Iranian literature in general, has been translated at least since the 19<sup>th</sup> century in ways that explicitly colonize the text, presenting a skewed picture not only of the work of the writer being translated, but also of Iranian culture in general. More specifically, I wanted to show a connection between the colonial assumptions of those who translated Saadi in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and what I called the “spiritual colonization” of classical Iranian poetry by the popular and popularizing translations of Rumi and Haféz produced in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries by Coleman Barks and Daniel Ladinsky.

My goal, however, was not to demonstrate the flawed nature of the translations themselves. Since I am not fluent in Persian, that is not something I feel qualified to do.<sup>2</sup> Rather, my focus was on how “doing my homework”—learning what I could about the history of literary translation from Persian into English—helped me feel that the formal

and other choices I made as I worked had enough integrity that I could ask others to take them seriously. What I did not say in Montreal was that what I learned from doing my homework also made me angry.

My wife is from Iran. Our son, obviously, is therefore half-Iranian, and so the cultural heritage of Iran is his to claim. To the degree that he is growing up in the United States, however, his view of Iranian culture—as well as the perceptions of him as Iranian that he will have to deal with as he moves through life—will inevitably be framed by how Iran is seen in the United States; and the way Iran is seen in the United States cannot help but be shaped by the nature and quality of the translations of Iranian literature that are available to us. The lack of fidelity to the original in Barks' and Ladinsky's work, however—an obvious target for my anger in this context—is not what made me angry. Lots of translators misrepresent their original texts in all kinds of unfortunate ways, but that misrepresentation is not necessarily a sign of bad faith. What made me angry was what seemed to me to be the willful bad faith that I found in the introductions Barks and Ladinsky wrote for their books.

Here, for example, is Coleman Barks from the introduction to his *The Essential Rumi*:

“Mystical poetry *can* be a subject for study, but in its essential nature it is not something to locate or describe within a cultural context. [...] I [therefore] am not trying to place Rumi in his thirteenth cen-

ture locus. That is fine work, and I am grateful for those who do it. My more grandiose project is to free his text into its essence.”<sup>3</sup>

Leave aside Barks' essentializing of Rumi's text—an assertion that is problematic on its face—and note instead how breezily he dismisses from relevance the centuries of tradition and culture that formed the context in which Rumi wrote. None of that, according to Barks, is relevant to what he wants his translation to accomplish. What is relevant, Barks insists on the same page, is that mystical poetry “is a way to open the heart, as a Sufi master, or any enlightened being, is a door to the radiant depth of the self.”

Perhaps so, but the cultural context that Barks so blithely dismisses was also the cultural context of the Sufism that Rumi practiced, of his friendship with Shams, of his struggles with his students, of his spiritual and other joys and sorrows, of his childhood, his marriage—of everything, in other words, that made him who he was. It was the cultural context of the poems and sermons he wrote and of the formal and other linguistic choices he made while writing them—because Rumi was, if nothing else, deeply committed to the literary nature of his writing. It was the cultural context of the people who first heard or read Rumi's work and of their responses to it, and in the space of a few sentences Barks makes all of that vanish. Every single thing I have just named and everything single that is implied by what I have just named disappears into Barks' assertion that mystical po-

etry “is not something to locate or describe within a cultural context.”

Indeed, just a few pages later, in discussing his “more grandiose project” a little more fully, Barks makes clear that this vanishing is an explicit part of what he wants his book to accomplish:

The design of this book is meant to confuse scholars who would divide Rumi’s poetry into the accepted categories. [...] The mind wants categories, but Rumi’s creativity was a continuous fountaining from beyond forms and the mind, or as the sufis say, from a mind within the mind, the *qalb*, which is a great compassionate generosity.

The twenty-seven divisions here are faint and playful palimpsests spread over Rumi’s imagination. Poems easily splash over, slide from one overlay to another. The unity behind, *La’illaha il’Allahu* (“there’s no reality but God; there is only God”), is the one substance the other subheadings float within at various depths. If one actually selected an “essential” Rumi, it would be the *zikir*, the remembering that everything is God.

All of which makes the point that these poems are not monumental in the Western sense of memorializing moments; they are not discrete entities but a fluid, continuously self-revising, self-interrupting

*medium*. They are not so much *about* anything as spoken from *within* something.<sup>4</sup>

Where is Rumi in all of this? According to Barks, the differences between the genres in which Rumi wrote don't matter; the integrity of Rumi's imagination, the boundaries of it, don't matter; the fact that Rumi did indeed write poems as discrete entities, each one having a beginning and an end, doesn't matter. Rather, what matters is the spiritualization of Rumi's work—"They are not so much *about* anything as spoken from *within* something"—that Barks feels he accomplishes by what, in his most recent translation, *The Drowned Book: Ecstatic And Earthy Reflections of Bahauddin, The Father of Rumi*, he calls "transmission." Here is the full paragraph in which he explains how a translator arrives at "transmission."

What we do with the text then, the "second translation," which you will read here [Barks, who neither speaks nor reads Persian, is explaining how he works with the trots his collaborator produces for him], feels more like mystical play. [I try] to sense something like a presence moving within the images and ideas. This part of the translation, when it's working right, is done not with the mind but with an emptiness in the soul. Work with mystical text is not scholarly work. It's making oneself available to an attunement with other presences, which is more like love than studying, more like tasting

food than reading a menu. So this is not word-for-word, “faithful” translation. It is amplification, interpretation, and spontaneous contemplation on what Bahauddin wrote. A mystic hopes for *transmission*.<sup>5</sup>

In literary terms, what Barks is describing is a form of what Keats called negative capability, the ability of someone to live “in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.” Keats, however, was talking about a poet’s ability to produce his own work, not translate the work of another. By focusing in the above passage on the emptiness of soul that he believes is required to do translation, however, rather than the writing he is actually translating, I think Barks reveals that his primary interest too is his own work, the work of “amplification, interpretation, and spontaneous contemplation.” He is, in other words, concerned not with Bahauddin or Rumi themselves, but with what Bahauddin and Rumi represent, or, more accurately, what they can be made to represent through the “amplification, interpretation, and spontaneous contemplation” that Barks performs on what they wrote.

In *The Gift: Poems By Hafiz*, Daniel Ladinsky takes this presumptuousness one step further, reducing the value of translating Hafez’s poems—and, by implication, of the poems themselves—to the kinds of promises made by self-help books or motivational speakers.

It is a tremendous venture to translate an “untranslatable” masterpiece such as Hafiz’s verse, with its brilliant whirling synergy of idioms, especially into a language as spiritually young and evolving as English. I believe the ultimate gauge of success is this: Does the text free the reader? Does it contribute to our physical and emotional health? Does it put “golden tools” into our hands that can help excavate the Beloved whom we and society have buried so deep inside?<sup>6</sup>

Notice that neither Hafez nor the time and place in which he lived, nor even the poems he wrote appear anywhere in the objectives Ladinsky sets for himself as a translator. Like Barks with Rumi, what Ladinsky cares about is what he can make Hafez represent, and what he makes Hafez represent transforms him, Ladinsky, into a prophet.

I feel my relationship with Hafiz defies reason and is really an attempt to do the impossible: to translate Light into words—to make the luminous resonance of God tangible to our finite senses.<sup>7</sup>

What Ladinsky actually claims to be doing here is translating not Hafez’s poetry, but Hafez himself, a task the divine charge for which came to him in a dream:

About six months into this work I had an astounding dream in which I saw Hafiz as an Infinite Fountaining Sun (I saw him as God), who sang



## AN INVITATION

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hundreds of lines of his poetry to me in English, asking me to give that message to his “artists and seekers.”<sup>8</sup>

I do not doubt that Ladinsky had this dream, nor do I doubt its power for him as a transforming vision, or even that there are levels of consciousness at which one can be visited by spirits; and I also do not doubt Ladinsky’s sincerity in wanting to share the beauty and power of his vision with the world. Similarly, I cannot and will not dispute the fact that the books Barks and Ladinsky have written have been meaningful and transformative for an awful lot of people or that their work might offer some useful interpretive insights into Rumi and Hafez. Nonetheless, by rooting their translations of these two great Persian poets more in a spiritualizing agenda than in the works they are presuming to translate, Barks and Ladinsky distort and misrepresent not only those works and their authors, but also Iranian culture in ways that, on behalf of my son, my wife and the other Iranians whom I know, I resent.

By itself, of course, my resentment means little or nothing. I can find ways to make sure my son encounters more authentic versions of Iranian culture as he grows up, and those Iranians who can do so can take responsibility for their own culture—as many are now doing—and produce translations that reflect this authenticity. However, when you place what Barks and Ladinsky have done in the context of the history of the translation of Persian literature into Eng-

lish, my resentment is no longer merely personal. The misrepresentation I have identified in their work is actually part of a long history of colonization through translation practiced in English on Iranian literature and culture. Here, for example is A. Hart Edwards talking about some of the difficulties he faced in producing his 1911 prose translation of the *Bustan*:

The *Bustan* is written in verse [...] which adds considerably to the difficulties of translation, since the invariable rule of Sadi, like that of every other Persian poet we have read, is to sacrifice sense to the exigencies of rhyme and metre [sic]. In not a few cases the meaning is so confused [...] that even the native commentators, who possess a fund of ingenuity in explaining what they do not properly understand, have been compelled to pass over [...] couplets through sheer inability to unravel their intricacies and the abstruse ideas of the poet.

Probably in no other language in the world is poetic license so freely permitted and indulged in as in Persian. The construction of sentences follows no rule; the order of words is just that which the individual poet chooses to adopt, and the idea of time—past, present, and future—is ignored in the use of tenses, that part of a verb being alone employed which rhymes the best.<sup>9</sup>

The condescension inherent in Edwards' characterization of Persian and Persian literature is so obvious as not to need any further comment, and it continues when he explains why he chose to render the *Bustan* into prose instead of poetry:

The poems abound in metaphor, a figure of style which Eastern writers employ to a degree that is always exaggerated, and sometimes tedious; but for the purpose of this translation, which aims at a happy medium between literal accuracy and the freedom requisite in order to render Oriental phraseology into polite English, numerous of the more far-fetched allusions have been discarded, to the benefit of the text.<sup>10</sup>

Here Edwards plants us firmly in Ladinsky's territory of the "untranslatable [...] brilliant whirling synergy of idioms." At least on the surface, though, Edwards and Ladinsky appear to have opposite reactions to this characteristic of classical Iranian poetry: Ladinsky claims he values what Edwards does not. What happens to Hafez in Ladinsky's translation, however, is essentially the same as what happens to Saadi in Edwards'. The writer himself, the specific, idiosyncratic literary figure who produced a series of meticulously crafted poems, disappears—as do those poems—behind the translator's assertion of the source text's impenetrable nature. What we are left with is the translator's distillation of what he believes to be the essence of the text. In this way,

Ladinsky reduces Hafez—as Barks does Rumi—to an impersonal oracle, while Edwards turns Saadi into a mere moralist.

Not that there's anything wrong with being a moralist, or, as Reuben Levy characterizes him, “an excellent preacher,”<sup>11</sup> but Levy, who also translated parts of the *Bustan* in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, comes to this description of Saadi through his assessment of what he perceives as cultural deficiencies in Saadi's writing:

It must be borne in mind when the stories are being read that to Sa'di the important point in each was the moral. [...] Much indeed may be forgiven him for the charming simplicity of his stories, and in his presentation of easily assimilated wisdom there is a freshness that makes it palatable even to those who have not acquired the Oriental taste for established truths—or what we call platitudes.<sup>12</sup>

And then again:

In criticism it must be said that the poet has not always the art to let well alone and will spoil an excellent story which points its own moral by dragging in a didactic tag. [...] But then, it must be repeated, to him the real point of the story was its moral.<sup>13</sup>

Neither Ladinsky nor Barks indulges explicitly in this kind of condescension, but their spiritualizing agendas are

really no different from the focus of translators like Edwards and Levy on the moral content of the *Bustan*. In each case, the translator is unwilling to meet the source text and its author on their own terms; and, in each case, the results are translations that give no hint of the literary mastery of the original and that portray Iranian culture as a culture without literary mastery—which brings me full circle, back to Montreal and the question raised by the panel I was on: What does it mean to create contemporary translations of Iranian poetry?

There are, of course, any number of ways that this question can be parsed. What, for example, do you mean by “contemporary?” Define “Iranian” in “Iranian poetry.” Aren’t all translations “contemporary” in one way or another? For me, since I am working with a poet from the 13th century—Saadi was a contemporary of Rumi and a predecessor of Hafez—the answer was that I wanted my translation to break very clearly with the tradition of colonization I have just talked about in at least two ways. First, I wanted it to be as much as possible a translation that would meet Saadi and the *Bustan* on their own terms; and, second, given my own strengths and weaknesses as a writer, I wanted my translation to reflect at least some small part of the literary beauty of the original.

In both instances, since I am not fluent in Persian, I relied heavily on G. M. Wickens’ 1974 translation of the *Bustan*, *Morals Pointed and Tales Adorned*. In contrast to both

Edwards and Levy, Wickens argues quite forcefully for the *Bustan's* purely literary value:

[...] Sa'di, in the *Bustan*, set a new standard, which marks him off even from such great contemporaries as Attar and Rumi, to say nothing of those who tried to imitate him in succeeding centuries. Not only is his poem one of the longest (at least in the category of *general* moralistic literature), but it is [...] in its combination of variety, epigrammatic fluency, and restrained elegance [...] a sustained *tour de force*. [...] What I have called Sa'di's "restrained elegance" appears to most ready advantage in the miniature descriptions with which he often opens his tales. [...] No one else in Persian poetry could say so much to the point in so little compass. Furthermore, there is scarcely a single "overblown" line in the whole work.<sup>14</sup>

Wickens' translation is an attempt to reveal, though perhaps not to approximate, the literary mastery he describes, following the original with a line-by-line fidelity with which he intends to "respect both the general self-containment of Persian poetry [and] the pithy aphoristic content of each line in the *Bustan*."<sup>15</sup>

Wickens is, by his own admission, not a poet, and his translation demonstrates that fact in nearly every line; indeed, his lines often read as if he'd written them in an earlier century. Nonetheless, you can hear within and behind

his work real echoes of Saadi's literary craft and accomplishment. This is from the introductory poem to chapter one:

I've heard that, while he yielded up his soul,  
Thus spoke to Hormuz, Nushirvan:  
Be a guardian of the poor man's mind,  
Lie not in the bonds of your own ease!  
No one in your land is easy,  
When your own ease is all you seek. [...]  
The people are like a root, the ruler is the tree;  
The tree, my son, from the root draws its strength.  
So far as you are able, hurt not the hearts of men;  
If you do, you but tear up your own roots!<sup>16</sup>

Inverted syntax, awkward phrasings, outdated word choices, clunky rhythms—none of these make these lines particularly easy to read, but if you listen for the play of ideas from line to line, for the play of words—“ease” in lines 3-6 and “root” in lines 7-10—you can get a sense of the literary quality of the original. My version of these lines betrays my own choices as a translator:

I've heard that with his dying breaths Nushir van  
advised his son Hormuz on how to rule:  
“Guarantee the poor their peace of mind.  
Do not allow your privilege to bind you.  
None who call your kingdom home will be  
at peace if privilege is all you live for. [...]  
A tree, my son, is nourished through its roots.

Just so, a monarch draws his kingdom's strength  
from those he rules. Do not betray their trust  
unless you have to; you'll find yourself rootless.

Wickens argues that it “would be quite false to the general character of the *Bustan* to adopt too smooth and mellifluous a style within the line or too easy a transition from one line to another” and that of “all the many valuables [a translator] must discard, metre and rhyme have always seemed to me the least.”<sup>17</sup> I, however, have chosen to do precisely the opposite, insisting on a smooth and musical language rendered into an as-rigorous-as-possible blank verse line. I have written a little bit about my choice of blank verse in the introduction to my *Selections from Saadi's Gulistan*, which is really a companion volume to this one, and so I won't repeat myself here. I would, however, like to add the following. Unlike the *Gulistan*, the *Bustan* is written entirely in verse, and so it was very important to me that my translation maintain the kinds of linguistic tension that make a poem a poem. I will not argue that this is impossible in free verse, but the discipline and rigor of the blank verse line forced on me a concision that, perhaps counter-intuitively, made it easier to recreate versions of both the wordplay that abounds in the text and what Wickens calls the “pithy aphoristic content of each line.”

Another reason I chose to work in blank verse was that Saadi was a formal poet. It may be true that duplicating in English the forms he used would be an impossible task—



and here I agree with Wickens: it's not worth trying to recreate Persian meter or rhyme in English. Nonetheless, I intended my choice of blank verse to create a version of Saadi that would be as true as possible to who he was as a working writer: someone concerned not only with the morals of the stories he had to tell, but with the sound of a line, the consequences of word choice, the placement of stresses within a line, with how far a line could be stretched without "breaking" it and with all the other conscious and unconscious technical choices a poet makes when he or she composes a poem. Good free verse, of course, is as carefully crafted as any traditionally formal poem, but I wanted a form that would announce itself in English as loudly and unmistakably as Saadi's form does in Persian.

Saadi completed the *Bustan* in 1257. The title means "Herb Garden," though it is usually translated as "Garden of Fragrance" or "Pleasure Garden." It is a more serious work in both purpose and in tone than the *Gulistan*, though both are concerned with ethics and morality. Perhaps the closest parallel we have in English literature is the work of Alexander Pope, whose moral essays delve into much the same territory, though Saadi seems to have a wider range of concerns, combining a realistic and pragmatic approach to life with a mystical high-mindedness in a way that Pope does not. Pope and Saadi do share, however, a proclivity for saying what's on their minds, and there are passages in the *Bustan* where Saadi shows real courage, given that the book was written for

the ruler who was his patron. Indeed, one of the pleasures I have enjoyed while translating this book has been discovering how appropriate so much of what Saadi wrote more than seven hundred years ago is for the world we live in today. Here again, for example, are the lines I quoted for you above, but without the ellipsis:

I've heard that with his dying breaths Nushirvan  
advised his son Hormuz on how to rule:  
"Guarantee the poor their peace of mind.  
Do not allow your privilege to bind you.  
None who call your kingdom home will be  
at peace if privilege is all you live for.  
No judge will find a shepherd innocent  
who slept and let the wolf among the sheep.  
Go! Stand guard! Protect their impoverished lives:  
The crown you wear would not exist without them.  
A tree, my son, is nourished through its roots.  
Just so, a monarch draws his kingdom's strength  
through those he rules. Do not betray their trust  
unless you have to; you'll find yourself rootless."

Whether you agree or disagree with the policies of the Bush administration, you have to admit that these lines go right to the heart of many of the issues with which those policies have confronted us. Sometimes, as I was working, I would try to imagine what it would be like if there were someone in the United States—the poet laureate, perhaps—whose job it was, as it was Saadi's, and who had the author-

ity, as Saadi clearly did, to write such poetry for the people we elect to run our country. It's not just that I happen to agree with what the lines I just quoted have to say and think that they say something the Bush administration needs to hear; it's also that poetry, given the chance, can communicate and instruct in ways that neither philosophy nor religion nor an ethics class can, and I guess I think we need that kind of instruction now more than ever.

This question of Saadi's relevance to today's world brings me back once more to the panel in Montreal. I do not remember why, but during the discussion, a member of the audience, himself a translator of Iranian poetry, asserted that the reason we translate literature from other countries is to inspire people to learn the languages of those countries so they can read the translated texts in their original form. As he explained his position further, it became clear that he was talking about an ideal reader, since it is obviously impractical even to hope that people will want to learn the source language of every translation they ever read. Nonetheless, I found myself in deep disagreement with what he was saying.

It is true, of course, that all translations fail and that if you want to be able to experience a text as its author wrote it, you must read it in the original language. However, if you define the *purpose*, as opposed to one desirable *consequence* of literary translation to be motivating readers to learn to read that original, then it seems to me you have reduced the whole enterprise to a kind of striptease. Translation, in other

words, becomes a form of manipulation, in which layer after layer after layer is removed from around the core of the original and the reader is left so filled with desire for the original's naked beauty that he or she is willing to go out and learn its language in order to possess it.

The striptease metaphor, however, misses the fact that literary translation inevitably adds to and subtracts from the original, even as it reveals whatever aspects of the original can be brought across more or less whole into the target language. So perhaps a more accurate metaphor for literary translation, at least in terms of that audience member's assertion, would be the baiting of a hook, or the setting out of a tasty morsel intended to induce you to want more. No matter what metaphor you choose, however, it seems to me that this way of thinking about translation is at best condescending and at worst insulting to readers, who deserve more from us than a wink and a nod in the direction of the "real deal" that we are not giving them.

Indeed, to define the purpose of translation in terms of getting a reader to want to read the original text is to suggest that the reader should feel obliged to occupy the position of the translator, whose relationship to the original text cannot help but be one in which her or his own work, no matter how well it stands on its own in the target language, is nonetheless derivative. It is, in other words, to suggest that the reader should experience him or herself as inadequate

for not having the translator's knowledge of the source language.

To be fair, there are times as a reader that I feel this inadequacy, usually when I am reading a translation from a language I know, but don't know well enough to read the original. This is one reason why I have begun to learn to read Persian, and why I wish I knew Korean, Spanish and Hebrew much better than I do. I do not feel this way, however, when I read translations from a language I don't know at all. What I care about then is the text in front of me, how well it is written, the ways in which it moves me, or fails to move me, and what it teaches me, explicitly and implicitly, about the culture from which it was translated. If the translator were suddenly to appear to me as I finished reading and tell me that this was not sufficient, that what I really ought to want is to learn to read the language of the original, that it had indeed been her or his intention to make me want to learn that language, it would be difficult for me not to see the work I'd just read as a kind of propaganda and, therefore, as ethically suspect.

So what, then, is the purpose of literary translation? One place to start answering this question, perhaps, is with the fact that literary translation is itself the construction of a metaphor. The book you are holding in your hand is not composed of actual selections from Saadi's *Bustan*. Rather, the poems you will read here are *like* the poems in the *Bustan*, or, at least, as much *like* them as I have been able to

*make* them. More to the point, the poems in this book are a way for you to understand Saadi's *Bustan* through something that is not Saadi's *Bustan*, i.e., the poems in this book. In order to build this metaphor, I had to bridge the gap between the tenor of the metaphor, Saadi's original work, and the vehicle, the subset of the English language that, defined by my sensibilities, can embody the spirit of Saadi's work.<sup>18</sup> I crossed this bridge, so to speak, on the backs of the ponies I used to create my translation, and with the help of the Persian speakers and scholars whom I consulted, but somehow or another I had to cross over into Saadi's Persian in order to create an English version of his work with any kind of integrity, artistic or otherwise.

The reader of a translation, however, does not cross this same bridge—unless, perhaps, he or she knows the language of the original. Instead, as a friend suggested to me, maybe the reader is looking through a window or a door, though this image also does not feel quite right because neither the act of looking nor the metaphor of the door or window accounts sufficiently for the ways in which the translation is absorbed by the reader and by the reader's culture. Or maybe languages and cultures are rivers and translations are tributaries connecting them; or maybe languages and cultures are infinitely intricate carpets and what literary translators do is copy and adapt some parts of the pattern of one carpet so that they can be woven seamlessly into the pattern of another. What I am looking for is a metaphor of adapta-

tion and internalization, of incorporation and integration, one that will capture not only the work done by the translator, but also the work done by the reader.

I want this metaphor because to me the purpose of literary translation is the broadening and deepening of the reader's consciousness, and, by extension, of the cultural imagination in which the reader exists. Or maybe it's the other way around. Maybe what a translation does is broaden the cultural imagination embodied by the target language and then make that broadened imagination available to readers in another language.

Sometime around 1750, Benjamin Franklin published what he claimed was a missing chapter of the book of Genesis. In this story, Abraham invites an elderly man to eat with him, but then rescinds the invitation when he finds out that the man worships a god that Abraham does not recognize. After Abraham chases the elderly man away, God appears and rebukes the patriarch, pointing out that since He had fed the man for seventy years, despite his idolatrous worship, surely Abraham could have afforded to give the man a single meal. About thirty years later, however, a writer in the *New Asiatick Miscellany* found it curious that Franklin had told in the 18<sup>th</sup> century precisely the same story that Saadi had told in the 13<sup>th</sup>. A plagiarism scandal ensued, and the precise provenance of the story was not fully established until early in the nineteenth century, when the testimony of Lord Teignmouth, who was once the governor-general of In-

dia, established Saadi as the first author of the tale. (In my translation, “Don’t Knot The Rope Of Generosity” is the second story in the chapter called “Generosity.”)

One of the unsolved mysteries of Franklin’s plagiarism is where, precisely, he got the story from. There are at least three possibilities. First, he might somehow have lifted the story, directly from Saadi, though almost certainly in translation. Second, he might have found it in *Discourse of the Liberty of Prophesying*, which was published in 1657 by Jeremy Taylor. Or, third, he might have read it in the book where Taylor first encountered it, Gentius’ *Historica Judaica*, which was published in 1651 and in which the story is attributed to “Sadus,” whose nationality is not mentioned. What Franklin published, in other words, was a copy of an English translation of a Latin version of the Persian original, but it is Franklin’s rationale for publishing it—“on account of the importance of the moral, well worth being made known to all mankind”—that makes my point. Saadi’s story was there, waiting to be taken up into our cultural consciousness, and it was literary translation that made this “taking up” possible.<sup>19</sup>

I certainly do not want to justify Franklin’s plagiarism, but it does seem to me that the way in which Western culture wove Saadi’s story into itself—or maybe it is the way Saadi’s story flowed through Western culture—is a prime example of how literary translation, to mix my metaphors, serves a “cross-pollinating” function. Another example can



be found in No. 293 of Joseph Addison's *Spectator*, in which he retells Chardin's version of Saadi's fable of the rain drop that becomes a pearl, which is the introductory poem to Chapter 8 of the *Bustan*. Through translation, in other words, long before my own work with him began, Saadi was made a part of our literary culture, where he was a thread waiting to be picked up or a river waiting to be explored. Choose your metaphor; it doesn't matter. He is there, and so he is as much ours as he is Iran's; and it is this act of sharing, more than anything else, that for me defines literary translation's purpose.

In addition to being a translator of poetry, I am a poet. A book of my own poems will be published in the spring of 2006 and like anyone else who has written for publication, I like to think that my work is important enough to demand the attention of a large and enthusiastic public. If I had my way, lots of people would be reading my books and reviewing them and perhaps even teaching them—because I do think I have something to say that it would be worth your while and a few dollars out of your pocket to read. The reality is, though, that what I think is important about what I have to say might, in the long run, turn out to be profoundly insignificant. Saadi, though, is someone who ought to command your attention. His wisdom and the poetry in which he couched it have withstood the test of time. He has a lot to teach us, though what it is precisely that we ought to be

learning from him is something I will leave to you to decide  
as you read.

Richard Jeffrey Newman  
November 28, 2005  
Jackson Heights, NY



# *Saadi's Bustan*

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## Nothing Fails To Bow Low Before Him

In the name of God, the merciful, the compassionate,  
who placed the gift of speech upon our tongues  
and gave us souls, whose generosity  
in forgiving us our many faults, helping  
all who need His help, surpasses what  
we can imagine. Whoever turns away  
from the door His glory shines behind  
will search all other doors in vain: the rooms  
they reveal are bare and dark. In God's court,  
the world's proudest princes bow their heads  
to the floor; yet He does not imprison those  
who rebel against Him. Neither does he banish  
the rebellious who recant. Does sin anger Him?  
Of course! Stop sinning! He'll wipe your record clean.

A man who seeks a quarrel with his father  
is guaranteed to feel his father's rage.  
A man whose relatives give him good reason  
will chase them as intruders from his house.  
A slave who's slow to do what he is told  
will never be among his master's favorites;  
and you, if you fail to show your friends you care,  
won't they run from you and keep their distance?  
If a soldier in the midst of war deserts,  
he knows his emperor will claim his life,

but the God of all above and all below  
does not shut those who defy him out.

This existence and the one that follows  
form in the endless sea of His knowledge  
a single drop. When He witnesses a sin,  
He quickly draws the veil of His mercy,  
hiding the transgression from Himself.  
Holder of Creation, Knower of Secrets,  
He sows into crevices we cannot see  
the bounty He has made for us to reap.  
He has no opposite, exists beyond  
the edge of all He made, needing nothing,  
yet nothing that breathes this earth's air—people,  
birds, ants, flies, the jinn, even the Simurgh  
enjoying God's feast in its nest on Qaf—  
nothing fails to bow low before Him.

Wear The Lining As The Silken Shirt  
You'd Hoped For

I've roamed the world's far corners now for years,  
for years I've shared the lives of foreigners,  
finding pleasure in each small moment,  
taking from each harvest an ear of corn.  
Yet nowhere have I met a humble folk  
to rival those who call Shiraz their home.  
Love called me back to them from the fragrant  
gardens of Byzantium and Syria,  
and love for them inspired me to bring  
what gifts I could. At first, I thought to buy  
Egyptian sugar, but I've brought instead,  
to share with those who recognize their sweetness,  
these honeyed words, from which, for all who want  
to learn, I've built this ten-doored pavilion:  
Cross first the threshold of *Justice*. Find there  
good judgment, management, care for others  
and fear of God. Next is *Generosity*:  
the act of doing good itself is thanks  
for all that God has given us. *Love*,  
but not the love we cling to with our flesh,  
is third. Fourth, *Humility; Resignation*,  
fifth. The sixth door opens to reveal  
the life awaiting those who choose *Contentment*.  
*Education* follows; then *Gratitude*.



*Repentance* lies behind the ninth door,  
while the tenth has written over it *Prayer*.

Six hundred had increased by fifty-five  
when, on a day between the two great feasts,<sup>20</sup>  
I placed the final pearl in this treasure house.  
An auspicious day, a felicitous year,  
and yet I am ashamed, bent double,  
my forehead resting on my knees, the glow  
of having written well concealed  
by the shells that litter the ocean where pearls shine,  
by the stunted trees that block the tall ones  
along the garden's path. You, though, are wise;  
your heart is pure; and no one skilled as you  
would bother finding fault in small details:  
Clothes of satin or shot silk still  
must have a lining. So if you can't find  
shot silk, be a gentleman, wear  
the lining as the silken shirt you'd hoped for.  
I will not boast that my words have value.  
Instead, I'll stand here with my hand outstretched.  
I've heard that on the Day of Hope and Fear  
God forgives us all for the sake of the righteous.  
You do the same. For the single line that moves you,  
make yourself godly, show your manhood,  
overlook my poem's thousand flaws!

*Justice*

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## The Crown You Wear Would Not Exist Without Them

I've heard that with his dying breaths Nushirvan  
advised his son Hormuz on how to rule:  
"Guarantee the poor their peace of mind.  
Do not allow your privilege to bind you.  
None who call your kingdom home will be  
at peace if privilege is all you live for.  
No judge will find a shepherd innocent  
who slept and let the wolf among the sheep.  
Go! Stand guard! Protect their impoverished lives.  
The crown you wear would not exist without them.  
A tree, my son, is nourished through its roots.  
Just so, a monarch draws his kingdom's strength  
through those he rules. Do not betray their trust  
unless you have to; you'll find yourself rootless.

Do you need a road to guide you? Hope and fear  
mark the path the devout have walked smooth.  
Hope for good; fear of evil. Prudence  
leads a man down that trail by default.  
Find it in a prince and you have found  
the foundation of his rule. To those who hope,  
he offers his indulgence, hoping himself  
our Creator will be indulgent as well.  
Fearing the harm harm always does to those

who cause it, this prince favors hurting no one.  
A prince who doesn't have these qualities  
will fill his land with conflict and unrest.

If life hobbles you, learn to accept your fate,  
but if you gallop freely, go where you will.  
You'll never have the room you need to run  
in a kingdom where the king abuses power.  
Fear the bold and proud among your subjects,  
but fear as well the one who doesn't fear  
heaven's Just Ruler.

A lord who lays waste  
to the hearts of his people will only see in dreams  
the prosperity he wants for his domain.  
Tyranny will earn him only ruin,  
and ruin will be the legacy he leaves.

Look to the future. Sound the depths of these words.  
Your people shelter and support your rule,  
so don't kill anyone without just cause.  
See to the comfort of those who tend your land.  
Their happiness will mean a greater yield.  
Repay with evil the good someone does you  
and you unman yourself in public view.

## With As Good An Eye

I've heard the story told that Darius,  
whose lineage is blessed, rode off one day  
far from his hunting entourage and saw,  
running towards him through the pasture, a man.  
"A foe I have not seen before," the king  
decided. "I'll nail him to the ground with this,"  
and he placed a poplar arrow in his bow.

"Lord of Iran and Tur," the man cried out.  
"May the evil eye never fall upon you.  
I am your stable master, here to serve you."

The man's voice brought the shah's memory  
back to the name that went with his face, "You  
were foolish to run at me like that." A smile  
played across the royal lips. "An angel  
protected you. The bowstring was nearly  
to my ear."

The stable master also smiled,  
"Because you've treated me so well, I won't  
withhold advice from you that you should hear:  
It neither makes us safe nor commands  
respect if the king cannot distinguish  
enemies from friends. Your high position  
carries this responsibility:  
that you should recognize each one who serves you.

You've seen me many times at court, and we  
have talked about your horses and their grazing.  
How then does it come to be that now,  
when I have rushed to serve you here, with love,  
you see mortal danger in my approach?  
If you ask me, O my king, I can bring  
from a herd of one hundred thousand horses  
the single beast you want to ride that day.  
This detailed knowledge drives my herdsmanship.  
Tend your own flock with as good an eye!  
Disorder will bring ruin to this land  
if its emperor cannot outthink a shepherd.”

## If The King Sleeps Well

A man whom other men of wisdom follow  
tells the story of Ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz,  
who owned a ring in which was set a stone  
no jeweler could properly assess.  
At night, you'd swear it was a rising sun.  
By day, it shone with a single pearl's luster.  
One year, by God's decree, Aziz's rule  
was plagued by drought. He watched his people's faces  
wane from full moons to narrow crescents  
and knew the royal comfort he enjoyed,  
unshared, would undo his manhood in their eyes.  
(When people are pouring poison down their throats,  
who would dare drink sweet-water in their sight?)  
He sold the stone for silver, giving it all  
in just one week to orphans, strangers, the poor  
and anybody else he saw in need.  
The court gossips pounced, "You'll never find  
a precious stone like that again!" I've heard  
that when he answered tears poured down his cheeks  
like candle wax. "A prince who wears such jewels  
in time of drought betrays his people's trust.  
This empty ring looks fine on me. Hunger's  
emptiness enhances no one's looks."  
Happiness is in providing comfort  
to those who need it, not in owning gems



to decorate your hands. Those who cherish  
virtue don't buy joy with others' sorrow.



If the shah sleeps well upon his throne,  
I doubt the poor sleep easily, but if  
the shah lights up the night with watchful eyes,  
those he rules will dream deeply, waking  
soothed. Praise God! The Atabeg,  
Abu Bakr ibn Sa'd, is such a ruler.  
The only signs of trouble plaguing Pars  
are the women whose lunar beauty turns our heads.

A verse from our last party caught my ear:  
"I held my moon-faced lover while she slept  
and wanted nothing more from life than that,  
but the sight of her so fully lost in sleep  
moved me. 'Your slender grace shames the cypress.  
Wash this sweet slumber from your narcissus-  
eyes, let the rose of your smile bloom  
and free the nightingale song of your voice!  
Your beauty subverts us all. Wake yourself  
and bring the ruby wine you poured last night!'  
She opened one indignant eye, 'You say  
I am subversive, and still you choose to rouse me?'"  
Under the rule of our enlightened king,  
no other subversion dares to stir.<sup>21</sup>

## Silken Gowns and Darvish Robes

When Takla took the throne of Zanki, it says  
in the chronicles kept by the ancient kings,  
his rule was marked by peace among his subjects.  
For that alone he's worthy of renown.  
He, however, felt himself a failure.  
"My life has been a waste," he told a wise  
and pious man. "I want to spend the days  
that I have left in solitary worship.  
My crown, my kingdom, the status I enjoy—  
all of it will crumble into dust.  
Darvishes alone leave this world wealthy."

"Takla! Enough!" the sage stood up at once.  
"A prayer mat will not help you find your way,  
neither will the tasbih, nor the khergeh<sup>22</sup>.  
The road you seek is the one you're on: service  
to others! Remain the king. In selfless rule  
you'll find your poverty. Gird your loins  
with sincerity and truth, and keep your tongue  
free of vanity and pretense. You need  
to walk the path, not conjure it with words.  
Words will not take hold unless you give them  
something in the world to take hold of.  
The kings of old whose lives were pure  
wore silken gowns over their darvish robes."

## What You've Taken By The Sword Will Slip Away From You

I've heard that Rum's ruler spoke these words,  
crying before a learned, pious man:  
"My enemy has stripped me of my kingdom,  
all except this city and this fort.  
Long and hard I worked to make my son  
the people's captain after me, but now  
this mongrel adversary's pinned me down,  
twisting my manhood into submission.  
Despair withers my soul. Is there a cure?"

The wise one answered, "Brother, worry first  
about you. True, your life is mostly gone;  
the best part of it is over. Still,  
you are alive, and that should be enough.  
Once you're dead, the world is someone else's,  
and you will never know if he is wise  
or indiscreet. His days are his concern,  
so don't despair! What you've taken by the sword  
will slip away from you with your last breath.  
To hold on now is hardly worth the trouble.

"You've made yourself too much at home  
here, in this five-day dwelling.  
Give careful thought to how you'll take your leave.  
Think! Name for me one Persian Khusrau,<sup>23</sup>

from Feridun to Zohak to Jamshid,  
who managed to escape his rule's decline?  
Only God Almighty's throne endures.  
So what hope is left to those whose hope  
is not to leave, when leaving is the end  
our living is designed to lead us to?

“A wealthy man's hoard of gold and silver  
will not be his forever. He will die,  
and in the days that follow others will come  
to make his treasure their own; but the man  
whose goodness does not fade with time has earned  
eternal mercy for his spirit, and when  
the good name of a great man remains  
among the people he has left behind,  
enlightened men say, ‘He remains as well.’

“To eat the fruits of generosity  
you have to cultivate its tree. Practice  
giving. Your reputation for largesse  
will determine, when you stand in court,  
the rank to which you'll be appointed. Just so,  
in God's Court of Truth, higher status  
goes to those who've walked His path the farthest.

“Bringing up the rear, trying hard  
not to be seen, are those who go in fear  
of what they'll get for work they haven't done.

Leave them to chew hard at the backs of their hands.<sup>24</sup>  
In the oven's heat, they did not bake  
a single loaf. Watch them at harvest time:  
You'll know then the burden of unsowed seed."

## The Friendship Of My Friends

In the wilds of Outer Syria, a sage  
retreated from worldly things into a cave,  
a dark place where he practiced self-restraint  
and gathered to himself a treasure house  
of bliss. I've heard his name was Theophile,  
angel-like despite his human skin.  
Because he would not darken another's door,  
great men came to bow their heads at his.  
(The mystic who risks all for love of God  
goes begging to rid himself of greed:  
As long as his desire must be fed,  
he feeds it, from village to village, ashamed of his  
need.)<sup>25</sup>

The governor who ruled the borderland  
where Theophile made his home, a tyrant  
who never missed a chance to dig his claws  
into a helpless man's flesh, satisfied  
his lust for killing and scorched, without pity,  
the earth wherever he went. His bitter reign  
curdled the face his kingdom showed the world:  
Those who left his tyranny behind  
carried stories of his wickedness  
to other lands; those who stayed consigned  
themselves to lacerated lives, and they

cursed him only in secret. (When despotism's reach grows long, those it touches do not smile.)

From time to time this tyrant stood outside  
the sage's door, but the wise man averted his eyes.  
"Auspicious one!" the despot once called out,  
"I am here to offer you my friendship.  
Why do you turn away from me in hatred?  
It's true my realm is smaller than the shah's,  
but does that mean I have less dignity  
than a darvish? I am not asking you  
to show the honor that is my rightful due.  
Befriend me as you do all other men!"

"Have you no common sense?" the pious man  
called out. "The fact of your existence sorrows  
people's lives and people's sorrows sorrow  
me. You are the enemy of my friend  
and so you are my enemy as well;  
and since I know God too takes you as a foe,  
to change my mind would be pure vanity.  
Don't kiss *my* hand; seek  
instead the friendship of my friends—or else  
come prepared to watch them skin me alive.<sup>26</sup>  
The friend's foe will never be my friend!  
I wonder how a man whose heart is stone  
can sleep at night knowing those he rules  
sleep tight-hearted because of him."

## Why Should Rough Waters Frighten A Duck?

The famine fell so hard that year that friends forgot their friendship. The sky above their heads grew so tight-fisted it refused to give a single drop of rain to wet the earth's parched throat. Crops failed. Damascus' ancient springs ran dry. The only source of water left was orphans' tears, and widows' desperate sighs were the only smoke-plumes rising from the city.<sup>27</sup> The trees, stripped of their provisions,<sup>28</sup> stood impoverished, like darvishes. Once strong men their muscled arms hanging slack, walked the listless streets, confused. The orchards were bare, the mountains denuded; locusts had devoured the people's gardens; the people had left not one locust uneaten. One day, a friend came to see me, a man of wealth and status, his body wasted as the land's. His skin hung loosely on his bones, but when I asked how he had come to this, his voice rang out like thunder, "Are you blind? Have you no sense? How dare you ask this question when you know! Tell me you haven't felt that all our pain has reached the limit of what we can endure! The heavens have dried up. Prayer no longer



smolders in people's hearts; nothing rises  
to the throne on high."

"But why," I answered him,  
"are *you* concerned? Poison only kills  
when there's no antidote at hand. Someone  
who does not have what you do probably  
will die—but you? Why should rough waters  
frighten a duck?"

My learned friend grew more  
enraged and stared at me, a sage surveying  
an idiot. "A man who's safe on shore  
will not sit back if he sees his friends are drowning.  
I do not suffer because I'm destitute,  
but to witness destitution *is* to suffer.  
No one with compassion wants to see  
the wounds a whipping leaves upon his own  
or someone else's flesh. It's as you say:  
I have enough that I will not go hungry,  
but others' hunger lays my flesh to waste.  
May those whose tables have not been laid bare,  
who stand aside when misery surrounds them,  
find every pleasure of their lives diminished!  
Each time I pass a darvish going hungry,  
every morsel I have swallowed turns  
to venom in my blood. If a man's friends  
are languishing in prison, by what right  
does he enjoy the garden and its fruit?"

## What You Will Not Reap

One night, as men smoldered,<sup>29</sup> they lit a fire.  
I've heard that half of Baghdad burned to the ground.  
One man stood while dust and smoke still swirled,  
giving thanks that his shop remained intact.  
A wise man passing by heard him and said,  
"You thoughtless fool! Are you the only one  
you care about? Did you tell yourself the flames  
could burn whatever else they wanted if  
they left your property unscorched? Only  
one whose heart was stone could turn his back  
on men tying stones against their bellies!<sup>30</sup>  
How can a rich man eat the food he's served  
when he sees the poor around him swallowing blood?  
To care for others means to grieve with them  
even as you try to comfort them,  
and so your grief will need comforting as well.  
Even though his friends have reached the inn,  
a tender-hearted man still loses sleep  
waiting for those who lag behind. A king  
who sees a loaded ass stuck in the mud  
carries that beast's burden in his heart.  
To those who value well-chosen words,  
one line from Saadi is an endless treasure.  
This one is for you if you will hear it:  
*If you sow thorns, you will not reap jasmine.*"

## Unclench Your Fists

A man perched high in a tree was chopping  
at the base of the branch where he was sitting.  
The garden's owner, looking up, said,  
"This man commits a crime against himself,  
not me."

Listen! There's wisdom in those words:  
You do not need to overthrow the weak  
by force. Our Judge in heaven will decide  
if tomorrow a prince should be reduced  
to the beggar you wouldn't waste a barleycorn on.  
If power and status are what you want from life,  
do nothing that will make a humble man  
your foe, for once the rank you bear is gone,  
the beggar who sought alms with such respect  
will seize you by your skirt and take revenge.<sup>31</sup>  
Unclench your fists! Do not seek to battle  
the powerless. If they defeat you, shame  
will haunt you. To be by the lowest laid so low  
would be in free men's eyes disgrace you can't  
recover from. The great kings made the crown  
and throne their own through intellect and clear-  
hearted wisdom.<sup>32</sup> Don't stray from that straight path;  
and if you would straighten yourself, heed Saadi.

## A Needle, A Spindle and "The Thread"

They tell the story that a certain shah,  
unraveled to a spindle by "the thread,"<sup>33</sup>  
began, because his body was so weak,  
to envy those he ruled: On chessboards, a monarch  
may command attention and respect,  
but once his enemies have pinned him down  
so he can't move, he's weaker than a pawn.  
An advisor kissed the ground before the king,  
"May your majesty enjoy eternal rule.  
A man whose every breath is sanctified,  
whose saintliness few others have achieved,  
lives in this city. Not once have his feet  
turned from the path of righteousness. His heart  
is clear. God answers his prayers. None  
who've come before him ever went away  
without receiving in a moment's time  
everything they asked for. Summon him  
to summon Heaven's kindness for your health."  
As soon as the advisor finished speaking,  
the king sent his chief attendants to lead  
the elder's blessed footsteps to the royal court.  
They found him, and they told him why they'd come.  
He followed them, his honored body covered  
by a ragged robe. "Pray for me," the shah  
commanded. "This 'thread' has fettered me as if

I were its needle.”

At this, his bent back  
shaking as if it might unbend itself,  
the holy man’s anger filled the room.  
“I’m not the one you need to ask for this!  
God gives and forgives at His own pleasure,  
and it pleases Him to answer just men’s prayers.  
What good will my petition do you  
when your command imprisons impoverished men  
and fetters them, and leaves them in a pit to die?  
Not once have you had mercy on your subjects;  
how dare you seek God’s mercy for yourself  
through me?! First, you must repent your sins;  
then you can ask an elder for his prayers.  
But as long as the prayers of those whom you oppress  
grab at your heels, how will my prayers pull you up?”

At first the shah drew back in rage and shame,  
but when his fury passed, he told himself,  
“Why get angry? The man speaks the truth.”  
And he ordered everyone he put in jail  
set free. Immediately, the holy one  
did two rak’as<sup>34</sup> of prayer, then raised his hands  
in supplication, “You who built the skies  
made him a prisoner of war; leave him in peace.”  
The saint stood still in that position  
till all at once the emperor sprang up

so full of joy you'd think that he'd grown wings,  
like a peacock with no tether on its leg.  
He ordered all the jewels that he possessed  
scattered at the elder's feet, and he placed  
a crown of gold upon that saintly head,  
but the sage knew well how vanity can dull  
one's impulse to the truth, and so he shook  
the gems and other riches from himself  
and said, "Let the threads you've just let go  
hang loose, or else the 'thread' that sickened you  
will strike once more. You fell, and now you've found  
a firmer ground on which to walk. Take care  
that you don't slip again." Listen to Saadi,  
for these words hit the mark, "Not everyone  
who falls is given a second chance to stand."



The world, my son, will not be yours forever:  
the universe treats no one in good faith.  
Look at Solomon (peace be upon him!)  
who used his magic throne to ride the winds.  
Did he not "go upon the wind"<sup>35</sup> himself,  
and happily so, because he filled his life  
with wisdom and justice? The man who finds no rest  
as long as people suffer carries with him  
when he dies the ball of his good fortune.<sup>36</sup>

Value lies in what you take when you go,  
not in the property you leave behind.



I've heard there was a peerless prince of Egypt  
against whose marshaled days Fate mobilized  
its forces. Beauty drained from the royal cheeks  
that once had set his people's hearts on fire,  
and like a sun at the end of its days,  
as the flame within him waned, he grew pale.  
Finding nothing in their lore to cure death,  
his advisors chewed and chewed their bitter failing.<sup>37</sup>  
All kingdoms decline and waste away,  
except the Undeclining Lord of Heaven's.  
As the prince's life drew nearer to the dark,  
they heard him muttering beneath his breath,  
"In all of Egypt, none could rival me,  
but what does that matter now? I'm dying,  
and even though the world itself was mine,  
I never once tasted its fruit. Now,  
no different from the poor and helpless,  
I leave it all behind."

*You* should strive  
for this: to be a man who gathers up  
the world as he moves through it, giving  
what is his to give, while using for himself  
what there is for him to use. Be this man

and the treasures of the world are yours forever.<sup>38</sup>  
Don't, and you'll take nothing when you leave  
except regret for what you haven't done  
and fear of bringing such a life before God's throne.



The master on his deathbed cannot talk—  
his tongue is knotted by his terror—and so  
he shows you with his hands: he draws one back  
from tyranny and greed, while reaching forward  
with the other into generosity.  
Now, while it's still in your hands, dig that thorn  
out of your side. How will you reach to do it  
through your shroud? The sun, the moon, the Pleiades  
will light the skies for countless days before  
you raise your head from the pillow of your grave.



## One Full Turn

The mighty fortress owned by Qizil Arslan  
reached high enough to challenge Mount Alvand.  
Scoffing at all who tried to breach its walls,  
needing nothing to defend itself  
except itself, at the end of a road curled tight  
like a bride's wedding-day hair, it shone  
on the field of green surrounding it  
like an egg bright on a cerulean plate.  
The way I've heard it told, a righteous man,  
whose wisdom pierced this world's illusions,  
who traveled long in foreign lands, whose choice  
to wander at the edge of what is known  
had deepened him, and made him practical,  
had taught him eloquence, and schooled his tongue  
so the right words were always on its tip—  
this man had journeyed from a distant state,  
and when he stood before the throne, the shah  
asked him, "In all your travels have you seen  
a stronghold unassailable as this?"  
The wise man smiled, "Your fort? Delightful  
as it is, I would not call it strong.  
Men more powerful than you have owned it,  
and didn't they have to let it go?  
And after you won't there be other princes?  
And won't *they* eat the fruit *you've* planted here

with all your hopes? Recall your father's rule,  
how it waxed and waned, and let that memory  
unlock the chains the onus to preserve  
your kingdom has wound tight around your heart.  
Fate left your father sitting in a corner,  
unable to control a single coin  
of the treasure that had once been his."

When someone  
loses hope, the only hope there is  
is in the goodness of God. A thoughtful man  
knows this world is worthless. In the end,  
it's always someone else's place.



Now hear  
what a man in Persia, mad with the love of God,  
told Kisrá.<sup>39</sup> "You, heir to Jam's sovereignty,  
if sovereignty had remained with Jam, and if  
prosperity had been his destiny,  
the crown you're wearing would not have passed to you.  
What throne could you have claimed as yours? And if  
you suddenly possessed Qarun's<sup>40</sup> treasure?  
It's what you give away that makes you rich."



As Alp Arslan was breathing his last breath,  
surrendering his life to life's Creator,

his son put on the crown. The father's place  
was moved from palace to grave, the high throne  
so many men desired no longer his  
on which to sit. The next day, another  
man divinely crazed saw the new king  
riding on a horse: "Bravo! The cycle  
has completed one full turn: the father's dead;  
the son's foot is in the stirrup. Destiny  
moves that quickly, raising from the crib,  
to replace an aged man whose days have ended,  
a youth with no experience—a fickle  
and unstable revolution. Treat this world  
like a stranger; don't try to make it yours.  
A minstrel, it plays each day in a new house,  
and it's vulgar to take pleasure with a lover  
who wakes each morning with a different spouse.  
This year, while the realm is yours, do  
what will make your good name endure. Next year,  
Fate will give your crown to someone else."

## The King's Two Kingdoms

A sage pronounced this blessing on Kai-Qubad,  
“May the sovereign’s crown never leave your head.”  
The benediction galled the king. “The wise,”  
he said, “should not invoke absurdities.  
Tell me, if you can, the name of one  
whose kingship suffered no decline! You can’t!  
And to try is unbecoming foolishness  
a learned man should not indulge. No one  
who hopes not to die will see that hope fulfilled.”

The man of learning listened, then said this,  
“Do not so easily reject my words.  
I did not bless you with eternal life.  
I asked that Heaven help you do God’s will,  
for a pious king who does not deviate  
from the path of pure and righteous living,  
who takes advice when it is given  
even though he knows the way—when such  
a monarch pries his heart loose from *this* realm,  
he carries his throne with him to the next.  
In this way sovereignty does not diminish  
but grows between the king’s two kingdoms.  
The devout shah loses nothing when he dies:  
he rules the here and now *and* the hereafter.”

Authority and treasure, world dominion;  
military might, fulfilled desire;  
personal magnificence, royal pleasure—  
a king possesses all of these by right,  
and if his rule is marked by righteousness,  
eternal bliss will be his right as well;  
but if he brings his fists down on the poor,  
chaos will mark his brief time here on earth.  
Because the Pharaoh chose to stay corrupt,  
his reign came to its end at his grave's edge.

## A Man Like That

They tell the story about a king of Ghur  
who'd seize his subjects' pack mules for his own.  
He weighed them down till they could hardly move  
and worked them without food, poor beasts, until  
they died, and two at least would die per day.  
When fortune gives a man like that the right  
to turn his own self-interest into law,  
fate tightens its grip on the tight-hearted poor,  
loading their lives with more than they can bear.  
A man like that, from his high roof, will dump  
on the roofs below, as if he didn't see them,  
his own and his household's piss and shit.

I've heard that once, on a hunting trip, this shah  
galloped fast and far into the night,  
pursuing his prey until he looked around  
and saw he'd left his entourage behind,  
and he was lost, alone, on unknown roads  
that led him through the dark to a small town,  
where an old man, wise in the ways of men,  
was at that moment saying to his son,  
"Please, tomorrow morning, do not take  
your beast to town, for that thief we must call king,  
whose fate will be to get what he deserves  
and not what he expects, whose proper place

will soon be in a coffin, I predict,  
not on a throne—that man has armed himself  
to be the demon’s soldier. We suffer,  
filling the dome of heaven with our cries.  
No one in this kingdom has lived at ease,  
and no one ever will, until the black  
mark our sovereign is upon the earth  
carries to hell the curses we call down  
upon him.”

The son replied, “The only road  
is long and hard; I cannot go on foot.  
Tell me what to do and I will do it.  
Your thinking is always clearer than my own.”

The father said, “If you want my advice,  
take to your donkey’s head and legs and flanks  
a stone large enough to hobble it.  
That worthless, faithless, foul-souled man  
will doubtless turn away from the crippled beast.  
Learn from the prophet Khidr, who wrecked a boat  
to guarantee it would be overlooked  
by the cruel king who stocked his fleet that year  
with stolen ships but earned himself only  
the evil name that is his legacy.<sup>41</sup>  
I spit on this land our monarch rules, staining  
him, I hope, until the Resurrection!”

The son obeyed reluctantly, and with  
a stone hobbled the helpless mule. The father  
bid his son farewell and blessed whichever  
road he took, while the son rode off behind  
the caravan, cursing his slow progress.  
Then the father turned to face the door, "Dear God!  
For the sake of the just, whose prayers you grant,  
grant me the years I'll need to witness  
this despot's desolation, for if I die  
while the throne is his, my eyes will not shut  
even in the dust of the grave's unending dark.  
Better a woman should bear a still-born fetus  
than a devil-child she must raise as a son.  
The boy who lets himself be used by men  
perhaps destroys himself, but no one else!"

Shocked speechless by what he'd overheard,  
the king did not respond. He tethered his horse,  
and with the saddle cloth beneath his head  
lay down beneath the stars, which sleeplessness  
compelled him to count, but no sleep came  
to take him far away from where he was  
or why he was awake. The next morning,  
the rooster's early crowing cleared his mind  
and he rose as if he'd rested well. His knights,  
who'd spurred their horses on in search of him  
throughout the night, had picked up on his trail



as the sun first climbed into the sky,  
and when they saw him in the clearing, high  
in the saddle, they ran to him as one and bowed  
their heads until their noses touched the ground  
(which looked for all their bowing like the sea).  
One of them approached the king, an old  
friend—by night, the royal chamberlain;  
by day, an intimate companion—“What  
did your subjects bring last night when you were  
hungry,  
while we were searching for you without rest?”  
The sultan could not bring himself to tell  
what he had overheard, but leaned his head  
close to the other’s ear and whispered low,  
“Nothing, not even a measly drumstick  
to fill my belly, but the donkey’s leg  
went much farther than it should have.”<sup>42</sup>

They sat down on that spot and called for food,  
and in their great relief the meal became  
a celebration on the king’s behalf,  
but all their songs and laughter called to mind  
the old man’s rantings from the night before,  
and the sultan ordered him brought, tightly bound,  
to where they were and forced to prostrate himself  
in the dirt at the royal feet. When this was done,  
the heartless king drew out his sharpened sword.

The old man, helpless, hopeless, raised his head,  
“When the grave opens, all must accept its welcome;  
on that night, no one should sleep at home.  
Kill me if you must, your majesty,  
but I am not the only one who says  
your reign has brought misfortune on us all.  
Why take out your rage on me alone?  
True, you may have heard me say it first,  
but the multitudes will shout it out as well.  
How can you expect to hear your name  
on people’s lips synonymous with good  
when oppression by your hand is all they know?  
If you find it hard to hear such words,  
don’t make your subject’s lives so hard to bear.  
The way to change is lying at your feet:  
stop killing people who are innocent.  
Take the few remaining days of my life,  
take a couple more and live them sweet!  
Death will take the tyrant in his time,  
but time won’t blunt the curses on his name.  
I’ll give you good advice if you will listen,  
and if you won’t, believe me, you’ll regret it.  
The praise of those a king receives at court  
does not make him praiseworthy. Who cares  
that the assembled crowd applauds as one  
if an old woman curses silently  
behind her spinning wheel?”

The emperor's sword  
hovered just above the old man's neck,  
who'd fallen silent, holding out his soul  
as if it were a shield against his fate.  
It's true, isn't it? Take a knife to its head  
and a pen will surprise you with its eloquence.<sup>43</sup>

Suddenly the king had second thoughts.  
They say an angel whispered in his ear,  
"Do not avenge yourself with this man's life;  
he'll be just one of millions you have to kill."  
The shah stepped back to sort his thinking out,  
then spread his arms: the prisoner was free.  
The king himself untied the old man's bonds,  
embracing him and kissing his head, conferring  
high rank and the power that goes with it.

Against all odds, the old man's desperate hope  
had ripened into kingly generosity,  
and now the tale's been told for all to hear:  
Good fortune follows those who take their lead  
from honest men, whose nature neither scholars  
nor the ignorant whose intellect  
is all pretense can teach you to emulate.  
Those who chant your praise in unison  
will not help you see where you are weak;  
for that, see yourself through your critic's eyes.  
Your enemies will tell you who you are;

your friends will tell you what you want to hear.  
Giving sweets to one whose suffering  
requires bitter medicine will hurt him;  
to be chastised by a man whose anger shows  
will teach you more than gentle admonitions  
from comrades too sweet-natured to offend.  
No one will give you better advice than this.  
If you're smart, a hint is all you'll need to take it.



*Generosity*

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## Give Attention While You're Still Alive

You will, if you are wise, value what remains when outward forms decay and die: the pure idea the outward form once housed. Just so, a man who chooses ignorance and greed, who does not live in fear of God, lives empty, possessing outward form alone.

The one who makes it possible that people sleep at night with peaceful hearts will sleep in peace when he is laid to rest beneath the ground, so give attention while you're still alive first to the welfare of your inner self. Don't assume your family will care. Their concern is how to satisfy their own desires, not with the corpse you'll be when you are dead.

Do you want to free your life of all distress? Then do not free your mind of those who live distressed lives. Give away your treasure, all of it, today. Tomorrow, the key to it might not be in your hand. Make your own provisions for the world to come; compassion will not give your wife and children strength to send after you what you will need. He who enjoys great wealth in the next world



carried the ball of fortune there from this one.  
There's no one anywhere to scratch my back  
as well as I can with my own fingertips.

Don't close your fist around what you possess;  
in the end, you'll chew your knuckles with regret.  
Use your wealth instead to clothe the poor  
and you will walk clothed in God's presence.  
If you let a needy stranger leave your door  
empty handed, when you, in need, go door-  
to-door, you'll find you are a stranger there.  
A man who has gives to those who don't,  
fearing the day that he's the one without.  
Look into the hearts of those who have suffered;  
one day, it will be your suffering heart  
you're looking into. Sustain in happiness  
the spirits of those who fail; the time will come,  
in your own failure, when you will need sustaining.  
Show gratitude that you are not a beggar:  
do not chase the beggars from your doorstep.



Spread your cloak to shade the orphan's head;  
brush the dust from his clothes; remove the thorns  
that prick him. (Don't you know how destitute  
he's been? Does a rootless tree ever bloom?)  
If an orphan can see you through his downcast eyes,

it's wrong to shower your child's face with kisses.  
If an orphan cries, who will comfort him?  
And if his rage explodes, who will take  
that burden from him? Beware the orphan's tears;  
God's throne trembles when they fall. Wipe them  
from his eyes; wash the dirt from his face;  
and if he lacks a place where he can find  
shelter, shelter him yourself. Once  
my head was fit to wear a crown—laying  
safe against my father's chest: if even  
a fly landed anywhere on me  
everyone around me rushed to keep me  
comfortable and safe; but no one now  
would come to my support, not even if  
my greatest enemy held me captive.  
And so I understand an orphan's pain:  
my father died when I was still a child.

Someone pulled a thorn from an orphan's foot.  
A fortunate noble saw that man in a dream  
walking the gardens of Paradise, saying,  
"From that thorn, look what roses bloomed for me."



Don't, if you can help it, live bare of mercy,  
for if you bear mercy into the world  
merciful men will bear you when you need them.

Just because you do someone a favor  
doesn't mean you've earned the right to say,  
"I'm the leader! You must follow me!"  
Fortune's turning may have turned against him,  
but don't forget, the wheel does not stop turning.  
If you see a thousand people praying for you,  
give thanks to God your life has been so graced  
that all those watchful eyes are turned towards you,  
while nothing they possess turns yours towards them.  
I've often thought that generosity  
was how a captain paid for loyalty;  
I should have said it is the way of God,  
modeled for us by His messengers.

## Don't Knot The Rope Of Generosity

I've heard that once a week went by  
when no one wandering the world  
stopped at the tents of Allah's Friend,<sup>44</sup>  
whose practice was to eat his meals  
only at the proper time  
unless a poor or homeless person  
came to his door. So he stood outside  
his tent and looked around. At the edge  
of the valley he saw a man whose hair  
age had powdered white, sitting  
bent and lonely in the desert  
like a willow. Abraham  
called out his warmest welcome, "Light  
of my eyes! Please, honor the salt  
and bread of my table! Eat with us!"<sup>45</sup>  
Recognizing Abraham for who he was,  
the old man sprang to his feet,  
eager to accept the invitation.  
Abraham's attendants gave  
the lowly guest a seat of honor,  
called for the table to be set,  
and took their own seats; but when  
they said together "In God's Name..."  
no words escaped the old man's mouth.  
Abraham spoke, "I do not see in you

the passion and sincerity of faith  
that men of your age usually express.  
Aren't we obliged each time we eat  
to thank the One who filled our plates?"  
The old man answered, "I will not speak  
of God except as I have learned to do  
from my teachers. I am Zoroastrian."

Once God's favored messenger found out  
the destitute old man was just a *gabr*,<sup>46</sup>  
he chased him like a stray dog from the tent.  
(The pure of heart cannot abide such filth!)  
But then, from Heaven, the voice of God's reproof  
came down, "Dear Friend! I have fed this man,  
and given him his life these hundred years,  
but you, in a single moment, were filled with hate.  
Why refuse him hospitality  
just because he bows before a fire?"  
Don't knot the rope of generosity  
just because you find, in this one, fraud  
and deceit; in that one, trickery and cunning.



A religious scholar bargains poorly when he sells  
wisdom and exegesis for mere bread.  
Neither reason nor God's holy law  
approves the exchange of faith for worldly things.

But you, if you are wise, will gladly pay.  
When someone sells so cheaply, you have to buy.

## Shop Where Others Won't

A woman complained to her husband, "Don't buy  
bread  
from the corner grocer anymore. Instead,  
go to the wheat-sellers market. The one  
down the road puts wheat out to be seen  
but sells barley. It's not customers  
that crowd his stall so you can't see his face.  
It's flies. They've blocked him out for seven days."

In a soothing voice, the man of humble means  
responded, "Light of my eyes, let it go!  
He opened his shop here and took a chance  
on us; for us to take away his profit  
would be inhuman."

Walk the path marked  
for you by men whose generosity  
and kindness you should emulate. Why  
are you still standing there? Reach for the hand  
of someone who's fallen and don't judge him!  
Men of virtue shop where others won't,  
in stores inelegant and lusterless.  
Generosity makes a man a saint,  
just like that king of men, Imam Ali.

## He Fell Right In

I've heard there was an elder who would stop  
at every step he took when he made haj,  
performing each time two rak'as of prayer.  
He walked God's road with such intense desire  
that nothing slowed his pace, not even thorns  
piercing the soles of his feet. Over time,  
an evil inclination clouded his mind,  
and everything he did seemed good and right.  
The Devil's blind had camouflaged the pit  
of thinking his the finest path that could be walked,  
and he fell right in. If Truth hadn't spoken,  
delusion would have made him lose the way.  
The voice descended from the Unknown World,  
"Fortunate one, you of exalted character,  
do not think because you've bowed so much  
you've brought the smallest gift before this Throne.  
Ease one heart with a single act of kindness  
and you've done more than a thousand acts of prayer  
offered at each stop along the way."



## It's Better To Eat

A sultan's captain heard this from his wife,  
"Go, my blessed one, and knock at the door  
of our subsistence. Let them cut you a share  
from their table. Your children's eyes are ripe with  
hunger."

"The kitchen," the captain said, "will be cold today.  
Last night, the sultan started on a fast."

The woman cast her head down in despair  
and said this to herself, her heart shredded  
with need, "What will the Sultan gain from fasting?  
When he breaks his fast each morning, our children  
feast!"

It's better to eat, and by your eating  
do some good, than to fast till the world's end,  
fulfilling only your own selfish needs.  
To fast so you can give a helpless man  
the early morning bread that went uneaten  
makes of fasting a valid enterprise.  
Otherwise, what's the point? So you can eat  
later what you did not eat before?  
The solitary musings of a fool  
will disprove infidelity *and* faith:

Water and mirror both shine brightly.  
Still, you must be able to tell bright from bright.

## What Difference Will It Make?

A man whose inclination was to give  
lacked the wherewithal to follow it.  
His income always failed to match the scope  
of his ambitious generosity.  
(And so, ignoble men should not have wealth,  
and nothing should prevent the generous  
from giving. Nonetheless, a noble man,  
eager to bestow what those in need need,  
snares what he desires only rarely,  
like the run-off of torrential mountain rains  
that finds on the mountain top no place to rest.)  
This man gave, always, more than he could afford,  
and so he lived in abject poverty.

Once, another empty-handed man  
wrote these words to him: "You, whose life  
God will reward, whose decency is well-known,  
lend me, please, the dirhems I require.  
I've been behind these bars for far too long."  
The sum was insignificant, and yet  
he couldn't lay his hands on a single coin,  
so he sent to those who held the captive  
a letter of his own: "You are, I know,  
men of good reputation and largesse.

Let this man walk free for just a while.  
If he flees, I will pay his debt.”

They said yes. Immediately, he went  
to the prison door, calling out, “Get up!  
Get out of town! If your legs still work, run!”  
The sparrow saw his cage unlocked and flew  
without a moment’s hesitation. Later,  
when a new breeze blew across the land—  
but not hard enough to reach the dust  
stirred up by the sparrow’s flight—the debtors  
came to the generous man and said, “Pay us,  
or give us back the man who owed us first.”

No one can recage a bird that’s flown,  
and so he had no choice; he followed them  
to jail, and all the time that he was there  
he wrote not one complaint, and cried not once  
for help. He kept himself awake for nights  
on end, and would not court complacency.  
A pious man walked past the cell and said,  
“You don’t look the sort to practice thievery.  
How did it come to be that you are here?”

“Thank you, kind and holy sir, for asking,”  
the imprisoned man responded. “Indeed,  
I have purloined nothing. I saw a man  
chafing at his bonds, helpless to free himself,

and the only avenue for saving him  
was to take those bonds upon myself. For him  
to live life fettered, I thought, was wrong  
when I was free to walk where I saw fit."<sup>47</sup>  
This selfless man took with him when he died  
a good name. Celebrate the life  
of one whose name endures. A body asleep  
beneath the earth, whose heart in such a name  
lives on is better than a world of men  
living with dead hearts beating in their chests.  
A heart alive to righteousness in life  
will never be destroyed. If its body dies,  
what difference will it make?

## Each Of Us Must Carry What He Can

A man walking the desert found a dog  
so drained of life by thirst  
it had just one breath left.  
Kindness was a ritual for him,  
and so he tied his turban like a rope  
to his hat and lowered it to draw water  
for the helpless dog—at which the Messenger<sup>48</sup>  
proclaimed in the name of the Arbiter of Sins  
that all the man's transgressions had been forgiven.  
If you would have done differently,  
there is a lesson here for you: practice  
generosity, choose loyalty.  
If God doesn't overlook a kindness  
to a dog, imagine how He values one  
whose good deeds help other men! Be as kind,  
as generous, as you have it in you to be;  
the world's Lord shuts no one out. If you don't  
own a well from which to offer water,  
light a lamp to guide the traveler  
on his way. Giving gold by the bucket  
from your treasury is not the same  
as a carat's worth in someone else's hands,  
but each of us must carry what he can.  
A locust's leg weighs heavy on an ant!

## Sweet Life Is A Pleasure To Live

You, if you are pious and decent, come,  
hear this tale of one man's decency:  
When Shibli opened up the sack of grain  
he'd carried on his shoulders all the way  
from the wheat-seller's, he saw an ant  
scrambling in and out between the kernels,  
searching for the trail that would lead it home.  
That night, Shibli couldn't sleep. Compassion  
pushed him out of bed to take the insect  
back to where he took it from. He said,  
"It would be inhumane of me to keep  
this ant from finding the place where it belongs."

Heal the hearts of those whose lives are broken  
and your life will be whole and graced with peace!  
Ferdowsi said it well, whose birth was pure,  
on whose pure dust may God's mercy fall:  
*Don't torment the ant that drags its grain  
along the ground. It's alive, and sweet life  
is a pleasure to live.* Only evil men,  
and those with hearts of stone will squeeze an ant's  
heart tight. Neither should you bring your fist  
down on the heads of the helpless. One day,  
you may fall, a helpless ant, at their feet.  
Be prepared when destitution finds you:

bring joy to those whose lives are destitute.  
The candle's flame shows no mercy to the moth,  
so we attend each night its public burning.<sup>49</sup>  
Those weaker than you may seem to fill the world,  
but there's always someone stronger you haven't met.



## You Don't Need To Settle

A man saw a fox who'd lost its hands and feet.  
He stood there, stunned that God would choose to  
shape  
the creature's life like that. "How," he asked,  
"does it survive? Without limbs, how does it eat?"  
These questions so disturbed the man he blushed.  
A lion with a jackal in its claws  
walked up just then and ate its prey,  
leaving enough to fill the fox's belly.  
The next day, God once more made sure the fox  
could eat his fill, and in that moment faith  
opened the man's eyes and he surrendered  
himself to the care of his Creator. He said,  
"I will from now on sit in a corner  
like an ant; even elephants don't use force  
to feed themselves." So he sat with his chin in his collar  
and waited for God to send his daily bread.  
No one, not a stranger, not a friend,  
came to nourish him. His withered fists  
were little more than vein and bone and skin.  
When he had grown so weak he lacked all sense  
and barely had the strength to stay awake,  
a voice called out from the wall he leaned against,  
"Go, you rogue! Be a ravening lion!  
Do not make yourself a crippled fox!"

Endeavor like the lion, though, to leave  
for others what you don't need, for you don't need  
to settle, like a fox, for leavings.



A man  
whose neck is muscular and lion-like,  
who acts instead as if he *were* a fox,  
is lower than a dog. Gather food to share  
with all who share your table; don't depend  
on others having more than what they need.  
Yes, eat while you're still strong enough, the food  
you earn yourself; when the time comes, such effort  
will tip your scales.<sup>50</sup> Do a man's work; comfort  
others: only men who are not men  
allow another's food to nourish them.  
Take, young man, the old beggar's hand; don't hold  
your hand up for someone else to take.  
God will forgive the one among His servants  
who lives his life so others live at ease.  
Generosity is common sense to a man  
who has a brain: the mind of one who's cheap  
lacks both the shell and the kernel within.  
Good will come in this world and the next  
to one who brings some good to God's creatures.

## Better You Should Kiss Us With A Pun

As I and some companions roamed the desert,  
we heard talk of a man in Outer Byzance<sup>51</sup>  
whose roots dug deep in clean soil, whose learning  
and whose travels, at least by reputation,  
compelled us to visit him. When we arrived,  
he kissed us each on our head, our hands and our eyes  
and seated us with dignity and honor.  
Then he sat down himself. His wealth—servants,  
fields, fancy clothes—surrounded us, but he,  
like a fruitless tree, was not a gentleman.  
The fire beneath his pot stayed cold throughout.  
He did not sleep and did not sit to rest,  
proclaiming the tahlil all night, reciting  
the tasbih.<sup>52</sup> We also stayed awake till dawn.  
Hunger did not let us close our eyes.  
In the morning, he girded his loins, opened his door  
and labored once again at the gracious  
kissing he'd starved us with the night before.

A sweet and pleasant man who traveled with us  
said, "Better you should kiss us with a pun:  
*Instead of your fair welcome, poor men prefer  
the hearty fare of a full table. Don't  
take my shoes to make me feel at home.*

Give me bread. Use the shoes to hit me  
on the head.”<sup>53</sup>

True men become preeminent  
by giving lavishly. They do not keep  
the night alive with empty-hearted prayers.  
(Those who do are like the Tartar sentries,  
scanning the night with ever watchful eyes,  
while in their hearts nothing lives.) To be  
a gentleman is to be generous,  
which means providing food: words expressing  
hospitality are headless drums.

The ones you’ll meet in paradise are those  
who sought God’s truth without seeking greatness:  
*Through* God’s truth greatness *can* be earned,  
but talk without action is not the way.

## Last Night's Roast Meat

I've heard it said of Hatam<sup>54</sup> that he owned  
a blue-black horse swift as the morning breeze,  
whose neighing drowned out thunder, who could  
outrun  
lightning. When he galloped, his hooves rained down  
like spring hail across the hills and plains. Fast  
like a flooded river coursing through the desert,  
the wind itself swirled like dust at his heels.  
People knew of Hatam's reputation  
as far away as Byzantium. "No man,"  
they told that kingdom's ruler, "is Hatam's peer  
in generosity; no steed is faster  
or better in a fight. He moves over sand  
like a boat on water. No eagle could keep pace  
above him." The sultan answered his advisor,  
"Claims that have no substance will embarrass  
those that make them. I will ask this Arab  
horse of Hatam as a gift. If he gives it  
freely, as you suggest he will, I'll know  
the grandeur people claim for him is real.  
If not, these stories I've heard are nothing more  
than pounding on a headless drum." He sent  
to Tayi a messenger who knew the ways  
of Hatam's tribe, with a company of ten.  
The earth lay dead below the weeping clouds;

the eastern gust that brought the rain brought it life.  
When they arrived at Hatam's house, they drank  
like thirsty men on the banks of the Zinda-Rud.<sup>55</sup>  
Hatam spread a carpet for a table,  
slaughtered a horse, poured sugar into their skirts  
and gold into their fists. They went to sleep  
and in the morning made their king's request.  
Hatam sputtered, tripping over his words  
like a drunk, flaying the back of his hand  
with his teeth, "Dear maubad<sup>56</sup>, why did you wait  
till now to tell me this? That wind-swift horse,  
fast as Dul-dul,<sup>57</sup> was last night's roast meat.  
No one, I thought, should have to risk the torrent  
that might have washed them away if they had gone  
on your account to the horse's grazing ground;  
and so I had no choice. That horse alone  
stood at my chamber door, and I could not  
allow my guests to spend the night hungry.  
I want my good name known throughout the land.  
Who cares if I own one less famous horse?"  
Then he loaded down his guests with money,  
robes of honor, and horses. (Good character  
comes naturally; it can't be learned.) When news  
of what had happened reached Byzantium,  
they praised Hatam Tayi a thousand times.

But don't be satisfied with this small tale.  
Here is one more wonderful, and rare.

## The Long Road Back To Yemen

I don't remember where I heard this tale:  
In Yemen once there lived a shah who marked  
his rule with generosity so great  
you might have said he was a "cloud of giving,"  
for money fell from his open hand like rain.  
In spreading wealth he had no peer, and so  
he snatched Fortune's ball from those more famous.  
Nonetheless, if anyone dared mention  
Hatam's name, a melancholy rage  
rose within the shah and he would say,  
"Why do you fill my ears with lavish praise  
for a man who weighs the wind.<sup>58</sup> He rules no land,  
is no one's lord and possesses no treasure!"

Once, they say, this shah gave a royal feast.  
As his guests unwound to a lute's soothing music,  
someone opened the door to talk of Hatam;  
another quickly praised the man. The shah  
so filled with envy his hatred boiled over,  
and he ordered a guard to bring him Hatam's head.  
"As long as Hatam's days and mine," he said,  
"are the same, nothing I can do will ensure  
the future of my good name!" The shah's assassin  
took the road to Banu Tayi to take  
Hatam's life. Along the way, he met



a younger man whose sociability he sensed.  
Handsome, wise and most sincere, this young man  
welcomed him that night as an honored guest,  
embarrassed him with generosity  
and sympathy, and asked him all the time  
to excuse such paltry hospitality.  
Such kindness stole the hired killer's heart.  
The next day, the man kissed the killer's hands  
and feet and said, "Stay a few days longer."

"I can't," the shah's assassin answered, "I  
am charged with a heavy task." The other said,  
"Tell me what it is and I will help you  
as if the task were mine as well."

"I will,"

the killer said, "because the generous,  
like you, I know to be discrete. Can you  
tell me where to find Hatam, whose good name  
and flawless conduct are known throughout the world?  
Yemen's shah wants his head, though what  
the hatred is between them I don't know.  
Can't you show me where he is my friend?  
I hope I can depend on one more kindness."

The young man smiled, "I am Hatam! Here!  
Slice my neck through with your sword! Have my head!  
I do not want you in the morning light  
to come to harm or give up in despair."

As Hatam freely offered up his life,  
the killer's soul cried out; he fell to the dirt,  
jumped up again; then he kissed the dirt  
where Hatam stood, and Hatam's hands and feet.  
He threw his sword to the ground, and next to it  
his quiver, and folded his hands beneath his arms  
and said, "If I attack you with a rose,  
I'll only prove that I am not a man,  
and other men will see me as a woman!"  
He touched his lips to each of Hatam's eyes,  
held him in a tight embrace, then turned  
and walked the long road back to Yemen.

The shah took one look at his servant's face  
and knew the job he'd sent the man to do  
had not been done. "Tell me," the shah said,  
"what is your report? Why is Hatam's head  
not strapped to your saddle? Were you ambushed  
by some illustrious man? Were you too weak  
to fight back?" At this, the servant bowed low  
and kissed the earth at the shah's feet, praising  
the sovereign, proclaiming the ruler's power:  
"I found this Hatam whom you say chases fame—  
a handsome man, virtuous, pleasant;  
I found him generous and wise; in fact,  
I found him more endowed with manliness  
than I am. The burden of his grace bent

my back double; he killed me with his sword  
of kindness!" The servant told all he'd seen,  
and the shah poured praised upon Hatam's house,  
giving the would-be killer a sealed purse  
filled with money, saying, "Hatam's name  
is sealed with generosity. In him,  
we see reality and reputation  
come together as a single truth!"

## Family Background Doesn't Lie

I've heard that when Mohammad was alive,  
the people of Tayi would not accept  
the mandate of Islam, and so he sent  
an army to persuade them, taking captive  
a group he ordered killed for the sake of God,  
for they and their beliefs were both unclean.  
A woman called out, "I am Hatam's daughter!  
Be generous, please, and intercede with God  
on my behalf, for my father was truly generous!"  
Mohammad knew at once she spoke the truth  
and freed her from the chains that bound her limbs;  
but then they put her comrades to the sword.  
The blood rushed out like rivers without end.  
She pointed to a man whose blade was drawn,  
shrieking, "Take my head along with theirs!  
I give you back this solitary freedom,  
the way of cowards and of selfishness!  
You cannot separate me from my kin!"  
Her voice reached the prophet's ears. He pardoned  
her people, rewarded her with many gifts.  
"Family background doesn't lie," he said.

## I'll Say This And Nothing More

Once, an old man came to Hatam's storehouse  
asking for ten dirhems worth of sugar.  
As I remember what was told to me,  
Hatam gave the man a full sack instead.  
Hatam's wife called out through her tent door,  
"What kind of management is this? The ten  
he asked for would have met his needs." Tayi's  
most famous man smiled in response, "My dear,  
he may have asked according to his need,  
but giving only that would fall far short  
of the generosity that is our legacy."

The world will end before another man  
who loves to give as much as Hatam did  
is born, except Abu Bekr ibn Saad ben Zanki,  
whose noble mind construes the hand of giving's  
only use is to satisfy hunger's mouth.  
Protector of your subjects, may your heart  
rejoice! Through your efforts may Islam flourish!  
Even the dust of this blessed soil  
can lift its head with pride. Your rule outshines  
by far Byzantium and Greece. You are  
like Hatam, whose ambition is the reason  
Tayi's name is known throughout the world,  
but if people praise *him* after all these years,

*you'll* have that and God's reward as well.  
Hatam wanted only lasting fame;  
the good you do you do on God's account.  
Poor men shouldn't stand on ceremony,  
so I'll say this and nothing more: As long  
as you're allowed to do good, do good!  
Your deeds will be remembered when you're gone  
like these words will be remembered when I'm dead.

## Answer Evil Men With Kindness

The man's donkey tumbled deep into the mud.  
Rage-boiled blood tumbled deep into his heart.  
"First the desert, then rain, then cold, then a flood,  
then darkness drapes its skirts across the sky....—"   
all night he cursed and swore against the world.  
No one escaped his tongue, not enemies,  
not friends, not even the shah who ruled that land.

It just so happened the shah was passing by  
the spot where man and mule were stuck. Hearing  
such foul language, lacking patience to listen  
and without the face to face the man, the shah  
looked shamefaced at the royal entourage,  
"Why does he pour his bile out on me?"

"Kill him now, my lord," one said, "His oaths  
spared no one, not your servants, not your wife!"

At that, the shah looked down and saw the fellow's  
misery, the donkey mired in muck,  
and swallowed his own rage, forgiving what he'd heard  
because he understood the man's position.  
The shah then gave him gold, a horse and robes!  
How fitting a response to words of hate!

Someone said, "You stupid careless man!  
You narrowly escaped your death!"

"Quiet!"

the man shot back. "If I cried bitterly,  
he eased my suffering as it suited him."  
To pay evil with evil is easy. To be  
a man, answer evil men with kindness.





# *Ecstatic Love*

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## Wild For Oneness

To love someone whose body is like yours,  
made from water and from clay, will rob you  
of your peace of mind and of your patience.  
When you're awake, his lovely dimpled cheeks  
call your thoughts to them, and you can't resist;  
and when you sleep, his image binds your dreams.  
In selfless love you lay your head so low  
at his feet that next to him the world means nothing;  
and when the gold you offer fails to move him,  
gold and dust become the same for you.  
No other beauty takes your breath away  
because his presence leaves no room for others.  
You say his dwelling place is in your eyes,  
but if you fold your eyelids shut, you'll see  
he's in your heart. You do not fear dishonor  
by another's hand, nor do you have the will  
to wait even a second for what you want.  
If he asked you for your soul, you'd put it on your lips;<sup>59</sup>  
and if he put his sword against your neck,  
you'd bend to it willingly, eagerly.  
Since love like this, that's built on empty air  
so controls your life, causing such trouble,  
why are you surprised at those who walk  
the Way, immersed as they are in Truth's ocean?  
Wild for oneness with God's divine soul,

they're careless with the souls God gave them.  
The thought of their Beloved wipes their thinking  
clean of the world. Focused solely on Truth,  
the world is what they run from, so drunk  
with what the Cupbearer has poured for them  
that they spill the wine. Don't treat them medically;  
they've not been told correctly why they suffer.  
With God's great "Am I not your Lord?" ringing  
always in their ears, always they cry out,  
"We bear witness!"<sup>60</sup> Forever active, they sit  
alone nonetheless. Dust covers their feet;  
their breath is fire. If they roar as one,  
they can remove a mountain from its place;  
a single sigh from them will raze a city.  
Like the wind, they're hidden from your sight,  
but their nimble movements move the world around  
you.

Mute as stones, still they sing the tasbih.<sup>61</sup>  
At sunrise, they cry with such deep fervor  
that their tears wash sleep's kohl from their eyes.  
They ride so hard at night, their horses die;  
then, at dawn, they complain they've been abandoned.  
Day and night, the sea of passion and flame  
buffets them till they can't tell night from day.  
The Artist's beauty so seduces them  
that they ignore the beauty of the art.  
Men of heart don't give their hearts to outer form,

and the foolish who do miss the inner essence.  
Only one who leaves this world behind  
and forgets the next, sips the wine of God's oneness.

## The Flames Have Taken Everything

Once, I've heard, a beauty, pari-like,<sup>62</sup>  
swept up by a musician's melody,  
danced the hearts of all who watched into flames.  
Their watching set the dancer's skirt on fire.  
The fire burned; the dancer grew enraged.  
One among them said, "Your skirt is gone,  
but why worry? Your skirt is all you've lost.  
From me, the flames have taken everything!"

If you're a true beloved, don't ramble on  
about yourself. If "beloved" and "self"  
remain apart, it's polytheism.

## Glass and Stone

I remember hearing this from a wise elder:  
Caught up in the frenzy of divine love,  
a man ran off alone into the desert.  
When he left, his father neither ate nor slept.  
Some reproached the son, but he responded,  
“Now that my Companion has called me His own,  
I leave the claims that others had on me  
behind. By the Truth of His existence, since Truth  
appeared to me as beauty, all I’ve seen  
in my life appears to have been fantasy.”

No one who has turned his face away  
from other creatures, then found the One he lost  
has ever gone astray. Such men, scattered  
under heaven, are called both wild beasts  
and angels: Angels because they never rest  
from keeping God in their hearts; and wild beasts  
because, like beasts, they run from human contact.  
Insane and in their insanity prudent,  
drunk and in their drunkenness sober,  
they’re strong enough to humble other men,  
yet they themselves define humility.  
Now they sit sewing their cloaks in a corner;  
now they dance together, their cloaks on fire.  
They show no passion for themselves and no



concern for any other: nothing else  
will fit where they believe that God is one.  
Their rational minds no longer function;  
their senses do not comprehend the world;  
they close their ears to any advisor's counsel.  
Still, ducks do not drown in the sea,  
nor does a salamander suffer in a blaze.  
They're empty-handed, yet they have the stomach  
to cross the desert without a caravan.  
They hide who they are so they can't be seen,  
but not like infidels who crouch, cloaked  
within the folds of the darvish's patched robes.<sup>63</sup>  
They seek approval from no one else, for Truth  
has approved them many times over. A vine,  
shade-giving, heavy with fruit, they're not like us,  
who shade our black deeds blue.<sup>64</sup> They bow their heads  
within themselves, like a pearl inside its shell,  
not like the ocean waves, spraying their foam  
when they fall. Skin and bones don't make them men:  
a form's existence does not mean it holds  
the Idea's spirit! (No king will purchase  
every slave for sale: a living man  
will not be found beneath each shabby cowl.  
If every drop of dew became a pearl,  
you could buy pearls everywhere, like cockle shells.)  
Such men do not wear stilts, like tumblers;  
they know that wooden legs slip out of place.

Gathered in the privacy of God's "Am I not?"  
one sip will keep them drunk till the trumpet sounds.  
They won't pull back their hands from what they want—  
not even if they're threatened with a sword—  
for reticence and love are like glass is to stone.

## The Wound's Pain

You'd say the one whose beauty stole his heart  
poured honey from his mouth instead of words.  
His loveliness outshined the sun; his flirting  
left the house of piety in ruins.  
(God's loveliness is so much greater still,  
it's earthly form *must* be a sign of His mercy.)  
Eyes followed behind him wherever he walked;  
lovers pledged their hearts to make him theirs;  
but the one whose heart was stolen always looked  
in secret. Once, the object of his gaze  
gazed back and scolded him, "You stubborn fool!  
How long will you chase after me? Don't you  
know I'm not the bird for your net? If I  
catch you near me one more time, I'll use  
my own blade, and like an enemy,  
with no regrets, I'll take your head."

Someone

told this unrequited lover, "Do  
as he says. Find someone attainable.  
I do not see how you will ever get  
what you want from him, and God forbid you lose  
your life because you can't control yourself."  
He heard this reprimand and from the lovesick  
root of his hurt he pulled this cry of sorrow,  
"Let it be that when he runs me through

the wound's pain rolls me in blood and dirt  
until I am a corpse. Then they'll say,  
perhaps, before friends and enemies alike,  
here is someone killed by his own hand.  
I can't escape the dust of where he lives.  
Tell him, tyrant that he is, to pour  
my reputation out until the dust  
has settled to the earth and I am clean.<sup>65</sup>  
You who worship only self, you tell me  
repent?! You should be repenting now  
for what you've said! Anything he does,  
even if he takes my life, is good.  
I'm the one who needs to be forgiven.  
His fire burns me nightly down to nothing!  
Each dawn I am revived by his fair scent.  
If I die today in his vicinity,  
when I arise, I'll pitch my tent beside him!"<sup>66</sup>

Don't turn your back if you can stand and fight!  
Saadi lives, though he was killed by love.



A thirsty man was saying as he died,  
"The man who dies in water dies happy."  
An inexperienced fellow overheard,  
"That's strange! If you're dying, what difference does it  
make

if you've slaked your thirst or if your lips stay parched?"  
The dying man replied, "Can't I moisten  
my mouth a drop, just to help me set  
my sweet soul at lip's edge?"

A thirsting man

will plunge deep into the water. He knows  
he will not drown until he drinks his fill!  
If you're a lover, grab his skirt, and if  
he says, "Give me your life!" tell him, "Take it!"  
You won't enjoy the ease of paradise  
till you pass through the hell of non-existence.  
When seeds are sown, those who sow them suffer;  
they sleep easy only when the harvest is in.  
The one who gets a cup at the last round  
is the only one here who will get what he wants.<sup>67</sup>

## It Would Be A Pity

A woman, young and newly wed, complains  
to an elder that her husband is unkind:  
“You cannot take it lightly that with him  
I live each day in growing bitterness  
and will until my days have reached their end.  
I watch the other couples living here;  
no bride among them suffers like I do.  
Husband and wife are such good and loyal friends,  
you’d say they were two kernels in one shell.  
But my husband? Not once since we were married  
has he smiled when he sees me!” The elder,  
whose wisdom augured happiness for her  
(a man of many years knows what to say),  
heard her words and gave this sweet reply,  
“If he is handsome, bear the burden he is;  
it would be a pity to turn your face  
from one whose like you’ll never see again.”

Resign yourself and make yourself a slave  
to what the Truth compels in you. You won’t find  
another Lord like Him. How can you turn  
your back on One whose turning away from you  
means He’s drawn a line right through your life?

## Hell Or Paradise?

Two cousins from the father's family  
happened to marry, each of noble blood,  
each as beautiful as the sun. The bride  
found her new life more than pleasant; the groom  
was hostile and reluctant. Like a pari,  
she was courteous and full of grace;  
he kept his face turned to the wall. She tried  
to make herself desirable for him.  
He prayed, desiring death from God.  
The village elders sat him down and said,  
"If you want to send her away, send her her dowry!"  
The young man smiled, "One hundred sheep  
is a small price to pay to gain my freedom!"  
When she heard this, the girl began to dig  
with her nails into her skin, "How will I live  
if I live without my love for such a sum?  
Not a hundred sheep, not three hundred thousand,  
will pay me back for giving up the sight  
of my beloved's face!" Whatever tempts you  
to leave the Friend behind, know this now:  
Only He will ease your heart. Someone wrote  
to a man wild with passion, "Which do you want,  
Hell or Paradise?" The man wrote back,  
"Don't ask! I want only what He wants for me!"

## Distance Doesn't Mean I've Tamed My Feelings

Someone asked Majnun, "What's wrong with you?  
It's been too long since your welcome footprints  
adorned  
Hay's tribal land?<sup>68</sup> Has the passion for Laila  
left your head? Has your desire turned,  
and so you do not want her?" When Majnun  
heard this, the poor wretch, he cried, "My master!  
Take your hand from my skirt!<sup>69</sup> My lacerated  
heart tortures me already. Don't you too  
rub salt into my wounds. I stay away,  
it's true, but distance doesn't mean I've tamed  
my feelings. Sometimes it's a necessary  
evil." The other then said, "You're loyal,  
and your character is good. What message  
would you have me carry back to Laila?"  
Majnun replied, "Don't say my name in her presence,  
for where she is, my name does violence."



## If A Camel Knows

If you would make yourself a man of love,  
then make yourself a man whom none notice.  
Otherwise, choose the path that offers safety.  
Do not fear that the Lover will turn you to dust;  
if He destroys you, you will last forever.  
No plant grows correctly from its seed  
unless the seed itself is first unmade.  
That which grants you access to the Truth  
can only be what grants you freedom from yourself,  
and only when you breathe that freedom's air  
will the road to the Self open for you to travel.  
Only one who's given himself up knows this.  
If you have lost yourself in frenzied love  
the melody you need to dance can come  
from musicians playing, of course, but also  
from the clip-clop of a packhorse's hooves;  
and if a man is wild with Love, a fly's  
beating wings are all he needs to clap  
his hands, fly-like, above his head. He can't  
distinguish bass from treble, and when he sings,  
a rooster's crowing leaves his love-struck mouth.  
Still, the singer never stops his singing,  
even though the ear he serenades  
may not be listening; and when those crazed  
with love drink in the wine of worship, even

a water wheel's creaking is music to them,  
and like the wheel, they wheel round and round,  
and like the wheel, the water pours from them,  
tears of surrender, their heads deep in their collars.  
But when the pain is more than they can bear,  
they tear their collars to shreds. So don't blame  
a darvish that he's drunk beyond all reason:  
he flails about like that because he's drowning.



I will not tell you, brother, how to hear  
such music unless I know who's listening.  
If his bird takes flight from Reality's loft,  
the angels themselves will lag behind it; but if  
he trifles with his life and gives himself  
to idle play, the Demon in his brain  
will grow in strength. When the man who hears this  
tune  
embraces his desire, he rises in sleep  
to the sweet sounds of heaven, not the pull  
of his own intoxication. The morning wind  
will scatter a rose's petals, but only an axe  
can split wood. Ecstatic music, frenzy,  
intoxication—they fill the world, but think:  
When he looks in a mirror, what does a blind man see?  
The Arabs coax their camels on with song,  
and the camels move, and if a camel knows

to give itself to melody, then the man  
who does not understand this is an ass.

## One Who's Clothed Is Powerless

The boy's sweet lips drew music from his reed  
that made hearts burn like reeds around him.  
His father fumed at him each time he played,  
lighting the reed with a fire of his own;  
but then, one night, the father listened first.  
What he heard unsettled him, and left him  
speechless, with sweat running down his face.  
"This time," he said, "the reed's set me on fire!"  
Do you know why, when they reach that frenzied state,  
they dance like drunks and throw their arms apart?  
They're opening their hearts in case the Friend  
decides to enter *and* tossing all they have  
to those they've left behind. It is halal  
for you to dance remembering those others,  
if in each sleeve you wear you've tucked a soul.  
Look, even if you are a strong swimmer,  
your hands and feet won't take you very far  
unless you strip; strip away, then, your need  
of a good name widely known, the false  
pretense that what clothes you matters, for one who's  
clothed  
is powerless and won't escape drowning.  
Attachment is a veil that yields you nothing;  
to achieve union, you must break those bonds.

## Love, My Boy, /s Fire

Someone told a moth, "You wretched thing!  
Go walk a path that offers you some hope  
and find yourself a friend who's more your match.  
You have no business chasing after candles.  
A salamander might survive that fire,  
but you will not. You just don't have the strength.  
A mole escapes the sunshine underground,  
and a show of force against iron fists is madness.  
If you know that someone is your enemy,  
then making him your friend is more than foolish.  
No one will tell you you've done a proper thing  
to sacrifice your life on his account.  
The beggar who dares ask for the emperor's daughter  
must swallow the blows they rain down on him  
even as his senseless passion seethes.  
Who in their right mind would let you near her,  
when she can have her pick of kings and princes?  
Don't fool yourself. With the company she keeps,  
she will not think a penniless fool like you  
deserves courtesy; and even if she's kind  
to everyone else, you're the laughingstock  
she'll turn to ash."

Come, listen, stand in awe  
at how that burning moth responded, "If  
I burn, it doesn't matter. Like Abraham,<sup>70</sup>

I carry in my soul a fire that makes  
the candle's flame a rose garden. A heart  
does not grab the skirts of the one who steals it;  
rather, the thief pulls hard at the lover's collar.  
I did not throw myself into the blaze;  
love dragged me there by the chain of longing  
wrapped around my neck, though when the heat  
first burned me, I was not here, with the flames  
in front of me. I was far away.

In beauty's presence a lover won't hold back;  
he will reject all talk of continence:  
"Who will disapprove of my desire  
for this friend, when I'd gladly lie slaughtered  
at his feet? This is why I'm hungry for death:  
As long as he exists, it's only right  
that I should not. So let me burn in him  
and in consuming me he'll be revealed  
as the best of all beloveds.

How much longer  
will you tell me, 'Choose someone who loves you back!  
Who will show, at least, some small compassion!'  
Advice like that, to one who's drunk with love,  
is like telling someone stung by scorpions  
not to moan in pain." If you know for sure  
that what you have to say will be ignored,  
for heaven's sake, say nothing! Once the reins

have fallen from the rider's hands, what's the use  
of telling him to slow down? The point  
is made in *Sinbad* very nicely, *Love,*  
*my boy, is fire; reproach is the wind;*  
and just as strong wind fans a fire's flames,  
a beaten leopard's fury burns the hottest.

"I understand you well and you do wrong  
to say I need a lover like myself.  
Search for someone better every chance  
you get; otherwise, you waste your days.  
If a lover like yourself is all you want,  
then yourself is what you worship. Those whom love  
intoxicates chance more dangerous roads.  
Since it first came to my head to do this thing,  
I've had to force my head and heart apart.  
In love, to risk one's head shows loyalty.  
Cowards risk nothing, loving only themselves.  
Death waits up ahead to ambush me.  
I'd rather die here by *those* lovely hands."

It's true: destruction's written on our heads.  
Destruction by a sweetheart, though, is sweeter.  
One day, helpless, you *will* give up your life.  
Better, then, to give it to the love of your life.

## Death Alone Puts Out The Fire

I recall a night when my eyes just wouldn't close,  
and I heard a moth saying to the candle,  
"It's right for me to burn: I am the lover;  
but tell me, why are you weeping and burning?"  
The candle replied, "My friend, you silly thing,  
don't be naïve: I've lost my sweet companion,  
honey, and since Shirin abandoned me,  
like Farhad, grief's flames scorch me head to foot."<sup>71</sup>  
As the candle spoke, her pain ran in rivers  
down her yellow cheeks, "You are a fraud;  
you have no business loving. You lack courage;  
you can't stay still; you fly from a single flame,  
half-baked, while I remain till all of me  
is properly done. Love's blaze may have singed  
your wings, but look at me, from top to bottom  
I am burning." The candle debated like this  
while the men gathered around it, and when the night  
was only partly gone, one among them,  
with a pari's face, put the candle to death.  
Then it said, smoke swirling at its head,  
"Love, my boy, ends just like that. You'll learn,  
if you're a lover, that death alone puts out  
the fire."

Don't shed tears at the grave of someone  
thus murdered by a friend; rejoice instead



that the friend accepted him. If you're infected,  
don't cleanse your mind of love's sickness. Rather,  
like Saadi, cleanse yourself of all  
other purpose. A true lover will fight  
a storm of stones and arrows to reach his goal.  
Beware! Don't try to sail that sea! You're warned!  
But if you go, give yourself to the storm.

*Humility*

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## And Heaven Let The Oyster Do Its Work

God, who is pure, created you from dust;  
like dust, therefore, practice humility.  
Don't be greedy; do not consume the world;  
and even if you're most unsatisfied,  
don't lose control. You're made from dust, not fire.  
When fire lifted its head in arrogance,  
dust threw itself, helpless, to the ground,  
and since one was arrogant and the other humble,  
the former was made into demons; the latter, humans.<sup>72</sup>



A drop of rain fell slowly from a cloud.  
Shamed by the sea's apparent endlessness  
it said, "Where there's an ocean, who am I?  
If such vast water exists, I do not!"  
But while it held itself in such contempt,  
an oyster took it in and cherished it,  
and heaven let the oyster do its work  
until the drop became a kingly pearl.  
It rose so high because it first bowed low,  
banging at non-being's door  
until at last it came to be.

## The Gates Of Repentance

Once, I've heard, on a feast day, before dawn,  
when Bayazid was leaving the bathhouse, someone  
accidentally poured a pot of ashes  
from a neighboring house onto his head—at which,  
his turban and hair a mess, he rubbed his palms  
in gratitude upon his face, “My soul!  
I know that I deserve to burn in hell;  
so why should this small bit of ash upset me?”  
Great men do not think about themselves.



You can't expect concern for godliness  
from someone whose concern is with himself.  
Neither words nor reputation will make you great;  
greatness is not pretension or conceit.  
The ones you'll meet in Paradise are those  
who sought God's truth without seeking greatness.  
Humility will elevate your head  
and earn you praise; pride will return you to dust.  
A man who lifts his neck in arrogance  
will break it. If eminence is what you want,  
don't make your life a search for eminence.  
You will not learn which path to take to God  
from someone over-dazzled by this world:

Do not expect concern for godliness  
from someone whose concern is for himself.



If you want rank and honor don't look down,  
like those who are not humble, on other people.  
What wise man would dare assume there's worth  
in denigrating others? Strive for this:  
that people say you have good character.  
You need no higher praise than that. Look,  
if someone like you treats you as his lesser,  
are you not wise enough to understand  
how small he is? So if you do the same,  
you'll seem to others as he did to you.  
If you achieve a place of honor, be smart;  
don't laugh at those who've fallen below you;  
many an upright man has lost his footing,  
while those who've stumbled have risen to take his  
place.  
I'll grant you that you're clean of any fault.  
Why waste your time, then, finding fault with me?  
One man can hold the Ka'ba's door ring  
in his hand; another can lie drunk, face down  
in the street where he fell. If God calls the latter,  
who will stand in his way? And if He chases  
the former away, who will bring him back?

The good deeds of the first earn him nothing;  
yet the gates of repentance are not closed to the other.

## In God's Court

I've heard somewhere from those who tell such tales  
that in the days of Jesus, peace be on him,  
there lived a man who'd wasted his whole life,  
spending it in ignorance and sin.  
Arrogant, hard-hearted, each deed of his  
blacker than the next—even the Devil  
was put to shame by his impurity.  
He gave his days to uselessness; no one  
rested easier because of him.  
His head held neither modesty nor wit,  
and forbidden foods fattened his belly. Lies  
sullied his skirts and he himself, in all  
his shamelessness, was smeared from head to toe  
with the blackest soot. So clouded were his eyes,  
he couldn't see the path to God that those  
whose sight is clear can easily discern.  
Nor was his ear open to advice.  
People avoided him like a bad year,  
pointing him out in the distance like a new moon.  
Lust and longing burned his whole harvest,  
leaving not a single barleycorn  
of reputation. So thoroughly had he  
indulged in pleasure, not one space remained  
in the book of his deeds to write anything else.  
Sinful, self-absorbed, a devotee



of appetite, he used up his days and nights  
in reckless drunkenness.

Anyway,  
they say that Jesus came out of the desert  
and passed by a hermit's prayer cell, who ran  
at once to throw himself at Jesus' feet  
and bow his head to the ground. The sinner watched  
from where he stood, a moth dazzled by light,  
feeling regret fill him, and shame, like a poor  
man in the presence of the truly wealthy.  
Embarrassed, he asked beneath his breath, his words  
burning, to be forgiven for all the nights  
he'd squandered. Sorrow fell from his eyes in a mist.  
"My days," he cried, "have passed in pointlessness.  
I've spent and spent the money of my life  
and there's not one scrap of good to show for it.  
No one like me should ever live again;  
death for him is much better than life!  
He who dies in childhood escapes;  
he has no shame to bear when he is old.  
Creator of the world, forgive my sins!  
They're evil companions; I don't want their company."  
He hung his head in disgrace, a river of guilt  
running down his face and over his chest.

Now picture this: In one corner, the sinner,  
moaning, "You who hold your hand out to all,

redeem me from the punishment I've earned."  
And the hermit, watching from not too far away,  
head inflated with pride, eyebrows bunched  
in self-righteous condescension, asking aloud,  
"Why is that wretched creature following us?  
A luckless oaf like that should not presume  
we'd welcome him: The fires of Hell lick  
at his neck; he's offered his whole life to the winds  
of desire. What good has come from his soul,  
stained as it is, that he should claim the right  
to take the Messiah and myself as companions?<sup>73</sup>  
Better he should take his troubles elsewhere  
and follow them straight down to the Devil's slave pits!  
His foul expression troubles me: I fear  
the flames of his sins will burn me as well!  
When Judgment Day arrives and all assemble  
to be judged, dear God, don't judge me next to him!"

At that moment, an inspiration came  
from God to Jesus, blessings be upon him,  
"This one may be a scholar, that one a boor,  
but I will accept the prayers of each; and if  
the one who threw his days away pours  
his anguish out and comes helpless before Me?  
Whoever cries out in their helplessness  
for My forgiveness will not be turned away  
from the threshold of My generosity.

Instead, I'll pardon even his worst transgressions  
and lead him, by My grace, to Paradise.  
And if the scholar thinks he'd be disgraced  
to spend eternity with such a man,  
there is no need to worry, for as the sinner  
is carried to the Garden, so the other  
will be given to the Fire!"

One man's liver,  
consumed with grieving, turned to blood; the other  
believed that his devotion was enough.  
He didn't understand that in God's court  
surrender matters more than pride and ego.  
A man in pure white robes who nonetheless  
lives an impure life will not need the keys  
to the gates of hell. No! At God's door,  
impotence and desolation far outweigh  
self-concerned obedience. If you,  
on your own, count yourself among the good,  
you are not. The Godhead has no room for you.



If you're a man, don't brag about your manhood;  
not every mounted champion takes the ball.  
A man without virtue is nothing but skin,  
like an onion—even though he thinks he contains  
a kernel, like a pistachio. Blind  
subservience will get you nowhere: Go!

Bring instead atonement for its failure.  
No matter who you are—a vagabond  
whose life is a shambles, or an ascetic  
whose practice is to torment his own flesh—  
these should be the goals you strive for: truth  
and sincerity; detachment and temperance:  
just know you won't surpass the Chosen One.<sup>74</sup>



A man who gives his goodness to the Truth  
and then mistreats the rest of humankind  
is stupid if he doesn't understand  
that such devotion bears no fruit. Wise men  
have kept this proverb alive. Hear it now  
from Saadi and keep it in your memory:  
*A sinner trembling in fear before the Lord  
stands higher than a saint sure of his devotion.*

## Dried Grass Among Anemones

A lawyer dressed in rags once dared to sit  
inside the court where those as poor as he  
did not belong. The judge kept looking down  
at him with eyebrows knit in consternation  
till the usher grabbed the lawyer's sleeve and said,  
"Don't you know that this is not your place?  
Get up! Go to the lower ranks! Or leave!  
Or stand! Not everyone has earned the right  
to claim a seat of honor as his own.  
Rank depends on worth; ennoble yourself  
and you will command a higher position. But you  
don't need advice from anyone, do you?  
This moment's shame, no doubt, is punishment  
enough. One who sits at the lower end  
with dignity will earn no one's contempt  
if he falls from low to high. Where great men are,  
boldness will get you nowhere; and if you lack  
a lion's claws, don't try a lion's attack!"  
Painted over as he was with poverty,  
the lawyer understood, for he was wise,  
that this conflict would determine how he fared.  
A sigh like helpless smoke escaped his mouth,  
and he took a seat much lower than where he was.

The other lawyers then began to walk  
the path their arguments laid out for them,  
throwing back and forth across the room  
their *why's* and *no-I-don't-agree's*. They opened  
on each other the doors of dissension and so  
stretched their necks to call out *Yes!* and *No!*  
you'd think that they were battle-ready cocks  
turned loose upon each other, beak and claw.  
One, beside himself with rage, blustered  
like a drunk; another beat upon the ground  
with both his hands, until they'd worked themselves  
into a knot so tightly tangled no one  
knew which end to pull to unravel it.  
Right then, from the last row, the man in tatters  
roared the way a lion might from deep  
in the thicket, "Champions of the Prophet's Law!  
To expound upon the Quran and all it contains,  
forceful arguments are fine, as long  
as they're informed by intellect and not  
the bulging neck veins you display. I know,  
and I am ready to put the stick and ball in play."

"If you know something about this, then speak,"  
they said, and so he took a seat at the judge's knee  
and, giving his tongue free reign, shut their mouths.  
He argued with such elegance that his thesis  
was a signet ring on the paper of their hearts.

He left abstraction's neighborhood behind  
for concrete ideas, effacing with his pen  
the letters of their scholarly pretensions.  
They applauded him no matter where they stood,  
"A thousand praises on your intellect  
and character." So quickly did he ride  
his argument's horse, and far, that he left the judge  
way in the rear, stuck like an ass in the mud.

At last the judge removed his gown and turban  
and sent them to the ragged one to wear.  
"I failed to recognize your worth," he said,  
"and to thank you for joining us today. Indeed,  
now that I know the substance of your thought,  
it grieves me to think that you've been brought so low."

The usher now approached respectfully  
to place the judge's turban on his head,  
but the unkempt lawyer raised his hand and said,  
"Stop! Don't bind my head with this crown of pride.  
I fear that beneath those five yards of cloth  
my eyes will see those dressed as I am now  
only down the long incline of my nose  
and that when they greet me as *My Lord Chief Justice*,  
I will have come to hold them in contempt.  
What difference does it make if drinking water  
is poured in golden cups or cups of clay?  
A man should fill his head with precious wisdom,

not place a turban like yours on top of it.  
The size of a man's head won't make him great;  
a pumpkin's head is *very* big—and brainless.

Don't let a turban and a beard deceive you:  
a turban is made of cotton; a beard is dry grass.  
We're all drawn in the shape of human beings,  
and so, like drawings, we shouldn't say a word.  
The measure of your virtue defines your place:  
Don't be like Saturn, high and unlucky too.  
The reed that we weave mats from may grow tall,  
but without a sugar-cane's sweetness, the reed's  
height means nothing. Intelligence like yours,  
along with your ambition, reduces you  
to no one in my eyes—even if  
a hundred slaves follow wherever you go.

A glass bead lying in a mud patch  
spoke well to the greedy fool who picked it up,  
'No one will pay even a penny for me,  
so don't go crazy wrapping me in silk!'  
Place dried grass among anemones,  
and it's still worth neither more nor less than grass.  
Wealth doesn't elevate a wealthy man.  
An ass who wears a satin saddle cloth  
is still an ass."

And so that man of wit  
and eloquence washed resentment from his heart.



(Your words when you are angry may be hard,  
but don't be slow with a fallen enemy.  
As soon as he's in your grasp, pluck out his brains!  
Doing so will sweep the dust from your heart.)

Stunned by this brutality, the judge  
could only say, "This day's been difficult,"  
and he bit the backs of both his hands, and stared,  
his eyes like *beta-gamma* of Ursa Minor.<sup>75</sup>  
Then the man who'd made the judge a fool  
walked out, and no one saw him ever again.  
The scholars assembled there cried out as one,  
"Where do you think a man like that comes from?"  
The usher ran out after him and searched  
in all directions, asking everyone  
and anyone if they'd seen a man who matched  
*that* man's description. Someone answered, "Such sweet  
words flow in this town from one man's mouth:  
Saadi's." May a hundred thousand blessings fall  
on the one who said that. He made a bitter truth sweet.

## Accept That You Have Neither Gold Nor Silver

A honey seller whose smile was sugar-sweet,  
igniting hearts throughout the selling day,  
and who himself, with girded loins, was sweet  
as sugar cane—he had more customers  
than flies; and if, just suppose, he'd held up  
poison, they'd have taken it from him  
like nectar. Now, in a lazy fellow watching  
the honey-seller at his business, jealousy  
was growing, and so, the next day, he too  
went from town to town to sell his wares.  
Honey was on his head, but vinegar  
was on his face. He wandered far, crying  
from street to street, but not a single fly  
settled on the sweetness he tried to sell.  
Night fell and he hadn't earned a penny,  
so he sat himself dejected in a corner,  
his face a sinner's on hearing God's judgment,  
his brow a prisoner's locked up on a feast day.  
His wife teased him playfully, "A sour-faced  
man gives bitter honey."

An ugly temper  
takes a man to hell; a handsome nature  
guarantees you paradise. Go!  
It's better to drink warm water from the bank

of an irrigation ditch than the cool rose water  
sold by a man with a curdled face. It is  
forbidden to taste the bread of a man who folds  
his eyebrows like a tablecloth. My friend,  
don't make life harder than it has to be.  
A rancid temperament *will* bring bad luck.  
Accept that you have neither gold nor silver.  
Can't you, like Saadi, at least have a pleasant tongue?

## Clarified Within

I've heard a learned and God-fearing man  
had his collar grabbed by a drunken bum,  
and from this black-hearted good-for-nothing  
the wise one, serene and clarified within,  
endured a beating he refused to return.  
After a while someone said to him,  
"Aren't you a man as well? Aren't you  
ashamed to take such treatment from a lowlife?"  
The man of pure character heard these words  
and answered, "Don't talk to me like that again!  
A drunken fool may tear at men's collars,  
but who will think in terms of fighting him  
when he fights with a lion's claw? It is beneath  
a sober, intelligent man to put his hands  
on a stupid drunk. A virtuous man's life  
is this: he suffers brutality, shows kindness."

## Didn't You Have Teeth As Well?

A dog in such a rage that poison dripped  
from its fangs bit a desert-dweller's legs,  
causing him such pain he couldn't sleep.  
A small daughter lived in his household,  
and she scolded her father severely, "Didn't you  
have teeth as well?" Her words stopped his tears,  
and he laughed, saying, "Little one! Light of my life!  
If I possessed a prince's power and strength,  
I would not use my jaws and teeth like that.  
Even if I took a sword to the head,  
I would not sink my teeth into a dog!"  
You may show malice to those who are less than men,  
but you're a man. Don't act like a dog!

## Cultivate The Tree

Anyone who wants to walk the road  
walked by Ma'ruf of Karkh must first decide  
to live without celebrity. I've heard  
that a man whose sickness had brought him close to  
death  
once came to Ma'ruf as a guest. His head  
had shed its hair; his face, serenity.  
Only by a hair did the man's soul  
cling to his body. That night, he flung himself  
down on a pillow and in that same moment  
started shouting and moaning. He couldn't sleep  
and his crying made sure no one else did either.  
He was a troubled man, by nature rough,  
and he didn't die, but he killed with his complaining  
all the others in Ma'ruf's house. Indeed,  
he shrieked and groaned and tossed and turned in pain  
till everyone whose custom was to stay  
with Ma'ruf—except, of course, Ma'ruf himself—  
had run away.

I've heard Ma'ruf nursed the man  
all day and didn't close his eyes at night.  
He squared his shoulders and did the right thing,  
but one night sleep's forces overwhelmed him,  
and just as slumber settled on his brow—  
what strength remains to one who hasn't slept?—

his “visitor” harangued him bitterly,  
“A curse upon all impure men like you,  
whose name and reputation are pretense  
and wind—dishonest men peddling piety,  
clothed in white, but defiled nonetheless.  
What does a man with a cozy paunch, drunk  
with sleep, know about the suffering wretch  
who can’t escape his wakefulness?” He spoke  
to Ma’ruf such ugly words, asking how  
the good man dared let his attention wander  
into sleep and away from the care he was giving.

Choosing kindness, Ma’ruf did not respond,  
swallowing the man’s belligerence instead,  
but those in the women’s quarters heard as well,  
and one whispered privately, “Didn’t you  
hear what that beggar said? Go tell him  
from now on he’s on his own. Let him  
take his misery somewhere else and there  
let him die. Goodness and mercy have their place,  
but to offer goodness to bad men is bad.  
That one deserves no pillows around his head;  
his head belongs instead upon a stone!  
You are a man of good character; don’t  
show it dealing with a man who’s evil.  
Only a fool plants trees in salty soil!  
I am not telling you you shouldn’t care

for humankind, but caring for someone like that,  
who is inhuman, is wasted effort. Don't  
treat a rough man mildly. You don't  
stroke a dog the way you stroke a cat,  
though, to be fair, a grateful dog outshines  
in its behavior people who are thankless.  
A vile man does not deserve your pity!  
Don't give him cool water to slake his thirst,  
but know that if you do, his thanks will be  
an IOU etched in melting ice.  
I've never seen a man as twisted as that one.  
He's a nobody; show him no compassion!"

Laughing, Ma'ruf replied, "My comfort, my darling,  
don't let his troubling words trouble you.  
He shouted his displeasure at me, it's true,  
but his unpleasant words fell pleasantly  
upon my ears. His complaints must be heard.  
He's in such agony he cannot rest."

When life is good and you are comfortable, bear  
with gratitude the burdens of the weak.



If, like a talisman, your outward form  
reveals all of who you are, you'll still die,  
and your name will die the way your body did;



but if you cultivate the tree of generosity,  
you will surely eat the fruit of the good name  
it bears for you. Look how many graves  
there are in Karkh, but only Ma'ruf's is well-known.  
People who throw down the crown of arrogance  
will wear a more majestic crown, while those  
who worship pomp and circumstance  
reveal themselves as self-important clowns,  
refusing to understand it's patience they need  
to reach the higher status they desire.

## A Bright And Pure Burning

King Salih, a prince of Syria, would,  
in the early morning, take a slave with him  
and with his face half-covered like an Arab  
wander through his city's streets and markets.  
He was a man of insight, a friend to the poor,  
qualities that make a good king good.  
He found two paupers sitting in a mosque,  
their spirits broken, their minds confused: sleep,  
all that bone-chilling night, had not fallen  
over their eyes, and so they sat waiting,  
like chameleons, for the sun to rise. One  
was saying to the other, "On the day  
we congregate to receive God's judgment,  
justice had better be served! If these princes  
with their outstretched necks, their constant revelry  
and lives of luxury, if those pampered  
souls can enter Paradise with *us*,  
I will not raise my head above the bricks  
covering my grave. The highest heavens  
are *reserved* for us, whose feet are bound today  
in poverty's chains. In your whole life, what good  
have you received from them that you should suffer  
their presence in the world to come? If Salih  
himself appears beside that garden wall,  
I'll beat his brains out with my shoes!"

Salih

decided it was best if he was not  
discovered, and so he left. He waited till  
the sun's waters washed the night from men's eyes,  
and then he summoned the two vagrants to him.  
He sat on his throne in all his majesty  
and seated them with dignity beside him.  
He showered them with generosity,  
cleansing them of destitution's dust;  
and so these men who'd suffered cold and rain  
and floods now sat among the highest class  
of their society. As naked beggars,  
day had been like night for them. Now they  
perfumed their clothes above an aloe-burning  
brazier. One turned privately to the king,  
"You who have put in the world's ear the ring<sup>76</sup>  
of your command, all whom you bless become great,  
but what did you see in slaves like us that we  
deserved your blessing?"

The emperor laughed at this,  
and joy at the question bloomed in him like a rose.  
"I'm not the kind of man to be deceived,"  
he said, "by followers who flatter me  
with empty praise and so avert my face  
from those in dire need. You too, therefore,  
should empty your head of what you thought of me,  
or you will sow discord in Paradise.

I've opened the door today to peace between us;  
please don't slam it in my face tomorrow!"

Follow this example and your fortune  
will progress. If you desire true  
nobility, take a needy man's hand.  
No one picks the fruit on Tuba's branch<sup>77</sup>  
who failed while he lived to sow devotion's seeds.  
So if devotion isn't in you, don't  
look for happiness. Serving others, though—  
with *that* stick you might carry off the ball.  
How do you expect to blaze like a lamp  
when you're as full of yourself as the *qandil*<sup>78</sup>  
is of water. A human being sets  
the congregation on fire with a bright  
and pure burning in the breast, like a candle's.<sup>79</sup>

## Come Back Empty

There was a man who dabbled in the stars,  
who, drunk with his own arrogance, empty  
in his heart of all devotion, deluded,  
came from far away to visit Kushyar.  
Kushyar was wise and sewed his eyes up tight  
against the visitor, refusing to teach  
a single syllable. As the dabbler turned  
to start his disappointed journey home,  
Kushyar stood to his full height and said,  
“No doubt you thought yourself already filled  
with wisdom, but once a vessel is full, what more  
can it hold? Filled with pretensions, you leave here  
empty.

Come back empty and fill yourself with ideas!”  
Do like Saadi, roam the world empty  
of your own existence. You will return with knowledge.

## Choose The One That's In Your Character

A well-respected pious man in Tabriz  
who almost never slept, who rose at night  
to say his prayers, once, hours before  
the sun's rise, saw a thief fixing his rope  
around the corner of a nearby roof.  
He told the people in the house, who raised  
a tumult, and men with sticks rose up to catch  
the thief, who heard—that-less-than-human creature—  
the people crying “Grab him!” and terror struck him,  
and he saw there was no way to win the fight,  
and so he fled. At that, the devout man's heart  
turned to wax. He didn't want to see  
the luckless burglar leave disappointed.  
He chased the fleeing man down in the dark,  
heading him off on a side street. “Please don't go,”  
he said. “I am your friend. I am the dust  
beneath the feet of your manhood. I've never seen  
virility like yours, but there are two  
kinds of bravery: one is to battle your foe  
face-to-face; the other is to carry  
your life away from the conflict. Choose the one  
that's in your character; whichever it is,  
I pledge myself to help you succeed in it.  
And what's your name? I want to serve beneath it.

If you're generous and think it right  
to tell me to, I'll take you to a place  
I know, a low-built house, with its door locked tight,  
and I believe the owner is away.  
We'll pile rock-slabs till they're high enough  
that one of us can climb on the other's shoulders.<sup>80</sup>  
Take whatever you can lay your hands on!  
It's better than returning empty-handed!"  
Like that, with flattery and cunning, he urged  
the thief towards his own home. Once there, the thief  
bent low, calling his devout companion  
onto his shoulders. His new partner went up  
and brought out jackets, turbans, whatever  
property he had and let it down  
into the other's waiting skirts. Then,  
when everything was in the burglar's arms,  
the man of faith gave a roaring cry, "Stop!  
Thief! A reward for the one who catches him!"  
The bewildered thief ran off with the good man's goods,  
while the good man felt his heart at ease to know  
that one who'd almost failed had achieved his goal.

That thief, a vile man, felt no pity,  
and yet the pious man treated him well.  
This should come as no surprise: worthy men  
prove their worth by being generous  
to less than worthy counterparts. Bad men

benefit from the good that good men do,  
even though they aren't fit  
to be a good man's lowest slave.



It Won't Take Much To Make Me  
Less Than Him

I've heard that in the desert of Sanaa,  
Junaid saw a dog whose hunting teeth  
were gone; the beast, which once possessed claws  
strong enough to prey on lions, stood there  
timid and weak as a powerless old fox;  
and so, after a life of bringing goats  
and antelope down by their heels, its fate was now  
to be kicked around by the local sheep. Junaid  
took one look at the wretched animal  
and gave it half his own possessions. I've heard  
he said, tears falling like blood as he spoke,  
"Who knows which of us is better off?  
Outwardly, at least today, I am;  
but who knows what fate will let fall on my head?  
If I stay sure-footed on the path of faith,  
I will place on my head the crown of God's forgiveness,  
but if I remove the robes of true knowledge,  
it won't take much to make me less than him.  
A dog, as vile as it is, when it dies  
will not be carried off to burn in hell!"

This Saadi, is the way: men *of* the way  
do not regard themselves with reverence,

and this is why they are superior to angels:  
they don't think they're more exalted than dogs.



# *Resignation*

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## Let's Follow Where This Thinking Leads Us

One night, as I burned with meditation's flame,  
I touched it to the lamp of eloquence.  
A man whose own speech others understand  
only rarely heard my words. "Well said!"  
was what he found at first to say, but then  
his malice spoke as well, a suffering cry  
at his own inferiority. "He writes  
well enough to handle moral guidance,  
abstinence and mysticism, but he  
doesn't speak at all of heavy clubs  
or spears or other weapons used to put  
the finishing touches on one's enemies!"  
He didn't know I have no head for war  
and that is why I write the way I write,  
but I too can sharpen my tongue like a sword  
or puncture other's rhetoric with my pen.  
Come, let's follow where this thinking leads us  
and make for my enemy's head a pillow of stones.

Happiness lies in what the Just One gives you;  
you cannot grab it with a forceful arm.  
If Heaven doesn't grant you a favored empire,  
courage alone will not rope one in.  
The ant's weakness does not cause him hardship,

nor do lions eat by their claws alone.  
Since we cannot take up arms against the stars,  
we have no choice but to adapt to their turning.  
If destiny confers old age on you,  
death will not come on the point of a blade  
or in a wild beast's open mouth,  
but when your life has reached its destined end,  
medicine will kill you just like poison.  
When Rustam ate the last of this life's portion,  
didn't Shaghad turn him into dust?<sup>81</sup>

## The Sharp Edge of Our Vengeance Failed To Fall

I used to have a friend in Isfahan,  
a man of war, a bold adventurer.  
The torrent he released from those he fought  
dyed his dagger and the hand that held it  
crimson. To him, an enemy's heart  
was meat to turn slowly over a fire.  
I always saw him with his quiver on,  
flames leaping from steel-tipped arrows.  
An ox's strength coursed through each inch of him;  
the power in his gaze sent lions reeling.  
A challenge brought his practice arrows out  
and each one found the center of its mark.  
No thorn has ever pierced a rose  
as easily as his spear pierced shields,  
and if with his javelin he struck a warrior's helmet,  
the helmet and its head were mashed together.  
He fought the way a sparrow fights its way  
through a swarm of locusts, not caring which,  
birds or men, had come for him to kill them;  
and if the man he had to kill was Feridun,  
he'd make sure Feridun did not have time  
to draw his sword. At the sight of what his claws  
plunged deep into a lion's brains could do,  
panthers cringed! He'd grab a seasoned warrior



by the belt, a mountain of a man,  
and pluck him like a flower from where he stood.  
When his axe came down on a soldier's armor,  
it passed right through and struck the saddle hard!  
No one heard talk anywhere of a man  
whose manliness or whose humanity  
would earn him a place as my friend's second.

My friend arranged each second of his life  
to be with me, so deeply did he honor  
honesty in men, but then, without warning,  
I was forced to leave: surviving day-to-day  
became impossible for me. Fate  
took me from Iraq to Syria,  
on whose pure soil I lived pleasantly enough,  
comforted by my hopes, troubled by my fears,  
until at last Syria had filled my cup  
and all I wanted was to be back home.<sup>82</sup>  
By chance, my return took me though Iraq  
once more. There, one night, as I sat immersed  
in anxious meditation, my friend's face  
came to me, like salt rubbed in an old wound,  
for I had eaten salt with him.<sup>83</sup> I went  
to Isfahan to see him, asking where  
he might be found, but the young man I remembered  
was gone: the poplar tree he'd been bent  
into a bow, his Judas-tree complexion

turned pale as dyer's weed.<sup>84</sup> His head, covered  
with snow, was a hoary mountain, and from its peaks  
the waters of age ran down his face.<sup>85</sup>  
Heaven at last had gained the upper hand,  
twisting the wrist of his manhood into submission.

The fate he knew was his had pushed from his mind  
all deluded pride and now, powerless,  
weak, all he could do was rest his head  
on his knees. "O Captain!" I said to him, "You  
who subdued lions, what has weakened you  
and turned you to an aged fox?" He laughed.  
"The Tatar Wars convinced me to give up  
the fighting spirit that was mine. I saw  
this land thick with lances like a field of reeds,  
the standards like flames flickering among them.  
In combat, I became that fire's smoke,  
but reckless fury on the battlefield  
will do no good if fortune and empire  
belong that day to someone else. There was  
a time when with my spear I could remove  
from the hand of the man I charged a ring,  
but now that my fortune's star hung dark  
above me, the ring *they* made closed in  
around me. Of course I ran. Only a fool  
meets his doom by sharpening his blade.  
Once your star no longer shines, the finest

suit of mail will not protect you, and if  
the key to victory is not in your hand,  
do you think your arms will possess the strength  
to shatter triumph's door?

We were archers  
skilled enough to bring down panthers, each of us  
strong as an elephant, covered in iron  
from the tops of our heads to the hooves of our horses,  
standing ready the moment we could see  
the other force's dust. As one we spurred  
our steeds on, like a cloud, and poured arrows  
on our foes like rain! Then, with such force,  
as if heaven had come crashing down to earth,  
the two armies clashed. The arrows fell like hail,  
raising death's chaos all around us.  
Our nooses opened wide like dragon's mouths  
to catch the enemy fighting fierce as lions.  
The dust of battle enveloped us like night;  
our swords and helmets glinted bright as stars;  
and when on foot we met their mounted troops,  
we fought them shield to shield and split their heads  
with arrows and with spears—but neither fortune  
nor empire were ours that day. They turned us back  
and our backs were all they saw of our retreat.

What force can the fist of one's endeavor have  
if the arm that lifts the fist is without strength?

The blades our brave men wielded were not blunt,  
but the sharp edge of our vengeance failed to fall  
from above. Not one of us survived that day  
whose armor was not steeped in his own blood.  
Like a hundred grains of wheat, we fell  
from our stalk, each to a separate hiding place.  
Men who were not men, we cast each other  
loose, falling, our armor for scales, like fish  
into a net. Some, whose arrows I'd have sworn  
could put stitches into an anvil, couldn't  
pierce silk with their spears! Since the stars foretold  
our doom, our shields could not stop fate's arrows!"

Now listen! Here's an even better tale  
to show how worthless ill-starred effort is.

## Now That Nothing Propels My Fist

An iron-fisted man from Ardabil  
could shoot two-headed arrows through a spade!  
A young man came to fight him wearing felt,<sup>86</sup>  
burning for battle like Bahram Gur, a noose  
woven from wild-ass rawhide slung  
over his shoulder. When the Ardabili  
saw the ragged armor this man wore,  
he strung his bow and pulled the string to his ear,  
sending fifty poplar arrows through the air,  
not one of which pierced the padded mail;  
and so the youth advanced like the champion Sam,  
capturing the other with his noose  
and taking him away from Ardabil.  
Back at his camp, the youth bound his captive  
hand to neck like a common thief, leaving  
the prisoner just outside his tent. That night,  
shame prodded the man from Ardabil  
constantly awake. The next morning,  
a servant spoke to him from within the tent,  
“How can it be that you, who put stitches  
in iron with bolts and arrows fell before  
an enemy who faced you wearing felt?”

The bound man answered, weeping blood,  
“Don’t you know that no one can survive

the day appointed for his death. My skills  
with a sword are such that Rustam could learn from me.  
When fortune strengthened my arm, a spade's thickness  
was thin and soft as felt; but now that nothing  
propels my fist, my arrows find felt  
thicker than a hundred spades!" On the day  
death has been decreed for you, a lance  
will rip your finest mail to shreds—but not  
the shirt of one whose day has not yet come.  
The man at whose neck the sword of doom lies  
is naked, even if he wears armor  
many layers thick; but a naked man  
whom fate and fortune fortify will not  
be killed, even if the weapon swung  
at him is a butcher's cleaver. Nothing the wise  
can do will keep their lives safe when life  
is to be taken from them. No ignoramus  
ever died from food that disagreed with him.

## Forty Years Have Passed

A champion one night could not fall asleep.  
A local doctor diagnosed the pains  
in his side, "Insofar as the patient  
has ingested leaves from the vines growing here,  
I'll be surprised if he survives the night.  
Tatar arrows lodged deep within your breast  
will prove themselves less discomforting  
than consuming foodstuffs not well-suited  
to the idiosyncrasies of your digestion.  
Should one bite become twisted in your bowels,  
it will bring to nothing your entire life!"  
That same night, the doctor died. Forty years  
have passed. The champion is alive and well.

## That's How He Died

When the peasant's donkey died, he placed its skull  
as a talisman on the wall above his garden.

A wise elder passing by laughed at him,  
"How, by your father's soul, do you suppose  
this jackass will keep the evil eye away?

He couldn't keep the stick you drove him with  
from his own head and ears, and that's how he died,  
scarred and powerless!" How can a doctor  
presume to know the cure for suffering,  
when everyone knows suffering will kill him?



The Pen That Moved While We  
Were In The Womb

I've heard a dinar fell from a poor man's hand  
and the penniless wretch looked everywhere for it.  
Finally, he despaired and turned away,  
and someone else who wasn't looking found it.  
The pen that moved while we were in the womb  
wrote out both our bad luck and our good.

You will not earn your daily bread by force;  
those who try end up with smaller portions.  
Many whose lives were not impoverished  
have died with pockets inside out and empty;  
while many who began in poverty  
have carried off the ball of wealth and comfort.

## To Whom Can I Turn?

An old man punished his son with a stick.  
“Father,” the son said, “I am innocent!  
I turn to you when I protest injustice;  
when you treat me unjustly, to whom can I turn?”  
A man with sense cries out to the Just One,  
but stands silent when the Just One’s hand comes  
down.

Nor Will A Black Man Wash White  
At The Baths

A man named Bakhtiyar was fortunate:  
the stars bestowed on him a life of wealth  
and comfort. His house stood in the beggars' quarter.  
He weighed his gold by the bushel, like wheat; he  
indulged  
the pleasures of his gold, and all his wealth,  
while around him his neighbors lived impoverished  
lives.

The poor who watch the wealthy live at ease  
are burned more deeply by their indigence,  
and so a wife harangued her helpless husband  
when every night he came home empty handed:  
"Who in this world is as unfortunate  
and penniless as you? Look at those  
who live next door and learn to be a man!  
I am not a whore so easily bought!  
Others have gold and silver; they own land  
and homes filled with the goods they buy. Why  
are you not blessed with their prosperity?"  
The husband, clear-hearted in his woolen clothing,<sup>87</sup>  
cried out in a voice rising from his empty  
belly like the beating of a drum,  
"I cannot have the upper hand in life!  
You cannot with your fist deflect the hand

of fate, which did not hand me the chance or choice  
to make myself as rich as Bakhtiyar!”



Now look how well a poor old man from Kish  
advised his consort on her ugliness:

“Since destiny has made you ugly,  
don’t smear cosmetics on that ugly face!”



Who can force good fortune into their lives?  
Who can give a blind eye sight with collyrium?<sup>88</sup>  
Good deeds won’t come from bad blood  
and to hope that dogs will produce needlework  
is absurd. Not even the philosophers  
of Byzantium and Greece can turn zaqqum<sup>89</sup>  
into honey. Since nothing wild can become human,  
to nurture with that goal is wasted effort.  
You can clean rust from a mirror, but no mirror  
is made of stone. Roses will not grow  
from a willow branch, nor will a Black man  
wash white at the baths. It doesn’t matter  
what you do! Since destiny’s arrow never  
misses, our only shield is resignation.

## On A Stream Where No One Can See The Shore

A vulture told a kite, "No one sees farther than I can!" The kite replied, "This I can't let pass. Tell me what you see at the farthest edges of the plain." They say the vulture looked as far as a whole day's flight and said, "One grain of wheat—if you believe it—lies waiting on the desert floor." The kite, amazed, couldn't wait, and so they plunged headfirst towards what the vulture said he saw, but just as the vulture took the grain in his mouth a long coil closed tight around him.

How could he have known it would be while he ate that fate would cast its snare around his neck?  
(Not all oysters are pregnant with pearls;  
even skillful marksmen sometimes miss.)  
The kite then said, "What good did it do you to see that grain, when you couldn't see the trap your enemy had laid for you?" I've heard the vulture answered, weeping bitter tears, "The greatest caution you can take won't help against what's preordained. When fate raises its hand to take a man's blood, destiny shuts that man's eyes, no matter how sharp his sight."

On a stream where no one can see the shore, what good  
is a swimmer's confident delusion *he* can?

## Even If The Pilot Rips His Clothing

At their journey's end, a baby camel told  
its mother, "Go ahead, sleep a while!"  
The mother answered, "If I held the reins,  
no one in this camel-train would see me  
carrying a load!" Destiny carries the ship  
wherever it wants, even if the pilot  
rips his clothing where he stands. Don't look  
with hope, Saadi, to any person's hand.  
Only the One who gives from above can give.  
If you worship Truth, doors will open for you,  
but if God chases you away, no one  
will want to lay their eyes on you. If He  
makes you fortunate, raise your head up high.  
If not, it's despair's head you'll be scratching.

## Can You Pull That Off In Front Of God?

An evil man fell from his ladder. I'm told  
he died the moment he hit the ground. His son  
wept for several days, then started again  
to visit those he knew. Once, in a dream,  
he saw his father and asked how he was doing  
and how he'd managed through the Gathering,  
the Raising and Interrogation.<sup>90</sup> The father  
answered, "Please, my son, don't tell me stories!  
When I fell, I fell straight into Hell."

A man whose goodness isn't visible  
is better than a man whose good name  
hides a rotten core. To me, a bandit  
robbing travelers at night stands taller  
than a libertine who wears a pious mask.  
When a man chooses doors that other men  
slam in his face—instead of choosing God's door  
from the start—what reward, if you were God  
and it was the resurrection, would you give him?  
Don't expect Amir to pay your wages  
if you're working in Zaid's house.

I say  
the only one on this road who will reach  
the Friend is the one who turns his face towards Him.  
Take the straight path to reach your resting place.



You didn't come this way to dawdle and gawk;  
nor are you an ox with blinders on,  
working the mill till nightfall, who finds when he's  
done  
that he's only circled back to where he started.

Whoever turns away from his place of prayer  
will find that those around him have testified  
to his infidelity; but you too  
pray with your back to Mecca if you don't  
open to God the full depth of your need.  
Nurture a tree whose roots are firmly planted.  
One day it will give you a load of fruit;  
but if the root of your sincerity  
has not reached deeply into soil  
no one will be as deprived of its fruit as you.  
Cast your seeds on the rocks at planting time  
and you will not harvest a single barleycorn.



Don't transform the honor others show you  
into empty affectation; the crystal  
water in which you see your wholesome face  
conceals the mud lying beneath. If I  
keep my evil nature hidden and stand  
before you humbly covered with dust, what good  
will it do to dip the face of my deeds in the stream

of the high regard you show me? It's easy to sew  
a robe of patches and wear it like you've earned it,  
but can you pull that off in front of God?<sup>91</sup>  
No one can know if what a person wears  
reveals the truth of who he is, but the scribe  
knows what he's written in the document.  
Place a purse of wind on the scales balanced  
by God, where God Himself records the register,  
and what will it weigh? That hypocrite whose scruples  
all admired? They looked. His purse held nothing.

What's visible is made of finer fabric  
than the lining the visible conceals. Great souls,  
however, don't care about what's visible;  
and so their linings are made from Chinese silk.  
If all you want is that your name is known  
throughout the land, dress up your outer self  
and let your inner self be the padding.  
Emperors too are beggars in God's court,  
and no man of God will rely on a beggar  
to realize his ambition. It is not proper  
to take the hand of one who's fallen, hoping  
that he can somehow help you up. Surely  
it's better, if you're pregnant with a pearl,  
to tuck your head in like an oyster. If the truth  
of your worship is focused only on God,  
it doesn't matter if Gabriel doesn't see you.<sup>92</sup>



If you take Saadi's advice, my son, the way  
you take your father's, it will be enough;  
but I hope that if you choose not to hear  
these words today, that you'll have no regrets  
tomorrow. And if you think you need a better  
advisor, what will happen when I'm gone?

# *Contentment*

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## Find A Way To Give Yourself A Rest

A man who's not content with how his luck  
has shaped his life, who scorns the daily bread  
he earns, knows neither obedience nor God.  
Tell the greedy ones who scour the world  
that only contentment makes men wealthy.  
So you who choose against a stable life  
should find a way to give yourself a rest.  
Nothing you plant will grow on a rolling stone.



A man of judgment and good sense does not  
indulge his body. Indulging it kills it  
and leaves you with no virtue on your bones.  
The wise indulge themselves in the practice of virtue,  
for only one who's muzzled the lower self  
can walk the path humanity was meant for.  
Living to eat and sleep is the way of beasts;  
to let the beast in us persist in that  
is to mark ourselves empty of all wisdom.



The lucky man who gathers to himself,  
sitting daily in his prayer corner,  
a wealth of knowledge is one whose happiness  
we should aspire to. Those to whom Truth

has revealed its secrets will never again prefer  
the way that leads to error; but one who can't  
distinguish dark from light will see no difference  
between a demon's face and a houri's. You've thrown  
yourself into a pit because to you  
the pit and the highway are indistinguishable.



How will the young falcon fly to heaven's  
highest point when you've weighed his regal feathers  
down with the stone of desire? Free his skirt  
from the grip lust has on him and he'll ascend  
straight to Sidra in the Seventh Heaven.<sup>93</sup>



Reduce what you consume below your habit  
and you may achieve the stature of an angel.  
Wild things, though, cannot become angelic.  
Nothing rises to heaven from the wet earth.  
First you have to practice being human;  
then you can pursue angelic heights.  
You're the saddle band on a restless colt.  
Make sure he knows who holds the reigns; a twist  
of his neck can pull them from your hands; then,  
he'll kill himself and shed your blood as well.



Eat in moderation: When your belly is full,  
are you a man or a vat? Don't forget!  
Your innards also hold your breath and what  
you know and feel of God. Did you really think  
they were made for bread alone? And if all you are  
is a bag of desire, how will you make room  
for God? People swollen with what they've consumed  
find it difficult to breathe. Don't they know  
a man with full bowels stands void of wisdom?



Neither eyes nor belly are ever satisfied:  
better, then, that those writhing guts were empty.  
They are like Hell, which has all the fuel it needs  
to burn, but still cries out, "Are there still more?"<sup>94</sup>  
The Jesus in you dies for leanness, yet you  
devote yourself to cherishing the ass.  
Do not buy the world at such a price!  
Nor with Jesus' gospel purchase the ass!  
Can't you see that animals, wild and tame,  
are caught in the hunter's trap by their greed for food?  
The leopard, which lifts its head above the rest,  
is trapped for the sake of what it wants to eat,  
just like the mouse is. The man whose bread and cheese  
*you* nibble at? You'll eat his arrows too!



## A Prince Is What You Are

A pilgrim brought for me an ivory comb  
(God's mercy on pilgrims' generosity),  
but then I heard he'd once called me a dog—  
apparently, I'd somehow hurt his pride—  
so I threw the comb away, saying, "This bone  
is not something I need. Don't call me a dog!"  
Just because vinegar is all I have,  
don't think that I will tolerate injustice  
from someone who eats sweetmeats when he wants.

Be content, my soul, with owning little:  
let the poor man and the ruler be for you  
the same. Why ask a prince for what you want?  
When you have rid yourself of all desire,  
a prince is what you are. If you worship  
self, your belly will be the thing you pray to,  
and every man's door will be your qibla.<sup>95</sup>

## In Which Direction Are You Praying Now?

An avaricious man, or so I've heard,  
shortly after sunrise went to see  
Khwarizmshah and, when the king appeared,  
bent himself in two, rubbing his face  
in the dust before standing up again.  
A grin tilted his son's cheeks, "O glory-  
seeking father of mine, here is a riddle.  
Tell me the correct answer: I learned  
from you the qibla faces towards Hejaz.  
In what direction are you praying now?"

Don't serve the lower self that worships lust;  
it turns each hour to a different qibla.  
Never put yourself at its disposal.  
In the end, those who don't are judged clean.  
Contentment alone will elevate your head;  
a head filled with greed never rises  
above its shoulders. Greed drains away  
the esteem in which a man of dignity  
is held, spills pearls from the skirt that holds them  
just to gain two corns of barley. You want  
to drink your fill of the true stream's water.  
Why empty your cup for the sake of mere snow?



Give up your quest for material well-being  
or condemn yourself to going door to door.  
Why do you think you need full-length sleeves?  
Shorten your desire's arm instead!  
The man who folds the scroll of greed away  
will never sign his name as "slave and servant."

If all you bring to gatherings is your hope  
for gain, that hope will make you most unwelcome.  
Make it unwelcome in yourself; you'll find  
yourself truly welcome wherever you go.

## The Belly's Better Empty Than The Heart

A man who followed Truth with all his heart  
fell sick with fever. The doctor told him,  
"Ask the man across the street for sugar."  
The patient replied, "Better the bitter taste  
of death, my boy, than the cruel burden of seeing  
his sour face!" A wise man will not eat  
sugar handed over in arrogance  
by one whose face looks twisted with vinegar.



Don't go searching for everything you want:  
ceding power to your body will dim  
the light your spirit shines with. The Soul Imperative<sup>96</sup>  
debases us. If you are wise, you'll let it go.  
If you eat all that you desire, life  
will bring you much that's undesirable,  
and you will suffer. Stoking the belly's oven  
over and over again will lead to trouble  
on the day that you have nothing to feed the fire.  
If in times of plenty you keep your innards  
straight, when you're in dire straits, your face  
will keep its healthy color. A gluttonous man  
must carry the weight of what he's eaten, and when  
there's no food to be had, he must carry his cares

as well. You'll often see the belly's slave  
unpleasantly surprised. That's why I think  
the belly's better empty than the heart.

## Only With Earth

I've brought back from Basra a true wonder!  
You'll never guess what it is! A story sweeter  
than the ripest Basra date:<sup>97</sup> A few of us,  
dressed in the patched cloaks of the just, walked past  
the edge of a date-plantation. One of us,  
a man degraded by his gluttony,  
intent on stuffing his gut with all he could eat,  
cinched his robe tight around his waist and climbed  
one of the trees, from where he fell, landing  
hard on his neck. Not every load of dates  
exists to be consumed or carried off.  
"Sack-belly" ate, ill-fated as he was,  
and died. The village leader caught up with us  
and asked, his voice harsh with accusation,  
"Who killed this man?" I said, "Don't speak to us  
like that. The wretch's belly pulled him down  
from the branch!" The man whose heart is shut tight  
possesses an expansive gut. The belly  
binds your hands and chains your feet; it's slave  
rarely worships God. It's true the locust  
is nothing from head to foot *but* belly.  
Still, the small-bellied ant can pull him  
by the leg. Now go! Make your insides pure.  
Your belly will be truly filled only with earth.

## Your Own Blood, No One Else's

A Sufi who could not control his belly  
or his groin spent two dinars on them both.  
A friend pulled him aside, "What did you do  
with those dinars?" The Sufi replied, "With one  
I paid to satisfy my loins; the other  
spread a table where I fed my hunger,  
but what I did was foolish and unworthy.  
My belly was not filled, nor were my loins  
emptied!" It doesn't matter if the food  
is tasteless or the finest delicacy:  
you'll relish it more if you have to wait to eat it.  
The wise man lays his head on his pillow  
only when sleep has tightened its noose around him.  
Until the moment is right for you to talk,  
don't. If you can't see the rest of the field,  
don't pass the ball. With women, practice  
moderation. You're not insane: don't wield  
that sword against yourself. To rouse your lust  
when you feel no desire is to shed blood  
lustfully. Your own blood. No one else's.

## Let It Possess Your Eyes

A man with sugar cane to sell  
ran with his tray from left to right  
in search of customers. He found  
a mystic sitting in a corner  
and said, "Have some now. Pay me  
when you can." The mystic's answer  
showed the beauty of his spirit.  
Here, let it possess your eyes:  
"The day may come when you can't wait for me,  
but I'll do fine without the sugar cane."  
Sugar in its cane won't be sweet,  
if bitter demands follow it.



## The Ground Can Be Your Bed If You Are Free

The prince of Khotan gave a silk scarf  
to a man enlightened by the Truth, who bloomed  
like a rose with joy. As he put it on, he smiled,  
kissed the prince's hand and said, "To be  
honored by Khotan's emperor is good,  
but I much prefer to wear my own patched cloak."  
The ground can be your bed if you are free.  
Not even for the sake of the finest carpet  
should you kiss the ground at another's feet.

## A Man Caught Up In His Own Desire

An onion was all the poor man had  
to put on his bread. A scatter-brained fool  
told him, "Go, Mr. Down-And-Out, and take  
your meal from the shah's public table. Ask there  
for what you need, my friend, and don't worry  
about the others who have come to ask as well.  
A quiet man will always come up short!"  
So he pulled his cloak around him and bent his arm,  
ready to receive, and the other beggars  
broke that arm and tore his cloak to shreds.  
I've heard he cried blood as he said, "My soul,  
where is the remedy for this self-inflicted damage?  
A man caught up in his own desire  
is a man out looking for trouble. At least  
I had bread and onions to eat!" I'd rather have  
a barley-loaf earned and eaten by the strength  
of my own arm than the finest bread served  
at the tables of the world's most generous men.  
Imagine the tight-hearted sleep of a man  
whose unworthy ears are open only  
to the sound of someone else's meals being served.

## The Syrup That You Have

A cat who lived in an old woman's house,  
whose impoverished days had left them both hungry,  
once found its way to the prince's guest-hall,  
where the prince's bodyguards shot arrows at it.  
It ran, blood dripping from its bones, saying,  
"If I can escape these marksmen with my life,  
my life will be at the old woman's hovel,  
eating mice!" Honey, my soul, is not worth  
the bee's sting. Be content instead  
with just the syrup that you have. The Lord  
will not be pleased with anyone who can't  
be satisfied with what He's given him.

## A Fistful Of Gold Is A Fistful Of Dust

A father saw his child's first few teeth  
and lowered his head. "How will I provide  
this mouth with bread to eat, this body with clothes?  
And yet I would be less than a man if I let  
the child go without!" The poor man spoke  
these fears to his wife, and she responded  
with the manliness he lacked. These were her words:  
"Don't let Satan terrorize you with  
this infant's death. The One who gave it teeth  
will also give it bread. The Lord of our days  
gives us daily what we need: You know this!  
So stop worrying. *He'll* prescribe the length  
of its life and how much food it has to eat.  
A master will not want to lose a slave  
he paid good money for. How much more, then,  
will the One who made him want to keep him?  
Don't you trust the Creator at least as much  
as a man who is owned trusts the one who owns him?"



I've heard it said that long ago a stone  
would turn to silver in the hand of a saint.  
*You* won't find this unbelievable:  
If you're content, silver and stone are the same.  
An infant has no greed inside itself.

To it, a fistful of gold is a fistful of dust  
and dust is just as valuable as gold.  
Tell the pauper who envies rulers their wealth  
that rulers are by far more wretched than he is.  
A beggar is happy with one silver dirhem;  
Feridun possessed the whole of Persia  
and still it wasn't enough. The stewardship  
of empire brings nothing but suffering,  
while the beggar is already an emperor.  
No responsibilities constrict him,  
and so he's better off than a harried king  
who's always putting off his own fulfillment.  
A beggar is a beggar in name only.



The peasant and his wife sleep peacefully  
and deep, the way a ruler in his palace  
never will; but whether it's a king  
or a tailor sewing rags, sleep transforms  
the night of each into day. When slumber's deluge  
sweeps men away, what difference does it make  
if one is a king seated on his throne  
or a Kurd riding hard across the plain?



When you see a wealthy man drunk with his own  
magnificence, go give thanks to God

that you don't hold such riches in your hand.  
Praise Him that it is not *in* your hands  
to injure another person *by* your hand.

## If You're Riding In A Caravan

I've heard a kindly mystic built a house  
to match his height. Someone said to him,  
"I know you can build a better house than this."  
"Be quiet!" the mystic replied. "Why  
should I build myself a mausoleum? This  
is plenty for me to leave behind!" Don't make  
your home where the river's surge is sure to find it.  
Nor, if you're riding in a caravan  
does it make sense to settle on the road.

## The Passing Of Time Will Not Bring You To Nothing

The sun was sinking behind the mountains  
on a shah who'd ruled with energy and grandeur.  
Since no one stood in line to take the throne,  
he left his land in the care of a holy elder,  
but once the drums of government and power  
beat in that solitary mystic's ears,  
he found himself no longer satisfied  
with the solitude his prayer-nook offered. He raised  
armies left and right, strengthening the hearts  
of those with heart to fight. His arm hardened;  
his claw grew sharp; and he went in search of those  
who were themselves in search of battle. Once,  
he killed some soldiers in retreat from him.  
Their comrades regrouped, hearts set on vengeance,  
and fought till he took cover in a fortress  
they besieged with such determination  
that his arrows and his stones were quickly gone.  
He sent a messenger to an old colleague,  
"I'm in trouble; I need your help. Pray  
for me and offer your pure thoughts and deeds.  
Stones and arrows won't win every fight!"  
The colleague heard the message, laughed and said,  
"If he'd been satisfied to eat his half-  
a-loaf and sleep, his life would now be peaceful."





Korah, who worshipped affluence, never knew  
the treasure that is security lies, for all  
to claim, in the corner of prayer and contemplation.  
The generous man's soul contains perfection;  
so what does he have to fear from lack of gold?  
And just because a vulgar man becomes  
a Korah, don't assume his character  
has suddenly become refined. Someone  
who practices munificence may not  
have bread to give; nonetheless, his nature  
is still rich. Manly generosity  
is the soil; what you have to hand out  
is the seed. Put it in the hands of those  
who need it so the root does not remain  
bare of branches. God made humanity  
from dust. I'd be surprised if He allowed  
humane behavior to vanish with the wind.



Don't attempt to elevate yourself  
by saving money; stagnant water smells  
of rotteness. Work instead to keep the water  
running: a flood-surge might bring help from Heaven.  
When a crude man falls in status and wealth,  
he'll likely never stand that tall again.

If you're made of finer stuff, don't worry;  
the passing of time will not bring you to nothing.  
No one even notices when a piece  
of brick falls onto the road; but a speck  
of gold from a goldsmith's shears calls men  
to their knees with candles to look for it. It's true  
we can with skill make glass from stone, but rust  
destroys the mirror if no one cares for it.  
Remember, wealth and status come and go.  
Excellence of character is what you need.



# *Edification*

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## You Are The Ruler

Propriety is my concern, and self-control, and how one learns to cultivate good character, and so I will not speak of playing fields and horses, polo sticks and balls. Your lower self, your housemate, is your enemy. Why do you need to clash with strangers? Those whom the soul reins in when they gallop after what's forbidden surpass Rustam and Sam in manliness. Discipline your soul as if it were a child: use a stick. Then you won't need a mace to beat the brains of other men. No one will care about a foe like you if you cannot even win against yourself.

Your body's a city-state, with all the good and bad a city gathers to itself. You are the ruler. The minister you can trust is prudence. Arrogance and condescension, passion, desire—these are the ones whose sole ambition is to feed their selfishness and they will sink as low as they have to do it. Godliness and resignation are freeborn men of solid reputation, while lust and shallow fancy are pickpockets

and bandits too; and if this city's ruler  
favors evil men, how will those who offer  
prudent counsel buy comfort?

Hunger,  
greed, hatred, envy—these run through your veins  
like blood; they inhabit your body like the soul.  
Nurture them and they'll soon grow strong enough  
to free themselves of your authority;  
but none of them will fight if they must face  
the sharpened claws of your intelligence.  
Don't you know that burglars and vagrants  
avoid those places frequently patrolled?  
A leader who won't speak harshly to those  
who don't accept his leadership can't lead.  
There's not much more to say on this: one word  
is enough if you have the wisdom to apply it.



Stand like a mountain, keep your feet beneath  
your skirt,<sup>98</sup> and you will elevate your head  
in splendor well beyond the end of the sky.  
If you're a man of knowledge, hold your tongue!  
Behave as if you're tongueless and no record  
of what you've said can ever be used against you.  
Those who know the secret's inner jewel  
open their mouths like oysters, only when  
they have a pearl to give. A man who talks

a lot has stuffed his ears with his own words.  
To do its work, advice requires silence.  
If every breath you take creates in you  
the desire to speak, you'll never hear the sweetness  
in what others have to say. If you're unprepared,  
keep quiet. No one can cut what is not  
laid out before them.



Those who stop to reflect  
on the nature of right and wrong know better,  
*are* better, than those with answers ready  
in their mouths like chewed thistle-cud. Reason  
expressed as speech expresses the perfection  
of the soul; do not let what leaves your mouth  
subtract from that. You'll never see a man  
who rarely speaks embarrass himself. Better  
a single drop of musk than a mound of mud  
piled high!

Beware the ignoramus  
who presumes to speak for ten others! Speak  
for yourself instead, once, after much thought,  
the way a wise man does. If you let a hundred  
arrows fly at once, each one of them  
might go wide. Take a single shot instead.  
Just make sure you shoot it true!





What moves  
a man to tell in secret what turns him pale  
when it becomes public? If you're standing  
by a wall, make sure you don't insult anyone.  
Someone you can't see might be listening  
behind it. Your heart is a closed city of secrets.  
Take care that no one sees its gates ajar.  
This is why a wise man sews his mouth shut.  
He knows. He has seen candles burned by tongues.

## The Scent Will Announce Itself

In the middle of an argument, a man  
said something inappropriate, and those  
who'd been watching tore like clawed beasts at his  
collar.

He bore the blows that fell on him, then sat  
naked, weeping, till someone with more knowledge  
of the world said, "You who worship your self,  
if you'd kept your mouth closed, like a rosebud,  
you would not have seen your shirt torn, like a rose."

The words a hothead speaks are filled with more  
than everything he thinks about himself,  
his voice the sound of a hollow, loudly-played  
mandolin.<sup>99</sup> Can't you see that the tongue  
is nothing but a fire you can douse,  
in the space of a single breath, with a single drop  
of water? The virtue a man of virtue has  
will speak for itself; *he* doesn't have to.  
There's no need to announce you don't have pure  
musk, but if you have it, the scent will announce  
itself. Nor do you need to swear the coin  
you own is of the rarest gold. The touchstone  
will confirm it. Or not. Let a thousand  
carping cynics say Saadi is unworthy,  
mixing too freely with the wrong people.

Since they lack what it takes to make off with my brain,  
let them instead tear my hide to shreds.

## What Keeps You A Prisoner

Adud had a son whose suffering was great,  
while Adud himself was not a patient man.  
A pious elder gave him this advice,  
“Release your wild birds from their prisons!” And so  
Adud smashed the cage of each bird that sang  
a morning song—and who would remain in jail  
once the bars have been broken?—but he kept  
the celebrated, sweet-voiced nightingale  
hanging on the garden-house archway.  
At sunrise, the son hurried to the garden  
and heard the lone bird above the porch.  
He smiled. “Nightingale,” he said, “your dulcet  
singing is what keeps you a prisoner.”

As long as you don't speak, no one will make  
your business their own, but once you've spoken,  
you'd better have what you need to back it up.  
Take Saadi, who for a short time tied  
his tongue and so avoided the attacks  
of those whose vanity keeps their tongues sharpened.  
The man who stands aloof from other men  
embraces peace of mind. Be prudent; don't  
publicize the faults of other people.  
Be so concerned with your own, you ignore theirs.  
When you hear idle gossip's melody,

let your ears run idle too. If you see  
a woman unveiled, veil your gaze instead.

## Down From Up

I've heard that at a feast of drunken Turks  
a postulant wrecked the minstrel's drum and harp.  
Those ghulams<sup>100</sup> plucked his hair like harp strings  
and beat his face as if it were a drum.  
The pain kept him awake all night. Next day,  
his teacher said to him, "If you don't want  
your face torn and battered like a drum,  
my son, be like a harp: keep your head down!"



Two people witnessed the dust and turmoil  
of a fight: stones flying through the air,  
shoes scattered. One, when he saw there was trouble,  
walked away. Another dove right in  
and got his head broken! No one is more  
pleasant than the man with self-control,  
who won't involve himself with what is good  
or bad in anybody else. Eyes  
were put in your head, ears too; you have  
a mouth to speak and a heart endowed with sense  
so you will know what's down from up and not  
say one's too short, while the other's too long.

## Or Do Not Speak

An elder whose good sense you should make your own  
told this tale. How pleasant a wise man's words  
sound in our ears: "Once, in India, I walked  
up to the entrance of a small, hidden room,  
and what did I see? A black man laying,  
long as a midwinter night, with a girl  
shining like the moon in his embrace,  
her lips a meal into which he'd sunk his teeth.  
(You'd have sworn that he was Bilqis' afreet;<sup>101</sup>  
he was ugly enough to be the devil himself!)  
He held her so tightly you might've said,  
'The day was covered by the night.'<sup>102</sup> The need  
to guide others towards their best behavior  
seized my skirt. Minding other people's  
business became a fire that consumed me.  
I picked up sticks and stones to throw at them,  
calling out as I did so, 'Have you no shame?  
Do you not fear God? Or at least that you will lose  
your good names?' I yelled and screamed and heaped  
abuse on them until, as if I were  
the dawn, I parted white from black. That cloud  
took its baleful shadow from the garden.  
That egg appeared from underneath the crow!

“The demon-faced monster ran, but the pari  
he’d been clinging to now clung to me:  
‘You hypocrite! You evil, black-hearted  
fake! These darvish robes conceal a man  
who counts his deeds for this world, not the next!  
For many days my heart’s been lost to me,  
my soul has been unable to find peace,  
so strong has been my hunger for that man;  
and now, at last, that this raw morsel sat  
steaming and delectable on my plate,  
and I was having my first taste of it,  
you dare to pull it from my mouth and throw it  
far beyond my reach?!’ She cried out loud  
for justice, called and called for help. ‘Compassion  
has been conquered! The world holds no mercy!  
Where are the young men able and willing  
to bring judgment against this senile fool?  
A man of his age, unashamed to touch  
a strange woman’s veil!’ She yelled and yelled  
and held tight to my skirt, and I stood there,  
my head sunk low beneath my collar, dishonored.  
Then, an idea came to me: to slip  
from my clothes like garlic from its peel, and since  
it was better for my clothes to be in her hands  
than me, I ran from her completely naked.



“Some time later, she passed me in the street.  
‘Do you remember me?’ she asked. ‘Hands off!’  
I answered. ‘Those hands of yours have taught me well  
not to meddle in the affairs of others.  
A man who’s smart enough to keep to himself  
will never have to deal with someone like you.  
That nasty situation taught me this:  
to treat as unseen everything I see!’”

If you possess intelligence, hold your tongue.  
Have sense! Speak like Saadi! Or do not speak!

## Fate Will See He Gets What He Deserves

Someone called Hajjaj a bloodthirsty man<sup>103</sup>  
with a piece of black stone in place of his heart.  
“He doesn’t care that his people call for help!  
Please, God, for them, let justice fall on him!”  
An older man with much experience  
gave the youth who’d said that some old advice.  
“Justice will be done for the sake of those  
he has oppressed; but justice will be brought  
as well to those who hate him. Don’t involve  
yourself with him, or with his fate. Know this:  
fate will see he gets what he deserves.  
I want no part of his injustices,  
but neither do I want to share in how  
you slander him.” The sins of a wicked man  
may carry him to hell, for he has tipped  
the scale, and the record of his deeds is black;  
but others run behind him, smearing his name,  
so he will not have to go to hell alone.

## I Am Myself Afraid

Once, I've heard, a robber from the desert  
passed through one of Sistan's gates and bought  
something from a local grocer. The purchase  
did the wretch no good, however; the grocer  
rigged the sale to rob him of twenty dollars.  
When the robber found out that he'd been cheated,  
he roared, "At night, I am myself afraid  
of what I do; but here, in broad daylight,  
this man fears nothing and no one! O God,  
don't send the thief who steals by night to hell,  
while this man in Sistan does it beneath the sun!"

## The Wood That Feeds It

Someone whose intentions were only good  
asked a Sufi, "Don't you know what *that one*  
says behind your back?" The Sufi answered,  
"Be quiet, brother! Don't let your mouth  
get the better of you! One should always choose  
not to hear what an enemy has said!"  
Those who bring you your enemy's messages  
have proven themselves the greater enemies.  
No one carries an enemy's words to a friend  
unless he agrees with what those words express.  
No insult my enemy can hurl at me  
will hurt enough to make my body tremble;  
but you, because you condescend to say,  
"In secret that one spoke of you like this"  
are far more cruel than he could ever be.  
The tattle-tale does nothing but renew  
old quarrels, and even a peaceful man  
becomes enraged at that. Run while you can  
from a companion who, shaking a sleeping mischief,  
calls out, "Time to wake up!" To be thrown  
with your legs tied into a black pit  
is better than ferrying trouble back and forth.  
A fight between two people is like a fire.  
The bearer of tales bears the wood that feeds it.

## I've Never Seen A Person More Adrift

In the court of Feridun, a minister  
was known and well-respected for the light  
that shined from his heart and the far-seeing  
wisdom that graced his eyes. His first concern  
was always to please God; only then  
did he fulfill his duty to the king.  
(His vile counterpart? Who in the name  
of managing the realm and treasury  
causes suffering? A man who will not  
turn his face towards God? The people will make  
their shah the instrument of that man's pain.)

Early one morning, a man approached the king.  
"May your days be peaceful," he said, "and may you  
achieve  
all you desire. I come with information  
you will want to hear. I have no motive  
other than your safety and your continued  
rule. The minister you rank so highly  
is secretly your enemy. There's no one  
left in the army of any rank who hasn't  
borrowed gold or silver from him. His terms  
are that they must repay him when you die.  
Believe me when I say he does not wish

to see you live—he calls you power-hungry!—  
for as long as you do, his money's lost to him.”

That minister, to whom the people looked  
for their protection, was brought before the king,  
whose eyes flashed hard with anger. “You,” he said,  
“who dare to stand before me as a friend,  
why do you have such evil plans for me?”  
The minister kissed the ground at the king's feet.  
“Since you've asked, I have no choice but to answer.  
Renowned King Feridun, my only hope  
is that your people pray for your long life.  
Were you to die, the people in my debt  
would have to pay me back, and so they ask,  
for fear of me, for your eternal health.  
Don't you want your subjects to yearn, both  
because they care *and* because they need you,  
for the green of youth that's in you not to fade?  
The prayers of others are a coat of mail,  
an extra layer against affliction's arrows.”  
This explanation pleased King Feridun,  
whose face bloomed like a rose in the morning sun.  
He raised the minister to a higher rank,  
his regard for the man magnified and deepened,  
while the one who'd brought the rumor to the throne  
was made to feel remorse for what he'd done.

I've never seen a person more adrift,  
or more deprived of auspicious possibility,  
than one who gambles by telling what he knows,  
or thinks he knows, hoping it will do some good.  
Out of ignorance and clouded thinking,  
he builds tension and mistrust between friends;  
but if they bring peace once more to each other's hearts,  
he remains between them, blinded and shamed.  
To light a fire beneath a friendship but burn  
only yourself proves only that you have no brains.  
Like Saadi, the man who holds his tongue,  
saying nothing about anything  
in either world, will savor solitude;  
but tell what you know if you're sure it will do good,  
even if no one's ready to accept it.  
Tomorrow, someone will regret it and say,  
"Why did I refuse to hear the truth?"

*Gratitude*

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It Forgets The Sweetness Of Her  
Breasts For Good

There is no breath in me to thank the Friend!  
No thanks I could give is worthy of Him.  
Each hair on my body is a gift from Him,  
and since each gift requires its own thanks,  
I can never thank Him as much as He deserves.  
All praise to God, Who gives us everything!  
He summoned each one of our lives from nothing.



Who can render His benevolence in words,  
when what is rendered has always already vanished  
*into* Him, Who is beyond rendering?  
Marvel at Him! He creates a person from slime,  
gives it mind and wisdom, sense and heart!  
Look at the honor He has given you:  
that you carry your portion of His essence  
from out of your father's loins until the day  
the gray hairs on your head stop growing.  
He made you pure. Take care, therefore, to stay pure.  
To return yourself to the earth less than pure  
would shame you. Keep the mirror clean of the dust  
that clouds its surface. If it rusts, nothing  
will make it shine again.



At your beginning,  
weren't you a sperm-filled drop? Now,  
if a man is what you want to be, clean  
the egotism from your head. It's not  
the strength of your arm that earns your daily bread,  
selfish one. Why won't you accept the Truth?  
Who else but He instills your desire to work?  
And when your effort brings a good result,  
understand it was the Truth that helped you,  
that you by yourself would've done nothing.  
No one carries the ball and scores a goal  
without the help of others. Let God know  
how grateful you are! Not even for one step  
do you survive on this road by yourself.  
Breath by breath, the Unseen assists you.



Were you not once a fetus in the womb,  
your tongue tied, unable to cry or scream  
for what you needed? Yet food arrived each day  
through your navel, and when the cord was cut,  
interrupting that supply, you clung  
to your mother's breast. When someone suffers abroad  
the pain of his own bad luck, they give  
as medicine the water from his home.  
Just so, a child floating before birth  
finds nourishment in its mother's belly.

After birth, the breasts that are the child's  
one desire flow like two springs  
from the place where it first lived. The mother's arms  
are paradise; her breasts, a stream of milk  
running through it. She is a life-giving tree;  
her child, the delicate fruit it was meant to bear.  
Isn't the blood that flows through her breasts the same  
as the blood flowing through her heart? Milk, then,  
is the heart's blood, and so, when the child pulls  
the blood from her breast, stinging her with its teeth,  
affection roots itself within her heart  
for that small blood sucker, and grows; but once  
the baby's arm is strong enough, its teeth  
sturdy in its mouth, the mother rubs  
a bitterness across her nipples, ending  
so completely the child's thirst for milk  
that it forgets the sweetness of her breasts  
for good. You, who are no more than a child  
on this road of repentance, may your sins too  
be wiped away by bitter suffering.

## Gratitude's Nail

A young man turned his back on the good sense  
his mother tried to teach him, burning her heart  
with ingratitude. She slammed his cradle down  
in front of him and gave her misery  
a voice. "You loveless man! Did you forget  
who I am to you? You were so helpless  
and tiny, and all you did was cry, and I  
for your sake did not sleep for nights on end!  
Were you not, when you slept here, so weak  
and without status that you couldn't chase  
even a fly away? Back then, one fly  
was enough to make you suffer—you, who today  
command a force of men who'd die for you.  
But once the bottom of your grave becomes  
the place of your unending sleep, you will  
return to such a weakness that an ant  
would prove too strong for you to fight off!"



Once worms have finished off the brain's tallow,  
how can the eye rekindle its own light?  
When you see someone whose eyes are veiled, walking  
unaware that the road is here, while there  
lies the pit, give thanks that you've been blessed  
with sight. If you don't, your eyes too are veiled.



Understanding and good judgment can't be taught.  
God instills these qualities in you;  
and if He denies you a heart that knows the truth,  
the truth will sound in your ears like the heart  
of falsehood. Look how many joints He used  
to craft the miracle of a single finger;  
how foolish, then, and misguided, to point  
one's finger at even the smallest part  
of what He's made. Consider the many bones  
He's linked in such a way that we can walk.  
If our ankles could not bend, or our knees  
and feet, none of us could take a step;  
and we can prostrate ourselves so easily  
because our vertebrae are not one bone.  
Instead, he's made two hundred of them lie  
one within the other, He, Who's fashioned  
a ball of clay like you with such a well-  
balanced temperament. The veins in your flesh  
are like three hundred sixty rivers flowing  
on a planet's surface, bringing to your head  
vision and discretion, judgment and intellect.  
Your heart pumps precious life into your limbs  
and precious wisdom into your heart.

The beasts

have fallen low to walk on all fours,  
while you ride high on two legs, like aleph.<sup>104</sup>

The beasts must hang their heads to eat their food,  
while you sit dignified, lifting what you eat  
into your mouth. God has graced you with grain,  
not straw; nor has He put you out with those  
grazing in the pasture. With such greatness,  
it would be wrong for you to bow your head,  
except in obedience, so you must take care  
not to be beguiled by the pleasures  
of the form you've been given. Set yourself a course  
towards good. A straight road is what you need,  
not straight posture. Unbelievers possess  
posture no different from your own. And the One  
who gave you eyes and mouth and ears? If you're smart  
you will not try to thwart Him. There may be  
an enemy for you to pound with a stone  
if you can, but no matter what you do,  
do not go to war in ignorance  
against the Friend. Wise men, thankful  
for all they have received, fasten God's  
grace to themselves with gratitude's nail.

## This Road That Has No End

A king's son fell from a splendid black horse,  
dislocating a vertebra in his neck,  
which bent till his chin rested on his chest,  
and he could not turn his head unless he turned  
his trunk as well. The court physicians were  
perplexed, except for one who'd traveled there  
from Greece. He twisted the prince's head  
back into place, realigning all the nerves.  
(If not, the prince would have been paralyzed,  
and yet, or so I've heard, the prince forgot  
what that man did for him, keeping silent  
when he should have offered thanks!) The healer  
came once more before the sultan. The prince  
behaved as if he didn't know the man,  
who hung his head low in shame, but they say  
he said, softly, walking from the room,  
"If yesterday I had not turned his neck,  
he would not turn his face from me today."  
So he sent a slave to the court with orders to drop  
a certain seed onto the royal censer.  
The messenger did what he'd been told to do,  
and the smoke that rose caused the prince to sneeze,  
dislocating his head and neck again.  
The prince sent his apologies with men  
who tracked the healer's footsteps far and wide,



but they couldn't find him. Don't twist your neck  
to avoid the thanks you owe your Benefactor.  
In the end, you'll raise your head towards him in vain.



Someone boxed a child's ears and said,  
"Can't you do anything right, you stupid fool?  
I gave you that axe to chop firewood!  
I never said to use it on the mosque's wall!"  
The tongue exists to offer gratitude  
and thanks, and the man who understands this  
will not wield it to spread slander. The ears  
receive the words of the Quran, its wisdom  
and good counsel. Make sure to keep them pure  
of what is false and hateful. The eyes are meant  
to gaze with love on all the Creator has made.  
Lower them so you won't have to see  
the faults of your brother, or of the friend.



Night and day were made for your comfort.  
The shining moon. The world-illuminating  
sun. For you, like a royal retainer, the sky  
spreads out the carpet of spring; and if  
the wind blows, or the snow falls, or the rain  
and mist descend, and if the thunder plays  
polo in the heavens, and the lightning

crosses swords—all are functionaries  
who nourish what the earth grows for you.

If thirst plagues you, don't let your anger boil.  
The Carrier in the clouds has hoisted water  
for you on His shoulder, and He will pour it out  
to coax from the soil all the colors and scents  
of sustenance: a feast for your eyes and brain,  
as well as your palate. He gives you honey from bees,  
manna from air; fresh dates from the palm tree,  
and piles and piles of date pits. Palm-binders<sup>105</sup>  
chew the backs of their hands in frustration,  
for none of them will ever make a tree  
that gives dates. The Pleiades, the sun, the moon—  
lamps put for your sake in the roof of your home.  
He brings you roses from thorns; from the deer's  
bladder, musk. From Him, the gold in the mines,  
the fresh leaves that sprout from dry wood.  
With His own hand, he adorned the eyebrows  
of the world, jealous of another's touch.

In His might, He cherishes the delicate,  
so all receive His grace, in all its shades.  
You cannot thank him only with your tongue;  
breath by breath, you must say it with your soul.  
O God! My heart has dissolved to blood; my eyes  
no longer have the will to see, seeing,  
as I do, how far You are beyond my words.

Neither wild beasts nor tame, neither fish nor ant,  
not even the angels in the topmost heaven  
have spoken more than the smallest thanks to You,  
just one of ten thousand thousand parts.  
Go, Saadi, and wash your hands of this  
and wipe your record clean. Don't start out  
upon this road that has no end!



No one  
knows the value of a happy day  
until a day of suffering arrives.  
A poor man's winter when the things he needs  
are scarce seems easy to endure to one  
whose property provides what he requires.  
A healthy man who's never groaned beneath  
the burden of a sickness has never thanked  
the Lord for his health. If your step is sure and strong,  
walk in gratitude with those who limp.  
The young must learn patience with the old;  
the powerful must show compassion for the weak.  
What do those who live by the Oxus River  
know about the value of water? If *you*  
want to know, ask someone stranded in the sun.  
What does the Arab who sits by the Tigris care  
for the thirsty people in Zarud? Only  
someone who's been helpless, fused to his bed

by fever, understands what it means to be fit.  
So how can you, turning gently in your sleep,  
call the night long? Think of the fevered tossing  
of one who cannot sleep, who suffers the full  
length of the night. The worthy magistrate  
may start his day at the beating of the drum,  
but he did not live through the watchman's night.

## You Dare Complain?

A man whose hands the night watchman had tied  
sat in the dark, distraught and overcome  
with shame. He heard from beyond his vision's reach  
a man bemoaning his empty-handedness.  
"Quiet!" the thief berated the other man.  
"You dare complain about your helplessness?!  
You empty-handed fool, give thanks to God  
the sentry hasn't bound your hands like mine!"  
Don't complain about your indigence  
when you see someone more indigent than yourself.

## *You Uncooked Simpleton*

A man who needed clothes borrowed a dirhem  
to make himself a rawhide shirt, but once  
he put it on, he started to complain,  
“I’m cursed with such unlucky stars! The heat  
within this rawhide shirt is cooking me!”  
And when that half-baked fool began to boil,  
someone from the prison called up to him,  
“Quiet down you uncooked simpleton!  
Go! Give thanks to God your hands and feet  
are not like mine, rubbed raw by the jailer’s ropes!”

A Beggar Should Not Fool Himself  
With Pride

A lawyer passed a man who'd fallen drunk  
into the street, and he let himself believe  
his clean-living made him superior.  
In his arrogance, he walked by without a word,  
at which the drunkard raised his head and said,  
"Go, kind sir, give thanks if you've been graced;  
haughtiness results in disappointment.  
When you see someone in chains, don't laugh; one day,  
you may find yourself bound up as well, with no  
idea how you got there. And so, does it not come  
within the realm of possibility  
that, tomorrow, you might fall down drunk like me?"

Heaven marked you for the mosque; don't despise  
on that account someone in a different  
house of worship. Bind your hands, Muslim,  
in eternal gratitude that He did not  
bind your waist with the Zoroastrian girdle.  
None go by themselves in search of Him.  
The Friend's favor drags them there by force.  
Look carefully where destiny has gone!  
To depend on anything else is blindness.



God made honey a medicine for us,  
but it's not enough to overpower Fate.  
Honey restores the health of one who's sick,  
but it cannot ease the pain of one who's dying.  
Someone whose breath is gone, whose spirit has left  
his body—what good will honey do him  
in his mouth? Or when a man's head is crushed  
by a mace, who will dare to say, "Rub  
sandalwood oil in to ease the suffering?"  
Run from danger if you can. Don't  
sharpen your claws to battle destiny.



As long as your insides accept food and drink,  
your body will stay young and unspoiled,  
but your soul's house will fall to utter ruin  
if it rejects the nourishment you bring it.  
Wet and dry and hot and cold combine  
to make you who you are. From these four humors  
all of human nature comes, but if one  
should fill you more strongly than another,  
Nature's equilibrium will be destroyed.  
If the cool air can't move freely through your lungs,  
the stomach's heat will torture life from your soul;  
and if your stomach does not "cook" the food  
you give it, the balanced workings of your flesh  
will come undone. Yet men who know the Truth



don't hang their hearts on the stability  
of these four elements. They know that nothing  
stays in balance forever. Consider, then,  
that the body's strength doesn't come from eating,  
but rather that it's nourished by Heaven's grace.  
If you think a knife and its blade are how you get  
what you need—by God!—you'll never honor  
the claim He has on your gratitude. When you bow  
your face to the ground and offer Him your service,  
praise Him alone. Don't think about yourself.  
The prayers and practices are a kind of begging,  
and a beggar should not fool himself with pride.  
It may be true you've rendered God a service,  
but don't you always accept His generous gifts?



God first placed the purpose in my heart,  
and then I placed my head upon the threshold.  
If no urge to goodness comes to you from Him,  
how will anyone receive goodness from you?  
Why worry about what your words say?  
Worry instead about who created speech!  
Our eyes are gateways to knowledge, open  
to everything in heaven and on earth.  
How would you understand what's down or up,  
except that He opened those gates for you?  
From nothing He called forth your head and hand,

placing generosity in one,  
and in the other proper deference.  
Otherwise, how could mere hands be generous?  
How could a head by itself show respect?  
In His wisdom, He provided us  
with a tongue and ears, the keys to the heart's treasure.  
If we did not use our tongues to tell our stories,  
who would know the secrets we keep in our hearts?  
Or, if the ears made no effort to spy,  
how would news of the world reach our minds?  
He gave me the power of sweet song; to you,  
He gave the power to listen and perceive Truth.  
These two are always at the door, attendants  
carrying reports back and forth between us.  
Do you suppose your good deeds come from yourself?  
There! That's the door through which He sends you  
    help!  
A gardener may bring to the emperor's porch  
the first rose of summer, but only one  
he's picked from the emperor's own garden.



# *Repentance*

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## The Few Breaths You Have Left

You whose life has lasted seventy years,  
listen! Were you sleeping as day by day  
the wind carried each year off? You've prepared  
yourself as if you think you'll never leave,  
as if the day when you will have no choice  
won't come. At the Resurrection, beneath  
the azure skies of Paradise, your place  
will be determined by the good you've done.  
The goods you take away will be the measure  
of what you've brought. If you arrive penniless,  
all you'll take away is shame. The tighter  
the bazaar is stuffed with things to buy, the more  
the man whose hand is empty must agonize.  
For five of the fifty dirhems you once had,  
grief lacerates your heart. Just so, you've let  
fifty years slip through your hands: make the most  
of the short time that remains to you. If the dead  
had tongues, they'd cry out to you in anguish,  
"You who are alive! Since you can speak,  
do not, as we must, fail to call on God  
because your lips are closed! We lived heedless  
of the consequences. So you, for Heaven's sake,  
put to good use the few breaths you have left!"

It Would Be Wrong To Lean On This  
Life Further

One night, when we were young and all blessings  
were ours, some of us sat together, chanting  
like nightingales, our faces blossoming  
like new roses, and in our impudence  
we allowed our songs to disturb the neighborhood.  
An older man who knew the world, whose hair  
the heavens' turning had turned from night to day,  
sat apart from us, his mouth shut tight  
and lipless like a hazel nut, while ours  
were open and smiling like pistachios.  
One of us said to him, "Why do you sit there,  
old man, filling that corner with the pain  
of your regret? Lift your head above  
the grief you wear around your neck and strut  
and sway and ease your heart with us!"

Feebly  
the old man raised his head to answer—and look  
at how well-turned his answer was—"When the  
eastern breeze blows through a rose garden,  
it is appropriate for youthful trees  
to sway, as wheat will sway while it's still green  
but break if you bend it when it's yellow. In spring,  
when the fragrant willow sighs in a gentle wind,  
the older trees will shed their dried up leaves.

It isn't right for me to strut and sway  
now that the morning of old age has blown  
across my cheek. The majestic falcon trapped  
in me pulls now with each breath I take  
to free itself from the rope of my life.  
It's your turn to sit at this table; I've washed  
my hands of all future pleasure. When the dust  
of your seniority settles on your head,  
don't expect the joys of youth to return.

Snow has fallen on my once-black hair.  
I can no longer be a nightingale  
at my leisure in the garden. A peacock  
can spread his splendor for all to see, but what  
would anyone want with a falcon whose wings have  
been clipped?  
The harvest my grain yields these days is sparse;  
for you, new greens are sprouting up all over.  
Freshness left my rose garden long ago:  
who would make a bouquet of withered posies?  
I rely—by my father's soul!—on my staff.  
It would be wrong to lean on this life further!  
A younger man runs lightly on his feet,  
while his elders carry pleas for help in their hands.  
Look, my rose that once was pink is now  
pure yellow, waning with the yellowing sun.  
The fantasies a not-yet-done child



cooks up smell less foul than those prepared  
by a half-baked elder. I should be crying  
like a child for the shame of my sins,  
not living *as* a child, indulging  
childish whims!”

Loqman<sup>106</sup> said it well,  
“It’s better not to live at all than to live  
in error for years.” Keeping your market stall  
shut from sunrise to nightfall is smarter  
than losing both profit and capital.  
While a young man’s days nurture his black head  
into white bloom, blackness carries off  
old men in their misery to their tombs.

## The Day Is Gone And We've Accomplished Nothing

The way he groaned when he came to see the doctor,  
you'd swear the old man was about to die.  
"You are wise," he said. "Here, please, take my pulse.  
I cannot lift my foot, and so I walk  
bent over, as if I were dragging myself  
through mud." The doctor said, "If you stop trying  
to hold the world in your hands, the mud won't hold  
your feet to the earth on the day of resurrection!"  
Do not expect the liveliness of youth  
from those who are old. Water that's run through  
a canal will not run through that canal again.  
When you were young, you swam those waters hard,  
but now that you're old, it's common sense  
that should prevail. When the cycle of your life  
passes forty, you must accept that the tide  
has risen above your head, and you can't swim  
as well as you did when your life was still fresh.



Vivaciousness first slipped away from me  
when my night began to whiten into dawn.  
Forget passion: passion's turn to play  
is over. How will I find freshness in herbs  
when herbs are ready to blossom on my grave?

When we could indulge the pleasures of idle dreaming,  
sweet passion, you and I walked on the dust  
of many in their graves, and many will come  
from the world we cannot see to walk on ours.  
I grieve for all the years that nourished my spirit,  
that passed me by like Yemeni lightning! All  
I cared about was how to dress and what  
to eat, and so I never found the time  
to nourish my faith. I let my vanity  
consume me and kept my distance from the Truth!  
The teacher spoke well who told the child,  
“The day is gone, and we’ve accomplished nothing!”



Prudent man that you are, come, use the sense  
God bestowed on you, and listen to me!  
You’ll bring the highest heaven beneath your foot  
if you take Saadi’s advice: Go, young man,  
and follow today the road of obedience!  
Tomorrow, when you’re old, you will not have  
the youthfulness you now possess. Your heart  
is free of care; your body, strong; the world,  
an arena wide open before you. Now  
is the time to hit the ball. Fate has stolen  
the days from me when every day was a Night  
of Power. Back then, I didn’t recognize  
its value; now I understand

I gambled it away. Watch a decrepit  
donkey struggling underneath its load.  
You keep riding on your wind-footed steed.  
Bind a broken jar as tight as you can—  
you'll never get a whole one's price for it;  
but since your carelessness has pushed the jar  
from your hand, to bind it tight is your only choice.



Who told you to throw yourself in the Oxus?  
But now that you're there, swim as hard as you can!  
Without thinking, you let your pure water  
run dry. What else can you do but purify  
yourself with dust?<sup>107</sup> It's true you didn't beat  
to the finish line those more nimble than you,  
but still, when you fall, pick yourself up and run!  
And even though the fastest are long gone,  
even though you feel handless and footless,  
get up from where you're sitting down and go!

## Before Your Eye Is Used By Ants For Food

One night, in the desert of Faid, sleep  
bound my feet so that I could not rise.  
A camel driver hit me on the head  
with his bridle, his voice menacing, resentful,  
“Get up! Or is your heart so set on dying  
when we’re gone that the ringing of the bells  
is not enough to wake you? I also  
would rather sleep, but out there, a desert  
lies before us!” If you don’t leave sweet sleep  
behind when they cry out, “We’re going!” how  
will you ever get started? The leader has beaten the  
drum  
for all to hear; the head of the caravan  
has reached the side of the road, and those who packed  
their bags the night before are happy indeed!  
But when the ones who slept through it all look up,  
they’ll see no trace of those who’ve gone ahead.  
The traveler who takes the lead is the one  
who rises early. Why bother yourself  
if everybody else has moved on?



If you plan for barley in the spring, how  
can you expect to harvest wheat? Now

is the time to be awake you lazy head!  
What's the point if death prods you from sleep?  
It's already late if age has lined your face.  
Pry the sleep from your eyes now! On the day  
that white fell into the black swirls of my hair,  
I pried loose all the hopes I had in life.  
Precious life has passed me by, and these  
few breaths that I have left will pass as well.  
The wrong I've done in the past is past, and if  
you fail to seize the chance before you now,  
it too will pass beyond recovering.  
If you hope to bring home what you cultivate,  
plant now, or you'll head empty-handed  
to the resurrection, where your remorse  
will serve no purpose. You have a sharp eye!  
Use it! Make arrangements now for when you die,  
before your eye is used by ants for food.



If you have capital, my son, you can  
turn a profit, but where's the profit in spending  
all your capital? Now, while the water's level  
is only at your waist, now is when  
you need to make the effort, not when the level  
is high above your head; and now—yes, now!—  
while you still possess your eyes, release your tears.  
Offer your atonement while your mouth

still contains your tongue. One day, your body  
will be empty of its soul, and then  
your tongue will stop moving. Speak the words  
of your repentance now, not when sleep  
has silenced the soul that speaks for you. Listen  
today to the words of those who are aware:  
You will be fiercely questioned by Nakir<sup>108</sup>  
tomorrow. Make the most of these priceless breaths;  
without a bird, this cage is worth nothing.  
Do not squander your life in causing pain  
and deceiving others. Opportunity  
is a rare thing, and time is a sword.

Your Shroud Is All You'll Ever Leave  
Here With

Fate severed the vein of a man's life,  
and another man tore his clothes in mourning.  
When the mourner's cries of grief reached the ears  
of a passerby, the passerby said this,  
"If he could hear the way you cry for him  
the dead man would, if he still had hands, tear  
the shroud from his body and say to you, 'This pain  
you feel because I'm gone—let it go,  
for I have packed my gear just these few days  
ahead of you. Have you forgotten that death  
will come for you as well, and is that why  
you greet my dying with this impotent agony?'"

When a seeker of truth shovels dirt on a corpse,  
his heart burns not for the one who died,  
but for himself! And when it is your child  
in the earth, why grieve? It came to this life  
pure, and pure was how it left. You came  
pure as well. Take care to stay that way!  
To go to your grave less than pure is shameful.



Now is the time to keep that bird tethered<sup>109</sup>  
by its foot, not when it's taken the rope



from your hand. You sit now where others sat  
before you. One day, that seat will belong  
to someone else. You can be an expert  
swordsman, or a champion. None of it matters.  
Your shroud is all you'll ever leave here with.  
A wild ass that snaps the cord you've tied  
around its neck is hobbled anyway  
if it gets stuck in the mud. Just like you.  
You only have the power you have now  
as long as your feet stay clear of your grave's  
damp soil. Don't, as the years engulf you,  
set your heart on this place: walnuts will not  
balance on a mosque's dome.<sup>110</sup> Last night is gone.  
Tomorrow is not yet in your hands. Count,  
therefore, only on this one breath that you have.

## The Spring Wind Has Long Blown Without Us

When one of Jamshid's best friend's died, Jamshid,  
like a silkworm, spun a silken shroud for him.  
A few days later, when he went to mourn  
over his friend's body, Jamshid saw  
that the shroud had rotted through. He said to himself,  
"I pulled the thread to make his winding sheet  
from the worms by force, but now the worms in this  
tomb  
have pulled it back from him!" This world is a garden  
where no cypress rises that the wind of doom  
doesn't pull up by the roots. Destiny  
has not yet brought forth a beauty, even  
a beauty like Joseph's, that the fish who swim  
the dirt of the grave don't swallow, like the whale  
that swallowed Jonah. Recently I heard  
recited to a rebec's mournful tune<sup>111</sup>  
these lines that seared my liver: "Roses grow  
and the spring wind has long blown without us;  
the months of summer, of winter, and of spring  
will come, even when our bones are dust."

## Greed's Mouth Is Not So Narrow

A bar of gold once fell into the hands  
of a pious man who served the Truth. The gold  
pulled his wise and careful thinking towards it  
till a black passion darkened his bright heart.  
He lay awake all night, imagining  
the rest of his life as a wealthy man: "No more  
bowing and scraping for what I need to live!  
Instead, I'll build a house with marble floors,  
with roof beams of naked aloe wood,  
and a private room for all my friends will face  
an inner garden. I'm tired of sewing patches  
one on top of the other, and the heat  
from this trivet has one too many times  
burned my eyes and seared my brain. Now  
I'll have subordinates to cook for me  
and the leisure to plumb the mysteries of God.  
When times were hard this felt was my mattress.  
Now I can have the finest carpets instead!"

These fantasies enfeebled him, tainting  
his thoughts with foolishness, till Cancer sank  
its claws into his head.<sup>112</sup> He couldn't find  
the time to commune with God, for food or sleep,  
or to say his prayers. Drunk with what he thought  
would be his future, he went into the desert

and wandered till he passed a person sitting  
by a grave, kneading clay into bricks. Sinking  
deeply into thought, he watched for a while,  
then said to himself, “Learn from this,  
my short-sighted soul. Why tie your heart  
to this golden brick when the day will come  
that they’ll make bricks of clay from your grave?”

Greed’s mouth is not so narrow  
that its hunger can be stilled with a single morsel.  
Let the golden brick go, you worthless fool!  
One brick is not enough to dam the Oxus.  
Don’t you see that you’ve been so obsessed  
with profit and wealth that you have let yourself  
trample your life’s capital underfoot?  
The dust of your illusion blinded you  
with indifference, and the heat of your appetite  
has reduced to ashes every seed you’ve planted.  
Cleanse your eyes of this collyrium;  
tomorrow, in the earth’s eye, you’ll be collyrium dust.<sup>113</sup>

## Do Not Celebrate The Death Of Any Man

The animosity between two men  
was such that when they saw each other they held  
their heads aloof like giraffes, their eyes as fierce  
as leopards. So deeply did each hate the sight  
of the other that with their eyes they pulled the sky  
tight around themselves. Doom brought its army  
down on the head of one of these men, ending  
the days of his pleasure. His enemy was glad,  
and, some time later, walking past the tomb,  
seeing the body's resting chamber sealed  
with mortar—as once he'd seen the home of the man  
the corpse had been plated with gold—this enemy  
swaggered up to where he knew the head  
would be, smiling and saying to himself,  
“Happy and at peace is the man who lies,  
after an enemy's death, in a friend's embrace.  
There is no need to mourn the man who lived  
even one day longer than his enemy.”

Possessed by his hatred, he tore a piece of mortar  
loose and saw his late foe's regal head  
laid low. The eyes that had gazed upon this world  
were stuffed with earth. The man's physical presence  
was imprisoned in the grave; his body, food

for the worms, already pillaged by the ants.  
In the turning of the heavens, the full moon  
of his face had waned to a crescent; time had withered  
his cypress-like physique to a toothpick.  
As for his palms, the fingers of his fists—  
ligament by ligament, the days  
had taken them apart. The surviving foe's  
heart swelled with such compassion for the dead  
that his tears mixed the dead man's dust into clay,  
and he felt remorse for what he'd done, for his foul  
nature, and he ordered this inscription  
for the tombstone, "Do not celebrate the death  
of any man, for time will come for you  
not long after he's gone!"

A wise mystic  
heard these words and cried aloud, "Dear God,  
I'll be surprised if You show him no mercy,  
since even his enemy has mourned for him!"

My body also will one day be such  
that my enemy's heart will burn with sorrow to see it,  
and when the Friend sees my enemy forgive me,  
perhaps forgiveness will enter His heart  
as well. Sooner or later, your head will reach  
a state where one might say it never did  
have eyes. One day, I sunk my axe-blade deep  
into a pile of earth and heard a voice:

“Be careful, please! I beg you! Be more gentle!  
There are eyes here, and ears; a face, a head!”

## Why Do We Care So Much About This Place?

My intention had been to leave that night. Instead,  
I fell asleep. I woke just after dawn  
and rushed to overtake the caravan,  
and when I did a dust storm darkened the world.  
Our guide had his daughter living with him,  
and with her kerchief she wiped the dust from his face.  
“My sweet-faced child,” he said to her, “you care  
so much for me and so this dust disturbs you;  
but the dust that will one day settle in my eyes  
will not be so little that with a cloth  
like this you can wipe it off!”

The breezes

passing always over the earth will carry  
each of our atoms to a different place.  
Like a horse you can't control, your skittish self  
bears you at a gallop to the grave's edge,  
and when doom snaps the stirrup-strap, and the reins  
fall from your hands, nothing you'll know to do  
will pull you back from the precipice.



You cage of bones! Your soul is a bird named “spirit,”<sup>114</sup>  
and when a bird breaks free of the cage that holds it,  
you can try and try, but nothing will bring it back!



Don't lose this chance. The world is only a breath,  
though wise men value a breath above the world.  
Alexander, whose power spanned the world,  
when he let the world go with his last breath,  
could not arrange it so that others took  
the world from him while leaving him in peace.  
So men have gone, each reaping what he's sown,  
leaving nothing but his name, good or bad.

Why do we care so much about this place?  
Our companions are gone, and we are on the road.  
When we're not here, these same roses will bloom,  
and friends will sit together here, in the garden.  
Don't bind your heart to this world of comforts;  
no one exists whose heart it will not take.  
A man can lay himself down in the dust  
of his tomb; the resurrection will still shake  
that dust from his hair. Lift your head now  
from out of your indifference, so you don't  
hang it in regret tomorrow. When you  
come home to Shiraz, don't you wash the dust  
of the road from your head and body? So, since you  
are covered with the dust of sin, and soon  
will travel to a strange city, let your eyes  
release a stream to wash that filth away!

## What Will You Buy With Your Cheap Black Silver?

I remember when my father was alive—  
let mercy fall each moment on him like rain—  
and I was small, he bought me a slate to write on,  
and a notebook, and a gold signet ring.  
But then a “customer” found me and bought the ring,  
paying me a single date. A child  
young as I was wouldn’t understand  
the value of a ring like that, and so,  
he could take it off my hands for something sweet.  
Like you, who don’t know your own life’s value.  
That’s why you’ve squandered it on sweet pleasures.

At the resurrection, when worthy men rise  
from the loamy darkness of their graves to reach  
the Pleiades, you will hang your head in shame  
as the deeds of all your years gather round you.  
Be ashamed of the work of evil men,  
or *good*’s presence will shame you. On the day  
when each of us is asked about our words  
and actions, even the Steadfast Seers<sup>115</sup>  
will tremble in fear; and when the prophets themselves  
worry about their record, what excuse  
will you offer for the sins that blacken yours?

Women who choose to bear devotion's burden  
on their own will go much further than men  
who lack piety. Aren't you concerned  
as a man that women might receive God's blessing  
in greater measure than yourself? Women,  
for well-established reasons,<sup>116</sup> are exempt  
at certain times from all religious duties.  
You, with no such reason, exempt yourself,  
as if you were a woman, so don't talk  
nonsense about the kind of man you are!  
What you've shown us makes you less than a woman!  
Since it's true I'm really not that good with words,  
give your ears instead to what Unsori,  
King Of All Words,<sup>117</sup> had to say. I mean it!  
Pay attention to my predecessor's  
wisdom: "If you're walking a straight path  
and turn to the left or right, the path you're walking  
is no longer straight. Just so, if someone  
is less than a woman, how can that someone  
be a man?"



Your lower-self was reared  
in merry-making comfort. Follow it  
and you follow a foe who grows stronger with time.  
A man once gave his time to rear a wolf-cub  
which, when it was grown, tore the man to shreds.

As he lay there waiting for his soul to leave him,  
a wise and quick-tongued man approached and said,  
“Didn’t you know that nourishing your foe  
as well as you have done would guarantee  
that he would injure you like this?” The Devil  
leveled this against us, “You will not  
find among them many who would give thanks!”<sup>118</sup>  
And given the evil in our lower-selves,  
I fear the Devil will be proven right.

Still, God cast the Devil out for our sake,  
because the Devil found his greatest pleasure  
in causing us to sin. How can we dare  
to raise our heads from out of this disgrace  
that is the peace we’ve made with the evil one?  
It means we’re still at war with the Truth! The Friend  
will look in your direction only rarely  
if your own face is turned towards the enemy’s.  
If you want the fruit your friendship with Him bears,  
then you cannot do what the enemy tells you.  
Only one who chooses his enemy  
to live with accepts it as appropriate  
to be estranged from his friend. Don’t you know  
your friend will rarely set foot in your house  
if he sees his enemy is in there too?  
So what will you buy with your cheap black silver  
now that you’ve closed your heart to love of Joseph?<sup>119</sup>



A man who quarreled with an emperor  
found himself, at the emperor's orders, delivered  
into his enemy's hands. "Spill his blood!"  
the enemy was told, and each moment  
the captive suffered his enemy's vengeance he said,  
"If I had not turned my friend against me,  
I would not now be enduring this cruelty!"  
(It's common to see an enemy flay the skin  
of someone who made a friend angry at him.)  
I know you're not an empty-headed fool,  
so don't turn your face away from the friend;  
that way, the enemy can't cast his eye  
on you. Make your heart and your mouth at one  
with the Friend and your foe will be pulled up by the  
root.  
It becomes no one to lose his good name  
by angering his friend to please his foe.

When Good Men Walk Past,  
Follow Quickly

A man who used the Devil's craft to eat  
other men's wealth, cursed the Devil, and so,  
once he was on the road, the Devil spoke,  
"I've never met an idiot like you!  
You, my friend, were at peace with me. Why now  
have you raised your neck to challenges me in battle?"  
For the sorrow in whatever that foul fiend  
arranges, an angel's hand is always there  
to write it down for later use against you.  
In your ignorant, shameless folly haven't you thought  
that the Pure would take note of your impurity?

Find some way to make things right; ask someone  
to intercede for you. Not one moment  
of grace will be conceded when your time  
arrives, and if you lack the strength to make  
a change, raise your hands in desperation,  
like the helpless. If indeed the evil  
in you has grown beyond your ability  
to control it, it will be best for you to say,  
"I've lost control!" And if you see the door  
of God's forgiveness open, get in there fast:  
the door of repentance might shut in your face.

Don't labor under the burden of sin,  
my son; on a journey, the porter grows weak.  
When good men walk past, follow quickly  
in their wake, for whoever seeks the happiness  
of God's acceptance will find it; but if you follow  
the footsteps of corruption, I can't see how  
you'll reach the goal of righteousness. For those  
who travel the highway of the Prophet's law  
the Prophet is himself an intercessor.



A man whose clothes were stained with mud walked,  
dazed by his condition, into a mosque.  
Someone chased him off, shouting, "God rot  
your hands! How dare you enter this pure place  
with your skirts smeared with dirt!?" My heart  
melted with pity, for since the highest heaven  
is pure and filled with joy, a place for the pure  
and hopeful, how can those stained with the filth  
of rebellion ever hope to enter there?  
The man who enters paradise has paid  
with his obedience. The man who wants  
cash must have merchandise to sell!

Wash the dust of degradation off you  
now, before the conduit closes higher up.<sup>120</sup>  
Do not say the bird of your good fortune

has escaped if you still hold the end of the rope  
that bound it to you in your hand; and if  
it is late, then run as quickly as you can  
along the path. Your lateness will not change  
the fact that you did well. Your hands have not  
been tied down yet by death, so raise them high  
in the Just One's court. Wake up, sweet-sleeping sinner!  
Let your tears flow when you ask God to pardon  
all your sins; and if it's necessary  
to shed the water of your honor, do it  
here; and if you have no tears, find someone  
to plead your case before the Lord, someone  
whose honor flows more abundantly  
than your own. If God chases me from His door,  
I'll bring the souls of the great ones to speak for me.



## He Cannot See The Road Ahead

Often the time comes back to me when I  
was still a little boy and I went with my father  
to a festival, where I had so much fun  
watching the people swarming around us  
that I did not see which way my father went.  
Confused and afraid, I cried out for him,  
and then there he was, and he boxed my ears,  
“How many times do I have to tell you—you  
with your head in the clouds—not to let go  
of my skirt?” A small child shouldn’t walk out  
alone. He cannot see the road ahead  
and so that road is frightening for him.  
You, my poor friend, are a child on the road  
to God. Go! Grab the skirts of those who know  
the way. Don’t sit with lowly, boorish men.  
If you do, you wash your hands of dignity.  
Seize the stirrups of pure men!<sup>121</sup> A mystic  
is not ashamed to beg for what he needs.



Disciples are weaker than children; their masters are  
strong  
as a reinforced concrete wall. Learn  
to walk from the child who leans against a wall  
to keep himself from falling. To break the chain

of sinfulness, you must sit in the mystic's ring,  
and if you need to, use that ring to knock  
at wisdom's door! Even the sultan does!  
Be like Saadi, glean knowledge wherever  
you find it, and you will gather a rich harvest.



Come, you who dwell in friendship's sanctuary,<sup>122</sup>  
who will tomorrow sit at the table of sanctity,  
don't turn away from the crowd of beggars.  
No generous man will chase them away.  
Now is the time to travel with the wise.  
Tomorrow, you might not have the chance to go.

## Don't Let The Wind Take What You Gather

A man who'd harvested his August grain  
and therefore felt himself prepared for winter  
got drunk one night and lit a fire, the luckless  
fool, that burned his entire harvest. He sat  
out in the field all the next day, gleaning  
what he could, for not a single corn  
remained from what he'd picked. As people passed,  
they watched him desperately trying to get back  
some of what he'd lost, and one man said  
to a boy he'd raised, "If you want to avoid  
dark days like his, don't let a moment lost  
to madness reduce your harvest to ashes; and know  
that if your life has gone in sin beyond  
what you can control, you've lit the flames already.  
To be forced to hoard gleanings because you torched  
the food you'd stored for winter is a scandal!  
Be sure you sow the seeds of faith and justice  
and don't let the wind take what you gather  
with your good name!"

When someone whose fortune  
fails him falls in bondage to another  
those who are fortunate learn a lesson: Pound  
on the door of forgiveness before your punishment  
begins, for once they start the bastinado,

crying is pointless. Lift your head  
from your indifference, or tomorrow  
it will hang down to your chest in shame.

## No One Else Will Ease Your Conscience

A man was immersed in a sinful act  
when a pious elder happened to walk by.  
The man sat down, the sweat of his embarrassment  
soaking his face, and said, "In front of you,  
I am so ashamed!" The elder heard these words  
and filled his own with anger. "Young man!  
Aren't you more ashamed that in God's presence  
it's my presence that shames you?!" No one else  
will ease your conscience; give respect to God  
alone. Feel before Him the same shame  
you feel before your relatives and neighbors.

## Tomorrow There'll Be No Room For Talk

Drunk with the wine of love, Zulaikha<sup>123</sup> hung  
on Joseph's skirt. So fully had she surrendered  
to the demon of her hunger that she'd pounced  
on him like a wolf. She had a marble idol  
she prayed to every day, but at that moment  
she covered its face and head so it wouldn't see  
the ugliness of what she intended. Joseph  
sat in a corner, stained with grief, holding  
his head in his hands, fighting the tyranny  
of the lower self. Zulaikha kissed those hands  
and both his feet, and said, "Don't disobey!  
Give in to your desires! Do it now!  
Clean that heavy-hearted frown from your face.  
Don't toss this sweet chance away  
just so you can sulk!" Her words released  
a stream from Joseph's eyes. "Stop it! Don't look  
for this impurity from me! Just now  
you felt ashamed before a stone. Let me  
feel my shame before the pure Lord Himself!"

Even with repentance in your heart,  
how much profit can you hope to make  
when you have wasted the capital that is your life?  
Men drink wine to bring the flush of life  
to their faces, but end up sallow-faced

instead. Submit your penitence today!  
Tomorrow there'll be no more room for talk!



When a cat relieves itself it knows to hide  
with earth the foulness it has left behind,  
but you, who've freed yourself of all concern  
for the wrong you do, don't you fear the eyes  
that might fall upon your own leavings?  
Consider the sin-filled slave who escapes  
his master time after time. If he returns  
sincerely humble and contrite, his master  
will not chain him down as punishment  
again. If a fight is what you want, pick it  
only with someone you can do without  
or from whom you can run and not be caught.



Take account of all you've done till now;  
don't wait till they come to audit your books.  
You do not want to be the man with deeds  
to repent, who keeps his books closed because  
the resurrection has not yet come, and why  
subject himself to all that pain before  
he needs to? Sighs darken most mirrors,  
but the sighs of true atonement brighten  
the mirror of the heart. Be afraid now

that you have sinned and you won't need to fear anyone on resurrection day.



Take That First Step Along God's Road  
And You'll Surpass The Angels

A stranger, I mingled with the black crowds  
of Abyssinia, my time my own,  
my heart free of care, my head giddy  
with pleasure, but then, on the street, I saw a dakka<sup>124</sup>  
on which several wretched men were bound in chains.  
I turned immediately around and made  
for the desert like a bird escaped from its cage,  
when someone called out, "Those imprisoned men  
are thieves who prowl the night and have refused  
both the advice we've offered *and* Truth."

If you've done nothing wrong to anyone,  
what concern is it of yours if the town  
magistrate arrests the entire world?  
If the tax collector has done an honest job,  
he will not worry when his boss reviews  
the records, but if your spotless reputation  
hides deceit, your tongue will lack the courage  
to account for what you've done. Fear God, therefore,  
and you won't have to fear the prince.

If my service  
is acceptable, I do not need to care  
about the enemies who lie in wait  
for me. If a man displays a servant's zeal,

the Lord will treasure him, but if a dull  
edge is all God sees of his service, he'll fall  
from his high office and be made instead  
the donkeys' caretaker. Take that first step  
along God's road and you'll surpass the angels.  
Stay where you are, though, and you're less than a beast.

If You Pour All Your Sins Out  
With Your Tears

An official of Damghan struck a man with his scepter. The racket the man's complaints made filled the streets like a drum roll. All that night, he was so upset he couldn't sleep. A pious man who passed where he was laying said, "If you'd carried to him the heat of your atonement last night, he might've cooled down by the time he saw you today!"

On the day we congregate before the final judgment, none who brought their heart's burden each night to God's court will feel at all embarrassed. If you're wise, you'll ask the Just One at night when you repent to shorten the day of your sinfulness. If your intent is to make peace with Him, what do you have to fear? The Generous One will not close His door on anyone who seeks forgiveness. It was His generosity that fashioned your existence out of nothing, and so it would be strange if He declined to take your hand when you fall. If you serve Him, raise your hands in desperate supplication, and if you are ashamed before Him, release the waters of your regret. No one seeking

absolution ever came to this door  
whose sins were not washed away by a river  
of remorse. God will not pour your honor out  
if you pour all your sins out with your tears.

## The One Who Plants The Seeds Will Harvest

How can I tell you what went through my mind  
when my child died in the town of Sana? (A sapling  
takes thirty years to become a tree,  
yet one rough wind can pull it up by the roots.  
No wonder roses bloom upon the earth,  
when so many who are roses  
in our memories sleep within it.) “Die  
you shameful man!” I told myself. “The child  
leaves pure, while the old, like you, die stained!”  
In a black passion, desperate to see my child’s  
body again, I threw his headstone down  
and stood in that narrow, lightless place, terrified,  
turning white. When I returned to my senses,  
my darling child’s voice filled my ears,  
“If panic overcomes you in the dark,  
use common sense. Go there with a light!”

If you want the grave to shine as bright as day,  
let the light of what you do from now on  
shine forth from here. The farmer trembles  
as if with fever, worrying that the dates  
his tree gives will not be fresh and moist,  
and yet there are those, greedy for all they can get,  
who think they’ll harvest wheat they haven’t sown.

The one who plants the roots, Saadi, will eat  
the fruit. The one who plants the seed *will* harvest.



# *Prayer*

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## The Strings That Turn My Head

Come now, let us lift our hands from our hearts!  
We cannot raise them from the grave for tomorrow!  
Have you not seen an autumn tree stripped bare  
by the harsh cold raising up its empty  
hands in desperation, pleading not  
to be turned away empty of God's mercy?  
(Do not assume that any who have raised  
their hands at the door that never closes  
will turn from there in hopelessness.) Fate  
will robe that tree in glory and God's decree  
will put fruit within its sleeves. All who come  
bring their obedience to God, but the wretched  
bring their need. Present yourself at the court  
where the one who cares for wretches presides. Let us  
raise our hands like naked branches; we can't  
sit leafless any longer. Look on us,  
dear God, with generosity, for though sin  
first emerged in us, that means sin comes  
from your abject servants prostrate in the dust,  
hoping their Lord will pardon them. We're nourished  
by Your generosity, dependent  
on Your favor and Your grace. The beggar  
who receives what he needs, and care and love as well,  
will not betray the one who gives those gifts  
to follow someone else.



If we have power  
in this world, it comes from You, and so  
we look to you for power in the world  
to come. Power comes from You alone,  
and You alone can strip us of all we have.  
Someone You've made powerful can't be abased.  
Dear God, I beg you, don't abase me;  
don't leave me shamed by the degradation  
of my sins. Don't give someone like myself  
power over me. I'd rather suffer  
punishment by Your hand. No evil  
in all the world is worse than this:  
to be mistreated by someone like myself.  
The shame I feel before You is enough.  
Please don't shame me before others as well.  
If Your shadow were to fall upon my head,  
heaven itself would be my smallest footstool.  
If you honor me with a crown, you raise me high.  
Lift me up so none can cast me down.



I still tremble when I recall the words  
of frantic melancholy spoken by one  
who'd achieved communion in the Sanctuary.<sup>125</sup>  
"Forgive me, God! I beg You! Don't banish me

to this degradation!" And again he moaned,  
"Please don't cast me down. No one will take  
my hand. Do not drive me from Your door.  
Instead, call me in. I rest my head  
in no doorway but Yours!"

You know how helpless  
and despicable we are. We are no match  
for the Soul Imperative, restive as it is,  
galloping in such a way that reason  
cannot grab the bridle. Who can win  
against the lower self *and* Satan? Ants  
do not battle leopards. Show me a path!  
In the name of those already on Your path,  
grant me asylum from these enemies!

O God! By the eternal essence of Your Godhood!  
By all Your attributes without equal!  
By the pilgrim's cry of, "Here we are! We're ready!"  
And by the one, peace be on him, buried  
at Kathrin!<sup>126</sup> By the swordsmen's cry that "God  
is greatest!" (Warriors, for them, are women)!  
By the collective devotion of the elders  
and by the newly sprouted sincerity of  
the young! At the moment of death, when doubt and  
confusion  
take hold within us, come to our defense  
against the blasphemy of saying "Two!"

instead of “One!”<sup>127</sup> We who fail in our obedience hope that those who don’t will come to intercede for us. In the name of the pure, keep me from what will stain me, and if I have slipped and stained myself, consider me already pardoned! By those with their backs bent double in devotion, their eyes focused in shame upon their insteps, do not bar my eyes from the joy of gazing on Your face, nor bind my tongue when it’s time to bear witness.



Light the lamp of faith above my path  
and hinder in me that which would do evil.  
Turn my eyes from what they should not see;  
give me hands that will not do wrong.  
I am a grain of dust floating in You.  
I must be still: existence, nothingness  
are the same to me if I pass into darkness.  
A single ray from the sun that is Your grace  
fulfills me. No one will see me if I don’t  
stand where your radiance can shine on me.  
Cast Your eye on an evil man and he will  
become a better person. One glance  
from the emperor satisfies a beggar. If You  
hold me to the standard of equity and justice,  
I’ll cry out, “Your mercy promised differently!”

I implore You! Do not chase me from Your door!  
I can't imagine another that's open to me.  
And while I've sometimes, in my ignorance  
and folly, turned away, I'm here now.  
Please don't slam the door shut in my face!  
How can I explain my scandalously soiled  
skirts, except by my inability  
to keep them clean? You of independent  
means! Do not arrest me for my sins.  
Someone with Your means must show compassion  
for the poor. Yet why should I weep for my weaknesses;  
I may be weak, but my asylum is strong.



Indifferently we've broken faith with You!  
How can anything we do change our fate?  
What result can we hope for from our efforts?  
This point alone defines our shortcomings.  
You've brought to ruin everything I've done.  
What power can self hope for against the Godhead?  
I am not the one who turns his head  
from Your authority; Your authority  
pulls the strings that turn my head.



## Notes

### Notes to the “Introduction”

<sup>1</sup> The panel was organized by Niloufar Talebi and included, along with her and myself, Reza Ordoubadian of Middle Tennessee State University.

<sup>2</sup> It is interesting, though, and probably worth investigating, that, despite their authors’ colonial assumptions, many of the translations produced in the 19<sup>th</sup> century are generally accepted as semantically accurate, while the closely related spiritualizing assumptions made by Barks and Ladinsky have resulted in translations that every speaker of Persian I know who also knows Rumi and Hafez has characterized as inaccurate at best.

<sup>3</sup> Rumi, *The Essential Rumi: New Expanded Edition*, trans. Coleman Barks (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004) xvii-xviii. Author’s italics.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. xxiii-xxiv.

<sup>5</sup> Bahauddin, *The Drowned Book: Ecstatic and Earthy Reflections of Bahauddin, the Father of Rumi*, trans. Coleman Barks and John Moyne, First hardcover ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004) xxix.

<sup>6</sup> Hafez, *The Gift: Poems by Hafiz*, trans. Daniel Ladinsky (New York: Penguin, 1999) 4.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 5-6.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 6. It’s interesting to note the similarity between Ladinsky’s image of Hafez as “an Infinite Fountaining Sun” and Barks’ characterization of Rumi’s “creativity [as a] continuous fountaining from beyond forms....”

<sup>9</sup> Saadi, *The Bustan of Sadi*, ed. L. Cranmer-Byng and Dr. S. A. Kapadia, trans. A. Hart Edwards, *The Wisdom of the East Series* (London: John Murray, 1911) 9-10.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 11.



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<sup>11</sup> Saadi, Reuben Levy, and Francis Gladwin, *Stories from Sa'di's Bustan and Gulistan*, ed. Sir E. Denison Ross, trans. Reuben Levy, *The Treasure House of Eastern Story* (London: Chapman and Hall, Limited, 1928) xvii-xviii.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Saadi, *Morals Pointed and Tales Adorned: The Bustan of Sadi*, trans. G. M. Wickens (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974) xx.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. xxvi. (Author's italics)

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 16.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. xxvi-xxvii. (Author's italics)

<sup>18</sup> It occurs to me that the metaphor could work the other way as well, i.e., that Saadi's work is the vehicle through which characteristics are ascribed to my translation, but this reverses, or at least ignores, the chronological order of the two works and so would take us in a direction different than the one I am interested in pursuing here.

<sup>19</sup> This story, as well as the reference to Joseph Addison's *Spectator*, can be found in John D. Yohannan, *The Poet Sa'di: A Persian Humanist, Persian Studies Series; No. 11* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America; Bibliotheca Persica, 1987) 3-4.

## Notes to Introductory Poems and "Justice"

<sup>20</sup> The Islamic year 655 corresponds to 1257. The "two great feasts" refer to the feast at the end of Ramadan and the Feast of Sacrifices, which Wickens places between October 13 and December 20 of that year.

<sup>21</sup> The political subtext here compares the effect of the beloved on the lover to an outbreak of civil unrest. It is better for the lover to be asleep and admired, in other words, than awake and causing trouble.

<sup>22</sup> Tasbih signifies both Muslim prayer beads and the prayer said while using them; khergeh signifies the traditional robes of the darvish.

- <sup>23</sup> In old Persian, "Khusrau" was a royal title. Now it is a proper name.
- <sup>24</sup> A standard gesture/image of regret.
- <sup>25</sup> The purpose of this parenthetical quatrain is to explain why Theophile no longer "darkens another's door." For a mystic, begging is understood to be a matter of self-discipline, something he does to teach himself to give up his desires.
- <sup>26</sup> For betraying their friendship by befriending you.
- <sup>27</sup> Smoke is a metaphor for grief and prayer.
- <sup>28</sup> In Persian, the word for leaves is identical to the word for provisions.
- <sup>29</sup> See note 20 above.
- <sup>30</sup> According to Wickens, the reference here is to "the comfort a starving man may derive from tightly binding his stomach with a hard object upon it" (257, note 640).
- <sup>31</sup> The skirt referred to here is the skirt of the robes men wore at the time. The image is of the traditional gesture of begging turned violent.
- <sup>32</sup> "Clear-hearted" is an expression used to connote a mystic.
- <sup>33</sup> The term indicates a worm-related disease.
- <sup>34</sup> The rak'a is a standard division of ritual prayer in Islam.
- <sup>35</sup> To "go upon the wind" is a Persian expression meaning to come to nothing; in this case, a reference to death.
- <sup>36</sup> The idea of carrying the ball is here a reference to the style of polo played by the Persians of Saadi's time.
- <sup>37</sup> See note 4.
- <sup>38</sup> If you are a good man in this world, then you will enjoy prosperity in the next.
- <sup>39</sup> Kisrá is a variation on Khusrau. See note 3.
- <sup>40</sup> Qarun was a man of great wealth who was swallowed by the earth for refusing to pay tithes to his cousins. He appears to be the Muslim version of Korah. See Numbers, 16.

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<sup>41</sup> The reference is to a story in the Quran, Sura 18. Here are verses 65-82:

65. Then they found one of Our votaries,  
whom We had blessed  
and given knowledge from Us.
66. Moses said to him: "May I attend upon you  
that you may instruct me in the knowledge  
you have been taught of the right way?"
67. He said: "You will not be able to bear with me.
68. How can you bear that which is beyond your  
comprehension?"
69. "You will find me patient if God wills," said Moses;  
"and I will not disobey you in any thing."
70. "If you must follow me," he said, "do not ask me any thing  
until I speak of it to you myself."
71. So they set out till they (came to the quay)  
and went on board a ship  
in which he made a hole, (and Moses said:)  
"You have made a hole in the boat to drown its passengers?  
You have done a strange thing!"
72. "Did I not tell you," he replied,  
"that you will not be able to bear with me?"
73. (Moses) said: "Do not hold me for having forgotten,  
and do not reprove me and make my task difficult."
74. The two men went on till they came to a boy, whom he  
killed.
- Moses exclaimed: "You have killed an innocent soul  
who had taken no life. You have done a most abominable  
thing!"
75. He said: "Did I not tell you  
you will not be able to bear with me?"
76. Moses said: "If I ask you any thing again  
then do not keep me with you. You have my apology."
77. The two went on till they came upon some villagers,  
and asked the people for food,  
but they refused to entertain them.  
There they found a wall that was crumbling,

which he repaired. Moses remarked:  
“You could have demanded wages for it if you liked.”  
78. “This is the parting of our ways,” he said.  
“But I will now explain the things you could not bear:  
79. That boat belonged to poor people  
who used to toil on the sea.  
I damaged it because there was a king after them  
who used to seize every ship by force.  
80. As for the boy, his parents were believers,  
but we feared that he would harass them  
with defiance and disbelief.  
81. We hoped their Lord would give them a substitute  
better than him in virtue and goodness.  
82. As for that wall, it belonged to two orphan boys  
of the city, and their treasure was buried under it.  
Their father was an upright man. So your Lord  
willed that on reaching the age of maturity  
they should dig out their treasure as a favor from the their  
Lord.  
So, I did not do that of my own accord.  
This is the explanation of things  
you could not bear with patience.”

<sup>42</sup> “Donkey’s leg” is a literal rendering; as an idiom it refers to the donkey’s penis.

<sup>43</sup> The image here is of the way a new nib needs to be cut for a pen when the old one becomes too dull for smooth writing.

## Notes to “Generosity”

<sup>44</sup> “Allah’s friend” is a term used to refer to Abraham.

<sup>45</sup> To eat salt with someone is to establish a bond with that person that should not be betrayed. Even a thief was not supposed to steal from someone with whom he had eaten salt.

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<sup>46</sup> The word *gabr* refers to Zoroastrian, but is used in a derogatory sense, meaning something akin to heathen.

<sup>47</sup> The formality of the imprisoned man's response is perhaps an ironic comment on the snooty observation of the pious man.

<sup>48</sup> Mohammed or perhaps some other prophet.

<sup>49</sup> The image of the moth immolating itself in a candle's flame is, in Persian poetry, a conventional metaphor for the relationship between the lover/mystic and the cruel and impassive beloved/God. Here, though, according to Wickens, Saadi seems to be comparing the candle to a king who has no compassion for his subjects: The candle is punished each night with a public burning for the fact that it shows no mercy to the moth.

<sup>50</sup> The reference here is to Judgment Day, when one's good deeds and bad deeds are weighed on the scales of God's judgment.

<sup>51</sup> I have chosen to keep the term Wickens used in his translation because it fits the meter. The name refers to the farthest outskirts of the non-Muslim world as it existed in medieval times.

<sup>52</sup> The *tahlil* is the first half of the profession of faith in Islam: "There is no god but God." The *tasbih* signifies the Muslim prayer beads and the prayers said when using them.

<sup>53</sup> The pun Saadi refers to in the original is a visual one, which is made in Persian (and other languages that use Arabic script) by transposing the dots that distinguish certain letters from others. In Persian the word for "kiss" begins with a "beh." By moving the dots and changing the letter "beh" to "teh" Saadi changed the word to "provisions." I have tried to get the same effect with the words fair and fare, though I have, obviously, lost some of the irony of the original.

<sup>54</sup> Hatam Tayi was a pre-Islamic Arab of the tribe of Tayi, who was known in literature as a prime example of generosity and other similar virtues.

<sup>55</sup> Wickens: "the 'living stream' of Isfahan."

<sup>56</sup> In Persian literature, biting the back of the hand is a sign of worry and distress. *Maubad* signifies a Zoroastrian cleric; and so Saadi misuses the label. As Wickens points out, though, it would not have been unreasonable for the Byzantium messenger to have been a cleric of some sort, nor would it have been unreasonable for either Hatam, a pre-Islamic Arab, or Saadi, a Muslim writer, to fail to distinguish between the religious hierarchies outside of their own traditions.

<sup>57</sup> The name of a very fast mule that Mohammed gave as a gift to Ali.

<sup>58</sup> To weigh the wind is to deal in unsubstantiated claims.

## Notes to “Ecstatic Love”

<sup>59</sup> When you’re soul is on your lips, you are at the point of death.

<sup>60</sup> The reference here is to the Quran 7, the second part of verse 171:

“When your Lord brings forth from their loins  
the offspring of the children of Adam,  
He makes them witnesses over themselves,  
(and asks): ‘Am I not your Lord?’  
‘Indeed,’ they reply, ‘We bear witness’—  
lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection:  
‘We were not aware of this.’”

<sup>61</sup> *Tasbih* is the word for Muslim prayer beads; to sing the *tasbih* is an expression meaning to sing God’s praises while fingering the beads.

<sup>62</sup> A *pari* is a kind of Persian nymph. According to Wickens, the gender of the dancer in this poem could be either male or female.

<sup>63</sup> The underlying comparison here, as through the rest of this section of the poem, is actually between true mystics and those who are pretenders, and it is the pretenders who are really being compared to the infidels. So the sense of the line is this: True lovers of God cover themselves but not like the counterfeit lovers who are like infidels—non-Muslims—who would cover the badge of identification they had to wear in Saadi’s time with the patched robes of the darvish.

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<sup>64</sup> The darvish's robes were traditionally blue.

<sup>65</sup> The original, and Wickens' translation, is much more compressed: "I from his district's dust see no escape:/Tell him, unjust, he may pour out my reputation" (Wickens, pg. 106). According to Wickens the sense of the lines is this, "I am willing, because I can't keep away from him, to deal with the dust, and I am willing to let him ruin my reputation—the literal phrase in Persian is "water of the face"—in order to get the dust to settle and to get it off me. It is a kind of paradox: the insults hurled and damage to the lover's reputation done by the beloved somehow cleanse the beloved.

<sup>66</sup> The reference here is to the resurrection.

<sup>67</sup> The last round is a reference to the resurrection.

<sup>68</sup> Hay is the name of Leila's tribe.

<sup>69</sup> The expression means "Leave me alone!"

<sup>70</sup> The word Saadi uses here is "friend," but it is understood to refer to Abraham. According to the legend, when Nimrod threw Abraham into the fire, God turned the fire into a rose garden.

<sup>71</sup> The reference to honey comes from the fact that the candle is made of beeswax. There is also a pun here: Shirin means sweet and is also the name of a heroine in one of the old Persian stories. When he loses her, Farhad is so overcome with grief, he jumps to his death from a high place.

### Note to "Humility"

<sup>72</sup> See note 114 below.

<sup>73</sup> Saadi has the hermit call Jesus the Messiah, but Muslims see him only as a prophet.

<sup>74</sup> Mohammed

<sup>75</sup> These stars are used as symbols of intense staring and are known in Arabo-Persian as "The Two Calves."

<sup>76</sup> Wickens translates this line like this: "O you in whose authority's ear the world is but a ring," but his note (1611, page 272) explains that an earring signifies enslavement in Islamic literature and so it cannot be the ear of the king's authority that is referred to, but rather the ear that listens to the king's authority.

<sup>77</sup> The word Tuba occurs just once in the Koran and is understood to refer to a tree in paradise that bears very delicious fruit.

<sup>78</sup> The *qandil* was a glass pot full of water on which oil lamps were floated.

<sup>79</sup> The reference here is to the much better light given off by beeswax candles. Wickens also suggests there is an allusion to the mystic's love of God (see the previous chapter) since a beeswax candle consumes itself even as it burns.

<sup>80</sup> According to Wickens, the houses of the time would have had a trap door in their roofs through which thieves could have easily gotten into a house from which they wanted to steal.

## Notes to "Resignation"

<sup>81</sup> The reference here is to Rustam, a hero of the *Shahnameh* who lived a long life filled with narrow escapes, and his brother Shaghad, who killed Rustam when his time on earth was up.

<sup>82</sup> Saadi here is probably referring to how his life was effected by the invasion of Ghengis Khan in the 1220s. According to Wickens, the *Iraq* to which Saadi refers here does not correspond to the country of Iraq that we know today. It was the name used during Saadi's time for the Persian province of Jibal, of which Isfahan occupied the southeast corner. As well, Syria here needs to be understood to include Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine.

<sup>83</sup> To eat salt with someone was a sign not only of hospitality, but also of a closeness and obligation that each person had towards the other.



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<sup>84</sup> The reference here is to the purple color of the Judas-tree flower, which Saadi probably means to signify health, as well as the color of dyer's greenweed, which has a yellow flower.

<sup>85</sup> Probably a reference to rheumy eyes.

<sup>86</sup> It was common during Saadi's time for people to use thickly padded felt as a kind of, obviously inferior, armor.

<sup>87</sup> Wickens points out that the man's clothing and the description of him as "clear-hearted" suggest he was not simply a poor man, but was most likely a holy, and even a mystical, pauper.

<sup>88</sup> Collyrium is a medicated eyewash; the word also denotes a dark eye shadow used by people in the east.

<sup>89</sup> Zaqqum refers both to several kinds of fruitless trees in the natural world and to a bitter tree found, according to the Quran, in Hell.

<sup>90</sup> These are the stages of the final judgment in Islam.

<sup>91</sup> The play in the previous lines on "face" and "water" is my attempt to render what Wickens points out in the original is a play on the expression I have translated as "the high regard you show me." Wickens gives the expression in Persian as "ab-ruy," which means literally "water of the face." The robe of patches is the garment worn by dervishes.

<sup>92</sup> In Islam, the angel Gabriel was the intermediary between Allah and the prophet.

## Notes to "Contentment"

<sup>93</sup> Sidra is the miraculous tree in the Seventh Heaven, which is the boundary beyond which angels can't ascend. The falcon is a metaphor for the soul.

<sup>94</sup> The Quran, 50:29. Here is are verses 28-29:

28. "Do not argue in my presence. I had announced  
the promise of doom in advance.

29. There is no changing of My word,

nor am I unjust to My creatures."  
We shall ask Hell that day: "Are you full?"  
It will answer: "Are there still more?"

<sup>95</sup> The qibla is the direction, facing Mecca, to which Muslims turn when they pray.

<sup>96</sup> In the Quran (12:51-53), after he is exonerated in front of the king of trying to seduce Potiphar's wife, Joseph says in verse 53, "But I do not wish to absolve myself, for the soul is prone to evil, unless my Lord have mercy. Indeed, my Lord is forgiving and kind." It is this tendency towards evil that Saadi refers to as the Soul Imperative.

<sup>97</sup> Basra was known for producing the finest dates.

## Notes to "Edification"

<sup>98</sup> According to Wickens, it was considered good manners to keep your feet covered at all times; he understands the lines here about mountains and feet to mean something like what we mean when we say "keep your nose clean."

<sup>99</sup> The hollowness of the mandolin is compared to the hollowness of the hothead's head. Wickens points out that the word *maghz* in Persian can mean both core and brain.

<sup>100</sup> A military slave, often a bodyguard.

<sup>101</sup> Bilqis is the Queen of Sheba; an afreet is a kind of genie.

<sup>102</sup> This is an allusion to a quote that appears two places in the Quran. First, 7:53:

Surely your Lord is God  
who created the heavens and the earth  
in six spans of time,  
then assumed all power.  
He covers up the day with night which comes  
chasing it fast;  
and the sun and moon and the stars

are subject to His command.  
It is His to create and enjoin.  
Blessed be God,  
the Lord of all the worlds.

And, second, 13:3:

It is He who stretched the earth  
and placed upon it  
stabilizers and rivers;  
and made two of a pair of every fruit;  
(and) He covers up the day with the night.  
In these are signs for those who reflect.

<sup>103</sup> Wickens: "Hajjaj b.Yusuf: a colourful [sic] and ferocious administrator under the Umayyad dynasty, died ca. A. D. 714.

## Notes to "Gratitude"

<sup>104</sup> Aleph, the first letter of the Persian alphabet, is a single, vertical line.

<sup>105</sup> Flower arrangers.

## Notes to "Repentance"

<sup>106</sup> Loqman is the name of a character who functions in Islamic literature like Aesop. Here are the verse in the Quran that refer to him (31:12-13):

12. We bestowed wisdom on Loqman  
that he may be grateful to God.  
Whoever is grateful is so for his own good,  
and whoever is ungrateful (should remember) that God  
is above all concern, worthy of praise.  
13. (Remember) when Loqman counseled his son:  
"O son, do not associate anyone with God.  
To associate others with God is a grievous wrong."

<sup>107</sup> If no water is available, Islam permits you to ritually cleanse your hands with dust or sand.

<sup>108</sup> Nakir is one of the two angels whose job it is to interrogate the dead. The other angel is named Munkar.

<sup>109</sup> The bird is a metaphor for the soul.

<sup>110</sup> Trying to balance walnuts on the dome of a mosque is a proverbial Persian expression for trying to do something that is a waste of time.

<sup>111</sup> The rebec is a stringed instrument.

<sup>112</sup> Cancer is a summer zodiacal sign. The expression is meant to suggest that perhaps the man had been out in the sun too long.

<sup>113</sup> Collyrium is a medicated eyewash; the word also denotes a dark eye shadow used by people in the east.

<sup>114</sup> The Persian word that I have rendered here as “spirit” can be used for both breath and soul; “spirit” is as close as come in English to a word that captures both those meanings.

<sup>115</sup> The expression signifies the true prophets in Muslim tradition: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Job, Moses, David and Jesus.

<sup>116</sup> Women are exempt from certain religious duties when they are menstruating and when they are pregnant.

<sup>117</sup> Unsori, who died some time around the year 1039, was the leading court poet for Mahmud of Ghazna.

<sup>118</sup> Quran, 7:17. Here are verses 11-19, which are part of the Quranic version of the story of the Garden of Eden:

11. Verily We created you and gave you form and shape,  
and ordered the angels to bow  
before Adam in homage;  
and they all bowed but Iblis  
who was not among those who bowed.  
12. “What prevented you” (said God)  
“from bowing (before Adam) at My bidding?”  
“I am better than him,” said he.

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“You created me from fire, and him from clay.”  
13. So God said: “Descend.  
You have no right to be insolent here.  
Go, and away; you are one of the damned.”  
14. “Grant me respite,” said he,  
“till the raising of the dead.”  
15. And God said: “You have the respite.”  
16. “Since You led me into error,” said Iblis,  
“I shall lie in wait for them along Your straight path.  
17. And I shall come upon them  
from the front and behind, right and left;  
and You will not find among them many  
who would give thanks.”  
18. “Begone,” said (God), “contemptible and rejected!  
As for those who follow you,  
I shall fill up Hell with all of you.  
19. And you, O Adam, and your spouse,  
live in the Garden and eat your fill  
wheresoever you like, but do not approach this tree  
or you will become iniquitous.”

<sup>119</sup> The reference here is to the paltry sum paid for Joseph, a plot point shared by both the Biblical and Quranic versions of his story.

<sup>120</sup> The reference is to a conduit through which water flows that might be closed, cutting off the supply of water you could use to wash yourself.

<sup>121</sup> This was a common gesture of supplication in Saadi’s time.

<sup>122</sup> This is another reference to the mystic’s ring.

<sup>123</sup> The name given in Muslim tradition to Potiphar’s wife.

<sup>124</sup> Wickens: “[D]akka..., strictly a high platform on which may be placed for safe-keeping both persons and things.”

## Notes to “Prayer”

<sup>125</sup> Wickens: “The Sacred Territory of Islam generally, specifically Mecca and the Ka’ba.”

<sup>126</sup> Yathrib is the old name of Medina. The prophet Mohammed is buried there.

<sup>127</sup> Saadi is asking for protection against the temptation to affirm more than one God.