



TALES OF AFGHANISTAN

*Duty, Conscience, The Nomad Girl,
The Prince of Bost, Three Lovers,
Rodabah and Zal, and The Wanderer*

Rahman Pazhwak



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Preface

The stories gathered in this volume—*Duty, Conscience, The Nomad Girl, The Prince of Bost, Three Lovers, Rodabah and Zal, and The Wanderer*—span a wide emotional and narrative range, encompassing folktale, legend, drama, moral story, and philosophical meditation. Yet they all emerge from a common cultural tradition. In Afghanistan, stories passed from elders to children—by firelight, in caravans, hujras, orchards, and winter rooms—were never merely a form of entertainment. They were instruction and warning, aspiration and consolation, memory and inheritance. They preserved not only the wisdom of earlier generations but also the moral imagination of a people.

With one exception, *Tales of Afghanistan* represents not simply a collection of old stories, but a literary window into the ethical and imaginative world from which they arose – Afghanistan and its culture. *The Wanderer* stands somewhat apart. It is not a folktale but a philosophical novella. It is a lyrical meditation on exile, memory, love, nature, and the meeting of civilizations. Written in the aftermath of the Second World War, it carries emotional and symbolic weight, a contemplation on civilization and the human spirit.

Placed at the conclusion of this collection, *The Wanderer* forms a graceful bridge between Afghanistan's collective memory, preserved in the preceding folktales, and the narrator's inward journey.

Throughout these stories, nature is never merely a backdrop to human events. It remembers. A willow grows over faithful lovers, mountains bear witness to sacrifice, rivers carry memory, and names endure long after kingdoms have vanished. In Pazhwak's world, the natural landscape itself becomes a guardian of history and human conscience.

The Afghanistan portrayed here is neither romanticized nor idealized. Fathers fail, rulers err, societies fracture, and innocence is often sacrificed. Yet beneath these trials lies an enduring conviction that meaning survives. A single act of loyalty can outlast tyranny; a moment of courage can redeem generations. Even tragedy, in this tradition, is never an expression of despair—it is a testimony to the resilience of the human spirit.

For readers encountering Afghan literature for the first time, these stories offer a window into a cultural heritage that reaches far beyond the political conflicts with which Afghanistan is so often associated. They reveal a civilization shaped by ethical reflection, poetic imagination, and philosophical restraint—a culture that speaks

through symbol rather than slogan, and values wisdom above spectacle.

Bringing this collection into English has been both a privilege and a demanding undertaking. My wife, Véronique Duchez-Pazhwak, played an indispensable role in recreating and editing the French edition of these stories and in preparing the first English draft. Her insight, patience, and unwavering encouragement have enriched every stage of this work. I am equally grateful to our family and friends for their thoughtful comments and generous support, especially my youngest son, Robert Torr Pazhwak.

As Véronique writes in her preface to the French edition:

Today, the generations descended from Ustad Pazhwak and from other Afghan scholars live largely in the diaspora, scattered across continents—my own sons among them. Many have intermarried and raised children within new customs and cultures. Though these younger generations may not read Pashto or Dari, they—and the wider world of curious minds—can nonetheless discover in these tales the spirit of Afghanistan's heritage. If they come to feel pride, courage, loyalty, or devotion, might it not be because such values continue to live through these stories?

For my part, I have spent many years immersed in my late grandfather's writings, poetry, and thought, an experience that ultimately inspired me to

establish the Pazhwak Foundation to preserve, study, and share his literary and intellectual legacy. In preparing this edition, I returned repeatedly to the original Dari text published in Kabul in the 1950s.

The brilliance of Pazhwak's prose—lyrical yet restrained, philosophical yet deeply humane, and enriched by subtle social and political reflection—posed unique challenges throughout the translation process. Our aim has been to remain faithful not only to the meaning of the original text but also to its contemplative rhythm, evocative imagery, and distinctive literary voice. At the same time, we have made careful editorial choices where necessary so that the English reads naturally for contemporary readers who may be unfamiliar with Afghan literary traditions, historical context, and cultural references. We hope these choices preserve the spirit, beauty, and integrity of the original while making these works accessible to a wider audience.

In a few instances, we have also made modest presentational adjustments to enhance readability. For example, *Duty* is presented in dramatic form to help readers follow the dialogue and unfolding action while remaining faithful to the structure and intent of the original work. It is also worth noting that *Duty* was written by the author in a play format, most likely the first narrative adapted for the stage in Afghanistan at the time. *The Wanderer*, the final work in this collection, differs from the preceding tales. As a lyrical meditation, it offers an intimate glimpse into Pazhwak's philosophical imagination

and his remarkable ability to fuse Afghan sensibility with universal human questions about memory, longing, beauty, identity, and belonging. Any shortcomings that remain are entirely our own, and we welcome readers' reflections with gratitude.

This volume is offered not as a relic of the past but as a living testament to Afghanistan's literary heritage. The questions these stories ask—about responsibility, love, justice, honor, sacrifice, and fate—belong to no single nation or century. They continue to resonate wherever human beings strive to remain faithful to one another and to themselves.

Though varied in setting and scale, the stories are united by a shared ethical vision: that true judgment resides not in worldly authority but in conscience; that love possesses the power to challenge injustice; and that memory—carried by people, by nature, and by story—outlives violence, exile, and loss. Pazhwak's prose achieves this with remarkable restraint, allowing symbol, character, and action to illuminate truths that transcend time and place.

Rendered here in English for a new generation of readers, this collection seeks to introduce one of Afghanistan's most distinguished literary voices to the wider world. It is offered as an invitation to discover a tradition in which folklore serves not merely to entertain, but to preserve a people's moral imagination and cultural memory.

May these stories be read as they were once told:
slowly, attentively, and with the understanding that
what ultimately survives us is not what we possess,
but what we honor.

Farhad Pazhwak

October 2026; Virginia, U.S.A

President, Pazhwak Foundation Inc.

www.pazhwakfoundation.com

Author's Note

(A. Rahman Pazhwak – 1957)

With the exception of *Āwāra* (“*The Wanderer*”), the pieces in this collection were written more than fifteen years ago, at a time when youth, ambition, and the untempered confidence of an early literary voice made such innocent boldness possible.

When the question of publication arose after so many years, I did not object. Any shortcomings these works may contain from a literary standpoint are my own alone. Readers will readily recognize them as belonging to the earliest period of my writing. Yet had they remained unpublished, a portion of our country's folklore would have stayed scattered and unrecorded.

Wazīfa (“*Duty*”) was written to preserve the memory of a genuine historical event known as “Aino.” I no longer recall my precise intention in shaping the narrative into its present form and divisions. That it was written in Bāghbānī¹, however, holds particular meaning for me. Like all people, I

¹ Baghbani is the author's ancestral village. This beautiful and fertile place is located in Surkhroad district of Nangahar province in eastern Afghanistan.

belong to the place of my upbringing—perhaps even more so when distance separates one from it.

Zamīr (“Conscience”) is a legend I heard firsthand and by which I was deeply moved; the narrator of this tale is still alive. Only in the section titled “The Necklace” have I taken limited creative liberties. The substance of the legend itself remains intact, and I am convinced that the narrator did not invent it. I wrote the story with his permission and dedicated it to his troubled conscience.

Āwāra (“*The Wanderer*”) which perhaps would have been better left outside this collection, records emotions shaped by long journeys far from the homeland. It was written to preserve personal memories. The only truth I can claim for it is the sincerity of those emotions.

The Nomad Girl (*Dokhtar-e Kūchī*) arises from an imaginative impulse. Should life grant me the opportunity to write again, I hope to continue this series, for I hold a particular fondness for stories that portray the lives of my people. If those with the means deem such efforts worthwhile, they will render a service to our literature by giving voice to lived experience.

It may be noted that this story, following the publication of its Arabic translation through the efforts of my friend Rashid Latifi in Cairo, has also appeared in English translations in England and India, as well as in French in France.

The Prince of Bost (*Shāhzāda-ye Bost*) is among our best-known national legends. Originally

composed in Pashto and known as the story of Fateh Khan, I have sought to preserve its simplicity in this retelling.

Three Lovers (She Ashq) is likewise a well-known national legend, known among the people as *Momin Khan*.

I have gathered several additional tales from the folklore and oral traditions of our people whose completion requires time. It is my hope that they may one day be published as a separate collection; the two stories included here are also intended to form part of that series.

Rudāba and Zāl is a local tale of our homeland which, should opportunity permit, will be republished as part of the *Stories of Ariana* series. This narrative is drawn from the *Shāhnāme* of the master poet Ferdowsi of Tus. In writing it, I have taken the spirit of that great master of the Dari language as my guide; his influence, I trust, remains evident.

The printed edition of this work unfortunately contains numerous errors. I wish, on the one hand, to express my gratitude to my friend Dr. Abdul Ghafoor Rawān Farhādi, who undertook the task of correction purely out of friendship; on the other hand, I fear that such acknowledgment may seem insufficient in light of the remaining flaws. My thanks extend as well to Mr. Habib Nawābi, editor-in-chief of *Radio Kabul* magazine. As both know me well, I trust they will receive this note as an apology to readers and accept my sincere gratitude. I ask readers with an interest in

these writings to overlook these errors and to accept my apologies in a spirit of generosity.

A. R. Pazhwak, Kabul — Aqrab 1336 (1957)

Duty

ACT I²

At night, in the tower of a fortified castle.

ZALMAI, alone.

Last night, at this very hour, I was certain
that new stars would ignite in the heavens,
and that another moon would rise, unknown to time.
But it was only a dream.

Tonight, as on all other nights,
silence and darkness have surrounded my longing.
And yet even now I wait to glimpse the colors of
dawn at the edge of this night.

I imagine the day advancing
upon a chariot with wheels of gold.
Whether it comes so or not,
I wish to welcome its arrival

² This actual story (written in a play format by the author) takes place in the setting of real historical events in Kandahar during the rise of the Durrani Empire (1747) led by Ahmad Shah Durrani. Among the Pashtuns the story is known as “Aino.” The Durrani Empire unified much of the territory of modern Afghanistan and parts of surrounding regions, establishing the foundation for the current state.

and reserve my dreams for another day —
for this unknown day may be preparing itself
to greet me with greater beauty, greater splendor.

Ah, if only the moon could glow with enchantment,
and the morning sun could shine more generously
upon the world—
upon me, upon my heart, upon my desires.

Did my longing breathe life into this vast universe?
If not, then why have the moon and stars dimmed
their fire?
Why does night wrap the cold body of the world
like a dark tomb?

Will tomorrow's sun rise without warmth for me?
My God! Why are my worries so fierce tonight?
Why do my feelings burn so deeply?
Are You testing me?

If this is Your will, I accept it.
My well-being rests in Your hands.
What You deny me does not disturb me;
I will answer with patience and contentment.
But why must I always endure separation
from the one I love?

Yes, I am a soldier.
I must soothe hardship and tragedy with endurance.
Yet I do not understand this restlessness that

consumes me.

My heart overflows; my voice trembles.

I do not know whether I can resist
the beauty and sorcery of the morning
that draws me toward a world of temptation;
a world of feelings I dare not trust.
And still, how difficult it is
to endure this turmoil and wait for another day.

Should I read this yearning as an omen?
Should love and tenderness be counted as enemies?
Must we deny ourselves the pure desires of youth
those simple longings that give birth
to love and friendship?

The moonlight fades.
Night yields to day.
Yet a fire kindles within me,
and my thoughts grow darker
as dawn approaches.

It was God's will not to hasten my burning desire,
but to make it wait,
to delay the arrival of love's palanquin,
borne by the patient-eyed camel,
its precious burden swaying
toward the door of my home.

Tomorrow, the sun will shine not on love's embrace
but on the silver harness of the horse
that carries me to the battlefield.

Ah, if only these torments could end,
and only my heart beating against yours would
remain,
O my betrothed.

Why could I not carry with me
the other half of my heart that I leave behind?
Would my courage not be doubled then?
Is victory not already in our blood?
Must triumph always demand our lives first?

Could the trumpets of war not be silenced for a few
days
to spare us eternal separation;
to spare our happiness from being trampled?

Why must young hands be stained with blood
before they are worthy of henna?
Must we raise banners of victory
before we are permitted the love of young girls?

Did our ancestors endure this with the coolness of
old age,
or was their joy forged
in the fiery blood of their youth—
a cruel inheritance passed down to us?

Away with these thoughts!
My God, forgive me;
forgive these irreverent questions.

Their hearts were purer than ours,
their thoughts clearer.
They were not prisoners of desire.
Their wedding gifts were banners of victory,
not silk and gold.

If my youthful sins were unforgivable,
would such fierce blood have been granted to me?

Calm yourself, O heart.
Stand with dignity.
Stand with glory.

Morning now claims the heavens.
The stars have vanished.
The moon has set.
Small things have yielded to greater ones.

You too, my heart:
let dark thoughts dissolve.
Let petty desires fade.
Let brighter stars rise within you,
a nobler moon, a stronger sun.

Let me take up arms.
When the trumpet sounds,
let the others form beside me.

I must be there
with them.

When hope is cut short,
one must abandon it
and devote oneself to another calling.
The heart does not always recognize
what will grant it the deepest joy.

For a moment, I imagine myself a man of glory—
eyes fixed upon me,
envied by all.

I lead the brave.

Praise and obedience surround me,
and the drums and trumpets
sing power into my blood.

My horse's neigh rises above the defeated,
loud enough for all to hear.

And then, in another moment,
I am only a young man
whose heart overflows with love.

The universe expands within my gaze.
Mountains and valleys fill my spirit.
Even captive, even vanquished,
I feel richer than in triumph.

Before, my strength conquered bodies;
now my pleading soul conquers a heart.
Which victory brings me greater joy:

the glory of arms,
or the surrender of love?

O man—how torn you are.

The heart offers me its cup,
begging to be filled with love and intoxication,
to be drunk in a peaceful valley
where flutes whisper,
where Venus and the moon watch silently,
and nothing exists beyond desire.

Yet I dismiss these visions—
waters and grasses, valleys and deserts,
tombs and monuments
that remind me of ancestors who watch
my glory and my fall.

The divine voice speaks within me:

*Offer me your soul,
that I may fill it with tears for the sake of others.
Walk the road to happiness,
though it be strewn with mortal peril.
Forget your life and your blood.
Restore joy to the hearts that rest in this land.*

My God, guide me.
Is not the greatest human weakness
the inability to distinguish eternal truth
from fleeting pleasure?

Why did You make them so alike?
Why do we stray so easily?

If we truly knew,
if we were not blind,
would we sacrifice truth so foolishly?

A man's regret
is the strongest witness he can offer You.

Here I stand under arms.

My God, help me.

My camel, adorned for joy—
go, rest beneath the tree watered by my tears.
Do not tempt my weakened heart.
One day, the bell at your neck
will make my spirit dance.

O my strongest horse
carry me toward glory.

Grant me success in battle,
that I may one day celebrate love
with a hopeful heart.

I still have one hour.

I must visit the old man
who loves me as a son.
His heart lives only for his daughter,
my betrothed.

If he has not denied her to me,
his prayer will surely be heard.

I must say farewell.

In the last war, his young son kissed his hand
and died like a man.

Today, he has no one left
to offer that final honor.

Is this not my duty?

(He exits.)

Curtain falls.

ACT II

*At the gate of one of the most ancient and majestic
Afghan castles. Dawn approaches.*

THE OLD MAN

Have you not yet departed?

(He stands at the threshold.)

I did not expect to see you again.

I was told the men would leave by night.

I wished to embrace you once more.

ZALMAI

Not yet, though the hour is near.

How could I leave without seeing you?
I have come to kiss your hands in farewell.

THE OLD MAN (*with a faint, knowing smile*)
Yes... a farewell kiss.

ZALMAI (*bowing his head*)
I could not go without your blessing.

THE OLD MAN
My blessing?
I pray God grants you victory,
yet there is another prayer
that always finds its way to my lips.

At this very gate, in former wars,
I prayed for our young men,
and victory came.
But I do not know whether I forgot
the name of my own son
or whether God did not will his return.

He knows I bear no resentment.
I rejoiced in victory,
even as the last fruit of my life
was torn away by the violent wind of war.

His death extinguished in me
the desire for another child,
yet the thirst for victory remains unbroken.

Still, I am grateful.
I see his face living on
in the eyes of our women.

Just moments ago,
two or three young men passed through this gate.
I thought my son walked among them,
and now, seeing you,
I see him again at your side.

Do not think this the fantasy of an old man.
Those who sacrifice themselves do not die.
Their spirits walk beside those
who set foot upon the path of war.

As I left the house,
I saw Aino finishing her prayer.
She smiled—a smile heavy with sorrow.
I asked her why.

She said:
“I saw my brother pass over the castle,
his wings bright as the sun.
He spoke to me.
He promised to carry my wishes
to where my longing rests.
He said he would walk beside Zalmi in battle,
cool his brow with the morning breeze,
and hurl burning fire upon his enemies.”

She asked me:
“O my father—
has he not shown himself to you as well?”

ZALMAI

You have truly seen him?

THE OLD MAN

He is never far from my sight.
But he no longer speaks to me.
He knows his father's old body
no longer needs consolation.

I know this:
he rests more peacefully
in the mercy of God
than he ever could
in the arms of his father.

ZALMAI

Did Aino speak of me?
Did she pray for me?

THE OLD MAN

Yes.
Last night she remained awake.
She tried to hide her worry,
but I am her father.
She grew beside me.
I know her heart.

She never forgets you in her prayers.

ZALMAI

This strengthens me.
I am glad I came.
Your prayer—and hers—
will bring me victory and honor.

THE OLD MAN

God accepts only sincere prayers.
I longed to kiss your forehead
upon which I already see victory inscribed.

Every young man may triumph
so long as the shining lines of purity
remain upon his brow.

I wish you strength and radiance.
As long as your heart honors
faith and dignity,
your hand will be free
to lay down your sword
and wipe the sweat of glory from your face.

(He laughs softly.)

Words of farewell belong to the young.
Wisdom does not repeat them.

ZALMAI ()

How can we not speak such pure words?

THE OLD MAN

Farewell burdens the journey.
Those who have traveled much

know this well;
especially the young man
who has no old soul
waiting at the gate of love.

Farewell is a sorrow
that hides in the most tender corner of the heart.

ZALMAI

But—

THE OLD MAN

Enough.
You will meet again in joy,
not part in tears.

ZALMAI

I wish only to see her again.
How can one go to war
certain of returning alive?

THE OLD MAN

Are you not certain of victory?

ZALMAI

I am certain the army will prevail—
but if all of us return unharmed,
what meaning has victory?

THE OLD MAN

Who knows in advance who will die?
My prayer is for your return in triumph.

Youth dies only of despair.
Youth lives by hope.

ZALMAI

I will not despair.
Yet my longing will not die with me.
Did not your son,
with his shining wings,
pass over the castle this very morning
to strengthen Aino?

Still, I feel I may not return alive.

THE OLD MAN

Then say this instead:
you will not return defeated.
Victory is life.
Defeat is death.

ZALMAI (*lifting his gaze to the sky*)

Yes—I return victorious.

THE OLD MAN

If victorious, then you will see her—
your triumph reflected
on her smiling lips.

But now—
it is not right for you to see her.

ZALMAI

I obey, my father.

Our people's sons
obey their elders.

(The Old Man kisses Zalmai.)

THE OLD MAN

Go.

I pray for all
and that if you kneel upon my grave one day,
it will not be as a defeated man.

God does not welcome complaints.
He welcomes gratitude,
and gratitude belongs to victors.

ZALMAI

When I kiss your hands,
may my lips carry
the smile of glory.

THE OLD MAN

The hour has come.

(Drums and trumpets sound in the distance.)

ZALMAI

The drums call us.
We must leave.

THE OLD MAN

Go, my son.
May God walk with you.

I entrust my daughter to your honor,
whether I live or not.

If you return victorious,
this gate will open before you.

I will not be here then,
but my camel will carry
the palanquin of your happiness.

Go—

I leave you in God's care.

(Zalmai kisses his hands and exits.)

The same gate. Later.

OLD MAN, alone

O my child,
never again will you go to war,
never again bring honor
to your unfortunate father.

The earth has claimed
your youth and strength forever.

Yet death cannot steal your face.
I call to you;
you answer only with silence.

From where I stand,
my gaze reaches into your grave.

Your bewildered eyes look back at me,
your smile telling me
that death has taken your desires
and left you without hope.

They say an arrow pierced your heart.
I feel it here,
in mine.

My God, why have You impoverished me?

The men have gone.
The drums have not changed.
It is as if I have not moved
since the day I last kissed you.

How long is this road of life,
especially for an old man
whose cane has broken,
whose legs are feeble,
whose heart is sad,
whose companion is gone?
Life feels dull, only a short walk remains,
to the hill where my ancestors rest.
Why am I not there already?
Only those untouched by sorrow say, life is short
and swift.

Forgive me, Lord.
You planted paternal love in us.

Grief breeds complaint,
and complaint erodes gratitude.

Is Zalmai not another son You gave me?
Yes, another pillar of my old age.

Take him into Your keeping.
Teach me thankfulness.

I must go to my daughter.
I see love and fear in her eyes.

Why did I not let them say farewell?
If he never returns,
Two pure hearts die apart,
how will I bear the misfortune?

He has gone.
In his last gaze, I felt such force
that he might have brought down these walls,
yet my cold heart failed to feel it.

How alike men are.
And how different.

Did Aino's mother share our story with her?
She might forgive me if she did,
I remember my own farewell kiss,
the strength it gave me in battle.
Why did I deny him that gift?

I still remember the sweetness of that kiss,

With my own exuberant past,
Why did I deny Zalmai that sweet moment?

Only memories of youth
soften the despair of old age.

My hair is white
but the colors of that memory
have not faded.

I am like a mountain:
snow upon its crown,
flowers at its feet.

Now all is silent.

O Zalmai...
God...

(The gate opens. AINO enters.)

AINO

Father!
Did he not wish to see us?
From the tower I saw the men depart.
All have gone.

THE OLD MAN

He came, my child.
We said farewell.

AINO

Has he come?
Will he return?

THE OLD MAN

He will return
when the war ends.

AINO

Forgive me, father.
I hoped to see him once more.

THE OLD MAN

Forgive me.
He longed to see you
but I did not allow it.

(He withdraws into the castle.)

AINO *(softly, to herself)*

Yes... I know.
It was not your will—
it was God's.

My God—
will You ever will it?

THE OLD MAN *(offstage)*

Come, my child.
Let us pray.

AINO

I am coming, father.

(She closes the gate.)

Curtain fall.

ACT III

*Nine months later. The Old Man's chamber within
the castle.*

*Late afternoon. Light filters softly through a narrow
window.*

OLD MAN *(weakly, to Aino standing beside him)*

My child...

pour a little water into my mouth.

(Aino gives him water.)

AINO

Father—how thirsty you are today.

THE OLD MAN

Come closer. Sit by me.

Yes... I am thirsty. Very thirsty.

While they live, men believe thirst is a sign of life.

Now I know that thirst also announces death.

Only God knows where this longing leads,

and by what river our throats will finally be refreshed.

AINO

Father, why do you speak of death?
Such words sound like abandonment to me.

THE OLD MAN

Why should I deceive you, my child?
A path opens before my eyes.
I must follow it—and leave you behind.
I am dying.

Pour me a little water.

AINO

My God, have mercy on him—and on me.
Are you leaving me alone
in this vast and merciless world?
I cannot remain alone in this castle,
not even in my own room.

THE OLD MAN

My child... the water.

(She gives him water.)

AINO

Who will protect me from loneliness now?
How can you tell me you are leaving?

THE OLD MAN

There is no one to whom I may entrust you
except God.

He is the One who takes me from you,
and He is the One who will remain with you.
Where is He not?

Is He not more merciful to His servants
than a father to his child?

Do not weep, my daughter.

AINO

God is great and merciful.
He will restore you to health.
He knows my happiness rests in your life.
He will not deny me His mercy.

THE OLD MAN

Aino... God is always merciful.
Sometimes His mercy comes to us
cloaked in trial and bitterness.

We mistake suffering for cruelty,
and ease for happiness.
Yet mankind does not know
what happiness truly is.

All our lives we pursue it,
though it lies within our reach—
and still we fail to recognize it.

We are weak.

We are ignorant.

If only we could accept what is given to us.

There is no answer but faith.

What God ordains is for our good.

Our happiness lies in assent.

AINO

How can I bear my sorrow alone, father?

THE OLD MAN

Do not complain, my child.

Restrain your tears.

Listen to me.

Nine months have passed.

Our men have not returned.

Ah! If only I could see Zalmai again.

When I bade him farewell,

I told him that you belonged to him.

That if he returned victorious,
this gate would open before him,
and my camel would bear
the palanquin of your happiness.

You must remember this.

Hear my final wish:

throughout your life,
give him love and obedience.

You are alone in this world;
you have no one but him
to whom you may give your heart.

Devote your soul to his love.
Know this:
for a woman,
there is no greater happiness
than a heart overflowing
with loyalty and tenderness for her husband.

You are the only bond,
the only treasure I leave behind.
To God I entrust you
and through you, everything else.

Believe this:
happiness rests in your own hands.

God looks upon His creation with mercy.
He loves those who pray to Him sincerely.
Misfortune visits those whose actions are corrupt.
God chastises them through their own weakness.

He pours His blessings upon those
who make themselves worthy of joy.
No sinful act diminishes His greatness;
no virtuous deed benefits anyone but the doer.

With my heart and soul,
I testify to God's unity,
His forgiveness, His mercy.

Pray that He forgive my sins.

My child... farewell.

My God...

grant me absolution.

Guide me.

(He dies.)

***AINO** (crying out)*

Father? What is happening to you?

Why do you end your words of wisdom?

Why have you fallen silent?

Speak to me!

Teach me again what goodness is,
what the right path should be.

Ah! What has happened to you?

My God, forgive him.

This heart,

for sixty years beating with love and generosity,
burning with remorse at the smallest fault,
sustained only by pure and ardent hopes,
has grown cold.

His eyes, once flooded with tears in prayer,
are closed to the world.

His body, alive for sixty years,
has become still in a single breath.

He will no longer console me.
He no longer sees my loneliness.
He can no longer pray for my happiness.

With his final gaze,
he has sealed an entire lifetime.

O God!
How a single look at the moment of death
can replace all the years of living!

(She weeps.)

Father,
why have you abandoned me?

(She collapses.)

Curtain falls.

ACT IV

*Three months later. A military encampment at dusk.
The city lies less than a league away.*

SCENE

ZALMAI, inside his tent.
YAWAR, his companion, enters.

ZALMAI

I do not understand why the Great Elder
ordered the army to halt here.
We are scarcely a league from the city.

YAWAR

Ahmad Shah the Great sees farther than we do.
The sun has already set.
The men could have reached the city by nightfall.

ZALMAI

Perhaps he did not wish
to carry his victory into the city
under cover of darkness.

YAWAR

Yes, perhaps that is so.

ZALMAI

Yet how many hearts wait tonight
for those who have fulfilled their duty
to return crowned with glory.

This camp trembles with anticipation.
Desire stirs in every tent.

YAWAR

And does not delay only sharpen
the longing of those who wait?

ZALMAI

The city knows we have returned
but we know nothing of what unfolds within its
walls.

YAWAR

All are rejoicing.

ZALMAI

Not all.

There are hearts weighed down with sorrow,
those who no longer dare hope
for the return of brothers, sons, husbands.

YAWAR

No one yet knows the names of the fallen.

ZALMAI

That is why this night is so cruel.
Every father, every mother
expects sacrifice
and thus believes their child already dead.

YAWAR

Yes.

ZALMAI

Tonight, fear and hope wrestle
within every heart.

You may go now.
Make the rounds of the camp.
Relay the Elder's command:
no one is to enter the city
before the entire army moves as one.

YAWAR

At your command.

(He exits.)

ZALMAI, alone

A whole year.
A whole year of waiting for death,
of marching without farewell.

Ah... how bitter that was.

I thought I was condemned
never to see her again.

But it is over.
All that lies behind me now.

Only a single league separates us.

Two months ago,
mountains and distances
stood between us.
Today, from a hilltop,
I saw the castle,
the house of my happiness.

No one stood at its gate.
Was I too far to see?
Or was no one truly there?

I could go now.
I could be there before dawn.

Why did we halt?
Would the army's glory be diminished
if we entered the city tonight?

Did not every man wish for this?

One order from the king
has bound thousands of desires.

Would he himself not prefer
to sleep beneath his own roof
rather than in a soldier's tent?

Law.
Order.
Obedience.
Duty.

Yes, these are sacred.

But have I not fulfilled mine?

My duty was war.

Victory.

Submission to fate.

Acceptance of death.

Have I not done this?

Was I not the first
to lead my horse into the river?

Did I not break open
the gates of three fortresses?

Did I not strike the enemy
at the heart of its power twice?

Did not the Great Elder
kiss my forehead three times
before the army?

And yet here I remain,
maintaining order
where no danger remains.

My final duty is done.

If I leave before the others,
what will change?

I will return before dawn.
No one will know.

Ah! My father.
If he still lives,
how his heart will rejoice.

I return victorious and alive.
Aino will open the castle gate for me.
I will kiss his hands.

What is this voice
that whispers within me:

Respect the law.
Do not go.
You are forbidden.

The voice of law?

No,
it is only fear,
only imagination.

Nothing binds me now
but this dreadful waiting.

Instead of resting,
my heart gallops toward her,
the one I left
without a farewell.

I must go.

Yes,
I must not waste another moment.

Your smiling face draws me forward.
Your open arms await me.

Is your hand already upon the lock?
Will you open the gate?

Aino,
open the door.
I am here.

Alive.
Victorious.

Let me kiss you first.
Then we shall wake the old man,
my father.

Ah, was it you
who once forbade our farewell?

Will your trembling hands
still have the strength
to lift the chain?

Let me kiss your hands.
Later, I will tell you
of rivers crossed,
of walls shattered,
of nights survived.

Let me kiss Aino.

You were right when you said:
“One day, you will meet again
in joy and laughter,
not in tears.”

That day has come.

I am coming.

(He exits the tent.)

Curtain falls.

ACT V

*At the gate of the castle.
Deep night. The first breath of dawn trembles at the
horizon.*

ZALMAI *(knocking)*

Why does no one open the door for me?
Is there no one within this castle?

(He knocks again, harder.)

Is the old man's sleep so heavy?

(Silence.)

Let me give them a moment.

Did he not promise me
that this gate would open
if I returned alive and victorious?
Have I not returned victorious and alive?
Is this not the home of my happiness?

Why does it remain closed?

(He throws a few pebbles against the door.)

Still no footsteps.

Have they gone?

(He throws pebbles again.)

—No.

I hear footsteps now.
They are approaching.

These are young steps.
The old man could not walk so swiftly.

Ah—why can I not know who comes?

They are awake now.

Is she not waiting for me at this hour?

If it is you, Aino
how blessed this night will be.

You too will welcome me with joy.
Tomorrow you will smile
as I tell you of courage and battle,
of how I broke through three fortress gates
with youth and fire in my blood.

Open this door before my hopeful soul.
Here stand the arms of happiness:
the arms of the elder who loved me as his son,
the arms of the woman
I love with my life.

Dawn already peers into the night.
Will I return to camp
before the sun rises?

(From behind the gate, a woman's voice.)

AINO (offstage)

Who is there?

Whom do you seek?

ZALMAI

It is I.

I know your voice.

AINO

I do not know who you are,
nor whom you seek.

ZALMAI

Open the door.

It is I. Do you not recognize my voice?

Where is my uncle?

AINO

My father died three months ago.
If you did not know this,
how can you claim to know me?

ZALMAI

He is dead...
Oh! Open the door,
that we may weep together.

It is I—Zalmai!

AINO

Zalmai will return
with the victorious army.
He will arrive
to the sound of drums and trumpets.

Go away.
I do not know you.

ZALMAI

I am no other than Zalmai, Aino.
Have I been forgotten so quickly?

AINO

Has the army's triumph
risen silently into the heavens?
Does victory return without its music?
Is Zalmai not among the triumphant?

ZALMAI

I am Zalmal!

Alive—and victorious!

Why do you not open the gate for me?

Why do you not recognize me?

Time presses.

Listen to me—quickly.

AINO

Why are you alone?

ZALMAI

Open the door!

Yes, I am alone.

AINO

Why did you return alone?

ZALMAI

Because I could no longer endure
the weight of not seeing you.

I came ahead of the others
so you might see me first
as I am now.

I must return soon.

AINO

Why must you leave again so quickly?

ZALMAI

To enter the city
with the rest of the army.

I must be back at camp before dawn.
A league still lies between me and duty.

AINO

The gate of this castle
does not open
to one who breaks the law for love
and forgets his duty.

ZALMAI

Aino...
your words pierce my heart.

AINO

Go away.
I cannot look upon you.

ZALMAI

Forgive me!
If your father still lived,
he would not treat me so.

AINO

Do not speak ill of the dead.

Leave.

Go!

May the law forgive you.

(Her voice breaks; her tears drown the words.)

ZALMAI *(slowly turning away)*

Returns to face the law...

(He exits.)

The final curtain falls.

Conscience

I wish I would vanish into the terrifying jaws of that python from a childhood tale, one my innocent mind once dreaded, rather than be tormented by my conscience, like a recurring nightmare without end.

On the nights of *Eid* and *Barat*³, he would come to visit me, and I would wait for him. The people of the town were celebrating joyfully with their families; none of them would have given up the happiness of those nights for the sake of a lonely stranger confined to his room, tormented by dark thoughts. No visitor could have found joy in my house.

Yet a city cannot exist without at least one suffering heart; otherwise, it would grow only sterile roots. And so, on festive nights, my friend left everything behind to come and share my solitude. We spoke together until dawn. I believe he loved me for my sorrows. He would tell me that my words filled him with melancholy; that when I spoke of my sadness, he felt as though he were reading a page

³ Barat is a religious festival that takes place mainly at night and is the commemoration of the dead in each family. That night, as many lights are turned on as there are members in the family. The candles are placed on a large tray with raisins and almond candies that look like pralines. (Translator's note.)

from his own past life. Even when I insisted, he would not leave me to rest.

It is the night of *Barat*. Darkness has settled. My heart holds nothing but memories of the past and the expectation of my friend's arrival. I prepare the candles, though I have not yet lit them. I do not know whether their light will bring me joy or sorrow.

Time passes. My friend is slow to arrive. Will I be alone tonight? Why has he not come?

For a moment, I felt as though the night had already passed, the candles had burned, my illusions had faded, my tears had flowed and dried again, and I was waiting for the morning star. And overtaken by memories, then suddenly, I realized that I had not even lit the candles.

I heard a voice say: Let me light them for you.

I looked up in astonishment and saw that my friend had arrived and that he was not alone. Someone unexpected accompanied him. Yet the presence of this unfamiliar guest did not distract me from my thoughts. The candles were now lit. I always light seven candles on the night of *Barat*. Why this number never increases or decreases, I do not know.

We sat down, and my friend said:

— You have a distinguished guest this evening.

I replied:

— Let me ask him about himself.

My unidentified guest, with an exceedingly sad smile, spoke softly:

— Allow me to answer all the questions you may have tomorrow morning.

You will understand that no answer could have felt more complete to me. Though my heart was already open, that simple sentence drew him even closer. He was not old, yet he looked like an old man. It was clear that he had once been handsome. In his sorrowful eyes and penetrating gaze there flickered regret and remorse; his hair had turned white before its time.

He was pensive, withdrawn. One sensed that he wished to speak yet could not. His silence weighed so heavily that my friend and I soon found ourselves with nothing left to say.

At last, I asked:

— What are you thinking about?

He replied:

— Before I can answer, give me some time to gather my thoughts.

We each withdrew into ourselves, forgetting one another's presence, until his voice suddenly broke the silence:

— Can you imagine what I am thinking about? I know you want me to speak, yet I do not know why I cannot. For so long I have been absorbed in my own thoughts. What could I possibly say to you? I cannot

leave my universe. My universe is a separate world inhabited by a solitary being who longs for death — me.

The air in there is unbreathable to others. Its fire would consume them. Its water quenches no thirst, not even my own. Its sun gives no light; its trees are dead and offer no shade. The beautiful castle of my life lies in ruins. Only a fragment of wall remains, and in its shadow I hide so that by day the sun's light, and by night the moon and stars, cannot reach me.

But if you still wish me to speak, I will share with you my story and the universe engulfing my existence.

His gaze grew darker, his voice began to tremble, and color rose in his pale face. I had the impression that a fire had been kindled in his heart burning him from within and I almost felt its heat. He fixed his eyes on me and said:

— I do not know why I could not once again show you the joyful face I once had. My youth and its pleasures were stolen from me by years of pain and torment. Only I know who I am, and this is my only consolation that those who were once closest to me now pass by without realizing that I am the same young man who once embodied joy and indulgence? Then, they envied me and spent their happiest moments in my company. They were partakers in my wealth, decadence and pleasure. Nowadays, when I pass them, I notice the smallest changes in their lives, faces, and bearing, yet they look at me as if they have never seen me before.

When encountering these familiar faces, I feel as though I have already left this world and been buried beneath the earth. It is not death that kills us, it is oblivion. I am not dead, but they have forgotten.

I cannot regard those that have actually died and whose faces are covered under the soil, as strangers, nor can I forget my past. At such moments, my gaze is drawn to a woman's teary eyes that pierce my heart. I see a crowd gathering near her as she begs them to look at my face so that they may recognize me. I try to hide my face, but her hands are stronger than mine. They tear away every mask, even the thickest, and do not allow me to conceal the disgraced face I now bear.

Among this crowd, I also see other piercing eyes that stare at me with hatred and cruelty, penetrating my soul and tearing up the walls of my hideout. Until now I do not know whether these visions rise from a grave or from my own heart and conscience? I am almost convinced that the grave of the oppressed lies within the conscience of the oppressor if he/she possesses one.

Cries of anguish, death, oppression, justice, cursing, ridicule, and agony strike me, though I cannot tell from where the blows come. At times it seems to me that I am destroying myself. Something within me mocks me, screams at me, curses me, and tears me apart. Yet there is no living judge who can settle on such self-inflicted vengeance, no verdict that might bring me peace.

A candle had gone out on the shelf.

— Why do you not light it again? My guest asked.

Years ago, he continued, I was a carefree and cheerful young man, a young tree among fragrant blossoms, with a prosperous future before me. Beauty surrounded me on all sides. A gentle breeze seemed to blow only for me. My sky was always clear; my waters were pure; my fruit was sweet; my shade was light.

Nightingales perched on my branches heavy with fruit. The rustling of my leaves was more pleasing than their nocturnal song. By day I bathed in sunlight; by night, in the glow of the moon and the stars.

I do not know why the sea in which I am now engulfed does not finally drown me or cast me back upon the shore. The waves, great and small, have worn me down. Would it please God that they might suffocate and absorb me, so that I would no longer have to bear this unbearable burden?

My heart seeks her and recalls the memory of her pale face, her labored breath, her disheveled hair, her eyes drowned in tears, her darkened gaze, her lashes like daggers, her parched lips, her torn bodice, her resentment, her restrained fury, her heart filled with cries.

All her features condemn me as she enters my mind. And she recoils:

— I want nothing to do with others. I will take revenge on you. Soon I will find you near me, and plunge my bloodied fingers into your throat.

I wish I had predicted this nightmare when I fell in love with her; when I counted every moment that separated me from her? I wonder how she gained this power over me and why I feel utterly helpless? I am trembling. I have been trembling for years.

Do you think I face an invincible enemy, my guest asked? Truly, I had oppressed her. I wronged her... And that injustice is what weakens me now. I am my own oppressor! The enormous remorse and guilt threaten me and prevent me from telling you the rest of my story. This powerful revolt that I feel stems from betraying pure love and trust. Now, her spirit constantly terrifies me. She warns me not to mention her name, but her threat is in vain; it cannot prevent me from recounting the trauma.

I loved her. She was the only woman who conquered both my heart and my soul. Her image shone endlessly in the heavens of my mind. In the worlds of my awareness, her beautiful face and innocent eyes were always omnipresent. She alone could transform the darkness of my sorrowful heart into light and joy.

I searched for her everywhere, as a bird seeks the nest of happiness. Almost without knowing it, my steps always carried me toward her.

Like a hungry falcon flying through a storm-filled night, I sent my spirit, clouded with sorrow, toward her.

She lived alone. She did not wish her poverty to be seen. She left her house only to draw water from the spring and return with her jar filled.

Her clothes were too worn to conceal the beauty of her body. The walls of her hut were like a garment wrapped around her, and its roof was a shawl drawn over her head.

No one knew where she came from. For two years she lived near our castle. At times she worked as a servant in my father's household, though I had never encountered her. When the women asked about her origins, she would say only that her husband had abandoned her years before and that she had lived alone ever since to guard her dignity.

One day by chance, as I then believed, I saw her standing at the gate of the castle. For an instant I thought I was gazing upon the guardian angel of my family's joy and prosperity. A poor servant, glimpsed from afar and known to me only by name, could not possibly have been so beautiful. She hastily covered her face, yet by a single glance she understood that she had captured my heart.

She was more perceptive than I. I never sensed that her soul had been quietly following mine, that she had loved me in silence for many months. I lost my peace and patience. I wanted to go to her at her home to speak with her. When I finally did, she believed that I loved her. I promised to marry her and gave her a necklace as a pledge of our engagement. Yet even then she doubted, unable to believe in the

fulfillment of her happiness, I was ready to marry her.

Love is a sacred fire, but desire is troubled water. And impure water extinguishes even heavenly flame. After only a few days with her, the sparks of fidelity and commitment faded from my heart. I thought only of leaving this poor, ragged girl behind.

One day she held me back and asked, “Do you remember our wedding?”

I answered, “The necklace should be enough for you.”

Her hand fell. Her face grew pale. And I left.

The next day I was told that she had departed the village during the night, bound for a destination no one knew. I felt nothing when I heard the news.

Months and years passed. The sun and the moon followed one another. I nearly forgot her. At times, however, her face would reappear in my dreams at night or in my thoughts at dawn. Did her image trouble me? No. I was young, and no thought was strong enough to cast a shadow over me. I wanted only to see her again and revive the desires of the past.

She vanished. And as of tonight, twenty-two years passed.

Three years ago she returned—but how? I did not recognize her. Like a man awakening from an unconscious state and failing to recognize his own companions, I stared at her without knowing who she

was. Her tears fell upon me like drops of molten gold, striking my face and rousing me. Death had lent its strength to her narrow hands, and the blow they dealt tore me from my stupor.

From that evening on, she has never left me. Whenever I try to immerse myself in my affairs, whenever I turn away to escape her radiant eyes that pierce straight through me, she clutches my clothes, forces my eyes open, and says:

— “Die soon. Come soon. The rays of justice will illuminate the Supreme Judge in anticipation of your arrival.”

I can no longer endure this torment. The only person who might have forgiven me now curses me.

Yes, three years ago I resolved to travel. Sometimes a man learns more about life, the world, and even himself among strangers. I knew that the pleasures of the past would never return. I had lost my fortune; each year the walls of my castle crumbled a little more. There are rains that fall from the sky intent on destroying certain castles.

Every moment of my past weighs upon my present as though it lasted several years, weakening me further each day. The carriage that once carried me toward happiness had long since abandoned the road to my home. Torrents of desire had flooded and destroyed every path leading back to it. How could I live in poverty when I had known nothing but abundance?

You may wonder: did my travels save me? As I traveled I left my homeland and my former sins. I left everything behind. Everything, except the burden of remorse that I carried in my heart and soul.

There are things a human being can never abandon.

For days and nights I walked. At times, when I was alone, I imagined myself still proud and wealthy, and fatigue left me. But soon reality returned: I was a poor man, far removed from the days of youth and from the homeland. Every step seemed more distant and heavier behind me. I was exhausted, and no shade came to shelter me.

When I passed a rich man, I imagined that he had stolen my horse, stripped me of my joy, my pride—even my youth—and I longed to reclaim my rights from him. When a poor man passed me, I trembled, believing that I had donned his clothes and stolen his misery and want. At last, I grew so weak that anyone could have robbed me without resistance.

One day I found a horseshoe along the road and picked it up. The sun had heated it, and I thought it belonged to the horse I once rode. I threw it away with regret.

One night, burning with fever, I arrived at the mosque of a small village. A man crushed by travel and misery has no refuge but the house of God. A kind villager took my hand, looked into my eyes, and told me he would send for food and medicine.

I was forty years old then, yet for the first time in my life I felt shame before compassion. In youth and wealth, I had known only sin; in poverty, only sorrow.

It was the month of Ramadan. I was hungry. I heard a woman's voice asking me to follow her, and it seemed to me like music heard in a dream. She led me into a dark room and left. After a short while she returned, holding a candle. She told me she was a servant of the generous man, and that no one was with her.

I sensed fear in her and questioned her. She replied that a young man, the son of the castle's owner, was pursuing her. I advised her to flee.

— "Where, and with whom?" she asked.

— "You can trust me," I said. "Will you accept my help?"

I believed my youth was returning. My horse was waiting for me near the castle gate. I was once again on the verge of committing another sin. I drifted into this illusion when her voice rose:

— "I will come with you. Yes, I will spend my entire life with you."

Fear and hope were mingled upon her face.

— "I have no other choice than to leave with a poor man," she continued. "But before we go, I must tell you something. Before my mother died, she gave me this necklace and told me to show it to the man who wished to marry me and to tell him her story."

I could not bring myself to look at the gleam of that necklace in the darkness.

My cry startled the young girl.

She seized the trembling hand of her unknown father, and together they fled into the night.

Her mother followed them.

Author Note: Written in Kabul, 1320 (1941)

The Nomad Girl

The desert, carpeted with wild flowers, fills the air with purity; it seems as though the presence of the *Friend*⁴ is distilled in its fragrance.

By day and by night, the sun and the moon shine upon tents half hidden among grasses and blossoms.

At dawn, as the nomads disperse in perfect freedom, their joyful songs stretch toward the horizon, spilling outward as though they wished to cross it. At night, when girls and boys return to their tents and gather around the campfire, their songs rise toward the stars.

They are the true children of nature. Unlike us, who have left our mother, they remain close to her. They gaze upon nature as a child looks at their mother's breast: with innocence and trust. When restless, they are like a child cradled in a mother's arms; when calm, their sleep is as peaceful as an infant resting on her lap. Their tears resemble those of a hungry baby seeking nourishment; their smiles recall the laughter of flowers stirred gently by a breeze that has crossed seas, valleys, and mountains.

⁴ The Friend, whose name begins with a capital letter in the ancient literature of Afghanistan, generally designates God. Here, the portrait of God seems to have been drawn through the perfume of the desert gazelles. (Translator's note)

They wish for the world to remain wholesome. Their hope is for the deserts to stay green, spring clouds to remain heavy with rain, winter skies to stretch blue, springs to overflow, flowers to bloom in every color, milk to flow abundantly from cows' udders, and sheep to grow fat and strong. They wish for things to remain as they are.

Desert gazelles are their companions, and they believe these creatures should not be disturbed. They do not throw stones at wild pigeons, and they consider the hunting of harmless animals a source of misfortune. If they kill wolves, it is only because innocent lambs have been devoured. They treat their dogs with affection, knowing that these animals are guardians of the weak, and that every kindness shown to them shines back through their loyal eyes. Sick camels sadden them. Even the croaking of crows⁵ brings them no fear, for they are not superstitious and do not believe in sinister omens. Loyalty dwells in their hearts, and their chests shelter nothing but purity.

Their way of life, which we call simple, is legendary. Anyone who knows their world as I do would never part with such knowledge at any cost. Like their caravan on the move, the lights of the stars dim a little more with each passing night. At the end of each day, when the sun withdraws into the dark tent of night, my memories awaken, and I think of the long-vanished caravans that left behind only the

⁵ It is apparently only among the Pashtun nomads that crows are not the messengers of doom. (Translator's note.)

bare desert. Their fires still burn within me; every breath I draw fans those embers, and every breath I release scatters the dark clouds weighing on my heart.

I have preserved tender memories of the nomads who came to our village; memories time itself has failed to erase. I cannot forget the joy with which children my own age welcomed me into their circle, simple and unguarded. An old woman, who had seen desert wildflowers bloom through more than eighty springs, once offered me eggs from her hens with gentle affection. Her husband, the chief of the tribe, smiling warmly to heighten both my happiness and the value of the gift, would add: “She hid these eggs especially for you.”

Their grandson watched me with jealous eyes. He was the only one who did not rejoice at my arrival; to him, I must have seemed like a thief stealing the old couple’s affection. When I returned home, the nomad girls would place bouquets of wildflowers in my hands to give to their friends in the village. And I was happy to bring them small gifts in return.

Only later did I understand that what I gave them was insignificant compared to what they gave me: gifts born of the desert itself.

As the rainy days of Nowruz⁶ passed, the nomads’ spring in our region drew to a close. They

⁶ March 21, the first day of the year in Afghanistan.
(Translator note.)

did not welcome the heat of the summer sun and soon began their migration. That year, their customary departure was delayed by three days, yet even after night fell upon our village, we could still hear the barking of their dogs.

“Are the nomads not leaving this year?”

That question weighed upon the entire village.

On the afternoon of the fourth day, the sound of drums rose, mingled with the shouts of young people. Was the whole tribe waiting for this noise?

A beautiful young girl who had played and danced among wildflowers through fourteen springs had been betrothed to the young man she loved. The night of their engagement had passed.

The next morning, the girl, who had not slept at all, rose at dawn, took up her small mirror, and waited for the first rays of sunlight to examine her face. The night had altered her black hair; morning had replaced it with white.

Her eyes filled with tears, yet she remained silent.

Ashamed, she tried to conceal the truth from the eyes of her tribe. But when daylight revealed what she could not hide, the nomads were heard whispering among themselves:

“This is what happens when we violate the customs of our ancestors. Why did we not leave on the appointed day? The girl’s hair has turned white overnight. May God protect the other tents. We must depart at once.”

The white-haired girl walked slowly beside her camel. The desert flowers seemed to draw in her sorrow with their breath. The sound of the *djaras*⁷ weighed ever more heavily on her soul. She moved as though she might collapse at any moment, and her camel lagged behind the caravan.

For days she walked in this way; for nights she rested. Yet her agitation deepened, and grief tightened its hold upon her heart. Nothing shone in her eyes but despair. The fire that once lived within them lay buried beneath a haze that dimmed the light of life itself.

She felt herself sinking into darkness. Fear seized her; she imagined ghosts rising to attack her. Whenever she reached a spring, she bent down to see whether her hair had turned black again. She dreaded discovery, longed to flee, yet knew she could not protect herself. All that remained to her was self-pity.

Those who have no one with whom to share the suffering of their soul are the most wretched of beings. The height of misfortune is reached when one can no longer bear one's own secret and has no one to whom it may be confided.

The rumor of the girl's hair reached her fiancé, but he could not believe it. She kept her camel at the rear of the caravan to avoid meeting him, for she knew she could not speak the truth if questioned.

⁷ "*Djaras*" is the bell that hangs from the neck of the last camel in a caravan. (Translator's note.)

Two years passed.

Through travel and labor, the young man accumulated modest means. He now owned a tent and several camels and could provide for a household. Preparations for the wedding began, and young people once more danced upon the grass. A tent was raised on a small hill, slightly apart from the others.

Seeing each other for the first time in the moonlight, the young man noticed that his bride's hair was white.

The girl trembled, fearing he would demand the truth. However, apart from her hair, nothing disturbed their happiness. They passed the night together in silence until she suddenly threw herself at her husband's feet and cried out:

"I have never betrayed you!"

A flame passed through the young man's eyes, as though fire had rushed from head to foot. Yet he remained silent, staring at her with astonishment, fear, and sorrow.

"I have never deceived you," she repeated. "But what could I do?"

"What do you mean?"

"I beg your forgiveness. I never wished to deceive you but—"

"But what?"

"I do not know why I could not die."

“What are you saying?”

“I was forced. I was weak.”

“What did he do to you?”

“Nothing, except my hair turning white. I resisted.”

“Then tell me. How did it turn white?”

“I will tell you. And then I will die.”

“Speak quickly,” he said. “I cannot endure this much longer.”

She said:

“Do you remember the night of our engagement? That evening, the stars brought me misfortune. The deep night darkened my face.⁸ That night, my hair turned white, but not because the moon descended, nor because the stars drew near to me.”

“I went to sleep with no such thoughts. I did not expect calamity. I fell asleep thinking of you, with your name in my heart. Then suddenly I felt warmth upon my lips. I awoke and saw a man kissing me. I struggled, and when I tried to cry out, he fled before I could recognize him.”

“The night passed. By morning, my hair was white.”

⁸ A popular expression in Afghanistan: it is said that sin darkens the face. (Translator’s note.)

“From that moment on, I no longer wished to live, for I no longer felt worthy of your love. Yet in the name of that love, know this: I will love you until my death.”

When the girl finished her story, she lowered her eyes and added:

“Now tell me how I may disappear without staining your honor.”

Before she could raise her gaze, she felt herself lifted into her husband’s arms. Still, she did not understand.

“To protect your honor,” she said, “do not kill me with your own hand. Let me do it myself—”

She could not finish her sentence. Her husband’s lips were already upon hers.

She wept with joy and whispered:

“Was it you who turned my hair white?”

“Yes,” he said. “It was I who came to kiss you.”

The next morning, when the sun rose and the other young women came to greet the bride, they saw that her hair had turned black once more.

The Prince of Bost

Joy is sometimes like spring, spreading green happiness so widely that not a sorrowful heart can be found in an entire city. At other times, one might search the whole world in vain for a single happy heart, and if one were finally discovered, it would be like a lone flower forgotten in the gardener's hand.

In ancient times, the city of *Bost*⁹ was founded upon joy. Its gardens were lush, its castles magnificent. The heart of the city rivaled *Kashghar*¹⁰, while its outskirts recalled *Farkhar*¹¹.

In this city, there lived a king of uncommon kindness, loved by both the great and the humble. His people sought only to please his heart, and he knew no kingdom beyond the hearts of his people. Flowers

⁹ Bost was the winter capital of the Ghaznavids, one of the most important dynasties of Afghanistan that ruled from the tenth to the twelfth century. Ghazni was the summer capital.

The Fort of Bost, locally referred to as Qala-e-Bost is a fortification near Lashkargah in the Helmand Province of Afghanistan. (Translator's note)

¹⁰ City name (Translator's note)

¹¹ City Name (Translator's note)

were planted in his name, and when peasants prayed for a good harvest, it was his name they invoked.

He had built a castle that mirrored paradise: a place of peace and repose. No one envied him, for he had no enemies, and no one wished for another ruler in his stead. There was no poor man in his realm. He coveted nothing from his subjects and demanded nothing from the wealthy. Instead, he gave freely to all. In the city, in the desert, and in the mountains alike, each received their share.

He lived thus until the spring of his life came to an end and the clouds of age gathered above him. His wise companions then said:

— If the King's life were to end, his people would have no shade beneath which to rest. They wish to see him marry, so that a child might one day comfort and reassure them.

The King took a wife. Yet for many years, the joy of fatherhood did not come. The people grew anxious.

The King had a *Vizier*¹² whose wisdom he trusted completely, and the Vizier, too, had no heir.

One day, a wise man arrived from the desert. Leaning on a long staff, he knocked upon the gates of the royal castle. The maidservants hurried to ask who he was and what he sought.

¹² The title *vizier* refers to a chief minister or top advisor to the King.

The *Dervish*¹³ said:

— Wishes are granted in the houses of kings, not in the hearts of dervishes. I have heard that the king is just and kind, yet troubled. I have come to hear his desire and to fulfill it.

The servants carried his words to the queen. Her heart leapt with hope, and she confided to the dervish her longing to bear a child.

In the royal garden stood a tall apple tree. The dervish struck it with his staff, and two apples fell to the ground. He gave one to the queen and the other to the vizier's wife.

When the King wished to reward him with gold, the dervish had already vanished. No one could find him again.

The King and the Vizier took this visit as a blessed sign and ordered a feast in celebration. Upon hearing the news, people prayed.

That very evening, both the queen and the Vizier's wife conceived. When the appointed days and nights had passed, the queen gave birth to a prince as radiant as daylight, and the vizier's wife to a daughter as luminous as a spring sky.

The King ordered a great feast. The people rejoiced as though the world itself had turned into joy. He then summoned the wise men to choose

¹³ The word *dervish* refers to a Sufi mystic or ascetic.

names for the newborns. They named the prince *Pati*, and the Vizier's daughter *Rabia*.

Days and nights followed into one another, and the children grew, shining like sun and moon. Their childhood companionship ripened into love, and this was spoken of openly throughout the city.

But youth is fleeting and untamed, like a whirling wind driven forward by life itself. Pati's blood burned so fiercely; he would wrestle the strongest men and throw them to the ground. In childhood, those around him excused his impulsiveness. As he grew older, however, this wildness hardened into pride, and all were troubled by it.

The wise men, who had foreseen such an end, began to fear him. When the prince left the royal castle, people hid themselves. He was surrounded by unruly youths, and together they roamed the streets as though they were hunting prey.

Why did this just King fail to restrain his son's wrongdoing? Did he, like other rulers, value the pleasure of his child above the peace of his people? How could a man who had devoted his life to justice and kindness be struck by such a misfortune?

One day, one of the prince's victims went to an old woman to recount the latest offense. The woman said:

"I have grown old beneath the shadow of the King's generosity. I swear upon my life and upon his reign, may it endure, that he is unaware of his son's actions."

The man replied:

“How can he be unaware? When the prince was still a child, he and his companions broke the water jugs of women at the fountain. When the King learned of it, he replaced the jugs with silver ones and did not punish his son. It was this very weakness that allowed his arrogance and violence to grow.”

The old woman answered:

“You cannot punish a small child. The King compensated the victims, but he did not correct the root of the matter.”

“If the King ignores this now,” the man said, “it is a grave injustice.”

The old woman, whose heart was full of devotion to the king, rose and went to the royal castle. No guard barred her path. She stood before the King and told him of his son’s cruelties.

That same day, when the prince returned from hunting and came to pay his respects, he found his father consumed with anger. The King reproached him with words too severe for Pati’s pride to endure.

In fury, the prince declared that he would leave the country.

The King replied:

“May God remove from my realm all who torment my people.”

Pati then gathered his companions and called upon them to depart with him.

The city of *Bost*¹⁴ had two gates. Pati departed through one, while his mother's cries rose from the other.

Beautiful Rabia, known throughout the kingdom as the Golden Nightingale, was beloved by the people. When she heard the queen's lament, she lost consciousness. The pain that drives mothers to wail can carry lovers to death. She ran to the palace and threw herself at the king's feet, begging him to recall Pati.

The King, silent with anger, turned his face away.

Weeping, Rabia rushed to her father, the Vizier. He went at once to the king and pleaded for the prince's forgiveness. The King replied:

"I have sent one child away so that my people, who are all my children, may live in peace. If you pity your daughter, let her go wherever she wishes. I did not expect my old vizier to ask for the return of a proud and violent youth, nor to forget the rights of the young and the old of this kingdom."

Seeing the shame upon his vizier's face, the King reassured him that he had committed no wrong. The Vizier then returned to his daughter and taught her that justice is more precious even than one's own child.

¹⁴ In Afghanistan, "Bost" is the older name for the city now known as Lashkar Gah, the capital of Helmand Province. The name has deep historical roots and is tied to the region's ancient past

Rabia rose like a madwoman and ordered the servants to prepare for a journey.

The King and the Vizier were walking in the palace garden beneath the apple tree when word reached them that Pati had left the city the previous day, and that Rabia had departed at dawn in pursuit of him. They lifted their eyes toward the branches, and the King said:

“The dervish has taken his apples back.”

The Vizier answered:

“Yes, but they were very sweet.”

After leaving *Bost*, Pati and his companions reached a village where they discovered a splendid garden. They settled there to plan their route. Karam and Pordel, the prince’s strongest and most loyal companions, suggested they spend the night and depart at dawn.

Both men were eager to travel toward India. They said to the prince:

“Let us plant a leafy branch in the ground, and tomorrow we will follow the direction it points.”

The prince agreed. Around midnight, while all were asleep, Karam quietly turned the branch toward India.

At dawn, they set out.

At evening, they dismounted in an oasis for prayer, pitched their tents, and released their horses. Forty tents rose in the desert, each sheltering a young

warrior who followed the prince. During the third watch of the night, a sentinel spotted a group of riders approaching at full gallop and alerted the camp.

They prepared for battle.

As the riders drew near, Pati recognized Rabia, accompanied by her maids, riding toward them. A great fire was lit to celebrate her arrival.

At dawn, as the sky blushed red, they resumed their journey toward India.

Meanwhile, in the city of *Bost*, mothers of the maidens who accompanied Rabia began to weep as they searched for their daughters. Their grief stirred anguish in the hearts of the fathers. The men gathered and went before the king to demand justice, accusing Pati and his companions of abducting their unmarried daughters and dishonoring the city.

Disturbed, the King summoned his vizier. The Vizier addressed the fathers:

“O people, I am one of you. My daughter Rabia, whom you call the Golden Nightingale, has gone with your daughters. Yet I did not tell the King that his son had taken my child.”

“My daughter has a heart. A heart filled with an all-consuming passion that has become her guide. I knew she was leaving, and I could not prevent her. One cannot restrain those who depart for love.”

“She was my only child; you have many. These girls were destined to leave one day, to join their lives with men and separate from you. They have

done only what fate required. To blame them, or others, is unjust.”

“A daughter is a gift entrusted to us, so that we may one day pass that gift onward. Like all gifts, she must be given with justice, and the best home for her is the one she herself has chosen.”

“I have spoken all that I know. Now it is for our righteous king to decide, and we shall act according to his will.”

The King approved of his vizier’s words and addressed the people:

“O people, I have grown old among you. Can anyone say that I was unjust, or that I harmed another? I once feared to have a child, lest he commit injustice and that injustice be laid upon me, for every father bears responsibility for the virtues and the faults of his offspring. A tree that yields bitter fruit is not without blame.”

“This shame alone is punishment enough for me: that I was unable to be the father of a son worthy of your praise. I banished my son from my country as I banished every tyrant, and I feel no sorrow in this. Our daughters followed the call of love, but my son followed only the appetite for oppression.”

“At issue is two separate matters: One is a matter of the heart and the other a matter of the country. Yet the heart, too, is a country, and it must be ruled. I relinquished my son to preserve my people and my land, just as your daughters relinquished their fathers to govern the kingdom of the heart.”

“Go now and petition another king, the king of youth and desire. I, with you old men, could not battle this young sovereign whose strength comes from youth. Ask no more of me. A king must not be unjust to his people, nor a people to their king. I have spoken all that I know. Now do as you will.”

The fathers fell silent and turned away.

Meanwhile, Pati and his companions galloped onward toward India¹⁵. When they arrived, they did not yet know where to settle. Near a village, Pati ordered his men to release their horses into grain fields. They obeyed.

Moments later, the villagers returned the horses and asked that they be tethered, for they were destroying the crops. Pati said to his companions:

“These peasants are united. Foreigners cannot live among such people. We must find a place where the inhabitants are divided.”

They rode on. The next village responded in the same way. At last, they reached the village of Goarian where once again the horses were loosed. There, the peasants chased the animals into neighboring fields instead of standing together. No bond of solidarity joined them.

Pati said to Karam and Pordel:

“This is the land we seek.”

¹⁵ The Indian subcontinent.

They settled in Goarian, where a fortified castle stood. The inhabitants disagreed among themselves, but in the presence of forty armed warriors, they were forced to submit. The following day, Pati ordered them to vacate the castle. They replied that the neighboring village was their sworn enemy and that they would be slaughtered if expelled.

Pati asked for directions to that village and rode there with his companions. When the villagers rejected his offer of peace, he declared war, seized the settlement, and ordered several of its people beheaded.

The tribes of that region had a king to whom they appealed for justice. The king sent a message to Pati, asking who he was, what he intended, and by what right he had taken the castle.

Pati sought counsel from his companions and replied:

“I am the son of the king of *Bost*. My father quarreled with me, and I departed from my kingdom. A branch turned in my hand toward India, and fate led me here. I came as a guest, but your people closed their doors to me. A door closed to friends must be opened by force.”

“I wish to settle here. The daughters of *Bost* and the children of Helmand¹⁶ chose this land. For a prince driven from his country by his father, the

¹⁶ Helmand is the great river that runs through Bost. Helmand is also a province in western Afghanistan. (Translator’s note.)

world grows narrow. If the king commands me to leave the castle, I will do so, but only to meet you on the battlefield.”

“I sought to make peace among the tribes. They chose war. Since they have chosen it, warn them not to lose it.”

When Pati’s reply reached the king, he reflected carefully and answered in writing. In order not to offend a guest, he said, he and his people would overlook what had already occurred and allow Pati to remain in the castle. The king emphasized that, unless justice demanded intervention, Pati was free to live there in peace and should regard both the king and the people as his own family. As long as no wrongdoing was committed, there would be no reason to expel him.

The king added that even young princes must not be governed by impulsive passions. He did not wish to take up arms against a guest, but he warned that aggression toward one’s hosts could not be tolerated. With these words, he extended welcome and warning alike, hoping to preserve peace and mutual respect.

After receiving the letter, Pati summoned his companions, and they agreed to send a reply of acceptance.

Pati then said:

“It is better to live in peace with this king and his people. His letter bears the mark of wisdom and courage. Though our presence is not pleasing to him,

he accepts it without desire, and only a man of great character can do that.”

Karam rose. His face was dark with rage.

“I do not know what water has been poured over the fire of the Prince of *Bost* to cool his hot blood,” he said. “This king speaks gently only to frighten us. If we accept his message, he will bind us with his power. He wishes to test our courage. We must fight him so he may acknowledge his weakness. Even if all his people stand behind him, he cannot drive us away for his own comfort.”

These words angered the prince, and he placed his hand upon his sword. But Pordel rose as well, supporting Karam’s claim, and the others followed. When Pati saw that all stood against him, he restrained himself and said:

“I admire your courage. But is there among you one who is braver, or a better warrior, than I?”

No one answered. The prince raised his voice:

“For the first time, my companions neither answer me nor listen. Has fate poured kohl¹⁷ in my throat, or placed cotton in your ears?”

Still they remained silent. He spoke again:

“We have left our homeland, yet wherever we go we must survive. Have you forgotten that the spoken

¹⁷ It is traditional to believe that if kohl were mixed with food, it would make it impossible to speak. (Translator’s note.)

word is part of our ancient tradition? For the third time, I ask you.”

No voice rose in reply.

At last, Pordel stood and said:

“On behalf of all my companions and myself, I demand an apology.”

They then rose together and left Pati alone, returning to their tents.

Sometime later, Karam emerged from the castle and saw a great caravan approaching on the horizon. He mounted his horse and rode to meet it. Drawing near, he saw camels advancing slowly. He asked the caravan’s leader what they carried.

“It is the treasure of a shah who rules both you and me,” the man replied.

Karam said:

“Regardless, this caravan will be coming home with me.”

The caravan leader—a tall, powerful man—struck Karam, and the two fought fiercely. Karam killed him and seized the caravan, bringing it back with him.

That day, the prince and his companions had gone hunting. Karam concealed the stolen treasure and released the camels.

When news of the theft reached the king, his anger flared. He ordered his warriors to prepare for battle.

Returning from the hunt, the Prince of *Bost*, meanwhile, was so weary that had he been allowed to sleep, he would not have risen before the sun stood high.

The next dawn, Rabia, gazing from the castle walls, saw that royal tents now encircled their castle. She woke Pati at once. He asked Pordel to call down from the towers and ask the soldiers their purpose. A warrior replied that they had come to fight, for the seizure of the royal treasury had deeply offended the king.

The prince summoned Karam, who confessed the truth. Pati was stricken with grief. His companions said to him:

“Why are you saddened? We are eager for battle!”

The prince replied:

“War brings death. Death erases responsibility. But the breaking of a pledge is a type of death that carries responsibility. What pains me is not war itself. I wish only that Karam, who longs so fiercely for battle, had not defeated us first by violating our word.”

The Prince of *Bost* then wrote to the king, revealing the truth and offering restitution. But the king, seeing that the moment now favored justice,

refused to lift the siege or accept the return of the treasure. By common accord, battle was set for the following day.

In those times, combat was fought face to face, man against man. For thirty days they fought. Thirty of Pati's warriors fell, while three hundred soldiers of the king were slain. Fighting continued for ten more days: nine more warriors of *Bost* died, and sixty of the king's men fell, bloodied.

On the eleventh day, Pati himself entered the battle. For thirty days he fought without rest, cutting down countless soldiers of the royal army.

When the new moon appeared, the prince prepared to return once more to the field. Rabia said to him:

“Do not go.”

Astonished, he asked:

“Why do you hold me back?”

She replied:

“Last night I dreamed that an old man wrapped in light—a saint—took my veil and spread it upon your horse. I wept, but he could not hear me. He said he had come to take back the apple from the King of *Bost*.”

The prince embraced her, left the castle, and rode to the battlefield.

That day, the daughters of *Bost* had laid the bodies of the fallen warriors upon their beds,

covering them with bright shawls. They crowded the castle walkways to watch the battle unfold.

Rabia cried out to Pati's horse:

"If you bring him back victorious today, I will shoe you with gold from my jewels and hang my pearls about your neck!"

Suddenly they saw the horse returning barely having entered the field. The women thought the prince was fleeing, and their cries rose toward the sky. They rushed to open the great gate, but Rabia stopped them, shouting:

"The gate must not be opened for a fleeing warrior!"

When the horse reached the door, Pati's body slid to the ground.

Then Rabia opened the gate.

The prince had returned so that he would not fall into the enemy's hands, but die in her arms. An arrow had pierced his heart. He had joined his companions.

The dervish had taken the apple back from the King of *Bost*!

Three Lovers

***Author's Note:** Having lived a golden youth, the man, now bent with age, remembered only his most searing memories. When he opened his mouth, it was to lament, and his words always carried tales of lovers torn apart by a merciless fate. He played music in the hujra¹⁸ and recounted love stories to the young people of the village. When he played, all listened in silence, spellbound by his music, while his own tears flowed like spring rain.*

When he spoke of lovers, it was as though he were revealing his own love stories from youth. As he finished his tales, he appeared proud and fearless; but when the trembling notes of the robab¹⁹ faded, he became once more an ordinary man. His importance and majesty seemed to depart with the music, for his

¹⁸ The term “hujra” generally refers to a guest room in Pashtun villages where members are equal in rights and can use this room to gather and organize community events. (Translator's Note)

¹⁹ The robab is recognized as Afghanistan's national instrument. This traditional folk musical instrument has deep roots in Afghan villages and storytelling. An eight-stringed instrument made of an elongated sound box covered with goat or antelope skin and a long neck highly decorated with bone or ivory motifs. (Translator's Note)

greatness lived within it. The color left his cheeks, and it was as though a light had been extinguished.

His stories enchanted me.

At that time, I was still a child, yet I was his most devoted listener. I loved him, and he kept me beneath his warm gaze until the darkness of death took him from our sight and returned him to the eternity of his songs. When I learned of his passing, I saw him again and again in my youthful dreams and nightmares. Yet he no longer sang for me.

I now offer this story, which I once heard from his own lips, though I am certain he no longer needs the offerings of this insignificant world.

A. R. Pazhwak

Long ago, in *Tizin*, a place of which no trace remains, in one of those Afghan villages where all men were brothers and equals, there lived two brothers bound by deep affection and mutual respect. They were so admired that the villagers regarded them as guides and counselors. Their table was always set, and their brows were broad with generosity.²⁰

²⁰ In Afghanistan, a tablecloth is spread on the floor (usually on a carpet) to eat: this means that the table was always set for

The elder brother had seven sons, all still young, the eldest named *Zabardast*. The younger brother had not yet known the joy of holding a child in his arms until divine mercy announced to both men, at the same moment, the promise of new life.

Before the moon and the sun had revealed themselves in those unborn children, the elder brother declared with a happy smile to the younger that if their children should turn out to be a moon and a sun, they would one day be pledged to one another.²¹

When the time came, a radiant sun rose over the *qalah*²² of the younger brother, illuminating the cradle of a newborn son, Momin Khan. Soon after, during the night, the moon shone over the elder brother's home, offering its splendor to a newborn daughter, Shirino.

Many sun rises renewed days and many moonlights went by.

guests, and a broad forehead expresses benevolence.
(Translator's Note)

²¹ In ancient Afghan culture and often today, the *moon* signifies a daughter and the *sun* a son.

²² *Qalah* is a kind of fortified castle where the lord of the village, the khan or the village chief lived with his family and his people. (Translator's Note)

Momin and Shirino grew as the life-stars of their fathers slowly dimmed. Both men departed for the final resting place to which we all must go. The fierce wind that extinguished the flame of the parents' lives fanned the embers of the children's love. Like twin flames from two candles, they burned for one another.

They played together, their affection simple and pure, until the day came when their eyes met and they blushed. Their love became a cherished and sacred secret: Shirino concealed it within her heart, veiled by modesty, while Momin buried it within himself beneath the veil of dignity.

Such hearts, simple and sincere, are sorely needed in our world.

Time passed, and the ashes of silence hid the living flame within them. Yet the gentle breeze of harmony between the two households gave way to turbulent winds of discord, unsettling the peace of their homes. In those days, it was not uncommon for noble families to be drawn into bitter quarrels.

The seven sons, each brave enough to rule seven regions, stood on one side of the conflict, while Momin, worthy of an entire kingdom, stood alone on the other. Thus began a struggle for power that divided what had once been a united land. Each side believed justice was on its own side.

The elders of the village intervened, urging peace:

“Each of you is worthy to rule. Act, then, as the great leaders of the world do and resolve this dispute through justice rather than the sword, so that the village may recover its peace.”

Indeed in those days, peace in the village was sought through concord among its khans. In time, both camps accepted the counsel of the elders. Zabardast, the eldest of the seven brothers, was granted authority on the condition that he share power with Momin, each ruling over half the village. All parties agreed, and peace was restored.

Yet hearts remained divided.

Zabardast no longer regarded Momin with the friendship of earlier days, while Momin, and even more so Shirino, yearned for harmony and earnestly sought Zabardast’s goodwill.

Momin understood that life without Shirino was more bitter than poison. He gathered a few wise men and sent them to Zabardast to ask for Shirino’s hand in marriage, declaring his willingness to accept any condition.

When the *marakah*²³ dismounted before Zabardast's qalah²⁴, he received them with courtesy. According to custom, he welcomed them as honored guests, touching the foreheads of their horses. They seated themselves, and the marakah spoke:

“In keeping with tradition, we come to seek Zabardast's counsel. Momin wishes to marry the light of this house, that she might guide him through life.”

Zabardast Khan²⁵ replied:

“It would violate propriety to refuse such a request. I will allow my daughter to be carried to Momin's qalah. However, only a man confident in his own strength is worthy of such a gift. Thus, the suitor must strike a target with an arrow, win a horse race, and bring an amount of gold equal to the weight of her father's shield.”

Such were the customs of that time.

The delegation accepted the terms, mounted their horses, and carried the message back to Momin. Those who knew his skill as an archer and horseman

²³ Negotiation to resolve conflict according to Afghanistan's codes of Pashtunwali.

²⁴ Fortress like large residential house in rural settings

²⁵ Khan is an honorary term used in rural Pashtun-dominated parts of Afghanistan usually to indicate prominence and power of a person within the community.

were confident; those who knew the depth of his poverty slowed their pace. There was no alternative but to accept the challenge.

When Momin heard Zabardast's reply, the sun shone as brightly as a warrior's shield on a mountain peak.

He said:

"Do not be troubled. The arm of a son whose father's shield weighed a man will find a way to match its weight in gold or exceed it."

At dawn, as the rising sun poured gold from its vessel, Momin prepared to depart. He thought to himself:

"With courage, one can borrow from the sun itself and fashion a shield of pure gold. I go now. If I succeed, I may live among my people. If I fail, they shall never again see my face."

No one knew how Shirino learned of his departure; no one knows who carries the messages of the heart. Aware of Momin's pride and his poverty, she rose at dawn and went to the road he would take hoping either to dissuade him from leaving or, if that proved impossible, to bid him farewell, so that the memory might soften the length of their separation.

Momin rode alone, lost in thought. A long road stretched before him, and he moved slowly, for such

a journey cannot be hurried. The path of love is sometimes swift, sometimes slow, and sometimes impossible to cross.

A sound drew him back from his reverie.

He looked up and saw Shirino standing on the very road he was taking to marry her.

Shirino cried out:

“You, with your traveling boots: into whose care do you leave this garden of yellow flowers?”

“I have put on my traveling boots,” he answered, “and I leave the garden of yellow flowers in God’s care.”

“Do not leave. Listen to me. Do not go to India. I will give you my *walwar*²⁶.”

“I must obtain it with my own hands. I am leaving for India.”

“Do not go. The Indian girls will enchant you.”

“I am going to India. I will be a good brother to them, and they will be my sisters. I must go.”

²⁶ In Afghanistan, particularly among Pashtun communities, “*walwar*” is the Pashto term for “bride price.” Walwar is traditionally seen as a payment to the bride’s family in recognition of the girl given away in marriage.

Momin did not wish Shirino to see his tears. He looked at her calmly and continued on his way.

Shirino wailed:

“My handsome horseman has departed, gone upon his journey. The torrent of my tears floods my faded face. My love, if you must go, do not forget the beauty mark upon my forehead. Indian girls do not bear green beauty marks.”

When she realized that Momin could no longer hear her cries, she said to herself:

“My body trembles; my strength is leaving me. I do not know how long this separation will last. Momin, you have gone. Go, and may God be with you. I will keep my black hair and my green marks for you. Travel in peace. My beauty belongs to you until I die. I have never endured absence before, and this one will lead me to my end.”

With the image of his beloved burning in his heart, Momin reached India, uncertain where to settle. The people, seeing a handsome young stranger, looked upon him with admiration and called him the unknown prince. When word reached the king, he ordered that the youth be brought to his court.

Momin arrived on a day of public audience and was received with honor. The King of India, a learned and discerning ruler, said:

“I know you come from a land where the sun rises when it sets here, yet I do not know who you are.”

Momin replied:

“The king’s wisdom is like gold. My name is Momin, and I am a khan of my homeland. Fate has led me to your country. I do not yet know where I belong. I have followed an unknown path, guided only by my heart. Whether I remain here depends upon the king’s will, and I trust that he will grant me leave to stay for a time.”

The king answered:

“I honor courage in young men. Be my guest. Go now and rest in the chambers prepared for you. Tomorrow my wrestlers will contend, my archers will shoot, and my horsemen will race. Sit at my right and witness these contests.”

Momin gave thanks and, exhausted, withdrew to rest. That night he dreamed of his father, who buckled his belt and said:

“My son, be strong and fearless. God is merciful. No wrestler will overpower you. No target will escape your arrow. No horse will outrun yours.”

At dawn, Momin returned to the court and took his place beside the king. As he watched the contests, he asked:

“May I compete with your champions?”

The king replied:

“While you are our guest, none of your wishes will be denied.”

“Then I ask to wrestle your strongest men, to shoot among your finest archers, and to race against your swiftest riders.”

With these words, Momin rose and joined the competitors.

A great crowd gathered, loud with anticipation. Momin wrestled the mightiest men and cast them all to the ground. In archery and in racing, he surpassed every rival. The people marveled, and the king praised him highly.

A magnificent feast was held in his honor, and the entire city was invited. Musicians played, dancers moved with grace, and the king rejoiced.

Young women placed garlands of flowers around Momin’s neck, and the elders said:

“Momin is the emblem of youth.”

Young men looked upon him as their model.

While speaking with Momin, the king received a letter. As he read it, his face darkened with anger and

concern. Sensing ill news, Momin asked about it. Without a word, the king handed him the letter.

After reading it, Momin said:

“I will answer this message.”

“What reply will you send?” the king asked.

“I will not send a reply,” Momin answered. “I will go myself.”

He rose at once.

The king ordered his horsemen to accompany him, but Momin refused.

“I must travel alone.”

No one knew which road he took or what befell him. All believed only this: that throughout his journey, Shirino lived constantly in his thoughts.

The letter had come from another ruler of India, demanding tribute. Momin intended to oppose these demands and free the king, his friend, from this burden. At that time, seven kings ruled the land, and six were forced to pay tribute to the seventh, who was known as the Collector King.

When Momin reached the collector king’s city, he went first to a goldsmith and asked that his horse be shod with red gold. The goldsmith, astonished,

obeyed. As the work was done, Momin observed the marketplace. Never in his life had he seen a *bazaar*²⁷ so orderly, so crowded, or so prosperous.

Suddenly, a strange silence fell. All movement ceased.

From the far end of the market appeared a camel bearing a palanquin. From within came cries of anguish. Momin asked the goldsmith whose camel it was, why there was lamentation, and where it was headed.

The goldsmith replied:

“A dragon lives in this land. Each day it must devour a young girl, or else it will destroy the city and consume all its people. Today, the youngest daughter of the king is to be sacrificed. She is the last maiden left; all the others have already been taken.”

At that moment, the camel halted before the goldsmith’s shop. The princess’s voice rang out:

“O young men, be brave. My father is a Moghul, and he sends me into the jaws of the dragon!”

Before Momin could speak, a mocking voice answered:

²⁷ A market place.

“We are ready—but your fiancé is still busy grooming his mustache!”

The princess fell silent. But when Momin heard the word fiancé, a fierce fire surged within him, as though a dragon had awakened in his own soul. He rose at once and followed the camel from a distance.

When it reached the dragon’s lair, the driver loosened the bridle and fled without once looking back. The princess began to wail, her cries echoing in the desolation.

Momin stepped from his hiding place and approached the camel.

The princess saw him and at once fell in love. Love, in the presence of death, strikes like lightning. She cried out:

“Young man, what do you seek?”

Then she added:

“If you seek death, go meet it beyond my sight. It would shatter my heart to watch you perish in the dragon’s jaws. Tell me: who are you?”

Momin replied:

“I am a traveler who wishes to die defending a maiden in a foreign land. What do you think of that?”

She said:

“Such words are no longer spoken in this world. Are you yourself from the realm of the dead?”

Momin asked calmly:

“When will the dragon come?”

“When the sun rises to the height of a spear.”

“Then I will sleep until that moment,” he said. “I have traveled far in little time and am weary.”

The princess cried:

“Leave! Do not sacrifice yourself!”

“Do not speak such words to me.”

“Then come closer,” she said softly, “and rest your head upon my lap.”

“I accept, he answered, so that you will not be afraid. And so you may wake me when the dragon comes.”

And Momin fell asleep.

In his dream, Shirino appeared and warned him:

“The Indian girls will seduce you.”

He replied:

“The Indian girls will be my sisters.”

Momin still slept when the dragon arrived. Frozen by terror, the princess could neither move nor cry out but her tears fell upon his face and woke him. Momin rose, sword in hand, and stepped toward the beast. The princess, overcome by love, forgot her fear of death and followed close behind.

The dragon towered above him, its vast jaws opening wide.

Momin advanced without hesitation.

The beast swallowed him whole. However, Momin knew:

— A gluttonous mouth has no teeth.²⁸

As the dragon engulfed him, Momin struck with his sharpened blade, piercing the beast from within until it collapsed and lay motionless. For a moment, silence reigned.

Then Momin emerged.

Seeing that the dragon no longer stirred, yet not knowing what had become of Momin, the princess ran to him and gathered him into her arms. He lay

²⁸ This is a saying.

still for a long while. At last, he opened his eyes. He saw the dragon stretched lifeless as stone, and the princess beside him. He praised God and prepared to take his leave.

The princess implored him:

“I would rather be in the dragon’s jaws than endure this separation.”

Momin replied:

“If I succeed in my task, I may one day return to you. But now I cannot remain. Go back to your father’s palace and turn it from a house of mourning into a place of rejoicing. I must retrieve my horse and resume my journey toward sorrow and happiness alike.”

On her way back to the palace, the princess encountered a royal guard sent by her mother to recover some keepsake from the place of sacrifice. As the guard approached and saw the dragon’s vast body, he believed it still alive and fled in terror.

The princess called after him:

“Do not fear a dead dragon!”

Momin, having taken a piece of the dragon’s skin as proof, returned to the city by another route so as not to be seen. Hearing the princess’s voice, the guard returned, astonished to find the beast truly

dead. Regaining his composure, he accompanied the princess back to the palace.

When the king and queen saw their daughter alive, they were struck speechless. After she told them all that had passed, the king sent messengers throughout the land in search of Momin. Having no son, he resolved to make the young hero his heir.

Meanwhile, Momin, having recovered his horse, changed his appearance so as not to be recognized and lived quietly in the city.

The king promised a great reward to whoever would bring Momin back. Many men presented themselves, falsely claiming to have slain the dragon. Each was sent before the princess for recognition, and each was exposed and punished for his lie.

One day, a stranger requested an audience with the princess. No one knew who he was, yet he was announced and received at once.

She asked him:

“What do you seek?”

He answered:

“Do you wish to find your savior?”

Her eyes shone, “That is my deepest wish.”

The man said:

“He has changed his appearance, yet I would recognize him beneath any disguise. Give me a few guards, and I will show him to you.”

Overjoyed, the princess informed the king, who sent men to accompany the stranger. The man led them to Momin’s hiding place, pointed him out from a distance and vanished.

The guards seized Momin and brought him before the court, despite his protests. At the first glance, the princess recognized him, even beneath his altered features.

The king ordered that the stranger who returned Momin be found and rewarded. When the stranger was brought before them, he was presented to Momin as the man who had discovered him. Momin looked closely and at once recognized his faithful servant, Ridigoll.

Amazed, he asked:

“What are you doing here?”

Ridigoll replied:

“I have followed you everywhere. I could not endure being separated from you. I knew you wished to be alone, so I followed in silence.”

Momin was moved by such loyalty, and both the king and his daughter praised Ridigoll for his devotion. Then Momin said:

“O King, I cannot accept succession to your throne. I came only to fulfill my purpose, not to rule. Grant me one question, and I will ask nothing more in return for my deeds.”

The king agreed to answer whatever he wished.

Momin asked:

“Why do you demand tribute from the King of Punjab?”

The king replied:

“Because my army defeated him.”

Momin said:

“If I were to defeat your forces, would you release the King of Punjab from this burden?”

“I will grant your request without subjecting you to combat, the king answered. Whoever can overcome a dragon can overcome any army.”

Thus the collector king released the Punjab king from tribute and placed a written decree of freedom in Momin’s hands while still urging him to remain. At last, in sorrow, he bowed to Momin’s refusal as

Momin mounted his horse to depart. The princess wept bitterly, watching the man she loved ride away.

With Ridigoll beside him, Momin reached the city of the Punjab king. Before delivering the decree, they encountered a man from their own village. Momin asked first for news of Shirino and her brothers.

The man replied:

“Since your departure, Zabardast Khan has ruled with cruelty. He expelled your mother from her home and has been starving the livestock. The villagers, angered by this injustice toward his own aunt, have begun to defy him and refuse to work his lands. Shirino’s brothers are divided; and their crops are failing despite your aunt’s efforts to protect them.

The situation had grown so dire that Momin’s mother had sent the man in search of her son.

Momin said urgently:

“I asked you first about Shirino.”

“Separation from you and the actions of her brothers have left her deeply unhappy. Young men of the village even planned to help her escape and bring her to your mother, who now lives in a neighboring village. But her brothers, suspecting this, have kept constant watch. At night they sleep encircling her bed.”

At these words, Momin placed the royal decree in Ridigoll's hands and said:

“Take this to the King of Punjab.”

Without delay, he turned his horse toward his homeland.

When the Punjab king received the decree, he was grieved to learn of Momin's sudden departure. Feeling powerless, he asked Ridigoll to tell him Momin's story. He wept as he listened, then ordered his officers to load forty camels with red gold to be sent after Momin. Ridigoll set out with the caravan, but could not overtake Momin for Momin rode at a desperate pace, driven by the need to return to Shirino and to calm the unrest among his people.

Momin rode day and night until at last he reached Tizin under cover of darkness. He waited long enough for a messenger to reach his mother, then sent word to reassure her of his return.

Beneath a sky thick with stars, Momin took the path toward Shirino's qalah. It was summer, the season when villagers sleep upon their rooftops beneath the open sky. The moon was sinking behind the mountains, casting long shadows. Night deepened: bright enough to find one's way, yet dark enough to hide faces.

Climbing the walls of the qalah, Momin reached the rooftop in silence. There, Shirino and her brothers

lay asleep. He counted seven dark forms encircling an eighth and knew that the one at the center was Shirino. He moved closer, intending to whisper softly that he had returned.

Shirino awoke suddenly. Not recognizing him, she cried out: "Brothers! An intruder!"

Momin did not wish to reveal himself. When he saw the seven swords drawn from their scabbards, he chose neither flight nor resistance. He would not be mistaken for a coward.

The blades of the seven brothers pierced the young man's unresisting body from every side.

At dawn, the truth of the tragedy became clear: Momin, who had returned from a long journey, had now departed on the longer journey of death.

For two days Shirino's brothers concealed what had happened. But Momin's mother, growing anxious, learned at last of her son's death. Shirino wept as she told her the depth of Momin's love. All believed her, and all agreed that love alone was to blame.

The funeral procession stretched along the road to the cemetery when Ridigoll arrived, leading the caravan of red gold. He halted before his master's lifeless body.

As Momin was about to be laid in the earth, the daughter of the Collector King arrived, escorted by forty guards.

Shirino bent over Momin's body to kiss his beloved face one final time before the soil claimed him. She remained motionless for a long while. Alarmed, the mourners drew near, only to discover that Shirino, too, had surrendered her soul to love.

The young princess then stepped forward, overcome by grief. She leaned down to kiss Momin, and with that kiss, she also breathed her last.

The guards returned to carry news of the tragedy to the kings of India. It is said that mourning spread across the land for forty days.

Momin was laid to rest in Tizin. From the graves of the three lovers, a weeping willow rose, its three branches intertwined each one bending and weeping over a tomb.

Rodabah and Zal

Sam, greatest among warrior-kings, was seated upon his throne when word reached him of joyous news: a son had been born to him. He rose at once and went to the Shabestan of Nowbahar, where the child had come into the world.

The newborn, named Zal²⁹, was born with hair as white as snow. Because of this sign, the birth of that little sun was concealed from Sam and hidden in the Shabestan for seven days—until the child’s nurse revealed the truth to the king.

When Sam learned that his son’s hair was white like that of an old man, he was struck with terror and grief. He implored God to take the child back, believing him to be marked by evil and destined to bring shame upon his name. In despair and blindness of heart, he ordered that the infant be taken far away and abandoned.

²⁹ Drawn from the Tale of Zal: In Ferdowsi’s “*Shahnameh*,” the albino prince Zal is abandoned in the mountains and raised by a Simorgh until his father, King Sam, reclaims him.

Thus, the innocent child was punished without cause and left upon the summit of a high mountain.

For this impious act, God punished Sam. A deep languor overtook him, and not even the most learned physicians could draw him out of it. Every remedy failed.

Meanwhile, the child lay alone and unguarded, sucking his thumb and crying through days and nights, his body bare to the wind. He was nursed by the earth and cradled by thorns.

One day, a Simorgh³⁰, searching for prey to feed its young, flew from its nest and heard the cries of the abandoned child. Seeing him without mother or protector, moved by a compassion deeper than instinct, the Simorgh swooped down, lifted the infant in its talons, and carried him to its lofty lair.

There, among its own offspring, it raised the child, feeding him as it fed its young, guarding him beneath its vast wings.

Sometimes birds possess more mercy than men.

Thus, Zal remained hidden as he grew, until one day a caravan passed near the mountain. All know that neither good nor evil can remain concealed

³⁰ In Afghan and Persian literature and mythology, Simorgh (Simurgh) is a majestic, phoenix-like creature whose wings stretch across centuries of storytelling. Neither entirely bird nor wholly divine, the Simurgh represents a bridge between the earthly and the celestial. Symbol of wisdom, healing, fertility, and divine protection, these revered mythical creatures are linked to Zoroastrian texts.

forever. The tale of the white-haired child spread, and at last reached the ears of Sam. At that moment, the king's illness lifted from him as though it had never been.

That night, Sam slept restlessly and dreamed that a horseman from the land of the Indians came to him, congratulating him on the new branch that had sprung from an old tree.

At dawn, Sam summoned his sages and told them of the dream and of what he had learned from the caravanners. The soothsayers, young and old alike, answered with one voice:

“Whom God preserves will not perish from cold or heat. Rest now, and then go seek your son.”

Sam rested until the first light touched the mountains. Then he dreamed again. This time he saw a banner flying upon the summit of the *Hindu Kosh*,³¹ and a handsome young man emerging from behind the peak, followed by an army. A sage rode at his left and the greatest wise men of the age stood at his right. One among them accused Sam, recounting the suffering of his abandoned child.

The King awoke trembling. He summoned his counselors and elite guards, mounted his horse, and rode at full gallop toward the mountains.

³¹ A major mountain range in Afghanistan known for its rugged terrain, cultural heritage and significance as a trading route and strategic barrier.

At last, he stood before a mountain so high it seemed to touch the sky—beyond the reach of falcons' wings. Near its summit, on a sheer overhanging rock no human could have climbed, Sam saw a young man walking back and forth, radiant against the stone.

He searched in vain for a path leading up to the Simorgh's lofty nest. Finding none, he cast himself upon the ground, pressing his forehead to the earth and imploring God to return the son he had condemned to death. His prayer, born of remorse, was swiftly answered.

From its high perch, the Simorgh saw Sam and his companions and understood their purpose. It spoke to Zal:

"I am your foster father. I raised you and named you Dastān-Zand. Your true father, Sam, has come for you. The time has arrived for me to carry you down to him. I do not surrender you as an enemy; I guide you toward your rightful throne. Your presence here honored me, but your true place lies in your father's palace."

The Simorgh spread its mighty wings, lifted Zal in its talons, and set him gently beside his father. At the sight of his son, Sam exhaled a long breath, heavy with joy and sorrow alike. He praised the king of birds for its justice, wisdom, strength, and majesty.

Sam felt that he had entered a happiness known only in paradise.

Descending the mountain, he ordered royal garments for his son and wrapped them around him with his own hands, saying:

“From this moment, I shall leave none of your wishes unfulfilled.”

The army burst into cries of joy. Golden bells rang, horsemen thundered forward, and amid celebration they turned back toward the capital. Messengers rode from Zabul³² to the court of *Manuchehr*³³, bearing news of Sam and Zal.

The *King of Kings*³⁴ Manuchehr, commanded his son Nozar to ride out, meet them, and escort them to the royal palace.

When they stood before Manuchehr, he congratulated both father and son, rejoicing at the sight of Zal. He ordered that the young prince be instructed in warfare, custom, and royal conduct—everything befitting a ruler—for until then Zal had known only the Simorgh, its nest, and the solitude of the mountain.

³² Zabul is a province in southern Afghanistan.

³³ *Manuchehr* is a legendary figure in Persian history, appearing in the “*Shahnameh*” (Book of Kings) as the eighth Shah of the Pishdadian dynasty. *Shahnameh* is one of the world’s greatest Epic poems.

³⁴ The term *Shāhanshāh* literally means “King of Kings” and historically denoted the supreme ruler of a vast empire, such as the Achaemenid or Sasanian monarchs in Iran. It is synonymous with emperor.

Sam said:

“I have sworn never to deny him any desire.”

The emperor praised this vow and ordered a magnificent feast. Arabian horses with golden harnesses were bestowed, swords from India set with precious stones, fine linens, furs, and heaps of gold. Servants from Rome poured wine into jewel-studded cups.

When the feast ended, Manuchehr issued a decree granting Sam dominion over lands stretching from the China Sea to the Indian Ocean, and from Zabulestan to the borders of Bost. An elephant was adorned with a palanquin so that Sam and Zal might return to their realm in splendor.

In time, Zal mastered the arts of rule and war. When Sam departed for the campaigns of Gorgzaran and Mazandaran, he entrusted the throne to his son as regent.

Zal governed Zabul wisely, to the satisfaction of all. Yet longing for his father grew within him. He gathered the sages, placed authority in their hands, and set out with his elite guards toward *Kabulistan*³⁵.

When the ruler of that land, *Mehrab*, learned of Zal's arrival, he went forth to meet him. Zal received him with honor, and a great feast was prepared. As

³⁵ Kabulistan is a historical regional name for the territory centered on present-day Kabul Province, Afghanistan, and sometimes extending westward along the southern edge of the Hindu Kush uplands

Mehrab observed the son of Sam, his heart was stirred, for he recognized in him a man of rare valor.

When Mehrab departed, Zal turned to his companions and said:

“I have never met a man like Mehrab. None seems braver than he.”

One of his attendants confirmed this and added that Mehrab had a daughter whose face shone brighter than the sun, whose form curved like the moon, and whose hair carried the scent of musk.

At these words, Zal fell in love without having seen her.

That night he kept vigil with the stars, and melancholy settled upon his soul as he dreamed of the beloved he had yet to behold.

One day, the king of Kabul came to visit the king of Zabul in his tent. Mehrab received him with courtesy and, in turn, invited Zal to join them. Zal sent Mehrab lavish gifts but excused himself, claiming that his men had drunk too freely and that it would be improper to attend. In his heart, Mehrab felt that it was a good excuse allowing him to depart.

Once more, Zal's companions spoke admiringly of Mehrab. Their talk soon returned to the beauty of the radiant star who adorned Mehrab's household, and they spoke with such fervor that Zal, already wounded by love, lost what little composure remained to him. Days passed swiftly. Love-sickness

took hold of him, yet unwilling to reveal his state, he withdrew ever deeper into solitude.

Not long after, Mehrab returned from a visit with Zal and went to the Shabestan, where his two stars shone: Sine Dokht, his wife, and Rodabah, his daughter. Rodabah, fresh as a garden of fragrant blossoms, came to greet him beside her mother. At the sight of them, Mehrab praised the name of the Lord.

Sine Dokht asked:

“How is this white-haired prince, the son of Sam? What is his countenance like? Does he speak of the throne or of the Simorgh and its mountain lair?”

Mehrab replied:

“There is no man in this world as valiant as he. He has the heart of a lion and the strength of an elephant; his generosity flows like the Nile. As a king, he gives away gold; as a general, he makes heads fall. His hair may be white, but his youthful face shines like the sun.”

As Rodabah listened, her cheeks flushed like ripe pomegranates. From that moment, she too fell captive to love, and her soul knew no rest.

Did not a philosopher of old warn that one should never praise men in the presence of women or young girls?

Rodabah was attended by five faithful maidservants. To them she confided her secret and

sought their counsel. The women were astonished and said:

“O most beautiful of the beautiful, all adore you from India to China and compare you to the moon and the stars. You are the jewel of your father’s palace. How could you give your heart to a man rejected by his own father, one raised by a bird upon a mountain?”

Rodabah silenced them angrily and said:

“My heart has lost its stars. How can it be whole without the moon? Zal is my body and my soul.”

Hearing the sorrow in her voice, the servants understood the depth of her love. They sought to console her and, above all, urged her to keep her secret. They promised, however, that they would guide Zal toward his beloved.

Spring had come. Zal had pitched his camp beside a river, and Rodabah’s maidservants crossed to the opposite bank to gather flowers. From afar, Zal noticed them and asked who they were. He was told they served Rodabah.

At that moment, a wild duck took flight. Zal seized his bow and struck the bird in midair; it fell upon the far bank. He ordered a slave to cross the river and retrieve it. As the man stepped ashore, one of the maids asked him who had loosened the arrow. He answered:

“Zal, son of King Sam, prince of Zabul.”

The maidservants marveled at his skill and said:

“Nothing created in this world is more beautiful than our princess Rodabah. She is a vision of paradise.”

The slave returned and reported their words to Zal. Hearing them, his heart felt suddenly renewed, and hope returned to him. He ordered that the maidservants be brought before him, and they spoke at length, praising the virtues and beauty of their mistress.

Zal rewarded the maidservants with gold and jewels, and for the princess he entrusted to them the ring he had received from Manuchehr. Delighted, they promised to lift his sorrow by guiding him to Rodabah.

As she waited for their return, the princess kept her eyes fixed upon the path they would take. Her heartbeat seemed to mark each imagined step. When the maids arrived, they recounted every word and gesture of the meeting. Rodabah, laughing now and radiant as the moon in the firmament, ordered them at once to send word to Zal that Mehrab’s daughter was fading with longing to behold him.

A day of yearning ended when the sun sought refuge in the dark shelter of night. Zal set out at last, drawn by love and hope.

Rodabah waited at the summit of the castle tower, her gaze never leaving the path he would take. When she saw him approach, she called down in welcome. At the sight of her, Zal felt himself grow twice as young and twice as intoxicated with love. Rodabah let down her long hair to the ground so that

he might climb to her, but her beloved's hands first caressed it, and his lips kissed it. Then Zal took a noose from his saddle, cast it upward toward the tower, and in an instant climbed to her side.

Drunk with joy, the two entered the chamber. Rodabah glanced at Zal shyly from the corner of her eye. Their hearts overflowed; they bound themselves with eternal vows.

Zal said:

“Manuchehr and my father Sam will be angered. Yet I will do all that lies within the power of this world to make you my wife.”

She answered:

“Let the Creator of the two worlds bear witness to my vow: no one but you shall reign over my heart.”

The greater their love grew, the more their reason withdrew.

Night fled. Dawn painted the mountains of Kabul, roosters crowed, and the sun scattered darkness. With tears upon their lashes, Zal untied the rope, descended from the tower, mounted his horse, and returned to camp.

At once he summoned his sages and commanders, revealed his secret, and sought their counsel. A heavy silence fell upon the gathering.

Because King Mehrab was descended from Zohak³⁶, the sages feared the wrath of Manuchehr and Sam alike.

Zal understood their silence and asked whether they saw any path forward. They urged patience and reminded him that Mehrab, despite his lineage, was a just and valiant ruler. At last, they advised that the wisest course would be to write to Sam.

Zal called for a scribe and dictated:

*I send greetings to my father and praise his name.
O you whose merit has earned the throne and the crown: You know my fate from the moment of my birth, while my father lived as a king, he placed me upon the wings of the Simorgh of the Hindu Kush. Instead of milk, I drank blood, until I descended from the heights to the throne.*

*Now destiny has led me to a matter I can confide only to one I love. I am caught in the lake of love, and Rodabah, daughter of Mehrab, is its shore. My nights are dark beneath the stars who keep me company, by the river that has been my mother. The mountain stands witness to your promise to fulfill all my desires.**

When the letter reached Sam, sorrow weighed heavily upon his heart, and he said:

³⁶ In Afghan folklore, the name has been adapted into the “Serpent King of Kabul” legend, symbolizing greed, betrayal, and tyranny. Zohak is portrayed as a personification of evil, often depicted as a serpent-like ruler who oppresses his people

“It is no wonder that one raised by the giant of birds should ask for the fulfillment of his desires.”

Sam summoned his sages, and together the magi searched the constellations to read the secrets of the future.

They spoke as one:

“From this union will be born one great among the great. He will overthrow the wicked. He will erase all trace of Saksār³⁷ and Mazandaran³⁸. With the might of his club he will make the earth tremble. He will be a scourge to the enemies of his land and a benefactor to his people.

Hearing this, Sam’s heart filled with joy. He sent word to his son, and Zal learned of his father’s consent. Now only the approval of Manuchehr remained and Zal was full of hope.

A woman served as messenger between the two lovers. One day, while carrying a message from Zal to Rodabah, she aroused suspicion of Sine Dokht. Pressed with questions, the woman revealed that Zal

³⁷ The term "Saksār" appears in some historical and literary contexts as a variant or related form, often linked to the same heroic lineage of Sohrab, the son of Rostam. A character in the *Shahnameh* or other classical Persian epics

³⁸ The name comes from the Avestan language, meaning “the gate of the giants” or “the valley of the giants.” Today, a geographic name for a province in northern Iran. Historically, the region was depicted in the *Shahnameh* as a land inhabited by supernatural beings (daevas/divs) and sorcerers, making it difficult to conquer.

and Rodabah had spent an entire night together, speaking of love and exchanging vows.

Sine Dokht was struck dumb. She feared above all that Mehrab would learn the truth.

Seeing her distress, Mehrab questioned her relentlessly, until she told him all. When she finished, his rage flared. His hand flew to his sword; his face darkened like lapis lazuli³⁹.

Sine Dokht burst into tears, yet even in sorrow she did not lose her wisdom. With calm words she softened her husband's anger and stayed his hand.

When Manuchehr learned of these events, he was deeply troubled. He sent Nozar to summon Sam before he returned to Zabul. Sam rejoiced at seeing Nozar and set out at once. Manuchehr rode out with his army to meet his old companion and escorted him to the palace.

They spoke of the recent war in Mazandaran. Sam recounted his victories. Neither man uttered the name of Mehrab.

A few days later, before Sam could speak of his son, Manuchehr summoned him and said:

³⁹ The vibrant blue color of lapis lazuli is often associated with spirituality and protection, making it a popular choice for talismans and decorative pieces. In Afghan culture, lapis lazuli is not just a gemstone; it represents artistry and tradition.

“The time has come to rid the earth of the dragon’s egg. Go, crush Mehrab and destroy Kabulistan.”

Sam received the command without protest, though astonishment seized him. He spoke not a word of Zal and departed for Kabulistan.

When Zal heard of this order, he went at once to his father. He reminded him of the past and of the promise sworn before heaven. A double burden pressed upon the shoulders of the lord of Zabul: the oath made to his son and the command of the king to whom he owed obedience.

After long reflection, Sam said:

“Go to Manuchehr yourself. Perhaps your youth, your skill, and the truth of your heart will persuade him to turn away from destruction.”

Zal praised his father’s wisdom.

A scribe was summoned, and Sam dictated:

From the most obedient of warriors, bearer of the mighty club, to the King of Kings, Manuchehr: The conquest of Gorgzaran and Mazandaran by your command bears witness to my loyalty. I remind the king that he himself stood witness to the promise I made to my son Zal. I now send him with this letter, that he may reveal his secret to you in person. May the king uphold the word of a warrior, and may the victor over enemies not be made to violate his oath.

Zal, true son of the Simorgh, leapt into the saddle and rode toward Manuchehr. He carried his father's message and the hope that his own valor might uproot the hatred the King of Kings bore toward Mehrab. He intended to speak openly of his love for Rodabah.

Meanwhile, in Kabul, Mehrab learned of Manuchehr's murderous resolve and of Sam's role in carrying it out. In his fury, he turned upon Sine Dokht and revealed the news.

She answered calmly:

"If you grant me leave to go to Sam, I will persuade him to turn away from war and spare Kabulistan."

Thus Sine Dokht set out as Mehrab's envoy to Sam, bearing many gifts. Like a seasoned warrior tempered by wisdom, she spoke with calm and persuasive words that eased Sam's heavy heart. He swore by oath that he would never destroy Kabul nor shed the blood of its people. Sine Dokht, satisfied, returned to Kabul to bring Mehrab the glad tidings: Sam would soon come not as an enemy, but as an honored guest.

Meanwhile, Zal arrived at the court of Manuchehr and greeted him with reverence. Upon reading Sam's letter, Manuchehr summoned his magi to consult the stars. For three days they observed the destinies of Zal and Rodabah written in the heavens. At last, they declared their union a favorable omen.

Reassured, the king ordered that Zal's wisdom be tested before his sages.

One asked:

"I seek twelve cypress trees, each bearing thirty branches."

Another said:

"I seek two noble horses, swift as the wind: one black as a deep lake, the other white as shining crystal. They run without rest, yet never meet."

A third asked:

"Do you know the thirty horsemen who, as they pass before the king, lose one companion, yet are thirty again when you recount them?"

The fourth spoke:

"There is a meadow filled with streams and flowers. A man enters it with a sharp sickle and cuts both green and dry grass alike, heedless of cries or groans. Where is this meadow, and who is this being?"

The fifth asked:

"What are the two cypress trees chosen by a bird for its rest, perching on one by day and the other by night? When it leaves the first, the tree withers; when it rests on the second, a musk-like fragrance arises."

At last, the sixth sage posed the final riddle:

“What is the city abandoned by its people who fled to the desert, where suddenly a wind will rise and reduce the tallest buildings to dust?”

Zal reflected, then replied:

“A year has twelve months, and each month thirty days; thus the universe turns.”

“Night and day follow one another, racing without ever meeting; thus time flows.”

“You speak of months, yet did not mention that sometimes a day is lost and regained

Time is the reaper, and we are the grass it cuts. Heaven heeds neither youth nor age, neither tears nor lamentation.”

“The two cypresses are the two halves of existence. The bird is the sun, bearer of hope and sorrow. Where it rests, life blooms; where it departs, all fades.”

“The city is the City of the Last Judgment. The desert is this world, rich in comfort and treasure yet burdened with pain and suffering. When death arrives, all return to the eternal city.”

At these answers, the king and his court rejoiced. A great feast was proclaimed; music, dancing, and contests followed one another without pause.

The next morning, when the world shone with the brightness of Badakhshan mountain⁴⁰, Zal buckled his belt and went forth to meet the King of Kings.

He ordered his warriors, wrestlers, and champions to gather in the great square. Zal joined them, and the contests began anew. In every trial, strength, skill, and endurance, Zal prevailed.

Then came the answer Zal had awaited.

Manuchehr dictated his reply to Sam's letter and dispatched a messenger at once. The next day, he himself prepared to return to his realm.

When the messenger reached Sam, Sam ordered the city of Kabul to be lit with torches of celebration. The glad tidings were carried to Mehrab, to Sine Dokht, and to Rodabah.

Zal reached his father the following day and recounted every word spoken in Manuchehr's palace. At once, the news was sent to Kabul, and preparations for the wedding began. The palace was illuminated and shone like paradise itself. A golden throne was set in place.

Rodabah, too, prepared for the union. From one end of Kabul to the other, the city felt like Eden rediscovered. All ancestral rites and ancient customs were honored.

⁴⁰ In Afghan and Central Asian cultural contexts, the brightness of the Badakhshan mountains is more than a visual phenomenon — it is a symbol of endurance, resilience, and spiritual significance.

The king and the moon sat together upon the throne, and gifts were distributed among the people.

Thus, the daughter of the king of Kabul became the wife of the prince of Zabul, and love—joined to wisdom, lineage reconciled with destiny—entered history as an enduring and exemplary legend.

The Wanderer

It is a blessing that thoughts and imaginings visit us from time to time, for through them we discover ourselves. Their very presence reminds us that we still exist. With their joys and sorrows alike, they sustain us in our pursuit of “life,” keeping us from surrendering as we wait for what we seek, and allowing us to remain faithful to the path that “aspiration” has chosen for us.⁴¹

Thought comes and sits beside us, knee to knee, or walks with us hand in hand. In darkness, it opens our eyes; in light, it gently turns our gaze, lest brilliance itself should blind us. It does not permit us to yield to unfounded fears or become captive to deceptive illusions.

Imagination arrives and gathers us into its embrace. It brings distant worlds within our reach. It closes our eyes only to illuminate the darkness within. Surrounded by shadow, we begin to shine from within, filled with a quiet warmth whose

⁴¹ *Awara* is translated in English as *Wanderer*, but it carries a heavier emotional tone in Afghan literature and poetry than the English word.

gentle radiance softens the chill of being. That touch awakens the messages for which we have long yearned and whispers them into our hearts. Even those things that once turned away from us return, drawing us once more into their embrace.

One sweetens our sleep, spreading over us the gentle mantle of pleasant dreams; the other softly calls us awake. One promises sweeter dreams so that we may pursue them; the other draws us more deeply into the peace we already possess.

Thought tells us to create life out of desire; imagination tells us to devote life to the creation of desire.

When thought and imagination mingle, they lead us to a realm where light and shadow together inscribe the image of life—with all its truth and beauty—upon the page of nature. There our eyes learn to love what they behold, and our hearts to revere it. Then we begin to see, to embrace, and to breathe the peace and joy we have long been seeking.

Accompanied by these thoughts and imaginings, I walk beside Lake Léman. I am nothing more than a wandering traveler, driven onward by the weariness of life and the thirst of unfulfilled desires. Before me lies little more than what I have left behind.

The mountain beneath whose shadow I was born, the tree beneath whose branches I played, the garden whose spring awakened my imagination, the parched fields that taught me how to think—all

these I abandoned before casting myself upon a sea whose distant shores belonged to strangers.

I have washed ashore upon this foreign land. When I look behind me, I see familiar faces whose suffering I could not bear to witness. Before me pass unfamiliar faces whom I cannot yet approach. I have left those I knew, yet I cannot truly belong among those I now meet.

To remain here is impossible. To move forward seems futile. To return, if not unbearable, is certainly no easy path.

Yes, with these thoughts and imaginings I walk beside the lake, where life has no fixed resting place and where man no longer knows where he stands or where he is bound.

The moon had poured itself into the lake. The mountains, bathed in its silver light, soothed the eye from every direction. Their snowy summits resembled bare shoulders and bosoms, while the dark slopes below hung like flowing skirts from silver waists.

I walk beside this lake with a joy of life, immersed in the radiance of my desires—desires awakened by the beauty of nature, which is itself the Creator's wish made visible.

The world, and everything within it, seemed adorned as though shaped and polished by absolute Beauty and absolute Power. Within the embrace of imagination, I found myself enclosed in a circle whose every boundary was beauty and majesty.

The vision shone like a precious jewel, blazing like the sun at the heart of life's shadows and sending its light toward every horizon. It surrounded me so completely that everything appeared as both ring and jewel: the sky was a ring and the moon its gem; the mountains a ring and the lake its jewel; the lake a ring and the solitary boat its jewel.

Nature and the beauty it contains; body and soul; fear and hope; present and future; heart and longing—everything revealed itself in the same harmonious order.

She is the joy of life toward whom I move, and I am the yearning toward which she comes. She was created in one place and I in another, so that "coming together" and "waiting for each other" might themselves come into being. We had no choice in this matter, nor do we have one now. I am satisfied that such choice was never given to us.

I have observed that whenever we imagine ourselves to be our own creators, we diminish ourselves until even the smallest attainment persuades us that we are complete. Amid the immensity of creation, we deprive ourselves of much and lose far more than we know.

Absolute Will and Absolute Power have ordained the limits of our being. We cannot become greater than ourselves.

Better, then, to remain in the hands of the Divine and gather the essence of our existence in the lap of eternity. Otherwise, nights such as this—

and moments such as these—pass without leaving their light within us.

Slowly I continue along the water's edge. From time to time, I stop and draw the pure air into my lungs as though draining a brimming goblet in a single draft.

I imagine my chest wider than nature itself, and I know I shall not feel fulfilled until everything that fills the horizon—from the shores of the lake to the farthest reaches of the sky, like an overflowing cup—has poured itself into my soul.

She too dwells within the embrace of beauty and imagination. It seems as though nature has offered itself wholly to her, and she, with a single smile, offers it all back to me.

At times we see no one but each other, yet it seems as though nothing in the world is hidden from our sight. We sense that we are searching for something. We know what it is and where it lies; we know it is within our reach. Yet, like those held beneath an enchantment, waiting only for the magician's touch, we remain silent until conversation awakens of its own accord.

Seeing and listening with her revealed to me things I had never perceived alone or in the company of others.

No one can see everything alone. Unless two gazes meet and mingle, the colors of being remain incomplete. What lies hidden within the vast design

of existence cannot be understood through one's own eyes alone.

Life is the greatest and most mysterious of all designs, the most delicate of forms. A man alone is like one deprived of sight; a woman alone is like an eye severed from the face that gives it vision.

Humanity is one wherever it dwells, and woman and man share equally in that common humanity. Yet their thoughts, their imaginings, and the colors with which they illuminate existence differ so beautifully that no two souls can ever behold the world in precisely the same way.

Through her eyes I discovered simple truths my own gaze had long overlooked. They lay quietly within those very things I had once believed to be profound.

And the depths she discerned in my eyes led her beyond those simplicities, without which life's tenderness and beauty cannot endure.

I was born in the East and carried into the West. She was born in the West and remained there. It seemed to me that the East is like the depths of the sea, while the West is like its open surface.

To us, life remains a mystery because we have not yet unraveled it. To the Westerner, it appears simple to the extent that he or she has succeeded in understanding it.

The unfinished mysteries of the East and the unfinished simplicities of the West await the gaze of generations yet to come.

East and West alike stand in need of the same spiritual fulfillment. Both await the perfect unity of human souls and the true communion of hearts that beat within the heart of creation and flow, like warm and vital blood, through the veins of life's vast seas until they find peace in the boundless ocean of truth.

That eye and this heart open upon horizons whose sunlight and moonlight recognize neither East nor West.

If there is a difference in the way we see, it draws us nearer rather than farther apart—just as two lips part only so that they may meet again. Our separation is, in truth, the beginning of our union.

From that longing, speech is born. It gives voice to understanding and feeling, carrying what lies hidden within one heart and soul into another.

Thus, whatever dwelt within the heart of nature and within the heart of that night flowed upon the tongue of the running water and was illumined beneath the moon.

Conversation is the moment when two souls truly discover one another. We Easterners often sit together and speak, yet our words seem to preserve the distance between us. Westerners speak as though each word were a step toward one another.

Ours is too often the language of separation; theirs, the language of communion.

We withdraw from one another; they move toward one another.

Beside her, all that beauty became the very body of Beauty itself—a beauty that, finding a pure gaze, no longer sought to conceal either itself or the nakedness of its soul. The innocence of that gaze clothed beauty more gracefully than garments ever could. In its stillness and in its movement there was a quiet enchantment through which the whole world gathered the heart into its embrace and danced before the spirit.

I looked into her eyes with the gaze a man turns toward a woman—not because all that beauty was contained within them, but because through those eyes she bestowed upon the world of beauty something it had not possessed before.

I received from existence.

She gave to existence.

The secret of becoming one with what we seek is to add ourselves to the beauty already revealed in nature. Yet we persist in coloring life with separation. Instead of going forth to meet the greatness and majesty of existence, we wait for them to come to us—and they never do.

Before I knew her, I believed nature to be complete. After meeting her, I realized that it lacked an entire world. All those lights, without the

radiance of friendship and the sign of love, were no more than shadows from which the marks of truth had faded.

The relationship between East and West resembles the journey of the sun. Just as the sun rises in the East and comes to rest in the West, the Eastern spirit is still upon its journey, while the Western spirit has drawn nearer to its resting place. Our search still wanders beneath the sky that stretches before us, while the Westerner, having crossed one horizon, already seeks another.

The love and spirit of us Easterners turn inward upon themselves; those of Westerners reach outward beyond themselves. We receive like water; they radiate like fire. We endure like earth; they move with the freedom of air.

I descended into my own depths, while she, light of spirit, floated upon my surface.

We conceal ourselves and become hidden. They reveal themselves and become known. We are like mountains that remain in place, waiting for the moon, the sun, and the stars to pass overhead. They are like the sea, rushing to meet those heavenly lights, gathering their radiance, and carrying it onward.

Our thought and imagination sink into the depths of our inner sea, where we sit upon thrones fashioned from our own pride, adorning ourselves with jewels borrowed from ourselves. They descend instead into the heart of nature and, in that

boundless ocean, transform droplets into pearls and delight in them with freedom.

The East remains captive to itself; the West has learned, at least in part, to free itself from itself.

I had often heard that Westerners were products of the material world. When my own spirit discovered how false that judgment was, it grieved.

We are in the habit of taking such pride in what we possess that we portray those who possess more or better as possessing “nothing at all.” This ... is one way of fleeing the truth of our own condition. We know that if we do not deny and ignore all that others have attained, what we ourselves have attained seems unworthy of satisfaction and fails to console us or be acceptable.

Perhaps it is because we mistake pleasure and enjoyment for materialism while seeking spirituality only in suffering and grief. Or perhaps we have never understood the spirituality of joys, nor comprehended the material causes of miseries; or perhaps we have never wished to understand and are unable to tolerate the wisdom. Or perhaps, since our appetite is large for calling names, we label everything whatever pleases us.

The waves of the lake mingled with the luminous currents of the night air. Her beautiful hair drifted gently in the breeze above the water. Beneath the moonlight, her silver forearm seemed like a line of living light, delicately and perfectly drawn between two currents of air, gliding before my eyes.

There, before the majesty of nature and in the presence of that radiant spirit, it seemed impossible for the heart to entertain any thought but surrender—to the beauty of the mountains, the quiet splendor of the shore, the serenity of the lake, and the mystery that embraced them all.

And yet...

I was a traveler.

The memory of loftier mountains and whiter snows drew me irresistibly toward them. In the eye of imagination, I saw the snow-clad peaks of Paghman⁴² gleaming in the distance, beckoning me like a beautiful maiden whose beauty calls forth the silent prayers of devoted hearts.

Yet as I drew nearer, I saw only the radiant shoulders and bosom of beauty. Below that graceful neck, her body had been severed away to the hem of her garment—a hem untouched by the flowers of life and unstirred by the life-giving breeze of joy.

Among those mountains, Kabul shines through the dust of memory like a jewel fallen upon the earth—a city whose narrow ridges and broken rocky contours divide its sky from its soil.

Its beauty has given birth to legends, yet youth passes there in sorrow, and even the thought of old age is tinged with sadness. Like an old man mourning a beloved child, the burning sun has

⁴² Paghman is a resort near Kabul City famous for its natural beauty and weather.

settled the dust of forgotten graves into the deep and noble furrows of its brow.

Kabul is the most broken-hearted remnant of antiquity, preserved by time as a memory both magnificent and mournful. How could one ever cast it from the heart?

Its iron mountains, like a chain fastened around the neck of a clay figure, press upon the eye with their immense and unyielding weight.

Above the city rises a fortress like a dragon coiled around its people, its shadow encircling their hopes. Within its embrace, their longings and their freedom remain imprisoned.

Kabul is our city. Whatever it once was, it was our city. Whatever it is today, it is our city. Whatever it may yet become, it will remain our city. And I am content—profoundly content—and equally filled with longing that it was so, that it is so, and that it shall always remain so.

Nature entrusted it to our keeping, and our love has stood faithful guard over its memory. We have placed it within hearts that cherish their own sorrows and hold them dearer than the happiness of others.

We keep watch over a city in which even dangers themselves seem imprisoned, and we devote our lives to guarding them.

Then the memories of darkness and the silence of death dim the moonlight upon the waters of Lake

Léman. They wash the radiance of joy from my eyes. Yet even amid such beauty, the thought of exile from that city—the center of our existence, the heart of our being—drives us to the edge of madness.

The light of joy slowly fades from my eyes.

It is then that Western eyes look into Eastern eyes.

Her gaze fills with wonder before a mystery she cannot name. The more she comes to know me, the more foreign I appear to her. She falls silent and calls me an enigma.

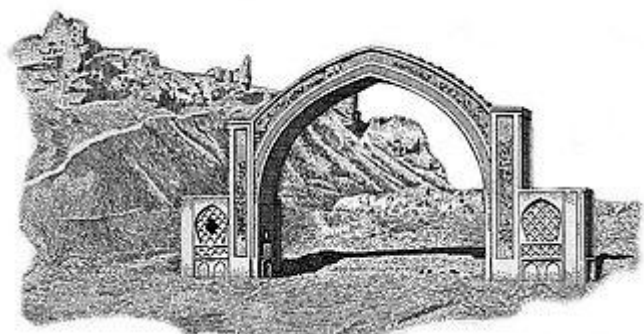
She remembers the spiritual secret through which the ancient East once sought the mysteries of existence and imagines that the legendary sun still rises from the eastern horizon. She does not know that our mystery today is little more than the secret of a grave in which the heart of the mystic has long been buried. We merely persuade ourselves that this forgotten grave remains a treasure upon which thought and imagination still bestow their reverence.

Perhaps that Westerner understands.

But the East itself does not yet know that the soul has departed from its body—and that, unless it awakens, it may vanish forever.

Yes... when she understands, compassion enters her gaze with such quiet tenderness that it pierces my heart.

In that moment, I long to tell my story and
reveal my secrets. But I am an Easterner; I conceal
myself and remain concealed. Do not wait to hear
my story!



About Abdur Rahman Pazhwak



Ambassador A. R. Pazhwak at the United Nations
(New York, 1966)

*Abdur Rahman (Abdul Rahman) Pazhwak (1919–1995)** was one of Afghanistan's foremost poets, writers, diplomats, and intellectuals of the twentieth century. A leading voice in the country's literary and public life, he helped shape modern

Afghan cultural identity while representing Afghanistan with distinction on the international stage. Throughout a career that spanned journalism, diplomacy, and public service, he exemplified Afghan patriotism and advocated for liberty, equality and justice for all on both domestic and international stage.

Although not a professional historian, Pazhwak's literary, journalistic, and diplomatic writings are imbued with a profound historical consciousness and philosophical depth. Drawing inspiration from Afghanistan's ancient civilizations, rich cultural traditions, and collective memory, his work looks both to the past and to the future, affirming the enduring values of freedom, education, civic responsibility, and the dignity of the individual.

Whether writing poetry, philosophical prose, journalism, or representing his country abroad, Pazhwak consistently expressed a deeply humanistic vision rooted in love for Afghanistan and confidence in its place within the broader history of world civilization. His writings continue to offer a distinctly Afghan perspective on nature, beauty, culture, justice, and humanity's shared aspirations.

The stories gathered in this volume were collected, adapted, and written during Pazhwak's early literary career and first published in Kabul in the 1950s. Inspired by Afghanistan's rich oral storytelling tradition, they preserve not only the voices of the past but also the moral imagination,

poetic sensibility, and cultural heritage of a people whose stories had long been passed from one generation to the next. Together, they stand as a lasting testament to Pazhwak's literary artistry and to his lifelong devotion to Afghanistan and its people.

Farhad Pazhwak

President, Pazhwak Foundation Inc.

www.pazhwakfoundation.com