

Tales from the Land of the Sufis
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'ABDUL-RAHMAN JAMI

The Last of the Great Storytellers

I am like a ball in the field of months and years.
In fate's game of polo, I roll from station to station.
In the year eight hundred and seventeen from the Prophet's
journey,
who left Mecca for Yathreb and built his camp of majesty,
From the top of the majestic mountain of pre-eternity,
I opened my wings and flew to this low valley of futility.
Today I have dragged to the year eight hundred and ninety-three
the ruins of the chariot of life in this narrow passage of fantasy.
In between these two dates, in my lifetime,
Oh, what turmoil has passed from the vagaries of life.

ABDUL-RAHMAN JAMI, Iran's last great classical poet, described himself thus in his concise autobiography, *Rashah-i bal fi sharh-i hal* (The Exudation of Memory for Biography). Thanks to this work, and those of many other writers, we have a good picture of the life and character of this master of both Sufism and literature.

In the *Exudation*, Jami indicates that he was sent to school at an early age. After he gained sufficient experience in reading and writing, he began studying the Qur'an. Once he had learned and memorized the entire book, he continued with linguistics, logic, and

philosophy. Then he undertook and completed mathematics, astronomy, and other subjects. Finally he mastered Islamic law, interpretation, and the Hadith (Traditions). In his words:

From the science of Divine Law and its pillars,
I knew the reason behind every commandment.

From studying the Traditions, I became familiar with
the Prophet's way and the methods of his companions.

However, the exoteric sciences were not enough:

But my thirst was not satisfied with these sciences
So I decided to apply what I had learned.

I joined the ranks of the pure-hearted Sufis
whose aim of studying is to become.

Jami does not indicate when he decided to be initiated, but apparently it was when he was still quite young. Moreover, he seems to have passed through the stages of development with remarkable speed:

Remembrance and spiritual thought elevated me to the level
at which the veils of Truth were pushed aside.

Jami tells us that after he reached a certain level of illumination, he was given the responsibility of composing poetry. He offers no further details of his life. Fortunately, however, many prominent people of the time wrote about him.

Jami was born in 1439 C.E. (817 on the Muslim calendar) in the district of Jam in the province of Khurasan. His birth came some five hundred years after Hallaj, who had lived in a very turbulent era. In Jami's century Sufism was well established, and many eminent masters such as Shah Ni'matullah Wali, Muhammad Nurbakhsh, and Baha'uddin Naqshband had laid the foundations of some of the largest Sufi orders in Iran and India. By the time Jami was born, the invasion of the Mongols as well as the Tartars had

taken place, and a relative peace had been established in both Persia and northern India. This break from warring times provided an opportunity for rebuilding Persia, in particular the capital city of Herat, where Jami spent most of his life.

King Shahrukh, a son of the Tartar invader, Tamerlane, and his wife were patrons of the arts and sciences, and especially of Sufism. In fact, there is a legend that whenever Shahrukh visited a city, he first visited the local *khanaqah* and its shaykh. As a result of Shahrukh's interests, Herat became a center of the arts and sciences. Thus, Jami was born in a flourishing society in which literature and the arts were at their height.

In a community of many learned scholars, Jami advanced to the top in a very short time. As a mathematician and scientist, he was revered by the scientific community, and the literary community praised him for his contributions to literature and poetry. As a result of his fame, a number of biographies were written about him. The following material is drawn from one of these—*Tadhkari Maykhana* (Memory of the Tavern), written by Qazwini in 1650.

It has been said that Jami's grandfather was one of the learned scholars of the city of Isfahan who moved to Khurasan and settled in the district of Jam, where Jami was born and from which he took his nickname. His father, also an educated man and the Islamic jurist of the district, moved to Herat when Jami was five years old. Jami began his studies with learning the Arabic alphabet under the direction of Junayd Ausuli and then attended the Nizamiyya School under the direction of Samarqandi. By the time he was fifteen, he had finished the courses that were offered. Because of his rare talents, he rose to a level that few had achieved.

He then moved to the city of Samarkand and continued his studies with Tabrizi, who was also the teacher of Agha Baik, the grand vizier of the time. This connection caused the eminent people of Samarkand to hear about him and admire his works. It is

said that Abdul-Rahman Jami spent nine years in Samarkand, then left the city to return to Herat.

The biographers indicate he took a position with the school that King Shahrukh had built and began to teach. His fame was such that even Shahrukh's successor came to his lectures. It is said that Jami mastered every branch of the sciences of the time and wrote commentaries on them. His circle of knowledge included Sufism as well. In fact, he was held by many as an equal to 'Ibn Arabi, if not superior to him. Jami wrote a number of critical commentaries and explanations of portions of 'Ibn Arabi's *Fusus el-Hekam* (Jewels of Wisdom).

He seems to have lived in Herat until he was about sixty or sixty-four years of age, then left for Mecca on pilgrimage. There is a story that a number of people, who were sad to see him leave, told him that every good deed that he had done was equivalent to a pilgrimage done on foot (implying that the seeker had walked through the desert). He merely smiled and replied that his feet were tired of these journeys and he wanted to ride to Mecca for a change.

From Mecca, Jami left for Syria, then continued on to Egypt and Iraq and back to Herat. In all these countries, he was received with the highest honors and respect. He died at the age of eighty-one.

Qazwini does not offer any account of Jami's Sufism — except to say that he was good at it! One of his students, 'Abdul Ghafur Lari, related in a book titled *Taklameh* (Spoken Letter) that apparently Jami left Herat because he had developed a romantic interest in someone, and to rid himself of the desire he went to Samarkand and immersed himself in his studies. One night he was particularly sad thinking about his beloved when in a vision he beheld Sufi master Kashghari telling him, "My dear brother, go and find a lover that you cannot let go!"

The Beloved called from the Tavern, "Come,"
Then gave me the wine of love, cup after cup.

I rid myself of the shackles of logic and reason,
Then began to weep and cry for union.

After this vision, Jami was deeply affected and left for Herat, only to come to Master Kashghari.

I saw a master under the blue heaven.
He was cleansed from his self like no other.
He was a mirror that reflected the Sun of Existence,
Reflections permanently shining in the form of a human.

In a relatively short period of time, he traversed the difficult steps of the Path and reached a high level of perfection. In 1482, Kashghari died and Jami turned to Khwaja Ahrar for further instruction and guidance. These two masters seem to have affected him the most. There were others, but they were of much less significance in Jami's life.

These two masters were of the Naqshbandi Order. Jami mentions that when he was five years old he met Khwaja Muhammad Parsa, who gave him a piece of rock candy. At the age of sixty Jami could still remember Parsa's glowing face and the look of loving-kindness in his eyes. Parsa was one of the most renowned masters of the Naqshbandi Order, and Jami attributes his inclination toward the Naqshbandi path to his childhood experience with Parsa.

Jami lived a very long life. His disciple Lari describes his last few days:

The number of years he lived was equivalent to the word *ka's* (in the science of the letters of Sufism, every letter has a corresponding number. In this way, letters were sometimes used as a means of passing information only to initiates. The words *ka's* in Arabic and *jam* in Persian both mean "cup." However, the word cup can also be taken to mean that which holds the Divine wine of love and knowledge. In other words, Lari may be referring to the high spiritual station of his master.

In his last year he had a vision about his time of departure, and very often he would recite the following.

It is a shame that without us many days will pass,
The flowers will bloom and spring will come.
Many summers, winters, and springs will pass,
and we will have turned into dust and clay.

A few days before his death, Jami began traveling to several nearby villages. One time he went to a village that he did not particularly care for; nevertheless, his stay became lengthy. His disciples, worried, rushed there. He told them, "We should cut ties."

Three days before his departure, he called some close disciples in and said to them, "Be my witness that I have no ties with anything or anyone." On Friday morning, at dawn, he felt the movement of the life force from his body. He stood to pray and then sat to attend to his litanies. By midmorning, he had departed.

A humorous story is told of the day of Jami's death. The Sufis, sad to see him about to depart this earth, had gathered at his house. Some were quietly weeping, while others were busy with their litanies. But one man was reciting the Holy Qur'an in a loud, harsh voice, disturbing everybody. Finally, Jami raised his head and said, "For God's sake, I will die if you don't stop that racket!"

Jami remarked on his own humorous nature in the following verse:

It is better to be like lightning—bright.
As long as you live, be happy and laughing.
To bring a smile to a drooping heart
Is better than giving away sweets.

A versatile writer, Jami left as his legacy eighty-one books on a variety of subjects. Among them are collections of poetry, an explanation of the works of Ibn Arabi, and *Haft Aurang*, a collection of seven stories in the form of *mathnawi*. Of these seven stories, his most famous among the common folk is *Yusuf and Zulaykha*, which

we retell here in prose form. The story of Yusuf—the Islamic name for Joseph—is familiar to Jews and Christians from the Book of Genesis in the Bible. The Islamic version—told in sura 12 of the Qur'an and elaborated upon in Jami's poem—is somewhat different from the biblical tale. The episode about the attempted seduction of Joseph by his master's wife, called Zulaykha, here becomes a touching love story, in which Zulaykha's passion for the spiritually beautiful, virtuous Yusuf exemplifies the surrender of the human soul to the Divine Beloved.

YUSUF AND ZULAYKHA

At the beginning of creation, when all of Adam's future descendants were arrayed before him in a vision, he found himself drawn to one in particular, a man with a beauty beyond description. His face shone like the sun, his hair flowed down to his shoulders in curls, and his body was flawless in shape and form, like a tall cypress.

"Who is this man with such ravishing beauty that he casts a shadow over all the rest?" Adam in amazement asked the Lord.

"This is Yusuf," God answered, "the light of your eyes. He is the mirror of your heart, a flower from the garden of Jacob and Abraham. Cherish him."

Born in Canaan, Yusuf and his brother Benjamin were the last of Jacob's children, descendants of Abraham. He was the fairest of Jacob's twelve sons. In fact, his beauty could find no equal among humans, for God had revealed part of His own beauty in Yusuf. Because of this, everyone—young and old, woman and man—fell in love with Yusuf the moment they laid eyes upon him. Jacob was no exception. He loved Yusuf more than the rest of his children and could not bear to be apart from him.

In a land far from Canaan, there lived a king who had a daughter by the name of Zulaykha. So lovely was the girl that many willingly

explains
why Jacob
loved
him

became her slaves just to be near her and serve her. The princess lived in peace and contentment, for her heart was untouched by others and her thoughts were free of worries and troubles.

Dream = Zulaykha
One night, however, Zulaykha dreamed of a man seated upon a throne in a garden. She had never seen so handsome a man before: his face shone like the moon in a dark sky, his eyes were radiant as the stars, and his graceful body seemed like a work of art. One look at the man was enough to pierce Zulaykha's heart, sending a sharp pain through her body. Yet, it was as if she enjoyed the pain, for she could not take her eyes off the man.

In the morning, Zulaykha opened her eyes, smiling—until she realized that the beauty she had seen was only a dream. From that day forth, she found no peace in her soul, thinking of nothing but her beloved, wanting only to see the man in her dream. She spoke of him to no one. In her restlessness, she could not eat, and if she had not had the hope of finding her love in her dreams again, she would not have been able to sleep. Her once-rosy cheeks turned ashen, and her once-regal posture was bent under the painful weight of separation.

2nd dream
Finally, on a particularly bad night, after she had cried for hours and hours, praying that she might see her beloved again, Zulaykha dreamed once more of the man sitting in the garden. But this time, she approached him in the dream and told him of her love and pain, begging him to let her know who he was.

"I am the Grand Vizier of Egypt," the man replied, then suddenly disappeared.

Zulaykha awoke with a sense of calm and contentment in her heart. She sent for her maids, telling them to let the king know that she was once again ready to receive suitors.

When it was learned that the princess was receiving suitors, the kings of other lands began to send caravans to the palace with the most exquisite gifts and jewels in hopes of gaining the princess's hand in marriage. But Zulaykha rejected them all and continued

waiting for the messenger she hoped would arrive from Egypt. This hope, however, was in vain, for no such messenger ever came. Eventually, unable to restrain herself any longer, Zulaykha had her father send a message to the Grand Vizier of Egypt, offering his consent to a marriage between Zulaykha and him. When she heard that the Vizier had accepted the offer, the young princess, now fifteen years old, was overjoyed. She set out for Egypt along with a great number of her maids and a treasure chest full of precious gems and pearls.

In anticipation of Zulaykha's visit, the Vizier had had a pavilion built for his bride-to-be just outside the city, for her to rest in before they met formally. But the princess was so impatient to see her beloved that she asked her chaperone to think of a way that she could have a glimpse of the Vizier without delay. Cautiously, the chaperone crept over to the Vizier's tent and tore a small opening in it; then she summoned her mistress. Upon looking through the opening, Zulaykha sighed and fainted away in shock.

"But this is not the man I saw in my dream," she exclaimed upon awakening—"The man in whose love I have lost my wits, the man who has stolen my peace and happiness!"

For hours Zulaykha wept and pleaded with God for mercy, wishing for her life to end there and then. Finally, a voice came to her from Heaven, saying, "The Grand Vizier of Egypt is not your heart's desire, but without him, reaching your goal will be impossible. Be patient, for you will soon gaze upon the beauty of your beloved by virtue of the company of the Vizier." *a voice reassures her*

The news gladdened Zulaykha's heart. Wiping away her tears, she arose, confident of her future for the first time in as long as she could remember.

Yusuf had just turned fourteen. Shortly after his birthday, he had a dream. In the dream, eleven stars and the moon were all bowing to him in humility. When he told his father about the dream, Jacob

advised him not to let anyone else know about it, especially his brothers, for the dream apparently foretold Yusuf's lordship over his eleven brothers and his parents. Unfortunately, Yusuf confided the dream to a close friend, who in turn told it to Yusuf's brothers. Driven by rage at Yusuf's arrogance and tired of their father's preferential treatment of him, they joined together to plot the elimination of their brother.

The next morning, the sons went to their father and asked permission to take Yusuf on an outing in the countryside with them. Jacob raised numerous objections to the idea, but the brothers insisted so vehemently that in the end their father agreed.

Once out of Jacob's sight, the brothers treated Yusuf with great cruelty. They beat him, tore the clothes from his back, and smeared his face with his own blood. Then they decided to throw him into a nearby well and leave him there, either to die or to be taken as a slave by any caravan that stopped at the well for water.

After three days, a caravan from Medina on its way to Egypt arrived at the well. When one of the travelers sent a bucket down for water, the angel Gabriel commanded Yusuf to get into it. Yusuf, who had been sitting forlornly on a rock, rose on hearing Gabriel's command and climbed into the bucket.

Upon sighting the approaching caravan, the brothers had hidden behind a bush, to see what would become of Yusuf. When they saw a man pull him out of the well, they approached him, claiming that Yusuf was a lazy slave of theirs and that they intended to sell him. The man, a merchant from the south who was struck by Yusuf's beauty, bought him for a few copper coins. Then the caravan loaded up and prepared to leave for Egypt.

Certain that Yusuf would never be able to get back to Canaan, the brothers stained his shirt with goat's blood and presented it to Jacob as proof that the boy had been killed by a wolf during a moment of their negligence. Meanwhile, the merchant who had

pulled Yusuf from the well was preparing to auction him off as a slave in the bazaar of the Nile.

When the caravan arrived in Egypt, word soon spread that an incredibly handsome slave could be found among the Medinan caravan. People from all over came to the bazaar to see this reputed god of beauty. After seeing him, all burned with the desire to buy him. Many gathered up their life's savings to bid for him. Even an old wretched woman brought her only possession, some yarn she had spun. "This is all I have, but at least I can take my place in the crowd of buyers," she said. Enormous prices were offered, but not a single agreement was reached for his sale. For days, Yusuf stood on a wooden stage, dressed in silk, the radiance of his appearance dumbfounding those who caught sight of him.

Zulaykha was on her way back from a day of rest in the country when she heard the commotion in the bazaar. Asking a young man what was causing it, she was told that it concerned a Canaanite slave on display. As soon as the curtains of her carriage were parted for her to have a look at this slave, she cried out in shock and began trembling with excitement and mumbling incoherently. When her chaperone asked her what was wrong, she replied that this man was the one of whom she had dreamed so long ago, and whom she had loved ever since. Of course, Zulaykha set her mind on buying Yusuf. When she told her husband, the Grand Vizier, who had no son of his own, he welcomed the idea. And so Yusuf was soon purchased by the Grand Vizier and Zulaykha.

Needless to say, Zulaykha was not the only one in love with Yusuf. Another young woman, called Bazigha—a beauty in her own right, and wealthy too—had fallen in love with Yusuf just from hearing a description of him. Bazigha left her city for the capital, hoping to find Yusuf. The moment she saw him in the flesh, she collapsed. When she regained consciousness, she dropped at his feet, worshipping his majestic beauty.

Yusuf advised Bazigha thus: "When you see beauty and perfec-

tion in this world, it is nothing but a sign of Him. A beautiful creature is merely a single blossom from the vast garden of God. If you have the eyes to see the perfection, then you must also have the discernment to know that what you see is but a mirror reflecting the image of His face. My appearance, too, is a picture of God's own beauty. But you should know that a picture fades, a flower dies, and the reflection in the mirror is eclipsed by the real Light. It is He Who is real and remains so forever. In that case, why waste your time over something that is here today and gone tomorrow? Go directly to the Source without delay."

Bazigha replied, "Now that you have given me the secret, I can see the true Light. You have torn away the veil from my blinded eyes. Now that I can see the Beloved, I can love no other but Him, and I shall not rest until I am in union with Him. If every hair on my head could praise and thank you for awakening me, it would only be a small portion of the gratitude I owe you."

Bazigha said farewell to Yusuf and returned to her hometown. She gave away all her wealth, even her house and clothing. Wearing a coat of felt on her back, and eating only once a day, she resided in a cell on the banks of the Nile. Turning her back on worldly possessions, she spent the rest of her life in retreat, devoted to her Divine Beloved.

Zulaykha, on the other hand, was more than gratified at the turn of events that had brought her beloved to her. Ironically, from the day she had bought Yusuf, it was she who had become a slave to him, and not the other way around. She showered Yusuf with gifts—silken garments, jewelry, money—and spent all her time with him or thinking about him. At night, when he went to sleep, she would stay up, watching over him all night. But to her dismay, Yusuf's eyes never looked beyond his own feet or the designs in the carpet.

In an effort to ensnare Yusuf, Zulaykha began to tell him of her deepest feelings. With the sweetest words, she told him about her

childhood dream and how the thought of him had never left her mind since that night, how her lips had said naught but his name.

"I am a slave to you and your husband," Yusuf replied. "The Grand Vizier has treated me like a son, and to him that is all I will ever be. So do not expect any more from me than being your servant. If, in fact, you feel as you claim, you should know that one whose heart is given to a friend thinks no longer of herself but loses herself in the wish of the friend. Her happiness lies in doing whatever the friend desires—and my wish and desire is to be a servant to you and your husband."

The more Zulaykha persisted, the more Yusuf resisted. Therefore, she decided to try a different approach. The following day, she sent Yusuf to a garden she owned. Among the trees, between two streams and flowerbeds where canaries and other birds sang, she ordered a bed be set for him with satin sheets and pillows. Then she chose a dozen of her prettiest maids, and prepared to send them to Yusuf. "I want you to serve Yusuf with all your heart and soul," she told them. "If he gives you poison, you should take it. If he sends you away, you should obey. But if any of you attracts his attention and desire, you must inform me first."

Should Yusuf be attracted to one of the girls, Zulaykha thought, she would switch places with the girl in the dark of night and deceive Yusuf into making love to her. Her efforts were in vain, though. The next morning, Zulaykha went to the garden and found her maids sitting in a circle around Yusuf, gazing at him in rapt devotion. As she drew closer, she heard Yusuf speaking of God and offering spiritual guidance to the maids, who had converted to the path of Unity.

In another scheme, Zulaykha's chaperone suggested building a new wing in the palace for Yusuf, with sensuous drawings on all the walls of him and Zulaykha embracing. Once he was forced to look at the pictures, temptation would enter his mind and he would eventually surrender to Zulaykha.

As soon as the palace was ready, Zulaykha put on her most exquisite dress and perfume, and sent for Yusuf. Indeed, she looked so beautiful that any man would have found her impossible to resist. When Yusuf arrived, Zulaykha welcomed him with a sweet smile, drew him into one of the rooms, and locked the door behind them. At first, she talked of her past and how her dream of him had driven her out of her mind. Yusuf kept his eyes fixed on the ground, talking of his loyalty to the Vizier and his wish to serve. Zulaykha took him through a doorway to a second room and again locked the door behind them. She told him of her devotion and of all the money and jewels she would sacrifice for him if, in return, he would only look at her. This time, too, Yusuf refused her. She took him to a third room, locking yet another door behind them. But Yusuf insisted that he would never betray his master or commit a sin.

Zulaykha took Yusuf through a total of six rooms, each time locking the door behind them, making sure that he would have no way to escape. In the seventh room, when she seductively tried to force him into looking at her, Yusuf turned his eyes toward the wall. There he saw a picture of himself in Zulaykha's arms. Stricken, he turned his gaze to the other walls and finally even to the ceiling, but everywhere he faced another love scene of himself with the Vizier's wife. Finally, he looked at her face. This lit hope in Zulaykha's heart. But Yusuf said, "There are two obstacles that prevent me from giving in to your wish: the first is answering to God, and the second is facing the Vizier."

"Do not talk to me of my husband," Zulaykha replied, "for compared to my love for you, he is nothing. I can poison him, or distract him from his ever knowing of our affair. As for your God, if He is as merciful as you claim, I will give alms and donations, and He will forgive us."

"You may very well hide your sin from the Vizier," Yusuf replied, "but you can never hide it from God. As for His forgiveness,

was He paid for creating us, that He would now would accept a bribe to forgive us?"

Seeing that any further pleading would be useless, Zulaykha drew a dagger from her dress and threatened to kill herself. Yusuf pulled the dagger out of her hand and ran toward the door, fearing that unless he escaped, he might give in to her pressure. As he ran, each door opened in front of him as if by magic. Zulaykha ran after him, grabbing at his clothes. But she succeeded only in tearing the back of his shirt.

Outside the palace, Yusuf came upon the Vizier, who, noticing the young man's agitated state, asked him what the matter was. Yusuf invented a story, concealing what had really happened.

When Zulaykha saw the two of them talking together, she thought that Yusuf was telling her husband what had happened. She ran toward the Vizier, screaming and crying, claiming that Yusuf had tried to rape her, and demanding justice.

After an investigation had taken place, the Vizier realized that since Yusuf's shirt was torn from behind, someone must have tried to stop him from running away. He must therefore be innocent, since if he had been the attacker, the shirt would have been torn in the front. He had his guesses as to what his wife might have been up to, but to prevent any rumors, he decided to ignore the situation, hoping thereby to put the matter to rest.

The Vizier's hope was in vain, though, for rumor spread in the capital that the Vizier's wife had become infatuated with her slave. When Zulaykha learned of the rumors, she decided to shut the mouths of the gossipers once and for all. A short time later, she threw a royal banquet to which she invited all the ladies of the city. After dinner, the ladies were served oranges, and each was given a sharp knife with which to peel the fruit. At this moment, Zulaykha called for her servant Yusuf.

When Yusuf, more beautiful than the full moon, appeared in the doorway, one glance at him was enough to strike all the ladies

God
saves
him

dumb with wonder. So startled were they by his perfection that they could no longer distinguish the fruit from their fingers, and the tablecloth turned red with their blood.

After Yusuf departed and the ladies realized what they had done to themselves, they immediately understood the strength of Zulaykha's love for the slave and felt nothing but sympathy for her. They went to Yusuf and pleaded Zulaykha's case, but were no more successful than she had been. Returning to their hostess, they advised her to have Yusuf thrown into prison so that he might come to his senses and return her affection.

Ready to try anything at this point, Zulaykha summoned Yusuf and threatened him with prison if he did not obey her. He replied that he would rather languish in prison for a hundred years than give in to her demands. Frustrated beyond reason, Zulaykha went to her husband and convinced him to send the slave to prison, arguing that it would help to restore her ruined reputation.

After Yusuf was gone, how she rued her impulsive action, for now there was nothing more painful for her grieving heart than to find her beloved's place empty. After wailing for hours over her foolish mistake, she finally resolved to go to the prison to visit her loved one. At the prison, she asked the warden for a corner close to Yusuf's cell, a spot where Yusuf could not see her and she could watch him undisturbed. Hidden there, she found Yusuf in a state of meditative communion with his beloved God.

All night long she watched him. At dawn she returned home, but she found no comfort in her house. Zulaykha then moved to a room whose window overlooked the prison. All day long she would sit in a corner and stare at the building, far removed from the affairs of the world and even from her own self. She was close to only one thing—Yusuf. Day and night she mournfully poured her heart out to her absent love, and found nourishment for her soul in this practice. It became her only solace so long as Yusuf remained in prison.

In prison, Yusuf became a favorite among the other inmates. They found comfort and relief in his words and told him their innermost thoughts and dreams, so that he might give them advice and interpretations. Yusuf devoted himself to their concerns, taking care of the sick and relieving the sorrows of imprisonment.

One day, two of the previous king's courtiers who were serving time there told Yusuf their dreams. After listening to their dreams, Yusuf told one man that he would be hanged on the gallows, and the other that he would be restored to favor in the king's court. Eventually, their dreams came to pass. Before the man who was restored to favor left the prison, Yusuf asked him to mention his name to the king when he returned to court, but by the time the courtier was set free and had resumed his position, he had forgotten all about Yusuf and his request.

Years passed. One night the king had a dream that disturbed him greatly. First he saw seven lean cows attacking and devouring seven plump cows. Then he saw seven withered ears of corn twined around seven green ears of corn, destroying them. The next morning the king asked the sages of his court for an explanation of his dream, but none could interpret it. The king's question, however, jogged the memory of one of the courtiers, a man who had been freed from prison years before. He told the king of Yusuf's ability to interpret dreams. Upon hearing this, the king issued an order for Yusuf to be brought to him. To the king's astonishment, though, Yusuf refused to obey the order until he was set free, claiming that he had been unjustly imprisoned.

As a result, the king launched an investigation of Yusuf's supposed crime. When the ladies of the city were summoned to court and questioned about Yusuf, they all said they had seen nothing but nobility and piety in him. Then Zulaykha was called. Now purified of all her lies and treachery by the hardships of love, she confessed to her schemes and admitted the innocence of Yusuf.

she is
purified

And so, after years of confinement, Yusuf, now thirty years old, was released at last.

Presented to the king in the royal garden, Yusuf proceeded to interpret the king's dream. The seven fat cows and seven green ears of corn, he explained, represented seven years of good crops and prosperity, while the seven lean cows and seven ears of dried-up corn stood for seven years of drought and famine. The dream signified that for the next seven years Egypt would be rich in crops, while during the following seven years its lands would lay barren and fallow.

Impressed with Yusuf's ability, the king appointed him Grand Vizier, a position that had become vacant with the death of Zulaikha's husband. Given authority over the entire land of Egypt, Yusuf was told to do whatever was necessary to remedy the situation foretold in the king's dream. In response, the new Grand Vizier ordered that three-fourths of the crops harvested over the next seven years be set aside in storage.

During the years that followed, Yusuf was busy overseeing the plan he had conceived and taking care of the people's needs. In seven years, as he had predicted, famine spread over Egypt and its neighboring lands. Egypt, of course, was the only country with food. Gift-laden messengers came from all over, seeking grain and wheat. As it happened, one of the delegations was from Canaan and consisted of the eleven sons of Jacob.

At his palace, Yusuf received his brothers warmly but did not reveal his identity to them. The brothers bowed in homage to him, without suspecting that he was their own brother, whom they had abandoned in the well so long ago. Yusuf recalled his childhood dream and smiled. He then ordered that his brothers' bags be filled with grain and their gifts returned to them. In the bag of his youngest brother, Benjamin, however, he had surreptitiously hid his royal cup hidden.

As the brothers were preparing to leave, the guards informed

them that the royal cup had been stolen and that their bags would have to be searched. Eventually, the cup was found in Benjamin's bag. Yusuf, as Grand Vizier, ordered that the thief be held captive, as prescribed by law. The brothers begged him to take another one of them in place of Benjamin, as the boy was very dear to their father, but Yusuf refused. They had no choice but to return to Canaan without him.

Jacob, who had lost his eyesight from grief at his separation from Yusuf, could not bear the thought of being separated from Benjamin as well. He went into such a state of mourning when he heard his sons' news that the sons decided to return to Egypt and beg the Vizier to forgive Benjamin.

Yusuf, who had meanwhile revealed his identity to Benjamin, could not bear to see his other brothers in such pain and told them the truth, adding that he had long ago forgiven them. He told them to go back to Canaan and bring Jacob to Egypt, as it was no longer necessary for their father to suffer the pain of separation from his favorite sons. And he gave them his shirt to show Jacob that he was still alive.

When the brothers' caravan approached Canaan, Jacob stopped weeping—and when they gave him the shirt and he held it to his lips, he cried out with joy, for it held the scent of his beloved son. He is alive! Yusuf is alive!" Jacob exclaimed. Benjamin embraced his father and pressed Yusuf's shirt against his father's face. The moment the shirt of beloved Yusuf touched Jacob's eyes, his sight was restored. With his heart filled with gladness, Jacob set out for Egypt.

That heart which suffers on the Beloved's account is rendered dead to all other forms of joy and pain. No other sorrow clings to that lover's robe; no other happiness surrounds him. Let the world become a sea of affliction for him, with waves of sorrow as high as mountains: not even the hem of his robe will become wet. And if fortune were to prepare a banquet of eternal delights for him, he

would turn his back on it. Nothing can distract him from his sorrow for the sake of the Beloved. — Jami'

Zulaykha had lost everything as the result of her love for Yusuf. After the death of her husband, she had abandoned her palace, finding her way to a ruined building, where she had lived in sorrow, crying incessantly and constantly repeating the name of Yusuf. During the first year, she had spent her last pieces of silver and gold in the hope of getting news of Yusuf; in the end, she had had nothing left to offer travelers for news of her beloved.

As the years passed, Zulaykha's youth faded. Her pitch-black hair turned to silver-white, her fresh, soft skin wrinkled, her slender body bent under the burden of her love, and her shiny black eyes were blinded by the tears she shed for her beloved. Though only forty years old, she looked like a woman of eighty.

Eventually, Zulaykha learned the route of Yusuf's daily travels and built a hut of reeds by the side of a road he used each day. Around the hut she constructed a reed fence, like a set of panpipes. As she sang her mournful laments of love, each reed would sound in sympathy with her. She lived in the hut, with only one hope — that Yusuf would notice her. Every day, when it came time for the Vizier to pass by, Zulaykha would rush out of her hut and sit by the roadside, waiting for her love. But as she heard the cries of Yusuf's guards announcing his arrival, she would fall down senseless. Later, she would regain consciousness and return to her reeds, singing her sad songs.

One night, Zulaykha knelt before the idol she had worshiped for years and prayed, "O you whom I have worshiped with devotion all my life, you who see my humiliation, if I cannot be with Yusuf, can you not restore my sight so that I can at least see him one more time?" Thus did she pray until dawn.

In the morning, when she heard the sound of horses, she ran outside. As Yusuf approached her, she shouted to him from the

depths of her soul. But her voice was drowned out by the whinnying of the horses and the shouts of people. No one paid the slightest attention to her. Heartbroken, she went back to her home. Taking a stone, she shattered her idol, crying, "You are nothing but stone. Now I shall cast off your shameful domination and be free of you once and for all. With the help of another stone, I am going to smash the jewel of your power." From the sudden explosion that followed, she received a new light. She was washed pure by her tears.

Earnestly, she prayed to God for forgiveness: "O Love, were it not for the reflection of your image in an idol, no one would ever worship it. Whoever bows down before an idol thinks that in doing so he is worshiping divinity. O God, if I worshiped a piece of rock, it was only myself that I wronged. Have mercy, and forgive me. Let my heart be healed of the wounds of regret, and let me pick a flower from Yusuf's garden. O Pure Being Who makes a king a lowly slave and crowns a slave with the royal crown . . ."

At this very moment, Yusuf happened to pass by. Hearing the voice of an old woman lamenting, he was struck by its reverence and ordered that the woman be found and brought to him in his palace. When she was presented to him, he asked her who she was.

"Don't you know me? I am the one who chose you over this world from the moment I cast eyes upon you, who has loved you ever since."

"Zulaykha? Is it really you? Oh, Zulaykha, what happened to you and your beauty?"

"When I lost you, I lost them, too."

"What became of your cypress-like body?"

"Being parted from you was too heavy a burden for it to endure."

"And why have your eyes gone blind?"

"Deprived of sight of you, they wept tears of blood until they could no longer see."

"And what of all your wealth?"

"I gave my riches to whoever brought me news of you. Now nothing remains but my heart. And no wish do I have but to be able to see you one more time."

Astounded, Yusuf wondered why God had not ended this poor creature's life and spared her so much suffering. An answer came into his heart from the Lord:

"We have not taken her, for she has within her a whole world of love for him whom We love. Since her love for you is unceasing, We too love her for your sake. Who gave you the permission to seek the death of a rose in Our garden and to wish for the destruction of the friend of Our friends? Since she is filled with tenderness for you, how could you think We would take her life? Her weeping eyes bear witness to her love. Though for a lifetime We have driven her to despair, now We will make her young again for you. She has given you her own precious soul; if We now bless her, let her be to you as your soul."⁴

And by divine decree, Zulaykha's youth and beauty were restored. Her black eyes shone once more with light; her skin became radiant again like that of a girl of eighteen, and her loveliness was more ravishing than ever. There then came a divine order from God: "We now unite Zulaykha with you on the divine throne of marriage. So bind yourself to her with an eternal knot." A ray from the sun of Truth struck Zulaykha's eyes with such overwhelming brilliance that Yusuf was lost in it like a mote in a sunbeam. The lover and beloved were finally one.

The marriage of Yusuf and Zulaykha was a fruitful one, resulting in many children and grandchildren and years of peace and happiness for the two of them. Then one night Yusuf saw his parents in a dream. "O child," they said, "it is time for you join us. It is time for you to unite with us here."

In the morning, Yusuf told Zulaykha of his dream. Her heart was seized with pain, for she knew what it meant. That night, Yusuf prayed: "O Lord, do not leave me behind with the laggards; grant me a place among those who are nearest to You."

The next day, Yusuf went out riding. As he was about to place his foot in the stirrup, the angel Gabriel appeared to him, saying, "Your cup of life is now empty. Abandon the desire of riding the chariot of life and return to union with your Lord." Hearing this, Yusuf immediately gave up his soul.

At Yusuf's funeral, Zulaykha found the pain unbearable. Throwing herself on the grave, she uttered a final prayer:

"Oh, where are you now, Yusuf, to have mercy on the afflicted? You are hidden below the roots of a rose tree, and I am above like its flowering branches. You have slipped like water into the soil, and I am left on top like thorns and chaff. You have gone so far away that I can get no news of you from anyone. The loss of you sets such a fire in me that its smoke brings tears to everyone's eyes. I cannot bear to live without you."⁵

Pressing her wet face to the earth, Zulaykha kissed the ground in humble prayer and gave up her spirit as well. Her whole life, from start to finish, had been sacrificed to love.

If you know how to sacrifice your life, O reader, you have some conception of the secret of lovers that Zulaykha knew. But if you have no notion of sacrificing your life, all talk of the path and the goal will be of no avail.

"Lucky the lovers who, in dying, breathe their last with the aroma of Union in their nostrils."⁶

Y as master = way to God