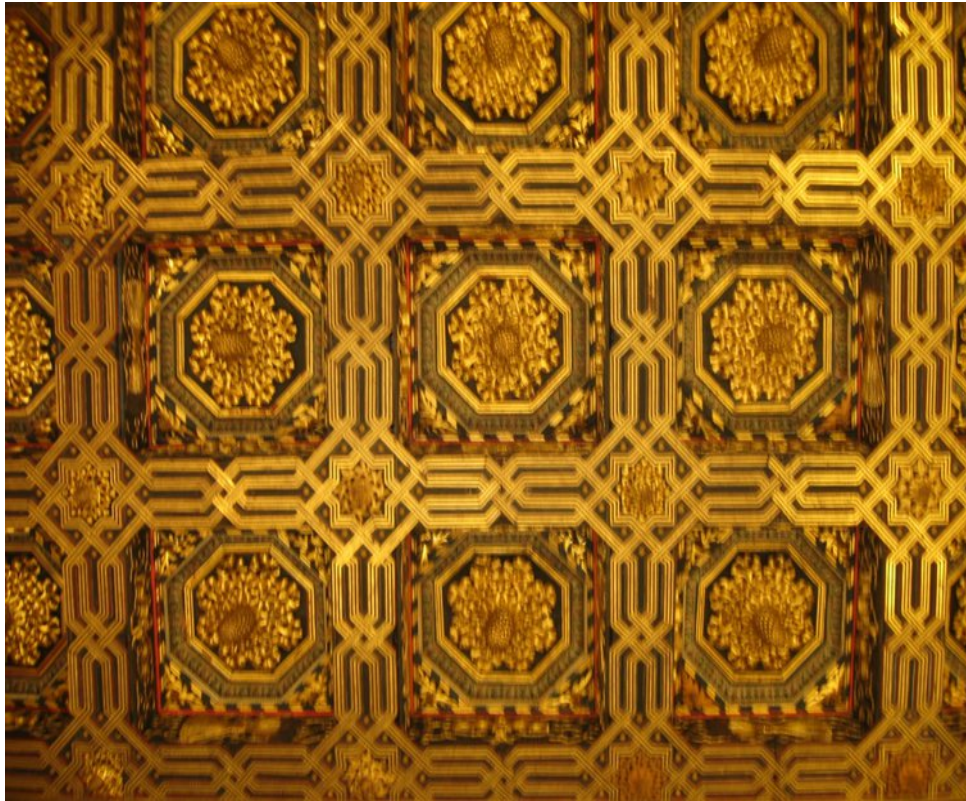


# THE PERSIAN LETTERS

**A MEDIEVAL PERSIAN GENERAL'S  
WARTIME LETTERS TO HIS WIFE**



**Edited by Henry Rasof**

# THE PERSIAN LETTERS



*The carpets here are marvelous. Some of them are very old, and have the beautiful look of well-made antiques. I have commissioned you a carpet from some weavers in the village. Their pattern is very unusual for carpets of this region.*  
--The Persian general, first series, fourteenth letter.

**THE PERSIAN LETTERS**  
**A MEDIEVAL PERSIAN GENERAL'S**  
**WARTIME LETTERS TO HIS WIFE**



**edited by Henry Rasof**

**Temescal Canyon Press**  
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**Dedicated to the memories of**

Elvin Rasof, Harriet Clark, Bob Flanagan,  
Ronald Corey, and Emil de Portimo

**Other Books by the Editor**

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*Here I Seek You: Jewish Poems for Shabbat, Holy Days, and Everyday* (2016)  
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**Web Sites by the Editor**

henyrasof.com  
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**Henry Rasof**  
**Temescal Canyon Press**  
**116 Monarch Street**  
**Louisville, CO 80027**  
**rotide@msn.com**

ARISE, oh Cup-bearer, rise! and bring  
To lips that are thirsting the bowl they praise,  
For it seemed that love was an easy thing,  
But my feet have fallen on difficult ways.  
I have prayed the wind o'er my heart to fling  
The fragrance of musk in her hair that sleeps  
In the night of her hair—yet no fragrance stays  
The tears of my heart's blood my sad heart weeps.

Hafiz

MY lady, that did change this house of mine  
Into a heaven when that she dwelt therein,  
From head to foot an angel's grace divine  
Enwrapped her; pure she was, spotless of sin;  
Fair as the moon her countenance, and wise;  
Lords of the kind and tender glance, her eyes  
With an abounding loveliness did shine.

Hafiz





*There is something beautiful about the desert—the fierceness of nature, stark scenery, almost total lack of vegetation, lack of water, and black nights where the stars seem to crowd my head so closely I feel I almost could touch them.*

—The Persian general, first series, eighth letter.

## INTRODUCTION

One summer—I can't remember the year—while staying in the beautiful old Iranian city of Isfahan, I met an Iranian writer, a pleasant and outgoing man of about forty. We got to talking about literature in general, then about the history of his city, whose name translates as "half the world." I explained my great interest in medieval Persia\* and its literature, and expressed my amazement that so many great scholars and poets could have produced their greatest works even while under domination by non-native rulers. Omar Khayyam (1048–1131), for example, who was better known as an astronomer and mathematician than as a poet, was such a person. Somewhat later, the great lyric poet Hafiz Shirazi (1315–1390), managed to work under the Mongols (1219–16th c.).

The tenth through twelfth centuries were a time of great transition in certain Persian cities. The Ghaznavid Turks (977–1186) had a dynasty in Persia, as did the Seljuk Turks (1038–1194). The latter, after years of battles and victories, eventually made Isfahan their capital during the latter half of the eleventh century. Both dynasties encouraged the pursuit of the arts and sciences. Abolqasem Ferdowsi (940–1020) completed the Persian national epic, the *Shahnameh* (the *Persian Book of Kings*, the national epic), in 1010. Concurrent with this period was the the rise of Europe out of its dark ages.

My new friend told me, after he had taken me to a lunch of classical Persian cuisine at one of the city's most elegant restaurants, that he had just discovered some old scrolls that had been in his family's possession for at least four hundred years, but which most likely dated back even further—perhaps, he said with a smile, to the eleventh century. He said he had translated them for me from Farsi to English. Seeing that I was anxious to look them over, he took me to his house, where he showed me into his study, brought out photostats of twenty-three holographs along with his translations, and then politely begged to be excused. He had some shopping to do, he said, and would return later. While he was away, I went to the museum, a more conducive place for research and editing.

What I found, after a rather quick first reading, was a series of letters apparently written during wartime, from a man—a general—mostly to his wife. I was very excited, as I had never come across any reference to such a set of letters in any of the standard codices of medieval Persian manuscripts. Accounts—historical or legendary—show no record of the man himself. It seemed obvious, however, from mention of the Seljuks, that the letters indeed from the early eleventh century. To be certain, of course, I would have to wait for carbon-14 datings of the originals, which were at the museum in safekeeping. Already I was imagining the importance of this find: Although the history of the period is well known, and the rulers' names, little is known about other individuals of the period, and so the letters might serve to fill some gaps.

The original letters themselves were fragments of rag paper rolled into tubes, about 25 x 14 cm. The sheets were in excellent condition, except for the edges, which were badly torn and effaced by decay. This seemed the natural effect of time and the elements, of course, and probably explained why none of the letters had a salutation. Since the personal nature of the letters was obvious, it seemed likely that at one time they had salutations, but as this part of a letter is usually near the top—and it was the top that had fallen apart—weathering and age undoubtedly were the cause of their demise.

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\*The editor has decided to use the words *Iran* and *Iranian* only to refer to the country or its people or culture as it is known today. Interestingly, many Iranian-Americans prefer to be called Persians rather than Iranians, seemingly to dissociate themselves from the current regime.



I began hunting for clues about the letters immediately after I had skimmed through them. Indeed, my eagerness was so great that I was nearly locked in the museum when it closed in the evening, which was fortunate in a way: Don't all scholars dream of "living" in a library or museum (if they don't already do so)? After analyzing the writing style, physical details of the paper, ink, etc., and then investigating the references to rivers, springs, pottery, rug weaving, etc., I made the following tentative conclusions. As the reader readily will note, more is omitted than included, because of the dearth of information and its uncertainty.

As was said, nothing is known of the author of the letters except that—based on information in the letters themselves—he appears to have been a general in a war with the Seljuks, a war eventually lost in about 1038, when they established their dynasty. Originally the Seljuks had been imported to act as a palace guard, but as so often happens in such situations, a twist of fate made the slaves the masters.

Whether his role in the war was too minor to have been taken much note of, or whether both his army and the invaders were destroyed by drought and thirst, or whether all the records were simply destroyed by the Mongols later on, is impossible to know from the information at hand. What we do know is that he fits the mould of the many Persian leaders at odds with the ways and morals of their superiors. As such he was another another unfortunate victim of the times—although of course it could be said that his type, and that of his superiors, is familiar from our own times.

Locating the exact place where his family originally came into possession of the letters was impossible. My friend said his family had lived on the outskirts of Isfahan for over four hundred years, approximately since the reign of Shah Abbas the Great (1587–1629). However, the town they now lived in was not the same one they lived in four hundred years ago: The original location now consists of fields of vegetables. The researcher cannot even postulate that either location was connected with the writing of the letters.

Other questions abound. Did the general live in Isfahan before the war? Did his wife live there during the war? Was he outside the city in the desert in order to protect the city from attack? It may be that Seljuk reinforcements were sent to apply pressure on the city by, for example, diverting a fairly large body of Persian soldiers from the internal defense of the city. Why was not this very sick man relieved of his post? While certain letters are rational and extremely touching, others make no sense whatsoever and appear to be the ravings of a mentally as well as physically ill man. For instance, observant Muslims—of which he seems like one—aren't supposed to drink, yet there are several references to the consumption of alcohol.

Then there is the question of his army's fate. He undoubtedly lost his battles, even if it was not necessarily in combat. Nature is severe in that part of the world: The deserts are known for their harshness, the average rainfall is several inches, often there is no rain for a year or two, and temperatures can hit 130 degrees F. That anyone as deathly ill as the general lasted even as long as he did seems a miracle. Also, why didn't he get sick when everyone else got dysentery?

The question also arises as to whether the general was responsible for the loss of Isfahan, which eventually was the case. For one thing, numerically the odds were against him. For another, the small amount of fighting that he mentions seems to indicate that whatever was to happen in the desert would not be too decisive. Bad strategy, insanity, poor judgment, illness, etc., while they must have had some

effect on matters, must have been insignificant when compared with the swift strokes with which nature, through drought and sickness, was able to debilitate his army.

In the eleventh century Isfahan was an important city, but nowhere near as glorious as it became in the sixteenth century when Abbas the Great made it what it is today. Thus the history of Persia-Iran, while affected by the anonymous general, does not seem to have been greatly affected by his quirks.

The general comes across as a truly wonderful and enigmatic person—interesting, stubborn, tender, decisive, ridiculous, romantic. The writing style suggests a genial man, of reasonable, if not considerable, education. What quickly catches the reader's eye is his fascination with rugs, old pottery, exotic birds, astrology, and foreigners. How does one explain his obsessions with music and art and such fantastical experiences as a wedding on a wartime front? Even more so his concerns with hair color and women's eyes! This would not be so unusual if, as has been said, the setting were not wartime, but we are taught that heroes, or even leaders, are sane, rational people. Our leader is a surreal leader. Though his life is not comic, it sometimes appears almost as ridiculous as that of Don Quixote.

We may of course remind ourselves that prolonged sensory deprivation, hardships, starvation, and illness can cause "schizophrenic" reactions, hallucinations, and a general loss of a sense of reality. That the general was under the influence of drugs for several months may have contributed to his mental state as well. As might have the heat, isolation, distance from his family, and sporadic fighting.

Of course, the possibility exists that the letters were a total fabrication, by either a writer or writers of the period or by later writers, or possibly a blending of fact and fiction. There is no way to verify this thesis, however, any more than there is a way to verify any of the various theses just described. In a way, perhaps it doesn't matter, since history is not an exact science anyway, and in some respects speculation is more interesting than fact-finding.

It is almost frightening to read these letters, for one cannot help thinking about the threat of nuclear holocaust that hangs over our heads today. Perhaps in a future time someone will come across similar letters (if they haven't been vaporized) and wonder about them in the way we are wondering about those of the unknown general from the eleventh century who, defying time and entropy, has made his way into the twentieth century, after being dead for over nine hundred years.

By the way, although my Iranian friend would not tell me his religion, I will freely say that I am Jewish and of Ashkenazi—Eastern European Jewish—heritage.

Finally, although I have numbered the letters sequentially, there is no way to verify this particular sequence, since the originals are not dated and cannot be dated by any method.

Isfahan, Iran February 1976\*

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\*Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the last Shah of Iran, was overthrown just three years after this date.

## RETURN TO ISFAHAN

Forty-three years later I returned to Isfahan and sought out my old friend, who had written me that he had come across a new cache of thirteen letters and was eager to share them with me. Travel from the United States to Iran (and back) is not so easy these days, but I had help from four Iranian-American friends whose faiths represent four of the main religious groups living in Iran today: a Zoroastrian, a Jew, a Muslim, and a Baha'i.\*

After carefully reading and discussing the new letters, we agreed that clearly they were written by the same unknown Persian general, although there were new themes. However, we were unsure where these letters fit into the first sequence of letters. In the original sequence, for example, the Twenty-Third Letter says there will be no more letters for a while. We decided that the newly found letters probably were written earlier than most of the original twenty-three letters. But, since the original chronology was no more clear than the chronology of the new letters, we decided to put the new letters after the first twenty-three letters, rather than attempt to fit them into the original sequence.

That said, although we can't be certain, the last letter in the new batch appears to be the general's last letter and very well might have signaled the end of the Persian general. Whether he met his end in battle or was killed by a family member, or died of natural causes, or went looking for his wife and daughter, or just went on living as he did and either not writing more letters or writing letters that have yet to surface, or killed himself, or just decided to disappear, we do not know. Possibly he returned to Isfahan, where most likely he had lived before going into battle, since Isfahan is fairly close to the desert, the setting of most of the letters and where he and his men were camped out.

By the way, the carbon-14 datings alluded to earlier were inconclusive. Also, letters from the general's wife and father are alluded to but to date have not been found.

We edited the letters together, but fearing for the safety of my friend, we decided to openly use only my name as the editor. I am grateful beyond words for his help, since it was he who possessed the letters, told me about them, translated them into English, and helped me with the research. May there come the day when it will be safe to openly give him the credit he deserves.

Isfahan, Iran July 2019

### PERSIAN MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

**oud**—a stringed instrument from which the lute is descended, consisting of a wood body and neck and strings that are strummed.

**qanun**—a stringed instrument related to the Western psaltery, from which the harpsichord is descended. The *qanun* is related to the hammered dulcimer, but played by plucking the strings.

**reedpipe**—a wind instrument whose sound is produced by air blown into or over a single or double reed. The sound probably resembled that of today's oboe.

**santur**—a stringed instrument related to the Western hammered dulcimer, from which the piano is descended, and is played by striking the strings with small hammers.

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\*The Zoroastrian faith was founded in the second millennium B.C.E., the Jewish faith somewhat later in this period, the Muslim faith in the seventh century C.E., and the Baha'i faith in the nineteenth century C.E.

# ◊ THE PERSIAN LETTERS: FIRST SERIES ◊

Roses blossom over and over  
on the same bush.  
Rumi



## FIRST LETTER

I have felt unwell for several days now. I don't say sick, because I am still maintaining a full schedule. I feel heavy. I sleep as long as I usually sleep, but in the morning I feel exhausted. My eyes feel heavy too, and the lids are swollen. I haven't been able to hold down much food. At first I thought it was just the heat—it is so intense that many of the men are collapsing, and for days it has been too hot for either side to do much—but yesterday I became fully aware that something is wrong.

Ordinarily I am not one to dwell on feeling out of sorts, but the feeling is so strange that I have been obsessed with it. In addition to the physical symptoms—achy legs, headache, fitful sleep, and listlessness—I have felt as if I were going to lose my mind. It is hard to describe. I cannot find my center. My own existence seems uncertain, for the first time since I was young and undecided about my life. Once I joined the army and married you I calmed down and felt solid. Now I am aware of a vast, frightening blackness when I lie in bed at night. It is not just the normal darkness of night. Now I feel afraid. My hand is shaky, and my body shakes slightly, too, when I stand to go and catch a breath of fresh air. Earlier this evening I felt a slight shudder of panic and couldn't catch my breath. The doctor came and prepared some tea, but that did nothing. Only when I finally fell asleep did I find myself again.

The worst thing is being left alone, which is becoming more and more the case, with every man we can find on the lines. What if I need help? But what does it matter if I am dead? By then it will be too late anyway. It would comfort me if you were here; I am afraid of dying alone.

On a happier note, we are holding our own, though the odds are against us. The Seljuks fight as if losing would mean the end of the world.

## SECOND LETTER

I have been praying all the time now, even in my dreams. I am praying for you and our daughter and for my men, of whom I am such a poor commander. We are rich, yet we now seem to be losing the war. I am not depressed, just worried, concerned. I am searching for some way out of a tragedy that almost now seems inevitable: the slaughter of my men by the Turkish barbarians. The sudden attacks are routine by now. The men are on constant alert; they do not need me to tell them they must fight for their lives. They are good men. Yes, Allah is by my side. He is with me now, but I want human company—you, and my father. The men are strangers, even the Captain, who attends to me night and day. He loves me in his own way. But when I am dead it won't matter. If only you could be here now, without endangering yourself. My body shakes uncontrollably at times. I yearn for someone to touch my forehead and hold my arms when I tremble. This doesn't sound very manly, like a leader, I know. I can write no more. Already I feel delirious again. My love.

### THIRD LETTER

A very old man in camp owns two colorful birds. They may be parrots. One has a bright gold tail; the other's is solid green. They actually can talk, though I'm not sure in what language. The man looks part Chinese. We read of such birds when we were children, but I never expected to see one in this life, except in a dream. Maybe this is all a dream, or the effect of the painkillers. I understand that the old man also has pots of exotic medicinal plants, with large, many-petaled yellow flowers. I wonder how they survive the heat. Once, when I was feeling better, I passed his tent. The only possessions he had besides the birds and plants were a sleeping mat, a trunk full of small lacquered boxes, and artist's materials.

If anything, these distractions may shake me from my lethargy. I sent him a present this morning—two rolls of drawing paper. Tomorrow he may let me listen to his parrots. If his drawings are as exotic as everything else, I may feel somewhat cheered. You ask what he is doing here? I will tell you after questioning him. He also may have an interesting story to amuse me with. The boredom I am experiencing is unbelievable. Where are my musicians with their *qanun* and *santur*. Where is my garden, where are my sofas and good pipe? And my good food? Sometimes I imagine myself skipping my medicine and just giving up. The sun becomes a flare, the yellow is blinding, the stones untouchable. My sense of reality abandons me. Illusions begin to appear over the desert.

It is time for my drugs. My drugs. I detest these horrible herbs and brews, but I have no choice. The last attack nearly did me in, and I have to be careful. This is a strange disease—it comes and goes. When I am under its power, I feel at death's door; then I am well and feel better than I ever have felt. Now I have to go to sleep. Tomorrow I must get up very early and, Allah willing, talk to my lieutenants. May you be healthy and live to a ripe old age. I love you as I love God. I have tried doing without the medicines, but I become too weak. Everything is swimming. No more. I must sleep. Always, sleep and more sleep. Am I ever awake, except to give orders and stare at my tasteless food? War. The scribe grows weary. . . . How is the garden?

## FOURTH LETTER

The doctor was here trying to bring my fever down, and again I imagined myself dead. And it was good. There was no sadness, only a longing to be united with you one day. At one moment I even felt my soul slip away. Instead of being afraid I rejoiced. The Captain wondered why I was smiling. But he would not have believed me. You mustn't be afraid. I now know what it is like—dying. And you mustn't be afraid for me. We should be together, I know, but in some ways it is better this way. It is only when I am struggling that I suffer. When I stop struggling I am peaceful. Maybe that's what it's like when we're dead.

How is our daughter? She must be tall and beautiful, like you. Will you give her my deepest love? I know you will. I have always trusted you. The first time I saw your eyes I knew I always could trust you. You are a fine mother. I remember when you were giving birth. You didn't scream or cry out or even wince. Your face was ecstatic. I knew then that I had a jewel of a wife. Well, I knew before, but this was even more evidence. You are my teacher. You taught me there is no suffering except when we struggle and become attached to the struggle and to things that are transient. And now I learn this for myself, in my own way.

## FIFTH LETTER

The Captain sent over an astrologer this morning. He doesn't look Persian, but I can't quite place his origins, although I'm afraid to ask, for fear of offending him. I wonder where the Captain found him. Like the Chinese man, he too is quite old, though he also is extremely charming, like a traveling salesman. He seems to know a lot about medicine in addition to astrology. If you will remember, astrology has fascinated me ever since childhood, despite my overwhelming logicity in everything else. One does not rule out the other, however, as many people seem to think. They are intertwined—the heavens and the earth—in an orderly though usually incomprehensible fashion, at least for most people.

He has been telling me that, because of my rising sign and the position of Mars, besides being a time of family feuds, adultery, and war, this is a period of disease in certain types of people, of which I am one. Black clouds in the heavens obscure the stars and planets; hence the constant fluctuation of my fever. But in a month things should improve.

This man is also a poet, and writes in Persian as well as in Arabic.

I wish there were more time to speak with him; he is fascinating and stimulating. But there is an important meeting soon, and he must go to town for his own reasons. In case I don't find myself in better health by the end of the month, he suggested I try submitting myself to the sun's rays, filtered through large plates of colored glass. Red, for instance, will filter out the red rays, of which I already am receiving too much because of Mars' position. This rather ingenious-sounding technique I later remembered is unfortunately one the Indians use, and you know how much I distrust them. Undoubtedly he picked it up on his travels. This is too bad, since I had been counting on some ideas our doctors hadn't thought of. Is my attitude foolish, considering the circumstances? Should I abandon my principles and beliefs and take the advice of an obviously wise man? But the Indians. Perhaps my resistance to death is showing its face, a not-too-unpleasant face either, at times. Physically I feel weak, but willfully I am stronger than ever in my life, even than when I was campaigning with my father in the north.

The monotony of the desert and my yearning for the cool mountains, which seem all too close when the sandstorms die down, make me think in strange ways. I fear losing control of my emotions and appearing weak and stupid, or incompetent. That would mean the end. A day, even an hour, in the hills would heal me faster than any medicine. I am stubborn. Should I reconsider? You remember when I was a boy and my mother died? Well, the doctor was an Indian, and since then I have not trusted them. Is this foolish, when perhaps their learning would help or even cure me?



## SIXTH LETTER

I remember now that I never did follow up with the colored-glass regimen. Alas, there is not time for everything.

Today I received a long letter from my father. The messenger barely made it. The enemy lines seem to be tightening. I had told him he should try to leave the city, in case, God forbid, the enemy should either break through our position or else go around us. The result would of course be the same: They would swarm the city. Furthermore, they would be able to link up with rebels within the city and that would be it. I don't think they will try and destroy the city: It is too valuable to them as a stronghold and as something to show for their dirty machinations.

What about my health? Apparently I fell today, hit my head, and had a seizure. Luckily the aide found me or I might have bled to death. I am resting quietly now outdoors. There actually is a cool breeze, an unusual breeze. The breeze is a gift from Allah, the Merciful and Compassionate One, a gift for me, perhaps an omen. Oh, but dinner is here. There is so much to say. I know you will wait.

## SEVENTH LETTER

The Captain sent a group of lieutenants to my tent today for my advice on a maneuver. There were eight of them, and they are a brilliant and courageous bunch, though not one is over seventeen. I am very impressed with the Captain's good judgment as well his knowledge of the strategies of warfare. One of the lieutenants suggested we send out small groups of soldiers, on foot, to ambush the enemy—sort of stick pins in them. Perhaps he is right: We should pick up the offensive instead of waiting. Then again, rashness rarely pays; if the idea backfires, we would be at an even greater manpower disadvantage than we already are. With such men leading our forces, and by God's will, the war soon will be over. . . .

## EIGHTH LETTER

Sometimes it is hard for me to imagine what you are doing. I get tired of asking questions, inquiring how you and our daughter are, and dream, just dream, of being with both of you. The image often comes to me just before sleep. It seems to come down from the sky, whirling; then it stops, and you are there. Sometimes I want to be there but have forgotten what it is like to be with someone I love, or to be somewhere I love.

Still, there is something beautiful about the desert—the fierceness of nature, stark scenery, almost total lack of vegetation, lack of water, and black nights where the stars seem to crowd my head so closely I feel I almost could touch them. I am with the stars on all the hot nights and on all the cooler nights, the sand whistling against the tent, the occasional calm centered directly overhead like a funnel, ready to suck me in. Far, far away is the sea, and the ships I once loved to watch. I never wanted to sail, but just dream of sailing. I used to read tales of merchants who washed ashore on deserted islands.

Then, suddenly, I was here, in this wasteland, surrounded, almost farther away than I can see, by a ring of mountains. This is hell sometimes. One wears next to nothing, crushes flies in lumps against one's skin, feels the sweat pour off one's body like a waterfall. The soldiers' feet stick to the sand, they are so wet. In the afternoon, no one moves. No one can move. The men are sacked out, as if dead. The Seljuks couldn't be much better off. It is an unwritten rule of war that everyone sleep in the hottest part of the day—if sleep is possible. We dream. We dream of ice, of cold water, of home. We dream of better dreams, of being elsewhere—anywhere but here. It is hell on earth today . . . in spite of the raw beauty of nature.

## NINTH LETTER

Something very odd happened today, just before noon: A man fell from the sky! Of course you immediately will think I am having hallucinations or gone mad—but I am really quite serious. At first I thought it was a mirage, or a vision of Kay Kavus.\*

. . . stage of my disease or the heat. Then I realized I felt better this morning than I have all week. . . . The Chinese-looking man came again this morning. . . . Now that I think about it, he doesn't look Chinese; probably it's his eyes. This time he brought a siamese cat, a wonderful creature that has been in my lap all day, purring and sleeping. When its master left, it just stayed where it was, without moving a whisker.

Another curious phenomenon is that almost everyone looks familiar and reminds me of someone else. Is God repeating faces, or am I just beginning to see past differences in features?

This person's face reminds me of another's. This tall man reminds me of another tall man I have seen. It is uncanny.

Is this another effect of the heat and my disease, the deterioration of my ability to perceive differences in people? Is this good or bad? Obviously it is bad for practical reasons. On the other hand, spiritually perhaps this is a good thing, that I see no differences in human beings--at least in their physical features. If only everyone wanted peace, whatever their visage? Unfortunately, of course, this is not the case, so perhaps I need to see my condition as a form of delusion.

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\*The mythological Persian king often shown in paintings on his flying throne or literally plummeting from the sky.

## TENTH LETTER

A woman came today . . . carrying a jug of cool spring water from town. It reminded me of home, it tasted so sweet. The water from the river tastes foul, and the well water we occasionally get at night is warm. She was wearing one of those gold-embroidered caps the local women always wear. I asked her if she could bring me a few the next time she came—for our daughter. She was an odd-looking woman—very attractive, with very large, wide-set eyes. She may be part Indian. Most likely, though, she takes belladonna. Why they do it I will never understand. My conservatism is showing again. I know my mother dressed and adorned herself very simply. Things these days are different; young people do not listen to their parents as we had to; but must I change? You get to the point where you no longer want to keep up, or be original and daring; you want to use what you already have and know. I do not want to change; I am too old.



## ELEVENTH LETTER

One of the officers got married tonight, to a woman from the village. It is not as strange as it seems, though, for it turns out the marriage had been arranged long before war broke out. She too has those fantastically large eyes, and her hair was dyed red for the occasion. Her father is the head of the village, as well as the scribe and doctor and probably a lot of other things as well. He said he would come by in a few days and look me over. Apparently he is an expert on local afflictions. Perhaps my disability is due to the water. His daughter's red hair was tied in long braids, and she was wearing a beautiful silk robe embroidered with exotic flowers and intricate designs. Some of her dowry must have been hanging around her neck, because she was walking with a kind of stoop, which is no reflection on her beauty. But the poor girl looked as if she could barely stand up. She had a proud face, though, and her new husband—an exceptional horseman, by the way—never stopped smiling, even when his comrades were teasing him about the marriage. It was all in fun. Afterwards there was dancing, and a generally good time. The afternoon was cool and seemed timeless. One never would have known a war was going on.

## TWELFTH LETTER

Today I felt somewhat better and took a short walk to a nearby oasis I always have wanted to see. There has been very little fighting lately because of the heat. The tiny pool is surrounded by a beautiful garden—surprising in its size and the diversity of plants, considering the weather and lack of rain. Curiously, sitting in this garden was a man playing the oud. Nearby was a woman, presumably his wife or lover, asleep or relaxing with her eyes closed. I did not wish to intrude, but the man nodded to me, so I sat down and listened. He was playing in an ancient mode, or *maqam*, and soon I fell into a wonderful slumber, filled with the most peaceful dreams I have had in a long time. These *maqam* are often played during certain times of the day or year, and some of them are believed to affect every listener exactly the same way. If sadness is the intent, everyone will feel sad. If joy is the intent, every listener will experience joy.

In one dream the war had ended, and we had returned to Isfahan, not in retreat, but in victory. It was the end of summer, and the weather was beginning to cool off. You and I were to go to the mountains for a few weeks, as a guest of my uncle, to relax and get to know each other again. . . . Then I woke up and found before me a pile of large, black dates, some wild honey, and a cassava melon. The man was still playing, but the woman was definitely asleep. Her breathing was deep and regular and slow, and she had a peaceful look on her face. The man turned to me and smiled, and for just a moment I forgot I was sick and commanding an army that again seemed to be gaining no ground. Maybe he was a fakir or dervish, or a water spirit. He gave me his blessing, and I returned to camp. Even now, just half a day later, it all seems unreal.

### THIRTEENTH LETTER

Today we executed two men accused of spying for the enemy. I had recommended tolerance, but they were disemboweled by their comrades, who were angry because these two had been the favorite companions of many of them. They felt betrayed, which is easily understood. The morale of the troops is extremely low. Such events, as you may guess, have this effect. The Captain came to my tent to see if I was well enough to go out and talk to the soldiers. He was right in asking, don't you think? In these situations there is always a correct procedure that one must follow. We decided to issue special rations of sweets and coffee, and to bring in some entertainment for the evening. We'll do things in shifts, for at these moments the enemy is bound to make a raid. Undoubtedly they have learned of the incident. The desert at night is so quiet that the enemy probably can hear what is going on, without the added singing and dancing. We have dogs out on patrol to safeguard against a surprise attack. My man is here now to take his orders. We'll see what happens.

## FOURTEENTH LETTER

The carpets here are marvelous. Some of them are very old, and have the beautiful look of well-made antiques. I have commissioned you a carpet from some weavers in the village. Their pattern is very unusual for carpets of this region. A rare insect is used for the lovely red, and the dark blue is a color I have never before seen used in such quantity—in any rug. The insects swarm in autumn, and apparently it is a sight to see all the children chasing them with nets and bags and open hands. It isn't the kind of rug every family owns, or that bazaars ordinarily carry. There is just one of a kind—always a different design and different colors or, rather, variations on a certain style or design. But you will be able to see for yourself when they have finished, and if and when I can persuade someone to take it to you, which is not as impossible as it sounds. Money around here is scarce, and the people are poorer than elsewhere. They rely on foreigners and travelers and—I hate to say it—this war to add to their coffers.

## FIFTEENTH LETTER

A few days ago some of the men, returning from a skirmish to the east, were stopping for a rest by the ruins of an old stone house and found some pieces of old bowls. When I saw the fragments I summoned some women from the village and paid them to return to the house and do some digging for me. Again, it is too hot to fight, which in fact is why this particular skirmish lasted only a day. The other side retreated, probably because they ran out of water, as did our side.

Sitting here before me now are several whole bowls, at least two hundred years old, from what I am told, and fragments of several dozen more, still older. There is one here you would love, a light-brown one, with a small, simple design at the bottom. Such workmanship and designs are truly timeless! I have been amusing myself trying to fit bits and pieces of the broken pottery together, but so far I haven't been able to piece together a cup, let alone a whole bowl. I may have to satisfy my insatiable curiosity with the few intact urns and bowls. Yet there would be twenty such bowls could the bits be reassembled. What a shame! What a waste that all that work should have been spent by so many talented artisans and then fallen prey to the elements. Perhaps when peace comes we will return here and amuse ourselves by digging for treasure. An entire city may lie beneath our feet!

## SIXTEENTH LETTER

I'm sorry I haven't written for so long. My fever has returned full force, and the heat has become even more unbearable. Yesterday there was a confrontation, and we lost a good fifty men, with another hundred or so injuries, not to mention the horses, blankets, and weapons captured. Though I have been bathing as often as I can, the water is so warm I feel just as hot afterward. The cool oasis where I heard the music is no longer safe, either. The day before yesterday two scouts were ambushed there. I have asked the runner who delivers this letter to go as fast as possible. I had to pay extra, though, because of the danger. You mustn't worry about the fever, since I'm no worse than before. If I haven't died by now, I suppose I will last a little longer. I haven't lost any more weight; in fact I have gained some. Maybe it was the wedding. Someone had a tentful of figs, dates, preserves, candies, and confections, some of them smothered in wild honey and pistachio nuts, the latter of which grow all around here. I feel a great weariness come over me in the evenings; almost inevitably I fall asleep long before anyone else, unless of course there is some reason to be up. At these moments, however, even the war cannot keep me up. But whenever I think of you I feel better—until I dwell on the possibility of never seeing you again. This depresses me terribly and drains my energy. At these moments I wonder why I ever became a soldier. Anything but a soldier. Even being a lowly potter, or perhaps a minor poet, would have been better.

## SEVENTEENTH LETTER

Today I was thinking of the splendors of Isfahan. In front of one of the smaller mosques—I forget its name—an old man with a long white beard is always standing. He especially enjoys talking with strangers, and his command of various languages is remarkable for someone who at least on the surface appears so ordinary. He doesn't look scholarly. It is such people—besides you and our daughter—who make life worth living and whom I most miss. The diversity of a large city, and the people one meets everywhere, who offer some special service or unique talent, makes me wish even more that things return to normal as soon as possible. The desolation here is murderous. Yet if we were to lose this war, the Seljuks, who are barbarians, undoubtedly would wipe out our wonderful ancient culture. Yet is this piece of land, this tiny strip of desert, really so important? Is it worth all the suffering to the families of those killed last week? But it is not my decision to continue; it is not in my power to alter the course of Fate. I am not in charge. I follow another's will.

Meanwhile the desert seems to grow more inhospitable daily. At first the silence, the stars, the dunes, the twisted rock formations, and the jackals at night were novel and intriguing; I was fascinated by the continuous ringing in my ears. The moon seemed larger than I ever had remembered. My eyes were clear; I could think as never before. The silence and the barrenness stimulated colorful and exotic dreams. I was, regrettably, even enjoying myself. The city was unimportant. Even the war didn't matter. It was only a plan to follow, to carry out, to become interested in, to be ensnared by. Everything I ever would need would be here, in the desert. If you can survive here, you can live anywhere. Death and thoughts of death were nonexistent. Not until the last few months did this illusion shatter completely. It's not a party, as I once thought; it's death trying to manifest itself at every moment. I am surrounded by men; sometimes they are warriors. At those times I am not afraid, nor are they. But who can keep up this facade for long? Who can always be invulnerable?

## EIGHTEENTH LETTER

We have had trouble again, not as bad as last time—at least insofar as deaths and injuries—but serious in another way, and potentially more damaging. The river has become polluted, and a number of the men have become seriously ill. It may be cholera, though no one yet has died. Last night there was a conference with leaders from the local villages still supporting us. Apparently there are underground springs that may be accessed at night—that is, if the enemy hasn't reached them already. Undoubtedly they have the same problem, since the river passes by their camp, behind their rear lines. At night we see huge fires. Whether or not they have had some deaths and are burning the bodies, or boiling water to sterilize it, I do not know. It may be a ruse. . . .

A scout has just returned with news that some of these springs are drying up, that there only will be enough uncontaminated water for a few more days. The animals will have to drink river water. Presumably the enemy's animals will have to do the same, so at least we don't have to fear their gaining an advantage over us—or at least getting more of one than they already have. I am sending a large contingent of troops to guard what's left of the few remaining springs, which luckily are nearer us than to them. I suspect, however, that they may try to rush us tonight, not to push for an all-out confrontation, but just to get some good water. People from the village have assured me that these springs are the only springs for miles around. Of course, the enemy's winning the springs would mean our defeat. Today was a blistering day; soon everyone will be desperate for water. If only the shade were better. In our haste to establish our position we had no time to build decent shelters. Furthermore, there is a weak spot in our line, between two natural rock formations to the south. If the enemy were to push through—well, that would be the end.



## NINETEENTH LETTER

. . . even in my tent I sweat so much that my clothes are constantly drenched. Aside from this, my condition has improved slightly. I have stopped spitting up blood, which I had started doing now and then. But what is the good of it? Within the last hour or so I have seen ten rugged men collapse.

## TWENTIETH LETTER

This morning I felt unbearably despairing. For a week I thought I was on the road to recovery. We had begun winning small battles, too, and I thought the tide of the war was turning. I was even sleeping soundly, instead of waking up at the slightest sound. Then, as if someone—something—beyond my control, had meddled with my mind, a mood came over me. I felt a foreboding. My fingers trembled, my eyes twitched. I felt around my eyes when I woke up, and there were small bumps. I could barely get out of bed.

The Captain came to help me outside to talk to the troops, which I do every morning. I went but could barely make it. It was as if some transparent blanket were folded tightly around me, compressing my muscles, making my teeth feel gritty, making me feel filthy all over. Of course I had to hide all of this. Generals aren't supposed to feel, let alone exhibit, any signs of weakness. When I came back to the tent I fell asleep but slept only fitfully. When I forced myself up in the afternoon I felt sleepless and irritable, as if I hadn't slept at all. My dreams had been jumbled together, in scraps, as if I had never really finished any of them but kept waking, then falling shallowly asleep again. Just when things seem to be changing for the better, they change for the worse. Then I remember, for the thousandth time, it seems, that nothing stays the same; things are always changing. This is obvious, of course, but quickly and easily forgotten. The philosophers say you can't become too attached to anything, not even tranquility, because that too won't last.

What is there, I ask? What hope is there, dear wife? This war will never end. Yet I know it will. I must get well. I must get well. I feel feverish again. Am I ranting and raving? Not yet. Well—soon I shall. I know it pains you to hear me like this. Thank Allah you can't see me like this. For that I am glad . . . yet I want to be near you so badly that sometimes I call out in my sleep for the angels to bring me to you, dead or alive. Ah, to wander aimlessly in love. . . . I must go. The Captain says there is a message.

## TWENTY-FIRST LETTER

Miraculously, today I am much better. Well, I have never felt better in all my life, though my doctor says I still must be careful or risk a relapse. For the first time in nearly a month I have been fully active. I went around to the battalions and chatted with the soldiers, who are a brave lot of men, willing to do anything for the safety of their home towns and families. There is not a coward among them, I am convinced, and they all are loyal. I remember my own years as a soldier and how lonely I was, yet I was contented too that I had chosen and found a way that rang true to my deepest desires and ambitions. One soldier asked me today if I had a family, and I think I must have embarrassed him as I waxed eloquent about you and our daughter and our parents. He kept trying to sneak away. When I noticed this I laughed, gave him the ring on my left hand, and sent him on his way. The Captain thought the man should be punished, but how could I punish someone when it was I who should have been rebuked for being a sappy bore? Think of that! I bored someone to tears describing my family! How riotous, considering my tremendous love for every last member of my family. Oh, well—I never was a very good orator. Goodbye, my darling.

## TWENTY-SECOND LETTER

They say one must get drunk on the mystical wine and become one with God. They say the ancient Zoroastrian kings were true warriors, whose spirit abided in their God. I wonder if the Seljuks drink the wine too. Since they are Muslims, our battles pit Muslim against Muslim, brother against brother. I once met a dervish who said he knew someone who knew someone who said he had known the Sufi Bayazid Bastami [804–874] and who died in mystical union with God, a concept at the heart of Bayazid's teachings. Is this possible, or am I just desperate to believe in something greater than I am? Often I have thought of becoming a dervish in order to achieve direct knowledge of God, but does one have to renounce the world to do that? They say a man must dissolve his ego in Allah. I am nothing anyway, so what is there to dissolve? This I just recently have realized. One day I feel this way, another day that way. I am chaff in the wind. One day I have faith, the next I have nothing, no hope, no faith. All has been forgotten, all has been thrown away. It is as if I want to throw it all away. Why? There is nothing sometimes, nothing to believe in. I need signs, a sign of love, that I may gather strength to go on with life. Even the moon looks black tonight.

The black moon shines a strange light;  
The man in the moon is drunk.

I would drink myself into oblivion  
Were it not for the rings on my hand

My heart is pounding. Sometimes I think it wants to leap out of me and go its own way. Perhaps I would not die. How could I be more dead than I am now? This evening I tried to remember what I did all day and got as far as breakfast before blanking out. I have been asleep all day, all week, all my life, it feels. Is there no other way, my dear wife, to go through life than under such darkness? The Seljuks swept down, and here I am, fighting for my life. The disease came over me suddenly, and here I am, fighting for my life. And the realization has penetrated me that nothing is forever, that I am here only part of the time. I am fighting for more than my physical life; I am fighting to stay awake, to experience a previous existence called life.

I do not have to be a dervish to pray or to drink the wine. I must train my eyes to stay open and must train myself to see, to recall all I have done, if only to prove to myself that I have been alive, that I am still alive. I am strangely coherent tonight, am I not? Despite the fog created by the fever, I am more rational than I have been in what seems like years. No, I wish to know what and who I am, what I am doing, and who is doing. What else is there? Good night, dark moon.

## TWENTY-THIRD LETTER

There may be no more letters for a while, but do not abandon all hope. Yet we both know the inevitable. When we first met, even then I knew that eventually we would have to separate, that we might not grow old together. I no longer can spare any more messengers: There are no men to spare. The troops are becoming decimated far sooner than I had expected. It is not, fortunately, the cholera; however, it doesn't really matter. The sickness still prevents the men from doing much more than lie around and groan. It is almost comic: several thousand grown men with dysentery! The enemy of course must be in the same position. How strange it all seems! The fate of our country may be decided within a few days by this ridiculous thing, or when the water supply runs out. I cannot picture our incapacitated men doing much of anything.

At this point we have stopped all reconnaissance missions: No one can stand! That is why I can only guess at the outcome of all this. But we will never concede victory. Knowing the Seljuks, I do not think they will, either. The moon is strangely bright tonight. It is not quite full. I almost had forgotten our daughter's birthday; let's see, she is twelve. What is her future husband doing? He's not in the army. How I yearn for peace. What else is there to say? It is time to go.

A garden is a delight to the eye  
and a solace for the soul.  
Sa'adi

◊ **THE PERSIAN LETTERS: SECOND SERIES** ◊

What lovely gift will you bring us  
from the garden?  
Sa'adi



## FIRST LETTER

When I look around at everything that humans have created, I wonder at it all. How did the idea of a saddle come into being, for example, or of a poem? Some things, like hats, seem obvious, to protect our head, yet who first thought of making a hat, and the many shapes they come in? The *Shahnameh*\* offers some answers, attributing various inventions and processes to various kings, but I ask, how did these inventors conceive of the inventions and processes?

I am told that the Greek philosopher Plato said there are abstract forms for the contents of the physical world, but where did these come from? If God created everything, did everything in Creation just appear of a sudden, or over time, and how did God's creating connect to the creating done by human beings? "As above, so below," the ancient aphorism goes. Or, as the Jews say, God made us in His image . . . but how does this relate to a plow, or a ring, or a musical instrument? Did God make these things in His image?

You will think once again that I am really losing my mind, spending so much thinking about such things. And maybe I am, but there is almost nothing I like better than contemplating the metaphysical and asking questions that may very well be unanswerable. That I—or others—can even conceive of such questions is a miracle, is it not? People attribute this questioning to some sort of instinct to understand, or just to ask questions. But, I really don't know. I just think it is the way I am, a mystery no one really can explain.

What a contrast to war and to mundanities, all of whose existence seems meaningless, or obvious, or not even worth thinking about. Why is there war? Why do people want to kill one another? What is God's purpose in all of this? Wealth, power, madness, fear, irrational hatred—these and a thousand other reasons. But why do these exist? Why did a good God create these? Are these part of God's constitution, so that it's just that we are created in God's image? If so, I don't see the purpose in living. Why create something so beautiful as this world and alongside it the destructive force?

It is the old Problem of Evil: How could a good God create pain and suffering and bad people? Zoroastrians have two gods, a good one—Ahura Mazda the "Wise Lord"—and an evil one. Muslims and Jews have just one. Supposedly some of us choose good; some evil. But this doesn't explain anything. Greater minds than mine have failed to fully answer this question, yet there seems an instinct to keep on trying.

Now I see that the sun is rising, with a lovely cloud bank in the distance creating the most spectacular colors, as if the Merciful and Compassionate One decided to distract me from my unanswerable questions and bring me back to earth with the reminder that in spite of the mysteries and questions there still is beauty, if only we can recognize it. Something in the makeup of our consciousness enables us to appreciate it.

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\*The *Persian Book of Kings*, the Persian national epic.

## SECOND LETTER

Today is unbearably hot, and I am staying in the shade. There is no fighting. In fact, in looking out in all directions, I see no one out, on either side. I can't even see any horses or mules. There are no birds, either, or small animals scampering about, as they usually are.

Yet in the distance there are beautiful, pale-orange clouds over the mountains and the horizon, perhaps portending rain. In spite of the dryness and heat, we still sometimes get rain in the late afternoon, along with a display of thunder and lightning for a short while. The lightning streaks illuminate the entire sky and are most fearsome, making even true believers wonder whether the ancient gods are still in charge.

Recently I had a series of conversations with a Jew who came through the camp selling various wares. Although he was a peddler, he was quite intelligent, and soon we got to talking about one of his favorite subjects that lately has begun to interest me as well: reincarnation. Only some Muslims believe in it, and I'm not sure where I stand, but I am curious about what he has to say.

According to this man, whose name is Isaac, reincarnation is not automatic after we die. Only people who die with what he calls unfinished business return, with a few exceptions: those people who return to help other people in this life.

What is this unfinished business? According to him, attachment and attachments, whether to people we love, to anger we hang on to, to things we love in this life like music, to memories of loved ones who have died, and so on. It is attachment and attachments that prevent our souls from totally detaching from our bodies at death and ascending to merge with God in Heaven. A trace remains, and so we are reborn, in order to have another chance to let go of attachment and attachments. This of course seems a paradox, since if we return, won't we become attached again to what we were attached to before? But, he says not. Strangely, he used the Indian word *karma* to describe the unfinished business. If and when we work out our *karma*, we will not return, will not be reincarnated.

He says the biblical prophets Elijah and Enoch were transformed into other beings while still alive, and Serah bat Asher, the only woman. They didn't die the way ordinary human beings do. Elijah is the one we Muslims call al-Khidr, the Green One.

What about those who return to help other people? These people are reincarnated not because they have attachments—well, just one: to helping other people. The Jew says that possibly these people who return also have *karma* to burn off—maybe they didn't help enough people in their previous lifetime. Or maybe they choose to return, without any obligation or necessity. Or, God chooses them to do His work on earth.

I now feel a few drops of cool rain, and what a relief from the heat. If I reincarnate, I hope it is to a cooler region, but we don't have a choice about the whether or where or when or how. The Holy Ancient One—the Jew's name for the Merciful and Compassionate One—He's the One Who decides, based on our *karma*.

The splattering rain hits the dry ground and stirs up little clouds of dust, which then settle back down. The vegetation here is minimal, almost nonexistent, but surely the vegetation that is here must be grateful for the little bit of cool water, maybe even more grateful than I am.

### THIRD LETTER

Everything seems to worry me today—the military confrontations, the condition of my troops, my own physical and mental health, thoughts about the future, and whether I ever will be able to put aside all of the things that interfere with the things and people I love, including most importantly you.

I dreamed again, this time about a future in which the Turks were running the show and native Persians like myself were shunted aside, exiled, imprisoned, or killed. They seem to have no knowledge of how to govern, and they are supposed to be ignoramuses when it comes to culture.

However, today I had a visit from a man familiar with these Seljuks who says they actually are not as uncultured as I thought. Let us hope this is the case, because in spite of our best efforts, they clearly are winning the war.

Everyone fights battles in their lives, mostly nonmilitary ones, and I would venture to speculate that everyone has the same issues: How can they win their battles or at least just step away from them for a short while they enjoy life? I'm thinking of battles within ourselves, with friends or family, with the government, with the climate, with our fears, and so on.

For me today the battle is with my own worries, whether it's what to eat, will I sleep enough, what is the best way to approach the enemy, will this letter reach you, will I get sick again and be unable to function, will the troops desert me and return home, and so on. . . .

One of the odd assortment of people wandering into camp today lately was a woman who teaches yoga, and she wanted to teach me how to control my anxieties by various breathing techniques and what the Indians call *mudras*, hand gestures that supposedly control the flow of energy through our bodies. I told her I was interested, and she showed me some techniques, but unfortunately I am so anxious and pressed for time that I haven't found the time to practice the techniques, which one has to do for them to work.

Right now I am going outside and see what the magnificent sky has to offer in the way of heavenly bodies. Last night I saw a comet or meteor cross the sky, a blazing fireball. No, it wasn't part of a Zoroastrian fire ceremony [part of the practice of the ancient Persian religion founded by Zoroaster], and I wasn't imagining what I saw. The skies are absolutely pitch black these days, and the air still and warm though not hot like in the daytime. Any bright object, even if not terribly bright, stands out, and I started wondering, once again, how all this came about and how it is that we humans seem to have built into us the ability first to even witness this phenomenon and second to appreciate it. Even if this ability is passed down from generation to generation, there must have been a first time, and if so, how did it all begin?!

The *Shahnameh* attempts to answer such questions about origins but does not go past the basics and explore the beautiful mysteries embedded in our fragile. And beauty and mystery are what so captivate me, my beloved wife. If I couldn't think and write about these mysteries, my life would be futile. And of course the greatest mystery is love—especially our love—and what drew us together and has kept us together all of these years, in spite of the separation. No one really can explain this. Philosophers, scholars, poets, and mystics have tried, but in my opinion their attempts are failures. Better, I think, to just allow love to be the profoundist of mysteries, without trying to analyze or explain it.

## FOURTH LETTER

Once again the heat today was stultifying, and now I barely can keep my head up. My breathing is very shallow, and I actually worry that each breath might be my last. Filling my chest with air is an effort.

Outside the tent I hear a flurry of activity and a chorus of nocturnal sounds: various birds and small mammals, the men preparing for sleep, odd echoes in the distance, horses, strange otherworldly noises that perhaps are in my imagination.

There is much to do, even at this late hour, but I have no energy or motivation. High in the sky the full moon makes its way across the heavens, intensely white, drained of all off-white colors. I had hoped to plan next week's encounters with the enemy, using simple drawings, but this will have to wait until morning—if there is a morning. A strange sense of doom permeates my tent, the whole camp, extending to the horizon, a feeling beyond my control, as if my mind and heart have been hijacked and are being controlled by something greater than I am, than I even am aware of.

I had a good dinner, with wonderfully sweet melon for dessert, yet I am hungry. I have been warned that if I begin moving in slow motion, something serious is happening to me, and that is how I feel now, and although you might think this is simply the effect of the heat, it is not; it is something more. I thumb through your letters to me, and those from my father, but concentrating is difficult, next to impossible. An aide came in a little while ago with folios of the *Shahnameh*, which I tried to read, with the same desultory result: I cannot concentrate, cannot follow the story of the royal successions, keep track of who is who, when, and where. As you know, my dear, I sometimes have dreamed of writing my own version of our history, told not from the perspective of kings but of artists, musicians, and poets, or from the perspective of our spiritual masters—laying out chapter after chapter of mystical religious experiences, as if rulers and their follies never existed, in a kind of parallel world, the hidden world always here but visible only in flashes.

On top of my woefully weak misery I also often feel as if my life is winding down. This is hard to explain, but I feel like a sand clock whose reservoir of sand is running out, never to be replaced. At the same time I find my mind scattered, jumping from thought to thought without any organization, randomly, leaving me feel as if my very being, my sense of self, is eroding and has no center, leaving me feeling not me, if you can understand this.

To break this spell I look at the sky and moon to see if I can find any direction, purpose, center to the world, so that maybe I can borrow some of this to reconstruct my own sense of self. In the distance I hear a *qanun* and *reedpipe*, the *qanun* with the harmony, the *reedpipe* with the melody, as if one instrument. If I listen hard enough, perhaps I can follow the obscure thread of the improvisation, or the pattern of the silences between the musical notes, revealing the larger unfathomable music of the spheres in which all of creation is a kind of music, obviating the need for instruments, songs, musicians and singers, melodies and harmonies, and silence. Sufis see the world like this, as a vast sonic orchestra whose meaning must be experienced without judgment or other human interference. They silently sing along with the cosmic music, perhaps even create the music, since there must be an interweaving of our own sonic experience with the sounds and silences beyond us, else what is the purpose of our being here and of the cosmic music? They must interact to complete the composition. Now the moon moves behind wispy clouds, signaling the time to say good night, my darling.

## FIFTH LETTER

Another near-sleepless night, filled with worries about almost everything: You, our daughter and her future, the fate of our country, the lives of my men, the various rashes on my skin and head, watery eyes, night sweats, strange sounds, my digestion, and various fears—mostly about the war and whether I am going insane.

I also struggled to breathe. Every few breaths I either gasped for air or had to force myself to take a deep breath. This is frightening, since again I feel as if I am about to suffocate and soon will take my last breath.

Then, after thrashing in bed for what seemed an eternity, I either had the most wondrous waking vision or fell asleep and had the most wondrous dream.

I was in a beautiful home in a lovely green garden, with different kinds of trees and shrubs, colorful flowers, vegetables, fruit trees with apples and plums, grape vines, and melon patches. There also were several kinds of birds and small mammals, in addition to yellow and orange butterflies, bees, and small black bugs with red undersides. I thought I was in Paradise, the Gardens of Delight, everything was so lush.

But even more remarkable than the garden were my encounters with old friends and acquaintances whom I hadn't seen in years: There was the wife of a literary friend, a healer, an older man I knew from regular conversations we used to have about mysticism, a poet, and a dark-skinned chef whose exotic cooking always pleased me. Each time I looked around, I saw another old friend. I cannot fully express my joy at seeing these friends. They embraced me with enthusiasm, as if no time had passed since our last encounters or as if they had been missing me with such fervor that they materialized in the vision or dream.

I became lost in the vision or dream, to the exclusion of all else, and finally fell into a deep, dreamless sleep that lasted until sunrise, when the Captain tapped me on the shoulder to alert me that enemy spies had been spotted and killed and that I had to make some key decisions about whether to retreat a little, dig in our heels, go on the offensive, or set an ambush for the enemy in case he came too close. I reminded him of the disastrous attempted ambush of Manuchehr by Tur and Salm in the *Shahnameh* and decided against an ambush, even though the situations were different. The time wasn't right for an all-out attack, and I didn't want to show weakness by retreating, so I chose to dig in our heels and see if the situation would resolve itself, as such situations often do with patience.

And so, after this wonderful escapade into the greenest of green gardens, I had to get up and return to the seemingly pointless mundanities of life on the battlefield.

## SIXTH LETTER

As before, today I do not feel well. It is hard to describe. It is not the heat, or the food, or the fighting. There have been no strange visitors. I have had no unusual experiences, no hallucinations, no nightmares.

For one thing, everything seems to be happening very quickly. People are talking fast and moving fast. I can't follow. Things seem a blur. I watch people riding their horses and think they will crash into one another. People cut one another off in conversation, eat quickly, bring me questions, and expect answers even before I have heard the whole question. Am I losing my mind, has the world speeded up, have I slowed down?

The Captain asked me something before and left before I could formulate an answer. Someone brought me food and took it away before I even began eating. A flute player played a song so quickly that it seemed over before it even had begun. Some things do not move quickly—for example, the sun. It still rises slowly in the sky. A sliver of a moon that moves slowly across the sky—at a normal speed.

Along with this disturbing set of circumstances is another odd and disturbing phenomenon: My memory is deteriorating. I begin a sentence and cannot remember the conclusion. If I want to describe something, I began the description but cannot remember what I am describing. On the other hand, I can remember the distant past, and quite well, for example, the names of my childhood friends, the face of my sainted mother of blessed memory, and the details of our wedding. I told the Captain this, and he thought I simply was overloaded with projects, plans, and ideas. I told one of the doctors, and he thought the same. He also recommended an herb that he said works directly on memory. He also said my experience of everything moving quickly and my memory problem are related. He suggested, in addition to the herb, drinking more water, going to sleep earlier, and having the Captain help me organize everything I want and need to do, so that I have less to pay attention to each moment.

I have that scattered sense again, as if my mind is crumbling and I cannot find my center. And right now I will try that herb, which smells a little like some type of mint, and see if it makes a difference. Good night, my dear. I hope you are well. I miss you and always feel better when I am with you, more together, but unfortunately I don't know where our camp is in relation to where you are or even if you are where I think you are.

## SEVENTH LETTER

This morning we had a little rain again, enough to cool the air and ground significantly. In the afternoon we had some skirmishes with the enemy in which, fortunately, there were no major casualties on our side. Afterwards, I gave a prayer of thanks to the All-Powerful, All-Compassionate, All-Merciful One.

Now, something very unusual is happening: A man calling himself the Masala Mystic has just come into camp and begun reciting, in a loud voice, some very unusual poems. The themes are whether we are separate from God; whether we have a soul, and if so, whether this soul is immortal; whether there is a world separate from us; and most strangely, whether we even exist. After he recited some of his work, I called him over to join me for tea and fruit and to test him on his ideas.

If we don't exist, I asked him, then what are we? Who or what is drinking tea and eating fruit? Who or what is reciting poetry, who or what is talking right now? Here is what he said about one of the points:

"Let's say I have no ability to see the color green but instead see yellow, we walk in a field of grass, and you ask me the color of the grass. I answer yellow. You say, no, grass is green, not yellow, at least not this time of year. Is the world, then—at least this small piece of it—defined by what it is in itself or how I see it? Is green something intrinsic to the grass or to my vision? Is the whole world something in itself or only a projection of my mind?"

He laughed, as did I, and we both agreed on a kind of qualified answer: The world exists both on its own terms and on how we interact with it.

This type of question is not Islamic, or Jewish, or Zoroastrian, or Buddhist, but rather is Hindu. This is what Hindus think about. Perhaps the Hindu world works this way, but the other worlds do not. Perhaps this question is not important in these other religions.

Strangely, this so-called Masala Mystic does not look Indian, as one might think from his name, but rather Jewish. He has Jewish features, not Indian ones. If so, why is he asking such questions that clearly are the kinds of questions Indians ask? Should I ask him his religion? I think I will. . . . It turns out he indeed is Jewish, but he has traveled to India several times and is familiar with the two main Hindu scriptures, the Upanishads and Vedas. Why he calls himself the Masala Mystic, I did not find out. Maybe it is a joke? I think I am fortunate that although I am Muslim, I am receptive to ideas from all the faiths, whether or not they align with Muslim ideas—as long as they aren't hostile to Islam or too contradictory.

## EIGHTH LETTER

I think a lot about my legacy. What have I done that people will remember? Yes, our beautiful daughter is a legacy, but aside from her, have I created anything, accomplished anything that will be remembered in the future?

These are such tumultuous times that it is hard to imagine anything lasting very long. The constant fighting and jockeying for power, the dynasties coming and going.

Of course, does any of this matter? Is it simply my vanity speaking? I remember meeting a Jew many years ago who quoted from the Book of Ecclesiastes in the Hebrew Bible: "There is nothing new under the sun, and all is vanity." This supposedly is King Solomon speaking, the wisest and most powerful of men. He is worried that he and all of his works and deeds will be forgotten after he dies. If such a man is concerned about posterity, who am I to be concerned?

Certainly I will not be remembered as a great commander, or as someone who managed to lead his troops in spite of illness and terrible battle conditions. A patron of the arts? I very much would like to be seen as one, but at present that is impossible. At best I am an aesthete, an admirer, a dilettante, since I create nothing artistic myself, only enjoy the creations of other people.

Still, perhaps this is all one can hope for in this life, to be able to appreciate a modicum of the beauty of creation and to ponder how all of this creation came to be. Clothing, architecture, books, music—how did these come about? Surely not by chance but by the hand of the Maker. But, how did the Maker create all of this, and why?



## NINTH LETTER

Today I woke up with a start: A tiger saw me and was rushing toward me. I pushed up with my arms in case it jumped on me, yelled, and woke up.

I then remembered two other, much nicer dreams: In one I had a very strong feeling of "I miss you." It is hard to explain, since you were not physically in the dream, but your aura pervaded the dream. In the other dream I was rubbing your neck and touching your arm.

Here in the desert I feel like an alien. And yet the alien places, people, and scenery feel familiar. This is the most bizarre feeling I ever have had. Perhaps that is why I feel so comfortable in the dreamworld. It is the more familiar one, with familiar feelings, people, and scenery.

Was the tiger a "dreamtiger"\* trying to chase me out of his world, out of the dreamworld? Was it trying to tell me to return to the "real" world, the one I find so alien? Everything is mixed up, which of course is what dreams are all about.

At the same time, I am nagged by that familiar sense of unreality. Am I alive, or dead, or in some intermediary state? It may be the heat to some extent, or the medication, or just the sense of unreality that war creates. We are separated from the familiar, thrown into a life-or-death situation, and somehow expected to remain ourselves and function normally. Of course, this is impossible.

A great deal of time here is spent arguing with people. You say one thing, and someone contradicts you. When this happens with what seems almost everything you say, the result is exhaustion and withdrawal. I don't want to say anything in the first place, or when there is opposition, but just nod my head in assent and not get drawn into the back and forth. This is sort of like the remedy for reincarnation: avoid attachment and attachments.

And now I hear in the distance what sounds like ethereal music. Perhaps it is in response to my frustration and lack of reality. It is a music not attached to musicians or instruments. A music of the spheres. I think this is a Sufi concept—tuning in to an all-pervasive music that underlies and permeates reality. I am going to stop writing for a little while to try to hear it better. . . .

. . . . When I tune in to this music, I am at peace, total peace. No problems, no arguments, no concerns, no thoughts, no loneliness, no anxieties, no attachments or nonattachments. It is a deep meditative state, like a trance. I am aware only of my breathing. I wish you were here so that I could to share it with you. The only emotion during this state is love—a constant, static, blissful state in which no separation exists between me and anything or anyone else, including God. I won't say I am God, because greater men than I have got themselves in trouble for saying they are the truth or are God, like Al-Hallaj\*\*, and what I don't need right now is trouble. So, for now, let us leave it at that, this peaceful place where, according to the Sufis, "everything is music."\*\*\*

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\*As the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986) might have called it.

\*\*Mansur al-Hallaj (858–922), a Persian mystic executed for proclaiming he was the truth.

\*\*\*See the poem by the Persian poet Jalaluddin Rumi (1207–1273), entitled by translators Coleman Barks and John Moyne "Where Everything Is Music."

## TENTH LETTER

Last night I woke up panting for breath, my heart racing. I was scared, but I don't know of what or who. I got up and walked around to try to calm down, which I did to some extent. The bright-white moonlight streamed in through the makeshift windows in the tent. The air was filled with a chorus of dogs howling at the moon. Or perhaps they too were afraid. Perhaps an animal predator was in the camp. Perhaps a spy was skulking around. Or one of my own men was wandering around.

I then had the oddest thought—that the two angels said to accompany Muslims after we die had come to take me away. Where they would take me—to heaven or to hell—is not in my power to know, but of course I hope it is to heaven, and with you by my side.

I also had a vision of the resurrection at the end of days, when God will rejoin our souls to our bodies. I never really understood how this is supposed to work, even though it is a tenet of our faith. The Mahdi\* will be there directing the goings-on. There will be no more war, no bloodshed, no strife, no argumentation, no hatred. Ethereal music will sound through the canyons and caves, the valleys and mountains.

I look forward to this, especially since lately I have been so disturbed in body and mind, and missing you so terribly. Whereas once you and I were inseparable, now we have been ripped apart, and so my body and mind are raw and bleeding, jagged where the joining once was. Being with you in the flesh would calm and heal me, but since this is impossible now, the best that can be is for me to imagine or dream this. And curiously, when I do this, I feel more calm, as if you are with me. I wonder how you feel now, what you are doing, where you are. The uncertainty is maddening, and it is all I can do to stay focused on the fantasy of our being together.

At this very moment the sun is rising over the barren desert, and I have to face another bleak day. There has been no fighting for a few days now, but it is only a matter of time when it will resume and head toward its no seemingly inevitable conclusion—namely, our defeat by an inferior race.

One small dark cloud is obscuring part of the sun, but otherwise the sky is a brilliant bright blue. The dogs are scurrying about looking for food and water. The sounds now are of men and horses. Once again I must go and face a reality without music, without art, without poetry, without color or nuance, without spiritual depth, without anything I value except survival. And so once again I must bid you adieu, if only, I hope, until the next time I can write.

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\*The Islamic Messiah.

## ELEVENTH LETTER

We had a skirmish last week with the enemy, and it didn't go well. At first we had the advantage, but then they sent in reinforcements and pushed us back until we had to retreat to the other side of a protective chasm, where we licked our heels. This was humiliating, since just a few weeks ago we at least would have held our ground. Once again the weather has turned, too, becoming even more unbearably hot than before. Fortunately, of course, the weather affects the enemy as well, probably preventing them from crossing the chasm and annihilating us to the man.

On the other front, my health, there was bad news from the doctors, all of whom came by the other day, examined me very carefully, and told me I may have a tumor, which would explain the decline in my mental capabilities, agitation, confusion, fuzzy thinking, erratic moods, forgetfulness, difficulty remembering, losing my train of thought midsentence, sleeplessness, general loss of interest in much of anything or anyone, and overall fogginess.

That news, coupled with the outcome of the skirmish with the enemy, brought into my head the thought of doing myself in. I know this is anathema to our religion, to all religions, but the thought is hard to subdue, and I have been lying awake drafting various scenarios in my head about how I would do the deed. But just as I come upon what seems a viable solution—for example, jumping off one of the nearby cliffs, or drowning myself in a well, or just disappearing into the mountains—I think of you and our daughter, the Prophet, my responsibilities to my men and king, and my parents, who brought me into this world and devoted themselves to raising me. And since my father is still alive, and is a devout believer, I know I couldn't go through with such a vile deed.

Please do not think less of me for having these thoughts, which in some ways are perhaps not any more unusual than the thoughts I have shared with you about pottery, birds, wedding ornaments, music, and all the other things I use to distract myself from the reality of the situation. The idea of knowing the bleakness of my future is more distressing even than the idea of losing the other war, which as I have said many times has seemed inevitable for some time now.

The imam just stopped by. This was his first visit in a while. Someone must have told him about my illness, or perhaps he read my mind. We had a long discussion about suicide, in which he convinced me that killing myself was unwise and selfish. Maybe if I declined rapidly and could no longer function. Or if the disease dragged on for years with a slow decline and the same endgame. Or if the war ended and my father and you and our daughter were no longer. He said maybe then I could justify suicide. But, now, he convinced me, it was too soon to make such a decision.

I take solace in the wonderful dream I had last night in which you and I were making passionate love, the way it was when we married. Your beauty and graces nearly overwhelmed me, and fortunately I woke up or I might have died an ecstatic death in the dream. I take solace in knowing I still can dream, remember a dream, and wake up. The sky is perfectly blue-gray, without clouds, and the air is rippling just above the desert floor. Today we again must decide whether to stay put, retreat, or try to retake the offensive. Now I see the Captain on his way to my tent, undoubtedly to begin the deliberations about how to proceed, if it is to proceed at all and not just see what will happen on its own. Now I must go. Farewell, dearest of dearests!

## TWELFTH LETTER

My dearest wife: The last few days have not been good ones, I am sorry to say. I hate to inundate you with complaints, but I have little good news.

Yesterday my right eye would close only halfway, and I struggled to keep it open even that much. The doctor could do nothing, nor the herbalists. On top of that, my neck and shoulders pained me so much that I feared I was going to become paralyzed.

Mentally I am not much better. If anything, I am worse off than before. I do not want to do anything or go anywhere. When people come to my tent, I talk to them, but I don't want to go out. I give the Captain and the lieutenants their orders, and they carry them out. When I am with more than one person, my head begins to spin and throb, as if I am being drowned in noises. I am constantly anxious, like before, and nothing works to alleviate my distress.

The copy of the *Shahnameh* lies on small table, and each day I think I am going to read more of it, especially the tales of battles. But each day I do nothing, and the book continues to lie closed, awaiting a better day and time--if ever there will be one. I seem to have extra energy only for my own writing.

These letters to you are a kind of diary, and I hope you will save them. Perhaps one day someone will collect and publish them in a book. I envision the person in the future who collects the letters calling them something like *The Persian Letters: A Medieval Persian General's Wartime Letters to His Wife*. Does this sound self-serving? Perhaps, but I would like to think the letters might add a personal perspective to the story of this terrible period in our history and maybe persuade people of the futility of taking up arms. In addition, maybe they would encourage people to pay more attention to the small wonders of life.

I also have been amusing myself with the poems the Masala Mystic read to me. He left me a small package of his poems, and I have been going over them, changing a few words here and there, and adding quotations that come into my head. I like the way he approaches the big metaphysical questions and feel it worth refining his ideas and preparing the poems for what I hope will be a wider readership than just me. He seems pleased that I am doing this. Each time I go over one of his poems I get a new insight or several new insights, which I try to restrain myself from adding to the poems, since they are his creation, not mine. I even imagine adding artwork to the collection, but that will have to wait for clearer days.

The other two projects I have begun but have not had time to complete are a collection of my own religious poetry and prose and a collection of my father's writings, possibly including some of the letters he has written me. You will remember that in addition to being a scientist of sorts he was a poet and spent much of his free time writing poetry.

Since my memory, concentration, and motivation seem to be deteriorating by the day, withdrawing from people and trivial matters seems essential if I am to finish these projects while I still have the ability. At some point I can see myself just sitting in my tent staring at the walls, or perhaps going outside when the moon is full to stare at the moon, or even just lying in bed day and night with my eyes shut praying that the end, when it comes, will be gentle and peaceful and that your spirit will be with me, even while your body is wherever it now is.

## THIRTEENTH LETTER

Another sleepless night, or maybe just restless. I don't remember.

I had the distinct feeling that I was being watched, that a presence was in the room. They didn't have shapes, just presence, and seemed to be waiting for something, but for what, I only could guess. Possibly I was being watched by the two angels sent to guide me after I die.

I decided I just cannot take part in this war any more, at least not on the terms of the king. It is not that I am higher and mightier than he is, or than anyone else. It's just that the whole enterprise seems even more pointless than I thought.

Men on both sides are dying, along with innocent people, and for what? Perhaps the Seljuks aren't as bad as is said about them.

A few days ago a group of prostitutes came to the camp, invited by one of my left-tenants, without my approval. It's not that I want to deny my men some pleasure in the midst of this hell, but is this what war is about?

I'm not a coward—you know that. But I am worn out. Aside from war talk, the only thing anyone, including myself, talks about is illness, dying, death, and what if anything comes after. Oh, sometimes someone will speculate about what came before.

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The Captain just brought some disturbing news: He said my sister's son just killed his brother, and their father killed his own brother. This is the kind of enmity that has permeated the kingdom and dynasty as long as I can remember. How can I justify participating in a war whose leaders and followers engage in such horrific acts? It is the kind of madness that has dominated this land for hundreds if not thousands of years, if one can believe even a hundredth of what is written in the *Shahnameh*.

I yearn to escape and leave it all behind, but of course I cannot just walk away—that would be irresponsible and lead to even worse tragedies than are occurring now.

Will my nephew and brother-in-law now go after me and extend the bloodshed? The Captain also told me he is concerned that a new army seems to be coming from a different direction from the Seljuks. I don't fear death, but what an ignoble way to die, at the hands of family and in such a manner as I despise.

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At a meeting today of my council, everyone, to the man, said we are losing the war and that it would be only a matter of time—perhaps days—until we would lose and be forced to surrender, or flee, or fight and be massacred, since we are greatly outnumbered. We prayed for guidance from the One above.

## END NOTES

page 5. "ARISE, oh Cup-bearer . . ." Poem I in *Poems from the Divan of Hafiz*, trans. Gertrude Lowthian Bell (1897), at [sacred-texts.com](http://sacred-texts.com).

page 5. "MY lady, that did change this house of mine . . ." Poem XXIII in *Poems from the Divan of Hafiz*, trans. Gertrude Lowthian Bell (1897), at [sacred-texts.com](http://sacred-texts.com).

page 12. "Roses blossom over and over on the same bush." Jalaladdin Rumi, *The Masnavi* (also written *Mathnavi* and other ways), VI, 129-179. See also Jalaladdin Rumi, "Opening," in *Rumi: One-Handed Basket Weaving: Poems on the Theme of Work*. Versions by Coleman Barks (Athens, GA: MAYPOP, 1991), p. 118.

page 36. "A garden is a delight to the eye and a solace for the soul." Attributed to the Persian poet Sa'di Shirazi and presumably from *The Gulistan (The Rose Garden)* (see [www.iranchamber.com/literature/saadi/books/golestan\\_saadi.pdf](http://www.iranchamber.com/literature/saadi/books/golestan_saadi.pdf)). However, I cannot locate this line in the online English version. Courtesy Ariana Spillane, Traditional Medicinals.

page 38. "What lovely gift will you bring us from that garden?" Sa'di Shirazi, *The Gulistan (The Rose Garden)* ([www.iranchamber.com/literature/saadi/books/golestan\\_saadi.pdf](http://www.iranchamber.com/literature/saadi/books/golestan_saadi.pdf)).

page 46. The general refers to the Masala Mystic. Though not impossible, it is unlikely that this is the same author who write the poems in this editor's book *Bees in the Garden: Poems by the Masala Mystic*.

page 48. Jalaluddin Rumi, "Where Everything Is Music," in *Rumi: Selected Poems*, trans. Coleman Barks and John Moyne (New York: Penguin, 2004).

page 51. The general refers to poems by the Masala Mystic. Though not impossible, it is unlikely that this is the same author who write the poems in this editor's book *Bees in the Garden: Poems by the Masala Mystic*.

## ABOUT THE EDITOR

The editor has degrees in music, creative writing, and Jewish studies and has been writing poetry, fiction, and nonfiction since 1964. After a long career in book publishing, he taught creative writing at the University of Denver. He now gives occasional poetry readings and writing workshops. His work has appeared in *Beatitude*, *Jewish Currents*, the *Boulder Jewish News*, *Kansas Quarterly*, *Midstream*, *Numinous*, *Partisan Review*, and *X-Peri*, among other print and online publications. He has published four books of his own poetry—*Souls in the Garden: Poems About Jewish Spain* (2019); *Here I Seek You: Jewish Poems for Shabbat, Holy Days, and Everyday* (2016); *Chance Music: Prose Poems 1974 to 1982* (2012); and *The House* (2008)—and hosts two web sites: [henryrasof.com](http://henryrasof.com) and [www.medievalhebrewpoetry.org](http://www.medievalhebrewpoetry.org).