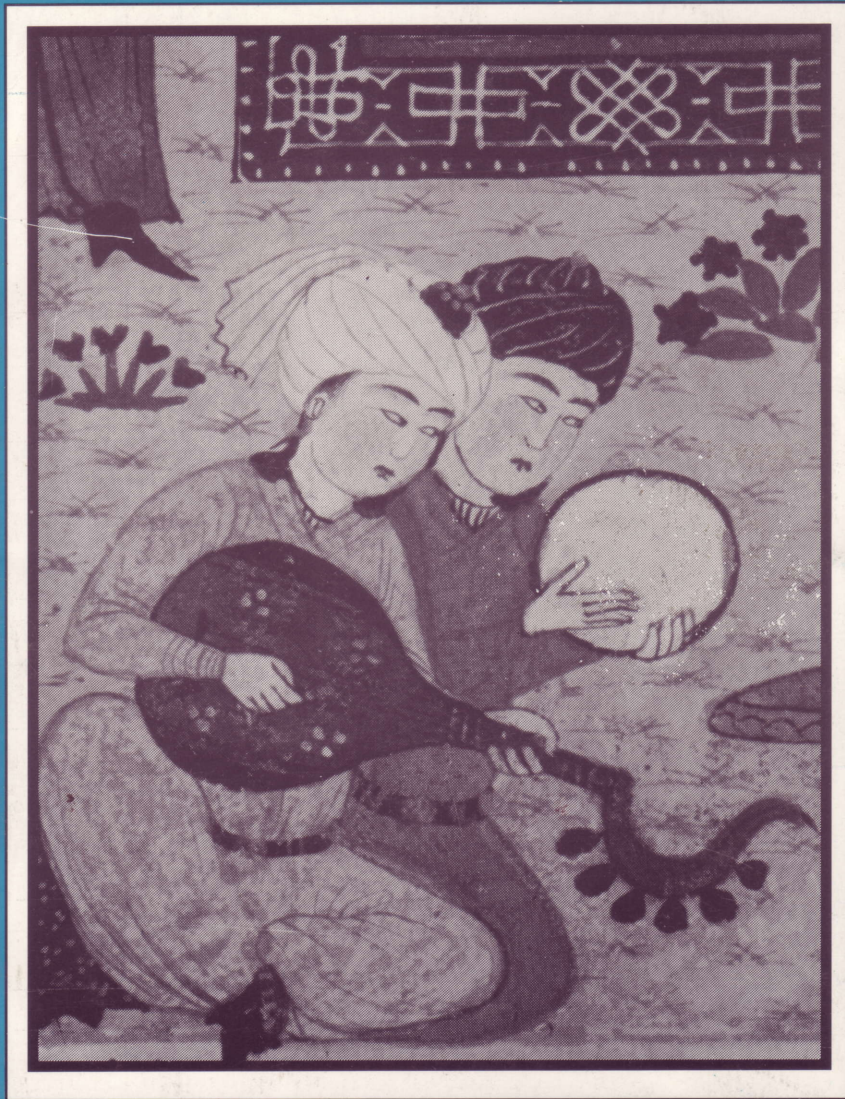




Sufi

Issue 13
\$3.75 £1.90

A Journal of Sufism



Khaniqahi Nimatullahi Publications

Wisdom of the Idiots

by Sohail Inayatullah

The sun shines brightly on the small village of Bavracona in Punjab. The heat of the sun parches the scalps and skins of the farmers tilling the dry earth. Those not working sit underneath the protective shade of the large, green banyan tree. There, children play games, mothers talk to each other, old men smoke the hookah, and I sit on a partially torn, rope-strung bed, half-reading a manual on data-gathering methods and half-looking towards the horizon in search of something, though I don't know what.

My eyes drift upwards and I look through the branches of the banyan tree for signs of moisture, of rain. There are none. I look down at my book and wonder how much longer it will take me to finish my work. Part of me knew when I planned my research at Lahore University that it might take longer to finish my thesis if I returned to my childhood village, but there was much I needed to teach the villagers. Through my efforts, I hoped one or two of them might actually finish school or even go to college.

I get up and slowly walk towards a little child who I have been teaching Urdu. I am pleased to see Asma reading her second grade language textbook. Her father, an older white-bearded man, sits beside her calmly smoking a hookah.

"Thank you for helping my daughter," says Moḥammad Khān. "But what about yourself? You are always reading, and if not reading, writing in that big book of yours." I am surprised to hear him question my work. "Why not join us more," he adds. I want to tell him that I have little desire to join them, but as he is my uncle and as I am staying in his house, I decide it best to be polite and say nothing.

Another elderly man, Rahim, who

is extremely thin and walks with a slight limp, interrupts our conversation. "He should go work in the fields, like others his age." He looks away from me and then says, "But what does he know about hard work. Even when he was young, he would stay in his room, and read all day."

I begin to get angry. I want to remind him who is in college and who is illiterate, but I say nothing. Instead, I turn away from the two men and direct my attention to Asma. "See. Look at your father and Raḥim. They are so lazy. All they do is sit around, smoke and drink tea."

Khān gently strokes his daughter's long hair. His eyes wander over to the small mud-brick mosque that the villagers have built. "If you don't like the fields, at least come pray with us sometimes," adds Khān. I look down. He then returns to smoking his waterpipe.

"How can he," says Raḥim. "He just sits outside the mosque and takes notes." They both start to laugh, and even Asma joins in their joke. I want to tell them that their religious rituals are foolish, that all their time in the fields has only destroyed their health, but I contain myself. My stomach, tense when I get upset, starts to hurt. I look away from them and the village. I notice a cloud of dust. Something is coming down the road towards the village.

The dust appears to be caused by horses. Before the horses come any closer, some of the children call everyone together. The women busily discuss who the unexpected strangers may be. "Most likely idiots," I say loudly, still feeling angry. Khān stops smoking his hookah long enough to disagree. "They are our friends," he says.

The horses are now almost in the village. They pull a carriage. Up front

are two men; one holds the reins and the other sits beside him. The horses stop and the *tonga* door opens. No one seems to know what to expect. I have an idea, though, for I notice the rich wood and the expensive ornaments that decorate the carriage. "If not idiots, then criminals." Khān and Raḥim both muster enough strength to stand up. Khān coughs and tells me once again that they are friends.

Out of the *tonga* come two people. The first is tall and has a rugged face with a curly black mustache. The second is small and has a large smile on his round face. I find further proof of their material wealth in their bulging stomachs. Khān and Raḥim are already many steps ahead of me and walk with a quickness I would have thought impossible. In seconds, all four men are warmly embracing each other. The other villagers also gather around the two gentlemen. Only I stand apart.

On closer inspection, I notice they are in fact gathered around the small man with the round face. I wonder why. There is something different about him; perhaps it is his glistening white, gold-embroidered clothes. The villagers crowd around him like beggars. What fools, I think, and then I notice the small man looking directly at me and smiling. He seems to recognize me and looks as if he is anxious to meet me. But I know I have not met him before. Perhaps he notices me because I am so obviously different from the others. Or perhaps he thinks knowing me might be profitable as well as enlightening for him.

Suddenly, he turns his eyes away from me and smiles at some children who are hugging him. Since everyone knows him so well, I gather that he must have visited the village while I was away at the University.

Within ten minutes, everyone is

sitting around the banyan tree and the visitors are served milk. I cannot believe they are serving the visitors some of the village's precious milk supply. They refuse to serve milk even to thirsty relatives, and once I could have sworn that I overheard some of the women complaining that I drink too much. So why this unneedy group?

I venture towards Muhammad Khān and ask him who these gentlemen are. He looks at me and smiles. I repeat my question. "Ask him," he replies, pointing at the small man who to my amazement has not stopped grinning. Instead of approaching the small man, though, I walk over to the tall one. He tells me that they have come to the village to bestow their spiritual blessings. "You don't look particularly spiritual to me," I say. He does not defend himself; instead, like the small man, he starts to smile. Everyone smiling so much starts to bother me. I cannot understand their happiness. Are they laughing at me?

And then I understand. It is the milk that is making them happy. This gets me extremely upset, for I do not want the villagers to be manipulated out of their milk supply. I manage to calm myself and ask the tall man his name. "Aurangzeb," he says. "And my master's name is Sufi Bābā Ali Farid Khān."

"Your master?" I ask with amazement. He then proceeds to explain that his master is a great saint, adding that he himself is one of the Sufi's many disciples. I vaguely remember my mother telling me about Sufis when I was a child. She had warned me to be wary of them as they were too lazy to work and simply clever beggars. And recently in a religion class in Lahore, we had discussed the problematic nature of the Sufi master-disciple relationship in Islam.

The Sufi is now hugging a little child given to him by a proud mother. I hypothesize that this must be a blessing of some sort. I wonder how the Sufi has convinced the villagers that his blessings can help them. What will he expect in return for his words, I wonder? I want to tell the mother that instead of spiritual blessings, she should

have her child vaccinated in Lahore, but unfortunately the villagers are afraid of the big city. The ones who visit Lahore, inevitably, get lost in the huge crowds.

I am glad my thesis will be finished soon, as it has become increasingly intolerable living in the village. Although I have regularly visited the village over the years, I had never stayed longer than a few days; nor had I ever closely studied the villagers. But now, as my research progresses, I can see how ridiculous their behavior is. And yet, when I look deeply into their faces, most have strange smiles of contentment and a look of happiness for which I can find no apparent reason. Even those who work all day beneath the blistering sun talk and laugh together in the evening when the cool moon ascends.

The Sufi gives the child back to the mother, and then I notice him looking directly at me. For a brief moment, everyone else disappears and I see only him. His clothes and face almost seem to glow. I feel naked in front of his eyes and look away. His stare leaves me confused and I do not know what to think.

Aurangzeb urges me to go over to the Sufi. I decide to accept the offer and meet this Bābā Farid character. Perhaps I'll show him not everyone in Bavracona is an illiterate, gullible fool. My steps are slow as I plan out what I will say. The Sufi tells the others to move as I come forward, and we greet each other.

"I've been waiting to meet you for quite some time now," he says. I ask him to explain what he means, but he only smiles. "There is a spiritual reason for our meeting today," he adds. Again, I ask him for an explanation, but he says that my belief system will not allow my mind to understand. Before I can reply; he asks my name. This time I do not respond.

"You are a psychology student - at Lahore University, isn't it?"

I look at him, at his round face, and ask how he knows. His eyes seem to get deeper and blacker. "Just a lucky guess," he says grinning. Suddenly my stomach tightens. Who the hell is this person, I wonder? And how

does he know me? Have the villagers told him about me? "I am Allah's servant," he says. "It is not important that I know you; it is important that you know you."

I don't know what to say, or do. My face feels flushed, my mind confused. To my surprise, I want to cry. I glance at his eyes for a clue to my condition, but he looks elsewhere. Now, Khān, Raḥim and many others look at me. I feel anger swell up inside my body. My hands tense and from inside me an urge to strike the Sufi arises, but I manage to control myself and walk away.

"Will you come talk to me again?" he asks. "I want to learn more about your education, your research." I do not look back. I just want to be far away from them. Far away from the Sufi.

My pace increases and soon I am running. A part of me wants to look back at the Sufi, but I do not. I will not. I ask myself why I wanted to cry earlier. I cannot imagine myself this out of control. I cross over a small drainage ditch, walk into the courtyard of Khān's mudbrick house, and enter my small enclosed room where I sit on my bed. Once again I feel tears rising. I clench my fists and the tears go away, leaving only a tightness in my stomach. I note that this is the third time today I have experienced this pain, but now it is much stronger. I turn on the light, take out one of my books, and start to read. The discomfort goes away as I become absorbed in a book on the human mind. The words on the page bring my tired self some peace, and soon I lay the book down and sleep.

I begin to dream. Hundreds of books rapidly move toward me through the air. The books appear from nowhere and quickly fly past. I try to read the titles but cannot. I desperately want to see what information the books contain. I need to see, but still can not. The harder I try, the less I can see, and the more frustrated I become. I look around to see where I am, and when I notice that I am at the University, the frustration disappears.

Then, at the next moment, I find myself back at the village. But I am

younger now and reading a children's book. I turn the first page. I see my parents. I turn to the next page and see my school. Suddenly I am an adult, and a picture of the Sufi stares at me. The Sufi grins and I can see his bright teeth. My stomach hurts and then the Sufi begins to cry. Tears seem to flow endlessly from his round black eyes. I watch him cry, my heart feels warm, and soon I too feel the need to cry.

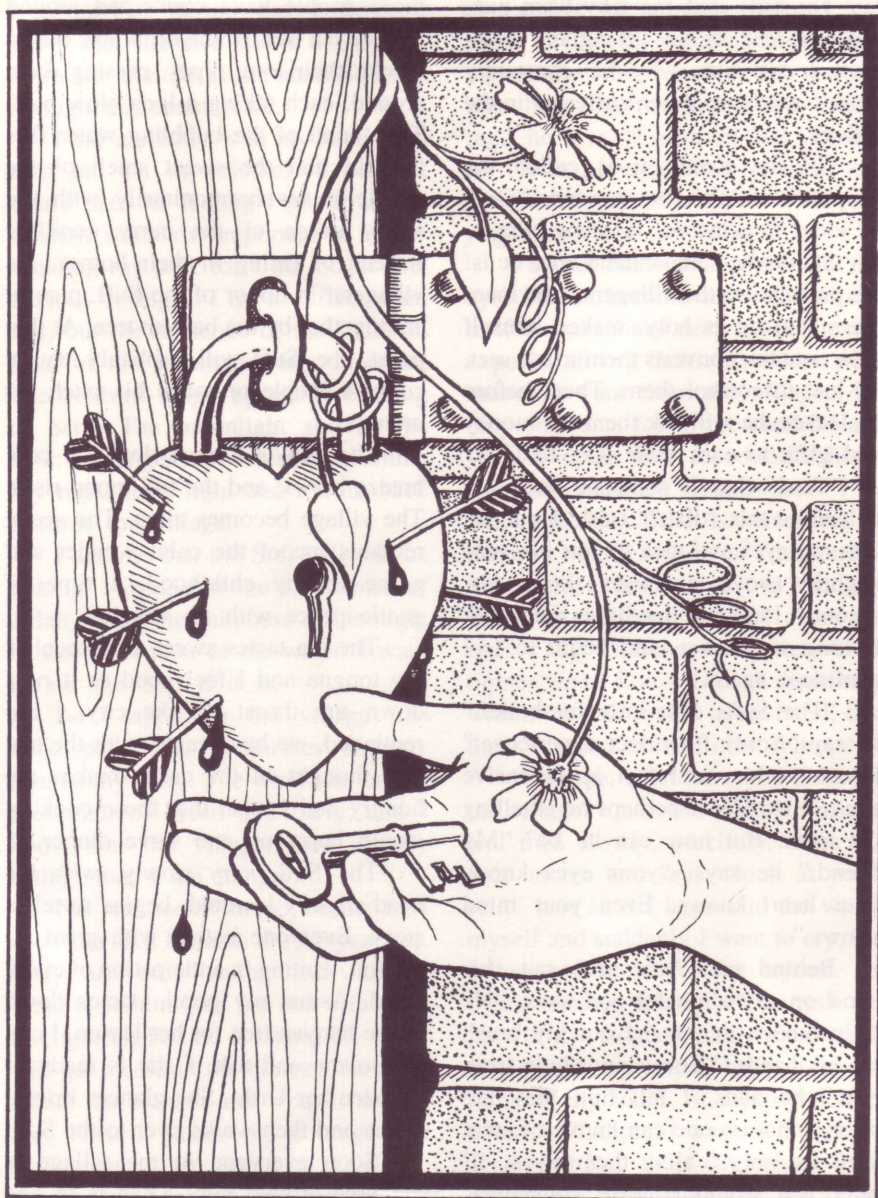
The dry heat wakes me up. Where am I? Looking around the room, I realize I am back in Bavracona. I search through my books until I find one on dream interpretation and read through the different parts of the book. But I fail to find anything that can adequately explain my dream.

I consider the possibility that the answer is not in some book but with the Sufi. I quickly dispel this notion, however, remembering that books have explained the world to me before. Surely, they will be able to again. When I return to Lahore, I tell myself, I will be able to find the needed information through my professors or at the university library - and then my dream will make sense.

Outside, the wind blows softly and the coolness of the night begins to relax me. The peasants will soon return from the fields to drink tea together. I am glad I do not have to farm the fields as it seems a waste of time to work from morning to evening, sweating profusely, only to earn barely enough money to support one's family. Years ago, when I was younger, I worked hard tilling the soil. I promised myself then I would never again work in the fields. The peasants never took the time to reflect on the world, on the purpose of their lives. I had taken the time, studied hard, and even given my inherited land to the village. But still they do not appreciate all that I have done for them, all I can yet do for them.

As I am thirsty, I decide to walk to the banyan tree and see if anyone is serving tea. The way there is dirty. Cow dung is slapped against the walls of the mud-brick houses and the gutter smells horrible as usual. I walk a bit faster, wishing I were back in Lahore.

Guessing that the Sufi will still be



at the tree, I experience a mixture of fright, curiosity, and anger at the thought of seeing him again. I wonder why I am reacting in such an unusual way towards this man. What is it?

There are ten or so people drinking tea around the banyan tree. The Sufi is talking to some of the laborers about something. I still cannot understand the respect they pay him. Who is he? I begin to doubt my earlier contention that he is here to take their food and drink. Maybe it is something else. Perhaps he has an inferiority complex. Perhaps he is afraid and lonely, hence his need to convert others to his belief system.

The Sufi gazes at me as I approach. His eyes pierce me and fear

shoots through my body. Yet the moment I feel the pain, he closes his eyes and smiles. I try to gather up my courage and calm my rapidly beating heart. But I cannot.

Moḥammad Khān, Raḥim, and the Sufi's disciple, Aurangzeb, greet me. Aurangzeb asks whether I have slept well. When I nod yes, he smiles in the same way that the Sufi smiles. Their smiles continue to perplex me. In Lahore it is an expression I rarely see, yet many of the villagers smile all the time in this way. Maybe they are genuinely happy. Yet there is something about their happiness. And then I understand: ignorance is bliss. Only because of their lack of knowledge do they think themselves happy.

The Sufi asks me why I am puzzled. Instead of answering his question, I ask him why he constantly smiles amidst so much suffering in the village.

"In the Koran it is called the happiness of Allah," he responds. "Only in love, in wisdom, is there bliss."

Suddenly, I understand who he is! He preaches to the villagers, convinces them that he is holy, makes himself look content, converts them to his sect, all just to control them. Then, before he leaves, he will ask them for money and gifts to earn their way to God.

"And what if someone does not believe in this Allah?" I ask. He looks into my eyes and then directs his gaze slightly above my eyes for a few seconds. I assume that his is confused, lacking an answer, and begin to feel confident again.

"The Sufis care little for belief," he says, "only for direct experience." I look at him and feel apprehensive again. I wonder if perhaps he is telling the truth. But how can he be? "My friend," he says, "your eyes know, your heart knows. Even your mind knows."

Behind me, Aurangzeb puts his hand on my shoulder and says, "He is in tune with you." I quickly brush off his hands. "You cannot hide from him," he adds. I tell him they are wrong, that no one can know me, that they are only fooling themselves. "If only you would educate yourselves, then you would understand," I say.

"Understand what?" asks Aurangzeb loudly. I do not know how to reply. Once more I am confused. I hear the Sufi tell him to be gentle. Aurangzeb nods. My stomach begins to ache as if something wants to break out, to be set free. I have no idea what, but I suspect it has something to do with the Sufi and the villagers. Who knows? Maybe he is doing something to me. I remind myself to be strong, not to blame others for my problems. And what can the Sufi do anyway? For some reason, I remember my dream about the Sufi crying and my wanting to join him.

Muhammad Khān comes over and offers me some tea. I take the cup and sip the tea. In a short while, more and

more people have converged around the banyan tree. Some drink tea; others smoke their long pipes, passing them around, each taking a long slow puff. The sound of the bubbling water fills the air, and the sweet smell of the smoke mixes harmoniously with the spicy aroma of the curry cooking. Instead of eating in their homes, the villagers, in honor of the Sufi, plan to eat together by the banyan tree. At that point, the Sufi will probably try to convert people or make his pitch for money.

The sun is almost down, a cool breeze blows, and the full moon rises. The village becomes alive. The scene reminds me of the calm wonder and peace of my childhood, a time of gentle peace with no worries.

The tea tastes sweet as it touches my tongue and I feel good as it runs down my throat. In the city, I am reminded, we have cakes with the tea. The thought of the cakes makes me hungry and I wish that those cooking would hurry up and serve dinner.

The Sufi, very slowly, with his head slightly lowered, begins to tell a story. Everyone listens with great attention, waiting in anticipation of every word. Asma, my pupil, comes down to the banyan tree for her lesson. I call her to me and ask if she is ready to practice her Urdu. She glances briefly at me and then walks over to the Sufi.

Soon everyone in the village is gathered around him. Khān is to one side of the Sufi and Aurangzeb to the other. In front of him are a group of little children. I feel so alone. My eyes seek out the Sufi, and when he returns my gaze, I sense a sadness in his eyes as if he knows what I am feeling. But I am not sure. Maybe it is only my imagination.

"Do you know what happens when intellectuals and Sufis see a mango tree?" asks the Sufi. "Tell us," reply the children in unison. The Sufi laughs. "The intellectuals sit around and analyze the tree. They count the number of mangos, and afterwards they count them again and again." He then asks if anyone knows what the Sufis do. A few of the older men laugh. "The Sufis," he says after a long pause, "eat the mangos." Then he inquires whether

they would rather count the mangos or eat them. Everyone now laughs.

Everyone except me. The story makes me sad. I remember my mother telling me similar stories when I was a child. As she did, my father would hold me closely until I fell asleep. But they died of smallpox, and I had to learn how to survive on my own. I studied hard and was rewarded with a scholarship to Lahore University. Though I pursue my bachelor's degree, still the villagers do not respect me, nor I them. I do not need any of them. Indeed, they are lucky I am using the village for my thesis research. Too bad they will not even be able to read the published study. What fools they are. As I think this, my stomach tightens.

I want to get away from the villagers, go back to my room and read. As I start to walk away, I realize a part of me does not want to return to the confined walls of the room. A part of me wants to stay in the open and listen to the Sufi. I do not know what to do. I feel torn, and my stomach continues to ache. Aurangzeb stands up. Then he walks over and apologizes to me for his earlier words. I look down. "Try to be kind to yourself," he says. I ask him how long he has been with the Sufi. Three years he tells me. I ask him what he did before, and he tells me that he was pursuing his M.A. in physics at the University of Karachi. I am shocked by this revelation and question his decision to travel with the Sufi. Aurangzeb gently laughs. He then looks directly at me. "I loved school," he explains, "but all my education left me empty. Something was missing."

I do not know what to say or what to think, but I want to be alone. And then I surprise myself by telling Aurangzeb to shut up and leave me alone. Instead of getting angry, he quickly apologizes again and excuses himself. I walk away from the banyan tree. It is dark now and I nearly slip into a drainage ditch, but still I quicken my pace until I am running. In less than a minute I am near my room, but I do not want to go in.

The Sufi's story and Aurangzeb's words continue to bother me. Their

words echo in my mind. I try to force them out, but I cannot, almost as if something inside does not want me to. They weave through my thoughts, through my defenses, and I think of all my years at the University. All the books I read - are they really useless? I know they are not, but the same voice tells me that the Sufi's knowledge is also necessary. And yet I am not totally certain: I need proof. I do not want to be fooled.

But where can I find the proof? In my books? Maybe they hold the answer to my problem. I try to think of what it is I am doing wrong. I know that the answer is somewhere, that it is near, but I do not know where. The more I think, the more complicated everything becomes. Maybe it is my words that confuse me. As I ponder this, another part of me emerges, and now I do not want to think. I want to experience. I look around and start to run.

I run past the last house in the village and soon I am out in the fields. The crops are freshly planted so that in the moonlight the area looks mysteriously foreboding yet inviting. I find myself on a path that weaves between the rice fields. My breathing quickens, and my legs and arms move faster. I jump over a small ditch but land off-balance and fall to the ground. I get up. I slowly gaze outwards. I notice that the path merges into the canal and I walk up to the waters.

The waters of the canal flow past my eyes. The moonlight reflects off the water. Seeing no one, I take off my clothes and jump in. The water is cool and my feet touch the soft earth. With a few strong strokes, I swim to the other side of the canal. I then wade to the shallow side where I can comfortably stand. I am pleased that after all these years I can still swim. As I watch the water drift by, my awareness focuses on a point in the water; the water appears still, yet moves. The water flows effortlessly without conflict. I try to understand the contentment I feel, but cannot. The canal continues its purposeful movement. I pull myself out of the canal feeling refreshed and exhilarated, yet calm. I look outwards at the fields. Although

I cannot see far into the darkness, I know that the rice fields extend for miles and that the canal runs endlessly through the countryside.

I dry my body with my hands and then put on my clothes. I become aware that the feeling I get from the water is somehow important in understanding my self, for I no longer feel anxious or angry. I try to reflect upon this, but the presence of the fields in front of me commands my attention. The fields no longer appear foreboding or hard. The moonlight softens the land: it changes my vision, and I smile. My mind feels light and I walk back towards the village.

I assume that the Sufi will still be talking. I wonder if the experience of Allah is like the calmness of the night or the movement of the water. I want to ask the Sufi if it is.

As I approach the village, the wind picks up. It brushes strongly against my body. The wind also brings the smell of bread and curry, and I know that the villagers are already eating, that I am hungry.

No one seems to notice me as I enter the area beneath the banyan tree. They are busy eating and talking. Finally, Raḥim sees me and offers me the light blanket he is sitting on. "You will get a cold in the breeze," he says. I take the blanket and wrap it around me. Then I gather my courage and walk over to the Sufi.

He looks at me and smiles. His smile extends to the entirety of his round face, making him look very comical. I laugh. I feel very light. Then suddenly, out of nowhere, all my doubts return. I wonder whether he is real, whether God is real, what the Sufi's true purpose is for being in the village. My stomach becomes tense again.

The Sufi stares intensely at me and offers me a glass of milk. I refuse, but he politely insists. I take the glass, examine it, and then quickly drink. The liquid is warm against my throat. I stop drinking and look at those around me. They are all watching me drink. And somehow it seems a great honor to be given something from the Sufi. "Thank you," I say. He tells me that later he will give me a ripe mango

to eat. We all laugh together. I feel close to him for a moment, but then my mind recoils. I look at him and ask what he wants from the village. "Nothing," he says. "I have all that I need." He closes his eyes for a moment and then slowly reopens them. "What do *you* want from the village?"

I do not know what to say, but my eyes burn. I become angry and afraid, as if he has looked deep inside me and exposed all my faults. I wonder what indeed I want from the village. Are they only data for my research? Have I really come here to educate them? I am not sure. Do I need them? I do not know. But there is something in the way he has said "you" that makes me afraid to know. I try to shut my mind, to shut myself off. I close my eyes. My stomach becomes even tighter, and I know there is something within me that wants to be freed, that there is a part of me I must relinquish.

"Tell me, what have you done for the village?" asks the Sufi. He pauses and then slowly, precisely, turns his gaze at me and says, "look at yourself." It is as if I have said the words myself and suddenly I want to cry, but I dare not in front of everyone. An overwhelming feeling of warmth begins in my stomach and then extends throughout my entire body. I try to think of my room, of my psychology books, of Lahore. I want to feel angry at them. But these thoughts, these desires are forced; they are no longer real, no longer suffice.

Khān looks kindly at me. "You are part of us," he says. Then looking over at Asma, he adds, "We do need you." I put my hands up to my face and begin to cry. My mind returns to the fields, to the canal, to the moonlight. I open my eyes and look at the Sufi. His face is expressionless, and I somehow understand that he will say no more. I close my eyes again and know that I am not alone. I feel warmth for those around me - Khān, Raḥim, the other villagers - as well as towards the Sufi and towards myself.

I let go of all my thoughts, warm arms embrace me, and my own tears do not stop.

