



Tulips in Bloom

An Anthology of
Modern Central Asian Literature

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the belt, spun him around his head, and slammed him to the ground so that he became soft as kohl.”

The simple-hearted people who heard these ravings imagined Ali right in front of their eyes and with their happy smiles showed the storyteller their approval and encouragement! Then this man suddenly left off his half-told tale and like a “wooden goat,” the stringed puppet of Iranian beggars, made a leap. He jumped about so, clapping his hands, shouting, beating himself in the chest, and throwing his turban on the ground, that I said, “Surely he’s lost his mind.”

My companion said, “He wants money.”

“Now? When his story isn’t even finished?”

“Yes, if he waited until the story was over to make his demands, no one would give any. So he stops at an exciting part and asks for money.”

I made to leave and my friend also got up. In what remained of the day we walked around and then passed the evening at the house of another respected person.

Istanbul, 1912

JADIDS AND DRAMA

Mirza Jalil Memmedguluzade (1869–1932) was a dramatist, poet, literary critic, and one of the most famous Azeri satirical prose writers of the twentieth century. He also served as editor of the internationally popular working-class Turkic and Persian-oriented satirical journal *Molla Nasreddin* (1906–1931). After graduating from the Russian imperial-sponsored Gori Pedagogical seminary in Tiflis (Tbilisi) in 1887, he traveled to Moscow and Petersburg, where he was involved in early Bolshevik revolutionary circles, and then returned to the Caucasus to teach in a local school in the Georgian countryside. In 1903 he moved to Tiflis to work as a correspondent for the leading Azeri language newspaper *Şerq-i Rus* (The Russian East), which was edited by his friend Mehmed aga Shahtakhtinski. When the paper closed, Memmedguluzade bought the press and founded the Azeri language satirical paper *Molla Nasreddin* in 1906. His most famous prose works include “The Events in the Danabash Village,” “The Russian Girl,” “Freedom in Iran,” “Qurbaneli bey,” and “The Postbox,” as well as the plays *The Dead* and *My Mother’s Books*.

Molla Nasreddin was published between 1906 and 1917 in Tbilisi, in 1921 in Tabriz, and between 1922 and 1931 in Baku. Memmedguluzade envisioned his projected readership as an international community of Muslim readers familiar with the popular folk character Molla (or Hoja) Nasreddin. Through this appeal to a broad Muslim cultural community and his use of non-verbal cartoons, Memmedguluzade's work held a wide appeal that arguably extended beyond particular Muslim modernist movements (such as the work of the Jadids). However, he draws on satire to forward a similar critique of the corrupt institutional and bureaucratic authority of the Muslim clergy through its service to the Russian imperial administration as well as to support broad secular educational and social reform. After the consolidation of Soviet power, Memmedguluzade shared his facilities and staff with the Soviet administrative Narkompros (the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment) offices. While Memmedguluzade initially supported the revolution and the Bolshevik annexation of the Caucasus, his work during this later period highlights tensions with the Soviet regime. His own work at *Molla Nasreddin* was subjected to Soviet censorship.

The Dead (*Ölüler*), published in 1909, is one of the most popular works of twentieth-century Azeri theater. Influenced by the nineteenth-century Russian writer Nikolai Gogol's *The Government Inspector* (1836), which presents a portrait of the backwardness of local government networks in the provinces of the Russian Empire, *The Dead* recounts the story of the arrival of a corrupt Isfahani (southern Azeri or Persian) religious figure to the revolutionary South Caucasus. Like Gogol's play, which also takes place on the imperial periphery, *The Dead* sets its critique of spiritual and political authority in a space characterized by temporal and geographical tensions, as well as by the transience of a revolution staged between crumbling imperial centers. Notably, the sheikh's pilgrimage north offers a critique of the encroaching power of corrupt, bourgeois Persian clerics, which would have resonated both with the agendas of Muslim reformists and Social Democratic activists (the Social Democrats were the group to which both Bolsheviks and Mensheviks laid leadership claims at this time) in this early revolutionary moment.

Drawing on another common Russian imperial theme that resonates with his own biography, Memmedguluzade explores the psychological dimensions of his main character's struggle to return home after studying in Europe. Iskender returns home from France to find his family and

town swindled by a greedy sheikh from Isfahan. Desperate and misunderstood, Iskender spends much of the play ranting in drunken monologues, offering a searing portrait of the challenges posed to young reformist intellectuals. Thus, Memmedguluzade seems to satirize both imperial authority and the anemic local intelligentsia. However, in his drunken rambling, Iskender's monologues often prove daringly poignant. His character evokes the popular folk figure of the "wise fool." In the Azeri comedic tradition, the figure of the fool can be traced to buffoonery, as well as to the Seljuk Sufi figure Molla Nasreddin, who was based on an actual medieval Seljuk Muslim cleric. The wise fool Nasreddin, often called Molla, Khoja, Efendi, or Juha, is the subject of stories that were popular throughout the Turkic world, as well as Persia, India, China, and beyond. Contextualized in its moment of inscription—penned between the 1905 and 1917 revolutions—Iskender's final monologue, which breaks the fourth wall to address the audience directly, powerfully calls the audience to rise up and give new life to a degenerate and indeed "dead" society, plagued by corrupt and dogmatic religious and imperial institutions. Yet Memmedguluzade's work has a timeless quality that resists a singular political doxa, drawing at once on the revolutionary anti-imperial spirit of its day, inviting its audience to awaken from political paralysis, while it also urges the audience toward civic enlightenment and a critique of religious institutionality.

Leah Feldman⁴⁰

The Dead

Mirza Jalil Memmedguluzade

Translated by Javad Efendi and Leah Feldman

A Comedy in Four Acts and Five Scenes

Dramatis Personae

Sheikh⁴¹ Nasrullah—45 years old

Sheikh Ahmad—his pupil, 40 years old

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⁴¹ An honorific in Arabic, literally meaning "elder" but also implying leader and/or governor. It is commonly used to designate the head of a tribe or group of people, or a respected Islamic scholar.

Hajji⁴² Hasan—one of the esteemed Hajjis of the town, 50 years old
Karbalayi⁴³ Fatma Khanim—his wife, 40 years old
Iskender—his son, 22 years old
Jalal—his younger son, 10 years old
Nazli—his daughter, 12 years old⁴⁴
Zeynab—Hajji Hasan's servant, 20 years old
Ali—Hajji Hasan's servant, 18 years old
Hajji Bakshali—45 years old
Hajji Karim—50 years old
Hajji Kazim—50 years old
Mashadi⁴⁵ Oruj—35 years old
Mother of Mashadi Oruj—50 years old
Mir⁴⁶ Baghir Agha—35 years old
Heydar Agha—the telegraphist, 45 years old
Aligulu Bey⁴⁷—the interpreter, 30 years old
Mirza⁴⁸ Huseyn—the teacher, 40 years old
Karbalayi Vali—35 years old
Four girls—wives of Sheikh Nasrullah, each 13–14 years old
Patients, Women, Travelers, People

The story takes place in a town in the Irevan⁴⁹ province in 1889

⁴² An honorific given to a Muslim person who has successfully completed the Hajj (pilgrimage) to Mecca.

⁴³ An honorific among Shi'i Muslims given to a person who has successfully completed a pilgrimage to the Holy city of Karbala, Iraq.

⁴⁴ The only place in the original text that gives Nazli's age as twelve—everywhere else in the text she is referred to as a nine years old.

⁴⁵ An honorific among Shi'i Muslims given to a person who has successfully completed a pilgrimage to the Holy city of Mashad, Iran.

⁴⁶ Mir is a prefix as a title for Seyyids—descendants of the Prophet Muhammad. Agha is a Persian honorific given to a landowner; also commonly used to refer to the head of the family.

⁴⁷ A Turkic honorific initially given to aristocrats; later in more common use as a sign of respect.

⁴⁸ Mirza is from the Persian *ʿAmīr-zāde* which literally means “*child of an ʿAmīr*” or “*child of the ruler*.” It is an honorific originally denoting the rank of a high nobleman or prince. In nineteenth and early twentieth-century Azerbaijan the word was also commonly used to denote clerks or more generally educated people able to teach literacy and/or manage paperwork.

⁴⁹ Irevan was in the early nineteenth to the early twentieth-centuries capital of the Armenian Oblast of Russia; formerly (from the early seventeenth century) capital of the Irevan Khanate, an administrative territory of the Azerbaijan region of Safavid Persia; currently it is Yerevan, the capital of Armenia.

Act I

Hajji Hasan's house, Iskender's room: There is an iron bed in the corner and an old writing desk in front of it with a couple of books on it. Two old chairs stand beside it. Jalal and his teacher Mirza Huseyn sit on their knees facing each other and reading a lesson.

Jalal (*a book in front of him, reads with apprehension*) "What a beautiful gift hast thou bought us..."

Teacher (*aloud*) Brought!

Jalal "...Brought us from the garden in which thou hast been?" He replied: "I intended to fill the skirts of my rope..."

Teacher (*aloud*) Robe!

Jalal "...robe with roses, when I reached the rose-tree, as pretends..."

Teacher (*aloud*) Presents.

Jalal "presents for my friends, but the perfume of the flowers intoxicated me so much that I let go the gold."

Teacher (*aloud*) Hold!

Jalal "hold on my skirts. O bird of the morning, learn love from the moth..."

(*Man in Mashadi robe⁵⁰ rushes in, breathless.*)

Man (*loudly*) Is Hajji Hasan at home?

Jalal (*to Man*) My agha went to the market.

(*Man exits. Teacher, surprised, follows the man with his eyes.*)

Jalal (*reads again*) "learn from the moth, witch... burnt..."

Teacher (*aloud*) Read correctly, "which burned..." One should not besmirch poetry.

Jalal "Which burned itself and burned completely, though no cry we've heard..."

(*Iskender's voice is heard, crying: "Mars, Mars! Mars!" He enters still calling for their dog.*)

Jalal (*reads*) "Which burned, which burned"... (*to Iskender*) Brother, please leave. Let me read my lesson.

(*Iskender attempts to pull the dog inside by its ears. The dog refuses to obey.*)

Jalal (*to Iskender*) For Allah's sake, brother, don't bring the dog in. Let me read my lesson.

⁵⁰ The same type of robe that Iranian mullahs wear today.

(Iskender lets go of the dog, and slams his hat on the bed. Taking out a cigarette he begins loosening the tobacco between his fingers.)

Teacher *(to Iskender)* Godspeed, Iskender Bey. It is good that you paid us a visit. So please be so kind as to counsel Mirza Jalal to be diligent about his lessons.

Iskender *(sits on bed)* Alright, alright, I will. But tell me, who is going to listen to me? See, even an Allah-fearing dog wouldn't obey me. He wouldn't come in no matter how hard I tried. *(Roars with laughter)* Ha...Ha...Ha...

Teacher No, do not say that. Mirza Jalal is a clever boy. For all of the effort that I've invested and that his father has invested in helping him, Mirza Jalal will listen to you and demonstrate that these efforts have not been in vain. Does Mirza Jalal not see that an uneducated man is not worth a penny? A person with no knowledge—what is he worth? How well can he be respected?

Iskender *(roars with laughter)* Does Mirza Jalal not see that an educated man is not worth a penny? Ha...Ha...Ha... Everyone who has an education has no respect, while everyone who has respect has no education. Ha... Ha... Ha... Being a man means being someone who has neither education nor respect. Ha... Ha... Ha...

Teacher *(to Jalal)* No, no. Iskender Bey is joking; he is surely joking.

Jalal *(to Teacher)* Mirza, by Allah, my brother is drunk again.

Iskender *(quickly stands up and approaches Jalal)* Me? Me? Am I drunk? *(Turns his mouth to Jalal's and exhales)* "Hu, hu, hu" Where? Where's the drunk?

Jalal *(turns away and screws up his face)* By Allah, brother you've been drinking wine again.

Iskender *(laughing loudly)* You're lying, by Allah you're lying! I haven't been drinking wine; I've been drinking vodka! See, you're lying! Ha...Ha...Ha!

Teacher *(standing up, to Jalal)* Since you do not know your lesson well today, I will not give you a new lesson. I will ask you to repeat the same lesson tomorrow.

(Man in Mashadi dress rushes through the door, breathless.)

Man *(loudly)* Is uncle Hajji home?

Jalal *(to Man)*: He is not.

(Man exits. The dog barks at the man in the yard.)

Iskender (*moving toward the door*) Shoo, Shoo, Shoo! Ha... Ha... Ha! Shoo, Shoo, Shoo! Ha... Ha... Ha! Mars, Mars, Mars! (*Whistles to the dog*) Toot, toot, toot!

Jalal (*to Iskender*) By Allah, brother, when my agha comes back I will tell him that my brother was setting the dog on people.

Iskender (*after looking at Jalal for a while*) Then I will tell him that Jalal didn't know his lesson. Ha... Ha... Ha! (*Stops laughing, looks at Jalal for a little while and approaches him*) No, no, I won't tell, I won't tell. You know that I love you very much. (*Touches his face*) But it isn't really right that you don't listen to your brother. Now, for example, you put this book in front of you and read. (*He picks up the book*) Your agha could have paid three abbasi, maybe even four abbasi, or even one manat for this book.⁵¹ So, you fool, put it in front of you and read it. Besides, if you had taken the money to old Karapet you could have instead got two bottles of Smirnov vodka for that. Then you could have given them to your brother Iskender. I would have put them in my pocket and drunk one to your health from morning till evening and the other to the Mirza's health from evening until morning. In this way, you would be healthy and I would be enjoying getting drunk. (*To Teacher*) For me, Mirza, am I not right? Ha...Ha...Ha!

Teacher Excuse me, Iskender Bey, while I know that it is impudent for a servant to counsel you, nonetheless I ask that you not say these sorts of things to children; it is inappropriate. Instead of telling your brother to strive for education, you give him useless advice.

(*Jalal tries to take the book from him, but he does not hand it over*)

Iskender Ha... Ha... Ha!... (*To Jalal*) Seek out knowledge. Ha... Ha... Ha! Seek out knowledge. Hush, hush, listen, listen to what I say.

(*A Mashadi enters, breathless*)

Mashadi (*loudly*) Is Uncle Hajji Hasan at home?

Iskender He's home. He's home.

Jalal (*to the Mashadi*) My brother is lying. My agha went to the market.

⁵¹ Abbasi is a popular name for the 20-kopeck coin from the era when Persian 20-kopeck coins carried a profile of the great Shah Abbas I of the Safavid dynasty. The manat, formally introduced in the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic in 1919, was the basic unit of currency of Azerbaijan; it was reintroduced in post-Soviet Azerbaijan. It is unclear if this use marks an error in the transliteration of the text or if manats were used as a term for currency informally prior to 1919.

Teacher (*to the Mashadi*) What is it, what has happened?

(*The Mashadi leaves without saying a word.*)

Iskender (*book in hand, runs after the Mashadi*) Hey man, don't go. The Hajji is home. Don't go. Mars, Mars, Mars! Shoo, shoo! Don't let him get away. Toot, toot, toot! Aha, toot! Shoo, shoo, shoo! (*Stamps his feet on the ground.*)

Teacher (*prepares to leave*) Well then, farewell. (*Exits.*)

Iskender (*laughing, to Teacher as he exits*) Mirza, don't go! For my sake, don't go. Come and teach Jalal. Let him learn and become a scholar.

Jalal (*stealthily approaches Iskender*) Brother, give me my book.

Iskender (*very loudly and angry*) Go to hell!

(*Jalal runs out scared. Iskender looks after him for a short while and then goes over to sit on the bed. Taking a bottle of vodka out of one pocket and a small glass out of the other he begins to pour, drink and then open the book to look at it.*)

Iskender (*to the book*) I recognize you. I also studied you a little. Fifteen years ago in this same room I read you too. (*He reads*) "*The Padishah liked his advice and spared his life.*"⁵² My teacher also gave me this advice: "Child, do your best, learn your lessons well." But I didn't hear any of those good-for-nothings tell me: "Child, be a proper human being." Everyone you meet tells you the same thing: "Study science and become a scholar." But in the end no one could explain: What does it mean, this science, this knowledge? This is what they call science—when one throws back the whole glass. (*He drinks down the glass*) Well! Pff! (*Screws up his face*) Now this is knowledge.

Jalal (*looks in from the door*) Brother, by Allah, when my agha comes I will tell him.

Iskender (*puts the glass and the bottle in his pocket*) Jalal, Jalal, come here, listen to what I am going to tell you.

Jalal I am not coming. You are drunk.

Iskender Jalal, you know what Socrates used to say?

Jalal Who is Socrates?

Iskender Socrates was a man. He was a man of ancient times. Socrates used to say: "Before I studied I thought I knew something in this world. But after I studied I realized that I knew nothing." Ha... Ha... Ha! Meaning—I did not know how to drink vodka either! Jalal, hey Jalal!

⁵² Also a piece from Saadi Shirazi's *Gulistan*.

You avoid me now, saying that I am drunk, but I swear on the shrine⁵³ of Gara Aghaj that when you finish your lessons as I did, you too will end up lying at the bottom of a wine jug like your brother Iskender. Ha... Ha... Ha!...

(*Nazli appears at the door.*)

Nazli Brother, for God's sake, don't drink so much of this poison!

Iskender On my honor and as my eyes attest—see how I am at your service. (*He touches his brow with his hand.*)

Nazli By Allah you lie.

Iskender By Allah, I do not. As long as you stand here, I will not drink even a drop. Though it's true that once you leave I will drink.

Nazli (*approaches and seizes Iskender by the hand*) Then I will not leave you.

Iskender (*embraces Nazli*) Oh my beautiful sister Nazli! From morning until evening you sit at home taking lessons from your mother on how to cook bozbash,⁵⁴ but you don't come to me to hear my stories about the cities I have traveled and so you don't see what is happening in the world! Look, the sun has risen in the yard; what is its light worth if you will not see it? Grasses sprout in the field, trees have flowered, but what are they worth without you—those meadows, those flowers? Your snotty little brothers (*Jalal and Nazli laugh*) collect alfalfa and eat at the canal's edge, while you sit at home chewing gum. At home, hand in hand with your lousy sisters you jump and sing:

Haqushka ha haqushka!⁵⁵
I have one love haqushka;
The long hemmed skirt haqushka!

Ha... Ha... Ha!... (*Jalal and Nazli laugh*) My beloved sister Nazli! Let me take you by the hand and let us leave this province. The moment

⁵³ The original word translated here as “shrine” is “pir,” which is from a Persian word literally meaning “old [person],” but is commonly used as a title for a Sufi master or saint. The name also, as in this context, refers to places connected with saints and, therefore, regarded as sacred.

⁵⁴ A popular meat soup cooked with chickpeas and potatoes.

⁵⁵ *Haqushka* has no meaning in Azeri, but the suffix “ushka” imitates that of Russian diminutive words. Since Russian was a relatively new language in the region during this period, some words may have sounded strange to Azeris, accounting for the linguistic parody in this folk song.

is precious. Why do you stand still? Why are you covering, why are you wrapping up, why are you feeling shame?

Enough of this restraint!

Thank God, your rosy cheeks have no disgrace,
Your brows, your mouth, your lips, have no disgrace,
Your hair, your chin, is free of all disgrace,
So why are you covering, why are you wrapping up, why are you feeling shame?

Enough of this restraint!⁵⁶

(Very perplexed and gasping for breath, Hajji Hasan enters. Nazli and Jalal exit.)

Iskender Father, what has happened?

Hajji Hasan *(raising his head after some thought)* They say Karbalayi Fatullah has risen from the dead.

Iskender *(surprised, inclines his head to his father)* What?

Hajji Hasan They say Karbalayi Fatullah has risen from the dead.

Iskender *(surprised)* What do you mean, which Karbalayi Fatullah?

Hajji Hasan Karbalayi Fatullah, the son of your uncle Hajji Rustam.

Iskender The one who died in Khorasan?⁵⁷

Hajji Hasan Yes, yes ... that same Karbalayi Fatullah.

Iskender You mean that he rose from the dead and left the grave?

Hajji Hasan *(impatiently)* Yes, yes, he rose from the dead.

(Iskender straightens, turns his face aside and tries to hold in his smile, but he cannot restrain himself, suddenly roars with laughter and runs out.)

Hajji Hasan *(looking after him with surprise)* God damn you! And this is one of our educated ones! He is probably drunk again. Even if he were not drunk, he would not believe such things. He believes in nothing—doesn't recognise either Allah or the prophet. I put his weight in gold into funding his education. He went to school for 10 years and studied his lessons at I-do-not-know-which Allah-forsaken classes. Now look, what is the end result? Still there are plenty of poor wretches who reproach Muslims for not taking their children to their lessons. Here is your lesson! Now let them come and see those who did study their lessons. May Allah damn me a thousand times if I ever send my child abroad to study among

⁵⁶ A short poem by the celebrated Azeri poet Molla Panah Vagif (1717–1797).

⁵⁷ Khorasan is currently the name of a region in northeastern Iran, but historically referred to a much larger area in the east and north-east of the Persian Empire.

*kafirs*⁵⁸ again! May I be damned! I knew it would all end like this. But they will not let it be. By Allah, these men do not let the people do what they think is right. They keep harassing me: “Hajji, take pity on the child, thank Allah you have the means, let him go and study and return as a leader. Let him become an enginar,⁵⁹ a doctor, an inspectist,⁶⁰ or an I-don’t-know-what-the-hell.” All right, so we sent him. Praised be Allah, he studied and returned. And look what became of him—drunk in the morning, drunk in the evening. Courthouses will not take him even as a clerk. May Allah ruin the house of the one who caused this.

(*Hajji Bakhshali enters.*)

Hajji Bakhshali (*breathless*) Hajji, Karbalayi Fatullah has revived?

Hajji Hasan (*stands up*) Yes, yes, he has revived. He even wrote a letter in his own hand; I am still shocked.

Hajji Bakhshali Nothing is beyond Allah. But wait, Hajji, a dead man cannot revive himself? Surely, someone else revived him.

Hajji Hasan Well Hajji, this is not such a strange thing! Only last year they announced that Karbalayi Khalil’s wife had died. But in the morning they said that she had risen from the dead. Now she is walking about.

Iskender (*sticks his head around the door*) Of course, in the evening they thought that the woman had died but it turned out that she was really still alive! Ha ... Ha ... Ha!...

Hajji Hasan (*loudly and angrily, to Iskender*) Get the hell out of here!

(*Hajji Karim enters.*)

Hajji Karim (*breathless*) Hajji, is it true as they say, that Karbalayi Fatullah has risen from the dead?

Hajji Hasan Yes, it is so, it is true. Hajji, take a seat. Hajji, take a seat.

(*They sit down. Hajji Kazim enters.*)

Hajji Kazim (*breathless*) Hajji, Hasan Agha, is it true as they say that the son of Hajji Rustam has risen from the dead?

Hajji Hasan (*stands up*) Yes, Hajji Agha, it is so, it is true.

(*Mashadi Oruj and a group of people following him enter, breathless.*)

⁵⁸ *Kafir* is an Arabic term used in an Islamic doctrinal sense, usually translated as “unbeliever” or “infidel.”

⁵⁹ Enginar (in the original text sounds like “indjinar”) is a deliberate misspelling/mispronunciation of the word “engineer,” which was also part of the new Russian imperial lexicon.

⁶⁰ Inspectist here means inspector. In the original text the author uses the folk word “silitchi” from the Russian “sledovatel.”

Mashadi Oruj (*paper in hand, raises both hands and calls out in the name of Allah*) Allah the Creator, powerless is my tongue to describe your might. Oh Allah, a thousand thanks to your grace!

(*Some people walk forward, look at the paper, asking: "Is it the letter from Karbalayi Fatullah? Read it. Let us see; what did he write?"*)

Hajji Hasan (*to Mashadi Oruj*) Mashadi Oruj, it would be better if you were to read the paper so that everyone can listen. This is a very strange case; one could become confused.

Mashadi Oruj (*raises both of his hands again, starts crying, and after wiping his tears with the hem of his gown, begins reading the paper*) "My dear and kind brother Mashadi Oruj. As soon as you receive this paper, deliver this good news directly to my uncle Hajji Hasan." (*Hajji Hasan cries.*)

Then, since my mother is still alive, go and embrace my mother and tell her: "Dear mother, poor mother, mourn no longer. Your son Karbalayi Fatullah has returned from the dead." Then pick up and hold my son Muhammadhasan in your arms and say: "My poor child, do not feel sad because you are an orphan no more. Your father has been revived and in a few days he will bring you red shoes from Khorasan." And, please, send my sister-in-law to let the mother of Muhammadhasan know—although she has surely remarried by now, or perhaps not yet. (*He cries*) My dear and kind brother Mashadi Oruj! Perhaps the news of my resurrection will seem staggering to you and to some skeptical people. May a thousand damnations be upon those who cast doubt on the wisdom of the Lord of the Universe!

People (*in unison*) Damnation!

Mashadi Oruj (*reads*) My brother! Mashadi Oruj! Myself along with one hundred and fourteen men have risen from the grave and returned to this world. I shall spend one whole week on a pilgrimage and, with the help of Allah, I shall return to my motherland after that week. Only now can I say in brief that in the holy city of Mashad a devout man has appeared. His eminence's name is Sheikh Nasrullah. *May the Mercy of Allah be his help!* After several years of studying the secret sciences in Isfahan his eminence the Sheikh has graciously arrived in Khorasan where, after several months of spiritual exercises and upholding a vow of silence, he was fated to reach the finest understanding of esoterics and exoterics that the sciences could offer. He was finally ordained by the Grace of the Almighty to begin practicing necromancy. My dear brother Mashadi Oruj! With the help of Allah, I shall personally render you a detailed account

of the story when I arrive and you will be astonished and amazed to hear it. Only listen and understand that on the eighteenth day of Jumada Al-Akhira,⁶¹ at the hour when Selene⁶² approached the lower world, his eminence the Sheikh came to visit the inhabitants of a distant cemetery in the holy city of Mashad. After following ritual preparations, he started to read a certain prayer and then recited aloud: "Grace be with you, o people of graves! Rise to your feet, righteous creatures of Allah!" When they heard his voice, all the dead came to life by the might of Allah. (*Some people start crying.*)

Oh brother, what else can I say? I saw a man standing by my head. He was a brave man of forty, truly devoted, and compassionate. His black-eyed blessed face was shot through with an olive green color and his blessed name is Sheikh Nasrullah Isfahani.

One of the Hajjis Oh Allah, praised be your glory!

Another Hajji Almighty Allah, have mercy upon your creatures!

(*Everyone starts crying again.*)

Mashadi Oruj (*reads*) "Oh my righteous brother Mashadi Oruj, by writing this letter to you my aim is to inform you that the morally peerless and saintly-devoted Sheikh Nasrullah departs from the Holy city of Mashad at the dawn of the month of Rajab.⁶³ He will pass through Tabriz by the Julfa road and head to Najaful-Ashraf city.⁶⁴ His eminence the Sheikh is intending to stay in our city for a day and then to start on the road and leave after paying a visit to inhabitants of the cemetery. (*People cry.*)

As soon as this letter reaches you, please deliver this news to my fellow countrymen and especially to my honorable uncle Hajji. Ask them to greet his eminence the Sheikh on the seventh or eighth day of the month and pay the respect due to this untarnished being so that my fellow townspeople will not forgo the benefits of the bliss and charity of the agha's divine grace. That is all. Signed: Mashadi Fatullah son of Hajji Rustam

⁶¹ The sixth month of the Islamic calendar.

⁶² The Ancient Greek goddess of the Moon.

⁶³ The seventh month of the Islamic calendar.

⁶⁴ Tabriz is the fourth largest city and one of the historical capitals of Iran; now the capital of Iran's East Azerbaijan Province. Julfa is a town in Nakhichevan. Nakhichevan was a khanate in Safavid Persia, then a province of the Russian Empire, and is now an autonomous republic and an exclave of the Azerbaijani Republic. Najaful-Ashraf is a historical city sacred to Shi'i Muslims, near Karbala, Iraq.

of such-and-such province. Dated: 19 Jumada Al-Akhira, holy city of Mashad." (*He raises both hands and cries. The people cry too.*) Praised be Allah!

Hajji Bakhshali (*surprised*) So his eminence the Sheikh will honor our city with his visit?

Hajji Hasan Yes, yes. The letter clearly says this. It is written there that several people will come and that they will come to our city.

Mashadi Oruj Yes, yes, they will come to our city, that is, they will come here and then go to Tabriz.

Hajji Kazim So when will they come? What do you think, good man?

Mashadi Oruj Yes, yes, it is written that they will pay us a visit on the seventh or eighth day of the month of Rajab.

Hajji Karim What? Really? That means that they will be in our city after how many days?

Mashadi Oruj It means in 2 or 3 days.

Several People This means that his eminence the Sheikh will visit our city in 2 or 3 days?

Mashadi Oruj Yes, yes, that's right.

(*People spring into motion and say to one another: "Then what are we waiting for?" They all look at one another.*)

Hajji Hasan (*turns to the Hajjis*) By Allah, this world leaves me completely astonished. (*After a little thought*) For it is a real miracle that a person can be resurrected from the dead and can still be a proper clever man just like us.

Hajji Bakhshali Hajji Hasan Agha, you shouldn't utter such words. One cannot embrace the wisdom of Allah and, moreover, this is not some kind of mystery. There it is, the man has written a letter in his own hand. So, don't say such things, Hajji Agha.

Several People Of course, of course, all of this is divine wisdom. All of these mysteries belong to Allah.

Hajji Hasan So then what are we waiting for? His eminence the Sheikh is on his way now. There's no time to stand still. Hajji Kazim, Hajji Karim, Hajji Bakhshali, Mashadi Oruj, and whoever else is there, I am talking to every one of you. Don't stand still, make preparations! (*Loudly*) Hey boy, Ali, where are our servant boys? (*Servant Ali can be seen at the door behind the people.*)

Hey boy, give barley to the horse and tighten the saddle. And you Hajjis, Mashadis—get prepared. There is no time to stand still. We must prepare supplies for the road. We must advance.

(The Hajjis and others spring into motion. A few people exit saying to each other: "Let's go prepare the horses.")

Hey boy, Ali! Don't stand still, rush home and tell them to furnish the rooms with carpets; guests are coming. *(Servant Ali emerges from the crowd and exits.)*

Hajji Kazim *(to Hajji Hasan)* Hajji, don't trouble yourself, I can serve his eminence the Sheikh myself; let him be our guest. I'm afraid it would be a burden for you.

Hajji Hasan No, no, Hajji Kazim, for Allah's sake, don't say that. It is a pleasure to take on these responsibilities to serve such a being.

Hajji Bakhshali No, please Hajji Hasan Agha, let the Sheikh be our guest.

Hajji Karim By Allah, I can't agree, I should accept the role of serving his eminence myself. By Allah, there is no other way.

Hajji Hasan *(to Hajji Karim)* We owe so much to his eminence the Sheikh. So I couldn't agree to it even if your head were on the line.

Hajji Kazim Well then, Hajji Hasan Agha, this isn't the time to stand still. Let's go and get prepared. Hajjis, please, let's go and make preparations for the road.

(All exit, saying "please-please, after you." Only Hajji Hasan remains in the room. Karbalayi Fatma Khanim, with a chador⁶⁵ over her head, timidly sticks her head through the door and enters.)

Karbalayi Fatma Khanim *(to Hajji Hasan)* Hey Hajji, what's this news? They say that Karbalayi Fatullah has risen from the dead and is on his way here?

Hajji Hasan Karbalayi Fatma, there is no time to stand around, put the house in order. The whole world is collapsing. Everyone who ever died in Khorasan has been revived. Karbalayi Fatullah has returned from the dead, too, and he'll be here any day now. The Sheikh who revived him is coming too and will be staying with us. Hey, I'm talking to you. Don't just stand there—go and tidy the house. *(Loudly and angrily)* Hey, I'm talking to you. Don't stand there! *(Goes to leave.)*

Karbalayi Fatma Khanim Hey Hajji, Allah rest your father's soul, tell me please, will he revive the dead men of our town too?

⁶⁵ An outer garment or open cloak worn by Shi'i Muslim women in public spaces following the Islamic dress code known as *hijab*. A chador is a full-body-length semicircle of fabric (usually black) that is placed over the woman's or girl's head and then held closed at the front.

Hajji Hasan (*at the door*) Hey woman, for Allah's sake, hurry, don't stand still! I don't know if he will revive them or not. It all depends on the benevolence of Allah. I'm racking my brains, but I don't understand a thing. How can he revive the dead? May Allah be praised, isn't that a difficult thing to do? (*He yells*) I'm talking to you woman. Don't stand still. Go make the preparations! I'm leaving. (*Exits.*)

Karbalayi Fatma Khanim (*raises both hands and starts crying*) Oh Allah who created the earth and heaven from nothing! You have left me in tears for a year and a half. You took my rosy-cheeked daughter from me and gave me so much pain! Oh All-Merciful Allah, I'm asking you for my Sara! Oh Allah who revived Karbalayi Fatullah, have mercy on me too. Please revive my rosy-cheeked daughter! Allah! Allah!... (*She cries and falls face down to the floor.*)

(*Iskender enters slowly, approaches his mother and stands beside her.*)

Iskender (*head bowed, sadly*) Poor mother!

(*Curtain*)

Act II

Hajji Hasan's guest room. Karbalayi Fatma Khanim and her servant Zeynab are putting the house in order. Nazli walks around cheerfully, dancing and singing.

Nazli (*joyfully to her mother*) Mother, my dear mother, my precious mother, they say that our guest who is coming revives the dead. My dear mother, please tell me, is it true or not?

Karbalayi Fatma Khanim Young lady, how would I know anymore than you? They say he revived ten hundred men in Khorasan. He revived your cousin Karbalayi Fatullah too. The guests are arriving any minute, let me get back to my work. Zeynab, girl, bring pillows and put them on this side. Pull the carpet this way a little. Hurry! More quickly!

Nazli Mother, by Allah I don't know if I should cry or laugh. In the name of Allah listen, something just came to my mind. Mother, I have to tell you something, let me speak. (*Her mother is silent.*) Mother, by Allah, I will beg our guest; (*Crying*) I will fall at his feet if only he will revive my sister Sara too.

Karbalayi Fatma Khanim Young lady, I just don't know. (*She sinks to the floor, covers her face with the edge of her kerchief, and starts crying.*)

Zeynab: Khanim, for Allah's sake, don't torture yourself, Allah is merciful. (*Karbalayi Fatma Khanim dries her tears and uncovers her face.*) Khanim, for Allah's sake, what kind of person can revive the dead? All

right, perhaps he's an Imam or a Seyyid?⁶⁶ Oh Allah thanks to your Grace. (*She pauses*) For Allah's sake, Khanim, there's only one thing I wanted to ask you—does he revive the poor dead or only the rich? By Allah, Khanim, I've been thinking so much today that I hardly know what I'm doing. To tell you the truth, (*crying*) I can't stop thinking about our little boy today. It's as if the little one were breathing his last in front of me now. The poor child was still staring at me when he died, as if he wanted something from me. (*She continues crying and dries her tears with her kerchief.*)

Karbalayi Fatma Khanim: Ah, I don't know, by Allah. Allah is merciful; surely he will take pity on us too. So don't just stand there, Zeynab, go tell Ali to bring water. And you, go take care of the stove. (*Zeynab exits.*)

Nazli Mother, mother, by Allah my heart feels like it will burst. (*Laughing*) I'll die if I can't see my sister Sara just once again. Mother, you know how I loved my sister. I just hope I don't die before seeing my Sara walk through this door again. I would throw myself at her, embrace her neck and say, "Oh my sister, who rots in the ground!" By Allah, mother, I want to lose my mind. I don't know if I should cry or laugh. I swear to Allah, to the prophet; I vow to give all that I have to the poor, here, my dresses, gold, I'll go and fetch it all now. (*She starts to run.*)

Karbalayi Fatma Khanim Young lady, don't rush yet. Let's see what happens. Don't dump all of your stuff out here. It's about time for our guests to arrive. Go and tell Zeynab to come here quickly.

(*Iskender enters singing.*)

Iskender All right ... mother, how are you feeling?

Karbalayi Fatma Khanim Eh, I'd feel better if I had been poisoned! Worrying about you all the time has almost ruined me. Other people's children studied and became proper men; they are all clear-eyed, reasonable men. Each in his own way is a respectable person. But you're drunk day and night... By Allah, we've completely lost face in this town. You drink this poison and babble on with whatever nonsense comes to your mind. You neither have faith in Allah nor respect for your elders. What was that you said to Nazli yesterday? "Let me hold your hand and let's go for a walk." Do you mean that now all we're left with are girls walking around just like boys? By Allah, when Jalal told me that yesterday, I was

⁶⁶ An Imam is a religious leader in Islam. A Seyyid is an honorific denoting male descendants of the Prophet Muhammad through his grandsons, Hasan ibn Ali and Huseyn ibn Ali, sons of the prophet's daughter Fatima Zahra and his son-in-law Ali ibn Abi Talib.

about to go and dig a grave with my own hands, get in it, and escape all this.

Iskender (*shouts with laughter and clasps his mother's shoulder*) From now on, you won't escape, even if you die. After all, he arrives today, this Sheikh Nasrullah or whatever. You will die and then the Sheikh will revive you again. Ha... Ha... Ha!... From now on you can't escape, even in death. Ha... Ha... Ha!...

(*Zeynab and Nazli enter. Iskender goes to sit down on some cushions. Zeynab tries to prevent him.*)

Zeynab Don't sit there and rumple the cushions! We didn't put them here for you! Can't you see we're expecting a guest?

Iskender (*to Zeynab*) Hey, Zeynab, by Allah I see what game you're playing! (*Stands up*) Are you trying your best to impress the guest so that he'll revive your husband Karbalayi Novruz? By Allah, I see your game. Ha... Ha... Ha!...

Karbalayi Fatma Khanim (*to Iskender*) You miserable man, you wretched man! How can you believe in that if you don't believe in anything at all? I feel sorry for you! You'd better leave and let us do our work. Hey girl, Zeynab, come straighten the corner of the carpet.

Nazli (*to Iskender*) Brother, for Allah's sake, hold yourself together, at least for today. By Allah this is embarrassing; the guests are coming.

(*Mir Baghir Agha enters and takes off his shoes.*)

Mir Baghir Agha: Salam aleykum.

(*Nazli covers her face and runs out.*)

Karbalayi Fatma Khanim: Aleyk As-Salam. Agha, please take a seat.

(*Mir Baghir Agha sits down. Iskender runs after Nazli.*)

Iskender Hey, Nazli, you're going to thank me—I have great news! Your fiancé has come.

Karbalayi Fatma Khanim (*angrily to Iskender*) Shut up! Stop talking nonsense!

(*Mir Baghir Agha bows his head.*)

Iskender (*approaches and stands before Mir Baghir*) For me, let's shake hands! If you're such a tough guy, give me your hand! By Allah, you have real guts to go for a 9 years old—exactly—everything it should be and nothing it shouldn't. Lamb's meat, soft, fresh, tender, small. A mouth that smells of milk. Delicious, delicious! By Allah, you've got guts! If you're such a tough guy, give me your hand!

Mir Baghir Agha (*to Iskender*) This is shameful, shameful! You should at least be ashamed to speak like that in front of your mother.

Karbalayi Fatma Khanim If he had a sense of shame then why would he speak like that?

Iskender (*stands, looking down at himself in surprise*) It's true, what if I have lost my shame? (*Puts both of his hands into his pockets as if trying to find something*) Let me see, maybe the shame is in my pockets, no, it isn't. (*To Mir Baghir Agha*) Agha, for my sake, look in your pockets, perhaps it's there. (*Mir Baghir Agha tries to stand up.*) Ha... Ha... Ha!... Don't take offense for my sake! If you're such a tough guy, don't take offense. Now I'll bring you your fiancée. (*Calls*) Nazli, Nazli! (*Fatma Khanim stands up.*)

Mir Baghir Agha (*in a rage, loudly*) Shut up, you drunk! (*He goes to leave*)

Karbalayi Fatma Khanim Oh dear! Hey boy, what are you doing! The boy's gone totally mad. (*Loudly*) Hey, Ali, come throw this idiot out!

(*Mir Baghir Agha exits. Nazli enters.*)

Nazli: Brother, by Allah, you've dishonored us. How could you say that? Aren't you ashamed?

Iskender (*sings and dances, snapping his fingers*)

I loved one girl, she was just nine...

Black kohl on her brows and her eyes are lined.

Aha! Aha! Aha!...

(*Karbalayi Fatma Khanim makes a gesture as if to strangle Iskender with both hands and exits.*)

Nazli (*loudly*) Brother, shut up!

Iskender (*after some thought he grabs Nazli by the hand and takes her to the window*) Look, look, who's that?

Nazli How do I know? You know yourself who that is.

Iskender Look carefully! Look, who is that?

(*Karbalayi Fatma Khanim enters, stands at the door.*)

Karbalayi Fatma Khanim Oh my child, that's enough! Aren't you ashamed, tired? Have a little pity on yourself. Have some sense of shame. All those words you said to that man, how could you not feel shame? The poor man couldn't stand the embarrassment and left. Above all, he is a Seyyid and our relative. Is it possible that everything you think comes out of your mouth? The poor man is an outcast; who else does he have in this town besides us?

Iskender (*snaps his fingers and points at Nazli*) But in this town he has a fiancée like Nazli.

Nazli Brother, I swear to Allah, I'm not going to marry Mir Baghir Agha. I will not marry anyone.

Iskender Ha... Ha... Ha!... (*approaches and takes Nazli by the hand*) My dear sister, you are still a child. Take your time; there is so much you haven't experienced yet! One day I'll come home and see that they are holding a mirror⁶⁷ in front of you and pulling you, taking you away. And say that you start acting coy. (*He pretends to be coy*) Let's presume that you don't want to get married. At that very moment, you will see that they will push you from behind, saying: "Don't stop, come on, go!" You'll turn back and see that it's your father Hajji Hasan pushing you. All right, and then, while you are walking you might stop again and not want to go on. You'll suddenly feel someone poke you and say: "Don't stop, walk quickly!" You'll turn back and see that it is your mother Karbalayi Fatma Khanim. And if eventually you try to resist, then all the people around you: your aunts, uncles, Seyyids, mullahs, neighbors, grandmothers, and sisters will each prod you: "Shut up, be quiet! Or the vampire will come and get you!" Yes, with all that hullabaloo they'll take you and set you down next to some man. How will you find me then? (*He sings, snapping his fingers*)

There will come a day when you'll abandon me,
Worms will be the ones to keep you company,
Baby, you will,
Sister, you will!...

(*He stands in thought for a while and then looks at Nazli and his mother.*)

Mother, you think I'm only saying these things because I'm drunk?

(*Karbalayi Fatma Khanim says nothing, Nazli approaches and embraces Iskender.*)

Nazli Brother, even if you're drunk I will never stop listening to you.
(*Servants enter.*)

Servants (*breathless*) Khanim, please come, the guests are arriving.

(*Karbalayi Fatma Khanim and Nazli leave the room. Hajji Hasan, covered in dust, enters breathlessly and looks at everyone round the room. A*

⁶⁷ A mirror held in front of the bride, a *mirror of good fortune*, is a traditional wedding ritual in Azerbaijan.

voice can be heard from afar reciting the salavat—a prayer for the Prophet Muhammad.)

Hajji Hasan Why should all of Allah's misfortune always fall upon this province? His eminence the Sheikh fell a little sick on the road. May Allah the Creator heal him so that we won't be embarrassed. (*To Iskender*) Iskender, keep yourself in order in front of the guests today. It's shameful and there are all sorts of people—friends and enemies.

Iskender Papa, is this the same Sheikh who revives the dead?

Hajji Hasan His eminence the Sheikh Nasrullah. I don't have any more time to talk to you. (*He prepares to leave*) Let me go see, have they prepared everything in the house?

Iskender Papa, then ask our guest to revive me first, because I'm somewhat dead too.

Hajji Hasan quickly and silently approaches and seizes Iskender by the arm and takes him out. The sound of the salavat⁶⁸ and of people babbling gets closer. The clatter, horses neighing and hullabaloo gets louder and louder. Hajji Hasan on one side and Sheikh Ahmad on the other side, supporting Sheikh Nasrullah by the arms, bring him inside, seat him on a mattress, move aside, and stand respectfully. Hajji Bakhshali, Hajji Karim, Hajji Kazim, Mashadi Oruj, Mir Bagbir Agha and the other Hajjis fill the room, while people covered with dust enter breathless and stand aside respectfully. Sheikh Nasrullah leans against the cushions like an invalid, not looking at anyone. Iskender sticks his head out of the crowd and watches. Hajji Hasan gestures for him to leave; Iskender disappears. Sheikh Ahmad approaches slowly, sinks down in front of Sheikh Nasrullah and on his knees speaks quietly.

Sheikh Ahmad (*to Sheikh Nasrullah*) My Sheikh, how are you feeling now?

(Sheikh Nasrullah doesn't say a word and moves his head.)

Hajji Hasan (*approaching Sheikh Ahmad timidly*) Will his eminence the Sheikh give permission for tea to be served?

(Sheikh Nasrullah shakes his head.)

Hajji Hasan (*carefully*) Perhaps they should bring sweet drinks?

(Sheikh Nasrullah again shakes his head)

Hajji Hasan Perhaps, his eminence the Sheikh wishes to feast? A good chicken pilaf has been prepared.

⁶⁸ The recitation of blessings upon the Prophet Muhammad when his name is mentioned or in prayer.

Sheikh Nasrullah (*not looking anyone in the face, speaks quietly*) While ill, a man has no desire to feast. One is not likely to remember Allah when one's heart is stricken with the illness of worldly passions. No matter how delicious the meal, it will never seem delicious to an ailing man; and neither would he gain pleasure from the benefits of the afterlife. If you love the hereafter then it will remove all desire for the things that seem beautiful in this world, and all the things that you want to see in the afterlife will take the world out of your heart. (*After some thought he looks at Hajji Hasan and suddenly stands up and calls out.*) Feast? Chicken pilaf? (*To Sheikh Ahmad*) Sheikh Ahmad, where did you bring me? What kind of Muslims are these men? What kind of devotion is this? What is this? (*Points at the room furnishings*) What are these carpets for? And the feast, and the chicken pilaf? Sheikh Ahmad, have you not told them that the only food I require in a single day is a date?!

(*Sheikh Ahmad, like everyone else, trembles with fear.*)

Sheikh Ahmad Yes, my Sheikh, that is what I said.

Sheikh Nasrullah (*turns to face the crowd and shouts*) What is this, you misbegotten ones? What lures you to this world? What is this? What do you want? What are you searching for? Even if you're a king, you will die. Your world is less to me than the leaf in the mouth of a locust. Your world consists of six tastes: Sweet, Sour, Salty, Bitter, Pungent, and Astringent. That's all! But the most delicious meal is honey made from the saliva of bees. Thousands of animal remains swill in the water that you drink. Your finest perfume is musk, which consists of blood from the navel of a gazelle. The most aristocratic of your animals is a horse, which puts at risk anyone who rides it. The best garments are made of silk, which comes out of the putrid mouth of a worm. As for the significant benefits of marriage, the question is a little complicated. (*He settles down a little, more quietly*) The most useful medicine against the very itchy scabies that appears as a result of the dream of one's eyes—is a marital affair, that is, a *Sigha*—temporary marriage.⁶⁹ A *Sigha* is a powerful measure that helps protect the realm of faith from the plundering charms of coquettish eyes. (*Very loudly*) Marriage protects faith. That means he who marries protects half of his faith from Satan's evil and inferior passions. (*Quietly, after a short*

⁶⁹ *Sigha* is a Persian word for *Nikāh al-Mut'ah* (Arabic, "Pleasure marriage"). A fixed-term contractual marriage in Shi'i Islam, which is automatically dissolved upon completion of its term. Like any marriage in Islam, *Sigha* is contractual and has the same rules as a conventional marriage.

pause) Sheikh Ahmad, why don't I see any sisters among these people? Tell those poor ones to come gather here behind the curtain so they can also benefit from hearing the precepts of Allah.

(People spring into motion. The wives covered in chadors enter in one-by-one and line up behind the men.)

(Loudly) Aksaru ablinnaril-az-zab bishtarin ahli-jahannam azabanand.⁷⁰ *(Quietly to Sheikh Ahmad)* Sheikh Ahmad I'm exhausted, you explain it to them.

Sheikh Ahmad *(to the people)* As is clear from the explanations of his eminence the Sheikh, hell is mostly populated by men and women deprived of temporary marriage.

Sheikh Nasrullah *(to Sheikh Ahmad)* Louder, louder. *(Screaming)* Two raka'at⁷¹ of prayer from a married man is better than seventy raka'at of prayer from a single one. *(He suddenly stands up and extends his right hand toward the people and speaks very loudly)* Get married. Otherwise, you will become one of the Christian hermits and brothers of Satan.

Hajji Hasan *(steps forward and prostrates himself in front of Sheikh Nasrullah)* My Sheikh, have mercy on us; we're pitiful. We're ready to do anything to obey your command. Take pity on us.

Sheikh Nasrullah *(looks at Hajji Hasan a little and starts crying)* Once King David happened upon a graveyard, and he saw the angel of sorrow torturing a dead man. His Highness said... *(Stops, sits down and people start crying)* Sheikh Ahmad, I'm too weak to speak.

Hajji Hasan May Allah heal you!

People May Allah heal you!

(A voice saying "Move away, give way" can be heard from within the crowd. Heydar Agha, Aligulu Bey and the teacher Mirza Huseyn enter. Sheikh Nasrullah notes that people show them respect and so he stands up.)

Sheikh Nasrullah Sheikh Ahmad who are these aghas?

Hajji Hasan My Sheikh! This is Heydar Agha, a high-ranking telegraph official and a very educated person. This agha is Aligulu Bey. He is

⁷⁰ Persian for "Clearly, the souls of a majority of those who are not married will populate Hell." The Persian phrase is retained here for dramatic purposes, since the Sheikh uses complex Persian and Arabic language to obscure and fool the simple people of a small town who can barely follow his speech. The use of Arabic among the mullahs of non-Arabic countries is somewhat similar to the use of Latin among Catholic priests.

⁷¹ The plural of the Arabic *raka'ah*—the cycle of prescribed movements and recitations followed by Muslims during their prayer that is to be practiced five times a day. For example, dawn prayer consists of two, sunset prayers of three, and the others four raka'at.

the son of the famous Jahangir Bey; he's also the judge's interpreter. This gentleman, Molla Huseyn, is a teacher.

Sheikh Nasrullah (*gestures a place for the visitors; they sit down*) Allah willing, you are all well, venerable gentlemen?

Heydar Agha Only may Allah not deprive us of such a theologian as you.

Aligulu Bey May Allah grant you a long life!

Sheikh Nasrullah As soon as a man is put in his grave, the secretaries of the invisible library write the lessons learned by the man's body on a coffin lid with the pen of doom... Allah, the beholder of Truth... (*Sheikh Nasrullah suddenly says "ow, ow," grimaces and touches his side with his left hand. People are shocked and silent. Sheikh Ahmad says nothing, stands up and leaves, gesturing to Hajji Hasan to follow him. After they exit, Sheikh Nasrullah renews his lecture.*)

...Asked him 40 questions. One of these questions was: "My educated son, you adorned your outside with the clothes of infidels. Have you forgotten the only thing that is of interest to me is your inside?" I wonder how they answer this question.

Heydar Agha Yes, your eminence the Sheikh, in any case we are Allah's sinful creatures. (*Turning to people, more quietly*) *Mashallah*,⁷² this gentleman is an ocean of knowledge; I have never seen such a theologian.

Several People *Mashallah*, remarkable speech; this truly is a gift from Allah.

Aligulu Bey (*to people*) *Mashallah*, to the Sheikh's scholarliness! "Biravo!"

Sheikh Nasrullah (*to Heydar Agha*) My agha, is there anyone else besides you who studies foreign languages in this town; aren't there more of you?

Heydar Agha No, my Sheikh, there aren't. There's only one of us. Well, a son of Hajji Hasan Agha studied in Frankistan⁷³ too; but it was no use, the results were disappointing. It's true, your eminence the Sheikh, there's no shame if one learns a little of a foreign nation's language.

(*Sheikh Ahmad and Hajji Hasan enter.*)

⁷² Arabic phrase that literally means "God has willed it." Muslims use it to express appreciation, joy, or praise for an event or a person.

⁷³ "The land of Franks," i.e., France.

But if a Muslim child goes and spends years among *kafirs*, of course his beliefs will change.

Hajji Hasan My Sheikh, honestly, I've become unhappy because of my child. I made a terrible mistake.

Sheikh Nasrullah Is the Hajji's son here among the people too?

Hajji Hasan No, your eminence the Sheikh, he was embarrassed to meet you and ran and hid. May Allah bring shame upon him.

Sheikh Nasrullah Each Muslim is called upon to do good deeds. Hajji Hasan Agha, call for your son to come; I want to see him.

(People spring into motion. Hajji Hasan moves toward the door and a woman begins to cry loudly.)

What does this woman want?

Mashadi Oruj *(takes a few steps forward)* My Sheikh, that's my mother, she cries because of her son. Her son is the same Karbalayi Fatullah, who you kindly revived in Khorasan.

Crying Woman *(a chador covering her head, cries, moves forward a little)* I beseech you, my Sheikh! I'm asking you for my son.

Sheikh Nasrullah *(very loudly)* Each word has its own time; each point has its own place.

Sheikh Ahmad *(to the woman)* Sister, step away, don't annoy the Sheikh; it isn't the right time for this conversation.

(Hajji Hasan brings Iskender in, holding him by the hand. Iskender approaches, stands in front of Sheikh Nasrullah, puts his hands in his pockets and looks him in the face.)

Sheikh Nasrullah: What is the name of the bey?

Hajji Hasan: Your servant's name is Iskender.

Sheikh Nasrullah: Vai, vai! Iskender! Iskender! Al-Iskender the Great! Iskender Zulgarneyn!⁷⁴ What a beautiful name! Iskender, Iskender! And since not a single person in the nation felt the necessity to purify their inner passions *(Hajji Hasan makes a sign to Hajji Bakhshali and both walk out.)* and morals as the padishahs did for their sultans, Iskender built a strong barrier around the country to secure it against the horror of an enemy as evil as Gog and Magog.

⁷⁴ Iskender Zulgarneyn is from Arabic and means "He of the Two Horns." He is a figure mentioned in the Qur'an, in which he is described as a great and righteous ruler who built the wall that prevented Gog and Magog from attacking the people he encountered on his journey east. He is also identified with Alexander the Great.

Everything that exists in this world
 is the work of comradeship.
 If it were not so, then how would the leaves
 of a willow tree grow green in spring?

Iskender Yes, your eminence the Sheikh, I understand.

Heydar Agha (*to Aligulu Bey*) You see, he jokes.

Sheikh Nasrullah (*to Iskender*) Do you, sir, also hold a high rank or not?

Iskender No, I don't hold anything. These aghas do hold high ranks. (*Gestures towards Heydar Agha and Aligulu Bey*) I'm the only dog-rose hip among these fruits.

Aligulu Bey (*to Heydar Agha*) He's certainly drunk again.

Sheikh Nasrullah (*to Iskender*) Obviously, you have learned less than these aghas, since you have not surpassed their rank.

Iskender Yes, yes, these are the oceans of knowledge. And so now, with Allah's help, they'll learn from your eminence how to revive a dead man and they will become even better scientists, Allah willing!

Sheikh Nasrullah (*to Hajji*) Hajji Hasan Agha, I ask you, please, remove this barbarian from here! This apostate mocks the power of Allah. (*Hajji Hasan and others threaten Iskender and push him out.*)

Heydar Agha My Sheikh, he has lost his mind from being drunk all day long.

Mir Baghir Agha Besides his drunkenness, he criticizes the *hijab* too. He says that women should walk with their faces uncovered.

Sheikh Nasrullah (*very loudly*) What?

Hajji Karim No, Mir Baghir Agha, he could not commit that blunder.

Mir Baghir Agha Why couldn't he? Wasn't that him yesterday telling his 9-year-old sister "let's go out and take a walk." Something like "the sun is shining, the flowers are in bloom." I heard it with my own ears.

Sheikh Nasrullah (*stands up*) Oh my God, oh my God! (*People spring into motion and all stand up. Sheikh Nasrullah rushes towards the door.*) I cannot stay in this province!

(*People jostle one another. Hajji Hasan enters anxiously and falls down crying before the Sheikh.*)

Hajji Hasan My Sheikh, please have mercy on my poor soul. Whatever punishment he deserves—let me do it. Just don't leave my house dissatisfied; don't make me miserable.

Hajjis My Sheikh, please be at peace. We'll turn him out of here right now; he'll go to hell!

(Several men leave the house and run after Iskender muttering.)

Hajji Hasan *(to the people)* Wait! Wait! Have patience. I'll punish him myself. Hajji Bakhshali, Hajji Karim, Hajji Kazim! Calm the people down and I'll handle that rascal myself *(He exits. Sheikh Nasrullah and Sheikh Ahmad stay in the room.)*

Sheikh Nasrullah Sheikh Ahmad, I don't like this Iskender, or whatever his name is.

Sheikh Ahmad *(after a little thought)* My Sheikh, don't worry, no one even regards him as a human being here. Don't lose your enthusiasm, keep up the good work.

Sheikh Nasrullah *(thinks for a moment)* Sheikh Ahmad, first, sneak out quietly and tell the host to bring me something to eat. Second, request them to allocate me a room; I want to rest. And third, *(pauses)* well you know, of course you've sorted it all out, for sure. I cannot stay here alone tonight, my body hurts, really. I need a massage... Thank Allah, you understand everything yourself. So don't stand there, come on, hurry!

(Sheikh Ahmad exits, it is getting dark. Sheikh Nasrullah sits down on a mattress and, after a pause, speaks to himself.)

Whenever I tell people that I don't feel well, they think that I'm lying. But Allah is my witness that... *(Pauses)* I don't lie to anyone, because I really am sick. Whenever I appear ill in front of gatherings, Sheikh Ahmad always thinks that I'm fooling people; but this poor fellow simply can't understand that my illness is very acute... *(Thinks)* It's because of this problem that I have become a little baby at the side of this nincompoop Ahmad. Every day, full of shame, I have to ask: "Sheikh Ahmad, give me raisins," just like a baby begging his father for a treat. *(He covers his face with both hands and sits quietly.)*

Hajji Hasan's servant Ali brings a tray with pilaf and other dishes, places it in the middle of the room and exits. Sheikh Ahmad enters and stands aside. After a while, two women appear at the door. Whispering to each other, they lead a small woman by the hand, bring her in and stand by the door the servant enters and lights the lamp. Hajji Hasan enters after the women.

Hajji Hasan *(to the women)* My daughter, don't be ashamed, it is Allah's order. Why are you ashamed?

Sheikh Nasrullah Sheikh Ahmad, be my representative and marry us temporarily.

Sheikh Ahmad Your wish is my command.

Hajji Hasan, Ali and the two women exit, leaving the small woman in the room. She also wants to leave, but while exiting they closed the door leaving her inside. Sheikh Nasrullah stands up and after thinking for a little while, speaks eloquently to the woman.

Sheikh Nasrullah It is in your power: if you want you can leave or you can stay. It is in your power if you fall into the realm of *purgatory*. A window will open beneath your feet and scorpions the size of a mule will claw onto your body. And it is also in your power to make it so that when you are laid in your grave a window will open above your head and a young servant of paradise will come to you through this window. And he will flirt with you, and at this moment the olivine chaplet will break, and the beads will scatter, and you will start threading them each from its own side. And suddenly you will realize that the world's seventy thousand hours have turned around you and that now it's Judgement Day. (*He approaches the woman*) Then, the servant of paradise will hold your hand (*holds woman's hand*) and say smiling: "I wonder how many good deeds you have done in the world to deserve this?"

(*Curtain*)

Act III

Act Three takes place on the outskirts of the town near a graveyard. A crowd of people stand barefoot, with their trousers rolled up to their knees, and hands resting one on top of the other. In the middle of the crowd, Sheikh Nasrullah sits on a high rock and speaks. Sheikh Ahmad is at his right side, Hajji Hasan at his left, Iskender and the women are not present.

Sheikh Nasrullah (*a large book in his hand, speaking very eloquently*) "In the treasuries of might there is no dearer and more valuable jewel than knowledge." (*Then poetically*)

"The life of the heart and soul is tied to knowledge.
Knowledge brings freshness to water and mud.
Knowledge is the gentle breeze of a soul's meadow.
Knowledge is the scent of the garden of paradise.
A man who has reached the source of knowledge
has tasted eternal heavenly life."

(*He pauses, raises the book with both hands and speaks very loudly*) This is the book! This is the knowledge! (*Pauses, then very quietly*) All disciplines and sciences are of two types: esoteric and exoteric. Exoteric ones are popularly known: most of the scientists are certainly aware of those laws and embrace their nuances. Esoteric ones are those that stay in hidden angles, and their reality and mysteries remain beyond reach. (*A little louder*) First among them is the art of conjuring. However, we do not deal with this. Second, the art of spiritism. We do not deal with this either. Third, the art of visualization. Nor do we deal with this. Fourth, the art of magic. We do not deal with this one. Fifth (*stands up, turns towards the graveyard, and after looking there for some moments, says very loudly*)—resurrection. (*Short pause, quietly*) That is, the return of the dead. (*Eases up, sits down and says quietly*) According to common knowledge and to what is given us in this valuable book (*raises the book*), which is the highest essence of knowledge and the key to any door. It is unique and is to be followed strictly. It is noble; it covers many fields, and is a gift to those who deserve it. It is full of the great splendor of humanity's religious treasures, collected by humble and devoted saintly people since the times of his highness Emir Khosrov. It was fated by Allah to be written down by such a poor, modest man as Nasrullah Ibn-Jafar of Isfahan. It is called *The Search for and Discovery of Resurrection* and consists of five sections. First, on signs; second, on decomposition; third, on chemistry; fourth, on preparation; fifth, on completion. And yet, we're not dealing with these matters. (*Pause*) Resurrection means the return to life after one's death. (*He continues quietly*) Some apostates argue: "Resurrection cannot be performed. For since one is dead, life is no longer his responsibility. What is the benefit of a return to this world?" (*Loudly*) Are there any such apostates among you? If there are, let them come to me. I will answer them with this book. Whoever said that the dead cannot return to this world?

Sheikh Ahmad (*quietly to Sheikh Nasrullah*) Say it in Arabic, in Arabic.

Sheikh Nasrullah (*very loudly*) *Fäiza äräftä haza vä övzähtü läkä fil-gövlü bir-rijätü-läti ichtämäätiş-shiätü äleyhima fi jämiil-ägvam.*⁷⁵ Anyone who denies has also to deny that he touched the back of a lamb with his holy hand (*begins to cry*) and chanted blessed prayer, and by the power of Almighty Allah that one lamb became seventy. He who can turn

⁷⁵ The Arabic here is unclear, and therefore, we have left it in a transliterated form without translation.

one sheep into seventy can kill his own creatures, as well as revive them. (*Very loudly*) Who denies this? Let them come to me and I will answer them with this book.

Hajji Hasan (*one hand on top of the other, bows his head in fear*) May we all be your sacrifice, for the one who denies the order of Allah is a *kafir*.

Sheikh Nasrullah (*to people, angrily and loudly*) Stand up! (*They all stand up as one.*) Haven't you heard that a tribe of seventy thousand men died of plague? And said he: oh Allah, if Thou wilt revive them they shall make your city flourish. Since they did not run from the suffering you set upon them, they have become your witnesses. Let them now be revived. Let them come alive and worship you. Let them return to this world and make your cities prosperous. And an answer came from the master of the universe: (*crying*) Do you wish me to revive them for your sake? (*People start crying*) And he said: Yes! So Almighty Allah revived them. Allah revived them all. And as it was promised, they all died and then revived and returned to this world.

Old Man (*cries*) Oh Sheikh, may my soul be a sacrifice for you. I ask you for my son, the wrestler. It is only a month since he died and my soul burns. I beseech you, oh Sheikh, have pity.

(*Several people try to make similar requests.*)

Sheikh Ahmad (*loudly*) Be patient, it is not the right time for this.

(*The crowd begins to cry and beg again, cries of "revive my father," "return my mother to life," "my sister," "my brother."*)

Sheikh Nasrullah (*very loudly*): Silence! (*All calm down and wipe their tears*) Sheikh Ahmad, take a paper and a pen, and for everyone who asks for someone from his family to be revived, please write it down and give it to me.

(*People spring into motion. Jostling one another, they all try to get closer to Sheikh Ahmad, some of them crying. Everyone wants to get to the front and clamor and bustle ensues.*)

Sheikh Nasrullah (*very loudly*): Order!

(*All step back slowly and stand still.*)

Sheikh Ahmad (*takes up paper and pen*) In the name of Allah, Most Gracious and Most Merciful. Everyone who asks to revive the dead—that is to return them alive to this world—please speak out one by one, each in his turn and in a civilized manner. I will write it down on this paper and pass it on to his eminence the Sheikh. (*Again people spring into motion and begin to clamor.*)

Sheikh Nasrullah (*very loudly*) Hey Muslims! Be patient! (*people are scared and fall silent. To Hajji Hasan*) Hajji Hasan Agha, tell me the names of the dead one by one and let Sheikh Ahmad write them down.

Hajji Hasan (*solemnly places one hand on top of the other, takes a step forward and bows his head*) My father Hajji Mehdi. May Allah also let the souls of your dead rest in peace.

People (*in unison*) May Allah let them rest in peace!

Sheikh Ahmad (*writes*) Your father Hajji Mehdi.

Hajji Hasan My mother Sakina.

Sheikh Ahmad (*writes*) Your mother Sukeyna.⁷⁶

Hajji Hasan: My son Jafar. (*Cries.*)

Sheikh Ahmad (*writes*) Your son Jafar.

Hajji Hasan: My son Heydar.

Sheikh Ahmad (*writes*) Your son Heydar.

Hajji Hasan My daughter Sara.

Mir Baghir Agha (*suddenly cries out from among the people*) Don't write that! Don't write that!

(*Hajji Hasan and the people are surprised and look in Mir Baghir's direction.*)

Sheikh Nasrullah (*loudly*) Who is that saying "don't write"? How does this concern you?

Mir Baghir Agha (*steps forward*) My Sheikh, excuse me, that girl is my wife!

Sheikh Nasrullah Fine, don't you agree to reviving your spouse?

Mir Baghir Agha (*hesitant*) Your eminence the Sheikh, I don't mean that. What hurts me is that if Hajji Hasan is an honest man, then why wouldn't he sign up his brother Hajji Rza?

(*The crowd looks expectantly at Hajji Hasan.*)

Hajji Hasan (*angrily, to Mir Baghir*) This is no concern of yours! He is my brother and if I want to I will sign him up, and if I don't, I won't. What is it to you?

Mir Baghir Agha (*angrily, to Hajji Hasan*) All right then, now why wouldn't you sign up that great man, but instead sign up a little girl?

Sheikh Nasrullah (*loudly*) There is no need for such argument! (*To Hajji Hasan*) Hajji Hasan Agha, why don't you sign up your dead brother Hajji Rza?

⁷⁶ An Arabic pronunciation of the original Arabic name. In Azeri the name is pronounced "Sakina."

Hajji Hasan (*bows his head and thinks*) My Sheikh! My brother Hajji Rza died more than 5 years ago now. He has decomposed already, so how can he be revived and become a man?

Sheikh Nasrullah (*very loudly*) What do you mean decomposed? Who decomposed him? Look how we can revive bones. Indeed, look at the bones and see how the Lord of the Universe raises them up and returns them to their place, connects some bones to others and then covers their surface—creating flesh.⁷⁷ What do you mean decomposed? Who decomposed him?

Sheikh Ahmad (*to Hajji Hasan*) Hajji Hasan Agha, please make it short. The time of his eminence the Sheikh is very valuable. Shall I write the name of your brother Hajji Rza on the list or not? The choice is yours. If you don't want him to be revived then that's another matter.

Hajji Hasan (*to Sheikh Nasrullah*): My Sheikh, if it is possible, will you allow me to go and think about it for a little while?

Sheikh Nasrullah All right, go and think. (*Hajji Hasan bows his head and exits.*)

Sheikh Nasrullah (*to Hajji Bakhshali*) Hajji Agha it's your turn. Tell us the name of your dead one by one so that Sheikh Ahmad can write them down.

Hajji Bakhshali (*puts one hand on top of the other, steps forward and starts to cry*) May my father and mother be your sacrifice. At the end of the day, I am left with, pardon me, only one daughter, and I miss my son badly. In my whole life Allah has granted me the blessing of two sons, but then took both out of my poor arms. One was called Jalil and the other Khalil. Jalil was ten and Khalil was eight. Both were engaged. I was preparing for Jalil's wedding, when all of a sudden, right in this part of his neck (*he points to the back of his neck*) he got a scab. It wouldn't heal, no matter how often I made Usta Jafar treat him. (*Cries*) Oh my poor Jalil! It was all in vain—no matter how many alms I gave out and no matter how many times I took him to Garadash shrine. It seems that the poor boy was doomed.

Sheikh Nasrullah Hajji Bakhshali, I don't have much time to sit here.

Sheikh Ahmad Hajji Bakhshali, state briefly, whom you want so that I can write it.

⁷⁷ An improvised rendering of a fragment from the Qur'an, sura *al-Baqra*, Verse 259.

Hajji Bakhshali (*to Sheikh Nasrullah*) Your eminence the Sheikh, I have no more to say. I want my Jalil and Khalil from you.

Sheikh Ahmad (*writes*) So, one son Jalil and another son Khalil. I have written them down. Anyone else besides them?

Hajji Bakhshali Sheikh Ahmad Agha, they are enough.

Sheikh Ahmad (*surprised*) Well, don't you have a father, mother, or any other relatives who died?

Hajji Bakhshali Yes, I have, my father and mother died too, but those poor souls were very old. They were so old, so very old that even they had had enough.

Sheikh Ahmad So, you have no one else to sign up except for Jalil and Khalil?

Hajji Bakhshali (*turns to the graveyard*) Oh my poor children. The graves of the unfortunate children can be seen from here. I buried them side-by-side. Actually, poor Khalil was truly very naughty, but they loved each other very much. That's why...

Sheikh Nasrullah (*angrily interrupting Hajji Bakhshali*) Hajji Bakhshali, if you have no more dead, please move aside!

Hajji Bakhshali: No, my Sheikh, there are no more.

Someone from the crowd (*loudly*) What do you mean there's no one else? Why don't you sign up your wife Hurnisa? (*The crowd, surprised, looks to where the voice came from.*)

Sheikh Nasrullah Who is that speaking? Come forward.

Karbalayi Vali (*moves forward*) Sheikh, it's me speaking. Please ask this Hajji (*points at Hajji Bakhshali*) why he doesn't sign up his wife who died 3 years ago. Her name's Hurnisa and she was my sister.

Hajji Bakhshali (*to Karbalayi Vali*) Go to hell, you imbecile! It's my family and I'll decide whether I want to sign her up or not. And what is it to you anyway?

Sheikh Nasrullah (*loudly*) Quiet! There is no need to argue! Hajji Bakhshali we need your final answer. I don't have much time and if you want your wife to be revived, sign her up, if not move aside.

Hajji Bakhshali (*thinks for a little while*) My Sheikh, allow me to take a little time to go and think about it.

Sheikh Nasrullah Very good, go and think about it. Sheikh Ahmad, look and see who else is left, so we can please finish writing.

(*Hajji Bakhshali moves away and the crowd slowly dwindles.*)

Karbalayi Vali (*moves forward*) Your eminence the Sheikh, I beg at your feet. Add the name of my sister Hurnisa to the list, let the poor

woman be revived and let her explain to your eminence herself everything that Hajji Bakhshali did to her. Then your eminence will understand why Hajji Bakhshali didn't agree to revive his wife.

Hajji Bakhshali (*steps forward from among the people again, angrily and loudly*) Hey you, aren't you ashamed to speak like this? All right, sign Hurnisa up. But on one condition: that you will also sign up all of your dead.

Karbalayi Vali (*angrily*) Very well, I will.

Sheikh Ahmad We don't need long discussions here. Karbalayi Vali, if you are going to sign up, tell us the names of your dead and move on.

Karbalayi Vali My father Mashadi Mustafa.

Sheikh Ahmad (*writes*) Your father Mashadi Mustafa.

Hajji Bakhshali Very good.

Karbalayi Vali My son Zeynal. (*On the verge of tears.*)

Sheikh Ahmad (*writes*): Your son Zeynal.

Hajji Bakhshali Very good.

Karbalayi Vali My daughter Pusta.

Sheikh Ahmad Your daughter Pusta.

Hajji Bakhshali Very good.

Karbalayi Vali (*thinks a little*) That's all.

Hajji Bakhshali (*moves forward, angrily to Karbalayi Vali*). That's all? Why don't you mention your mother? Hasn't your mother died? Last year you beat the old lady to death! Well, why are you silent, eh? Or are you afraid that she will be revived, complain to the authorities and that they will pick you up and throw you into prison? Eh... why don't you sign her up? Why are you leering?

Sheikh Nasrullah (*loudly*) Don't start a hullabaloo. Karbalayi Vali, if you wish then let Sheikh Ahmad write down your mother too, but if you do not, then move aside.

Karbalayi Vali (*head bowed*) Your eminence the Sheikh, let me go and think for a while.

Sheikh Nasrullah Good, you go and think too.

(*Karbalayi Vali and Hajji Bakhshali leave, looking angrily at one another. The crowd disperses. The voice of drunken Iskender is heard in the distance.*)

Iskender Good, you go and think too! Good, you go and think too!...

Iskender continues repeating these words and taking pieces of bread out of his pocket. While eating he grabs people's arms and looks into their faces with

a smile. They say nothing and leave, heads bowed. Sheikh Nasrullah comes down from the rock, and Sheikh Ahmad puts away the pen and paper.

Good, you go and think too! Good, you go and think too!...

(As he sees the Sheikh he stops, explodes with laughter and bends over laughing so hard that he almost falls on the ground. Then he calms down and scrutinizes the Sheikh.)

Everyone has gone to think. All that's left in this square is the drunkard Iskender. This square is a wrestling ring. It takes courage for a hero like Iskender to come and stand in this square and say: (*Loudly*) Your eminence the Sheikh, revive all the dead—whoever is buried in this graveyard (*indicates with his hand*) Ha... Ha... Ha!... (*He turns and looks at the people leaving*) Ha... Ha... Ha!... Everyone has gone away to think. (*Turns to Sheikh Nasrullah, goes over to him and offers him his hand*) Your eminence the Sheikh, for my sake, give me your hand! Aren't you a real man? Give me your hand!

Sheikh Nasrullah (*loudly*) Withdraw! I'll never give my hand to you. You have partaken of wine.

Iskender Your eminence the Sheikh, you should thank Allah that I drink wine. If I don't drink wine, then I'm clear-headed. And if I were clear-headed then I'd open my eyes and see that, aha, one highly religious Muslim came to our town, calls himself the reviver of the dead, and while pulling the wool over the eyes of our devout Hajjis with this reviving business, takes in one little girl every night. Ha... Ha... Ha!... For my sake, give me your hand! You're a real man, give me your hand! Ha... Ha... Ha!...

Sheikh Nasrullah (*very angry*) Go to hell! By Allah, I could put such a terrible curse on you that you would be wiped out completely! Every night I achieve endless bliss by the order of Allah; I do not corrupt my spirit in drinking houses as you do. (*To Sheikh Ahmad*) Sheikh Ahmad, let's go, this agnostic is talking too much. (*The Sheikhs exit.*)

(Iskender quietly watches them go and when they disappear he raises both fists.)

Iskender (*loudly*) If these arms had the strength of Rustam⁷⁸ the hero, I would catch you by the feet and throw you up in the sky, and you would fall upside-down and crack like a watermelon—(*shouts and jumps in the air*) Bang!... Pah, charlatans! ... (*Sighs like a drunkard, looking down at*

⁷⁸ A heroic character from the epic poem *Shah-nameh* (*The Book of Kings*) written by the great Persian poet Ferdowsi (940–1020).

himself carefully and smiling) Say! Aha, by Allah, it seems I am quite a wrestler! Ha ... Ha ... Ha!...

He lights a cigarette, slowly walks up and stops at the stone that Sheikh Nasrullah had sat on, stands and looks over the graveyard. After gazing thoughtfully for a while, he slaps his hands on his knees in frustration.

Oh, by the greatness of Allah, if only I had the knowledge that Sheikh Nasrullah has, I could speak with the dead who rest here! Oh! If only that were the case, I would turn to this graveyard and call out: (*Very loudly*) "Oh you dead!" (*A little quieter*) At that moment, all the dead resting here would stick their heads out of their graves and ask: "What, Iskender Bey?" Then I would advise these deceased; I would say to them" (*turns to the graveyard and cries out*) "Oh dead! (*Again a little quieter*) One day Sheikh Nasrullah will come and stand over your heads and he will pray and call out loudly: (*Loudly*) 'Hey righteous servants of Allah, stand on your feet!' (*Pauses, a little quieter*) Oh dead! I command you not to obey the orders of the Sheikh. You had better think about the words of this drunkard Iskender and accept his advice." And if you ask me why, I'm ready to answer you. (*Pauses, takes a piece of bread out of his pocket and eats*) "Oh, deceased ones! You sleep here comfortably now with no idea of what's going on in the world. But, by Allah, I swear on your dear souls that as soon as you are revived and stand up from the grave, you'll be extremely disappointed." If you ask me why, I'll explain it to you now. "Let's assume, for example, that you've been revived. Very good. But after you are revived you won't stay in this graveyard, will you? No doubt you will want to go to your homes. Very well, there you go. Now tell me please, will they let you in? By Allah, I swear on the head of Sheikh Nasrullah, you'll go and see that the doors of your houses are closed. Well, that's alright. You'll pick up a stone and knock on the door so that someone opens it. Then a man will come and ask from behind the door: (*In a shrill voice*) 'Hey you knocking on the door, who are you?' Yes, you'll answer: 'Open the door, it's me.' (*In a shrill voice*) 'And who are you? What's your name?' 'Open the door! I'm the owner of this house.' (*in a shrill voice*) 'Go to hell, get away! We don't know you.' 'Hey man, what do you mean, you don't know me? I'm Karbalayi Huseyngulu, this house is mine. I have a wife and a child in there.' (*In a shrill voice*) 'You talk too much! Go to hell! There's nothing for you here! Your brother Hajji Faraj married your wife, took this house and sent your children to herd the cattle.' 'Hey man, for Allah's sake, open the door, I have a husband in there.' (*In a harsh voice*) 'You talk too much! Go away!

We don't need any wives here! The world is full of 9-year-old girls. The grave is the place for a hag like you. Go to hell! Go back where you came from! We don't need you here.'" Ha... Ha... Ha!... Ha... Ha... Ha... (*Suddenly calms down, looks at the graveyard and calls loudly*) You dead! (*A little quieter*) You had better listen to the words of this drunkard Iskender and stay as you were, asleep! May Allah rest your souls...

(*Curtain*)

Act IV

Scene 1

Hajji Hasan's house, Iskender's room. Hajji Hasan and his wife Karbalayi Fatma Khanim sit thinking.

Hajji Hasan Hey Fatma, get Nazli ready, we have to move her to the Sheikh's room today.

Karbalayi Fatma Khanim Oh Hajji, so soon?

Hajji Hasan Yes, so soon....

Karbalayi Fatma Khanim (*after some thought*) Hey Hajji, by Allah, I don't know what to do! I'm totally confused. I don't understand why the Sheikh needs so many women! He takes a new one every day. Now he wants our daughter.

Hajji Hasan I mean, what's so evil or sinful about taking one every day? Allah orders—he takes.

Karbalayi Fatma Khanim Hajji, you're right in what you say, but I'm afraid that Nazli won't stand for it. And also, by Allah Hajji, Nazli is really still a child.

Hajji Hasan (*angrily*) Don't talk rubbish! I know better than you whether she's a child or not. She turned nine on the 18th of Zu-l-Hijjah,⁷⁹ she'll soon be ten. And still I don't know: what do you call a child? There's no need to spread rumors. Say clearly, once and for all, that you will marry Nazli to Mir Baghir Agha.

Karbalayi Fatma Khanim No, by Allah, I didn't say that I would marry her to Mir Baghir Agha! You should know better, she is your daughter after all. Marry her to whomever you want. All I know is that Nazli won't stand for it.

Hajji Hasan I don't give a damn! Girls are all stupid; what do they know about what's good or bad for them?! Anyway, the sister of that drunkard Iskender won't ever be more than that! She should thank Allah

⁷⁹ The twelfth and final month in the Islamic calendar.

that she's getting married to such a being as Sheikh Nasrullah. To become the relative of such a holy man is a fortune very few people in the world have in their destiny. It is a bliss sent to us by Allah and after all, you should know that... (*Quietly*) One must not offend the Sheikh. You must understand what I'm saying.

Karbalayi Fatma Khanim (*quietly*) I understand.

Hajji Hasan To tell you the truth, I've felt a bit strange over these two days. My eyes go dim and sometimes I even feel dizzy.

Karbalayi Fatma Khanim Oh Hajji, Allah is merciful, everything will be alright.

Hajji Hasan (*thoughtfully*) I don't know... (*Pause*) Well don't stay here Fatma, go. Tell Nazli whatever you have to (*Fatma Khanim exits. Hajji lowers his head and thinks. After a while he looks at the door as if seeing something, suddenly stands up and asks*) What do you want? (*There is no answer. Speaks quickly, to himself*) *Ästägfürullah räbbi vä toube ileyh. Bismillahir-Rähmanir-Rähim.*⁸⁰ (*Calls loudly*) Fatma, Fatma!

(*Iskender enters and asks in surprise.*)

Iskender Father, what do you want?

Hajji Hasan (*to Iskender*) Come here, come here. Let me hold your hand, my knees are trembling. (*He sits down and Iskender holds his father's hand*) *Bismillahir-Rähmanir-Rähim.* Tell them to bring me a glass of water.

Iskender Father don't be afraid. Nothing's wrong, you've just lost your mind a little.

Hajji Hasan (*holding Iskender's hand*) No, Iskender, I'm in my right mind. Don't be afraid, there's nothing wrong with me. Only, my eyes are growing dim.

Iskender Don't be afraid, it's nothing. When a man loses his mind, his eyes go a little dim. That's it. Nothing more. So don't be scared; you just went mad.

Hajji Hasan No, no, *inshallah*,⁸¹ nothing's wrong. Tell them to bring a glass of water.

Iskender Let them bring water, but water is no good for a madman. (*Loudly*) Ali, Ali! (*Ali enters.*) Bring a glass of water. (*Ali exits.*)

⁸⁰ Arabic for "I seek forgiveness from Allah; I repent oh Lord. In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful." Both phrases are used extensively in informal speech.

⁸¹ In Arabic: "If God wills it." Used informally in speech.

Hajji Hasan Iskender, you're really scaring me. I know that I'm in my right mind. It just seemed to me that I saw something. It was something like a shrouded man. He came and stood at the door. Maybe you noticed something like that, too?

Iskender No father, I didn't see anything. Only madmen see such things. (*Ali brings water, Hajji Hasan takes it, drinks.*) May Allah damn that Yazid!⁸²

Hajji Hasan (*to Iskender*) Iskender, by Allah, it seems you're joking with me. I see everything clearly here. Why are you saying that I went mad?

Iskender Because, in order to trap you Sheikh Nasrullah put the idea into your head that he can revive the dead. Now you believe that you want to give whatever you have to an Isfahani rascal!

Hajji Hasan (*after some thought*) Alright, let's imagine that I went mad for an hour, but what about Mir Baghir Agha? He's a man of a science, so why does he believe in reviving the dead? Is he mad too?

Iskender No, Mir Baghir Agha isn't mad, just a donkey.

Hajji Hasan (*angrily gathers himself, loudly*) Shut your mouth, you incoherent fool! (*pause*) And why does the telegrapher Heydar Agha believe; is he mad too?

Iskender No, he isn't mad. You can tell that he believes because his ears are so long.

Hajji Hasan Sure, everyone in this world is mad or a donkey, and only you are the clever one. And so Hajji Bakhshali is mad, Hajji Kazim is also a fool, and Hajji Karim is stupid. All of them are mad, only Iskender is clever.

Iskender You think there are only a few donkeys in the world? There was only one pair of every kind of animal on Noah's ship, but now look how many donkeys there are in Hamadan alone.

Hajji Hasan (*angrily*) Don't talk rubbish!

(*Karbalayi Fatma Khanim enters and stands to one side.*)

⁸² Yazid I was the Umayyad caliph whom the Prophet Muhammad's grandson Husayn ibn Ali fought in the Battle of Karbala because he refused to recognize Yazid I as caliph. Yazid I used a water blockade as one of his main tactical weapons. As a result, Husayn and all his supporters were killed, including Husayn's six-months-old infant son. The women and children were taken as prisoners. The dead are regarded as martyrs by Shi'i Muslims, and the battle has a central place in Shi'i history and tradition.

Karbalayi Fatma Khanim Hajji, I cannot cope with your daughter; perhaps you should try to persuade her yourself.

Hajji Hasan (*a moment's thought*) Woman, Fatma, you know me. Thank Allah, you know that if I get angry I lose control. Go and manage your daughter quietly. Tonight we have to move her. (*Fatma Khanim exits. Hajji Hasan follows her.*) Stop, stop! (*She stops*) Tell your daughter not to make me come and break her ribs!

(*Fatma Khanim exits. With a stare at his father, Iskender spits, "tfu," and exits.*)

Hajji Hasan (*calling after him angrily and loudly*) Damn those who gave birth to you! So this is how you act now? (*Exits angrily after Iskender and then returns. First Patient, a pale man muttering "ow, ouch" and coughing, enters leaning on a stick.*)

First Patient Salam aleykum. Ah! Ow! Ow! I haven't the strength to stand on my feet. Hajji Agha, help me, may Allah save your sons. It has been almost a year since this damned sickness took me over and it refuses to leave. Ouch, ouch, ow! Ouch, ow! (*coughs*) Look, sometimes a pain strikes in this part of my chest, so strong that I can't breathe. At night the cough won't let me sleep until morning. I'm tired of ordering prayers.⁸³ I'm tired of visiting Jafar the barber.⁸⁴ For Allah's sake, Hajji (*coughs*) Help me out. May Allah grant you long life. So now I look for refuge at your door. Either his eminence the Sheikh should take my life right now (*mutters "ow, ow", puts his hand to his chest and coughs*) so that I can rest, or let him give me some remedy. May I be a sacrifice at the Sheikh's feet. All I want is for him to look upon me with a merciful gaze, and I'll be healed. I have no other hope. Allah's mercy is enough for me. Eh ... ouch ... ow! I can't breathe.

Hajji Hasan Good, of course, Mashadi. But his eminence the Sheikh is busy with prayer. Certainly as soon as he is free, I will solicit a cure for your poor soul. Of course.

First Patient Eh! (*coughs*) Eh!... My Allah, what is this woeful thing that I cannot get rid of? A couple of months ago it was a bit better. I coughed less and had an appetite... (*Second Patient, head covered with a towel, enters frowning and interrupts First Patient*)

⁸³ Prayers (*duah*) written according to ritual were believed to heal diseases. Ordering such prayers was a very widespread practice in the region.

⁸⁴ Barbers historically performed bloodletting, which was believed to help ease certain diseases.

Second Patient Salam aleykum, (*to First Patient*) Mashadi Huseyn-gulu, you're here too? It's good that you came. The path to salvation for our poor souls lies behind this door. May Allah not deprive us of uncle Hajji's shadow over our heads! (*To Hajji Hasan*) Uncle Hajji, this headache is killing me; it doesn't give me rest in the evenings or afternoons. When I go to master Jafar he says: your blood has increased; you need a bloodletting. When I go to Mir Baghir he says: your blood has decreased; you need to eat nothing but honey halva.⁸⁵ Uncle Hajji, for the sake of your children, ask his eminence the Sheikh to write me a prayer just as long as a finger (*shows his forefinger*), so this headache will leave me alone. Uncle Hajji, as long as I live...

A man shows up with a child in his arms, the child cries and interrupts Second Patient. Other patients begin to enter one-by-one. Some have their heads in bandages, some their necks, others their arms; all enter sighing. The most seriously afflicted patients sit down on the floor as they enter. Several of them begin asking Hajji Hasan for a remedy.

Patients Uncle Hajji! We take refuge at your door. May his eminence the Sheikh cure us. For Allah's sake, take pity on us.

Hajji Hasan (*moves to stand before the patients*) Alright, I'll do the best I can but now, as you can see, our Sheikh isn't allowing anyone to enter. Please sit in the shade under a tree in the backyard and wait. I'll inform you as soon as his eminence grants permission to enter. All of you will recount your problems and I believe, inshallah, you won't leave without hope.

Patients (*exit slowly, praising Hajji Hasan as they go*) May Allah grant uncle Hajji a long life! May Allah let the father of Hajji Agha rest in peace! For the sake of His Unity, may Allah not deprive us of him!

(*Servant Ali appears at the door.*)

Hajji Hasan Ali, have you served his eminence tea and refreshments?

Ali No, Hajji Agha, the Sheikh hasn't woken up yet; his door is still closed. (*exits*)

(*Karbalayi Fatma Khanim enters.*)

Karbalayi Fatma Khanim Hajji, I've tricked Nazli into agreeing. But, by Allah, there's one thing I'm afraid of mentioning.

Hajji Hasan Say whatever you want to say.

⁸⁵ Halva (Arabic for "sweet") is a variety of sweet confections cooked throughout the Muslim world. Halva is predominantly a dense paste made from flour or crushed nuts with sugar or honey.

Karbalayi Fatma Khanim Hajji, you know how much I suffered when we married poor Sara without a wedding. You said that it was a sin so I said nothing.⁸⁶ I beseech Allah, we were always afraid of committing a sin, but...

Hajji Hasan (*interrupts his wife*) Alright, out with it now. Are you saying we should start celebrating the wedding in our home in front of the Sheikh?

Karbalayi Fatma Khanim By Allah, it's none of my business; I'm not suggesting anything. There, your nieces Fizza Khanim, Sakina Khanim, Gulchohra Khanim, Ummigulsum Khanim have all come to pester me about having musicians come.

Hajji Hasan I'm telling you, don't talk rubbish. Let's leave the Sheikh alone for now. Who ever saw a wedding celebrated in a Hajji's house?

Karbalayi Fatma Khanim Please be fair: Didn't Hajji Alekber celebrate a wedding when he married off his daughter? And what do you say about Hajji Mirtaghi? They invited people for a wedding. Practically the whole neighborhood moved out because of the noise. Or do your eyes only see us? Hajji Bakhshali married his son a month ago. Now ask yourself please, were there musicians and singers or not? Are we the only misfits in the world? We take so much trouble bringing up our children, but when we marry them we behave as if they are stolen plunder; neither relatives nor neighbors know. I don't mean that you have to invite people, set a feast or arrange entertainment. I'm just saying that a funeral is a funeral and a wedding is a wedding. Those poor relatives of ours are already here. What would be wrong with them clapping their hands for just an hour if it would open poor Nazli's heart? By Allah, she's been crying since morning. She isn't some kind of stranger, but your own daughter; so take pity on your daughter.

Hajji Hasan (*after some thought, quietly*) No, tell my daughter not to cry. I won't tolerate her crying. Let's go; I'll have a few words with her too (*stands up*). No, no, I shouldn't let my daughter Nazli cry. Let's go. (*They exit.*)

Servant Ali enters and two old women follow him. Then more, fifteen-twenty women altogether, mostly old and dressed in chadors, enter whispering and sit down on one side. Ali exits. Jalal enters with candy in his mouth,

⁸⁶ Wedding celebrations are not religious holidays and therefore are not supported by Islam. Some Muslims regard such celebrations as a sin.

stands at the door and looks at the women. None of the women speak or reveal their faces. After watching for a while, Jalal speaks.

Jalal Have you come for the wedding too? (*The women look at Jalal in silence. Jalal watches them for a while.*) If you came for the wedding, this isn't a wedding room. (*The women remain silent and just shake their heads. Then one woman speaks.*)

Woman (*low voice*) We came to be the Sheikh's sigha.

Jalal What does it mean to be sigha?

(*The women chuckle quietly. One woman answers.*)

Woman We came to marry the Sheikh.

Jalal (*Jalal starts to laugh*) Heh, how can so many women marry one man? (*Runs out laughing.*)

Several women laugh too. Mir Baghir Agha enters, looks at the women in shock and immediately exits. Fatma Khanim enters with her head covered in chador and Mir Baghir Agha follows her.

Karbalayi Fatma Khanim Agha, please come and take a seat on that side.

Mir Baghir Agha turns his back on the women, moves to sit in front of them with his back to them. After whispering to the women, Karbalayi Fatma Khanim bows to them.

(*To Mir Baghir Agha*) These women beg you, for Allah's sake, please tell the Sheikh to bestow his name upon these poor souls so that they won't be deprived of Allah's bliss.

Mir Baghir Agha (*with bowed head*) I certainly will. I'll tell him, of course I will. It is a very good deed. Allah is always a friend to his creatures. May Allah bless you. Mashallah, mashallah, sisters!

(*The sound of fingers snapping, a musician playing a saz,⁸⁷ and singing is heard.*)

Mir Baghir Agha (*raises his head to Fatma Khanim in surprise*) My dear, what's going on?

Karbalayi Fatma Khanim (*to the women*) And another thing, by Allah, if anyone says anything—they're lying. Whatever is written in one's fate will be just so. Otherwise, who could have imagined that our Nazli would be destined for a man like the Sheikh?

⁸⁷ The *saz* is a plucked stringed musical instrument used in several traditions in Asia, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean. It is a long-necked lute with three single or double strings. In the Caucasus, the *saz* is usually played by traveling storytellers, *ashigs*, and therefore involves singing.

Mir Baghir Agha (*very surprised*) How could it be Nazli, your Nazli?
Karbalayi Fatma Khanim I don't know what to say, Agha. Hajji is giving Nazli away to our guest today.

Mir Baghir Agha (*surprised*) To Sheikh Nasrullah?

Karbalayi Fatma Khanim Yes, to his eminence the Sheikh.

Mir Baghir Agha (*after some thought*) Really, today?

Karbalayi Fatma Khanim Well Agha, by Allah, I just can't cope with Hajji, but it's certainly wrong to do things in such a hurry. I don't know, by Allah; I'm confused.

(*Mir Baghir Agha bows his head, takes a handkerchief with a red flower pattern from his pocket, covers his face and begins to cry.*)

Hajji Hasan (*appears at the door*) Fatma, take the women to the other room; that's where people will arrive.

Karbalayi Fatma Khanim and the women stand up and exit. Hajji Hasan and Iskender enter. Hajji Hasan sits down while Iskender remains standing.

(*To his son*) Iskender, listen and pay attention to what I'm saying. Mir Baghir Agha is not a stranger here either. You know how much your sister Nazli loves you. Don't let anyone shed a tear in my house today. I made her agree to marry his eminence the Sheikh, but she keeps crying and won't calm down. She says, I don't know, Iskender has to agree or something. I want you to know that I don't care if you agree or not. You have caused me so much trouble that I don't even look at you as a human being anymore. Now it's up to you. If you want the girl to rest easy, then call her here and talk to her sweetly. Well, it's up to you.

In tears, Mir Baghir Agha exits with Hajji Hasan. The sound of music and singing is heard. Iskender reflects. Nazli appears and stands at the door, silent for some time.

Nazli Brother, let me come and kiss you on the cheek. (*She steps forward. Iskender quickly steps back, stands aside and looks at Nazli quietly.*) Brother, for Allah's sake, don't be upset with me!

Iskender If you don't want me to be upset with you then stay where you are and don't move. (*After looking at Nazli for a while, he puts his hand into his pocket, takes out a bottle of vodka and goes to drink it. Nazli tries to stop him. Very loudly and angrily*) Get away! (*He pushes Nazli so hard that the girl falls on her back. Iskender starts drinking the vodka. Nazli gets up, crying, and moves towards the door.*) Ugh! (*Screws up his face*) Stop, stop! I want to tell you something. (*Drinks again from the bottle and puts it into his pocket. The sound of a musician playing a saz and singing is heard. At this, Iskender begins to sing quietly. The musician plays a dance melody and Iskender begins to dance; then he stops.*) Nazli, for my sake come here; come here, let's make up. Now say whatever you want to say. Now I'm your servant, your slave. Come, let's make up. (*Embraces Nazli.*)

(*Mashadi Oruj enters, breathless, a telegraph letter in his hand.*)

Mashadi Oruj (*loudly*) Where is uncle Hajji?

Mashadi Oruj's mother enters crying. Nazli disappears. Hajji Bakhshali, Hajji Karim, Hajji Kazim, Mir Baghir Agha, Heydar Agha and many of the men we have already seen enter, groaning. Many can't find space inside and stand at the door. People look at each other, groaning, and don't know what to do. Hajji Hasan enters very surprised.

Hajji Hasan (*astonished*) People, is everything alright? What's going on, what is it?

Mashadi Oruj (*crying*) Hajji, Karbalayi Fatullah hasn't been revived.

(*Iskender laughs loudly and disappears into the crowd.*)

Hajji Hasan (*to Mashadi Oruj*) What? What do you mean he hasn't been revived?

Many People (*in unison*) Yes, yes, he hasn't been revived.

Hajji Hasan: People, don't say that, for Allah's sake. It cannot and will not be.

Mashadi Oruj: Uncle Hajji, by Allah it is so. And here's the telegraph, here. Read it and see what it says. (*Dries his tears with his gown*

and holds out the paper to Hajji Hasan) Uncle Hajji, didn't a letter come from Karbalayi Fatullah as if he were returning here after the Sheikh had resurrected him? And so, as you know, I telegraphed to Khorasan to find out why Karbalayi Fatullah had been delayed. I sent a telegraph to Hajji Muhammadali. If my brother had been revived he wouldn't go anywhere else but to Hajji Muhammadali's. Now Hajji Muhammadali writes, saying: "You've gone insane. How can anyone go from death to life?"

Hajji Hasan (*taking the telegraph*) What?

(*Iskender laughs loudly from the crowd.*)

Hajji Hasan (*to Heydar Agha*) Heydar Agha, may Allah bring rest to your father's soul, please explain to us: what kind of telegraph is this? I still can't understand how all the things we saw with our own eyes have turned out to be lies. Thank Allah, we're not children, we're not insane. Thank Allah that all these people here have observed the miracles performed by his eminence the Sheikh. Perhaps there is a mistake or something in the telegraph?

(*All speak to one another: "By Allah, this can't be," "No, it isn't so." "By Allah, I cannot understand."*)

Heydar Agha Hajji Hasan Agha I've read the telegraph carefully. There is no mistake in it. I recommend that you tell the Sheikh about this. Let's see what he says—who could have sent this wire and who could set up such a lie?

All as one Yes, yes, that's good advice; we should tell the Sheikh himself.

(*Everyone calms down.*)

Hajji Hasan By Allah, to tell the truth, it's shameful to say such things to the Sheikh. To tell the truth, I'm embarrassed. Look people, by Allah, this can't be. Something strange is going on here. So, by Allah I'm ashamed. I cannot deliver such news to the Sheikh.

Hajji Bakhshali (*to Hajji Karim*) Hajji Karim Agha, you'll do it better; you speak to the Sheikh.

Hajji Karim No, no, I can't do that! (*to Hajji Kazim*) Hajji Kazim Agha, you'll do it better.

Hajji Kazim To tell the truth, I am afraid of his eminence the Sheikh. Don't you see how angry he gets? He screams so loud the whole house shakes.

Mir Baghir Agha (*stepping forward*) Look people, I don't know what is so difficult about this? Sheikh Nasrullah isn't going to eat you! If you

wish, I can go right now and tell him whatever you want. (*Approaches the Sheikh's door.*)

All Very good! Very good! May Allah bring rest to your father's soul!

Hajji Hasan (*moves in front of Mir Baghir Agha*) Agha, for Allah's sake, be a little careful. Whatever you say, say it quite politely so that we don't offend the poor Sheikh.

Mir Baghir Agha knocks on the Sheikh's door. Everyone moves aside, scared. Many people leave the room. Mir Baghir Agha knocks on the door again.

Mir Baghir Agha Your eminence the Sheikh!

Hajji Hasan (*from aside, scared*) Mir Baghir Agha, let's cast lots first.⁸⁸ Perhaps we shouldn't bother the Sheikh at all?

Mir Baghir Agha doesn't listen and knocks even harder on the door. Everyone goes silent, astonished. Iskender suddenly emerges from the crowd and kicks the door forcefully. The door opens, people run out scared and the curtain to the Sheikh's room, which is facing the audience, begins to rise.

Scene 2

There is no one to be seen in the Sheikh's room. Iskender enters the room, looks around surprised, and then approaches a curtain hanging in the corner. As he raises the edge of the curtain, four girls behind the curtain begin to cry.

Iskender (*to girls*) Where is the Sheikh? (*They continue crying, do not answer. Iskender looks around for the Sheikh, then turns back to the girls behind the curtain.*) So where did our guests go?

A Girl (*from behind the curtain*) They gathered their things in the night and said: "we're going to the bathhouse."

Iskender says nothing, drops the curtain, bows his head and ponders for a few moments. People rush in noisily from outside. Then three very angry men, dressed as travelers, armed and covered in dust and dirt, enter the front room.

Travelers (*loudly*) Where are those dead-men-revivers? (*The travelers and their followers enter the Sheikh's room.*)

⁸⁸ The original word is *Isikhareh*, which is a folk custom of telling fortunes by opening the Qur'an or using a rosary, *tasbeeh*, to predict whether an activity will bring good results.

Travelers (*to Iskender*) Where are they? Where is Sheikh Nasrullah?

Iskender They have run away.

Travelers (*loudly*) How? Where? (*The room is in uproar. The girls behind the curtain start crying.*)

Traveler 1 Where did they run to?

Traveler 2 How did they escape?

Traveler 3 When did they flee?

Travelers (*Travelers approach and ask the girls behind the curtain*) My child, why are you crying? Don't be afraid, child! (*People become agitated.*)

Traveler 1 My Muslim brothers! Please, calm down. Listen to a few words we have to say, and then you can help us, too. We're from Irevan province, and as we now understand, whatever trouble the Isfahani swindlers brought us, they have done the same to you. So, these bastards, feigning righteousness, came and stayed in our town for four days and by a thousand tricks they married one girl every night, left them all with the obligations of marriage⁸⁹ and then ran away. For Allah's sake, show us where they went; let's arrest and punish them.

(*The girls behind the curtain begin crying again. Several men lead the travelers out. Most of the people run after them yelling.*)

Various People Don't stand around, hurry! Let's run to the Julfa road! Karbalayi Hasan! Mashadi Jafar! Ali! Hasangulu! Mount your horses, hurry; let's find those rogues! (*Most of the people and the travelers run out.*)

Iskender (*stands in the middle of the Sheikh's room repeating to himself the Travelers' words*) Married one girl every night and then ran away! Ha... Ha... Ha!... (*He roars with laughter, then calms down, and turns towards the girls. After a few moments' thought, calls the rest of the people in, one-by-one, from the outer room. To the people*) Come in, come here! Come, come! Come closer!? Come, come in. You come too! Hajji Kazim, you as well, please come in. Everyone come in! For my sake come in, all of you! Here! Come, come! You come in too! And you too. Come, come. (*He assembles everyone in the Sheikh's room.*) So, now it's my turn. Listen to me; let me tell you a few things too. (*People draw in together and remain quiet.*) Hush!

⁸⁹ According to Muslim law, divorce (even in the case of a temporary marriage) is to be granted by the husband, unless he dies.

He goes over to the curtain, pulls it down and throws it aside. People lower their heads in shame. The girls, also ashamed, cover their faces with their hands and start crying. Iskender turns to the people.

Iskender's Speech

Look! Look! Take a good look! Look carefully! This is a page entered in blood into the annals of your history. When leafing through these annals, those who come after you will read this page, they'll remember you and (*loudly*) "tfu!" in your faces!

(He spits on the people. All bow their heads and remain silent.)

Sorry, the drunkard Iskender is behaving a little indecently. But it's my turn now. I'm not asking why you forced these kids (*points to the girls*) into this whorehouse. Clearly, when you told them that you were going to give them to this Sheikh, these poor souls must have yelled and cried and kissed your dirty feet, begging: "Father, for Allah's sake, don't take me away from my mother!" (*Looks at the girls*) Is it true? Am I right?

(Girls bow their heads, crying.)

No, let's not think about that. Besides, while dragging your daughters here you imagined that you were taking them to paradise because the Sheikhs of Isfahan convinced you that everyone who stepped into this blessed room, from death until Judgment Day, would be talking to angels through a window in the grave. But what happened when the matter of resurrection came up, and Sheikh Nasrullah gave you the choice of which of your dead to return to life? You angel seekers didn't agree to revive your dead brothers, sisters, wives or children. Why didn't you agree? It was because you beat all of your wives to death, or married wives of your late brothers, or embezzled the fortunes of your late friends' children. You didn't want them to be revived because they would come and see what you've done and "tfu!" in your face! (*Spits vehemently. All bow their heads.*)

Don't think that by telling you these things I mean to deride you and praise myself. No, no! I know that I am nothing. I'm the weed on the wasteland, the dirt on the street, the stone on the mountain, the ball of tumbleweed, the worm on the trees. I am nothing in this world. If I were something, I would have taken a bomb out of my pocket (*takes a bottle of vodka out of his pocket*), blown this house sky-high in a second, and buried the Isfahani scoundrel alive under the bricks. But don't be afraid, I wouldn't do such a thing. It's just a bottle of vodka and while Sheikh Nasrullah suffocated these little children here at night I was drinking vodka from this bottle too.

(The girls start crying.)

No, no, that's not something I can do. Only a hero can do that. People like you deserve a hero like me. But enough about me. Now let's see: Who are you? My name is Drunkard Iskender, and what should we call you? I will call the mountains, stones, birds, heavens, moons, stars and the whole world here to witness, and I'll show them these girls and ask them: What can we call these people? Then they will answer in unison: "The Dead!" I'll gather all the nations here and ask them to look at Sheikh Nasrullah's harem, and then all the tribes of the world will call to you in unison: "The Dead!" And those who come after us will speak in unison for years and years, every time they recall you: "The Dead"...

(Music.)

That's enough. Come, take your daughters to their mothers. *(takes one girl by the hand)* Whose daughter is this?

(A man steps forward.)

She's your daughter? Come and take her.

(The man takes his daughter's hand. Iskender takes another girl by the hand.)

Whose daughter is this?

Again one man steps forward, takes his daughter by the hand and takes her away. In the same manner Iskender sends off the third and fourth girls. The girls lower their heads and walk out, crying quietly to the sound of music. People stand depressed, with their heads bowed. When the last girl has left, Iskender drinks from the bottle of vodka and slams the empty bottle to the ground. The curtain falls slowly while music plays.

End

June 12, 1909. Tiflis.⁹⁰

NOTES ON SOURCES AND SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

1. Pre-revolutionary Written Literature: For more on Russian and Russophone literature in the Caucasus at this time, see Caffee (2013), Hokanson (2008), Layton (2005), and Ram (2003). For more on Jadids and their activity, see Khalid (1998) and Rorlich (1986).

⁹⁰ The former name of Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia.

2. For Abdulqadir “Bedil” of Delhi, “Don’t strain yourself, holding out,” the translator worked from the version of the text found in ‘Abd al-Qādir Bīdil Dihlavī (1341a). For Khalifa Ashur Muhammad “Yakdil” of Bukhara, “Despair, don’t plant the seed,” the translator worked from the version of the text found in Yakdil (1926). For Abdulqadir “Bedil” of Delhi, “What color were the roses,” the translator worked from the version of the text found in ‘Abd al-Qādir Bīdil Dihlavī (1341b). For Sadriddin Ayni, “My tulip field,” the translator worked from the version of the text found in Aīnī (1981). The translator would like to thank Iraj Ayni for granting permission to publish this translation.
3. Sultan Kazy-Girei’s “The Valley of Azhitugai” was located in and translated from the original found in “Dolina Azhitugai,” *Sovremennik* 1 (1836): 155–169. For more on the Russian conquest of the Caucasus, see Shenfield (1999, 149–62).
4. Dilshod Barno’s “History of the Refugees” exists in the form of marginalia on the manuscript of her poetry. The manuscript, which the translator has seen but did not have access to for the translation, is incomplete and at points illegible. That is reflected in the 1972 published transliteration of her work which was used for the translation. See Dilshod (1972). The translator has indicated unrenderable portions by enclosing ellipses in brackets or indicating his best guess as to a missing or illegible word in brackets. Additionally, we should note that readers familiar with more elevated forms of Eastern Turkic, especially Chaghatay, whether in the classical style of Nava’i or in the courtly style associated with the Khanate of Khiva in Dilshod’s time, may be appalled by her diction. However, every writer has their idiolect, and the translator has sought not only to render Dilshod’s meaning accurately but also to respect her grammatical and lexical idiosyncrasies. They are, after all, *her* memories, warts and all.
5. Anbar Otin wrote her *divan*, in which “[To Muqimiy]” is found, in 1905. She dates her *Treatise on the Philosophy of Blackness* to 1910. The two translations are based on Fatima Husainova’s transliteration of her *divan* and the *Treatise* from the original Arabic script into Cyrillic, which were published together in a single volume in 1970. See Anbar Otin (1970). Anbar Otin’s extant *divan* of poems and her prose are held at the Literary Museum of Khoqand, Uzbekistan.

6. Mugallym Muhammet Atabay oğlu, “The Intelligence of Turkmen Women,” was located in and translated from the original (Atabay oğlu 1915). Mät Gurban Oğlu, “Turkmen Girl-Selling Circles,” was located in and translated from the original (Gurban Oğlu 1915).
7. For Khislat, “Study, you beautiful child, the time has treated you well...,” the translator worked from the version of this ghazal found in Khislat (1971, 83). The collection does not indicate whether the poem was published previously or only found in manuscript form. Khislat, “I, dear friends, have known the loss of a child...” According to the poem’s chronogram, Khislat composed it in 1330 AH or 1911 CE. The translator used a reprinted collection of Khislat’s poetry for the translation (2009, 112–13). The apparatus and commentary found in the reprinted collection do not indicate whether the poem was published or only found in manuscript form.
8. Abdurauf Fitrat, “Notes of an Indian Traveler,” was first self-published in 1912 in Istanbul. The text was distributed in Bukhara and Turkestan soon after. A.N. Kondrat’ev translated the text into Russian and published it in Samarqand in 1913. The translator was unable to locate these two copies of the text and instead used the glasnost-era transliterated republication of the Persian text found in the Tajik journal *Sadayi Sharq* (Fitrat 1988). The editors also referenced Hasan Qudratullaev’s 1991 translation into Uzbek, which has been republished without crediting the translator in various post-Soviet volumes of Fitrat’s collected works (Fitrat 2022a). The translator would like to thank Sevargul Karamatullakhodjaeva for granting permission to publish this translation.
9. Mirza Jalil Memmedguluzade wrote *The Dead* between 1907 and 1909, but only managed to stage it in 1916. Five manuscript copies of the play are held in the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences Manuscript Institute. The play was first published in 1925. The translators did not have access to the manuscripts or that first publication. They used a 2004 collected works publication of the play (Memmedguluzade 2004). For a longer reading of the play in the context of Memmedguluzade and Gogol’s work, see Feldman (2018, 39–79). For more on the importance of the folk figure in Sufi teachings, see Shah (1990; 1993). This translation was originally prepared for publication in the anthology *Five Iconic Azerbaijani Plays*. The editors would like to thank Nijat Ibrahimov and TEAS Press for permission to republish this translation.

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