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My Summer Vacation in Afghanistan

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Retrieved on 7th October 2021 from www.fifthestate.org
Published in *Fifth Estate* #357, Summer 2002.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

First time in Afghanistan, late winter 1968/9, making the Overland Trail fast as possible through howling cold of Central Asian steppes. Minibus from Mashhad to Herat, arriving at the border crossing: dark, dusty, cold and bleak. (Later, I was to discover that somehow Afghan border-crossings were always dark dusty cold bleak, even on nice summer days.) Bus-load of hippies pulls up at the checkpoint. Suddenly a huge Afghan officer with bristling mustaches and fierce scowl thrusts himself into the bus: “Any you got hashish?!” he screamed.

Chorus of “No,” “No,” “Not me,” “Not me, Sir”—squeaky and scared. What the hell?!

“Ssssooo...” hissed the officer, reaching menacingly into his jacket...”You like to buy?” he whipped out a chunk of hash the size of a loaf of Wonder Bread. “Very good, grade-A Afghani.”

I don’t know exactly when the Overland Route to India really opened. I presume not till after WW II, maybe not really till the early ’60s. It lasted till 1976 when the Communists took over in Afghanistan and effectively closed the borders. Then, in 1978, with the Iranian Revolution and the Russian invasion

of Afghanistan, the Route was sealed, perhaps forever. Like the Silk Route (which really functioned only during the Han and T'ang Dynasties and under the Mongols, and even then only sporadically), the Overland Route represented a unique falling-together of political and economic forces for peaceful trade against fissiparous war and banditry. A rare "window of opportunity" for Marco Polo—or for me. We hippies, ignorant of history, never realized our once-in-a-millennium stroke of luck. We were...just there, man; just passing through.

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A few vivid memories from that first dash across Afghanistan: changing money at the National Bank in Herat: mud floor with chickens pecking in the dirt. An Afghan soldier-bank guard asleep leaning on his rifle, barrel down in the mud; the frigid austere 5 cents per night hotel; a horde of Kuchi nomads on the move along the Herat-Kandahar highway: thousands of them, scores of black tents, hundreds of camels and donkeys. People with pale blue and green eyes, some of the kids blond.

(Note: I recently read that the Kuchis are Pathans but they don't really look it. They may have a client relationship with a Pathan tribe without actually being related to them. I'd guess the nomads are "pure" Indo-Aryan remnants, like the Kaffirs or the Dards. But I've never found any ethnography on the Kuchis.)

In the public park in Kabul, some old men in turbans and traditional gear praying, sipping tea, smoking hookas. It occurs to me for the first time that in a society not devoted to constant "progress" and change, old people have a different meaning. They're not obsolete human junk, they're repositories of accumulated experience, maybe even "wisdom." I watch the graybeards being elaborately polite to each other, like a ritual. I'd always assumed that "good manners" equals hypocritical bullshit, unworthy of an individualist and conscious rebel.

But suddenly I begin to suspect that there might be something beautiful about manners, like an art form.

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The Kuchi women (like most nomads) were not veiled, and in Kabul one could see modernized Afghan women without veils, but all other women over twelve wore burqas, total sacks, the most extreme purdah in the world. I never met any Afghan women. Most Western women, especially hippies, were so shocked by the burqa they never even attempted to penetrate this secret world. I only know about it through books, especially those of my old friends Chuck and Cherry Lindholm (anthropologists from Harvard)—Cherry covered Pathan women while Chuck dealt with the men. The novelist Doris Lessing (who followed Afghan Sufi guru Idries Shah) visited Peshawar during the Russian period, interviewed Afghan women refugees, and wrote a good but small book on the subject.

(Note: Idries Shah wrote a weird novel, *Kara Kush*, a fantasy of Sufi resistance against the Russians, badly written but worth reading.)

One thing I learned by talking to men, however, was that many of them could not afford to marry, since Afghan custom requires the groom's family to pay a bride price, which at that time could run to hundreds or even thousands of dollars. The burqa therefore cannot be seen simply as a symbol of oppression of women (though it is that) but also as a symbol of the value of daughters.

Societies without dowry customs may paradoxically seem to allow women more "freedom" because they value them less than societies with bride-price customs. In any case, sexual tension is high in Afghan society. It's not surprising that the Taliban came to power on an anti-rape platform (at least according to their own propaganda). Also, the notion that Moslems "hate women" because they veil them must be weighed against the conscious beliefs of most Moslem men:

i.e., that they value women far more than—say—Hollywood America, where women are used to sell products through fleshly exposure. Given sexual relations in Afghanistan, the burqa can be seen as a form of freedom from harassment and exploitation. I'm not saying this is my opinion. I'm just trying to explain the attitude of the average Afghan.

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After a couple years in India I was expelled for overstaying my visa and headed back to Afghanistan. Again it was winter, I was stuck in Kabul waiting for a money-order to arrive, penniless, in another frigid hotel, holed up with a German hippy who was shooting raw opium four or five times a day. At one point, I had to visit the U.S. Embassy about some problem, perhaps a visa extension. The vice-consul I met was a young guy from the Midwest, not much older than me. This was his first posting abroad. As I seemed friendly he kind of opened up, expressing amazement at my foolhardiness in wandering alone around Afghanistan. He admitted he himself was terrified. With a shaking finger he pointed at the window, "There...there's no law out there!" he quavered. I kept a straight face, but secretly I was quite pleased.

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I got in so much trouble overstaying visas that when I finally left the country; an official wrote a huge essay (in Pashtu) in my passport, which had two 12-page accordion fold-out additions full of highly dubious seals and stamps. (I was especially fond of a page of tax-stamps from the Libyan monarchy.) An Afghan friend translated the essay for me later. Basically it I.D.'d me as a penniless, drug-addled hippy and suggested strongly that I never be allowed back into the country. Later, however, this passport was stolen—by the Visa Office in Islamabad, Pakistan—and presumably sold on the black market for \$2,000 (so one lone friendly official told me in secret). When I described what had happened to the U.S. Consul there in Islamabad he screamed, "What, again?!" So, anyway, I got a new

Jami's never seen wine nor cup yet he's drunk on
your love:

This is the banquet of love. What room for cup or
wine?

(adapted from E.G. Browne's version in *A Literary
History of Persia*)

Maybe it's true that we hippies were merely casting our "gaze" on such treasures. But although the treasures are imaginal they're real enough. And unlike other "resources," the more such treasures are taken the more they are given. "Appropriation" renews the source rather than depletes it. When the treasures are withheld or refused, they die. Perhaps now they exist only in the form of a terrible nostalgia—a nostalgia so severe it could be called tragic. It's no wonder that some Afghan people look back on the 60s and 70s as a kind of Golden Age. They've even brought back old Zahir Shah out of mothballs in Rome, like a lucky talisman lost for thirty years, even propping him up again in Kabul. Probably a big mistake. Hell, nowadays you can't step in the same river even once.

But the romantic impulse seems irresistible. Who wouldn't regret the peace and prosperity, or the now-long-lost pleasures of rebabs in the teahouse or kite flying in the Spring? To have been there then is to be overwhelmed with regret. I offer no defense based on theory or ideology. You can despise me for it, but you can't argue me out of it. And you—you've seen all those images in *The New York Times* and on TV. You can't tear your gaze away, can you? What does it look like to you? Like the last real place in the world?

(November-December, 2001)

passport and could now safely go back to Afghanistan; and I did, many times.

Around October 1971, the owner of my hotel in Kandahar invited me to spend the evening smoking opium. When night fell cold clear and moonlit, we left town in a horse-drawn gari for the *teriak-khaneh*, the *o-den*, quite a drive over the desert to a huge old mudbrick, multi-domed caravanserai. There was no electricity, but moon and stars illuminated the scene. A caravan had come in earlier and settled down for the night. Literally about 100 camels in the courtyard of the caravanserai plumped on the dirt with their legs tucked under them, each one glowing in the moonlight like a teapot the size of a Cadillac: big double-humped "Bactrian" camels.

Later that winter I suffered on through to Bactria itself, to Mazar-i Sharif, over mountain passes in a blizzard in an unheated bus. Sometime in the middle of the night and howling snowstorm the bus stopped—to let a camel caravan cross the highway. Shivering and amazed I counted about 25 big Bactrians, humps frosted with snow, and heard for the first time the clanking of caravan bells, a sound used as a cliché in Persian poetry to signify "departure" with all its sadness and anticipation. The caravaneers muffled in padded sheepskins and turbans of snow yanked the undulating giants by ropes through their noses, exhorting and cursing as the beasts honked and groaned. Then they disappeared into the storm heading north for the Soviet border.

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Later, I managed to get to Balkh, the ancient capital of Bactria. The old city walls with watchtowers are still crumbling under the blows they received 700 years ago from the Mongols. We drove through a vast gate into a city that wasn't there, then kept on driving. On the inside of the wall was the same desert as on the outside. I think it was sixteen kilometers, all inside the wall, before we reached the center and the shattered remains of Balkh: a ruined mausoleum (the dome collapsed)

still flowery with patches of Timurid tile: the tomb of a Sufi shaykh in the line of Ibn 'Arabi. In a circle around the tomb, a dozen or so teahouses were huddled together—nothing else, not even trees—just Central Asian desert and patches of snow. The great “Mother of Cities,” birthplace of Jalaloddin Rumi, already a metropolis when Alexander conquered it: nothing now but a flattened waste and the Ozymandian stump of a cenotaph.

There's an old Sufi legend about Gengis Khan (said to be part of *The Secret History of the Mongols*, but I could never find it in any translation): he's just fourteen and hiding out alone in the desert from his enemies; he goes to sleep in a cave and dreams of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara who gives him a gold ring and tells him that his mission is to go forth and destroy civilization, to erase the blight of cities from the world. When he wakes, the ring is still on his finger. As far as Balkh is concerned, Gengis Khan did his duty, or one of his descendants did it for him, I forget which.

Only one thing kept Balkh alive in 1971: hashish. The chaikhanehs there were set up to host a charas bazaar, and the famous north Afghani green-gold enticed gourmet connoisseurs from all over the universe. I wasn't there to buy bulk, however, just a few “candy canes” of the Number One, so I drank sweet green tea with cardamon and sat around sampling the product with the extremely genial host.

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The “dialect” of Persian spoken in Balkh and northeastern Afghanistan is called Dari; but in fact it's not a dialect, but purer and more archaic than Iranian Persian (Farsi), rather like the Elizabethan English spoken by country people in remote parts of eastern America. Once in Tehran I met a professor of Persian linguistics from the University and he told me about his recent vacation in Balkh. “I was sitting in one of the chaikhanehs, you know, the ones where they sell charas, chatting with the proprietor, an extremely nice man and polite to a fault. Suddenly, I burst into tears.

(when he asked the Mahatma, “What do you think of British Civilization?”), “Yes, it would have been a good idea.”

On the one hand: true. On the other hand...

It seems to me that there exists something I'd like to call an oriental Romanticism of the Orient. After all, the very idea of the romance came to us from the Islamic East. Emerson and Goethe sometimes seemed to think that Romanticism had been invented by the Persian poet Hafez of Shiraz. Chivalric love is probably an Islamic trope. This ill-defined oriental Romanticism doesn't situate itself dialectically in relation to the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, but to the “worldly” world in general, in an a-historical and existentialist manner. Love, the beloved, the saki and wine shop, music, dance, the rose garden and nightingale—all these exist both as sensual reality and as an “other world” of imagination and intoxication. One illustration: a poem by 'Abd alRahman Jami of Herat:

Edge of the garden, brink of the stream, lip of the
goblet:

Saki, get up! Here abstinence is crime

If the old monk of the cloister is drunk on music's
delight

I'll take the tavern—where this state endures for-
ever

You touch cup's lip to your lip and I the drunkard
can't tell which is wine's ruby and which is yours

I'm not the only heart snared in your dark tresses:
wherever hearts are birds they're caught in your
net

You draw the sword to slice my heart in two
—don't bother. One glance will do it

Don't discuss love's problems with the rationalists
and don't tell secrets: this is a public assembly

the Khwajeh's own guts will be kebabs.
 He does not go purified by purity,
 nor in the way of fidelity,
 he does not go in God-intoxication
 but stone-blind drunk on lies...
 The Khwajeh: how many fine robes tailored,
 how many turbans fitted –
 And now, undressed by God,
 a naked nobody.
 Every exile returns home at last,
 East to East, West to West;
 he who was born of devil's fire returns to fire,
 he who was born of light to light.
 Spawn of the imp,
 he spread out the fingers of cruelty;
 do you think it likely he'll be
 rewarded with 78 houris?
 The witty and nimble
 are seated at God's dining table –
 but he, unsalted, unripe,
 is headed for the pits.

(adapted from the version by W.C. Chittick and
 myself, in *Sacred Drift*)

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I must confess that I've never been able to overcome my Romanticism vis-a-vis Afghanistan or the "Orient" in general. At times I thought perhaps I should try. The "Subaltern Studies" critics of post-colonialism condemn all orientalism as "appropriation." I remember a Native American poet who summed it up thus: "First you took our land, then our languages, now you want our 'spirituality' !" It's easy to see that there can exist such a thing as too much translation. Why don't we pale-faces get a culture of our own? As Ghandi told Mountbatten

He was very upset. 'Was it something I said, dear sir?'
 "Yes,' I sobbed, 'something you said.'
 "Ah, honorable Presence, how have I offended thee?"
 "No, no! you didn't offend me. It was your use of the subjunctive! So beautiful! Like visiting the 15th century!"

Two border towns in Pakistan—Quetta and Peshawar—have been mentioned in the news lately as refugee centers. Peshawar is mostly a Pathan city; Quetta has Pathans but also Baluchis, Brahuis (a mysterious people speaking a Dravidian language), and sprinklings of Hazaras, Turks, Persians, Punjabis, etc.—very cosmopolitan, a smuggler's paradise. One special feature of Quetta were the saki-khanehs or teahouses, where hash was served in huge hubblebubbles. I spent months in one that was frequented by ne'er-do-well Brahui "princes" and presided over by a witty disreputable Sayyid (descendant of the Prophet); I divided my day between the saki-khaneh and the teriak-khaneh (opium den) run by a genial Uzbek called Khan Baba. Quetta food is famous: barbecued meats and rich milk sweets are the specialties. By comparison Afghanistan itself was not what we hippies called a "food trip." Even in Kabul restaurants the cuisine was that of poor shepherds: tough kebabs, greasy pilaw, flat bread, and tea (either black or green, always toothachingly sweet).

Of course, given the crisp weather and the hash, one was always hungry and appreciative of even small treats such as yoghurt or leek dumplings. One recipe I recall fondly: mutton meatballs fried in mutton fat with tomatoes and onions; add eggs to make an omelette swimming in grease; mop up with flat bread. Afghan bread though simple is real staff-of-life stuff. I'm certain bread in the Neolithic tasted just like that, bursting with wheat flavor and slightly smoky from the wood fired clay ovens.

Peshawar always reminded me of Dodge City or maybe Tombstone. A tough border town at the foot of the Kyber Pass, capital of "Pushtunistan" (the idle dream of Pathan

nationalists), where the Great Game still seemed to go on as if Kipling had never died. The Peshawar bazaar is famous for its “break fast” delicacies during Ramadan, the month of fasting (and feasting). I recall for instance spiced larks in brochette. I learned to appreciate the Pathans here as extreme examples of the Mountain Warrior ethos, like the Kurds: the best friends and the worst enemies in the world. (Tibetans are really mountain warriors, but Buddhists, like the ancient Afghans.) Like the old Scottish clansmen, all Pathans are “noble” even when dirt poor, and they act like noblemen: proud, self-assured, unconquered.

I know I’m guilty of stereotyping here, but the types seem very real when you’re sojourning amongst them. And the Pathans, unlike say the Scots or Tibetans, are still actively engaged in war, Hatfield/McCoy blood feuds in the 1970s, real full-scale war in the 80s and 90s, etc. In the Khyber Pass, the tribes ruled openly and in total disregard of all government. Up there, gunsmiths could copy any small weapon in world history from a flintlock (still very popular because you can make your own bullets) to an Uzi or AK-47, complete with serial numbers. Wild-looking longhaired types with crossed bandoliers and rifles. Shops full of smuggled electronic goods and gaudy jewelry. The term “tribal anarchy” has been used to describe this situation. In effect, no central government has ever controlled the tribal hinterlands of Pakistan and Afghanistan. The unit of freedom, to coin a phrase, is not the individual, but the coherent group: family, clan, tribe. The successful military forces of Central Asia are always tribal confederations, usually with a charismatic khan (like Gengis) to unite them. When the leader dies, the confederation usually breaks up and returns to “tribal anarchy.”

In the ’70s, people said the king—Zahir Shah—controlled Kabul and the other major cities and highways but the tribes controlled everything else. (Note: two stories I heard about the king: When I asked someone “Where are all the famous

Russians and by civil war. I never heard any Afghan, however pious, praise “fundamentalism” or mullah-inspired bigotry. No one had ever heard of this perversion of Islam, which then existed only in Saudi Arabia. Afghan Islam was very orthodox, but also very pro-sufi; essentially it was old-fashioned mainstream Islam. The idea of banning kite-flying would have probably caused hoots of incredulous laughter. It must have taken twenty years of vicious neo-imperialist ideological cultural murder and oppression to make Talibanism look like the least of all available evils.

Since American readers have not, generally speaking, been offered a very multi-dimensional view of Islam and Central Asian culture, I thought it might be useful and amusing to dip into Afghan literature to discover what the great poets of the past might have said about the Taliban. Jalaloddin Rumi lived and died in Turkey, but was born in Balkh (his family fled the Mongol invasion) and wrote in Persian. In this poem he describes the postmortem fate of a khwajah (pron. “khoja”) a professional Islamic “cleric” and puritanical killjoy:

What’s all this fanfare in the morning?
Ah! The khwajah’s going to the grave!
won’t be back till late, I suppose:
a rather distant caravanserai, Death.
Instead of fair beauties he’ll consort
with scorpions and snakes;
he’s come from the silken pavilion
and inherited the sepulchre.
No more free lunch—
his neck is firmly broken.
How steadfastly,
how patiently he makes his exit.
While he lived no one
had the guts to cross him;
but now, one imagines, where he’s going

an extremely sharp young Herati merchant whose shop was my hangout. Hajji was not a sufi but-like all good traditional Afghans—he revered them highly.

He told me that a cousin of his, a terribly worldly and sinful young man, had openly mocked Baba Qaltan’s “miraculous” tomb and announced his intention of making the pilgrimage and refusing to roll. So he did. He lay down and closed his eyes—and suddenly he was rolling, rolling around the courtyard in circles, out of control, around and around, faster and faster. His friends had to jump on his spinning body to stop it, drag it to a halt. Pebbles were embedded in his bleeding cheeks. “After that,” said Hajji, “he became a believer.”

I decided to try it. I followed the protocol exactly. The shrine attendant gave my shoulder a tiny nudge. I’ll roll a bit, I thought, so as not to disappoint him.

All at once I felt the world tip over at a 45 degree angle. This is not a metaphor. I couldn’t have stopped rolling if I’d tried. Nor could I open my eyes. Zoom! Finally, I rolled to a halt. “Masha’Allah! he’s facing Mecca!” Believe me, I’m not a very psychic person. This was one of the weirdest experiences I’ve ever had.

Hajji, by the way, like many Afghans, was a phenomenal speed-chess player. I used to sit in his shop and watch him annihilate one Westerner after another. Ten seconds between moves! Good Moslems don’t gamble, otherwise Hajji could have hustled professionally.

After Zahir Shah was ousted in 1973 by his cousin Da’ud, I was sitting in Hajji’s shop one day and asked him how people felt about the fall of the Monarchy and the proclamation of a republic. “We Afghans have an old saying,” he replied: “Black dog out, yellow dog in.”

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The fact that the Taliban succeeded in taking over Afghanistan has always seemed to me a certain sign that the Afghanistan I knew was completely smashed to hell by the

Afghan hounds? Why haven’t I seen any?” I was told that the king owned them all. Once in Herat, some dervishes gave me the best hashish I’ve ever smoked. One hit felt like 50 mic’s of LSD. They told me that this grade AAA first-pressing charas, the finest few kilograms of Halkh’s best, was reserved for a few special dervish shaykhs and the king! Even if neither of these tales is true they reveal something about the magic of archetypes.)

Of course, tribal anarchy is not anarchism. For one thing, Islam—which has always been anti-tribal—has deeply influenced the Afghans and modified their customs. But I can’t help thinking Bakunin might have admired the Pathans: the people armed, resisting all other powers. Even Marx and Engels sympathized with the Afghans, whom they felt had been betrayed by perfidious British foreign policy. The Afghans missed a lot of Imperialist/colonialist history. There’s something to be said for fierce independence.

My favorite city in Afghanistan—the one I kept going back to again and again—was Herat. I felt quite at home in its decayed Persian ambience, more Persian even than Iran with all its oil money and “West-intoxication.” The Timurid Mongols who ruled Herat in the 15th century loved Spring best of all its seasons, but I remember Herat in October when the sky was really a “turquoise dome,” the air crisp and clean—no factories for thousands of kilometres in all directions!—smelling only of pine trees and distant mountains. Or December with snow on the pines and mud domes, starry nights, the smell of woodfires, the sound of horses’ hooves. (Herat in the ’70s still had more horsedrawn garis or droshkys than automobiles.) The Timurids had left traces, ruined mosques, tombs, minarets, encrusted with the most beautiful and vivid of all Islamic tilework. (I believe most of this was destroyed by the Russians in the ’80s.) In the old city there was no electricity, a Luddite paradise, night alleyways black as blindness. I remember stumbling back to my hotel from the teriak-khaneh, a cozy den

under a dome in the old town. The owner, a sweet-tempered Hazara family man, had painted the ceiling of the dome with flowers, birds and pastoral scenes in Grandma Moses style, so that his customers would have something pleasant to enhance their nusha' or intoxication. In the Herat bazaar one might see hunting hawks for sale, or rainbow striped chapans like the wasp-waisted coats of courtiers in old miniatures. Herat teahouses had no tables or chairs but only wooden platforms called takhts (lit. "thrones") with carpets, sometimes outdoors under chinar trees or next to a little rivulet lined with water-cress. Sometimes, bards played rebabs, archaic instruments never seen nowadays in India or Iran, but mentioned often in medieval poetry.

Someone told me there were 500 sufi shrines in Herat. I only managed to visit a few of the major ones. I found those wandering dervishes who turned me on to the "royal" hashish in the tomb of the famous Timurid miniaturist Behzad, perched on a bare hillside outside the city with a view of the whole valley. Most sufis in Afghanistan belong to the Naqshbandi or the Qadiri orders, two of the biggest worldwide Sunni sufi turuq. Two of the mujaheddin militias during the Russian period consisted of these sufi orders armed and following their pirs (i.e., their gurus). The most famous saint of Herat was an 11th century sufi shaykh, 'Abdullah Ansari. I reached his tomb in Gazargah, a suburb of Herat, by horse carriage. The carginah or enclosure was rich and well-preserved, and the tombstone was amazing, a lacy cake of Koranic calligraphy carved in solid marble. Ansari's tomb enclosure was considered bast, a sanctuary for criminals. As with certain cathedral closes in medieval Europe, anyone—even a murderer—who takes refuge there is exempt from prosecution. We met a number of these fugitives: ragged and hungry-looking to be sure, and stuck inside a tiny garden. But the garden had cypress trees and mountain views, and the men were free inside the garden, not too miserable. In fact, they looked rather happy. Ansari's post-mortem influ-

ence is warm and forgiving. (All active sufi shrines seem to take on the personality of the dead saint.)

In the agony suffered for you,
 The wounded find the scent of balm:
 The memory of you consoles the souls of lovers.
 Thousands in every corner, seeking a glimpse of
 you,
 Cry out like Moses, "Lord, show me yourself!"
 I see thousands of lovers lost in a desert of grief,
 Wandering aimlessly and saying hopefully,
 "O God! O God!"
 I see breasts scorched by the burning separation
 from you,
 I see eyes weeping in love's agony.
 Dancing down the lane of blame and censure,
 Your lovers cry out, "Poverty is my source of
 pride!"
 Pir-i Ansari has quaffed the wine of longing:
 Like Majnun he wanders drunk and perplexed
 Through the world.

—Kwaja Abdullah Ansari, *Intimate Conversations*
 Trans. by Wheeler M. Thackston (Paulist Press,
 N.Y., 1978)

In my book, *Scandal*, I've described a number of shrines in Herat, but I can't resist retelling the story of Baba Qaltan. This sufi came to pay a visit to Jami, the great 15th century poet of Herat, by rolling on the ground—hence his name which means Papa Roller. An Islamic Holy Roller. At his tomb there's an open courtyard empty and covered with small pebbles. The pilgrim lies down with his head on a broken bit of gravestone, closes his eyes and recites a prayer. Then—according to my informant—he rolls. If he's a "good Moslem" he ends up coming to a halt facing Mecca. My informant was "Hajji,"