

NAIYER MASUD

## Sultan Muzaffar's Imperial Chronicler

At least, not in this continuum ...

—H. Beam Piper

*Didīm, tapīdīm, nah didīm, tapīdīm*

We saw, we were in agony; we did not see, we were in agony

—Iqbāl

### I

NOW THAT Sultan Muzaffar's tomb has become so famous in his own lifetime that people come from far away to see it, I have been ordered to write an account of how it was built. This order puts an end to my days of staying at home.

I found out from the Sultan himself that his tomb had been built. And when the Sultan told me that his tomb had not been constructed in the valley where his ancestors were buried, I understood that the tomb was in the desert because I had been the chronicler of his desert campaign. And when he told me that the mausoleum was unique I understood that this building would be roofless, also because I was the chronicler of his desert campaign. That was my last chronicle. After that began a time of staying at home.

I have forgotten many things about this time, but I remember my first day of staying at home so well that I can write an account of it like an authoritative chronicler.

On my morning walk that day, I saw many small plants lying at the edge of the valley of the tombs. These had perhaps been uprooted from the ground only a short while ago. They were shoots of the big umbrella-shaped trees which surrounded the valley in rows. I did not

know the name of these trees, but sometimes I had rested beneath them. Their trunks were whitish and their branches grew dense, and one felt sleepy in their shade. I looked attentively at the shoots which lay on the ground. Two of them still had their roots intact. I picked them up carefully and put some of the wet earth from below the big trees around their roots, then began walking home. By the time I reached home I had decided where I would plant them in my garden. I did not stop on the way, although when I passed by the shore of a small lake I bent to take some water up in my hand and sprinkled the plants' leaves with it. I estimate that the Sultan's envoy must have started for my house at precisely that time.

I had finished planting the two shoots in my garden and was trying to plan shelter from the sun for them. The children of my house had encircled one of them. They tried to shade it with their toys and playthings in turns. They were so happy with this new game that they were fighting for their turns. I was sprinkling the other's leaves with water when the shadow of the Sultan's envoy fell across it. I saw the shadow first, then the envoy. The children left the plant and encircled the envoy, but after looking at his uniform carefully they got scared of him and ran away to hide in the house.

I also examined his uniform attentively, because aside from their uniforms imperial envoys do not bear a written or oral message. The purpose of their coming is apparent from the uniform they wear. This envoy's uniform meant that the Sultan demanded some service from me and I was to wait at home for his order. This envoy, or rather an envoy wearing this uniform, had frequently come to my house in the past. But when I saw him this time I was surprised, because it had only been a few days since the Sultan's desert campaign had ended, and I did not expect the Sultan to start on another venture which needed a chronicler so soon. But the Sultan's acting contrary to expectation was not a thing to be surprised at for very long. To me, therefore, the most remarkable thing about that day was that one of the two shoots I had planted was crushed underfoot by the imperial envoy. The other shoot was safe, however, and I could rest underneath it when it grew bigger.

I was resting underneath it when I saw a shadow moving and one of the Sultan's envoys came and stood before me. It is not difficult to recognize

imperial envoys, although their uniforms differ. I examined everything about this one's uniform from top to bottom many times, down to the last thread, and racked my brains. The envoy watched me silently during the examination, and his growing surprise was apparent in his eyes. Finally I was forced to speak to him.

"My vision isn't very good any more," I said to him.

"Obviously," he said, coming very close to me, "because even after seeing me you are still where you were."

And then I remembered.

"An imperial summons," I said, "immediately."

The envoy turned around swiftly. He tripped over a root of the tree which was sticking out, and perhaps he hurt himself. When he was going back he limped slightly. Perhaps that was why I preceded him on our way out of the house. When we had gone a little way I stopped and let him go on, then followed him after he had gained a few steps.

When I had received my orders from the Sultan, I returned via the bazaar road according to my old habit. After stopping at many small markets and observing the buying and selling there, I entered the main bazaar. The market was almost the same as it had been when I last saw it, although there seemed to be a larger crowd there now. The fixed places of the vendors had not changed either, so that my gaze first fell on the gardeners who sold flowers and plants, spreading them out on the ground in front of them. However, I could not see the old gardener from whom I always used to buy plants, sometimes without needing any at all. He used to sit among the others, but unlike them he would always arrange his wares so that there seemed to be a small garden in front of him. Like the others, he was employed in the imperial gardens, and sold the superfluous plants which interfered with the artistic arrangement of the Sultan's gardens and were therefore uprooted.

In this green and flourishing part of the market there was as yet only one customer apart from me. When the gardeners saw us, they began to call out the names of different flowers and plants. This was their usual practice, but the old gardener would remain silent on such occasions. Even now, among the crowd of noisy gardeners, I could see that one man sat silently. When I paused in front of him, he began silently to rearrange the plants he had set out. I sat down on the ground and casually picked up some plants to look at them, then asked, "There used to be an old man who sat here, with plants arranged around him."

He nodded his head in affirmation, and I saw that the other customer

had sat down near me and was picking at the petals of a large yellow flower. I glanced at the young gardener, searching for the likeness of that old man.

“Who was he to you?”

“My grandfather,” he said.

“Do you also work in the Sultan’s gardens?”

He nodded his head in affirmation once more.

“In your grandfather’s place?”

“In my father’s place,” he said.

I looked around at the entire market. And felt again that in spite of the crowd getting somewhat larger, there had been no great change in the bazaar, although the platform on my right where public shows took place appeared higher and its edges had worn away in places. The crowd on the platform was more numerous than in other parts of the market, but this had also been the case earlier. I turned my attention to the gardener once more.

“Don’t you have shoots for large trees?”

He picked out some plants and set them before me. I glanced at the plants superficially, turning them over in my hands. The other customer was still fussing with the yellow flower, and two of its petals now hung loose, but instead of looking at the flower he was looking at me.

“You are spoiling it,” I told him.

“I have bought this one,” he told the gardener, and pulled the flower plant out completely.

Even after that he continued to sit there. It occurred to me that perhaps he wished to stay with me for a reason. I gazed at him once, attentively, but his was not a face I recognized. I strained my memory and stared at him, but could not trace in him the likeness of any familiar person. Still he continued looking at me. Confused, I put my hands on my knees and began to get up, but then my glance fell on a small heap of green plants beside the gardener. I sat down. Then I got up again and came around to the gardener’s side. I picked up one plant and looked at it, then asked the gardener, “These don’t have roots?”

“These are not for planting.”

“Then?” the other customer asked.

“People take them away,” said the gardener, “to feed to them.” And he gestured towards the platform where the public shows were held.

The other customer now stood beside me. He bent down, picked up two or three of the plants and asked the gardener, “What’s so special about these?”

“The poison.”

And I understood which people were staging the shows on the platform. I asked the gardener, or perhaps I asked myself, “Have they started to come again?”

“Did they come here before?” he asked me.

They used to come here before. The desert was their home, and every year in the season of shows they would make a trip into the town. They would stage their show from the afternoon till the setting of the sun. When they were on the platform no one would look at the other troupes of performers, and sometimes fights would break out between them and the other performers which the spectators would have to stop.

And the marvel they staged was that they would eat anything and everything. The spectators would search far and wide, and bring them things which they thought no human, nor even any animal, could eat. But these desert-dwellers could eat everything, and in return would collect donations from the spectators. Sometimes people would look at their show and collapse laughing on the ground, sometimes they would be frightened and move back, and sometimes they would turn their faces away, disgusted. Some spectators would feel sick during the show, and their companions would take them away, but the crowd at the platform never lessened from the afternoon till the setting of the sun.

Many seasons before the Sultan’s desert campaign began, these people had stopped coming to the town. Even after the desert campaign ended, they did not come. I was certain that we would never see their show in the town again. But they were staging their show now, and the crowd on the platform of the main market was larger than ever. From this crowd two or three men jumped off the platform and, laughing and joking among themselves, came towards us.

“Give them to me,” said one of them to the gardener, extending his hand.

The other customer put the plants in his hand down on the ground, and the spectators gathered them up with the other plants.

After they had gone back, I fumed. I heard the voice of the gardener: “There is no remedy for their poison,” he said, “and they are not planted within the town.”

I moved on towards the platform where the shows were held.

There was still some time before sunset. When I came near the platform, I stopped. The other customer passed by me and climbed up on the platform. I saw him getting lost amid the crowd of spectators. But when I left the market and turned onto the desert road, he was walking behind me at a distance. I advanced silently until the boundary of the town came close to its end, and the margin of the desert could be seen in the distance. I stopped and sat down on a stone to rest. In a little while he was standing in front of me. I raised my head to look at him. He was also looking at me silently. Finally I asked him, "Do you recognize me?"

He sat down on a nearby stone and stretched slightly.

"Do you?" I asked again.

"Sultan Muzaffar's chronicler," he declared as if making a public announcement, "going to write an account of the making of the tomb whose construction he has never seen."

After that he became silent, as if he had never spoken.

The Sultan's servant, I thought, and asked him, "Have you been appointed to torture me?"

But he seemed to be struggling with some torment of his own. I felt a vague sense of sympathy for him.

"I have been appointed to observe you observing the tomb," he said.

"Only to observe?"

"And also, when you finish writing the chronicle of its building, to write its history."

I was surprised, because the man did not appear to be very old.

"You are the Sultan's official historian?" I asked. "What about the one before you?"

"There were many before me."

"The one who was there at the time of the desert campaign?"

"He had to die."

Precisely then a group of people coming from the desert passed by us. They appeared to be inhabitants of other towns. Then some more groups of people passed by. I saw no one going towards the desert. For some time there was complete silence around us, then the vendors who set up temporary shops along the roads could be seen coming towards us with rapid steps, carrying their wares with them. When they drew near us, one or two halted slightly, but seeing that we were not paying attention, they went on. Then I began to feel, sitting in my place, that now there was silence in the desert. At that point my companion stood up.

“It’s time,” he said, and advanced towards the desert.

I saw the sun beginning to set, and rose and started walking beside him. We walked silently along the paths and reached the edge of the desert. Far off, the outline of a building was visible. To reach it, a long straight road had been built. The road had been paved with small slabs of stone, and on both its sides two low walls with shelves, also of stone, had been erected. The road sloped so much on both sides that the sand that gathered on it was continually spilling out from the lower shelves of the boundary walls like water spilling from the town’s drains during the rains. We continued to traverse the road in silence. The tomb was not visible now and soon the road climbed higher and higher, until it ended at the steps of an elevated platform. We climbed the steps onto the platform. On the other side of the platform, a similar road descended into the desert. On that straight road, far off in the distance where its two boundary walls appeared to meet, the tomb stood obstructing the path. The road made it seem like the sharp point of a knife had cleaved straight through to the heart of the desert.

Then I grew tired. Gusts of desert wind increased my fatigue with their warmth, in which the cool of the approaching evening had begun to mingle, so I decided to rest on the platform for a while. The white stone floor of the platform was still warm, but I could sit on it. I sat down. From this distance the architecture of the tomb did not seem at all novel. The rays of the setting sun fell on its round serrated roof. I said, “Its roof ...”

“Doesn’t exist,” said my companion, “but can only be seen from a distance.”

“Shall we go near it and see?”

“No,” he said, “not until the custodian arrives.”

Waiting for the custodian, I had to sit on the stone floor a little longer. I had thought that he would come along the same road that we had traversed, but he appeared from around the tomb and approached us. Walking rapidly, he climbed up onto the platform, bowed before us perfunctorily, and slowly turned around and began to lead us on the road. The distance between the platform and the tomb was less than I had estimated. Soon we were standing in front of its gate. Once we arrived here, the custodian began to speak. He recounted every step from the measuring of the ground to the laying of the last stone slab as if he were showing me the tomb being built. Sometimes I even had the feeling that I was not listening to what he was saying, but reading what I myself had written.

After finishing his account the custodian advanced towards the platform, but I put a hand on his chest.

“You have told us everything,” I said, “but I want to see it as well.”

Then I entered through the doorway. On all sides I saw walls upon walls. Walls all around, high and low, intersected each other at angles and then drew far away from each other. The highest walls were at the very back. These had been erected in the shape of a semicircle, and were the walls which gave the illusion of a roof from a distance. Because of the proliferation of walls, and also because the sun was setting, it was somewhat dark inside the tomb and one could not feel the absence of a ceiling. The walls ranged far and wide, making a labyrinth whose center was impossible to locate. And when I wanted to go outside, I could not find the way. Perhaps this was why people came from great distances to see the tomb. I wandered through the labyrinth for a long time, until the custodian came to find me.

In a little while we were on the stone platform again. I spoke to the custodian:

“I have to find out something else.”

He seemed somewhat anxious.

“I have told you everything from the beginning to the end,” he said slowly.

“Did you see the tomb being built from beginning to end?” He remained silent.

“Were only the people of the town employed to construct it?” I asked.

“Eventually, the desert-dwellers were as well.”

“Who oversaw them?”

“I did.”

“Did they know they were building a mausoleum?”

“They knew. They were told before they started.”

“That they were building the Sultan’s mausoleum?”

He fell silent again and seemed even more upset.

“Who chose the place for the tomb?”

“The Sultan.”

“Where did the stone come from?”

“I have already told you. The mountain range on the far side of the valley of the tombs ...”

“It was brought from there, but for which building?”

“It has been used for the tomb.”

“The tomb is exactly where the fort for the desert campaign used to



be. Which stone was used for the fort?"

Somewhat astonished, he looked at me and said, "I have been ordered to tell you about the tomb. I have not seen the fort."

"The fort was demolished," I told him.

The custodian stood there silently. I looked at the road going towards the tomb, then at the road coming into the desert. Both roads were exactly the same; if the stone platform were not there, they would be one road.

"This platform ..." I asked, bending over the intricately carved white stone of the platform, "Why has this platform been built?"

"In order to rest," he replied.

"On it?"

"Obviously."

"What is underneath it?"

"Sand."

"Did the Sultan choose the place for this platform too?"

"No, one of the imperial servants," he said, "but at the orders of the Sultan."

"Obviously," I said.

He was looking at the sun again and again, so I asked him my last question: "Why was it not necessary to tell me that stone from the fort was used to build the tomb?"

"I have told you everything which I was ordered to," he said, and I sensed a slight tone of fear mixed in with the irritation in his voice. "Whatever you write besides this will not be what I have told you." He fumed towards my companion and said, "And you will have to bear witness to this."

He descended from the platform and, leaning with his hand on the left boundary wall, proceeded along the road to the town. His feet scattered the sand which had gathered in the declivity of the road, so that it poured with even greater rapidity from the lowest shelves of the wall, and I could see many particles shine out like sparks in the rays of the setting sun.

The custodian's last sentence had reminded me of the existence of my companion. I looked toward him. He was truly very young. I asked him, "Who taught you how to write history?"

"No one did," he said, "I have only studied."

"What have you studied?"

He listed many disciplines of knowledge.

"And histories?"

“Just one. The history of the desert campaign.”

The historian of the period of the desert campaign came to mind. He was my only enemy. I remembered his voice, and also that when he laughed, his eyes would close of their own volition.

“You said he had to die?” I asked.

“Yes. The Sultan did not like his history of the desert campaign.”

“But he was a very good historian.”

“He had written all those things in his history which the chronicler of the desert campaign had written,” he said. He paused a bit, then spoke again: “He said this in his own defense as well.”

“In his defense?” I asked. “And what was the charge against him?”

“This was it. That he had written all those things in his history which the chronicler of the desert campaign had written.”

“How was he made to die?”

“By eating the poisonous fruit of a tree.”

“By order of the Sultan?”

He did not respond. I asked again: “By order of the Sultan?”

“By order of the Sultan I am now writing that history.”

“Is it with you now?”

He nodded his head in affirmation.

“And the account of the chronicler?”

“And the account of the chronicler.”

“It wasn’t destroyed?”

“It will be. When I finish the history and present it to the Sultan. I have been assured of this.”

“Up to where have you written?”

“The arrival of the Sultan in the desert ...”

“... And into the fort ...”

“There was no fort there.”

I looked at him in astonishment, and he spoke emphasizing every word: “There was no fort, and in the fort there was no woman.”

I looked at him with even greater astonishment.

“You have written this,” he said in a sharp voice. “I will not write it. I have been given the right.”

“That’s why it is also your duty,” I said in a low tone.

“But why are we talking about it, about the campaign?” he said. Then, as he saw me sitting down on the stone floor of the platform he advanced towards me and said, “In a little while it will be dark here.”

“I will stay here for now,” I said. “Perhaps till morning.”

“Will you start writing today?”

“No. I will get paper tomorrow,” I said. Then I told him, “Chronicling has to be done on imperial paper. You will get paper too, but without the imperial seal, and not in numbered quantities.”

While telling him this I forgot that he had with him a chronicle of events, and he himself had started writing a history. He listened to me inattentively and then, although he had seemed annoyed with me until then, sat down next to me on the floor, put his hand on my shoulder, and said in a conspiratorial tone, “The building of this tomb ... can’t we write an account of its construction together?”

“Then you too will have to say in your defense that you have only written what the chronicler of the building of the tomb had written.”

He sat there lost in thought for a while. Then he pressed down hard on my shoulder, raised himself up, and said, “It’s getting late for me.”

“Your work will start after mine,” I said. “You can rest now.”

“And you ... will you stay here?” he said with some distress. “It gets very cold here at night.”

“I will be able to bear it. Otherwise I can take shelter inside the tomb.”

At that moment neither I, nor perhaps he, realized that the tomb was made only of walls.

As soon as he left darkness spread through the desert and the tomb began to be obscured from my sight. I changed sides many times to get comfortable, then settled down to rest. Now it only seemed that there was a building there, and because of this building I did not feel that I was in the desert. After a while the building seemed just like a large black stain, to which an onlooker’s imagination could give any shape it chose. My imagination gave it the shape of a fort, and then I could see its tower and ramparts. The susurrations of the wings of desert birds returning from the town’s lakes passed close by me and then flew far away, and I began to remember the Sultan’s desert campaign. I tried to forget it, but the effort was profitless.

I had been made to sit in the eastern tower of the fort. A bundle of counted imperial paper lay in front of me. A beautifully carved weight of white stone lay on the papers so that the wind, which always blows quicker around towers, could not fly away with them. At the head of each

sheet of paper the golden seal of the Sultan—a crown, two swords, and shading them from above, a royal parasol—shone in the light of the rising sun. I had been brought to sit in the tower some time before sunrise, so that I could not see the people who had conducted me into the tower and then had descended silently. I put one hand on the white stone weight and was waiting for the sun to rise so that I could watch its light running across the waves of sand which flowed in every direction, and then after that my pen could commit to paper whatever my eyes saw. This was easy for me, because I did not have the responsibility of explaining what I saw and wrote. And I had not even been told anything about the desert campaign. I had only heard in the bazaars of the town that the campaign had started and that the Sultan himself was in the desert. Then I was suddenly summoned at midnight and was made to sit in darkness in the eastern tower with a bundle of imperial paper. At that time I did not even know that I was in the tower of a fort, or that a temporary observation post had been set up for me so that I could sit and see clearly whatever was happening far away in the desert. This was why my mind was completely empty and I was waiting for the light.

But when the light spread I saw the rampart of the fort in front of me. Behind it, there was nothing but the silent sky. Between my tower and the rampart stretched a flat roof and on it I saw the Sultan bending over a heap of clothes. He remained bent over like that until the first rays of the sun arrived. Then he rose and walked slowly to the rampart, which was slightly shorter than he was. He raised himself up on his toes and looked outside, then turned around towards the flat roof. Above his waist he wore battle armor, and the rays of the sun made the iron links of his chain mail shine like stars.

“On all sides, only the desert,” he said. His loud heavy voice sounded hollow in the open air, and I could only hear him with difficulty.

“Only the desert,” he said again, and I imagined that he was addressing me. But then I saw that the heap of clothes on the roof was moving, and I saw a woman standing up there. Her face was hidden by her hair, so I could not see what she looked like, but when she walked towards the Sultan I had the impression that she was not a woman from the town. Layers of clothing covered most of her body, but even so I could make out the gleam of jewelry on her hands and neck.

“Let me see,” she said, drawing near the Sultan. Then she put both hands on the rampart as if she meant to pull it towards her rather than to glance over it.

The Sultan watched her efforts for a while. Then he grabbed both of

the woman's shoulders and pulled her up. The sound of the woman's screams crashed against my tower and also appeared to be coming from far away in the desert. The Sultan put her down on the ground. The woman's hair had become entangled with the links of his chain mail, and she was in pain. The Sultan slowly and with some difficulty disentangled her hair, and then grabbed her shoulders once more.

"Look," he said, trying to raise the woman higher, but she thrashed about and twisted out of his grip.

"I don't want to see," she said with hatred, and went to sit next to the heap of clothes on the roof. After a while the Sultan came and sat near her, staying there for a long time.

Watching this alien scene, I forgot that I was sitting in the tower in order to chronicle the campaign, so I watched them quietly for a long time until the sunlight turned fierce and the Sultan's face grew redder.

"The sun is getting strong again," he said to the woman. Then he gestured towards the tower and said in imperious tones, "Let's go over there, underneath the roof."

"No, not under the roof," she replied flatly, "I will die there."

And it seemed as if the Sultan had heard this reply many times, for he got up, went to the rampart and glanced over it, then came back to the woman.

"I will have to go back," he said, "and you will have to come with me."

"Not to the town," the woman said in the same flat tone. "There will be roofs there."

The sun grew fiercer, and its heat mingled with the strong wind blowing through the tower. The Sultan glanced over the rampart once more, then came over to the other side of the tower and called out to someone.

"What is happening now?" he asked. "It's hard to see outside from here."

In reply an imperial officer's voice could be heard echoing slightly. But I could not understand what he was saying, although the voice reminded me that I was the chronicler of events for the Sultan's desert campaign.

"Let them make a circle," the Sultan said.

The officer said something else. The Sultan spoke: "No, she will go with us."

In response to another question from the officer, he said: "A memento." Turning to look at the woman, "And proof as well."

After this, his attention shifted almost completely away from the woman. Mostly he continued his conversation with the officer. Sometimes I could hear the officer, and often not at all. At times I could understand him, and at times he was incomprehensible, but from the conversation I got details about the desert campaign which I could chronicle as if they were scenes I had witnessed with my own eyes. I had already begun to arrange these scenes in my head when I heard the rustle of wings and saw shadows passing over the roof. Long lines appeared attached to those shadows. The shadows passed over the ramparts, and then I saw that these were small flocks of desert birds, and that every bird in every flock was pierced by an arrow. The Sultan looked at their flight in astonishment. I was also astonished, because the birds were floating calmly through the air with their large wings spread out. The Sultan said, apparently to himself, "It seems as if they are flying with the force of the arrows."

But I could see that after flying over the rampart the birds thrashed about in the air in torment and fell. An occasional bird rolled about so fast that the arrow piercing its body described a circle in the sky. I had seen this scene in the Sultan's hunting lodges many times.

Many more flocks of birds passed over the roof. The Sultan, leaning back against the rampart, was inspecting them attentively, as if he were counting the birds. Suddenly he pulled a dagger from his waist and came forward many steps.

"One of them is coming down very low," he told his officer from there, "and it is not hit by an arrow."

At the same time I saw that the woman sprang towards the Sultan. The Sultan pulled her roughly behind him and bent backwards himself, his dagger poised in the air. The beating of wings was heard, and a desert bird swooped low over the Sultan and the woman. I was convinced that it would crash against the rampart and fall down there, but the bird flapped its wings and rose higher. When it had crossed the wall it spread out its wings completely and soared high into the air, rapidly vanishing from sight. All this happened at once, and at the same moment I heard the woman scream. The Sultan's dagger had been trapped in her long hair, and she was in pain once more. The Sultan wrenched his dagger loose from her hair, jerking it about again and again. Bunches of hair were cut loose from her head and fell to the roof, and perhaps because of the fierce heat in the stone they lay there writhing for a while.

The Sultan was searching for the bird in the air, dagger poised in his hand, when from far beyond the rampart a cloud of sand rose up and

could be seen moving slowly towards the fort. And this time I heard the officer's voice clearly.

"Something is about to happen," he said. "It's not safe to stay out in the open now."

"I shall stay here for now," replied the Sultan. "Let them make the circle."

"At least she should be sent inside."

"She too will stay here."

"They may want to kill her."

"They won't want to," the Sultan said with great confidence.

The officer began to respond, but his voice was lost in the noise of the wind. Hot gusts of wind were making it difficult for me to sit in my place, but I had pressed down the bundle of imperial papers with both hands and was seated on the floor as if I myself were a weight made of stone. I was practiced at doing this, but this was my first encounter with a sandstorm. Gritty particles were in my hair and seemed to be passing through my neck, all the way to my back. The sunlight grew dimmer in places, and the cloud of sand which had risen up at a distance was now at the ramparts of the fort. The cloud was being blown about by the wind as well. It would fall, rise, dip about here and there, and sometimes it would revolve in one place like an immense whirlwind. Then some arrows were shot from behind it and landed at the Sultan's feet. With the same calm that appeared on his face at dangerous battles, the Sultan bent and picked up one of the arrows and examined its point carefully for some time. He glanced casually at the other arrows lying there, threw the arrow in his hand in the direction of the officer's voice, and said: "What is the blood on this?"

In a little while the officer responded, "This is our arrow, and perhaps the blood ..."

But suddenly many other human voices joined his, and at that very moment I saw something like a flock of desert birds on the fort's rampart. The whistle of arrows came from the spot where the officer's voice had been. Bunches of feathers rose up over the wall and then were overturned, but I had seen that there were human faces beneath the feathers. Then the Sultan's voice rose higher:

"Of which feathers are their crests made?"

He received no response, and his voice rose again: "Whose feathers are these?"

In reply only the twang of bows and the whistling of arrows could be heard, and the crests of feathers beyond the rampart began to rise and fall

with greater rapidity.

“What’s the situation now?” the Sultan called out loudly, but perhaps he was used to not getting an answer on such occasions. He advanced slowly towards the head of the woman lying on the roof, looked at her attentively for a while, then bent over her and rose with her almost dangling from his hand.

“All this for your sake,” he said in a growling whisper, “for your sake.”

I heard his whisper despite the noise in the wind, and then for the first time my gaze fell on the woman’s upturned, open face. Perhaps it was because her eyes were closed that she seemed dead to me. The Sultan circled with her to the place from where the voice of the officer had come.

“Pull her under the roof,” he said loudly.

The woman’s body trembled slightly and she opened her eyes. For a while she stared disconnectedly at the Sultan’s face. It seemed that the suddenly rising blood-thirst in his eyes did not have any effect on her. Slowly but firmly she extricated herself from the Sultan’s grip and walked with light steps towards the officer’s voice, but the Sultan advanced and caught her up slowly and with the same firmness and said loudly, “Ropes!”

He had barely spoken when two or three rope-ends fell at his feet. He tied the woman tightly by her shoulders and waist. I heard the low clink of jewelry, then I saw the ropes become taut, but then my gaze fell on the ramparts. The cloud of sand appeared to be resting on top of the rampart, the noise of arrows was louder than the noise of the wind, and the rising and falling bunches of feathers behind the cloud could not be seen clearly. I looked at the roof again. The Sultan was standing there alone. One hand resting on the opposite shoulder, he seemed to be waiting for some news.

For a moment I imagined I was watching a dream, but at that instant a gust of wind hit my face and hot sand filled my open eyes. I bowed my head and let water stream from my eyes until all the particles of sand flowed out with it and I could see again. Meanwhile the wind had abated, the cloud of sand had disappeared, and there was nothing beyond the ramparts except the silent sky. The Sultan was standing quietly, as he had been before. At last the voice of the officer was heard, along with many other voices which were congratulating the Sultan over the victorious end of the campaign. The Sultan raised one hand and acknowledged the congratulations, turned and walked to the rampart, stood looking out for a while, then spoke:



“Only the desert!”

And again I suspected he was addressing me. Since I could see no one else on the roof I felt my suspicion turning into belief, but he was not looking at me.

“Everyone awaits your orders,” said the voice of the officer.

“Return,” the Sultan replied. Then he paused and said, “And tell her she is to come with us.”

“She ...” said the officer’s terrified voice “... is dead.”

The Sultan leaned back against the wall of the fort. “How?” he asked.

“She was crushed.”

“Did a roof fall?” the Sultan asked, then advanced many steps.

“All the roofs are in place,” came the voice, “ but she has been crushed and killed. It seems that way from her face. Her face ...”

“Return,” ordered the Sultan, interrupting him. “The fort must be completely emptied by nightfall.”

“And her?”

The Sultan looked towards the voice, looked up at the tower, then turned his head toward the ramparts and said in a voice of great clarity, “Let her be thrown into the desert. In a few days she will be sand again.

5

I saw the rays of the rising sun running on the waves of sand. The tomb lay in front of me. My body had stiffened from sitting on the stone platform in the cold of the night. I waited for the sun to get stronger, and when my body grew a little warmer I went close to the tomb once again to examine it. I entered its doorway, carefully noting the way to return through the labyrinth, and reached the last of the walls built in the shape of a semicircle. On looking at one of the walls I suspected that the stones used to build it were from the floor of the tower in which I was made to sit to chronicle the desert campaign and where I had written nothing. I had written the account of the desert campaign sitting in the garden in front of my house, where until that time there was no tree which cast a shadow. And most of the account consisted of hearsay which I described as if I were an eyewitness at the scene. But there were also in it the things I had seen sitting in the tower, because of which one imperial historian—who was my only enemy—had to die.

And now I had to write the chronicle of the construction of the tomb which I had not seen built. The custodian had described the process of its

building, but now I was seeing it completed with my own eyes. I remembered the new imperial historian and his youthfulness, and slowly I walked back through the tomb and left by the doorway. From the platform the tomb's serrated roof, which did not exist, looked beautiful. I descended onto the road on the other side of the platform. On the way I met small groups of people who were coming from great distances to see the tomb. Above me flew flocks of desert birds going towards the lakes of the town. Without looking in any direction I walked on through the bazaar and the small markets and entered my house, where the Sultan's official was waiting for me. He put a bundle of imperial paper bearing the Sultan's seal into my hands. We counted the paper together and the official went back.

I have written all this from beginning to end on the paper stamped with the Sultan's seal which had been given to me in a numbered quantity, which will be tallied when it is taken back from me. The personal use of imperial paper by a chronicler is a new crime, for which a new punishment should be devised. The Sultan has a refined knack for inventing punishments, and I have chronicled these in the past. But now I have been commanded to write a chronicle of the construction of the Sultan's tomb, and I think I have fulfilled his orders, although during my days of staying at home I have forgotten many of the conventions of chronicling events. I cannot even say how long I have spent staying at home, but the fruit of all that time is this umbrella-shaped tree under which I have often rested. From its roots to its flower, from the skin of the fruit to the marrow of its kernel, it is all poisonous. Perhaps that is why one feels sleepy in its shade. □

—*Translated by Aditya Behl*