

The Man with One Foot Outside of Hell

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*A man must not despair of God's Mercy; for Zardusht says: "I beheld one whose body, with the exception of one foot, was entirely in hell; but that foot was outside. The Lord said: 'This person, who ruled over thirty-three cities, never performed good deeds; but having one day observed a sheep tied up a distance from her food, he with his foot pushed the grass near her.'"—Moshan Fani, *The Dabistán*, "Gate the Fourth," of *The Hundred Gates of Paradise**

Moshan Fani, in the *Dabistán*, or School of Manners, tells how in Zardusht's dream the only light was the fire of a kind of purity burning like a star far beyond the dark side of ordinary evil. In Zardusht's dream, Moshan Fani explains, Hell had as many gates as Heaven, but the combinations were as easy as walking through, and each opened directly on the side of a scaly precipice near the bank of a river of tar. No one remembers his first sin—they fall like slag over the guilty, victims, in the end, of their own crimes. As proof that the punished do not stop sinning, there are none who do not, every thousand years or so, steal an oasis from misery: the hope that their wretched lives have only plotted wretched dreams, that as they dreamt of waking from death to anguish, just so they will wake from sleep to unrelinquished mortality, reproved and reprieved,

and this present tangent of troubled conscience
will teach them to live better lives.
Pleasant delusion in unpleasant circumstance!
Moshan Fani explains that a man must not despair
of God's mercy, but in Zardusht's dream God has
learned irony from the worst of his creation.
The unluckiest of the punished
is the one whose limping charity
has consecrated the moral foot,
earned him the horrifying privilege of truth,
left him without dreams.
Heaven, Zardusht tells, has a hundred consecutive gates,
hard to pass through, but its frontier
is as close as your heart.
This man ruled his cities harshly,
but his name was lost even to the Almighty
and to the devils who lashed him with the tails of serpents
and placed spiders on his eyes.
Of Hell's tenants only he knows, and Zardusht knows,
who will wake from his dream on the desert rocks
that no more than one step away
the air is stirred by the linen of angels.