

## Ellipses

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**T**To my beloved poet interred deep in the earth, Al  
Ma'arri—

How many of my tongues shall I cut out until you can understand me? How many leagues of dirt shall I shovel until my voice is more than mumbling? I've disturbed your sleep to tell you that I have dared abandon worship in the mosque, the shriek of prayer, and the sacrificial sheep. I have become blind like you! How I wish you were alive to hear from my own voice what I have written. I imagined that you approved my undertaking and urged me to leave my bed and write my poems. I imagined that you would take me as your disciple. Know that you've helped me finally see for myself.

I laugh at myself now. For as a young man, in my village, there was an old blind man like you who said he's traveled far and wide, but I didn't believe him.

I called out to him mockingly, "How far have you gone? Who have you seen?" "Beyond the spaces between stars," said he, placing his hand over his heart.

And he told me of...

### **The Shah**

Believe me or not—the huma cast her shadow over me.

### **The Ogre**

A ferocious ogre lived in a cave upon a hill that looked over a village. Every seven days it would emerge from its slimy grotto and

fill its belly with someone to eat. Some men gathered on the sixth night with every intention of killing the ogre.

“Yes, we ought to destroy it,” one declared. “Perhaps we can set a trap,” another added.

“Or maybe we can block the cave’s entrance with stones,” another explained.

“I’ll take ten of our strongest men and have its head tomorrow morning,” boasted another. “Let’s drive it away with fire,” another replied.

They each devised their schemes, amicably explaining to each other the nuances of their plans, but they couldn’t decide amongst themselves which to follow.

“Perhaps we should draw lots,” suggested one.

“But then the best plan has an equal chance of being selected as the worst plan.”

“Yea, this is true,” the first replied. “Although I’m not quite ready to relinquish the idea.” “Perhaps we should vote on the best plan?” another suggested.

“Gentleman!” roared one. “I demand action! Let’s storm the cave with all our weapons!”

“We just don’t know how deep the cave is; if we aren’t careful we could die ourselves, and for nothing.” “Let’s select the wisest amongst ourselves to guide us,” one broke the silence.

“But one man can only have so much prescience,” another said.

“Yes, even so, I feel that he would choose his own plan even after examining the others.”

After much quarreling, they resolved that it would be most fair for each of them to allow the ogre to capture a villager every seventh day. In this way, each man was satisfied that no injustice was done against him.

### **The Zephyr**

“Would that I be an unrelenting gale,” she huffed—out of breath—across the harbor.

### **The Shoreman**

Last night, I dreamt I stood at the edge of the sea and I met a man who lived there. I called out to him cheerfully, “What would I give to take your place always enjoying the sea!”

He replied despondently, “What would I give to take your place! The tides are called back to the ocean and in due time return to the shore. But when I am called back, I shall never return.”

“Oh, that’s too bad.”

### **The Alchemist**

“You see,” the Alchemist explained to me, “a great tree is at the base of every soul. I have created an elixir that strengthens its roots, allowing one to live forever! Do you want to try first?”

I politely declined, citing my weak stomach. “Oh well,” he said. “More for me.”

### **The Slave**

“What do you want from me?” he growled as I met him in the marketplace. “Let me on my way, and to you, yours. My master is not a patient man, and neither am I.”

“But don’t you want to be free?” I asked the old man quietly, afraid someone might hear us. He only stared at me. Gathering my courage I asked again. “I can pay for your freedom; it’s unfair that someone could own you like an ox or sheep.”

“Don’t insult me,” he puffed his chest. “I know my place.”

“Please don’t be offended; please forgive me because I’m only a young man. Tell me, I only ask out of ignorance, don’t you wish for something more?”

He softened his tone and replied, “When a slave commits a crime, he is punished with only half the severity of a freeman. When he is married, he isn’t expected to pay the dowry. When a slave makes a mistake, it’s because his master hasn’t disciplined him well enough. They can only beat you so much—you’d be unusable otherwise. The truth is, I prefer being a slave. Now leave me alone.”

### **The Philosopher**

I came into his little house world-weary and sad. He smiled, picked a book out from his shelf, and handed it to me. Over a glass of wine he told me everything will be alright.

### **The Sage**

On his deathbed he gasped, after an illustrious career advising warring princes, “Where are the sages? Where are the sages?”

### **The Spinster**

"I tell you," she pleaded. "I saw what I saw!"

"It was only a dream," they said. "Do you think the world needs more tall tales and ravings?"

"If a piece of the sky fell on you people, you'd call it a dense cloud!"

"Get away from us," they scolded. "We're tired of this."

### **The Earthbound**

Whereas you look to the stars to watch your ascending soul, I look to the earth to watch my decaying corpse.

### **The Commanders**

Their armies met each other—genies, fairies, war machines, and men—accompanied by the whole panoply and pomp of war. The fighting lasted the better part of the day; they wept to see their soldiers massacred.

### **The Mother**

She cradled the corpse in her arms and cried out in agony, "I've given you a martyr, but you've taken my son."

### **The Madman**

"What are you doing?" they taunted from their market stalls.

"I am looking for a human being," replied he, his lantern alight at noon.

### **The Camel-Herder**

I have seen Iram's lofty pillars. Have you?

### **The Glutton**

Death sits somberly at his banquet. Since he's only bones, everyone crushed in his jaws is ground to pieces and falls through his ribs on to the floor. Always hungry, he can't leave the table.

### **The Stargazer**

He passed by a hungry child holding her swollen stomach.

### **The Fool**

“Why whence whither, why whence whither,” he laughed again with his juggling balls.

### **The Beggar**

My conscience bothered me so I threw some coins in his direction. He threw them back at me.

“I don’t like to be pitied, thank you very much,” he snarled. “And now that you know that, I’ll take them back. I could use a drink.”

### **The Mortician**

“I am a young man,” I explained. “So please excuse my ignorance. But surely it’s disturbing to do what you do?”

He replied irate, “What does it matter? Most people live between life and death anyways, carcasses carrying around their rotting entrails. Might as well beautify them when they’re surely dead.”

### **The Witch**

The king sent an investigator to examine the account of a woman who was accused of witchcraft by some townspeople and had been put to death.

When the investigator arrived, decked in the pomp and perfume of the royal court, he was greeted by the town’s mayor.

“Who was this witch?” the investigator asked.

“A good man accused her of giving him a defective potion. It seems that quite a few people complained the same, so a few men, myself included, held a meeting on what to do about her.”

“So you killed her?”

“No! We drove her out. She lives at the edge of the village now; sometimes we desperately need her draughts.”

### **The Hermit**

“I came up here many years ago to find myself,” she told me as I reached the mountain’s summit. “But surely, you can’t travel anywhere in the first place without packing your self?”

She slapped me.

### **The Villagers**

A traveler once related to me a story about a village in India where the villagers questioned their imam why God grew angry with them without fail at the beginning of every monsoon season.

### **The Architect**

“In the time of ignorance, the idolaters would say that they didn’t worship the idol, but the spirit which resided within it.”

We both gazed long at the mosque.

### **The Wretch**

I stared at a photograph of the girl I’d very much like to marry. I’ll invent any reason to avoid getting married to her.

### **The Revolutionaries**

One after another, they lined up before the firing squad. The coronation would continue as planned.

### **The Caravaneer**

You should know that I am a traveler for no country shall ever accept me, and I am exiled to the desert.

Every now and then, the wind carries the scent of decomposition. Bloating corpses wander in, their ankles bound by iron, and beaten by Time, whose whip cries like thunder does when black clouds bloom. The vultures pick at them with impunity. All that is left behind are puddles of puss and blood. Is there anything better to do than decay?

### **The Miser**

If her prince charming appeared to her disguised as a beggar, she would turn him away.

### **The Seeress**

“I’ve seen this before,” she hesitated, her fingers weaving invisible webs over a crystal ball. “You have two souls: a puritan tortured by an inquisitor.”

### **The Muezzin**

“Bring out your dead! Bring out your dead!” he cried, dragging his cart, filled to the brim, through the mud.

**The Immortal**

I live as though I have already died. Can a corpse feel shame? After all, if this isn't your century, many others will be.

**The Ambassador**

The sultan had specially chosen him to lead the delegation to the King of Yunan. When he stood up to thank his host, he let out a loud, rippling fart.

**The Infant**

An infant was born with the power of speech. He shrieked, "Why did you create me?" His father did not look up once. He replied, "I am a treasure and I wanted to be known."

**The Diver**

The umbilical cord that gave air to his lungs wrapped around his neck beneath the waves. He must've cursed us as he choked.

**The Iconoclast**

You idiot! You smashed your village idols, but you were too cowardly to kill the idol genuflectors!

**The Prince**

Imagine his utter desolation when he learned that his precious pomegranate blossom entombed herself alive—how could their love be realized?—And finding no one else to blame except himself, took up arms against his father.

**The Prisoners**

"We must pretend that we're freemen," one said to another. They escaped this morning; the fortress loomed behind them as they approached the kasbah.

**The Digger**

"I've heard that this is the site of an ancient palace and its fabulous treasures," he said. "But we dug until we reached bedrock and we still haven't found anything."

### **The Pilgrim**

In my youth I heard there was a beautiful garden that bore sweet fruit and orchids. As a man I resolved to find this garden. But when I arrived, I found that the winter frost had devastated it already.

### **The Sirens**

The body of a young man lay mangled on a sandbar not too far from the coast. As the winds picked up, some vultures found and devoured him. In his pocket was a letter to his beloved, but the seawater had made it unreadable.

### **The Lover**

“How do I tell her how fond I am of her, how she’s in each of my dreams?” I asked the hermit famous for his wisdom.

“How should I know?” the hermit replied, averting his eyes. He really didn’t have an answer; he was out too long.

### **The Mystic**

“I have secret knowledge, but I can’t share it with the uninitiated,” he said with some pity. “OK.”

### **The Players**

In a place where the Aztecs once ruled, there is a village that still plays the old game. Players’ elbows and knees are swathed in heavy pads and they kick a heavy rubber ball across an arena.

Now this arena is unlike any other arena. It resembles the ancient step pyramids, but the steps jut off at odd angles and they lead up and down in irregular patterns. The crowd sits at the furthest edges of the arena.

A philosopher is placed on his back, tucked away in a corner where it is determined that the rubber ball will pass over him, but never hit him. His legs are immobilized by heavy stones, but his arms are free. As the ball flies over him—kicked around by the players—he covers his face with his hands. The crowd laughs at him, and he laughs uneasily along with them, recognizing his folly.

It is said that the elders developed this practice to dissuade the people from believing that the examined life is better than any other life.



### **The Traveler**

I hold Hope in my pocket. It's a stone of polished black quartz, mesmerizing and mystical, whispering to me dangerous thoughts....

As I write this, my spirit is making his long travail to the sea where he can finally throw that stone into the waters where it will sink to the bottom, crushed into its constituent atoms because of the intense pressure of the depths.

### **The Library of Alexandria**

It's not strange to me that such a great repository of knowledge erected and fell inversely to the price of grain; books can't speak for themselves, which is to say they can't say anything at all. Stomachs, however, yelp and growl.

### **The Scholar**

A scholar related to me a tale of a scholar who trespassed the kingdom of the genies in search of knowledge, but didn't come back to tell the tale.

### **The Monk**

"Soon," he wrote in his diary. The night was cloudy; the stars behind them faded anyways. "You will renounce any worldly obligation, including your obligation to breathe."

### **The Hunter**

Where did the gods come from? A man came to the village a hero. The children tugged at his clothes, the roast (his catch) was prepared, but he couldn't help but feel himself a criminal, or a thief.

### **The Fisherman**

I saw a man scolding a poor fisherman as he dragged his meager catch from the shore.

"It's time to pray!" the man lectured violently, waving his fist. "Don't you fear the furnace?" The bereaved fisherman sighed, wishing the holes in his net were smaller.

### **The Sungazer**

"What did you see up there?" they asked the one who got away. "Oh, not much," he replied using his better judgment.

### **The Cartographer**

Every time I return to the black core of the heart—the tar-sand desert at the center of my soul—to map a portion of my purgatory, I realize that the desert stretches into eternity, and the monsters found within are hiding just beyond the dunes. That is to say everywhere at once, but never *here*.

### **The Exile**

I try to explain myself, but every attempt makes it worse. So I write it down for them. But when people ask me to explain what I meant, I try to explain myself.

### **The Marooned**

Alone on a rock somewhere in the ocean—the gun still had its lone bullet, and the bottle was unopened—he had starved.

### **The Scarecrow**

I woke up one day in old rags dressed upon a bundle of straw and sticks. My soul seeped out of the husks and the crows laughed.

### **The Academy of Gondeshapur**

So much for the highest activity of the highest men.

### **The Corpses**

“Who is the human being and who is the corpse?” she wailed as the body finally rested on the ground. Meanwhile, I imagined what it would be like for her body to rest against mine.

### **The Surgeon**

“I got real sick of her when she told me that her only prize possessions are the ones that can’t be taken away,” he told me. “So I cut off some of her brain.”

### **The Swindler**

There’s a swindler who likes to make bets with weighted dice. I figured out all his tricks. Today I challenged him proud as a peacock and still lost.

### **The Jurors**

The philosopher was taken before the court. The judge said to him, "You will be tried by a jury of your peers." The philosopher replied, genuinely confused, "These aren't my peers."

### **The Shoemaker**

Impressed by their handiwork, the prince invited the shoemaker and his wife to the palace to prepare shoes for the annual gala. The shoemaker returned to his workshop one evening in order to retrieve a tool he had forgotten, but found it had all burned to the ground.

### **The Ghoul**

I vomited up my friend, bones and all.

### **The Cannibal**

By consuming his own flesh—perhaps only to feel the rancid vomit expelled from his throat and relish the lingering bitterness that remains—the cannibal allowed himself to continue living. At some point, he became indistinguishable from a giant rotten scab which one picks and chews.

### **The Delegates**

Tired of the rivalry between the town's oldest families, the prince called them both to sit in his palace and work out their differences.

"I want him dead," one said.

From across the table the other chimed, "I want him dead as well."

### **The Lusty**

"That's it, there no more to it!" the imam scolded the new batch of converts. "Go find something else to do, I'm tired!"

### **The House of Wisdom**

So much for the highest activity of the highest men.

### **The Busybody**

In order to prevent him from choking on his own blood, his physician recommended that he stay upright until his gums healed. What a shame. He had so much to do this week!

**The Resurrected**

The dead stirred from their sleep, rubbing their eyes, yawning, “Is this the day that has been promised?” They waited naked, the sun brought near to them. Would they be held to account?

**The Actors**

Every household boiled water on their stoves so that the neighbors wouldn’t know they were starving.

**The Elect**

I begged my mother for water but she refused; the righteous in heaven, that hideous book says, shall ignore the cries of the sinners in the furnace whose fuel is men and stones.

**The Librarian**

Because she was surrounded by books—that is to say, opinions—she wouldn’t believe in anything.

**The Ascetic**

There upon the road I found a starving ascetic laying still. I saw Death gnawing on his bones. He told me in spurts, through the pain of being eaten alive, that by abasing himself completely he had subdued the animal part within him and thus remained only divine.

**The Lyceum**

So much for the highest activity of the highest men.

**The Humble**

I found the old man in a barrel. I asked him, “What do you do, really?” He replied, “I do what I want.”

I couldn’t help but feel I had met a god.

**The Moongazers**

What is that madness that drives men to desolate places?—The call of unknown gods, lonesome and terrible.

**The Sculptor**

His masters dismissed the sculpture he wished to submit to the guild; he was told that it wasn’t up to standard. He must be disappointed.

**The Idiot**

He spent his youth studying in the great universities of the world, memorizing the sages' words. "I have no beliefs!" he proudly declared. You should know that men without beliefs are entirely derivative.

**The Theologian**

Have you ever seen a creature that ashamed of having emerged from a womb?—So much so he relegates women to the house, veiled. Anything from reminding him of his origin.

**The Stutterer**

A king knowingly called for a stutterer to issue a proclamation at his court. When the stutterer failed, the king filled his throat with boiling water.

**The Islander**

On a lonely island there lived a clan of merchants. To their misfortune, a philosopher was born among them.

**The Buyer**

Tired of a cold bed, I went to the store to purchase a wife for myself. I tried on many wives, one after another, until I found one to my liking. After all, it's written somewhere that your wives are garments for you.

**The Pederasts**

It's commonly said that evil men love to send restless young men to war; but in truth, they love the young peace-lovers even more.

**The Castrated**

Paranoid by the mere possibility of their wives' treachery, the townsmen elected to keep their women at home, veiled. The boys became much prettier since then.

**The Metaphysician**

When the metaphysician's head was cut off, his head rolled upright and said, "See I told you! The soul isn't dependent on the body!"

**The Orphan**

An orphan might be the most wicked of men but becomes a moralist concerning the conduct towards one's parents. For

example, I beat my old man when he got too troublesome while out in the market. The orphan saw my blows and cried out, begging me to stop. I did not stop; in fact, I hit him even harder. Noticing my reaction, I am certain the orphan would have cried out when I was a troublesome child while out in the market.

### **The Martyrs**

Every martyr is a jealous lover. Unable to win the affection of his woman, he hangs himself. She finds his body long after its convulsions settle; his final revenge. "Look what you made me do," his wicked eyes flicker from beyond the grave, smiling.

### **The Artisans**

Three artisans sold their wares in their hometown: vases, jugs, idols, necklaces, and rings. One artisan used only mud. The other used only dung. The last one used ivory. The last artisan couldn't sell a single thing, and soon he was out of business; the people only found use for mud and dung.

### **The Trickster**

One day I found a brass lamp on the side of the road. I was feeling a bit down, so I rubbed it for good luck. A genie appeared before me, his legs and ankles bound together with red rope, begging Solomon to free him.

"I am no Solomon," I told the genie. "But if you do not grant me a wish, I will return you to him." The genie wailed, and agreed on condition. "What is it that you wish for?" it asked.

"Riches."

"I will present to you three houses. You shall pick one, and thus become its owner and inherit all inside it."

The genie then presented three houses to me: the first two were mansions, decked in marble and electrum, surrounded by gardens; the last was a simple hut made of mud bricks. Now I know that genies are tricksters by nature, so I chose the hut.

I found myself moved in an instant to the mud hut. Inside there was a wooden bench and a straw mat.

### **The Philosopher**

Every night I have dreamt that I scream as my legs are crushed with stones.

### **The Eunuch**

My friend castrated himself—and as a show of his devotion to her swallowed his testicles!

### **The Prospect**

My friend wasn't as rich as he is now. He announced he wanted to get married, but he barely got any proposals. So he sold all his belongings and joined a merchant caravan. After he came back, decked in silk, servants carrying jade into his house, he received two proposals a day. I was with him when he asked the father of one of the prospective brides why he had waited to propose his daughter. The father was quite an old man, and having no more use for eloquence told him, "Food is bought with money, dumbass."

### **The Absentee**

"Do you know how I know that mankind is still in its infancy? The sages men revere are those who promise to teach them how to die well. And those they scorn are the sages who promise to teach them how to live well."

### **The Convert**

My beloved lay sick in bed. I knelt and prayed. I said that the only reason I pray for her health is so that I may leave her with good conscience. My breath barely left my lips before she started to stir. My wretched wish was only answered when I wanted to leave that wretched woman.

### **The Revolutionary**

Every young man knows a woman who made him face his own isolation. Mine was a beautiful one from Mianwalli. She collected tools all day in preparation for the revolution. I was not a tool, so she had no use for me.

### **The Potter**

A potter collected clay at banks of the river. It whispered to him, "I was once a shah."

*Confluence*