

# الواديان

the valleys  
the conference of the birds

The atlas of the way

*(world premiere commission, 2022)*

by Forrest Farhad Pierce



THE ESOTERICS

Directed by Eric Banks

Saturday | 15 October 2022 | 8pm

Christ Episcopal Church

310 North K Street | Tacoma

Sunday | 16 October 2022 | 4pm

Plymouth United Church of Christ

1217 6th Avenue | Seattle

# About the composer

Forrest (Farhad) Pierce, wayfarer of both mountains and valleys, is a composer and poet of the Great Plains. Originally from the Columbia Plateau of Washington state, he writes music of meditative stillness and ecstatic virtuosity rooted in a deep connection to the natural world. A member of the convivial faculty of the Cortona Sessions for New Music and an indiscriminate enthusiast, he is Professor of Composition at the University of Kansas. Forrest teaches Sufism in the Inayati tradition, enjoys camping at high altitudes, and leads *zikr* in his community.

## Foreward to *The atlas of the way*

The path of *tasawwuf* (translated by Orientalist scholars as “Sufism”) is a wisdom tradition flowing from the teachings and blessing of the Prophet Muhammad (saws). Its literal meaning, “Becoming a Sufi,” or perhaps “Becoming pure,” points toward its lifelong, ongoing nature. It is a path, not a religion or ideology, and it has been extensively explored by humans for 1400 years, guided by the motto that *tasawwuf* is about experience, not premises. Still, most long journeys benefit from a guide and a map.

In Sufism, the guide is the *shaykh*, a wise elder and lineage holder who can help the seeker avoid dangers and pitfalls that come from being an ego-bound human in pursuit of the Real. Some would say that this map can take as many forms as there are human souls. Just as Sufism takes on the forms of the cultures it inhabits—in Classical times from West Africa to Indonesia, Madagascar and Sri Lanka to Russia, Northern China and the Balkans—the shape of the map reflects the *shaykh*, the seeker, and the experience of a given lineage, or *tariqa*. One commonality is the recognition of various *maqamat*, or stations of progress. A *maqam* may be likened to a room, a country, a waystation, a ladder-rung, or, as is the case in *The atlas of the way*, a *wadi*, a desert valley alive with mysteries, revelation, wonder, and dangers. Although one could say all depends on the map, a Sufi might say all depends on Allah, the cherisher and sustainer of all wayfarers, waystations, and ways.

Among the most beautiful of these maps is an extensive section of Farid ud-Din Attar’s (1145-1221) *Mantiq ut-Tair*, better known in English as *The conference of the birds*. Over a span of a thousand or so couplets in the middle of the larger poem, Attar’s bird-shaykh, the Hoopoe, describes for the gathered bird-seekers (*murids* or dervishes) the vast landscape that lies ahead. Seven valleys, each a poetic unveiling of a traditional Sufi *maqam*, await the traveler on their journey to remembering their origin, represented here as the mythical Simorgh bird.

Attar ornaments each valley with stories, commentary, dialogue between the birds and the Hoopoe, and profound metaphor, progressing from the station of *talab* (translated here as “farawayfaring”) through the soul’s gradual unfoldment into and through love, knowing, sufficiency, unity, wonder, and finally effacement in Allah. In each valley, the Hoopoe warns, a seeker may become lost and unable to continue; the path of being a human is so immense, complex and dangerous as to terrify anyone setting foot upon it. And yet, for the true seeker, there is no other option. A shaykh, as one who has successfully made the pilgrimage in their own heart, acknowledges this daunting prospect, and still encourages and supports the dervish. As the Hoopoe says,

“Yes, friends,  
now you know.  
You may burn by sun  
or leave your ghosts  
to snow:

The path is narrow.  
Wake your  
wings.

Go.”

*The atlas of the way* traces the soul’s path to the Real through the words of the Hoopoe, distilling the epic scale of what is already merely an excerpt of the *Mantiq ut-Tair* into a kernel of words that can then flower as music, inshallah (if Allah wills). It is a meditation on, and reflection of my own journey within *tasawwuf*, an earnest gift to students on any path of wisdom, and a sincere offering of gratitude and devotion to my own shaykh, and the great beings of her lineage.

# *The sohbet of the rare small bird*

Most Sufi lineages have a tradition of *sohbet*, intimate spiritual conversation between a shaykh and their students. The 4- to 8-voice interludes that together comprise *The sohbet of the rare small bird* reflect the quiet, tender nature of these gatherings. Setting a passage of 9 couplets from much earlier in the epic, the music invites us into a fireside gathering of the journeying birds, perhaps in the midnight hour of prayer, when the Hoopoe's words can lift the veils from the face of the beloved, and allow its beauty to reverberate in the hearts of the weary seekers. These eight movements can be performed as a set, or omitted in a performance of the 9 larger movements. The title of the collected sohbet comes from the Victorian translation of Edward FitzGerald, an abbreviated and free adaptation that condenses a series of protestations by the birds into a single "rare small bird" who humbly admits its inadequacy in the face of such a journey. The Hoopoe's response is tender, adamant, and profound.

## A note on the translation

When I began working with Attar's poem in 2012, it was in large part because I wished to understand his vision of the spiritual path. Only later did I aspire to present it in music, yet the existing translations, though impressive, were not lyrics. There are numerous excellent translations of the work in English, some scholarly, some prose, some in traditional English verse, and some in free verse or modifications of Persian verse styles. None of those I encountered read like lyrics, nor did they seem to reflect the way in which Attar and other Persian-language poets had become part of the teachings of the Chistiyya lineage in which I was living. With the encouragement of my shaykh, I began to "lyricize" the poem, working from the translations of De Tassy, Nott, Darbandi/Davis, Avery, and others, as well as from the Farsi original with the help of dictionaries and translation software. My goal was a delicious, singable English language version, inspired by the ways in which the *qawwali* musicians of the Chishtis improvise and compose around the poetry of great Persian and Urdu poets of Iran and South Asia, as well as by my own training as a composer of vocal music in the Western Classical tradition. This meant an improvisatory, playful encounter with English, and a meditative, bedrock relationship with the esoteric teachings embedded in the words of Attar. Whereas a more literal or scholarly version might offer Attar himself, mine tries to offer the way dervishes have cooked, eaten, sung, and lived the stuff Attar was sharing. *Inshallah*, it also might live as a work of *ihsan*—beauty—translating a beautiful poem into beautiful words with beautiful music. The result, I think, is as "Sufi" a version as I can make it, though it reflects my own limited understanding, my own limitations as an artist, and my own shortcomings as a dervish. *Estaghfirullah*—all mistakes are mine.

## A note on culture and inheritance

I rely on the blessing and teaching of an initiatic line of shaykhs stretching back to Prophet Muhammad (saws), as is the case for every dervish, regardless their nationality or lineage. Attar was one such dervish, a Sunni Muslim and Sufi, a Persian-speaking poet of Nishapur in the Turko-Persian empire of the Seljuks. His poetry and accounts of Sufi saints are used as teaching texts by Sufi orders across the globe. His work is also a treasured part of the historical literary culture of Iran, Turkey, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and dozens of other countries—all the places where Farsi became the language of literature and government.

My ancestry and culture does not include these countries and regions, beyond the inherited teachings of Classical Sufism. Because of this, in my work with Attar's magnificent poem, it has been my intention to avoid setting any passages from *The conference of the birds* that enter into the realm of folklore or cultural identity, beyond that which is shared in common by muslims or Sufi lineages the world over. Likewise, there are no intentional references to the stupendous musical culture of Iran or to other Persian-speaking historical musical cultures, whether classical or folkloric, as I am not trained in these art forms. Just as *tasawwuf* has taken on the colors and flavors of every cultural landscape it has encountered, *The atlas of the way* could be seen as a work of American Sufism, framed by the cultural inheritance of the complex, rich, and fraught history of this country, while offering anew a reflection of a poem beloved by dervishes of all nations, who are collectively and individually following the hoopoe across beautiful, awesome, strange and familiar ground. I invite the listener to consider it as an American musical vehicle transporting one composer's understanding of an authentic, experiential inheritance of wisdom teachings.

Again, *estaghfirullah*—all mistakes are mine.

Thank you all so much for joining us for *The atlas of the way!*  
We are so glad that you are here.

Forrest (Farhad) Pierce, Eric Banks, and The Esoterics

# الودديات

# the valleys

P R O G R A M

Please turn off all noise-making devices, and refrain from talking during the performance.

## The atlas of the way (2020-2022)

by Forrest Farhad Pierce (1972)

- I. A prayer map for birds
  1. The mirror of the heart
- II. The valley of farawayfaring
  2. The cloth of the world
- III. The valley of lovestruckness
  3. Within the within
- IV. The valley of kenning
  4. A thirty-bird shadow
- V. The valley of enougging
  5. Simply step beyond
- VI. The valley of onement
  6. Ask the dark
- VII. The valley of wonderstruckness
  7. The great gate
- VIII. The valley of noughtness
  8. Same sun, self, same
- IX. An invitation to fledge

*After a brief talk with Forrest at the start of the concert,  
his piece will be performed without intermission.  
The running time is about 60 minutes.*

### Special thanks to:

Christine Dove | *Volunteer Coordinator*  
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# T H E E S O T E R I C S

Now on the cusp of its 30<sup>th</sup> concert season, Seattle's most innovative chorus has drawn local, national, and international praise for performing rarely-heard compositions of contemporary music for unaccompanied voices, for infusing elements of the literary, theatrical, and visual arts into the typical concert experience, and for inspiring and performing new *a cappella* choral settings of poetry, philosophy, and spiritual writings by composers around the world. In early 1992, Eric Banks brought together a group of friends to perform his Master's and Doctoral recitals in Choral Studies at the University of Washington. After Banks' recitals were completed, the group wanted to keep singing together, so Banks chose a name for his ensemble based on the Greek adjective εσοτερικος – which describes a close-knit community and the secret knowledge that its members share. Since incorporating with this name in 1993, The Esoterics has performed hundreds of concerts throughout the Pacific Northwest, has commissioned and premiered hundreds of new works for *a cappella* voices in myriad languages, and has mastered many of the most virtuosic choral works of the last century in concerts described as “compelling,” “crafted,” “luxuriant,” “lyrical,” “sumptuous,” and “superb.” The Esoterics has released twenty-one CD recordings on its own label (Terpsichore) and has been honored to compete at the 2000 Cork International Choral Festival (Ireland), the 2001 Certamen Coral de Tolosa (Spain), and the 2006 Harald Andersen International Choir Competition in Helsinki (Finland). As well, The Esoterics has demonstrated its continuing commitment to choral education in becoming the only choral ensemble in Washington State that grants continuing-education credit to its members who also teach in the public schools. In recognition for its efforts in choral education and innovation, The Esoterics has been honored five times with the ASCAP and Chorus America Award for the Adventurous Programming of Contemporary Music (in 2001, 2003, 2006, 2008, and 2017). The Esoterics has been honored to receive grants from the arts commissions of Washington State, King County, and the City of Seattle, as well as funding from Amazon, Google, Microsoft, the Seattle Foundation, the Aaron Copland Fund for Music, the BMI Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts. The Esoterics is a proud member chorus of ACDA (the American Choral Directors Association), Chorus America, IFCM (the International Federation for Choral Music), and GALA (the Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses).

# M I S S I O N S T A T E M E N T

The Esoterics is a Seattle-based vocal ensemble that is dedicated to performing and perpetuating contemporary *a cappella* choral settings of poetry, philosophy, and spiritual writings from around the world.

While cultivating artistic expression and cultural understanding among its singers and audience alike, The Esoterics aspires to reflect the beauty, power, and significance that are inherent in the music of our time.

# E R I C B A N K S

As a conductor, composer, clinician, vocalist, linguist, and ethnomusicologist, Eric Banks has garnered significant acclaim as one of the most creative and compelling choral directors in the United States for his unwavering commitment to new music for unaccompanied voices. In 1992, Eric founded The Esoterics, a professional-caliber chamber chorus in Seattle whose mission is to perform and perpetuate contemporary choral music beyond the scope of the established *a cappella* canon. After completing his BA in Composition at Yale University in 1990, Eric relocated to Seattle to study in the departments of Choral Studies and Music Theory at the University of Washington. His MM thesis (1992) is a performance edition of *Dixit Dominus* by Chiara Margarita Cozzolani; his MA thesis (1995) is a postmodern analysis of Arvo Pärt's *Credo*; and his DMA dissertation (1996) surveys the choral music of Mexican composer and Aztec ethnomusicologist Carlos Chávez. In 1997, at the conclusion of his graduate study, Banks traveled to Sweden as a Fulbright Scholar and Lois Roth Fellow in order to learn more about its contemporary choral culture. While in Stockholm, Eric performed with several ensembles, including the Swedish Radio Choir and the Eric Ericson Chamber Choir. In his music, Eric is drawn to ideas that are 'esoteric' in origin, and chooses to express concepts that are undiscovered, under-represented, or not easily decipherable to a wider audience. As a composer, Banks has been able to combine his love of poetry, foreign language, classical civilization, social justice, comparative religion, and the natural sciences to create a growing repertoire of new works for *a cappella* chorus. Several of Banks' commissioned works have been recorded by The Esoterics, and can be found on CDs released on the Terpsichore label. Eric was a visiting scholar at the Royal Conservatory of Music and Swedish National Radio in Stockholm, as well as at the Cama Oriental Institute in Mumbai, India. Winner of the 2010 *Dale Warland Singers Commission Award* from Chorus America and the American Composers Forum, Eric has received composition and research grants from 4Culture, the Aaron Copland Fund for Music, Artist Trust, the Atwood Foundation, New Music USA, the San Francisco Arts Commission, Seattle City Artists, the Washington State Arts Commission, and three “creativity” grants from the National Endowment for the Arts. His upcoming premieres include pieces for the International Federation for Choral Music, the Taipei Philharmonic Chorus, and the Vancouver Chamber Choir. Eric lives in Seattle with David Gellman, his husband of 25 years (who is also The Esoterics' graphic design guru). You can read more about Eric's work on his own webpage: [www.ericbanks.com](http://www.ericbanks.com). Eric is a member of ASCAP.

# THE ESOTERICS

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The Esoterics' continued success as an arts organization is directly related to you and your generosity.

If you are committed to the future of the choral art, then please consider supporting The Esoterics: invite friends to our performances, purchase our CDs, or make a tax-deductible contribution to the group. Thank you!

If you would like to receive information about future concerts, or are interested in volunteering, please contact us:

The Esoterics | 1815 24<sup>th</sup> Avenue | Seattle WA 98122-3014 | 206.551.1379 | [info@TheEsoterics.org](mailto:info@TheEsoterics.org)

The Esoterics would like to acknowledge our generous rehearsal and concert venues,  
as well as their staff, for their contributions to The Esoterics' success this year:

Mary Palmer, Tom Kirkland, and the entire parish at Queen Anne Christian Church in Seattle

The Reverend Samuel Torvend, Music Director Paul Tegels,  
and Parish Administrator Deborah Breneman at Christ Episcopal Church in Tacoma

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# The atlas of the way

Libretto by Forrest Pierce

after *Mantiq at-Tair*

(*The conference of the birds*)

by Farid ud-Din Attar (1145-1221)

The nine main choral movements of this "atlas" are denoted by Roman numerals. They depict:

*The road-weary gathering of birds begs of the Hoopoe to describe the journey ahead. The Hoopoe obliges.*

The eight interstitial movements for soloists ("the sobbets of the rare small bird") are denoted by Arabic numerals, and describe:

*By the fire at night, with whispers echoing off the canyon walls and within the hearts of the gathered birds, the Hoopoe holds an intimate conversation on the nature of beauty, the heart, and deep knowing. Words become echoes, memory, shadow, longing and at last, love.*

## I. A prayer map for birds

[couplets 3224ff]

Heat  
Dust  
Our skulls  
scarred  
from  
prayer  
on  
hot  
rocks.

Hoopoe,  
you've  
been there  
before.

How far?  
How long?

"Seven valleys,  
flooded, dusty, mudded,  
rocky, swamped, frozen, blazing  
stand between us  
and the great gate.

Then the ocean  
may swallow  
your small  
drop of rain.

### 1. The mirror of the heart

[couplet 1115]

If you love the beauty of your friend  
Find it mirrored in your heart.

## II. The valley of farawayfaring

[couplets 3234ff]

Years  
will be spent in constant  
effort, grief, striving.

Give up the world,  
your power,  
possessions,  
to cross through the valley  
of the farawayfaring.  
First empty your hands,  
then your heart,  
so that light may  
enter in.

When that  
wine touches your tongue,  
you will thirst for an ocean  
with suddenly parched lips.  
One step forward,  
and the thousand-mile path  
becomes visible.  
One hint of joy,  
and a thousand sorrows become clear.  
This valley is where  
comfort is left behind.  
Choose instead  
struggle  
and effort.

### 2. The cloth of the world

[couplet 1116]

If the Simorgh shows its beauty  
costumed with the cloth of this world,  
you can ken that sun by the shade it makes.

## III. The valley of lovestruckness

[couplets 3333ff]

The valley of lovestruckness  
is a sea of fire—  
and as like draws like,  
a pilgrim who burns with passion  
can swim therein.  
Caution bars the door  
to those who,  
shamed by their desire,  
stand timid  
on the smoking shore.

But we who make  
no distinction between  
faith and heresy,  
doubt and certainty,  
goodness and badness,  
we are neither and both,  
indifferent and  
on fire. We will swim  
in furnace.

Don't dishonor love  
with some tepid  
half-heart promise,  
with hypocrisy  
and timid waffling—  
steal,  
tryst,  
fling,  
risk it all on one flickering.

Leave mind and reason  
there in the dirt of justification—  
they have no place  
in love.

Behind the veil,  
its particles  
spark and crack,  
in a dance no reason  
will ever see.  
If you cannot  
risk all for the agony  
of desire,  
then turn back—  
we will leave you  
to your dry desert  
of intellect  
and theology.

Choose to be a fish  
on a beach  
within reach  
of the sea.  
Risk all  
in want  
of wet.

### 3. Within the within

[couplet 1117]

That face shines, sovereign,  
A sun within the within: its palace is there.  
All awareness radiant in every atom.

## IV. The valley of kenning

[couplets 3477ff]

Next,  
a valley of knowing  
into the hidden meaning  
of things and ways;  
Every soul walks  
it differently.  
The station of each  
rises or falls as it needs to.  
A thousand roads, and each one  
fits a single soul's passage.  
The insect can't  
ken the migration  
of elephants—  
nor fly faster than  
the swift wind.  
Your progress  
is your own.

One belongs in the mosque,  
One belongs in the shrine of idols;  
above those clouds  
each wanderer is welcome  
in the sunlit  
upper air.  
This world that felt  
like a furnace will be  
sweet as dreams,  
and true essence  
will shine.

Then we will see  
beyond skin, beyond bone,  
to the marrow.  
and from the depth of each  
will be revealed  
the face we hankered for—  
The friend, the beloved.

A hundred thousand secrets  
will whisper when that  
great face  
removes its veils.

#### 4. A thirty-bird shadow

[couplets 1118-1119]

A panoply of forty birds, or thirty,  
is still only the casting of its shadow—  
Shadows and thirty-birds are one.  
All you see is Hu, there is no two.

#### V. The valley of enouging

[couplets 3578ff]

Then the valley of enouging.  
Nothing to discover, describe or declaim.  
From such sufficing roars  
a wind so cold it razes plains.  
The seas become small as a puddle  
the planets a single pebble  
the heavens, dead still.  
the hells, cracked ice.  
The ant might eat a hundred horses  
the crow an entire caravan.

Angels ache so Adam (*peace*) is made  
extinctions gather as Noah (*peace*)  
hammers infants, dead,  
lead Moses (*peace*) to Sinai  
a thousand yokes enlighten Jesus (*peace*)  
countless mirages lift Muhammad  
(*peace be upon him*) to heaven

New, old; act, don't—

The burning of the whole world's heart—  
brief as dreams.

The plunging of a thousand souls  
into the flood— a drop drips.

A hundred thousand sleeping heads—  
sunlit dust.

The bare bones of the stars scatter—  
leaf leaves tree.

End of everything everywhere—  
a lame ant in a pothole.

Earth and heaven blown apart—  
sand underfoot.

Human and djinn gone for good—  
a fleck of rain.

All earth's creatures crumbled—  
a shed hair.

Part, whole, all destroyed—  
one thin twig.

If all the nine humming spheres  
ground to silence,  
it would be the sea  
as it lost  
one  
drop.

#### 5. Simply step beyond

[couplets 1120-1121]

So: you can go looking  
for the union of shade and sun,  
or simply step beyond the silhouette  
into the royal court: the core of the real.

#### VI. The valley of onement

[couplets 3694ff]

Onement is the next valley to face:  
you do not even do the Only,  
nor do you do the you.  
All heads rise  
from the same shirt—  
neither many nor few,  
but One,  
*Qul Hu.*

Cardinal, Ordinal, Nominal,  
United, Singular, Only,  
are All One, *Allah.*

Before eternity's beginning  
and after its end,  
outside the limit  
and inside the center—  
How could there be anything between?

Nothing is One, and this nothing is One.  
Don't say two: there is no you to do.

#### 6. Ask the dark

[couplet 1122]

Ask the dark, and the dark will ask back—  
If you lag in the vague halfness of its cast  
shadows, it cannot be caught.

#### VII. The valley of wonderstruckness

[couplets 3801ff]

The wadi of wonderstruckness  
waits for you, and with it  
twinge, pang, sting,  
grief, ache, unease.

Each breath sighs fire,  
Each sigh a cutlass blade,  
Each cut an eager breathing  
burning both day and night.  
Blood weeps woe from  
the roots of every hair,  
frostburned and firebitten.

You have lost even the path:  
Shocked, a shell.  
Found, dumb.  
Slap-happy drunk  
on haymaker punches  
of flabbergast and agog.

The word One written within  
is nowhere to be read—  
Self is lost, no-self is lost,  
Lost itself: at last lost.  
If they asked, then,  
"Are you there? Or here?  
Are you hidden or seen?  
Are you dying or not yet born?  
Are you both or neither,  
or neither both nor neither?  
O You, are you you?"

Say,  
"I don't know yes,  
I don't know no.  
With whom I am in love  
I don't not know.  
a heart full of empty  
not doubt not belief  
not a ruin of love,  
not a garden of grief."

#### 7. Ask the dark

[couplet 1123]

A single swinging of that great gate  
will show the star that's in every dusk.  
Then the shade fades forever into sun.

#### VIII. The valley of noughtness

[couplets 3941ff]

Speak? Moot.  
Meet Nought.  
Forget, limp,  
deaf, dunce.  
Sense? Snuff.

One Sun  
ate your shade.  
Surf will warp  
glass seas:  
waves change  
future, past—  
Both worlds.

A shipwreck  
lost, rests.  
Heart drifts  
calm, deep.  
It knows  
overthrow,  
undertow,  
when at last  
It comes back.

Step One  
must come first.  
Miss this?  
No next.  
Most miss  
the first—  
they never  
know Nought,  
They remain  
naught but rock.



Flame burns  
both twig  
and incense  
to black ash.  
That doesn't  
mean they're  
the same.

Plumb ocean  
with lead—  
it sinks, and  
won't come  
out, damned  
spot.

But stop,  
drip one  
pure drop,  
and it,  
being nothing,  
becomes the vast  
clean sea."

## 8. Same sun, self, same [couplet 1124]

Same sun, self, same.  
Peace. See.

## IX. An invitation to fledge [couplets 4135ff]

Our heads droop low,  
Hoopoe.  
We at last know  
that our weak arms  
could not draw that bow.

No one could cheat,  
think, speak, sing  
their way to the goal.

Some will drown,  
some will die drinking.  
Some will kill,  
some be murdered.  
Some will starve,  
some will eat it all,  
and die of another hunger.

Some, seeing beauty,  
will linger like  
ants in amber.

"Yes, friends,  
now you know.  
You may burn by sun  
or leave your ghosts  
to snow:

The path is narrow.

Wake your  
wings.

Go."

## A brief glossary of traditional terms used in *The atlas of the way*

**Allah:** (Arabic)

The Only Being, that which is beyond all conception, and contains all qualities and their opposites.

**Allahu Ahad, Allahu as-Samad:** (Arabic)

from *Surah 112, al-Ikhlās*.

"Allah is One, Allah is the eternal Refuge"

**Hu, Huwwe:** (Arabic)

"He." Believed by some to be derived from the ancient Semitic verb "to be," "Hu" is a crucial Sufi sound-marker for verbalizing the experience of the source and goal of existence. NB: "Huwwe" is Levantine (Shami) Arabic, and is used here instead of "Huwa" of Classical Arabic.

**La ilaha illa'llahu:** (Arabic)

"There is no Deity but Allah." Interpretively,

"There is no Reality but the One Reality."

**Qul Hu:** (Arabic)

from *Surah 112, al-Ikhlās*.

"Say He." More linguistically revealing, "Say the Isness."

More deeply, "Carve That Which Is into your heart."

**Sohbet:** (Turkish)

A spiritual conversation between Shaykh and Murid.

**Wadi:** (Arabic and Farsi)

An arroyo or coulee, a desert valley carved by intermittent streams or floods. A central metaphor used by Attar to describe a maqam (or station) of the Sufi path.

**Ya Hayy Ya Haqq:** (Arabic)

"O Ever-living, O Utter Truth." Two of the most beautiful names of Allah, traditionally recited as a pair.

## The names of the seven valleys

The problem is this: traditional English translations of the maqamat used by Attar draw on words that are broadly used for numerous meanings, concepts, and contexts, and are therefore imprecise. Saying that *mahhabat* (the name of the second valley) is "Love," for example, discounts the distinction between numerous practices, forms and flavors of love that are among the most important spiritual tools of tasawwuf. The English word's ubiquity also can trivialize the Love of which we're speaking, implying that the station of mahhabat is simply the state of "feeling" love, or "being in" love. Both are wonderful, and sacred, and yet they are elements of a much larger set to which we refer. I used the uncommon English word "**lovestruckness**" so as to have the potential for it to be associated only with the Sufi station, in much the same way that Buddhist terms like *loving-kindness*, *mindfulness*, or *buddhanature* are English neologisms associated almost entirely with a specific Buddhist concept. **Lovestruckness** is jawdropping love-overwhelm you never forget, that breaks all reason, that dismantles your personality, your ethics, your ego structures. It makes you anew, breaks you anew, soaks your heart in lamp oil and strikes a match. From there, you can learn forgiving love, healing love, vigilant love, passionate love, beneficent, merciful, compassionate loves, as well as the exacting love of the physician who can dispassionately remove the thorn from the lion's paw in order to bring about healing.

In the same way, the first valley, *talab* became "**farawayfaring**," a portmanteau implying both immeasurable, unpredictable distance and duration, as well as the difficulty of traveling so far and long. This works better for me than "Quest," which seems like an Arthurian hero's journey. A *talib* (one in the station of talab) is not a hero. Nor is "seeking" adequate in my understanding, as the *talib* is not just seeking but learning to seek, partly by an alchemy of humility, diligence, failure, and everyday life, but mostly by the grace of Allah (swt).

Gnosis, the common translation of the third valley, is a rarefied Christian loanword from Greek, and seemed too philosophically codified to refer to *ma'rifat*. I settled on the rare verb "to ken" as a way to capture the knowing of something bone-deep. That a "**kenning**" is itself a poetic device of Anglo-Saxon and Norse poetry—to illuminate not merely the name of a thing, but to say what it is—was a further encouragement for the term. To quote the great writer Terry Pratchett, "Taint what a horse looks like, it's what a horse be." **Ma'rifat** for me thrives as the nouning of a verb, an ongoing activity of the great ken.

Scholars and translators (and of course I, myself) have struggled with *istighna*, the third valley, a station related to the Most Beautiful Name of Allah "al-Ghaniyy." Its sufficiency is so selfsame that even naming it is overkill. Sufi Shaykhs have told me that the ancient semitic root G-N, blooming to Gh-N-Y in Arabic, has the root meaning of a garden enclosure. The English word "enough" is a close cognate, and when gerunded into "**enoughing**" can point toward a station in which one's process of experiencing sufficiency is continuous and ongoing. The whimsical quality of its construction might also gently and beneficently undermine our penchant for the superfluous naming of things.

With *tawhid*, the central premise and reality of Islam and *tasawwuf*, I must admit failure in translation. Unity, Oneness, Unicity, Onliness, Singularity, and all the other English words I explored are either specific qualities of One, or so generic and imprecise as to cause confusion. Simply calling it "One" encourages cardinality. "Oneness" implies kinship to New Age teachings that are routinely trivialized in popular culture and present a barrier to understanding. Nott tackled this by qualifying Unity as "Pure Unity". Avery took a similar tack, "Absolute Unification." But anything that requires two words cannot be *tawhid*, except in the way that two is itself a multiple of one (to paraphrase Ibn Arabi). I find *tawhid* to be a term akin to "Zen," which must be its own translation, which is another way of me saying "I give up." Thankfully, Islam means submission. Nevertheless, I settled on "**onement**" as a unique Anglicism that—if it fails at denoting *tawhid*—can nevertheless connote it without excessive confusion.

*Hairat*, that exquisite station of awe, seems far from the traditional English translation of "bewilderment," in that there is little "awesomeness" in its fabric. *Yirat* (the Hebrew version of this old semitic word) is commonly translated as "Fear of the Lord." But *hairat* is not just fear in the way we use that word today. I'm fond of Avery's "Dire Amazement," though I wanted a single word. Thunderstruck is a great word for this, though associated with an AC/DC song, and too specifically meteorological. I playfully chose "**wonderstruckness**" to imply awe, fascination, confusion, and immobilizing overwhelm, and to align this *maqam* with *Lovestruckness*, valley two.

The last *wadi* of Attar's great atlas of the journey is *fana*, a commonplace Sufi word that is entirely uncommon in nature. I'm a fan of De Tassy's *le dénuement*, or "destitution". I wonder if this is where Nott, Darbandi/Davis and Avery came up with the addition of "poverty" to "nothingness," for destitution does have this modern connotation of the absence of material wealth. "Spiritual Poverty" is a concept aligned with Christian traditions, though some use it to mean different states entirely. I see the etymology of "destitution" (literally the absolute removal of all place, station and trapping) as being very much *fana*; but that's not the same as its association with "poverty" in modern English. Another common translation, "Annihilation", has violent implications, though it really means "brought to nothingness." It was from here that the notion of zeroing-out the self entered the conversation. I chose the construction "**noughtness**" instead of "moitness" to convey absence without negation.

In his poetic description of *fana*, Attar hints at a further stage typically held to be inexplicable, that of *baqa*, a kind of "coming back" after the complete dissolution of self. What is it? What is it like? Can't say. Hang out with a real Shaykh long enough and you'll see it in action—it looks like a sane human being. The Hoopoe lives there.

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