Wisdom from
Shams of Tabriz

I shall not place you in my heart
For you may get hurt by its wounds.
I won’t keep you in my eyes
For I may belittle you and expose you to the ridicule of common men.
I will hide you inside my soul,
not in my heart or in my eyes,
so that you may become one with my breath.

Rumi lovers, spiritual seekers, and devotees of the mystical path will meet this little book of wisdom and mystical secrets with enthusiasm.

At long last, here is an accessible introduction to the teachings of Rumi’s teacher and inspiration, Shams of Tabriz. Included in this illuminating and charming volume are both a biographical sketch of the great Sufi teacher and mystic and a new translation of more than three hundred of his core teachings that bring into fresh focus the meaning and mysteries of life and love.

There are many books on Rumi and many translations of his works, yet most readers are largely unaware of the genesis of Rumi’s mystical beliefs. Shams (his name in Arabic means “the sun”) was the catalyst that converted Rumi, resolute and ascetic cleric and teacher, into Rumi, the passionate disciple of the religion of love. Shams was the agent of the propulsive mystical energy that transformed Rumi into the ecstatic poet.
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In the 21st century, Mowlânâ Jalal ad-Din Balkhi, to give Rumi his full name, is probably the world’s most read poet, even in the United States and despite the fact that he lived more than eight hundred years ago. Yet relatively little is known outside academia about Rumi’s own spiritual tutor and source of inspiration, Mohammad ibn-e Ali ibn-e Malekdâd Tabrizi, known better as Shams of Tabriz.

Shams, an Arabic word that means the sun, was the catalyst that converted the rather resolute and ascetic Rumi, the cleric and teacher, into Rumi, the passionate disciple of the religion of love. He was the agent of the propulsive mystical energy that transformed Rumi the reticent into Rumi the ecstatic poet.
Maryam Mafi’s wonderful new book, *The Little Book of Mystical Secrets*, helps to redress this imbalance by shedding light on the life of Shams, and equally importantly, sharing his writings with us.

The enchanting, exuberant poems of Rumi have passed from mystic to mystic and from devotee to believer, first by word of mouth, then in print, and now in audio and visual recordings. These poems and the familiar stories have journeyed through lands from Morocco to Indonesia, from the Near East to the heart of Europe and on to the Americas, first resting at medieval taverns and then at modern khâneghâhs, the friary-like refuges for Sufi *darvisches*. Men and women of all backgrounds and faiths have been enraptured by the love and positive energy that coruscates from these poems. For centuries, followers of Rumi have celebrated his legacy as they sing and whirl and dance, reciting his poems.

In the 21st century, the gatherings of his followers are no longer just an intimate affair but rather take the shape of dynamic meditations in the gym, raves in clubs, or shows on the catwalks during the New York fashion week. However, those who throughout the ages have carried his message on palimpsests from the old palaces and shrines of the East to the university and town halls across the world to the pages of today’s Facebook and Twitter still ardently celebrate and proselytize his religion of love.
Rumi is mostly known in the West as the author of the long narrative poem, *Masnavi-ye Ma'navi* (meaning “spiritual couplets”), that at more than twenty-five thousand double lines of rhyming verse is almost five times the length of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Yet even this magnum opus is dwarfed by Rumi’s much longer, condensed masterpiece, *Divan of Shams-e Tabrizi*, a forty thousand-verse collection of lyrical odes, quatrains, eulogies, and more. The most famous section of this great divan is the collection of more than three thousand *ghazals*, or lyrics, that are often described as ebullient hymns to love.

Authorship of ghazals are generally identified by the appearance of the actual name or the distinctive sobriquet of the poet in the last line of the poem, known as the *takhallus*. In the case of Rumi, the name that appears on the title page of the *Divan* and the takhallus signature on more than 80 percent of these ghazals, is not his own but that of Shams al-Din Tabrizi, the *Sun of the Religion from Tabriz*, known universally as Rumi’s beloved spiritual mentor, teacher, and soulmate. It is as if the poet’s identity is merged with, and dissolved into, that of this guiding light, who had most probably died well before the completion of the *Divan*.

It is difficult to separate the poetic presence of the master and the pupil in these poems, as Shams and Rumi often speak with one and the same voice. But who was
Shams? Who was this scorching Sun that rose out of Tabriz and, in a period of less than four years, enthralled all who were accepted into his circle in the central Anato-
lian town of Konya?

The ruptures caused in the tight-knit community of students and followers of Rumi in Konya by the sudden arrival of Shams, and the changes it brought to Rumi’s style of teaching and manner of worship, are well doc-
umented and analyzed in numerous books and articles that need not be repeated here. What we can revisit, how-
ever, are Rumi’s own reflections on this transformation. Rumi encapsulates how he had changed, in this poem, when posthumously he tells Shams:

I was an ascetic, you turned me into a bard
You made me the ringleader of revels and imbibber
    of wine
I was the noble man of prayer
You turned me into the teasing stock of kids on the
    street

There are endless references by Rumi, in page after page of his poetry, to the scorching, burning, searing effects of Shams on his life, the most memorable of which is how he summed up his own life:

Fruits of my existence are but three:
I was raw, I became cooked, and I burnt.
It is surprising how relatively little is known about Shams of Tabriz, considering the reach and magnitude of the influence he exercised on his circle. However, the best clues to the character of the man are woven into the poems of Mowlânâ Jalal ad-Din Balkhi Rumi himself. In story after story in the Spiritual Couplets, Rumi alludes to his encounters with Shams and to the endless conversations and discussions and confrontations they had.

In book 1 of the Masnavi, while developing the tale of the “King and the Handmaiden,” Rumi describes his meeting with Shams, defining the restlessness and frustration of waiting for someone you long for but are incapable of identifying until they arrive. He describes that thrilling Damascene moment, when you recognize that person with certainty and realize that you had been expecting them all along, with their exact attributes and familiar features. In this passage, Rumi relates the appearance of Shams in the guise of a sage and otherworldly physician whose arrival was foretold in a dream. Here, the poetic narrator recounts what the King saw:

When the hour came and dawn broke  
The Sun rose from the East and scorched the stars  
He saw a man, a sage with gravitas  
A Sun encircled by shadows  
The vision the king had seen in his dream
Was now apparent in the guest’s face
The king stepped forth ahead of the servants
Welcoming his guest from the unseen:
Both of them seasoned mariners
Two souls fused together seamlessly
He said: “you are my beloved, not she
Alas, one thing leads to another in this world”
You are my Mohammad and to you I’ll be Omar
I will tighten my belt to serve you.

Rumi relies heavily on many Koranic and Islamic texts to highlight the ideas he explores and relates in the Masnavi. So much so that Jami, the 15th-century Persian Sufi poet, referred to the Masnavi as the Koran in the Persian tongue. In several Islamic texts, God is at times referred to as the “sun framed in shadow,” as if he is a vision hidden in plain sight. In many other instances, Rumi elevates Shams to celestial levels, and, in his companionship, he sees glimpses of the divine as in the following ghazal that Rumi opens with the words, “once again that reigning sun has risen to the sky”; it concludes, “that Sovereign Supreme had shut the door firm, / but clothed in cassock of mortality, today he has come through the door.”

Based on accounts left by the companions of Rumi and his contemporary—or later—biographers, Mowlânâ
Shams, as he was often addressed in these texts, was a well-versed, highly educated, and knowledgeable peripatetic mystic, always clad in black felt robes and, according to Aflaki, “handsome of face as a young man.” These accounts also describe him as a mordant teacher and an authoritarian master.

Many agree that it is Rumi’s texts that have written Shams into existence and history, but what other sources can shed light on this man, and what do we know or have of Shams’s own writings?

In the opening chapter of this book, Maryam Mafi, who has devoted most of her writing career to translating the poetry of Rumi, gives an extended outline of the Maghâlât, or Discourses of Shams-e Tabriz. In The Little Book of Mystical Secrets, she coalesces much of the information available about the life of Shams, his beliefs, pupils, and travels. Mafi’s beautiful and clear translations of the Maghâlât make Shams’s aphorisms and prescient observations accessible to a wider readership and allow us to glimpse the philosophy and views of this enigmatic figure.

From the vignettes of Shams’s writings, translated by Mafi, we learn that often it was he who would plant the seed of an idea or throw a hyperbole into the mix that would inspire and engage Rumi’s imagination, who in

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turn developed these anecdotes into philosophical narratives or rapturous songs. For example, Shams says: “What a joy to see the elephant in its entirety! Though each limb is amazing, but to see the whole, carries another joy!” And we see this developed into the “Story of the Elephant in the Dark” in book 3 of the *Masnavi*.

Throughout history and literature, there are many examples of intense emotional and intellectual intimacy between two men, framed in a chaste, nonsexual but highly affectionate bond, that continue to fascinate us in modern times, from Socrates and Plato to Horatio and Hamlet, from Emerson and Thoreau to Robert Friedland and Steve Jobs, and even Woody and Buzz in *Toy Story*. These “bromances,” friendships that complement and complete two men, have resulted in writings, creations, and viewpoints that have shaped our understanding of the world.

Perhaps the closest comparison to the relationship between Shams and Rumi is that of Socrates and Plato, especially given the similarities in the age gaps of mentor and devotee, as well as distaste for material wealth by both Socrates and Shams, their refusal to follow conventions and fit into the mores of their time, and the way in which each ultimately achieved immortality through the writings of their disciple. Finally, the brutal manner
of both men’s deaths has also added to the pathos that frames the image of these two teachers: the execution of Socrates and, in all likelihood, the murder of Shams.

In his biographies of Sufi saints, *Nafahat al-Ens, Breaths of Fellowship*, the poet Jami poignantly recounts the last meeting of Shams and Rumi in the year 1248 AD; here in Reynold Nicholson’s translation:

One evening Shaikh Shams ud-din and Maulana (Jalal ad-Din) were sitting in private, when somebody outside desired the Shaikh to come forth immediately. He rose, saying to Maulana, “I am called to my death.” After a long pause, “Verily,” said Maulana, “His is the whole creation and the empire thereof. Blessed be God, the Lord of all creatures!”

Seven conspirators were lying in ambush and fell upon him with knives, but the Sheikh uttered so terrible a cry that they all were dumbfounded. One of them was ’Ala ud-Din, Maulana’s son, who bore the brand of “He is not of thy people.” When they recovered their senses, they saw nothing except a few drops of blood. From that day to the present time no trace of that spiritual monarch has appeared.
Mowlânâ Jalal ad-Din Balkhi Rumi wrote his most beautiful poetry after the death of Shams of Tabriz, who vanished just as mysteriously as he had appeared. For years Rumi tried to explicate the nature of his longing for his beloved, trustful friend whose presence is felt throughout the collection of verses that bear his name, *Divan of Shams-e Tabrizi*. Rumi acknowledged this love with a poetic bow to the memory of Shams, who showed him how “to look at the night and see the day; to look at the thorn and see the rose.”

Robert Browning talked of pouring floods of love into the world only to hide himself; a rather apt description of what Shams did. Rumi channeled this love into his poetry, and many centuries later, E. E. Cummings, the 20th-century American poet, wrote that “now the ears of my ears are awake and now the eyes of my eyes are opened.” Cummings’s words perfectly capture the essential message that is the legacy of Shams and Rumi.

In his last ghazal, dictated to his son on his deathbed, Rumi finally accepts the call of Shams. Once again, he refers to a vision in a dream and declaims:

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Last night in a dream, I saw an old man in the alley-way of love
He beckoned me in a gesture and said: “begin your journey, come our way.”
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A LITTLE BOOK OF MYSTICAL SECRETS
And with these words, he reaffirms the bedrock of humanity’s deliverance, that the Kingdom of Heaven comes near through Love.

Narguess Farzad, senior tutor in the Faculty of Languages and Culture at the University of London