

Al-Shadhili

Note: Al-Shadhili was a Sufi mystic who—they say—invented coffee in order to stay awake for *dhikr*, a repetitive praising of God through the Islamic proclamation of faith (*shahada*).

Unfocused by twelve hours of *dhikr* sung,
Al-Shadhili, eyebags like pinned tent flaps,
Stopped chanting *shahada*, stood-down his lips,
And, returning to, removed himself from among
The muttered ecstasy of their desert masjid,
His praying brothers' eyes so shut that under the lid
No self could sit and block the road to God.

Through moon-lit fatigue, he could hear them singing still.
In that air, the droning hum swirled the stars and made
Heaven of the sands. Once-pious thoughts strayed
To the notes alone, saw no godly meaning in each trill
But ecstasy in its mere sound; a spiritual delight
That was animal only. He awoke again to holy night,
Shocked that half-dream had swept him from God.

Confronting the final temptation, sleep,
Al-Shadhili shuffled brown beans from a sack.
Grooved desert-horse hooves, ridged like a camel's back,
Pattered on the copper base and made a heap.
He picked up a sandstone, ground them into divine
Powder and drank through his nose dry Arabian wine.
With this in a drink, he thought, I can focus on God.

Like sun-dried leather, he watched the water tan
And brew clouds in which an oaky pleasure hung.
In a sip, a full, bitter rapture lapped on his tongue.
It whirled with the music, like soft wind in a dune.
He tipped out the dregs and watched the sand bruise,
Hellish black, which accused him: was God his excuse
For coffee, or was coffee his way to God?