

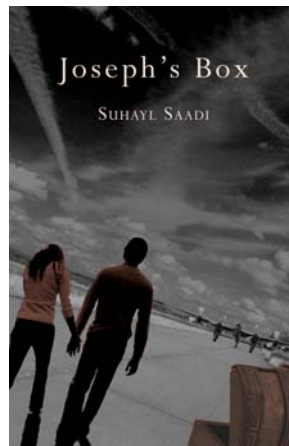
Suhayl Saadi KAABA

An extract from his latest novel, *Joseph's Box*
(Ullapool, Scotland: Two Ravens Press, 2009)



Born in Yorkshire, England, in 1961, Suhayl Saadi is an award-winning Glasgow-based novelist and stage and radio dramatist whose first mainstream novel, *Psychoraag* (Edinburgh: Black & White Publishing, 2004), was short-listed for the James Tait Black Memorial Prize of 2005. The novel has also appeared in French translation. His short story collection, *The Burning Mirror* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2001) was shortlisted for the Saltire First Book Prize. Other books include *The White Cliffs* (2004) and, under the pen-name Melanie Desmoulins, *The Snake* (London: Velvet, 1997). Most recently, he has published a major new novel, *Joseph's Box*, from which this extract has been taken. For further information on Suhayl's writing, see <www.suhaylsaadi.com>. Saadi's essay, "A Beautiful Chaos," appeared in the *Messenger* 14.1 (2005): 45-9.

"I deploy the rhythms and ambiances of other languages in the text. Urdu, Arabic and Persian employ multiple narrative and symbolic levels – this is one of the reasons why poetry written in these tongues is so difficult to translate effectively – and I try to employ some of that in my writing in English. I am attempting, then, to shift the gravitational possibilities of the English language, again, in terms of potential thought-processes. To some extent, it's a neurological thing, a matter of bio-chemistry. Sometimes this is done overtly, in almost Joycean fashion, through the use of word-play, neologisms, etc., as can be seen extensively in *Psychoraag*, sometimes with subtlety, as predominantly is the case in *Joseph's Box*, where, except in climactic passages, it remains an under-current." <www.3ammagazine.com/3am/a-new-literary-form-is-born-an-interview-with-suhayl-saadi>.



Kaaba

The chamber was square and all of its windows had been covered with black cloth, each one outlined with a thin border of light. The room was empty – except for a circular wall of bricks, some four feet in height and perhaps ten across, at its centre. Raised over the opening thus formed was a thick wooden beam from which was suspended a ladder. She moved closer. A breeze blew back her hair and clothes. The air smelled of spring, primavera, bahar. She leaned over what must have been either a well or else a tower of some sort. But a well, up here on the second floor? Wells were set in the ground, weren't they?

She remembered an old hospital in Glasgow whose entrance was on the sixth floor but whose exit lay at ground level. This house too had been built on an incline, but the hill was not steep enough, nor the house sufficiently large, to have produced such an effect. Then she remembered that the hospital was rumoured to have been built on a cholera-pit and that through the rising blue smoke of their wavering cigarettes, the night-nurses had been like storytellers.

The stone saint felt warm in her pocket. Roman Catholic attitudes were like potent bacteria: they conjured up a feverish diorama of blood and ossuary. And there was something else, too. In the cold air that issued from the opening, Zuleikha made out what she thought at first to be the sound of water lapping against the sides of the well – but no; it seemed too rhythmic for that.

At first, the temperature in the stone well was freezing and she had to button up her coat and evert the collar to prevent herself from shivering as she measured out each step on the metal rungs of the ladder that had been bolted to its side-wall. But after she had climbed down about fifteen feet or so the atmosphere began to

moderate somewhat, though she was unsure whether this was from the shelter provided by the enclosed space or from the heat generated by her own exertions. I need the exercise, she thought, as she found the muscle tone in her left calf suddenly insufficient to prevent her from wobbling just a little, so that the fingers of both hands went into a rictus around the iron of the ladder. It was more difficult climbing down than it would have been to have ascended, because while the circle of dim light at the top of the tower – was it after all a tower, she wondered – cast a little illumination from above, yet at her level she could not make out even her own hand, held up before her.

The sound of her boots on the iron echoed more loudly the further she descended, and she attributed this to some effect of physics – Newton's nth Law, no doubt, which stated that, 'In an enclosed, cylindrical vacuum, the amplitude of a sound-wave will be equal to the square of its distance from the sun'. But this was not a vacuum, otherwise she wouldn't have been able to smell that scent which lay somewhere between jasmine, cedar and sulphur. Nor would she have been able to hear the unmistakable twanging of a Jew's Harp, a marranzanu, which also had grown louder. What if I get stuck down here, she thought, in this dried-up well in a deserted villa in the middle of these barren lands? When I do not return to the massaria people will become worried, but no-one will know where to look. After a few days without water, I will grow weak and will be unable even to stand, and then slowly I will become delirious and lose consciousness. My breathing will become stertorous, just as my mother's did in the hours before she died, and like Archie McPherson's breathing has been for months on end. No, she thought: that is inaccurate, unscientific. Nasrin Zeinab had died of heart failure, part of the

multiple organ collapse brought on by disseminated cancer. Her lungs had become flooded with her own serum, the blood minus the cells. But all of Zuleikha's science could neither create nor destroy even the tiniest atom. Archie was dying from a type of neoplasm which had been triggered by the skins of the big ships, a meso-tumour which grew like a giant red spider. It was filling up the darkness of his lung tree with its deformity, its fast-growing cells whose nuclei had been programmed from their inception to do nothing but destroy, even to the extent of causing their own demise. There was logic, but no sentience.

She kept on going, a few more steps, a few more feet down into the earth. Every so often, her hand would brush against something soft and she would recoil, imagining that it was the head of some fungal growth or else that of a lizard or worse. The tactility became more prominent as she descended and seemed to comprise two distinct qualities of sensation. One was like touching a vein, a dead person's vein, the denervated blood vessel of a corpse halfway through dissection. Cold, cylindrical, solidified. The other was more like a thick sugar paper redolent of primary school. But after a while, there was only the irregular surface of the stone and the smooth iron of the ladder. That, and her own heartbeat. She was proceeding by touch and smell. And by the sound of the Jew's harp.

Again, she wondered what would happen if she got trapped down here. Down in the well, she thought, perhaps I would be forced to begin drinking my own urine. But the mineral balance of urine was wrong and anyway, with less and less input, its production would slow and then stop and the total lack of water would cause the cells of her organs to cease functioning. Chemicals would build up and would poison even more cells, including those of the muscle of her heart. Zuleikha became obsessed by this thought and, as sweat broke out under her armpits and along the whip-line formed by the join between her neck and skull, she found herself impelled to follow its trajectory.

Wrapped in its clothes, my cadaver slowly would desiccate; the cheeks would implode; the belly, bloated with anaerobic microbial activity, first would burst open and then later, partially eviscerated, would fall in; the globes of the eyes would grow opaque and then shrivel to plastic skins. If I am not eaten by rats and spiders, in death I will be propped-up against the wall, a queen of the dead, my shoulders swathed in white flowers, my gaze piercing the future, my mouth set in an inanimate grin, and from my tissues will erupt the aroma of sainthood and the aroma will fill the well, the palazzo, the countryside. And the land and my body will become one and will gather within itself, as though it were a miniature paradise, the heady reek of mint, carnations, roses and myrtle, the great and multifarious sex of spring.

Then she found herself dwelling on those women who, during the Indian Partition in the 1940s, had leapt into wells rather than be captured and gang-raped, tortured and then slaughtered. Eventually, so many bodies had piled up that they had formed a cushion of flesh, and so some women had survived the initial fall. However, because no-one had been left alive at the top – all the men having either run away or been killed (if, that is, they hadn't gone and joined some reciprocal killing gang of their own) – these women had been unable to escape. They'd sat there on top of the pile formed by their sisters, mothers, aunts, grandmas, daughters ... some already dead, others dying from their wounds, moaning, screaming, pleading, scalped, mastectomised, incontinent, broken. And eventually, in the heat of that particular August in India, in the water the bodies would have begun rapidly to putrefy, one by one to burst open at the belly and to let out the intestines and then slowly to boil, like lobsters in a pot. And amidst all this, the women closest to the top of the well would have died slowly from dehydration. The Black Hole of Calcutta. Yeah, right. People dug their own black holes and then they jumped into them. And she thought of her own visit to the big bridge. Of Alexander and the box. Had she really been suicidal? She was no longer sure.

Suddenly the rungs stopped, her foot flailed wildly, and she panicked. The noise had become loud and its wavering, bent-back notes filled up the tower so that it became hard to think straight.

She let her foot probe just a little further and then peered deep into the darkness. She realised then that in fact the darkness had become diluted ever so slightly and that the ground lay about six, or possibly seven, feet beyond the end of her boot. She climbed right down to the bottom rung and hung onto it with both hands.

But the gap had been deceptive, rather like the depth distortion produced by the water in a pool. Kicking her toes against the wall, she caused her body to swing outwards and then she let go.

Simultaneously she realised that if the bottom rung of the ladder was higher up than she was able, at maximal jump, to reach, then she would not be able to get back up again. These thoughts were cut short by her landing, which was rough and awkward. The depth had indeed been deceptive, and when she looked up again towards the tiny ring of light, Zuleikha realised that she must have just leapt about fifteen feet down from the last rung. Since she was five foot-six, this meant that, at the point of release, the ground had lain some nine and a half feet beneath the soles of her feet. No wonder she'd jarred both knees. Luckily, her boots had probably saved her ankles from being badly sprained, though she knew that sometimes the full extent of any such damage became evident only a few hours after initial injury.

She gathered herself together. She was at the foot of either a tall tower or a deep well that surely, she thought, must reach far down into the ground. The light which she had perceived earlier seemed to be coming from one side of the brick wall. The bricks felt slightly warm to the touch, but as she followed the light and knelt down, at the lower part of the wall she saw that the stonework gave way to wood. Zuleikha realised that she was pushing against a small door. There did not seem to be a handle or lever and it did not respond to her attempts to force it

open and so, stepping back a few paces, she took a run and kicked hard with the steel toe of her boot. She felt the wood splinter but still the door did not yield and so she repeated the action twice, and at the third blow it gave way and light flooded into the tower. At first, Zuleikha could see nothing for the clouds of dust and ash that her commotion had raised. The stench caught her in the centre of her chest and caused her to cough repeatedly until she felt that her head would explode. She desperately needed a drink of water. When at last the dust had subsided, she wiped the tears from her face and licked the salty liquid off the back of her hand.

Now that light had filled the tower, Zuleikha saw that from about a third of the way up the surface of the brick was veined with tendrils and small white flowers whose petals were shaped like clubs. Each flower had five – or maybe six – lobes, and exuded a scent so powerful it felt almost like a drug – a scent which seemed now to be drawn and concentrated as though through a vacuum down to where Zuleikha was standing, at the foot of the tower and on the threshold of a chamber. The music had stopped as soon as she'd blasted open the hatch. She crouched down and crawled through the aperture. She closed her eyes to avoid the dust and, as the aroma of flowers filled her brain, it was as though Zuleikha was a *lavureddu*: a receptacle in which these flowers of the night had been germinating, perhaps for years, perhaps for centuries. She remembered now. *Jasmine, chambeyli. The Queen of the Night.*

As soon as she emerged into the room, she realised that the structure down which she had been descending was neither well nor tower, but an enormous chimney whose upper portion had been removed and in whose hearth she had been standing.

'I'm Santa Claus!' she said aloud.

Her clothes were filthy and she brushed them down as well as she could. She was in a small low-ceilinged room whose walls seemed to have been whitewashed fairly recently. At the opposite

end of the room to the fire-place was a doorway from which there protruded a single brass hinge. Beyond, the space opened out into a much larger chamber – again, totally bare and with whitewashed brick walls, but at whose centre, reaching almost to the flat ceiling, there stood a pink cubic structure some twenty feet square.

The surface of the structure seemed to be peeling, so that as she walked slowly around it Zuleikha was able to make out several layers of stone at once: white, pink, bluish-grey, black. Right around the top there was a narrow band of stone into which had been carved the angular letters of a script which looked like a mixture of Greek and Kufic. She wished she could read either of them. Immediately beneath this was a broader area occupied by images coloured in pale pigments: yellow, green and purple. There were two such scenes on each side of the cube. Beneath a heavily pregnant vine she made out the figure of what she thought was Dionysus, while on another panel was Pan. Both deities were surrounded by creatures which looked like archaic horned goats, or else goat-antelopes, or perhaps muscular sheep.

But the dominant theme around the cube was that of the incarnations of Persephone, from fertility goddess to Queen of the Dead. In places, these pictures had been overlaid with other images: drawings of musicians, some in Arab clothing, others dressed like Mediaeval northern Europeans, and one even resembling a Norman knight from the Bayeaux Tapestry's depiction of the Battle of Hastings. The musicians included women and they played all manner of instruments: gitterns, oddly-shaped fiddles, bagpipes, a Jew's harp, various types of drums and tambourines, a small recorder and a single hurdy-gurdy, but most prominent and varied of all, several ouds. And, watching over the entire scene, eating couscous speckled with raisins, badams and pine nuts and no doubt listening to the music – which in ten centuries or more, never seemed to have ceased – were the great sultans: Manfredi, chess-master and Lord of the Saracens; al-mu'tazz bi-llah Roger II; and

Emperor Fredericus Secundus, the Stupor Mundi. Zuleikha wasn't sure how she knew all this stuff, but then her attention wavered and she could have sworn that at one point she saw a woman dancing between the panels, dancing through time and space as though from one agora to the next, from the time of bone and horn, through the bronze gleam of Hamilcar Barca and the gold leaf of Byzantium to the era of the three emperors and beyond. The figure shifted between the human and the non-human and from male to female. It seemed to possess no fixed structure – or rather, the fluidity of its transformation was infinite.

Further down the cube were numerous pictures of chimaerae – figures painted in ochre, sepia and pale blue – children whose fingers became waterfalls, and lute-shaped women whose hair turned into gardens of fig trees. She felt as though she was standing at the summit of one of the hills she had crossed earlier on her way to the villa. The air smelled of almond and sorb apple blossom, of asphodel and narcissus, the scents of early spring that normally were placid and understated like an English cup of tea, but which, thrown together in this enclosed space, now in the aromatic decadence of their music, quite overpowered her senses.

And she was certain that she could hear music, somewhere deep in her head. Not sound, not the noise of instruments, but something that held the quality of music, the transfiguring of form, the intersection of the physical, mathematical and spiritual that threw up windows, portals; what in another place she might have called insights, intuitive realities, illuminations. It was obvious now that this building was being painstakingly restored, its layers uncovered one by one, right down to the bare limestone. She could see the marks of tools drawn across its surface, and she knew that the work must be taking years, decades – at least, if it was being undertaken by one person, and she was certain that one person was responsible and that he had fallen in love with the building, with its walls, its arkan, its pillars and all it represented. Giuseppe Ayala, whose

grandmother's name had been Asunsi and whose father's mother's name had been Scime'.

On the walls of the room, Zuleikha began to make out the imprints – almost like silhouettes – of the symbols, aleph, beth, gimla, dalet, and then she wondered whether this might have been a burial chamber of the Marranos, the Jewish converts who sometimes had continued to practise their old religion in secret and who had been rooted out and burned here in Sicily at the hellish hands of the Spanish Inquisition. Perhaps, when persecuted, a spirit would secrete itself in airless grutti, in sea-bed jars and inside the hearts of human beings. And at times the music seemed to attain the coherence of words, so that it was as though Zuleikha was picking up an ancient radio broadcast:

...petra disprizata, cantunera di muro...

And then it sank back again into a morass of noise. And it was as though the force of the music had thrown this great stone block from out of the mouth of the Mountain of Mountains and carried it to this place where, long before the palazzu had been constructed, the cube had burned down to the very bedrock of the island.

Sweat ran into her eyes. She blinked several times, threw back her head and drew out a hankie. But instead of the hankie, there in her hand was a man. San Giuseppe ru Casteddu Nivuru, cut a thousand years ago from the very lip of Etna, from a seam of black rock, long ago cooled, that now lay deep beneath the surface, and that with God's grace had held up the wall of a sulphur mine.

The saint's right hand protruded slightly from his gown as though inviting, enticing the believer to follow him, to follow him down into the deepest shafts of the mine, the shafts into which no-one ventured any more, the mine that had been sucked into emptiness by the ghosts of those who had died beneath its yellow fumes, by the contadini who had been burned to the bone by its white-hot magma. The music was much louder now; the smell was almost palpable

and it was as though, through the music, Zuleikha could see deep into the interior of the cube. And she could see that it was filled with nothing but light, light from which she was shielded by layers of stone, paint, mosaic, stucco, by every accretion that had formed the skin of the complex polytonal organism called Sicily. The images began to move between panels so that it became impossible to attribute a particular one to a specific scene, and then the cube itself seemed to begin to move, to spin, to become almost liquid.

And then, from the substance of the cube, at a level around seven feet from the floor, eyes began to form – eyes that were black at their centres – while the smell emanating from the structure grew stronger, the music louder, until, with the density of sensation, Zuleikha felt as though she might lose consciousness altogether.

And it was the music of the wheat as it burst, full and green and speckled with carmine, through the heavy moistness of the soil, and the notes caught sharply in her throat with the pungency of zàgara. It was the music of all the earth that rose up beneath the widening sun, an octagonal music that bit her in the neck and infused her body with a delicious poison that turned the balls of her eyes upwards to gaze again at the gold and white stucco, at the vaults and shadows of statues which lay buried in the walls of this secreted oratory deep in a disused sulphur mine. Flitting along the walls, she saw the weeping shades of child-miners, the long bloody history of yellow death on this island.

And at the heart of the music there was the face of basalt black that had been cut, burning and molten, from the mouth of Mongibeddu, the fire mountain, Gibel Utlamat, and it was the face of Wali Yusuf of Sicilia, Yusuf of the great palaces, Joseph the Just, the Miraculous, the Bethrothed, Nutritor Domini, Joseph of box-makers and carpenters, of travellers and the dying, of the inner soul, the Old Man of the Lily. And behind everything was Beautiful Joseph of the Nile, the Moon of Canaan.

And the face was weeping tears of liquid sulphur, tears of rage at the priests, the bishops, the kings and at all those who burned forever in a lake of sulphur, who burned for their sins, for the life of each child they had murdered down in the tunnels of the lemon-stone tomb. The face was singing an old lament, a Scottish lament for the African's body that had been washed-up dead, white and bloated on the southern beaches of Sciacca, Licata, Pantelleria and Lampedusa; for the African who a thousand years earlier had brought irrigation, palaces, mathematics and most of the fruits of the island, but who now disembarked as, seventy years ago, Sicilians of the family classes had arrived on other shores as slaves, beggars, hookers: people with swarthy mysterious lives. Terrune. Dirt people. People of Aadam. Now it was the Africans who sold trinkets, sitting on mats in the centres of Palermo, Agrigento, Gela, Marsala, or who sold their bodies for pyramids of cocaine in the brothels of Catania, Siracusa, Ragusa, Salemi. As-salaam alaikum. Al Banurmu, Mars'Allah, Sirako, Rogos, Qalat al Nisena, Katane, Gergent. Peace and granaries. The markets of Al Madina. The people of the scirocco, peace be upon them, who bathed in the holy spring water of sacred gebbias and who brought forth revelation to the land and the sea. The Congolese, Ethiopians and Malians who nowadays were captured like bluefin tuna from the depths of the ocean; the people who swirled upwards through the chambers of death, and who now lived amongst the shit and spunk of the Vuccinia and who eeked out a living on the edges of death row vara and who were stuck in sweat-cellars, spending their lives being played shamelessly upon the fingertips of the Honourable Men, the Men of Respect who, when asked what they do, reply that they are in security, or else that they direct cars to resting places in the excessively well-protected mandamenti of Palermo.

The lament was for the intelligent goats who find ancient buried cities beneath the thrones of archbishops, for the shades of ragged children and tightly swaddled babies who drink milk from goats' udders and who sing to the flickering

dance of nache lights, and it was the song of the Lady of the Chain, of the carusi, those bones of the earth who emerge from the zulfare during only the deepest, blackest of nights to howl madrigals at the empty moon, of the penitents with bleeding heads, of the curatuli who commune with the stars and with the face of the beautiful Joseph. And all of these joined now with the grizzled emirs of Kasr Yanni and the dancing animals cut into golden sandstone and the sugar dolls of the devil as together they sang laments across the stillness of the mountains. The forgotten songs, the songs of those rushing towards death. Ad Mortem Festinamus.

And the saint was also weeping for Archibald Enoch McPherson, peace be upon him, who at that moment was sinking into a final unconsciousness, and for all the shipbuilders, roofers, plasterers and their wives and children who had been poisoned by those same lords of silver and gold who had filled the Temple with their heinous breath, with the substance of their foul sulphurous lungs, and who continued to receive great medals and honours and peaceful spiritual deaths at advanced ages with several generations garnered around them like petals, like devotees, disciples, acolytes. There were no devotees or disciples, no family at all around Archie's deathbed. Only the faded images, their lower parts half-hidden behind coloured winding-sheets, of dead lovers who danced on brass balconies, lovers who spun in the arms of the juggling spider, lovers who screamed in the music of arks and the songs of aeroplanes, the lovers who, with their bare fists, punched holes in heaven. Peace be upon heaven.

And Zuleikha reached out her hand, the bones of her fingers wrapped tightly around the black body of the saint, and she placed the saint's form upside-down in the niche which had opened up in the cube. She felt that somehow the statue had led them here, that she and Alex had been drawn to this hilly place in the heart of Sicily, to this village of San Giuseppe ru Casteddu Nivuru, to this palazzu in the middle of a sea of wheat, to this node of penance, by the power of a

face, by all the faces of Yusuf the Prophet, the Technicolour and the Black, San Giuseppe of the Night, the man who in his dark nakedness had risen from the face of the zolfara. She had been drawn here by the music of the Hebrew, the Catholic, the Muslim Yusuf. Joseph, the architectural restorer, the patron of causes lost and dying, of dead airmen, of whores, jugglers, soldiers, sufis, poets, of n'er-do-wells, of those who were lost in wells. Yusuf the Greek with his face of light. And now at last she was returning the saint to his rightful place. To the tomb that lay beneath all the layers, to the house cut in red porphyry, the crimson residence of the soul of Sultan Rujari whose blood flowed to the place where all the knowledge of the ages was stored, knowledge that awaited a new revelation, a different justice, a law that would be administered by dishonourable women.

A vision of beauty: an image of sea pigs riding untrammelled through the open ocean, of the stone skulls of ancient children, of the courses taken during the night by holy feral cats from al'Attabiya, of the dance of tornados as they tore open the skin of the ocean. And there, in the middle of the great stone cube, was the face, the body, of Daoud – of her son, Daoud. He was asleep and was nine and a half months old and his skin glowed with a perfect lustre, while his hair was cast across his forehead just as it had been in life, each strand purest gold beyond measure. It was as though he had been captured at the very moment before death, caught deep in the night in the midst of a perfect sleep in his cot, in the act of taking his last ever breath. In death he would remain immortal. His eyes perfect sapphires. Yaqut, jachitu. Yes, naturally, that's right, she thought; he was here, cut into the dry stone of Black Joseph, and not six feet under the sodden soil of the Cathcart Cemetery. His spirit resided in the arms of the saint, he played happily among the ghosts of lost carusi, he was protected and sung to as he never had been in life. No, that wasn't so: she had sung to him; she had sung sestinas till her voice had grown hoarse, till her breath had died within him. And even

after he had been taken from her, she had sung to the empty walls which once had been kissed by his shadow, had tried, through the music of her mothers, to bring him back, just for a second or two, just for the span of a single warm breath.

Zuleikha felt the music grip her body as though it were a muscle and thrust her down onto her knees and then press her flat onto her chest, so that she was prostrated like a nun or a slave. The tears burned the skin of her face, branding her with the soot and bone dust of this place, turning her face black like that of the Old Madonna. And she wept and worshipped at the same time. She wept for her mother, Nasrin Zeinab, the beautiful woman to whom she had never said goodbye and with whom it had not seemed possible to have made her peace. And she wept for her father, Daniel John, as he sank into his pool of lilies and dark whisky; for Susan who, in a long second of despair, had taken her own life; for Alexander, whose tangent would never have coincided with Zuleikha's had it not been for Susan's act of self-immolation; and for Archibald of the Blue Asbestos, her patient, the man who had started all this, the man for whom at last the box had come.

And she wept for the disarticulated skeleton of her own long-dead child, of Holy Daoud, buried seven years in the children's section of the Cathcart Cemetery among the plastic windmills and the faded streamers, the dog-eared teddies that had been propped up by strangers against the headstones of tiny graves.

And there, sprawled on the floor of the zolfara, her lips kissing the stone that had been yellowed with dust and age and the heavy tread of calloused skin, she swore obedience to Saint Joseph. She swore always to be his slave, to do his bidding, to follow the path which he had laid out – across continents, across time, faith, spirit. The ground tasted bitter, like human seed; but then she and the cube were moving together as though enveloped in a single integument and, as though through the spirit beatitude of the spider, truly they had become one.