

And that her gap-toothed whistling was the wind
One sometimes hears emitted by an overstuffed behind.
Besides, she was so lame it was her fate
To limp about lopsided and to lope with crooked gait.
I stared in disbelief, spat in disdain,
Then made my getaway into the night and pouring rain.
Lost and confused, I dashed from place to place
Like an escaping robber when the cops are giving chase,
Until the light of dawn brought a reprieve,
The city gates were opened and I was the first to leave.
Since then I've had no news of my ex-spouse,
Or, come to think of it, of that lost property—my house.

To end, a most blatant (and literal) tall tale, capped by an even taller, though horizontal, one, from a book on the dialect of my adoptive hometown. I have found no information about the

original narrator, Colonel Hilmi ibn 'Ali Ruhi, but I suspect from his name—and the comeuppance at the end of the story—that he may have been of Turkish origin.

An Iranian and a Turk met in a café. The Iranian said, "Our Shah has built a palace so tall that no one knows how tall it is."

"How many floors does it have?" the Turk asked.

"Oh, far too many to count," the Iranian answered. "But a builder dropped a hammer from the top of it two months ago, and it still hasn't reached the ground."

"Well," said the Turk, "our Sultan ordered some cucumber seeds from America and sowed them in his vegetable garden. When the cucumbers appeared, one of them started growing at a rate of 10 meters a day. The Sultan gave orders that no one should interfere with it until they knew how long it would get. Anyway, it grew out of the garden and through the streets of Istanbul and eventually reached Lake Van—the Sultan had sent 10 policemen to keep track of it, you see. The cucumber went down from Lake Van, along the mountains of Kurdistan and across the Great Zab, and then arrived at the River Tigris. It then grew all the way down to Shatt al-'Arab, entered al-Muhammarah on the Iranian shore . . ."

"Hey, you can't expect me to believe this!" the Iranian interrupted.

"Okay then," said the Turk, "you bring your hammer down to earth. And if you don't . . ."

But the Turk's threat had better remain unspoken. Suffice it to say that it involved the rogue cucumber continuing its relentless

progress and only stopping when it had reached the most private part of all the Shah's domains.

Since the account clearly predates the abolition of the Ottoman sultanate in 1923, this and the subsequent claims for the cucumber's remarkable growth (modest though they are in comparison with the figures above) suggest the need for a reassessment of the history of genetically modified vegetables.

Depending on the hammer's precise terminal velocity, this could give a height for the palace of as much as 461,000 kilometers (288,000 mi). The lost tool is therefore probably either a) still in orbit somewhere beyond the moon or b) has burned up on re-entry into the Earth's atmosphere.

In the east of Turkey. Of the further points on the cucumber's route, the Great Zab is a tributary of the Tigris rising east of Van, and Shatt al-'Arab the combined waterway of the Tigris and Euphrates. Al-Muhammarah is the former Arabic name of Khurmanshahr, on the left bank of Shatt al-'Arab.