arrived at Harvard in September 2002, exactly a year after 9/11. “Everywhere I went, people were kind of cagey about Muslims,” he recalls. “Like, ‘Ooh, what do Muslims really believe?’” Even as he felt pressure to explain, a part of him was searching, too:

“There was this wanting to have a narrative that fit”—about his home and culture, and himself—“and not quite having recourse to one.”

He found it in a class on Islamic culture in contemporary societies, taught by professor of Indo-Muslim and Islamic religion and cultures Ali Asani. For the first time, Sethi learned about the role the arts had always played in Muslims’ understanding of their faith. He learned that Islam was not only politics and theology but what Asani called...
“heart-mind knowledge”: that before it was codified into scripture, the religion had begun as an aesthetic tradition that sought “to explain God through beauty.” The class unlocked something in Sethi.

He began to see the old folksongs he’d grown up with in a new light—ghazals (love poems) and qawwalis (devotional songs) handed down by the Sufis, Islamic mystics whose practice emphasizes pluralism, tolerance, and an inward search for the divine. He’d heard them embedded in movies and advertisements and jingles on the radio—“just a part of our cultural DNA”—but they’d always seemed separate from religion, and lesser; now he understood they were neither.

He abandoned his planned economics fo-