

Viewpoints

In response to crisis: the use of songs to respond to multiple crises in Yusuf Islam (Cat Stevens)' post-conversion lyrical compositions

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Article Information	Abstract
<p>Keywords: Yusuf Islam Cat Stevens Crises Songs Lyrics</p> <p>Received July 1 2022 Received in revised form 15 August 2022 Accepted September 1 2022 doi: 10.33750/ijhi.v5i3.156</p>	<p>Yusuf Islam, also known as Cat Stevens, is a well-known singer and songwriter. He had decided to avoid the music industry for many years. He focused more on humanitarian activism as well as building educational institutions in London. In 2006, through the release of the album entitled "An Other Cup", Stevens marked his return to popular music with a strong intention to carry his Islamic vision. Furthermore, he connected his humanitarian activism with his lyrical compositions. The artist has shown very intense participation in crises that happened across countries. In dealing with these crises, the use of a single seemed very rational since such crises need a fast response and a single song is easier to compose than an album. The result of those circumstances is Stevens' releasing several songs in response to multiple crises across different countries. He released "The Little Ones" to voice the misery of the genocide in Bosnia. Similarly, Islam released "Indian Ocean" for the victims of the tsunami in Indonesia, "My People" to support people's freedom regarding political turmoil in the Arab world, such as Egypt and Tunisia, and "He Was Alone" to show sympathy for children's refugees at the Syrian-Turkish border. These responses were all released in his post-conversion phase. This essay argues that Yusuf Islam, also known as "Cat Stevens," has used his post-conversion lyrics, particularly his singles, to help voice the misery of the victims of multiple crises.</p>

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1. Introduction

Cat Stevens was born Demetre Georgiou on July 21, 1948 (Stevens, 2022). His father is a Greek Cypriot, namely Stavros Georgiou. Meanwhile, his mother is a Swedish Baptist, namely Ingrid Wickman. Even though his upbringing was through Greek Orthodox means, his parents sent him to a school of Roman Catholicism. Musicals had solidly impacted his life since his first school was at Drury Lane, a street where clubs, cinemas, and theatres were all around (Stevens).

In 1975, when Cat Stevens was swimming at Malibu beach, he was about to be drowned. Exposed by death with no one to help, directed him to declare a transcendental

pledge: "Oh God, if You save me, I will work for You". A moment later, as he affirmed, a wave appeared and pushed him to the shore as if it was the direct answer to his declaration. Soon after this momentous life event, his brother, David Gordon, brought him a copy of the Quran, which led him finally to convert to Islam in 1977. Later, in 1978, he changed his name to Yusuf Islam, inspired by the story of the prophet Joseph ("Yusuf" in Arabic) he found in the Quran. In this phase of life, he shocked the public and his audiences with his decision to depart from the music industry. He lost his enthusiasm in the field. Cat Stevens, in 2014, stated that "I vaguely knew things like Madonna, MTV, and Michael Jackson were happening, but I was not interested at all... As far as I was concerned, the last great record was Stevie Wonder's Songs in the Key to Life.". The singer-songwriter

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decided to focus on his family life. He also established Islamic schools in England and founded a charity organization named 'Small Kindness' to support the victims of war and famine in Third World countries (Greene).

"The Muslim 500: The World's 500 Most Influential Muslims", released by Jordan National Library (2020), puts Cat Stevens in their list. He is considered as one of the global influential Muslims as a singer-songwriter. In addition, in terms of arts and culture within the Muslim world, he is viewed to be the single most outstanding figure. One of the reasons for this distinguished position is Stevens' global fame. He is also viewed as "a vocal opponent of terrorism and extremism." The Muslim 500 also acknowledges some awards accepted by the artist; the Man of Peace award by the Nobel Peace Prize Laureates Committee in 2004, inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in 2014, the Global Islamic Economy Award, the Steiger Award, and BBC's Lifetime Achievement Award.

2. A Starting Point

It was the President of Bosnia and Herzegovina himself, Dr. Alija Izetbegovic, who personally requested that I take up music again to help bridge the enormous cultural gap – particularly in Europe, where music is part of the everyday air that people live and breathe (Islam, 2015).

Yusuf positively responded to Alija's request. As the tension in Sarajevo abated, the Dayton Peace Agreement marked, and the famous convert returned to the spotlight and sang. Among the audience, Alija witnessed Yusuf touching hearts and spreading optimism with his ordinary duff. Nevertheless, besides the positive vibrations that he created for the audiences, he had helped voice the misery of victims of the Bosnian Genocide, the children in particular, to the world. With this Bosnian Genocide case as the entry point for Yusuf's new lyrical composition paradigm, this essay has a central argument that Yusuf has actively used his post-conversion lyrical compositions, his singles, in particular, to help voice the misery of crises victims across countries.

3. A Seminal Academic Study of Cat Stevens' Legacy by Andrekos Varnava

Andrekos Varnava categorizes Cat Stevens' popular music career into three periods: 1966-7, 1970-8, and 2000s-present, respectively. The first period started from his early popularity as a teen pop star until he was diagnosed with tuberculosis after his hasty music tours. The second period was indicated by his re-emergence as a singer-songwriter, impacted predominantly by his time away, his spiritual quest, as well as his resenting the music industry at that moment. The second period ended with embracing Islam in 1977 and releasing his "Back to Earth" album in 1978. The last period was started by his return to re-release his former and present songs uninhibitedly in the early 2000s (Varnava, 2018).

Varnava's article emphasizes Cat Stevens' anti-war and pro-peace songs. Varnava seeks to discuss the continuance and variety of anti-war and pro-peace songs of Cat Stevens in his post-conversion era. He moreover views that Stevens deserves his position amongst the distinguishably well-

known singer-songwriters, and Stevens keeps maintaining his consistency in his message even after his conversion. Besides, Varnava believes that Stevens' new songs attempt to show the importance of inclusiveness instead of exclusiveness in the light of creating world peace. Therefore, Varnava's study concedes that Stevens' current self-representation as a Muslim is similar to his counterculture before conversion because both phases show the shared notion, of peace. In addition, Stevens' progressive understanding of Islam has led him to advocate inclusiveness further (Varnava, 2018).

Varnava has cited a study that discusses Stevens' music concerning his conversion proposed by Roald (2012): "The conversion process in stages: new Muslims in the twenty-first century." Roald (2012) proposes that there are four stages converted Muslims go across. They are "zealous stage", "disappointment stage" or also called "confused stage", "acceptance stage", and "secularization stage". All of these four stages have their own characteristics. The zealous stage is marked by the strict approach of the converts in referring to Islamic laws.

The confusing stage is indicated by conflicting paradigms found by the converts in terms of their past and new lifestyle or various interpretations among Muslim scholars. The acceptance stage is shown by the realization of the converts that Muslims are varied in their applying Islam. At this stage, they also attempt to find harmony between the various religious interpretations, their practice of Islam, and their former cultural atmosphere. Finally, the secularization stage is marked by the converts' tendency to practice Islam more privately and/or reconnect with their former identity. By the time her article was published in 2012, Roald had argued that Stevens had passed the zealous and confusing stage and was in his acceptance stage (Varnava, 2018).

The hippy movement predominantly activated Yusuf's lyrical compositions in the Cat Stevens' era. Nevertheless, after converting to Islam hippy movement was no longer his inspirational source, although, in terms of themes, he has been keeping his intense attachment to anti-war and pro-peace. Thus, Yusuf, who currently uses Yusuf / Cat Stevens on his Facebook fan page, has synthesized the music of Cat Stevens with the idealism of Yusuf Islam. According to Varnava (2018),

Yusuf has married his music as Cat Stevens, inspired, as it were, by the hippy movement, with his current music, inspired by his Islamic activism, largely around his focus on anti-war and pro-peace themes (Varnava, 2018).

As indicated by Varnava above, Yusuf's Islamic activism was ultimately found in the form of humanitarian acts by helping those in need, which were predominantly indicated soon after he converted to Islam. This active involvement gradually exposed him to multiple crises, especially in the Muslim majority of countries, which encouraged the singer-songwriter to reconsider his hard-line stance on music. As stated by Otterbeck (2021):

Another cornerstone in Yusuf Islam's musical endeavor has been his involvement with social justice and the disempowered. For example, he understood the value of motivational songs to keep hopes up and was fascinated by Bosnian nasheeds produced in

connection with the Bosnian war starting in the early 1990s, something that caused him to re-evaluate his hardline stance on music (Otterbeck, 2021).

4. The Analysis of Cat Stevens' Singles as Response to Multiple Crises across Countries

4.1. The Little Ones

"The Little Ones" is an example of a song he made after being called by an Egyptian doctor serving in Sarajevo who urged him to voice the crisis on the ground, showing sincere empathy to the children's victims of the conflict. The song then was renamed "The Little Ones (of Sarajevo and Dunblane)" recalling the sixteen children and their teacher murdered by a gunman in a Scottish School or also referred to as The Dunblane Massacre. "I Have No Cannons That Roar" the album consisting of the track was released by Cat Stevens' Jamal Records in 2000. The 1995 Bosnian conflict encourages the artist to collaborate with others to compose inspirational songs aiming to collect financial support and raise social awareness of the tragedy. Bosnian Foreign Minister, Irfan Ljubijankic, composed the song "I Have No Cannons That Roar" which became the album's name. In 1995, Irfan Ljubijankic was killed as his helicopter was shot down. Cat Stevens had been provided a cassette recording of Ljubijankic's song a few months before his death so that it could lower the miseries caused by the war (Stevens, 2022).

On July 7, 2020, Stevens published an article in his website *catstevens.com* entitled "They Will Sit on Tall Thrones" to remember the 25th anniversary of the Bosnian Genocide. He makes a comparison of Covid 19, a pandemic that we are facing to the other more "diabolic" and "corrosive" pandemic: "willful prejudice," referring to the reason behind the Bosnian Genocide also named "The Srebrenica Massacre". Stevens emphasizes the lesson of the pandemic that "nations cannot remain independently healthy while ignoring the suffering of others – we just can't." to provide a sense of togetherness. He, moreover, describes the situation in the Bosnian Genocide when 8.000 Bosnians, mostly fathers and sons, were killed. Meanwhile, the mothers and babies were displaced by force, and that was apart from the affliction and sexual violation. Tragically, the United Nations (UN)'s function was absent.

4.1.1. Showing stance on crises through singles

"The Little Ones" can be seen as an initial attempt of Yusuf to help voice the misery of those who were in crisis. The very first lines of the song directly address the vital issue of the Bosnian Genocide: the murder of innocent children by the soldiers as seen below:

*Oh they killed all the little ones
While their faces still smiled
With their guns and the fury
They erased their young lives*

In the following part of the lyrics, Yusuf turns his attention to show how the Bosnian genocide was hidden from the public as we can identify in the line "So the world cannot see" within the following lines:

*Now they're burying the little ones
And they're making the graves deep
So the world cannot see
That tonight we may sleep*

These two lines indicate Yusuf's attempt to voice the crisis to his vast number of listeners. At this point, "The Little Ones" contributed significantly to voicing out the Bosnian Genocide and later the Dunblane Massacre for both tragedies shared similar miseries. The song, moreover, has personally affected Yusuf himself, elevating the singer-songwriter to self-reconviction of the power of song to emotionally invite the public to the common dream of a better world.

Song has been proven an effective and powerful medium for conveying moral and ethical messages to many hearts, especially when facing a crisis. Yusuf realized this in his early return to popular music and saw another obligation. In his autobiography, he writes:

It seemed as if there was a new chance to serve Islam by doing what I used to do so naturally – to make people concerned about the world we share and consider their obligation towards others in times of calamity. (Islam, 2015.)

4.2. Indian Ocean

Yusuf's voicing of the misery of crisis victims continued in the case of the Tsunami in Indonesia. In response to the December 2004 Tsunami in Banda Aceh, Indonesia, Yusuf did not only visit the country and directly delivered aid to the victims with his wife, but he also released "Indian Ocean", a charity single. The inspiration for "Indian Ocean" lyrics is taken from Yusuf's near-death experience in Malibu, the Pacific Ocean. There was a connection between the people who run for their lives to avoid the Tsunami attack to his attempt to save his life from the ocean wave in his near-death experience (Islam, 2015) as seen in the line:

*No one even dared to turn their head
Just one slip and you're dead*

Similar to "The Little Ones", yet this time with a single subject as a representative for the other children who became the victims of the tsunami, Yusuf narrates the misery of the crises with "A child" as his central attention. The context brought by Yusuf was when the tsunami wave stopped, another misery was found: the child lost her parents as seen in the following lines:

*As the waves were dying
A child was crying
Searching for her mum and dad
A thin dress was all she had*

Yusuf strengthened his message by describing the other misery, that is where nothing is left for the lonely child, through the lines:

*She held us tight
We looked far and wide
But nothing there
There was nothing left*

Indian Ocean tells the story of a family who adopts an orphan impacted by a tsunami, was performed by Stevens along with "The Little Ones" in his 2006 US tour (Pareles,

2006). The Indian Ocean, in addition, has its relation to Stevens' unforgettable moment as he was saved from drowning on the coast of Malibu, California, which, as described earlier, he pledged "Oh God! If you save me I will work for you". Stevens' self-reflection of the moment paves the way to another mission: to work for or serve Islam through composing and singing songs in the light of promoting awareness of people to take parts in dealing with the miseries. Even though "Indian Ocean" did not appear to be a wide-scale hit song, Stevens accomplished that his songwriting was still active. Additionally, a great number of comments came to confirm that his voice remains the same as well as his identical music and melodies (Islam, 2015). This second case indicates how Yusuf's post-conversion lyrical compositions have been solidly related to humanitarian crises. The single "Indian Ocean" was collectively recorded with Martin Terefe (Swedish producer), A. R. Rahman (Indian composer) along with other prominent musicians (Islam, 2015). It was the first instrumentalized song made by Stevens in his return to popular music industry.

4.3. My People

Early 2011 witnessed the political turmoil in the Arab World, showing the citizens demanding their freedom. The situation, particularly in Egypt, had inspired Yusuf to compose another single called "My People". In an interview with Al Jazeera entitled "The Music of Revolution" which lasted for approximately 25 minutes, he stated that this single is a sort of support from him and many other free people for those who are struggling to feel the same freedom. By posting the song on his Facebook, Yusuf attracted his fans and other sympathetic people to take part, showing their stance on the crisis. The single, in addition, was recorded in a studio nearby the location where Berlin Wall, Germany, fell, along with a few musicians adding strong sentiment for freedom. Moreover, "My People" was re-released in 2020 with an official video clip showing the detained Uyghurs men in Xinjiang, China. Yusuf also dedicates the single to the similar oppressions that happened in Kashmir, Myanmar, and what he calls "the once enlightened cities of Europe".

In a 2011 interview named "The Music of Revolution" lasting about 25 minutes with the Al Jazeera TV channel, Stevens stated that the song was a kind of encouragement from free people who want to be equally liberated. He also posted the track on his Facebook to achieve more participation from the people because the artist believed that the internet could be a powerful device to share his idealism. Furthermore, in responding to the question about the power of music as a tool for change, Stevens positively responded by referring to his past era, where music became a kind of inspiration for making a change which provides a relation to what he did in his early music career. Later, in 2020, as the world witnessed what happened in Xinjiang, namely, China's attitude towards the Uyghur people, Stevens manifested his solidarity by re-releasing the single through a video with a specific image of Uyghur men under detention in Xinjiang.

Facing the multiple socio-political crises above, with people's freedom as the core issue, Yusuf showed contribution through his lyrical compositions as seen in the part of lyrics below:

*My People
When you gonna leave
My People?
Give them room to breath
My People?
Stop oppressing
My People?
All they want is bread, clothes
Space to rest – and left alone*

The message of opposing the oppression of people as well as advocating their fundamental needs is very clear within the lyrics above. In this single, Yusuf is also trying to describe the miseries surrounding the oppressed people, such as being threatened and jailed in:

*Stop making scared
My People
Let them out of jail*

4.4. He was Alone

Yusuf's consistency in voicing the crisis through his lyrical compositions kept going. Cat Stevens visited the Syrian refugees in the Turkish/Syrian border area in Gaziantep, Turkey, in April 2016. After the visit, he released another single called "He Was Alone" as a part of a campaign to help the children refugees. In 2016, Cat Stevens stated in his official statement that "My hope is to open people's hearts to the sadness experienced by thousands of young souls whose voices are not heard in the clamor created by the politicians and the media in the midst of the refugee crisis, generated by the wars and conflicts blazing through their homelands" (Michelle Geslani). The quotation shows how he consistently carries his humanitarian mission with his musical performance.

Adding his intense participation in crises through lyrical composition, Stevens' composed a song that is attributed to a kid who died on his way as he migrated in search of a better place and life. The single was composed for a charity campaign named #YouAreNotAlone, giving a strong sign of solidarity for the child refugees. Furthermore, Yusuf performed a distinguished concert at London's Westminster Central Hall to gain financial support for the children affected by the crisis. "He Was Alone" is classified as an exceptional single of Yusuf, who claimed himself as "an eternal optimist", due to the single sad tone. The long-lasting calamities predominantly cause this personal view in the crisis with relatively unclear resolutions ahead. Yet, in terms of voicing the miseries of crises victims, the single is in line with "The Little Ones", "Indian Ocean", and "My People". The tone of "He Was Alone" is predominantly influenced by Yusuf's witnessing the lonely refugee children in the camp. This atmosphere starts the lines of the lyrics as seen below:

*He was alone,
When he was twelve,
Only his thoughts, which he kept to himself
He didn't have, A place to play
A friend to call, or a word to say*

Yusuf continued voicing the miseries by indicating another dimension of the crisis: public ignorance. This issue added to the level of loneliness felt by the children impacted

by the crisis since they seemed to be ignored or lack of media exposure as we can see below:

*He lay awake,
All night through
This was his world, no one else knew,
Nothing to fear,
Nothing to hide,
Nothing but stars, to care as he cried*

Closing the lyrics, Yusuf emphasized that more children had the same miseries. The message is that the children refugee risk their only lives as tried to escape the crisis by migrating to safer places, as identified in the following lines:

*He was just one,
Who never grew old,
On a list of names, upon the road*

4. Conclusion

In his post-conversion lyrical compositions, Cat Stevens has criticized people's ignorance towards those in need or in times of crisis. This criticism is in line with his humanitarian activism, which was predominantly started after his conversion to Islam. Stevens' return to composing music after a long break was triggered by his motivation to invite people to care about Bosnian tragedy through the album "I Have No Cannon That Roars" album which contains the song "Mother, Father, Sister, Brother" and "The Little Ones". Stevens' criticism of ignorance continues in his return to popular music, such as through the release of "Glass World" where he shows that it is as clear as "glass" to see those who are in need and those who do not care about them and keeps on living their comfort life.

Stevens' involvement in humanitarian aid paves the way for his more sensitive lyrical compositions toward those in need or those living in crises. Due to the nature of crises requiring immediate action, Stevens plays his role fast by composing single songs instead of an album with many tracks within. The time aspect is crucial in this circumstance. For instance, in 2004, in response to the Tsunami in Aceh, Indonesia, he not only visited and distributed aid to the victims' but also composed a song named "Indian Ocean" as a charity single. In 2011, as the world watched the Middle East's political turmoil, he released the single "My People" to show his support for Egyptians who were struggling to gain their freedom. He intentionally posted the song on his social media to broaden the support for the freedom campaign. Adding to the freedom notion, the song was composed nearby the place where the Berlin wall fell. "My People" was also dedicated to the Muslims of Kashmir, Myanmar (Rohingya Muslim communities), and what he calls "once enlightened cities of Europe" who suffered from oppression. Furthermore, emphasizing Stevens' consistency in voicing those in crisis, he composed "He Was Alone" as a charity single. The single is dedicated to the children refugee on the border of Turkey and Syria. It was written in 2014 after Stevens visited the refugee camp and met the children there.

Most importantly, Stevens' criticism over the ignorance of those in need through his post-conversion lyrical compositions resonates vibrantly because he has shown

concrete participation in the fields through his direct visit and charities through his various humanitarian organizations. All of these songs' compositions were motivated by Yusuf's humanitarian activism, which had shifted from the hippy movement to Islamic activism, as proposed by Varnava. In relation to that point, the highly influential factor behind Yusuf's release of his post-conversion humanitarian songs to voice the misery of those affected by crises is his shifting paradigm on music in Islam, as suggested by Otterbeck.

Appendices

(Complete Lyrics of the Four Songs Analyzed)

The Little Ones (released January 1997)

*Oh, they've killed all the Little Ones
While their faces still smiled
With their guns and their fury
They erased their young lives.
No longer to laugh,
No longer to be a child,
Oh, they've killed all the Little Ones
While their faces still smiled*

*Now they're burying the Little Ones
And making their graves deep
So the world cannot see
That tonight we may sleep
While they wash away the blood
The mothers all weep
Oh, they're burying the Little Ones
And making the graves deep
Yes, they're burying the Little Ones
And making the graves deep*

*But where will the devils go
When that day comes?
When the angels drag them out
To face The Little Ones*

*Oh they killed all the Little Ones
With their eyes open wide
There was no one to help them
On the day that they died
No bed to run under,
No cupboard to hide,
Oh they've killed all the Little Ones
With their eyes open wide*

*But they'll be raising The Little Ones
With no sin to atone
In the light of high Heaven
They will sit on tall thrones
Where playtime lasts forever
And God's Mercy never ends – They'll be raising the Little Ones
And they'll all be best friends
They'll be raising the Little Ones
And they'll all be best friends*

Indian Ocean (released March 2005)

*It was a cold day in London,
Dark clouds rumbling,
Grabbed the yellow pages under the bed,
I noticed an ad it said,
'Indian Summer', '10 Days of Wonder',
'Paradise is yours for £50!'*

I thought to myself, 'That's it!'

*Told the wife to pack the bag,
Forget about the plans we had
"We're going east instead."
She looked at me and shakes her head.
I said, "O now baby,
I know it sounds crazy,
But this may be the only chance we get.
We only get one life to live!"*

*So we grabbed the kids and some body-lotion
and we went to the middle of the
Indian Ocean*

*Our guide was there to meet us;
Welcome sign to greet us
Ten porters stood up like a wall
Carried our bags to the hall
The custom man smiled to me
Begs so politely
"Tell me sir, have you any more?"
I looked at him and said, "that's all."*

*They drove us to the beach house,
I said, "Is this all ours?"
They nodded and rolled out the bed
I turned to my wife and said,
"Ooh now honey, I guess it's still sunny,
Let's all go down for a dip
Before the sun sets."*

*Suddenly I gazed up,
Upon the rising wave, I
Saw the sea drawn from the sand
I grabbed the wife and kids and ran.
"Please God! save us!
Please don't blame us,
For this is the only life we have;
We'll make it up if we were bad."*

*The wave was a-pounding as we
scrambled up the mountain
No one even dared to turn their head
Just one slip and you're dead!*

*As the waves were dying,
A child was crying
Searching for her mum and dad
A thin dress was all she had
She held us tight,
We looked far and wide
But nothing there...
There was nothing left
We all broke down and wept.*

*Then came the morning,
A New Year was born
The girl had been with us all night
My wife looked down at her and sighed:
"O my Darling! It's suddenly dawning,
But just take a look at those eyes
She must be Paradise!"*

My People (released March 2011)
My People

*When you gonna leave
My People?
Give them room to breath
My People?
Stop oppressing
My People?
All they want is bread, clothes
Space to rest – and left alone
My People:
When you gonna free
My People?*

*Let them live in peace
Stop killing
My People?
All they need is dignity
A chance to be free
My People
Stop making scared
My People
Let them out of jail
My People
Stop building walls around
My People
When you gonna show you care
Join the people in the square
My People*

*Oh, oh
My People
Oohh*

*My People
See them coming now
My People
Can't you hear them shout?
My People
Everyday, everywhere
Stop running from
My People
Stop stealing from
My People
Stop pointing guns at
My People
Oh, Come on
My People
Come on, come on
My People
Come on, come on
My People
God show them the way
My People
God show them the way
My People
See them pray
My People
Come on, come on
My People
Oh,
My People
Come on
My People
Keep on keeping on*

He Was Alone (released June 2016)
He was alone,

*When he was twelve,
Only his thoughts, which he kept to himself*

*He didn't have, A place to play
A friend to call, or a word to say*

*But he had hope,
That one day he'd fly
Over the rainbow, up through the sky*

*He was alone,
He didn't have much
And all that he had, he couldn't touch*

*He lay awake,
All night through
This was his world, no one else knew,
Nothing to fear,
Nothing to hide,
Nothing but stars, to care as he cried*

*But he had hope,
That one day he'd own
A flashing (white) horse, to carry him home*

*And in his hand He felt a stone,
That's all he had, and he was alone*

*But he had wish,
That one day he'd fly
Over the wall, up to the sky*

*He was just one,
Who never grew old,
On a list of names, upon the road*

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