



# *damazine*

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**Thieves of Baghdad**  
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*During the Umayyad Caliphate...*

For their lovers, they swipe rose-water  
of Mosul and filch cramoisy roses  
from the *souk*. From the Caliph's  
garden they sneak damask roses.

When sunset burns with cirrus petals,  
they cook on a fire of canes and stems  
scented with a drop of attar.  
They feast their lovers on rose-hip jam

and stories—*djinn* that feed on dew  
that falls the hour the rose first blooms,  
*afreet* that live on fragrance alone.  
*Are they going to spout this stuff till dawn?*  
the women wonder. They swallow a yawn.  
Human love needs root ball and thorn.

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## Swimming with Sharks in Mogadishu

Timothy Charles Anderson – Canada

Liban, come! My mother took my arm,  
Put her tongue tip out, and licked my skin.  
Lying child, you're going to come to harm,  
Allah knows the trouble you are in.

Anyway, I swam again; what little care  
we had of sharks or drowning, fear of death  
was yet unknown. We dared each other where  
a ship lay wrecked, and treaded for our breath  
or floated skyward, lifeless, to renew  
the energy to make it back to shore.

So then with ocean skin, what did we do?  
We learned a trick: We'd enter mosque, before  
returning home—wash off the residue.

But when my eyes were red my mother knew.

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*Timothy Charles Anderson lives in Toronto, Canada where he writes poetry and plays in a local rock band. He is the author of Funtimes the Snail, a musical storybook for kids. His poetry is featured in the short film, Orbit, directed by Shunsuke Teshima.*

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## Nuria

Michael Bradburn-Ruster – United States

Content if not devout Party members until the unification, her parents had not been too blithe about her conversion to any faith, let alone one they considered so rigorous and strange; but after all, her father mused, nothing should astound us—who could ever have predicted the changes in our own lives, and at such a late stage? Besides, they were immediately enchanted with Salim, his gracious demeanor matched by that eccentric sense of humor. Where, they wondered, did he ever develop such a gift for mimicry? It was quite amazing to hear their son-in-law capturing every inflection of Depardieu's voice; if you closed your eyes for a moment (as Lenore's mother had done, sitting in the old burgundy wingchair) you would have thought that exuberant bear of a man was taking up the whole room, only to discover with surprise the unassuming, compact figure with its dusky oval face.

Salim had shrugged at their amusement, offering an explanation as simple as it was humble: he was, in his own words, *un musicien manqué*, recognizing that his exquisitely attentive ear lacked the necessary complement of dexterity and discipline required to resolve his merely receptive talents into the active mode that professional performance demanded. Lenore had lain beside him, enfolding him as he wept over the failure of his dream; but in his customary way, he had transformed tragedy into charm. The unfulfilled talent allowed him to get inside the music of another's voice, just the way a flautist, he suggested, has to find the path to the center of the music.

This time, of course, her mother was more interested in Nuria than in Salim: when last they visited, the child had not yet begun to speak, and the telephone imposed an artificial atmosphere; her grandmother had awaited a conversation with eager patience. But for most of the trip from the airport, the girl only offered a brief, warm smile before her attention was absorbed by the novelty of her surroundings. For the time being, Magdalena had to content herself with her daughter's news, reminding herself, for Salim's sake, not to revert to German. Again she expressed her delight that the tenure process had been less grueling than Lenore had feared.

And the flight from Istanbul—no problems? Unremarkable, Lenore reported, except that Nuria had been an angel. But that was no surprise by now: all the way from Boston she had slept or stared out the window, unable to believe that what she saw below were clouds. She was convinced it was the ocean, even though the waves didn't seem to move.

"Well," Salim had hesitated. "It's a different sort of ocean."

Lenore's father chuckled at that, but said nothing, distracted as ever by the traffic; all those years in Berlin he had never driven. When they emigrated he had taken up the challenge, but he had not grown entirely comfortable; even now he turned warily down the Rue Prévoyance, as if even in nearing his own neighborhood he might suddenly lose his way.

Her father had been rather well-connected before the Wall came down, yet not so intimately that he was suspected of dangerous loyalties to the old regime; it was not difficult for him to arrange to spend the last three years before retirement as a minor functionary in the German Embassy. And though he missed his native city, this life had its share of delights, not least of which were the long walks he took with Magdalena in the Bois de Vincennes. After a lifetime in East Berlin, the quiet was both welcome and oddly unsettling, but Paris was very close, when they needed a little cosmopolitan glow.

When they emerged from the elevator, he began fumbling for his door key, never quite certain which pocket he had slipped it into. “Why don’t you keep them all on the same ring, Franz?” his wife often asked. But he could only lamely reply that the key to your home was different; it was separate from the others, just as you didn’t keep your toothbrush with the brushes you used to clean the floor or the toilet. Magdalena was always a bit vexed at that reply, but Salim suggested that it made perfect sense, provided you looked at it the way Franz did.

The large apartment was redolent with the smell of braised chicken and onions. Magdalena had risen at four, her husband announced, to begin her preparations. Not that the dish took so long, but her excitement at their arrival made her restless.

Over the meal, they shared stories of the recent fortnight in Istanbul. Absorbed in listening, Franz nearly forgot the protocol, and once or twice briefly slanted the bottle of Beaujolais in Salim’s or Lenore’s direction before snatching it away and discreetly pouring his wife another glass.

But he had no trouble recalling Salim’s family, asking particularly about each member. He had even relished, on first meeting his daughter’s husband, what a friend of hers once called the obligatory martyrdom of photos. Magdalena could not fail to be impressed with her husband; she still had trouble with some of those names, despite her good faith in trying. When Lenore had first announced what her daughter was to be named, an uncomfortable pause ensued; the silence spanned the distance between Boston and Paris several times. No doubt her mother had hoped for something more conventional—Elsa or Amalie or even Hedwig, like her own beloved grandmother.

“What does that mean, exactly—Nuria? It’s a Turkish name?”

“Aramaic, actually, though a Spanish friend of ours insists it’s Catalan. It means *glänzende Lumineuse*.”

“And your Uncle Murad,” Franz wanted to know, “what about him?” He always asked after him, even though he wasn’t really Salim’s uncle but his father’s oldest friend. Based on a photograph, he had taken an instantaneous liking to him. “Now *there’s* the face of a man,” he had proclaimed. Murad belonged to the Mevlevi Order, having begun dancing at age thirteen, and during this visit he had arranged for the family to attend a special *sema* one evening. For days afterward Nuria had repeated the dancers’ movements, swirling about with one hand raised, the other lowered. Before they left she said she wanted a dress like the one the men wore.

Over her mother's gentle laugh, Lenore confessed that it was hard to tell exactly what the girl understood. But she took in everything; one had to be careful with the offhand remark. She had always loved to watch her mother pray, echoing her ablutions and prostrations, watching her intently during *dhikr*, reaching out to touch the soft red tassels of her mother's *masbaha*, as she recited the Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names.

Early this spring, just before she turned three, she had asked her mother, "What is the one-hundred name?"

"The hundredth name?" Rarely did Lenore ever correct her directly.

"They always say hundreds. Nobody talks about 'Ninety-nines and ninety-nines' of toys, or anything."

Lenore caressed her cheek. "No one knows that. At least, not until they get to Paradise, where the hundredth name is hidden."

"Nuria, my child," her grandmother said, gathering the dinner plates. "Help me slice the apples and lay out the cheese." After ten years in France, her mother now invariably provided a platter of cheeses as a coda to any formal meal.

"We have to meet sometime," Franz insisted, "your parents and us. None of us is getting any younger." Then, as if the thought were too painful, he asked what else they had seen in Istanbul, and how Nuria had reacted.

She had squealed with delight, Salim said, at the fountains near the Blue Mosque, casting their arcs toward the central pillar of water, and then had run through the shadows of the trees surrounding the edifice, holding her potato *börek* so tightly that by the time she finally nibbled at it, the pastry was a mush of crumbs. Her ecstasy had subsided once they entered the mosque, and she stood very still under the double circle of suspended lights, rapt as she stared at the colors of the windows in the domed recesses, fascinated by the red and gold glass, the large petals of deep blue like the wings of an angel.

But tonight Nuria was weary and hungry, and wasn't thinking about windows or angels.

"This one is the best," she announced, sinking her teeth into another creamy lump of goat cheese.

On Friday the young family took the subway to Place Monge. After prayers, they walked along the gallery of the mosque, its walls lined with radiating tiles of blue and brown. Passing the concentric designs, Nuria gently tapped out constellations among the outer and inner rings. Carefully she avoided touching the white center. "Where do these maps take you?" she asked.

Her father smiled. "Closer and closer."

In the café behind the mosque, sitting under a fig tree, Salim and Lenore drank Moroccan mint tea and spoke to the garrulous Lebanese waiter while Nuria nibbled at her baklava, scattering almost as many crumbs on her dress as she fed to the sparrows. Little wonder, her mother laughed, when she declared, long before they returned to Vincennes, that she was starving.

A few days later, all of them went to the city together. Salim had insisted on inviting Magdalena and Franz to a restaurant he had heard about, around the corner from Notre Dame. When they passed the cathedral early that evening, Lenore remarked that neither she nor Salim had ever been inside.

Her father declined to enter, and was baffled at his son-in-law's eagerness. "Why shouldn't I go in?" Salim smiled. "Wasn't the Archbishop born a Jew?"

"It's not about *you*," Franz frowned. "I still have trouble with churches."

"Someday, if you're interested," Salim said, "I could tell you what Uncle Murad has to say about such things."

Inside the cathedral, Nuria gazed about in wonderment at the height of the vault, the arches, the clusters of pillars, the vivid shadows, the rack of fluttering candles. Suddenly her father touched her shoulder and pulled her out of the stream of tourists, pointing behind them at the Rose Window. In the afternoon light it was ablaze with luminosity, its violet kindled to intense but tender warmth.

Entranced by the colors, by the beauty that possessed her wide eyes, she heaved a sigh, and with a voice clear and pure with praise cried out loudly, "*Allahu Akbar*."

For a moment Lenore was mortified, and her mother mirrored the shock in her own face. Two or three old women, wearing long coats despite the warmth, stared up at the little family. Who could tell whether dismay, disgust or simply astonishment gathered in the wrinkles of their faces? The horrific image of a furious sexton bustling them out of the cathedral assailed her.

At the peak of her chagrin, a tall man passing down the nave beside them halted abruptly, a large volume of music tucked under his arm. Turning, he lowered his long slender face, peering directly into Nuria's eyes. The girl smiled at him, noticing that his closely trimmed beard was not unlike her father's. Raising his hand toward her face, his wrist pivoted, the curve of long, cool fingers caressed her cheek.

"*Oui, ma petite*," he said, in a soft tenor voice. "*C'est vrai*."

He cast a fraternal smile at the parents of the child, as if to dispel a portion of their embarrassment, gathering them in a brief look before turning to continue on his way down the nave.

A short while later, they rejoined her father, who stood intently listening to a man playing a melancholy flute in the square. As her mother told him what had just happened, Lenore determined to recall the man's face, fix it in her memory. But she was uncertain about his eyes. They had seemed blue-gray, yet in another light they might have been some other color altogether.

Her father was surprised to hear his son-in-law's enthusiasm for the cathedral.

"Yes," Franz conceded. "I suppose it's rather beautiful."

"Oh, more than that, I think," Salim gently countered, slipping his arm around his father-in-law's shoulders. "In a way, you know, we are all expatriates, perpetual wanderers," he said. "Who knows, in this world, where he really belongs?"

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## Necessity

Marc Brenman – United States

Tamuz Ogul sat on the old bus as it drove down the dusty country road and looked out the window. His possessions were in a cotton drawstring bag in the rack over his head. He looked out the window at the spare landscape. It was not hot enough for him to sweat, which was good, because then the dust kicked up by the bus would have stuck to him. As it was, a thin layer accumulated on everything. There were a few trees, large rocks, tall grass, rolling hills, the rutted dirt road the bus bounced over. Everything was brown and gray under a direct Anatolian sun.

The bus driver grumbled through his stubble because they were late, as they always were. They had been delayed by the herd of bloody sheep miles back. The shepherd had glared at the driver as the herd slowly, very slowly, crossed the road and the bus idled. The shepherd's eyes dared the driver to move the bus through the herd. The shepherd's dog, a big typical blond *çoban köpeği* with a snout like a wolf, a thick leather collar with metal spikes, no ears and no tail, stood next to the shepherd and also glared at the driver. The odds were not even. The driver thought of the shotgun under his seat, and calculated whether he could shoot the dog before it grabbed him by the throat. Every time he made this run, once a week for what, three years now, he made this calculation. One day he would take the gamble, and maybe win. Then he would shoot the shepherd. Then the authorities would hang him. No, perhaps today was not the day. His wife would be sad if he was hanged. She would say, be patient my dear, they pay you to drive whether you wait for the sheep or whether the steering wheel vibrates in your hands as you keep the bus in the worn ruts. Come home safely and I will make it worth your while.

As they drew near the institution, Tamuz watched two boys play basketball in slow motion. They stopped and watched the bus, observing the fresh meat it delivered. Tamuz was the only slab of beef on it. He did not know if this was unusual. He had not missed having anyone to talk with. Since the crackdown, there were fewer ordinary criminals like him. Today, the magistrate said, everybody has a cause. This one is a Kurd, that one an Islamist. Why the hell can't they all just obey the laws of the Turkish Republic? Did Kemal Atatürk create it just so the magistrate could preside over boys who killed one another? Like this one, what was his name, Tamuz Ogul, who might deserve a chance. Save the hangman's rope for Kurds and Islamists and other terrorists. The magistrate put down his small decorated glass of very sweet tea, and affixed the necessary red stamps to the stack of papers in front of him. "Tamuz, I think you're basically a good boy. I'm giving you a chance. You won't embarrass me by killing anyone else, will you?" Tamuz bowed his head, shuffled his feet, and held his hands in front of him. "No, sir." But inside his head, Tamuz was surprised. He thought he was going to hang. He had no particular regrets. The man he had killed, Ali Kuchuk, had needed killing. Tamuz had acted out of necessity, and to protect his sister. The elders in the neighborhood had agreed, and were reluctant to give Tamuz up to the gendarmes. But the laws of the Turkish Republic must be followed. The oldest old man took his hand before the gendarmes led him away and told him to keep his dignity and know that a man must do what a man must do.

In the jail van, one of the gendarmes looked at Tamuz and said, "So you're the one who killed that asshole, Ali Kuchuk," then spat on the floor. The other gendarme looked at the first disapprovingly because he knew they were going to have to hose down the van at the end of their shift. "He deserved what he got. He was bothering your sister?" Tamuz nodded.

“You seem like a good kid. I’ll put in a word to the sergeant. He’s a good guy. Maybe he’ll be able to put in a good word for you.”

The sergeant listened. His mustache twitched. “We can’t let the little f---er go, corporal. He killed a man. It would look bad. But I’ll talk to the magistrate. You’re pretty sure this Tamuz character won’t kill anyone else? I’ve got to worry about the statistics in our precinct.”

“He’s got a pretty sister, and all the young men buzz around her. I think if they’re worried that this Tamuz may come back and kill them, they’ll stay in line.”

“And you and your men, corporal, the neighborhood youth, they’re not afraid of you?” The sergeant and the corporal had had this conversation many times. “Sergeant, you know those neighborhoods, I send my men in pairs in there. They spend most of their time looking the other way. If we hanged everyone who needed hanging, the Republic would soon be composed of old women. We just try to keep a lid on things. A little fear of one of their own should keep the tongues wagging for a few years.”

The bus drew up in front of the institution. No one was around. It was hot enough that no one without a purpose or strong boredom or a job like the shepherd’s was outside. “End of the line, my friend.” The bus driver jerked his thumb toward the building. “Keep your nose clean and maybe I’ll haul your sorry ass back down this road in a few years. Good luck.” He had spoken little with this boy, who knew how to keep his mouth shut. The boy wouldn’t rat on anyone. Once during the journey the driver had broken out in song to keep himself awake and stave off boredom. An old gambling song. The boy had joined in. The driver was impressed that a youth of today even knew the song, from his own boyhood. “Where’d you learn that song, boy?” “From my father. When he sang it, my mother would wag her finger at him and remind him not to set a bad example for us kids.” The driver could not look back, because if he did, the bus would jump the ruts, but he felt that the boy smiled when he said this, remembering his mother, her warning finger, and her secret smile. The driver wished he had a son who would tell such stories about him and his wife. But their son, blessed be his memory, had died jumping out of an airplane—what an asshole!—on a training mission with the Army over Incirlik. If Allah had intended men to fly, he would have given them wings. It was all he could do to control this f---ing bus!

Tamuz slung his bag over his shoulder, climbed the stone steps, and pulled open the heavy door. Inside was gloom, but also the hum of human activity. Corridors stretched in front of him, and to the left and right. Nothing seemed to be happening front and right, so he turned left, toward an anteroom with a long chest-high wooden counter and benches. He stood in front of the counter, set his bag on the floor, and waited. He was not impatient. He knew how to wait. Waiting was better than hanging.

A middle-aged man with short steel gray hair, stubble, and a fierce mustache walked up to the other side of the counter. He looked like the American actor George Clooney. Tamuz knew what Clooney looked like because he had seen several movies with this star, sitting in the outdoor theater in a vacant lot in his neighborhood, pistachio shells clicking onto the concrete around him. “Papers?” Tamuz dug out the wad of forms from his pants pocket. “Ogul, Tamuz. You killed a man. The magistrate says you deserve a chance. Welcome to Antalya Rehabilitation Center. Where troubled boys become worthy citizens of the Turkish Republic. Want to join the Army instead?”

“If my country needs me, I will be happy to serve. But the magistrate says I belong here.” His father had also taught him never to volunteer.

“Good choice. Behave yourself, and you’ll be home in a few years, maybe two with good behavior. How did you do the killing?”

Tamuz held out his hands, palms up. “I broke his neck.”

“Any particular reason?”

“He was bothering my sister.”

Warden Clooney raised his eyebrows. Principled killers had always intrigued him. Many of us thought we could do it if we had to, but these characters actually did it. “How is she?”

“My sister? She told me I shouldn’t have done it. That she could take care of herself. But the old men, they said I did the right thing. I don’t know. “

The Warden liked this boy. He had doubts. It had taken the Warden many years to have doubts. Now he had plenty. Was he helping these boys? How many years did he have until retirement? What would he do then? Maybe if this backwards and lovely country ever got admitted to the European Union, he’d visit his relatives in Germany. “With hands like that, you’ll work in the butcher shop. Ever worked in a butcher shop?”

“No, sir. I delivered packages. And wrote letters for the old men.”

“You can read and write?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Read this.” The Warden shoved a sheet of paper across the counter toward the boy.

“Requisition. Forty-two sheets, bed, white, standard issue; tire, 570 by 40, truck, all-weather, tubed—”

“Enough. You can read. Write this.” The Warden pushed a pencil and blank sheet of paper toward Tamuz.

Tamuz took the pencil in his left hand and held it over the paper.

“Didn’t anyone tell you that the left hand does the Devil’s work?” The Warden noticed a flash of anger in the boy’s eyes.

“Yes, sir, my nickname in the neighborhood was ‘Satan’s Child,’ but the old men said that name was lifted from me after the incident.”

The Warden noticed that the boy had been in the system long enough to adopt its circumlocutions. Murder became just an incident. “The incident—when you murdered a man?”

“Yes, sir. The old men said I had done the neighborhood a favor.”

“And you, do you feel you did the neighborhood a favor? We frown on murder around here.”

“No, sir, I just did what had to be done. I take no pride in it. I am ashamed to have brought dishonor onto my family.”

“But it sounds like your neighbors approve.”

“Yes, sir. After the incident—killing—the women brought great bowls of food to my house. And when my mother visited me in jail, she said that the food keeps coming, the family has never eaten so well, my father is growing fat, and the neighbor women seem to be competing to see who can cook the best. Their husbands are jealous. My sister is embarrassed. But I think secretly she likes the attention. She says her girlfriends at school whisper that she is so beautiful that her brother had to kill a man to keep him away from her.” Tamuz blushed.

The clerks in the office were now openly looking at Tamuz and listening. In their mouths, they could taste the lamb the neighbor women brought, and in their minds they could see the beautiful sister. In their hands, they could feel the neck cracking of the local thug who dared to approach their sister in an impolite way.

The Warden turned his head slightly. “Back to work, guys. Tamuz here spins a good story, but we’ve heard plenty of stories before, right?” But he knew that this story had the ring of truth. “Tamuz, write this for me:

“Living is no laughing matter:  
you must live with great seriousness,  
like a squirrel, for example—  
I mean without looking for something beyond and above living,  
I mean living must be your whole occupation.

“Do you know that poem? Nazim Hikmet. F---ing communist died in Moscow. Still, he could write.”

The clerks rolled their eyes. The Boss sometimes went off like this, on these poetry jags. His stories of the Old Days, sitting around a fire in a sheep camp, reciting poetry, the stars above, the earth below, crapping in the dirt, drinking boiled coffee, yeah, right.

“And he loved the Republic. I’ll whip any man who says different.” The clerks, a few with broken noses, knew better than to disagree. The Boss had his ways. His soft mouth spouted poetry, but his fists were fast, too fast, some said. That’s why he would retire from this shithole in the middle of nowhere. They say he also had killed a man who needed killing, years ago, in the Yenice Barracks, a captain who was raping a private. The authorities had hushed up the killing, and exiled the Boss to the Rehabilitation Center. General Kanik had said, “Clooney, go rehabilitate yourself. I can’t say you did the right thing. I mean that, I am not permitted to say you did the right thing. But I will say that in my younger days, I would also have pinned the captain’s balls to the wall. Get out of my office. You report to Antalya in two weeks.” Clooney saluted, spun on his heels, and left.

And now he faced Tamuz. Who was he, anyway, to decide who should live and who should die? Clooney had regrets and knew it was foolish to have regrets. Life must be lived

forward, not backward. “No neck-cracking here, you hear me? You have a problem with someone, you come to me, and I’ll handle it. No bodies on my watch.” The clerks knew this motto by heart. They could beat the boys with a stick. They could not draw blood or break bones. “No bodies on my watch.” The boys knew this, and walked up to the edge. The Boss had been known to look the other way at an occasional broken nose. He had been known to break a nose. Thus, the institution was governed by respect. And hence the Boss’s nickname—Nose Breaker. One of the clerks involuntarily touched his nose. It had been a beautiful straight nose. But it had been betrayed by the mouth that lived beneath it. What had possessed that mouth to talk back to the Boss? To make a joke about that hoary old Daglarca poem, “From Samsun to Ankara”?

My horse is ailing with hunger, my sword is stolen,  
The cold bites.  
Weapons rattle in my heart.  
Till daybreak, in remorse and sorrow,  
I fight the nights.

My butts had gold and diamonds  
For ornament.  
I brought them from Central Asia  
To dazzle Western Europe.  
Now my hands weigh down with their lament.

They all had different shapes,  
But the rifle and the bow were brothers.  
They gave my life its mad speed,  
And made water and bread taste better,  
And easier than the others.

My sword was stolen.  
My time turned crimson when the flames gored.  
Epoch after epoch beat the anvil of our hearts.  
So light and naked,  
The mind becomes the sword.

Why had he said, “Yeah, my butt was dripping gold and diamonds, too”? Whap! The beautiful straight nose the girls had loved so much now had a hump like a camel. The other clerks laughed. An institution run on poetry, broken noses, and second chances. Life could be worse.

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## To Whiteness

Krystina Derrickson – Qatar

We shall not be wronged.  
Anther, embryo, seed,  
women in the rough state, the wayfarer passing,  
the relatives, the orphans, the needy,  
the companion in a journey,  
the pure,  
the impure  
call.

and Allah is full of

of blue air,  
of empire forests!  
He sets the wind to blow  
in a favorable direction.

Clouds enslaved cross the sky,  
boats pass, rains come and go.  
Mercies, yes.

And yet.  
The ephemerality of mythmaking.  
Truly my life is bones,  
my city astray. The tender  
compass gnaws,  
directs.

And yet.  
He grinds you to whiteness,  
His husk, the stars.

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## Driving the Jinns Away

Rafiq Ebrahim – United States

Whisked away from the comforts of Pearl Continental, I found myself in a small but decent house in North Nazimabad belonging to Uncle Yusuf and Auntie Zulekha, my ancient relatives, both in their early eighties. They had insisted that I must stay with them at least a couple of days before going back to Chicago, and I couldn't disappoint them, for they were two of the very few relatives who had cared for me and my family and showered us with selfless love when we were in Karachi, prior to settling down in America.

Having got their seven daughters married off, they now lived alone in their house, and in spite of their age, managed to get all the household chores done and even enjoy an occasional romantic, candle-lit dinner, the fact which Uncle Yusuf confided in me. After a mouth-watering dinner prepared by Auntie Zulekha, expert in the art, I was taken to a room which was supposed to be my bedroom for two nights. It was small but cozy, and I hoped to have a good night's sleep. Just as I dropped down on the bed, everything turned dark. The power broke down. I opened the window to get some cool air, but instead of air an army of buzzing mosquitoes invaded the room, and in turn started feasting on my blood. I picked up an old newspaper lying on a table and tried to beat them away, but it was a futile effort. Covering myself completely with a bed sheet, I tossed and turned, and somehow passed the night.

"Looks as if you slept well," remarked Auntie at breakfast. I said I did, not wanting to tell her about how I really had passed the night. Her love and care outweighed the discomfort I had suffered. I didn't go out anywhere that day, for I wanted to pass as much time as I possibly could with them.

Something happened in the evening. I was watching *Aalim Online*, when I heard a deep, heavy voice saying, "Allah" at the door. I thought Sabri Qawwal had paid a visit, but Uncle Yusuf, before opening the door, briefed me that Bawa Sai had arrived and that I must kiss his hand in respect, because he was an enlightened soul, helping people in distress, and it was he who was going to dispel a big jinn who had made Uncle's house his abode.

I was stunned, and couldn't believe my ears that Uncle could even think of such supernatural invasions. He opened the door, and a tall, well-built, dark-complexioned man of about forty entered. He was wearing a saffron *qurta* and a gold embroidered skull-cap on his head, which had a massive growth of hair, flowing at the back. A rosary in his hand, he walked in like a monarch on a mission to bless people.

He was offered an easy chair, and I stepped forward to kiss his extended left hand, which had stone-studded rings on all the fingers. Was it marijuana that I smelled? Well, I could be mistaken. After chanting "Allah" a couple of times, he clapped his hands and submerged in silence, vigorously shaking his head. Then he started murmuring some mantra and went towards a wall. He scratched it for a while, then closed his fists and threw an imaginary object out the door. He clapped again, breathed heavily and collapsed on a chair. Bawa Sai was offered a plate of rice pudding, a specialty of Auntie Zulekha. He consumed it rapidly and asked for more. I was sure he would finish the whole dish, leaving nothing for me. He

burped aloud and turned his gaze on me. Suddenly he began to laugh. "He likes you," said Auntie Zulekha. "Naturally, now you will be blessed."

Bawa Sai now spread his hands, palm upwards. Auntie got the cue, went to her bedroom, and came out with an envelope full of currency notes. This she placed in his right hand. He pocketed it and patted her on the shoulder.

I was witnessing a scene, all too familiar in the subcontinent. Tens of thousands of innocent, gullible people fall victims to such fake *pirs* and get themselves robbed. I didn't want my old relatives to be continuously cheated. Something ought to be done, I felt. I thought for a while and said, "Bawa Sai, I have a problem. My business has taken a downturn and I am afraid I might go bankrupt. Could you do something for me?"

"Where do you do your business?" he asked.

"In Chicago."

He raised his eyebrows.

"America," I clarified.

"Ah, Amrika!" he said. "Amrika. Full of jinns. Every third person is carrying a jinn inside him."

He asked me to describe the location of my place, which I did.

Bawa Sai heaved a long, sonorous sigh and said, "*Bachha*, I can clearly see two male jinns residing together in your store, making a mess of things and devouring all the profits."

"Two male jinns, living together?" I asked. "Are they gay?"

He again raised his eyebrows.

"Never mind," I said. "Forget it. Tell me how to get rid of these jinns."

"Ah!" he said. "Let me think. Yes, you will have to get me a visa, return air tickets and provide me with boarding and lodging for forty days in Amrika. I'll pray in your store. You will also have to sacrifice black goats on alternate days."

"God!" I gasped. He was asking for a cool five thousand dollars! "Is there another option?" I asked.

He closed his eyes and whirled his head from left to right. "I'll have to go to a mountain resort in Mangho Pir, and do a *chilla* for forty days. I'll myself sacrifice black goats, to be purchased by you every alternate day, and feed the meat to the crocodiles."

Twenty black goats! I wondered.

“And during this period,” he continued, “you will have to be locked in a mosque with your head shaved. You will pray silently like a hermit all the time.”

“I’ll do as you say. Will the jinns leave my place?”

“Definitely! They will come flying here.”

“Will I have to provide them with air tickets?”

He clapped his hands and was lost in a reverie, probably congratulating himself on getting one more victim who would make him richer by a couple of lacs.

I went to my room, took out a couple of one million Turkish lira bills. I had brought with me a number of such bills when I visited Istanbul two years ago. At that time one million Turkish liras were equivalent to eighty US cents. Then I scribbled a note in Urdu, which read: *If you are ever seen again in this neighborhood, or if you bother my relatives, not only the local police, but the Anti-Terrorist Squad and the CIA will be alerted to look for you. You will not only be arrested, but may be sent to Guantanamo. The foreign currency notes enclosed can be cashed at any currency exchange. That should suffice you.*

I put the note and the bills in an envelope and put it in his extended right hand. “Allah,” he uttered loudly and before departing asked me to see him the next day at his place.

The next day, I went back to the hotel. A couple of weeks later, before leaving for Chicago, I visited my ancient relatives. I was informed that Bawa Sai never again came to their place. They looked concerned, so I said, “Don’t worry. I met him recently and he said his job at your place is finished, and that you should now live happily.”

“Did he do away with the jinn?”

“Of course! Didn’t you see him scratching the wall and throwing something out the door? The jinn was hiding in the wall. He took him out and now he is Bawa Sai’s prisoner.”

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## Here and There

M.A.R. Habib – United States

Your every absence is a presence of death:  
Each time you go away, for a minute or a day,  
I know the life that will come without you.

Your every absence is a star, beckoning  
From some lost moment, when I failed to smile  
Or smother you in warmth and longing.

When you leave, the world will be free of me.  
Also: I will not leave you there, lost in waiting.  
My shadow will stay here, but I will be there,  
Waiting.

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## Meditation on Travel

Kate Colette – United States

Here's the low-equatorial bright that ripples like white Cetus stars on the surface of water. The white glimmer that resembles coins. Then the navy channel; all day dhow boats named Salwah, Ashid, Angela, drift slow in a canvas line, head east toward a slit that opens into the Indian Ocean and a great azure sky. The sun gleams white, bends into the small Kenyan island, Lamu.

On land, slow moving Muslim men in long, taupe linen line two miles of pier. Like their ancestors, they take dusty flip-flopped steps alongside branded donkeys, breathe in a hot breeze, palpable with the smell of manure, heave rubble into straw sacks on the animals' backs, rope steel wires into the side sacks. Today they command animals to walk to the island's latest project, a seafood restaurant just a few yards from the dock.

We tourists watch carelessly in shorts, clutch our cameras and canvas totes like we're supposed to, forget life back west for a moment. Here's the new ethereal happiness, the glimmer on the island. Here's the lack of satisfaction—awe isn't tactile; it's simply not enough. We want a takeaway for the sake of having something to show, so we take and take from hagglers surrounding us: hand-carved wooden cats, photographs, fabrics patterned with African faces, long dresses, oil paintings in the color of sky, all sorts of fresh foods. Not too far off in the future, though, there's the inevitable refraction from this place, the return from jaw-dropped gaping, the return to home. Then what?

But now these men go back to their stoops outside of shops on the main drag, near glitter-like coral and shell restaurants and hotels, near almost-built stores framed with jacaranda, or they go down the drag outside of the donkey sanctuary, unenclosed, stinking like excrement and worn-out bodies, or down the drag further to Lamu Hotel, filled with marble and granite and canvases with jeweled hearts, or in front of the Lamu Museum, the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources, or further into narrow streets and an open-air septic system, crowds, signs, Gallery Baraka, Whispers Café, past conversations in English, Arabic, Swahili, past the wide town square with a sixteenth-century mosque, more glitter walls, broken clay walls, cracked grounds, then a fruit stand, wafts of ripe citrus, a trinket stand, a vegetable stand, mosquitoes, flies, feces, hungry cats, and further into high-stacked rice shops spilling out life-long Lamu friends, bakeries, bodegas that sell water for less than a dime, imported sugar wafers for less than a nickel, batteries, flashlights held together by masking tape; and further in, past a one-room school house and a chalkboard that reads, "Being lazy will make you poor, but hard work will make you rich and prosperous," past trash heaps, past rows of houses like clapboard projects, broken clapboards on the dirt, past open doors with old tables, broken chairs, and people sitting, laughing, waving, laughing, past women and babies, past tourists snapping pics of women and babies, more women and babies, all covered in beige or black, smelling like Saudi perfume, sweet, until a clearing—a long stretch of dirt littered with plastic baggies, needles, scraps of paper, a single donkey that pokes into an ash-plumed fire pit, feral cats that scream like the white hot sun, the white hot sun, the sky.

Here's delusion, constructed like plaster to cement. I'm on a couch inside La Pizzeria at the bottom of La Palace Hotel. Servers are there to make sure tourists like me are happy; they bring trays of flatbread pizza to the steady influx seated at patio tables. From inside, I

watch the curtains do their familiar twists and turns against paisley bars, and listen to my mind as it clanks in a swirling passageway of fear.

Here are the worries, framed. This trip, which is supposed to materialize a new view of life in exchange for my own personal growth and several thousand dollars, has gifted me with the “what ifs”—a strange paranoia surrounding unpredictable diseases, chance encounters with pickpockets, rats, sharks, or whatever dangerous else that could possibly arise from out of nowhere. So all I really know is I’m shillingless and unable to see beyond my sight so I sit here stupidly asking no one in particular, how is it possible to have an authentic experience? That’s what I came here for and that’s what I want to get.

I’ve been in Lamu for three days and I most certainly have swine flu at this point. If not swine flu, then something more exotically toxic—Chikungunya Virus (CHIKV), which affected 75 percent of residents in 2004; cholera, which killed eight people, including three children, just two months ago; or perhaps a staph infection, which, as evidenced through a real-life scenario involving my fellow traveler and a contagious white pus on her forehead, could easily be obtained through fecal water on the streets, in the ocean, or in the shower. To say nothing of the traveler who got bit in the shin by a monkey.

All of my money has been spent on samosas, Internet access, alcohol, and bartered wares including giraffe-handled kitchen tongs, a lion’s tooth, and a wooden cat toy. It’s Christmas Day; I should be home, not here, consuming. I try to breathe in this elegantly Eastern motif on a single six-foot persimmon pillow framed in thick jacaranda wood, speckled with gold fabric, which I found upon my immediate arrival in Lamu after several glasses of Tusker en route to the lav, but all I feel is myself. Surely all of this is delusion—so why travel?

Here is the moral obligation. Why aren’t I capable of more, like contributing to the eradication of village-wide health epidemics or poverty, which I imagine could be chipped away at through the purchasing of many locally-made goods? Instead my efforts go toward responding to hagglers regarding trinkets and finding the most comfortable seat in all of Lamu.

Here are the reflections. It is worth noting that this couch is the kind that beckons tourists. Anyone in any developed country might see it at Pier 1 Imports, however this one is authentic—not imported, topped with the cleanest of tufted pillows in pinks, persimmons, saffrons, berries, purples—all perhaps stitched together by the tailor down the street whom I met earlier this week with another student while she arranged for him to make a one-of-a-kind dress for her for less than ten dollars. He works against a compressed white wall and a single florescent bulb, uses an old-fashioned sewing machine and lines up his fabrics with an eye that is permanently crossed inward most likely due to long hours compounded by many years tending to his livelihood.

This couch, possibly his couch, bears no resemblance to the chair in my own room at Yumbe House, which is in the center of town; nor my bed, which is covered by a holey mosquito net. Holey, not holy; I do not mean it relates to Jesus, Allah, or Buddha. I do not mean that this torn-up swath of pathetic fabric, which is aged like a yellowing veil and blasphemous like a contorted burqa of the wrong color, can offer hope, respect for life, or a sense of community the way the 4 a.m. and 4 p.m. Muslim chants on the Lamu-wide loudspeaker do, or the way the annual Koran trivia contests at the mosque do (winner receives \$1,500 and a round-trip plane ticket). What I mean is that the netting is filled with holes, deep, gaping ones filled with dozens of these “what ifs” that penetrate me and bring

to my surface the most painful boils—infected characteristics of myself: anxious, cowardly, pathetic, sores that imagine the worst in every possible situation, that see bug fragments on a net as a condemnation of culture and an invitation to death. I should feel happy to have it draped over me every night, and I should feel happy to have my room, as my roof is sealed completely to a six-foot high wall, while another tourist's across the hall is thatched and disconnected, which enables bats and hard-backed bugs of all sorts to enter at their leisure.

Here's the comfort, meandering.

My door, five cylindrical slabs of finished wood nailed together, both shuts and locks, and since I closed all of the windows, I hear little if any noise from outside, aside from babies crying and mumbling voices which both typically stop at the first sign of night—this is luxury, according to some travel companions, who say they awake daily to the chants. That is not to say I've had no real dangerous encounters. On my first night at my hotel, I sat zazen on my bed in the mosquito net, hoping to slow or at least notice my swirling thoughts, but while gazing 45 degrees ahead I came across a tawdry lizard, to whom I yelled, "How am I supposed to concentrate?!"

I am unable to keep my mind in what the locals call *polle-polle*, or slowed time, which can be evidenced in the absence of cars, in lingering conversations, in long waits for Tusker and meals, and in bodies: sandaled people who don't budge from low cement slabs outside of their shops, sale caws to tourists for dhow boat rides and trinkets, giggling children playing barefoot all day alongside heaps of trash in tucked away corners of the town, tender voices that shout hands-out, "Shillings for our picture."

Surely this idea of *polle-polle* is delusion as well. My mind still swirls non-stop with that idea and dozens of scenarios that involve brushes with death, barring and boxing me in despite all of the goings-on outside where there is so much to see and buy, so much that I should want, so much that the others have bought in troves that I cannot have.

Here's the observation, wisdom in a box.

In my sitting meditation, I imagined bed bugs crawled up from their places in the mattress, gnawed at my legs, back, shoulders, until they slowly circled around to my snout and mangy hair, all of which were covered in a brittle crust of 100 percent deet that resembled camel hair—and yet somehow, some way, regardless of the deet, in this particular scenario the bugs managed to eat away at me anyway. In another scenario, a fat and rabid rat lurked under the bed; he kept quiet until I turned off the light and fell asleep, at which point he lurched at me through the mosquito net, went straight for my face, fanged and hissing—I put my arms up to stop him and stopped imagining after that. This is what happens to me when I am awake. I sleep with the lights on. My dreams are more vivid because of my malaria pills and I've been murdered on several occasions in my sleep.

In another one, a woman offered up her children to my friend. This was real. It took place in one brick room that was divided into sections. It stank of sweat and must. There was a woven bed in the hallway, broken furniture, and three stones for balancing a pot to cook. The mother, husband, four children, aunts, uncles, and grandparents were all there. The next night over Tusker on the patio at La Pizzeria, a tourist, who has children and grandchildren of her own, said to me, "I was photographing the mom as she applied henna to some customers and we were talking about Obama. She said she thought I was his mother."

I had to laugh.

“As we spoke it came about that I lived in America. And that's when she said, ‘Can I give you my daughter to take back to America so she can go to school?’

“‘She doesn't have a passport.’

“‘I'll get her one.’

“‘You'd miss her.’

“‘When she is older she'll come see me and take care of me.’

“‘You love her—you'll miss her.’

“She looked up from the henna, and said very matter-of-factly, ‘You'll love her like I love her.’

“When I told her I can't take her girl, she said, ‘Will you take my son?’”

The tourist recollects, shakes her head back and forth as we sip our beers. In a couple of days, we'll be so far from this that all of it will be another inevitable memory. She'll have her pictures. I'll write about our conversation. Eventually, though, we'll put this in the back of our minds; then one day perhaps we'll have forgotten it completely.

Here's the moment, priceless.

Now children spill out of La Pizzeria's entrance like trinkets on a table. Now I'm more jaundiced than anything, unable to detach myself from a mother I never met, unrelated, and unable to help. Now twenty wide-eyed heads circle around an electronic Santa Claus next to Christmas lights, evergreen garland, and pretty beads in American gold and red. Claus wiggles every few minutes to “Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree,” at which point the children all chuckle near-unending. They point, shake their hips, scream in Swahili, then wait barefoot in dirty dresses zipped halfway up in the back for the next jig. They remind me of their friends who walk around shoeless beside piles of shit and rubble, soiled, wide-eyed, smiling; and curious—the way I was one morning walking way, way away from the main drag, down where tourists don't usually play.

Now here's the predictable moment when the children turn and reach out to tourists for money, or they'll simply say, “Jambo,” because that's the friendly thing to do. Now I ask no one in particular, what is the correct way to view this?

Here's the victim, played fast on repeat.

Now near the kitchen, a break from my understanding of revulsion, all wooden and jagged. My waiter's gaze—each look is a closer look, the right view. It refracts from his shirt, lean arms and shoulders, then bends wide orange and breathy onto my flecked chest like the now sun and taupe hennaed skin. Now I'm to blame.

I almost confess to him my blind ignorance about the dress code; I almost say I'm sorry in an old tank with my cleavage bursting out, but it's better to keep my mouth shut. Here are

the sins, covered in my body—white, Western, wrong—viewing, thinking, looking, all wrong. But he is still at fault because at least to me he is disrespectful. I don't apologize or mention it because after all, this is vacation. Instead, we say, "Jambo, Jambo." And now the dance, the jig we've been doing the entire week. The friendly thing to do.

My waiter and I could be friends. Maybe he, like all of the locals, could be my authentic entry into Lamu beyond my pathetic view. If I can speak to him, I can learn a little bit more, see the world in a different light—this is why I wanted to come to Lamu in the first place, which is really to obtain more than what I had before. This will make my experience more valuable. This will make me more authentic and somehow more alive and certain that I will get my money's worth.

Here's irascible, near-unending.

He watches my shoulders. I watch his shirt, perfectly pressed; his face, clean shaven; his shoes, sparkling black. I wonder where he sleeps or if this is all for show. He's told me before that his days at the restaurant are long. Now his mouth opens wide and smile-like and I like this because his mouth is not like mine; his eyes are meeting mine and softening; so I say thick-accented and buck-toothed something insignificant and he wants to know if I am happy. He asks me if I want the cappuccino again today. I lie, my mouth gaping, my hooves tapping, myself bursting with guilt because I have no intentions to buy, because I have no idea where he sleeps, and my cleavage is everywhere. He tells me I can sit here as long as I want—here's the kindness—his hands unfurling, his bottom lip upcurling, his arms lifting up as if he were taking off his shirt or as if he were composing a decent human gesture, him saying, "Hakuna Matata." Now it's still too hot for my sweater beside me so I can't put it on.

Here's a lack of understanding, no connection.

My family: father, mother, brothers, sisters-in-law, aunt, uncle, cousins, new baby cousin, niece, nephew, are all wearing sweaters right now celebrating Christmas together. We could all be together wearing sweaters in a circle in the living room, all unwrapping gifts, hee-ing and haw-ing like donkeys, freshly scrubbed, shiny and clean. Robert, my cat, would be there, plopped against the fireplace, wagging his tail back and forth, his stomach plump and superb.

Cats are everywhere in Lamu. Yesterday on a walk back from Shela Beach, with my camera on movie mode, I watched six of them jump out of a pile of jacaranda and a single old urinal, then waif around waiting for a fisherman to slice the head off a fresh catch of fat tuna. The cats edged the shore unabashedly, scar-faced like the Masai warriors from last night's tourist dinner at Diamond Beach's Christmas Eve Spectacular, who performed a traditional dance like Western live entertainment in exchange for money. (Last night I was the fish, all gaping and severed, opening my mouth in an exchange that, to me (and others?), involved flesh, noise, the temporary ceasing of flickering desires, and of course money.) The cats did a dance of sorts around the fish, jumping at it one by one, retreating, racketeering, dangerously thin. For they were merely trying to feed themselves, I reassured myself, watching them inhale small scraps of pink flesh the way I do when Masai warriors put away their BlackBerries and walk real close selling me wares made of dead animals on the street: bracelets made of giraffe tails, cups made of hooves, donkey-engraved plates, stomach-length necklaces decadent with tiny primary colored beads, lion teeth (I will give one to my brother) individually sold (250 shillings o/b/o), rings made of ivory, wine glasses

carved from coconuts, troves of them. But to see them bounce really was a treat—gazelle-like, prowling, pitching high meows and long, drawn-out caws, all disjointed, all of it alarmingly indigestible (I will email the video to cousin Rachael who loves cats. She won't know whether to laugh or cry.)

Here's trying to calculate the value.

Now outside, the patio is empty except for the boat boys, docked in a line on the waters, who edge outside of La Pizzeria, all smiling, happy and friendly, all Hakuna Matata-ing and Jambo-Jambo-ing to the tourists; ready to lead an adventure for the right price. For 1000 shillings, or eighteen dollars, I took an hour ride two days ago with three students over to Diamond Beach across from Lamu, led by Captain Dolphin, a man as lean as my waiter, unabashed with the skin of God. He sang about happiness, lent us snorkels, made us lunch on the sand with jasmine rice, fish, fresh mangoes and coconuts and passion fruit, and asked us over and over, "Are you happy?" Yes, I told him, responding as I've done to so many other locals this week.

Here's kitsch: trying to get the most of your time before it is too late.

Now maybe I will get up and sniff out a new thing. Maybe I will go for a walk, look at trinkets, snap pics of every person or animal or trinket I see or record another movie or eat rocks and papers from the ground like the donkeys. Maybe I will sniff around for more tourists, then we'll look at more trinkets. Maybe all of this won't lead to regret. But now I will regret—sitting here pathetic on a couch (and before, walking, snapping pics, buying), unable to see Lamu clearly because of my origin, ailed by "what ifs", occasionally counting down the days until I leave. Now I will regret that I am an ass, a toy, and a gaping, severed fish. Now I will regret that I objectify my waiter and everything I see. For that much, I will be grateful when I am home.

Here's the reflection, forgotten.

I will be so grateful I won't mail out trinkets to some family. I will have forgotten to get stamps and won't want to drive to the post office. The trinkets will sit in my living room in a plastic bag. I will send them in a couple of days, maybe when it stops raining. The tooth from the lion will sit inside newspaper scraps and then it will chip at the tip. My brother will wonder where his gift is. The hand-carved ear on the cat toy that I give to my nephew will break. He will put it in a big toy bin with the rest of his toys like he is supposed to. A Lego will accidentally knock into it and scratch it. He will put a toy truck over it because he is told to and the cat will fall to the bottom of the bin. On the bottom of the bin, it will get wedged between small shreds of toy fabrics and papers; dust will accumulate on it; it will start to smell like plastic from the bin. He will buy more trucks and action figures like military men or Transformers and he will put them away. He won't remember that the cat is there.

Here's the take away.

I will think about all of this and will put all of this including the regret in the back of my mind after I put it on a Word document and cut it into a narrative the way a warrior cuts up a lion and sells its pieces or the way I'm making impossible cutouts of bodies: sandaled people who don't budge from low cement slabs outside of their shops, sale caws to tourists for dhow boat rides and trinkets, giggling children playing barefoot all day alongside heaps

of trash in tucked away corners of the town, tender voices that shout, hands out, “Shillings for our picture”, cats, warriors, donkeys, giggling men in lingering gazes, and days, my self, this idea of traveling as something valuable; and then I will plaster all of this with ocean, azure skies, canvas sails, long, drawn-out streets that run into a clearing and the sun, the sun; and then I will save what used to be all of “this” but is now “it” because it is just plaster, like a memory or an arced story, to a folder that is in a folder that is in a folder on my computer that I am getting rid of soon because it is old. There it will be forgotten.

Here’s what’s left.

Further into the future, it will reappear in a moment of conversation when a friend says, “Lamu sounds wonderful. Africa, how exotic. I’ve always wanted to travel there.” And I will smile, white, glimmer-cheeked, and still dumb. Scraps will be on my plate. I will have ivory around my neck and a ring. I will pick up my coconut cup and drink from it as if I were drinking fresh blood or cold water from the faucet or swallowing bags of groceries or necklaces or trinkets. I will reply like I have Lamu’s authentic experience in my body, like I possess a clear understanding of it or of myself. I will say happily, “Yes, it is so unreal.”

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