Land of Promise

by Myshel Prasad

I
Meat. A tool. A fire. A hide.
A shard of bone. Even then I dreamed of Cordoba.

II
The long sway. Ship. Camel. Horse.
Rhythm of oars, hooves, snapping of sails,
jingle of harness
Tasting of weather
Sweat and myrrh

I was a bolt of silk
I was lapis lazuli
I was cinnamon and clove, ivory and
cedar, ebony and pearls
I was Phoenecian purple
I was Sassanian silver
I was Byzantine gold
I was paper that signified gold
I was glass, porcelain, and tea.

I was an alphabet.
I was the Plague. Sorry.

III
Not a round stone, but an obelisk.
An arrow. Best, a coin.

I believed in Brahma.
I believed in Ahura Mazda.
I believed in Osiris and Zeus.
I believed in the Tao and in the way of the Buddha.
I believed in the shamanic sky god of the Khan.

Like earthquakes I don't play favorites for long.

IV
Before sugar and coffee and chocolate,
before the black fountains of petroleum whispered
and flamed, it was spice that had the restless ear of
the One God.

Here's where it gets tricky:

In English the word for conversion is used when someone goes from one religion to another or when changing one currency to another.

V
So I rode with Joseph cradled in the saddle, sold to spice traders bound for Egypt, eventually to Alexandria where biblical verse was intoned in Greek and the synagogues adorned with golden wreaths, where linen and glass crossed the ocean to Malabar and returned as spice, as silk; from Babylon to Samarkand, I embraced diaspora not as exile but exchange;

I rode too with Paul out of the old desert to the new empire of Constantine that doused the flames from a thousand little altars, where even a cistern was a temple; where the dome of the church rivaled the sky; I stayed silent throughout the debates at Nicaea but lost control and cried out eagerly with the Portuguese soldiers leaping themselves at last onto the shores of Calicut, "For Christ and spices!";

I followed Mohammed himself riding to Medina, first and wisely married in to the spice trade, wedded cave and vision, saddle and sword, prophecy and spice, raised towers of light, the minarets of Damascus, Baghdad, and Cordoba, most beloved, Cordoba, where the fruits of the trees were pearls, a golden place in the sun of a golden age.

VI
At Las Medullas, the hands of Roman legions
whitened, clutched, flooded gold from the
mountains of Leon, Making gold into liquid,
solid discs of still fluid nature

Out I poured, like water across the sea,
treacherously fulfilling desires,
Becoming black pepper to flavor wine,
pillows of saffron, a necklace of pearls for the

Emperor's horse, aromatics and unguents for
the thighs of his nightly slave.

I poured out with the current, always in one
direction: away.

VII
The Muslim Curtain closed across the
Mediterranean like a frozen wave,
a wall beyond which prices could be hidden,
taxes levied, monopolies sealed.

Let's put this plainly. Arab merchants bought
cheap and sold high and were otherwise
winning the game.

For the Latin Lords of the West,
for the northern Christian kingdoms,
for the unconquered Asturias of Spain
that would seed Castile,
came the dark age of goldlessness,
the dark age of spicelessness;
Only intrepid Jewish traders were
still moving peppercorns in,
for the exalted few.

Muslim rule for them was a rule of spice
a rule of the dinar.
This kind of thing is sometimes resented.

VIII
But in Cordoba
I was a fountain, a courtyard
I was a glittering glazed tile wall and the
sound of single notes across shallow pools
I was a library of 400,000 texts
and later their ash
I was red stone and white stone, and arches
that promised the infinite
I was an orange grove
I was perfume
I was a golden astrolabe
I flowered in kisses and ink,
I was the rock and roll of the enigmatic
muwashshah and unintelligible kharjas,
understood only in the press of the streets
where Hebrew and Arabic descended into the
mongrelized colloquials, latinus, ladino,
mozarabic, crossing boundaries of cosmic
absolutes to sing of drunkenness and love
and other border crossings, human flesh or
dream, a verbal maze of carved wooden screens
and curtains that lift, neither by hand or wind.

IX
The fall of Toledo.
The unification of Leon and Castile.
Repopulation to change demographics
(take note)
Crusade. Inquisition. Enough conversions for a
currency market.

Al Muwahhidun warriors introduced forced
conversions.
exchanging value, making Muslims or exiles from
Andalusian Christians and Jews.

Then Papal Bull. Hammered cross. Javelin.
Mercenary.

The pearls of Cordoba began to rot, hollow on
their branches;
500 Venetian vessels sailed to Byzantium
returned with 900,000 silver marks
a confetti of crimson and gold, plundered mosaics
of Hagia Sophia

Cordoba fell, Castile prevailed,
Isabella generously returned Almohad hospitality:
New terms of exchange: expulsion for Jews,
making Christians or exiles from Andalusian
Muslims

X
Then the Ottoman gates on the overland routes,
barrier to pepper, pepper the dowry, pepper the
price of a lamb, pepper the first "black gold,"
Barrier over land.
But the sea, the sea, was still wild possibility.

Trembling on wide wet wings of modern
conquest, I became: Discovery

Magellan left Seville, sailing west
Rounded Patagonia
Arrived on the island of Homohon,
in the eastern archipelago,

Only to be felled by the bamboo spear of a
Lapu-Lapu

But the last remaining ship journeyed home around
the African Cape,
completing the first circumnavigation of the Earth,
suddenly, impossibly, graspable.

XI
Let me back up a little.

Malaya. Sumatra. Java. Malaccas.
Imagine the taste of the breeze; camphor,
clove, nutmeg, and sandalwood trees

When Islam arrived, it came with traders not
warriors, with mystical, caste-transcending, Indian
Sufis. It had its own dance,
new rituals keeping faith with old spirits,

I liked this. One tires of "either-or."

Where the remnants of a forgotten Buddhist empire
left off, Islam picked up and spread through the
ports, to the Spice Islands, and from there, to
Mindanao.

XII
Philip II of Spain, great-grandson of Isabella and
Ferdinand, was busy defaulting on loans, enforcing
prohibitions on the use of Arabic in Granada
while the Kingdom of Maynila was conquered
by Miguel López de Legazpi , and it became the
capital of the Philippines, so named for the king.

They drew their own curtain of galleons around
the Sultans of Mindanao, and learned to curse the
pirates of the Sulu Sea, armed with ivory handled
kris, serpentine blades, agile galley ships for raids,
for trading in slaves

In the end every dominant narrator must pass
the sword, the language, the coin. Spanish.
Chinese. British. Japan. The Americans.
Conversions. Evacuations. Repopulations.
Occupations. Plantations.

It went on. It goes on.

XIII
Epilogue:
In Mindanao
I am coconut meat, softer than silk on the
tongue
I am river and rain and sky, more royally blue
than lapis lazuli
I am fertile fields so green it hurts the eyes
I am fish with scales that shine brighter than
silver
I am pineapple flesh, so much sweeter than gold

But I am not gold anymore

I am not the gold that tiny fingers coax from
the stone with mercury and cyanide that ignores
distended bellies and creeps inside the marrow of
too-young bones

I am not the gold in South Cotabato
mysterious extractions by nameless lords,
measuring wealth across the world in zeros and
ones leaving craters behind that only volcanoes
could make long ago, when I was young

XIV
Alphabets and plagues. Was it worth it?

There never was a Cordoba.

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