LAND OF PROMISE

by Myshel Prasad

I
A shard of bone. Even then I dreamed of Cordoba.

II
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 khasjas, understood only in the press of the streets where Hebrew and Arabic descended into the mongrelized colloquials, latinus, ladino, mozarábico, 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.


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


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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