

The Book Smuggler

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To the Voyagers, the Cranes, from Wasil ibn Ataa to
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Historical figures

Abu al-Alaa al-Maari	Renowned, blind ancient Arab poet.
Abu Bakr	The first of the First Four Caliphs of Islam, who ruled after the Prophet's death.
Abu Hayan al-Tawhidi	Renowned tenth-century Arab intellectual and philosopher.
Abu Nawas	Famous ancient Arab poet, known for his verses on the love of boys among others.
Ahmad ibn Tulun	Founder of the Tulunid dynasty in Egypt, best remembered for his great mosque.
Amr ibn al-Aas	Arab commander who led the Muslim conquest of Egypt and Egypt's first Islamic ruler.
Caliph Abd al-Malik	Fifth Umayyad caliph. Revived Umayyad authority, quelling Kharijite rebellion.
Caliph Adud al-Dawla al-Bouhi	"Pillar of the Dynasty," a Buyid caliph whose empire stretched from Yemen to the Mediterranean.
Caliph al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah	Sixth Fatimid caliph of Egypt, best known for his arbitrary and bizarre laws, such as prohibiting the sale of women's footwear and the eating of <i>mulukhiya</i> .
Caliph Mamoun	Seventh Abbasid caliph, Baghdad. Known for supporting Mutazilism and imprisoning the strict Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal.

Caliph Muawiya	Founder and first caliph of the Umayyad Caliphate. Ascended to the caliphate after conflict with Ali ibn Abu Taleb, ending with Ali's assassination by a Kharijite.
Caliph al-Muizz (li-Din Allah)	Fourth Fatimid caliph of Egypt, best known for constructing the walled city of what is now Old Cairo as the new capital of the Fatimid Caliphate.
Caliph al-Muqtadir bi-Allah	Eighteenth Abbasid caliph, Baghdad.
Caliph al-Mustansir	First caliph of Cairo for the Mamluk Sultanate.
Caliph al-Mutasim	Eighth Abbasid caliph, Baghdad.
Caliph al-Qadir	Abbasid caliph in Baghdad best known for supporting the Sunnis against the Shiites.
al-Farabi	Famous Persian philosopher of early Islamic times. Said to have preserved the ancient Greek texts in the Middle Ages.
Harut and Marut	Two angels mentioned in the Qur'an (2:102), said to have tested the people with sorcery.
Hisham ibn al-Hakam of the Umayyads, also known as al-Muayyad	Shiite scholar of the second century AH, a defender of the doctrine of imams being selected on the basis of wisdom and logic.
Ibn Hanbal	One of the four Great Sunni Imams, known for his strictness.
Ibn al-Haytham	Famous Arab polymath, astronomer, and physicist, known as "the father of modern optics."
Ibn Hisham	Editor of the ancient biography of Prophet Muhammad written by Ibn Ishaq.
Ibn al-Muqaffa	Renowned ancient Arab poet.

Imam Ali ibn Abu Talib	The fourth of the Four Caliphs of Islam, who ruled after the Prophet's death. Shiite Muslims believe that Ali should have been First Caliph rather than Abu Bakr and Umar after him, which caused a schism between them and Sunni Muslims. He was assassinated by a member of the Khawarij sect in 661.
Imam al-Husayn	Son of Ali ibn Abu Taleb and grandson of Prophet Muhammad, third Shiite Imam. Rejected the claim to the Caliphate of Yazid, son of Muawiya, and consequently was killed in the famous battle of Karbala. Hussein's death became the catalyst for the Umayyad Caliphate's eventual Abbasid overthrow.
Imam al-Shafei	One of the four Great Sunni Imams, known for his leniency.
Imru al-Qays	Renowned ancient Arab poet.
al-Jahiz	Renowned ancient Arab prose author and Mutazilite.
al-Kindi	Famous Iraqi Muslim philosopher, mathematician, physician, and musician, known as "the father of Arab philosophy."
al-Mutanabbi	Renowned ancient Arab poet.
Umar (ibn al-Khattab)	The second of the First Four Caliphs of Islam, who ruled after the Prophet's death.
Uthman ibn Affan	The third of the First Four Caliphs of Islam, who ruled after the Prophet's death.
Yazid ibn Muawiya	Second Umayyad Caliph; attained power after the beheading of al-Husayn in the Battle of Karbala. Understandably, bad blood between the supporters of Ali and those of Yazid and Muawiya ensued.

Dynasties

Abbasids	Arab clan descended from Abbas ibn Abd al-Muttalib, 750–1517 with the exception of the years 1259–60.
Buyids	Ancient Shiite Iranian dynasty of Daylamite origin, ruled Iraq and southern Iran 934–1062.
Byzantines	The Byzantine Empire was the continuation of the Roman Empire in the Middle Ages. Its capital city was Constantinople; it fell to the Ottoman Empire in 1453, and until then was the most powerful empire in Europe.
Umayyads	Ruling family of the Muslim Caliphate 661–750; overthrown in 750 by the Abbasids.

Peoples

Ayyarin	Criminal gangs.
Berbers	Old name for people of the Maghreb.
Daylamites	An Iranian people of the Daylam, which refers to the mountainous regions of northern Iran on the southwest coast of the Caspian Sea.
Hanbalites	Followers of the principles of Imam Ibn Hanbal.
Hanafites	Followers of the principles of Imam Abu Hanifa.
Hashimite	Member of the clan of Hashim.
Ishmaelites	Muslim Arabs descended from Ishmael, the elder son of Abraham.
Jahmis	Followers of the thinking of Jahm ibn Safwan, who denied all the names and attributes of Allah considered sacred by orthodox Muslims. The word came to be a pejorative term among early Hanbalites, with a connotation of heresy.

Khawarij, aka Kharijites	Sect in the first century of Islam who revolted against Caliph Ali after he agreed to arbitration with his rival Muawiya I for succession to the caliphate, and later assassinated him.
Mushabbiha	Those who compare God to human form—considered blasphemous by some Muslims.
Mutazilites	Rationalist school of Islamic theology based on justice and monotheism. Considered blasphemous by some.
Nasibi (pl. Nawasib)	A Shiite slur for Salafi (Sunni) Muslims, literally meaning “hater.”
Qarmatians	Branch of Shiite Islam, notorious for sacking Mecca in AD 930.
Rafida	Derogatory Sunni term for Shiite Muslims, meaning “those who reject” since Shiites view Ali as the Prophet’s first successor.
Rajilat al-Hanabila	Civilian militia intent on establishing the strictest principles of Imam Ibn Hanbal by force.
saqaliba (sing. saqlabi)	Muslim Slavs from Central and Eastern Europe, originally brought to the Arab world as slaves.
Shiites and Sunnis	Shiite Muslims do not recognize the first three caliphs—Abu Bakr, Umar, and Uthman—as the legitimate successors of Muhammad. Shiites believe Ali to be the first successor. This is why Shiite worship is centered around Ali as a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, and drives some Sunni Muslims to brand them as heretics.

Terms

bimaristan	Hospital.
fitna	<i>Fitna</i> is a catchall term literally meaning “sedition,” but can also mean “temptation” or “civil war” depending on the context.

The Fitna of Cordoba / of the Umayyads	<p>The Fitna of Cordoba, aka the Fitna of al-Andalus, resulted in the collapse of Umayyad and Amari rule, the fragmentation of Muslim Andalusia into <i>taifas</i>, or factions, and the end of the Islamic Caliphate in that region.</p> <p>The Umayyad Fitna is a period of unrest in the Islamic community following the death of Muawiya I, whose throne was claimed by Husayn ibn Ali and then by Abdallah ibn al-Zubayr. Umayyad rule was ultimately restored, but the rift between Shiite and Sunni widened.</p>
House of Wisdom	<p>Another name for the (ancient) Great Library of Baghdad.</p>
<i>jizya</i>	<p>An ancient tax levied on non-Muslims living in an Islamic state.</p>
the Mahdi (the Fatimid Mahdi)	<p>The Mahdi is the prophesied redeemer of Islam. Mostly Shiites (and relatively few Sunnis) believe that the long-awaited Mahdi will appear at the end of the world to bring about a perfect and just Islamic society.</p>
Quraysh	<p>The ancient Arabian tribe from which the Prophet first hailed.</p>
zakat	<p>Islam-mandated annual charitable sum. It was enforced by law under caliphs of early Islamic dynasties and paid into the state treasury.</p>

Caravans Pursued by Longing, Exiled by Drought

Shaaban 4, AH 402; March 1, AD 1012

I TURN MY FACE TO the city of Jerusalem, and I am neither prophet nor saint nor missionary.

I am no disciple in the first stages of reaching up to attain knowledge, excavating for answers in the discussion circles of mosques and the loneliness of monks' cells; I am but a book-seller in the era of sedition, or, as it is known, *fitna*: conflict and quarrel, the lust for burning records and manuscripts, and purging sins with blazing coals.

Behind us is the town of Ayn al-Tamr, giving way in the west to Basra in the Levant. The land slopes gently into flat plains, except for a few hills, and passages through valleys. Sand dunes part and rejoin; suddenly, from between them, there appear breathtaking towers of rock, sharpened like great djinn standing in rows in preparation for some monumental task. Around the bases of these great pinnacles and among their curves, mirrored streams twine, shining with pebbles and filled with sweet water. The branches of palms and acacias interlock around them, flocks of wary partridges followed by their chicks filling the spaces between their rocks, like beads in a tightly strung rosary.

We pause to sleep beneath the shoulder of the mountain. We cook our food and feed our beasts of burden. When evening comes, some of us retire to the caves for shelter from the bite of the cold wind. In the cave, we light a small fire that makes our shadows flicker on the rocky walls; when we stare

into the dark, we know they are not our shadows, but folk we cannot see, taking their supper in grim silence. We call to them in greeting, but they make no answer; instead, a cold wind blows in from the mouth of the cave, making us cry out the Lord's name. We sleep like a pack of wolves, with one eye open, before we go out again at dawn, down the treacherous mountain paths to the caravan preparing to set off.

I stopped sleeping in caves after that. I preferred to remain close to my crate of books, for fear it might pique someone's curiosity enough to steal a glance inside.

Before sunrise, a freezing wind from the Levant blows over us, nipping at my extremities and rustling the dried evening primrose bushes on our path, making them tremble and whine. I wait for the sun to rise into the sky for a little warmth: a sky of such deep blue that even the flies would not think of buzzing there. The caravan leader commands the camel driver to raise his voice in song, in hopes of revitalizing the beasts. We approach an oasis where some of the clansmen of the tribe of Kalb ibn Wabara are wintering.

The camels rest on the outskirts of the tribe's winter grounds for a number of days. Before we resume our journey, the caravan leader asks them for a tracker to accompany us, to guide us to a shorter path through the Sarhan Valley, leading down to Basra and thus saving us four days of travel.

Numb with cold, I wrap my turban more securely about my head and bow my head to protect the bridge of my nose. From my sleeve, I withdraw Galen of Pergamon's book of medicine. It is the only book I have dared to keep outside the crate. I sink into endless recipes: the imbalance of humors in the body, earth, water, heat, cold, pulled this way and that by the forces of attraction and stability, digestion and impulse, and all that Galen believed to be the cause of disease. I fear for the balance of my own humors now that my extremities feel frozen. I wrap my merino-lined Nabatean abaya of thick wool more closely about me, its edges embroidered with

curlicues resembling the crest of a hoopoe. When the healing *saba* breezes come from the southeast, it is as though the air is gentle hands caressing my frozen limbs. Perhaps if I listen closely to the southern breezes, I will hear the rattle and clatter of the caravans of the *mustariba*, the Adnanite Arabs, who have left their ruins in the Arabian Peninsula and moved on to the paths of flooding in the north.

Hundreds of caravans, lost, pursued by longing, exiled by drought, seeking out fertile lands where rivers once flowed, hills were verdant, and fields bore fruit, in the depths of every one of them a Bedouin melancholy with the dream of return.

A bookseller: perhaps it is my true occupation, or perhaps I use it to hide from the suspicions and doubts of the travelers on this caravan, bearing perfumes from Baghdad to Jerusalem. I avoid their evening gatherings; I ignore the lines they throw me, hoping to reel me in to their conversation. I am terse and monosyllabic, my motions quick and darting. Will they notice that I am a terrified fugitive, transporting not only philosophical and heretical tomes, but also the commandments of the Just Monotheists, not knowing to which of these groups he belongs? For I am still a spirit suspended somewhere between the two, between two statuses manifested in this era they call the Cream of Ages. I am Mazid al-Hanafi, son of Abdullah Thaqib al-Hanafi and Shammaa of the House of Wael, and what I possess is little indeed, down to the scant layer of fat under the skin of my old she-camel, Shubra. I named her so on the advice of al-Fazzari, the Bedouin who sold her to me under the southern wall of Baghdad. He told me that Shubra was the name of a great she-demon who lived in the desert, whose powers would be summoned if my camel were named after her, making the camel light of foot and energetic, flying like the wind as her namesake does. She would then cross the deserts and the dunes, he said, and obey my every command.

However, the she-demon did not seem to find my camel's hairy, bony body an agreeable home for her presence, what with her pendulous lips and cracked pads. The poor creature walked with difficulty, lagging behind the caravan, straining under the crate of books her puny legs were ill-equipped to carry, the distances she walked eating away at them. Was her weariness due to the books of philosophy and heresy she carried on her back?

More than two years before, when we had passed by the tomb of Abu Taher al-Janabi al-Qarmati in the region of Ihsaa, the keepers of the mausoleum told us that the she-camel who had carried upon her back the famous Black Rock, which was ripped from the Holy Kaaba and brought to Ihsaa, had grown fat and healthy and put on flesh, and was blessed every year with twins. What odd tales the keepers told us! One was that the body of Hamdan al-Qarmati did not decompose in its grave because the maggots were kept miraculously from his sacred body, and that tall men in green robes circumambulated the mausoleum nightly, singing God's praises. Meanwhile, the philosophers' weight upon Shubra's frame caused her to wither away mile after mile.

I had determined that Damascus would be my next stop after Baghdad: its mosques, its imams, its libraries, all held much in store for me. Damascus was the home of Muawiya ibn Abu Sufyan, whom I always imagined with a crown befitting a caesar and not the turban of an Islamic leader. In my mind, he swaggered along wearing a robe of scarlet silk swirling proudly about him, with bright eyes that brought together intelligence and the lusts of a tyrannical monarch.

My grandfather was a sheikh and the imam of a mosque in the Citadel of Bani Ukhaydar in the region of Hijr al-Yamama in the central Arabian Peninsula. After each prayer, he would say prayers atop the minaret for long life and power and eventual rise to the caliphate for the descendants of Imam

Ali ibn Abu Talib, as the Shiites do, after which all the inhabitants of al-Yamama would say "Amen!" But he never cursed the imam Muawiya, merely saying, "The Shiite descendants of the Prophet have a dispute with the people of the Levant rooted in conflict over who should rule, and Muawiya is the aggressor in that dispute. However," he would continue, "when power settled upon Muawiya and his rivals were done away with, he became a just caliph, with an army and conquests that shine upon the pages of his good deeds." When I was born, he named me Mazid after his own grandfather, whereupon the men of Bani Ukhaydar all remonstrated with him, saying, "Mazid is but an anagram of the name of Yazid ibn Muawiya, Lord damn him! How could you name your grandson such a name?" But he ignored them and kept my name unchanged. Since my name means "more," he prayed to the Lord to give me more years of life, more earnings in this world, and more knowledge and education.

According to Damascenes, the only remaining copy of the definitive version of the Holy Qur'an created by Uthman ibn Affan, which he distributed among the different lands, is in the Umayyad Mosque. They say that its pages are still stained with his blood. The paper traders at the Baghdad Market still repeat this story to one another in wonder, saying that those who believe it are heretics: Uthman was murdered in Medina, while his copy of the Qur'an remained in the Levant. Yet the tale is still told in Iraq.

I ached for the libraries of the Syriac Catholic priests in Damascus, who left no book by the Greeks they encountered untranslated. However, all the caravans that left Baghdad for Jerusalem refused to pass by Damascus that year. There was news that, despite the Byzantine emperor Basil's ten-year pact of peace with the Fatimids, some mercenaries from his armies were disguising themselves in the garb of Arab traders, or as pilgrims headed for Jerusalem; once in this guise,

they approached the caravans of the Silk Road on their way from Persia laden with saffron and jasper, or from Iraq and Oman laden with perfumes and gum arabic. They set upon them and robbed them of everything, even the traders' garments, then heated a piece of metal in the shape of a crucifix, branded their backs with it, and fled.

The Fatimid wali in Damascus turned a blind eye to their doings, with the excuse that the handful of soldiers in his province were ill equipped to face the gangs of the Normans. In truth, he cared nothing, nor did he listen to the complaints that reached his ears, so long as the caravans arriving from Byzantium and their lands had paid him the pilgrimage tax for Jerusalem.

Free will, not predestination. There are burning coals of longing in my heart that are not yet ash. Baghdad kicked me out; I did not leave it willingly. Baghdad is a savage seductress, like a beauty into whose tent I had crept, and had drunk of her springs and plucked her fruits, but who then viciously told me to leave at dawn. It was that city that revealed to me the greatest secret, where the Just Monotheists breathed their message into my heart. My departure from Baghdad left me disturbed and flustered, as though beneath me were only the wind.

Predestination or free will? On that day, when I fully resolved to leave Baghdad, at midday I was still walking around this and that caravan, where the camels slept, in search of one to join. Some advised me to direct my steps to al-Anbar, where I should find a great many caravans whose camel drivers were the best at tracking and knew all the desert paths: the caravans arriving in Baghdad, it was explained to me, had avaricious leaders—so avaricious, some swore, that they split up the booty collected from the traders' caravans with the robbers who ambushed them along the way. I looked into people's faces and examined their features: it was not as though a thief

would approach me and say, "Honorable brother Mazid, I am a robber, so please do not choose my caravan."

It was the habit of caravan leaders to call out their destination. But my arrival at the market coincided with the arrival of caravans from the desert, laden with its bounty: grouse, sparrows, desert truffles, and the bitter apples that the people of Baghdad regularly ingested to purify their insides. Everyone in the marketplace clustered around the caravans, and no one paid me any mind.

I kept walking until I reached the riverbank. I began to hear the cries of the boatmen and the dinghy skippers, reaching me together with the braying of camels and the moist perfume of river silt mixed with the ashes of burnt palm fronds.

A man caught my attention. He was standing by an immense white she-camel, sitting like a hillock, with tiered wooden shelves atop her hump. Upon these shelves, in neat rows, the man was carefully placing small glass bottles, each of a different color. I had never seen anything as beautiful as the colors of these bottles, the charm of their ornamentation, or the intricacy of the miniatures painted upon them. One was the color of saffron, the next azure, the next turquoise. Their stoppers were all of petaled crimson, ornamented with the same color as the bottle they were placed in. Some were inscribed with names such as "water lily, narcissus, bay laurel"; others with "iris, lily, myrtle"; others "sage, henbane, bitter orange"; and still others with "cadaba, sweet basil, rhubarb." When the man had finished arranging them in their boxes, he covered them with a linen cloth, a thin boy behind him sewing the edges of the linen into the edges of the boxes with great skill, as though he had been born with that great sewing needle in his hands. My avid stare eventually caused the man to turn and smile quizzically at me. He had sharp features and a deeply lined face. His neatly trimmed beard had white hairs in it, but his shoulders were wide, and his body was muscular and built like a soldier's, incongruous with his

elderly and tired features. He appeared unperturbed at my intense scrutiny. Indeed, he spoke to me in the accent of a Daylamite, as though continuing a long conversation: “That’s the way of perfumes, like a virgin’s lips or butterfly wings. Air and light ruin them—especially ambergris. That’s why they must be protected on this long journey.”

His pleasant demeanor encouraged me to ask eagerly, “Where to?”

The Daylamite responded unhesitatingly, “To Basra in the Levant.”

“Perhaps you will pass by Damascus on the way?” I said beseechingly.

“And perhaps you are eager for a brand in the back,” he retorted in a mocking tone. He then began to repeat the tales everyone was telling about the Byzantine marauders disguised as caravan drivers. When he arrived at the part of the story about the red-hot brand they applied to traders’ backs, he called out to a man feeding his camels a short way away from us. “Hilal! Come over here!”

Hilal’s name means “crescent,” and he was like the waning crescent moon: tall, skinny, hollow-cheeked, carrying ropes bundled around his arm. “Show us your brand,” the Daylamite sneered.

After a moment’s hesitation, Hilal, wretched and humiliated, turned and opened the neck of his tunic, showing his shoulder blade. “God damn them,” he said. “They tied me up after I killed three of them!” We could see it clearly: the brand of a cross, the scar gouged deep into the flesh of his back, not yet fully healed; its edges were still suppurating. Before I could so much as wince in sympathy, the Daylamite gave Hilal a kick in the buttocks. “Go!” he guffawed lewdly. “Let’s hope it’s just your shoulder the Byzantines branded, and not some other place!”

I was stricken at his cruelty in the face of the man’s age and his brokenness. Still, the Daylamite was my last hope for

leaving this day. He was one of those men whose caravan you want to join: he had an air of competence and power about him, like the last and best resort after an exhausting journey. The deep timbre of his voice, the scent of perfumes in his abaya, the delicacy of his hands, and the awe in which his underlings held him, all bespoke a trader who could loosen the purse strings of barter and lubricate the long journey with the salve of stories; a skilled broker who could so side with the buyer that the latter felt they were buying the goods together.

He charged me a sum greater than that usually asked by caravan leaders. It was, later, he who recommended Farrazi, that camel dealer who saddled me with Shubra. But my mind was set at rest by his presence. It was the whisper in my breast that said, "Do not pretend that you have free will; do not fight destiny. It will surely be the death of you. Pass along the road set forth for you by Fate alone."

Only then did I know that God intended me to stay away from Damascus, and that I would be accompanying this caravan to Basra; from there, I should certainly find passage to the City of Prophets. I hurried to my Hashimite teacher to inform him that there was no way to reach Damascus, and that my next stop after Baghdad would be Jerusalem.

Bajkam's Chests

It would not be long now until we reached Basra in the Levant. Whenever we stopped, the Daylamite leader of our caravan always warned us away from the chests eroded by the desert sand, which we thought were treasure chests. "They are," he said, "the chests of Bajkam, the minister of Caliph al-Radi, who was said to have embezzled a great fortune from the treasury and was afraid the money would be taken back after al-Radi's death. He collected it in chests and went out to the desert with a slave of his. He would have the slave dig a deep hole and mark the spot; then he would bury the chest, murder the slave so that he would not divulge the secret of the

treasure, bury the slave in another chest by the side of the first, and go home.” It is said that in this desert wilderness, there are nearly forty chests. And because the caravan robbers have already taken all that was in the chests over the years, there is nothing left but the chests with the betrayed slaves, whose souls would surely destroy anyone who dared open them.

My turban was only three arm spans long; I unfurled it and covered myself with it when I slept, including most of my face, so no member of the caravan could stare at my sleeping face and identify me. Or perhaps I simply desired the security I had known since I was a child of having my face masked. Only the chest of books, large and full, burdened the poor she-camel; I walked by her side at times, and sat at her right thigh at others, armed with nothing but my victuals, my collection of various acquisitions, and the wisdom of the ancients. The superlative craftsmanship of the chest and its expensive wood led me to sprinkle a layer of dust over it whenever we stopped, for its noble appearance was incongruous with my modest—almost mean—attire.

I would get rid of much of the contents of this chest in Jerusalem. I had been told that the scientists of Jerusalem, and especially its priests, were eager for knowledge and information, and took pride in their church libraries. They took care of these books, which contained the wisdom of the Greeks and the secrets of transforming base into precious metals, and would pay a month’s salary for the privilege of adding a valuable book to the libraries and treasure troves of the churches of Jerusalem. If I told them these were the books that were sold for their weight in gold immediately upon their translation in the House of Wisdom, the Grand Library of Baghdad, they would no doubt eagerly purchase them, whereupon I would have spread the books of wisdom and philosophy throughout libraries and theological circles, not to mention the high prices that would not only cover the costs of my journey, but place

some gold dinars in the purse at my waist. I did not know in truth whether these books were actually the ones whose pages were exchanged for gold at the House of Wisdom, or merely copies. I was only a simple trader: a few little lies were well within my right to purvey my wares, like the lies the Bedouin told when he sold me Shubra.

A Veil Scented Like the Hills in Springtime

I am Mazid al-Najdi al-Hanafi, born in Hijr al-Yamama; my mother was Shammaa, of the House of Wael. Shammaa had long braids, and you could hear the jingling of her silver jewelry wherever she went. Her veil smelled like the hills in springtime.

I was her only child: in my childhood, she thought me so fair-skinned and beautiful that she not only covered my face for fear of the evil eye, but planted a demon in every corner of our house and neighborhood to frighten me, so that I would not play too far from the house with the other children and allow them to, as she said, “pluck the roses from my cheeks.” She followed me from room to room, or stood at the doorstep watching me climb the stairs, hand in hand with my grandfather, up to the Citadel of Bani Ukhaydar. Or perhaps she merely made the excuse for her constant movement from corridor to hallway to passageway so that she would not have to sit in the same room with my father. I rarely saw them speaking with affection or familiarity. He would stand at the door and call her: “You, woman from the House of Wael!” then proceed to upbraid her for mysterious matters between them. She would go to the farthest corner of the house and burst into heaving sobs, crying out the names of her family in al-Aflaj, who were four days’ and nights’ journey from Hijr al-Yamama.

My father was a camel trader, with broad shoulders, towering height, and a thick black beard down to the middle of his chest. One of his eyes was always red and teary, and in his final years, this eye melted from its socket out into his hand so that he only had one eye. My grandfather was from

Khadrama, but then moved to al-Yamama and settled there, having become the imam of the mosque of the rulers of Bani Ukhaydar Citadel, who were descendants of Imam Hassan, the Prophet's grandson, peace be upon him. The sheikhs of al-Yamama say of their ancestors that, when they intermingled with the best of all lineages, that of the Prophet, the lands of al-Yamama became green, their springs welled with water, plants burst forth, and the beasts became fruitful ever since they arrived, for they are the ones that the Lord promised springs when they arrive "shining of face and limbs from ablutions on the Judgment Day."

Hijr al-Yamama is the heart of al-Yamama and a destination for the neighboring towns and estates. The caravans on pilgrimage pass through it, and it is the market where my father set up shop, buying, selling, lending, and borrowing on credit. His coffers filled with dirhams, and his belt grew heavy with dinars; his flocks multiplied, and he bought estates, each with a well of its own, watering the date palms, vineyards, and fields of wheat. His silos, his crops, and his herds meant he could take his pick of any bride whose beauty was spoken about in al-Yamama, even if she was four days' journey away in the village of al-Aflaj.

My mother, Shammaa, was a delicate and blooming beauty. She had the features of a pampered little girl, and her cheeks were as round as the half-moon. Women called her "the quail" because of her tripping, pretty steps. Her voice was pliant and soft, which usually annoyed my father, who constantly complained about how slow she was to get to the point, how she was raising me "like a girl," and how she avoided him under the guise of following me around. I would run away from their skirmishes and go to my grandfather instead.

My shyness and tenderhearted nature led me to stick close to my grandfather. I followed him as he went from our house to the mosque, and we passed together through its great gate.

I sat next to him in the high pulpit as he recited the Qur'an at dawn, waiting for prayer time to arrive, watching the light spilling through the triangles and circles cut into the dome of the mosque roof, until the muezzin would call worshippers to prayer: "*God is Most Great, God is Most Great,*" ending with the unusual phrase, "Come to the best of all works!" After this, my grandfather would lead the men in prayer. "Come to prayer," he would say, and then, in an uncommon mixture of Sunni and Shiite, "Muhammad and Ali are the best of all men!" Then he would ask me to move back in the ranks and not look up at the ceiling or around at the faithful, but rather bow my head in respect at the presence of the Almighty, and look at the spot where one prostrated oneself. But I ignored him, spending prayer time watching the birds that looked in on us through the triangular and circular openings in the dome, wondering if they were praying along with us or watching us so as to betray our secrets to the desert robbers.

The mosque was the most impressive structure in al-Yamama. It was built of stone, not mud brick. Its inner walls were faced in gypsum, with blue leaf on top. Its pillars were topped with ornaments of white gesso. The prayer hall and the pulpit were covered with Persian carpets that tickled the soles of my feet, filling me with delight when I walked barefoot upon them. Next to the pulpit were wooden shelves set into the walls, inlaid with mother-of-pearl and framed with engraved wood, bearing copies of the Qur'an and some prayer books. Against the sides of the mosque were chambers and private boxes furnished with Persian carpets and woolen cushions for those spending time there in contemplation and prayer. Next to these were straw-stuffed silken cushions for discussion circles, in addition to brass urns with water for ablutions set out by the entrance. All this had been brought in by a great caravan by order of a Byzantine woman, Qout al-Quloub, mother to Prince Yusuf, and a favorite of His Majesty Ahmad. Not long after her son was born, he fell victim to an

illness that strikes down many of the infants of Bani Ukhaydar and kills them speedily. The infant was at death's door; Qout al-Quloub made a sacred vow that if her son lived, she would furnish the Mosque of Our Lord. She fell asleep that night, her son hanging between life and death, his every breath dropping out onto his pillow. It was still misty at dawn, the mosques giving the call to prayer, when she glimpsed the Prophet Muhammad, prayers and peace be upon him, the babe's great-great-great-grandfather, bearing a piece of white silk dripping with water. "It is the water of the River Kawthar in Paradise, for the apple of my eye," he said, and passed the silken cloth over Yusuf's brow, cheek, and breast. The fever was extinguished with the sunrise. With the afternoon prayers, Yusuf was sitting up in bed, recovered, and asking for something to eat. She did not give him anything to eat; instead, she rushed to the mosque, spread out a prayer mat, and prostrated herself with great sobs, so that her slave girls could barely tear her away. From that day on, it is said, the mosque received special treatment from her.

Vultures nest on the towering eastern spires, five stories high, of the mighty Citadel of Bani Ukhaydar. The towers have two gates that open onto the palm groves. On the right side of these are the soldiers' barracks and the guardhouses, while the left side, overlooking the plains of Bani Hanifa, is inhabited by His Majesty Sayyid Ahmad ibn Ukhaydar, his womenfolk and family and servants. On feast days at prayer time, we saw the womenfolk descending draped in wools, silks, and satins, and heard the susurrations of their clothing rustling through the hallways and the whispers of their anklets as they walked. On the breeze wafted the perfumes of rose and safflower, thickening the air on the way to the mosque. Ornamental wooden screens were set up for them at the back of the prayer hall, and some of the little princesses rushed out from behind the barriers with faces as radiant as the full moon, chased by slave

girls, their delicate hands adorned with henna and the chirping of their high voices filling the space of the mosque.

The Citadel is a tremendous castle overlooking al-Yamama from a great height. The people of al-Yamama look up at it in awe. An astounding stone staircase ascends to the castle, carved into the mountainside, each step exactly the same size. It is said that it is the wind that carved out the staircase, commanded by the prophet Sulayman for the extinct tribes of Tasm and Jadis, the bygone inhabitants of al-Yamama. I always accompanied my grandfather up the staircase to arrive at the mosque and commence prayer. In the middle, we began to hear the soldiers singing and the clatter of their weapons as they leapt about and yelled and took their exercise before the noon prayers: "There is no real man but Imam Ali ibn Abu Talib, and there is no real sword but Ali's sword, Dhu al-Faqqar, which the Prophet gifted to him!"

The wife of My Lord Ahmad, Qout al-Quloub, bless her, gave my grandfather a generous salary. Not only did he lead the prayers at the mosque, but he also owned a large ledger bound in precious leather and trimmed in brass, with a lock, where he set down the contracts of sale, debt, wills, and marriage. Then he locked the ledger up with a key he wore around his neck.

The lower square of Hijr al-Yamama is surrounded by passageways filled with stores: blacksmiths, tailors, spice traders, and other tradesmen and craftsmen. The northern side of the square is devoted to caravans, and from there the tradesmen who owed debts, the craftsmen in dispute, and the cheated laborers all climbed up to see my grandfather. They would stand at his door, crying out loudly, "Abu Abdullah! Wise man!" whereupon my grandfather would grant them an audience, hearing their complaints from morning till the noon prayers. After the noon prayers was the time for quarreling spouses, orphans whose inheritance had been unjustly