BY THE SAME AUTHOR
Memory of Departure
Pilgrim's Way
Dottie
Paradise
Admiring Silence

BY THE SEA

ABDULRAZAK GURNAH

Note to Sawyer seminar attendees:
This reading comprises the first chapter of a novel, By the Sea which has become an iconic anglophone text on the Indian Ocean world (and beyond) and lends itself well to this session on "Race and the Littoral". The chapter has something of a stand-alone quality since an earlier version appeared as a short story ("The Wood of the Moon" in Transition 88 (2001), 88-113).
Relics

1

SHE SAID SHE’LL CALL later, and sometimes when she says that she does. Rachel. She sent me a card because I don’t have a telephone in the flat, I refuse to have one. In the card she said that I should call her if her coming was a problem, but I haven’t. I have no urge to do so. It’s late now, so I don’t suppose she’ll be coming after all, not today.

Though, in the card she did say today after six. Maybe it was only one of those gestures that was complete when it was made, to say that she had thought of me, in the sure expectation that I would take comfort from that, which I do. It doesn’t matter, just that I don’t want her turning up in the deep hours of the night, shattering its pregnant silences with a racket of explanations and regrets, and blotting out plans to take away more of the remaining hours of darkness.

I marvel how the hours of darkness have come to be so precious to me, how night silences have turned out so full of mumbles and whispers when before they had been so terrifyingly still, so tense with the uncanny noiselessness that hovered above words. As if coming to live here has shut one narrow door and opened another into a widening concourse. In the darkness I lose a sense of space, and in this nowhere I feel myself more solidly, and hear the play of voices more clearly, as if they were happening for the first time. Sometimes I hear music in the distance, played in the open and coming to me as a muted whisper. I long for night each arid day, even though I dread the darkness and its limitless chambers and shifting shadows. Sometimes I think it is my fate to live in the wreckage and confusion of crumbling houses.
It is difficult to know with precision how things became as they have, to be able to say with some assurance that first it was this and then led to that and the other, and now here we are. The moments slip through my fingers. Even as I recount them to myself, I can hear echoes of what I am suppressing, of something I've forgotten to remember, which then makes the telling so difficult when I don't wish it to be. But it is possible to say something, and I have an urge to give this account, to give an accounting of the minor dramas I have witnessed and played a part in, and whose endings and beginnings stretch away from me. I don't think it's a noble urge. What I mean is, I don't know a great truth which I ache to impart, nor have I lived an exemplary experience which will illuminate our conditions and our times. Though I have lived, I have lived. It is so different here that it seems as if one life has ended and I am now living another one. So perhaps I should say of myself that once I lived another life elsewhere, but now it is over. Yet I know that the earlier one teems and pulses in rude good health behind me and before me. I have time on my hands, I am in the hands of time, so I might as well account for myself. Sooner or later we have to attend to that.

I live in a small town by the sea, as I have all my life, though for most of it it was by a warm green ocean a long way from here. Now I live the half-life of a stranger, glimpsing interiors through the television screen and guessing at the tireless alarms which afflict people I see in my strolls. I have no inkling of their plight, though I keep my eyes open and observe what I can, but I fear that I recognise little of what I see. It is not that they are mysterious, but that their strangeness disarms me. I have so little understanding of the striving that seems to accompany their most ordinary acts. They seem consumed and distracted, their eyes smarting as they tug against turmoils incomprehensible to me. Perhaps I exaggerate, or cannot resist dwelling on my difference from them, cannot resist the drama of our contrastedness. Perhaps they are only straining against the cold wind that blows in from the murky ocean, and I am trying too hard to make sense of the sight. It is not easy, after all these years, to learn not to see, to learn discretion about the meaning of what I think I see. I am fascinated by their faces. They jeer at me. I think they do.

The streets make me tense and nervous, and sometimes even in my locked-in flat I find myself unable to sleep or sit at ease because of the rustlings and whisperings that agitate the lower air. The upper air is always full of agitation because God and his angels live there and debate high policy, and flush the treachery and rebellion. They do not welcome casual listeners or informers or self-servers and have the fate of the universe to darken their brows and whiten their hair. As a precaution, the angels release a corrosive shower every now and then to deter mischievous eavesdroppers with a threat of deforming wounds. The middle air is the arena for contention, where the clerks and the ante-room scribblers and the wordy jeeps and flabby serpents writhe and flap and fume as they strain for the counsels of their betters. Ack ack, did you hear what he said? What can it mean? In the murk of the lower air is where you'll find the venomless time-servers and the fantasists who'll believe anything and defer to everything, the gullible and the spiritless throngs that crowd and pollute the narrowing spaces where they congregate, and that's where you'll find me. Nowhere else suits me quite as well. Perhaps I should say nowhere else suited me quite as well. That is where you would have found me when I was in my prime and pomp, for since coming here I have not been able to ignore the misgivings and the agitation I feel in the airs and lanes of this town. Not everywhere, though. I mean I do not feel this agitation everywhere and at every time. Furniture shops in the morning are silent, expansive places, and I stroll in them in some equanimity, troubled only by the tiny particles of artificial fibre which fill the air and which corrode the lining of my nostrils and bronchials, and which in the end drive me away for a while.

I found the furniture shops by chance, in the early days when they first moved me here, though I have always had an interest in furniture. At the very least, it weighs us down and keeps us on the ground, and prevents us from clambering up trees and howling naked as the terror of our useless lives overcomes us. It keeps us from wandering aimlessly in pathless wildernesses, plotting cannibalism in forest clearings and dripping caves. I
speak for myself, even though I presume to include the unspeaking in my banal wisdom. Anyway, the refugee people found this flat for me and brought me here from the lodging where I had been staying, from Celia’s bed and breakfast house. The journey there was brief but full of twists and turns through short streets with lines of similar houses. It made me feel as if I was being taken to a place of hiding. Except that the streets were so silent and so straight, it could have been a part of that other town I once lived in. No, it couldn’t. It was too clean, and bright and open. Too silent. The streets were too wide, the lamp-posts too regular, the road-side kerbs still whole, everything in working order. Not that that town I lived in before was excessively filthy and dark, but its streets twisted in upon themselves, curling tightly on the corrupt detritus of fermented intimacies. No, it couldn’t be part of that town, but there was something alike in it, because it made me feel hemmed in and observed. So as soon as they left me, I went out, to see where I was and to see if I could find the sea. That was how I found the small village of furniture shops round the corner from here, six of them, each as large as a warehouse and arranged in a square marked out with car-parking spaces. It was called Middle Square Park. Most mornings it is quiet and empty there, and I stroll among the beds and the sofas until the fibres drive me away. I enter a different store every day, and after the first or second time, the assistants no longer make eye-contact. I wander between the sofas and the dining tables, and the beds and the sideboards, lounging on an item for a few seconds, trying out the machinery, checking the price, comparing the fabric of this to that one. Needless to say, some of the furniture is ugly and over-decorated, but some of it is delicate and ingenious, and in these warehouses I feel for a while a kind of content and the possibility of mercy and absolution.

I am a refugee, an asylum-seeker. These are not simple words, even if habit of hearing them makes them seem so. I arrived at Gatwick Airport in the late afternoon of 23 November last year. It is a familiar minor climax in our stories, leaving what we know and arriving in strange places, carrying little bits of jumbled luggage and suppressing secret and garbled ambitions. For some, as for me, it was the first journey by air, and the first arrival in a place so monumental as an airport, though I have travelled by sea and by land, and in my imagination. I walked slowly through what felt like coldly lit and silent empty tunnels, though now on reflection I know I walked past rows of seats and large glass windows, and signs and instructions. Tunnels, the streaming darkness outside lashing with fine rain and the light inside drawing me in. What we know constantly reals us in to our ignorance, makes us see the world as if we were still squatting in that shallow tepid pool which we had known since childhood terrors. I walked slowly, surprised at every anxious turn that an instruction awaited to tell me where to go. I walked slowly so that I would not miss a turning or misread a sign, so that I would not attract attention too early by getting into a flutter of confusion. They took me away at the passport desk. ‘Passport’, the man said, after I had been standing in front of him for a moment too long, waiting to be found out, to be arrested. His face looked stern, even though the blankness in his eyes was intended to give nothing away. I had been told not to say anything, to pretend I could not speak any English. I was not sure why, but I knew I would do as I was told because the advice had a crafty ring to it, the kind of resourceful ruse the powerless would know. They will ask you your name and your father’s name, and what good you had done in your life: say nothing. When he said Passport a second time, I handed it over, wincing in anticipation of abuse and threats. I was used to officials who glared and spluttered at you for the smallest mishap, who toyed with you and humiliated you for the sheer pleasure of wielding their hallowed authority. So I expected the immigration hamal behind his little podium toregister something, to snarl or shake his head, to look up slowly and stare at me with the blaze of assurance with which the fortunate regard the supplicant. But he looked up from leafing through my joke document with a look of suppressed joy in his eyes, like a fisherman who has just felt a tug on the line. No entry visa. Then he picked up his phone and spoke into it for a moment. Smiling openly now, he asked me to wait on one side.

I stood with my eyes lowered, so I did not see the approach of
the man who took me away for questioning. He called me by name and smiled as I looked up, a friendly worldly smile which said with some assurance, Why don't you come with me so we can sort out this little problem? As he strode briskly ahead of me, I saw that he was overweight and looked unhealthy, and by the time we reached an interview room, he was breathing heavily and tugging at his shirt. He sat in a chair and immediately shifted uncomfortably in it, and I thought of him as someone sweaty trapped in a form he disliked. It made me fear that his distemper would indispense him towards me but then he smiled again, and was soft-spoken and polite. We were in a small windowless room with a hard floor, with a table between us and a bench running along one wall. It was lit with hard fluorescent strips which made the pewter-coloured walls close in out of the corners of my eyes. He told me his name was Kevin Edelman, pointing to the badge he wore on his jacket. May God give you health, Kevin Edelman. He smiled again, smiling a lot, perhaps because he could see my nervousness despite my best efforts and wished to reassure me, or perhaps in his work it was unavoidable that he should take pleasure at the discomfort of those who came before him. He had a pad of yellow paper in front of him, and he wrote in it for a moment or two, taking down the name from my joke passport before he spoke to me.

'May I see your ticket, please?'

'Ticket, oh yes.

'I see you have baggage,' he said, pointing. 'Your baggage identification tag.'

'I played dumb. You might know ticket without speaking English, but baggage identification tag seemed advanced.

'I'll have the baggage collected for you,' he said, keeping the ticket beside his note-pad. Then he smiled again, interrupting himself from saying more on the subject. A long face, a bit fleshy in the temples, especially then as he smiled.

Perhaps he was only smiling in anticipation of the mixed pleasure of picking through my baggage, and the assurance that what he saw there would tell him what he needed to know, with or without my assistance. I imagine there would be some pleasure in such scrutiny, like looking into a room before it has been prepared for viewing, before its truthful ordinariness has been transformed into a kind of spectacle. I imagine there would be pleasure too in having an assured grasp of the secret codes that reveal what people seek to hide, a hermeneutics of baggage that is like following an archaeological trail or examining lines on a shipping map. I kept quiet, matching my breathing to his, so that I should feel the approach of annoyance in him. Reason for seeking entry into the United Kingdom? Are you a tourist? On holiday? Any funds? Do you have any money, sir? Traveller's cheques? Sterling? Dollars? Do you know anybody who can offer a guarantee? Any contact address? Was there someone you were hoping to stay with while you were in the United Kingdom?

Oh, bloody hell, bloody stupid hell. Do you have family in UK? Do you speak any English, sir? I am afraid your documents are not in order, sir, and I will have to refuse you permission to enter. Unless you can tell me something about your circumstances. Do you have any documentation that might help me understand your circumstances? Papers, do you have any papers?

He left the room, and I sat calmly and still, suppressing a sigh of relief, and counted backwards from 145, which was where I had got to while he was talking to me. I restrained myself from leaning forward to inspect his pad, in case he had seen through my dumb silence, but I suspected someone would be peering at me through a spyhole, watching for just such an incriminating move. It must have been the drama of the moment that made me think that. As if anyone could have cared whether I was picking my nose or secreting diamonds up my bowel. Sooner or later they would get to know all they needed to know. They had machines for all that. I had been warned. And their officials had been trained at great expense to see through the lies people like me told, and in addition they had great and frequent experience. So I sat still and counted quietly, shutting my eyes now and then to suggest distress, reflection and a trace of resignation. Do with me what you will, O Kevin.

He returned with the small green cloth bag I had brought as my luggage, and put the bag on the bench. 'Would you mind opening this please,' he said. I looked agitated and uncompre-
hending, I hoped, and waited for him to elaborate. He glared at me and pointed at the bag, so with smiles of relief and understanding, and placating nods, I got up to unzip the bag. He took one item out at a time, laying each one out carefully on the bench, as if he was unpacking clothing of some delicacy: two shirts, one blue, one yellow, both faded, three white T-shirts, one pair of brown trousers, three pairs of underpants, two pairs of socks, one kanzu, two sarisus, a towel and a small wooden casket. He sniffed when he came to the last item, turning it round in his hand with interest and then sniffing it. 'Mahogany?' he asked. I asked nothing, of course, touched for the moment by the paltry mementos of a life spread out on the bench in that airless room. It was not my life that lay spread there, just what I had selected as signals of a story I hoped to convey. Kevin Edelman opened the casket and started with surprise at its contents. Perhaps he expected jewellery or something valuable. Drugs. 'What's this?' he asked, then carefully sniffed the open casket. It was hardly necessary, as the little room had filled with glorious perfume as soon as he opened the box. 'Incense,' he said. 'It is, isn't it?' He shut the casket and put it down on the bench, his tired eyes sparkling with amusement. Interesting booty from the reeking heat of some bazaar. I sat down on the chair as he instructed me, and waited while he went back to the bench with his pad and noted down the grubby items he had laid out there.

He went on writing for a moment longer after he came back to the table, having now filled two or three pages of his note-pad, then he put his pen down and leaned back, wincing slightly as the back of the chair bit into his weary shoulder-blades. He looked pleased with himself, almost cheerful. I could see he was about to pronounce sentence, and I could not suppress a surge of depression and panic. 'Mr Shaaban, I don't know you or know anything about the reasons that brought you here, or the expenses you incurred and all that. So I am sorry for what I now have to do, but I'm afraid I'm going to have to refuse you entry into the United Kingdom. You don't have a valid entry visa, you have no funds and you have no one who can offer a guarantee for you. I don't suppose you can understand what I am saying, but I have to tell you this anyway before I stamp your passport. Once I stamp your passport as having been refused entry, it means that next time you attempt to enter the United Kingdom you will automatically be turned away, unless your papers are in order, of course. Did you understand what I just said? No, I didn't think so. I'm sorry about this, but we have to go through these formalities none the less. We'll try and find someone who speaks your language so that they can explain it all to you later. In the meantime, we will be putting you on the next available flight back to the destination you came from and on the airline that brought you here.' With that he leaped through my passport, looking for a clean page, and then picked up the little stamp he had placed on the table when he first came back.

'Refugee,' I said. 'Asylum.'

He looked up, and I dropped my eyes. His were angry. 'So you do speak English,' he said. 'Mr Shaaban, you've been taking the piss.'

'Refugee,' I repeated. 'Asylum.' I glanced up as I said this, and started to say it a third time, but Kevin Edelman interrupted me. His face had gone slightly darker and his breathing had changed, had become less easy to match. He breathed deeply twice, making a visible effort to control himself when what he would really have liked to do was to pull a lever and have the floor beneath me open into an airy and bottomless drop. I know, I have wished the same myself on many occasions in my earlier life.

'Mr Shaaban, do you speak English?' he asked, his voice mellowing again, but this time more sweaty than oily, officially soft-spoken now, labouring. Maybe I do, maybe I don't. I was catching up with his breathing again.

'Refugee,' I said, pointing at my chest. 'Asylum.'

He grinned at me as if I was persecuting him, giving me a long look which I returned this time, smiling back. He sighed wearily, then he shook his head slowly and chuckled, perhaps amused by my incomprehending smile. His manner made me feel that I was a tiresome and stupid prisoner he was interrogating, who had just momentarily frustrated him in some petty word-play. I reminded myself, needlessly, to watch out for a surprise attack. Needlessly because his options were many and I had only one: to
make sure that Kevin Edelman did not become angry and contemplate something brutal. It must have been the tiny room and the duplicitous courtesy with which he was speaking to me that made me feel I was a prisoner, when both he and I knew that I was trying to get in and he was trying to keep me out. Wearily, he leafed through my passport, and I felt again that I was a tiresome nuisance, causing reasonable people needless trouble and inconvenience. Then he left me in the room again while he went to consult and check.

I knew he would find that the British government had decided, for reasons which are still not completely clear to me even now, that people who came from where I did were eligible for asylum if they claimed that their lives were in danger. The British wanted to make the point to an international audience that it regarded our government as dangerous to its own citizens, something both they and everyone else has known for a long time. But times had changed, and now every puffed-up member of the international community had to show that it was taking no more nonsense from the unruly and eternally bickering rabble that teem in those parched savannahs. Enough was enough. What did our government do that was worse than the evils it had done before? It rigged an election, falsifying the figures in front of international observers, whereas before it had only gaol, raped, killed or otherwise degraded its citizens. For this delinquent behaviour, the British government granted asylum to anyone who claimed their lives were in danger. It was a cheap way of showing stern disapproval, and there weren't too many of us, being only a small island of relatively poor people only a few of whom would be able to find the fare. Several dozen young people did manage to raise the fare, forcing parents and relatives to give up their secret hoards or borrow, and sure enough when they arrived in London they were admitted as asylum-seekers in fear of their lives. I too was in fear of my life, had been for years, though only recently had my fear reached the proportions of crisis. So when I heard that the youngsters were allowed in I decided to make the journey myself.

So I knew that Kevin Edelman would return in a few minutes with a different stamp in his hand and that I would then be on my way to detention or some other place to stay. Unless the British government had changed its mind while I was airborne, had decided that the joke had gone on for too long. Which it hadn't, because Kevin Edelman returned after a few minutes looking wry and amused, also defeated. I could see that he would not after all be putting me back on the plane to where I had come from, that other place where the oppressed manage to survive. For that I was relieved.

'Mr Shaaban, why do you want to do this, a man of your age?' he said, sitting down clumsily and looking sad and furrowed with concern, then leaning against the back of the chair and working his shoulders slowly. 'How much danger is your life really in? Do you realise what you're doing? Whoever persuaded you to do this is not doing you any favours, let me tell you that. You don't even speak the language, and you probably never will. It's very rare for old people to learn a new language. Did you know that? It may take years to sort out your application, and then you may be sent back, anyway. No one will give you a job. You'll be lonely and miserable and poor, and when you fall ill there'll be no one here to look after you. Why didn't you stay in your own country, where you could grow old in peace? This is a young man's game, this asylum business, because it is really just looking for jobs and prosperity in Europe and all that, isn't it? There is nothing moral in it, just greed. No fear of life and safety, just greed. Mr Shaaban, a man of your age should know better.'

At what age are you supposed not to be afraid for your life? Or not to want to live without fear? How did he know that my life was in any less danger that those young men they let in? And why was it immoral to want to live better and in safety? Why was that greed or a game? I was touched by his concern though, and wished I could break my silence and tell him not to worry. I was not born yesterday, I knew how to look after myself. Please stamp that passport, kind sir, and send me away to some safe place of detention. I dropped my eyes in case their alertness should reveal that I understood him.

'Mr Shaaban, look at yourself, and look at these things you've brought with you,' he said, visibly frustrated, holding out his arm towards my worldly possessions. 'This is all you'll have if
you stay here. What do you think you’ll find here? Let me tell you something. My parents were refugees, from Romania. I would tell you about that if we had more time, but what I mean is, I know something about uprooting yourself and going to live somewhere else. I know about the hardships of being alien and poor, because that is what they went through when they came here, and I know about the rewards. But my parents are European, they have a right, they’re part of the family. Mr Shaaban, look at yourself. It saddens me to say this to you, because you won’t understand it and I wish you bloody well did. People like you come pouring in here without any thought of the damage they cause. You don’t belong here, you don’t value any of the things we value, you haven’t paid for them through generations, and we don’t want you here. We’ll make life hard for you, make you suffer indignities, perhaps even commit violence on you. Mr Shaaban, why do you want to do this?

That this too too solid flesh should melt, thaw and resolve itself into a dew. It had been easy to match my breathing to his as he spoke, until the very end, because for most of the time his voice was calm and ordinary as if he was only reciting regulations. Edelman, was that a German name? Or a Jewish name? Or a made-up name? Into a dew, jew, juju. Anyway, the name of the owner of Europe, who knew its values and had paid for them through generations. But the whole world had paid for Europe’s values already, even if a lot of the time it just paid and paid and didn’t get to enjoy them. Think of me as one of those objects that Europe took away with her. I thought of saying something like this, but of course I didn’t. I was an asylum-seeker, in Europe for the first time, in an airport for the first time, though not for the first time under interrogation. I knew the meaning of silence, the danger of words. So I only thought this to myself. Do you remember that endless catalogue of objects that were taken away to Europe because they were too fragile and delicate to be left in the clumsy and careless hands of natives? I am fragile and precious too, a sacred work, too delicate to be left in the hands of natives, so now you’d better take me too. I joke, I joke.

As for indignity and violence, I would just have to take my chances on them — though there weren’t many places you could go to avoid the first, and the second could come at you out of nowhere. As for someone to look after you when you are old and poorly, better not to put too much hope in that solace. O Kevin, may the rudder of your life stay ever true and may hell never catch you in the open. May you not lose patience with this supplicant, and may you be kind enough to press that stamp in my joke passport and let me sniff the values of Europe’s generations, alhamdulillah. My bladder is in urgent need of relief. I didn’t even dare say that last, though it was true at the time. Silence imposes unexpected discomforts on you.

He went on talking, frowning and shaking his head, but I stopped listening. It’s something I taught myself to do over the years, to win a little respite from the blaring lies I had to endure in my earlier life. Instead I stared dumbly at my passport, reminding Kevin Edelman that this one had got away, so could he put an end to the sport and inscribe. He stopped suddenly, frustrated in his good intention to persuade me to get back on the plane and leave Europe to its rightful owners, and rifled through my passport with the other stamp, the good stamp, held between the fingers of his hand. Then he remembered something, and it made him smile. He went back to my bag and took out the casket. As he had done before, he opened it and sniffed. ‘What is this?’ he asked, his emphasis sterner, frowning at me. ‘What is this, Mr Shaaban? Is it incense?’ He held the casket out towards me, then took a deep sniff and held it out again. ‘What is it?’ he asked, placatingly. ‘It smells familiar. It’s a kind of incense, isn’t it?’

Perhaps he was Jewish. I stared back dumbly, then dropped my eyes. I could have told him it was udi, and we could then have had a pleasant conversation about how it was he remembered the perfume, some ceremony in his youth perhaps when his parents still expected him to participate in prayers and holy days, but then he wouldn’t have stamped my passport, would have wanted to know exactly how my life was in danger in my little bit of parched savannah, might even have had me sent back on the plane in shackles for pretending not to speak English. So I didn’t tell him that it was ud-al-qamari of the best quality, all that remained of a consignment I had acquired more than thirty
years ago, and which I could not bear to leave behind when I set out on this journey into a new life. When I looked up again I saw that he would steal it from me. 'We'll have to have this tested,' he said, smiling, waiting a long time to see if I understood and then bringing the casket back to the table with him. He put it down beside him, next to his yellow pad, tucked at his shirt to make himself more comfortable, and went on writing.

Ud-al-qamari: its fragrance comes back to me at odd times, unexpectedly, like a fragment of a voice or the memory of my beloved’s arm on my neck. Every Idd I used to prepare an incense-burner and walk around my house with it, waving clouds of perfume into its deepest corners, pacing the labours it had taken me to possess such beautiful things, rejoicing in the pleasure they brought to me and to my loved ones — incense-burner in one hand and a brass dish filled with ud in the other. Aloe wood, ud-al-qamari, the wood of the moon. That was what I thought the words meant, but the man I obtained my consignment from explained that the translation was really a corruption of qimari, Khmer, Cambodia, because that was one of the few places in the whole world where the right kind of aloe wood was to be found. The ud was a resin which only an aloe tree infected by fungus produced. A healthy aloe tree was useless, but the infected one produced this beautiful fragrance. Another little irony by you know Who.

The man I obtained the ud-al-qamari from was a Persian trader from Bahrain who had come to our part of the world with the musim, the winds of the monsoons, and thousands of other traders from Arabia, the Gulf, India and Sind, and the Horn of Africa. They had been doing this every year for at least a thousand years. In the last months of the year, the winds blow steadily across the Indian Ocean towards the coast of Africa, where the currents obligingly provide a channel to harbour. Then in the early months of the new year, the winds turn around and blow in the opposite direction, ready to speed the traders home. It was all as if intended to be exactly thus, that the winds and currents would only reach the stretch of coast from southern Somalia to Sofala, at the northern end of what has become known as the Mozambique Channel. South of this stretch, the currents turned evil and cold, and ships that strayed beyond there were never heard of again. South of Sofala was an impenetrable sea of strange mists, and whirlpools a mile wide, and giant luminescent stingrays rising to the surface in the dead of night and monstrous squids obscuring the horizon.

For centuries, intrepid traders and sailors, most of them barbarous and poor no doubt, made the annual journey to that stretch of coast on the eastern side of the continent, which had cusped so long ago to receive the musim winds. They brought with them their goods and their God and their way of looking at the world, their stories and their songs and prayers, and just a glimpse of the learning which was the jewel of their endeavours.

And they brought their hungers and greeds, their fantasies and lies and hatreds, leaving some among their numbers behind for whole life-times and taking what they could buy, trade or snatch away with them, including people they bought or kidnapped and sold into labour and degradation in their own lands. After all that time, the people who lived on that coast hardly knew who they were, but knew enough to cling to what made them different from those they despised, among themselves as well as among the outlying progeny of the human race in the interior of the continent.

Then the Portuguese, rounding the continent, burst so unexpectedly and so disasterously from that unknown and impenetrable sea, and put paid to medieval geography with their sea-borne cannons. They wreaked their religion-crazed havoc on islands, harbours and cities, exulting over their cruelty to the inhabitants they plundered. Then the Omanis came to remove them and take charge in the name of the true God, and brought with them Indian money, with the British close behind, and close behind them the Germans and the French and whoever else had the wherewithal.

New maps were made, complete maps, so that every inch was accounted for, and everyone now knew who they were, or at least who they belonged to. Those maps, how they transformed everything. And so it came to pass that in time those scattered little towns by the sea along the African coast found themselves
part of huge territories stretching for hundreds of miles into the interior, teeming with people they had thought beneath them, and who when the time came promptly returned the favour. Among the many deprivations inflicted on those towns by the sea was the prohibition of the musim trade. The last months of the year would no longer see crowds of sailing ships lying plank to plank in the harbour, the sea between them glistening with slicks of their waste, or the streets thronged with Somalis or Suri Arabs or Sindhis, buying and selling and breaking into incomprehensible fights, and at night camping in the open spaces, singing cheerful songs and brewing tea, or stretched out on the ground in their grimey rags, shouting raucous ribaldries at each other. In the first year or two after that, the streets and the open spaces were silent with their absences in those late months of the year, especially when we felt the lack of the things they used to bring with them, ghee and gum, cloths and crudely hammered trinkets, livestock and salted fish, dates, tobacco, perfume, rosewater, incense and handfuls of all manner of wondrous things. We missed the ill-kempt gaiety they filled the town with. But soon we mostly forgot them as they became unimaginable to the new lives we led in those early years after independence. In any case, perhaps they would not have gone on coming for much longer. Who would choose to come hundreds of miles across the sea to sell us cloth and tobacco when they could live a life of luxury in the rich states of the Gulf?

This is the story of the trader I obtained the ud from. I'll tell it this way, because I no longer know who may be listening. His name was Hussein, a Persian from Bahrain, as he was quick to remind anyone who mistook him for an Arab or an Indian. He was among the more affluent traders, dressed in the light cream embroidered kanzu of the Persian Gulf and always clean and perfumed and faultlessly courteous, which was not the case with all the traders who came with the musim. His courtesy was like a gift, like a kind of talent, an elaboration of forms and manners into something abstract and poetic. His business was perfume and incense, and to tell the truth that combination of courtesy, affluence and unguents made him seem slippery and dissem-
that mattered: curing diseases, flying aeroplanes, making movies. Perhaps admired is too uncomplicated a way of describing what I think we felt, for it was closer to conceding to their command over our material lives, conceding in the mind as well as in the concrete, succumbing to their blazng self-assurance. In their books I read unflattering accounts of my history, and because they were unflattering, they seemed truer than the stories we told ourselves. I read about the diseases that tormented us, about the future that lay before us, about the world we lived in and our place in it. It was as if they had remade us, and in ways that we no longer had any recourse but to accept, so complete and well-fitting was the story they told about us. I don’t suppose the story was told cynically, because I think they believed it too. It was how they understood us and how they understood themselves, and there was little in the overwhelming reality we lived with that allowed us to argue, not while the story had novelty and went unchallenged. The stories we knew about ourselves before they took charge of us seemed medieval and fanciful, sacred and secret myths that were liturgical metaphors and rites of adherence, a different category of knowledge which, despite our assertive observance, could not contest with theirs. So that is how it seems when I think back to the way I was as a child, with no recourse to irony or knowledge of the fuller story of the multitudinous world. And at school there was little or no time for those other stories, just an orderly accumulation of the real knowledge they brought to us, in books they made available to us, in a language they taught us.

But they left too many spaces unattended to, could not in the nature of things do anything about them, so in time gaping holes began to appear in the story. It began to fray and unravel under assault, and a grumbling retreat was unavoidable. Though that was not the end of stories. There was still Suez to come, and the inhumanities of the Congo and Uganda, and other bitter bloodlettings in small places. Then it would seem that the British had been doing us nothing but good compared to the brutalities we could visit on ourselves. Their good, though, was steeped in irony. They told us about the nobility of resisting tyranny in the classroom and then applied a curfew after sunset, or sent pamphleteers for independence to prison for sedition. Never mind, they did drain the creeks, and improve the sewage system and bring vaccines and the radio. Their departure seemed so sudden in the end, precipitate and somehow petulant.

Anyway, they picked me out of the ruck of other eager students, along with three others that year who won scholarships to Makerere University College in Kampala, a different place than from what it has since become. I was eighteen years old, and now I think how fortunate I was in having had my eyes opened to a different way of looking at the world and to see how we looked from that angle. Puny and ragged.

Hussein. The year 1960 was a blessed musim: calm steady winds, dozens of richly loaded ships sailing safely into harbour, none lost at sea, none forced back. The harvests were good that year too, the trade was brisk and there were almost none of the high-spirited fights between ships’ companies that sometimes broke out between the uncouth sailors. It was Hussein’s third musim, and he came to the new furniture store I had opened to look at some of the things I had there. It was not really a new store, but my father’s halwa shop converted, repainted and refit to sell furniture and other beautiful things. Despite all efforts, the smell of hot ghee still lingered in the store, and at times of despondency it seemed no different from the dingy dark cave from where my father sold halwa in small saucers. But I knew it was different, that my despondency was just an affliction of the glooms and faint-heartedness, and that such dispirited moments were unavoidable. I tried thus to be wise. I knew the store looked smart and expensive, and the objects I displayed in there spoke for themselves. I have always had an interest in furniture. Furniture and maps. Beautiful, intricate things. I employed two cabinet-makers and installed them in a shed at the back of the store, and they built items on order: wardrobes, sofas, beds, that sort of thing. They did these things well, to designs they were familiar with and with wood they knew how to work. The real money, though, and where my passion for the business lay, was in acquiring auction lots of house contents and then picking out the valuables and the antiques. A small sandalwood cabinet made in Cochin or Trivandrum brought in a great deal
more, pleasure and lucre, than a shedful of new oily monstrosities in mahogany and trinket glass panels, which also in any case fetched a small profit from customers and traders who bought such things from me. If any restoration work was necessary I did it myself — guesswork mostly at first, but my customers knew even less about it than I did, so no harm was done.

My customers? For the antiques and the exquisites, they were European tourists and the resident British colonials. We were a day-stop for the Castle Line cruise ships from South Africa to Europe and back. There were other lines as well, but the Castle was a regular twice-a-week call, one going up, the other going down. The tourists disembarked, were taken in hand by accredited guides, who (for a commission) brought many of them to my shop by and by. They were my best and most welcome customers, though I also did a little trade with resident colonial officials, and the one or two consular officials of other colonial nations, the French and the Dutch to be precise. Once the British Resident, the Ruler of the Waves himself, sent an agent to look over a mirror in a silver-studded Malacca frame made in the last century. The price was beyond him, unfortunately. The underling he had sent curled his red lips and stroked his fair hair with distracted distaste when I mentioned the price, as if I was asking too much, but I guessed it was just beyond him. He stomped up and down a few times, puffing his hot cheeks and saying outrageous, outrageous to himself, waiting for me to defer to the Admiral's right to choose his price, but I smiled attentively and stopped listening. Anyone who knew Malacca would have seen that it was not worth a penny less.

It was not that my countrymen were incapable of seeing the beauty of these things. I arranged the most beautiful of them as exhibits in the store, and people came in to look at them and admire. But they would not, could not, pay the prices I was asking for them. They did not have the same obsessive need of them that my European customers had — to acquire the world's beautiful things so they could take them home and possess them, as tokens of their cultivation and open-mindedness, as trophies of their worldliness and their conquest of the multitudinous parched savannahs. At a different time, the British Resident's underling would not have been deterred by the price of the silver-studded Malacca mirror, especially after I told him that there were only a few of them left in the world. He would have taken it at his price, or no price at all, as a right of conquest, as a reflection of our comparative worth in the scheme of things. It was something like that that Kevin Edelman had done with my casker of ud-al-qamar. It's not that I don't understand the desire.

I recognised Hussein when he walked into the store, a tall unmistakable man with a look of the world about him. When he came into the store my head filled with words: Persia, Bahrain, Basra, Harun al-Rashid, Sindbad and more. I was not acquainted with him, but I had seen him in the streets and in the mosque. I even knew his name, because people spoke of him as the trader who the year before had taken lodgings with Rajab Shaaban Mahmud, the Public Works department clerk, a man I had had some delicate dealings with in the past. He wasn't staying with him in 1960, some falling-out with a hint of scandal in it as rumour had it, but he was living in the area, and was known for his generosity. When I heard about his generosity, I knew that the usual malingerers would have already touched him for hand-outs, those shameless whiners for whom our way of doing things allows to make a life out of weakness and abjection. He spoke to me in Arabic, offering courteious salutations, asking after my health, wishing me prosperity in my business, perhaps a little over-salted by and by. I apologised for my Arabic, which was scratchy at best, and spoke to him in Kiswahili. He smiled ruefully, saying, Ah swahili. Ninaowhaa kidogo kidogo tu. I can do little, little only. Then, surprisingly, he spoke to me in English. It was surprising because the traders and the sailors who came during the musim were an uncouth and rough-hewn riff-raff, although this is not to say they did not have a decorous integrity of their own. Of course Hussein did not look or act like that, but still, English meant school, and people who went to school did not become sailors and musim traders who travelled in cramped and squalid dhows in the grimy company of loud-mouth, brawny and thick ear.
He sat in the chair I offered him, stroking his jet moustache and smiling, waiting for me to invite him to state his business. He had heard about my shop, he said, and that I had many beautiful things there. He was looking for a gift for a friend, something delicate and attractive.

‘For the family of a friend,’ he said.

I understood from this that he wanted a gift for a woman, perhaps the wife of a business friend or perhaps not. I showed him round and he was taken first by a slim ebony box which when I acquired it made me think it would have housed an assassin’s dagger. Then he paused over a round teak cabinet engraved with a design of arched doorways and wheels. But I had already seen his eyes wandering towards a low table on three delicately bowed legs, made of ebony so highly polished that it glowed tremulously even from a distance. Before he got there he looked a long time at a set of green fluted goblets on a silver tray, running a finger round the gilded rim and sighing. ‘Beautiful’, he murmured. ‘Exquisite’.

‘And this,’ he said, when we arrived at the ebony table I now knew he coveted.

‘This little thing?’ I asked. He smiled politely when I named the price, and then nodded. We went back to our chairs to begin a pleasurable and courteous exchange of views on the matter. After a while, when it became clear we were too far apart to agree, Hussein dropped the subject and began to talk about something else, I can’t remember now. That was how we became friends, in that casual exchange of opinion over that beautiful table, and in the enjoyable appreciation of the little courtesies we extended to each other. Perhaps also there was some pleasure in speaking to each other in English. At some point during the day, Hussein would be sure to step into the store, look to see that my table, as he called it, was still there, and then settle down for a chat. Sometimes someone else would be there, passing the time of day, delivering and collecting news, doing a bit of business, the convivial routine of small-town life. Then Hussein would sit back and do his best to follow the conversation. There was nothing portentous about these conversations, but Hussein listened attentively, appealing to me for help if there was something he particularly cared not to miss. It was part of his talent for courtesy, and sometimes because he did not want to miss a delicious twist to a bit of gossip. But if there was no one else in the shop, he leant back in the chair with his right ankle tucked under his left thigh, made himself a fat roll-up and talked.

This was his third musim in Africa. His family had no business this way before that, trading mostly further east. His grandfather, Jaafar Musa, was a merchant of legend. He had lived most of his life in Malaya and Siam, going there as a boy apprentice to another Persian merchant known to his father. Persian and Arab merchants had been trading in Malaya for centuries, and merchants from Hadhramut took the message of Islam there in the seventh century, in the same generation as the Prophet’s revelations in Makka. There were also merchants from India and China, and all these people worked and competed in the way of trade. But the word of Islam spread over Malaya, to the extent of the creation of Muslim states and empire. Even though the Portuguese and the Dutch came to conquer and take charge in their characteristic ways from the 1500s, it was not until the British swaggered in in the 1850s that the power of the Muslim Malay states was finally made null. All this had a bearing on Hussein’s story.

From the very beginning of his time in Malaya, the endeavours of Hussein’s grandfather Jaafar Musa were blessed, and he made his fortune while still a young man. In his prime he was dealing in all kinds of business and running several ships all across the Asian seas. This great prosperity coincided with the time when Europeans, especially the British, were taking a firmer grip on the world. In the far east trade, in the 1880s, they were squeezing everyone else out in the name of a higher civilisation. They wanted the opium, the rubber, the tin, the timber, the spices, and they wanted it all without any interference from anyone else, native, muslim or worshipper of a thousand demons, and especially not from merchants who were from territories outside their authority. There was every reason to imagine that they would have their way here as they had everywhere else. So Jaafar, looking to defer the moment somewhat, employed Eur-
opeans to captain his ships and to work as clerks in his office. By some guile or other, he managed to make it seem that his European employees were running him, that he was the dupe of his resourceful retainers, without whom the business would collapse. To casual appearance it was a European company, but in reality Jaafar Musa stayed in his old timber room at the back of the office counting the blessing of God on his enterprise and plotting new ventures. His ships traded as far south as Sulawesi and as far east as the country of the Qimari, the Khmers, and as far west as Bahrain, and anything else in between was also fine. Quietly, he watched the blustering European companies going bankrupt and the dashing captains and crews of their ships turn into suicides and wharf rats. Not all of them went bankrupt, of course, but an encouraging number did, and after a while it became impossible not to notice that Jaafar Musa was becoming one of the richest merchants in Malaya, despite the steam boats, the repeating rifles and the Malay sultans lining up to capitulate to the new world order.

It was a moment of great peril for him, something he understood very well. The British were interfering everywhere they could, energetically penetrating the orderly shambles of native government, asking searching questions, writing reports, cleaning up, imposing consuls and residents and customs regulations, creating order by taking charge of everything that looked as if it would deliver a penny or two. And here was this rich Persian merchant, this Arab as the British insisted on describing him, whom rumour and speculation made far richer than he really was, and whom envy transformed into a legendary and merciless intriguer, a despot, a slaver, keeper of a harem, a sodomiser of little boys, craftily controlling trade which should be in more deserving hands. There was talk of investigating his business methods or even the possibility of criminal proceedings against him for kidnap and murder. No one said this in front of Jaafar Musa, but he knew this was the loose talk of the Europeans and he understood how much they wanted it to be true. He saw something in the eyes of the Europeans who worked for him that made him suspect that they found it harder than ever now not to sneer at him, even though their manner was still obsequious and correct.

Jaafar Musa had a son and two daughters, all of them born in Malaya to his late beloved, Mariam Kufah, may God have mercy on her soul. The daughters Zeynab and Aziza were honourably married by the time of these events and living in Bombay and Shiraz with their husbands, both of whom came from families distanty related to Jaafar. That was how it had been for decades, perhaps centuries. However far people travelled for trade, they received news and sent news, and when it was time to marry their sons and daughters there was always an honourable option available to them. So it had been with Jaafar’s daughters, as it no longer is in our time. Jaafar Musa’s instinct was to begin a careful and disguised withdrawal out of Malaya before the greed of the British became something impossible to resist. He would transfer the business to Bombay and Shiraz in his daughters’ names and put his sons-in-law in charge while events ran their course and the moment came when he and his son could leave with as much as possible intact.

His son, Reza, disagreed. For years he had fretted at his father’s subterfuge of having Europeans appear to be running his business, at the high-handed disregard with which he thought these employees were treating both his father and him. ‘If they now want war, let’s give them war,’ he said to his father. They should dispense with the arrogant dogs and employ Malays and Indians and Arabs and then do as cut-throat trade as they could. Jaafar Musa, who had been doing cut-throat trade all his adult life, was alarmed and distressed by his son’s anger. These are not village sultans we are talking about, but the rulers of the world. He cajoled him, talked to him about the hard-headed realities of their circumstances, in the end insisted with him. Reza dutifully desisted but was not persuaded, was still seething at the injustice.

In the year 1899 Jaafar Musa suffered a stroke. He was walking on the wide upstairs veranda of his house, on his way to the afternoon walk he always took round his beautiful garden, when it seemed as if someone hit him a powerful blow in his diaphragm. His heart burst. The gardener, Abdulrazak, who always watered the beds in late afternoon and who in any case waited until the master appeared to commend and instruct him, and who in his mind thought of these exchanges as the climax of...
his working day, was at that moment picking jasmine for his wife, with half an eye on the veranda which opened out from the merchant's bedroom. So he saw Jaafer Musa curl over and fall to the side and stood transfixed for a moment at the sight of the world's end. The gardener ran upstairs, screaming for help, slipping and grazing his shins and leaving muddy footprints on the polished teak staircase. He clutched the merchant in his arms, rocking him as if he were a child, and screaming out for someone to come and help them. No one came. There was no one to come at that time of day and on this side of the house. This was the merchant's garden terrace, where in time gone by he sat with his beloved Mariam Kufah through the early hours of the evening, talking with her or listening to her recite, and where sometimes their daughters, when they lived here before their mother's death, joined them in song and laughter and conversation. When Reza was younger, he sat with them too. Even after their departure, no one came to this part of the house except the gardener, not at that time of day. So it was that Jaafer Musa, the legendary Arab cut-throat trader, died in the arms of his gardener, Abdulrazak, whose face was covered with tears and snort and blood from sinews which had burst in his grief.

'Even as he led the huge funeral procession, my father Reza was planning changes,' Hussein said. 'It was hopeless, and he lost the business as my grandfather predicted. He got rid of his European employees as soon as he could, some time in 1900, but then he couldn't get anyone to accept a job with him, not senior job. They were too scared of the British. By then all the sultans had signed the British paper, accepting protectorate. My father Reza had to pay big compensation, very big, to all the captains and managers he had got rid of, and all the companies that had been waiting for consignments and deliveries. They made him pay in court. Insurers refused to give him cover. Customs, they searched everything, delayed everything, accused him of bribery. It was probably true. He probably thought that was what they wanted. He was in his twenties and he thought he was as good as anyone, but he wasn't. Not as good as the Europeans, anyway. So slowly like that they strangled him and the business went to ruin. He could not get credit even from local sources, let alone the high and mighty British. After 1910 all Malaya was theirs, even Johor and the northern states, and in that ten years the great company my grandfather had so cunningly built was just a little thing, although still not in debt. It was an obsession of my father, to avoid debt. In the end he was forced to consider selling the house and its beautiful garden. The gardener, he kept the garden beautiful all this time. And then, when the house was for sale, all those stories about my grandfather started again, slaver, criminal, and so on. Only this time they added that he fucked the gardener, pardon my language, which was why he was found dead in his arms. It was time for my father to go, to get away from the ugliness of people who skinned their faces with such shamelessness.'

That was how Reza told the story to him, Hussein, and sometimes to others who wanted to know about his time in Malaya, but it wasn't something he liked to talk about. It made him angry to tell it, and sometimes the injustice of it made him tearful. It was not a good story to tell, especially not to a son, and especially not to merchants, who were the people Reza associated with in Bahrain. He had lost the fortune his father had so diligently accumulated, and in such a far-off place. Jaafer Musa had done what every merchant dreamed of. He had fulfilled the romance of the trader who sets off to a distant destination with his worldly goods and finds prosperity and respect. Reza's loss was the nightmare of that dream, that after a lifetime of cunning and sacrifice, the son would lose it all. That was what I thought too when Hussein told me. I even predicted to myself, as soon as Reza entered the story, that he would lose everything. Well, he did not lose everything. He retrieved enough from the wreck to start another business in Bahrain, importing perfume and incense and cloth from Siam and Malaya and places further to the east. Bahrain was ruled by the British too, as was so much of the known world, but their government there was a ramshackle affair. To them it was just a place from where they could launch attacks on their enemies and refuel their ships. And the Persian and Arab and Indian merchants who had been operating out of Bahrain for centuries were too wily to be brow-beaten by lordly
disdain. Before they found oil there in the 1930s, there wasn’t much to fight over anyway apart from the import trade – no tin or rubber or gold or any of those commodities that could be gouged out of the earth to be taken to Europe as loot.

Sometimes Reza dealt in rare wood when there was a demand for it, when an Agha was building himself a new mansion and his carpenters needed teak for the staircase or mahogany for his bedrooms. Or when a dealer for some Syrian sultan or Russian baron or German banker was buying up supplies for a palace in which he could sit and gloat over his good fortune. I imagine these transactions, though Hussein did mention doing business with a dealer for a Russian baron who had established himself in Mashad, in preparation for the Czar’s take-over of Persia, which he thought was imminent. I forget what it was Hussein said he dealt in. Perhaps he didn’t say. Reza even left a rump of the business in Malaya to act as agents for acquiring supplies, and to look after whatever little property still remained in his hands.

Anyway, the move to Bahrain was blessed too, just as his father had been in Malaya, though not in quite the same spectacular fashion. The war against the Turks did him no harm, only good, bringing business along with the thousands of the odious English and Indian armies passing through on their way to the battles in Iraq. (Poor Iraq, it seems the British have been fighting there for one reason or another so often in this century.) And soon after the war, in 1918, he married and was blessed with three daughters before Hussein arrived. People came and went from his shop all day, always aware of a welcome whether they had come to buy or sell or sit and chat in the atmosphere of heady scents. His children milled around the shop, spoiled and praised by everyone, accepting such adoration with precocious composure.

‘He loved his children,’ Hussein said, his eyes glinting with water at the memory. ‘And they loved him. He was very emotional about it, and it seems he wanted everyone else to love them too.’

When Hussein was ten years old, Reza decided to make a trip to Malaya, to wind up what bits of business still remained there, and to see the old places again, and to show everyone who cared to know that things had not turned out all bad for him. He took Hussein with him as testimony of the good fortune that had befallen him, but also so that he would see the big world and begin to learn how to cope in it. They spent four months travelling – the sea voyage, doing business, seeing the sights, visiting and staying with friends.

‘Wait, wait,’ I said to Hussein. ‘Let me fetch a map. I want you to show me all these places. I want to see where they are.’

They even went to Bangkok, where Reza had lived for some months as a teenager, living with his father’s agent there in the days before their affairs went bad. It was a calm beautiful port town then, with canals and riverside boulevards, not the teeming behemoth it became later. People from all over the world congregated there: Chinese, Indians, Arabs, Europeans. To Hussein it was an incredible journey, an unbelievable journey, and images of that time have stayed with him all his life. And even though he only told them to me as stories, they’ve stayed with me too ever since. To this day I imagine a walk he described across the courtyard of a temple on the royal island, I imagine the austere tranquility he described, and the overwhelming authority of the temple dome. I have seen a photograph of the temple since coming here, but it revealed nothing of the beauty that Hussein described.

In Bangkok his father purchased a consignment of the best quality ud-al-qamari from Cambodia for a good price, and had it shipped to Bahrain on the same boat that they took back. It was he, Hussein’s father, who explained that ud-al-qamari, the wood of the moon, was a corruption of ud-al-qimari, the wood of the Khmers. The Japanese war started soon after they returned to Bahrain, and there was no ud to be had for another seven or eight years, so Reza made a healthy profit for years on that consignment.

‘I still have some,’ Hussein said, smiling to see how the story of the journey and the ud had so excited and captivated me. It was at this point that I realised that crafty Hussein was still bargaining for that ebony table. He glanced at it briefly and gave me a friendly knowing look.

‘Do you have some with you?’ I asked.
So the next time he came he brought a small mahogany casket with the most beautiful ud-al-qamar it has ever been my good fortune to inhale. With the help of the coffee-seller across the road from my shop, who contributed some pieces of glowing charcoal, Hussein prepared an incense-burner and perfumed the air we breathed. People walking along the street stopped in their tracks and came to sit by the glowing scent. The coffee-seller, crossed the road and stood on the steps, saying, 'Mashaallah, mashaallah, that is a beautiful, Allah karim. May I bring you some coffee, maulana?' His gratitude did not extend to me because I had ruined his life. As everyone knows you can't eat halwa without a cup of coffee in your hand, so when I stopped the halwa business I also cut his throat, as he put it. I assassinated him. But now even he entered the store and sat breathing the same scented air as the rest of us. I thought I could catch the odour of the fantasy of those distant places in the dense body of that perfume, although that was only because Hussein had bound the two things together for me with his stories, and I had surrendered to both so completely.

Of course I let Hussein have the ebony table, in the end. 'Tell me one thing,' I said to him in the process of our negotiations, smiling and making it possible for him to turn the matter into a joke if he chose to. 'Why do you want this table so much? Is it for someone special?'

He smiled evasively, drooping his eyelids theatrically, playing the rogue. 'It's a delicate matter,' he said.

I knew, everyone knew, that he was wooing the beautiful son of Rajab Shaaban Mahmud, the Public Works Department clerk, at whose house he had lodged on an earlier trip, and where he was still a visitor. I will tell the story this way, for all the blemishes in the telling, because I no longer know who may be listening. In any case, the rumour was that Hussein was wooing the beautiful son of Rajab Shaaban Mahmud, the Public Works Department clerk. For all I knew he had already corrupted that glowing youth, but I could not imagine that the ebony table would be of any interest to him. It was more likely that the rumoured gifts of money and silk cloth would be appropriate to the seduction of the vanity of such a youth. Young people caught up in the stews of their passions have no sense of the beauty of things. Perhaps the table was a gift to Rajab Shaaban Mahmud himself, a token of courtesy to him as a way of saying that because he wished to seduce the son, this did not mean that he did not esteem the father. A bribe. Or perhaps the cunning Persian trader was playing an even more complicated game, really stalking Rajab Shaaban Mahmud's beautiful wife, Asha, by pretending to be after the son. She was indeed a beautiful woman, and I had found her courteous and self-respecting in the very brief acquaintance I had with her up to that time.

As it concerned the matter of Hussein, though, she was rumoured to have been game for a fling or two in the past and was still willing, according to those who had the gift for pronouncing on such matters. These are difficult things to know, and miserable matters to talk about, but they are the currency of daily commerce in a small town and it would be false not to speak about them. Nevertheless, it makes me uncomfortable to do so. And now I feel foolish and dissembling for protesting so much. Perhaps it was all a tease for Hussein, at least at first, occupying the long months of the musim after he had disposed of his merchandise and was waiting for the winds to change for the return journey. None of it was my affair, though in such a small place it was impossible not to know about such things.

We agreed that Hussein would pay me half my asking price for the table in cash, and for the rest he would give me a twenty-pound packet of the ud-al-qamar. He was generous, or I was better at bargaining than I thought I was. He gave me the casket as a gift, the casket Kevin Edelman plundered from me, and with it the last of the ud-al-qamar Hussein and his father bought in Bangkok in the year before the war, the casket which I had brought with me as all the luggage from a life departed, the provisions of my after-life.

Kevin Edelman, the bawab of Europe, and the gatekeeper to the orchards in the family courtyard, the same gate which had released the hordes that went out to consume the world and to which we have come sliming up to beg admittance. Refugee. Asylum-seeker. Mercy.
But the arrangement we made over the little ebony table wasn't the end of my dealings with Hussein. It was a bad year for the return winds of the musim, coming so late and fitfully at first. In any case Hussein overextended himself in his dealings, perhaps out of boredom or playfulness. As I got to know him a little better, I came to understand that so much of what he did was playful and mischievous, and when the mischief led to a little havoc and rancour, his laughter thickened with unkind glee. At those moments I thought I caught glimpses of something cruel in him beneath the courtesies and the gleeful chuckles, a sternness or cynicism that was uncomplicated and assured. I thought I could imagine him killing or causing someone unbearable pain if he felt it necessary to protect what he valued. Whereas I can't think there is anything that valuable. Anyway, I could imagine him trading out of boredom, just for something to do, inching towards ruin. It doesn't sound like good business, but then he was a Persian who traded in incense and perfume, gliding with his stories and his courtesies only just out of reach of the tangles that made us so ordinary. Who is to know whether doing things in style seemed to him a better reason for making decisions than ensuring that there was a lamb curry to eat every day?

He underestimated the cost of style, which also doesn't sound like good business, and approached me for a sizeable loan, and I was fortunate to be able to extend it to him. Business had been good, which is to say that my customers had been foolish enough to pay my prices and the carpenters had not thought to ask for an increase in their payment, or I had managed whatever came my way with wily efficiency and prudent husbandry. Whatever it was I did, I was in the gloatingly happy position to lend Hussein the money he needed. Such loans used to be frequent between traders, especially traders across the ocean, although no one would dream of doing it these days, now that everyone is scrabbling for the merest coppers. In those days... Such sad words for a man of my age, and, after everything that has happened, such useless words. Then, someone borrowed money from you here, went to trade somewhere else, then repaid the loan to an associate of yours at yet another place. The associate purchased what merchandise you required and shipped it to you.

Everyone got a cut, and honour and trust prevailed between merchants, marriage contracts were agreed, families became closer, and business prospered. Now and then there was drama and intrigue as something went wrong, and scandal threatened, but obligations and self-respect prevented a descent into chaos, and if the worst came to the worst, scholars of law and scholars of religion, who might be the same personages, would be called in to arbitrate. Although even by then things had changed in the few decades of British rule, and when the worst did come to the worst, it was more likely that a Gujarati lawyer would be consulted, some Shah & Shah or Patel & Sons, rather than the qadhi, a good and gentle man at that time unlike the ranners who came after him.

In any case, I was new in business and had no associates of the kind I have described, no one who would be obliged to care for my money as if it were his own. Such associates were relations or the work of a lifetime, cultivated and then inherited, generation after generation, life after life, obligation by obligation, inescapable and impossible to terminate. So I had to ask Hussein for something to hold against the loan.

"Without doubt," he said, relieved and smiling. It made me wonder whether he was in greater difficulties than he had told me. "I made that mistake once myself in Bombay. Only a trivial sum, I'm glad to say, but I never saw an anna of it back."

"Bombay," I said. "Is there no end to your adventures? What were you doing there?"

"I was sent to school there. My aunt asked for me. My aunt Zeynab, you remember her. She asked for me so I could go to school," Hussein said, sneering gently and raising his eyebrows at his aunt's earnestness. "I learnt a great deal in Bombay, a city of many wrongs. I also learnt the language of our conquerors, may God give them strength."

I ignored that last remark, taking it to be another of his provocative ironies. Anyway, Hussein had brought a surprising document with him, which all along he had intended as security for the loan. It showed that in the previous year he had lent Rajab Shaaban Mahmud, his landlord at that time, the exact sum of money he wished to borrow from me, and that by that
agreement Rajab Shaaban Mahmud undertook to pay back the money not less than twelve months later. The penalty for failure to pay was the loss of Rajab Shaaban Mahmud’s house and all its contents. It was sworn to and witnessed in front of the qadi.

‘Why don’t you just get your money off him?’ I asked, though I had a very good idea why not. Rajab Shaaban Mahmud was a Public Works Department clerk, who had a love for the forbidden drink, the devil’s brew, and on the evidence of the document was a complete fool. He had inherited the house from his aunt Bi Sara only the previous year, otherwise he had little else to his name. Why agree to the loss of the house as penalty? The very roof over his head. It was not much of a house, but enough to keep shame at bay and provide a roof over the heads of his loved ones. Where was he going to find the money to pay that loan back? Hussein must have known that all along, and must have lent him the money to put him under a crushing obligation for some reason. And if there was any truth to the rumours of his seduction of the son, then that reason was the gratification of what was beginning to look like a playfully malicious desire.

‘I don’t intend to press for payment,’ Hussein said, no doubt guessing my thoughts. ‘If you agree, I intend to have the document made over to you, for you to hold as security until I come back next year. Then I will repay you and you’ll return the document to me.’

I wish I had refused the plan, because after the havoc he wreaked on Rajab Shaaban Mahmud’s household at the end of that musim, I didn’t think it likely that he would come back. Though I could not be sure what a reckless and proud Persian merchant might do, what jinns and demons he had as his playmates, what dishonours and indignities he could bear without embarrassment. In the eight months or so until the next musim, I considered the options available to me and waited, but sure enough, Hussein did not come back. He sent a letter with another trader, with greetings and apologies, pressure of business elsewhere, and may God bless all your enterprises until we meet again, which, inshaallah, will be in the year after. He also sent a gift, a map. It was a mariner’s map of South Asia. It belonged to his grandfather Jaafar Musa, he said in his letter, and it didn’t look as if it had been used very much. He found it in his father’s papers and thought I might like to have it. The gift made me smile. He remembered how much I liked maps. Such a fine map. The money could wait until next year, and I still had the note on the house. Business was good, alhamdulillah. I talked to myself in this way, but could not quite still the anxieties the affair filled me with.

I speak to maps. And sometimes they say something back to me. This is not as strange as it sounds, nor is it an unheard of thing. Before maps the world was limitless. It was maps that gave it shape and made it seem like territory, like something that could be possessed, not just laid waste and plundered. Maps made places on the edges of the imagination seem graspable and pliable. And later when it became necessary, geography became biology in order to construct a hierarchy in which to place the people who lived in their inaccessibility and primitiveness in other places on the map.

The first map I saw, though I must have seen others in innocence before that, was one a teacher showed us when we were seven years old. I was seven anyway, even if I can’t say for certain about the ages of the multitude which shared this experience with me. There or thereabouts, anyway. For some reason, you had to be below a certain age before you could begin school. I have never properly considered the oddness of this before and it is only now as I think it that I realise its strangeness. If you were over a certain age, it was as if you had gone over the point beyond which you could be instructed, like a coconut that had overripened and become undrinkable, or cloves that had been left too long on the tree and had swollen into seeds. And even now as I think of it I can’t come up with an explanation for this stern exclusion. The British brought us school, and brought the rules to make school work. If the rules said you had to be six and no older than six to be allowed to start school, that was how it would be. Not that the schools had things their own way, because parents shaved off however many years it was necessary to have their children allowed in. Birth certificate? They were
poor, ignorant people and never bothered to obtain one. Which was why they wanted their son to go to school, so he wouldn't end up a beast like them.

In our own lives, everyone had been going to chuoni for generations. Chuoni, that was where we went to learn the alphabet so we could read the Koran and listen to the miraculous events which befell the Prophet throughout his lifetime, sallahu-wa-ale. And whenever there was time to spare, or the heat was too great to concentrate on the nimbly curling letters on the page, we listened to stories of the hair-raising tortures that awaited some of us after death. Nobody bothered with age in chuoni. You started more or less as soon as you were toilet-trained and stayed there until you could read the Koran from beginning to end, or until you found the nerve to escape, or until the teachers could no longer bear to have you around, or your parents refused to pay the miserable pittance which was the teacher's fee. Most people had made their escape by the age of thirteen or so. But at school you started when you were six and progressed as well as you could, year after year, all of you the same age together. There were always stragglers, those who had been required to repeat a year, one or two in every class who lived with their shame throughout their school life. For the rest of us, we were all the same age, on paper. You could never be sure how old class-mates really were, and as we grew a little older, some developed moustaches at a tender age and some disappeared for a few days and returned with eyes alight with secret knowledge, followed by whispered rumours of quiet weddings in the countryside. We did tend to marry early in those days. I don't know what happened in girls' schools and wish now that I did. Perhaps the girls would have just disappeared from school, there one day gone the next, and everyone would have guessed they had been married. Married off, married by, done to. I try to imagine what that would have felt like. I imagine myself a woman, feeble with unuttered justification, unutterable. I imagine myself defeated.

But I was talking about the first map I saw. I was seven when the teacher showed it to us, even if I can't say for certain the ages of the other boys in the class. Seven is a propitious number, and I have been here for seven months, though that is not why I cling to that number for the moment of my first map. I know I was seven because it was my second year at school, and I have the integrity of the British Empire to bear me out, since I would have been six the year I started, as the rules required. The teacher introduced his subject in a dramatic fashion. He held up a hen's egg between thumb and forefinger. "Who can tell me how to make this egg stand up on its end?" That was how he introduced Christopher Columbus to us. It was a fabulous and unrepeatable moment, as if I too had stumbled across an unimagined and unexpected continent. It was the moment at the start of a story. As his story developed, he began to draw a map on the blackboard with a piece of white chalk: the coast of north-west Europe, the Iberian peninsula, southern Europe, the land of Shams, Syria and Palestine, the coast of North Africa which then bulged out and tucked in and then slid down to the Cape of Good Hope. As he drew, he spoke, naming places, sometimes in full sometimes in passing. Sinuously north to the jut of the Ruvuma delta, the cup of our stretch of coast, the Horn of Africa, then the Red Sea coast to Suez, the Arabian peninsula, the Persian Gulf, India, the Malay Peninsula and then all the way to China. He stopped there and smiled, having drawn half the known world in one continuous line with his piece of chalk. He put a dot halfway down the east coast of Africa and said, 'This is where we are, a long way from China.'

Then he put a dot in the north Mediterranean and said, 'This is where Christopher Columbus was, and he wanted to go to China, but by following a route in the opposite direction.' I don't remember much of what he told us about the adventures of greedy Cristobal, so many other stories have sifted up over that innocent moment, but I remember that he said that Columbus set out on his voyage the same year as the fall of Granada and the expulsion of Muslims from Andalus. These names too were new to me, as were so many of the others, but he said them with such reverence and longing – the fall of Granada and the expulsion of Muslims from Andalus – that I have never lost the moment. I see him now, a short plump man, dressed in a kanzu, kofia and a faded brown jacket, his face pitted with smallpox scars yet
composed into a look of forebearance and tolerance. And I remember the fluency with which he created an image of the world for us, my first map.

The egg? This was the story. The sailors on Columbus's ships had never sailed west into the Atlantic, nobody had. For all anyone knew, the ocean suddenly ended and its waters fell into a gigantic chasm and then travelled through caverns and gorges under the earth to a depthless pool infested with monsters and devils. Then also the journey was long and difficult, the ocean empty, no glimpse of Cathay however sharp-eyed the lookout. So the rabble grumbled and plotted. We want to go home. In the end Columbus confronted them, holding a hen's egg between thumb and forefinger. Which of you can make this egg stand on its end? he asked. None of them could, of course. They were only sailors, doomed to play superstitious bit parts in such high drama, and grumble and cook up improbable plots. Columbus gently cracked the end of the egg – the teacher demonstrated with his own egg – and then stood it on the quarter-deck rail. I am not sure now whether the moral was that in order to eat an egg you have to crack it, and therefore in order to find Cathay you have to put up with suffering, or whether it was just to demonstrate that Columbus was a great deal cleverer than the sailors and was therefore more likely to be right about the most sensible course of action. In any case, the sailors immediately gave up any thought of insurrection and sailed on in search of the Grand Khan. As I would have done when I was seven. The teacher carefully put his hard-boiled egg down on his desk for later consumption.

We never had that teacher again, although he was a regular teacher at the school. Our class teacher was absent that day and he was looking after us for the morning. At the end of the morning we trooped out to go back to our class, and when I peeped in later to see the world he had shown us, the map had been wiped off the board.

Hussein would not have known about this, would have had no idea how it was that maps began to speak to me, but he knew how I loved looking at them and collecting them, and he sent me his grandfather's old map to placate me because he owed me money. I laughed with pleasure when the gift arrived, but I was also almost certain that I would not see Hussein again. Why would he want to come our way to sell bits and pieces of sandalwood and rosewater when he could be trading in Rangoon and Shiraz and other such far-flung places in the great world, places hard to reach and therefore beautiful because of that?