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The Last Annal of Alamgir

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Her laundry basket is a hornets' nest
that spits at you. Voyeur, clairvoyante,
urchin-cut waif, she stares in at windows,
her head a gourd hollowed by age,
her hair a silver floss.

Objects are lessons: the light seeps
through the slats, sets off a shimmer
on her lace. The silken thread
that she pulls from her stitching
knots tight around my neck.

THE LAST ANNAL OF ALAMGIR

I

When the heat takes over, I am its creature, and no more a man with a mission. The bomb that has been ticking away for years in the head, stops. The hoopoe that used to tap its long digger beak on the window-pane every morning has flown away; it isn't there to cock its brown crest sharply, to warn me where the next attack might come from. Half the day wasted on an idle game of chess, and now I walk briskly past mansions whose owners have disappeared, empty houses that have wilted, collapsed soggily to the dusty grass of the sidewalks.

Something of their defeatism enters the soul: blood straining at bone, half phantom and half stubborn desire to keep going, I stagger up the long shadows that the streets throw at me. Keep to the right and look out for rogue drivers: even a sleepwalker must keep the law, even as he staggers up those tilted shadows, all the way into the sun at the end of the square.

This, now, is noon. All this and a bell tower that launches itself from a red-tiled roof. The wind flings a rain of silver coins through a crab-apple tree that has squeezed what water it could from this earth, and now makes its last stand. It was here long before my grandfather's soldiers first rode through this province, along roads they had lined with the impaled heads of rebels. And its

branches rustle, as branches should in welcome, till the leaves become a single shimmer of tigered green. When you lie alone with yourself, as I have, over so many summers, it isn't surprising that only first things and last things should come to matter. Over all that intervenes, a discreet veil is drawn. A whirr of helicopters. A burst of bugles. Tangled telegraph wires. Not a crow in sight.

I don't sign decrees anymore. I can't waste my time trying to unscramble lines of hieroglyphics that are as barren as the highway to Ashkabad. I don't know the country as well as I once did: which happens when lackeys stop bringing you decrees to sign. Then you can no longer tell which way the two-headed god of time will point. You lose your gift of prophecy, and cannot predict the future from the patterns that form in the red wax of your seal. It's a sacrifice, but I accept it with stoic grace. A principle of growth: as you age, your needs grow fewer and fewer. Or should. But I shouldn't moralize. It's never been my custom, nor have I the authority to coin precepts for others.

When I was young, not more than seventeen, I had wanted Ashkabad and Deha in the east and Shrath on the faraway western border, and Gelesh, that place of vanishing horizons where the sky dips into the sea, and the captains of high-masted ships cannot say whether they are navigating along the tides or the clouds . . . in brief, the whole sprawl of the empire, not a district less. And I got it too. I couldn't wait, so I killed all my rivals, real and imagined, on the battlefield or by deceit, in single combat or on the rack. That's the way my father went, and my brothers, my cousins, in other words, contenders and pretenders, and later, my own cautious advisors. That kind of slaughter was sanctioned by custom, of course. My father had done it before me, and his father had, before him: so who was I to break with family tradition?

And here I am now, the precipitate of these complicated desires, these bloody genetic spirals: I lie under this cupola, dried to a yellow husk by the heat of the south. My vista is empty, except for a rock, and at last, a crow. And a thunder-blue cloud too, chanting to itself, although it will sail elsewhere to deliver its burden of rain.

Not even the mind can be tethered here: I drift into dream. The cupola folds itself around me, a sort of marble placenta. The sun speckles the brown of remembered eyes with gold. All is cold and marmoreal to the ashen touch. I drift further. A chalk-white face and the slanting fall of a steel crescent. Then a band of sawtooth mercenaries hacking their way through the gaps in the

hills, plunging into valleys where the blacksmiths have forgotten the gentle arts of the cutlass and the bridle. I drift northward to meet my mother's ancestors as they come down again, over the east slopes.

The sky is the thinnest of tissues today. If I could, I would wet it with what tears I have, and watch it crumple and tear along its creases in my hands. Who would believe that I am the emperor Alamgir?

II

He lies under his cupola, the cruelest of old men. His grandfather had thought to weave the empire together into one tapestry of races and persuasions, stone worshippers and fire worshippers, heretics and priests, shepherds from the mountains and oarsmen from the backwaters. The Empire of the Sun did not outlive its founder; perhaps it had never really existed outside his edicts and communiqués and the periodic speech he addressed to his loyal subjects. By the time his grandson took the throne, the tapestry had frayed at the edges, been nibbled through by moths; skeins that had come apart hissed and struck at one another like vipers.

The grandson had no intention of repairing the tapestry. A curious emperor he made, who stitched caps and knit his calligraphy into banners, who spent half the day in prayer, and the other half treating the itch of conquest that afflicted him.

The peninsula, extending into the ocean like some fugitive whale, was his particular obsession. He wanted to harness it, if he could; and if he couldn't, he would harpoon it. So southward he went, to drive the people of the parched hills and agave-scattered plateaus from their fortresses, to spike their camouflaged bivouacs, to break their rebellion and yoke them to the war chariots of the Empire of the Sun. He never understood their instinctive hatred for him: for twenty years, he had lived among them, punished them for their temerity, burned their homesteads and exiled them into slavery, and still they remained adamant.

Occasionally, an afternoon on the campaign finds the emperor under a tent, looking out over one of those dead plains of salt that punctuate the long sentence of the southern peninsula. These salt plains are an agony: their crystal outcrops catch the sun's glare and throw it back with a vengeance; jeweled

daggers, they burn through the retina until they reach that dark place behind the eyes, where the terror of dreams is born.

Sometimes, in such hours, the emperor is visited by Ashraf, the oldest of his murdered brothers. Ashraf whispers in his ear what a fool he was to succeed, what a fool he had been to outlive his brothers. Caught between the hiss of his brother's voice and the glare of the salt plain, Alamgir loses his philosophical calm; his guards think he is finally losing his mind when he cries out for Ashraf to go away.

But for many days now, no one has come to him, not even the unwelcome specters of his youth. No one has brought him news. Not from Gelesh, where he had expected the navy to revolt two, no three, perhaps even four months ago. Nor from that Ashkabad, the capital that he has not seen in twenty years. The labyrinthine pungencies of its spice markets, the cries of its hawkers, its promenades and fountains are all marked as vignettes on the daguerreotype wall-maps of his mind, where nothing has changed by even so much as a trifling mosaic, no rivers have changed direction and flooded the long-entrenched earthworks of settlements, no borders have been breached by intrepid raiders. In his mind, the guardians of the gates stand alert, and the Empire of the Sun reigns, immune to eclipse.

I pass him often, touching his wrinkled face with the tips of my wings. He can't see me, though, and flicks his fingers at a fly that he thinks has committed the sacrilege of settling on the bridge of his aquiline nose. If he could understand the language of angels, he would have heard me say: The lava plain stretches out all around you, like a tideless sea. Every muscle in your body is worn out; your nerves are frayed; you can't even see very clearly any longer. But I whisper, because I do not want you to lose faith in yourself. On the brink, in the heat: these are dangerous places for an old man to be.

You cannot show someone the futility of his works and days, represent him to himself as a skull and a pair of crossed bones while he yet lives. And how much more delicate one must be, in the presence of Alamgir himself. Finger those rosaries carefully, carefully. One can never be so careful, so minutely attentive to detail, as when one is on the brink, in the heat. Watch every millimeter that your arthritic fingers trace across the coverlet, every twitch in your toes. You have been the fiercest of men; but now, under this cupola, you are waiting for death to claim you, an aging emperor.

III

Red, all red and black on the heights; and the rest bleaching to chalk. Rock, rock in every form: jagged and smooth, gleaming like a saddle polished through many campaigns, or dull as a cyst. Scrub. Desert. Rock, again, rock ignited by the blinding sun.

She thinks I can't hear or see her. She tends to be slightly romantic, like many angels. A touch of melodrama about the way she phrased that last thought: You have been the fiercest of men; but now, under this cupola, you are waiting for death to claim you, an aging emperor.

Am I death's lost baggage, that it should so imperiously claim me? And do I not hear and see her, this girl with her flushed cheeks and tawny wings? Have I not the right to resist her feathers when they tickle my nostrils, force me to sneeze? She forgets that I am, after all, the descendant of Jamshed, who was long ago King of the Angels. He may have been banished to earth, but he never forgot the winged speech that he had spoken.

It's a gift I inherit: whisper or wingbeat, I hear it in my solitude. There are bearded, bespectacled old monks at court who have been trying, all their lives, to convince me that the apes were the fathers of men. I tell them otherwise, knowing better. If they could see past the blindfold of their doctrines, they would realize that we have not risen above the apes, we have fallen below the angels. I don't think I shall ever convince them. They bore me, these scrabbling theologians, spittle dribbling down their ragged beards, forever poring through their crabbed volumes, finding ways of preserving my soul.

I should have beheaded them a long time ago, these sniveling oracles. Not that it will matter, eventually. What will it matter whether I had a soul or not, a beard or not? In the end, all that people will remember of me, if they remember me at all, will be a name. It'll finish with a couple of phrases carved into a tomb, a portrait or two in a folio, one on horseback, the other picturing me strolling through a garden, between two other figures bent over their canes. And perhaps a city that bears my imperial title.

I don't wish to be immortal any longer. Now that the wall-maps in my head don't agree even remotely with what's happening in the world of events, and

I'm just a rusty scabbard clanking against a column—let it all go, I say, let it all go.

My generals are dangerous men. I no longer want to hear from them or want to read their tedious reports. Wherever they march, they loot villages and burn standing crops, slaughter and rape at will, spread the gospel of fire and darkness in my name. Here I lie under my cupola, without so much as twitching a ligament—and in all quarters, peasants who have never seen my face, traders to whom I have never been more than a head on a coin, curse me for a tyrant.

Tyrant or scapegoat? Perhaps the deep red hollow of the throne in Ashkabad was a reminder, to whoever sat on it, of the earliest kings on earth—those poor fools chosen by their tribe, or those unwary strangers shanghaied to play the part, who ruled for one year before they were sacrificed to the goddess of the fields. Have I not also been a sacrifice, lean and stringy though it be? My blood has streamed to the earth, to fertilize these chapped plateaus, these clotted escarpments, these wrung-out hills. I cannot close my eyes, because from each clouded eyeball, a jacaranda has burst and spread its velvet foliage, its hooded shadow over the raw, smarting wound of the landscape.

I don't sleep, but slide into morbid fantasies. I try to keep my eyes wide open (where have those jacarandas gone, who pulled them up by the roots?), but then the sky drips between the upper and the lower lids and hardens into a crust. A miniature sierra forms inside the eyes, and now I no longer see the angel, but only sense, feel on the parchment of my skin the light pressure of her wings.

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