

“Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing
there is a field. I’ll meet you there.” -- by Jalal Al-Din Rumi (1207-1273)

Wajdan

A shimmer of breath, a stillness of light.

Dawn penetrated a bedroom window through the ripples of its carmine curtains to illuminate the particles above Kabir. He shivered under a meager, low-thread count bedsheet, and rubbed his feet together under its dome. Breathing shallow breaths, and delaying his alarm, Kabir realized how important good bedsheets were, but accepted the fact that he could not have them yet. First he had to settle into his new apartment. Why? The “why” fell to the wayside, as much falls to the wayside, especially when hesitating. What mattered most to Kabir lay beyond the low-thread count sheets, past the delay, outside of the bedroom, and in the kitchen, where he would prepare the magic dish, a dessert for that evening’s date.

Kabir smiled at the ninety-degree turn his clock’s long-hand had made since he got out of bed to prepare the date. He had fantasized about the rendezvous all week, since the last quarter moon, the first day of the fall equinox. An affinity for the astrological has always loomed over Kabir. The fact that the planets were orbiting where they were, when they were—as the objects in Kabir’s life were orbiting where they were, when they were, in parallel succession—was enough to prove that everything happened for a reason and that there were no such thing as coincidence. The same day he had set the date, he had moved into his new apartment: both a week ago. Kabir now hoped the celestial orbs inside his plexus would again align with his coveted yet unrealized dream. To be with her. The date. The Dancer.

“Dinner at my place,” he had said.

“Yes,” she had replied.

An inopportune aside, of moon, hoona.

Raqs sharqi means “eastern dance” in Arabic, and counts on the passionate twitches of a dancer’s body movements to irradiate heat like the jabs of a flickering flame; though under the right inspiration the dance can also unwind before the viewer as a continuous fluid, a stream. The curves of a dancer’s body are multiplied when the right elements of the dance come together: the music, location, and audience; the last one, key, because when the relationship between dancer and spectator haps unbroken, it reiterates, multiplying the number of curves. The dancer’s articulation of hips, her isolation of torso muscles, her twisting wrists, hypnotize its spectator through cyclical motion, loops forming between limbs that are themselves looping to form concentric circles of eroticism; which, like Eros, is best under the light of a full moon. Overwhelming to the eye, and allusive to intellect, words or thoughts may fail to capture the dancer. A block of unbroken text, when compared to the human body, compares unsexy. Meanwhile, under a raqs sharqi spell, the eye is seduced into hypnosis by the dancer’s flesh and scent. From her dance flowing with focus, comes the eye’s concentration. The viewer does not only see breasts, cheeks, inner thighs, but their unity; a unity cooked by the dancer’s auto-hypnosis. The more in tuned she is, the more in tune the spectator becomes. And the cycle continues, staccato, legato, and in between, with shimmies, shakes and shivers. Why do we watch? Why does she dance? These questions are irrelevant to the hypnotized. They only disenchant.

So long as the raqs sharqi lingers in its centrifuge of gaze and body, spectator and dancer, the nature of its movements will elude even the most articulate poet.

Yet, as to be revealed, a carved sketch may in the end unite sacerdotal Man and virtuous Woman.

The flickering fall.

It was at the park, exactly one week before that carmine morning, where Kabir met the Dancer. She donned not a traditional belly dancing dress—the weather too cold and gray for that—but the clothes of the city’s commoners. What she did not reveal beneath her clothes, as she danced, was left to the imagination. It warmed Kabir’s belly like haram to behold just her glistening earrings. They were fish hooks. And Kabir had taken the bait. The Dancer’s hips seemed at once dislocated from her body, yet orbiting her center of gravity, unscrewing her privates, stirring her inner challis. Her hidden petals, smooth as her wrists, shook so much that Kabir forgot he had been sitting on a bench for thirty minutes, dislocating himself from the park, as well as the neighborhood he had moved to recently, dislocating himself even from the city, if only for a moment to fall in, fall out, focus and refocus on the raqs sharki. The moment fell short of the sublime for Kabir, though, who, having known many a dancer in his life, began to notice this particular Dancer’s narrow repertoire, her few moves; similarly, the strumming oud player to her left, who strummed the same four or five chords, who had known the Dancer his whole life, could not pick at the strings the way an experienced player could. Kabir wondered if a more experienced player would have freed the Dancer to find other articulations, other shakes, other shimmies that might complement her body. She was too young, hadn’t learned the tricks, though it was clear she had spent a handful of years repeating those few she’d mastered. The riqq player, on her other side, didn’t add much to the spectacle either, only a procession of percussion jingles and a voice that spoke a mix of English, Arabic and Spanish, and accompanied his own black stone stare upon the Dancer. One glance at the riqq player’s meteoric eyes would bounce Kabir’s gaze back to the Dancer. Her breaths, visible and warm, tingled through noon’s light air. A slight smile with some uneven teeth, white and gold, pivoted as she sloped her head side to side. Then she closed her eyes. Bent backwards and shook her knotted braids in waves, pulled her torso back up, and spun a full circle with her body. As she did, her shoulders rotated in

opposite directions, while her hips, first clockwise, then counterclockwise, screwed and unscrewed once more her flower's petals, the honeyed jewel inside her challis. Her body was the third instrument. It was a glass harp filled with water and arak. Would he clink her with his nails, or only run his fingertips? Kabir wished now more than ever to perform with her. On her. For her. The Dancer.

She opened her eyes, they blazed green, and with a smile the raqs sharqi ended.

In exchange, Kabir pulled his hands out of his leather jacket pockets and dropped a business card into the oud traveling-case, along with a rolled, crisp Jackson, for which the Dancer closed her eyes and bowed deeply before Kabir.

"Thank you," she said.

"Please," Kabir responded. "Thank you." And he asked for her name.

A depth inside out, a night to be called.

The two agreed to meet again at the same park the next day. Then and there they walked. For Kabir, too many orbits were lining up. Soon there'd be an alignment. First, he moved in. Then, he met her. He reminded her of home, while she showed him the neighborhood. Her name meant Love in one language, Consciousness in another. This, to Kabir, was the ultimate proof fate had drawn him a favorable card. It was time to flip it.

"Yes," was the Dancer's reply. "But could you prepare a roz bhaleeb? It is my favorite dish, and it has been ages since last I had it. Were it a family recipe, I would like it even more."

"I have one," Kabir replied. "It is my favorite dish too."

Former sopor turned inhalation peppers all-tarot on the floor.

Roz bhaleeb is rice with milk. Not the most complicated dish, yet it requires time and attention. Between washing the rice, boiling the water, simmering

the milk, cooking the rice, and mixing it together, Kabir had his morning not just carmine, but booked. An hour into his preparations, slowly adding the cooked rice to the simmered milk, and stirring a wooden spoon gently through the mixture so as to not crumble a single grain of rice (as his mother had shown him), he covered the pot halfway and waited by the stove. Every five minutes, for another hour and a half, he stirred the pot's contents, preventing them from sticking, a process which made Kabir's mouth water. It was during the final hour, when the mixture reached the desired thickness, that one hand unloaded a half-cup of cane-sugar into the pot, while the other hand reached for the drawer overhead with Kabir's secret ingredient, a vial of imported rose water. As he brought it down, he saw it was empty.

The fragrance that rose.

Only one deli uptown sold the vials Kabir needed. Its liquid contained culinary powers as magical as the 13th century. It turned milk and rice into heaven on earth. There is no use explaining rose water in roz bhaleeb—or dancing erotically, or eye contact—with words. It is like trying to talk with your mouth full. The best way to communicate the idea is, then, to cook it and serve.

The subway ride uptown allowed Kabir's mind to wander, while his dessert chilled in the fridge. The candles stood wick erect throughout his apartment and awaited his command; the incense sticks cuddled together in trays and awaited his flame; and two bottles of wine kissed behind a bottle of corked tap water awaiting the twist of his hands. All Kabir had to do upon his return was hit the play button on his stereo, set the table with a bountiful centerpiece—a cornucopia full of pairs of fruits, except for one—and dinner would cook itself. What concerned Kabir more than the main course was adding that finishing touch to the desert. Not even the uptown Yemeni deli owners, with their talk of politics, broke his excitement. To exit the deli quicker, he pretended not to speak Arabic well. He said it had been too long. They let him go with the vial. Shukraan, shukraan. Ma'a as-salamah.

An opportune aside, of sun, hana'alik.

Damascus, one score and ten years before. A memory now dressed in a dream: Kabir was walking along the top of the concrete fence that separated his parents' backyard and the backyard of his neighbors—"the childless neighbors," as Kabir's father often put it. Step by step, the sun above him baked the slabs of the concrete fence under Kabir's bare soles. He was sweating, too, but not because of the sun, but because of the sensation from the naked concrete; a sensation he would not again feel for a long time. Suddenly, on one of the many yellow patches of dry grass dotting the neighbor's lawn, Kabir spotted an ant pile. It was one small jump away from where Kabir had halted along the wall. He stared at the ant pile, questioned it, and recalled a recent dinner in which his father complained about the neighbors, about how they had brought more than just mat'eh from their recent vacation to northern Argentina. They had imported fire ants. And now the whole block had to buy a special kind of venom, which of course, the childless neighbors did not compensate. Kabir thought about this, and figured he would do his part to help. He couldn't buy poison for his neighbors, but he could still help. He could destroy the ant pile himself. So he jumped into the air, and planted his bare feet over the mound with a crash that splattered brown crumbs and red ants in three-hundred-sixty directions. Kabir was amazed by the veins of his feet reflected in the veins of the invaders' underground dome. It was in that moment that Kabir realized something: for the ant's home to exist it had to destroy another's.

And now Kabir had destroyed theirs.

That afternoon, Kabir's mother—the lush fibers of her dress sleeves draped around Kabir's trembling body—listened to the doctor as he explained the situation.

"Had the ants crawled a mere sixteen centimeters higher," he said, "Kabir's genitals would not have survived the allergic reaction. They would have been destroyed."

It set here, there, and everywhere.

Kabir pulled out the roz bhaleeb from its refrigerated repose and sampled a waft of its simple aromas. Simple, yet elegant, he thought, white and creamy and viscous; in need of one final ingredient, one last touch. The rose water. Butt up to the kitchen ceiling, and plastic top off, the vial streamed liquid in squirts. Between pours, Kabir stuck a finger into the center of the pool of rose water that had yet to seep to the bottom of the pot—putting the liquid to his lips so as to taste its purity, all while the dormant hues of his apartment awoke. Blue became azure, wood became mahogany, and bedroom became chamber. His dessert was complete, the candles were lit, the table set, the cornucopia full of pairs of fruits, except for one.

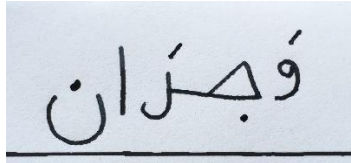
Kabir saw the way the candle light danced, and remembered her moves. He rearranged the fruits and thought of her body. He put dinner back in the oven, and thought its digits are like her eyes, while the clock's hand resembles mine. A long time passed. But there was no knock at the door. How long before she arrives? The planets move slowly sometimes. Did she lose his address, her appetite, her way? No knock, nor answer. Perhaps she remembered, as one tends to while walking, a forgotten purse, or her perfume. An old lover, an old fight, an oath to never again make new memories with men. Or perhaps she ran into that one ex, had dinner with him instead. Or she looked at a mirror and questioned her contours and figured, no one deserves this but me. Perhaps, once out the door, she ran away from the city, which dominates its people, and took to the road, its horizontal concrete. Or maybe she was as dead as her phone.

Kabir worried and waited. Oh, he hoped she hadn't died. Surely she would show up when all the elements align. And that's when he realized there was one last key left to turn.

Back to his desert, through the clarity of rose water, Kabir saw the roz bhaleeb's final ingredient was not its final touch. That there was one last

addition, one that would climax the dish past the ceiling of the mundane, to a holy zenith, like the indescribable dance that had enflamed Kabir.

Freshly picked, Kabir reached into his cornucopia for its single orange, and peeled off a gash of its skin in one dashing motion. He bit his teeth into the fleshy wedges of the exposed citrus. Then, as he chewed, with his finest blade in hand, Kabir carved upon that peel the name of the woman that had stalked his every thought for the last quarter of a moon's cycle, the Love, the Consciousness, unrealized mirth and toxic obsession, yes, the name of the Dancer:



She did not come hither or go thither, so which was the field, then?

Rearranging the evening with what suited her absence, Kabir blew out all but one candle light. He drank the wine by himself, shattered a glass in the sink, and gobbled the rice pudding—in it no magic, as it doesn't exist—straight from the pot with the spoon he had used to prepare it. He tuned to his stereo to play country dirges. He sat outside on his fire escape and told himself it wasn't meant to be, his one night of joy, eclipsed reality. He sighed. He tried also to forgive the Dancer's forgetfulness. But he couldn't forget the lonely odd-numberedness. "Why?" doesn't matter. There were so many reasons piled up during his lifetime that this latest woman could pick any of the ones her sisters had used before as excuse for her absence. Not so suddenly, as loneliness loomed from the dissipating cloud of uncertainty, an image not so vague appeared—one that had haunted Kabir since his exodus to the City of Dreams from the Sublime Porte, where his first love had shunned him the same, before this series of second loves ignored him one by one. The first absence weighed on him more than all the others that followed combined. Kabir knew he would eventually let go of this latest second love, unlike the

first, which he knew he couldn't let go. He has carried that etching on the heel of his foot ever since.

Before the final exhale that would extinguish the last candle's light, he took up a pen and jotted some lines.

A love come easy runs away, a love once rooted will stay.