

Between the Devil and the Deep Lucy

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Every three or four paces, Amo stops for several lines. He won't finish a thought unless we're standing. Our walks through Jabal Amman—my great-uncle's neighbourhood of over forty years—consist less of walking than of standing. We struggle to move from curb to curb because the drops are deep, the breaks sudden. They provide no smooth transitions nor relief from the steep hills of the city. They are so discontinuous I cannot, as a stranger to this place, risk looking up. I realize only later that I remember nothing about our surroundings during these walks. Jabal Amman recedes around Amo. I listen more than I look.

I remember best Amo's face when he stops and staggers along the path, both as we leave the house and as we return. A face visibly changed by the nine years I have spent away from my great-uncle and Amman—this city that feels peripheral to the family history but to which Amo Jihad provides the final link. I was a teenager when I last saw him, so it is now like a first encounter, alone and without my mother mediating between us.

The farther we get, the closer we get until we're circling back to the house and the sun has started to set.

“The Arabs began measuring distance in the Sahara,” he tells me. “Living in the vast expanse of the desert, where the sky was more punctured by lights and images than the land, they began to tell stories about the sky. They began measuring the distance between . . .”

He loses the word.

“What is the name of those things that light up at night?”

Amo is beginning to forget the names of things. It is often something elemental, as jarring to forget as one’s own name. During these lapses, I know he sees the thing perfectly in his mind, but it hangs there without a name.

Those things, which could belong to a desert or a city, a tunnel or a sea. In the night, the hills of Amman are dotted amber, street light upon white stone, black foliage hung over the drop of valleys where nothing comes alight at night but the metallic sheen of little creatures whose shells make them vulnerable to exposure in the dark.

“That light up at night?”

“Yes, in the sky, what are they called?”

“You mean *the stars*?”

Everywhere in the Arab legends there are stars traversing the sky, names that describe the great journeys of stars and their formations. *The one who fled south. The one who crossed the river.* They are associated with will, weakness, fear, memory, desire, longing. The one who fled blood vengeance following his bride’s mysterious death. The one who moved to be with her brother. One, Sirius, in Arabic known as al-Shi’ra Who Crossed Over, had lives on both the east and west banks of the Milky Way River. There are the Two Fish, the Great Fish, the Smaller Fish, the Belly of the Fish.

I want a river in the sky for the River Jordan, which Amo traversed once and never again. It was long known as the river of death: Whoever crossed

it overcame death. Now when I ask to see it, people chuckle and say, “What river? There is no river.” There is a foreign, usurping nation on its western bank that controls death and has sucked it dry.

It took fifty thousand years for al-Shi’ra to cross from east to west, and I wonder if stars only move in one direction.

Amo and I have taken these walks every week since I arrived to spend my August in Amman. Six o’clock, on the hour. Eleven thirty is lunch, seven o’clock dinner. Aunt Patricia, Amo’s English wife of some fifty years, is normally the one keeping time. I’m there once when the clock freezes at precisely ten to six, and Amo and I are in the middle of a conversation in the living room. The usual spot. Burgundy sofas positioned adjacent to each other, Aunt Pat in her observing corner by her wheelchair and in the recliner. I am grateful for the clock’s error. We can go on believing it is not yet time.

It is when I ask Amo about his mother’s, my great-grandmother’s, stories that he begins to speak about the Arabs and the stars. For weeks he has been recollecting memories I’ve often heard from my own mother: of the phantom father in Haifa whom Amo was separated from at seven years old during the Palestinian mass exodus; of the mother who raised her grandchildren—including my mother, who grew up motherless—alone in Gaza, and how she fled with her children because the train they were due to take, all but the father, was rumoured to be the last. Of the new border that closed behind them for nineteen years. Of the death of Amo’s father, Younes, not yet an old man, just two years shy of the possibility of reunion.

“All our lives,” Amo keeps repeating, “our mother was caught between the devil and the deep lucy.”

I keep hearing *Lucy*, like the name. It conjures all sorts of associations with the American South. The Deep Lucy sounds like the name of a riff, a move, a dance.

*One hell of a woman,
one hell of a will,*

*one hell of a determination,
one hell of an intelligence—
A formidable woman.*

She was illiterate, my mother.

I often record Amo’s voice when we speak, though inconsistently. Sometimes I take notes, and they are never any good. They form no transcript, if transcripts promise completion—only residues:

*Made a meal out of nothing: 2 eggs and potatoes for 10 ppl
Never spend all the money of the month—even if you have to spend a week eating
zaatar. Zaatar is a beautiful thing.*

nahr: throat

nahr: river?

to get at each other’s throat

janaya (harvest):

a part of me, what the mother feels toward the son or daughter

UNRWA midwifery course (6 weeks)

25 piastres/delivery

Many people gave more in addition

*If the family was very poor, she would discreetly tuck the money back into the newborn’s
shroud*

1956 occupation

Curfew at all hours

A man knocking at the door, they open, begging on his knees

Ran miles in the middle of the night under the watch of snipers to call for help

A wife in labour, on the edge of death

*Amo’s elder brother, my jedo, “No way I’ll let my mother go with you, no way I’ll
let her go”*

Went under the threat of sniper fire

Returned

She was very pleased with herself

*Like a hero coming back from battle
 “The man needed help, and God wanted me to help him”
 Jedo’s eyes red as the devil from crying
 Blood bright
 Unbelievable image, it was*

All our lives she was torn between the devil and the deep Lucy . . .

Weeks later I’m looking over my notes, making a search.

Google corrects me:

THE DEVIL AND THE DEEP BLUE SEA

D-E-E-P-L-U-S-A-Y

Or

D-E-E-B-L-U-S-E-E

“Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea,” I discover, is the title of a jazz piece with variations the world over—Ella Fitzgerald and Benny Carter, Frank Sinatra, George Harrison, the Modern Jazz Quartet, Paolo Nutini, Thelonious Monk, and so on.

Because Amo never confuses his *b*’s and *p*’s, as is the habit of many Arabs, I do not know how I make this mistake, do not know how both the right phrase and my error turn out to feel right.

You are mistaken, says the Arabic adage, though truthful.

The sea like Haifa, the sea like jazz, Lucy like jazz, jazz like Haifa, Lucy like a variation, variations and pacing, the pacing to our walking our trains our distance and—always, the unmistakable constant—the devil.

Amo always smiled when he said it, always looked amused. As if describing my great-grandmother’s struggle using this expression blunted the struggle’s severity. *The Deep Lucy*. A trance. Disarming.

I wonder now if perhaps even Amo thought it was the deep Lucy and not the deep blue sea. He pronounced the last syllable like the *-cy* of British English, more *say* than *sea*. I don’t care to ask which of them he really believes he said because I like them both.

Google suggests: “What happened to the Modern Jazz Quartet?”

Always the question—*what happened, what happened, what happened.*

I know the dangers of questions like these because I have asked them before. They open up a gulf so vast I have seen people and memory fall in. I and others like me search for a beginning or end to this vastness, and when we fail to find it, we risk falling in. Like the fedayee—trained in the hills east of the Jordan River—who long ago said of a comrade leaving him to die, *That gulf he may leave beside me tomorrow will always be there, but I must be careful not to fall into it.*

I find somewhere in a Google result:

This expression [“between the devil and the deep blue sea”] has existed since at least the 1600s. This expression doesn’t have to do with the devil of the Bible but to a seam around a ship’s hull near the water. When a sailor attempted to caulk this seam in heavy seas, he was in serious danger of falling overboard and drowning.

My great-grandmother Zahiya was illiterate and full of wise phrases. I don't know how it happens that, in my mind, she is better survived by this expression Amo introduces in English than by one of her own. Whenever my mother or great-uncle recount one of her phrases, I ask them, "Have you ever wanted to write them, collect them?"

Write them? For whom?

What would become of the words without the woman who voiced them? What do we make of pages that prefer our voices pale and memories smoothed, levelled, evened? I will later think of the sailor who attempted to caulk a ship's seam against the force of the sea and wonder which of those fissures in our stories we can stand to keep and which we also depend on to survive.

"For you, it is novel, dear," Amo replies. "You have a curiosity, a nostalgia. You are Western bred, as well—don't forget that. But all our elders spoke that way. My mother was full of wisdom, poetry, sayings, stories, ahadith . . ."

"You are like those musicians. I forget the name. It is a kind of music I enjoy very much . . . What is that music called that Black Americans created to describe their histories? It has a certain nostalgia, in it they speak to each other about the past, they remember

and record their stories and their pain . . . Do you know it?"

"The blues?"

"No. What is the other one—"

Beside us, Aunt Patricia has wheeled her chair forward to listen. In my time here, Amo Jihad has described her as his greatest listener. When we sit to talk, Amo and I, she is often with us. The two of us listen, but for one of us, the listening has been lifelong—an endless repetition, a true duration.

And what does it mean, Amo, to be a listener?

When they speak of their marriage, Aunt Pat and Amo speak more of that duration and less of the moment they first met eyes—he the surgeon, she the nurse—during surgery. *We were serious about what we wanted—serious and precise.* Amo urges me, in my choice of a partner, to be the same. Speaks of the importance of foresight. Says, *Do not let yourself be distracted by the grammar of the occasion.*

"Is it jazz?"

He's silent for a moment as he smiles.

Yes, it is jazz.

"The musicians play less with each other than for each other," I add. "Call and response, I learned from a friend, and a lot of it is improvised . . ."

"Yes, yes—and so I was saying that in it, I hear something familiar. I remember my months as a prisoner—" remembers steel remembers freight trains made to carry cattle carrying men, remembers the holes in the steel and the lucky ones he says the lucky ones had a hole right by the face to stick a nose a mouth somewhere in the break of steel of stench sweat piss them sixteen hundred to how many carriages standing

Aunt Pat intervenes. “But there’s no continuity! I don’t understand its sound at all. Why it must be so discontinuous?”

they put us on the train from Gaza to Tulkarem—but we were not going to Tulkarem for a long time it was like this
DIRECTION tulkarem-gaza-tulkarem-gaza-tulkarem-gaza-tulkarem-gaza-tulkarem-gazatulkarem- *DIRECTION* gaza-tulkarem-gaza-tulkarem-gaza-tulkarem-gaza-tulkarem-gaza-tulkarem-gaza-tulkarem-gaza-tulkarem-gaza-tulkarem-gaza-gazagazgagzgagzagza single stretch of the tracks, *back forth*
back back back back so that when we arrived the train stopped and we still haven’t arrived fifty-three years ago, was it? how long how far standing
the distance *between* *from* *between* something like days or the hours measured in days they altered the way our heads spin, how we order time
order

One train journey he takes as a child, the next as a prisoner. I no longer remember where they took those prisoners with Amo from the hospital in Gaza. It wasn’t Tulkarem. Maybe it is somewhere in my notes.

Tulkarem, I now remember, was where the first train went, the one Amo was forced to take when he was seven years old. He is adamant about this fact every time he speaks of it. *I was seven. I had no say in my mother’s decision.* Seven and not yet a surgeon, watching his father on the platform in Haifa shout after his mother, “Go, you and your grown sons, you who are afraid of death!”

I come to Amman at the beginning of a planned year’s absence from home, and Amman becomes the place I experience the slow receding of everyone for whom it will be, for a long time, *night my time, day yours.* I find myself often recalling those parts of my conversations with Amo that skirt around distances,

discontinuities, separations. *Of the phenomenon* we both know too well, *of bodies growing ever larger the further they move from our sight.*

On a video call with my seven-year-old niece, her blue wig dazzles in the light of a window I have been away from longer than ever before. We call her Lulu—Lulu from Layla, Layla like the night. Before she could speak in full sentences, Lulu would try telling me everything she learned about the solar system. I wonder if in her mind words like *system* only classify those things in the sky, just as those things in the sky become *images* under Amo’s lost word for the stars.

I ask Lulu for help learning about the stars because she knows how to find all the right questions.

I wait as she types our searches and transcribe what she finds as if I have no access to the internet myself. I wait in want for a language for the intervening time.

“Lulu, ask Google:”

What is the distance between stars?
From earth or from nowhere?
The Sun to 4.24 light years away
Now I'll see from the earth . . .
4.37 light years
Now what do you want me to write?
How do you measure the distance between stars?
OK, How do you measure the distance from . . .
Not from between . . .
S-T-E-L-L-A-R[space bar]P-A-L-L-E-X[space]or T-I-R-I-G-O-N-O-M-T-E-R
[space bar]P-A-R-L-L-X-A
Wait wait wait repeat everything
Everything? What have you got?
L l a x
 OR
T r I g o n o m e t r i c _____ p a r a l l a x
Repeat?
Yes

I produce transcripts like these not to record answers but to map errors, silences, punctures, interventions. Possibilities. In all my time making notes of the voices around me—there have been many, particularly elders, before Amo—I have learned there are formal transcription systems that attempt to mark the particularities of speech in text. Transcripts that promise to tell a reader who has not heard the speech precisely where the speaker might have stopped, hesitated, laughed, prolonged a pause, stretched a word. There are even a pair of symbols for a breath taken in and a breath out.

N:ow what do you want me to (0.2) wri::te?

After the Jefferson Transcription system: “Colon

indicates prolonged vowel or consonant. One or two colons common, three or more colons only in ‘extreme’ cases.” Other pauses, “a timed pause,” are long enough to require a noted duration. In parentheses, we indicate “time (in absolute seconds) between end of a word and beginning of next. Alternative method: ‘none-one-thousand-two-one-thousand...’: 0.2, 0.5, 0.7, 1.0 seconds, etc.”

Perhaps it is possible, like this, to measure the distance inside a word. But where now is the symbol for an afternoon, or perhaps years, or as I’ve read of original wounds, the *night that lasts a lifetime*?

As a child, bedtime with my mother was the oral tales of the prophets. My favourite was that of the

Prophet Younes, who was swallowed by a big fish. It's still the only prayer I know by heart—the one he said to God from the darkness of the belly of that fish.

lā 'ilāha 'illā 'anta suḅānaka 'innī kuntu mina al-ẓālimīn.

But our Younes was swallowed by a vicious human-made construction of a fish that never let him free. Stayed in his home in Haifa to protect it and died there, alone, seventeen years later. In conversations about the family, I don't say any of this, and it becomes the only way I know how to tell my niece stories like these. An often involuntary withholding, a silence. I tell Lulu there once was a home by the sea in Haifa, where Younes lived since forever ago. We skirt the edges of this sea and stop.

"Then one day," I tell her, "a train came—and it took everyone.

"Only Younes didn't get on it."

No trace of sadness in this tale for Lulu. I am stupefied when she tells me her solution flat:

"Then do a story about him going at the train."

It wasn't long before I began experiencing a familiar aversion to our family's stories proper. Stories like these came leaden with impossible expectations—to carry, to remember. I wanted to hear around them. For so long I have looked for relief in the worlds that carried them before us.

I come to Amo at a time in my life when I no longer want the stories proper. I know it is a position I can take only because I know many of them already. There would be no seams to probe and pick apart if I did not.

Every phone call with my mother, it's "Have you sat with him *proper* yet? Have you asked him about Younes? Have you recorded his voice?" I do not know whether I have.

Mama herself has, but she thinks I am the one who should be asking. That the stories of her uncle, as of all our elders, belong to the young.

I tell her I will, I plan to, I could, that was the plan, "but first we're just talking"—as if asking were not the same as talking—"about everything."

"Don't forget, he's one of few alive who knew Younes.

"Don't forget, he is nearly eighty-one.

"And may God give him life."

I often have another voice in my ears when I am walking. I call my friend Javier in Amman. I call him when I am descending a steep hill by an Eastern Church in Lweibdeh during high noon, complaining about the sun and the hills, and Javier lends his narration:

"Walking, walking, not always landing—"

"I'm always moving, Javier, I haven't stopped since I arrived—"

The night I arrived in Amman, I was immediately introduced to the incessant lane-switching and wild jerking that characterizes driving in this city. I tell the friends who drive me around—Amo is never the one driving—"There are no straight lines here, no fluidity, no sense of continuity." Yet I can't quite say the drivers are directionless.

I say, "People here, they don't drive—"

"They swim," my friends answer.

It is Javier who shows me how he associates walking with the stars. Tells me about a kind of walking that can make many variations on the same theme. Tells me to let Amman be that:

*Constellations mapped on the ground
A form of cartography
A non-linear map even when you're walking straight
A labyrinthine path where the farther you get, the closer
you get*

"I'm better paced with Amo," I tell Javier. "The walk is easier but the conversation harder."

"Is there a difference?"

I do not answer, do not know the answer.

"I thought my questions would get better, more precise . . .

"We speak in English—I have never spoken to my elders in English—and I thought that would make things easier for me, which is to say without limits, but that's just it: Now I see a gulf just as vast, if

*We walk, and we play, in the same way we
speak, with the recognition it's momentary,
it's kind of gone, it's a precarious arrangement
No grand resolutions
the intent is to be together
It's kind of gone—
rooted in the humming, the
someone humming the whistling on the street*

Amo and I talk about everything, and yet I seem to have nothing to show for it. *Little to tell you, Mama.* I almost want there to be no more stories to tell. Almost. Something proximate. Something like a sound that only reaches, reaches . . .

How to say *those things that light up in the sky at night?*

How to say jazz?

*the notes burning through and off everyone
and forgotten in the body because*

not vaster than those simple, earnest questions I dared ask only before I had already learned too much."

What happened, what happened, what happened—

"We can learn a great deal from counter-forensic artists like Abu Hamdan, for example," says Javier, "but there's a point where his process is surgical—a means to an end of a criminal proceeding. To my knowledge, you are not preparing for a criminal proceeding.

"Think about what it means to walk without landing. You have to be okay with that. Amman is a city of hills, and you've been training yourself to walk down them."

During later calls, Javier will tell me, *I'm kind of making this up for you, in the spirit of jazz—*

*they were swallowed by the next one . . .
sending them forward and forth
till, as he could see them, their bursts of air
were animals fighting in the room.*

How to say the only way Amo seems to know how to talk about his father is to talk about his mother? And to talk about his mother, the devil and the sea? How to tell Mama even the only man left alive who knew Younes cannot remember Younes?

What then, at the end of it all, will we have to remember of Amo Jihad if all we had asked about was Younes?

It kind of just goes—

Mama saying of death, *We will all be going—*

Leaving through the door of a house, to the porch step, to the front yard—as if the end of the going only took you as far as the street.

On one of our final walks that August, I tell Amo an observation of Javier's on the expectation to remember that many Palestinian children are raised with:

While the expectation to remember everything may be an impossible expectation, it is not an unreasonable expectation. It is simply a utopian one.

At this, Amo stops walking. A slow smile as he turns to me.

“What a thoughtful way of putting it. Your friend must have some imagination, and a poetic facility, to be able to put it in these terms.”

I ask Amo why we were raised with this expectation.

He walks along, watching his feet. “For a long time,” he answers, “we thought it was the only thing that could be done.”

Amo does not say more. Walking beside the eldest of the family, the youngest of our young visits my mind again, her voice certain, demanding, almost accusing:

Then do a story about him going at the train.

Beyond the then-four-year-old's grammar—to do a story—the power of Lulu's earlier provocation perhaps lies in the young speaking back to me, so soon already an elder. Coming from a lifetime absorbing the *impossible expectations* of my elders, I was disarmed

to receive a demand as equally utopian from someone so young.

I am still not sure I understand what it is she is asking of me, nor that I could ever do more than reach for the possibilities of her demand, beyond its innocence.

Though Lulu could not have understood that a story in which Younes goes on the train is no less painful a story—the choice between the house and the land or the family, the choice *between the devil and the deep lucy*—I want to believe in a thing, an imaginary of some kind, in which the train Lulu demands I have Younes take is neither the train between Haifa and Gaza nor the train between Gaza and Tulkarem nor any train fixed in a wretched moment of our history.

An imaginary train as liminal as any, striding the *between*, never arriving, the same *back forth back back forth back* of Amo and the prisoners' torture transformed into a site in which Lulu can imagine anything she may choose to.

*Something like a sound that only reaches, reaches
not always to arrive*

I want Lulu's train, like those things that hang in Amo's mind without a name, to be a train without a name. The train meaning the sea. The train meaning Amo's river in the sky. The train the bordered expanse between father son a voice communicated across time.

For us each a different devil, around us a different sea. The train a name for the place we meet.

The intent to be together

Like two or more voices assembled arranged composed—made to meet in a single sentence, on a single line.

Amo stopping for the length of a breath, a memory, a
reaching—

Two people leaping into the drop in the concrete,
one of them landing, landing, expectant of the other
until the other can no longer land

even if it's momentary

it's kind of gone—

It's like, See you next week!

*the trains the roads the pacing to our walking the
back forth back back back back*

forth