

Aboard the Ark
—an occurrence in five parts—
by Jaclyn Costello

I

Safina

As Safina travels Far North, her passengers grow weary. They have not yet become aware of their situation. They only watch as all that was once familiar drifts further from sight.

The passengers continue to live their terrestrial lives while, at the same time, aboard the ship, the doctor helps them adapt to the emerging earth of Hurqalya. Each passenger must be adequately prepared for the final stations in ascension, for in order to enter the city behind the rising mountain, the voyagers must be ready to pass beyond the evidence of their senses.

Those who require particular assistance are transferred to the doctor's island hotel. The hotel itself is a roaming residence—never quite at home atop one continent or another—it floats tranquilly across the surface of the ocean, attaching and re-attaching itself to land masses as it sees fit. Its inhabitants scratch their heads at the bizarre changes in season and ever-shifting horizons. There are times the hotel passes Safina at sea. If the doctor has not been successful in fully transferring passengers from one locale to the next, they run the risk of suffering a bewildering jolt upon discovery of counter-images of themselves aboard the passing vessels.

The closer Safina moves toward the Far horizon, the faster the memories of her passengers fade. Their pasts—the events occurring below the osculating chords on the vertical time spindle—are under their feet as the ship rises. Octave per octave, higher on the sea.

No one remembers pain, though some still feel the sting of it from time to time and are confused by the sensation, with no remedy or explanation. They act as infants who do not know the origin of their desires but instinctually respond with suckling lips, fits of tears, and self-indulgent rest.

II

The girl with long legs and lips like a frog's told Fatima of this in the hotel salon—

“There is a woman living on the fourth floor in a room the size of three of my rooms with a balcony overlooking the Kasbah. She's lived in the hotel twenty-nine years. She only comes out after midnight. The boys call her *shwuka*, crazy. Sometimes she says hello. Sometimes she doesn't laugh. They follow her with stones and stray dogs, but she always disappears before they have a chance to reach her. Last night she disappeared into a bucket.”

I chewed a sprig of mint. Fatima sat with her knees together, listening. I could tell she was upset, though I doubted it had much to do with the defeated resident wandering the streets of the medina at midnight. We'd seen her on several occasions before—clutching her purse to her breast as if her entire memory were kept inside. What disturbed Fatima was the fact the woman was considered mad.

“I saw a man in the cemetery beating his wife with a cane,” the frog went on. “I wanted someone to call the police, but no one did anything. They all just watched. That's how it is here.” She shook her head. A curl of golden cedar fell from her hair onto the table.

“Oh,” Fatima said. It was time for a change.

Fatima roamed the streets eating everything in sight. When her money ran out, she crawled back to the hotel in pain, swearing at herself so quietly she could have been happy. She wanted nothing but to eat more and kill herself.

“I thought the cure for grief was motion.” I helped her to her feet. She walked to the mirror and removed her blouse, contemplating the bulge of meats and vegetables inside her stomach. Something she'd eaten had been cooked with too much oil. It showed in her face. I

approached her from behind and placed my hands where her ovaries would be if she were inside out. “You have ‘just eaten’ belly,” I said. She gave me a look through the mirror, then took off the rest of her clothes and turned to face me.

“I never know what I’m capable of until I’ve eaten it.” The words were a plea for forgiveness. So I stripped down and pulled her as close to me as possible, and when it wasn’t close enough, we wove in and out of each other in that way that didn’t involve our bodies.

Who is Fatima?

“This is us,” she says. I am inside her, below her. But I only know her when I wake between days with the first call to prayer, and the moon is a half-eaten biscuit in the sky. I find Fatima there, drooling on my pillow. She begins and ends the same. A lapse. A lull. At peace in my bed on a wet pillow.

“I want to fill your pond with fishes,” I say.

Her eyes open suddenly. There is a knock on the door. I place a finger to her lips.

“Si Muhammad?” It is the voice of the doctor.

“I don’t know where I was born,” Fatima mumbles.

“Si Muhammad?” A scuffling. A slip of paper is pushed underneath the door. The doctor hurries down the hall.

“You were not fit for purpose, so they sent you to me.”

Fatima asks about my mother, and we both fall back asleep.

*

Under the midday sun Fatima paused—tenderly holding a fruit in her palm. Unrushed, unmoved, she went to the fruit market alone. She always begins in the fruit market, holding fruits like condemned treasures. Today she touches them all. Even the moldy apricots that would have once repulsed her send a surge of energy through her arm as she holds them to her nose and inhales. Fatima isn't just selecting something to eat. She is selecting her future—she is sure of it. With this one choice everything will be decided.

Hakim watches from behind a curtain of plastic footballs hanging by strings from a sun-worn canopy. He has been dusting off cans of peas all morning, and now it is time to sweep the floor of his stall with the branch of a wilted palm, but Fatima stands in his way. Hakim wishes to pour a pail of water over the filth on the ground to send it swimming out into the street, but if he does that now, all the dirty water will rush to Fatima's feet and soak through the seams of her shoes, causing her toes to shrivel—and all of yesterday's chewing gum wrappers will cling to her shoes.

“Choose,” Hakim tells Fatima, placing a can of peas back on the shelf. “If you never choose, you will never arrive.”

“Can I come back later?” Fatima shrugs.

“Then it is twice the work for me.” Hakim pushes a football away from his head and moves to stand at Fatima's side. “You have the scent of a lamb,” he says.

Fatima closes her eyes and eases her arm slowly into a crate of nectarines.

The fruit she chooses is soft to the touch. It is a vagrant peach that has tumbled away from its fellow peaches in search of the nectarines, two wooden crates below. And though the fall had been rough, and the peach is now collapsing in on itself through a variety of lesions and brown bruises, it has survived. The fuzz on its skin reminds Fatima that it is out of place, and it

reminds her of the back of her first lover's neck where the finest of his hairs met with the collar of his shirt. She chooses this peach and immediately knows she will never eat it.

Hakim shakes his head and sighs, removing himself from Fatima's side. He removes the dying fruit from her palm.

"I will not sell you a stale adventure." He digs through a crate of figs and dates, then places his choice in Fatima's hand. Fatima squishes the fig gently between her fingers. "There is a place to stand at the edge of the ocean," Hakim continues. "Between two rows of identical palms. It is a good place to eat your fruit."

Fatima nods and traces the memory of Hakim carefully in her mind, storing his face in the oldest portion of herself that still believes things can be saved. This is her wish: at the instant of her death, all the moments she has ever saved will be re-granted to her in a downpour—spilled back into her, and over her, to bury her gently as sand. Fatima takes the fig as well as the peach and hands Hakim a coin. She smiles, though Hakim is not much affected by it. He has just decided he dislikes selling fruit in stall 151 and would rather be spending a holiday in someone else's life, perhaps someone who sells used books in stall 24.

Fatima leaves the market, and she leaves the old medina.

The urge for happiness follows her everywhere today. For a while it takes the form of a white napkin, whose company at her heel gives her a new sense of importance—a kinship, a responsibility. Fatima must walk at a particular pace so the pull of her personal gravity is just centrifugal enough to save her napkin-companion from the coddling grip of the greedy wind. She succeeds in this for a while, until the napkin discovers a pile of melted ice cream and abandons her to rest. Fatima buys a loaf of bread and a handful of olives to fill the void.

"Delicious," she says.

Of course she is lost on the way to the shore, though she's walked this path many times before. She never remembers which way to turn once she passes through the arch made of crumbling stone. It doesn't bother Fatima to find a new way, or to step on un-crunched walnut shells, or to arrive early or late to places she isn't expected. Fatima has grown to love being lost, realizing that since it happens all the time, if she did not learn to love it, she would hate her life. Today she can smell the ocean five miles from the shore. She follows the scent then stops and decides she does not care if she ever arrives at the rows of identical palms. She sits on a mound of grass, removes Hakim's fig from her pack, and rolls it back and forth in her hand.

The birds above her sing their plea, "*La vérité! La vérité!*" Fatima does not know why it has to be this way, but she believes it's a necessity. "*La vérité! La vérité!*" Fatima taps her brow with the fig then rolls it toward the base of her tête, slowly down the nape of her neck to the place where her spine miscommunicates with the stem of her brain—the place where all things half-understood cling to each other, desperately struggling to stay afloat in a turbulent synaptic ocean. "*La vérité! La vérité!*" The plea becomes a mantra, sung to the marrow in Fatima's bones. The birds have made it so! They've made it so Fatima requires their song and *nothing* more—not even her identity. She suddenly wishes to abandon herself for a gentle anonymity. She believes this will relieve the world of some of its aching tension. Fatima wishes to become a string. A thread. A wisp of lost web. A tightrope. A wire. A detached ceiling fiber. She would be happiest invisible in times of magic, as an unseen catalyst—but for now, she is Fatima on the mound of grass, fumbling through her bag for a pair of recently purchased socks. When she finds them, she tears the tags off to examine the plastic t-shaped bit that holds the price tag to the fabric. *What is this piece?* Fatima holds it to the sun. *What is it called?* Often discarded. Rarely considered. *Does it wish to see the ocean before it dies?* Fatima suspects 'yes' and holds it in her hand a

moment longer before placing it carefully on a rock underneath a leafless tree. She stands to leave, but promises the plastic 't' she will return before the day is done, and together they will find the way to the shore.

This is where I found her—hiding something small and preparing to leave the place she stood. I hid behind a tree and tossed stones at her head, watching her blame the birds. When she picked up a rock and wound her arm for a kill, I gave myself up and grabbed her by the shoulders.

“Not on my watch,” I said.

She screamed a little.

“You were going to kill a bird, Fatima! That is not like you.”

She dropped the rock and sat back down, fondling the fig. “I still love. I love this fruit.” She reached in her pack and handed me the gone-off peach.

“That’s appropriate,” I grinned. “I’m damaged goods, too.”

“Are you dying at an accelerated rate?”

“Sometimes.”

A lone dromadaire passed us by—carelessly swooshing flies back and forth with its tail.

“I have a picture of you,” Fatima said. “You’re standing at the bath. You have *severance* tattooed on your back.” She swatted at a fly, hard. It flew to me and landed on my cheek. “It’s easy for you,” Fatima said. “You don’t feel anything anymore. I’m almost like you.”

She lifted a shredded garbage bag from underneath the tree. She lifted an abandoned toothbrush, barely bristles left. If her eyes had been any browner, nothing would have made sense. The reflection of the sky. Milkweed. Halos. Something floating in her right eye—two flecks of dust, two continents merging then detaching from one another. *Goodbye*, they said.

They circumnavigated her eye in opposite directions.

“The trees are shedding plastic leaves,” Fatima said. “When will we be free again? Were we ever really here?”

“We can never go home again.”

“Do you sometimes feel you’re being held to the earth by an extra-ordinary gravity?”

“You were once so light-hearted I thought you’d float away.”

“That was before you broke my heart.”

“Your heart was broken before I ever left you. Once your mother breaks your heart there’s a stone in your chest in place of the flesh. You can never be broken again.”

The horizon shifted. The dromadaire returned and began to urinate on an unimportant monument. Fatima tossed the fig to its feet.

Somewhere far away, a man left his home with a rusted rake in hand. “For the clouds,” he said to his wife. “That is nothing,” he said of our lives—noticing us in his dream. He lifted the rake to the sky and began to ground a ripened cloud.

I led Fatima from the hill to the shore where we borrowed a boat and rowed across the channel to a town where the houses had been built at the edge of the sea, without respect for the tides. The ocean rushed up the doorsteps delivering crab shells and sea salts and kelp treasures.

“Is the doctor waiting for us?” Fatima asked.

“Yes,” I said. “He has something to show us.” We rowed onto the beach. “We’re there,” I said. “You can stop rowing now.”

“I’m almost there,” Fatima cradled the oars in her arms until I pulled her from the boat.

The doctor owned an off-shore building surrounded by tall trees and fruit-bearing hemlock. Red berry residue stained the walls of his residence from places the children used ripe fruit as paint and places the sun warmed the fruits as they slid down the walls, leaving deep, scarlet streaks reminiscent of blood. The building looked like death and smelled like a warm tarte.

The residents wandered. Some of them climbed trees. Some swam in shallow pools of clear, filtered water—though they did not know it was filtered at all and would have been just as happy contemplating the light shining off the slick bellies of the drowned dung beetles that the doctor removed from the water’s surface every morning.

“Ah ha!” the doctor greeted us at the door. He clasped his hands and led us inside, down the great room hall, excusing himself frequently from our company in response to a variety of bells and chimes. He scuttled from room to room, adhering to the nuance of each patient’s whims. He strained the pulp from a glass of orange juice for Monsieur DuPont. “There is your hat,” he told a trembling man.

“Would you sharpen this pencil?”

The doctor obliged. And he sat at the edge of Ms. Nottingbyrd’s bed, stroking her hand with whispered reassurance that, yes, the great mountain would re-surface soon, and if she was ready for a life full of Light, she would be welcomed there.

“I’m awake every hour,” the doctor confided.

“Do you miss sleep?”

He cocked his head. “I miss nothing,” the doctor said. He dashed away toward a ringing bell. “There’s nothing as common as a relapse,” he called.

“How many disorders are there?” Fatima wondered. “A disorder for every order?”

“There’s no order here,” the doctor reappeared. “Just lessons in death. The people at White Leaf have come to die in the comfort of my arms. But even though my patients know they’re leaving an illusory place, they insist on holding on! They hold on to who they thought they were. They hold on to reasoning. They hold most tightly to their precious fears and memories.” The doctor sighed. “I’ve become impatient with human beings. Their self-imposed limitations are frustrating. That’s why I’ll soon have nothing to do with people at all.” He rushed away to a ringing bell. “After this crop!” the doctor called.

I pulled Fatima to a window. “Look outside,” I said. We watched a woman melting a box of crayons in the sun.

“Once these have passed,” the doctor returned, “I’m focusing my attention entirely on a new project.” He reached for Fatima’s hand. “Come up to the terrace—I have soup for you.”

Fatima refused to leave the window. “What is she doing out there?”

“Releasing her sadness,” the doctor said. “Do not worry for her. He rushed away again.

Fatima turned to me in pain. “I don’t trust this place. Look outside. There are *orchids* in the desert.”

“If you want to leave, we should leave now,” I said. “But you were meant to come here. Do you remember?”

“No. I’m starting to feel strange,” Fatima leaned against my chest. “The orchids are beautiful though.”

“It’s too late for that one,” the doctor returned, shaking his head. He gazed out the window at a lavender hybrid sprouted from the sand. It had one petal left hanging to its stem like a delicate farewell tissue. “Something always breaks to indicate departure,” he said. “A bottle on a hull, a heart, bread.”

“It’s always goodbye,” Fatima could barely stand.

“I think she’s ready,” I told the doctor.

“That fast?”

“She acclimates quickly to her environment.”

The doctor wiped his hands. “First things first, come up to the terrace to see my butterflies. They are my new affiliates.”

“What, these things?” They had begun to swarm us at the window—thousands of minuscule butterflies.

“No, not those,” the doctor smiled. “I want to show you my artificial butterflies. I think you will enjoy them. They’re an impossible blue, and they fly in very straight lines.”

Fatima slumped against the wall amid the silent flutter of 40,000 wings.

“I think she needs some food,” I said. “If you expect her to last much longer.”

“Mademoiselle has quite the appetite.”

“She exists in many places at once.”

“What does she do in so many places?” the doctor asked with a twinkle in his eyes.

“We search for us,” I told the doctor. “In all possible worlds.” I placed my hand on Fatima’s head as Fatima closed her eyes. She wanted to speak, but her mind was re-arranging itself, and she was trapped somewhere inside it. “Would you find some soup for her?” I asked.

“You’ll be gone by the time I return.”

“I’ll wait.”

“Neither of you have much control over yourselves at this point. Fatima is already on her way to her next incarnation. I believe she will born, after several lifetimes, with this same identity. Though from the start, she’ll be further along, evolutionarily speaking. She ascends

rather quickly.”

“I didn’t know we could go back with the same identities.”

“It happens sometimes.”

“What about me?”

“I need to keep you here for a while. I’m studying your memory.”

“My memory’s fine,” I told the doctor.

“Do you remember coming here?” he asked.

“Thinking forward or backwards?”

“Displace time.”

“I don’t know,” I shook my head. “I must be forgetting.” It was becoming difficult to focus on anything. “I know we were on some sort of ship, stowed away like contraband. The air was so cold we built a fort out of life-vests and slept inside it to stay warm.”

“That was the first time, the original memory.”

“Someone found us—you found us. You fed us and clothed us to look like the locals. Then we were sent somewhere else, far away, but we didn’t care. Death hadn’t jarred us. We’d died before. We knew we’d die again. I knew I’d always be at Fatima’s side. Sometimes as a rock she carried with her in her apron. Sometimes as her lover, or her brother, or friend. I do all I can to keep her close to me—and when she takes her time, I wait.”

“Yes, that is true. Go on.”

I held Fatima close to my chest and scanned my memory. “I remember being in the sky. Was it an airplane to New York City? Fatima wore a headscarf. It’s becoming clear to me. But this isn’t the past. This is our future—a future memory.”

*

“Do you know many people where you’re going?” I asked.

She peered out from behind her *Sky Mall* magazine. “I do not.”

“You’re brave,” I said. “What’s your name?”

“Fatima.” She adjusted her headscarf and smiled. “My father thinks I’m crazy to move to the States alone. I’ve only left my village once before. My aunt and I took a train to Isfahan.”

Fatima studied my face. “Why are you leaving your family?”

“I’m not. I mean, I already did. I left a long time ago. I’m just returning from a work trip in Turkey.”

“You left a long time ago, but you look so young.”

“I’m twenty-six.”

“I’m twenty-three,” Fatima said. “My father would welcome me back if I returned. You could return too, to your family, if you desired?”

“I could, but it’s different in America,” I said. “Once you hit a certain age, you’re expected to leave. You have to build a life for yourself. It’s shameful if you return.”

Fatima hesitated before she shook her head. “This is the problem with America,” she said.

I popped a peanut and shrugged. A mother behind us hushed her crying child. I took out a picture of the Mojave, where Fatima and I met in a past lifetime. I hadn’t been me, and she hadn’t been she, but I still retained the memory—though I wasn’t about to tell her that. I was largely surprised that I remembered a past life so clearly and wondered if the memory would soon begin dissipating. “Want to see a picture of the desert?” I asked, as if she had a choice. I handed her the photo.

“This is America?” she said.

“Yup. That’s what all the fuss is about. Want to turn the plane around?” I laughed. “It’s not all like that. I’m sure you know. You’ve seen movies and things.”

“I know there are harsh cities, but I can become anything I dream.”

“That’s the story,” I told her. Her eyes were dazzling.

When we landed in Lille, it hadn’t been planned. Something was wrong with the cargo carrier.

Those who saw the smoke first were the farmers, dropping their tools in the hay-fields and rapidly waving their arms. I saw the smoke too, from the seat I’d chosen in front of the plane’s left wing. The pilot made an announcement. *“There is a slight problem. Don’t be alarmed. Please remain calm.”*

Fireman gathered with heavy hoses. The stairs came down, but the doors didn’t budge.

“Please leave the aircraft now.”

“We can’t you bloody fool!” the mother called.

The farmers observed from the fields.

“They’re growing peas,” I said.

“Someone open the door! Break open the door!”

“Peas?” Fatima asked.

“Do you see the pods?”

She shook her head.

I pointed. “There are pea pods clinging to that farmer’s face.”

*

“That is the future,” the doctor said. “Now go back to when you first met me. Go back to the fort of life vests. Do you remember anything? Do you remember the council, your mission, your responsibility?”

“I no longer know,” I told the doctor.

“That’s the thing about memories,” he sighed. “You can just replace them over time.”

He left us to tend to his butterflies.

III

Mi'raj-Namah
(the ascent)

As Safina approaches the eighth climate, she crosses the confluence of two seas
where warm waters meet with cool glacier melt-off and the passengers feel the heavy
pull of the mountain emerging. They hasten their goodbyes composing letters, prayers,
and poetry, which they stow in chests of acacia wood underneath their beds.

The more verbal of the voyagers creep to the dock at night, making their way to the hull
of the ship where they scream severe twilight uncertainties reverberating starboard
then westward toward eternity

Who steers this ship?
Who guides this course?

There is no captain. The ship knows the way.

The darkness stretches out before Safina as she approaches the northernmost Pole. She
shudders in the darkness, considering a return. No longer wishing to carry her passengers, her
pleas fold into their own.

If I had a body, I would will it to you

take my planks

my anchor

my compass

they are yours.

My direction, my passengers

I will them to you

I want only oceans.

As the underwater mountain becomes visible, a fountain of pure white water leaps from the highest peak. This tree of water solidifies to ice the moment it hits the air—

spreading out like a snowy tree against the midnight sky. The tree immediately begins to bear ripe winter fruits. Pomegranates, glistening pears, bunches of succulent oranges.

Safina drifts into the ninth climate, approaching the final station. Mount Hukairya continues to rise from the sea.

IV

The weather changes. The extreme west, the warmest sea, covered by shadows and fine black sand, rumbles in violent ecstasy, spewing forth bits of deeply buried ocean residue
squids' dried ink, sulfurous algae, phosphorous coral chards

The sky sheds all traces of darkness
changing from black to dawn, and suddenly—

it is morning. The wandering stars disappear into the incorruptible light of the suns, thousands of suns orbiting together, each outshining the rest. The many moods of these celestial spheres create delightful smells and colors as they revolve around Hukairya's peak.

Mount Hukairya soon breaks open to reveal a second mountain encased in its shell; this is Mountain Qaf, the mountain of the dawns, the source of all other mountains in the cosmos. That is, all physical landscapes are but lateral projections originating from Qaf's center. Mount Qaf is the first mountain to receive the rays of dawn from the central Sun each morning—though this warmth is entirely unnecessary because Qaf's rocks emit their own light. Qaf's soil emits its own warmth. The entire mountain is luminous without the aid of a sun. All imaginable treasures cling to the edges of Qaf's cliffs—castles made of ruby, gardens of myrtle and caapi vines, sweet royal basil, sparkling sapphires, emeralds in pastures of lush green grass...

Safina's passengers hang over the edges of the ship, dumbfounded by what they see. All lofty constructions of conscious thought become blurred in the rays of this dawn.

V
Xvarnah

Fatima leans over the balcony on the port side of the ship, gazing into the glittering fruit tree as it melts under the sun. The water collecting at the base of the tree forms a crescent-shaped cove, reflecting the many colors and shapes of the fruits from the branches above. Fatima stretches over the edge of the ship and reaches for a pear. As she breaks it from the branch, a light sparks from the cove, and moving upon the water—a soft figure appears. Ocean drips from her garments. Seaweed clings to her arms. Tendrils of sea foam are wound together in her long, dark hair.

The figure approaching Fatima is free from all layers of darkness and fear. In her face, she carries the beauty and brightness of extreme youth, together with the trusted gravity of an old sage. She takes Fatima by the hand and leads her to the ship's main deck where Fatima wraps an arm around the foremast and gazes forward.

As Safina draws nearer to Mount Qaf, the primordial light grows ever brighter. The passengers who cannot stand this light retreat to their bunks and hide. Some jump overboard and splash frantically in attempts to swim away. Others close their eyes and wish themselves back to their terrestrial lives.

“Should we try to help them?” Fatima cries. “Won't they be punished for closing their eyes?”

“Their refusal inspires only sadness and compassion,” the figure gleams.

*

The ocean rises and embraces Safina in its limbs.

“*Let go of your knots!*” the doctor cries. His patients obey and open their eyes.

nafs

Sea, ship, and horizon are one.

A blanket of light wraps this event and pulls Safina upward.