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*Tales From
The Deportees Room:
Porting One (DXB)*



16:03

"You in uae I take it?

'In?'"

...

With a sudden jerk I look out over a familiar nightscape with recognisable light-ways as we prepare to land. It's two, almost three years since I was last here. I'm returning for a two-month residency in Sharjah, to make a work focused on the landside residues of centuries of 'porting'. My expectant scans give way to a realisation that the zonal abstractions, classic squares of light and pretty white loops, are not immediately legible after all. Livid orange carriageways threaded with pretty junctions stream through slabs of blackness towards the horizon, where they curl and disappear.

An adrenalin of fond (mis)recognition gives way to a buzz of curiosity as I stare into a mask of nothingness. Heidegger's forest pathways loom from this darkness; those orange darts of confident purpose are named and signed-posted, like the walks around the philosopher's hut on the mountainous edge of the Black Forest. The other squiggles – concentrated but seemingly random, clearly not leading anywhere beyond themselves – echo the wood-cutter or – gatherer's pathways on which visitors get lost when approaching Heidegger's work-world at Todtnauberg.

I take quick images on my phone in case I'm bounced back this time, and my face is unavoidably dominant amongst their dark deceptions. The burning assertion of the main artery down there is not Shaikh Zayed Road but a bypass; the Shaikh Mohammed Bin Zayed Road, recently named after Abu Dhabi's deputy ruler. The future or futures lie beyond. Dubai is built on reiterations of a single shining future, an old 'futuristic' one of air-conditioned fantasias and air-borne policemen in which doubters can be deleted. The orange is an open-all-hours signal of rapid progress towards it, the rest a darkness from which unscripted futures will emerge in the light of a new day.

Any 'nothingness' below is actually dense with trails and pathways of migrants picking out a life here, like those hunting wild mushrooms in the ruined industrial forests of Oregon. There, or here, indeterminacy is the mode for encounters with and between foreign, precarious and unsystematic worlds being improvised amongst the ruins of our common one. Recognising what will grow in these gleaming 'ruins' incorporates Anna Tsing's insurgent whisper, "Our first step is to bring back curiosity."¹

Matsutake mushroom pickers in the American northwest are typically Southeast Asian migrants, displaced from China to Laos, Thailand, or Vietnam, finding new value in the wreckage. The treasured Matsutake represent "the fruiting bodies of an underground fungus"² that also supports their host trees. Post-Hiroshima, they were the "first living thing to emerge from the blasted landscape"³ and require human-disturbed forests or landscapes like these to grow at all.

I've enjoyed some of the brightness and know parts of the darkness below intimately well; those deletable milieus of South Asian, Indian, Pakistani, Nepali and Bangladeshi migrant labour camps with connective trails throughout Dubai and Abu Dhabi in particular. It is my familiarity with those realms, and attempts to wield nuanced precision with ground-up authority in writing about them, which makes my detention and deportation on arrival at DXB distinctly possible.



The *Rolla* tree in the midst of its eponymous Square near Sharjah's city centre takes the form of a swish of white concrete through the bottom of which is cut the leafy form of a half-sized tree, revealing a replica tree trunk with bare branches beyond. It's a remarkable object in every way, and was commissioned by the current Shaikh, Sultan bin Muhammad Al-Qasimi, in tribute to a tree that flourished on this site from the early nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth. The stories attached to the tree relate to its actual and symbolic role in Sharjah's life, sketched flatly in this text from the city's Heritage Museum;

Rolla Square is located in the heart of Sharjah near Al Hisn. The square was home to a large old Banyan tree (Ficus benghalensis) where people regularly gathered during celebrations, holidays, poetry recitals and horse-races. The name rolla is derived from roal which is the name given to the tree's fruit. The tree is believed to have been about 15 metres tall by 30 metres wide, which provided enough shade for more than 500 people to gather under. The ruler of Sharjah, Shaikh Sultan bin Saqr Al Rashid Qassimi I (1803-66), is said to have brought the tree to the emirate. The Banyan tree is believed to have lived for 150 years before it died in 1978. Rolla Square was built as a memorial to the tree.⁴

The *Rolla* tree figures in the memoirs of the ruling Shaikh, where he describes his uncle and predecessor sitting on "a big chair"⁵ under the canopy for Eid celebrations. Amongst the dignitaries gathered beside him in the shade was his *Wazir* Ibrahim Al-Midfa, publisher of the first newspaper on the Trucial Coast in 1917, and owner of a fleet of trading boats and a library in his creekside home with its unique minaret-like *barjeel* or wind-tower. His mercantile links with British Bombay allowed him to disseminate news of the coloniser's excesses, which recommends him to us. His family lost their ancestral home near the creek to 1970s developments on and around Bank Street, but the building survives as a museum in the ongoing Heart of Sharjah redevelopment.

Noura Al Noman is one of Ibrahim Al-Midfa's granddaughters and a writer of Arabic sci-fi. Rather than receiving passively in English, she wanted to conjure positive future visions and broadcast them in a mainstream Arabic terminology. She grew up by the creek and "spent many family outings, especially Eid, under the famous and massive *Rolla* tree of Sharjah. People would set up swings on its branches and families would picnic in its shade... [it] was the first Banyan tree to be planted in the UAE, transported from India by ship in the early 1800s."⁶

In 1932 Imperial Airways added a small airport two kilometres outside Sharjah's walls and four days flight from London to its route to Karachi via Alexandria, Gaza, and Baghdad. Aerial images reveal the old *Rolla* tree in its more informal setting while film clips and stills from the mid-twentieth century show it standing alone between the fort and walls of what is becoming the Heart of Sharjah and the Shaikh's al Qasimiyyah school. It was a large open area—also known as the Ruler's Square or *majlis*⁷—and horses, camels and falcons can be seen in these images, as crowds cluster around the huge tree, which also functioned as an informal caravanserai. Childrens' sports day races activate the space, jeeps cluster next to the *Rolla* in anticipation of the coming bus stand. In 1970, the funeral for Gamel Abdel Nasser was marked in this same space.

Whether Shaikh Saqr brought the *Rolla* from India or elsewhere, or planted it himself is not certain, but the origins of the tree are more interesting than an absence of footnotes. As is the Shaikh most closely associated with it. Shaikh Sultan bin Saqr was the leader of the Qawasim tribe who stood up to the incoming colonisers and was painted by the British as a notoriously deceitful man even amongst his own people. This is a line common to many accounts of newly colonised territories, and can only be taken as a compliment. Saqr was also held hostage by the Saud family in Diriyya in the early years of the development of their Wahhabi ideology and power as it swept through and around Sharjah. This is well-documented in contemporaneous correspondence between him and the British interlopers, who disputed its significance.

And the *Rolla* tree itself? It condenses the most interesting currents in the region for at least two hundred years, the most potent of all the residues of port activity across the Gulf, the Arabian Sea, Indian Ocean and beyond. India's most holy of trees, named after a people or subcontinental caste in English, and an epiphytic species which can grow on any host, this tree embodies the transfer of a foreign species into the sand, earth and ground and culture of Arabia and the modern Emirates specifically, where none of the people it represents have the right of residency.

07:53

"Where are you now?

I'm trying to get in touch with you."

Four of the thirteen men gathered have their back to the Lebanese artist who composed the frame; an American academic, a British writer, an Indian artist and an Irish journalist. The whole group cluster in an open-air courtyard lined with lowering desert light in geometric lines, ruddy gold across mould-patterned tiles, feet, legs and toilet doors. It's a photograph taken down a short run of steps towards a row of doors stencilled with numbers from 94 to 101, some open, others ajar; one marked STAFF is closed.

This is LABOUR CAMP NO. 49, BK Gulf LLC, as a sign above the external entrance reads. A camp for male construction workers in Mussafah district on the outskirts of Abu Dhabi, run for a British subsidiary of Balfour Beatty and their local business partners. The nine men facing the camera and visitors are migrant workers from South Asia, including two middle-aged men who have come from prayers still wearing the dust from their shift. The shorter of the two supervisors from Peshawar is listening to the British writer as he gestures with one hand. The Indian artist is

speaking more fluently to the younger men and their showered and changed heads are turned in rapt attention. After the shutter releases men in their twenties fill the yard in dusty work gear with Arabtec tags; younger, sober-faced or fizzing at our presence. They assemble in some wonderment to ask questions, show us their accommodation, and share testimony about their work on Saadiyat Island in conversational detail.

No-one is alone in the Deportees Room, especially at the generously inclusive club established at DXB. Within minutes of my arrival, two anxious Thai teenagers are deported with a man in his thirties who had established a camp on the bench seating on the far side of the Room, directly beneath the airport sponsor's big watch and logo: ROLEX. The seats are pressed close together to be used as beds by some of the most precarious people in the world.

Nearer to me are two South Asian men, Indian and Hindu I would guess, wearing different airs to the rest of us; friendly but mutually absorbed, off-duty staff, probably on their way home. We exchange greetings but they are peculiarly absorbed in their phones and I am not feeling especially gregarious. After a while an African colleague of theirs appears, also relaxed and friendly, and we greet each other as if it were habitual. He is in uniform, and reveals that he and all three are Security Guards, working for Emirates (Airlines).

A pair of potted plants stand directly in front of me across a shiny, reflective floor. The floor reflects a brushed aluminium waste-bin, two metre-high brushed aluminium plant pots and a mesh-backed office chair pressed against a partitioning wall. I am not thinking about these banalities; I am reflecting less than the mottled white marbled floor. I'm just wondering if the tall plants in the metre-high pots are real, whether they are alive. Each is about a metre and a half tall, with similar but varying shapes, colours, forms, imperfections and browned tips, even suckers. What more perfect atrium than the bright vastness of Dubai International's Terminal 3?

All three get up to leave for a while and I find myself counting the fifty-seven seats in the Room and then measuring it under the watchful not-so-ethical face of the great ROLEX above. There are eleven tiles between me and the plants, which occupy a space five tiles wide, for example. The tiles are 500mm by 500mm square and at its greatest expanse the Room is twenty-four tiles long by seventeen tiles wide. That is twelve metres in length, and eight and a half metres wide, which is large enough to be a small theatrical stage or performance space. Big enough though only half the size of the *Rolla's* shade in which the Shaikh, "his relatives and the dignitaries of the town" sat "receiving the Eid congratulations" while "the 'iyala dance, a war dance, was performed near them"⁸ in the middle of the twentieth century, only twenty years or so before independence. Even at less than half the scale of Shaikh Sultan Saqr's arboreal *majlis*, the Deportees Room is large enough to stage something then. What?

00:59

“Ok, from where exactly?

And how long detained? Questioned etc?

Did they take your laptop or phone away?”

A series of images from my phone show the professor joshing with the Emirati taxi driver over dhal and rice in a cafe below a digital clock sponsored by Rainbow milk, reading 02:00 and 28°. On the neighbouring table the artists record testimony from two migrant workers, as they prepare to take their employer to court in a week’s time. The cafe is one in a short row which includes the hard-working tandoor of Al Hanmaniah Bakery, a short walk from a Labour Camp in Al Sajaa industrial district of Sharjah, which is a forty kilometre drive into the interior beyond Sharjah’s University campus. Later, we weighed the modest positives of camp life here amid the remote but benign neglect; open access, contiguous facilities, aspects of recognisable social space. These qualities reduce significantly towards Al Quoz and Jebel Ali in Dubai, Mussafah and Mafraq in Abu Dhabi, and especially at Saadiyat Island’s idealised Labour Camp with its confinement and clinical artificiality. We left Al Sajaa through ramshackle desolation in a sudden heavy shower of rain which drew long tyre-tracks in the sand under a black sky.

If we had turned left on the main highway and continued eastwards on the E88 road to Dhaid, we would have reached Ed-dhelaimah, which “means ‘The Dark Area’ because of the high density of bushy big close (*ghaf*) trees (*Prosopis cineraria*), which makes it dark during the day since sun light don’t [sic] pass through.”⁹ This protected area is one of the most important in Sharjah, according to the Environment and Protected Areas Authority. Rare and endangered animals have been released within it by the Shaikh, including the Arabian Oryx, *ghaf*-loving gazelles, foxes, along with the sand skink and Ethiopian hedgehog.

The Dark Area is a lush green copse standing in the middle of orange sand dunes, above water reached by roots up to sixty-five metres long. It extends to an “estimated” 1.9413 square kilometres.¹⁰ I had been planning to walk out this way to Dhaid and then up into the mountains and eventually down to Sharjah’s east coast via more wildlife and nature reserves to Kalba and Khor Fakkan. These old ports are south of the Straits of Hormuz, north of Muscat, and open to the Indian Ocean. Buses ply this route, and my commission covered car hire, but I’ve been this way by road before and the heat of the sand and the relative cool of the *ghafs* which dot the landscape beyond The Dark Area—along with the irrigated farms linking north to Ras al Khaimah and surprisingly green *wadis* in the mountains—had become elemental to my purpose. Incidentally, the *ghaf* is also native to the Indian subcontinent where it is known as the *jhand* and “deeply revered”.¹¹ It produces a fruit in the form of long green pods, which is cooked and eaten in Rajasthan.

In April 2017, a couple of months after my ‘escape’ from the Deportees Room, Sheikh Nahyan Bin Mubarak Al Nahyan, UAE Minister of Culture and Knowledge Development, launched a new India-UAE cultural partnership: “The logo shows the flags of India and the UAE planted firmly in the Ashoka Chakra surmounting the leaves of the *ghaf* tree, the national tree of the UAE. The moral authority of the twenty-four spokes of the Chakra ready to roll into the future allied with the reverence for the environment represented by the *ghaf* tree signals a relationship of monumental significance.”¹²

Simultaneously, an actual monument was being rushed towards completion on Saadiyat Island. The Louvre Abu Dhabi, celebrated at its November 2017 opening as the 'Rain of Light', was built by thousands of Indian men under brutally exploitative conditions, built in this way despite the relatively minuscule cost of dealing with the recruitment debts at its billion dollar heart, which would also honour a series of decrees issued by Abu Dhabi's Shaikhs. The monument of significance here is Saadiyat's brightly lit memorial to forced labour in 2017.¹³ In contrast to Abu Dhabi's darkly empty rhetoric, I still anticipate stepping out of the light into Sharjah's Ed-dhelaimah and laying down my tracks across the dunes when I leave with the early-rising gazelles and sand fish.

Two years before I sat in the Room the artist who took the photograph in the Mussafah Labour Camp sat here. The professor, the artist, the journalist and the writer in the photograph have also all been banned, blacklisted or deported since trying to amplify the voices of entrapped migrants from subcontinental 'nowheres' on the outskirts of regional towns, or remote valleys in Nepal and Waziristan. In that period human rights advocates have been banned, migrants have been deported for protesting their conditions, and Emiratis imprisoned without charge or disappeared for expressing any doubts about Abu Dhabi's increasingly autocratic and militarily adventurous régime.¹⁴

Two hundred years before me, Shaikh Sultan Saqr al Rashid al Qasimi was confined to a Room like this on a similar autocratic whim. Saqr became Shaikh of Sharjah and its shifting territories in 1803, at a time when the British, in the form of the East India Company, were consolidating and expanding their regional influence at sea from Bombay. Simultaneously, Wahhabi-infused Saudi Imams were flexing and raiding from their inland base at Diriyya, in the Najd, just north of Riyadh, which would become their base and eventual capital city. They had previously taken and lost much of the Arabian coast of the Persian Gulf and their strict monotheistic influence extended east into Ras al-Khaimah and Oman. "In March 1809 a delegation arrived from Dir'iyya, led by Muhammad bin Salama, to invite Shaikh Sultan to meet their ruler, Imam Muhammad bin Saud. The following month, accompanied by eight tribal shaikhs, Shaikh Sultan travelled to Dir'iyya [where] he was imprisoned and his accompanying shaikhs were sent home. Shaikh Sultan bin Saqr... was replaced both in Sharjah and in neighbouring Ras al-Khaimah by Shaikh Hassan bin Rahma" and other Wahhabi agents. "All of these men had fallen under the sway of the S'audi forces."¹⁵

Sharjah's ruling Shaikh writes with brave clarity about these sketchily documented events and a predecessor's escape from his Saudi prison after three years. Saqr travelled in disguise to Mokha, then the principle port on the coast of Yemen, and soon discovered his loss of Sharjah from the Imam of Muscat. He sought sanctuary and material support from Qasimi cousins who then ruled the Persian bandar of Lingeh, where he assembled three hundred men to reclaim Sharjah after a four year gap in his rule. Upon their success, he set about fortifying the sea front, building and connecting towers and forts by defensive walls to protect the town from the interior too.

Tales From The Deportees Room: Porting One (DXB)



00:16

“I’m amazed u had the balls to start taking photographs when they were extraditing you”

It was not courage, just a quiet, befuddled determination to document the place in forensic detail. Writers are always ‘on’. Win or lose, history is ours. When I looked at the high resolution images taken on a new and unused camera—bought to deliver the work I had been contracted to make by the Government of Sharjah in the coming months—I noticed security cameras in the images when blown up large enough. Ask yourself who is paid to watch the footage, what are their entitlements in this society, and how close do you think they feel to being in this same Room?

“HOTEL” it reads in dark green neon above a relatively short seven-storey building next to a neighbourhood *masjid* with a single *minar* of very similar height. One of the many other high-rises reads “Furnished Apartments” across its twelfth or thirteenth floor. Everything I can see is less than forty years old. This image from my phone—my first of Sharjah, March 2011—was taken through tinted windows from the sixth floor of the old Rotana Hotel above a roundabout on the far side of the flyover from the waterfront. Beneath the flyover, al Arouba and Al Sharq Streets meet at the roundabout, in a grid crossed by Arabian Gulf Street which runs to the waterfront. I can see the floating derricks lined up in Port Khalid beyond Sharjah’s creek and the green tubular roof of the Museum of Islamic Civilisation on Corniche Street. Between the two and a lot of beige, peach and sandy towers I also see *dhow*s moored on the far side of the Creek.

The Rotana is pyramidal in a stark 1990s style, all tinted glass facades and fortifying air-conditioning. The roundabout and gridded highways above, on and below the ground were built to a development masterplan drafted by a British engineering company called Halcrow in 1968. That sentence describes the casual disaster that led to blanket demolitions and high-rise grids, which Sharjah has been busily reversing ever since it was accomplished. Professor of Urbanism at Sharjah University, Hassan Radoine describes the results as “urban chaos” in which “road grids of endless roundabouts... frame districts of noticeable disorder.”¹⁶

When I swept back the layers of curtains from my floor-to-ceiling windows, the view hit me with a rush of uncanny pleasures. I tried to capture what I was actually looking at, what was compelling to me, before heading down into it. I stepped out of the lift and into a very close friend who led me across the grid to the waterfront and back to eat at the Karachi Darbar, next to the HOTEL and *masjid*. The KD branch on Arabian Gulf Street wears a sign advertising its presence “Since 1973” on the outside. Inside, the Bangladeshi-British writer with a key work in the *Sharjah Biennial* laughed happily as he read me the crazy-cheap menu card. Afterwards, we dodged through Al Shuwaiheen’s ambient blend of Arabian, Iranian and South Asian worlds to the Sharjah Art Museum. The Museum housed Sharjah’s Art Foundation and *Sharjah Biennial* headquarters at the time and as we reached its entrance another friend, the Palestinian artist and Foundation operative, stepped out.

Almost everything encountered so far was the result of an over-hasty imposition of modern engineering cliché that cut through and erased many of the indigenous forms and structures of the old town within the *sour*, or walls. The Museum is a more recent and considered attempt to replace and renew some of what was lost. Between it and the waterfront stand a pair of grand old *bait*s;

al Shamsi and al Serkal, large domestic dwellings with Persian-detailed roof terraces and courtyards undergoing renovation. These were early parts of the ongoing recovery of old Sharjah which extends beyond Bank Street into Al Mareijah and now accommodates SAF's Art Spaces and *Biennial*.

Bank Street cut a seventy metre wide gash through the continuous *suq* which ran the length of the town since Sharjah was founded in the early eighteenth century. The old Iranian *suq*, a.k.a Suq Saqr,¹⁷ forms the northern end just beyond bait al-Shamsi and runs parallel with the water towards Suq Al Arsa on the far side of Bank Street. These modest looking, richly stocked shops open both to the waterside and the landside, rather as an airport terminal opens to airside and landside. Instead of Duty Free, I would stock-up here on bitter-sweet Iranian *zereshk* superior in taste to anything available at home in London. Understanding the quiet vitality of these two faces is key to this place, making for a notably organic local order amidst the imposed disordering grids.

12:52

"Oh. Shit. I didn't know about this. Speechless.
Especially after everything we had been discussing.
Where are you?"

The Gujarati port city of Surat has for centuries been a fixed connection between the subcontinent and Arabia. As the official port for the Hajj, where pilgrims gathered before journeying by sea, it developed its own micro-economy which can be traced today in its diamond trade. In 1627 a young Thomas Herbert was on board an East Indiaman called the 'Rose' as it reached Surat on its way from England to Gombroone or Bandar Abbas, just along the Persian coast from Lingeh. Bandar Abbas had recently been transformed by Shah Abbas I, the unifying Safavid ruler who ended a century of Portuguese possession of Hormuz – the "emporium of Persia"¹⁸ – with East India Company support.

Herbert had been appointed assistant to Dodmore Cotton, Charles I's newly appointed Ambassador to Persia. Young Thomas kept a journal of strange sightings on land and at sea, accompanied with drawings of "Bannyans (who are) exquisite merchants"¹⁹ but also "gross idolaters",²⁰ a hallucinatory sailor-eating shark, and the view from Hormuz to Bandar Abbas, for example. His journal reports that Surat, a little north of Bombay, is on the River Indus. Surat is actually on the River Tapti, beside which Hendrik Van Reede, of the *Hortus Malabaricus* and ex-Governor of Malabar, lies buried in a monumental tomb from 1691. Van Reede's *Hortus* – The Garden of Malabar – produced during the 1680s, contains the earliest published image of the Banyan tree, the *Ficus benghalensis*, or Shaikh Sultan Saqr's *Rolla*. I passed his tomb during the monsoon of 2003, on my ride through a city awash with mud.

The 'Rose' reached Bandar Abbas on the 28th January 1628, where Herbert encountered a port bazaar bustling with "sundry Nations as Persians, Indians, Arabs, Jewes", especially the numerous "Bannyans" who "are the most subtle and faire spoken Merchants in the Orient."²¹ He's astonished by the sheer abundance; "chiefly fruits and flowers, as Oranges, Lemmons, Pomegranates, Quinces, Peares, Apples, Almonds, Figs, Dates and Lilies, Roses, Tulips" brought from "other places hither", much of it, he says traded by "Bannyans".²²

Bandar Abbas was naturally sheltered from the Gulf's busy channels of ancient trade by the islands of Qishm and Hormuz; a burgeoning port which the British would target for themselves before shifting to the deeper waters of Persian Bushire to the north. Thereafter, along with Zanzibar, it became Oman's strategic possession into the late nineteenth century. What interests me and seems to have interested Herbert sufficiently for him to gain an entry in the Oxford English Dictionary as a result, was an extraordinary phenomenon "three miles from Gombroone, right against Ormuz Ile"²³ towards the south and half a mile from the English Factory. There, against the waters of the Persian Gulf,

*Growes a tree, which we call the Bannyan tree, whose circumference in the leaves and boughs fixt in the earth, is two hundred and nine of my paces, as I measured. Within, the boughes are lopt off, so that it seems a Theater. And wherein, may ambush very primately three hundred Horse (or men). A Chappell sacred to the Bannyans Numen, is built close to the bole included and hidden, to those without, by her thicke spreading branches, near which is the Cave or Hermitage of an ancient Brahminy, a devout Wretch, having constantly served his Master the Devil about threescore yeares.*²⁴

Herbert's ambassadorial mission crossed the interior to meet the Shah, but within a year both ambassador and Shah were dead. Meanwhile, young Thomas gave birth to a strange cultural assemblage in the form of a tree, the Banyan, which he named after a people that he barely comprehended. A people that included the *Bania* or *Wania* caste of traditional merchants, who still reside in eponymous quarters or *wads*, in the old ports and walled towns along India's north-west sea coast like Mandvi or Bhuj. Herbert's Banyan tree bears a biopolitics of this kind but is also marked as a theatre, a religious and socio-political stage bound up with the prosperity and diversity of *bandars* like this throughout the region, bound up with the possibility of trade as such since the Banyans in each port on both sides of the emerging Gulf were often the gold dealers and money lenders.

If the circumference of Herbert's arboreal theatre of dropped roots was two hundred and nine paces, then it would have been approximately 3,400 square metres. Today a pace is 0.75 metres, but Herbert refers to his own pace, in the early sixteenth century. A pace of mine is closer to a full metre. In any case, his "Bannyan" was larger than my Deportees Room, and only a little smaller than the average size of the arena or stage in Roman amphitheatres across Europe, Britain, North Africa and West Asia. The nearest amphitheatre is at the Syrian end of the Euphrates, Dura Europus, a 'small' archeological ruin with an arena thirty-one metres in diameter. This makes it larger than the nearby theatrical stage at Palmyra²⁵ or the next nearest at exceptionally well-preserved Bosra.²⁶ Herbert's "Bannyan" was about sixty-six metres in diameter using one pace as a metre, forty-nine metres using a three-quarters of a metre pace, which still compares well to the Colosseum in Rome with its elliptical arena of eighty-seven metres by fifty-five metres.

The Banyan, which we know can dwarf these little amphitheatres, can also grow anywhere, on and from anything. Herbert described the way the tree branches drop roots to form a kind of cage around a central trunk that sometimes dies away. Of the famously massive examples in India, I have walked inside the one in the Calcutta Botanical Gardens, which first established itself on a date palm in 1782 and can shelter five thousand people.²⁷ In general, the Banyan's ubiquity long ago numbed me to its qualities, but images of it smeared in red *kum-kum* to make or incorporate a shrine in Bhubaneswar, in or sheltering a social microcosm of barber, *chai* stand and bike mechanic in Baroda are indelible.

There were other sentinel Banyan trees throughout the Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea region, at *bandars* all along the Baluchi and Persian coasts linking to and from Mughal and British India. Once inside Gulf waters, there was one in Hormuz itself, opposite Herbert's originary one outside Bandar Abbas. A large Banyan stood at the mouth of the harbour at Bushire near the head of the Gulf and riverine routes to Baghdad, Dura Europus and on. Further afield, Banyans were introduced to Hawai'i by the family of the last indigenous ruler, King Kalakaua, where music and mourning was performed under the grand canopy, as well as rebellions to protest their usurpation by white settlers and subsequent annexation by the United States of America.

And there was one other Banyan, of course, just outside the land-side *sour* of Shaikh Sultan Saqr al Qasimi's Sharjah, a town with about two thousand inhabitants in the late 1820s, when it was planted. Saqr's *Rolla* tree reached thirty metres in diameter, ninety-four metres in circumference and almost half the size of Herbert's Banyan at Bandar Abbas. Compare that further to the stage and semi-circle orchestra pit at Bosra, twenty-one to twenty-five metres across, which serviced 15,000 spectators in the cavea itself. By any standards, Saqr's *Rolla* tree grew into a significantly scaled feature on the edge of the Ruler's Square beyond the *sour* and embedded Al Hisn.

I walk off flight EK032 into DXB's tubular T3, which is quite familiar and unchanged but for an unfamiliar sensation of not knowing whether I will actually 'land'. Landing, even in this dumbly mediatised age, requires uh, *land* and for me to physically walk upon it. Outside the Terminal. Under the coddling sky. Even if only towards a taxi. Thus, I'm embracing the strangeness which has bred a nonchalance in me to the point of displaying an unnatural cool. At no point have I pictured myself walking out in the balmy air at the end of my six hour flight. If I *do* get through, I'll be overwhelmed with quick joy and a rush of contained purpose.

Still airside, I descend the multi-storey escalator to be met by a *Mahabha*²⁸ agent who whisks me through crowd control barriers as we cut across Arrivals. I'm carrying all I need for my six week residency, so can skip baggage reclaim where the palm tree-lined travelator is reflected in its mirrored ceiling. Polite grins and exchanges greet us at the desk, an unusual experience, but quite soon the pleasantries dry up in confusion. The diligent checker makes two or three goes, verifies that I've been here before, tries again and, with genuine surprise in his face, says there is a problem which he does not understand. His arm takes wing and from my right another man looms with a plastic grin.

So it goes. I play the surprised-but-not-remotely-ruffled-hand. My *Mahabha* agent is actually flustered, replaces herself with a colleague to go and seek advice. I send messages to my Sharjah hosts but I know that key figures are in the air and won't land for a couple of hours, by which time it will be too late (so it proves; my phone rings at the exact moment the plane deporting me starts to taxi). An hour passes very quickly in this abstract space before I decide I should go through the motions of a conventional response to delay. Minutes later I'm being led away to the big Security Office in the sky, referred to with a fluttering gesture by another tight-lipped man sent to collect me. He is the blankest of those so far encountered, but while he guides me to an electric buggy I try to engage him in Arabic. He ignores me, so I persist until he offers an awkward grin and says he does not speak Arabic — "I am not..." he tails off, "I am Russia." The drive along the Terminal on the buggy takes us quite a long way from human or other signs of life. We pull up outside a small glass-fronted office, which is closed and empty, but where he says I must "just wait. Report here."

Above the empty reception window it reads General Directorate of Residential and Foreigners Affairs. A large sticker in the middle of the glass centres on a falcon above the words IMMIGRATION INVESTIGATION. Beneath it the glass stops short of the counter so that documents can be conveyed. There are symmetrical clusters of circular holes cut in to aide hearing, the backs of matching screens. Through the glass a rear partition wall is lined with desks and PCs. Plum centre, pride of place, are two small portraits in heavily ornate gilt frames. On the the left is a youthful likeness of the Shaikh of Abu Dhabi, the same virile force that greets visitors to Abu Dhabi's Yaz Island where it towers on a motorway bridge. Press images of his rare public appearances, in which he is unrecognisable, caused me some bewilderment. The figure on the right of the two is the Shaikh of Dubai, ubiquitous landside and much more diligent in keeping up appearances.

The all powerful rulers whose insecurities have brought me here are framed by potted plants of an anonymous and banal kind, placed each side of the reception desk. I would not have noticed them at all if my circumstances were not so removed from meaningful human experience. But they are and I do. I notice that they are real, living, well-watered plants. I could reach in and touch them or their soil if there were any ambiguity about it. They remind me of tall, brown, thistles clustering a farmer's stone-built store in a valley outside Ramallah which were described to me, winkingly, as "soldiers protecting the *qasr!*"²⁹ The Shaikhs' 'soldiers' stimulate an insurgent thought which will grow in potency in the Deportees Room.

7:01

"Ok. Messaging XXXXXXXXX. Shifted job to T3
Camp Costa ;)
If you really* can leave the room try to meet?"

Ras al-Khaimah is in flames. Lingeh is in flames. Buildings are in ruins, stores are burnt out, men are dead, the boats in each port howl orange to a descending black sky. Europeans had behaved in this way for centuries throughout the region on every coast and in many ports. What I find odd is that they made paintings of their work.

The "intent" of the long-planned mission sent from Bombay was simple in its ill-informed crudity and prejudice: "to crush the pirates in the Persian Gulf"³⁰ according to Captain Wainwright, leader of the expedition. Of the hundreds of troops envisaged for this expedition a significant proportion were to be Indian sepoy.³¹ The expedition would be accompanied by one artist, too. "The main point of attack was to be Ras al-Khaima, but all other Qasimi ports from Rams southwards were to be attacked and their ships destroyed (as well as) all Qasimi ports on the Persian coast."³² The caveat was always "to avoid any clashes with the Wahhabis". The Shaikh of Sharjah added to this in his 1985 doctoral thesis that, "It is most curious that the organisers and the leaders of the expedition did not possess any accurate information on the whole Arab coast. They did not even know the exact location of their main target, Ras al-Khaima."³³

Tales From The Deportees Room: Porting One (DXB)



The Company expedition set off from Bombay on the 14th September 1809; thirty-six gun frigates and several smaller cruisers, with seven hundred European and five hundred “native” troops. “On 11th November the whole force assembled in sight of Ras al-Khaima, but they soon found out that their frigates could not get within four miles of the town.”³⁴ Next day, Wainwright continued, “the town was cannonaded by the small cruisers and gunboats with visible effect.”³⁵ As the sun rose on the morning of the thirteenth, they made a two-pronged attack which cleared the town by ten o’clock and erased it by mid-afternoon. He writes in that florid Latin hand they used, “Thus, in a few hours was this enterprising and powerful people reduced to poverty and weakness.”³⁶ They had not quite finished, as the Shaikh continues: “In Wainwright’s words: ‘On the 15th, the squadron sailed to attack the pirates on the Persian coast. On the 17th it was off Linga, that town was abandoned on the approach of the ships, and all the piratical vessels, twenty in number, nine of them very large, were destroyed without loss of lives’.”³⁷

It is the paintings that interest me most. A number were made from on-board vessels outside Ras al-Khaimah, showing the troops landing, in red-belted jackets and tall black hats firing and reloading their muskets, inhabitants throwing arms in the air as they are hit. One from the southwest was painted, it says, at half past two that afternoon, showing the town engulfed in black towers of smoke, British soldiers in neat line formations, huge *dhow*s aflame behind them. In the foreground of this painting, shoeless, barely-dressed Asian men retrieve textiles from burning buildings.

The painting of Ras al-Khaimah at 2:30pm is inscribed to the expeditionary artist; “R. Temple HM65th Regt.” There are similar ones of Lingeh, from distant moorings, again against the rising mountains behind, again attributed to Temple, but no timecode evident. In one, the town, which had been abandoned strategically, is intact, but the smaller looking *dhow*s in the water and others drawn up on the beach are spewing lividly assertive orange flames.

These paintings are sickening in their banality and the ways they incorporate epistemological distance, their contemptuous ignorance of and unhesitant lack of interest in the land here, what happened landside, or the interiors of its peoples. Everything waterside, you understand, now belonged to the East India Company. The paintings are equivalent to those images of aerial bombardment of Iraq in 1991 or 2003, which I witnessed from the banks of the River Indus in the desert of Gujarat. Or of drone images of wedding parties being eviscerated, suspected jihadis or resisters being summarily assassinated. They are no different from the Salafi ‘propaganda’ videos made in response.

The British returned in 1819—directly from reducing Bhuj, the capital of Kachchh—and exceeded their official mission, destroying Ras al-Khaimah, stripping Sharjah of fortifications, destroying fleets and sacking Lingeh to reduce their foes to dependency for one hundred and fifty years to come. Yet, I can’t help but think of Saqr as the canny winner in the ruins. He nurtured a form of sovereignty in Sharjah and beyond which had the effect of consolidating Sharjah as such. He ruled through internal strife and mortal conflict for forty more years until his death in 1866.

What of his *Rolla* tree, planted in the late 1820s, transplanted or seeded, from who knows where? Lingeh? Hormuz? Or all the way from Surat or Bombay? I would love to know, but it seems undiscoverable. The *Rolla* was planted landside, out left of the fort’s entrance to the interior, and would have been big enough to sit under in his own lifetime. Saqr the wild mushroom?—flourishing in symbiotic relationship with the holiest tree in India which took root in his time, place of ruin and repair.

00:01

“Ok. We stage a meeting in the Deportees Room DXB.
An artist, a writer, a rights activist, an academic, NGO, like this...
We film what we are able to plant. This involves risk 🙄
Ok! So we are all ‘in’ then!”

In thinking about what I have been doing, or might hope for in certain circumstances, I kept circling Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali’s notion of the truth of taste/taste of truth. Yet this is not intended as “the incredible exploits of some fabulous exemplum”³⁸ as Eric Ormsby reassures us about the work of Al-Ghazali. Al-Ghazali had been teaching in Baghdad, at the Nizamiyya *madrassa* appointed by the new Seljuk ‘kings’, when he had a well-documented, physical and mental breakdown of some sort in 1095. It caused him months of pain and triggered his departure for Damascus, then Jerusalem and finally a return home to Persia. This life of sufi-like seclusion lasted for eleven years. Abu Hamid was about thirty-eight years old when he left Baghdad and about fifty when he wrote *al-Munqidh min al-dalal* or *The Deliverer from Error* some five years before his death in 1111.

Al-Ghazali was driven by a “quest for certitude, for an unshakeable basis of knowledge” in an age of what he called “spiritual torpor and lassitude, of lukewarmness and mediocrity”.³⁹ What appeals to me is that his certitude had to be “realised by ‘taste and practice’ (*dhawq wa-suluk*)”⁴⁰ which, crucially, is “available to all, even the unlettered.”⁴¹ For Abu Hamid “to taste means to experience directly”,⁴² a notion that takes in the Quranic reminder that “every soul will taste of death”. This perception of taste recurs in Sufi writing, that of Persian and Christian mystics and the author of *al-Munqidh* drew from exceptionally wide sources. Ormsby concludes;

*Though he is openly eclectic and allows several approaches to truth, he presents the deepest truth as accessible only through immediate, living experience, or “taste”. Taste has a direct meaning for the reader, as an ordinary, and daily, physical experience. The experience of taste has, however, the further merit of being notoriously incommunicable. Unlike the other senses, taste has few analogues [but al-Ghazali’s use of this notion] is an astute way to communicate something incommunicable to a wide and diverse circle of readers.*⁴³

I would like to rescue this notion of taste as an individual and collective experience of truth and truths, from scholarly or theological debate. In the contexts of ruins assembled here, taste generates new value, present in the beginning and after the end. It allowed al-Ghazali to capture “transfigured, spiritual senses” and dreams understood as “the innate, unmediated state of knowing”⁴⁴ for his (prophetic) purposes. I will do something similar for mine in relation to artful invention, temperamental resistance and speculative visioning within Anthropocenic dystopias.

In the Deportees Room at DXB the true experience of taste is inclusiveness. Sharing. It is that which is in common—public space. It is a taste of an Other. When the national tree of the Emirates, the *ghaf*, is eaten in Rajasthan, that is what it tastes of. Pradip Krishen describes how the bark of the tree is sweetish and can be ground into flour and how it “saved lives in the Great Rajputana Famine of 1868-69.”⁴⁵ This is the truth of taste; interior, active, unerring.

Similarly, the figs of the Banyan or *Rolla*, the sacred tree of India and Arabian Eid-awning, taste peculiarly good in Terminal 3 I will discover when I stage a return. They are the taste of the only kind of revenge – or response to the despotic refusal of truths engaged by the Abu Dhabi regime – worth my time. My truths are eclectic, I can't think of a more direct way of conveying the resulting experience. I also can't help but think myself out of the Room by holding to the improvised, migratory, outlawed joys of embracing how precarious all life is here, now. Versus the ruins of Saadiyat Island and the demagoguery that arms itself to delete others. The Deportees Room reminded me that all life begins after deletion, that we're already there.

IMBECILIC CONTINGENT INTRUSION⁴⁶

Everything we know about ourselves and our various shared and not well-shared histories affirms that systems of hermetic control never work for long, that consolidation hastens collapse. The more autocratic the regime, the messier the collapse. I will leave all of that to time, which will operate unerringly.

Meanwhile, to demonstrate a simple truth, we are going to plant a forest in DXB's Terminal 3. It's easy. Those of us who know the place will return from various ports in carefully staged flights that betray no joint venture. We will all be either prevented from getting on a flight, stopped at and detained at DXB, or held in the Deportees Room for some hours. Two of us at least will get in – to the airport, not the country! – and overlap in the Room on ROLEX time. We will take our allotted hour to find food in the Terminal and head up to our Costa rendezvous. We will have seeds of trees with us. We will be carrying gorgeous presentation boxes of fertilised *roals* or figs, like the kind from Aliya Dates Farm that I recall from a leather-lined yacht in Abu Dhabi's Palace Marina. Gifts, you see. Gifts of the *Rolla* tree, the put-upon-banyans, these potent embodiments of hopes, wishes and dreams for change.

And we will plant, wherever we find soil in the Terminal. Where the palms grow in the great halls, where floral displays are within reach, in the two potted plants in the Deportees Room itself. I will enjoy reaching my hands underneath the glass partition in the Security Office to plant rebellion right under the fixed visages of the two Shaikhs at the rear of the room. These seeds will grow into 'soldiers' protecting new *qasrs* which are closer to the Palestinian farmer's shelter in the *wadi* than the thinking spectacle of the new Ruler's Palace at the end of the corniche in Abu Dhabi.

The point is to document the planting on film; soiled fingers, hasty thrusting and smoothing-over, in mirrored halls under ROLEX time and meaningless ads for connectedness. Then to share that harmless but insurrectionary 'poor' imagery with the best generational minds out there at Sharjah's 2019 *Biennial* and beyond.

8:01

"We are out of uae.

'Out' ;)

WE HAVE FOOTAGE

Brother 'Costa' received his gift and promises more..."

Tales From The Deportees Room: Porting One (DXB)

Notes

¹ Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016, p. 6

² *ibid.*, p. 40

³ *ibid.*, p. 3

⁴ Author's note from a board at the Heritage Museum, Sharjah; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FuW_WzGSGpA

⁵ Sultan bin Muhammad Al-Qasimi, *My Early Life*, Domenyk Eades trans., London: Bloomsbury, 2011, p. 21

⁶ <https://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/sharjah-family-shares-70-years-of-emirati-women-s-history-through-three-generations-and-five-women-1.631385?videoid=5688157736001>

⁷ Samia Rab uses these constructions in her research, which she spoke of at the March Meeting in Sharjah, 2013

⁸ Sultan bin Muhammad Al-Qasimi, *op cit.*, p. 21

⁹ See Govt of Sharjah page; <http://www.epaashj.ae/protected-areas/ed-dhelaimah/>

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ Pradip Krishen, *Trees of Delhi*, Delhi: Dorling Kindersley, 2006, p. 277

¹² See *Khaleej Times*; <https://www.khaleejtimes.com/nation/abu-dhabi/emirati-indian-cultural-celebrations-begin-in-abu-dhabi>

¹³ See *Middle East Eye*; <http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/louvre-abu-dhabi-universal-museum-or-memorial-forced-labour-1371077816>

¹⁴ After my deportation 9-10 January 2017 as a "security threat" with orders "from the centre" according to Sharjah authorities, I offer a tiny sample of examples: 16 January 2017, Abdulkhaleq Abdullah, retired academic and conservative critic disappeared after tweeting his wish for "freedom of expression, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly", resurfacing ten days later promising a "new phase of communication with followers"; 20 March 2017, Ahmed Mansour 'disappeared' again from his home in Ajman and has been held without charge ever since, a further chapter in his persecution since appealing for democratic reforms previously; see <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/03/21/uae-free-prominent-rights-activist> March 29th 2017; Dr Nasser bin Ghaith was sentenced to ten years imprisonment for sending tweets criticising his experience of lacunae in the justice system in Abu Dhabi. "By imposing this ludicrous sentence in response to his peaceful tweets, the authorities have left no room for doubt: those who dare to speak their minds freely in the UAE today risk grave punishment," said Lynn Maalouf, Deputy Director for Research in Amnesty International Middle East and North Africa Regional Office; <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/uae-prominent-academic-jailed-ten-years-over-tweets>; The UAE bans Skype, Whatsapp, Change.org, filters news and arrests curious journalists; https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/politics/-attack-on-press-freedom-_swiss-tv-journalists-arrested--held-in-abu-dhabi/43670010

¹⁵ Sultan bin Muhammad Al-Qasimi, *Under the Flag of Occupation*, London: Bloomsbury, 2015, p. xiv

¹⁶ Hassan Radoine, 'Chapter 10. Sharjah, UAE', in *Architecture and Globalisation in the Persian Gulf Region*, Murray Fraser & Nasser Golzari eds, London: Ashgate Publishing, 2013, p. 246

¹⁷ Mona El Mousfy and Sharmeen Syed, 'Cultural Exchange and Urban Appropriation in UAE & The Gulf', George Katodrytis & Kevin Mitchell eds, *Architectural Design* No. 233, 2015, p. 31

¹⁸ Sultan Bin Muhammad Al-Qasimi, 'The Myth of Arab Piracy', University of Exeter PhD, March 1985, p. 17. Also published as a book with the same title though different pagination, London: Routledge, 1988

¹⁹ Thomas Herbert, *A relation of some yeares travaile, begynne anno 1626. Into Afrique and the greater Asia, especially the territories of the Persian Monarchie: and some parts of the orientall Indies, and lles adjacent*, London: Printed by William Stansby and Jacob Bloome, 1634, p. 37. NB: This is the full title pasted from the copy at the British Library, London

²⁰ *ibid.*

GUY MANNES-ABBOTT

²¹ op cit., p. 48

²² ibid.

²³ ibid.

²⁴ ibid.

²⁵ Palmyra has a twenty-three metre diameter orchestra pit, and a forty-five metre long stage

²⁶ Bosra has a twenty-one metre diameter orchestra pit and a twenty-five metre stage

²⁷ Krishen, *Trees of Delhi*, op cit., p. 323

²⁸ *Marhaba* (which is a version of the informal Arabic greeting meaning 'hi') is a meet and greet service which started out at DXB; <https://www.marhabaservices.com/english/about/our-story>

²⁹ Guy Mannes-Abbott, *In Ramallah, Running*, London: Black Dog Publishing, 2012, p. 52

³⁰ Sultan Bin Muhammad Al-Qasimi, PhD, p. 232

³¹ Sultan Bin Muhammad Al-Qasimi, PhD, quoting Duncan Minute, June 1809, p. 238

³² ibid., p. 252

³³ ibid.

³⁴ ibid., p. 254

³⁵ ibid., p. 255

³⁶ ibid., 256

³⁷ ibid., p. 259

³⁸ Eric Ormsby, 'The Taste of Truth: The Structure of Experience in al-Ghazali's Al-Munqidh min al-Dalal', in *Islamic Studies presented to Charles J. Adams*, Wael Hallaq & Donald Little eds, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991, pp. 133-152

³⁹ ibid., p. 138

⁴⁰ ibid., p. 141

⁴¹ ibid., p. 140

⁴² ibid., p. 141

⁴³ ibid., p. 152

⁴⁴ ibid., p. 149

⁴⁵ Krishen, *Trees of Delhi*, op cit., p. 277

⁴⁶ This refers to a short series of texts called 'Imbecilic Contingent Intrusions', a phrase lifted from Slavoj Zizek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, London: Verso, 1997, p. 129. I exhibited *ICI (two)* with Cerith Wyn Evans' neon Lacanian loop in an exhibition titled *Essential Things*, Robert Prime Gallery, London, July 1999 (all the texts were published on a then 'special' CD-ROM edition)