It is impossible to elude the nanny’s lullaby, impossible to shy away from her gestures and from the dreams in which she envelops us and that she continues to conjure through the divine echo of her voice. The lullaby’s solicitude is never lost; it is impossible to forget without committing a sacrilege. We carry our cradle within us and are buried with it. We take it everywhere, in our journeys across the world, from one dwelling-place to another, transported by waves, from one port to another. I had a Berber cradle, with three rounded legs. It rocked to the rhythm of the sea that dampened the delicate and vulnerable ramparts of Essaouira of Mogador, situated on a peninsula in southern Morocco. When I returned there for the first time, thirty-five years after having left, the whole town felt like a cradle to me. The wintry warmth, the movement of the waves, the unvarying Berber chants. I no longer inhabited it; it inhabited me.

Mogador was a town made of lace that trembled when the wind kicked up. In the morning, seagulls unfurled the light of day; in the evening, gannets rolled it up again. On all sides, waves crashed against the rocks in a vain attempt to move them or get around them. The pine trees, majestic and imperturbable, replayed their old Patagonian roles; the rubber plants, disheveled and scruffy, no longer knew where to spread their branches; the palm trees pondered their nostalgia for the desert. Merchants offered grilled grasshoppers in jars and acorns boiled in cisterns. Crunchy meringues and melt-in-your-mouth pralines. Powder for all types of ink and herbs for all kinds of pain. Dried butterflies and lizard tails to bring good luck. In the shops, since converted into art galleries, almond sorters gave their seasonal concert. The call of the muezzin, the sound of bells ringing and the clock’s toll bounced off the rammed earth of the ramparts, the white lime walls, the blue doors and shutters. The sea spray saturated itself with the black incantations of the Gnawas and the soft insinuations of swallows, the murmurings
of soothsayers and the litanies of beggars. The Gnawa are an ethnic group in Morocco and Algeria of Western African origin. Traditional Gnawa music consists of ancient African Islamic ritual songs.
Wall or at Sacré-Coeur. Longing to make out her subdued voices in muffled memories and illuminated visions, to reconstitute with a rare precision her décor and her sites in my dreams. I left my childhood self in Mogador; I remain from there. The price of emigration, but also its compensation, is the cocoon whose caterpillar never became a butterfly and that remains the safe place where my memories are preserved.

As soon as I could walk, I was placed in the care of Rabbi Pinchas who ran a nursery school at his house. He was a devout man, dressed in a black djellaba, his head covered by the blue veil with white polka-dots worn by the sages of North African Judaism. He lived on a somber street that connected Chaïla Square to the rue du Destin in the old casbah. We were a large flock of children, aged two to four, who repeated the letters of the Hebrew alphabet drawn on an old slate that the rabbi held against his chest. A litany that mixed Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic intonations—incomprehensible, senseless, indelible. It meant nothing; it meant everything. It was brazen; it was wise. It was deafening. Then each child was invited to identify the letter pronounced by the rabbi. When one of us got it wrong, our errant finger was placed between the rabbi’s pincers, and he pinched so hard that he extracted a cry of penitence from the culprit.

It was the Divine Presence in all its fullness—candles flickering in the half-light, sobs caught in the throat, the feeling of abandonment—that was prisoner of this dingy and squalid street, which we hurried to cross in order to regain the reassuring light of day. But the Presence would remain there, a misty divinity, deaf and blind, waiting to be liberated from its imprisonment. When I went back for the first time, the caretaker of the cemetery showed me into a chamber with a tomb in the center. It was my old master. The first and last. The one and only. He had merited the distinguished honor of not being buried with common mortals. The caretaker handed me a skullcap and a prayer book. The kaddish didn’t come to my lips. It’s meaningless if not enlivened by the echoes of ten or more people. Instead, what came to mind was one of Kafka’s apologues, which I had to look up in my notes: “Here I am before my old master. He smiles at me and says, ‘How can this be? You left my class such a long time ago. If I didn’t have an inhumanly faithful memory of all my pupils, I would not have recognized you. But, as it is, I recognize you very well, yes, you are my pupil. But why have you come back?’”

Rabbi Pinchas left neither great works nor progeny. Years later, I would try to make up for his oppressive severity by devoting a story to him, in which I posit myself as his spiritual heir and lend him a copy of The Kabbalah Unveiled. I had him recite a

2. Resembling the Egyptian jalabiya (or galabeya), the djellaba (or jillaba) is a loose-fitting, long-sleeved outer robe worn in North Africa by both men and women.
3. The kaddish is the Hebrew prayer for the dead.
quote from The Book of Splendor, which he spent his days reading: “The tohu-bohu are residues of ink that stick to the tip of the reed pen.”

From Rabbi Pinchas’s nursery school, I moved up to the rabbinical school where I experienced the rich assortment of abuses dished out by the teachers there. God had momentarily left la rue de la Prison only to end up in the slum that was the mellah. It was the most squalid, overcrowded environment; deprivation at its extreme. It was humanity in transit, heading somewhere else, late for everything, stalled in its anticipation of the Messiah. In sordid secrecy, merely existing, raging against the wind. The roads were pitiful, as were the buildings, the streets, the faces; the prayers were insistent, whether uttered by cantors, beadles, or beggars. It was the pitiful people of God weakened by two thousand years of exile who chanted their chosenness and their degradation. Their deaf resistance was as seductive as it was repugnant. It was a human swamp that gave off a liturgical stench and nobody asked themselves if there was a God to listen to them. That was where I was taken, day after day, to receive His word.

Then we moved from the House of Wells in the medina to the cracked house of the casbah. The glass panes of the roof, tormented by the wind, shattered and smashed in the courtyard. The doors and shutters slammed incessantly, making the whole building shake. Mice and cats entered freely under the door. Swallows, in search of an emergency exit, bashed themselves against the walls. Flies, bees, and cockchafer fluttered around us until they wound up caught in one of the numerous cobwebs that laced the corners. And yet, it was paradise. The windows looked out onto the ramparts, the clock, and the porte des Lions, which was guarded by two minuscule bronze canons that we straddled under the vigilant eye of our mother, watching us behind the glass.

From then on, we were situated halfway between the Hebrew school and the colonial school. My father renounced the rabbinic ambitions he had entertained for me; my mother pushed me toward the secular classroom. It was a real school, complete with a courtyard planted with oak trees and poplars, a covered playground and . . . a weathervane knocked about by the wind. There was almost no longer any question of God. The Hebrew teacher contented himself with teaching us Hebrew grammar, in the best of the Spinozan traditions upheld by the Alliance. The Arabic teacher was the only one who unfailingly added “the prophet” every time he invoked Allah. We wore overalls and brandished our slates; colored chalk and white chalk were mixed together; and whereas at the rabbinical school the ink was black, at the Alliance it was purple.

On another return visit, I let myself be led by a colleague to consult a Gnawa fortuneteller. She had prepared everything—the tray of earthenware pottery, the blazing fire, and the incense. She completed her ritual. Then, when the moment

came for her to speak, she withdrew, explaining that she had a migraine, which prevented her from practicing divination. She refused to speak, despite my insistence and that of my colleague. I’ve often asked myself what she saw or felt that made her refuse to share her predictions with me. Maybe she detected the influence of Aïcha Kandisha on me and did not want to expose her fears.\textsuperscript{6} Out of discretion, out of hospitality . . . out of fear of the great Muquadama of the region.\textsuperscript{7} Since then, I have fantasized incessantly about having a home in Mogador. Marquetry furniture, curtains with tassels, and mosaic tiles with Berber tones. Bay windows looking out onto the ocean, walls of glass to resist the wind and make it sing, a bedroom resembling the hold of a boat. Wrapped up in a lovely and intimate warmth, cradled by the waves, visited by seagulls, watched over by gannets, lost at home, ready to make the leap into the great silence. An extraterritoriality of body and soul, free from illusions of grandeur or ambition. To hide away behind the closed shutters to watch the ballet of the waves, unbeknownst to them. Then, from time to time, to cross paths with the Wind who, returning to Kafka, "plays with light existences, prolongs the life of the falling leaves,"\textsuperscript{8} and which, in \textit{The Kabbalah Unveiled} of Rabbi Pinchas, embodies and symbolizes God . . .

\textit{—Translated by Rebekah Vince}

\begin{enumerate}
\item Aïcha Kandisha is a figure of Moroccan legend. Some stories hold her to be a mythical figure—a fairy, or even an ogress—and a great beauty who would prey on single men at night. Other stories classify her as an historical heroine who fought to push back the Portuguese invaders of Morocco.
\item Muquadama (typically spelled \textit{muqadama} and usually transcribed as \textit{mqadima} in Moroccan Arabic), signifies “leader.” In this context, it refers back to Aïcha Kandisha.
\item Author’s note: F. Kafka, \textit{Lettre à Franz Werfel}, Décembre 1922, La Pléiade, Vol. III, 1202. (Editors’ note: Unofficial English translation.)
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