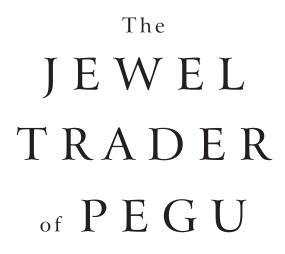
The JEWEL TRADER of PEGU

a novel

JEFFREY HANTOVER





J E F F R E Y H A N T O V E R



In memory of my mother, Lonnie Hantover Every day redemption is worked for him, as for those who went out of Egypt.

-THE MIDRASH

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Map

Uytgevoerd te LEYDEN door PIETER VANDER AA met Privilegie .

The shorelines and islands of (the East) Indies from the Pegu and Malacca axis, till the Moluccas, etc.; 1707



Don Vasco da Gamma

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m The}$ king [Sigismund Augustus Jagiellon, king of Poland] takes extreme delight in jewels, and he showed them to me one day in secret, for he does not want the Poles to know that he has spent so much to buy them. There is in his chamber a large table, almost as big as the room itself, on which stand sixteen jewel cases two spans long and a span and a half wide, filled with jewels. Four cases having belonged to his Mother are worth 200 thousand crowns and were brought from Naples. Four others were bought by his Majesty for 500 thousand gold crowns. They contain: a clasp from Charles V, which is worth 30 thousand gold crowns, and his diamond-studded medal big as a gold ducat, having on one side the eagle with the arms of Spain, on the other, Charles V's personal motto: two columns bearing the inscription "plu ultra." There are, besides, many square and pointed rubies, and emeralds. The other eight cases are very old, one of them containing a bonnet full of emeralds, rubies and diamonds, which are worth 300 thousand gold crowns. I saw, finally, many jewels which I did not expect to find, and with which neither those of Venice which I have likewise seen nor those of the papacy can be compared.

> —Bernard Bongiovanni, Papal Ambassador to Poland, 1560

PROLOGUE

In 1614 Father Jorge de Silva, a young priest fresh from the seminary in Lisbon, traveled upriver to the ruined city of Pegu. The royal palaces and golden temples were burnt memories. There were few native souls to save or foreign ones to keep from straying into the barbarism he had been warned the lush and sensuous country and half-naked women induced. He had read of strange wonders in the lands "beneath the wind": islands where children were fathered by the wind and all males were strangled at birth; creatures with the faces of maidens and the tails of scorpions; lands where people worshipped the first creature they met in the morning, whether it walked on two legs or four; and a race of men who ate raw flesh and hunted upon the backs of green-scaled beasts the size of horses, that had three horns in the middle of their foreheads and short wings like the fins of fishes and could leap thirty paces at a time. He kept paper and pen dry in a leather chest to record the wonders he would see, but he had seen little of note and his journal (now housed in the Vatican Library) is more an account of his troubled constitution and intestinal woes than the exotic world he had hoped to find. Looking for the extraordinary, he failed to see the ordinary.

He did remark on one strange occurrence that led him in his later years to propose with some modicum of conviction that the Burmese were the lost tribe of Israel descended from the Israelites of Judea who had wandered eastward in the days of King Solomon, in search of the kingdom of Ophir. One morning in the market he saw a boy, likely thirteen or fourteen-the child himself did not know when he was born-whose face was different from the other young men sitting on their haunches. His hair was auburn and tightly curled, his eyes rounder. Most striking was his nose: not flat and broad like his countrymen but narrow, with a slight hump in the middle. He had to Father de Silva "the look of the Semites." That was what first caught Father de Silva's eye. Then he saw glittering against the boy's brown chest a small silver pendant hanging on a thin silver chain. On the scratched and tarnished silver square was etched a five-fingered hand pointing downward, and across the palm were several Hebrew characters so worn that the priest could not have deciphered them even if he had been trained to read the language. He recognized it to be an amulet worn by Jews to protect themselves from the evil eye and all manner of illness and danger. The boy knew nothing of its history or what it meant. He simply had worn it all his life. Perhaps, he said, he had been born with it.



27 September 1598

Dearest Joseph,

I long to wake up on solid ground. The halcyon nests calmly on the waves, but I was born for the stones of our Most Serene City.

You should soon receive a large pouch of letters that I gave to Mordecai Halevi of Mantua, whose niece you know. Since leaving Masulipatnam, I have not encountered any Italian, Gentile, or Israelite with whom I could entrust my letters. Though it may be a year before you read this letter, writing it bears me closer to home. Like a lodestone, my words draw me back to where my heart desires to be. I live in two worlds: the world where I am, whether it be a bark floating down the Euphrates or this ship riding the waves in the Bay of Bengal, and the world where I wish to be, safe among kin and community. During the day I try to imagine where you might be at that hour. In the early morning as I watch the sails being hoisted to catch the wind, I see you dragging your feet slowly across the Campiello della Scuola and rubbing the sleep from your eyes on your way to the synagogue. In the early evening when the light fades, I think of you slapping your thigh to count the beat, calling out to youth more awkward than I the graceful steps of the galliard. Or unrepentant, are you slipping away to find pleasure in a forbidden bed?

Uncle will be proud that I have tried, as he instructed when we

were young, to write a letter a day. I imagine those daily letters that traveled but a few feet from my bedroom to his eased him quickly to sleep with their dull depiction of days repetitive and uneventful. I could not twist and twirl words with his dexterity nor lather my thoughts with allusions so rich and layered that a second letter would be required to make clear the first. If my letters now show some spark, it comes less from my skills as a humble servant of words and more from the strangeness of the world that lies beyond the Lagoon. I have seen enough wonders to turn the Grand Canal black with ink.

I turned twenty-eight at sea, a fact I kept to myself because it was no cause for celebration, especially among strangers with whom I have no history. Well over a year has passed since this journey began and we were together. Though now two years older than you, when I return I should be much more your elder cousin, as I am told one ages rapidly in these climes.

There are still no other Israelites on the ship, but my treatment has been agreeable. Some barely speak to me; but I take no offense because I think perhaps they fear the effort and influx of air may trouble even more their churning stomachs. There are a few, closer to home, whose eyes betray all the ancient fears. Yet for now we Europeans are equal—strangers made one by our discomfort and our hopes for shore and home. Equal in the amusement we provide the Gujaratis, Malays, Siamese, Peguans, and all the other brown-faced heathens aboard; and, if I could understand their tongues, equal, I imagine, in their disdain. We are, in their eyes, big-nosed, hairy barbarians, loud, clumsy, lacking in their quiet grace. Perhaps, cousin, if they saw you dancing the *ballo del fiore*, they might reconsider a portion of their prejudice and ridicule, but only a portion—you too would be lumped a barbarian with us all, Gentiles and Israelites. I have had to travel half a world away, but triumph at last: though my legs may wobble with the waves, I stand an equal to the Gentiles.

I know you would not be at ease among these heathens. You are happy where you are and were honest in saying that you would never journey so long and so far from all you have ever known. Even Uncle chuckled when you said you could not imagine living among strangers who would not smile when you entered the room or laugh at your jokes. I remember your impatience when Jacob Levi loudly boasted that he was ready for adventure and would gladly leave the next day in my place. You silenced him, perhaps a bit too sharply, saying he knew full well that tomorrow would find him safely at his father's side, under the blue awning of their pawnshop, and his only adventure would be flipping through the pages of the pledge book.

We hug the coast like a child his mother and put into harbor at the least sign of bad weather. North up the Bengal coast and now south along the coast of Burma—you can trace my journey on Uncle's map. Yesterday we lay becalmed near a headland thick with tall palms. The sailors stood upon the deck facing the stiff, lifeless palms and whistled for the wind. I guess they believed this would get the ear of their gods. At first they whistled softly, like aunts cooing over a baby. Then they stamped their bare feet on the deck and between shrill whistles cursed the heavens, or so it seemed by their bulging eyes and grimaces. Their gods remained deaf—or simply lazy.

In the ship's hold, among the tightly packed boxes of cloth we bought in Surat, is red Gujarati cotton I am told the Peguans value highly because the more it is washed the redder it becomes. How nature seems to reverse itself in this part of the world. Soon I shall find a people who are born old and grow younger with each passing year. I have seen on my long journey people who behave in ways fit for the asylum. I have seen people who bow down to cows and paint their houses with the cows' dung, and beggars, thought holy as saints, walking naked in the market, their fingernails long as knife blades, their uncut beards and hair covering their privates. Until you sail beyond the Mediterranean, you have not seen the fullness of humanity.

As Uncle instructed, I trade with respect and a face that keeps my thoughts hidden; but still I find it strange how each man values goods that for another are common. As dear Dante reminds us "how ludicrous and brief are all the goods in Fortune's ken." Yet on this ship at the edge of the world are almost one hundred men and a half dozen women who would die for a piece of painted cloth or a bag of pepper or cloves. Do they look at me and think, what an odd creature that risks his life to put colored stones on the fingers of strangers?

The city of Pegu awaits us in a fortnight. The few Peguans aboard the ship, men and women, frighten me. They, like us, have two arms, two legs, and by appearance are human—they do have thumbs, so I do not think them devils. But the men are covered from navel to knee and below with all kinds of wild and strange creatures burned into their skin: lions, tigers, monkeys, fierce tusked boars, and the glowering spirits and demons that infest their imagination. Their thighs are thick with numbers and letters meant to keep them safe from the swords and bullets of their enemies. I do not know what would scare away the daggers of their enemies more, these grotesquely tattooed men or their women, their faces painted with yellow powder and paste and sagging ears long as palm leaves with holes a man could stick his fist through. We should, with good winds, arrive in Cosmin in three days, and from there I will travel upriver another eight or nine days until I reach my destination and our business begins. All that has come before is necessary prologue to the business given me to carry out. I know I must stay a year in order to draw the best advantage from the stone trade here, but it will be a year whose days will move more slowly than an old man creaking up the stairs. Remember that after a year among the idolaters, it will take another year's travel across ocean and desert to arrive home. It is obligation to our uncle and our business that takes me to strange lands far from home. You know better than anyone that I am not one to seek adventure or repute. All I desire is a bed that does not rock with the wind and tides, and a quiet life lived in peace among those I have known, whatever their failings.

It is quiet now, and I write under a small circle of light cast by the sole lamp swinging gently on deck. The sky is thick with stars brighter than a sparkling Murano chandelier, brighter than the stars that greeted Dante on his return from his dark journey. It is as if the land below the wind is another world under its own sky, under stars and planets that move to their own laws. Tomorrow, like every day, we set out at dawn, so I will put this letter to bed among the others that await trustworthy hands and strong winds to bring them safe to you on your velvet pillow and soft bed.

> Your distant cousin, Abraham



I have a gift for you, my cousin said. He claimed it came from far across the seas, but he was full of tales. He spoke of many things that I didn't believe. His stories sparkled brighter than the glass beads he put in my hand streaked with the mud of the paddy field. He came back to the village after many years in the land of Arakan, whose king, he said, had more wives than a sparrow has feathers.

Every year the king takes a new wife from twelve maidens chosen at birth for their princely blood and their mother's beauty. How sad to be taken from your mother and raised by royal governors who think only of the king's favor.

Their hands never pick up a needle for fear they will prick their delicate fingers. They rarely go out during the day, even under an umbrella, so that their faces will remain smooth and white as ivory. Attendants rub their bodies with rare oils and bathe them in water scented with secret fragrances. They drink special potions to cleanse the smell of earth and animals from their bodies. For the king has a curious way of choosing his brides. At least this is what my cousin said.

In their sixteenth year, on the eighth day of the eighth month, the twelve girls are brought to the royal palace. Just after sunrise they are led into the palace courtyard, wrapped in robes of new cotton so white that the king's ministers have to shield their eyes from the glare. They sit on benches far from the shade of the palms, until the sun shines high in the sky and beads of sweat trickle down their necks and shoulders and turn their robes damp. Then the keeper of the royal brides guides them into a bare room where no woman has entered since the ceremony the year before. The teak floor is polished so smooth and swept so clean that their reflections shimmer like lotus blossoms on pond water. Royal maids undress them, and ministers carry their sweat-scented robes like newborn infants to the king's chamber.

The king has barely splashed sleep from his eyes. He bends over each folded robe. He nestles his face into the moist cotton and inhales the scent of each maiden. Twelve maidens have dreamed their bodies next to the king's in the royal bed, and the king, my cousin said, chooses his bride with his nose.

I could feel the beads, smooth and hard in my hand. The words of his fanciful tale were made only of air. Who would want to be one among many? Who would want her name forgotten in the morning, her face drifting away like smoke?

My father whistles for the dog and calls my name. The seedlings are waiting.



8 October 1598

Dear Joseph,

We should arrive in Pegu in three days. Soon the beginning will end, and the end begin. I will count the days, cross off the weeks and months, until I write only single digits and can return to where I belong. Like Dante in his sojourn to the netherworld, "Although I come, I do not come to remain."

My home remains the water, but now it flows smoothly. Life, seen and unseen, surrounds me as we make our way through the web of creeks and streams from Cosmin east to Pegu. Some mornings when I awake, the fog hugs the riverbanks and envelops us in mist so thick I feel I have gone back to the beginnings of time. I alone am here, sprung from the very earth itself—Adam in a new world with silence my only companion. Soon the sun burns off the river's foggy shroud and my idle imaginings, and I see banks cheek to jowl with villages most strange to an Italian's eyes. No stone houses, no cobbled streets. Houses of wood and bamboo, thatched with palms. Many rest on stilts, like Carnival revelers stripped of their finery. I am told it is cooler to live the elevated life and also much safer from the nightly marauding of the tigers who abide in the jungle. The people along the river tether their water buffaloes beneath their homes; this lumbering creature, despite its stolid appearance and lethargic demeanor, is a fierce warrior when its life is threatened. I pray to the Holy One, blessed be He, that I am spared witness to such struggles.

I have been told, more than once, by men who have traveled here before that this land of plentitude is an Eden where none can starve. Fruit falls ripe from trees and vines into brown hands that need do nothing. The Holy One, blessed be He, has balanced their nature's indolence with Nature's bounty. Queer that the Dutch travel thousands of miles to waste their youth and lose their lives for spices that grow wild and untended, harvested at leisure by indolent heathens.

Sailing down the river, the jungle billows behind the villages, like cascading green clouds. Where man's work is not seen, the lush green vegetation spills over the banks into the water itself. Some nights we anchor offshore in fear of bandits who, we are told, have multiplied recently in the countryside. The nights that we have anchored ashore, I have not ventured, even in good company, beyond the borders of the village. These jungles are nothing like the forests of our native land. In our familiar forests, though so thick with towering trees that sunlight rarely pierces their branches, you still feel you can hear the echo of an ax. You sense the hand of man is nearby, though hidden from view—you can hear the distant march of ox and plow. Here, these jungles appear to have existed from the beginning of time. Dense, twisted trees, hung with creepers, sprout roots from trunks and branches—some tangled branches so thickly knotted that even Alexander could not cut them asunder. Palms and ferns hang heavy as damask curtains. If the Holy One, blessed be He, sends another flood to cleanse the world of our sinful creations, when the waters recede, these jungles with all their mysteries will remain.

Even the Ghetto with its daily bustle and chatter grows quiet at night as we sleep behind wooden gates and bricked windows, but there is no silence in this land. Fruit bats, large as cats, hang head down from the trees along the river during the day; when night arrives, they unfold their black wings and swoop away into the approaching darkness. Flitting insects like tiny flying lanterns spangle the shore with darting sparks of pulsing light. I stand on deck, the ship asleep, all human sound put to bed, and I listen to the world come alive. The chirp and clack of insects, the whistle of birds, the croaking choir of frogs, the whoops and chatter of monkeys hidden in the treetops. It is like an orchestra playing from a dozen different scores. What wondrous music God composes.

Sometimes, I admit, all these sounds frighten me. The world is so much larger, so much more populated by beings that I could not have imagined when I waved farewell to you at the dock. Abodes line the river like fragile dollhouses, while a short walk away lies the vast unknown darkness. The Gentiles outside our walls primp and parade, praising the creations of their hand and mind. And among us Israelites there are some who are not shy to proclaim the pinnacles of learning they have reached or recite the wisdom of the Rambam, as if he alone put pen to paper. Yet beneath our silken and plumed finery, I have begun to wonder if we are not more brothers than we care to admit to the half-naked heathens.

Forgive me, but I have sailed beyond Cosmin with my words. Let me return to this port where we first landed and discharged our goods under the gimlet-eyed gaze of the royal customs officials. We had sailed around Cape Negrais, drawn through treacherous shoals by a huge golden structure where these people pray to their god: imagine the Campanile but higher, story upon story like some baker's confection, a gilded sugar loaf that flashed in the sunlight, a bright beacon from the headland. Its reflected light and the mumbled prayers of the crew brought us safely into the harbor, where we were greeted with much pomp and surprising kindness.

We anchored two hundred yards from shore and were soon greeted by the governor of the city himself. Out he came in a long, thin ship, as narrow at the stern and bow as a gondola but at least one hundred rowers long. He sat in a cabin raised in the middle of this low sliver of a ship, hidden behind shuttered windows painted gaily with red and gold dragons, magical birds and flowers. He was only a governor of this one port, not a king or prince as one would have thought from the glittering appearance of his vessel and the four trumpeters sitting before his cabin urging on the rowers with the rhythm of their bellowing. You should have seen our ship owner play the fawning subject. He, who for these many weeks had ruled our floating world like a despot, whose simple scowl turned both freeman and slave silent, now bowed and stood meekly before a small brown man no taller than a boy just old enough to make a minyan. I took pleasure in how the wheels of divine justice had turned, and I saw in the crew's eyes and their half-hidden smiles this pleasure shared. The governor welcomed us with baskets brimming with oranges, whose sweetness bathed the brackishness from our mouths, and crates of squawking chickens, whose sacrifice later that night brought full bellies and no tears. After a customs inspection more thorough than a prospective groom's inquisition, we and our goods were allowed to come ashore. The king of Pegu wants no diamonds, pearls, and fine cloth smuggled into the kingdom, for smuggled goods rob his treasury of duties; and I have quickly learned that the king's ambitions and follies have left the treasury much diminished.

Our goods now travel to Pegu on a larger vessel, while we proceed upriver on smaller boats, close cousin to our gondolas.

Cosmin is a bustling entrepôt where peoples from lands that are only undecorated voids on our maps crowd the markets and storehouses, scurrying back and forth like frightened deer, one hand on their money pouch, the other stroking their chins as they calculate in their mental ledgers the play of profit and worldly advantage. In this land, everything has a value and is fair game for the trader's eye. Melaka, Sumatra, Arakan, Aceh, Chieng Mai, Java, Siam, Yunnan these strange lands sound like magical incantations an alchemist might chant, hunched over his vials and flasks. Though I have no desire to travel beyond the needs of our business, I must admit there is fascination in these names and the images they conjure up.

Our time in Cosmin was only two nights, but it seems these heathens love their gods more than money. You cannot walk a hundred yards without coming across a temple—or what they call a pagoda-with gilded images of their god in all sizes and poses. There is no solemnity in these places. Beggars crowd the steps, women crouch on their haunches selling trinkets and spitting red gobs of betel juice on the ground, and monkeys scamper everywhere. You may claim that some of our brothers act the monkey at synagogue; but we can count them on one hand, and if they keep their tongues, they are hard to discover. Here dozens clamber everywhere, running wildly among idols and idolaters, who feed and care for them as if they were orphans beloved by their god. Yellow-robed monks walk the streets in silence, leather pads about their necks and begging bowls in their hands. They take the pad from their neck and sit cross-legged upon it when begging for food or coin—a wise custom on ground strewn with spit and rotting fruit. While these monks show in this practice some wisdom, most heathens, like children, wallow in superstition before their gods. Walking the streets with a Portuguese trader in pepper and nutmeg, who has traveled several times to these lands over the last decade, I remarked on the fearsome naturalness of two large wooden tigers standing guard before the high steps leading to a grand pagoda. From the craftsman's fine touch, you almost expected a frightening roar to shake the ground. He said that a native trader told him with convincing earnestness that he had seen one of these guardians raise its lethal claws and swipe dead with one blow a blustering official from the customs house, who claimed loudly that no one's prayers could save the king from his follies. The Holy One, blessed be He, works in mysterious ways, but not through the paws of some heathen idol.

Each bend in the twisting river we now travel brings sights strange and mystifying. The Ghetto's face does not change from day to day, while on the river, when you think you have seen all the pages in the book of life, another opens before your eyes. In the late afternoon we had just passed a floating village of fishermen-hundreds of barks with straw houses straddling them from bow to stern. The families living there sold fresh and salted fish. The stench was fierce, and black clouds of flies hovered over fish drying on straw mats. The village disappeared in the curve of the river, and soon a swirling cloud of black flies floated toward us. My first thought was that a small boat had come back to join its neighbors. Our jabbering boatman and laughing crew fell silent, as if under a choirmaster's command. What I saw later than they was a small raft of coconut palms lashed together, and tied atop it, feast for the flies, the bloated body of a woman. I had to cover my nose and mouth, the smell was so overpowering. I wish I had covered my eyes so that the vision did not bore itself into my memory: a grimace of black teeth exposed by skin drawn taut from starvation and the sun, her tattered sarong bunched around her waist. Death spared her no shame. The boatman steered the boat toward the opposite shore, as far as we could get from the raft without running aground among the fallen trees tangled in the shallows. Two crewmen, as if on silent cue, spat in the direction of the stinking body and in mumbled singsong chanted this unbidden omen downstream toward the sea. I was told that it is the custom in this land for an adulteress to be set adrift to die far from the shame she has brought family and village. We shun our adulteresses too but do not set them afloat in the canal or exile them to die alone on some islet in the Lagoon. I have not been among these Peguans long enough to know what they believe or how they think, but it is hard to imagine these people, so small and childlike in appearance, so cruel and inhuman to their own. There was only one Eden, and it is long past.

Oh, this land has loosened my tongue. I best sleep and awake my old self—quiet, observing from the safety of the corner, while you and your friends twirl and dance in the middle of the floor.

> Your cousin, Abrabam



Bugs skitter across the surface of the water. The paddy field is alive with tiny creatures no bigger than a speck of dust. I hold my hand over the water, careful to scare them away with my shadow before I plant a seedling. The rice spirit wouldn't be pleased if her children lived because innocent creatures died. I listen and she speaks to me. She directs my hand beneath the water. My seedlings find a good home, and they take root.

If my mother were alive, I would sing to her, and she would send me back a song, skimming across the water. But I work alone and sing only to myself.

My mother was a handmaid to my father. When he speaks her name, his eyes redden, his voice trembles. I grow small as a sparrow, until I disappear altogether into his sadness. No matter what I do, I am not her. I am not the sons taken from him when they were young. My life is a reminder of theirs not lived.

My aunt says I look like her. I was four when she died. I struggle to remember her face. What I do remember is her hand holding mine when we walked to and from the field. My hand fit into hers, like two pieces of wood cut and smoothed to lock one into the other. When you are a child, an older person grabs your hand and squeezes it tightly or just lets it hang limp. You are expected to do all the work—you clutch three fingers and try to keep up with their long strides. They forget you are there, trailing along like the tail of a kite. But my mother and I walked side by side, her hand a nest for mine.

I remember coming back from the field, my hand in hers. The trees trembled, alive with spirits. When we got to the village gate, we would say together, as she had taught me, "Outside! Outside!" and she would turn and spit on the ground to keep the ghosts from following us into the village. I thought it was a game and tried to spit but could only offer a whoosh of air and a dribble of saliva. That always made my mother laugh. Even now, though I am no longer a child, I sometimes lie at the edge of the stream and look into the water. I smile, and my mother smiles back at me. I say my name, and I hear my mother's voice, "Mya, Mya." A breeze ripples the surface of the water, and my mother comforts me.

 $\mathbf{I}_{ ext{t}}$ is a great city, very plain and flat, and four square, walled round about, and with ditches that compass the walls about with water, in which ditches are many crocodiles; it hath no drawbridges, yet it hath twenty gates, five for every square on the walls; there are many places made for sentinels to watch, made of wood and covered or gilt with gold; the streets thereof are the fairest I have seen, they are straight as a line from one gate to another ... and they are as broad as ten or twelve men may ride abreast in them ... these streets ... are planted at the doors of the houses with nut trees of India, which make a very commodious shadow; the houses be made of wood, and covered with a kind of tiles in the form of cups ... the king's palace is in the middle of the city, made in form of a walled castle, with ditches full of water round about it, the lodgings within are made of wood all over gilded, with fine pinnacles and very costly work, covered with plates of gold.

-Cesare Frederici, 1581



15 October 1598

Dear Joseph,

My first letter from Pegu, my home for the next year. I write from a table that does not shake with the waves, and sleep on a thick mat that does not swing in the breeze. I apologize for not writing sooner, but this city tests my habits. The activities of the day and walking freely in this spacious city send me early and tired to bed—but this is a freedom I will never complain of.

The eight royal brokers assigned to the foreign merchants stood on the shore to greet our boat with its half dozen traders, I alone from Italy. A more reckless breed, these Gentiles leapt the gap between ship and shore, but I had not come this far to fall in these foul waters. I would not venture farther until they had found a plank long enough to provide a narrow but solid path to land. I did not want to fall and risk losing to the murky water the blessed Talmud and my beloved Dante, carried in the leather pouch I hugged close to my chest.

My broker, a small bald fellow whose name is Maung Win, found me. His parents named him well, or perhaps he grew to be the name they had given him. His name means "Brother Bright" and he appears to wear a permanent smile and see only the sunlight in this world and not its shadows. Though he seemed genuinely saddened, when in answer to his barrage of questions he learned that Ruth of blessed memory had died long ago, leaving me without wife or son—a condition he believes no man should suffer. We would make a fine pair for the commedia dell'arte: he squat and smiling and myself tall and serious. Yes, Joseph, serious, not dour. To my surprise and pleasure he speaks a rudimentary Italian—childlike in its vocabulary and comical in its grammar but passable. The last four years he served a Genoese trader who lived in the house I now occupy and who died suddenly a few months ago. This Genoese seems to have been well liked; when people learn I am living in his former home, his name is met with a nod and a broad smile. I noticed that the columns on the house's verandah are streaked with red, where many visitors must have wiped their betel-stained fingers.

Win's Italian will make my life easier. I would not want to depend on Portuguese, Spanish, or even Italian traders to speak on my behalf. I would not want to share with them knowledge of our affairs. On the ship from India there were Peguans from whom I learned the rudiments of their language—enough to praise a sunset and ask questions about the marvels of this new world—and hopefully by year's end I will speak with some facility. For the moment, Win and I converse in a humorous stew of Italian and Peguan. Maybe I shall teach him some Hebrew to make me feel closer to home—I have not heard our tongue since I left the Israelites of Cochin.

Unlike our city with its narrow twisting streets and its dark maze of alleys that start, stop, and disappear under names new and confounding, Pegu is a grand city of wide streets ordered with a carpenter's measuring rod. Coconut palms, taller than a half dozen men one atop another, fan over street corners and shade the walls of houses. The streets glow and glitter with gilded spires. Win tells me that the city is an earthly miniature of the cosmic order, with the king's palace and royal residences at the center and the number of surrounding blocks of this ordered grid a reflection of their many gods. I do not understand all this convoluted talk of cosmic order—I soon lose my way in these infidels' phantasma. All I know is that I can stand in the middle of a wide road and look down its long, shaded expanse and not see the road's end before it narrows into the horizon.

I walk these streets a free man. When I left Venice I put away the yellow hat that marks us, but I still feel strange walking without it. I am an object of bemused curiosity, especially in these dark clothes that I must shed lest I drown in my sweat, but I am just a barbarian, lumped with all the other barbarians. I am not feared, kept at a distance like a diseased animal. I do not feel the Gentiles' gaze or even the eyes of other Jews ready to report my words and acts to the Assembly, ever watchful of behavior they fear will inflame Christian hostility. A solitary traveler, I have come to realize how tired I was of living under the constant gaze of others. Though I stand a head above most of these people, I feel I am invisible to them. Here only the eyes of the Holy One, blessed be He, keep watch over me.

I am not used to getting up in the morning with the city free before me. I can go where my feet take me and do not have to wait for the Marangona chimes to open the Ghetto gates. I do not have to flee for home before the gates close at sunset. I do not have to worry that if I lose track of the hour I will be stuck for the night in the Ghetto Nuovo across the bridge, forced to sleep in another's bed. You will be amazed to hear that old Abraham of the Antechamber, who never made the morning's first prayers and had to wait until others drowsy with sleep straggled in, now arises with the cock's crow. Without waiting for the bell's command, I watch the market come to life or simply wander where whim takes me. Even if I were free to do so, I have had little cause to go out of the Ghetto after sunset or early in the morning. But that I cannot is a constant reminder that we Israelites live in Venice at the toleration of the Gentiles—it is like a pebble in my shoe that I cannot remove.

The last two days I have taken walks at sunset, when the palms come alive with the sound of birds, high and shrill like the chatter of Peguan women in the market. Without plan I ended by the river sparkling in starlight. I had no destination. The simple act of walking drew me through the quiet streets in the growing darkness. No guarded gates kept me close to home. I embraced the freedom of walking. I felt for the first time freedom as a presence, as something real that exists in the world. Not just an ideal. Not just a prayer at Passover.

The streets are dense with shops and stalls the closer you get to the trading houses and the royal storehouse, or what is called in this land a godown. A cat could leap from roof to roof without touching the ground; and if it fell, it could scramble from umbrella to umbrella, shoulder to shoulder and never dirty its paws. What a Babel of tongues, what a mosaic of bodies and colors—bare brown skin, bright-colored cottons and silks, turbans and robes, polished staffs and jeweled daggers, umbrellas bobbing up and down in the bright sunlight. It is as if the world were tipped on its side, and merchants from every heathen land funneled into these market streets: Bengalis, Chinese, Malays, Turks, Arabs, Siamese, Gujaratis, darkskinned Indians from Coromandel and Calicut, and even dusky Abyssinians. Win tells me merchants from these lands set up stalls for six months or more to sell their cloth and thread, earthenware jars, seed pearls, iron and copper pans, spices, and anything else the Peguans have come to desire. You can tell a man of means—even if he is a heathen—from his fine dress and the ease with which he carries himself. Seamen and petty traders, rougher in dress and appearance, sell their wares themselves, or sometimes Peguan women, whom they call their wives, carry on their business. But these men have pledged themselves to women who can speak the local tongue only to turn a profit.

Yesterday, with Win as my guide, I walked through the market amidst the constant jabbering and curious eyes of women, sole rulers of this domain, who sell any creature that slithers, swims, flaps, and flies and anything that grows from tree or earth. Men hover about, flirting with the young ones and gossiping with any with tongue and ears. Baskets and tables were stacked with pyramids of fruits and mounds of vegetables new to my eyes. One fruit has the brown scales of a snake; a second, small, round, and red in color, has crinkly spines like a baby porcupine; and another that looks like a ball of worn leather holds drops of white flesh sweet as pure sugar. One of the women sliced open the spiny fruit and offered me the white flesh cupped inside. I stood with my hands at my sides until Win bid me take it. Though it has been more than a year since I have been away from the Rialto, the prohibitions we live under are hard to escape-they burrow like termites into your being. Forbidden like a common prostitute from touching fruit in the market, I have to struggle to break this unwanted habit. It is not easy to be a free man. What Win takes for granted without pause-touching, squeezing, and sampling the fruitmonger's offerings-are gifts for me to savor. The prickly fruit in my hand, its sweet, moist flesh in my mouth, I felt a free man, my soul unshackled.

You will be jealous when I tell you of my home, even though its walls are made of wood, its floor of split bamboo, and its roof cane and plaster mixed with lime—houses of brick and stone are few, even for foreign traders. It is mine alone. Peguans build houses only a single story high, for they think it an insult to their honor to live under others; and the men here, mired in superstition, are afraid for their souls if a woman's private parts were to pass above their heads. What a dishonored race they would think us poor Venetian Israelites, stacked family upon family, in a warren of quarters carved one from the other.

I have a feeling that this house will bring us good fortune. Whenever I tell a Peguan I live in the house of Massimo the Genoese, they bow their heads and with a slight smile say it is a very auspicious house. One Peguan trader told me that my house bore healthy fruit. Lush coconut palms shade the verandah. They must bear tasty flesh and refreshing liquid. Likely, the Genoese was a generous man who shared his bounty with others.

Curtains made of wooden beads, not doors, separate the rooms and keep the house cool. I feel like a child at play pushing the beads with my hands when I pass from my sleeping room to the room where I eat my meals and write these letters, cross-legged before a low table under the light of an oil lamp. An old woman named Khaing, who served the Genoese, cooks and sweeps for me. She hides herself in the back of the house, and I do not see her unless I want to.

The house is raised above the ground about five feet and an open verandah covered by the steep-sloping roof stretches the width of the house. Here Win and I speak in the cool air of the morning before setting out on our day, and in the evening when the city turns quiet. How I savor the simple pleasure of standing on my own verandah and watching life's procession. Do the Gentiles truly believe we would mock their holidays and holy parades if they allowed us open balconies on which to stand? What do they fear we would contaminate by our gaze that they forbid us balconies and brick our windows?

This is a city of wood, not stones, and the danger of fire always lurks. Fire wardens patrol the streets and check to make sure that everyone, Peguan or foreigner, cooks only in pits of prescribed depths and at the prescribed hours. They fear fire so much you cannot even smoke a pipe in these streets. I can still see the smoke-blackened ground where houses once stood near the street of the Portuguese, where Win tells me a half year ago a wind-whipped fire began and consumed dozens of houses and pagodas. The king made sure those responsible paid in blood for their carelessness.

I have yet to sleep through the night. I find the thick straw mat on the floor comfortable, but uninvited strangers interrupt my sleep. The first night someone knocked on my bedroom wall and woke me. Wbo's there? I cried out, but no one answered. In the morning I asked Win to find out why Khaing had wanted to come into my room. He smiled and started to make a clucking sound with his tongue in perfect imitation of my nocturnal visitor, which turned out to be a small lizard they call a gecko. They skitter up the beams and across the ceiling—I am getting used to their occasional serenade; and since they feast on flies and mosquitoes, they are welcome boarders. The second night I was awakened by what sounded like pebbles thrown against the shutters. Young boys playing tricks on a strange-looking foreigner; but when I went out onto the verandah the next morning, it was carpeted with bugs the size of black beads. Hopefully these vermin will cease their visits when the winds change. Knowing my stay is temporary, all these irritations and discomforts can be borne.

Cousin, I imagine you talking back to my letter, pestering me to move quickly over markets and city streets and speak of things of greater import. I am afraid the women of this city will disappoint your fantasies. I thought the wives and concubines of the Peguan sailors, whose presence on ship I found unseemly and indecent, were singularly ugly and maybe not a fair example of their kind. I was wrong: the women here, despite whatever natural beauty some may possess, are worse in appearance than the cheap women who bare their breasts near the Church of San Samuele or the oddest painted courtesan you might find in the forbidden places you sometimes frequent.

Where to begin the litany of their grotesqueries? Their teeth are blackened dark as charcoal and their lips stained red from the betel leaves they constantly chew and spit on the ground. At first I thought they were ill, coughing up gobs of blood. If they stand or crouch on their haunches in one place for any amount of time, like the sellers of fruit and vegetables in the market, the ground around them is as spattered and splotched as a butcher's stall. Behind these reddened lips—far from rose petals, dear cousin—you find "a flock of sheep that are even shorn," but they are black sheep. I am afraid white teeth remind these people of dogs, and the pointed canines we are born with are filed smooth to separate their kind from the wild animals of the jungle. Their faces look like sad Carnival clowns their brown cheeks and foreheads roughly painted with yellow powder to protect them from the sun. It certainly has no allure for any but a heathen.

What you may have heard is true: these women walk about naked

from the waist up. But I am afraid reality comes a far second to the imagination. After just one day of market crones' sagging breasts, dried and striated like rotten gourds, you want to shield your eyes or offer them shawls to cover their shame. A few young ones do catch the eye, but what the future promises so assaults you that even the most dissolute libertine would find it difficult for this display to fire the flames of passion. Some women walk the streets with skirts tied so tight about them that when they take a step they expose their private parts. Win says a distant queen ordered this practice to turn the men of the kingdom away from their rampant sodomy. For any decent man, it can only turn them red with shame. The debauched Europeans who take these women for their temporary wives must have eyes blinded by desire. There can be no affection in these arrangements.

Before I put my pen to bed let me relate something curious that has occurred several times when I have returned home after spending the day at the royal trading house. Across the street there are two large palm trees whose morning shade draws women selling coconuts, limes, and other fruit. In the late afternoon they remain, joined by their friends, crouching on their haunches and, by the look of it, exchanging gossip, as old women do. My passage seems to draw them into animated chatter and even laughter—their hands covering their red-stained mouths, their eyes dancing. Am I, this strange Jew, so comical a figure? But there is nothing to mark me as a Jew—my yellow hat is stored away until my return. Perhaps it is the dark beard that I have grown since my departure—the men here are smooth skinned and carry pincers with them, and in idle moments pull straggly wisps from their chins and cheeks. But many other foreigners have beards thick as mine. As I walk about the city, I do not seem to draw the same mirthful attention that these old crones direct my way. Most curious.

As I write, I finger the *bamsa* hand that hangs around my neck. Your gift has brought me safely to my new home. As you promised, it warded off the devils of the desert and the monsters of the deep; and though it did not calm the sea, it did settle my stomach after only a week on the rolling waves. Though reason makes me question its power. I wonder if this amulet works and therefore I believe, or does it work because I believe? The absence of harm during my long journey argues, if not for faith, at least an open mind, which I will keep until I return safe to your side.

I wish, dear cousin, that you were here to walk these streets with me and share most directly the curiosities of this world. I miss your tongue sweet with charming pleasantries. Sadly, our companionship can only be in my dreams that I now most eagerly invite.

> Your cousin, Abraham



30 October 1598

Dear Joseph,

Another Sabbath has passed and thanks to the Holy One, blessed be He, and to Win, who is more brother than broker, our business here goes well. We are gathering stones that should bring us gain when I return. Win and I have become alchemists turning cloth to coin, and coin to rubies and sapphires.

My Sabbaths pass in solitary prayer, as I am the only man of our faith here. I have met a Portuguese filibuster, who from his looks and manner I believe hides his Jewish heart under the golden cross that hangs about his neck, but he has said nothing to me nor I to him. He tips his hat and smiles. I think he is measuring me. I speak freely with Win of my faith and his strange beliefs, but it would not be wise to pursue my suspicions with this rough-looking fellow.

A solitary believer, I worried when I arrived that I would not be able to mark the start of the Sabbath. There is no trumpeter here to signal its imminence, no sea of yellow hats sweeping me home. But the Holy One, blessed be He, in his mystery sends me flocks of sparrows that swarm among the branches of the shade trees outside the verandah. At sunset they burst forth in a choir of song. I put down the ledger and tell Win that it is time to stop speaking of rubies and trade. There are only four royal jewel brokers, and we are blessed that Win is ours. Despite his meek appearance, he is a man of strong will. I am certain that without his keen eyes and loyalty, not to speak of the fear he arouses in the underlings at the royal godowns, our cloth would have disappeared from the customs house before I could trade it for the money with which to buy the rubies and sapphires. The customs officers are like vultures, swooping down to feast first for themselves before serving the king. It is easy, Win says, to pick out a customs official in a crowd—they are the ones with big bellies and full cheeks. They do not miss a meal. Their wives are clothed in the finest Indian cloth, and their fat fingers, circled with rings, shine like golden sausages. I do not begrudge him one coin of his two percent commission and would gladly pay him more for all his value to us.

I would pay another one percent just to see his face wrinkle like a dried plum when he smiles, which is often. Like many of his people, he flees from the word "no" like a miser does a beggar. He wishes to please, and "no" seems a word he is constitutionally unable to utter. "Yes" is always on his lips or in the shake of his head, but then I count two beats for the inevitable "but."

-Can we visit the royal treasury to speak of the rubies today?

-Yes, he says, and then pauses, but we should wait until tomorrow when it will be more auspicious to speak of these things.

-Is it safe to travel to visit the pagoda north of the Prome Gate?

-Ob, yes, then pauses, but it would be best to go when all the monks have returned. I sometimes ask him a question just to see how he will wiggle a "no" from a "yes."

Our goods, like all foreign trade goods, are stored in royal storehouses, built of brick and thick stone to resist fire, at the edge of the old city, near the royal enclosure. At Win's guidance we are selling off our Indian cloth gradually to extract the highest price possible in the market. So far we have accumulated a fine supply of stones that our clients in noble houses will pay handsomely for.

The Persians and Turks do not miss a day at the trading house: the princes in their lands are hungry for jewels. To a man they bargain as if their names would be besmirched were they to pay one cent more than they had intended. Sometimes I think the royal traders drive a harder bargain with them because of their doggedness. One Turk buys many stones, but all of poor quality. He constantly brags of the low prices he pays, but Win calls him a bottom-fisher, for he feasts on food no one of better taste can stomach. Either he has a poor eye or sells to old men with clouded vision and young brides. The Chinese traders buy few stones but only of the highest quality. They go about their business saying little and keeping to themselves. Win praises their eye above all others. They hold the stones to the light and turn them slowly between their fingers, finding imperfections that escape the rest of us. I watched one Chinese hold a ruby in the palm of his hand and close his fingers around it, as if he were trying to feel the heat of its soul.

Though I breathe freer air here, I still conduct our business quietly. It is a habit I have learned well from Uncle, not to draw attention to ourselves and to dealings forbidden—at least in the Gentiles' public posturing—to our people. When they need stones of fine quality to impress retainers and rivals or keep content their wives and lovers, our Venetian neighbors suddenly find it convenient to forget what their own laws prohibit.

You will find it strange that in this land every man may mint his own money. It is called *ganza*, and we traders must be careful not to be cheated by unscrupulous men who would make their coins light with copper and heavy with lead. I have learned not to be misled by Win's smile. He casts a wary eye on all men, fellow or foreigner. He pays a monthly fee to a public assayer who weighs and binds with his seal all the coins given to us in trade.

I may be here only a short time, but that is no call for deception. I have acted in good faith, as if I were trading with my own people. These Peguans may be strangers and idolaters, but that is not license to deceive. What our law forbids, our law forbids. Many traders, especially the Portuguese, believe they have no obligation to keep bargains with pagans if it plays to their advantage. For me, my word is my word, to whomever it is given. I may be far from my people, but not from the eyes of God.

Win knows well the value of stones. From our earlier purchases we need few words between us to set the boundaries of our bidding. In the royal trading house, the officers of the king spread out the stones in shallow wooden boxes placed on small tables one after the other in a long, narrow room, the sapphires on one table, the spinels on a second, the rubies on another. A gaggle of observers with sharp eyes and quick opinions, but most with empty purses, crowd around the tables. When a buyer is ready, he signals a royal trader and they sit down at the table to bargain.

It is not like any bargaining that you have seen, or rather that you have not seen. I am not teasing you with my words. The table is covered with a dark blue cloth. The buyer and seller do not speak a word. They do not want the public, leaning over them like willows at water's edge, to know the details of their business. They speak with their hands hidden beneath the cloth. It is all done by touch every finger, every joint has special meaning. Win is teaching me this gentle art, but I am still a child in learning its ways. It is like the touch of hands between lovers as they dance in front of family and friends. There are ways of speaking when the tongue must be silent and even eyes must stare in innocence. One finger is squeezed, then two or three. The message received, fingers are held and squeezed in return. Each knows by touch alone the desire and longing of the other. Even if I was adept at this silent language and my hands could speak while my tongue was mute, it works to our interests that I watch in silence while Win speaks with practiced hands for me. At the table, he buys us time and stones, as it is the custom in Pegu for the buyer to have three days to examine more closely the stones and return them if he is not satisfied with their quality. It is rare that any stones are returned, for it is a great loss of face to the king's trader, and in lesser measure, does not speak well for the eyes or bargaining skill of the buyer's broker. I have not taken this path, and do not think with Win's eyes and hands it is one I will ever need follow.

I find myself strangely taken with the trade, given my previous disinterest. It was something I did more out of loyalty to Uncle than for myself. It was simply a means to help put food on the table and clothes on the backs of those who had done the same for me when I was young and orphaned. But I have come to see it as more. There is another community other than that of the Israelites, another community beyond the community of the Word.

A community of exchange covers the world, and we are only a small part of it. Our silver in Surat turned to indigo blue and madder red and silken patola, and once in Pegu, with trade's alchemy, they are transformed into rubies and sapphires that in Venice will turn to gold and silver once more. A nobleman in Mantua sealing his letters with the finest wax owes the privacy of his words to some half-naked infidel collecting lac in these distant jungles. From places that are only names to us-Sumatra, Chieng Mai, Yunnan, Ava, Ternatecome spices, fragrant woods, and colorful cloth that are traded in another no less exotic place for precious stones or rice or glazed jars that themselves bear wine or other spices held dear. From some creature slinking through the jungles comes the musk for the scent a courtesan dabs behind her ears and between her breasts to lure her besotted lover. Where do all those who push themselves away from the table with full bellies think the pepper, cinnamon, and cloves come from to make meat fit for their mouths? Do those Franciscans that bedevil us with their sharp tongues and sulfurous minds believe the incense they inhale with rapturous chants comes from some peasant's field outside Assisi? Do the Charons who transport us to the other shore think the lotions with which they embalm our flesh bubbles from Veneto springs? We are part of the world—unless we live like stylites in the desert, surviving on air, faith, and rainwater. We cannot escape this net of exchange that binds us without our choosing. How strange that I feel so much more a part of the world so far from the world that I have known.

The rough stones we buy are mined northeast of Pegu in a place called Capelan, a journey of several weeks, and no one can go there without royal permission. Brigands roam the countryside, and it is a long and dangerous trip into territory hostile to the Peguans. So we wait for the rubies, sapphires, and spinels to be transported here for our examination. Win has in safer times been to the hills of Capelan, which are, from his telling, Dante's words made flesh and stone. At the edge of the Seventh Circle, you look down into pits as far as the eye can behold at bent, brown backs scurrying like beetles across the gray, ravaged earth. These poor brutes burrow through mud and gravel, their picks and shovels striking stone outcroppings with a low, mournful echo.

What if these echoes were heard in the princely halls where our stones, cut and polished, finally find jeweled homes on fingers, wrists, and necks? Would it make a difference if our rich and noble patrons witnessed these scenes of woe outside their leaded windows? I think not. This is the way of the world.

Though at times, in the quiet of the night with the palms rustling outside my window, I wonder if this way is forever set, if we cannot make ourselves more than we were born to be. The words I write are not in the pen before I pick it up. Who is to say that the path is in my feet before I take a step? Forgive these late-night meanderings. Perhaps my journey taken reluctantly may lead me as far inward as it has outward across oceans and desert. Perhaps I may return to Venice a better cartographer of my soul than if I had remained.

> Your cousin, Abrabam



When the rice field turns from green to the gold of early-morning sunlight and then to the pale yellow of dry straw, it is ready. I can see that it is ready. If I close my eyes and rub the kernels between my fingers, I can feel that it is ready. I see it. I feel it. I know it.

When the day approached for my ears to be bored, I knew it. I prayed to the Buddha to hurry the day. I was ready. I sat on the mat in front of my father and felt like a princess. The needle caused me no more pain than the bite of a mosquito. With each blade of grass my aunt slivered into my ear day by day, the more a woman I became. I stopped chewing sugarcane like a child (or at least stopped chewing where I could be seen). When the leaf in my ear uncurled more and more until I could almost poke my little finger in the hole, I knew that someday I would marry.

And now I am ready. It has been many years since I stopped playing games with the boys and touching them on their right shoulder, many years since they ran without fear under my sarong drying on the line. I am ready to be a wife and to bear, I pray, a son.

But the village is quiet. There are no young men for the girls to tease with songs at harvest time. We pound the rice alone. The young men drift away into the jungle to avoid the king's men, who want to make them soldiers. They would rather live on wild fruit and roots than die a slave in Arakan or Toungoo.

Old Min-Tun, who with a short arm and twisted foot could make no match when he was young, is now every young girl's favorite. He is uncle to us all, and with his long Buddha ears he hears what we say and what we want to say but don't. I can talk to him and when my mind confuses my tongue, he doesn't scold me or turn away like my father.

Yesterday he scuffled into the edge of the forest to hunt for medicine, while I looked for wild fruit. Whatever he may have done in a previous life to deserve his twisted and stunted body, his eyes are sharp as a hawk's. There is not a plant to cure our ninety-six afflictions that he can't spy twined around a tree or matted beneath his crooked foot.

Nu-Nyunt had lain too close for too many days by the fire to cool her body from the heat of childbirth, and one side of her body was blistered and almost black. Old Min-Tun gathered the leaves to make an ointment to soothe her scorched skin. It had pained me to see her blistered body. How better to be born a man, I told him, and live without the pain women must bear. He told me, as he has told me many times since I was old enough to listen, that if I followed the right path I might be reborn a man. Min-Tun is a good worldling and a wise man. All of us, men and women, suffer, he said. It is in our nature, and if I thought blindly I could escape suffering, then my suffering would be even greater.

"Don't go crashing through life like the silly hog deer. Listen to the Buddha and you will leap over the fallen trees life puts in your path." He cupped his good hand, and he offered me an invisible bowl of rice to give me strength and patience. Min-Tun's body chose his path for him, but he knows that I am ready.

I will stay if my father says I should stay. I will leave if he says I should leave. I am ready to let go. I am ready to take root in a new field.



6 November 1598

Dear Joseph,

Tell Uncle I am tending to my health with extra attention, since Win told me today that if I die in Pegu, all I possess would go to the king. I have paid for these jewels in absence and longing, and I do not intend to finance the king's foreign adventures that many complain have put the kingdom in peril. Maybe if news of the kingdom's troubles had traveled as fast as talk of profit to be made, I would not have undertaken this journey at all. Or perhaps Uncle felt that in times of unrest, jewels could be gotten at a bargain price. We may feast on others' troubles—I only hope we can get up from the table in time.

Win owes his position to Nandabayin, the king, and will speak only in his house or mine, and even then in hushed tones, of the king's folly, his hard-heartedness, and the fear and suspicion he harbors for his closest lords. The king's line is not from this place. He is a Burman from Toungoo and not much admired by the Mon people of Pegu. He sees enmity in their eyes when, under sword and gun, they are conscripted to subdue the rebellious vassal regions that no longer pay tribute in money and soldiers. Imagine if we Venetians ruled Florence, the Florentines would find that a heavy yoke to bear. They would not step forward willingly to bear arms to preserve our power. They might even seek refuge in other cities not under our sway. Win, who seems to have eyes and ears throughout the kingdom, hears that more and more paddy fields lie fallow and villages grow quiet—the only sound the shuffle of those too old and infirm to survive in the forest or on the exodus to neighboring lands.

Win reads omens not in the stars but in the bellow and tromp of the kingdom's fighting elephants. These wondrous beasts are the heart of the kingdom's power, like galleys are to the Republic. I have seen but a few on parade in the city streets, and they are frightening creatures when bedecked for battle, with wooden castles, large enough for four men, atop their backs. With streamers flying, bejeweled collars and harnesses, and swords swinging from their trunks, they would strike fear in the stoutest heart. A Portuguese filibuster turned merchant told me that before going into battle they drink specially prepared spirits to fortify their martial spirit. He swears that after the surrender of one city, he saw with his own eyes the king's soldiers gather up the slain children lying in the streets and feed them to the elephants. The soldiers, swords dripping blood, dismembered and cut these innocents into small pieces, rolled them in rice chaff and grass, and fed them to the elephants in front of the rebellious ruler, whose doom soon followed. I have seen thieves begging in the market who, undeterred by searing brands on chest and cheeks for their first offense, have lost both hands for their second. But I find hard to believe this act of barbarity, even for these infidels in time of war. Under the last king, who all say was a great warrior and a devout man-much the opposite of his pitiless successorthe kingdom had an army of four thousand fighting elephants. Now Win says the number is less than a thousand, and this bodes ill for the kingdom's future.

My time here is governed more by seasonal winds than even our desire for profit. I can only do our business and pray for the best. Tell Uncle to pray for his faithful nephew and this benighted king.

This evening I rearranged things in the chest where I keep the heavy dark pants and jacket not fit for this climate. I found my yellow hat had turned moldy and rotten in the thick, humid air. I looked at it with a stranger's eyes: it wasn't my hat anymore. It looked much too small to ever have fit. It seemed a costume kept by a troupe of traveling players—something an actor wears to play a role. I had Khaing throw it out with the fish bones and coconut husks.

> Your cousin, Abraham



12 November 1598

Dear Joseph,

This letter will be brief. I am wearied by what my eyes witnessed today. If I do not share my grief, I am afraid my heart will burst with sadness.

The king commanded the citizens of the city and the foreigners to witness the public execution in the central square of a dozen lords whom he accused of conspiring with the king of Ava. They and their wives and children-there must have been close to one hundred poor souls-were led from the Prome Gate through the city streets to their death. The lords, stripped bare from the waist up, their clothes in tatters, rode backward on sway-backed nags. They wore straw crowns hung with mussel shells and strings of onions. What all that meant I do not know, but no one could be blind to the humiliation intended-as if the death that awaited them was not enough. Their wives, hands bound behind them by rough rope, and their children, some so young they could barely walk, shuffled and stumbled and were dragged in pitiful parade through the dirt on either side of their husbands and fathers. Their wailing rent my heart. Attendants and old retainers followed their masters through the crowd, raising dreadful cries and lamentations to their deaf gods. Many of these souls, slave and freemen, struck their fore-

heads and cheeks with rocks until blood bathed their faces. Even the royal guards were moved to tears by this cascading woe and wailing. When they reached the place of death, the soldiers pulled the lords from their horses and threw them to the ground, their wives crying and fainting. One lord, who did not stumble and stood like a nobleman to all eyes, heathen and European, bent over his fallen wife to console her with words, for he could not touch her, as his hands too were bound behind him. I do not know which "Lord" he cried out to-whether his god or king-but Win said his words were-Lord, my Lord, remember who thou art and not who I am. I did not understand at the time the meaning of his words, but I felt the power of his feelings, the nobility of his bearing. An old attendant broke through the crowd and poured water from a pouch into his mouth. He did not swallow, though his lips were dry and cracked. Instead, he bent over his fallen wife and spit water into her mouth. The chambers of my heart moaned for him. No kiss could have borne better witness to his love. I felt shamed by this infidel. He bore for his wife more love than I ever did for mine. More love than I fear I can ever feel

The women and children were hung by their feet until they choked on their own blood. The men were impaled like sheep and burned. These people talk of their Buddha's compassion. I can say no more.

Abrabam



19 November 1598

Dear Joseph,

I now know why those old women smiled. I have seen and heard much on my travels, but these Peguans, for all their incense and prayers and bowing before their golden gods, rank highest for their disregard of all that is sacred before the Holy One, blessed be He.

Because what was asked of me was so foreign to what any moral man, Israelite or Gentile, could imagine, I have been blind to hints and clues that only now I understand—the old women selling fruit across the way, their smiles and laughter muffled by wrinkled hands, and the sly smiles of traders telling me that the Genoese was a gentle man and his house a happy one. And to think I had come to hold this fellow in good repute and was pleased to walk in his footsteps. I thought it could bring only advantage to our business. When Win told me more than once that he knew I, like the Genoese, would do what was expected of me, I said of course. I thought Win, in his imperfect Italian, spoken slowly like water dripping from a gutter spout, meant only that I would meet my obligations as a trader. Words, I am learning, may not always be the best way to speak.

I do not mean to tease you by circling slowly around what happened. I am not a man who blushes easily, especially for all the nakedness I have seen since leaving Venice, but these are matters not easily spoken of. After sundown on the Sabbath, Win arrived at my house—this in itself was unusual, for the entire day was one of rest for him as well as me. Behind him on the verandah stood a man and two women. All were dressed in fine cloth, not their everyday cotton. The younger woman, who I soon learned was the daughter of the man and older woman, sparkled with rings on her fingers, gold bangles on her arms. Her hair, pulled back into the bun women wear here, was freshly oiled and smelled of jasmine flowers. Two bejeweled gold ornaments, the shape of cranes, peeked from either side of the bun. When she saw me, she bowed her head. Win smiled and gave me evening greetings in his language.

-Are you ready to take this bride? he said.

-Take her where? I asked in ignorance and innocence.

—She has come humbly for you to take her maidenhead.

I said nothing, and Win frowned like a stepmother at my silence, thinking I did not understand his words. My confusion and displeasure clear, he said—This is the custom in Pegu. Her busband waits for her return.

I stammered and, speaking Italian in my anger, could only repeat —What is this . . . what is this? Peguans feel it impolite to show one's temper, and Win, seeing my face redden, motioned for me to go inside. He bowed to the bride's father and mother and followed quickly behind me, almost stepping on my heels.

—Abraham, I beg your pardon for not having told you earlier of the family's arrival.

-How could you ask me to deflower this young girl?

Now it was his turn to be confused. - It is our custom that brides

from good families have a foreigner take their maidenbead. It is an bonor to both. The Genoese performed this service for many. He was gentle and kind. He was "uncle" to many brides in Pegu. Brides who passed through this house have borne their husbands healthy sons. The spirits protect this house and bring prosperity to those who dwell here.

—I am not a Christian, I am not like the Genoese. He was moved by lust. I am bound by the Law. My God forbids it.

—He was not a bad man. You foreigners are protected from the dangers of first blood. You will bring good fortune to this marriage—your god too must think it a meritorious deed. I raised my hand in front of my lips so he would not blaspheme the Holy One, blessed be He, any further. —Am I to send ber away? That will shame her and ber family.

-This will bring me shame, I said, both my voice and hands trembling. -Is there no one else who will do this for ber?

Win told me there were two other merchants, a Portuguese and a Dutchman, who performed this role. The Portuguese had a reputation for roughness. The Dutchman drank so much he often fell asleep in a drunken stupor, and the bride would have to stay until midmorning when he was sober enough to perform.

-I do not want to see the girl ill-treated, but I cannot do this . . . act.

I almost said "barbaric" but held my tongue not to insult Win further.

Seeing that I could not be moved, Win took several steps back. —I will tell them that you are ill and cannot perform. Before I could argue with this lie, he turned and was gone.

I may have been slow to rise in the morning and never made earlymorning hymns like the blessed Watchers of the Morning. But how could I do this barbaric act? You know when Ruth of blessed memory died, I cursed God for the pain He brought me. But I never denied Him. How could I lie with another man's wife? How could I lie with a woman for whom I had no love, not one gram of feeling? Win said after the act was consummated, the girl would quietly leave my bed in the morning, and Khaing would attend to her. What would that matter? I still would be no better than an adulterer, a lecher in the eyes of God. Gentiles may think nothing of taking a temporary wife while they are here, even sanctifying their lust with ceremony and promises of faithfulness. The Peguans think this is a fine arrangement for their daughters, who are left with jewels and good cloth for their dowries and carry no shame in the eyes of future suitors. I am a man, but this is something I will not do. There may be no other Israelites to shame me for this transgression, but God sees all and judges me in this distant land though I be hidden behind cane and palm.

Can you imagine me doing what Win asked? Even if God did not forbid it, even if these women with their powdered faces and blackened teeth held for me a sliver of attraction, I could not be a lecher and open my bed like a fishmonger to every woman passing by.

I slept alone last night, as all other nights, as the Law commands.

But, Joseph, I awoke this morning to find that I had shamed myself. Lilith had seduced me while I slept. I rose quickly and washed my seed from my body with rainwater from a large jar Khaing keeps in the garden. I could not remember all of the psalms I was supposed to read to protect myself, but read the ones that I could remember. I told Khaing that my stomach was upset and ate no breakfast. I fasted all day and told Win, when he asked, that it was a special day and my faith required it.

I cannot remember the last time this happened—it was many

years ago. It troubles me. Did a part of me want to deflower that bride, and did Lilith come to me in the night because she smelled the sin of my desire? Maybe I do not know myself as well as I think.

> Your cousin, Abraham



26 November 1598

Dear Joseph,

The Dutchman took from the young bride what can be taken only once. Win heard from her mother that it was a night of tears. He would not let her leave until he had his way with her a second time. He might well have kept her until past noon, but he fell into a deep sleep from wine and exhaustion, and she escaped from under his hairy bulk and now sleeps wanted in the arms of her husband. I am sorry for the young woman's discomfort, but I had no choice.

Win has not said anything more, but I can tell by his eyes he wishes me to reconsider. He has several times praised my house as a safe haven from evil spirits that seem numerous as motes of dust in this place. Every tree, hill, rice field, and house has its own spirit that must be kept happy. These spirits are constantly hungry (perhaps you with your ravenous appetite are one of these spirits who has wandered far from his jungle home). These idolaters are always feeding them: coconuts, bananas, a sweet sticky rice, and even chicken. Khaing hangs a coconut in a corner to appease the spirit she believes protects this house. Since I am a guest in this house and she looks after me well, I humor her idolatry.

Win is as superstitious as all his countrymen. He told me last year a whole family—parents and two children—in the village where his cousin lives had died because they had cut down a banyan tree without making an offering to the tree spirits. A few days after I arrived, Win summoned a friend to paint a magic design above the door to protect me in my new home. You see these designs everywhere—on gates and arches, on the shields and banners of the king's soldiers. This painter is a quiet fellow who speaks in a whisper. I think he is afraid of awakening the demons and dark spirits Peguans believe hide under eaves, in dim, damp corners, and at the bottoms of wells. The nails of his thumb and small finger on his left hand looked as if they had never been cut—they were several inches long and had begun to curl toward his palm. I am sure he caught me staring. I thought this was some heathen custom to pierce the invisible bodies of malicious spirits, but Win said long nails showed that he did not do the rough work of a slave or a commoner. Before he painted the magic squares that now greet my arrival and send me safely on my daily way, he asked the date and time of my birth. Though more conjecture than certainty in the minds of Auntie and Uncle, I remembered my supposed early-morning arrival, since our friend Leon, who wished to see what fate the stars held in store for me on my journey, had asked me the same question before I left.

How such a prodigious, learned mind can play among the stars confounds me. If all is ordained by birth—by some auspicious star—then what need have we to study the Torah? What right would the Holy One, blessed be He, have to punish or reward us puppets of the stars? But there is no hope in arguing with Leon and his charts and pages of scribbling that only he can decipher.

—Don't tell me I am going on a long journey, I already know that, I told Leon. —Tell me if I will see your face again.

-God forbid your eyes should be robbed of such beauty, he laughed

that high-pitched cackle that sounds like a cat screeching in an alley. —God forbid you should die among the idolaters. But if that is your sad fate, take comfort—I will write you an epitaph fit for the Assembly president or the Messiah himself. I thanked him for his reassuring words and left my fate in the hands of God.

I find Win's faith an incomprehensible jumble—the more he speaks of it, the more confused and puzzled I become. I put my hand over my mouth and chin to appear a serious student of his words, while actually I am smiling, bemused by this stew of blasphemy, fantasy, and folly. You would think every man here was a Talmudic scholar, the way they carry on. Men who cannot write their names love to talk about their Buddha, his teachings, and subjects so esoteric that the Rambam and Aristotle would scratch their heads in exasperation.

Last night I asked Win to tell me about his Lord.

-King Nandabayin, what do you wish to know?

-No, the Buddha, your god, the lord you talk about.

—I have no god.

-But you call him lord.

—As the king is my lord. Buddha is only a good guide pointing the way to a land of safety. He is not like Massimo's god. A very strange god. Dying for everyone—what good is that? Only a man can save himself, not another man, not even a god, not even our Buddha. If you are lost, the Buddha can give you a map, but it is you who must follow it and walk with your two feet out of the jungle.

What kind of faith is there without a god, even if he is not the God of our fathers, blessed be He? What kind of world is it that has no creator, no protector, no divine guide to lead us? What good is a map, if we are doomed to suffer such an endless wasteland? Are we all just madmen babbling prayers in an empty room? Their loneliness is something I could not bear. Not even a god against whom to rail, to beat one's chest? What use is sackcloth and ash, if there is no god to take pity on us, to forgive us, to allow us to redeem ourselves through study and good deeds?

On this morning's walk, Win dropped coins in the begging bowls of two monks but left empty the outstretched palm of a thin, wretched beggar standing on the corner of the main thoroughfare to the market. When we passed an especially hollow-eyed stick of a man, I asked politely, as one who wished to understand the ways of his people, what marked this man and the other man left emptyhanded so unworthy. Win motioned toward him with a turn of his head. —He was a merchant in a prior life who so loved money that be cheated even his own kin, and so be earned this life as a beggar.

I wanted to ask if all the beggars crowding the edges of the market had so earned their misfortune but held my tongue. The business of the day turned us from further talk on this matter, but later this afternoon while we drank tea on the porch of Win's home, he returned to this subject, which is clearly a constant concern. He asked me if I remembered a friend, a perfume maker for the king and his many wives, whom I had met briefly at his home soon after my arrival. He is a small, pockmarked fellow with an equally unattractive wife, who showed her scorn for him with dismissive looks and harsh words that needed no translation. —Poor man, be bas the perfumer's power to mix scents and potions that could lure any beauty to his bed but, Win lowered his voice, his face scrunched with seriousness, his noble organ is small as a baby's thumb—cruel punishment for his wanton adultery in a prior life.

Was this just a tale to scare Win's sons to marital fidelity? I was

trying to make sense of this primitive notion of divine retribution, when Win told me a longer tale. His grandfather's cousin had been a wealthy man who prized his material possessions with overweening desire. One day, fire burst out in his house just as he was approaching his gate on his way back from the market. Without pausing to listen for the cries of his wife and young son, he rushed into the house to save precious double ikats stored in a camphor chest in his sleeping room. He ran out through the flames, cradling the folded silk like a child. Safe outside, he found his wife, who was visiting a neighbor and, seeing the flames, had rushed back. She screamed that their son, barely three, was asleep in the house. The man rushed back into the burning building and found the boy cowering in a corner. He saved his son, but not before the flames had blistered the boy's tender skin and the foul smoke had weakened his young lungs. A sickly child, he died before he could marry and bear his father a grandson. With a somber voice that matched the dimming light of day, Win said this avaricious man was reborn a louse that lived upon the silk he so blindly loved.

 $-Ab \ldots ra \ldots bam$, when Win wishes to say something of importance, he speaks my name very slowly. We all will be punished or rewarded in our next life for the life we lead now. He rattled off a chorus of punishments that a man might suffer in his next life for evils done in this one. I cannot remember them all, but a discontented man might be reborn a monkey, a man who in anger hurt others with his words would be reborn a ghost with a mouth burning like a furnace, those full of pride in their own beauty and contemptuous of others would find themselves hunchbacks or dwarves in their next lives, and a lecher who took pleasure in adulterous love affairs would be reborn a woman.

Perhaps his tale of retribution might scare into goodness a child who had not yet attained the natural reason to know the wisdom and righteousness of the mitzvoth. But no man old enough to make a minyan would be frightened by this primitive reckoning of consequences. What a dark faith that denies the soul's rebirth in this life. Cannot we change and make up for our youthful errors? If not, you are doomed. No marble crypt on the Lido for you: I am afraid, exhausted by your flirting and amorous indiscretions, you too may end up a louse—your home the unwashed hair of some aging courtesan. Or even worse, you will be reborn a woman who will have to ward off the lecherous advances of callow youths.

-Could not, I asked Win, this poor fellow have seen the error of his ways, repented, and through good deeds tipped the scales of your faith's divine justice?

-Ob, yes, we can harvest good deeds like a hardworking farmer his rice, and they may change the present fate our past deeds have earned. But we can never erase completely the punishment our bad deeds deserve. We cannot escape the next life our many deeds merit.

Win shook his head. —Massimo's god frightens me. To be banished to the Lower Depths of the House of Smoke forever for what you have done in only one life. That is so cruel. That Buddha would have spent forever in the Lower Depths for one sin in an earthly life is beyond my understanding. Why is Massimo's god so unforgiving? Has bis god no heart? What good is shame if you have no chance to make up for your sins? Forever—that is very difficult for my small mind to comprehend.

—Massimo's god is not mine. My people do not think so much about your House of Smoke. Our God has given us the laws to obey. It is our sacred duty to live our lives according to His laws. Win smiled. —Your people are wise to think that way. Let me show you something.

He went to a chest in the corner of the room and returned with a long ledger of palm leaves. He calls it his merit ledger. I can't decipher this script—all curves and semicircles, like scraps of spaghetti left on a plate. Here he keeps track of his good deeds, like a clerk. His accounts are more detailed than a pawnbroker his pledges. All his giving, down to the last coin—how much, how often, the pleasures he has forgone to make his gifts. I thought he might need another several entries to offset the pride with which he presented his ledger. I cannot say where his pride dwelled most, with the ledger or with the actions it so thoroughly documents. Where is the anonymous giver? Where is the purity of faith, the goodness of heart?

Win told me of a man who claims to be the father of his own wife, but Win has no recollection of his own past lives. But he must think that he has lived lives of sufficient generosity and merit to have been reborn in finest Cambay cloth and not rags, to go to sleep with a full belly, and not scrounge for roots in the forest, or worse, be born a mongrel scratching fleas and howling at the moon.

Who am I to mark the angels among us, to rank men of goodness? Though it seems odd that merit for Win and the others of his faith is nothing but giving, and then only to monks with begging bowls, to gild already grand monasteries and pagodas, or to fund holiday feasts for holy men. Win thinks it better to feed a plump monk than a starving woman and her suckling child. Better to build a new monastery or, even better, a pagoda, though the streets glitter with them, than a lean-to of cane and palms for the homeless streaming into the city. It seems all a show. This religion is like these pagodas, all gold and ornamentation but nothing inside. Joseph, one human life is enough for me, given the losses I have suffered. Those who follow the Buddha believe to be born an animal is to be reborn in a state of woe, one realm below the demons. But if the Holy One, blessed be He, granted me another life before resurrection, I would not think it punishment to be reborn a seagull floating on eddies of air or, since you say I look like one with my gangly gait, a crane snapping up fish in the muddy shoals of the Lagoon. Freed from worldly woe, left alone—that seems a quiet life, more reward than punishment.

The more I listen to Win speak of his belief in the Buddha, intently as my mind is able, the more I feel myself sinking with every step deeper and deeper in the swampy mud. He and his fellows could make a Sophist blush. They never kill a mosquito or a fly—they only brush them away. A fisherman doesn't kill fish—he only takes them from the water. At first I smiled at the warp and weft their words weave, but now I grow somber at the tortures I have witnessed in my brief stay here. Their hands hover harmlessly over a mosquito on their bare arms, but with their own hands they hang in cruel fashion innocent women and children.

I am learning that "the sad hypocrites' assembly" can gather anywhere, and golden calves can be found in more places than the Sinai. How harshly can I condemn these believers in the Buddha, when on my travels I have found fools in every port? They at least embrace their fanciful faith with a childlike innocence, more endearing than the hauteur of Christians. The Gentiles laugh at the Peguans for their reverence of the Buddha's tooth, kept in a magnificent temple built by the king's father and enshrined in a golden casket studded with rubies and sapphires. They joke that he probably had more teeth than an ear of corn has kernels. Before the Gentiles laugh too loudly, they best look in their own naves, where their brethren kiss the bones of Jesus and pray to pieces of the cross kept in their own bejeweled reliquaries. If all his bones and all the slivers of the cross were put back together, he would be a grotesque giant and his cross heavier than the ship that brought me from India.

So no need to worry that my long stay will turn me into an apostate. I will neither don the monk's yellow robe nor take up residence in the House of the Converts when I return. Believers here must wash their feet before they enter a temple. I cannot imagine this practice in Venice: before feet touched water, the stench would overwhelm us all. We would never be able to revive the fallen for a minyan.

I may make light with you of Win's fantastical beliefs, but I would not insult his faith to his face. We have too long suffered the Gentiles' revulsion to visit ill will on another man's faith, even if he be an idolater praying before his gilded idols. Unlike our Gentile countrymen and the viper-tongued Franciscans, Win lives his faith humbly and makes no effort to save me by scourge and flame. There is much foolishness and childishness about this Buddha, but Win treats me fairly and is a man, for all I can see, who tries as best he can to live a decent life. I would wish no gentler epitaph.

As always my thoughts are with you and Uncle.

Your cousin, Abrabam



My father gave me my mother's prayer beads the morning I left. "Take refuge in the Buddha, and remember," he said, "wake before your husband and go to bed after he has lain down for the night." Those were his last words to me. I left the village well before midday, when angry spirits might be about.

I must go to Pegu. It is my fate. Father tells me the man I will marry is the son of a rich merchant. His father must have lived past lives of merit to be so rewarded in this one. I am fortunate, Father says, to be accepted by such a family. I know the man I will marry was born on an auspicious day. I know he has all his fingers and toes, and his body is unmarked by signs of past sins. I know that his cheeks are smooth, without a pockmark, since I never left a single grain of rice in my bowl. That is all I know. That is enough, my father says.

I was ready to become a woman when the time came for my ears to be pierced. I am ready to wed. I thought I would marry a man from my village, but few young men remain. Many have fled into the forest; and those who have not, the king has taken for soldiers at the point of his bloody sword. When we were children, Ye Shwe vowed he would marry me one day, but he ran away in the spring. I am lucky to find a man who will have me. Even if I must go far away to Pegu. I will miss the smell of roses and jasmine. I will miss tending the betel vines. I will miss lying on the riverbank looking up at a fierce elephant in the clouds turn into a dancing goddess, and she float apart into more orchids than I could count. I will miss my dog, closer to me than my shadow. I will not miss my father and his angry words.

I told my aunts and cousins that I'm not afraid of going to Pegu, but I am. I have heard you can walk all day and not leave the city gates. The streets are crowded with strangers from distant lands, tall as ghosts and with skin white as spiderwebs, who have pointed teeth like dogs. There are men from islands at the edge of the world, who take their parents, when they are too old to work, and sell them in the market for others to eat. There are men, skin dark as river mud, who have never heard of the Buddha and bow before angry demons. I pray my husband will protect me.



13 December 1598

Dear Joseph,

Your humble cousin, who in Venice tips his hat more than he opens his mouth, has just returned from speaking to the king of Pegu. From now on, I will expect greater respect and bended knees from your even more humble person.

Win and I were summoned to the king's presence on a day's notice. Win spent the day in great turmoil for fear that, out of ignorance, I would bow too few times, lift my head at the wrong moment, or simply behave with such impropriety as to put my business and his, if not our lives, at jeopardy. Last evening Win summoned me to his home to practice our entrance and exit and acts of supplication. I felt I was a thirteen-year-old ready to recite his first blessing at the Sabbath reading, receiving last-minute instruction from an anxious rabbi. I have never seen Win so agitated, so imperious with his slaves—a woman and her two young daughters. A year ago, her husband failed to pay for some stones he had pledged to buy, and, as is the custom here, Win took his family as his slaves. For how long—if not forever—I am not sure. Win does not seem to treat them badly, no worse than a rich Israelite treats his maid or manservant. But yesterday he was quick to raise his voice and pushed the two girls roughly to their places as they played our parts as subject

and supplicant. At evening's end, he had achieved the opposite of his intentions, and I was almost as nervous as he. Before I left, he showed me with glowing pride a small silver spittoon the king had bestowed upon him for his loyalty and faithful performance as a royal broker. It seemed a ridiculous object of honor, but I held my tongue and praised its workmanship.

I cannot describe in great detail the royal hall: my eyes were cast down at my feet or toward the king, when bidden to speak to him. Win and I entered the hall with the sound of trumpets in our ears. We cast ourselves down on our knees, stretched out our arms three times as if in prayer to some pagan idol, and kissed the ground thirty-two paces from the entrance—not thirty-three paces, not thirty-one, but thirty-two. As best I could understand from Win, there is one supreme god in their heaven and thirty-two lesser gods, so in paying homage to the supreme earthly god we had to come forward thirty-two steps. What foolishness, but I walked shoulder to shoulder with Win, and listened to his hushed voice count out each step. The king sat on a high throne of gilded wood, its arms carved like tigers in full roar, and at the back of the throne, above the king's head, were two large elephant tusks tipped in gold and so studded with rubies, sapphires, and other jewels that you could barely see the white ivory. The king sparkled no less, his fingers and toes bejeweled with rubies, his arms circled with gold bangles and bracelets of sapphires and rubies. His princes and ministers surrounded him and looked down at us from high benches, one behind the other. We stopped eight paces in front of the king and stood at the side of the royal interpreter, the Lord of the Words. We were not close enough to cause the king any harm but close enough to speak without raising our voices. We bowed, stretched out our arms, and kissed the ground three more times.

I confess I had thought this bowing and scraping would offend me. I have long bent my head and stood silent before those no better than I, who hold me in contempt because I wear the yellow hat. No one likes to bow before his equal, especially when others command that he must. But all men, Israelite, Christian, Muslim, and heathen, bow before the king and so, dear cousin, I felt in some strange way, which I had not foreseen, a freer man, a man equal to all, when I bowed and kissed the ground before this heathen king.

At a soft word from Win, I took the carved amber box with the three emeralds from the leather pouch around my waist and gave it to Win, who lifted the box above his head and bowed and kissed the earth again before giving it to the king's interpreter. He in servile mimicry bowed his head and with outstretched arms passed it to a royal retainer, who in turn passed the box with exaggerated deliberateness to the king. I thank the Holy One, blessed be He, for Uncle's wisdom in having me bring this gift. The king was much impressed with the fine workmanship of the box: its paper-thin amber shone like liquid gold in the raking sunlight. His eyes lit up, and his hands caressed the emeralds, stones rare and highly valued in this land.

Nandabayin struck me a strange mix of a man, softness and hardness intertwined like veined marble. He looks like someone who has never touched a door handle and never heard a word in dispute of his own. Some men in common cloth have the look of nobility: you can see in their bearing why others would risk their lives to follow them. This king, I think, rules by command only.

The king first wanted to know who had made the fine box and

where the jewels were from, and only then did he ask my name, what country I was from, and how long I had been away from my home. He seemed saddened that I had traveled such a great distance and had been gone so long. He asked how many wives I had and took on an even graver face when I said I had none. Peguans often ask me that question, and I have grown accustomed to their prying; but I thought, what a strange question for a king to ask a foreigner, and for a moment I was afraid he would turn matchmaker to save my poor soul. Others have come to the kingdom from Italy, especially in the time of his father, but I was the first from Venice to come before this king. Nandabayin wanted to know what king governed Venice. When I said it was a republic, not governed by any king, but by the freemen of the city—I of course did not say we Israelites were not among these freemen-there was a long silence. Then the king began to laugh. He paused as he struggled to stifle his mirth, and then burst out laughing even more violently. He was so overcome by laughter that he coughed and spluttered and could not speak for several moments. Recovering his royal composure, he asked if Venice was warlike, and I said we feared no country but sought friendship with all. At least you are not a country of women, he said. I thought it best to say no more.

Joseph, what irony that an Israelite stood before the king of Pegu speaking on behalf of the Republic that tolerates our people in small numbers, from charter to charter. I spoke for the very Gentiles who oblige me to walk quietly in the shadows behind heavy gates and have bricked our windows facing their world, so that we do not pollute their sacraments with even our silhouettes. I think God has a sense of humor and may not always be the stern ruler that the rabbis proclaim. Our audience ended when the king gave me a small gold cup and five pieces of Chinese damask in shades of red and blue. Win was much pleased, as it is not the king's custom to give gifts to foreigners. Win believes Nandabayin was moved by the quality of the emeralds and amber. For my part, I think the king was humored so by our form of government that his gifts were small payment for the laughter I brought, especially in these times when laughter, like rice, is in dwindling supply. Of most importance to our enterprise, the king ordered that forthwith I do not have to pay any taxes on our transactions.

Relieved and excited, like children who had won praise from an adoring father for remembering without mistake their first prayers, we walked back to my house reliving every moment of our audience. Win thinks word will travel quickly that the king finds favor with me and our enterprise, and we should get first look at the stones that arrive from Capelan. However, before we parted, he cast a shadow over my enthusiasm.

—Your affairs will go well in Pegu, he said, if you do what is expected of you.

And I knew he was not talking about our business.

I leave that struggle for another day and go to sleep tonight a companion of kings.

Your loving cousin, Abraham



21 December 1598

Dear Joseph,

What I feared has happened. Win has asked me again to deflower a bride.

This time, though his words were not sharp, it is clear the consequences of my refusal will greatly endanger our business here. The groom is the son of one of Win's brothers-in-law, and this fellow is determined that I and only I can perform this service for his son's bride in three days' time. This is a propitious house in his eyes. To shed the bride's first blood here, he says, will bring good fortune to his line. Last spring his other son died on another of Nandabayin's ill-fated campaigns. This son is the last bearer of his seed, the last hope for a grandson. How can I convince him that the bamboo walls and floor of this house are no stronger than those at the homes of other foreigners, that the sun shines on my house no more brightly than on theirs, that its roof is no better protection against the monsoon rains than is theirs? Against superstition, reason is an orphan.

My refusal has become the talk of the market and the trading house. The women, when they are not haggling over the price of eggs and fruit, have turned my one refusal into many. You might think this loose chatter has blackened my name dark as the teeth of the crones who spread these rumors. Just the opposite. My refusal has made me a saint in their foolish eyes. My many rumored denials are seen as a sign of the respect and kindness with which I would treat the nervous brides. The other foreign traders see this as sport, while my market adulators claim that I, unfettered by lust, must be a Buddhist disguised in a barbarian's skin. The more my imagined denials multiply, the more my services are in demand.

Among the Europeans, who knew well the Genoese, my refusal has become the stuff of lewd jokes.

—Abraham, if you don't want them, send them my way for a little gallop on my stick.

-I've got the hoe, if you don't, to till their herb patch.

Once they get started it doesn't take long for the jokes to turn to baiting our people. —Cut too much off? Or—You people are a stiffnecked race—I guess that's the only thing that's stiff.

You people—when I hear those words I know nothing good will follow. The old hate will bubble up. I let it pass, as I have always why roil the waters in this small pond? The Gentiles are spectators to our affairs here, it is Win upon whom I depend.

If I lose Win's loyalty, I imperil our entire venture. I have come too far and been away too long to jeopardize our enterprise. I cannot put Uncle's money at risk. I would not waver, if I alone bore the consequences of my refusal, but others beyond myself may pay for my actions. Win does not indulge in insults like the Gentiles. He honestly believes our business will suffer if I do not reconsider. He knows the truth of my singular refusal, but the rumors of the market have seeped into ears at the palace. He says that persons in positions of influence near the king find my behavior insulting. I am a guest of the king and a recipient of his favor, and in these troubled times they say I should not bring disorder to the affairs of his people. I cannot believe these courtiers are deaf to the ill will spoken toward the king by the people of the city. My refusal could add but a drop to this spreading sea of discontent. Yet it does not take a scholar to understand a proverb Win says has been long repeated here, "There are three chances in a dragon's stare; there is but one in a king's." I have seen the king's anger visited upon those he believes have turned against him.

You know I am not cut from hero's cloth and do not have the wisdom or the will to be a martyr for our faith. I only wish to return and live the quiet life I have led. I think less about myself than Uncle, who has raised me and entrusted the future of the family to me. I think of Win, who likely will bear the brunt of royal anger if the whispers from the palace are true.

A man of his faith, Win tries in his heathen way to reason me to his side. He does not want me to be reborn on some lesser plane of existence. He thinks deflowering a bride is an act of merit, not only for me but also for himself as my broker.

—Ab . . . ra . . . ham, how could your god set before you such a narrow path? If he is a just god, he will judge you by your pure heart, by your good intentions. You have no lust in your heart. It is only your body, a worthless container of blood and excrement.

I wish I had been a better student and not daydreamed when our tutor and the rabbis spoke. Their words could guide me now. I cannot imagine there is a mitzvah that commands me to commit adultery for the sake of rubies and sapphires. Was the woman who fornicated for apples to give to the poor praised or censured? I cannot remember. What I remember, though it is fuzzy in my mind, is that before Eve took the first bite, there was no physical desire between her and Adam. Their touching was pure and unpolluted. Touching their private places was as innocent as touching the fingers of their hands. Do I remember the lesson correctly, or drowning in stormy waters am I trying to make a raft from a twisted branch?

It is late and I am alone. I have no one to turn to and can only turn to myself.

Your cousin, Abraham



24 December 1598

Dear Joseph,

I have not eaten for two days. I can keep nothing down. Plain rice tastes bitter as wormwood. My stomach turns at the sight of it, as if it were alive with maggots. Last night, weakened from hunger, tired and restless from fitful sleep—I do not want to believe what I saw was anything but the delusions of an anguished mind—I stood frozen, unable to enter my room. The bead curtain had become a wall of writhing snakes. I needed to sleep and could see my mat, but the snakes blocked my way. I retreated to the verandah and slumped against the railing. I prayed to the Holy One, blessed be He. I took deep breaths to calm my thumping heart. I closed my eyes and, like a blind man with arms outstretched, I pushed through the curtain and sprawled exhausted on the mat.

Win has grown worried. This morning he saw my pale face and the dark circles under my eyes. He asked me to hold out my hand. He looked at my hand, then into my eyes, and stared again at my hand. If my hand had trembled up and down, my condition was surely the work of the household spirit that I must have insulted without knowing. If my hand had trembled side to side, a witch had put a spell on me. But though I was weak, my steady hand told Win that the cause of my illness lay within my body itself. He told me to lie down and sent Khaing for a doctor. A small, thin fellow, who serves the princes of the king's court, came with a large brown sack strapped across his chest. He looked himself in need of powder and potions. He held my hand, put his fingers under my armpit, behind my ears, and against my throat, and pressed his palm with surprising strength against my belly. He ordered Khaing to boil some water. He spread a red cloth on the floor and took several bamboo phials from his bag. He rubbed bits of bark, dried leaves, and seeds between his hands and poured the coarse powder into a cup of hot water. The brew tasted earthy and thick, and he made me drink it all, down to the sludgy dregs. Almost at once, I could feel my body heating up, the sweat beading on my forehead, and I fell into a heavy sleep and did not wake until dusk.

I am better, but I am not well. No doctor can cure me. I must decide, but no path is straight and free of dangers.

Do you remember at the party the night before I left, these many months ago, how I tried once again to join in the dancing and the merriment? I plodded in my awkward way, always one step behind the beat, whether the Piantone or the Canary. The merriment of others is like mother's milk to you: you throw yourself into the joy of the moment with ever greater vigor. For me, all that unrestrained good cheer is like a breeze that snuffs out a candle. I tried to be one with the music and the merriment, but I soon grew tired and withdrew to a corner to watch the others lost in the music and good cheer. An observer. That is who I am. I want to remain an observer.

> Your cousin, Abraham



The city shone under a full moon my first night here—a good sign for my anxious heart. The stars say it will be auspicious to meet the man I will marry the day after the next half-moon, and so I must wait another two days. It is not wise yet for me to walk the streets, so I sit on the verandah of his uncle's house and watch the strangers in this city parade by. I have seen more people in the last four days than in all the years of my life. From what lands do they come that they wear white robes that cover their bodies from head to foot? What are they hiding, what demon tattoos are they concealing? Large men in dark pants and shoes that look heavy as stones drag themselves from shade to shade, gasping for breath, their hands fluttering with cloths to wipe their pale faces flushed red. They do not belong in this land. Why are they here? Have they fled the anger of a vengeful king or a heartless father? Or do dreams lead them here? What treasure are they seeking that they would suffer so?

I am curious about these strangers. When I am married and know better the streets and life of the city, I will pass these men with my eyes and ears wide open. I will stand in the market and observe their ways. I won't talk to them, but I will ask my husband to tell me what kind of men they are. I seek no dreams here. The village was life enough for me. In our village a young girl dreamed one night she was the king's wife. She ate off gold dishes. She drank from golden cups that sparkled with rubies. Her feet never touched the floor, and she slept on silk clouds that floated above the polished floors of the palace. Everyone in the village laughed at her: she had never been beyond the paddy fields, the only prince she had ever seen danced on strings at festival time. How could she dream of the palace in Pegu? How could she dream of gold dishes, when all she ate from were banana leaves?

I haven't dreamt of the future. How can anyone see the future? Last night, as I slept, some images did come to me. I was in the paddy field. I held a young green rice plant in my hand. A cloud moved across the sun, and the air was cool. My dog sat guarding the field. I waited for something to happen. I waited for my dream to begin, but it didn't.



27 December 1598

Dear Joseph,

I trust that you do not share all my letters with Uncle but select the news fit for his ears. My descriptions of our business, of course, and the strange ways of these people are topics he will find of keen interest. My personal travails and the sexual customs of the Peguans are best kept to ourselves, especially what I now write. I hesitate to even share these intimacies with you, dear as you are to my heart. The Day of Atonement lies months away. Writing the words helps map the contours of my soul, hidden to me until now. I see myself better in the words I write, than if I were to let these events pass in silence.

As you have already guessed by my words, I chose to deflower the bride of Win's nephew. The doctor's potion had brought me sleep, but my dreams brought me no counsel. The walls of the room pressed in on me. I sought guidance in the cool quietness of the streets, when most of the city still slumbered. I walked slowly, my body still weak from little food and lack of sleep. Uninvited by any object seen or sound heard in the waking city, a Talmudic sage joined me. He whispered words I had long forgotten: A man who seeks both the world and justice is like a man grasping a rope by both ends. —Let one of them go, he said. —If you do not relent a little, the world cannot endure. I have relented. I believe in my heart I did it for Uncle and our enterprise. Not for my carnal pleasure. The Holy One, blessed be He, will be the judge.

She arrived at dusk, when birds were in full throat and the air was still. She stood at my door, her head down, her eyes looking at her feet. Win stood at one side, her parents at the other. She was dressed in a bright red cotton skirt and a red tunic that covered her breasts—I was glad for that modesty. It made these first awkward moments feel like the serious rite I had told myself this would be. She smelled of strong perfume, and her hair glistened with fragrant oils. A garland of jasmine flowers and orchids circled her chignon. She held a folded sheet of pure white cotton in her arms. Win called for Khaing, who took the sheet, and the young girl followed her into the house. Win had told me that Khaing knew what to do, and few words would be necessary. He would return at dawn with her parents and the groom. We exchanged silent bows. I waited on the verandah for about a quarter hour, until Khaing walked out and motioned for me to come inside.

Khaing had spread the white sheet over my mat and placed my regular sheet over it. The bride, draped in a cotton shawl, sat on the edge of the mat. Her hair, now loose, flowed about her shoulders, the flowers hung around her neck. Khaing had lit two candles and placed them on either side of the bed. She left a tray with cups of sugarcane juice and small coconut cakes that I have become fond of. I offered the young woman juice and the cakes. We nibbled the cakes without speaking. I am sure she was not hungry or thirsty but, like me, went through the motions to calm her pounding heart.

A day has passed, and even when I write these words, I feel my

heart quicken, my face flush with shame, my skin likely turning scarlet under the lamplight. I performed poorly-like the clumsy boy of eighteen I was when I married innocent Ruth of blessed memory, who was even younger than I. During our engagement, we did not touch each other, not even our little fingers, not even the brush of my hand across her arm. Uncle thought it a good match—a distant cousin of a good man. There was no love in our wedding bed. Duty lay in my marriage bed, not love. I did not know her long enough to love her. It pains me to say it, but in our year together I grew only to expect her presence. Perhaps if she had not become pregnant so soon and she and the child had not died in birthing, maybe love would have bloomed. Maybe our bodies would have grown more comfortable, our hands more comforting, and our hearts warmer. Ruth of blessed memory did not even live to be the companion her name promised-time and my callow heart did not allow it.

So last night, I slid beneath the sheet, awkward as a frightened groom on his wedding night. Almost a decade had passed since I lay with a woman, and never a woman so full in her nakedness. Nightgown, blanket, and darkness always covered Ruth.

I do not count the whore you bought for me two years after death took Ruth of blessed memory. I should not have been swayed by wine and your words. You told her that my loss had turned me into a morose fellow, and she pranced and preened—a painted clown—to make me smile. I have erased much of that night but cannot forget the image of her flouncing about in worn black stockings, dimpled with darning and snags, pulled up above her thick knees. Her forced frivolity and that dark room's thick purple curtains, heavy with the stink of countless customers, turned me even gloomier. She cooed my name, but her false passion could not warm the coldness of her embrace or mute the clink of coins echoing in my ears.

The bride shivered, her shoulders tensed when I lightly touched her arm. I think she was frightened to be so close to a man so pale and hairy—the men here are smooth as marble statues. I must have seemed like a ghost or a demon to her young eyes. When my fumbling hands touched that place, she was dry. I confess my carnal longings. The touch of her smooth skin aroused me. I could not control my desire after these celibate years. When I tried to enter her, I spilt my seed on her thighs before I could pierce her virgin's shield. Unmanned, ashamed, I turned my back to her, certain she knew from the talk of women that this was not the way bodies should behave. I lay at the edge of the mat, my mind churning from thought to thought like the surface of a pond under whipping winds. It seemed like hours but was probably only thirty minutes or so judging from the candle as it burned. I felt her fingertips touch my back, move down my spine slowly, stop, then caress the curve of my buttocks, and reach even more slowly between my legs to stroke my member. I turned over to face her, and with a grace that I had never before possessed, my hands moved from her whitened cheeks, over her small breasts, down to that place. A man again, I entered her. She held me tight with a strength that surprised me, as if she were trying to keep me from tumbling into a sudden chasm in the earth. I did what was expected of me. I came deep inside her with an explosive shudder of relief. Stars burst behind my closed eyes. My cheek, wet with tears, pressed against hers, and we fell asleep entwined in each other's arms.

In the half sleep of morning, I heard a loud knock. I jerked up, covering myself with the sheet, certain the Assembly had sent some-

one to exile me as an apostate into the wilderness of the marshes. The young bride, startled awake by my sudden movement, pointed with a giggle to the corner of the ceiling, where a gecko lay in wait for the day's prey. She raised the top sheet to see the stained cotton beneath her. She smiled, touched my cheek, and with a slight bow of her head, rose, wrapped the shawl around her bare shoulders, and padded out of the room in search of Khaing.

As was my routine, Khaing had put a bucket of heated water outside my room. I washed, and before I dressed, I gave my thanks to the Holy One, blessed be He, for guiding me through the night. Though she was not my first woman, I do not think I blasphemed to offer a blessing for her arrival and safe passage through the night. My safe passage as well. Passage to where, I leave to God to chart. All that happens happens under His eyes and for reasons that time may reveal.

How long Win, the husband, and the bride's parents waited on the verandah I do not know, but they were there when I went outside. We stood, not saying anything, our silence matched by the dawn quiet of the street whose daily life had not yet begun. When I was a small child waiting for Yom Kippur prayers to start, I would close my eyes and count backward from ten, believing I could will the service to begin when I uttered "one." As I stood on the verandah, I felt that if I counted down to one, a bell would sound and the town would come alive, like actors rushing onto a stage. When the bride came out of the house, she looked as fresh and smelled as fragrant as when she had arrived the night before. Khaing had oiled and brushed her hair into a bun, and from some trove secreted since her youth she had rubbed the girl's body with perfume. The bride thanked "Auntie" Khaing and "Uncle" Win for their kindness—in this land the young address their elders in this way. She handed the bridal sheet stained with her blood to her husband, who bowed his head slightly. It may seem strange to say, Joseph, but I felt a twinge of pride, as if I were sending my own daughter off to a new life. She looked directly in my eyes, said a simple thank you, turned, and followed her husband down the steps. Win looked relieved, and said he would return later in the morning.

I think that for the moment, I should write no more about last night. My mind swirls with thoughts, and words may set in a mold feelings not fully formed. I am not wise enough to quote the Rambam or plumb the wisdom of the Talmud—you know I, like you, was not the most diligent of students. All I know is this morning before I washed the dried blood and fluids from my body, I didn't feel unclean.

> Your cousin, Abrabam



9 January 1599

Dear Joseph,

More than two weeks have passed, and thoughts of the young bride haunt me. I remember the feel of her body. Some nights I have even dreamt new brides into my arms. What am I to do? Wear a hair shirt or walk to the market with my eyes closed, Win leading me like a blind beggar? I thought myself a stronger man.

While you have risked your life in the arms of your Christian courtesan and your soul in Purim flirtations with Ghetto maidens, I have sat in silent but stern judgment, wondering how you keep your mind free of guilt. You tell me your carnal adventures are but a temporary way station on the journey to faithfulness to a wife whose moderate appetite will keep you virtuous and in good health. But I worry you will become one of those men who empty their purses on a prostitute's bed and bring tears to their wives' cheeks. Or worse, your weekly trysts in a Christian's bed will lead to galley chains or death in a windowless dungeon. Now I wonder if perhaps I have been too harsh a judge and held myself in higher regard than our shared nature allows.

Cousin, you make me think the world less etched in black and white. You do not deny that you break the commandments, but claim that does not mean you do not believe in them. On Purim you proudly claim to do as the Talmud commands. On our one day of revelry to rival the Gentiles' Carnival you are commanded to eat, and you eat. You are commanded to be merry, and no one is merrier. You are commanded to drink until you can't tell the difference between "cursed be Haman" and "blessed be Mordecai," and you drink the cup of obedience until the last drop. Many a Purim I have taken you by the arm and led you up and down the narrow stairs of houses that list and lean from too many stories, like you from too much wine. Young maidens, emboldened by their masks and their heads dizzied by sweets, too much dancing, and a cup or two more of wine than they are used to, rarely rebuff your sweet words—in truth, I think they encourage them.

They forgot that you are a dance master and do not need to see a woman's face to know who she is. There are few young women in the Ghetto you have not partnered. You know the feel of fingers bare and gloved. You can read their hands like a sea captain can read the stars. You know a masked woman by her carriage, by the way she moves. And yet though you may coax an embrace and a kiss in an alley hidden from other revelers, you guard like a brother the names of these young women. You confine your flirtations to young maidens. You never take advantage of married women, who, freed by their supposed invisibility, seek to salve a wounded heart with forbidden kisses.

Sometimes you seem a man ruled by your body, other times by the law. What a strange teacher you are turning out to be. Honor is not always a well-marked path. An ox yoked to the grinding wheel cannot claim to be virtuous for not trampling the crops in the field. When the next bride comes, I will do what is expected. I pray that I do what is right.

> Your cousin, Abraham



5 February 1599

Dear Joseph,

Trade goes slowly. The days are full of festivals, and the countryside full of bandits. We await the arrival of fresh stones from Capelan. I am afraid Uncle has sent me to live in a house whose foundation is rotting: termites feast upon the beams, and the walls shudder with every gust of wind. All I can do is make as much profit as possible and wait for the seasonal winds to take me home before I am buried beneath fallen timbers.

Peguans, their minds full of superstition, read dire omens everywhere. There is talk in the market that the spirits have abandoned the king. Rats, it is rumored, have overrun the royal granaries. More frightening to their heathen eyes, clouded by spirits and demons, was the death last week at its bath of one of the king's white elephants. The people hold these beasts sacred—they believe Buddha was a white elephant just before being reborn in his final human form. The king's white elephants live better than princes in our land. Protected from the elements, they lounge in houses gilded with gold. Attendants bathe them in sandalwood-scented water poured from silver basins and feed them sugarcane by hand. This spoiled behemoth is in truth a pink-eyed, dusty gray creature with patches of white; even bejeweled, he looks sickly to my eyes. But kings in these lands fight wars and sacrifice thousands of lives to capture these sorry animals. I and every other foreigner are taxed to keep the royal elephants pampered like concubines in the seraglio. When the king commands, we visit the royal elephants; we must attend, no excuses are allowed. And as a foreigner, I must bring gifts of *ganza* to the royal handlers for the care of their charges. Little did Uncle think that his profits would be eaten by elephants.

Perhaps it was only coincidence that, soon after the death of the elephant, a festival was held today to display the fierceness of the royal elephants. Maybe the full moon dictated the celebration, or maybe the king heard the rumors swirling in the market and wanted to awe the populace with his power and pomp. No awe to my eyes, only more doubt and concern about the kingdom's fate. Before the celebrations began in the royal compound, the king rode through the city in a high, gilded wagon drawn by sixteen white horses. Twenty noblemen walked behind and at the side of the wagon, holding taut ropes to keep the wagon from tipping over. The horses were well groomed and strode with stately grandeur; the noblemen, short swords with jeweled handles strapped around their waists, looked straight ahead, like statues come to life. But I could not help think through the trumpets' roar and the clatter of hoofs and the crunch of the wheels over the road that all this display was a symbol of what is rotten here: a gilded wagon too high for its own good, built for effect only, held up by the labor of others, and if it were to fall, those below would be the ones to suffer the greatest injury. The king sat impassive under a white canopy that only he as king is allowed to travel under-noblemen and commoners must suffer under umbrellas of darker color. The king did not wave or smile—he sat there to be seen, to instill awe in the minds of his subjects by his presence alone.

I could not tell whether the crowds lining the road were impressed with the king or scornful of his extravagant display, while they scrimp to buy rice that trickles into the market, more costly with each day. It is hard to read the faces of Peguans. Their flat, round faces are more mask than mirror. When I first arrived, I judged them dull and thick-witted, but hidden beneath their impassive softness are quick minds and generous souls, just as the waters of the Lagoon are alive with creatures under its dark surface. They show little emotion and never anger. It is only Europeans, new to these lands, who lose their tempers, bare their teeth like dogs, and turn red with anger. From what I have seen, those who do not govern their temper and restrain their emotions, no matter the color of their skin, will die poor men in this land.

Later in the day, the foreign traders were compelled to go with thousands of Peguans to a large enclosed field in the royal city to see the royal elephants battle a wild tiger. It was a dispiriting event that brought me only sad reservation about where man stands in the ladder of being, or what these believers in Buddha call the planes of existence. The elephants, though not white, were quite regal—large brown creatures with huge, gleaming tusks pointed in gold. But there was no fairness to this fight, no doubt as to its outcome. It was all mummery. The tiger was tethered to a stake in the middle of the field. Four elephants gored and stomped the poor creature until he lay bloodied in the dust. Royal retainers cut him free and dragged his body across the ground in front of the benches where Win and I and much of the crowd sat. The tiger had no claws—they had been pulled out—and his mouth had been sewn shut. What chance did that poor beast have? What acclaim could the king garner with such a barbaric display? Where was the compassion, the reverence for life that Win speaks so much about?

I think even Win must have been embarrassed by the sheer unfairness of the battle. He must know in the royal script the tiger cannot win, that the forces of royal order will always triumph over rebellion and disorder. But in so hobbling his enemy, the king makes a sham of the contest and diminishes himself.

Wishing perhaps to wash the bad taste of the afternoon from our mouths, Win invited me and several local traders and brokers to his house for something cool to drink and eat. I went in hopes it would be humble offerings of sugarcane juice, whose sweetness I enjoy, and a luscious fruit called mangosteen that looks like a small wooden ball but under its tough exterior nestle plump white crescents of sweet flesh, the size of almonds, that taste almost like pure sugar. I dreaded anything more substantial, for these people eat whatever they can catch. Vermin and creatures that creep upon the earth—they eat everything but the croak and the hiss. I have seen cages of lizards, frogs, and snakes in the market and even heaping mounds of rats and baskets black with bats. Whatever the creature, all the Peguans need are hot coals, some chilies and banana leaves to wrap it in, and their mouths are open and waiting.

We drank coconut juice and palm wine sweetened with honey and dipped our fingers into a heaping plate of a special delicacy they call pickled tea—a pile of tea paste surrounded by piles of fried beans and peanuts, fried garlic, roasted sesame seeds, and chopped green chilies. Usually it is served with dried shrimp, but I had told Win once that my faith forbids my eating such animals, and out of kindness he put them on a separate plate for the others to eat. The mix of the leaves' sweetness and bitterness—a bit like dipping *maror* into *charoses* at Passover—with the crunch of seeds and nuts is very much to my liking, and I could survive a desert exodus with such food. As my fingers swung back and forth between plate and mouth, one of the slave children brought out a wooden plate steaming with what at first looked like our gnocchi flecked with slices of red chilies. I hesitated, and well I did, because as the plate passed from one guest's hands to another's, Win said they were the worms that spin silk. I need no mitzvah to keep me from eating worms, whatever beauty might come from their bowels. After the plate was cleaned and fingers licked, Win went out behind the house to his garden and returned with a large spiky fruit cradled in his arms. The eyes of the other guests sparkled, and some rubbed their stomachs in joking anticipation. Everyone here, including not a few Europeans, is addicted to this fruit they call a durian. Inside its spiky exterior hides-but is not hidden enough-a creamy flesh that smells to those who love it like garlic custard. Joseph, I tell you it is an aroma most foul, like undergarments forgotten in some chest, which have rotted and fermented and then been mixed with decaying old slippers and garlic bulbs black with age. You can smell a man who has eaten this fruit ten paces off, and approaching verandah stairs you know without sight when the family has just split open this stinkpot of a fruit. Win had tried before to force me to swallow a spoonful of this fetid flesh, and of course this night I became the butt of everyone's good-natured joking.

—How can you claim to be a man of sound mind and good breeding if you turn your nose up at this delicacy?

—How could the country of your birth be any better than a jungle of ignorant beasts if it produces men of such low taste?

-This is the food of monkeys, I shot back.

-Yes, one of the fellows said, even they have the good sense to eat this jewel of the jungle.

I felt like that poor tiger, outnumbered and overwhelmed. What a curious world. I judge one people my inferiors for burning designs on their skins and blackening their teeth, and they see me refuse what they covet and, despite their good-natured jibes and laughter, think me a queer fellow, lower than the monkeys that scrounge the refuse heaps at their temple grounds.

Another bride will come to the house in three days' time. She will be the fourth. I keep count so that I do not take my obligations lightly. I consider each one, like a fine stone, unique and worthy of special attention. As I have with the others, I will try to do well what is asked of me, like any task in life on which others depend. I see you smirk and hear your voice: "Please, Abraham, you are not being asked to comb her hair or pull a sliver from her finger." I do not need you here to accuse me of sophistry. I am my own accuser. My stomach may not twist and roil and my body rebel as it once did, but my soul remains troubled. I fear now my anticipation: the desire I feel for the body of this unknown woman. It is not done for pleasure, but how can I say there is no pleasure? I am not Adam. To touch a woman's fingers is not the same as the touch of her breast or the softness of her thighs. I have not been schooled in the language of the bed as you have, though I know enough that brief and rapid coupling brings neither man nor woman pleasure. If it is not a pleasure for me, how can it be a pleasure for her? It may be only one night; but for that one night, she is my bride. I must embrace her with the desire of a groom on his wedding night. I know that we can clothe base desires in fine words and can convince ourselves that we are honorable men. I try—only when asked—like Solomon to be a good gardener who unlocks with care the garden for another to enjoy.

Win says this bride came from upriver to marry a man whom she has never met. The men are few in the villages up-country—they are fleeing to monasteries, into the forest, and to neighboring kingdoms to avoid the king's harsh demand for soldiers and laborers. At least the bride will be safe here.

Please believe I have not lost my way.

Abraham



What have I done to deserve this misfortune?

Tell me, Lord of the Great Mountain, when did I insult you, when did I neglect you? Haven't I always treated you, our household spirit, with respect? I wrapped your coconut in yellow strips of cloth. I made sure to hang another one in the corner when the stem fell off—you always had cool juice to soothe the pain from the flames that burned your human body long ago. I never forgot to give you bananas, sticky rice, and pickled tea leaves. So why have you cursed me with such misery?

Yes, my father grew sullen and bitter after Mother died, but he always paid proper respect to the spirit of our ancestors. He never spoke in anger against him. We made offerings to our family spirit at the marriage, even though my father didn't come to Pegu. Why then this harm?

When I set out for Pegu, I bowed my head, pressed my hands together against my forehead, and lay pickled tea, cooked rice, plantains, and palm sugar on the shrine at the village gate. I told the village spirit I meant no disrespect in leaving. I told him I would return with husband and children to add to those who honor him. Before entering the path through the forest, I and my two traveling companions from the village made offerings to the spirits that reside there. We laid out betel leaves and rice and asked for protection from the tigers and wild boars roaming unseen in the thick trees. I kept silent as we passed through the spirit's domain. The cart jangled my insides, and when I could no longer stand it, I made sure to relieve myself in the tall grass far from any tree. The driver kept his tongue and didn't curse, even when the ox decided to rest despite the sting of his whip. Why then this harm?

Other children laughed and hissed names at the witch who lived at the edge of the village when she passed by, but I never did. I wasn't any better than them, just more scared. Her gray eyes frightened me. The stories the aunties told of her turning into a bat or a snake that slithered across her victim's mat in the darkness kept me far from her shadow. She had no reason to cause me this harm.

What sin did I commit in a past life to be so punished?

I waited in this city without complaint for four half-moons until the stars said it was an auspicious time to wed. Yesterday Chien and I pressed our palms together. Yesterday Chien and I fed each other rice from the same bowl. Today I am a widow alone in a stranger's house. Today I am homeless in the world.



9 February 1599

Dear Joseph,

My household has grown since last I wrote. A young girl named Mya sleeps under the eaves in the back of the house. It is a sad tale.

She was the bride who came from upriver to marry the son of a local merchant. She is not much different from the others whom I have served. Perhaps a bit shorter and darker skinned than the women of Pegu, and more reserved, though it is hard to tell. These women and I share little more than touch, and who would not be shy in this circumstance? She barely said a word and was already lying in bed when I came into the room. Her body waited, her hands lay quiet by her sides, and she did not call out in pain or pleasure. Yet something happened that night that was different—perhaps I should be ashamed to reveal it: she was the first bride I entered more than once. I awoke in the night, and she was lying on her side staring at me—maybe her eyes had willed me awake. She touched two fingers to her lips, and then pressed them gently to mine. Such a simple gesture. No bride had ever done that before. I think I saw her smile in the dim light. She reached out and pulled me onto her, though I must admit, I did not resist. She said not one word during or after; and when I was spent, I fell asleep in her arms. She had already gotten up when the dawn light woke me. I heard water splashing and Khaing talking.

At the ritual hour, Mya waited, dressed and perfumed, on the verandah. No one came. After half an hour, I sent Khaing out to keep her company until her husband arrived. Midmorning and still no one had come. She sat in a corner of the verandah cradling the bloodstained bridal sheet in her arms, fingering her prayer beads, murmuring her prayers softly.

I sent Khaing to find Win. It wasn't until noon that he returned with the sad news that her husband of one day had died the night before. Cousins and friends forced him to drink cup after cup of palm wine. They tied the cup to the wine gourd, and he couldn't drink slowly or escape their taunting challenges. Sickly drunk, he choked on his own vomit. His parents are grief stricken—he was their only surviving son—and they don't want to have anything to do with the bride who brought ill luck upon their family. Win says he will try to talk to them when they are calmer; but they are under no duty to take her in, and he doesn't think they will. The bride's father, her mother long dead, had not come downriver for the ceremony and likely won't want his daughter back, as she is now a widow in his eyes, the responsibility of her husband's family. Like me, fate has orphaned her.

Mya looked shocked and lost, like a child pulled from a burning building. It grieved me to see her struggle with her feelings—her face crumpling, her powdered cheeks "watered by tears of pain." She trembled but did not cry or keen, all the while holding the stained sheet tight to her chest. It wrenched my heart to imagine her heart moaning like a panpipe. Where could she go so far from home? Win could not take her into his house, already full with family and servants. Alone in the city, she will have to indenture herself to a government official to survive, and who can say how long it would take for her to buy back her freedom. How could I enslave her?

Uncle took me in. I could do no less for this young girl who had slept in my bed and sat weeping under my roof. Win will talk again to the groom's family, and in the meantime she can help Khaing, whose arms and legs are weaker than her good heart. I am sure Uncle, more easily than I, can find a Talmudic tale to guide me. For the moment, I look to Dante.

Angels of that base sort Who, neither rebellious to God nor faithful to Him, Chose neither side, but kept themselves apart.

I am no angel of any sort, but I could not stand apart.

Your cousin, Abraham



I had little time to know him. Chien seemed a good man. I'm afraid his memory will soon fade away, like morning mist on the paddy fields. He is gone less than two days, and I can barely remember the way he walked, the creatures and signs tattooed on his legs, or the sound of his voice. In the many weeks here, waiting for the auspicious day and hour to wed, we were rarely alone. In front of his father he was quiet—as a son should be. I am his widow, but I was never his bride. I never touched his cheek. Never felt his heart beating next to mine.

Maybe my father was tired of feeding me, tired of being reminded of the wife he had lost. He said I would be safer here behind city walls. He won't want me back. My husband's family won't give me what they promised—I can't blame them. They think I am a witch, a bearer of death, a crow casting dark shadows over every path. What man will have me now? If Uncle Win hadn't convinced the master of this house, I would be sleeping on the hard ground under a cart in the market. Last night I slept in my master's bed, tonight I sleep in the corner on a mat next to Auntie Khaing. Last night he took my maidenhood. Tonight I take rice from his pot and am grateful for his generosity.

Before I came to Pegu, I had seen only one stranger. A warrior,

he came with the king's men to the village the year my ears were pierced. He was tall as a ghost, and I had never seen a human so hairy—hair exploded from his head and face. I could barely see his mouth, hidden in his thick beard. He and the soldiers stopped for water and some food. If they had spent the night, I'm sure I wouldn't have closed my eyes for a moment, afraid he would devour me like a hungry ghost. Now I am a woman, and these strangers are more odd than frightening. They waddle down the street. They drip with sweat, their hair damp and matted like soaked dogs in an afternoon shower. They show their jagged dog teeth and turn red as raw meat when they are angry. Sometimes I want to laugh. I am sad for them—they seem so far from the Buddha.

The master of this house is a quiet man. He has pale skin, and his belly and legs are not beautiful with tattoos, as all men's should be. But he took on the danger of my blood. What he did, he did for me and not himself.

I know some brides cry out at the pain of the first time. I didn't, though it did hurt. I thought of the Buddha's face. I tried to be as calm. I knew this man didn't want to hurt me. I believe he knew the pain I felt—as if my spirit were his—and he touched my cheek to comfort me, to quiet my anxious heart. What words can I have for something that I never felt before? After he had given me the gift of his body, I lay next to him and floated away, feeling like green rice swaying in the wind. I wanted that feeling again. I wanted him inside me again. Was that wrong? Was I snared by Mara, the Evil One's sweet song of desire? Was that the moment my husband died?

When I wake in the morning, who can I talk to? Aunt Khaing is an old woman. What will I do in the city? There are no weeds to pull, no rice to harvest. Surrounded by this strange darkness, my heart is hollow as a bell. I know the bitter truth—this is the last man who will know my body.

I go for refuge to the Buddha. I go for refuge to the Dharma. I go for refuge to the Sangha. I go for refuge to the Buddha. I go for refuge to the Dharma. I go for refuge to the Sangha. I go for refuge to the Buddha. I go for refuge ...



8 March 1599

Dear Joseph,

Two days ago Win heard, through his many ears in the trade, that soldiers sent north had cleared the road of bandits, and a new group of stones had arrived. We were at the trading house the hour its doors opened. There were riches among these rough stones, and we pounced upon the best. A skilled cutter will harvest great value from the stones we secured this morning. Among the sapphires we bought is one as orange and pink as the sun swallowed by the ocean at sunset and two black as crow's wings. Even an unschooled eye could see in the pinkish red spinels a necklace calling out for the white skin of a duchess. But it was the rubies that set our hearts pounding. They all shine, as if born of lightning. The queen among them has the pigeon-blood red color royalty so prizes. When I held the stone to the light, it glowed like a burning coal. I felt I was holding the beating heart of an angel in my hand.

This is a ruby fit for the legendary helmet of Sultan Suleiman. When I was little and could not go to sleep, Uncle would sit on the edge of the bed and tell me the story of the sultan's gold helmet studded with hundreds of diamonds, pearls, emeralds, rubies, and one enormous turquoise. His eyes sparkled as bright as its stones, and his voice grew hushed with reverence as he told me about the dozen Rialto workshops that fashioned a helmet to rival the grandeur of Alexander. I would fall asleep with its feathered plume fluttering before my drowsy eyes. Now a real stone to rival my dreams is ours.

Today I finally exchanged more than a nod with the Portuguese soldier who I think is a hidden Israelite. His name is Antonio de Briho; he is from Pôrto, but he has been away so long he says his home is wherever he is paid for his services. I guess he is in his midthirties—his hard life has left its marks on his scarred and creased face. If the scars on his forehead and neck could speak of their origins, I am sure they would make me tremble. I am glad I have not seen the horrors his dark eyes have surely witnessed. He is a short, squat, thick-necked man, solid as a tree trunk. His speech is blunt but not as rough as his appearance. I find his directness a refreshing change from the quiet, circuitous talk of the Peguans, who wander off the path or muddy the waters with politeness. He has been here more than a year training the king's artillerymen in the use of arquebuses, culverins, and the newest weapons, but he has little good to say about the troops. There is no glory here for him, just silver coins for his pocket. He rattled off, like a gazetteer, the mercenaries fighting with and against Pegu—Greeks, Turks, Armenians, Tatars, Moghuls, Rajputs, Persians, Javanese, Siamese, Gizares from the valley of the Tigris and Euphrates, Tanocos of Arabia Felix, Andamans, Celebes, and all manner of men tattooed and pierced.

—These are men without king or law, he said. They fear neither God nor death, not like these infidels who fight like angels. They would rather scare the enemy with the deafening sound of their infernal horns and drums and the fusillades of arquebuses shot in the air than press the battle after the first have fallen. These are not men who, landing on a distant shore, would set fire to their ships to show themselves ready to fight to the death. They're after prisoners, not land. More of these poor louts die marching in chains through the jungle than in battle.

With a faint smile, he told me —You and I are brothers. I barter musket balls for silver, and you, silver for precious stones. That smile convinced me he is one of us and knows that I know, but I will let him be the first to speak of his faith, if he still has one.

Don't misunderstand me when I write that some days I forget that I am a Jew. I recite the Shema morning and night, bless my food, say grace after every meal, and celebrate the holy days, as best I can determine when they fall. But when I leave the four walls of the house, the tefillin put gently away in my camphor chest, there is no one to remind me that I am a Jew. No community of brethren with their expectations. No prohibitions in Gentiles' eyes when I walk past a stall brimming with fruit. A Jesuit from Portugal has arrived, but I have seen him only at a distance, so there has been no occasion for him to spurn me.

Then there are some days when, bidden by no one's claims or curses, I feel myself more a Jew than ever I did in Venice, surrounded by brethren in the Campiello della Scuola or praying in the dark warmth of the synagogue. I sit in the solitude of my own house and bless some strange fruit or dish Khaing has prepared and that no other Israelite anywhere on earth is eating at that moment or has ever eaten, and I feel that I am not alone. I embrace my evening prayers with my heart, not merely my mouth. Though the words of the mitzvoth make me a sinner, when I lay in the arms of an infidel bride and brush her perfumed hair from her face and touch her check to calm her trembling heart, I feel the Holy One, blessed be He, is guiding my hands and blessing me—and her—with His grace. Some evenings deep into the night, Win and I, like students at the yeshiva, talk of life and things more sacred than stones. Wine loosens Win's tongue, and melancholy mine. In the early evening as I walk the city streets, I hear the sounds of gongs, bells, and chimes: groups of men are practicing for a feast or a wedding or a naming celebration. The music floats from hidden courtyards, as if the stars themselves were the source of these strangely bewitching melodies. What first sounded to my ears like the clinks and clanks of falling pots is now music from the beginning of time that sweeps me away from myself. There is sadness in the melodies that summon forth images of you and Uncle and those whom I miss most. The music's melancholy airs dampen my usual impatience at speaking about things unseen, things that cannot be touched and measured and put in the ledger.

Win enjoys our sedentary search and doesn't seem to care if we never reach a destination or even a clearing in the jungle on our nocturnal meandering through the tangled thicket of his beliefs. Sometimes I think he takes greater pleasure in seeing me wander off the path, entangled among the twisted vines, guiding stars blocked from view, than in drawing me to his side.

Win reads my face well. I hide my confusion and doubt poorly when he talks of his religion without a god, his prayers that aren't prayers, his dark view of life as suffering. Strange that this comes from your long-faced cousin, this child of the plague, whom you always said was born to wear black. Of course, not yet having reached my first birthday, I do not remember when the plague took both my parents, but some of my earliest memories are of funeral bells pealing, a constant din of death that drove me to tears. Uncle says that streets were littered with corpses and the walls of the ghetto echoed with more wailing than my own. I was born of suffering, and when Ruth and the little one of blessed memory were taken from me, I wondered why God chose me to bear such trials. What had I done to deserve this pain and loss?

Win is gentle with his words but finds fault with me when I speak of my trials. I have wandered far from his faith's teachings. —*Ab*... *ra*...*bam, you speak as if your god bas chosen you and only you to suffer. You love your passing, impermanent self so much you believe suffering is your burden alone. My dear Abraham, life is suffering. That is what the Buddba teaches. Suffering is to us as water is to the fishes of the sea. It surrounds us, it is inescapable, we live within it, and it lives within us. Where there is life there is suffering. I am not a wise man. Even if I spoke your language better or you understood mine, I still wouldn't be a wise man. I stumble and struggle to remember the sutras (Joseph, these are his prayers), and I have not lived so well in my past lives as to have been reborn a monk in this one. All I know is what the Buddba teaches—we live, we suffer, we die, and we are reborn. All of us. Not you or me alone. All of us.*

You know, dear cousin, I am not one who laughs easily like Leon or Jacob. I don't walk around with a smile shining on the world, but Win's world painted in tears seems too dark even for me. This somber presence, who sits in the corner while you and others swirl by to the music, takes on Win, not to be disputatious like a scholar, but because even I do not want to live in a world so full of suffering, so empty of meaning.

—Is that all, Win? Are we not born to love, to do duty to our family, to our ancestors, to our faith? Loving fine cloth more than man or boarding jewels rather than wisdom, that is not what the Holy One, blessed be He, commands. How can our desire to hold dear those we love be anything but a good? —Desire is the waterwheel that churns suffering into the fields of our lives, Win said. —We desire what we don't have. We desire more of what we already have. We cling to what we have like a crab to a stone at high tide. Afraid we will lose what we have or restless to get more, we suffer. Desire—snuff out the flame of desire, Ab . . . ra . . . ham, and suffering will disappear like a wisp of black smoke from the candle's wick.

—Is a man a crab to want to shelter a child from the hurt that lurks in the shadows of the world, to want to grow old surrounded by a wife and children and their children?

Win's face was dim in the flickering light, and he seemed pained by the words he had to speak. —*Hurt is the world*, he said, looking at me as if I were a wayward son.

—I will pray to the Holy One, blessed be He, to save you and all your family from burt.

A slight smile crossed his face. —Ab . . . ra . . . ham, only I can save myself. I know Massimo was not of your faitb. He gave me a carved piece of wood with a sad man on it with nails in his hands and feet. I asked what this poor man had done to his king to be punished so harshly. He said he had done nothing bad—that he was the son of his god and died to save all those who believed in him. It all sounded so strange, like a tale told to calm a child frightened by thunder and lightning. But I did not say that—I didn't want to hurt his feelings. I only spoke the same words I speak to you. It is hard, my dear friend, but no dead man, no god, not even yours, can save you. He can tell you, "Abraham, go here, do this," but it is you who must choose the way.

We and the night grew quiet. Win and I were both sleepy, and we parted down our separate paths, like friends who wave good-bye but know they will meet again. Don't worry, Joseph, I will not return dressed in a yellow robe, but I will continue to speak with Win of these things. He never stands above me, wrapped in holiness, making me feel, as even some men among our own do, that only they speak to the Holy One, blessed be He, and only they are cut from sacred cloth. For Win and his kind, we are all humbler cloth, *strazzaria*, each with our flaws.

I came home to find Mya awake, waiting for my return. She doesn't go to sleep until I have said my prayers and am ready for bed. It is strange. Before she came, I felt I lived alone, even though Khaing slept under the same roof. Now when I lie on my mat at night, I can feel the young woman's presence. I no longer feel alone.

> Your cousin, Abraham



12 March 1599

Dear Joseph,

You would think my adventures would bring me greater wisdom. Yet the opposite seems to be happening. Axioms turn to questions, certainties turn to doubts, straight roads to twisting paths. Wind ripples the water, and when I look down, my reflection is broken and shifting in the fractured surface.

I walked past the Auythia Gate today not knowing what horror lay there. A prince long loyal to the king had refused to march with his retainers on an expedition he thought foolhardy. The king had the prince, close as a brother, slain. His body, pierced with wounds, was thrown naked on the ground under the gate, a bloody reminder to all who passed of the price of disloyalty. The prince's son came that very evening to mourn his father, and he too was slain as he bent in prayer over his father's mutilated body. Tragedy begat tragedy—the next morning a family servant, loyal in death as well as life, came to cover the two bodies from the pecking of jackdaws and the prodding sticks of wild children. He too was slain on the spot by royal guards. The three bodies had lain under the gate another two days before I passed by. As I write I still see in my mind the crows feasting on their rotting bodies, smell the stench of their flesh, and feel sadness in my heart. Not all kings are cruel, though power can easily exile a man from his heart. Does Nandabayin's cruelty flow from his heathen blood, from the blood of his line, from the power that is his, or is his soul a twisted labyrinth our minds cannot comprehend? And if it is his heathen blood, then what of the servant's blood that impelled him, like an angel, to cover his masters from shame?

I can't so easily place the peoples I have met on my travels upon some moral ladder. I am no longer so certain who to allow and who to exclude from God's embrace. I confess I have been too quick to pass judgment on those whose tongues and customs are different, and too slow to see the Rambam's wisdom that all of us are half innocent and half guilty. Peguans, Portuguese, even some Israelites, one day dance with the devil, and the next sing with the angels.

I thought when I first arrived that Peguans accumulated gold and jewels and fine cloth out of an excessive love of display, like children entranced by the sparkle of colored glass; but I have come to see that like us Israelites their lives are precarious, subject to forces outside their control. They fear that they too will be exiled, cast out from home and hearth and forced to flee into the forest from those who would kill or enslave them. They can carry jewels with them and bury their fine cloth in the hope that when the tides of fortune change, they will be able to return home.

Win and his brethren grow in my eyes. The Gentiles, with their gates and ghettos and cages hung halfway up the Campanile to shame their wayward priests, travel round the world but seem no better for the sea, air, and sun. The Gentiles have no place in their hearts for us, and the Peguans fare not much better. But at least the Peguans can be forgiven, for they are in the Gentiles' eyes ignorant of the holy word and their hands are not stained with the blood of Jesus. A Dutchman, who is not a bad fellow, was railing the other day against a Chinese trader from Malacca. —*These Chinamen can't be trusted. They're worse than the Jews.* He for a moment had forgotten I was there or perhaps who I was, but caught himself. —*Not you, Abraham, you're not like the others. You're a good man.* Even a gentle fellow, who seems a cut above his brethren, has the poison in his blood.

The Jesuit, who I finally met but will now try to avoid, is like the Franciscans who so bedevil us with hate at home. Though young, with peach fuzz for a beard, his deep-sunk eyes and hollow cheeks make him look like an old man. His thin neck pokes out from his cassock like a willow reed. He speaks as if he had lived forever and knows without doubt the mysteries of the world. He had passed me by several times without a word but couldn't avoid me two days ago. Win and another Peguan broker were trying to convince him to visit a pagoda, a few miles outside the city, that believers in the Buddha hold especially sacred. He had not stepped inside a pagoda and had no intention of traveling to see their false gods, he said, especially one so lazy as to be lying down. He bent over Win, his arms folded. —If you abandon your false gods, you will be born again.

I could see the smile bubbling behind Win's impassive face. —That will not be necessary, he said slowly.

Joseph, you know I am not a rude person by nature, especially to a Gentile and even more so to a priest. But I am not good at hiding my feelings. The priest read my faint smile at his ignorance. His face reddened. —Jew, why do you mock me? Before I could feign my innocence, his words spewed forth. —You people strut about baughty and ungrateful. Do you think because you're far from the Holy Church, you're free to look down your nose at me like some bigbborn nobleman? Maybe bere you think yourself free, but let me tell you something—Christians are the true free men in Jesus Christ and God. You and your people are only tolerated to bear witness to our faith. And how do you repay our kindness? With arrogance. Until you people accept the light of the one true faith, you will bear the perpetual servitude you deserve, the servitude you have earned by your guilt. Oxen and mules are created for the service of man; you people live for the service of Christians. Even if he had taken a breath, I would have stayed silent. What good would it have done to speak? Red faced, he sputtered on. —You struck our Lord on the Via Dolorosa. You people are cursed to wander till the Second Coming. He waved his hand as if to brush away a bothersome fly, turned like a soldier on parade, and walked away.

I had foolishly thought that the priest had avoided me because he had heard of my service for the brides-perhaps he was jealous. Now I know it was just the same old venom, the same old hate. "Tolerated." What is worse, to be a slave, a defeated foe of the Peguans, forced to live far from home and kin, or to be banished behind thick gates and bricked-up windows, tolerated by Gentiles? The Peguans may laugh at me, at my white teeth like a growling dog's, my hairy arms and my gawky body, but there is no animus in their laughter. Children grow quiet at my approach. When I pass, they point and burst into singsong jabbering and giggling, but I am just a queer animal to them. I live where the Peguans tell me to live, but all foreigners have their own neighborhoods marked by the nations from which they come, not by the faiths they embrace. The Peguans want to keep track of us, want to make their trade with us go more smoothly. We have a definite place in their cosmic order. We are necessary-not "tolerated," not shunned like some contagion, some agent of the plague.

We stand on the edge of a new century—new worlds await us, men of science at Padua chart the seas and inlets of the body, while adventurers chart lands unknown to our grandfathers. Joseph, we climb ever upward, and yet on this path of progress, we are burdened with unbounded hatred and blood libels.

I don't think Win understood all that the Jesuit said, but he could hear the hate in his voice and see the anger in his eyes. —That is no priest. Poor man, be will be reborn a ghost with a mouth burning like a furnace.

I couldn't wait to return home, pour buckets of cold water over my head and shoulders to wash the stench of the Jesuit from my body. I couldn't wait to sit quietly sipping tea that Mya would bring without my asking. I have stopped asking Win what luck he has had in finding her a permanent place. She costs me little and is no bother. In fact, I must admit that her presence pleases me. Khaing cooks well enough, but her wrinkled face, lips stained red from years of betel chewing, not to mention her sagging breasts, are not the easiest sights to bear, especially in the bright light of morning. Mya hides the grief she must feel beneath a smile. She and Khaing fill the house with chatter and laughter, like mother and daughter, as they sweep the floor and earth in front of the verandah or sit around the hearth pounding spices. Mya is always up before the sun and has taken to sleeping on a mat outside the curtained entrance to my room in case I wake early and need a bucket of warm water.

I wonder why after all these years of absence I have thought again, and even dreamed, of Ruth. I see her and a man who looks like me and I think him a stranger—a man buried with her those many years ago. In the first years after her death, did I, like you, look up from my prayers to catch sight of young women behind the wooden screen at the synagogue? I don't remember. Did I ever in those early years, like you, mark the young girls who sat silent at the end of the Passover table as ones who, with time, might blossom into women worthy of attention? I don't remember. What I remember is that there came a time when whatever interest I might have had disappeared, and whatever interest parents and anxious aunts had in me disappeared also. Even the Rieti twins, whose mother must have gazed at the time of their conception at a painting of the frogs God visited on the Egyptians, stopped cornering me at parties with their idle prattle. Though I spoke of finding another bride, they knew they could smell the musty odor of someone who had given up.

Tonight, like other nights, I hear the soft shush of Mya's breath outside my door. Her perfume fills the house. Her slight smile, even with blackened teeth, sweetens my day and makes me smile, a rare expression when you last saw me. She has been here barely a month, but it is hard to remember my days in this house without her.

> Your cousin, Abraham



In the mornings, Khaing and I go to the market. I carry the full basket home on my head, and she carries a stick to shoo away the crows. I help her cook his food and wash his clothes. I sweep the floor and ground in front of his house. I tend the garden—village girls are good at spotting weeds and making things bloom. Except for sharing his mat, Khaing jokes, we are his wives.

He is like a house whose door and windows are shut. When Uncle Win is not here, he nods more than he speaks. He doesn't talk to himself or hum or sing a song. You can feel the silence, thick and heavy as afternoon air before the rain. Maybe his people were punished for speaking. Maybe his family spirits commanded him to be silent—his silence like offerings to keep them content. Win says he speaks many languages, even ours, but he says few words. He speaks a strange language that only his god understands. Who can know what a man thinks, especially a stranger?

He seems a good man, who wants to please his god. He prays to his god every morning and every night before he goes to bed. At least, I think he is praying—his eyes are closed, and he rocks gently back and forth. You can't see his god—there are no statues of him in the house, no altar to offer him food and flowers. There is an amulet, nailed to the door frame, he kisses with his fingertips when he enters the house; but inside, the house is empty. He carries his god inside him all the time. I think this god is always telling him what to do, and that is why he is so somber, listening hard to everything his god says. Before and after he eats anything, he bows his head and talks to his god. I want to tell him not to be afraid—I would never poison his rice.

I know he can smile. I have seen him smile at Win. Uncle Win could make a dark cloud smile. At night I sit outside his room and watch him smile as he reads back to himself the words he has written. I know he isn't writing his wife; Khaing, who asked Win, has told me he isn't married. He must be writing someone he loves. Not a woman, though—how could he travel so far and stay away so long if he loved her enough to write her almost every day? Maybe it is his father who has sent him on this long journey or a brother whom he has seen every day of his life.

If I knew how to write and if my dog knew how to read, I would write her letters too. I miss her. She followed me like a shadow. No snake ever bit me in the fields, because she was my protector. She listened to everything I said, and never turned away, never barked for me to stop. If she has not gained enough merit to be reborn a human, I hope that, like the Buddha, she can be reborn a white elephant, honored, and well treated.

The days pass. I am not unhappy. I have a dry mat to sleep on. I have enough rice to eat. I have a master who doesn't raise his voice or hand to me. Sometimes there are even moments when he looks at me with the comforting eyes of my bridal night. I think I see in his eyes the memory of his body in mine; but then I stop myself—I'm just a foolish girl lost in my dreams.

What will happen to me when, his fortune made, he leaves? Or

takes a temporary wife, like other foreign traders do? I see the old nuns, stooped and lame, begging for coins in the market. Where do they sleep at night? I tremble with shame that someday I might be one of them.

Today I went to the pagoda near the Prome Gate. Clumps of boys stood at the entrance selling caged birds. They were doing well, and only a few birds were left by the time I arrived. With most of the extra coins that my master had given me, I bought a sparrow and brought it home. I took the bird into the garden and let it go. It flew up into the palms and then away over the wall. May the Buddha notice this act of generosity, and may the merit I gain erase the bad karma that has cursed me a young widow far from home.



25 March 1599

Dear Joseph,

It is Sunday, and if I were there with you, we would spend our day in idleness, forced to obey the Gentiles' Sabbath commandments. I did a bit of work with Win, examining again the stones we have bought, looking to see if any stones bought early in my stay should be sold so we can upgrade our stock. It was not a pressing task, but the freedom to work when I choose is like sweet nectar to the bee, and I couldn't resist.

As I walked home after a morning of holding stones up to the light, imagining them cut, polished, and set, I couldn't help but think of Uncle and his daily rounds. He claims his good health comes from the power of the precious stones he handles, that they protect him from the lurking harm of pestilent vapors. I think rather it is our doctors—one of the few things that bloom luxuriant in the Ghetto—that keep his bodily humors in balance. I marvel how every morning he rises, clear minded, ready for the day. With steady hands, he puts on his right shoe, then his left shoe, then ties the left and the right to bring him good fortune, strides off to be one of the first at morning prayers, then sets off for the Rialto to barter in gossip and rumor. If gossip were gold, our uncle would be rich as Croesus. I would be his silent shadow as he moved through the stalls and storerooms of the Rialto like a chicken pecking the ground for spare kernels, listening to the talk of merchants, goldsmiths, and the agents of noblemen from Florence to Augsburg, even from the palaces of the Ottomans and the pope in Rome. His favorite goldsmiths whisper to him of betrothals still in negotiation, merchants flush with profits even before their ships from the East drop anchor, and unfaithful husbands anxious to appease angry wives with pearls and precious stones. The buyer matters not to Uncle—Holy See, sultan, or princely merchant—he finds the best stones and the best Christian hands to work them. I think he will be pleased with the goods Win and I have secured.

When I returned home in the late morning, Mya was tending the garden. She had a cloak over her shoulders to protect herself from the sun and the mosquitoes flitting among the vines, leaves, and petals of the flowers and spices she was tending. In Venice, I paid no attention to the orphaned flowers that gulped for slivers of sunlight on windowsills and boxes under Auntie's care. Here flowers bloom and blossom unattended. I could lie down in the garden and awake in the morning entwined with vines, my hair garlanded with wildflowers like some Greek god. Son of the Ghetto, I am ignorant of much of nature's handiwork and can name only a few of the flowers and plants that grow in the garden. I do know that it's orchids that Mya graces with much attention. She stood tending an orchid that grew from among some thick vines hugging a bamboo trellis. Its scalloped yellow petals dotted with purple looked like an aureole of golden butterflies floating about her head. I sat on the steps watching her, and she must have sensed my presence. She turned and smiled and asked if I wanted some sugarcane juice she had pressed that morning, but I told her to keep on in the garden. My eyes were thirstier than my throat and drank up the sweetness of her graceful movements. One of the flowers fell to the ground, and she picked it up and put it behind her ear with a simple swoop of her hand. Not to please me, I think, though it greatly did.

Mya served me a simple midday meal of rice, dried fish, greens flecked with bits of chili pepper, and a few mangosteens. I couldn't imagine a duke more contented with life than I. The kingdom's troubles, which cast a cloud over the success of our enterprise, seemed for the moment distant as the sands of Babylon.

Mya came to take away the banana leaves on which I eat, and I did something—or rather, did not do something—whose import I find curious. This afternoon as Mya crouched on her knees to pick up bits of rice dropped on the floor, a mosquito alighted on the back of my left hand. I glanced at it. My eyes caught Mya watching me. I waved my hand and the mosquito flew away. I am certain that she gave me a slight smile before getting up. I stayed my hand, not because Win had said it was wrong to take the life of a living creature—even if that creature lacked thought or feeling and intended to do me ill—not because that creature could have been some ancestor reborn in vile form for an evil he had committed, and not because I might be condemned to a hell where I would be crushed over and over between rams big as mountains. I did it because Mya asked me to do it with her eyes. I did it not to disappoint her. Isn't it odd, Joseph, that I wanted to be the man this young girl thought I was, or should be?

I go to bed wondering about Mya's strange effect on me.

Your cousin, Abraham



Abraham—he says I should call him Abraham—has asked me to teach him our language. He knows many words already, but he says he wants to learn more. He asks me to name things. Some of the words I think he already knows: they are words for children. Lips, cheeks, neck, arm, hand. Sometimes he points. Sometimes he touches me. I think he wants to hear my voice. I think he wants to touch me. He says that he will teach me the language of his country—the language he and Win speak. I told him I would like that and I pointed. He said "chest." I said, no, inside. "Heart," he said, and smiled. It made me feel good to make him smile.

Some nights when I am combing my hair, I feel him watching me. I turned once to see him staring, and his face reddened and he looked away—like a shy, young boy.

I can't write like Uncle Win or move numbers like he can. But some things I know. I have planted rice since I was a little girl. I was too small to stand in the water when my mother first took me to the field, and I sat on high ground watching her and the other women. No one said, This is how you know this field will be richer in rice this year than last. No one said, These shoots will grow sturdy, like the king's guards, and these sickly, like an orphan wandering in the forest. I just knew. The soul of the rice speaks to me. I know which shoots will thrive, which will wither, even if all around them grow strong. When harvest time came and I cut them one stalk at a time with my finger knife, I thanked them for growing full and tall, as I knew they would.

I can't read the words Abraham writes, and I know only a few of the words he speaks. But I know this: he is a special man.



4 April 1599

Dear Joseph,

Forgive me that I have been derelict in my letter writing. It isn't that words have deserted me—like a kettle atop the stove, my heart bubbles with words, so many that my pen can't capture them. Eight nights ago Mya fell asleep in my arms for the second time, but for the first time I slept with a woman out of choice, not obligation or expectation.

I walked back from Win's after a long night talking of spiritual matters and the World to Come. These followers of Buddha, merchant or street sweeper, love to talk of these things. The stars seemed closer and brighter than even in the middle of the ocean. The moon, a day or two shy of fullness, shone like a beacon. Believe me, I hadn't come back with any plan to take her into my bed. I didn't realize until later how much I had already taken her into my heart. Usually she doesn't lay her mat down outside my room until I have gone in for the evening. This night she must have grown tired waiting. She was already sleeping when I returned. Strips of moonlight through the shutters lit her face. Something—I believe without blasphemy it was the hand of the Holy One, blessed be He—directed me to crouch before her as I stared at her face, gentle as a child's. Lying on her back, she turned, still asleep, to face me, and as she did, the sarong, doubling as a sheet under which she slept, slipped from her shoulders. I reached down to cover her from the evening air, and without opening her eyes, her hand reached out and grasped mine, as if she knew I was there. Then she opened her eyes, smiled, and squeezed my hand. We held hands. We became one, no mine or hers. The world slowed, the world quieted. I could hear the rustle of palm leaves outside the shutters. I could feel my heart beat, feel the blood coursing through my body. I did not think, "Abraham, you must do this, Abraham you must do that." She sat up, still holding my hand, and many of the words she spoke I couldn't understand. I did understand "yours" when she placed her other hand over her heart. I kissed her on the forehead and placed my hand over my heart and heard myself say, as if I were a father speaking to his child for the first time, "Yours." We rose as one, our hands still clasped. We walked over the threshold, through the beaded curtain and into my room.

We lay together that night in a oneness so complete, so new to me that words seem a false language. I am like a blind man trying to describe a rainbow. The boundaries of our bodies disappeared there was a moment when I didn't know whether I was in her, or she was in me. In that precious moment, I stopped thinking, stopped floating outside myself, stopped observing myself. In that precious moment, we were blessed without words and prayers. In that silent union, I, Abraham, took her, Mya, for my wife.

Spent, we lay entwined in each other's arms, her cheek pressed against mine. Her perfumed hair brushed my lips, and the fragrance of her body filled me with every breath I took. In the languor and quiet of the gray light that traced the curve of her back and the swell of her buttocks, I swore I would willingly be reborn for one hundred million eons to love Mya for one night. Perhaps the old Abraham has died little by little each day since I left Venice. Perhaps I died in greater degree after I arrived in Pegu this I can't say, how can any man make himself such an object of study? When I awoke the next morning, the somber, resigned man you knew seemed like a distant relative faintly remembered. Yet I don't feel a stranger to myself: I feel a truer self than ever before when I lay next to my Shulamite, dark but comely, her smoothskinned brown arm resting across my heart.

Uncle has trained me well to grade stones, and there are other Peguan women more ample in their beauty, but they are not the ones I desire, not the ones I love. "Love," a word long foreign to my tongue and pen. It is not a word that can be dissected by reason or dictated by the eye's optic power—it springs from the heart. Like her sisters', Mya's teeth are blackened, her face powdered, her ears lengthened from large plugs of amber. An Israelite might think her a Carnival reveler, but all of that is the costume her people drape over the soul God has given her. When her eyes sparkle as she pours water into a cup, or when she combs her hair or moves her hand in the simplest of gestures, I feel honored by her being.

She wears only a skirt, but there is nothing shameful about her bare flesh. What in Venice would be vulgar, even for a courtesan, is to her what nature commands. I am a man of my country and can't help but be aroused with desire by her breasts—her breasts—not the breasts of other women. I'm not like the European merchants walking through the market, wiping the sweat from their ruddy faces and necks, leering at the bare-breasted women, sending sly smiles and raised eyebrows as signals to induct me into their guild of lust—You're a man, you've got a member just like us all. Look at that beathen, all she's good for is taking a gallop on your stick. Right? They are so certain they know the answer. As soon as I took Mya in after her husband's death, word spread in the trading house that she was my concubine, taken in to satisfy my carnal needs. They think she is my servant in the day and my concubine at night. They think I am one of them. They think they know my heart.

You may want to keep news of Mya from Uncle. He may think I have lost my way. Mya told me that her name means "emerald" in her language. Just tell Uncle I have done well at what he instructed me to do: I have found a jewel of great value.

> Your cousin reborn, Abraham



I dreamed Abraham into my arms. Like pebbles dropped on a path, my dreams led him to me.

Last night, with gestures and touch, we pledged ourselves to each other. Last night, I chose him as my husband, and he chose me as his bride. Last night, his mat was my bridal bed.

This morning, Abraham brought my mat into his room and put it next to his. He did it solemnly, like a priest making an offering.



1 May 1599

Dear Joseph,

Win amuses me. You would think Mya were his daughter the way he fusses over her, or I his son the pleasure he takes in my happiness. He was quick to find out which day of the week each of us was born; and once certain ours would be a compatible coupling that will bring neither childlessness nor early death to one of us, he has taken our happiness as his charge. He finds excuses to go to the market and bring us a basket of rambutans or snakefruit or a jackfruit so enormous his servant struggles to carry it. He constantly compliments Mya on the sweetness of her sugarcane juice or the firmness of her rice, as if these simple tasks demanded the skill of a builder of bridges over the Rialto. She in turn treats him with a daughter's respect and affection and spoils him with sweets and laughter. I think he genuinely likes her-I suspect that he thinks she will make a good bride for his son after I leave. But for now, he is happy that I have such a caring woman, and yet he seems pulled in two directions, like a mule caught between two bushels of feed. In one bushel—A man needs a woman. To be alone is punishment for past sins. Mya is more precious than fine stones. But in the other bushel—Don't show affection; you don't want her to take advantage of you. In this bushel is the Buddha who fled wife and child to find the

truth, who spoke of his son as a fetter. Imagine calling the flesh of your flesh a fetter, an obstacle to salvation. For Win those we love are the fishhooks of desire and suffering. When I hold Mya in my arms, I am not a fish snared in a net, wildly flopping and gasping for breath. Desire may cause pain; yes, it may bear the seeds of evil in its extreme, but I can't believe that all desire is evil.

Win believes that he turns away from his Buddha's teachings when he loves another. Little did I know when I praised God in the synagogue that I was a devout follower of Win's faith—I went about my life smug in the certainty that I did not need love, that I was whole without it. I was like a drunk man stumbling home in the dark, who trips and cuts open his head, but staggers on so drunk he doesn't know he's wounded and, if unattended, will die from his wound. Now surrounded by thousands of glittering statues and hundreds of yellow-robed monks unfettered by love and longing, I am turning away from the Buddha I had unknowingly embraced and returning to the Holy One, blessed be He.

I pray that He doesn't turn His back on me. I'm not an apostate. I'm not deaf to the deep, rumbling voice of Rabbi Sforno, his head shaking back and forth in condemnation. —You cannot marry a Gentile. It is forbidden. Don't think his words don't pain me. I hold no less today to the articles of our faith than when I set sail. The words of the law may damn me, but what am I to do? Not to have loved is to turn away from God, who gave us body and soul—not to have loved is a sacrilege. How can the law be just if it means not listening to my heart?

Last night, the late hour and the palm wine Mya poured whenever er his cup grew empty put Win in a philosophical mood. —*My wife* and family are too dear to me. I cannot meditate: my mind is too much on them. Maybe in my next life I will be born a monk, and then I will meditate. How weak a man I have been, Win said, shaking his head. —I should leave my wife and children behind and wander solitary as a rhinoceros. I am like one of those wild young men the Buddha rebuked for chasing after a courtesan who had stolen their money. "Which is better for you?" he asked. "To look for a woman or to find yourself?" In my next life, Win said, raising his hand as if swearing before a tribunal, —I will find myself.

-My friend, with all you have drunk, it may be hard for you to find your way home.

-You are right to make fun of me, Abraham, maybe all I can hope for is a better life next time—more silk than cotton, more jeweled bangles for my wife and daughter.

-Win, it is late and I am growing tired thinking of the many rebirths that await me. I am content to sleep in the dust until my resurrection.

Win frowned, the muscles of his face grew limp, and in that moment he seemed an old man. $-Ab \dots ra \dots bam$, how sad to sleep in the dust. That is not a life fit for an ant or a worm.

-Maybe God has other plans for me. There are some among my brethren who believe that souls with unfinished business are reborn.

-Ab . . . ra . . . ham, we all have unfinished business.

I said no more. The night was late, and I was afraid my words had added to the sadness that had clouded his face these past few days and had banished his laughter. His second son, a sweet boy of barely sixteen and the son closest to his heart, has fled up-country to be a monk at a distant pagoda to escape the king's tightening grasp. He isn't alone. The Mon bear the king and his people little love, and many—it is rumored tens of thousands—flee into the jungle, to the safety of distant provinces and even farther, to Laos, Siam, and Arakan to escape the growing specter of death. Some men have bowed their heads to debt slavery and have sold themselves to princes or other men of standing who will protect them from royal taxes and the onerous obligations of service. This is too low a path for an official like Win to tread, too much a blow to his pride to consider.

The king is like a fool atop a diseased tree, sawing off the limb on which he sits. His foreign follies have brought him no slaves, so he hasn't enough soldiers to man his army and fight his battles, not enough men to cut and keep his roads. The paddy fields lie untended at growing season: there aren't enough hands to care for the seedlings. Men found wandering the roads are taken directly to military camps or returned to their villages under threat of death to perform the labor their villages owe, or they are sent to toil in lands laid waste by war. The king's men have taken to tattooing a man's name, rank, and village on his right hand so he cannot lie about where he is from and what obligations he owes. We Israelites can take off our hat or unpin the star from our coat and disappear in another city, if our appearance does not betray us, but these poor Peguans have no escape.

Antonio tells me that in Cosmin, where I landed, the governor, fed up with the king's demand for labor, rebelled. The king shows no mercy to those who are disloyal, as I with my own eyes witnessed at Authyia Gate, and Cosmin is now a port of no return. Its streets echo with the screeching of crows and the flapping wings of vultures fighting over the rotting flesh of the dead. Those not killed by the king's troops have fled to Arakan. Even Win, proud possessor of his royal spittoon, no longer raises his voice against those who think the king is out to exterminate the Mon for fear of their disloyalty. The empire is shrinking with rebellion, like a puddle in the sun. If the king doesn't come to some accommodation soon with his enemies in Toungoo and Arakan, the empire will be a head without a body, a city with howling wolves outside its gates and walking skeletons within.

Maybe it is the late hour that makes the future look so dark, or maybe it is because now I have more to lose. As I write I see Mya sleeping on the mat. Her hair is unpinned and covers her shoulders like a glistening black cape. Her breathing is like a soft whistle calling me to her side. There is a question I should have asked Win when he told his tale of the wayward youths chasing after a woman. What if you weren't looking for a woman but found her, and in finding her found yourself?

> Your cousin, Abraham



Before Abraham touches me, he speaks to his god. After I have taken him inside me and he lies quietly by my side, he speaks to his god again. I told him in simple words, so he would understand, not to be afraid. He doesn't need to pray for his god's protection. I would never hurt him. I would never rob him of his power. No, he said, he was thanking his god for sending me to him. His god seems hungry for thanks, but I didn't say that to Abraham.

It is I who am blessed. Blessed doubly—that he has taken me into his home and into his heart. Not like the other foreigners, whom Khaing and the women in the market speak about. They give shelter and pay well enough, but they are rough men who barter their beds and never speak their woman's name. They never thank their gods for the gifts they are receiving.

Abraham's heart's blood must be as beautiful as rubies. The more his heart opens, the more he speaks. At night I lie in his arms, and words overflow his heart and into his mouth. He tells me of his long journey across bottomless seas and wide rivers, over burning, barren land. All those nights among strangers—I can't imagine such loneliness. He tells me stories about the strange city he comes from. A city that floats on water—maybe I don't understand his words, or maybe he wants to make me laugh with fantastic tales. Could it be that he was sent here for me? Or I for him? Perhaps it was poor Chien, who died on our wedding day, whose karma was bad—not mine—whose previous lives had been full of evil acts. Khaing says he must have been a drunk, a miser who never shared his drink with anyone. No river flows straight—maybe this bend in my life was intended to bring me to the safe harbor of Abraham's love. I'm not wise or pious enough to know what lives I led in the past. All I know is that I must build merit now by caring for this man, far from his home, who cares for me.

When Father sent me off, he said for me to be a devout wife and lead a good life, and I might be reborn among the gods. At least, he said, say your prayers, do no harm, and maybe I would be reborn a man. I'm afraid that won't happen. I will be reborn a woman. I am trying to follow the Buddha, but I can't follow him past the threshold of Abraham's room. My passion for Abraham burns. When he touches me, I don't want to be anyone other than who I am. I can't deny the body he caresses. I can't deny the desire I feel for him.

Auntie Khaing has been good to me, but sometimes, like today, she makes me wonder if she isn't jealous and is trying to plant seeds of doubt in my mind. She spoiled the morning with her talk that I will be a rich woman when he leaves. She says all the foreigners give their wives money, fine cloth, and jewels when they return to their homes. I will be a rich prize fought over by men who wish to live well in the shade. What good will it be to have fine things if Abraham is gone? I don't want to be widowed twice over. I can't imagine the touch of another man. I believe it is my fate to be his wife. Forever. Khaing is an old woman—she no longer remembers how it feels to be held by a man, touched by him. My man is different. I see it in his dark eyes, I hear it in his voice, even if sometimes I don't understand the words. I feel it in his embrace. I feel it in the tears that moisten his cheeks when his face is pressed against my breast.

Why would he teach me his language just to say good-bye?



10 May 1599

Dear Joseph,

Win now professes for me newfound sympathy. Not because I have traveled far from home and kin, or because my faith has led me far from the path of enlightenment. No, he feels sorry for me because I have no foreskin.

These Peguans think nothing of bathing twice a day, sometimes three, and simply for the pleasure of cooling themselves in the thick heat. After returning damp and dusty from the market, I have grown accustomed, regardless of the time of day, to the cool comfort of water running down my head and back. This is not something I recommend for the damp Venetian air, unless you want to rest in the Lido before your time. Win had several times invited me to bathe in a stream, not far outside the Prome Gate, where the water cascades over a ledge of rocks into a shaded pool. I always found an excuse. Though far from the Church's reach, the shadow of fear lingers that I will be imprisoned for bathing with a Gentile, even if he is an infidel. No Gentile had ever seen me in my nakedness, and I couldn't imagine feeling as comfortable in this intimacy as Win and other Peguans do. But yesterday he wouldn't listen to my excuses when we passed the gate at the height of the midday sun. It was there, though I tried to slide unnoticed into the

cool water, that my nakedness plucked the sympathetic strings of Win's heart.

When he shook his head, I said nothing, afraid I didn't measure up to what a man should be. Seeing that I wasn't going to inquire into the meaning of his obvious look of regret and exaggerated head wagging, he couldn't contain his curiosity and concern and asked where the rest of my member was. When I told him that God, blessed be He, commanded our people to have it cut off when an infant, he couldn't disguise the sadness in his eyes. I quickly tried to calm what I thought was the cause of his sorrow: the child is only eight days old, I told him, and is too young to remember any pain.

—It is not the child, Abraham, I am sorry for. It is you. It is Mya. The pleasure you are denied giving, and the pleasure she can't receive.

Joseph, I have written to you of many strange things that if I had not seen them myself or couldn't vouch for their source, you would think me a madman. What I tell you now challenges the boundaries of belief. Though I write with a steady hand, you may still think that I have lost my senses; or, despite all I have said, these Peguans are some strange breed set beneath the human race. I grimace as I write these words: Peguans put metal balls beneath their foreskins to please their women. Some small as a pea, some large as little hen eggs. Men of wealth have penis balls finely made of silver or brass that ring like bells. Those of little means have ones of lead, copper, or tin that barely make a sound. Win says that the king and the princes have ones of gold, so skillfully wrought they ring with treble, contralto, and tenor tones.

-What kind of god would deny women the pleasure of such sweet harmony?

Win asked with only the slightest of smiles. —What kind of god

would let his people disappear from the earth? So long ago, no one can remember her name, a queen commanded the men of the kingdom to wear penis balls to save them from their addiction to self-abuse and sodomy and to please the women of Pegu.

We sat on rocks in the shallow pool behind a curtain of cascading water. I nodded my head, afraid if I showed too much interest, Win would stand up to demonstrate the dulcet tones he so praised. He must have sensed my unease. He waved his hand in the air. —I once had two silver balls, one for each of my sons who lived, but I have taken them out. I am too old to endure those youthful pleasures.

As we walked back, I strained to hear the faint tinkle of metal whenever we passed a group of young men, but the noise of the street was too loud. For a moment I thought I heard the delicate sound of these private bells, but it was only a wind chime hanging from a tree in front of a pagoda. When we turned toward Win's house, he pointed out the nearby home of a wealthy lac merchant, who lived there with his last, lovely daughter. A week or so ago, returning late one night, Win spied a young fellow beneath the palm tree that stood by the corner window. The young girl's shadow moved across the bamboo wall. The fellow was pretending to relieve himself, shaking vigorously the member that should be concealed, sending a melodious signal to his lover.

—Her shadow stayed fixed to the wall, so I imagine she wasn't displeased by his musical ability. He, I am sure, hoped she would invite him inside to perform. Win put his hand over his mouth, chuckling, amused by his own joke.

How much of this am I to believe? Win says he will show me the women who have no calling other than selling these balls and are skilled in placing them. Shame prohibits me from pursuing the subject further, even with Mya. Oh yes, Win told me the king sometimes will remove one of his silver penis balls that are gilded with gold and give it to a nobleman who has served him well, and for whom it is considered a gift of great honor. I pray that I am never so honored.

> Your cousin, Abraham



Uncle Win scowls. He is angry with me.

"A body is just a body," he says. "A heap of bone and blood, skin and bile. I thought you different from your kind," he said. Why am I so lustful? he wants to know. "You are like a roaring fire that consumes everything. I know you are a woman, but didn't you learn anything from the monks? The Buddha, in a past life, born a woman, gave up her breasts to feed a starving woman on the verge of devouring her child. All I am asking you to do is give up his body for one night. The Buddha's breasts were restored. In the morning, Abraham will be restored to you. If you are so worried about his vital powers and the pleasure he gives you, feed him milk and eggs after each time."

I went into the garden. I didn't want Win to see my tears. Abraham is my husband. His body is more than the guts and blood spilled on the ground of the butcher's stall. He is dear as life itself to me. How can Uncle Win ask me to lie outside his room again, while another woman, more beautiful than I, sleeps in his arms?

Abraham told Win that I was his last bride. It is Abraham's choice, not mine to make. When I said that to Win, he pursed his lips and shook his head. "He is a good man, but he doesn't know the way of the Buddha. He doesn't understand the customs here," Win said. "You confuse me. First, you hold him tight, like a miser hoards his gold, like a man who never has listened to the Dharma," Win said. "Then you say he is free to choose, and you have no control over him. How can you walk down two paths at the same time? Even a child just learning to speak knows that giving is the first of the virtues. Abraham gains great merit each time he serves a bride. Why do you stand in his way? Think of the merit you gain if you give the man you love to another."

I love this man. I want him to be reborn among the gods. But he is my husband. I have lost one. I don't want to lose another.



7 June 1599

Dear Joseph,

I climb one mountain to find another looming above me. An insistent family pleaded with Win to arrange my services in a week's time. I refused. He had turned away other brides, leaving them to the traders eager to take their maidenhood. From the day Win saw our mats lying side by side, he knew, without any declaration from me, the depth of my feelings. Though no monk had blessed our union, he saw in the simple acts of our lives together that I had taken Mya into my heart.

I won't go through the formal marriage rite like other merchants, to clothe their "temporary marriages" in sham respectability. These traders pledge faithfulness while they are in Pegu and payment when they leave: these are the arrangements between an adulterer and his courtesan. What binds Mya and me is not an arrangement. I lie in Mya's arms with a pure heart. I hide from neither man nor God and need no ritual to sanctify our love. My heart is pledged forever.

Win started to talk of "merit," and though he speaks from his heart, I said I didn't want to hear any more of it. If the business suffers from my refusal, it will suffer. We have made profit enough. Win asks too high a price for whatever other stones we might gain. How could I push Mya from my bed for even one night? How could I give my heart to her and my body to another?

Today is the eighth day after the full moon, one of Mya's Sabbath days. The house was quiet. I missed her laughter, the smell of her perfume hovering in the air as she passes. She leaves her hair unscented and goes about solemn as a monk on these days, not laughing or joking with Khaing or me. She puts away in a small wooden box by the bed her bangles and fasts from midday to the next morning. When I come to bed after writing to you, she will be sleeping on the floor, out of my reach.

Devout as any Israelite, Mya began and ended this day, like every day, offering prayers in front of a small shrine at the back of the house. She keeps a thin vase with fresh flowers next to a small wooden image of the Buddha on a simple shelf above her head. She lights candles and offers him fruit and sometimes even cooks a chicken over the fire for him. He never gets fat. I shouldn't make light of her faith, though what good a piece of wood can do for her I'm not sure. Who am I to deny her a faith that has molded her into the being she has become, the being who has brought me love and summoned it, long buried, from within myself? I could no more leave my faith than I could strip the skin from my body and still live, and I can't imagine that she could live without her idols and her faith. If the Rambam could take Averroes, Avicenna, and al-Farabi for his brothers, I can find a small space in the corner of my heart for the Buddha.

There are no Grand Inquisitors stalking the shadows in her faith. When I walk down the streets here, I don't have to make way for anyone. These followers of the Buddha may believe in more hells than Dante could imagine; but when I asked Win if I would burn in one of them for not believing what he believed, he was no Jesuit in his answer.

—Ob no, Abraham, you do not call my truth untrue. It is just not your truth. If you believe your truth—if you live your truth—you will not burn. He smiled. —But sad for me, because I won't have you to talk with amidst the smoke and wailing.

Win and Mya know I will be reborn, whether I believe in their faith or not. My merit is always on their mind: they are bankers of my soul, looking after my account, trying to make sure I amass sufficient funds for a more fortunate next life.

Prayers are now offered in pagoda and synagogue for my well-being. Perhaps the dangers I face are greater than I imagine, or I am more fortunate than I once thought.

> Your cousin, Abraham



Win must think because I am a village girl that I am slow-witted as a water buffalo. I have planted more seedlings than there are stars in the sky—I know the seed he is trying to plant. He told me again the tale of the Buddha born a woman who gave her breasts to feed a starving mother. It is a beautiful story that brings me close to tears, so I didn't tell him to stop. I am not bored to hear again how her breasts were restored, how because of her selfless gift she became a man.

Each day Win tells me another tale of generosity and sacrifice. He told me of an ancient king who gave his life twice over. He sacrificed himself to be reborn a rare fish with magic powers and then had himself cut up and fed to his people to cure them of their sickness. Another king of great generosity gave away his wealth without pause and even gave his head to an evil man, simply because he was asked. Win greets me every morning with a tale of these and other kings and princes who gave up wealth, family, and the most precious gift—the gift of body.

This morning before he could even speak, I asked him, "Uncle, what gift of body do you offer me today?" He giggled like a child. "Oh, Mya," he said, "forgive me, I am clumsy as a baby elephant. You know I wish you well. But we should not cling to things that are not ours: things that will be gone when their time is up."

I'm not sure the reason for his concern, and I spoke more boldly than I am used to. "Why are you so insistent? For your gain or Abraham's merit? Or your merit for bringing this all about?"

"I have enough money," he said. "I do it for the merit of us all. For the service he performs, for your generosity . . . and for whatever benefit may accrue to me. And, my young Mya, remember that a wounded tiger is more dangerous than a contented one. The king is an intemperate man, and his ways are unpredictable. We don't want him to devour Abraham out of spite."

He asked me to think again of what I would lose by giving up Abraham's body for a night. He asked me to think what the man I love would gain.



11 June 1599

Dear Joseph,

Today I shamed myself with anger I didn't know I possessed. Today, I was honored by a love I couldn't imagine.

Mya went early this morning to her favorite temple and spent the day praying and fasting. She said she wanted to hear more clearly the Buddha's voice. I walked her to the temple, and she was quieter than usual. We passed Europeans who, despite their time here, still held perfumed cloths to their noses as they made their way past rotting clumps of refuse and stagnant pools of rainwater. Would they, I wonder, do the same walking through the stench of Venetian alleys, stray cats nosing about piles of rotting fish bones and decaying vegetables? With Mya at my side, I smell only the fragrance of flowers, burning incense, and sandalwood wafting from pagoda and kitchen shrines.

I watched her enter the temple where hundreds of gilded idols, stacked from floor to ceiling, stretch along the front wall. The mitzvah tells me these are pagan abominations, but I must confess repetition strangely soothes me, like waves lapping against the side of an anchored ship. I looked at that golden wall shining in the morning light and thought not of the Buddha but of the Holy One, blessed be He, creator of all beauty, who opens our eyes to all that is beautiful in the world. I came back from the godown early, and Mya still hadn't returned. When she did come back, near dusk, Win was with her, which surprised me, since his servant had sent word that he was not feeling well. The evening birds chorused in the soft light of dusk, and Mya prepared tea from the hard stalks of lemongrass. The tea is clear as rainwater but strong enough to wash the day's tastes from your tongue. I think she wanted to clear my senses, so nothing would distract me from her simple words.

After Mya sought special guidance, she had gone to Win's. She needed him to help her with the words. He wrote down what she wanted to say. -I want you to bear my beart clearly. He speaks your language better than I, and with ours I run, while you can only walk.

She told me she knew for certain the right thing for me to do. —Now that I am sure, you can act with a pure beart.

—She wants you to sleep again with the brides. Mya sat silently, while Win spoke Italian slowly, reading from a piece of paper he held in his hand. —Who better than you? She knows you will say that she has known no others, but that doesn't matter. It is what you do. Mya looked straight into my eyes, as if she were drawing a line under the words he spoke. It doesn't matter if others could do it better. She isn't talking of pleasure, though you have pleased her even more since that first night.

I waved my hand for him to stop. How could she speak to him and he to me of things so intimate? —Whose words are these?

—Mine, Mya said. I rose quickly and walked toward the front door and out onto the verandah. *—There is more*. I didn't turn around. I had raised my voice and must have turned red like the Europeans I had pledged myself I wouldn't become. I had spoken harshly to a woman I loved like I had never spoken to Ruth, whom I only honored but never loved. Joseph, what a strange game our passions play, that we snap and bite at those who mean the most to us. Win followed me out onto the verandah. —*Ab* . . . *ra* . . . *bam, let us walk for a bit.* Win guided me down the road, afraid that Mya would hear my angry words.

—Abraham, I did try to convince her. But there was no threat on my part. It was her choice, her choice alone. Abraham, I am an average worldling, but she is a pious follower of the Buddha—she is a good worldling. Don't be angry with her.

My words came quickly, words that I had never spoken, even to myself. —It's not her. It's me. I'm afraid. Sometimes I have thought only of my own pleasure. I'm afraid I will lust after another woman. What if in a moment of desire, I think of my own pleasure and forget the reason for lying with these women? What if I forget Mya in the moment of my pleasure?

—You are not the Buddha. You are a man. These brides are supplicants in need of gifts. Even with your imperfections, you are a better gift giver than most. If you find their bodies pleasurable, think of the impure and the unpleasant—the rotting flesh of corpses strewn outside the city walls, the mud-covered swine your god tells you not to consume.

—How could I do that and still treat them with the gentleness and reverence their bodies deserve? If I did that, I become nothing more than my soulless member. That is an even worse thought than being consumed by lust. If it is just a body, there is no gift. If it is just a body, then I am an adulterer and these innocent brides are unwitting whores.

—Then think of Mya and the merit she is gaining.

—That seems more lustful—to lie in another's arms and think of the woman you love.

—Ab . . . ra . . . ham, you think too much. My head is spinning. It's just one night. It's just one body. Don't worry; you aren't a man overwhelmed by desires of the flesh. You will not be reborn a woman.

That was far from my worry. The truth I now couldn't deny was that Mya had made me a man and, I was afraid, too much of one. Win saw that my anger had dampened, and he turned and headed back to my house. Mya had not moved. Her eyes were red. My heart ached at the pain I had caused her. I told her I was wrong to raise my voice, to have lost my temper.

-I will speak with my own voice, she said. If you don't understand, Win can help you in the language of your people. My soul contrite, I shook my head and said nothing. -When I came to this house, I knew I had no name. I was just another bride who would leave in the morning. I entered this house because I had to, not to find love. I expected the pain—women in the village had warned me. But they didn't tell me the wind would stop blowing through the palms when you touched me, and the animals of the night would turn silent. You could have been rough with me, as I know other men are; you could have entered me quickly and been done, your task complete. But when you touched me, I felt I was your first woman. I felt I was the only woman in the world. That night, and every night you hold me in your arms, is like our last night on earth together. She looked down at the floor for a moment, made shy by the words she had spoken or was about to speak. —I knew that you had done an act of great merit, but Mara, who tried to seduce the Buddha, blinded me—I wanted to possess you for myself. Monks seek enlightenment alone in the forest, chanting the Buddha's name until they run out of breath. I have learned wisdom in your arms. Love is a great teacher. I came here a girl sleepwalking. Now I am awake. I am a poor woman—I can give you nothing but the chance to gain merit. What you did for me you should do for others. I can give them one night—what is one night to the countless nights of affection that lie before us? Please let me do this for you.

I sat speechless in the embrace of her words. I was moved by what she said and even more by the words not spoken. Joseph, she did not say, "Do this for me." She did not beg on her behalf in some simpering womanly way as I have heard our women do for some trifle. It was as if the silver hand that hangs from my neck had fallen into the fire, and she had thrust her hand into the flames to save it without thought or hesitation. Stifling my tears, I forgot Win was sitting there and touched her cheek, not having the words to repay hers.

I don't believe I will be reborn—my soul passes only once through this world of flesh and matter—but Mya believes it and will do all in her power to make my next life a better one. Do I repay her selflessness with my refusal? If I don't refuse but make a bride a whore in my bed, can there be merit for anyone in that? I haven't shared my fears with Mya—she will think less of me. It would pain me to see my tarnished self in her eyes. If I cross the line between love and lust, in that moment of desire I become the adulterer she believes I could never be. I told her that I will pray to the Holy One, blessed be He, for guidance. Whatever decision I make, no one but she will share my heart.

Why is the path to righteousness unmarked? Why do the law and one's heart not always point in the same direction? No brides wait outside my door. I am safe, but only until Win comes again. Easy to be a moral man sitting safely within the four walls of your room, but when you go through the door into the world, you must choose. No path, I am learning, may lead you through the forest unscathed.

Maybe Win is right. Maybe it is better to wander solitary as a rhinoceros.

Your cousin, Abrabam



13 June 1599

Dear Joseph,

Stones come into the city in a trickle compared with the stream when I arrived, but though few, I was able to secure six quality rubies today. With some more stones of this quality, when the winds shift, I will be ready to return with all my treasure. Win doesn't believe me when I say I will take Mya with me. No European has ever left with his wife—it is forbidden. Only my action will convince him, so I simply tell him to wait.

Antonio has revealed himself to be of our blood, as I had thought, though he has turned his back on our faith and all faiths. The cross around his neck means nothing to him—it is only an amulet to keep the Gentiles at bay. I have never met a man who claims to be so far from God, yet seems in his words and actions a good man. Strange to say that of a man who makes his living teaching men to kill other men. For all his bluntness and rough appearance, he treats all with personal kindness, no matter brown, yellow, or white. That Jesuit with the soul of a serpent reaches down from his high perch to save the infidels floundering in the muck his mind fashions, while Antonio, who believes in nothing, acts as brother to all. He heard me speak of Mya as my wife and knew that I meant it as a man should and not like other traders who rent them like whores. He, and only he, brought Mya a gift to mark my words. He came calling last night with a small silver bowl wrapped in a piece of red silk and finely etched all over with lotus flowers. He speaks the language well. He told her it was a wedding gift, though he joked he hadn't been invited to the ceremony; the bowl's beauty and his words moved her. She bowed her head and said he would always be welcome in her home. I added "our home." He stayed, we talked, and he revealed himself.

When others fled to escape the flames, his father's father stayed in Porto and played well the New Christian. —*Survival, Abrabam, is the song to sing.* His father kept the Sabbath light inside a pitcher of olive oil in the cellar. The flame flickered in his father's heart and went out in his own. —*I am,* he laughed, *vinegar to my father's wine*—the wicked son of a righteous man.

—When I was a boy, I saw acts that the devil has not dreamed of. I saw Israelites hanged by their feet from the gallows, babies tossed from balconies onto a sea of bayonets, old men trussed like pigs and their beards shaved with torches before being thrown into the flames. These infidels have nothing on my countrymen—a word hissed more than spoken—you needn't sail halfway round the world to visit the land of the barbarians.

Antonio remembers only a few words of Hebrew. He had a quick temper, and his father thought it best he not learn the language, for fear in a moment of anger he would blurt out words that would send all the family to the stake. Hushed prayers and secret rites were games he grew to mock. One of his uncles feigned a weak stomach and ate unleavened bread all year round to make sure he ate it on Passover. When Yom Kippur approached, he sent out his servants on frivolous errands and greased the plates to pretend he had eaten while they were out. Antonio had no time for such playacting. No hidden flames burned for him, not even in the cellar. —Survival, he said again, and then paused. But there is something more: doing something well. I'm a good soldier. I've walked across battlefields puddled with blood, where the fiery air was so heavy with cannonballs they smashed into each other and burst in midair. I've seen good men jump down wells out of fear, dive into rivers red with blood and thick with corpses. I never let my fellows down and have the scars to prove it. I am a good man with guns and can make a decent shot a better one. Israelite, Christian, infidel—we're all here to do something well, he said. That, my friend, is the meaning of life.

-Did not the Holy One, blessed be He, guide your actions? I asked.

—I'm not a tinker, I'm a soldier. I have seen enough to know God has left the battlefield. I only pray to a cobbler to make sure my boots take me to the next paymaster. I have faith only in what I can hold in my hands and aim at another man's heart.

He is a brother who has lost his way, and I feel free to press him about his faith more than I do with Win, who was born surrounded by idols and false beliefs. —If you have no God, what is to stop you from being a thief, a lecher, or a sinner without bounds?

—The brotherbood of pain. If I stick my band in the fire, I pull it back because of the pain—a pain we all feel. There may be no God, but there is pain. War is necessary. Pain off the battlefield isn't. He paused. His face had the expression of a man who was rummaging through a chest for a long-buried keepsake. Hillel—I have not spoken that name since my father whispered it softly for fear passersby on the street could bear through stone walls. A heathen challenged Hillel that he would convert, if Hillel could teach him all the Torah while the beathen stood on one leg. Hillel said to him, "What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is all the Torah. The rest is commentary." I remember little of the Torah anymore; but I know the world, and these words are enough guide for me. Too bad all those who pound their chests in praise of their gods don't have this compass tied to their waist.

Who am I, poor student that I was, reprobate in the eyes of my brethren for the life I now lead, to stand in judgment of this man? I came on this journey to do our business and return. I thought the journey might sharpen my eye to separate the dull stone from the intense and find the inclusions beneath a stone's surface sparkle. I was too comfortable in my certitudes to think the world could teach me anything else. I write you now a man humbled and slow to pass judgment on those whose legs are tattooed with birds and beasts and whose cheeks are scarred with war. Joseph, here is a man who our Assembly would surely excommunicate for his words and deeds, but he opens his heart to me and the woman I love, who others walk by without a cordial tip of their hats. Antonio is more a brother than my old self would have claimed.

—Abraham, don't be too disappointed in me. My time on the battlefield is coming to a close. He turned solemn, his gravelly voice even rougher, deeper. —I am the angel of progress, the destroyer of war. This is the end of war and the beginning of slaughter. No more elephants, no more jeweled swords parried with skill, no more pikes and short swords. No more courage, just men standing too far away to see the faces of their enemy. Some of my men grind rubies to powder and mix it with palm wine and think this potion will protect them from harm. Bullets have no eyes: they can't see what courses through a man's blood—they only aim to spill it.

He sat in the light of the flickering oil lamp, the shadows slashing across his lined face. —I leave the slaughter to others. This is my last post. I came here with only cloak and sword. I will settle in Goa, and one trip to Lisbon and back with a ship full of goods and I will be rich enough to live like a grandee for life. He raised his cup of palm wine.

—In my palace, there will always be a room for you and Mya, facing the ocean and the orange sunset sky.

As he made ready to leave, I offered him my future home, with a view that would be more dark walls than blue skies, though I promised a comfortable bed for two. —A narrow bed will do, he said. Some nights I need a woman in my bed, but there is no room in my beart for ber to stay. What starts out as a convenience ends in attachment and tears—these believers in Buddha are no fools. He looked at Mya as she padded in to take away our cups and plates, and said in words she could understand—But you two will sing us a new song.

We lay in each other's arms that night, our bodies one prayer that his words would be so.

Your cousin, Abraham



I took out the gold pins from her hair and laid them on a piece of folded cotton. I ran my hands through her perfumed hair to smooth away the curls and knots. I brushed the oiled and scented hair with long, steady strokes of a sandalwood comb my aunt gave me before I left home. The fragrance of sandalwood and jasmine and the scent of perfumed oils filled the room. I think the brushing calmed her. I took deep breaths and exhaled loudly enough to get her attention; she quieted herself with her own deep, steady breathing. We breathed as one; and when I felt her body relax, I took her to the bridal bed. She was a gentle, quiet girl, fit it seemed more for the nun's way than the life of a merchant's wife. Her beauty graced this house, and I felt good that Abraham would perform his service for such an angel.

When silence filled the house, I retreated into the back to sleep. I rose before dawn and waited for her to awake and seek me out. I had prepared warm water to pour over her and soft cloths dipped in fragrant oils to wash away the dried blood and Abraham's fluid. I wrapped her in clean cotton and rubbed her back and shoulders dry. I shared with her my oils, perfumes, and powder and combed her hair once again. I was her mirror to make sure her chignon was tight and no stray hairs dangled to mar the beauty of her face. While she sipped coconut water and Khaing humored her with idle talk, I went into the bedroom to fetch the bridal sheet. I folded it neatly so the red stains showed. Abraham had gone onto the verandah, and I inhaled the smell of his sex that hovered in the room.

I tried to comfort her anxious heart, to give her the gentle embrace of a sister. I am part of the gift she received. I readied her for my husband, so he would receive her without fear or shame as a full bride in his bed. My husband touched her, entered her, and loved her with his body, but only for one night and only with his body. What pain she may have suffered was erased by his touch that told her she is a woman worthy of love. I saw it in her face. Forgive me for the pride I felt when she presented the bridal sheet to her husband.

If there are more, I will treat them with respect and kindness. I don't want to dishonor my husband. Last night I lay down without jealousy or worry and fell asleep enfolding him into the depths of my heart. Like lovers in the highest of heavens, being together in the same place is enough.



2 July 1599

Dear Joseph,

There is only one bride in this house. There will be no others. If Mya asks, Win will tell her that there are no brides in need of my services. The truth is too confusing: I am not sure why myself, but I know in my heart I can give my body only to one. It was for Mya that I agreed to deflower another bride, and it is for her that I have stopped. I will have to find other opportunities to gain merit for her and myself; but in these darkening times, this shouldn't be difficult.

The bride left this morning. When Mya came into the bedroom, knelt, and touched her forehead to the floor to thank me for the act of merit she believed I had performed, I knew that was the last bride. She is the woman I love. I cannot hold another in my arms and not think of her. Her asking only deepened my love; and though out of love I tried, my love makes my obedience to her wishes impossible. I drank from one cup with my mind on another, and that is a sin.

I had prayed that the first bride would have crooked teeth, dragon's breath, and the clumping gait of an awkward child. I prayed for a test that I could pass. God sent me instead a bride more beautiful than any I have deflowered. Peguans pray to saints that have the gentle, quiet countenance of a woman, and the face of this bride shone with the same calm innocence. She had a beauty that makes even the roughest of men bow their heads in shame at the lives they have lived. Mya had combed her hair until it hung glistening like black silk at her shoulders and had rubbed fragrant oils about her neck and breasts. Mya summoned me to the room where the bride lay haloed in candlelight.

Never have I seen a woman so untouched by the wear of the world—her skin was as smooth and unblemished as the finest Chinese silk. Forgive me, even a tzaddik would have been aroused by her soft flesh. I lay at the edge of the mat, teetering on the precipice of desire. Mara, the god of desire, whispered in my ear and I listened. I ran my hand over the small of her back, the smooth curve of her buttocks, for the pure pleasure of the feel of her skin. I took her virginity for the sensual pleasure her body offered. The woman I loved slept under the same roof, and I betrayed her. I lay inside this bride and thought of Mya in hopes of pulling back from the depths of desire onto the level ground of duty, and that was a second betrayal.

Before Mya, I held each bride in my arms as if she were a wife I had chosen for myself. I imagined the final conflagration, flames roaring like an ocean gale, the tops of the palms exploding in fire, and I held them tight to shield them from the flames. Before Mya, there was no shame in what I did. Do you remember when Rabbi Jacob Cohen died? His books and the Torah scroll were placed atop his coffin, to honor the scholarly and wise man he had been. Before Mya, what I did for the brides, I did well, and Antonio is right there is something sacred in that. If the bloodstained sheets of the brides I have honored were put on my coffin, I wouldn't be ashamed. Before Mya, each bride was for me the earth around which the planets spin. Now there can be only one center of the universe. We Israelites are like scientists bent over their lenses and flea glasses, continually observing ourselves. How we walk—not too fast or too slow, how we speak—not too loudly, how we dress—not too fashionable, not too colorful. The Gentiles have exiled us to the laboratory. Even when they aren't around to order us to our instruments, we have so absorbed their commands that we take ourselves as the objects of our wary regard. We pay attention so we will not draw attention. Before Mya, I lost myself, if only for a few moments, in the arms of those brides. I stopped being the observing Jew: the voice telling me not to do this, not to do that was stilled. Now, in love fully for the first time, my mind stands a rebel sentinel above the bridal bed. Now, it is only with Mya that the mind is quiet, and our bodies speak—there is no past or future, just the present of our two bodies. This is happiness. I don't dare lose it.

> Your cousin, Abraham



16 July 1599

Dear Joseph,

I am gnawed by guilt that I am happy, while the world around me grows darker and more dangerous. The king has ordered his men to cull the pious and principled from those who hide in yellow robes from blade and blood, and Win worries that his son in the monastery may not be safe. Soldiers grow thin on reduced rations, and women in the market have lost their laughter. Mya pays double for what rice cost two weeks ago and returns from the market with a basket full of rumors. Parents in distant villages, it is whispered, are selling their children's flesh for a bowl of rice. I don't believe these stories of kin devouring kin, but I do see with my own eyes the bare market stalls and bands of ragged children begging on pagoda steps. Toungoo, Arakan, or even Nandabayin—it matters little to me who is victorious, as long as there is peace and no one dear to me suffers. Give us peace so I may conclude our affairs and leave with the fruits of these long months' labor.

Grim-faced Antonio left yesterday with troops in the thousands to protect the port of Syriam from the Arakanese. With Cosmin destroyed, if Syriam falls, we will have no avenue for food and supplies. Mya put a precious chicken before her Buddha, but I don't begrudge her prayers. I too have asked the Holy One, blessed be He, to watch over our wayward brother. Tears came to her eyes during her evening prayers. I told her not to worry—Antonio would return safely to drink our palm-wine pot dry.

-My tears are not for him, she said.

She listens to stupid chatter and not to her heart. She fears I will leave her, as all the other foreigners have done to the women they have wed. The foreign traders hide behind the royal decree that no wives or female children may leave the kingdom. If a ship is found at its departure to have more women than at its arrival, all its goods are seized and the crew enslaved. This may be a risk too high for most to take, but I have seen money and goods placed in the right hands turn eyes blind to other laws and royal decrees. If love not lust holds a heart, a man will find a way to keep what he can't live without. Khaing and the old women have been filling Mya's head with tales of foreign traders who speak of love and future lives together, then tell their wives they are going up-country to trade for a week and never return, or others who embrace these innocents lost in dreams one night and in the morning leave some gold bangles behind and are gone. I can only tell her again what I have told her before. I asked her to look into my eyes as I spoke.

-I am not like the others. If all others before me have left their wives behind, that doesn't mean I will. How could I leave with a bag full of jewels and an empty beart? I clasped both her hands between mine and held them in front of her face. -Look, there are no ropes around our wrists—we are not tied to what others have done. I took both her hands and placed them tight against my heart. -There is only one rope, and it binds my beart to yours. Do you feel it? She smiled, nodded yes, and began to cry again. I kissed my fingertips and wiped away her tears. If I return to Venice without Mya, may I be condemned to one of the Republic's dark cells, where not a ray of light enters, for such a heinous crime against the heart.

> Your cousin, Abrabam



24 July 1599

Dear Joseph,

I slept fitfully last night and woke to write this letter at first light, which isn't my habit. My soul is riven with doubts. I wish I could walk with you at midday along the Fondamenta Pescaria and speak out loud my fears and hear you speak and read in your face your reaction to my interrogation of myself. I wish I could seek the advice of Uncle or someone learned in the law.

In my troubled sleep, I saw Mya shivering in the damp alleys of our city, saw her shaking in the winter air, her bare arms coarse with goose bumps. I saw boys, Gentile and Israelite, point their fingers and taunt her, and women, old and young, turn their backs as she walked by. I lay there in hazy half sleep and knew myself a fool for thinking I wouldn't clothe her in warm wool or shield her from wicked words and careless cruelty. Yet were these dark images accusing me of some deeper selfishness, of putting my desire before Mya's happiness? Was Mara, whom these people so believe in, again trying to seduce me from the meritorious path? Would I be breaking her heart by following mine, if I uprooted her from all she has known, and planted her in alien soil to wither under chilly disregard? Would she and I travel around the world to be spurned by Israelite and Gentile alike? When I wed Ruth of blessed memory, my doubts were quieted by the tale of the rabbi who answered a Roman lady's haughty question of what the Holy One, blessed be He, had done since creating the Universe. "He has been arranging marriages," he said. I thought God wouldn't have arranged a marriage to a woman I couldn't in time love.

How can I now believe that our love hasn't been arranged? That no rabbi has legally blessed us doesn't make the blessings of our union any less real—no rite bound Adam and Eve. Some few have followed their hearts out of the Ghetto and turned their backs on the faith of their fathers. That is not my path. That would never be Mya's wish. The law and my heart must be one. How could I follow my heart and betray the law and still call myself a Jew? But how could the law demand I betray my heart? I would be lost if I had to do either. Sometimes I feel like a galley slave on a ship sinking in the midst of a flaming sea. Sprawled and gasping on a raft, I'm afraid to signal my masters, who would enslave me again, but I am afraid of waving to my master's enemy for fear he would kill me for the brand on my hand. The law and my heart call me to different ports and neither is safe sanctuary.

Mya fills my heart, when sitting down and rising up, when I eat, and when I drink. My daily prayer is a simple one—what I need and have received in rich measure are the same. I thank God for what has been given me and no longer pray for what I need—I have received all that I need. If I were to lose her, I would lose my better self. Let the Mourners of Zion cry for the loss of Jerusalem, my tears would flood the world.

She is my refuge, and surely our people will give her refuge, after a purifying bath, after she embraces our laws and rites. What more will be asked of her—that she turn her back on her idols, never utter the Buddha's name again? She thinks him only a tzaddik, not a god. If I were to show her the favor that love requires, would black candles be snuffed out and Assembly curses exile me from the community? I would rather help hide her Buddha in the closet or cellar than see her grow sad without his comfort.

If I loved her less, would I serve her better? And yet I grow angry thinking that if I left her behind for noble reasons, I would be thrown in among the traders who discard their temporary wives without remorse. I have come too far in my journey to once again be lost in the crowd.

Joseph, I float on a raft in the roiling seas. I hold on for fear of drowning, while siren songs come not from devils on the shore but righteous men of faith, who call out for me to let go so that I will be saved. The mitzvoth command me to let Mya go so I can reach the solid ground my brethren surely must think I have forsaken. Win berates himself for his weakness and is always going on about his Buddha's call for "letting go." I have not yet shared my doubts with Win, but I can hear him say—Ab . . . ra . . . bam, let go of this woman, quench the fires of your desire and you will not suffer. If I let go, I will drown of a broken heart. If I cling to her, my brethren will cast me down into the murky depths. If I cling to her, she may drown in unknown waters.

I am bedeviled. I want to do the right thing, but so many voices claim the right.

Your cousin, Abrabam



1 August 1599

Dear Joseph,

The last days have sped by like a runaway coach rushing downhill, past dangers and death, and coming to rest on the level ground of some old truths.

The defense of Syriam goes poorly: the Arakanese fleet surrounds the city, and their army advances. Antonio returned with his left shoulder badly slashed but fortunate to have kept his life. The enemy overran one of the Peguan camps, even before they had reached Syriam. The king was so enraged by news of the disaster that he ordered the soldiers on watch beheaded for their dereliction. Antonio didn't speak badly of those who died or escaped into the jungle in the face of the king's cruel punishment, but he couldn't contain his anger at the king's suicidal stubbornness and the stupidity of the officers. It was they who ordered camp set in an indefensible spot, hemmed in by the river and the jungle, and who failed to send scouts out before nightfall. —The king will only drive more of the Mon into the jungle, Antonio railed. Safer unarmed amidst the tigers than armed at the king's side. There is talk that Nandabayin will come to some accommodation with the king of Toungoo, but Antonio believes him too stubborn and cut off from the truth to make peace. Rumors swirl through the city that the

king of Toungoo has promised good treatment if Nandabayin's eldest son comes over to his side.

—What do we have most to fear, Antonio asked with mocking bitterness, the thin rats invading the granaries from the countryside or the plump rats scampering out the gates? It's time for me to seek a safer trade. Soon, Abraham, there will be another "wandering Jew" making his way in the world.

Win has a soft spot in his heart for the rough-hewn Antonio. He invited all of us to his home to celebrate his safe, though wounded, return. Mya and I arrived at midday to find the household in turmoil: tears streamed down the women's cheeks, the color had drained from Win's face, and his hands fluttered like caged birds as he spoke. One of the slave children had found a large snake coiled in a shady corner of the house where his son had slept before leaving for the monastery. A harmless type, a decent rat catcher, as long as it knew its place and stayed outside under the house. But for the Peguans, a snake inside the house is a grave omen. They believe without doubt or question it can only mean that the family under its roof will lose all its property. Win recited, one after the other, tales of neighbors whose houses had gone up in flames, had been enslaved for failing to pay a debt, or had fallen, through drink and debauchery, into penury and had lost everything. This lazy snake had only sought a shady change of scenery and then slithered away between the bamboo slats, more frightened by all the tumult than the humans rushing about the house. But for Win, the snake's presence was a clear sign, as night follows day, that devastating harm would befall his family, and his riches would vanish quick as an arrow from the bow. As soon as we had entered this anguished uproar, Mya was drawn into talk so rapid I couldn't follow it without Antonio as my translator. The subject of their fevered debate was how they could counter the evil that the snake had brought, how they could draw out the omen's venom from their future. I had never seen Win's wife, Myint San, her whitened cheeks stained with tears, so vocal in front of her husband. She interrupted him, shook her head, and turned away with a frown when she disagreed with what he said. The siege of Syriam was a skirmish compared to the battle fought in front of Antonio and me.

They had to seek the Buddha's protection immediately, and Myint San would hear no objection to her plans. She sent the servants to the market to buy as many fish as they could find still alive and flapping in bamboo baskets. The family and everyone in the household, except for an elderly servant too weak to make the trip, would travel to a large temple complex a good three hours by bullock cart from the city. Here two large reclining Buddhas lay by a stream, where on Buddha's Day-the very same day of his birth, enlightenment, and death-the faithful come to free fish into the fresh water. The family would do this now and make offerings at the temple, thought to be an especially propitious place for the pleadings of women. Win's resistance to his wife's entreaties was practical: it was late in the day to start such a journey-the oxen would be trudging along in the heat of the afternoon, rather than the coolness of the morning, and we would be returning in fading light and darkness on roads unsafe for such a small party. Myint San had made her mind up and would not listen to reason.

Outside of his wife's hearing, Win shook his finger to caution Antonio and I.

-Never marry a woman born on Saturday. They are quarrelsome dragons who give you no peace. Waving his hand toward Myint San,

he said she should change her name to "Thaw Thaw," which means "noisy, noisy" in his language.

Myint San forged ahead with her plans, turning to Antonio for the aid of his one good arm and to me for my two thin ones. —You will come to keep us safe? It was more command than question, and who was I to deny those who have so aided me? Mya very much wanted to go to make her own pleadings at the temple, and I had little choice but to let her come along. Antonio demanded that we get a third cart and three other men with arquebuses to accompany us. Servants scurried off with messages, and we waited more than an hour until the carts lumbered to the house. The servants loaded the baskets of fish, flopping and splashing, onto the carts, and we began our pilgrimage.

If you haven't traveled in the carts of this country, you haven't experienced torture—torture beyond even Dante's imagination, torture enough to turn the holiest Israelite into an apostate. They are more coffins than conveyance—the open basket of the cart resting on the wooden axle and two large, roughly rounded slabs of wood for wheels bumping along the uneven roads. The wheels weren't greased and made shrieking noises, like the tortured denizens of hell—you could hear our screaming carts a half mile away. We could have made better time walking if not for the women and children; and for much of the way, Antonio, Win, and I walked beside the carts. The journey was not unpleasant, despite the dust and discomfort of the cart.

The temple was in a quiet spot shaded with a crown of palms, and the river, more a narrow stream, curved behind the trees. A handful of monks strolled the grounds, and no more than a half-dozen women and children were sitting on the steps leading to the Buddhas when we arrived. They were outnumbered by troops of large brown monkeys, some who sat scratching themselves indecently and others who ran around making a nuisance of themselves in hopes we would feed them. A solitary jester, well fed, makes me smile, but these thin, scraggly creatures, grown unaccustomed to making their way in the jungle, had turned aggressive, for few pilgrims visited in these hard times. Their sad, surly antics brought no laughter, only reminders of the world beyond these quiet grounds.

We carried three baskets of fish along a path that ran through the palms to the river. Maybe four dozen or so silver fishes a bit longer than the length of my hand—the larger ones had been sold earlier in the day—squirmed and flopped on the way to their unexpected freedom. Win passed some coins to the monks. They blessed the fishes, and the family and servants dumped them into the shallow water. A few lay still, beyond the power of prayers, and the rest skittered here and there, surprised to find themselves back in cool water, not searing flames. Perhaps the heat and the journey had tired me out, but try as I could to put myself into the hearts of Win and his family, this seemed a useless gesture, a bit of magic that wouldn't trick even a heathen's gods. Mya, more moved than I, tugged at my sleeve, and smiling, pointed toward two fish who seemed most revived and darted downstream together—one was longer and thinner than his partner. —*There we go.* I smiled too, hoping it would be so.

Prayers said and monks thanked with words and gifts, we began our return to Pegu in the dim light of dusk, serenaded by unseen birds and insects. Despite the sounds of the jungle and our noisy wheels, this part of the day is for me a gentle, serene time: the day takes a long, calming breath before exhaling into the darkness of night. But what we feared and had prepared for cut short the tranquil hour. Our shrieking wheels announced our coming. Less than a mile from the temple, five men, silent and pale as wraiths, emerged from the jungle. If it hadn't been for the swords they waved and the quick slashing of one of the bullock's front haunches, I would have felt pity for their spectral appearance and put a coin in a begging bowl if offered. One of the brigands grabbed the driver of the first cart and threw him to the ground, and another menaced Myint San with a short sword and froze our guards for fear he would slit her throat. I was walking with Antonio, arquebus on his shoulder, behind the last cart. When, in the confusion of the attack, I turned toward him, he had disappeared. Just as I wondered where he had fled—a shameful thought I regret—I caught in the dimness his figure crouching, camouflaged by thick vegetation at the side of the road. In that very instant the leaves exploded with flames and the brigand at Myint San's side screamed and fell to the ground, his chest torn red with blood. One of our guards jumped from the first cart, and grabbing his gun by the muzzle, swung the heavy wooden butt of his weapon and knocked unconscious the brigand who had attacked the first driver. The other three fled into the jungle. How Antonio managed with his wounded shoulder I can't say. In our moment of danger he reacted without thinking of himself or his injury. Myint San and Mya were weeping, and the servants loudly echoed their tears. I held Mya and comforted her more with silence than words until she stopped shaking. The wound to the bullock was fortunately more bloody than severe, and the drivers staunched the bleeding with wet clay and leaves. The brigand lay pale and moaning, his life flowing from him. Even I, who had not seen until then what a musket ball could do, knew his death was near. Antonio and Win hurried the servants to tend the wounded animal and herded the women back into the carts. We wanted to start up again, before we would be enveloped in full darkness. Antonio told the drivers to drive ahead and the women not to turn around. I went back to where Antonio stood over the fallen man.

-Leave this to me, Abraham. Your hands are clean. A little more blood won't make any difference to mine. I'll put the bastard out of his misery.

-What about the other one?

-We'll leave him. When he comes to, he can take care of his friend here.

I caught up with Mya's cart, and turned in time to see Antonio take a large stone from the side of the road and bring it down with his one good arm on the head of the wounded man. Don't think harshly of him—he didn't want the man to suffer. I think he would have wanted the same done to him on the battlefield.

The half-moon lit our way back, and we finished our journey without incident. Once we arrived at the safety of our home, you can imagine the blessings and offerings Mya made to her idol and the prayers of thanks I offered the Holy One, blessed be He. To see a dead man, laid out pale and lifeless like a painted statue, is far different from a man struck dead in front of your eyes, the anguish of his last moments, the fragility of life writ in red before you. I feel a bit the fool writing as if I had discovered the truth of our fleeting mortality, but just because others have long seen what is fresh to my eyes makes it no less true. The image of that brigand writhing in the throes of death will remain forever in my mind.

Sleep may be calling, but I am clear-eyed: it is the here and now that is most dear. All the rest, past and future, is as insubstantial as the morning fog. There is time enough in one life to be a righteous man. Joseph, enough talk of rebirth—what good is another life without memory of this one? Of you, of Uncle, of Mya, of all those bound to me by love and affection. This life is the life I must live.

Safe now in the quiet of my home, I look back on yesterday. When Antonio fired his arquebus to save us all, and held the stone in his hand to save me from whatever punishment God might have meted out or from the guilt I might have inflicted on my own soul, he and I became bound forever beyond the blood we share. I would trust him with all I hold dear. With equal passion, I feel that when I embraced Mya before her people, without pause or shame, I reaffirmed the silent vow I made months ago to take her as my bride. I know in my heart, so long hidden from me and shut off from others, that we are one.

> Your cousin, Abraham



13 August 1599

Dear Joseph,

Every gust of wind brings another rumor. If rumors were rice, everyone's belly would be full.

—Syriam bas fallen.

-Syriam remains in Pegu hands.

—The king's eldest son has thrown in his lot with the king of Toungoo and lives there in pampered splendor.

—The son was greeted in Toungoo by the sword and his head sits atop a bloody pike.

—The king has sent his white elephants—dearer than all his kin—to appease the Arakan king.

-Nandabayin's own daughter has been sent weeping to Arakan as a royal bride.

—The Toungoo demand no less than the Tooth of Buddha; and if Nandabayin bows to this demand, the city is doomed; and if he doesn't, our fate will be the same.

-Not all the gold statues and precious stones in Nandabayin's treasure-bouse will soften the Arakan king's beart.

An optimist grabs at a branch, thinking it sturdy enough to float safely to shore, a pessimist thinks it weak as straw. All of us tread water in these tumultuous seas and wait for others on the hilltop to determine our fate. Strong swimmer or weak, we will be saved or drowned by currents outside our control.

What I do know as a fact is that two merchants, a Dutch trader in spices and a Portuguese doing well in lac, have cut short their pursuit of profits and left for the safety of Melaka. They paid a premium to find a ship that would sail against the winds; and they had to sell some of their stores at a loss because the hold wasn't large enough for all their goods. I can travel lighter but am not yet ready to leave. Win, my barometer of royal winds and weather, sees the dark clouds, but he clings to the hope that Nandabayin can appease the rulers of Toungoo and Arakan—that gold and jewels and bended knee will pry apart the vise's jaws and bring peace. —*Better for them to yoke a bealthy bullock than slay it*, he says.

I can't stay forever, for the jewels bring Uncle no benefit here. If I must go now, I will have to find a way to bring Mya without harm to her or anyone who helps us. Win cares nothing about keeping Peguan women within the empire. —There are enough for the men bere, enough to keep the young men from turning to sodomy. If you must take anyone, take Myint San. She was not amused.

Win believes it's unsafe to try to smuggle Mya out on a ship.

—In times of chaos, a bribe to the right people and can't we sail free? I asked.

—In hard times, you can't trust anyone. The customs officers will take your money and then betray you. The risk is too great. Even before you set sail, a crewman might kill her for fear of his own life. You put the sailors' freedom at risk, the shipowner's money, and the merchants whose goods lie in the hold. If you are in a burning house, maybe you should flee through the flames and out the back. But be patient, the sparks may not yet set the bamboo aflame.

Win and Myint San worry about their son, of whom they have heard nothing these last several weeks. When his name comes up, Myint San's eyes redden, and she struggles to hold back her tears. I try to turn the subject to other things, which is difficult in these darkening times. I look at her undisguised grief and hear the catch in Win's voice, despite the impassive visage his people have perfected, and I am ashamed of the tales my European "brothers" tell about Peguans. They speak with solemn faces of the Peguans' line having begun in the mating of a Chinese woman and a dog—sole survivors of a shipwrecked junk on the coast centuries ago. What blasphemy the Portuguese and Dutch have spawned to free them of guilt, while they murder and plunder all those who don't wear a cross or have skin the color of theirs. Like the blood libel we Israelites have long suffered, these words are just a circle the Gentiles draw around their own kind to exclude those different from themselves from humanity's embrace.

I have seen many wonders since leaving Venice, but I haven't seen men with feet round as oxen or skin scaly as snakes, or fellows with lumps of flesh at the bottom of their spines, large as both my fists, where their ancestors' tails once grew. These creatures live only in the second- and third-hand tales of those who swear that those who told them swore them to be true. My travels have turned me into a doubter of such certainties. I have dropped "I was told" from my vocabulary. Until I had traveled far from the narrow streets and small squares of our city, I hadn't noticed how much in our life is told to us by others, how much we take on faith from the eyes and ears of those who have neither seen nor heard what they claim to know. Their opinions are cold dishes served distant from the kitchen where others have prepared them. I have seen so much firsthand on my journey that I am now reluctant to swallow the secondhand notions others serve. I doubt what I haven't seen myself. Especially when tales come from the mouths of men who believe themselves superior to those they claim to describe and judge. I have seen with my own eyes only men made of flesh and blood no different, beneath their robes and tunics and hair braided and beaded, than those who walk the streets of Venice. I have seen tears flow down heathens' cheeks as easily and copiously as ours.

Oh, I have seen wonders fashioned by the Holy One, blessed be He, that have left me awed and silent—the Mouth of Hell's bubbling field of pitch on the banks of the Euphrates, rainbows arcing the ocean's waves, palms sparkling in the morning light along rivers half hidden in billowing mist, birds the colors of peacock feathers, and beasts—enough to fill Noah's ark—not seen by any man who has lived his life behind Ghetto gates. I have seen wonders fashioned by men—castles of desert brick, soaring infidel temples gilded in gold, gentle-faced stone idols with carved gowns draped and diaphanous, so skilled in their workmanship that you would swear they fluttered in the breeze. In winter's long night in years ahead, I may be that old man boring all who can't escape his thrice-told tales of distant lands and adventures more fantastic and unbelievable with each telling. But I know that the true wonders I discovered were the ones that lay waiting in my heart.

> Your cousin, Abraham



Some nights I wake in the darkness and Abraham is lying next to me, his eyes wide open, looking at the ceiling, listening to voices only he can hear. I know the perils of the kingdom worry him. Death is dancing everywhere. Strange, but as the times grow more troubled, he seems to have become calmer. When I first came to this house, his hands darted about his head, and he ran his fingers through his hair and twirled strands between his fingertips. His hands had lives of their own. Now he sits like a statue. His hands rest quietly in his lap. Only once has he raised his voice, like other foreigners. Though I know he has his own god, sometimes I think he is one of us.

I know he won't leave me, but I am frightened. I am frightened of the sea—of water whose bottom disappears into the darkness, whose shores can't be seen. I am frightened of the monsters I have heard live at the edge of the world and swallow ships as easily as geckos swallow flies. Abraham comforts me with tales of his safe journey. He tells me not to believe the words of those who have never ventured past their paddy fields. Yes, the wind can churn the water, and the water can churn your stomach, he says, until you cannot stand and wish nothing more than to die and escape your misery. But he promises to cradle my head in his lap, to put a cool cloth on my forehead and croak—for he can't sing—a lullaby to bring me rest. All my discomfort will drift away like smoke, he says, when I see the sun rise from its watery bed and return at night with colors more lovely than any Indian cloth. My heart believes him—I hope my stomach won't betray my heart.

Abraham asks if I will be lonely so far from my people. Khaing has comforted me, and Myint San has treated me well; but they will grow old, and there are few who will grieve at my going. My father has sent no words to me since I left. Sometimes I see him in my dreams—that will be enough. Some mornings I may wake in Abraham's city and want to smell the scent of jasmine, hear our women laughing in the market, or crack open a coconut and drink its cool liquid. I will have to learn to let go. It won't be easy, but I think there will be curious things in his city to make me smile, new flowers to smell, even food that will please my tongue. Abraham says they have rice in his country, so my sadness won't stay long.

I told him I would be happy in his country, as long he didn't go on long journeys across the sea. If something were to happen to him, every bite of rice would taste like dust, every cup of water would be bitter with sadness and tears. He said he didn't need to travel anymore—he had everything he needed.

He tells me that the people of his city burn trees in their houses to keep out the cold. The air is so cold, you must cover all your body with cloth, and no one can tell one person from the other. When I told him that will make me happy, he was surprised. I said that until I learn the right words in his language, I will have to point, and I don't want people to know who I am.

During the day he points to things and people and what they do and tells me the words in his language. Before we go to bed, he reads from a book he has brought all the way from his country. He treasures it as if it were the sacred words of the Buddha. It is the story of a man who travels to the Lower Depths of the House of Smoke and sees the punishments that befall evil people. Abraham doesn't find it sad. The words are beautiful; and though the man is not of his faith, he is of his spirit. Abraham finds the words a comfort, like torches lighting the way at night.

I can't read my language. I was never taught. He is teaching me the letters and words of his language. Someday I will be able to write words on a piece of paper for him. I will fold it until it is small enough to put in the pocket of his coat. When he walks through the city, he can take out the paper and hear my voice tell him how deep he dwells in my heart.

He shows me words in his book. "Amore"—I have learned that word.



19 August 1599

Dear Joseph,

I rose before dawn this morning after another restless night of dreams that fled the moment I awoke, leaving a gnawing unease and tiredness, as if I had carried a basket heavy with rocks up a steep hillside. My soul is burdened with decisions to be made and voices urging me in different directions. While the city still slumbered, I decided to walk the quiet streets to clear my mind. Trying hard not to wake Mya and to dress quietly, I grew clumsy, as often happens when we think too much about something as natural as putting one foot in front of the other. Haven't you ever been so careful not to drop a fragile cup that the fear of an accident turns your fingers to wood and the cup almost tumbles from your hand? I stumbled against the bead curtain, and it clattered Mya awake. She, like Win and the others, finds my walking an object of amusement. For Win, walking is for servants. Walking without purpose makes no sense to Mya, especially in the heat of the day. Walking to the market or to the pagoda she understands. To walk simply to savor the sights and sounds of the city, she dismisses as some strange custom of "your people." This morning, I joked and prodded Mya that without her I would stumble and harm myself or get lost and never be found. With feigned grumbling, she agreed to come with me; but only because the sun still wouldn't be high in the sky when we returned, and she could stop at the market on the way back.

We followed the fragrances of the flowers, turned at the play of light on the palms, and set a course drawn by the shadows the houses cast. A line of palms drew us to a small temple that neither she nor I had visited; in the courtyard a shaded pond shone with golden carp, large and lazy, floating among underwater islands of pitted rocks. The fish bumped each other when we bent over the water; but without bits of rice to feed them, they soon glided back to their rocky homes. In the calmed water, like Narcissus I saw myself but didn't fall in love with what I saw. With Mya's reflection shimmering beside me, I saw the self I had been, the self I left behind.

I am sure you remember that more than once, when chided by some prospective in-laws for my apparent moroseness or disinterest in the prospect of marrying their daughter, I claimed that I wasn't a sad person. Nor, I claimed, was I a happy one. I took pride in my self-proclaimed balance—like some finely calibrated scale, I had achieved equilibrium between the depths of sadness, with its self-absorption that with time bores even its bearer, and the giddy heights of happiness, which demand a level of blindness to the world I could never allow. I believed that with the scales in balance, I had attained some special level of wisdom.

When I looked at my face surrounded by the fish swimming aimlessly in the confines of the small pond that was the ocean to them, it struck me that I hadn't lived a balanced life—that I had lived no life at all. The only scales I had fashioned covered my eyes. Yes, I was neither a happy nor a sad man: I was no man at all. I was neither here nor there: I grieved over the past, I sleepwalked through the present, and I looked ahead hoping the future would be brighter by some magical energy of its own. I had damped down that part of my heart where emotions spark. How can you be a man, how can you be alive if you don't live in the present?

When you last saw me, I believed that I alone suffered. There were beggars and widows in the Ghetto, mothers who had lost their children to the plague or their sons and husbands to the Knights of St. John to die in some dungeon unredeemed. Yet I thought their suffering was different, a lesser mark than mine. I thought myself born under a dark star, the child of death and destruction, arriving in the world between the great earthquake of 1570 and the plague in Padua a year later—none of this an accident in the dark universe at whose center I stood. I thought myself Job when my son died. Why had the Holy One, blessed be He, forsaken me? But my son was just one among many who died in their innocence. When smallpox swept away sixscore children from our community in less than a half year not too many years ago, the tears of those grieving fathers were no more bitter than mine, their rent hearts no less torn. I thought I had a royal monopoly on suffering. What presumption to think that God had deserted me alone or had chosen me above all others to be the bearer of some dark lesson.

Soon after I arrived here—forgive me if I have written of this earlier—there was a man who I could not help but notice at the godown. He went everywhere with his son, a child of nine or ten, with fine features, like a marble angel, and a pleasant disposition that made even the sternest customs official smile and joke. The love this man had for his son shone like a blazing hearth. He praised him for the smallest achievement, gave him dried fruit and sweets for accomplishing the simplest task. Win said that the man, a gentle soul who had gone through life with little comment or distinction, saw in his son all that he wished for himself but had not become. One day the son took ill with a fever and died suddenly. The man sat in his garden wailing so loudly that the leaves of the palms shook with his grief. After a day of weeping and keening, he fell into a brooding sadness and wouldn't move from his house, even to make offerings at the temple. Finally, after almost a week, an old monk, who knew the man well, came to the house and told him that he had invited all who had never suffered in their lives to come to the house the next day to console him. The man ordered his servants to stay up all night preparing food and drink for his guests. In the morning no one came, and by the afternoon still no one had walked up the steps of his verandah. By dusk, the man grew calm and went to the temple. He remembered what he had forgotten in his grief—that he was no different from all other men. At the time, I thought the monk heartless, but now I understand.

Don't think me an apostate when I say that Win and Mya and all the believers in the Buddha are right: I see now that pain is universal. God visits upon all of us, for reasons too mysterious for my mind to fathom, pain and suffering that can't be weighed and compared by the souls who do not bear it.

I have struggled to find words to describe who I was before I arrived in Pegu. I was like the room of Asher Levi's pawnshop where the pledges are kept. Built of stone and mortared so tight, not the thinnest beam of light can penetrate, not even one mote of dust can filter in. Thick and solid, no thief can peer inside. Without design or trowel, I became my own master mason. I built a room around my soul, stone by stone, trying to keep the pain outside. The light stayed outside, and all that was within the stone walls was my dark and dusty soul. But there was no treasure to safeguard from thieves. All that I encased in stone was bitterness. The world couldn't enter, and the bile bubbled up into that empty space and seeped into the crevices of my soul. I gave nothing of myself, so how could I receive any pledges of affection? I had become a walking Ghetto, my windows bricked and barred.

Ruth's death was an excuse. Long before her death and the death of my son, I had cut myself off from life. I used their deaths to justify the person I had already become. I heard the talk: "That's Abraham's nature—he is a dark fellow." Nature is the sum of the choices we make: thread after thread is woven together into a coat we find more and more difficult to remove.

I can see the contours of my old soul in the pond's clear water and in the silent darkness of my room late at night, but I can't foretell what soul is being reborn in this foreign soil. Like all of us human *strazzaria*, it will be an imperfect work, with tears and missed stitches. I do know that when Mya gave herself to me and I reached out to draw her close, the bricks of the pledge room began to crumble, the light began to stream in, and now even the dust floats and dances in the light. But Win is right, no matter how much light and breeze this love carries with it, my soul will never be free of pain. We suffer because we love. Win would suffer less if he loved his son less, but he can no more choose to love his son less than I can parcel out my love for Mya like a cook ladles out soup. Better my heart be set ablaze than crumble like dried leaves. If pain is the cost of loving, then it is a cost I will bear. How can I be human, how can I wake from the sleep that I have called my life, if I don't love?

As we walked back from the temple, I tried as best I could to tell Mya what I had seen in the pond, what I had learned from the images in the rippling water. She did not say anything for a few moments. Then, smiling, she said—Those fish must have been wise teachers in their previous lives to have taught you so much. She covered her mouth with her hand, as Peguan women do when they laugh, and her eyes sparkled. Pity the poor man reborn a thousand times who never sees that smile.

> Your cousin, Abraham



22 August 1599

Dear Joseph,

We are in the bloody maw of history. Syriam has fallen. Antonio came to the house at first light with the dark news. As soon as word spread through the royal barracks, deserters headed for the gates and the jungle.

If the Toungoo set siege to the city, we can hope to last only a few weeks: cut off from the countryside, we will become a city of walking cadavers, fighting the monkeys for rotting coconuts and scraps of rice. —The king's soldiers can beat their magical gongs till their arms turn to stone, but the enemy won't wither away, Antonio said. Our only hope is some accommodation with the king of Toungoo, but Antonio casts a soldier's skeptical eye on any promises. What are promises to the victor?

—When the armies of Toungoo enter the city, words will blow away like chaff in the wind. There will be no barriers to the appetites of men hungry for gold and women. He looked at Mya. —Forgive my bluntness. I speak out of friendship. Abraham, if you live in a world of dreams, Mya will be violated and you will die.

—Aren't you too quick to see the worst? I asked. There is no siege, and there is talk that the king has sent cartloads of gold and jewels to Toungoo.

—All for the king and the royal treasure-bouse. Do you think a tattooed Malabari or Achinese heathen from some thatched hut will eat from the king's gold plates or be handed a jeweled bracelet from the king's hoard? When they bear what treasures Nandabayin has sent, it will only drive them to claim the city's spoils for themselves. They'll strip the temples and pagodas clean of gold; and what they can't take, they'll burn down in spite. Believe me, when blood runs, men are deaf to their gods and turn into beasts.

-But I'm not a Peguan. I'm just a trader. The moment I spoke I was ashamed for separating myself from those who I have come to respect and love.

—In the smoke and flames, you'll just be a body standing in the way of what they want. I have seen men blinded by lust who thought nothing of killing a hundred men for a single cruzado. He looked again at Mya. She saw in his eyes something that he did not want her to hear, and she left the room without a word.

—You can't protect her and she can't protect you. I've seen this with my own eyes. Soon after I came to Pegu, the king ordered the death of a general whose incompetence he took for disloyalty. At the execution the condemned man's wife embraced her husband one last time. Before the guards could pull her away, she wound her unpinned hair around her husband's neck and dared the executioner to lift his sword. With one swing of the blade, he cut both their heads off. I won't forget her head lying on the bloody ground, the look of open-mouthed surprise on her face. And she was a general's wife. He paused. —If you stay, Mya won't be able to save you. Abraham, my brother, take her back to Venice, you don't want to die in this heathen town. Come with me, what choice do you have? He plans to go to Melaka, Aceh, or wherever a ship at Martaban will take him. Antonio thinks I have no more than two weeks to decide. If the Toungoo forces march down along the Sittang River, it will be too dangerous to make our way to Martaban. I have to decide. I have to choose. Whether I go or not, Antonio needs my help. He doesn't want to travel loaded with the reals he demanded in pay and is now burdened with. —It's best to travel light—this I learned from my grand-father. I know you understand. He wants to buy stones from me—he can hide them more easily. A small pouch around his neck, under his shirt, or sewn in the lining of a coat will draw no attention. He knows the danger in this business. The king holds a monopoly on all the stones sold and taken from here. Though these are chaotic times, the customs people remain at their post, and all the goods I have bought must be accounted for. There is little need for him to ask me to be silent about our business.

-If I'm caught, the king's men will kill me. For the jewels or for my disloyalty—it won't matter to the crows picking clean my bones. The king's commanders fear that the spirit of the troops will be broken if we Portuguese leave. They live in denial: the spirit of the men is weak as the rice gruel they are fed.

I will talk to Win. We will find a way to get him the jewels. I owe Antonio my life.

The sky is dark, dear Joseph, and the storm approaches. Yet I feel strangely alive and calm. I think not so much of myself to believe that God sends these trials to test me alone. Yet it is a test I embrace, a test whose answer lies in its taking. I am called to choose, and in the choosing I live, even if death lies down the "deep and savage road" before me. I could have stayed comfortably in the Ghetto and died an old man, but my death in spirit would have come long before my body's demise. There is much to do, many choices to be made. Sleep tonight in your soft bed with me in your prayers. Have no fear in your heart, knowing I listen to Dante's counsel: "So long as conscience is not betrayed, I am prepared for Fortune to do her will."

> Your cousin, Abraham



Last night Abraham's heart beat in the palm of my hand. He had fallen asleep with his arms about me. Afraid I might wake him, I didn't move my hand that lay under his chest. I never imagined that a man so tall, a man strong enough to travel across many lands and over seas bounded by unseen shores, would have a heart so small. It seemed no bigger than a hummingbird. The Buddha says all things are impermanent, but I never thought until last night of a world without Abraham in it. If he dies before me, I will die twice.



27 August 1599

Dear Joseph,

I have stopped going to the godown and to the trading table. The trickle of stones has dried up. The days stagger slowly from dawn to dusk. Even Mya awakes fatigued and upset, her stomach churning with worry. Win's mood floats up and down, like a leaf riding the waves. In the morning he is filled with hope and faith. By the afternoon he curses anyone a fool who would believe the king of Toungoo's promise to treat Nandabayin like a Buddha; for Win they are hollow words, empty as the market stalls. He goes to sleep planning the exodus of his family and servants to the distant village of his cousin, and the next morning awakes trembling with fear that such a journey is no better than suicide. —*Better to throw ourselves in the moat, to be eaten by alligators and be done with it.* It is sad to see his once smiling face now shadowed with worry and suffering.

Today, we sat on the verandah, looking out at the quiet street even the old women with nothing to trade but gossip have stopped sitting on their haunches under the palm trees. Win looked up after a long silence. —Ab . . . ra . . . bam, it is bard to live as the Buddha instructs. My mind knows that life is suffering, but I am too weak to let go of those I love. My beart shudders with pain at what may happen to them. I can't stop desiring their happiness. What comfort can I give him? If he were a beast without a heart, he would feel no pain. To love is to be human.

Shaking off for a moment the mantle of foreboding that weighs heavy on his shoulders, Win has devised a simple plan to help Antonio and not endanger too greatly our affairs. Through the years he has collected stones of poor quality with cracks and inclusions and other imperfections that make them of no value on the market even some colored glass that Chinese traders have tried to pass off as precious. We will substitute these for the rubies and spinels I will sell to Antonio. If the customs officials haven't fled into the jungle, Win says, they will only count the stones and not pay attention to their quality. We will hover over them, distracting them with idle talk and moving the suspect stones quickly across the cloth.

We ration rice and the few fresh vegetables and fish that come into the city. Mya is afraid to walk alone in the street—hungry children with angry eyes poke thin fingers at her arms, demanding a small coin or a scrap of food from her basket. She has seen them and their thin, spectral mothers sneaking into unguarded gardens to steal fruit and scavenge fallen coconuts. Win's servants sit with thick wooden sticks, guarding day and night his durian trees and coconut palms. Yesterday Mya came back from the temple we had visited, her eyes red from crying—this is unusual, as she keeps her emotions well reined in. A few orphaned fish swim in the pond once crowded with carp: empty bellies have driven people to desecrate this sacred place. No prayers will be answered there.

I am afraid we will die if we stay here. "We." It must be "we." If I leave without her, I will die. So it is no longer should we leave, but when and where we will go.

Joseph, we are a family of flight, a people of flight, and I for too

long fled myself. I had to travel to the far ends of the earth to find myself. So once more I will flee, but now with the one who has redeemed me from captivity. Her mouth says she will go wherever I want, but I can see in her eyes the fear of traveling far across waters and lands whose immensity she struggles to imagine. To travel to Pegu was for her a perilous adventure. Will she endure the hardships of sea and desert, and if she does, will she survive our damp stones and gray skies? Can we travel safely to her village or even farther, to the village of Win's relatives? The road is likely to become even more treacherous with deserters prowling the jungles, and if we do survive its perils, what will our lives be in villages that may not welcome more mouths to feed, especially one on such a strange face as mine? Can you see me knee-deep in a paddy field or flicking the rump of a bullock with a bamboo rod? Mya laughed at that picture, and even I had to smile. So, I am a fountain of questions and doubts, but there is no time for the Talmudic dissection our uncle so revels in. Starving children lurk in the shadows. Outside the gates the enemies of Pegu are on the march.

> Your cousin, Abraham



29 August 1599

Dear Joseph,

As the pharaoh needed your namesake, I need you now. My nights are full of dark dreams. Portents hover like noxious airs over even the gayest scenes.

Last night I dreamt word had come to Uncle that I was returning. The house was in turmoil. Aunts and cousins bustled about, their cheeks glowing pink from the heat of the kitchen, their foreheads glistening with sweat. They had stayed well past the sixth hour, chopping and stirring and sautéing. The windows were clouded with steam. Every room was filled with the smell of cinnamon, cloves, fried garlic, and onions. Aunt Esther was marinating red mullet with pine nuts, raisins, and onions as if she were preparing to break the Yom Kippur fast. She had roasted a chicken with orange, lemon, and ginger, and kept repeating, though no one seemed to be listening, "His favorite, his favorite." I don't remember any dish being special to me: I was just a dutiful diner who never took great delight in what I ate but cleaned my plate and thanked the cook out of politeness, not pleasure. She and the other women rushed about in silent determination-you would have thought King David would soon arrive. The table sagged with salt cod with polenta, fish balls with cinnamon and cloves, peppers stuffed with eggplant, braised fennel,

and in the center, at great expense, lamb shoulder smothered in olives. The excess was oppressive. The room was stifling. My body in sleep felt hot and damp.

You were preparing to greet me at the dock. You strutted through the house, holding open a coat made especially for my arrival, showing off its brightly colored silk lining of purple and aquamarine. Uncle wouldn't let you out the door for fear you would unbutton your coat and arouse the ire of the Gentiles with your peacock display. You "baaed" in his face like a sheep, and with red face and loud voice said that just because the Gentiles cursed us as God's black sheep, you didn't have to dress like one.

Uncle looked paler and feebler than I remember. I thought as the dream passed before my eyes that my absence had turned him into an old man: all those hours in the synagogue praying for my safe return had turned him into a sallow, shrunken specter. He hurried as best he could through the streets toward the Riva degli Schiavoni to find my ship among those crowding the quay. He struggled to make his way through the black mass of merchants returning and leaving, pressing their money pouches close to their chests. Redeyed relatives of the dead shepherded coffins up the gangplank for their burial journey to the Holy Land. My face stared blankly from an open coffin. Uncle didn't see the coffin.

Tears of joy streaming down his cheeks, he pushed his way through the crowded dock, trying to find me. He rushed toward an Israelite in yellow hat and black coat. When he turned around, he was a stranger. A small boy stood off to the side: he had my nose and Mya's dark skin. He called out "Uncle," but he was too small to be seen, his voice too soft to be heard above the noise of the quayside throng. Everyone had left the ship. Dusk was approaching. Uncle shuffled across the empty dock toward the Ghetto, before the gates closed.

I woke heavyhearted and drenched in sweat. What direction were these dark images pointing? Don't tell Uncle of this letter.

> Your cousin, Abrabam



30 August 1599

Dear Joseph,

How blind I have been.

Mya rushed from the bed this morning, and I heard her throwing up outside the back of the house. I thought at first the fish we had eaten last night had upset her stomach and I went to comfort her. Khaing was wiping Mya's face with a damp cloth.

—Are you well?

-Abraham, my husband, it is to be expected.

Khaing grinned her toothless smile, and I knew. The Holy One, blessed be the All Merciful, has given me a second life. When Ruth of blessed memory carried my son, I was too young, too unworldly to understand the miracle bestowed on me. I thought it the natural course of things, my due as a husband. I have awakened. I stood before my wife and Khaing and cried without shame.

I must stay here. I can't allow Mya, with child, to bear the travails of the long journey home in the damp stench of a ship's belly, heaved to and fro by wind and waves. I can't imagine her bearing the pains of childbirth among strangers, stranded in a village on the way to Aleppo, crying out while sand beats against a hut's dried-mud walls. What hope will there be for my child in those dangerous early days, if he takes his first breath on some rolling ship far from shore or in the smoky shadows of a desert campfire? The unknown dangers are too great—I can't gamble the lives of Mya and my child.

The day has been filled with talk and plans. Antonio and Win rushed back and forth from the house. I brought them news of life, and they brought fears of death. There is much to do, and time grows short. There will be no siege, but neither Win nor Antonio thinks this cause for celebration. Nandabayin has accepted the king of Toungoo's offer of protection, but what a fool he is, they think, to believe his daughter and the gold she bears will buy peace. Dreams of revenge can't be buried with the dead—too much blood has been shed. The king of Toungoo and his army will arrive in a week's time to humble Nandabayin publicly before the people.

-Nandabayin believes it enough to offer gold and bow his head as a vassal. He thinks he will survive to fight again, but his head will roll in the dust. I won't be here to see it, Win said.

Antonio agreed. —You needn't know how to read the stars or the innards of a dead goat to know the future will bring blood and sorrow to this doomed city.

Win has shed the hopes that clouded his vision. He and Antonio see the fires of Sodom and Gomorrah. The princes and generals of Toungoo won't be content with a handful of bangles or a legion of slaves. Their king is a weak man who sleeps fitfully, afraid more of his followers' plotting than he is of the Mon of Pegu. He will appease his retainers and let them ravage the city and take what they can. Thousands of horses and bullocks will drag away carts heavy with the riches of sacked palaces and pagodas. If we stay, we will be choked by dust and trampled beneath the hooves of elephants tromping under the weight of chests and bags filled with gold, rubies, and sapphires. Antonio takes no pride in the dark picture he paints, in the predictions he is sure will come to pass. Win can only shake his head in agreement. The Arakans, slow to arrive, will take out their fury at the greed of their ally and will strip the city bare of anything the Toungoo in their haste leave behind. Then, Antonio says, they will set the city aflame. -I can smell the smoldering timbers already, the burning bodies of the innocent.

We all leave in three days' time. Win and his family will travel with Mya and me to her village, and if we are not welcomed there by her father and her relatives, we will travel on to the village where Win's cousins live. We will stay until the future is clear, praying that the dark visions we harbor prove false. If they are not, we will wait, live as best we can in the countryside, and return to the city when the embers have turned cold.

Antonio will go south to Martaban and from there start a long journey to a destination that wasn't in his plans until tonight. May God, his Rock, protect him—he goes to Venice with our jewels and all the letters I have written since leaving India's shore. I didn't have to be the insistent supplicant I had feared. Little did I think when I first saw this rough-looking man, scarred and martial, that I would entrust him, as I would a brother, with our family's fortune. I must trust him if I am to fulfill my obligations to Uncle. If you are reading this letter, then my trust was not betrayed. I believe him to be a man whose "yes" is really "yes" and whose "no" is really "no." I sold him stones for reals, as we had originally agreed, and came to an arrangement for Uncle to pay him a fair but handsome amount for bringing back our jewels. This arrangement and a complete inventory of the stones entrusted to him are in the letter to Uncle that I include with this one. I have full faith that Antonio and Uncle will honor the arrangements that I have made. I have kept some jewels—these too are listed for Uncle—and will carry a portion with me along with some reals into the jungle; the rest Win and I will bury under his house. I take the jewels to buy our safety from brigands, though these soulless men may take our lives as well as our jewels. I can do no more than this and pray to the Holy One, blessed be the All Merciful, to protect us in our exodus through the wilderness. Mya and the child whose heart beats within her are all the treasure that matters to me.

If Antonio arrives safely with the stones, then Uncle will find no fault with my decision, the arrangements made, and the explanation offered. Jewels are of little value compared to the woman by my side; but Uncle has risked much of his fortune to procure the stones, and I must fulfill my obligations to him. If I were to keep them here until it's safe for me to return, his well-being and the well-being of all who depend on him would suffer greatly. All he has worked so hard to achieve would be put in jeopardy. I told all of this to Antonio, deep into the night. He bantered and joked that a palace in Lisbon might please him as much as a palace in Goa. He would take great satisfaction in parading down the street in silken finery just to give apoplexy to the wellborn to whom in his younger days he had to tip his hat and make way. Though I don't discount the promise of riches, I think one last adventure appeals to the soldier in him. There is also an unspoken bond between us, the bond of two, one later than the other, who have turned their backs on what others expect, to live as they choose.

Tell Uncle I will return. But to you, I say I do not know. I can't speak with certainty in these uncertain times. Not because I may lose my life to brigands or beasts of the jungle, but because I have gained my life by coming here. When we were young boys, we sat shoulder to shoulder in the synagogue, surrounded by our darkclothed elders. I felt like a man, a miniature man. I saw myself in those men and couldn't wait to become one of them. Now I'm not so sure. Sometimes I think I could never return to the cages crafted by Israelite and Gentile: to be locked up at night by the Gentiles or confined every hour of the day by the gaze of my fellow Israelites. I can't imagine going back to become another old Jew among old Jews, thought by his neighbors to be just like them, to think as they think, feel as they feel, to be one of them, interchangeable, replaceable.

Or will I grow lonely for the sounds of the Israelites, the sound of prayers in the thick warmth of the synagogue? Maybe one day I will wake up and on my daily rounds the sound of monastery bells and the smells of a fish stall will carry me back to Venetian days and Rialto mornings. Then again, I may grow to embrace ever more tightly the freedom my strangeness allows me here. Maybe I won't want to give up cradling a mango in my hand or sampling a slice of papaya offered by a smiling woman in the market. Perhaps my strangeness will fade, and I will just be Abraham, the foreign devil who fell in love and stayed.

Forgive me, Joseph, if I seem not to know my mind. I can retrace the route over sea and land that brought me from Venice, but I can't return to who I was. I will leave my dark coat and pants behind when I leave for the countryside. I looked at these clothes tonight and wondered whose they were. They don't fit me anymore. That person in dark clothes and of somber mien never saw the sun rise from the ocean's edge or from behind a line of palms, never stood in the middle of an empty street and opened his arms wide to the day, never let his heart speak. That person walked narrow alleys and rarely looked up. Now I see the stars. Now I see all "the beautiful things that Heaven bears." Now I live in "the shining world."

There is much to be done before we depart.

Your cousin, Abraham



I went to the special Buddha who looks after women bearing children and asked him to return me safely to the city before the baby comes. Khaing has brought many babies into the world, and I will be safe when my time comes. The Buddha entered the world from his mother's side, next to her beating heart, and my child comes too from the heart. If my prayers are heard, he will be a boy.

My son will be a man of the city, and he should begin life here among men of breeding who hold his father in high regard. His father has the soft hands of a city man and is not fit for the mud and muck of the paddy field. He says he would make a good scarecrow, but he couldn't frighten away a baby dove. The crows will feel his gentleness: they will land on his outstretched arms and dot the fields in black.

What my man does for me today, I will do for him tomorrow. When my son is strong limbed, I will put my fears aside. I will leave my fate to the Buddha and travel across deep water and lands filled with strangers.

Khaing will stay back—she says she is too old for the trials and dangers of the road. She was born in the city and believes she is fated to die here. I pray that day is distant and peaceful.

I have cleaned the house and weeded the garden. Khaing will

look after the betel vines and the orchids that I have planted. It would sadden me if they were to wither from neglect. I wrapped a few strands of my hair around one of my wedding hairpins; and when no one was looking, I buried the pin beneath the bamboo trellis. No one told me to do it. It simply seemed the right thing to do—a way to protect this house from harm and draw us safely back. We go to my village and the house where I lived, but this is the house where I was born.



2 September 1599

Dear Joseph,

You know that I am not the cousin you last embraced, when it isn't yet dawn and I'm already awake. Antonio will be here soon, and I want to write one more letter to you—but I pray it is not my last.

Win and I buried jewels and reals under the durian tree in his garden last night while everyone was asleep. Many men here prize its fruit more than gold, and Win believes that even the greediest invader will steal the fruit and spare the tree. Even if he is old and blind when he returns, he says he will follow the fragrant stink to our treasure, like an X on a pirate's map.

I take only what I need and what can be carried, which is not much—rice, dried fish, some cotton sarongs, the holy Torah, my Dante, and for Mya a small idol of the Buddha. Win leaves his silks and silver in chests at the godown but doesn't expect to see them again. There is so much that now seems unnecessary. Mya is a city in which everything is found, and there is nothing else that I need.

She spent yesterday sweeping the house, washing the cooking pots, cleaning the hearth, as if the New Year were approaching. I think she believes that if she acts as if we will return, we will, and all will be here when we do. Mya doesn't want to anger the spirits by leaving the house dirty and dusty, as if she were abandoning it forever. As I write, she and Khaing are rolling up and tying our straw mats for the journey. They are the last things to go into the cart. The room seems so empty without them. She is saying what I think is a prayer over the place that has brought us blessings beyond riches. I debated whether to leave the mezuzah, afraid that if I take it from the door frame, it will be the cause of our not returning; but I don't want an infidel to desecrate God's holy words, so it travels with us to our new home, however temporary it might be.

Beneath my prayers I share a bit of Mya's superstition, and am afraid that if I write as if this were my last letter to you, I will make it so. You know my absence has made my love for you burn more strongly. I can only repeat what I have said before or which hopefully these letters will convey. Don't think I am not returning because I love you or Uncle less: it is that I love Mya more and choose to do nothing that will bring her harm.

Pegu has made me choose. My feet trod the hard cobblestones of Venice, but I floated through life on the expectations of others. I came here because it was expected. I came here the obedient nephew. I thought I was a good man, but I was only obedient. I thought I was a free man, but I simply did what others told me to do and believed I was listening to the commands of my own soul. Not all lessons are learned when we are young. I have learned that to do what is right is an act of will, not the blind acceptance of what others say. I chose to sleep with the brides. I chose to take in Mya. I chose her for my wife, and I choose to stay here. I will never again hide behind the easy words "I have no choice." I will never again speak of fate as if the stars have set our path. If I have acted unwisely or played the fool, it wasn't the stars that were the cause. The self, the self that sleeps or denies itself, that is the cause. Remember me, Joseph, not as the man who was asleep but as the one who has awakened.

Do you remember when you were five and I was seven, and Uncle talked for days about the comet that streaked across the sky in a great reddish arc? I didn't see this celestial wonder but remember Uncle's excited words about the beauty of the night sky. While these visions have passed into the bright lore of memories, men who study the stars with lenses and numbers see in that comet a challenge to all those who believe the heavens perfect and unchanging. A new century approaches: new worlds above us are revealed, new worlds beyond our imaginations open with each ship that sets sail from our shores. Some despair navigating under stars that shift and change their paths. Dear cousin, we shouldn't despair that we are unmoored, that we, like the stars, are not constant and unchanging. We can choose our own course under the broad heavens. To choose is to set sail in strong winds and rough waters. But oh, where the stars and winds may take us.

There is so much that is unknown.

It is dawn and we must go.

Your cousin, Abrabam

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I will lullaby my son to sleep with tales of his father.

When I walk to the fields, I will bind him to my chest and speak to him of this good man. Before he can run away from my words, before he can speak of foolish things, or hide behind his silence, I will tell him of his father. Someday when he is a man, he will speak of his father and say, "Thus I have heard."

The market stalls were empty, and the temple grounds full. Those leaving prayed for the Buddha's protection on their journey, and those staying prayed for the Buddha to fill the hearts of their enemies with compassion. Win said better to pray that their arms grow tired from hoisting the king's treasure onto carts, so that they are too weak to lift their vengeful swords. The guards had deserted their posts, and the high wooden gates swung open, leaving the city to its fate.

Some of our neighbors sat glassy eyed on their verandahs, too frightened to leave or too overwhelmed by the unknown that lay ahead to raise a finger or give a command as their servants scurried about. Your father was a clear-eyed general. He chose what to take and what to leave behind. He lifted chests onto the carts, and tied them down. Of course, he didn't invite the perils we faced—what compassionate man would? But he seemed to come alive preparing for the dangers before us. As if he welcomed the chance to show with deeds his love for me and his affectionate gratitude to Win.

As we made final preparations, Win joked with your father that perhaps he would be reborn in his next life in a more martial calling. Whatever anxiety he felt, your father kept it concealed. My people, he said, are used to fleeing from cruel kings. They have learned to live lightly. What is a few weeks' journey in the forest, even a few months'? Someday, he said, he would tell you the story of his people wandering in the desert for forty years. I could tell by his solemn manner that what he said was true—this was not a tale to quiet my fears at the hour of our departure. But it did.

Antonio, a soldier of the king's and one of your father's people, came by for a brief farewell. You owe your life to this brave man—this is a story I will tell you often. This day I said little for fear my words would lead to tears. I bowed to him. He grasped my hands between his large, rough hands and told me to look after your father. It grieves me to think that I will never see this good man again.

Uncle Win said that when the city was built, in ancient days, the king chose four of his bravest soldiers—a great honor they embraced for themselves and their families—and buried them alive, one in each of the four corners of the city to protect it from evil spirits and human enemies. That was long ago: the tears and blood of the innocents slain by our king have washed away the power of their sacrifice.

Our three-cart caravan moved slowly through the gate and out of the city. The road was dry and pounded smooth, but the wagon still bumped and jarred my insides. I didn't want you to be harmed, so part of the day I walked alongside your father. The lumbering oxen and heavy wheels covered our hair and faces with a thin veil of dust. Dust was in everyone's eyes. Your father blinked and rubbed his eyes. I moistened a corner of my shawl in my mouth and cleaned the dust from his eyes.

Near dusk we approached the paddy fields on the edge of a village. Bloated bodies floated in the muddy water. Your father didn't look away. They were just bodies, impermanent bodies. We camped for the night on the grounds of a deserted temple. The roof and pillars had been stripped clean of their gilding. We slept inside the temple, beneath the sad-eyed gaze of the Buddha. Some evil men had gouged out the jewels that had once shone from the Buddha's forehead and palm. Your father and the other men took turns standing guard to protect us from bad men roaming the forest. When I went to sleep, I smelled the faint odor of burning wood. In the morning, the sky was dark over the distant city. Everything was burning.

We were not alone on our journey. The roads were crowded with people, most much worse off than us—sarongs dirty and torn, their arms stick thin, and their cheeks sallow and sunken. In this river of desperate people, if we had given only a handful of rice to each outstretched palm, we ourselves would have been beggars in two days' time. Your father and Uncle Win did share some of our food with clumps of orphaned children whose eyes had the dull glint of water in a deep well. But your father worried about me and you—concerned that I ate enough rice and drank enough water for the both of us, concerned that I didn't tire myself out by walking too much or get bounced about by the cart over the bumpy roads. The farther we got from the city, the worse the roads became. The villagers had stopped giving the king the labor they owed him. Elephant grass grew tall at the side of the road, and deep holes, where the rains had washed away the earth, rattled and cracked the carts.

I am not a soft woman born in the city, I told your father. I have spent more time bent over in paddy fields, more time slapping the rump of a water buffalo than I have fanning myself on a shaded porch in Pegu. Win, who was as close as a brother to your father, warned that he would make a poor husband and an even poorer farmer if he pampered me: "A woman is like an ox; one should not display affection to either." I had heard these words before in the village, and I'm not sure they came from Win's heart. For sure, they found no home in your father's.

As dusk approached on our second day out of Pegu, we came to the edge of a small village. A short walk from the village gate, a stream made a gentle loop before heading north, away from the road. Two young girls, who looked only a few years younger than I, splashed and laughed in the shaded shallows. Their swinging arms sent water fanning into the air. The fires of Pegu and my simple village days seemed years away—ancient stories told by old women.

We rose early with the sun, rested the oxen during the midday heat, and traveled on until dusk. The heat, the dust, and the uncertain future that hovered above us like a flock of crows kept us all silent on the road, even Uncle Win. A touch, a look, a few words—this was how your father spoke to me. Your father looked with fresh eyes at what I and others born in the village pass by without pause or comment. Sometimes a sight would so move him that he would just stop walking, rooted where he stood, as the carts rolled ahead.

Three days from my village, we had spent the morning traveling a narrow road through a thick bamboo forest. Bits of sunlight struggled through the trees—it was as if we were walking under a large pale green umbrella. We came out of the forest onto a grassy plain with paddy fields at its edges and blue hills on the distant horizon. Your father and I were walking side by side. He stopped and threw his arms wide, as if he were trying to embrace the sky that surrounded us. In his city the sky is never so close, he said. The streets are narrow, not much bigger than a forest path; and the buildings, taller than palm trees, lean over the streets, and force you to walk like a hunchback, your eyes tethered to the gray stones at your feet. You can see the sky, but you have to choose to lift up your eyes, he said. You have to shake yourself out of the habit of looking down. Days pass without looking up, until you forget the sky is there.

As we walked, he spoke again of the strange city that floats on water and his people who dress themselves dark as crows and live cooped up like songbirds in a cage. When he first opened his heart to me and spoke of his life before Pegu, I asked if his people were slaves. Did they lose their freedom in battle? He said no, and this confused me. I don't understand the ways of these tall hairy men from across the sea with their dog teeth. They all look alike to me—no one marked a master, no one a slave.

Looking out at the paddy fields stretching toward the horizon, he said that on the day he sailed away from his home he sat among his people in the house of prayer, speaking to his god who has no name and prayed to return safely to live as he had always lived. "Now," he said, spreading his arms wide once more, "look at me—here I stand bareheaded under a blue sky thousands of miles from who I was." Smiling, he shook his head and strode ahead in silence.

At midday we rested the oxen, and we ate a few handfuls of cold rice from the night before and some small bananas we had picked on the journey. His meal was meager, but your father didn't fail to thank his god before and after for the food he had received. Remember, your mother knows little of the world beyond the kingdom and the gods people there pray to. I asked your father how his god would judge me, since I didn't know how to speak to him, what prayers to offer him. Your father took my right hand in his, my palm and fingers rough from years in the paddy field and vegetable garden. He traced gentle circles in my palm. "My God, blessed be He, will love you as I do." Your father touched a small scar on my finger where I had carelessly cut myself harvesting rice when I was a young girl. "The first thing He did after making heaven and earth was to plant a garden." That is a god, I thought, that would listen to my heart.

Did I miss my home? your father asked. Was I happy to be going home? No one was close enough to hear, so I spoke the truth. "I am happy that I am with you, but part of me is sad. I'm not returning home, I'm leaving it. Pegu is my home. Pegu is where I found love. Pegu is where I found you."

The next night, we camped in a village of no more than a dozen houses a half hour's walk off the main road. War and our troubled times had seemed to pass this village by. The children didn't rub their stomachs and hold out their hands. They smiled and laughed and had color in their cheeks. Even a few young men had stayed, protected by the smallness of the village and its isolation. A narrow path ran west from the village well to a small pagoda, its back lined with mango trees. An ancient banyan tree stood at one side; its creepers hung down like braided ropes. On the other side, a thick grove of bamboo gently arched over the roof, like the fingers of hands held high to bless and protect the Buddha inside. It was a cool, quiet place whose beauty silenced us all. Not even the faint trill of birdsong broke the stillness, and the oxen went meekly to graze without a smack on their haunches. The villagers must have fed well the spirits who dwelled here. In this blessed place, our prayers for safe travel and health would surely be heard.

The fire made and our rice cooking, a young boy and girl crept, hand in hand, near the pagoda, to where we sat eating. The boy stared at your father. He had never seen a white stranger before. The little girl would go no farther, but the boy came closer, step by halting step. Your father pretended not to see him so as not to frighten him away. Taking a deep breath and one long stride, the boy poked your father in the ribs to see if he was made of flesh and not smoke and air like a ghost. Surprised that his hand didn't go straight through your father, the boy stood still, not sure what to do next. Your father turned and poked him gently in the stomach, and we all laughed. Our laughter melted away the boy's fear. He stood his ground and poked your father's chest, then his shoulder, even ran his fingers up and down the hair on his arm. Like a loyal puppy, the boy stayed at your father's side until the fire turned to glowing embers, and we went into the pagoda to sleep under the Buddha's gentle gaze.

In the night I was wakened by the sound of bamboo crackling and moaning in the wind. Rain beat down on the roof and against the walls of the pagoda. I moved closer to your father, who slept soundly through the storm. He didn't awake even when a cascade of thuds pounded the roof, as if a giant were beating on it like a drum. In the morning, he was surprised to find the ground strewn with mangoes shaken from the trees by the violent wind. It was a good sign, food from the heavens, he said. I wanted to believe that, but the sight of the now naked trees chilled my heart, and the fallen mangoes looked like golden teardrops shed by the Buddha for reasons I didn't then understand.

As the cart turned a remembered bend in the road, I told your father that we would soon be in my village. I hadn't been gone so long that I would have forgotten where my own village was. But there, where no houses had stood, where no smoke had curled from home fires, where no well had been dug, a line of newly thatched houses was strung out between the road and the forest. A young boy stood by the side of the road as we approached. When he saw me, he waved and called out my name. I didn't know this pockmarked boy. He waved again. I stared at him and saw in now familiar eyes and smile the smooth-cheeked child he had once been.

My village was dead. The house where I was born was deserted, home to rats and crows. My father was gone, both my aunts were gone, my cousin a widow scarred and blind in one eye. The healthy ones, untouched by the pox, had left the old village and built this new one, as soon as their neighbors' skin began to burn and blister.

Old Min-Tun was alive, prince among the pocked and blinded. The pox must have found his twisted body not a fit meal to feast on. He said a vision came to him in the gray hour between night and dawn, the half-life between sleep and wakefulness. He awoke and scraped the scabs from the face of a child who had survived the pox's curse. He ground the scabs into a fine powder and inhaled the powder while many of my neighbors looked on, too frightened to even call him crazy. A few, who he had cured of pains and fever and whose trust and desperation were greater than their fear, did as he said and breathed in the powder. One got the pox and died, but all the rest had a fever for only a day or two and lived. It was too late for my father and all whose blood I shared. I had come back, like dear Abraham your father, an orphan.

Though the pox had passed almost two months before, if the sun had been higher in the sky, Win and a weeping Myint San would have left that very hour. They had no choice but to wait until the morning. Though your father wanted me stay away from the old village, afraid that evil vapors clung to the earth, I had to go—I owed my father's spirit my prayers.

We walked quickly past the cemetery, where hungry ghosts scavenged the rotting mangoes and clumps of rice scattered amidst the dead. We didn't slow down until we reached the paddy fields. Inside the gate, rain and crows had swept clean the last grain of rice from the village shrine. The village spirit had cursed the village and disappeared.

I stood before an empty house full of death and summoned life one last time. I saw my mother pounding rice, heard her voice singing a soft lullaby, felt her hand in mine. I saw my father on the Buddha's birthday—his hair oiled and wearing a new, brightly colored sarong. I stood at his side, a small child barely up to his waist, proud to help carry offerings of fruit and sticky rice to the pagoda. He smiled at me. I remember—he smiled at me.

I asked the Buddha to see the man he was and not the man he had become. I asked the Buddha to watch over you on your journey to life and to protect your father, who was for us both the giver of new life.

We had just hurried past the cemetery, on our way back, when a high-pierced shriek tore apart the late-afternoon stillness. I grabbed your father's hand, and he squeezed mine. Our fear bound us together. He was about to run back to the camp, certain that robbers had attacked and were strangling Myint San. Wait, I said, for I remembered that sound. Another shrill shriek and a low, trembling, moaning hoot—it was the Devil Owl. Just a bird, I said. Your father loosened his grip, but I continued to hold his hand tightly. I closed my ears to the tales of old women and their dark omens of death.

When we returned to the others, Auntie Myint San was too upset to eat. She was afraid of the night, sleeping so close to death. She was afraid of the coming day, once more traveling past forests where she was sure brigands lay waiting to rob and kill her. She couldn't stop her trembling and her tears. "Where will we go? Where will we find refuge?" she wailed. "We must take refuge in the Buddha," Win said. The truth didn't comfort her.

We set out early the next morning for the village of Win's cousins. We backtracked for a day before heading north again. The road branched in three directions. The driver of the first cart asked Win which way we were to go. I think Win had been polishing the answer, hoping for the question. "The Buddha says to take the middle way," said Win. Even your father, new to the Buddha's teachings, couldn't help smiling.

The road Win knew all along to take ran between the forest on

one side and a stream on the other. The road curved left to cross the river an hour or so into the morning. Timbers from a burned bridge lay in a jumble in the shallow water. It was not a broad stream, but I got out of the cart, afraid of another jolting ride across a stream's rocky bottom. I pulled up my sarong with one hand, and held your father's hand with the other. We entered the stream hand in hand. The cool water barely came up to my knees. Nearing the far shore, your father slipped and stumbled, but he caught himself on the shallow bottom with his free hand, before he could fall all the way in the water. He laughed at his clumsiness. I never let go of his hand.

By midday, the sun had dried his damp clothes. By dusk, his shirt was damp again from hours of walking under the sun in the clear sky. Your father was quieter than usual that evening. We lay side by side under the stars. He brushed his hand across a tuft of grass that poked up between a narrow space where the edges of our mats didn't meet. He raised his hand and pointed with his finger at the stars. "Every living thing, every blade of grass, has a guardian star that watches over it and whispers, 'Grow.'" He placed his hand on my belly. Before I could speak, he had fallen asleep. I could feel his hand warm through my sarong.

The next morning, even after a bowl of rice, he didn't look well. His face was pale, and his cheeks were cool to my touch. He started the morning walking behind the cart to keep Uncle Win company. Your father was a tall man, and walked with long strides when he was in a hurry. Now his steps were short and slow. He said he was fine, just a bit tired, and the walking would get his blood flowing. But his body told a story different from his words. I played the pregnant wife, and it didn't take much convincing for him to keep me company in the cart. He ate little during the day, complaining that his stomach bubbled and churned. At night I made him eat a bowl of plain rice, telling him that when you came, you would need a strong father.

I was awakened late that night by his body next to mine shaking and burning with fever. His forehead was hot as a hearthstone. I tore a strip of cloth from an old sarong, dipped it in water, and held the cool cloth against his forehead. Your father kept saying that the fever would soon pass. The heat of his fevered body quickly turned the cloth dry. I applied more wet rags to his forehead and cheeks all through the night. When he slept, I dozed off. When he awoke fevered, I awoke, as if our bodies were one.

In the morning, his body still burned, and he lay exhausted from the night's battle. Uncle Win and his servants tended him while Auntie Myint San and I went into the forest in search of a remedy for his fever. I looked with Min-Tun's eyes as best I could remember, and we returned with three handfuls of roots, leaves, and pieces of rough bark. Over the fire, we brewed a special tea. I let it cool a bit and raised your father's head and made him sip as much as he could through his parched lips. He was weak and spoke little and then only in a whisper and most times in the special language he used to talk to his god.

Uncle Win wouldn't let us travel the next day or the day after. Your poor father grew weaker. I offered rice and prayers to the Buddha that I'd brought with us. I offered rice and wild bananas found in the forest to spirits we might have unknowingly offended on our journey. I prayed for him and for you and for all those he held dear in his distant city.

His fever didn't break. Throughout the fourth day your father fell in and out of sleep. I dipped my fingers into the warm tea and

wet his lips. At dusk, exhausted, I dozed off. I woke under the first evening stars to the sounds of your father gulping for air, like a drowning man.

Oh, how I wish I could delay with words the course of fate.

I crouched by his side, leaned over, my cheek next to his and my hand on his heart. He grew calm, and in a voice soft as the evening wind through the palms, he spoke to his god. Your father's gentle eyes looked into mine. "Thank you, Mya," he said. His eyes wandered beyond me, into the darkening evening sky. He seemed to be searching for one star among the many. He raised his hand and his fingers weakly brushed against my belly. "Grow," he whispered.

I spoke his name three times. My dear Abraham didn't answer.

We did what must be done. We wrapped his body in clean cotton and lay it in a cart. We set out to find a village pagoda. We met a young boy on the road who said in a half hour we would come to a path that would lead to a village near the river. Uncle Win said that your father had come by water and should leave by water. We found the path, but it was too narrow for the cart, so Win and the servants carried your father. We made our way single file to the bank of the river. We gathered up branches and dried palms and made a bed for your father at the river's edge. We all chanted prayers over your father's body. They were our prayers, not his, but I am sure his god understood our hearts.

Before Uncle Win and his servants lifted your father onto the pyre, I thought of you. I unwrapped the cotton that covered your father's neck and shoulders. I took off the chain from around his neck and slipped it over my head. I bent down and kissed your father's lips one last time. When his body was put on the pyre, I placed on his chest the two books that began and ended his day. Rubbing two pieces of bamboo against each other, one of the servants started a fire and lit a small torch of twigs. I tried to light the pyre, but the branches wouldn't catch. I think they had gotten damp from the splashing water. Win told me to be patient: not all wood, he said, takes flame in a sudden burst.

We waited in silence. I could hear the sound of the birds and insects in the forest. The twigs crackled, and the cotton caught fire. White smoke billowed from the pyre, and the wind blew the smoke toward the bank. The pyre hugged the river's edge in the still water for several minutes. On the far bank, two egrets sat high atop an overhanging branch, their heads bowed in mourning. Win and I gave your father a gentle push to send him on his way. The others moved away from the smoke that swirled over the bank. I walked along the bank, following the blazing body as it drifted downstream.

I put my hand over my belly, and told you then as I tell you now that someday you will meet your father reborn in the body of another good man, and both of you will know each other. I prayed then as I do now that you do not think ill of your mother, poor worldling that she is. I am unenlightened—I love this man, I cling to him. My love is a fetter that I cannot sever. The path of suffering awaits me.

I watched your father's flaming, impermanent body float toward a slight bend in the river. Billowing clouds of white smoke rose from the water, and my dear Abraham was gone. ... the wretched inhabitants being slain, the former seats of great and powerful lords became the abodes of tigers and other wild beasts, without any more trace being left at all, but the horrid cinders, and a greater silence on earth than human thought can imagine.

-A Brief Account of the Kingdom of Pegu, 1605

EPILOGUE

He kept his cousin's letters in the drawer of a small chest next to his bed. They were bound with the same black ribbon and in the same worn leather bag in which they had been delivered. On Rosh Hashanah and Abraham's birthday, Joseph sat by the window and read these letters one after the other, along with the letters that had been sent earlier in his journey. He slowly unfolded and folded the letters, careful not to tear or crumble the yellowed paper. Some of the letters, impersonal in their rich description of strange peoples and exotic places, he had given to his uncle, who in the early days reread them with great pleasure. Now when an aunt or cousin would reminisce about Abraham at a holiday dinner, his uncle's eyes would mist, and he would turn the talk to other things or smother their memories under a cloak of silence.

Joseph's wife had lived in Ferrara before their marriage and had never met Abraham. Wanting to know her husband better, she was curious to learn about his cousin, as close to him as a brother. She asked Joseph to read the letters to her and tell her of their lives together and his adventures in distant lands. But soon she grew bored of thrice-told tales. With the birth of her son, she had more important matters to attend to than spending her time listening to stories woven by a lonely fabulist.

His uncle had done well with the jewels that Abraham sent. He hadn't wanted to check the goods, stone for stone against Abraham's list, trusting the good faith of the man who had saved his nephew's life and who had honored his word by enduring much to deliver them. But this stern fellow would not leave the house until his uncle had counted and examined every stone, down to the smallest spinel. His uncle knew right away the profit that could be made from the jewels and generously rewarded this Israelite, whom he thanked God for being true to his blood. The fellow took the pouch, heavy with gold coins, and put it in his coat pocket without even looking inside. He had dinner with the family and left for Lisbon the next day.

The treasure from Pegu was soon the talk of goldsmiths along the Rialto. Joseph's uncle had more suitors than a rich widow, and the jewels soon adorned the necks, wrists, and fingers of the rich and the hilts and scabbards of the powerful. All but one—the pigeon-blood ruby.

Joseph saw the ruby once and only once. His uncle took it from a simple silver box and placed the stone on a piece of black felt. The ruby pulsed with life, its red glow bathing crimson the walls of the small room. Word of the magnificent stone traveled from one workshop to the other, gaining carats and becoming more brilliant with each telling. Those who had never seen it spoke with assured awe of its beauty. But his uncle refused to sell it. Agents from all over Europe left Venice empty-handed. Bishops of the church, princes, and pashas all were rebuffed, their dreams of the mythic stone disappointed. "I will sell it when my nephew returns," his uncle said. "It was his eye that saw its value." His uncle was certain Abraham would come to his senses. He could not imagine that he would not return to his family and the life he had led. Some nights, when everyone in the house was asleep, Joseph's uncle would take the silver box from its hiding place. He would sit at his desk in the flickering candlelight, holding the ruby in the palm of his hand. Its beauty comforted him.

Abraham would return. The old man waited.

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