



JOURNEYS THROUGH BARREN LANDS



FROM
PERSONAL NARRATIVE OF A PILGRIMAGE TO AL-MADINAH AND MECCAH

(1855-56), by Captain Sir Richard Francis Burton and Meccah

“In the desert, even more than upon the ocean, there is present death: hardship is there, and piracies, and shipwreck, solitary, not in crowds, where, as the Persians say, ‘Death is a Festival’;—and this sense of danger, never absent, invests the scene of travel with an interest not its own. • Let the traveller who suspects exaggeration leave the Suez Road for an hour or two, and gallop northwards over the sands: in the drear silence, the solitude, and the fantastic desolation of the place, he will feel what the Desert may be.” (149)

ILLUSTRATION: PETE WATTS



FROM

JUAN MARIA SCHUVER'S TRAVELS IN NORTH-EAST AFRICA

1880-1883, edited by Wendy James, Gerd Baumann, and Douglas Johnson (1996)

“Nubia is charming, with its black rocks, bathed in glaciers of the most golden sand in the world; ravishing are its little valleys with green carpets, with groves of slender palms; in silent solitude, listening to the rustling of the rapids; one does not pass these deserted and charming riverbanks without experiencing a certain sadness that one has not yet reached the point where one could pitch one’s tent for the last time, to finish life in contemplation like the Sanyasis of Brahmanism. Korosko, a miserable village, is where one leaves the Nile to enter the desert. We leave

it tired from three days of argument on the subject of scurry camels, ropes of dom-palm leaves, water skins and greedy officials.

“The desert, here a mixture of rocks as black as charcoal and vast windy plains, has its miseries as well as its charms. I would not wish upon my worst enemy to be woken each morning unduly early by the raucous howls of a dozen camels. I made the entire journey of 15 days on foot, with a facility I would not have expected; the pure and dry air of the desert, the serene

sky which had not been disturbed for six months by a single cloud, acted as a vigorous stimulant on the nerves; the sand is rarely other than firm, except in the slopes and descents of several small passes.”

ILLUSTRATION: ANGELA DOMINGUEZ

“JUAN MARIA SCHUVER’S TRAVELS IN NORTH-EAST AFRICA” — ILLUSTRATION: ANGELA DOMINGUEZ





FROM
SEVEN PILLARS OF WISDOM

(1922), by T. E. Lawrence

“Next morning we did a fast march of five hours (our camels being full of life after their ease of yesterday) to an oasis-hollow of stunted palm-trees, with tamarisk dumps here and there, and plentiful water, about seven feet underground, tasting sweeter than the water of Arfaja. Yet this also upon experience proved ‘Sirhan water,’ the first drink of which was tolerable, but which refused a lather to soap, and developed (after two days in closed vessels) a foul smell and a taste destructive to the intended flavour of coffee, tea, or bread.”

ILLUSTRATION: ELI HARRIS



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Near morning we did
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FROM
BAGHDAD SKETCHES

(1933), by Freya Stark

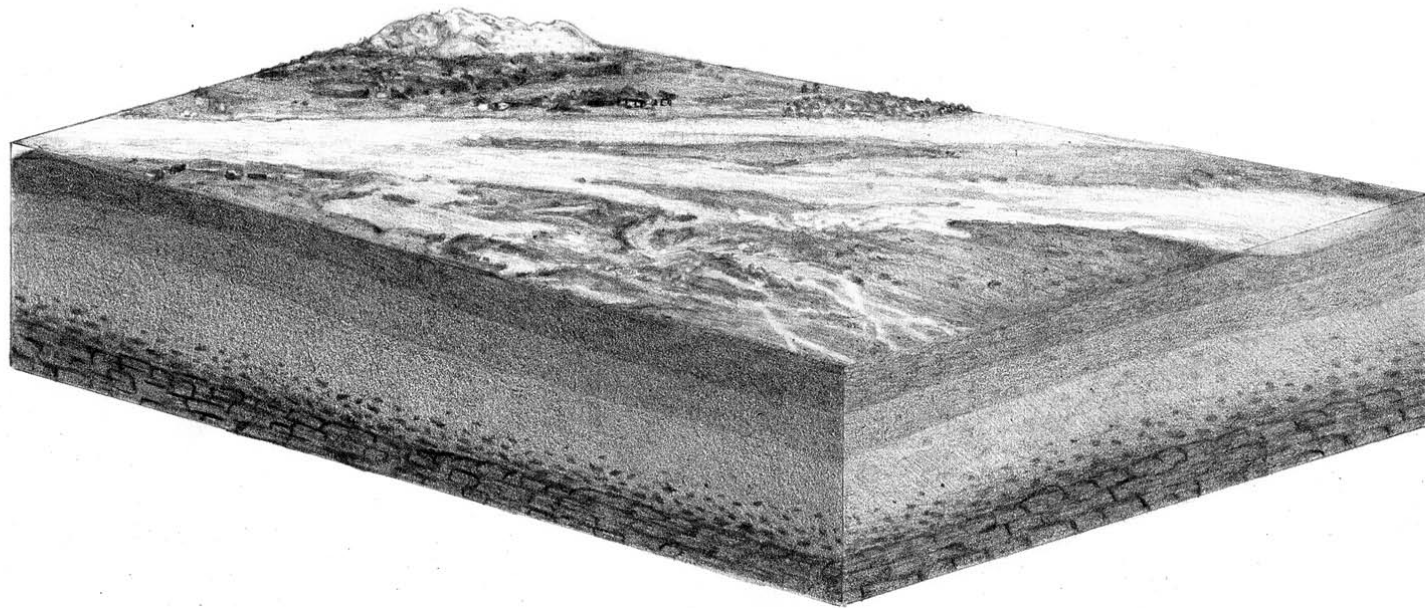
“When the Prophet looked on Damascus, he is supposed to have turned aside from the beautiful oasis, saying that no one can enter Paradise twice; and yet if one coldly compares the two, the gardens of Damascus are not so lovely as an English countryside in spring. But one never does compare them coldly, because the desert gives to the one an enchanted value. And so it is with water in Iraq.

“A clear little brook that you would scarcely notice in Deronshire is here as a rainless day in the Lake District, merely because most of the streams of Iraq consist less of water than of liquid earth, and you might as well be looking at rivers full of tea with milk in it. I like these slow yellow streams. As they silt up or shift in their lazy beds, they remove cities bodily from one district to another. They are as indolent and wayward, powerful, beneficent and un pitying as the Older

Gods whom no doubt they represent: and there is no greater desolation in this land than to come upon their dry beds, long abandoned, but still marked step by step with sand-coloured ruins of the desert.”

ILLUSTRATION: PETE WATTS

“BAGHDAD SKETCHES” — ILLUSTRATION: PETE WATTS





FROM
MOBY-DICK

(1851), by Herman Melville

“But look! here come more crowds, pacing straight for the water, and seemingly bound for a dive. Strange! Nothing will content them but the extremest limit of the land; loitering under the lee of yonder warehouses will not suffice. No. They must get just as nigh the water as they possibly can without falling in. And there they stand — miles of them — leagues. Inlanders, all, they come from lanes and alleys, streets and avenues — north, east, south, or west. Yet here they all unite. Tell me, does the magnetic virtue of the nee-

dles of the compasses of all those ships attract them hither?

“Once more. Say you are in the country, in some high land of lakes. Take almost any path you please, and ten to one it carries you down in a dale, and leaves you there by a pool in the stream. There is magic in it. Let the most absent-minded of men be plunged in his deepest reveries — stand that man on his legs, set his feet a-going, and he will infallibly lead you to water,

if water there be in all that region. Should you ever be a-thirst in the great American desert, try that experiment, if your caravan happen to be supplied with a metaphysical professor. Yes, as everyone knows, meditation and water are wedded forever.”

ILLUSTRATION: ANGELA DOMINGUEZ

"MOBY-DICK" — ILLUSTRATION: ANGELA DOMINGUEZ





FROM
THE TRAVELS OF MARCO POLO

(circa 1300), 1852 translation by Hugh Murray

“I now wish to tell you of a country lying to the north. When a man has left Creman he travels seven days in that direction through a very dreary region. During three days he finds no river, and the little water met with is salt, green like grass, and so bitter that it is impossible to drink it, and if a man tastes even a drop, it produces violent purging. Travellers therefore carry water with them; but the beasts being obliged to drink such as they find, suffer severely.

CONT. »



“The whole tract is an arid desert, destitute of animals, which could not find food. On the fourth day, you reach a river of fresh water, but with its channel mostly under ground. In some spots, however, the force of the current makes abrupt openings, when the stream appears for a short space and drink is abundantly supplied. Then follows another tract that lasts four days, and is also a dry desert with bitter water, and no animals except wild asses. At the end of the four days, we leave Creman and proceed toward Cobinam.” (199)

XXXIV Of the City and Desert of Lop

“Lop is a large city at the entrance of the great desert bearing its name, and lying between the east and northeast. It belongs to the khan, and the people adore Mohammed. You must know that those persons who wish to pass this tract rest in the city a week to

refresh themselves and their cattle; then having taken a month’s provisions and provende, they enter upon the desert, which I assure you is so extensive that if a man were to travel through its whole length, it would employ a year; and even at its smallest breadth a month is requisite. It consists altogether of mountains and valleys of sand, and nothing is got to eat, but after travelling a day and night, you find sweet water sufficient for from fifty to a hundred men, with their animals. A larger body could not be supplied. Thus, water is seen daily, or altogether in about twenty-eight places, and except in three or four it is good. Beasts or birds there are none, because they could not find food; but there is a great wonder which I must now tell you. When a party rides by night through this desert, and any one lags behind, or straggles from his companions through sleep or any other cause, when he seeks to return to them, he hears spirits speak to him in such a manner that they seem to be his comrades, and

they frequently call him by name, and thus lead him out of his way so that he never regains it and many persons are thus lost and perish I must tell you too that even hear these voices of spirits and even tambours and many other instruments sounding. They find it necessary, also, before going to rest at night, to fix an advanced signal, pointing out the course to be afterwards held; likewise to attach a bell to each of the animals, that they may be more easily kept from straggling. In this manner, amid much danger and fear, this desert is passed. Now we must tell you of the countries that lie on the other side.”

"THE TRAVELS OF MARCO POLO" — ILLUSTRATION: ELI HARRIS





FROM
THE ROAD TO OXIANA

(1937), by Robert Byron

“One knows these modern travellers, these over-grown prefects and pseudo-scientific bores despatched by congregations of extinguished officials to see if sand-dunes sing and snow is cold. Unlimited money; every kind of official influence support them; they penetrate the furthest recesses of the globe; and beyond ascertaining that sand-dunes do sing and snow is cold, what do they observe to enlarge the human mind?”

“Nothing.

“Is it surprising? Their physical health is cared for; they go into training; they obey rules to keep them hard, and are laden with medicines to restore them

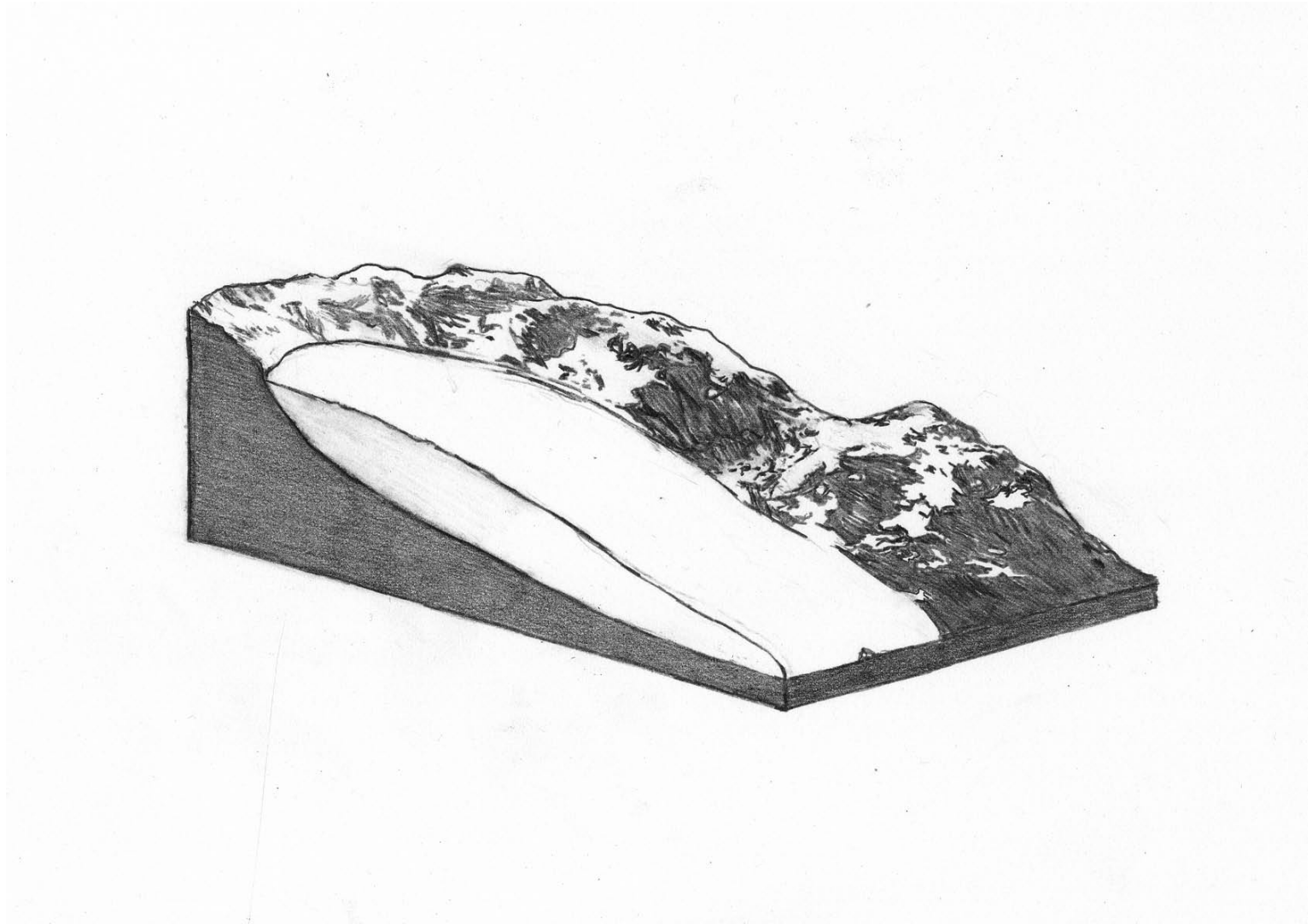
when, as a result of the hardening process, they break down. But no one thinks of their mental health, and of its possible importance to a journey of supposed observation. Their light and handy equipment contains food for a skyscraper, instruments for a battleship, and weapons for an army. But it mustn't contain a book. I wish I were rich enough to endow a prize for the sensible traveller: £10,000 for the first man to cover Marco Polo's outward route reading three fresh books a week, and another £10,000 if he drinks a bottle of wine a day as well. That man might tell one something about the journey. He might or might not be naturally observant. But at least he would use what eyes he had, and would not think it necessary to

dress up the result in thrills that never happened and science no deeper than its own jargon.

“What I mean is, that if I had some more detective stories instead of Thucydides and some bottles of claret instead of tepid whisky, I should probably settle here for good.”

ILLUSTRATION: PETE WATTS

“THE ROAD TO OXIANA” — ILLUSTRATION: PETE WATTS





FROM
TELL ME ABOUT A REASSURING HAND
by Levi Stahl

“In my traveling days, I lived for a few years in a village at the edge of a great desert. In this village were only twins. I was tolerated, even, at times, celebrated in song and dance, as an aberration, a visitor from a strange world where a person is forced to fend for himself without the aid of his mirror companion. The townspeople were unable even fully to comprehend my state; the loneliness and uncertainty they assumed for me tainted all our conversations, surfacing in the pomegranate tarts two sad-eyed women would bring to my hut, the freshly killed hart delivered by two silent hunters.

CONT. »



“Their astonishment was understandable. As far as anyone could remember, only identical twins had ever been born to the women of the village. Twins were born of marriage, twins were born of adultery; were born of the young and of the old.

“Though I was happy in that village, and might have lived out my life among those shifting dunes, a singular event forced me to leave: a woman, completely ordinary and unremarkable in every other way, gave birth to a single son. The town was thrown into paroxysms of fright. This would disturb all their systems, all their ways of life. Though the people of the town were not cruel, their lives were shaped by the harshness of the desert. The hot wind sweeping all before it rendered their customs stony. Their only precedent for this solitary birth was a time in the distant past when the second baby of a pair was born dead, strangled by the umbilical cord of the first. The living child, having brutally failed his most sacred charge, that of caring for and protecting his mirror, was exposed. Remem-

bering that, someone suggested killing this solitary baby. That idea — its cleanness, simplicity, and finality — appealed to the crowd, even to the shame-faced father, and almost before the mother could realize what was happening, killing the baby had become the preferred plan.

“At that point that I returned from a trip to some burial caves up on the ridge. As I reached the edge of town, I saw a woman lying slumped against a rock, heaving with sobs, eyes staring up at the unforgiving noonday sun, unseeing. Alarmed, I knelt and took her hand. I knew her, knew that her twin had been expected to give birth that day; and I feared for her twin’s health. I wiped her face, feverish from fear, with my robe, but her sorrow was an oasis that, though a whole herd may drink from it, never runs dry. Through her sobs, the woman told me what was about to occur.

“She said, ‘I fear for the child, yes, but also for his twin. No, his twin was not born here, but as all men

have twins — I would even venture to say that you, all the way from your strange land, have an unknown twin — I fear for his twin, about to be left utterly alone, like a desert fox after a sandstorm. Who will speak for him? Who will stand at his back in time of war, at his side in time of peace, outside his tent in time of love? Who will kneel at his feet in time of need? To kill one twin is to atrophy and doom the second, the unknown twin, waste him away under the misunderstanding eyes of his parents. It is to deny the symmetry of the world, it is a cruel, cruel thing, and my sister has no recourse.’



"I knew then that I must leave the village. Its people had been kind, their songs heart-rendingly beautiful, but now I would leave. I would go to the people, ask that the boy be considered my twin, that he be given into my care. We would journey together, either until we found his twin or until the two of us, by minuscule changes over time, were found to be twinned to each other.

"I found the villagers in the meeting tent, circling the child and his mother, who had long since become insensible with grief. Their stony faces, flickering with fear, revealed that a simple request would not do. So I told of a dying beggar on the far continent of my birth, of his rasping last words as he lay propped against a shade tree, of his assurances that I was twinned — he could hear it in my breathing, see it in the set of my jaw, the cool air ranging itself about my frame — but that my twin had been delayed to complete a celestial mission, would only be made manifest after an astral reckoning. Seeing their rapt attention, I continued, as

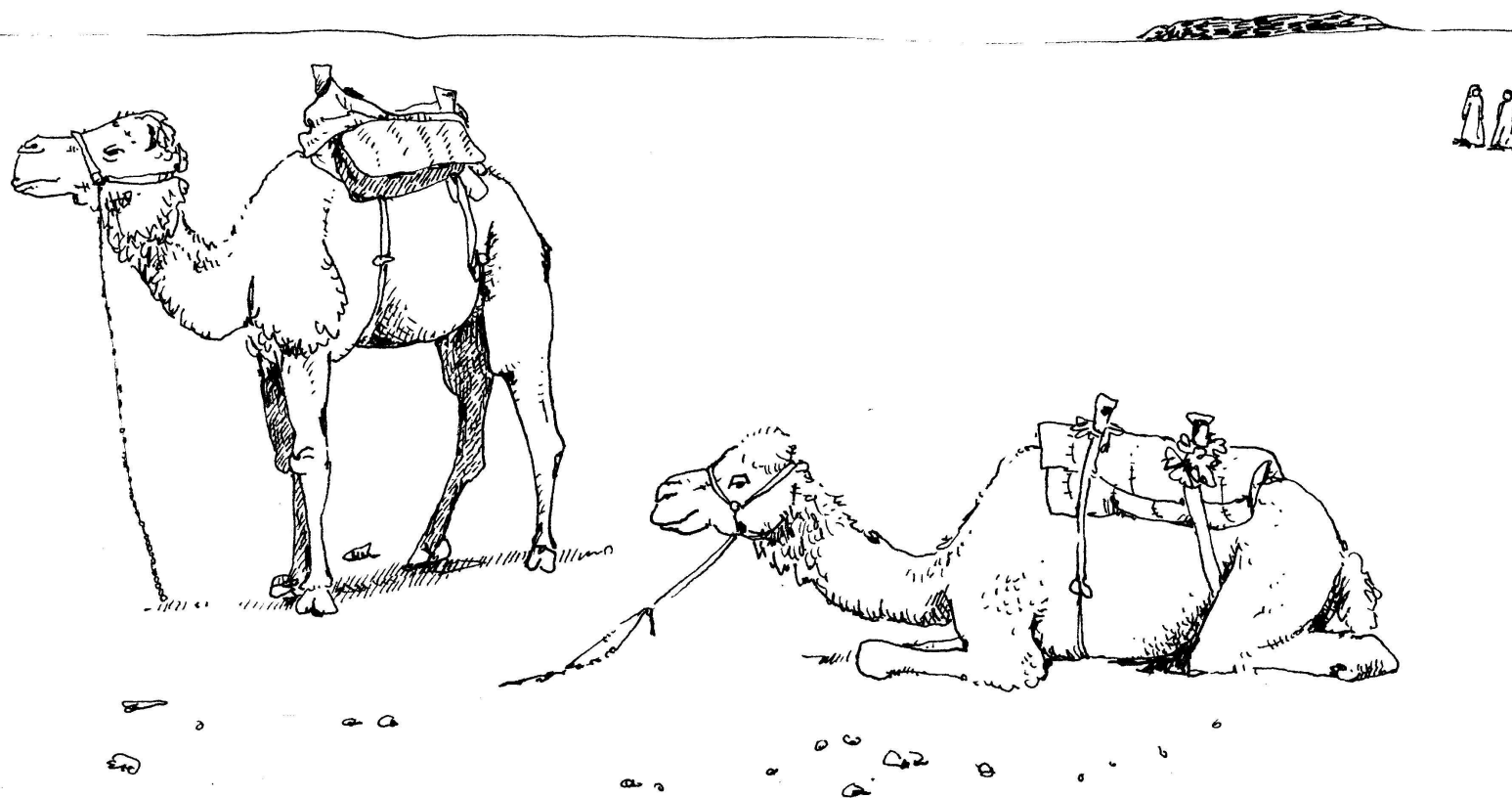
the mendicant explained that I would find my twin where he did not belong, was not expected, had no place, a child of water among sand, a child of green among brown. The mother, returning to alertness as my story concluded, strode through the crowd to me, and, bowing deeply, gave the child into my arms. Before anyone could reconsider, I handed an elder my village cape and left there forever.

"The boy and I journeyed together for many years. Traveling with an infant brought its own hardships, but the people of the road as usual showed their kindness and care — thrice, nameless gypsies cured my twin of burning fevers — and as he grew, we had many adventures. A mystic we encountered tried to mold clay into a twin for the boy, but it came to naught. In a hilly, green country, we parted ways, as, following a fever vision, he devoted himself to religious study in a quiet stone monastery. As I left, sorrowful in the midst of the happiness I felt for the boy, I saw a familiar face watching from an upstairs window.

Perhaps it was him, watching me as I wound my way down the grassy trail? Perhaps it was his real twin, his wait over? Or could it have been my twin, forever unknown?

"Now that I think about it, though, it could be that I am conflating two distinct tales. I may have been the one who suggested exposing the infant, rather than killing him outright. I distinctly remember leaving rags bloodied by a slaughtered lamb and taking an unwanted child with me to safety. Whether it was that child or another, I am not certain."

“TELL ME ABOUT A REASSURING HAND” — ILLUSTRATION: AURORA ANDREWS



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