

## SINAI SOUVENIRS

i

Back in the Sinai, twenty years later  
with my family, I don't want to think about Dick,  
  
but there I am again, standing by the road with him,  
weighted down by backpacks and sleeping bags,  
  
hitchhiking Israeli-style, right forefinger pointing down  
at a slant. Our ride took us another hour south  
  
through dust, to Dahab, where huts opened  
to the sea, and I gagged at the stench of human feces  
  
beneath the low flames of palm trees.  
Kids camping there for months  
  
lay in a haze of hashish.  
Down the road  
  
we set up a tent near where  
A sunburned blonde  
  
squatted by the water in a fishnet shift.  
Dick sweet-talked. I undid my bikini top,  
  
and he took out his camera to photograph the scenery.  
Only later, did I wonder  
  
if those moments when my breasts  
faced the sea, the Saudi mountains, and the desert sun  
  
became part of Dick's slide show back in Rochester.  
But then, I wasn't watching Dick. I was watching  
  
a man in white robes kick his camel until, groaning, it folded  
like a clothes rack. He dismounted. I put on my shirt.  
  
Emaciated, dusty-skinned, the man spoke to us, holding out  
a white rag. The teeth he had under the moustache were stained.  
  
Dick gave the man some coins for the *jalabiya*  
and pulled it over his head. Gauzy cotton stuck to his wet swimsuit.

The sun set behind the Sinai mountains,  
 now purple against a yellow sky. The man led his camel  
 into the silence. All night long, the wind's hollow voice.  
 In the morning, I licked sand from my lips.

## ii

We're under a palm-stump, its dried fronds  
 wired together, when four girls come by on the beach.  
 About the same age as my daughter and her friend—  
 eleven, twelve—they sit down on the sand,

next to us, pulling small bags  
 from their skirts, reaching inside for handfuls  
 of beads and string bracelets. Rebecca and Adela  
 have been teaching each other intricate knots

for friendship bracelets, so they examine the girls' wares  
 with the interest of fellow craftsmen  
 from the same barefoot guild:  
 the four local members dressed in mismatched blouses and loose skirts,

their ankles covered with leggings, their heads with scarves;  
 Rebecca and Adela, barelegged in swimsuits.  
 The locals consult among themselves in Arabic,  
 then address the visitors in Hebrew.

“My name is Aida; in Hebrew, Hagit,”  
 one girl says. “I learn English in school. I learn  
 Hebrew on the beach.” Her fingers whip black strands around turquoise  
 and white as she speaks, and she ties it around my left ankle.

“You buy from me.” “From me, too,” says a smaller girl  
 with scars on her face. Rebecca and Adela decide  
 to borrow against future allowances and buy up  
 twenty bracelets each from the girls—

they'll go into business at school.  
 The next morning, the girls come by again.  
 Dark-eyed Aida says they have a vacation,  
 four days off to celebrate the return of the Sinai Canal.

To make sure we understand,  
 she spells it, “C-A-N-A-L, I learn to write English, too.”  
 Her mother, she says, ordered her back to the beach today  
 to sell more bracelets, instead of visiting

her sister's new baby down the coast in Dahab.  
 She pulls out a band of red and green beads  
 woven in a pattern of mountains and ties it on Rebecca's wrist.  
 “No, no, enough,” I protest, but she says, “*Matana*, a present!”

I reach into my beach bag. Aida's eyes widen.  
 “What's that? An apple? Will it turn red or yellow?”  
 She cups the green sphere like a crystal ball,  
 then tucks it away for her future.

iii

Like a cat or a baby that looks  
 not at the bird being pointed to  
 but at the pointing finger, so my husband  
 fixes on the hands of the young girl

selling bracelets to our daughter  
 and notices her ring—thick silver  
 circling her right forefinger and holding flat  
 against the light an auburn oval emitting

silver rays as wavy as sun penetrating water.  
 “A beautiful ring you're wearing. Will you sell it?”  
 A moment's hesitation, then she nods.  
 “How much?” “How much you want to give?”

He hands her thirty pounds, and the ring is  
 on my finger. It's heavier than my wedding ring,  
 too big. The band, pounded  
 into angles, not a circle, embraces

my thumb, intimately foreign. The girl's face  
 falls. Has she sold her betrothal  
 for less than ten dollars? Will she be beaten?  
 My husband whispers, “If her father comes, we'll

give him back the ring.” All afternoon I rub the stone  
 in my pocket. I sneak out my hand to admire  
 this ring of a Bedouin girl  
 from tents, fires, songs.

I want it to be mine.  
 Next day at the beach, the girl is back.  
 Silver bands on several fingers,  
 she asks, “You like the ring?”

She wants to sell me more.

iv

The young man rides his camel up and down the beach  
 all afternoon. White-gowned, he dismounts in front of sunbathers  
 to sell them a ride. When he leads the beast along the water,  
 a girl in a tank top or a guy wearing a camera

jounces on the hump. Late in the day, he stops at our hut.  
 The camel groans, chewing at the frond roof.  
 We say, “No thanks.” But I see the woven saddle—  
 with its reds, blues, greens, russets in triangles, with fringes.

“Is that for sale?” A half-joke, then we’re bargaining.  
 I don’t have a camel. I’d rather buy a rug.  
 He wants five hundred Egyptian pounds. I offer three—  
 less than a hundred dollars, but what would I do

with a thing of such beauty  
 and of no use to me? He leaves. He returns.  
 He unrolls the saddle on the sand. With his hands,  
 he shows how the pockets can hold supplies for several days,

how someone stitched stripes down the creamy backing,  
 braided each strand of each brilliant tassel.  
 “My mother made it. Fifteen days.” His hands are weaving.  
 “She’ll make me another.” He smooths out

the wrinkled bills I hand him,  
 then leads away his naked camel.  
 I roll up the saddle and try to lift it.  
 It’s too heavy. It smells of animal.

**LOCKER-ROOM BEAUTY**

The nude woman speaks to the little girl:

*At yafah! You're beautiful!*

The two-year-old turns her curly head

Toward freckled, heavy breasts, belly

With a history, a face that has known

Decades of Russian winters, years

Now of Mediterranean sun:

*At lo yafah! You are not beautiful!*

The child's mother—half-dressed,

Still golden-skinned—dries the child

And chides: *Ze lo yafeh! That's not nice!*

*B'emet! Ani lo yafah! It's true! I'm not beautiful!*

The nude one laughs, fastens her braissiere

And repeats, *At yafah!*

**THE MONOTHEISTIC HOUSEWIFE ENCOUNTERS SHIVA'S  
IMPASSIVE SMILE**

Thousand-year-old Chola bronzes  
Bring divinity to eye level  
In glass cases. Seasons, decades,  
Centuries: priests have bathed  
These sloe-eyed gods in milk and curds,  
Adorned them with gold-set rubies, emeralds,  
Diamonds, swathed their verdigris in silks  
Gilded scarlet and verdant, to parade them  
Monthly to the seashore or the mountains.

Dancing, chanting, villagers  
Regard the four arms of the green god  
Whose hands hold life and peace,  
Punishment and prosperity.  
They gaze upon divine fate.  
I see multi-tasking. If only I had  
Four arms and four faces  
For all my work! My God!  
I seek mercy from Your Eye. I await  
Salvation from Your single, unseen Hand.

Shiva's hands clasp broken  
Sacred grasses, goblets of life's waters, pythons,  
Sweets. Gracefully, one smooth leg  
Kicks up around the other, concealing  
Your manhood from me and from your  
Buxom Uma, goddess-wife, smiling like you.  
I will enjoy all those fingers  
When they set down  
The tokens of men's fortune and touch  
My tender parts. Divinity lies in your eyes—  
Almonds without pupils,  
Bathed in milk, stroked for centuries  
By countless lucky palms.