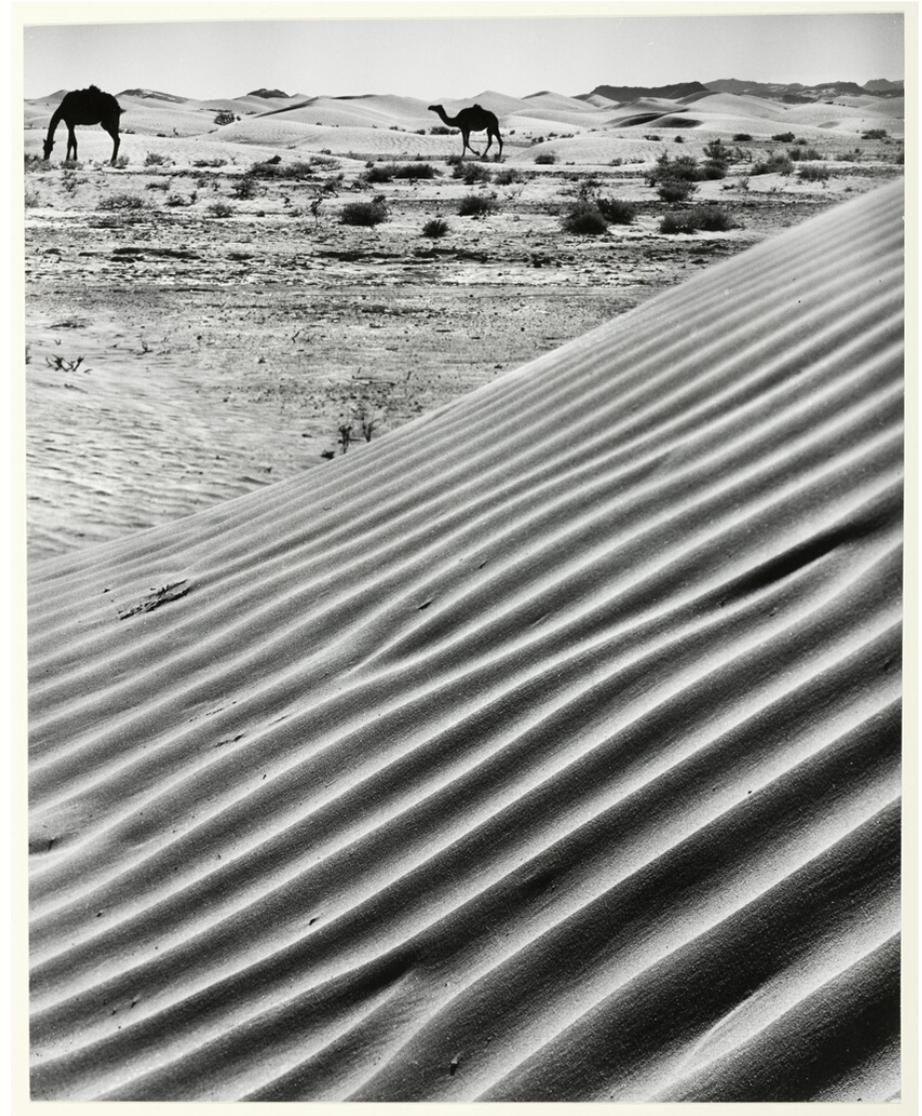


Another Absolutely True Tale from the Arabias



The Dark Eye

Lying, I have been told, is just another form of communication. Consider it a foreign language: meaning will not come as easily as from your own native tongue. In a belief system in which falsehood is officially sanctioned, lying becomes a way of life. The problem is that lies, unless strictly monitored, take on a life of their own. Worse, if lies are not monitored, it is possible to lose touch with reality. This happened yesterday, when the office's Bedouin driver dematerialized.

For weeks I have been trying to get the office to fulfill a promise to provide me with a rental car. Finally, I was told that arrangements had been made and all I needed to do was go and pick up the car. I asked the long-suffering *wakeel*, who, as it turns out, rescinded his resignation moments after he had shown it to me (if indeed it had been a resignation at all) to have the Bedouin driver take me to the automobile rental facility. I had seen the driver in the office about a half-hour before making this modest request.

—It's impossible, he said. The driver has been in Nejran for three days visiting his mother.

—I saw him a few moments ago.

—That's impossible. No one has seen him for three days.

—He was just here.

—I have a copy of the certificate from the doctor. Why don't you drive there?

—Because I don't have a car.

—We made arrangements for your car, all you have to do is pick it up.

—That's why I need the driver.

—But he's been gone for three days. I tell you, his mother is so sick. I would take you, but I have too much to do. Do I have to do everything? I am a slavery.

I thought of hurrying to the mosque to tell the Imam of the evidence of a miracle in the architectural office. Or perhaps the police should be called. The power to bi-locate, is subversive, if nothing else. The talent could certainly be used by ruffians engaged in dishonest behavior. I thought of simply waiting in the hall to see if he would materialize again. I wanted proof of the miraculous. Instead, I thought it would be better to assist where assistance was required. I took an empty Kleenex box (all Saudi offices are equipped with a box of

Kleenex, without question), wrote 'ZAKAT' (charity) on the top using a felt maker, and went from office to office asking for money. I thought that I would start with my Egyptian colleague, whose generosity was legendary.

—Why do you want the money?

—It's not for me. This is charity. For the driver's mother.

—Is she sick?

—Yes. The driver has been in Nejran for three days visiting her.

—He was just here in the hall.

—The wakeel says that he has been in Nejran.

—I saw him a short while ago. I don't have any money.

—Not a riyal? Not a halala?

For my trouble all I got was a look. I then realized the nature of the problem. Begging in Saudi Arabia is an honorable profession, with its own code, regulations, customs, traditions and practices. I had violated almost all of these. First, any request for money needs to have the proper paperwork. The document, usually from a charitable hospital, should bear the seal of the Chamber of Commerce, a facsimile thereof, or at least a passable forgery. The symptomology should be prominently displayed on the document, in a font and size easy to read at a speed of approximately 2.0 kilometers per hour at a distance of one meter, because the document will most probably be shown to drivers as their automobiles come to a stop at a traffic light. I had always wondered what document the beggars kept waving at the waiting automobiles. Without the proper documentation, there was simply no chance of receiving alms.

Additionally, there is a long tradition of using poetry in order to request funds; the rhymes of the tumor patient were, unfortunately, not recorded. Sadly, the mellifluous sonority of Arabic poetry has been hijacked by the needy, who prepare long poems in order to request funds from the wealthy. Such a poem should describe the virtues of the donor and, if at all possible while exaggerating the need beyond all description. There is a belief that there is a direct relationship between sincerity and volume. This has led not to declamation, but screaming. The sight of a beggar screaming his poem while waving his arms is a sight terrible enough to frighten away any jinn—or for that matter, someone capable of dematerialization—who happened to be in the area.

The actual writing of the poem may be subcontracted: on one occasion, I was asked to assist. My efforts are meager, but did result in the bequest of a cosmetic loan (i.e., one that need not be repaid) to a South Indian man who

needed the funds for a begging. I do not remember the text (it is probably still circulating in the beggar's database) but it commenced as follows:

*Hear me, O Great One
O Great One times two:
I need a loan
and a substantial one, too.*

The Beggar's Code of Ethics is scrupulously followed, but regrettably sometimes ends in violence. In a recent case, a beggar took a certificate evidencing the same tumor he had been dying from for the past ten years into a mosque in order to solicit funds from the worshippers. After making his presentation, he returned to his strategic spot outside the mosque's door, only to find that a colleague with a crutch had occupied the strategic, and usually profitable, position. The two argued; a crutch can be used as a weapon. The worshippers tried to break up the fight between the cripple and the surprisingly vigorous tumor patient; but in the end the police had to be called.

The word 'beggar' conjures up poverty and a randomness of luck that is simply inadequate to describe the systematic, organized funds-transfer reality. Perhaps another term should be used: unaffiliated fund raisers, or UFR's. In any case, my mistake in soliciting funds in the office was to fail to have the proper documentation, not to mention a short verse. I went to the wakeel's office with the Kleenex box and asked for the driver's mother's medical certificate.

—Why do you want that?

—So that I can collect funds for the poor woman. She must be terribly ill.

—Who said she was sick?

—You did. You said the driver has been visiting her in Nejran for three days, due to her awful illness.

—What do you mean? The driver is here. Didn't you see him in the hall? He was here just a few minutes ago.

I left the Kleenex box in the wakeel's office and called the car rental establishment. I told them that I did not want the car.

—Why not? It's here waiting for you. Why don't you have your driver bring you?

—No. It's impossible. Someone has put the 'dark eye' on that car. I don't want it.

—But it's a nice car.

—That car will be involved in an accident. Someone will be killed in that car.

—Your driver was here yesterday and looked at it.

—That's impossible. He's in Nejran visiting his sick mother. He's been there for three days.

—You know, you're right. Maybe he didn't come yesterday. Maybe, he wanted to come yesterday. But couldn't. Because of his sick mother.

—I hope she gets well.

—If God so wills.