Wadi-Bashing in Arabia Deserta

Straight out of graduate school and glad to have it behind me, I did what Horace Greeley told us to. I went west. But the flowers in California, though the biggest I’d seen and gorgeous to look at, didn’t smell. My teaching job at UCLA had strings attached. I’d been at it only a few months when I was asked to sign a loyalty oath. Asked puts it politely, and before Christmas I found myself out of a job.

My colleagues were my friends, nice people you could count on. They cared about the environment, supported our schools, and belonged to the liberal wing of the Democratic Party. All signed the oath, except one rancorous conservative who was damned if he’d do what they told him. Most of my students came from Central Casting, blond young women with ponytails and golden skin, young men who smiled easily and had sun-bleached eyes and a great backhand. In some, what you saw was what you got. The best-looking coed in the class turned out to be the smartest, though, also a friend. When I got fired she went to her accountant uncle, who worked for the ILWU, the longshoremen. Jobs on the waterfront aren’t easy to come by, but he wangled me a ticket, entitling me to “shape up.”

Every day at dawn I drove my ancient Dodge from my apartment in Venice around the coast to San Pedro, one of LA’s three seaports. Standing on a chair in the hiring hall, the dispatch—accent on the first syllable—shaped us up. Men with seniority got the day’s first assignments, posted to work warehouses “alongshore.” Those with know-how were dispatched to load and unload cargo in the holds of oceangoing ships. For men with a strong back, there seemed nothing to it. Appearances deceive,
though, and unless cargo is stowed properly it will shift in rough seas, sometimes battering its way through the hull. At the bottom of the totem pole, I waited for my name to be called. If it wasn’t I got back in the car and drove home.

Longshoremen come from every stratum of society, and generalizing about them is next to impossible. One thing I can say for sure, though, they weren’t always what they looked like. Some were big-bellied brutes who drank too much and cheated on their wives. Some were disbarred lawyers and ex-doctors, and one I knew had a pianist’s long tapering fingers. Some of the big bellies were nature’s noblemen. I was glad to call them my friends.

But I didn’t like California—“it’s cold and it’s damp.” “Go east, young man,” I said to myself when spring came round again and the flowers didn’t smell. East meant East of Suez, however. The cold war was going strong then, and it boosted me into a job. My new employer, the U.S. Information Service, promoted America to the rest of the world. I was to serve as a conduit. In a world that made sense, they would never have hired me. But the government, then as now, couldn’t tell its right hand from its left.

The locale they sent me to, one of date palms and desert, was different from any I’d known. Especially the people, not like my next-door neighbors in West Wood. Some, squint-eyed and scrofulous from malnutrition or a disease I’d never heard of, looked like rascals; others, movie-star heroic, would steal the last crust from their mother. My USIS host, a romantic expat, made no distinction among them. People the world over had in common their natural goodness, he said, and were much the same under the skin. Arabs were “our brothers,” cleansed by their alfresco life in the desert. Over the years I’ve thought about this man, wondering if he got out in one piece.

For successful wadi-bashing, you need four-wheel drive and a good head of steam. Land Rovers and Cherokee jeeps are preferred. Pulling out the throttle, you race along the wadis, making a run at the dunes. Some dunes, enormous, dwarf a three-story house. Lying between them are the wadis, old water courses dry most of the year. In the rainy time they flood, and men and animals parched for water have drowned in the
The bashing isn’t when you hit the wadis but when you top the dunes, a bone-jarring experience. I learned this in Dubai on the coast of Arabia.

A wink of prosperity under the desert sun, Dubai is squeezed between water, sand, and a high place. The water is the Persian Gulf. Below the Strait of Hormuz, a spiny headland called the Ru’us al-Jibal cuts the gulf in two. The Emirates, all but one, huddle together on the Ru’us al-Jibal. Besides Dubai, they are Abu Dhabi, ‘Ajman, Ash Shariqah, Umm al Qaywayn, Ra’s al Khaymah, and al Fujayrah. Abu Dhabi, the capital, lies along the mainland coast. Behind the coast are lumpy mountains, like tufts of carded wool, says the sura, a verse from the Koran. The Tropic of Cancer bisects the lower reaches of this Trucial Coast. South and west of the imaginary line is the desert. Occupying a 1.25 million square miles, it peters out in salt plains this side of Mecca, not far from the Red Sea. Between the foothills of Oman and the Yemeni border nine hundred miles away, the land is empty. Here is a dead land, said Doughty, an English traveler in the Arabian Desert. He said men returning from it brought home nothing but weariness in their bones.

On the other side of the Strait of Hormuz, the Gulf of Oman runs south and east into the Arabian Sea. Across the water is Iran, a medieval country where the mullahs, Islamic priests, are fighting a holy war against the present. Soldiers in this war don’t give or expect quarter, death on the battlefield counting for them as a blessing. One of their hadiths, a collection of sayings ascribed to the Prophet, tells them that Paradise lies beneath the shadow of swords. Oil, vital to the present, supplies the sinews of the war and is brought from the ground by modern technology. Each day, nine million barrels pass through the Strait of Hormuz.

My host, reciting this statistic, has oil on the brain. He is USIS, a fidgety Californian with a turn for metaphor. Oil is “our vital lifeline,” and the enemy wants to cut it. He divides the world into enemies and friends. Arabs, all of them, are “friendlies,” Russia, an enemy, is “the bear that walks like a man.” Though he held fast to his belief in natural goodness, he made an exception for the Soviet Union. Knives were being sharpened a generation ago, and being prudent, he looked to his defenses. Down the road he saw a shootout between them and us. But he banked on the presence, close by in Oman, of our Rapid Deployment Force. Like a Roman centurion on Hadrian’s Wall, the RDF kept on the lookout, alert for signs
of trouble. Surveillance planes, the AWACS, were its eyes and ears. Air-
borne every day, they used the fields at Seeb and Thumrait, thanks to the
Sultan of Oman, a friendly.

Stuck over with art deco, Arabian style, the hall he puts me into is a
pocket version of Radio City Music Hall, where I used to see the Rock-
ettes. A chrome-scuppered pool, Olympic-size but strictly for show, sepa-
rates this ornate building from the new mosque, austere as the desert. The
pool is lined with jacaranda trees, and four minarets rise at the corners of
the mosque. In the distance are refineries, black against a cloudless sky.
Before I go onstage I get my briefing, a list of no-no’s including Khome-
ini, Israel, and OPEC. This isn’t the Chataqua circuit, and if America has
shortcomings I needn’t tell the world. A careful young man, my host takes
me back to old days in the Navy. Over coffee in the wardroom, officers’
country, they let you talk baseball, but politics and women were out.

The American flag and the colors of the Emirates stand in sockets
behind the lectern. For props I have a slide projector, a pitcher of water,
and a mike that doesn’t work. It didn’t work in Jerusalem either when I
gave my lecture there, but I stayed mum on this coincidence. Seeing no
evil, Arabs pretend that Israel doesn’t exist. They like you to go along with
their fiction. An American banker I know, having been to Israel, neglected
to tell them in Tel Aviv not to stamp his visa. When he came to Dubai, they
looked at this visa and put him on the next plane back to London.

Fiddling with the microphone, I count the house—thirty bodies, all
male, and all but one of them Arab. Splendid in their dishdashas, loose-
fitting robes, they look like Semitic patriarchs from the Old Testament.
Semitic is what they are, Arabs and Jews sharing the same inheritance.
Both include Abraham in their family tree. Jewish Aaron is Arab Harun,
as in Harun al-Rashid, and the standard-bearer of the Prophet was Eyup, or
Job. Courteous but impassive, the men in the audience keep their illusion-
less eyes on my face. What goes on in their heads they keep under their
hats.

My subject is the arts, American and modern, with attention to
poetry. I tell them how the artist sharpens our awareness but doesn’t take
sides. Richard Wilbur, for instance. A modern poet, he has this poem,
“The Giaour and the Pasha,” based on the Delacroix painting. At a signal
from me, my assistant, an Arab boy, pops a colored slide in the projector.
A giaour is an infidel or “uncircumcised dog,” but Arabs don’t have to be
told. At the rear of the stage, USIS, fidgeting uneasily on his leather camp-stool, wonders where I am going to take this.

“As for the infidels,” God says to Mohammed, “strike off their heads, maim their fingers.” This infidel, however, has got the upper hand. He sits on horseback, but the Pasha, at his mercy, is down. Looking at the painting, you feel that death is imminent. But the poem has a happy ending, and the Pasha gets off scot-free. People who believe that poetry is lies will say that this ending defines it. If the Pasha is lucky, though, the giaour is blessed. Poised to kill, he holds his hand, so gets beyond himself like a work of art. He freezes in air, staring without purpose, and lets the pistol fall beside his knee.

The head of a victim, said the Prophet, an angry man, was better than the choicest camel in Arabia. He said this after his first battle, when they gave him a head. Their eyes crinkling skeptically, these Arabs, his descendants, consider a resolution where nothing gets resolved. Falconry is a favorite diversion of theirs. The falcon, having the prey in sight, doesn’t balance pros and cons but falls like a plummet. However, I am ahl al-kitab, “People of the Book.” Oddly, this works out to unknowing. Secure in what they know, they applaud me politely. They are ahl al-bait, “People of the House of the Prophet.”

Shouldering his way up to the platform, Nate Yelverton sticks out a hand. He has a shrewd idea that poetry is for the birds, and unlike the Arabs he is willing to say what he thinks. “More truth than poetry” is one of his sayings. Journeying around the world to tell the wogs about poetry seems labor lost to him. He doesn’t like wogs, “shiftless fellaheen,” and lumps them all together. Also he doesn’t like Jews. Islam and Judaism, brothers under the skin, are both secret conspiracies, he tells me. But where Arabs have their Jihad or holy war, Jews let money do the talking. Have I read the Protocols of the Elders of Zion?

In Dubai on loan from Bechtel Co., Yelverton has taken up the white man’s burden. Constructing a new desalination plant, he is helping the Arabs augment their supply of potable water. He calls this working for IBM, Inshallah Bukra Mumkin. I will hear these words often in the Emirates, he says. They mean “God willing tomorrow maybe.” A good engineer, Yelverton marches with the army of progress. Bechtel, his employer, is building an industrial city in the desert, on the shores of the Persian Gulf. The railroad, coming up from Dammam, will link it to the capital,
once served by camel caravans. Jubail, the new city, is almost in place. When it is finished, Yelverton says, a third of a million people will live there.

The first time we met, he was bellied up to the bar at the Mena House in Cairo. Calling for Wild Turkey, he didn’t bat an eye when he got what he called for. Yelverton expects this. Getting things done is his business, a fight against odds. When he walks, he weaves and lurches. Mohammed, said Arab chroniclers, had this strange, lurching walk, “as if he were ascending a steep and invisible hill.” In his cups Yelverton is apt to turn maudlin, sometimes breaking into song. Surprising in a big man, he has a melodious tenor, reminiscent of John McCormack. He exercises this on sentimental ballads that call the Irish home to Erin and old tunes from the hymnal where they wrestle and fight and pray. His business card, fished from a plastic sleeve in his wallet, has kabbalistic signs like Greek sigmas and gammas. Bold horizontal lines connect open loops and little corkscrews like pigs’ tails. Above and under the lines, clusters of dots inflect this mysterious writing. The other face of the card gives his name in English, N. B. F. Yelverton, and beneath this the name of his firm. The initials, he says, stand for Nathan Bedford Forrest, a Confederate general who got there fustest with the mostest. Putting down his drink, he pencils in a phone number with a Dubai exchange. “If you’re ever in the U.A.E.”

Day, coming all at once, dawns in the U.A.E. like noontide. The air is thin, and the mountains stick up like erector sets. Detail, qualifying what you see, gets swallowed in immensity. Sun beats on the dead land, conferring the clarity that goes with moribund things. Not blurred by half-lights and shadows, contours are sharp, and good and evil look like themselves. This makes life simpler. Humbled in the dust, Arabs say how Allah, impalpable unlike the God of the Christians, inherits the earth, letting nothing escape. Ibn Khaldun, the Arab historian, has a hundred litanies like this one. A Berber from North Africa, he lived on the fringes of the Sahara. This waste of scorching sands, mountains, and stony uplands is bigger than the continental United States. Men are minerals, Mohammed says: some, his fellow Muslims, are precious like gold, while all others are drossy. Possibly banal, this saying takes on a harder meaning in the desert. Men, uncounted like grains of sand, undifferentiated too, have their brief incandescence, then lapse back in matter.

Mohammed, like Yelverton a man for clear-cut distinctions, began his new cult of Islam in the desert. He did this when he fled from Mecca to
Medina, a ten days’ journey across empty sands. In his native place, enemies waited to kill him. There was the wife of Abu Lahab who strewed thorns in the sand where he walked. He cursed this man and wife in one of his suras. “Cursed be the hands of Abu Lahab: he shall perish! . . . Faggots shall be heaped on his wife.”

The Hegira showed Mohammed how this wish might father the deed. Coming out of the desert, he called the sword the key of heaven and hell. “The Lord destroy the Jews and Christians,” said the Prophet, all of them in Arabia who didn’t worship the God of Islam. Arab soldiers weren’t troubled by doubts and hesitations, and except for the Covenanters, Scotch Calvinists strong in the possession of truth, no better fighting men ever lived. Each day of Ramadan, the month of fasting for Arabs, begins when they can distinguish a white thread from a black one. You can do this any day in the unfiltered light of the desert. Arabs call it Rub al Khali, or Empty Quarter.

Modern hotels stand tall in the desert, and businessmen around the world have made them a home away from home. Some wear Norman Hilton suits and Ferragamo shoes, but the briefcases they carry are plastic. Air-conditioning whirs faintly inside the hotels, where the climate, neither hot nor cold, never varies. Outside, the Arabs meet the climate halfway. Square wind tunnels sit on top of their houses. The burning air, passing through these tunnels, is cooled by water or dampened cloths. This gives some relief to the people in the houses. However, they still know where they are.

Muzak, soft but perky, fills the lobby of the Holiday Inn. This is in Ash Shariqah, just up the road from Dubai. It being early December, the music suits the season, and they are playing “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer.” My Avis rent-a-car, picked up at the airport, has air-conditioning, a radio, and a tape deck. Upholstered in velour, the interior is red with black stripes. Arabs, reserved in last things, like their surfaces bedizened. One of their caliphs, when he went on his travels, slept beneath a black satin tent. The poles were silver, the rings were gold, and the ropes made of wool or shot silk. But their first caliph left only a camel, a single slave, and a mantle. Before he died, he spurned this mantle with his foot. “I have given back all that,” he said, “and I am well and happy.” When I start the car, the radio, left on, plays Kris Kristofferson and “Bobby McGee.”

Money, a great leveler, has homogenized the Emirates. Like tourist islands in the Caribbean, emptied of culture, they have nothing personal
to show. Everything you need comes in from the outside, oil being the single exception. In the souk, or market, not far from the brackish creek that links Dubai to the sea, you can purchase Del Monte pineapples imported from Hawaii, Earl Grey breakfast tea, artichoke hearts, plastic yo-yos, throwaway pens, and many of Heinz’s 57 varieties. The vegetable man, Bagghal, offers apples that might be McIntosh apples. Sometimes he sings, “Apples, apples, rosy as a young girl’s cheek.” This market doesn’t stun your senses like the Bab el Louk in Cairo, where the heads of butchered animals are mounted over the doors of the shops. They have live chickens in wicker arks, though, and if you want a chicken for dinner they will slaughter it for you on the spot.

Men, idle and magnificent, kill time in the souk, fingering the merchandise and kibitzing with friends. They wear the familiar headdress, “a napkin with a fan belt,” Yelverton says. The women wear the black veil or burka, and some of these veils are trimmed with gold thread. The nose and lips of the women are covered, but their hooded eyes are visible, like a fencer’s behind his mask. A peripatetic Arab merchant, an everyday presence in the bazaar, hawks a cluster of gorgeous tropical snakes. That is what they look like until he holds them up for inspection. Steering wheel covers, they shimmer in the sun. Ibn Khaldun compared the world to a market like this one. Set out for display, the wares were sects and customs, institutions, forgotten lore. Mutable, not constant, they didn’t persist in the same form, however, but changed with the passing of days. This was a sore affliction, the historian said.

Leading to the world outside, the creek, an arm of the sea, brings the world to Dubai. Some Arabs, strong for the old ways, say this is how the rot gets in. Platonists in their bones, they despise the world and the flesh. This goes with their notorious carnality, a source of pleasure but no more than that, the principle being that what’s up front doesn’t count. In his Laws, Plato put the good state far inland. Merchants and such never came there, and this provincial place kept its virtue intact. Provincialism, said Ibn Khaldun, was the key to Arab greatness. He thought that Arabs in the desert, savage, not sociable, were more disposed to courage than sedentary people, also closer to being good. They didn’t obey the law, being ignorant of laws, and didn’t go to school, but stood to the rest of men like beasts of prey or dumb animals. Jealous of the stranger, Arabs cocked an ear for every faint barking. This xenophobia preserved their ‘asibiyah. Rosenthal, translating Ibn Khaldun, renders the Arab word as group-feeling.
But the tale, baffling the teller, has an unexpected ending. Leaving the desert, Arabs, bent on conquest, took to the sea. This sullied their lineage. They meddled with strangers, and the closely knit group was a thing of the past. After the conquest, said Ibn Khaldun, Arabs acquired “the stigma of meekness.” Our English language still remembers their sea terms. “What is our ‘admiral’ but the Al-mir-al-bahr of the Arabian Sea,” Holdich asks in his Gates of India, “or our ‘barge’ but a barija or warship?” Careened in the mud by the bankside, trading vessels, caulked and painted, await the next voyage. The thrusting stems of these dhows are like giant toggle switches for opening or closing an electric circuit.

Bouncing off the water, the unrefracted light explodes in fragments, creating a movie set. The movie is a Western, Duel in the Sun, and the hero and villain, outlined against the sky, are stalking each other. The people in the street stand up like gnomons, uncompromisingly themselves. Poor or pretentious, the buildings can’t evade what they are. Nuance, Arabs think, is for effeminate people, and their art, like their politics, is mostly innocent of chiaroscuro.

Palestinian Jews, sun-spattered like Arabs, share their yen for broad strokes and primary colors. Hallucinating in the sun, I go back in mind to Palestine. In Tel Aviv, the capital, an old movie is playing, white settlers vs. Redskins. The hero, clean shaven, rides a white horse. You can tell the villain by the pricking of your thumbs. Out in the country, still biblical country where shepherds tend their flocks, military checkpoints, bisecting the roads, are manned by soldiers toting automatic rifles. Dressed in combat fatigues, the soldiers, men and women, are sexless. In Israel, everybody goes to war.

Barbed wire, running with the roads, separates the beleaguered state from the Jordan River. The wire, a secondary line of defense, also functions as metaphor, dividing sheep from goats. Stockades topped with wire surround the kibbutzim, lonely outposts in the desert. Outside are the hostiles. Arab merchants in the city, paying out treasure, keep these guerrilla fighters in pocket. Self-appointed vigilantes keep tabs on the merchants. But the other side is vigilant too. “Buy Blue and White, Not Arab,” read wall placards in Jerusalem, posted by the Jewish Defense League. Blue and white are the colors of the Israeli flag.

A free port on the gulf, Dubai has its own dry dock, a modern harbor nearby at Port Rashid, also a trade center, state of the art. Along the curving drive that sweeps up to the entrance, fan palms, pomegranates,
dusty pink oleander do what they can to mollify its abstract design. Little flame-colored blossoms surround the fruit of the pomegranate. Wood and wire screens protect these growing things, otherwise the desert, always on the prowl, would destroy them. Arabs understand this, a hard lesson learned. Centuries ago, when they conquered North Africa, they found an enormous thicket covering the wide littoral between Tangier and Tripoli. Under the shade were hamlets where men and women fostered life in society. They cultivated the land, sunk wells, and had their arts and crafts. These little enclaves on the edge of the desert, artificial, not natural, needed tending. Today the land is treeless, and nine-tenths of the people who lived there are gone. The ruins of Roman oil mills break the surface of the plain.

Jews in Tel Aviv are like Arabs in Dubai. Admonished by the desert, they don’t take their land for granted. As you fly into Ben Gurion Airport, the land below you, flushed with green, looks like a garden. Aaron, a great magician, has touched the rock with his wand. The garden that used to be desert bears plums and apricots, barley, wheat, and banana trees. Hangers of bananas are thick on the trees, and the shiny bracts of poinsettia, contrasting with the yellow flowers, show as blood red. The blue and white El Al carrier serves kosher food. Handed round by the steward, the daily paper is printed in Hebrew. Some letters in this Hebrew alphabet undulate whimsically, like the Arabic on Yelverton’s calling card, and are marked with dots, signifying vowels. The Israeli steward, fair-haired and muscular, makes me think of those Anzac soldiers, prodigious sons of scrawny fathers, who came back from the Antipodes to startle the world at Gallipoli.

Outside the Dubai Hilton, my home away from home, rose of Sharon in concrete tubs splashes bright color against the facade. Water from the local desalinization plant, courtesy of Yelverton, cascades in a rococo fountain. More precious than oil in these parts, it isn’t hoarded on the Trucial Coast, Arabs having found money to burn. Getting rid of indigenous things, the Emirates have got rid of poverty too. Before the gushers came in, Arab poor lived on crumbs from the tables of the rich. For Eid al-Adha, the Feast of Sacrifice honoring their prophet Ibrahim, well-to-do Arabs sacrificed a sheep and gave the meat to the poor. Now the dole, a state subsidy, feeds both rich and poor. In Dubai, unlike the Caribbean, nobody goes hungry.
In the up-to-date hospital, care is free. Dark-skinned nurses are all starch and no nonsense, and their peremptory voices sound like Mary Poppins. Most of the doctors are Indian or Pakistani, but some have degrees from London or Trinity College, Dublin. On the phone their accents are Harley Street, plummy or clipped. Even on the hottest days, the chief resident wears a business suit, his pouter-pigeon belly covered by a decent waistcoat. A gold fob with a seal, attached to a pocket watch, hangs over his belly. Like a Harley Street doctor, he doesn’t answer to Doctor but Mister.

The Trucial Coast was English once, and if you are English once this is as good as forever. Re-creating life back home, transplanted English from Sussex and Kent persuade themselves and others that England is really like that, a demiparadise or other Eden. Back home their drizzly climate is ripe like old cheese. They ignore this, however. Indifferent to the heat of the desert, they go out in the noonday sun. English make their own weather. I marvel at the knack they have of warping the world to suit their perception or making it over in their image and likeness. It tells how Britannia, a dot on the map, ruled the rest of the world for so long.

Soccer thrives in the Emirates, Dubai having the best eleven, and between Dubai and Ash Shariqah rivalry is keen. The manager of Barclay’s Bank keeps a string of polo ponies. Weekends on the playing field outside Deira, linked by tunnel to Dubai, local residents, correctly dressed, meet to play polo. Long before the English, Arabs did this too, but cricket is a Johnny-come-lately. Though a recent import, it has taken hold, and some of the grander houses, laying down sod, have added a miniature cricket pitch out in back.

Britannia today, a magnet for colored people, is no longer a tight little island. Some English resent this. The man who had the flat below me when I lived in London said he didn’t know what the world was coming to. This was after the war, and the “Gypso” in Cairo had just burned down Shepheard’s Hotel. The world he remembered looked like a map in an old atlas, circa 1900. Red was for British, blue was for French, and these colonial powers divided up the world between them. A few scraps and orts were left over for the Dutch, Portuguese, etc. In this man’s lifetime, however, the primary colors had begun to leach out or run into each other. He detected a yellow tide seeping from the East. Gandhi in particular upset him. This Middle Temple fakir parlayed on equal terms