

Dromedaries in America

Jin waddled up to the ducks as they waddled towards the water. The sun had set. The sky was lavender. Bird droppings were littered all over the grass though the webbed feet never seemed to step on any. Jin sat down on a park bench and checked the bottoms of his own feet. His wife will not be pleased.

When the ducks had all waded into the pond he looked at the opposite bank. A tall bird with chopstick legs executed a landing like a paratrooper. A crane maybe, or an egret. Jin had trouble making it out. He rubbed his eyes and squinted but the smooth cameline mountains in the distance faded like islands in the fog. Even though he knew there was still light, he somehow couldn't distinguish the outlines of anything. Not the straight curbs of McCormick Road or the manicured edges of the golf course. He shut his eyes and pinched the spot in between but nothing improved. For a moment, Jin could hardly see a thing. Then that moment prolonged and he found himself in utter darkness.

Jin sat there and listened to his surroundings. First, he heard the breeze, then a few wing flaps, then a runner's steady steps. He turned his head as if to rise, but the steps were already passing him by. What could he have said? Briefly, he regretted not joining his wife in her English class at the community college before they left China, but he was not her after all. He could not attempt a new language at the age of seventy-six. One time he saw her practicing pronunciations with her classmates in their living room. They played a CD over and over again while twisting their wrinkled old lips this way and that, puckering, pouting, tongues darting around dentures like newly hatched chicks yelping for the hen. He didn't have any desire for that.

The air was getting chilly. Jin put his right hand over the watch on the other wrist as if he might feel time through the glass. It was probably close to seven-thirty. How long would it be before

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his daughter comes looking for him? Another hour? Maybe two? Jin rubbed his palms together for warmth and then tucked each hand into its opposite sleeve. This will surely cause a fuss in his family. His daughter will call his son, who will make the seven-hour drive from LA, and together they will consult doctors, books, friends, cousins – everything from the Internet to the *I Ching*. Somehow he had raised worrisome children. All his life he had tried not to inconvenience them, not to give them troubles that were otherwise his own, but now he had done it. He remembered what his father said near the end: the last thing to betray you in life is your own body. It dawned on him then that his last vision of the world was a land he knew nothing about.

Jin slid all the way to the end of the bench and got up slowly with a hand on the armrest. He shuffled forward. The second his hand left the bench he became disoriented. Easy now. Jin stood still for a minute and then stretched out his hands. A second step. A third. He felt like an astronaut floating in an endless vacuum. But on he went, small steps to stay in the same direction. He felt the soft ground beneath the grass rise in an incline, the dirt becoming firmer, and finally something flat and concrete under his heel. The path.

Just then a shiver shot up his spine. Jin dropped his hands to his legs to steady himself. The shiver stopped, but after a second it returned again. He felt as though his liver was trembling and the tremor came at an even, persistent pace. Here it comes. There it goes. It comes again. It goes again. After a whole minute of waiting for the final strike that he figured would end him on the spot, Jin put a hand to his body. Oh look, there was the cell phone he had forgotten about, purring like a kitten in his pocket.

Jin's fingers fumbled until the phone was upright. His thumb felt the smooth screen at the top and jabbed at all the buttons below.

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Dad?

Hm.

Dinner's ready.

Oh.

His daughter paused and waited.

Dad?

I'm here.

How long will you be?

Dad?

I'm here, he cleared his throat.

Everything all right?

Yes, yes, he nodded. I just can't see.

What do you mean? Where are you?

Already, her voice has risen a pitch higher and Jin thought he could hear his wife in the background, shuffling closer, pushing her ear next to his daughter's. He chafed his face with the rough heel of his palm.

I'm by the pond, he sighed. He began to tell them about the bird across the water as if that made sense of the ensuing darkness.

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But then something above snapped on. Dim yellow light pooled at his feet like he was about to deliver a soliloquy. Jin turned his face to the pale orb of the streetlamp and blinked. Looking down, he could vaguely make out the way he came and the dark glassy surface of the water. He rubbed his eyes. The image remained blurry – but it remained.

I'm fine, Jin began to feign annoyance. I just can't see the damn buttons on this thing.

His daughter was skeptical.

You will have to hang up first, he told her impatiently.

In his mind, Jin could see the way his wife shook her head with her lips pressed into a thin sharp line and the concerned look on his daughter's face. He kept the phone at his ear until the call was disconnected. Then he moved onto the path and followed it by the puddles of light back to home.

Jin and Xia have been staying with their daughter for a month. The first time they visited, the three of them had to share a studio in South Phoenix. This time around Liyan had bought a three-bedroom house in Scottsdale next to a golf course. Every day Jin and Xia ate together, walked together, napped together, and read side by side. Neither has yet to mention the divorce. Jin doesn't know if his wife has forgotten it, changed her mind, or just not talking about it on account of their daughter, who had her own divorce a few years ago. For all he knew, his wife might have already asked her brother-in-law to draw up the paperwork.

What Jin does know is that his wife thinks he's a lump of wood. It wasn't a guess either. She told him flat out before they came to Arizona. She said, I've been married to a lump of wood all my life. Then her face crumbled and she locked herself in their bedroom. From the kitchen Jin could hear

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her sobbing and cursing to her sister on the phone. Spools of anger and regret. He paced the tiny flat they shared for the better half of the century and wondered what he had done wrong.

He said a year was too long. That was what did it. He worried about leaving their home and being away. So far away.

What could happen?

Lots.

Don't you want to see your children?

It's not that, he said.

Then what is it?

He couldn't explain. He worried about the radiator leaking, the wires short-circuiting, the pipes bursting in the winter – anything he could've said would've sounded silly. One night on the news he saw an obstinate homeowner in Sichuan refusing to sell his property while every inch of land around his house was dug up by some government developer. The aerial shot showed a lonesome home atop the only remaining stack of dirt in the area. A long bamboo ladder extended from the front door to the bottom. That man could not give a reason, either.

Say something, she prodded.

Anything.

There were knots inside him and she insisted on tugging at the first loose end she saw. And when that failed she indicted him: you've never been anywhere because you're always too scared.

What are you afraid of?

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He knew he had to say something but didn't know what.

She shook her head, exasperated.

Tell me. What are you afraid of?

Jin looked up at his wife who stared back at him.

Finally she shook her head again. I wish I divorced you years ago.

It was the first time Xia had ever used the word, but she said it like an afterthought. Like it was some conclusion they'd both come to after much debate. Has he somehow missed hours of this conversation?

Sure, over the years they've fought about travelling. After their children left the country with their own families, she complained that her life was too bland. That, having finally waited out the wars and the famines and the revolutions, they were not taking advantage of their good health to see the world. She told him the passing of their days together felt as if she was counting all the grains of sand in the world. But that was dealt with, he thought. They aged out of it the way teenagers age out of puberty.

Ten years ago she started travelling alone. First, they were just weekend trips to see some farms. Then it was the week-long treks to nearby provinces. Afterwards, when she got over her fear of flight, she went away for months at a time. The first day she ever left home, he sat alone in front of the TV to watch the evening news. When the weather report came on, Jin found a half-empty notebook and recorded the local weather and for wherever his wife was. The next evening he did the same. Every night at exactly 7p.m. he parked himself on the sofa and noted the highs and lows, the precipitation, wind speed and humidity in each column he had carefully drawn with a ruler.

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Somewhere in their closet there are photo albums of her spelunking in caves, floating down rivers, tasting exotic meats, and a stack of yellowing notebooks.

Where are you going? He asked when she came out of their bedroom, luggage in tow.

Outer space.

He watched her drag her suitcase with one hand and heard its wheels clunk down three flights of stairs. She didn't even bother shutting the door behind her.

Jin waited for an hour and then called her sister's house.

What does he want? He heard his wife in the background.

To talk to you, Jin shouted into the phone.

Hold on, said her sister.

The phone fell silent.

After a while, her sister got back on.

Look, she said. Give her some time.

We don't have much left.

Give her a few days.

Jin scraped the inside of his thumb on his knee.

Her sister sighed, you have something to eat?

Some.

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A silence followed by muffled speech.

She wants you to know there are dumplings in the freezer and noodles in the top left cupboard.

There is no street lamp near the front of Liyan's house. When Jin approached, he saw only a dark recess where the yard is. All four hundred and fifty square feet of it. He peered into the thick murkiness but could not see a thing. Not the flower bed his wife tends every morning, not the trellis he erected, and not the six-foot tall saguaro covered in sharp spines. He shut his eyes and made a wide reaching motion with one hand in front of him. Then forward he went, arms like windshield wipers and forefoot sweeping for mines. Time dragged on through sludge. With out-stretched fingers, he inched forward bearing a preemptive wince on his face. Pain was a foregone conclusion; the question is whether anyone would find out.

Jin didn't know it but his fingertips were half a foot away from the front door when he heard a noise to his left. It sounded metallic though he couldn't be sure. Out of pure desperation, he decided it might've been the door and that someone inside was fiddling with the lock. He aimed his belabored steps to the side and turned sharply like a kid after a piñata. Step after step he reached out to grasp the door and felt only air. Step after step he paused and listened and heard nothing more. He was absolutely convinced of his intuition until he had taken so many steps in one direction that he knew he had to have missed the door. Jin stood still. The sky was dark and so was the ground. He blinked his eyes and could hardly tell that he had blinked at all.

What the hell is your father doing? Xia came to a stop when she saw him from the kitchen window.

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Liyan got up and came next to her mother. There her father stood, face to face with the saguaro, peering into it with all his might.

What is he doing? Her mother looked back.

Liyan met her eyes then rushed to the door.

Dad, she called out from behind.

Jin turned his head without a word and instantly lost his balance.

I'm here, she caught his arm and put a hand on his shoulder.

His fingers searched for hers.

I'm here. I'm here.

He held on to her arm.

The blindness was only temporary. Jin opened his eyes the next morning and almost found religion. He sprang out of bed like a kid on Christmas and pitter-pattered barefoot to the bathroom. Everything seemed surreal in this newfound light. Jin ran his hand under some water and splashed his face. Then he leaned into the mirror, blew a hot breath and drew a squiggle. It was the first time in decades he smiled at the sight of his pecker.

For the rest of the day, Jin hardly stood still. He washed vegetables, rinsed rice, soaked beans, baked bread, cleaned windows, swept the floor, and even scrubbed the stovetop. Xia was quieter than usual. She spoke to him almost entirely in questions. Patient and attentive. Tenderer, he

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thought. There was a time in their youth, after the kids were born, when he had quietly wished that she would act this way, sprinkle some of the tenderness she poured over the children on him. But if there's ever an antithesis to a bride, it's motherhood. Now, after all these years, her kindness only made him self-conscious. The first chance he got, Jin climbed up a ten-foot ladder with a broom under his arm.

The roof was flat and gleaming. A quick-dry foam shell was sprayed last winter after an unexpected hail. The sun was very bright and the reflection off the material made Jin squint. Behind the house there were two fully crowned bitter orange trees. When a breeze came through, the fruit-laden boughs bent wearily and scattered dark leaves with tapered ends all across the roof. Jin went to each corner and crevice and swept out the leaves and dirt. He took his time clearing the gutters, dislodging the mud, and pushed the debris into manageable piles. When he finally straightened his back, he breathed deep and peered at the mountains in the north. The sight of them gave him relief. Mountains always did. As Jin turned to face the yard, he saw the saguaro with its two arms raised at its sides in a gesture of surrender. Without thinking, he raised the broomstick with both hands, tucked the bristles under his armpit, and pointed the handle at the saguaro.

Jin has never held a gun in his life, but when the Japanese came through his village he had seen soldiers sweeping the streets holding their bayoneted rifles just like that. Every time they came, Jin's father led him and his brother into the mountains. They took yams with them and left the more valuable grains behind because yams can be eaten without building a fire. Also because you had to leave satisfactory food for the raiding party or they'd burn down the house. Jin never knew what his home would look like when they returned. They could only pray that the Japanese took the food and abided by the unspoken agreement. One time the news came late and they didn't have time to run away, Jin's father threw him into the wok and put the lid over his body. Back in those days each

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family had seven or eight children, like his once did. The woks were as big as bathtubs. Jin remembered hearing the Japanese soldiers, whom the Chinese called ghosts, talk as they poked their way through the house. Their words sounded fast and harsh, like machine gun rounds hitting a sand bag. Staccato consonances with not enough vowels. Jin was lying cramped up in the dark, not knowing where his father and brother went to hide. The only thing he could do was wait in that tiny space, where he thought his trembling body might move the lid or scratch the metal.

The ghosts were anything but quiet. They kicked over tables and stools. Jin heard the crackling sound made by the baskets he wove when army boots stomped through them and felt his body fill up with hate. But hate is fire and fear is ice. He was frozen solid at every step that neared the kitchen. He couldn't peek over the edge of the wok, but he could picture these ghosts. Their round helmet with the neck flap. Dirt colored uniform and brown leather belt. The little mustache in the center of their lip. Jin burrowed his chin into his chest and wished he could melt through the earth like piss through snow.

There were three voices in total. One was low like a growl, another was mostly silent, and the third was high pitched and boyish. The rustling moved from the far side of the house to the kitchen, where more clattering rang in Jin's ear. He tried to guess what the soldiers broke by the sound but then tried to just shut off his mind. As they dragged out the burlap sacks of grains from a few feet away, Jin could hear his pulse echo inside the wok. He was breathing so hard he thought one of these breaths would blow the lid right off. But before he knew, it was over. The low voice gave a command and the steps fell away. Seconds later, the door opened, banged shut, and the house was quiet again.

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Jin waited some more. He shifted his body and loosened his fingers that ached from clenching in the dark. Count to one hundred, he convinced himself. Heart rattling like a trapped animal, he began to reel out the numbers in his head, trying to be deliberate as not to rush.

At thirty he felt his toes tingle with pins and needles.

At fifty he let out a sigh.

At eighty he sensed a smile creeping onto his face and ballooned his cheeks to suppress it. The cocky ones were the first to die.

Yet it was impossible to stay steady. He breezed through the rest of the numbers. The ghosts were gone and the house remained standing. Jin lifted his chin and put a sweaty palm on the lid above him.

A dog suddenly barked. He drew his hand back and his elbow hit the side of the wok. Please. He bit his lip till he tasted metal. Please. Please. Please. The door banged open, footsteps returned, fast and some scraping along the floor. They closed in towards the kitchen. Please. Jin squeezed his eyes shut. He heard the boyish voice ask an unanswered question, then the door banged again, and this time a girl yelled. Jin recognized her voice.

The girl screamed and sobbed. Screamed and sobbed. Jin buried his face between his knees and covered his ears, his head, his neck, but it could not keep out the sounds. It bore right through the wooden lid like a thousand long nails being hammered inwards from every which way. Jin felt the wok fill up with her scream, the sharp points boring into his skull. He couldn't breathe, couldn't stop trembling and, when it had gone on for longer than he could bear, he jammed his fingers so deep into his ears that he wished he was deaf or even dead.

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But the girl's cry never stopped. Even when the men's grunting did. Even when they slapped her so hard that the sound of the slap had a wetness to it. Even when the men dragged her back out of the house, the door banging one last time, Jin could still hear her screaming all the way up the dirt road.

That night when his father and brother came back, they found him asleep in the wok. His father righted a stool and set him on it, then began to heat up water in the wok to boil yams.

They didn't burn down the house, his brother said and collected the broken baskets.

They killed Old Zhang's youngest, said his father.

Jin stared at the bed next to the stove and never breathed a word.

Behind the saguaro, in the line of sight along the broom handle, stood the neighbor's house. Liyan said the house was on the market for nine months before she saw a young Mexican man park a Mercedes-Benz in the driveway. But that was all they knew. The curtains on the windows were always shut, though the lights go on at night. Liyan thinks the property manager turn them on to discourage burglars.

The house was lower but wider than Liyan's. It had the same style of a flat roof except with a large skylight. From where Jin stood, he could see the color of the wooden floor in the neighbor's living room. He stared at it. Not a soul in there. Before he turned away, however, he noticed the edge of a shadow move under the skylight. With the broom still clamped under his arm, Jin cupped a hand over his brow and trained his eyes on the spot. The shadow passed again. Someone was certainly in that house. Jin stood as still as the saguaro until a part of a person came into view.

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It was a couple. At first Jin couldn't figure out what they were doing. For all the slow bobbing and tight embrace, Jin had almost turned away in embarrassment. But when more came into view, he saw they were no younger than himself. The man was short, had silver hair, and stooped on arthritic knees. He held a woman in a large shawl with one hand on her upper back, and she wrapped a thin, twig-like arm around his waist. Their other hands were laced and tucked away between the clam shells of their hunched shoulders. Together, the old couple shuffled left and right, slowly, carefully. As they moved, he bent his head and their foreheads touched.

At times they were out of sight, other times they rocked against one another beneath the skylight. Their bodies were stiff, they were not effortless, but they unfolded and refolded themselves gently like they were cradling a sleeping infant. One time the old man lifted their clasped hands towards the ceiling and the old woman, as though by instinct, spun like she was stamping out a small fire. Afterwards they both threw their heads back and laughed. Jin could not say why, but it was a sight that all but hollowed him. He stood there, mesmerized, though when he tried to imagine what their music sounded like he had no idea.

He put down the broom and peered once more at the mountains in the distance, the slow curvatures across the sky. Then his eyes rested on the saguaro. The bristled green figure frozen forever in the moment of its capture. Is that how his wife sees him? A man in perpetual surrender. Is that who he has been? A fearful man.

The sun was the only thing in the sky when Jin climbed down the ladder and waddled down the sidewalk. He marched past the neighbor's thick creamy curtains without knowing where he was going. He let his feet carry him like an old horse who knew its way.

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At first, he walked a mile. Then two more. Then he began to weary. He felt the pressure on his knees, his ankles, his back. He grew acutely aware of how flat-footed he is. It's been years since he last walked this far, but his bowed legs went on, one before the other, block after block. For the first time in a long time a stubbornness was building inside him. He was either doing or was going to do something and nobody was going to stop him. Jin puffed out a breath and took in his surroundings. It was a land strange and new.

When the main street ended, he took a smaller road. When the road ended, he took a footpath. The traffic thinned. There was no one ahead of him. The farther north he went the more he felt the incline of the earth rising to meet his sole, the world tilting against him. But he kept his pace. As his shadow caught up and began to wobble in front of him, he watched it grow long and thin; its head warped over time as though by malnutrition. It looked like himself when he was a child, the child who walked from his village in Shanxi (literally West of the Mountains) to Xi'an, fleeing his burnt home with nothing but a sheepskin on his bare back. The blisters on his feet, Jin recalled. He doesn't feel them yet.

It had been a long time but the flesh remembers what the mind may forget. How to endure. How to keep moving. Even as a nine-year-old boy he knew the secret to surviving anything in life: patience. Patience turns time into an ally. It stokes but also tempers hope. It insulates, upholds, and metes out suffering in bearable bites. He wore that same expressionless face now that he wore sixty some years ago. Kept the same metronomic pace.

Step.

Step.

Step.

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Step.

Steady drips of water that will pierce the stone.

Three hundred and seventy miles he travelled. One time when his knees buckled, an old man from his village dragged him up by his collar and said, spitting in his face, Our ancestors walked here from the Arabian desert. They walked the Silk Road from end to end. Then, clamping Jin's chin in his coarse grip, the old man twisted his face towards the mountains behind them. Those are their camels still making their way home.

Jin could still recall the giant rocky humps under the gray sky, one following the other, mossy in the morning mist. When he had finally reached the door of his prearranged bride's home, he looked up at his father-in-law and apologized.

Sorry I came early.

The Arizona sun hung at the edge of the world. Jin could not tell how far he had walked or for how long. As the sun ducked behind the horizon, for a shrinking moment, he saw the vast mottled desert around him. Rocky slopes staked with grand saguaros. Ground dotted with chollas and broken sandstone. The half-moon, pale only seconds ago, began to brighten in the sky.

Jin stopped. He breathed in and let it out slow. As he closed his eyes he became nine years old again, inside the mountains, inside the wok, inside that lice-infested sheepskin outside her door. A feeble fist poised to knock.

Xia climbed the trembling ladder. She managed one rung at a time, pausing in the middle.

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The saguaro watched as she called Jin's name over the edge of the roof and then, turning to the street, found his waddling figure in the distance. It watched as she went after him, one trailing the other like a pair of sandhill cranes heading north in the spring.

Xia hurried along the sidewalk with her eyes on her husband. She has never seen him do anything like this. She was afraid for him but was also afraid of what she might find when she caught up. Vacant eyes? A vacant mind? She has heard stories about women her age waking up one morning and finding their husbands unable to speak or unable to remember. Then you have to start a life anew. You have to learn to care for a stranger in your own home.

She tried to read the cues in his movement, guessing at the diagnosis. Though much has changed in old age, she could still recognize the child in him – the child she met at her doorstep, standing next to her father. There's always some sustaining feature in a man that, if you look back in photographs decades earlier, you can find in the child. For Jin it was the way he swung his arms. Always a tad too vigorously. She remembered telling her mother in confidence that he looked like a cow with two tails, constantly swatting the flies on his behind. And there were indeed flies the way he showed up at their door. Matted hair, dirty face, a thick country accent, and the wild way he tore at steamed buns with his teeth.

She couldn't believe she had to marry him, but her father's word was the law, and his promise to a dead man meant that it was a promise without reprieve. She watched him from afar. He did everything he was told and did it with womanly care. He learned carpentry, then taught himself how to read. When her mother asked him about his family, he named the crops they used to grow. When her father asked about the Japanese, he said he'd always run off to the mountains before they arrived.

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They've had a steady, stable life. He was never lazy, never shirked his duties. By all measures he was a good man, but there was a silence in him that muted the colors of life. And she saw it in her children. They lived without gusto. When the sun began to set, Xia hurried even more. She was tired, and as she raced against his waddling figure, anger fluttered inside her like a gas stove being ignited. She did not want to marry him. Though that seemed a millennium ago that was the truth and still is. Her sister chose her husband. Her cousins chose theirs. But she was the oldest and the communists hadn't shattered the traditions yet.

The faster she walked the brighter her anger burned. What did it matter he was a dutiful husband? What did it matter he worked hard and never cheated? Or that their marriage was peaceful even through wartimes?

He never gave her joy. Is that so much to ask for?

She looked at the desert around her. In the failing light, the calm beauty of desolation enveloped her but it did not quiet the roiling inside. She looked at him, his arms swinging too far back with each step, and all of a sudden she wanted to chase up and scream and hit him in the face. The thought of caring for him for the rest of his days irked her. She did not owe him that, even if he was a good man, even if he had done right by her. She didn't owe anybody that. Yet she knew she could not leave him if he were lost and broken. What timing, the bastard.

The desert wind began to pick up. Her hair whipped about her face like flames. When she saw him stop she began to run and as she did she thought of things that hadn't come into her mind for years. The intense jealousy she felt towards her daughter when she boarded the train to go to college. All the times she wrote Liyan, telling her not to be homesick, telling her to see the world while she can. And when Liyan said she wanted to leave the country for a post-doctoral position and Jin told

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her to reconsider, of course he was only worried for his daughter's safety, but by God she could've murdered him right then.

When she finally reached him she was breathless. Sweat streamed down her face and stung her eyes. She almost fell at the moment she gasped his name. Jin turned around. His wife was no more than ten feet behind him, hands on her knees, gasping for air.

Have you lost your mind, he cried as he rushed over.

She hung onto his shoulder, still hating him, and lowered herself to the ground, the heaving of her chest like the uncontrollable sobs of a child. He sat down next to her. As she finally raised her eyes, she saw the man-like saguaros standing all around them, tall and stoic beneath the night that billowed in the wind like a colossal tent, the starlight shimmering like rips and tears in the canvass. The giants of antiquity. What did they dream of? Whom did they love?

She looked past his face and sighed at how far they had come, the city lights stretching all the way out.

He pointed over her shoulder.

Someone once told me that before mountains were mountains they were camels returning to their home.

She turned her head. The fool had never seen a camel in his life. But when her eyes traced along his arm, she saw the silhouette of the rounded peaks far in the distance like a caravan of dromedaries travelling westwards to the sea.

Given a hundred thousand years more, he muttered. They may reach it yet.