TRIPPING WITH ALLAH

Islam, Drugs, and Writing

MICHAEL MUHAMMAD KNIGHT



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BY
MICHAEL MUHAMMAD KNIGHT



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FOR **POOR RIGHTEOUS TEACHERS**

TRIPPING WITH ALLAH

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CYBERTRON KIDS

Shortly after the Megabus arrives in Mecca, we're stopped at a red light next to a car blaring that Jay-Z duet with Alicia Keys about the joys of being rich in a corporate police city-state. A cop drives through the intersection, and I think of how anxious the Santo Daime people in this town can get about their work: "If you ever want to write about Santo Daime," Zoser had told me, "you can't mention people's names. You can't mention street names or even cities." So when I write about taking a Megabus to Mecca, it's not really Mecca; and when I call him Zoser, that's not the name on his driver's license. I have to change enough here that I'm a mostly nonfictional protagonist in a mostly fictional universe.

The MegaBus drops me off in that empire state of mind at Wisdom Understanding Street. While waiting in the Duane Reade for Zoser, I give a call to my friend 8-Bit Allah, and he answers my question.

"Yes, absolutely, Muslims should trip out," says 8-Bit Allah as I look at the 5-hour Energy display. "It's too bad that we don't really have a cultural context for it, at least not in this country, but I've done chemically enhanced Sufism on the clandestine level, undercover smuggling rasuls into my builds with the Naqshbandis and Bektashis and all of them—you know, tripping and then going into the tariqas and joining the zikr without letting on that I had brought something extra." When 8-Bit Allah says rasuls, he means mushrooms.

"I'm considering ayahuasca," I tell him.

"Now that's a whole other level," he says. "Take that cipher seriously. Tripping is like old-school Super Mario Bros.; you remember that game?"

"Because he eats a mushroom and gets big, and he eats the flower and shoots fire? So the mushroom's a mushroom, and the flower is weed. What does it mean when he eats the star and becomes invincible?" The image of the star appears frequently in Santo Daime culture, so maybe Mario's star is ayahuasca.

"It's about more than that, god. It's the limited lives that you get for adventuring through the Mushroom Kingdom. You have a certain number of credits, and once you use them up, it's game over. You can only trip so many times in your life before it stops being a positive thing. Your slate is pretty clean, and you don't have to worry about that, but ayahuasca's still going to take a lot of credits out of you, insha'Allah." In 1971, without the Nintendo metaphor, Jim Morrison had expressed the same basic idea: "I don't think anyone really has the strength to sustain those trips forever. . . . Instead of trying to think more, you try to kill thought."

Then 8-Bit Allah says that he might be into another Islamic mushroom experiment but he'll have to pass on ayahuasca; at this point in the game, he doesn't have the credits left for something like that.

Not even my Muslim friends who do coke want to join me for ayahuasca, but they're not doing coke for the sake of spiritual growth. Coke is fun, and ayahuasca is anti-fun. Coke is for people who like to party, and ayahuasca is for people who like throwing up and shitting themselves and seeing Muhammad flying through space on a jaguar. I guess it's understandable that these experiences attract different crowds.

Zoser comes through. As I run out to greet him, he clears the trash off his passenger seat.

"Look at this fuckin' gentleman of Harvard," he says. "How are they treating you up there, god?"

"It's all peace, god," I tell him. "Just writing papers, had to get out of there."

"Word, god. It's good to have you back."

As we drive off, Zoser puts in a tape and holds the fast-forward button until reaching Jay Electronica's "Dimethyltryptamine." He knows people who know Jay, and he has this idea that if he can connect with Jay and introduce him to ayahuasca, it will set off a spiritual revolution in the hip-hop community and thereby touch the whole world.

"If you listen to most of the shit today," he tells me as we drive out of the city, "it's so fuckin' ugly, man, so self-destructive. It just eats away at you and gives you nothing back. Hip-hop today is lost in cocaine consciousness: all that talk about money and bitches and killing people and rejoicing in empty material shit, dehumanizing shit, giving meaning to nothing, healing nothing. We need to get off that and go for vine consciousness."

Daime literally means "Give me," says Zoser. "Santo Daime means, 'Saint Give Me.' You're asking the vine to give you something, and if you ask with the right heart, it answers your need."

From a medical standpoint, what bark from the Banisteriopsis caapi vine actually does is supply your body with harmala alkaloids such as harmine, harmaline, and tetrahydroharmine, which inhibit your body's monoamine oxidase (MAO), thus allowing

dimethyltryptamine (DMT) from the Psychotria viridis leaves to become active. It's technically not the sacred vine that speaks to you; the role of the vine is to render you vulnerable to the leaves' DMT, the real magic. Even if science might demystify the vine, the very discovery of ayahuasca seems to justify sacramental status for its ingredients. Out of the trillions of plants in the Amazon and the more or less infinite possibilities for mixing and brewing them, people somehow managed to stumble upon a combination that would take them through heavens and hells and into the universal Black Mind.

"I'm kind of terrified," I tell him.

"That's okay," he says. "Much respect—you're coming into it with a careful heart. It can be scary, god, no joke. But the point is that it's a healing process, so all of that scary shit, the negative shit that's buried deep inside you, now you finally see it and confront it and learn how to just overwhelm the poison with positivity."

"Truth, god."

"That's why they call it the work. When I first got into it, I just wanted to penetrate into the fuckin' alam al-mithal, you know what I'm saying, the world of images and archetypes and symbols and shit, and have dope-ass visions and trip my face off. Once the Daime hit me, I realized that visions weren't really the point; there have been times when I've gone deeper on ayahuasca without even seeing any weirdness." I get where he's coming from, but I do in fact want the weirdness. Maybe it's spiritually immature, but I still want to see Muhammad on a flying jaguar. That should go without saying.

For Zoser, a major difference between the ayahuasca that he drinks now and the LSD that he dropped as a teenager is context. "When I did acid, rasuls, whatever," he tells me, "I was just on my own, with no one there to walk me through it, and I'd do shit like drive my car until it ran out of gas and then leave it and walk home. And that's dumb. With the Daime, at least you have this whole operation, like it's in a structured environment for you to get the most out of your work."

"Drugs can't deliver culture," I say.

"Right on, god. Drugs aren't going to mean anything by themselves."

Zoser, hero of the skinny, unwashed Muslim hipsters, reads the Qur'an with the aid of cheap beer, Kemetic science, and deconstruction. If you ask him how he defends his drinking alcohol, he'll name-drop two stars from our tradition. The medieval philosopher Ibn Sina (known in the West as Avicenna) was unapologetic in his love of wine—he actually died after mixing wine and opium. The twentieth century's hero of American Islam, Malcolm X, started drinking rum and Coke after his pilgrimage to Mecca. Anyway, the Qur'an only gradually prohibited alcohol. The Qur'an's first revelation to mention wine appeared to be neutral on the matter; the second allowed that wine offered some good but also some sin, warning that the sin outweighed the good. The third revelation prohibited believers from praying while drunk and unable to

comprehend their own words (apparently, a companion of the Prophet had prayed after drinking wine and recited, "Say, 'O unbelievers, I worship what you worship'" instead of the correct, "Say, 'O unbelievers, I do not worship what you worship'" [109:1]; wine had destabilized the Qur'an). Only on the Qur'an's fourth mention of wine did Allah prohibit drinking altogether. Zoser says that in his own Qur'an, the first and second wine verses haven't yet been abrogated.

If you ask Zoser whether he's mu'min or kafr, he'll launch into his rant about the artificiality of these constructed binaries. Fair enough; there's a body of Sufi poetry that will back him up. He can also defend ayahuasca on somewhat traditionally Islamic grounds, citing the principle that Allah put everything on the earth for us to use as long as the effects are not harmful. It says that in the Qur'an, I think.

At Zoser's seat of civilization on Lord's Island, we sink deep into his couch and build on the two-part Transformers episode, "Dinobot Island," from the second season, 1985. Optimus Prime exiles the reckless Dinobots to a mysterious island so that they can train and learn to better refine their powers. It's also on this island that the Decepticons happen to discover a rich energy source, which they harvest into glowing pink Energon cubes—but their excessive hoarding creates an "energy disturbance" that leads to the appearance of time warps, portals through which life forms from other time periods can trespass upon the present. Cavemen riding wooly mammoths stampede down city streets; eighteenth-century pirates show up and try to commandeer a cruise ship; Old West cowboys tangle with biker gangs.

"That's where we're at, god," says Zoser. "Dinobot Island manifests the loss of context. Everything's thrown together; we just mash that shit up with no regard for whether these things naturally belong in dialogue with each other."

"It's not like the old days," I add, "when you had to travel thousands of miles to sit at a scholar's feet and get access to manuscripts that only existed in ten copies across the Muslim world."

"Now we can buy all of it," says Zoser. "Translate those shits, put a bar code on them, print them in the thousands, make them PDFs. But it can't be the same if you read it like that, lord. It's like a hurricane blasted through the whole tradition, and now you're just picking up artifacts wherever you found them, but the houses are all gone."

It occurs to me that hipsters like Zoser, with their aesthetic of appropriation and irony —stirring punk rock, 1980s hiphop, glam, grunge, whatever else, into an insincere syncretic blend—also remove all artifacts from their contexts and have created Dinobot Islands of their own in sections of Medina. But they've also created their own distinct context in which these thefts and admixtures become something new and coherent, a distinct construction of "hipster." Allah builds; Allah destroys; Allah adds knowledge to the cipher and makes a newborn. It's the same with religions: you can pull them apart

and put them back together and mix and match and create your own system.

At least in the cartoon, this loss of context threatens our very being. The Autobots defeat the Decepticons and release the stolen energy, which restores Time and saves the universe from getting torn apart. For their pivotal role in the stabilizing of existence, the Dinobots are released from their island exile to once again live at Autobot Headquarters.

"So what's the lesson?" I ask.

"The Decepticons are wantonly plundering the tradition, god," he answers. "They just take whatever they want, and that's how everything gets twisted up and confused."

Decepticons have no sense of how to read critically, he insists.

"So what are the Autobots doing, god?" I ask him.

"Restoring context, god. You can deconstruct Islam, but at some point you have to put it back together. Get your readings grounded in something." But neither of us have done that; we're still on Dinobot Island. Zoser is a Muslim, I guess, but he also does things with ancient Egypt that wouldn't fly with most Muslims, and he likes to call people "god." On top of that, he drinks a psychedelic brew with a community that regards itself as a Christian church, whether or not other Christians would accept it as such. I am a Muslim, and I'm getting ready to follow him.

"The Beats were on some Dinobot Island shit more than anyone," I say.

"How so, god?"

"They didn't know anything except that the white man's America into which they were born, and the whole language in which they were taught to think, was totally and irreparably fucked. So they kept trying to fix their heads and pull out all of the white world's pins and needles, but they had no real path: go to South America, go to India, dive into that 'Spiritual Orient,' that 'magical brown people' idea, do every drug, invade every context."

"You don't take them seriously?" he asks.

"I can't say that, really. I'm just a shit-talker."

"You ever do the knowledge to Burroughs and Ginsberg's correspondence on ayahuasca?"

"I did, lord. Burroughs said that ayahuasca was like space-time travel."

"Ginsberg had a bad trip," he says. "Ayahuasca didn't give him the love-and-peace experience but more of what he called the Murder of the Universe."

"Ya Haqq."

"Burroughs was a Harvard man, did you know that?"

"I did."

"When Burroughs did his yagé mission to the Amazon in 1953, he was building with this other dude from Harvard, Richard Evans Schultes, and Schultes was doing research

into ayahuasca and—"

"Ya Haqq," I interrupt, "do you want to build in equality?"

"Sure," he says, "we can do that."

I haven't smoked equality in three years, not since Lahore, where the shrine of the Sufi saint Shah Jamal had been the center of the local drug trade. Every Thursday night, the shrine was crowded with people coming to hear the music and smoke hashish and love God, love the Prophet, love Ali. The shrine was later bombed by some dickface and then shut down by the government.

"Do you really believe in that story about the plants, god?" I ask him.

"What story about what plants, god?"

"That you're communicating with the vine? That the vine knows your needs and delivers?" In the Quechua language, ayahuasca is a compound word meaning "vine of the [dead] spirits."

"I don't know," he says. "Do you think that plants can have consciousness?"

"I'm not going anywhere near that."

"You know that I'm not trying to be spooky with it, right? It's how you see things within your own circumference that matters. I mean, I love Ali, god. Ya Ali, ya Ali, Ali is my fucking heart. But I'm calling to the Ali that's my inner self, the Ali that's me, Ali as A.L.I., right? Allah Living I, Allah's Living Eye." He points at his eye to illustrate the difference.

"But if we all read it in our own ways, don't we risk the tradition losing coherence?"

"Mmm," he says, and then nothing. Back to Dinobot Island.

There is no mystery god up in space, and Zoser knows it—there's no knowledge or experience of Allah beyond you in your moment. How do you get up there or bring him down here? You put some books and chemicals in your head and that becomes Allah, or as much of Allah as you can know. Both the Qur'an and the vine are deep conversations that you're having with yourself. "Allah" is a projection of your own desires upon the mind of the universe. "Muhammad" is a superhero template, his sunna functioning as a How to Be the Perfect Human kit that you'll never finish: Muhammad as M.H.M.D., or Masters His Motherfucking Devils.

Sherman Jackson, one of the more important Muslim intellectuals in North America, has advised against treating the Tradition (yes, he capitalizes "Tradition") as an "ideological flea-market" and taking the principle of religious agency as "license to abandon the value and/or concept of orthodoxy." As for the ideological flea market, what else can we do? Jackson himself has to treat his capital-T "Tradition" as a flea market on some level because he still has to pick what he wants to include in the Tradition and haggle over its price. As for "orthodoxy," I have nothing to say, since orthodoxy is only a popularity contest. If I could get enough Muslims into ayahuasca,

then ayahuasca-Islam would become the new orthodoxy.

We watch more second-season Transformers, building on the high science of the "God Gambit" episode. The story takes place on Titan, Saturn's largest moon, where the masses are exploited and oppressed by their high priest, Jero, and his cult of the Sky God. Forced to offer sacrifices to the Sky God's idol, the people are left impoverished and starving. A poor, righteous teacher named Talaria, preaching a message of "reason and common sense" and condemning Jero for imposing unfair taxes and laws in the Sky God's name, storms the temple and destroys the statue, while her rebels capture Jero and his priests.

Talaria holds a bonfire parliament in the woods and teaches her people that there is no Sky God, just as Autobot Cosmos, having been chased through space by Decepticons, makes a crash landing. For tied-up Jero, the Autobot's descent proves the truth of his religion, and he manages to convince the people that the unconscious Cosmos is a Sky God.

The Decepticons who have chased Cosmos to Titan—Astrotrain, Starscream, and Thrust—arrive near the Sky God temple. Observing the conflict between Jero and Talaria, Astrotrain exclaims, "These fools worship Transformers!" Astrotrain puts himself over as a divine being and orders Cosmos, still unconscious, to be displayed in the temple as the new idol. Convinced of Astrotrain's divinity, Jero and the priests pledge themselves and their reserves of energy crystals to the Decepticons.

The Autobots come to rescue Cosmos, there's a fight, and the Decepticons flee Titan, but not before blowing up their hoard of energy crystals. The entire temple is destroyed, and Jero dies in the blast. On the first day of postrevolution Titan, Autobot Jazz tells the people, now led by philosopher-queen Talaria, that the Decepticons will never again be able to interfere with their religious beliefs.

"That's radical, god," says Zoser. "They couldn't make a cartoon like that now. That shit's the haqq. Organized religion is for fuckin' Decepticons, god."

"Shit's deep, god," I answer.

"The Autobots teach freedom, justice, and equality, god. They're Allah's poor and righteous teachers, and the Decepticons are on that bloodsucking, slave-making Sky God porkshit."

"The Decepticons will have people worshiping what they know not, blind to the living god and their origins in this universe."

"Slaves to mental death and power."

"The Autobots could have the people worshiping them too, but Jazz told them, 'We're not gods and never claimed to be.'"

"That's where he's wrong, though," says Zoser. "Because we're gods on our level, right?"

"I think he was just saying that Transformers weren't gods over other sentient beings. Jazz would probably accept all of us to be equal reflections of the Black Mind."

"That's peace," says Zoser. "That's some Optimus Prime knowledge." It's like the Sufi story about Moses getting proud of himself for having been spoken to directly by Allah, only to get humbled when Allah shows Moses a thousand mountains with a Moses atop every single one.

There's another lesson in the "God Gambit" episode, not explicitly stated within the story but rather lurking beyond the text, in the real-world mechanisms of putting this cartoon together. If you look at Astrotrain in this episode—the way that he orders around his fellow Decepticons, his treatment of Starscream, and his eagerness to be worshiped as a god when it serves his interests—it's all a bit out of character. It reads much more like the character of Megatron, and this is one of only two episodes in the entire series in which Megatron does not appear. Serious Transformers-heads have speculated that the script was most likely written with Megatron as the lead antagonist, but because Hasbro had just put out Astrotrain as a new toy, the cartoon writers did a quick switch and inserted Astrotrain to make his toy worth buying. The story was driven by economic factors outside its own fictional universe; if you look close enough, our religions work the same way. It's all about rearranging the pieces in a story to sell the right action figure at the right moment.

"We should use this in majlis," I suggest. "Make a video of clips from this episode set to Lost Children of Babylon and we could vibe on it like Nimatullahis, just haqq out."

Zoser puts on another episode, but exhausted from the long Megabus ride, I decide to close my eyes and see what happens. Tomorrow I have a meeting with a Santo Daime member. In part because of the ritual's cloudy legal status, and in part for confirmation that I'm not a psychopath who could get triggered by the wrong chemicals, participation in what the Santo Daime church calls "the work" requires a preliminary interview. Insha'Allah, we'll have a nice conversation, and the guy will arrive at the conclusion that I'm neither a narc nor a violent lunatic, and he'll give the green light for me to drink the vine with full institutional support and go crazy in the appropriate ways. I'm on a path, I think to the sounds of Decepticon lasers, and I sink deeper into the couch with the peace that comes with surrender—I'm about to surrender and sleep, yes, peace to the god, no Sky God, but whatever god, peace to us true and living names of the Haqq, the Black Mind. Cybertron's in all of us. Muhammad is God because the Qur'an says that all praise is due to Allah, and Muhammad's name in Arabic means "he who is praised." Ali is God because his name is one of the ninety-nine blessed Names of Allah, "the Highest." And we are gods, as my man Vishnu Allah said to me during our cipher last year: "How can you tell us that to glorify ourselves is idolatry, but you can go on hajj

and throw stones at something that looks like Osiris's dick?" Peace to the gods from that day: Vishnu Allah, Black Man Allah, King I'm Righteous Allah, the gods of that plus-lesson school, peace to whichever one said that we can build with cartoons because the Bible's the ultimate comic book already. Peace to Zoser who's building on ancient history while my eyes get too heavy: something that he had read about the Greek historian Hecataeus flexing to Egyptian priests at their Zeus/Amon-Re temple, boasting a lineage that could be traced back to a heroic god from sixteen generations ago. The Egyptian priests then slap Hecataeus down with their own genealogy: 345 statues, each representing a generation in an unbroken chain, all priests, all human. So peace to Kemet because I know who the Original Man is. Peace to Abu Hamzah al-Khurasani in the tenth century who said, "Here am I, Lord," to a bird, peace to 'Ayn al-Qudat al-Hamadhani in the twelfth century who said that whatever you hear from the Sufi, "you have heard from God," peace to the hululiyya and the pseudo-hululiyya and everyone who gets the hululi tag wrongfully or rightfully put on them, peace.

CIVILIZATION CLASS

As of this moment, there is not yet a federal ruling on ayahuasca. The sacred vine used in the brew is not illegal; people sell them on eBay with the disclaimer "for research purposes only." The problem is the leaves and their sacred DMT, a serotonergic psychedelic that qualifies as a Schedule I controlled substance under Chapter 13 of the Controlled Substance Act. When used with the vine, the leaves produce effects of intense introspection and emotional modification, accompanied by the production of vivid visual imagery and encounters with divine beings, for which I could get twenty years in prison.

Ayahuasca's legal status remains a complicated matter because while the tea is certainly a drug—described by no less an expert than Burroughs as the strongest drug he had ever taken—it is also a religious sacrament, and the U.S. government occasionally seems to respect freedom of religion more than other civil liberties. Upon news that Santo Daime folks in Oregon have won legal protection for their use of ayahuasca, the Mecca church remains hopeful but cautious.

If I were in Peru, it would be less complicated, since the government there has officially recognized ayahuasca as traditional medicine, cultural heritage, and spiritual practice. A relationship to particular drugs can determine your relationship to the state. Doesn't even have to be a drug, really; some plant life cannot help but speak truth to power. Because Muslims had introduced oranges to Spain, the Christian Reconquista called for a destruction of orange trees. To properly take back Spain for Jesus, it was necessary to purge the land of infidel fruit.

In Cuban Counterpoint, a treatment of tobacco and sugar as the main actors in Cuban history, Fernando Ortiz reads the economic lives of the crops as expressions of their innate essences. According to Ortiz, tobacco is masculine, individualist, and the source of Cuba's national pride, which it exports to the world; sugar is feminine, capitalist, and an import from the same outsiders that brought colonialism and subjugation. Tobacco is

natural, smoked pure; sugar is produced from a "long series of complicated physiochemical operations." Ortiz says that tobacco is born, "the voluntary offering of nature," while sugar is made by human power, and "impossible without machinery." Ortiz even reads the crops through human racial politics: tobacco has integrity because it does not change its color, whereas sugar starts as brown but is "bleached and refined until it can pass for white, travel all over the world . . . and reach a better price, climbing to the top of the social ladder."

Today, marijuana remains mostly illegal in the United States, whereas alcohol is slightly regulated; in Iran, it's the opposite. America's nineteenth-century war on opium targeted Chinese laborers who threatened to take railroad jobs from white men; its twentieth-century war on marijuana began with fears of Mexican farm laborers taking jobs from white men; and the movement toward Prohibition was motivated in part by prejudice against Irish immigrants and in part by America's entry into World War I and its throbbing with anti-German hatred. The hysteria in the 1960s over marijuana and LSD had as much to do with antiwar movements and their members' supposed use of those drugs. The 1980s War on Drugs was a war on black people, which explains why, even when more white people used illegal drugs, more black people did time for it. That's part of the humor in George H.W. Bush, who would go on to become the first U.S. president to hold up a bag of crack on national television, telling the country during his 1988 campaign, "We are not going to be divided by class."

In the post-9/11 era, Islam was positioned as something like a drug, the new poisoning of the mind from which Americans must be protected. We went from the smears of Bill Clinton as a secret pothead to the smears of Barack Obama as a secret Muslim. Watch that old cautionary tale Reefer Madness, in which marijuana turns decent American kids into psychotic murderers and rapists throwing away their good lives for sanitariums and suicide, and then turn on Fox News any day of the week and see what it says about Muslims. The next tragedy may be that of your daughters or your sons . . . TELL YOUR CHILDREN!

"Too many Americans don't know or understand how it threatens the very fabrics of our republic," says Islamic studies scholar Chuck Norris on shari'a. Muslims and drug religionists both know a tension with the state that comes with outlaw prayers. We have a War on Drugs that includes some holy sacraments, and a War on Terror that might also be a War on Islam, despite the reassurances of more than one president. There can be no Santo Daime church in America as a fixed location, a "real" church with brick and mortar and a reliable address, at least not in this American Mecca, and Muslims can't build a mosque without facing protests and even proposals of legislation; in Tennessee, people have tried to make it a felony to be Muslim. My Megabus trip to Mecca happens to be around the time that a toad-faced congressman is holding hearings in Washington

on American Muslims and their questionable loyalty to the United States. Santo Daime churches fight for their legal right to exist, a privilege that every other Christian denomination assumes to be protected by the Constitution, and Muslims fight to keep theirs. Speaking at a church that presumably faced no such challenge, Newt Gingrich expressed his fear that "if we do not decisively win the struggle over the nature of America," his grandchildren will be forced to grow up in a "secular atheist country, potentially one dominated by radical Islamists and with no understanding of what it once meant to be an American." I had failed to realize that the goal of radical Islamists was to bring America to secular atheism, and I can only speculate as to what he means by the "nature of America" or the "we" that joins him in his struggle. At the very least, it seems safe to say that his "we" cannot include me. When Newt Gingrich closes his eyes and imagines the nature of America, he doesn't see a Muslim consuming hallucinogens.

I am a Muslim with plans of tripping with Allah, if Allah so wills, making me simultaneously a participant in two religions of high discomfort in our present America. Muslim writers on interfaith missions have placed Islam into dialogue with Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, and even secularism, seeking common ground and shared values. No one has done it with Islam and drugs. This might be an appropriate time to write the book, which could be the scripture for a post–Mother Wheel America, because Islam and drugs both say so much about America and the nature of America. Both have always stood at the gates, and sometimes they have been forced to stand together. In 1937, Harry J. Anslinger, commissioner of the Federal Narcotics Bureau, alerted the nation to marijuana's dangers by recalling a group of Isma'ili Muslims known as the Assassins—the word "assassin" being derived from hashish—who were "noted for their acts of cruelty." Anslinger was a bit off with his chronology, claiming that the Assassins, who emerged a few centuries after Muhammad, came a thousand years before Christ, but he got his point across: marijuana was the green devil of crazy brown-skinned killers, threatening to destroy the rational Western mind. "The word 'assassin,'" he promised, "very aptly describes the drug." In the state's vision, marijuana was blackness and brownness assassinating the white nature of America, malforming our good Aryan American children from superior Christian intellects to lustful, deranged Mahometan animality. From angelic beings of the brain to degraded creatures of the body.

This could provide insight not only on the prohibition of drugs but also on their legalization—that is, why they could become legal for some and not others. The spiritual use of peyote had been persecuted for centuries by Europeans; in Mexico City in 1620, the Spanish Inquisition decreed the cactus to be an enemy of the Catholic Church. Peyote was similarly attacked in the United States, with over a dozen states outlawing its possession, until the federal government allowed its use for spiritual purposes—with a racial qualifier, as the user must be "Indian." A federal act as recent

as 1994 protects Native American peyote users from both state and federal harassment; however, non–Native American seekers have had a hard time obtaining similar legal protection. Red people can run naked through the desert and trip out with their magical plants and false gods and paint with all of the colors of the wind, says our government, but the rationalism and clarity of the White Mind must be protected at all costs.

The racism in American thought on drugs could also help us understand why the ritualized slaughter of animals in Islam or Santeria, a religion mixing elements of African and Caribbean traditions, will strike many as more disturbing and offensive to the nature of America than the mass torture—electrocuting, castrating, malnourishing, overcrowding, and chemical-pumping—of animals in our corporate meat factories. Consistency doesn't seem to be an issue. Likewise, to imprison human beings is modern, and flogging them is primitive. To murder a criminal with stones or a sword is barbaric, but technological advancements in the matter, such as lethal injection, electrocution, and gas chambers, make execution appear to be cleaner than it is. The commodification of women as consumer products in porn, strip clubs, and American culture at large is progressive, but veiling and polygamy belong to monsters from a lost premodern world. One society disciplines its female bodies through anorexia and plastic surgery, the other through acid in the face. What's at stake here is "civilization."

• • •

White governments feared black knowledge of plant power before the United States even existed, going back to the medicinal and magical herb-based traditions that traveled with captured Africans to the New World. Neither Africans nor Europeans held the division between magic and medicine to be clear; both slaves and slave masters in the American South widely believed in the powers of traditional African herbalists to heal sickness, offer protection against witchcraft, or even harm their enemies. The African American traditions of root doctoring and Conjure were employed as magical weaponry in slave revolts and linked to attempts by individual slaves to kill their masters. In 1751, in fear of either natural or supernatural violence, South Carolina's Negro Act made it a crime punishable by death that "any slave shall teach or instruct another slave in the knowledge of any poisonous root, plant, herb, or other poison whatsoever."

Peace to Gullah Jack, who brought a bag of conjuring technology with him on the slave ship from Zanzibar to South Carolina, and later became the spiritual adviser to an attempted slave insurrection, handing out cullah (charms made from crab claws) that were believed to make the freedom fighters invincible. The planned revolt was foiled, and Gullah Jack was among the conspirators hanged on July 12, 1822. They never taught me about him in school.

Wherever there's a story of control, there's a story of resistance; wherever there's narrative, there's counter-narrative. Find the Caliph and you find the Anti-Caliph. Find the ground, and you find the underground. Neither the ground nor the underground are stable. Plenty of Americans are unable to conceive that their country has its own underground, and if they do, they fail or refuse to admit that the underground, the counter-narrative, is just as "American" as the patriots' mythology on top. So the T-shirts and bumper stickers tell me, "Love it or leave it," missing the obvious fact that I do love America, maybe more than they do—but my America is also the anti-America, the lineage of Shakers and Nat Turner and William Lloyd Garrison and Emma Goldman and the Weathermen. Loving America doesn't mean that you buy into that aboveground story of freedom and democracy or that you want to see Ronald Reagan's head on Mount Rushmore. Loving America could mean dynamiting the four devils and restoring Mount Crazy Horse to the Lakota.

"The United States of America," after all, isn't really real; it only exists because we have all agreed that it exists. If everyone from the president to the rich citizens to the soldiers and cops and reporters, and even the poor citizens, ceased to believe in the borders and ceased to believe in such a thing called "America," then there would be no America. The money would be no good, and the flag wouldn't be worth anyone's blood.

If you look at it that way, what we call "America" is only a pile of stories, and the tellers of some stories have more power than others to make their stories "real." What we call "Islam" works the same way. Islam has no existence outside our language. If Muslims no longer believed that a religious system called "Islam" existed, and the heads of various governments and media conglomerates no longer believed that Islam existed, then there would be no Islam. It's not a mountain or an ocean or the sun that could go on without us.

Like America, Islam is there because we have all agreed that it is there, even if we don't agree on what exactly it means. Like America, Islam also has an underground, a counter-narrative to the Islam(s) of power. When Muslims challenge the confused and excluded members of their community—"If you have so many problems with Islam, why stay in it? Why even call yourself a Muslim?"—the underground can offer them a home. Like the American story of power, the Islamic story of power will say, "Love it or leave it," as though the Islamic story of power is the only Islam, and anyone wanting to wear the title of "Muslim" has to step through its gate. Only the Sith deal in absolutes. Beneath or beyond the absolutism, Islam has always been home to misfits, freaks, rebels, and queers.

So America has a "counter-American" lineage that's fully American, and Islam has a "counter-Islamic" legacy that's fully Islamic. The Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan makes both lists. So do drugs.

As the human race increasingly moves toward the realization of a "global West," some try to present the primary ideological resistance, the opposite magnetic pole, as a "global Islam"—the claim that regional and cultural variations of Islam must sacrifice their uniqueness and conform to one timeless, universal Islam. Perhaps an Islamic drug movement could stand between these rival globalizations and become a new position in defiance of both. In the simple act of drinking ayahuasca, I break laws on both sides of my being, my American laws and my shari'a laws, but I also affirm myself as under those laws—because I can only drink as an American and as a Muslim, and for me to drink means the survival of my America and my Islam. It's a good start, anyway. Just a thought as I rationalize increasing the blood flow to my forebrain's paralimbic and neocortical regions, which will put me on a spaceship.

Six and a half decades after the government revived legends of the Assassins for its anti-marijuana scare campaign, on December 14, 2001, George W. Bush told us that illegal drug traffic funds the enemies of America, suggesting, "If you quit drugs, you join the fight against terrorism." The president (as well as the government's ad campaign that followed) failed to specify which drugs or which terrorists. The logical guess might be that if you bought heroin, you were supporting jihadists in Afghanistan, where nearly 90 percent of the world's opium was produced; but the government left it to our imagination, rendering every dime bag a potential act of high treason. Maybe 9/11 had been funded by an underground peyote network, as a native retaking of Manhattan. Maybe Osama bin Laden was selling ayahuasca vines on eBay.

It's odd that drugs and Islam would be used to muddy each other's names, when so many would assume that they are natural enemies. If you're into drug use as a spiritual quest grounded in individual freedom, you might not be into an organized religion full of devotional, behavioral, and communal demands. However, for Muslims who seek to build a shared reality in which the exoteric (zahir) dominates the esoteric (batin), and conforming to public religiosity is valued above direct personal encounters with the Mind of the Universe, then yes, drugs are trouble. Even when Muslims get fucked by the current political climate and see their own rights threatened and violated, the broader Muslim community retains a social conservatism that stands in the way of aligning with other marginalized groups. (Instead of siding with the LGBT community in the battle for civil rights, a Muslim group such as the Islamic Circle of North America begs for acceptance from the Christian Right by condemning gay marriage.) You'll even hear Muslims argue that their antidrug values are part of what makes Islam so crucially positive for America.

Islamophobia's a real problem in American culture, but this doesn't mean that I expect American Muslims by and large to have any sympathy for the undeserving targets of narcophobia, even when it's a matter of religious persecution. To many of my Muslim

sisters and brothers, it will be taken as an insult that I even compare these prejudices.

Again, I am a Muslim. Authorities within my religious tradition, like my nation-state, assert their right to define my relationship to the substances that I put in my body. In both cases, the authorities do so with a claim to guard my own welfare along with that of my fellow believers/citizens. In neither case are the authorities entirely consistent. In my religion, people have to make shit up when Allah's words give no explicit answer. In my nation-state, prescription drugs kill more citizens than illegal drugs.

Newt Gingrich is a converted Catholic, which means that he drinks wine with the belief that he is literally ingesting Christ's blood. The spiritual drug use favored by Gingrich is fully accepted within American culture and law, but coming from my personal experience of Islam, I can't bring myself to approach wine. Whether or not I presently agree with my imams that it's a "sin," the power of self-imposed religious conditioning has made an encounter with alcohol impossible for me; in Islam as I have experienced it, wine is like the pork of drugs. Despite the popular imagery of taverns and drunkenness in classical Sufi poetry, I don't feel like I'm missing much. Alcohol just strikes me as poisonous. Ayahuasca, however, promises something more. The way that people talk about ayahuasca, it can't be just about getting wasted. It doesn't even sound like a "drug" at all, at least not in the sense that I've been taught to view intoxicants, and certainly not in the traditional Islamic description of intoxication as taghtiyat al-'aql (covering of the intellect). I'm not writing Adventures in Islam and Meth here; ayahuasca heals.

The traumatic aspect of drinking ayahuasca is that in order to heal yourself, you must first confront the wound; by forcing you to deal with your own inner garbage, ayahuasca shows you things about yourself that you might not want to see. I wish that a whole country could drink ayahuasca—not merely every individual citizen of a country, but the country itself, the spirit of the country. I wish that a flag could drink ayahuasca, that we could just fold the Stars and Stripes into the shape of a cup, pour in the tea, and transport Uncle Sam into another dimension. He'd have to fight his way out of some nightmares, but he'd be cleansed. What would he find? William S. Burroughs wrote that when you drink ayahuasca, "The blood and substance of many races, Negro, Polynesian, Mountain Mongol, Desert Nomad, Polyglot Near East, Indian—new races as yet unconceived and unborn, combinations not yet realized—pass through your body." When Burroughs drank, he actually saw himself transformed into both a black man and a black woman. What if some freedom-hating narcoterrorists snuck into the Fox News studios and put ayahuasca in Sean Hannity's coffee, just before he went live? What would be the day's fair and balanced news for America?

If America drank ayahuasca and then withdrew into the filthy pit of its own heart, confronting all its fears and hate and finally purging itself of that negative energy, maybe

America would come out Muslim: sucked through a black hole by the Black Mind, young Latter-Day Saint crackers with smooth cheeks, short-sleeved white shirts, and name tags confront nightmarish visions of getting swallowed whole by giant grotesque "Jolly Nigger" coin banks and then find themselves vomited back up as Nubian Islamic Hebrews in turbans and robes selling incense on the subways. The "God Hates Fags" pastor, eyes wild with a new passion for Allah, boards a helicopter to drop thousands of Qur'ans upon the small towns below.

I want to see ayahuasca's vine goddess clean out America's poison. But what would happen if a religion could drink the vine? What if I poured ayahuasca into my Qur'an?

WISDOM ELEVATES EXCEPTIONAL DEVILS

> Abandon wine, take the cup of Haydar, this cup which has the fragrance of amber and sparkles like a green emerald.
>
> —AL-MAQRIZI

I wake up early. Zoser sleeps all day. I brush weed specks from one of the books on his coffee table and read the whole thing: The Shaman and Ayahuasca, by Don José Campos, a Peruvian curandero (healing shaman). Zoser had drunk ayahuasca with the man's guidance on more than one occasion. The back cover claims that Amazonian shamans have been drinking ayahuasca for 70,000 years. Maybe, maybe not; human beings haven't even been in the Americas for 70,000 years.

It's okay, but still the kind of faith-driven book that I have a hard time reading now, since my new academic life can leave me feeling a bit like Han Solo when he laughs off Obi-Wan Kenobi's lessons on the Force. They're hanging out on the Millennium Falcon, and Tatooine farm-boy Luke Skywalker is clearly mesmerized by Kenobi's wizard hustle, but Han just leans back in his chair and dumps all over the Force: "Kid, I've been from one end of the galaxy to the other, and I've seen a lot of strange stuff, but I've never seen anything to make me believe that there's one all-powerful Force controlling everything. 'Cause no mystical energy field controls my destiny. It's all a lot of simple tricks and nonsense."

This shaman Campos has found what he holds to be the Ultimate Reality, and it seems to be a good thing for him, making him a better person and more mindful of the universe and such, and the ultimate truth of his Truth has apparently been proven to his satisfaction. This shaman writes like a missionary, an evangelist for ayahuasca, fine, but missionaries these days know that organized religion's not cool, so you can't be sectarian about your sect.

> The sweet thing about curanderismo is that in this knowledge there are no sects. It has nothing to do with religion. It is free. Fluid. There is a difference between religion and religiosity. The religious part is the practice. Remember, when

we do an Ayahuasca practice it is religious but it has nothing to do with religion.

"I'm not a practitioner of any religion," he adds. In a discussion of ayahuasca's long road toward becoming legal in Peru, Campos mentions the opposition from "religious" forces: "You know, it's usually the religious folks who are against us and that happens here too. Religion has always been opposed to these practices. They sometimes see it as, you know, satanic practices." He's not exactly wrong; I'm not doubting that "mainstream" Christian churches in Peru took issue with drug use attached to non-Christian spirits and belief systems, but he might be a bit unfair, because this isn't a case of religion versus some other, more genuinely magical and legitimate category of human behavior. It could just be religion versus religion, and one religious body happens to be more politically powerful than the other.

"It is important to understand that one is not ingesting a liquid, one is ingesting the spirit of the plant." So the vine is believed to possess a spirit and a consciousness; it actively and knowingly does things for us. She (the shaman regards the vine as a feminine spirit) unties the knots within you because she knows where they are. "She always gives you what you need at the time." With or without the Daime mythology, Zoser had told me that drinking ayahuasca was like treating your consciousness as an Etch-A-Sketch: "You take what you consider 'reality' and just give it a few good shakes, and it's gone and you see that it's not so absolute or 'real' after all. That's what the ayahuasca does, god: it shakes up the Etch-A-Sketch of your memories, your beliefs, all of it, and lets you draw your new reality." I could go for something like that. Michel Foucault considered the ability of drugs to mess with the socially and culturally scripted self, dissolving and generally fucking with the self and achieving "a state of 'nonreason' in which the experience of madness is outside the distinction between the normal and the pathological." In 1975, he went to Death Valley and experienced a transformative LSD trip, the single LSD trip of his life, after which he said that he finally understood his sexuality.

There are some cool pictures in the shaman's book. Besides photos of the river and the plants and birds and Don José strumming his charangito, he includes ayahuasca-inspired paintings by Pablo Amaringo. They remind me of posters that my stoner friends in college would have hung on their dorm walls: psychedelic scenes with winged centaurs holding staffs, and mermaids and rainbow serpents, palaces and expansive halls with columns and goblets and spirits everywhere, dolphins and pink fish and fish-people, and the shaman with his double, a jaguar wearing a crown.

I know that I'm going to write a book about Islam and ayahuasca, though I don't yet know its voice. I've been learning the science of academic work, but sometimes I'd rather keep writing adventure books for academics to chew on. Becoming an object of study isn't that hard: just place yourself at the intersection of two categories and they'll

spend all day coming up with a name for your new place. Give them any reason to say that you've deconstructed something. Make them want to retrace your steps and figure out what books you've read. Write the craziest shit that you can think of, and get them to ask whether you're really saying what you seem to be saying or perhaps there's a higher meaning to you that everyone else has missed. In their own way, these people are all professional esotericists, because they need a hidden secret to live in your words. Offer a pile of coded symbols and obscure references that aren't too complex, but complex enough to make the scholars work, and they'll take themselves seriously for having deciphered you. Expose your veins and let them inject their own educations into you, nourishing your work with all their trained and refined meaning-making power. Remember that you're not a victim and they're not parasites, as it's pretty much a fair trade: they make use of their institutional authority in declaring to their field that you are worth talking about, and you give them a previously uncharted territory to conquer for their CVs. You lie down on their operating table, and they earn a degree or get one step closer to tenure.

Zoser wakes up around three and comes out of his bedroom wearing the clothes in which I had last seen him, smashing his palms into his eyes.

"Peace, god," I say.

"Let's build," he says.

He sets next to me on the couch and pulls out his 100-sided die, black with white numbers. It's the size of a ping-pong ball and almost as perfectly spherical, with the sides barely distinct enough for the die to function as a die. The die stops rolling due to weights inside that also make it rattle when you shake it. Looks like some legitimate spiritual technology, like it's not available to just anyone. He had to go through some kind of initiation to get it.

Zoser pushes a pile of books and magazines off his coffee table to make room, says, "Bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim, Ya Ali, Ya Ali, Ya Ali," shakes the die a couple times, and then gently drops it.

The die rolls like a ball, wobbles, and comes to a halt. It takes a second to figure out which number is the one facing directly up: 81.

"Build Knowledge," says Zoser. In Allah's Supreme Mathematics, the number 8 signifies "Build" (or "Destroy") and 1 signifies "Knowledge."

"You have to build with your knowledge to manifest your knowledge," I respond. This interpretation falls within the logic of Supreme Mathematics, because "manifesting" your knowledge means that you're making it "born," and "Born" is the attribute for the number 9, which you get by adding the digits (8 + 1 = 9).

"Right and exact, god."

"When you build with your knowledge, you're destroying the devil's knowledge," I

add. “The devil builds with his false knowledge, his tricknology, and when he builds that up, he’s destroying you and making his own vision manifest.”

“That’s why we never love the devil, no matter how long he studies.” Zoser picks up the D-100 and hands it to me: 42.

“Culture Wisdom,” I say. “A culture with wisdom brings forth equality.” This is because “Equality” is the attribute for 6 and 4 + 2 = 6. “You don’t have equality when the wisdom is separate from the culture.”

“That’s peace, haqq. How do you see it in the degrees?” The “degrees” were the Supreme Wisdom Lessons of Master Fard Muhammad.

“The equality degree in the Lost-Found Muslim Lesson No. 1 asks, ‘Why does the Devil call our people Africans?’ That shit’s worth deconstructing, god.”

“True indeed.”

“It’s an identity that comes from the outside, god. It creates both false unity and false difference: false unity because it perceives that whatever happens within the geographical boundaries of ‘Africa’—thousands of languages, countless tribal and national and religious things going on, cultures, histories, all of it—adds up to make one essential ‘Africanity’ that we can stick a label on and put in a box. And that’s not reality, god. That’s some white dudes creating reality the way that they want to see it, but then the people who get fed that reality, the ‘Africans,’ end up taking it and build their own reality of what ‘African’ means as a resistance against the white dudes’ ‘Africa.’ This porkshit ends up becoming real because everyone believes in it.”

“So that’s the false unity, god. Where’s the false difference?”

“Because once you designate something as ‘African,’ you automatically designate other things as non-African, right? That’s the only way that these labels can have any meaning. So you draw borders around Africa and then decide that the Arabian Peninsula’s not part of it—why not? Look at the map, god; it can be as African as it is non-African. Or the Iberian Peninsula’s not part of Africa, even though most Portuguese people have some trace of Kongolese ancestry. Or diasporic populations aren’t part of ‘Africa’ because they’re removed from the land. The idea of ‘Africa’ creates false difference because it’s not just about geography, lord. You create this idea of Africa and then that creates an idea of Asia and an idea of Europe and all of it.”

We make the words, and then the words make us. Master Fard Muhammad was on to something. As Stephan Palmié writes, “Most ‘Africans,’ be they Nuer, Dogon, Ndembu or what have you, only learned that they were ‘Africans’ when slave traders, missionaries, or colonial officials told them so, and began treating them ‘as such.’” In the course of this process, which accompanied the slave trade, imperialism, and contemporary global inequality, these so-called Africans “also came to shoulder the weight of a foreign intellectual formation that had been in the making for centuries.”

This is all stuff that Master Fard Muhammad has already told us. He likes the devil because the devil gives him nothing, says Master Fard Muhammad in the sixth degree of his English Lesson C-1. The devil gives you these tools for organizing your reality into categories, and through them the devil reorients you toward his own vision of the world. It's the same thing with religion and the ways that colonialism and globalization created a template of "religion" that is now projected upon all times and places as though it's a self-evident universal. The British authorities decided that something called "Hinduism" existed, gave it that name, and made it so real that the people now marked as "Hindus" formulated their tradition accordingly and even made it the basis for nationalism. Hinduism's either four thousand years old or barely two hundred, depending on what you mean by "Hinduism." You can take "Why does the devil call our people 'Africans?'" and apply it to just about anything: nation, class, gender, sexual orientation, any means of making categories for people that takes on real institutional energy, any context in which language defines and limits our possibilities.

"It's all made up," says Zoser. "You're in the fucking Devil's matrix, Ya Haqq."

"So what's knowledge of self, then?"

"You need to drink ayahuasca."

"But ayahuasca's outside the self. It's as external as anything. Some Muslims would see it as artificial, as opposed to mysticism that doesn't involve chemical interference."

"There's no inside/outside, lord. Islam has a whole tradition of dream interpretation, right? But dreams aren't just inside you or between you and a spirit. There's a science of dreams. You might see the Prophet in a dream because you ate a certain kind of cheese before bed."

"I've seen the Prophet in a dream," I tell him. "And I dreamed of Master Fard Muhammad after eating a wedge of blue Stilton. He taught me sacred geometry."

"So what's the difference between a dream and a trip?"

"In principle, nothing," I answer.

"You can twirl around in circles until you lose yourself in God, or recite the same words over and over, or bang on a drum or whatever. None of that shit's more or less artificial just because there aren't drugs involved. It's always manipulation of real and physical things going on in your brain, god. Listening to music does shit in your brain; listening to the Qur'an, looking at images, whatever the fuck you want to do, it's still you doing work on yourself and your own chemicals with tools from the outside."

"Ramadan," I add.

"Right on," he says. "Make it plain."

"You fast in the month of Ramadan, and your hunger pain mixes up with the talk that you hear at the mosque and it's supposed to do something for you: make you more mindful of what you have, more compassionate for those who go without, and the ache

in your stomach has you thinking about your Creator all day long. People say that fasting isn't just a ritual obligation, right? It's supposed to change your mind. You alter your consciousness by what you don't put in your body."

We can also make changes in our brains by what we remove from our bodies, as with my Shi'a brothers who slice open their foreheads and tear up their backs with bladed chains in mourning for the brutal death of Husayn, grandson of Muhammad, at the cursed and blessed desert of Karbala. The act of cutting stimulates a flood of chemicals within the body that act like morphine; in the West, self-cutting has been recognized as addictive, especially among adolescent girls. In the Shi'a context, the natural high is delivered within a matrix of stories, symbols, interpretations, and emotions that load it with meaning: grief and compassion for the family of the Prophet, the lines drawn around a community that loves the family of the Prophet in this way, bewilderment at the utter lack of mercy and ethics that we can witness every day among our species, mourning for our utterly fucked shit-box of a world, anticipation of a more just future, and salvation for the individual self. All of those meanings can get into your system too, making your blood pump harder and your body shake and your head tingle, really amping you up for when it's time to tear into your skin.

There's a wide spectrum of rulings on the legality of these self-harming practices, even among scholars within the Shi'a tradition. At first glance, the question might be whether causing deliberate damage to one's own body contradicts Islamic principles; but from my personal history of self-cutting, which has usually been contextualized within a wrestling ring, I can also link it to the question of drugs and intoxication. The whole body itself is a drug, or at least it has its own awesome stash of drugs already built in, and the chemicals within a good Muslim body must be governed. Normally responsible and proper believers can transport themselves to all kinds of spiritually dangerous places through the ecstasy of self-harm, and it's easy to envision a variety of institutions, both "religious" and "secular," that would want to keep us from ever going there.

Thinking about Husayn, Karbala, and my own scars makes me go quiet.

"The whole argument that narcotics produce a false reality doesn't mean anything to me," says Zoser, reviving the conversation. "It's all false reality, god. You decided to learn Arabic because you want to know Allah better; is the Arabic language coming from inside or outside you? Is it natural?"

Are any words natural? Along with the various invented categories that produce knowledge and thus create our world as we know it—"race," "religion," "sexual orientation," and so on—we could also include "drug." As with those terms, we now treat "drug" like a self-evident reality, a word that no longer needs to be defined; even if we can't define "drug," we're sure that we would know a drug if we saw it, just as we

know a "religion" or a "race." But all of those terms have histories; there were times in which people did not use these terms, or they used them in different ways. The category of "drug" as we use it now, with its implied meanings of legal and moral regulation, can only be what, a century old? And just what is covered under this term can change, with items falling in or out based on politics and economics, similar to the way that Irish, Italian, and Jewish people have been at times excluded from or included in the "white race." The ground underneath our terms is always moving.

How do you escape your moment? When Master Fard Muhammad showed up in 1930, preaching in Detroit's poorest neighborhoods that black people were gods and white people were devils, the word "racism" didn't even exist in public vocabulary; "racism" wasn't widely used until the 1940s. Fard did not have a word for the kind of injustice that he saw. But Fard took the prevailing assumption about biological difference—that there were clearly distinct categories ("races") of people, and that these categories were separated from each other by essential inherited differences—and redirected them to crucify the oppressors instead of the oppressed. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the years of Master Fard Muhammad's preaching in Detroit and Chicago, commonly accepted science was used to affirm racial prejudice. The Nation of Islam's doctrines as formulated by Master Fard Muhammad and the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, as much as they offered resistance to white supremacy, adhered to the same foundational knowledge through which white supremacy had been produced and enforced. Changes in the ways that Nation members saw race would also correspond to changes in science.

In the decades following World War II, as the aftermath of the Holocaust and the rise of decolonization movements led to a rethinking of race, science shifted with politics; science would no longer be employed to support racism but now served to overcome it. In turn, as science moved, the makers and owners of Islam moved too. In 1965, Malcolm X embarked on what many American Muslims would call the culmination of the Nation of Islam's mission and relevance, his pilgrimage to Mecca, where he prayed with white Muslims and rediscovered his transracial humanity, as the absolute unity of God found its earthly reflection in a parallel oneness of humanity. Malcolm X, who was no less opposed to white supremacy than Master Fard Muhammad, constructed his resistance to white supremacy, just as Master Fard Muhammad had three decades earlier, in the dominant scientific discourse of the time. Even as they sought to dismantle the Devil's worldview, they both found their truths within it.

Zoser picks up the die and rolls: 62. "Equality wisdom," he reads. "So do how you break that down?"

"I know how you want to break it down," I answer, smiling. It just so happens that the code for 6, "Equality," is also the code for weed.

“Fire up some equality and do the wisdom, god! Let’s make some wisdom born in here, Ya Haqq!”

Zoser may be opening the door for me to drink ayahuasca, but it seems that weed could be his real sacrament. “What’s Islam say about equality?” he asks me.

“There’s room for debate,” I tell him. “Unlike alcohol, equality isn’t explicitly forbidden in the Qur’an.”

“Ya Haqq,” he says. “I’d suggest that there’s still room to talk about alcohol, but go on.”

“I’ve been reading a lot, god. My access to Harvard’s library system expires the day of graduation, so I just go in there and get stacks of books and build. I found some good shit in there.”

“On equality, lord?”

“Franz Rosenthal, The Herb: Hashish Versus Medieval Muslim Society. 1971.” I break it down for him: Rosenthal covers discourse from the period’s religious scholars on hashish—understood in the medieval context, which lacked our modern distinctions between varieties of hemp, as a general term for what we now call “cannabis”—and its permissibility in Islam. The first issue for a user of any drug in the Islamic tradition is determining whether the drug can be halal (permissible). Muslims in my galaxy aren’t so much into the halal/haram thing these days, but it’s still a conversation that I should have. If the drug is worth doing, it ought to be worth defending. Rosenthal gets into debates as to whether using hashish makes one “intoxicated,” ritually unclean, or mentally unable to perform prayers or even acts such as divorce; whether one can feed hashish to animals; and what punishments might be suitable for the user of hashish.

I thought that Rosenthal might be helpful for contextualizing ayahuasca within Islam, since the major figures in the formation of Islam’s “classical tradition” never had to deal with South American shamans or drugs from rain forests. Looking at Zoser for answers only goes so far; Zoser can claim all sects or no sects however he wants them, since on Dinobot Island it all works. He smokes his equality and we watch 2001: A Space Odyssey.

Sometimes I’m not sure whether weed or the Daime is Zoser’s sacrament of choice. The Daime seems to send him on the epic spiritual odysseys, but equality gives him the daily maintenance. Maybe ayahuasca has genuinely fixed whatever was broken in him; he seems to think so, but he tells an evangelical Daime story that I’ve heard about other technologies—the same conversion narrative of “I let this into my heart and everything changed forever” that you’d get from more normative born-again Christians or Muslims or anything, the same story that I used to tell about my religion when I thought that a light-switch conversion instantly solved every problem in my life. I might have to face the possibility that Zoser just likes getting wasted, and Santo Daime’s stories and

structures have repackaged the experience of getting wasted so that it means more than just regular dumb getting wasted.

ISLAM AND EQUALITY

The Qur'an was revealed in the seventh century, and Sunnism and Shi'ism both crystallized in the ninth century, several generations after the Prophet's death; so canonical Islam, as most people define it, can say nothing about ayahuasca. Turns out, it's also a problem with weed, which is absent not only from the Qur'an but also the sayings of the Prophet and even the works of imams Shafi'i, Malik, Abu Hanifa, and Ahmad ibn Hanbal, eponyms of the four major schools of Sunni law. It doesn't appear that Muhammad or even the broader Arab world in his lifetime were aware of its existence; the earliest references to hashish in Islamic literature come a couple of centuries after the Prophet's death.

So what can you do? Can something exist if there's no category for it?

I have done the vast majority of my life's weed-smoking in Pakistan, with Muslims, and sometimes at Islamic holy places. What's funny is that if you subscribe to the whole "clash of civilizations" thing, you wouldn't expect weed to be so prevalent in Pakistan —and that's especially amusing because weed was in the so-called Muslim world long before it ever hit Europe.

Hashish entered Islamic tradition with the expansion of Islam's territorial and intellectual horizons: the spread of empire into lands with long-standing relationships to the plant, and the mass translation into Arabic of various cultures' literatures, including medical and scientific texts. Not only did Muslims conquer the world; the world conquered Islam. Newly converted Muslims in Persia and India maintained their hashish traditions, and without much trouble or opposition since the Qur'an did not speak against it. When the Seljuk Turks took Baghdad, they brought hashish with them, integrating hashish deeper into Islamic cultures.

Some Muslims, however, did have a problem with hashish and argued for its prohibition on Islamic grounds. But how do you invent a law that isn't there? Basing legislation on divinely revealed scripture comes with obstacles and opportunities, since

the scripture is both too vague and too specific. It's vague enough that it can be made to say anything, and it's specific enough that it fails to answer the needs of new contexts. The Qur'an's complete lack of a statement on hashish helped both supporters and opponents of the herb. For supporters, the Qur'an's silence amounted to the absence of undeniable prohibition; for opponents, the Qur'an's silence provided a chance to link hashish with a substance on which the Qur'an does give what most would accept as a clear answer.

With the sacred sources refusing to speak on hashish, Islamic legal scholars used the principle of qiyas (deduction by analogy) to determine its status. Just as I've been trying to imagine the relationship between Islam and ayahuasca through Islam's relationship to hashish, some thinkers sought to determine the rightful place of hashish by comparing it to wine. For scholars who opposed hashish, judging weed as analogous to wine gave the issue a clean logic:

1. Wine is intoxicating.
2. Wine is forbidden in Islam.
3. Hashish is intoxicating.
4. Therefore, hashish is forbidden in Islam.

For Islam's weed question, this reasoning failed to end the conversation. A pro-hashish interpretation of Islam also had its advocates, such as that by poet 'Alam ad-Din ibn Shukr, who argued that comparing the two drugs only revealed one to be a halal substitute for the other:

> O soul, turn to amusement,
> For by play does a young man live.
> Do not get fed up with daily drunkenness.
> If it cannot be wine, let it be hashish.

Hashish even received positive fatwas allowing its use, such as the ruling by ninth-century Hanafi judge Jamal ad-Din Yusuf ibn Musa al-Malati. Pro-hashish jurists argued for a subtle but meaningful distinction between the categories of "corruptive" and "intoxicating"; even though hashish could "corrupt" someone, it did not cause the same intoxication as wine. "It is above pure wine," wrote poet al-Jayshi al-Hakwi. "When noble men use it, eat it and agree, young man. Eating it revives the dead. By God, bravo, hashish!"

It was also asserted that hashish did not make its consumer ritually "unclean," as did wine. Az-Zarkashi, a scholar of the Shafi'i school of law, argued that the comparison to wine simply failed to prove anything:

The statement that hashish is to be declared unclean is not to be considered acceptable, even if [hashish] were intoxicating, for proof comes only in connection with wine, and something other than wine does not correspond to it in all aspects. It is agreed that it is permissible to consume a small quantity of hashish. If it were unclean, this would not be permissible.

The defense of hashish wielded an important counterattack on the claims of its adversaries, as firmly grounded in the claim of Islamic authenticity as those who opposed hashish: Muslims who claimed legal authority to prohibit hashish were not actually religious traditionalists or puritans, but rather heretics who were inserting new rules, based only on their own personal prejudices, into Islam. For Muslims emphasizing the importance of remaining faithful to Muhammad's uncorrupted message and example, to be accused of "innovation" (bida') was a serious matter. "They have declared it forbidden without any justification on the basis of reason and tradition," 'Alam ad-Din ibn Shukr charged. "Declaring forbidden what is not forbidden is forbidden." Al-'Ukbari asserted, "Know that the pure shari'a has not indicated that the use of drugs that cause joy such as saffron, bugloss, and others whose action is similar to that of this drug is forbidden. No indication has come down from the Prophet to the effect that it is forbidden as such and that a hadd punishment has been established for eating it. Because there has been no tradition on this matter, people have permitted it and have used it."

For the anti-hashish side, one answer was to invent and circulate new sayings of Muhammad, presented on the authority of his companions, that strengthened the case for forbidding nonalcoholic intoxicants, like as-Samarqandi's narration on the authority of Ma'mar: "The Prophet said, 'May God curse one who seeks intoxication by means of a liquid or a dry [substance].'" A narration disseminated on the authority of Abu Hurayrah had Muhammad saying, "Beware of the green one, for it is the greatest wine." Hudhayfah ibn al-Yaman was reported to have told a story in which Muhammad foretold the chemical dangers that would befall Muslims after his death:

I went together with the Prophet into the countryside. He saw a tree and shook his head. I asked him why he was shaking his head, and he replied: "A time will come upon my nation when they will eat from the leaves of this tree and get intoxicated, and they will pray while intoxicated. They are the worst of the worst. They are the bira' of my nation, as God has nothing to do with them."

Another report told of a Bedouin who had been wandering in the desert, suffering from extreme hunger and thirst, when he came across "a hashishah consisting of five and six fingers, notched at the top, smelling clean and having red-colored wood." After eating it, he found himself "staggering" and feeling "inner commotion." The Prophet explained to him that this plant was the tree of Zaqqum mentioned in the Qur'an (37:62–66), which grows from the bottom of Hell with fruits like the heads of devils.

Even when opposed to hashish, medieval Islamic writers catalogued the nicknames

for it used by the people of various regions, vocations, and lifestyles. In Yemen, it was known as al-khadra, “the green one,” and in Baghdad, they called it bint al-jirab, “daughter of the bag.” In Hama, it was al-muhammasah, “the toasted one.” The people of Homs called it al-mubahhijah, “the one that cheers,” and people of the coastal plains called it ma’din az-zumurrud, “emerald mine.” Surgeons referred to hashish as lazqah, “adhesive bandage,” and merchants called it rahat al-bal, “peace of mind.” Among rope-makers and porters, weed was al-mukhaffifah “the one that lightens the load.” Songstresses called it aghsan as-sa’ddah, “branches of bliss.” Lantern bearers called it ‘ashirah, “family” or “girlfriends.” The washers of corpses called it al-quds, which meant “the holy” and was an honorific title for Jerusalem, and gravediggers called it as-sukhari, “sugary.” Hullah wearers called it shajrat at-tarab, “shrub of emotion,” and caftan wearers called it shajrat alfahm, “shrub of understanding.” Travelers named it zuwwadah, “provisions.” Philosophers spoke of hashish as luqaymat al-fikr, “thought morsel.”

There were also terms for hashish in use in specific religious circles. The Qarmatiyyas, famous for having invaded the holy city of Mecca and temporarily removing the Black Stone from the Ka’ba, dubbed hashish qurrat al-ayn, “consolation.” Among Sufis, hashish was described with terms such as musilat al-qalb, “the one that connects the heart,” and ziyarat al-Khidr al-akhdar, “visit of the green Khidr.” Over the centuries, Khidr evolved a special place for himself in Islam’s mystical tradition, as a kind of supernatural eccentric who could show up at any random moment. Countless Sufis have claimed initiation after encountering him in a vision. Perhaps some of those visionary exchanges came through hashish; regardless, having started his career as a pre-Islamic fertility god, Khidr already had a connection to plants and a name derived from the Arabic word for “green” (akhdar), so it made sense to link him with weed.

Sufi approaches to cannabis were diverse because Sufism itself was diverse, with a wide range of relationships to Islamic “orthodoxy” and sacred law. Some Sufis argued that weed poisoned the mind, whereas others asserted that weed enhanced their imaginations: they found their minds opened by the herb, not “covered” by it. Although these Sufis claimed that hashish promoted mystical insights, Ibn Taymiyya charged them with making the use of hashish an “act of worship.” In Iraq, one Sufi recognized his disciple’s addiction to hashish as a sign of his having reached the highest state of spiritual development, thus requiring no more training on the path.

According to al-‘Ukbari, it was a Sufi saint, Shaykh Haydar, who discovered cannabis. Haydar stumbled across the green miracle and told his followers, “Almighty God has bestowed upon you by a special favor the virtues of this plant, which will dissipate the shadows that cloud your souls and will brighten your spirits.” The Haydaris followed none of the religious observances that we’d normally associate with

Islam, but wore collars to illustrate their state of slavery to Ali. They kept their hair in locks to symbolize their opposition to their lower selves, their animal selves; they begged, wandered, and fucked boys. And they saw the human face as a mirror of the Prophetic Spirit, the divine within the self.

It has been suggested that the spread of cannabis use across Islamic cultures accompanied the spread of Sufism. In God's Unruly Friends, his discussion of antinomian Sufi sects between 1200 and 1550, Ahmet T. Karamustafa describes groups such as the Madaris in South Asia, who walked around completely naked except for iron chains around their necks and black turbans on their heads, grew their hair long and matted, covered their naked bodies in ashes, carried black banners, and became "notorious for their open rejection of religious observances as well as their excessive consumption of hemp." The Abdals of Rum shaved their faces, slept on the ground, awakened each other with a horn to act out the Resurrection, and carried a hatchet on one shoulder and a club on the other. They wore depictions of Zulfikar, the double-bladed sword of Ali, on their chests and snakes on their upper arms. They considered themselves free from Islamic law and went naked except for a piece of felt kept in place by a woolen belt; attached to the belt were two leather pouches, one containing flint and the other filled with hashish. Devotional life for the Abdals consisted of musical sessions (sama') supplemented by hashish; according to Karamustafa, they regarded the drug as "a means to find respite from the unreal phenomena of time and space and to attain the hidden treasure of reality." Their lessons connected cannabis to the beginnings of the human race, suggesting that after his exile from paradise, Adam lived only on "green leaves."

> Mix your hashish with the appropriate amount of clay
> Chew upon the bed and kill it leisurely.
> Eat heavily, for eating is an ornament for you,
> And if you get excited sexually, do not have any but anal intercourse.
>
> —al-Mi'mar

Among homosexuals, weed was allegedly known as ashshumay'ah, "little wax candle." Perhaps due to the association of hashish with outlaw Sufi groups, whose dervishes were commonly accused of licentiousness with young boys, anti-hashish writers held cannabis and queers to be inseparable: for a defender of "mainstream" Islam such as Ibn Taymiyya, both chemical and sexual deviance were crucial components of an heretical, anarchic Sufism that subverted the religion and law of the Prophet. But hashish also had its proponents among more conventionally pious Muslims: there was even hashish use in mosques, as famed Muslim traveler Ibn Battuta noted during his travels from Persia to East Africa. In one report, a religious scholar

named Muslim al-Hanafi was giving a lecture when his turban slipped off his head, revealing zih pills inside.

If there was so much room to debate over hashish in Islam, and—whether or not it had the support of legal rulings—Muslims in real life were getting high all over the empire, how were the opponents of hashish so successful in rendering it unacceptable within "orthodox" or "mainstream" Islam? Why couldn't it have flourished in Islamic consciousness as the slightly less sinful alternative to wine?

Rosenthal comments that hashish was widely regarded as "anathema to all members of society of the highest social standing." While observing the use of hashish among the poor, Ibn Battuta had also reported wine drinking among the upper echelons of Muslim cultures. In this regard, the world of medieval Islam struck me as strangely resonant with modern America: there are drugs that symbolize status and power and drugs that symbolize disenfranchisement and resistance. Drugs become texts; they are words spoken upon their users to write a place for them in society. Listen to how alcohol and weed are positioned in hip-hop today. Popping expensive bottles says that you're in, that you've succeeded in rising to the top of society, and blowing smoke implies that you're still down with the people, still capable of being a renegade, even when your weed is high-quality and pretending to be a renegade makes you millions of dollars.

As an illegal substance in Islam, hashish held some practical advantages over wine. To produce hashish, Rosenthal explains, was "much less refined and complicated than the cultivation and the processing of grapes." Hashish was a "much less bulky and more easily handled merchandise than wine," and "the trade in it did not require the capital and organization that can be assumed to have been required in the merchandising of wine." In other words, even if both hashish and wine were prohibited, hashish was easier to smuggle, buy and sell, and carry in public without being noticed. As one user remarked, "The palm of my hand serves as cup for it . . . I never gave away its secret by a hug."

We end up with a triangle of drug, class, and religion: hashish is cheap and easy, so hashish becomes a drug of choice for the lower classes and people of ill repute; Sufism appeals to the marginalized and holds an often questionable relationship to religious law, which of course is politically entrenched, so Sufism becomes a communal expression for those outside the cultural, political, and economic centers of society; Sufism (at least some varieties of Sufism) thus integrates hashish into its Islamic life. Dynamics of class and orthodoxy intersect to make things difficult for the drug. Ibn Taymiyya might attack hashish in part for its association with unconventional Sufi groups that he considers to be dangerous to the Islamic establishment; because of their socioeconomic position, these groups cannot advocate for their drug in the circles of power. To this mix of outlaw drugs and outlaw religion, we can add outlaw sexuality:

Karamustafa notes that for Sufis, celibacy "meant primarily the refusal to participate in the sexual reproduction of society and did not exclude unreproductive forms of sexual activity. It is likely, therefore, that antisocial ways of sexual gratification came to be included in the deliberately rejectionist repertoire of some dervishes." And these outlaw dervish groups, far outside the limits of socially and doctrinally acceptable Islam, offered a home for sexualities that had no place within the religion's main currents.

Hashish was used by both the least and the most educated members of society: the peasants and laborers on one end of the spectrum, Sufis and scholars on the other; both sides were traditionally poor, and Nahas adds that "both groups intermingled, sharing their contempt for an establishment riddled with corruption." Thanks to the consumption of wine among the ruling class, opponents of hashish lacked a superior moral footing for their argument; the elite religious scholars might have claimed that hashish was haram, but sultans and rich people were getting drunk! Strangely, wine—the only drug that was explicitly prohibited in the Qur'an—thus came to be better socially positioned than hashish within the same power structure that defined and enforced "Islam" for the state, despite wine's prohibition in the Qur'an and vehement attacks from religious conservatives. Though hashish was better equipped to defend itself on Islamic grounds, it became known as the drug of lawlessness, sexual deviance, religious heresy, and resistance against state Islam, even more so than wine. Though a few rulers were known to use hashish, it became a drug for the powerless. The fact that a philosopher like Avicenna openly drank wine might have tarnished his religious street cred, but it did not make him low-class; puffing weed, however, would have made him look like a bum.

"The world has usually heard about the Isma'ilis from their enemies," wrote scholar Marshall Hodgson. The Assassins, it should be said, did not call themselves hashishiyyun because it sounded cool; they didn't call themselves that at all. At a time when Isma'ilism was seen as the single greatest threat to medieval Sunnism and all religio-political constructions owing their existence to Sunnism, hashishiyyun was shoved upon on the community as a derogatory term, a synonym for "scumbags." Whether they actually got high doesn't mean a whole lot.

So that's weed in Islam, and possibly a bit on weed in the Americas; the social meaning of hashish among the lawless Sufi groups could tell us something about the linkage of marijuana and radical politics in U.S. history or the sacralization of weed by the Rastas. The U.S. government would put those same Assassin legends to similar use nearly a thousand years later, citing the Nizaris as proof that marijuana was the first step toward creating brainwashed cultists and ritual killers. In the 1960s, reporters found their modern Assassins in the Five Percenters, a legion of black teenagers in Harlem who smoked a lot of weed, followed a black man named Allah, and supposedly plotted

to take out the Pope, detonate the Statue of Liberty, and kill as many white people as was humanly possible.

I'd suggest that if medieval Muslims who used hashish—again, remembering that both the terms "Muslims" and "hashish" covered all kinds of things—could have encountered ayahuasca, they would not have had a problem with incorporating it into their Islam. If Amazonian hallucinogens feel so alien to my holy sites in Saudi Arabia, it's only an accident of geography.

AVICENNA AND THE MONOLITH

The film 2001: A Space Odyssey starts with several minutes of spooky music playing over a black screen. It isn't an empty screen; it's actually a close-up of the black Monolith. The music stops and a blue screen with the MGM logo appears; then we're in outer space and hear the familiar 2001 theme (Also Sprach Zarathustra, which also happens to be Ric Flair's ring entrance theme).

Red sky. "The Dawn of Man." The African plains, maybe four million years ago. Apes forage in the dust for food. One ape gets attacked by a cheetah and can do nothing to defend itself.

The apes are chilling at a pool of water, drinking out of their hands. A clan of rival apes shows up and screams and forces the apes to leave, claiming exclusive access to the water for themselves. The defeated apes are then shown at night, trying to sleep in shallow caves and caverns, naked against the darkness full of monster sounds.

Cut to morning. The sun's out, and the apes awake to find the Monolith of black smoothness, arriving as a perfect rectangle at a time millions of years before geometry, when a rectangle could be something transcendent and otherworldly. Cue the spooky music again. The apes jump around and shriek at the thing, until one cautiously approaches and touches it. When he isn't destroyed, the rest of the apes crowd around and caress the Monolith, the first idol of prehuman history.

The apes later scrounge for food among the bones of a dead animal, looking for anything worth eating. One ape picks up a bone, realizes that the bone in his hand becomes an extension of himself and his power, that it moves in accordance with his will, and finally discovers its use as a weapon—smashing the skull, killing pigs. At this moment, a line has been crossed. The ape has done something that no one else had ever done.

The use of the bone enables the apes to hunt more efficiently and enjoy fresh meat. The apes then return to the water pool and challenge the clan that had defeated them

earlier. The leader of the rival clan, still ignorant of weapons, is destroyed by the newly armed apes, who drive their competitors from the water. The triumphant ape leader throws up his bone—and then there is a quick match cut to an orbital satellite millions of years later.

The bone-swinging ape reminds me of my final paper for a Science and Islam class that I'm presently taking at Harvard. Possibly Adam, the first prophet of Islam, that ape functions beautifully as an illustration of Avicenna's prophetology—which could also become my bridge to an Islamic understanding of the ayahuasca experience.

Avicenna could belong to the aboveground Islam or the underground Islam. The aboveground Islam hails him as proof of Muslims' contributions to medical science and philosophy, without looking too closely at the details of his thought or the fact that Islam's greatest theologian-philosopher-mystic, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, had made Avicenna the target of his masterpiece, The Incoherence of the Philosophers. Avicenna's orthodox credentials are shaky: his father was an Isma'ili, and Avicenna grew up reading Isma'ili texts. He was open about his love of wine. Al-Ghazali's criticism of Avicenna's rejection of bodily resurrection, argument for the eternity of the world, and denial that God knows particulars charged that Avicenna had crossed the border between Islam and disbelief. Avicenna's prophetology doesn't help matters.

Avicenna builds his concept of prophethood upon the thought of al-Farabi, for whom prophecy related to the supreme development of human faculties. For Avicenna, prophethood is the result of "acquired intellect," the emanation from the Active Intelligence to a human being's imaginative faculty. To varying degrees, this phenomenon can be experienced by all humans, in accordance with their relative capacities. For the majority of people, this acquired intellect appears in the form of dreams. The dream that correctly tells the future is a small revelation, the experience of prophecy. Most people, however, are unable to experience any further access to the Active Intelligence because in their waking hours, they distract themselves with the sensory world and thereby suppress revelation. What makes a prophet exceptional, therefore, is not that the phenomenon of revelation happens only to prophets, but that prophets are exceptionally capable of accessing what comes to them, receiving the kinds of unimpeded revelations while awake that most humans can only receive in dreams. Muhammad's experience of prophethood was thus directed not only by what came to him from above but also his unique ability to access it.

In addition to the special access to the Active Intelligence that is within the reach of some exceptional humans, Avicenna sees another process taking place in the phenomenon of prophethood; the experience that figures such as Fazlur Rahman have called "intellectual revelation." Avicenna argues for the existence of a human mind with supreme capacity for obtaining knowledge through intuition (hads). All human beings

have some degree of hads; those whose hads causes them to be "burning with insights, that is, with the reception from the Active Intelligence," according to Avicenna, are the greatest philosophers. Because such ability is not shared equally by all humans, Avicenna suggests that just as one person may be all but devoid of this faculty, another person could possess the faculty in absolute perfection. Such individuals would be capable of acquiring knowledge instantaneously and without instruction. In the vocabulary of ayahuasca religion, the prophet would be an aparelho, a human vessel manifesting a spirit and the spirit's knowledge. Prophethood is not beyond the realm of possibility; it is simply a matter of certain humans having greater use of their natural human abilities than others. The greatest event of hads would be the Qur'an, for which Muslims claim a miraculous nature in part because this work of supreme power was revealed to an unlettered orphan who had lacked access to training either as a poet or religious teacher. It came to Muhammad without his possessing the logical qualifications.

So that's the ape in 2001 who picks up the bone and intuits the use of tools and weapons. He's Adam, the first prophet. The Monolith represents the Active Intelligence, which corresponds to the angel Gabriel, the agent of revelation. All the apes are in the presence of the Active Intelligence, but only one is sufficiently developed to access its wisdom; this ape-prophet must then deliver the information to his community. The gifted ape is the first of two prophets in 2001; the second is astronaut Dave Bowman, who directly confronts the Monolith and becomes the Star Child, the next stage in human evolution.

Avicenna's thought has dangerous implications for a religion invested in the finality of divine instruction. If prophethood is simply the result of supremely developed human faculties and thus theoretically within reach of any human, what does this mean for the belief that Muhammad was God's final messenger?

Though Avicenna was the primary target of al-Ghazali's Incoherence of the Philosophers, al-Ghazali did adopt much of Avicenna's thought later in his career. This includes Avicenna's conception of prophethood, which served al-Ghazali's own purposes in his articulation of the Sufi path and defense of his own sectarian Sunnism.

Al-Ghazali attacks the philosophers' prophetology in his polemical work against the Isma'ilis (who were known at the time as "Batiniyya," implying that they privileged esoteric meanings to the complete exclusion of exoteric meanings). This is salient, since Avicenna's father was an Isma'ili and Avicenna had to defend himself against accusations of Isma'ili allegiance. Avicenna had read Isma'ili texts at a young age, and discussion persists today regarding his intellectual debts to figures such as the martyred Isma'ili philosopher Abu Yaqub al-Sijistani. Henri Corbin suggests that Avicenna's hierarchy of ten intelligences was influenced by the Persian Isma'ili thinker Hamid ad-

Din al-Kirmani. The Ismai'li approach to the Qur'an, which requires a living guide to provide its inner meanings to the masses (who themselves can only access its outer, literal meanings) could be seen as relevant to Avicenna's approach to prophethood.

Al-Ghazali's disagreements with Avicenna's prophetology relate to Avicenna's emanationism and his notion that the metaphorical language of revelation distorts reality to make revelation more comprehensible to ordinary people. However, al-Ghazali's own understanding of prophethood does draw upon Avicenna's elaboration upon al-Farabi. The notion that development of one's mental faculties could result in special mystical insight held tremendous salience for al-Ghazali as he developed his own vision of the Sufi path.

Al-Ghazali triumphed in his battle with the philosophers, but his appropriation of their ideas enabled a figure such as Avicenna to still exert influence upon what one might call the "mainstream" Islamic tradition. Through al-Ghazali, some elements of Avicenna's prophetology were smuggled into Sufism even when other elements were thrown out. Al-Ghazali brought Avicenna's prophetology into Ash'ari theology, which had not said much on the matter of prophethood beyond bi-la kayf (without asking how). However, with Avicenna's prophetology come difficult questions regarding the text of the Qur'an. If revelation is connected to a prophet's supremely developed faculties, and it is the prophet's role to translate revelation into terms that can be understood by those without such self-perfection, what was Muhammad's role in the specific wording of the Qur'an? Is it possible to consider that, even if Muhammad had experienced genuine revelation from God (directly or through the intermediary of the Active Intelligence), his own consciousness somehow informed the scripture's content? It appears that to these questions, al-Ghazali offered bi-la kayf as his response.

Avicenna's contribution to Sufism came through his systematization of mystical experience and revelation, which influenced al-Ghazali's work toward the reconciliation of philosophy with mystical intuition, providing a rational argument for transrational truth. The intersection of rational argument and mysticism influenced mystics to make attempts at communicating their own transcendent experiences. Avicenna thus becomes part of the intellectual lineage for a figure such as Ibn 'Arabi, the Greatest Shaykh, Seal of Islamic Sainthood, who has been described as neither a philosopher nor simply a mystic but rather a "rational mystic," and is perhaps the best example of the social consequences of Avicenna's influence.

Like al-Ghazali, Ibn 'Arabi valued mystical revelation or "unveiling" (kashf) over pure intellect ('aql). Ibn 'Arabi regarded himself as belonging among the Sufis of true insight, within the realm of Sufism but also exceptional in relation to it. Ibn 'Arabi does not appear to have viewed himself as a "philosopher" as the term was understood in his time, nor did his many opponents—who were willing to tag him as a heretic, atheist,

and drug addict—deem fit to apply the label to him. Authority for Ibn ‘Arabi was won not in the arena of philosophical inquiry but in his visionary encounters with figures such as Khidr, al-Hallaj, and the Prophet himself.

I find similar visions in my American Islamic traditions. In September 1985, Louis Farrakhan made a pilgrimage to Tepozteco Mountain in Tepoztlán, Mexico, home to the ruins of a temple that he understood to have been dedicated to Quetzalcoatl, the feathered snake god of the Aztecs. The area is associated with Quetzalcoatl’s birth, but the temple was actually a house of worship for Tepoztecatl, who was the god of pulque, a sacred intoxicating drink. Pulque was made from fermented maguey sap and believed to be the blood of Tepoztecatl’s mother, the goddess Mayahuel.

During Farrakhan’s Tepozteco journey, he witnessed the appearance of the Mother Wheel, which descended to the side of the mountain and then beamed him aboard. He was then led by the ship’s pilot to a room in which he heard the voice of Elijah Muhammad through a speaker in the ceiling. “He spoke in short cryptic sentences,” Farrakhan recalled, “and as he spoke a scroll full of cursive writing rolled down in front of my eyes, but it was a projection of what was being written in my mind.” Elijah warned Farrakhan of a war being planned by Ronald Reagan, which would continue under George H.W. Bush. Farrakhan interpreted the message as foretelling both the 1986 U.S. attack on Libya and an institutionalized genocide that would be waged on black people under the guise of a “war on drugs.”

In 2001: A Space Odyssey, Dave Bowman defeats HAL and has his own encounter with the Monolith, leading to his rebirth as the Star Child. It has me considering ayahuasca narco-theology as a means of accessing the Active Intelligence, the holy Mother Wheel of everything. Maybe that’s how Zoser sees it, but there’s no telling whether Zoser has read Avicenna or knows anything about him besides the wine drinking and opium overdose. Maybe Zoser just sees ayahuasca on some Transformers trip, with the vine a superior being like a more benevolent version of planeteating mechagod Unicron who can resurrect your destroyed body, evolve you from Megatron to Galvatron, and replace your old fusion cannon with a new particle cannon shooting directcurrent electricity. In that case, I should ask Zoser for his take on the controversy among serious Transformers-heads about Galvatron’s level of self-awareness: does he know that he was once Megatron? After his encounter with the Active Intelligence, does he possess the same consciousness? It could go either way, depending on how you read certain quotes from the animated series, along with the fact that a memorial to Megatron was built at the Decepticon crypt on Cybertron, as though Decepticons viewed him as dead.

Suhrawardi said, “Drink poison so you may be born.”

“I’ve seen the vines for sale online,” I mention to Zoser at random. “Do people drink

on their own?"

"People do all kinds of shit. I've heard that Sting drinks ayahuasca in strip clubs, but that's Sting."

"Sting, the wrestler?"

"No, the singer."

"I wasn't sure. The wrestler is a born-again Christian, I think."

"You can drink on your own," says Zoser, "but having a shaman brings a whole other power to it. If you're going to engage in the real shit, my philosophy is that you go through proper channels and get it the right way." Besides, he reminds me, spiritual knowledge, especially of the psychedelic variety, can be dangerous in a number of ways, and if you might lose your mind for a moment, it's better to have some support. To go down this path alone, Zoser tells me, is like benching without a spotter. You don't want to find yourself trapped under that iron with no one to help you get out. It sounds like a Sufi thought to me, or perhaps Sufism is a shaman thought.

There is shamanism in Islam, but it's usually textual shamanism. Instead of asking the witch doctor to communicate with spirits on your behalf, you go to the imams and scholars for their book smarts, asking them how to correctly perform rituals so that Allah will find your prayers acceptable. They draw up the answers from their old books, and in that way, a Muslim's most essential connection to other planes of existence remains a scholastic one. Why one shamanism looks more "superstitious" than the other, or why scripturally centered monotheisms get to pretend that they own all the integrity, it's hard to say. If you follow Islam's lineages of books back through the generations to their source, you still end up with Muhammad in a cave listening to what spirits tell him, so that he can go back to his community and reveal knowledge from realms of the unseen. All the supposedly rational and high-end intellectual work just covers over its foundation in Muhammad's moment at the cave. Islamic philosophy and theology murders its secret origin in Muhammad's shamanism, stabilizing and guarding the formulated tradition against another Muhammad-style mystical rupture.

It's only the "seal of prophethood" idea that makes a coherent Islam even thinkable. Muhammad presented his shamanistic intervention as words from God, delivered by the angel Gabriel; the moment at which "Islam" became an institutionalized, organized religion would have to be a piece of duct tape pulled across the angel's mouth: no more out of you, we have what we need. For an institution to be an institution, it has to be predictable and stay on message. So Islam, despite its birth in an experience of Semitic shamanism called "prophethood," has to restrain its shamans. "Seal of prophethood," which could have meant anything on the day that Muslims first heard it, came to mean the conclusion of prophethood.

We even place limits on Muhammad's own visions, as witnessed in the ways that we

read an ambiguous sequence of verses in the Qur'an's fifty-third sura: "For he appeared while he was in the highest part of the horizon. Then he approached and came closer, and was at a distance of two bow-lengths or nearer." The meanings of the male pronouns here are not clear and raise some difficult questions. No one seems to feel theologically threatened by the suggestion that Muhammad heard Allah, but could he also see Allah? Is that what happened here? Who is the "he" that appears, and then who's the "he" in the highest part of the horizon? The verses could read as Muhammad meeting Allah in a direct, face-to-face encounter; but as Islamic interpretive tradition moved toward a privileging of Allah's transcendence, making the sight of Allah a major problem, Gabriel became firmly established as the "he" witnessed by Muhammad in these verses, preserving the uncrossable distance between Creator and creation. Even more explicitly challenging episodes from hadith literature, in which Muhammad encounters Allah as a young man and the two actually share physical contact, are discreetly erased from tradition. Over time, Allah became completely untouchable.

So there's the scriptural shamanism of what gets called "orthodoxy"; the other shamanism keeps listening, without the anchor of a text. History is full of Muslims resisting the scholarly urge to kill off the spirit. Sufi tradition took form around holy shaman-like figures who journeyed in other worlds, experiencing visions of Muhammad, the mystical creature Khidr, dead saints from the past, or invisible saintly hierarchies that administered the universe. Ibn 'Arabi met the Prophet six hundred years after the Prophet's death, and Suhrawardi received instruction from Aristotle. As Sufism evolved its own formal institutions, the charismatic masters at the center remained crucial. They boasted spiritual and often familial lineages going back to the Prophet and were needed to assist Sufi wayfarers through their own experience and mastery of the path. Shaykh-centered Sufis would tell you that without this guide, you're lost. "If you do not have a shaykh," the saying went, "you have the Devil for your shaykh."

For their great spiritual power—which was not actually their own, we are reminded by strict Islamic monotheism, but simply a manifestation of Allah's power within them—these Sufi shamans were revered as the workers of miracles and even intercessors between the dervish and Allah. After a master's death, his tomb would become a site of pilgrimage, with devotees approaching the bodily remains as a seat of blessings (baraka). Zoser has a Daime shaykh, a man named Alfredo who now heads the church. "He's like KRS-One," Zoser had told me. "Alfredo's like the fucking salamander that goes through a fire and doesn't burn and then becomes resistant to everything." I'm not sure what any of that means, but I can appreciate the idea of a human bridge to the superhuman, the big man of the cosmos, the Meganthropos, the Active Intelligence that itself is a bridge, the Mother Wheel to the Black Mind—or the idea that even if the shaman or shaykh isn't the bridge itself, s/he is the one who walks you across. I don't

always trust it; I have looked to more than one man as a shaykh, officially or not, with mixed results. But I do get the idea.

VINES AND VEILS

> The French are true Muslims.
>
> —NAPOLEON BONAPARTE

If I'm trying to write a book about drugs and Islam, where does the niqab come in?

Fabric is now a controlled substance. The French government has declared it illegal for Muslim women to cover their faces in public. I had thought about niqab and the movement to ban it through much of my Megabus ride into Mecca, my American Mecca where mosques are protested and shamans must be discreet with their sacraments.

France operates on its own notions of "church" and "state" and what it means to keep them separate. The French conception of public space, laïcité, requires that public space become a de-religionized zone in which individual citizens are protected from having to witness the religious expressions of other individual citizens. It may seem paradoxical to say this, but French secularism is Christian secularism. More specifically, it is post-Enlightenment Protestant secularism, in which "religion" is primarily something that you keep in your heart, a private conversation between you and your inner self. Religion is seen as relating more to what you believe than what you do; the government can therefore tell its citizens what to wear and still insist that it respects freedom of religion because the government does not officially claim a stake in one theology over another. As long as the social demands of North African Islam are reshaped to match those of French Christianity, Algerians can practice their religion in Paris.

Muslims are not the only non-Christians to have their religion defined by laïcité. A recent study of Indians in Guadeloupe, French West Indies, has shown that Indian cultural associations are redefining "Hinduism" in negotiation with French secular republicanism. Because any public assertion of religiosity would be seen as oppositional to collective French identity, French Hindus have worked to decontextualize religious acts such as puja—taking the "religion" out of "Hinduism,"

relocating Hinduism as "Indian culture," and creating a new formulation that one scholar calls "French civil Hinduism." It's hard to say where "religion" ends and "culture" begins (If I go home for Christmas and exchange Christmas presents with my mom, does this stop being "religious" just because I'm not a practicing Christian?), but these negotiations with laïcité might allow Hindu tradition to survive in a hostile environment. Perhaps this approach could also benefit the French Muslim community, which happens to be largely North African, and certain Islamic acts could be repositioned as "North African culture." If it's just one way of making one reality versus another, why not? After Peru's official recognition of ayahuasca's cultural importance, the false distinction between religion and culture could also benefit French ayahuasca drinkers; if an argument for religious freedom does not work, perhaps cultural freedom will.

There is a French idea of religion and where religion fits in society, and also a French idea of drugs, and these ideas negotiate with the French idea of Frenchness as it relates to wine: it is okay to go insane off grapes from Languedoc-Roussillon, but not vines from the Amazon. In the 1990s, around the time that the government first enacted a ban on hijab (headscarves, not just face veils) in public schools, police began targeting Santo Daime groups in Paris and Marseilles. Because the vines had been imported from Brazil, members were arrested and charged with international drug trafficking.

For a short time between rulings in 2005, ayahuasca was legal in France. In January, a court ruled that ayahuasca was not a controlled substance. In May, however, all the plants involved with making ayahuasca, including the vine, were categorized under the tag of stupéfiant (narcotic). South American shamanism, like Arab clothing, remains a threat to France's construction of itself. The government suppresses these alien forces, pretending that it can push back a genuine exchange between Europe and non-Europe for another day, desperately working to keep two fictional entities apart—like setting up coils of razor wire to separate jinns and tooth fairies.

COFFEE CONSCIOUSNESS

My coffee is brought to me, and I stare into it. A Persian proverb calls coffee the "black-faced one, killer of sleep, destroyer of lust." For the mental stimulation that it gave to a civilization that had been slumped in wine stupor, Ortiz said that coffee was as culturally important as telescopes and microscopes.

Coffee came to Europe through Muslim cultures, and the social institution of the coffeehouse was invented by Muslims, but both coffee and the coffeehouse required some defense against those who saw them as haram. In contrast to hashish, however, the opponents of coffee failed to push it out of the bounds of normative Islamic life.

The domestication of coffee is said to have originated in fifteenth-century Ethiopia, where the Oromo tribes held it to be the buna qala, or the tears of their sky god, Waqa. Believing that coffee killed cattle, the Oromo celebrated the birth of both cattle and children with a "slaughtering of the coffee" ceremony, in which coffee and barley were roasted in butter—a "symbolic union of coffee and cow," writes Antony Wild in Coffee: A Dark History, that appealed to unseen beings and honored the sacredness of life and procreation.

Coffee next reached Yemen, Ethiopia's neighbor across the Red Sea. From its first appearances in the lands of Islam, coffee was closely linked to Sufism. It's unclear when the beverage called qahwa (a term originally used for wine) was first made from coffee beans; one story attributes the innovation to a Sufi named Muhammad al-Dhabhani, who had traveled to Ethiopia and later introduced the beans among his fellow dervishes in Yemen as a tool for staying awake during their all-night devotions. The city of Zabid, home to Sufi circles that were accused of various sins and heresies, including the idea that humans could identify themselves with Allah, is also said to have been home to all-night sessions of zikr—the recitations of Allah's Names—fueled by coffee.

An alternative story also puts coffee's introduction on a Sufi, Ali ibn Umar al-Shadhili, though his version of qahwa was not made from coffee beans but rather qat (a

plant containing cathinone and cathine, which are comparable, respectively, to amphetamines and cocaine). Qat leaves are still chewed in the region, despite occasional Islamic opposition; some Muslims have held the leaves to be useful for Sufi practices, and others have even insisted that they need the drug's help for fasting during Ramadan. During my trip to Harar in 2008, I took part in a qat ceremony at one of the holy city's countless mosque-shrines.

Ambiguity regarding the drink's proper ingredients eventually faded, as the cultivation of qat was banned in Yemen on religious grounds and coffee was positioned as a more acceptable choice. Qahwa came to specify a beverage made from the coffee bean, and spread from southern Arabia up into Mecca, Cairo, and Damascus. People in Mecca drank coffee even within the precincts of the Ka'ba, and sixteenth-century writer Abd al-Qadir al-Jaziri explained that in Islam's holiest city, "there was scarcely a zikr or observance of the Prophet's birthday where coffee was not present." At Al-Azhar, the prestigious religious university in Cairo, coffee was consumed in the "Yemeni quarters" for assistance in late-night worship and marathon recitations of Allah's Names. In 1530, Damascus became home to the first coffeehouse. Midway through the sixteenth century, coffee became available in the Ottoman Empire's capital of Istanbul. Ottoman territorial holdings in Ethiopia and Yemen and domination over Red Sea trade led to coffee becoming a fixture of the imperial economy, and Ethiopia's holy city of Harar became a major trading post through which both coffee and slaves found their way to Arabia. As Arab traders marched their captured Oromo merchandise to Harar, the Oromo carried coffee cherries to eat; they spat out the beans as they walked, causing coffee plants to grow along the slave trails. The economic significance of coffee also encouraged the development of an Islamic coffee culture; in the course of roughly a decade, the empire saw six hundred coffeehouses established.

The first evidence of Islamic opposition to coffee dates to 1511, in Mecca, when Kha'ir Beg al-Mi'mar, pasha of the Mamluks in the holy city, found an assembly of men with lanterns outside the Great Mosque. They were apparently celebrating the birthday of the Prophet, but on closer examination, Kha'ir Beg found them consuming a beverage "in the fashion of drinkers swallowing an intoxicant." He ordered the men to go home and called a meeting the next day for scholars from each of Sunnism's four recognized legal schools to assemble and determine whether this mysterious beverage was Islamically permissible. Kha'ir Beg showed them a vessel filled with coffee, apparently for display purposes only. The scholars decided that gathering for the purpose of drinking coffee was prohibited, considering that such assemblies could resemble the gatherings of drunkards in taverns, where all kinds of sinful activities took place. Even if assembling to drink coffee was forbidden, drinking coffee was not necessarily a sin; the scholars stated that doctors must decide whether coffee produced effects similar to

alcohol. In response, Kha'ir Beg brought in two doctors who testified that coffee was psychologically damaging to its consumer. The Islamic jurists then agreed that coffee was haram, leaving Mecca's coffee drinkers subject to legal punishment.

In 1517, when the Ottomans conquered Mecca, the two doctors who had argued for coffee's prohibition were each sentenced to death, their bodies severed in half by the orders of Selim I. Coffee's status in the sixteenth century, however, remained unstable. Just nine years later, coffee was again banned in Mecca, and in 1535, preachers inspired the masses to destroy coffeehouses and punish coffee drinkers. In 1580, coffee was declared to be an Islamically forbidden substance in the same category as wine, forcing the coffeehouse to become an underground institution.

As with coffee's first ban in Mecca, the religious controversy often had less to do with the actual beverage or the question of how "intoxication" was defined than the social life surrounding it. Not only were there complaints that coffeehouses competed with mosques for the attention of Muslims; coffeehouses were also seen as offering amusements that threatened or outright defied Islamic limits, such as poetry, female singers, hookahs, opium, and boy prostitutes. In Safavid Iran, Rudolph Matthee explains in The Pursuit of Pleasure, objections to coffee also related to centralization of the state. Shah Abbas I, fearing that coffee-houses promoted anarchy, arranged for religious clerics to visit each coffeehouse early in the morning, lecture the patrons for hours at a time, and then ask everyone present to leave the coffeehouse and return to their work.

Centralizing the empire also required a centralization of religion and spiritual authority, as imperial interests encouraged Islam's move toward legalism and a formalized orthodoxy. Anti-coffee discourses in the Safavid Empire, as in the Ottoman context, were connected to the mullahs' opposition to Sufism, along with various practices and activities—dancing, singing, and sodomy—that came to be associated with Sufis. To crack down on Iran's coffeehouses, writes Matthee, was to suppress the "forum for a Sufi-dominated counterculture subversive of the changing self-identification of the Safavids."

Coffee managed to survive the religious assaults and eventually came to be freed from its association with unsavory lifestyles and heretical brotherhoods. The institution of the coffeehouse, however, faced a longer road to rehabilitation. In 1884, a mullah in Iran was outraged to hear music emanating from a coffeehouse. In the subsequent confrontation between the mullah's crew and the flute player and his audience, the flute was destroyed and the mullah was beaten. Authorities later reprimanded the mullah, since the flute player and his listeners happened to be members of the military. In the nineteenth century, with coffeehouses thoroughly secularized, their suppression by the government became secular as well, justified not by religion but rather by the ideal of a modernized nation-state and public discipline. Prior to electronic media, or even high

literacy, coffeehouses in both the Ottoman lands and Iran had emerged as vital sites of discourse, where people could go to get their news from professional readers. To control the coffeehouse was to control public space, along with whatever political debates, flows of information, or economic activities occurred within it. Under Qajar rule, Iran's urban coffeehouses were closed down, only to be reopened later under government supervision and laws requiring that each coffeehouse must be attached to a police station, hostel, and library. Harsh punishments awaited both disruptive coffeehouse patrons and any coffeehouse owner who failed to report suspicious characters to the police.

In 1638, coffee reached Venice. Prior to coffee's introduction to Europe, white empires had laid the foundation for an economic system in which coffee would contribute to slavery and gross inequality for centuries to come.

I pick up the glass cylinder and pour sugar into my coffee. Malcolm X used to say that coffee was the only thing that he liked to see integrated, but the sweetening of coffee with milk and sugar was a European innovation, in fact an expression of Europe's domination over world markets, the accumulation of resources from every corner. Sugared tea and coffee also found a place as "the preferred 'soft drugs' of Western Europe," writes Woodruff D. Smith in Consumption and the Making of Respectability, 1600–1800, because they projected an image of "bourgeois standing—a function completely different from those performed by indigenous European psychoactive substances."

It was through the early expansion of Islam that sugar reached the Mediterranean, and through the Crusades that Western Europeans first encountered sugar. Spain and Portugal brought sugar to the Americas; the first cane cuttings arrived in the New World with Christopher Columbus, who took them from his father-in-law's plantation in Madeira to a Spanish settlement in the Caribbean in 1493.

As Christians brought sugar to the New World, the New World in turn exposed them to tobacco. In Cuban Counterpoint, Ortiz writes of the difference in the Catholic Church's reaction to the two: "Despite the fact that both plants originated among heathen peoples, sugar was never frowned upon by the Church and was considered veritable ambrosia"; tobacco, however, was seen as an "invention of the devil" and "savagely persecuted to the lengths of excommunication and the gallows for its users."

According to Ortiz, both sugar and tobacco were racialized, informed by who grew them and used them. Tobacco, he writes, was "an inheritance received from the Indian, which was immediately used and esteemed by the Negro"; the Africans learned the cultivation and pleasure of tobacco from the natives, and also grew tobacco to sell until whites realized its commercial potential and banned Africans from growing tobacco except for personal use. The eventual European embrace of tobacco would rely on

black slaves growing it for white use and profit. The white men then brought tobacco back to the Old World, in turn introducing it to the Muslims, who had introduced sugar and coffee to Europe; upon its arrival, tobacco was temporarily outlawed and its use punished with death in the Ottoman Empire and Persia. Portuguese missionaries and traders would also bring tobacco to India, China, Indonesia, and Japan. Within a relatively short period, both sugar and tobacco became globally recognized and accepted.

The Portuguese, who had successfully cultivated sugar in West Africa, produced sugar in their American colonies, and the high price of sugar led to French, British, and Spanish territories in the Caribbean eventually becoming "sugar plantation societies," with sugar driving their entire economies. Producing crude sugar required a significant workforce, and making a profit from mass sugar production required the labor to come cheap. Columbus had failed in his attempt to build a sugar trade in the Caribbean due to a lack of laborers, as the natives were dying off fast under European violence and diseases. The Portuguese and other powers would solve this problem by replacing the dead natives with living Africans.

The transatlantic slave trade originally moved in the opposite direction than you'd expect, shipping natives from the Americas to Europe, as Columbus sent some captured natives to his friend in Seville in 1494; the next year saw four hundred natives put on the eastward boats as slaves. The trade switched directions as Africans came to be regarded as better workers and better suited to the climate of the Americas than American natives were to the cold of Europe. Growing demands for production in the New World required a steady flow of human cargo across the Atlantic, since slaves didn't live long, and it was cheaper to replace adults with adults than to wait for slave babies to grow.

The Portuguese were the first Europeans to trade slaves on a massive scale, beginning with the importation of black Africans for what we would today call indentured servitude. This led to significant intermarriage, and most Portuguese today carry some genetic connection to fifteenth-century Kongo. With the development of high-production agriculture and an increasing need for slaves, the fifteenth century saw a change in how "slave" was defined. Enslavement became a permanent status, not only lifelong but also hereditary; it outlived the slaves and survived in their children. In the coming centuries, this system would become "rational" and "scientific" with the emerging fiction of race.

In the sixteenth century, Portugal dominated the transatlantic slave trade, not as imperial power in Africa but rather as dealers who set up fortified trading posts along the African coast. The Portuguese were advantaged in that it was a relatively short trip from their trading posts in West Africa to Brazil, so slaves survived the voyage at a

higher rate than those shipped to the Caribbean. A little more than 3 percent of the average ship's cargo consisted of children under ten years old; such children were inventoried and sold along with their mothers.

The success of European sugar slavery would establish a working template and infrastructure for coffee slavery. Seeking to Europeanize coffee, sugar, tea, tobacco, and chocolate and control their own supplies, mercantile empires of the Old World exploited their New World colonies and African slaves to produce these commodities. Most chocolate ultimately came from Venezuela, and most tobacco came from the slave plantations in Virginia. Portugal produced its coffee in Brazil; Spain took its coffee from Mexico, Cuba, Costa Rica, Guatemala, and Venezuela; the British produced theirs in Jamaica.

The demand for drugs moved history, moved black and brown bodies across the sea to satisfy white cravings. Haiti, France's primary source of sugar, chocolate, and coffee, replenished its labor force every week with a new shipment of slaves. For the traffickers in bodies, Africans were not only valued as field workers who produced drugs for white people; pricing humans as commodities meant that slaves themselves could be traded for drugs. In eighteenth-century New England, an adult slave was worth 130 gallons of rum, a child 80 gallons. The notorious Triangle Trade consisted of seafaring merchants exchanging American rum for African slaves, who were then brought to America to cultivate sugar; molasses, a by-product of sugar, was then distilled to make the rum that in turn would be traded for more slaves, who would make more sugar to make more rum to get more slaves. Traders in Newport, Rhode Island, alone were said to have obtained a total of over 106,000 slaves through the rum exchange.

Sometimes, when those black and brown bodies journeyed across the oceans of white power, their own drugs followed them. As peoples in various corners of the British Empire moved to other British territories for work, many of the migrant workers in Britain's Caribbean sugar plantations came from British India. They brought cannabis with them, which would come to be known in British Jamaica by the Sanskrit-derived term ganja. The herb was found to be a serious problem for the imperial economy, since it turned the Indian immigrants into lousy workers. There was also the matter of imperial power and marijuana's threat to it, since getting high seems to have left colonial subjects uninterested in properly submitting to their masters. In a colony in which there were nearly as many natives as Europeans, and Africans outnumbered the Europeans 10 to 1, ganja became a political threat.

Cannabis was not indigenous to the Americas, but the low-THC strain, hemp, had first reached the New World with the conquistadors in 1545 for the non-psychoactive purpose of making rope. The use of hemp in manufacturing spread to other European

powers, and the first cannabis law in U.S. history, established in Jamestown in 1619, actually required farmers to grow hemp. The real magic of ingesting high-THC cannabis, however, remained largely unknown in the West. With the South Asian laborers came not only the plant itself but also traditions of viewing marijuana as medicinal and even a sacred gift from the divine. As ganja circulated among the colonial subjects, passing from the South Asian laborers to the African cane cutters, marijuana-centered folk medicine and spirituality also took hold in local culture—along with traditions of dreadlocks, vegetarianism, and perhaps the notion of avatars, including a future appearance of Vishnu on earth. Read it all through the lens of the Bible, reimagine the divine gift that Shiva brought from the Himalayas as a "wisdom weed" that was first grown on the grave of Solomon, project Marcus Garvey's prophecy of a great black king onto Haile Selassie, and you get Ras Tafari.

For the colonial oppressors to outlaw ganja only added to its sacramental authority.

In Europe, coffee and tea triumphed over marijuana because they were presented as signifiers of high class and sophistication, arriving at a time when Europeans viewed the refined Chinese tea rituals with envy, and additionally because these soft drugs were seen as a dignified alternative to wine. Caffeine also fit well into the period in which Enlightenment philosophy and modern capitalism took shape, as both depended on a scientific rationalism that required sharp and clear minds. The sober institution of the coffeehouse became more desirable than rowdy taverns for the exchange of ideas or business negotiations. Cannabis loses again; weed's the perfect sacrament for Rastafari visions of Zion and Babylon, and the Five Percenters are right in calling it "equality": weed always seems to be the drug on the bottom, the drug of poor righteous teachers opposed at every step by social inequality. Weed slows the labor machine down, and coffee speeds it up, which is why only caffeine—the drug that in 1903 replaced cocaine as the stimulant in Coca-Cola—could become the official drug of capitalism. Caffeine's also the official drug of my getting through grad school.

Germany brought coffee to what is now Rwanda in 1905, and enacted a policy that gave military support to local elites—the wealthy tribal chiefs close to the king, called "Tutsis"—in exchange for access to the manpower of the common masses, who were called "Hutus." Colonial law empowered tribal chiefs to force their subjects to produce coffee. German (and later Belgian) administrators structured Rwandan society on a myth of biological difference, in which Tutsis and Hutus were not merely social classes but in fact markedly separate ethnicities, with the Tutsis superior to the "Negroid" Hutus. Ethnic identity cards were issued to ensure that Hutus were not able to obtain the education or work reserved for Tutsis. These fabricated differences, after enough time, became so "real" that the Tutsis and Hutus saw themselves as genuinely distinct ethnicities. Nearly a century after coffee and white people entered the life of Rwanda,

creating and enforcing false divisions between human beings and valuing the production of coffee for European powers over that of food for local people, Hutus and Tutsis ended up slaughtering each other in a hundred days of massive genocide. Reducing the Rwandan civil war to a "tribal" conflict, American media ensured that the naked brutality—fed to our eyes with images of skulls stacked into pyramids, black men wielding machetes, dismembered children, and rivers running red with blood—would be seen as inescapably primitive, driven by something that the modern, rational West could never comprehend, though these notions were in fact "modern" and even created by the modern, rational West.

Master Fard Muhammad asks, Why does the Devil call our people "Africans"?

BOOM, go the Supreme Wisdom Lessons upside my head.

The end of colonialism did not mean an end to coffee's body count. Coffee is still produced by poor nations for the enjoyment of rich nations, and the work of empire is now performed mostly by corporations. When the producing nations attempt to balance this inequality, they commonly meet resistance from the consuming nations. In 2006, the government of Ethiopia sought to trademark its Sidamo, Harar, and Yirgacheffe beans, meaning that distributors across the globe would have to pay a licensing fee to use these premium crops. The idea was that trademarks would bring a larger share of specialty coffee prices to the people who actually made the specialty coffee: the nearly two million farmers in a country that a United Nations report ranked seventh from the bottom in terms of development, where a quarter of the people lived on less than a dollar a day. In Ethiopia's bid for a fairer share, the chief opposition came from Starbucks, which raced ahead of the government to trademark Sidamo. Starbucks claimed Ethiopia's most valuable natural resource as its own intellectual property; it was colonialism without flags.

After a legal struggle between one of the world's poorest nations and one of the world's most recognizable corporations became a public relations disaster for the latter, Starbucks agreed to sign a licensing agreement with Ethiopia. The company that sold its Harar coffee for $26 a pound reluctantly committed to no longer block the flow of money to farmers in Harar who made up to $1.10 a pound.

Suddenly, the question of how I'd feel about someone crashing a plane head-on into all that slavery, suffering, and death is worth asking.

In 1993, after the first attack on the World Trade Center (WTC), the Coffee, Sugar and Cocoa Exchange, which was headquartered there, prepared a secondary base in case of a future emergency. This emergency location continued to be maintained after the Coffee, Sugar and Cocoa Exchange merged with the New York Cotton Exchange to become the New York Board of Trade, an alliance of former slave economies. The emergency base, the upkeep for which cost the board $350,000 annually, enabled the

world's coffee, sugar, cocoa, and cotton trades to continue without a hitch after the board's WTC headquarters was destroyed on September 11, 2001.

When I paid $8,000 to visit the holy cities of Mecca and Medina—the real Mecca and Medina, the ones in Saudi Arabia, not the American cities that I call Mecca and Medina here—I went to the mosque in which the Prophet Muhammad is buried, paid my respects, and then stepped outside and went to Starbucks. Right there at the bones of the Prophet, while pestered by a veiled woman with her hand out crying, "Iraqi, Iraqi, Iraqi," the American hajji can still get his Starbucks: "clash of civilizations," "Islam versus the West," my balls. I wonder about the routes by which coffee comes to Mecca and Medina today, the rapes and tortures and crushed rebellions that pilgrims are drinking, the greedy white devil power that gets them hopped up, fueling their tawaf around the Ka'ba with genocide and slavery, Alkaloid Allah. But anyway, you can also buy weed in dark alleys less than a mile from the Ka'ba, get elevated and float up into the Great Mosque's stadium lights.

Issues of class and nation continue to factor into the presentation of coffee. As an alternative to the faux-European snobbishness of ordering pseudo-coffee drinks with fancy names at Starbucks, Dunkin' Donuts has positioned its own shitty coffee as the red-state elixir of blue-collar working heroes: AMERICA RUNS ON DUNKIN. Coffee is patriotism. This is the America that began its revolt against colonial rule by dumping British tea into Boston Harbor.

I drink my sugared coffee and wait for the Santo Daime guy, recognizing that all the history in my cup should be considered for the ayahuasca question. To ask whether ayahuasca might find a place in Islam doesn't seem to be only about reconciling religious doctrines to outside practices; traditional religious scholars don't always have as much to say on these matters as we or they expect. Perhaps it's more about the forces that drive these confrontations, the material push: conquered lands bringing hashish to Islam, colonial power bringing ganja to the Americas, empire and slavery keeping Christian Europe caffeinated, America's labor force running on Dunkin'. Spirit comes later.

BUMBLEBEE

I remember Zoser's complaint about hip-hop's "cocaine consciousness," for which he presented "vine consciousness" as the solution, but cocaine and ayahuasca came from the same Amazon. Coca was used by the Incas in magic, fortune-telling, rites of passage, rituals at the Temple of the Sun, offerings to Pachamama the earth goddess, and sacrifices for successful harvests and wars. For its importance in native religion, coca became the subject of the First Council of Lima (1552), in which Spanish clergy appealed to the imperial power to ban its use. The first Europeans to find natives chewing coca leaves condemned the practice as the "idolatry and work of the devil . . . a useless object liable to promote the practices and superstitions of the Indians," but after the invasion of Peru, Spaniards brought coca back to Europe, where it entered into Western science and ultimately gave the world cocaine. In the 1890s, cocaine was promoted as a cure-all elixir, endorsed by both scientific and religious superstars (i.e., Sigmund Freud and the Pope) and marketed as the key ingredient in Coca-Cola, which was first branded as a medicinal tonic. From the medical cocaine craze of the late 1800s came the snortable party drug, and from the party drug we got crack. Maybe the Banisteriopsis caapi vine is a holy plant, and Erythroxylum coca is an evil plant, or perhaps modern cocaine is an act of evil alchemy: white people came to the Americas, enslaved and murdered the natives, sailed away with their holy sacrament, and then transmuted the sacrament into more genocide and destruction.

Considering that plants can be property (and therefore political), I wonder about the ramifications for this vine as it attracts a growing market of consumers beyond the Amazon—both as an imported crop in the United States and as the leading draw for "spiritual tourists," foreigners who travel to South America on adventures of self-discovery. As the Banisteriopsis caapi vine becomes ever more intertwined with a global economy, and this crop is grown by the poor increasingly to serve the spiritual, emotional, and entertainment needs of the rich, will ayahuasca do better than coffee?

The Amazon is already overrun with pharmaceutical bioprospectors and bio-pirates, and as corporations tangle with environmentalists, advocates for indigenous cultures, and also the agendas of nation-states, who will own the vine?

An American has already tried to become the Starbucks of ayahuasca. In 1986, Loren Miller of the International Plant Medicine Corporation was able to obtain a U.S. plant patent for a strain of the vine that he had "discovered" in a family's garden in Ecuador. With the patent, Miller was awarded exclusive rights to grow and sell the vine. It was not until years later that any indigenous peoples knew of the patent; when they learned of this legal theft, various organizations denounced Miller and his company as "enemies of the native peoples," and Ecuador then refused to sign an intellectual property agreement with the United States—for which the U.S. government threatened economic sanctions against Ecuador. A number of North American environmental law nonprofit organizations joined forces with Coordinadora de las Organizaciones Indígenas de la Cuenca Amazónica (COICA), a federation of Amazonian peoples, to file their own petition against Miller. The U.S. Patent and Trademark Office revoked the patent in 1999 but reversed its decision in 2001. Ultimately, Miller's patent did not give him much, since it applied only to the lineage of future plants grown from his particular specimen.

Miller's patent expired in 2003 and cannot be renewed, but I don't expect that to be the end of the issue. At present, only the Psychotria viridis leaf, ayahuasca's dimethyltryptamine agent, makes ayahuasca legally complicated in the United States; the Banisteriopsis caapi vine can be bought, sold, and shipped with no worries. It's likely that someday, a company will figure out how to properly package and market this vine for American consumers, perhaps grinding it into a pill, and trademark the power.

In the postcolonial era, oppressed and exploited peoples sought liberation through the logic of European-styled nationalism, reading the fictions of these territories with their straight borders drawn by white men as actually signifying eternal and timeless essences that must now be restored to their previous glory. A diverse assortment of communities and histories, having been boxed together by colonial powers, would come to be grouped together as the "Syrian people," or the "Iraqi people." It's the same process that European empires had done to themselves, pulling together diverse groups to create the ideas of a "German people" and a "French people." As political contexts change, nationalism isn't always the answer, but new approaches must still contend with the devil's kingdom, negotiating by use of the devil's own language. In the age of globalized capitalism, indigenous peoples sometimes defend themselves using capitalism's rules, presenting culture and the sacred as products that can be copyrighted and sued over.

This branding of the sacred, however, can also serve the interests of oppression. When Pakistan sought to establish itself as an "Islamic republic," it did so by defining

and policing the borders of Islam—namely, by finding Muslims who violated these borders and punishing them as public examples. In 1974, Pakistan's government classified members of the Ahmadiyya community as non-Muslims. When this law was challenged, a judge ruled in the law's favor, stating that governments must protect religions just like any commodity: "Therefore anyone who improperly recited the profession of faith or called their place of worship a mosque," explains scholar Carl Ernst in Following Muhammad, "was in effect using a copyrighted logo without permission and was liable to legal penalties." In making this point, the judge compared Islam to Coca-Cola. Seriously, he did that.

As ayahuasca spreads and perhaps even becomes trendy, governments and corporations won't be the only problem; there's also the question of people like me, and whatever kind of damage I might be doing to Amazonian shamanism at this very moment, waiting in a coffeehouse far from the Amazon for ayahuasca's gates to be opened for me by a man who is not an Amazonian shaman. I don't think that he has even been to the Amazon, but he's at least a fardado, an initiated member of the Daime church who wears the farda (uniform) in ceremonies. The fardadoes are also called "star people." I wonder if the Portuguese word for "uniform" derives from the Arabic fard, meaning "duty." It's not unreasonable; lots of Arabic found its way into Portuguese.

> Seamos Moros! (Let us be Moors!)
>
> —José Martí, Cuban nationalist/poet, 1893

Europe's "discovery" of the Americas came largely as a result of efforts to circumvent the land routes that went through Islamic empires such as the Ottoman and Mamluk empires. In 1492, the armies of Ferdinand and Isabella successfully conquered Granada, the last piece of the Iberian Peninsula to be ruled by Muslims. In the Spanish purging of all things non-Catholic, hundreds of thousands of Muslims and Jews were either forced to submit to the church, becoming moriscos (converted Muslims) or marranos (converted Jews). To prevent Islam from going underground, all use of the Arabic language was forbidden, the doors of morisco homes were required to stay open on Fridays and major Islamic holidays, children of moriscos were placed in the custody of priests, and even childbirth required the presence of Christian midwives to prevent any Islamic rituals from being held. As none of this appeared to sufficiently erase Islam from their memory, all moriscos were exiled from Spain in 1609.

With the taking of Granada and completion of the Reconquista came a revival of devotion to James, the saint who had evangelized Spain and was said to have descended from heaven to help fight the Moors in a battle centuries earlier. His shrine in Compostela was a site of Catholic pilgrimage, and he was widely known as Matamoros (Moor-Killer). During the Festival of St. James, the battle is reenacted and the Moors

are represented by celebrants wearing vejigante masks, which portray monsters with multiple horns and big lips and big noses.

Around the same time that Christians retook Granada, the king of Kongo accepted baptism, and his son attributed Christ's victory over native black heathenism to St. James. As Moors were transformed into archetypal stand-ins for non-Christians and non-Europeans everywhere, worship of the Moor-Killer accompanied Catholic soldiers on their adventures in the New World. Spanish victory in southwestern North America was attributed to his aid; the conquistadors adopted James as the holy protector of their invasion, and he became known as Mataindios (Indian-Killer). In Puerto Rico, James became the patron saint of Loíza, but this embrace of Spanish Catholic power was also a secret subversion: worship of the Yoruba god Changó had been forbidden on the island, so Africans in Loíza merely changed his name to James and maintained their old practices.

Today, white Christian soldiers still appeal to the patron saint of genocide for protection and delivery from brown evil. In 2003, the Spanish government sent thousands of its soldiers to Iraq, where they were to police the sacred city of Najaf, home to the tomb of Ali—wearing St. James patches on their shoulders.

The Portuguese also persecuted non-Christians. In 1390, the Islamic call to prayer was outlawed as an offense against God and the church. In 1490, it became law that slaves owned by Jews and Muslims automatically became free if they accepted Christ. Muslims in Lisbon were required to wear distinctive emblems on their clothes to keep them socially separated from moriscos. Christians who converted to Judaism or Islam were put to death; as in Spain, there were also forced conversions of Jews and Muslims to Christianity. In rare cases, individuals were arrested for secretly practicing Islam; interestingly, these were mostly slaves and free men of North African origin, as opposed to descendants of the Muslims who had called Portugal home.

When most people say "American Islam," they really mean "Islam in the United States," and I've done this myself in my work, but there's also a history of Islam in South America. The slave trade brought African Muslims to the colonized Amazon, so I have to wonder whether the remnants of an Islamic presence contributed at all to the spiritual matrix in which Santo Daime emerged.

My Santo Daime gatekeeper walks in, and he's just a guy, a generic middle-aged white guy who could be a softball coach or the father of some white kids, and he's wearing white sneakers. I didn't expect him to be so normal—but he's excessively normal, even abnormally normal; he's a parody of what "normal" could mean. Despite his engagement of this quasi-legal alternative religion, it appears that he holds himself together well in the white man's world, like ayahuasca hasn't brought on a complete flipout at the bank or wherever he works. He comes over and shakes my hand and then

goes back to the counter to order his tea.

Everyone needs to be disguised, and I've been watching a lot of old Transformers lately, so I'm going to call this guy Bumblebee. We build on small-talk things—how was my journey to Mecca, where am I from originally, that sort of deal—until the arrival of his beverage, which apparently marks the real beginning of the interview.

"So what sparked your interest in Daime?" he asks.

"Well, I'm coming from a Muslim background, and I've been at Harvard for the last two years, finishing a Master of Theological Studies degree. In the fall, I'm going to start in the doctoral program in Islamic studies at UNC Chapel Hill."

"Wow," he says. "How long is your program going to be?"

"Five or six years."

"On top of two years at Harvard?"

"Yes, sir."

"Amazing, eight years learning your stuff. God bless you. I couldn't do it. So what's your plan, you eventually want to become a professor?"

"That's where I seem to be headed, but the academic study of religion has done a number on my spirituality, which is kind of why I'm here."

"How so?"

"The more I learn, the more it's all up for grabs. It's death by critical reading. There's no longer an 'Islam' as anything outside of myself or all of this." When I say, "this," I kind of swirl my hands in the air, as though the gesture indicates our immediate surroundings, these tables, chairs, people talking and reading newspapers or looking at their phones, coffee, napkins, this institution of the coffee shop, the streets outside, everything out there in the human-made world.

"Right on," he says. "Within Islam, what kind of tradition are you working with? Sunni or Shi'a or—"

"I'm not really into the sectarian thing, but I took initiation with a Sufi order."

"What Sufi order are you in?"

"The Tahrifiyya," I tell him.

"What's their orientation?"

"It started in India during the early Mughal period."

"A good friend of mine studies South Asian Sufism, but I've never heard him mention the—I'm sorry, how do you say their name?"

"Tah-ri-fiyya."

"Right."

"Their main thought is that it's impossible to worship anything but Allah, because Allah speaks in all symbols, all languages. If you look at Christianity or Shintoism or whatever and you can't find Allah in it, you're an unbeliever."

"Wow," he says.

"I mean, if you look at the historical context, with a ruling Muslim minority interacting with the Hindu majority, it's the kind of thing that was bound to happen."

"Makes sense to me."

"So that's my vehicle to explore other systems while keeping myself as a Muslim."

"Is it related to the emperor Akbar at all?"

"Maybe. I think he came later, though."

"I'm Jewish," Bumblebee tells me. "When I first got into Daime, I was a little thrown off by the Christian-ness of the hymns and all. But now it's just, you know." He shrugs and smirks. "Of course, there are some people who really, really get into that aspect, like Daime is the 'one true religion,' and they'll even swear up and down that Jesus drank ayahuasca. But you don't have to go there."

"I guess that's true with any tradition," I reply. "People need different things from it."

"So . . . with the Tahrifiyya, have you had what you might call 'mystical' or 'peak' experiences?"

"We'd do zikr, the chanting of Allah's Name—"

He nods like his Sufi friend must have keyed him into the lingo. "Sometimes," I continue, "it can get crazy intense, with the chants and drums and everyone losing themselves in the dark. Things happen with your brain."

"Have you ever had an experience with psychedelics?"

"Once, when I was in Pakistan. You hear of bhang lassi?"

"Bhang lassi?"

"Bhang is crushed cannabis."

"So it's like lassi with weed?" He laughs out the words.

"Yeah, kind of looks like a Shamrock Shake." We both share a laugh at that. "But it's not like you're just smoking a lot of weed; bhang's a real freak-out. We drank it and went to one of the Tahrifiyya shrines in Lahore and had this incredible experience getting into a cosmic spirit-cipher, building with the saints. It ended with me almost getting raped by police officers in the shrine's basement, but that was part of the journey."

"Wow," he says.

"The word Islam means 'submission' or 'surrender,' so making myself absolutely helpless with the cops was like perfect Islam, like Hajar in the desert, just putting my life in Allah's care."

"Amazing. Any other substances?"

"Muslims are usually pretty clean. I don't even drink beer."

"Right, absolutely." He takes a breath and then, without any further effort at a transition between topics, asks me if I have a history of mental illness.

“My father was a diagnosed schizophrenic,” I tell him. “He was also a Hell’s Angel,” I add for no clear reason.

“He saw things?”

“Yeah, he saw things.”

“But you personally, yourself, you never . . .”

“Nope.”

“You know, I think mental illness is misunderstood in this country.”

“How so?”

“Did you ever think that maybe your dad wasn’t mentally ill, but rather that he had something beautiful that the world couldn’t understand?”

“No,” I say.

A short pause; he doesn’t know if I’m taking the idea seriously. I’m not. “Dad was actually unwell,” I tell him.

“Okay,” he says. “You know that ayahuasca’s a purgative, right?”

“Yeah, I’ve read that.”

“You might throw up, you might have diarrhea. I can’t tell you which end it’s going to come out, but it’s going to come out. This is a healing, remember. You’re purging yourself of spiritual toxins, emotional toxins, and there’s going to be a physical component to that as well.”

“I’m okay with that,” I tell him. I’d honestly rather throw up than shit my pants, but it’s Allah’s will.

“Great,” he says. “Now I’m going to tell you a bit about the origins of our church.” He gives me a look as if to say I’d better get ready; the good stuff is coming. I lean in as he starts. If the story’s any good, I’m going to feel guilty, because there’s no such thing as the Tahrifiyya order. I just made it up.

CHURCH FATHERS AND MOTHERS

Chamo a força, eu chamo a força
A força vem me amostrar
Treme a terra e balanceia
E vós não sai do seu lugar

Treme a terra, treme a terra
Treme a terra e geme o mar
Ainda tem gente que duvida
Do poder que vós me dá

—Mestre Irineu, "Chamo a Força"

Who the fuck do you think wrote the Book of Revelation? A bunch of stone-sober clerics?

—HUNTER S. THOMPSON

The man that the Santo Daime church calls Mestre Irineu was born Raimundo Irineu Serra on December 15, 1892, in São Vicente Ferrer, a small city in Maranhão, Brazil. São Vicente Ferrer is maybe a hundred miles from the Atlantic Ocean. Irineu's grandparents had come from the opposite coast; prior to the (official) abolition of slavery in Brazil in 1850, Maranhão had imported Africans to work the cattle ranches, perform construction work, serve as domestics (escravos de ganho), and support the region's booming cotton production.

The spirits of West African religions had survived their devotees' voyage across the Atlantic. In Brazil, African religions were called "Tambor de Mina" (drum of Mina). "Mina" signified slaves from the Gold Coast of what is today Ghana, named for Fort San Jorge de Mina, one of the first Portuguese slave-trading posts in Africa. The Tambor de Mina religions emphasized initiation in the realms of trance and possession, and the meanings of their rituals and states mingled with Maranhão's dominant Catholicism. With both sides encouraging interaction between humans and unseen spiritual beings, it was easy to place the traditions in dialogue with each other; one only needed to reconcile the spiritual beings. As slaves veiled their native systems in the

imposed religion of their oppressors, orishas from the Yoruba system became identified with Catholic saints. Ogoun, the orisha of iron and war, often represented with a machete, rum, and tobacco, would find his Catholic parallel in Saint George, who carried a sword. Young Irineu experienced these intersections firsthand in rituals such as the local Tambor de Crioula festivities, in which men played drums of wood and leather while the women sang and danced. The celebration honored São Benedito, the black saint who watched over former slaves and their descendants, but had its origins in Candomblé, an Afro-Brazilian tradition faithful to the orishas. São Benedito was believed to correspond to Averekete, a vodun spirit, trickster character, and "linguist of the gods," who was alternately portrayed as male or female.

By the end of his teen years, Irineu stood seven feet tall. As a young man, he sometimes found himself in trouble, but he lived in a thoroughly moral universe; whenever he misbehaved, a woman appeared in his dreams and punished him. After a fight at one of the parties, Irineu decided to leave town. He took a ship to Belém do Pará and worked as a gardener until he saved enough to keep moving. His wanderings took him to Peru, where he reunited with his cousins Antonio and Andre from back home and worked as a rubber tapper.

Rubber would turn out to be the material that spread ayahuasca shamanism across the Amazon basin. The first crop that contributed to Santo Daime's formation wasn't psychoactive, but it was sacred: in premodern Mesoamerica, natural latex signified the "sacred essence" as it flowed like blood from the rubber tree, and sacrificial victims were painted with rubber before priests offered their blood to the gods. After Charles Goodyear mastered vulcanization in 1839, enabling rubber products to better endure winter and summer, the worldwide market exploded. For most of the nineteenth century, the Amazon nearly monopolized rubber production. The Industrial Revolution's growing demand for rubber, however, brought new waves of slavery and genocide to both the Amazon and its nearest competitor, West Africa.

While the northeastern sugar plantations utilized African slaves, the Amazon's rubber trade relied on natives—at least until the smallpox, violence, and brutal conditions caused by the European presence decimated much of the local population. The Portuguese brought in more black laborers, but the Amazon was not as conducive to plantation slavery. Instead, workers were sent on expeditions to collect rubber.

Despite the official abolition of slavery in Peru (1884) and Brazil (1888), human beings, often children, were bought and sold like merchandise or otherwise forced into unpaid labor and prostitution; tappers were whipped bloody or even starved to death for failing to deliver rubber quotas; children were castrated and murdered; old slaves were killed when they were no longer useful. In nearby Colombia, the rubber boom produced traumatic scenes such as women being whipped because their small children

had not delivered enough rubber; children murdered because their parents had fled; starving natives eating handfuls of dirt or the maggots from their wounds; natives used as target practice; the skulls of babies smashed against trees and the elderly hacked up with machetes; white company employees celebrating Easter and other Christian holidays by burning natives alive; white Christians crucifying brown heathens; dogs eating the unburied dead. Across the ocean, rubber traders in the Belgian Kongo were similarly torturing and killing black people while boasting that benevolent European rule had saved them from the wicked Arab slave trade.

Barbara Weinstein writes in The Amazon Rubber Boom: 1850–1920 that "The lowest man on this commercial totem pole was the tapper (seringueiro)—the worker who actually went into the forest and collected the rubber." The tapper would work his assigned trails, slicing into each Hevea brasiliensis tree and leaving a bowl into which the latex would flow. The trails led him back to his hut, where he'd eat and take a nap. Then he went back out on the trails to coagulate the latex over burning palm nuts, producing a black rubber ball—what the Europeans called "nigger heads." The tapper would eventually deliver piles of rubber balls to a barracão (trading post), where the tapper's patrão—either the landowner or merchant who controlled the production and movement of rubber—would charge him up to 50 percent of the rubber's value. On top of this, the tapper was likely to pay commission on the money or goods with which he was compensated.

By the time that Irineu entered this arrangement, the Amazon's rubber industry had collapsed in the face of cheaper African and Asian rubber, but during his time as a tapper, drifting across the borders of Brazil, Peru, and Bolivia, he became a conduit through which traditions could reach each other. Antonio introduced him to a spiritual guide named Pisango, who was descended from the Incas, though people called him caboclo, which meant "deriving from the white." The term signified not only people of mixed ancestry, but also natives who maintained contact with whites. Caboclo was additionally used to refer to forest spirits and orishas. "They say that Pisango knew where the swallows made their nest," Bumblebee tells me, which I assume has to mean something more than just swallows and nests.

Pisango invited Irineu to drink ayahuasca. Irineu told him, "I'll go, and if it's something good, I'll bring it back to my country." Up to this point, according to Bumblebee, ayahuasca had been used by the natives and the whites, but not yet the Africans. In agreeing to drink, Irineu was making himself a gateway between contexts.

The story goes that Irineu drank ayahuasca on two occasions without feeling any effect. On his third drink, however, he had a miração, a vision, featuring a being called "Clara." She appeared to him as the moon.

"Do you think that anyone else has ever seen what you are seeing now?" Clara asked

Irineu. Before he could answer, she told him, “You are wrong. What you are seeing no one ever saw; only you. Now you tell me, who do you think I am?”

He answered, “You are a universal goddess.”

The universal goddess told Irineu that she was going to teach him to sing hymns (hinos). Irineu pleaded that he was not a singer and that he didn’t even know how to begin. Clara told him, “Open your mouth.”

Then came “Lua Branca” (White Moon):

God salutes you, O white moon
Of such silvery light
You are my protectress
You are esteemed by God

O! Divine Mother of the heart
There in the heights where you are
My Mother, there in heaven
Give me forgiveness

Amongst the flowers of my country
You are the most delicate
With all my heart
You are esteemed by God

O! Divine Mother of the heart
There in the heights where you are
My Mother, there in heaven
Give me forgiveness

You are the most beautiful flower
Where God put His hand
You are my advocate
O! Virgin of Conception

O! Divine Mother of the heart
There in the heights where you are
My Mother, there in heaven
Give me forgiveness

Star of the universe
That looks to me like a garden
Being bright as you are
I want you to shine upon me

O! Divine Mother of the heart
There in the heights where you are
My Mother, there in heaven
Give me forgiveness

“That’s the thing, is these hymns,” says Bumblebee. “Irineu was just this poor black rubber tapper, grandson of slaves, in the middle of nowhere, the middle of the forest, totally uneducated, just about illiterate, oppressed, exploited, at the very bottom of society—not just his own society, but he’s basically at the bottom on a global scale—and yet he presented these incredible hymns to the world. The hymns weren’t coming from him; they came through him. That’s where the miracle of the Daime comes in.” He nods at me, his eyebrows raised and his mouth open, as if it astonishes him just to talk about the hymns. Of course I understand; it’s the same story that Muslims tell about the Qur’an. Muhammad, after all, was just an orphan in the Hijaz, and he was also supposed to be illiterate, so when the angel Gabriel came to him in that mountain cave outside Mecca and said, “Recite,” Muhammad could only recite what he received. Look at this beauty, this power, this truth, everyone wants to say about what they’ve got; how could it be human? The significance of the Qur’an miraculously coming to a “blank slate” has led some scholars to compare Muhammad’s illiteracy to Mary’s virginity.

Irineu received more hymns, says Bumblebee, and had a trusted companion, Percilia Matos da Silva, write them into a notebook. As with the Qur’an for Muslims, these hymns have become central in the ritual life of Irineu’s church.

Bumblebee recites another hymn, half-singing in Portuguese off the top of his head and then translating for me:

> Vi Deus no sol, Deus na lua nas estrelas
> Vi Deus no vento, Deus na terra e Deus no mar
> Todos sabem que Deus esta em todo
> Todos se firmem e se companham em sue lugar.
>
> I saw God in the sun, in the moon, and in the stars
> I saw God in the wind, the earth, and the sea
> Everyone knows that God is in everything
> Everyone be firm and composed in your place.

“That sounds like Sufism,” I tell him. “That’s like some Wahdat al-Wujud right there, the total unity of existence in God.”

“It wasn’t a Mestre Irineu hymn,” he tells me. “It came to us through one of his followers, Chico Corrente. The revelation didn’t end with Mestre Irineu. You might find that when you drink, things will come to you, or out of you, and you’ll feel like you have to write them down. I received a hymn myself one time.”

We keep building. Clara was the Queen of the Forest, he tells me. The community through which Irineu had found ayahuasca, Circulo de Regeneração e Fé (Circle of Regeneration and Faith), was also called Centro da Rainha da Floresta (Queen of the Forest Center). This Queen of the Forest, for Irineu and possibly the community, was also the Virgin Mary. “Maybe she wasn’t Mary right away,” he admits. “I’m just telling

the story as it was given to me. It's possible that when Mestre first encountered this spiritual entity, he understood it as an orisha or indigenous goddess, and then later the story changed and she was Christianized. But I guess the name and form isn't really the point, right?"

I nod. Bumblebee tells me that the Virgin, or whatever, revealed Irineu's astral name to him. In this world, he was Raimundo, but in the astral, his name was Juramidã. Raimundo/Juramidã asked her to make him a great healer through the drink. She told him that he could never make money from his healing. He agreed, and she taught him the proper techniques for finding and preparing the vine. When he tried to use a hammer to make smashing the vine easier, she afflicted him with massive headaches and forbade the use of unnatural tools.

The story goes that Irineu became known as a powerful healer but left the Queen of the Forest Center in the late 1920s, perhaps due to political drama. Going his own way, Irineu, having been given the title Chefe Império Juramidam (Imperial Chief Juramidam), became the center of a new movement. In the early 1930s, he became known as Mestre ("Master") Irineu. In those same years, some 3,737 miles away, another Master—Wallace Fard Muhammad—appeared on the streets of Detroit and preached that the devil's time to rule this earth had expired, that he was a messenger sent from Mecca to resurrect the mentally dead and prepare them for the new world. He promised that someday we would see him in his holy robes.

Like Master Fard Muhammad, who was exiled from Detroit by police, Mestre Irineu and his community encountered persecution that forced him to leave his base in the town of Vila Ivonete. Unlike Master Fard Muhammad, Mestre Irineu found enough political support to develop his mission in peace, as the governor of Acre protected him from police harassment and even donated land for his church. Irineu died in 1971, but the land is still home to his followers. Master Fard, however, was forced to sneak back and forth between Detroit and Chicago until one day in 1934 when he had Elijah Muhammad drive him to the airport, and then he was gone.

Thinking about Master Fard, I get Mestre Irineu, both of them healers and both also seeking to heal themselves. Ayahuasca devotees often wish to place the vine's shamanic traditions out of history, beyond any speculations of origins; some scholars would allow that ayahuasca shamanism possibly goes back to 2300 BCE; others have argued for ayahuasca shamanism as a much more recent phenomenon. The shaman's use of ayahuasca for healing and curing was born from the slavery, torture, rape, murder, starvation, suffering, and Christian missionary work of colonialism and the rubber trade; these shamans really sought healing from the personal and communal traumas of encountering white people. Whatever you believe about the spirits or the Queen of the Forest or the message of the vine, ayahuasca shamanism spread as a real technology for

confronting and treating real wounds. With this history in mind, calling ayahuasca shamanism a modern development does nothing to discredit it, any more than Master Fard Muhammad's racial mythology can be discredited if you prove that there was not really an ancient eugenicist named Yakub. The terrible disease of white power called for an extraordinary cure, and whatever did the job would have to be called a miracle.

I'm not sure if Bumblebee knows this, but the transatlantic slave trade also brought Muslims to Brazil, and Islamic materials even contributed to the Afro-Brazilian traditions that informed his world. Muslims were the leaders in an 1835 rebellion in Bahia; among the men of influence was a figure known as Bilal, whose Islamic knowledge earned him the same title claimed by Irineu for his ayahuasca knowledge: mestre, Portuguese for "teacher." As it had been prior to their abduction across the sea, African Muslims in Brazil were recognized by African non-Muslims for their knowledge of magic, particularly the construction of powerful amulets and talismans using verses from the Qur'an. Additionally, the religious systems of West Africa had already been infused with Islamic content; though not always obvious, Islam was one of the ingredients in Brazil's mixtures of African, South American, and European religions. Perhaps there was even a secret history of Afro-Amazonian Muslims drinking the sacred vine and starting new lineages of mystical initiation from Muhammad on a jaguar buraq.

I get the feeling from Bumblebee that our interview is a complete success, since he talks about what will happen when I drink, and he promises to put me in touch with Daime workers in Massachusetts. All I had really needed to do was show up and not freak him out or look too much like he'd expect an undercover narc agent to look.

"I'd be really interested in the Tahrifiyya Sufi order," he tells me on our way back to the street. "Do they have any literature in English that you'd recommend?"

"I'll see what I have at home," I tell him. We part and he says, "Good luck at Harvard," though my two years are up and all I have to do at this point is write my dumb final papers about Avicenna and such.

Irineu might have been something real. He could have been at least a Master Fard or maybe even Muhammad for the rain forest. There's no knowing with Masters Irineu or Fard or any founders, because their biographies get adjusted to match the institutions built upon their skeletons, and the past is always read through the needs of the present. A charismatic prophet type shows up, speaks the absolute real-deal haqq for his time, and then dies or disappears. People need to maintain the prophet's power without replacing him with a new prophet, so they build up a whole big religion in his name and rewrite the prophet's life to serve the new church.

The only question, then, is form versus spirit: whether following the new church is the best way to follow the dead prophet, whether you want to stay safe in the well-

constructed house of your prophet's words or follow the prophetic heart and drive clear off the bridge. The house is always the safer bet; then again, your hallucination could birth the next great mosque. You never know.

WHY DID MOSES HAVE A HARD TIME CIVILIZING THE DEVIL?

Back in Zoser's car, flying through this Mecca full of impossible combinations, I picture Muhammad's idol-smashing general, Khalid ibn al-Walid, as a manifestation of Ogoun chopping his way through the rain forest. Or perhaps Ogoun is the manifestation of Khalid. Or maybe they are both manifestations of General Monk Monk, who had marched the devils across the desert thousands of years ago with his high-powered rifle. The three legends all become one character for me. He's nine feet tall with a dense, thick sunna beard that looks heavy and he's totally roided out, with huge spikes sprouting from his balloon-like delts, machete in one hand and rifle in the other, complete scholar and killer. And maybe instead of the rain forest, he runs through these streets, the perfect composite character for this Dinobot Island of a city, an Original Asiatic Martian Salafi building on Supreme Mathematics.

Zoser has First Born Prince Allah in the tape deck reciting the Supreme Wisdom Lessons—First Born Prince Allah the demon-afflicted shaykh and author of scriptures that he sold for $2 a copy, allegedly a leader of the 1971 Attica prison rebellion, and best knower among the best knowers. The god knew that he was al-Haqq even while putting his head to the floor in the mosque.

First Born Prince Allah's recitation of the lessons comes to the part about Moses being "half-original," and I tell Zoser the story of First Born Prince Allah as a teenager in 1965 wanting to get high and go to Malcolm X's funeral, but he wasn't sure how the man that he called Allah—the former Clarence 13X—would feel about it. So instead of telling Allah that he was planning to smoke a joint and then hit up the funeral, First Born Prince Allah just said, "I'm going to go smoke a joint." Allah then referred to the lessons and Moses being half-original, meaning that First Born Prince Allah had only spoken half of the truth.

Allah warned in 1968 that drugs were putting American youths to sleep ("The hippies

are losing the knowledge of themselves," he lamented), but he also criticized the Nation of Islam's rigid anti-drug policy as a form of compulsion in religion:

> Protect the child. Show him where if he doesn't do right, he is going to go to jail, just like the Muslims. I'm not against anyone but they are really teaching their children not to smoke, drink, or do anything to require other people to follow their standards. Now, I don't teach the child not to smoke. I teach him to get the understanding what? Of it! Because I don't have no religion, because that doesn't do anything for him. Now if you taught the child under religion like the Muslims, they say no smoking, and if you do smoke, they send you out. They can force what? Religion! You can't win nothing by force.

"I done messed with cocaine," Allah admitted. "I have done messed with everything but LSD and I'm not going to take any of those trips. Did I gain from using cocaine? Yes. I know what it do for me."

Neither Zoser nor myself ever met First Born Prince Allah, or the former Clarence 13X, or Malcolm X; the latter two were dead long before we were born, and First Born Prince Allah was shot down a few years before we ever had the chance to hear of him. It's sometimes hard to distinguish those names and stories from the other, older myths, the ones about Moses and Abraham and Muhammad, let alone to recognize that the younger myths had really happened on these very streets—that you can pray where Malcolm X had prayed, and stand in front of the same Hotel Theresa on Lenox Avenue where the New York Police Department arrested the man named Allah for charges including possession of marijuana.

"First Born Prince Allah had a hard time civilizing his own devils," says Zoser.

"True indeed, god," I answer. "He almost lost his leg to crack. The doctors said that he needed to have it amputated or die, and First Born Prince Allah said that he'd rather die. But then he got assassinated anyway."

First Born Prince Allah could build with anyone. He'd go to the mosque and pray with the Muslims; he'd build on Supreme Mathematics with young gods on the corner, whatever. I get the sense that he never saw it as a Dinobot Island thing, though; he didn't speak of Islam in the plural, the way that nerds write "Islam(s)" to convey diversity. For First Born Prince Allah, it all really held together as one coherent system.

Zoser pops out the First Born Prince Allah tape.

"I can understand crack being haram," he says. "It's cocaine consciousness but a million times more sinister."

"Right on," I tell him.

"It's not anything like fucking with the shit that I fuck with. Crack's a dead planet, god."

"The older gods say that the only things Allah had forbidden to Five Percenters were pork, heroin, and white women. Allah himself did coke, but if crack had been around in his time, he wouldn't have wanted the young gods going near it. He'd put crack in the

category of heroin."

"True indeed, god," says Zoser. But this is the same problem that medieval Muslim scholars had faced with hashish, using qiyas to invent a new ruling for what was to them a new drug. The man that I call Allah was on such an I Self Lord And Master mission that despite his own authority as the founder of a movement, every poor and righteous teacher is ultimately left to make his or her own path. Worship under your own vine, as Noble Drew Ali said.

Then we build on the Transformers episode "Changing Gears," in which Megatron builds a solar needle to harness the power of the sun. The solar needle requires a special circuit that can apparently only be found within Autobot Gears. The Decepticons kidnap Gears and remove the circuit, which alters Gears's personality, rendering him a slave to Megatron. Meanwhile, the solar needle creates instability and threatens to explode the sun.

"There's a lot that you can do with that," says Zoser.

"The Decepticons are obsessed with hoarding energy," I add on. "It seems to come up in every episode."

"Ya Haqq, right and exact. You know, as you progress and build with the Daime, you'll see that there's a heavy ecological angle to it. All of this healing, all of the wisdom that you get from the vine, god, it comes from the fuckin' rain forest, you know? The fuckin' Amazon that we're destroying at however many acres a day, extincting like fifty thousand species a year, god. The vine is the earth, god. When you're in a religious system that's all about the earth speaking to you and teaching you, healing you, you know, there has to be a political consequence to that, right? Ya Haqq."

The Daime people probably won't comprehend any hip-hop references or 1980s cartoon references. And they're not Muslims or even my fringe kind of Muslims, so none of my various Islamic readings would mean anything to them. No "peace, god" or "Ya Haqq" or any of that, no Qur'an or Prophet, no Arabic terms, no Supreme Mathematics, no pictures of Master Fard Muhammad. That's the thing that I keep forgetting, since my own personal dialogue with Santo Daime is entirely Islamic; for the Daime people, their religion has nothing to do with Islam. They're not drinking ayahuasca as a reaction to Islam or reinvention of Islam; the church sees itself as full-on Christian. What I'm doing here is interfaith dialogue, a meeting of two systems that remain separate, at least for now.

We drive for a while, and then I pull a slim book out of my jacket.

"This is something," I tell Zoser.

"What's that?" he asks. I hold up the book to show him the cover: Ibn Taymiyya's Letters from Prison. "Who was Ibn Taymiyya?"

"You know that Avicenna drank wine, but you've never heard of Ibn Taymiyya?"

“I’m an autodidact,” he says. “I know what I need to know.”

“Ibn Taymiyya was a medieval Hanbali jurist,” I tell him. “Pretty controversial in his day, hence the prison thing.”

“Think he’d be down with ayahuasca?”

“Probably not.”

“Was he down with weed?”

“He claimed that hashish entered Islamic cultures through the Mongol invasions, and the Mongols had pretty much fucked his world up, so it is what it is.”

“Peace to him,” says Zoser.

“Ya Haqq, almighty.”

Standing around on Understanding Culture Street with Zoser, waiting for the bus to load. He tells me that when I find myself on the Harvard campus again, I should go to wherever Timothy Leary’s office used to be and make a du’a for him, recite al-Fatiha in the man’s name or something.

“What’s your take on Leary?” I ask.

“Leary is all peace, god. Leary’s a real wali’Allah, a friend of God in a sacred spiritual drug silsila of the West.”

“What’s his deal?”

“Aldous Huxley and those guys believed in restricting access to LSD to a small circle of elites and academic philosopher types, and Leary was like, fuck that, the people need this, everyone in the world needs to be reawakened.”

“So Leary liberated acid.”

“True indeed,” says Zoser.

“The Huxley crew would be like Ibn Rushd, who said that the uneducated common people should spare themselves from deep theology, or the Sufi mystics, who guarded their secrets from the people that they deemed unqualified. And Leary would be the al-Hallaj of drug gnosis, shouting his truth in the streets.”

“I guess so, god.”

“Was that a good thing?”

“I think it was a beautiful thing. It did a lot for me, god. When I was a kid it cracked my cranium, you know what I mean? Opened me right up and set me out on my path. Knowledge of self, god. He who knows himself, knows his lord.”

“But it wasn’t all good. There were some casualties.” My father might have been one of them.

“Right on. Leary offered freedom and not everyone knew what to do with that. LSD is just like TV or the Internet or a gun. It’s technology, god. You can use it to do good things or bad things, but the technology itself is morally neutral.”

“So Leary was using it for good things.”

“Leary was a warrior for the mind, god. They locked him up and he fucking broke out, made it overseas, partied with the Black Panthers in Algeria, and had this dream of turning on the whole continent of Africa.”

“Eldridge Cleaver thought he was nuts,” I counter. “He said the acid had burned Leary’s brain.”

“Yeah. It didn’t end too well between Leary and the Panthers, but he moved on. You know where the authorities finally caught him?”

“Where?”

“Afghanistan, god. He was lured to Afghanistan and they busted him at the Kabul airport.”

“That’s crazy,” I say.

“God, think about it; what if he had been able to turn on the Afghans?”

“Well, god, they already have opium, and it’s kind of a problem.”

“Yeah, but opium just puts you to sleep; that’s why Marx called religion the opiate of the masses, right? What if they found something that woke them up?”

“So you get all the tribal warlords with their massive beards and pakul hats to run around mountains on acid. What happens when the Soviet tanks roll in?”

“I think that they would have blown the Russian minds, god. You think that just because a Muslim sees crazy colors or feels the vibrations of the universe or whatever, he can’t still blow shit up?”

“Then what? Now that you’ve got a psychedelic Taliban, what happens?”

“Afghanistan would be a crazy new culture that we’ve never seen before, god. Think of a society in which every single person was a Sufi saint in tune with the Black Mind, the Haqq.”

“Sounds like a party,” I say.

“And anyway, 9/11 would never have happened.”

I look at him, and he waits for me to add on, but I’m not going to go anywhere near it. “DAMN!” exclaims Zoser, and he actually jumps into the air with the words. My silence had given him a chance to put something together. “YOU GOT ME THINKING, GOD!”

“You okay, god?” I ask him, smiling.

“I’m good, Ya Haqq; you just sparked my brain. Now I’m really wanting this to happen, god. Muslims need to get their shit together—everyone says that. The conservatives say it, the liberals say it, the progressives and the reformers, the Wahhabis, the pro-Western Muslims, the neocons, the jihadists, the Sufis. Everyone agrees that we need some kind of dramatic transformation. Maybe it’s just acid, god. Maybe that’s the answer. Muslims have to trip their shit into the fucking cosmos. That’s the craziness that can really turn the ummah upside down in awesome new ways. Picture

all of these Muslims from around the world who went to Afghanistan to serve as mujahideen against the invasion if they would have tripped out, experienced this crazy opening up of their consciousness, and they would have gone back to Pakistan or the Gulf or wherever and shared that awakening in their own cultures. They would have brought that shit back to Saudi! The ummah would look a lot different, god."

"Sounds cool."

"We should make it happen, lord. What if we went to Saudi during hajj season and put LSD in all of the Zamzam water? You'd have all of these Muslims from all over the world, every nation, every color, speaking every language, all dressed in white—it's like a microcosm of humanity in that place, right? Hundreds of thousands of people crammed into the Haram, moving as one body around the Ka'ba, swarming around the first temple of the One True God ever built in history, and at that one corner, you know, they're all trying to kiss this crazy meteorite that fell upon the desert from outer space, right? And each and every last one of them is out of his fucking mind, totally lost on acid."

"Amazing," I answer.

"They're touching the Black Stone on acid, they're making prayers at the footprints of Abraham on acid. They're running back and forth between the two hills like Abraham's abandoned slave Hajar when she searched for water for baby Ishmael, but then they fucking become Hajar and Ishmael. Stepping in Abraham's footprints just makes you Abraham; that's it, you're Abraham with God's words flying around your head in all the rainbow colors, and you ride a buraq across the stars and fire-halo angels and everything's awesome and crazy, and you get your own Laylatul-Qadr, god, the Night of Motherfucking Power, Better Than a Thousand Months—you know what that means? A thousand months of prayer is nothing compared to what Allah reveals to your heart. When it comes time to stone the Devil, the fucking Devil is right fucking there in the fucking flesh and—SHIT, MAN! GOD, IMAGINE IT!"

"I don't know if I can."

"And there's that cave outside of Mecca, up on the mountain, where the Prophet first received revelation. People are up in that cave where it all started and they're tripping their balls off."

"Of course."

"They become Muhammad."

"Wild shit, god."

"Or like, they'd go to that awful fucking mosque that the Saudis have at his tomb, right, that big grand monstrosity, and they'd stand in front of Muhammad's tomb and Muhammad would just fuckin' start talking to them, his voice vibrating through the gold, fucking massive sonic waves knocking down the religion cops. Rasullullah's gonna let

dudes know where he stands and dudes are gonna go burn down the Starbucks that's right there. You put the pilgrims on acid, all of the sinister Saudi shit would come falling down; their whole Wahhabi capitalist nation-state edifice just crumbles in smoke. Slip acid to the religion cops, you know, the mutaween, and see what happens. Psychedelic prayers in the Haramayn, god. Think about what gets broadcast from all of the minarets. Picture the streets fucking covered with torn-out pages of legal texts, tafsirs, the collections of hadith, all of it just scattering in the breeze."

"What about the Qur'an?"

"Ya Haqq, everyone's gonna be a Qur'an! And I don't mean like a hafiz] memorizing words on a page. I mean like, everyone's going to have that actual confrontation with the whole fucking universe in their head, the experience of Rasullullah in the cave. After that, every mushaf can lose its binding and the loose pages will just fly around us in the wind, god. Folks are just going to get annihilated." I think that he means "annihilated" in the good way, the Sufi way (fana), the dissolving of the self in the Absolute—the merging of the ocean and the drop, the disappearance of the drop's separate identity within the ocean, as they like to say. "That Starbucks shit outside the tomb is crazy, god," he says. "See, that's the shit that I'm talking about. We need to take down the Saudis, god. We need fuckin' ayahuasca at the Prophet's tomb, not imperialist coffee. Daime would be like straight shots of holy divine lightning sent by the Haqq through their eyeballs and into their brains. That's the plan, god: burn down the Starbucks and open up Zoser's Daime Shack right there in Medina."

"That's peace."

"Nah, god, that's not peace. Everyone wants Islam to be peace, but I'm not hearing that right now. Islam isn't peace, god. Islam is when you give up your peace, you stop coveting your peace and comfort and sound sleep and you hand all of that over to Allah, and you just fuckin' surrender up everything to the beautiful violence of the cosmos, Ya Haqq."

"There's no peace in being a prophetic commentator," I add.

"You want to know the Rabb, custodians of the holy cities? You want to know what the Qur'an's trying to tell you? Drink this shit and let's be fucking pilgrims for real."

The bus opens, and I hug Zoser good-bye, and then he wanders back into his own Mecca. I watch him from my window seat until he's gone.

In the row in front of me, a dude on his phone is talking about mental illness, specifically some great artist who happened to be schizophrenic. The guy's main point seems to be that schizophrenics possess a secret wisdom that the rest of us cannot understand, because they have broken free of whatever mental constraints have been put on us by living in this shared reality with all of its rules. He says that at some point you're not ill, but have actually advanced beyond everyone else. As the child of a

schizophrenic, this makes me want to reach around the seat and punch the person's jaw out of his face. It also momentarily sours me on the notion of achieving special knowledge through fucking with the chemicals in my brain. Popular romanticism regarding drug trips and mental illness might come from similar places. I suspect that the asshole who says stupid things like, "Did you know that in some cultures, they regard schizophrenic people as having direct communication with God? Our so-called 'modern world' has it so wrong!" could be the same asshole who would think that seeing magical colors makes him a buddha.

The idea of spiking Zamzam water with LSD during hajj season does sound like a fun art installation, I'll give Zoser that much, but I'm starting to question whether Zoser really has a coherent platform for the whole drugs-and-religion adventure. For starters, he was able to just transfer the focus from LSD to ayahuasca in his psychedelic-hajj fantasy as if the two were interchangeable. That might taint things for me, just a bit. The beauty of ayahuasca is that it comes from the earth and nature and offers an encounter with divine plant consciousness, but LSD has none of that; LSD is just some shit that dudes made in a lab. If LSD can be treated as a genuine spiritual path, then the whole forest-goddess story of ayahuasca, the promise that ayahuasca gives something more, loses some of its currency.

Cocaine might fall somewhere between the benevolent natural ayahuasca and the benevolent synthetic acid, a place no longer benevolent—but then again, ayahuasca isn't strictly "natural." Ayahuasca's ingredients come from the rain forest, but the product is human-made, designed in a lab of sorts, even if the lab was just some guys in the forest 70,000 years ago. When humans mix these plants together and cook them, they actively transform the plants into the Daime; the exact moment of this change is described as the apuração. The brew is a machine, and the cultural delivery system—the Santo Daime church, the hymns and rituals, the mythology of the vine, the art that it inspires, the performance of the shaman—is nothing but technology.

The joys of sacred plants don't seem to be all that far removed from the "God Helmet," a transcranial magnetic simulator designed by neuroscientist Michael Persinger. The God Helmet, basically a snowmobile helmet wired to a computer, produced magnetic fields to stimulate specific parts of the brain. When the God Helmet's magnetic Yakub solenoids stimulated a subject's temporal lobes, s/he was likely to report an experience of union with God, as well as visions of sacred personalities from his or her religious tradition. What if Microsoft mass-produced the God Helmet? We could have an Xbox religion, tear down all of the churches and mosques, and become harmonized with the divine in the comfort of our own homes.

Drawing the line between "natural" and "artificial" isn't as easy as it looks.

Zoser appreciates that Santo Daime offers a communal spirituality and structure that's

not available with acid, since LSD is too young and there's no established tradition of acid temples, no medieval acid poets or acid theologians, but his position does not seem consistent. He admires Leary as a psychedelic manifestation of Allah's poor and righteous Five Percent, rescuing acid from the elites like Huxley and bringing it to the masses with no context or structure at all, but opposes someone making the same move with ayahuasca, even though the professional shamans want big donations that will forever be an obstacle between the sacred vine and the poor and marginalized people of this city. He resents the fact that it's always bourgeois white people who take part in the local works and fly down to South America for more intense confrontations and peddle porkshit books about their experiences, but he upholds the power relations that make this the only possibility—even if it means that he himself cannot afford the work. If the evil of coke consciousness is due in part to the materialism with which it has become associated, has ayahuasca escaped money? As the work grows more popular and these rich white devils keep funding shamans and going on psychedelic vacations south of the equator, and the shamans in turn redirect their work toward fulfilling these spiritual tourists, what happens to the "indigenous" contingent, the people who have been living in the work for however many thousands of years?

The reality for Zoser, the tourist pilgrims, and—I have to confront this—myself is that ayahuasca religion is a luxury church, at least in our own setting north of the equator. I have been told that this product will magically heal me of inner psychic discomfort buried so deep that I don't even know it's there. As with any good advertising, the need is invented. "Inner psychic discomfort" might be a luxury problem, at least compared to discomforts involving food, shelter, and opportunity.

Whatever problems ayahuasca promises to fix, it's inevitable that some people can afford the healing easier than others; the way that it works now, the folks who get to have their "inner psychic discomfort" healed aren't the twelve-year-old gang members who have seen their friends shot up to bits, or abused migrant domestic workers, or homeless veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder. Zoser is unemployed and broke most of the time, but his existence remains secure; his mom has a big house and food, and he doesn't really have to worry about anything. If a hundred dollars falls into his hands, he can go to a Daime ceremony and have his conversation with Jesus Christ, or Khidr, or the jaguar. If a thousand dollars falls into his hands, he can take part in a Daime seminar in Costa Rica.

In the name of spreading psychedelic shamanism through the American ghetto, Zoser wants to find a way of paying for underprivileged kids' trips to Brazil. Bring them deep into the Amazon, have them drink and trip out, and prepare them for reentry into their communities as fully initiated and trained shamans—"the Zulu Nation Scholarship," he wants to call it, if he can get Afrika Bambaataa to drink the Daime. Then, perhaps with a

new Afro-Futurist sci-fi shamanism, the Daime could reach inner cities while evading all the class struggle afflicting the present church and the white hypocrisy of the broader psychedelic community: all these Internet shamans clogging up message boards with talk of reawakening global consciousness while possessing next to no awareness of their personal socioeconomic worlds.

I can see the righteous intention behind a Zulu Nation Scholarship, but it might be a stupid and careless scheme that would only bring destruction to the people that it's meant to help. Something tells me that it's a bad idea to fly kids to South America to trip out in a guided, safe setting and then send them back to neighborhoods where those structures don't exist, the plants are beyond their means, and street shamans offer a wide variety of destructive substitutes—especially in a society in which the war on drugs has amounted to a war on black people, with African Americans doing more prison time for drugs than white people, though whites are actually doing more drugs. And it just seems a bit out of touch to suggest that what underprivileged people need is a new religion, or a new drug, or a new set of symbols and stories, as though the mystical jaguar brings your rent. America's underclass doesn't have much use for another church shoving donation plates in its face.

Right, what the whole continent of Africa needs is LSD. Mass tripping will end all injustice and oppression and restore our fragile world to its proper balance. If there's any truth or wisdom in that, it's buried under so much toxic white privilege that I won't even bother trying to rescue it. Telling poor people that drugs will save them is as empty as the promise that "positive thinking" will save them. Forget Leary. Peace to the Black Panthers who kicked his ass out of Algeria.

Mushrooms are more democratic than ayahuasca, and Zoser likes mushrooms. He has some rasul chocolates in his freezer that we're supposed to eat at some point. Now that he's out of money, and the Daime work's beyond his financial reach, his main entheogen is weed, the cheapest and therefore most democratic sacrament, a real drug of the people, but I can't say that it's really taking him anywhere. He just smokes all night and sleeps all day. For two years he has talked about writing a book, but the present word count is zero. Again, there's a political consequence here, and I hope that it's not too hard to see.

Maybe a drug promises to lift you up above the material world, but the drug itself is material. The drug can take you beyond all the filth of what it means to be human, but the drug still has to travel through human channels; to reach us, the drug itself has to pass through all the machinations of society that we long to transcend. Just as cannabis came to the New World through colonialism, there's no ayahuasca for me without global capitalism. But Islam is money too, since I dressed up in two white Ihram towels and blew eight grand on my hajj, escaping reality for a few weeks, and there weren't even

any cool drugs involved—the only rock that I chased was the Black Stone. I did benefit from it, sure.

JEHANGIR ALLAH

Back to Harvard life, no magical alphanumerics or underground Islams, none of the secret languages that I spoke back in Mecca. Just the end of two years of coursework. Tuesdays and Thursdays, I go to Harvard's Semitic Museum past massive statues of Babylonian kings, recreations of ancient Israelite clay huts, and displays of pottery under glass to a seminar room with the walls covered by hanging 1950s maps, the land colored in garish yellow and orange and green, everything named in German: ATLANTISCHER OZEAN, AEGYPTEN, LIBYEN, SYRIEN. There's a classicist Orientalism with the kind of naïveté that makes me feel like I'm in a Wes Anderson movie, like the distinguished Assyriologist teaching this Mesopotamian Religion seminar, Piotr Steinkeller, could have been one of Etheline Tenenbaum's suitors, looking straight into the camera with a captioned close-up.

Steinkeller sits at the end of a long table, and we listen to him end every sentence with "mmhmm, yes" and act as referee for the great debates of his field. Samuel Noah Kramer argues that Mesopotamian religion was exceedingly practical—the sun god is the sun—while Thorkild Jacobsen argues for allegorical readings in which myths satisfy psychological needs: the sun god is not just the sun, but a symbol of divine power, even divine power within humans. Sadly, Steinkeller tells us, there are no meaningful developments in resolving these controversies, since "Assyriology doesn't provoke the excitement that Obama would get involved in, which is perhaps a pity, mmhmm, yes?"

Influenced by developments in Egyptology, Jacobsen suggests three stages of development in Mesopotamian religion: first, the literalism suggested by Kramer, in which the moon god was actually the moon. In the next stage, gods were conceived in zoomorphic forms: because the crescent moon resembled the horns of bulls, the moon god was represented as a bull. At some point during the advancement of civilization, as ancient Mesopotamians no longer saw themselves at the mercy of unknowable distant powers, divinity became anthropomorphized; in this third stage, the moon god was

portrayed as a man. For Jacobsen, the human form triumphed only after a long and hard struggle. Steinkeller disagrees with this evolutionary model, saying, "We can't tell which forms are the oldest, mmhmm, yes." I just wonder what Zoser would do in this seminar, reading everything through the lessons of Master Fard Muhammad. Steinkeller tells us about the Akkadian king Naram-Sin, who reigned ca. 2254–2218 BCE, who might have been the first person to say "I am God" and the first to be deified by others during his own lifetime. What would Zoser do with that?

President Obama, despite his silence on the matter of anthropomorphism in ancient Mesopotamian conceptions of the divine, comes on television to announce that Osama bin Laden has been killed. The news arrives during a Mets-Phillies game, which prompts thousands of fans in attendance to interrupt the game with a chant of "USA, USA." In the nation's capital, Americans dance in the streets and wave flags in front of the White House. For our purposes here, it could be worth adding that there were apparently rows of marijuana plants growing in the garden of bin Laden's compound.

A professor of Islamic studies emails me to ask if I plan to write about bin Laden; she wonders whether I have any thoughts on the "public lynching and queering of his body." I can't say that I do, since the news comes at the end of my final semester, and there's no time for real bodies when I have to write papers about Avicenna's prophetology.

Finals week means spending twenty-four hours at a time in Lamont, the only Harvard library that doesn't close, making concoctions of 5-hour Energy and Red Bull and constructing bad arguments with a frazzled mind to email four or five thousand words or so to professors at six in the morning, then finding a couch for some sleep before doing it all again.

One evening in the Lamont café, I tell a friend in ABD (all but dissertation) stage about my ayahuasca book, and she snaps that drugs aren't friends to graduate students.

"I smoked a lot of weed when I first got here," she explains. "Like, every day, getting faded and just shitting my way through seminars. It's not sustainable. You have to treat this thing like your brain is training for the Brain Olympics." But all she did was switch drugs; she's still hopped up on caffeine with heaping scoops of sugar, phenylalanine, taurine, and 8,333 percent of her daily recommended B12.

During a morning trip off-campus for food, I see one of my characters, Jehangir Allah, slumped against the newsstand by the train stop with the bummy punks, the same spot where the bummy punks always congregate. You go one Red Line stop in either direction, and it's dead, but come out of the Harvard Square station and they're waiting for you at the top of the escalator in their ratty beards and spiked jackets and big dumb boots like they're fighting a war, equipped with ripped sleeping bags and pleas for money written on scraps of cardboard boxes. Why is it always Harvard Square? From my own time in that sphere, I can say that there's some glory in self-marginalization, and

nothing says "margin" like being the bummy punk that Harvard people have to pass on their way through the campus gates. That's about as bummy punk as it gets. I used to like being the punk outside the gates, but now I go in.

With the exception of Jehangir Allah, all these self-marginalizing punk kids getting off on their fringe status are white. Self-marginalization is more satisfying when you're not already on the margins. I say "with the exception of Jehangir Allah," but when he's done with the bummy punks, he goes back to his mom's house in the suburbs, home to video games and weed that were all bought with his mom's money, and a maid does his laundry. Jehangir Allah's privileged enough to see every hobo as a natural poet-saint and every hungry person as a symbol of freedom. White or not white, it's still lame to fall into that Kerouac "I want to trade places with the Negro" trap.

I was once riding in Jehangir Allah's car, and he told me, "There's a piety in poverty," which had to be the most immature porkshit I had ever heard. I later understood that it makes sense in Jehangir Allah's life. Piety is a choice, an intention; for Jehangir Allah, so is poverty. Jehangir Allah's punk poverty never leads him to genuine panic, it never makes him a desperate animal, because it's a condition that he controls. When the punk houses and squats wear him down, he has his clean childhood bed and Ninja Turtles sheets still waiting for him.

Jehangir Allah and I used to crash Muslim conventions together, smoking weed with muhajabah girls, sleeping in parking lots, squatting mosques and so on. That was a long time ago. Jehangir Allah used to have a bright red mohawk, but he cut it off and then grew it out black. His hair now flops over his eyes like an androgynous 1980s British pop star, and he has shaved stripes into the sides like an 1980s rapper. His pants are so tight you can see his religion. He wears bright red high-tops. He's an amalgamation of styles and worlds without commitment to any of them, Dinobot Island–style.

In his time as a young Muslim Punk Rawk superhero, Jehangir Allah had some muscles, and he had those amazing creases in his groin, going from his lower abs into his pants. I've never had creases like his, but he has probably lost his. He's not fat at all, but he's lazy.

"Jehangir Allah!" I shout.

He raises his head.

"Hey-hey, peace to the god!" he answers. He pulls himself to his feet, and we hug. "Ya Haqq!"

"Let's get you some breakfast," I tell him.

There's an IHOP down the street, and we sit across from each other in a booth. He talks without looking up from his food.

"So what do they have you reading at Haah-vahd? What's your science?"

"I have to write this paper about Max Weber," I tell him.

"What's that?"

"A German sociologist from the turn of the twentieth century. I have to look at what he did with Islam."

"So break it down, almighty."

"Weber only did work in comparative religion because he wanted to figure out why capitalism and what he called 'rationalism' developed in Christian Europe but not anywhere else."

Jehangir Allah doesn't say anything. I don't say anything. We avoid looking directly at each other. After about a minute, I just add on to my own words. "He just projected his questions of Europe onto non-Europe, so his whole impetus for studying Islamic cultures was to figure out what made Christian Europe so special."

"Word," says Jehangir Allah.

"How's the band going?"

"It's peace, god. I think I'm going to put myself first for a while."

"As opposed to what?" I ask as a half-joke.

"It's just hard, god, when you make a lot of progress as an artist and there's a lot of positive momentum, but it doesn't manifest anything to your dad because all of that momentum doesn't put any money in your pocket. So you could feel like a fucking star, but you're still broke and dealing with the family pressures."

"I know how that feels," I tell him.

"You used to," he answers.

"Sure."

"So if you're going into a doctoral program," he asks, "are you still going to write?"

"I wrote two books while doing the master's here, but it's going to start slowing down."

"That's too bad, god."

"Slowing down might make the books better, though."

"What else are you doing?" he asks.

"There's this paper about Derrida and negative theology."

"Who's Derrida?"

"He was this mega-rock-star intellectual."

"Okay, cut that shit, first of all."

"Cut what shit?"

"That 'mega-rock-star intellectual' shit. There's no such thing as a mega-rock-star intellectual."

"He's huge, though."

"Yeah, but I've never heard of him."

"Because you're not into that sort of thing."

“That’s why he’s not a rock star. If intellectuals could be rock stars, then it wouldn’t matter whether or not I was ‘into’ him; even if I had never read his shit, I’d still know what he looked like and who he fucked.”

“I guess.”

“See that lady over there?” he asks, nodding in the direction of a middle-aged white woman who looks like she might work at the registrar or something.

“Okay.”

“If you showed her a picture of Edward Said’s face, she couldn’t tell you that it was Edward Said.”

“I don’t even think that I could. I mean, I’ve read him, but I’m not sure if I’ve ever seen his picture.”

“Then Edward Said’s not a rock star.”

“I get it.”

“You academics are so far from the mainstream human race that you think someone from your little fucking anthill of a culture can mean something to normal people.”

“Fair enough,” I say.

“Okay, so negative theology. Break it down, god. Make knowledge born.”

“Well, negative theology is basically the attempt to understand God through transcending the limits of language; to strip down all our conceptions of God, everything that we attribute to him, because God’s supposed to be way above anything that we can express with words.”

“I’m down,” he says. “It sounds like Sufism.”

“Everything sounds like Sufism.”

“Sure. Because Allah’s in your heart, right? He’s not in the books. What do they say? Don’t be a donkey carrying books, or some shit like that?”

“Yeah, some shit like that. But there’s a tension in this kind of apophatic discourse, because the people who tell us that we can’t describe God with words are in fact writing lots of words.” As soon as the phrase “apophatic discourse” falls out of my mouth, and I think about my intonation and look at the way that my hands move as I speak, it becomes clear that I am an asshole: my classroom self is becoming my natural self. But I keep going. “There can be no apophatic theology without cataphatic theology, or no apophasis that’s not also a cataphasis. No matter how much the negative theologians say, ‘Don’t speak of God, don’t conceptualize God,’ they do as much speaking and conceptualizing as anyone. Even the Sufis are guilty of it. A Sufi master might say, ‘If you can express it with words, it’s not Sufism,’ but what he just said is words and it’s also Sufism. So what can you do?”

“I’m peace with that,” says Jehangir Allah.

“People tried to discuss Derrida as a negative theologian, but he wasn’t into it, so he

wrote this essay called, 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials.' He says that when you speak about not speaking, you're still speaking, so we're always at that threshold of leaving language, but we can never pass it. All we end up doing is creating new vocabulary."

"That sounds about right."

"But there's this thing that he does in the essay; he says specifically that he's not going to speak about negative theology in Judaism or Islam. He's keeping it Christian, but he doesn't give a clear reason."

"What's that all about?" asks Jehangir Allah.

"It's strange because he grew up Jewish in Algeria. You'd think he might have something to say."

"He can fuckin' talk about Sufism, y'akhi. I just talked about Sufism and I don't know shit."

"Maybe Derrida doesn't know shit either, at least about Islam, and he has to slick his way out of that question."

"Right," says Jehangir Allah through a mouthful.

"But since his whole deal is that even when you refuse to speak, you're still speaking, his refusal to speak about Judaism or Islam is also speaking about Judaism and Islam."

"Why do you have to know this shit?"

"The guest list," I tell him.

"What guest list?"

"When you write a book, it's like you're inviting readers to a party at your house. Before they decide to come over, people want to examine the guest list and know who they'll see standing in your doorway. That's the measuring stick for how seriously they take your party."

"So a French philosopher makes people want to come to your party?"

"Some people. You put a quote from the right figure at the top of your chapter and it will draw readers in, because it makes them feel like they're hanging with the cool kids."

"That just sounds like some hipster shit," says the hipster.

"That's exactly what it is."

"Who you choose to quote is a fuckin' power play."

"How so?"

"It's the power of lording coolness over someone. You reference a certain band and that's how you perform your coolness. Or you reference a band that no one else has heard of, and you're automatically the coolest person in the room."

"Something like that."

"Derrida's just a fucking T-shirt for you." He says this without knowing that I literally

own a Derrida T-shirt. It bears Derrida's portrait and the words, "DECONSTRUCTION MAKES THE DIFFÈRANCE," which a small handful of assholes on this earth find hilarious.

"I worry about you," I say.

"Why's that?"

"Because once you hit thirty, the girls are going to dry up."

"You think so?"

"Your go-to girls are going to marry off, and the single ones aren't going to be marks for the sad burning poet-hero anymore, at least when he's still at his mom's house. The young ones might still go for a tormented ecstatic with an al-Hallaj complex, but you can't play that role after thirty—you'll just creep them out. And there's no more road adventures, brother, because the friends who used to let you crash on their couches are now changing diapers."

"I'm kind of pissed right now," he says, but it's so flat that I'm not sure if he still possesses the emotional range to be "pissed."

"I'm sorry."

"Some of us haven't lost our wanderlust."

"I have wanderlust," I argue, "but I wander in the library."

"You used to tell me a lot of shit about being an artist, suffering for it, living for it even when it means losing everything."

"But I didn't have to lose everything," I tell him. "Life can be okay."

"What was that line you said about writing for the youth of your own generation, and the academics of the next one?"

"Something like that, but it was F. Scott Fitzgerald."

"Do you see yourself as still living that out, or have you skipped over the kids to just write for professors and grad students?"

"People used to think that you were a philosopher," I tell him. "They looked at you and thought, 'This means something. There's an idea here.' At least I did. But that could be the pins and needles stuck in my own brain. Allah knows best."

"But I love you anyway."

When I make a new character, I'll call him Ya Sin Allah, because he'll be a prayer for the dying and the dead like poor sad Jehangir Allah getting old, left behind like a half-remembered hero from a movie.

We head out of IHOP and go back to where I had found him with the bummy punks, and after starting on my way to Harvard Yard, I turn around with the realization that I have something cool to tell the kid.

"I'm going to drink ayahuasca," I shout, momentarily forgetting the legal delicacies of the situation. At least it's probable that Boston cops have never heard of ayahuasca.

"What?"

"Ayahuasca."

"What the fuck's that?"

"It's a drug. I'm going to drink it and then write a book about it."

"Word?" he asks.

"Word," I answer.

"Is the book going to have a bibliography?"

"I don't know yet."

"What's ayahuasca supposed to do?"

"It's this Amazonian shaman tea that everyone says tastes disgusting. People have supposedly been drinking it for 70,000 years. You trip out and have crazy visions of jaguars and heal from whatever psycho-spiritual toxins are afflicting you from within."

"No shit?"

"I don't know. That's what they say."

"You're going to drink it?"

"It looks that way," I answer.

"But you're clean, god. You don't really do drugs, and you're all Mr. Harvard now."

"I'm calling it fieldwork."

"Visions of jaguars, damn."

"It varies," I tell him.

"Sounds like a party, god."

"I hope not."

"Listen," he says. "I've done a lot of drugs, right? I've done so many drugs, I'd tell you about them, if I could remember all of their names. And I've put substances into my body that are so fuckin' condemned by society that I wouldn't even name them to you. So, from that experience, I'd say to go for it."

"Thanks," I tell him.

"I'd probably be down for something like that. Give me a call."

"Sure," I lie, remembering what 8-Bit Allah had told me about the credits. Whenever I see Jehangir Allah, and he talks to me in that way like he's not really talking to me, but through me, to someone else that he sees living in the air, I get the feeling that his credits are up.

SCHOLARS AND MARTYRS

> Writing . . . is the act of a lost soul; the approach is that of someone fragile, who has no message, someone in search of herself, someone sure of nothing, except that something isn't right and it hurts.
>
> —FATIMA MERNISSI, "WRITING IS BETTER THAN A FACE-LIFT"

> Wrestling presents man's suffering with all the amplification of tragic masks. The wrestler who suffers in a hold which is reputedly cruel (an arm-lock, a twisted leg) offers an excessive portrayal of Suffering; like a primitive Pietà, he exhibits for all to see his face, exaggeratedly contorted by an intolerable affliction . . . wrestling is the only sport which gives such an externalized image of torture.
>
> —ROLAND BARTHES, "THE WORLD OF WRESTLING"

Footnotes or not, the drugs-and-Islam project will be my ninth book, and I don't yet know what kind of song I'll be singing with this one, or if I can still sing at all. I've spent the decade after 9/11 writing with fair hope that I could pump out some defining work of the time—a strange era in which the colonial-gazing white sexist media told me that just going to the annual Islamic Society of North America conference and getting blow jobs or hand jobs from hijab-wearing Muslim girls, which happened three years in a row, meant that I could see myself on the front line of some Clash of Civilizations with the whole world's fate in the balance. At the very least, I thought that I could write a book about Islam for Muslims like me, since none of the pop intellectuals of post-9/11 American Islam, neither the pop reformers nor the pop apostates, held any interest in us odd ones. I tried to write that book every time, and I tried so hard.

After roughly a million words, I might have been getting close, but two years of churning out papers at Harvard have killed it. All religions are stuck being human, and we study these human religions as if we're extraterrestrial anthropologists too detached from the earthling experience to have any feeling for any of it. Academia has sealed my heart, dulling much of my passion for belief and disbelief. But even if I could feel something about Allah, I couldn't write it; as a writer, you are what you eat, and I don't get the chance to eat poems anymore. Consuming hundreds of academic articles might have killed my ability to put together a sentence with any guts. I used to be an artist, and

now I write papers for seminars.

My academic adviser for the past two years, distinguished scholar Jane Idleman Smith, told me, "Your books could be used in courses, if you took out the crap." This was after a dozen professors across the country, including more than one at Harvard itself, were already using those books, crap included. But I can still see where the business is taking me.

You can't fake your language. You write the way you speak, and school has ruined my words. Now I vomit up things like, "For the sake of transparency, I will discuss the personal lens through which I engage this discursive tradition." Not only have I put my own power to sleep, I've also contributed to the journeys of others on academia's soul-murdering path. A student in Australia just emailed me a copy of her thesis on my work. "Religious identity is best understood as an external marker," the thesis tells me, "a semantic system which Knight actively employs in mediating both his interactions with other people and his perception of himself. This conscious construction of religious identity in his novels illustrates his view of Islam as a uniquely dynamic framework through which he could orient himself and structure his experience into a more meaningful context."

That's the kind of thing that I read now, but I'm hoping that ayahuasca might flush me out. A nice entheogenic adventure with jaguar visions could make this shit come alive again.

. . .

Sometimes when I write, I forget that anyone's actually going to pay attention, and then they come back and show me what I actually said. It can get horrifying. "Gender plays an important role in configuring Knight's visions of Islam," says the thesis. "Not only are his novels overrun with immature sexual innuendos and graphic descriptions of male masturbation, but he also includes a number of misogynistic perspectives he once held in regard to the proper role of women within Islam, which were heavily informed by the Salafi leanings of his mosque." I congratulate the student for her project's success, but advise that she shouldn't attempt an investigation of gender in my work without a thorough reading of Osama Van Halen, my statement on white boys who get into Islam and develop overblown colonial fetishes for brown Muslim girls, which her thesis had neglected.

When students wrote to F. Scott Fitzgerald about their theses, he would send them on wild goose chases for books that did not exist; one of them was titled F. Scott Fitzgerald and the Rise of Islam, which he claimed was published by Harcourt, Brace and Howe in 1922. Years ago I had planned to write an actual book called F. Scott Fitzgerald and the Rise of Islam but never saw it through. I have piles of unfinished books. Maybe this will

be one of them.

A professor had sent me his article, "A Brain Full of Contraband: The Islamic Gonzo Writing of Michael Muhammad Knight," which he had presented at a conference in Belgium. The article argues that my books place me in the tradition of "gonzo" literature and journalism most commonly associated with Hunter S. Thompson. Scholar-novelist-poet Mohja Kahf had called me "the Hunter S. Thompson of Islamic literature," and the blurb has gotten so much mileage—like the "Catcher in the Rye for Muslim youth" one from The New York Times—that journalists and researchers who write about me always have to repeat it or examine it. One of the points of this article is that both Thompson and I included self-critique throughout our work: "While Thompson's self-satire focused primarily on his own drinking and drugging, Knight centers his around fornication and self-abuse. He often depicts himself as a chronic masturbator." To illustrate his point, he quotes the passage from Journey to the End of Islam in which I do it while wearing a burqa, imitating one of my fictional characters.

Scholars love to contextualize writers within genealogies, and it does feel good to be assigned a history; I don't want to have come out of nowhere. But the pressure of being compared to someone like Thompson is that if you're aiming to write about drugs, you actually have to do the drugs.

. . .

My ideal image of the writer wasn't Thompson but rather Bruiser Brody, a pro wrestler who earned a reputation as one of the wildest fuckers in the ring. Perhaps he could be called a gonzo wrestler. Brody was never fit for a run as the beloved golden-boy champion—too crazy and ugly and scarred-up and unmarketable as a Saturday morning cartoon. Instead of arm bars and leg locks, he'd swing a chain at your head.

He always looked as if he had come in from the mountains, mass of frizzy hair and ungroomed beard and he wore these odd fur-covered boots. As a kid, I imagined that he had skinned the animal himself and made the boots in a special ritual on a mountain in Japan. Bruiser Brody carried himself like a human version of Ookla from Thundarr the Barbarian. There was also something vaguely religious about him, as if he were a mystical pagan warrior-monk from another chapter of history, a true and living destroyer-god embodied as a man, a terrible force of nature, a violent storm god enshrined in flesh, coming out of the bas-relief on a Sumerian temple wall to ejaculate nuclear holocausts once more. I think of Bruiser Brody whenever Steinkeller talks about the fierce god of war Ninurta, who defeats the monster Anzu and restores the lost Tablet of Destinies to Enki.

Bruiser Brody traveled the world, drawing big crowds throughout North America and Japan and everywhere, never staying in one spot too long because he was a true

mercenary and a bigger payoff always waited somewhere else—and also because he burned bridges. There was a famous match in the early 1980s with Lex Luger, a bleached-blond hero with chiseled muscles, who received tons of hype as potentially the next Hogan-level superstar. Unfortunately for Luger, wrestling is show business, and you only look as good as the other guy's willing to make you look. Brody wouldn't sell any of Luger's muscle-moves, only standing there and shrugging whenever Luger threw a fake punch. Just a rookie in the business, Luger had no idea what to do when a legitimately frightening man like Bruiser Brody went off-script, so he punched the referee to end the match and ran out.

At six-foot-eight and over three hundred pounds, Bruiser Brody would have made a monster villain and perfect foil for Hulk Hogan, but they never brought him into the World Wrestling Federation (WWF). The fact that we've missed our chance at a Hogan-Brody dream match has become a crucial part of the Brody legend; wrestling purists insist that a legit badass like Brody would never lie down for a glorified bodybuilder like Hogan.

Hulk Hogan came to the ring oiled up and tanned and flexing his biceps; Hogan's musculature wasn't exactly a drug-free zone, but that's not the drug book that I want to write. It's a question of show muscles versus go muscles. To write a decent drug book, you have to get in the ring like Bruiser Brody. Swing the chain over your head and take your furry boots and stomp the brains out of people, get carved up and stain every arena with trails of your blood.

In 1988, a wrestler known as Invader #1 stabbed Bruiser Brody to death in a locker room in Puerto Rico. Twenty years later, after my very first week at Harvard, I flew down to Atlanta to take part in a book festival in which the chief attraction was a wrestling match between myself and Bruiser Brody's famed nemesis, Abdullah the Butcher, the "Madman from the Sudan." Abdullah's like Brody; he spent his career drifting from league to league, never a promoter's dream face but still drawing crowds and making money, and he must have fought Brody thousands of times and on every continent. I don't think any of their matches had a definitive end; they'd brawl in the ring, then out of the ring, then back up the aisle from which they came, beat each other bloody, and never return to the ring to officially finish the match.

Like Brody, Abdullah never ventured into the Saturday-cartoon world of the WWF, so I didn't get to see him on TV as a kid; instead, I gazed upon his photos in wrestling magazines, always with his face and that of his opponent washed in blood, Abdullah trying to put a fork into the man's eye or carve up his forehead. The magazine commentary would leave me terrified that this man could be out there somewhere, walking the streets, waiting for someone to stab, as in this ratings analysis from the February 1984 issue of The Wrestler, explaining Abdullah's surge up the "Most Hated"

rankings:

> Where Abdullah goes, a bloody trail of mayhem is left behind in his wake. . . . In Florida, Abdullah has concentrated his attack on "The American Dream," Dusty Rhodes. Match after bloody match has brought the collective hatred of thousands of fans upon him, . . . In Georgia, Abdullah has made a series of appearances that are notable for their excessive brutality, . . . You don't mutilate a man like Dusty Rhodes, and you don't come into an area like Georgia and wreak havoc, without paying for those actions—at least in the hearts of the fans. Dusty is trying hard to turn back Abdullah's challenge . . . but he's been losing a lot of blood as a result of that ghastly feud.

Next to the reportage appears a shot of Abdullah's scarred-up head, home to deep grooves from years of repeated cutting. Supposedly he could stick coins or poker chips into the scars and it would freak people out, and he had been cut so many times that a stiff punch to the forehead would have him gushing red.

Other children of the 1980s might have feared Jason Voorhees or Freddy Krueger, but my boyhood nightmare was Abdullah the Butcher, hailed almost universally as the most sadistic monster in the history of professional wrestling. Knowing what I was in for, I dyed my hair blond just to make the blood show up better, and hid "gigs"—razor blades cut in half—in my wrestling gloves. When it came time to sell Abdullah's attack, he would discreetly ask me to remove a gig and slice my forehead. I pranced in the ring in my stupid golden sunglasses and sparkling feathery white cape with "MMK" across the back, and my curly-toed boots—every wrestler working the "evil Muslim" gimmick had to have curly-toed boots, made most famous in the 1980s by the Iron Sheik. Abdullah the Butcher also wears curly-toed boots, the kind that he can slip on and zip along the side rather than lace up.

He stood outside, cane in one hand, leaning on the ring with the other, as I dared him to get in and fight. I then realized that I was about to fight a seventy-year-old man. There was a sad-grandfather vibe to the Madman from the Sudan as he hobbled his way around the ring. Abdullah was the villain of another time, back when wrestling was populated with foreign monsters from everywhere exotic and hostile. Maybe his decline symbolized wrestling's transition from a "clash of civilization" thesis to a truly post-Orientalist understanding—the end of the curly-toed boots?

Abdullah just stood by the ring and looked at me. "COME ON!" I shouted, jumping around and goading the old man to get in the ring. After a few seconds of taunts, realizing that Abdullah wasn't physically capable of climbing through the ropes, I decided to throw a lame kick and feed him my leg so he could pull me out and get the match going. Abdullah took my foot, and I flailed around as though trying to escape his clutches.

"Easy!" he whispered at me. "Go easy!" I slowed it down. He pulled me out of the ring and gave me some punches and then asked, "Do you have your blade?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Table," Abdullah said in my ear, and then he sent me crashing into a nearby table. The crowd popped. The blood started pouring and wouldn't stop; flowing down my face, it felt like I was showering in blood. I rolled around on the ground, and Abdullah kicked and stomped me, and the blood followed wherever I went. I noticed that at first, people were laughing, but they stopped once it became apparent that real liquid was pouring out of my head.

The flood of endorphins put me in sufficient shock that I couldn't think my way through it or even remember what I had done to myself. It was like trying to recall the details of a car accident. Had I really split my own head open? It didn't seem like I had gone deep enough into my flesh to produce a wound like this. Was there any chance that Abdullah had contributed to the cut? Before the match, his manager had warned me in the locker room, "Abby likes blood. If you don't bleed enough for him, he'll get it from you." Because Abdullah made his money and fame by being recognized as far and away the most sadistic man in wrestling history, he needed my massive head wound for the integrity of his brand.

After later hearing from witnesses and doing my best to piece it all together, I am left with three theories for the bloodbath:

1. I simply cut myself, as per my agreement with the Butcher; but with the adrenaline pumping, I sliced myself harder than planned.
2. When I raised the blade to my head, Abdullah—knowing that I was about to cut myself, because he had already called the spot—smashed a chair into the back of my skull, driving the blade much deeper into me than I would have done on my own. This was the argument offered by my photographer-friend Kim Badawi, who was at the match.
3. Abdullah had taped razor blades to his fingers, as he has been known to do, and cut me before I crashed into the table—and I was so out of my mind with excitement that I couldn't even recognize what had happened. This theory is supported by the fact that there were actually two cuts on my head: the deep one that ended up covering me in my own plasma, and another, much less serious cut three inches away. It's possible that I had executed both cuts, or that one came from me and the other from Abdullah.

The Madman from the Sudan beat on me for maybe five minutes, my blood spurting all over the place, and then put me in a standing chokehold. When he let go, I collapsed to the ground. Abdullah whispered, "Stay down," and then walked away. Match over. Abdullah signed autographs in a tent somewhere, still soaked in my blood, and told someone to call an ambulance for me.

“I fell over a table, and my head hit the concrete,” I told the paramedics. I wasn’t confident that a razor slice could look anything like that kind of wound, but they seemed to believe me.

My gig had hit a blood vessel, meaning that I required over twenty stitches inside the cut, just to stop the bleeding, before they could stitch the cut itself. They sewed up both wounds on my head for a grand total of forty-six stitches. To keep the EMTs and doctors from asking questions, I had successfully concealed the deep razor cut on my finger.

“Don’t let your head get wet,” they said, so after returning to my hotel room I was careful with the bubble bath. While I soaked and flipped through Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson’s Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism, a five-inch tall Abdullah the Butcher action figure stared at me from the edge of the tub. Even the action figure had scars on its head. For Abdullah, washing himself in my blood was just another day at the office; he had been doing this kind of thing since the 1950s. The doctor who had sewn me together had a background in plastic surgery and said that she would do her best, but confessed that I’d have an intense-looking scar forever. Contemplating the scars on Abdullah’s action figure, and the real Abdullah, I was okay with it; my own Abdullah scar made me a small part of the Butcher’s legacy. My head had become one more text in Abdullah’s immeasurable body of work, another Abdullah signature that would remain after he left this world.

Having wrestled Abdullah the Butcher, my flesh now sharing the same signature that appears a thousand times in Bruiser Brody’s autograph collection, I had to think of Brody. We had become cousins in a way, along with everyone who had bled with Abdullah. If stepping into the ring with Abdullah guaranteed that your head would be sliced open, what did it say about Brody that he traveled around the globe to dance the same violence everywhere from Texas to Puerto Rico to Japan? Could I call Bruiser Brody a masochist, or was it just business for him—“No red, no green,” as wrestling carnies used to say? Or did I only ask the question about Brody’s masochism to avoid considering my own? Was there something about spilling a mass quantity of blood in front of a crowd that got me off? There’s a glory in bleeding, the celebration of the sacrifice. Bruiser Brody became Bruiser Brody by appearing in stacks of wrestling magazines in which his face was shown as a crimson mask. Whenever he subtracted from his body, he added to his legend. When I was rolling around in the contents of my own body, claiming my share of the Abdullah legend, I also became a believer in myself in a new way—in carny talk, a mark for myself.

Lying in bed, leaving darkened crumbs of blood on the pillow, I wondered how much blood I had lost and whether I’d wake up the next morning. But I did, and flew back to Boston with my hair still crusted up, back to Harvard where I kept a ski hat on all day to hide the bandage wrapped around my head and my bleached and blood-crusted hair. F.

Scott Fitzgerald called Harvard men "sissies," but he never took on a monster like Abdullah. (It should also be said that Fitzgerald was torn up with concerns over the size of his penis; Hemingway assured poor Scott that he was looking at it from the wrong angle, that he should view his junk straight ahead in the mirror rather than looking down at it.)

I didn't tell too many people about the match: getting slashed up by the legendary Abdullah the Butcher was my secret vanity. I'd walk across Harvard Yard sweating in my ski hat and smiling, telling myself that I was a writer. I know that this is dumb, because if being Bruiser Brody makes you a writer, then Bruiser Brody would have been a writer. But the Brody spirit was what being a writer meant to me, if only because I had gotten so deep into the writer-as-wrestler metaphor that I had to live it out and become the Bruiser Brody of my own imagination. Writing was for beasts and barbarians who could live alone in the hard places.

When I read the Mernissi quote about what it meant to be a writer, it seemed to me like the job for a wrestler. I wondered if Bruiser Brody ever went to the ring in search of himself. And when I read what Barthes said about wrestling, it struck me as the work of writers, because writers, like wrestlers, perform their suffering on a stage, and the audience usually has no concern for whether the suffering is real or not. In writing, like wrestling, I find the line between fiction and nonfiction to mean nothing. When I wrestled Abdullah the Butcher, we were only pretending to fight; our match, like any pro wrestling match, was "fake." But fake or not, I was rolling around in my real blood, and spent a real six to eight hours in a real emergency room getting sewn back together with nearly fifty real stitches.

Writing books can be like that; all writing is fiction, and Foucault said somewhere that writers write to become what they're not. But if you want to go the extra mile to make your fiction credible, sometimes you have to really get cut. And writing, real writing as I saw it, is charisma. Real writing is charismatic because charisma is antirational, as the argument of charisma can never be unpacked. Charisma rips up the institution's rational arguments and policies and reduces everything to guts. Writing charisma is like religious charisma, which speaks outside the temple. Charisma is for renegades, magicians, outlaws. You can't go there if you're soothed and comforted by the institution; the institution hates charisma because institutions need stability and coherence, whereas charisma can never be predicted. Charisma is irresponsible; charisma is chaos, the road to power for "the berserk with manic seizures of frenzy," as Weber said.

In Weber's reading of religious charisma, the prophet brings the spirit and the fire, only to have it extinguished after he's gone, because the institution steps in and builds ritual and routine and organization not on charisma, but on the memory of charisma past.

This process could take place over centuries, or it could happen within the course of someone's own career: you start on the outskirts, the edge of responsible society, and you start screaming to no one until the right people find you and bring you into town, and then you routinize your own voice because the town is more comfortable than the desert.

The academic article that contextualizes my work within the gonzo tradition quotes a line from one of my other books, nearly a decade old: "Ali himself said that the Mahdi would come as a poor stranger unknown and uncared for, not a Ph.D. of anything, not a tenured professor of anything anywhere, and he'd start out like a tired old camel lowering its head, wagging its tail but from that point he'd build the Empire of God." I wanted a Mahdi who could speak for the bums and the punks because I saw myself as a bum and a punk. Now I am known, and perhaps cared for, and aiming at a Ph.D. in something, and would be grateful for a tenure-track job somewhere someday, insha'Allah.

Two years have passed at Harvard, and now I try to picture Bruiser Brody obsessed with explaining himself, apologizing for himself, justifying his existence through the use of a larger tradition and perhaps a grounding in theory, trying to find legitimacy as a public intellectual. I see Bruiser Brody understanding himself through Roland Barthes, wearing a corduroy blazer and tying back his hair and insisting, "I'm so much more than just a psychotic chain-swinging freak, if you read me in my proper context," dipping out of the personality game while he's still ahead and focusing on pure scholarship from this moment on—Bruiser Brody with his forehead full of scars disappearing into the quiet soft darkness of those Widener Library stacks and never coming back out.

MACHO MADNESS

> Hulkamania is like a single grain of sand in the Sahara Desert that is Macho Madness.
>
> —RANDY "MACHO MAN" SAVAGE, 1989

May 20, six days before my graduation, I learn that Randy "Macho Man" Savage, the greatest professional wrestler of the 1980s, died in a car accident. I spend much more time thinking about Macho Man's passing than the recent murder of bin Laden. He meant more to my development as a human being and even to my experience of religion. I say this with full seriousness and zero hesitation.

Savage ascended to stardom at a time when the wrestling universe was divided by a strict ethical dualism, in which clearly defined "good guys" fought equally explicit "bad guys." In the 1980s, it was extremely rare to see good guys fight good guys or bad guys fight bad guys; if wrestling was less about "sport" than the production of a moral passion play, as Barthes observed, such matches would have nothing at stake. But in the black-and-white world of wrestling, Macho Man occupied what would later be called the "shade of gray." In the second half of 1987, after a couple of years in Vince McMahon's circus as one of its most hated villains, Savage began wrestling other villains. This was around the time of my tenth birthday, and it blew my mind forever.

I still remember how Macho Man's personality shift was first articulated by Mean Gene Okerlund, the bald tux-wearing announcer who had to play straight man to all of Vince's goofy walking cartoons. Upon mention of Savage's upcoming bouts against heels like the One Man Gang and Honky Tonk Man, Mean Gene remarked, "Savage has been . . . a bit of an island here in the World Wrestling Federation." An island, he said. A psycho-glam island in blinding sequined robes and snowmobile goggles, who delivered rambling statements that were described in one eulogy as "the wrestling promo as scripted by David Foster Wallace . . . a mesmerizing experiment in free associative thought."

Randy Savage had become the only glimpse of moral complexity available in wrestling; he had revealed the naïve conceptions of heroes and villains to be utter

porkshit and illusion and he broke it all down. In the age of Hulk Hogan, our golden champion, the Saturday-morning hero who told kids to train, eat vitamins, and say their prayers, Macho Man's amoral shifting threatened everything upon which professional wrestling had been built—much more so than the classical villains, the Roddy Pipers and Bobby Heenans, who schemed day and night to destroy the Hulkster. An absolute villain actually reinforces the absolute hero: Piper-as-villain, by justifying the line between good and evil, makes Hogan's heroics possible. Randy Savage, in moving away from his villain status, undermined the status of heroes. It was from that transformative Saturday morning that this moral island named Randy Savage, man beyond categories, became my favorite wrestler.

It would turn out that Macho Man's island position was only temporary, a liminal state that allowed him to pass from villain to hero. He soon aligned with Hulk Hogan, which erased any further chance of moral complexity, and became the World Wrestling Federation champion for most of 1988 and the start of 1989. He won the championship by defeating four men in a single night, emerging victorious at the WrestleMania IV tournament. After his victory, he celebrated in the ring with Hogan and his manager (and real-life wife), Miss Elizabeth, while his theme ("Pomp and Circumstance") blared throughout the Trump Plaza and play-by-play announcer Gorilla Monsoon declared, "This is Macho Man's finest hour!" It's fitting to remember Wrestle-Mania IV as I get ready to leave Harvard, because most people know Macho Man's theme as the "commencement song" from high school and college graduations. Having handed in my final papers, I feel a bit like Macho Man at the end of WrestleMania IV, writhing in pain and exhaustion but still ecstatic to be holding that gold championship belt.

That said, there's always WrestleMania V, when Hulk Hogan stomps you into the earth and takes it all back.

There's a vein in my arm that I associate with mental illness: the basilic vein, which travels up the forearm. It's considered a superficial vein because it's close to the surface of the skin, close enough to see. Whenever my basilic vein becomes especially visible and starts to bulge, it's a signifier that things are getting rough.

The basilic vein has taken this special meaning because some of my most frenetic periods as a writer have also been times of both malnourishment and rabid weight lifting. In 2003 and 2004, I did my lonely vagabonding across America, handwriting an Islamic road adventure in a backpack's worth of one-subject spiral notebooks, crashing in Muslim girls' dorms and doing hundreds of push-ups while they slept. The basilic vein would come and go, and sometimes it looked ready to pop. In the warm months of 2005 I was living in my car in Lowell, Massachusetts, eating only canned tuna and green beans, keeping my caloric intake to seven hundred or less and doing military presses in parking lots. My striated shoulders and horseshoe triceps looked good but what I really

loved was the reappearance of my basilic vein, like someone had strung a thick rope just below my skin. That was when I wrote my second novel, Osama Van Halen. I saw this kind of life to be exploding with virtue, as though sleeping in parking lots and starving qualified my work because the voices of legitimate Islamic reform couldn't have done it. The idea was that even if I lacked the legit reformers' education or institutional support or outstanding reputations, I would go somewhere beyond their range of vision and come back with books that they couldn't dream of writing even if they wanted to—and with these books would emerge a truth that they never could have seen. A willingness to endure and suffer and fight would make the writer. This was the game that I played, even if I played it alone.

"Thus the function of the wrestler is not to win," writes Barthes, "it is to go exactly through the motions which are expected of him."

Remembering it now, it reads like full-on anorexia. At one point, I used free ketchup packets at interstate rest stops as a meal substitute. I couldn't gain mass, but still looked ripped because I shredded all the fat. I had lost over twenty pounds in a month, but somehow thought that I was jacked because I could see all my abs and do wide-gripped pull-ups with big forty-five-pound plates chained to my waist and cut up my latissimus dorsi. My gut caved in; nothing was there. It was an unhealthy musculature; even a heroin addict can have striations and vascularity. Despite the fact that I'd get dizzy, go soft, and almost pass out during sex—yeah, there were girls willing to go with a guy who lived in his car—I felt more alive and in tune with myself than ever, and the writing punched like a crazed animal, like monster Bruiser Brody, foaming at the mouth and getting it all over his beard. During that time, I'd stare at myself in the mirror with my arms crossed hard, forcing the basilic veins to manifest as best they could.

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That's some sorcery right there, real alchemy of the body. Become other than your own self.

I was prepared for GNC alchemy as a child by the 1988 arcade game Altered Beast, which became the initial flagship game for the Sega Genesis console. In Altered Beast, you play a dead centurion who has been brought back to life by Zeus for the sake of rescuing his daughter from the netherworld. In classic side-scrolling action, you walk from point A to point B punching and kicking monsters and level bosses, capturing Spirit Balls along the way. Each Spirit Ball jacks you up. The first one makes you bigger and more muscular, the second really gets you roided, and the third turns you into a supernatural creature of some kind. With each successive level, your "altered beast"

self becomes more powerful. First you're a totally ripped werewolf, then a weredragon, then a weretiger, then a werebear, and then a golden werewolf, which is like an enhanced werewolf, I guess. In your various beast forms, you become endowed with special attacks of rocks and lightning and fire, zapping bad guys with lasers, or turning them into stone with your Petri-Breath.

Ayahuasca can do that too. Drinkers of the Daime often report that they find themselves temporarily transformed, experiencing life and consciousness as a fish or jaguar or insect-like thing.

Catch the floating orb and let it remake you into a greater man or something beyond man. In 1988, a skinny sixth-grader in purple Macho Man T-shirts, obsessed with wrestlers and wrestlers' bodies—creating my own fantasy characters on blue-lined notebook paper, pencil sketches of men in trunks and tights with unnatural definition in their pecs, abs, and arms, and attention to details of veins and nipples and hair—I wished that a Spirit Ball would float my way and work its magic.

Then, in later years, came GNC.

As of 2005 I was published only with an anarchist collective that never paid me for a word. When money trickled in from speaking engagements, I'd blow it on junk weightlifting supplements, the pre-workout powders that were advertised as producing insane pumps. I also had creatine monohydrate, but it didn't mix well in drinks, so I'd just shovel heaping spoonfuls of that nastiness into my mouth and then force it down with a gulp of water. Chris Benoit used to do that, before killing his wife and son and hanging himself on a cable pulldown machine. The powder was intolerable, like having a mouthful of milky chalk dust, and grainier. The purpose of suffering with creatine was to bolster my conversion of testosterone into dihydrotestosterone, though I had no idea what this actually meant. Then I took some big Leukic horse pills, six at a time, that were supposed to keep my body anabolic. One day I spent so much at GNC that they gave me a free pack of some hormonal mischief that promised to "inhibit your body's natural tendency to produce estrogen." The first day that I took it, I felt like I was invincible and could lift anything and fuck anything, I could go put my big dong in the sun and pump into that fire until Earth's sky goes dark. Three days later I wanted to rip telephone poles out of the ground with my bare hands and then weep about it.

I mixed, matched, and stacked supplements. It had me pissing in fantastic colors and getting tingly in unusual places. My neck and the outer ridges of my ears would tingle as if they had fallen asleep. I'd then blast my triceps until I could feel the skin around my arms stretching like someone had pumped them full of air. My arms hurt not only from the work, but the growth, like the muscles were expanding more than the skin could allow. Weight lifting was an antidepressant, I had read somewhere; it caused the brain to release endorphins, and the endorphins would link to my neurotransmitter receptors,

rewarding me with good feelings for my effort and pain. The aggression and stress poured out of me. When I lived in my car, I kept some weights in the back and performed insane military presses in empty parking lots. I'd lift at night during rainstorms, rusting out my iron hexagon dumbbells, and then dive into the shelter of my car, my Shawn Michaels T-shirt drenched in water from me and water from the sky. I'd hide in there all alone with my whole body flooded with endorphins, my brain empty, my cock in my hand. I spent much of this time smelling like scratch-and-sniff stickers of dead fish, but when my friends would sneak me into the gym at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, I had access to showers—which also meant I wouldn't have to jerk off into the crusty old T-shirt I kept under the driver's seat. Sometimes my arms were too tired to fuck myself with any justice, sometimes I didn't get fully hard until just before I came, and sometimes I would orgasm while unsure if I had actually ejected anything. It was a different story than doing cardio, which could make me blast like a shotgun, pumping so hard that my hand could sense the machinery working inside. It wasn't the kind of masturbation fueled by creation of a fantasy world with elaborate scenarios and characters; my body only worked itself for its own sake, a sexuality that cannot be called hetero or homo, since no other penises or vaginas exist in its world.

Orgasm caused my brain to release chemicals like norephedrine, OxyContin, vasopressin, nitric oxide—which happens to be the "N.O." in ABB™ Speed Stack® Pumped N.O.—and prolactin, the chemical that makes a man sleepy after coming into a drain. With my brain and body in recovery mode, I'd watch my semen swirl like bolos around the drain. In ejaculation's aftermath of spatio-temporal activation in my amygdala and temporal lobes, I'd dry off, get dressed, and sit outside with this balance of peace and agitation, feeling both spaced-out and strangely sharp. I could not have produced a logical argument for anything while in that state, but the sky's blue was bluer. Leaning against the gym, I'd whip out a folded sheet of paper and scribble notes to myself. Most of it never went anywhere, but it seemed brilliant and crucial at the time.

The combination of GNC poison, post-workout buzz, and post-orgasm haze would somehow make me want to pray. Ejaculation requires that a man perform a special washing (ghusl) before engaging in ritual activity, but without having ever learned the procedure, I counted my shower as ghusl. Then I'd go find a quiet space behind the building to do some rakats;I kept a prayer rug in my car for this purpose. In Muslim prayer there's lots of standing up and prostrating on the ground and reciting Qur'an, but in prayers after working out I loved the julus position, where I'd pull my face up from the rug and just sit there. I'd stay in that position much longer than necessary, more than an hour, just blurring myself out of the world and then pulling myself back into it to keep going with the prayer. Bodybuilding supplements had become entheogens for me.

Those were some good prayers, shutting down and turning back on and keying in with my Creator, and it felt like my good writer brain was also a good Muslim brain. I wondered whether scholars in any classical school of Islamic jurisprudence would have considered my prayers to be legal. I wasn't exactly intoxicated; I still understood where I was, and I knew the difference between the sky and the ground and a man and a woman. And the Qur'an says nothing about GNC.

I have heard of guys pissing blood after going heavy and even ejaculating during lifts due to severe pressure on systems and parts in the pelvic area. Neither ever happened to me, but sometimes I wanted those kinds of signs. If nothing else, it was intriguing that a transgression against my limit could be revealed out of the supreme stargate dick hole; reality would just spill out of there and tell me who I was.

Like my religious discipline, my body discipline bounced between extremes, and the gut would come and go and come back. I'd switch from eating nothing but canned tuna to Lucky Charms and Mountain Dew. During my first year at Harvard, I wanted to hit the gym but never had time because Arabic homework would beat my ass for hours every night. I used the oppression of my courses to justify another shift from extreme asceticism to extreme indulgence. Even if finals week offers its own kind of chemical psychosis, it's not exactly the same as living in my car, writing books and doing military presses in parking lots, and eating nothing. My body became soft. I wasn't a monster, just an overworked nerd, compensating for sleep deprivation with massive sugar.

Having fulfilled the program's language requirement in the first year, I quit Arabic for a more relaxed finish to my Harvard stint. Finally able to start lifting again, I switched back to asceticism. Any chance that I had between classes, I'd work out at the Law School's gym or swim at Blodgett Pool.

The biggest departure from my earlier lifting was that I no longer tried to limit myself to a thousand calories a day; a new willingness to eat made me stronger than I had ever been in my life. The basilic and other veins reemerged like long thick worms that had burrowed into my forearms, providing a vascularity that reminded me of Peter North's huge anabolic cannon, the "North Pole." The bulging rivers of blood in my arm became a text, like the removal of my foreskin. Just as circumcision rewrites a mere penis into Absolute Reality's One-Eyed Fact, the vein's rise to the surface was an act of writing upon my body, marking my flesh with the Haqq.

Tuesdays and Thursdays, I'd head for the weights after Steinkeller's seminar—always arms, never worked legs—and in the shower I'd remember the trippiness of Mesopotamian mythology. I thought about the god Enki, obsessed with his own cock power. Early representations of Enki have him holding a symbolic penis like a sacred scepter. Enki was a god of irrigation, and he became more important than storm gods in the pantheon due to the relative insignificance of rainwater in ancient Mesopotamian

agriculture. He was often depicted with streams gushing from his arms, which could have been water or semen, both signified with the same Sumerian word. Standing under the shower's flow, I'd remember Enki with his fish-man priests and his home in the watery deep of Abzu, and his teachers who came up from the sea to bring the arts of civilization to humankind. I thought of Enki making the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers with his ejaculation, but chose to leave out the stories of Enki's serial incest.

Then I'd remember Steinkeller telling us about the healing goddess Gula, whose cult was associated with dogs. Ancient Mesopotamians were terrified of rabies and saw dogs as healers since the "element that caused disease was also seen as responsible for its cure, mmhmm, yes." Steinkeller read us an incantation in which a rabid dog was described as carrying its own semen in its mouth. I thought of a new character, Pharmakon Allah, an embodiment of the disease and the cure, the hero and villain of a yet unwritten novel.

The ancient Mesopotamian myths and motifs blended into each other in my head, but there was no real argument attached, just pictures and feelings: Enki dragging his cock across the sand to dig the irrigation ditches that would make civilization possible, Enki with streams of jizz flowing from his arms, insane dogs with their mouths full of their own come, my own leaving me emptied and spiritless in a dreamy stupor, my power softening in my hand. It does occur to me that no matter how sharp and developed a Muslim feminist I think I have become, there remains inside me a gendered poison that's just not coming out. I'm seriously crudded up with some masculinity issues, and however they got there, they're in deep. It's not just an Islamic thing, either. Enki's way older than Islam, and I, too, am older than Islam: I am older than the entrance of Islam into my life; I was on my manhood trip before ever hearing of Muhammad. I was the kid with a room full of He-Man figures—He-Man, the dude whose name is nothing but redundant masculinity, HE, MAN—and all the characters were just different heads and colors placed on the same generic roided body. From He-Man I went to Randy "Macho Man" Savage, and then I was the insecure fifteen-year-old whose rapist father showed him porn on the day they first met—and that was the sad boy who fell in deep love with Malcolm X's bullet-filled body and set out to become the greatest Muslim brother ever. Don't blame Islam for the asymmetrical hang of my balls.

In Blodgett Pool, I wondered how Randy Savage or Bruiser Brody looked when they swam, whether swimming would present their bodies in a new way. Perhaps their movements were more controlled and graceful, even feminine, or maybe they just swam like ugly sea monsters. Maybe they jumped into the ocean after matches and bloodied the water, daring sharks to come. I had an image of Bruiser Brody doing the breaststroke after a fight with Abdullah the Butcher, still wearing his furry wrestling boots, his big bloody head rising from the water and his mouth opening inhumanly wide as he gasped

for air, swimming for the horizon.

There was no ejaculation on swimming days, since the pool's locker room did not have private showers, but after I had reached the point at which I liked the sight of my body, Blodgett's communal shower let me stand naked in front of other men and wait for them to see me, to witness what I've built and recognize me as the supreme architect of my own self. Like Allah in the person of Master Fard Muhammad, I said "Be!" to my body and made it from nothing; I was the one who disciplined my triceps into horseshoe shape and dug deep trenches between the segments of my deltoids. Builders build, and I'm Hiram Abiff the Master Builder, designing my torso with lat pulldowns to look like an upside-down pyramid. I realize that standing naked in front of people is also what I do with my books. It's what I'm doing here, on this page, for you.

Just before graduation, however, I injure my wrists, the price of lifting by myself and attempting dumb weights for ego stats. Trying to top my one-rep max on the incline bench, I take more than I can handle and get trapped with the bar across my chest. Dumping weight, I mess up both wrists and have to wear supportive braces, even when I'm not lifting. Any exercise that involves wrist movement, such as the basic bicep curl, becomes unbearably painful, and I step away from free weights altogether. My wrists are killing me during commencement ceremonies; even accepting my diploma hurts. It doesn't help that I spend most of my time on a computer, trying to write my Muslim drug manifesto.

INITIATION

What would you say to people who believe drugs aid in their understanding of spiritual matters?

In Pakistan last year, I had what I'd consider a legit spiritual experience after doing bhang lassi, which is a drink made with crushed cannabis, and then going to the shrine of the Sufi saint Hujwiri. But I don't imagine that the drug path really goes anywhere. If the sky changes color and you see God, great, but that's not giving you ethics or helping you to become a better person in the world. And I like my brain, I like having a brain. Most people wouldn't guess this because of the characters in my fiction, but I don't even drink alcohol.

—"Q& A WITH MICHAEL MUHAMMAD KNIGHT," SHAMBHALA SUN, 2009

Into bat country, as they say.

I'm not really a drug person, at least not when it comes to hallucinogens in what Terence McKenna called "heroic doses," and I'm scared. I'm not used to seeing things that aren't there. My dad saw things that weren't there, and his visions led to him holding women hostage and putting a knife to the throat of his infant son. I haven't read any of the Star Wars novels, but apparently there's one in which Luke Skywalker briefly dabbles in the Dark Side just to understand his father's experience. Maybe I can get into ayahuasca on that level.

I'm on the train to a small town that will go unnamed, where a Santo Daime member will pick me up and take me to her house for the work. I have not met this person. I don't know what she looks like, or how old she might be, or how she came into Santo Daime. All I have is an email address.

If you travel among folks who use psychedelic drugs for spiritual purposes, you're likely to hear the terms "set" and "setting." I do not know the origin of these terms, but they seem to be fairly standard lingo.

In DMT: The Spirit Molecule, Rick Strassman describes "set" as "our past, our present, and our potential future; our preferences, ideas, habits, and feelings. Set also includes our body and brain." He defines "setting" as "who or what is or isn't in our immediate surroundings; the environment we're in, whether natural or urban, indoor or outdoor; the quality of the air and ambient sound around us; and so on." Basically, the set is the user, and the setting is everything external to the user.

A few hours from drinking ayahuasca for the first time, I consider my own set and setting. I am a Muslim, a writer, something of a scholar, the son of a schizophrenic, American, white, male, and a chronic masturbator according to the recent scholarship on me, with a head full of pro wrestling and Transformers and wrists injured at the incline bench. A chronic masturbator with injured wrists.

My set is also what I've read and heard about ayahuasca, what I expect from it, and how I understand my knowledge and expectations by viewing them through my Islamic lens. From what I've heard, ayahuasca brings men to an encounter with the Divine Feminine, a universal goddess that could be understood as the Queen of the Forest or the Virgin Mary, depending on one's mythological framework. Within the limits of my own Muslim set, what can I do with that? I say that there is no god but Allah; where is there room in my tawhid for a goddess?

It turns out that if you spend enough time searching the Islamic tradition, you can find a goddess—though no one's going to call her that—whose name is engraved on the gate of paradise and a leg of the Throne: Fatima, daughter of the Prophet Muhammad. Her face shines to the people of paradise like stars in the sky shine to us. She has the name "al-Zahra" (the Radiant), because she lights the heavens and earth with her light. Her light existed before anything, her light is god-light and she's the mother of her father. Her great-great-grandson Ja'far ibn Muhammad al-Sadiq read the Qur'an's famous Verse of Light to say that she was the niche and the shining star, and the lamp referred to her sons Hasan and Husayn.

Fatima's father said that she was like a virgin of paradise appearing in human form. There's even a story that Adam saw her in paradise and wanted to marry her instead of Eve, until he had a vision of Ali. God put Fatima in an apple of paradise and gave it to the angel Gabriel to give to Muhammad during his Night Journey. Muhammad split the apple in two and saw her light shining from it, and Gabriel exclaimed: "Muhammad, why are you not eating it entirely? Do not fear! That light is al-Mansura in heaven, and on earth she is Fatima." Muhammad ate the apple, and from it God made the sperm that Muhammad would send into his wife Khadija to make Fatima.

In the early caliphate after Muhammad's death, Fatima found herself pushed out of nascent state power and deprived of her inheritance from her father in this world. In paradise, however, she owns a dome made of rubies. It would take a year to travel from the bottom of the dome to the top, and the dome has 100,000 doors that are each guarded by a thousand angels. Seventy thousand angels march in front of her, and seventy thousand virgins of paradise welcome her into paradise, where she sits on a throne of light between two palaces made of pearl, one containing seventy thousand houses for Muhammad and his family, the other containing seventy thousand houses for Abraham and his family. But Fatima still cries, having descended from her heavenly palaces to the

desert of Karbala to see her son Husayn get butchered by the Muslims who ruled Islam at the time. She watched it all go down.

There's a whole underground Islamic tradition surrounding Fatima that all but crashes head-on into idolatry—even Sir Muhammad Iqbal said that if her father had not prohibited idol worship, "I would have circumambulated her grave and fallen into prostration on her dust"—and Muslims with claims on "orthodoxy" generally seek to erase Fatima-worship, but it works for me, perhaps because I was a good Catholic boy in my pre-Islamic life and I can put the ghulat image of Fatima in Mary's old place as the bathtub shrine in the front yard or the figurine on the dashboard. But just as it might be naïve to suggest that Catholic worship of Mary meant that all Catholics were feminists, Muslim deification of Fatima also fed into patriarchy; the men who chose to worship Fatima were limited by their own contexts, and Fatima's godhood was constructed in part by distinguishing her from earthly women. Hadiths circulated in which Muhammad said that Fatima was exempt from the "deficiencies of earthly women," and some writers, uncomfortable with placing a woman on the same level of divine personhood as her father Muhammad, husband Ali, and sons Hasan and Husayn, called her Fatir, a masculine name. Debates between Muslims and Christians seem to have driven the insistence upon Fatima's eternal virginity, lest she be relegated to a lower status than Mary (whom the Qur'an does recognize as a virgin mother). In the case of Fatima, however, "virginity" did not mean abstinence from sexual intercourse, but rather the absence of menstruation.

Famous Orientalist scholar Henri Corbin was a bit of a problem, and his fixation on the batin—esoteric and mystical hidden meanings—sabotaged a lot of Western readers (including Foucault) against having any clue about real-life popular Shi'ism, but he produced some material on Fatima that I can use. In Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: from Mazdean Iran to Shi'ite Iran, Corbin builds on interpretations of Fatima as Earth, which comes with a whole other set of meanings if I read it with my own special glasses on, or even the eco-theology of the Daime.

Calling Fatima the Earth, I remember my teacher, Azreal, a man nearing sixty who was born with the name John Michael Kennedy but was renamed after meeting Allah in a mental institution in 1967. Allah taught him how to smoke weed, and four decades later, Azreal taught me. Azreal once took some hits of what he called "double-barrel sunshine" and it gave him a vision of the sun exploding and engulfing half the earth; from his personal framework in which the sun is man and the earth is woman, Azreal put a reading on the vision: men need to recognize the divinity in women, or else their maleness will blow up out of control.

One day in New York, I was riding around with Azreal and Gabriel, a.k.a. Propaganda Anonymous, a.k.a. Jibril Bey, Ayatollah of Liminal Space, the underground

MC who first told me about ayahuasca. Azreal told us a story about the three angels who were our respective namesakes. Allah first commands the angel Michael to descend from heaven and come back with a handful of earth. Michael approaches the earth, but she forbids him from taking any of her soil, so he returns empty-handed. Allah then gives the order to Gabriel, but the same thing happens: the earth won't allow him. Finally, Allah commands Azreal, his death-angel, to take the earth. Azreal descends upon the land and scoops up a handful of soil, despite the earth's objections. When he brings it back to heaven, however, Allah scolds him! In the story as Azreal told it to Gabriel and me, Allah declared to the three angels, "No one can take from the earth without her permission, not even Allah."

If Fatima is the earth, then Abu Bakr fucked up when he claimed the authority to take her rightful inheritance in Allah's Name; if the earth is symbolized by women everywhere, it can explain why Muhammad did not beat his wives, even if Allah gave him the right to do so in verse 4:34 of the Qur'an. Not even Allah can give you rights over the earth. It sounds like some ayahuasca knowledge.

"A Muslim told me that story," Azreal had said. I recognized Azreal's tale as a mistelling of a story from hadith literature concerning the creation of Adam. The story goes that Allah ordered Seraphiel, Michael, and Gabriel to collect soil from the earth, but the earth refused until Allah sent Azreal, who explained that the earth would only be loaning the soil for a short period of time and that Azreal himself would be responsible for returning it. If I mix up my texts, reading this hadith as a story of Fatima, then Fatima-as-earth becomes our point of origin, the divine mother of humanity.

Fatima is not only the earth; she's the sun too. Corbin calls Fatima "the splendor of each sun illuminating every conceivable universe." She is the Creator and the Soul (Nafs) corresponding to Ali as Intellect ('Aql); she's the holy Preserved Tablet. Each prophet is measured by his knowledge of her, and even the prophets prior to Muhammad are below his daughter in rank "because it is she who is the source of all their knowledge, revelations, and thaumaturgical powers."

"She is the THEOPHANY," writes Corbin. So when I look at the Universal Flag of Islam, I can see Fatima, glory to the Black Mind. If I'm to drink ayahuasca and see the Queen of the Forest, Muhammad's daughter will be my way through it, saying la ilaha illa Allah.

If ayahuasca presents the divine as feminine, what would the vine do to my Qur'an, in which Allah, supposedly beyond gender, speaks with a masculine or masculinist voice?

I own a concordance of the Qur'an, which is basically an index for every word that appears in the sacred text. In Arabic, words are generally derived from three-letter roots, and the concordance allows me to look up any root to see how it appears in different verses. It's useful for a root like D-Y-N, which is generally translated as

"religion" today, when you consider that the meaning of the English word "religion" has changed so much over the centuries that its modern definition might not be the best choice to inject into a seventh-century Arabic root. With a concordance, you can look up the numerous appearances of a root in the Qur'an and try to figure out what meanings it might have expressed at the time of its revelation.

I had once turned to the N-S-W root, which signified "women" (or, by way of interpretation, "wives") to see what the Qur'an said about them. According to one tradition, the Qur'anic revelation began to refer to women only after one of the Prophet's wives, Umm Salamah, complained to him about the total absence of women from the revelation. The Qur'an sometimes addresses men and women together, or it addresses the Prophet's wives. Otherwise, it does not speak directly to women, although it does speak about them. When Allah addresses Muhammad and the community of believers, women are treated as an issue or a problem to be discussed and settled upon by Allah and men; men are the "you." Go into your wives (2:187); do not marry women that your fathers married (4:22); marry such women as seem good for you, two, three, four (4:3); give the women their dowries as a gift spontaneous (4:4); go apart from women during the monthly course (2:222); your women are a place of cultivation for you, so come to your place of cultivation however you wish (2:223); when you divorce women, and they have reached their term (2:231, 232); if you divorce women and yet you have not touched them (2:236); or you have touched women, and you can find no water (5:6); such of your women as commit indecency (4:15); those of you who say, regarding their wives (58:2); men are the managers of the affairs of women (4:34); the male shall receive the portion of two females (4:176); it is not lawful for you to inherit women against their will (4:19); see, you approach men lustfully instead of women (7:81); say to your wives and daughters and the believing women (33:59); your suckling sisters, your wives' mothers (4:23); say to the believing women that they cast down their eyes (24:31).

I see the men sitting around the campfire together: Allah as the curly-haired youth dressed in green on his throne, Jibril/Gabriel the angel who assumes the form of a man, Muhammad with the fist-length beard, and his upstart nation of believing men. This nation also has womenfolk, but they have been tented away in the darkness, far beyond the reach of this light. Allah sits and listens as Muhammad tells the men, "I am not leaving a trial more harmful for man than the fitnah of women." The men nod. Gabriel nods. Allah nods.

What changes if the Author, Allah the smooth-faced youth who sits among men, is really Fatima as a drag king? Maybe the Qur'an is Fatima's version of camp, an exaggerated performance of gender norms that ironically subverts them. Go on YouTube and find a female reciter of the Qur'an, such as Sumayya EdDeeb reciting all of Surat

ar-Rahman or maybe the knowledge degree of the Born Equality sura; what if that's the real voice when it first comes down on the night that's better than a thousand months?

The words on the page become Fatima's performance of an Allah so hyper-straight and mega-masculine that it's nothing but queer, like the cartoon manhood of pro wrestling that veils batin homoeroticism within zahir homophobia. Fatima tapes down her breasts, puts on a suit and tie, and stuffs her pants with the biggest cosmic strap-on ever. She gets onstage as the Peter North-Star who pumped out the Milky Way as a load from his Mercy, the god who gives Abraham a slave to rape and then tells him to murder the son born from that rape, the same Allah who takes offense if you suggest that he has daughters. In her Fatima role, she cooks the food and cleans the house and washes blood from the swords of her father and husband, and Sunnis love her because she cries over her father's death, and Shi'as love her because she cries over her son's death; she spends all of eternity crying over men, and she's a woman so pure that her vagina never bleeds. On the batin level, it's outrageous.

Considering that in my hemisphere, Islam and ayahuasca come with a mix of anticolonialist, anticapitalist, antistate, and anti-white histories, I realize that propping up Fatima as a goddess potentially issues a worthwhile statement to more than one context. On this American side, I have replaced the white Mary of my childhood (for me, regardless of history, the Virgin could only be a pale European; I've seen that face too many times) with Muhammad's black daughter. Again, my Fatima must be black, since the only time I've ever seen depictions of her has been in the old Nubian Islamic Hebrew literature that circulated through Brooklyn in the 1980s. She's black and wears a flowing white niqab. Contemplating these images of Fatima, getting into stories about the special cosmological status of her light, and calling her a goddess also undermine certain Islamic orthodoxies, the Islam of people who would call these practices bida' (innovation), the injection of foreign concepts and practices into Islam, or even zandaqa (heresy), which takes someone out of the religion altogether. Every so often, we hear Muslims complaining about other Muslims having lost their religion to bida', meaning that non-Islamic influences have completely diluted what is presumed to have been a pure and pristine religion at one time. In my humble opinion, and Allah knows best, this concern is as historically naïve—and sometimes just as offensive—as white supremacists who assume that there's such a thing as a "pure white blood" that needs to be preserved. Purity's always a dream, because the call for purity never comes but after the fact of corruption. Mixture produced the people who would call themselves "white" and then care about being "pure white"; mixture produced the Islam that would need constant protection from mixture.

During the late eighteenth century, African Muslims became more active in trans-atlantic slave trading, and their involvement was connected to forces that sought a

purification of African Islam. It has been argued that nearly all those slaves who originated from the interior of West Africa—estimated to comprise 75 percent of Africans shipped across the Atlantic between 1690 and 1800—had been captured in jihads of the Sokoto Caliphate. The participants in these jihads were religious reformers, charging that West African Muslims who had integrated their indigenous worldviews with canonical Islam were mukhallitun (mixers or syncretists) and guilty of poisoning Islam with the superstitions of their ancestors. Many of the West African Muslims who came to America in chains were victims of a religious cleansing.

American Islamic discourses these days make a big deal about how many of the slaves taken from Africa were Muslims, but some of that righteous noise accompanies a call to "revive the Islamic spirit," which involves certain standards of orthodoxy that those African Muslims with their magical amulets and tree spirits could not have satisfied. If today's American Muslims knew anything about the worldviews and practices of those African Muslims, would they still call them sisters and brothers?

The call to "orthodoxy" accompanies a claim that "true Islam" does away with differences of race, nationality, and culture. The Prophet told us that the Arab is no better than the non-Arab, nor the white any better than the black. But this supposedly trans-racial, transnational, transcultural unity also demands that we recognize some parts of our unique heritages as unacceptable to God and our beautiful worldwide ummah. So I'm going to call the black woman in the white niqab Allah, because there is no meaningful political or economic power, whether in my Islamic hand or my American hand, that would support such a move. It speaks to all the racist, sexist, and religiously bigoted powers that oppose the deification of black womanhood for one reason or another. Fatima is buried in Medina, not far from her father and the Starbucks, but her grave is unmarked and its exact location in the Jannat al-Baqi cemetery unknown. Calling her God might symbolically fuck over world Sunni power and its Wahhabi globalization in favor of Shi'ism, but it also fucks over the state-enforced Shi'ism of Iran's so-called Islamic Republic for stateless ghulat Shi'ism, and calling her black also pisses on long histories of antiblack prejudice in Iran and elsewhere. Representing Fatima as black means that her father and husband and sons are black too, and that's all unthinkable for so many of my brothers. Reviving goddess worship through Fatima, the Eternal Weeper, offers as powerful a symbolic resistance to all of this shit as I can conceive.

Strangely, I wouldn't be the first to drink ayahuasca and see Fatima. There's actually a brand-new "post-Islam" Sufi order in Australia that gets down with ayahuasca, and they've read the Queen of the Forest to be Muhammad's daughter. If Santo Daime is a product of the trans-atlantic slave trade and colonialism—the mashing together of African, Amazonian, and European beliefs and practices in the New World, forced by

the dawn of world capitalism—then the Fatimiya Sufi Order is a product of the next phase, globalization, which has brought a South American vine to Australia for its confrontation with Iran.

I'm something like a Nuwaubian Fatimiya; for tonight, that's my set. As for the second element, the setting, only Allah knows. I have no control over it, but I'm pretty sure that where I'm going, there won't be a black Fatima on the wall. Going blind into the setting, the set is really the only aspect of this experience over which I can have any influence. I reach into my backpack and pull out my old booklet on Fatima and just stare at the pictures, trying to burn her images into my brain so that when it's just me and the setting and of course the third crucial element, the drug, I know what I'm looking for.

After getting off the train, I call the Daime contact and sit in front of a gas station until she comes through. I was asked to wear white. My button-up shirt is white and my pants are a light khaki, as white as I had.

She had said to look out for a tan minivan, but when it shows up, it's still a surprise. Not sure what I was expecting, but I get in the minivan and there aren't any spiritual items hanging from the mirror, and this seems noteworthy. As with Bumblebee back in Mecca, it's hard to register how normal she seems, just a middle-class white lady with a minivan in a small town. She seems nice. The strangest thing about her could be that she's picking up this random stranger at a gas station to ingest hallucinogens in her home.

Back to the Transformers thing: I'm going to call her Arcee here. In our small talk on the way to her house, Arcee asks about my interest in Daime. I tell her that I'm coming from a Muslim background and that I read Islam through a particular lens—which I make sure to call "Sufi"—that allows space for religious syncretism, universalism, pantheism, panentheism, direct mystical encounters with the mind of the universe, searching the self for the divine within, all the good stuff that New Agers like. She responds with a comment about "high Hinduism," which she understands as the intellectually advanced, systematized, and "universal" version, as opposed to "low Hinduism," the regular folk religion of the masses. It sounds like an idea that white people would invent to privilege their Orientalist study of Hindu texts above what brown people do in real life; or it could be a reformist reading of Hinduism's "essence" that can't help but be colonial, defined by a British measurement of how "religion" is supposed to look, as in the Arya Samaj and Brahmo Samaj movements. But if the idea of "Hinduism" itself was a product of British domination, which Hinduism is authentic?

Her "high Hinduism" makes me insecure about my own path and the possibility that I'm just making up my own "high Islam" (no cheap drug pun). So many of the scholars who have guided my readings of the tradition thus far have been white scholars: William C. Chittick, Annemarie Schimmel, Corbin. These people weren't even

Muslims, at least not in their exoteric profiles. If you're going to read a tradition for yourself, it can get hard not to see your personal reading as the very top of the pyramid, the "high" truth that no one at the lower base can comprehend. Mix that up with the current imbalance of the world, and it gets politically toxic.

We go to Arcee's house, and it's a normal house in a normal neighborhood, no goofy shit in the front yard, clean and managed on the inside. A couple of boys can be heard running in and out, but I don't see them. She offers me water, and I notice glamorized photos of two wise-looking brown men on her refrigerator, sages of her high Hinduism. At first glance, New Age culture seems to soak up all wisdom from every corner of humanity, but it's interesting to see what gets prioritized and what's left out. The indigenous cultures of South America are cool; ayahuasca is cool; the rain forests are cool. North America's indigenous peoples are also cool, the Great Spirit and all of that. India is cool, the land of spirituality and home to the oldest religion and so on, and Buddhism occupies its own category, not even a "religion" but something better. Tibetan Buddhism is cool; Japanese Zen is cool. What you don't see in this New Age matrix of coolness is anything Islamic, with the occasional exception of Rumi and maybe Hafiz, both softened up and purged of their Muslim contexts (if nothing else, folks at least think that the word "Sufi" could mean something cool). You also don't see anything from black people. Esotericism from pharaonic Egypt once enjoyed some prestige in the European intellectual circles that constituted New Age's prehistory, but by the end of the 1800s, as European scholars increasingly imagined ancient blue-eyed Aryans as the founders of everything worthwhile in India, white esotericists ditched Egypt for their high Hinduism. Traditions of sub-Saharan Africa, meanwhile, get no representation whatsoever, though iboga, a psychoactive plant used in Bwiti rituals in Gabon, has been making progress in the United States as an alternative means of treating drug addiction. New Age can be as white and racist as anything.

Africa still finds its way in. Due to the slave trade, Africa is everywhere, Africa has no boundaries, and scholars might ask where "Africa" begins or ends when investigating a tradition like Santo Daime. These white Daime people can think of their church as purely "indigenous" to the Amazon, or perhaps as a dialogue between European Christianity and rain forest shamanism, but it was founded by a black man with a history that crosses the ocean.

The rest of our group comes by—three other middle-aged white ladies—and they all go into another room and come out with the prescribed Daime dress for women in official works, navy-blue pleated skirts with white blouses and bow ties. The other women and I help with setting up. Because I am tall, Arcee gives me the task of hanging the Jesus portraits. They are very old-school pictures of Jesus as a glowing European, the kind of images that my grandparents would have had on their walls. It occurs to me

that my setting is nothing less than church, a real Christian house service. There is also a painting of a Mary-looking creature hovering above the ocean, though she's not explicitly Christian, and a small shrine on a table with pictures of Mestre Irineu. In this room and the one adjacent, there are several couches on which we spread out sheets; apparently, there's a time in the ceremony when we lie down and meditate.

Before the ceremony can start, Arcee goes outside and wrangles her son and his friend into the house. They need to stay inside for the night, but they won't be interfering with our work; they have a Nintendo Wii and the new Star Wars game in another room somewhere. Arcee whispers that there is a guest book for me to sign, and I can put my donation of sixty dollars inside it.

Arcee brings out the ayahuasca in a glass jar. She pours each of us a small glass, and we drink in turn. It's brown and tastes like tangy fecal water, I guess, but since I had heard and read everywhere that it tastes awful, it doesn't seem so bad. Goes down fast and easy. Then we sit down, and Arcee passes us the hymnals. Arcee leads the singing and clapping. I try to join in but have never heard these hymns and can't pronounce Portuguese; my contribution is more or less a quiet mumbling to the tune of each song. We sing for what seems like forever, and I don't feel any effects from the ayahuasca. Every now and then I think I feel something, but I'm leading myself on. Arcee, however, occasionally pauses the singing to turn and vomit into a bucket. Each of us has a bucket at our side. I've heard various explanations for the vomiting: it might be a purging of your anxieties or simply a physical reaction that's part of the process. Watching Arcee throw up, I wonder about her state of mind; I'm not sure if vomiting necessarily means that you're tripping or on your way to tripping, or if it actually lessens the trip to have expelled the brew from your system. I have no idea what any of this means, but I'd at least like an indicator that my body registers the tea's presence.

After going through the hymns, Arcee directs us to the couches, inviting each of us to lie down and meditate quietly. I choose a couch, get comfortable and close my eyes, waiting for the magic.

It seems that I should do my best to empty my head, making myself a clean slate on which the vine can write its revelation, but I'm nowhere close. Perhaps some experience with sober meditation could have helped me in this area, since my mind is always cluttered and I can't force out the mess. I feel the small pink notepad and pen in my pocket, but wonder whether I'll even be able to write when the vine turns on. I should have held the pen and secured my grip by wrapping a massive ball of duct tape around my hand, allowing me to write even when my fingers lose their power, if that's what happens.

There are times on the couch when I feel emotionally vulnerable, as though I'm approaching a knowledge of pain and suffering on some higher level—or, if the pain is

not my own, a heightened empathy for the pain of others—and I try to draw my body into myself, pulling in my shoulders. It's going to hurt more, I'm sure, but the medicine hurts when it works. Minister Farrakhan has said that when the demons come out from your unconscious to your conscious mind, they don't come out peacefully. They're screaming every step of the way.

I keep my eyes closed but feel someone putting a blanket over my body. Still grounded in reality, I know that the blanket is not part of any hallucination but was placed on me in real life by the ceremony's leader. In the way that external stimuli can influence a dream, however, the blanket becomes part of my ayahuasca experience, showing me a manifestation of divine love and peace and then forcing me to recognize all the people in the world who need blankets in one form or another and don't have them. I pull in my shoulders again, trying to shelter myself from my own empathy.

A grid appears. It's purple and reminds me of Decepticons from the old Transformers cartoons. In Breaking Open the Head, one of the more popular accounts in contemporary psychedelic lit, Daniel Pinchbeck recalls seeing grids when he drank ayahuasca, so I might be seeing grids because that's just what ayahuasca does or because I had read about Pinchbeck seeing grids while on ayahuasca, thus making grids part of my set, the personal knowledge and expectations that I brought to the chemicals.

Then I see Unicron, the planet-eating robot from the Transformers movie (the original 1986 version—no Michael Bay CGI junk in my drug visions). Unicron is neither Autobot nor Decepticon but above those categories, the bringer of divine chaos. His consumption of planets and moons is part of a larger project to eat existence itself and find peace through emptiness like a universe-destroying robotic buddha. At the end of the movie, Unicron's head is blown off his body and flies off into space, eventually entering into Cybertron's orbit. In the "Five Faces of Darkness" episode, Cyclonus, Scourge, and the Sweeps enter Unicron's head and access footage from his memory archive to learn the fate of Galvatron; Unicron becomes a source of knowledge and authority.

I wonder why Unicron appeared in my head, and then I start to think of the Prophet's beloved grandson Husayn, whose head was taken off his body during his stand in the desert of Karbala. In the 1990s, I had written a short story in which Muslim astronauts take Husayn's head into space in a special sarcophagus that looked a lot like a Transformer's head.

To protect Husayn's holy head from the forces of al-Dajjal (the Islamic antichrist figure) on earth, the astronauts take the head far from earth and heave it from their spaceship to wander space like Unicron's head. Years after writing the story, I visited two shrines at which people claimed to house the head, one in Cairo and a competing shrine in the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus. At the Damascus shrine, what was

believed to be the head was bathed in green light.

Lying here on this lady's couch, I envision Husayn's head as a big robot head like Unicron's, drifting through space, and wonder what it would be like to enter Husayn's head and find his memory banks. But then I open my eyes. I'm not really seeing anything—no Unicron, no Husayn. I'm just in a room in a house looking at the ceiling. I haven't had anything close to what you might call "hallucinations." I had just closed my eyes and thought about stuff on my own. So far, it doesn't seem that I've gotten anything from ayahuasca at all. I had a better spiritual trip drinking bhang lassi in Lahore and then going to Hujwiri's tomb, and in Mecca I had more intense visionary experiences without any chemicals at all—I just found quiet places around the Ka'ba and entered the Ka'ba of my own heart, where I encountered Ishmael. I could have sat on my own couch in my own house and thought about Unicron without drinking ayahuasca, and as far as I can tell, it would have turned out the same.

I close my eyes again and keep trying. I could be trying too hard; maybe an ayahuasca vision isn't the kind of thing that you can force. There are times when it feels like something's about to happen. This could be a liminal space between sober and tripping, but I never cross the line. Just when I start to feel affected by the tea, we're called from our couches to sit again at the table and sing Portuguese hymns.

It has me kind of pissed; what if I had been left on the couch all night, dealing with the sacred vine alone? Something might have happened. Instead, I'm called out of my head to sing these hymns that I can't really sing and gaze up at European Jesus on the walls. Say what you will about my set—really a grab bag of random materials like Transformers and Shi'ism and black supremacist Islamic sects from Brooklyn—but it might have taken me somewhere if I had a more relatable setting.

Then it's over, and I realize that I blew my whole night and sixty dollars on nothing. I had brought clothes and a toothbrush to stay the night, but there's no need; I was so unaffected by the tea that if I had a car, I could have driven myself home. One of the women who drank, in fact, is driving home and offers me a ride. I jump at the chance to leave the night behind me.

On the way home, she asks me how it went with this smile like she's so happy that I was able to experience the gifts of the vine goddess, and without getting too specific, I let her keep thinking that. It was amazing, I tell her. But it wasn't, and I have to think about what that means. My instincts say that it was just the setting, the cultural delivery system. We were praying to a goddess that meant nothing to me—I never had the space to really turn her into Fatima—in a language that I neither understood nor invested with any particular religious significance, surrounded by pictures of the blue-eyed, blond-haired white Jesus against whom I had spent the last twenty years defining myself as a Muslim in the tradition of Malcolm X. The symbols and forms couldn't put me in the

right head to let go and trip out.

So now what? The ideal situation would be to jump on a plane to Australia and get initiated into the Fatimiya Sufi Order, where I could drink ayahuasca in something closer to an Islamic setting, surrounded by people who see Muhammad's daughter as their image of Allah, even if they call themselves "post-Islamic." A few years ago, in my vagabonding writer prime, that would have been my move. Shifting from nomadism to civilization has made those adventures harder to pull off.

BETWEEN HEADS

> Hustlers of the world, there is one Mark you cannot beat: The Mark Inside.
>
> —WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS

So the ayahuasca failure doesn't just have meaning for me as a spiritual drug user; it also kills my dream to write the Great American Islamic Ayahuasca Adventure. This is like Geraldo Rivera's 1980s stunt in which he opened the vault of Al Capone on live television and no one knew what he would find—the Internal Revenue Service was on hand to recover any piles of cash, and medical examiners were present in case Geraldo found bodies—but the vault turned out to contain only empty bottles. In this case, the vault was me, and ayahuasca recovered no treasures. There were no insights to write about or even a cool trippy vision; even if it was just random and weird, seeing Muhammad ride a jaguar through outer space would have made for a good chapter.

The plan was to write a compelling narrative in which everything built toward drinking the tea, and whatever visions showed up would tie it all together and drop tons of mystical knowledge on my skull, but my book shit the bed.

Time for a plan B: I could write Tripping with Allah as a collection of essays, maybe the kind of book that would have footnotes and bibliography and such. It could offer some theorizing on what we mean when we say "drug," what we mean when we say "religion," the impact of science as a discourse on religious truth claims, the constructions of orthodoxy and heresy, the genealogies of our terms and the power relations that drive them. I could include something on the cognitive science of religious experiences and "neurotheology." Write about globalization and nation-states and capitalism and their implications for sacred plants and the people and communities that use them.

Another option would be to fictionalize everything and write the story that I had wanted as if it really went down that way. I could then write about the Fatimiya without having to deal with their actual selves: as fictional characters, there would never be a chance of them letting me down with the regular problems that you find in any

community, no risk of my conversion ending in painful disillusionment. I could even imagine a Fatimiya-ish movement in the United States and my own ayahuasca Sufi shamans and probably make it all much cooler than it could ever be in real life. Maybe a novel like that would even lead some American Muslim ayahuasca drinkers to come together and manifest my fiction in their own lives, and create a whole new scene and inspire more documentaries and dumb articles.

Neither idea really pushes me too hard. The whole point was to get the vision and then build everything on it, but there was no vision, nothing. I guess a third option would be to make that the book, just tell it like that: build up the story of encountering ayahuasca drinkers like Jibril Bey and Zoser who swear on this miracle vine as the bearer of supreme wisdom and then write about my own disappointing ayahuasca experiment. It could perhaps shed some light on the false promises of New Age–type movements and these irritating "I'm spiritual, but not religious" people, and make the point that "real" religion or spirituality or whatever is ultimately about hard work.

It's summer and apart from getting ready to move to North Carolina, there's not much going on, so I sign up for alumni access to Widener Library and keep reading up on drugs, plowing through books like David Strophlet Flattery and Martin Schwartz's Haoma and Harmaline: The Botanical Identity of the Indo-Iranian Sacred Hallucinogen "Soma" and Its Legacy in Religion, Language, and Middle Eastern Folklore. The book argues that harmel, also known as wild rue, a weed common to Iran and the steppes of central Asia, was the original haoma of ancient Iranian religion and also the soma of ancient Indian religion—taking on the claims made for mushrooms in R. Gordon Wasson's Soma: Divine Mushroom of Immortality, which had claimed that soma came from the Amanita muscaria found in Siberian shamanism.

Two things make Flattery and Schwartz's argument interesting for me: first, of course it's relevant to my project that the use of harmel in Iran survived into Islamic history, even finding recontextualization through Muhammad; the Prophet was alleged to have said that angels were appointed to endow each leaf and seed of the plant with powers to heal suffering and protect against magic.

The prophet Zoroaster drank soma. Pahlavi literature portrayed his first revelation as connected to his encounter with a river of haoma water, and his spirit was said to have resided within haoma. In the Islamicizing of Iran, Zoroastrian scriptural narratives of Ahura Mazda creating haoma to give courage to humankind were supplanted by accounts of Muhammad complaining to Allah that his people lacked courage, and Allah revealing that isfand (red harmel) would make them brave. Though Iranian Muslim pharmacologists wrote that the plant's effects were comparable to that of religiously prohibited wine, harmel's sacramental status persisted for centuries in Islamic Iran. Ritual burnings of harmel were accompanied by recited verses praising the Ahlul-Bayt:

Who planted it? The Prophet. Who gathered it? Fatima.
For whom do they make it smoke? For the Imam Hasan and
the Imam Husayn.
By the grace of the King of Men, turn away misfortune and pain.

My second interest in harmel: this weed from central and western Asia provides the same alkaloids as the Banisteriopsis caapi vine. Islam already has its version of ayahuasca. The idea generates a slight spark for the Islam-and-ayahuasca book, and I play with different possibilities for the project, going from one to the other and back but without any passion. The work refuses to commit itself to pure academic material, nor is it willing to blast off the launchpad as a piece of art. The writing feels depressed. I try for fiction but can't get it to move. The words won't jump. Maybe the reason that I can't write fiction is the same reason that ayahuasca did nothing for me; I'm not able to sit back and watch the story run. This new persona as an aspiring scholar has ruined me as a writer. Creative writing is about you in your moment, spilling your heart, your colon, all of it; creative writing means living for what kills you in academic writing, in which your historically situated context and personal investments become the limitations that always threaten the integrity of your project. Retraining myself as a critical thinker has put speed bumps on the path; I unpack and overthink sentences before they ever have a chance on the page. How do you write a first-person adventure when you no longer believe in the "author" as a possibility? Foucault regarded the modern conception of authorship, the only authorship that I'm equipped to imagine, as having evolved alongside the modern conception of "property." Authorship is economics.

Without the possibility of an author, it's hard to place much stock in drug mysticism; what's the point of expanding your consciousness when you no longer have a self?

Instead of shooting off into space, I search academic databases and try to figure out how to take the concept of drugs and throw Foucault at it: retrace the genealogy of that knowledge and the power relations that made the term "drugs" possible, or build on drugs as a "technology of the self" or whatever, and keep my feet on this planet. Going dense nerd-style like that might be the kind of desperation maneuver for times when you have no story, but I don't have the theoretical mastery to pull it off.

In my soulless new context, it's not just the writing that hurts; religion takes a bump too. Writing and religion have never been separate in my story, and the end of one would have to mean the end of the other. Both are obstructed by the same failure to let go. With both art and prayer, like drugs, you have to go flying. The Qur'an speaks about people like me: we cannot receive the truth of Allah because our hearts are sealed. I did it to myself.

On top of that, I'm starting to fear for the consequences of my old life for my new one. Hunter S. Thompson made distinctions for (male) writers between "men of action" and

"men of thought," and I'm switching my affiliation. Like Randy Savage in the fall of 1987, I might still occupy the in-between state, no longer what I was but not quite what I'm trying to be. Maybe I could go legit; I've made progress—whenever I seem friendlier to conservative Sunnis or include endnotes, someone says, "Knight shows signs of maturing"—but others still see me as the guy who stink-palmed Cat Stevens and Siraj Wahhaj ten years ago. It wouldn't help to put out a gonzo book filled with accounts of drug-induced hallucinations.

At odd hours of the night, the darkness broken by the glow of the laptop, I resort to Googling myself to see if anything new might push me, and from there head to the review websites to read posts on books that I wrote back when I was starving.

So much interesting stuff if you can get over initial disgust of author.
*
If you would like an odyssey through Mike Knight's love life and bodily functions check out this book. Your call.
*
This book is obnoxious, offensive, and worse, and yet. . . . Despite his irreverent attitude toward everything and everyone . . . this book might be one of the most important things I have read about so-called American Islam.
*
Although at times abrasive, MMK's insight into Islam is eye-opening. This is a voice we need in Islam to wake us up to the realities of the religion and the way it is practiced.
*
He has little discipline as a writer, but Knight goes anywhere with a latter-day Beat irreverence and a punk irreverence (combined, oddly, with some real reverence for things like Five Percenter doctrine that I find, well, nutty).
*
The best Islamic wrestling masturbation punk scene F. Scott Fitzgerald mental illness family history memoir I have ever read, hands down.
*
Funny, honest, tragic, risky, well-written, thoughtful, funny as fuck.
*
He was on the bed with a Muslim girl who I think he was dating and she left some menstruation blood on the bed sheets. This freak cuts out a piece of the bed cloth and puts it in his pocket for memories or something. Does this sound like something a Muslim would do?
*
I don't think he is the future of Islamic thought that some have claimed, unless by that we mean the thoughts that will lead to the death of the religion.
*
It just seemed like an endless parade of insanity. . . . The depiction of women is especially difficult to stomach.
*
Really, I don't know what to say about this book. It's offensive and obscene, but it's intentionally so. The objectification of women is blatant, and I thought Knight was unaware of how very sexist his work is, but in the end one of Knight's characters "addresses" that issue, you could say. There are some clever bits of satire scattered through the book, but it's an uncomfortable read, and I still don't know what to think of it.

If I want to write about men and maleness, I do it the only way I know how. I haven't consumed stacks of theory yet, and I'm not going to reinvent the wheel on Islamic jurisprudence or interpretation of the Qur'an or the Prophet's life, so I just write the

history of my penis and and say, “Look at this. It’s messed up.” I have always written about ugly maleness as much as ugly whiteness, and they mix into each other in my books. Before I knew enough to drop Edward Said’s name into my arguments, I knew the place that an image of veiled, “submissive,” and virginal brown women could capture in a white convert boy’s fantasy, so I made myself the center of the critique and wrote of a Muslim woman cutting off my head after calling me Indiana Jones.

Peel back whatever I say about race, religion, identity, literature, or America, and what you really have is a story of fathers and sons, the struggle of sons as they murder and resurrect their fathers in this whole symbolic universe that’s obsessed with dick. Not everyone gets it; some people don’t realize that I’m writing about gender unless I first tell them that I plan to write about gender. If I write about gender by writing myself ugly, they’ll have no idea how to read me. Chances are strong that they’ll confuse me with the character that I play; in the wrestling business, we refer to such readers as “marks.”

As for the menstrual blood: that girl claimed that she was directly descended from the Prophet, which would make it his blood; so yeah, at least in my tweaked way of looking at things, it was a Muslim thing to do.

Figuring out my voice for this book becomes that much harder with people shouting in my ear, whether they want to see a gender turn or an orthodoxy turn or a scholar turn. It feels like I can’t go anymore; I’m like Macho Man at the end of his run, when dropping those elbows from the top rope had left his knees and hips so shot that he had to legitimately land on dudes to preserve his own body. I’m like Macho Man when he wore a shirt in the ring; you can’t believe in a wrestler who wears a shirt. A wrestler in a shirt is hiding something. When Macho Man first wore a shirt, it was because he and Miss Elizabeth were trying to get pregnant and he had to go off the gas. When the Rock wore shirts, it was to hide scars from recent liposuction on his pecs.

From the fiction, I consider shifting toward a more research-oriented project, closer to the kind of work that I’ll most likely be doing for the rest of my life, and even properly cite sources, but I still want it to have a narrative shape. Then I think about essays loosely strung together by my own adventures through the city and write these thoughts on drugs and religion as my personal contemplations during car rides uptown and downtown and conversations with colorful characters. Even if it could work, where should it wrap up? There’s supposed to be a grand point at the end about drugs or Islam or something bigger, but I still haven’t found it.

SNAKES OF THE GRAFTED TYPE

In July, two attacks in Norway—the first a bombing, the second a mass shooting—leave nearly one hundred civilians dead. The suspect is a blond-haired ultranationalist Christian named Anders Behring Breivik. It is reported that prior to the attacks, he expressed his ideology in a 1,516-page manifesto, 2083: A European Declaration of Independence. The manifesto was emailed to over a thousand people just an hour and a half before the bomb went off.

My first thought when hearing about Breivik: "Thank Allah that the maniac wasn't a Muslim this time." My second thought: "What a despicable attitude to have when ninety-plus people are dead." Then I wonder if anyone's calling this "terrorism," since this kind of political or religious violence is usually only designated as terrorism when brown people do it. But there's limited space in my brain for thinking more about this guy because I'm trying to prepare for the move to North Carolina, packing up all of my books and getting sentimental over the last two years and weird around the John Harvard statue.

Then the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) invites me out of nowhere to participate in its conference, speaking at a panel on generational and national differences in Muslim perceptions of al-Qaeda. The conference is "unclassified," they tell me, but everyone in attendance will be from the intelligence community. To be honest, I really don't have dick to say about al-Qaeda, but for some reason these government people think that I have a qualified opinion, and the honorarium covers what I'll have to pay the movers.

Apart from my glaring lack of expertise, there's an ethical question about being an American Muslim and doing this kind of thing, because you never know what talking to the government is actually going to do. You could say that for Muslims to be fully included within American life, they need to participate in society on every level; but there's still a big bad empire that can do whatever it wants with what you tell it.

A god named Cipher Self Allah had told me that if I only say at this conference what I'd say anywhere else, and I'm not twisting up the truth for a paycheck, then I can take the government's money and not be entirely a prostitute. Works for me. This was also my approach back at Harvard, which had received a $20 million endowment from Saudi Arabia's Prince al-Waleed bin Talal. I accepted Saudi money to speak at a Harvard conference on Islam and the arts but said nothing that Saudi money wanted to hear, nothing that I could legally say within Saudi's borders. Pharmakon Allah, both poison and cure, whore with principles, is a poor righteous teacher trying to stay righteous while getting less poor.

It's the middle of the night when I pull onto the resort's property and get lost in its maze of winding lanes, eventually finding the main office and my key to a room in an inn somewhere else up a dark road and across a wooden bridge over a pond. The folks at the office hand me dinner in a brown paper bag, but when I settle into my room at the Lake Cottage, it turns out to be potato chips and a ham sandwich. I sit on my bed smelling the pink meat. Maybe the ham is their way of figuring me out; tomorrow morning, a Homeland Security agent disguised as inn staff will search my garbage to see if I ate it. In the 1950s, officials at Attica State Prison actually pulled such a move to identify prisoners as followers of Elijah Muhammad, monitoring which ones ate ham when it was served to them.

I prop up my portrait of Master Fard Muhammad on the desk, Fard holding an unknown book, open to an unknown page. Master Fard Muhammad had visions—he saw himself heaving the Rockefellers and Carnegies of the world into a lake of fire. Then he came to America and preached up and down the ghetto streets, preached in crowded basements, getting harassed by the police until he just up and disappeared.

What's the book in his hands? People usually assume that it's the Qur'an. It would be nice if Fard's book was about my panel topic and I could make out something on the page, because I still have no idea what to say. Maybe I should have done more work on al-Qaeda these past two years. No government's ever going to pay me to talk about Avicenna's prophetology.

Master Fard Muhammad was the greatest escape artist of all time, his final fate still unknown despite some meaningful government interest in him. The United States got Osama, but after Master Fard bailed in the summer of 1934, he was gone forever, no matter how many bodies the feds dug up. J. Edgar Hoover put substantial resources into uncovering Fard's true identity and whereabouts but had to keep guessing. Fard's ghost defeated Hoover, with the seeds that he had planted blossoming into Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali and Allah's Five Percent.

I've also brought a small plastic baggie of the sacred Banisteriopsis caapi vine, ground into a fine powder. It sits on the desk in front of Master Fard Muhammad, like a

votive offering. Smelling the caapi through the bag, there's a sweetness to the powder that I never would have expected.

Master Fard Muhammad, my uncanny X-Man. Master Fard Muhammad, master of sacred geometry, knower of the right shapes and their functions in the universe. Master Fard Muhammad, the Qutb, the Pole of Saints, invisible center of existence, gone and gone. He's just a picture now; he's me: Master Fard Muhammad within the frames of my knowledge. That's a portrait of me holding an unknown scripture with the ayahuasca vine in front of him.

The ayahuasca vine is a monoamine oxidase inhibitor (MAOI), and MAOIs are used as antidepressants. By inhibiting the work of monoamine oxidase, MAOIs serve as defenders of monoamine neurotransmitters such as serotonin and dopamine. A slight reason for concern is that I have recently been using Cellucor's "C4 Extreme" powder, a pre-workout pump found at GNC. Besides the suggestion that competitive athletes should check with their sanctioning organizations to confirm that C4 Extreme's ingredients are permissible, the label also warns against use while on MAOIs. I text Zoser to ask for his thoughts.

"Are you trying to trip during your reverse inclines?" he responds. "You want to see Arnold Schwarzenegger riding a jaguar?" That would be something—you're trapped under the weight with your feet in the air and your head near the ground, the iron ready to crash down on your face, and the bar becomes . . . what does the bar become? The bar becomes God; you're bench-pressing God. But Zoser says that it should be okay.

I read namaz before going to bed, wake up early, and spend half the day in my room, having no contact with anyone from the conference, not even an overheard conversation from the hallways or neighboring rooms. I don't know who's out there or what they're doing. It's one of those days where you're alone in quiet long enough and going outside becomes scary, so I just sit at the desk with my Master Fard Muhammad and my bag of sacramental vine and look at the conference program. My panel, "Generational and Nationality Differences in Al-Qaeda," takes place tomorrow morning; I will be appearing alongside Robert F. Worth, New York Times reporter, and Fathali Moghaddam, director of the Georgetown University Conflict Resolution Program. The conference program lists me as "American Muslim Novelist and Journalist." So I'm here as a Muslim; my role is simply to appear as a Muslim face, to perform "Muslim" for these government people. The whole thing's an identity theater, but I'm still amazed at how explicit and shameless they can be about it. At conferences on race relations or gender and sexuality, are speakers designated as "Black Writer" or "Homosexual Academic?" Maybe somewhere.

Praise be to Allah. If it wasn't for this speaking gig, paying my movers would have been an issue.

It occurs to me that I'll at least have to leave the room if I'm going to consume this caapi powder, so I grab the baggie and say good-bye to Master Fard Muhammad and venture out, walking back across the wooden bridge to the main house where all the panels take place. Weaving through these CIA, FBI, and Homeland Security agents joking and telling stories with each other, I find the snacks and coffee. The baggie in my palm is discreetly emptied into a white styrofoam cup, into which I pour hot water and mix with a coffee stirrer. With a hot cup in my hand, I look more or less normal as I glide through this scene, hoping to catch an interesting remark or any sign at all that this is worth my time, sipping my ayahuasca vine as a thick brown sludge.

Nothing's happening with these people, so I sit on the bench outside and keep stirring my vine drink. There was way too much powder for this small cup. I cross the bridge again, sit on the grass, and watch some geese, at which point I start to space out. Nothing crazy, just feeling dreamy and dizzy with my own thoughts. For reasons that remain unclear, the National Counterterrorism Center considers me a qualified expert to speak on al-Qaeda's outreach to Muslim youth. This encourages me to never believe in anyone's expertise for the rest of my life, but it's all comedy at this point. I'm stupid, the government is stupid for thinking that I know something, and no one knows anything, we're just "children in a world that knows no adulthood," as my father told me in a poem. I'm just going to sit and watch these birds and feel some crazy if I can.

When I start to really feel it, and I'm not even sure what the it might be, I go back to my room and lie down with my spiritual technology: the portrait of Master Fard Muhammad directly in front of me, this gross brown shit in a styrofoam cup, and my laptop looped on Chechen Sufi zikrs, men running in circles buzzing out on Allah's Names. The zikrs become a soundtrack for muted clips from The Mysterious Cities of Gold on YouTube. You remember that show? It was an epic cartoon series from the start of the 1980s, a French-Japanese collaboration that played in Nickelodeon's early years. The Mysterious Cities of Gold tells the story of three kids in the sixteenth century: a Spanish orphan boy, the daughter of an Inca priest, and the last descendant of the people of the lost continent of Mu (though in the U.S. version, it was renamed Hiva), as they fly around in their solar-powered Golden Condor ornithopter (a lost technological marvel from Mu/Hiva), chasing after their destiny. There's a cool anticolonial vibe to the show, and I dig the South American futurism thing, ancient empires with super-advanced technology and such. Despite the fact that Olmec civilization has been taken up by Afrocentrists as proof of an ancient black presence in the Americas, the Olmecs show up in The Mysterious Cities of Gold as a near-extinct race of pale mutants living under a mountain. They have their own aircraft that shoots particle beams. So I'm watching the battle between the Golden Condor and the Olmec Machine with the sound off, listening to these Chechens chant praises of Allah, while Master Fard Muhammad stands in his

picture with the book and I have the vine in my gut, and I build my own myths. I see Master Fard Muhammad in the early decades of the twentieth century, with colonialism in decline but still a generation or two from anyone really knowing it. He builds with the Ahmadiyya, Arya Samaj, and Sikhs as they all struggle for knowledge of self in British-ruled Punjab. Then he learns pan-Islamism from the Khalifat movement. He goes to Japan and learns pan-Asianism from the Kokuryukai and then watches the Japanese defeat the Russians. He sails to South Africa and hears stories of the failed Bambatha Rebellion, during which Mahatma Gandhi had attempted to create an Indian force that would support the British against the Zulus; through this service to the Empire against black freedom, Gandhi believed that he could procure full British citizenship for Indians. Master Fard Muhammad notes that when colonized Indians and colonized Zulus see their freedom struggles as separate, only the Devil's kingdom wins.

He crosses every ocean. In Brazil, he witnesses the torment of the white man's rubber trade upon black, brown, and red people. He observes slavery in sugar fields from Jamaica to Fiji. He walks among the aboriginal peoples of Australia and recognizes that there are "aboriginal" people everywhere, and also that white people are aboriginal nowhere, aliens wherever they go, destroyers wherever they go. Master Fard Muhammad watches the British interference in what would become Saudi Arabia, as well as the carving up of Muslim peoples by European powers and the creation of artificial nations: Iraq, Jordan, Syria, whole new peoples invented and divided by outsiders. Why does the Devil call our people "Africans"?

He knows that it is the work of gods to take devils off the planet, and seeks the right tools to clean up his world. He spends time in Qom, Iran's holy city of scholars and clerics, where he sits at the feet of old sayyeds with long white beards and big black turbans, mastering all bodies of classical Islamic knowledge: shari'a, fiqh, tafsir, ta'wil, hadith, kalam, falsafa, and even the mystical science of 'irfan. He can also recite all sixty-thousand verses of the epic Shahnameh but studies with one eye to the political realities around him: intervention by European powers chasing newly discovered oil, the instability following constitutional reforms, and the imminent fall of Qajar rule. There is not yet a Pahlavi regime or a Khomeini revolution, but he knows that Iran's next century will be hard.

Master Fard Muhammad's quest for knowledge, wisdom, and understanding sends him deep into the jungles and the deserts. He marks the truth on his body: in Iraq, he whips and cuts himself with his Shi'a brothers for the love of Husayn and Husayn's stand against all the world's tyrants; in the Great Plains, he opens his flesh again with his Lakota brothers in the Sun Dance. On each continent, he joins drum circles and chants and traditional dances. He receives ritual scars and tattoos that are concealed when he wears the suit of Western men. He meditates at the tops of ziggurats and inhales

sacred smoke, receives initiation into mystery schools and Sufi orders, reads brittle ancient scrolls and golden quipu, deciphers mathematical codes in the Qur'an, and translates Sumerian stone tablets and the inscriptions on Egyptian tomb walls. He sneaks onto the dig sites of imperial archaeologists late at night and leaves clues that will either guide the white men or lead them astray, whichever way he wants them to go. He seeks blessings at shrines that have never been seen by blue eyes. Master Fard Muhammad sometimes wears a black turban, sometimes a green turban, or a pakul, or a feathered headdress, or a pith helmet. Sometimes he grows a long beard and dyes it with henna, and sometimes his face is painted with tribal marks. Master Fard Muhammad's hand knows the weapons of all nations, and his mouth has called out to the gods of all peoples, knowing that the gods were the peoples themselves. With all of the training that a black planet could offer him, he flies his Golden Condor to Detroit and begins his work.

I can see an encounter between Master Fard Muhammad and the founding father of modern Islamic revivalism, Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani, the first Muslim intellectual to speak of a civilizational struggle between "Islam" and "the West," the first to idealize a lost Islamic golden age and call for its return through the embrace of modern Western technology and restoration of Islamic tradition. The years of Fard's and Jamal ad-Din's lives don't line up easily—according to the most likely dates, Fard was born a decade after Jamal ad-Din's death—but my dream occurs beyond history. Jamal ad-Din was a Fard in his own right. Born in Iran, educated in Shi'a theology and Avicenna's philosophy, he changed his name to al-Afghani (the Afghan) to shed his Iranian backstory for one more credible with Sunni audiences. Like Fard, he wandered, studied, taught, accumulated followers, and found trouble. He learned about other religions while in India, where he also studied Islamic reformists and cultivated a hatred for European imperialism, and then traveled throughout central Asia. In Afghanistan, he landed a position as adviser to the king but was chased out of the country after a British-backed coup by the king's brother. He wandered the Caucasus region and then found his way to Istanbul, where he helped to found a new university but was exiled after giving a lecture in which he equated prophets with philosophers. Then he moved to Cairo, where he headed a masonic lodge but experienced his third exile for speaking out against the ruling regime. He ended up in Iran, where he founded secret societies that in turn led to his expulsion by the shah.

Like Master Fard Muhammad, Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani could be called a heretic by many Sunnis and Shi'as alike, even as he traveled in Sunni disguise—links can be drawn between him and Iran's Shaykhi movement, which led to the Babis, which led to the Baha'is—and as with Fard, connections can be drawn between Jamal ad-Din and the Theosophy of Helena Blavatsky. Fard could have met Jamal ad-Din in Paris, where

he edited pan-Islamic, anti-imperialist newspapers in Arabic, or perhaps in Iran during the Tobacco Revolt, during which Jamal ad-Din sided with the religious scholars against Nasir al-Din Shah's concession of the country's tobacco trade to British control. Taking a stand against the British presence in Iran and Iran's pro-British shah, the clerics issued a fatwa that tobacco was forbidden in Islam. It strikes me as a Fard move.

I envision the two men in a green lodge together, sitting on the floor, drinking tea. The eight-point black-and-gold sun of the Universal Flag of Islam, star and crescent and black "7" in the center—a transhistorical flag in this case, still a few decades before its creation in 1960s Brooklyn—hangs on the wall above them.

Perhaps their conversation begins with a reading of numbers and letters. In her biography of Jamal ad-Din, Nikki Keddie writes that he showed an interest in "mystical alphabets, numerical combinations, and esoteric treatises" and also that his years of wandering and study had trained him in "paradoxical combinations of a Sufi mystical streak with extraordinary political activism." Master Fard Muhammad could relate.

Jamal ad-Din calls for all Muslims of the world to unite against their European oppressors. Master Fard Muhammad sees Jamal ad-Din's pan-Islamism as a step toward his own, more expansive vision, a unity of black, brown, red, and yellow Original peoples against white power; I could also see Satokata Takahashi, the Kokuryukai agent who would encounter the Nation of Islam in 1930s Detroit, in the lodge with these two masters, moving pieces across a map. Master Fard Muhammad would cosign on a new caliphate, but what of righteous Muslims outside the dar al-Islam who do not know that they are Muslims, the Muslims who had been fed the wrong foods and became other than their own selves? So Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani and Master Fard Muhammad agree that while Jamal ad-Din will preach revival and unity in the Muslim lands, Master Fard will trade his royal robes for a suit and tie, go deep into the wilderness of North America, and preach to the community that he called his "uncle," Muslims who have lost knowledge of themselves: the descendants of kidnapped and enslaved Muslims who now eat pig and wear Christian names. Both men carry out their missions with imagined biographies, and they speak to their followers of imagined histories, lost golden ages that can be reclaimed.

This fantasy bleeds into an alternate version, in which Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani's travels across Central Asia coincide with Elijah Muhammad's mythic biography of Master Fard Muhammad, portraying Fard as born from an Original man and a white woman from Chechnya. In this version of the encounter, the man called al-Afghani is Fard's father. Jamal ad-Din deliberately produced a son whose phenotypic ambiguity would benefit his mission: to sneak into the rising white empire, the United States, white enough for devils and sufficiently nonwhite for the gods, and smuggle the knowledge of Islam across America's borders and into the hearts of its oppressed.

Fard knows that America is where the Battle of Armageddon will be fought, the forces of Freedom, Justice, and Equality against Slavery, Suffering, and Death. He walks among the poorest of the poor in the most powerful nation on earth, and he gives them the absolute truth of their existence in a story that will make sense for them. He knows much more than he can ever tell anyone. Master Fard Muhammad plants seeds in minds, and somehow he knows that in just a generation, his seeds will produce a Malcolm X who will seek to pull the oppressed and degraded peoples of America into a global freedom struggle.

The vine's in me, and it might be doing something, but this is just meditation. I'm not tripping; there's no hallucination. Master Fard Muhammad is my Mahdi, I know at this moment. He is the man who came to fix us and heal us and bring harmony to the universe, restore balance in the Force, everything.

Then, as the word "us" runs through my thought, I have to recognize that Master Fard Muhammad's "us" did not include me, because in his worldview, I am the devil, made weak and wicked. But in my dream vision of him, I can potentially join the "us," even as I rest in this room on government money. Vishnu Allah had once told me that I could link myself to Master Fard Muhammad through his white mother, Baby Gee. If a woman from the caves could produce the golden Mahdi-God, then there's hope for me, and even if Fard's lessons were not meant for my eyes, I am guided and cannot deprive my thought of his guidance.

At night, the government agents party in another building. I walk through the darkness and just stand in a corner with a red plastic cup of Coca-Cola, watching drunk CIA folks dance and try to hook up with each other. They're pretty much all white, and they're so alien to me that I forget my own whiteness. It feels like I'm observing white people from the far end of the solar system, these fascinating life forms who wear shoes inside their houses and don't properly wash their butts—only wiping the feces off their bodies with paper—and they smell like wet dogs and bacon and mayonnaise. Not a thing there for me, so I walk back to my room and sleep. Before I drift off, the question of my book, this book, crosses my mind. If nothing else, I drank the caapi vine at a counterterrorism convention, which might add something to the project and read as a gonzo-ish thing to do.

My panel's at noon. No reason to get nervous over this kind of thing, I remind myself in the morning, even if my presence here is an absolute sham. These panels never last as long or go as deep as I expect. You sit there, give short answers when you don't know shit, really long answers when you do know something, and smile for people who come up to you after it's done.

There might be two hundred people in the room. Each of the panelists is given ten to fifteen minutes to explain themselves. I open with a mild joke, "The last time I was in a

room filled with government agents, it didn't go too well," and everyone roars with laughter—get it? Because my name is Muhammad. After that, every-thing's fine, and I just work them. I talk about American Muslim kids in punk bands and rattle off some of the more provocative lyrics and the audience keeps laughing and howling. I offer nothing of substance, but they love it anyway; the single exception might be a line about the "radicalization of white people" in reference to the Norway attacks. Some look at me like I had just performed a human sacrifice, and others appear to be laughing out of shock and discomfort. At any rate, I feel like an entertainer, and they probably haven't gotten too much entertainment at these panels. They dig my show. And even when I say something potentially threatening, such as "radicalization of white people," they know from the punky stuff and swear words that I'm not one of those Muslims who want to bring on the shari'a. Besides, no matter how anti-white I sound, I'm still a white guy myself, with white privilege remaining fully operational.

During the Q&A, someone asks me if I think that al-Qaeda has a chance of taking over Iran, and I'm stunned. First, I can't understand why this question was thrown at me, because I don't actually work on al-Qaeda or Iran. Second, and perhaps more urgently, if it's your professional duty to know something about Islamic extremists, trends in Muslim-majority countries, literacy in Islamic cultures and traditions, and the nuances of various movements and figures and such, asking this question should be the end of your career. It betrays less than a Wikipedia-level comprehension of Muslims. But I treat this Nerf ball as a legitimate inquiry, if only because it gives me a chance to sound like an expert and also run out the clock. I give the audience a breakdown of the Sunni-Shi'a division, along with treatments of Iran and al-Qaeda that would be useful in an "intro to Islam" course for undergraduates a year or two removed from high school. And with that, having talked out of my anus for a total of perhaps twenty minutes, I just earned $2,000 to pay my movers. Time for free lunch.

The "war on terror" racket strikes me as a close-knit community, as clusters of loud friends fill up each table and leave no room for lonely outsiders. I walk around with my plate of food until I find a half-empty table occupied by a few of the guest panelists, the only strangers in this setting, and an agent of some kind who's making small talk with them. I can see faded green tattoos creep out from the edges of his white buttoned sleeves. It seems reasonable to see this guy as having been a punk once in his life—but if he was ever punk, he would have been the worst kind of punk, the jockish tough-guy hardcore bully who'd go to shows to throw his knees and elbows up in the pit, just another football player listening to fight music.

When the other panelists get up with explanations that they have to catch their rides to the airport or whatever, leaving just the agent and myself, he turns to me.

"So you're supposedly the Hunter S. Thompson of Muslims," he says.

“That’s a big supposedly,” I tell him.

“I’m guessing that you rolled in here with a trunk full of drugs and you’re tripping all over the place. You fighting off bats with a flyswatter?”

“Not exactly.”

“You don’t drink beer in your religion.”

“Personally, I don’t. But some people argue that the Qur’an only forbids a specific wine made from date palm.”

“Is that right?” He gives me a look like I can’t possibly be serious.

“According to Abu Hanifa, who was one of the great legal scholars of Sunni tradition, you can drink, but don’t get intoxicated; and you’re not to be considered intoxicated unless you can no longer tell the difference between the sky and the earth or between a man and a woman.”

“That’s pretty drunk,” he says.

“In Abu Hanifa’s day, a man was arrested for carrying a flask of wine, and a judge decreed that even if no one saw the man drinking, he should still be punished, since he carried the instrument for committing the crime. So Abu Hanifa said, ‘Stone him too, because he also carries the instrument for committing adultery.’”

The agent throws his head back and makes a grunt of amusement, but doesn’t exactly laugh.

“If you could have seen me before I got into this,” he says, and by “this” I’m guessing he means the counterterrorism industry, “you wouldn’t believe it. None of the people who knew me back then would believe it if they could see how I turned my life around . . .” His sentence trails off into nowhere and then he brings it back. “I mean, I found the Lord, and I straightened myself out, but I was capable of just about anything back in my time.”

“People change,” I say.

“I also got heavy into the socialist multiculturalism stuff, at least before I had to pay any bills.”

“I went through stuff, too.”

“You said some interesting things out there,” he tells me. “Your point about—how’d you put it? The radicalization of white people?” I nod and smile. “That had me thinking,” he says. “I wasn’t prepared to hear something like that; nobody talks like that here. But I have to, you know, play devil’s advocate.”

“Sure.”

“I look at these kinds of things scientifically.” Then something changes, like a telekinetic bolt has pushed out of his forehead and locked me to him, like we’re the only ones in the room now and he has a deep and serious Haqq that he’s about to drill into my brain. “You could refer to biology and it’s right there,” he says. “It’s like snakes in

Florida."

"Snakes in Florida?" I ask, our eyes fixed upon each other.

"It's really quite simple. You introduce a new species into an ecosystem and it's complete havoc. The ecosystem has taken shape over how many years, who knows, and everything in that ecosystem has its natural role and makes a contribution to the overall balance of things. The ecosystem has developed its own natural state of harmony. It's not prepared for some new species to just burst in and wreck the whole order. Maybe over time, the other beings in the ecosystem find their ways to defend against this intruder, but how long does that take?"

"Right," I say.

"Does the ecosystem have that much time to spare? Or in the time that it would take to assimilate the new species, does the new species just consume and destroy everything? I mean, that's just reality. That's scientific, right?"

"It sounds scientific."

"So what's next? What are we supposed to do? You got the snakes in Florida, and they're eating up all of the crops or whatever it is that they're doing down there, showing up in people's lawns and eating their dogs, I don't know what, and the whole natural balance is helpless against them. Whatever those things eat, they just swallow it whole. How do you deal with something like that? See, we have to be scientists about it. Whether or not you believe in evolution doesn't change anything. Biologists know that nature is competition."

His eyes keep their hold on mine and won't let go. He wants to say more than he's saying. He knows the unspeakable conclusion to his thought, and he wants to read my eyes to see if I know it too, if I can read him beyond his words.

"Interesting," I say. He leans back and appears to relax a bit.

"Americans don't get it. In the U.S., it's spread out more, so we don't have to deal with centralized communities in the same way. Across the pond, it's a different story. Shit, it's like a giant bulldozer scooped up half of North Africa and drove it over to France."

"The communities are less diverse in Europe, right?" I ask him, reaching for a neutral way to keep the conversation going. "In France, most Muslims are North Africans, but in the United Kingdom, they're overwhelmingly South Asian, and in Germany, they're Turkish—"

"The older guys from Turkey aren't the problem," he says, cutting me off. "They were happy to get away from all of that crap. The problem is the younger guys."

"The younger guys?" I ask. "The radicalization is more with younger guys?"

"I'm going to tell you the big truth of the matter," he says, leaning forward again and lowering his voice. "Islam isn't the problem. In Europe, it's not about religion. It's the

crime, the drugs, and the disease that these people bring."

"That's the big truth of the matter?"

"Snakes in Florida," he says. "Just remember that. Snakes in Florida."

"Snakes in Florida," I say.

"But anyway, I like what you're doing. Best of luck to you." He stands up and puts out his hand. I shake it and then I'm alone, wondering what it is that I'm doing and why he would like it. Best of luck to me.

AL-NAJM

This is the seventeenth chapter. After learning mathematics, which is Islam, and Islam is mathematics, it stands true.

Then Eyad Zahra, the filmmaker who had directed a big-screen adaptation of one of my novels, sends a text.

"Have you ever heard of ayahuasca? I'm about to do it."

I call him, and he explains that some rich white guy hosts ayahuasca ceremonies at his big house in the deserts of southern California, and Eyad had just happened to meet a friend of a friend and found himself invited to a ceremony. They told him to wear white, he says, though not for any ritual significance but rather for the safety of ayahuasca drinkers who might wander off at night.

"Let me know what happens," I tell him. The next day he texts again with the good news that everything in his universe has been transformed. Then he calls and says that he had a "gender awakening" and wants Muslim men everywhere to drink it. He wants me to drink it so badly that he's willing to fly me to Los Angeles on our film's dime.

During the long cross-country flight, I keep a few items on the tray in front of me: a laminated, pocket-sized card bearing a painting of Husayn, slaughtered son of Fatima and grandson of Muhammad, on his white horse, holding his infant son Ali Asghar (who was also murdered); half of a turba, a small clay disc made from the soil of Karbala, in modern Iraq, where Husayn had made his last stand; and a small booklet containing Ya Sin, a sura from the Qur'an often believed to hold special properties. I read Ya Sin, clutch my turba that was symbolically soaked with the blood of Husayn, and think of my doomed superhero with sword in hand, staring down his enemies, knowing how it would all turn out for him: mutilation, the trampling of his body under horses, the parading of his severed head on a spear, the imprisonment of his family.

What a man, I think. Husayn was like Malcolm X in that way. Step into the ring and take it like a champ.

During the moment of prayer in which Muslims prostrate their faces to the floor, Shi'a Muslims rest their foreheads on the turba. I don't have the story of how this particular turba came to be broken in half—it was a gift from another Shi'a Five Percenter friend during my travels—and it's too weathered for me to make out what the Arabic inscriptions might have said. No more words or half-words on my half-turba, but the clay is still Karbala, it's still the dust sanctified with Imam Husayn's blood, the light of the universe.

On the east coast, Jibril Bey had offered to take me to the Long Island Sound, setting of The Great Gatsby, with some chocolate rasuls and a mission to trip our way into the soul of the text. I wish that I had taken him up on it whenever I remember Master Fard Muhammad, the man that I see as the real Gatsby of Gatsby's own time. In the 1920s, Fard took hold of Gatsby's unyielding belief in America's promise of limitless potential for self-creation, gave himself a new name and fake Hashemite backstory ("You have not yet seen me in my royal robes"), and journeyed from Los Angeles to Detroit bringing that promise to those for whom it had never been intended: black men. He pulled a Gatsby on the whole African American experience, rewriting their history, handing out new names, and offering a new future of green light. That would make Elijah Muhammad into Nick Carraway, the narrator transformed by his encounter with the self-made hero.

There's reason to speculate that around the turn of the 1920s, Fard was associated with the Theosophical Society in San Francisco. The Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI) had investigated a Theosophist named George Farr, who preached on the rise of Japan and the fall of the white race and would also apparently shoot up and/or let others shoot up in the café where he worked. Farr was a member of Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association. According to the ONI informant, Farr—who lived in the "Negro section" of town—claimed to be a "Negro," though his appearance and accent suggested that he was instead an "American-educated Hindu." If this Farr, who was connected to Mohini Chatterjee and through him to Theosophy founder Madame Blavatsky, was Master Fard Muhammad, it might help us construct a proper genealogy for Fard's teachings. The Theosophists avoided Islam in part for what they saw as its uncompromising separation between the human and the divine; this would not have been a problem for Fard, who later claimed to have been sent from Mecca to inform black people that they were gods.

"My name is W.F. Muhammad," said the Master. "I came to North America by myself." Los Angeles is the city where Master Fard Muhammad showed up in 1922. He changed his name from Wali to Wallie, short for Wallace, and worked as a cook, eventually saving enough to open his own restaurant—possibly by bootlegging during the height of Prohibition. In 1926, he was arrested on four counts of possessing and

selling alcohol; while awaiting trial, he was busted for selling morphine, heroin, and cocaine out of his restaurant. A jury found Fard guilty of violating the California State Poison Act, and he was sentenced to six years at San Quentin but got out after three. Upon his release, he took a train to Chicago, became a traveling salesman for a while, and arrived in Detroit on July 4, 1930, where he would use his acquired door-to-door hustling skills to recover the lost tribe, one person at a time.

The Mahdi comes as an unloved stranger, as Ali said. In America, he came in the person of a drug dealer. Master Fard Muhammad's three years in San Quentin, a brown man under the sticks and boots of white guards, working chain gangs and jute mills, read like the classical prophet/hero's descent into Hell. Fard entered into the belly of the American beast and came out with a determined idea. In 1949, Fard would appear in a mystical vision to another transformed prisoner, a convicted burglar at Norfolk Prison Colony in Massachusetts, Malcolm Little. "He had on a dark suit," Malcolm would later recall. "He wasn't black, and he wasn't white. He was light brown-skinned . . . and he had oily hair." In Fard's presence, Malcolm was unable to move or speak, but only looked Fard in the eyes. Fard "just sat there. Then, suddenly as he had come, he was gone." That visionary experience would become part of the prisoner's transformation from Malcolm Little to Malcolm X, and one of the roots for my own tree of Islam. Not only does the Mahdi arrive as a stranger, but Master Fard Muhammad remains a stranger, still unrecognized for his contribution to the story, unknown compared to the fruits of his tree like Malcolm, Muhammad Ali, and Louis Farrakhan.

Now I'm going to Los Angeles, looking for a vision, maybe of Fard too. I begin to build another new mythology around Fard, a conception of Fard as shaman. The day that San Quentin sets him free with a new suit and one-way ticket to Los Angeles, he chooses instead to wander into the desert, the void of unfathomable time but no history, the non-place of eternal silent prehistory where he could unlock the future—the Sonoran Desert, a vast 120,000-square-mile stretch that covers parts of southeastern California and Arizona and reaches into Mexico—and stumbles upon the Bufo alvarius toad, the largest toad native to North America and one of Allah's most amazing jokes. If you catch one of these toads, you can squeeze the glands on its neck and limbs and milk it for venom, which contains 5-MeO-DMT. Ingest the venom, and in less than a minute you're on fana, total Sufi annihilation of the self, ego-death in Allah. So I picture Fard in his new suit, freaking out in the desert as the toad puts him on a journey through the celestial spheres and shows him a proper understanding for all of his tribulation and toil in the devil's kingdom. The toad becomes a scripture in its own right, a divine prophetic Allah-toad, an ayat-Allah like verses of the Qur'an, hujjat-Allah like the Imam, a better knower like Khidr, and Fard is like Moses, but Fard knows when not to ask questions. Fard just reads the toad. We next find Fard in Detroit, raincoat salesman preaching in

packed basements on the wildest shit, the stories of Yakub and Shabazz, General Monk Monk with his high-powered rifle marching devils to the caves of Europe, nine-feet-tall black men on Mars, scientists blasting the Moon from the Earth, the Mother Wheel spaceship filled with bomb-dropping drones, and proclamations of a new world.

To consider Fard's Yakub story as a DMT vision makes it true on a whole other level. He already knew the reality of colonialism, slavery, genocide, and oppression that Europeans had brought everywhere they went. Perhaps through a reaction to the right chemicals, he found this reality expressed in a narrative form that transcended the history on which it spoke. Whether or not there was actually a big-headed scientist named Yakub six thousand years ago means nothing. The vision was real. I try to see Yakub as Fard might have seen him, first as the fiercely determined young child playing with magnets, then the brilliant but arrogant university student, then the demagogue preaching in the marketplace, seducing followers into his eugenics cult. Yakub becomes more real for me when I no longer think of him as a historical claim that can be proven true or false, a contested truth of fact, but rather as a truth of essence.

Master Fard Muhammad brings the promise and the danger. He had remade himself more than once—a million times if you count the reinventions of him by his heirs—but if there was ever a real Fard, he got lost in the reinventions. The man who came to me on the Fourth of July, 1930, has no true self and no master to unlock him. Fard-as-shaman is just my newest version.

I land in Los Angeles a couple of days early, allowing for some travels through Eyad's circles. Eyad has gone vegan in a big way, and in fact his initial portal to ayahuasca came through a friend who prepares vegan meals for movie stars. Eyad drives me to the guy's place, and we have some kale chips from a batch that's going to Mark Wahlberg's house.

Sitting in this celebrity chef's apartment, listening to him and Eyad talk about their bodies and what veganism did to/for them—physically, mentally, spiritually, everything—I can't help but try to read them as a scholar of religion might. There's something potentially religious happening here, I think, depending on what "religious" means to you. The testimonies that I'm hearing on food from Eyad and his friend, the emphasis on "organic" and calls for a return to "natural" and "clean," also contribute to the ways in which ayahuasca is framed; out here, people call it "medicine." Much of what people would consider "religion" is cut out of the narrative; they're not drinking with a church, and they don't derive authority for ayahuasca from a commitment to Christian doctrine or belief in the vine as a goddess. Ayahuasca has truth because it brings wellness; it purges your body of toxins and also cleans out your spirit. It's the spirituality of a juice bar. There's no separation of our emotional sickness from our physical state; spiritual health depends on the body, and our vomiting and defecating from ayahuasca is part of

our psychic cleansing. It's all the same process.

The ayahuasca group's dietary advice for the days leading up to the event—no meat, eat light, avoid artificial stuff, no alcohol or drugs, be delicate with your insides—fits within the broader life program for Eyad and his scene out here. We spend our time at amazing vegan restaurants, and at every stop, Eyad's dropping knowledge about the junk that most Americans consume in abundance every day. I can slide Master Fard Muhammad into all this because he said that the devil makes people "other than their own selves" by teaching them to eat the wrong food. According to Master Fard Muhammad, "poison animal eaters" were among the "deaf, dumb, and blind, slaves to mental death and power." I've known Muslim vegans and vegetarians who contextualized their consumption choices within Islam. Ali had warned us against making our stomachs into "graveyards." If there's a place for real dialogue between Muslims and ayahuasca drinkers in North America, it might have less to do with touchy issues of mysticism and drug use than a shared spiritual investment in health and issues of ecology.

The ceremony will take place at a farmhouse on the edge of the desert, which has me thinking of that famous first line in Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas about being "on the edge of the desert when the drugs began to take hold." Maybe they'll take hold this time. The edge is where things happen. It was at the highest point of the horizon, the edge of sky and world, that Muhammad first saw the "one mighty in power" who then came toward him until they were only two bows' lengths apart.

This will be my third taste of the vine, and Mestre Irineu took three tries before meeting his queen. There's a chance that no one at the ceremony has heard of Irineu; this group isn't tied to Santo Daime or any of the various religious organizations that use ayahuasca. There's no official affiliation or conformity of belief involved. The seekers assembling in the farmhouse are not members of a community any more than shoppers at the Gap form a community. Of course, successful brands do promote the idea that through purchasing their products, you join a tribe that's united in its core values and opposed to the worldviews of other brands. To justify its existence, the pop-goth store presents itself as ideologically hostile to the preppy store next to it in the same mall. It's something to remember as Eyad parks the car along the highway and we wander down an unlit road into the woods, trying to find the farmhouse. I hope we don't miss the start of the ceremony, but the shaman should wait; Eyad and I are paying a combined five hundred dollars for our reserved places.

Traditionally, the shaman was seen as a mediator between supernatural forces and a group, often a specific tribe or clan; the shaman maintained the group's connection to its shared divinity, sacred histories, and knowledges that were crucial to the group's continuing existence. In a new context with no tribes or clans, that meaning is lost. As

shamanism crosses the equator in both directions—with shamans finding patrons in the Northern Hemisphere and spiritual tourists retreating from New York into the rain forest—shamanism becomes Dinobot Island. It is no longer a bridge between the spirit and the group, but instead between the spirit and the individual, or between the individual and his or her innermost self.

White power is about buying power. Twenty white people are coming together on a rich white person's land, each of us putting in a chunk of money, and we collectively rent access to the supernatural. Like sacrificial offerings thrown into the fire, the dollar summons the spirit. Our money has redirected shamanism to fit our own experience, in which "spirituality" is (a) fundamentally private, personal, and within the self, and (b) a service that can be purchased. Mysticism has become psychotherapy, and the shaman is professionalized. As much as anything can transform me, it will also be transformed by me. I am Pharmakon Allah, the cure and the poison.

White people did not only transform the shaman; they created the shaman and this construct called "shamanism." The term originated with German explorers of Siberia in the eighteenth century, found its way into Western social sciences such as the then-gestational field of religious studies, and eventually became a way for people to express their dissatisfaction with modernity, materialism, soulless Western civilization, and intolerant organized religions by throwing a variety of beliefs and practices from every continent into what's supposed to look like a coherent category. With this very vague, kind of racist sense of a pure, innocent "primitive wisdom" that can cure our sick modernity, we use a European scholarly term with roots in Siberia to describe healers from South America, which strikes me as a bit of a load.

So much for this line that we continually draw, erase, and redraw between "traditional" and "modern." The traditional is nothing but modern; the indigenous is Western; the Global South is north; the whole planet is America; the black, brown, red, and yellow are all grafted to white. The familiar line, "I'm spiritual but not religious" also falls apart, because people only rebel against the old made-up categories through a new made-up category with the same rules and assumptions.

Speaking of Siberia: I have seen it suggested that Santa Claus represents a Siberian shaman who eats mushrooms and then rides through the celestial spheres with his reindeer, who themselves are tripping because they drank his mushroom-laced urine. Santa Claus is then a syncretic merging of the Siberian shaman with St. Nicholas, the patron saint of merchants, his red-and-white costume representing both Coca-Cola and Amanita muscaria, the fly agaric. The shaman that I'm about to meet (if we can ever find the place) is a kind of Santa Claus for me, another intersection of capitalism, hallucinogens, and the spirit world.

Apart from this New Age shamanism, I have another technology, Islam, and Islam

might be free. Strictly speaking, I don't have to pay anyone to be a Muslim. Whatever small amount of Qur'an I have memorized remains mine forever. For these New Age people, there's no "Ayahuasca Qur'an," just ayahuasca; every time you use that technology, you have to pay for the product and the services of qualified technicians.

In an idealized vision of Islam, being Muslim doesn't have a price because Allah does not need your money. Islam is the state of your heart and your character and your deeds. In its real-life machinations, however, living as a Muslim and belonging to a Muslim community can enter you into an Islamic economy: you buy your hijab; you buy halal meat; you buy your Qur'ans and Qur'an DVDs and fiqh books and pious decorations and recorded lectures from superstar religious scholars. You buy your prayer rugs; you buy your prayer beads. You buy your alarm clocks that look like mosques and blast the adhan five times a day. You buy Islamic Sunday school for your kids; you buy registration at conventions that promise to "revive the Islamic spirit." You buy your mosques and Muslim community centers, and you buy the pilgrimage to the Ka'ba at Saudi Disney. Your ummah is a big mall. However we go about it, seekers and practitioners have to also be customers.

There's a defense of Islamic capitalism in the argument that since Muhammad's first wife, Khadija, was a businesswoman and Muhammad worked for her as a merchant, Allah's cool with you getting rich; but with or without money changing hands, religion costs you something. If you don't pay cash, you pay with affiliation, whatever you give up to receive the blessing of this shared identity. As opposed to communally centered "organized religion," individualized "spirituality" offers a bargain on affiliation, since you just buy candles and crystals, and that's the whole lifestyle. Once you have the products, you can sit alone with them in your house, and you can buy a seat at a ceremony without owing anyone anything the next day. There's no New Age ummah.

In much of my life as a Muslim, I have bounced between the communal and the individual. I do love my Muslim families, but I don't call myself Sunni or Shi'a; I stand between them and draw what I need from both. Sometimes, I avoid paying any form of affiliation and just treat the mosque like it's a store at the mall, and I can do that. Unlike the shaman's healing circle, my anonymous Friday prayers are completely free. There's no free ayahuasca ceremony.

But paying for something doesn't mean that it's a scam, and I am about to pay two hundred and fifty dollars because there's a chance of something good here. To find the usable land in New Age shamanism, I need to check my cynicism and critical scrutiny and guard my intention. I have two intentions but remain undecided as to which one will become my focus for tonight. There's the question of my religious wandering, but also a certain pain that might be a gendered pain, a special masculine wound for which I hurt myself in the gym and the wrestling ring. It occurs to me that I haven't chosen between

these questions because they might in fact have the same source and could perhaps blend into one intention, but I can't articulate that.

I carry my small laminated picture of Imam Husayn that I purchased in Syria. I can't see the image in the dark but clutch it in my pocket and know that it's there. In this representation, Husayn is not black like he and his mother appear in my Nubian Islamic Hebrew art, but Arab or Persian. He rides his white horse while holding his banner in one hand and with his other arm cradling young Ali Asghar, who had just been martyred by a blow dart from the enemies of Islam when Husayn begged them for water. The child's name literally means "Smallest Ali." Above Husayn's head hovers the double-bladed sword of his father, the Big Ali, Ali Akbar. Both Husayn and Smallest Ali have very Christian-looking halos. In the background, women with halos, the women of Husayn's house, are wailing at their tents. In the upper left corner is an open hand, the outstretched fingers representing the five holy ones: Husayn, his brother Hasan, his parents Ali and Fatima, and his grandfather, Muhammad.

I also have small chips from my half of a turba clay, made from the ground of Karbala where Husayn spilled his blood, which I have ground into powder and carry in a plastic baggie. Before drinking ayahuasca tonight, I will swallow my Karbala dirt, which means eating the blood of Husayn. Ingesting Husayn could be a vestige of my Catholic childhood popping up, but it feels like the right thing to do. Ayahuasca and Islam will have their encounter literally inside me, not only in my conscience but in my guts. The sacred vine of the Amazon will mix with the sacred desert of Iraq, and the Queen of the Forest will meet the grandson of the Prophet. Exploited rain forests and exploited oil fields, World Village Allah.

Anyone could say that my practice is not authentic. I can't claim to know how this looks to traditional ayahuasca healers deep in the Amazon, if there are any who haven't yet been transformed by doing business with white people. New Agers might not warm up to an Islamic presence, since Islam looks to them like it's more demanding and less "spiritual" than their image of cool spiritual Buddhism or "high Hinduism." Shi'as can say that I have no right to corrupt Shi'ism in this way, and some Sunnis would say that Shi'ism in all its forms is corruption. And then people who believe that there's such a thing as a "Judeo-Christian tradition" will say that there's no such thing as an authentic Islam, that everything derived from Muhammad falls outside the proper Abrahamic heritage or is merely a plagiarism of it. None of this changes anything for me; the arguments about authenticity only have meaning if you believe that authenticity's possible.

We find the place, and it's friendly but quiet, everyone just getting into their own inner spaces to prepare for the medicine. Conversations are brief and whispered. Eyad and I find a place on the floor to claim for ourselves, spread out our sleeping bags and

make sure our bottles of water are within reach, and sit for a time without saying anything. One of the organizers walks around the room handing out vomit buckets to everyone. I scan the participants: all white, and I guess a bit on the hippie side, if all I can go by is the length of hair and beards. But they seem like a good group of folks, no one a negative force to fuck up the circle for anyone else.

Out of nervous energy, I take several trips to the bathroom. When it appears that people are anticipating the shaman's arrival, I take what I decide will be my last piss, and then, with water from the bathroom sink, I say "Bismillah, rabbi zidna ilma"—"In the name of Allah, my lord, increase me in knowledge"—and swallow my Karbala soil. Whatever happens, whatever buried emotional trauma confronts me in the vision state, I carry the love for Husayn in my stomach. The clay is my protective magic, like a pocket-sized Qur'an hanging from the mirror in my car. It's there for me in the event of major wreckage.

The shaman comes through, and I don't feel as though I can look directly at him. The lights go down, the room becomes completely silent, and the shaman brings out the tea in a glass jar and prepares the utensils. His spot in the room is the same as that of the shaykh in Sufi gatherings that I have attended. It works for me to see him that way. Moving clockwise, each of us comes to the shaman, sits before him, and accepts the medicine. At this moment, we have the choice of stating our intentions to the shaman. I can't hear what anyone says.

When it's my turn, I walk up to the shaman and sit, still not looking him directly in the eye. This was also my adab with Sufi shaykhs, so it seems right. He pours me the glass. I tip it back and whisper thanks to him, then return to my place and lie down in silence, as per the instructions. After everyone has drunk, the shaman does some spooky shaman stuff, shakes his rattle, sings a kind of musical breathing. There might be a point to it, a place to which he's trying to steer us. The shaman is supposed to be like the designer of a video game, and we'll be moving within the rules and structure of the world that he produces.

I close my eyes and wait to enter the game world. There's no telling how my sisters and brothers on this trip are doing. No sounds coming from anyone, so I wonder if I'm the only one still lucid while everyone else ascends through the celestial intellects.

Back at that Daime ceremony on the East Coast, there were moments when it seemed that I was getting close, only to be pulled back out of myself to join in the singing of Portuguese hymns and deal in unrelatable symbols. This time, at least, I can apparently stay inside myself. I don't even have to know what the shaman's doing or what any of his shaman sounds mean, which frees me up to take this where I need it to go. The shaman appears to be functioning less as an active director than a referee, giving us our own space until something goes wrong.

It's a good setting here; we're a mile away from a country road, no traffic sounds, no people or dogs, no sounds, in fact, except our own. I try to let go and just ride the holy tea. I do a reasonable job of clearing out any thoughts, but time passes and my rational head still holds together. It might have been forty minutes or so when I start to think, Fuck this shit. It's turning out just like the Daime ceremony, only more expensive and three thousand miles from home. Whether it's due to my ongoing academic training, general distaste for these New Age scenes, or just a calcified pineal gland, nothing happens. This medicine was not meant for me.

If it's really a waste, my best move would be to fall asleep and let Eyad and everyone else have their trips. I try to focus on what the shaman is doing. I guess that his rattle is a schacapa made from leaves and held together with vine. He might also have a quena, a wooden flute from the Andean highlands. Before the flight, I had read an article from the 1970s about music used in ayahuasca rituals. The authors, Marlene Dobkin De Rios and Fred Katz, argued that "once the biochemical effects of the hallucinogenic drug alter the user's perception, music operates as a 'jungle gym' in consciousness during the drug state, providing a series of pathways and banisters through which the drug user negotiates his way." According to the article, rituals are programmed so that the music makes the paths, and "the implicit mathematical structure of music, purposefully chosen by the shaman, would serve specific cultural goals," such as communing with the spirit of the vine. Through the music, this ayahuasquero can help direct the choices that we make in our visions. If the shaman and I are riding in a car together, I'm the one behind the wheel, and I decide which turns to make, but the shaman makes the roads.

My eyes closed, I manage to find some good feelings in the sounds and drift off to sleep. When I wake up, it's on. I've boarded the Mother Wheel, the Active Intelligence, the Golden Condor, Cybertron. I've logged into the Universal Libraries. Either I'm up there or it's down here.

First it's like geometrically perfect static of zigzagging black-and-white patterns. Then, as though my field of vision were a computer screen, I am bombarded with pop-up windows in which beautiful South Asian women gaze at me with their best long-lashed fuck-me eyes, big anime eyes like brown versions of hentai girls. The windows keep popping up, overlapping each other and filling my sight too fast for me to follow. As the images multiply, they grow exponentially nastier—progressing from images that could be acceptable for a Victoria's Secret commercial to brutal hardcore porn. The girls look like desi versions of Alexis Love, and they're choking on big veiny disembodied dongs, cocks with no men attached that I can see, until the mascara-colored tears run down their cheeks and their faces are bombed with semen in heavy globs and long strings. They let the spunk dribble out of their mouths, then suck it back in and lick their lips. They open their mouths wide to show me and then blow bubbles

with it. Whatever's happening, they never turn their gazes; their eyes, all of their thousands of jizz-tortured eyes at once, stay locked onto mine.

Through it all, I know that my brutal bukkake champs love it, even if they only love it because they know that I want it. These women are houris, the living sex dolls of Islamic paradise. Houris aren't exactly human; they're more like robots, possessing no souls or free will, created for my enjoyment. The houris reportedly boast, "We are the eternal ones, we do not disintegrate; we are the soft ones, we do not cause suffering; we are the pleased ones, we do not get angry. Blessed is he who belongs to us and to whom we belong."

Allah created the houris to have eternally renewing virginity, no matter what goes into them or how many times. Muhammad's own wife, A'isha, grew sick of hearing about the virgins of Allah's garden—perhaps because, though she had bragged about her own virginity to Muhammad's other wives, who had not been virgins before marrying him, A'isha's virginity was nonrenewable. A'isha derived prestige from her former virgin status, which had been necessarily sacrificed for her new status as a wife of the Prophet. In response to the boasts of the houris, A'isha promised that the believing women of this world would say to them: "We are those who pray and you have not prayed; we are the ones who have fasted and you have not fasted; we have performed ablutions and you have not; we have given alms and you have not." In A'isha's estimation, the human women of this world triumph over the manufactured female bodies of paradise.

There's no escaping the houris—when I turn away from one, or manage to close the pop-up window, a thousand more appear—and it's tempting to just accept their invitation and let the whole ayahuasca vision be a long fuck party, since I have no guarantee that anything else will come of it. Then I hear a voice speaking on the houris' nature and limitation: "They are me too, but you don't have to stop here. You can keep moving."

I understand it to be the voice of Allah. The houris are Allah in the sense that everything in creation expresses Allah's Attributes. The houris are embodied Names, revealing Allah as al-Khabir (the All-Aware), because they know what I want, and ar-Razzaq (the Provider) or al-Karim (the Bountiful) because they give it to me, or ar-Rafi (the Exalter) because, as with earthly porn, the performer exalts the consumer, the performer's desires existing only within the frames of what the consumer wants.

Allah is calling me to move past the houris with compassion for them, no anger. I love the appearances for what they are but know that appearances are also veils. According to Ibn 'Arabi, the Qur'an's mention of magdubi alayhim (those who have put wrath on themselves) in its first sura refers to seekers who are distracted from Allah by their attraction to mere appearances such as beautiful houris and other joys of the

paradisiacal garden. For their failure to look past the appearances, they earn "wrath," meaning that they distance themselves from Allah.

The houris behind me, I now see Fatima, the Prophet's daughter, as a naked black woman hovering above her son Husayn, prince of martyrs, while blood pours from her vagina into his body. I cannot see exactly how the blood finds its way into Husayn—perhaps through a hole in the top of his head?—but it flows hard like a faucet on full blast. There is a wound in Husayn's side, from which the blood pours out of him with the same force, and I kneel before him to drink it.

This would be another good time to remember that I grew up Catholic.

I'm on my knees, taking every drop from him and fighting to swallow it all. Husayn's blood is the blood issuing from Fatima's vagina, as though Husayn is just a funnel through which I ingest his mother. So much of her blood gushes into me that I expand like a balloon. My body becomes nearly a perfect sphere and ready to pop when I finally recognize that this blood is me; I, myself, am nothing but a bag of blood from a vagina. When Husayn spilled his blood at Karbala, it was Fatima's blood. When I spill blood, whether in grief for Husayn or taking on Abdullah the Butcher in the wrestling ring, it is also blood from a woman, who is now represented along with all women by the macrocosmic Fatima. Upon attainment of this new knowledge of self, the swelling goes down, and I return to my regular shape.

It feels like I might vomit, as I had been warned, and I remember that a bucket remains within reach for this purpose. Reading the physical effects through the vision, however, I decide to hold it down; I must hold it down because what makes me nauseated is the fact that I drank gallons of sacred blood. Fatima's blood is filled with lessons, and I need to keep it inside, integrating her blood and the knowledge of her blood within me, allowing Fatima to do her work and make me whole in a new way.

In finding my way past the houris and then realizing the truth of human existence as vaginal blood, I passed two initiations. Now I sit at a table in a white room. It feels less like a room with walls, a ceiling, and a floor than just empty white space, completely blank except for two parallel tubes of neon light, one red and one green, that run from one end of infinity to the other. It seems that the lights are in motion, that they flow like rivers. They are alive. I know that these two streams of light, though they do not appear in double helix form or have rungs connecting them, represent my deoxyribose nucleic acid, my genetic blueprint. Half of it comes from my father, a diagnosed schizophrenic, and he was the son of a pentecostal preacher who experienced glossolalia, often called "speaking in tongues." Part of my set is that I come from a long line of strange brains.

Fatima and I sit together on opposite sides of a table. She wears a head wrap, more in the style that Erykah Badu wore in the 1990s than what most people would regard as Islamic hijab. I have no sense of what she wears below the neck.

“Are you Allah?” I ask her.

“I’m as Allah as you’ll ever get,” she answers. I immediately understand. No image can contain Allah in Allah’s totality, if the Qur’an is right when it says that nothing is like Allah but Allah appears to us in forms that we can recognize. Fatima is my personal experience of Allah and also the station of my limit. Does the vision count as “hallucination”? None of it’s here if I open my eyes, but it’s so real that I can’t help but keep my eyes closed and stay with Fatima. She’s actually there on some level, and opening my eyes is like walking away from her.

Then the table is gone, Fatima is naked, and she takes my hand and holds my open palm to her vagina. With total peace, my hand rests on labia that belong not only to the daughter of the Prophet but actually the Lord of the Worlds. “This,” she tells me, “is all that it is. All of the religion, the books, the mosques, it’s just this. It’s men trying to replicate this power.”

“What about the Qur’an?” I want to know the meanings of verses. If Allah could appear as a woman, why would Allah send down revelations that enabled men to claim divinely sanctioned patriarchy? Why would Allah’s verses give women spiritual equality but legal inferiority? Why would Allah speak of herself in male pronouns and even condemn as unbelievers those who assigned feminine names to the angels?

I want to know more than just the answers to my problems. What about all the hidden jewels waiting to be found in the text of the revelation, the Qur’an’s “mystery letters” that appear in seemingly random order, or the secret meanings of numbers? What of the Qur’an’s mathematical code? What’s the meaning of that mystery pronoun in the verses of Muhammad’s strange encounter: “As he was in the highest part of the horizon, then he approached and came closer, and was at a distance of two bow-lengths or nearer”—who’s this “he” that approached? How many dots are in the Qur’an? And what did it mean that Fatima’s husband said that he was the dot under ba, the first letter in the first word of the first verse?

“That’s for the boys,” she says. “Stay with me now.” Still clutching my hand to her vagina, she adds, “This is the door to the mosque.”

Her father had once said that the entire earth was a mosque. At the moment that I understand the earth as symbolic of the human womb, our surroundings change. We are no longer in the empty white space with red and green strands of DNA light around us, but have been transported to a more materially sturdy room, with a marble floor and green curtains draped over the walls. Three pillars divide the middle of the room, and a string of hanging lamps runs between them. We are inside the Ka’ba, and the inside looks more or less as I had seen it in pictures online—and also in my semi-mystical contemplations during the hajj. I am flooded with surges of boundless joy. Fatima then gestures to her lower abdomen, repeating her words, “This is all that it is.” The Ka’ba

was built by men as an imitation of Fatima's real power, Hajar's real power, against which the man-made Ka'ba, the elaborate constructions around it, and the millions of gold-on-green hardcover Qur'ans that the Saudi government prints each year to distribute across the globe amount to nothing. If we are all gods within our own ciphers, what could be a greater mosque than the place where gods are made?

As a teenager hanging out at the mosque, I couldn't count the number of times that I read a pamphlet or heard an imam compare the position of the fetus in the womb to sajdah, the prostration made in Islamic prayer, thus arguing that all human beings were created as perfect Muslims. The pamphleteers and imams were right, but they didn't even know why. The Qur'an begins with the words, Bismillahir Rahmanir Raheem, and the R-H-M root that gives us the word for "mercy" also gives us the word for "womb." The womb is a name of Allah, in fact the first two attributes assigned to Allah in the Qur'an.

Allah's vagina blanks the pages of my Qur'an. There is no need for text, no words to be used like Legos to build a mystery god from nothing, and no endless chain of signifiers pointing to what cannot be seen with my own eyes. I give up the Book because this is a divine command from the Mother of the Book, and I have touched the sacred lips with my own hand. That was all that it could be, as Allah as I'd ever get.

While on the subject of the Divine Feminine, what about the goddess religion that Fatima's father destroyed? What of al-Lat, whose name was a feminine form of Allah? What of al-Uzza, who was portrayed in hadith literature as a naked black woman, destroyed with a sword to the head at Muhammad's command? Al-Lat, al-Uzza, and their sister Manat were called the daughters of Allah. In the Qur'an, just a few verses away from the references to an unknown "he" approaching from the highest part of the horizon, Allah mocks the men of Mecca for attributing daughters to Allah when they view daughters as a disgrace. Many like to read these verses as a protofeminist statement, that Allah is condemning the men for their sexism, but it could also read as an acceptance of that sexism, as the men are simply scolded for giving Allah a raw deal, attributing less to Allah than what they would want for themselves. It might be an affirmation of Islamic monotheism—both sons and daughters betray Allah's absolute transcendence and incomparability—but daughters additionally put Allah beneath men who cherish their sons. "This would be an unfair division," says Allah.

Muhammad is not the father of any of your men, says the Qur'an, and Allah begets not, nor is he begotten. Muhammad, the human vessel through which we received this text, had no sons who lived to maturity, but he had daughters. Even if the Qur'an mocks the notion of Allah having daughters, one of Muhammad's daughters is now my stand-in for Allah. This is a point at which things could get messy.

Stay with me, says Fatima.

The Qur'an?

It is for the boys, she answers.

If Islam was an effort by men to exalt a male mystery god over the true and living power of the womb, should we recover the lost pre-Islamic worship of fertility goddesses? I ask Fatima to speak on al-Lat, Manat, and al-Uzza. "They have no adab," she tells me, referring to the Islamic traditions of manners and refinement. "It's not a path."

Then, without warning, Fatima is gone, the green lodge of the Ka'ba is gone, and I look up and see the mean face of my father, gritting his teeth and looking down at me with his Charles Manson eyes, raining down all his violence and hatred upon my body. In real life, at least as far back as I can remember, I had never seen him like that; I am witnessing him through my mother's eyes. I am my mother experiencing rape by my father—the rape that made me—and I burst out crying, not for my hurt but hers, because only now can I really know it.

Fatima returns and wipes the violence clean.

"If men are that way," I ask her, "how can you love Ali?"

"Ali is something else," she answers.

Ali is now with us, a glowing black man with his thick beard and long double-bladed Zulfikar sword. He tells me, "I'm only here because you can't see her." True. During my teen heartbreak over Islam, I was visited by Muhammad, Ali, Hasan, and Husayn in a dream, the four of them surrounding me and holding me tight by the milky-white pond of Kauthar. If Fatima was there with her father, husband, and sons, I failed to notice, and it was not until this trip that I ever considered her absence from my dream or my blindness to her.

Lying on my back in both this farmhouse and the visionary realm, I spread my legs wide and arch my spine because now I am Fatima, accepting Ali upon me. I am the Daughter of the Prophet, Mother of Civilization, Queen of the Forest, Goddess of the Earth, Radiant Sun of the Universe, knowing it most in my hips and legs and the way that I move. My body moves as Fatima would move when Ali goes into her, though I remain aware that I'm tripping and that there's a room full of people here who might witness me writhing on the floor in this way. But I can't care.

The bulbous mushroom head opens me wide, and Ali goes deep with a single push, and he's big like you would not believe, bigger than could be realistically possible, but it does not hurt—or at least it transcends hurt; it leaves hurt far behind. It feels like he's in me all the way up to my neck, that my entire self is filled with him, and as he fills me, I am also engulfed within his body, blanketed by him, locked between his big arms.

Ali was the first male to follow Muhammad and accept Islam. Just a sickly little boy standing alone, Ali's love for Muhammad caused him to be jeered and mocked by his

idol-worshiping uncles. As the first male convert, he was Muhammad's second follower overall. The first human being to bear witness to Muhammad's mission was his wife Khadija, Fatima's mother. Ali, as I understand him, remained mindful of his rank, even after he grew strong and matured into a chivalrous warrior-sage.

Muhammad never took multiple wives during his marriage to Khadija; it was only after her death that we find the various episodes that anti-Islamic writers employ to paint Muhammad as a sex fiend, such as the marriage to young A'isha and the taking of his adopted son's wife as his own. Ali did not marry another woman during Fatima's lifetime; according to tradition, Muhammad actually forbade him from doing so, fearing that jealousy would bring Fatima difficulty in her religion. "Fatima is part of me," said the Prophet. "I am displeased by what displeases her, and I am harmed by what harms her."

When I am in the form of Fatima, my longing for Ali becomes a desire for Allah as a male beloved. In the Sufi traditions of the Punjab, figures such as Bulleh Shah would assume female personas in their poetry and write of Allah as their bridegroom. Bulleh Shah, a direct descendant of Muhammad who believed that Muhammad was an incarnation of Krishna, even dressed in women's clothes and danced as a woman. I feel it now for Ali; I want to be a houri for Ali when he needs one, a safe space and comfort for him. With Ali inside me and my feet resting on his calves, my hips rising to meet him, I also know that even when he needs a houri, I'm more than a houri. I am the Mother Wheel that beams him up into herself.

Even sperm cells are imagined to uphold constructions of masculinity. People regard the sperms as heroic adventurers on a perilous journey, struggling like real men against all odds, braving hostile terrain with no help, a Manifest Destiny trip. That's not the entire picture. Just as a pilgrim makes hajj only at Allah's invitation, and the pilgrim answers the call with the chant of "Labbayk, Allahumma labbayk," the egg invites the sperm cells to itself by releasing progesterone, which not only attracts the sperm but also powers their tails to swim harder in hyperactivation. As Fatima, I am maker and owner of the greater Ka'ba, to which Ali sends his pilgrims on a mission to make Allah.

I need Ali to come inside me. It's the trust that I give to him and receive from him. Ali and I want to know ourselves so we create the world. Ali's sperm is encoded with the secret understandings of letters and numbers and the events of the future and the science of God and self; my womb is the niche mentioned in the Qur'an's Verse of Light, holding the divine wisdom of Allah's nur, which is why they call me Fatima az-Zahra, Fatima the Radiant. I am revelation made manifest and also its source, my father's daughter and also my father's mother.

Ali gives it like a storm god, an emotionally and morally advanced version of Enki. His penis is the Father of Civilization, digging irrigation ditches in the sand. When Ali

shoots—at which point he holds his thrust to its absolute limit, the deepest inside me that it can go, making sure that his pilgrims get a good start on their long swim—I feel it like an electric charge of living glitter and sparkles through my arms and legs, all the way to my fingertips and toes. Every inch of me tingles with him and the swimming unborn Imams, forty million new Husayns in every milliliter. I want Ali's coming to never stop, soaking my insides, my tissue and organs, permeating every ounce of my flesh with the infinite living Imamate, fertilizing all of me with electric Ali-ness.

His sperm cells are not like tadpoles—and this isn't exactly saying that they don't "look like" or "appear to be" tadpoles, because I'm not sure of the way that I perceive them—but they're more like cartoon stars of every color. They surround my Ka'ba, releasing enzymes from their heads that are designed to open the Ka'ba's door. Once a single sperm star makes its way inside, the Ka'ba is transformed. The union of Ali's sperm with my egg makes a new cell, which knows that it must then divide and become two cells, which will then repeat the division again and again as the clustered zygote-mahdi travels through my tubes on its way to my uterus, the cells growing more specialized, becoming blood cells and nerve cells and so on. Against the zygote-imam, there is no theological abstraction, no searching across the universe; the mystery god is both lost and found within the mysteries of parents.

Just as I was an altered beast after drinking Fatima's blood, I am again transformed by having received Ali's sperm. When I am restored to my own self, which has since been remade into a new self, integrating Fatima and Ali together within my new Husayn star body, I ask Fatima to explain how she sees Ali as God.

"That's my business," she answers. Though Fatima has granted me the supreme baraka of loaning her body so that I could know penetration from Ali, I still cannot share in her vision of Ali as the Wajh Allah, the Face of God. As soon as she says that it's her business, I know the reason. As Ali had told me, I never saw Fatima. I have always loved Ali, and my whole life has been spent in longing for heroic and divine men. He-Man, Hulk Hogan, and Malcolm X trained me to love the specific godhood of Ali, the kind of godhood in which the penis represents hero ethics.

That Muhammad was not the father of any of our men takes on a purpose of divine pedagogy: Allah is pointing at Muhammad's daughter, waiting for us to witness his light that survived through her body.

In allowing me to assume her form, Fatima had fed my desire for Ali and showed me the kind of man that I was not, but my Allah needed to be Fatima, the appearance of Allah that Ali himself recognized. It is for this reason that while I had transformed into Fatima to witness a better masculinity in Ali, the reverse does not happen; I never become Ali to have sex with Fatima. If I had assumed Ali's form, even for the purpose of making love to the Prophet's daughter, it would just become a narcissistic show: me

staring at my/Ali's awesome Zulfikar-sized penis as it goes into her, flexing my juiced biceps to the mirrors around us, and reducing Fatima to a houri. No new lessons in that experience.

Now that I've had Ali as Fatima would have him, I understand the lion in those pictures, the tamed lion that rests peacefully at Ali's feet. The lion can represent the nafs, the lower self, the ego, in some general sense, but when I see it subdued by Ali, I know that it's the pure terror of maleness. The lion is not merely the lower self, but the lower self in a culture that tells men that their lower selves are their truest selves—all our rape cultures in which sex is competition and war, women are disassembled into their parts, and men earn the right of dominion over female bodies through conquest of male bodies. You are men, you are soldiers and football players and wrestling champions, created by our heavenly Father in His image for the blessed holy missions of murdering and fucking. That's what the world has told me since my brain was developed enough to receive culture. It keeps throwing diseased meat at the monster. My father could not tame his lion, but I see the lion resting in front of Ali, no threat whatsoever; Ali has a relaxed grip on his sword, no tension at all. Ali altered the beast inside himself, taught it the meaning of civilization, and made that lion into a Muslim. And then he sat himself in heaven at once; as Fatima, I experienced the lion of Ali's nafs, the brutal animal power that he had refined and made safe for me.

Both Fatima and Ali disappear, and the lion too, replaced by my father, who forced two miscarriages upon my mother, raped me into existence, and then tried to perform his third DIY abortion by making Mom sprint around the block in her ninth month. This man is a force of nature's malevolence, I know, like hurricanes or volcanic eruptions or rabid dogs. But he seems different now, softer; even as a brittle old man he still carried himself like he might have to make someone swallow his gun. Dad now looks younger than I had ever known him, as though this could be how he actually looked when he and my mother were together, but he's also much older because he has graduated from this earthly life. Because the visions aren't entirely visual, there's not a specific image in mind with this description of him. I have a sense for the color of his hair—like the light brown of the lion's mane—but can't even say whether or not he has a beard. Likewise, I'm not certain of our surroundings, but it feels like we're in the woods somewhere in West Virginia on a clear day.

"When my brother David was killed," he tells me, "it destroyed my mother. That truck did as much to her as it did to him. She was gone. But it did not do the same to my father, and I never understood why." He has just explained his lifetime of male violence. In the rational world, this explanation might not be sufficient. In the ayahuasca world, it means more than he can actually say with words, and I get it, and we embrace—something that has happened only once in my life. He cries in my arms, something that

has never happened, and it's the kind of crying that reveals a healing; my father cries because the poison is making its way out of him.

My healing him also heals me of him and everything that followed him: growing up fatherless, learning about him around the time that puberty hit, coming to terms with the fact that I was made in an act of assault, and wanting so badly to save my mother that it somehow led me to punish her. At fifteen, I found my cure-all solution in a patriarchal religious view that made men the lords and masters of women, promising to keep women safe by locking them away. The problem was no longer my father's control of my mother, but that he was the wrong man to control her.

I love the devil because the devil gives me nothing; I love the devil because the devil planted fear in me as a little boy; and now as a grown man, I still fear the devil, because the devil feeds me bad foods that make me forget my own self. Healing my father, I begin to heal of the boy poison that I've allowed into myself over the years, from Dad's advice to me on the day that we met ("No pussy on this earth is worth the woman's game"; "Woman is the nigger of the earth") to my adoration of sexist Malcolm X and Islamic masculinity, which I performed by trying to erase all consciousness of sex.

At a vulnerable time in a boy's life, religion came in and tortured me with its promises and pressures. Islam was a heavy weight that I hung from my balls. The Muslim retraining that I adopted as a teenager, an antisexuality of lowering my gaze when girls walked by and keeping my hand off my dick as best as I could, led me nowhere but to a sexuality of anger and revenge. When my repression finally hit the wall, I bounced back hard in the opposite direction; for a time, liberation from Muslim bodily discipline meant being careless about where I shot it. Abandoning the path of Malcolm, I moved toward a simple frat-boy masculinity, living as though all my toxic self-hatred and fear and resentment could escape my body with orgasm. I treated semen as a means of vandalism, my way to tag people by reddening their eyes and leaving crust on their necks and clumps in their hair and bad tastes in their mouths. Ejaculation on or in women became the proof of my new and free self. I pursued girls not even for pleasure so much as a sense of triumph, strove to get my dick sucked without having to kiss first, crossed the bridge to Niagara Falls to go to strip clubs where I could buy blow jobs in the daytime, and collected a rich pile of rotten dude-bro adventure stories for my team of dude-bros. After hitting that wall, the point at which I began to crawl back to Muslim communities and reconsider my position, I started to chase after Muslim girls. At the time, my understanding of concepts like "religion" and "liberation" would have positioned me as the white boy savior for repressed brown sisters.

With ayahuasca causing an eruption of natural empathy chemicals, Fatima forces me to confront every Lundy's Lane prostitute, Buffalo State College first-year, and sheltered desi Muslimah who might travel this earth carrying a sad or lame experience from me,

every time that I was less than Ali. It all survives in my own gut, every bad work festering and multiplying and combining with the others. Before it can be expelled from my body, each individual hurt must pass through my heart, where it lingers and I am forced to feel its weight. The memories then merge like Voltron lions into an overwhelming power that I cannot bear. In real life, outside the ayahuasca vision, I cry hard. In the logic of ayahuasca world, I know that my crying is what pushes out the poison.

As I hold my father, he holds me, and he matches my crying, and we cry into each other. Not far from us in that West Virginia forest, a parallel encounter takes place between Ali and his father-in-law. I turn and see Ali and Muhammad holding each other, both of them crying, soaking their beards in tears, Ali healing Muhammad of something deep inside him that I could never know. Muhammad had reportedly confessed that if it were at all possible for one human being to worship another, he would order women to worship their husbands; it has been suggested that he said this in response to Fatima herself, instructing her to be obedient to Ali. But I wonder if Ali, who witnesses Allah in Fatima, might know something that Muhammad, the older man who had witnessed Allah in the form of a young man, does not.

According to hadith tradition, Muhammad promised that the majority of the Fire's inhabitants would be women. There's something torn up in this man, Allah's Mercy to the Worlds who cursed effeminate men, declared that he would rather fall from the heavens to the earth than see another man's arwah, and married six-year-old A'isha who grew up to command an army against Ali on the battlefield; and Muhammad cannot mend what is torn until he drops his weapons and cries in Ali's arms. When Muhammad bawls so hard that he can no longer stand, Ali continues to hold him and support his weight. Muhammad is loved and he loves his daughter and he's going to be okay, I know, just as my father will be okay, and I will be okay. All of us are made whole again. Sunlight pokes through that West Virginia forest to bless us men, and we know who the sunlight is.

Parts of the vision and/or the emotions that I had felt during them play over again. I retrace my steps through the psychic purge and healing, even when there's no new material. Fatima says nothing, and I can't see her but know that she's still there, more like an abstract mystery goddess at this point. When the visions are done but the trip is still going, I keep my eyes closed just to stay in those feelings. Sometimes the pain returns. With my back still flat on the floor, I stretch my arms up and reach as though Fatima's hanging out on the ceiling. I can't tell if my grabbing at the air and tossing and turning disrupt the trips of anyone around me, but at one point, I open my eyes and see the shape of the shaman in the dark. A seeker near me has sat up, and the shaman puts his hand on her shoulder and blows mist on the top of her head and then she lies back down.

I know that this will set me right, so when the shaman approaches me, I sit up. He blows a spray of rosewater over my head, and the scent reminds me of Pakistan. I lie back down and knock out.

There comes a time when I could be awake or asleep, not sure, but I realize that the shaman is gone. It feels like I might still be tripping, or at least that a vision quest of that magnitude requires some transition time as I pass between levels of reality. After all of the overstimulation of the houris and the emotional traumas and the devastating love of Allah in human form, the world seems a lot quieter. It's the most perfect peace from the only source of peace; I was with Allah and my Allah came as a mother, and she let me swim nine thousand miles with her and now I'm just wiped out on the shore, halfway in the water, looking up at the blue and knowing that yes, I'm okay, I'll be okay, I can love myself and give a better kind of love to the people in my cipher. My hurt is so far away that it's funny; I can laugh about it. The boys are going to be okay and the girls are going to be okay. I am millions of years old now, and I can laugh with compassion for the little ones who think that their hurts will last forever, like Allah who laughs hardest when good news is around the corner and the sad believers have no idea.

I could be drifting in and out of sleep, but I'm not sure. At times, it feels like I'm dreaming or half-dreaming. I hear epic vomiting from someone near me. I am still in such contentment that it only makes sense to stay on the floor in mad love with Allah. By some accident, human beings found a combination of plants that would work on their chemicals in the most wondrous ways, and with these plants, they could open their hearts. They also worked on their chemicals through stories, the technologies through which they gave meaning to the plant's effects. There's no distinction here between the natural and the cultural, the chemical effects of the plants and the practices and interpretations that we put on them; we're all the earth, no reason to see one as contrary to the other. Vegetation and human worked together to make this thing. The accident/miracle of ayahuasca, both the nature and the cultures, the vine and the people, opened my heart's Ka'ba. Fatima Kubra.

The Qur'an says that Allah is closer to me than the vein in my neck. Allah was swimming in my blood, and I was filled with Allah's blood. I am Allah because I placed the seal on my own heart and then opened it back up—light or no light, it's always me. And I am a Muslim because there's no choice but to submit to what I was given. Hiya and la hiya.

There are still twenty or so other customers in the room. I don't know what happened inside Eyad or any of them. Maybe I was the only one to see Fatima, or just the only one who called her by that name. I wonder what they might have called her, what kinds of mythological frameworks they would have used to conceptualize and understand her, the tools that they brought here for anthropomorphizing love and compassion and empathy

into a personified creature. She could have been Mary for some of these people, or the Queen of the Forest. Maybe she appeared in forms that I couldn't recognize.

The room is still mostly dark, but I can tell that the sun is up. At some point Eyad turns around and sees my eyes open.

"How is it?" he whispers, his voice ragged and worn out as though he had been screaming all night. Not entirely confident that I could bring myself to speak, I give him a thumbs-up and close my eyes again, withdrawing back into myself. It seems appropriate to remember that even if I had my own buraq ride to the Farthest Mosque, I am not a prophet, that nothing I had been given amounted to authority over my sisters and brothers; but I still smile at the idea that Allah gave me a small taste of prophetic experience, and wonder whether Muhammad's experience of Allah was anything like mine. According to hadith accounts, Muhammad did see Allah in human form, as a beardless young man with curly hair, dressed in green. This youthful Allah put his hand between Muhammad's shoulder blades, causing Muhammad to feel a coolness in his nipples. I love Muhammad for what he had and love Allah for coming to him and giving him peace. I love Allah for coming to me as Muhammad's daughter. Perhaps Muhammad could love that too, or not, but I love Muhammad regardless.

I manage to stand up and take baby steps through the dark to find the bathroom. One of the shaman's sober assistants sees me staggering and comes over to help me balance. I thank him and say that I'm okay, closing the bathroom door behind me and turning on the eye-crushing light. The door is locked, but I'm not sure if that was a good move on my part, since I might need help later. I sit on the toilet for a long time, doing nothing, just re-acclimating myself to this kind of life away from the Mother Wheel, the life of painful bathroom lights. The toilet is white. The sink is also white, and the floor tiles are white. The only sound is my breathing through my mouth. It sounds to me like I'm breathing in a space helmet. In my reading of each breath, the inhalation is my work, and what happens next—the air's journey into my lungs, the transfer of oxygen through my alveoli walls into the blood vessels, and the movement of carbon dioxide from the vessels to the alveoli—is the work of someone else. There is an intelligence deep inside me that I cannot know or control, a mystery within me, doing this work. Then I push the air back out. The Qur'an says that Allah is nearer to me than the vein in my neck, and this sounds right in a new way.

I take out my small lavender notepad and pen and scribble. Insha'Allah, this will help me remember the important things later.

THE LION IS MY FATHER HE'S ME

ALI HAS SUBDUED ME

ALI SERVES ANOTHER (FATIMA)

FATIMA: I'M AS ALLAH AS YOU'LL EVER GET

ALI'S SPERM

FATIMA KEEPS SAYING STAY WITH ME NOW

DON'T ASK ABOUT QUR'AN THAT'S FOR THE BOYS

STAY WITH ME

THE PROJECT WAS CREATING MY FAMILY 1913–2013

My hand still unsteady, just these few lines take up several pages. The notes are barely legible, but they'll guide me later when I'm at a computer trying to articulate memories from another plane of existence. As a visual aid, I make a messy doodle of a lion.

It's a smooth ride back to earth; the Mother Wheel brings me down easy. Even after I'm fully awake and sober, the world comes at me slower and softer. The seekers roll up their sleeping bags and mill around outside the house, eating banana chips and half-whispering our conversations. We exchange positive reports without giving much detail about whatever crazy things we saw. It seems reasonable to assume that besides Eyad, none of these people have ever heard of Fatima or know much of Islam, so I just tell them that I made contact with the divine feminine and that it healed me of accumulated masculine pain. They nod and share. Everyone seems to have come out of the trip with reassurance about themselves and their own broken parts, and now it feels like we might actually be a community, if only for the next hour or so. Even though we didn't say two words to each other prior to the experience, and I never caught most of their names, we did embark on a pilgrimage together, and the good-bye hugs feel sincere.

As Eyad drives us back to the city, I try to explain what had happened.

"I was chilling with Fatima," I tell him, smiling.

"Yeah?"

"It was peace." It's hard to begin or know whether I should talk about becoming Fatima and having sex with Ali before I've really processed it. My mind's not sharp yet; it feels almost like I've smoked some weed. My thoughts move slow but feel wise, as if I'm centuries old, way too old to be bothered by any of this childhood world that knows no adulthood. "It was crazy, completely off-the-chart heretical, but also really Islam-positive," I tell Eyad.

"Do you feel like going to the mosque?" he asks. I do. We stop at the Islamic Center

of Los Angeles and share a sad laugh that its address just happens to be 434 South Vermont Avenue, 4:34 being the Qur'an's famous "wife-beating" verse.

"Do you know the context of the verse?" I ask Eyad. He doesn't, so I build on it: "A woman had come to the Prophet, saying that her husband mistreated her. The Prophet reprimanded the man, and then this verse came down. The Prophet did not want to share the verse, but he had no choice; he said that he wanted one thing, and Allah wanted something else, and what Allah wanted was better."

"No shit?" says Eyad.

"No shit," I answer.

We step in with our right feet first, according to Muhammad's custom for entering a mosque. Sura 4:34 stays on my mind, but words can give no headache when you build with Allah in person. For the cosmic Qur'an, the umm al-kitab, to have come from Fatima, and Fatima to represent boundless compassion, decimates any potential issues with what the earthly paper-and-ink mushaf might actually say; Fatima herself becomes the answer to every question. I go to the men's room and make wudhu, doing everything exactly by the book but at one-third my normal speed, and head to the masalla, where an old woman teaches a circle of small children. Facing the direction of Mecca, I begin my prayer, my silent recitation of al-Fatiha corresponding to the children reciting some twenty feet away, and then some verses that I know from ar-Rahman, the sura that keeps asking, "Which of the favors of your Lord will you deny?" It takes effort to keep my gaze lowered and avoid turning to see the class, and I remember a saying of al-Juwayni, the teacher of al-Ghazali: "Hold onto the religion of the old women." It momentarily distracts me from prayer to consider what that meant. I spend extra time at each position of the salah, fulfilling my ritual obligations but also allowing the recitations from these children and their teacher to enter into my prayer. The time that I spend in sajdah, my face pressed to the carpet, lasts nearly as long as some full prayers that I've done.

On the outside, the prayer is a performance of my authentic religion. I do everything the way that I'm supposed to do it; I position my body as I was taught and say the right words at the right times. On the inside, this is my first prayer to a woman, to the Allah who appeared to me as a woman. Fatima is the secret of my prayer. I wonder what the old woman here would think of that, and what kind of Allah is the object of her prayer.

After completing the prayer, I linger in the seated position for a long time, and recite a silent prayer that Muhammad had taught to his daughter, counting praises of Allah on my knuckles. The story goes that Fatima had asked her father for a servant to help her with housework, and the Prophet answered that he would teach her something more valuable than a servant: saying Allahu Akbar (God is the Greatest) thirty-four times, followed by Al-hamdulilah (The praise is for God) thirty-three times, followed by Subhan'Allah (Glory to God) thirty-three times, and La ilaha illa Allah (There is no god

but God) once. This short recitation, Muhammad assured her, produced more blessings than one thousand rakats of regular prayer. Fatima used to count the praises on her blue-stringed tasbih, its beads made with dirt taken from the grave of her great-uncle Hamza, who had been martyred at the Battle of Uhud. Later generations of Shi'a Muslims would make their tasbih with soil from Karbala.

Everything comes with a secret now, my personal batin hiding in the zahir. I think of the "Hand of Fatima" ornament that you can find hanging on front doors and from rearview mirrors in Muslim-majority countries, a protection against the evil eye. Interestingly, it is Sunni tradition that interprets the hand as that of Fatima; for Shi'as, the hand belongs to Husayn's half-brother Abbas, who lost both of his arms and then his life at Karbala. For the rest of my life, I will remember the secret of Fatima's hand: it's my hand, the hand that Fatima placed on herself to show me the door of the mosque.

Watching the soft prayers of another man as he goes through the same cycles of standing, bowing, and prostrating that I had just performed, I remember a story of the Prophet and his granddaughter Umama, the daughter of Fatima's sister Zaynab. It was reported that Muhammad would hold little Umama in his arms when in the standing position, put her down when prostrating, and then pick her back up as he stood again. Hiding within the exoteric sweetness of Muhammad-as-grandfather, there could also be a mystery to that prayer, batin symbols at every move, and of course the Prophet knows it. At least I find some comfort in the idea without trying too hard to crack the code.

At a time like this, what is my relationship to the Law? I have just prayed in accordance with established Islamic jurisprudence of the Hanafi madhab, with neither a firm conviction in the importance of following a madhab nor any particular objection to doing so. I then followed this Sunni version of prayer with a practice that I contextualize through Shi'a tradition, and a private contemplation that goes off the map. The debates and angst over prayer and sectarianism are too far away to mean anything for me: I pray; I care for the people of prayer; I care for my religion and the people of my religion. I am a Muslim with no problems. I have joined radical activists to reform Islamic rituals, and I love those people too; I want to love those people without losing these people, these old women and small children reciting short suras in Arabic and singing songs about the Prophet. As of this moment, sitting in the mosque with the people of the mosque, I have no positions and no questions. There's only the joy of my secret with Fatima—a secret that, while seemingly opposed to everything that the people of this mosque would consider to be acceptable Islam, makes my participation in their Islam easier than ever.

There are times for the Miraj and times for the mosque. The paths of ecstasy and mystical superheroism don't have to lead to isolation and disillusion; your visions and inner proclamations of Ana al-Haqq don't have to put you on the path of the al-Hallaj legend, and there's no need to live a whole lonely life on Cybertron. You can keep all of

it as you come home.

KNOWLEDGE BUILD/DESTROY

> LA ESCRITURA DE SILENCIO LA ESCRITURA DEESPACIO. ESO ES TODO TODO TODO HASSAN SABBAH.
>
> —WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS, THE YAGÉ LETTERS

According to tradition, Ali had called himself the dot under the ba in the Qur'an's bismillah. This cannot be historical, because in Ali's lifetime, Arabic letters did not yet have dots. Depending on the number and position of dots, the ba could instead be a ta or tha or ya or noon, and the whole word is transformed. So as the master interpreter and maker of meaning, Ali can be the dot, but Fatima does not need a dot or a letter. She is the Mother of the Book itself.

As I consider the Qur'an, I also read my personal text, the words that Fatima gave me when I asked her to explain the verses. "That's for the boys," she said. "Stay with me." Not men. Boys. There are no men, and the Qur'an came for boys, or we recite what boys think that they hear when a goddess tries to teach them. A'isha used to tease the Prophet about the Qur'an always seeming to speak for his own desires. Modern Muslim feminists have argued that generations of Muslim men have completely missed the Qur'an's real gender ethics, choosing instead to read only male supremacy in the verses.

Fatima brought me no god of books; she's not an Allah who studies the Qur'an as it has been said in Jewish tradition that Yahweh himself studies his own Torah. Fatima's not a theologian trying to decenter the womb with specialized vocabulary and fake mystery gods, and she brings no new methods for boys to manipulate letters and numbers and name themselves the masters of the universe. I had asked for these tools, and she refused—her words pulled me away from words—so I have no theology, no new version of what Elijah called the "spook god in space," just a freak-out at life that makes me see Allah in Husayn's emergence from his mother, blood bursting out of her R-H-M as R-H-M to the entire universe.

The Progressive Islam scene is filled with so-called Qur'an-only Muslims, who pull a Protestant sola scriptura trick to cut Muhammad out of Islam and avoid the rough spots

in his life, but I don't need it. I can pray as Fatima's father prayed, because her father has been transformed. I follow a post-ayahuasca Muhammad. The daughter made the father new again, and this could be leading me back to the sunna, putting on my new man. After years of mostly fearing and ducking the sunna, I now ride on the path of reconstructing what had been deconstructed, the Prophet and his masculinity. Muhammad's male body, healed and whole, can become the map for my own male body. I'm feeling so Ahl as-Sunna wa'l-Jamaa'ah and Muhammadus Prime right now, I want to shape my beard right and roll up my pant legs and everything. Next book is Why I Am a Salafee, filled with authenticated hadeeth and right manhaj and all double-vowel transliterations. Muhammad's rehabilitation in my heart could even open new possibilities for me with the Qur'an's male voice.

How did the Prophet's companions build with Supreme Mathematics? I can still get on point with my aqeedah, because even when I pray to Fatima—even when I think Fatima as I say Allah's Name—it does not feel as though I have violated Islamic tawhid by worshiping a human in place of Allah. I remain too self-aware in my idolatry. Fatima's not Allah, exactly; she's as Allah as I'll ever get. Fatima's only the Black Stone that I touch in my pilgrimage of witnessing. Even with these disclaimers, my new meanings for old prayers signify a conversion experience. Ayahuasca has transformed me into a new kind of Muslim, which also means that there's no longer a question of whether Muslims can drink ayahuasca or ayahuasca can become an "Islamic" drug. Theologians and jurists would approach the question from their own angles, but a historian can point at me and say, "Yes, ayahuasca is an Islamic drug. It just became one."

I do want to drink ayahuasca in the holy city. If you can chug Pepsi and eat KFC during hajj, why not ayahuasca? On top of that, you can now buy weed in alleys less than a mile from the Ka'ba, and they're already marketing energy pills for the weary pilgrims. During my time in Mecca, I saw poster-sized advertisements for "Pharmaton," featuring photos of smiling, robust, and refreshed hajjis in their ihram towels. "FULFILL YOUR SACRED DUTY WITH ENERGY!" said the posters. So now it's halal to do hajj on speed.

Gather the pilgrims around the Ka'ba with sleeping bags and buckets, turn off the Haram's stadium lights and get Mecca dark again like it's the Mecca of Abraham, mix ayahuasca with Zamzam water and make them drink the medicine, get us all up there with Fatima, and let the minaret loudspeakers blare the sounds of weeping and vomiting men. In the morning I'd sit with my sisters and brothers, and we'd eat the lambs that we slaughtered and talk about all the pain that we puked into our buckets and how getting it out has opened us up to see what Islam's really supposed to be, and we'd hug each other and go back to our Book while knowing its Mother.

I want to stay with Fatima, as she had told me to do, but I am also a scholar, or an aspiring scholar, and I live in ink. I am a writer; I veil myself with text. Even when she tells me to leave books alone, I put it in a new book. Before leaving the mosque, I pull out my purple notepad and jot down more recollections from the vision. A line from my earlier notes strikes me: "THE PROJECT WAS CREATING MY FAMILY 1913–2013." If it's not a Noble Drew Ali reference, I'm guessing that 1913 was supposed to be 1993, the year that I both met my father and embarked on reinventing myself as a Muslim. I've spent roughly twenty years as a Muslim of some form or another, a crazy convert and then an ex-Muslim, progressive Muslim, ghulat Shi'a, Nimatullahi dervish, Azreal Wisdom, Mikail El, Islamic Gonzo, "godfather of Muslim punk rock," Seal of Muslim Pseudo, and now Pharmakon Allah, Muhammadus Prime, Quetzalcoatl Farrakhan who trips and says Fatima Kubra but has this goofy idea of taking up the way of the salaf, and Dr. Bruce Lawrence just called me a malamatiyya at a lecture in Vancouver.

. . .

Back on the old coast with a new life, or between two lives. This book is between two books. It is also between two characters, and I still cannot write naturally in the voice of either one. The wandering bum writer who bragged about getting tug jobs at the 2003 convention of the Islamic Society of North America is no longer my voice, and there's also a voice that is not yet my voice; the new Ph.D. turning his dissertation into a book remains unimaginable, still years away.

I'm afraid of that future and what the next few years presenting papers and writing chapters for academic volumes, attending conferences, proposing and writing that dissertation, and hanging out almost exclusively with professors and other graduate students will do to my head. When all my friends have ".edu" email addresses, my language is going to change, and the categories with which I order my world will change. The present me that's writing these words is dying on the page. With every semester, my perceptions change. Even my body will change, as this work of sitting at computers, bad postures, and no sleep tends to break bodies down. Academic training offers an altered state from which I can never sober up. This book, like all my books, is an act of freezing myself for another time.

I can already feel the transformation with this book, because this book can never just let go and run. There's no chance for momentum when every word is second-guessed. I've been to too many reading seminars now to ever write anything without a scene in my head of ten graduate students sitting around a long table, professor at the end, each with a copy of the book and picking meat off my words. Whatever words I manage to put down, I instantly read them like I'm in a theory group and it's my job to dissect the author.

The question of fiction versus nonfiction lingers, unresolved even by my experience in Los Angeles, because fiction and nonfiction had been undermining each other within the text up to that point. Changing the names of cities and individuals allowed me to mix and match and combine characters; when people lose their main bridge to real life, their names, they exist entirely within these jumbles of words and eventually break down into the imaginary. To use pro wrestling lingo, the book goes beyond "work" (fake) and "shoot" (real). Even when I write the truth, I write it in character, having chosen and developed a voice for the project. Sometimes I'm a photographer, and sometimes I'm a painter. The genocidal agent at the NCTC event was real and quoted as verbatim as I could get him—after our conversation, I rushed to the bathroom and scribbled his words into my notepad—but I create Zoser as a fictional synthesis of some real people in my life. He's kind of real, but not. Call the book a "worked shoot."

However I reshape the outside world and my memory of it, I write with a commitment to be faithful to my inner happenings. I report the vision of Fatima as I remember it, but the fact remains that I am writing a drug book when I am no longer on drugs. Is a book about drug hallucinations by a sober writer "fiction" or "nonfiction"? To write in the present tense means that every word is a lie, because when I write, "I am tripping," I'm not actually tripping. When I retell the story of my trip hours, days, weeks after the fact, the words are removed from the moment. The real experience is refined and edited, and possibly clogged up with interpretation and commentary. I've had time to think about the vision, and it becomes impossible to keep that out of my reportage. No story is simply a reciting of incidents exactly as they happened; to be a story, the facts need meaning, and for the meaning to become clear, the facts need to be more than facts.

I write of my drug vision as I wrote of my hajj in Journey to the End of Islam. I have notebooks from hajj, and I have a small notepad from Los Angeles. The notebooks and manuscripts complement but also become my memory; they not only record the experience, but create it. Twenty years from now, when I want to reflect on my pilgrimage to Mecca, I'll refer to what I published. It's the same for my memoir, Impossible Man. I remember less about my childhood now than I did when I wrote that book. Impossible Man even depicts scenes of my parents that happened before I was born; for my book that I position within categories like "nonfiction" and "autobiography," I had to create dialogue. There are choices made within those pages, and probably mistakes too, but Impossible Man is now my guide to myself, my official memory.

My books have even switched categories after publication. Blue-Eyed Devil, my American Islam road book, was first published as nonfiction, but when it came out in a new edition, an editor accidentally added a standard fiction disclaimer to the copyright page: "This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the

product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental." This especially hurt because I had been sued by an actual living person over her treatment in Blue-Eyed Devil and had to fight for the book's right to speak. So now, after I had successfully defended its integrity, the book presents itself as fiction. Since the release of the new edition, I have received an email from a graduate student in Malaysia who made Blue-Eyed Devil the center of her thesis on American Muslim fiction, asking if I would call the book a "novel." I didn't know what to tell her.

My decision is to write and think of this new book as nonfiction, but leave out the endnotes. A formal documentation of sources, the performance of scholarship, would imply a rigorous nonfiction that I just don't need, and it feels like a bad idea to dress this book in that costume. It's about a drug trip, after all. Isn't the drug trip supposed to shake up all the false constructions that make up our "reality," even the idea of the self, and by consequence, the possibility of an author? I want to say more about Foucault and his LSD trip here, but step back from Foucault for reasons similar to my lack of notes. It's not the character that I'm playing with this one.

All I have ever done was write about myself, but the drug book has to be my most self-absorbed, self-obsessed book ever, even more than my deliberate autobiographies. Authorial solipsism is more inevitable with drug narratives than travelogues; although a travelogue reads as self-centered, telling the story of a place and its people entirely through the adventure of someone who visits from outside, at least the story remains ostensibly about places and people that exist beyond the visitor's own conscience. With a drug narrative, everything that happens is inside you; it's like writing a masturbation narrative. I do write about masturbation in the new project because the academic coverage tells me that this is a major motif in my work.

I wanted this ayahuasca book to speak on things outside my skull. I intended to write an international story, global in its vision and preoccupied with global things, but at no point do I leave the United States. Even in my telling of the story, I remain American. I had once read an academic article about the phenomenon of the "Magical Negro" archetype in American cinema, witnessed in films like Bagger Vance and The Green Mile, in which supernatural black characters fix "broken" white characters by sharing anti-intellectual folk wisdom and primitive but potent magical powers. I could treat my ayahuasca trip as a movie and ask whether I had just produced a Magical Negro film in my brain, whether my vision of Fatima was actually the product of a lifetime spent ingesting Hollywood's vision of blackness. The article had even argued that central to the Magical Negro motif is that the Magical Negro heals white men of their sexual or romantic dysfunctions. It seems inescapable that in my multiple retreats from America, through both Islam and ayahuasca, the result is still American; deep down, at the

innermost core of my being, I still find accumulated American-ness and specifically American whiteness and maleness. If ayahuasca really does the Etch-A-Sketch thing and shakes up your consciousness, it can only shake up what's already there.

Islam and ayahuasca came to me through different historical channels, but at times, those channels intersect; if you go back far enough, America's genealogies of white New Age shamanism and black supremacist Islam have shared ancestors in an Asia that exists on no map, the magical, mystical, metaphysical Asia born in the American imagination.

I try to write about all of this and also write about writing about it, and I bring a set to the writing. Which has me thinking.

Then Zoser calls and we talk about cartoons and algebra and he asks me about this book.

"I'm writing before I know what it is," I tell him.

"Am I in it?" he asks.

"Yes, but you might not recognize yourself. I change everything around."

"That's peace. You know, I've been thinking about the book that I want to write."

"That's cool," I say, because something has to be said.

"Yeah, man. How many books is it for you?"

"This is number nine."

"That's crazy," he says. "How do you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Like, get into writing like that?"

"Publishing's rough," I tell him. "I still don't know how the business shit works, and the industry is dying and everyone is freaking out. We lost Borders, god. The world of paper media is burning down fast—"

"Nah, man. I mean, how do you get into the writing part, like how you do get into just like, writing. You know what I mean?"

"I don't think so."

"Like, you want to write a book, and you just sit down and write it."

"That's what I do."

"How do you get into that mindstate?"

"How do you make your dick hard?" I ask him.

"Huh?"

"That's what it is. Asking writers how they get their mindstate for writing is like asking a dude how he gets his dick hard."

"Oh, right on."

"You can't force the blood to start running; your body wants what it wants. If writing isn't what your body wants, you're not a writer."

"Damn, man."

"Be like Ibn 'Arabi, god. Fly into space and hump the letters of the alphabet."

I don't mean to be a jerk, but everyone in the world has an idea for a book, every coffee shop has at least one hipster asshole at any given moment posing behind a laptop, telling people about great books that will never exist, and my Facebook inbox is filled with people who want to learn a magic formula for writing prophetically in their spare time. Writing was never comfy Sunday morning shit for me. I say that writers write. That's it.

Even when I feared that this project was dead, I couldn't not write it; I had to keep writing, even if I only wrote about writing. I needed to stay up late enough to feel like the last human alive, put in my earphones and search for a random song to loop for two or three hours until it cut me off from everything but the Word document. The song really does help with that. Before I find the right song to launch me into writing, I often start with wrestlers' ring entrance themes, just to get my confidence up. The chosen theme song depends on the kind of character that I want to play in my words. Sometimes I'm a cocky heel and want to strut and smirk through my pages like hot shit, for which I'd loop the themes for Chris Jericho or DX; other times, I'm in a mood to stomp into the ring and beat asses and throw my middle fingers up at the world, for which I'd play Stone Cold's theme. To get into character for this book, I've been playing CM Punk's themes, both the Kills-witch Engage and Living Colour songs, which is kind of odd, considering my subject matter and the Xs on his hands.

If it hits me in the right way at the right moment, any song can become the main theme for a project. For Tripping with Allah, my soundtrack eventually became "My Life in the Knife Trade" by Boysetsfire. One night, while watching Combat Zone Wrestling videos on YouTube, I found a tribute to Necro Butcher set to that song, and for some reason it just stuck and I listened to it maybe ten thousand times while writing this book. For my hajj book, I listened to a lot of things, but one of the main songs was Kanye West's "Can't Tell Me Nothing," both the album version and the instrumental. I can't make sense of that choice at all, except that in the video, Kanye's walking alone in the desert, apparently wrestling with his selfhood, and maybe that seemed like a cool way to imagine hajj before I went.

I loop a song and wander through the empire of my words, building and destroying. After a while, something happens with my brain. The "spaceship," I call it. I can't spend too much time on your planet, or the atmosphere disintegrates my skin.

There's some fantastic neural shit going on when I write. I've read scientific work on connections between artistic creativity and mental illness, leading me to consider that I get this from my dad. Same goes for the religiosity, another reason that writing and religion can never be separate paths for me.

This is where the drug book leads: a new realization of set, setting, and drug. My set is the weird genetics, my setting is a laptop and earphones and the right song on loop, and you're holding my drug.

There's a reason that Zoser has not yet written his book, and it's not just that marijuana kills your ambition and makes you happy doing nothing. The problem isn't his drugs, because people who take drugs can also write books; the problem is that writing isn't his favorite drug. Drugs are his favorite drug. Writing isn't what makes him crazy.

I am a writer. If I did nothing today but have a massive bowel movement, I'd write about that dump and walk you through the journey. I've published the better part of a million words in roughly ten years. On the side, I fill up notebooks for no reason and start projects that I can't finish; there are chapters for four incomplete books on my desktop right now. The name for my drug is hypergraphia. The amount of spare time that I am given for this drug has no bearing on anything; if daily life interferes, I just stay up all night and supplement the writing drug with GNC drugs meant for explosive energy on the bench, pre-workout nitric oxide pumps that instead keep my body tingling as I do heavy lifting with words. I shot out seventy-five thousand words about drugs to realize that I trip off words—it's right here, rearranging symbols for phonemes until they mean what I want them to, moving sentences around each other like puzzle pieces to find their rightful order, scrolling up and down my Word file to edit at random spots, that I buzz out and go deep inside, stimulate my lobes, get awesomely disoriented, shake up my consciousness, abandon my responsibilities, and find my peace and all of that.

Writing is my god food and my demon. I go crazy when I'm on it and when I'm off it. Writing made me lose jobs, alienate girlfriends, check out of friendships, travel across the country with no change of clothes but a backpack filled with notebooks, become a recluse at Mom's house, crash on professors' couches, live in my car, and give up on my future. Unlike marijuana, alcohol, or coffee, however, my drug's Islamic appropriateness goes unchallenged; the Qur'an exalts letters of the alphabet (2:1, for one example), after all, and speaks highly of pens (96:4). Despite the threat that my drug poses to my mental and even physical welfare, and perhaps by extension to society at large, writing appears to be fully halal in the consensus of the 'ulama.

My life has gotten better, but not because I shook the monkey off my back; I just found ways for the addiction to fund itself. The words eventually brought me to publishers and universities, so peace to my institutional enablers.

KNOWLEDGE BORN

As for Tripping With Allah, if it's not just a performance of addiction, my drug book might actually serve as the seventy-five-thousand-word intro for a book still unwritten. I began Tripping with Allah as a discussion of drugs that would include a tripping episode, but never prepared for what the trip would actually give me. I failed to anticipate the vision as a chapter that would need to integrate with other chapters, and it never seriously dawned on me that my religious drug experience would offer insight on more than just religion and drugs.

My plan was to lay out the history and context and issues, drink ayahuasca, have a few visions, and then find a way to offer my conclusion at seventy-five thousand words. Things didn't work out that way because when the vine decided to speak to me, it brought not only cool freak-outs but some real content. Out of nowhere, the drug interrupted my book about drugs and spoke instead about broken masculinities. Fatima showed up and set me swimming another nine thousand miles, the journey to a new book. There has never been a decent book about being a Muslim feminist man, and Fatima has me feeling like I should get in the ring and try. Maybe I'll come close, even as poisoned as I still am.

Though Fatima told me that the Qur'an and its mystery letters were for boys, there are numerous women in Muslim communities who search for their own voice in the he-god's words. I think about the stakes while attending a conference in Boston dedicated to the work of scholar-activist Amina Wadud, which accompanied the publication of a Festschrift in her honor. I call myself a friend and ally of Dr. Wadud, as well to as the editors of the volume and several of its contributors; you can also find me inside that book, giving a breakdown of Wadud's famous woman-led prayer of 2005 with Supreme Mathematics. At the conference, I listen to my friends question whether the Qur'an really says what it seems to be saying in the difficult verses, and consider new ways to handle the text and its Author. Inspired and informed by Wadud's work, they enter God's

work and wrestle with the words. From where I stand, betting it all on scripture and interpretive tradition could be missing something—it misses the process by which we came into this scripture and built a tradition, because Islam did not begin with a council of scientists formulating a rational system. The library is not the mountain. Thinkers like Avicenna regarded prophets as supreme philosophers, but Avicenna never had to debate a prophet, and Muhammad never took on a philosopher. The prophet–philosopher conversation never happened. There were no famed institutions of learning in Muhammad's Mecca, just a cave on the outskirts of town where you could get disturbed and then become filled up with Allah. The Qur'an isn't Muhammad's dissertation; it's the event of Muhammad being seized in his throat by divine power. Prophethood is explosive and nuts; Muhammad wasn't a theologian or a literary theorist but a fucking shaman. If you forget about that sunna, you've gutted the spirit out of the words. Scholars only talk behind the Prophet's back; they can say nothing to his face. Considering social realities and the changes that these legit Muslim feminist scholars hope to achieve in the world, however, I have to accept that a new Islamic shamanism isn't going to be the tool for every job.

Allah is closer to me than the vein in my neck, and Fatima is as close to Allah as I'll ever get; the Fatima who said so lived in my own brain. A messenger from myself to myself, Fatima provided the Fatima that I needed, with the Ali that I needed, the Fatima and Ali that I witnessed for myself, in myself. Their roles in my vision were determined by my biography; the vision might have brought something different if my mother was the violent psychotic and my dad was the hero of parental martyrdom. My Fatima can't be Fatima for anyone else, and her father who found himself healed in my vision was only the Muhammad that lives in my heart, my private picture of Muhammad. Because I am not a prophet or shaykh or shaman, a jumbling up of my consciousness won't solve your problems. I have no solutions for anyone, except that maybe you and Fatima should have your own conversation. If you have a hard time with what Allah wrote on a postcard, just call her on the phone.

Fatima might have assigned my next book, but she hasn't written it for me. I'll have to perform more critical unpacking than drug visions usually ask. If Fatima relocated sacredness within the womb, how do I apply her message without essentializing women as child bearers? What does the vision end up saying about women who, for any number of reasons, do not physically reproduce, or women who are biological mothers but not interested in being defined and limited within that role? Wadud's Inside the Gender Jihad helps by ripping up the "Paradise lies at the feet of the mother" porkshit that you'll hear in mosques and breaking down the social construction of motherhood. When reflecting on my encounters with Fatima and Ali, I'll also have to consider how to learn from the divine pair without going on some perennialist "pairing of complementary

opposites" trip that would regard numerous identities and practices as aberrations against the natural order of the universe. Mystical drug hallucinations can be awesome and even have genuine instructional value, but once you try to live them out in profane earthly time, there needs to be consideration for what the trip means outside you, what it says about other people and how you should treat them.

My experience of Allah in Fatima and Ali comes loaded with problems. A drug vision is your own private myth, and myths are not theoretically sound. Myths play on archetypes, and archetypes aren't archetypes at all. Talk of archetypes is some lame pseudoscience carried over from colonialism, just white dudes universalizing their white dude experiences, reading themselves into all cultures and contexts, sure that every "dying god" story around the world must share a secret with their own Christian story. There's nothing cosmic in "masculine" or "feminine," there's no male/female dynamic floating in space with the stars and planets. It's all our invention, and I can't reduce relationships between complex human beings to lazy active/receptive, yin/yang analysis. Fatima still has a lot of explaining to do.

Apart from politics of what the vision might say about others, Fatima's appearance will also have meaning for my writer life. Throughout my books, I have written about the bodies of Muslim women. Because of the words that I have inscribed upon these bodies, readers have inscribed a variety of intentions, meanings, and values upon me. The meaning of Fatima's body, of my touching it and even becoming it and then writing it, and the question of how she relates to those bodies in my other books, will be decided by readers that I have never met. Let me know.

CHAPEL OF THE CHIMES

Now I have this manuscript, the new seventy-five thousand words or so, and I've just worked some more and made final edits and am ready to send it in. I feel even more Muslim at this point than when I finished the first draft. I have an app on my phone that alerts me at the proper times of each of the day's five daily prayers, and also indicates the exact direction of the Ka'ba from where I stand, so it's easier for me to actually care about such things and keep at them. I additionally have a "daily hadith" app that allows me to begin each day with a saying of the Prophet.

So much for the Seal of Muslim Pseudo.

When it comes to "religion," I take more interest these days in disciplining what I do than what I believe. With points of doctrine, I could run in circles forever, but it's so boring, and all the twisting and flipping with abstract theology only happens inside my head and stays there. I have become concerned not with how a faith conviction might inform my outer behavior but the opposite: the ways that mindfully eating like the Prophet ate, or sitting as he sat, could inform and transform my insides. Many people fail to get this, because religion is only about faith for them. I am sometimes asked how I reconcile various things to my "faith," and I have nothing to say. Faith is not always what brings me to the Prophet.

My love offers a more reliable technology than my faith. Whether faith goes or stays, I hold on to my love. I love the Prophet. Actualizing my love through adherence to his sunna, performing my love through imitation of him, has become my equipment for self-constitution. I wash as the Prophet washed; it makes me think about him and his character, which then colors my interactions with Allah's other created things, as I try to treat them with his manners. Doing little sunna things here and there slows me down in a good way, and also feels like it slows down the world around me. Strange that I went into the drug tunnel as an out-of-hand heretic and came out the other side looking somewhat normative and mainstream, even though words like "normative" and

“mainstream” still feel gross. How fucked would it be to end up as a responsible Muslim because of a ghulat goddess party? The Prophet did say that Allah laughs.

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