



*The  
Egyptian  
Sorcerer*







# *The Egyptian Sorcerer*

## *A Majamah Parable*

Translated into German  
by Mortiz Steinschneider in 1849

Translated into English and  
introduced by Frater Acher in 2022

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*Preface.*

## *To Know is to Taste.*



Allowing the absurd to trespass into the sacred, the laughable into the holy, is one of the oldest approaches to revealing the mysteries. Such revelation precisely is not a cognitive one, but one of direct, sudden experience.

By pulling the rug out from under our mind, all we are left with is a moment of brilliant, piercing, painful presence. A moment of singularity. A moment that pushes us out on the tightrope, away from the mind we were bound into a moment ago, into the unknown.

It's a bitter, yet simple fact we all have to experience first-hand that to truly *know*, we first have to *taste*. Knowledge is born on a passage: From the tip of our tongue, into our blood, through the pool of our heart, into the pearl of our mind.

Here is an invitation to listen to one such parable that offers a faint taste of the mysteries. It is an ancient story. It once was told in beautiful rhymed Arabic prose, interspersed with lines of poetry.

The literary genre it was embedded into is called *Maqāmāh* (مقام, pl. *maqāmāt*, literally *gathering* or *assemblies*) and was especially famous between the 11th and the 13th century.

Our parable once was part of such an assembly of stories. The original Arab version would have been a multi-layered prosimetric piece of art, deliberately playing with puns, double-meanings and allusions to classical themes of poetry and mystical traditions.

From there it travelled into the Hebrew tongue. And further on, centuries later, a famed Jewish scholar, who did not know how to make presents that were not wrapped in words, translated it as a wedding gift for his bride.<sup>1</sup>

The version of the story that I am able to share here has lost much of its contextuality and depth. I am certain, neither bride nor bridegroom would be amused.

And the fault is all mine, as the makeshift translator I had to become, so this story could travel on. It is true: Our minds can no longer delight in its rhymed prose, or the artfull references to mystical texts. And yet, I hope, our tongues can still taste a whiff of its potent spice.

Like with all good parables, the story still can be read in many different ways: As the jest of a magical trickster, as a

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1 Translated from the German original by Frater Acher: Moritz Steinschneider; *Der Zauberer: Eine Auswahl hebräischer Makamendichtung des Mittelalters*, Berlin: Welt-Verlag, 1920; first published as: Moritz Steinschneider, *Manna*, Berlin: J. Rosenberg, 1847



medieval coming-of-age story, or as a mystical allegory on crossing the Abyss.

In particular, we are familiar with the theme of a searcher of wisdom walking out into the desert and finding an old man as a teacher. We hear its echo in the narrative of *Abraham of Worms* finding his magical teacher, *Abramelin*, in the Egyptian desert.<sup>2</sup> And while the latter narrative expands into detailed ritual instructions, our present story remains condensed in a journey through mystical symbols<sup>3</sup> and a focus on the margins of human experience.

Let's indulge jointly in the Maqāmah tale of the Egyptian sorcerer. I'll meet you on the other side.

*The meaning of the word Makamat is derived from “a place where one stands upright” and hence the place where one is at any time.<sup>4</sup>*

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2 Abraham of Worms, *The Book of Abramelin, A New Translation*, compiled and edited by Georg Dehn, Lake Worth: Ibis Press, 2015

3 To name a few: the dry well, the dream-garden, the shore and the bridge into another realm, the meeting of the king, etc.

4 *The Assemblies of Al-Hariri: Fifty Encounters with the Shaykh Abu Zayd of Seruj*, trans. by Amina Shah, London: Octagon, 1980, p. viii.



*A Majamah Parable*  
*The Egyptian Sorcerer*  
✱

*Scene 1*

A youngling was once in Zion, who had already learned many things and had found entrance to all knowledge, because his insights were eager and agile. Now he also wanted to fathom sorcery, but could not find a teacher in it. For in the kingdom of the Israelites sorcery was not tolerated. Since the desire squeezed his heart, but it failed him so, so he took something of his fortune and went away on Egypt's ways.

Beyond a city he came to an old man, who was sitting there, thinking and quiet.

When he saw the stranger, the youngling's face appeared like a rising light: full of jewels, in a garment of linen and silk, the old man turned to him: *From where do you come and where do you go?*

And the young man said: *I come from Jerusalem, and am at home in Bethlehem. Then the old man said, "Come and stay with me, and let me be your host.*

And he brought the guest into his tent, he fed the donkey with litter, they washed their feet and began to eat and drink,

and a conversation of all kinds of things began.

The old man said: *As everyone should respect the wise, and strive to be familiar with the old and the pious, so it befits such to lead guests into their house, to entertain them in the best way, to tell them friendly words, so that they put their toil and troubles out of their minds. To guide them on the right way, according to the best of one's knowledge and conscience.*

*Therefore, it is only fair to know the guest's path and plan, to guide him with sincere advice, so that he walks on the right path. Since you have now honoured me, have eaten at my table, and my camp is the resting place, open to me your heart's desire and motion, so that we can consider according to our ability, cultivate advice and deliberate. Perhaps my suggestions may be convenient.*

The youngling replied: *The wise are right to instruct and teach: Every man shall take counsel with the aged. Even if he himself would be still so understanding, nevertheless everyone needs advice. How much more is this fair to the traveler who is cut off from his own circle, whose heart is troubled by the pain of the foreign country.*

*Therefore, I will not conceal my request from you. I once lived in Zion like a gushing spring in the desert. I cared for the understanding of knowledge, searched for wisdom and knowledge. I was also concerned with the art of magic, in what its craft and power consisted of. But I found no one to talk to, and so I hoped to learn it in the distant cities. That is why I left the*

*promised land and came here. And I long for nothing more than a black artist, a magician, a Chaldean as a teacher.*

*So, if you want to show me love and mercy after I have come here by chance, name me a man who is experienced in this art. Whatever he may ask of me and whatever price he may desire for it, he shall receive it. That he will only let me share in the splendour of his knowledge, and implant the benefits of his art in me.*

*The old man said: So much wisdom you have already studied, to come now here in the shade of my tent, to fathom an art, which cannot be found in your country. I will grant you your wish, and teach you thoroughly the right pathways to the essence of sorcery, magic and chiromancy. For this art is my trade, which I received from my ancestors as an inheritance.*

*But the youngling in his heart thought this was mockery and jest. And he made his contemplation on the art of the old man with contempt. He thought: *The man is oppressed by the glow of wine, and he lies and deceives in arrogance. He looks with eagerness at my property and blood. I wonder if he will be happy to play a trick on me.**

*And he said: Thy reward thou shalt find there. Thy word is gentle to me as a psalm and a sacrifice! Thou hast spoken to a despondent heart that lay broken with pain. But I will not lay a burden upon thee, nor will I afflict thee on my account. For the art of conjuration is a burdensome art.*

*Therefore I will look for a young man of my own kind, who may teach me. He may present his doubts to you, since I will be a stranger to him, and you may encourage him in my proposal.*

The old man, however, saw that the young man did not trust his science and did not rely much on his knowledge. And so the old man swore to himself that he would not enter his cabinet first, spurning his bedstead, before he converted the youngling from the bottom up. And from the depth of his wisdom he wanted to play a trick on him, and to teach him better from his mouth.

## *Scene 2*

So he began with cunning and said thus: *Look, stay with me tonight and tomorrow I am anxious to lead you to an expert who will teach you according to your wish. I remain indebted to you.*

This aligned to the youngling's inclination and he spoke with a bow: *All praise to the All-wise, whom he is due to praise. Therefore, that he led in this way and on a straight path and track by his grace my journey!*

For a long while they stayed together, disported and the evening disappeared quickly. But the old man was intent on cheating and asked for more wine in a jug, and he handed the jug to the drinking companion full of wine. And said: *Drink and forget your sorrow, this sweetens your slumber!*

The youth drank, and his thoughts wavered, and his gait

swayed toward the camp.

And when the two parted, the old man got up and laid snares in front of the youngling, in which his feet became entangled. And as he tried to escape, his feet bumped and stumbled, and the youngling lay in a deep ditch bed!

But it was a dry well shaft.

And after he had risen from the ground, despondently lamenting the trickery and haunting perpetrated on him, he groped along all night, toiled in the dark, taught himself many a push and blow, and then, when daylight came, he finally came to the door at the end of the passage. He was afraid to put an end to his tribulation and to find the exit into the open.

There he stepped out into a garden of trees and shrubs, of palms and stalks, rich in blossoms and fruits, wetted by streams and ponds, in which the man feasted.

Delighted by the beauty, refreshed by the plucked fruits, absorbed in the show of this splendour, drunk with the pleasure, he forgot his painful situation.

Thus he wandered to the edge of the garden, where he found himself on the beach. There before his gaze stood a beautifully built bridge, and on it were painted two bridgeheads, of artistic form.





He stood amazed and contemplated the stone bridge.

And he thought: *Over the bridge goes my journey, with the eagle's tearing flight. Perhaps I will find a place beyond, convenient and comfortable to rest.*

So he walked with a fast pace along the bridge road, which led him to a large city.

It was adorned with all splendour, full of squares and streets, to the delight of the masses, in it were tradesmen of all kinds, distributed in all places. And he stopped at a market, where everyone was. There, one found all kinds of precious and rare goods. Onyx, jasper and turquoise, and in wide circles sat there the ranks of the scribes, what joy and surprise again in the stranger!

Then a scribe, who was ready at his post and saw the young man's manners and daintiness, said: *Speak where you are from, where you are going, you whose grace opens every heart?*

The youngling replied: *I come from Zion on the way to Egypt, reverent before the Lord on the throne of heaven, to learn the advantages and disadvantages of the black arts, the owl and the night owl.*

But the scribe laughed because of the answer, and brought his colleagues from their places, saying: *Know ye a city that is called Jerusalem? And a man that goeth into Egypt unto wisdom? And they said: At this hour do we first hear such strange tidings? And he said: This man cometh from a far*

country, called Jerusalem, and is known as Zion.

Then the scribes marvelled at this circumstance, and still more at the youngling's splendour and elegance, and said: *Have you studied and proved yourself in the art of writing?*

And he said: *I know of many a fine and first thing about it.* Thereupon he wrote without hesitation and recited the following lines:

*To the fugitive offer a place,  
Who nothing but solitude faced  
Who measures with hollow hand  
The bitterness of torment!  
In a tent he was invited  
Where his plans were blighted,  
There he stands aggrieved,  
With only misery received.*

Lo!, and the scribes marvelled at his intellect and admired his verse.

And the chief and overseer of the scribes brought him into his house, prepared a feast of spicy food and wine and must<sup>5</sup>, and his comrades brought him gifts and preciosities, sat around him in a circle, and delighted in his manner of

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5 Must – from the Latin *vinum mustum*, 'young wine' – is freshly crushed fruit juice that contains the skins, seeds, and stems of the fruit.

speaking. And the guest on his place was writing poetry all around, and wrote them two more lines to heal blind eyes:

*As you await the great feast,  
The wine, that God has released,  
For those who rightfully believe  
They shall drink and receive  
To our host's long living grace!  
Who kept the wine in the grapes!*

Then the people, admiring the direction of the writing and the structure of his poetry, said: *Such excellence is sufficiently recommended before the king's seat.*

### *Scene 3*

And they told the ruler in the palace: *Direct thy steps hither in haste, that thou mayest know a skilful scribe who shines from the heavenly light. There is a man who has come to us today and has taken his seat within our walls.*

And the king commanded to fetch him, and the youngling came with fleeting soles, bowing to the king who bent his sceptre towards him.

And the scribes on the right and on the left outdid themselves in praising the youth before the councillors and guards, speaking Aramaic: *This man's special mind can withstand the king's most difficult questions. He deserves a place*

*among the king's servants by the wisdom and prudence of his inner being and the divine spirit that is shown in him.*

The king, after a moment's hesitation, bestowed gifts upon them, but tenfold surpassed all that he offered the youngling, asking him if he would be willing to accept an office at court, at the head of the scribes, in the seat of the artisans and the favoured.

But the youngling said: *O Lord and King! I have little desire to remain here! I did not leave my fatherland for ambition and to be honoured by kings, but for the love of teaching and wisdom. The experienced and the thoughtful also warn: You should not seek high positions. Further: The king and the fire are equal in their effect: In the distance you will miss and desire them, up close they will hurt and consume you!*

The king replied: *Trust in God and his institutions, rely on the king and his commitment, and join the wise to please him. Further: The king and the faithful are comrades, anointed by the holy oil; without both the world does not endure, they line up, nothing separates their union. Further: Stay in no city without a king full of power, who is careful about the justice of his subjects, without a doctor, who is popular and tested in the dangers of the body, and in no city, which does not touch a river and is not decorated a bazaar.*

And the king continued: *These are the recommendations to the king which I live by: To adhere to the law, to live by his own commands, to stand guard at the barriers of justice, which are*



*the steps to the heights of the throne; from neither the finest nor the smallest should he withhold his attention.*

*It also exalts the king if he honours the word of the prophet and the seer, pleasing to the Lord in service as pleasing to the servants, humble in his outward appearance, kind in his utterances, able in discerning, right in deciding, understanding in commanding, a shield to the despondent, a steadfast, a comforter to the afflicted.*

*If his anger awakens, he stops it and does not let it roam, and if his desire wants to tempt him, he lets himself be guided by reason into the depth of the plans, that is, the depth of the king, who controls his desire like a shepherd controls his flock.*

*Furthermore, the wise instruct the king: He is to speak for the penitents, he does homage to them before his seat, the wise men are his ministers, the priests and sextons he refreshes.*

*I have striven for such customs, I am honoured and respected by them, they are the badges of my dignity, my glory, and my adornment.*

*Therefore I have desired your words, gladly heard your speeches. But it is clear to you and has become evident that a king who has adopted such qualities and adheres to them is worthy of consecration to his service and enjoyment of his favour. Every man of insight and understanding gladly makes himself known to him.*

*Therefore, abide with me, and be without sorrow in your office. For thou knowest thy tent secure, riches and honour I will*

*give you, with gold and silver in abundance I will bestow upon thee, for no wise man and artist has yet entered my kingdom whom I have not approached with honour and glory to ask for instruction, so that I receive insight from all my teachers.*

*But you, a man whom I esteem equal to myself, that he may make my way a wholesome one, I place you on a par with my brothers and relatives, and esteem you as my trusted ones, confidants and acquaintances.*

The youngling felt from the king's words that he was pleased with his comradeship and said: *Well, I will serve you with sincere sense here for one year from the beginning to the end.*

And the king said: *So stay for my benefit and salvation, in my palace always at my side, may your insight always guide me to the right.* And willingly he stayed a year until it was finished.

#### *Scene 4*

The king delighted in the young man's knowledge, which he pursued to its depths. They talked for many an hour, in a friendly alliance with symbols and parables, events and fables, secrets and rhyming questions, songs and poems, replying and teaching, and advice about state situations. Thus, the year fled away among casual things and holy ones.

Then the young man said: *Now my exile ends, so that I may find my goal in my country on the Nile.* Then the king commanded the young man be given the rich reward of

silver and gold.

And he said: *Not now shalt thou depart, after thou hast known me! Stay with me one more year for the glory time.*

And the young man said: *I will surrender myself again to seek your favour, but after that do not delay any longer in your grace to send your servant on his way.*

So, he remained in his place for another year, a faithful, fine journeyman.

And soon the year passes with law explanations and teachings, basic considerations and formal readings, solving and binding the universal and the particular, establishing and illuminating cases and passages.

And the second year completes in sublime wisdom, which wins the heart by pondering the rules of interpretation.

Then the young man said: *Do not delay any longer in releasing me, after you have known my service.*

Then the lord gave him money and goods, horses and carriages, saying: *Do not look for a land far away, see, my soul is attached to your soul, which shines; so let us make a covenant on permanent ground: I give you my daughter as a wife, to whom I give a rich dowry.*

*Thou shalt be heir to my throne that my name shall not vanish, since no son was given me, which grieved me bitterly. May your*



*understanding be the bandage and comfort of my suffering, the fortress of my peace. For I did not choose any man on the throne, but beheld your piety and experience, your insight and learning. For piety is the foundation of government, and wisdom the ground of leadership, and the root of understanding, guiding towards knowledge.*

*Through righteousness all fissures and cracks end, rulers govern and powers make just decisions. The words of the sage also describe this in sublime images:*

*The world is a garden, which man must maintain rightfully. A ruler is the lineage, raised by law. Law is a guide, followed by a wise man. A wise man is a regent, whom reason appoints. Reason is a ladder, which the sophists worship. The sophists are the fighters supported by coin. The coin is a pile of gold, adored by the crowd. The crowd is a servant, held by justice. Justice is a fine pair of scales, it destroys every complaint, it is the salvation of the world and its ornament, it shines on the earth and on those who live on it.*

*And now you, blessed by God, consecrated by my mind, offspring of piety, the scion of wisdom, the fosterling of insight, the pupil of modesty, you are equal to the rule, born to be the leader of the people, because God has chosen you.*

*Therefore, receive with kindness the two I offer you: That you may become my daughter's husband and henceforth rule my kingdom!*

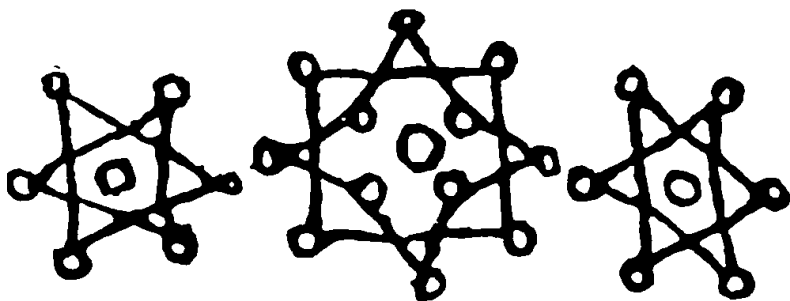
There said the young man: *What am I and my life, desire and aspiration? A stranger, a lowly person, the king's son-in-law!*

And the king said: *I do not care about the price of the race, only about the man who is prudent and wise. Therefore, do not delay to fulfil my wish, and do quickly according to my will. The day is short and the work is great, on the rope of desires it is stretched into length!*

Then the young man said: *I will also do this your desire, in the shadow of your promise I will create shelter, dedicate to you all instinct, because you are valuable and dear to me!*

Then the king summoned his horsemen and his warriors, and entertained his leaders, his attendants and his workers. And he spoke to them in a powerful way, praising and extolling the youngling so that he would be honoured.

His speech found approval and followers. The lesser and the greater paid homage to the ruler's comrade, the king made him his son-in-law, the highest cornerstone of his throne. And the country and the people rejoiced united, for



every harm and crack was healed. Everyone paid homage to the new lord from near and far.

## Scene 5

When the free time had passed, enjoyed in delight and peace, the man built himself a mighty house and decorated it splendidly, quietly digging a well in the courtyard, adorning and refreshing.

And for the woman he built a castle of magnificent sight, whose tower rose up to heaven.

And he soon forgot his father's land, with the beautiful woman he now possessed. She also gave him a son, an heir to the crown, called by his commandment: Yirah, Fear God!

And when the boy was ripe for weaning, his father gave gifts to the sons of the land, a banquet to the princes, a feast to the provinces.

Then one day, the regent stood in the corridor, at the gate of the court, reading and thinking quietly, while the boy ran around. He slipped away and jumped on the grate of the well, the wood bent and bowed, and down he slid! A cry reached the father's ears, announcing the child's downfall. And shouting: *My life, I will give mine for yours!* the father jumped into the well, his spirit tumbled, and trembling like leaves in the wind, he looked in vain for his child, turning long and anxiously, with tears on his chin and cheek, when

he suddenly beholds - - his host!

### *Scene 6*

It is the cunning magician who asks: *Why are you crying and grinning?*

And the youngling: *I have been struck by misfortune that has snatched my son away!*

And he says: *Where did you get a child? Do you lack sense, like the donkey and the ox? Your pain is senseless, your complaints worthless!*

The youngling replies: *I am the second at the king's side, I have married his daughter, soon I enjoyed the delight of a beautiful son! He stepped out on the well grate and broke it into splinters; there he sank down and probably drowned in the well, or in the fall down his tender limbs shattered! Therefore, I weep and am lament and am despondent on this most bitter of days, and wander about pierced by woe, like a mother robbed of her boy. Falling like a leaf in the storm, I go after my son into the tomb of sorrow!*

Then said the Egyptian: *Come, afflicted one! Be calm and do not despair, this too was delusion and a sham! For the content of your story and the time of your reports, your misery and misfortune, was nothing but a single moment! Here, the cup you emptied, whose drugged potion you consumed, so that you may fight your way to the better, that you may recognise and confess*

my art.

This speech deeply moves the young man and high admiration stirs in him.

*And he confesses: You are chosen as a magician, in you blows a higher spirit, which inspires you. In secret signs there is no one like you, in league with you is divine knowledge, you are the first in this power and science to perform miracles of things! You make one drink and one sees visions, and at your beckoning they fall to naught!*

*Therefore I am ready to stand in your service, my life is consecrated to your art. Thou wilt enliven and uplift me, not deceive my aspirations, wilt lead me to thy heights to advance near thee!*

And so the youngling let much time pass, to learn the black art's language and signs.

*The End*



*Concluding Remarks*  
*The Dream Passage*



Before the first step happens, a whole life must be endured. Hopes have to fall. Dreams have to fall. Fears have to fall.

Then we arrive at the head of the bridge, and we dare to speak: *It is okay now. It does nothing. It means nothing. I am light as a leaf taken from a tree. I am with the wind now. All sides turned to the sun. Nothing to hide.*

From vain exaltation to riches, from the love of our children to the loss of our children – all will be passaged through, assessed by the foot-measure of our heart, before we are ready.

The *language and signs of the black art* are seeds which are brought into the earth of our knowing-how-to-be-human. Nothing will come from these seeds unless they land in soft soil.

We all come from Zion. We all go to Egypt. And on this long passage we lose ourselves in deserts and dreams. No step on this journey, though, is a detour. Each fantasy we break is an inch forward. A preparation of our clay, of our human soil.

We spend most of our time in dreams, in wrestling down our desires, affections, longings. Only when we have grown out of these shells, broken out of the Orphic egg, then we can embed the *language and sign of the black art* into our earth.

The sorcerer's potion, we drink it every day. The stumbling through the dark passage, we experience it every day. And when we become king, *it is nothing*. And when we make marriage, *it is nothing*. And when the well eats our children, *it is nothing*. All is nothing, to the field of soft soil where the language and signs of the black art grow.

So weigh wisely, my friend.

Whether you want to become a farmer of this field?  
Whether you will walk into the desert of Egypt?

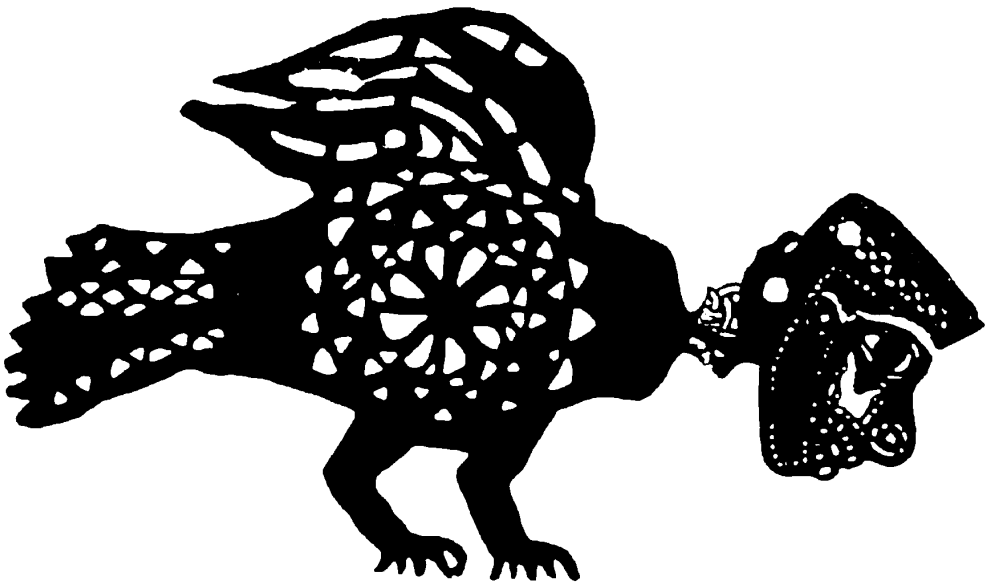
If you choose to do so, expect a journey without mercy. Expect a shaft beneath what people call *the human life*. This shaft will lead you further and further away from yourself. With each step, it will take from you the grace of forgetting. And it will give you the taste of not-knowing. It is a black path. It comes cloaked in the skin of the trickster. And it pulls a sharp blade in a casual jest.

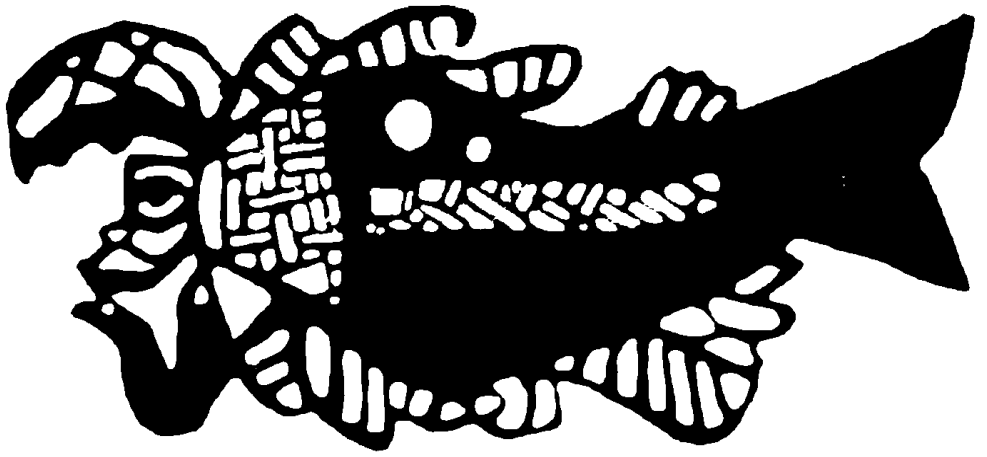
Be ready. Or don't be. It is nothing.



















☆  
Yirah  
☆