

—indeed, in no other city is panic so likely
to attack the stranger, and yet considerations
of religious taboo and military strategy
forbid the publication of maps. But courage,

oh my star! for I am still on my way,
clutching grimly at my water-flask, eyes fixed
on the exposed mechanism of the casino's clock tower,—

which is like our hearts, like the rich and complex feelings
that should be coming into play at this moment, amidst
the striking of bells and the ululations of muezziins,

if only I could find you. But, as is inevitable,
the sky begins to darken as if an immense shutter were sliding
into place,
a fog rises from the canals and a swarm of starving people
stumbles through the narrow streets.

I am thrown aside into the crumbling pavilion
of a disused public fountain, and fear,
like a line of ants begins to crawl up my spine.

Malicious birds, carriers of disease, have devoured the crumbs
I left as a trail,
and examination of my pockets reveals that I carry
no note of your address. The crowd thickens

and begins to chant in unison words
my phrase book does not record; they begin to lacerate their faces
with their nails; they begin to strike out at one another
confusedly with branches.
I dare not emerge from my hiding place,
and I am still on my way. Forever now.

The Road to Ogalma

Perhaps this is not a good day for you. A menacing letter has
arrived from the Ministry of the Interior. A lover, a wife or a
husband has phoned you with a voice full of hate. Alas, the
small boat of your life is about to capsize and the sharks are
circling greedily. And you know that this is the day that you
must find Ogalma. . . . If this is indeed such a day, here is
what you must do. You must leave the city very early in the
morning, taking care that no policemen follow you. You
must carry a stone and a long stick in case you should meet
some wild dogs. You must head north, keeping the peak of
Rose-Coco Mountain always in sight. At the first cross-roads
you will find a goat standing in the back of a broken-down
truck. Walk quickly past it, still heading for the north, until
you come across a man urinating in a field of maize. As soon
as you see him shout a hearty greeting (but do not on any
account mention Ogalma) and turn immediately to your left
before he has a chance to reply. At first you will find yourself
in a savannah scattered with clumps of thorn bushes, but
soon you will come upon flowers. They are orange with
reddish-brown spots. You must pick some of these. Now it
will begin to rain and you should shelter under the branches
of the nearest carob tree. When the rain stops a cat will
appear. Follow it along the path between the tall bamboos.
Voices will come from beyond the bamboos—the voices of
children, perhaps of your childhood friends, but you must
ignore them for the cat will not wait. He will lead you to a
grotto built of old petrol cans. This is the shrine of Mama
Luza, patron of drunkards. Leave your flowers but do not
drink from the spring. You must hurry for the shadows are
lengthening. Ahead of you stands a row of six prickly pear
trees. You must pass to the right of the fourth tree from the
left and walk in a straight line until you come to a low shack,
roofed with old Pepsi-Cola signs. On the steps of the shack
you will find an old woman chopping yams with a big knife.
When she sees you, you should call out, "Well, sister, did
you dream last night?" and she will reply, "Sit down and I
will tell you." If her dream is a dream of water and sky you

need not worry, but if her dream is a dream of fire and blood you must beware. She will offer you a bed for the night and you are forced to accept since it is now quite dark and there is no moon in sight. Also you can hear wild dogs howling not far off. If she has dreamt of water and the sky you may sleep, but if she has dreamt of fire and blood you must stay awake all night, for it is possible that she will attack you with her knife. Pretend to sleep. If she creeps into your room holding the knife you need only sit up suddenly and stare at her without fear. She will scurry away like a spider, whimpering and cursing to herself. In the morning you must behave as if nothing has happened. You will find her scattering grain for her hens, but amid the hens a very beautiful hoopoe will appear. Before it has eaten very much the hens will drive it off. Be quick now, you must follow it. You must run down a hill through a banana plantation. Then you must jump over a stream on the far side of which there is flight of steps overgrown with moss. Run up the steps. At the top the hoopoe will alight on a broken statue. The head of the statue is missing and vines have ensnared it, but it is still possible to tell that it represents a naked woman carrying a sheaf of arrows. You must imagine the head of the woman; you must imagine her eyes and estimate the direction they must once have looked in. Now walk in that direction and you will come upon a great house. It is the house of a rich man who was killed by his slaves in the Great Rebellion. Now you are very near Ogalma. Approach the house with an air of nonchalance. Do not believe the tales of vampires that are told about this place. It is certain that the last vampire packed up and left for Europe more than thirty years ago. There are ghosts of course but it is too early in the day for them to bother you. Enter by the central door. You will find yourself in a room with many pillars, its floor scattered with bat droppings, dead leaves and broken glass pendants. Walk quickly to the far end of this room looking neither to right nor left, but be careful,—the floor is slippery. You will find a small doorway half-hidden by ferns and beyond it a narrow passage in which a poisonous fungus grows in shapes like

thunder clouds and dripping candle-wax. Step carefully and try to hold your breath for the air is full of fungus spores which may cause nausea and dizziness. If you should faint here you may never reach Ogalma, but have courage, the passage is short and at its end you will emerge on to a broad sunlit terrace. Below you lies a valley in which many plants grow. And rising from the valley you will see a column of pure white smoke. It is the smoke rising from the giant spiff of Ogalma. You will find him resting in a hammock. Do not disturb him. After a time he will notice you. He will say: "So you are here at last. You must be a very clever man. How did you manage to find me?" And you must reply—

"I left the city in the early morning when the shadows were still long. No police followed me. I carried a stone and a long stick. I walked towards the peak of Rose-Coco Mountain. At the first cross-roads I came upon a goat standing in the back of a broken down truck, but I walked quickly past it and continued towards the north until I saw an old man urinating in a field of maize. I called out loudly, "A good year for the crops, brother!" but before he could reply I turned to the west and began to cross a savannah of thorn bushes. Soon I came upon some flowers. They were white with red stripes. As I bent down to pick them it began to rain so I took shelter under the branches of a nearby carob. The tree was low so I had to crouch. Ants crawled around my feet. When the rain stopped a handsome grey cat appeared and I followed it. It led me along a narrow path between tall bamboos. Voices of children came from beyond the bamboos and I remembered a summer many years ago when I went with my brothers, my sisters and my cousins to the big river near our village; I remembered the cool water on my feet and the taste of the mangoes we had picked on our way. . . . I must have stopped for a few seconds. Perhaps I closed my eyes, for suddenly the cat was gone. I ran to the end of the path and stumbled into a car cemetery. There was no sign of the cat. A mound of Mercedes, Chevrolets, Buicks, Toyotas and Volkswagens was surmounted by a crumpled Cadillac. Beyond the cars I saw the prickly pears. I passed to the right

of the fourth tree from the left and walked in a straight line until I came across an old woman chopping yarns in front of a low shack. I called out to her "Well sister did you dream last night?" and she replied, "Sit down and I will tell you." I offered her the flowers which she accepted. This was her dream. "I was floating on a great calm ocean. My skirts billowed like the sails of a galleon. All around me my good friends were also floating. We exchanged greetings, quite naturally as if we had met on our way to a market. A breeze carried us on over the water which was clear as glass. The fins of a small fish brushed against my legs. Not far off I heard the deep laugh of my friend Syreeta who is very ticklish. After some time I saw that we were approaching land and I heard bells ringing. The breeze shifted and the whole fleet of women rounded a cape. Before us was the most beautiful city I have ever seen. There were walls of white stone, roofs of gold and windows of green glass. Many flags fluttered above the roofs, the streets were carpeted with roses and all the people of the city were running in the direction of the harbour, pointing towards us, shouting—"It is the Promised Ships, the Magic Fleet! They have come to take us away from this dreadful place!" And I did not understand them for I was thinking that I would like to have lived in that city for the rest of my life. That was my dream." She smiled almost shyly. It was getting dark so I asked her if she had a place where I could sleep. She showed me to a room hardly bigger than a cupboard, but it was clean and the bed was soft. I spent a peaceful night. Roosters woke me. In the yard I found red hens pecking at grain. But in their midst was a bird of a kind I had never seen before. About the size of a pigeon, it was very graceful, its high crest was the blue of irises, for the rest it was coloured a dusty pink with crescents of pale grey on its wings. I asked the woman the name of the bird. She said only: "It is your bird." At this the hens began to attack the bird and it flew off. I ran after it, down a hill, over a stream and up a flight of steps. (I did not stop to think what a flight of steps was doing in this place.) The bird alighted at the foot of a white statue. The statue had

no head and lacked an arm but I saw that it had been the statue of a woman, even though the breasts were also mutilated. I thought of her head and her eyes. And her eyes appeared before me and I saw which way they looked. I began to walk slowly along the line of her gaze which led me through a shallow pond, a thick hedge and into an open field. At once I saw the magnificent ruins of a house built of yellow stone with many columns and a hundred dark windows. Then from the windows and from between the columns wild dogs ran out howling like ghosts and baring their teeth. I remembered my stone. I threw it. I swung my stick in a wide circle and I cursed the race of dogs. And this I do not understand, for they fled away without more ado. They seemed horrified and ashamed as if I had broken some unspoken understanding. Now I could approach the house, and I began to tremble—surely this must be the home of vampires. I thought of their glistening lips, their pale skin, elegant gestures and soft speech. But I walked to the central door and entered. I found nothing, only a vast space littered with torn books and broken wine-bottles, some pools of water and weeping ferns. At the far end of this space I saw the opening of a narrow corridor. This I also entered feeling very pleased at my fearlessness. But I must say, Ogalma, that I was very foolish, for the corridor was almost blocked with strange plants in the shapes of deformed children, withered breasts, snarling mouths, leprous hands. I began to feel very dizzy. Suddenly my mother appeared shouting why didn't I eat the plants since I hadn't eaten for a day and a half. "You think you can live this way?" she screamed, "Stupid, bad, wicked boy. Why did you go away?" Then she shrank away and vanished. Next my father appeared, enraged and drunk. He grew very tall and vomited as if he would never stop. I fell down drenched and suffocated. I think I fainted. After a time I felt a child's hand tugging at my sleeve, though no child was present. I saw that sunlight was pouring into the corridor and I crawled towards it. I saw, briefly, a priest, a policeman and an American soldier, but the light passed through them and I laughed. I laughed for a long time, moving slowly

towards the light. This is why my hands are scarred and why my knees bleed, Ogalma. From the terrace I looked down with joy to see the white smoke rising from your giant spliff. And so I came to you and waited."

Then Ogalma will say—

"Yes, this is very good, but what happened next?"
And you must say—

"Then Ogalma said to me, 'So you are here at last. You must be a very clever man. How did you manage to find me?'"

And Ogalma will say—

"And how did you reply?"

And you will say—

"I told him how I left the city early in the morning before the sun had risen, how no one saw me, how I kept the peak of Rose-Coco Mountain always in sight, how at the first cross-roads I found a goat standing in the back of a broken-down truck, how I ignored the goat and the truck and continued to walk in a northwards direction, how I saw an old man pissing in his field of maize and turned immediately to the left, how I came upon flowers with trumpet mouths, how the rain fell and where I sheltered, how the cat appeared, what the old woman told me of her dreams—her fleet of women, her beautiful city whose inhabitants desperately desired to leave it."

And you will pause. Your voice will falter, and you will say, "But you are not Ogalma". And he will smile in mockery and forgiveness.

The Poem of Arrival

The welcome
so carefully planned
by the entire town council and representatives
of local trades and industries (glass-work,

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bead-work, and coal, gold and bronze—
those figurines in doubtful taste offered to all new-
comers)

had failed. Smiles faded
and jaws drooped lower than the flowers willing
in the hands of the prettiest children of both sexes
carefully schooled in their lyrical greetings:

'O Prince in need of our affection!'
they cried, 'Green frond
of our longing! Child of happiness, more
ardently desired than the full moon
on a summer night, or a soup of celery and lentils
on a cruel winter's eve . . . Milk
of our hunger! Jewels! Richness! Truffles,
liberty and love! O delightful and wholly unknown person!'

And thus they chirruped absently
as trains (more trains than they could count)
moved in and out of platforms like pistons of a machine
going about its day-long, night-long business,
selflessly supplying an abundance and comfort
unanimously unappreciated. And so

an immense pathos descended on the scene,
like the sight of small birds
(brown and undistinguished) starving
by slow degrees in an endless wave of snow;
pop-bottles, and transparent wrappers of cigarette packets
littered platforms curving towards the south,
lovers were reunited in telephone booths,
adult children negligently greeted the parents they resented,
business men decanted into taxis that fled
to garish suburban hotels full of horribly framed mirrors
and a thin man suddenly collapsed under
the weight of the dinner service he was carrying . . .

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