

Excerpt from “From Agadez to Aladab to Agadez”

One late October afternoon, when I couldn't think of anything better to do than to watch the sunset once again, I flip-flopped north and crossed the Kouri River, in which I hadn't seen a single drop of water in ten years. There, I met Oukoulla, who was coming from Azel, which means branch. He is a Tuareg, blue, and a blacksmith; although chafed by the sand, his watery eyes gleam dynamically, and he always carries a couple of knives with him, since he is, after all, a blacksmith. Like all of the blacksmiths in most African tribes, Oukoulla belongs to a lower class or caste, because he knows how to manipulate fire. As a blacksmith, he can allow his tongue free rein, and doesn't have to adhere to the strict, haughty rules the other Tuaregs follow. So it's always fun to talk to Oukoulla—that is, if he speaks at all. Likely, he had been at a celebration of some sort in Azel, slitting the throats of a couple of sheep. After uttering a few religious words, he moves his sharp, thin knife so elegantly and gracefully that it looks as if he's drawing a bow across the neck of a violin.

He is very economical about everything and sits quietly in front of you, like a blue sculpture. I have to be economical with my questions, too, even though I'd like to imbibe so much more from out of his eyes. Usually, he asks the same thing, as if he were not asking you anything at all. “*Et la fatigue?*” Am I still tired, even though I arrived weeks ago. “*Ça va?*” He looks at you; no, he doesn't look at you at all, but rather, through you, as if you were a piece of glass. His moist, intense eyes laugh and cry simultaneously. At the same time, I'm wrenched into their depths, and I don't know how to escape, as if I were high. We talked about business, the same way men do in New York, and night fell.

The sun sank as fast as Usain Bolt would run a lap. Night. These sunsets in the desert are as intense as a heavenly masturbation session, in which one is, once again, the outsider. Oukoulla—“culla” means “sphere” in Romansh—wore a ring with a silver sphere. A *bijou tuareg*, which I don't want to describe at all. Never saw it. After a half-hour, I asked him if he'd made the ring, the perfect sphere, in particular. He said yes. And we both thought, who else. Meanwhile, there were more stars than sky above us. The starry sky was an ocean made of grains of sand, upon which we kept sailing. Oukoulla, unmoved, like a lapis lazuli stone. This sky is a waste of nature over the desert, which knows no waste itself. I asked Oukoulla if he could forge a silver sphere as big as a melon. “*Pas de problème,*” he said, so proudly that it seemed as if his beautiful teeth would burst out of his mouth.

Never did it, but no problem. That is a great friend, I thought; he thought the same thing. No room for doubt, if one wants to survive.

(With us, in the west, the word “problem” shows up in the first sentence, or in the third, at the latest, when one gives someone a commission.) I have learned from my Tuareg friends to be sparing in my use of this word.

By the time he had finished his reply, I had to know exactly what I wanted to put inside this sphere, in order to make a sculpture. Neither stars nor sand nor Oukoulla nor I would fit into it. His camel, Koura, lay on the ground twelve meters away, as still as his master, ignoring the sky, grinding his ungainly teeth, and perhaps thinking lustful thoughts about other camels, so I had to say, “a camel has to fit into it.” “*Pas de problème*,” said Oukoulla. “But you have to make twelve spheres out of silver, so that a whole animal, dried in the sun, will fit in.” A slight smile escaped his lips. “*Comme ils sont bizarres ces blancs*”—“these whites are so bizarre”—he must have thought, once again. “*Jojo*,” he said in Tamasheq, which means the same thing in the Swiss-German dialect—“yeah, yeah,” in English. No more questions were asked while the sculpture was being realized; every smith knew what was going to go into it. But if the spheres had remained empty, there would have been a thousand questions, and no valid answer. In our state of affluence, we are better prepared to deal with emptiness than a desert dweller is.

The daily expeditions taken by the tribes, when they go off seeking pastureland, are not what constitute real life in the desert. Real life, as Saint-Exupéry says, is the game that is played on the side.

Not Vital, 2009