

# Four Scenes and an Epilogue (or no coherent story)

Salwa Aleryani

## 1 *Waiting to begin*

On a late afternoon in October 2020, I wrote my mother asking if she knew someone who worked at the Central Bank of Yemen in Sana'a.<sup>1</sup>

She answered.

أيوة بنات عمي حمود حميدة وعائده ليش  
17:37

I'm looking for someone who could photograph the main waiting area of the bank. I told you, remember?

For months I had been tracing artifacts and buildings that appeared on Yemeni coins and banknotes and as time passed,<sup>2</sup> and the exterior of the building emerged in 100s and 500s, in reverse, I had a desire to see its interior.

The waiting area was where I imagine myself sitting, I said — but I am not sure what I am waiting for.

Early the next morning she forwarded Shadia's answer.

صباح الخير هذا رد شادية  
05:40

Forwarded



05:40

[11:40 MYT]

Her voice came with a family dialect I had not heard in a long time. That night when I fell asleep I dreamt that Shadia, her sister, and her niece, had come to visit me.

أعمل لكن شاهي؟

I did not mention the bank again.



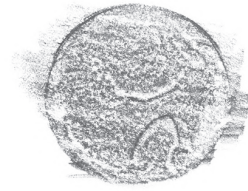
My photographs and writing here began with a recognition of an occasional act of forgetting: forgetting that I was in a foreign country. I began also with a fascination with the most trivial signs of national difference, with the mild unfamiliarities of foreign currency.<sup>3</sup>

— Allan Sekula

## 2 Landscape in obverse

In Rabih Alameddine's novel, *The Angel of History*, Jacob, the protagonist, a Yemeni-born poet, recounts his departure from Cairo where he grew up, quoting Brecht, "and in a poem Bertolt Brecht compared himself to a man who carried a brick to show how beautiful his house once was."<sup>4</sup>

Shaharah Bridge is a site I have never visited, and a town with houses I have not lived in. I have come to know its features as well as one knows the obverse side of a coin.



Value	Mass	Diameter	Thickness	Composition
10 Yer	6.05 g	26 mm	1.75 mm	stainless steel

[10YER 1995–2009, still in circulation]

The Shahara footbridge can be found in the Ahnum mountain range in Amran, northwestern Yemen. Built in the seventeenth century, it connects two mountains — Jabal al Emir (جبل الأمير) and Jabal al Faish (جبل الفيش) — stretching across a deep gorge where the two mountains meet.

Before the bridge was built, and for as long as people had lived across the two mountains, there were difficulties getting supplies to the villages across each side. Although both mountains are within shouting distance of each other, villagers had to climb all the way down to the bottom of the gorge and then back up the other side.

Village elders today pass down the story that its architect Salah al-Yaman was in awe at what stood before his eyes after it was completed. Unable to fathom the construction of such an incredible bridge, he lost his mind.<sup>5</sup>



In a science-fiction story by E. Hamilton, Humati, the main character is a woodcutter who finds himself in the forest, following a strange magical rite, with his sense of perception strangely altered. Within this rural Babel, a place of confusion, his sense of time is completely slackened, and the forest and its inhabitants take on a strange power before his very eyes. The plants, trees and grass follow a rhythm and movement that he has never seen before. In this hallucinatory vision, objects that are static or at least characterized by almost imperceptible movements, slowly come alive. This is what might happen if we could see the movements of the Earth's crust in immeasurable slowness — we would see mountains, plains and lakes take shape before our very eyes.<sup>6</sup>

— Luigi Ghirri

### 3 A bridge by any other name

On one evening in May 2013, two young men were killed for overtaking a wedding procession in Sana'a. The assailant was affiliated with a well-known tribal leader and senior member of the General People's Congress (GPC) party.<sup>7</sup> The two victims belonged to a civilian family from the South.

In the days that followed protesters marched but no arrests were made.

One month later the governor announced that an ongoing bridge and tunnel project in Bayt Baws district, close to the location of their murder, would be renamed Khatib and Aman Martyrs Bridge

جسر الشهيدين حسن خطيب وخالد أمان

Construction was completed in 2014.



كان جبلا وعراً بدون مسالك وبدون حياة .. مجرد صخور صلبة.. ورأى علي التهامي الحبال تربط في وسط الرجال القصار الذين بدأوا دون إبطاء في التسلق، وشعر بدقات قلبه تنتفض بقوة. إن كل شيء إذن حقيقة، لقد كذب الخبر منذ أيام حين سمع أن الصين سينسفون كل الجبال التي تعوق الطريق لتسير في خط مستقيم. . كيف يستطيع هؤلاء المجانين نسف الجبال؟

— محمد عبدالولي، طريق الصين، ١٩٦٦<sup>٨</sup>

A few years ago I came across this sentence, “in a system based on prices, there can be no solidarity between millions and pennies.”<sup>9</sup> I have thought about it often ever since — and every time I press a coin into my hand.

Each year millions in paper and metallic currency is taken out of circulation. Worn and damaged paper notes are destroyed, shredded, granulated, or partially burned, and metal coins are turned into scrap and sold.

What can I possibly say about monetary policies? I have neither the expertise nor the lived experience to tell the story.

What I can tell you is that Mohammed al-Qaisar lives in Taiz and repairs damaged banknotes.<sup>10</sup>

For the past six years the depreciation of the YER has led to massive inflation. More recently, shortages in banknote liquidity meant that damaged and worn banknotes previously withdrawn from the market were put back into circulation. The most affected by this shortage were the smaller denominations, the 10 – 20YER coins, and the 50 – 100YER banknotes.

In small grocery stores and public minibuses customers and passengers are often given sweets or chocolate instead of change.

Occasionally this exchange breaks into a fight.

And from here begins al-Qaisar’s story.

*\* I’m crazy about your visit, I mend all kinds of banknotes.*





My father would tell how once, long ago — centuries? years? — the lottery in Babylon was a game played by commoners. He would tell (though whether this is true or not, I cannot say) how barbers would take a man's copper coins and give back rectangles made of bone or parchment and adorned with symbols. Then, in broad daylight, a drawing would be held; those smiled upon by fate would, with no further corroboration by chance, win coins minted of silver. The procedure, as you can see, was rudimentary. Naturally, those so-called "lotteries" were a failure. They had no moral force whatsoever; they appealed not to all man's faculties, but only to his hopefulness.<sup>11</sup>

— Jorge Luis Borges



~ *Epilogue*

Initially I thought that the subject of my writing would be the curious path that tracing the illustrations on banknotes and coins has led me through.

I imagined that I would neatly write:

**T**o my surprise, I found that many of the panoramic and archeological illustrations in YER banknotes were engraved from photographs by German orientalists, Richard Gerlach and Hans Helfritz [mainly from, *Sonne über Arabien: Bilder aus dem Jemen* (1960) and *Land Ohne Schatten* (1934)] and from the American Foundation for the Study of Man, founded by American archeologist turned oil tycoon Wendell Phillips.<sup>12</sup>

But I am still far from untangling the legacy of these photographs, the whereabouts of the artifacts today,<sup>13</sup> and the ways in which the buildings and landscapes depicted shifted and followed along the lives of those of us who still — or no longer — inhabit them.

I assure you that I am even farther from telling a coherent story of the past, while more than ever the present unfolds with uncertainty and ambiguity.



All forms must bear within themselves the possibility of becoming something else.<sup>14</sup>

— Marisa Merz



## Endnotes

1 The Central Bank of Yemen was established in 1971 in the North, and the Bank of Yemen in 1972 in the South. Following the unification in 1990, the two merged under the Central Bank of Yemen name and maintained headquarters in Sana'a. The Sana'a building had been designed a few years prior by Egyptian Architects Mustafa Shawky and Salah Zeitoun and won the Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 1988. Officially, the building opened its doors in 1981, and appears on the [100YER 1984–92. Reverse] and [500YER 1997–2000. Obverse] banknotes. In 2016 the government in exile abruptly moved the bank headquarters from Sana'a to Aden. The branch in Sana'a remains in operation under Houthi control

2 From 1967 to 1990 the Dinar [Yemen Democratic Dinar (YDD)] was the currency of South Yemen. After the monetary unification it was replaced by the YER. YDD banknotes remained in legal circulation until 1996.

3 Allan Sekula, *Geography Lesson: Canadian Notes* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984), 6.

4 Alameddine, Rabih, "The Angel of History," *Atlantic Monthly Press*, 2015, 142.

5 Denzil Griffiths, "Shaharah — the remote fortified

mountain village: And the story behind the bridge of sighs," *Medium*, July 23, 2020, <https://medium.com/lessons-from-history/shaharah-the-remote-fortified-mountain-village-84cb3fd2cde4#>.

6 Luigi Ghirri, "Franco Vimercati," *The Complete Essays 1973–1991* (London: MACK, 2016), 85.

7 The General People's Congress (GPC) is the party of Yemen's late autocratic leader, Ali Abdullah Saleh. Founded in 1982, it remained the dominant political party until 2011 — ruling with a combination of family rule and kleptocracy.

8 محمد عبدالولي، "طريق الصين الأرض يا سلمى، دار التدا، ١٩٦٦، ص٢٢، بيروت، (Mohammad Abdul-Wali, "China Road," in *The Land, Salma, Dar al-Adab, Beirut* (n.p., 1966), 23; for the English edition see Mohammad Abdul-Wali, "China Road," in *They Die Strangers*, trans. Abubaker Bagader and Deborah Akers (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 84

9 Gerrit Gohlke, "Abstract Absolutism: On the Abstracting Power of the Market and Local Counter-Strategies," in *Public Abstraction*, ed. Vlado Velkov (Berlin: Walter König, 2015), 212.

\* *AP Archive*, "Damaged bank notes repaired to stay in use," September 7, 2016,

online video, 3:00 min, <http://www.aparchive.com/metadata/youtube/4b57734334a7bdc917724e8b17c4267a>.

10 Mohammed al-Qaisar, appears in the video above as repairer and mender of damaged banknotes.

11 Jorge Luis Borges, "The Babylon Lottery," in *Ficciones*, ed. Anthony Kerrigan (New York: Grove Press, 1962 [1956]), 55.

12 P. Symes, M. Hanewich, and K. Street, *The Banknotes of Yemen* (self-pub., Canberra, 1997), 85.

13 Many of which were looted in early archeological expeditions and remain in private collections, or were later donated to western museums, and many more of which are smuggled today and find their way into the international market.

14 Marisa Merz, *It Doesn't Match, Yet It Flourishes* (Turin: Fondazione Merz; Venice: Fondazione Querini Stampalia, 2012), 83. Published in conjunction with an exhibition of the same title, organized by and presented at Fondazione Merz, Turin, June 1–26, 2012 and Fondazione Querini Stampalia, Venice, June 1–September 18, 2011.

imagining the hidden  
in the exchange

Salwa Aleryani

- 131 Central Bank of Yemen, 1988  
Interior view of the main lobby, Sanaa.  
Courtesy of architect Salah Zeitoun ©  
1988 Aga Khan Archives
- 134 Image depicting a graphite rubbing of  
a 10 rial coin showing an impression of  
the Shahara Bridge outline which ap-  
pears on the obverse side. © 2020 Salwa  
Aleryani
- 135 ^ Photograph of Shahara pedestrian  
bridge. The image shows a frontal high  
angle view of the stone arch bridge  
which connects two mountains with  
connecting stairs leading to the bridge  
from each mountain side. Five figures  
are sitting on the center and right side  
of the bridge and one figure is walking  
down the stairs on the left side. The  
image colors are sepia-like and a foggy  
valley appears in the background.

Caption: *People sitting across the  
Shahara Bridge*, 1986. Courtesy of

- Bernard Gagnon, published with a CC BY-SA 3.0 license.
- 135 ∨ Photograph of Shahara pedestrian bridge. The image shows a side high angle view of the stone arch bridge which connects two mountains with connecting stairs leading to the bridge from each mountain side. One figure leans over the bridge and looks down the valley. The image is a warm reddish color and nearby mountain ranges can be seen in the background.
- 139 ∧ Photograph of a grey stone wall with a white horse stencil and an embossed red brick text in Arabic. The text reads: Roads.
- Caption: *Untitled (The Roads)* by Salwa Aleryani, 2008, digital photograph, stone wall with horse stencil (GPC party symbol), Sanaa — Hodeida Road © 2020 Salwa Aleryani
- 139 ∨ Screenshot of the Saeed Manufacturing Concrete and Construction Company portfolio slide show. The high angle image depicts the final stages of the Bayt Baws bridge and tunnel project construction. The city skyline, cars and street appear around the construction site. There are vertical lines on the left side of the picture that show the image transition in the slide. — Sanaa municipality, 2014. © 2014 SMCC Contracting
- 143 ∧ Photograph of various old Yemeni rial banknotes on display in a shop window in the in Souq al-Melh (Salt Market) in the Old City of Sanaa. The banknotes hang in a grid pattern and vary in color — blue, green, pink, purple — and are of different denominations. © 2020 Doaa Sudam
- 143 ∨ Scan of a 100 Yemeni rial damaged banknote. The banknote is pale pink and beige, it shows wear and is distressed at the edges and partially torn in
- the middle. Published under the public domain.
- 145 Still of a film work by Roman Ondak. In *Lucky Day* Roman Ondak explores the contemporary possibilities of pilgrimage in a secular context. The film follows a man who tosses a large number of coins into a fountain, in a somewhat grandiose gesture of applying for luck. The film was shot in Santiago de Compostela, a traditional site of pilgrimage since medieval times and still much frequented today. The fountain into which the film's protagonist spills the coins is the fountain of Praza de Fonseca.
- Lucky day* by Roman Ondak, 2006, 04:00 min (loop), 16mm film, color, silent. Courtesy the artist and Esther Schipper, Berlin. © 2006 Roman Ondak
- 147 ∧ Purple and brown colored image of reverse 20 Riyal banknote. Issued by the Central Bank of Yemen between 1973-1977. Image shows English text and numbering and a decorative frame. The center illustration depicts mountain terraces found in the central highlands of Yemen and are still used today to grow much of the agricultural produce.
- 20 rial (reverse), Republic of Yemen, 1973–77, Banknote Index. P-0014. © 2011 Ömer Yalcinkaya
- 147 ∨ Photograph of terrace mountain fields in Yemen. The image shows a light blue sky with clouds and mountain terrace fields in the foreground with a rocky mountain range in the background.
- Im jemenitischen Bergland wurden kunstvoll Terrassenfelder angelegt* (In the Yemeni mountains, terraced fields were elaborately shaped) by Richard Gerlach, 1960, scanned from the book by the same author: *Sonne über Ara-*
- bien: Bilder aus dem Jemen* (Leipzig: VEB F.A Brockhaus Verlag, 1960), 36.
- 147 < Black and white image of obverse 20 Riyal banknote. Issued by the Central Bank of Yemen between 1973-1977. The image shows Arabic text and numbering and a decorative frame. The left side of the banknote shows an illustration of the Fragment of a pediment with a Goddess, an ancient South Arabian marble relief depicting a nude fertility goddess emerging from vine leaves and grapes.
- 20 rial (obverse), Republic of Yemen, 1973–77, Banknote Index. P-0014. © 2011 Ömer Yalcinkaya
- 147 > Fragment of a Pediment with a Goddess. The upper left side of this composition depicts an imaginary creature composed of an Asiatic lion's head, a serpent-like body, a fishtail, and wings. A nude child deity grasps one of the creature's wing with his left hand and holds a short sword in his right hand to control it. A smaller fragment containing the head of a similar composite beast in the British Museum might be the complement to this vignette. The lower right section depicts a nude fertility goddess emerging from vine leaves and grapes. With the increasing influence of Greco-Roman culture during the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE, new artistic styles and motifs, such as this female deity, became part of ancient South Arabian culture.
- Made from Alabaster in Marib, Yemen (second century CE). Currently on display at the Walters Art Museum, Baltimore. Published under the public domain.