Walk from Wakan to Menakhir and out Wadi Halfain
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Jean-Michel is a young Dutchman living in England whom I chancedto be bunked with on a recent pass through the Cook Islands. He came to Oman to organize the laser lights for the Sultan's National Day extravaganza in Wattaya Stadium, and he stayed on with us after the show. Paula is a teenage girl who has to be dragged off on wadi trips when she would much prefer lounging at home next to a soft drink and a video player. That is why, as her parents drove Jean-Michel and I up the Ghubra Bowl, she nagged her mom to turn back because of the sheaths of light that filtered through the dark clouds, looking much like distant rain. Talk in the car centered on people we have known who had to be rescued in Oman from flash floods, and at one point, Anne asked me if I thought we ought to continue or not. I tried to encourage her, though I looked forlornly at the gray clouds obscuring the tops of the mountains ringing the bowl. Having walked in clouds once before in Oman, I was imagining what it would be like in the pea soup at the top: cold, directionless, maybe even wet. Then as we headed up the road toward the village of Wakan, its dozen houses perched below the green of its gardens midway up the mountain side, I saw a pinpoint of light shining just below the underbelly of the sea of gray. The light was coming through the low point in the wall of mountains, through the gap. There it is, I pointed, there's where we're going.

From the perspective of people not planning to wander far from the car that brought them, the gap, aqaba in Arabic, looks to be a long way up from Wakan. It barely makes a dent in the tops of a circle of mountains ringing what westerners call the Ghubra Bowl, after the town at the mouth of the wadi that provides access by motor car. As we readied our packs and rushed through our picnic lunch, the people who had brought us, especially the elderly Swedes in the second car, probably thought us a little daft heading off unconcernedly in dubious weather conditions into a wall of solid rock towering 600 meters overhead of our vantage already half way up the mountain. But like ants far from home, persistence would see us through, and we would make the top and beyond.

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The cab driver was a trip. He pulled off the road just down from where we were standing, the first driver to have reacted after half an hour of flagging in the dark. After I told him in Arabic that we were going to either the university or the roundabout by the military hospital, I asked how much, and he said in English "No problem," as if why would I ask such question in such pitch darkness in such a remote location with such a chill wind howling through the Izki gap. I saw his point, and jumped in next to a very old man who had to move a bundle of grass occupying most of the back seat. The old man got out just up the road, at Hamma, in the dark past some brightly lit restaurant and Food Stuffs Div. shops, at his "dukak", whatever that was. When I asked the driver what a dukak was, he just laughed and pulled into the highway, complaining about other Omani drivers who drink, get drunk, and smoke cigarettes. It's a dangerous road, he said, talking now solely in Arabic. He talked about how he had been driving 23 years. As a gambit, I always ask people where they are from, and he said Barka, but he worked now at the airport. He was a licensed airport taxi driver. From the taxi to the university, 5 riyals he said. He started quoting fares: from the airport to the capital, 7 riyals; from the airport to Nizwa, 25. Twenty-five! I exclaimed. I told him I had hired a taxi the month before to take me from Nizwa all the way to my house at the university for just 10 riyals. Ah, but he was a licensed airport driver, he said, and 25 was the official rate he was allowed to charge. This got me worried that the fare might not be "no problem", especially after he passed by some Indians standing by the turning to Sumail, saying they were "miskieen," meaning filthy or naughty, depending on context. Also, he had mentioned earlier that his cab had been "engaged", a word borrowed into Omani Arabic implying that a cab has been hired "special". So I brought up the question of fares again. He didn't answer directly, but when I pressed the point, as politely and obliquely as I could in a foreign language, he finally said "around two riyals." OK, two riyals would be no problem, I allowed, and sat back and relaxed my exhausted muscles. Finally, at our roundabout, he asked if we wanted to be driven up to the university, and I replied affirmative. As we sped up the road home, I asked if he was on his way to Barka, in

which case he might as well be going by the university road, but he said he was going to the airport, so I understood that the detour to take us home was out of his way. When he dropped us off, I asked how much we owed, and he answered "ala keefek," which means, as you like. So we gave him three riyals each, and he seemed quite happy with it. I had a look at him as he got back in his cab, friendly face with patches of gray in his mustache. He had said he was the same age I was, 44, but he looked older.

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"Chill, chill!" the people say, as they watch you eat dates. They are saying the Arabic word akil, meaning eat. But they say it in this dialect with a "ch" instead of "k" sound; for example, keef halich, instead of keef halek, for how are you. I think on this as I savor the sweet dates, laced with cumin. They are the color of honey and really delicious. I ask what kind they are, another of my gambits, and am told they are "khalis". The ones we just had were (the typical kind ??). They come from Nizwa, having been brought to Menakhir by road, the one that goes to Saiq. I don't imagine that many people come to Menakhir by "rigil" anymore, as I have three times now.

Some of the people in the village are familiar to me. For example, there is the unusual-looking Ahmad bin Nakhar, and an old corpulent and very black character who looks like a biblical figure because of the way he wears his headdress. They are sitting around the same tree I sat round once before, on perhaps even on the same mat. The arrival of guests with backpacks is cause for men in the village to gravitate toward the majlis tree, and coffee rich in cardoman is produced along with the dates. Conversation goes on around us which I can't understand at all, but when people talk directly to me, I can understand pretty well. We talk about the trail from the gap to Menakhir, and I realize now that the best one goes along the mountain crest, not down the wadi I've negotiated two times now, though it wasn't a bad walk down from 2100 meters to 1800, only slightly circuitous, but dropping down on Menakhir the whole way. We talk about how the kids from Menakhir stay in school in Nizwa eight months of the year (and go there by helicopter, though the helicopter doesn't call regularly as it does in villages without roads). As usual, they wonder where my car is; the reason for our wandering around in hills when we could be driving elsewhere always requires lengthy explanation in Arab villages. People always want to know where you are going and where you've been, and they figure there must be a car in there somewhere, and are surprised when there isn't.

We were right on schedule for the morning. I had figured on getting through Menakhir by noon, and it was almost that time as I announced that we would be pushing on. Earlier, in the hills over Menakhir, as we were resting from a hike up one of the ubiquitous fingers of mountain that seemed to be forever blocking our way, Jean-Michel had seemed incredulous when I told him that the walk down Wadi Halfain from Menakhir might take us six hours, and that on top of the four I had figured on for getting from our campsite to Menakhir that morning. He had the look of one who had not fully understood the nature of the bargain he had made with nature, for once into the mountains, there is little grace and no turning back. But he never complained, not even after he turned his ankle rather badly near the end of the walk (thank god not in the middle), and he trudged gamely along the whole way.

The evening before, we had just barely made the gap in time to scrounge together some wood for a campfire. Our timing on that one couldn't have been closer. I had figured on a two o'clock start from Wakan as the latest we could manage in order to avoid sleeping out on the mountain-side, but it was two fifteen when we finally trundled past the gardens and along the falaj leading to the improbable stepped trail starting at 1500 meters, not far below the cliff faces. The trail had been fine at first, but at one point we had gone high when I thought perhaps the trail went low, and we had climbed rapidly up the land, like Lilliputians mounting a layer cake with a soaring top. I had my doubts until we came to a spit of land with a dozen faded paper drinks containers scattered about, as if either a group of day trippers had come here for a picnic, or more hopefully, that this was a logical stopping point for travelers between Wakan and Menakhir. However, there was no obvious trail from there, so we had again gone high, and eventually found ourselves grasping at hand-holds in huge vertical ripples of granite and sharp karst limestone trying to get from one distention of cliff to the next. We had become enmired in rock walls at 1930 meters.

This was dangerous walking, verging on rock climbing without ropes, and I could see we risked spending inordinate amounts of precious daylight negotiating minute creases of the towering mountains, so I ordered a descent. Rather than look for ways to climb out of our predicament, I looked down for ways with greater slope, and soon we had dropped to nearly 1800. But in this way, we made decent time laterally, and soon we came on the trail, helpfully marked with piled stones. We followed it up, making even better time as the light began to fade from the sky until not far below the gap, at about 2000 feet, we lost the damn trail again.

We were getting fatigued, in our fourth hour of climbing, and once again found ourselves heading haphazardly up the granite where the cliff face was steepest. But I pressed on, moving briskly and without rest, climbing up when possible, and moving sideways whenever a patch of ground presented itself. As we rounded each spit of land where we couldn't see on the other side, there was danger that beyond would lie a chasm and it would be impossible to continue, and we would have to stop where we were and sort ourselves out next morning. With that in mind, I began to note the places where the scrub was thickest and where we might have a spot of level ground and firewood against the chill. But always there was a way, either up or forward, and despite the waning light, we were lucky to come again upon the last and most remarkable set of steps leading right up to the gap. Five minutes later, we were at 2165 meters and through.

The sky beyond the gap still retained a faint orange glow, and in that dim light we spotted a patch of open ground by the trail below us. After pausing to admire the panoramic view behind us out the Ghubra Bowl, we dropped to our campsite and immediately began to forage for wood. Sticks were barely visible as unrock-like shapes, and I had to call to Jean-Michel after gathering my last load in order to return to him and our camping spot, but we got enough wood before pitch darkness set in to get a fire blazing and keep it going through most of the night.

Despite the pervasive chill, the clothes we were wearing, even our underwear, were drenched with sweat from our efforts. We put on dry clothes from our packs and lay the wet clothes out on rocks by our fire, and the sweat steamed off into the cold air in vapor visible in the hot firelight. It was so cold that when the clothes were dry and warm, we put them right back on over those we were already wearing. Even then, we hadn't quite enough clothes and bedding to ward off the chill of cold dawn, and we were awake shivering in our bedrolls when the sun came up next morning. Fortunately, in the early light, we found plenty of wood, and we had the fire blazing again to warm up and boil water for tea. Luckily for us, the weather had cleared and the sun would soon warm things up and dry the dew that had settled on our things overnight.

Jean-Michel was surprised it could be so cold anywhere in Oman. He said he understood now why I had pushed so unwaveringly the last hour of our walk the night before. If we had reached the gap even ten minutes later, we wouldn't have been able to gather wood, and we'd have frozen our asses off. "And that's all there is to it," he said with succinct realization.

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I've walked up Wadi Halfain before, but never down. Going up, one grasps only gradually what is in store. The wall of rock at the end of it is so massive that it is only half way up it that you realize that yes, you are going to have to climb all the way up there. I don't know why it never occurs to you while you are wandering in the wadi bed that the very top is where you are going. If it did, you'd probably turn right around and go back home to your beer in your fridge and a/c and stereo. It is a very long way, but the views down the wadi are well worth it.

Coming from the top, at Menakhir, you get the views right away. At first, you walk in a wadi that you had better climb out of and on to the trail above, because it soon turns into an impressive gorge which eventually drops off into space, like someone just sliced off the end of it and lifted a whole wedge of mountain away, and where the gorge would have continued happily along getting deeper and deeper as it cut down what would have been the side of a mountain, you can now stand and contemplate the potential there for hang-gliding and parapenting. It is breathtaking.

As you survey the situation from the rock ledge your are standing on, not too close to the edge because it drops away so precipitously, you can see that you are going to have to go around the inside of the scoop made by the entity which removed the mountain that you otherwise would have walked over in order to get down to the place on the right side of the wadi for descending into the wadi bed. The other side is all rock walls, so the inside of the scoop it is. Halfway through that, as the rocks under your feet break and crumble away, you wonder how long it will last and how many more of these peninsulas of mountain you have to go down and up again, and will the next one over have an easy transition to the one beyond, or will you be confronted with a deep depression requiring you to change your plan, perhaps move uphill to go around? When walking down, you try to avoid going uphill, just as when walking up, you try to avoid going down.

In the end, it was only because I had been there before that we were able to find our way out to the highway before dark. I knew that we were heading for a point of land at 1400 meters above sea level on which there was a tree, and I could see what I thought was that point of land from 300 meters higher up. It turned out that I was right, and that all the maneuvering along the giant scoop was heading us in the right direction. Furthermore, after we had rested in the deserted village and set out down the trail leading from there, I was able to see that the trail was heading us in the opposite direction from where we wanted to go, and I abruptly changed course, backtracked a hundred meters, and just headed us down the mountain to that spit of land. And sure enough, there we picked up another trail and a couple of cairns, and the impressive set of steps leading in half an hour from there down to the wadi bed at 730 meters.

Two hours after that, we were on the road in the dark, waving at cars as they zoomed past. Arabs won't leave people on the road too long in general, but that is because they can't resist interaction once you've made eye contact, but in the dark that is impossible. And they drive too fast to stop at short notice. So we were just about to march Jean-Michel on his twisted ankle four kilometers up the road when the cab driver pulled over and ended our story.

Time Alt. - Notes
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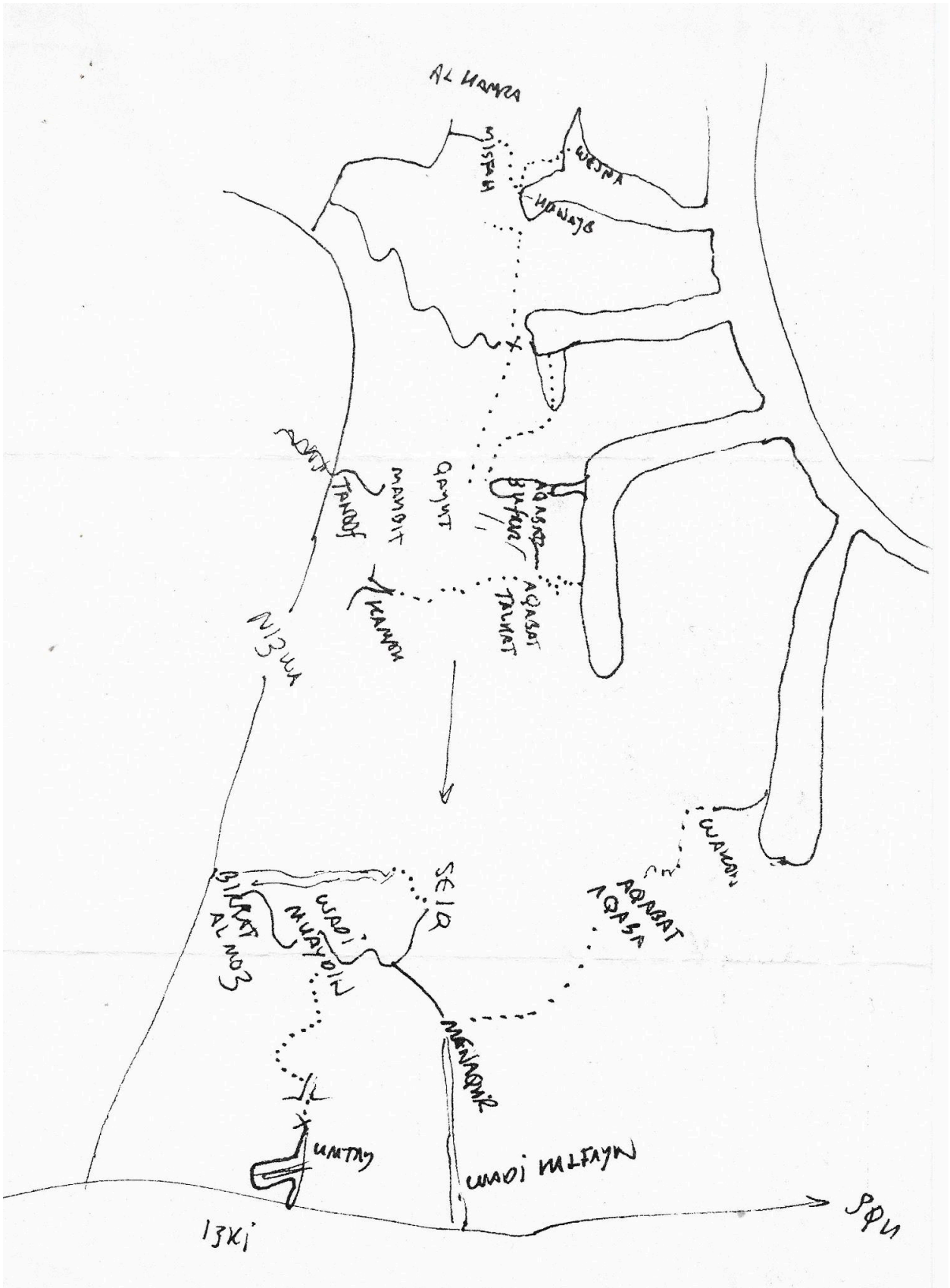
14:15, 1495 - left Wakan
18:00, 2165 - reached the aqaba just in time to get wood
07:50, - set out in a.m.
11:00, 1800 - reached Menakhir
14:00, 1500 - reached deserted village
14:55, - left after feeble attempt at boiling water
16:00, 730 - reached wadi bed
18:00, ? - reached road in deep dusk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