



I want to start with a tulip.

In the sixteenth century the first tulip was imported to Holland from Turkey. I know – I carried it myself.

By 1634 the Dutch were so crazy for this fish-mouthed flower that one collector exchanged a thousand pounds of cheese, four oxen, eight pigs, twelve sheep, a bed and a suit of clothes for a single bulb.

What's so special about a tulip?

Put it this way . . . When is a tulip not a tulip?

When it's a Parrot or a Bizarre. When it's variegated or dwarf. When it comes called Beauty's Reward or Heart's Reviver. When it comes called Key of Pleasure or Lover's Dream . . .

Tulips, every one – and hundreds more – each distinctively different, all the same. The attribute of variation that humans and tulips share.

It was Key of Pleasure and Lover's Dream that I carried from

Sulyman the Magnificent to Leiden in 1591. To be exact, I strapped them under my trousers . . .

‘Put it this way.’

‘No. I’ll crush them when I rest.’

‘Put it this way . . .’

‘No. I’ll crush them when I pray.’

‘Put one here and one here . . .’

‘No! It will look as though I have an evil swelling.’

Well, where would you store a priceless pair of bulbs?

That gave me the idea.

In the same place as a priceless pair of balls.

Yes! Yes! Yes!

When I was born, my mother dressed me as a boy because she could not afford to feed any more daughters. By the mystic laws of gender and economics, it ruins a peasant to place half a bowl of figs in front of his daughter, while his son may gorge on the whole tree, burn it for firewood and piss on the stump, and still be reckoned a blessing to his father.

When I was born, my father wanted to drown me, but my mother persuaded him to let me live in disguise, to see if I could

bring any wealth to the household.

I did.

So slender am I, and so slight, that I can slip under the door of a palace, or between the dirt and the floor of a hovel, and never be seen.

A golden thread, a moment's talk, a spill of coffee, a pepper seed, is all the distance I am between one side and the other.

I became a spy.

Sulyman himself appointed me and his instruction now is that I should get into a boat and bear a gift to his friends, the Dutch. A gift that every scurvy captain and leprous merchant will try to steal.

How to conceal it?

Put it this way . . .

My mother got some stout thread and belted it through the natural die-back of the bulb tops. Then she sewed the lot on to a narrow leather strap and fastened it round my hips.

'Should they hang dead centre like that?'

(My mother went to inspect my father.)

'Dress them on the left.'

'That's good, but there's something missing.'

'What?'

'The bit in the middle.'

I went up into the hills, for tulips grow as thick as thieves here. I

found myself a well-formed fat stem supporting a good-sized red head with rounded tips. I nicked it at the base with my knife and the juice covered my fingers.

At home my mother embalmed the tulip, and in a few days it was ready to wear.

This was my centrepiece. About eight inches long, plump, with a nice weight to it. We secured it to my person and inspected the results. There are many legends of men being turned into beasts and women into trees, but none I think, till now, of a woman who becomes a man by means of a little horticultural grafting.

My mother knelt down and put her nose close.

‘You smell like a garden,’ she said.

The sun rose. The ship hoisted sail. I lifted my arms and waved and waved. Then, adjusting my tulip, I went below.

I seemed to dream of buffalo muddying the banks of clear streams that spilled down into the watercress beds. There were crystallised oranges on a table in the sun, and small cups of sweet coffee, and the little workshops and weaving sheds of our town.

There were women at the roadside selling hard-boiled eggs and homemade dolma, while their children wove simple mats and their men unloaded charcoal or packed tobacco, or went in and out of Nikolaus the pawnbroker’s.

I dreamed I was ploughing a field and the stork was following behind me and inspecting the turned earth and waiting by the marshy edges for a frog.

At the bazaar, the copper pots were coming in stacked on the ox-carts. Eager hands carried them to shaded rugs, to burnish up the spatterings with a cloth. All the pots were sealed – it keeps the genie in, and no Turk would want a pot without a genie.

Humble or grand, what is made must keep with it the memory of what cannot be made. In the spun cloth, the thrown earthenware, the beaten pot and the silver box, is Allah – the spirit of God in the things of the world.

Atom and dream.

I awoke to a rattle. The only light in my cabin was a wick in a cruse of oil. I took it from the shelf over my hammock and looked down. I had filled a wooden bucket with water for washing and drinking, and left my metal cup on its chain inside the bucket. Knocking the cup from side to side as it drank was a long-haired rat.

In the morning, as the only paying passenger on the spice ship, I was invited to breakfast with the Captain. He offered me roast chicken and his wife's hard-baked bread covered in pumpkin seeds.

He was a man of the world and a worldly man, who profited from trade with the English, regularly carging the tin, coarse

cloth and shot the Sultan needed for his armies, in return for the jewels and luxury stuffs the English loved.

If tin for gold and shot for rubies seems a strange exchange, blame the Pope. The Pope, not one but many Popes, the sum-total-continuous-Pope without beginning or end, had refused to allow his flock to trade with the Infidel, and since his flock was all Europe the Ottoman Empire had trouble supplying its war machine. Then, in 1570, the Pope finally excommunicated Queen Elizabeth and her subjects. We were all infidels now and Britain and the East began to trade.

This Captain had been brought up in Istanbul. His mind was made of minarets and domes. He capped himself with spacious ease. He was his own call to prayer.

‘Be confident,’ he advised me. ‘Be confident even in your mistakes. In Allah there is no wrong road. There is only the road you must travel.’

‘And if the road leads nowhere?’

He shrugged. ‘Turn your Nowhere into Somewhere.’

He smiled. ‘You are young. You have hopes and fears but no experience. You do not know that the gilded palaces and the souks do not really exist. And that is how it should be. You will live in this world as though it is real, until it is no longer real, and then you will know, as I do, that all your adventures and all your possessions, and all your losses, and what you have loved – this gold, this bread, the green glass sea – were things you dreamed as