NEAR THE BEGINNING OF HIS BOOK

of descriptive geography and adventure, The Best of Divisions, the 10th-century traveler al-Maqdisi listed some of the perils he had encountered in his 20 years of wanderings. These include getting lost in the desert and almost drowned at sea, escaping murderers and highwaymen, and losing his money and literally the shirt off his back. “What a difference there is,” he concluded, “between someone who compiles a book from hearsay in the comfort of his home, and someone who writes having experienced such difficulties.”

He is right, of course: Perils are good to write and read about only when they are over and done with, or have happened to someone else. An almost exact contemporary of al-Maqdisi, the Iraqi judge al-Tanukhi, realized this and compiled a whole collection of supposedly true tales of remarkable escapes called Relief After Distress—and a very good read they are, too.

This miniature collection of perils, mostly from my library (one is from a beach in Oman, another from a suq in the Sahara), begins with some appropriately miniature dangers remembered by Ibn al-Hajj al-Numayri, a 14th-century judge and author of Granada. His judicial work took him on circuits of the rural areas of the Spanish sultanate, where he often had to share his accommodation with numerous small and unwelcome bedfellows. In one village, he recalled,

But, as the Arabic saying goes, “Many a nuisance has its uses” (“Every cloud...”), and even fleas have their beneficial side—at least according to an unnamed poet quoted by the 17th-century traveler and native of Madinah, Muhammad ibn ‘Abdallah al-Musawi, known as “Kibrit.” A literal translation shows how the verse depends entirely on a clever (or you might say awful) pun:
D o not hate the flea [burguth], for its name is bīr [kindness] and ghawth [assistance] for you, if you only know: its “kindness” is to suck corrupt blood, and the “assistance” is to wake you for the dawn [prayer].

As in law, so in poetry: The spirit is as important as the letter. Here is an attempt to catch that spirit in a non-literal translation. Having failed to find suitable plays on the English word flea, I looked up the scientific name of the insect, and found it belongs to the order Siphonaptera:

Aflea by any other name would drive you hopping mad, But call it “siphonapteran”—you’ll see it’s not all bad: And as a dawn-prayer wake-up there’s no apter an alarm.

Perhaps the pun is indeed the lowest form of wit. It is certainly the lowest form of poetry. Some of the other verses on minor perils of the night quoted by Kibrit do, however, hit a more elevated poetic note. This one is also unascribed.

Mosquitoes quaffed my blood to an accompaniment Of all the themes and variations their choir sings. And for this diverse night-music their instrument Was me—a human violin with veins for strings.

Of course, the slow and dangerous business of travel was filled with many greater perils than insects, no travel more than the pilgrimage to Makkah. Ibn Jubayr of Valencia, who recounted his own 12th-century pilgrimage in what is perhaps the most brilliantly written travel book in the language, described the crossing of Egypt’s Eastern Desert to the port of ‘Aydhab on the Red Sea. One arrives there, he said, “looking like a corpse resurrected from its shroud.” But worse was to come on the sea crossing to Jiddah:

The conduct of the people of ‘Aydhab toward the pilgrims is governed by unholy laws. For they pack them into the jalbah so tightly that they end up sitting on top of each other, and the boats resemble crowded chicken-coops. The reason for this is the shippers’ greed for fares, which is such that the owner of a jalbah will aim to recoup the cost of his vessel in a single trip; after that, he cares nothing at all about what happens to the boat on later voyages. They say, “We’ll look after our hulls, and the pilgrims can look after their souls,” and this is a well-known proverb among them.

Sea perils are, of course, more often natural than man-made. Here is one of the greatest Arabic descriptions of a storm—one experienced by the Algerian-born writer al-Maqqari on a voyage to Egypt in the early 17th century. I have tried to catch something of the flavor of the original rhyming prose:

What with the din of storms and waters, we abandoned hope of getting out alive and well—// may God give neither life nor succor to that fearful swell! // The waves applauded when they heard the voices of the winds, and raved, and came to blows, // as if they’d drunk a draft that sent them into frenzy’s throes—// now far, now near they rose, // waves in squads at odds with one another, // clapping and slapping, dashing and clashing with one another, // until you’d think the hands of the air // had grabbed them by the hair // and dragged them from their deepest lair, // and you’d all but see the bed of the sea between those waves laid bare, // and their crests flying high to wrest the clouds from the sky in their snare, // till fear and illness made each soul confront destruction’s stare, // and all resolve threatened to dissolve in despair, // and imagination conjured up the worst that could be feared, // as death in every shape before our
Al-Maqari would no doubt have been comforted by the following prayer. I came across it en route to the Kuria Muria Islands, off the southern coast of Oman. It was carved on the stern of an old wooden sailing vessel, beached at the small port of Sad'h.

In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful
O Protector of souls in hulls
O Savior of hulls in the fathomless sea
Protect for us this sambuq called Al-Dhib
O God, O Sustainer, O God, O Protector

Turning to the perils of travel in general, they are neatly summed up in a verse I heard recited while stuck in a market in Mauritania.

Don't ever go a-roving, O my friend, if you'd
Escape the seven circles of the traveler's hell.
The first's a haunt of homesick thoughts and solitude,
The second's where your fears for far-off family dwell.
The third's a den of thieves, the fourth's the latitude
Where rogues rip off an unsuspecting clientele.
Then come the hells of lonely nights and nasty food.
The last, and worst: the Hades of the Bad Hotel.

A strange echo, across seas and centuries, of the last sentence of that passage from Ibn Jubayr, above.

The inscription was dated 5 Rajab 1371 (March 31, 1552). Later, by one of those beautiful coincidences of travel, I stayed with the grandson of the Wolf's owner; the owner's son—my host's father—had done the calligraphy for the prayer. The Wolf, I learned, had carried frankincense to Aden, Basrah and India, and dried shark to East Africa.

The poem, attributed (I later discovered) to the 11th-century Andalusion scholar and traveler Abu Bakr al-Tartushi, is a parody of a famous verse listing five benefits of travel.

The Ayyubids were the former rulers of the region.

The earliest and most notorious of such assassinations in Arabic literature was that of the poet Imru' al-Qays in about 540 CE: He was supposedly killed by a poisoned shirt, less well known, but equally ingenious, was an assassination in Tunis mentioned by al-Maqdisi—by means of poisoned toothpaste! Was the poison in the stripes?

Other accounts attribute the sultan's death to natural causes or to a wound received in battle. However, Abu 'l-Fida is not alone in giving this more lurid version.

It could of course be argued that the story illustrates a number of other perils—those of believing in superstitious suq gossip, of sharing tableware and, not least, those of abusing the rules of hospitality by murdering your guests.

The dangers of frequenting the courts of autocrats are well documented. As one poet said, the three greatest perils are "seas, sultans and the march of Time." In the case of sultans, apparently minor slips of etiquette could prove perilous, if not fatal. The 14th-century encyclopedist al-'Umari, for example, says that at the West African court of the emperor of Mali, sneezing was one of the biggest social gaffes:

If one of the courtiers suddenly feels the need to sneeze, he will throw himself on the floor and sneeze in such a way that no one is aware of it. As for the emperor, if he should sneeze, then all those present hit their chests with their hands.

The consequences of a standing sneeze are not spelled out. But al-Qalqashandi, a later encyclopedist, noted the penalty for a different breach of court manners—forgetting to take off your footwear. If anyone walks into the emperor's court in sandals, he says,
According to the 12th-century geographer al-Idrisi, the female rulers of the Indian Ocean archipelago of the Maldives cracked down on sandal-wearers in almost as draconian a fashion:

Visitors to the archipelago today may go about with impunity. According to the Arabic History of the Maldives, the sandal ban was repealed by a 17th-century ruler.

Now little more than a village in the central highlands of Yemen, Zafar is still littered with the ruins of its greatness in the early centuries of our era. The Himyaris, whose capital it was, spoke one of the ancient South Arabian languages, related to but distinct from the Arabic of central and northern Arabia.

It was the seat of the kings of Himyar, and the origin of the saying, “When in Zafar, speak as the Himyaris do.” According to the Arabic History of the Maldives, the sandal ban was repealed by a 17th-century ruler.

As for the third of those great perils, the march of Time, even if its consequences are ultimately inescapable, some of them—like gray hair—may be overcome by artifice or wit. The following story is told of Yahya ibn Hakam, a ninth-century Andalusian poet and diplomat who was nicknamed “the Gazelle” on account of his youthful good looks.

It happened that the Gazelle was sent on an embassy to the land of the Majus. At the time, he was approaching 50 years of age and quite gray-haired, although he was still completely fit and healthy. One day, the wife of the king asked him how old he was. Being in a playful mood, he told her he was 20. She said, “So what’s with all this gray hair?” And he replied, “What’s wrong with grey hair? Or don’t you know that just because a young stalwart’s coat is gray it doesn’t stop him siring foals?” The queen was delighted with this retort.

Some of the perils of Time are, however, insuperable. Here is the nonagenarian 12th-century Syrian nobleman and warrior Usamah ibn Munqidh reflecting in his memoirs on the effects of old age:

I wonder that my hand, too weak to hold a pen, Speared lions long ago in its young day; That when I walk with stick in hand the ground, Though solid, clings beneath my feet like clay.

As the poet Abu ‘l-‘Atahiyah is supposed to have said,

If only our young selves could visit us one day And see what Time has done to us when we are grey.

Even the best efforts at translation often entail some loss. However, the pleasing sound of the original Arabic title of this series, Tarjuman al-Kunuz, makes up for some of the literary shortfall when it becomes the syntactically accurate but less euphonious English “Interpreter of Treasures.” Tarjuman is the root of the English word “dragoman,” which refers to an interpreter serving in an official capacity. The full title echoes Ibn al-‘Arabi’s early-13th-century collection of poems, Tarjuman al-Ashwaq (Interpreter of Desires).