

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

*Also called al-Mugaddasi.
Both names show that he was a
native of Jerusalem—in Arabic,
al-Quds. Bayt al-Maqdis or
al-Bayt al-Mugaddas.*

I was taken into a house with cramped passageways, as intensely dark as the blackest night, which brought to mind the grave and its terrors and banished memories of my loved ones. Or rather, it was worse than the grave, for it was full of fetid mud that stuck to me, and fleas like the seeds threshed from flax, and mosquitoes that pierced me all the while with their lances and were never satisfied till they’d drunk their fill, and bugs that fell on me like morning dew and marched over my mattress like an advancing enemy, and speckled snakes appearing from every hole in the wall, and vipers whose bite would make your flesh fall off, and the constant humming moan of the wind, and thieves who never ceased to terrify. In short, the only difference from being incarcerated in a prison cell was that they gave me a rug—and that had been in use so long that it was black.

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

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,

His varied output included works on comedy and sleep, and a dictionary of double entendre.

i.e., “sulfur” (why?). His Winter and Summer Journey describes travels through Egypt and Syria to Istanbul.

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: