

Slender, white of skin, her belly flat and taut,
her breastbone burnished like a looking-glass,
She looks askance, reveals a shapely profile; then a guarding
glance, as of a wild gazelle of Wajrah with her young;
Reveals a neck as graceful as an oryx's
when high she arches it, not unadorned,
And hair cascading black to grace her back, intensely black
and hanging dense and tangled as the bunches of the
palm-tree fruit,
The tresses at her crown piled high in plaits—
a maze of straight and twisted ways where hairpins stray;
Reveals a waist as slim and pliant as a plaited rein,
a leg as limber as a reed-stem bending to the breeze . . .

Wajrah is the name of a region two or three days' journey from Makkah on the route to al-Basrah. It was famous in early times for its rich supply of game.

My favorite female prose-portrait is of a very different woman—the aged Lu'lu'ah, nanny to three generations of the Ibn Munqidh family in 12th-century Syria. Below, the memoirist 'Usamah ibn Munqidh—one of her second-generation charges—looks back on her at the end of his own long life.

For me, the portrait's candor, and the way it opens a glimpse into the sort of domestic space that is always closed to outsiders and thus eventually, inevitably, lost to time, makes it the literary equivalent of those intimate interiors by 17th-century Dutch painters like Vermeer.

"Pearl"

Lu'lu'ah, God have mercy on her, was one of the best of women, much given to fasting, and upright in character. Time and again, however, she suffered from colic, and one day she had such a violent attack that she passed out. She remained unconscious for two days and two nights, during which we all gave up hope that she would ever recover. But she suddenly regained consciousness and exclaimed, "There is no god but God! What a strange time I've had of it! I met all our loved ones who have died, and they told me such strange things. And one of the things they told me was that I'd never have the colic again!" She lived on long after this incident—to nearly a hundred, in fact—and, indeed, never again suffered from colic.

Lu'lu'ah, God have mercy on her, was always scrupulous in performing her prayers. One day I went into the apartment I had set aside for her in my house, and found her sitting in front of a basin, washing a mantle she used for her prayers. I said, "Mother, what are you doing?" and she replied, "My boy, people with cheesy hands must have got hold of this mantle, because whenever I wash it, it smells of cheese." I said, "Let me have a look at the soap you're using." She took the soap out—and I saw that what she thought was soap was in fact a lump of cheese! She'd been scrubbing the kerchief with it all this time, and it was this that had been giving off the smell. So I said, "Mother, this isn't soap—it is cheese." And she had a look at it and said, "You're right, my boy. And there was me thinking it was soap."

Muslim women often keep a special set of clothes for their devotions. "Mantle" and the Arabic word it translates, mandil, are etymological cousins; perhaps "kerchief" or "headscarf"—as in the Spanish mantilla—might be more accurate.

'Usamah calls his old nanny "Mother" out of endearment and respect, regardless of any social difference. In the next sentence, regardless of age, he is still bunayy to Lu'lu'ah—literally "my little boy."

Fearing that he's slipped too far into his own anecdote, 'Usamah then quotes a rhyming proverb, "Al-italah tajlib al-malalah"—which means something like, "A drawn-out tale will soon go

stale." Personally, I could never have enough of such tales, such portraits. In them the people of the past live on.