

JOHANN

JACKOAS

MUSEUM

A SEASON

IN SHELL



1. 存在

In and of sense

I live a way faring life
Though I seemingly feel like I remain anchored
Carrying pockmarked armour, these heavy annals,
a flexing muscle of my assimilations
From the bedrock I cling
Extending from seabed moonscapes
To sift the surrounds
My eyes breathing and bathing
While tentacles become telescopes
Yet beneath all of my bumps
You'll find a kaleidoscope
Traces
Along temperate currents, collections of residue,
of produce traded
Released and absorbed into unknown channels
Catalysts for new assemblies yet to meet
All I know is, I must chart these waters
Sense tells me to keep moving



2. 腐爛肉的 香味

The sweet smell of carrion

From collisions and divisions, a compelling pull together of peripatetic beings, finds new legs becoming mobile. Propelled rapidly, a water eddy is created and becomes a compass to guide direction of their movements, helping to bring sustenance closer in order to capture it more easily.

We met the Bull in a china shop. It was full of exiles and itinerants, so mindful of their movements so as not to make the porcelain tremble by their presence. A well-spoken gentleman, quick to impatience and with a penchant for verse, he hailed from the Horn of Africa, from a family of poets and was the son of a military general. He had spent his childhood in Saudi, attending the same school as Osama once did. Upon his return home he became a nationalist and when the Coptic flags eclipsed the White Star, he did what any nationalist would do, he became a traitor. He began selling rockets to the army, "so we could drive those bastards from the country." He reminded us of a man that lived 150 years before him, of a poet in self-imposed exile, an enterprising nomad travelling through the desert, who one day sold 2000 Remingtons to Menelik II and used them to kill Italian colonialists in Adwa, and then went on to wander the terrains of Yemen, Somalia, Djibouti and Ethiopia for 17 years, trading ivory and guns. The Bull still trades in shells, but of a different kind.

His talent for drawing channels now high wires fresh connections where 'cockroaches of the sea' find new life in the highest echelons of potent, aphrodisiac cuisine and aesthetic adornment, flags of social status waving from hilltops in Asia and Europe. He recalls how the Omanis would pay 100 dollars for 1 kilo and the fishermen were happy because for them, it was money for collecting "trash". The Omanis would sell those reticent molluscs to the seafood dealers from Hong Kong for \$600 a kilo. Then the Bull charged, prices were matched, and a new industry was hatched, with the guidance of Japanese ama audio tapes. Soon, the Omanis were driven from the seas and the fishermen prospered. This is how you play the game.

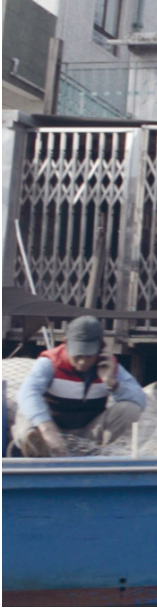


3. 強大 貝殼

Becoming shell

Some spend a considerable amount of time searching for an ideal habitat before metamorphosing, but others may settle on the nearest suitable substrate.

The Bull told us one day that “there was a time when all I wanted was to die in one piece”. He had left Kampala a day before a bomb exploded in Kabalagala. Something told him to get out, but sure enough that very move soon gave him fresh legs, albeit ones of prey and a new game was born. Shucked and dried out. He found himself sleeping in a corner in Dubai airport, and decided he might have better luck on an island in the South China sea.

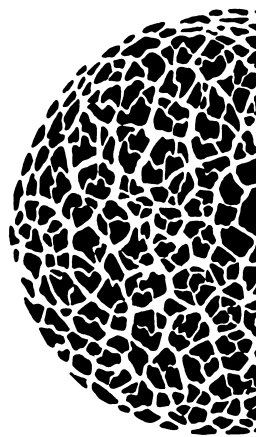


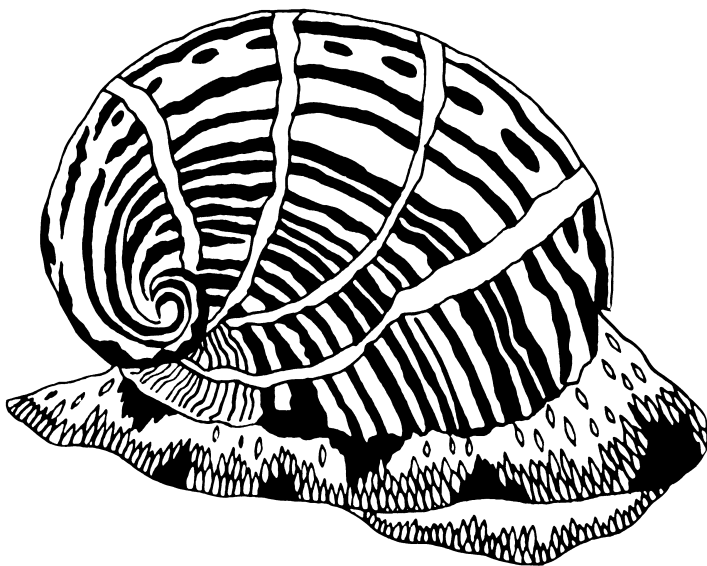
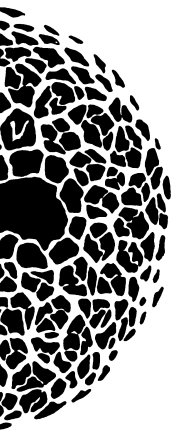
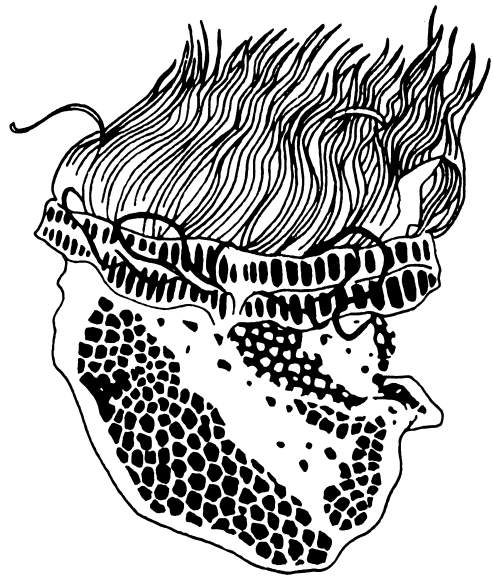
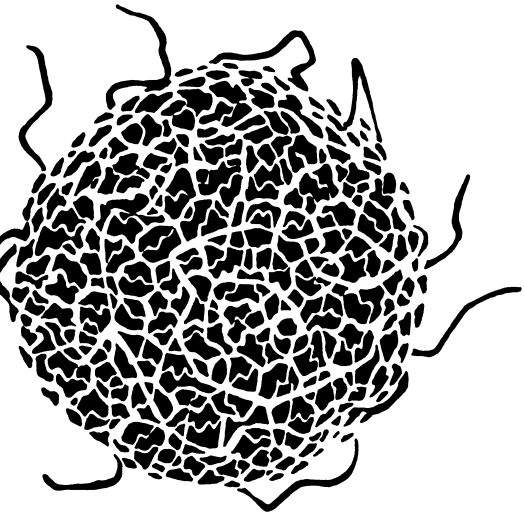
4. 強大 身體

Becoming muscle

The settlement may be followed by a searching phase, looking for an appropriate place to metamorphose.

A condition of the Bull's exile in Hong Kong was that he could not work. But if you pick up a phone and call a man from China and order some goods from him, and a man in Dubai pays for them, and then they are shipped to Sudan, have you “worked”? It's late afternoon, and I sit in a luxury hotel with the Bull and an elder Somali businessman whose personal history and situation couldn't be more different from the Bull's. He is where the Bull wants to be. Bespoke suit, a crisp shirt and nursing an espresso, columns of sunlight that fall through the faint scratches of window tinting behind us glint off the Bull's thin, wire rimmed spectacles as he checks his Rolex. He gives himself the impression of a high flyer that detracts from a stifling boredom and every day sameness of his status and to almost evoke, transform himself with the power of a suit, into that very impression, aspiration, he is cultivating. Behind us a plump Middle Eastern gentlemen in the company of a kowtowing colleague is enjoying high tea, small sandwiches, petite cakes that are crumbling easily through his stumpy fingers. We are entangled in conversation about distribution channel moguls for Asian goods flowing into North Africa but I see the Bull prick his ears to listen to the conversation behind us. When the time becomes right, he stands up and walks over and introduces himself.





5. 貨物 Cargo

From the murky sea depths to the darkness of container holds . I am consigned, plucked, shucked and shipped; condemned, despatched and delivered. I no longer move on my own but a course carries me across liminal worlds where my meter ticks , gathering currency with every creak and lurch . I have been killed and granted a new (after) life, but implicated in the arteries and cells of some strange insatiable beast .

“I am an asylum seeker and torture claimant in Hong Kong, but my business partners do not know this “

“Who do they think you are? “

“To them, I am the son of a respected military general from Somalia who works as the regional manager for their mining company .”

“So what’s your dilemma? “

“Well, I ordered twelve second hand caterpillar excavators from Japan, though the customs officers in Sudan will only accept imports of new equipment into the country . So I have them refurbished en route in Hong Kong and they’re sitting in the Aberdeen container yard awaiting delivery . That day , I received a letter from our bank informing us that they were closing our company’s account . I had a panic attack, I collapsed on the street; I had money and goods to move urgently . We visited the address that the letter was sent from, to find out why , but all we found was a warehouse full of computers . We went to the bank and those monkey s refused to tell us why exactly but they implied that it had something to do with the account holder’s nationality . I guess its because economic sanctions were renewed against North Sudan in July 2012 and the bank here is still recovering from the punishment meted out to it for facilitating money laundering by Mexican drug cartels .”

It’s a dank, oppressive grey day . The humidity hangs heavy between the claustrophobic spaces of the skyscrapers . The heat conspicuously clings to everyone’s clammy bodies as we hurriedly march through the streets of Central. Blisters are forming and aching in response to these disagreeable high heels and sticky stockings . The urgency of arriving is compounded by the determination of finding relief from the suffocating air . We step between the big city grit and across marbled thresholds of icy , air-conditioned warrens of building lobbies to find the Bull with a banking soothsayer dealing words of guidance but nothing much of certainties .

“These monkey s, these racists, they take one look at my face and shake their heads . This is why business between China and Africa can never work . I want you both to come with me to the bank . You have the face of a local and you are a white woman, they cannot refuse you as they’ve refused me.” The Bull filters through all these reservoirs, growing pains until his walls strengthen until the first small opening for breathing appears .



6. 交易

Dealt

Emerging markets are no longer peripheral embryonic beings. In Guangdong, 6 tonnes of abalone shells arrive at a factory where workers await to polish and carve up their iridescent lining and crush the chalky remains into a soft white powder. Meanwhile, Indian middlemen in Hong Kong ferry the dried, fleshy translucent muscles the colour of ripe grapefruits to the doors throughout the city's maze of seafood restaurants. They fetch a shining price for their prized haul as if they were freshly directly delivered from Somali fishermen's nets themselves, their recent seabound voyage merely a suspended animation of a power that becomes reinstated, or even reified upon touching shore, loaded and unleashed into the arteries and burning underbellies of the metropolis.

We soon become furniture of the office for an emerging East African mining company. Situated in an old textile factory converted into a labyrinthine of secret offices made up of gemstone dealers, diet scheme merchants and garment manufacturers, the space is initially devoid of chairs and desks soon materialises into an impression of an abandoned workspace when the Bull buys all the furniture of an office moving out upstairs in haste upon finding out bank managers would be visiting the office the very next day. He hires his friends to come in, and pays them handsomely to sit at the dull plastic veneer desks and thumb the used computer keyboards while the Bull meets with them in his office to discuss accounts. We are all fast learning the art of impressions. Soon after he takes me to furniture stores and declares, "You choose what is best for the office" I have become a substitute Somali 'wife', selecting furniture for our 'marital residence'. But unlike the woman he was once engaged to I won't be running off to Canada with the 'dowry' money designated for the nuptial abode. We begin to bicker over lighting in Ikea. "Light means everything in an office" he decides. The lights reflecting off the mirror glass dazzle him as we walk through the warren of material excesses, a rabbit caught in headlights. "Let's play with mirrors" the Bull ecstatically chimes.

We enter upper stream with our 200 name cards and all their wrong letters and new titles. It's a precautionary measure but the moment you give up your identity all sorts of uncertainties emerge. One falsehood leads to another and they accumulate, and the Law as it was understood loses its meaning and legal linings become blurred. We have been anticipating the arrival of the director from Sudan. The bank is ready to open the account for us, but there is a crucial compliance measure that needs to be fulfilled, the account holders proof of address. The only problem is in his home country of Uganda there are no addresses. The Bull, in all his impatience yet a sense to not disturb the flow, says "this won't be a problem" and looks me in the eye in front of the bank staff and says "You can take care of that". I know the meaning of what his look implies, that I could rush off and employ my artistic training to fake a Ugandan drivers license for proof of address. I examine the detail of patterns and colour that run beneath the text of a Ugandan drivers license. Looking closer, my eye travels along the diverging parallel lines and I appreciate their beauty. As I examine the intricacies, I notice the line is spelling messages to me, and the tiny font, like a million eyes makes me feel like I'm being watched. A nausea soon settles in my stomach.

"Let's look into setting up an office in Singapore instead" the Bull muses as he strokes the surface of a table on sale. It is a time of gaining ground and reaching out as a muscle seeks its rock.

7. 研磨

Refined, reworked

The Bull has a new coat
Thick mustard tweed-like and he cuts a handsome figure
Weaving through the crowded streets, bright neon signs overhead
guiding his passage
Together as lustrous, colourful fragments
As the very pieces of shells do, finding their way into watches and
strings around delicate necks
With every turn, another stone is paved
Cut to size to build a path, this fortuitous path forward
Where the next shape is unknown
Like his sesame becoming Eritrean, then Chinese, and then Israeli.
We discuss canned food distribution channels over plates of pasta
A stream of cylinders rolling into and nourishing the Middle East
And eyes are set on local evaporated milk rivals
I stir my 熱奶茶
“Now to take on the White Cow...” he resolves with confidence
All these invisible roads he draws between continents
Cutting across currents
He is craftsman too, casting clockwork, lacing beads, shining stones
A conductor knowing of what each piece and each place harbours
He asks me to write a letter to the Minister of Mining in Yemen
With an audacious request for the exclusive rights to brokering
investors for the region
Signed with a local's face, we have all become a bead in a chain
That will soon signify a game changer
This week we celebrate the birth of a calf by one of the Bull's camels
in Somalia
And the surprise engagement of his youngest sister
Mobile phones are sent as gifts, connectors for lovers apart
Linking two families who will soon come together
But the Bull is uneasy in celebrating for his role is changing
Though he cannot help but smile
For indeed it is quite an auspicious occasion.



8. 點綴 和 吸收 Adorned and absorbed

“Yes hello?” is the Bull’s catchcry .

We have become a functioning office, operating by it’s own clockwork
And a bejewelled fixture crowning our daily labours
It is the mother of all pearls
And carries promises that drinking the prized
muscle soup does
Infused with a belief that it can cure your ailing eyes .
The Bull is seeking new skins
A new passport
A new cloak that brings mutual comforts
In the meanwhile, business carries on but not without caution. I find
myself mysteriously the subject of strange, sly, shoot and dash
photographic incidences, which prompt me to think, are we under
surveillance? “They probably have a file on you by now, especially
foreigners who frequent the mansions regularly .” The Bull proceeds
to tell me how he picked up a habit of regularly and inconspicuously
photographing crowds over his shoulder. “I had a strange feeling I was
being followed once in Uganda, while I was on a motorbike, and sure
enough, there was someone following me. Ever since then I’m watching
my back literally ...” he reminisces . Trust is truly the last bastion.
Later on, we find ourselves enmeshed in discussing the credentials
of a character we encounter together . It becomes a fine line between
paranoia, mistrust, instinct and reason. The Hawala agent asked
to speak to me from Dubai and we were both taken aback by our
respective Australian accents .

“Why do you want to transfer money with us and not a bank?”

“I need to get money from Australia to Hargeisa and this is how
I was advised to do it”

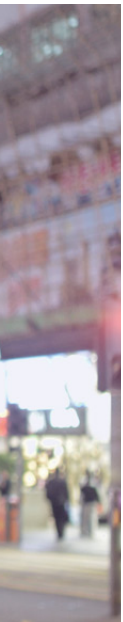
“What is the amount you want to transfer?”

“10,000 US dollars .”

“We’re not very competitive. We usually do smaller amounts .
What’s your occupation?”

“Artist .”

Silence.



9. 貝殼裡的季節

A Season in Shell

Our island rains soon give me a fever and as I lie in bed all day, all I see is shells. Hundreds, thousands, millions of those gastropods, floating and multiplying in space before my eyes, alien creatures with tentacles and antennae that clutch beneath rocks. I see shells moving across the dim ocean floor then travelling in the darkened bellies of shipholds, wrapped in hessian, moving between entrepots in Berbera, Dubai and Zurich. And then I see us and the Bull in the shadowy confines of cells. A voice battling fogs of fever tells me to pick up the phone immediately.

10. 追債 Debt collecting

One day the Bull, rubbing his hands together, wryly suggests, "Why don't we go collect a debt?"

We enter the office without knocking. It's dark, empty, disordered. A man is sitting alone at a desk at the far end of the room engrossed in the image of a Cantonese siren on his phone. He makes no acknowledgement of our entry and as we stand over him, our eyes adjusting to the darkness, the Bull asks, "Where's your boss?"

The man doesn't respond.

"Ok, so let me call him....this number doesn't work"

The man hands the Bull a phone without looking at him. I stand behind looking out the window, trying my best not to look intimidating.

"Where's the rest of my payment?"

An unintelligible voice responds on the speaker phone.

"Ok, ok, I'll be back later...Tell your boss to get his phone fixed"

We return to the elevator

"Let me tell you, I gave this Tanzanian guy, whose been in Hong Kong for 12 years, I gave him 20kg of abalone to find a buyer for me, and this guy calls me back and says he left it in a taxi. These people are all criminals, they look like they've been in prison, they're all monkeys! So I tell him now you owe me \$20,000 USD. It's taken me 6 months to work the debt down to \$8000, I had to follow him, find out where he lived. Make him feel like I am a desperate man who could do anything to him, and then he pays"

