

*Paradiso: Astaghfirullah!*

*Abstract catalogue text*, Karim Boumjimar's "Pandemonium Paradiso" by Basyma Saad

It is high time. The villagers are rambunctious, swept up, glistening ochre in the pre-sunset, which feels like it has lasted hours. It has not lasted hours, but the inebriated villagers are not ones to say.

They flock to the massive, oblong table under the belittling mulberry tree in the village square. A ritual is about to take place.

As if adhering to a general rule, the ritual itself has no bearing on the hierarchies, habits, handshakes, or humdrum in the village. The ritual does not turn the clock forward or backwards on the social relationships outside of itself.

In fact, there is no clock. There are only blistered palms, wanton toilers, and the tilled fields.

And yet, during the ritual, there is the fancy of playing at overturning fate, and, if the stelliferous sky gets its chakras aligned, there is the possibility of finding oneself in a jacquerie, or a Zanj rebellion, or at least some kind of millenarian orgy.

The ceremonial banquet is set up to be rich in calories and deficient in politeness. All manner of cooking, curing, and serving horse meat (and only horse meat) are represented in the banquet. The colour of the food is thus exclusively in shades of crimson, due to the horse meat's high degree of vascularisation and myoglobin content.

Around the table sit many a big personality, about a dozen of the biggest fish in the small pond that the village continues to be. The surface of the table presents a rolling cartography, with two and a half mountain ranges, innumerable small hills and geological formations, and a handful of waterways and aquifers. This terrain-in-lieu-of-a-piece-of-furniture has the effect of rendering the people around it exceedingly primordial, as though each of them were a natural disaster sprouting out of the immemorial Earth and imminently befalling both the living and the dead.

Nothing in particular announces the start of the ritual: it is experienced as a gradual lull in the general garrulousness of the spectators, giving way to the first signs of showmanship at the table.

Out of the crowd comes the village clairvoyant. She is veiled in a long and narrow gauzy fabric whose sheerness and proportions defy practicality, leading her to wrap it around her head multiple times very tightly. This lends her the air of a mummy. She chaperones a puppet in the shape of a monkey from the crowd and takes her seat at the one remaining empty chair. She whips the puppet to life by its strings and ventriloquizes through it a sort of sour malediction.

Two seats down, past the obligatory jester and the neurotic arsonist, is the picky faggot, in fact, the pickiest faggot on this side of the Silk Road. He remains lithe and hairless, known to have weathered his twink and post-twink years without ever dropping his standards. As the only scantily clad non-hairy young man in the village, he was used to shouts of *Astaghfirullah!* (I ask for God's forgiveness!) by the older men upon his passing. The men would blurt this out as apologia for having sinned by desiring this specimen of the same sex, or for having broken a fast by desiring at all.

The picky faggot does not intend to break anyone's fast on this sacred day. His contribution to the potluck is a classic. He gets into formation: face down, ass up, next to a sign that reads, "NO LOADS REFUSED!"

But at one promontory in the unusual geometry of the table sits the most out-of-place figure among the gathered. Here is the heraldic imperial eagle, fresh off its cameo in Dante's *Paradiso*, Canto XVIII. The bird is diaphanous, wispy, a luminous sight to behold, totally unlike its stocky and frigid depictions on flags, coins, and armour by the Germans since the Holy Roman Empire. In the golden light, it is an elongated shadow slithering in its seat, composed of a hundred human faces bleeding into one another, eyes darting around erratically, and mouths spewing a faint ambient score in Nostratic glossolalia. According to Dante, the faces are those of the corporate body of souls of all the just rulers who have ruled thus far. Divine justice is present.

Soon enough, as the eagle starts making its way atop the table's earthen surface, both table company and spectators come to utter silence. The eagle slaloms to the gaping canyon between the two primary mountain ranges on the table and appears to crouch, dignified and reverent. Its sedate, see-through faces gently close their eyes in unison.

An air of solemn, appreciative grace sweeps across the crowd. There is exhalation and cooing, as well as the sound of placid collective reflection about the nature of being and its injustices.

Then, all of a sudden, the faces of the eagle appear to tense up and agitate, furrowing brows and tightening shut eyes, vibrating in place all at once. Still crouched, the eagle spreads out its wings in flutter, not in an attempt at flight but rather to say that it needs a moment. A dark cloud begins to form at its rear, as a sulfuric stench takes hold of the company. Out of its translucent rectum there comes a great and continuous mudslide, inundating the terrain atop which it starts to run around in circles, squeaking loudly and unheraldically. It spares none of those seated at the table or those standing front row behind them. Squeals of scandal and disgust fill the village square. The heraldic eagle has taken a dump across the land.

An outside observer not accustomed to the traditions of the village may have expected everyone to disperse after what appears to have been a non-starter, a

scatological force majeure. But after the momentary shock and frenzy, followed by some provisional wiping on the part of those directly affected by the excretion, a certain intentness seems to return to the assembly.

The eagle, now restored to its pre-faecal state of beatitude, prances back to its seat. It looks to its left, where an oversized human infant sits in a high chair staring blankly ahead. The baby in question is double the height and girth of a standard baby from the village.

The eagle leans in towards the baby, bringing its beak until it is almost touching the baby's nose. Parental instincts kick into full gear: the villagers are apprehensive, scrutinising the scene with bated breath. The child continues to stare at nothing. The eagle's beak opens slowly and widely, until the space between its jaws is greater than the head of the baby. Then, with all the force of its constituent souls, it snaps its beak thunderously, just grazing the infant's nose and causing it to snap out of its torpor.

The baby, now alert, lifts a pudgy index finger to its nose and starts to feel out the inside of its right nostril.

The village clergyman, seated across the table from the ensouled eagle and the outsized baby, bolts to action, proclaiming: "We must not allow these has-been souls to terrorise the Babe! The Babe is a manifestation of the body of our very own King. We may not see our King, but we can see the Babe!"

At this statement, the baby belches joyously, "Wa wa wee wa!"

The call and response between the clergyman and the baby rouses an audible suspicion among the villagers:

Which souls are unworthy?

Who is the clergyman to judge entire lineages of previous rulers, both victors and vanquished?

What is between him and the Babe?

What time is the orgy?

Loud whispers are heard among conspiring neighbours.

To the clergyman's rescue comes the Hermaphrostitute. Broad shoulders, big tits, still smeared in shit but unfettered, she climbs and strides to the centre of the table. She is also used to the Astaghfirullahs.

The Hermaphrostitute loudly exclaims in the direction of everyone present: "I have no strong feelings about the eagle or the baby, but I'll let you know that all you village men should be ashamed of yourselves! The priest is the only man in the entire village who did not want to be cucked, penetrated, or disembowelled! All he wanted me to do was wear a bib and squeal like the Babe. It was a relief, a welcome respite from the domination expected of me. I'll defend him till the day I'm stoned to death!"

While she delivers her speech, the largest landowner in the province, a settler who owned even the village square where the ritual was taking place, tries to take his turn on the picky faggot. Even though the “NO LOADS REFUSED!” sign is still up near the latter’s asshole, the landowner feels compelled to claim that he is owed the fuck regardless, because this is after all, entirely his property—to which the faggot mutters “ew!” and promptly refuses the load.

Then, in adulation of the Hermaphrostitute, the faggot crawls on all fours and devotionally offers her his asshole. She bends down, grabs the two moons of his buttocks, and yells into the hole: “IT’S MY DAY OFF!”