Museums use facts to support the objects they display and to explain them to visitors. It is right that these facts are properly valued and carefully examined, and that institutions are respected for both the value of their collections and the strength of their expertise. But do we accord too much respect to the museum's authority? Shift attention from facts to truth, especially to the whole truth, and think again about what museums say about their objects. One label might ascribe its object to 'Spain, 1656', while the best another can do is 'France or Italy, 16th century'. There is no absolute standard here: in each case information sits somewhere on a scale between complete knowledge and total ignorance, never reaching either extremity. Even in a fictional account there is much that is factual: a story about an equatorium depends on the existence of such things, and might play on their extreme rarity or the fact that they track the positions of the planets.

Museum knowledge is not only incomplete in its own terms, in one aspect of our engagement with objects – emotional engagement – it is almost blind. Even when there are recorded facts about an object's past, their deployment in museums scarcely begins to tap this emotional potential. Occasionally a more imaginative engagement might be offered through the creative arts. A fiction might be factually wrong in most respects but still convey truth we will otherwise ignore. It can at least remind us of all that we will never know of the lives of objects and the people they have touched.

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BROAD SHEET

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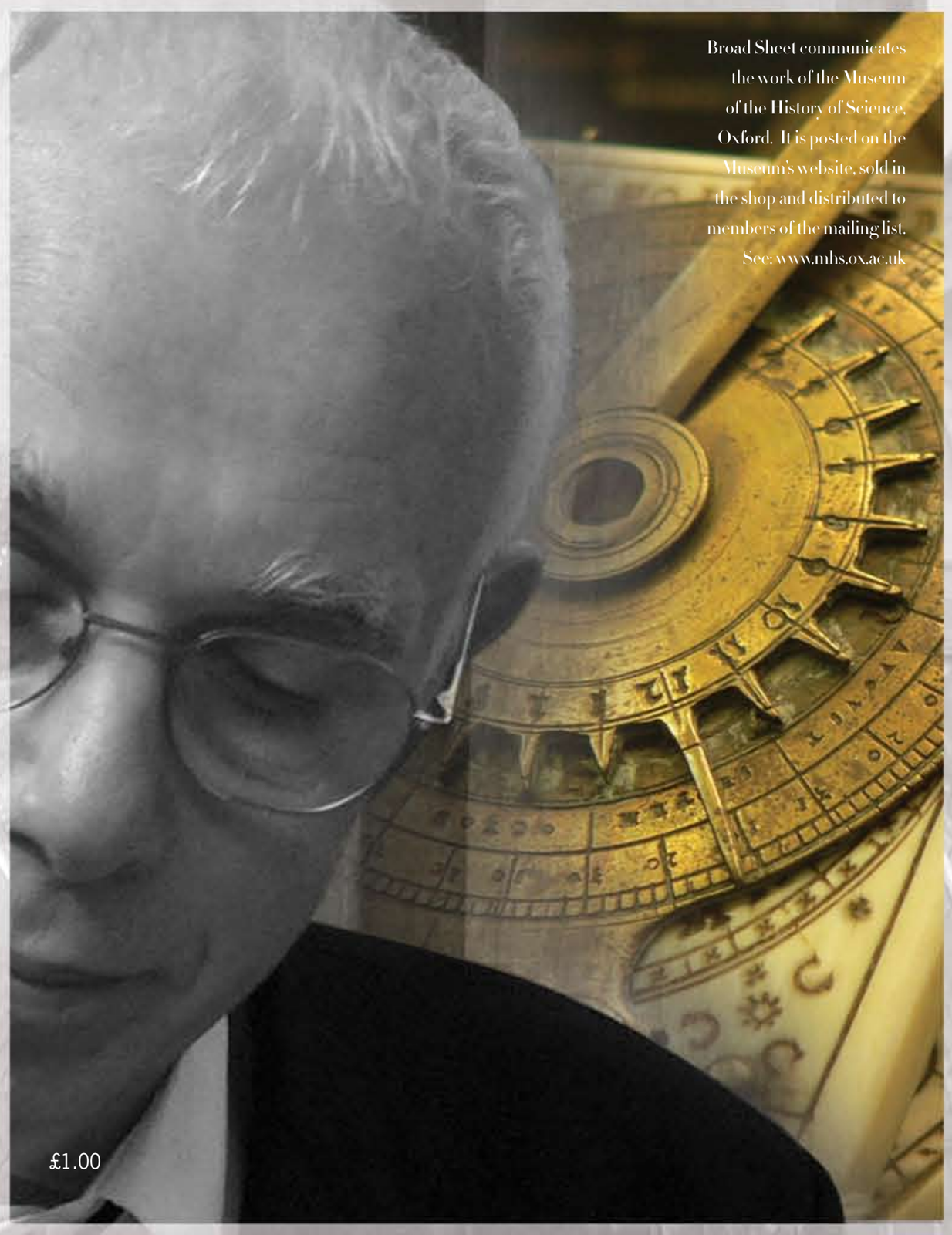

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BROAD SHEET NO. 3

CHASING VENUS

A photo narrative *by* Roma Tearne

2007

They thought it was the tornado that knocked down the head in Broad Street in the night. Yes, a tornado, a little twister was what the local news station called it. These things happen. One of the heads was merely cracked but the other fell onto the pavement and broke in two. It was good all this happened in the middle of the night and not in broad daylight with tourists milling around and the students flying past on their bicycles. No one mentioned the other business, the thing that was on all their minds.

The head that had fallen still had its black, cloth blindfolds on. Much earlier all fourteen of them from Solomon's House and around the Sheldonian Theatre were blindfolded. Nobody commented on this strange fact, no one owned up to being puzzled by it. The artist who had been responsible for the dramatic act in the first place had gone home. And then, in the morning, with the twister gone, and the broken head carted away to be restored, had anyone cared to look up, they would have seen the other thirteen blindfolds had been removed. So how had *that* happened? How had they been removed? Perhaps there had never been any blindfolds in the first place? Perhaps it had been a dream? Along with the other business. No one was prepared to comment. It was all too embarrassing, too unreal. People needed time to think about the implications, about what they really felt. After a while, however, everything returned to normal; well, almost normal. A head was still missing from one of the pillars of the house and another, now cracked, stood precariously on its plinth beside the railings. But strangely, no one who had been there at that time ever forgot the story. And forever after, the City Guides and the residents, and those working in the bookshop, glancing up towards the sky, remembered the story. For nothing like this had ever happened before, and, it seemed, to all those who were familiar with them that the heads had taken on a watchful, knowing air.

When on the following Monday morning, he heard about the storm, the director of Solomon's House came down the steps to gauge the damage for himself. He loved those heads as though they were his own. He hated the idea of their being destroyed in any way. Or being patched up, changed forever from what they had always been. Restoration was never the same thing; restoration had imperfection built into its very process. The Director hated the idea that, having withstood time so perfectly for all these years, they should suddenly crack open like nuts in a wind that had no business to turn up here, in this corner of golden sun-baked stone and tradition. Well, that was global warming for you, people were heard to mutter. Too close for comfort, it would seem. The Director said nothing. Something was upsetting him. Something that he was reluctant to talk about. He would have liked, he realised, gazing absent-mindedly at the innocently blue sky, to have been able to share his suspicions with another person. With the artist, perhaps?

"They're supposed to have an imagination, after all" he murmured to himself.

But no one heard him. The passers by were too busy being, well, passers by.

The director of Solomon's House was called Jack Evans. He had been Director for almost a year now, and since his father's sudden death, he had tried very hard to *become* Solomon's House. Such was his symbiotic connection. Such was his passion for the objects and the place itself. He had loved this collection for as long as he could remember, from when he had been a mere boy. For Jack, and Charles Evans, his father before him, came from a long line of Keepers of the Treasures – treasures that had been in existence since the early fifteenth century. And Solomon's House, as anyone who had ever visited it knew, positively glittered and sparkled with the instruments of time. Through time and about time. Sun and sea and stars, that was what Solomon's House was about. There they stood in the half light, these orbs and astrolabes, these telescopes and globes, no longer navigating the universe, no longer steeped in the shadows of the setting sun, but still touched by the memory of it. Life in all its desire for accuracy, laid bare. What more could anyone ask for, Jack Evans was heard to cry, every time he viewed the visitor figures. Here in this magnificent house was a panorama of man's struggle for an understanding of the world, and yet, what did people ask him? Why wasn't there a tearoom?! Sometimes Jack despaired of ever really comprehending human nature. As if all of this wasn't distressing enough, now the heads outside his beloved house were damaged and broken. It would be months before they could be repaired again. And then of course there was the other business, which was upsetting in a completely different way and not something he was ready to discuss. Not until he had worked it out in his own mind.

"There was someone from the newspapers looking for you Jack," one of his staff said, seeing him disappearing down the stairs.

"What did they want?" asked Jack, frowning, pausing in mid-flight. The chandeliers glinted dangerously in the empty stairwell. The wooden staircase, the dark cogs of measurements, the innards of the great clock displayed against the high walls, all added to the feeling of descending into a dungeon. Below in the recently excavated exhibition space, fifty-seven grandfather and mother clocks struggled to agree with each other, so that the hour when it chimed often went disagreeably on and on. Time stretched like a vulgar limousine.

"They wanted to know if you had any comment to make about the woman, Sir? The one who sent you that letter?"

"No. No, how could I? I never even saw her."

"But they want to show you a photograph, Sir."

He could not bear to see a photograph, not now he thought he knew what had happened. Really, what could he have done to change the course of events? History was other people's mess dumped on your doorstep before you had any awareness about your own role in things. No, he had no desire to talk to the newspapers.

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Amel's great-grandfather had made Celestial globes. Even as a small child, the sound of such magical words had sent a shiver of delight through her. Their house, when she was growing up, was filled with a collection of perfect spheres. Small nocturnals, navicula, shining orbs, minute calibrations scratched all over them. Her great grandfather had told the time from the orientation of the night sky. Amel had been more keenly aware, had learnt to read the time at a younger age than anyone in their village. That was many years ago. The sun had danced across her life in those days. When she had been ten, the light falling on the arid landscape had been something she had loved but could hardly describe. How do you describe something that is as familiar as your hand without making it sound ordinary? Yet the light on the land was not ordinary. It was transcendent and lovely.

"You will be beautiful one day," her father told her, softly, "like this land. If you don't ruin your life."

Amel had no idea why her life should get ruined if she did not want it to. But then the river dried up and the hot months became hotter. She understood that when the earth cracked like the skin under her grandmother's heels it meant real hardship was on the way. It started with the water. Always, the water. The lack of it, the need for it. And then even the nights became hotter offering them no respite. Then it was that the stars crawling across the horizon like the efflorescent insects on the wasteland seemed to be burning holes in the sky. Burning for eternity.

Once when the drought got so bad that even the succulent black spiders shrivelled and the leaves of the rubber plant became thinner than parchment; once when the well had become simply a hollow slap in a hole, Amel and her father walked to the edge of the village to where the Englishman lived. The road they walked on was a tangle of old roots and dead things; skulls picked clean by an unknown animal, drying in the burning sun, and stubble left over from a long forgotten harvest. The road had never been made. It had simply arisen out of a need. Avoiding the midday sun, Amel and her father walked slowly, churning the dust with their feet, to the big cool white house where the Englishman lived. Amel's father was his gardener. The Englishman, his boss, was a collector of scientific instruments. His interests, he had told them, were natural philosophy and astronomy. On that afternoon, even though it was not his usual day of work, Amel's father walked across the dust basin of common land carrying a bag full of astrolabes and nocturnals, (all of them belonging in some distant past to Amel's great grandfather), and sold them to his boss. The Englishman, his name was Charles Evans, invited Amel's father in. His son Jack, who was playing in the garden at the time, looked curiously at Amel. Then he went back to his game. That day, with the money he received, Amel's father was able to continue paying for the use of the local well, and the shadow of that particular drought seemed to pass them over. For a while, at least.

Hardship came in slow stages. Imperceptibly. While the rains fell, they forgot about the death-rattling heat. Flowers bloomed briefly, purple hibiscus and scarlet mimosa. Because there were only these flowers, because she had known no others, Amel did not find them exotic. Sometimes the girls would weave them into garlands to be worn around their necks. Then the rain would stop abruptly and that was that. Her father had no more astrolabes to sell, no instruments, no clocks. Besides, the Englishman, having tired of the heat, had packed up his house and taken his wife and son back to England. And then, without warning, her father died and everything changed for Amel. She emerged from the curious and beautiful chrysalis that had been her childhood, catching a glimpse of how her life would soon be ruined. Her uncles came. There were several of them. After the funeral Amel could hear them talking to her mother inside, in the cool of the house. Their voices rose and fell like hissing snakes. There were no longer any hibiscus flowers to be seen. All the flowers had died with her father. The sky had become a flat static blue, monotonous and indifferent. Through the heat the voices of Amel's uncles came faintly towards her. She knew instinctively that something was about to happen.

"They are going to send you away," one of her sisters told her, "because you are the oldest."

"You will cross the sea," her brother said.

Amel tried to imagine the sea. Long ago on a cross-country trip with her father she had caught a glimpse of it. She had noticed that, to her astonishment, a surfeit of light had danced on it.

"When you sail on it," her brother said, "that will be the end of our country. And you will be in England."

So that was how it was meant to be. She was leaving her home.

"It will be a family of four," her mother told her. "You will look after the children. And you are so lucky you will see England before any of us. You must be good," she added anxiously when Amel could not stop crying, "until we see you again."

Already it was as though she had left. Absence filled the stiffling air. Absence was everywhere. They packed her things. There was not much, so it did not take long. A small woven bag with her prayer book. At the last moment her mother brought out a small box. It held the precious equatorium, the beautiful bronze disc that could track the evening star. It was the only instrument that had not been sold by Amel's father. He had told Amel years before, there were only two equatoria in the world. This was one of them.

"Here," her mother said, giving the box to her. "You will always know where you are because of it."

The night before she left, Amel hardly slept. It was as though her heart was breaking. She could not bear the thought of leaving her mother and her brother and sisters. Her sadness was beyond tears. Fear watched over her that night. Fear grew in her for the first time.

Then in the early morning light, fully covered in a nijid, for she had grown beautiful and her life would now be amongst strangers, she went. Stepping off the arid land that held nothing except disease and indifference. A land too shrivelled and worn for all the life it supported. That was how she went, with the smell of singed, dead grass beneath her ebony ankles, and the song of the grasshoppers all around, veiled in black. One mouth less to feed.

A sea voyage has very little variations if you have no money. Centuries rolled backwards and the sea, unchanged from long ago, moved as it had always done. The storms were monumental. Amel was speechless with fright. The sea, she saw belatedly, was a force like no other. The light still danced on the waves, but now it was terrifying. And endless. Night after dreadful night she slept with five others in the lowest part of the ship. Bodies on bodies, piled against each other. The smugglers had taken even more people than usual and there was no room to breath. Amel was always thirsty, always on the point of collapse. But every night as she lay suffocating in the minute space that was her bed she felt close against her cheek, the hard round shape of the instrument she carried and was comforted a little. She was too timid to talk to anyone, too frightened to do more than lie motionless within the steady rocking of the sea. Life closed in. Later the weather cleared. But by then it was much cooler. Standing on deck, chasing the evening stars with her huge eyes, she hoped the weather would warm up soon.

"Always find Venus," her father had said. "Stay close to it and you won't go wrong."
But it was impossible to find. The sky was too cloudy or too dark, or she was too cold to go on deck. Two men were thrown overboard, no one knew why. The atmosphere inside the cabins filled up with anger and despair. The cold bit into Amel with intensity. It drove out all thoughts of home; it numbed her fear and confused her further so that her silence deepened. No one bothered much with her. A woman, veiled as she was, gave nothing away, and there was neither time nor inclination to prise her story from her. Everyone after all had their own story, each one as unique as the next. Everyone struggled to survive. So that for the rest of that interminable voyage, faceless and ignored, Amel hardly spoke. Finally when she arrived in England, when she met the family she would serve, she was simply grateful to be on dry land again. Things happened swiftly. Her small bag was taken away from her, she was strapped into a car and whisked through a rain-washed England to her new home. Too disorientated and confused to notice much, she simply watched the blurred light flash past the window of the car. The two children she would be looking after sat beside her on the back seat eyeing her curiously. Her employers Tamara and Hassan seemed in a hurry, they drove without saying much. And the dull green of England swept past in a blur. Much later, when they put her things in her small room, she discovered that her precious equatorium had disappeared. When she asked her new family where it might be, no one knew what she meant.

Her new life began. How could she imagine it would be like this? She worked from morning until well past midnight. She had been told she would be looking after the children but when she arrived at the house, the woman Tamara decided she would be the new cleaner. So Amel began to wash clothes. She washed the curtains, she vacuumed the carpets, she changed bed linen, she cleaned the toilets. The house was large; the work never finished. At night, after she had bathed the children and put them to bed, she washed the dishes and cleaned the kitchen. Tamara checked over the work all the time. More often than not she would go down on her knees with a magnifying glass to look for dust in the carpet. Finally, if she were lucky, wAmel would be allowed to go to bed, knowing that she would have to be up before six the following morning. This then was the shape of her new life. She was never allowed out without her veil. She was never allowed out alone. That was the rule. Not even to the shops. There was always at least one member of the family with her. Always. Six months went by. She had not been paid any money. Tamara told her it was being sent directly to her family. There was no way she could check if this was true. And what did she need money for, anyway? Didn't she have just about everything she needed? Amel did not argue. And when she tried asking again as to the whereabouts of the equatorium, she was either ignored or scolded or hit across her feet with a small horsehair whip, depending on the mood of her employer. She could no longer see the evening star from her windowless room. Slowly it dawned on her, she was a prisoner.

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Autumn was late. Not a single leaf had fallen from the trees in the University Parks yet strangely the smell of wood smoke drifted across the river. Must be habit that made him imagine it, thought Jack Evans as he walked across to Solomon's House. There had been no sun all day, just a thick fog that seemed to stagnate under a roof of grey clouds. Funny weather. He had been watching the news. The television was full of the past returning to haunt the world with its cycle of repetitive images. September the eleventh had come around again. A man fell endlessly out of the sky; people watched what they should never have had to watch. Somehow the image became more unbearable with time. Not less. Inside Solomon's House the cases gleamed. The daylight through the stiff heavy conservation blinds hardly dented the gloom. Today the building was closed to the public but Jack had come in to pick up some papers from his office. Fifty-seven clocks chimed the hour as he crossed the threshold. Fifty-seven pairs of minute hands moved almost in unison. Having got what he had been looking for, Jack paused for a moment beside some of his new acquisitions. Here he was, he thought, with a houseful of objects. Instruments that testified man's curiosity about the stars, the earth, the seasons, the solar system. But what had that particular struggle for knowledge done for mankind in the end? In the half-light the celestial orbs and sun markers gleamed. Footsteps on the cobbled pavement reverberated hollowly; somewhere in the distance the sound of a police siren travelled towards him in waves as the rain that had held off all morning fell softly. Sighing, for although he was usually a cheerful man, the day had a melancholy cast to it, Jack Evens switched off the lights. September the eleventh. The day was immortalised as a sun picture in the public mind, an image of waste. The gleam of metal sundials, hidden from the sun for so many centuries, caught a strand of late afternoon light as Jack Evans let himself out into the wet street carefully locking the door behind him. Beyond him in the small car park, head bowed in concentration, a parking attendant was writing out another ticket.

Six weeks later at one of the museum's regular table talks Jack brought out his latest acquisition and passed it around the group of visitors who were assembled there. He had paid a huge sum of money (more in fact than he had intended). Such an extraordinarily rare equatorium was a find indeed. The couple who had brought it in had clearly known its market value. They had refused to sell it for less. For his part Jack had not wanted to let it go. In addition to which, he discovered to his excitement, it had come from the same place as the *original* group now displayed in the museum. And it was in good condition. So although he had disliked the couple, Jack Evans had paid up. It crossed his mind that they might have stolen it. However, he reassured his audience now, the instrument had been checked out. There were no reports of a theft and it was the genuine article all right. Here it was, he said, passing it carefully around, evoking the sixteenth-century hands that would have held it once, staring at a night sky unchanged by time. The audience, consisting mostly of fathers and sons looked in awe, at the delicate markings. It was what always happened. Mathematics had that effect on people. As the session was ending one of his staff came in with an envelope for Jack.

"She couldn't speak much English but I thought you'd better see it."

"Thanks," said Jack, pocketing the letter, which he would need to get translated. He went back to say goodbye to his audience. Afterwards he placed the equatorium along with all the other objects, in its cabinet facing the now fading light from the window, and went out into the evening.

******

They had gone to this place called Solomon's House because it was the autumn half term. Amel was allowed to go with them in order to keep the youngest child quiet. That was where she had seen it. Displayed like an exotic bird in a flock of other, commoner birds, pinioned by the pinpricks of museum light. Grief caught at her throat. Grief she had forgotten she possessed. Nothing could describe how she felt. She knew now that she lived in Oxford. She had gathered as much from the glimpses she caught here and there, the snatches of conversation between the children and the carelessness on the part of her mistress who could afford to be careless. It enabled her to fix a name to this place at last. But that was all. She had not spoken to a single person outside the confines of the house. And now, this: her equatorium. She was sure it was hers. It took her back to the heat of a different sort of day and a night sky so vast as to swamp the evening star. Her eyes watered, she could not read the label. Too frightened to show any interest (if Tamara noticed she would punish her) Amel could hardly move away from the cabinet. The child in the pushchair, her charge, was wriggling and she bent and unstrapped her. She was aware of the ground, of the white, sandblasted tiles, of her feet, hardly visible under her niqab. Suddenly she remembered her brother and his feet, as he played in the yard, scratched white with dirt, wearing the plastic water-bottle slippers that he had tied down to his toes with scraps of rag. Her brother had been so proud of his makeshift invention. The image rose and fell as she swayed gently. She had a feeling she would never see the real thing again. The thought of the curious, shuffling motion of his walk made her heart contract painfully. Time stopped. Everything was jumbled up, everything a memory, so near yet so inaccessible, just like the objects in the glass case beside her. The child wriggled in her arms and Tamara was glaring angrily. They went downstairs to the basement to look at the clocks.

It wasn't until later that night that the idea of writing to the museum about the lost equatorium occurred to Amel. It was midnight by the time she had finished all her chores. Tamara told her she could go to bed. This was a special concession; normally she would stay up until the early hours of the morning ironing or preparing food for the next day. But tonight there were visitors and Amel guessed her employers wanted her out of the way.

"Don't forget to say your prayers," Tamara said, sounding as she always sounded when there were guests. Amel's bedroom was freezing. She was supposed to switch the light off as soon as possible or risk being accused of wasting electricity, so hurriedly she took a pen and the piece of paper she had stolen from a drawer in the kitchen. She would replace the pen in the morning. She was determined to write her letter. She wrote in Arabic; she could barely speak English let alone write in it. She wanted to speak to someone from the museum. She wanted to tell them it was *her* equatorium she had seen. She wanted to tell them about her father's fine collection of orbs and how he had sold it to the Englishman on the edge of the town where she had once lived. So she wrote in the language that she thought in, about the place that was her home, setting down those things that mattered most to her. She wrote about the land that had been unable to sustain them because of its bitter heat. Land tormented by the sun, by a lack of rain. She set down those things that still haunted her dreams, in the closed up corner that her existence. She tried to capture the whirl of the grasshoppers in the clogged air, the long low call of the blue-faced Malkoha and the rustle of her brother's ebony legs, scratched and bleeding as he wandered aimlessly by. She wanted to tell of these things before they choked within her. She did not pause to wonder if the museum would be interested in her story. It had not occurred to her that they might think her story was far-fetched. These things did not trouble her. And she was sure, there would be someone who could read Arabic, who would help her to return home. For that was what she wanted most of all. She had no idea how she would get the letter to the people in the museum. All that was important was for her to write the letter. Tomorrow she would think of a way to deliver it.

******

It was a while before Jack Evans showed the letter to his friend Benjamin in the Islamic Department and by then it was almost Christmas. Solomon's House was closed for a fortnight and Broad Street emptied of students. A few resolute sightseers wandered past, braving the rain and on New Year's Eve, some revellers placed a traffic cone on one of the statues. After that, encouraged no doubt by this gesture, someone else stole the banner advertising the latest exhibition. But generally the area around Solomon's House remained quiet. The time between Christmas and New Year was always a dead time. Only the clocks in the basement continued their relentless march.

The letter was waiting for Jack on his first day back.
"I can't decipher the first few sentences," Ben had written.

There is a lovely road that runs from Gibbon to Zafara in the hills. The land there is windless and dry as a drum-skin. This is where I once lived. With my father and my mother and my brothers and sisters. This is where I was born. I did not know that one day I would travel across the world to this place so far from that road. For months after I arrived, I simply existed, everything I had known disappeared. Then suddenly there it was, in your museum. It is my father's equatorium, the one instrument that can follow the evening star. I am certain of it. There is the dent made when my brother accidentally dropped it. I realise I have been living blankly, without memory. Denying all thoughts of the dust filled village, with its black soil and its brittle eucalyptus leaves that was my home. How different it is here in your country, where the leaves fall because there is no sun. Then today when the miracle happened, when I saw the bronze equatorium in your glass case, all the small memories, the photographs of my great-grandfather in his frock coat, the cabinet with the three sundials he used to measure the sun, came back to haunt me. And I understodd a terrible thing. Like me, they too have gone. Wiped out. Caged.

There was a little more. And the writer had simply signed herself Amel.

"Quite good Arabic," Ben said when Jack rang him. "Surprising, given she claims she lived in a village near Zafara. What are you going to do? Try to trace her? Obviously she's some sort of slave. Outrageous really."
Jack was silent. The writer had mentioned Charles Evans. How could she have known about him or the white house on the edge of the hill? Unless… It had been years since he had thought about the place but the writer's words conjured up all sorts of memories.

"I was about ten at the time," he said slowly. "We left soon after."

"D'you think its true then?" Ben asked.

"I wonder. Look even the dent she mentions is there."

"Well she could have simply seen that," Ben said, "and put together a nice little story in order to get you to part with some money."
All sorts of things were possible. But she had not asked for money. She had not asked for anything.

"And she knows what most people do not; that the equatorium can chart the path of Venus."

"You say there was no address?"

"None. Anyway she claims she doesn't know where she is!"

"Outrageous! What will you do? Go to the police?"

"N-no," Jack said slowly. "Not yet. Not till I've looked up some of the old photographs from that time."
Some weeks passed. Jack Evans was busy with his spring programme. It was the week-end when the artist, who was blindfolding the statues, was due to arrive. Jack wasn't too sure about letting an artist loose on his beloved museum but she had assured him her work would not harm the collection in any way. In fact, she had promised him it could only enhance the objects.

"Just exactly what are you planning?" Jack asked suspiciously. "Do you want to work with the sundials, the clocks perhaps, or our latest acquisition, the equatorium?"
When he mentioned the word equatorium Jack Evans had a strange feeling, a sharp stirring, deep within him, as though he had had this conversation before. For a fraction of a second he was back in the big white house that he had lived in with his parents. In a flash he saw with exceptional clarity, the dark wood panelled study belonging to his father and his grandfather before that, with its globes and its sundials. And in that instant Jack recalled the vague outline of the gardener, waiting patently at the side door of their house. That was it! He had been playing in the garden with his dog and the gardener's beautiful daughter had come towards him smiling. When after a time the gardener emerged from the house, Jack's father had been with him. Jack saw his father wave and for some reason he had looked pleased.

"Come, Amel," the gardener had called, wearily, softly. "We must go now."
They had gone out closing the gate gently behind and the girl had turned once and smiled shyly at Jack. He remembered it, that smile. He never saw either of them again. Later that day, he saw his father's new treasure and understood why he had looked so pleased.

"He wanted to sell them," Jack's father was telling his mother. "Can you imagine! It was too good an opportunity to let slip. These instruments are such a rarity. They can join the others in the museum. When we get back. At least they'll be looked after properly there."

The artist had arrived early and begun blindfolding the statues that ringed Solomon's House. Soft, black linen on stone features. The heads looked almost human. The blindfolds implied sight, the artist told Jack. He could see that. The artist laughed.

"Ah-ha!" she said. "It's working then. You're looking at these heads in a new way already. I've given them a story you see! I call it the defamiliarization of the familiar!"
Jack was not listening. Something was nagging at him; pulling him with an invisible thread. He needed to check up on one of his photographs. The artist, having finished, packed her things up and headed off home.

"See you on Monday," she said. "I'll take the blindfolds off then."

"Yes," mumbled Jack. He was frowning as he closed and locked the museum up. It was a Friday night. He would not be returning to Solomon's House for two days. A piece of information dislodged itself and was slowly rising to consciousness. He had meant to look up the old photograph of his father but had been too busy and now he was late for his dinner appointment. Well, he thought, shrugging, it would have to keep until after the weekend. On Monday morning, he arrived early by the back door and went straight to his filing cabinet. He had not slept well all weekend. Opening the first of the battered albums he was faced almost immediately with the faded photograph from a lifetime ago. Jack Evans stared at it and the image stared silently back. He had no idea who had taken it but there was the evidence. Himself, aged about ten standing beside a dark haired girl, squinting painfully at the sun. On the back of the photograph, in his mother's hand was written: Jack and Amel, the gardener's daughter.

Outside the Monday morning sounds continued as usual. Voices rose and fell. Somewhere a clock chimed. But Jack heard none of it. He had been transported back in time, to a place where the endless sounds of grasshoppers filled the air and the earth beneath his feet was cracked and broken by the sun. For on that cold blustery morning in Oxford, at the end of March, soon after the unexpected tornado, Jack Evans was thinking of the girl whose name meant Venus, and who, like a bird against a window, or a moth near a flame, in her desperate plea for recognition, had simply moved from one fate only to be caught by another.