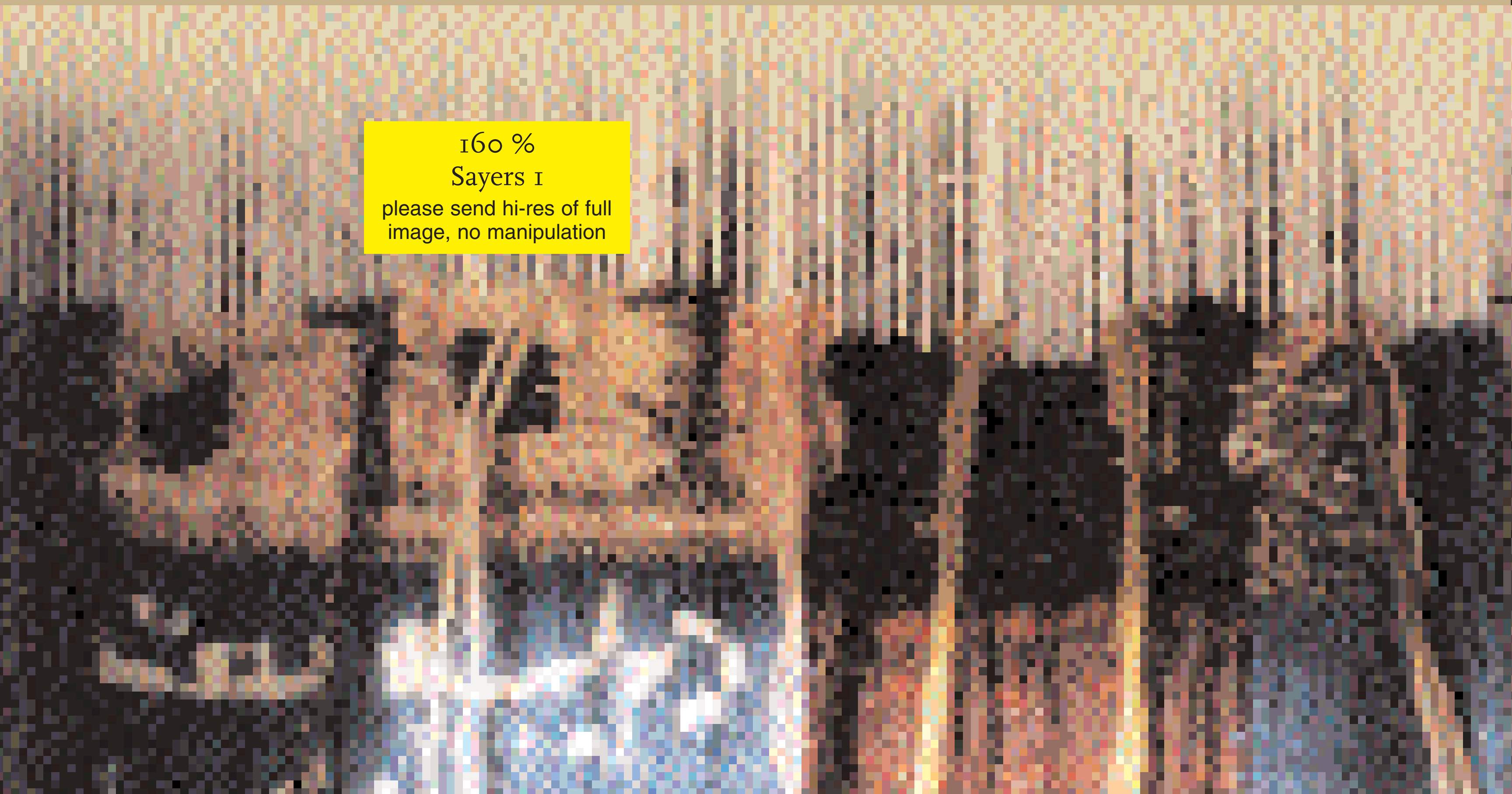
MEGHAN NUTTALL SAYRES

WEAVING BASRA

On an artist's loom, poetry, politics, and prayer entwine



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I spun some yarn to sell for food
And sold it for two silver coins.
I put a coin in each hand
Because I was afraid
That if I put both together in one hand
This great pile of wealth might hold me back.
—Rabi'a al-Adawiyya

For two years I contemplated this poem by Rabi'a al-Adawiyya, an eighth-century Sufi poet and favored saint of Islam who lived in Mesopotamia. I intended to weave images rendered from her words into a tapestry, to give them texture and shape, and to create a keepsake from the wool of my sheep.

In January of this year I finally arrived at a design that captured for me the essence of her poem. It would contain two coins, a caravanserai—one of the chain of ancient shelters where camel trains would rest along the Silk Route—a mosque, a minaret, and Rabi'a, her gaze lifted beyond them all. In addition to my own yarn, I would use the indigo-, chamomile-, and madderroot-dyed yarns I brought home from the Middle East a few years ago.

I am drawn to Rabi'a because she spun her own yarn and because I have a love for her part of the world—its carpets, architecture, food, literature, deserts, and people. Who was it who said that place belongs to the person who claims it most passionately?

On a typical dark Pacific Northwest day in February, I warp my loom, stringing it with one hundred six-ply threads. One hundred threads I fasten onto the upper crossbeam, pass through the slits called heddles, and then tie onto the lower crossbar of the loom with square knots. One hundred or more thoughts, a thankfully smaller number of mistakes, and many wishes and worries have gone into this tapestry before I weave the first row. The real work, Rabi'a might have called this stage of the craft. A story about her may help to explain this notion.

One day Hasan of Basra, a renowned ascetic, saw Rabi'a down by the riverside. He came up to her, spread his prayer rug on the surface of the water, and said, "Come sit with me and pray."

"Do you really have to sell yourself in the market of this world to the consumers of the next?" asked Rabi'a. Then she unrolled her own prayer rug in thin air, and sat on it. "What you did any fish can do, Hasan, and what I did any fly can do. Our real work is far beyond the work of fish and flies."

In my mind, Rabi'a's "real work" is the reflective part of any activity. Real work is rarely for show, and often never seen. In this story, Hasan reflected little before throwing his carpet on the water to show off his spiritual accomplishments. But Rabi'a knew that there is more to faith than following the ritual of one's religion, and saw through Hasan's rhetoric and false actions.

In art, real work includes the skills, passion, and preparation of materials that go into the finished piece. The Turkish call this *işçilik*, a word that has no English equivalent. Folklorist Henry Glassie suggests that it encompasses utility and beauty, and wonderment of God. For me, the real work in making a tapestry includes the hours required in skirting a sheep's fleece (removing grass, dung, thistles) and the more pleasurable tasks of washing, spinning, and dyeing it. This labor, which can take months, is often done alone and rarely meets anyone's gaze. I consider it a contemplative time when my mind is concentrated solely on the

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work: What portion of this tapestry will be the border? How much wool will I need to spin for that? What colors best mimic the landscape where Rabi'a lived? Shall I use dyes made from the red and yellow mineral soils that I've saved from the Utah desert? Then my thoughts move to Rabi'a herself. How would she dress? Should I weave her face? Would she have wanted me to? Each question brings greater clarity to the work.

Beginning on the bottom right corner of my loom, working to the left, I weave four rows with yarn from my own sheep's wool into soumak knots—two wraps around each warp—to form the bottom selvage of my tapestry. My wool is medium-soft by most standards and pleasing to the touch. I reach for the indigo thread that will color the background. Traces of blue rub off on my fingers as I work, tinting also the wooden weft comb I use to beat the knots into place. As I separate the warp threads with my fingers, my hands move awkwardly at first, then become more nimble with each woven row. Time escapes me. I think about the thickness of the yarn, worry about the ripple that could develop if the tension is uneven, and try to keep the edges straight as the tapestry grows vertically up the loom.

> I think this is the essence of what Rabi'a means by real work. Reflection that fosters familiarity. Familiarity that breeds understanding. Understanding that can lead to knowing and loving others as we know and love ourselves.

The next day when I sit at my loom, a blue section of weaving covers a two-inch strip across the bottom of my tapestry. I decide to switch to natural-colored yarn and begin weaving Rabi'a's poem. How lovely the swirling arabic script looks as it takes shape, like something between a letter and a flower. Three characters appear at once, the base of one word defining the sweep of the next. This is the nature of tapestry—everything is interconnected. What appears at the top of a piece would not exist were it not for each knot below or on either side.

In late March of this year, I sift among the yarn in my basket for shades of beige that would depict the mud homes of Rabi'a's hometown. I choose two yarns, one with a copper tint, the other yellow. Wrapping them around my fingers I make a wool butterfly that will pass easily between the warp threads. My hands move back and forth just above the words in the poem to form a foundation of sand bricks, and the threads blend into a saffron-colored tweed. Yes, I think, this is the color I remember from the mud homes I visited in central Turkey. There must be some similarities between the soils of Turkey and Mesopotamia, I muse.

Mesopotamia. The land between the Tigris and the Euphrates. Modern-day Iraq. Rabi'a was from Basra! Didn't I just read about Basra in the newspaper? I let go of the threads and get up to find it. "Choppers Pound Basra's Defense: Resistance Stiffens as U.S.-led Assault Wave Nears City." I stand for a moment staring at the dangling threads. How did it come to pass that I'm weaving an image of Basra? And today, for that matter? A year ago my sketches for this tapestry did not include Basra's mud homes.

I pick up the weft comb, tap it against my palm, and a sensation rolls through me—something close to a low-grade zing you might get from an electrified pasture fence. Knotting together a few more threads, I try to discern the meaning of this coincidence, but cannot. I weave some more—a splash of gold, a bit of brown to cast a shadow on a wall. Here I am weaving Basra's mud homes together, I think, when my country is blowing them apart. Wow. Why?

"Because you are providing the balance," my friend Mary later said to me on the phone.

Her explanation hung in the air.

Days have passed and the newspapers and public radio express outrage over the fact that we haven't won this war in a week's time. I find it hard to listen to, this example of America's need for immediate gratification. Yet it is time I want to explore, as in how much time the Bush administration allowed themselves for real work before committing this country to war. How much real work would it have taken them to have resolved their perceived problem with Iraq nondestructively?

I wonder, did the administration pause to ask themselves questions of this sort: Would Iraqis wish to trade their lives or the lives of their children for Saddam's? In order to oust Saddam would they elect to bring cluster bombs into their communities or choose to become refugees or beggars, risk diseases such as cholera, typhoid, or dysentery that kill victims of disrupted infrastructures?

Aside from health and human lives, did the administration ask what else will be lost as a result of their "liberating" invasion? What does "freedom" mean—the kind that we intend to bring to Iraq? How might our actions make things worse for Iraqis rather than better? Might they suffer culturally, spiritually?

While weaving the vertical walls of the mud homes, I am forced to weave a part of Rabi'a's dress that is beside them—

everything being connected. But what color? Could she, a freed slave, have afforded dyed cloth? Would she have splurged on dyed fabric even if she were able?

I remember the story in which Rabi'a needed a piece of cloth and she gave a man three coins to buy her one. The man asked her, "What color do you want?" Rabi'a replied, "So, it's become a question of color? Give me back my money!" And she threw it into the Tigris River.

No, Rabi'a would not have worn a dyed garment, she would have thought it was extravagant. I can respect this about her life. Because her clothing has to stand out against a desert of indigo, I choose an eggplant color that, when woven, looks rather drab, an unflashy color that I believe would have met her approval.

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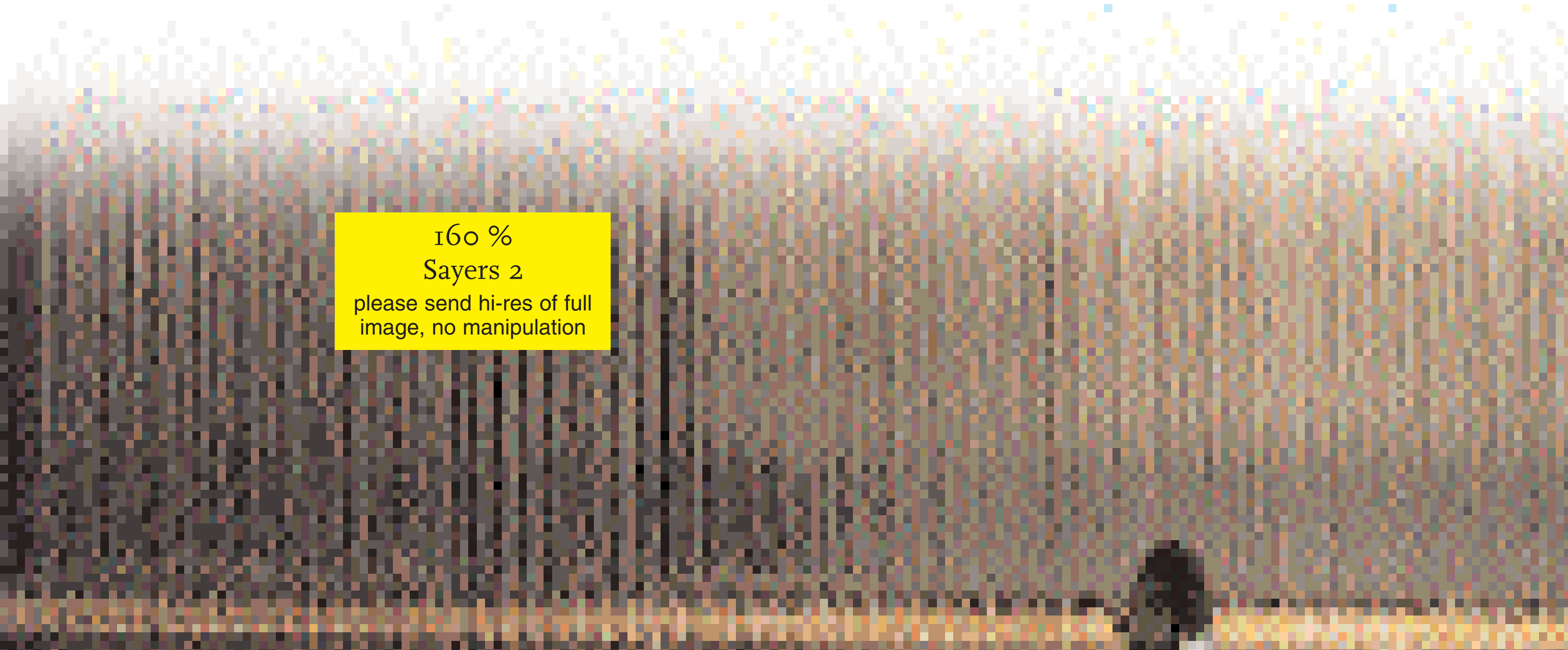
"Egypt's Mubarak Warns of '100 bin Ladens,'" scream American headlines, accompanied by images of eager Middle Eastern volunteers waiting for a bus to take them to Iraq to fight a holy war against the American soldiers. The newspapers say that Vice President Cheney and other administration officials predicted a quick war, with American troops welcomed by the Iraqi people. How much real work would it have taken to predict otherwise?

In William E. Phipps's book *Muhammad and Jesus*, I read that for centuries these people practiced tribal warfare, a desert survival system in which the winner gets the spoils and the deaths of relatives are avenged. (My Irish ancestors lived the same way in many respects.) Thus, with very little real work, did I understand that many Iraqi people would not greet with joy the sight of American soldiers. It should not have come as a surprise that the U.S. met "resistance" (bullets, their deaths) in holy cities like Rabi'a's Basra and An Najaf. Why would the Iraqi people have walked away from their communities, caravanserais, and village wells—places imbued with their family stories, those of their Prophet, peace be upon him, and his revered son-in-law Ali, the first convert to Islam, I believe, after Muhammad's beloved wife Khadija?

An understanding of Iraqi history and its varied cultures might have shed light on the prospects for a successful "regime change," or the planting of democracy in a country where the majority of the people are younger than voting age (and likely unprepared), where one in four are malnourished, and the population is divided into many opposing groups. Rabi'a would have seen that the U.S. hoped to weave a democracy on a partially warped loom.

I would offer that less time was spent reflecting upon the wishes of the would-be victims of war and/or the consequences of military action than the two years and some odd months that I spent preparing to weave the tapestry that will decorate my wall; less time than I gave to trying to understand how Rabi'a might like me to represent her. Without genuine efforts to step inside the shoes of people of another culture, the "other" remains vague, unknown, and threatening. Without appreciation of differences, it's much easier to allow fear to be the guide and entertain thoughts of destruction.

I pound my knots into place with more vigor than necessary. I feel rather than see the tautness in the weave where the muscles in my shoulders have tensed and caused the warp to



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pull together. Where is that harmony my friend had suggested would flow from my fingers?

Harmony—give me a break! chides a voice from within, so steeped am I in the discourse of our day. The voice reminds me that it’s wiser to suppress ideas that our society labels irrational. Safer to live inside the land of the status quo, and not think beyond my own culture or loom frame.

Yet, however absurd it might seem, the thought grows that these feeble threads, spun back on themselves to make them six strands strong, would stitch Rabi’a’s home place back together. Metaphysically, or perhaps transcendentally, somehow my efforts will help to reconcile opposing events, the tearing down and weaving together of this city, and bring harmony. This I know to be a significant theme in Sufism, one that Rabi’a might have appreciated.

In Rabi’a’s part of the world weaving is a communal activity; often three weavers sit together at a loom. The continuity of design depends on the skill of the weaver on either side of you. My work was once the weak link in a chain of knots that brought a carpet to life in central Turkey. I sat between women in headscarves whose patience with me stretched beyond the length of their warp, and whose fingers fluttered as swiftly and delicately as hummingbirds. They seemed to pull rug patterns from a kinesthetic memory, one likely drawn from years of repetitive handwork and from their earliest explorations: as toddlers crawling on coarse, colorful carpets, or as schoolgirls running fingers over the filigree carved on a caravanserai wall. Their patterns bore names such as Tree of Life and Fatima’s Hands. I felt a bond with these women whom I hardly knew, and all those who have practiced this art for millennia—an art that welcomes and relies on the work of nature and the power beyond.

Little in the art of weaving—especially in Rabi’a’s part of the world—is wasteful. The eggplant-colored thread with which I wove the curve of Rabi’a’s hip is made from the remains of a madder-root dye bath, an “exhaust bath.” The madder roots matured in the earth for seven years until they grew woody and thick as pencils, then were harvested, pulverized, and simmered by a Turkish dye master to make a deep red dye. For centuries, indigo has been fermented in vats of urine. Some of the pale rose and beige threads in the mud homes in my tapestry are from yarn dyed with chokecherry twigs that I salvaged after a delivery truck uprooted a bush in my field. Many of the golds in this wall hanging are dyes made from tansy, yarrow, or goldenrod—plants deemed weeds by many.

Tapestry and carpets—kilims in particular——are woven in a way that wastes nothing. The images on the back mirror the front. This is done by weaving to the very end of each thread, tucking in the tiniest micron of fiber, and leaving nothing to snip from either side.

The media report that some Iraqis have rejoiced at the arrival of American soldiers, but many have grown angry at the troops who have “come through their towns and left them in disorder, creating a situation in which the strongest and most ruthless prevail.” One merchant lamented that seven hundred dollars’ worth of cheese in his store would rot because the bombs had knocked out the electricity for his refrigerator. Another, whose workshop had been blown up, expressed outrage at the terrible wastefulness of this war.

With “shock and awe” tactics that Rabi’a would have seen for the empty showmanship that they are, we feed our

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indifference to the consequences of war: instances in which people's hard-won businesses are looted or demolished, mayhem that brings to ruin museums, mosques, minarets, mud homes, and dye masters' colorful workshops. While we might build new airports, and perhaps replace the cheese merchant's shop with a Dairy Mart, how do we intend to replace the irreplaceable: a bride's handmade wedding carpet; artifacts older than Sarah and Hagar and Abraham (our Biblical and Koranic foremothers and forefathers); or the archeological sites—those that might have been discovered—that our subterranean bunker bombs have likely destroyed?

In the same way that we take for granted the demise of priceless artifacts of other cultures, we accept waste as a rightful way of life for ourselves. We are a long way from admitting that simply by living our consumer lifestyles, we are contributing to the deprivation of the majority of the poor in this world—everything being connected. Surely few of us will soon toss coins into the Tigris because we realize we have more than we deserve or need.

Not only does our waste and overconsumption deny others what we have, our indifference keeps them from even telling their own histories. When the superstores go up, what memories will be bulldozed beneath the sand?

"It is neither Islam nor even poverty itself directly that succors terrorists whose ferocity and creativity are unprecedented in human history, but the crushing humiliation that has infected third world countries like cancer," said the Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk. The crushing humiliation of not being seen, heard, or considered.

I have read that a few of the officials in the current administration spent the last decade since the Gulf War in think-tanks, studying and lecturing on what they believed might be done with respect to Saddam Hussein. But did they contemplate anything other than the oil market and military capability? What place, I wonder, did faith and history—those often intangible but no less real aspects of any culture—have in their discussions? Perhaps if they had sat on the floor for a meal with an Iraqi family, they would have beheld a handmade carpet and seen that the Iraqis are humans who create wonders. Had they allowed themselves to feel an affinity, or just respect, for the Iraqi people, they might have been less quick to conclude that war was the best means to their end.

It is my prayer that as the mud homes and weavers' looms in Basra are rebuilt, that Iraq and the world at large will find it in their hearts to forgive America for its trespasses. I pray, as this administration looks toward Syria and Iran, that it pauses and looks beyond power and politics to find there cultures deserving our courtesy, and allows itself time to knot action to understanding.

I hope that the women of Rabi'a's homeland are consulted in matters affecting their people's future. Women who have spent hours each day at their looms practicing the art of real work. Women who have brought exquisite beauty and tangible spirituality into the world. Women whose weaving skills teach them how all things are interconnected and give them the wherewithal—not to mention the attention spans—to succeed at tasks that last years on end. (A carpet in Mashhad's Palace of the Imam Reza contains three million knots and took fourteen years to weave. This is staying power.)

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April 21 and snowflakes scatter on bursts of wind outside my window. Weather the forecasters did not predict. My fingers move back and forth across the soft threads of my tapestry as I try to ignore the voice that has intellectualized my "coincidence," mixed it up with the media frenzy of this war, and now implores me, "Keep weaving those mud homes. Quickly, before the balance is lost!"

I settle on a pace that responds instead to my intuition—that socially suspect yet reliable sense that tells me that nothing lasting can be woven overnight. This irrational muse of mine knows what it is doing. I'm learning to trust it, its transitory nature, and its generosity to share with me little flashes of insight. A consciousness within us all that would lead to a greater understanding of humanity.

How is it that I am weaving Basra back together? I think I know the answer now—it lies within that little Turkish word işçilik. I'd wager that the real work, the wonderment that flows through my fingers, is guiding the threads, moving the piece beyond the toil of fish and flies, transforming the plant- and mineral-dyed material into spirit. A spirit that embraces the world with compassion. Because aren't the methods and goal of any work of art part of the same great love? ❧