

*SAFARA IN THE BEGINNING
(With Bible Verses, Motion Pictures
and Field Guides)*

*and he made chains, as in the
oracle, and put them of the
heads of the pillars; and made
a hundred pomegranates, and
put them on the chains.*

*mangoes and pomegranates,
pomegranates and guavas
and papaws ...*

banana trees ...

*Also he made a molten sea ...
and the brim was like the work
on the brim of a cup, with
flowers of lilies; and it received
and held three thousand baths.*

An enraged Safara cries as she runs. Her father has chosen her future husband, a neighboring king. “You only want the sheep he’ll trade for me.” She hears bleating, envisions her body strapped over a ram’s back, her black hair dragging the dirt. She runs toward her secret place, a fern-lined waterfall. Her pet monkey follows, swinging on vines. She’d found him with a leopard hunched over his body, a hind leg in his mouth. Her father had frightened the cat, soothed her, and severed the mangled foot. The monkey is still handsome: russet rump, shiny black coat, white underside extending to his forehead, caressing his cheeks in sensitive spots. He fidgets and chatters. Safara frowns at the disturbed water. It clears as she removes her amber necklace, her green wrapped

Times roman 12

1.8 on right

1.1 on left

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*and he made tongs, chains,
an altar, two cherubim,
ten lavers, ten candlesticks,
ten tables, four hundred pome-
granates, one sea, twelve oxen,
then pots, snuffers, and spoons ...*

*and shovels
and flowers,
and fleshhooks.*

dress. She dives. Surfacing, she hears shouts and her father's rising voice. She submerges, then bobs up for air. She sees her father running toward her, a servant at his heels. A third man, pale as a ground nut, tackles her father from behind, garrotes him. Legs heavy, Safara thrashes through water. The pale man grabs her wrist, yanks her from the pool. Screeching, the monkey jumps up and down. The man shoots him with his musket; he falls into the water. From his his white stomach, a big red spot moves outward in circles. The monkey stutters in a high-pitched whine. Safara flinches as the man shoves her away from her father. Her captor marches her naked up the hill. When she turns around, he pinches her upper arm.

As they enter the village, her brother, friends, cousins cry out to her. Bodies are strewn on the ground. A man chains Safara by the neck to her male cousin who is surprised by her nudity. The man runs the back of his hand over her breasts. She bends forward to cover herself then bites his finger. He slaps her. Another man shouts for help; her tormenter leaves.

*And . . . the queen of Sheba . . . came
 . . . with a very great company,
 and camels that bore spices,
 and gold in abundance, and
 precious stones; and . . . communed
 with . . . all that was in her heart.*

(Projector whirring. Film begins.) 1649 Safara is eleven, crossing the Atlantic in white batiste gown, hair intricately braided. She gazes straight ahead, as she walks through water—feet touching the sand, head breaking the surface. Fish—some oily, black spotted, others gray, flat, ovoid—swim round her.

Hurricane season. The captain's made a mistake. Thunder-heads gather. Lightning strikes the seas. The waves form deep shifting troughs. The ship creaks as it begins to break apart. The captain refuses to remove his heavy uniform, his war metals.

Like a runner struggling to reach the finish line, Safara stumbles toward the water. She strips off her clothes as she runs. She climbs over men hunched together in brocaded suits, white ruffs at their necks. They form a volcanic island; she plunges into the spume of the sea.

Safara begins her swimmer's kick, then falters. The current pushes her under, then up. At last, she is thrown onto the beach. Straight ahead is a

*Les Maladies et Prédateurs
de Bananiers*

*Les viroses: le bunchy-top
et le mosaïque.*

*L'insecte: Cosmopolites
sordidus.*

*Les autres ennemis: les nema-
todes, les champignons
et les chenilles.*

seven-foot wall of foam. She crashes through it. The cliffs of Martinique loom before her. (Film ends.)

Standing nearby is a calm black man in a black hat. With a gloved hand, he cracks his whip once. A tendril circles her waist. She clutches at the stinging vine. Legs apart, boots planted in the sand, he pulls her toward him. He grabs her head, looks in her face.

“You’re a child,” he says, remembering his dead daughter. He hugs her. “My name is Juste.” She understands nothing but kneels to kiss his knees. They sleep on goat skins in a shed near the water. Safara lies cradled in his arms.

In the morning, white light glints on the green sea. Debris floats in the distance. Bodies dot the shoreline. In a wagon, Juste drives Safara up the rugged slope of the cove. At the top is a dramatic outcropping. Safara sees women draped like goddesses in sheer apple green, lounging on the rocks.

*curtains of goats' hair
rams' skins dyed red.*

the mercy seat of pure gold

A servant is leading a blindfolded man in a long officer's jacket up the path. As the wagon passes, the servant removes the kerchief. The soldier, oblivious to the semi-nude women, stares at Safara. Defiantly her eyes lock into his. He sways as if drunk. Some of the floras on the rocks are black, some white. Dark circles and triangles swim into view as he rubs his eyes. The wagon rumbles toward the house.

A few minutes later, the man descends to the house—the entourage of women laughing and talking behind him. He stops to look at Safara standing with her feet locked in a square metal brace. “Juste, qu’est-ce que c’est?” he demands. “Monsieur, last night she jumped ship in the storm. This morning she ran away again.” What are those scrapes on her feet?” “Cut by the rocks, Sir.” The propriétaire laughs. Tell Sidoine to wash the girl’s feet with rum. Any gangrene will be her responsibility. What is your name?” asks the patron. Safara answers in Wolof, a stream of phrases, each one a caress on the point of a knife. A woman yells, “Bruno, à table.” Safara repeats, “Bruno.” He says, “You cannot call me Bruno. You must call me Monsieur Le Louvois.”

(Projector whirring. Film begins.). Close-up of Sidoine's dark brown hand lighting rum with a match. Safara sits on a three-legged stool. Sidoine pours flaming liquid over crêpes d'ananas. Blue flames course over the platter, dance behind Safara's head. Sidoine, a tall, thin woman with bony hands, unshackles her ankles. Close-up of cut and chaffed feet. Sidoine washes them firmly but with care. She takes a half-empty bottle of rum from a shelf, then massages Safara's ankles with the clear liquid until the skin is warm and glowing. A halo of light outlines her feet. (Film ends.)

Mornings Safara weeds the endless rows of pea-like shrubs. Evenings she stews the plants in vats. In three months, she learns many French phrases. Pardonnez-moi. Bonjour. Je m'appelle Safara. Je suis esclave. Les mains sont bleues. Je suis fatiguée. J'ai faim. Je voudrais vous plaire. J'ai faim. She bends over her pot, smells the acrid odor of indigo.

One day, in the forest by the sea, Safara strays from the path. She bends

the subtle serpent
the death threat
the desirable fruit
the fig-leaf aprons
the flaming sword

*I did but taste a little honey
with the end of the rod*

*. . . not one hair of his head
shall fall to the ground*

to pick up a pale green fruit. “Arretez*. Stop!” a stranger shouts at her, waves his arms. “Cet arbre-ci est poison. La peau, l’estomac, tout sera enflammé si vous mangiez ce fruit.” “Ce n’est pas une pomme?” “No, this is the manchineel tree.” “Monsieur, comme vous êtes gentil.” “Drop it. Drop the fruit!” She releases her grip. He rushes to her. “Open your palm. Come, we must find ointment.” She frets. “Hush now.”

He takes her burning hand, leads her toward the house. “You care about me,” she says. “Sh! Any decent person would help you.” He has kind hazel eyes and brown fly-away curls. “What is your name, child?” he asks. “I’m not a child.” “How old are you?” “Thirteen, and you?” Don’t be insolent. I’m nineteen. Now run tell Sidoine what happened.”

That night before sleep, Safara chants softly: “‘Grégoire,’ ‘You cannot call me Grégoire. You must call me Monsieur Soissons.’”

strange wives

*He rends his garment and his
mantle, and plucks off the hair
of his head and his beard, and
sits down astonished.*

One week later. “Grégoire!” “Safara, if you persist in calling me by my prénom, Bruno will have Juste whip you.” “Not hard. Bruno has plans for my next birthday. Que faites-vous?” “Im staining machineel trees with a red band—a reminder like a string around the finger. Yesterday they found a dead child. So Bruno has plans for your fourteenth birthday?” “Grégoire, je suis méchante. It will be my thirteenth birthday.” “Vous êtes sûre?” “Oui. Grégoire, I do not want to sleep with Bruno.” “Safara, I’m working; go gather your indigo plants.” “I know you are a good man, Grégoire.” She skips off.

A fortnight later under a full moon on a cliff overlooking the sea, Grégoire is crying. Safara approaches: “Vous êtes triste?” “What are you doing here?” he demands. “I am thinking of swimming to Africa. And you?” “I am thinking of swimming to France, but I am persona non grata. Maybe one day, the King will pardon me.” “Did you kill someone?” “Non, non. I lost my map of the African interior. Veins of gold clearly marked. Un bone explorateur ne doit pas perdre sa carte.” “The King is angry?” “His mother wanted to hang me, but my mother

l'ananas (pineapple)

trois sépales

trois pétales

six étamines et

un pistil tricarPELLAIRE

the two asses saddled

the dead dog cursing

the bloody man

the father's concubines

begged on her knees for my life. My exile was an Easter gift to her. I miss France very much.” “And I Africa.”

Next day. “Grégoire, I draw you a map. I know places gold leaps from cracks.” “Vous plaisantez.” “Non, tu dois me croire.” “Safara,” he says backing her into a corner, “I don’t believe you. Now, don’t tease me and don’t tutoyer me. It’s dangerous.” “Toute ma vie est dangereuse. In two weeks, I will be twelve and Bruno’s femme de chambre. Take me on your boat, Grégoire, or I will swim to Africa.” He looks down at her blue black hands stained with indigo: “Twelve?”

The next week, a slave ship is loading supplies for a return voyage.

Grégoire: “Sacré bleu! I must be out of my mind.” Safara: “I’m helping you, Grégoire.” “Bruno will kill me.” “No, no, you are his favorite nephew. He’ll find another girl. He’s had five lovers since I arrived.” “He has desired you from the beginning, Safara.”

The bribes, the tiny wooden cabin below decks. The clever sack full of

*two hundred loaves of bread,
a hundred summer fruits and
a bottle of wine*

*. . . the color amber . . .
appearance of fire . . . of his
loins even upward . . . of his
loins even downward . . .
appearance of fire, and it
had brightness round about.*

shells for trade with Safara inside. Grégoire's stateroom is directly above. He scampers like a rat at night delivering biscuits and water, fruit and meat scraps. One evening, he brings her a nightgown stolen from his niece. When he returns to his room, he is surprised to see a light seeping from a corner in his floor. For five days, he watches the light from his bed. At last, helplessly, he lies on his belly and peers through the hole. Safara, in long pink satin gown, pleated transparent top with tiny ostrich feathers around the neck, stares at the flame.

Grégoire dreams of Safara. In her hair: anthuriums, roses de porcelaines, alpinias, heliconias—reds, pinks, oranges—tongues, veins—thick petals in her hair.

Whimpering, Safara wakes with blood on her hands. Grégoire rushes downstairs. "Taisez-vous!" he warns. "Bring me a clean cloth," she demands. "I am menstruating." Grégoire blushes, disappears, returns.

"Why are you crying, Safara?" "I am lonely. Je suis toute seule." "I am

bécune
bonite
poisson volans
poisson armé
poisson de roche
congres
carangues
rayes
souffleurs
tassard
requiem
orfie
lamantin
baleines
balaou
loup marins
perroquets de mer
équilles de mer
remour
galère

here.” He holds her close and pats her back. “Grégoire, I know you love me.” “There, there.” He rocks her until she falls asleep, then he dozes off. A loud knock wakes Grégoire. Quickly he covers Safara with the burlap bag. “Yes?” “I heard noises,” a sailor says. Grégoire opens the door, says, “Just checking my cargo.” Squinting, the mate says, “D’accord.”

The next night the sailor breaks into Safara’s room. “Qui est-ce?” she demands. He grabs the sack. “Votre ami est riche, n’est-ce-pas?” Empty—no shells, no gold. In a fury, dagger drawn, he lunges toward her. She dodges him. His blade plunges into her wooden pallet. She throws the sack at his face, pulls the knife from her bed. He throws himself at her; she gores his stomach. The blade extrudes through his back. Safara cries, “Grégoire, Grégoire.” Not until morning can she rouse him. That evening Grégoire dumps the body overboard.

(Projector whirring. Film begins.) Close-up of hot pink anthuriums, upside down heart-shapes tightly rolled. Time lapse of slow unfurling. Safara in front of the flowers. Lots of greenery. Grégoire knocks. He enters, takes

*Can a man take fire in his bosom,
and his clothes not be burned?*

her hands, kisses them. “I want you so much, but you’re too young.” Breezes shake the leaves. “No, I’m not too young. My father had already welcomed a king bearing three sacks of koala nuts. He was rich and very handsome. But I did not love him.” She’s still, yet he raises his hands to ward her off: “For me,” it would be a sin. We will wait until you are fourteen.” Flowers half-opened, fluttering. Scene suffused with pink glow. “I will stay my passion, content myself, knowing I’ve saved a princess, my princess.” “Grégoire, my darling.” “Safara, kiss me once; I will remember your lips for the next two years.” “Two years?” she says. “Virtue will be rewarded.” He kisses her. She returns his kiss and he leaves. Freeze frame of totally opened flowers. (Film ends.)

A Day’s journey from Gorée, a French ship greets them. “Th English have captured the port, go north!” Safara’s heart falls inside her chest. “This can’t happen,” she cries.

(Projector whirring. Film begins.) Gloved dissection of manchineel fruit. The toxic, milky juice is squeezed into pipettes. Men and women in sur-

*anemones, jasmine, carnations,
and jonquils*

orange blossoms

a lodge in a garden of cucumbers

gical marks and floor-length lab coats hover over protracted sections.

(Film ends.)

A Marseille. Safara, still chaste, is thirteen. By day she is Grégoire's servant. By night he is hers. Grégoire has promised that she will celebrate her fourteenth birthday in Africa.

All is forgiven. Grégoire's mother writes from Paris she's arranged his marriage. He ignores the letter, says, "In one more year, you will be my bride, Safara."

Grégoire in purple shirt, tending yellow sunflowers with bright green foliage. Safara in fuchsia, straddling a basket, peeling eels under stars.

Opening a skep one day, Grégoire asks, "What do you want to do when you grow up?" "Keep bees in Africa," she says, scraping a little honey into her bowl.

Herbes et Fleurs de Paris

*le basilic, le laurier,
le marjolaine, le romarin.
les roses, les violettes, les lis,
les soucis, les bluets . . .*

*There came out two women,
and the wind was in their wings
like the wings of a stork.*

*I will go up to the palm tree, I
will take hold of the boughs thereof. . .
thy breasts shall be
as clusters of the vine, and the smell
of thy nose like apples.*

Grégoire writes from Paris: Chère Safara, Two nights ago, I hunted a stag under moonlight. And last night at a ball, I ate a supper of time fish. Violins, oboes and trumpets played minuets and canaries, and a woman from Spain taught us gypsy steps, fas as darting minnows. I tried to quench my thirst with wine and found myself fairly staggering by ten. I was saved by a play, which commenced in a circle of orange trees. The King, who's about your age, rose from a fountain and danced. A small but comical role.

Shortly before midnight, I met Marie-Louise Lavoisier, my mother's choice for a bride. She's pink—a buxom girl with a mass of strawberry curls and freckles. She acted quite the coquette, batting her pop-eyes at me. Brown, I think.

In two weeks, I'll take you on my back to our grotto by the sea. Tonight, Safara, color your lips with crimson. Sleep, and in your dreams, I will come and kiss away the paint.

*The bush burned with fire and
was not consumed, not burnt . . .
God called from the bush . . .
Here I am.*

The scent of daffodils clings everywhere—on Marie-Louise’s clothes, in her hair. After supper on the water and a night of gaming, Grégoire seals their betrothal in a Versailles Garden. They wed at noon in the chapel of Saint-Germain. In three months, Marie-Louise crawls out of bed and faints. A servant rushes to her side with water from the Queen of Hungary. She sips, calming her morning queasiness.

Safara torches the house overlooking the sea. In bedclothes, neighbors watch the blaze. Safara, silent, unsmiling, is escorted to a nearby cloister. No one suspects her of arson, of burning down the house.

(Projector whirring. Film begins.). Close-up of bush spontaneously bursting into flammers. The lick Safara’s face. The bush reassembles; twice more the sequence recurs. The flames dissolve into charred embers and black plumes of smoke. Her face is smeared with soot. Black over brown. (Film ends.)

Grégoire rides by barouche to Marseille. He enters Safara’s convent

*The mandrakes give a smell
and at your gates are all manner
of pleasant fruits, new and old,
which I have laid up for thee,
O my beloved.*

cell. She greets him: “Tu es traître! Tu es une peste exécration!” She turns away. “Je ne suis pas ton ennemi,” he says, trying to touch her shoulder.

Outside the window, stands a tree—a flamboyant with red blooms.

“Grégoire, in three months, I will be fourteen.” “I know, Safara, I’ve come to take you home.” “Home?” “To Africa. I have permission to employ you as my guide.”

Hands on hips, she hisses, “How could you make that pink pig pregnant?” “Safara, had I not married Marie-Louise, I faced disinheritance and the King’s displeasure, possibly death.” “Ha, the King’s a child.” “But his mother isn’t. Marie-Louise enjoys the milk swelling her breasts, not me.” “And you, Grégoire?” “I only wanted you.” Safara, holding his face in her hands, looks unblinkingly into his eyes. “Keep your promise to me, Grégoire!” Behind the flamboyant, the sun sets in a purple sky.

*leopards, hyenas, egrets,
marabouts, touracos, parrots*

*monkeys, baboons, hippos,
elephants, lions, buffaloes,
antelopes, francolins, guinea-fowl,
snipe, pheasants, ducks
and bustards*

(Projector whirring. Film begins.). In profile, Grégoire and Safara hand-in-hand, heads just above water, feet planted open, as in an Egyptian wall-painting. Water ripples over them. Trade routes project on their bodies. The lines begin to oscillate and move whip-like in the water. Vibrations narrow—as though the lines of trade were stretching taut as hard strings. Sounds of plucked catgut trembling. (Film ends.)

Safara and Grégoire glide down the Saloum in a dugout canoe. She points to a crocodile sunning on a bank. Above it, red combretum vines cover the trees. Near her village, boys shoot arrows at fish. One readjusts his aim. Safara yells. Too late. His shot pierces Grégoire's shoulder. Arrows rain over them. She yells again. The boys fall silent. then chatter. "They don't remember me," she says, tending Grégoire's wound. "Quickly, bring your parents!" she commands in Wolof. "Tell them Safara has returned with her future husband." The drums—calabash gourds—begin almost immediately.

That evening, the couple are feted with sweet potatoes and bananas,

*She is not afraid of the snow . . .
all her household are clothed
in scarlet.*

*red, yellow, orange hibiscus
and purple bougainvilleas*

wild flowering cassias

fowl with peanut sauce. They drink palm wine and dance—men and women in separate groups. Safara’s uncle, alive due to a fishing trip, has become father to all the village orphans. “Help me care for these children, Safara.”

For several weeks, Safara and her uncle argue and draw maps on the ground. Grégoire studies their diagrams. He leaves for Dakar to buy camels for his trek into the interior.

“Thierry? What are you doing in Dakar?” “Grégoire!” The two men kiss on both cheeks. Their first meeting since sharing a court tutor as children. “My family lives here; they trade silk for ivory.” Thierry invites Grégoire to his home on a promontory overlooking the sea.

They play tennis on a dusty clay court. An occasional child darts from behind a baobab tree, stealing glimpses of the two men with rackets, running after balls. A servant pours buckets of water over the players’ filthy, sweating bodies.

*anthuriums, roses de porcelains,
alpinias, heliconias*

That night over red wine and roast, the two men toast their former tutor. Thierry says, “When she uttered ‘amo, amas, amat’ through those bowed lips, she aroused me.” He laughs and slaps his knee. Thierry’s eyes are black and shiny like basalt after rain. The men smoke and sip cognac. Thierry details his liaison with an admiral’s wife.

Grégoire glosses over his marriage to Marie-Louise, moves on to his impending bigamy. “Oh? Where is she now, your African wife-to-be?” On a map, Grégoire pinpoints Safara’s village on the Saloum. He recounts the death of Safara’s father and her capture. Thierry says, “I understand your doubts about le trait, but the planters need workers.” He yawns: “I’m afraid I’m falling asleep.”

Unsteadily, Thierry stands, directs Grégoire to a glass case filled with fetishes and intricate ivory carvings.¹ “For you, old friend,” Thierry says, handing him a wooden figure, a naked man with shortened torso, stuck with spikes. The eyelids are glazed shut with white. Grégoire

*Oh my dove, that art in the
clefts of the rock*

*He brought me to the ban-
queting house, and his banner
over me was love. Stay me
with flagons, comfort me with
apples*

tucks the gift under one arm and weaves his way upstairs. He collapses fully dressed across the bed.

A week later, slavers invade Safara's village. On his horse, Thierry scoops Safara into his arms. She wrestles free; they tumble to the ground. She runs; he catches her. From behind, Safara's uncle lets fly a rock. Thierry turns around; it strikes his temple. Blood gushes forth. "You bitch," he says, pitching forward. "Grégoire told me your exact location."

Safara strips off Thierry's musket and knife. She climbs atop his horse and gallops toward the mining site.

"Safara!" Grégoire shouts, surprised, smiling. She aims and fires. The anguish that spreads over his face scares her; an electric charge runs up her neck. He clutches his chest. "Why?" he cries, "why?" "Your friend and his men routed my village. We killed him." Grégoire, hands full of blood, falls to his knees. "He lied to me. I never—" She dismounts,

*And he made a serpent of brass,
and put it upon a pole,
and it came to pass, that if
a serpent had bitten
any man, when he beheld
the serpent of brass, he lived.*

rushes to him. “Grégoire, say you betrayed me!” “Safara, I love you. We were to be so happy.” She shakes him. “Don’t die. No! What have I done?” She covers his face with kisses and hears. His head flops to one side. She unwraps a small silken scarf, takes a handful of manchi-neel seeds, stuff them into her mouth. She dies—her body caressing Grégoire’s from head to toe.

(Projector whirring. Film begins.). Now nude, Safara and Grégoire float in blackness. Their skin is lit by candle-glow. Their movements: rhythmic, porpoise-like. The pacing: slightly accelerated. Their bodies ripple together, suspended. The mood is one of vibrancy, slipperiness and grace. (Film ends.)