



Water Be a String

by Arran Robert Walshe

She told when she thought of Al-Andalus, she thought of water.
At the time I was horrified by the world around me. God I felt sick by
the feeling of it being twisted, by the unnatural, by the sense that
everything around me was becoming so god damn tight.

"But beauty, history, and art" she told me one night, "are made from that
friction, from that tightness."

"Think," she told me, "of the harmony we see in the world, of balance."
She wrapped her arms around me, and I could feel it.

In the mid-19th century a young architect named Owen Jones went to the Alhambra. Over weeks and months, and eventually years, he fell in love with the monument's lines, its forms, and its intersecting angles. So like any lover with an artistic eye, he drew them. For Owen, the consummate Orientalist, the Alhambra was the culmination of all technologies and practices of ornamentation. "To the artist and those provided with a mind to estimate the value of the beauty to which they give a life they repeated," he wrote of the Alhambra in his seminal *The Grammar of the Ornament*, "look and learn."

Jones believed that our human quest to be close to and to live within beauty could only be achieved through our mimetic attempts to copy nature, to bend it to our will but never to stray too far from its laws. Jones saw in the Alhambra an architectural Eden, an endless world to revel in, to study, to tease out its form and laws. He spent over a decade returning to Alhambra to trace its lines and revel in the study of it. Like Eden, he saw Alhambra as both the pinnacle of our past achievements, unrivaled in its sublimity, and the apex of our potential future.







Owen Jones' enduring masterpiece *The Grammar of the Ornament* arrived squarely amidst a mid-18th century boom in Moorish Revival architecture and style. His was one of many design and ornamentation books that were regularly pilfered by bootleggers, folded in to mass produced collections and sold on the street to artists and designers looking for new designs, new patterns, new forms to stitch, paint, and build. Owen's design adorned theaters, synagogues, and restaurants, and grand new buildings, harbingers of modernity. The designs of Alhambra become content, divorced for many from its form, its histories, and its place in our collective imagination.

Throughout the 19th century and into the 20th, these designs were taken up by the architects and designers challenged with building synagogues that both expressed the inherent spirituality and solemnity of a holy space, while eschewing the representational and iconic qualities of churches. When you visit these synagogues today, you are told a story of design, of form's liberation from its context. These collages are a small attempt at stitching those histories together again.

Still in her arms, my love then told me to look to those things that are no longer in balance, those things all akimbo."

She took out her guitar and plucked a few notes. "Look at this, it's just a bit of old bent wood."

"Twisted, wrenched, shaped."

"Then you take some strings, and stretch them across, so tight they'll break if you're careless."

"And you pluck, sometimes very hard, sometimes soft, but always with tension, and a little bit of pressure, but never too much. And from that you make music, and if you do it right it can be beautiful."

She played those notes, and they felt like water, and I fell in love.



leaves by Molly Crabapple