

The Fish-Eaters to Cambyses: A Reckoning

after Herodotus

Forced like animals onto haunches, hear this dirge –
camel teat a last mouth to the river.
Our tongues tanned hides,
flanks of bodies under brunt of nails.
Ichthyophagoi – our name the slap of feet in dust.
We who command the tongue and drink your tears.
Your bronzed face, a table to the sun;
your nose, the hook with which we fish.
Comrade bones in this desert:
coccyx, sternum, patella.
Our sons will remember when scaling their fish,
justice skinned, the roe styes under eyelids.
Piscine gazes in palms.
We are not emissaries but witnesses.

We wanted to kiss the Ethiopian king –
our sinews spent, violet-sweat.
We wanted our bodies to be unwritten,
the force of his hand on our shoulders.
The coffins cool and porcelain.
Honour vitrified, virilised among the first fruits.
The starved opulence of milk and boiled meat.
They mark their lives with firsts.

To the ends of the earth:
did you ever hold the nail
of your index finger to your arm,
measure the distance to flex
the noble carpal curve?
The beasts of burden stretching legs.
Hand/arm/finger/paw.
A fifth of the way: from the fold
of your wrist to the burnished mole.
The hooves in the ground
like the half-moons of fingernails.
The beasts sallow and revered

for slaughter. The men ate grass
and you ignored the gypsum of their bones.
Some would have given you their spit,
watching the salivary suds cool your brow.
At night they press their bodies together
and you are their lung.
They can find each other in the dark
only through tracing the helix:
a nail in the labyrinthine tunnel of the ear.
They kiss each earlobe they meet.

They draw lots: one in each ring of ten.
Twenty eyes, one hundred fingertips, ten tongues.
You dream like a Fish-Eater.
You see what the hollowed men have done,
their stomachs drums, rally them to Thebes.
Anthropophagoi. You must find a new skin.