

Sinai

Even that night when we first set out some of us were uncertain.
 I remember the air was thick like stifled crying, unsleeping,
 And the fearful houses shrank back, wanting us out of the city.
 We were distracted by the haste of it, grabbing at handfuls
 Of still-wet dough and Egyptian gold; untying and driving
 The drowsy cattle ahead. That night it felt like a dream,
 Now like a legend. The cattle are long dead, the gold an encumbrance.

After we'd walked for a day, our minds caught up with us, sweating.
 Some started to mention their beds and their rations, murmuring like locusts.
 So we told them the tricks of the Pharaoh, a man I'd never quite met;
 We remembered the sneers of the taskmasters, flickering into anger;
 Remembered picking straw to make their bricks every day -
 My hands took only a matter of weeks to unlearn that aching,
 Though my back never will now. Sleeping arrangements don't help.
 In those first weeks we accustomed ourselves to discomfort. The distance
 We walked ahead to piss diminished, even the women.
 Our country is the space that spreads within our sight lines.
 The patched up tents we pitch every night are our city.
 We once were the strangers; now we're the only humans in view.

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It was during this time that we first became acquainted with you.
 You: the fear and the hope, the carrot and the stick; the deliverer
 From out of slavery into the cage of the wild. You speak
 To us through our leaders, and through strange close signs of your own.
 Solitude has swallowed us as far as the world knows
 Now, we're entangled in the wilderness they say.
 Sure, the laws that govern nature govern us also,
 Certainly to a certain extent, they'd be right if they said that.
 But you make nature strange; your hand is as heavy
 On huge humps of land as it is on each slim soul.
 You drag the sun up, jerked by its ears in the morning,
 And push its head down under the black sea at night.
 You made the waters stand on their tiptoes around us, trembling.
 When it takes your fancy you fether the wildest thing.

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What government can fix itself to a people in motion?

Laws are as local as language, as the dust on our foot-soles.
 The temptation is to brush them off, to forget them.
 For our lives those days were half holiday half emergency -
 Flight falls between governments, and 'we'll settle when we get there'.

We have a leader. He is a shy and shuffling man,
 More comfortable herding his in-laws' sheep than leading a nation.
 All he has is a rod, some hope, and a clever brother
 Who can put things well when he hands on the bad news. Some hope.
 He comes back to us from his secret talks, face shining like water -
 A man like that you either mock or trust till your heart cracks.
 His ruling comes in sudden attacks, like the gasps of a sprinter,
 And to follow him we run to the rim of the wilderness; he
 Has his eyes always fixed on something beyond - on you.

You are our ruler's ruler; he can't stand between us and you.
 You crush kings like ants, and we choose to run along your finger.
 You make strange, elaborate commands; your attention to detail
 Leaves us edgy and yet sure there must be a plan.
 You concern yourself with bread, and the smallest folds of our bodies.
 Your hands, that roll thick waves of darkness over the land,
 Can flick the smallest insect into flight. Your eyes
 Are everywhere, looking back at us from one step ahead.

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We've never grown used to the wild; it changes its face every day,
 And you are the only one who holds the muzzle to its maw.
 We talk of the things that you've done and shown but our voices are too high.
 You rule us by fear and reward, one fear at a time.
 Millions of quails do make for a showy reveal, sure;
 We were grateful too, we split our sides with laughter.
 But, for all that, fear of hunger is instinct mapped
 Out in the blood like sand-paths, smoothed but never forgotten.
 So, however rapturous the reprieve, it remains.
 So, now these are my people, wild-eyed for water and meat.

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If we get there we'll eat sweet things and drink to delirium.
 If we get there we'll meet for meetings that go on for hours,
 And discuss the smallest points of statecraft until we're hoarse.
 If we get there I'll marry the prettiest girl in the nation
 And have hundreds of children, and they'll have a home to grow up in.

If we get there I'll like my oldest friends once again,
 And they will be my neighbours instead of my stinking tent-mates.
 This is what you lead us towards, like the one who promises
 Water to the thirsty child who trusts against fear.
 If we get there we'll all have places to go: one of us
 Will have a roomful of musical instruments and sing there;
 One of us will grow plants and get to the origin of things;
 One of us will have reams and reams of paper to write on.
 Our nation is built out of hope; its bricks are not made from straw
 But hope, hope traces the tracks that score our imagined cities.
 I'll be happy with a house or even a room,
 With a window through which I can look at the disparate stars.

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Back in Egypt we were equals in suffering slavery
 But now we see each other too clearly, and we see an order:
 There are those who walk at the front, us strong ones taking long strides,
 And those who fall behind as inevitably as daylight.
 Strong hands to grab fill bellies first; slow hands grasp air.
 We've seen the sun rise bloody; strained eyes watch for idolatry.
 Far off is the trivial luxury of equality.

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For there was a day when we broke our nation in half like a bone.
 They were up on the mountain with you, and just then it seemed like a joke,
 Grown men talking to clouds, so earnest, like children with shadows.
 Blue fire entered us that day; it burnt off belief
 And from there our minds took off like a swarm - as simple as that.
 They tell us that we have hope and it's you, you have promised;
 They make us obey and it's you, you are the threat, your anger.
 But what if the signs, the plagues, the smokes, the snakes, were delusion,
 Frightened credence and hope against hope in the wild? The Egyptians
 Too had their gods: they truly believed that they guarded the dead
 And coaxed out the crops. And - us or them, now - who lived in plenty?
 Their land is a gift, not a promise; meanwhile, we chase clouds.
 We did not want to live like children any longer;
 We wanted to leave our leaders behind, and the lie of your love.
 Instead, we thought, our god should be a palpable truth,
 Whatever god we need on our side to rule how we want.
 All in all, we were sick of their secret meeting on the mountain,
 And so we made a god of our own, thick-set and pleasing:
 A fat gold calf, born placid from the flames, hot into our hands.

We wanted a god our palms could contain, one we could control.
 The timid shepherd surged down from the mountain like lava, screaming,
 And you - you seethed us all that day in the desert, I know now;
 You cauterised our wound, and we half died, horrible, we hated you:
 We didn't choose you - but you chose us, for worse and for better.
 We tremble under your hand, but our only hope is to trust you.

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For all his shyness, our leader is sinewed with power you give him.
 We read your changes in his face; the staff in his hand
 Now stirs and hisses, now strikes out shining streams from the rock.
 But even his hands grow heavy with wielding the life of a nation,
 And when his father-in-law turned up out of nowhere, dragging
 The wife and kids in tow, he gaped for advice like a schoolboy.
 The old man told our leader he couldn't lead us alone,
 And so a chain of elders followed him up the mountain -
 That mountain, that time, when far below we were breaking and burning.
 When he came down things were different; he carried something that changed us -
 Sure, it was only a few rough stones, but they shored us up:
 It was your law, and it made us feel like a nation again.
 Your law has little of your mystery, your love of stagecraft.
 Your law is not high and mighty: it jostles among our oxen.
 Your law constrains us; it dictates our smallest actions; we see,
 Perhaps, the insistence of your finger as you scored it
 Into the stone, the desire you feel, they feel, to control
 A people prone to rebellion. But it helped to make things clear
 At a time when our hungry nation was ripping out its entrails.
 The streets of our promised cities have no flagstones but this,
 And this is the mortar that binds the bricks of our hope into buildings.

We have seen the mountains smoking and swaddled in darkness;
 Pillars of cloud and fire, and things that are there and then not there.
 So in some ways we liked that the laws were on stone; their weight and their dullness.
 They were something we could hold, without scorching our fingers.
 You've made an uneasy truce with us, and I think it will last.

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The first mark of the truce, the trembling trust on both sides, was this:
 You commanded our leader that we make you a home.
 All day he relayed your demands, concerning measurements, decor.
 You made us give up our treasures, the little girls rip out their earrings;
 And we did - we gave all we had, excited, absorbed,

Unstoppable, until you had more than you could use, too much.
Our hands were long accustomed to building the houses of others,
Egyptian bricks for the palace of the Pharaoh; and it was the same,
Except this time the beauty was ours as well as the labour.
When we'd built it it stood sulkily just outside the camp,
Wherever we went. It devoured our livestock, belching out fragrance.
Those who wish to talk with you frankly can go and stand in it
And you will appear as a cloud-mass, dimming our jewels that glisten
On the walls and the altar; they say you speak. I have not been.
But every day I see it glinting in my periphery,
Where it always will be, even if we walk across worlds.
Where there's a building one day a nation will follow, even
If it has to wander with us in the wild for millennia.

It was cruel, though, to make us build a house for a cloud; inexplicably
The intricacy of your interior design made me tearful.
I was thinking of my starlit room, the colours I'd paint it.

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And so we walked, and are walking still; the cloud goes with us,
Now fire, now fog, but always clearing our path up ahead.
Our nation is built out of nothing, a knot of slaves in the desert,
Lost in the sand-swirls. Just hopes, just fears, just rules, just ourselves -
And we've never seen ourselves more sharply than here in the wild.
What government can fix itself to a people in motion?
Only what we choose to carry with us on the journey,
And what we pick up on the way like snow rolling down from a mountain.
Only the hope we have in believing that we are a people
To fill a land we only half believe to be real.