

Borderlines

‘wandering creates the desert’ – Edmond Jabès

‘O how farre art thou gone from thy Country, not being driven away, but wandring of thine owne accord’ – Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*

‘If two bedouins know the same verses of the same poem, they never recite them in exactly the same way but change the original words and often whole verses’ – Alois Musil, *The Manners and Customs of the Rwala Bedouins*

The sky is blindfolded. A hostage tilts towards the earth blown flat. This morning, the air is strewn
 with signals: bloodshot surface effects,
 explosions on air causing
 silence on impact. September light
 vanishes like a letter in ash. The white blocks of the city register as blanks. The night hoods over
 and we watch the projections under covers like children –
 huddled in the square – the quartered body
 of the polis. There is no bridge
 to join us, to carry our food
 across distances walked by ankles traced in sand.
 But at night – cupped like an ear to the sky – the desert roars
 between us. Our radio signals beam nothing of this:

 the goat-herder’s song as an echo
 of the world. It flows through the landscape
 as a cosmic inheritance – a level plain of stones –
 white and nameless as the wild deer bounding
 over the edge of the prayer camps. The palm trees
 grow upwards, towards their roots – pressing deeper
 into warmer pockets of time –
 more saturated grains, preserved
 like alphabets in resin.

As the morning alights, the figures on the walls
 withdraw from their scenes, to wander at large
 through the susurrations
 of reeds, inscribing them
 as breaths.

*

Back in the city, the sunlight is changed for copper,
 wrinkled like parchment – flocks
 of grain to be burned
 by morning. We are torn
 away from the central pivot of the desert –
 the river-
 bank is a broken latch

for the heart. Our fortunes
 wheel through the air as dust, across
 oceans of dry lavender, as the sun casts discs
 of copper shadows on the ground.

*

This is the capital – the present state
 of blame. Live streams flow through our pockets
 like drains: black water in the rose-bush,
 olives preserved in a pigment
 defect. A bird's-eye-view
 provides a total aspect of the landscape:
 red lights overhead – the ambit, the precincts, the inner-
 city short circuited and fused with grenades
 drifting off course towards more central
 points of impact. Our bodies register

as infrared clusters, detected like stars.
 We must refuse these keys to paradise.
 The desert expanse is a gateway
 unclosed – and flies open to the touch
 of a lyre in the wind. Black eagles
 guide our herds to water, before
 the night turns inside-
 out like a cloak, and blankets a path
 for our footsteps, erased
 by morning.

*

Now sandstorms cloud us further away
 into patterns of disappearance: white cells rushing
 between lines of red ink – the corrector pen jolting
 its score against the walls. The soundtrack
 is music breaking up. White noise
 cascades down the dim hallway
 of the prisoner's cinema
 and turns the window blind.

The pilgrim's feet black out
 into sequences of shoreline
 cut to breaking point –
my body is a rag to be sewn to the earth

*

The polis lies scattered in frescoes
 of marble. The monumental arch

bends away from the sky, as the ground beneath us
 shifts like oil dropping
 from the roof of the amphitheatre.
 The stage is covered for
 executions, where the darkening tones
 of Russian orchestras hang in the air
 like smoke. The damage runs down
 to the edge of the Tigris – from the walls
 of the temple – shrapnel falling
 in the northern necropolis.

Blue pencilled photographs
 are strewn on the table: salt pits,
 float tanks, mosaics of bone. Intelligence
 is leaked offshore, and the radio
 disrupts its tones like heatwaves –
 hell cannons, broken
 spike fiddles, rasps
 in the voice –
where is your homeland?
 Grids

*

estimate losses. We sift
 through the layers of our houses for stones
 that once paved our steppes, and the dust inscribes
 our names as carvings: stags, deer, vessels
 of ewe milk preserved
 in permafrost. Overhead
 drones hem the air. The devil's tongue flickers
 at the back of our robes, as the ringing of our bells
 is muffled under fire.

Soon the sky's abrasions will uncover
 our steps – the harsh coronal
 display breaking over the Black Sea.
 But the bleared passage of the night
 enshrouds us like a tent. The beams
 cast by Sirius are clear paths
 for us, for our Scythian horses
 to break the tide like chalk.

*

At the edge of the border, our mothers lie
 in wait on the hillside – the green
 shades extending through the lost
 roots of shrubs. The first flowers in sight
 are a parabolic mirage. The image

breaks down auspiciously as birds
 flock back to the sky – to the bird’s-eye
 view. This morning, we whisper to each other,
 assembled in the square,
 and our bodies are scrawled with the colour
 of virtue. The wind decays, aspiring
 to feel the vital tensions between each
 body – each deep with reference –
 before the crimson field
 forces us deeper
 along the water-path – the desert
 contracting into the horizon. There

the distance is forestalled, to where we will be
 passing for a moment, suspended in the fog
 of the background, before the green eyes of love
 pull across the sky’s terrain, transferring us down
 to the walked-on path. The *Siraat* bridge
 is our true condition and the bells
 amass in clean pools
 of daylight.

*

This is a prayer. Cup your hands. The air
 is like pollen, and we follow that pattern
 naked and free-threshing. The corn dispersed
 by morning may leave us withdrawn. But tonight
 the field is open, and our figures glisten with water
 washing over discordant shards of glass – the city’s sirens,
 blockades of flowers, faded purple
 images of war. We disperse like music, wandering
 freely of our own accord, and our songs
 are charms against patterns of hurt – little ghinnawas
 to carry us across to some other place
 beyond the craters of dust abandoned on the landscape.
 Our true home escapes us. We are sewn
 to the threadbare carpet of the earth. But the horizon
 extends – is an entrance for us – and our eyes
 draw it closer, to the reach of our palms.