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.

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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.

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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.

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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*

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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.

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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.