

SINAI

desert fast and desert feast

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*for Makhad: Danny, Joan, Satish, Karan
the Class of March 2010
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THE JOURNEY

At Sharm-el-Sheikh, surrounded by fake green
there are more lawn sprinklers than you've ever seen
just to reassure the tourists that this
isn't really a desert. It's an oasis !

Our Bedouin driver knows better
in this brief excursion into the unreal world.
He knows that what you see
is as important as what you say.

The resort from the air: tiny white apartments
flanked by turquoise paddling pools...
It looks like child's play

And the plastic detritus as if left by an invisible wave
crowds the central reservation in the dust
but our eyes are on mountains
rising in a cloud of light

scored in petrified earth like dried clay
in a landscape where nothing is hidden

It all begins to fall away

Pylons, like frozen dalek dancers
breeze block shelters and lines of washing
the light slowly draining from the land
as the road empties with its vaguely familiar signs

Bored Egyptian guards as the road forks to Dahab
past caring about the enemy

then the signal goes
as we begin to fall quiet

already shedding a layer
closer to silence

The desert knows

There is another kind of life
beyond the road

...so that when we abruptly arrive
nowhere in the dark to find
an open backed pick-up and a 4x4
waiting to transfer us and our luggage

we plunge into the unknown across the sand
without a clue where we're going—even
the ghosts of previous tyretracks are misleading
as we swerve to the left or right as suddenly

accelerating, lurched forward, to stop
the wheels getting snagged...then racing downhill
as crazily like a wild drive home
from a pub that doesn't exist

drunk on pure mysterious darkness

until we see ahead a solitary white figure
stand in the pale emerging moonlight
by a tethered camel...and we're finally out of time.

FIRST SILENCE

Finally we all stop talking.
Soft moonlight on sand
beneath our hands and feet
and the silence, a soft suspended hiss
spreading to everything you can see
shadowed in the moonlight
beyond the other sound you realize
is the blood pumping in your ears...

and as you breathe into the softest hint of a breeze

this giant sleeping seal of rock
shouldering up beside us

everything here held in God's peace.

BEDOUIN TENT

Woven from the finest hessian
by the women in black bowed in burquas
only their eyes free in their slits—
recycled guyropes and smoothed tree limbs for poles
set in a big rectangle with cloth mats for a floor
with their bright coloured strips, Moroccan-style
at the threshold where you remove your shoes

and inside, round a fire set in a circle of flat stones
sitting on thin mattresses, we're together
not raised apart on chairs, but cross legged
at one in the unity of being human here
with nothing but our unpacked luggage
and only what our being can afford
by being in this pausing that is presence
where eyes come before words

and by the fire, candles in cut-off plastic bottles
half filled with sand (nothing is wasted)
and beside the blackened kettle full of *kark-aday*
poured into small glass tumblers on a tray
and a single acacia log smouldering like a big cigar

spelling the scarcity of wood, conserved
like water, food, petrol, everything
held for what it is when you have nothing
but what you actually need.

Out of the darkness and the sand like a miracle
the cry of *soup!* delicious green smooth
and rice yellowed with saffron
from a kitchen that's like a ruin with no roof
a wall against the wind where our barefoot hosts
chop and stir unseen as the women

bearing the blackened pots over yards of sand
sitting to one side as we circle the fire
later on when we're gone surrounding its embers
with a meditation where cigarette follows cigarette
sucked in over the emptiness of the breath.

DESERT STARS

Not overlarge, flickering and dancing like tinsel lights
in your fantasy of what they would be like
you realize is mostly air pollution,
but still bright, pellucid as you've never seen them
precise to the naked eye
as acupuncture points, incised
visible, mappable (as they were to us)
and filling the dark crystalline sky
in all the directions of your neck
craned and tilted as you lie back
between two rocks on a sleeping bag;

and if all their light reaching us now
left when we were together then
we're no less apart across all these miles, only held
with an intention we can't fully see
until it shines in our hearts and eyes
and all we're here to be.

SECOND SILENCE

Out of the noonday heat under a rocky overhang
we line up under to squat, in the relative cool
as the silence takes us again, its soft sibilance
become the sea sounding in your ears
the ancient sea that filled
all these wadis and gulleys
before the hills and cliffs were scraped to stone...

and in the stillness now, the desert
stealing up like a snake hissing close
suffusing your chest as your eyes begin to close...

DESERT VAGINA

Open, wide open in the rock
poised above the dry hot noonday wadi
half hidden above eye level where you have to climb
where it wrinkles and cracks—

and there's her cave
open, breathtaking, unashamed

heart-shaped

the size of a man
in the inner fluted folds of her flesh
sketched between sand-brown and red ochre
reaching back into the womb of the cliff
beyond all contradiction—

so all you can do is bow
wordlessly asking for rebirth as you enter
where heart and sex are one again...

and slowly turning

to re-emerge into the light
in the midst of all your self-conscious smiling
ask yourself: how do you want to be now ?

HOW TO RIDE A CAMEL

Having straddled the saddle, and legs splayed
been hoisted up vertical—
as he or she (is it ?) begins to move, and you get
tipped forward into your pelvis
tempted to grip on with your legs—
don't do it !

This is where riding is dancing instead
Hang on to the pommel, yes
but for the rest
slip gently into your lower back
letting your spine be liquid
and move as she (he) moves

swaying to that rhythm
that is camel step, all day
across the open desert plain—then, hey
you could even take the reins.

CATHEDRAL OF THE BREAST

1.

First glimpsed in the moonlight
under the cliff's hollowed overhang
impossibly, improbably, this
sand-smooth wind-sculpted
—in a precise wind tunnel location—
the whispered sand grains spiralling
into a perfect full breast
topped by a nipple of rock
four foot by three

and in its cathedral
nave, altar and font

2.

You call it the Cathedral of the Breast
this one woman naked church
where you spent your fasting days
(and mostly naked)

It's a climb up the dune from camp
past a half way clump of broom

Breast in delicious early sun
(breast in all lights and seasons)
and the cavity behind it
a wall to lean against with its interior
so like peeling plaster
in this vast ancient niche

and above, at the hill mountain's peak
the eyes of an eagle, beak
worn smooth, filed by wind
but the eyes forever seeing.

3.

A naked man closens
under his few remaining clothes.

He pauses at the threshold
then makes his way round, making sure
to leave her shape untrodden.

He leans against the hollowed rock
slowly surrendering all inward striving
into being held from behind
deeply as his spine can release
falling softly backwards into time
resting his neck on its effortless
exact pillar of stone.

He rests his whole being in creation
that is the createdness inside each cell of him
held by an eternal lover
he never knew he had
and never thought he knew.

A little later he leans forward
and spreads his arms lying
his cheek pillowed against her.

*Now rest and feed from the breast,
rest and suck to your heart's content.*

4.

He could rest for hours, for days even
and can for as long as he needs to
but another voice is calling him
down to the rocks below
into the sun and the wide open wadi
where there's no visible form
and the wind blows

*It says I am the Father
and you are my son. Will you come ?*

IN THE SILENCE

1.

We gather at the cliff's edge
wrapped in coats or blankets.
Cool dawn light. Pink clouds rising
over the wadi, over the ancient cracked hills.

This fasting now, entering silence
inside our bodies and all we can see
having only this.

And you are here invisibly
as only your soul can be
to spur me gently on

And when I ask in Your Name
for the best we can be
finding each other again

a bird directly ahead
following the line of the cliff's edge
its wingbeats breaking the silence

letting it be in freedom.

2.

She's walking over the wadi below
all the way to her chosen place
like an altar under its table of rock—
sleeping bag draped over her shoulder,
in side profile

at this distance, like some marvellous magical horse.

3.

How to be with the time
what to do when there is nothing to do
and nowhere to go but here: when the hours
expand like inflated air with no limit
but the sun's orbit in a cloudless sky
inching its way around the horizon
your only punctuation, these signs of water
your only structure, this unfolding moment
your only company, your own acceptance
of loneliness transformed into intuiting a way.

4.

Sweet Sinai silence, your soft hiss
as if of wind and sand, but invisible
and intangible, high in the inner ear;
surf braking on an unknown shore
closer to you than your own hand;
and as the morning sun warms your skin
penetrating every pore: the wind
still gently cool and soothing
the flies barely beginning
above the deep silence under it all.

5.

There is only one answer to fear
and it's this: *anything could happen anyway*
regardless of your anxiety—
in spite of you, above you, and beyond you
(remember the way you both first magically met)
and only if you can surrender to that
will you ever have a moment's peace.

There is no other way, it means
you have to believe.

6.

Two stories side by side:
the ego's bitter narration
based on cynical explanation
reduced to selfish motivation

and the Self's—initiation
threshold, invitation, expansion
when I invite you to Love
as you invite me to Freedom

and the tables at the feast
are trying to meet.

7.

See how I am holding you now you say
in this beautiful morning sun
with a full breast of sand beside me
and the view down to the wadi below
still in exquisite etched brown shadow...

and all is well as it can only be now
there is nowhere else where you can be free
outside of this Yes in your body.

8.

And it's yes to me—not someone else's idea
about how I should be in this precious time.

The camel's attenuated growling snort
waking me to where my No is
in the heart of freedom

And what it means to step outside
the ideology and the tribe
and be this I

crossing the wadi just in time
in the deepening gold evening light
to climb into an alcove in the cliff

for long enough to pray
as the sun silhouettes these jagged high worn faces
*find me here as only I can be
stripped to myself in this human body
speaking the truth of its need.*

9.

Where the thin path among cliff-tumbled stones
under its towering overhang reaches its edge:
a flat boulder you crouch down on
to step into a gap between the rocks
lowering yourself down these handmade steps

into its wind-shielded opening
a shallow grave open to the sky
its curved weathered sandstone walls filled
with miniature alcoves and recesses
bordered by thin stalactites...

A sleeping bag in a thin mat stretches the length
before more rough steps down to the open edge
where my night time visitor will rustle and climb
sensing food through layers of tin foil and plastic
while its occupant secretly sickens unto death
rushing out among the rocks to defecate
the cold wind wrapping round his legs.

10.

A glimpse of a desert father
spelling out the name 'Aloysius'
a white patrician face in profile...

'Submit to the will of the father': what does it mean ?
*To go into the direction of Self, he says
Self and strength. And from within your own freedom*

when I can choose to surrender to be.

11.

Allowing the Self to speak...alive to its whispers
that bird's cliff-edge flight—
the sound of a bucket put down
you walking far down slowly in the light
picking your way over the cracked paving...

the call of the desert clarified
to be naked to this

and then sitting, back against the ancient cliff
becoming the silence in the silent mind
expanding slowly becoming the sky

when a fluttering suddenly in front of my face
eyes filled with it, black against the light
streaked in gold... for long enough to see

how it spells freedom to chrysalis me.

12.

Stand in strength with the father
But I don't feel strong
Just give your attention to me
How ?
By giving me your senses

Asnd not giving them to a woman all the time
however beautiful she is, because
it means my awareness is leaving me

empty with longing.

Empty of you.

13.

'Doing one thing at a time'
is how it's described in Zen
—as empowered action.
Sit up, drink water.

Prepare portable hand mirror.
Clean hands, lick fingers clean of sand.
Kneel. Undo lens case.
Peer into mirror, arse in the air.
Insert lens free of sand.
Blink. Try again.
Try the other eye.
Look around you.
How does it feel ?
Suncream, clothing. Sunhat, head torch.
Toothbrush. Mouthwash. Water store. Loo roll.
The essentials are everywhere
dusted by silica
saying *be with me now*.

14.

No strength at all
and it's there we descend
down sand slope in shelving rock
step by step to stand on the valley floor
suddenly unable to go on
(the sick bug biting, draining
every last ounce) and feeling
for just a bit of shade out of the sun
to crawl in under this overhang
and die quietly...letting go at last

and all of it to be brought this low
into the foundations of surrender
eye-level to sand: to stir, turn
and see these tiny white open flowers
blossoming out of nothing
but the vaguest memory of rain
and to see
that's why I came.

15.

Where water gushes forth
where's that ? No rod, no rock
to strike...and as hard to feel
held in all this dryness, so dry—

until you see the signs are small
and the desert's secret life
as discreet as it is vast...
then you can know it all.

16.

Death calls.

There among the sandstone stalactites
alcoves and holes in the shelving rock
as your eyes wander, can you see him ?
Staring eye sockets and nose, domed forehead
and his mouth, well, grinning !

As unmistakable as his meaning
Don't take all this too seriously
you know, I didn't either
and look where it got me...

17.

After the Dark Night comes the morning
after every inch of self-care
the blanket folded against the cliff
vaulting into the blue above, and You
all around me everywhere as light
and soft, not burning if I could
just breathe that in and let it be
the balm it is with nothing to do
but be the light...

if only I could.

18.

So You show me...from far beyond my hands
and all my mind can reach

as I walk back unexpectedly to my cell...

this single tiny something floating down
and flickering alive on the sandy floor, as I stoop
a miniature wingfeather

just like the one I sent you before leaving
returning as if at last from you
(and in your own self and darker colour)

as if to say *I am with you*—beyond all my disbelief
'to help you on your way today'
having proved the existence of grace.

19.

The wadi in light opening up like a cloudscape
into its furthest reaches between its craggy cracked
hill mounds and mountains

after this little heart valley you show me
with its holding
its red and white fragments all over
the canvas of the ground...
and the artifacts you'd made

for each other in the silence, as signs
this heart of pebbles enclosing sand
still intact, only its side wall breached
still breathing the desert air

to see what love can make, even in privation
and because of it—the heart breathing in
then expanding all over the golden evening sky

with its silent trumpet of release and joy.

20.

Sensing you out there in the dark
for this last night under your lid of stone
I light this candle in its sawn-off bottle
and place it up on the parapet edge

One light in all the wilderness dark
until with a white flickering, your torch answers !
Across half a mile—and again
and I know you know that I know

and light to light, we're smiling
as the darkness becomes your face, friend
in my mind as I am in yours
as the full moon rises, calling us

to dream in the mystery again.

SANDBATH

No water, no mirror
but sand—imagine. Can you ?
Washing yourself in sand ?

Not wet sand or estuary mud
but the finest hourglass silica
running free in your hands.

Rub it on your skin and discover
it's perfect—smoothly abrasive, scaling
all your skin needs to shed

from neck to feet, beginning
so intimate a thing, then
to shed your clothes in the sun

and move from toes to ankle
to shin, calves and thigh
as the sand falls away unscathed

unpolluted by suds or discoloured water
evaporating its working in the sun
its tiny particles of shaving

even your chest hair, rubbed free
clings on to none of it
falling back near the sheltering cliff

and then pour this
delicious warm herbal mixture
as an after-rinse gleaming in the sun

as it oils down over you
a miracle out of a Schweppes bottle
celebrating your nakedness

shadow-flung in a single
unbroken line—your body
naked and free, all one, complete

with the rock and the sand, and
just then...as you stand to dry

a butterfly comes

your salutation: drifting, flitting
among these tiny white flowers
free as necessity, free as the day.

DESERT STONES

Creamy white quartz, smoothed to a sheen. Precious wadi pearls.

White sandstone balls, constantly rolled like dough dusted in silica: in all sizes from plump cherry to tennis ball.

Red mauve terracotta and gold ochre sand-hand painted cave token.

A heart of gold, out of the blue, glancing down: deep cut sandstone with an imperial yellow topping.

A jawbone of ironstone, a blunt forgotten instrument (so many other skulls long since turned to dust).

Quartz superglued by heat to sandstone, a tiny summit of illumination.

A triangle of white silica topped with menstrual red ochre.

A snapped off meteorite fragment with its cold creased metallic skin, and white crystal flesh like coconut.

A granite chip that is salmon pink and silica white everywhere containing the seeds of its own dissolution.

A fragment of what could have been pottery but never was.

A heat-basted silica heart like an oyster.

A stone of sand, variegated with light and dark bands, and so sunbaked it crumbles to the touch like a biscuit.

Top of the mountain: a flat piece of limestone from the ancient seabed at 900m that is a house with one window.

Broken from the underlayer, the wadi within the wadi, the hidden foundations: pale mauve streaked under white with a single gold painted line, and so light to hold it only weighs of air.

WILDERNESS WALK

After all this silence
we fill the wilderness with our stories
we fill the sun-baked emptiness as we walk now
leaving the camp behind,
the tent stripped of its mats gone on ahead
as we wander in home valley vastness
our precious lives etched in their colours
hovering hummingbird-bright
as the beach-like sand absorbs our steps

And behind us, briefly cruising, a jeep
white-dwarfed under the ancient cliff
disgorges its transient visitors
for their tiny instant of time
before it revvs on soundlessly by...

and we move on under craggy cracked cliffs
suspended in their time of sand
slow as erosion, built for millennia
into the farthest reaches of our spirit
that can conceive of being here this long
being alive this long, in any dimension
stretching our imagining to breaking...

for as long as they wandered, and we do
across the open plain where distance retreats
and the mountain you're reaching towards
remains the same, as in a dream of walking
where you move like a mime artist on the spot
and the cliffs that tower above us are as impassive
with their massive featureless heads
where nothing matters to the eagle but the view

and I pray for us, so fragile down below
with this chalk scratched triangle
encasing its round white stone
that we may find the love that's holding us
again so we can let go

As we step onto the Broken Plain
where the orange-red scree fragments spread
the hills ahead as if quarry-blasted with explosions
mirrored by the mottled cloud-sky

and the kneeling waiting camels gift our feet
raised into their swinging siesta step;
and Marbruk, who knows this way so well
tolerates his temporary janitor whose name
keeps slipping away like sand grains;
but the barefoot Bedouin boy by his side
shall pass through the eye of the needle
because he leads his camel kindly

As you guide us on foot into Asteroid Valley
where these frozen star-flung fragments landed
their wrinkled metallic skin still cool to the touch
their white crystal inner flesh like coconut
as other as only the universe can be
all around this tiny vast domain
where wilderness planets weave without end
and we carry its testimony

out to where this peeled rock phallus raises to the sky
without apology, just being as we are
in our primordial nature as the blood
floods us as created man and woman
surviving all these hundreds of thousands of years
by nothing less definite

and on the plain, just the sketch of a path
a thin ribbon in the emptiness
as we walk with our stories and our silence
and for a moment in the midst of your telling
glancing up at you ahead, in your walking
on in the swaying of your camel
just floating timeless in your motion
a mirage imprinted on the air
where you can't tell what day or year it is

the desert hills ahead folded into the blue
the late sun streaming over the sand
almost white in the light
among the footprints and the camel prints side by side;

and the sun as it will be setting, poised
a huge translucent amber balloon of light
between the ridges and the dunes;

and the moon rising, vertically as bright
full as my whispered aching for you
where the tyre tracks lead out into the midnight...

the pitted rocks full of their own secrets
the camels resting in their silhouettes
eight bodies breathing in line in the nomad tent.

BARAKA

A dune reaches nearly half way from the plain
massed against the mountain side
breaking into clear dry boulders for hands and feet.
And climbing means now in the given time
to shed your lunar melancholy, perhaps
and the sickness and doubt of the days
to reach for the sun.

Dawn our calling with no breakfast
the pure opposite of rest
lungfuls of air for the dune
on this ascent to the old seabed.

And the climbing is easy, no vertical walls
or dizzying drops, just the present moment
of touching the mountain's body
holding us as nearly as it can
in the dry warm stillness as we wind round.
And if this was Your Body ? I'd say it is.

The summit up ahead above scree
in its once submerged limestone high and dry
as an ark...for us to lie down on dreaming
where our breath meets the sky
remembering our aquatic origin.

How many millennia has it been ?
And our bodies still remember
the way our bones sing to the desert silence.

We lie around gladly stranded
before standing as we are now
to face Saudi Arabia
Sinai veiled in a blue mist
Cairo across that parallel ridge
Jerusalem beyond the sun
where the Promised Land was a dream
of Your Kingdom within.

Eden within, earth heart
where our hearts return
from all our mind's wandering.

Forty years or centuries.

And now in this moment of loving
to want you here—
arrowbright across the miles
to where you might be waking
as we did on our new day's morning.

Dawn our eyes, our traveller's eyes
seeing us as always for the first time
and the last time in this moment
expanding in all directions
with more than can ever be held
holding us in its life
become a traveller's tale.

And here and now beyond all distance
(where the desert is beyond distance)
I stand in the consciousness that can stretch
forever surpassing itself, like this view
which is why we climb mountains
to come down with a more generous truth.

ADUDA DUNE

Trudging up to where the line
is as crisp as on a folded sheet, rippled
in its wave-scales of sand-sea moving
heaped into this

three hundred foot tsunami
poised above the granite it has
as unbelievably come from
as hard as it is soft—
dark as this is light—
craggy black spread ranging below

And all you can do
is stand in wonder waiting to let go
down its ski-less slope
walking, running, rolling as you wish
as you untie your boots
on this last threshold
of all your being
offered to lightness and air
freedom and laughter
to be reborn like this
like a second chance

You wait for your moment.
You step out

and as one foot lifts and softly ignites after the other
in a sole-kissed sliding slalom all the way down

you dance

coda: *'Everything returns to desert sleep'*

Everything returns to desert sleep
the bedouin to a secret place to die
the camel, after years of service, released
left to wander at will; and as you close your eyes
in afternoon weariness and lie down
where the sand takes you as the hills do
in their skeletal embrace, *I know you*
they say without words or need of them
in the silence that knows what it is;
and beneath our departing plane now
as you keen your eyes through its window-slit
the desert a dream under the dusky gold light
folded back into the contours of its mysteries
wadi after nameless wadi, hill, mountain
beyond wherever you thought you were
where you also have left no trace behind.

Jay Ramsay
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