

A Change of Sky

caelum non animus mutant qui trans mare currunt (To travel
across the sea bring a change of sky, not of soul)

Horace

Bystander-slack, all aplomb and delicious exemption,
I'm a benchful of pricey sprawl outside the kibbutz hotel,
awaiting the bus to Masada, made capital-g glorious by mass suicide in 73 CE.
Far down a slope of drone-prowled sand scabbed with outcrops, a sea—
yes, the Dead one—
flares back at the sky like a sheet of pitted steel.
Turns out I *like* my vistas cleansed enough for, say,
phylacteried zealots and phalanxed legionaries to suffer just as superbly
as a good-kitschy network miniseries, *circa* 1980, could imagine them.
It's simpler that way, like not listening.
Meantime, shadows creep like wet ink beneath olive-drab scrub
while a hot hush, as between blows,
clots in the burdened air.

All at once I un-slump: across the road stands an ibex, too real to be random,
horns like flourished sabers, outthrust pharaoh's beard, hoofs of battered onyx.
It surveys the façade, side-eyes me curtly, then clops over the hot frontier—
if a driveway counts as a frontier—
and in among pool-blockading and palm-surveilled bungalows, planted
where olive trees and flocks of sheep once belonged
to people who don't belong here anymore.
I look around: no one to witness it step through that rent in the probable
which has, just like *that*,
zipped shut behind its quickening trot.

Whatever it is I feel stands me up, god *damn* it,
fierce as a prophet for a good scourging by some truths:
mass immiseration, a carceral shadow-state,
dark-age atavisms thickly naced in digital frivolity,
the whole hypertrophied apparatus of a wartime imperium
still lubricated by its founding crimes, but soon—
too soon—
I hear the heave and grind of my bus lurching up the switchbacks.
Any minute now, the doors will open with a hiss and a clunk,
a gush of air conditioning and Mid-Atlantic English will blur the desert glare,
and in a candy-hued touchscreen glow that soothes like home
I'll sit where the look no one gives me proves I still belong.

Going with the Flow

If flux once locks its theme to things—
the framing exit dream's
self-aware same-bed reawakening,
one abruptly sulfur gingko
the cue for a further August's undoing,
a slow soft rinse of rain
to aid the sidewalk's sloughing
off of chalked-on hopscotch lanes—
good luck dodging the frivolity it brings.
Things end, things end, it says,
it's just what they do.
Oh I know, you reply
smiling at nothing,
me, too.

A Very Short Trip to a Very Dark Place

I

Past midnight they drive
 down a back road,
unpaved, unlit,
 towards nowhere they know.
Where the highbeams push
 the woods divide,
then shoulder in close
 around and behind.
They've left their city
 cloaked in a blaze
that cottons its sky
 like breath on a pane,
for this least-peopled place
 in a thousand miles,
their blind on a starfield
 no wastelight will hide.
He parks in a clearing,
 she pockets her phone,
the engine stops humming,
 the dashboard dims down,
and night in that instant
 ambushes them
with the truth of what passes
 for darkness back home.

II

Where the simmering wake
 of the Milky Way floats,
a gold like San Marco's
 in a blue like Van Gogh's
limns without lightening
 the opaque uncolor
that joins their silhouettes;
 then a noise, and it's over.
That was close. . . Something's coming. . .
 They know that we're here!
"Spectacular." "It is."
 "So we'll go then?" "Sure."

He slews the car round,
 she maps a way back,
the tires spew gravel,
 thank god they'd got gas.
All down the highway
 it's aftermath and laughter,
regret-slash-relief
 they didn't stay longer,
but no words just yet
 for what they imagined
stalking through a light
 that illumines nothing.

Trust Me, I've Done This Before

To feel at each step
that fang of glass
lancing deep

through soft sole flesh,
probing for bone
as membranes yield,

stringlets of pain
stitching toes to heel,
and the flinch-faced walk

inflicted by some-
thing somebody broke,
must be to blame

if I of all people
sit still for your scalpel.

In the Ruins of a Tyrant's Palace

1.

Leering like some grim old satyr, the porter
sallies from his lodge's nicotine-ochre fug
to intercept your sauntering-by. *Now money.*
No map. Close soon. Paid, he resumes his morning
gameshows and *grappa*, while that blotched, forbidding face
lingers like the film (or was it TV?) avatar
of him who built this pile and at whose death
it burned, to endure sullenly as plundered hulk,
quarry for drystone, midden, picturesque view and,
these days, attraction.

2.

Sinkpipe guardrails, crudely
cemented-in, narrowly sluice tourists through
a fractured arch, past doorways agape to the sky
or gagged with rubble, around a lichenous portico
caging a fountain's rust-caked stump, then through
to a vast bare hall where, beneath its then-unpunctured
roof, favorites preened in the fierce mood-field emitted
from its daised far end. Sunbeams drop and scatter
like shrapnel across bald pavingstones asizzle
in the dust of your passing. Off dank corridors, notched
with a pantheon of purged niches, room implicates room,
husked of all residue but his: blasphemous rants
scudding the bowed heads of trembling nobles, rituals
bizarre and defiling, annihilations roughed out
over maps noded like synapses. From this wrecked terrace
fatuous whims flurried forth to harry the wits
of a war-sick people; down these walls, continents
voided their curses like filthy pelting rain.

3.

In a poem,
the rustle of crumbling tile might summon a hush
as at his approach; the kite's muffled caw, a flinch
as at the scrape of his grindstone voice. But you know
you know better. So scavenge a chunk of brick

IN THE RUINS OF A TYRANT'S PALACE

Page 2, continue stanza

for your desk, then pause for a last look over the cliff
whence were hurled,
 shrieking,
 those who displeased. Up here,
the cadence of waves whitening against the rocks
measures another tide unheard, and the white,
chevron-winged seabirds wheel and sweep for their prey
through the soundlessness of distance, as sundering as that
of fear.