

CROSSING

the Sa'ila, a dry riverbed in Old Sana'a

This morning the riverbed, dry since my arrival,
sparkles with blue water bottles
and plastic bags the hue of coral.

Downstream, Japanese pickups sink into dust
beneath pyramids of tinder,
each load enough to brown a week of bread.

A flock of fat-tailed sheep lip leafless stems
while their shepherd hawks hides,
brethren of his own matted coat.

A boy with neither pants nor sandals
pees into the ravine before wandering
back to the *souq*, where truck horns vie

for position, forward the only direction.

Likewise I enter, accepting greetings
from a trachea hanging over the brim

of a gutbucket balanced on a matron's veiled head.

Morning of goodness, it nods,
as I stumble over yesterday's hooves strewn about;

morning of fragrance, it nods, as I smell sheep livers
cursing from vats of exhausted oil.

To make a living, all it takes is a word

and the lungs to wield it. Let mine answer why

I am in this life so far from my own,
why I enter every day without need to buy.

["Crossing" was previously published in *Al-Masar*]

JIHANA

for Jamie

The grenade the tribe
lobbed into your compound
was for your landlord,
not you. After all, you
will be gone in a year, maybe two.

When glass rained in,
no one was home
but the landlord's wife.
It was she who shuddered
all night on the kitchen floor,

wailing her husband
had abandoned her and lied
that everything was settled, fine.
Remember the nurse
who converted, married

a local man whose pistol
prayed harder than he.
She looked for faith,
but found his outlaw town.
Nevertheless, she embraced it.

Besides grapes and guns,
the *souq* is lined with trucks
full of contraband.
We have learned how to haggle,
how to hide what is precious:

a private chamber, the face
we love within, the unexpected.
Tonight in Jihana, under lights
garlanded between buildings,
a family will work a man

into its life like a dance
with knives, like cousins
standing guard outside,
firing their rifles
at an unpredictable sky.

[“Jihana” was previously published in *Rag Mag* .]

REQUIEM FOR AL-MOCHA

for Jenny

Long gone the coffee, the storehouses
reeking of cinnamon, saffron, incense.
We walk the barren coast as clouds
crash and try to rain salt. They can't.

For 300 years, brick has been sinking,
rows of black stones askew in grit,
houses of dead merchants reduced
to rafters gray goats clitter across.

Minaret or lighthouse, rubble is rubble,
the barber reasons, swigging smuggled whiskey
in his shop's solitary chair. Ships
bring him more bottles than heads.

Every night, the landlady sleepwalks
up the stairs, stands in your doorway,
stares out from beneath the yellow bulb.
Her family escaped, but she's afraid to hate.

Even babies born dry and hard as dolls
fight for this life. Perhaps the placentas
mothers bury in sand do bring luck.
Luck of your hands, of any history at all.

["Requiem for Al-Mocha" was originally published in *River Styx*.]

MALARIAL

A boy sits beside me, watching the ebb
and flow of my face. Arabic words bob
along the surface, an alien accent:

'*ammi* '*atoora* *Al-Hudaydah*
as cheap amber perfume moistens my wrist.

Minutes ago, days ago, the sea was silenced
by a scream. A baked salt plain cracked
beneath my feet as I followed fishermen
walking somewhere home,
stalked a small mosque onto the horizon.

A man plods toward me, his hard toes
separating, sinking like a turtle's into dunes.
He brings water from palm groves, warm juice.
Reminiscent of peach and pine, mango
is my own pungent past.

On the beach, an old man hacks melons open,
sings wedding songs. Look: sunset, fishermen
walking back on water, carrying streamers
of dangling fish. They've come to devour
sweet red flesh.

No reason to remember names, places.
Only the nectarous juice running down
the brown cords of their arms, the fever
their foreheads press into damp sand
for the God who brought them back.

["Malarial" was originally published in *River Styx*.]

SINCE YOU LEFT AL-HUDAYDAH

for Wayne

Tea at the Borg Terrace still comes slow as sleep,
briny, in china from a defunct inn. I can still sit for hours
watching couples stroll below, in People's Garden,
shifting like chess pieces over the lawn
in their long white and black gowns.

I spent the morning searching
for the coldest mango juice in town, an excuse
to languish in rooms with frantic ceiling fans.
Where I finally found it, the proprietor's left eye
bulged red. I wonder if you'd searched too,
found both eye and juice.

In the market, I tried to shoot
the tiers of displayed fruits, the most
colors I've seen that weren't Somali clothes.
But from the middle stall a broken voice said no,
no photos.

A woman you knew claimed a bright green line
lingers on the horizon after sunset
as if the sea would allow the submerged orb
one final bleary glow. On relentlessly hot nights,
she entered the rooms of sleeping men,
and explained. On those nights, you dreamed
of blue foxes eating their young.

I remember your daily trips to the post office,
the wilted envelopes from home. After reading them,
you floated whatever they held in the tepid waves
until shadows grew bold beneath your feet.
How far away love has remained.

["Since You Left Al-Hudaydah" was originally published in *Red Weather*.]

EMBRACE

Through wood shutters
the world hums and buzzes.
The tall houses spill

many secrets: a toddler
howling through bars
after a mother's cuff,

an aluminum lid
slammed onto its kettle,
an old man and an old woman

arguing loud, without teeth,
a girl scowling laundry
onto a roof clothesline.

Leaving my bedroom's
whitewashed walls
and alabaster windows,

I walk through the Old City
to the university.
On the street I am called

Nasrani, Almani, jusoos,
though I am neither Christian,
German, nor spy.

Before class, my student Marwan
tells me his dream:
I saw you, my teacher,

and you were Muslim,
he says, handing me pamphlets
rife with misspellings.

Last night, who worried more
about my eternity than he?
Like this, I fall in love

with everyone, every mud wall
built to show me away,
with the fruit *souq*'s pugilism of pits and peels,

with the afternoon confidence
of white gowns, and the faith
that unlatches every gate.

WHAT KEEPS US

for Joyce

Consider the foreigners before us,
the Slav who doctored the final imam deep
within the city wall. Beyond, no centuries,
no shadows, nothing. The sun fell and rose.

Mere decades later, the city explodes,
clouds of white taxi vans waiting for seconds
to tick away in the traffic soldier's gun,
for lights to flinch before giving up green.

At the corner of Zubeiry and Ring, legless beggars
scuff between cars. A battered wheelbarrow
bears a fragile hag, small enough to be a newborn,
buried under rags and wool batting.

I was glad you took my top-floor apartment, though I miss
watching hawks spiral down out of arid lavender
to roost in eucalyptus and pine spires, the cadre
of black weather charging in from Haraz.

Surely you make better use of the moon,
albeit crescent. These days, when disappointment
and love eclipse daily, I leave celestial bodies
to God. And I've discovered

I can sleep anywhere: on sand dunes
beyond unnamed fishing villages,
on dirt roofs six stories above the city of Shem,
on metal airport benches from Denver to Cairo.

If I call myself coyote, you'll know I mean
someone who knows he won't be alone forever.
Like your grandmother in Dakota, we know
the good sense of grain, the needlessness to utter love.

["What Keeps Us" was originally published in *Red Weather*:]