Listening is Made for the Ashen Sky: Four Poems

Deema Shehabi

*The Glistening*

There are mountains
that savor the sun at the end of day,
a sun drawn from the blurred bludgeoned
belly of the East,
spilling bleeding streaks of exile
across the rocks.

There are mountains
that breathe the white light of autumn
into hospitals
where the comfort of swollen strangers
is a reunion with love.

In the dark, worn-out night,
mountains drip secret layers of perfumed mist
into the cheeks of young girls
and the moon is a solitary man
who waits in anguish
for the unveiling of violet courtyards
hidden just beneath the mountain tops.

Restless breathing mountains of the East,
enclosed in swells of desert light
tumble down, like moving hymns
into the waiting lips of occupied people
creating the giant hush
of an earthen resistance.

Bountiful mountains of the West
hum softly into blue slumber
and rise past the valleys strewn
with the roots of wide-eyed children
creating the deep gnawing of love,
a love which makes you want to leave your skin behind.

And where is that mountain
the prophet prayed for
to separate Mecca from its enemies,
that yellow mountain, face of black,
meteor of heaven?
I want to find that mountain
that will fold us inward slowly, that infinitely laboring
bald, beautiful mountain,
enemy of melancholy, ally of life
glistening darkly
in silence.
Blue

The breeze that came down from over the hills was no longer…

Begin with your last gaze on the morning of your first departure, your boyhood room in the dawn light, you combing you hair and staring out the window at the sunken city of Jaffa, Bride of the Sea.

There’s the map composed on a white napkin that you hand to your children—walk six blocks back from the sea—the house later found behind a façade of ancient sepia, and Donna says “This must be Tata’s house.”

Only in your dreams does your trembling return. You say the sea will no longer cast its veined net of blue on a city of absent inhabitants.

Before we cross the bridge, you tell me of Omar’s rapturous mythic heart—galloping in silence.

“When we first arrived at the dock, the gray-blue waves were large hills that opened to a thrumming sky, the sea swallowing the small boat, the big boat beckoning, but the sea would not take us across to Lebanon that day; its secret voice kept crying out to me: Freedom is land.”

“Let’s go to Nablus,” Hind said, “There’s a house there…”

Begin again with the Tennessee Walking Horse. She rode it regally at Little Daddy’s Texas ranch, her back straight, her golden hair like an emissary of no known sun, her blue eyes unlike Mediterranean blue.

“I loved her since with all the darkness of my veins. Before I bought her a horse, I remember how I sold cigarettes in the streets of Nablus. I bought Hind her first bra, and when I sold an entire pack, we ate lamb instead of vegetables.”

On the morning of your first departure, loudspeakers blared news of pregnant women with bayoneted bellies, and the dawn was no longer dawn, and the breeze was no longer.

“Does that man with the restaurant on the water still serve fried fish with lousy tahini?”

Omar sobs on the bus back to Jordan. The settlements gallop towards him; from over the hills, he feels a choking. Donna says the blue of Palestinian pottery is unlike a blue she’s ever seen.

You wait for us across the bridge with borderless sandwiches, the sea forever snatched from your eyes.
Morning's Opal

Here is the light loosening through dawn-colored leaves. It makes its way past a rootless morning that resembles,

in its sever of bird song and scent of old-wood smoke, every place and no place we know. You point

at those roots resting beneath the enormous Aleppo pine and say they are the ancient calligraphy aging on mosque corridors.

You say roots are leaping market places sprawling in a thousand directions, and those wrinkles emanating endlessly from my forehead.

And what of roots we find in small hands, beneath big feet, all succumbing to an earth that leans inward and opens to a sky withdrawn from stars? Here, we yellow when we think of our dead, and we grow large with rootlessness, although our blossoming is born.

And I wonder: what kind of hunger is it, our bathing in the mist of all this orange light?
The Emptying

Whenever we buried the sun’s palm
in our mothers’ eyes
my grandmother would quote the Prophet,
the white butterfly in her voice
draging over red-haired grass:
paradise is under the feet
of your mothers.

She never wanted to bury our mothers
each in a country
under a sky that hung the eye of envy,
its heavy arrow darting
towards them through the years.

We only wanted to be there at the beginning
when she rode her donkey to school,
Jerusalem’s golden Dome padlocked
in the black mink of her hair,
and when she lamented a love poem by Byron,
and later when she lined up her daughters
in front of a mirror: You are not as beautiful
as others, but your eyes are like the long rays of the sun.

Those summers she reclaimed the sun
with eyes like giant cups of dew
swaying beneath the blue-green spruce,
as we tumbled at her feet
listening to her stories of lustrous djins,
who hide the earrings of little girls.

She said the angel of death
would arrive disguised as the eye of fog
to escort those post-amber, sulky souls,
and that he would carry a lantern so sooted
that even the sun could not cleanse.

Is all beauty promised to darkness?
we asked in oblivion,
as we slipped on the delicate skulls
of her warnings, and our eyes kept
on netting larger questions:

How does the body empty the spirit
when the time comes?

Does the air smell like sun
and muslin when you die?
We never caught the answers
as she gathered us in bunches,
and we curled towards her
like sunflowers before dawn
shivering beneath the haul
of those gusty beings.

Note

The line “because beauty promised to darkness” is from Susan Terris’s poem Fallen Light.