

LitMag



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Morgan Entrekin

Omer Friedlander

Mark Gottlieb

Kevin Moffett

Eliezra Schaffzin

Charles Simic

Corinna Vallianatos

Rosanna Warren

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SEESAW

Eliezra Schaffzin

W*e demand that you stop using the ancient words when the English will suffice. We have determined that by Reed you mean Red, by finish you mean come, by covenant you mean circumcision, and by order you mean that ritual meal which is observed on the first evening of the long spring pilgrimage holiday in the land where you say certain events took place, as follows. You were hired to serve food to guests at a hotel on the Reed Sea. You wore a white dress shirt and a black stretch miniskirt given you by Bathsheba, the woman who ran the laundry, a person so large she required two chairs to hold her when she sat. You slept on a mattress on the floor of a room off a back hallway. You had a roommate, a skinny girl with a bruised face; her name was Squirrel. Squirrel worked as a chambermaid. Your job was less permanent, as you were among those hired to handle the crowds that had come for the spring holiday (though you'd hoped, when you first got the job, that you'd be asked to stay). You say that on the night of the order, a Sunday, the wife of the hotel's owner gave birth to their first child, a son; on the Monday that concluded the holiday the baby was submitted to a covenant ceremony in the hotel ballroom. Celebrations followed. You were*

summoned from the dining hall to pick up a tray in the ballroom and deliver it to a guest room whose number you cannot recall. In the room the hotel owner stood in his socks and brandished a remote control one millimeter from the television, manipulating the screen. He said to place the tray by the window. As you crossed the room, you peered through the tall glass panes and saw children in fancy clothes conquering the hotel playground below. Your hands had not set the tray down when you were pulled to the bed; you heard the dishes clank as your face pressed the pillows. You say you cried out to him to let you go. You say, he replied: At least let me finish. In the room off the back hallway Squirrel eyed you from her mattress, lit a cigarette, and said she was in love with the hotel owner. You cashed your pay, took a local bus whose number you cannot recall, and walked across the border into the desert, where you wandered until we found you. We have already informed you of the terms of your release. When will you tell us a story we have not yet heard?

Until you found me. It comes as no surprise that you are certain in your conviction that your discovery of me marks the end of my wandering, or, rather, the beginning of my existence, the rest a mass of uncorroborated past-matter floating about a murky womb. My grief at my present captivity might lead me to fall prey to such nonsensical drawing of lines, delineating beginnings and ends. But my wandering, as you call it, has taught me otherwise: the universe can be contained in a dusty triangle bordered by sea.

In any case, damn you for the shit bed you've given me, "matt" minus the "ress," a layer of straw on a layer of concrete on a layer of earth too far away for me to feel. Damn the sweat-stained mattress on the floor off the back hallway, where I could not bear to lie another night. I hoped Squirrel would drag it to her side of the room and stack it atop her own, all the more cushioning for her battered bones. But I did not look back. Now you wait for me to serve you my story on a gilded ballroom tray? Oh, to thrust yourself into my nutshell and count yourself a king of infinite space!

As dusk comes to this desert, all things—buses, ballrooms, borders, bones—fall under the spell of twilight, then disappear. Alone, I walked

along a coastline barely visible now that darkness had come, as my feet traced the southward pathway formed by sands to my right, silently rippling waters to my left; even the moon god for which this peninsula is named hid himself behind distant clouds. (I did not want him.) I recalled that as a child, I used to add an extra syllable of my own to the name of this place, pronouncing it like *cyanide*. On the coast that night, the thought of that word somehow sent my footsteps on a sloping diagonal to my left, eastward, into the water. I could see no farther than one pace ahead of me, but the vision of a single pace was all I needed, as one pace piled atop another: I felt the water rise to my ankles, my knees, my thighs. What did I want? To be cleansed, I imagine, and I was, though not as you might expect. The water had just touched my waist when I felt a stab to my foot. I looked down and saw a rusty, stippled stone retract multiple switchblades into its uppermost cavities, then swim away.

The pain sent me veering to my right, outward, west, undefined thoughts of flight driving me back up the sloping sand to dry ground. I looked again to my feet: I still wore my shoes, black and laced, regulation soles, kitchen duty, safety first, non-slip. They looked placidly back at me, two elongated pupils without irises, dilated with darkness that expanded in a sudden burst, and swallowed me whole.

I awoke to the heat of a sun I knew had reached its zenith, though I could not lift my head to see it there, driving its rays into my hotel uniform, my bare skin, with unvarying intensity. My cheek pressed the sand, my face was turned from the sea, which lapped somewhere behind me with calm indifference. Before me, the sand's vast surface still undulated with the khamseen, the spring winds that had lifted it and sent it spiraling, wild, for fifty days, then let it fall to the earth in infinite waves, laying down the warp to which my splayed body was the weft, knitting itself into the desert. I could not move from that place.

I longed to—what? Longing was the first sensation, and my mind shuffled through its repertoire of urges to find the nature of the desire. Not for water, it seemed, nor food, not companionship (not yet, thank you), not for shade, even, under that searing glare. It seemed the site of this impulse was

my fingers, which lay spread out on the plane of the earth, close enough for my thoughts to detect, but too far to manipulate. I itched, it seemed, to lift my hand and draw patterns in the sand. But the compulsion could not overcome the torpor. I lay immobilized, all but the features of my face: my eyes, which twitched and blinked, my lips, which met each other, parted, and met again, getting re-acquainted—nice-to-see-you, a bit of bloat on you today, wouldn't you say?—and my nose, which took in and expelled air in cautious increments, gently stirring the sand in its vicinity.

My field of vision was confined, or so I believed, to the slightest angle, from the patch of sand immediately before my face to a low horizon that hugged the earth. For some time I moved my eyes back and forth along this field, until I tired even of that, resting my gaze on the sands that tumbled about beneath my breath. They danced, those grains, jumping and rolling and falling and rocking, so dry and light that even my enfeebled airways could toss them around so. How long did I lie that way? The desert is not subject to the clock, and even the cycles of sunrises and sunsets are not as countable as you wish them to be. The scorching heat, the freezing night—these ran and stopped my blood, then ran it again, healing my poisoned tissues while I lay there for what could have been forty hours, forty days, forty years. All along I watched the grains of sand, until my breath gathered strength, and, like the khamseen, lifted the sands up, twisting them into a tiny cyclone, raging with a fury that stung my nostrils. I stared steadily into the miniature storm, which pulsed with its own whirling patterns, and then, somewhere in among the winds, with other forms. I did not blink.

In the storm's center I saw a little figure, its shoulders crowned by flailing epaulettes, its colors effaced by dust, its middle encircled with bits of metal that glinted intermittently between gusts. The figure shook tiny fists in soiled white gloves, raging back at the storm. A miniscule French general! I could see his mouth open and shut against battering sands, struggling to scream desiccated curses at the wind that blinded his soldiers, spinning their compasses with its electricity, rendering his frontiers and conquests meaningless. The wind tore through his uniform, picking up the molecules of his person and lifting them into the air, until they too were dust. Through the twirling lines of sand I saw another man: weathered, weary, his arms

aloft, while beneath him in a bloodied valley at the edge of an oasis two armies fought by the sword, one about to overcome the other—until the man's arms fell to his sides. Then fortunes turned. From a place just beneath my nose, two others appeared, deputies it seemed, and climbed to meet the weary man. Seating him on a stone, they lifted his arms on his behalf, each man holding one limb with both of his own. Clearly they wished for the first army to triumph, for with this gesture, fortunes turned again in their favor, their enemy succumbing in deepening rivers of blood. The miniature khamseen salted the rivers with an accumulation of granules so rapid it swiftly obliterated the scene, continuing to swirl, this time pelting two armies that, overcome by the storm, lay down firearms clogged with sand and buried themselves under military-issue blankets. A temporary cessation of hostilities in a world war, a respite to which all sides subscribed—all except the khamseen itself. I squinted to make out the combatants where they huddled beneath their shelters, one group spread out just opposite my forehead, another by my chin, and thought of friendly football matches conducted outside trenches, ceasefires on holy days, the time-outs of my childhood imagination when it traveled too close to horror's edge. Never mind, I'd have my make-believe villains declare, relinquishing knives and guns and poison gas canisters. The wasp (a villain because I feared it) forgiving the errant footstep and flying graciously away. The weary man on the stone lifting one arm only, then the other, alternating them smoothly like a child's imitation of soaring flight, so that no winner prevails, both sides gathering peacefully at the oasis, from which everyone might drink. In truth, my mind remains infantile in that regard, never quite grasping why the world won't do the same: why not just stop, stop, time out, freeze (shall we chat?), the trigger not pulled, the people not massacred to make way for other people, the strike not met with counterstrike, no need for a new volley of terror against the last volley of terror, no need to lie still to accommodate someone else's need to finish.

The little armies crawled out from beneath their coverings, ready to resume battle. I sneezed, aerosolizing the lot of them into the desert air. A bird called then, too high in the sky for my eyes to see it, its cry reaching my exposed, sunburnt ear. An eagle, I thought, indigenous to this desert. It

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cried out again, as if it had said something it wished me to understand. In what language? Some form of Aramaic, left behind by the ancients for its feathered ancestors to carry through the years? No. *Levant!* it shouted, the name given to this place by those who brought it forth from other people's memories and strong-armed it into other people's futures, trampling present along the way. I wondered why the bird would carry such a language in its beak. *Levántate!* it yelled: rise up. I barely knew what my throat wanted from me when it pushed a reply through parched vocal chords: *Je me lève*. I barely knew the language it spoke. Perhaps the bird and I are both puppets of history. Never mind: the bird was satisfied. *Aiwa*, it squawked, a local "yes." The bird chose the words that fit its meaning, and not the other way around. That is why, I told myself, it can rise. I concentrated on lifting whatever part of me I could.

By now your attention has wandered; it has no time for hallucinatory humbug. All I can do, if you continue to prod me to speak, is tell you what I have seen. For my eyes were all I could turn upward, and upward they rose, lifting and expanding the horizon, until I could see in *all* directions, north, south, east, and west, into the clouds above the mountains, and deep beneath my body, where it lay pinned to the land. Unblinkingly, I saw a pharaoh privately genuflect in a nighttime encampment, praying, before he slept, that the location of a turquoise mine would be revealed to him in a dream. I saw the lone slave who was permitted to watch over him as he prayed, holding the royal bedclothes aloft so as not to allow the scorpions to crawl beneath the sheets before the pharaoh himself did. I saw the slave's smallest child lower himself into a hole in the ground, sent there to seek out blazes of blue; I saw the earth quake; I saw an entire mountain range thrown up to meet the sky; I saw the marrow inside the child's bones when they cracked under collapsing sandstone. I saw the last leopard cub of this desert, and I saw it alive, pawing at the remnants of its last dinner, alone at the mouth of a grotto. I saw a man in a white brimmed hat and brown ankle boots point here and there with a long walking stick, telling a woman in a white brimmed hat and brown ankle boots that the green stalks growing by their feet were *ephemeral*, that the rivers flowing past the stalks were *ephemeral*, and I saw the woman nod as the two of them

walked smugly on, as if they were not the least bit ephemeral themselves. I saw all the secret suffering pockmarking their bones as they crumbled and vanished into the earth. I saw a young man in the green uniform of a reserves captain, seated with a gun across his lap at the mouth of a tunnel, remove a sleek silver phone from his pocket and dial the number of his young wife's phone in order to tell his twelve-year-old daughter a bedtime story of adult necessities, of faceless enemies, of having no choice, the same story every night for thirty nights, until at last the man believed it himself. I saw a man clothed in rags seated on the back of a donkey, alighting when something caught his eye in a rocky grotto; I saw him enter the grotto and, his eyes still adjusting to the darkness, walk unaware past deposits of blue on the undersides of rock, past the skeleton of a leopard not yet fully grown, past ibex droppings still steaming with body heat, and reach out his hand to grasp several pages of parchment weighed down by stones. (I saw the calf that gave its skin for the vellum; I saw the black ink in its shallow well; I saw the scribe wipe a mosquito from his brow, heedless of the blood smeared across his knuckles as he returned to his task.) I saw the man in rags water his donkey at an ephemeral river at the same time I saw a woman in a library as cold as a morgue lay out the pages with white gloves beneath multispectral lamps, searching for palimpsests, the old words that had been doused in lemon juice so as to make room for new ones. I saw our incremental forgetting, year after year, of how to tell a story that does not erase the ones that came before it. I saw every grain of sand beneath my cheek, from the stratum of grit that bore into my skin down to the place where the land turned to bedrock.

I lay in place. I saw the sun melt into the horizon, and I saw it rise again from the sea.

I saw, in the shimmering heat of afternoon, eight dromedary toes, four impossibly weedy legs moving in unison on the left, then on the right, rocking a massive body side to side across the sand. I wished to lift my gaze to its nose, see those muscular nostrils that could shut themselves against an invading khamseen. But it was not in such a fashion that my sight had learned to rise. My gaze remained where it was, flush with the earth, while the camel swayed past—and as it did, an object slapped the ground, fallen,

it seemed, from its hump. Rectangular, foil-wrapped, it signaled with heliographic flashes, and with four letters: C-L-I-F. Before I could ponder its message, two sandals strapped to desert-hardened feet overtook the camel, and the object was scooped up by a sun-browned hand. The CLIF had not yet disappeared beyond my field of vision when another object, this time cylindrical in shape, fell past it and rolled a nearly imperceptible distance across the sand: Y-E-T-I, it announced. Again the hand reached down, but before it could lift the cylinder, another object, stuffed compactly into a draw-string bag, joined it with a bounce: NORTHFACE. After that, a deluge:

NIKEREIPATAGONIATIMBUK2BANDAIDSEPHORAS
SMARTWOOLD
URACELLAMAZONRAYBANLLBEANBLACKDIAMONDCOLEMANHE
LLYHANSENGARMIN

I saw the letters but could not determine what they meant. The avalanche reverberated with a racket in my ear that was pressed with the weight of my head to the ground. The dromedary's feet remained still, the sun-browned hands frantic, until at last nothing more fell. The hands gathered it all up, shaking sand from each item with a quick wrist flick, and avalanche, dromedary toes, sandaled feet all exited my line of sight. It was not long (or maybe it was long) before I heard, then saw, the stampede of shoes aiming to meet the guide and the pack animal (and those things they carried): these feet tore through the sand in colors and shapes as numerous as the fish I could see in the waters behind me, striped and speckled and crisscrossing patterns, underbellies thick and bulbous and pale, geometric moray eels, yellowmargin triggerfish, silvertip sharks. I watched the shoes toss the sand in every direction, undoing the khamseen's crowning waves. (No matter; the khamseen would return.) I saw the campsite where the guide and his pack animal awaited the hikers and their guide; I saw the fire they would build that night, boiling tea and patting flour and water and salt into flatbreads on a domed piece of metal. I saw the guides—the one who'd walked the camel and the one who'd walked the humans—joking with the male hikers, offering to trade the camel for their females. I saw the women

laugh. I saw all the times this joke had been made, all the times the women had laughed, until the instances were so numerous they eclipsed the origins of the jest, making them indecipherable to the eye and ear. I saw one of the women travelers, so young and so pink the desert blazed inside her and kept her body awake under the stars, wonder if there was a single comfort she could have in this world that did not come at the expense of another's. I saw the beach where, in two days' time, she would meet the woman who would become her lover; I saw them drunk on a Ptolemaic wine in a curtained barge floating over the water. I saw the twenty years of happiness in which this young woman's age would double; I saw her acceptance, gradual and then absolute, of the world's disproportions as natural law. I saw her years double again, though I only saw them as through a mirage of rippling haze and rising water. I saw a woman who was the sister of the guide who had walked the camel turn a cloudy bulb in its housing, its filament sucking in light like mercury through a pipette; I saw her husband, buried beneath a sand dune overlooking a string of gently bobbing beach cabanas, a bullet cradled in his rib cage, etched with the enigmatic words *Lake City*. I saw their daughter, the guide's niece, wrapped in a dress so bright with color I could not find adequate words to name its hues; I saw at the hem of her dress two small, sandaled feet, I saw the feet skip across the sand, I saw them stop and turn, toes reoriented in my direction; I saw the child kneel; I saw her lower her cheek to the sand, her eyelashes nearly touching mine.

Masteek? said the girl. Her breath was sweet with dates and camel's milk.

Masteek?

I knew the word, in the languages of the desert and the languages of the stampeding feet: it meant chewing gum.

La, my swollen tongue clucked, apologetically. I hadn't any.

The child had brought her small body to the sand in a fetal curl, both arms folded to her chest. I saw one of those arms reach out to touch the side of my face exposed to the sun. Her fingers felt along my cheek, tracing jawbone and temple, crawling their way to my ear. They tugged lightly at something there, recalling it to my memory: a small, silver hoop that hugged the lobe.

Masteek? the child said again.

Aiwa, my mouth replied, though I could not lift a hand to assist her. Her fingers deftly released the clasp and placed the dusty loop in her opposite palm. I thought for the first time of the earring's twin, trapped between my head and the sand, and suddenly I felt it throbbing there against my scalp. I was helpless to release it. But the child, still curled on the sand, spat on the lone loop, shining it, brought it to her nose, and slid it cleanly through her septum.

The girl rose, first to her knees, then to her feet, and skipped away. My vision followed her to a stone-littered valley where her uncle had parted ways with his tourists at the side of an asphalt road and was escorting his camel home to its mate, his earnings home to his wife and sister. I saw the girl's path where it extended beyond the valley, but I will not tell it here. Her footsteps will not always evade yours, but as long as they do, they are hers.

I saw, in the valley, a dry riverbed marked with the ghosts of streams that wound their way to the foot of a mountain where an aggrieved people had once gathered, impatiently awaiting their share in a divine covenant, and I saw, in the shadow of that mountain, a walled place that called itself God-Trodden, inhabited by monks who drew their hands over their bodies in the sign of a cross, and in a place deep inside the walls, I saw a room lined with prayer rugs and crescent moons, the moons enclosed within the walls within the covenant within the valley. I saw the gliding robes of a monk; I saw, just beneath his robes, the crater in the flesh above the monk's ankle, a scar he considers very old but which the monastery, built fifteen centuries ago, knows is young. I saw the day when this monk, a truly young man at the time, came to hike the desert and crossed paths with a viper, *cerastes cerastes*; I saw the bearded old monk who found the young man, prone at the base of a boulder and brought him back to wrestle with the snake's venom in a bedroom within the fortified walls; I saw the young man struggle for ten days and ten nights, vomiting bile, pissing blood. I saw the fever break; I saw the old monk show the young man, in the margins of an illuminated manuscript, an illustration of his vanquished adversary, a desert serpent with devil's horns, and tell him his recovery was a miracle from god, a sign he should remain at the monastery for the rest

of his god-granted days. I saw the young man instantly agree to stay. I saw that in his heart, where he stored his faith, he also stored a secret: while he'd writhed in his sick-bed in the monastery, delirious with poison, he'd mistaken the old monk watching over him for his gray-haired violin teacher at home, the pain in his calf for the ache in the place where his teacher used to thrash him with his bow, punishing him for his lack of discipline (when his mind wandered—perhaps, the monk suspects, to this very desert, even before he knew of its existence), the teacher choosing to strike the thin skin above the bone in his pupil's leg, where the purplish contusion would remain concealed under layered woolens. I saw the young-old monk's belief that this secret belied his faith, that he'd disgracefully taken refuge in substitute forms of discipline, those sanctified by calling. I saw how he held the secret in his heart for a lifetime, allowing its shame to seep into his daytime prayers and nighttime agonies, and then I saw how, with the years, the young-old monk saw what was sacred in the fronds of the bramble the tourists plucked and pocketed, in the wall the brothers ordered to be built to protect the bush from their reach, in the mortar the desert people moistened with spit as they smeared it between the wall's stones, in the alien click of the tourists' camera phones, the scents of their sun creams; I saw how the old-young monk came to see the sting of the violin's bow, the wounds on his body, in the same way. I saw what the monk did not see: the jird (tiny, earnest creature! Glossy eyes, furry ears, bushy tail) scamper determinedly from the ancient library and across the sacristy, darting under the robes of the monk and out again, hopping through the unceremonious links in a chicken-wire fence to the ossuary, where heaped in a corner I saw a mound of skulls, the collected noggins of generations of monks, exhumed and gathered here because the sand holds them only for so long. I saw, inside one of the skulls, the place where the jird had built a nest, and in the nest I saw a huddling of pink pups. I saw that the skull did not mind; in death, it was multi-purposely ecumenical. My vision tunneled further, into another empty cranium; I saw that it had once belonged to the old monk who'd told the young man with the viper bite that his life was a miracle. (And I saw that he was not wrong.) I saw, inside the curved and sutured walls of bone,

the universe: rupture and renewal and murder and mercy. I saw, out one orbital opening, the face of the man with the remote control, not in profile, as I'd seen him before, when I'd entered a room and sought a place to set down a tray of sustenance, but directly, head-on; I faced the man as he jabbed a stick in my direction and pressed its many buttons. I did not blink. I looked out through both the skull's eye sockets at once, beyond the man, through a window, to the hotel playground, where children in grown-up dresses and suits tailored to diminutive proportions kicked up glorious dust as they swung up and down, hung from parallel bars, spun each other round a carousel. And in their midst, I saw big Bathsheba and little Squirrel, perched on either side of a board, a beam poised on a fulcrum, a teeter-totter—a seesaw, it is called—in perfect balance, and I knew that as they hovered there, each one at precisely the same distance from the ground, each one casting the same cool shadow, they held the entirety of the world in perfect equilibrium. From the middle of this skull in the middle of this desert in the middle of two seas in the middle of the world, this I saw: Holy of Holies. Vision of Visions. Sees of Saws.

My head pressed to the desert floor, I laughed. A sandy gust leapt and fell.

Then across my vision rolled a cloud: four massive wheels, a black knot of wire and metal and fumes. The khamseen had coated its entire shell, except for two overlapping arcs of glass cleared at its front. Two fogged headlamps cut the descending dusk—a captive moon and sun. The tires rolled to a stop, and two heavy boots smacked the sand, then two more. I hadn't noticed the darkness fall. Or perhaps it had never lifted.

You pried my cheek from the sand, tore me from the earth, and I wept, grieving first for my vision, next for my tears, which dried on my body before they could wet the ground. You dragged me here to ask questions for which you want no honest answer. Honest answers are like the khamseen: they spin instruments, thwart plans, rip up documents and deeds. But I have learned that the dust in my eyes does not obscure my vision; it is the vision itself. I cannot tell you a story you have not yet heard. But I can tell you a million to which you have not yet listened.

