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In his latest collection *Here is the Desert* Dom Gabrielli offers a desert of rays and roses to his readers as much as to himself. The book is a ceaseless wandering through dunes, visions and recollections in search for the “deep windy unknown”. Light and translucent, the poems proceed with grace and delicacy; ethereal, they take the reader on a magic carpet to a wondrous world where all the senses are engaged.

The approach to the desert should be flawless, the appreciation complete. While eyes can relish in “yellow swarms” and “emerald palms”, and get hooked on “the bleeding eye of dawn”, ears are “attracted by the subtle fountain’s tickle” and the singing of the “frog of dawn”. Enchanted by “the song of the beloved”, they remain attentive “to the late skin in you/to the almond dance”.

A plethora of tastes and scents render this intake partially maddening: from “salted kiss” and “perfumes sweetly minted” to “unknown sugars” and “cumin winds” that “simmered” on “the parched tongue of my tasting”. Even touching ancient riverbeds and their “salts” becomes a sacred rite meant to “anoint the banks of their absences”.

This plunging into the desert with all senses expectedly invites the erotic:

“can I hold it
 This aroma of you
 Burning in steamy mint
 This erotic cloud of brown breath”

Like Ondaatje’s *Almásy*, the poet not only values sensuality but also venerates the desert of desire and climax:

The night
 is full of donkeys
 screaming sex
 at the stars.

Night in the desert is not only about intimacy and romance but also pain and loss:

Lost the night
 I descended there

Into the lost loves

My tears silent pools
For the cynical diver

At once one and other
The pain of sunsets pulling

Amid this insane age's obliterating rush and noise, the poet is generous enough to propose a flight from pressure to a landscape where one can indulge in loss, "dissolve into deep blue", "lose [his] hand in dunes of golden sand". In fact, Loss becomes that superior fantasy; a cherished state offering an incentive to sing and boast of broadness, and providing a point of departure towards brighter horizons: "I am a lost brother of a lost race/you were never lost and you sit proud".

There is no fear from loss since in this broad, versatile desert, everything can still be found "by magic". On the other hand, there is fear from "losing the silence" and there is comfort at listening to the desert. A seeker who learns to listen to the desert in the manner of Coelho's Santiago, the poet is so blithe and composed, to the extent that he feels inclined to "converse/with the amphibian's leap".

Silence is an art in this collection. Chosen rather than imposed, it is invited to greet the solemnity of the setting, its holiness. Light rather than heavy, it is congruent with the poet's communion and meditations. More significantly, silence is a ritual: "he writes/with her hands/on his dark body/ in silence/he bides timelessness".

The poet is forever drawn to "where the desert spoke/where the song sung itself". The desert is song and discourse; it is all the words and poems that are coming: "I lie in silence/eyes closed in my night vigil/waiting for the desert".

Broad and unlimited, the desert invites its opposites: "up the mountain/where the cool clouds gather/near the snowy summits/the English gather for tea". Is the poet invoking contrasts to better comprehend the true beauty of the desert or is he weighing the blissful gifts of each landscape and cherishing his right to embrace all regions, all seasons, all natural landscapes?

Still, Gabrielli's presentation of the desert is not mere intense admiration or pleasurable contemplation. Even amid entranced states, there is critique. How do foreigners deal with local beggars? "where does he go/in the dying wolf light of evening/do the tourists remember his words/as they sleep on frozen money". Poverty and need are detected, the glimpse of hope not neglected: "ten children in one room/night within night/stars within tomorrow".

The poet portrays many characters in the Moroccan setting: a robed beggar, a veiled woman, a master and his mules, and a nomad. Rather than portraying her as an odalisque crossing the "souk", the "veiled woman" is looked at with wonder, with veneration for feminine beauty and a bowing to "the poems in her eyes". The nomad is not characterized as an uncivilized barbarian; neither despised nor looked down, he is valued for his idiosyncratic self-expression; there is recognition of his charm and intelligence, his power to write and express his origins and heritage "directly/ in the wind the sun the sand". The poet's conviction is categorical: "domination is in vain/vanity must be banished".

Free from the colonizer's gaze, this is a mature approach to the desert. There is recognition, a tracing down of origins, a mapping of belonging. The I becomes we and they, all of us: "we were all Moors once/expelled from a rich land/stigmatized/the skins of our wanderings"

There is an urgent plea for tolerance and understanding too: "will you banish what I banished/in the womb of tomorrow/for our children to play/sipping sweet mint tea/on the Henbel carpet". There is even an obsession with warning from "hatred":

trust me

if words

do not first

crackle in the boiling creases of your skin

if they do not breathe

on you

before you infuse them with floral charms

they will always stink of hatred

And the breathing is there, from start to "finish". Brief, and with comfortable space between its lines, the poems in this collection breathe. Is it the "desert effect"? Spaciousness becomes enmeshed with the poems' texture and the textual fabric cannot help succumbing to the principle of broadness. The broadness is similarly conveyed through the beautiful calligraphy by the Tunisian artist Najeh Jegham, and which is a transcription in French, English and Arabic of some of the poems and selected lines in the collection. These serve as an aesthetic and semantic illustration of Gabrielli's words. There is much play with space, shapes, density, and length. Some tableaux look like Berber carpets made up of innumerable letters or figures of mules, or tribesmen. Others look like camels or tents. But all are attempts to echo Gabrielli's vision and message in a different but no less catching artistic form.

The poems in their itinerary cannot help but form a circle, the roaming. Loss begins the book and seals it. There is no fixed point of departure or arrival; there are no definite shapes: we are in the spaciousness of dawn, light, and sun rays; we are in the "immensity of everything". Perhaps, the only destination available, again, remains the poems themselves, "the lost poems", "the ones written with instinct", and which should be followed and heard.

The poet did write "with instinct" and his "pen had dipped into impossible rains". Gabrielli's book is this "kora song lost in the dunes", this echo "nested in the rocks". A "smile", do not hesitate, follow it; a "kiss", tarry not, "pluck it now at sunset".