

Where we come from

by Britta R. Kollberg

"Thinking of Germany at night / Just puts all thought of sleep to flight" (Heinrich Heine, in Paris)

Sleep doesn't flee me. I do not stir at night:
I chose my exile far from the news, far
from immigrant citizens murdered, their killers concealed
by the secret service—in Germany, in the 21st century—
while police searched
the victims' homes, suspecting Turkish wives and brothers,
where in fact neo-Nazis had raged,
extremists, radicals as they are labeled
by civil servants who are much more moderate
racists.

I chose my exile well,
far from the news, from refugees sleeping on worn-out mattresses
in an abandoned school in Kreuzberg, surrounded by artists, tourists,
Turkish shop-owners, teachers, the whole crowd of those
who let their pit bulls shit on the sidewalk and those
who pick up their golden retrievers' droppings with plastic bags always
to throw them in trash bins
overflowing with empty bottles and wet-sucked joints.
There in a school they try to winter, stranded from warmer climates
and steaming battlefields,
arranging on ramshackle shelves the one photograph
they saved through desert storms and breaking waves ...
Outside the door protest marches against asylum go on
and counter-protests; politicians argue
which party does the best job at feeding them—with ration cards,
and at attempting to deport them
back
to where they come from: the old song of hunger and persecution
and the threat of being drafted
to kill their neighbors, classmates, and brothers.
Well, all cousins in Africa are called brothers. Close friends even are.
But I tell you: Each brother is a brother.

My exile is safe and far from my brothers, far
from where I come from and they are now.
While Heine shivered in Paris, too close
to that fire of cold, I went further up, and, crossing Jordan, settled
in the middle of heat. My hosts' feet are red, still burning
from their own flight from my country, and within daily Middle-East threat.

The Cave at Makkedah

Joshua 10

They had been kings. They had heard about
“Don’t be afraid and discouraged”.
It was not meant for them. They had hurried
to a hiding place, hearing
“Be determined and confident”
was taking over. They crouched in a cave. They counted
the cities they lost to the histories of other nations,
stories recounted by neighbors now turned against them.
Mighty rulers, they had run off the battle,
all lost, men and mountains,
the last thing they tried was to rescue themselves.
Big stones and guards closed them in, refugees
whose hiding place was turned into a prison.
Then the cave opened,
their necks were broken,
refugees whose hiding place turned into a grave.

The cave at Makkedah
was no asylum, no custody pending deportation,
it didn't issue a permit to leave
to see the family and come back
to the silent shade of the rock.
It didn't prepare the inmates for travel
in the back row of a plane,
handcuffed, and if necessary,
gagged, for sound return to safe haven,
safe haven,
a city like Hebron, burned down
and rebuilt. They were kings
and had not learned to resign before battle,
to trick their way into life like Gibeon,
or to survive in a desert with nowhere to go.
They would have died anyway, from starvation,
or hunted down by a lion searching for water,
stung by a snake that made its way into the cave.
They would have died anyway, without jobs,
without money to buy a theatre ticket,
in dry affairs with desperate women,
slowly, slowly forgetting the children they left
in a country called home. Their hiding place
had turned into a prison, a new battlefield,
and there was no other way, deportation or not,
to get out of this cell than to make it their grave.

Paris

Heine, from his exile, continued to write about German politics, even in his sickbed, the “mattress-grave” as he called it. The European (non-)reaction to the 1840 “Damascus Affair”, an incident of blood libel and persecution, caused him to publish his unfinished novel “The Rabbi of Bacherach” about anti-Semitism in the Middle Ages.

The most romantic place for an exile,
paralyzed by the news in my mother-tongue’s self-defense
cutting out,
cutting in—even beyond the borders.
The most romantic place to get away
from the we and say
you.

To write *them* and spell: *you*.
I am not far enough and still I am trembling
with those who search you out
to find their luck and kiss you awake.
But you hide behind your thorns along withered roses.
You don’t receive visitors. You make everybody a traveler
living from take-away jobs and take-away beds, singing
Zigeunermusik for your prancing parties,
sacrificing their name for your schnitzel and gravy.
You make everyone a camper outside of your boroughs
and then *you*
call them “gypsies”, “wandering Jew”—
Damascus is everywhere, and most of all places, it’s here
in the yellowing dog-ears of my poems
from Paris.

Damascus, once chasing its Jews for blood libel,
now kills its Arab fathers and children. It sends
on a refugee trail its mothers and grandfathers:
and *you*, and Paris, you take them
aside, not in
—the princes, the fiddlers, the scullery boys—
and send them to work. Not a second of rest.

The wandering Jew,
that’s me, throwing up from the smell of your dishes
served to the outcast,
the poets, prophets without a church to tell that
you, burning books now, will burn people later,
and you, East of Damascus and Paris,
will grind to dirt under uprising boots
the epics of the Nibelungen, the Buddhas of Bamiyan,
the holy shrines of Timbuktu
for a future, erected on that very dirt, fleeting as the smell
of the meat simmering under the lids of your pots.
Who dares tell us why we can go and when?
Who tells us where?
The wandering Jew, that’s me
with the chutzpa to write down your recipes
from my mattress-grave,
listening to the groans of your guests,
watching from my romantic exile, a bed without legs.

Tel Aviv

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Here's the place out of sorrow. The partying never stops.
Everyone drags a queen along with him
as if the lots of Purim were cast every night.
This place is far from the world newsstands for me.

My Ivrith stumbles over the headlines,
a plane got lost in the East, a boat sank in the North,
scientists run for the black box,
the boat doesn't have any: everything there,
everyone
his own black box,
tracked down by forensics to keep the boats
off the shores,
while planes land softly with neatly stamped visas
crossing the lines.

Underneath the Mediterranean mirror,
boats assemble, at Italy's coast,
before Israel, out of Egypt and Spain,
sharing stories, showing their bones,
jellyfish floating silently by through their beams.
One day, the divers, still jogging now on the beach,
stretching their muscles and pumping their lungs,
one day they'll plunge in and pass the corals, the grey fish
on the surface, and find the box:
photographs, a crooked necklace, and shards
of unknown origin.
They will give signs underwater, two fingers rounded
to form a circle, three fingers up like a jolly bird's tail.
One of them may pick up a ring, a picture;
and we will not see it again
in his shelf, stored at home,
a souvenir
from our travels under the world,
to the underworld
of other people's
dreams.