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Exodus: Nile; Slavery; The Burning Bush; Sinai; Wilderness; The Promised Land; Moses to Joshua

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Exodus · Alicia Ostriker

1. Nile

High clouds gaze
Water far from its source
Straight as a line
Marking a playing field

A basket of reeds wobbles
In the shallows
A girl giggles
Disobeying her father

2. Slavery

The Egyptian foreman was beating the Hebrew
With a leather whip
That was what Moses saw
When he emerged from Pharaoh’s palace
And took a walk through the construction site
Like Buddha leaving the palace
Of protected boyhood
And seeing sickness, old age, death
Pop forth in front of his eyes—just like that
And being horribly shocked.

Fight or flight.
Moses felt himself turn to rock.
He wanted to vomit.
He killed the Egyptian.
Next day he saw two Hebrews fighting
At lunchtime, two slaves. He intervened
Rebuking the offender but both men
Jumped up in his face
They waved their tattooed arms
Will you kill us
Like you killed the Egyptian, they yell
Meaning who the hell
Do you think you are.

To be a slave is to be brutalized.
To be free, then, would entail
What, exactly?—he
Was out of there by nightfall.

3. The Burning Bush

In the middle of a rocky meadow
It flamed like a ship on fire
In the ocean, reflecting luridly
Greasy smoke
Blew in his face and stung him
When he came closer
It was letters of the alphabet, sharp
As brambles, aflame
And wriggling. It said Come here—
It said Take off your shoes—
A voice booming
And horrible

4. Sinai

The prophet has been climbing up the bowl
Of this mountain since early morning
It has turned blue, rose, mere granite
All day long, as the hours pass, and now
Mist and pearly cloud are stretched below him,
The valley where Israel camps is occluded by darkness
Under that shadow people are afraid
Like young children and dogs in a thunderstorm
But above him are crags,
Precipices, the sky like sapphire,
Like poppies, like glass, like a knife
All purities compounded
He rushes to the end of time
The sill of eternity
The crack of lightning

5. WILDERNESS

Never to be loved, Moses
Doesn’t so much mind that
Because every year he
Can see the enslavement
Dropping away, the babies
Being born who will obey
No king.
He sits in his tent
Writing. Light filters whitely
Through the cloth, and makes
His stylus sing.

6. THE PROMISED LAND

Moses is seventy
He climbs Mount Nebo
At dawn on the Lord’s orders
He looks out over the land of Israel
He sees the body of Jacob
Beloved father, shepherd and wrestler
Extended from Sinai to Galilee
Like a mighty man still asleep
As the sun rises.
Moses is dazzled,
Dizzy, elderly. He rubs his eyes.
A spear of sunlight shoots
Along the Jordan River.
Mine, he thinks.
The Lord appears out of the sun
And presses his face
Up into Moses’ face
Speaks to him mouth to mouth
No, he replies, No.

7. Moses to Joshua

They are alone
On Nebo, Moses kisses Joshua
Touches a final time
His chosen body
About to descend the barren hills
About to cross Jordan
About to be followed by hordes
Of ordinary humans, ignorant,
Greedy, lustful, violent and disrespectful
Who will flow like honey into the land
That has been prepared for them.

The young man’s motionless copper muscles
Shine as if they have been oiled
Or glazed, the restless Moses
Cannot understand such immobility
But Joshua’s blue eyes jump
Like rabbits across a field
Strewn with traps,
They scan interior maps, they
Correlate supplies with population,
Run an imaginary thumb
Over a spear point.