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The Cow

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The Cow

On the road from Samarkand

The road from Samarkand slices blue-black and bored through the salt-veined desert, past cotton fields bleached copper green and white, past mulberries massed in dusty ranks like soldiers of the Great Khan. At the edge of town we thread our way through busloads of women and children bound for those very fields, a “voluntary” Sunday picking cotton. It is November, clear and cold. We woke in darkness, the stars of Ulug Beg wheeling about the astringent heavens, dressed in silence, fingers thick with chill. Snorting and bucking, the bus complains its way forward, exhaling little puffs of air laced with lemon disinfectant. We daydream caravans of hard-mouthed camels, salve imaginary saddle sores, brush the coruscating sand from flesh etched by desert winds. Cross-pollinating cultures—Mongol-eyed faces girding a squat
Russian church, a verb
meaning “the ground redden
with blood,” the harem of
the last Bukhara emir
locked in the arms of Red
Army regulars (we
are assured the ladies went
willingly)—the desert
pays them no nevermind,
puzzling only now
and then at the asphalt
ribbons unfurling among
its oases. And,
in the careless way of deserts
and seas, here it casts up
a peril: groan, shudder,
halt. Throaty Uzbek vowels:
“Flat tire. Please to walk out.”
We tumble down steps
to the hollowing sand. The sun
creeps cautiously along
the ridge, fingers the horns
of a solitary cow—
head tipped back, legs collapsed
beneath, eyes run wild
in sudden, staggering
intimation of what
it means to be mortal.
“Been dead some time,” opines
a man surveying the carcass
with what passes for
a practiced air. “Climate
preserves ’em well.” He spits,
stumps off with the satisfied
look of one who has
divined some mystery.
The crowd breaks into twos and threes, some wandering up the nearest slope, some clumping close to where a tire is being fitted to the axle. *By our deeds ye shall know us.* The driver pulls a hose from the belly of the bus. Water spills black upon the ground and burns away. These sands run unchanging to Bukhara, looped and laced by a veil of frailest green—too frail to sanctify a dead cow kneeling in the dust, bemused stars—nothing—reflected in her eyes.