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A Change of Sky

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JAMES MCKEE

A CHANGE OF SKY

caelum non animum mutant qui trans mare currunt (To travel
across the sea bring a change of sky, not of soul)

Horace

Bystander-slack, all aplomb and delicious exemption,
I'm a benchful of pricey sprawl outside the kibbutz hotel,
awaiting the bus to Masada, made capital-g glorious by mass
suicide in 73 CE.
Far down a slope of drone-prowled sand scabbed with outcrops,
a sea—
yes, the Dead one—
flares back at the sky like a sheet of pitted steel.
Turns out I *like* my vistas cleansed enough for, say,
phylacteried zealots and phalanxed legionaries to suffer just as
superbly
as a good-kitschy network miniseries, *circa* 1980, could imagine
them.
It's simpler that way, like not listening.
Meantime, shadows creep like wet ink beneath olive-drab scrub
while a hot hush, as between blows,
clots in the burdened air.

All at once I un-slump: across the road stands an ibex, too real to
be random,
horns like flourished sabers, outthrust pharaoh's beard, hoofs of
battered onyx.

It surveys the façade, side-eyes me curtly, then clops over the hot
frontier—
if a driveway counts as a frontier—
and in among pool-blockading and palm-surveilled bungalows,
planted
where olive trees and flocks of sheep once belonged
to people who don't belong here anymore.
I look around: no one to witness it step through that rent in the
probable
which has, just like *that*,
zipped shut behind its quickening trot.

Whatever it is I feel stands me up, god *damn* it,
fierce as a prophet for a good scourging by some truths:
mass immiseration, a carceral shadow-state,
dark-age atavisms thickly naced in digital frivolity,
the whole hypertrophied apparatus of a wartime imperium
still lubricated by its founding crimes, but soon—
too soon—
I hear the heave and grind of my bus lurching up the switchbacks.
Any minute now, the doors will open with a hiss and a clunk,
a gush of air conditioning and Mid-Atlantic English will blur the
desert glare,
and in a candy-hued touchscreen glow that soothes like home
I'll sit where the look no one gives me proves I still belong.