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ODE TO TROY OR IRAQ OR THE NEXT PLACE

Alvin Pang

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kmap@mailhost.net

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ode to troy or iraq or the next place

Version 1

Starlings wheel over stone. This time of year,
the lone and level sky bare as the ground, even
the scavengers move on. Of course the birds don't know this;
their nesting instinct is irresistible, and they'll not rest
until chancing on some hollow cactus or rusted chassis
to lay their eggs and build a careful future in. Not much else
to count on now. Of course this entire stretch was wild
with wings once, when the tall thatched roofs they love
muscled all the way to the mountains, thickening the plains
with the smell of kitchen fires, echoes of moonlight, half-heard
strains of what could pass for birdsong chattering in cribs of light
multitudinous as the stars, as one with a minstrel's tongue might put it.
Must have been quite a place in its prime; a real destination;
a city, in short. Hard to believe now, isn't it? The imagination staggers
between storybook marble, the walls and gilded fountains,
and this plain nothing. Surely there'd be something left:
foundations, a stump, fragments of mosaic, graves.
Some mark of hurt to mark a passing. Flags of bone,
a code of pain, mummified but readable. The ancients
had a name for this blankness: *tabula rasa*. A clean slate.
A chance, granted by grace or war, to recompose the fate of a world.
Perhaps it happened to the Neanderthals: a civilisation
miscarried, erased, rebooted in an instant. No doubt the absence
of evidence is a clue, itself an indication of intent; of some
bigger picture -- but of that, none are left who dare comment
except these sands, which cherish truth and quiet and refuse
to say what else might have been witnessed, then or since.

Version 2

Starlings wheel over stone. This time of year, the lone
and level sky bare as the ground, even the scavengers move on.
Of course the birds don't know this; their nesting
instinct is irresistible, and they'll not be resting
unless they chance on some hollow cactus or rusted chassis
to lay their eggs and build a careful future in. Not much else is
available these days. Of course this whole stretch was once a grove

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wild with wings, and the tall thatched roofs they so love
muscled all the way to the mountains, thickening the plains
with the smell of kitchen fires, echoes of moonlight, half-heard strains
of what could pass for birdsong chittering in cribs of light
multitudinous as the stars, as one with a minstrel's tongue might
put it. Must have been quite a place in its prime; a real destination;
a city, in short. Hard to believe now, isn't it? The imagination
staggers between the storybook marble, the walls and gilded rooms,
and this plain nothing. Surely there'd be something left: tombs,
foundations, fragments of mosaic, a stump, some mark
of hurt to mark a passing. Flags of bone, a code of pain, dark
with age and mummified, but readable. The ancients named
this blankness: *tabula rasa*. A clean slate. A chance, reclaimed
through grace or war, to recompose the fate of a civilisation.
Perhaps it happened to the Neanderthals: a nation
miscarried, erased, supplanted in an instant? No doubt the absence
of evidence is a clue, itself an indication of intent;
of some bigger picture -- but of that, none are left who dare comment
except these sands, which cherish truth and quiet, and refuse to say
what else might have been witnessed, on or since that day.

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