

IO

Songs of the Aveyron and the Ariège

After the Song of Songs

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Song of the Aveyron

This song is the Aveyron:

from Sévérac-le-Château

to the Tarn at Moissac

the river sings

over wide lush valleys;

is forced through the neck of the gorge,

a peal of bells

sounding the limestone;

a flume of white water spilling

over the Département of Aveyron,

famous for pig trotters and poultry.

You cook us *confit de canard*,

condensed in a tin,

and from the overstuffed liver of duck,

foie gras. 'Eat, friends, drink yourselves

drunk on caresses!'

You give us the best champagne,

tiny bubbles rising

in a seemingly endless stream

up the narrow glass flutes,
 a creamy *goulayant* in the throat,
 smooth on the tongue ... That's how
 you know its provenance,
 she tell us ... *'Let him kiss me
 with the kisses of his mouth
 for your caresses are better than wine!'*

The Republic

Liberté. Egalité. Fraternité.

Walking that cleft of rock,
 the Aveyron scurrying
 into white water
 we are parched,
 our mouths like stones.

A man, washing his car, asks
 us for ten euros
 to fill our bottles from his tap, and then
 says it's only a joke!

Ah ... *'Should a man offer all
 his wealth for love,
 it would be utterly disdained.'*

La cathédrale

Bricks. Red Bricks. So many bricks!

The cathedral of Albi on the Tarn,
 strong lithe river coursing
 under the stone bridge,
 swinging around the enormous apse,
 its blank façade

belying a complex interior,
 trompe l'oeil,
 fools no eye
 in the perspicaciousness of its space,
 now circumspect,
 its heaviness reinforced
 by dull brown paint,
 is dedicated to St Cecilia,
 patron saint of music –
 asphyxiated in steam.

The adjacent garden of the Palais de la Berbie
 is a precision
 of flower beds,
 privet hedges and gravel paths,
 that delimit public from private.

*'They found me, the guards,
 doing the rounds of the city;
 they beat me, they wounded me;
 they took away my shawl,
 the guards of the walls.'*

Outside we crane our necks skywards:
 water spouts from the gullets,
 gargouilles, of gargoyles.

La Bécassine des Marais

On a low stone
 mid-stream,
 white chest,
 long beak, still
 in the fast flowing river,

until our appearance,
 our brutal noise, ruptures
 its rapt attention
 and he slips
 downstream,
 darkening
 into disappearance.

Before the war flocks
 of common snipe
 would blot out the sun:
 before snipers
 killed the dwindling stock.

A short season now
 here, in the Aveyron ...
 though, in the Languedoc
 they still spread out their nets
 to trap tiny birds
 and wring their necks ...
 leaving
 the lost dogs of the hunt
 out all winter.

(Our desire—
 to see all those wild creatures,
 hidden, secret.) *My dove*
in the clefts of the rock,
in the shadow of the cliff,

let me see you, all of you! Let me hear
your voice, your delicious song.
I love to look at you.'

The smallest oak

Le chêne vert de montagne.

A strange haemorrhage,
this summer

over northern Europe, sun lost
to the perpetual grey
of history,

leaves preparing to drop.

Previous
this horse chestnut, blighted with moth,
(*Cameraria ohridella*
tunnelling through its leaves)
the first tree
to wither –

this tree planted by your mother
in the garden of her house
beside the Averyon
where you were born.

'A man like a cedar! Tall as Mount Lebanon.

*This is my beloved
this is my friend,
O daughters of Jerusalem.'*

You are *le chêne vert de montagne*,
clenched to itself,
tensile strength held in
a tight fist,
the hard wood of resistance,
yet supple.

*'Wherever we lie our bed is green.
Our roofbeams are cedar,
our rafters fir (pine, juniper, cypress)'
le chêne vert de montagne ...*

Un cri de cœur

*'An enclosed garden is my sister,
my bride,
a hidden well, a sealed spring.'*

Alit on the buddleia,
summer lilac,
its nectar sweetest at midday,
les papillons –
orange flappers,
The queen of Spain, silver –
washed, fritillaries,
red and white admiral,
grayling and ringlet, swallowtail,
large white,
small white, green-veined white,
common blue, adonis blue, holly blue,
chalkhill blue,

la passion du cœur,
burnt red peacock
(two blue eyes on each wing).
How the yellow brimstone opens
yellow to the sun!

folding and unfolding its wings, flat –
packed on that hinge
that is its being –
closed, leaf-green veins,
disguise, concede

(how we reveal,
 conceal, our life, our love!)
*'My love reached in for the latch and
 my heart beat wild.'*

As the letter *e dans l'o*
*I opened to my love
 but he had slipped away. ...*
How I wanted him when he spoke!
 A courtship of flight. ...
 How butterflies move like the *tournesol*,
 stalk to the sun
 those furious yellow faces turned away.

Rivers

*'My beloved is
 milk and wine,
 he towers above ten thousand ...'*
 above this river Aveyron
 stilled to a lake.

*'His head pure gold, the curls of
 his hair black as a raven.'*

Two eyes '*... like doves,
 by the rivers washing in milk*'
 Two cheeks, '*his cheeks
 a bed of spices, precious scents, perfumes, ointments ...*'
 Two lips, '*... his lips
 red lilies wet with myrrh.*'

Two ears one mouth
 one voice
 many songs –

rills, rillets rivulets, streams,
 one river in continuum
 shunted over the weir in
 a white rush of roiling water:

here, a glissade
 slipping over smoothed stones, calmed
 after turmoil. ...

 Look!
 a gulp, a swoop of swallows
 skimming the water, snatching flies –
 glints of pyrites in the low sun. ...

 ‘Great seas cannot extinguish love,
 no river can sweep it away.’

Autumn fruits

Purple dying our fingers blue,
 les mûres mûres,
 our mouths stained
 dark with juice,
 sweet, tart,

seeds stuck like grit between our teeth–
 ripe blackberries
 on our breath
 pour la confiture
 and little tarts,

blue-purple taking over
 the white flesh of apple;
 how love overtakes and
 the body is taken ...

*'Your branches are an orchard,
Paradise'*

(from the Persian, *pardes* –

P for *peshat*, the literal mind,
R for *remez*, allusion, metonymy,
D for *derash*, metaphor, symbol,
S for *sod*, secret)

*'Your branches
are an orchard of pomegranate trees heavy
with fruit,
flowering henna and spikenard ... '*

Seeds, like white feathers
in a slow glacial drift
to ground –
everything we believed is abjured.

The honeybees

*'Look, winter is over,
the rains are done,
wildflowers spring up in the fields.'*

In the copse of *pin à crochets*,
(small weathered pine of the Pyrénées)
cooied down against that wind,
forced headlong
over Plateau de Beille,

small wooden house on stilts, hide
in the flanks of pine
and swarm!

this cloud of honeybees,
wings beating at the
frequency of a hum in A.

Collecting resin to make propolis,
 gathering pollen with their heads and bodies,
 carrying pollen in baskets on their legs –

from orchids, gentians, daisies,
 deep purple lilies and wild irises, for the honey
 of a thousand wild flowers

clear as truth ... *'Your lips
 are honey, honey and milk under your tongue,
 (your clothes hold the scent of Lebanon).'*

*'... set me as a seal upon your heart,
 a sign on your arm ...'*

as the seal of Solomon is a gift,
 allowing us to communicate with animals,

the bee sting triggering immunity.

After the garrison

Occitan is still spoken,
 still sung – *chants d'Auvergne*,
 with mountain bagpipes, tambourines
 and drums;

a legacy of Latin
 after the collapse of Rome,
 a language
 of idealised love, Troubadour songs;

Occitan of resistance to the Inquisition,
 speech of the heretic, the Cathars'
 escape from matter,

(all forms of procreation –
 eggs, cheese and milk) a language of spirit, pinnacled

impossible high

like those medieval towns,
Cordes sur le ciel.

*'Who is that rising like the morning star,
clear as the moon, bright
as the blazing sun, daunting
as the stars in their courses!'*

In the valley where the Aveyron
meets the Bonnette,
Saint-Antonin-Noble-Val,
there is something welcome,
under this mawkish sunscape of
canoeing, children laughing, white water, pretty bridges,
trees, old mills, stones, geraniums ...

some other tongue –
your mother tongue, *Occitan*,
licking clean the floors of your old home
after the military boots
of Occupation.

On that simple square of grass circling
around the medieval stocks
a large corned bull, Ankole, from Africa, a tall-
necked llama and a pony
with a three-day old foal, trembling, graze:
animal smells, the white breath of animals,
this cold morning.
Herald the Circus.

Standing stones

*'Your neck is a tower of David raised
in splendour,
a thousand bucklers hang upon it, all
the shields of the warriors.'*

Solitary

in those first Chalcolithic fields
of early rye and spelt,
they stood in the rolling plains and forests

of the Aveyron, these statue-menhirs
(carved with a human face
and shallow-drawn breasts, flattened feet and hands,
robes of heavy felt, sheathed
daggers for men at war): sentry, guide, marker ... ?

Here, in Musée Fenaille,

Rodez, they are collected together
in trays of sand, under spotlights that throw
each line into relief

like the cratered moon:

a room

of glass cases arrayed with
jars and bowls, arrowheads of polished flint,
copper brooches, necklaces and beads,
stone pendants drilled

with a hole for a leather thong
like the one I wear today
made from Preseli's rhyolite –
a spotted blue universe of stars, bluestone dragged
to Stonehenge,

that place of silence

in the chain of water, wind, breath

and the taste of wild food (mushrooms,
blueberries, blackberries, hazelnuts and seeds) that are
our memories genetic ancestral.





chevron symbols, flutes and claviforms, painted
with red haematite;

images

defined by rock,
backbone of bison following a ridge
in the cave;

fossilised footprints of a small child
preserved on a raised bed of limestone.

*'My love, I dreamed of you
as my mare ...'*

They passed through us –
those wild horses. ...

Le Plateau de Beille

SAY NO TO BEARS

(bears from Slovenia)
a slogan on the road ascending
through forests

of poplar, birch, silver fir,
beech, and Scots pine, giving way
to dark woods –
triangular black conifers, opening

to sparse copse of thin, aged
hooked pine
and small mountain oak,

le chêne vert de montagne, dur,
up here in this
still, flat, space.

Sounds

of bells carry far
 in the thin air – sheep with long ears and
 pale grey cows sojourn

on the green alpine pasture, goats
 balance on an impossibly
 high precipice. ... *'My love*

*is a gazelle, a wild stag. There
 he stands, the other side of our wall, peering
 between the stones.'*

'Before day breathes'

*'Before day breathes,
 before the shadows of night
 are gone'* mist nurses
 the peaks of these slopes,

keepsake of the mountain cool, under
 the overhanging brow of stones
 that hides the *isard*
 (Pyrenean chamois),
 lizard and occasional snake –

(zigzag pattern of the *vipère aspic*,
 as it scissors its graze over the burning path)

bang your stick and
 stamp your feet!

*'Before day breathes,
 before the shadows of night are gone,
 I will hurry to the mountain
 of myrrh, the hill of frankincense.'*

The GRIO, that highway of paths
 linking ocean to sea, climbs
 from the valley floor of the Oriège,
 to a ridge, where a waterfall
 is disgorged
 into an infinitely blue lake ...

'Oh come with me,
my bride,
come down with me
from Lebanon. Look down from the peak of Amana ...

The hawk clustered into the blue,
 powder-blue sky, keels acrobatic. ...
 and above, the great raptor, *aigle royal*, soars

on the wing, for hours, silent
 between the fast cross –
 path of high-altitude cloud,
 scudding into the heaving dark
 of the mountain, and as if
 suicidal
 sky-dives its prey ...

'Look down from Senir
and Hermon,
from the mountains of the leopards,
 the lions' dens.'

A man suspended under a yellow kite, swings
 out from the land on
 an armature of sky (honeyed flight
 held by hot air)
 his arms sprawled wide
 above the tunnel of Puymorens
 to Barcelona,
 cut into the jagged cuff

Oriège

Sweet cold water
of snowmelt
sears fast
between the valley's
green shoulders –
salmon queue
at the weir:
behind high wire
wolves howl
as if to those extinct.

*'And he calls to me,
Hurry my love,
my friend,
and come away!'*

Come away!
to the mountains, home
to the shy *marmotte*,
le chat sauvage,
le sanglier (wild boar),
écureuil rouge (red squirrel),
et martre (pine
marten) swinging
through the pine.

Ghazal of Sharon

Camels pass us on the Plain of Sharon,
from Cairo to Damascus, through Sharon.

*'My lover's desire mine, a longing
for paradise, a lust for Sharon ...'*

shared ideal of beauty, exceeding place,
the groves of citrus, of Sharon.

A paradise in the mind, that sees
literally, a place of trust – Sharon.

*'For love, fierce as death, is stronger
than the grave of jealousy, of Sharon ...'*

the wilderness, a desert storm,
a plague of locusts in Sharon.

We need love for this, our world,
as love's must for Sharon.

*'You, the wild lily of the valley,
I am the narcissus of Sharon.'*

*'You, the wild tulip of the valley,
I am the lotus of Sharon.'*

*You, the wild-thorned rose—
I am the crocus of Sharon.'*

*Run away, my love, like a wild
stag, kicking up dust in Sharon.'*

*Dark under the eye of the sun,
black in its focus – I am Sharon.'*

Context

In 2008, New Hall Cambridge hosted an exhibition of prints by the American artist Judy Chicago, based on the biblical text the Song of Songs. They invited an art critic, a theologian and a poet to respond to the artworks. Whereas Chicago was concerned to assert a graphic representation of the physical body to counter an allegorical reading of the biblical text, I was drawn to the images – the land, animals and plants – as a complex poetics of self.

Using contrasting translations of the Hebrew, I became interested in the syntax of the original and how the indeterminacy of translation can open up the vocality of the text.¹ For example, questioning the states of gender, ‘you’ and ‘him’, multiplies the trajectories of desire: ‘Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth / for your caresses are better than wine!’²

In locating these plural voices geographically, I chose the valleys of the Ariège and Aveyron in the French Midi-Pyrénées, an area of extraordinary beauty, where Occitan, language of both the Troubadours and the Cathars, continues a complex history. Excavating the Persian root of the word ‘paradise’, *pardes*, gave me access to the ideal leitmotif that runs through the Song of Songs and determines my concluding poem’s return to the Plain of Sharon.

This sequence of poems uses modernist strategies of collage and parallelism centred on Imagism’s definition of Image as an intellectual and emotional complex: ‘An “Image” is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.’³

Drawing from Persian tradition, the final poem is a Ghazal with rhyming scheme and refrain, offering a different mode of self-reflexivity. To quote from Iranian poet Mimi Khalvati:

The traditional ghazal addresses the unattainable beloved (often in the guise of a young boy or with an ambiguity due to epicene pronouns) and does so from a subservient, submissive position. ... The last couplet of a ghazal is known as the ‘signature couplet’ (*maqta*) in which the poet will claim authorship either by signing his/her name or by using a pseudonym or play on words. If the ghazal represents the world, then the *maqta* is the poet’s place in it.⁴

NOTES

1. Ariel Bloch and Chana Bloch, trans., *The Songs of Songs* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988); P.W.T. Stoop-van Paridon, *The Song of Songs: A Philological Analysis of the Hebrew Book* (Louvain, Paris and Dudley, MA: Peters, 2005); J. Cheryl Exum, *The Song of Songs, A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005).
2. J. Cheryl Exum, 'Song of Songs', translated unpublished manuscript.
3. Ezra Pound and R. S. Flint, *Imagist Poetry*, ed. Peter Jones (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 130.
4. Mimi Khalvati, *The Meanest Flower* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2007), p. 80.

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