

HISTORY

---who was Ibn Ezra,
but a man wandering, alone?
Nothing scares most of us more
than a man who does not need
a woman, a home, a child,
but he knew there is a home
in the road, in the mind.
All the warm homes of all
the women-clasping men
of the twelfth century
are gone, but my Ibn Ezra
and his grammar, his tired feet,
his obsession with stars and poems
and the ticking of time,
his wandering for years
upon years—his failure
at everything but the page?
That lives in me.

ARRIVAL, 1146

Verona, bitter, gray, the Colosseum
mocking me with its height. I am weak,
I know, and the Colosseum is strong.
I am flesh and bone and the Colosseum
is rock. Lovers hide in the arches
of it, on the bottom, as they used to in the gates
of Córdoba, as they once did between
the columns of the Pantheon in Rome,
and I wonder if this next city of lovers
hiding from the light will be my home.
A clock ticks in the distance:
time is my companion, still—

the Colosseum's companion
and mine. Do not be arrogant, Colosseum:
we have the same tireless, sunburned, godly rival,
made of hours, sneaky minutes, treacherous seconds.
Time, how it ticks and weakens all
of us, man-creation and man,
entirely mortal in sunlight and moonlight,
whether made of stone or bone.

MANTOVA, 1147

And there is nothing in rainy Mantova
for me but a synagogue, where the congregants'
wet eyes mock me, a womanless man,
praying. Once Virgil walked here, once Virgil
made his scrolls of sky and earth in this place,
once he made the middle

of the road a poem. Here I am, past
the middle of my life, in the middle of a place
that means nothing to me, and all I can do is what
I did as a boy: stare at the women from a distance,
think of God but crave the song
and wail and welcome of a feminine voice—

a voice that can come down
from the women's section
of the old synagogue and walk me out
of Mantua, out of Mantova,
out of the map and into the silver
sliver of a new life, a *vita nova*,

like the life I began again
at the banks of the Tiber:
remember, the poets of the place said,
waving arms and quills dipped in fresh ink:
empires fall, but what continues is
the water of God—rain, river, speech.

RIVER, 1144

I catch myself—
wild beard, tired feet,
the reflection of a human beast
in a stream.

Ogre that I am
or must appear
to any woman

I can still protect
some runaway, some unwanted
rebel who had
to take to the road,

some illegitimate someone,
perhaps even a granddaughter of mine,
half-Jew, half-Muslim,
wandering on the highway of God.

UNSENT LETTER TO ISAAC, 1142

My son, watch how night comes and leaves:
how evening

becomes morning.

Most gods, most ways of being

are like days—

ending as they begin.

Save your love for the stars, for verses, for what lasts.

ROUEN

Bricks, cement, glass, holy water—
every morning the praying monks
blessing the builders and their materials

and in the distance, the sound of the sh'ma,
the *listen, O Israel, the Lord is our God, and God is one,*
the whisper of it so modest, the lone line an aaah

against mountains, a soft echo, half-ridiculous against bricks,
jeweled glass, gold, monks
and multitudes. The Crusaders,

never too far away. Maybe long after I am gone,
this cathedral-building will fall,
this urge for gold and stone and permanence

will collapse. This investment in height

reminds me of Rome, its ancient belief
in the power of structure, the might

of statues, the muscles of builders.
Sculpture as argument, and all of it
eventually just residue—
whispering echo of dried-up power:
empire, emperor, belief.

CANDLES IN NARBONNE, 1153

Through the window, two flames—
from the shivering candles, lit by the woman
of the house. *Shabbat*. The domain

of God, the evening meal the moment,
maybe the only moment, of triumph
for woman—gorgeous, so-called weaker woman.

It has been months since I saw candles, longer
since I felt the heat of a woman,
the skin, and for a moment watching the wick turn

to flame, I craved the inside
of a house. But I am cursed
to be outside, looking inward,

blessed to be able to survive
without what I once thought I needed.
Half my life I gave to my child,

my children. The other half is for the page, the flame
of the future. There are candles
of all kinds, I tell myself, fires that burn

between, fires that burn beneath.
flames that live within, that wither
in the presence of a woman who breathes

I am more important than your book.
I chose to walk the Roman road, the *Via Domitia*;
I chose candles through glass. I chose to just look.

SCAVENGER

Bread and a fallen orange, not far
from an animal, grazing—

and I remember Córdoba.
That orange light around

the Mezquita at night,
the oil burning, burning,

and Dunash's lovely wife, clothed
in poetry, her dress covered

in her verses so someone—
even an old rabbi,

scavenging for free
oranges that had fallen from the tree,

would find her. Oranges,
food of my country, bought and sold

by traders and wanderers,
kings and conquerors, symbol

of my hope that my poet-friends are alive,
clothed in poems, writing by oil-light.

Oh Córdoba, maker of poets.
Oh Córdoba, ornament of the world.

HUMMING THROUGH FROZEN FRANCE, 1148

The mind buzzes
but the heart falls,
alone, on the road.

I hum to God,
I hum to earth,
with my questions.

I walk, and walk
until I understand

the land and its call.

It's familiar. For what
is the terrain of God
but the heart of man?