

*Dreams of the Caucasus*

*Also by Norman Jope*

For the Wedding-Guest (Stride, 1997)

The Book of Bells and Candles (Waterloo, 2009)

Aphinar (Waterloo, forthcoming)

# **Dreams of the Caucasus**

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# I

## *Suspended Gold*



## Erg

Soft sand covers the shoes and scratches the lenses of the eyes. The sand is the colour of a filtered lens, that is trained on a blank surface. Where does that colour come from? It hovers and drifts as the shadows darken and harden, ambassadors of an ethereal weight. Ergs extend in a limitless expanse, forming waves and crescents of golden dust, on a horizon of suspended gold.

The erg's imperative is the silence of the footprint, which can outlast one's life. Traces in the erg—the hyena, the jackal, the gazelle, the horse. The mark of the eye of the bird of the night, left in the space at the bottom of the slope, insinuates that the vultures are circling. Addax and oryx skip across the dunes on delicate hooves, filling their jowls with *aristida plumose*. Here is the lazily-shrivelled fire-meat of the interior.

The void of the eye fills up with sand, on the skin of a world just 93 million miles away from the source of its conflagrations. It is possible to stand, tongue roofing the mouth, in the face of a blast that sends all water heavenward, causing the lips to crack and the tongue to swell. Facing the seas ahead, the sable seas which would scorch the naked feet, it is possible to inscribe the Poem of the Clearing but, in this unforested place without abundant wells, the text becomes a series of glances. It exists in an eye that has become more brittle than stone, that is on the verge of becoming powder where the Many confronts the One.

So silence confronts Silence, the eye confronts the Eye . . . the body of the sand confronts the body of the sky which darkens, daily, to reveal the stars that also gather into dunes, that deposit their silver, gold and silence over the backdrop, covering the shoes with which we walk from the other side, scratching the lenses that we use, when walking there, to observe our shadows walking.

## Serir

And then there is *serir*. A cleansed space, a location wind whistles through, arranging the remains. A somewhere else, where nothing prevails and the horizons are constant.

We can only define it by moving slowly. There are no nests for the arrows that fall.

This is a space where silence enters the pilgrim—enshrines the one who renounces action and event. A surface of refusal reaches into the refusal that is death, a domain where every gobbet of flesh is razored directly from bone.

Its tenuous gravel is arranged on pallid sand, beneath a sky in which nothing, not even the human eye, is tangible. Its expanses erode all primate curiosity, returning the mind to reptilian languor. The brain is spring-cleaned, as if by an injection of menthol.

Each stone here is a *ka'aba*, the tiny temple of a posthumous grace, on which a black sweat drips from marmoreal bones. They turn to gold, then scarlet, in the light that dismantles them.

Coming here means to assent to a deeper nakedness, in which all flesh is superfluous. A heap of bones at the bottom of the star-well, one is filleted by photonic vultures.

Knowledge, here, is scorched. Belief, ignited.

We are suddenly here, where the music stops, and the invention of the Names of God begins.

## L'arbre du Ténéré

The mobile rattles in red wind, a jewel-boned scarecrow whose existence nails the past to a shadow thrown brokenly on gravel, purloined by the lizard playing dead in a limitless noon.

The tree that it supplants was plucked for posterity by a Libyan trucker—outlasting his liver-faced embarrassment, it was carried off and tapped for Carbon-14 in the Musée de Niamey. It could have been the product of a seed dropped from the arse of a passing vulture, catching by chance the merest sparkle of fetched water from the well nearby. Yet it grew to become a landmark, the only tree discovered in a region the size of France . . . a Michelin symbol placed on the small-scale map for years after its destruction.

So what would it mean to lie there now . . . cooled by its non-existent shadow at the height of day, or in the sulphuric-acid sharpness of night's immensities, so that a tiny portion of the geode-encrusted sky was obscured by the flaps of its desperate moisture?

The Japanese artist's monument blinks in the solar glare, but the absent tree, the one that was stunned and kidnapped, the one that is dead yet privileged, puts forth its shade and the *azalais* halt to take a reading from its non-existence. Unbending in absence, resplendent integer of zero's One, it locates what is most remote, and directs it into the bull's eye of the earth.

## Les nuits de Bilma

There are salt-clay bricks under flat roofs seldom rained on, flaking in laser sun. A street filled with sand, which rises towards a fort. An abandoned pool, half-filled. Evenings, sweating by a paraffin lamp.

But, at night, the sky is filled with crystals of salt—so many, that the sand seems rivalled. Orion guards the passage across the Ténéré. Cassiopeia writhes at the zenith—Polaris lights the road the colonists took. The sound of pestles fades in the static-laden air.

No breeze, no cloud. To be out there, standing by the wells, away from the stacks of moulded salt, the yoghurt-coloured crater-lakes where the brine has settled. To be out there, licking the stars with all the eyes one has.

On a night like this, the earth's protective veils fall away. What is left is exposure, not so much chilling the spine as filling it with a golden sap, so that the body becomes a fountain of leaves in love with the outer darknesses, the magnetic onslaughts from the war chests of other stars than the implacable sun.

Pinned to the narrow crevasse of a single night, where both one's birth and one's death advance like walls of salt-clay cast into utter shadow, there is only one direction that can be scouted with a calm heart. So look up, to the skies of Bilma—feel the planet tighten under the feet, drink in the absinthes of abandonment, never so alive as when so lost, not needing shade of any description.

## Atakor

Forced upwards—basalt, phonolite, andesite, trachite.

Denuded, so that the pipes remain and only the pipes, in the form of cones and dog-toothed plugs that rise above the surrounding plain. Black spires of rock, like the spars of enormous ships, or the pinnacles of Breton churches—solid yet brittle, forced upwards into the sky flesh, prickly as doum-palm barbs on naked feet.

This is a porcupine of a landscape—defending itself, in vain, against the erosive forces that assail it, to the point where there is no longer anything intact that can, with meaning, be defended, so that the gesture is mechanical, the charm-spell of a weary old man who knows that the ravens are already picking the locks of his eyes but is nonetheless trying, as if still young, to shoo them away. He is spare and defaced, yet continues to wave at the heavens as the skin on his back turns to chitin.

To be here means to share in its dissolution and, no less, its jagged defiance. One travels exposed yet upright, forced from the womb towards the sun, denuded by that very sun which turns each item of clothing to a scar—a human column, destined to fall yet holding one's ground. Not even a tower of breath, for breath begins to thin in the tamarisk-scented upland air—but solid despite one's brittleness, an agent of geometry resisting the temptations of erosion, the ultimate sleep that is the risk of the *serir*.

## Reg

The gravel coats the eye. The sun is a bowl of acid, drawing the softer colours out of the face. Each mile is ripped from the silence. The stars melt in their cages, as a heap of dust explodes and covers the moon with the spectre of itself. Everything swims before the mouth.

There is *nothing* here. Perhaps it could be mined, the perfect excuse for speculation. It is smooth, hard, razor-finned and brutally contemporary. It exhausts all signatories, sealing the lips of the herald. On a shield of granite, schist and gneiss, it loiters and squats. It wipes the distant sound of pestles, that hammer millet in oases to the south.

Azure on gold—heraldic noon. Brilliance is raised to the status of fire. The gravel dismantles the eye.

One must wait for the stars, which reappear cooled in the rapidly freezing skies of evening. Then the world swings open, devouring all models of itself, all compromised measures.

Lost on the *reg*, having walked a plank of words into its gold-grey sea, one imagines that tomorrow's landscape is pre-ordained, that the ultimate nothing stretches across the pupil of the eye. But then something changes, if only for a moment—and, beyond the pollens of dream, the horizon blows open, revealing a presence that spins webs across the shallow gulf between nothing and something, enabling a weightless moment to assert itself. Elusive as a *waran*, flicking its tail in the furnace of another day.



## Navigation: The Seven Daughters of the Night

Waking chilled, in the hours before dawn, one encounters the Daughters. They rise, like larks, in the late summer sky.

Their sapphire tinge is strong, as piquant as mint. Near them, the Cyclopean eye of Aldebaran is ox-blood red, a haemorrhage of light against its obsidian backdrop.

Beneath these stars, the form of the Hunter scintillates—his belt is a series of ivory studs, his sword a misty flash of alien metal. Even the star-names of Orion resonate with a language of the desert—as if, wherever seen on earth, their most appropriate sky were here. The desert, like the sea, remains in love with its stars.

The Daughters rise at the coldest point of the night, when—even at this time of year—the stones are already sheathed in lattices of hoarfrost. These icy mistresses of absence refuse the nights of sweat which seek them to the south, retreating behind cloud. Imperious as they are glacial, they turn to face a place that is more lethal, by far, than any earthly desert—and yet, they connect to the deserts of earth as if they were sitting on the backs of distant camels.

Their rejection is an octave of presence, as it is for the perched falcon that is Vega, the predator staring from the northern quarter with its eyeball of lapis lazuli.

To navigate here is to surrender to these stars, to make use of their ineffable indifference. To journey, as if pillowed on their unconcern, through a region bereft of human fat.

## Ashab

When he rubs the white stone in his pocket, the inscription—as illegible to the untrained eye as an Ogham epitaph on granite—invokes the gods at the source of Eridanus, who fire at the clouds with their blowpipes of mahogany. Suddenly, the rain is carried down the channel, which has been dry for years or possibly decades, causing the seeds to wake and blossom. The sand is covered in a mantle of greenness, stippled with polychromatic fragments. The seeds flower, set fruits and successor seeds, as if the act of magic guaranteed permanence.

The white stone in the pocket of the visitor acquires a film of protective dust. The flowers die—seeds are buried in sand, the flowering herbs are replaced by patterns the wind inscribes, the marks that are left by the hoof-prints of camels and the lasers of stars.

Brief periods of life are set amongst golden sleep, defining it to the visitor who walks away, remembering the superstitious Tuareg who had asked him to rub the white stone in his pocket for a sprinkling of rain. As he lives his life in the greenscapes of Europe, the clouds that are brought in from the Atlantic falter, melting, barely able to muster a drop of sizzling nourishment. They dissolve in the mirrors of the *chotts*, like Narcissuses stunned by the solid, salty sight that their reflections offer them.

## Evidence: The Hoofprints of Camels

The sand is inscribed by the tracks of vehicles, but still no less by the hoofprints of camels. They convey the traders and the traded-in, and these prints express their patient, dry-mouthed masochism. They are beasts who expect nothing and are ready for all contingencies, yet can throw a tantrum over the smallest human infraction.

Yet the smallest mark also impresses the traveller. A piece of bone can bake for a hundred years. A trace of an old campfire can outlast its creators, and the couple who crept out secretly to lie, entwined, beside it, exuding moist heat in the fingernail-cracking dryness, are preserved by their faded shapes, as if embossed on a sheet of beaten light.

Hoofprints, fire-pits, wheel-tracks, words. The desert's rhythms are produced from these instances, with infinite patience and interminable slowness—spread across space, they are strewn on maps of human attention. And the star-points join those of the sand-dunes. The she-Camel culminates, not the Great Bear of the Britons or the Winter Stag of the Urals, and she snorts and clumsies at the zenith, tethered against the black-skinned galaxy, as the *balises* constellate the sand and the brilliant bones preserve the past like the egg-sacs of fish on an ocean floor.

So, the music of the desert is constructed. It is not the orderly polyphony of more fertile regions. It is an assemblage of traces, a swarming unison in which the fragments cluster and coincide, the amplification of a deeper silence.

Dead or alive, there is always room for one more camel, or another *azalai* of words—from breve to breve, from silence to silence, we deposit the trails that will leave us behind.