CITIES ON THE PLAIN, ON A HILL

‘Asking questions no one else asks isn’t genius. It’s insane. If you’re not unhappy ... let it go.…’

‘Not more unhappy than if.… And uncertainty – it’s good for you.’

A really bad start.

Two males, no sex, live together – a decision to share everything.

Nothing is ever shared – not equally: one has the fresh, the other what’s left. One the top, the other.... One what he can afford, the other.... They say ‘shared’, they must mean ‘divide’.

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Neighbours: When the old man died, his wife let his bird starve to death in the cage – ‘he would have wanted it,’ she tells the daughter.

‘No I wouldn’t,’ the old man shouts from the rackety cemetery, but he’s crying – if he’d not cried, maybe he’d have been heard. But dying, and death – they’re almost never described as being good experiences... You must expect some tears. Not being heard – that’s common enough.

You can turn up to pray, no one ever asks about the bird, not so many about the old man.

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Salvation? The Americans had it easy – a big country conquered, against a handful of poorly armed people protecting their livelihoods, ignorant of the depth of those attacking armies. That's how now they impress – some of them, a handful – with their slick use of language, their ingenuity. No one can rival them, and they still have motorcars, they drive all over meeting people with turns of phrase, and publish the quips and trouvailles, like smart alecs and party-heroes, the 'life and arse-souls' they are called.

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'I'm not riding that bus,' the woman says.

'They've paid the bandits,' says the daughter, pushing her aboard, 'And there's the statue too.'

The bandits don't get them – it's the curve: – always been there, always take it slow and circumspect.

This kind of talk – it's everywhere

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'There's bandits everywhere, nearly,' says Ahmed. 'Guerrillas gone bad. Or living on rich guys' vices – smokes and pills.'

'I could talk to guerrillas,' Nico says. 'They're used to talk. I know the texts. It's hard not to sympathise – they've not forgotten evil, if we have.'

'If they cut off your nose.…' says Ahmed, laughing.

‘Oh, then it’s easy not to sympathise,’ Nico says. He holds his long nose, spoofs with a twang, ‘“The bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every occupation....” even clandestinity!’

‘It’s cheap living here,’ says Ahmed. ‘So you always feel you’re nearly rich.’

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‘There’s lots here who’s come back from the war,’ says Ahmed.

‘Usually people wish you hadn’t,’ Nico says. ‘That’s maybe why they have these wars – send the horrible ones far off and hope they don’t come back. I was in one....’

‘One in Chechnya?’ Ahmed asks. ‘That was hard. Hard on everyone.’

‘Sleep and a crap,’ says Nico. ‘Those are hard to get in war. Everything else – it’s encouraged. Do it casual, it doesn’t register.’

‘Oh, I take sides,’ says Ahmed. ‘If you avoid the lines, you must know sides – it’s geometry. If you don’t have aeroplanes – for sure you are a terrorist.’

‘I don’t remember the humans,’ says Nico. ‘I remember the cats. There were thousands, scurrying, looking for the perfect hiding-place....’

‘Are you sure you were there?’ asks Ahmed. ‘People write about where they weren’t, and the language is wonderful. So maybe you weren’t there, but have a tale.... Hunters must finish when it gets dark – then, narrative is what they do. Soldiers – think they have a home. It’s all a fantasy. A silent cry. “Retreat!”

‘A hunter knows there’s no return, no “back”. They cover up their dirty deeds with lyrical embroidery.’

‘If you come back, it makes no difference,’ says Nico. ‘And if you don’t come back, it makes no difference. Reason has no opinion – I could have been where I say. Opinion – has no reason to suspect.’

So it rests, and Ahmed thinks Nico was in some combat, somewhere. He hopes it wasn’t Chechnya – those pictures, that everybody shared. Divided. A horror, even if they were touched up.

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