

PHILIP METRES

Home/Front

))(

I hear it, at times, even in the wind. The black helicopters chutting overhead, the catch in the throat of the leaden sky. They are watching. You are watching. The ache of eyes after a day staring at papers—the same tired arguments, the same disembodied I's. Sometimes it feels like drowning in my own skull. Rainwater leaking into the hall, thoughts of thighs at a funeral. They are watching, you are watching. I wrote nothing. I had nothing to say. Outside, unbutton your shirt. Handle each button as if it's attached by a single thread. Inside, the wind knocks over a powerline. Outside, unzip your pants so the zipper purrs. Inside, protesters gather at the embassy. Slip off underwear as if lost in thought. Outside, climb into bed as if it were filled with spiders. Inside, they are watching. I hear it.

))(

As if, somehow, I were responsible. *Patriotism is a feeling, the student wrote, that is rooted deep inside everyone of us, and it's hard, he wrote, to let something such as your country, go to shame.* The photos of the hijackers looked like a bunch of my cousins, a Warhol rendering of our family photo album, portraits bleared in displaced layers of ink. Who fed you who memorized your hands who breathed you in? The editor of *Life* laid out the *old rule of thumb* in journalism: *one person dead in your paper's hometown equals five dead the next town over equals fifty dead in the next state, or 5,000 dead in China.* The homeland is slate blue, tastes of metal, like blood in the mouth. My cousins my demons my plotting and foiled selves, what have you done, what have we done with us?

)(

In the wake of. I don't even speak the language. In the glances and glares. *My son, you are Arab, be proud of it*, my Dad would say. I awaken. I avoid pulling up beside flagged trucks. Of ire I sing, mirror. Who turns to see me, the invisible now visible. Who lives in a want ad for a criminal act. *Fits the ethnicity, if you know what I mean*, my colleague said. Myself as numb stranger. *My son, you are Arab, be proud of it*. I count raised eyebrows at the faculty meeting, when two Muslims are introduced as visiting professors in physics. What does it matter where numbers come from? B—'s father is still missing. In the wreckage. Whose face, he'd joke, he never knew, seeing it was always behind a home movie camera. *My son, I caught myself saying to no one who exists, I am air*.

)(

You look at me / looking at you. How close the words *creation* and *cremation*. How in Hebrew, Adam is *dust*, how the stars swam in Abraham's eyes, his profligate future. Uncountable windows of light, flashing open-eyed. The towers burned down into themselves—just like a cigarette, the poet laureate wanted to say, and did, on air, knowing that distance makes metaphors terrifying and the world less so, dividing the night from night. How to describe the twisted angles and planes? Picasso: *a picture is a sum of destructions*, a way of saying the wind draws dust into us. Thus, my friend E— who held klieg lights at Ground Zero carries the towers in lung roots. A kind of seeding, this seeing. We are windows, half-open, half-reflecting, trying to impersonate someone who can breathe.

)(

I was planning my lesson on imagery, Introduction to Poetry. How Tu Fu said, it's like being alive twice. We were to read "The Colonel." My phone rang. *Have you heard?* Something about a plane crash. I could not understand. It was my first week in the Ivory Tower. But I had a plan and I had to go through with it. It's being a lie twice. *The moon swung bare on its black cord over the house.* How is this true? Any abstraction can lead to murder. I had to stop at every sentence so I did not weep. They didn't understand the first thing—how it's more like a building than a dream, more like a plane than a cloud. And you can enter it. I didn't understand the first thing. To open like an ear, shut like an eye. Twice. To feel around outside. Surmise insides. How was Homer blind?

)(

On the flight overseas, the rows dotted with isolatos, each an island of eyes. I was looking (for), looking (like). Ivan Zhdanov: *what outside is a cross, inside is a window.* An old white woman across the aisle eyed me the entire trip. Her gaze widened and neck craned as I (her eyes) slowly removed (her eyes) my shoes. What could I say? Sometimes I'm afraid I'm carrying a bomb. That I'm a sleeper and don't know when I'll awaken. I should have said: Identity isn't an end—it's a portal, a deportation from the country of mirrors, an inflection within a question, punctuation in the sentence of birth. I said nothing. Later, visiting a Quaker Meeting, I sat among scattered chairs. On the shores of breathing, all eyes shut, I waded. Silence was our rudder. Together we faced the sea we could not see.