

AMERICA! AMERICA!

America! America! Is anybody there?

Yes, I'm here. I know I am because I can feel one middle finger, a lock of hair on my forehead, a small bone in my wrist and one leg is still present - numb, but here with me, my own dear calf and thigh.

My darling lips too kiss the dirt, giving a pope's blessing to my homeland. To America where I lie, scanning the dark with my one free eye, searching for my other hand. There it is, all upturned and coated in a dirty, white crust that grows thicker each second. My poor hand is becoming just another part of the dust landscape of blocks and metal bars, which surrounds me. We look the same now, broken body and broken building. And we hear the same mobile phone calling in the stillness, calling

America! America! Is anybody there?

Yes, I'm here. I know I am because I can still remember.

I remember the blue and gold morning. Liquid sunshine on glass. The brightness of a thousand reflected suns. Endless slats of gold intersecting one another. Great pyramids and ladders of geometric light reaching upwards. The pure gold looking-glasses of America.

And beyond? Only the sky humming with blue. Blue on blue, bluest blue, dense, layered through the lenses of so many squinting eyes. The endless, vast acreage of American dreams - Wild West and open prairie, wetlands and deserts, deep rivers and wide oceans. Lifting from every horizon in mile upon

mile of rinsed, clear cobalt. Or spied through glass, or opening like a turquoise butterfly to greet you at the subway exit. The last blue before the axe, the guillotine, the trapdoor. The very blue I saw through my window this morning, hanging like a floating rectangle beyond the golden towers.

Because I can remember this I'm still here and I can count the fingers on my hand. Four fingers and a thumb that I last saw pressed up on the warm glass to steady me while I leaned and looked at something which should not have been there. Watched it glinting gold as it caught the sunlight, watched it move steadily across the last blue. My phone rang, but I didn't answer it, a colleague spoke but I didn't turn, I was watching its purpose. I remember it entered my gilded morning with such purpose.

A phone rings now, but a different cry this time and further away. It's so quiet down here and the dust rains down on me so softly, like a tender blanket. A bead of sweat forms at my hairline and starts to roll, carving its way through my snow-capped forehead. It rolls like a skier zig zagging this way and that. A lunatic pathway getting faster until it drops: red. Not sweat then, but blood, which implodes on the American soil beneath my cheek. Such a rich red which turns the dust a grey black and there I am again, with my splayed hand against the warm glass, seeing that red that should not have been there. The purposeful intruder has disappeared and instead such red. A great mushroom of it bubbling out into the blue. Boiling out like a fast blooming flower. An organic, red carnation beautiful in its geometric vase.

Yes, I'm losing blood, but it doesn't matter, I'm sure I have it to spare. My body feels so solid now. It fills all this space with hard muscle and bone. It's seething with life, pulsing and flickering with tiny movements, vibrant and bloody as the carnation. Every sound down here is like an oratorio, every peppering of dust the most sensuous caress. This earth tastes sweet on my lips and in the darkness I can see every colour there has ever been. I am home and warm here. The lovely curve of my spine rests on these jags of concrete and steel as if stretched out on the softest bed. I fell gently and I'm glad. I would not like to have fallen like them. The seeds of the flower, they were dropped downwards one by one, then two or three together. Wheeling black pods, free falling onto stony soil, silent and lonely. I saw them and pitied them. I wanted to put out my hand to catch them, they looked so small and lost. I'm not lost, I'm found, held, cradled in my dusty bed. I belong to this moment, to these memories, which keep me here listening to the phones. There is a chorus of them now, calling together

Is anybody there?

Of course I am. I'm remembering the red carnation and then the hush. I'm recalling how I took my hand from the window, how it left a sweaty mark. Yes adrenaline came quickly, but we were orderly in our flight. Some put papers straight, some returned lids to pens, some pushed chairs under desks. I straightened a pad and turned off my screen. We put out our arms to usher others in front; we held open doors for our neighbours. No-one shouted, no-one wept. It was not the place for that, our light, airy office. It was a place to hurry to, not from. But we had seen the

cruel flower bloom, we knew the colours had changed for ever and there was no reason to stay by the window, nothing to see but black smoke and falling fruit.

We just wanted to see the blue again, but we didn't jostle or push. When the lifts were full, we walked quietly to the stairs and descended in rhythm, down, down, down, down...

Hear that? Something is moving above, a grinding, groaning adjustment and I imagine tectonic plates shifting slowly and inexorably; changing the make up of the world all those millions of years ago. It's changing again now, but more quickly and the fine dust of it is still settling on the precious bones, which make a bridge of my graceful neck. It feels like a lover softly blowing kisses and would lull me to sleep but the memories keep me awake. They want me to remember that we kept going two by two until the steps themselves rocked and we tottered and then ducked instinctively, just as I would duck now hearing the noises above. But I can't move, nor do I need to. I know I'm safe here, that I can't fall as more did when a second intruder sliced the blue and entered our golden tower. This sound was like the end of the world, not an adjustment. We staggered against each other clutching walls and rails, our eyes widening. Then someone started to move and we all followed. To a quicker rhythm now, down, down, down and round the corner, down, down, down and round to meet them coming up sweating with the weight of steel helmets and fire axes, stamping their booted feet. They had purpose too and we were reassured, we smiled and cheered them on. Heroes, American heroes everyone. We clapped them on the back and made way to let them pass. They were

used to the hot red and smoky black, 'Go on up', we said, thinking 'This is your place now, not ours.' Yes, I remember, how they smiled back for our sakes, in spite of knowing, yet still hopeful and determined to go on, to get there, to meet the fierce, searing heat of the reddest hell on earth, on American earth. True American heroes and each of their faces is a permanent snapshot in my mind. A set of photographs, which include the look on the face of a young colleague as he glanced back past me at their disappearing feet. He hesitated for just a second, breaking the rhythm of his step, tripping so I had to steady him and guide him on down in search of the blue.

The dust is getting much thicker, I think the seismic shifts above are causing it. It's muffling the sound but I can still hear the phones. One just stopped, but then another immediately started up. They are taking turns, desperate to get through. They'll try anything. Hear that one? That's new. A little Copland isn't it? Or am I imagining things? There it goes again. From Appalachian Spring I think. Clear chiming notes, like the clear blue and gold we were running to, down the stairs, across the foyer and out through the doors. Clear notes singing out

Are you there America? Is anybody, anybody there?

Yes, I'm here, still here and to prove it I put out my tongue and taste my sweet, sweet blood. I raise my darling head a little too, I want to smell my sweat, but I can't. The air is dense with dust. It hangs in soft veils, clogging my nose and lining my eyelashes. My eyelids are so heavy I would like to close them, to float like this dust which has surrounded me ever since I left the building. As we

stepped out onto the sidewalk, we instinctively looked up, but the blue and gold were gone and our music was only the wailing of fire engines and police cars.

How we ran then our knees bent, our feet slapping. Someone clutched at me and we stumbled shoulder to shoulder until we heard that terrible noise. It drove my companion on, but I stopped and turned and looked back. I had to, I wanted to see. But it was too late and as I stood it came rushing towards me and before I could move a step I was overtaken.....

By the ash of Pompeii, by the lava of Mount Etna, by the mud slide, the bomb blast, the rising waters, the teargas, the tsunami, the earthquake, the sandstorm. By sleep. Sleep, I must sleep. It's warm as blood down here and the dust is too soft; my cheek can no longer resist it's pillowy charm. I look at my porcelain white hand. One finger is lifted and seems so lonely I wish I could take it in my mouth and lick it clean and kiss it. My thigh too I would love to stroke back into feeling. But I'm so warm and sleepy my longings are distant, like that slow thudding which could be my own heartbeat, or...perhaps... someone somebody pounding above?

It is a heavy, stunned note and like the bass on a passing car stereo it's getting fainter and fainter. Now all I can hear is the phone. Just one, still crying out into the dark. Calling

America!

Oh America!

America! America!

