

**Four poems: Argus Inside, Cyclops, Krak de Chevalier, Palmyra, plus A Matter of Context**

**SANDY FEINSTEIN, PENN STATE BERKS**

**Argus Inside**

Peacocks, said to embody Hera's watchful many-eyed guardian, have tiny black eyes, sight belying the tail unfurled to sin as Zeus would and did, perhaps why Argus saw and didn't see the God raining Danae gold, feathering Leda, lowing to Europa, and that other unnamed by those who would keep the secret still or simply failed to see despite one hundred eyes set in the revolving sky. Looking through one windowpane to rows of windows stacked in fours at least six times around the angle of limestone columns I wonder if one hundred eyes see one hundred individual grains or undelineated pale limestone dust flying nowhere in particular before the scrim of square frames, pink slatted window shades blocking heat and someone seeing something that must not be seen behind the dark rectangular holes receding into black that five score eyes created by vexed divinity might penetrate but two do not.

**Sandy Feinstein**

## **Cyclops**

One eye stupefies, Odysseus knew  
barely disguised by the cover of sheep  
rushing into a cave made darker by ocular  
singularity, the light above or below  
in some missed corner, a niche to hide  
the fretting ewe and what remains of day.  
How does the never closed blue eye of Allah  
see the trash of time blown against yellow  
limestone unmentioned by travelers fixed  
on swirling opened bag unloosed by careless  
navigators disregarding divine warnings  
about the wind and weather, loosed storms  
breaking their boats in pieces appropriated  
and sold as something whole, driftwood  
churned by violent tides said to be endemic  
to the geography redrawn by the hand  
now extending a poor wooden slat once  
the straight mast or dry hull, nobody's  
boat one dilated pupil barely sees,  
as if it were the evil eye powered  
by spells or muscle lacking more  
than one cornea and retina limited  
to one view where the vanishing lines  
of perspective have yet to be figured.

**Sandy Feinstein**

### **Krak de Chevalier**

Off the highway to Tartus and other castles, a road leads  
through a grove half remembered, olives perhaps  
or parsley planted before the incline leaves the terraced  
gardens, and keeps rising, winding round a small  
village, past metal pointers to the crusader fortress  
cold as the Middle Ages without great tapestries  
and lit torches, the windows open to winter wind  
gray as aging stone burned with unchronicled fires  
or exhaust spewn from old taxis and tourist buses.  
In dark January, a dog and donkey are all the traffic,  
territorial skirmishes of another kind. No hooves or paws  
clatter through the warren of rooms, approach slits  
sighting enemies and towers making swords superfluous  
by God's will figured in medieval stone rosettes  
revealing dark interiors, a chapel yielding to a mosque.

### **Sandy Feinstein**

**Palmyra**  
(for Liza)

You would find God somewhere in these ruined columns.  
Shinny up the highest, perch on its capital, gaze upward  
neck bare, your offering to the spirit sun.  
I look down, wobble on the pillar  
recall yellow dates, the concrete hotel  
(I hear you hiss like my camel).  
Diocletian's camped to defend Zenobia's ruins,  
scorn his guard bivouacked on marble, sing  
beauty uncontained by military order.  
Who else mourns displaced sand?  
Bel seems to me as good a god as any.  
His temple proof enough, if proof is needed.  
Deposed, as he had Zeus, now together entombed  
like Elhabel and his brothers raised not quite so high  
as Ganymede who takes their souls to Olympus—  
if one can believe there's still a God .

**Sandy Feinstein**

## **A MATTER OF CONTEXT**

### **SANDY FEINSTEIN, PENN STATE BERKS**

Preparing for my Fulbright year in Syria that would begin in 1998, I read what I could find in Winfield, Kansas where I was then teaching. The internet was in its infancy, though I tried to learn some basic Arabic – which turned out to be useless: Syrian Arabic little resembles what was on offer online in 1998. My research was similarly accidental and haphazard. I had read medieval alchemical texts originally written in Arabic because I was teaching a course called ‘From Alchemy to Chemistry’. I would learn that Syria has numerous important alchemical manuscripts I would never be adept enough in Arabic to read.

Even without being an adept, alchemy may serve – as revenant, as ideal, as transformation – to describe what I learned from the travel and historical guides (Cadogan, Ball, Joris), scholarly works (Pitard, Rooke, Spellberg, Shaaban, Chow), autobiographies (Waldmeier, Tergeman, al-Shaykh, Balakian), poetry, and fiction, often suggested or lent to me by friends and colleagues. Not surprisingly, the first works I read before leaving were all from the point of view of the west: British, Swedish, Swiss, and American. That said, while these texts did not circumvent the complexities of the past, they reshaped legends, depending on voice and teller; they were like the ruins themselves, a layer on top of a layer jostling old stones, stones sometimes removed to build new structures elsewhere, contexts and stories inevitably shifting over time and geographies. Krak de Chevalier was for T.E. Lawrence, ‘perhaps the best preserved and most wholly admirable castle in the world.’ Its changing hands from Christian to Moslem didn’t later Lawrence’s opinion, even while what was inside was repurposed – chapel or prayer room; from a distance, it still appears imposing, imperious. Local legends focus on Saladin or the Assassins, which western accounts underplay in terms of their success (Ball 1998). I heard over and over that Saladin was the more honorable leader and warrior until I was sure I had read that somewhere.

In my journal entry of 26 September 1998, I wrote regarding the poem I was working on, 'Argus Inside': 'I have an idea for a group of poems about Syria – Argus – the 100 eyes, ways that place might be seen, has been – and wonder if with each eye, one sees something else or more or less, or is the sight steadily confused?' I didn't then consider that the contrast in perspectives was partly the difference in the source of the legends that informed both what I saw and what I read and what I felt.

Similarly, Palmyra, in Syria called Tadmor, is seen as a wonder of antiquity that included the pagan temple of Bel, destroyed after I left Syria. That destruction itself, though, marks the region's never-ending war that has cost the country far more lives than marble monuments. The marble shards amidst the other ruins of empire, conquest and attempted conquest signify the strength of legends that inform history and the histories that shape shared legends, making them seemingly indestructible. So many cultures and religions inform the places my poems contemplate before their fall, destruction, reconstruction – whether in the time of the Caesars, the Middle Ages, the Ottomans, the French Mandate, or the present.

My initial interest in Palmyra was not, however, primarily the Temple of Bel, or Agatha Christie's sojourn there with her archeologist husband (though I stayed at the same hotel as they did), but what the Monk – one of Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims – says about the place and its queen in his tale, 'De Casibus Vivorum Illustrium', in English, the 'Fall of Illustrious Men'. Chaucer doesn't put Queen Zenobia in his *Legend of Good Women*, but, rather, has his pilgrim Monk begin his exemplum on the only female included in his tale of fallen illustrious men, as follows:

Cenobia, of Palymerie queene,...

So worthy was in armes and so keene

That no wight passed hire in hardyness,

Ne in Lynage, nor in oother gentillesse.

Of kings blood of Perce is she descended—

I seye nat that she hadde moost fairnesse,

But of hir shape she might nat be amended.

(2247, 2249-54)

Zenobia, Queen of Palmyra...

So worthy was in arms and so keen

That no man passed her in hardiness,

Nor in Lineage, nor in other nobleness.

She is descended from Persian king's blood—

I don't say that she was the most fair,

But her body could not be improved upon.

In short, Zenobia was a warrior queen. She was a legend in Chaucer's time, in Medieval England, as well as in Medieval Italy, where Boccaccio included her in his text of the same name from which Chaucer borrows. In The Monk's treatment, she is Wonder Woman, eschewing the 'Office of women' to hunt wild animals, run all night in the mountains and sleep under bushes; she also runs so fast no one can catch her and wrestles (and defeats) young men foolish enough to challenge her. Though she is married off, it is to the perfect match, not only a Prince but one who had the same 'fantasies' as she, and so they lived in perfect companionability, 'in joye and in felicite'. Of course she is mostly chaste – even in marriage – bears two sons, but still conquers many 'great regnes' (kingdoms) with her husband, from whom she will inherit the kingdom. Indeed, after her husband's death she retains power over all her lands, defeating and cowing even Roman emperors until finally losing to Aurelius.

This is one of the legends constructed in the Middle Ages, here by Chaucer's Monk, to demonstrate the fickleness of fortune, and where true salvation lies. To me, though, she deserved to be in the Pantheon, a super-heroine among a preponderance of heroes. She shares company with Old Testament figures as well as real and mythical kings and conquerors, ranging from Lucifer, Adam, and Sampson to Alexander, Julius Caesar, and Croesus. To those I met locally, her achievement was in defeating Rome, a symbol of western imperialism and overreaching.

I went to Palmyra three times.

On 10 October 1998, I wrote about the poems I had been working on, noting that 'these all take different shape – probably because I cannot get the shape of the country.' More than twenty years later, and far from Aleppo, where I lived, I have a better idea of why it was so hard to find its shape: though I knew there were many stories, I inevitably tried to connect them to what I knew, the legends of Athens and Rome, the western canon. I would look first at what could be literally seen and inch my way through the doors until I came to the stories I didn't know. Legends collapsed into one another. And that is what you have here.

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