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The Cow

On the road from Samarkand

The road from Samarkand
slices blue-black and bored
through the salt-veined desert,
past cotton fields bleached
copper green and white,
past mulberries massed
in dusty ranks like soldiers
of the Great Khan. At the edge
of town we thread our way
through busloads of women
and children bound for those very
fields, a “voluntary”
Sunday picking cotton.
It is November, clear
and cold. We woke in darkness,
the stars of Ulug Beg
wheeling about the astringent
heavens, dressed in silence,
fingers thick with chill.
Snorting and bucking, the bus
complains its way forward,
exhaling little puffs
of air laced with lemon
disinfectant. We daydream
caravans of hard-mouthed
camels, salve imaginary
saddle sores, brush
the coruscating sand
from flesh etched by desert
winds. Cross-pollinating
cultures—Mongol-eyed
faces girding a squat

Russian church, a verb
meaning “the ground reddens
with blood,” the harem of
the last Bukhara emir
locked in the arms of Red
Army regulars (we
are assured the ladies went
willingly)—the desert
pays them no nevermind,
puzzling only now
and then at the asphalt
ribbons unfurling among
its oases. And,
in the careless way of deserts
and seas, here it casts up
a peril: groan, shudder,
halt. Throaty Uzbek vowels:
“Flat tire. Please to walk out.”
We tumble down steps
to the hollowing sand. The sun
creeps cautiously along
the ridge, fingers the horns
of a solitary cow—
head tipped back, legs collapsed
beneath, eyes run wild
in sudden, staggering
intimation of what
it means to be mortal.
“Been dead some time,” opines
a man surveying the carcass
with what passes for
a practiced air. “Climate
preserves ’em well.” He spits,
stumps off with the satisfied
look of one who has
divined some mystery.

The crowd breaks into twos
and threes, some wandering up
the nearest slope, some clumping
close to where a tire
is being fitted to
the axle. *By our deeds
ye shall know us.* The driver
pulls a hose from the belly
of the bus. Water spills
black upon the ground
and burns away. These sands
run unchanging to Bukhara,
looped and laced by a veil
of frailest green—too frail
to sanctify a dead
cow kneeling in the dust,
bemused stars
—nothing—
reflected in her eyes.