

## Exodus · *Alicia Ostriker*

### 1. NILE

High clouds gaze  
Water far from its source  
Straight as a line  
Marking a playing field

A basket of reeds wobbles  
In the shallows  
A girl giggles  
Disobeying her father

### 2. SLAVERY

The Egyptian foreman was beating the Hebrew  
With a leather whip  
That was what Moses saw  
When he emerged from Pharaoh's palace  
And took a walk through the construction site  
Like Buddha leaving the palace  
Of protected boyhood  
And seeing sickness, old age, death  
Pop forth in front of his eyes—just like that  
And being horribly shocked.  
Fight or flight.  
Moses felt himself turn to rock.  
He wanted to vomit.  
He killed the Egyptian.  
Next day he saw two Hebrews fighting  
At lunchtime, two slaves. He intervened  
Rebuking the offender but both men  
Jumped up in his face

They waved their tattooed arms  
Will you kill us  
Like you killed the Egyptian, they yell  
Meaning who the hell  
Do you think you are.

To be a slave is to be brutalized.  
To be free, then, would entail  
What, exactly?—he  
Was out of there by nightfall.

### 3. THE BURNING BUSH

In the middle of a rocky meadow  
It flamed like a ship on fire  
In the ocean, reflecting luridly  
Greasy smoke  
Blew in his face and stung him  
When he came closer  
It was letters of the alphabet, sharp  
As brambles, aflame  
And wriggling. It said Come here—  
It said Take off your shoes—  
A voice booming  
And horrible

### 4. SINAI

The prophet has been climbing up the bowl  
Of this mountain since early morning  
It has turned blue, rose, mere granite  
All day long, as the hours pass, and now  
Mist and pearly cloud are stretched below him,  
The valley where Israel camps is occluded by darkness

Under that shadow people are afraid  
Like young children and dogs in a thunderstorm  
But above him are crags,  
Precipices, the sky like sapphire,  
Like poppies, like glass, like a knife  
All purities compounded  
He rushes to the end of time  
The sill of eternity  
The crack of lightning

## 5. WILDERNESS

Never to be loved, Moses  
Doesn't so much mind that  
Because every year he  
Can see the enslavement  
Dropping away, the babies  
Being born who will obey  
No king.  
He sits in his tent  
Writing. Light filters whitely  
Through the cloth, and makes  
His stylus sing.

## 6. THE PROMISED LAND

Moses is seventy  
He climbs Mount Nebo  
At dawn on the Lord's orders  
He looks out over the land of Israel  
He sees the body of Jacob  
Beloved father, shepherd and wrestler  
Extended from Sinai to Galilee  
Like a mighty man still asleep  
As the sun rises.

Moses is dazzled,  
Dizzy, elderly. He rubs his eyes.  
A spear of sunlight shoots  
Along the Jordan River.  
*Mine*, he thinks.  
The Lord appears out of the sun  
And presses his face  
Up into Moses' face  
Speaks to him mouth to mouth  
*No*, he replies, *No*.

## 7. MOSES TO JOSHUA

They are alone  
On Nebo, Moses kisses Joshua  
Touches a final time  
His chosen body  
About to descend the barren hills  
About to cross Jordan  
About to be followed by hordes  
Of ordinary humans, ignorant,  
Greedy, lustful, violent and disrespectful  
Who will flow like honey into the land  
That has been prepared for them.

The young man's motionless copper muscles  
Shine as if they have been oiled  
Or glazed, the restless Moses  
Cannot understand such immobility  
But Joshua's blue eyes jump  
Like rabbits across a field  
Strewn with traps,  
They scan interior maps, they  
Correlate supplies with population,  
Run an imaginary thumb  
Over a spear point.