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workshops

‘From the land of the darkness’

‘The Book of Ibn Fadlan’, 921 AD

by Steve Brown

Here’s a piece of accidental reading
I cannot shift from my always distractible,
Ever-shifting mind – it sits in the present times,
A hard black stone, troubling icy waters:

In 921, far from the poetic gardens
Of Baghdad, Ibn Fadlan, emissary,
On a diplomatic mission to the Bulghar khan
(a new convert to Islam, appealing for aid
Against the oppressive Jewish kingdom
Of Khazars beyond the Caucasus),
Himself civilized, polished, suave,

Though thrown amongst the pagans,
And swaddled absurdly in endless layers
Against the biting cold, encounters for the first time
Pale strangers he calls Rhus
(although we might call them Vikings,
And in the England of that time
They would be most known as Danes).
They were ferrying slave girls from the North
(perhaps from Sweden, maybe England,
Even Ireland) down the grey flats of the Volga
Towards the markets of Itils, Baghdad
Or Byzantium, all in the quest for solid silver,
Bright-eyed coins called dirhams
(perhaps those to turn up later, disinterred
From buried hoards in York or Mainz or Dublin).

He has a cool anthropological eye:
Inquisitive, puzzled, clear of judgment;
He notes down everything he sees
Dispassionately – as though his hand
Were touching ice: the unfamiliar cold
Made clear and solid, blocked, unyielding,
New to him. He notes their skin –
A pallid red, covered in green tattoos:
They stand like palm trees. He doesn't blink
When they wash themselves in dirtied water,
Swimming with phlegm from themselves
And others, as the one bowl is passed between them.
He sees how they use their 'wares' –

Without shame or ceremony,
In plain daylight, indifferent to anyone's eyes;
They mount the girls at whim, as they see fit.

When one of the 'masters' dies – suddenly,
Perhaps from excess of their strong alcohol –
Ibn Fadlan notes the elaborated rites,
The drawn-out ritual, all calculated
To mark departed greatness, the regard
For dying power. He must not go alone.,
Someone must answer 'Who will die with him?'.
The words 'I will' once uttered cannot be rescinded.
One of the slave girls so answers. (Does she do this
Knowingly, having her reasons to escape this life?
Is she tricked, provoked? Ibn Fadlan doesn't know:
The minds of others, others' misery,
Is to him as is a clouded mirror).
Then the man's body is buried in cold earth
Ten days – and when dug up, the soil so iced,
It will be unchanged, though the skin turned black.
The girl, meanwhile, drinks and sings, must visit
In turn each of the living men's tents,
Where they in turn will use her – each saying after
'Tell your master I did this for love of him.'
And then the Angel of Death must come to her
- An older woman with a body thick
And sinister. It is she who will lead the girl
Towards the master's boat now lifted onto ground,
And where his blackened body now sits

Upon a mattress in his best clothes and sable cap.
The girl is lifted up three times, to glimpse
Her coming paradise – and then led in
By the old woman; the men outside strike
Upon their shields, in order to drown out
What they know will shortly come: the girl's
Last cries, for in that tent upon the boat
Two men pull upon a rope around her neck,
And the Angel, with a broad-bladed knife, stabs.
Brands are thrown upon the wood, prepared
And underneath the boat. Soon all is ashes.
When all is cold – master, boat, and girl, and all –
A low earthen mound is raised, round
And topped with a great post. Then all move on.

All this from the book of Ibn Fadlan,
Late of the poetic gardens of Baghdad.

Here then it is: this black stone,
Accidental, which will not wash away.
What should I make of it? Perhaps:
- That time is fluid, but never flown,
- that civility is as thin and tearable
As this paper – that we are all children
Both of slaves and slavers – that flesh
Is always bartered, yielding butter
In the hands of power – that Inferno
Is always here and now. We must be busy
Collecting up the scattered parts

Of paradise, but noting down those dark, sharp
Shards of hell, like this black stone
Troubling the icy water.