

Martin Robertson

On the Border

“You! Hi! You over there!
One of your goats is caught in a bush, caught tight.
You’ll leave her there for good if you don’t take care.
No, down a bit. Yes, there—a bit to your right.”

“Thanks. Did you lose a lamb the other day?
I found a dead one this side, not far from here,
not one of mine, or any of ours I’d say.”
“A month ago. . . That’s what became of her.

How’s your father?” “Old now. Your sister—what’s her name?—
kept the flock sometimes a year or two ago—
how’s she?” “Just had a boy.” “Long life to him.”
Thanks. They’ve taken her man for the army though.”

“My brother’s been called and I’ll be going soon
—have to put off getting married.” “It’s a hard life.
Why can’t the bastards leave each other alone?
Ruined if I go—there’s only my pregnant wife—”

“I hope it’s a boy.” “Thanks. How can she keep the flock?”
“My two unmarried sisters can manage ours.”
“You’re lucky.” “What about dowries? Call that luck?”
“Everything’s arse-up, blast it. Blast them! Wars!”

Behind in the cities words boil up to war
—Athens and Sparta, Paris and Berlin,
Rome and Carthage, London and Edinburgh.
The world goes round and the words come round again.

Down in the plain Napoleon or Pericles
draws to the drill-ground the flower of life and land.
The shepherds of Parnes or the Pyrenees
are fetched to the ranks, and the frontier-posts are manned.

The men to the ranks and the women to the fields,
grease wiped from rifles, a new edge ground on spears
—a stack of polished shells or polished shields
catches the sun across two thousand years.

“Good-bye.” “Good luck.” “But you can’t trust them. He may
have stolen that lamb—too many of them get lost.”
“Why does he keep his flock so far this way?
Or has he an eye on the strength of the Twelve-Mile Post?”

Billowing, settling, over wood and hill,
now wind-blown clear, now eddying round again,
the founts unquenched, the fumes of brimstone spill
from the cities of the plain.