



Lorand Gaspar

Earth Absolute
& Other Texts

TRANSLATED BY

Mary Ann Caws & Nancy Kline

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Earth Absolute

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Contents

- o Mary Ann Caws, Preface
- vi Nancy Kline, Introduction

Earth Absolute'

- 2 "They tell me I was born in 1925..." *
- 26 *Approach of the Word*
- 38 *The Fourth State of Matter*
 - Knowledge of the Light
 - Iconostasis
 - Shells
 - The Garden of Stones
- 94 *Earth Absolute' **
- 214 *Corrosive Body*
- 230 Bibliography

* Translated by Nancy Kline. All other texts
translated by Mary Ann Caws.

Preface

LORAND GASPAR

When I first knew Lorand Gaspar, many years ago in 1982 — though in no way does it feel so long ago —, it was as a poet, a friend of my great poet friend René Char, arriving in New York for the first time. Immediately, he and his wife Jacqueline became great companions and companion walkers around the city, both in Manhattan & in Brooklyn.

We talked about everything under the sun, it seemed to me, and most particularly, about the lamentable state of bookstores and the possibilities of finding the poets you cared to read, as well as the state of the universe, in its lamentable and yet miracle-worthy being. Being, that's what it was and is about. *Le merveilleux* — roughly speaking, the marvelous, but of course that translation, as it happens with so many renderings of an in-itself marvelous French word, falls far short of what the term meant — & what we meant in speaking together of all this — in the original. We were trying, all three of us, to locate exactly what, in France, in New York, in the world and its political self, was at that moment important to talk about. And, if it isn't too preposterous a thought, I think we were not far from whatever any of us might have conceived as the truth. Then, if you like, and on.

And so we walked and walked, the three of us. And talked and talked. About what mattered, if that's the way to put it, and also what didn't. What did was poetry, in all the senses of that wonderful word. Lorand Gaspar was, in my view, and remains always, a superb embodiment of a poet at that term's best. He had the essential wide-ranging curiosity and knowledge, of people and situations, and shared it willingly.

As both surgeon and poet, manifesting both a scientific and a lyrical mind and expression, he was at that point, for his work, based in Tunisia. Would I come over, he asked, and speak about poetry there? How could I have refused, as I did, in a peculiar timidity I now marvel at? and regret, ah so deeply.

But that could not have mattered in itself: he had and has the generosity of a gentleman intellectual, and remained faithful to ongoing friendship. At that first moment of walking, he had published a first state of *Le Quatrième Etat de la matière*, and offered it to me, as he did all his ensuing works. It wasn't that I could possibly understand the scientific reach of his mind and writing, but that, in his affection, he wanted to give me what he had, and he did.

I wasn't up to the scientific side, but he knew that and pardoned it of course, as he pardoned my eventual never making the voyage he invited me to make. It wasn't that that mattered, it was friendship, the kind of friendship poets can offer and we can accept with our entire selves, wherever we are.

So I was not here when I received my copy of the book we are now publishing with such joy. His inscription in my copy of this *Sol absolu*, or *Earth Absolute*, the work Nancy Kline and I have translated, reads like this, and remains as witness to the voyage I did not make:

Yesterday in New York was lonely (as are the skyscrapers) without you, but until soon, and in Sidi Bon Said — affectionately, Lorand

Paris March the 1st 1982

But last year I went again to Paris to see Lorand and Jacqueline, and that voyage remains fixed, as an unmistakably poetic moment, in my mind.

Mary Ann Caws

New York, May 21, 2014

P.S. One other thing about Lorand Gaspar that may not have appeared in all our translations is his enormous sense of humor along with his no less enormous sense of melancholy — which makes it all the more appropriate that he should have been the winner in 1967 of the Prix Guillaume Apollinaire for his *Fourth State of Matter* — both of them arriving in Paris from somewhere else, & merging a sense of otherness with a particular intimacy with the French language.

Translator's Introduction

In his uprootedness and multiplicity, his life “of movement through space-time, but also... over cognitive and cultural expanses,” as he himself has put it (LM 2), Lorand Gaspar mirrors the century of upheavals into which he was born: in 1925, in Transylvania (now part of Romania), into a Hungarian family. He grew up speaking Hungarian, Romanian, and German and, once he entered school, French, the language in which he ultimately chose to live his life and write his poetry. As a very young man, took his “first ‘great journey,’ if independent of my will” (LM 2), in a closed cattle car, to a German POW camp in Germany. In 1945, he made his way across a world in ruins to Paris, where he studied medicine and ‘mutated’ into a French citizen (LM 3). It was in 1954 that he became a surgeon at the French hospital in Jerusalem, where he remained for the next sixteen years.

Earth Absolute is the poet’s compendium and distillation of those years in the Middle East, first written as he was preparing to move on again, about to leave this region that he loved but whose turbulence had finally become too disruptive. The text is his long love poem to

*the naked song of the Judean mountains which
revealed itself to my thirst on the pathways
of Rock-strewn Arabia, desolate and blessed. (EA 2)*

Even this brief dedicatory sentence shimmers with a number of *Earth Absolute*'s major leitmotifs: the poet's thirst, the music of the desolate landscape, the multiple pathways through it, and the epiphanies it offers, the ubiquity of rock. The text brims with light and mystery & science, brief lyrics interspersed with longer poems, biblical citations, and prose passages that speak of ancient history, medicine, geology, geography, religion, archeology, linguistics, botany, the act of love, the act of writing, the vigilance required to make poems. In a multiplicity of voices, *Earth Absolute* evokes the desert and the creatures who inhabit it: nomads, saints, burrowing toads, gerbils ("athlete[s] of hydric asceticism" [38]). "ON THE BURNING ROADS ... WITHIN SIGHT OF NOTHING" (6), in "familiarity with the void" (7), these wanderers and isolates (but *are* they isolated, traveling on what Gaspar calls "the unmapped roads of solidarity in motion" [11]?) — these wanderers are joined on the white expanse of the page by the poet, in mid-stride, "*space flung negligently over one shoulder*" (EA 48).

Gaspar tells us in the short autobiographical essay that introduces *Earth Absolute* how, on his first trip to Jerusalem, flying over the desert for the first time, he can't keep his eyes away from "*the rhythmic beige and brown of the great sensual undulations that were the mountains of Ammon and Moab.*" Instantly seduced, the poet, this "*offspring of a country of forests,*" wonders

what was there in my make-up that resonated so immediately with the vibration of this desolate land? In the course of the years, each time I came back to it, after a longer or shorter absence, the perception of these meager colors, these curvatures, these mesas, these rhythmic faults, unfolding as would a fugue, flooded me, physically, with the same simple and unutterable joy... I was in love with this country.
(8–9)

The poet-lover rejoices here, as in *Earth Absolute*, in the land's rich 'meagerness,' and he experiences the body of the desert, its beige curves, its "shimmering pelt" (EA 60) and hidden liquids, not only as a locus of desire but also synesthetically, as a fugue, a grand rhythmic piece of music. He will transcribe this music not just in his choice of words, but also in his idiosyncratic placement of words on the page.

On first reading *Earth Absolute*, one is immediately struck by its typography, which, as Jérôme Hennebert has written, breaks "the linearity of poetic discourse" (JH 1) and "spatializes" (JH 2) Gaspar's poetry, as in the following text:

desert

what remains of music
when the design is no longer visible
as if light had eroded
the time and the place that belong to things
as if the grammar of the depths were readable
by the hand illuminated on the regs

anchorites

lizards

snakes

hyenas & cynhyenes

through the morning's gorges
on the evening's slopes

the unmapped roads of solidarity in motion

the wild oryx
the Arabian gazelle

the wind across the plains of Sam south of the Euphrates

barillas
shrivelled shrubs
sandstone plateaus
sheer-cut psammites
streaming thalwegs
depths of the eocene sea

the same nakedness of life

one single

respiration

(EA 11)

If Gaspar often invokes the desert's spacious emptiness ("*the naked tables of the winds*" [73], "familiarity with the void beneath the scattered names" [7], "sand limitless NOTHING" [4]), as above, its desolation is also a scattered plenitude of living creatures, plant and animal, here specifically named (barillas, anchorites, lizards, gazelles) in a specific geography (the plains of Sam, the Euphrates) and a breadth of erudition (psammmites, thalwegs, the Eocene Sea) that is characteristic of *Earth Absolute*. So too is the epic lyricism coupled with the abstruse vocabulary of the verse: "the hand illuminated on the regs" (*reg*: an Arab word connoting a certain form of rocky desert), and the poem's spacious last line, which can be seen to *breathe* in the desert of the page:

r e s p i r a t i o n

"*I seek a respiration at the bottom of the stones,*" writes Gaspar (EA 90). The stones *are* the desert, the quintessential place of wandering, its burning sands

worked working without respite
in the atelier of the millennia —

at last, marvelously light and polished
crystalline bodies close to perfection
harder than steel... (EA 17)

The stones are also the individual poems in *Earth Absolute* — worked, working without respite by the poet, as a comparison between the first published version of the text (1972) and its revision, ten years later, will show. This translation contains the poet's revised version (1982), which offered its translator, in addition to the usual conundrums (e.g., what does he *mean*? how can I possibly say that in English?), the challenge of Gaspar's extraordinarily specific multiple vocabularies and the plethora of proper nouns included in his poems and his autobiographical essay in at least three languages: Arabic, Hebrew, and French.

The endnotes to *Earth Absolute* are the poet's. Where a note seems to be called for and doesn't exist, he has not supplied one.

Nancy Kline

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Earth Absolute

“They tell me
I was born in 1925...”

They tell me I was born in 1925 in a small town in eastern Transylvania, whose acquaintance I was able to make a few years later. My parents met there, following the war of 1914–18, though both hailed from the harsh villages of the high Carpathian plateaus; my father had come to find a job after his discharge. As the child of novice city dwellers and happy to be so, I eagerly waited for vacations when I could return “behind the back of God,” as they used to say. I had great affection for my maternal grandmother and for my uncle B., a bachelor, the only member of my family, it seemed to me as a child, who hadn’t betrayed our origins at the heart of the peasant-warrior tribe once stationed there to defend the countryside against the new waves of invaders from the East, which Asia continued to pour into Europe. I later learned that on my mother’s side I didn’t have a drop of the “Székely” blood (the specific name of those Magyars of the mountains). My maternal grandfather was Armenian, and in my grandmother’s family a German dialect was spoken. The only thing lacking from the mosaic was the Romanian element.

After earning a business degree in Germany, this uncle B. had returned “behind the back of God,” where, as my father said, he demonstrated without even trying that he didn’t have a head for business. I loved him deeply.

He was a sort of Taoist philosopher, speaking little, laughing easily, meditating habitually behind the eternal cigarette, happy to be alive, drinking heavily. He died a few years ago, at the age of eighty-six, "behind the back of God," stripped of everything except his good humor. To me, my grandmother seemed entirely transparent, small and thin, dressed in grey and black. I never heard her raise her voice, still less complain; she was all attention, all devotion. She died alone amid the final tide of World War II, which had taken far away from her all of her ten children and their numerous offspring.

These two beings reigned over a small universe of animals, barns, granaries and cellars, carts, ploughs and harrows, not to mention all the clutter of tools, nails, ropes and cans that filled the workshop. Behind the stables ran a mountain stream where the village boys taught me to catch trout under the stones with my bare hands. The great forests of fir trees were several hours away on foot, and among the mountain shepherds there were those who knew how to tame bears & leave them at liberty.

Some twenty kilometers away, a handful of graves were left to speak for the ancestors on my father's side. Widowed immediately after his birth, my grandmother had sold the little she possessed, in order to raise her two sons. By taking in the neighbors' laundry, she had managed to educate the elder son, killed in the first battle of World War I. She had placed my father in a little seminary, which he escaped from at the first opportunity, to hire out as an apprentice mechanic.

The only memory I have concerning this paternal grandmother is of an early morning, still very dark and cold — I must have been three or four — when my parents bundled me, half asleep, into a large black car unlike any I'd ever seen before, telling me: "We're going to Szárhegy to bury your grandmother." My memory has retained only the black of the car, the cold of a night not yet dispersed, and the mysterious idea, encountered for the first time, of death.

My native town, of forty thousand at that time, is built on the banks of a river where we used to swim in the summer and ice skate in the winter. One hour from our house, on foot, the slopes of the mountain were steep enough for skiing and sledding. Between the joys of snow and our wild races on the skating rink, which didn't close till ten at night, I wonder when we found time for our homework, during the four winter months.

My father had come a distance since his escape from seminary. He had the virtues needed to succeed in business, starting from nothing. A continent away, in America, he would have been a self-made man like those I later came across, who recounted their exploits in countless books. He had their energy, their perseverance, their intuition. I think his not emigrating to the United States after the war was the only regret of his life. Since Transylvania was not America — most people can't even place it; an American lady, who knew nothing more, informed me it was 'Dracula's territory' — my father thought the knowledge of several languages essential. He saw to it personally that I learnt the three

languages spoken in our country, & he added a fourth when I began primary school: French. Apart from languages, I needed to know math and physics, all the rest being merely literature. Doubtless he was unaware that the man he'd put in charge of inculcating in me the foundations of this new language (we called him *The Parisian* because he'd studied music in Paris) talked to me only of literature. As soon as I was capable of understanding it, he read to me or had me read aloud *Letters from My Windmill*. As for my high school French teacher, several years later — in one of those miracles that happen in little towns at the end of the world whose monotony is unbroken, aside from a sporting event or a moral scandal — he invited two or three of his pupils to his home and there initiated us, this was the supreme recompense, into the mysteries of Rimbaud's poetry. With equal enthusiasm, I followed the flights of oratory of our Hungarian literature professor, who found my sentimental attempts at stories not devoid of interest. As for my father, he considered with a mixture of indulgence & anxiety these first foolish efforts, published in some little magazine. As long as my grades in the hard sciences were good, it wasn't too serious! The day when, at thirteen, I confided in him that I wanted to become a physicist & a writer both, he looked at me long and hard, the way you look at a species you have vaguely heard about but never before encountered, and then with a smile to mitigate my suffering (or his) he uttered the oracular: "What I have taken so much trouble to construct, you will destroy!" The prophecy came true without my even trying.

In 1943, I'd been admitted to Budapest Polytechnic; my father couldn't have been happier. That didn't last for long. The victorious Soviet army was approaching the frontier. After a few months of intensive training, I found myself behind a gun, which was supposed to help slow down the invasion of Russian tanks. Of this war, I have nothing to tell, beyond my astonishment at having made it out, my departure occurred in a closed cattle car, which carried me toward some unknown destination in Germany. We'd been informed that, following an attempt to negotiate a separate peace in October of 1944, our government officials were seized by the SS of Skorzeny, who installed the Hungarian Nazi party in power.

It was my first trip across Germany. All I saw of it was a sky almost entirely filled with smoke, the interminable march of telegraph poles, the dirty walls of some railroad switching station, in which we were stranded for days, and wide open landscapes where we were strafed by Allied fighter planes. This somewhat peculiar form of tourism ended after a month in the barracks of Swabian Franconia. That I descended unhurt from the train was a new source of astonishment to me, soon followed by many others. When in the month of April 1945, the Allied troops had crossed the Black Forest and were closing in on Stuttgart, the confusion became so great that it was possible to organize and effect an escape. After two weeks of playing hide and seek, we were able to emerge from our burrows: French troops controlled the region. The commander of the unit holding Pfullendorf

had us provisioned and ordered us to present ourselves in Strasbourg. It was a magnificent walk through Württemberg and the Black Forest. I remember the German towns half in ruins and, all around them, the jubilation of nature. A year later, after many other tribulations, I arrived in Paris. It was once again spring, the chestnut trees in the Luxembourg Gardens were flowering, people were smiling in the streets, I told myself the word freedom had a meaning; it was the most beautiful day of my life.

There, I found a small group of young people from Central Europe who wanted, as I did, to remain in France. Devoted members of the Hungarian diaspora in Paris and their French friends helped us to find work. Cook, valet de chambre, longshoreman, door-to-door salesman, night watchman, and so many other makeshift jobs seemed somehow miraculous to my comrades and me, in comparison to the labyrinth from which we were emerging. When I think back to those early Parisian years, which, seen objectively, were hard, all I remember is a joyous ferment, a long feast of friendship and mutual support. How many new faces, how many new ways of seeing and living! What open-armed generosity, after so much hatred and aggression! Though working, in October I was able to enroll in P.C.B. [pre-med studies in physics, chemistry, & biology], and then the years of medicine succeeded one another. Where did this altered course come from? The idea of medicine had arisen and then grown, little by little, developing deep within me along a hidden path. I saw in it, naively, a kind of synthesis

between two poles that never ceased exerting an equally strong attraction on my mind: art and science. It wasn't as simple as that.

You could feed yourself on very little money: a loaf of bread and some eggs, pasta and French fries. Once a week I went to reconstitute my reserves — caloric, proteinaceous & affective — in the home of a classmate's parents, who filled me with good things. It was harder to find cheap housing; many students of modest means had nowhere to live. One day, an enthusiastic and determined group learned that the old brothels, permanently closed under the Marthe Richard law, were not in use. The students stormed the one in Blondel Street, and the government ended up giving them three: Communal Houses were born. A friend who was active in the group succeeded in getting me admitted. That was the way I became, in 1947, one of the tenants in the formerly celebrated Sphinx, on the Boulevard Edgar-Quinet. We formed a republic that was colorful from every point of view, and hard to govern. Just collecting the rent, even at unbeatable prices, was a drama. As for chores, they regularly fell to the same people: those with the lowest tolerance for disorder and filth. Other conflicts arose from the varying demands imposed on one group or another by the course of studies they were pursuing. Between those who really had to wear out the seats of their pants and the joyous band of party animals revolving around a few art students, civil wars flared up, followed by ceasefires celebrated in common. This was a most salubrious experiment in social living.

Approach of the Word

The language of poetry cannot be enclosed in any category, cannot be summed up in any function or formula. Neither instrument, nor ornament, it scrutinizes a word transporting the ages and the fleeting space, founding both stone & history, the welcoming place of their dust. It moves about in the energy that makes and breaks empires. It is this dilapidated backyard, overgrown with grass, its walls covered with lichens, where the evening light lingers a moment.

No one justifies poetry and it needs no defense: I am only trying to see what in myself, guided by precision, goes in such an unchangeable way toward that nightly groping, toward the search of another, a rockier precision. To understand and not, to knock up against, to break, to lose oneself and still to understand. I want to assume all the contradictions, to exceed them. For everything in me knows that I am speaking always the same language (that which *speaks me, constructs me* in speaking, in expressing) on different levels. And it isn't a matter of more or less perfect degrees of elevation, higher or lower: what distinguishes them is a particular movement, a particular nameless organization, a relation to the human and the world. The abruptness of a proof without name and the patient methods of a fragment.

I see no break between the language (or expression), which is the differently enlivened matter, human discourse, and society. Levels of emergence, of composition, of vitality & desiccation, perhaps of sickness, of a same word that shows itself in discontinuous signs, caught up in the game of a formidable combinatory, a game whose matter, rules and energy, text, syntax and writing, it is.

What my ceaselessly interrupted word is seeking, ceaselessly insufficient, inadequate, breathless, is not the pertinence of a demonstration, a law, but the laying bare of a gleam that is ungraspable, transfixing, of a fluidity in turn benevolent and devouring. *A breathing.*

To class, isolate, fix; these exercises guided to their somnolent usefulness, now we are ready for the sleeplessness of genesis.

All these paths I am following open onto something impossible where only the vertical exercise of the word maintains the motion: menace, happiness, & loss. And nowhere any term that would resolve, reassure. Nothing but this narrow pain; nothing but this excessive width. You cannot close off poetry: its central place collapses upon itself, in a compacity that consumes itself, makes holes in itself. An unfounded silence where, against any proof, the fragile word, the scandalous word, the crushing word, the useless word still moves forward.

The poem is not an answer to a questioning of the human or the world. It only digs into and aggravates the questioning. The most exigent moment of poetry is perhaps the one where the movement of the question is such — by its radicality, its bareness, its irrefragable progress — that no answer is expected; rather, all reveal their silence. The breach opened by this gesture effaces the formulations. The separate values, duly catalogued, that create the coming and going between opposite shores are, for a moment of lucidity, caught up in the force of the river. From this word that refers to everything that is burning, the mouth lost forever.

Our meaning and our thought are ceaselessly encumbered with reflections, losing this vivacious fluidity that we sometimes call soul. But someone stops near a dilapidated wall of mud, near a stone where words are lacking. He palpates the seed of an off-white, secreted light. He touches a porous crackled glass, with the rough texture of the voice. Moving through the strata, he works in the very motion and breath of language. An architect of the statute-book, he shapes the material of signs at their birth. Ceaselessly taking up again the veins of an order at the source of their energy, he leads them to a meaning that disappears. This endlessly thirsty seeker, this eternally inadequate person, this scorner of the impossible is above all a worker of language, a worker despairing

The Fourth State of Matter

KNOWLEDGE OF THE LIGHT

Our rivers have caught fire!

A bird sometimes glides over the light —
here it is late.

We shall go through the other end of things
to explore the clear face of night —

I know mornings mad with their stretches
of desert and of sea —
motion reshaping faces
refilling its traces.
Monastery of life of pulmonary flame
in the smoking thickness of noon —
we teach the algæ, the fish
the color of air and the story of man
to set them laughing in the evening in the opaque ink
of the frightened squid

this morning coming so freshly in your eyes
still full of fragile porcelain
the porous day
its long wool kiss
this whole body remaining somewhere for the night.

Light plays in the narrow bodies of birds
brief motions of air where sounds pleat and
reveal the skin the eyes of women

men heavy with trespass, with sleep,
night arched in their backs are looking
at this mesh on the water severed by the slightest things
and over there surely some windowpanes afire —

white walls of rested birds
fossils by chance in the layers of day
waters painted with our passing
the depths are still trembling —

swaying of wings
rapid chasms under the skin
one leans over smoking beaches
with cheeks burned

tender cloths of grey steel
our hands pruned on the slopes
of this light —
and our fingers laugh
at wheels immensely slight
in the most inward house of life
where someone comes
steel
silence
folds.

Sounds swell in the tiles of light.
You've made yourself white night in the white
piercing the net of our sounds.
Distant surfaces devotions
days fritter away in the arena
and the gaze
and the dance —

I have built you from screeches & cries
exhumed then slowly
buried once again.

Blinding slowness
from mineral to the sea
long trips gouged out in time
to find yourself in a plant, a ciliate
the coolness of its nights
all those doors where you are and give up.

Like those astonished gazes
at being dead
as the drunken birds
tear off their feathers
our gestures were too clear
to not surprise
their weight in shadow.

So far off that the smile does not know the eyelids.
Drawn from the long cries of birds in flight
the fluid letter of unremembering things
the day burned you might forget the words.

Over there at the end of the world
over there the suns
the swollen mouth of nights
over there horizons
the wild silk of desire

grave world
where nothing's insulted or ugly
the knife falls
the day walks on the ceilings
in its copper entrails.

The port is repainted black
there are two or three very white boats
where night is lacking —
windows where islands
sunken in the eyes are dreaming.

Oh so much night eaten away to white
we also had a fate of window
where someone cried out with joy —
silence the port at evening
two or three very white boats
where night is lacking —

I wanted to be loved —
exact beggar at the feasts of light
worn out with grey & blasphemies.
From this flesh I keep the bones
of so many stitches —

now the daytime
 the naked eyes
 and someone
has repainted my ceiling of things
and already I see nothing more there —

it is raining in the sun
the trees & houses are graver
by the earth weightier I know where you are
when the eyes are emptied
and you see space through them.

Earth Absolute

*To the naked song of the Judean mountains
which revealed itself to my thirst on the
pathways of Rock-strewn Arabia, desolate
& blessed.*

SILENCE

STONE STONE

still another

STONE

sand

limitless

NOTHING

Altars
stelæ
dolmens
cromlechs
kists

(thick blocks of stone whose massive cubes
cover their ancient sepultures)

or a simple P i l e o f S t o n e s in witness of

an understanding
an accident
a crime
a death

TORTURE of STONING

closing up a well
the mouth of a cistern
wall of stone
tower of vine

c o r a l t o m b s o f P e t r a .

Magi
Caravaners
Bandits
Traffickers
Onagers of men

ON THE BURNING ROADS

myrrh
incense
gold
pearls and stones

ON THE ROAD WITHIN SIGHT OF NOTHING

the enlightened the clairvoyant the blind

“My brothers have deceived me like a stream
like the bed of the seasonal wadis
whose waters swell with snowmelt
and run dry in the burning sun.
For them the caravans leave their routes
plunge into the desert and are lost — ”

ARABIAN PENINSULA

HEDJAZ

granite

porphyry

limestone

volcanic outcrops

rivers of lava

HĀRRA

sulfur jumble

iron ore

copper

silver

word

HĀMD

Tebūk

Teima

el Hedjer

el – Ela

Medina

Mecca

HEGIRA

from the Great Harran of Ḥaibar to Jebel el Kora

familiarity with the void

beneath the scattered names

EROSION

works whose passion is the same as
the coherence of matter
language of innumerable rhythms
displayed crumbled recomposed

CHEMISTRY

of w i n d s
of w a t e r s
of d r e a m s
of l i g h t s

the same movements compose and elucidate
the breadth of the trajectory without intention

more than once at dawn,
 in the desert of Ram or of Toubeig
 or farther south along the shores
 east of the Red Sea in that place where
 pink granite veined with lava, tender sandstone
 and blinding gypsum slow their slopes
 I have dreamed of a genesis
 the universe was emerging without interruption
 not of an order that came from outside
 but ample but full of its music
 at being there infinitely compact pebble
 filled with the dance that vibrates in each sound
 drilled into the light —
 a fugue of clear and shadowed curvatures
 without beginning or end
 poured out from the outpouring
 at the same undivided pace
 breath doubled
 on the pulmonary paths
 the force of silence
 of which these deserts at dawn
 are the unfolded leaf
 the rustling cool — disclosed —

 or again
 on the chalky rotunda
 of the day's last arenas
 the speed of the light
 abruptly penetrated by the languor of a caress
 the murmuring of hands beneath deep skin
 like water from the eyes
 that renders faces a blur —

Good morning to you who come in the night.

Good morning to you regal approach that splits the pulp of the sun.

Good morning to you in the dust.

All this day to wear yourself thin, to wear the day thin.

To the bones of your weariness.

When the light bends over a well —

Peace, noises settle down.

Ah, how hearing smooths out!

Goodnight to you who come in the light, who come as silence.

Like a final eyelid of color or of sound

You migrate in depth, leaving the pallid day on the embalmer's table.

desert

what remains of music
when the design is no longer visible
as if light had eroded
the time and the place that belong to things
as if the grammar of the depths were readable
by the hand illuminated on the regs

anchorites

lizards

snakes

hyenas & cynhyenes

through the morning's gorges
on the evening's slopes

the unmapped roads of solidarity in motion

the wild oryx
the Arabian gazelle

the wind across the plains of Sam south of the Euphrates

barillas
shrivelled shrubs
sandstone plateaus
sheer-cut psammites
streaming thalwegs
depths of the eocene sea

the same nakedness of life

one single

respiration

Stretched between the crest of the Judean range and the depression of the Ghôr, the desert of Judea displays its undulating slopes to the east, like an ocean swell solidified on the immense carboniferous sea.

This orientation shelters it from the humid winds out of the west and exposes it to the scorching breath of the eastern winds.

Rare gusts of winter sweep into the riverbeds deeply sculpted in the cloak of hard rock. The runoff filters into the porosities of the senonian limestone, whose strata are badly joined. These subterranean waters irrigate the oases nestling beneath the steep walls of the Ghôr.

Yet at the end of even a parsimonious winter you can see hilltops of a blinding nakedness covered with a timid, sparsely scattered green that perfumes the gaze. "Let the desert and the arid earth rejoice, ... let her exult and cry out in joy."

Soon the first Hamsin winds make sure to burn the tender down along the flanks of the hills. Then summer leads the landscapes back to their absolute source. Exemplary fate between the brilliant whiteness of the chalks and the reverberation of the overheated browns of the rivers of flint. The pulverized rock pushed by the east wind raises its mud cataract into the arrogance of the blue.

Approaching the crest you encounter the biblical midbâr, a region of semi-desert, a zone of transition where nomads graze their skinny herds, and the fellaheen push their wooden plows between the loose stones that shelter wild cyclamen. Once arrived at the end of his "field," the farmer gazes for an instant, through his mule's legs, at the blue trough of the Dead Sea, scarcely bigger than that sparrow hawk suspended over the fractured fault.

LORAND GASPAR

THE FLINT OF DAYBREAK
KINDLES THE MOUNTAINS
AT THEIR ROOTS

WE WILL SEARCH THROUGH THE CLEAR STONES
TO THE UTMOST LIMIT
OF THE DARK.

*I come from the revealed core of this unavowed walking:
Judea of my shadows, how you dance at the height of day!
The broken sun your stones disclosed to me'
their depths of trees never born
greens without leaves in the thickness of the winds
without road and without rose —
and the empty spring beneath the funerary stone,
so alive that it makes the marble porous,
that the pigments of light emigrate'
in the heavy breasts of night.*

FLINT

like a somber and warm origin dispersed
poem-deserts in the light of evening
stripping duration naked before the eye

flint finely veined with quartz
nodular flint whose silica has
contracted into an ellipsoid
block englobing a fossilized
organism, the debris of clay
and chalk. Sometimes, the
silification of the core being
incomplete, the cavity that's
left fills up with percolated
water, to produce crystals of
calcite or of quartz.

"Then Zipporah took a flint,
cut off the foreskin of her
son and touched it to Mo-
ses' sex, saying: Truly! to me
you are a blood husband!"

THE FLINT OF THE EMBALMER

perfume of our roads at night
ah, the putrid garden of our entrails!

*Every morning at a bound
the sun sure-footed on my face.
I take hold of that burning as if a rudder.*

G r a i n s o f s a n d

worked working without respite
in the atelier of the millenia

at last, marvelously light & polished
crystalline bodies close to perfection
harder than steel in the war
of all against all indefinitely
they revive without ever wearing out

These great deserts of sand
offer us loose soil almost en-
tirely crystalline from which
are absent the silts and clays
so indispensable to organic
growth. And yet, microbio-
logical research demonstrates
the permanence of microflora
in the harshest sands.

*Compact impenetrable sky.
The earth is caught in the hardened tables of its law
which sends the gaze
back infinitely behind its source
to the liquid skeleton of its song.*

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Born in 1925 in Transylvania into a Hungarian family, Lorand Gaspar grew up speaking Hungarian, Romanian, German, and also French, which would become the language in which he wrote. Endowed with many gifts, all of which he grandly used, Gaspar is a surgeon, a poet, & a writer of scientific & lyric prose in addition to a translator of Spinoza, Rilke, Seferis and others.

Sol absolu et autres textes, edited and translated by Mary Ann Caws & Nancy Kline, contains abundant evidence of Gaspar's gifts: an autobiographical essay, a reflection on scientific and medical matters, and poems from diverse periods and places. *Earth Absolute*, the book's central text, is Gaspar's long love poem to "the naked song of the Judean mountains," which, he tells us, revealed itself to his "thirst on the pathways of Rockstrewn Arabia, desolate and blessed." The breadth and scope of his poetics is evident in the text's diversity, too, a complex synthesis of science, ancient history, medicine, geology, religion, archeology, linguistics, botany & more. This erudition is spatialized through Gaspar's lineation, making the poems almost vibrate on the page, resonating with his sensitivity to the vibration of the lands of which he writes.

Also included herein is Gaspar's *Fourth State of Matter*, which received the Prix Guillaume Apollinaire in 1967, and sections from *Approach of the Word*, the writer's reflection on poetics. Gaspar is the recipient of numerous honors including the Grand prix de poésie de la Ville de Paris (1987), the Prix Mallarmé (1993), the Grand prix national de Poésie (1995), and the Prix Goncourt de la poésie (1998). Translated for the first time into English along with brief commentaries by the editors & translators, Lorand Gaspar's *Earth Absolute & Other Texts* conveys the scientific and lyrical mind and expression of one of France's genuinely nomadic poets.



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