



Antoine Cassar
poetry sample

Author of *Forty Days* and *Passport*



Forty Days

Antoine Cassar



from Erbgħin Jum
Ede Books, 2017
National Book Prize 2018
English version edited by Albert Gatt
sample chapbook, unpublished



I

LET US TREAD the first step of this penance,
I and this body spilling ancient guilt.
Forty days, ten thousand steps each morning
till the end of the year, or until I wilt.

The first step. The second step. Each step a leap
over an endless fall, a lurking pit
that cackles and chatters with starving fangs;
pits stationed along the serpentine paths
of the crumpled map of the past.
The third step. The fourth. Each step lighter
than the one before it, begetting the next;
the soles of my feet fathom the ground,
forgetting that they tread a tightrope.
The fifth, the sixth, the seventh — till I lose count
of the ghosts that shrink away behind me,
until my chest advances light as air.



I

I want the drizzle in the ruins of my hair,
I want the flow of sweat along my shoulders,
a baptism rinsing the letters of my name.
I want the rucksack warm against my back,
I want the boil of blood along my legs,
a fire purging my body of its shame.

Forty days, ten thousand steps each morning,
toward no arms but those of the earth's curve,
toward no lips but those of the breeze,
toward no warm bosom but that of the sun.

Forty mornings from today till the end of the year,
to atone for every fault, dispel all fear,
to roll out the map once more, restore its place,
and at the tightrope's end reset the compass,
then either I go on walking, or I wilt.



I CANNOT force you to cherish the sea.
You waited two years to tell me you despise it.
Two years to tell me that the salted air
makes you want to cough out your entrails.
All those hearts traced in the sand to later confess
that, from the start, you've resented my wish
for us to plant our roots on this island.
And all the verses in which I rhymed your breath
with the ebb and flow of the waves, your lashes
with the rise and fall of the waves, your tresses
with the waves I plied to dock at your chest.
Today I can't tell if I sang your name with the sea
or if I sang the sea with the letters of your name.

I cannot force you to cherish the sea.
You waited two years to tell me you despise it.
Right then, the earth slid from beneath my feet,
you left me here with my roots exposed
to a sealess coast, a sandless beach,



II

a soiless island swimming in darkness
where the letters of your name swirl and spiral
and on them and inside them come to nest
a thousand sneering spirits, hand in hand.



WALKING is a balm for the heart. Walk, then.
Should you cry a sea, rinse your feet in it.
Should your eyes burn, plunge them into the wind.
Heed not who belittles you for them to grow.
Heed not who startles you to soothe their woe.
Heed not the red scythe of your rising shadow.
If anything, this pain will spur you on.
Cry, then. Be your very own cat.
Walk. Be the path that welcomes your foot.
Write. Be the word that recounts your silence
and release it to the wind. This is your duty.



v

LIKE A RAINDROP falling never to land,
where is the just desert, the crack, the earth
that had promised to absorb me whole,
to water the land I carry within me,
nurturing flowers to stop its every hole?

From pit to pit I walk and leap and walk,
the thirst for solace pressing through my blood.
The seam of guilt runs deep, it burns well,
there's comfort in this combustion in my chest.
Onward, onward, oxygen in the sails,
ten thousand steps, ten thousand leaps of faith,
don't be afraid to cheer at every streak of blue,
don't be afraid to weep at every willow.
This foot wants to take root. Raise it above the soil.
This foot wants to take wing. Set it back down.
If a monster pops up to halt your tracks
stand your ground, defy him, speak your mind,
watch him give way, and set the next foot down.



v

March on like a wave toward the shore
and then another wave upon another.
Eight kilometres in, you'll start to feel
the throb of fever wither in your blood.

That's enough for today. Now take a rest.
The road will be long, and you've barely set out.
Another day will dawn, with guilt afresh
after another night hearing the ghosts.
Meanwhile, take this newly acquired solitude
to feast upon with bread, swig down with water.

PASSPORT



Antoine Cassar

from Passaport
Ede Books, 3rd ed., 2019
English adaptation by
Albert Gatt & the author
7th edition, unpublished

Yours, old or new friend, of the breath
and of the spine, of the soul and of the
marrow,

of my own generation, whenever you were
born, I have glimpsed the daybreak in
your eyes, and the setting sun,

of my very own landscape, wherever you
were born, I have sensed you in the rock
and in the cities,

yours the grass of Paumanok, the foam
rolling out the pebbles of Isla Negra, and
the dance of light and shade in the arms
of the banyan of Shantiniketan,

yours the words chimkowe, الضيافة,
liberté, 平和, llipímpac, ಸೌವರ್ಗತ,
mbizo mbizo,

yours

the palpable, pullulating pleasure

of a heart pulsating

in your ardent hands.

Yours

this passport

for all peoples,

with a rainbow flag, and the emblem of a
migratory swift encircling the globe,

in any language that you please, official,
dialectal,

in ocean blue, blood red, or coal black ready
for the pyre, the choice is yours,

take it where you will, your passage is safe
and unobstructed, the door unscrewed
from the jambs,

you can enter and leave without fear, there
is no one to stop you,

no one to jump you in the queue or send
you to the back, no need to wait,

no one to say *Ihre Papiere bitte!*, quickening
your heartbeat with the pallor of his
finger,

no one to squint or glare at you in
proportion to the GDP per capita of the
nation you've left behind,

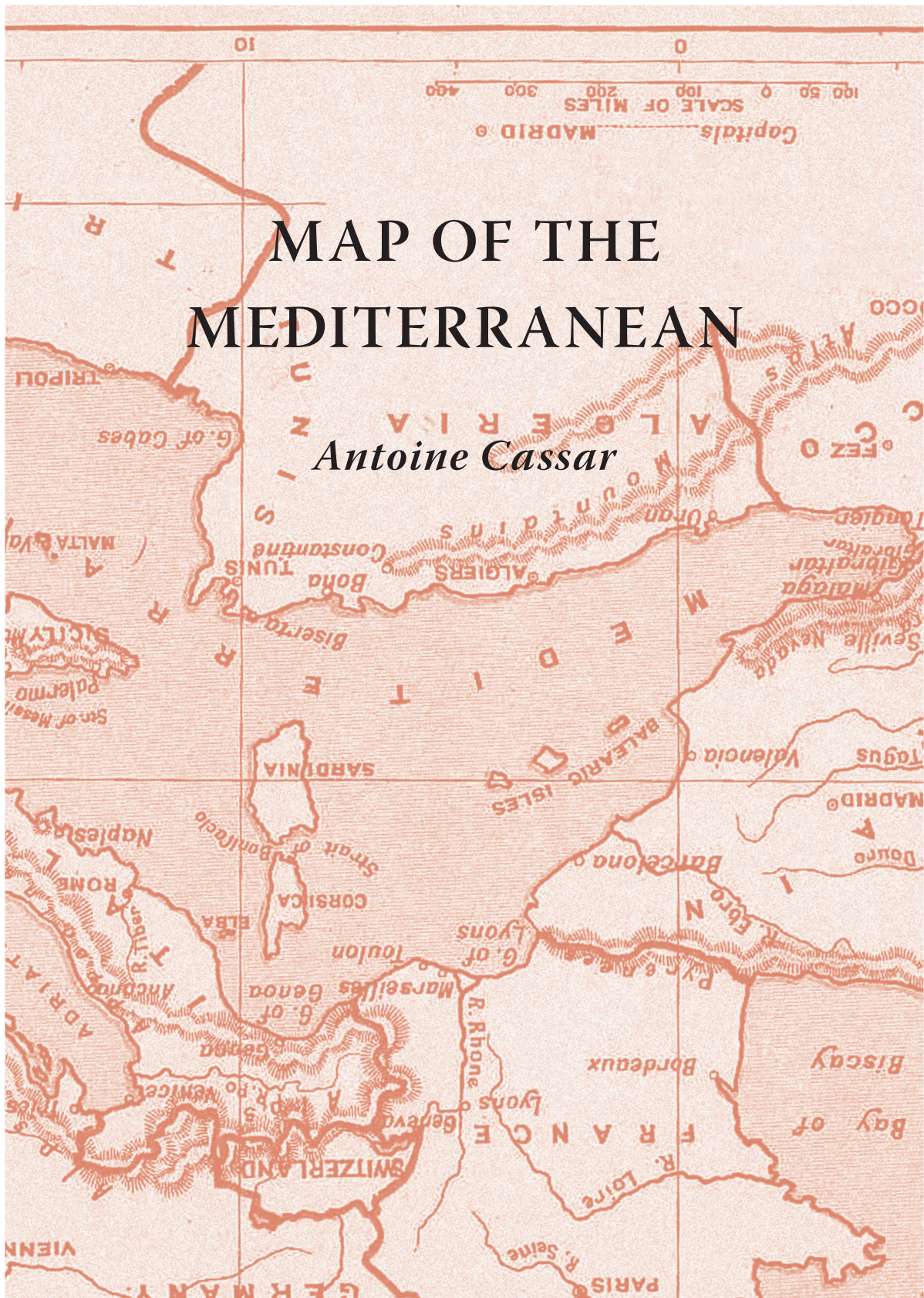
no one to brand you stranger, alien,
criminal, illegal immigrant, or *extra-*
communautaire, nobody is extra,

no one to call you spic, gringo, paki, cholo,
creamy, sudaca, golliwog, chink,

no one to hold you at the business end of
a kalashnikov, or the crowded, craggy
canines of a half-starved dog,

no one to squat you down against a
wall and slip a well-lubed hand from
underneath and calmly probe,

no one to lock you up in an icy cell, to throw
you out again after a sweaty three-night
ordeal, no reasons given, with blood
that's barely dried against your arse...



from Mappa tal-Mediterran
Għaqda tal-Malti, 2013
translated by the author
revised by Alex Vella Gera

Suns and moons sprouted
and drowned, the Mediterranean lit up
and darkened for three and a half
millennia, shining
and dimming, shining
and dimming, as if under the bars
of a cage spinning through space.
Zigzagging between the bars,
from light to shade, from shade to light,
weaving the meshes knot by knot
with their oily wake,
vessels of all sizes, all shapes,
in all directions, with all sorts
and qualities of goods
this side of the stars.
From Tangiers, from Tunis, from Tripoli,
a new merchandise, cheaper than uranium,
cheaper than oil, cheaper than gas,
a new merchandise, rising alone from
beneath the tempestuous carpets of sand,
a new merchandise, selling unassisted,
no advertising needed,
a new merchandise, that walks and talks.





ANTOINE CASSAR

Translated by the poet from Maltese

On conventional north-up maps, when not hidden behind the letter M or a circled star, Malta appears to be shaped like a fish: small fry adrift in a large blue battlefield, but also, of course, an ancient Christian symbol. Beyond popular imagination, the south-western bulge of the main island might rather suggest the shape of a whale, linking to the Jonah Complex: a society that fears becoming itself, that has spent three generations at pains to comprehend and accept its Mediterranean identity (that is or could be said, somewhere between southern European and Maghrebi, and/or vice-versa).

Rotate the map—east-up—and the main island morphs into a long face that appears to be choking. In overdeveloped Malta, solitude is difficult to find; one might look for it on the coast, staring out toward the horizon, yet the sense of being watched (and judged) remains. Paradoxically, many Maltese report feeling alone in their claustrophobia. How to escape the belly of the whale? Spend too long on an island, and the more you pine to leave, the more difficult leaving becomes.

Opposite: A Maltese man with a beard and a green cap smiles into the camera, wearing a black shirt with a ship in front of a moon as it crests over the waves.

ANTOINE CASSAR 39

published in
Modern Poetry in Translation
2023

I looked up

The world begins in Qrendi and ends in Xlendi:
this island is a planet in a dark sea,
the sun circles it—not vice-versa—
illuminating her alone, whilst the moon
goes on shifting the horizon back and forth.

I looked up to stop feeling dizzy:
I saw a net of stars wrapping everything,
now and again tightening so as to remind us
that not even galaxies away from this island
can there ever be a way out.

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Image description: Royalty-free image taken from [vectorstock.com](https://www.vectorstock.com/), a silhouette of the island of Malta, rotated upside-down.