

A world without maps

searching for my school from the Cathedral
city on the hill, medieval Ely
with a view of the lantern,
on Google Earth
the lines
run
out

by definition it
doesn't exist

inaccessible to search engines,
Al Sheyam Girls' School lives
mapped by dreams
in airport departure lounges,
over the darkening
Arabian Gulf

before the Goat
Roundabout right
 straight
left
make me bilingual
in taxi language

for those who don't read maps
no maps exist

I cut and paste
obsolete satellite
maps with their superimposed
street names oases
and the leaky Buraimi border

annotate with post-its
my primary document,
reading by roundabouts
camel tracks
and signs
to Oman

self-censoring

The white
dishdashed Omani
company driver
says little
from the
Dubai marbleclad
arrivals hall
to the Hilton
 Al Ain's oldest hotel.

We keep missing
each other
Kiwi mixed
with Buraimi
broken English

air currents icy
A/C – air conditioning.
Now I hear you.

Humour is riskier
than juggling
two mobile phones at
the wheel checking
texts, surfing
the net
cruising on
a near-
empty superhighway

with no upper limit.

the desert is

the desert is
experienced
micro-irrigated
roundabouts
green-flashing neon
advertising
the business of
wire-fenced
desert

a highway
vicariously
concrete-walled
go anticlockwise
counterintuitive
heaven
mosques
sands
logic

where zebra crossed

the millennia melt
dishes point to the sky
a purple smudge
holy theatre from flat
roofs business as usual
below where concrete
crumbles diggers wait

the heavens are a turtle
shell pricked
quick dusk then darkness
stars sparkling

a grain of sand the smallest bone
the tooth of an ancient
rat in Al Gharbia
scientists study on the bridge
for crocodiles
when the Himalayas
were young

English only please

the first lesson in
the old desert
school, the national
anthem insistent
as tinnitus

windows blackened
heat-cracked
like a crazed wadi

my student paces
the stacks, Arabic books
the government says
take up too much space,
softly touches their spines
chews her gum

pouts and ignores the sing-song
small talk we must teach
these women, then breaks
the *English Only* rule
and the rule we have given
up on – *Mobiles Off*

tries half the lesson
to get through to the enemy –
the newly-created Abu
Dhabi Education Council

keeps repeating
stock phrases, takes
the yes-men on –

her language book scarcely opened
when the bell rings. We go past
the cups; the ritual welcome
to her classroom, cardamon tea
forgotten.