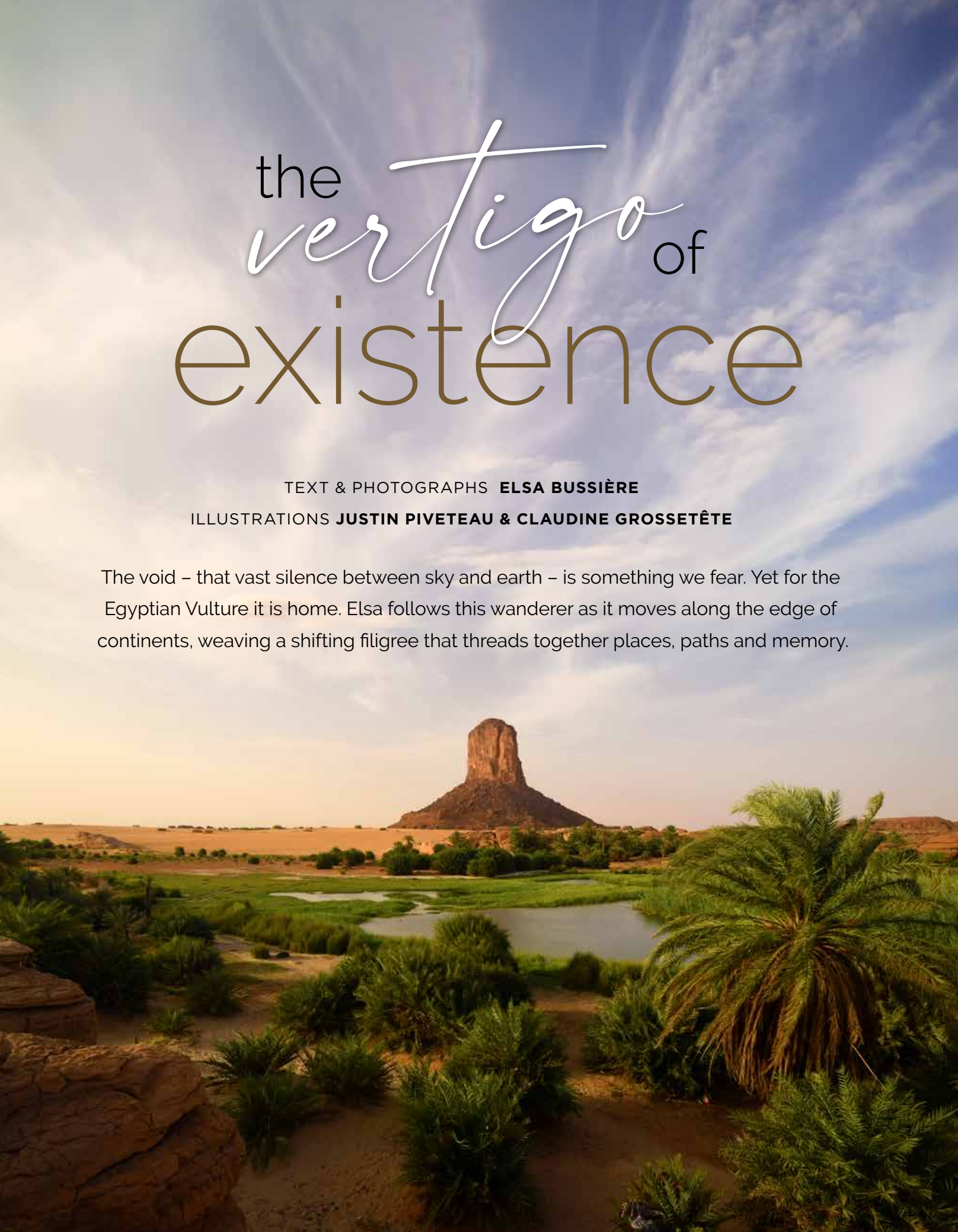


# the *vertigo* of existence

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS **ELSA BUSSIÈRE**

ILLUSTRATIONS **JUSTIN PIVETEAU & CLAUDINE GROSSETÊTE**

The void – that vast silence between sky and earth – is something we fear. Yet for the Egyptian Vulture it is home. Elsa follows this wanderer as it moves along the edge of continents, weaving a shifting fligree that threads together places, paths and memory.



It's July 2025 and at Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris six security agents are bombarding me with questions. A light backpack is my only luggage. I bought my ticket the day before, my destination Israel. Why now, in the middle of the Gaza war? they keep asking.

The trip is no whim. The Egyptian Vulture I follow crosses continents, flies over battlefields, ruins, torn borders – the fault lines of the world. In its struggle to exist I sense something essential, something intimate.

Passengers stream past like ants. Time is slipping away. The plane departs without me. Hours later I'm finally cleared to board another flight.

For a long time, the Egyptian Vulture was no more than a myth to me, one I never imagined tracing across the sky. Its white plumage edged with black flight feathers reminds me of eyes

framed by kohl. Its yellow mask makes it look even stranger. And to crown it all, it has that improbable nickname: Pharaoh's chicken! A bird without borders, it was celebrated by the ancient Egyptians; they saw it as a symbol of protection and maternity – virtues bestowed upon all who wore the Nérét crown. 'All females,' the ancients pointed out. For these birds were faithful companions of the wind, joining it in a high-wire act of desire, and it was the wind that impregnated them.

When I arrive in Tel Aviv the familiar prickling of distrust returns. I have to convince border control that a genuine friendship binds me to Walter Neser, my only contact in the city. Over the years, Walter and I have shared a passion for birds and deserts. While working on ostrich reintroduction in northern Chad I developed the habit of gazing skyward, searching for the >



ABOVE A modern interpretation of an Egyptian queen wearing a vulture crown, symbolising protection and power in Pharaonic civilisation.

TOP The Egyptian Vulture uses warm air currents to soar effortlessly, scan its territory and locate food over vast distances.

OPPOSITE The Anoa oasis, in the north-west of the Ennedi Massif in Chad, is a haven in a harsh desert. Its permanent fresh water attracts nomads seeking its therapeutic qualities.



Egyptian Vultures that Walter tracks with satellite tags as they pass through the Sahara on their way to Sahelian wintering grounds.

One morning, a frozen signal led me to an empty world of sand. A female vulture that had begun her journey in the Balkans lay lifeless, her feathers undulating in the wind's caress. For five years she had faithfully traced the same migratory path through Israel and the Chadian desert. She was delayed one season by a sandstorm and a more punctual female claimed her nesting spot. And now her life of struggle had ended. After so many dances in the sky, this beautiful 'white crow', as the Saharan nomads call her species, was

pinned to the earth, her neck curved backward, her eyes emptied by poison. So the Egyptian Vulture was still a figure of legend to me, weaving its yellow mask into my imagination.

The immigration officer finally agrees to call Walter. *Shalom*. My mind drifts to a day in May, in Chad. The suffocating heat had climbed above 45 degrees Celsius. The harmattan had dried the last blades of grass. The silhouettes of emaciated dromedaries wavered on the horizon. A remote oasis called Anoa drew in nomads, wagtails, moorhens and Sedge Warblers, enticed by its clear water, while a shepherd dozed in the shade of date palms. There, perched side by side on a rock, two Egyptian

ABOVE A pair of adult Egyptian Vultures keeps watch near the Anoa oasis. This rare and precious observation offers hope that a small resident population persists in the region.

OPPOSITE The Egyptian Vulture is distinguished by its bright yellow face, slender black beak, and white feather crest fluttering in the wind. Its white plumage can take on a rusty hue after it has bathed in red soil, while a black line on the wings contrasts sharply with the white, echoing the shape of the eye and beak.

Vultures watched me. With my camera lens I recorded a rare moment in time: an image that, for me, is intimate; for others, it's proof. Observing two adult Egyptian Vultures here together at >



## Where is it now?

The Egyptian Vulture, classified as Endangered by the IUCN, has an important breeding presence across parts of Africa, particularly along the Sahel, in the Horn of Africa and in north-eastern regions where cliffs and rocky landscapes provide suitable nesting sites. Numbering between 1000 and 2000 pairs, many African populations are resident or undertake seasonal movements that follow food availability across dryland ecosystems.

The global population of mature individuals is generally estimated to be 12 400–36 000. In Europe, there are 3000–4500 breeding pairs, most of which are concentrated in Spain. Italy has experienced a dramatic decline of more than 80 per cent in the past 50 years, leaving fewer than 10–12 breeding pairs in the southern part of the country. The situation in the Balkans is similarly dire, with fewer than 70 pairs remaining.

the end of May cannot be explained by a mere migratory pause. In that instant, the memory of a once-confirmed local population seemed to reawaken.

Eventually, the officer returns my passport and wishes me good travels. At last, I set foot in Israel and join Walter and his team as they crisscross the country from the Golan plateau in the north, near the Syrian border, to the Judean Desert in the south, along the River Jordan and the Dead Sea. Our goal is to reach where only vultures and the wind dare to go: the cliffs and hidden crevices where an embrace takes shape, an egg is laid, a chick hatches.

Our rucksacks filled with ropes, karabiners and harnesses, we walk towards a chasm more than a hundred metres deep. The heat of the Levant presses on our shoulders, sweat stings our eyes. My soles cling to the rough ground, finding a reassuring anchor; I am of the earth. By contrast Walter, a climber and paraglider, is a creature of the air. His body merges with the vertical rock. He defies gravity, drawing

The migratory routes of the Egyptian Vulture between Europe, Africa and the Middle East, with a major corridor linking Israel and Chad.

ever closer to what he may secretly wish to become: a vulture himself. He carries this pull towards incarnation even in his surname, which in Hebrew translates to ‘vulture’.

Looking down into the chasm, I feel my heart sway between fear and exaltation. Walter sits calmly on the edge, legs dangling into the void. We exchange glances, then tip over the edge, side by side. We must become feathers, balancing on air, toes brushing the cliff face just enough to stay steady. Rock debris thuds down onto our helmets, reeds cling to the ledges and slow our descent. We pause to switch ropes. Then a fracture in the wall opens and from it four pupils in two blue masks fix on us. Using my harness as a swing, I set a foot and hand on the edge and slip inside. Amid skins, bones, tufts of wool and dry droppings, two small feathered creatures, mottled black and gold, remain still.



PRIA BENTER

Carefully handling each chick, with a ribbon of silicone we attach a GPS tracker, light as a feather. In the stillness of the cave, a fragile harmony reigns; no sudden gestures, no attempts to flee. This bird in my hands, one I thought I'd never see, is suddenly real – warm and alive. It has led me here, to a land saturated with history and conflict, where even breathing feels like skimming over the pain of others.

Soon these chicks, as fledglings, will dive into the unknown, relying on a blast of air to allow them to take wing. They will cross deserts and land in oases. Their blue masks will turn golden yellow; their feathers will shine luminous white. And perhaps one day they will even fly over the beautiful Anoa oasis, where a few years ago I stood watch, eyes turned to the sky.

Who will meet their gaze? Between them and me stretches a thread of white feathers. Like the Egyptian Vulture, I am defined by movement, a nomad with a light step. I discover a sense of home in distant places, deep warmth in the vertigo of existence.

A week later, one of the two adult birds taking care of their already-grown offspring is found dead. Our camera, watching over the nest entrance, reveals



how scarce food has become. The team returns to feed the chicks, leaving a fresh carcass as a final gesture for the remaining parent before the chicks' great leap.

Beyond the need for clean air and pure water lies an emotional pull towards the wild world. A flight becomes poetry, a breeze soothes. And the loss of a vulture resonates like a silent wound. Their absence would mark a thinning of the world. ♦

ABOVE A GPS tracker, mounted on a harness, is carefully secured on a juvenile.

TOP, LEFT In its nest, this juvenile Egyptian Vulture blends with the remnants of its meals: bones, bits of skin and tufts of wool.

TOP, RIGHT Elsa and Walter descended 100 metres by rope to reach an Egyptian Vulture nest in the Golan Heights, Israel. They were photographed through a spotting scope from the other side of the canyon.