

VAHNI CAPILDEO

From Dark and Unaccustomed Words

Past Inhabitant

For Emma Dillon

Even if it was your white sleeve rising through the earth under woods you'd not care for, weak cultivars, modern beyond use for your time – even if you raised your sleeved arm, reassuring, I understood now as if it were yesterday and no quarry, as if gravel did not spit in the face of search for unreconstitutable wings, unrecorded weddings, house unimprinted, drained of traitors. Laughter leaves no shadow, rushing for refuge in the honeycombs, storage caverns collapsed, stream wiped, the action of mercy and chalk.

Douce amie, you, meanwhile, walking tall between much taller hedges, counted, in another garden, the singing of birds, the young ones (especially starlings) needing what you figured as a window for the slow illuminations of their induction into song. Numbers of them, flung from the nest into nests not their own, dimwits, interjecting wrong notes or twists. Ignorant what makes melody – How to vary, still, shake, depart, fuse the necessary signal for two needs: love and territory. Entreaty and repulsion. How hard they sing! Elaborate necessity defeats itself, reaving sung from song: starlings plummet, falling from branches, sometimes dying. Come. Go. Carried away.

A henge of good intentions a megalith of effort uphill of slippage perpetual uphill with no downhill thought grinding thought tooth upon tooth so much strength surely for giving forehead wrenched to the incline set to an identical angle as once the nick-in-the-neck stone that old straight track for not seeing for not looking from desired to required from excruciating to crossed. Send out a call for bonfires. Give no warning against burning. Make a blaze of every gradient. Our ships are coming in.

I wished for this in the valley where
the lake stays an oblong below
the ridge that turns back the harsher winds
where leaves from our apple trees blew.

I looked from the window to the well.
You stepped up almost to the door.
You stood, unawares, among your men.
I stepped down, walked into this song.

I brought my life back into the house
of stone, brown and white as the cloth
that slipped kindly under brown-white earth.
I rise now, returning by choice.

About

For Pat Bishop

Aware of these rooms five four three two one hundred years old all about us
for hundreds of people each year and none not one room for us this night feels
the blocks waiting three two one the rooms have emptied out and each is
bored by its own pulse the core of blackness that is the waiting of interested
stone for there has been nothing like this for them nothing like us except once
twice perhaps each century.
Sssh, everybody's here.

"We have come to the place of which I told you . . ."

Hills set on gulf, surf set on hill, rift city –
In the skin of a house a hissy fit,
a crying jag, it veins thermometers,
gradual because quick-pressed, desiccative,
scales over eyes the exit fangs first?
Snakeform's a total way, rice-paper slough
shines of got out sun-bitten rolled between
a rough place and somewhere much like this.

"Some birds line their nests with snakeskin."

Rare things do happen occasionally
(remorse, the true dream, a dead one's call?) –
the all-purpose assailant's face turned helpful,
the knife-strapped taxi driver touching wires
to start a car shot to cobwebs. And you fail:
it's that your appointment's with extreme cases,
solids alight by millions, cellular,
disranking every day all too much rarity.

"You can't go back to a piece of dusting
and reflect upon it."

This time she's brought some handouts on panic,
pink sheets (the chair kicked from beneath a plan,
what feels like permanent fatal errors) –
consisting as they do of eminently
sayable, beautiful effective sounds,
what transfers into poems? Enough recall
one voice? Listen. Language dreams about this:
the infant making bird-soft divisions of dawn.

". . . could just be dot dot dot."

At night, you see, there seems to be one lit room. Who is at its exit, in the
doorway, back turned? The soft rectangle of human frame widens. Who waits
within the metal edging? In this state of nervousness, forearms go cold
seconds before hands catch fire, excessive lotuses of flame. Would you – two

dark torches loose at your sides – would you walk into the first of the long dark corridors in a building that consists more nearly of corridors than any that should ever have been designed? Each corridor runs like a spill of milk on a black tile reflected in a smoked glass ceiling clapped on the width of one layer of a hotel. These corridors are dark; you would feel them all like paleness? Though there were light I could not name their handcrafted nougat colours, gentler, intentionally washed-out. I walk in the dark, and you feel the walls' paleness? For we ourselves are luminous. Except we do not give off light.

Journal Of Ordinary Days

For Ron Paste

I.

We are not born with an instinctive understanding of the mangrove.
We drove out and booked and paid to step in the flat boat bound for mangrove.
It feeds on land dissolved ocean dismissed sunset deferred, the mangrove.
Snakes up top stayed squamous yellow knots of sleep guides tried in vain to shake awake,
the silky anteater too knotted in sleep on high.
The mangrove the movement of the mangrove.
Look lively.

Like the ribbing of a gothic cathedral inlaid with no stone,
inlay of scuttling tree crabs, branch-attached above-ground oysters, sprung
inlay as if pollution resides not in the invisible hills,
inlay of wickerwork red and spotted white and black by nature growing not green
what is this mangrove, salt-nourished, where sea floods inlets?
Can we breathe here?

Yes and in yogic and Carib perfection
the swaying incarceration over
still and suddenly all into blue
perfection of lake and fluorescent ibis
winging to roost in perfection of dusk.
Will this or any memory of serenity
permeate his sleep – your two-year-old
who's slumbered now beside us in the boat
long since we stepped apart from automotive dust?
Once or twice he woke and looked.
Will peace keep with him?

II.

You, detesting lizards but having been given,
years ago, a rubber shark plus half a diver,
are insulated from this lunchroom shock: riven,
his arm, the croc engrossing, jaws that devour.
What is the ground over which newspapers murmur?

Unimaginable, unimaginable.

Aren't there shark bites so sharp that what makes the surface
is gamely swimming torso, red pennants engulfed?

Unimaginable, unimaginable.

What breaks the surface –

Maybe gratitude for cold climates and dry land.

A sense of detachment from that which moves the hand.

III.

Sometimes I dream in a language that is mine only by scratches,
but I can get the tune of it, a whole conversation
between strangers friendly to each other, dawdling behind me
somewhere outdoors, a sandy cone of syllables
rising and falling, whole sentences
coming smattering to the surface from an occluded source.
Sometimes it is the actual people around me on a journey
whose language drifts into another throughout my dreams,
the prerequisite for transformation always being
that both tunes already are familiar to my memory,
so that the Irish have become Jamaican; the Spanish, Trinidadian;
while the French stay French, but sound maternal, a loving thirty-nine.

Some time ago, I dreamt that I could no longer see by means of light.
Without knowing by experience, or even scientifically,
what this would involve, I saw by means of heat.
How gradually I registered the changeable reddish-dark,
and that my dream environment was room-like, and enclosure,
and that the pulsing blue was situated in someone, not unlike
yourself, whose breathing seemed too loud to me
because of the lack of light; and how, instead of speaking,
you comforted my shoulder, both incandescing white.

The Round Pond

The air above this village on the gradual hillside is so fine, so blue, it seems to spill out of wild eggshells never oozing with hatchlings, only a distillation shaken out like song, song that, glimpsed in ribbons, noted down, decides against this tracing of descent and with no kind of composure refills the sky till, dropping one by one under the musical downpour, villagers gasp agreement: "We shall keep time".

This agreement, perhaps, is why, around the pale and cheerful spire, there are spaces in this village, where houses might have been. But no. The built-up eyes of visitors read wrongly, turning back inwards to the built-up brain. "These are not spaces *for houses*. People here live with spaces". The eye looks out again, dim and unable to vault distances, while the furred heart clutches its walls; admiration and agoraphobia.

I was yet more foreign than such visitors. The histories of this village had been absorbed by me at long distance. I sought it out by choice.

Some of the villages came close and spoke to me. "Where is the round pond?" I asked them. How did you know that existed, their quiet said.

A little way down the slope but within the village boundaries, there was the round pond. I had walked past it without passing it. I had to turn to see it. It was a few feet across. So very close.

"I know it's good for swimming," I said, confident in my reading. Who, if not themselves, had written their histories? A reaction moved all over the villagers' faces and arms and fluttered their garments: the uneasy laughter that none of them would utter, not wishing to contradict a visitor's compliment. "I wouldn't". "Not right now". "Not today, perhaps," said their movement. Perhaps the words, too, were muttered.

"People did swim here," I said, more pleasantly, and added, because I wasn't sure, "It must be safe". The laughter died from the villagers to such an extent that in the very clear air I wondered if they were alive at all.

I turned to the round pond. It was perfectly round and pitch black. The waters were not sluggish or unmoving. They were thick and still. The sun and clouds reflected off the surface. "I'm going in!" I shouted with false jollity and bent my knees. As I did so I forgot what I looked like, and felt like quite a different girl; I knew how she looked. I jumped into the centre of the round pond, scattering clear water. As I sank my hair floated up above me and seemed to create a pocket of air. I could breathe through my nose and mouth, for a limited time. Then straw was being stuffed into the water above my head, pushing me down further, but trapping air in an unscientific though very real cavity. I was moving down too fast. The water around me was filtering sun through blackness. I would come up coated in mud. About four or five bodylengths down I realized the solid ooze two bodylengths below, bottomless and exerting a great pull. I knew that if I reached that, there would be no coming up. I struggled and began to rise, not fast enough. Then I realized that the straw thrust down and the extra air had not been meant to help me. The air was to reassure me and get me sinking down further than I could swim back up to save myself without the aid of a new and unreachable lungful. Nonetheless I swam up, faster and faster.

I climbed out of the pond, coated in mud that seemed already to have slid off, the sun shining on me while I was unsure whether I looked like myself or that other girl. Like someone welcomed, I greeted the villagers. “You see I made it! Your pond is good for swimming!”

But half of them seemed to have melted away, and I could see the wind knocking holes through the ribs and tatters of the other half. The sun kept shining. I had returned to tell my story, but suspected that I was no longer alive.

Thoughts of the dead

Think of me as I was if that draws strength,
direct no words. I am the walking dead,
the rocking-horse child hand in plaster trace,
child of snakehole embracing stained glass head
out in the linen garden, pigsty walls.
Factory for incurious fishermen
at road's end notwithstanding, what you see
is not what was. Play steadily in gone
and done sunbeams, barring no pines, no planes
where he strode smiling mapping thinking.
Lakes, shadows, re-endeavoured, roll again
new ones to be re-trodden, lost in
anew by new ones. So great his efforts.
He described the longest trek. Take comfort,
can you, in this place approximating
to his description and your needs? Hating
his footsore and smiling lifetime, waiting
for strength, think: I was, and am no longer
alive.
Settle, settle, settle, be wise.

Thought to settle in the set of barracks
built less than carriage height you see
over there beyond the three I call them pools
oblong pits of red and burning sand.
Between the first pit and the barracks
there is a narrow strip for cultivation.
He who has gone would be happy with me
there I thought.

He did not move.

I say he went
of his own free will.

Inside the barracks: "Switch the lights on!
Switch the bleeding lights on!" "I got used –
living on my own – to moving around
in the dark, you see. I can't see clearly
without my lenses on, anyway." "Switch
the – " "No need to get nasty." "– bleeding lights –"
"The lights were on."

Only yesterday.

There. I thought.

This excerpt is an Almost Island exclusive.