

VAHNI CAPILDEO

From The Undraining Sea

from the sequence "Winter to Winter":

August

NORTH

The sun has been revised. So the cold fades
about bewilderment upon the wing.
The track from Arctic to Antarctic glides
into this estuary. They'll stay too long:
the migrant tern, on fire for ice, can't rate
this air they clap and suffer – for such heat
belongs to earliness, heat can't belong –
They cope as if they had not been caught out,
defend the stalling of their powerful young.
And flight becomes a lingering estate.

Take back that sky. There's something you forgot.
You left your looks behind, or threw them out:
those settler-invader lights that lock
a pulsar in each centred mine, no heart
and not sapphire. You were for the dark,
dark through and through, not to be found until
abandoned. Light casts milk on seas that numb,
I'd call it perfect, still – how Iceland's hills
act like your eye-bones. Here your cover's gone.
For night is you playing invisible.

I saw you running softly, swept with rain,
and dipped my neck. That is the proudest place.
When dogs first suffer human touch, the nape
retains its wildness longest, drops at last.
The owners don't know how much they have won.
Rain offers softness, seen through panes like these,
a fight of shadow sticks, a fleece embrace.
I thought I could go out. We would not meet.
At once my running feet begin to sink in place,
their shoes' thin canvas soaked, words misconceived as grass.

Nine thousand memories, one for every mile
and back again, and the same over, race
to summon to these eyes a double Nile
in pressure under leisure, snub that face,
the soft copy of a crocodile.
That's distance sounding like a present. I've
false intervals of time, to like you less –
time taken off my hands, given as if
I lived routinely by your foreignness:
Nine thousand guesses that come true as love.

You love them all: the strangers, and the dead:
yours to come home to, in the night, alone.
Work said this nowhere. You know saying stayed
between the I and air: heat sheathed in cold:
a sunset fell of courtesy: no saying fades . . .
You . . . give the time to claim forbidden words,
the ones marked SAFEST WRITTEN, LOVE, and DEATH.
Speak, our times fuse, make these the usual words.
We have no sure address for happiness.
What then? Just this: now, here, glad. You. That sheerness holds.

September

IRON AGE, STONE WORDS

If we'd grown barley,
We'd have had to mill it.
So we grew blades.

The grass is species rich . . .

They built their houses
And crypts built like houses.
Hills drank up their houses,
As did perfect sand.

kale, linseed, mustard seed, attractive to bird life.

They cut us to ladders,
Push down, pull down, fall down,
Feeding the earth.

Many of the skeletons are disarticulated,

Foot-shelves, scale-coloured,
Hang moisture for weather,
Seeping to earth.

We think they practised excarnation . . .

We grow over darkness
That's ill to imagine
Rounded in earth.

the exposure of corpses to scavengers and air.

If we flipped, bone fields,
Live ones could visit.
So we turf blades.

*A deep freeze, an execution chamber – nobody knows,
so it can be what you like.*

It is too cold for wheat here now.

Have a cheerful day at the tombs.

They build their houses
On mounds closed on houses
From rubble from houses
Left half to stand.

Broch.

Red sand, lead-silver,
The timed sea upon us,
And no human witness:
Then we shall have passed.

October

TASTEFUL MODERN CONVERSION, SITUATED ON A QUIET ROAD

The main rooms have been knocked through for better entertainment.
They bend like a dried bean painted on to a white counter.
Like a clinical diagram of something human and internal.
Everyone who lives here learns to step around a dent.

But Julia dances with Julia,
Comes up short where is no wall.

In the open-plan kitchen, she switches on the wrong burner.
Should she notice it stays cold, the cold steel salt and water.
Why her sleeve smells scorching, that she does wonder.
Say it, she should change, leaving behind velvet and mauve.

But Julia dances with Julia,
Humming with her usual sound.

What made the builder proudest was the way he'd done the attic.
The servants' sleeping alcove allows for something ornamental.
The new layout is his own, but he thanks those old Victorians.
You could live and work in these dimensions and never want to walk downstairs.

There Julia dances with Julia,
Heeling value into brick

November

RIVER

November shall have been a sombre month
like breath fetched from the navel of the earth
to say a word of ending. November
shall be a solemn month, recipient
of sides dashed down by rainfall, human turf.
The grass lashes. Flames ascend. The ash bed
a patch beneath god-eyebrow sky collects
a lifetime like the water's look. This month
nods its face downwards. This was November.
Someone has died. Who hardly knows this.

December

WATER

I. Cold Hands

There is a moment when
the water seems as if it might be warm.
Quick
wash your face
in the illusion

frII. The Atlantic. Like

Putting a handspan square of glass
flat on the sea, thinking I see
something. That's the sky.

Calling the colour roaring grey
heard in December, when the tide
discourages. That's a lie

III. Opalescent, Crystalline, Amethyst. And Dark

The sea is.
 In my mind I never left you.
The sea
is.
 Place-holder, holder of a place:
The sea
 Who can hold to this? A causeway.
is.
 Essential ground for memory.
Twig-runes dust the shore with bird-tracks.
 And the wind

IV. Changes

Swans and rain and swans in rain
Swans and rain
Swans again

January

NORTH

“It doesn’t feel like minus eight.” “It feels more like zero.” The violet – the pink – the ice! “You’re living on the moon.” “Of course.” “With Marilyn Monroe.” “In Reykjavík.” (Forgot to say this light makes distance close). Give me musical accompaniment, perhaps I shall reply – let the flute double the violins, the oboes follow the flute – then a lapse for half a step, a second’s silence – These streets, they’re spinning Christmas salt to glass.

A quelled thing not a quiet thing – She laughed. At first that was enough: that she should laugh; assured sounds, not a sure sound – how she laughed! A shine that played on warmth for brightness – Laugh too, caught up and fraught with laughter’s past. Imaginary conversations: this is most unlike any scenario for us – no, even when I tell you “This is most unlike –”. You know. Our full stops flow for uncut cheese; red rind; a knife that missed.

“In this year was the great mortality of birds,” they noted in the chronicle. If all kinds of winged things fell from the sky, would quietness be more remarkable for happening by flashes? Just today, today you are, are beautiful. Don’t wish for more: to look like this again: why choose to be some history? Can you fix this list: what influences and what can be used? Different as kissing is from being kissed.

Now no phrase added to the fact that is is marvellous, now lifelong poets rear up from their stanzas, clapping face to voice – Who should be desperate to be sincere? No doorstep space for images. Dismissed those neurochemical upsets, that swear by daytime darkness, fired skin; those eyes, that slip like sweated glass; those words, that fear too much to change, and only change: I hide in you from you, found out in every where.

His childhood: Swiss, Icelandic: had high peaks,
unhuman views. And so his spirit lifts
in any landscape that's volcanic. Steeps
are his necessity: whatever slips
into less comfortable reaches.
The last place that he brought us on this trip
shone: wind-resistant candles: red and gold
dotting the graves where country people keep
each Christmas Eve among their green-crossed dead.
But we'll spend time like glaciers, dear shape.

February

VALENTINE

Who'd try to tell the fish: it does not matter
about the air, but being hauled to light –
that's memorable, new work for gills, that spatter
reddens silence, reddens red, reels in delight,
would you look at that, fished out of water.
Slow as the couples walking age in hand
between the blues and leaves, they steered this boat,
thinking their course by high points on the land.
The snap. The angler's curse. The snarl. The engine caught.
The line cast further out than he had planned.

A BOOK OF HOURS: FROM AIDONEUS TO ZEUS

22.30 h.

The dilemma of the people who are unaware that it is night. They have something to say to themselves: some kind of question.

The steps taken by the people who wish to begin to be aware that it is night.

Pyjamas: put them on and move about in them. That unaccustomed feeling of breath: the body has that, not tied in at the waist as it is during the day. The shoulders collapse with gratitude.

So: the feeling of relief: is that the reminder of night? No: self-forgetting, that is gradual; relief is no constant reminder of night.

You cannot go outside.

Think, then, of taking the lights off.

Toe nudges towards switch, the black plastic ridges of switch discreet on the floor, spade-shaped foot, barely calloused.

Still from the street the amber glow, a terrace of houses stuck together by the sounds of putting-away. The day is being put away.

Honey! Is that night?

It's not right.

The steps retraced by the people who put the lights back on because it is no use that it is night.

Think, then, of those places where there are no lights. No lights, nothing at all; and the sounds, they do not sound as if they can be put away, this is it, this night, territorial absolute, it is not the brief interval before day advancing.

No! They don't count. It's as if they exist in a time slip – those places; they're as good as –

The dilemma of the people who

06.25 h.

Since there has been no other colour but violet, is that what to call the mist that neither rises nor folds above the flood meadow?

Since there is no other colour but violet, do we make that the way to detect the new tips to branches that winter has bared so that trees stand static, recalling what's too deep in flesh – our electrified nerves?

Given the mind's first confusion each day – since reminders of ourselves unseen throw us off – so far as those filaments make us uneasy, how is it possible that anything strikes us as other than violet – the colour the sun seems to impose between our eyes and the effort to see – And the ordinary craving to look has nowhere to go that is not to and from what seem like strong lights, so every experience, one after another, intensifies into a temporary unspectacular individual blindness.

08.43 h.

A mile away there is a library where tourists have not yet queued up and on the faces of the people soon to be readers it is not the morning or the morning after, it is the daze of the night before. In the library from which readers were unseated the night before, the desks with nothing on them are looking their best. The computers are still running their virus checks. Satsuma peel shucked off healthwise in the gutter corresponds to something tingeing the viewer's blood or the sky.

The commuters who unsettle the fringes of the city have become so many and stopped so long that theirs is the primary hand creating its soundscape. They start with a

roar. They Hoover up the oxygen from the tremulous air. How they go and stay – how they multiply! The voices they leave behind them are identical and female, much too strong for the narrowness of the brick corridors formed by terrace housing that yearns towards the park. There is no change in what the voices keep calling or how they give voice, only in the names of children that they call. *Laura . . . Kerry . . . Nigel . . . Paul . . .* The soundscape of the street is a rolling one, and whether it is humanly restful or unrestful depends on how attached the hearer's head remains to the axle of pushchair wheels.

The one person who has decided to take a sickie, and though alone has begun to behave as if he's ill, is lying upstairs in just such a narrow house in just such a brick-faced road that leads most directly to, oh, to *the* park. The outside walls and the soundscape slapping up against them mean nothing to him, for this day he will be unsupervised, and he means to wallow. He wriggles his toes inside the quilt that he thinks of as sky-coloured, by which he means blue, not tangerine. His hand floats like a hand in a fever towards the telephone, at the infinite-seeming ends of which everyone will be otherwise engaged, earning, meandering, or tending. He draws his hand back and thinks: *a whole day of doing just nothing*. Cracks that have been there a while appear as new in the ceiling.

Hell. At the corner of his eye, over the edge of his book, half hidden by the bedroom door (left ajar, opening inwards) – that was something. *What something?* He scolds himself for not settling down, and settles down, but what with the placement of his futon mattress on the floor he suddenly is aware that twenty centimetres below him (that is all there is between floors in his kind of housing) there is a big drop through which bodies could fall more than the height of an average tall man like himself. This is morbid, and he is not sick; but his gullet is telling him it is wet and his toes inform him they are cold.

Again. A cookie-cutter round of darkness. He won't pretend that it is the kind of shadow the mind conjures up from scarred corneas and neurological promptings. He knows it is not A Presence (that was his ex's term for them; his ex had been appallingly well Presented). He knows he has seen something when he has seen something. In a split second, knowing that he is trying to tell and not just telling, knowing trying is no use, he informs himself that what is was, was the edge of a housebreaker's overcoat. *That goblin angle*. His mind must have shaped it into something that it was not, since he's imperfectly deprogrammed from an awareness of Presences picked up from his ex. Ignoring the snouted curve he knows he saw, he looks again, determined to outstare, resolved to discover. For housebreakers are likely to be pervs, especially in a nice but not first class area like this, and he must not be found in bed, clad in nothing but sky-coloured duvet. He must spring up and defend himself. *That cookie-cutter darkness!*

So in a split second, he turns and sees

it

just

as

it

was

before.

The little face, peering.

It is away in a whisk. In a trice there is nothing to look at. Where has it gone?

There is no it! It is a he – an intruder!

He gets up to pursue the intruder in whose existence he must believe. He moves cautiously, as stalking people do, then pushes the door wide and contemplates the carpet track to bathroom, second-bedroom-sliver, and break-your-neck-with-no-pause-for-a-turn-at-the-landing stair.

There is no other space where – He was soon enough – No one could be so quick – *Nothing?*

He drags himself, bristling, to look in the room that he knows to be empty.

But the little face?

He pushes his way like a man seeking confrontation through the three upstairs rooms of his sole-tenanted house.

Still nothing.

Then, standing in the corridor that lacks any intruder, the man on his day off screams.

He screams

screams realizing he will see it again. Not now. Just again. Any time it likes, sometimes before or after he knows it: the inhuman eye and ear among the files in his office; the thick round of night in between the cheeses in the shop; slicing a glance over the tops of library shelves packed with books seldom touched except to be dusted; that listening stubbornness riding serene as the moon for a moment above public transport vehicles.

It is his demon.

His madness.

That round of felted face.

16.07 h.

When it was cooler than about 28°C she put on a turquoise sweater down the back of which her black hair looked brown. This girl called herself Amber but her name was not quite that. She had spent very little time in the place where she was born. Now she was in a different nation from any that she had lived in before. This one was further south than many but not as far west as some.

The picture of herself that Amber liked most showed her in bright North American daylight no brighter than her eyes under the white cowboy hat that she held up with a hand either side of her face, and she looked like she thought she looked every inch the cowgirl, and so, though not a sliver of unlawful wrist or ankle was showing, what mattered in such photos was Amber's pride in her blue jeans.

There was a sadness in Amber, who loved language but was better at art.

Well in her new nation where she sometimes wore the turquoise sweater that she had imported from somewhere where such garments (trapping the light like dew on brambles or the glint of sharps in grass) are commonly sold rather than made, well here her movements were as strictly regulated as usual (she was sixteen), which was a relief to the local nymphs who were her allowed companions – that such a luxurious exotic creature submitted as if naturally to being checked up on, just like they had to, though she answered to stranger authorities.

So Amber's appearances were heralded and chauffeured, her disappearances belled and controlled.

It was always on the cards that Amber, with her family, would vanish in a big way; and after a period of lingering that must have involved some preparation, they vanished just like that. They may have had international motives.

One day while there was still not much foreshadowing of any colossal future events, Amber let it drop that she loved the wealth of blue in the sky before sunset in this her latest land. This was a peculiar thing for a schoolgirl to say; astonishing, in fact. You could see it on clear evenings between five and six p.m. (Isn't that blue also found in other skies at other times?)

Since then, that blue is Amber.

23.00

Those eyes did it, wide-lidded and sea-dark. I looked into those eyes, but they were so perfectly opaque that any hope of looking into them was dashed and wrongness overspread all my limbs as I realized, first, that I was caught up in *looking-at*; finally, that I was in the process of *being-looked-at*, and that there was nothing but night outside and sociability in between.

So my eyes kept to those unreturning eyes while I searched sideways in my mind, not hoping for much, but accustomed to find a corner where I would sprout a pelt and a tail and whiskers and go to sleep. But this time, in what those sea-dark eyes were fixing about me as their due of time, I stayed human and there was no resort.

This is not the last resort, I told myself, no, never the last.

And then, though the wide-lidded, unrelenting eyes still were on my eyes, I could feel that the power of the smile that was trained on me had been baffled and that flint-tinted searchlight was no longer picking me up. What, had the escapee made a break straight up and over the wall?

It didn't hold good that there were doorways (several with doors). It was as if I could be both there and not-there. Even though everything had been made nice – no asterism of glass shattered upon glass marked these windows, no smashed gin bottle spread a milky way to crunch beneath the feet of mortgage-holders – it did not hold.

The look could press on as long as it wanted, taking its time to gather its forces in order to further acts that resembled communication where the most important purpose of communication is silently understood to be reassurance in the face of frailty.

Show us your frailty then! the opaque look beamed.

– A place had lit up: the bleakest room ever. The pine timber walls and floor were splitting. Just now (but never) the boards would let in the night that reigned outside, cold without need of winter. That would be night at a rush, neither attack nor rescue; undraining, and of right. Such a room was exactly to my mind. The bare light bulb hung from a flex. The light this cast was impossible! It ran all through me. This was my imagination.

But the gods have been in process of dissolving me for longer than I can remember. No one in such a place has anything to offer!

This was what I did not say aloud to the looker:

“I will raise such a monument – such a monument – I will build – ”

So filled with light I said nothing; and the rooms of night are forever mine.

This excerpt is an Almost Island exclusive.