A Different History

*Sujata Bhatt*

Great Pan is not dead; he simply emigrated
to India.
Here, the gods roam freely,
disguised as snakes or monkeys; every tree is sacred
and it is a sin
to be rude to a book.
It is a sin to shove a book aside
with your foot,
a sin to slam books down
hard on a table,
a sin to toss one carelessly
across a room.
You must learn how to turn the pages gently
without disturbing Sarasvati,
without offending the tree
from whose wood the paper was made.

Which language
has not been the oppressor’s tongue?
Which language
truly meant to murder someone?
And how does it happen
that after the torture,
after the soul has been cropped
with a long scythe swooping out
of the conqueror’s face –
the unborn grandchildren
grow to love that strange language.
Pied Beauty

Gerard Manley Hopkins

Glory be to God for dappled things –
    For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;
    For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches’ wings;
    Landscape plotted and pieced – fold, fallow, and plough;
    And all trade, their gear and tackle and trim.
All things counter, original, spare, strange;
    Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
    With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
    Praise him.
Continuum

Allen Curnow

The moon rolls over the roof and falls behind
my house, and the moon does neither of these things,
I am talking about myself.

It’s not possible to get off to sleep or
the subject or the planet, nor to think thoughts.
Better barefoot it out the front

door and lean from the porch across the privets
and the palms into the washed-out creation,
a dark place with two particular

bright clouds dusted (query) by the moon, one’s mine
the other’s an adversary, which may depend
on the wind, or something.

A long moment stretches, the next one is not
on time. Not unaccountably the chill of
the planking underfoot rises

in the throat, for its part the night sky empties
the whole of its contents down. Turn on a bare
heel, close the door behind

on the author, cringing demiurge, who picks up
his litter and his tools and paces me back
to bed, stealthily in step.
Hunting Snake

Judith Wright

Sun-warmed in this late season’s grace
under the autumn’s gentlest sky
we walked, and froze half-through a pace.
The great black snake went reeling by.

Head-down, tongue flickering on the trail
he quested through the parting grass;
sun glazed his curves of diamond scale,
and we lost breath to watch him pass.

What track he followed, what small food
fled living from his fierce intent,
we scarcely thought; still as we stood
our eyes went with him as he went.

Cold, dark and splendid he was gone
into the grass that hid his prey.
We took a deeper breath of day,
looked at each other, and went on.
A Birthday
Christina Rossetti

My heart is like a singing bird
    Whose nest is in a watered shoot;
My heart is like an apple-tree
    Whose boughs are bent with thickset fruit;
My heart is like a rainbow shell
    That paddles in a halcyon sea;
My heart is gladder than all these
    Because my love is come to me.

Raise me a dais of silk and down;
    Hang it with vair and purple dyes;
Carve it in doves and pomegranates,
    And peacocks with a hundred eyes;
Work it in gold and silver grapes,
    In leaves and silver fleurs-de-lys;
Because the birthday of my life
    Is come, my love is come to me.
The Woodspurge

Dante Gabriel Rossetti

The wind flapped loose, the wind was still,
Shaken out dead from tree and hill:
I had walked on at the wind's will, –
I sat now, for the wind was still.

Between my knees my forehead was, –
My lips, drawn in said not Alas!
My hair was over in the grass,
My naked ears heard the day pass.

My eyes, wide open, had the run
Of some ten weeds to fix upon;
Among those few, out of the sun,
The woodspurge flowered, three cups in one.

From perfect grief there need not be
Wisdom or even memory:
One thing then learnt remains to me, –
The woodspurge has a cup of three.
The Cockroach

Kevin Halligan

I watched a giant cockroach start to pace,  
Skirting a ball of dust that rode the floor.  
At first he seemed quite satisfied to trace  
A path between the wainscot and the door,  
But soon he turned to jog in crooked rings,  
Circling the rusty table leg and back,  
And flipping right over to scratch his wings –  
As if the victim of a mild attack  
Of restlessness that worsened over time.  
After a while, he climbed an open shelf  
And stopped. He looked uncertain where to go.  
Was this due payment for some vicious crime  
A former life had led to? I don’t know,  
Except I thought I recognised myself.
The City Planners
Margaret Atwood

Cruising these residential Sunday
streets in dry August sunlight:
what offends us is
the sanities:
the houses in pedantic rows, the planted
sanitary trees, assert
levelness of surface like a rebuke
to the dent in our car door.
No shouting here, or
shatter of glass; nothing more abrupt
than the rational whine of a power mower
cutting a straight swath in the discouraged grass.

But though the driveways neatly
sidestep hysteria
by being even, the roofs all display
the same slant of avoidance to the hot sky,
certain things:
the smell of spilt oil a faint
sickness lingering in the garages,
a splash of paint on brick surprising as a bruise,
a plastic hose poised in a vicious
coil; even the too-fixed stare of the wide windows
give momentary access to
the landscape behind or under
the future cracks in the plaster
when the houses, capsized, will slide
obliquely into the clay seas, gradual as glaciers
that right now nobody notices.
That is where the City Planners
with the insane faces of political conspirators
are scattered over unsurveyed
territories, concealed from each other,
each in his own private blizzard;
guessing directions, they sketch
transitory lines rigid as wooden borders
on a wall in the white vanishing air

tracing the panic of suburb
order in a bland madness of snows.
The Planners

Boey Kim Cheng

They plan. They build. All spaces are gridded, filled with permutations of possibilities.
The buildings are in alignment with the roads which meet at desired points linked by bridges all hang in the grace of mathematics.
They build and will not stop.
Even the sea draws back and the skies surrender.

They erase the flaws, the blemishes of the past, knock off useless blocks with dental dexterity.
All gaps are plugged with gleaming gold.
The country wears perfect rows of shining teeth.
Anaesthesia, amnesia, hypnosis. They have the means.
They have it all so it will not hurt, so history is new again.
The piling will not stop.
The drilling goes right through the fossils of last century.

But my heart would not bleed poetry. Not a single drop to stain the blueprint of our past's tomorrow.
Summer farm

Norman MacCaig

Straws like tame lightnings lie about the grass
And hang zigzag on hedges. Green as glass
The water in the horse-trough shines.
Nine ducks go wobbling by in two straight lines.

A hen stares at nothing with one eye,
Then picks it up. Out of an empty sky
A swallow falls and, flickering through
The barn, dives up again into the dizzy blue.

I lie, not thinking, in the cool, soft grass,
Afraid of where a thought might take me – as
This grasshopper with plated face
Unfolds his legs and finds himself in space.

Self under self, a pile of selves I stand
Threaded on time, and with metaphysic hand
Lift the farm like a lid and see
Farm within farm, and in the centre, me.
Where I Come From

Elizabeth Brewster

People are made of places. They carry with them hints of jungles or mountains, a tropic grace or the cool eyes of sea-gazers. Atmosphere of cities how different drops from them, like the smell of smog or the almost-not-smell of tulips in the spring, nature tidily plotted in little squares with a fountain in the centre; museum smell, art also tidily plotted with a guidebook; or the smell of work, glue factories maybe, chromium-plated offices; smell of subways crowded at rush hours.

Where I come from, people carry woods in their minds, acres of pine woods; blueberry patches in the burned-out bush; wooden farmhouses, old, in need of paint, with yards where hens and chickens circle about, clucking aimlessly; battered schoolhouses behind which violets grow. Spring and winter are the mind’s chief seasons: ice and the breaking of ice.

A door in the mind blows open, and there blows a frosty wind from fields of snow.
Composed upon Westminster Bridge

William Wordsworth

Earth has not anything to show more fair:
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty:
This City now doth like a garment wear
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.
Never did sun more beautifully steep
In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill;
Ne’er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
The river glideth at his own sweet will:
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still!
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