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Poems

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Poems

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ALAMGIR HASHMI

BIRDS IN A TREE: AN ELEGY*

Before they took wing
the legend was there.

They sat together (which
seemed like necking to some)
on this branch for a spring.
It was an old tree,

an oak, sans intention,
and free.

Come September, the air
goes nipping through the woods
instinct to the root,
keening.

Of a feather,
they chirped a while

and fell silent.
Up in the blue turning to look

at this vanishing sight,
the sunset gold of leaf-fall,

a tree
that is wood to a fault
yet live from its own convention.

* From an earlier draft manuscript by Alamgir Hashmi, in the archives of the Dickens Memorial Library (U.K.).
SYD HARREX

THE PRECIOUS THING

I heard him say ‘I’ve lost it’
and being but a small child —
for I was affectionately attached
to him — I wondered anxiously
what it was he lost. His cigarette
lighter perhaps, his wallet thin
with poverty but fat with black
and white photographs. Or his smile
which was of the trickster gentle kind.
So being an innocent I went
looking in the garden, down the street,
by the river, across the foot bridge, searching
for the precious thing he had lost
because of a bad-luck accident.
But all I found was a rabbit
palpitating in a trap, its leg
askew and leaking dark blood.
With all my puny strength, I freed
it, cradled it, avoiding its stare
so hypnotising and so like my
ancient uncle’s who had lost
something I had gone looking for.
‘Look,’ I said, giving him my
tender precious burden of pain
to hold and make better with
his healing hands. ‘Ah, you found
it,’ he whispered, stroking its fur,
‘my lucky charm, my rabbit’s foot
I always keep in my pocket,
But lost somewhere yesterday long ago’.
FRUITS INSTEAD OF FLOWERS
(in memory of Lauris Edmond)

‘Fruits instead of flowers,’ you said when last we spoke.
You were an expert at tucking into bed the demanding villanelle’s rhymes and stanzas,
its courteous and wicked refrains,
like a dinner host pouring each glass at the right taste-bud moment.
Always the children of your heart anticipated the pure trance of art,
yet your muse was never weary. Two lines of yours chandelier the candlelight as we raise crystal goblets to your flame:
On sinful days and nights red wine is right
The wine of absolution is always white.
BURIAL

How the things that seem to touch you least
can hurt the most, how the elegy lingers.
Like our cat’s fur between my fingers, as I
prepare to carry her in a sling of a blanket,
sunset-faded pink, perforated by mice,
to the grave I have just been digging.
I know this is a truly family event,
and heart-juggling, when body contradicts
the soul, and maggot eaten-out the mouth
and crow-plundered the eyes, the jugular wounds,
are belied by dreaming tortoiseshell beauty
sleeping in the sheltering grass under
an olive tree.

And so it is we’re reminded
that every death-drifting phrase must rest
somewhere, a hillside perhaps, where the grief
cannot quantify either the pleasure or the pain
and the mind is a trap-door to an undefined
elsewhere, or otherwise, or distant nebula.
Neither letting in nor out the very word
that is unsaid by being said
summoning the living, comforting the dead.
LATE AFTERNOON, GRANITE ISLAND

I hadn’t realised before how grey greyness is, that most boring, uninspiring of colours in the rainbow spectrum; much maligned and totally neglected as a source of beauty. Here, now, grey infuses everything: the light that wants to be milky, the sea that wants to be a coat of many colours, the sky that wants the credit for everything (beautiful moon, mystical sun, enchanting star ascendant), the hills that want to be green, the rocks ochre, the ripples crystal-glinting. Yet I take heart from the majestic endorsement of the jetty whose wood has greyed to total greyness, while generations have sulked and cried spilt milk, and does its job as it always has, supporting departures and arrivals greyly in a black and white movie as time goes by.
BEVERLEY FARMER

KNOWING ANNA
i.m. Anna Rutherford

1 Paskedag

Remember the dinner we all
gathered at Anna’s for

on the Easter Sunday
Grey trees in the windows

in grey light the snow
gone the lake loose

a hare the kids set off
on the brown fur of the bank

—whoosh! of a train—
Anna upstairs taking her time

the colours of water going lake—
deep in the table cloth

and the shimmer of wine
glasses raised come nightfall
2 Midsummer

The last time I saw
Anna we saw the New Year in

here they had a fire sculpture
all set and ready to go

in the park down by the pier—
black water underfoot

a black lighthouse on the hill—
only this fierce icy wind

kept putting it out flare
fizzle flare

fizzle not that we minded
Give me a fog sculpture any day

Or the bonfire burning mmm?
like old times on the other shore.