

The miracle of the crow-pheasant

There is a slowness here which is more
a way of saying, than something said.
It is a way of wandering into someone's
past without infringing on her right
to memory. Nothing is real or unreal.

With a little word-play, anything can turn
real, provided it conforms to the prevailing
norms of fiction. You return to the unfinished
part of a sentence years later, and find
the syntax intact. The right metaphor

is all that takes to seal a deal.
There are do's and don'ts in matters
of gestures and silence. Everyone reads
the unspoken and the unwritten
with devoted ease. It is an eventful day

when the crow-pheasant glides just above
the thickets of touch-me-nots, its black
body, coppery-brown wings and red eyes,
flashing into the canvas of uncommon
landscapes. The world now adjusts

to its wisdom, its idiom of the luminous,
and the anguished, the miracle of the gliding
pheasant now becomes the last word
in the unwritten book of anonymous quotes
that will never be found wanting.

The Dutch Cemetery in Surat, India

The river extends its hand over the narrow
ridge of history. The haze of oblivion
hangs low over the tombs beneath an overcast
July sky. The city has many pasts
to choose from. In these flaking pages

there is no inheritance. The traders,
sailors, sufis, story-tellers, the homeless
and the mercenaries walked their
dazed paths, opiated and multi-tongued.
A scrawny lizard meditates under the shade

of a pillar vandalised by the locals. Crabs
walk backwards as if they have found a way
out of the chronicles of the vainglorious
and the trampled. The scribes are busy
rewriting history, new digital versions

sanitized in pious Sanskrit. One wonders
where they will place the boisterous
Dutch who was banished from his
land, but found a home here. His tomb has a cup
over its dome in memory of his midnight

revelries. Assailed by the monsoon winds
from the Arabian sea, the witnessed acts of hate,
etched in human flesh, fade. Tombs speak
of traumas only in their absent foot-notes.
Hendrik Adrian van Reed never meant

to lie here, under the piles of pigeon-shit.
He is unaware of his posthumous fame
in the most unlikely place, in a book of plants,
Hortus Malabaricus, the Garden of Malabar,
which he compiled in between battles

in the Arabian sea, on the Kerala coast.
Each plant still holds its secret in its herbarium
of fluent lines, in the vernaculars of the vanquished.
His desire to possess a faraway land through
its leaves, fruits and roots, ended in an after-life

of altered gaze and unintended readings.

There is more history in the calligraphy
of flowers in a book of botany, than in
a marble monument lashed by the waves
of mistrust, standing stranded and lost.

Cloud 36: A Sequence

White cranes in a green pond.

A fire-engine passes by.

The city holds its breath.

*

Land caves in, in slow motion.

A tree caught unawares, waves

frantically to the world.

*

The bird escapes, but not its

song which has a tree

waving to the world.

*

A lady with a parrot and an afternoon

of predictions. Her voluptuous

voice is all that I can remember.

*

Digital books get mixed up.

The Origin of Species midway has

passages from the *Book of Genesis*.

*

The sun fills the water in your cupped

Hands. Marigolds and mango-leaves.

Bells ring in the distance.