

*Debasish Lahiri*

**Nocturne before Rain**

The message on the mantelpiece read:

“fear death by night”.

after a lifetime

of fearing death by light

it was about time.

i wonder

who left the message:

must be one of a party of straggling stars

out of chime with the universe,

with soft hamstrings of light

lingering

on every patch of ether,

feeling all the time

what stepping on nothing is like

till they are out of breath too.

this must be a message from the very last of that crew,

the last star

to beat the first of the October rain.

Something is stuck in the clock's throat.

alarm bells are ringing,

somewhere.

what toll shall the clock's cough,

or gasp,

take on time?  
time like the stars is fresh out of breath –  
it is best to hit time in the gut,  
now.  
between hard pants,  
doubled over with pain,  
what might time's swear words be?

When a man dies, or a candle,  
a cold wick of breath  
burns darkly  
like the memory of flame  
in the nose.  
when tears die in the night  
no comet brooms through the blind lawn of the milky way,  
no rain wets fumbling memory on a starless porch,  
no light or sound gives away  
the passing of tears,  
undead for eternity  
like fire  
in the gutter of a candle.

## Ripples

When rage beats dawn on the edge of cities  
    a hollow note,  
    an unremarkable ripple,  
is raised in potholes and sewers,  
in ponds that abscond during the mustering of time  
in cities,  
in rivers that coil with water  
as though guilty of disturbing the poise of a city  
with their seawardness.

I sit beside a pond –  
self-deprecating green camouflage  
on blue skyvisage –  
I sit beside a pond,  
two misnomers consoling each other  
at dawn,  
fugitives  
from the witness of televisions and history  
and watch  
an unremarkable ripple.

What careless stone or frolic fin  
or the painful power that turns the once-loved  
into heavy objects  
raised this ripple,

I shall never know.

I watch an unremarkable ripple  
doomed like Leander in schoolboy myths  
never to reach the shore  
where Hero or the morning cormorant  
would watch with inscrutable grief.

Ripples that make no landfall,  
ripples  
that never become the tremor in the morning tea  
or the tilt and the spill of the red gut of grape  
in a fine evening Bordeaux:  
isn't history a naked Archimedes  
rough-landing in the bath tub,  
wondering,  
“What a wave do I raise”?

I watch an unremarkable ripple,  
unfinished, unmade by the water's call to calm.

I watch ripples,  
shape-shifters –  
all the million heartbreaks  
the million lumps in the throat  
the million catches in the breathing,  
all stilled by the frown of Father Time.

A ripple is a refuge,

a cry, the last,  
 against that curfew against cries.

Next time you see a ripple without origin  
 on a sheet of water  
 pass not by in your city haste.

Watch it  
 lunge desperately for the shore of another heart,  
 and fail:  
 who knows, it might be the gasp and the tear  
 you tried holding back,  
 and failed,  
 last night.

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