

The Last Days of Petrol

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Bridget K. Mursheed

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For Faisal and Yousuf

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When everything is water

How did we get here? The roads have gone
once there was a network and we plugged into that

buses came for school only to the road end
now they are swept away by the waves.

We are the central point our island of barn and beasts
three children and many thrushes.

There is nothing left to share.
Fodder all squared up.

Once the helicopter came like a bee
drawn by the flowers still blooming by the door.

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Talking about how blood moves

Your body is a machine,
it works. Ducts, pipes, tissue, tubes,
the heart belching blood –
a saggy bucket
connecting to three more –
it is impossible to regulate
pressure up and down
and failing
 eventually

into holding pools
 or furred
and weed-clogged canals
to idly loop in the defunct, yes,
industrial complex
and stop.

Your body is not a machine,
the way your heart works
is not architecture and
 not a river system
but this map of tattered colours
embracing all the ports,
the moors, heath, marshes, mountain pass,
 deserts and the sea;
not a road, no, not even
the movement of cars
 ribboning through
 a long high street;

the commute to
necessary extremities.
The smeared space between
wheel or foot or road and destination

is life itself:
the push forward
flux of messages exchanged

a hurriedly made-up parcel
and the desperate race back home.

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At the walnut processing factory

The rattle of nuts in the machinery
tings a pitted conveyor belt; piercing

the acrid smell, rich bitter mixed with sweat,
zinging through the bright social distance marks,

factory lights and faded red overalls.
The remaining workers blind taste product

intermittently with languid pick out
and chew and spit; none of the amateur

struggle. Prised kernels are laid bare outwith
a forest more imaginary with each harvest.

A rare memory held in one or two
dry leaves pounded down in the shell discard

echoing beyond the packers' dance steps;
a husk of half-known song on the radio.

Sometimes I can't see out of my car
without the windows open

Inside I am listening to Udo Lindenberg
wearing a feather boa in the seventies
drinking kirsch snakebite. There are several
lorries ahead and they all contain animals
or quarried stone; an accident
could reinstate acres of field and dyke.

Outside there's a pink light pressing through twilight
like a bruise, the snappy teeth of pine
all snarled by winds; but I beast the weather,
get the mills generating electricity.
They set to it: all the commuters pay my tithe in bread and sugar
until the salt-licked windows bow down and reveal
that bit of moor again. And it's looking the other way.

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After new year

the hedgelines really shouldn't be where they are
it is so easy to change them
look at John Clare one day finding signs and fences

and walls
our neighbour cut a copper beech right down
it took one day

or there are no barriers and the light changes
plants grow in different ways
we have the power

we say we can make this happen
but the first birds at the feeder in the morning
are always the blackbirds and dunnocks

the commuter next door triggers his artificial light
which I reflect back from big and little screens
the windows stop everything
mattering

the line of hand-blown glass

New media

that boy on Soutra in his old car
nothing is the same

at the lay-by where the farmer drops
the feed from his quad bike

the cows in a circle
waiting quiet

even when the hedge brash is burnt
the windfarms grind

except the one forgotten by the wind
he types out requests to other officers

at home, in Edinburgh
he manages the landscape

until the top squall and windbreak
drop off his shoulders

the right man interviewed on radio
lapwings like waves on the plough

Birdwatching

silly fish in the sky almost like starlings
well yes starlings exactly spitting like bacon
or clocks ticking spots knocked and back up

on the toilet they clean the gutter above me
and throw out debris in debt of bugs weevil
anything that takes their eyes

moving in shoals and chattering chattering
imagine them teenagers in the mall
iridescent coats and scarves flying

phones going and noise in all directions
they have sharp claws they are such friends
and then they swim away again

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A ling time

Your hair is full of chaff and your head well these little exhalations
remove the straw with blood from executions,
faces of Jesuits, the sunflower flower stalks dry now
heather bells and sphagnum florets,
daffodil cauls close and the flaccid fleshy pig's ear, dock.

All the sad leaves blown up streets and streets of sticky-treed suburbs
ending in your quay-wall contained melt lakes and xenolith moraine

washed out to sea. Our refuse lands on shale, granite, pea shingle
beaches, or sinks undrowned by antler and submerged lea, brash
skeleton boundaries, or exhales probed by oyster-catchers,
pattered by dunlin, sanderling and above
the single erratic skua pierced by a peregrine –

you are the only person to kiss me in the fleshmarket

– the rounded hills, bosomy grass, sheep rocks like clouds,
cotton grass smirred with linn spatter and green shine
birches, mica glint and that sound, that breath of soft wind, shifts
our journey through the black moor on an uncertain path.

Step high, miles to go!

I'll clear your hair, your eyes stay a formal contract of digital crumbs,
field walls, copse, cuckoos like falcons, a clearing – simmer ling – or
this winter ignites paper and the empty boxes
I collect to sail south all while we breathe in the same air.