

VAHNI CAPILDEO

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**UNDRAINING SEA**



## **Undraining Sea**

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## **PRAISE FOR UNDRAINING SEA:**

Vahni Capildeo, to her credit, clearly doesn't give a fig about fashion or prestige. Her poetry is utterly divorced from that unfortunately prevalent tendency to write poems where the words give way to an (imagined) applauding audience at the next prestigious poetry awards. Her poetry is sassy, sometimes scary; dark, certainly, but there's light there, too, even sweetness, and much humour; complex, even virtuosic, though she can be simple, in her own unique way. She's one of the best around, and I applaud her.

**David Miller**

If Capildeo keeps writing like this, then we other poor scribes will mass to break her cunning nails and delicious bones, pull out her unique glimmering teeth and pluck out her sincere and breathtaking heart long before we dare touch her sensual Gnostic tongue.

**Brian Catling**

So much of the world has been rendered familiar by the industries of interpretation (including the literary) that it takes a genius to recover its real intransigence. It is like being brought up hard against an unmoveable rock amidst all the torrents of counterfeited poetry when you catch hold of any poem by Capildeo.

**Rod Mengham**

**PRAISE FOR UNRAINING SEA:**

Vahni Capildeo's profoundly intelligent poems are original in a very unusual way. They are modern, but composed without fear of traditional subjects or language. Every topic springs to life, in a way that is both disturbing and beautiful. These are life-enhancing poems that stay with you long after you have closed the book.

**Bernard O'Donoghue**

UNDRAINING SEA  
by Vahni Capildeo



for David Groiser

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

*No Traveller Returns* (Salt, 2003)

*Person Animal Figure* (Landfill, 2005)



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## POSSIBLE BOX

For nine nights and days a bronze anvil might fall from heaven, and on the tenth reach the earth; and for nine nights and days a bronze anvil might fall from earth, and on the tenth reach Tartarus. Round it a brazen barrier is driven, and darkness is spread about its neck in three layers, while above it grow the roots of the earth and of the undraining sea.

**Hesiod**



## A BOOK OF HOURS: FROM AIDONEUS TO ZEUS

### 22.30 h.

The dilemma of the people who are unaware that it is night. They have something to say to themselves: some kind of question.

The steps taken by the people who wish to begin to be aware that it is night.

Pyjamas: put them on and move about in them. That unaccustomed feeling of breath: the body has that, not tied in at the waist as it is during the day. The shoulders collapse with gratitude.

So: the feeling of relief: is that the reminder of night? No: self-forgetting, that is gradual; relief is no constant reminder of night.

You cannot go outside.

Think, then, of taking the lights off.

Toe nudges towards switch, the black plastic ridges of switch discreet on the floor, spade-shaped foot, barely calloused.

Still from the street the amber glow, a terrace of houses stuck together by the sounds of putting-away. The day is being put away.

Honey! Is that night?

It's not right.

The steps retraced by the people who put the lights back on because it is no use that it is night.

Think, then, of those places where there are no lights. No lights, nothing at all; and the sounds, they do not sound as if they can be put away, this is it, this night, territorial absolute, it is not the brief interval before day advancing.

No! They don't count. It's as if they exist in a time slip – those places; they're as good as –

The dilemma of the people who

### 06.25 h.

Since there has been no other colour but violet, is that what to call the mist that neither rises nor folds above the flood meadow?

Since there is no other colour but violet, do we make that the way to detect the new tips to branches that winter has bared so that trees stand static, recalling what's too deep in flesh – our electrified nerves?

Given the mind's first confusion each day – since reminders of ourselves unseen throw us off – so far as those filaments make us uneasy, how is it possible that anything strikes us as other than violet – the colour the sun seems to impose between our eyes and the effort to see – And the ordinary craving to look has nowhere to go that is not to and from what seem like strong lights, so every experience, one after another, intensifies into a temporary unspectacular individual blindness.

### 08.43 h.

A mile away there is a library where tourists have not yet queued up and on the faces of the people soon to be readers it is not the morning or the morning after, it is the daze of the night before. In the library from which readers were unseated the night before, the desks with nothing on them are looking their best. The computers are still running their virus checks. Satsuma peel shucked off healthwise in the gutter corresponds to something tingeing the viewer's blood or the sky.

The commuters who unsettle the fringes of the city have become so many and stopped so long that theirs is the primary hand creating its soundscape. They start with a roar. They Hoover up the oxygen from the tremulous air. How they go and stay – how they multiply! The voices they leave behind them are identical and female, much too strong for the narrowness of the brick corridors formed by terrace housing that yearns towards the park. There is no change in what the voices keep calling or how they give voice, only in the names of children that they call. Laura ... Kerry ... Nigel ... Paul ... The soundscape of the street is a rolling one, and whether it is humanly restful or unrestful depends on how attached the hearer's head remains to the axle of pushchair wheels.

The one person who has decided to take a sickie, and though alone has begun to behave as if he's ill, is lying upstairs in just such a narrow house in just such a brick-faced road that leads most directly to, oh, to the park. The outside walls and the soundscape slapping up against them mean nothing to him, for this day he will be unsupervised, and he means to wallow. He wriggles his toes inside the quilt that he thinks of as sky-coloured, by which he means blue, not tangerine. His hand floats like a hand in a fever towards the telephone, at the infinite-seeming ends of which everyone will be otherwise engaged, earning, meandering, or tending. He draws his hand back and thinks: a whole

## August

### NORTH

The sun has been revised. So the cold fades  
about bewilderment upon the wing.  
The track from Arctic to Antarctic glides  
into this estuary. They'll stay too long:  
the migrant tern, on fire for ice, can't rate  
this air they clap and suffer – for such heat  
belongs to earliness, heat can't belong –  
They cope as if they had not been caught out,  
defend the stalling of their powerful young.  
And flight becomes a lingering estate.

Take back that sky. There's something you forgot.  
You left your looks behind, or threw them out:  
those settler-invader lights that lock  
a pulsar in each centred mine, no heart  
and not sapphire. You were for the dark,  
dark through and through, not to be found until  
abandoned. Light casts milk on seas that numb,  
I'd call it perfect, still – how Iceland's hills  
act like your eye-bones. Here your cover's gone.  
For night is you playing invisible.

I saw you running softly, swept with rain,  
and dipped my neck. That is the proudest place.  
When dogs first suffer human touch, the nape  
retains its wildness longest, drops at last.  
The owners don't know how much they have won.  
Rain offers softness, seen through panes like these,  
a fight of shadow sticks, a fleece embrace.  
I thought I could go out. We would not meet.

At once my running feet begin to sink in place,  
their shoes' thin canvas soaked, words misconceived as grass.

Nine thousand memories, one for every mile  
and back again, and the same over, race  
to summon to these eyes a double Nile  
in pressure under leisure, snub that face,  
the soft copy of a crocodile.

That's distance sounding like a present. I've  
false intervals of time, to like you less –  
time taken off my hands, given as if  
I lived routinely by your foreignness:  
Nine thousand guesses that come true as love.

You love them all: the strangers, and the dead:  
yours to come home to, in the night, alone.  
Work said this nowhere. You know saying stayed  
between the I and air: heat sheathed in cold:  
a sunset fell of courtesy: no saying fades . . .  
You . . . give the time to claim forbidden words,  
the ones marked SAFEST WRITTEN, LOVE, and DEATH.  
Speak, our times fuse, make these the usual words.  
We have no sure address for happiness.  
What then? Just this: now, here, glad. You. That sheerness holds.

## February

### VALENTINE

Who'd try to tell the fish: it does not matter  
about the air, but being hauled to light –  
that's memorable, new work for gills, that spatter  
reddens silence, reddens red, reels in delight,  
would you look at that, fished out of water.  
Slow as the couples walking age in hand  
between the blues and leaves, they steered this boat,  
thinking their course by high points on the land.  
The snap. The angler's curse. The snarl. The engine caught.  
The line cast further out than he had planned.

FROM FIRST TO LAST HIS BOOKS, THAT STARTED THIN,  
GREW LESS, AND I'D PUT MYSELF IN DEBT TO BUY  
ALL FOUR OR FIVE OF THEM

Fame came to him at an age  
when already long begun  
was his way of moving off.  
He wanted less of the words –  
they were fewer, though not thought  
pure; denser, pocked key-heads through  
paper, as if resistless.  
The most was, “I saw something”.  
Like ending a letter “Love”,  
he wrote, as if to people.  
He was a generous man.