

VAHNI CAPILDEO

**DARK &
UNACCUSTOMED WORDS**



egg box

Dark & Unaccustomed Words

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DARK & UNACCUSTOMED WORDS
by Vahni Capildeo



for Nicholas Laughlin

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

No Traveller Returns (Salt, 2003)

Person Animal Figure (Landfill, 2005)

Undraining Sea (Egg Box, 2009)



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But generally the high stile is disgraced and made foolish and ridiculous by all wordes affected, counterfait, and puffed vp, as it were a windball carrying more countenance than matter, and can not be better resembled then to these midsomer pageants in London, where to make the people wonder are set forth great and vglie Gyants marching as if they were aliuie, and armed at all points, but within they are stuffed full of browne paper and tow, which the shrewd boyes undverpeering, do guilefully discouer and turne to a great derision: also all darke and vnaccustomed wordes, or rusticall and homely, and sentences that hold too much of the mery & light, or infamous & vnshamefast are to be accounted of the same sort, for such speaches become not Princes, nor great estates, nor them that write of their doings to vtter or report and intermingle with the graue and weightie matters.

George Puttenham,

‘Of the high, low, and meane subject’,
in *The Arte of Poesie* (1589)

The fisherman will set his tray of hooks
and ease them one by one into the flood.
His net of twine will strain the liquid billow
and take the silver fishes from the deep.
But my own hand I dare not plunge too far
lest only sand and shells I bring to air
lest only bones I resurrect to light.

Martin Carter,

‘Till I Collect’,
in *Poems of Resistance* (1954)

‘Fayre damesel,’ seyde Sir Launcelot, ‘know y[e] in this con-
try one adventures nere hande?’

‘Sir knyght,’ seyde the damesel, ‘here ar adventures nyghe,
and thou durst preve hem.’

‘Why sholde I not preve?’ seyde sir Launcelot. ‘For for that cause com
I hydir.’

Thomas Malory,

‘A Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot du Lake’,
in *Works*, ed. by Eugène Vinaver, second edn (1971)

DARK & UNACCUSTOMED WORDS

FRAMBOYÁN

For Deana Rankin

That trees had evolved to eat other trees.
That this happened at the end of a garden.
That this was first noticed in a small tree's wincing.
That the larger tree was bending in, whipped by no wind,
a flamboyant tree and not in flower, bunched to a beak.
Dwarf and royal poinciana trees: almost one kind:
at the end of a Trinidad childhood garden.

That the small tree visibly respired; menaced,
yet stock still, spread and ruffled, animal
yet green; this one yes in flower as if on fire
yet in devouring distress letting air in
yet – feather-tipped and all aflame – just like an offshoot
of what stood over.

Hardly leafed, intent and purposeful,
stacked altostratus storm-bark discovering its due
moved in to take, concave against odds of weather.

Pitiless, we witness small uprootings; turn,
with each untreelike recommencing; retreat
further into the house, feel ourselves delicate;
stridently walk, shuddering bolts shut, instinct outraged,
know: we are next, who shall be due to fall under green shade.

But lock the doors (the well-made doors: investments, property).
The thing is busy outside (that tree evolved to eat
other trees). It is good our doors are good.

And indeed it centred in – the earth; the slate; the concrete –
And indeed it entered wading. For our doors were wood.

TREE WITH A SILVER LINING

i.m. the dead and living of Hiroshima and Nagasaki

Above the fence the silver underside of leaves
several stems next door to make one slender tree
do not ascribe distress or a wish for peace
neither inanimate nor animate
the movement of the wind the movement of the tree

it is a human thing to think the leaf is green
silver side up each leaf fled deflecting heat
leaves leaving the holder of the thought of tree
how thin this leaf is wind-tossed seen like that
the shadows on the fence have more heft, in their way

branched shadows on the fence outweigh the slender tree
black leaves bunched like fruit like excavation finds
like trowels like the speaking clock like relief
where and wherever leaves change never far
the fear the flash that stamped apart shadow and leaf.

Come home, soon and quickly, love. The butterfly tree,
light on the fence, slender stems, make thoughts in me,
if you arrive late, you will find me away,
neither of here nor of now; do not leave,
do not leave believing bereavement, who can stay?

EVEN IN SLEEP, REFRAINING

When I heard the sad adulterers Tristan and Iseult
had placed a sword between them as they slept, so to avoid
sexual congress in the forest, my first and filthy thought:
how much you can do despite a sword, lean above maybe,
long soothes down flanks whose fighting muscles bunch and do not rest,
waterfalls of pitiful caresses run misplaced.
But those two know swords, the humiliations of wound care,
instantaneous gross damage. Cousins to that-which-broke.
One blade, lying coldly, puts a guard upon the mind,
trains body, motive, separate in the forest of their want.
Sharp metal cuts unmoved upon the first unconscious move,
prevents love reaching through their sleep, or sleeping hand in hand.

AS IN THE SUNLIGHT AND GIVEN HUMAN FORM IT IS
LESS USUALLY IMPOSSIBLE TO BE SUBJECT TO THE
MINUTLE OF WARMTH

I'd think it must be after death
that place
if I were born to think so –
where we'd meet
and walk towards each other
face to face
surveying without fear
(Feel how the street has emptied,
now you're near).
Happiness would be your name.
(No it has not).

FOR ADJECTIVES ARE ONE ROAD CUT INTO THE PRECIPICE
BORDERING PERFECTION

For Carole Bourne-Taylor

According to the wall chart, the average
Neolithic lady
inhabited a body
the same size as me.

The esplanade had been enough.
Pleased like a Victorian
to walk until it gave way find a stone
as smooth as flat to sacrifice upon

I saw a sky the colour only of bluebells
the clear blue loved, reserved, only for bluebells
for imaginary equatorial cumulonimbus bluebells
– little like the actual absent weak-stemmed lilac flowers –

If you see,
we have that reading in common,
bleu céleste *celestial blue*

THE SALAMANDER IS SO COLD

Drop adornments, endearments, rope in
hovering behaviour, trap
each look at its limits, stop don't
hit the roof – that's out of bounds, not reach –
I know that's where you're going.

I'll steal
across its ridge, tonight, knock off ten tiles
(save that smash, but with the sound turned off,
a gift to local mosaic makers), nails
filed and filled with stuff that glints beneath,
open a hole from central heating into
cold.

The salamander is so cold
it lives in fire, that's where it finds its level,
it strikes an average by a life in fire.
And how I'll blister, fixing your escape,
across my nature, if I have not planned
where burning creatures can find cold enough.

WE'RE PROCEEDING, WEIGHTED FOR SWIFTNESS

Inconceivable

Birds, dried, small ones, peppering down, stiff-feathered,
they'd do as decorations (make them be for something),
hang them in a fringe on a red-letter day,
twirled along the banister of a pizza restaurant
(anything else?) (they can't get better than this) –

to put the thought –

but we can't stop for them, we're travelling much faster,
too fast to catch them, faster than their gravity,
and in a metal hood (they can't click) (send sounds bouncing back)
it's no good to stick out a charcoal arm from.

Weighted for swiftiness, proceed: flat pockets, eyes averse,
we're on our flight path: no painful bundles, please.

Inconceivable some kind of idea of song in twigs.

OUTSIDE

thinking
the box the box the box the box the
thinking box the box the box the box the box thinking
the box the box the box the box the
thinking box the box the box the box the box thinking
the box the box the box the box the
box the box the box the box the box
thinking

THE VEGETABLES OF CONTEMPT

O urban blow-in, paver of private gardens,
scorning to husband allotments of thine own!
Attend local markets; the harvest is plenteous;
abandon the vitamins of alienation;
scrub off the sunblock compounded of wickedness;
nor show up swinging plastic bags lettered TESCO;
for thy repentance comes late, thou shalt be sized up,
yea, thy time shall be spent with rotten tomatoes,
thou shalt seek out and pay over the odds for 'em;
depart in gratitude, nor enquire after
certification of organic origin;
let men be what they eat; beans are too good for thee;
if thou thinkest the stall-holder handed and eyed
like a cardsharp, put thy hand in thy pocket,
pull out small change; thou despiser of toil and soil
deserv'st to have decaying chard palmed off on thee;
if fresh compost hide a mouldy stalk, that is less shame
than the moist and sinful idleness of legs
exercised upon car-pedals and adultery.

Through exploiting of thee, slowly the world improves,
and through thy unexpected, asked-for patience.
Know the seasons are in haste; and not on your side;
so turn thou betimes to the freezing of berries,
let the storage of carrots occupy thy days;
pay heed to the scampering of gnawing critters.
And yet, thou office slave, thy repentance comes late;
too late, thou speedy Urbanite; thou art condemned;
leave thy fruitless bargain-hunting; for all thy days
thou shalt eat of the vegetables of contempt.
And with that be contented.

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This book is for Nicholas Laughlin.

