

Rose Apple and the Desiccated Lake

NAUSH SABAH

I

Fractals bloom along the horizon
inky-black and skeletal reaching upward
as if fists have pounded from underground
and the earth has shattered the sky.
Or I could call them bare trees
and tell you to see them as I do
in dusk-grey distance, indistinct and fading.
Only, there are no horizons where I live
and no blue-haze of hills or towns,
just the immediacy of walls and amputated limbs
on narrowing pavements outside chicken shops.
There is no distance in Sparkbrook,
only other corners to turn into cul-de-sacs,
and here – in the suburb I've escaped to – a chill.

II

Weeks on, snow is still held by the woodland,
ground so saturated that each step I take draws
its own foot-shaped puddle up to the surface,
pool here around me, my weight too much
for the land to hold without spilling forth its water;
my presence will cause floods and I am staying
here to drown the city. Let it never be said
I took more than I gave.

III

I have taken to driving in the night
to remind myself I am safe to move,
confined
in my containers of breath, hurtling through
any darkness,
as if it is normal to trust, at speed, with abandon.
I have perched on a hilltop to overlook the lit city
and pretend that elevated distance brings epiphany,
that silent staring is contemplation, has meaning.
Now, with a view from the promontory
I transcend my own estimations, realise
I would still rather look through glass than air.

IV

Memory is thin, membranous.
Something wet is slipping down the walls,
the earthy dampness of paint and plaster,
a smell that witnesses the negligence of disuse.
It was a condition of my insurance policy
to visit you every seven days and pass a tender look
over each threshold, into every crevice,
to watch for any drip that might bring rot;
destruction is small, slow, then sudden and complete.
I did not come for months,
trusting that the neighbouring houses would
keep you standing, knowing you had a longer lifespan
than me and deeper foundations on this land.

V

Mountain folk do not fear like valley people.
I learnt this only when our guide placed the little shell
of baby carseat at the very edge of the air and I stood
trying not to send my breath plunging down with my baby,
made pomegranate-heart grip granite and pull itself back
into my chest from the dark of my stomach.
He had a sense of perspective I lacked: it wasn't sheer
just because air was all around it
or gave the pleasure of distant vision.
But I'm of the valley and in the valley
the deep rises up to meet our toes
before it washes over our rooftops.

VI

We pray for rainfall then watch the waters
surge and rush the land away from us.

*O Lord, let the rose apple be quenched
not ripped by the deluge.*