

The White City

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1.

Finally, after twenty-seven years, the ice is melting. But, in this devastated city with its once-commercial wharves and gleaming Shards, its empty cathedrals and ivory minarets, no one notices. Life amongst the ruins goes on in the same hopeless way and the pulse of existence seems lost. The half-buried homes, the outlines of trains standing motionless on frozen railway tracks, the useless street lamps and the iced-up car parks all remain abandoned. I am used to this; to the silence of ice, its cruel beauty, its gothic, petrified grandeur, and so, for a few weeks, I, too, notice nothing. And then, unexpectedly, a faint shimmer of water forms across the horizon and I realise: the blue ice is melting.

Every day when I stand on high ground and look towards the Tower, to where the river used to be, I see it melt a little more. This blue ice lies deep beneath the frozen world. When the earth starts to warm up, the blue ice shifts and the white ice on top cracks, bends and splinters with a ferocious pyrotechnic energy. Watching, I can't help but be astonished. The cracks are thin and appear as delicate geometric folds drawn on transparent paper. Underneath it is possible to see glints of greyish water moving with deceptive calm. But this situation is becoming increasingly lethal, for the water is actually fast-moving and deep. At first there doesn't seem

anything dangerous but then one of the guards walking across the river gets trapped between two of the ice plates and when his companion tries to save him another chunk of ice breaks off and they both vanish under it. There is a brief thrashing of arms in the undertow and then the crunching and grinding of the huge sheets of ice. The river is alive and seems to be digesting the men. I watch all of it standing by the bridge. Even if I wanted to I am too far away to help them. Soon after, other men who used to skate across the river, frightened away no doubt by what has happened, disappear. News travels surprisingly fast in this static, empty city.

So, yes, the river is slowly returning to its former state. Daily I see its curve widen like shot silk across the horizon. There are no trees in this part of the city. Only cranes and unfinished skyscrapers rise alongside empty office blocks. The world, mute for so many years, is now filled with sounds of fracturing ice, brittle and unpredictable. It is impossible to tell where the next fault line will appear.

On one of my morning walks I go as far as the Tower itself. This ancient prison both fascinates and horrifies me.

‘Where are your prisoners now?’ I shout.

My voice is whipped away by the wind. There isn’t anyone to hear me. There are no ravens any more either, but a blackened, ragged cloth still hangs at half-mast. I move closer, hesitating, staring at the broken bridge, once such a symbol of greatness in this place. Then I notice that even in the moat the ice has broken. *Water!* Grey, dirty; but still, water.

Walking across this white desert isn’t easy any more. The sky has lightened but the wind remains bitter. In spite of it though, today, I walk for three hours. I am a swathed figure dark against the whiteness of the city. Occasionally my long,

still-black hair escapes and flies with the wind. I am the raven in this birdless world. Ahead of me I notice other figures huddling together. One holds up a large black cross. From this I gather a funeral is taking place beside the river. Soon someone will dig a hole, or if not dig then find a gap between two ice cracks and the body will be pushed in. Death and water go well together, I suppose. There is nothing remarkable in such an event. I skirt around the gathering and turn away from the river.

I decide to visit the wrought-iron ruin, once a huge exhibition hall, now crystal-white and encrusted with icicles that sparkle like chandeliers in the uncertain light. Afterwards I walk for so long and in such an erratic manner that eventually I come to a series of old railway arches. I have been here before on a different occasion. Usually there are huge stalactites hanging down from its arches but today they appear shorter and the ground is wet and slippery. A single icicle breaks off with a brittle snap, narrowly missing me. As I walk past I notice a small white sign on a wall.

The Cut, I read.

And then in red letters, *S.E.*

On the way back I fall over because the thawing ground has become glassy and dangerous. I fall into a ditch. When I stand up I am soaking wet. Water! Again. Lately I have seen marks appearing all over the once-smooth ground. When I first noticed this I was puzzled but after a while I realised these marks are the tread from tyres of old, obsolete grit lorries. Preserved like fossils. There are no moving cars, of course, just rusting body parts embedded in the ice, emerging daily into view in a fragmentary way.

Yes, the thaw has finally come.

I am almost home when I see something so horrific that I feel a jolt like electricity passing through my body. Trembling, I am compelled to move closer; to look. And what I see is a man, fully clothed, slumped in his car. Preserved in ice, complete with tie and suit, his face embalmed by refrigeration. Perfect features, perfect skin, perfect hair. Dead. Above him, a sign showing faintly through the dissolving veil of ice.

Car Wash, I read.

I hurry back, hardly noticing the flat roofs of the buildings that are appearing, hardly caring that once, long ago, this was a street full of shops, cafés, homes. In the descending pink-streaked twilight I pass a man trying to roast rats over damp wood. I wonder how long it will be before he finds the body in the car.

I reach my house. It is the very same house where I was born and spent most of my childhood. Where Aslam, my brother, too, was born. There isn't much that resembles our old home. I burned most of the furniture before discovering other methods of keeping warm. In the kitchen I stand for a moment staring out of the window. The high banks of frozen whiteness in the back garden have been creaking and expanding for weeks as though they were a large wooden ship. The thaw is speeding up; I am aware of a change from this morning, even. The top of the old shed has become visible and suddenly, out of some long-forgotten place, comes the memory of those things that I thought were buried for ever.

A lawn mower for a lawn that no longer exists.

An old prayer mat for all those unanswered prayers.

Computer parts belonging to my brother, Aslam.

A tool kit my father used for boarding up a window.

The pram in which our mother pushed each of us.

A cool box.

At the thought of the cool box I begin to laugh but my laugh changes almost instantly. What comes out of my mouth now cannot be called laughter. Staring at the darkening garden with its buried, abandoned things, I remember the love song you once sang to me when I asked too many questions.

Why tell them all the old things ... buried under the snow

I continue to stare blankly out of the window, hearing your voice, tenderness never far from the surface. And then I hear the thud of ice falling somewhere out of sight. I jump. And I realise there are other sounds rising and falling above these cracks and explosions. Sounds so small yet unmistakable. Small drops of water are beginning to fall from the eaves.

There is no doubt about this thaw, I think again.

Something on the shelf of my heart shifts as, through the high banks of frozen whiteness looming out of the night, I see the beloved faces coming towards me like revellers after a drunken party. Yes, you are here, demanding to be acknowledged. So that, going out into what passes for the back garden, I notice the Milky Way has flung its stars far and wide like jewels across the sky. And as the rain begins its insistent tattoo across the windowpane I see I can no longer ignore the past.