

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

The Lantern Kieran Murphy

I retraced my steps, attempting to visualise from memory what I had barely been able to see the first time: the light-smearing cobbles of St John street; the high Victorian gate and edifice of the Church of the Holy Rood; the closed bowling green to the left; the battlements with their plugged, black-lacquered cannons facing King James Park; the jaundiced remains of Cowane's hospital; the hunched, easily missed gate into the cemetery itself; the crooked gravestones; the glass-encased, angelic statue of the martyr Mary Shellway, who drowned miles from home on the West Coast, praying to God with such fervour, the story runs, that she was unaware of the rising tide and its sweeping undercurrents; the steps of the hill, stones gouged into earth, higgledy piggledy, a staircase remaining makeshift for hundreds of years.

A cold wind brought me back to reality and I pointed my dim eyes towards the sunset. I felt the awe that precedes collapse, a despairing euphoria. I enjoyed the flare of light as I refocused my eyes, getting a morbid kick out of how little I could see. The way I used to feel picking at scabs. It's better than getting upset. I directed my gaze from one vista to another, wallowing in the protracted light refracting through the serried benches. I recalled what it used to look like. All I could see was a flat band of gold. Then I saw the aliens.

My plan had been to enjoy a view from my childhood while I still could, but my vision was too watery; everything smeared into a patchwork impression of the old amber and the new blue lights, of fog and chimney smoke. And again there was that absurd sensation, that distance from myself. This can't be happening. At least it's better at night when the spots disappear.

The doctor explained the situation with that vexed professionalism doctors always adopt. Although I understood the gravity of what he said, his voice seemed far away, as if he was talking to me from the end of a long, high-ceilinged corridor. I zoned out. With my head downturned, I let my eyes go in and out of focus, ignoring the blotches blocking out the left corner of my vision. It felt as if someone had taken a pair of scissors and simply cut out whatever had been there. Eventually my concentration was such that I forgot about my body. For a while, I felt like a spirit haunting the room.

'It's called diabetic retinopathy. Currently it is non-proliferative, but at this late stage and due to the nature of the condition, it's only a matter of time before it turns severe and proliferative.'

The room had become a montage of still images. The photo-shopped pictures of various demographics undergoing the same symptoms. They were all skinny, and a ginger-haired child and Asian woman were smiling. An advert for type-one diabetes. They don't smile in the type-two adverts, which are about making old, fat people feel guiltier about their slovenly lifestyle.

'So what has happened is that the blood vessels nourishing your retinas have become blocked. Your retinas are then sending signals to your brain to replace these blood vessels. Understand?' An advertisement for an insulin drip that sticks in your belly. Pamphlets in metal sconces by the door. More on a small table in the corner.

'The Lantern.' Kieran Murphy.

Transnational Literature Vol. 5 no. 1, November 2012.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

Multicoloured diagram of cartoon patients, for children. The way the halogen light attacked the white walls, making the room swell and contract.

‘The new blood vessels are very weak and can burst easily, accounting for the blotches and blood specks you have been observing in recent months.’

The blue floor. The neat desk. The medical tomes on the shelf below the window. The doctor. The coffee stain on his left cuff. The pen in his right hand that he used like a conductor’s baton.

‘Generally, in ninety per cent of cases, it is an easily prevented condition.

His dark Indian skin, shiny in the hard light. His cropped black hair. His nose a little too large for his face. His chubbiness. A mole on his left cheek.

‘In your case, however, because it has been diagnosed so late, it is very unlikely that we can stop debilitating, if not complete, blindness. Are you listening?’

His voice, the voice of a native Hindi speaker, with its rolled ‘r’s and thick vowels like dollops of ghee, a voice which had paused for effect.

‘In your case, I advise you to prepare for the worst case scenario, and rejoice in anything better than that.’

The room filled with the noises from the corridor. Other patients’ names being called. Someone pushing a trolley. The hum of various diagnostic and vending machines. I had listened and not listened, the way I always hear bad news.

‘Rejoice?’ I said, with a half-smile.

‘Yes.’

‘I think you’ve used that sentence before. You’ve prepared that.’

The doctor laughed without making a sound. His head waggled slightly, a cultural tic from his childhood that he had probably worked on eradicating: ‘Well...’

‘It’s a good sentence, don’t worry.’

He looked as if he were about to say something and then stopped himself. The smile disappeared and was replaced with sternness. He stared at me for longer than was comfortable. Only then did I realise how tired he looked, his eyes raccooned and bloodshot. Finally he spoke again.

‘Do you understand how serious this is?’

‘Yes,’ I replied.

‘You have something in your eye.’ That was the first sign, two months ago now. My mother sitting across from me; the twilight filtering through metal blinds and linden trees; the small blotch beside her head, a red non-space, like a whispering demon. The kitchen was quiet after rush hour, and her words sounded accusative. Everything she said sounded accusative.

After eleven years and two months of regular tests, I had given up. I had given myself up for this. Not an easy feat for a brittle diabetic – the sudden surge of sugar-spiked blood turned sour, hypoglycaemic. It was as if I was removed from my life and merely staring at it from a high vantage, and yet it was a cowardly form of self-harm. This happened shortly after my parents’ divorce – my one concession to the melodramatic impulses propelling us through that time, when every sentence sounded like a line from a bad TV drama, or too real and faintly ludicrous.

Anyway – there were few warning signs, although I should have been prepared for it. Blood specks that disappeared in a half-hour. Easily ignored.

A chain of glowing rectangles suspended in the night. Had they come for me? I grew cognisant of their movement: a subtle bobbing and a stately progress southwards.

They were lanterns. Someone, somewhere, had released them. I watched as their flames grew in the encroaching darkness. I could ascertain every detail of them. The cuboids of craft paper and tissue held together by superglue and copper wire. How was this possible? I was so mesmerised, I didn't even question my suddenly perfect vision. I thought the lanterns were the realest things I had ever seen. One of them in particular, second from the end, took my focus. I stopped thinking. I could hear the susurrant of the forest engulfing Back O'Hill road. Then silence. I tunnel-visualised into the lantern. It moved slower than the others now. In fact, everything was slow.

Then I discovered that I was the lantern.

You can feel thermal upwinds. The subtleties of vectors. The moisture logging in your thin paper walls. And an inner heat, which propels you upwards, ineffably upwards, beyond the troposphere, to where there is no more oxygen. You realise you are committing suicide. Or, more nobly, that which allows you to fulfil your function, your inner flame, your inexorable trajectory upwards, is also killing you.

You can see as you never have before all 360 degrees of the sky and the globe below. Its curvature. The setting sun rising as you drift higher. A flock of birds silhouetted against the sky, like ticks: seagulls far from the sea. You can see the smudge on the hillside. The old you, slumped like a rag doll.

The air thins. Not long now. You can taste oblivion. It's close. Death once seemed like an absurd proposition, but it had always been the truest thing. You realise that now. Another lantern gutters in front of you. It wobbles in the air, like a spinning top losing speed and plummets towards the country road below. You think how much will be lost. You, who have seen so little, felt so little. Your flame dwindles. Almost extinguishes. More dead lanterns descend. Then the sun goes out.

Birds claw and scrape at your side. They live in a sudden world. Your wall rips – a thin slit on the left side. Are you a bird now? No. A seagull collides with you. It is madly painting itself onto your walls. Your flame returns, but the elm trees loom, their tops a mere foot away.

Your mother's tears splash into the kitchen sink, mingling with washing up liquid and old pots. Your father is a slammed door and ten empty Stella cans hidden in the recycling bin. You are buffeted by the vortexed wind from the trees. The seagull's legs catch in your metal frame. You tumble through the tops of the trees, dodging branches. Then you soar out from the thicket, and wheel over King James Park. The seagull pulls you across the sky like a pony pulling a cart. You turn right towards the cemetery and castle, towards Mote hill. You see the beheading stone. The seagull caws maniacally as if speaking to you.

The stone is naked and bloody. The familiar black iron enclosure is gone. As are the benches and cannons. You see the rail lines, the council houses, the new bridges, the tenements swallowed by a wave of green, by grass and trees and hillocks. By thatched hovels and dry stonewalls.

A sombre group of townspeople stand around the stone. A priest holding a large wooden cross addresses them. As you fly over, an axe lifts and lops off a pagan head.

At the north side of the River Forth, the battle is finished. A fleeing knight in full armour jumps into the river and does not emerge. A cavalry soldier making for the bridge tries to manoeuvre his horse over a pile of bodies. The horse missteps and both fall into the blood and viscera. A broadsword slices into the back of a naked man and moves downward to his heels, cutting off a curtain of skin. The remnants of the army at the south bank of the river retreats.

The seagull squawks again. It is winter. Volleys of snow attack you. You turn towards the castle. A pyre blazes into the afternoon, melting the surrounding snow. There is a snowball fight, and then cheers as a young queen slides down the castle hill on the skull of a cow. She falls into a drift in the bottom of the hills and one of her minders, a hunched old nun with strong hands, picks her up.

The seagull glides and dips. A light in the south like the sunrise. The blast reaches you as a hot breeze. Your flame dances. You have little wax left.

Vines climb through the few glass and stone buildings that rise above the frosted mulch. You see floodlands in every direction. There are no humans.

The seagull calls again, but now it sounds like crying, a voice raised in anguish. The hospital lumbers up from the swamp, shedding its refurbished layers. You fly towards a window. You see your mother holding the old you, swaddled, newborn. Your father stands next to her. You can see their frantic love as a red aura. Superimposed upon your father's face flicker images of the shy diffident souls of your ancestors; all of them frustrated; all hand their anger to him like a torch. Turning to your mother, you see fractious intellectuals, schizophrenics, crybabies, bullies. And you see past all of them to a frailty that is your parents' alone.

The seagull gulps down chips on the pavement below. When did it escape? It looks up at you and squawks a final time before taking off towards the ocean.

You float away from the hospital, ascending. The clouds rave overhead. Thunder. The world holds its breath. Everything looks loaded and purplish. You reach the clouds just as the rain starts. Inside them your fragile panels absorb vapour; turbulence strips them bare. As you break through the clouds into the troposphere, you realise you are no longer the lantern. You are nothing. You drift higher.

All of Stirling lies below, pummelled by lightning. As you rise, you can see further, beyond the storm. You can see Scotland, England, Europe, Africa and the world.

And you see it as it is, as it was, and as it will be. A boiling mass solidifying, pinballed by meteors. One meteor is so big it takes a chunk out of your nascent planet and creates the moon, another brings water, brings life. Oxygen. You see broiling pangea, the time before names, life in the waters. Tectonic drift. Life on the land. Dinosaurs and their slow demise. Grass. Humans and their slower demise. The cycles of the planet and then death. The sun expanding, its dwarfing. And then nothing. Nothing anywhere. Lifelessness that lasts for eternity.

I wake on the wet grass. I cannot see a thing. My clothes soaked through. How many hours have passed? What has happened? It takes me a while to get to my feet. I'm shaky. I need sugar. I remember the chocolate bar in my jacket pocket and devour it. I feel my way with my hands. As I crawl I touch metal. It is a frame. I laugh. It is me; my lantern.

Evolution is a rogue engine, raging, unrelenting. The lantern quashed by its

own flame, me blinded by my own blood cells. I pick up the tangled frame. The wet paper walls stick to my forearm. Slowly, I feel my way home.