

No Traveller Returns

VAHNI CAPILDEO was born in 1973, in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad. She came to England in 1991. This is her first book.

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VAHNI CAPILDEO



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For my parents

Devendranath Capildeo and Leila Bissoondath Capildeo

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VAHNI CAPILDEO
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The Mask in the Bone

Amulet

“That’s an unusual pendant you are wearing.”

“Yes, it is rather unusual.”

“May I look at it?”

“There is really nothing to see.”

“Was it a gift?”

“It is something I chose for myself.”

“Do you wear it often?”

“Not all the time.”

“Why not? It suits you. Don’t you like it?”

“Yes, it is one of those things which you need to feel complete.”

“But you don’t wear it all the time.”

“The only item I wear all the time is my watch.”

“Are you afraid of being late?”

“Lateness is the other person’s problem.”

“Is your schedule very pressured?”

“Never really pressured but never really free.”

“So what do you like to do in your free time?”

“I like to sleep.”

“To sleep! What if someone told you that you had two months
free?”

“For two months I would sleep.”

“Do you need so much sleep?”

“I like to sleep.”

“There must be someone with healing hands that would make
you not have to sleep.”

“No, I would sleep.”

“For two months?”

“I would sleep.”

Education

There began the fierce sounds of a house stabbing itself.
However, we were not disposed to listen.
Our attention was transfixed, under the large-scale pine tree,
by a brown bird, quick as dammit, in the dried grass.

Rats have been through my ships. I remember your words:
“Woman is like the wind” – which is poetry,
but makes no sense. That is not the warning,
nor indeed the explanation, given by a friend.

Would you leave your ships to be watched
by the eyes of a mermaid whose hands are gloves
with the fingers broken off, handlers of nothing,
best in museums, the other side of glass?

The blades that back this house are couch grass.
I almost asked to hire a flame thrower.
No use: the roots mat into completeness.
Taking fire as refreshment, how they would spring again.

White as Jasmine

They say, in the family,
usually the women,
though not in whispers,
they say, At this time –
or, At that time –
the same day, the day before,
months or years after someone
died –
a *sweet smell* lingered.

Visiting?

Not a blessing, not a warning.

It is no mystery.

The sweet smell visits the living
in their living place,
never inhabits the dying room.

Why then, in the coach station –
rank oil, ranked taxis,
plastic toys, plastic money,
packed sweat, packed lunches –
Why, then, the smell of jasmine
two days before I
fly home?

Lord white as jasmine,
who has died?

Life is

long in me, lives long before
long after me.

The senses
are too violent
to bear evidence, in this sun
this afternoon,
yet jasmine visits,
strong like evening.

Is it a country has died
within me? Is it
I have died to it, to the past or future
that is my own strange land?

Memory is a professional whisperer.
I smelled a sweet smell.
Who has died?

In Cunaripo

The first time I saw the giant Pandit in his peach-hued kurta,
his whole bulk bespoke his kindness, as he gentled his voice's
 soundwaves
to play with his terrified baby nephew (himself large for his age –
some time after, other children would run away, take fright in
 their turn,
when the big little one cooed down at them, gently proffering
 his toys);
so, what happened with the caymans was entirely in character.

It was the family night
of a festival day.
They opened the door.
Sporting in the ravine
maybe a dozen
baby caymans
and their pianolength mother.
Alligator laughter
splashing and boiling
through their proper element,
sparking off water.
No happier sight.

He scattered consecrated sweets to the beasts,
and the little wedgemouths, delighted, gave chase.
(The mother ignored him, however.) He admired them feasting,
how human and animal could live so close.

Who knows why
he filled in the ravine
later that year,
when he decided
to earth it up.
It is doubtful they died.
Their preferred method
of getting through drought weather

is to be dried into mud.
And even if they did,
who knows how they're reborn.
What a chance. After such blessed food,
perhaps they live in India.
Perhaps they are kalaripayattu masters.

Was it since one small cayman, jagged-jawed, lunged, backed off,
lunged, backed off,
at his beautiful daughter, when she went out to see to the
flowers?
Not necessarily.
Should you agree blood is thicker than water.