

Dennis Haskell, *Ahead of Us*. Fremantle: Fremantle Press, 2015. 112 pp. ISBN 9781925163285.

Why do we read poetry? Some ten years back, in a poetry-reading session at a small town in West Bengal, a very senior Bengali poet, Nirendranatha Chakrabarty, gave an answer to this question, asked by the organisers of the event. He said that poetry has a utility value, that we read poetry because we need it. Referring to Tagore's poetry, he said that we read him because he is a source of support to our joy, of strength in our fight and of solace in our grief. In a time when, in the midst of various experiments, we tend to forget that poetry is not merely a cerebral exercise but something more than it, Dennis Haskell's new book of poetry, *Ahead of Us*, comes as a pleasant surprise. While reading him, I was reminded of Nirendranath Chakrabarty's words. Haskell's poetry makes us face to face with emotions which are universal, in a language which is not at all emotional. Readers can connect with him. In fact, to his readers, he becomes a source of support to joy, of strength in fight and of solace in grief. What more can you expect from a book?

The book is divided into three parts. The first part is titled "Chance." It contains 27 poems. Most of the poems in this part, often through gentle irony and understatement, reveal that the only certainty in life is uncertainty. In the first poem of this section, titled "Chance: A Conversation," Haskell writes: "Chance, I know that my chances/of having a conversation with you/are slight.../Your place/ seems so arbitrary; and/if we could sit down together/I know the talk would be hopelessly haphazard..." (8). The poems of the first section, in different ways, in fact, try to define the mystery of uncertainty. This is why, probably, travel, which is often marked by uncertainties and surprises, acts as a strong motif in many of the poems of the section. In fact, there are two sub-sections within the first section, "French Poems" and "China Poems." As the titles suggest, these two sections present poems written on the experiences of the poet's visits to Paris and China respectively.

In his travel poems, Haskell does not romanticise travel. In a sardonic tone, he, rather, portrays the small hazards one has to negotiate with in travel. In "After Roissy," for instance, he writes on the uneasiness that body encounters after getting off from a plane: "...I calculated the minutes when/you must have stumbled off the plane, and gone straggling/through Changi, your head/tired, your eyes struggling open,/ankles swollen, your legs/enjoying being legs again, the/muscles stretching, the blood/ starting to flow freely" (13). China poems show the poet's encounter with an alien culture and land which by its very largeness produces shock. "Poem Beginning with a Line by Li Po" begins with this shock: "Tianjin, Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing ladies and men/by tens of thousands on tens of thousands/of bicycles, mopeds, motorscooters,

motorbikes,/gauze their faces, handkerchief their mouths,/ so many particles of dust and lead/pixel the air” (16). This element of shock continues all through the poem as Haskell writes, “Chinese count in numbers so enormous/they add up to anonymity./ No matter how many faces you see/there are always more, no matter/how many arms and hands you touch/ there are always more...” (17). Such a feeling culminates in the last line of the poem in which the poet writes that living in China without his love has converted all China into “a stretch of long silence” (17). What is to be noted here is Haskell’s ability to reach an unsurpassable height, all of a sudden, by dint of minimal use of words. In the poem “At the Marco Polo Hotel,” Haskell again writes about the culture shock of travelling in an oriental country as he notes, “No encounters with members/of the opposite sexes in the rooms that/is what the lobbys is for” (19). Haskell’s diction in this poem smells of the matter-of-fact world that obliquely portrays a mechanical, rule-bound country that China is.

There are some poems in the first section of the book that directly deal with the relationship between man and nature. Some of these poems celebrate the serenity of nature and man’s dependence on it. “The Gift” ends with such a celebration of the healing power of nature: “Now the sun’s gleaming off the wings/and we’re heading homeward in the light/ at last unperturbed by its luminous/ and utterly ordinary silence” (10). Of course, nature is not always a shelter to a human being in Haskell. In “The Trees,” Haskell writes about a cloudy day when “Trees mark out distances/like goals, and there are more of them/than your mind, or the light,/can hold” (15). At the end of the poem, “near clouds” clot the air and an early darkness sets in like fear. This ending speaks of humanity’s incapability of comprehending and controlling nature. Such a sense pervades some other poems as well. In “Word without Limits,” Haskell writes: “Our lives are granted us,/gratuitously. Out of a huge and unfamiliar silence/first breaths/thump into our bodies. More/ than our minds could ever collect/is there/and with us always. Call it God” (24). The poem ends on a similar note that shows the sheer incomprehensibility of life: “A silence that allows/ all possibilities. Call it/ ‘God’” (25). The last poem of the first section is the title poem of the book. Fear, uncertainty and incomprehensibility of life blend together in this poem. Haskell writes: “Freight trains moan on the line./What does their shaky language spell/and carry? What is its urgent load?/What refuses to dissolve,/its tongue determinedly calling us/into the determined dark?” (50). In fact, this is the poem that serves as a link between the first and the second sections of the book, as the second section graphically records the process through which one enters death.

The second section, the best part of the book, “That Other Country,” through 23 poems, shows how rapidly not only the victim of cancer, the Big C (as Haskell calls it in the poem, “Eventually”), but also her near ones become citizens of another country, the country of death. In short, it graphically depicts

the journey of the poet's wife, Rhonda Haskell, to death through cancer. The section uses Owen's "The poetry is in the pity" as its epigraph. The poetry in this section, however, lies not only in pity but also in love. The poems in this section show how passionate love fights cancer, how the intensely personal could be dispassionately universal. In so many of these poems, Haskell is on top of his emotions but not even once does he lose control of them. Instead, he successfully converts them into pure poetry by dint of his dispassionate detachment from and gentle irony about death.

The title poem of the section shows how the very utterance of one word, that acts as a visa, transports not only the poet's wife but also "those closest" to her to another country: "The word/will be a visa, in your passport/an indelible stamp, and your passport/now full of pages that you will never use" (52). The incredible shock that cancer gives to its victims is poignantly captured by the dramatic ending of the poem: "No use to declare/stark ignorance of the language./He says the word, 'cancer',/and already you are there" (53). The pain and suffering of cancer have also been vividly recorded by Haskell. In some of the poems, he gives graphic details of step by step deterioration of the patient. In "After Chemo," he writes: "Your hair is falling like thin rain,/like mizzle, like long, silent,/lightening snow" (56). What strikes here is Haskell's use of simile, a device that some poets consider dated and worn-out. Haskell shows how powerful this ancient poetic device could be in conveying the pain and transcending the personal. There are some poems which, however, do not poeticise the trauma but portray the raw angst of suffering. In "Who or Why or How or What," he writes how he has become used to "the nausea, the anguish,/the stomach pains" and the "arm aided walk, the diarrhoetic dashes, the slow sleepless nights" (61). In the poem "Six Years," Haskell shows how difficult it has been to fight cancer: "For six years/we have slipped/into the black pit/of illness and death/again and again,/climbed out/with no suggestions of doubt/then slipped back/and climbed out/ again and again" (71). The horrors and anxieties of the fight, the swing between despair and hope are best captured in the poem "On the Eve" that records Haskell's thoughts on the day before the operation of Rhonda. The poem looks like a diary entry and is composed in run-on lines to give it the look of prose and not poetry, to mark the prosaic character of the battle with cancer. The longest poem of the book, "Saturday Night and Sunday Morning," is a record of Rhonda's ultimate journey into death. The poem, on the one hand, is a release of Haskell's emotions, and, on the other, a calm acceptance of the ultimate fate of the battle he was in for the last six years.

The best poems of this section are the ones which show the inevitability of death and the little adjustments and negotiations we make with life as our near ones journey to death. The calm, matter-of-fact tone of these poems shows

Haskell's power of turning the emotional into the cerebral, the personal into the universal. In "Belief," Haskell writes how silently death waits for the end: "You never see him move/but how he sits silent/in the expectant corner/ of every room you enter" (64). The reaction of Rhonda after receiving the notice for the renewal of her driver's licence shows how pungent and ironic the acceptance of death could be: "You must choose:/one more year or five./ 'Just one,'/you say, playing/the Scotsman's daughter,/ 'I wouldn't want/ to waste the money'" (68). Poems written after Rhonda's death, similarly show how the near ones of the deceased survive often making little adjustments, helplessly. In "Ashes and Hair," Haskell writes: "Wills, certificates, accounts, cancellations/ – there is so much to do/after a death,/some with things,/ some inside the head" (90). How difficult it is to adjust inside the head is shown in some other poems. In "Oranges," Haskell talks about the pain of having adjusted to a changed reality inside: "Three weeks since you've gone/and I can barely believe it./...I cannot take its measure. The calendar/is meaningless.../The morning of your funeral/I washed my hair/with the last of your shampoo/as if to get part of you,/the smell of you, on me" (88). The poem ends with an understatement that poignantly brings out the void that death ultimately is. Just a few days before her death, Rhonda bought oranges thinking that they would prevent "blockages" in her intestine. In the emptiness after her death when "the unsatisfiable monster of grief/heaves itself like a tortured animal," Haskell writes, "What can I more honestly do/but to take up an orange and bite?" (89). How omnivorous grief is and how it can undo anybody anytime is shown by Haskell in the poem "Grief": "Like a cat with a ball/of string, grief/can string you along/and just when you think/you're all right/show you yours are wrong" (97). The book, however, does not end in mourning. The last section of the book, "Fascination," contains only one poem that shows how a new born baby, Livio Haskell, Dennis Haskell's grandson, brings him back to life. Haskell begins the poem by pointing out the utter helplessness of the new born baby: "Five months into life/you have the utter helplessness/of the human, incapable/beyond any other animal," and then shows the amazement of the baby as things "cling" to his "tiny, wild fingers" (106). At the end of the poem, Haskell admits that his grandson has helped him come out of grief, that *he* is now his shelter, a tree that gives him shadow: "When tiredness overtakes/you curl into me/like a koala bear/into a tree/as if every leaf/were a sap-filled wonder,/as if I could/stand there forever" (107).

Reading Haskell is an experience. His is poetry that comes straight out of experiences and is honest and authentic. I must admit that I have not read poetry like this for long. In a world in which differences are overemphasised and often wrongly celebrated, Dennis Haskell's *Ahead of Us* underlines the commonalities of pain and joy. As an outstanding collection of poetry, it proves

that specific could really be cosmic.

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