

Usha Kishore

MIND THE GAP

(encountering the bard on a London Tube in Summer)

From day to day, this tube keeps
up its fleeting pace;
dashing madly through
the tangled veins
of the city's *straying streets*;
it swallows time,
as station after station disappears
into darkness
that sings *like a woeful ballad*.
From day to day,
another wandering soul,
charting *unpathed waters*
and undreamed shores,
cruises on the tube
pulsing in its rhythms, losing
itself in its myriad beats.

MIND THE GAP

Italian tourists with Gucci slung
on manicured hands,
raring to rival the Kate effect;
a mewling infant,
precariously perched
on a sareed hip,
whines at nonchalant humanity;
while his mother, eyes
lined in collyrium, dreams
in *attar* and gold.

MIND THE GAP

Acclimatise yourself to the *fretting*
and the fury of the tube,
traversing this ancient metropolis,

Londinium;
accustom yourself to the proximity
of faces and bodies;
learn this language that colonises
the world; get used
to its subtleties, its wayward
metaphors. Understand
that you too are a stranger
like many of them,
all alone in a crowd.

MIND THE GAP

Two young girls, cynosure
of all eyes, crop tops,
hip huggers, ringed in fingers,
nose and belly-button;
one of them *sighing like a furnace;*
journeys end
in lovers meeting. That pensive
man with dreadlocks,
eyes severe, bearded like the pard,
a guitar fast asleep on his lap.
That Indian student, rucksack
on his back, riding
unwillingly to his lectures,
strums an imagined
sitar, *whispering music*
to my weary spirit,

MIND THE GAP

That French couple
loudly studying
the underground map
and The Globe's
summer season. Remember,
the bard is never far away.
He is just around the corner,
musing on this megalopolis,
this *brave new world*, and

this newfangled contraption,
called the tube that *speaks in treble*,
 and rattles on
in wise saws and modern instances.

MIND THE GAP

This tube is *full of noises*,
 sounds and sweet airs.
This tube is the city
 The people are the city.
The language is the city
 Each one of us is a player,
with *exits and entrances.*
 Each one of us, a play
running beyond words and verse.
 This tube is a travelling
playhouse, *full of strange oaths*,
 sudden and quick

in its stops, *seeking bubble reputation*
 on the world's chequered stage.

MIND THE GAP

My grandmother's yarns

My grandmother had an uncanny knack
for spinning yarns, she sat cross legged

on the veranda all those years, and did
nothing but spin yarns out of thin air

and dye them in the shades of monsoon clouds.
She spun yarns of wayward *Gandharvas*

seducing virgins, of chaste women carrying
their husbands to whore houses, of shape-

shifting snake gods dancing in courtyards
lit up by fireflies, of bewitching *yakshis*

who lived on *champaka* trees, of virgin maids
courting blue gods and of a rare magical jewel

called *syamantaka*. All the while, she counted
the raindrops and scanned the sky for a fire-star

that birthed summer. All the while, she
counted time, for her yarns to be woven,

to be reborn in verse, in a distant land.

Gandharva – Male nature spirits

Yakshi - female vampire

Champaka - evergreen Indian tree, *Magnolia champaca*,

Ethnic soul

You cannot comprehend my ethnic soul.
It is not a book, you can interpret...

You cannot forge my ethnic soul in the
anvil of your words, it is not malleable...

My ethnic soul will not fit into your
metaphors, similes or conceits...

It will not give in to your silences,
your dagger looks, your conspiracies...

It will burn you in the desert heat of the Thar,
wash you in the depths of the Arabian Sea

and hang you in monsoon rainbows to be
wrung dry in the roaring westerlies ...