

## Travel Notes: Dhaka

Time never has controlled desire.  
It would have been timely to let go of Bangladesh  
But now I write in the open air of evening before a familiar view.  
Beyond the balcony is a Dhaka twice removed.  
(that is, I've removed myself twice from it.)  
From there I can't stand the distance.  
And from here, the proximity.  
Roofs and trees give way to the bamboo bones of half-made buildings.  
By the sky's hazy suspension, the hour seems later.  
The cantonment pond reflects a blot of crows.  
Air contrives a dusty plan on my skin.  
It dries in cracks then deeper in, like salt from my native sea.  
To feel it there hurts as much as when I forced out my first language.  
The present shows up bleakness in its light.  
Moments I've scarcely missed reveal my loss.  
When I stand for the panorama the drink runs to my knees.  
On the rooftop before me, laundry lines are wound in.  
In place of their dresses sit the women who fit them.  
The fronded pond turns a greyer shade of brown and crows fly from the treetops.  
The women rise to go inside.  
When they do, I follow.

In my room I telephone just about everyone I know.  
Just about everyone I know is male.  
The past six months I describe for Ganesh as a desert.  
He replies, That's always the problem in Australia.  
His thoughts are not on sand.  
I travel alone and when I do the solitude pricks.  
Every new life I lead is filled with ghosts. I give myself the creeps.  
They distract me into wandering the city.  
I come to a cafe garden full of trash.  
Those eating cake are watched by those on the street outside.  
In between the wall is barred and ridged with glass.  
This is non-fiction after all.  
Dhaka is not a place for living or eating alone. Flats and meals come in family portions.  
Outside a crowd shouts for a pleasure I don't understand.  
Tin instruments in revelry, car horns in confusion.  
My instinct is to keep the time rather than the beat.  
I am a damp onlooker to the return of a lost carnival.

There are those who are in charge of wheels  
and there are those who are ready to spin them.  
I've no desire of my own but to feed off those of others.  
My CNG cage is a portable exhibition of the pale-skinned animal.  
Bottle tops and mucous make me perform.  
Each object cast has Biblical possibilities.  
Lepers, fallen women, mad dogs.  
The question of silence is when to maintain it.  
Reacting will only bring curses upon you.  
Neatly timed emotion makes the world turn.  
Badly timed, it regresses.  
Timing is on the wristwatch of the beholder.  
Emotion attaches a label of madness.  
There are those who will never go below the surface.  
There are those who will never imperil themselves.  
And then: foreign women may walk and talk where local women should not.  
Learn from your sisters.  
It is unclear whether they are right or not.  
So call them right, save your voice.  
Nothing in between.

The sky makes way for an ocean of rain.  
Flooding floors and leaking through windows.  
A shipwreck in an apartment.  
Balcony dirt pulled inside with the tide.  
Through the branches of washed trees shine wedding lights and windows.  
A halo from a candle in a narrow space.  
I almost...  
Pause as the azan fires over the bed.  
It reminds me words and people can't be rushed.  
Direct the body from the soul.  
Six o'clock on the day of prayer with washed floors and filthy feet.  
I can smell the sea this afternoon.  
On the balcony a crow dips to drink and cleans itself on a wire.  
From my holiday, a suntan and a white dress.  
African songs and beer from Mexico.  
Anywhere could be here.  
Tonight another friend leaves for another country.  
Gifts for someone already gone, farewell over the phone.  
The heat is everywhere without relief.  
In sameness there is a tinge of discomfort.  
I feel the need to expel something.

I visit the beauty parlour to be among women.  
There are too many mirrors and cat's eyes for sanctuary.  
The stares measure me. They know I'm not as beautiful as they are.  
Even to myself in the mirror.  
I'm doing what it is a writer should be doing.  
Trying to save my voice from failing.  
My original mantra said the only cure is action.  
Stick it to your life.  
In this heat it slips.  
Half in shape and half out.  
Always compelled to do the opposite of right.  
A wall of certainty is something my self-doubt can't stand before.  
The planes of some landscapes you can't flatten your body to.  
When I was younger my mind was stricter.  
Now I excuse humanity's twists.  
I make allowances in my age and ego.  
Judgement slips, exposing my pale side.

Conversations flow like days.  
Women move in cycles.  
Around yonic curves we are brought together to talk again.  
The people and their words change.  
The rhythm does not.  
Even absence has a meaning of its own.  
The fullness of feeling.  
The fullness and kick from a Gulshan coffee.  
My company, the female deshi diaspora.  
Self-assurance as boundless as the cash at their backs.  
In theory, existence across worlds begets a crisis of belonging.  
But suppose the worlds are not so different.  
Moneyed confidence and education are world travellers.  
Accented with more American than America.  
Well-groomed significance both here and there.  
Nothing in between.  
Bonhomie in sorority.  
In tailored elegance, every curve attended to.  
In their company, I suspect they can turn the earth.  
My energy lifts to consider what I'm missing.  
You only have to choose which world you want to know.  
Simultaneous life is possible. Simultaneous intimacy is not.  
Outside, I'm sure they are traitors in ready-made clothes.  
The illusion is on the inside. The danger is beyond it.

You never know til you leave it just what a place means.  
Withdrawal is quick but the only way to insight.  
An exercise in removing the present tense.  
How to write now, with any certainty?  
How to write in future with any certainty?  
Reflect inwards daily. Seize the meditation.  
Write it out. Start fresh and new.  
To protect myself I encourage more ghosts.  
You have plenty of friends, one of them tells me.  
Not true when I find Bangladesh hostile.  
At this, a respected Sir expresses surprise.  
I back down and wrap myself round Bangladesh. Combine the trouble.  
But inside I whisper—hostile.  
Hooded words on the street outside.  
Miaows from the lips of velvet-eyed men.  
Slightings from the privileged fruit of the disordered diaspora.  
An onlooker announces: You're supposed to understand.  
Exchanges it with: You don't understand.  
And again: You don't get it or you failed.  
He counts the gaps in my grasp of System, Culture, Family Life.  
Always blame. Elsewhere, guilt.  
Everywhere people resist or desist, push tea or pull rickshaws.  
Everywhere people are their own cause and effect.  
This is my attempt to unhook their mercy.  
This is my attempt to set my suspension down.  
Close up. Close up those eyes.

Wide open your eyelashes stick to your skin.  
Wait for the morning.  
Watch the city from your window, don't write a poem.  
Clouded, the sky is as passionless as a sleeping face.  
Wait for the tender light of twilight.  
Watch the city from your window.  
Don't write a poem about that either.  
You could really do so much with your hours.  
Alone you come to the sanest conclusions to the wildest thoughts.  
Test them on yourself.  
Life has too many toxins.  
On the street there is a boy tall as a short man, smoking a cigarette.  
Elsewhere a man slapped a child and smiled at me.  
There's never enough sleep to cover certain pictures.  
The air rejects me.  
Wine and cigarettes are the only things to be absorbed.  
But nothing has the ability to clear moods or tidy messes.  
It started to rain.

'Travel Notes: Dhaka'. Kathryn Hummel.  
Transnational Literature Vol. 7 no. 1, November 2014.  
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

Control your reaction if not the event.  
Don't telephone just about everyone you know.  
Just about everyone you know is male.  
Progression.  
Heavily the rain came.

A vision of how my life should be comes as I depart.  
It is something more than silk scarves and pottery to take away.  
Unhappiness is not geography.  
Always between spaces we show understanding.  
I wanted my Bangladesh to have width, but I am the audience, not the creator.  
I have never listened to the same tale twice.  
The arrangement of words is finite.  
Patterns never serve to transgress or pay tribute.  
I don't like writing in a straight line.  
To capture instantly, make all words free.  
Fatigue stops my fingers from fully closing around meaning.  
The emptiness around like an ocean.  
In transit the hours have a smooth pulse.  
Rest easy til the next destination.  
Forget scattered time. Forget yourself.  
Spend the energy where you land.  
I keep saying I will not go back.  
But outside you feel how much you're not in it.  
I want more time in Bangladesh.  
Either I can't resist it or I'm afraid to move beyond.

*Kathryn Hummel*