

Niloofar Fanaiyan, *Transit* (Recent Works Press, 2017)

Transit has never been so pretty as with Niloofar Fanaiyan. In contrast to the volume's cover image, hazed with a red filter suggestive of unwelcome daybreak and circadian arrhythmia, Fanaiyan casts a net of motifs – flowers, clouds, hills, trees, light, colours, windows, doors, fruit, salt, sea, spices, scents – that loops pleasantly around her collection, despite the non-linearity suggested by the fractures and repetitions of the titles listed in the contents.

Transit and its cousin travel are not, of course, solely physical experiences: Fanaiyan explores a range of their effects, giving pragmatic pre-departure advice in 'Leaving' ('Remember to say goodbye / Hide the key') while expressing a keenness to embrace less certain and more exciting realms. Her treatment of light and shade stands out, with shadows of motion observed under different skylscapes where light patches are very light, as in 'Red Film' with its pulses of colour, and the dark paradoxically enhance the heaviness and inevitability of transit, with melancholy detail:

This was never meant to be our home
we rented four walls and a patch of soil
taught ourselves the local language ('In a many-layered cotton sling')

Such lines can potentially be laid against a global political discourse concerning asylum seekers in feeling if not in a bold statement of solidarity. Elsewhere, transit appears to be a hollow where sensory memory settles ('Goodbye'), whereas other poems relay transit as providing distance from which to view the minutiae required to make sense of the world:

City lights far below signal sleepy households
unaware of our passage outside. We skirt
its invisible lines – its mountains taller
and its border wider every time, and every time
we are turned away. ('Flying over Tabriz')

In 'Finding', this preoccupation is revisited at ground level: 'it's not in the city but in the people / in the city ...' Fanaiyan also shows transit as a space for rebirth through memory, as in the prose poem 'I remember the day I was born ...', which includes an arresting image of the earth flinging 'the plane to the sky'. The last two poems in the collection underline a calm appreciation for transience, for longing and return, which is nothing other than an apt conclusion. 'And now we start again' writes Fanaiyan in 'Pomegranates', evoking the cyclic habits of restless souls. I am not convinced the poet intends the re-start to take a new direction.

Transit's longer poems are carefully crafted and more assured, especially compared to poems like 'On the way', which apparently serves to punctuate more than enhance. Similarly brief poems scattered throughout (29-30) seem little more than puzzlingly neat descriptions and add to a sense of disorder within the collection, as do the regular epigraphs (12, 26) that appear without the warning of a blank page to divide sections, possibly due to the formatting of the physical

book; the spacing between stanzas in 'Pomegranates' is also problematic. 'Secrets of Salt' is a lengthier poem that repeats variations of the Persian proverb 'Del be del rah darad – hearts lead to hearts', printed in Farsi with English translations aligned to the right margin. Both devices are successful: the refrain (a reorientation of the radif?) resonates and the shifting of the reader's focus between languages, fonts and page alignments introduces a kind of 'micro-transit' to the act of reading. Similar forms are used for 'Pomegranates' and 'Song of the Caravan', with the latter repeating images of the rooster, crouching forms and shadow, suggesting another contemporary reorientation of Persian poetics. Similarly, ravani (flowingness) is hinted at in Fanaiyan's series of poems that repeat or nearly-repeat the first and last lines (36, 38, 40, 53), with 'Winter' demonstrating a thoughtful sympathy between theme and form. Yet by the time the penultimate poem states twice: 'There is only one hour left', I wondered if the cycle isn't overused; why the hour hadn't already come.

Often Fanaiyan uses formal phrases such as 'bade me follow, 'but for ...' and 'in the midst'. which are not out of place in the context of her nostalgic journeys; other choices like 'precipitation', 'whooshing' dust, 'wispy clouds', the 'sticky sweetness of marshmallow' and the 'light mineral smell' of salt are unformed or lacking in finesse – or at the least, do not excite with their freshness. While repetition within certain poems works well, the repetition of phrases between separate poems ('smell of coffee and butter'; 'smell of garlic and butter') niggles, as does the unusually heavy hand displayed in 'The luggage was packed'.

Transit is indeed pretty and inclines towards effortless, presenting few knots to unravel within its soothing lyricism. This could be the main challenge of the collection, or the chief component of its appeal, depending on what the reader seeks to take away from the experience of engaging with poetry, as with travel.

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