

Write a commentary on one of the following:

1.

The birds chattered in the fir trees by the front corner of the house, dusting the yard with more snow. Maybe they made all that noise to comfort one another in the cold. She wished she could gather them all into her house. Why didn't their little bodies freeze like ice-cubes? What kept them warm? Their little hearts beating fiercely like an old coal stove? How many shovels had she shucked into one of them?

5 She saw her neighbor pouring a bucket on his garden rows. Probably sheep manure. He was far away but he waved at her and the howl of his black dog broke the cold. Her cat looked up, alarmed.

10 On the edge of her garden she found a cob emptied of its corn. It sparkled on one end with frost. She looked at the muffin-tin shape. The honeycomb openings where the kernels had gone. She decided the spirits left it there. Everytime she moved they snipped another detail from the world. They had taken enough from her. Now she was getting parts of it back, sucking them deep within herself. She felt her bowels rumble. The thick branches of the bush stitched a net for her. The empty garden rows. All of them growing like frozen vines around her.

15 Maybe she'd disappear into them someday.
Inside the house once more, she wiped a place to look through the window. Her cat would be scratching at the door soon. She lit the stove and boiled water for tea. She saw that the wet teabag looked like birdseed. She turned the furnace down even farther when it came on. She didn't want to call the gas truck yet. She would wear her coat and scarf, her galoshes and gloves in the house.

20 Where was her needle? She needed to work her fingers. They felt blue and cold. She'd sew a bright pocket on the dress she was working on. A pocket to help her remember everything she saw. Things she noticed, thoughts she wanted to store in her head. The bush with the blue gas-flame of the blue jays' heads. The pattern of frost growing on the windows. How it covered the glass like ancient cave markings or the scribblings of a child. No, it wasn't the frost at all. It was the spirits that got loose when it was cold. The north wind opened up a highway and they slipped right down to the Great Lakes from the north. Hadn't she seen them after her husband died last winter? Hadn't she heard his ice-fishing decoys rattle one night? Weren't the spirits a pale blue when she looked from the window, floating around the house like manta rays? Their graceful edges undulating in the dim light from the window. Now they were wrapping her house in cellophane. She knew it as she stood at the sink looking out. Something scratched the door and it startled her, but she remembered it was the cat and she let him in.

30 She knew another secret. They had been in her house. They could walk across the floor without creaking. They could sit on her roof and she'd never know it. Stingrays with their blue-finger edges. Devilfish! She whacked the counter with her broom. The cat ran.

They were coming to take her too. She panicked at the sink. She saw her husband in his icehouse fishing in winter. She felt like she was walking barefoot across the ice to him. She fought to hold to the counter. But she was shuffling across the lake. The drift of cold fog across the ice was like a line of old people. Inside her head, birds flew from the wall.

40 They banged at the windows to get out. Up the road, the church steeple hung like a telephone pole pulled crooked by its wires after an ice storm. How long had she been there? The room circled like the round hole in the ice. She felt the tight hole around her chest. There was something hurting her ankles. She was tangled in the fishing line that went down into the cold, dark hole below her. Now the sun shined its wicked and beautiful pattern on the

45 kitchen window. The cold fog still shuffled across the lake. Something knocked the old cans and kettles from the counter to the floor. She was walking up the road now. Wasn't the afternoon light through the window-frost like a church? How many years had she sung hymns up the road? The little tendrils of the ice like petroglyphs²? She heard her children drawing in the frost on the windows. She reached for the finger she saw at the glass. But the icehole burped like her old

50 husband in his chair and the frigid water closed her up.

Diane Glancy, *Polar Breath*, published in Firesticks, University of Oklahoma Press (1993)
Reprinted with the permission of the author.

¹ manta rays: mantas are the largest of the ray family of fish. Rays are a type of flattened fish with pectoral fins like wings. The body is broad and flat; mantas are generally about 6 metres wide.

² petroglyphs: images carved or engraved on rock, usually associated with the prehistoric age.

2.

Minority

I was born a foreigner.
I carried on from there
to become a foreigner everywhere
I went, even in the place
5 planted with my relatives,
six-foot tubers sprouting roots,
their fingers and faces pushing up
new shoots of maize and sugar cane.

All kinds of places and groups
10 of people who have an admirable
history would, almost certainly,
distance themselves from me.

I don't fit,
like a clumsily-translated poem;

15 like food cooked in milk of coconut
where you expected ghee¹ or cream,
the unexpected aftertaste
of cardamom or neem².

There's always that point where
20 the language flips
into an unfamiliar taste;
where words tumble over
a cunning tripwire on the tongue;
where the frame slips,
25 the reception of an image
not quite tuned, ghost-outlined,
that signals, in their midst,
an alien.

And so I scratch, scratch
30 through the night, at this
growing scab of black on white.
Everyone has the right
to infiltrate a piece of paper.
A page doesn't fight back.

- 35 And, who knows, these lines
may scratch their way
into your head –
through all the chatter of community,
family, clattering spoons,
40 children being fed –
immigrate into your bed,
squat in your home,
and in a corner, eat your bread,
- until, one day, you meet
45 the stranger sidling down your street,
realise you know the face
simplified to bone,
look into its outcast eyes
and recognise it as your own.

Imtiaz Dharker, *Minority*, published in *Postcards from God*, Bloodaxe Books (1997)
Reprinted with permission.

¹ ghee: a class of clarified butter that originated in the Indian subcontinent

² neem: the shoots and flowers of the neem tree are eaten as a vegetable in India
