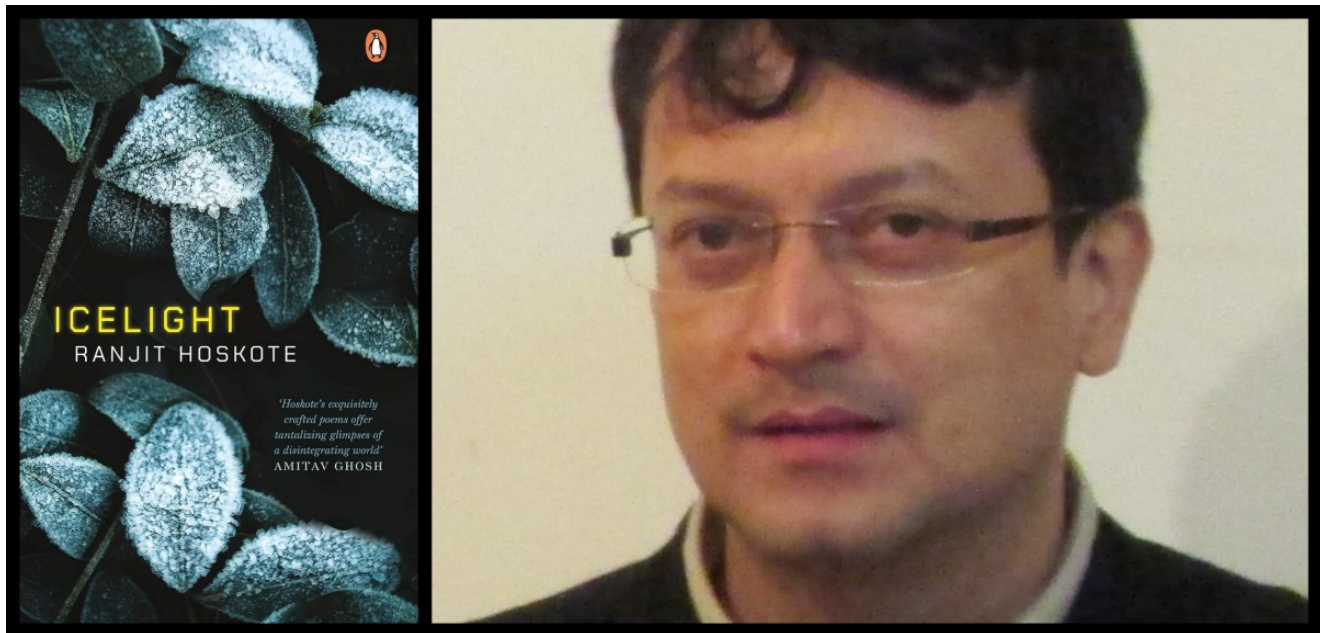


Verse Affairs: Annihilation Aesthetics

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In Ranjit Hoskote's poem "Retreat", included in his latest collection of poetry *Icelight* (Penguin, 2023), the dream of a sailor accommodates nostalgic yearnings with futuristic aspirations. Only 15 lines long, the poem compresses various striking images in five tercets or three-line stanzas. It begins dramatically, almost cinematically, with seawater withdrawing from the floor of a vessel and its admiral regaining his composure after being destabilised by a storm:

The floor is wet with the sea's retreat

A draggled wing
drapes its shadow on the bell tower

Admiral, your telescope!

Soon, however, you realise that the images and voices are, in fact, surreal. In a remarkable metaphor, Hoskote describes sleep, dreaming, but also time: "He scoops darkness / from darkness". If sleep and the subconscious are a vast, black, night-time sea, the sailor can be imagined to be rowing through it with his paddle, scooping up the dark waters, keeping time.

Nautical images are, of course, not uncommon in Hoskote's poetry. In his earlier collection of poetry, *Johanwhale* (2018), he had drawn upon the Biblical Book of Jonah, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), and nautical histories to create elegies. His previous book of poetry, *Hunchprose* (2021), which I had [reviewed](#), also drew upon images of oceans and voyages as metaphors for narratives.

In “Retreat”, the image of the sea is not only a metaphor for the subconscious but also a vessel that allows Hoskote to travel between genres of surreal and futuristic poetry. In the last two stanzas of the poem, it is revealed that the admiral of the ship is not travelling between two ports but between two worlds:

The surveyor continues to look
for a world at the other end
of his spyglass

knowing it's out there
a distant cousin to the one
that's blowing up around him.

Perhaps it is not too far-fetched to imagine that the vessel is an intergalactic spaceship with voyagers escaping from Earth torn apart by conflict and the disastrous effects of climate change. There is an element of hope, of finding another planet that might accommodate humans when the third rock from the sun implodes because of our relentless activities. But it is also a grim image, of a world blowing up all around us.

In recent months, as governments around the world have failed to act decisively to prevent climate change or stop conflict like the one roiling Israel-Palestine since October 7, annihilation anxiety — described by psychoanalysts as “(f)ears of being overwhelmed, merged, penetrated, fragmented, and destroyed” — has spiked. Polarisation around tentpole events, often acerbated by vicious online campaigns, only aggravates such anxiety.

Hoskote has experienced the effects of such polarising himself following accusations of antisemitism in early November this year by the German daily *Süddeutsche Zeitung* for signing a 2019 BDS (Boycott, Disinvestment and Sanctions against Israel) petition against an event on “Zionism and Hindutva” organised by the Consulate General of Israel in Mumbai. With the German government threatening to withdraw funding for Documenta, one of the world's most prestigious art exhibitions held every five years in Kassel, Germany, Hoskote resigned from the Finding Committee of its upcoming 16th edition. In his resignation letter, he clarified his position that while he did not support the intellectual and cultural boycott of Israel, he was also opposed to the idea that any criticism of the country should be painted as “antisemitism”.

“I have dedicated my life to opposing authoritarian forces and discriminatory ideologies, and my signature carried with it the weight of my commitment to dialogue, inclusiveness, mutuality, and the ceaseless quest for common ground,” he wrote in his letter. But, in this age of polarising debates augmented by social media algorithms and trigger-happy cancel culture, such nuance is easily lost.

In *Hunchprose*, Hoskote had set up a dichotomy between the poet's nuanced use of language and the shiny wordplay of a rhetorician. Anxiety about the utility of poetry in our world — even the ability to write it — informs some of the poems in his book as well.

"Redacted" is haunted by the presence of a lost poem. It begins: "This poem was not found in his manuscripts". Then, a litany is provided of all the places where this poem is not found: "manuscripts", "conversations", "interviews", "lectures", "archive", "hard drives", "xeroxes", "index cards" — somewhat reminiscent of litanies and lists provided by the Chilean novelist Roberto Bolaño in his byzantine novels about missing writers. Hoskote's poem ends with the lines:

Chased by prosecutors fanning their collars
flashing across banners wayward as the wind
nothing conclusive you understand
this poem may never be found

This is almost a nightmarish conclusion of silencing, of censorship, that might give sleepless nights to editors, literary scholars, and textual historians. How do you respond to a poem that is never found? What is the value of a lost work?

This is a theme Hoskote returns to a little later in the book, in the poem "The Harappan Merchant's Complaint". The titular merchant begins by demanding:

What do I care how these words sound
in translation?

Joppo — kshumpa — plaksha

In the detailed endnotes on this poem, Hoskote explains that *joppo* means water, *kshumpa* is mushroom, and *plaksha* is the fig tree. While the first one appears in Nihali, "an endangered Central Indian language", the others are found in the *Rig Veda*. All three can be traced to the language of the Indus Valley Civilisation that has eluded decipherment over the century since its discovery. Naturally, the Harappan merchant throws the gauntlet to the reader:

Now decipher if you dare
these words sealed in images
the squat bull the sage lost in a trance

the horned man fighting a tiger
Are these chants to cure the seasick
or curses aimed at fleeing debtors?

Like the Harappan language is now lost to us, will our language also be lost to future generations? This anxiety is particularly poignant for someone like Hoskote, who is not only a poet — *Icelight* is his eighth collection of poetry — but also an accomplished translator.

Another poem, “Paishachi”, a ghazal of sorts, refers to the legendary language of ghosts from which Kashmiri is said to have descended. All the couplets in this poem end with the refrain “the language of ghosts”:

His words sound like nothing that guests have ever spoken to hosts.
This is the language of my people, the language of living ghosts.

But violence is not only epistemically experienced; it is also corporeal. The poem “Lesson”, dedicated to Kashmiri poet and filmmaker Asiya Zahoor, also refers to the troubled region of Kashmir and the suppression of free speech. In the poem, a professor admonishes his class, asking them “not to say a word”. His chalk bifurcates the country — a metaphoric reference to the Indian government’s unilateral decision in 2019 to revoke Article 370 of the Indian Constitution that gave the region some degree of autonomy and the bifurcation of the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir. This decision was followed by a brutal, months-long communications lockdown in the region that Hoskote reimagines poetically:

When he clapped his hands and blew on them
could of chalk dust settled on our desks

burying them for years in snow

It is not surprising that the image he chooses to express the aesthetics of poetry in this book — which I call “annihilation aesthetics” — is light refracted through ice. There is a deep sense of loss that shoots through the poems, many are dedicated to people who have died recently. The book is dedicated to Hoskote’s father, who died in 2021. At least three poems — “Aubade”, “Breath”, and “Bed” — were earlier published in an anthology on the pandemic and lockdown, edited by K. Satchidanandan and Nishi Chawla.

The very first poem expresses a desire to disappear:

What if there was no border
between flesh and light
What if I had
no skin

Objects, including human beings, can be seen because light reflects on them; turning transparent is, therefore, also a process of turning invisible. This image sustains throughout the book, a light so refracted and otherworldly that it is difficult not to be blinded by it.

And in the final poem of the book, “Return”, Hoskote leaves us with a post-apocalyptic vision of the world. A ship abandoned in the clouds, without any captain or crew or compass:

as you stumble towards the latched gate
out-of-breath traveller
stammering a word of thanks

light returns to the world

Is this the light of a fadeout — a white darkness of sorts — at the end of a film that leaves you gobsmacked (this book definitely does)? Or is it a metaphor for hope, of renewal? One must believe that it is, simply to carry on.

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