

## In the Wake of Asbestos: Ship-building and Ship-breaking in Ross Raisin's *Waterline* and Tahmima Anam's *The Bones of Grace*

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**Abstract:** This article interprets Ross Raisin's *Waterline* and Tahmima Anam's *The Bones of Grace* and their invocation of Glasgow's ship-building and Chittagong's ship-breaking industries, respectively. The article addresses variations in the cost of work, social fragility, and health precarity across parallel postcolonial economies, which are illustrated by comparing the risks the ship workers face. *Waterline* and *The Bones of Grace* share an interest in the consequences of ship-building and ship-breaking, but they do not individually consider how these activities produce different risks depending on whether they take place in the Global North or the Global South. Preoccupied with their own immediate health concerns, the texts pay scant attention to shared risks that intersect across the life-cycle of ships. Reading the novels together demonstrates how each might supplement the other in attending to the health experiences of workers in ship construction and destruction, especially as they relate to asbestos exposure.

**Keywords:** asbestos, Tahmima Anam, Ross Raisin, ship-building, ship-breaking

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In an essay that emphasises the potential for diverse literary texts to elucidate different aspects of a single postcolonial political economy, the late Anthony Carrigan turns to two heterogeneous works “to link cruise tourism’s environmental interventions to colonial histories and concepts of agency” (143). The challenge, concludes Carrigan, is not simply to ban cruise ships in the Caribbean, where they have become

vital to already precarious economies. It is to “ensur[e] that resistance to cruise tourism’s exploitative operations in the insular Caribbean is not conducted through a universalising ‘green imperialism’ or ‘green globalism’ (Lohmann) but according to local ethics and demands” (157). Carrigan’s chosen texts, Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983) and Derek Walcott’s *Omeros* (1990), demonstrate these “local ethics and demands” by emphasising how cruise liners align with the island politics of the postcolonial environments that they visit. Marshall’s realist novel addresses life on board a cruise liner while Walcott’s epic poem considers how liners are seen from the shore; these differing perspectives intersect, through Carrigan’s essay, as the ships come in to dock. Carrigan’s analysis of the shared space of the dock relies on, he acknowledges, “circuits of touristic consumption [that] connect the Caribbean to the climes where many cruise ships are built” (145). This essay addresses the challenges that emerge when one shifts attention from the spaces where cruise ships operate to consider how the life-cycle of ships link their place of construction with their place of destruction.

For this purpose, I adapt Carrigan’s conceit—the shared spaces of cruise tourism—to deliver a temporal conceit, considering the history of these cruise ships as a life-cycle that ties together workers involved in their construction and destruction but who are otherwise geographically separate.<sup>1</sup> As I track the life-cycle of these ships, from building to breaking, alongside the workers who undertake this precarious labour, I will connect diverse economies across traditional divides between the Global North and Global South. Accordingly, I follow the breathing bodies of ship-builders and ship-breakers in Ross Raisin’s *Waterline* (2011) and Tahmima Anam’s *The Bones of Grace* (2016) to consider how these melancholic romances might form an arc of continuity between the construction of ships in the Global North and their destruction in the Global South. *Waterline* and *The Bones of Grace* are set in the ship-building and ship-breaking contexts of Glasgow and Chittagong. Raisin’s Mick, the focaliser for much of *Waterline*, begins the novel as a taxi driver in Glasgow, Scotland. He mourns his wife, Cathy, who has recently died of mesothelioma, an asbestos-related disease. Anam’s Zubaida, the first-person narrator for two thirds of *The Bones of Grace*,

is completing work for her Ph.D. in Archaeology at Harvard University. As she puts together the bones of an *Ambulocetus* (an amphibious ancestor to the whale), she composes a letter (the novel) to an absent lover, Elijah, that recounts her experiences in Cambridge, Massachusetts; Dera Bugti in Pakistan; and Dhaka and Chittagong in Bangladesh. Beneath these conventional, if geographically eclectic, romances of mourning and melancholia, both novels draw on historical and anthropological texts to develop realist critiques of precarious work practices, conservative family relations, and those health risks attenuated or exacerbated by time.

At the same time, I want to trouble the metaphoric ease with which we might use the concept of life-cycles to translate Carrigan's analysis of space into an analysis of time. Carrigan's chosen texts appear to unite at the shared space of the dock. But the lives aboard, and associated with, the ships in *Waterline* and *The Bones of Grace* do not coincide so smoothly. The discontinuity of these life-cycles, between ship-making and ship-breaking, is evidenced by the novels' contrasting stances toward latent morbidities. By latent morbidities, I refer to those conditions that are most risky for the characters, irrespective of whatever actually does or does not kill them. Since ships built between the early twentieth century and, at least, the 1970s used significant amounts of asbestos, both the construction and destruction of these ships involve substantial exposure to the fibrous mineral. Hence workers in both settings share a latent morbidity: the risk of an asbestos-related disease. Despite not being a concern for workers in Chittagong, asbestos constitutes a latent health concern for workers from both sites. Therefore, its seeming insignificance in Chittagong throws into stark relief how temporalities of risk shift between the regulated construction conditions of the Global North and the underregulated disposal practices of the Global South. Because workers in the Global North understand their risk as contained, their response to the risk posed by asbestos registers as a temporal lag, sometimes stretching out as long as fifty years after exposure. Workers in the Global South, attending to risk as a matter of instants rather than decades, cannot afford to concern themselves with asbestos latencies. So workers from each setting tend to focus only on

the forms of workplace-related death and dying that pertain to their own environments. Differing priorities mean that workers in the Global North are more attuned to the “slow violence” of asbestos exposure than their counterparts in the Global South (Nixon 2), where experiences of risk are often more immediate. At the same time, workers in the Global North may well forget where or how the products of their work are disposed of in the Global South.

*Waterline* and *The Bones of Grace* accommodate latent morbidity in much the same way. Raisin’s novel focuses primarily on the long-term health consequences of asbestos inhalation in ship-builders and their families in Glasgow; Anam’s novel attends to the more immediate injuries facing ship-breakers in Chittagong, a focus that might explain why asbestos is not mentioned. In this article I make a claim for the narrative continuity that links these two texts, concerned with the life-cycles of ships, but I also point out the tension between them in the epistemic disjuncture between their contrasting reflections of risk in the precarious economy of the world system.

This tension inheres in something like Christina Sharpe’s “wake work” (28). Sharpe focuses on the aftermath of chattel slavery and the lived experience of Black life in America, although she hints at what “living in the wake on a global level” might entail (29). Drawing on the multiple meanings of “wake”—“the keeping watch with the dead, the path of a ship, a consequence of something, in the line of flight and/or sight, awakening and consciousness” (32)—Sharpe understands wake work “to be a mode of inhabiting *and* rupturing [the episteme of slavery] with our known lived and un/imaginable lives” (32; emphasis in original). “Staying in the wake” requires one to consider, with Sharpe, “what, if anything, survives this insistent Black exclusion, this ontological negation, and how . . . literature, performance and visual culture observe and mediate this un/survival” (29). This essay aims to extend Sharpe’s work in response to asbestos’ transcultural effect on ship-builders and -breakers, whether it is foregrounded, as in Raisin’s work, or foreclosed, as in Anam’s. Raisin gives us the resources for thinking in the wake of asbestos, but he does not register the comparable privileges that sustain this thinking. Anam may not attend to the wake of asbestos, but

she does recall those forms of precarity that remove people prematurely from asbestos' wake. In this way, each text offers insights that are useful for navigating conditions excluded or ignored by the other.

By thinking about those workers left "in the wake," I do not presume to correlate their experiences with the ongoing consequences of the Middle Passage in the experience of Black life. Nor do I wish to appropriate Sharpe's meditation as a merely theoretical enterprise. Rather, I draw on Sharpe's work because of a moment when her personal position in the wake aligns with asbestos latency. Sharpe remembers when her brother, Stephen, was diagnosed with mesothelioma. They could not be sure when he was exposed to asbestos: "We were struck that the damage from one summer's work forty-five years earlier at a local insulation company in Wayne, Pennsylvania, when he was fourteen years old could suddenly appear, now, to fracture the present. In the wake, the past that is not past reappears, always to rupture the present" (23). Sharpe's personal encounter with mesothelioma in someone she loves leads her to reflect on how "wake work" must attend to that which is latent.

The wake is not simply a mode of analysis that attends to those concerns that, forgotten, are in need of remembering. It also attends to the rupturing force of a latent past into the present. In this regard, Anam's decision not to include asbestos in *The Bones of Grace* seems like a failure to attend to the virtual futures of the ship-breakers, in which their present inhalation of asbestos may have disastrous consequences. Given the novel's social realism, at least in its sections about ship-breaking, the oversight is striking. If Raisin's *Waterline* ignores the political economies of ship-breaking by focusing exclusively on ship-builders in the Global North, *The Bones of Grace*, by not attending to the asbestos that the real counterparts to its characters certainly inhale, effectively dismisses a possible future wherein they survive the immediate dangers of their jobs long enough to die from long-term toxic exposure.

Workers in *Waterline* and *The Bones of Grace* share a world ecology or what Jason W. Moore calls an *oikeios*—a "relation of life-making," whereby "manifold species-environment configurations emerge . . . [and] evolve" as part of a web of life that develops out of economic rela-

tions (20). “*Oikeios* is a way naming the creative, historical, and dialectical relation between, and also always within, human and extra-human natures” (3) that develops out of the reliance of economic systems on natural resources.<sup>2</sup> By exploiting cheap labour, reframing waste ships as raw material, and taking advantage of the energy of the tides, the shipbreaking industry creates an ecology detrimental to the health of workers and the environment. But, equally, it sustains those workers and shapes their environment, giving them origin stories and new patterns of social interaction. Reading cases of the shipping industry with Moore’s attentiveness to relations across the world system helps to demarcate absences in each novel.

*Waterline* considers how economically deprived former ship-builders of Glasgow are affected by the asbestos used in the construction process, but it does not attend to what happens to those ships, or the asbestos they contain, after construction is completed. In contrast, *The Bones of Grace* explores the lives of the Chittagong ship-breakers, many of whom are exposed to a variety of risks, but without considering the deep histories, nor the asbestos, of the ships they destroy. Asbestos is never mentioned in the novel, yet this absence is more weighted than it first seems. Despite their obvious differences in locations, characters, and objects of attention, the novels share three features that mitigate the arbitrariness of their connection. First, the characters encounter precarious labour practices, conveyed in a realist mode. At the same time, they are forced to negotiate, in affective terms, the personal consequences of decisions about their working life. And finally, this negotiation is made more difficult by an aspirational disconnect between their work circumstances and the dizzying products of their work, those sublime ships, “white, immense, violent” (Anam 146), which momentarily dominate the narrative frame.

In both cases, the environment-character-ship composite develops out of economic relations, hence my preference for *oikeios* over terms such as Donna Haraway’s “affinity,” Karen Barad’s “intra-action,” or Timothy Morton’s “mesh.”<sup>3</sup> But it also has economic consequences, since the affective concerns of the characters seems to develop out of their responses to the ships with which they interact. The characters’

emotional states moderate, and are moderated by, a network of ecological relations emergent in the birth and death of ships. When Mick briefly works in Newcastle's Swan Hunter Shipyard after losing his job in Glasgow, he feels "it wasn't his yard, his river. He didn't belong there. Didn't get the same feeling from it: that sense of the river always being there, around him, inside him" (Raisin 97). His response to the river is that it should, like Moore's *oikeios*, be a relation between and within human and extra-human natures. Clearly, when he refers to the sense of the river inside him, he does not mean the water literally inside him. The affective relation between Mick and his work is more obvious when he describes "the sheer thrill of a ship on its stocks, grown from just a few small pieces of metal, walking toward it each morning and seeing that it was bigger, looking like it was parked there at the end of the street, looming over the end tenement" (97). Zubaida experiences the obverse sense of awe, when, arriving in Chittagong, she finds herself in a landscape "where everything was salvaged and half-broken," matching "the chaos [she] felt within" (Anam 136). Similarly, she is startled out of her numbness by "an oil tanker in the final stages of being pulled apart, a felled dinosaur of metal lying on its side" (136). The specific interaction between character, environment, and ship precipitates a generic thrill, an affective connection to an *oikeios*.

In following the *oikeios* of ships, I am taking my cue not just from Carrigan but also from Nicky Gregson et al., who respond to Arjun Appadurai's call to "follow the things themselves" (Appadurai qtd. in Gregson et al. "Following Things of Rubbish Value," 847). If Appadurai is primarily interested in global flows from developing world producers to developed world consumers, Gregson et al. direct attention down the value chain to the ways in which the developing world also becomes the repository of the developed world's waste—in this case "end-of-life ships" (847), which are sent to Bangladesh after their decommission to be stripped and recycled. If *Waterline* fails to address this value chain, *The Bones of Grace* does so with an acute awareness of the consequences for the workers involved. Gregson, however, models a way of thinking about ship-breaking practices of the Global South and Global North as mutually implicated ("Ship Disposal" 138). She acknowledges an in-

controvertible difference between a labour-intensive, uncontained practice in the South and a technology-intensive, contained practice in the North. But, as she shows, these differences are often used to contrast “green practices” of “ship recycling” in the North with environmentally “unfriendly” ship-breaking in the Global South (149).

The challenge posed by Gregson’s reading is to make connections that do not rely on these sorts of uninterrogated dichotomies. Gregson develops a posthuman reading of the industry, grounded in corporeality, materiality, and performativity. The emphasis of this “assemblage,” or gathering together of things, is “the conjuncture of vulnerable, fleshy, breathing human bodies . . . with metal, rust, furniture, fixtures and fittings, heavy metals, plastics, paint flakes, asbestos” (“Ship Disposal” 150). Gregson’s enumeration continues, but I halt on asbestos because it is in my focus on this deadly mineral that my own connective strategy differs from Gregson’s.<sup>4</sup> I share Gregson’s basic inference that an interaction between the “breathing human body” and “asbestos” produces an assemblage that puts the spotlight on “the human within the [asbestos] assemblage, to focus not on the conditions of labour, or containment, but on the corporeality of disposal work and its iterative inter-activity with matter” (151). Although asbestos may be absorbed through ingestion or through the skin, cultural attention has been overwhelmingly paid to its reaction with lung tissue when inhaled. A political economy of asbestos posits an environmental relation between the human and extra-human (an *oikeios*) predicated upon breathing as the form this relation takes. But where Gregson focuses on an underlying congruity between practices of ship-breaking in the North and South—an effort comparable to connecting narratives of ship-birth and ship-death—I want to address the tension created when literary texts do not attend to the same forms of lethality. To draw out this tension, we should contrast Gregson’s reflections on the political economy of ship-building or ship-breaking with an affective economy that persists even in those texts like *The Bones of Grace*, which in attending to more immediate risks disclose other latent effects of living in the wake.

For the moment, let us return to Glasgow and *Waterline*. As previously noted, Mick is grieving the death of his wife, Cathy, by plural



mesothelioma. Mesothelioma is a cancer that affects either the lung lining, the pleura, or the abdominal lining, called the peritoneum. Ever since the epidemiological work by J. C. Wagner et al. published in 1960, mesothelioma has been almost exclusively associated with asbestos exposure. In Cathy's case, this exposure happened when she inhaled the asbestos dust clinging to Mick's overalls. Wagner et al.'s work heralded a significant departure from the epidemiological consensus that asbestos was simply an occupational hazard, since the majority of their sample had para-occupational exposure rather than occupational exposure (i.e., they were family members of asbestos workers exposed to dust brought home on workers' clothes rather than workers exposed at work). The study linked even comparatively mild exposure to asbestos with a risk of mesothelioma, an insight which shaped asbestos' transformation into the fearful substance we know today. This association is the basis of Mick's anger, guilt, and eventual shame, all of which form the affective substrate of the novel. Mick worked in the ship-building industry on Glasgow's Clydeside and, like many of those workers, recalls bringing the asbestos home: "Him that played snowballs with the stuff and came home with it stored in the turn-ups of his trousers" (Raisin 37). Coming home with it stored in his trousers acknowledges a circumstantial responsibility, while suggesting Mick's own innocence and ignorance.

"Playing snowballs" carries associations of childhood and play. Mick contrasts "snowballs" with asbestos' ominous intrusion into the home, as a paraoccupational or environmental risk. The "snowball fight" is a historiographic *leitmotif* of many accounts about the asbestos industry, where the contrast between innocence and risk makes salient stories of unsuspecting workers unintentionally exposing themselves and their families to the dust.<sup>5</sup> The conceit plays a particularly important role in witness testimony for the asbestos litigation industry, which specialises in securing compensation for asbestos-related diseases. Raisin signals its entanglement with legal economics when he introduces the conceit in Mick's response to a letter that he receives from a widow named Alice, who has made a claim for compensation after her husband's death. "It's not about the money," Alice writes, "it's about justice" (Raisin 37). Mick deconstructs this implicit equation between compensation and justice:

The idea of it—justice—seems pure absurd. Alice is gone down that route and fair enough, . . . but the thought of it—how many thousands have died and still you’ve to tear yourself inside out dragging through the courts. . . . And it’s no even him dead. . . . Justice is a word for it maybe, getting the payout, but it doesn’t feel sitting here like the right one, not the right one at all. (37)

Alice relies on a distinction between money and justice to justify her case for compensation. Mick, by forming an equivalence between justice and “getting the payout,” elides the comforting distinction between genuine compensation and mere profiteering. Thus, Alice couches her decision within a discourse of justice, while Mick finds himself unable to do so.

Mick’s response to the question of compensation is indicative of his general inability or refusal to cast himself as unknowing victim of the asbestos industry and thereby salve his guilt over Cathy’s death. Acknowledging this response is crucial when considering his gradual disintegration from working homeowner to homeless alcoholic; the novel traces this disintegration as a relentless, inevitable progression. Mick moves into the garden shed to avoid his house, turns to alcohol to avoid thinking, and stops working to avoid socialising. Eventually he leaves Glasgow for London, where, after some time as a live-in dishwasher at an anonymous Heathrow-based hotel, he becomes homeless. This pattern of self-abnegation is a shame response. In bringing Cathy into contact with asbestos, Mick has failed in a (heteronormative) duty of care. Mick reflects on how he might have acted if he had developed mesothelioma in Cathy’s place:

They deserved everything that was coming to them. And if it was him dying, then maybe he would go down that route. Secure a future for Cathy. But it wasn’t; it was him brought the stuff in the house. And he should have known. . . . [W]hy should *he* get a windfall? Him that brought it into the house and handed her the overalls to wash and here’s two hundred grand, pal, take it, it’s yours—you deserve it. (65–66; emphasis in original)

Something symbolic is happening in this exchange of “overalls” for “two hundred grand.” By shifting its perspective, tense, and voice, the run-on sentence marks the difference between moments in which Mick is an agent (“handed her the overalls”) and moments in which he is a passive recipient (“take it, it’s yours”). Clearly, Mick believes that receiving the “windfall” or “payout” for his wife’s death will deprive him of agency. More importantly, it would exculpate him, relieving him of his responsibility for bringing “the stuff in the house.” But this belief is gendered: were the situation reversed, he would “secure a future for Cathy.”

It is not enough, then, to follow Mick’s feelings of responsibility for having exposed Cathy to asbestos; we must also respond to the underlying assumptions about work on which the case for compensation rests. In short, his refusal to accept the exchange demonstrates an inability to understand Cathy’s work in the home as labour: a commodity subject to exchange. Alice is able to claim compensation “fair enough” because her husband worked, but Mick cannot because, to his mind, Cathy’s domestic work does not count as work. Raisin makes this point by combining a syntactic continuity (“and . . . and . . . and”) with the aforementioned shift in voice. He interrupts a run of conjunctions in the third-person by shifting the register from the descriptive to the conversational and the narrative perspective from Mick to the payer of the two hundred grand. Mick’s inability to understand why he might deserve the two hundred grand, combined with his feelings of responsibility, is a response to his environment and causes him to reproduce it.<sup>6</sup> Because he won’t take money—whether compensation, the dole, or a handout from his son—he is ultimately unable to support himself, which precipitates his move to London and subsequent shift to various homeless shelters.

I read *Waterline* as divided into two parts: a meditative, static period before Mick leaves Glasgow and the frenetic, mobile period after he arrives in London as he moves restlessly from kitchen work to the various permutations of homelessness (accompanied/unaccompanied; in shelter/unsheltered). This concise division ignores the structural continuity of precarious labour and the affective continuity of Mick’s anxieties about justice. Mick’s work, whether in Glasgow, Newcastle, or London, is always unreliable. It is subject to conditions of casualised labour and

likely to be misrecognised as non-work. At the same time, Mick's strategies for avoiding the aftermath of Cathy's death might differ in different locations, but they coalesce around his failure to fulfil his role as husband or parent. In fact, his feelings about this failure extend back into the structural analysis of what he understands work to be. Casualised labour is, if anything, intensified in the ship-breaking industry of Chittagong, but often it carries similarly affective responses.

Chittagong's ship-breaking industry began, so the story goes, when a ship en route from Glasgow ran itself aground on the Karnaphuli river mouth in low tide.<sup>7</sup> The story of the SS *Clan Alpine*, formerly the *Empire Barrie*, provides a useful conceit with which to introduce my analysis. The SS *Clan Alpine* was a cargo ship built in Sunderland in 1942 under the name *Empire Barrie*. After eighteen years of service to the British Navy, Clan Line Steamers Ltd., and Bullard, King & Co. Ltd., the SS *Clan Alpine* left the River Mersey, Liverpool, on what would be its final journey. After a brief period in Glasgow, it travelled through the Suez Canal, later tracing a path via Aden to the Indian subcontinent. In response to reports of a cyclone off the Bangladesh coast at Chittagong, it sought shelter in the nearby Karnaphuli River and ran aground. The crew were rescued and sheltered at the local club, itself a relic of British colonialism. The ship was subsequently stripped, its steel a valuable commodity in the booming construction of then East Bengal.

In *The Bones of Grace*, Zubaida calls this story "apocryphal": "[T]here were apocryphal stories about how it had all started – a cyclone in the Bay of Bengal, a ship banked on the shore, a group of scavengers, the discovery of steel, and then, eventually, businessmen who turned ill-fortune into profit" (142). Anwar, the migrant worker and later ship-breaker whose narrative punctuates Zubaida's, is less concerned with its veracity. In a conversation with an old man, Anwar reports that he "[t]ells me there used to be nothing here, then a storm and ship that got washed up and stuck in the sand. There was a foreigner, a Captain, he started the whole thing. I don't believe him, just let the old man talk – what's left when you're old except the ears of the young?" (235). Both versions describe an origin for the Chittagong *oikeios*. But for Zubaida, a

middle-class activist, the story evokes a history of capitalist expansion from the chance conditions of a natural event. For Anwar, a worker, it is a meaningless genesis tale, which can be disbelieved but demands the performance of attention “no matter how long or made up” (235). The inclusion of these stories demonstrates Anam’s attentiveness to the actual existing *mythos* surrounding the Chittagong ship-breaking industry. By contrasting Zubaida’s and Anwar’s experiences of the ship-breaking environment, the novel highlights different concerns for activists and workers.

There are ample comparative bases for thinking about *Waterline* alongside *The Bones of Grace* if one focuses on the issue of justice. In the section entitled “The Testimony of Anwar,” Anwar seems to be as stricken by the failure of justice as Mick. Anwar’s narrative occurs midway through the novel and recounts his search for Megna, his sometime lover and Zubaida’s missing twin sister. Although he describes the ship-breaking as “hell”—“[T]his is what I deserve after all the bad I’ve done. This work at the end of the world” (236)—his “bad” includes abandoning Megna to eventual prostitution and death by venereal disease so that he might find work in “foreign” (i.e., Dubai) (191), taking a payout in exchange for not reporting on the unsafe work environments that caused the death of a co-worker, leaving his wife to find Megna, and spending all of their assets to bribe police officers to release him from jail. The “bad” that concerns him most, however, is abandoning his and Megna’s child. Hence his hunt for them: “[M]y bones are dead. I’m stupid and my luck is over. I have to give up. I’m an even bigger fool if I don’t see that my girl and my kid are never going to be found. . . . I’m so fed up with my life it’s like I’m drunk too, so I say, ‘I don’t even know if it is a son or a daughter’” (239). Both Anwar and Mick have lost lovers. More significantly for their affective states, they both assume a responsibility to protect these women, while finding themselves inadequate to the task.

In both cases, feelings of responsibility and recrimination, described in a language of social justice, account for a movement toward activities with increased precarity, whether casualised labour or unsafe environments. Zubaida mirrors this movement in a less dramatic way, moving

to places that are progressively less comfortable. Unhappy in her arranged marriage to her childhood sweetheart and distraught over the miscarriage of their child, Zubaida attempts to distance herself from their privileged lifestyle by moving to the family's summer house in Chittagong and then to the living quarters of Shipsafe, a Chittagong-based NGO, where she begins to work as a translator. Zubaida remarks on this movement at the end of "The Testimony of Anwar": "I wasn't the only one in Chittagong in search of a self. I wasn't the only one who felt like the loneliest person in the world" (252). Zubaida, who also mourns a lost love object (Elijah) in a way that is self-recriminating and self-conscious, is in a less precarious position than Anwar. It would be a mistake, however, to think of her upper-middle-class lifestyle as anything but contingent on the good will of her husband, Rashid, and her parents-in-law. So, while Mick and Anwar accept increasing amounts of precarity in their labour practice, Zubaida is already precariously positioned in her domestic environment. Her work for Shipsafe exasperates Rashid because he cannot see it as more than just the affectation of a bored housewife. Even Gabriela, the filmmaker for whom Zubaida acts as translator, finds it difficult to find meaning in their work in the face of the workers' precarity: "[A] film," she remarks, "seems like a pathetic response" (173). As in *Waterline*, the solace offered by the work is incommensurate with ideal justice.

Anam positions Shipsafe as an NGO that "for years . . . had been campaigning for a ban on the whole [ship-breaking] industry" (144). While Anam does not describe the rationale behind this ban, it might be inferred that even fictional NGOs must justify their campaigns by using advocacy documents like the International Labour Organization's Conventions (ILOC). Although Bangladesh is not a signatory to ILOC 162 of 1986, otherwise known as "The Asbestos Convention," asbestos is generally cited in advocacy reports and academic research on Chittagong because the substance is a recognised hazard.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps because of this attention, journalism about the Chittagong ship-breakers has tended to foreground asbestos exposure.<sup>9</sup> The first conclusive study to demonstrate asbestosis in ship-breakers was only released in 2017, after *The Bones of Grace* was published. However, there is almost twenty

years of work on the Chittagong shipyards that foregrounds exposure to asbestos as a marked, if not primary, concern. Given this weight of scholarship, I want to query Anam's decision to disregard asbestos-related diseases in *The Bones of Grace*. Anam's preoccupation with other matters contrasts with the concerns of *Waterline*. By not mentioning asbestos, Anam attends more closely to the lived experience of the workers she depicts, concerned as they are with immanent risk rather than with the NGO documents critiquing the industry.<sup>10</sup>

This likelihood is demonstrated in the actual accounts of Chittagong ship-breakers. "Every day I go to work thinking I might die," says Massood, a Chittagong ship-breaker interviewed by *Vice* (L. Jansen). Anam's novel implicitly acknowledges this pragmatic fatalism by portraying Anwar as far more concerned with the risk of falling (when working on the skyscrapers of Dubai) or being crushed (in the ship-breaking yard at Chittagong) than with any eventual disease he might contract from his work. The emphasis on imminent precarity is a structural feature of the novel that extends beyond affective fatalism: the narrative culminates in the death of a young boy, Mo, who is crushed by a falling crate. Given the immediate risks to life posed by the physical and psychological traumas of ship-breaking, the risk of eventual asbestos-related disease recedes into the background. But asbestos exposure itself produces "a culture of pragmatic fatalism" typical of workers exposed to asbestos (Boggio 47). The difference between exposed characters in both novels, then, is not so much their fatalism as it is a feature of the risks this fatalism attaches to. For Anwar, it is the more immediate risk of falling; for Mick, it is the long-term effects of asbestos exposure.

The matter of relative risk becomes reflexively important to an analysis of *Waterline* because of our reading of *The Bones of Grace*. Raisin is obviously familiar with the literature on asbestos and the Clydeside ship-builders, and not just because he mentions "snowballs."<sup>11</sup> Woven throughout *Waterline* are similar recollections to those found in Ronald Johnson and Arthur McIvor's oral history, *Lethal Work: A History of the Asbestos Tragedy in Scotland* (2000). Here, for instance, is a moment from an interview by Johnson and McIvor: "When you went in the door of Turner's asbestos there was a Factory Act with all the stuff. The

only problem was that you couldnae see through it with the layer of asbestos cement on the glass” (72).<sup>12</sup> Raisin reframes a similar memory: “We’ve put the signs up—telling about ventilation and masks and dust checks and all these things that were never bothered with and nobody ever thought to ask for because you couldn’t read the bloody sign even, it was that covered in fucking dust” (65). Raisin revises it to come from a hypothetical “we” to imply a greater agency on the part of the factory owners and, therefore, a greater culpability. In both accounts, the irony of the sign lies in its misplaced signification: instead of informing the workers about health and safety, it demonstrates a failure to attend to the conditions that occasion the regulations in the first place. The problem with this irony is that it perpetuates the fiction that had the workers known the risks they were facing, they might have chosen otherwise. The fiction of “choosing otherwise” ignores the structural inequalities that generate fatalism in workers about their circumstances. It translates a structural obviation of risk into the moral arena of innocence and guilt, whereby workers whose minimal agency in making complex decisions that offset economic precarity against health risks are recast as innocents without any agency at all.

Characters in both novels assess risk according to the time frames to which they most relate. For this reason *The Bones of Grace* does not delve into the asbestos problems of the ship-breaking industry at Chittagong, despite its prominence in the related environmental and anthropological literature. The occupational time frames of Anam’s novel are principally concerned with intervals that are either too short (the narrative covers the period of a few years) or too long (Zubaida’s archaeological work involves the reconstruction of an *Ambulocetus* skeleton described as “fifty million years of history encased in calcium, iron, and sediment” [403–04]). Mid-range time frames in the novel, measured in the “family time” of a few decades, do not involve the shipping industry. Anwar is employed in the ship-breaking industry only briefly. Zubaida works for Shipsafe only for a few months. Even the stories that she elicits from the workers measure their experiences in the Prosperity ship-breaking yard by timescales too brief for the manifestation of an asbestos-related disease. *Waterline*, which focuses on the



ways that Mick's memories obtrude into his present, seems better fitted to address a temporal mismatch.

So while the novels are united in a shared *oikeios* that concerns itself with problems of social justice, their coincidence across the life-cycle of ships is disrupted by opposite, even opposing, responses to temporal risk, manifested in their respective decisions to foreground or foreclose documented histories of asbestos exposure. In order to cut across these contrasting positions and demonstrate how the novels might supplement each other, I turn again to Sharpe. Sharpe meditates on "aspiration" as "the word . . . for keeping and putting breath in the Black body" (132). Aspiration evokes those deflated dreams of economic empowerment that sustain Mick and Anwar in their precarious labours. But aspiration's complementary senses include "the withdrawal of fluid *and* the taking in of foreign matter (usually fluid) into the lungs with the respiratory current, *and as audible breath* that accompanies or comprises a speech sound" (113; emphasis in original).

Breathing in asbestos is generally recognised to be harmful to health. This observation, prevalent in accounts of public health, ignores a politics of use in which long-term health risks are balanced against other, more immediate, threats to bodily integrity. And yet it provides the basis for comparing wildly different circumstances of asbestos use that transect clear divisions between the Global North and the Global South. The possible ill effects of asbestos are, it seems, as ubiquitous as breathing. This is in no small way because of the production of asbestos bodies, formed of asbestos fibre, breath, tissue, and time.<sup>13</sup> Asbestos, a generic term for a silicate form, is a long, thin, fibrous crystal that can break down into millions of microscopic fibrils. When a fibre is breathed into the lungs, it lacerates the lung lining and embeds itself into the lung wall. The body responds in two ways: first, it builds up scar tissue over the lacerations, which impedes the transport of oxygen to the blood, and, second, it forms asbestos bodies, fibres encased in human tissue. It may be these asbestos bodies that cause, rather than prevent, the malignancies that lead to asbestos-related diseases. Certainly, asbestos bodies are recognised indicators of asbestos-related diseases and form the basis of many postmortem diagnoses of asbestos exposure. Such

negative health associations justify the righteous anger of activists when asbestos exposure is lifted to the level of a political case, whether this be the systemic obfuscation of health-related concerns about asbestos by the asbestos industry throughout the twentieth century, the ongoing production and use of asbestos particularly by Russia and India, or the historic burden of past use, which makes itself felt in present efforts to dispose of asbestos safely. But righteous anger risks ignoring other systems, where each breath is a wager with death in a political economy that weighs affect against structural uncertainty. By surveying, below, the treatment of breath in both novels, I highlight those breath economies that underwrite the aspiration to social justice that unites the lives of ship workers across both novels and the violence implied in their respective temporal differences.

References to breath in *Waterline* recall the consequences of asbestos exposure; breath in *The Bones of Grace*, in the manner of conventional romance, marks the immediacy of high emotion. Consider, for instance, Mick, whose breath is described as “all over the place” (Raisin 51), “snatching” (92), “stopping” (147), “constricting” (17), and “dying” (202). Each descriptor indicates a pathological inhibition in Mick’s breathing pattern. If Cathy represented stability or normality for Mick, then her death was the end of this normality. He expresses this end of normality somatically with pathological breathing. When read against the following description of one particular panic attack, the descriptors cohere as respiratory responses to Cathy’s death: “What is normal? There isn’t a normal. [Mick] swings his legs over the bed and sits up. Everything racing and rushing. He is sucking for breath but it’s no good, sitting up is making him feel boaky [nauseated], so he lies back down. . . . She is normal. That is what normal is” (101). Breath is never normal in *Waterline*—indeed, references to breath are marked by constraining adjectives. At the same time, these pathological references to breath usually emerge when Mick is thinking about Cathy, who used to represent Mick’s sense of normal and whose absence, then, is accompanied by an end of normality. By extension, these references to breath also come to be linked to Cathy’s constricted, snatched, and stopped breath, the consequence of her death from mesothelioma.

By contrast, breath in *The Bones of Grace* indexes affective states rather than compromised breathing, but most of these seem to be associated with conventions of the romance genre. Lovers feel each other's breath on their skin (Anam 120, 276, 277, 389, 390); breath gives away clues of drinking (119, 132) or smoking (307); it is associated with things that "take the breath away" (45), cause characters to take a breath (373), or make "the breaths [come] so sharply out of me that I could hardly speak" (366). Anam generally uses breath as a simple realist device: a physiological reminder of how the body reacts to surprise or shock. It is only occasionally that breath is made to reference the concerns of the worker characters, as when Anwar refers to building the Dubai skyscraper as "working through the devil's breath of summer" (188). When it does, however, theological implications emerge. Perhaps the most interesting of these, given the emphasis I have placed on the creation of an *oikeios*, is the moment that the manager of Prosperity Shipyard, Ali, marks the grounding of the eponymous cruise ship of *The Bones of Grace* by muttering a prayer "under his breath, then bl[owing] the air out of his cheeks, spreading the blessing" (146). This release of the prayer out into the environment is one of the few moments when the novel concerns itself with connecting the human and non-human environments through breath. Ali's gesture expels this interaction into the environment, occasioning a renewed attention to how breath connects a larger assemblage that includes the workers, the worker's yard, and the cruise ship.

By way of conclusion, I want to suggest that comparing *Waterline* and *The Bones of Grace* extends a postcolonial analytic that incorporates not simply the birth or death of ships but the latent harm they can deliver to the people who engage with them. We began by considering, alongside Carrigan, how bringing two perspectives on the cruise ship's role in postcolonial economies might be useful. Following Carrigan's analysis, we do not simply find an intertext for Mick's ship—"parked at the end of the street" (Raisin 97)—when, in *Omeros*, Walcott calls Fame "that white liner / at the end of your street, a city to itself" (72). We also find in *Omeros* a paradigm for how the liner dwarfs those concerns of the people who must necessarily live in relation to it rather than in it:

The immaculate hull insulted the tin roofs  
beneath it, its pursers were milk, even the bilge  
bubbling from its stern in quietly muttering troughs

and its humming engines spewed expensive garbage (73)

The cruise ship's wake includes more than those immediate forms of waste, bubbling from the bilge or spewing from the engines. It includes an assemblage of workers, "insulted" by "immaculate hulls," whose process, from the birth of the ship to its death, is tracked by inevitable relation with substances that harm—substances like asbestos. The cruise ship itself encourages us to carry concerns across oceans. In this respect, the cruise ship has received ample attention as a translocation of cultural economic exploitation. But within the ship, there lies a latent, harmful substance, which manifests its own economy most devastatingly at each end of its carrier's long and varied life. This asbestos load is felt acutely in the wake of ships long departed, in launch or final rest, at Glasgow and Chittagong.

## Notes

- 1 M. Jansen considers how Italian asbestos narratives draw on elements of fiction and non-fiction to generate an "affective realism" (Berlant 52) about the precarity facing asbestos workers and their families. While I see our projects as aligned, Jansen focuses on narratives that, like Carrigan's, co-locate, a focus that means that she does not address the ways in which precarities may be relativized through comparison.
- 2 Moore describes these, together with food, as the "Four Cheaps": labour power, food, energy, and raw materials.
- 3 "Affinity," "intra-action," and "mesh," like *oikeios*, describe complex ecological forms of coming-into-relation between entities (human or non-human). But whereas "affinity" prioritizes a politics, "intra-action" an ontology, and "mesh" an ecology, *oikeios* emphasises the economics of such relations.
- 4 In "Asbestos," Gregson writes on the extraordinary materiality of the substance, which "notwithstanding human attempts to sequester and contain it . . . is endlessly potentially recurring, dispersed and dissipated, and as such touches us all" (271). Although she does not mention Moore's *oikeios*, Gregson also understands asbestos as party to "a materialist politics that enacts a radical network ecology, comprising myriad transient associations and connections of human and more-than-human bodies with materials and their effects" (271).

- 5 The snowball metaphor has also been mentioned in two productions about the paraoccupational exposure to asbestos of people living around the JW Roberts Asbestos Factory in Armley, West Yorkshire: Nutter's radio play *Snow in July* and Yates' theatrical production *Dust*.
- 6 This passage occurs soon after Mick has moved into his garden shed, at the beginning of Chapter 9. It marks a general decline in Mick's ability to form causal relations between his thoughts and his decisions. The first three paragraphs of the chapter begin with physical observations—"It is cold," "He turns over," "He presses himself into the crack" (64–65)—that give way to extensive mindwandering about different aspects of asbestos at work and at home. This mindwandering itself is an unwanted byproduct of his efforts not to think. Again and again, Mick tries to "shut the thoughts out" (66). The overall effect highlights Mick's self-harming behaviour.
- 7 This summary is derived from Morris' account.
- 8 See Bailey 2000; Andersen 2001; Cairns 2007; Cairns 2017.
- 9 See, for example, The *Guardian's* 2012 photo essay, L. Jansen, and Gwin.
- 10 Waldman notes how sufferers of asbestos-related diseases in India, South Africa, and the UK respond to asbestos diseases differently: as, respectively, a necessary byproduct of modernisation, a welcome source of compensation to relieve extreme poverty, and a pernicious force that erodes the sufferers' masculinity.
- 11 He also acknowledges the support of the Clydebank Asbestos Group and GMB Union at the end of the novel, implying some firsthand research contact.
- 12 This probably refers to Section 63 of the UK Factories Act of 1961, revised from the 1937 Factories Act. Although the quotation is taken from Johnson and McIvor's oral history project, it also appears in Dudgeon's *Our Glasgow: Memories of Life in Disappearing Britain*, which may be Raisin's source.
- 13 "Asbestos bodies," a term derived from Marchand's observation of pigmented crystals (1906), describes an asbestos fibre that through its interactions with the human body comes to be coated in iron and proteins. Increasingly these seem to be associated with the toxicological outcomes associated with asbestos exposure, suggesting that, internally at least, asbestos-related diseases might be the result of intra-actions between fibres and human cell material. (Churg and Warnock; Bardelli et al.).

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