

## Lahore, I Am Coming

(RIZWAN AKHTAR)

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## For

**My parents Samra, Rayan Tammara Claire & Iffat Saeed**

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# Preface

In his collection *Lahore, I am coming*, Rizwan Akhtar creates the voice of a bard who must bear witness to, not just the effects of a colonial past, but also the present, in terms of terrorist atrocities in Pakistan. Akhtar suggests that poets are chosen and much rather like a medium see opportunities for poems everywhere. As such these poems are finely crafted. There is a sense of a compulsion to write the world the poet sees, an imperative not to overlook anything. There is virtuoso use of language in Akhtar’s ’s work, original similes and metaphors abound to vividly present the minute particulars of life and variety of human emotions.

The collection’s subject matter is delightfully diverse including everything from a master class with Derek Walcott to a letter that is delivered to the wrong address. In this way Akhtar presents the human condition. There are too poems of love and loss tenderly evoked. Included in this grouping is the voice’s brief exile in Belfast which is starkly contrasted to the richness of Lahore. As such the alienation overseas contrasts the works located in Lahore where there is a sadness at the changing times but none the less as the title suggests a love for the place. It should be stressed that these are not ‘fluffy’ poems. The poet’s talent for language is used to effectively convey throughout a hint of violence that dogs the past not just of Pakistan but ironically Belfast. It is similarly used in poems that describe in honest detail terrorist attacks in Lahore in recent times. Again, this links to the concept of bardic witnessing.

Akhtar is an erudite writer who carries his learning lightly. He is a poet who uses intertextuality with a deft touch that nevertheless enriches meaning. These poems are accessible but not trite which is largely due to the poet’s skill. With so much

going on, this is a collection that must be savoured, to enjoy the language and reveal the layers of meaning. I suspect that this collection will be revisited by the reader and indeed with reward re-reading.

**Fiona Sinclair**

# Introduction

Poetry is perhaps humanity’s oldest art form and may have begun at the time when our remote ancestors first invented words and began putting them into pleasing and meaningful rhythmic patterns – a time long before the cave paintings of Chauvet in Southern France and Pettakere in Silawesi were created. Behind contemporary poetry is the great tradition that followed on from these very early beginnings – a tradition that includes poetry from many peoples and many languages, from Sanskrit and Anglo Saxon as in the Ramayana, Homer’s great epics and Beowulf. People writing poetry today enhance and extend this great tradition, and demonstrate that poetry has been written everywhere and in all languages ever since languages began to differentiate from each other. And there are great poems – poems that will continue being read into the distant future. Rizwan Akhtar belongs to this great tradition – at the same time he and his writing belong to the world as a whole, the contemporary world – and especially so in his case because he bridges the worlds of both East and West.

As well as being a poet Rizwan Akhtar is an academic. Born in Lahore Pakistan his original language was Urdu but he writes in English and writes exceptionally well. In October 2008 he went to England and to the University of Essex where he gained a PhD in Postcolonial literature and theory by women writers – a doubly distinguished achievement because he was studying and writing in English, and taking the unusual course for a man of exploring the literary work and achievements of women academics and writers. But he has the skills and sensitivity for such work as his current collection reveals. His poetry is subtle and distinguished by a poetics that as Samuel Taylor Coleridge suggested takes the rhythmic phrasing of ordinary speech and converts it into a sinuous and musical programme of honest and impressive persuasion. The chief characteristic of his writing is that he recognises and uses the breathed phrase, the musical phrase which has always been the

predominant feature of spoken and written English, for example as he says in ‘Empty Rooms’:

*The evening halted for some words there was no one interested in details*

These two lines might well seem like prose but they’re not prose – they represent a subtle and effective use of everyday English in poetry form. Although language is always the heart of poetry and its prime essential, the subject matter makes its own contribution by giving a basis and structure to form. In the case of this collection, the poet has employed his extensive experience of living in and growing up in Lahore supplemented with material that’s arisen from his travels elsewhere and his knowledge of the effects of colonialism in Pakistan and other parts of the world and the way post colonialism lingers and distorts the cultures colonialism has swamped and in many cases overrun. As a poet and traveler his work bridges the worlds of East and West – two very different worlds in culture and the geographical sense. This is because there is a fundamental but not always sufficiently acknowledged divide between the sensibilities of East and West – a divide that Rizwan Akhtar has personally experienced as he reveals in his poetry, and brings to us through such poems as ‘Lahore I am Coming’:

*I enter the courtyard of the Baadshahi Mosque See Moghuls sleeping on pillows made of Ghazals*

In ‘Crossing Londonderry’:

*I swim in pubs after each gulp semantics split like marriages over foamy mugs of beer*

And in ‘Haunting’:

*I waited standing in distance You took away my language I kept chasing silence.*

In addition to these themes he writes of what’s traditionally been included in a great deal of the poetry written in English and other languages – landscape, human relationships, historic and social concepts. But he writes as well in terms of his original culture and Urdu his first language, colouring this collection with the sense of loss that colonialism and a divided cultural experience almost inevitably bring with them. This is typified in his repetitive use of and reference to the ghazal, a complex and subtle poetic form that has been around for more than twelve hundred years, that was adopted into European languages (particularly German and English) from about the mid 1700s and more recently into American poetry by poets such as W S Merwin, John Hollander and Maxine Kumin. The majority of the poems convey a wide variety of emotions inclusive of loss, separation, love and pain. Akhtar expresses these feelings honestly and tellingly and perhaps experience them himself as is suggested in many of his poems including his ‘History of formless Ghazal’:

*half evolved grief is a text in ten fingers and two arms*.

Cross cultural stress and the sense of exile and human suffering that go with it extend throughout this collection. Rizwan Akhtar draws these together in a poetry that’s deeply moving, that’s rich in the language he uses and his understanding of the urban and natural worlds around us – particularly in his longer poem, ‘Lahore I am coming’. He brings these ingredients together in a way that’s attractive and captivating and should delight everyone in his native Pakistan and beyond its borders who looks for and reads poetry of the quality that forms this impressive collection.

***Alistair Paterson***

# The Dancing Courtesans of Old Lahore

There are noises in dark rooms who can build a house without din wooden stairs without creaking and a veranda without creepers

crookedly ajar doors scandalize ghazals escape gramophone

like a royal an ageing *raqasa* shows up on a murky balcony

arabesque alleys continue under bras messages hibernate

ogling in the The Dancing Girls' Bazaar nights reveal in sitar and anklets

hennaed-feet agile dancers

exude intricate bodily expressions those who lack skills are desires growing on audience

body encores mystical whirls asking fresh piece of betel-leaf poems in courtesans’ hands endure a legitimate munch

over rickshaws and donkey carts a dim moon smudges the songs sung by the concubine Anarkali

planted alive in bricks by the Emperor –

azan form The Royal Mosque tempers sweating bodies

ablutions flow on white ponds

pigeons land like souls wanting modest bribes.

\**raqasa is an Urdu word for dancer*

# Exiled

In a city of tea-brown heat acrid phlegm stacks in pharynx eyes search for extra shades

suddenly there is a river contracting sledge over which mean boats veer tired water on scorched patches crows land

with an antagonistic intent

the day is a heterogeneity of traffic complicit in a language tucking tones of old men killing time near banks

of Lahore’s lonely river hedging Kamran's Bara Dari whose vaulted pavilions cusp paradoxical doors from which couples sneak through tall grass

of the garden finding bodies of nocturnal animals exiled into bones.

*Kamran ki Baradari is a summer pavilion at Lahore, Pakistan. It was built by Mughals around 1540. Bara Dari is form of architecture of a building or pavilion with 12 doors designed to allow free flow of air.*

# History of A Formless Ghazal

1

When you leave sunlight is a platter of orange shreds beneath trees sparrows make a memorial of departure an empty car shows that legs have a project.

2

Freed from winter’s freaks February evenings relax winds berries mixed with cigarette stubs footpaths are canvases on which midday sun illuminate girls’ skimpy outfits.

3

In the distance a company of crows cuddle in thick feathers the black acacia is not a metaphor for their intentions

but they fly like writers searching logic between passages—

4

Meanwhile I made mental mess of choices county took

in 1989 television started explaining defanging revolutions finally we visited Mughal’s prisons inside the Fort.

5

Why bother? Urdu ghazals speak too much of love dark voluptuous concubines repeat Persian couplets their shadows simmer over Lahore’s skyscrapers.

6

How an elegist submits tears to pages? How people roll in black coverings, speculation has a history of its own “lament but do not say things you cannot”.

7

The dead only rise when poetry shakes their skeletons in graves

on ponds of The Royal Mosque souls run a parliament after *Allahu Akbar* pigeons are a subdued army on feet.

8

Old men settle on straw mattress adjusting in rows cordoned by verses their faces are stoned in reluctance the young laugh for kites cradling on sky.

9

Sedated by low clientele The Dancing Girl Bazaar is silent all night bodies stretch for numerous angles

language confines to stares on sitar’s strings and stasis.

10

In prosaic postures beggars eat from soiled hands

half-evolved grief is a text in ten fingers and two arms, red buses churn an unending chorus of arrivals.

# Birds

for you

They scrape and bill for answers I peck evenings for small words finches and robins temper tones

They don’t flutter against my desires Or rise from foggy halos

like sentences blurring intentions

only stare my doubts with little eyes over ponds of petaled flowers carrying conviction under feathers

a stripped choir of town’s winter land on raven craggy earth

sank in scrimped necks

a milky whiteness of nude bodies— clamp beaks against an urgent silence of blue, red, and magenta quills

These birds I see cloister you huddle like expressions muted by long flights

They drop our histories

tied to footnotes, on vague wings.

# Way Out

The trees dripped so many words vanishing in puddles

pattering lexical silence hibernating under squelched roots

now bloating with extra meanings on dark flooding roads like pages sag from edges with stories seeping all day cusped on leaves

a staring memory of a wet squirrel referencing this lonely script drowned in sounds

tweaking a larger project of rain falling in measured rituals

for us spreading palms

in a murky veranda to find our way out.

# Do Not Love a Poet

She picked gummy shreds from her vast eyes, tossed arms killing air with knuckles afterwards stars blurred edging windows of her room where she sat underlining

Akhtamova’s poems as if desires found home in pages.

Where so much is said

in cold Russian about nights towns and trees in *Voronezh* for Osip Mandelstam.

In the frozen basement ‘where the exiled poet is banished’ and from where she could see

her loneliness among poplars covered with a stubborn snow

fixing her drafts of passion

*do not love a poet*

*let the poem learn dislocation.*

# Monara Lighthouse

What separates a rock from water? waves numerous like muddled desires touch sandy shore actualized by crabs

inside city no one knows what they bring a memory clawing wreaths of reef sticking out broken wooden planks,

face damp in humid fumes of August like a foggy mirror in a bath room where steamy eyes mope over and over

in an instant fibrous ants make way through holes of creaking door, their lean crawl stop you from meeting me

last time we met the sea boiled over your sweltering tongue, monosyllabic, tide-heavy, surged arrogantly —

only last year the lighthouse keeper buried his bride on craggy commotion

he is alone, beating rhymes, one, two, three.

# Trees

Trees are like extinct languages taking care of their lonely lives

wind spatters leaves curling verbosely on ground holding archaic texts

words pile on tongue for sounds, I make a mental munch of silence

your memory is cusped on barks swinging like loose sentences

hinged on an esoteric grammar,

l stable on its spontaneous growth

you did not read my gestures they are sprouting like poems

evening strips their shadows like themes leaving me, wondering meanings.

# Haunting

Too many leaves, two footsteps wind ruled with a scattering fist you walked frantically on one pace legs covered one space loyally

in measured hypnosis of muscles body’s convulsions set the scene registering references

empty chairs on wet grass added to an empty strip of road

& I imagined future strollers

& about movies with weird endings when the guard told me “it is time” leaving garden

I waited standing in distance you took away my language I kept chasing silence.

# From Empire’s Days in Lahore

In colonial days the Mall Road was laid

for clerks and officials who watched sellers,

haggling through crooked binoculars, shying people copied English words in small corners,

an insinuation or swearing spilled in regular intervals from pink pouting mouths of men wearing tricornes

they squeezed noses with muslin handkerchiefs over vegetables and fruits, while a god-sent retinue

parted crowd for superior ghosts of the empire correcting locals with obtuse stares

over city’s geography of music and courtesans and near canon *Zamzama* and *Oriental College*

where pigeons wafted all day taking flights to shrines of Lahore’s saints

who cultivated a mystic resistance

but Kipling, the son of her majesty covered Lahore

with all the might of a scholar rooted in Victorian grandeur of ornate flourish

in markets he braved European merchandise noted the lust of seller and the piety of invader

ginger-white bodies furling in French chiffon flecked hands and threw coins to beggars

how they awed under bold exposure and an odd shake hand in white gloves as if cleansed the land

from the malady of eastern magic and dormancy whose tiny lives are wedged between

the love of betel-leaf and Urdu ghazal, and passion for soldiers who vented guns

cocked into a language

as distance grew after slangs kegged

into a script of sedition until the Mutiny routed our trusted clientele.

# A Lonely Language

Not just city’s noise but your happy tone made me so lonely, and I crushed words

when evening is already receding slowly there is no need to fill it with language

night does not need many expressions it bears the agony of a forced sentence

moment by moment a description of silence in lengthy passages without formal ending

casual consolations drizzle from mouths there is no concern only the desire to eject.

# The Only Woman

It takes a little effort to tempt her face into conversation

without twists and turns linear stammering:

shops, driving, and love life

on wrinkled palms straightening

history of frayed hairs absinth eyes in ancient pits

monosyllabic but fluently using silence

against crusaders

arrowing her with language

at sights she prohibits where the velocity of gaze

follows her to her garden maids and music over tea

when sun ritualizes trees and owns their shadows

crowning grass with feet

she measures earth’s loneliness.

# Walcott’s Class of Poetry

*(Colchester, 2012)*

Walcott said what a beautiful word *flit* is teaching Hardy’s *The Darkling Thrush* instead white clouds loomed

English summer emptied a series of winds in the dank smell of classroom

the green-eyed laureate wished Saint Lucia nostalgia effused over his nose

stuffed with phlegm

and later on the man who wrote *Omeros*

was the schooner

went berserk with England

hoisting his English oaring all waters

I read my fledgling things from papers at the mouth of a deep ocean

he listened with a flicker of doubt my skiff of verse dabbled

white herons squeaked

*Should we have a show down between a reader and a writer? Do not imitate*

*Hart Crane*, *say what you are born to say*

it was poetry a six weeks child I rocked in the coral cradle of the Caribbean.

# The Embrace Wishes to Be A Local Sonnet

The embrace wishes to be a sonnet of difference a shy step forward, rest is up to her fate

she pictures her a thespian out on high heels yelling at distant lover and his folded arms

stripping reluctance with a bit of modern day nudge a spent out nymph of road-side walk jabbing hands though roughened by ascending too many necks

in pink-white blushing returns with each breath, hooding her abilities transported by love of poetry in a language she forces to memorize; the local theatre shows women dumb and fat pushing men in air, their giant bodies resist the depth of hugging and ribald tongues shoulder anger as if an embrace is a permeable to orgasmic torture

will there be time to accomplish a squeeze?

# I Cannot Prove Love

*What a fuss people make about fidelity! Oscar Wilde*

*I*

Will you ever think of rinsing me with smiles and wrinkles? Often, dark hands pry into our cupboards left open by unwashed intensions

some dresses are still untouched

I did not iron them and neither you like nice unfrowned arguments hiding shudders of lonely bodies

you waited for me like a letter

I lost my address and distracted for the work I encumber daily to ensure the bread for children

still a beauty hinges your words and a commitment to take away content from our story gasping to achieve a romantic ending.

Poetry is an excuse to do nothing shower gel, shaving cream, combs I use them all over to stay away from the market of insanity

along unpaved dust-driven streets people see me talking to myself

I stop and stare and take notes of your face wedging windows

black crows on doddering acacia after a day’s long monologue

drop excrements of frustration and taint my shirts like scandals

hurtling I walk past a rustic milkman hurling a rickety cycle crooning

love-smitten cow-herding *Ranjha*

of Waris Shah’s *Heer.*

*II*

Our epiphany of love is under sleeve files, brief case, and your lipstick crusting lips, these are rituals

from the threshold of vows,

you keep an eye on my maps long hours, and never doze

like an unscrupulous watchman who can be bribed to hush

unable to provide evidence I seek mediation; a soul nudges past me knocking

at the next door, ‘who is there?’

Outside the world is not secure like your objections mired

in a history of cynical ease crush my flimsy answers.

*III*

Lahore is absolutely unaware

Of the germs of poems, so many of them like sluggish sperm waste inside ovaries of suspicion

from a well-crafted distance you corner me like an island

I am now a wave of silence tiding you up to safer shores.

Bricks after bricks houses flood inside there is a conference

on fidelity, their conclusions drown in opaque accusations.

Helplessness is an unknown growth which braids my neck into submission; every evening cold anticipations strangle new preambles

when a day wipes off questions

answers peep through pages prescribing antidotes to so many things. ‘Say! one can love my poetry, not me”.

\*Heer Ranjha *is one of several popular tragic romances of Punjab, Pakistan. There are several poetic narrations of the story, the most famous being 'Heer' by the famous Sufi poet Waris Shah written in 1766. The poem is about love, union, and separation of lovers.*

# Passages

The overnight memory on floor avails space between cemented blocks

just around the corner walls keep a glare of someone walking cautiously

covering the creak of her body from an ever watchful world

sometime a sparrow comes chirping disembraces the moment

a simple sound from window’s rusty axis suggests the design

passages are trains of thought hampering visitors to look around for names

some are hidden in corners with desires plaqued on shut doors

a spell of routine comes and goes they sleep unperturbed.

# Caliban Stays Back

Prospero bent time for Miranda in his theater of dramatic reversals

calibrated Columbus hoisting Santa Maria gone past unnoticed small islands

coast-snooty ocean-hubristic he rattled the Brave New World with his faith;

Miranda with a monochromic heart found Ferdinand a chimera

far from stardom of court hurling logs Prospero directed her daughter’s smiles

Caliban proceeded through an agon axed tongues to basic letters

sang seductive ditties of love

so Ferdinand dueled for golden curls

O dear father/ make not rash a trial of him says Miranda who found her Eros

Prospero the arch priest satiated with power and genius wanted a safe exit

sent the fabled pair of Naples in white bridals to their chosen climax

left Ariel and Calibanto sort out languages floating on seas.

# Local Donald Duck Outside Macdonald’s

Huffing inside his armor of livelihood

a shaggy local mascot of Donald Duck primps outside MacDonald’s where children of the rich giggle over his puck nose absurdity

with a master stroke of luck he haggles hilarity with expensive cars and quivering babies wages come chuckling; in sultry days

of local summer the ghost inside drenches air-conditioned vehicles effuse heat children spot the soul of harlequin

in baggy haunches, bowing and bending

he creates an audience out of a camouflaged theater of crumbs, pampering them to moods but sometimes a rebuff comes if he goes

too close to children, a complete reversal of antics

a child holding his tail, and the tale that is so obvious stumping in short steps, the interlude

of a bagger cuddling clown.

# Ways of Reading

Deep in winter’s trees a slow story of leaves finds your hands poking words on pages you bury face in palms

I dig an extra hole for eyes black crows flutter crudely pecking my curtain of patience they seem to hang on for hours swollen monsters

tearing winds angrily like unattended passages

These are ways of reading lost treasure of silence same as bodies do not yell

and become interpretations.

# Lahore, I Am Coming

1

My voice in a dusty evening of Lahore echoes from the chipped roof

of grandfather’s grave.

The map of my life is all wrinkled. The dust cloaks my stubbled face sleeves upturned into a muddy pouch,

my alphabets are singlehandedly sown in this city.

A new language emerges from my silence a sound waves through the clogs of time

and my fingers dance to a dervish’s manuscript.

2

I return to Lahore riding on a tonga

hurled by emaciated horses and decked rickshaws

the rides of passion and jolt.

The metaphors like me also return after ten years

to search for themes squandered in alleys

for the Lahorites bury their dreams with grace… the barber in my Mohalla circumcised me

in those days doctors were atheists so that groggy old man leapt

as if I was a sacrificial goat

a little spurt of water and the fleshy other regained a new form, the poetry

took many a slashing… the barber left our house

on that day December 1971

his hands were stained with blood.

3

I return to the tree in which I was branched, to the first verses I churned with my tongue the first *molvi* who taught me

the first teacher who corrected my geography the first woman hidden behind a black veil.

4

I return

after my hands have been dipped in wells of amazing perfumes…

I have found no other graveyard to sleep in… where I played balls

no longer did any other “child” in the world stayed behind,

after the spinach steaming in globs of ghee mother rolled dough into granular

(I am still excited about meals) the bitter gourd with milky lasi

and the carrot drink that she would pour— now other foods have claimed my palate.

5

I enter the courtyard of the Baadshahi Mosque see Moghuls sleeping on pillows made of Ghazals neck deep . . . drenched

brick upon brick, a sea of marble pigeons cooing to pigeon, vibrations I wander in the streets of Urdu script

And chose images stetting in a basket of words

and see with my eye the white marbles thinning in dust and the mumbling mouths holding beads

an aperture swallows me and I am lost so I sit near the pond of water listening:

“Hayya ‘ala ‘l-falah” “ Hayya ‘ala ‘l-falah”.

6

Returning to you

submerged in the monsoons of my childhood returning to sneak more coins from father’s pockets buying candy floss, chopped guava in plate,

peanuts skinned in smoky pots of the vendors returning to my favourite fountain

for the pigeons at Trafalgar

are no compensation to the Lawrence Gardens where we peeled mangoes like an event of history (Anarkali ogled at the colonial admirers)

but Tesco and Iceland are no distant cousins to that noisy Friday Bazaar,

but Westminster Abbey in London

is like the torn dream from The Lahore Fort… pigeons coded during call for prayers

and more fortunate

than those ash-grey ones,

on Marx’s monument in Highgate Cemetery.

7

I wander in the squeezed alleys of Lahore behind the torn curtains wheatish girls wink… letters hidden in diaries,

their smiles struggle for contours and spare me…

the pigeons curve unexpectedly and greet me

and the fluttering kites become queens of that sky patched into legends

beloveds of an air choked with dust, greet me.

8

I croon Ghailb’s ghazals sitting in the *Devan e Khas* bedewed in ponderous gems clouds of saffron

and betel leaf aroma dazes me,

a rain of cinnamon and aniseeds fall

I do my silent prayers in the sequestered garden, and in the straw-gliding water see reflections

of chipped minarets

recalling Faiz’s last couplets— the exaggerated hoardings

encroach upon the footnotes of history . . . Lahore I am in love with you

How have you subdued my images?

For I have been made

to recall the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam amidst the wedding drums in the outskirts and anklets-wearing saints patched and dusted dancing wildly on the Fair of Lamps,

How do the gardens of Shalimar resonate?

9

I have come to recollect you from the trunk of neglect that corrodes furtively

like a loveless bride,

so is the Mall Road sprawled

in silent dissent, tempered with compromises, spooled in barbed wires,

I have come to you to embrace you, the cypresses and mulberries ,

and the Punjabi folk tales. And the “spontaneous wit” That you taught me

I have come to you for the shy smiles of women

That first taught me restraints I carried in European winters

I beamed at you, a Ghazal ripening… And from my father’s tasbih

I shed off the reluctance and argued with my creator.

10

I unbutton the clammy shirt

one by one it exudes beads of sweat… I remember my father’s muslin Kurta drenched in June’s heat

behind a vendor yelling for a spicy Alo Chat . . . And the sellers praising white cauliflower

And the rickety Chai walla pouring in discoloured cups of tea like histories; slow anodynes

it works and the mind opens… I remember the towels hanging outside the saloons

the massage men sprawling on straw mats As if celebrating the bodies,

I remember the houses tucked in alleys With their iron doorknobs

And their thresholds decorated with glazed tiles And their cold red and white floors

That remind me of an oasis.

11

The Lahore Fort

shaped into the rolling tears, poised on staggering imagination for every brick is chipped

And every balcony is lighted with lamp Lahore pours oil

Lahore claims dark alleys

lovers meet one another behind curtains

and exchange letters

secretly-at night, arms dangle.

12

When I was Shakespeare buff ten years ago

My father would send letters crisp and well-crafted

unfolding a smell of betel-leaf and turmeric And when the English doubted the alphabets They took them to the scanner

they sensed mutiny in Urdu alphabets espionage in metaphoric flourishes And when they found nothing

They made stories worse than mine What is the aroma that you put in Paulo Is it a coded smell?

a plot like mangoes chutney

much is lost in the cheap translation

I said to them: It’s difficult for me to interpret For betel-leaf is a tongue

It is our way of making love Our dancing lilts

And if your great poet

Wordsworth had known of betel leaf

must have left Windermere and Cocker mouth

a brief a revolt against cartography and poetry… My father loves Persian, he quotes Hafiz

And whenever he missed me He would send me a letter,

a poultice of green pan Because for him, it is a seal upon the envelope: my address

And when the English didn’t understand they shifted to another paradigm.

The betel leaf was sent for a forensic the dossier is now closed.

13

I put on the warm chadar on my shoulders Lahore descends with its smells

carrying for my children stories of mangoes, peaches, pomegranates and street junk food women wearing etched bangles

and slobbering like ghazlas I enter into them

an alcove of lust gillyflowers, hibiscus

clustered jasmine join their wrists and I speak in perfumes

but my passport is dank English

and my black brief case is full of explanations.

14

I am a box

stuffed with compromises I am yours, Lahore

let me take an autograph from time before I claim for more indemnity.

I am also your prisoner

so be among you that punished me into life Let me donate this

Because I haven’t given charity for years.

# The Poet Meets an Adulteress

I did not entertain her except her words

and the way

she used her tongue—

In the mid-winter amber-white clouds cleave sky into pieces wind frets

she feels her breasts is a morass of history

eyes are pits of passions arms like folded closures

she cannot dismiss barked silence of night

ants-itching fingers working

on the extra flesh of belly button.

Her heart pumps crazily in a dark basement

where a blindfolded ghost of lust snores under her cot creaking insinuations

the embrace she exchanged on the bed of lush grass sooths her vertebrate

is now like a tarnished relic

mute among goats and cows face freckled by mosquitoes a verdict waits in cobwebs

she just wishes it to be otherwise

but who could be spared arrows flying

from gods’ pantomime over snowed mountains stoned valleys

of bloated protrusions

and a soul kicking inside her—

I who have stood vicariously watching her treading to caves a cargo of shame

embracing her little belongings

like me she could not vent

that love was the exact emotion fashioned wildly

through body’s language.

# Love Signs In

*for Tammara Claire*

I consider those days of serious suffering when I waited and cursed arrival of words

dust-like a language rented your face cloudy shreds poked skies for privacy

snail-pace wind entered into cupboards and you said *memory is a piece of dress*

letters opened like hidden seasons came and stealthily winter hedged over skins

trees stood straight like long sentences denounced by silence, vendors yawned

over things unable to make a point

while this was not the first disappointment

in tall grass we hid redressing city’s noise hazel-brown evenings of November draped over hands and arms signing in deeds.

# Project of Love

Same as brimmed clouds wander orgasmic her face crafted in stillness lingers for climax

lips pursed in hiatus cheek bones become heavier and hemmed with florid phrases

she arrives small hours huffing into departures, miserable beloved. I stay content with language

vigilant with my head on her pillowed presence at midnight sick with the idea of delaying revision

over-tweaking the draft of her best insinuations who says in love a stranger at home is more familiar,

You are my shadow and we cancel each other, nights on wet passages, days on dreamy sentences

I am punished for fingers transgressing breasts but love is an inclination to wind up argument

*Would I write you*? Both forever and never, after conceding all sins in a quick embrace

after loving sacred crusts of monologues

in passion overlooking many words unedited,

a guilt of consigning you to a world amazed at its creation. Now, the rain ejects you.

# Foster Boy of Ghosts

a boy peeps into a bloated trunk something in the air wants him to saunter towards trees owned by veteran ghosts; watching him eat from greasy newspapers on the first day they ignore his trespassing wicked things pass their seasoned minds like politicians they mince and move on next day they rattle his hair, pinch cheeks the boy no longer complains silence behind him a city voyeurs, past gardens malls, a cacophonous grudging

they poke fingers making him laugh

at least with him they need no language.

# Houbara Bustards

Winter creeps like a ritual from Himalayan Mountains on Pakistan’s North every year— trenchant talons of felons pick desert-brown bodies of Houbara bustards pecking seeds of death behind Arab majesties swaddled

in white robes chuckling aphrodisiac fancies rattling them to fly in all directions,

their trimmed beards expand with each body

of pummeled bird outstripped for libations to Eros; the declining bird heavy in gait migrate

from frozen belts of Central Asia

until Arab princes uplifting hunt for extra testosterone gratify sex drive on them, the scandal sits

like a violated bride on country enduring ties for oil and labor—in broad wings

they mate like men, the similarities between our mimic man and flying gallants bring diplomatic remunerations.

# Homeless

there

in a point of view narratives and stories

wed each other to which I cling,

who decides in me to write and to leave just as a wasp shatters normalcy

of language whose dissonant droning is a plot, an untypical conspiracy

of creativity the whole day I carry from breakfast to a litter bin

where I stare at the fate of a wrapper and of a poem, and stinging questions

they are like knots in a braid more appealing than the length of an ungainly manuscript an editor dismisses but remembers

the best parts, so out there under trees

and on pages we exist without wings and words bred to specialize in alienating themes

no one comes to distract us

laugh out if you are alone otherwise you are also alone, homeless

are not anthologized.

# Fissures

Mute musing

silenced by birds hanging in air

spatial

averse to movement

shy of words, and long vistas

yowled cacophony of streets scratched palms and entangled fingers waiting for echo not origin

sepulcher stare

mist of city harassing

in bafflement butterflies die

the cloudy hour is over thinned by distant rains adjusting hairs with wind

You thought we are still together no, we have dug a hole in the heart.

# Belfast Vignettes

*The Happy Leave no Clues, John Hewitt*

Preferring to get wet in Belfast’s rain I walk over the bridge of River Lagan, mossy densities hold its pace

near Albert Tower pigeons make decisions from one bench to another,

people in bars clock contradictions over glasses of guinness

some are alone like me figuring out places Near the Titanic Monument

I pause, the Irish say we only built it

but it drowned somewhere else, its bit like me planting memories on Dublin Road

Ulster Museum, Tudor structures

in awe of absence I snuggled from home, telephone calls, pillowed whisperings, early morning voices

(Cities are like beloveds

you try to catch them they elude

the privilege of losing destination is romantic)

I exchange smile with an old man holding a map pruning hedges of his garden

big yellow roses outside his house tell that he must have loved someone deeply, that it is not too late, but I resist and

do not pluck, sauntering back

I am blocked by a young couple kissing on promenade, I snap images

they do not leave hands and embrace here is a reason to hold a city, a face, and a pedestrianized path.

# The Maids of the City of Dust

The days stay in dust-clouds of streets The walls of houses burn in heat some only want a silent shadow

Tired from herding wages women sweat profusely hands are soaked in controlled brooms

leaning back on their dresses sticking out

their bursting breasts are an architect’s site

but women of dust build up like traffic lousy children run over their bodies smashing bones to seductive turns

You wouldn’t put a street to a thorough cleaning and a woman’s body to forensic for the shreds of bricks and mortar in her stomach where

her umbilical cord is now cemented after years of clipping and cleaving

Only nights and roofs hide dust, like forgotten love It changes colour and dies in a corner where again a woman simmers for absence, then a long sky with no stars meets more sky, and there is no hand to go through smutty hairs,

The city comes alive in her gaze moping

whatever comes her way, layers and layers of litter.

# Inside American Embassy Islamabad

Behind a glassy window

I meet a pink-white flat face years of doggedness claim his still eyebrows

and fingers working on keyboard storing the story of my life

as if I had surrendered my copy rights instantly.

Clutching a bulging envelope

like a child I was spanked into silence,

I had to measure my chances secretly beside the height and the spill-over effect of biometrics, something is taken away my hands’ skin chaffed

for the rest of the day, they placed me in boxes,

tabbing selecting details of rows and rows of applicants murmuring and nudging

like unwanted poems whittle for interpretations and find their way to uninterested listeners.

The wall-picture of a white hawk snaps my home-grown pretensions.

The history is strangled inside barbed walls; over vast gravel spaces diplomats’ black cars crunch their presence.

Shuttle service hiccups

at emblematic gates of embassies emit people like prisoners

apply parole by choice.

Back there in Brooklyn a friend anticipates my arrival—cold winds of Margalla Hills bring a calming proximity of the shrine

Of Bari Imam where dervishes

in patched clothes smile and

last night lamps carry waxen shapes

of journeys of souls accepting everything.

The man behind window remains busy his complacent jaws expands

like an empire manages through a single click of word to each answer — *Refused*.

# A Photograph

A boy was found guilty of peering into a crater,

in *Baghdad-* the city is banned like a blasphemous text, as the soldiers in beige walk past the squint-eyed road. The craters will replace the graves;

the ritual of burial will be revised.

These are trophies,

all over the city - seems treacherous in its moods- like a paramour in her vacant moment.

Wearing a torn night goggle,

the boy fumbles like a mediocre historian.

Bullets and chaplets of a dervish

spin and roam in the sands.

He vows never to come back, like this poem,

in memory to de-throne,

but the flag of confusion flutters

for who can stop the boys from peering into the craters

and the poets from falling everywhere for a bit of space.

# Director’s Cut

1. *diminuendo*

Even the strangers nod head and exchange gestures lovers made of limbs

as if barks,

cut, stem, prune,

collect evidence in eyes—

buckets shimmering with moon beans doubts dip at convenience.

Love scenes last for a moment faces wrinkle into confession bra straps hang out in contrition beloveds, too holy to touch carry a seed of discontent.

1. *crescendo*

But I taste that cascade of dribble, return to the old innocence, shedding their fruits, and falling into sleep with a thud.

*Mondscheinsonate*runs *mezzo-forte*

the lover stops near her shoulders

as if a poem is deposited in the collar bone tapping, tapping,

he becomes a grave digger

fingers bring rhythms to the bones silence into pause,

a shadow of climax.

# 1971

Someone showed me an album flipping away 1971 and one-liner written on the pallid backside

“from somewhere I cannot name” after this I never doubted my tongue—

In those days language fed everyone was marooned papers crinkled

after one letter I wrote another

a kind of drill over my father’s photograph in a uniform

how I loved to comb his hairs

in imagination holding a gun at someone behind barbed wires scarred-face soldiers watched each other

clenched hands, I housed a corner and wept held my mother’s finger & a book by Iqbal canonized posthumously

for inciting children to defiance and for writing a poem

in which a Spider entices a Fly and lust overtakes conscience

reading it for years after the country embraced a personalized prose snapping fingers on each image I stop and let the silence do its work.

I always touch the feet-end of a grave in our graveyard of concerns

make a national shadow of every reality adjust with cynical questions

keys of mind unlock many dead bodies—

I run for ice balls holding a ten *paisa* coin

and ask why do not sparrows demolish nests? there are ways to end melodramas

ways to close vocabulary hidden in pictures, primers, and poems.

# Damascus Knife of Wazirabad

A bladesmith in Wazirabad’s narrow street replicates Damascus knife, pampering it on a widespread surface of a grey stone, the glory of steel lulls his mind;

how Syrians molded medieval wootz bladesmiths fancied wars, honed edges erased crusts, and dogged caravans sang Arabic ditties of lovelorn lovers

distracted highwaymen full of daggers and knifes— this tool like an embryo wishes growth

as bladesmith’s grubby fingers touch

glossy rivets, each gentle hammering is a stroke

of memory of invaders crossing hinterlands of Punjab.

His hands wade through blinking embers over pommeled wood angled to accomplish perfect stabbings, but the stag handle

curls faintly like history—

ships from Tamil Nado carried steel ignots to Damascus, Arabian fancies adapted crucible steel muscling alloyed prowess across seas—

but how our smith in Wazirabad gives it a hand-finish resilience in his humble furnace birthing

a blade fragging like an occupant

ravages this city brinked on the River Chenab where love tales sustain bloodsheds, Damascus knives sit exotic in glass cases.

*\*Wazirabad is situated on the banks of the Chenab River nearly 100 kilometers north of the city of Lahore, Pakistan.*

# Your Poem’s Content

After all

what you missed in the middle of dust’s motes

are my eyes and their deep glare for distant places.

I blink you, and come over

nose-touching close with a causal use

of grammar and florid words instead of gaze

on dark circles & over-scrubbed cheeks and whatnot ? My understanding of silence adds silence to stanzas.

Well! Onwards, pauses replace doubts I’m going to write on fear

hidden in lines.

# Text

The metaphor frittered away like sand from the palms.

A local poet dabbles in foreign fantasies sprinkles borrowed seeds

and prays for bumper crops but cannot imagine

that wind is sullen

in the North of England.

Listening with ears is still forbidden in the heat and dust of Lahore where hanging around the gardens during evenings

solitary like an alphabet is the only leisure, without consequences — the user does not know the meaning.

Exposed

after every clause and consonant;

with every winnowing squeak

the entries in the local lump of dictionary create a giggling gap.

Mind it or not.

These subtle sins are catalogued

squeezed like an end-note.

Here I am taught English like the Bible, facing the dilemma like a monk

wish release from the school of habit

and run, never to come back.

Hope that my people will forget me, and let me live like sacred dust,

or make an example out of me to pillory for ever

in anglicized order.

# Evacuating

Exposed to the successors’ curiosity photographs continue with dust

in their hazy kingdoms

creating a lane with my fingertips I peer into furrows ants draw and disappear in dark holes

shirt’s sleeves brush everything

I lift boxes hollowed out last Sunday a regale smell lingers over curtains

falling to a toga’s perfection

We don’t look like settlers,

the house is empty like an arena without royalty

In my son’s room papers dance their gladiatorial dance

silvery blue stars chink on sky before I realize time is ticking fast

rooms boom your elbowed closeness I kiss spontaneously

echoes are left caged in cupboards on vacant floors wind embroils packing sheets and ropes’ ends

somewhere a castle waits for its retinue.

## Under House Arrest in 1979

In Lahore's dust-brown evenings guttural slogans died,

over broken rows of houses

a coal-black sky contrasted with sepia-tone walls

night was an ember-eye of scarecrow

smell of prison’s bricks

stayed on his bone-white body lashed on a couch,

corners blinked without language

and books flowed in tides

a dog-barked interruption over garden’s hedge

where a squirrel electrocuted

without fuss silence cracked trackless stars

claddings of darkness

in his last tatters of words he walked on a lonely roof shrugged shoulders

sentenced for words a story

noosed morning tongues.

*\*On April 14, 1979 Pakistan’s Prime Minister Z.A. Bhutto was hanged to death.*

# Burnt Brides of Lahore

*(At least seven brides were burnt alive in a massive suicide attack in a market in Allama Iqbal Town Lahore, in December 2009)*

Seven brides and many yet-to-be-brides burnt to ashes their embroidered dresses charred into seared palls

cheek bones under layers of blended foundation receded smiles crammed under chins turned into feeble moraines

all came to have the night of their life not knowing bombs celebrated city’s brazen season of banquets and bridals

noses and trinkets cindered like faked fossils limbs made a bier inside saloons of molten plastic

fragrances and puffs added to the reeking flesh a geography of scalded trunks crabbed spaces

grooms waiting somewhere else wondered for answers Brahmanic *satis*, sisters of Athaea, Hellenic fires

of contours conflagrated into a river of distracting smoke the Call for Prayer stifled the rubble of abrupt nemesis

the forensic debride their tissues and shreds of singed skin bangled around a mish-mash of bones and wired hairs

Lahore stayed in the hands of avatars mummifying bodies in beauty parlors fashioned into pyres of faith.

# Winter’s Erasure

*for Tammara Claire*

No one bothers about birds missing trees nor actually notes how they struggle

against hassled moorings of evenings preening over patched portions of grass

autumn’s turf is a shred of a lateral skin wedged between touch and taste

no one objects at silent windows fissures in words and creaking portals

of foggy banks of the Lahore Canal ghosted by truncated denouements of shovels

where pincered cranes grate alluvial mud stumps of juicy roots stew in ochre slime

and leaves fell like stories from invisible mouths holding calloused expressions

suggesting someone to wait for the right time and a rebellious initiation in dead water.

# A Letter Arrives at a Wrong Address

One morning an envelope carrying a bare floor groomed to destinations wrapped in few wrinkles

Someone imagines who touched its virginal silence sealed to perfection with a rim of scotch tape

peered through the white sheets in mystic folds cold creased pages invite an enthusiastic ripping

concealing words some text is faintly visible what else one can find in things shut with care

a tragedy or some language gone out of control on lines procreating muddled scenes of life

or hand written errors escaping awkward moments and a way of fixing sadness unable to find tongue

at least the world still believes in written words amidst a flood of icons abbreviations and beeps

but when you come to know that it was not for you

it is like on a wrong funeral and mourning compulsively

all postcodes in the end are similar for they breath what letters have in common, a desire to find hands.

# Love Amidst Parked Cars

Parked under chopped trees at the heart of city are cars empty and alone in rows like a dead army of mettle

in hands parking them to perfection with wild gestures

elbows and mad heads scampering for space, and suddenly you say

“ No! do not stop near this iron-filled space” there is a virus in your tongue

as if saving me from an invasion driving through boulevards and malls for love of coffee and gibberish tones when one can afford a silent stare,

a sparrow waiting for sunset and a broken wire smashing the wall,

but again you say “ Watch out the road they go out of eyes like promises ”

a talismanic creak from the rear animate dented roof

a lustful calm holds the handle on door

amidst a herd of solid mass hinging huffing

and whenever alone at night

without screeching tires.

# Change

How I hang to exilic words and their meanings in a dictionary after clouds pronounce rain

smothering gales of late November

over Lahore in treaty with perennial dust

now the drizzling patches tickle wings birds forget to take extra measures.

Where are your hands ? Huddled inside or on the rusty tap leaking consonants

language spooks the evening rattling windows and washings strewn wildly

What matters is silence escaping passages and walls habitual of banking crowds

inside rooms what is lost in conversation is also on trees hosting stripped barks

everyone holds a word for this change we can count on grammar not sentences

everything carries a tinge of brown tongue expressions are no strangers to wanderers.

# Expressions

You brought a silent weight with you today it was history evicting accent you rented

conversations paused for desperate dwellings adjectives crammed in-between for shelter —

embellished for tongues our folklore digress elegies flower unrequited passions in Punjabi

and sometimes Urdu chords our flight

motley kites flutter like versions of dictionaries

spread over skies choked with a dusty vocabulary and vowels handed from the heydays of Empire;

*children jumping in pools, crows tearing afternoons mangoes trickling, foxy vendors cheating clients,*

this story is quite simple but hands are overfed the scheme of chewing language is predictable,

some expressions just hide under your palate I peel for hours tasting buds of lingual theft.

# Copenhagen

a morning in Copenhagen brings mouthfuls of rain over Venetian windows

I seatbelt in a black Vauxhall creaking along banks peppered by dull sands

bleach-white seagulls float narcissistically over Baltic rim humming blue-ash water

moderate waves freak naked ankles as if mermaids leap from tales of Hans Christine

fairies and goblins outsmart security cameras guarding city’s spires and fictions,

my fellow friends exchange in Danish the language of their future bread

exilic vowels belch assonance

as if Vikings chase the Irish on bogs

where Derry’s poet Heaney planted his seeds in Arhus, (the traffic sign)

tempts me to slimy open lands peat, dead bodies, and corpses

refracting gaze of an ‘artful voyeur’

in whose reverence now I dig my words

burrowing out anxiety of distance and a silence too unadulterated

clogs my nose untamed by Nordic smells perpetuating a dank autumnal palate

of almond horns, apple muffins displayed with a cozy appetite

in curled streets of Gothic hush where blonde girls cycle with finesse

a sea-smelling evening waits on cobbled path outside queen’s palace I take off my jacket

to let the wind write its verdict on ruffled hairs after journeying dishevels my directions

a church bell peals for the newlywed flowers hurl in air like oracular omens

I am reminded of people making love arriving homes and to safer ends.

# Two Women

Cramping laps in corners two women lean elbows chafe finger-tips flake

baiting words in ambushed mouths blush under a crust of smiles manage hands at odd interventions

may it be a bird or an untamed thought beyond drastic boundary of reason fantasy of sleeping in velvety beds

with hermaphrodites and brawny warriors broad-chested hairy embrace,

hedging poetic analogies but their intentions are camouflaged by daily din of jobs

to earn a modest bread, a room in the city and a view for arms to entangle when

no one comes to sleep over cushioned backs Eros dies day by day blinking eyes

inside pillows and in nooks where they float tabooed resumes of a life fiddling endlessly plans of hording men over a steamy coffee or sly interpretation of Adrienne Rich

and Carol and Duffy—Medusa & Mrs. Havisham— cheat verses impersonate muse

to shape their versions of love

and the city says “ two women in corner are like delayed fates” coiled by a will and a diction hidden in bloused desires and armpits

marking everyone with their language.

# Children Bombed in a Park in Lahore

*(March, 2015)*

Sifting detritus on scalded grass young rescuers say *it’s ok*

old ones are monumental absence decentered bones have new homes

each survivor is a miniature of his past versions of life between rubble and smoke

in a park children’s bodies spread like nascent metaphors

mature into splintered texts in which tongues finish on monosyllabic utterances.

# A Lover’s Plangent for Muhammad (PBUH)

*(An Allusion)*

If this be the life it is full of your memory, even if an allusion On my Sheik’s shrine You come in real, for some it is an allusion.

The sea-sent wind enters through crevices of red-bricked house

Gabriel touched Your feet with eyelashes —it is an allusion.

In the morning someone walks gently on the sandy earth a women throws litter on Him, and He smiles, it is an allusion.

Hair curling on broad shoulders, the night loses its shape A finger goes through the white moon, it is an allusion.

Adam after losing grace wanders in the fields of paradise a name beginning with *meem* redeems him, it is an allusion.

Who wear a bridal and covers his head looking down? Behind the veil a face chants *kun*, it is more than an allusion.

God created time but could not spend it without Him the Beloved ascended to Him alone, it is not an allusion.

Your fragrance, on lips and beads, in eyes and silence

the poet yearns too much, but waits— waiting is an allusion.

# The Night of Memory

Wind went from one tree to another

like Greek strophes evoke antiphonal spectacles choric frenzy of willows flummoxed dizzy drivers branches fell like fates on roads

in black spaces of shrubs birds snapped their beaks picked metallic poles

tires smooching dry puddles repaved memory lost on a pillow, in the morning I collected shreds of a mirror scattered all over veranda

a fragment showed your eyes.

# Shower

*“What men call the shadow of the body is not the shadow of the body, but is the body of the soul.”― Oscar Wilde*

In a hazy mirror your exposed back reflects ways bodies find homes

drops quiver on fleshy protrusions, after escaping dimpled cheeks

hairs snake down shoulder blades like longer stanzas holding poems

in the simple privacy of the place foaming, scrubbing, sponging

the floor of the soul left unattended find footsteps in whispering water

a wet monument of toweled huddle walks out smiling over immersion.

# Lockdown

*(2016, Islamabad)*

*The end of art is peace. Seamus Heaney*

The protest seeps in walls and holes of the city —

police shower bullets bodies bend and scamper

bricked-soul, mortar-heart a skeleton of guns hover

over intruders barbing tongues

to no end, behind cordoned pickets

they sway under Dionysian spell

the country is run by make-shift oracles —

out there in the middle of human heads you are a Teiresias dithering in divination

though not meant to take sides and yet your charming spin on words

of poems firing discontent bellistic in intention and diction

an army of latent expressions commanding drastic ends

in squirmed soliloquies and borrowed conclusions

a parliament of language snores squint-eyed, cocked-hands

your bored readers scatter

others drowse over interpretations.

# From Tower Bridge

The evening over Thames is orange-black a cold wind wags London Bridge

near East India station backyards are littered mossy water hold its mirror against docks

after a day’s assault on their bodies immigrants fancy Euro lottery—

a glass-infested skyline swallows eyes chocolatey waves break on Queen’s,

cruisers pass dizzyingly shrugging history the Union Jack erects a lonely command,

pigeons sit on parapets and cradled arches where I lull memory, seagulls preen

unfamiliar words, tourists click cameras each language scatters a forced smile.

# In Times of Sit-in

*(Islamabad, 2014)*

The night is solid black, a reliable mask never to rumble people sleep stone-heavy

after what happened to their lives, broken bones wrenched flesh, cameras spied on faces

under the husky thinness of a dolling moon language did the rest of clubbing

in portable beds drinking from greasy cups tongue liberated on music under sudden rains

at a distance generators groaned crazily

a parliament of deaf fueled a choric anger

when a nightjar ripped their complacency.

I am born in silence. The fake cries

were of wrapped prostitutes in murky cars hobbled on green belts, and appeased

my desire of an adventurous love while mouths were kidnapped, and jagged words

swished like cutlasses, when mosquitoes pinched earlobes and I chafed knuckles

there was no one to choreograph the climax with a shut gate of a big house in front of me.

# Lahore: a Pictorial Triptych

I

A dusty sky is a drab desire endless lines of cars copulating one over the other roads creak under their lust,

a beggar mutters verses and then stares at the coin curling in wooden bowl

for the sake of sonorous effect

after a pause he yells a dramatized misery displaying his broken limbs

in an amphitheater of honkers.

II

City’s trees are scared children brawny workers axe

darkness fosters,

subways are sacred temples late night they have the look of an orphan.

Electricity poles stand like ancient gods

still and stubborn, silence adapts faces wedded by fate or will.

III

Sometimes we find surprises

sometimes people smile, stop after words but something is obvious in chaos

the way a painter imagines climax on a riddled canvas.

# Causalities

Like an obscure story winter’s haze takes over the lawn unhinged scripts clouds resist dissolution against darkness

there in the middle I stand like fiction for a better closure patchy and provocative grassy trails vanish into pauses

just as words want separation from a stressed day

after staying on a blinking monitor when electricity fails,

during that dark moment rooms have nothing but a silence there *you* are in front of me staring at an ashtray with stubs

all over cold verandas echoing boots take away attention behind a certain limit it does not matter if you look back or not

December continues at a rhetorical pace removing many Some lay clearly exposed, others just disappear, after me.

# Pakistani Charity

In my hands is space to squeeze meaning of this mad prologue

of people pitching shopping trolleys and pockets full of plastic cards children eating from fluffy bags huffily choking in elevators

there is a black face trapped in a mirror

and outside a bird sputtering over a dry spell soon this happy crowd ascends to mountains with their portable property

and a retinue of maids lulling their chubby babies

laugh and do sex on damp sheets munch anecdotes of a childhood of vast lawns and Western ease

others crouch under humid shadows of mulberries and acacias

while Lahore’s trident sun collaborate with electricity ditching for hours stretching dark pauses

the city naked and ribbed

like a body needs resuscitation after Call for prayer breaks out it floods with neat clothes

wearing caps old men smirk with loads of faith and when there is nothing to spend charity comes from rich relatives revealing mouths

of huge pots steaming with chicken curry and rice garnished with orange zest

the dreams of unfed find a deeper corner in the heart of men distributing profusely to save their souls.

# The ‘Silence’ in Our Project

*(My silence would acquire speech) Faiz Ahmad Faiz*

1

I am deeply interested in your silence how you bear it bit by bit

a project; an unstable sword of unknown length

I lavish on its godly glamour

all these years in my hands unused it lost some edge

without propaganda.

2

And you can’t beat my design I am a poet with a manifesto; bearing blisters

I occupy the other side of tongue on safer days I encamp in stanzas no longer eager I ice my words my palate is a frozen strip

with a denture creaking all ends.

3

One day I dared to quote from Kafka; night of scary trials

the country banged windy

phantoms shook hands on television wearing majestic words

the crown of politics cracked

by utter loyalty to style not content

when you and me found solace in a corner of a passage of an obscene story.

4

Hence, stars in my city’s skies are now old they shimmer from embarrassing heights like urchins eating from litter holes; procedures of civilized evenings

pale dark windows on pavements and poetry cut-out to perfection

touch everything, but cosmic conversation is the privilege of angels.

5

Finally, words returned to their home with alien inflections; I bent them

to no ends craving a world of their own an experimental demiurge

a germ of banned quietness franchised every street

a tunic saddled with insignias newspapers tempered

even a decent adultery.

6

Featherless, I flew in all directions drifted over sanctuaries

persisted flights rhyming remote journeys made nests only to camouflage

picked food from dead bones and heaps of smoked litter landed unheard with shut beaks spent nights, stared at darkness.

# Refugee-muse

The poem is a refugee huddling to sentinels picking on its unpredictable palate lulled under tin-roof cabins

erected on gravel paths crowned by wires

where you cannot think other than pincers-teeth and spear-eyes, sometimes rains keep falling

and snow enchants stories frozen under foster blankest, lateral shadows

creep on wires holding over-used clothing swimming like ghosts mimic under yellow bulbs metaphors blink to rescue

when night becomes too real around bowls of gravy and crumbs, and televisions chirp sophisticated

out there on green verdure of cold winds are scripts of wanderers kept for stealing manifestos which readers endure with smiles springing from bashed expressions

and smart abbreviations with philosophical quips about thresholds and doors unwinding myths under table lamps, moths risk death by hands when the conclusion is so obvious, it is

writing a beloved whose body bloats like a loaf of imagination.

# From Stockholm

*(Summer, 2016)*

In Gamalastan strolling over abrasive grime of medieval streets

teasingly cobbled to home-grown shoes feeling stones’ crooked edges

each promenade is an anthology

like poems they remain hard until treaded.

With this distance away from home in a city hammocked on bridges memory winks entangled arches

last time it came through the window of a train from which Swedish clouds bobbed into baroque lakes.

Deep in North trees invade earth with a silent ambition

a wooden splinter in water spreads a massive chest

distracting a mute swan demonstrating

a question-mark-neck on an impressionist canvas, someone from behind hurls a rock giving water

a rowdy tongue suggesting not to stare the place too much.

Every evening history breaks its pact black waters of islets carry flimsy twigs wearing Viking skins cuddling romance of a forgotten monster—

a unicorn appears through silver birches crowding countryside with a quietness of cabined forests without trails.

# Love in Times of Load Shedding

The only thing in darkness is elopement electricity flees with a romantic hubris

you are at home waiting its absence dark halos embrace your eyes

bending on a waxen flame the country is a blind bride

prolonging its sable eyes

on everyone, on every street

lonely stares plop from pupils

just as bulbs quiver on bland roads

a presence clouds the city of Lahore drowned in oriental murk

while men in overhauls hang ladders on skeleton of wires

fixing poles like fates—

like a language left to mature

you condescend words of a pitch-black grammar

ash sentences, sooty promises under which I cannot smolder

but millions are veiling like you in their rooms alone

groping for clear sights and you do not return.

# For Rayan

Look! behind curtains is a smell of a shadow my chair in the corner is fading from its arms

I can see your loins bursting from three quarters tiny hairs sprouting; why are you cuddling silently?

our life passes through words about your growing body brushes me, a trove of wild embracing

your head rests on my chest for conviction and expectations of touch are like small tears

I wipe carefully when you repeat too much silence rocks me, you smile instead of language.

# Empty Rooms

The evening halted for some words there was no one interested in details

Under a whizzing fan papers disperse they are moods concealed in pages

the room was hollow like a promise wastes in letters posted hurriedly

the dust continues its history on table windows are shut like ancient ledgers

a moth is smothered unwittingly Inside the hinges, buried eternally

in morning an old woman came to clean stains stayed on carpet like memories ,

Once the kettle is unplugged there is silence Of untouched spoons, and long used cups

outside the mower does not stop for anything tendrils meet a villainous blade slashing

the cropped grass reminds of conversation removed from the tongue of a lonely person

the next room is locked like the plot of play one act is finished, the next unfolds afterwards.

# Evening on Lahore Canal

Trees bend over Lahore canal like crooked sentinels black crows stubborn as death cuff crusted barks

skinny children do splash and jump rituals all day disheveled water ropes their vulnerable necks

swirling densities, broken rubber tires, and twigs accumulate, a muddy and formless hiatus waits

truant lovers evicted from crowd recline on banks postured to sensual ends they are in the middle

weak clouds hang elegantly over a sky loosing sun an ochre brown watery silence arrests closure.

# My Loss

I invested both silence and stares used eyes instead of words, seeds

of logic pollinated by storms of verse reaped what Empire planted

some expected fruits with bloated stones and pulps too hard to satisfy

our olfactory beliefs in chapattis and wheat-smelling women

who sank on stoves cursed men folk swaddled in shawls from Kashmir strolled in Lawrence Garden

where rained oaks dripped

like their woes in so many sounds; we marketed languages freely through a tunnel of love

carryings mixed cargoes

our palate bandaged with Mutiny and Partition lifted bloody shipments only when the darkness founded

a school of thought behind The Lahore Fort sulking mothers fed babies

courtesans meddled with strings

and The Call For Prayer captured guilt I saw your face behind window’s bars struggling with a language out of trade.

# Shaving

My father told me to shave when it is thick but wandering Punjab’s wheat fields I saw jagged scythes shearing stubble

erecting overnight, a patchy viable earth

I touched my cheeks growing half-fleecy

to this day I see mirror holding a shaving buzzer nipping bumps along with grain

a mock-tractor that plows unguarded

not those copper blades of my father’s days I used sharp pencils, to cut nails

along with some flesh and to scrub over wooden slates I used to write with a quill to fix my Urdu script—

now rents on chin glisten blood dots sparkle doubts

I wipe them with damp towel exfoliating on burns

achieving a peeled brown face.

I imagine a wooden comb a plastic pincer to pluck me an academic appearance

showering with poems while some of them funnel through holes like shavings

vortex in basin shallowing after soapy fizz

behind me my son stands holding a tooth brush, when he overdoes

his gums spurt. I think of interpretations I made last week.

# Gulnaz of Waziristan

Behind barbed wires her home drowns in a river of smoke sifting through a Drone’s carcass

she finds an extra flesh on her cheeks.

Her tree is burnt alive under which she read her first holy verses

*its time to wind up doll’s wedding*

her mother yells from

the broken periphery of a well now six months pregnant

she carries waters, her last baby died on her way to an-open air hospital fainting she imagines choppers’ blades clipping her umbilical cord.

In rugged mountains she eloped with a sturdy Khan who ditched her

flourishing faith and guns in dark caves where bearded men chanted allegiance.

# l'amour entre Bonnue et le général Allard;

***Lahore’s French Connection***

*‘... and now she can’t find her way back’. Lady from the Sea: Henrik Ibsen.*

I

Throwing out her *dharma* Bonnues stamped out fires of *sati* pyre and baptized near blue waters of Saint Tropez, carefully consigned by Allard their matrimonial bliss hibernated

under cold Parisian skies.

II

Near *Français Riveria* she pegged her seeping heart before meandering through streets of Lahore played bangles and stones

kissed pillows in long Monsoons after *tourbillon de neige* in Marseilles

strolled gloved hands in Provencal solitude crooned songs cradling Indian summer placed aromatic sticks of cinnamon

on her palate blurted by blue berries but her body wrapped in thin saris oozed amnesic juices like mangoes burst before the final pluck

Punjabi mouth escorted French gourmand while Ranjit Singh only tasted power.

III

Allard gives Ranjt’s army feasts of life-time

*Khalsa* spirit fabled Punjab’s earth cavalries swallowed heady chieftains mounting the pass of Peshawar

he died of failing heart, the crime of war diminished in passion for guns and batteries along with his daughter

under the shadow of a sufi shrine Ranjit gave Allard a burial

from benign waters of River Ravi.

IV

Black traffic of Lahore creeps

a grimed patchwork on fluted cupola caps Marie of *Kuri Bagh—*

Bonnue embodying shawls of Kashmir staggers like a vessel waiting for Allard to return with souvenirs and rubies her seven children on an oil canvas cluster like fawns masquerading gardens of Anarkali,

the French Kingly eye adapts her anxieties stripping loneliness of widowhood lionized with godparents

she recalls her real mother waiting hot afternoons of Lahore,

a sacred silence strews Bonnue’s French evenings with news of Allard’s death

she mummifies the harbour like an Indian goddess embracing a French knight.

*Bannou Pan Dei (1814-1884) married Jean Francois Allard, one of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's French generals, in March 1826, and bore him seven children, two of whom died in infancy and are buried in Lahore ( old Anarkali) along with their father. Allard sent his wife (and children) to France because their marriage could not be legitimized on account of their divergent religious faiths; Bannou was a Hindu.*

*Lovelorn and waiting she never accepted the news of her husband’s death.*

*The Khalsa is the collective body of all initiated Sikhs. It also means ‘Singh’ and ‘King’.*

*Kuri Bagh means Daughter’s Garden’*

# Lahore Feasts

I end in a cul-de-sac

bandaged drains drip over patched curtains on roofs antennas like skewed histories

are entangled by chords

disgusted over pigeons’ excrement an old man slurps tea from a saucer

curses the whole country for smudging his clean clothes of worship—

kites flit crazily, full-time children bawl a fat woman swears non-stop

young boys yell after everything,

local guffaws flab over goat feet drowned in viscous curry,

fatty bits settle inside steamy nanas fragmenting in mouths

on The Mall Road tear gas scorches eyes batons fed on low wages smash bones belching policemen tucking fermented girths pick people like ingredients of the day.

# Disaster Diary

One day it begins:

a pram scuttles in the Brokenhurst Gardens the wind takes away the impact

... ) late night a disconsolate sky with a single star & a gibbous moon (like a chipped hazelnut)

...The Witch Hazel crumbles in the garden’s wet silence

...a pregnant cat

randomly thuds on the roof and limps away

...inside the family photograph trembles only the children feel it, faces huddled like frozen allusions

with a graveyard look an old woman trapped among the grownups and the frame

...mosquitoes drone, the shrivelled

dead moths drizzle from the dusty railings

...last year on Khartoum Roada man slipped from the crusted snow, the place still look likes a crime scene, there are other things too

a few find space.

# The Sea Connects...

*(near Conway County, Wales)*

Cobalt glare of stars mystify blinds

a cable chokes the struggling antenna

freezing signals the cell phone dies

on beach shingles find hands instinctively

ankles pause dissolving edges of waves couples walk with a crafted distance

in their deadpan middling years no nudities under this sort of sky

last summer to watch the Bronze age mime they huddled on pier like children

now arm-fold gaze skeletons of love sleep over rocks seagulls encircle as memories.

# She Was a language

*The limits of my language means the limits of my world. Ludwig Wittgenstein*

In the sobering glare of afternoon her skin glows, eyes stay behind

steamy spectacles, I clean them slowly winter leaves a hazy legacy on eyelashes loading analogies, when she inhibits a smile I introduce words, my intentions

are paraphrased like a tradition timing her tongue to silence using lengthy phrases, too soon

I run out of pages and scamper for elbows her braid sways like a sentence

whirling me on a mystic path unaware of end

space shudders to perfection there is need to conclude her in a manuscript.

# From Cairo

He tells me in Cairo the air is full of burnt sand sends me an embossed camel skin rug

with Arabic calligraphy in curlicues the narrow streets cradling

in the fumes of *shisha* starkness of The White Desert on men’s ragged cheekbones

guides coddle the western women sneak at their meniscus bodies given to fits under its heat

the abrupt gusts airbrush facile lines and histories

motes of afternoon dust appear in their sleepwalk eyes

the armpits reek perfumed sweat liquoring nights

in blue body of the Nile—

they say whosoever drinks its water always comes back

like that desert-driven moon

gazes through the balconies of hotels girdling negligees see the city

waning into darkness.

# Southern Punjab

Last time a brick-maker died inside a clayed oven he carried his burial in hands made of sands

and a stomach full of pebbles and gravel—

brick-makers build cities out of raw dust their women sell stone jewels chanting songs

children like fates scamper with goats and cows

ancestral politicians and pot-belly contractors sell villages and labor of sturdy cotton pickers factories churn their money with rural amnesia

tribal chiefs of Southern Punjab hunt deserts burn piles of wood in their versions of bonfire with dogs, attendants, camels and skeletons

of animals blown by sandstorms and rhythms of *rohi* women beat arms clogged with bangles.

\* *in the local language of Southern Punjab rohi means desert.*

# Passages

The overnight memory on floor avails space between cemented blocks

just around the corner walls keep a glare of someone walking cautiously

covering the creak of her body from an ever watchful world

sometime a sparrow comes chirping disembraces the moment

a simple sound from window’s rusty axis suggests the design

passages are trains of thought hampering visitors to look around for names

some are hidden in corners with desires plaqued on shut doors

a spell of routine comes and goes they sleep unperturbed.

# Abusive Phone Calls

On the other side of phone was a tide of language drowned my evening against blaring traffic of Lahore a waspish throat fouled his palate over me

without a sting of evidence splashed claims a voice oaring a river bent on inundating someone whose life was a drying lake

has a policy of not embanking unexpected visitors when all you wanted were quivering waves

a bank covered with creepers and bird’s flights basking in hermetic fasting of words

each abuse each street-slang he redialed

his tongue exhausted on Sisyphean numbers.

# Buffalos in River Ravi

Black buffalos paddle

crows dogmatically punctual pecking horns

jar their thick souls shelled in eyes clenched with fluids

they toss heads to flies invading

like tribes herding their way through Punjab’s hinterlands

their foamy snouts

are provoked like that heroine of a Punjabi legend who swam to death

on an unbaked pitcher

to meet the love of her life

soiled in grunting graces slip through polluted banks like hieroglyphics

their mud-caked tails swirl water

hurtling a life-time flesh skins grow alluvial coatings exfoliate udders

on a straw-yellow ground from wet bodies

cough dunk filth of Ravi falls like bits of history lowing half-visible survive immersion.

# Behind Rain

Cicadas’ cymbals deny evening of its privacy suddenly I woke to sounds behind windows drowning lawns and shallow patches

a euphoric rain over-weeps

broadcasting a bawling melee of consonants each tree effuses its pitter-patter

a defiant crow analyses his perch bolted doors squirm

in the middle it loses form

random gusts rattle wires and roofs heat vanishes like amnesia

staccato drops chill bodies to stinging repercussions water solicits darkness on soil attaining new smells.

# Alphabets

We used four-line note books

to smoothen our English handwriting

the recipe was utterly local

but the taste was distinctly foreign

the Urdu alphabets sprawled bold and black well-cooked

on those solid wooden slates scrubbed with greyish *gaachi*

but the English letters were slow steaming fluid and mysterious happenings

I could not control myself

and often went beneath the lines

and frantically held the others

*W* with its western posterior

*D* mingled with protruded *B*

it was easier to assault with *A*

but umbilical *U* opened like an umbrella.

We crammed and shouted in those days

language sprinkled doubts on the pages

*desi* proverbs

were often more spicy

than canned whittling phrases The country braced itself,

for a religious conversion

Shalwar kameez and all kinds of body coverings

like the English alphabets were everywhere the darned bell bottom jeans and flappers

James Bond and lusty Indian films

filled the appetite for western sins disguised in the East

television became a drawing-room commodity unhooked it was the politics of silence

the streets were empty in curfews

soldiers tore

my books for English

and I was told to wear wilting white starched clothes which may expand my piety

I feared that like my four English copy

I will be taken to some uncanny destination

day and night I struggled bloated with this English

and one day landed on the English sea

seagulls pecked my body

out came retching the sticky words

but the colloquial dreams were well-girdled

I smuggled out my lessons in English like Galileo the bread and butter

for times to come

and from low to moderate

I spoke half-minced words sometimes only searched

appropriate alternatives

in the market full of expressions.

# Zeugma

I smell strangeness in you and your breath. The whole dress is different the way you comb and let hairs fly call it one of your ways of rejection

language is a straightener may it be in your hands

or some visible anatomy. You and your style is outdated a mere touch is predictable.

The teeth never eat themselves the tongue is tasteless an ear does not listen that higher powers are audible you and your dogma is kinesthetic.

Bare fists and gloved policeman are angles of darkness poor prostitutes stage a tableau of survival, employ extra effort to pinch more from hasty clients

wearing chains and necklaces You and your morality are glossy.

In buses faces threaten to stick to you outside workers shaping constructions sites uplift urban parks with modern art and ease imagination prospers , some try poems

they and their metaphors are same.

Time takes a reasonable spill during embrace call it a tragedy you are versed in sex

last time there was nothing except a melee stripped off and soaking with sweat you subsided in your concerns was a paradox do this/do that with body . Fingers in cleavage

you and your Eros fakes pleasure.

Cell phones and tabs are Titans' godly gadgets warring gifts you manage for epic hours

read fiction in Kindle and stack surprises

in files and folders with millions of icons infesting custody of contacts. You and your software

are bugged. Egyptian Pharaohs and their sleep is fossilized.

# A Ghazal Travels to an English Editor

*"The true subject of poetry is the loss of the beloved." - Faiz Ahmed Faiz*

The old flame does not stay behind.

On the Nabab’s divan

the Ghazal alone breathes its first in the candle-lit womb

fed on the Persian potions flanked by moths

mid-way flitting exit raises its head

but the umbilical wick coils around

the strings of Sitar and echoes across the English channel loses a note or so

a bit of rhyme and lilt

lips need moisturizers hands want gloves there comes a time

it tapers off

under the damp conditions (not limited to cricket anymore) the editorial sniffs connotatively distanced

abort the inseminations;

*you* breed children in palanquins

under the mosquito nets and hope them to grow in tube stations

in front of an open audience.

# The Rebellious Pet

Her snout is over-stretched like a map of an empire

the broken whiskers suggest aborted incursions

she sneaks out like a subject I tempt her back

pluck out the thorn of defiance from her paws.

But one night she undoes her neck strap an extra layer of flesh creeps out

I fix her gunky eyes glaring dissensions

afterwards she slinks like a cortège crawls from one room to another the country sounds a cemetery.

I want her to keep sprawling near my feet and like a hired interlocutor

to show me new territories but she abandons me

to her progeny of fragile kittens. I collar the furry poultices.

# A Painter’s Ado

The amazonite sky dribbled the sponges held the wet stars damp evening simmered

on the canvas

the brush lazed out like the lanky bill of the lark over the still lids, here and there

a flimsy relent

with palmated colours

in the occluded pauses —

the painter was ideally all over.

If you keep the sponge damp

it will suck the evening and stare you dead during the doing. He thought.

Water

obviates the unforced lapses colours commit:

immerse, dabble, dip and destroy.

The agaped sky

is fed with pauses

the Contè\* were like fingers pepping the wandering hands finally the sky folded itself

and the wet palette whisked away.

\* *Rosalba Contè*

# The Anniversary

*for Samra*

The wedding day washed away wisdom says the pot-lickers inundate their bridals—

the guests squeezed without embraces, huddled women sang no songs

only calmed their bawling children

winding up last words hurriedly

the *Molvi\**pampered his dripping beard anchored us an island surfaced

we claimed a shore

marooned by the first night

which brought its drizzling dispersals from the chinks in the ceiling

lateral drops fell on thumping hearts we remained noiseless

in time your white elbows dangled like egrets enfolds oceans in wings

now another year the flight is downwards but cruising all the way

Passages, rails, ferries we boarded sit in the albums coasting us home.

*\*urdu word for priest*

# The English Boredom

*(Somebody’s boring me. I think it’s me. Dylan Thomas*)

I

The rain plods at a mediocre pace but chimes well with the morning,

the weather report in metropolitan paper runs on each face from the underground to the over ground.

II

Waterbed, and cut & dried flowers; the room is planted in leisure, fancies take root in book shelves,

an arabesque of wires coils around the windows.

III

They all open to brown peats; every turf is a soccer pitch, flanked by mossy pavements

and houses, fenced in silent footnotes, punctuated with accurate gaps;

smoke lazes out from red chimneys and helps out the hazy afternoons.

IV

In the evening towns settle with the drizzle people spread umbrellas

single mothers stroll towards bars as though in some covenant, night becomes a stripper

one by one it corrupts every one tipsy blondes fall out of the cabs their postcodes are lost.

V

Under a thinning sun old men appear in parks with editorial regularity

spill some coffee and opinion, and hide behind

cheap paper-backs.

# The Reader

*how did this voracious reader... became John Keats. Susan.J.Wolfson.*

Browsing. Dust falls

a thumbed golden thread hangs out from musty pages

sticking out reader’s imagination now someone's else (I pick it)

muddles through lines

eyes roll with a smudge of coffee a cryptic note distracts concentration

under blanket

from the rocking chair like a character struggles against tyranny

of underlined sentences meanings dog-eared

each full stop is a wink

silence stares through passages madness for clarity.

Shutting.

# Winter-weddings of Lahore

The city runs a marathon of winter-weddings a relay of dolhkis, barrats and nikkahs

hog every place, from hand to hand neighborhoods turn into glitzy parks all tracks lead to marquees , glossy cars

crammed with women indulged in finery of life-time sit smugly, layered with exotic cosmetic their eyes ripple smiles, blinking ridiculously at every jolt on roads clogged

with traffic, there is a pause of horns as lines and lines of guests pose to photographers and camcorders dazzle their vanity; huddling in banquet halls where grooms

and brides stare under luminous chandeliers winter drizzles on exaggerated outfits filigreed taffeta semi-bloused saris flaunt heartbeat fastens on each tip of heel

some hide their wardrobe crisis in late arrivals, but in a cold evening you have no option but to stay cozy till everyone sees through rituals, after the clatter

of food dies down men with dyed hairs flank their flabby wives, ogling at bevies of girls clapping ditties of fake separation

quick hugs and tears blur the finishing line.

# Writing Your Absence

*for Tammara Claire*

Because silence is uninvited so I thought of nothing except seeing trees drizzling autumnal spoors

denuded they are our desires wanting a new blanket of concerns and washing of some overused words

of tones of cats in corridors sleeping till afternoon halts on a sudden rain, you dislike me to use as a metaphor

so no need to turn on kettle again and again for realism water is simmering, the computer beeping, watch out

on a turf discursive shadows acquire a linear illusion anytime they can be lyrical when the wind plots a story

in leaves, in their unpretentious company I see you concurrently your hairs inspire me too much

stop at the window to see my endeavors of ignoring you where pages continue to achieve a clutter of some sort.

# Intruder

Ovalish, out-of-shape, clownish shadows halted over trees and spaces unfamiliar to intrusion

on ground a dry crust resisted the clanking grandeur of city, behind anagogic walls crumpled leaves waited orgasmic crush, but

the intruder was meticulous, this time of the year

we used to edit our thoughts, every time clouds came stories of mangoes oozed, tongues endured

before a flood of taste brought bold gestures of love in Lahore’s crouching cartography some open lands housed shadows generously, roofs with crooked wires offered surreal evictions, we promised to counter arrogance in this transition, so feudal in intent

so irreverent that whipped us to take out words from rusty suitcases.

# The Right Word

There was a time we named haze

with all possible inflections of obscurity from pages to pages wrote stories in disbelief searching a clear expression;

today in a dark corner

you are behind a tree with crusty barks, I see a woman passing, her shadow is quiet

there is no voice for it, a body is inside it

I do not care if it speaks, a car tears the web

of a night mingling fog and wet sounds remind me the sentence you used so brutally when

it could have been a measured kiss

on shivering cheek like a leaf resigning

to a premature curl; today in fragments I pass the same road behind a cloistered yard

where bees colonized our privacy, and a vendor trespassed with stares; after years our government of glance is same but the parliament of touch

is on a wayward constitution, I lately think of ejecting you on the same road where loneliness refuses to live in bins

where whole day metropolitan workers wipe the waste of people’s passions; hugging

the language deposited in cupboards

I see the same mist spreading over scripts unable to house a right word for our writing.

# She Loves His Words

In a slow evening she is just another prose acquiring the speed of lyric, on a white paper the black dress drapes, she stammers blushing conclusions.

She is silence. He writes in staccato secret verbs no one can read his cursive simmer.

When he does not speak it is a transition.

The touch of cold veranda. Nowhere to gaze away from crowded watchful onlookers there is no theft of privacy in heart.

Uneasy with his words he can linger on surmises and lines, and what she might expect.

Revise it. The body is another possible draft.

# Trees Made Me Write You

*I am constantly trying to communicate something incommunicable… ( Franz Kafka’s letters to Melina)*

Not because of roots but of elliptical leaves I thought of writing you a letter about trees they are now swaying my constructions

for you, and an occasional swirl of a squirrel from barks long wet from unexpected rains help me to think your damp hairs when there

is no one to praise them, you open it and refold by repeating a sentence with layered concerns Just as branches mingle into each other vainly without birds they are dead logs hanging

in dark evenings, you scare your own voice somewhere under a denuding acacia

but we burrow our epistolary arabesque however what is so simple are surfaces under a murmuring mulberry

canopying my writing whereas an abrupt excrement spoils the delusive embrace

I describe in a purple passage where you blush and stop me from touching we sleep with trees like street urchins wishing a fostering hand, sequestered what if soiled fruits, dust-blown gourds waste as egotistic words crack

my letters do not end for the want of muse going through your curls, branches, errors of overwriting, and the pauses wind plants in scripts of trees without much revision gardens evolve out of them, mere crusts carry sheets of papers.

# The Last Letter

We make same mistakes replace silence with words

use end-stopped conversations where a simple utterance can do

language huddles bodies rescue vehicles separate them

Lahore is a rubble of expressions bridges and tracks run over tongues

dust carries an eternal dictionary eyes regime unwanted endings

love finds way in all synonyms this is the last letter.

# VIP movement on Lahore’s Mall Road

a cavalcade of cars like an infinite python lays it fangs on Lahore’s Mall Road

on edges people wait like baited worms they may rise from torpor and blink back

tamed in uniforms police carries the dust of city, making sure

the clutch cabinet of many ministers bred in feudal footholds of Punjab

get a godly cordon of snipers

who doubt every bystander by glances

vendors hold back in ridiculous postures trees as if diseased bow in old reticence

in rickshaw a party of eunuchs curse

a child on zebra crossing skips elegantly

bikers' boredom kicks them into ribaldry prime minister is coming to his home town

our story is all over, there is no pause compromise and move on, people smirk

swear Punjabi vulgarity, the traffic of city is counted by a decent wave of hand

spectral crows yell from electricity wires the only protest government does not mind

drenched in sweating an ambulance blares the last cacophony on this land of folk tales

where security is a dirge inside parliament of bullet-proof cars snaking, and hissing.

# Prohibited to Touch You

they were hidden in dying sunlight circles around your lips

a pouted patch touched by age

You — surviving like words on a page— delicately curl without intentions wanting to freak me in a passage

it’s small effort to make me think shining stars and distant analogies a wrinkled cosmos on forehead— a prohibited room of imagination not a battle for silence

just eyes trapped behind doors

But in fact, I haven’t even come close to you. At least, I want to.

# The Dying Dog of City

I witnessed him routing soil with crooked feet– neck with a surprised layer of hanging fat corresponding to flecked blanket

sagging under the drizzle of Lahore;

the dripping mulberry mingles with mute snarling.

The policemen on bikes chuckle pass on the Sunday

they examine his tattered teeth foaming an alphabetic chaos of body

I did not know the things cities do to outsiders. The municipal people haggle and grin

On the next day

we gather at the same spot, I no longer rued words my God, and see nothing in this void of bones

clearly I don’t know why I was silent. Now I enter the street I frequent iron gates swing, children whimper,

Be courageous, I say, and move his skeleton is going to a furnace.

# Promenade

The promenade is another language lying unattended along veering expressions of city lonely like a line, a strip of chiseled memory holds a reminder that much has been tread; bursting stamina of a jogger, of a wild cat dropping excrement on edges

of a gardener struggling with leaves; its stones remain fixed in frames graveled stubs and wrappers

garnish the gaunt regularity of direction tempt lovers to feeble safety

and absorb privacy of strollers

who come from nowhere to capture smudging its history; unable to articulate in rains and in wet darkness

abandoned to silence, an archive where words and footholds wait prick imagination of loitering hands steering a walk and a soliloquy

to vent a day’s content on a bench.

# The Day We Survived

The city swirls in rain water all day gushing colonies of pools

I wade through

back to save my room. My mother is yelling over a rusty stove, mixing spices

“Hurry up,” she prods my arms

“The roof is leaking without pauses.”

I cannot believe water can be so hysterical I console her but she hates delays

busy breaking eggshells of our fading appetite

I grab a bucket to distract—a damp quilt— but it sags in my fragile hands unable to lift I want my sister to give up her gossip;

what could be more scandalous than a flood? She will not bother.

In backyard, my father plugs nooks and funnels with sacks ; at least he does not curse;

and when I locate my bicycle

dead in its metallic loneliness, where are rabbits? buried perhaps in burrows choked others things went missing

the fire brigade blares from distance, a dirge-party gather in a circle around building

the crumbling rib cage of the house

the electric short-circuiting smokes our hopes stranded in street, dripping hands

a choir given to groaning

I scream for sun to come out, but winds slap my face rescue workers collect debris from all parts

In a final burst,

as if from cosmos angles descend to write the loss caused by skies —

little beating hearts we watch abandoned on our ancestral strip of land I want to carry them all to an island before we rebuild.

# The Wedding Crew

Our rivers are too noisy at night bats and night jars halt their flow—

on a lane blocked by lazy cows

a bride appears like the summary of land

tears tempers her chaffing nose ring dress heavy in work muffles motifs

no one wants a boneset bride, too easy for sturdy hands of earthy vocabulary

like lakes they hedge when currents swirl when winds dagger out waters’ skin

and peak in emotions over staggering banks littered with kites’ dark excrement—

a cavalcade of few cars plucks distance beaming lights on jackals nightly intentions

sagging under jewels a quivering chin

joins mouth gagged by a lush head covering

the groom ensconced in foreign words endowments of perfumed prosperity

foreplay stories of exotic places

of his Swiss wrist watch and cuff links

and the bride fluctuates in the rear seat Punjabi guffaw founders rusty mustaches

fat chirpy women hog her wedding bed hiding behind ribald jokes

only friendly things are unknown eyes and goat-skin drums beating outside.

# Subterranean Love

The December night was like a cold bunker I admitted your stares for warmer ends

the world outside was absorbed in a design two electricity poles fell on innocent cows

their carcass rotted whole day crows darted lamenting fragile flesh whining dense air

cars passed by our windows unaware of seeds we kept for a planet that is yet to be orbited

In the evening we read a book about folklore Were not we making one in a closed room?

There was no one outside using language anymore We chose a hole to keep silence uncontaminated.

# The Story of an Indian Oak

*‘the decisive actors... are the adventurer and the pirate’ Aimé Césaire*

Hookworms and weevils browsed you like an oriental manuscript

birds preened you into details out came stories of hangings dockyards, galleys

and dream-merchants who sold your barks

and wrote deeds of trade.

From Thames to sun-lit shores your roots had life under sea bed— they spread

as if a tin-food company had its franchise

on every little island that came

in Columbus’ route who threw your cones on each soil.

The branched chronicles Indian women worshipped they did black magic

under your shade but you did not die and left behind

fruits for generations

to fight over gourd and husk.

# My Languages

I dream about my ancestors in Arabic, who planted stories in sands and pearls wrote love tales on fronds of fig trees danced in Oasis and left me wondering.

I talk in my father's language chewed with betel leafs

and sung with tapering candles before and after the Mutiny— people were hanged in words expressions were concealed in letters

streets were lonely and long like the Urdu dirge.

Now I struggle with another one

one with which I swam all the oceans, has double-edge teeth

it bites out of loyalty and betrayal and makes me claim

the bastardised foreword of a vanity book— so sometimes I mesh it

with my personal pronouns sprinkle some home-grind spices then words bob out of my grip

like a little child on a remote platform while haggard goes the mother

so I am often

prisoner and custodian straddles with its fortunes falling and running

across the English Channel.

# Bride From Lahore

Buffed with filigree

holding the rustling *ghararah\**

ears and nose

reined-in by golden trinkets the bride steps out

from a glossy car wobbling on pointed heels smile-collector she walks with a market-logic

the photographers

land on her with cameras like octopus’ tentacles lips slicked with lipstick eyes clogged withmascara she blinks to flashes

the post-box mouth swallows the greetings amidst clank of crockery and velvety drizzle of guests face-lowered she goes on waiting.

*\*an ornamental wedding dress worn by women in the sub-continent.*

# Aberdonian Winter

I

Beneath a dark sky there are no shades only a white web of black barks

the snowy morning is touch illuminated by surreal peripheries on the horizon the city holds to its frozen centre

the old structures settle in the stoned silence, wind-shattered a crow perches on the antennae.

II

The crusted pavement is a forensic sheet the town is a map of footprints, a prowler from the beyond only adds to its obscurity, the snow freezes his directions but melts

in the prolonged pauses, the wind leaves him scattered on a road going everywhere.

III

A slow spooky rain determines the status of the wanderer; the accent gurgles with

distant streams, tongues rinse in the alien tides the teeth sparkle in the Northern mirrors

the buds are brown, the enamel is white.

IV

The church is cobbled into nuptial solemnity kilt-wearing men play pipes,the groom whips

the last flakes (he cruises past) from the bride's lips the guests disperse mutely.

# The Porcelain

(*In memory of Faiz Ahmad Faiz*)\*

A city was once abundant in candles, then darkness became a language

all lineage, all expressions were tightened unknown maladies surfaced

on alveolar and dental ridges.

From the darkness emerged *ghazals*

carefully sifted, transplanted

and grew across the continent like ivy— in the exiled incubator

with my oxygenated English

and a souvenir worn for diplomatic huff ,

I see you. From where I will bring

the pitcher-maker's whirl and an uncensored lurk— you inserted putty on the right chinks,

had a porcelain brimmed with strange potions, a hand familiar with similes and Persian fluff quilting the cradling cities in poems.

Your poems have cloned in rugged and even places

where language is a mutilated wick.

*\*Faiz Ahmad Faiz (1911-84) is the renowned Urdu poet from Pakistan, and was the recipient of the Lenin Peace Prize.*

# The Crow

*(Death was the midwife that delivered the Crow. Rand Brandes)*

Walking in the lazy drizzle I saw the carcass of a crow pouched in a tuft of grass legs uplifted

a cargo turned upside down.

An ovalish totem

bobbed into a ripped rugby ball

and stiffened into a taxidermist’s fancy, while the beak had gone still,

a question mark asking me to move on.

I threw a glance around, complicit in this causality—

the world should have been a museum for such fossils lying unattended

on the road.

Wet with shimmering English rain that crow was not black enough, not like ours back home.

It had other feathers too, but not like the one

we have in the droning hot afternoons of Lahore

where sun bakes the birds in its eternal oven—

so I rubbed my eyes

like the wipers working on the wind screen and hurried on.

# The English Lesson

Inside a falling room

I learnt the first lesson; vowels ejected sluggishly from a throat

oiled by Ghazals the skin collected

jaws and palate resisted

verbs messed up the taste buds I traversed punctuations,

but all freedoms are short-lived the English teacher

reined the rebel in me the subdued ones

stilled into mock-alligators swallowed a tricky idiomatic figurative or metaphoric

God knows! I chewed and gobbled but some of it remained

beneath the tongue

with fricative diphthongs and signs of exclamations I choked, cramped

made faces like a harlequin

until the appetite for Punjabi tales and Urdu flourishes

perished in caries

then consonants took root in time the local enamel went away

they made a new denture

for I was their advanced learner.

Come ! and pluck me, each entry each page is a bleeding gum.

# Diversion; a Day in The Lake District

Until I did not stop and took some snaps The Lake District remained lost

in lengths of imagination but then a live entry

into this landscape;

winds were simply lapping around the mountains

fixed into some ghostly heights, (I thought of my own little turf, that tiny *desi* plantation

in the backyard)

once I discovered in pages cottages near Keswick

tourists’ tongues smack charcuterie, Salumi

de-boned galantine, but the farms

were in a mute flavor an old sophistication, the whitish exteriors

tinged with a wheatish light

and a speck of white cloud appeared— “The days...

I lived with mixed odors

as the Empire intruded upon our kitchen

the taste buds messed up

we cooked sentimental rhymes English overtook the palates

a strange cuisine of words, with toppings so freakish that scarcely dissolved

in mouths seasoned with

the Persian and Punjabi aromas”— and here I am left

staring at drowsy cows tossing their heads udders wanting a touch made me think

about other diversions,

I left carrying a dank smell a chunk of brown peat

edged on the creaking plimsole and an evening

obscuring road signs.

## Kitchen Cabinet

Sunken in her weight mother leaves

for the market and brushes with every vendor that comes her way,

*the fish not finned, the meat not skinned*

*and the garlic too thin.*

The sellers swear take oaths

but she doubts them with an epicurean grin.

A breed of lusty stomachs she obeys the fingers and lips make forays

the pots she cooks smell for days. (The season changes and spices

scatter on a charpoy, lentils bask under sun, orange peels curl into saffron shavings.)

A wave of steam,

comes from that gauze door, ginger, tamarind and thyme she grounds in a pestle

and murmurs her prayers

bending over a grime-crusted stove while tomatoes struggle in coriander keema \* sizzles in the bottom

as her kitchen battles for a new taste.

The smells spread like a rumor in the neighborhood.

The aroma of mother’s pot colonizes each nose, out of appetite

they make speculations about brands and tags some mimic cheating sellers others giggle and nag

the dripping rain chips in

onions brown in globs of ghee for tarka\* under her vigilant eyes

the ladle goes here and there with her swinging braid.

To this day, the spices need some interlocutor for elaboration. In an iron basket

the yogurt resists its shape while flakes of garlic and cloves are in the back-up plan.

With nimble surgeon’s fingers she examines and gets rid of each

and takes her recipes out of their reach

the sheets are unrolled the recipes remain untold

though the rituals are bold

aunts and uncles trickle from that door she serves and everyone belches for more.

*\*urdu word for seasoning*

*\*urdu word for minced meat.*

# The Punjabi Humor

*( in memory of Taufiq Rafat)*

(i)

The sun is a burning ball with spikes earth salt-white crumbling mask

the river Chenab avoids crowding hands twirling his moustache like a harlequin the farmer mounts on a tractor sputtering the dumb-show of his life chafing his sweating beard

belching mango-pickle-breath with a chipped-teeth smile.

(ii)

The goats and dogs like stray troupes graze passing patches of grass sprinkle droppings and coiled turds there mime is slow but sure

like the train crawling through fields smoky beauty honking dazed buffaloes and complicit electricity poles.

Huddled on a scrubby charpoy mouths sank in bowls of curdling

no longer old men consider medicines and cough phlegm on a brown soil

a breeding stage of their anecdotes crackling and sleepy.

*\*Taufiq Rafat( 1927-98) was an internationally acclaimed English-language poet of Pakistan.*

# Autumn in Lahore

The trees and birds in Lahore’s gardens lose some leaves some voices stamped with dust

autumn-nudged silence seeks space

on the stubbled faces of old men whimpering on sticks their fungal fingers with children running for their mothers

what was dear last year

is now unbelievably absent cheeks

accumulate eyes

extinguished craters the evenings

as if on anodyne bats cluster

in a web

of the dog-barked darkness the city folds

like a bride

in its virgin embrace

I sleep in its warm lap.

# Squirrels of Words

Nibbling at straws from holes squirrels’ impish eyes dance

on frisking edges of grass

their jaunty bodies scatter silence

of an early summer stabling on distant views and wagging evenings;

when a gardener’s husky call hampers we whisper our plans, sitting away

his shovel starts plucking earth

a hose sputters water over words

how we keep them on a tongue heavy with a day’s anxiety

no matter how hard we try to avoid they sneak from oblique corners

expanding forelegs and hind legs working in tandem ambitiously

tangled in their staccato chatter as if give explanations of love

and disappear in arboreal clutters after stealing our share of language.

# Shalimar Gardens

Born on Persian palate the word Shalimar cracks local buds;

Shah Jehan paused for beauty hunting Dara Sikoh to divine wrath quarried and chiseled a rectangle

of oblong pillars to mesmerizing angles with arabesques implicating Arabic verses hushing calligrams to secular ends erected fountains in asphalt basins

to cleanse his trail and a just cause

on shrubbed paths fancied nights with anklets thinking ghosts do not choose daylights

or perhaps they do when white pavilions hide simulated errands of courtesans promenading languidly on moonlit grass faking silence crooning ghazals-

the official signboards are crusted

with a language spilling through new hands.

# Lahore 2009

The city is still mine.

I sneaked it from my grandfather’s diary

holding his finger, when the morning *azan*

throbbed at our door.

Its street is the vendor’s junk food of words, fried

with a smattering of chilies and garnished with Punjabi.

Words drop into another’s words.

The city keeps a tighter lingual embrace

and suddenly unclasps beyond the borders of courtesy.

Tales of elopement and wedding couplets mix well with the cow dung dross of the Ravi.

Rough but innocuous, it’s ultimately a decent courtesan, well-versed in the art of betel-leaf chewing

and garlands of night blooming jasmine. (She danced with and without anklets.

Her spidery luxury was uncased.)

Sometimes, the dust storms hurt the eyes

and history is censored, behind the dying fort.

Though lips are dried with heat

it lingers as if *ghazal* is brewed in wine.

On the dusk-dabbed horizon a cordless kite plummets,

at the mercy of its chasers, chase it, hunt it.

# Pakistan Meets a Terrorist

The world had one 9/11 and one 7/7 we live through them each moment

every day rehearse a dumb-show of ridiculous stares silently

sift through the detritus fingers limbs heads

a heck of imagery on roads

a grin tagged to each anatomy

out there on ticking check posts police place their heart on triggers

under yellow bulbs rains pelt in ditches all over cities cradles of fear

rock children to terrorist’s dissonance now they speak powdery rhymes

ripped end-lines pelleted syntax climax riddled form obscured

in smog and flames

like surreal poems trapped

between detonators and detectors peeled and barbed bodies

in TV footages virtual reconstructions thrice removed from reality

cameras run through smoke as ghosts find a way of communication

jacketed in contentment people respond to *azans*

in this debris of confusion

life plays its tenebrous rhythms

battery and gun siren and yell downlink mortuaries with hell

still not enough to stop world’s tongue from screaming headlines

*the dangerous corner of the world*

not knowing that our poetry is terror-free.

# Chapatti

On the wooden platter a rounded mountain lingered for shape stuck on the palm

the podgy ball toddled in coquettish flourish blanching thinning out goes your life

on soot friendly *tava*

expanding like the chest

the moon disc chapatti took birth spared for eaters

patted and put

in straw-woven baskets wheat-scrubbed rural queen offered with English butter in the open market.

# Epicurean Monsoons

After the first pelt

the dry earth loses its smell boys splash in the muddy pools and skim the collected surf straws and dung balls glide

the old men yell and stride

the small tides hide bigger plights.

While in Lahore's waterlogged alleys under corrugated tin roof

of vender's pushcart jalebis frizzle

in a pattering karahi; decked with plantain leaves the Indus fish browns

in exaggerated spices

as the fire sticks out its scales, and the air goes heavy with lust, fingers lick the plates

the Monsoon lifts its lid steaming white rice

sets the palates going men belch at each picking

women adjust mosquito nets on creaking cots,

the water keeps falling from the funnelled roof and covers the noise when they make love the holes in ceiling drip; the lateral drops

douse

the bodies and pots.

# Family

Mother. Like a damp log. Creaking in and out

to serve as an ultimate hostess, I see her and feel as if I have put hand in time’s half-filled sink .

Still, it was unbelievable the way she scrubbed with fingers like rotten barks, shriveling.

Such is the discipline in her faltering gait, nudging, huffing like a government on its end, the exchequer exhausted:

those who love living with family are like tall trees that never give up but dodder so regular, a politics so simple, you keep silent, and the rest is a protest so you measure life through mothers, trees, watches

and measure time through their silence, rustle and tick.

Could such an institution of stubborn love be dislodged by a lover of nuclear fission? At night she snores away the surroundings the wallpaper throbs, the cat squirms some humans can cheat and live forever.

# Footloose

(he said)

to wander alone

is to wander with someone the difference is manageable for example one route can

have more than one pedestrians

however

the space does matter how much you squeeze

and allow your limbs to contract

like

the lines on that map in the geography class

always mock your posture

imprisoned between a table and a chair outside a road behind that window

is a lust you need to fall for. So, it all means that wandering is not taught but a fluke moment by moment

you come close to a destination which in the first instance

is an imaginary hallmark

but

the stop-watch you wear, the calendar you keep, the food you eat

and the sickness you endure is all real it does not matter much

that a road and watch are made for different units of mileage

and

being a modernist you have to settle with a slightly stupid form

so neither histories nor roads

neither cartographies nor wanderings are exactly described

however

most of us remain crazy

and settle down without knowing that we had done this many times.

# The Excursion

Four hours of rain, peat turning into dough, I drag through, heavy imagining the Vikings

wearing horns,

but crossed by a pram, plump baby

in layers of clothes is settled.

I drink cappuccino

in the mist; wet sleeves make me a squelching moor mauled by rains

the detached English houses drop in silence.

# Opportunity

(sky)

(twilight) wears it

Paper-thin wind occludes Eyes—he rubs

the brush is a cigarette

with a dot of fire at one end

the time between reflection

and description winks away the canvas absorbs stares

and a whole (bit) of silence the sky goes back in angel’s secure hands

they do not pose every day (better luck next time).

# Lahore Evenings

Only there evenings can have sounds and when I stare back adjusting my hood in Jinnah Bagh\* an old tree stoops over me in a blessed posture a vendor slinks past

on the Chairing Cross I see colonial structures oddly brushed by five o’clock faces

let my cycle waddle on pavements in their noise invent an obscurity

in a t-shaped alley a beggar throws his patience I sneak through a gap in the broken wall edged by autumn grass lonely and evoke

a brown silence scrape my knuckles

I know it is irritating the way decrepit houses draw subtle shadows from dusty light bushes let out a foul smell to my nostrils

I gulp spit under my grown tongue

*Too smart* says a skeletal woman with a trunk of her arm poking sticks of fingers

clueless and coiled in stares a primitive snort falls from her grating gutturals

I keep her words all the way home see children scattered in a strange harmony through city time hisses from the November twilight

yip, yip, yip.10

*\* Persian and Urdu word for garden*

# The Lahore Fort

*(in memory of Agha Shahid Ali)*

On chipped merlons and furbished bastions sun stoops like a *darban* out of habit

hinging on a creaking arm of history the getaway smells of broken bricks in cold vestibule a chandelier swings with stories of hangings

the Persian panegyrics echo through the porous ceilings

in crowned pavilions winds spill tales from friezes and goblets.

The twilight sits like a dozing sentinel guards filigreed curtains of harems where flabby courtesans stretch

their aging bodies eunuchs giggle after girls running errands in hennaed palms

their anklets resound on marbled floors and hearts of the spent queen

stowed in palanquins and divans

the candles lit their faces but the fort lowers in darkness like a maqta in ghazal.

*In Urdu ghazal maqta is the last couplet in which a poet uses his pseudonym.*

# Rain-script: Lahore 2013

Puddles are kings crowning dark corners a smoky moon thrones their surfaces scripted to measured waves-

beneath predictable skies wet sounds plug ears

sluggish vendors work through brown tides lashing knees

escaping that touch of ancient deluges drizzly insects take over electric pools birds grab flagging wires

and dry margins flipping pages chafing exposed arms

I find muddy bits & an odd carcass over angry water

spreading like a manuscript.

# On Discovering an Old Letter

I saw your face entering through a smudged sentence

memory mingles with words running along messed up lines

the crumpled paper sees its slow decay in my hands like redundant moments

sneak from thumbed silence on torn edges and margins

full stops overlooked contemplating muddled phrases tangled overwriting

what could have been left

pauses pick where time slows down

random journeys capture purpose written on walls and woods

absence scribbles its map I look for the way out.

## Tree Busters

*(Lahore: 2014)*

pruned by colonial fantasies

old trees stand like arrogant histories

tree cutters mark their lineage in red and white chalked torsos

leaves fall slowly as alphabets struggle on a palate growing distant stories

each morning they turn into heaps of resilient memories

later coil into obscure shapes crackling ghosts conflagrate

a noisy language burns in each pile splintering and merging voices

our handy little mobs calling for survival and space.

.

# Jahanara: Shah Jehn’s Daughter

On paths peppered with stones

she follows her lovers through pavilions long curtains cover her bare-foot walk

hovering around harems her father whets bodies with cold hands

scrunches betel leaf pulp like a peacock pecks

on condiments and fruits decked in a platter

bathing in sandalwood and rosewater he picks elbows shuddering both for touch

and small respect

while eunuchs smirk for nothing

eyes enlarged with collyrium and antimony, stroking braids

dipped in mosseri they sniff politics over slender shoulders

in perfumed murk of Emperor’s palace Jahanara writes her private story hushed in Persian quatrains

not a feminist grudge or a mid-night sulk of many Begums tossing in soft beds whom passion sends to early sleep

but the reclusive delight of virginity mirroring henna-patterned hands moping feminine sweat

sharing her bold moments

Jahanara takes lessons in sensuality from Sufis, anecodating her universe she places wine on prayer rugs drinks theophanies from ornate cups

the tumbler and verse canonize her pilgrimage

after initiation her heart sedates, a veil rules her princely eyes

while Mumtaz’s grief erects domes ghazals soak pillows

secrets settle like postures silence sheets their souls,

served by giggling maids she watches destinies

in marble pools

swooned by winds in seraglios in green aromas of gardens thin mists entomb her.

# The English Loneliness

One bird doggedly chirps its choric concerns;

to waste an evening all by myself without someone’s memory is not easy.

Streets with locked cars are neatly parked not even a squeak from doors

but neck-strapped dogs stare at traffic signs on road

leaves drop on moss-green pavements camouflage moody squirrels

behind a garbage bin full of bottles the whoosh of a double-decker dies

before it spills the rest of silence there are others too, moving alone.

# Dust Storm in Punjab

Windows plague ears with noises in distance a city shimmers

make-shift cars honk for more space

skies show fissured streams of light

buffalos choose odd bellowing ropes prick their flamboyant necks like country girls they moo

for more freedom

fearful of men picking faults women cover heads penitently rubbing eyes smitten by straws cow dung kneading spoils

their hennaed hands rolling dough shooing cows with cramped udders in barns where weasels and rats infest the remaining silence of night.

# Larkinesque

The broken pipe hanged silently

in the doorway a shredded cupboard found a drab angle

last year the ceiling wanted hands

my son scribbled over damp splinters he discovered walls instead of pages

ants perforate dour kitchen cabinets the carpenter joined them drilling holes a perennial grime settled on handles

sand paper failed on stubborn surfaces

on bloated wood rusty nails bruised hands in the end he left it sulking words.

# Among Leaves

My spread palm is leaf-faced rests unrhymed on knees agaping thumbs droop unalliterative

a balding cypress themes our garden swampy shadows add abstraction

to roots sticking out like motifs wasting

close by another branch leans

on the grass like a chest growing hair stamen seek fingers

a bird preening watches over the quick and confused embrace

across the road many details whither

See ! the plot scattering leaves how these private hearts make a story out of earth.

# Window-reading

*“Every face, every shop, bedroom window, public-house, and dark square is a picture feverishly turned--in search of what? It is the same with books.*

*What do we seek through millions of pages?”Virginia Woolf, Jacob’s Room.*

I

Shades rest on elbows’ outer points

a languid wind stirs two opaque panes I vent on a brickmold shadow;

dust clambers embossed dentelle a grey hair refers to a passage underlined frenetically— someone hides every written opened thing in the house.

II

Trapped inside spines

and odor of cladding vinyl nothing speaks like silence sitting

on musty fraying edges—words ajar; I re-open with knuckles and fingers a miracle is in thinking miracle missing pages missing faces

a clumsy reader wastes hinges.

III

Friends listening from behind whisper about love they have a consensus

it needs corners to huddle; lizards fire-flies browse through mesh screen like chapters

and headings they leave marks on cloth.

IV

A receding autograph lives on the flyleaf ...

*the length of your arm which includes wrists and that canal of cleavage*

*is like a fantasy-carpet*

folding I escape through purple openings.

# Edinburgh Calls

On granite structures

wooden walls creak as words escape

outside rain sneaks silence like language it has pauses

cinching vows in smattering sounds hooded I mount city’s hills

imagining holes in windows covering my splaying gait

like a sentence needing extra support after living mistily on pages of history

and a full stop to stare and look around for a map everywhere alleys creep

on kidney stones a cobbled-pinch runs through legs

there is some charm in getting tired nursing crackling bones on benches

alone with a wet pigeon

shouldering luggage the unpaid postman

of dark evenings emerging

from hazy mouth of Froth’s estuary

over Queens ferry Bridge quivering on cables

stroking winds anti-clockwise a metallic North Sea

spooks primitive music

buses plow through wet spaces

you miss one and wait for the next out of geographic love.

# Betrayal

The student union at university’s square

talks about my country while I sit in a warm room outside gale force winds bang every living thing.

Our western borders\* are raided by Drones and I am reading about Shakespeare’s England with a subtle English wit over cappuccino

and French fries,

seasoned with a layman’s vocabulary.

I am a less ambitious broker

but our politicians have bartered everything

so I am selling ideas dipped in European gravy.

My wallet is bulged with credit cards

and I do not miss auctions, second-hand things come on rebound,

haggling, touting, and yelling with my English acquaintances

withdrawn in a muffler and leather bidding for a better price surviving bombs and crash.

*\*Pakistan’s western borders.*

# Mixed Inspirations

a measured rain brings sounds worth fitting a stanza a girl renders footsteps hoping to get a similar end

holding a bag and a book her hairs mime drifting clouds laptop beeps on every click as if a machine has a heart reading Dostoevsky along Ghalib’s ghazals over and over imbuing dusty moments of Lahore with interpretations like ringlets hang thematically from a fictional walk

on gravel paths edged by trees integrating like lovers locked in embrace, and evenings full of passages texts woo minds ejecting enjambments.

# December's Fatalities

The day went on like a white sheet on roof inside room I was safe from staining words

just a cordial pact between walls and windows but a face went again and again to a mirror

dusted with surreal inventions it was alone

I gave it a company of my reflections and winks

a statue-like December evening held to the last ears took aberrations; you lipped too much.

Language endured the will of shrieking crows sentences broke the heart of a clouded sky

houses in rows were like dead carcasses

to suggest intricacy of skeletons over bodies

after an accident on the Canal trees stood guilty who shook them back to deciduous flurry of leaves?

unendingly they pointed out another sequel a blood-spilled road, autopsies, some silence.

# Jinnah’s Residency at Ziarat

In his Saville Row Jinnah strolls majestically among juniper forest for extra oxygen while borders thunder like lungs

(At midnight motorcyclists pause hurl grenades and rockets).

His cheekbones are wrinkled maps under a monocle hemmed with stains his coughing shadow stalks wooden halls confronting rough winds—

a half-burnt torso of Residency breathes through metallic smoke Jinnah serves embers to historians conflagrating choices

the torched structure

and green leaves smolder with eyes I cannot rub him off.

# rehtoric de l'amour

*for Tammara Claire*

Your half-visible hand on a dusty bookshelf winks like a footnote swallowed by history,

silence is a pen in fingers to leaf references

we can make a list or rely on random browsing.

I left you on a page like a metaphor to enjoy privacy tunneling archives you wormed through an abstract.

I will access you in anecdotes, and anthologize rest is an index of kisses on your chignoned neck

help me preserve your musty annotations

spare citations to braid this disheveled manuscript.

# Uncharted

and pigeons everywhere...

Each feather is a sign of continuity stitched like sentences with commas:

pleasure flutter volumes of flight self-mesmerizing. Trembling eyes

given to blubbering winds embracing fields of sunlight.

A touch of vanity. Bowing, driving, spangled bodies.

What’s left of rest of day? A wonderful question.

Take a pot bird, wait only ponder: answer.

Pigeons complete skies like poets filling nights

Only things they know

we do not know, and write.

# Marriage

You had that touch of a cold building

I was supposed to house for some time outer windows splashed while hinges gave way to meaningless frowns

some abrupt passages between rooms which a body like yours has a license to open to visitors where arguments get windy and staircase tremors eyebrow freeze and a sudden

touch on elbow dies not like heydays when illogical was beautiful

now conversations like excerpts stolen from serious books rescue sermons of frigidity louder and louder all walls needing a second coating

or me pretending to already have one until the idea of permanently putting up take a silent whitewash

I need to invest more in this structure! glazing, plumbing, thicker curtains warmer beds, foods, moods.

# The Cat

is it a white, dust-brown or spotted a Solid, or a mixed Oriental

under fallen trunks

and uncut grassy silence

purrs for heads of blades only to disturb wind

defecting delicately and preening the crammed flesh on belly

floating pen-tail

writes a vertical shadow

the lonely sentence of her body maps empty patches

every passing thing

streets and yards stammer for contact night-daring hubris lifts

the taste for jagged loneliness

let it be taken feral resurgence

claw-scraping guest appearance in arched whiskers

a hidden life lives in silhouette of furry slink

when bells wait for a touch distance becomes a sound

real as a listening ear picks

shimmering stares

in random incursions

reacts neither to hunger nor prospective hedges transplanting smells tracking life

made of moments, the crawling engine.

# Divorcee

Stepping out she holds back her last tears and swings handbag with a romantic chin of a wanderer the kind that demands attention, and takes seat in the rear

just for a better view after a long time.

Now fifteen miles away from her mother’s grave who wished her many children

and a man who took his lawful lust on a face that flogged questions

sagged pardons after each yelling episode,

but vows and faith recycled her anger on pillows when elders suggested silence and talisman

she runs white chaplets

on the finger next wearing wedding ring to fix something tottering

on verses clenching divorce papers covers her head on the Call for Prayer but in her pocket mirror

eyes chase a body bursting under a thick shawl.

# Resident

He must have hurtled through tall grass frisked over frayed bricks and expendable coils of wires freaked cats and rabbits made me wonder at night why a passerby dared to throw a hefty clod in my backyard on a puddle of water enduring ruckus

perhaps someone fed up with words catapulted objects flung bits instead of punctuation transfixed silence stalking remote edge of house thought to tear pages no more worth reading themes of betrayals of past and then came

the rash moment of a lover seeking closure peeped at every passing window gradually modulated sound of his thudding footsteps gave me the chance of forgetting him.

# I Have a Faith Too

In a distant village a man built a mosque dug a water pump and cooked humble food peppered with anecdotes of love

crows and pigeons landed for crumbs picked grains, screeched praises tapped clay bowls, pecked pitchers

in hot afternoons dogs excreted on brown soil vultures encircled over occasional corpses

of buffaloes died after giving tons of milk

when he chanted verses sparrows muttered churned milk curdled in intricate whirls some drowned in theophanies

but no one was concerned about the supplier our man who wore a tattered turban and drank from palms with a separate wet face

One day there came a man with a big moustache and a woman heaving flesh and children

noisy and sullen bickering over clan titles

crows were harassed, goats bleated tones of escape the call for prayer subdued them but the new man haggled for space, kicked bowls and spat on ground

there came a new faith levied with words of fixity garlands like creeds hanged over the simple arch

of mosque, plants around graves shriveled like opinions

the shrine’s silence buried under metallic monologues fantasies dipped in magic crammed their rituals people bowed to calls for spectral lashings

meanwhile the land turned red crops grew hard even if rains fell there was no festival

songs smothered in mothers’ wombs

lovers stopped exciting their eyes and words

the pause in their tales crept like a beast mashing behind dry bushes and stumbling in black fields

the man who built the mosque withdrew to sands of a distant glamour, his dazzling mausoleum

was somewhere beyond the language of finality

the new man stretched beard on a wooden cot roped by incanted phrases his retinue whipped bodies refusing rites and graves.

# I Recall You Through Death

*for Tammara Claire*

What can I remind? That was a vacant February evening I collected you from the silence around you, haggard winds poked chinked windows grieving unbolted,

a friend strapped with wires was dying in a local hospital his blood pressure was soaring metaphoric heights, doctors exchanged pupils frozen like morgues,

sensing conclusion we discovered a new language, though a day before your love was an unruffled page

I left messages, and conversation flagged epidemically;

shadows of pine trees appear commenting on earth of course loneliness leaves mute seeds, cold corridors grow stretchers, aborted arguments whip patients’ lips

portals bang in cold wards, sirens repeat mystically

even the sole chirp of a lonely sparrow caught in a turret tells that pain is deposited in unseen coroners,

like an on-going project, your eyes show extra designs the whole thing is simple, injected and oxygenated you watched me washing my face, cleaned me

from doubts of dying, and hovered like a presence but the dark brush of your ghostly attention touched

the edge of my half-finished gaze ,framing me, outside

a lark gasps after hitting blindly, fear of losing sky

I suspect it will die, you insist on alternatives, thankfully we did not go beyond some questions and margins,

inside a glassy cabin I saw a perforated canvas, that evening crows under some compulsive oath pecked everything

I signed on a white sheet, someone was packing you.

# Trilogy

*But didn’t Jinnah, too, die of a broken heart?*

*Bapsi Sidhwa*

*(I)*

In Darjling summer of 1918

Husband ‘J’ and Ruttie walks out of tea plantations wedged between age and impulse

his bony fingers direct her brown elbows shaping a skeleton of silence

on an Oriental neck craning contentment but the country grows for divorces

she placates her head on his well-ironed lapels till goblins tear their dresses.

*(II)*

In French winters she writes him letters trading love with politics

hecklers arrive on his speeches

but in front of her grave he weeps like a baby stubbornness soaks Indian soil with lean hands.

*(III)*

Wind from Arabian sea picks on colonial buildings of Karachi

he gazes at her saris and necklaces tokens of battles corrode the salty

tip of his tongue now heavy with coughing—

tears are dossiers of states whose footnotes are gentle like histories diluting romance with war

Ruttie sleeps in her musty file of white termite in a remote corner with a broken heart

of broken tribe who expressed love when it was not family-time.

# Letters d'amour

*How we need another soul to cling to ― Sylvia Plath*

I have rows of unaddressed letters an army of papers in silent battles but there is no room for invasions on the field of pages folded

no one gives me any postcode a private parley of words

to wage soul’s wars;

how can I stampede battalions

of overhearing, prying, spying snipers behind walls watching me

describing epic weapons and causalities of love, even if there is a messenger hired to deliver he would be searched

at check posts emptying me out of stories wasted in the crossfire of intent.

# Some Rains Have Stories

The raindrops patter like words held long clouds monolingual and battering

down in black puddles reflections write faces penning this mirror for references

passage in which rain is an interpreter is translated from hailing to pouring

skins long covered are souls shut as books wait for a pelt and we manage readings

in the frantic middle the story is vaguer wet haze coroners, dry patches haunt

we can make our way out of this plot only if this silence concludes, before rain.

# All About That Picture

*for Tammara Claire*

I am attaching your image

you look so still, I wait for cracks.

Unaligned you betray background

but wrinkles on dress connote anxiety

last night’s shadowy touch hibernate under cheeks like compulsory companions

I embrace your silence and leave you for a congealed conference of stares.

later your hands clutch me violently scroll to *burn* or *paint*

my web of elastic fingers save you as if you are a website crashing

so plausibly I also crop your head morphing fussy finishing.

I see you losing sense of time add colors to beautify your size

you get your mind off from me and stop for brown forest of chest

this unplanned journey on flesh halts in dull beeps of a cold evening.

I sow an unseasoned seed on shoulder you grow around me for the rest of life

and after in-boxing your warmth I keep you in a folder and lock,

and avoid clicking on wrong files my browsing is merely distracting

you do not open for everyone

memory works like a disc without a chip

so I upload your scattered presence which other visitors could not access

*Here* I am copy pasting your eyes perfectly open—unblocked.

# A Day at Daman-e-Koh

*(near Islamabad)*

The forest was wiped like myths denuded before their contents are exposed

town planners took care of angry roots

in time their companion-roots like dogged lovers surfaced and found new soil for mating.

Tracking hurdles under a referential spreading

of Margalla Hills our bodies trundled in small cabs romantic altitude of heart endured bumpy strides we disappeared in glances and groups.

A few never return since history avoids exit

like overnight footprints of porcupines and monkeys memory finds a virginal forest at its will camouflaged by a mystical regularity of hills

to herd back, and to unburden.

# Crossing Londonderry

*“YOU ARE NOW ENETRING FREE DERRY”*

In London-Derry I carry

two names, two echoes, two currents history spares its hyphenated children under the Union Jack and security cameras recording haze sitting over

Dublin’s distant spirals,

the pointed cannons around city’s wall are out of use

the snaking arches of Peace Bridge holds traffic to a mutual pause— the river Foyle flows

with natural boundaries.

I swim;

in pubs after each gulp semantics split like marriages over foamy mugs of beers

the tides under bridge gush away connotations

cacophonous din denotes silence on the gigantic Magilligan strand and Martello Towers

fixed as footnotes

of Belfastian chapter, in placid waters

clinker-built boats paddle replicas of the Vikings’ ships who anchored epics of vendettas on Irish shores.

# Incomplete Interpretation

Sun keeps a vigilant presence over a brown lawn everything illuminates except your intention on pages

exposed under a blue sky birds mock freedom same as interpretations whittle after each stanza

a pause resembles your reluctance to shake hands trees gaze on their own shadows cramping for space

collaborating silence unaware of bearing traffic distorts each utterance on a nearby road,

ideally we did not want any conclusion on that day only a few casual glances, rest is borrowing time.

# Distraction

While we were leaning

a wasp entered like a refrain

it droned away the privacy cradling disaster

your eyes followed it, and I followed to ensure that it is not exclusive

wiry hairs like thin sentences covered your face

What was your mind thinking?

I relaxed arms around you

this is not the way to end

in the beginning it was so silent.

# The Last of Trees

The last trees I see along the road are bent rain subdued them like monks soaked

in the soiled sludge of existential postures with shaven tops exposed to knocking buffets

of wind splicing their open ended barks just there among an endemic pile of leaves

a footpath swirls into a strip of your memory fledgling a brimmed canister of water on road

there we had a conversation about drowning now the dead hollow of a bloated oak carries

our language wasted on convincing ourselves not the common pits of regrets but a needle

tunnels jammed arteries in blood despite cold hazy quilting of city in which our love waged

an ascetic silence like a design holds bodies meant to meditate, shrink, and drip unnoticed

I see there is a faith in some branches which like our limbs try to cover space with grace.

# When We Lived on Sounds

The stammer in my conversation is not without purpose, after you left I made a list of words which failed and I packed them sulking.

In traffic there were many voices familiar, monosyllabic utterances and mish-mashed vendors’ craving

beggars’ litanies, and a woman’s yawn.

On breakfast table forks clanked toasted edges of bread scrunched a brown tea whetted musty lips after small sips memory gulped.

On guava trees woodpecker picked roundish fruit chipped from stem but stopped harassed by blaring echoes of gunshots in the vicinity.

I managed to stop evening’s rattle over shed where a bulbul made a nest we came like a rescue party hearing micro chirping with big fleshy ears.

This happened after I opened a letter swaddled in a smell your hands carried the long scatter of words drizzling from tiny fingers alluding to crammed love.

Now there is a subsequent passage

like a sonata abandoned by street singers night after night the whistling watchman reminds that vigilance is a music.

# A Butterfly Converses With a Terrorist

*“I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations...”*

*J.R.R Tolkien*

Tragedies you create are similar to butterflies and fireflies

but we consume air silently cleanse ears and finish

you squander ominous sounds on us, squash words with noise

the necessity of becoming sad now taints our wings too

but under a vague hubris you colonize our shrubs

blemish our romance of wandering pools

ravens and vultures attend your screeching consequences

under masks made of fragments isn’t it embarrassing

trapped between so much, and yet denied of any ending.

# The Courier Man

hollow boxes rumble attention bubble wraps wink in piled silence

long roads flow with miles, you stop take turns, halt, and choose to pause

wander like a whirlpool of dust dislodge on kerbs hogged by vendors

nights carry drowsy destinations on your body crumpled with bags

how many times you tumble and huff for the last shipment yet undelivered

in the end bar codes of companionship save you from losing postcodes.

# Love In Times of Suffering

I knew her, that woman like a shadow flamed on city’s walls

a poem exploding away from pages landscapes and faces

having long hairs and jittery blinks an epidemic of love grew

in congested corridors conversations lifted our winter

abrupt news of tremors and floods interpretations ran amuck

above my face her mouth moaned eyes habitual of not returning answers

her loneliness needed a second chance but the dead do not have this privilege

past gardens, trees, roads and dust causalities scattered like smiles

behind broken walls, smashed iron railings Lahore lost her company —

I don’t know her—of course and I whispered *it’s too odd to leave*

when it was just between two moments not knowing which one is more painful.

# Themes

They are coming: some bending for support

for a stage which can house them a language which can choose them

to welcome them so far so good from garden, from window

with you, and without me fostering their silent embryos

they tell us we want a place: to incubate long hours refined and careful

not exactly non-human

I am glad to have contracted

such company. We are surrounded: a silence already explains presence

a wordless morning, a windless night

a chorus of existence in their arrival in rooms, parks, houses

behind locked doors

they make neighbors. *No!*

# A Suicidal Urdu Poet

*I labour by singing light – Dylan Thomas*

Sunkun on a Persian divan he peers at a sky dependent on moody clouds

his skin cannot bear abrupt showers except the days when rhymes flooded

now his Majnoon avoids vast deserts surrenders at an oasis not at Layla’s door

conjures cadence from silence and hides behind smoke-blackened walls of the days of Mutiny

one by one they leave him to his noble drought in candle-lit courts ghazals seek adulation

his quill creaks refrains on a wooden tablet just as a courtesan monas again and again

abandons drafts to rivers in solitary walks seeing soldiers rife with guns and canons

bodies annotate, couplets tremble for conclusion without a neat *maqta* they parade his funeral.

\* *maqta is the last couplet of a ghazal.*

# Summer of Desires

All summer home-made charpoy creaks under mulberries children pick plums

on ground blueberries’ stones shrivel earth gasps rain, in sheds goats drop

desires in droppings, old women grunt electricity fails fetching their curses

a young girl opens her window—

wistful Punjabi girls flock wedding rituals

some weep all night beating drums with their tiny tresses mothers tag tales

of shame and when nothing is found they are wed against dark Monsoons

villagers gather and fix clans’ stupidities over feuds of words and allegiance.

# Summer Moths

separately

a sea of moths in street we are vulnerable behind windows marooned words fretting crowds

our eyes plangent & castaway

we discover squashed wings

like unattended phrases islands hide behind them places tremble

flitting flimsy vessels chaffing faces wrecked overnight

a funeral of bits.

# The Mystic Dancers of Punjab

Rolled in orange and green chadars dervishes dance to the metallic balls clanging around ankles; iron-wristed, knee-jerking, necks clogged with beads they stamp the earth with their heels and the earth’s heart crack

tongs-clasped chanting verses

they whirl to become the circumference of time measured in braided ringlets touching their patched faces; children clap to *Dhamal*, and copy their limbed world; the saintly melody turns into a solemn crescendo as they surround their *murshid,* love becomes a cradle in which they sleep with smoke-tinged fragrance of *agarbattis* the whole world drowns for the one Man the *kafis*and songs shape

the mud-smelling Punjabi poetry.

* *Dhamal is Sufi trance dance*
* *Murshid is an Arabic word for ‘guide’ or teacher’*
* *Agarbatti is a kind of incense.*

# Ending

*It must be nearly finished – Harold Pinter*

It was such a broken version of evening even the empty veranda cried shreds

of your unmarked departure from floor of words stuck in throat, having ears

rest of the space was a jarring machine disgorging, rattling drivel, no destination

I packed bags of your silence stowed under eyelashes which you lifted for a last glimpse

to bury me alone, there is no point visiting my story in future, no interpretation clears

the syncopated halos around our pile of exchange, and it was perhaps the last

of efforts to extract an ending from language you left me to keep for the rest of life.

# Host

*(train bound to East Anglia: 2012)*

Remember those snow-stalled exteriors an odd Union Jack staggering over roofs ears fixed on polyphonic clutter of tracks

of my train bound to East Anglia, the only word East stays in mind full of fricative adjectives and a silence vanishing in smoky coffee at each station destinations are called aloud, names of places follow drizzles winking like truncated footnotes on blinds, pursuing

maps my most wanted companionship is a smile despite patches on dank paths in countryside supporting a grey-bone evening on ocher heaths courtyards with washing smacking wires, and who wear them are skeletons rattling me

down from the North Sea, nowhere I expected to host this smattering of everything

to make a home of bits and bluff.

# Noise

Outside a crow whines the whole afternoon, the day surrenders its share of silence to screeching roads soiled by their contribution ears bag stones suddenly a vehicle adds to my monastic veneer crumbling behind flat regularity of vendors yelling from all sides flanking a patched figure of beggar hypnotized by heat and a staggering bowl, I

waste a few steps throwing gestures with coins.

# 31 Native Infantry

Felice Beato was the first photographer who captured corpses trickling from Mutiny 31 Native Infantry found Judas of Empire whose dreams sat on skulls and bones scattered in streets and on that mound

in Luknow where a pair of rebels hanged like spheres expelled from their master’s orbits, lean erected bodies exposed to camera toiling impossibility of shooting with the sun blaring down on Empire’s deeds lifted to serve

a sublime cause, for those watching gallows fellow sepoys whose hearts clicked after Becto must have asked them to stay where they were, while

he disappeared behind Colliding dry plates uncertain to choose a posture and a pose for both murderers and mourners contemplating the range of loyalty wedged between

sepia tone and a black harassing

landscape toned down fighters and gazers.

# Aftermaths

*(In memory of 141 children who died in a terrorist attack in a school in Peshawar, Pakistan in December 16, 2014)*

In Lahore canal ocher brown waves slinked on edges

wind smattered leaves congregated on dead water

last night a car lunged spontaneously in canal leaving behind a vortex

no clue of dead bodies, a smell clawed frogs croaked ominously

sirens blared, small children sniffled mothers pawed them back to sleep

the country huddled like a cat freaking in quest of a corner.

# The Fallen Leaves

On a red bricked pathway instead of footprints

I stare at leaves;

why they leave trees after growing on barks under a hypnotic pact

crinkling complains bird-pecked notes

of personal dissolution

mirrors of epic reflections coniferous shapes, fragment on every available field

their veins like arteries of disconsolate memory

carry earth’s lonely words

of episodic plots warring factions crunching massacre

grounded fates of armies hinge on language

curling with embarrassment

who says there is meaning in every fallen thing, at least a few hold out an ending.

# Bearing Language

Found it first on a blackboard where boys flecked shapes

I whacked it endlessly it took over my antics

in a classroom where patience earned a kiss and an embrace

at school I wiped my palate with it mastered common nouns enslaved verbs and reflexives every sentence jabbered

the weird factory of my denture.

When pronunciation dissented we waved from distance

it was cool for some to mimic of course I wanted to elope : *would you please? yes I will and I did.*

Later my clownish fate was lost

in the storm of Empire’s departure echoed all the way to English Channel.

Now in my stabler days knees and tongues are intact I spit out where it needs

to swallow, open and shut

my mouth taking no extra care.

# Flying Home For My Father’s Burial

On his grave stems of clayed grass emerge they sprinkle water making bowls from palms

butterflies flit over Arabic engraved in curlicues —

passengers dragged trolleys checking-in

I carried him like a luggage in boarding lounge where an air hostess sneaked at my eyes

for hours distracting fuss of change-over imagining sweating hands shoveling soil a five pound note crumpled my pocket

an airstrip vast as a graveyard ran with me on trail bulged bags repeated hypnotically

like the verses I whispered over my shoulders

in a maelstrom of crowd I saw familiar faces immigration window was lined as if mourners payed tribute at their appointed turns

but unlike my clumsy disembarking home he was neatly dispatched to a local morgue I stamped exit, holding back tears.

# Death Has Poetry

Every time I see in graveyards dead tucked in hypnotic corners

a theme park of verses and stones full-length collections of bones.

Graves sit just as poems rejected a slush pile of wrong submissions heaven wants a simple metaphor but to recall the dead

is to raise an anthology.

# Texting Interpretation

*for Sarah*

You did a great job connecting landscape with language like those lovers in my poem strolling a snowed heath, and our chat flowed without stylish metaphors but occasional gaps caused words to break deeper crusts.

I could not have been more awed to see stanzas you carefully split and there was no hurry to call off this session of text messages which we slowed

on purpose same as those two lovers in poem paused under birches standing like lengths of time.

It was not right to disclose similarity but everything has a context same as your voice also conveyed eyes in the end a single click removed our thread.

# Void

The evenings are lines

who drew them without words? is a question we do not put

and live behind windows

in automobiles, manicured gardens.

The questions need pages we have wasted a lot

in each leaf a story bleeds we walk past elegantly over squeezed curls.

The lights in cities are permanent

love seems to have found destination in in its din, quick kiss and hug and heard no more but the fury of soul lasts

no one waits till it is late.

# Voyagers

In the middle of evening mind is a postman no one comes but a cranky vendor

with a stony tongue masticating tobacco teeth delivers verbs lost in his languid yawns.

No response, no restraints, no following, stars are remote beloveds without postcodes distance has a taste of tantalizing kiss, after a bomb blast the city is without moon.

The thing is we can weep and sleep

for ourselves—no morning is same, same is with that lover chasing her—only on walls and shops there are timings and schedules.

Who knows, I might take you along to English gardens for dalliance, and then just stare you out of my passport, there is some logic in losing people.

But, I suspect, we’d miss our plane, and behave like our cat that makes winter

its favorite time huddling around everything, and sorts out continents in beds.

# Food For an Accurate Love

In front of empty plates we blinked at our menu of exaggerated delicacies

stones in the dead water of a fountain stayed like contents of a story

mere ripples stretched continents we ate in courses crossing islands

It’s my own fault that I made a map of your words seeing you so silent

on a rainy day when Lahore was wet when alders dripped so many sounds

we were lead to a table in a corner not the mere clank of fork and spoon

lights behind windows were fuzzy same as intentions hung their curtains

in a slump winter of appetites we picked food impulsively

muddled stares fudged taste buds

too precise and the plot went out of hands

this norm of loving accurately with food was exposed by intemperate pouring

tumbling the center that could have held lips steamed by tea’s aromatic clouds

munching greasy bits of conversation implicitness echoed but died away

when the waiter stared on our stained table cloth we silently wiped our hands of each other.

# You Crossed My Way

You walk passages like ceremonies a cult is concentric in those glares on a moped floor where sounds die

when wind spills intentions crammed

In mid-day loneliness of my room soaked in bookish nonsense of ignoring you

I am bound to make a detour next time do not cross my way with this peace

in your body hampering my projects.

# The Dead Bird

In your hands I put remains you were supposed to take care they were actually feathers

of that unlucky bird who blinded on our hazy windows

his blood-spattered wings left a map, later black skies poured generously, washed the guilt of building an open house

even the carcass was removed from our debris of culpable imagination similar birds prosecuted

like a primitive jury —

now the lawn is silent bearing a craving wind, ambushing us.

# Enactment

*for Grey*

The day when you enacted a poem your body directed the stage

the text wavered in naïve hands

you seemed to press out at each stanza

its form created a halo around you what was so complex left out

words which could have been covered hedged over elbowed choreography

a simple accent took care of my loneliness of the evening in quest of a corner

someday I would ask you to come close what I missed making a mad exit

you left a pause, a shadow, and a space unbearable for a mutual conversation

only monologues of a blind future

but in some remote land I would explain

that I am the audience who forced you out from a draft going nowhere.

# The Crisis

The predictable sounds come and go only echoes swallowed by traffic

remind me that I have left you to wait under dusty clouds of Lahore

where a mature crow leaves his cluster mocking the idea of home

built on mere words and a silence leading to usual bickering

five fingers one face two eyes project

a huddle by two people in a dark corner

to achieve a decent closure

to clarify that it is more than love

we are such crisis.

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# The Boot Polish Man

Under a tree a sturdy Khan sits with the awe of an empire

set to rule the heart of his clients

with trappings of his boot polishing hands carrying blackened fissures palms spattered with waxen grime

I grew up watching him rubbing toes; on a tattered mat his hands flow lyrically picking from tin wax boxes

mere scrubbing after laces are taken out goes on and on before a stubborn shine appears above the dusty edges of heels

the bristled cacophony of brushes elbows fling like an opera's maestro with a modified damp foam he buffs

the reluctant parts, how each stroke defines the sweating arm of his faith over glossy upper front invoking

vanities in his watchful customers waiting for their turn patiently

I see him doggedly skimming wax

for a muddled battle of brushes. When I miss a day because of rain or traffic makes me detour my paths

shoes stay in my feet sad and swatting I coax my son but he fumbles between a disposed towel and a brush

too heavy for his fingers

but in this scattered labor I see a mute recognition in each pair.

# When We Met for Stories

The small bird is not interested in long stalks of grass where the cat brushed against brambles nosily

gave me some sense of an overcrowded page and the crisis of an unplanned beginning

of writing hurriedly and to hope conclusions

even the chirping sparrow has terms and conditions (now you are half-visible and I am camouflaged

in the manuscript of hushed entries)

the depth of a word is not in the word but utterance from connotations to dead-pan disintegration

our love needs not only language but many versions after many years of bird watching and cat purring gave me some sense of editing pauses after details.

# Storm

There was not a single sound that can be shifted from cracking melee of water, marooned in verandas watching puddles on bricked floors and vulnerable patches the micro oceans inundated everything

in a few moments unborn sounds clung to walls how dissonant and alterative concurrently

the prose of rain imposed monotony, and I thought of you unaware of my efforts of creating rain sending a vocabulary soaked in sturdy splashes, split windy lyrics, and crooked rhythms, with birds on a nearby mulberry pretending fear their beaks became the measure of silence buried in water,

I did not flex tongue for hours in a dark corner like a ship given to pirates in the corridor leading to my room outside which you also waited but did not burst and the superficial cloud of your memory

dissolved like those many streams turning into islands of languages cast away by storms I could not write down.

# The Rain Continued

In veranda sprayed drops brought earth’s smell buried under a drought ruling for long days

words which have been left to rot under heat returned after big spells of extempore rain

pegged clothes went wild and were left to dribble from a distance they looked like absorbed egos

bickering long for a drenched squeezing under sky legs splashing watered grass effused new sounds

lyrically funneling from roofs over which antennas swung threatening disconnection from the world

we wanted a pause but pretended innocence rain overtook like a subject on page folded long

text messages with icons and cropped images of rain-touched objects, undulations in puddles

carried fable mirrors in which clouds appeared bowled cusped hands collected water to measure

the exposure bodies endured after staying dry

once it achieved mornedo I pulled the straw-curtain

the ripped meshed plants and plastic toys floated on the pottered floor showing an evening

I wrapped a sheet around body, a carcass of bird bobbed on muddy surface beaten by low waves.

# Ageing

The grey temples makes you a premature sage when all you need is to clean the stained mirror you do not bother to shave the stubbles growing and curling into rings contracting face marks

with every wipe of the towel eyes blur over shreds of skin loosing old hubris of elbows flowing all ends

so visible is the recession in dark halos on cheekbones and yet the courage to pretend and to make love

is just a small consolation given the dresses you left to wear and friends you managed to loose gradually and repeated the same bench to support your

bent posture and a chest hollowed backwards an abrasive strip of memory of entangled hairs whitening drizzle of slow days when the body has no desire to show its concealed miracles of that single touch which could kill hearts that long engulfing stare which used to pour over faces searching companionship or just a little attention through words but now you

count on random appearances of starched collars skimpy outfits and try to cover the balding scalp with a few puffs , a huffing walk and a voice devoid of erotic pauses, forcing the moment

to erect the flaccid flesh.

# After You Left

When you were close words did not wander now they are homeless like street urchins the creeper on railing also gained an ugly length unable to suggest a direction it curls hallucinations for grasshoppers frisking too much seeing butterflies flitting maddeningly around stems of roses, even the gardener has broken silence about mysterious ways saplings catch fungal layers and the cat

cuts down its regular visits through corridor now echoing cold and chooses to sleep inside the ragged quilt of the watchman who has been eating alone for years unless there is an unexpected visitor taking the bench you

used to sit but I invoke presence by throwing a stone in the puddle left by an overnight rain how many of us are coming to terms with you.

