

Harris KHALIQUE

“I shall not return the borrowed dust...”

(for Osip Mandelstam and Agha Shahid Ali)

In Lahore,
after the monsoon evening
darkness began edging away light.
Tadpoles, chairs, pedestal fans
appeared in Nana Farooq’s courtyard.

“Let’s tune in Amritsar.”

There were no cables, no dish antennae.
We would be glued to blurred India for hours.

“They made Pakistan on the train stations.
Separate water taps
for Hindus and Muslims
and they were labelled,
Hindu pani, Muslim pani.
My word.”

Nana Farooq had said.

Usman stirred the soundscapes
of an Iranian café in Quetta.

“Come off it. You are obsessed with Karachi.”
Oh yes.
We are.
Like our forebears were obsessed
with Avadh and Kashmir.
But they failed to choose a water tap.
And couldn’t prefer the Indus over the Ganges,
the Ganges over the Euphrates.

Avadh lives in our lexicon, Kashmir in our taste buds,
we live in the valley of Sindh.
But we fail to choose a water tap.

With gunpowder
Srinagar and Karachi are cleansed.
We are not given time to bury the dead.
We carry them.

They are heavy.
We are always tired, always thirsty.
But we fail to choose a water tap –
and drink tears.

Hindu tears, Muslim tears
Punjabi tears, Bengali tears
Mohajir tears, Sindhi tears –

For our forebears told us,

“Never sell your souls
for the reasons you sell your bodies,
drink tears to quench your thirst,
and what the Koran said
bear in mind,

‘When the sky is cleft,
and when the stars are scattered,
and when the seas are flowed out,
and when the graves are ransacked,
each soul shall know what it sent afore
and what it left behind...’ ”

She and I

She and I would talk of wonder and dread
of desires and disasters,
boys and girls pacing up and down
the sidewalk beside us,
milk she forgot to put back in the fridge,
writing tables, table lamps, bookshelves, kitchens,
plumbers and fixers.

She and I would talk of families,
spouses and siblings,
pets in the neighbourhood,
who have the same faith as their keepers,
of lying to loved ones about sex and night outs,
travels,
friends found when travelling,
hat racks in aircrafts with defective latches,
unkempt interiors of slow moving trains,
rivers, mountains, forests, deserts,
oceans and dreams.

She and I would talk of our country,
dust can hold us together for so long,
of Gog and Magog,
licking up the walls of sanity,
of people and their struggle,
wounds unhealed and seasons we fear.

The sibilance of sorrow creeping behind us,
we wished we chat till the world ends
and the world always ended.

as destined...

strange images of lust and loneliness
in a city without frontiers
beckon me –
in broad daylight
in the dead of night
they beckon me –
when I go near
they take my arms and dance

the betes noires are tamed
the fears become familiar
the air is filled with pleasure –

pleasure alone lurks
in the quagmire
of ambition and desire –
vanishes when needed

happiness deludes pleasure
the time comes whenever.

Burying martyrs who are heavy

We are turned into a funeral procession
All 180 million of us
We carry a hundred thousand bodies on our shoulders
We are told they are martyrs and martyrs are light
Light like rose petals.
But the ones we carry are heavy
They have metal inside
Bullets, shrapnel, pellets, nails
Tips of swords and daggers broken into their flesh.
The bodies will dissolve in the mud once buried
But the metal will keep the earth hard under our feet
For long.

Remains

After the massacre
The night has fallen
Moonless and dry.
Let us collect the scattered body parts
It's easier, less painful
In the darkness of the sky.
An arm cannot be made out from a leg
Fingers from toes
A child's torso from a big man's thigh.

But what about the head?
A head is a head
Whether living or dead.

Friday Prayers

In the sixth row of the faithful,
the bomb rips apart,
the five rows ahead
and the many rows behind,
the sixth row,
the bomber.

In the sixth row of the faithful,
the country rips apart,
not once
but always.
Separations are crowded,
puzzling and heavy.

In the sixth row of the faithful,
prisoners are leashed like dogs,
barriers are built in stone,
cluster bombs are dropped,
future is maimed,
verve is buried alive.

In the sixth row of the faithful,
on May 7, 2004,
there are no five rows ahead,
and the many rows behind,
in the debris of Hyderi mosque,
we stand and we cry.

Sehnsucht

The dreary silence
Of a dense wilderness –
 a wilderness of Sehnsucht
On whose every tree
 a drapery of solitude
Clung to the draperies
 a vine of gloom
Vine's every foliole
 spread in my heart
 like a dense wilderness
 of Sehnsucht.

Translated from the Urdu by Taimoor Shahid

Rush

They anticipate a jam ahead
On the chaotic city's
long, old, central road;
buses, cars and rickshaws,
a little short of the 'Old Exhibition',
dash into the poor little streets,
ruthlessly choke them,
put to test their graciousness;
sweet meat sellers,
to prosperous looking
or young married girls,
at the top of their voices,
offer to sell, on the half the price,
the sesame sweet,
making the eardrums reverberate.

The street dwellers,
sickly but clever kids,
struggling for space
in their parents' small homes
shrink and shrivel,
diminish each day, grow shorter;
with the dawn of days
step into the street,
perpetually rolling their eyes,
craving, looking for marbles,
chasing kites, spinning tops,
dispensing joy with their laughter.

Daunted by raging vehicles
claiming their streets,
on that day then,
when they play their games,
their only yield is loss,
defeat is all they gather.

Translated from the Urdu by Yasmeen Hameed

Metaphor

In dark, downcast nights,
if a bird of song
of its own will
goes astray,
whose tiny heart knows the spirit of love,
with tired, aching wings,
who chooses to fly,
search new skies,
it shapes a metaphor that I desire;
my voice longs for it to sing with me,
songs of new seasons, of love,
of moments sprinkling flowers,
to adorn with colour, the earth.

Translated from the Urdu by Yasmeen Hameed

Homelessness

There's nothing wrong, really,
the days are passing all fine.
But sometimes somewhere
in a foreign town,
one longs to hear:
Come, let's go home.

Translated from the Urdu by Taimoor Shahid

Roses of joy

Let you and me today
embrace all sorrows in the world.
Let our souls imbibe all pain
and run it through our flesh and bones.
Let the warmth of sorrows
turn all pain in a resolve.

The resolve that makes the despots
tremble with fear.

The resolve espousing the verve of truth
abounds all time and space in a way
that in the veins of frail women and men
sunken in the swamp of tyranny
a new passion blooms, a new spirit flows.

The new passion
dries up the swamp of tyranny
grows fresh roses of joy.

Translated from the Urdu by the poet

Gulsher

(On the terrorist attack in Peshawar killing 140 school children in 2014)

Gulsher, who was 13
Just loved whisking his sister up from deep slumber
He just loved hiding away his grandma's pen
He just loved teasing his mum by being brash
He just loved nagging his daddy for more cash.

Now he will not wake his sister up
Now he will not hide his grandma's pen
Now he will not pester his mum again
Now he will not eye his daddy's purse
From school today, he came back in a hearse.

The school was squashed in terror's embrace
Massacre of the innocents, no mercy, no grace.

When the cortege left home, the day was cold and dry
And the old grandma... stared blankly into the sky
Shamsher, who is five, with his brother's looks
Picked up Gulsher's schoolbag, his lunchbox, his books.

Translated from the Urdu by the poet
