

## An Evening of Caged Beasts

*[Asif Farrukhi and Frances W. Pritchett are currently putting together an anthology of postmodern Urdu poets translated into English, entitled An Evening of Caged Beasts. The following is a selection from their work in progress. —Eds.]*

**Afzal Ahmad Sayyid**

URGENT MEMORANDUM

Miss Yasmin Sultana,  
in view of the above  
you are informed that  
you have become  
redundant.

From 1982 to 1983,  
your chemistry was no longer  
so colorful.

To perform twofold duties,  
an efficient full-timer is needed.

Yours sincerely, the undersigned, feel  
that your speed  
compared greater  
or lesser.

The monies due you (if any)  
will be forwarded to [...]

your address (if any).

Your services are no longer required,  
Miss Yasmin Sultana.  
Now the one-act play ends  
and the Company Act begins.  
So long.

THE VERDICT

The radiologist is reading  
some x-rays  
stamped with the date  
of my last poem.  
Those people's wounds

are being read with so much  
delay, so much  
cruelty—those people  
who are still busy undergoing  
the test  
of living

“A man dies of his own mistake.”  
This is the Surgeon-General's verdict.

“You have made a mistake.”  
In the evening when I tell her  
that I love her very much  
this is what she'll say.

STEP INTO MY PARLOR

Step into my parlor,  
Death says to me

In her body I see  
all my beloveds            [...]

naked

Trickling down her thigh  
I recognize my semen  
She is pregnant with the poem  
I could not write,  
She is pregnant with a net  
in which I wanted to catch  
a star

Step into my parlor,  
Death says to me,  
and she does not know  
that now I have  
nothing  
to give her

THE HOSTESS

You're a good hostess

You bring me an apple  
marked by your teeth

and a bloody pomegranate

and a poem

and a knife  
that cuts things  
crooked

—*Translated by Asif Farrukhi & Frances W. Pritchett*

**Tanvir Anjum**

NOT A SOUND

Dust has spread through our homes  
there's no rain in this season  
we let the last bit of torn cloud pass  
away  
now

like my disobedient son  
it won't come back

Hatred has spread through our hearts  
there's no miracle in the night  
we let the water run into the mud  
now

like an old man's lost vision  
it won't come back

Death has spread through our bodies  
there's no sound in these lanes  
we let blood run in the streets  
now

like my lost god  
it won't come back.

CROSSROADS

A beautiful poem  
or a day's content  
A hungry day  
or a sleeping night  
A long journey  
or a long car  
A cold ground  
or a high house  
An ugly war  
or a beautiful girl     [...]



city

then lumber, warehouses, lanes  
courthouses and sundials  
all this scenery  
made of  
tributes and treaties

will collapse  
on our  
bodies

—*Translated by Frances W. Pritchett & Asif Farrukhi*

### Zishan Sahil

#### THE STAIRCASE—A COMMONPLACE DIALOGUE

Don't tell me  
the sun is blazing—  
when I go up the stairs  
my feet will burn  
and I won't be able to go  
anywhere.

I will now go up the stairs  
and get the flowers  
left in the sun  
and bring them down  
and put them in water.

Don't tell me  
blazing sun, stairs,  
flowers blooming in the water—

we can see nothing.

LOVE

For girls,  
being in love  
is as hard  
as crossing a mountain stream  
on a tree-trunk,  
or drying out  
a wet page.

But with a little care  
all these things can be done.

Girls don't even write  
anyone's name  
in their notebook.

No one who knows  
someone's name  
can possibly keep from  
writing it down.

I too know  
a girl's name.

WHITE CARPET

The carpet shop  
has a white carpet  
and everyone wants to buy it  
and everyone's obsessed with fear—

it will get dirty  
faster than other carpets  
the first dropped cigarette  
will scar it  
muddy feet  
will mark it  
pet cats            [...]

will claw it  
hot cups of tea  
will scald it

Its beauty pleases no one  
and everyone wants  
to have its color changed  
or to see it left forever  
in the shop  
with no one to buy it  
or to have the carpet shop  
catch fire some night

and the white carpet be  
burned.

#### THE PRISONER'S TELESCOPE

A soldier from the firing squad  
picked up from the possessions  
of the executed prisoner  
a telescope  
but then he too, like the prisoner  
was put to death,  
and the telescope came to me.

Now I can see very far—  
the roofs of railroad cars  
the happy and anxious  
faces of travelers  
the trees and signal poles  
lining the track  
and lots of birds.  
Perhaps they are saying something  
or singing  
and perhaps some children  
are watching the train with wonder  
as always.

I can see [..]



first morning, then evening, then stars  
and sometimes clouds  
in your eyes and  
(when you're not here)  
in your heart.

And all the things that I can't see—  
glittering scythes in the fields  
smoke rising from homes.

And then one morning,  
gathering in the prison courtyard  
the new soldiers  
of the firing squad—  
the sound of a bell,  
and the prisoner's telescope  
will go today  
to someone else.

#### A LIFELESS POEM

This is a lifeless poem,  
it will do you no harm,  
it won't even get in your way.  
Perhaps you might not even  
see it again.

Anyone can give it a kick  
and hurl it into the air,  
or take it up in his hand  
and knock it against the ceiling.

Under the sky or against the wall,  
when it is rolling here and there  
you can laugh at it  
to your heart's content,  
you can laugh until  
tears come to your eyes.            [...]



of fresh air and blooming flowers.

That day goes very badly,  
when sixteen soldiers,  
four sergeants, and two captains,  
hear the verdict of the  
court martial,  
and the gardener's life  
is not spared either.

That day the General Sahib  
crushes a bud under his boot  
saying, It has no scent.

We later realize  
that for some time  
the General Sahib's nose  
has been blocked.

#### BULLDOZER

Hide that sound coming  
from the bell  
of your father's bicycle,  
and don't look at that wall  
behind which  
he was buried.  
Forget the blade of grass  
sprouting in the mud  
by his grave.  
And forget every poem  
written in the rain  
and every song  
sung again and again  
by lovers.  
Don't walk for very long  
in the dark.  
Sit on the doorstep and  
write a letter to your friends,

[...]

and notice for everyone else:  
The soldier has put on his boots,  
now he will pass over our hearts  
like a bulldozer.

FOUR WALLS

Where we live  
you can call it a home—  
above a very high room  
a very low ceiling,  
a very large window  
and a very small door.

You can pass through this door  
with your arms drawn in to your chest  
without lifting your feet from the  
ground.

You can look out this window  
in a very high room  
beneath a very low ceiling.

If you wish  
without stretching out your legs, you  
can sleep  
without lifting your head, you can live.

—*Translated by Frances W. Pritchett & Asif Farrukhi*

Sa'iduddin

POEM

Make less noise  
speak softly

[...]

so that your voice  
can at least reach  
the ones  
who want  
to hear you

GLOVES

I scream  
all my life  
I have never touched  
anything

not a voice  
not a wall  
not your body

my whole life  
I haven't been able  
to take off  
the gloves  
from my hands

A MISTAKE

A smallish matter  
concerning flowers  
caused his death  
(so they say)  
but I believe  
he was killed.  
He was killed by the radioactivity  
of words,  
when suddenly  
(as can happen anywhere)  
he couldn't get a grip on words  
and they got a grip on him

—*Translated by Frances W. Pritchett & Asif Farrukhi*

Sara Shaguftah

THE SKIES OWE ME MY MOON

Our tears were made into eyes  
we played tug-of-war with our storms  
and became our own mourning

When the stars call out  
the earth hears more than the sky  
I loosened the hair of Death  
and stretched out on a lie

Sleep played marbles  
with my eyes  
The evening endured  
two-faced colors  
The skies owe me my moon

I am a lamp in Death's hand  
On the wheel of births  
I see Death's chariot  
My human being is buried  
in the earths

Lift up your head from  
humble prostrations  
Death has left  
a child  
in my lap.

A DEBT

My father was naked  
I took off my clothes  
and gave them to him  
The earth too was naked  
I branded it  
with my house  
Shame too was naked                    [...]

I gave it eyes  
To thirst I gave a sense of touch  
And in the flower-beds of lips  
I sowed the one who goes away

The seasons were wandering, carrying  
the moon  
I branded the seasons  
and set the moon free

From the smoke of a funeral pyre  
I made a human  
and opened my mind before him—  
his word which he chose at birth—  
and he said  
I see a wonder in your womb.

When the fire moved away from my  
body  
I heated up my sins

Even after I was a mother  
I became a virgin  
and my mother too became a virgin,  
now you are the wonder of a virgin  
mother

I'll burn all the seasons on a funeral  
pyre  
I blew a soul into you  
I snap my fingers  
in the rhythm of your seasons

What will dust think?  
Dust will think shadows  
and we will think dust—  
your denial gives life to me.

Shall we suffer the trees' curse  
or wear the rags of sorrows?

—*Translated by Frances W. Pritchett & Asif Farrukhi*