

ZEESHAN SAHIL

Karachi and Other Poems:
A Selection

Translator's Note

I WAS FIRST INTRODUCED to Zeeshan Sahil's poetry in 1992, when Frances Pritchett and Asif Farrukhi sent the *AUS* a preview of their upcoming anthology of translations, *An Evening of Caged Beasts*. At the time, I didn't see any of Sahil's original Urdu poems, but I recall being struck by the translations' disarming combination of succinctness, charm, and wit. The poems expressed a mood that deftly combined a childlike diction and cadence with a lurking sense of wizened adult scorn and irony. I was intrigued, and I kept my eye peeled for his work.

Three and a half years later, upon my return to the States from a research grant in Lahore, Professor Muhammad Umar Memon showed me a newly published collection of Sahil's poetry written in Karachi between May and August, 1995, entitled *Karāchī aur Dūsri Nazmēñ* (Karachi and Other Poems; Karāchī: Āj kī Kitābēñ, 1995). Each morning of my previous thirteen months in Pakistan had started with an assemblage of almost routine headlines announcing the murder, political one-upmanship, and civil carnage then raging in Karachi. My friends, my teachers, rickshaw drivers—everybody discussed Karachi daily. It was a city being torn apart piece by bloody piece. Parties and individuals were parlaying death and despair into the most perverse forms of political capital. Although there was no dearth of hand-wringing and noble rhetoric, Karachi seemed day by day only to be confirming the loss much earlier of a moral cause. From the perspective of an outsider trying to gaze into Karachi, there was little ultimately to be done besides shaking one's head and trying to move on. And always talking to one's friends.

Sahil's *Karachi* poems are so successful—so endearing and so poignant—precisely because they seek out the observer's unresolvable sense of fatalism and outrage, and use them as a sympathetic embarkation point for a deepened understanding. Never pedantic, always gentle, the combination I first saw in Sahil of the child's fairy-tale wonder and the adult's hardened cynicism is here the figural substrate for the expression of what headlines and outsiders on

their own must always miss: the complex interplay of simple hope and resigned despair, born of the horrifying conditions of Karachi's civil existence.

I'd like to thank Zeeshan Sahil for providing me with a list of his favorite twenty or so poems from the *Karachi* book, and Prof. Memon, for going over my translations in detail and making numerous helpful suggestions, as well as for his eagerness to discuss translation and poetry in general. If, as Zeeshan Sahib states in his Foreword, poems do not belong to the poet alone, then even less so do these translations belong to me. My sincere thanks to both these gentlemen.

G.A.C.

Foreword

LIKE LOVE, poetry too is a personal endeavor. When a poem begins to make room for itself in the poet's heart, it's as if that endeavor commences. And when the poem transfers itself, letter by letter, word by word, onto paper, other people too become a part of the process—they become participants in the poetry. But despite their participation, the poet still considers the poetry his alone.

The poet's selfishness cannot remain steadfast, neither in love nor poetry. Sometimes he is compelled to entrust his personal possession to others. He is compelled to pull together everything in his poetry and in his love, compelled to include everyone.

These poems, written for Karachi, are such common property—a world not just mine alone, but everyone's. The poems do not belong just to me; they belong also to those who live with me in my home; to my friends, without whom not a single word would have been completed; to the children, whose small words sustain both Karachi and the entire world outside Karachi; and to all the scared and brave people of Karachi, whose determination to live on there is the greatest reason these poems were written.

These are not poems for people of any one color, or of any one nation, or of any one language: these are everyone's poems. Perhaps they are not even for Karachi, but rather are for all those cities that have at some point either faced conditions like those in Karachi, or are now facing them, or, God forbid, may yet face them.

All the poems were written between the last week of May and the first week of August, 1995, while living in Karachi. This brief period will perhaps not stand out as any special time in world history, but for those who live in Karachi there is now nothing of any greater significance than this, that even more than within world history, they must live within their own city, and that despite all manner of adverse conditions, they must keep both their city and themselves alive. These poems are just such an effort—a dream whose other name is Karachi.

Along with my poems, this book also presents the drawings of artist and

journalist Nafisa Shah, drawings which constitute another creative expression of Karachi's afflictions, and which maintain their own individual significance even apart from the poems. I am grateful to her for permission to include them. This book, then, is the joint effort of two concerned people who belong to Karachi.

—ZEESHAN SAHIL
Karachi
August, 1995

ROME

I want to know—
When Rome was burning
and Nero was playing his flute,
who were the people there for it all?
Who had his ear turned to the flute?
And whose eyes
glimmered in the light of the fire?

I want to know—
Who were the people praising Nero's flutistry?
And who were fanning the embers?

How many comfortable homes were offered up to that fire?
How many magnificent buildings
turned to heaps of ash?
How many people's bones
scattered like dust?
How many beautiful bodies
melted like candles of wax?
How many epic dramas,
how many tragic melodies,
how many songs of disappointment and love,
how many impressions of hope and heart-suspending allure
passed into nothingness?
Dismayed by the fire's ferocity,
how many dreams vanished from the page of being?

I want to see
the record of that decimation of Rome.
Or perhaps somewhere to find
just a list of the people, the structures, the things [...]

destroyed in that fire for all time.
Or even just to know—
When the conflagration broke out,
who were the people there with Nero,
and who were there with Rome?

POEM

What a mistake.
Today I had some pressing decisions to make
about the sky.
Again I had to settle
the gait of the stars and the route the clouds
take when they commute.
How far the river should be
from the city.
And how far the sea can be from my home.
Starting afresh
I had to plumb
the depth of your eyes
and guess as well at the emptiness of my heart.
The anxiety of those who live in the city.
To discover the reason
the fire flies into its rage
every day.

A big mistake.
I didn't go to the bridge on the river.
I went instead to stand at the bus stop.
Amid the crazy rush of people,
the din of their horns,
nothing made sense.

A window—not in the waiting room at the train station,
but in a small dark cell—
tight iron mesh, outward jutting.
I began to look outside.
Stale bread lying in the lane,
empty fruit juice boxes;
aside from the refuse
I didn't see a thing.

[...]

To crown it all:
Instead of stuffing cotton in my ears,
instead of enjoying my tea at my desk
and getting something written,
I sat down in front of the door
leading out.
Two gunshots. And my heart
began wildly fluttering
like small birds.
Forgetting everything else
I began to ponder the city
that, without you,
without cease,
terrifies me.

RISKY INVESTMENT

If the traffic keeps moving
from morning till night,
if after work people want
to leave their homes for the beach
and the beach for the moon,
if they get there after midnight,
then for that entire day
you too can do
whatever you like.
Walking about, hands in pockets,
you can buy everything.
If it happens not to be the end of the month,
if nothing else has claimed your cash,
you can buy a wood-frame mirror you really don't need
or a plastic-coated jumbo Mona Lisa print
or a green mermaid made of marble.

But if the very next morning,
on the road that takes you to work,
numbers of people, sinful and innocent,
without distinction, are to die,
if the newspaper delivery truck,
along with newspapers and driver,
is to be torched,
and the city [...]

The other isn't even seen
past midnight.

The earth turns circles
all about one star;
the other eternally waits
for a moon.

Rain pleases one;
fog-shrouded morning the other.

Eruptions on the surface of the sun
or some extraordinary alteration in space
makes one of the two stars
falter.

It is caught and set right by the other.
In a state of extreme danger
both stars
abandon their places
and begin to fall
downward.

If one of them
falls into water
and the other into dry desert,
they both still make the attempt
to find their way back to each other;
they both continue to gleam
until the very end.

MATCHBOX

Children who live
both inside Karachi and out
are always asked:
Where was the Quaid-e Azam born?
In Karachi, the children say.
And where is his tomb?
In Karachi, they say again.
But one child
does not so respond to this question so frequently asked
and instead, he says: [...]

The Quaid-e Azam's tomb is found
in a matchbox.
To prove his point
he takes from his school bag
some empty matchboxes
and shows them to his teacher.

Merewether Tower, Frere Hall,
Bunder Road, Empress Market,
and after all the rest
the Quaid-e Azam's tomb
—the teacher sees for herself—
it's all there
in the matchbox.

OUR KING

Our King
—whoever he is—
in no way displeases us.
We never get angry
at anything he says.
It is enough
that he looks after us
no matter our condition;
enough that he shows some small care
for the depression of our land;
enough, too, that he always maintains
some feel for the heights of our sky.
When, upon our heads, the circumambient sky
becomes so high that
raising both hands
we cannot touch it,
he spreads out his black cloak
and we forget everything
in the darkness.
When the earth
gets so hot
it burns our feet,
he seats us upon his royal carpet;
sitting there
we become lost

[...]

So he takes her.

Like Cinderella
a queen can become a poor girl as well.
After her step-mother and -sisters
have left for the wedding feast
she can sit alone and weep, as well.
Then by fairy's favor,
becoming a princess
till midnight, she too
goes to the palace
and with her prince
 dances on and on.
But then she loses her beautiful slipper
on the palace steps—
she must flee.
Even after the magic wears off,
with the aid of the slipper
her prince searches until he finds her
and takes her away to the palace.
That is, he makes her the queen.
A queen is just like this.
Just like a fairy tale.

The queen's children
 do not applaud
the burning cars and buses they see.
The queen's servants
 are not terror struck
by the explosions they hear.
And even the queen herself
in such circumstances does not, as we do,
drink glucose dissolved in water;
does not, as we do,
take headache pills on an empty stomach.

On a wall in our drawing room
in a plain drab frame
she goes on smiling forever
—at what, no one knows—
just like a queen.

ONE MAN

Every day
upon emerging
from his incomplete dreams,
after getting his newspaper and cup of tea,
one man
 thinks over
the day about to begin.

How many people were killed
in the city by yesterday evening?
He doesn't know them.
Two doctors, a hockey player,
a political worker, a milkman,
and who knows who else.

One man doesn't go into a lot of details.
In order to distract himself
from the way of things in the city
he turns on the TV.
The screen shows the Israeli police
dragging Palestinian women
down a street.
With the aid of armored vehicles
some people in Sarajevo
cross the street.

I am much more fortunate than they,
one man thinks and
again turns to the TV.
Michael Jackson's new album
has been released.
Pleased with this, one man
turns off the TV
and begins to sing old songs.

He forgets
where he was supposed to go today.
To work,
to meet his friends,
to meet his lover—
one man thinks

[...]

about promises always made,
and fears
the thought of their not being kept.

He looks outside;
the way into town lies deserted.
Undiluted silence on the bridge.
Suddenly, from somewhere
begins the sound of gunfire.
One man
has returned to his world;
again he assembles
his incomplete dreams.

THE GIRL IN THE RED HAIRBAND

In a city like this
where every morning
commences with
a new procession
of frightened faces,
the girl in the red hairband
indifferently filling the tea kettle
looks so sweet
you can't even imagine.

Every day
in a neighborhood rife with strikes,
blind shootings, and despondent people,
she goes on adding salt to the rice,
lost in her own world.
Shaking her wet hands
outside the kitchen window,
she goes on dispensing
delight
like drops of water
among her neighbors.

The birds stop in at her flat
singing as always.
Despite the city's unrest
abundant deep gray and white clouds

[...]

watch her put sugar
in teacups
and move on, content.

And then the stars
one by one
begin to take her in view.
Finishing all her work
the girl in the red hairband
looks down.
Watching me write
she whistles and
hides when I jump.
I look at her again, she laughs,
and thinking nothing at all about the city
she closes her window
until the next morning.

CITY

You are a moon.
Circling endlessly
about the earth
you've grown weary.
Shining incessantly among the stars
you've had enough.
Forever begging light from the sun
you've begun to feel ashamed.

Clear from so far away
your milk-white borders
are turning the color of dirt.
Again now you ought
to dip into the sea
and bathe.

But whenever this
is your intent,
the sea begins to pull far away from you;
night comes upon completion,
morning begins.

[...]

But in some city somewhere,
beyond the deep seven seas,
you are always to be seen.
Gazing at the small old woman
who sits on your rugged surface
spinning thread upon her wheel,
people continue to laugh.
Don't be upset.
They're not laughing at you.

When by reason of deep black clouds
or otherwise,
you are not seen
for many days,
your friends
take their broken boat
and set out in search of you.

They worry about your cheerless laugh,
about your glittering tears as well.
As your tears fall
they raise their palms skyward
attempting to stop them
from falling into the sea
or soaking into the soil.
Even still, half a drop
makes it through
into the sand
down to the bottom.

We discover this some time later
when on our days off
like children
at the seashore
with the wet sand
we build bus stops,
supermarkets, buildings tall and low,
all manner of houses, large and small,
with windows and doors.

Suddenly, to adorn them all,
amid the sand we begin to find
multihued seashells

[...]

and radiant pearls.

Overjoyed
at this great kindness of yours
we search for you
everywhere,
but see you nowhere,
not even circling the earth.

POEM

How does happiness
begin?

By always watching
flowing water.
By watching drifting clouds
and trying to touch them.

We can't touch clouds.
But watching them
we can begin
happiness.

FRIEND

I'm all alone;
befriend me,
says the city
and extends its hands
toward us.

We see its hands
and start to fear.
They are burned
to the elbows.

In such condition
who could possibly take
someone's hand?
How could anyone

[...]

become friends?

We turn away
and begin to walk somewhere
far from the city.

Watching us withdraw
perhaps the city itself begins to fear.
In haste it starts to follow
and calls out,
Take me with you.

Hiding its hands inside a white cloth
it calls out again.
We see it coming along
and we stop.
So does the city.

We look at its feet
and close
our eyes.
Its toes
are covered with blisters;
the soles of its feet, its heels
bleed.

We say to the city,
You can't come with us
without proper footwear—
canvas shoes, woolen socks.
And
we set out
on our way.

Hearing our words
the city's eyes well up with tears.
We don't see them.
What happens to its heart
when we leave?
We don't worry about it.
The city's grief, how lonely it must be
without us—
leaving it behind, on our way

[...]

we have no idea at all.

We are unaware:
whenever ill befalls us
the city, like our friends,
is troubled.
Wherever we may be
it runs after us
upon its wounded feet
to save us.

Finding us nowhere
it raises
its
hands in supplication
burned to the elbows
and says a prayer
for our well-being.

NUDRAT

Nudrat is a little girl
who tells me stories.
The story of Nadira,
the story of Peepu,
the story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears.
I ask Nudrat:
Who are the three bears?
Mama Bear, Papa Bear and Baby Bear.
She knows how to tell even more stories.
When she's in the mood
she goes on telling one right after another.
Nudrat tells me nothing
of Karachi.
She has no news for me
of Islamabad.
She still doesn't know even the names
of the political parties working to maintain national unity
—more than a thousand of them—
nor of the imbecile national leaders
—more than two dozen of them.
And for now

I don't even want to ask her.
I'll just keep listening to her tell stories.
THE DEATH OF KHAIR-UN-NISA

Khair-un-Nisa died
at home
the result of gunfire
above to below
or the reverse.
Maybe
she was coming with a cup of hot tea
for her son
and didn't make it to his room.
Being shot
in the chest or neck or head
or all over
she collapsed right in the courtyard
and could not get up.
The pieces of the cup made it to the trash can
and Khair-un-Nisa's body
lay on the rug
until the photographer had left.
Her family
saw her bloody body and wept.
Shot by those on the Right
or those on the Left.
No one lifted a finger to find out.
Not a single responsible citizen
mourned her death in any paper.
From bullets fired without reason
another killing without reason.
The senseless death of an average citizen
or maybe some other thing.
You are free;
express your sorrow any way you please.
Slogans.
Newspapers.
Or perhaps blind shooting
from morning until nightfall
by reason of which
Khair-un-Nisa died
and you, me, all of us ...

THE BOSS

(for Sajjad Ali)

(I)

Every week
the Boss sings the Top of the Pops'
number one song
and we all start to waltz
to the sound of his voice.
He sings
and on his command
we begin to greet
the dancers and the singers,
those who die and those who kill.

Wearing a fat gold chain
around his neck
he goes jogging in Safari Park
completely unafraid.
We can't buy five kilos of flour
from the store that stays closed
because of him;
we can't leave our lane.

He is faxed congratulations
on his birthday.
He eats pineapple cake
and laughs out loud
whether it's funny or not.
The very next day
recalling a friend
we write a poem of mourning,
light sticks of incense,
eat gram blessed with benediction
and start to cry.

In open expanse free of pollution
without us, the Boss
draws deep his breaths.
But on his say-so
uttering not a word
we hold our breath

[...]

for good.

(2)

The Boss delivers a harangue.
Everyone tunes it out,
but it continues.
Now some people open one ear
and push his words out
with the other.
The speech goes on.
Endless listening; people begin to get bored.
Mouths agape they start to yawn.
They fall asleep.
The Boss goes on talking
non-stop.
People can't go home
before the speech is over.
Everyone waits.
When it's finished they might get on with their work
or might go home.
But should anyone do anything before it's over
—stir, or even speak—
the Boss will get upset.
He can give speeches,
but he can do a whole lot more.
You understand?
Sure do, Boss.

INDEPENDENCE

Before our freedom
or after
by the time we grew up
half the buildings you see in Karachi
were built by the Brits.
They get the credit
inside the city
for some of the spires and bridges too.
Despite renaming most of
the streets Karachiites traverse,
they go by their former names.
Even after so many years have passed, [..]

Clifton, Hawkes Bay, Napier Road
are all still called just that.
With relentless effort
throughout Karachi
a forest of buildings is being grown;
the people who live there
go at times to Manora, the Quaid's tomb,
or Safari Park for a picnic.
Karachi people
generally picnic on a day when
atop the Civic Center, the Assembly Building,
or Tughlaq House,
instead of the Union Jack
our nation's flag
waves in freedom.

YESTERDAY

We can say much
about yesterday and
today.
Yesterday we were a sun;
today just
a leeching moon.

Yesterday we were a tree;
today a cruel ax
hafted with its wood.

Yesterday we were a festive boat;
today upon the ocean floor
an ill-lit refuge
for crabs and snails.

But can such words
lessen the shock
of what
we just don't want to hear?

Yesterday we were a body in good health;
today a drying corpse.

KARACHI

Karachi
is a forest
where you see darkness, noise,
and a thousand trees of fear
conversing with the sky
in a voice raised so high
that no one living
inside or outside the city
can even hear another's screams.

In truth, Karachi now
isn't a city at all.
It's rather a cry choked out
in a state of mortal peril
briefly echoed all around.

No one has even the slightest idea
that this might also be
the cry of someone alone
calling for help.
Karachi's taken for
an inhuman throng
by those who don't come to assist.
Or a crowd of the blind
who get hungry
and are fed only rice pudding;
who cry out
and are made to sit through speeches;
they take each other by the hand
or not,
they move,
and draw gunfire into the air.

But now in Karachi
the firing is no longer confined just to the air.
Bullets and the sounds they make
are showing up in people's dreams.
Karachi, though, is not a city of dreams.
There's just one place to wait for dreams to come.
For our convenience
we use it

[...]

as a seaport
or even as a makeshift laboratory.
Where we
perform no experiments on human bodies
as everyone knows.
For that, rabbits are used
or white rats
whose fecundity
upon approaching the limits of safety
draws rat poison
and cats
from the capital.

WORK

From dawn till dusk
a poet
should plow the field of his dreams
without stop
with no team of oxen
with only a termite-ridden stick.
If people laugh
watching him put down countless lines
back and forth in his salt-stricken land
he should think nothing of it
and look for some other work.
At first
it'll be hard on the poet.
He can't fashion raw leather
into shoes for all manner of feet;
nor can he make gunny sacks
into an outfit for anyone.
He can't make even the decorative arches
placed on the stage at political meetings.
Nor even the rattan chair
the politician might take home
after the meeting.
Poor poet:
with his trembling hands
he can't make even the cardboard hats
for the meeting's attendees.
Should it rain the day of the meeting

[...]

the poet
calling to mind
the nation's people forever soaked
and the politician cowered under an umbrella
will laugh for no good reason
and as usual
will do no work.

QUTB-UD-DIN RETURNS

Two and a half years after
his self-imposed exile
during the late-begun monsoon
Qutb-ud-Din returns.
No one welcomes him.
As soon as his sisters see him
they shut the door.
But his grief-stricken mother
opens it again
and he goes inside.
His mother starts to cry.
His brothers leave the house.
And both his sisters hide
inside their tiny room.
Like his brothers
they too forgive him.
They then all eat dinner together
and go to sleep.
The water from the late-starting rains
begins to come into the house.
His whole family and he
start to bail it out.
Workers paid an unusual wage
spot him
and take him with them.
When the water pooled inside the house
is finally back outside
the rain stops
and the sun comes out.
Tied inside an empty wheat sack
in the form of a lifeless body
Qutb-ud-Din returns.

BIRDS

One bird soars
the other learns to speak.
One bird sings
the other awaits.
One bird dwells in shade
the other moves in sunshine.
One bird likes
the rains on the banks of the Amazon
the other, the winds from Siberia.
One inhabits a cage of colorful bars
the other, a somber house of cardboard.
At dusk they swing on a bougainvillea branch
lighter than their combined weight
and seeing the squirrels dart all around
they part to sit far away.
Later, oh so slowly,
again they begin to draw near.

WHEEL

Love
is a cat
that licks its wounds
after the rain.

Or a princess
who lives in a castle of salt
and cannot cry.

Or a blossom
you can't put in a vase
after it's been touched.

Love can also be a rabbit
whose two eyes
have been plucked out with a knitting needle.

Or a small bear
that goes on playing with hives
after the honey's run out.

Or a wheel of wood
turning its fashioner
all his life
along one particular roundness.

—*Translated by G.A. Chaussée*