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Selections from
Death Sentence in Two Languages

SOBIA

Outside Sobia's tent from a willow's half-severed bough fluttered a white scarf whose chastity I penetrated with my arrow. Sobia was in a dream that she saw her scarf red with blood and bemoaned the rent made in the scarf, and came out of her tent and said to me, We are also versed in sanguinariness. I said, Sobia I have brought you the willow's twin branch and these verses:

In the woods behind the wine cellar
I
wished to seize Sobia for union
She turned into a fawn
and I into a sniggle
Sobia became a nilgai
and I a swamp
Sobia a lioness
and I a grass-covered pit
When I had
taken Sobia by force
Sobia
became a tree in the woods behind the wine cellar
From a bough of Sobia's tree
I made an arrow
and rent the scarf
fluttering outside Sobia's tent
the white scarf
that was fluttering outside Sobia's reinforced tent

Sobia divided my twin branch and said, I shall make
twins of your song:

Your arrow
is a tree as well as a bird
to which I sing a lullaby
which you rouse from its sleep
whom I provide the nest's comfort
and you the quiver's prison
which I perch on my hand
and you in someone's heart
Your quiver is full of nightmares
therefore a bird
sought a nest in my scarf—
in my impeccable white scarf
on which I had yet
to embroider my name

I said, Sobia silk heals many wounds and your thimble shall not allow the needle to seek union with your fingers, but when you shall be drowning in some well, of a certain I shall weave for you a rope of nettles, even if the wounds on my hand lose their count. Sobia said, Perhaps there shall be no count of wounds on your corpse either, and your ransom seekers shall remain unable to identify the final mark. I said, Sobia do not put a curse on my ransom seekers. Sobia said, Non-nomads do not fall under our curses. I said, Let us do the dance of curses:

The curses that fall none
and the heart that falls to one
the heart that falls to one
like a vagrant ship
that berths itself to some port
where it is pillaged

My love
do not put a curse on me
I must kiss your lips
Do not plunder my ship
I must carry the loveliest girl in the woods behind the
wine cellar across the sea

Then I said, Now we shall do the dance of hands:

The hands that dance on
firm
and supple Sobia's
arms and shoulders
On sorrowful and somnolent Sobia's
arms and shoulders
the hands that dance
even though they be severed
Still I shall
dance with Sobia
until she forgets her sorrow
Sobia whom I never kissed

Then Sobia said, Do you know the dance of the
diamond mine? and placing her hands on my
shoulders joined me:

When I shall die
with a diamond slab Sobia will make my tombstone

The woods behind the wine cellar
thronged with thieves
Sobia do not forfeit me to the chisels
I wish to be interred
in the diamond mine—

in the woods behind the wine cellar
The diamond mine
which I discovered—
my Sobia's heart

Worn out from the dance we sat on the ground.
Sobia let her hair loose and watched her fluttering
white scarf awhile, then began crooning:

You smelt the Moon's Flower
listened to the song
for the vine pickers
whose wine
if sprinkled on the desert floor
the showers would never end

My love
where shall you find a vase big enough
to take the Moon's Flower

You appeared in my dream the other day, I said to
her. To see nomads in the dream is the augur for
dying young, Sobia said, and began to comb her
hair. As I saw her fastening it with a red riband I
said:

A bird called heart
steals a lock of your hair
and makes its nest
with it

In the waning moon
Sobia washes her hair in the virgins' lake
and ties it
into four tight plaits
without knowing
that the heart has four chambers

Sobia adorned her hair with russet and black blossoms and talked to me. She said, In these two colors alone lies all of luck. She kneads her bread with flowers and night-dew. She said, No mare shall be lured away from the pasture of love, even with a harness studded with the stars from the sky. She said, The heart is a dense forest, and God makes its abode in forests rather than in houses of worship. She said she belonged to the bani-Uroos whose girls become even lovelier in winter. She said, In winter the men of bani-Uroos fortify themselves in their tents and send their women out to beg in thick fog and snow. She said, The girls of bani-Uroos do not seek charity but the indemnity of their charm. She said, The beauty of the heavens leaves something to be desired without the sight of a bird in air. She said, Fortunate are the nomad girls whose mothers bore them away from the tent and the caravan. She said, The darlings of your poets do not meet my beauty and grace even half way, and still no poet writes verses for me that would rend my heart in two. She said, No one split even a plain brick for me. She said, When a funeral procession shall be passing over a bridge, someone under the bridge will love me for the first time; perhaps it will be you; the memory of your kiss shall distress me for days, like a mare possessed, her rights to the pasture revoked. She said, I was

singing one night when the tent caught fire. She said, I did not break my song; song and fire are free like nomads, and must not be put out in the middle. She said, I am consumed by grief, fetch me two birds from somewhere. Sacrifice one to me, and dyeing its wings in the blood of the first, set the other free.

After the dance Sobia said, The nomads are the children of Adam from the woman whom he experienced before Eve. She said, Fortunate are those unencumbered by a history; for ages death remained the punishment for harbouring nomads, so they never found refuge in history; the nomads' boat never sailed in the waters of history. Our tents were not tolerated in a place for more than a night. Sobia said, We were put to sift the sands of history for gold dust and our life wages were arrogated; even so we nomads invented combs, horseshoes and the fortune of man.

The following day when I met Sobia she said, Today is the Day of Serpent, find me some serpent to kill that I may be lucky for a year. I said, Come let us search for the serpent that bit the lover of a nomad girl at the precise moment of climax. Then I asked Sobia, What if we could not find a snake or failed to kill one? Sobia said, There is a physic for every failing; then I would be obliged to have a serpent tattooed on my body. I said, Sobia where shall you have it tattooed. Sobia said, Wherever you may wish. I said, Then I shall tattoo on your body a dragon that shall coil around your heel, your calf, your thigh, your hips, your back and your breasts. Shall I start from your right heel or left. Sobia said, From the right, because I have a mole on my left thigh that I don't ever wish to lose. I kissed the mole and also Sobia's lips. The dragon that I could not tattoo kept tossing and turning between our bodies.

The following day Sobia gave me a string. She said, Now I am tied to you. I said, Sobia if you wished you could also entangle the bands of the rainbow in two humble leaves of grass. Sobia said, I do not wish to inculcate myself with anything that is not punishable with death. Then Sobia took the lace out of my shoe and tying it tightly around her neck said, Love spells doom and infamy. Then we began the dance of doom and infamy.

After the dance Sobia said, Your seaports are barren, desolate and arid; your shores are tortuous and covered with ravage and ruin; your mares are proud and your horses gelded; your crops are wild and your harvesting unfaithful; you who scavenge on the wreckage

of ships, what do you seek of me? I said, The eyes that have acquired vision must not break a heart. Sobia said, Standing under a lynched body you shall also sing, merely because there is nobody to avenge your blood. I said, Sobia I only sing that I may put up with myself. And why do you love? Sobia asked. That I may put up with another, I said. Sobia said, But I can't leave my tent when there's a full moon. I said, Then we must await the eclipse, perhaps. Sobia said, The wait extinguishes lamps; we nomads drink water from falls and milk from cows and commit no trespass in the night. I said, Sobia do you discern between night and day even in sinning; does your name change from night to day? Sobia said, My name changes from tent to tent, and on the Sabbath I burden myself with neither a name nor singing. Sobia said, Name is a brook that turns to ice in snowfall, yet a few must seek in it a refuge for their lives. I said if I could not escape with my life would she be able to chant the chronicle of my assassination on the bonfire of her tent. Sobia said, Nubile nomad girls are sometimes flogged for chanting true songs. I asked if she would be stripped and flogged. Sobia said, It depends how ribald the chant was, but forget this for now, today a nomad was exonerated of the charges against him, let us now do the dance of his freedom.

My hand remained in Sobia's hand after the dance. She said, Let me tell your fortune: you shall take the souls into the cellars of love, lilies and roses are on your feet and your ankle is fettered with the snake that has swallowed itself, if you reach a heart before death, both you and death shall be annulled, and if you get there after the chariot has passed, the queen of the dead shall make her robe with a manuscript of your dream; someone shall tie you to a black column and a white one and your hand shall not reach the tree whose fruit you could turn into jewels with your touch, in your sky a star shall always swerve and sway, until you shall save it from being crushed under the chariot wheels, your quiver shall be full of poison-tipped arrows and you shall keep practicing your aim on an image that appears to you in a mirror that a naked girl will be holding in her hands; one day you shall set free the red rose from her hair and the gold chain from her neck, and put in her hands a double-edged sword, or a scales in which she could weigh souls, but you are the black sun that causes lunacy in those who spurn it; before you are hanged from your heels and lynched, someone would have loved you once.

I said to Sobia, Now let me tell your fortune: You are the disrobed

dream with a gold crown in its hands, but you are tied to your heart with a corroded chain, although if you wish you could harness a black and a red lion in your chariot, when silence departs from the rose you shall be able to tuck it in your hair; you shall entangle the threads of men's fortunes, but no blossom shall be embroidered on your shawl; one day with your image a new tarot card will be made, but you shall not get any court cards from the suits of heart or sword or diamond or spade and without stripping yourself naked you may not play the trump, but you might still stud with ivory and emerald the willow tree from which I shall be hanged; you shall build with your image a bridge on a river of mirrors and then forget to walk over it; even so the length to which you wish to dance the earth, the water, the fire and the air are yours.

When I met Sobia again she was singing:

“My two eyes
 My two feet
 O grief
 From my eyes
 to my feet
 from my feet
 into clay
 from clay
 pass unto death”¹

I said to her, Sobia even grief you send away on a journey. Sobia said, If I touched a black stallion with my fingers, it would turn white. I said, Couldn't you give your fingers wings, to me they seem like the swallows that die in confinement. Sobia said, Perhaps you could fill up your sky if you named every part of my body on a bird and sent it flying, but I am a nomad and for the star no word exists in our speech yet. I said, Sobia how are your eyes called? Sobia said, What use would be your knowing the name for my eyes; you cannot lay stars on the sacrificial stone. I said, But in honor of your eyes and the stone I could dance by your side.

When we met again Sobia said, Of the slaves nomad girls are the

¹ Gypsy folksong.

cheapest, and of all purchased things freedom is the dearest; hedge my grave with thistles that my soul might never dream of escape ever, and do not put too great a store in love that love could begin any time you offered someone a fresh, red apple, the heart is beggared by a fire; perchance your love's moist sheet burns with me do not imagine that it could not be studded with stars from the sky or that in its flowerbeds of earth would not have found room, the heart is only an innocent frost-bitten bird whom you cover with the scarlet and white wool of your love; but if some star of the sky froze to death, what purpose did this white and scarlet wool serve? Life is not the nomad's tent that is easily erected and easily pulled down, but today I went to read a builder's fortune and filched the plan of a house from him; this house shall be made of stone slabs that weigh less than tears; these slabs shall be joined with honey and blood; its walls shall be arrayed with mirrors whose embrace will never end; in its courtyard black roses shall blossom whose silence will keep endeavoring to break a heart; I shall assign to myself three floors, I shall remain clothed on one, unbloused on the second, and on the third I shall not pollute my skin with dress; and on every floor there shall be three chambers, I shall see you standing in one, seated in the second and supine in the third. Then she handed me the plan and said, It's my heart's wish to do the dance of the stairs whose mention I forgot.

Sobia disappeared dancing into the clump of willows. When I reached her she was peering into a deserted well. Then she asked me, Is this water imprisoned here or is this its abode? I said, Water has a nomadic existence. Sobia said, But not the rope attached to the bucket; this is the same rope with which a nomad was strung up. Then she pulled up the bucket and handing me the rope said, Today I shall do the dance of water and death, lower me into the well in the bucket. I kept lowering the bucket and Sobia into the well, until she reached the surface of the water and I could no longer make out whether her eyes were a light shade of green or dark. Then I lowered the bucket further, until the water came up to Sobia's neck. Then she began her dance which I discerned from the motion of her arms and her hair and experienced it in the rope in my hand from the movement of her feet. Then Sobia covered her hands in water and bent her head to wet her tresses. After she had been motionless for a long time I began to pull up the bucket. Impetuous man! she shouted, and I realized that she had bared her upper torso. Sobia's shoulders and breasts were so pink and glowing that I thought they were made from mother-of-pearl, and that no

word existed in my language to express the form and beauty of her breasts. Until they came up level with my face, I could make the resolve before planting a kiss that if ever I held the reins of power I should have the selfsame flowers embossed on my coins. When she came out of the well Sobia said, I thought that perchance you might let go of the rope. I said, Sobia I hold your body dear too, and also the rope used to lynch.

One day Sobia said, I have told you several things, now let us solve riddles. Sobia said, What lives with its head under- and feet above ground? I said I could not guess. Sobia said, Who are the four princesses who chase each other without ever catching up with one another? I said I could not guess. Sobia said, Who walks over water and underneath it, and over and underneath the forest floor? I said I could not guess. Sobia said, There is little point in the game if you cannot guess the onion, the windmill and the young girl carrying water on her head in a wooden bucket across a wooden bridge; but today I wish to do the dance of solved and unsolved riddles. I danced with Sobia and danced until I had overcome my grief at not solving the riddles.

The following morning when I went to see Sobia, her tent had disappeared. I did not go in search of her as the earth was strewn with obscure riddles and the sky with dead swallows.

IF MY VOICE IS NOT REACHING YOU

If my voice is not reaching you,
add to it the echo—
echo of ancient epics

And to that—
a princess

And to the princess—your beauty

And to your beauty—
a lover's heart

And in the lover's heart
a dagger

POEM

You arrive
daily decked out in a new outfit
to teach your alluring eyes
a new language

Between your lowered neck
and your shoulder
I find a new clasp
for my heart

Looking out the window
your eyes
rest on my face

Pronouncing the unfamiliar phrase
my tongue is caught
between your teeth

Through the window
perhaps
we could walk far
towards the sea
ignoring the throng of scrapmongers
scrapping a ship

Perhaps we could cross over the bridge
that has been condemned
Sit in benches
where the paint has not dried

YOU LIVE IN LOVELY ORBS

You live in lovely orbs
A sphericity
conscientiously
holds your hair

An ornate necklace
truckles your neck

The unfaltering watch
is attached to your wrist

A dainty belt
embraces your waist

Your feet are girdled
in lace-up
shoes to tread our earth

I shall not mention the hidden orbs
that might have you in their hold
Allow them the advantage
that is theirs

In my mind in play
I never disarrayed you

You live in lovely orbs
And I in tortuous lines
How may I possibly serve you
except
fetch you in my mouth the ball
you kicked

ZARMEENA

Zarmeena whom it was given me to discover with the compass and the astrolabe, addressed me in three languages, and also in an aquatic language yet to be contrived. At the Promulgation of the Canon of Nature's Mimicry prohibiting food and drink, the schedules of manufactories and lyceums had been revised, and Zarmeena, who would not have cared much for the discrepancies on the terrestrial domain, loyal to the old calendar, reached the lyceum at a time when the books and the walls had all been locked. I had not left the lyceum that day. I was on the verge of being locked inside when I saw her and she returned me my collection of poems. Oblivious of myself, when handing her the book, I could not, in either language, present it to her. Even so, she relied on my pledge of the Aquatic God and kept it in her custody: she unfolded several poems and chanced to know in History that poets were not loved; and that it was still difficult for one whose heart and star

were made with water. But her eyes, which require no preface, could not desist from the question that if her boat would best others on the First Morn, would I dedicate to her my new collection of verse, keeping in view that she had disclosed to me the place from which the sea looked its most beautiful and where after bribing the guards I had spent a whole day. Zarmeena was not there that day. She did not wish my love of the sea apportioned. She was not there another day when I went to look her up in the holds of boats, and where the seamen eat. Even so, when she was turned out innocent from the bibliothèque, to console her I was there; within the walls of the painting exhibit I was locked with her and freed. The last time I walked away from her, she came with her carriage and found it most improper not to see me home. But she knew nothing of the garden of caged beasts and the heart of the city, adjacent. So she could have dropped me at will, anywhere. Before we could cross the bridge that separates mirth from sorrow in my city, she asked me a few questions, which everyone sooner or later asks, who would enter or break a relationship. Deciding not to take her too deep into the recesses of sorrow, without caring to ask when or where I next might see her, I asked to be dropped at the foot of the bridge. I never saw her again. Incessantly I searched for her at the steps of the Admiralty, near shops that sell sails, and in auberges near the sea. The blue ink that smeared her wrist one day during the lesson would keep reminding me I could have gathered her in a poem.

Zarmeena, if she is too near the sea, must needs feel obligated to me—for I could well have distanced her from the sea with the magnet's help.

WHOM NONE AWAITS

Whom none awaits
must not turn
back
until the last door is shut

Whom none awaits
must not stalk
fretfully
a lovely passageway
until it's deserted

Whom none awaits
 must not sever
 bloodied feet
 from the complete pilgrimage

Whom none awaits
 must not ask
 the price of a bouquet
 or the day, date or hour

THE GENRES OF POETRY

Without knowing that nomadism is a creed of life and among poetry's more difficult genres, he found his way to a tattered amphitheater and began to dream of funambulists; but his ropes were not yet woven when a non-nomad girl appeared before him who took him many light-years away from nomadism. This encounter exposed him to the shadow of light and blood and in a bird shop he priced the dream of a fledgling of exquisite plumage in maiden flight, until the spool of his voice flew away from his hands. The custodian of the bird shop pasted him to the wall of an edifice and from there, in exchange for cartage and a time-and-a-half allowance, he was taken to a cell where someone addressed him. The liveliest drop of blood in his body which sometimes disrobes in his eyes, is the voice of the girl he heard, and found out that paper blossoms, the glass vase, the brick wall, the wooden door, and even he himself, could speak, in the accent and language of his choice. He did not see the girl but like the lighthouse which the waves perhaps never reach, he saw how the sea lay, and the parts where it was turbulent. The live drop of blood which once answered to his fingers disappeared in his body of a sudden. From that moment he turned bitter, and now searched for an adversary. Ages later it dawned on him that both friend and foe are terms for a lost blessing. But for now he had no patience and set forth the charges against his father in his verses. This self-instilled enmity which solidified one day, allowed him to search in his father's eyes for the face of the girl he could pronounce mother, or not pronounce it. Around that time he was granted bail from the prison that was his home. Those who bailed him out introduced him to the pack of fifty-two fairies. The training in self-denial and his suicidal tendency brought out in him a gambler's keenness. He gambled

excessively but could not forfeit himself. Then he played a strange trick, becoming partners with a preceptress in life. The drop of blood that disrobed in his eyes was absorbed in the preceptress's white chalk. After some time, one day when she drew a fledgling in maiden flight, the picture flew away from the blackboard. When he learnt of the incident, he began to dream of nomad girls who can walk on air without tightropes—without knowing that this variety of nomadism is poetry's most complex genre.

I WAS TAKEN WITH AN INDIGO FLOWER

I was taken with an indigo flower. By that I allude to the girl I loved. I could also say her name but the world is crowded with people. I had met her on the twin bridges far away from my home that were inadvertently built side by side over a lake. Sometimes we would walk over a bridge together and sometimes over our separate bridges hold each other's hands. With my first wages I bought nails and between fixing the loosened planks of the bridge and composing a verse for her eyes, hammered a nail into the palm of my hand and realized I was not made of wood. In an internecine war perhaps that bridge was torched. I could never buy nails for another bridge again.

WHOM ONE LOVES

Whom one loves
must be conducted
out
of a fading city
on the last boat

With the beloved
one must cross over
a bridge
condemned to be razed

The syllables in a beloved name must
always be softened

The beloved must be shown around
an isle

abounding in live volcanoes

The beloved
must be first kissed
inside
a torture cell
in a salt mine

With the beloved
one must type
a memorandum
against all inequities in the world
whose pages
one must fling
out the hotel window
towards the swimming pool
come morning

HAD WE NOT SUNG THE SONG

We know
how meaningful
is the life
we live

We know
the mass of stones
that from our neglect
turned into things
whose beauty
our lives did not advance

That moment
we felt
our hearts
among the flowers put on the altar
as we walked in the parade
of wounded horses

Defeat is our God
We shall worship him in our deaths
We shall die the death

of a man in agony

Life would never have reckoned
what we sought of it
had we not sung the song

THE HOSTESS

You are a worthy hostess
You bring me the apple
with your teeth marks
and the blood-stained pomegranate
and a poem
and a knife
that cuts things askew

YOUR FINGERS

Your fingers
did not blow a kiss
to a man drowning in the mire
Did not close
the dead man's eyes

The knots
that your fingers could unravel
you cut away
with daggers
used for human sacrifice

Where your fingers pass
is the shade
that was once a tree

Your fingers
look lovely in the shade
and you
in the dark

In the dark
where there is a wounded bird

whose cage door
your fingers would never lift

ONCE THE FESTIVAL OF YOUR FLESH WAS OVER

Once the festival of your flesh was over
the images and the masks
were taken off
The ornamental arches were removed
and the foot-marks
were leveled with a pickaxe

Once the festival of your flesh was over
the trained beasts
returned with their masters
The soothsayers
were paid their due
A tent caught fire
and was put out with tears

Once the festival of your flesh was over
the venue for the next banquet
was settled
To explore a new island
paints were bought for the boats
And the shores were cleared
of dead seagulls

WE MUST FORGET

We must needs forget the brick
underneath which is the key to our home
broken in a dream

must forget
the kiss
that was caught in our throats like a fish-bone
and does not come out

We must forget the yellow
severed from the sunflower

as we dwelt on our afternoon

must forget
the man
who rolls out iron sheets
on his hunger

must forget the girl
who packs time
in medicine bottles

We must forget
that from the rubble
called the heart
anyone can be salvaged alive

Some words we must forget altogether
Humanity
for instance

HELL

After death I was interred in Hell

Someone had already taken up
the grave that I entered
It was the same man I had murdered
Real Hell begins
when the murderer and his victim are gathered in the
same grave

The Angels of Reckoning descended to the grave to
judge
the angels were naked
and my stomach turned at the sight
I held it down
I did not wish to soil my grave

The angels looked apprehensive
Perhaps they had not descended into a dual grave
before
To begin the questioning

one of the angels produced from his ear a coin
that had my profile on one face
and God's on the other
The angel tossed the coin
My face came up over God's on the floor of the grave
The angel who lost the toss settled down to begin
questioning
I drew my sword
The angels scampered out of my grave
I picked up the coin from the grave's floor
It was my first wages in Hell

"It was foolish of you to have raised the sword against
the Angels of Reckoning"
"It was foolish of me to have raised the sword against
you too, swine!"
"You could kill but not revile me!"
But this was false
I could not have murdered the same man twice
"Now you will hear from the Warden of Hell"

I lay in wait for the Warden of Hell
and pondered
this man seeking refuge from my wrath even in his
grave
what could have given him the courage to cross me
But on his neck the half-moon mark of the sword was
alive
and in the whole world only I could inflict such a
wound

Presently there was commotion
and the Warden of Hell entered our grave—
a rather civilized angel, and dressed

"Did you raise your sword against my angel?"
"Indeed he is the culprit, sir!"
My victim called out from the other end of the grave
although against an angel he should have sided with
man

"Could my sword wound an angel?"
"No"

“Could I kill the angel?”

“No”

“Could I be sentenced for a crime
that is impossible to commit?”

“I would not know”

“Who would?”

“God”

“Send for God!”

I knew that God would not dare come near me
God is afraid to set foot in a grave

The Warden of Hell left

“You drove away the Warden of Hell?”

“I shall also drive away Doomsday”

“It is past Doomsday”

I was grieved to learn it was past Doomsday and I had
no news

“You did not die on Doomsday,
Some did not live to Doomsday
God sent them to Hell directly”

In Hell I took out cards from my pocket
and began playing patience
until the deck rotted away
Then I divided my memory in fifty-two
and began anew

One day a slothful angel
sneaked into our grave to rest
I pressed my sword to his neck

“I will murder you”

“You cannot kill me, but take the sword away, it
frightens me”

“Take me outside”

“It is unheard of”

In reply I put the coin obtained from the Angel of
Reckoning
into the slothful angel’s hand
The angel hung his head

I was stepping out of the grave
when I thought of my victim
I shook him awake with my voice:

“Let’s get out!”
“I shall not go out,
I do not wish to go anywhere with you!”
I spat in his face
and came out of my grave

KRISTALLNACHT

Tonight is the night of the broken glass

Today five stars were made on our arms
which common people
take for numerals

Today the waif-scholars
were treated to a performance of
“The Dying Prince”
to the functionaries’ great delight

Today I
was assigned
to a synthetic coal plant
This would make a girl in Baltimore happy

Today I wrote a poem

Today the crematorium
burnt well past the hour

WE CAN TAKE DELIGHT IN THAT

We can take delight in the fact
that in the 1700s
more candles
were consumed
in the silver-mines of Potosì
than in Spain’s royal palaces

More sheepskins
were used there
to hoard

silver ingots
than in the whole of Europe

And that
to send the ransom from Atahualpa forthwith
the horses
were shod
with sterling

PARABLE

He had a firm hold on this sensation that it was daybreak. He turned in bed. This movement was in itself very gentle as his feelings were never devoid of the regard for the planks of the bed that could not withstand negligence and would dislocate from the frame. The rays of sunlight were piercing him, as if the sun, which belongs to nomads and charioteers all, and which for sundry considerations no one now calls God, was about to raise him on the lances of its rays. The same rays were also smarting his eyes, and for this very reason he had a firm hold on the event of the break of day, and for the selfsame reason he could not let go of the sensation of the loss of his sight. He could not see a thing, and it was morning.

The listeners to this tale, by virtue of their altruistic nature or benevolence, might perhaps be expectant that further down, by error or through a miracle, the sight of the man will be restored, which is erroneous.

When the man had no pretext left to refute the fact of the loss of his sight—for darkness is its own contention—he must have tried to make much ado: the usual reactions of a man during or after a calamity: crying, yelling, flailing arms about, turning away from God and resolving on suicide. Men who are not written about in stories take forever to get through these stages, but he lived them all in an flash, and then he again turned extremely gently in the bed, because after all the planks of his bed were vulnerable to disregard, and on the bed within his reach slept the woman who was impregnated with his sight. He wished to reveal his situation to the woman, but left himself to be discovered. The woman is close to awakening; it is morning after all.

As he had wished, the loss of his sight became apparent to his

woman, became apparent to his neighbors, his kin, friends and acquaintances, his juniors, his superiors, all, and if he had had a mother it would have become apparent to her too. Then things took their usual course. He was retired from his position with a modest stipend, and his woman found employment.

Then one day he told his woman that he wished to change the house. The house was changed. After a long time it dawned on the woman that he could not climb stairs from memory, that he had lost count.

His woman, the fact of whose pregnancy has been detailed, one day gave birth to a girl. On the occasion the man was as overwhelmed with happiness as any father capable of regarding his daughter. After a long time he felt the contention of darkness being refuted. His daughter had light in both her eyes.

He continued in his efforts to discern his daughter's features by fondling her face with his fingertips when someone told him of her likeness to him, and on learning that, he was delighted. At that moment he thought of what his features were like, and the same moment realized that his face had been lost to him. He pondered for days and was continuously disappointed. His woman, neighbors, friends, kin, he entreated them all for the recovery of his features; many a memory that had been prevented from stirring went crazy, but despite all he could not recall his face, and now only a miracle could restore it to him. The reason for his continuing belief in miracles is beyond the comprehension of the storyteller.

Often, when his woman was absent, he wished to strangle his daughter so that no one could remind him of their resemblance. But he could not rationalize such audacity with logic.

In a small house by the sea a change came to his life. A girl whom he might have loved in adolescence came to know of his condition, and one day she graced a small house by the sea with her man and children. The same day his woman and the other woman's man observed the miraculous likeness of the other woman's children to the man whose story is not yet ended. This observation was ignored with as much ceremony as the surprise with which it had been made. Then on some festive occasion the other woman's man, on behalf of himself and his woman, presented the sightless man with

a dog. Sooner or later everyone who has lost his sight finds himself with a dog. He named the dog after himself.

Then he took such courage that he roamed the seaside with the dog, and returned home in the evening to a waiting woman holding a girl's hand.

The narrator of this story cannot tell whether all continued as before, or his sea inundated the townships, or his dog reverted, or his wife, or daughter, or both, became depraved, ran away from home, or died. A story narrated with pen and ink must be considered told where it is ended.

BOUQUETS AND INVITATION

We who turn up at concerts
without a bouquet
for the musician
and do not know
how many legs a piano has

We whom
nobody beckons to an empty seat
We who stand against the wall
where we shall be after all
herded

From the clavichord
to the piano
music has come a long way
without an invitation
as we have
brought ourselves from the main entrance to the back
wall

After her performance
the musician
is taking a bow

Now
she shall see blood on the floor

Our blood
that finds its way everywhere
ahead of us—
without a bouquet
or an invitation

NEAR LAVANIA

There, where silence lies flanked by armed sentinels, with her I recall the bread, the bread and the wine, the wine. With her verdant fingers she touches an aquatic bell and dead horsemen rush galloping past under the boughs of the flower-of-the-unknown-name. She says that in the rain the flower a man gives a woman always carries the same meaning. Hope, which disarrays our night and our day, brings her to the black juniper tree. The name of this land is Genesis. Where we shall be picked with the vines and brewed, there I present to her a horse, and to me she gives an olive plant—she made of glass and naphtha and wood and stone and wool.

Near Lavania, I touch her flower bearing five wounds and closing the puerto morona kiss her lips. I am the weed which grows outside the stable; a tablet with plaintive letters; the loneliest fish in the net; the memory of a heartsick princess; an Argonaut forsaken back on land.

In flight we taste many seasons, and now it's snowing heavily, and I cover her wholly with flowers. The moon is in Virgo. The bricks of this building were laid in the full moon. In those days I was living dangerously and except for the dream I had no word.

Could her wide blue eyes be more erroneously read?

SHOULD SOMEONE ASK

Should someone ask
whether trees are better or parasols
you should answer trees
when we stand under them in the sun
and parasols
when we make a pilgrimage

and pilgrimage is preferable to destinations
to get where
the mind
and conveyances are frequently changed
although the needle point
which pierces the finger
and the eye that sees it enter the heart
are also pilgrims

Should someone ask
whether doors are better or windows
you should answer
doors in daytime
and windows in the night
and happy are their nights
who journey from one expectation to another
although journey is a fire
that has never come down from the trees

If the supplicant receives uncooked bread from one
house
he should seek matchsticks
at the next
And when it rains
he must ask nothing of anyone
neither supplicate for an end to showers
To supplicate one must have a God
Those who take their prayers
the others' gods
cannot sense in their left heel
the piercing of a nail in their right

Some acquire God by inheritance
some as a gift
Some find him by their own labor
others steal
yet others presume

I bought God on installments
Gods bought on installments
answer no prayers
until the last installment is remitted

Once
 I was late making God's installment
 God was carried away from my side
 and those who knew me
 learnt
 that now I had neither God
 nor prayers that are answered
 and
 I had even lost the chance to presume a God

A COUPLET BY POET-LAUREATE NUBAR ISBARIAN

The beauty of the couplet that poet-laureate Nubar Isbarian composed for his courtesan Irma's breasts would be lost in translation as Irma's breasts were wasted on the sands of River Esta. In Armenia it surpassed the acclaim accorded the couplets that Nubar Isbarian had written for his beloved and contemporary poetess, Nura Na'albandian's eyes, that were cited as the epitome of highest poetry. Poetess Nura Na'albandian was so tormented by the couplet that oftentimes she was disposed to put out her eyes with the gift dagger from her former lover, goldsmith Jaraer Sambarian, which she was only permitted to put in her heart. The couplet earned such renown in the length and breadth of Armenia that every woman from those of easy virtue to chaste virgins, even the cloistered nuns of the Convent of Turikian, entreated Nubar Isbarian, saying they would bare their breasts for him if he would compose for them as elegant or somewhat inferior a couplet. Troubled by the celebrity of the couplet, the annalists regularly reported that Nubar Isbarian had never seen Irma's breasts bare, nor felt them with his hands, for to make such poetry about a thing seen or felt was beyond human capacity. Irma was aware of these reports and also of the apple-orchard that she had cost Nubar Isbarian. Also, that Nubar Isbarian, under the spell of her breasts or antagonized by the annalists, is abdicating his vocation. Before it could be reported in future chronicles that poet-laureate Nubar Isbarian had stopped writing poetry, in goddess Ardvazi's temple, with the holy dagger, Irma severed her breasts and threw them on the sands of River Esta.

STEP INTO MY PARLOR

Step into my parlor,
death says to me

In her person
I see my beloved
undressed
identify my ejaculation
flowing on her thighs
she carries the fetus of the poem
I could not write—
carries a snare
I aimed at a star

Step into my parlor,
death says to me
not knowing
that now I have nothing to give her

GOD HAS BECOME ANGRY WITH ME

God has become angry with me and walked away
I fear that the kidnappers have taken God
I fear that God has been detained in forced labor

God has become angry with me
I had torn a bough from God's tree
I fear that the loggers have taken God
I fear that God has been fashioned into an axe-handle

God has become angry with me
I had torn a page from God's book
I fear that God has been bound in iron
I fear that God has been laid on the print-shop stone

God has become angry with me
I had opened his mynah's cage
God has become angry with me
I had seen my face in his mirror
God has become angry with me
I had laid my head on his pillow

Who knows God might be returning to me
Someone might have sown God as a hashish shrub
Who knows God might be returning to me
Someone might have caught God in a machine's
gears

Who could bring God back to me
Except for God
who knows my whereabouts

THE BALLAD OF THE POET AND THE SWORD

Sword
How my breast turns red

Poet
From my blood
From my blood

Sword
From the blood of your heart

Poet
From the blood of my heart
wounded by a thousand wolves and one night

Sword
With a black jasmine flower your night digs a grave

Poet
It shall be filled with my blood
With my blood

Sword
And with butterflies that appear for lovers

Poet
The butterflies are dormant in your scabbard
that is filled with my blood
With my blood

Sword
And a drop of your blood

Poet
On my beloved's heart

Sword
In the mirror's branches the nest of a dove riddled
with arrows

Poet
Her heart
Her heart

Sword
Blood in mirrors
Blood in nests

Poet
My blood
My blood

Sword
Your blood bathes her tree

Poet
Her tree in the cellar filled with axes

Sword
Fills up her well

Poet
Her well in the bed of the garrotted sands

Sword
Fills up the first urn from her potter's wheel

Poet
The urn made of elegies
for slain lovers and poisoned moon

Sword
Where did your blood go after the urn was broken

Poet
To the blacksmith's anvil
to be forged into a sword

Sword
A sword to run through your heart made of verses
and black jasmine

Poet
A sword to run through a heart made of verses and
black jasmine and a princess's kisses

THE HANGING

The very first one I met
was a blacksmith
who in one day
had made my stockade and the scaffold
but he could not make padlocks

The locksmith stood by his side
who after selling away my padlock
had sold me its key
which I had swallowed during my body-search

The man in front of him
was a thief
who had stolen the canal
in which the stocks for making the scaffold were
immersed

After that was the empty space
where the stocks had dried in the sun

By the empty space stood the weaver
on whose spindle the thread was spun
with which the condemned man's uniform is woven

By the weaver stood his half-sister
braiding strings, she who had twined the hanging
rope

Ahead of her stood the man
who had pushed me into the well as I quenched my
thirst
It was the same man
who had written out the announcement for my
capture
And thus I was saved meeting another man

After him, among the stewards
stood the man
who was detailed to hang me
The laborers who raised the scaffold—
who being servile had been kept out of the queue—
cast surprised glances at me
There was someone between me and the executioner
as well,
It was God
The last thing that was brought before me
was my last wish
I asked for the national anthem to be played at my
death
My executioner promised me that he would write to
the capital
for a copy of the anthem

All of a sudden there was a commotion
The stewards come to deliver the wages
The queue was thrown into turmoil
Only my executioner advanced with me
Because under the new decree the garroter inherits
the condemned man's clothes

At my death except for the executioner
there was no one beside me
I wish the wages had not arrived from the capital that
day

I WAS NOT BORN TO THIS DESTINY

I was not born in the month of making verses; nor spotless white
horses were pulling this century. To celebrate my coming into
existence a bowl of starch must have been distributed among

neighbors who no longer solemnized the festival of blooming verdure. My first friend must have been the mynah who repeated her name to me, and under one roof in separate cages we were both imprisoned. There were not one or more columns in front of our house. No kind or flint-hearted woman was appointed my nanny who would have covered me or some wounded animal with garlands. My father had no ivory cane to beat me with. My mother would have become renowned for her long hair and long poems had my father not cut them off with his sickle.

I was thrown on the fish nets that were laid away after the river silted up. The first thing my teeth felt must have been the wooden trough filled with the vomit of dogs. Quite early I must have learnt to fill my stomach with wild barley and the blood-red rice that was never among the food placed in the lake as offering for the dead.

The peace pact was being witnessed when my father tendered his resignation from life, and knowing full well that no one else would have found the sea more compassionate, I pledged to carry out my plan to ford channels and straits; but my mother knew that I was not born to die anonymous on a faraway isle. Announcing my death as she covers me with a blood-stained sheet, she will recognize that I never lost a war.

Selections from *Rococo and Other Worlds*

A POET AT THE GEM EXHIBIT

Gems are not displayed in open air
The city beauty shall not set foot there
(she is at the flower show)

People have come to admire precious stones and
salesgirls
with the Princess cut

Three adolescent girls
(unaware of the layout of the city)
are inspecting a sizeable emerald with expert eyes

The Oriental ruby that catches my eye
(In my fancy
I am about to present it to the girl in the sleeveless
black dress)
displays a small plaque by its side
announcing "Sold"

"To cut eighteen facets on a five-carat stone
is more exacting than open-heart surgery,"
a passing man comments gratuitously

The cheapest stone,
I calculate,
could buy eight hundred and thirty-two point three
three loaves of bread

In the center of the exhibit
the smile of a salesgirl arrests me

"A diamond is forever!"
she repeats
As if my poetry were something transient

LENIN BEFORE FAHMIDA RIAZ

Lenin appeared before Fahmida Riaz
the way
King Hamlet's ghost
had appeared before the Prince

She hurried to fetch
the half-emptied bottle of Rasputin vodka
her husband had squirreled away

Before engaging him
She tried to rush through the memories
of all she had ever read or heard about Lenin

She could only recall

That like herself, Lenin too had spent
a great many years in exile

She felt remorse
at not having translated any of his books
and further
at not writing one about him
Would he address her in Russian?
A shiver went down her spine with the realization
she hadn't learnt Russian

At Friendship House
after the Fall of Dhaka
she had said a few words about one book: "Lenin:
The Sun of Wisdom"
Where is that book to be found now?
Certainly not on her shelves

Her children passing on the verandah
only cast a surprised glance at the stranger

It was quite likely, she thought—
had the revolution been a success—
that the country would be strewn with Lenin's images
and busts
and our capital renamed Leninabad

He was regarding her
without interest
She had failed to impress him—
she thought—
even to the extent
that Ashraf Pahlavi had impressed Stalin
(But she was a poet,
not a princess)

She wished to broach with him
the breaking up of the Soviet Union
(provided it did not distress him)
And all the sufferings
that were meted out in the Revolution's name
and which until recently were beyond her belief

Suddenly she realized
her crazy friends
would be looking for her in the coffee-shop corner
Today Zeeshan would read out his new poems

She got up
and took her leave of Lenin
the way King Hamlet
had bid the Prince adieu

AN INAUGURAL CEREMONY

Dressed in a frilled skirt
sporting a black crocheted beret
her shoulders exposed
Flora Luck
went up to Keemari
with a small procession

She stopped by the Scotch mission
and listened to interesting orators

In the morning she was taken around
the trolley-shed with the galvanized iron roof
and the sixty-horse stable

At the tramway inauguration
Karachi's loveliest girl
looked joyous

That day she would have showered her lover with
kisses
if she had had one

As a memorial to her happiness
the Karachi Tramways
rolled over rails for ninety years

And
when the influential transporters
stripped off the tramway rails
the city slipped into the hands of ruin

SPRING SHALL RETURN TO THE CITY

By virtue of the prime minister's
photogenic smile
Adonis-like
the murdered youth shall return from Hades
and other victims too

The president shall clear his throat
and the terrorists will surrender arms
and get jobs at the Mehran Bank

In the afternoon
the moment the Chief Minister's yawn is ended
the citizenry shall set out for movie houses and
theaters
Topless nymphomaniac girls will come out to the
French Beach

The moment our eyes pop and the tongues loll out
from bodies strung up
on boughs of trees
Spring shall return to the city

GAME

Blindfolded the President of the Republic
is trying to pin on the donkey's tail
at the Funfair
Three girls chortle
one of them truly charming

A dignitary's beloved
stealing into his room on tiptoe
covers his eyes with her hands
asking him to guess
She is not wearing the ring he gave her

Blindfolded the Prime Minister
is playing blindman's buff
with her children
on the lush lawn

Blindfolded we
are being pushed
into prison vans

AS PER DIRECTIONS

The prime minister shall not head south
the president
shall only fly vertically
the army shall imitate
the knight's move
the exiled leaders
shall turn 22 degrees 30 minutes
the people shall not step out of homes
the ambulances
shall move zigzag
History
is already turning counterclockwise

OUR NATIONAL TREE

Instead of the white jasmine
we proclaim acacia our national tree
It does not line the campuses of US colleges
is nowhere to be found in tropical gardens
remains untouched by the ikebana practitioners

Biologists do not classify acacia as a tree
because it does not support lynching

Acacia is the shrub
with which our cities, our deserts
and our poetry is replete

We are much taken with
the spinous acacia
that kept our soil from being washed away into the
Arabian Sea

A DOG'S DEATH

Air Vice-Marshal Manocher Nadirshaw
taking his dinner
during a civilian flight
chokes on a bone
and dies

Throw another dog
before just such a bone

ON THE WAY HOME FROM EMPRESS MARKET

Every weekend
dutiful Porochista Dastur
must needs visit
the hideous Empress Market's
beef section

In her gypsy blouse and drab skirt
Porochista Dastur
could be considered immune
to Tetrapodic and other loves
One could readily believe
she wouldn't set foot
in shabby hotels, estate agencies,
or wet dreams
nor take the elevator
alone with another man
Carrying the load of beef
Porochista Dastur
before she boards the bus
at the approach of the half-deserted Somerset Street
steps up to the first floor
of the crumbling Duarte Building
and makes water standing—
as the girls of Egypt did,
on the authority of Herodotus

AN IMPOSSIBLE GIRL

Pragat Agarwal
graduates from the charnel house assembly line
to become a bank teller
Her boatlike eyes
light up with joy
and her musical throat
mists up

Without snacking on sunflower seeds
she walks past the high street

Pragat Agarwal
adjusts her brassiere strap
flashes an eccentric smile
and jiggles her legs
free of all fetters

Pragat Agarwal
is absorbed in her work

In Babylon
she could have been summoned in Aphrodite's name
and in Carthage
could have tinkled bells
to attract passersby into balnea

The usurer bankers
and their bastard progeny
would have died unredeemed by Pragat Agarwal's
rebuke
if she had not set her lovely foot
on the catwalk
one evening
enveloped in turquoise lingerie

A BEGINNING WITH GREAT NAMES

We do not at all know
where Alice Rendal may be found at this hour
This past day she was seen at the hotel pool's western

side
and in the telescope
of Godhra Camp's Ibrahim Borka
on the Industrial Corporation's fifth floor

Were he a silkworm
he would have woven a cocoon around her
and the two would have been dropped in boiling
water together

Our sympathies and our nights
go out to the girls
who saw off their childhood speedily and with
insolence

Our love
goes out to the girl
whose eyes tell New York time
whose nail polish glows in the dark
She is actively trying to save the race of dolphins

The best of all nights
was spent in her permed hair
We were at variance over Germany's reunification

Yet we know
the heart is a trapeze artist
that keeps up its act
without an audience

Wellai Wang-Ik
is lying stripped and joyful in her room
and could entertain guests in that state
but our knowledge is short

Beginning today
we must
call the two girls Helen and Beatrice—
who pass by Mansfield Street
at half past five in the evening—
that we may make a beginning with two great names

ONLY UNNOTEWORTHY POETS

Only unnoteworthy poets
do not forget
that enameled plate from childhood with blue and
white flowers
on which bread was served

Only unnoteworthy poets
shamelessly write
in their poems
their beloved's name

Only unnoteworthy poets
do not forget
the room cruelly searched,
and the photograph of the girl standing in the
garden—
neither she nor the image ever seen again

TELL ME A STORY

Tell me a story
other than that you're carrying my seed
other than that you're more beautiful
than the girl who has left me
other than that you always wear a white brassiere
under a white blouse

Tell me a story
other than who the mirror pronounced the loveliest
other than that all reflection in the mirror is beautiful
other than how the princesses' mirrors
slipped from the slave-girls' hands
other than how the princesses' fetuses aborted
other than how the cities fell
and the ramparts
and the standards
and men in combat

Tell me a story
other than that you did not sleep in the Captain's

cabin
sailing over the dateline
other than that you never set eyes on the sea
other than that of the drowned
some names never make the list

Tell me a story
other than how in a brothel separated twin sisters met
other than what flower grew from whose tears
other than that from a burning oven nobody steals
bread

Tell me a story
other than how from the museum
the witness table of the peace pact disappeared
other than that a continent is called by the wrong
name

Tell me a story
other than that you do not like to kiss lips
other than that I was not the first man in your life
other than that it was not raining that day

SOLDIERS SEIZE VIRGIL'S LANDS

Soldiers seize Virgil's lands
whose restoration lies
a journey to Rome and two poems
farther on

The length of his stay there
and how long the civil war detained him
from writing poetry
remains unrecorded

From his Spanish campaign
Emperor Augustus
sends for
the manuscript of the Aeneid
which was read to him four years later
on his deathbed

Virgil repeatedly sent for the manuscript of the
Aeneid—
to destroy it—
it was not provided him

**ON A POLITICAL PARTY BEING ALLOTTED
THE HORSE AS THE ELECTION SYMBOL**

Do not appear on a wretched piece of paper; do not conceal Odysseus and his wily companions in your belly; walk out of the posters smeared on Aabpara walls and trot neighing past Constitution Avenue; get under the Amazons' thighs; unseat Nelson at the Trafalgar; head straight for Giambologna's studio and walk in without knocking; take al-Mutanabbi to the Sultan's tent—for the first time in history a poet will read out his qasida astride a horse; come out of the bank lockers; break the vaults, and Samson-like bring down the pillars of the head office; do not submit your mane to the lawn mower; Eve is presenting Adam an apple bought from the supermarket, pluck it from her hands and present it to your favorite filly; go aboard and discover the America that Isabella could not buy for all her crown jewels; enslave Alexander and Julius Caesar; pull Adonis's bier to its last resting place; locate sunken ships; search for the Earth's treasures; invent a new variety of grass; wear the moon as a stud in your shoe; do not look back at the Minotaur; Jesus doesn't have a ride, take him to Mary Magdalene's place this evening under falling showers; Nefertiti has never set eyes on a horse, thinking you God she will prostrate herself before you; do not let your flanks be branded; do not let your image be stamped.

ASTRONOMY AND THE POET

As an homage to love, the volcano of a Martian moon was named after the beloved of the man who had discovered that moon and another, whose naming after a mythical god was influenced by the worship instinct—a lesser passion than love. But we can overlook that as the god in question was killed. What affords us satisfaction is that a satellite of Mars was baptized after the one who made the first unsuccessful flight, and that to invest the cosmos with some semblance of purpose, at least the regions of Mercury were named after a poet, a novelist, a painter, and a composer. Aphrodite, the

deity of love, reigns over just one region of Venus, whereas Satellite No. 433 was determined as the God of Fornication. The satellite named after the God Hermes was unfortunately lost after it drew one thousand meters too close to Earth. Those who venerate wealth would be delighted to learn that the goddess of the Roman mint is in revolution as a Martian satellite. All the illustrious cosmic gods whose worshipers became extinct or were put to the sword, are in orbit somewhere or the other, with their august names. Some day someone will also name a planetoid—discovered somewhere in the far reaches of the space—after our God.

THE SECRET HISTORY OF A REPUBLIC

Brought under the hammer
 the Republic was declared destitute and ill-starred
 Except for
 well-cared-for hunting fields
 and
 love-play couches of kept women
 which attracted the highest bids

They all disappeared
 sailors and fishermen,
 the makers of damascened blades,
 traders and farmers of indigo
 masons who adorned edifices with mosaics of
 Nishapur turquoise
 Only the victorious troops
 stayed on the shores
 to bring cheer to women of the land
 who were truly lovely

This history must be excused from divulging
 what part of the peace pact
 was breached

History must record the fact
 that there was no charge for our cannons
 Nor were we wont to use girls as cannonballs
 a practice common in quality circuses

“Man does not live on bread and circuses alone,”

some two thousand years ago
someone said in Rome,
Man does not live on history alone
(these words may be expunged)

Our bread and our dancing girl
were left buried in our archaeological remains

Beside the three tame crocodiles
and their loathsome sulphur spring,
that remained preserved
History
could provide the complete inventory
of all that was carried away on the Indus flotilla
to the last straw

Concluding its narrative
History
expresses its (rightful) inability to conserve
a river that flows through Zand, Pazand and
Mahabharata
that shall soon enough
be stolen.

—*Translated by Musharraf Farooqi*