

FAHMIDA RIAZ

Poems

THE LANGUAGE OF A Stone¹

You met me on this lone mountain
This very height is your acquaintance
This is the very stone of my faithfulness
Uninhabited, distraught, rocky, wild
But for aeons I have stood gripping it
Holding onto your perfume in a torn
scarf
The scarf sways about from the weight
of the vicious gusty wind
I hug the stones and balance myself
Sharp stones
They have over time sunk so deep into
my heart
That all which is around me is stained
by my throbbing blood
But for aeons I have stood wrapped
around it
And through the bird which navigates
high altitudes
I send a message for you
If you come and see
You will be overjoyed

¹This and the following poem are from the poet's first collection *Patt̄ar kī Zabān* (Lahore: Andāzē Pablikēshanz, 1975).

That all the knife-edged stones have
turned to rubies
They are on fire
A rose is flowering from a stone
(“Paṭṭhar kī Zabān,” 13-4)

RESERVE

This naive unmarried girl of my
thoughts
Shies away from speaking in front of a
stranger
Hiding in the foggy narrative of her veil
Head bowed, she slips away in a mean-
dering fashion
(“Jhijhak,” 17)

IMAGE²

There is a picture of myself buried deep
in my heart
God knows who made it and when it
was made
It is hidden from my friends and from
me too
But sometimes absentmindedly if I do
manage to see it
And compare it with my self then my
heart shivers
(“Taṣvīr,” 17)

SURA-E YASIN

The eerie lull of twilight!

²This and the following six poems are from the poet's collection *Badan Darida* (Karachi: Maktaba-e Dāniyāl, 1974).

On this darkening way
Hurriedly quickening my steps
I am one lone woman!
Following me for a long time
There is the deafening sound of
 approaching footsteps
Home!
My home!
How will I reach my home
I speculate with parched throat and
 sinking heart
Perhaps I forgot the way
This way is not my way
When did I pass this way
All the streets have names displayed
This street has no name
Holding their breath far and wide
All these unknown houses
Lo, the yellow crescent moon too
Has sunk beyond black leaves
Now there is nothing
Only a fear burdened and paralyzed
 tongue in my mouth
Or
Creeping upwards from my soles
Saturated in my every pore
Is a chill

(37-8)

VIRGIN

Sky white like overheated iron
Parched thirsty tongue like sandpaper
Thirst is in the throat, in the body, in
 the soul

In this burning desert, my head is
 bowed

I have brought this frightful slaughter
in your service!
That sacrifice to which I was bound, I
have done

There is still a sparkle in those bulging
eyes
And even now the black hair is soaked
in blood
Your command was that there be no
stain on it
Therefore this innocent was untouched
and unseen too
Endless sand absorbed all the hot blood
Look my veil carries the seal of its stain
O Great God!
O Omnipotent Being!
O Proud and Illustrious Being!
Yes I recited your names and slit its
throat
Now if only a cloudy fragment would
appear, shade be found somewhere
O Almighty God
The breeze of fulfillment! For the soul
is on fire!
A drop of water for my spirit ebbs away
(“Bākira,” 41-2)

AQLEEMA

Aqleema
Who is the sister of Cain and Abel
Their sister
But different

Different between the middle of her
thighs
And in the swell of her breasts
And inside her stomach

In her womb
 Why is the fate of them all
 The sacrifice of one stout lamb
 She is a prisoner to her body
 Burning in the scorching sun
 She stands on a mound
 Etched in stone
 Look carefully at this impression
 Above the long thighs
 Above the protruding breasts
 Above the raveled womb
 Aqleema has a head too
 Sometimes Allah too should speak with
 Aqleema
 And ask something!

(“Aqlimā,” 75–6)

SHE IS A WOMAN IMPURE

She is a woman impure
 Imprisoned in flowing blood
 In the rotation of month and year
 Burning in the greedy fire of lust
 In pursuit of her desire
 She was Satan’s progeny
 Took to his path
 Toward that unknown destination
 Of which there is no known sign
 A union of fire and light
 That cannot be traced
 From bubbling boiling blood
 Her breasts have ripped out
 From every thorn-tipped passage
 All bodily flesh has been slashed
 On her body’s shame
 No shade of sanctity
 But God of land and ocean
 Such has never been seen
 All your worthy commands

Yes, on this impure woman's
Lips there is no prayer
Her head is without prostration
(“Võ Ēk Zan-e Nāpāk Hai,” 78–9)

THE LAUGHTER OF A WOMAN

In the singing cataracts of rocky moun-
tains
Echoes the soft laughter of one woman
Wealth, power and fame, all are noth-
ing
Hidden in her body is her freedom
The new idols of the worshippers of the
world do what they will
They cannot hear her cry of pleasure

Though in this bazaar, every item is for
sale
Can someone just go and buy her satis-
faction
An intoxication that is known only to
her
Even if she wanted to she cannot sell it
Wandering winds of the valley! Come
Come and smother her face with kisses
Flying her oh so long tresses she goes
Daughter of the wind, singing with the
wind

(“Ēk ‘Aurat ki Hañsi,” 80)

MOHAJIR

These balloons, purple with rage,
They have burst from internal pressure

From the elevation of careless thought
Bits of rubber fell like dead skin

With what speed!

These lifeless pieces of rubber
In what corner will they find a home?
They have no affection for the earth
They will not be able to mix with the
land
And, every drop of the pure clear water
says to them,
That stream of fresh water which has
come out from cleaving rock
Flows in accordance with its own
desire.
The balloons are furious with the water
and the earth.

(“Muhājir,” 100–01)

WALL³

Every time the wall shall crumble
The smell of gunpowder shall spread

The wall on which is written
The story of my life
My crushed childhood
My desolate youth

Our every moment is auctioned
We are the ones whose value falls

The constriction of an expiring body
Overflowing pearls of the heart
Life’s earning: shame
Bread soggy with tears
All blemishes imprinted upon the heart

³This and the following three poems are from the poet’s collection *Dhūp* (Karachi: Maktaba-e Dāniyāl, 1976).

Those tribulations endured with tears
Every moment is accounted for
All is written on the wall

When youths bathed in blood
Dark shadowy jails
The smell of gunpowder shall spread
Some wall shall crumble

Smoldering in the gunpowder
Is whose arrogant youth?
Innocent laughter-filled childhood
Shall write a new story!

(“Dīvār,” 45–6)

MOHAJIR

Songs filled with anger and deception
The songs of our elders
High and mighty verses
On earth’s naked breast
Potent verses are dancing

The dripping wounds from the heart’s
neglected roots will remain evergreen
The songs of our elders have dumb-
founded us

The songs of our elders are crawling
parasites
They nurture themselves by feeding on
your flesh

Far away the jungles of Sindh echo
“Sain Sain”
Hot dark jungles echo “Sain Sain”

For a long time sweat has been pouring
from the dark body of the Sindhi

If you find a way to recognize this thick
salty smell
Why then would gossip come from
your lips
Why then would you turn pale in a
burning climate
Why then does the flower droop which
adorns your crown
Why then is your body shamed by your
stature
Why then does your human face wither
(“Muhājir,” 50-1)

LULLABY

Dearest your countenance like the
moon
You who are a piece of my heart
Dearest I keep on looking
Dearest my eyes are filled by your
image

Dearest I rock you in my cradled arms
Holding you next to my heart

Dearest sparkle of my eye listen,
Your mother’s entire life,
A flowing cataract of tears
Passed by
This bowl has been filled with that clear
water
With that dearest let me wash your
flowerlike hands, lotuslike feet
Touch you with my eyes

I endlessly wept away my sorrowful ex-
istence, your sight stopped the tears
They unfurled and blossomed into
laughter

My frightened motherhood has great
faith in you

It seems like yesterday to me
I can recall that night
When you were born

That night was very black
Tormenting the heart with pain
But a kind of oil lamp began to burn
upon hearing your cry

Your beautiful beautiful limbs
Lovely and fresh, healthy and
prospering
Dearest can't manage a kiss
Dearest I'm shaking and shivering

I know a wolf stands in my doorway
Consuming my youth, drinking my
blood
The wolf who was raised by Mammon
Who rules the world
We who are cursed from age to age

Because of whom in this world
Thinking is considered a crime
To love—a major sin

It has sniffed the blood of a human
body
It tracks your every move
Dearest cannot sleep at night
Dearest I am constantly awake

Dearest borne of my womb listen
This world belongs to injustice
What skills can I teach you

Women who came and went

Embroidering sprigs on net upon net
Placed food on platter upon platter
Which the wolf ate

Today every kitchen is empty
What can I show you
What skills shall I teach you!

When I take you in my arms
I listen to the call of time
I hear great battle cries
I listen to the beckoning of war
Hearing this again and again
Your skill is "bravery"!

Listen my dear little one
This land, this sky
All the grandeur of peace
The markets full of grain

Until that does not belong to us
We cannot exist in harmony
No one to lean on
There is no other option

Do not fear the wolf
Dear heart! Fight with conviction
Do not ever despair

I will teach you bravery
I will make you into a lioness
Fear will not touch you

Listen my dear new little one
You will not be alone
Your friends will be with you arm in
arm

Your friends, your companions
Will be by your side

Many hands will join together
This is my one wish!

(“Lōrī,” 52–7)

THE RULING THRONE

O beneficiaries residing on the ruling
throne of revolution ...
What intelligence will you bestow upon
me!
You who are the ones to show me the
straight path

Know this much
You are seated on the chair
And I am standing on the ground

Are you sending me back from the
threshold of your kingdom’s temple?
On my platter, the wick of my hot
blood has begun to burn
That which burst out of the ashes of my
heart has blossomed into a flower
What intelligence will you bestow upon
me
Take care of your Shiva’s temple
That which you could not learn by
reciting scriptures all your life
That a woman has felt in her stricken
body

(“Rāj Saṅghāsan,” 73)

WON'T YOU SEE THE FULL MOON?⁴

Paper, why has your complexion faded?

“Poet, from watching your deeds”

Paper, what are those blemishes upon
your cheek?

“Poet, I could not drink your tears”

Paper, shall I tell you the truth...?

“Poet!, my heart will burst”

(From “Intisāb” in *Kyā Tum Pūrā*
Čānd na Dēkhōgē, 312)

—*Translated by Amina Yaqin*

⁴From the poet's collection *Kyā Tum Pūrā Čānd na Dēkhōgē* (Karachi: Maktaba-e Dāniyāl, 1986).