

ZEESHAN SAHIL

Twelve Poems

BIRDS¹

It is a lie
that in Karachi
after the rain the sprouting grass
doesn't have blades
deep green and soft.
Or that the trees
do not give shade
without the help of clouds.

It is, too, a lie
that our rabbits' eyes
don't shine in the dark
and squirrels
don't play with walnut shells.

Or that herbs
on the palm of the hand
yellow.
Snakes leave their share of milk
for the paper pythons.

With us
in Karachi live birds
who fly from trees

¹“Āj kī Kitābēh,” in *Karāĉī aur Dūsri Nazmēh* (Karachi and Other Poems) (Karachi: Āj kī Kitābēh, 1995), 88–89.

through the sound of bullets and bombs;
perch on walls; always
they gather somewhere
to pray.

Our books don't wait
inside cupboards for termites.
Now our hearts
swim these seas
where once our eyes
searched for golden flowers
and our hands
tear down the walls
that once buried us alive.

I WILL SEND A BIRD²

I will send a bird
with shining wings.
It will come to you,
hidden in the clouds.
Maybe it will be evening
when it sees you drinking tea.
The bird will laugh and laugh
when it sees you talking to the stars.
But you won't hear the laughter.
The bird will be tired, having traveled
so far a distance.
But you won't see.
The TV in your room will drone
while you fall asleep on the couch in front of it.
And above you in the skylight:
the bird with shining wings.
The bird I have sent.

²“Mēñ Ēk Čiryā Bhējūñgā,” in *Nīm-Tārik Muḥabbat* (Semi-Dark Love) (Karachi: Āj kī Kitābēñ, 2005), 17–18.

KNIFE³

From my loneliness
 a lantern takes shape
 to be used in an emergency
 during rainstorms.
 Or given free of charge
 to miners working in a gold mine.

From my loneliness
 a carriage is made
 to be used at tourist spots.
 Or when the express train
 derails in bad weather.

From my loneliness
 a bridge will be built
 to be used during and after
 the war for tanks to cross.
 Or suddenly be blown up.

From my loneliness
 a knife is honed
 to cut paper or peel an apple.
 And when it rusts
 it will be plunged into my heart.

THE SECOND SKY⁴

On the first day the clouds were wounded.
 On the second day the stars.
 On the third day
 many bullets struck the blue sky
 and turned it black.

³“Čāqū,” in *Kobr-Ālūd Āsmān kē Sitārē* (Stars of a Cloudy Sky) (Karachi: Āj kī Kitābēñ, 1994), 98–99.

⁴“Dūsrā Āsmān,” in *Karāčī aur Dūsrī Naẓmēñ* (Karachi and Other Poems) (Karachi: Āj kī Kitābēñ, 1995), 152–53.

Something resembling tears
fell on the ground.
Sometimes the many drops fell silently.
Sometimes loudly on the road: steady falling water.

The wounded sky
cried loudly.
It hid its face
in many clouds.

When we tried to lift its spirits
the rain came faster.

Dark mud stuck to our shoes
when we came home.

The carpet
drank the sky's tears
that we spread through the house
with our damp clothes.

Our muddy footprints on the cement floor,
sometimes light, sometimes dark,
like the wounded sky.

Prayers aimed at the sky
come back with the fast rain
and the wet earth swallowed them.

Small umbrellas were
not enough for us or the sky.
If the guns had stopped firing
in this weather
maybe the sky would have mended
like us.

POEM⁵

Get out of the house.
 Go to the worn wooden bench
 at the end of the park.
 Watch the sunlight vanish into twilight.
 Far from you, on the unpaved road
 the bells ring, the dust blows.
 At the river's banks the boats arrive.
 There are people on the boats.
 There is joy in their faces
 but not in your twilight.
 They are far away from your life.
 The bench at the end of the park
 and the bench in your house
 span the river's reach
 or the length of the paved road your dreams walk.
 For a while you can't see
 the bells ring on the unpaved road,
 the boats at the river's banks,
 and the joy wrapped in dust.
 Morning, the day: vanished; evening arrives.
 Night happens and yet you never went to the park.
 Not ever.

POETRY⁶

In these days of war
 poetry
 is a soldier's lover
 or a bird's nest.
 Nothing makes sense.
 The sea is thrown into turmoil
 from looking at the moon.

⁵"Nazm," in *E-Mail aur Dūsrī Nazmēñ* (Email and Other Poems) (Karachi: Āj kī Kitābēñ, 2002), 40.

⁶"Shā'erī," in *Jan̄g kē Dinōñ (Nazmēñ)* (In the Days of War, Poems) (Karachi: Āj kī Kitābēñ, 2003), 64–65.

Sometimes a shell comes in
 through the window of a house.
 Nothing makes sense.
 Suddenly disappearing
 gossamer angels
 and Saddam Hussein.
 Nothing makes sense.
 Except for the light that appears in the sky
 poetry leaves no trace of itself.
 Except for tears in a girl's eye
 poetry can't be found.
 It's an empty house,
 its doors and windows stolen,
 but the roof remains to shelter us from rain.
 Or a tent
 that can be burnt only by love
 or a bridge that can't be reduced to pieces
 by a tank or fighter plane.
 Or a good Samaritan who takes
 all the world's injured
 in his arms and runs towards the infirmary.

SUN STROKE⁷

Today the sun
 rose in the west
 and tried all day
 to go east.
 The dew on the trees
 shone through the afternoon.
 Today the grasshoppers
 sang songs in remembrance of rain.
 Birds seek their way
 on the Siberian wind.
 Today the sun, like a flower
 turned toward the moon

⁷“San Iṣṭarōk,” in *Kobr-Ālūd Āsmān kē Sitārē* (Stars of a Cloudy Sky) (Karachi: Āj kī Kitābēñ, 1994), 36–37.

and by evening the moon
finished orbiting the earth.
Today people hung
the front doors of their houses
and set their mirrors
in the water
to catch the silver fish.

TIME BOMB⁸

I have a picture
and a wall that holds
the picture tight.
And a nail that pierces
the picture and the wall
and enters my heart.
I have a mirror and a candle
whose flame collects in the mirror.
And a cup in which rainwater or
honey or wax can't be collected.
I have a song that can be sung in the dark.
I have a story
that can only be told in the light.
I have a dream that can't be told to anyone.
And I have a heart and nearby a time bomb
which is always ticking.

TO FORGET⁹

Where were we going
before leaving each other?

Maybe I moved north to south

⁸"Tā'im Bam," in *E-Mail aur Dūsrī Nazmēn* (Email and Other Poems) (Karachi: Āj kī Kitābēn, 2002), 19–20.

⁹"Farāmōshī," in *Kobr-Ālūd Āsmān kē Sitārē* (Stars of a Cloudy Sky) (Karachi: Āj kī Kitābēn, 1994), 46.

while you moved west to east.

Our faces turned away from each other,
and our hearts
like vines that grow behind a wall
put down roots far from it.
And you thoughtlessly
busy, trying to increase, a bit more,
the distance between us.
Not looking in any direction,
you moved away from me.

POEM¹⁰

Whenever I travel
in the dark
I cover my face
with my hands
so the darkness
won't snatch it
away from me.

THE UNWORTHY¹¹

The ones who think a flower
is a flower
and a star is just a star
never go to the beach
on Sundays.
They never take the flowers
given to them
on New Year's Eve
out of their cellophane graves.

No new season

¹⁰"Nazm," in *ibid.*, 9.

¹¹"Jinhēn Kō'i Nahīn Jāntā," in *ibid.*, 18.

begins with their tears.
At spring's end
they dream no new dreams.
On rainy days they go to sleep
after closing the windows.
Or coming home from work
they step in the puddle
that hides the downed wire
and they die
like those people
no one knows.

POEM¹²

This heart is a bomb
about to detonate.
But a suicide bomber can't trigger it.
These eyes are bullets
designed to go through the walls
and these hands, to stop
the enemy tanks' onslaught.
We have planted our feet on the ground.
(This is known to everyone)
In the lull between the wars,
we bought shoes for our children
and lanterns for our houses.

—*Translated by Raza Ali Hasan, Christopher Kennedy,
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¹²“Nazm,” in *Jaṅg kē Dinōṅ (Nazmēṅ)* (In Days of War, Poems) (Karachi: Āj kī Kitābēṅ, 2003), 67.