

HASAN ALTAF

فیض کے نام

[POET'S NOTE: I realize that some readers may be confused by the appearance of Urdu words in an otherwise English-language poem. These words are part of the poem, and since the poem is dedicated to Faiz, they are mostly words drawn from his poetry—*“faryādi,” “rōshniyōñ kē shebr,” “dard kē kāsni pāzēb,”* and of course the long quote from his poem *“Ham Jō Tārik Rāhōñ Mēñ Mārē Ga’ē.”* While I could have translated these words into English, it was very important for me to keep them in Urdu.

This poem is not really about Faiz but about what he represents for me. Growing up in America, Faiz’s poetry was one of the strongest links I had to Pakistan and to Urdu. If I had not read and listened to his poetry as a child, it would have been much harder for me to acclimatize to Pakistan when my family moved back there when I was fourteen, and I would not be as attached to Pakistan as I now am. My connection to what I think of as “home” is built on Faiz—he was like a bridge from my suburban childhood to something that was both in my past and in my future.

The main feeling I always got from Faiz’s poetry was hope and dreams, and a desire to change things. Seeing Pakistan now, unchanged in so many ways, I wonder what Faiz would have to say, and I wonder what we who read him can offer to him or say to him. So the words from his poetry have to be in Urdu—partly because that is how I always think of them, partly because it was in Urdu that they connected me to Pakistan, but mostly because I think of them as questions, questions that I think Faiz would ask of us. In that sense, the English of the poem is my attempt at some kind of answer. That’s what I was thinking as I put them in, and that is what I wanted for the reader to get from the poem.]

I remember finding you, buried there
in the shrouds of dust and spiderwebs, in the back, in the dark.
The way your face shone from there as we lifted
you out, the brilliant white of your words,

like the sound of someone
clearing their throat to sing against the stillness
like a hand turning off the lights
in a bright room.

I don't think I'd known you till then,

فریادی for so long

I don't think I knew the voice I heard before I was born,
words reaching me like rhythm in sleep.

I don't think I ever knew your face,

now on my wall, white on black against blankness and blocked
windows.

The curve of your words like sweat on skin,

like the trails of streetlights on glittering city nights,
a nimbus.

A path.

قتل گا ہوں سے چن کر ہمارے علم
اور نکلیں گے عشاق کے تافلے
جن کی راہ طلب سے ہمارے قدم
مختصر کر چلے درد کے فاصلے

The steps are still waiting

but I don't know how to walk them,
my feet so new and unfamiliar and far away,
the flag still lies there on the killing fields
but who can pick it up now?

Now

کون لوٹے گا؟

to start us again along the path?

There is nothing for me to give you.

Everything is gone now, I wonder
if your boy's spirit still chases butterflies
in the lanes of old Sialkot,

if your verses

still ring from prison cells

if your heart

is somewhere still beating

in some other's chest,
if even now there lingers
in the dark of some cell
away from the world, where some soul lies languishing
the perfume of a bouquet brought there by a stranger.

The flag raised and lowered,
the battle not won, not lost,
forgotten and left behind like the closing of your eyes,
what else was there?

The armies you never wanted to raise
have slipped away, faded
to words in old voices tired over wine,
a brief shape in the blue of cigarette smoke
before impatient hands wave it away.

What paths can I walk for you?
So far away now. I don't even speak your language.
Your words are like music for me,
a lullaby that soothes with just its sound.

What can I give you?
I who look at the world, the new world
and see nothing
but this
روشنیوں کے شہر
still dark, waiting for your light?

In my dreams
I bear you a bouquet
of all the things I want to say to you and never will.
The perfume of
my bones still strong enough to lift a flag,
my voice still here to sing,
my words which ache to speak
and stay silent.
The sound of chains on city streets
the celebration in every چھٹک

of these درد کے کاسنی پازیب

that I keep hidden. What do I know of them?
The sky is never truly dark here, yet
once midnight strikes I stand in the halo of the streetlights,
a dark shape against the white,
waiting.

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From Patti Smith, "Mummer Love."