

Between Continents

2006

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BETWEEN CONTINENTS

by

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M.A. University of Karachi, 1994

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ABSTRACT

Between Continents is a collection of thirty-two poems. The most challenging aspect of finding the right voice and the appropriate metaphors in *Between Continents* has been the difficulty in assimilating a diversity of traditions within my own work. The polarity of aesthetic values is a well known feature of contemporary American poetry. Charles Webb in his essay on the competing aesthetics in poetry uses the metaphor of apples and orangutans to point out how exaggerated this difference really is. Jorie Graham sees in the way young writers today are simultaneously influenced by elements of poets whose philosophies mutually exclude each other “without feeling the need to be accountable to the beliefs that gave birth to those voices and styles they imitate” a testament to “the history of how any art form breaks through a period style.” My personal struggle, in locating the values that I brought into my reading and writing of poetry involved making peace between combating impulses of personal confession and impersonal abstraction.

Dedicated to
my mother, father, and brother,
who live on the other side of the world.

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AMONG COBWEBS

If I haven't written since the news of your paralysis,
it is only because the speed of mental arthritis
holds my body back,
like the sound of thunder
long after lightening strikes down a tree.

When I allow myself to remember,
it is always the doughy roughness
of your skin under the eyes,
the red webs spun around your nostrils,
the faulty punctuations along your lip line---
like a realtor spider on your patio
wondering if you are still inhabitable.

I always thought I'd make it in time
to remove the yellowing white-sheets of distance
from the sofa backs of a formal living-room in Nazimabad
and restore things to order,
of the time before I left home to be with my husband,
of when you thought America was just around the corner,
of when I believed I would visit you once every year.

Who could have predicted
that I would never finish packing,
or waiting for resident papers that did not arrive in the mail
except as stillborns,
ghost papers that haunt every house I want to call home?

I dust imaginary cobwebs
from all the unwritten letters
I have collected over the years.

I imagine that when we meet again
you are likely to resort to Figar's poetry
in calling me (the daughter
you sent away so willingly at one time)
*one of those respectable people
who are born to live in hotels
and die in hospital beds,*

even though I haven't been in a hotel
or a hospital
in eighteen years.

ARRANGED MARRIAGE TO AMERICAN CITIZEN

Evening closes the eyes of the afternoon;
The koel sleeps in its darkened nest;
I fold the prayer mat for the day
But keep thinking west.

The mid-morning sun glides to America
Whose immigration secrets are closed to me,
Where my husband drinks coffee in darkened shades
Of the Arabian (night) Sea.

He wanted parsley topped curry and easy sex.
I needed shelter to park my wings.
We sought the sane, the way thought goes
Towards familiar things.

Is paper thicker than blood or water?
Are words stronger than insurmountable space?
Against the terror of anonymity the womb contains
The premonition of a baby's face.

Love comes to me like an aftershock
Miles from the epicenter of a massive quake.
Glory to the laws of subversive things
In the wonder of the morning's wake.

ARRANGED MARRIAGE TO RESIDENT ALIEN

When I waited head on knees
in the land of my poverty
they said: all desi men in America
become cabbies
to drive away the loneliness.

Meanwhile the mangoes in my country
became dizzy ripe and rich yellow,
and every last one was handpicked
from the tree and devoured.

By September, of two years later
even the younger cousins
had honeymooned at the Murree valleys
and hill stations
where the British of the Raj
had once sipped their afternoon teas.

I dreamt of the dents of my husband's nose,
his sad regal eyes,
and calloused New York hands
on my shoulders.

I shivered
and not from the scratchy cold
of the untreated winters of Karachi
that couldn't find the relief
of the centrally heated enclaves
or the arms of the opposite sex.

Not from the frigid words
of the neighborhood matrons
that always crossed your path
on the polythene littered way
to the poultry shops:

*How many years now?
Hasn't been to see you since—astakhfarulla!--
since the wedding night?
The paperwork, right. Of course.
Well, I hope I don't see you again
without a husband. Bye-bye.*

He wasn't really a taxi-driver,
he'd told my parents
With a two-year BA in Communications
that wasn't recognized in the US,
he was saving money to buy a franchise.

First, he didn't have papers,
he didn't tell them.
Then, he married the African-American,
he told me later
(paper-marriage, didn't touch a toenail.)
Then he stayed in the cab industry:
the money was good.

Later, I was shocked
at how hard he worked and how long
to make money to send to his folks.
He hardly had any friends or furniture.

In love he was quick and sparse.
When angry he was profuse with poetry
in the cabby vernacular
and kicked my Samsonite vanity
arranged on the bedroom floor.
How had he ever expressed defeat
before he met me, I always wondered.

Once he threw a pair of scissors
at my face and nearly missed.
My American neighbors,
cheeky as their Pakistani counterparts,

called the police.
No one believed me when I said
it was an accident.
It really was.

Through my cleft cheek
and stub-tongue
I felt he was the only one
who understood my accent.

BETWEEN CONTINENTS

There is no one I can call for guidance
except for the people in the picture
framed somewhere on a wall, in the past.

They look like a set from a sub-continental movie---
doting parents, sister, brother, and cat.---
misty-eyed because I am leaving home.

At the Quiad-I-Azam airport, I almost expect them
to tell me to leave the husband's house
only in a hearse.

I am already on a 36-hour, one-way flight to America.
My spouse snores, contentedly, in the window seat..
He is going home.

What is it that we carry with us,
playing hopscotch over oceans and continents,
as memory turns to imagination?

In my tote bag there are pirated CDs,
recent photographs of the wedding,
tins of *halwa* and *mithai*,

a mass of gold chokers, with embossed designs
of unripe mangoes, and matching *jhumkas*, matching rings,
half a dozen 24-carat gold bangles,

A pencil with a broken tip, some scattered, loose change,
in a currency I will no longer use,
and a crumpled memo of a dentist's appointment

that I never made it to.

BIRD LOVE

Mid morning, I lie in a whirlpool bed
under a yellowing, shadowing ceiling fan
that mimics the passage of time.

This was my room, where, once every spring,
in the middle window, between opaque glass and mosquito netting,
sparrows made their nest.

Because sometime in the future I would understand nests---
long past summer, after the clumsiest little bird
had learnt to fly---

I let the husk of sparrow house remain,
suspended between columns of glass, metal, and window-wood
like a Taj Mahal of laborers .

When had love ever come to me like a song
except as a navigational failure of a barefoot walk
in pursuit of splintered things?

The rest was a desperate act of holding on
to him sleeping with his back to me, yearning for perfection,
dreaming of wings.

When was love not just a twig by twig collection
of good days that gathered in memory,
like objects with history, in a home?

I had to be convinced---
by the time I allowed the Punjabi maids to get to the dust infested ruin
---that the sparrows were all long past dead anyway.

CLUTTER

the need of the hour
is to let go
but the man and woman moving
do not know
how to tell
the eavesdropping future
from the out-of-earshot past

so they get
on the rocking leather couch,
fingers entwined,
and watch a television show
about clutter
and what they have been doing wrong
all their lives

the man and the woman learn
that all their needs,
their complicated and extracurricular deeds
can be fit
into three little boxes

the first one is titled 'yard sale'
to liquidate the unnecessary,
and pour it into the anti-penury
piggybank of their present
where they put all their buff,
mother-in-law stuff,

old wedding gifts and china,
the dining and the bedroom sets,
her jewelry,
his electronics,
the yard (since it's a yard sale),
their old Ford and the condo

and what remains is only 'junk'
letters and photographs,
books,
read or never to be read
(both taking up precious space),
travel souvenirs, and tablecloths,
spices, and clothes,
and the empty 'necessary' box

the need of the hour
is to let go
and the man and the woman
now know
and move to a better place
and eat sushi
from the floor

A DIRGE FOR MILO THE CAT

I wanted him to die---
long before illness pursued him
yellowing the whites of his eyes and gums
like time eating cherished photographs
---and he died:
a cat in an asthma-ridden household.

We paid for him with disease---
the swelling up of our lung passageways,
with short hungry gasps,
like the choking unease of illicit love
and its passing sweetness
followed by long defeat:
loss, guilt, powerlessness.

Still, it is the measure of all things:
from the parched earth,
love rises up like a mist in your eyes,
like a monster more terrible than asthma.
Absences curl upon your bed,
on laundered heaps,
and raise their tiny paws onto your knees
for sustenance.

DIVORCED

Fireflies flit in and out of the window where she knits.
It doesn't matter that she is alone.

In the winter she buys roasted peanuts from the hawker
and shells them for her son.

At night the hum of the television from her parents' living room
lulls her to sleep.

She blames no one for her calamities,
asks no compensations.

In the day she works at a local Montessori,
wiping runny noses, dabbing wet eyes,

the exalted mother, the venerated cow, who goes hungry
to feed conventional wisdom.

She guards with piety the trapdoors of heaven
that lie under her feet as a mother.

Always, she keeps her legs clamped shut,
hiding an open wound in the middle of her thighs

that finds no closure,
in safe retreats.

DEATH OF THE DEMI-GOD

Is a husband's dead body
heavier than his live one?

At 3AM she fights the weight of sleep pressing on swollen eyelids.
The dupatta keeps slipping from her head
onto an open chapter from the Book,
She does not understand what she reads in Arabic,
except for the *kalima* repeated on rosary beads:
there is no God, but God.

In all the places the heart revisits,
loneliness descends on her soul like a flock of geese.

Once she had run through a balding patch of grass,
her six-year old frame floating like a feather
through the sky of everything made for her.
Once she had seen from a distance
how the birds dip their feet in cold water for a reason.

Tonight they put him on a block of ice
to keep him from decomposing through the night,
his nose pinched closed with a rubber clip.
Not even the youngest of his four girls laugh
at the pacifier on daddy's face.

For each of the daughters, there is only one shot at life,
as they plait their braids and serve tea in toy teacups
to entertain themselves.
They practice and do not know
how they are the guests in the parents' home,
the caged budgerigars destined to fly away,
all colors of spring striving to crimson, the bridal red,
the color of the beating heart.

His face is blanched in the vigil
of the single tube light fixed on a wall,
while sleep brushes the widow's hair
with its soft feathery touch.
Her face falls forward in the folds of the Book.
She wakes with the guilt of having betrayed him
by dreaming in color.

No matter what the maulvi's tell you from the minarets,
no matter what the waves of feminism bring ashore
from the Occident, she knows,
by the laws of unkempt spinsterhood and widowhood,
and divorced mothers eating dry bread
to keep the children alive,
by the laws of colors and numbers
and geometrical imbalances,

that it happens to us only once:
wings of love gather us in their folds
and place us with the living.

She cannot remember the warmth of his lips on hers.

Tell me, she asks, as she imagines the angel of death,
his feet dipped in the melting ice-water of a retention pond,
what is the point of such a short life?

FRIDAY NIGHTS

He snores all night---
a white-bellied
nicotine conch
washed ashore
on the sea
of NFL---
and won't let her
turn off the TV
even in his sleep,

as if it keeps away
the grating sounds
of accusations
that she buries him in,
as if it blocks her
out of his rich world
like a secret button
of marital control.

Something about the twist
of his mouth
tells her
not to probe tonight,
not to touch
the burns
of his unemployed skin,
not to scaffold her arms
around his neck.:

tonight,
he should have played pool
with the guys,
he should have picked up
the names
of exotic butterflies
and sea-washed fossils
glittering at his feet,
he should have laughed
like the tinkling wine-glasses
immaculately blended
into the American nightlife.

Instead,
he is held back
by this domestic pauper
sleeping on the sidewalks
of his reveries,

the smell of stale sweat
lingering like dew
on her inviolate fragility,
her anomalous existence
heavy on this earth,
her belly swelling
like a dream's grave.

She tiptoes past him
to the front door
just in time to glimpse
the last headlights
disappearing into the night.

The houses breathe
under the moonless sky,
unseen,
like stingrays in the ocean brine
The hardest thing
she ever did for survival
was to let him sleep his sleep.

GHAZAL

Bamboozled, the violated squeak, the lights go out.
Dust settles on the discotheque, the lights go out.

The world was yoked until you broke the mould of sand.
Your will is strong, my body weak, the lights go out.

The village sleeps. Tonight we risk their stones that crush
Our bones. Inevitably, the news will leak, the lights go out.

Absence haunts the world of the homeless, the fatherless.
Their bowls are empty; their goals oblique, the lights go out.

A shroud covers the twinkles in the eyes of Koh Kaf.
The sun sets on the Himalayan peek, the lights go out.

A rocket falls on my fairytale. My baby limps. Allah!
Let the blind see, let the wayward seek, the lights go out.

Our passion sweeps the dirt of enmities.
The rivers swell, the bridges creak, the lights go out.

HINDSIGHT

He leaves in the night
to collect the bricks and the mortar
of his daydreams.
No one knows specifically where he goes
in his untried profundity
and recently wrecked car.
At his back
are nagging questions
that follow him, in spite of the soul shrugs,

like his house,
deep in the heart of a fading photograph
where two old people
sitting on wicker chairs,
watch with hindsight
the long arc of the shooting stars;

like the ones who are silenced
by distance (by the earth
that keeps turning her face away
in familiar gestures of denial),
his lost brothers and sisters;

also, like the little egg and the little seed
that wait vulnerable and still
in unborn darkness
for him to take the predestined road.

Droning against the rolled up windows of his car
are the moths of the moment
drawn to his great need.

Inside, the pretty girl
holds him by a fading polo collar.
The trunk of the Kia,
as well as the compartment of intentions,
is stashed with misdirections.

As he kisses her he glimpses,
in his rearview mirror,
the broken remains
of a predictable future
reflecting the consequences
on a well known street.

I CALL HER PHILOMELE

I call her Philomele,
walking down the Pine Cedar street
with her back to the traffic,
leading a mouse-colored little one
in his made-in-China three-wheeler
defying the American penchant for safety.

She doesn't mean it, of course,
I know the minute I spot her
extra-large sweat pants and trousers
swirling around her thin frame
like a ball gown,
her gazelle eyes, garish lipstick
and plaster of Paris smile
set in an expression of preemptive apology.

"No English."
She pronounces the two words
with pauses in the beginning, middle, and end
like a technically correct essay
that lacks plausibility,
and right away I know she is not an Arab.

"Karachi?" I ask though I already know the answer
and she laughs as if at a practical joke
and the apology disappears
in her recourse to effortless Urdu
and spontaneous applause:
"Where did you learn to speak such English?"

The question embarrasses me.
I want to remind her that we are from the land
where the tongues of the masses
are cut off by the English speaking classes.

Instead, I evade her (invade her).
"You'll learn too. This is America."

I ask her in for afternoon tea
(Lipton leaves with generous milk and sugar)
and *halal* chicken rolls
that I made from scratch
one housewife's day on my full calendar
of unintended cultural insularity.

As always, the fire alarm goes off
from the smoke of frying frozen rolls.
Her father, she tells me, died in a fire 'accident'
in a public bus lit up by an angry mob.
I forget to tell her that I am moving to Alabama
in a week.

She doesn't remember her mother
and had been living with the in-laws in Karachi
for the last six years,
seeing her husband for two weeks every year,
as the American immigration process
moved leisurely
like a metallic nail
piercing flesh.

I feel responsible for this defenseless nymph---
starved for words,
her husband working long shifts
at retail stores seven days a week---
like the eighty-year-old woman
who walked six miles to our house
in the blazing Karachi heat
to ask for drinking water, bread, and a mango.

The last time I saw the old hag
in her unchanged Sindhi clothes
and eyes white with hardened cataracts
was in the middle of some winter
when she came asking for a spare blanket
that I did not have.

I never knew what became of her either.

I MARRIED HIM BECAUSE THE IN-LAWS WERE WELL-GROOMED

They came to the girl-viewing without oil-stained dress-shirts,
evidence of having been too many places.

They did not take over the drawing room like a military coup.

They did not reject or spill too many *samosas* with their tea.

They did not ask my mother if *I* had made anything on the menu.

They did not ask if I had learnt to sew.

They did not ask how many years had elapsed
since I had matriculated.

They did not ask if I intended to stop working.

They did not offer our Siamese kitten
to their two year old nephew as a pagan sacrifice.

Also:

The boy to be viewed did not sweat excessively.

He did not insist he was only twenty-five.

He did not blush or laugh in condescension when I asked him
to move his chair from the path of the tea-tray.

He did not look away in holy dismissal when I asked his opinion.

He did not enumerate his encounters with foreign women
on official travels.

He did not stare at the horizon of my neckline.

I had no need to spill tea on his manhood.

I did not say 'no'
when they asked me.

IN THE STILLY NIGHTS

*Having lit on the day of the night that we parted,
The candle still holding her place goes dumb.*

---Ghalib

What can I say about dining alone in winter,
the trees swaying in the dark outside
like one big power shed-down,
the moon waning dully at zero watts,
and. I, sitting by the single light in the room,
a low lit table lamp,
because the tube lights overhead clash
with the only electric bulb in the house,
and because I am partial to warm yellows,
vanilla candles and Aladdin butter lamps

Outside the rain on fir trees is blue ink,
staining everything written before this point,
the starched tablecloth, white as a floodlight,
scattered with tangerines,
their veins showing after the peel.
The rain that has freed itself
of time and place falls on eucalyptuses,
jasmine vines, and beetle-nuts.
Whole continents disappear.
I, resident-alien,
in the purgatory of middle-class marriages,
attempt to swallow a Scotch-blend
of pride and ungratefulness.
To save myself.

What can I say about pining,
about loving, or being loved?
This is where clarity happens to delusions of happiness.
In the window-pane darkness of three past six,
sunk in the coarse net of a sofa cloth
at a temporary corporate apartment,
eyes fixed on imagined headlights
on a far-off street,
I have lost my aura.

A HONEYMOON JOURNEY THROUGH AMERICA

*The gaze revisits those scenes (of ugliness), what can one do?
Although your beauty still touches the heart but what can one do?
My darling, don't ask me for the love
that I was once capable of.*

---trans from Faiz Ahmed Faiz

God blesses America
as we travel north from Florida
the length of this wet June day
the interstate snaking up
all the way to Niagra

An Indian song plays in the background
something about the monsoon
of the eyes, the thirst of the soul.
Something about the distance saddens me
From Arabia to India to Karachi
to Orlando, Florida,
my ancestry has been a caravan
of adventurers, restless seekers:
immigrants.

I peer into the road map on my lap
and offer directions to a man
who had believed that, in marrying me,
he had bottled the fragrance of Pakistani women,
traversed the difference
between promise and premise.
How do I get across the fact
that left alone well-known streets transform
beyond willful reversal?

We pass Jacksonville, Savannah,
Atlantic city, Manhattan, Amish county,
Erie-Pennsylvania, Niagra.
They all strike me as the same
in their clinical hospitalities,
their homogenous rest areas and self service gas stations,
their Wendy's and Wal-Marts,

while my husband is unnerved
by the lack of predictability of my face---
it is not a face he has known,
not the face of his mother
not the face upon which are pasted
the fantasy faces of all the women he has loved,
not the face he had shopped for
at the two-week shopping spree
in Pakistan, the prodigal son returning every six years.
He curses the rain that blurs his view.

Does he not remember
how we have washed our whole lives
in a tea-cup of water,
of how filth has clung to our skins
like a leper's curse?
How, all the fifty-odd years since my country's birth,
the sun weighed down our backs,
enslaved us, blinded us, turned us
into the dot-matrix cigarette-burnt figures
at the police-stations
without imperial help?

Somewhere on a broken dirt road to Nazimabad
barefoot babies with their malaria-eyes
play catch-catch in sewer puddles.
Time, the gerophile, consumes my elders
as they sit, unsuspecting, fanning off the mosquitoes
on dark, clammy nights
of the usual power outages.
A man dies on the sidewalk,
full contact with a swaying minibus.

On some periphery, I am at the platform,
more than half a century ago,
where the ghost trains arrive in the subcontinent
with their dismembered bodies,
their stench of warm blood, congealing
like the meeting of eyelids
after too long a wait.

This is no place to be on a honeymoon.
I panic. Where is my husband?
In a queue at the vending machine
I want to run to him now,
to throw my arms around his waist.

How do I tell him that I miss my mother?
Who will make fresh roti for me when I get home?
Who will press my temples to ward away delirium?
In what language will love speak to me?
When will we go home?
I keep my seatbelt fastened tight.

Hey you still in the car? he says, *Check out the view.*
A burst of cold fresh air hits my face
as I step out of the car on a precarious curb.
The sun smiles at me from beyond
the limitless curves of green.
My husband winks at me
from across the roof of the Camry
as a tall blond grazes past him.
Thank goodness, he says, *his gaze upon her,*
there is no tax on beauty in this country.
I join uneasily
in his carefree laughter.

May God bless America
(though she is not mine.)

THE JUDGMENT ON MAHIWAL

No questions are asked by Mahiwal
He loves her when he has the time,
As one who looks up at nightfall,
And in the metropolitan streetlight
Is filled with wonder at that
Which appears to be redundant,
But knows is not.

They meet across the river from her house
In stealth, as any man meets another man's wife,
Sohni is Mahiwal's reason d'etre,
His wealth, and must pay with her life
For that mistake:
It is the inevitable decree of her fate
And of our storytellers who elude
The shocking implications
Of their own sinful assertions.

Mahiwal, on the parallel bank of the river,
Lies on his back, quiet as conical shells are,
Counting the stars,
Sohni reaches him late, like a quiver
Of starlight, long extinguished in the treacherous waves
Of river and deceit, bloated dead, as if her flesh
Trying to reach him, stretched.

The storytellers focus mainly on the pot,
In their voice---which carries the solemnity of death---
Sohni is the porcelain victim of a domestic plot;
The unbaked clay she used as a raft,
Mistakenly (to swim across to reach...),
Symbolizes the eternal quest, the eternal loss.

Mahiwal himself does not hear the screams;
They reach him late, like unheeded whispers,
Like overlooked signal beams
On the waves of the Chenab
On that moonless date
Where we find him counting dead stars.

We watch as from a parallel shore
Human and Chenab-eyed,
Traversing time and fiction.
Keeping the punishment of stones
Deep in our pockets,
We watch him walk away---
His shoulders slouched,
His hands cold from the water,
The words dried on his lips
---Into the sacred sanctuary
Of a communal memory.

LET NO ONE TELL YOU

Let no one tell you
that you were an accident.

That it was December 2001 in New York;
that your father had lost his job;
that your mother was losing her mind
because there was no money to pay the full rent.

We shared an apartment
with an illegal immigrant,
a woman whose husband was in jail
because he loved America
(her long, lean highways,
her ample curves of green hills, prairies, and plains,
the whole milk and coffee and fresh juice
that flows down her streets),
because he loved his clean job
that fed all five of his legal American children.

The family had it all:
the color, the noses,
two anomalous passports
with the Word of God stamped on them
and its ability to send continents drifting
to uncertain destinies.

One day the woman sold her furniture
and gathered her children
to join the deported husband,
leaving the little things behind:
the Power Puff dolls, the Nike shoes,
the schoolbags, playground, electricity, snow---
things no longer taken for granted
in the foreign land called home.

Down on the cold, wooden floor,
in an empty New York apartment,
your father and I listened
to the absence of little feet playing tag,
and the nightingale song of an infant
waking in the uncertain darkness.

Maybe that was the moment
we should have said:
*The world is not a playground
it is not a birthday party
with conical hats and ice-cream scoops.
It is ground zero, it is...
a rubble dump, a minefield,
a consternation camp.*

In the silence, instead,
We held hands.

We listened for the moment that survives
because it is beautiful.
On our knees, we prayed
for the creation
of a whole new America.
That night
we made love.

We made you

MONTGOMERY, ALABAMA

For a lover of the metropolitan,
its an unlikely city
to feel at home in,
but, for some reason, I do.

I do. Already,
I feel married to it.

The bare branch trees,
their arms
in supplication to the sky,
all Adams and Eves,
asking forgiveness,
discretion for their deeds,
carrying wiry nests
on their shoulders,
and birds
of magnificent wingspans
balanced,
scrunched up in their sleep,
beckon us
into a gallery
of sculpted nudes
and this is
my first experience of Fall,

after the palm trees,
the evergreens,
the dusty cities,
almost without trees.
This is happiness.
The certainty
of seasonal change,
like love's retreat,
and love's famous feat
of unfolding.

Never has there been
such intense suspense,
such an overcast sky
of waiting.
Not a ripple rises
from the artificial ponds,
not an eagle crosses
the ominous gray,
not a face appears
at the window of the living,
not a word is spoken
on that date.

Sometimes, it pours for weeks,
sometimes, the wind heaps more dead leaves
into our backyard,
sometimes, cows appear
in rows, moving behind
invisible fences,
green grass (or weed)
breaks through the monotony
of the burnt-yellow landscape,
larks rehearse their speech,
gardenia buds camouflage
like clingy babies
in their demure indoor leaves.

I look for one beautiful thing
everyday to plant
in the garden of long-term memory.
Who knows when
there will be such stasis
in my yard again.

From this rented house,
in a foreign country,
if nothing else,
let me take this one imaginary rose:

the intention of moving forward,
a season of perpetual hope.

NAZNI INSIDE

The smell of curry stales
in the faded upholstery.
She is afraid to touch the switches
of central cooling,
to mess with expensive equipment,
afraid to open the doors and windows
to lizards and worse.

Beyond the horizon of pines and the palms
through the thick glass windows
where only the mind can reach,
Nazni sees the jasmine vines
draping the front boundary
of her parents' home
in Karachi.

*Chalo, you spoilt creature,
the neighbor says to her in Urdu
Don't sit dreaming
of your Amreecan husband all day long.
Tell that liar and cheat of a cleaning girl
to stop at our house next.*

Nazni's husband is reticent and late.
I have to pay the bills tonight.
is all that there is on his mind.
They eat lentil and rice
with their hands,
the sound waves from CNN
like a thick screen between them.

Tsunami bodies float helplessly
on television.
In the clatter of the dirty dishes by herself
she listens for the fireworks on a tearless sky.
*One day, she consoles herself,
I will learn to drive a car
and learn the names of the streets
that finally go someplace.*

THE OLD MAN AND THE RETENTION POND

*The dew receives the lessons of the finite from the morning sun;
I, too, exist until I receive your glance of favor.*

trans. from Ghalib

The old Puerto Rican sits on his chalk porch
heavily smoking his Marlborough Lights.
The migratory ducks snooze close to him,
comforted by the vessel of a God who feeds them
the finest birdseed.

He has come here to die, he tells me,
his neighbor in the Pine Shadows condominiums.
All the ways in and out of his heart are blocked
except for the ten percent
anticipating the last cholesterol pile of dirt.

Everywhere around us I see signs of growth.
The Florida egrets land in the retention pond
their magnificent wings expanding into the sky
A rainbow shimmers against the fountain sprinkler
as the day inches taller
and the grass grows, habitually, at least half a foot
before it is cut every third day.

Beyond, the women in the swimming pool are visible
through the meshed wire fence
in their striped bikinis and denim shorts.
Laughter rings above the fifty miles an hour traffic
along Kirkman Road

Like Ghalib and Yeats before him
the old man communicates his desire to drink with his eyes,
while inside, away from the impeccably clean porch
and carefully spaced potted plants
his wife, I imagine, writes holiday cards
to the grandchildren who rarely visit.

‘Habla Espaniol?’ he finally asks me.
‘No, I only speak Urdu,’ I tell him in American English.

We talk for fifteen minutes
about different cultures, migratory birds,
smoking and death.

'They are making holes in the ozone
with rockets,' he complains.

'Oh yeah,' I ask him,
'whatever happened to the dinosaurs you think?'

He looks at me with an interest I haven't received in months.
I have the urge, as I walk away,
to give him a memento before he dies---
a fistful of damp earth from Karachi after the first rain,
an ancestral lighter for his lethal cigarettes,
Samarkand and Bukhara, the cities I have only read about,
an ordinary rabbit---

just anything to say that I, too,
am waiting for transformation.

ONLY FLOWERS

I teach English Literature,
my colonial legacy.

My mother wanted me to be a dentist---
you get the status of a doctor
and no house calls at odd hours of the night.
My father desired a Civil Servant for a daughter---
there's prestige in it, very little money
(but you're only a girl.)

I failed them both for the same reason
that I failed to trap a husband:
I shirked responsibility like a plant
that absorbs air and water and sunlight
but gives out only flowers.

And as the hungry know
North and South of the equator
one does not eat flowers.

I wanted to see the world
and English was a passport
to the seven thousand wonders
of the world's bazaar.
I wanted to bring home the stars.
People everywhere smiled at me kindly.
I saw too the world full of refugees
though man had claimed the moon
with a flagstaff.

I met my country one day
with a gold ring in her nose
and in her upturned palm I placed a few coins
as in a wishing well.
her eyes reflected the defiance of my gaze.
I knew that she could not read
the scroll of my eyes,
their ambiguous apology;
I am sorry
I have only flowers.

OUR MAN OF ALLAH AL-QAYYUM (THE SUSTAINER)

for my late uncle Abdul Qayyum

He is as stiff as coral reefs
at an unreachable point
on an unreachable beach
and spurts of salt tears
do not move him from his place
before they wrap him up
in a simple cotton sheet
and fix him into the earth
as everlasting as a face in a wall,
a rock in the sea
as reliably placed
as human memory.

Men attend his funeral,
the mosque fills to capacity;
the house too is flooded
with women who sew with tears
the patches where absence shows
our poverty,
and slowly the tide of people
recedes into the distance
and no one really knows
who has carried away what of the dead man:

those rising bubbles,
the first words he ever spoke,
that seahorse of a smile
around a practical joke,
shells of conversation
now damaged in the head,
a lover's urgency,
a father's sacredness,
the last years of premature suffering,
the bloated flesh?

the human mystery that loved
and laughed and made mistakes
with a true windsurfer's intensity
has left of his life's stakes
only shadows and oral traditions
and seaweed twisted revised editions
for those who wished to be lulled asleep.

It is yet ordained
that while we sit on the warm beach
making rosaries out of sand grains
praying for comfort in our great need
that we may not locate or retrieve
that which is lost to us
and gained by sea-nymphs
and the deep sea bells

PHOTOGRAPHS

Don't let her forget our faces,
through chemical dark-rooms,
those eerie tunnels of time,
distorted digital images that paste,
pixel by pixel, facts by facts,
our outstretched mouths, the illusions of happiness
that cage the perfect spirals of smoke
rising from a cup of coffee
in the advertising world
(all make-belief: genies in bottles
hustling impossibles from the time-bound),

the prized wrinkles at the edge of our eyes
that weren't always there,
that won't always be there.
Don't let her forget the bougainvillea blossoms,
their abundance that crowns our old house
in Karachi
and how our hands once dug the cool earth,
planting saplings that spiraled out of reach
climbing our terraces, encircling the wires
that led to the top of electric poles
and singed their green fingertips.

If we had only known
how little girls grow fast as vines
wrapping their hopes around
the nearest semblances of solidity
we would have never slept all those years.
And just as we were protected
by our lack of experience,
she is shielded by the loss
of her childhood memories:
don't let her forget
but stretch our stories in the telling,
retouch the old photographs like a work of art,
forgive us in the process of rehabilitation.

In this recent picture of our granddaughter,
with your hand-scribbled date and event,
taken at your house at the edge of the world,
in America, the one we have only imagined

in our prayers for your happiness,
she seems to have grown more curls
and bigger teeth, and the blue eyes---
that swam through the gene pool
and broke the racial ice---
shine with a sense of belonging.

When you came to see us two years ago
it made her happy (despite all your protests)
to be held like a monkey in our arms
almost all the length of a three-week stay.
She was so much like you then.
Looking at her now, from this distance, standing aloof,
tall and regal in her princess suit,
confetti suspended in the background,
she could be just about anybody's child.

PLAYGROUP PAPILLON

*There are only two lasting bequests
we can hope to give our children.
One of these is roots, the other wings.
Hodding Carter*

For you, my papillon,
there may be no going back to roots.
The only foreign faces in a Southern group
of white mothers and children,
you and I cling to each other
like the lifeguard and the drowning
hard to tell apart from the outside.

For the first hour, you sit on my lap
and then tentatively reach for an unclaimed toy in a basket,
one hand tightly clamped around my thumb,
your eyes on mine, seeking permission.
One day you will have to do this on you own.

On your fragile wings you will carry
the slaughter reds and the aquamarine blues of *hijr*,
the dust of many cities,
and the knowledge of the faces left behind.
Driven by need, we move from place to place
and always convince ourselves, if even for a day,
that we have arrived.

After many hours at the house of our host,
her immaculate wooden floor scattered
with used napkins and empty paper plates,
stuffed animals, modern abacuses, alphabet blocks,
and rattling maracas,
I am absorbed in a discussion about digital cameras,
and you are two feet away from me
posing for a photo shot, struggling for a Southern drawl.
I realize, it is time to leave.

Tired, you fall asleep in your car-seat,
and as always, I lose my way home.

My mother calls me from Pakistan on the cell phone.
“When are you coming back home for a visit?”
The devoted wife of a merchant marine,
she is accustomed to asking questions like these.
I take another wrong turn and ask her to call back later.

My father remembers being five years old
when his father was alive in India
and how when his father was dead
and the house that belonged to the government
wasn't home anymore.
He remembers the fear, the stories of ghost trains
full of decapitated bodies.
The partition of India.

Who can tell what is more traumatic,
to leave that which we love or to be left behind by what loves us?

When we get home, I give you a good scrub
and let you play in the warm tub for a long time.
This is what you love best.
My mother calls again and you ask her,
between exuberant screeches and splashes,
(from across the Atlantic and the Indian oceans),
for a lollipop.

And so we all talk as the sun goes down
and the water in the tub grows cold.

POST-PARTUM PROZAC

And if we cannot be sane
let us at least be happy:

the Bedlam witches
are no longer dunked in water,

and after the baby shower,
and the drowned pain of birth,

and the sight of the tiny fists
of a drooling creature,

and the full weight of the uninvited,
hunch-back tears

of misunderstood innocuousness
on our cursed cheekbones,

after we have spent our last quarters
of resistance

calling strangers
who don't understand the words

to a familiar song---
the language of tidal waves,

of lunar mists,
of the nightly human wolf howl,

words that take us to the border
of surrender

the point of union
of water and submersion---

the baby's cry of the living
a mother's mad complicity.

QUIET PLACES

Growing up in Karachi,
I wouldn't let my parents take me
to quiet restaurants like Shezan
with their red carpets, tombstone china,
starched white tablecloths, oiled down waiters
and hint of later-at-home intimacy.

I wanted to be seen around young people
on forbidden excursions,
and sitting sandwiched between my parents,
sometimes I noticed the eyes of a Romeo
calling me from behind a menu card.
Much as I enjoyed working on a snub
as a work of art,
I secretly wondered what would happen
if I did something different for a change.

It angered me
that my parents always ordered the same food:
chicken tikka, seekh kebabs, and buttered, round bread.
It had become painful hopping from restaurant to restaurant
trying to find the right combination of my kind of ambiance
with my father's choice of food.

My father told my mother stories
of the Indian movies that he had seen abroad
and brought her up to date on Bollywood gossip,
the Kapurs, the Kumars, and the Sri Devis,
names they later swore to their friends
I had never heard of
in my single-minded pursuit of education.

“Doesn't your mother look like Zeenat Aman?”
my father might ask.
“Zeenat *who*?” I played along.
My parents exchanged a self congratulatory look:
Yep, we must be doing something right with her.

Years away and miles off
only on weekdays to avoid the crowds
my husband and I go to Italian restaurants.
In a non Muslim country, with our growing fastidiousness,
we choose from either seafood or vegetarian.
In these eating monasteries,
I speak between forkfuls
without meaning or reverence
while my husband takes a vow of silence at the door
and never looks me in the eye during meals.

I tell stories to the shrimps in my plate
who have come appropriately dressed for this party
and Honey eventually grumbles at the check.

No more shopping for us, I suppose,
and no more fast food pizzerias to go.

SADIQUAIN'S NON CALLIGRAPHIC COLLECTION

At the Mohatta Palace exhibition
they called it his 'non-calligraphic collection'
as if something that filled up thirty rooms

could be described in terms of a negation.
Dizzied by the prolific intricacies
of Sadequain's giant canvasses, eyes closed,

poised on a bench, I imagined the bare studios
where he painted his cluttered murals,
evoking the long sparse hands, their knotted fingers

and wrapping my hands around their hollows in consent.
The limbs of his men and women encircle each other
like coils of different colored play dough

merging and reemerging to form a single sherbet.
What does it mean to be so naked? So close
and so separate? What does it mean to be man and woman?

To dream in color and contrast?
Sadequain drinks to oblivion to stand upright---
in a cosmic swirl, along with the sun, the moon, the planets,

and the plants rooted to the skin of the world---
long enough to sustain this vision through the night
long enough to fill it up in buckets of paint

to smear the graffiti of a seemingly inconsistent God
on walls and ceilings of official buildings
across the stretched canvasses of warring continents

I make several visits to this historic site turned gallery,
the last one with you, lingering at the depictions
of the river Seine that symbolizes your childhood.

Together we try to make sense of the Arabic, the Urdu
and the Persian verses that beat like a pulse through his art
and make their appearances like the veins on the back of a hand.

I show you the manuscripts of Camus' *Stranger*
that Sadequain illustrated and try to tell you
what the book means to me as human

and what it might have meant to the artist as man,
We move to the longest room
where wise men tower in a chronological queue.

From Avicenna to the twentieth century masters,
these men of Islam are rarely chronicled
in modern intellectual histories of the world.

In my opinion, it must have taken
a larger than usual bottle for Sadequain
to paint himself at the edge of that spectrum of giants

dispensing the artist's humility.

For some reason I am drawn to this room with its turbaned men
and their assorted props of books, maps and feather quills.

I have the vision of being in a men's private dressing room
and the urge to rearrange their scattered documents,
until you catch me by the elbow of my dissent

and I remember I am literally not in the picture,
reverse of the Creator's design, reduced to rib
not you, the man, not authorized.

SLIMY THINGS

A slug cross-stitched her way into our living room,
waving his body like a victory flag over enemy land
while I oozed out my hatred of slimy things
using all the appropriate words
for creatures that invade our private spaces.

I remember the leaping toad that my brother sneaked
into the backseat of our tiny Suzuki
the long iguana that slithered down a rack
in my grandfather's basement library,
the flying roach that reached halfway
up the inside of my pajama when I was six,
leaving me roach-phobic for life.

I also remember when my father's house in Karachi
was broken into by masked men
brandishing knives like crocodiles' teeth.
For every paisa's worth of his sweat-money
that they took from us, they gave us back fears
that taunt us with pain, like missing limbs.

I pick up a broom and a dust-pan past my revulsion

and, for the first time, look at the little thug.

For this rotund little sac of flesh and fluid

the world of our two-room condo is immense,

a destiny beyond her creation and control.

I understand my power to squish and squirm

the worm-heart beating like the wheels of a train.

How much compassion does it take to let a tense body go

live out to its natural end, its precious life

in some undisclosed dirt hole?

SNOWBOUND

Feeding imaginary popcorn to a brass duck
in our living room.

I brace my daughter for survival
in a world without wings,
in a sea without gills,
as the only mackerel in an ocean of squids
without guilt.

I teach her to knock inwards---
if she is ever caught in a storm
or snowbound for life---
until the door opens,
just a crack at a time,
bringing momentary relief
against frigidity,

against darkness that unfurls
like a vulture's wings,
against sea-snake silence
that curls around the neck,
against the strangling out of vitality
against snubbing off of light
against snow,
against gravity.

TOWARDS HUMILITY

There is a walk towards your garden
through a landmine of wish-fulfillment dreams.
(Earth rebukes the arrogant step,
love eludes the stalker,
stars light up for the accidental worlds.)
And I the occidental walker,
decide the apples in your garden aren't sweet.
The natural sun is happier than your hearth.
And though God has blessed us with honey,
milk, and fruit from the fig trees,
it is a privilege to politely refuse
and say, "We do not love these."
I have already counted the fireworks of hell
by looking away from the eyes of the mendicant;
because my hardened frame,
skin, and vital signs resist metamorphosis;
because I wished there was less humility on the road
to where your house is.

WEDDING FAREWELL

Abba kissed her on the forehead
between the hair spray and the nose
and put her on the palanquin,
a Toyota taped with roses.

'I am letting you go', said his
eyes, wet with jasmine in the air.
The dry-eyed bride interpreted,
'Morpheus, take what shape you should.'

Later, in the house, where a string
of electric lights hung from the roof,
Woolf, Stein and Beauvoir stood
on shelves, in abandoned darkness.

Amma did not sweep the dead leaves
from the floor that night, and Tito,
the cat, did not sleep his nine hours
sleep, the bed empty. We just mourned.

She knew this in the in-laws' house,
moving slowly in four-inch heels
six paces from the front to the
bridal door, like Neil Armstrong

on the moon. She knew us too well.
But focused instead on her dress,
the *gharara*, crimson, heavy
with ancestral knowledge of craft,

On the husband and his turban,
donned as a fashion statement.
On the new in-laws and their guests,
and their tributes of rose garlands.

When the guests left, the young man locked
the door from the inside and looked
to see if he had frightened her:
His Movado read 2 a.m..

We just waited for the sun to rise.
Soon the smell of henna would fade.
That night, in the four-poster bed,
perhaps she lost her virginity.