Postcard from Kashmir and Other Poems
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Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox,
my home a neat four by six inches.

I always loved neatness. Now I hold
the half-inch Himalayas in my hand.

This is home. And this the closest
I'll ever be to home. When I return,
the colors won't be so brilliant,
the Jhelum's waters so clean,
so ultramarine. My love
so overexposed.

And my memory will be a little
out of focus, in it
a giant negative, black
and white, still undeveloped.

(for Pavan Sahgal)
Snowmen

My ancestor, a man
of Himalayan snow,
came to Kashmir from Samarkand,
carrying a bag
of whale bones:
heirlooms from sea funerals.
His skeleton
carved from glaciers, his breath
arctic,
he froze women in his embrace.
His wife thawed into stony water,
her old age a clear
evaporation.

This heirloom,
his skeleton under my skin, passed
from son to grandson,
generations of snowmen on my back.
They tap every year on my window,
their voices hushed to ice.

No, they won’t let me out of winter,
and I’ve promised myself,
even if I’m the last snowman,
that I’ll ride into spring.
on their melting shoulders.
The Dacca Gauzes

... for a whole year he sought
to accumulate the most exquisite
Dacca gauzes.

— Oscar Wilde/The Picture of Dorian Gray

Those transparent Dacca gauzes
known as woven air, running
water, evening dew:

a dead art now, dead over
a hundred years. “No one
now knows,” my grandmother says,

“what it was to wear
or touch that cloth.” She wore
it once, an heirloom sari from

her mother’s dowry, proved
genuine when it was pulled, all
six yards, through a ring.

Years later when it tore,
many handkerchiefs embroidered
with gold-thread paisleys

were distributed among
the nieces and daughters-in-law.
Those too not lost.

In history we learned: the hands
of weavers were amputated,
the looms of Bengal silenced,
and the cotton shipped raw
by the British to England.
History of little use to her,

my grandmother just says
how the muslins of today
seem so coarse and that only
in autumn, should one wake up
at dawn to pray, can one
feel that same texture again.

One morning, she says, the air
was dew-starched: she pulled
it absently through her ring.
Homage to Faiz Ahmed Faiz
(d. 20 November 1984)

"You are welcome to make your adaptations of my poems."

You wrote this from Beirut, two years before the Sabra-Shatila massacres. That city’s refugee air was open, torn by jets and the voices of reporters. As always, you were witness to “rains of stones,”

though you were away from Pakistan, from the laws of home which said: the hands of thieves will be surgically amputated. But the subcontinent always spoke to you: in Ghalib’s Urdu, and sometimes through

the old masters who sang of twilight but didn’t live, like Ghalib, to see the wind rip the collars of the dawn: the summer of 1857, the trees of Delhi became scaffolds: 30,000 men

were hanged. Wherever you were, Faiz, that language spoke to you; and when you heard it, you were alone—in Tunis, Beirut, London, or Moscow. Those poets’ laments concealed, as yours revealed, the sorrows

of a broken time. You knew Ghalib was right: blood must not merely follow routine, must not just flow as the veins uninterrupted river. Sometimes it must flood the eyes, surprise them by being clear as water.
I didn’t listen when my father
recited your poems to us
by heart. What could it mean to a boy
that you had redefined the cruel
beloved, that figure who already
was Friend, Woman, God? In your hands

she was Revolution. You gave
her silver hands, her lips were red.
Impoverished lovers waited all

night every night, but she remained
only a glimpse behind
light. When I learned of her,

I was no longer a boy, and Urdu
a silhouette traced
by the voices of singers,

by Begum Akhtar, who wove your couplets
into ragas: both language and music
were sharpened. I listened:

and you became, like memory,
necessary. Dast-e-Saba,
I said to myself. And quietly

the wind opened its palms: I read
there of the night: the secrets
of lovers, the secrets of prisons.

When you permitted my hands to turn to stone,
as must happen to a translator’s hands,

I thought of you writing *Zindan-Nama*
on prison walls, on cigarette packages,
on torn envelopes. Your lines were measured
do so carefully to become in our veins
the blood of prisoners. In the free verse
of another language I imprisoned
each line — but I touched my own exile.
This hush, while your ghazals lay in my palms,
was accurate, as is this hush that falls
at news of your death over Pakistan
and India and over all of us no
longer there to whom you spoke in Urdu.
Twenty days before your death you finally
wrote, this time from Lahore, that after the sack
of Beirut you had no address... I
had gone from poem to poem, and found
you once, terribly alone, speaking
to yourself: "Bolt your doors, Sad heart! Put out
the candles, break all cups of wine. No one,
now no one will ever return," But you
still waited, Faiz, for that God, that Woman,
that Friend, that Revolution, to come
at last. And because you waited,
I listen as you pass with some song,
A memory of musk, the rebel face of hope.
I Dream It Is Afternoon When
I Return to Delhi

At Purana Qila I am alone, waiting
for the bus to Daryaganj. I see it coming,
but my hands are empty.
"Jump on, jump on," someone shouts,
"I've saved this change for you
for years. Look!"
A hand opens, full of silver rupees.
"Jump on, jump on." The voice doesn’t stop.
There’s no one I know. A policeman,
handcuffs silver in his hands,
asks for my ticket.

I jump off the running bus,
Sweat pouring from my hair.
I run past the Doll Museum, past
headlines on the Times of India
building, PRISONERS BLINDED IN A BIHAR
JAIL, HARIJAN VILLAGES BURNED BY LANDLORDS.
Panting, I stop in Daryaganj,
outside Golcha Cinema.

Sunil is there, lighting
a cigarette, smiling. I say,
"It must be ten years, you haven’t changed,
it was your voice on the bus!"
He says, "The film is about to begin,
I've bought an extra ticket for you,"
and we rush inside:

Anarkali is being led away,
her earrings lying on the marble floor.
Any moment she’ll be buried alive.
"But this is the end," I turn
toward Sunil. He is nowhere.
The usher taps my shoulder, says
My ticket is ten years old.
Once again my hands are empty.
I am waiting, alone, at Purana Qila.
Bus after empty bus is not stopping.
Suddenly, beggar women with children
are everywhere, offering
me money, weeping for me.