

Poems, New Uncollected

Sand, Music

The wind is blurring our faces
We do not know who we are or what songs we might sing.
A stranger enters the village, lets go his horse.
A woman drags a cart filled with pots and pans,
Pulling the sky behind her.
When I was a young girl, I saw nothing,
My skin set fire to everything.
A tethered horse is pecked to death by songbirds.
In Muhagiriya everything's laid out
As if in a Japanese garden, the sort one dreams of –
Circles of sand, beaten rocks, tree stumps
Tilting into blue. A child's elbow pokes out of a well.
In a mosque, men kneeling, five beheaded.
And the daughters of music brought low.

(American Poetry Review)

In Our Lifetime

Flushed by the rose of flesh
Pierced by barbed wire, a wound that will not heal.
The iron of attachment cuts
What we take for ourselves, ways of living
That will not last for very long, untenable, yes.
A boy moves on the plain, his goats beside him.
Trying to find his way through clouds of dust --
Haskanita, where children rushed by men
On horseback discover the guns temerity,
Where stars startle themselves in broken water
And the boy with his goats, trying to turn home
Remembers what his father never told him –
Open your legs wide, run
Not those staggering towards slaughter .

(American Poetry Review)

Green Leaves of El Fasher

Everything that's real turns to sun
Stones, trees, the jeeps they came in, those men.
In Jebel Marra, the leaves are very green.
Here, in El Fasher too.
I am singing, stones fill with music.
Do not touch my hair, I cried. They forced me
To uncover my head then beat me when my veil slipped,
Not the pink one I am wearing now, with stripes – this
My aunt gave me. I am not an animal,
They are more free, birds in the tree, horses too.
I am your language, do not cover me.
I am burning in what you take to be the present tense.
We are the letters *alif, ba, taa, mim* –
What the sun makes as it spins a nest of fire.

(Nimrod)

Nurredin

A garden bright with fruit trees,
Each tree, in its own shadow, singing.
Above our house, a cloud of locusts stinging.

Mother lay not moving, out of her throat,
My fate, a tiny river. I saw a man with a gun
In his mouth trying to eat it.

From the cloud-ship- Antonov - black rain fell
We ran to the wadi, many people came.
(Wadi means dry river bed).

Creatures too, camels, dogs, cats with no fur
Birds with torn wings. I curled up in the wadi house,
Hungry, with bones and ash to stay.

Remember me, Nurredin.
My name means light of day.

(Fence)

Last Colors

In another country, in a tent under a tree,
A child sets paper to rock,
Picks up a crayon, draws a woman with a scarlet face,
Arms outstretched, body flung into blue.

(Hashsha – to beat down leaves from a tree.)

The child draws an armored vehicle, guns sticking out
Purple flames, orange and yellow jabbing,
A bounty of crayons, a hut burst into glory.

(Yatima – to be an orphan, the verb intransitive.)

The child draws what's near at hand and common
Not what's far away – not the ghost house
In Khartoum where a father lies
Whose hands and ears are torn.

(Idhash-shamsu kuwwirat – so the sun is overthrown)

(American Poetry Review)

Birthplace (with Buried Stones)

I.

In the absence of reliable ghosts I made aria,
Coughing into emptiness, and it came

A west wind from the plains with its arbitrary arsenal:
Torn sails from the Ganga river,

Bits of spurned silk,
Strips of jute to be fashioned into lines,

What words stake – sentence and make believe,
A lyric summoning.

II.

I came into this world in an Allahabad hospital
Close to a smelly cow pasture.

I was brought to a barracks with white walls
And corrugated tin roof

Beside a Civil Aviation Training Center
— In World War II officers were docketed there --

I heard the twang of propellers,
Jets pumping hot whorls of air,

Heaven bent,
Blessing my first home.

III.

In an open doorway, in half darkness
I see a young woman standing.

Her breasts are swollen with milk.
She is transfixed, staring at a man,
His hair gleaming with sweat,
Trousers rolled up,

Stepping off his bicycle,

Mustard bloom catches in his shirt.

I do not know what she says to him,
Or he to her, all that is utterly beyond me.

Their infant once a clot of blood
Is spectral still.

Behind this family are vessels of brass
Dotted with saffron,

The trunk of a mango tree chopped into bits,
Ready to be burnt at the household fire.

IV.

Through the portals of that larger chaos,
What we can scarcely conceive of in our minds --

We'd rather think of starry nights with biting flames
Trapped inside tree trunks, a wellspring of desire

Igniting men and gods,
A lava storm where butterflies dance --

Comes bloodletting at the borders,
Severed tongues, riots in the capital,

The unspeakable hurt of history:
So the river Ganga pours into the sea.

V.

In aftermath – the elements of vocal awakening:
Crud, spittle, snot, menstrual blistering,
Also infant steps, a child's hunger, a woman's rage
At the entrance to a kitchen,

Her hands picking up vegetable shavings, chicken bones,
Gold tossed from an ancestral keep.

All this flows into me as mottled memory,
Mixed with syllables of sweat, gashed syntax,

Strands of burst bone in river sand,
Beside the buried stones of Sarasvati Koop,

Well of mystic sky-water where swans
Dip their throats and come out dreaming.

(Ploughshares)