

Ather Zia

Poems for Kashmir

Poem 1: Prima Facie nothing has happened

circa 1989

doors, once kept the homes warm
now lie open, flapping like
wounded jungle birds, the
Himalayan winter
enters unasked, the
river is frozen, there is no water
blood crusts their lips
daughter, mother,
sister and niece,
the 10 year old whose legs are bare -
grandmother, great-grandmother
grandaunt, great-niece
petrified,
dark weaves into
their hearts, now just a mound of broken,
palpating flesh in the ash-filled courtyard
where tunics, and veils
have become rags
shameful flags of hubris
that bled across barriers
age, kinship, young, old nothing mattered
the terror filled night
still hangs onto the doors,
refusing sleep -

a probe,
swift to begin,
as justice has never been,
inside the armored jeeps shiny insignia's, flags,
guns and painted roses,
stiff men in muftis hunch over papers
some turn the earth, filling little envelopes marked evidence' with dust,
their glasses reflect the darkness of the blinding light,
their gloved hands, hold newly issued note-pads, shining pens, ready -
their words are hard, and easy to follow,
(depending on you knowing what they mean and don't),
scratches,
no forced entry, no witnesses,
compensation,
not so innocent 10 year old
tea stains, safari suits, bonus,
boot marks,
urine, rape-kit, set-up
daughters (not their own), swabs
military, sputum, semen,
militants, dissidents and traitors,
pleasure, rolex, airfare,
framed, nation,
glance, youth,
virgin, hand-me-downs
newborn born with a broken arm,
(a womb can only offer so much protection),
skiing, royal springs, golf
overtime, vacation
there is much, much to endure
what, where, tampering, nothing
medical eyes, surgical hands, find smudges, marks, scratches
that tell no tale -
clinical ears, hear sobs that must be quieted
pens through a maze of words, find those that must fit -
prima facie nothing has happened

circa 2011

the women lurk inside,
rags hung on ancient nails,
eyes turned inwards,
lips are a thin line of horror and fatigue,
voices that entered into their bodies
are like metal probes with endless thorns,
still echoing
over and over
that night sticks to their doors, hunted
watching over the unseen dead bodies of their husbands,
the ghosts of the disappeared sons haunting only them
the women mourn in an unknown language
by the cracked river-bed dotted
with bleached bones, and melting plastic shoes,
mother's must watch over
the children, who are growing up
and resemble no one
the officials come to measure the territory
and to keep the barbed wires in place -
a cog in a square wheel of the sovereign
count the number of souls' in the bodies,
the alleged rapists' again deny all charges,
and yes - *prima facie* nothing has happened

POEM 2: Homecoming

His lunch is getting cold, she whispers, to herself
The nickel-plated, copper edged bowl,
placed just right on the thread-bare mat
white, glob of pudgy rice
wet with glistening collards,
a twisted wreath of peace

the slogans rise
Khoon ka badla khoon se lenge
(blood for blood) -
Lal * chowk is lal today
(red square is red today)
She closes the window,
Shivering; shuts the sunshine out,
The noise dims - only for a moment

She waits, like everyday
For him to come
grease, gas, and sorrow marking his face
he remembers to forget the
phantom coolness of the trigger
warmth of a mission, which he thought was bigger than his heart,
now he tries to coax unwilling vehicles to life
touching the worn map behind his grandfather's framed picture,
for the last time, every time
in the garage where everything creaks with age and poverty

She puts her ear to the closed window
Khoon ka badla khoon se lenge
(blood for blood) -
Lal chowk is lal today
(red square is red today)
The shouts fill the
Emptiness everywhere
Seething a little,
she wrings the dripping rag,
cleans the already-clean kerosene stove,
whispering, his lunch is getting cold

She watches the weathered door open a flood of eyes,
Cramming the small dark room,
The aroma of cooling lunch
drowns in short gasps of fiery breaths
He is cradled in a sea of frightened arms,
Sleeping like he never could -
The yelps of kicked-about dogs in the night,
the moans from his father's room, and mother's prayers,
never let him
She laments his cold lunch
He does not hear,
like always
He has arrived, he has arrived
but he is not here
his lunch is getting cold

*Meaning : Lal means the color red and chowk means square. Named after Red Square, Moscow.

Poem 3: Journey across the concertina-wire

the road stops everywhere
stops being a road
and just be that
a check point
a staccato journey,
barricaded, potholed, of the ridiculed sort
that will not lead me to my grandfather's anymore -
useless borders,
simply waylay me,
reminders of my inclusion in the exclusion
contained within the fancily named
concertina' wire,
toothy, metallic,
shiny, gloating
wantonly lying on the roadside,
one with dust, spit, dried blood, ash,
in that intimate display with AK-47's
looking over the heaps of abandoned shoes,
and puddles of endless dog-mess,

there at the check points
my chest is riddled with labels,
and yours
together we ride the limp wind,
heads drooping, eyes down
headed for the same place
though we hardly seem to know where we are going -

watching across the toothy wires,
you seem to stop everywhere
stop being you
and just be that
a point, of endless burden and blame
receptacle for the metal of certain order
(not gold, not silver)
same as me
still
we must keep walking.

Poem 4: The Shoemaker: In the killing fields

They seldom wore shoes
they said they had nowhere to go

then one fine day they wore them out,
kept wearing them out,
kept coming for all the mending I could do,
they held candles in their bloody hands,
urging me to hurry
then they came no more

I heard their toes were gone,
their feet, crumbled
Frost bitten, hard as icicles
buried in the snow too long,
summer heat seared away
what winter left of the rebel flesh
In the unforgiving Himalayas

Sour, green Adams or in other words soldiers'
came for me!
Sewing, needle, thread and candle light
Became aiding and abetting,
Mending shoes became a mark of a traitor,
Metal butts made bloody dents in my flesh
they kicked me, and kept on kicking
their boots stuck like unwanted destiny on my chest
and then I saw,
the boots were torn like the shoes of the dead ones
shadows of winter were creeping on their exposed toes
latent icicles waiting to fall off

I lay back assuaged, the burden gone
The resistance ebbing -
My hands lay quietly by my side
My lips closed,
Blood rushed into my ears,
they kicked and kept on kicking,
I saw nature taking its course

Poem 5: A Fake Encounter with the Real

Yesterday's sunset
is quite on your face,
still, cold -
your body is accounted for (just this once)
your life never was
Probe the matter, they say!

You could be posing
for a gallant photo
without that victory smile,
black dust, grey ash, dead blue
on your stiff, awkward
fingers
a galaxy exists
between them and the gun,
sticking to your sooty palm
your eyes - dark, open graves, silent, untiring
your shirt - torn
the hole on the back of your neck is neat, lethal
dead on
Zuliekha tongues lick fire over and over
Probe the matter, they say!

You are a rigid, stubborn, cold question
I have no answers,
At least not yet
Your question mark of a wife,
swears, you made winter coals for living,
in the jungle of oozing stumps and deadwood,
above their village,
leaving each morning pre-dawn
chewing stale bread
with dark tea (milk if any was for the kids)
she still smells the turmeric on your hands,
from the lunch of collards and rice she had packed
in the old copper tin box
passed down from your mother's brother,
you lived on hand-me-downs,
she wipes her tears and children's noses

in one expert swipe
you never lifted a knife, she wails (not difficult to believe),
never even sliced a fish (not that they could afford it)
or pared an apple ever, for the
litter of kids, who cling
to her bony body, like wet, living rags
Yesterday's gunshots
echo, ring, scream, echo
temple bells before deities made of soft stone,
dead notes cowering in the eternal autumnal
cold earth, closing for a long winter
barren fruits and sterile lands,
a tiny, clean entry wound,
a halo, residue of close-range shot
as if someone had lent to give you a kiss (of death)
Speaks, clear and loud,
a nightmare takes the witness stand,
claws my eyes
inscribes on my flesh, etches itself on my heart,
the pen continues to write the account
of the real encounter of the fake kind
Thus the matter stands probed!