

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!