



“The Prince of Looking Back”

— Poems By Kishwar Naheed

Kishwar Naheed, born 1940, a major poet of Pakistan, is among the pioneers of the prose poem in Urdu. A senior civil servant, broadcaster and editor of magazine, she has written several books, including seven collections of poems. She is known as a champion of women's rights. We present here some of her poems, translated from Urdu by Baidaa Bakht and Derek M. Cohen.

The Rain Within Myself

To you I was a window.
You opened me
And enjoyed the scene as you
pleased,
And inhaled the breeze and colours.
To shelter from the storm,
You closed the shutters
And I became a robe
Snugly wrapped around you.

To shelter from the storm,
You closed the shutters
And I became a robe
Snugly wrapped around you.

To you I was a tunnel,
Where you could shelter when you
wished
And could conceal me too.
To keep your footprints from sight

You walked in me for life.

To you I was a dream;
I was water;
I was sand;
I was reality on command;
And like indigestion's after-taste;
forgotten.

When you talk in your dreams,
I have to listen, lying awake.
But no dream listens
To my wakeful words.

Anti-Clockwise

My eyes can become your soles.
The fear will still haunt you
That, though I may not see,
I can still smell bodies and phrases
Like fragrance.
For my protection

I can rub my nose out of existence
On the ground in front of you.
The fear will still haunt you
That, though I may not smell,
I can still speak.

Singing your praises,
My lips can parch and become life-less.
The fear will still haunt you
That, though I may not speak,
I can still walk.

You can cripple my feet
By shackles of wifehood and modesty.

The fear will still haunt you
That, though I may not walk,
I can still think.

The fear of my independent living
self

And my thinking
Will haunt you for how long?

Difficult Errata For Easy Words

When poetry seems easy,
Life is easy.
So for all I know are hard words.

‘Freedom’, for example, was a simple
word;
Life made it hard.

‘Living’ was easy;
But breath is caught in the throat’s
snare
And the body rings like an alarm.
‘Laughter’ was simple;
But its every letter is fraught with
tears.

Try ‘walking’ for an innocent words;
Easy to read, but when I tried to
walk
I stumbled on every step,
And fell.

Those words we are permitted to
write
And easy as words
But resist usage.
‘Desire’ is a simple one;
But try to find that river of milk and
honey
And you will end up
With a pillow wet with tears.
We can all seem like an open books,
Very simple:
As some truths
Lying with a straight face
Such lies as even lies
Would not dare to tell.

I and I

I live in the forest of books.
Books like green branches
Gather my body’s scorching heat
And offer dark sweet shade of word
and meaning.

I am not a woman alone;
Many are imprisoned within myself.
One woman,
Who joined Adam to her blood;

Who ate leftovers
And then thanked God.

Another,
Who entered the world of man, Carried
his burden and hers,
Raised a wall of fear
And a dust cloud of doubt,
For herself and the world.

Another,
Who gave life her colour,
And the world, wrapped in wonder
Lay eagerly waiting.

Another,
Who would not be
Yashodhara, or Noor Jehan, or
Mumtaz;*
Like Qur’at-ul-Ain**
Kept her lips free.
Cut her hair
Rather than be dragged by it.

Another
Who wrote tales of bravery in the
day,
Of cowardice at night;
Who clenched her fists
In the dark
And became a lamp herself.

Another,
Who cast off the role of a beloved
And herself became Ranjha***;
Who closed her ears to dreams
And knew whispers
To be the language of the forbidden
city.

And another,
Who even now is like a steam engine:
Keeps drinking water;
Vomiting smoke,
And keeps going, keeps going, keeps
going.

* Yashodhara—Wife of the Buddha
Noor Jehan—Beloved of a Mughal prince.
Mumtaz Mahal—Emperor Shah Jehan’s wife
for whom he built the Taj Mahal.

** A nineteenth century Irani poetess who
was punished by strangulation for her
feminist views.

***The hero of a tragic love story.

A Story

A child is rocking
On a toy horse.
The horse is wood
And unaware of the touch.
He thrashes it
And for his mastery
Likes himself.
He grows to be a man,
Rides the wooden horse again,
And declares his youth by a
ceremony.
With the passage of the night
The horse is transformed.
But he who beats it,
Who likes himself,
Remains the same:
Master, rider, husband.

Ordained

You carry an empty can of
confidence,
While I thirst for forty years.

You see the future through a
microscope,
While I seek a highway in the diiest
of today.
You lie in the soft green shade of
smugness,
While I am scorched by the sun of
restlessness

You hold the oars of dew-like love;
While I, like the fingers of a
drowning man,
Grab at the twilight of life.

Glow worms of dreams sparkle in
your fist,
While sadness, fast in my grip,
Tries to penetrate the lines on my
palm.

Spring at your lips calls.
The locked door of my heart
Did not submit to the hurrican’
Would not submit to the flood;
Could not be moved by the earthquake.

Carrying the empty can of confidence,
How long will you stand at this
door? □