

LAUREL STEELE

Six Poems by Mustafa Zaidi With an Elegy by Salam Machhli-shahri

IN every decade since the seventies, I have been lucky to spend some time both in Pakistan and in India. Pakistan, to my mind, is the only country in the world where the doings of poets can be, in many ways, of more import than the doings of politicians. It makes living there seem a bit like attending a huge literary debate wrought with characters, and pressure groups, and gossip, preferably scandalous. Of course, saying this in an *Annual of Urdu Studies* is simply to state what is obvious to all of us. However, it is worth remembering how poetry and writing are burning issues within an Urdu cultural milieu.

When I first lived in Lahore, I remember asking Pakistani friends what poets they read. “Faiz. Ghālib. Mīr.” Those were the standard answers. These were the answers in Karachi, too. But I found that if I asked a few more questions, the answer became, “Oh, Muṣṭafā Zaidī and Nāṣir Kāzmī.” Poets were rarely spoken of in isolation—the poetic landscape was heavily populated and frequently recollected.

Over the years, both Zaidī and Kāzmī continued to be mentioned. My informants could tell me that Zaidī was well known as a young poet in Allahabad before Partition, and had come with the rest of the millions of Muslims to begin life in the created country. Later he became a member of the Civil Service of Pakistan. Then, they told me, he had died in some sort of suicide pact. Some of my friends who talked about him seemed to see him as a metaphor for their own experience. Nāṣir Kāzmī, too, was remembered as someone who spoke to the experience of Pakistan. He had written poems about the longing he felt for India, for the past, and at the same time, he had re-infused the ghazal with a kind of compressed energy created by a “*ḥōṭī baḥr*,” literally a small or short

meter. “Yes,” people would continue, “Muṣṭafā Zaidī was a *naẓm* poet, and Nāṣir Kāẓmī was a ghazal poet.”

I was very intrigued. So many poets, both well-known and sometimes now almost forgotten, had stayed in India. There were Sāḥir Ludḥiyānvī, Jān Niṣār Akhtar, ‘Alī Sardār Ja‘farī, Akhtaru ‘l-Īmān and Salām Mačḥlī-shahrī, not to forget Majāz and of course, Jigar. The list was endless. The story of Jōsh’s move to Pakistan, another of the older generation, was told in dire tones, a cautionary tale of disappointment and humiliation. Meanwhile, Pakistan was producing poets in the generation after Faiz, and the two who stood out, Muṣṭafā Zaidī and Nāṣir Kāẓmī, were part of that group. Neither was “progressive.” Zaidī’s notoriety and his position as a government official seemed to be a hindrance to his reputation as a poet. Nāṣir Kāẓmī’s personal life did not present the same problems, but his deep mining and radical compressions of one genre—the ghazal—appeared remarkable in the wake of the influence of either Faiz or Nūn Mīm Rāshid. Sometimes he would be compared to Mīrājī. He seemed unique, and yet utterly of the tradition.

As I began my own work on Muṣṭafā Zaidī, except for Faiz’s poems, there were very few translations from this post-Partition group. Researching Zaidī’s life and finding out about the kinds of poems that were being written in the fifties and sixties in Pakistan has been intellectually stimulating. Poets both in India and Pakistan had so much to say, as the subject at hand turned from the struggle for freedom from colonialism to the experiences of Partition, and then to other subjects as well. They had inherited so much—from Jōsh, from Firāq, and earlier, from Iqbāl, and Ghālīb—but what was to happen to this inheritance? Poetry in Pakistan, as exemplified by Faiz, was a dangerous occupation. To be a poet was to be jailed and exiled. Parvīn Shākir once told me about her life and her struggles. Even though she was a middle-ranking civil service officer, and thus financially secure, her life as a poet was not easy. How, after all, could she be a poet in this environment? How did she manage to use her creative energy so exquisitely? The force of her creativity seemed to lie within the culture itself, allowing her to produce poetry of a very high caliber in spite of tremendous obstacles, not least among them that of being a woman in Zia ul Haq’s Pakistan.

Experiences and encounters like these engaged my deepest interest. Questions about literature, art, language and politics converged. Often the poems were astonishing testimonials to imagination and tradition. When I read Anita Desai’s *In Custody*, I could tell that my outsider’s obsession with Urdu poetry was a shared obsession.

The critic Muhammad Ali Siddiqi (Ariel) quoted Jōsh at Zaidī's memorial service as asserting that he was, "The greatest Urdu poet of the future."¹ Was Jōsh foretelling the future: a poet, and a path, that simply ended? The poems that follow are from Muṣṭafā Zaidī's last, posthumously published collection, *Kōh-e Nidā*. Literally, "kōh-e nidā" means "the mountain of calling." The image is extremely rich. It is from the story (*qiṣṣa*) of Ḥātim Ṭā'ī in which the mountain calls out, "O, Brother," as it beckons people to enter it, to disappear forever inside—a metaphor from a classic Arabian tale, but one—given the popularity of *qiṣṣas*—that was well understood by Zaidī's audience.

The first poem in the group is Salām Mačḥlī-shahri's elegy for Muṣṭafā Zaidī, written soon after his death, but written from India. Other poets in Pakistan had written about this tragic occasion—Jōsh, Majīd Amjad, Ra'īs Amrōhvi, Zafar Iqbāl. But Salām's work reaches across the divide of Partition, to encompass both the Pakistani Muṣṭafā Zaidī and the young Indian man who had been Tēgh Ilāhābādī.

The six poems by Muṣṭafā Zaidī were written just before and just after his dismissal from his job. The first one, "Musāfir" or "The Traveler," was written in 1969, in Singapore, as he made his way back to Pakistan after an overseas training trip. This is a translation with which I took more liberties than I usually would. The Urdu poem, which is written in the *āzād nazm* (free verse) style, is alternately terse and flowing; in the English version I have trimmed the Urdu pronouns and constructions to make the syntax less cumbersome. For example, the first lines of the poem "Musāfir," when translated fairly literally, read:

My homeland, I have brought in your service
 The enchantments of many places, the colors of many lands
 The ashes of an old mind and the passions of young hearts
 Don't look so at my empty hands
 Don't be so embarrassed by my nothingness

¹A number of people have told me that Faiẓ said this at the memorial service, but in Muhammad Ali Siddiqi's (Ariel) column in *Dawn* (17 November 1970), he quotes Jōsh as the speaker who said this. I have the memorial service program, and Jōsh is listed there, though Faiẓ did, indeed, attend. It may be that this "poet of the future" remark was said and repeated by a number of people.

In the translation I made for pleasure (not for grammatical and linguistic analysis, and not for what the new translation theory is calling background translation) my foregrounded version reads like this:

My homeland, I bring you
 Charms, colors
 Of many lands
 Ashes of old minds, passions of young hearts
 My empty hands
 My nothingness
 Don't look at them thus, ashamed

The next set of poems is the famous quintet of verses Zaidī wrote to Shahnāz Gul the summer before he died. Within the realm of popular culture, these are the poems for which Zaidī is best known. This affair can be understood as a part of the breakdown he had after he became one of a group of 303, “Three Naught Three,” members of the government bureaucracy purged from the Civil Service by Yahya Khan. His relationships with women had been troubled and difficult since his teens; the poems here are at once a result of his breakdown and the continuation of a pattern in his emotional reactions. The poems themselves, four *nazms* and a ghazal, record the disintegration of his relationship with his muse and lover, Shahnāz. This is by no means a new theme in Urdu poetry, but the Shahnāz poems are marked by their frank explication of sex, in this case between a married man and an identifiable single woman, in language that is both melodic and explicit. Urdu prose already had a well-established tradition of sexual explicitness (viz., *Manṭō* and *Āghṭā’ī*), but poets, by and large, had stuck to allusion and delicacy when bringing up the subject in their published works. Unlike my translation of “The Traveler,” with these poems I have kept somewhat more closely to the Urdu syntax as I tried not to lose the sense of how the thoughts are constructed.

No one pretends that a translated poem “sounds” like the original, and no one believes that the reader of a translated poem will comprehend all the worlds of the poem. More good is served, however, by informing the English-knowing audience of this tradition and metaphorical universe, albeit imperfectly, than not. At this point, I take refuge with Walter Benjamin at the edge of the forest:

The task of the translator consists in finding that intended effect upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the

original. ... Unlike a work of literature, translation does not find itself in the center of the language forest but on the outside facing the wooded ridge; it calls into it without entering, aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one.²

One can sometimes see the attractive perversity in the contrarian idea that poetry is better in translation. After all, the translated poem is exotic, mysterious (not the rightfully mocked orientalist mystery of the East—rather, the mystery of the barely comprehensible) and often cumbersome. It is a true stranger in our midst. Like a stranger barely speaking the language, a translated poem is intriguing. One struggles to understand, to place. Confronting a translated poem, one knows that one will never have the original linguistic and aesthetic experience of the native speaker, and in that gap lies something unfathomably interesting. After all, one then has to imagine the original, and one can always imagine a better original.

My own concerns for translations center on the functional aesthetic. I prefer translated poems that are printed beautifully on good paper. They should float on the page just as they float in one's mind. If one wants to tear apart a poem in discussion, then it needs to be translated very literally, with plenty of notes. But if one wants to enjoy a poem, as the visual (in our culture) and aural object that it is, then the translation should invite an elegant and accessible reading, and the original text should be provided, if possible, for those who can read it. The readers can then enjoy as much of the experience as they are able. □

²Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 76.



MUSTAFA ZAIDI WITH HIS GERMAN WIFE AND THEIR CHILDREN

MUSTAFA ZAIDI

The Traveler

[*Translator's note:* This poem was written in Singapore in 1969 as Zaidi made his way back to Pakistan by traveling west. He had just spent some months in London on a fellowship given to members of the Civil Service of Pakistan. "The Traveler" is a tour de force of longing—a longing for place, for recognition, and for love. As he returns, the poet addresses his "homeland" (*vaṭan*) giving impressions of other countries. Yet, the imprint of art and culture that he has within him and that he has received from foreign places is met by the rude trappings of consumerism and the market.]

My homeland, I bring you
 Charms, colors
 Of many lands
 Ashes of old minds, passions of young hearts
 My empty hands
 My nothingness
 Don't look at them thus, ashamed
 In my heart, a thousand gifts
 Some sadness, joys, odd people
 Somewhere, thrills, somewhere, pain
 A desert traveler lifts them
 They won't fit in sacks, in suitcases

*

Parted from you, several strange countries
 Embraced me, consoled me
 Told me the secrets of the dark and mysterious nights
 Taught my body a thousand delights
 The sun and the moon came to me
 I thought for a time that the touch of the body
 Was the only joy, from the beginning to eternity
 Everything a lie, only my body the truth
 So that my loneliness
 After clinging to the seas and colliding with the wind
 Sometimes pulling me together in new islands

Sometimes scattering me like the waters of a mountain stream
Sometimes raising me parallel to the skies
Sometimes spreading me out in the roots at the bottom of the
earth

Has merged with my senses so
That it has taken me out of my self
Such a dream, such a sleeplessness spread
That even shadows were heavy, not to mention the body

*

My homeland, where were your spectators
Of the celebration of my blistered feet, a sight worth seeing?
In a foreign city I met a few friends
Who reminded me of some angelic enemies
There must be few such crazies
Who have neither respect, nor infamy
The icy wind of the north could not blow me away
The depths of the Red Sea could not drown me
What sort of planet was I
That the earth spun round me?

*

I met Egyptian pharaohs
Searching for the lost treasures in graves
Those speaking the language of the stones
I met such people in old statues
The same artists were in lofty churches
Whom I found in the domes of decaying mosques
My exhausted sleep lamented
Nights spent in the tossing and turning over puzzles
For which clues were found in stories
Guides were found in the margins

*

After telling me their tales
Everyone asked me my story
After showing me the season of snow my elders
Asked about the fiery time of their youth

*

My lowered eyes kept searching
For an accent of conscience, for a mention of principle
The sleepless night sped before my eyelashes
The sweat of shame burst on my face

Your name came to my tongue and silenced it

*

Accept this shame for in this sweat's
Every drop are molds of sparks
Accept the wrinkles in my face in which
There are the imprints of passion and culture
Hold my delicate gift of the sadness of perception
Which I found after drinking the poisons of the seven seas
After living in every volcano of the arts
I was summoned by the gods of Greece
Deities sprang to life in my breast
Steered me away from every fraudulent road
And then left me at the supermarket
Where a lone measure of humanity
A mob of men and women absorbed in its barbarism
The beauty of the watch, the aesthetics of a new radio
Plastic lotuses, a tie of nylon
New boots from Italy, necklaces from Hong Kong
The new line from Chrysler, cosmetics from Tokyo
Every body desired ease
Every eye worshipped things
Such devotion is not even in politics
Such satisfaction is not even in self-worship

My homeland, there is nothing in my luggage
Just a dream and the ramparts of a dream
Accept the gift of my dirty shirt
For in its dirt are the lands of prayers
This robe cannot be washed for on its breast
Are the sacred bloodstains of Biafra
This is the dirt from Vietnam and in its specks
Are the shining faces of prophets

(Singapore, 2 February 1969)

—*Translated by Laurel Steele*

A Quintet of Poems

[*Translator's note:* The next five poems are the sequence of verses Zaidi wrote about his mistress, Shahnāz Gul. These poems were written during the summer of 1970. Initially, when he began the affair, he still held his position as a high-ranking civil servant and, of course, he was a well-known poet. After his dismissal, he was no longer of any potential pecuniary or social use to his mistress, or to her business cronies. He became increasingly obsessed with her. The poems transcend this sorry situation. Standing alone, they trace a love affair in which the mistress is at first helper, next inspirer/muse, and then someone he wants others to acknowledge as having been there for him, as having existed for him. The poems limn the process of creation and track the precarious situation of the artist. The second poem, the ghazal in the group, with its exploration of the relationship between love and creative inspiration, is often quoted. The fifth and last poem forms a bitter coda to the affair, and to memory. As I mentioned earlier, I left the syntax and the images here less polished than those in "The Traveler." With "Shahnaz V" I used punctuation to capture the pattern of the refrain and changed the couplet format into a three-line unit.]

SHAHNAZ I

There were just spectators of my torn shirt
 If not for you, who would suggest mending it?
 A goblet of poison was enough
 Who would wish for a decanter?
 If not for the sanctity on your face
 Who would make an ablution in the heart's stormy sea?

In spite of understanding tomorrow's risks
 You kept me today
 The pestilent wind blew me away like a grain of sand
 You collected me
 You kept me like diamonds
 Even the generosity of a drop was forbidden to that

Lip on which you put Kausar's cup³

You hid me in your lashes
When everyone on the road was my killer
You came and gave me a measure of courage
There was a coward and a hero within me
No one knows that in the battle song
Your hot blood is in my melody

The purity and plainness of color
Creating the lover in stone
It is from you
The treasure of faith is so great
The fear of life is so small
Because of you
How am I to be aloof and write the story of you?
My art, my rhetoric, my pen
It is from you

(Karachi, 14 June 1970)

SHAHNAZ II

Not an artist herself, she shared my art
She shared the flesh in the voyage of the spirit

On whom descended the chapter of modesty page by page
She shared each and every crease of the bed

I was a fire-worshipper
She shared every corner of the garden⁴

³Kausar (*kausar*) is the canal in Paradise that flows with wine; the wine of the spirit as opposed to the wine of earthly love.

⁴A.K. Ramanujan helped me with the organization and wording of this translation. At the risk of disturbing the reading of the poem with explanation: the third couplet was particularly difficult. The fire-worshipper (Zoroastrian) is an infidel—worships idols, beauties, the flame of beauty, which consumes the worshipper. The garden is the abode of beauty, full of colors and flame-like

Star teaser. Moon mocker.
She shared my eclipse in a time of misfortune

Companion in calamity and in the hardships of pleasure
She shared the comfort of the crucifix and the noose⁵

In spite of the darkness
She shared my prayer of the nation's dawn

The world shared one year
The heart shared several thousand centuries

(Karachi, 30 August 1970)

SHAHNAZ III

Certify from my wounds, from my ashes
That someone was the breath of the messiah, a face of fire

The afterworld is in doubt, the mention of God is in doubt
Yet, in that mind, someone was belief and wisdom

The phone is silent and the bell at the gate soundless
As if someone never was in this city

Was it a circle of souls or your burning lips?
Was it a reality or a notion that someone was here?

Now there is my pledge and my loneliness

flowers. The contrast between the narrow devotion of the worshipper and the all-encompassing beauty of the mistress is in the awkward word “angle,” which, in the end, I omitted. The literal translation is “From one angle, I was a fire worshipper/She shared the garden from every angle.” This fire-worshipper reference calls to mind Ghālib’s “*Ātish-parast kabtē haiñ abl-e jahāñ mujhē*” (“The people of the world call me a fire worshipper”).

⁵The crucifix and the noose refer to the two martyrdoms of Jesus Christ and al-Ḥallāj, who was the Sufi mystic who declared “*ana ’l-Ḥaqq*” (“I am the Truth”) and was executed for this heresy in 922 C.E.

In spite of my denial, someone was my friend

Poets, singers, sculptors, look
Meet her then say: someone was beautiful

(Karachi, 2 September 1970)

SHAHNAZ IV

Destroy yourselves, curtail your lives
Mourn the maddened heart as you wish

This fear is not of the desert or prison
Time cannot give the power of the cure

The analogy of the lover's vow will come
Only in the correspondence of friends torn apart

Once ruined, homes are not rebuilt
Such wounds do not heal

SHAHNAZ V

You insist on leaving this time
Even in my vow of faith to you
/No such intensity

I have knowingly drunk that poison
Even among the ranks of the happy
/No such courage

The way you had loved me like a wave
Even in the music and in the zephyr was
/No such essence

I was so engrossed after losing myself in the desert of madness
Even in earth and heaven was
/No such discovery

And now as if the tradition of genuine love
Even among fakirs, or dwellers of the moon had
/No such existence

This new faithlessness
Was not in the bloody heart
Nor in the color of henna

The heart is neither ashamed
Nor marked with henna
The way you insist on leaving this time

(Hotel Sumar, Karachi
22 September 1970)

—*Translated by Laurel Steele*

SALAM MACHHLI-SHAHRI

Punishment for Dreaming
(Elegy for Mustafa Zaidi)

[*Translator's note:* Salām Mač^hlī-shahrī (1922–1973) wrote this elegy in July 1971, several months after Zaidī's death. On the morning of 12 October 1970, Zaidī's body was discovered alongside that of an unconscious Shahnāz Gul. His wife and two young children had left a few months earlier and were in Munich. His dismissal from his job had come in two parts—first a suspension in December 1969 and then a final dismissal in May 1970. The purge was carried out on the orders of the new military ruler, General Yahya Khan. Three hundred and three officers (soon to be known as the group of “Three Naught Three”) were summarily fired in this purge.

Salām was among the Urdu poets who, at the peak of his powers, stayed in India after Partition. He is now enjoying a renaissance in his reputation,⁶ which for a long time had suffered the fate of many of those who stayed—a sort of gentle diminishing in memory and discussion, as the locus of Urdu poetry moved to Pakistan. In this elegy, he mentions Zaidī's initial nom de plume (*takhalluṣ*), Tēgh Ilāhābādī. The poem also mentions Tēgh's first love affair.]

Tēgh, you became Muṣṭafā Zaidī in Lahore,
Yet you were the same as you were in Allahabad.
Flowers longed for and came to your lips
That wild flame was still in your heart

⁶If the reader would like to become familiar with the work of an Urdu poet who had almost slipped from view, three collections of Salām Mač^hlī-shahrī's poems, as well as a critical biography, were published in the nineties, almost twenty years after his death. They are: *Intikhāb-e Kalām-e Salām Mač^hlī-shahrī*, ed. by 'Irfān 'Abbās (Lak^hna'ū: Uttar Pradesh Urdū Akāḍemī, 1991); *Intikhāb-e Salām Mač^hlī-shahrī*, ed. by 'Azīz Indaurī (Dihlī: Urdū Akāḍemī, 1996); *Kalām-e Salām Mač^hlī-shahrī*, ed. by Saiyid Muntāzar Ja'fārī (Lak^hna'ū: al-Mumtāz Sōsā'itī, Nuṣrat Pabliharz, 1990), and Ḍākṭar 'Azīz Indaurī, *Salām Mač^hlī-shahrī: Shakhṣiyat aur Fann* (Dihlī: Sāqī Buk Ḍipō, 1998).

Which long ago had burned for a woman.
People say you thought of dying
In the past as a sensual jest.
You thought of turning your back on life,
The flight that is wine and song and love.
But flight is nothing but fog:
The body's rainbow, the wine in the cup and goblet
Are nothing but a leaping flame.
Two abandoned children and in your body the poison of
 Shahnāz.
Perhaps your spirit isn't calm even in the hereafter.
You were always starved for love.
Maybe you cannot understand all this.
Well, death has come in the past like this.
We have always been punished for our dreams.

—*Translated by Laurel Steele*