

MUNIBUR RAHMAN

Poems*

FIRST SNOWFALL IN LONDON

Huddled under the soft blanket of snow,
This city of nightlife dozes.
Everyone has left.
On the table lie
Teacups
And empty glasses
And wilted flowers in a vase.
Everyone has left.
Now there's no one
In this desolation except us.

Let's talk
Of the day's happenings.

*Of the following poems, the first nine ("Landan kī Pahli Barfbārī," "Nauḥa-Gar," "Sāniḥa," "Āñkhēñ," "Čāñd," "Bādal," "Nīm-Shab," "Hamsafar," "Jashn") appear in the poet's first collection of poems, *Bāzdid* (Visitations) (Rochester, MI: Katydid Books, 1988), pp. 71–3, 83–4, 97, 38–9, 54, 60, 64, 70, and 77, respectively; the next ten ("Nām," "Qaṭra," "Pēshkash," "Agar," "Paḡḡandī," "Garmī kī Dōpahar," "But-Shikan," "Us kī Āvāz," "Ajantā," "Čirāgh") are from his second collection, *Shehr-e Gumnām* (The Obscure City) (Delhi: Educational Publishing House, 1983), pp. 6–7, 10, 13, 16, 22, 24–5, 31–2, 30, 35, and 60, respectively; and the last four poems ("Barf kā Ādmī," "Naqlī Phūl," "Din kī Maut," "Disambar kē Mahīnē Mēñ") are taken from his third collection, *Nuḡṭa-e Mauhūm* (Imaginary Dot) (Delhi: Educational Publishing House, 1999), pp. 52–3, 68–9, 54–5, and 66–7, respectively.

Weather forecast for tomorrow.
Sensational news of daily papers:
Murder of a girl,
Corpse found in woods;
Daylight robbery in Piccadilly,
Robbers ransack jewelry store,
Thousands lost;
Duchess divorces;
Worker drowns himself.
What boredom.

Look, the cat quivers in her sleep
Rubbing her paws on the floor.
Teased,
She has no desire to snap back.
What helplessness lurks in her eyes.
She looks entreatingly to be picked up.

The wind kept blowing throughout the
day
Rattling window shutters,
Swaying trees.
People walk by the roadside
Keeping near the walls.
There's no sound of footsteps.
Not even a rustle.
The housetops
Are covered with snow.
The street lamps grow dim.
Only shadows remain.
We too have become
A shadow in this wilderness,
A stranger to ourselves.

MOURNERS

We are the mourners of the light of dawn:
The light that has dissolved into darkness.

Our desolate land has neither the stillness
of the night
Nor the clamor of the day.
There is only darkness like spent youth.
Living in the region of darkness,
The sight has gone from our eyes.
Still we are the mourners of the light of
dawn.

We teach our children it is good to live
safely.
We tell them:
Go and sleep; in death is the true essence
of life.
These curses are the signs of the end of
the world.
Our beginning was an elusive dream.
Our sight and soul are blessed with its
darkness.
Our sight and soul live in its darkness.
Our sight and soul will never come out of
its darkness.

Still unspoken are the words which need
to be said.
The proof of our being is still unmanifest,
Even the signs of our life are still hidden.
Voices resound in the wilderness of
imagination.
Words constantly dance on the tip of the
pen.
Eyes yearn for admission to the sanctuary
of divine will.
God, we still await your command.

WHEREVER YOU LOOK
*(On the death of Mahatma Gandhi,
30 January 1948)*

Grief rules the four directions, wherever
you look.
There's wailing in the streets, wherever
you look.
So great is today's calamity that every
heart is sad.
Every soul is in chaos, wherever you look.
At dawn, the breeze comes invoking the
message of tears.
It's the season of mourning, wherever you
look.
Suddenly clouds of smoke spread
everywhere.
The eye of dew sheds blood, wherever you
look.
Before whom can we now unburden our
hearts?
This night of sorrow is harsh, wherever
you look.
Men of love bear the wounds of his loss.
Everyone's eyes are weeping, wherever
you look.
Where is there a true Hindu, where a true
Muslim?
Only man's ignominy, wherever you look.

EYES

In your kohl-adorned eyes,
I have seen those peaceful evenings
That soothe the traveler's grief
In the burning desert.

In your kohl-adorned eyes,
I often imagine I see
The road-dust settle
Under the burnt-out dusk;
Caravans lost in darkness,
And a flame shining somewhere

In the boundless night.

And my midnight dreams,
Accustomed to the joys and sorrows of
thirsty lips,
Dance perpetually like whirlpools
Around that light,
Clapping, dancing, chanting,
Like the Sufis of Persia.

Then, exhausted, they go to sleep
In their tents which remain alive at night:
Your kohl-adorned eyes.

THE MOON

Someone said: The moon is a flower,
Fragrant in the beloved's hair.
Someone said: The moon is a wound-scar,
Shining every night through a heart in
despair.

CLOUDS

Where are the clouds coming from, where
are they going,
Wandering in the vastness of a world of
secrets?
Ships, their exploring sails hoisted,
Cruise at dawn on the sea of many
silences.

The breeze knocked on sleeping windows.
The houses spilled their residents out on
the streets.
Someone is anxious for the day, someone
else sorry for the night.

A tree—stooping, darkened, poverty-
stricken—
Stands on the roadside, its beggar-hand
outstretched.

Like my sorrows, roaming through cities
and lands,
Alien to the hypocrisy of worldly men,
Far from the crowd's riotous tongue,
These angels of color and scent, these
birds of paradise,
Will keep wandering in the infinity of the
universe.

MIDNIGHT

Much of the night has passed.
Gone are the pleasures of the cup, the
liveliness of speech;
Gone the warmth of eyes and heart, the
glow of cheeks.
We have heard enough tales.

Come, let's sneak out of this crowded
meeting.
Let's not betray the grief of our wakeful
eyes.
Let's become the moon hidden by the
trees.
Let's not show the night-illuminating
seclusion of our souls.

The star-lamps flicker in the sky.
Silence hangs over streets and squares,
And every road is deserted.

COMPANION

Walk along with me;
Stay with me.
And we shall usher in a new dawn.

Everywhere we go there's a crowd of alien
eyes:
Flowers and shrubs, moon and stars.
Let's share our secrets with this company
of strangers.

The wide-open reaches of cities and
climes
Cannot but dissolve in our arms
If we give wings to the longings of our
vision.

The color of the heart, or the color of the
dawn;
The midnight solitude, or tear-stained
eyes:
Let's find solace in whatever comes our
way.

A mere threshold separates darkness from
light,
A single moment is critical for one's heart
and soul:
Let's break the barrier of sight and throw
open the door of time.

CELEBRATION

Bring the burning flame again.
Bring again the glowing scar of wounds.
Let's have a celebration in this silent city.

Where is the ecstasy of your frenzied
passion?
Where are your yearnings for deserts and
plains?
Why have blood-soaked tears dried on the
eyelashes of your longings?

Pain is an everlasting moment.
Endless is a teardrop's journey.
The soul's anguish is a river impossible to
cross.

Today, in this gathering of friends,
This company of afflicted ones, this circle
of lovers,
Rise from the heart of the night like the
sigh of dawn.

NAME

The poor soul who was killed was my
brother.
Walking along the road, I saw his lifeless
body
By an open drain.
He was hidden in the darkness,
And he had no friend
Except the moistened eyes of the night.

He was an ordinary man
Whose life was like that of others.
His days were simple, his nights colorless.
At the break of dawn, he would go out
On his daily routine,
And return home when evening fell.
His griefs were small, and so were his
hopes,
As if his entire universe had shrunk to an
egg.

People say: What's in a name?
A name is given to children by their
parents.
That's how my brother got his name,
So he could have an identity.
This very identity led to his destruction.
Now he has gone taking his identity with
him.
Now he is neither a Hindu nor a Muslim.
He's just a corpse, dead and lifeless.

RAINDROP

The wind swept me upwards.
Suddenly I became a raindrop.
For a long time I wandered with the
clouds,
But could not water anyone's heart.
Disappointed, I fell from the skies,
And the earth cried out: Flood, flood
everywhere.

GIFT

If I offered you my heart,
It would be dishonest of me.
It has stayed with others. It has marks of
many fingers,
Drops of happiness that flowed from lips
of others
Have left dried stains under its rim.
Still, I would give you this unworthy gift
If only I were not sure that you too,
Satiated, will return it.

IF ONLY

If only you could see your face
You could, perhaps, find the reflection of
my features.
If I could call in the deserts of my heart,
Then, perhaps, your voice would echo in
my ears.
If we could join our nights
Then, perhaps, fields and rivers and
boundaries
Would drown in them;
Our desires would have the same color;
The same lamp-flame would light our
windows.

THE PATH

Walking on this path,
The trees coming up ahead
We felt as if we could go no further.
Our feet said: Let's go back
The way we came.
But, a little beyond, the path would turn
Sharply inside a row of trees.
Scattered leaves, soaked with dew;
The gold of filtering rays;
The fragrance of silent surroundings;
And suddenly the start of a bird's wings.
We have come to these fields,
The wide-open fields and the vastness of
the horizon.
Now let's go back home, walking on this
path.

A SUMMER AFTERNOON

The trees will sleep,

The paths will lose themselves in a cloud
of dust.

Every sunbeam will strike against bricks.
Flowers will hang from the thorns.
A story will come to your mind,
And travelers will lose their way.¹
You will call someone,
And empty-handed, like a beggar's bowl,
Your voice will return to you.

A hot wind blows everywhere.
How long will you wander on this
burning road?
There is not a patch of cloud here,
Nor the shade of a wall.
They are lucky who have the comfort of a
home.
They may draw the blinds, close the door,
Put away their griefs and sorrows under
their pillow,
And go to sleep peacefully.
But for you there is neither rest from
walking,
Nor relief from the blazing sun.

ICONOCLAST

You have set out to break the idols in
their idol temples.
Have you seen the idol in your own?
This idol also burns in the fire of envy;
This idol also yearns for adoration.
This too says: I outrank them all.
My head reaches the skies.
But all the other idols laugh at him:

¹Elderly ladies refused to read stories to children during the day by saying that if they did, travelers would lose their way.

He is just an upstart.

You have set out to break the idols in
 their idol temples,
But first you should break your own.
Its clay is still moist;
Its heart can still melt;
Its eyes can still cry.
Before it turns to stone,
Free it from its bonds,
And those idols which adorn their idol
 temples
Will fall and break by themselves;
They will dissolve into their own clay.

IN HER VOICE

In her voice,
Mirror-like bodies shimmered,
Trembling garments of light and shade
Began to rustle
And the heart said:
Such-and-such are her features.
The curves of her body,
Ebb and tide of silken waves.
Her hair flowing over her shoulders.
In the valleys and mountains,
In the frenzied crowd of color and
 fragrance,
She was a wandering secret,
Only a voice.

AJANTA

Rocks can speak.
Rocks can reveal their secrets,
And show the invisible world of sanctity

With monasteries of cloistered thought
and art,
With deep, dark caves of feelings.

Whose fingers' magic
Gave them leave to speak?
Whose heart's warmth
Gave them their body?
Many will come here,
But none will find him.

Look for him.
He may be hidden in these rocks.
It was the condition for their speech
That a man must dissolve himself in them
To open their locked-up secrets.

LAMPS

Remembering you,
The lamps of my heart flicker
Like the lights on the shore,
Direct towards the port.

Your memory today
Is more enchanting than ever.
How beautiful are the lamps of journey's
end,
Shining in the distance.

Now the shadows of grief lengthen;
Let the night of separation
Again kindle my tears with the lamps
That burned in your company.

SNOWMAN

The snow falls.
Children have made a snowman.
The landscape is all white.
There is quiet everywhere.

He stands alone in a field,
Alien, stranger, anonymous.
His eyes stare into space.
His mode of speech is silence.

His existence is quite worthless.
His life, fun for children.
Dressed in absurd clothes,
He is a joke to everyone.

He is used to the coldness of the world.
The north wind suits him well.
The winter has frozen his soul,
As if hope has forsaken him.

He still wishes, however,
For the weather to change,
For the sun to cast a glance on him,
And melt his being.

FAKE FLOWERS

When I first saw them,
How wonderful they seemed.
You had put them in a flower vase.
They lit up my room.

Now my eyes are bored
With the sight of them.
They neither smell nor wither.
The days just go past them.

I wish that in the scheme of seasons,
They too were subject to change.
When they blossomed, you would pick
 them bud by bud,
To adorn your hair.
And when they were overtaken by
 autumn,
I would throw them out with the waste.

DEATH OF A DAY

The setting sun cast
With its dying eyes
A glance towards the trees' bowed heads,
And then with a cold sigh
Hid itself behind the low hills.
Subdued voices of the day
Still quiver in the air.
Stony feet of the city roads are tired.
Windows flicker in houses.
Those who set out at dawn
Return home.
Woe to him who has no home.

O how lovingly did I cherish it.
How often did my heart shed tears at its
 leaving.
I am the mourner of the day gone by.
Again I shall remain disconsolate,
 grieving,
And when the birds return to their nests
I shall wrap it in the shroud of my desires,
And bury it beyond the tall houses
Whose rooftops kiss the shadows of the
 night.

IN THE MONTH OF DECEMBER

The mist has hidden the trees.
The day passes exhausted.
No sunbeam kisses the windows.
The rooms long for sunshine.

The mind will lounge around dreaming.
The memory will go looking for tropical
lands.
We will remember friends long departed,
And pass the days
Reading books, making plans.

Those grass-green parks and those
children,
Those spontaneous shouts of carefree
years:
Where have they gone?
Dead leaves on the ground
Are soaked with yesterday's snow.
The sound of silence, the fragrance of
death,
The smothering of tears in the chest,
Trees, the skeletons of past seasons:
All in the month of December.

—*Translated by Baidar Bakht
and Leslie Lavigne with the poet*

FIRST SNOWFALL IN LONDON*

Hidden under a thin blanket of snow
the city of nighthawks dozes off,

*This and the following poems are from the poet's collection *Bāzdid* (*Visitations*) (Rochester, MI: Katydid Books, 1988), pp. 71–3, 83, 97. For another translation of this poem, see p. 458.

all have gone.
 Tables strewn with
 teacups
 and empty glasses,
 dried flowers in vases,
 all have gone.
 There's no one else in this deserted place
 except us.

Let's talk;
 what all happened today—
 the weather,
 sensational headlines—
 "Murder of a Girl,
 "Body Found in Jungle"
 "Daylight Robbery at Piccadilly"
 "Thieves Escape with Ornaments Worth
 Thousands from Jeweler's Shop"
 "A Duchess Divorced"
 "Suicide of a Worker by Drowning"
 How very depressing!

Look! the cat shudders in her sleep
 rubbing her claws on the floor
 as we tease her, she scratches us
 she can't put up with anything now.
 Her eyes betray helplessness
 as she stares, hoping someone will pick
 her up.
 The wind howled till late in the day
 rattling window panes
 and shaking trees.

People walking past the walls
 moving through side streets
 without any rushing about,
 not even the sound of rustling.

Each roof covered with a layer of snow
 lights in the corridors dimmed

everywhere only shadows remain.
We too are shadows in that haunted place
strangers to ourselves!

WORDS

The scent wafting from your body
now holds my senses captive,
warming the silent ambience of the room.

Your cheek, moist with sweat,
brings to my mind the first showers of the
nighttime rains.

The half-burnt cigarette between your
fingers—
showing traces of your lipstick,
makes reality a twirl of smoke.

You're silent, I'm quiet too,
while in our hearts we both debate—
if only words were not the sole recourse.

HAPPENING*

There's a kingdom of pain all round, look
where you may!
A state of mourning in lanes and bylanes,
look where you may!

A tragedy has left every heart aggrieved,
The soul's realm upside down, look where
you may!

The gentle breeze has brought a message,
tearful,

*For another translation of this poem, see p. 460.

Intimating a season of cry and complaint,
look where you may!

Suddenly clouds of smoke have enveloped
everything
Dewdrops stained with blood, look where
you may!

None with whom heartfelt grief is shared
How terrible the night of pain, look
where you may!

With lovers fated for separation's plight
Every eye is wet with tears, look where
you may!

Be it Hindu there, or Muslim here
Only ignominy for Man, look where you
may!

—*Translated by Naqi Hussain Jafri*