

ZEESHAN SAHIL

## Five Poems

### BLACK BIRD<sup>\*</sup>

The cage was empty,  
and the vase in your window  
overflowed with white flowers.  
In the bookstore, a new book  
of poems had arrived.  
The train in the station  
waited to go: somewhere.  
The cage was empty.  
The black bird  
flew a little ahead of the train.  
Moving out of the tunnel,  
the engine let out a scream.  
I stared outside the window.  
Dreams had built their nests in my eyes,  
and the cage was empty.

### A POEM FOR YOU

The world is the wrong place to live  
if one had to live forever.  
Each day life  
would become more unbearable.  
But the happiness of traveling on the bus

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<sup>\*</sup>For the Urdu original of this and the following poems, see *The Annual of Urdu Studies* No. 8 (1993): 260 and No. 11 (1996): 377-78, 376-77, 378-79, and 380-82.

with Saiduddin,  
and the melting wax from the burning candle  
on your dressing table,  
and the smoke collecting on your mirror  
make up for everything.  
The flowers pressed in my book  
grow in to jungle dreams.  
Your fingers trace many different paths  
in the dust on the Formica.  
And in the city with many blank street signs  
when the night becomes darker,  
your uneasy presence makes  
the stars unnecessary, the moon redundant,  
and the sea superfluous.  
Your memory and the mounting pressure around my  
heart  
make me pray.  
Despite the eternal anger of God toward poets,  
my prayer always begins with you.

#### MY UNCLE'S HOUSE

My sister goes to school.  
My brother goes to work  
Or goes to meet his friends.

My uncle never goes anywhere;  
He stays at his house. A house  
Full of spring flowers and lush trees,  
Where the grass grows next to the wall  
And having never seen the stars  
Dries up and grows taller.

It's where nothing is heard from the window.  
It's where no one waves from the window.  
It's where the door never opens for anyone.  
When the birds start to squawk  
No one cares or tries to stop them.  
Even my uncle doesn't try to stop them.

He doesn't say a word.  
Maybe he's angry with everyone,  
with the birds, with me as well.  
He doesn't speak to anyone.  
He doesn't leave his house.  
If someone calls him, he doesn't answer.  
I don't go there any more.  
It seems as if my uncle has begun to live somewhere  
else,  
far away from me.  
And not in his house.

POEM

Be afraid of poets  
They have hand grenade dreams  
If you let your words slip  
They will throw them against the wall  
If you try to snatch them back  
They will put them under water  
Whatever they have  
They won't give you  
If a group of you confront them  
Even then the sky is theirs  
And they will call up a cavalry of clouds  
And they will drown you  
They own the earth and keep your footprints captive

They have a boat  
And they will ship you off  
To an island and leave you there  
If you live with birds you will forget  
Faces of poets, your own face  
When they come for you  
You might push the birds in front  
To take your place.

WHAT DOES SUU KYI<sup>1</sup> WANT?

Slender Suu Kyi  
 in her house in Rangoon:  
 What does she want?  
 Why won't she stop  
 the people from gathering outside her door  
 each day? She climbs the wooden stairs,  
 and from behind iron bars  
 she looks at them and wonders  
 at the brightness in their eyes ...  
 All their impatient hearts are stilled.  
 Why won't Suu Kyi stop this  
 carnival? Outside her house, they tremble  
 and wait. Why won't she help them?  
 Outside her house soldiers, presenting their guns,  
 pass by in lorries.  
 Why doesn't Suu Kyi fear them?  
 Why does tucking a flower behind her ear  
 like an ordinary housewife  
 make her so happy?  
 Why doesn't the fate of the Burmese people  
 bring Suu Kyi to tears?  
 Each day, why do the faces of tired citizens  
 make her smile?  
 Won't someone tell her to stop smiling?  
 Or snatch the flowers from her hair?  
 Time has made Suu Kyi fearless and strong.  
 Each day she becomes more fearless and stronger.  
 Perhaps now no one can look her in the eye.  
 Perhaps no one can even ask her:  
 What does she want?

—Translated by  
*Raza Ali Hasan and  
 Christopher Kennedy*

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<sup>1</sup>Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the National League for Democracy (NLD) living under house arrest in Myanmar (Burma). Awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, 1991.