

RIYAZ LATIF

Six Poems

[TRANSLATOR'S PREFATORY NOTE:

*lakīrēñ ghaib kī khēñčīñ khalā kī jalvagābōñ mēñ
banāyā ham nē dēkhō hindsā bē-khvāb rātōñ kā*

Drawing lines of absence across the faces of the void
Look, we have fashioned geometries of dreamless nights.

This distich (*she'r*), a self-quotation that opens Riyaz Latif's collection of poems¹ as an epigraph and contains the book's title, already presents the ruin of the metaphysic that forms its predominant theme. Including his readers by using the collective pronoun "we," the speaker leads us through a double negation: with him, we draw figures of absence across what is already an absence, "the void." This negation of what was already a negation of being ought to produce an affirmation, a being that includes the first negation of being by nothing (the void) as well as the second that cancels this first by inscribing on it the character of a being: a linear extension in space ("lines of absence"). But what results is far from the being that might reassuringly constitute the elementary beginning of a system of being, an ontology. What we find instead is a hallucinatory image resulting from human exhaustion, from dreamless nocturnal labor: "geometries of dreamless nights" (*hindsā bē-khvāb rātōñ kā*). The speaker confronts the impulse to ground all being in a first principle that might genetically and systematically account for the world's beings with what such metaphysics never confronted in philosophical discourses like Hegel's: the exhaustion that brings the intellectual projects of the inquiring human consciousness to a premature and illusory end—"geometries of dreamless nights."

We see night spoken of as a geometrical figure, as a form of space rather than time. We ground our measurements of time in our lived experience of it, in the diurnal cycles of light and darkness, waking consciousness and sleeping semi-consciousness, this experience forming the lived basis of all

¹*Hindsā Bē-Khvāb Rātōñ kā* (Geometries of Dreamless Nights). (Ahmadabad: Sukhan-kada, 2006).

our more abstract measurements of time such as the week, the month, the year and years. How we experience time—our anxiety over our aging bodies, our surprise at transformations of our built environments—does not modify in the least the clock-time by which time has come to be measured since the beginnings of industrialism. Registered in the pure extensions of a dial, the day signifies none of our waking alertness, our afternoon languor or nocturnal fevers. None of the diverse ways in which we invest our ambient spaces with moods and then remember these spaces as stained deeply by those moods enters the form of spacing that is clock-time. Neither economically productive nor epistemically reliable, our lived awareness of time retreats to and exults in the only site our age has permitted it—art. Art thus constitutes a simultaneously trivial and crucially important domain of human experience today, depending on one’s viewpoint. From the perspective of an instrumental rationality, art must be no more than an unproductive and falsifying reverie, one of the contemporary meanings of “entertainment.” From the perspective of a consciousness committed to retaining and retrieving older and discredited ways of experiencing time, art must legitimize, preserve and perpetuate the complexity of the modes of our temporal experience.

The speaker in Riyaz Latif’s poetry everywhere encrypts time in space. We say the speaker encrypts it because it does not appear immediately obvious what it means to speak of “shoreless centuries,” as he does in his long poem “Kḥō’ē Nishān” (Lost Signs). The temporal significations of the many diegetic spaces of this poetic world must be worked out with reference to each individual poem. It will suffice to observe for the purposes of this prefatory note that there is a particular spatial formation placed in relation to time in each poem—namely, a body. A diversity of bodies interacts with time: bodies of cities, the human body, the body of the cow ... each of these bodies stages its own incompleteness. This incompleteness must be understood as a flux or indeterminacy of relations with other bodies, inner and outer, past and future. This movement of self-dissolution continually undoes the impulse to ground a metaphysics in the speaking subject. What rises on the ruins of this metaphysics are “the shifting shades” or “web of worlds” of fiction. In “Makrī” (Spider, *ibid.*, 52) the speaker, the spider herself, says,

Each way out—entangled in eight legs of mine.
Who knows what distance may flourish now!
There
Where wall crawls to the ceiling
Turning the corner into a *limbo*²

The shifting, still developing character of the spaces of the spider’s ambient

²Translation by Riyaz Latif and Moazzam Sheikh. *Annual of Urdu Studies* 20 (2005):212.

world causes the spider to describe the future as a hypothetical mode of spatiality: “Who knows what distance may flourish now!” It is this indeterminacy of ambient space that leads the spider to colonize the reader’s body for its own nutriment:

I, therefore, with my saliva
Weave a web of worlds
Weave multiple presents
from a single past—
And in this web
For my nutriment today
I select you!

But the spider must surely be among the more confident character-speakers of Riyaz Latif’s poetry, most of whom attest to their own incompleteness. And indeed, the spider too tacitly admits to the illusory and incomplete nature of the worlds it produces, an illusion that compensates for the real world’s indeterminacy (this compensatory relation indicated by the “therefore”) by generating the fiction of multiple presents from a single past, entering into which the reader will be consumed. This reading of the distich epigraph and of “Makrī,” an *ars poetica* for Riyaz Latif’s poetry, will hopefully put the following translations into interpretative perspective.]

You³

In every direction
Shifting shades—
Red, blue,
Yellow, black,
Green—
Mixture
Void!
And despite this being so
It’s as if nothing existed!
Shoreless!

³“Tū” in *Hindsā Bē-Khvāb Rātōñ kā*, 1.

THE COW⁴

Green fields of grass now only remain in dreams—
 My heavy body
 rising impelled by four legs
 has indeed begun to walk
 in the windings of those wayward lanes,
 but my every gesture strikes and shatters against
 the city's helter-skelter breathing—
 and now in the shade of wayward lanes
 flies copulate, enthusiastically,
 on the planes of my melancholy eyes—
 Tell me, how much longer must I, flicking my tail,
 set right their crooked flight?
 Thus do I, wandering the lanes, for the soul's nurture
 continually chew on the paper of two worlds—
 Becoming mother to all
 I settle into my own expanse—
 And now
 that I have been made mother:
 Drink the few drops of milk,
 the extract of all those pages
 that have found their way into my sacred body—
 And live on in the depths of your mirages!

THE FACE'S EYE⁵

face, eye of the within
 fixed upon an eternity
 cytoplasmic depth
 expanse of scenes
 opens layer by layer—
 an abstract sound

in the buffeting of the blood
 in the press of the flesh
 bones, our fortress

⁴“Gā’ē.” Unpublished in Urdu.

⁵“Muñh kī Āñkḥ.” Unpublished in Urdu.

breath, our dust
within the face's reach
the inner ocean too
the world of the waters too

in the worlds of the face
the stillness of man
weeping as an eye

waters the dry
circles of eternity.

FEW ABSURD PHRASES⁶
(for *Shabbir*)

And what if the circle of Man's breath
rising from its mute realms
should end like butterflies being interred in graves of
color?
Tying the sorrow of the existence and non-existence of
things
to our wings
we have indeed soared but
the sky is a mere shadow
of the geometry of a dormant teardrop ...
So come,
let's tell all our formless vaults and domes
that we shall not henceforth journey
to the dilapidated boundaries of the ruins of infinity.

LOST SIGNS⁷

WATER

shoreless centuries!
look at us

⁶“Čand Lā-Ya‘nī Kalemāt (Shabbīr Kē Liyē)” in *Hindsā Bē-Khvāb Rātōñ kā*, 94.

⁷“Khō‘ē Nishān” in *Bādbān* 5 (1997), 269–72.

we're still as we used to be
 lost signs
 on your dancing shores, fold within fold
 in between fixity and negation on shifting sands
 tell us who lifted and placed us
 glaring on the ancient level
 on the palm of ragged waters
 where nothing existed in the mirages of ruined spin-drift
 in the desolations of the silent wave
 the ocean our constant movement
 the ocean perpetual feeling
 the ocean gathering our grief into its barren breast
 the space between life and our lives
 homeless—
 the swollen touch of the ocean's vast breathing
 trembling on the world's vast brow
 in its singular dispersal
 tell us, who had made us
 that impediment in the earliest swelling of waters?
 that obscure endlessness of sands?
 lost signs
 only look
 reckless centuries—
 who was that liquid-form
 insinuating himself, a space in the spaces of the water's
 body
 from the ocean's steady coursing to its dancing shores
 continually dreamlike
 once again, that hellish expanse from desert to desert
 that restlessness of the extinction of water in water
 that revolution striking out of extinguished droplets
 O shoreless centuries
 turning to steam, the ocean's become the universe
 and as for us
 we remain as we used to be
 flinging ourselves against dense waves
 visitors of mortal spin-drift
 those very lost signs

FIRE

shoreless centuries!
 abandoning your shores, look where we've reached
 we—in the fire-temples of your hollow coursing
 like unfinished worlds
 burning others, ourselves burning
 incarnated
 and from somewhere within, somewhere
 disgorging the skies high up
 your night has formed us
 adorned us
 burned us
 in the theaters of the sky
 in the eyes of the stars
 on the highways of eternity
 tell us, who was that in those earliest sparks
 like sounds
 fevered, melting, coming alive
 becoming perfect light
 brilliant in some blood-dimmed rapture
 waning on the breath
 kindling the dry leaves of our minds, our hearts
 becoming now the extinguished meaning of his own red
 figure
 shoreless centuries!
 having expressed your fire
 we burst into light in bodies
 somewhere outside—on the far side of the body
 in remote dreams,
 moving, passing into extinction
 further, further on towards an unknown point
 on those very familiar sands
 seared by your touch
 falling, incandescent in the soul
 turning to smoke
 look at us, centuries
 we remain
 on your obscure, distant shores
 gathering and then incandescent skies
 lost signs

WIND

shoreless centuries!
 through your countless kindled flames have we passed
 blowing like breezes
 in those very familiar tones
 blindly swooping in
 round the bend of some broken horizon
 from an unknown center
 a ripple in the blood of unfinished worlds
 of a meaningless flow
 in the fashionings of their own dreams
 touching bustling worlds, then vanishing
 willful wind
 ordering anew
 up until now
 the armies of your heartless moments
 as if every breath arose and passed by
 the hospices of some million births
 far beyond the mind's eye
 O shoreless centuries
 the winds fallen away from your breath
 inscribe message after message
 with their soft finger on faces without lineage
 raising the storm of your name
 shrieking, spinning in our desolate soundless bodies
 whirling in our soul
 in its own dense, pure gyre
 pouring us out
 having gathered our forms into its turning
 shoreless centuries!
 we're still as we were
 in the wind of your worlds
 shrieking as we roam
 in the mists of your forgotten shores, fold within fold
 crazed, lonely without a form
 those very lost signs—

EARTH

shoreless centuries!

by the spell of your billowing and wakened waters
 have grounds shot up—here, there
 ever spreading, advancing, scattering
 gathering the sands of countless feelings
 creating us by the moment, raising us, destroying us
 inaugurating your endless rising
 fashioning our bodies
 out of its own heart's mud
 imprisoning you in the vastness of its deserts
 and us in our perpetual gyrations
 we're still who we were
 who entered with you
 into the press of this earth's spaces
 into the night densely prickling with stars
 secretly turning into dying sound
 it was with you we had entered
 the lush wildness of forests
 gilded grasses, rushing springs
 becoming the stones of caves we arrived
 at domes and niches resonant with your humming
 at pillars risen from your vast yawning
 waking earths slumbering in your every new expression
 settling a million cultures!
 perpetually beating in your dance, in your arrest
 always in the hidden chambers of these silent places—
 coursing in the swift, pathless forms of the cleft earth
 O shoreless centuries!
 how many wildernesses does your infernal beauty
 swallow!
 as if dawn was extinguished in twilight's bottomless pit!
 sinking into the blind depths of this inferno
 in the expanses of night and day
 mountain, ocean, flower, leaf,
 color and fragrance
 coursing squandered
 coming to nothing
 O shoreless centuries!
 we are what we were
 the earliest guardians of the dispersed mud of your axis!
 look, lost signs—

BODY

shoreless centuries!
from the weak, obscure fortresses of our bodies
rises your murmur, sliding
coursing through veins, bones, the flesh
by the crenellations of the nose
in hearing, in vision, sometimes in nameless feelings
abide worlds you had once flung up
from the regions of your dreams
you, touch of crazed emptiness spreading in the blood
you, taste thriving in the mouth's famished world
you, great eagle of fragrance in the skies of our breath
tell me, shoreless centuries
how is it that hours are entangled
in the heartless pores of our hide?
through whose animated faces
only you may pass briefly like beauty
as the fruit of light's branches may lose flavor
they were your fruits all
your very own elements
transformed utterly
becoming fire, turning to dust
rising in waves
lost in vain and upwelling winds
from spaces, from forests, from sands—becoming
 massive earth
in the theaters of the body
where now even your echo tires of its own approach
what to speak of the body?
body a moment
body the dwelling of uprooted breaths
axis of the expression of your fire, water, earth
body the countenance of souls
station on the road to eternity
our path to you
O shoreless centuries
we are as we were
passing by the theaters of the body
the hospices of birth
reaching you

caravans silently advancing towards you
confidants
look—upon your dancing shores, fold within fold
those lost signs again
express us
for driven by the moment, your secrets into the heart,
forgetting themselves, unknowing
had arisen from you
will return into you someday—

—*Translated by Prashant Kesbavmurthy*