

AFZAL AHMED SYED

Poems from
Rococo And Other Worlds

THE DEATH OF STELLA D'CRUZ¹

On Anklesaria Hospital's fourth floor
Stella D'Cruz
died
leaving over ten thousand unpaid in bills
Proceedings were initiated
for her last rites at Our Lady of Fatima Church
for the overdraft at Allied Bank

A few days ago
these two institutions had declared her persona non
grata
for kissing in public,
and passing a bad check,
respectively

With professional skill
everything was settled
Around the black coffin
pews in Our Lady of Fatima filled up

Poorly recorded dirges filled up the church
for
the melodious Stella D'Cruz

¹“Iṣṭēlā Dī-Krūz kī Maut,” from the author’s collection *Rōkōkō aur Dūsri Dun-ya’ēñ* (Karachi: Āj ki Kitābēñ, 2000), 22–23.

WE NEED A WHOLE LOT OF FLOWERS²

A whole lot of flowers
 to gather at the feet of the dead
 we need a whole lot of flowers
 to cover the faces of corpses in gunny-sacs
 A whole annual flower show
 should be preserved in Edhi's morgue
 to keep at the foot of graves
 dug in the police graveyard for the designated dead
 A spray of flowers from the balcony in bloom
 for the woman shot dead
 at the bus stop
 Sky-blue flowers
 to tickle
 the two youths lost to eternal sleep in a yellow cab
 Dried flowers
 to caparison
 and restore a mutilated corpse
 We need a whole lot of flowers
 for the wounded
 languishing in clinics
 that neither have the Japanese rock-
 nor any other variety of garden
 We need a whole lot of flowers
 for one half of them will succumb to their wounds
 We need a forest of nocturnal flowers
 for those who could not sleep for the report of gunfire
 we need a whole lot of flowers
 for a whole lot of rueful people
 we need anonymous flowers
 to cloak the stripped girl

 we need a whole lot of flowers

 We need a whole lot of flowers
 on a whole lot of dancing creepers
 that we could train to screen this city

²"Hamēñ Buhāt Sārē Phūl Čāhiyēñ," in *ibid.*, 36–37.

FOR US³

A charming girl
with Polynesian eyes
shall sell invites to our benefit-dinner
in a North American city

The old dames of Vienna
shall gather for us cast off clothes
that shall be shipped for Karachi
from Marseilles

Brunei Darus-Salam
shall accept from Karachi
fifty foundlings

In Bangladesh
a base minority
shall demonstrate to show solidarity with us

Sarajevo's Stefanovski shall be commissioned
to compile a directory
of the Karachi dead

TIME IS AGAINST THEM⁴

They are not waiting for some Galileo
to construct a giant clock
to be installed into the city's commemorative wall

Besides reflecting our history
this vacuum
could be fitted out with a swing
on the International Day of Women

The Chinese troupe
could leap through it from off their stilts
From it

³“Hamārē Liyē,” in *ibid.*, 42–43.

⁴“Vaqt Unkā Dushman Hai,” in *ibid.*, 51–52.

an abridged corpse could be hung
It could be stone-walled
with bricks from Mohenjo-Daro

WHY WOULDN'T THE INDUS WASH AWAY OUR SORROWS⁵

Of all the blood
that was spilled
Charles Napier was absolved
in his own eyes
and so was the case, a century-and-half later
with his successors

Even otherwise
everything had remained unchanged
but for Tabasco sauce
that had replaced half-ground chilies
in government institutions
for use on women in physical remand
and improved output
that rendered it possible to sooner dispatch men
to an elegant table
where the official certificates
of their death-by-natural-causes were gathered

ROBERT CLIVE⁶

“Take away all my riches,
and leave me my good name!”

He was likewise treated

He had stopped taking opium to kill the pain

⁵“Daryā-e Sindh Hamārē Dukh Kyūn Bahā Nahīn Lē Jātā,” in *ibid.*, 55–56.

⁶“Rōbarī Kilāṅv,” in *ibid.*, 61–62.

The ghost of Omichund no longer paraded before his
eyes
He was aware
his monopoly over luck and truth had ended

The rains no longer
would wet the enemy's powder
Standing under his feet
no ruler
would offer him truce

Still he was the one
who had won a historic battle
for the loss of fourteen sepoy

He lived in a difficult world
we could deplore his suicide

A PICTURE ON PAGE 163⁷

She has no occasion
to remember her city
sitting by a foreign river's bank

She is perfectly happy in the Mahakhali settlement
which is the subject of discussion
in a lecture delivered in Copenhagen

She could even swim
to the garment factory
where she started work
after finishing her matriculation

Every week, on a shared VCR
she watches three movies in succession
And on the first of every month
buys a whole kilo of hilsa-fish for home

She has no sick father,
reprobate brother,

⁷“Şafha Nambar 163 par Ēk Taşvīr,” in *ibid.*, 63–65.

or an unknown enemy

And it is not that
she is fated to remain a spinster

There is a boy
He teaches in a school
And has no mind to become a driver in New York
or a cook in Karachi

She is happy
under her tin roof
in her house of bamboo walls

When she was not chosen for a role
in the community theater
she felt no regrets

Just today she was included
in a contingent of girls
protesting outside the office of the water supply
authority

Nobody taught her how to be happy
She knew it by instinct
She does not know where the poverty-line
crosses her body

Her poor country
has become independent twice

She is freer and happier
than the rest of the world

WHY WOULDN'T AMINA JILANI WRITE⁸

Why wouldn't Amina Jilani write
for the newspaper
whose sixteen per cent subscribers
spend twenty times our per capita income

⁸“Amīna Jilānī Kyūñ Nahiñ Likhī,” in *ibid.*, 76–77.

on their wardrobe?

Why doesn't Amina Jilani write
instead of bland anecdotes
the numbers of Swiss bank accounts
where our looted wealth is hoarded?

Why wouldn't Amina Jilani report
that Tacitus wrote
Nero had an old fixation with riding a four-horse-drawn
chariot?

Why doesn't she allude to the black Mercedes as Nero's
equipage?

To create sensation why wouldn't Amina Jilani report
that in a reputable airline
passengers are served kibble?

Why wouldn't Amina Jilani broach
exhausted issues—
Extra judicial murders? Water-famine?

It's not that Amina Jilani writes recipes
for Noques de pommes and Polenta

Amina Jilani realizes
the Clifton bridge is strongly-built
and her current year was ushered in by an accident

Amina Jilani realizes
that during an encounter with dacoits
the dentist run over by a jeep
is still in a coma

—*Translated by Musharraf Ali Farooqi*