

ZEESHAN SAHIL

Five Poems

GESTAPO¹

Our closed doors
and high walls
don't stop them.
They enter without permission,
rummaging around,
upending books—
until the words
disappear from the pages.
They play our albums too loud
and sing over the music.
They toss our cat
into the street from our balcony
and threaten our friends
over the phone.
They draw straight paths
for us to walk
and use computers
to program our poems and stories.
Our houses and schools
are hung with
blessings and good wishes
that flatter them.
They control everything
except our dreams—
and their books instruct us
that our dreams are nightmares.

¹“Gastāpō,” from the poet’s collection *Čīryōñ Kā Shōr* (Noise of the Birds) (Karachi: Āj Kī Kitābēñ, 1989), 62.

They fear one day
all this will change.
We hope this fear destroys them.

JAIL²

You lay our head on
bent steel bars
to dream.
Your lips brush
rough walls
in song.
You sing
but even your shoes can't hear you.
You dream
but your dreams
have forgotten the way to your house.
Upon your death
wherever it finds you,
there is no moment of silence.
no calendar marks
the occasion of your birth
as a common holiday.
not even a tree
can remember your name.
maybe you are even forgotten
by the ant for whose sake
you sprinkled
your ration of sugar
onto the floor.

²“Āīyōñ Kā Shōr,” from the poet’s collection *Āīyōñ Kā Shōr* (Noise of the Birds) (Karachi: Āj Kī Kitābēñ, 1989), 2.

LIGHT AND HEAVY THINGS³

A single bullet
doesn't weight much.
It flies from a boy's gun
where he stands on a street corner
into an arm hanging out the window
of a distant apartment.
The bullet loses all its weight,
all its power
after tearing a hole in the arm
it can't go any farther.
It rests.

A single bullet at rest in the victim's arm
causes pain. Another two or three
would cause more. But the arm doesn't regard this.
The victim moans. He doesn't think
more bullets would have killed him.
He doesn't think, begins to weep—
tears lighter than bullets
fall onto bed sheets
and pillows stuffed with feathers.
With a bullet at rest in his arm
the victim doesn't think
that if his nearly weightless tears
fall on the boy's heavy gun
instead of pillows and bed sheets
one day the gun would rust,
or the boy's heart would go soft as wax.

Light things take the place of heavy things;
there is nothing
to take the place of light things.

³“Halkī aur Bhārī Čizēñ,” from the poet's collection *Karāčī aur Dusrī Naz-mēñ* (Karachi and Other Poems) (Karachi: Āj Kī Kitābēñ, 1995), 27–8.

WE, EVERY DAY⁴

Every day we
 should buy flowers
 or candles
 or bottles for water
 or plastic knives and forks—
 anything can have a use in war.
 We shouldn't buy toys,
 shouldn't leaf through books.
 We should hoard sunglasses
 and umbrellas and lighters.
 We should always keep biscuits
 and a box of matches in our pocket
 to give to someone, or to set something on fire.
 A handkerchief we need, too,
 for bleeding hands or burning eyes.
 When the mail is delivered again,
 a postcard every day
 with news that we're alive
 will reach our friends.
 Maybe they will come here
 to search for us
 where people who are always searching
 are lost.

PEOPLE⁵

Some people were killed while running away
 and some while walking.

Those going to work started towards home instead;
 those going home

⁴“Hamēn Har Rōz,” from the poet's collection *Jañg kē Dinōñ Mēñ: Naẓmēñ* (In the Days of War, Poems) (Karachi: Āj Kī Kitābēñ, 2003), 76.

⁵“Lōg,” from the poet's collection *Karāčī aur Dusrī Naẓmēñ* (Karachi and Other Poems) (Karachi: Āj Kī Kitābēñ, 1995), 154.

arrived at the graveyard.

People hiding inside their houses were also killed
and those too who were closing their front doors.

People asleep on rooftops died
and so did people peeking out windows.

Death roamed every street
and every wall
was stained with its handprints.

The people who wet their rags
to clean the walls
those were the last ones to die.

—*Translated by Faisal Siddiqui,
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