

MUKHTAR SIDDIQI

Five Poems

THATTHA¹

First Tableau:

now lie in front of me pathways dust-smear'd
on each turn each curve of which these deserted remains
these decrepit lords of regal ruination—these lifeless remains
how content in their extinction

on the knolls, and in dwellings these deceased pathways
these pathways, withered dust of unmarked graves
these remonstrating bewailing pathways on ruins of sepulchers,
cupolas
these winding pathways in protracted wastelands of palaces and
edifices!
these pathways bowed in eternal prostration—turning steps to
the solitary mosque!
and these pathways slinking away from each shadow of walls,
porticos, patios

these pathways, for eons, they have not even been the way to the
destination!
these pathways, nor are they now the attainment of caravans'
desires!
these pathways, nor are they now present in the sorrows of
provision-bearing itinerants!
these pathways, nor are they now a wedged interval within
wilderness and inhabitance!

¹“Thaṭṭha,” from the poet’s collection *Manzil-e Shab* (Lahore: Nazir Ahmad Chaudhary, 1955), 117–22.

Second Tableau:

the lyre of the primeval is mute, eternal death is cast
 the day if encumbered, nights burdened from dusk
 each barren dome resounds with owls' hoot
 each awning veiled by swaying cobwebs
 roiled in dust dry shrubbery all around
 these lands since long denuded of poppies and roses
 and ... these feral-abodes struck by centuries
 say: Perpetual and Everlasting, Sir Most Exalted:

neither is this extinction, nor is this eternity
 between being and nonbeing what long-winded interval is this
 that has become the epistle of our destiny?
 on the river-bank it once resided—
 but now is a liminal station between nothingness and existence
 such limbo, in which, since ages, abodes and lanes, patios and
 portals, ceaselessly,
 are vainly headstrong in defeat, decrepitude, depravity!

stepping out of being's frames we turned to ruins
 but turning to ruins we would have perished
 for these connoisseurs of life's sorrows
 would have effaced our existence with their memories, forgotten
 us!
 not that they would have made us world's spectacle-abode,
 would have kept our counsel-houses safeguarded
 not that for the sake of flourishing they
 would have preserved our ravages as "historical memorials"
 those "memorials"
 where these people ... existence's leaseholders, may come if
 they can
 kick up the dust of roads during days
 those sanctuaries, the ones which held heavens in Khusrawi
 pomp and pageantry
 there they keep sneaking boldly
 wherever they wish, mark their names and verses
 wreck tumult, sing coarse songs
 but never during the five stated hours
 never once peek into the forlorn mosque
 nor raise their palms in prayer at someone's grave

pointlessly kick up the dust of withered roads during days
return home at the lighting of lamps
turn more desolate our desolation and walk away!!
and let spread here again that icy silence of sightless darkneses
to which are privy and intimate merely owls and bats!

nor was there any decline in the day's lunacy
that there may be some flaw in the night's terror!
our days and nights are alike
our days and nights in the same continual interval of existence
and nothingness
are clay-sunk in the liminal of being and nonbeing!
our days and nights are coupled to the same beyond-the-Time
interval!
but when shall we be liberated from this snare?
shall we, Lord, attain eternal repose of nonexistence's extinct lost
embrace?
from the circles of origin and infinitude when shall deliverance
be bestowed upon us?
Lord Perpetual and Everlasting and Eternal
Sir Most Exalted!!

Third Tableau:

the expanse of horizons at times, destination's mark
and the destination itself on occasion shunning desire's path
the fount of being often commencement of extinction's portal
the growth of life often death's effects
life at times evenly indisposed due to its own sorrows
life at times assembly-adorning, ode-reciting
often cadaverous amid the living, alive in hands of the dead
in the city's sight at times the city of the silent

dusk has arrived that night may turn to dawn
this just this is considered destiny's favor here
settlements may keep booming, ruins not eliminated
merely up till here is endeavor's sovereignty
and in these remains, at each stride, dust within dust,
is the prey in the archer's own flank
somewhere in effaced graves, somewhere in sepulchers
we are the dust of the lions cast forth, world-subduing

their foreheads blended in the mosque's ground
 whose forebears sounded the first call to the Almighty here
 for heart's niche, it is secure in lone air
 the song of the lyre, the words of the lute
 for the visionary eye there are in these very abodes of the wild,
 fables of a civilization, a culture

again in front of me are those first pathways
 those that say "from paths emerged paths"
 at the bell-chime of rosebuds courses the caravan of spring
 each autumn keeps wandering looking for its pathways
 "life, assembly-adorning, is its own vigilant"
 by its wiles has it robbed death's pathways!
 pathways, they are not destinations that they will not flourish
 after ruin
 pathways, they shall keep thriving like life!
 "one must look again at the past and the future
 yes! rise, for one must have another thought."

IDOL OF THE CHAFING-DISH²

the unsaid is what the stone said, what I heard:
 in the weighty reverie of prime youth
 her graceful body was just about to coalesce
 right then quivered someone's known shadow
 wakefulness shattered the silvery webs of dreams
 swayed, ruffled, a silhouette on the tresses' brow
 bracelets sang out, casting melodies in a chime
 thought transported to the eyes a throbbing heart
 squalls of sleep blew short by a thread for life
 writhing in restiveness—
 when eyes opened it was the illusive illusion of dream

a misty angst gnawing at the heart
 it shuddered it shuddered the tiny little thing
 the petrified glance could not face the flame's loneliness
 brought into reminiscence the ashes of the heart-moth

²"Atish-Dān kā But," in *ibid.*, 27–28.

depth to depth draped in shadows the countenance of dawn
mocked that the edifice of heart is not luminous
and in tears are no stars no moon of delight
without even brimming the goblet of heart keeps shattering no
leaf rustled today at the sound—
presently the night's journey will ensnare the sphere of brilliance

this jab of ridicule was shaped into "severe deprivation"
the unsaid was what the stone said, what I heard!

sleep was uprooted thus, who was to arrive? that someone would
arrive
the idol is silent—now let's sleep, much night has passed

LIMBO³

no reflection on paradise, no dread for fires of chastisement
mercy, there is some world where there is no today no tomorrow
partial inebriety pats my eyes!
with feathery dreams eyelids become heavy
in each fiber and sinew is shaped a soft melting
heartbeats are hushed, there is, at this moment, no infinitude no
primeval
even today even now, why wouldn't the weary spirit find
bliss?
for such moments have arrived fulfilling vows to death

present's sorrow too future's foreboding too ended
and the thought of bygone springs has occurred
in front of me have arrived enchanted dreams of childhood
the thought of my fallen stars has occurred
heady moments of youth have come into reminiscence
the thought of unshielded tavern-mates has occurred
where first love had created splendored palaces
the thought of those boulevards has occurred
that which we understood to live sometimes and sometimes to
die

³"Barzakh," in *ibid.*, 37–38.

today the thought of those false struts has occurred

mercy, now sins are through, look what came to memory
at the wiping of existence's anguish, God loomed in memory

KHAYAL YAMAN KALYAN⁴

Slow Tempo:

hither thither run the heralds of mists
each thing nor visible nor veiled in grey dust
boundless shadows melt in the raging hush
no star has yet appeared—whither the moon!

oh! the array of the depths of this ceaseless darkness
may the blossomed flowers of westerly fields not wilt so
there is no star, no moon, nor him!
tell these nights, at least now ask that the beloved come home
not make the desolate-one yearn thus
at least now ask that the beloved come home!!
the evening, unfurling its curls, stroking its hair
says to me that I am, thus nowhere the night or the day!
the expanse of night wrapped around the void of my chest
oh dear friend, I know no solace without my beloved
restiveness stings me instant to instant second to second
oh dear friend, without my beloved!
darkness circle within circle, it was on the alert
everywhere tosses and turns the mirage of the dark
oh dear friend, this mirage of the dark!
not ever shall the moon cross eyes with them
oh, this restless dance of voids
such restiveness stings them instant to instant second to second
oh dear friend, they too have no peace without the beloved
oh dear friend, without the beloved!

⁴“Khayāl Ayman Kalyān,” in *ibid.*, 71–72.

Fast Tempo:

when the strewing of stars was sorted, the beloved returned
home

my beloved returned home
no entanglement of promise now makes us frenetic
my beloved returned home
my beloved returned, I am his offering!—
on the virtuous eye am I sacrificed
no entanglement of promise now makes us frenetic

my beloved returned: on the progeny of Ali, on the kin of the
Prophet am I sacrificed
on the kin of the Prophet am I sacrificed

MOHENJO-DARO⁵

now in the earth-mounds those spirits are captive no more
whose presence made the shore of this watercourse, this rose-
decked land
the noble abode of all evolution, the cradle of civilization,
today, these walls, in the gaping lap of mounds,
are mournful over their extinct portals and patios,
are hushed narratives of their extinct exaltation

but these sanctuaries of desolation
in the bosom of these rolling green harvests
these abodes of sightless ruination

these dwellings of culture's summit in the feral void of the past
these—devastated grounds of my land's ancient grandeur

it is the fable of life's dawn that these wastelands
now cremation-grounds, then were cities thriving flourishing
this mass of derelict streets, this bathhouse, this pool
pronounce: our inhabitant if someone somewhere, may he listen!

⁵“Mohen Jo Daro,” in *ibid.*, 107–16.

First Spirit: hear! this is not a maze, do not be bewildered
come! this was your house where you were raised nurtured

Second Spirit: even the dust of this threshold is healing collyrium
this is that famed house of knowledge where you studied

First Spirit: this is the beloved vault-hall of the republic's empire
yes, this is the shining stately form where all foreheads bow

in the raging hush of the unknown are lost these voices
expanses quiver at the sighs of soft wafts
in each lane, dust on forehead, sobs the zephyr
in this infamy rise new plaints

First Spirit: not even a little was the city's ruin a wile for repose
not an evening that we would not have come here

Second Spirit: yes, we are the ones, connoisseurs of autumn,
head hung down, abundant,
the faithful of these outspread wastelands of dust and bricks

First Spirit: the bane of merciless slaps of myriad centuries
we have suffered that the world may not forget us

but—the veils of obscurities of thousands of years
they have been the eyeless tomb of this very same civilization
in the gruesome wars of
ancient ages, middle ages, later ages—
in the beautiful moments of accord—
in the resounding verve of gratification—
not a single deep-sighted one emerged!

the one who would rip the veils of obscurities of thousands of
years
and reach this priceless cache of culture!!

who had the acumen to rend the bosom of these mounds?
seek after rending what in the depths of this primeval burial
place
of a civilization were the enduring imprints?
of the craftsmen of a civilization—

what was the norm of living, of wading through existence?
to amuse oneself what were the contrivances?
modes of ecstasies, what were the materials of melancholy?
for them what was the bond between the creator and humanity,
of what manner?

Stupa:

I, the first shrine of the city, became the master of these knolls
the Buddha's creed, the gospel of nonviolence, from age to age
became salvation's means
bonds of births broke, each being found light!
illusive body's burden departed, the earth gained its sky
my mendicants, my liberation-seekers, city-to-city itinerants
are drawn here that by their grace whoever may wish may attain
liberation
form-phantasm all entrapments, save the soul from their snare

on pathways of barren centuries, life has continued fleet-footed
on the shores of the Indus, but this sublime shrine on the hill—
eternal and rooted in the fleet-footedness of fifty centuries!
blind-sightedness of numerous progenies has
remained the hushed realm of plaint for fallacy's freeze!

and then thirty years ago arrived here a discerning Man
who related the mounds to civilizations of ancient Persia and
Mesopotamia
who in these mounds,
in these extended heaps, in this shrine,
detected the buried relics of a pristine civilization!!

and the remains were excavated, research conducted path-
steering
the resolve of knowledge rent asunder these mounds!
the vestiges of their obscurity released by pickaxes of seeking
and a city was unearthed!!

just in days as if we pulled the reigns of fifty centuries
and within the buttresses of this city
in well-paved lanes
in clean well-built houses
in the unshackling abbey of the shrine—

we also discovered the cracking, blackening frames of the
inhabitants here!!

First Spirit: you think, what calamity befell, the entire city
disappeared from the earth
if you appraise now, then we may know how each one cut
through life

Second Spirit: you think, we who were here at the vanguard of
culture
savage robbers, emperors and indigents, were all hungering
for our own possessions

First Spirit: you think, in the watercourse somewhere doomsday's
tempest must have raged!
all marks of existence, in a fraction, it must have effaced!

whatever it might be, has anyone escaped the grip of death?
life passes away, only lifeless things remain
“things” become the prelude to past civilizations!!

our eyes, in their things, found the radiance of knowledge and
wisdom
our eyes, in their things,
found novel manifestation of ingenuity
of dexterity
we found here treasure-troves of knowledge and learning!
we found in these things eons-old departments!
all discourse-inclined for heart's hearing:

Pottery:
in front of you the countenance of creation is desolate
fractured shards are mirrors of pottery's marvel
these broken pots, engraved chalices, crystals, worship-platters
even in dereliction are splendors of artisanship's heartiness

was there no merit of stone in this grove of the Sindh valley?

Stone-Cutting:
but we are not perturbed by stone's veiling
we know the art of shaping visages, of chiseling forms

these toys of clay, know them as the first mark of Azar's
craftsmanship
for each figure becomes a mirror for art's sublimity!

in their hands, these conches these seashells softened
as if in the depths of enamel's solidity
was buried the softness the suppleness of wet earth!
be it Yemeni carnelian, onyx, or jasper or gold or silver
what all did they not become through the craft of those skilled-
ones
poised necks, moon-like brows, silvery arms of nymphs
those petite lobes of lovely ears
delicate nostrils like petal-leaves of lush roses
twinkling silvery wrists, feet like crystal—hands as if coral's palm
not wanting in any adornment, any ornament!!

in the objects of houses' richness also rests life's stasis
outside the houses is the stretched earth
innumerable, fathomless exactions of the vast world
outside the houses, the tillage and the harvest
outside the houses too the blood-smeared, vulnerable exactions
of battlefields!!

Art of War:

in the dazzle of the sword is the purity of finest gold
the run of limpid bronze, a dreg of venom
spear's head, the tongue of death's serpent
water's cutting flow in the dagger's lethal edge
are they tips of arrowheads or instruments of doom?
in speed their glance is second but to soaring flights

of copper of bronze each thing to be made was made
these are the very same metals which, in fields, in rolling
grounds, in houses,
in modes of living and dying,
were in every manner their companions

in each civilization, trappings of luxury, sports
along with arts and crafts
are the essence of delight and freshness
for weary bodies, for doused spirits!

here, the rush of polo, here too, dice-game and chess
 such is the roll of dice that defeat is an every-day gamble,
 the indulgence of valiant youths, the hunting of wild beasts
 on the pedestal of the tavern, a renewing fête of dance and wine
 and song

an enchantment for our eyes, this nymphet's form
 this peerless spectacle of dance
 as if in glittering copper the lilt of melodies were arrested!
 the sweet intoxicating stir of a wide world's luscious bodies
 untamed beauty of the fables of youth and revelry,
 dreamy euphoria, dashing intemperance
 as if it were contented in the tiny statuette of glittering copper
 who was she? some dance-queen
 or a *devdasi*?
 the cute fervent-one of the fiery affections of the bygone epoch!!

Dancer:

jhan jhanan jhanan tinkle the anklets again
 the spell of silence shattered
 o! the ones who watch from afar, illusory are the bonds of the far
jhan jhanan jhanan tinkle the anklets again
 the spell of silence shattered
 among you and us has remained a severance of eons and births
 who has mused about whom, who has remained forlorn for
 whom
 with you now it is a moment's bonhomie, that moment's passing
 shall be our parting
jhan jhanan jhanan tinkle the anklets again
 the spell of silence shattered
 o! the ones who watch from afar
 illusory are the bonds of the far
 o! the ones who have arrived from diverse cities, this realm too
 flourished at one time
 once uprooted it was such that ruin thirsted for life's sap
 it's the same desolation now, but the spell of silence shattered
jhan jhanan jhanan tinkle the anklets again the spell of silence
 shattered
 o! the ones who watch from afar
 illusory are the bonds of the far

now in these spread mounds these spirits are captive no more
whose presence made this lush valley the noble abode of
civilization
this civilization too is not a prisoner of past's hidden crypt
it is the bequest of the present time,
now the heritage of my nation!!

we are its true inheritors, for we have unearthed,
have embraced with our eyes these lost treasures
of our land's pristine grandeurs
of eastern terrains,
these lands of the first ascension of Mankind!!

—*Translated by Riyaz Latif*