

Three Poems

By Shadab Zeest Hashmi

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Ghazal for the Girl in the Photo

You became the girl with the piercing eyes when you found your country swiped by a stranger
In Kabul snow, a missile turned your mother into coal, your last tears were wiped by a stranger

A garden once hung from your name like the perfume of wild apple blossoms, phantom tulips
In the refugee camp, are you Sharbat Gula, *liquor of flowers*, or a number typed by a stranger?

Your eyes teach how cold flint ignites a flare, how a father's bones become an orphan's roof
History writes itself clear as cornea, your green glare—no whitewashing, no hype is stranger

Pity the empire that failed to decipher the disdain in your eyes, the hard stare of war
Pity the first world's pity, the promise of friends who show up as every type of stranger

Zeest, return to the arms of memory, the riddle of its minefields, velvet lullabies
To the lilt of this land, its lyrical storms, its bells and bagpipes, you're no stranger

Ghazal of the Superstitious Darling

You brush your long hair far from the oak, the tamarind's shadow, my superstitious darling
You spit and toss the tangled tresses to be safe from the jinn, and all that's vicious, darling

Bad luck vaulted across your obsidian threshold (a velvety cat romping with a rabbit foot),
tied itself into the knots of your trousseau rug which we'd thought auspicious, darling

What message was encrypted in a woolen rug by weaving desire into loss, flame into ash
This lovely handspun contention is no less than an extravagant hint, my judicious darling

Not the kohl dot on your neck, not the hand trained to wave thrice to avert your demons
Not *esfand*, not turmeric, kept you from being eaten— fate's maw is malicious, darling

You struck the enemies with shock and awe, smoked them out of their living rooms
They cast the evil eye just before execution, when you were least suspicious, darling

You ordered robes of fire-proof textiles, goblets of amethyst, amulets of bloodstone
Your superpower-needs for protection left the planet bankrupt, my ambitious darling

Look, the lovely tropical paisleys, the arctic-blue blossoms on your trousseau rug
No nuptial bliss as exquisite as art— the true magic carpet ride, my capricious darling

Zeest, come, unravel the day to the song of the koel, the magpie, the scent of wild moss
You've burnt the sage, sprinkled the salt— let them wish the harm they wish us, darling

(Note: The two Ghazals were previously published in Shadab Zeest Hashmi's poetry collection
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Ghalib lists thirty-eight varieties of mangoes in his letters

Because the sky's vote of ruin
in yellow dust storms
said seven times your life-size mirror will crack
show marks of infant deaths
in cinnabar ink:
Go bury each palpitation of hope

Said your haveli's thirsty walls
will devour years of rains
flood your bones and your wife's
and burst through your brother's
schizophrenia

The poet tosses and turns
but always wakes up with Adam's spark
of mischief and his gift for names

dandles a new divan on his knee
taunting loss
by naming the lust of monsoon
thirty-eight times:

Husan Aara "adorned with beauty"
Enviably beauty

Badami "Almond-like"
Shape of jinn eyes
shape of secret through spy glass

Neelam "Sapphire"
Verandah under the indulgent velvet
of the night-sky

Zafrani “Saffron-like”
Aubade of the beloved’s veil
draped over the window

Fajri “of the Morning Prayer”
Gold foil rising
Dew under the worshipper’s feet

The poet finds names of mangoes
in the folds between empires:

Bishop:
Man of God
on the chessboard of the great game

Bombay Green:
Green hills where “Chaughaan”
becomes “Polo”

Hamlet
who asks on every stage
what the poet asks

Monsoon moistens the grave
Ghalib inhabits
Mirror in the courtyard webbed with cracks
He pens:
Nazuk Pasand “Favoring the Delicate”
Turn of phrase
shard of diamond

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About the Author:

Shadab Zeest Hashmi is the author of *Kohl & Chalk* and *Baker of Tarifa*. Her poems have been translated into Spanish and Urdu, and published in several journals. She represents Pakistan on Universe: A United Nations of Poetry.