

## A Selection of Poems

by

### Akhtarul Iman (Akhtarulīmān) (1915-96)

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Abbreviation: *Yād* = *Yāden*

024

**1. Āgahī / Insight**

As a schoolboy, I knew every philosophy—everything.  
 From a pulpit I would preach for hours, on emperors, old and new,  
 Of their happy tales, their bitter ones too, their glaring crimes  
 Numbered on the pages of Time,  
 Their orders, their laws, the sayings of philosophers, the messages of  
 Great orators now quoted by the worldly-wise;  
 Art, its ins and outs,  
 God's injunctions, His commands  
 Distorted by the sons of priests; earth's elements, on all such things.  
 People thought me an ocean  
 Of all knowledge! Everyone sought me out.  
 But suddenly—what happened? I now feel  
 As if I just woke from a deep sleep, unable to move,  
 Sitting on a lonely shore, my head bent down.

How clever this insight that came at the end of day.

*Yād*, 213-14

025

## 2. *'Ahd-i vafā* / Pledge of Fidelity

This branch under which you stand in tears, here, a few years ago  
 I met a small girl whom I took into my arms and asked, "My child, why do  
 You stand here crying?" Showing me the flower garland in her worn-out scarf;  
 She said, "There!" (she pointed with her fingers) "There, on that side"  
 Where domes of a tall palace and the black mill chimney thrust their heads into the sky,  
 She told me, "Rami, I will bring you ornaments of silver and gold."

*Yād*, 87

026

### 3. *Āzādī ke ba 'd* / After Freedom

( 1 )

Whereas my heart was drowned in blood by the mere thought of it  
 I was sad about the broken stars;  
 Sometimes I mourned for the buds which did not blossom;  
 Sometimes I was sorrowful for the burned tulip fields;  
 Sometimes I sowed tears in the sterile earths,  
 Sometimes I was sad for unborn spring;  
 Sometimes I felt sorry for those rosy-cheeked ones  
 Whose sweet fragrance someone would rob;  
 How could the funeral of color and scent have stopped!  
 Sometimes I was sorrowful for my own consolers;  
 Whereas I was fearful of the lancets of wind and rain  
 That they would wound the newly-grown flowers;  
 Here I am, wool in my ears, frightened, a stone;  
 With my feet buried in the earth, mixed with blood,  
 Looking at those newly-grown plants,  
 Those unborn springs, buds  
 That scented the bride of the garden  
 Whose youth had been adorned by the earth,  
 Which is now taking her in its embrace;  
 The love-afflicted is now giving her a shroud.

( 2 )

Man does not even have the time for a single glance.  
 The seeds sown by politics have sprouted;  
 The harvest sown by the elders is now ripe;  
 A signal was given and the workers became liars;  
 There is no thought for wages, nor anxiety for recompense;  
 Every plant is in the range of the sickle,  
 The earth so fertile, the field so verdant,  
 If this plant had not been nurtured even here,  
 If these seeds had not sprouted even here,  
 Which earth would then have suited them?  
 Night and day the harvests being reaped;  
 The earth is clustered with bunches of skeletons;

Let there be festive music; let there be merry-making!

( 3 )

O inhabitants of the base earth, arise!  
 What is this drunkenness in which you are still sunk;  
 Listen! The minarets of sky-kissing fame  
 Fill every hamlet and city  
 From which the spring of light sprouts  
 And washes the dirt of the hearts;  
 Your leaders and mine and the gods,  
 Are calling us with tearful eyes;  
 May their shadow remain over our heads;  
 We have our sorrow, but they have the sorrow' of the times.  
 Through them, we, the brothers of dogs,  
 Learned to turn peopled settlements  
 Into ruins for a piece of bone.  
 Thanks to them, we have always been trouble-makers,  
 And will always remain so.

O inhabitants of this base earth, Arise!  
 Those minarets of fame shine again with light;  
 The chaste voice of our gods  
 Echoes in the space.  
 Not only we, but even Trees and stones listen  
 With heads bowed; the gods smile from the minarets,  
 Rise, look at your claws and teeth;  
 If they don't shine now, of what use are they?  
 The leather coats of culture the beasts had been wearing  
 They now cast them off;  
 The command of the jungle rules over culture;  
 Love has now closed its eyes;  
 Humanity has just gone to sleep.

( 4 )

This plaster of mud and straw, prepared  
 By the mixing of blood and earth,  
 For which building will it be the foundation?  
 This land where fire has been sewn,  
 How will it be settled, if it is ever to be?

This bloody story which has been written down —  
 I'm familiar with it, but who will remember it tomorrow?

( 5 )

The Sun of Doomsday has arrived;  
 Sinners are standing astonished and baffled  
 With their books of deeds in their left hand;  
 Everyone is blind; who's there to give support

To those who are about to fall?  
 Terrible confusion; eyes set in the foreheads;  
 Friends and strangers complain about the darkness of light;  
 But to whom should one tell one's heart's grief?  
 Heads boil, pots are cooking,

## ( 6 )

O beloved creatures of the gods, listen!  
 In whose love have you shed blood  
 And hacked bodies as one would cut  
 Dry trees;  
 Those temple conches and bells,  
 Those sad and suffering stories  
 Come running in pursuit of you.  
 The calls to prayers tremble into space.  
 The icon-makers and the icons weep for you;  
 These foul pages of history  
 Which your pens have coloreds, why  
 Do you leave them behind for us?  
 Take this heavy load with you!

These foul pages of history which  
 Your pens have colored will constantly agitate  
 Like blood in the veins of future generations.  
 These foul-tasting fruits  
 Which you have sown such great diligence—  
 Will your sons, their children,  
 And the children of their children keep eating them  
 With shrouds tied around their heads  
 In the shadow of grave?

## ( 7 )

I smell the blood-soaked shirt.  
 O mother, take me in your embrace; darkness  
 Approaches upon me;  
 My brothers on whom I had put my trust  
 Are singing lullabies, are lovingly giving lullabies to me  
 Concealing daggers in their sleeves.

## ( 8 )

O playful sunbeams, entwining yourselves in the flowers,  
 O innocent souls of new, supple plants,  
 Walk by here more quietly;  
 The weary poet whom Man  
 Often wanted make despondent, longing,  
 Who has remained restless for you for ages,  
 Is sleeping in the lap of this earth  
 In your path of this day!

027

**4. Ek laṅkā / A Boy**

Over the high hills of the eastern settlements,  
 Sometimes in mango groves, sometimes in field hedges,  
 Sometimes in lake waters, sometimes in the narrow lanes of the town,  
 Sometimes in the joyful half-naked kids,  
 At dawn, dusk, in the darkness of the night,  
 Sometimes at a fair, among itinerant players in their tents,  
 Sometimes lost on desolate roads in pursuit of butterflies,  
 Sometimes in the hidden resting places of little birds,  
 Barefooted on burning sand, in frozen winds,  
 Skipping from the neighborhoods, from schools, in shrines,  
 Sometimes among girls of the same age, cheerful, with heart lost to them,  
 Sometimes twisting like a whirlwind, sometimes like bloodshot eyes,  
 Swimming in the wind, flying like clouds in a dream,  
 Hidden in branches like birds, swinging, turning,  
 I see a boy of a wandering nature, free, roving,  
 A boy, like running water of a swift stream.  
 It seems as if this devil  
 Is my double; at every step, every turn  
 I find him running beside me like a shadow;  
 He follows me as I am a fugitive, a criminal;  
 He asks me, "Are you Akhtarul Iman?"

I also acknowledge the blessings of God, the Exalted, the Glorified,  
 I admit that He has spread the universe in such a way  
 That it is like bedding of brocade, silk and velvet;  
 I admit that this shadow of the tent of heaven  
 Is His gift; He had decorated space  
 With sun, moon and stars, established each in its orbit;



He cleaved the rocks and called forth rivers;  
 From lowly clay He created me,  
 He gave me the guardianship of the world;  
 He filled the sea with pearls and coral, mines with diamonds and gems,  
 Wind with intoxicating smells;  
 That commander is absolute Lord, the One, the All-Wise.  
 He separates light from darkness; if I recognize myself  
 It is His kindness and generosity;  
 It is He who has given sovereignty to the ignoble and adversity to me;  
 It is He who has made idle talkers my custodians;  
 He had made triflers rich and me a beggar;  
 But whenever I have stretched my hand before anyone,  
 This boy asks me, "Are you Akhtarul Iman?"

The means of subsistence are in the hands of others.  
 I have nothing except my talent, but, nevertheless,  
 Till the end of life's tumult, I have to carry a burden;  
 Till the disintegration of the elements and the drowning of the pulse,  
 I have to sing something or other  
 Whether it is the melody of the dawn, or the lament of the night.  
 For the sake of earning a livelihood,  
 I sometimes have to smile before the victor  
 Calling my song theirs; that laboring of the pen resulting in sleepless nights,  
 I have to show it to everyone, like a counterfeit coin.  
 Whenever I think about myself, I say:  
 "You are a blister which has ultimately to burst."  
 In short, I wander like the dawn breeze, but  
 Whenever I hold the robe of night in the desire for dawn,  
 This boy asks, "Are you Akhtarul Iman?"

When this boy asks me, I answer, annoyed:  
 "That distracted, defected and restless one  
 You are always asking, the wretch, had died long ago.  
 I wrapped him in the shroud of deceit with my own hand?  
 And threw him in the grave of his own desires."  
 I tell that boy, "That flame has died out which  
 Once wished that it would burn all the rubbish of this world."  
 This boy smiles and says, "This is lying, falsehood!  
 It's a lie. Look! I am alive."

December 1954

*Yād*, 205-208

028

### 5. *Ek savāl* / A Question

*Ek savāl* is quoted in full in [Urdu Poetry, 1935-1970](#)

Throw his clay body into black earth's bosom;  
 These silvery soft sunbeams  
 Sprouting from the stars and the moon,  
 This blue-heaven world,  
 These east-west shores,  
 These luscious, sweet fruits,  
 These invitations to unknown beauty  
 Will never wake him up.  
 Sorrow has robbed the light from his young face;  
 Miserable eyes opened in death  
 Saw that man  
 Closing all the doors  
 On a man like himself,  
 Has awakened brutality,  
 And the savory piles of food  
 Had been buried beneath black veils,  
 And finally, earth's arms proved faithful to him, an outcast in this world.  
 Will these delicate plants, branches,

Grow so that  
 One day, picking them,  
 We may put them to sleep in autumn's arms?

*Yād*, 98-99

029

**6. *Ghulām rūḥon kā kārvān* /  
 Caravan of Enslaved Souls**

In the caravan of enslaved souls  
 There're not even the sounds of the caravan bell.

O Guardians of culture, rise from the earth of your masters;  
 The springs of life have stopped sprouting.  
 Erase the marks of prostration from your forehead;  
 Blood drips from the sleeve;  
 See to it that its source is not hidden.  
 In the caravan of enslaved souls  
 There not even the sound of breathing,

O Guardians of love, these valleys, mountains, these plains, rivers  
 Here your ancestors have sung

That fiery song  
 Which was the warmth of the gathering.  
 But since then, a long time has passed.

The steed of days has hooves of lightning;  
 Rise, for history seeks on every page  
 Your good name.  
 The time which has flown away,  
 Its wings will never call you.  
 Do not scratch the earth with your eyes;  
 You will not find those bones  
 Which have been devoured by the dark deep breast of earth.  
 Teach a new way  
 To this downtrodden life.

O Guardians of graves, rise up!  
 Move along, heat up life.  
 These heaps are lying desolate; on these  
 Place a few flowers.

*Yād*, 161-63

### 7. *Intiz..ār* / **Waiting**

Life—a long twisting  
 road where  
 shade trees,  
 rivers and streams  
 springing from earth's soft bosom;  
 where stars and moon  
 with torches in darkness, all  
 scatter fragrance and flowers of all shades—  
 Life waits to welcome the traveler.  
 She adorns herself from morning till night,

waiting, day and night.

*Yād*, 183

031

**8. *Itifāq* / By Chance**

In a strange land where I have no friend  
after spending moments of intense pain

By chance it might so happen that one evening somewhere  
I might pass by some such place  
where I could catch a glimpse of you in the fleeting crowd

And we may stop still, staring at one another in surprise.

*Yād*, 79-80

032

### 9. *I'timād* / Confidence

The rebellious winds said: You're just a particle;  
 I will sweep you away in a snap;  
 The river wave approached and said:  
 You're just a straw for me;  
 I will take you away like that.

A flame of quick fire said: I'll consume you;  
And the earth said: I'll swallow you up.  
I pulled veil from my face and said, laughing:  
I am Solomon, the son of Adam, that is,  
Man!

*Yād*, 56

Once it was so that my love had the tickling of lullabies,  
The softness of new shoots, the freshness of new buds;

Once it was so that my love was a song of bubbling youth,  
And now, it is so that your voice has become like a blank, lost voice  
And no one knows from which corner of the earth it is coming,  
Haltingly, suffocated, filtered through a thousand veils.

*Yād*, 83



The losers are frightened; the winners are losing;  
 They're staking all money and cash they have;  
 Their faces wear a death-like look; their eyes, ships caught up in whirlpools.

Desire urges them on: Play on, gambler, play on; you've lost  
 What you had to lose; defeat isn't a defeat; call it a custom in the city of  
     winning;  
 Their breaths are held captive; fear keeps guard; the four walls close in.

Before you, other gamblers also have won and lost;  
 This is a business, winning and losing; what's the worry; why fear?  
 Throw the dice; why do you hesitate? Why die while living?  
 In ruins and storms lie shadows and hopes.

Just one hand, one hand only, someone keeps urging:  
 Sell the clothes off your back, your turban; you have to win this hand;  
 You'll keep your prestige with your rivals; wealth comes and goes;  
 You really haven't lost; heart consoles heart.

We bit our lips, changed sides; sold everything and won the hand.  
 Then in greed we sat down again, eyes lit up, the heart waving in joy;  
 We were so lost that we forgot ourselves; we didn't remember anything as we  
     played;  
 When we got up, our pockets were empty; who is there to ask: How did it go?

Deep shadows, blind earthen lamps are awake and dance!  
 Circled by walls made of hands, bets, and gamblers,  
 Who knows who won? This blind hand and who lost?  
 Who knows why, night and day, we pursue each other?

035

**12. *Kutbah* / Inscription**

Is this a heart or an empty village?  
Graves, everywhere.  
I weep for no one,  
But whose tombstone is that,  
Smooth and clear like a mirror?  
Come. Look.  
O God!' The child of a desire,  
A bud, younger than young,  
Born a moment ago.

*Yād*, 248-49

036

**13. Maḥrūmī / Privation**

You are not fate; nor is pain eternal;  
 Time spent with you, promises of love  
 have drowned like one last tear shed at night.  
 Sleepy eyes, lips deceptive of pain  
 are a story — half-remembered, half-forgotten.  
 I have no buds, nor thorns nor dust on my breast.  
 Tired morning lurks in evening's shadows;  
 Desire's caravan returned, unable to find its journey's end.  
 There was a hope, but now it slumbers in the dust!

I stand at crossroads, puzzled, not sure where to step;  
 Perhaps I'm not yet free of my own chains.  
 I, too, am a prisoner of time's games;  
 Perhaps I am all pain . . . but not a complaint.

What have I to do with the flickering stars in your eyes?  
 Your tears, melted by fiery sights,  
 Could not wash away the stains of grief upon my heart.  
 What have I to do with your blossoming days?  
 I don't even worry about my future anymore!

*Yād*, 32-33

037

**14. Masjid / Mosque**

Far away under the dense shade of the banyan tree, silent and sad  
 Where under the black shroud of night  
 The past and present, like a sinful worshipper,  
 Silently cry over their misdeeds.

The broken spire on dome  
 Stares at the river flowing nearby,  
 And on the broken wall an owl  
 Recites an elegy of past glory.

Gusts of wind buried the dust-covered lamps  
 Every day in under a new layer of mud;  
 And the parting breaths of the sun, taking leave,  
 Extinguished the lights in the window.

The disappointment of morning and evening sitting near the dome  
 Listens to the wandering prayers  
 Thirsting to be accepted  
 And holds its broken heart.

Or a swallow, at the approach of winter,  
 Seeks the mosque out for making its nest;  
 And curling up for hours in the broken arch  
 Tells the story of cold countries.

Sometimes an old donkey while passing by  
 Sits dozing for a while under the shade of the wall;  
 Or a traveler comes; he too, fearing, stops for a moment.  
 The floor does not know what sweeping is?

The floor does not know what sweeping is;  
 The rooms for ritual bathing are not aware of a drop of dew  
 In the niche there are still the tears of the candle,  
 Now there is neither prayer carpet the pulpit.

The messages and blessings of the Master of Heaven have come;  
 The mountains and the doors will not hear the voice of Gabriel;  
 No more, perhaps, will the foundation be laid for any Kaaba;  
 The voice of Abraham been lost in the Plains of Forgetfulness.

Noon passes by laughing blandly;

The stars spread out their washed sheet  
On the body of the beloved of God's heart  
Only dew comes and stains her eyes here.

A somewhat dirty, lonely and despondent earthen lamp  
Says everyday with its shivering diseased hands:  
"You light me; but you should also put me out sometimes;  
One burns, but another goes out."

[stanza break]

Every flood-carrying wave of the fast-flowing river  
Cries out from that distance: "Mortal, mortal!  
I will sweep you away tomorrow breaking the bonds of the bank,  
And then the dome and minaret too will be just water."

*Yād*, 28-31

038

*15. Nayā shahr / New City*

When I go to a new city—its walls, gates;  
 people, agitated, confused; shops, bazaars;  
 new idols, old statues of famous men;  
 sad hospitals, the sick in long queues;  
 the telegraph office, railroad bridges, theaters, telephone poles;  
 half-naked trees lining the roads;  
 everywhere ads for drugs to cure every ill—  
 everything here attracts me,  
 this new city, a dream city.  
 Perhaps because here  
 there's no one whom I burden with my life;  
 here, no one—no acquaintance, nor companion,  
 nor friend, nor beloved—knows my faults.

*Yād*, 234-35

039

**16. *Pagdanḍi* / Footpath**

A beautiful woman—weary, helpless, alone—is looking about,  
 As if proceeding, she would ultimately reach and swing over the horizon's color,  
 As if, falling and rising, she would reach out and touch the stars.  
 She sees some wayfarer entangled in the twists and turns of the road.

Yawning, coiling, striking against ruins and settlements,  
 Avoiding and turning from them, raising whirlpools on the dry earth,  
 Coquettish, shy, frightened, revealing future dreams,  
 Resting under shade, then turning, she goes forward freely.

Casting herself into the eyes of the wayfarer, she falls and again recovers;  
 She becomes a current of silvery dreams under cool star shade;  
 She becomes a wanderer of the plain in the lighted torches of day;  
 Joining with rivers and streams, she finally reaches far ahead.

She crushes the bodies of flowers, awakens the candelabra of particles;  
 She hears the laments of the branches of weary trees;  
 Unseen, she weaves a net in the path of every new arrival;  
 She puts the buds to sleep under earth, then goes on, pointing to the destination.

Sorrowful travelers left behind lose their way in the darkness;  
 On the cheeks of the road, feet leave dim imprints.  
 Travelers straggling behind erase the earlier impressions  
 Which become a story buried continuously under the dust of Time.

Someone is dragging the hem of his robe on the turns and twists of the road;  
 The complicated dimness of the future, the deep darkness of the past,

This silence, this dead silence and, in addition, our blindness; these are  
The journey, O lonely traveler! You have borne well all which you had to suffer.

A beautiful woman—wearing, helpless, alone—is looking about;  
The path of life curls in the darkness;  
Who can touch the stars? One loses one's breath in the course of the journey.  
She sees some wayfarer entangled in the twists and turns of the road.

This sun, this moon and stars, can they light the way?  
Is darkness the prelude to dawn? Isn't darkness the end?  
Is there not someone to drink the light on the path of those who'll later come?  
We have at least the power to live and to die.

*Yād*, 68-70

040

**17. *Pas-i dīvār-i caman* /  
On the Other Side of the Garden Wall**

The scent of the flower woke her up in the morning  
And softly said: Go to the other side of the garden wall.  
Behind the thick ivy creeper  
Your lover, alone, carrying your longing in his heart,  
Has been waiting for you for a long time. She rose, startled, as if  
A wild gazelle was startled from its own sound.  
Then she set out towards the garden combing her hair  
With an indifference of someone who goes about  
Aimlessly for a walk in the garden, having no wish to meet anyone,  
And recognizing no one except her own shadow.  
From somewhere the scent of fresh flowers was the guide; somewhere the breeze;  
Only she was on the ground, the munificent Lord was in the highest heaven;  
Waving grass, the river flowing softly  
Her gait was one which cannot be given a name;  
Her hair was a caravan of amber and musk  
Or some floating cloud was riding over the shoulders of the wind;  
Flowers and sprigs were all ears to hear something from her;  
The dust, holding her feet, encircled her?  
In how many places on the road the branches caught hold of her hem  
Many times, her head-covering slipped down as she combed her hair;  
She bent like a branch, stopped liked imagination, walked coquettishly;  
At every step she stumbled in a new way/different way.

I, who was sitting there heard the sound, got up



And no sooner did I go forward to take her in my embrace, I woke up.  
My feet stumbled; I fell and in this way my eyes  
Opened toward the latter part of the night;  
I saw that some of the night's journey was still left.  
I remained sitting and kept seeing  
Minutes melting into hour and days into years; the beautiful moments  
Turned into wounds, then gangrene, then tears.  
I remained as I was, as if I was the movement of the compass;  
Day and night there kept dancing before me.  
A single word written on the tablet of action: No!

June 57

*Yād*, 222-24

041

**18. *Qayāmat* / Doomsday**

No one knows why the immortal palace  
Is indifferent,  
Why a worthless teardrop  
Enjoys repute.

Let friends play:  
Would that the minarets of light,  
Moons, skies and stars  
Break and scatter.  
From the mountains, plains and rivers  
Rises a tremulous voice:  
O immortal God, Your sovereignty is brief.

Let the darkness of ages  
Be washed by light,  
By the brook of life sprout forth,  
By a new sun  
In the fresh sky,  
On the shoulders of Life.  
The coffin of Death.

*Yād, 96-97*

042

**19. *Sar-i rāh guzre* / Along the Road**

You are a moonlit night; you are dawn.  
 You are a cry; you are its answer.  
 This is your spring, it's true;  
 Your flowering days.  
 But careful. Destroy no one.  
 Stop that graceful, all-too-graceful gait on the street.  
 This world does have other people;  
 They love beauty too,  
 But life as well!

*Yād*, 250

043

**20. *Silsile* / Sequences**

I've roamed for years  
City after city, village after village,  
Often this world  
Seemed  
Aa bud, blossoming in dawn's light;  
The moon,  
A dry well  
Or a festering wound.  
But still I live.  
Yesterday for hours I thought:  
I was never in love like this;  
Why then do I remember you?

*Yād*, 178

044

### 21. *Tamāshah* / Spectacle

It's New Year's celebration; streets are decorated,  
 The city glitters with light  
 The crowd is like a wave of the sea  
 Or a verdant field swaying.  
 Here, the beauties walk with such a charm  
 That one feels the pleasure of strong wine;  
 There, staggering in a drunken state,  
 Goes a band of tipplers.  
 To be sure, there is prohibition,  
 But is the police superintendent one's God?  
 There, one sound echoes in the street:  
 "O drinkers, it is God who gives you drink!"  
 Every drain has become a hoarding place;  
 Filth from drains used to make drink.  
 Everywhere there is a line of *saqis*;  
 This is an age of country-made wine;  
 Who is it that touches foreign liquor?  
 The custom of the earthen cup has become common;  
 The blood of martyrs is bringing results.  
 Today the disobedient are prospering;  
 Every man of honor has to bear whims of those disobedients;  
 Every shroud thief sings the praises  
 Of the statesmanship of the reformer;  
 Vagrants have abandoned the roads;  
 The police officer fights shy of them;  
 People say he is in league with them;  
 But who has the knowledge of the unknown?  
 Who is it who smiles alluringly, sitting this spectacle?

October 56

*Yād*, 211-12

045

**22. *Tark-i vafā* / Abandonment of Fidelity**

Perhaps you remember that moment of  
 sad winter moonlight when I made an agreement with you—  
 whether the days of my life  
 would pass in poverty or prosperity  
 I would come one day like a whirlwind  
 in search of you  
 complain about the tyranny of the world  
 and test the sincerity of my tears  
 or to give a message of happiness  
 and receive the praise of my fidelity  
 if you had become someone else's,  
 I would not let you live, nor live myself  
 I would make you drink the same  
 poison of life which I myself would drink

Today I break that agreement  
 Abandon this tradition of fidelity.

*Yād*, 184-85

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**23. *Voh makān* / That House**

I bind my hopes with  
 stone, brick and steel  
 as if  
 I am mortar for  
 stone, brick and steel?

I stand beneath that window  
 so that  
 sometimes at night  
 she, if awakened from a dream,  
 might see me once

This killing faithfulness  
 lives with my every breath

In night's dead hours  
 two remain awake;  
 I'm one, the other,  
 a chimney of a mill,  
 a rich man's personal effect

Each moment passes  
 night wanes  
 life shortens  
 with each breath  
 I don't even have the strength  
 to stitch my lips  
 as if a wound,  
 nor to sip grief as if bane,  
 nor even to live  
 while away from her.

047

**24. *Yāden* / Memories**

See, in the late hours of night, the pale moon rises from the well of night;  
Haltingly the mind opens the old book of the past,

The meaningless records of memories, the sad meteors of dreams  
All say with a tongue of silence, "O wretch,  
Whether a century or a moment, a thing of the past is an impression on the water."  
This is the story of our journey in this peopled desolation.,

See how we lived in this peopled desolation.  
In the center of the city of desire, a fair is going on;  
Everywhere a colorful garden of toys has blossomed forth;  
The kid who did not receive a cent from home  
Let go the hand of his father and was lost in the hubbub of the fair;  
When he realized this, he became very astonished at finding himself alone  
In this peopled desolation; he did not find his house through the crowd;  
See how we lived in this peopled desolation.  
That kid is still astonished; the fair is still being held as before;  
He silently puzzled at the goods being sold in the bazaar.  
In one place, nobility; at another, high-mindedness; in one place, love; at another, fidelity;  
Somewhere it is the family being sold; somewhere else, great people; and somewhere else, God.  
We finally left this fool in his confusion  
And found a way to escape in this peopled desolation.

Lips are accustomed to smiling; otherwise in the soul  
There are pierced so many poisonous lancets, which have no count.  
How many times has this widespread earth narrowed down on us?  
The forehead about which we are so proud has often bent itself in prostration.  
Sometimes a mean person is the master; sometimes a fool is the king;  
We even sold the respect of our talent in this peopled desolation.  
See how we lived in this peopled desolation.

Long leagues are the sorrows of love and I, the seeker of bread for the night;  
Sometimes I got entangled in the gardens and sometimes the smell of the wheat  
Became the heady musk of Tasktar and carried me everywhere.  
This same lightning-natured life sometimes became idle, sometimes grew;  
Sometimes I took fright of love like a wild gazelle,



And sometimes passed the night in the throes of death in this peopled desolation.  
 See how we lived in this peopled desolation.  
 Sometimes I got beaten at the hands of the cruel foe  
 That I had to suffer contempt in the land of sorrow and for years my conditions were bad;  
 And when the day came forth, ages passed and there was no night;  
 Everywhere sweethearts, simple but tyrannical; everywhere, presents of kindness and generosity;  
 Glances, cold like dew; words, like the fragrance of flowers;  
 One way or the other, we overcame this stage in this peopled desolation.

[stanza break]

Who were the friends the wayfarer of longing found on his path?  
 He came across the clouds of spring, the reflections  
 Of the sweethearts, the moles on the cheeks of the beloveds.  
 Some were just figurines of clay; some, sharp like a dagger;  
 Some were found in the whirlpool; some on the bank,  
 And some on the other side of the river.  
 But with everyone, in every state, I met them with out-stretched hands?  
 I only looked at their virtue in this peopled desolation.  
 See how we lived in this peopled desolation.

The whole story is unconnected; the pages are faded.  
 Where are all those from whom even a moment's separation was an agony?  
 There is no wound anywhere, although there intervenes a separation of years.  
 See how many agreements have been eaten away by  
 The moth of forgetfulness.  
 Friends have become resigned to losing me. Well, the debt has been paid off.  
 The secret of one's influence was at last exposed in this peopled desolation?  
 See how we lived in this peopled desolation.

I dreamed that one day I would touch the Milky Way from earth's height.  
 I would play with the roseate twilight and swing upon the rainbow, would  
 I would walk like the spring breeze, blossom like mustard plants;  
 I would forget the sorrows and hardships in the colorful cluster of pleasure.  
 I would take a fragrant smell in return for the scar of the flower and bud.  
 But I received the pain of the heart's wounds in this peopled desolation.

Sometimes I debased myself for a penny and sometimes I got up  
 And leaving a whole apronful of money in such a way  
 As if were I to touch it, I would become a pauper.  
 When I tried to be clever, I ruined everything and a simple move came out right.  
 How much did I explore the plain of love, like Majnun, with blistered feet?  
 Sometimes like Alexander, sometimes a dervish, sometimes a whirlwind?  
 I mimicked these roles and passed by time in this peopled desolation.  
 See how we lived in this peopled desolation.

God only knows what life is; hunger, search, tears, escape;

Babies like flowers, beautiful women, men full of the joy of life;  
 Why do all these often wither away? After all, who is it that has made  
 The soul of the earth diseased? And from which earth sprout  
 These poisonous thoughts? Why living merely forced labor without pay?  
 I overlooked all these things in this peopled desolation.  
 See how we lived in this peopled desolation.

[stanza break]

Somewhere in the distance a koil bird cried out; far away in night's silence  
 The fragrant mango flowers must be scattered on the tender earth;  
 In bonds, work-weary young boys must be singing to lessen the load of toil.  
 See the light of dawn burst forth from the well of night; I, sometimes sad,  
 Sometimes happy, am thinking of this and that in this peopled desolation.

Even now my eyes are far from sleep, though they are sleepless the whole night;  
 The meaningless registers of memory, the sad meteors of dreams  
 Are all saying with the tongue of silence, "O wretch, a thing past,  
 Whether a century or a moment, a thing past is an impression on the water."  
 Think of the future; put away this ancient, time-worn book of the past.  
 This is the stage of judgment, of understanding in this peopled desolation.  
 See how we lived in this peopled desolation.

June 1957

*Yād*, 215-21

### INTERVIEW

"The 'Gotcha!'" Interview with Akhtarul Iman." *Speaking of/with/about/to South Asian Writers: Interviews and Essays*. Bombay, Thursday, 25 January 1968. 5:00 p.m. Forthcoming.

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