

Poetry from Pakistan

Adrian A. Husain

Desert Album



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The Jubilee Series

50

1947-1997
50 Years of Pakistan

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DESERT ALBUM

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ADRIAN A. HUSAIN

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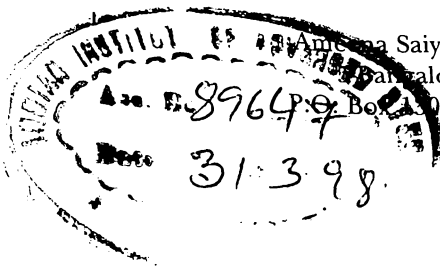
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To my mother

INTRODUCTION

Talaat Moreau

It is not unusual for a writer, poet or dramatist to use a language other than his mother tongue to give form to his inspiration. The Irishman Beckett wrote in both English and French. The Romanian Ionesco wrote in French, the Polish Conrad wrote in English; so did the Russian American novelist Nabokov; the Bengali poet Tagore wrote in both Bengali and English; Pakistan's national poet Iqbal wrote in Persian as well as in Urdu. And they all wrote superlatively well. These are some of the great writers in the past. In the present, to name a few subcontinental writers, Rushdie, Sidwa, Suleri and Narayan write in English. So does the Nigerian Achebe, and of course the list goes on. Why did they choose to write in a language other than their own? Perhaps they received their entire education in a foreign language, as is often the case with writers from those countries that were once part of the British Empire or the French Colonies. Perhaps the writer felt equally comfortable in both languages and chose to express himself in one or the other depending on the audience he wished to reach or else as his whimsy moved him. For Pakistani writers, Urdu would limit their work to the subcontinent, whereas English allows them to reach people across the world.

In the case of the poet Adrian Husain, we have a man who was educated in England, Italy and Switzerland, and returned to England to do an advanced degree in English

Literature at New College in Oxford, subsequently getting a Ph.D. for a thesis on Shakespeare and Machiavelli from the University of East Anglia. He brings a subtle nuance to his elegant and easy use of the English language which, by his choice of subject matter, symbol or metaphor, makes it uniquely his own, and makes it a bridge between east and west and between the past and the present. But what is gained in breadth of understanding when much time is passed in cultures and an environment other than one's own also exacts a price: and this too we see in the work of Adrian Husain. He is a poet of exile, and the desert is both his ontological grounding and his landscape. His restless search for identity, for being and belonging, is played out in the merciless light, the shifting sands, and the cold, clear nights of the desert. *Desert Album* talks to us of isolation, alienation, mirage, illusion and death. The desert calls to and elicits the wanderer and the nomad, it brings about a search for being in its scarcity of phenomena; and it is at the same time a window of fertility, an oasis; a glimpse of eternity. Perhaps too a promise of reconciliation—as when a cactus suddenly flowers, or sand meets sky. Husain's wandering past leads him first of all through a confrontation with a shattered self, aware of nature's inhumanity in a sudden shaft of light.

The negation of the poet's revolt is expressed in *The Praying Mantis* by rage and destructive violence, as he lashes out against his own inability to surrender and accept life as it is, in its sacred horror and intensity. The praying mantis is snatched from its natural environment, 'trapped'. The poet senses that its eyes

seemed not to see at all
as though meant not for sight

but for some deeper focusing.
Tenacity had made the forelegs
devotional...

The mantis, unlike the poet, not only accepts its condition but seems able to transcend it:

He showed no great regret
at being captured as though
freedom barely mattered...

He'd lived as long as he was able.

The poet is remorseful, because his actions lead to the death of the mantis. 'I should have left him where he/was, hinged to his acacia'. This 'might have helped/him be what he had wanted: bark or tree'.

A large number of the poems have to do with animals. There are crocodiles, the goat, and the crow to name but some of the inhabitants of this exotic bestiary. The animal poems all show a sinuous interaction between the animal and its environment. In *Crocodiles* 'forbidding vapours' rise from around the marshy swamp; the crocodiles are seen 'weighted against the sand', weighed down by centuries of prehistory, scarcely breathing, immobile, 'you would think them/dead or asleep' brooding on the bank as if they had been spewed up by the swamp. Then follows an image that is almost supernatural, because in each weighted, dead or sleeping reptile 'there flickers its instant/of ravenous, lightning revival'. The whole ambience of the poem is ominous; 'The approach has been walled off' so there is no exit, the crocodiles lie with 'canines bared like tusks', they lie there nursing their torpor but 'each primitive lozenge/of skin is watching'. The metaphors disorient the mind, 'tusks' on crocodiles and scales turning into 'lozenges' of skin. This is not mother nature, but nature as the enemy.

In *Stray* there is an ambiguity: is the stray the cat or the man running after himself? There is a tension between innocence and slime; in the beginning the stray was above it all:

You mooned at the window
full of nests and birds.

Now you tunnel through slime.

But there is a hint of redemption at the end of the poem:

I crouch by myself
taking you back
piece by piece from the dark.

What is the poet taking back 'piece by piece from the dark'
but himself, out of alienation and despair.

Man himself is also nature's enemy, taking advantage of
its innocence to deceive and destroy as in *Goat*. The poem
shows deception at many different levels. The goat has
been

Cajoled from the desert
he finds his world intact...

The garden is his savannah.
Tied to a tree
he invents freedom...

we approach
and cradle him lovingly.

But man is false, because he holds the goat, not to comfort
it, but to bare its neck for sacrifice. And this sacrifice is as
naught because even though the goat's 'blood spurts from
his throat' the earth soaks up the sacrifice 'unappeased'. An
identification between the goat and man is implicit in the
poem.

Crow on a String is a metapoem, a poem about poetry. A
poet who tries to bring order to the confusion of life is fated
to 'a dark, plumed silence'. So what the reader arrives at is
'A taxidermy of mood beyond/nature's'. The 'pylons' and
'pilasters' of the opening verse are evocative of jail and

imprisonment; the ‘confusion of bougainvillaea’ expresses the freedom and exuberance of life, and it is ‘monitored by a crow’. The crow bears the connotation of death, yet in this poem the crow monitors life. As dead matter? Not quite, for the string that binds the crow is a ‘tendril’ that ‘lures’ it to the balcony. Nature and life and death are all bound together in this. As a master of verse the poet must enter the sacred circle of life where the beginning and the end intertwine; T. S. Eliot, too, said ‘In my beginning is my end’.

It is Husain’s experience that all that is is not. All perfection lures us into deception, as in the desert the cool breeze rising from the oasis and bringing a promise of water to quench a raging thirst is often an illusion, a mirage. *Night Train* is at the heart of *Desert Album*. The desert is like an immense tomb, the cradle of all temporality, the cradle of human civilization. The notion of the desert being empty is false, once we start to dig we uncover strata and layers of past civilizations. There is only the appearance of sterility, of nothingness. There is the invisible world beneath the visible world. In the desert, and in *Night Train* each element calls up its opposite. Music exists only in contrast to silence; darkness through an absence of light. In the desert, temporality is the conscious awareness of another reality, a glimpse of perfection, a tantalizing glimpse of the human condition as it might have been, and perhaps still could be.

Consciousness of past civilizations, and the poet’s restless search for ‘being’ in the present and in the past, are also rendered in *Carvings*:

Hundreds of years old
radiant sandstone tombs
depict their dead:
the horseman...

or archer...

and are linked to the desert’s vast expanse: ‘Homelier
devices come to light/in the desert—lesser graves/

clamouring to be known' and as if aware of his own pride and arrogance the poet welcomes the appearance of the 'lesser graves' and there is again a hint of redemption when he describes the 'silent insinuations of thorn'. *Forbears* reinforces the notion of strata and past civilizations, as does *Cairns*, a nostalgic evocation of bygone generations, somewhat reminiscent of Eliot's *East Coker* in the *Four Quartets* and Eliot's concern with origins, familial beginnings, and with human time and generations as opposed to God's time. Eliot's influence is apparent in Husain's poetry, as indeed it has been with a whole generation of poets. Husain's work places him in the modernist school.

In the Museum at Taxila also contains these elements of circularity/infinity and strata of civilizations;

A tree-ringed
hush contains
them: friezes,
statues, heads...

a tree's ring also tells of its age and silence is of course eternal. There is emptiness and nostalgia in the 'self-absorbed figures' who 'proffer/a history not ours/nor theirs'. This links up with the praying mantis who, if left alone hinged on his tree, might have become what he wanted: bark or tree. The stone Buddhas who sit before us in the museum with 'eyes closed, lips/almost parted/in meditation...' are impassable, immutable, unaffected by the march of time. Here there is another message, mankind can look back and reinterpret history when it retrieves past civilizations, but this does not affect or change the past civilization that has been retrieved: the Buddhas'

... inner
light beamed back at them
or passing into a beyond:
suffering no diminution.

These poems show that the past, like nature, is unyielding.
Khyber makes a statement out of this:

...what we find here
are not just
vulnerable valley, pass,
but signs

of an unyielding:

By the Traffic Lights and *On the Pavement* portray beggars. They provide a gruesome metaphor for the human condition: dismemberment, not being whole, being existentially, mentally and physically handicapped.

That the poet in the search for his own identity cannot even turn towards other human beings is crystallized in the two poems *Tête à Tête* and *Out-Patient*. The hallucinating, schizophrenic woman is a mirror of the self. Thus, a depersonalization, the portrait of a man or a woman exiled from their own selves.

Man is not able to affect the world, regardless of who or what he is. *Margalla* and *Mountain Journey* dwell on the cruelty and indifference of nature. In *Mountain Journey* 'Everywhere the river/merges/into the stillness', the 'still point', the point where all is reconciliation in a shaft of light, and there is a glimpse of being. Throughout *Desert Album* there is a play of light and shadow; a lightness, a gliding, flowing freedom that is always out of the poet's reach, leaving him in the shadows even as his eyes are bedazzled and his mind bemused by the radiance that tantalizes him and shows him glimpses of perfection, of the platonic ideal. 'Beauty fertile but withdrawn', beyond man's reach, 'speaking out of stone', another reminder that nature is unyielding and implacable.

The Blue Urn is the very symbol of platonism; it is blue, it is a funerary object, the pot is made of clay and so is man who here has been reduced to ashes and thus human presence has been hidden.

the leaves, mauve tinged,
of the crotons
sail above the urn—

(their guilty pot hidden)...

and because the guilty pot is hidden we have an intuition of perfection, an abstraction of all that is fragile, 'So perfect, unreal', this suggestion of life without the human condition offers a vision of a perfect world, of paradise. With 'the swans/moulded on the urn in a circle' the notion of circularity leads to infinity. In *Kashmiri Rug*, the 'indelible birds', 'the mountain-goat', 'the hoopoe', 'the jackal' all provide echoes of platonism, 'All echo a world once true'. *Interior* by contrast is Proustian. 'Things once carelessly glimpsed/return like long-dead friends'. The past is reanimated and lives again.

In *Shrine* the poet longs for simplicity, for the single-minded devoutness of the praying mantis. He yearns to follow the pre-established rites and traditions, he wants to do as the others do:

you too ...
...utter
a stumbling prayer, then stop

brought up short by..
...your own imagining...

But, just as the poet is about to bow in prayer, he is impeded by a consciousness of self, which inhibits his becoming a part of the brotherhood of man; there is a detachment. And where is the poet? Is there a shrine? Is the sea the shrine or is the shrine his own imagination? He is the outsider solitary, unable to identify with that which is given. This is also seen in the *Muezzins* where:

I press my forehead
to the floor

sensing the sounds
I utter
more
than I experience them.

The poems in *Desert Album* naturally divide into roughly three categories according to their subject matter. Those that deal with the animal kingdom: cows, dogs, goats, crocodiles, crows—man however is not part of this animal kingdom; he is the outcast, nature is most often inimical to him; the second category is an examination and an exhumation of the buried past, in the petrified world of cairns and marble graves, such as in *Forbears*, *Cairns*, *Carvings*, *In the Museum at Taxila*; and the third category is human beings. Whenever human beings enter the poems, it is in conjunction with sickness and madness, and war and death, and most often unnatural death: the sick mother in *Handbag*, the hallucinating, schizophrenic woman in *Tête à Tête* and *Out-Patient*. Death in *The Death of Mrs Gandhi* is by assassination, *Calvary Misunderstood* is about the assassination of Mir Murtaza Bhutto, *Requiem* is for Leila Shahzada, the artist who burned to death; *For Srebrenica's Dead* is a dirge for the massacred Bosnians. But the poet blames man, who is himself responsible for his human condition, for the gulf that exists between him and the platonic ideal, for his inability to transcend nature's unyielding implacability.

The structure of *Desert Album* is itself circular. The very first poem, *Porthole*, touches on many of the themes that dominate Husain's poetry—the journey or the quest; illusion versus reality, transformation and metamorphosis. It illustrates the poet's use of language as a device to disorient the reader and to make the transition from illusion to reality or from one world to another; from the past to the present, from the animal world to man's world, from life into death. The porthole, this round

ocean-window,
set high in the wall...

Tuned to voyage,
each house

seems a masthead...

immediately disorients the reader: he is ready to depart on his mystical journey in search of himself, in search of perfection. His sea-going vessel is this house 'anchoring here/between eucalyptus and palm'. The interplay of light and cloud, trees and haze, changes his perspective so that looking through this porthole window, its 'delirium' affects him so that he too can see 'cows bathe' in the shallows and houses anchored among the trees. The illusion is so complete that none is aware of its 'proud,/terrible shipwreck'.

The first poem in the album links up with the last, *The Tube*. Here too is the journey, but underground, 'through subways' (like the stray tunnelling its way through slime); there is no 'haze/of light and trees'; the search for self, for identity, for awareness, takes place 'through corridors and halls/and hollow spaces'. The poem repeats the themes of past, buried civilizations as, in the tunnel of the tube, the poet writes

I vacillate
before a piece of paper
that has been volatile for centuries.
It licks me idly, rustling, and is gone.

I listen. And I wait

The theme of dismemberment resurfaces: 'At last I find him/like an errant limb amidst a crowd'. The physical dismemberment links up with the fragmentation of the personality and this becomes the ultimate exile.

But this dissolution that is an exile, as in the desert where all is defined by what it is not, also brings about a higher level of consciousness, closer to the platonic ideal, that perfect world, which is the siren song that lures the poet into perpetuating his wandering.

O how can I forget the vagary of years
on escalators, the oblique
colloquy between heaven and hell,
and, on the railings, those hands:
thin, purposeless?

I have often wondered if those hands are mine.

In the poems, the reader accompanies Husain on his turbulent journey. At the beginning, the wanderer looks out through the porthole's gifted ocean-window, tuned to voyage. The last obsessive image the poet paints is that of the wanderer who has glimpsed the reality that till now had been but a shadow.

At last I find him...

I try to catch him.
He breaks away, then waves
sardonically.
At length he disappears.
Zigzagging, I follow him again.

The poet will never give up; he will continue his quest with a quiet tenacity. He has had a glimpse of the ontological world he is seeking, and is now certain exists.

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PORTHOLE

Gifted ocean-window,
set high in the wall,
contriving a haze
of light and trees,

wafting such birds,
such low cloud
and such weathers—
your delirium infects my gaze.

Looking to windward,
you change all you see.
Hawkers float in
on your vision,

cows bathe
in your shallows.
Tuned to voyage,
each house

seems a masthead,
anchoring here
between eucalyptus and palm.
All sense your mellowness.

None divines
your cyclops' eye
or proud,
terrible shipwreck.

DESERT ALBUM

I

Marble

A false-backed picture-frame,
the white marble surround
to my father's grave
contains only clay.

Impeccable steps
rise to a porch
beneath a whitewashed canopy.
Plants curl on the parapet.

Here father makes a home
among ghettoed neighbours,
his gaze fixing
upon a desert of dead.

How cannily he slips
into their otiose habits,
with what ease
winnowing out his presence!

Nothing recalls the night
when from the damp earth
through a scent of rose-petals
a light breeze

wafted the carrion-stench.
Nothing disturbs
his fluent sleep in marble,
save for the headstone

where it blanches,
where the Holy Book opens
on a page bearing
the admonishment, 'Ye that reject faith...'

II Carvings

*H*undreds of years old
radiant sandstone tombs
depict their dead:
the horseman

jaunty above flower motifs
or archer
credible by his seal.
Homelier devices come to light

in the desert—lesser graves
clamouring to be known
for their tracery
amid silent insinuations of thorn.

III
Forbears

When from the desert
the eye retrieves
lintels hewn
out of rock

they are there
deserving their summits
or huddled around gay shrines
hugging their sleep.

Gone, they send
brave offerings.
Our scant
incense watches

as they turn
into sinewy
pasture—hustling
stone after stone.

CAIRNS

Thinly strewn with stones,
in poor fistfuls,
on their remote hilltop
lie the cairns—

end to end
above the farm's fecund bustle,
from centuries back,
where villager or warrior went aground.

Whatever alarum or flourish
signalled them here
lives now in explosions of thorn
or small, unnameable shrubs

that grow deftly about them.
Whatever each death meant,
the half-outlined forms
turn away from the carved hubris

of the monument at the hill's edge.
Three-tier, monarchical,
smothered in fretwork,
its stone slabs buttress the skyline.

No plaque narrates
what bacchanals of power
or heady conquests
came to grief in this hollow.

Wind breathes through its crevices.
Partridge calls echo.
Deep in the cave-wall
a lizard's tail flickers.

CROCODILES

From around the swamp
the forbidding vapours rise.
On one side, acacias shoot up.
The approach has been walled off.

Then, in a sudden shaft of light
you see them: venerable,
weighted against the sand,
nursing their torpor.

Canines bared like tusks,
they lie
as though the swamp
had spewed them up.

You would think them
dead or asleep.
But each primitive lozenge
of skin is watching.

In each form
brooding on the bank
there flickers its instant
of ravenous, lightning revival.

THE PRAYING MANTIS

I trapped him on a tree.
The tiny primitive black
body clung to the bark of the acacia
fierce intent unmoving and superbly

camouflaged but for the white
wings. The eyes embossed on the head
seemed not to see at all
as though meant not for sight

but for some deeper focusing.
Tenacity had made the forelegs
devotional. I sensed
a will compelling

that body to preserve its severe
posture—a will that somehow
made me seize it, from devoutness
shot with guilt and fear.

He showed no great regret
at being captured as though
freedom barely mattered. He just lay
where I had stowed him, between my cigarettes.

At home I stood him on a table.
All of the strain was gone.
The legs were limp and crumpled.
He'd lived as long as he was able.

I should have left him where he
was, hinged to his acacia. The roughness
of the surface had suited him and might have helped
him be what he had wanted: bark or tree.

STRAY

You skulk on the lawn
hammocked in shadow
among bits of pipe
and diminishing grass.

I do not know you.
Your white watery
fur grows mangy
drained by litter upon litter.

A year old
you're gorged on rats.
Their toxins rise
to your brain

making you snarl.
When first you came
thinking the garden
fraught with hazard

I fussed for you
like a child.
You mooned at the window
full of nests and birds.

Now you tunnel through slime.
I crouch by myself
taking you back
piece by piece from the dark.

EUTHANASIA

I imagine your minimal,
spent ghost steal back
to where you lay
at the end

all but spreadeagled
in your close corner
by our dining-room door.
Alive, such physic

as was ours
we gave you.
Listless and restive
by turns, you remained

intent on breath
that wouldn't come
easily—and exempt
from the sight

of your own struggle:
the paused rush
of dying, the held
hollows in your specked fur

craving tribute;
building us to a knowledge
of what you were,
or had become,

a knowledge that,
guiding us, bade
us lead you
headlong into death.

GOAT

The curling lips
and slow disdainful
gaze of Ammon
watching from among the ferns...

Cajoled from the desert
he finds his world intact
yanking at leaves
or grass browned in summer's furnace.

The garden is his savannah.
Tied to a tree
he invents freedom
his black and white

form in the undergrowth
starting
as we approach
and cradle him lovingly.

Though the legs flail about
he barely bleats once.
Blood spurts from his throat.
Unappeased, earth soaks up our sacrifice.

COWBELLS

I wake up to this tinkling.
Half-dreamed of and very distant,
the sound is as of stalactites melting,
swimming closer, never quite insistent,

till it stops short at the coarse 'Whoa!'
of the cowherd as he checks
his cattle. The whole herd halts,
fogged and aimless. Adamant, it bottlenecks

the lane. It takes in the house-fronts
and the bricked-in saplings. Finding what little green
there is all make-believe, one of the cows
strays to the slag-heap and munches polythene.

In a minute they're all there. Bells clinking,
they dip into the refuse for their pick
of eggshells, newspaper. One cow won't budge.
She faces the wrong way—absentminded or maybe she's
just sick

of her colour, a dead aunt's frayed black velvet.
Her gaze transcends the crooked smiles
of the puddles next to her. The eyes glow
a moist amber. The buffalo and the other cows meanwhile

have made the best of it and are filing off.
Two trainee pyedogs trot before
them. The bells keep tinkling, tinkling.
The sound's still there. And then it isn't. And then, you are
not sure.

MOCK-FRONT

*M*ildly tumultuous, twelve in all,
the dogs are led
from salutary kennels
to their training pad.

Alsatian and Labrador
each on a leash
strain from the dog-handlers
swivel and flash

down the hill. One of the pack
is detailed for battle.
Padded, the dummy ducks
behind a boulder and settles

like a child waiting to be found.
The dog has the scent.
He falters, quivering, then bounds
at the compliant

figure growing out of the rushes.
Battle lasts a minute.
Shuffling on hindlegs, the dog gashes
the dummy until told to sit.

Back up the slope
the pack has quietened.
Solemn, tense, the dogs move,
jaws set against the horizon.

NIGHT TRAIN

*I*n a convoy by night
the camels look dreamy
proud or erudite
driven by robed figures.

Now the road is clear
their rhythm's steady.
The old limits disappear
by measure.

At each step the tar
effervesces like a mirage.
Nowhere's too far
from the desert.

Astride the great
bodies in the blur
the figures levitate
knifing a radiance around them.

Camel and figure go
by, blending
in the unassertive flow
of temporality.

HANDBAG

Sick, mother shivers.
She has tugged and tugged
at the rough bedspread
till it just won't give.

Now she luxuriates
in a rising fever.
Not wishing to be spoken to
she tries to concentrate

on her beads, the glow-
worms she counts off
like her dead: the brother
who went months ago,

the mad aunt. The path ends
where they flash, filing
slowly before her.
Mother's eye distends

then stops at her handbag. Reimbursed,
it almost purrs.
A gift from father, it subsists
shamelessly, without anguish or remorse.

OUT-PATIENT

I

Truant Visitor

*A*n aimless clatter of stiletto heels
just before dark declares she is about,
preparing for some nebulous soirée.
By stages the dim corridor reveals
pale cheeks, stiff carriage and chromatic pout.
Her eyes by force of habit look away.

Mechanically, like someone in a dream,
pursuing the steep angle of her gaze,
she sits as though in an appointed chair.
Unless at times a comprehending gleam
of consciousness awakes in her, she stays
torpidly quiet, a smile half forming there;

and pulls on an obsessive cigarette.
Who is she dressed up for today in green?
And why the bouffant hair and manicure?
Her monumental fixity deflects
our cautious interrogatory routine.
We almost sense the truant visitor

beckoning as she wavers in the hall,
then stops and stares at us in prim reproof.
How shall we answer? What urbane regrets,
what brave assurances will serve to stall
her? How can we explain that time is proof
against suggestion—and is inveterate?

II Tête à Tête

The woman reels
into the room.
Fifty? She could be any age.
The flicker in her eyes congeals

as she enters. But for the lips
nothing moves in the face.
Slouched on the sofa
she strips

the door to a transparency
to smile
at someone
she can evidently see

and finds worth talking to
in snatches
(the other person
filling in as 'view').

To her right
her parents taper off
into their tide
of bedsheets.

On the scarped shelf
of their age
they barely notice
as the small voice laughs to itself.

SUBALTERN RAIN

The subaltern stares at the soldier
as he sprays the BOQs
with a fire extinguisher. Besides 'rain'
he has commandeered the view.

His unit hill is wooded.
Alongside
a road cuts across shanty towns
and watercourses long dry.

Barbed wire up, from cannons to snakes,
is the depot area. Here he sees
service-green trucks
or the teacosy come through the trees

with the tea. The jet of water
makes his eyes gleam.
The porch is flooded. But summer
does not end as the fireman's drill

gets over. Up and down their illusory
seesaw, the flight of birds continues.
The BOQs simmer. Alone
the subaltern wars with the sun.

ON THE PAVEMENT

*L*ike squatters they have come to stay.
The woman on the pavement sits
as far in front as it permits.
A sort of go-cart just behind
holds her dismal miscellany
of things: old tins, rags, gunny, rind

and cardboard boxes and a broom.
The beggar next to her stagnates,
malformed and multifoliate,
between his squalor-stiffened sheets.
Sprawling half-seated, he assumes
unlikely postures of retreat.

The woman is the more alert.
She nods at passers-by as though
she's someone that they ought to know,
waylaying them in her distress.
Her benedictions kindle curt
and unproductive interest.

Good-humouredly the man looks round
and smiles at her and cracks a joke.
The butt he tries to oversmoke,
the leafstrewn bed, will have to do.
This nurtured penury is bound
to last—while it may see them though.

BY THE TRAFFIC LIGHTS

*H*is cumbrous advance
prefigures the approach
of the other.
The jaundiced stump of a leg
and outsize crutches
are followed
by an uninformed half-sleeve.

Neither ever speaks.
They trade their loss
in mime
shuffling from kerb to kerb
assailing cars,
recovering a leg or an arm
in minute windfalls.

DRY THUNDER

*L*ightning. Night
cracks like a plate.
First a convulsion,
then a crash of thunder.
A door shuts somewhere,
hesitant sifting
of gravel—
and they leap
into the shadows.
They are away,
forever trapped
in the invisible helter-skelter
of bones in search of a body.

ANIMAL

Curtains, that were three sisters, dejected
ghosts. I had sucked night

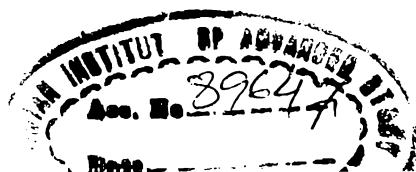
through the window, which was ink
on my tongue, venomous taste of gentian.

But the night fur panted, alive
and desperate. Always the brain

is invisible cargo. I held an eye in my hand,
frozen and fluttering.

There sound was busiest,
and the heart.

And the heart
crouched.



MARGALLA

*M*orning. Like my balcony
half of the hills
are in sun.

The light pauses
gliding effortlessly across
them. It has the forgetfulness

of fingertips
on a smooth table
as it rediscovers

how the land lies:
from the jagged rise
to the despondent

slump of Margalla.
The hills know
such ebb and flow

of light and shade—
desultory lifting
of film from diaphanous film—

hump and shaggy hollow
come casually into view
with a dried-up spring

as do the hills' summits.
Here day, fresh-settled,
glows. A thin group of pines,

gathering courage, climbs
gingerly up past
a stone ridge.

There are no other such trees.
Nothing detracts
from this tremulous conquest.

MOUNTAIN JOURNEY

We never planted these trees.
They grew of themselves,
fig, walnut, wild olive,
oblivious on their mountainside.

These heights were here
before we saw them—
cascade of rock
and the valley's

ambush of springs.
Everywhere the river
merges
into the stillness:

beauty fertile but withdrawn
defies our climb,
dreaming of itself,
speaking out of stone.

THE BLUE URN

So perfect, unreal,
the leaves, mauve-tinged,
of the crotons
sail above the urn—

languid in the summer
(their guilty pot hidden)
lift above the swans
moulded on the urn in a circle

and gliding, gliding through a blue infinity.

CROW ON A STRING

*M*orning's concave opal.
Against pylons, sky
and the pilasters of a balcony
confusion of bougainvillaea

monitored by a crow,
limber shoot and tendril
leading it on till
it settles: to no

matins, no railing cries,
but a dark, plumed silence.
A taxidermy of mood beyond
nature's. Aviary

hung with sporadic bloom,
where, live weathervanes,
birds swivel in the wind
balking your jealous calm

come sounds as of sleigh bells—
rime-winnowed, swift—and then fade,
leaving a briefly sunlit
donkey cart's fugitive trail.

INTERIOR

*D*istraught, mind conceives what it can.
Things once carelessly glimpsed
return like long-dead friends
pointing the way

to luminous scenes within—
from the torchlit carnival room
to the balcony
where we had left them,

where they still sit,
inconsolable: bowlegged
wrought-iron chairs,
surprised by rain.

KASHMIRI RUG

Edged round with trees
and fortuitous shrubs,
my rug extends
to miles of forest.

Bristling with animals,
each box is a thicket.
The clearings trill
with indelible birds.

Here a mountain-goat
cranes his neck, looking back,
a hoopoe alights
or jackal slinks off.

All echo a world once true.
A trick of the yarn
keeps its colours fresh
in the pale, antlered dawn.

SHRINE

From its share of headland
it overlooks the sea,
the once plain mound
bearing up bravely

to the dour chafings of zeal:
death's rites: kiosks of incense
and roses, graves grazing like sheep
along the shrine's

sloped sides. At twilight in a huddle
you find junkies here: pilgrims
come to dribble
their own furtive requiems.

And beggars moth-hung around cars,
whose separate dusk you must
cleave to gain entry, pausing,
unshod, as you move to your tryst.

Portentous,
the garish dome
and cupola wait. A ceremony
of ascent and you are welcomed

to expiatory smoke, an intent
hum of voices: a diorama
wherein, somnambulant,
figures pace framing

rash prayers. Less sanguine, you too
track the saint with drapes
and rose petals, utter
a stumbling prayer, then stop

brought up short by a rustling,
a breath borne on the wind, faintly
crescendo—your own imagining
or at half-tide somewhere the real sea.

MUEZZINS

So many voices, one after another,
reaching out to us, proliferating,
thinking the word aloud...
Each voice is different.
This one has lost all interest,
another is urgent, though a little off-key,
while a third, far off,
has remembered to sound eschatological.
In the silence after
I go sleepwalking
from the verandah to my wash-basin.
Then my ablutions are more than ritual,
as my fingers flow with the water
and I deliver my eyes and ankles.
In prayer my locket jingles
every time
I press my forehead
to the floor
sensing the sounds
I utter
more
than I experience them.

IN THE MUSEUM AT TAXILA

A tree-ringed
hush contains
them: friezes,
statues, heads

in schist or terracotta,
exhumed
for our pleasure.
Choric reliefs—

self-absorbed figures—
proffer
a history not ours
nor theirs

whose mounds
yawn
at all weathers:
throngs of attendants

hangers-on
who now only in stone
reach hungrily
for their Buddhas.

These, true to type,
sit facing us
eyes closed, lips
almost parted

in meditation, their inner
light beamed back at them
or passing into a beyond:
suffering no diminution.

KHYBER

The fort still stands.
In a phalanx, one by one,
the invasions
are recorded in marble.

Known, resonant names:
Tamerlane, Skylax.
Almost with gratitude
we say them

as if they redeemed
us or a stake
in the past
could somehow allay its terrors.

Yet what we find here
are not just
vulnerable valley, pass,
but signs.

of an unyielding:
each house with its own
turret, walls scuttled for guns;
rough hands, guarded looks:

eyes obliged to heed
spectres: mouldering
pickets—derelicts of the Empire—
quite at home on these hills.

SALVADOR DALI AT THE TATE

Dali,
you move adroitly
through the livid greens
and Prussian blues of the mind
with mask and scalpel.
And carve
image upon scabrous image;
the frozen beef of senility,
the swabs you left behind
in somebody's stomach;
or the distended, predatory eye.
Cerebral perhaps beneath the horseplay,
yet each image persists.
Caught in the dreamglare,
they protest
the red herring
of Narcissus
in the truer
anthropoid.

LANDSCAPE I BY LEILA SHAHZADA

You have preserved
only what is essential: crags,
dun, flint-grey,
with a crevice between them.

Rising in the foreground
they scale a molten sky
where, announced by the hint of a moon
and sun cratered behind cloud,

by shifting hues and pale effusions of light,
day mutates into dusk.
But what are these faces
that peer out of the rock

or this rain of jewels
falling down the rock-face?
Who are the king and queen
imprisoned here

and eyeing, a little sadly,
the slow cascade of topaz, aquamarine,
ruby, amethyst
and lapis?

Imagination's spendthrifts
locked fast in a dream:
of a rain that never fell,
a kingdom that never was.

LANDSCAPE II BY LEILA SHAHZADA

A vegetable peace
pervades the scene.
Lavender, leek-coloured,
boulders (or are they shrubs?)

crowding the base of the canvas
drowse in the first
nuzzling light of day.
In the distance beyond them

around igneous red mountains
dawn is seen breaking.
Here the sky is still dark: deep
indigo shading to gentian.

This from close to.
Yet stand off a bit
and by chance or perspective
the sky seems to light up

a scree quite else; stark
throbbing rocks,
rocks in retreat,
the vast postnecine sleep of fractious gods.

REQUIEM

*for Leila Shahzada who died, tragically, of third degree
burns in July 1994*

A habit made of pain, slow death.
Her homecoming for once
became a mockery, a sleight-
of-hand of chance

to ease us and her.
We concede the interim.
She was drawn where
an awesome candour loomed:

a world ignited,
sudden burgeoning of glass,
of blood: the bright
flower that sprang from her holocaust.

THE DEATH OF MRS GANDHI

*A*avatar, borne to your rest,
your pyre liberally lit,
Vedic spells chanted,
the abacus of red and white

roses on your hearse
in one breath
snapped off. While Jumna waited
you made your smallest

yet surest of journeys—
just as when
on that last October morning
behind its fat-leafed hedge

time paused
letting you walk the few
short steps to where
in a circle of sun

you were honeycombed with bullets.
Scintillae of blood: rich spoor
of the elect: a retake
of the auspices on lush, whisperless grass.

THE LAST PATRIARCH

Late July. The sun has set.
You lean against the bruised
horizon, a peeling balustrade.
You are hooded with clouds

which wrap themselves around you,
busily. That flag—it is
the hand of the murdered queen
unfurling its fluid ultimatum.

It is your mind abroad
on gestures of passivity.
Those men below with arched
backs and spiky fingers—

speak to them: they are
waiting for you to speak
to them for the last time.
Their eyes are blank

obscenities. That gaping socket.
Blindness? No. It is the muzzle
of a tank they aim at you.
You are my dummy

out there smiling at them.
Their hate is ponderous
and still. Old fashioned lead.
Now they have scuttled your head.

Out of the wounds the dark blood runs
like a plum. You and I
lost in a photo finish. Dead dove, numb Christ,
will you fall as confetti when snow falls?

FOR SREBRENICA'S DEAD

Casualties of a somnolence,
you died
outside time,
your obsequies terse,

your graves a welter
of docile forms.
indifferent as they
who made them.

Today, that
murky bravura
recounted (no
detail too gross)

vouchsafes you
a name, a home.
While you, from deep chutes,
are brought up to air,

at last, with your
dressed taint—like
plankton, new-landed
and unblinking in the sun.

CALVARY MISUNDERSTOOD

*for Mir Murtaza Bhutto, brother of Benazir Bhutto, who
was gunned down outside his home on 20 September 1996*

*M*artyr to no known cause
(fumbling rebel, vague ideologue)
you went up no hill
but down a road

without a gradient—
deep, deep
into an inimical wood
dense with the shuddering

girths of guns. And there,
faith in your name's
talisman holding,
fondly stood your ground:

discovering, later—
when the rabid bullets flew—
that from the place, noiselessly,
all of the tutelary gods had departed.

CAR MIRRORS—PAKISTAN 1996

Wind. Crows adrift.
The cold crusading
gaze of kites
coming

low—too low—
their thud
on windshield or fender
only a brief

damping of purpose.
And no rain.
Rather, an aftertaste of it:
opaline windows

set in a grey sky
near sun-pierced cloud
with palms flailing hopefully,
lignums bobbing.

An idyll our car mirrors
bisect—a mere reprieve—
viewed as if from the last bogey
of a train, lengthening as it recedes.

HILL STATION

*H*ad I but looked for them
they'd have been there—
cloud cumuli, mustiness,
grass limp, unkempt—

a northern town's
set portents of rain
affirmed later
if only by a mizzling.

And the wailing of a saw
which never stayed
the dread code of its hammer
or the fresh shavings

of wood on which sat,
unabsorbed, globules of water
in a carpenter's shop
dark as a smithy.

This, and more, would return
from a past best let pass:
of bleak hotel windows
and slovenly hills.

THE MUSIC LEAVES ANTONY

*I*t was a maritime tryst,
the occasion of algae
and bilge: a muddied
iridescence.

The languors of Egypt
stole into him
with the licence
of soldiery:

carousals beckoned,
their genial fires
at large
beneath the palms.

Impelled (if still not
hamstrung) by love
he sought respite
from conquest.

And would have
reneged on war
but for the humming
inside him,

a resonance barely
heard above love's
tumult. Or heard
receding. Oboe

and viol and systolic
drum put to flight
one evening past
a vigil of soldiers

till he awoke
to find, before Actium,
his courage—Hercules'
finetuned engines—gone.

LATTICE

Winter light
defined by shadow
of window-grills
and wicker

and dapple
of swaying leaves
strays
across my carpet.

Forgotten
its journey
through trees,
its descent

from between an explosion
of a gaggle
of birds
in slow motion—

glint of feather,
wing, parting
(a crepitation
heard lingeringly)—

to where it rests
now, pale,
pensive, askew.
And dreams

of afternoons
when it lay
just so, wondering
and wondered at,

heedless
of the legerdemain,
the deft
Ahrimanic hand

with fateful brush
and tar
poised
to erase it.

LATE SUN

*A*round grass
sweetpeas, buds
like larvae
clambering up stalks.

And, set back from them,
screened by fronds
of palm, juniper,
a mosque.

From where they come,
the old men,
anxiously clad
in waistcoats or jumpers

to stand,
sit bolt upright
on stone benches
and stare wistfully

past the yellow,
carmine and white
of the flowers
as they talk.

Tones, thin, archaic,
carry to us,
lost emphases
rise, trail off:

the testament
of such as,
misty-eyed,
grant their own limits.

Still, charmed
out of hiding,
part brownie, leprechaun,
our serene if hobbling

sires gather here
each day
for a late sun
and air and breezes

off a pepper tree
and the rubatos
of children—
and the later call to prayer.

THE TUBE

I shadow him through subways,
intricately.
He escapes before me, driven by the wind
that blows through corridors and halls
and hollow spaces.

Darkly, in some derelict tunnel, I listen
to the drumming of feet. I vacillate
before a piece of paper
that has been volatile for centuries.
It licks me idly, rustling, and is gone.

I listen. And I wait.

At last I find him
like an errant limb amidst a crowd.
I try to catch him.
He breaks away, then waves
sardonically.
At length he disappears.
Zigzagging, I follow him again.

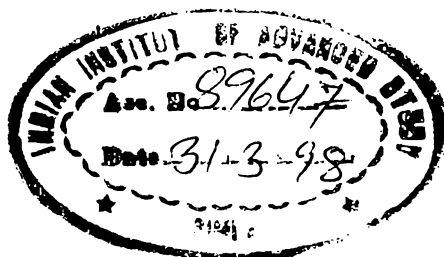
O how can I forget the vagary of years
on escalators, the oblique
colloquy between heaven and hell,
and, on the railings, those hands:
thin, purposeless?

I have often wondered if those hands are mine.

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Desert Album is a beautiful and moving volume, and I fancy that I can see an unexpected and happy marriage in it of English verse traditions—that of the Elizabethans especially—and the noble and ancient traditions and themes of Arabic poetry. Whether that is so or not, the poems of *Desert Album* certainly are remarkable in their freshness, their vividness, and their originality.

Adrian Husain has a marvellous feeling for language and the phrase that illuminates. Many of these poems are real gems of observation and perception, that make us feel the reality of the world he writes about. I shall look forward with great interest to his next collection.

Dr John Bayley

St Catherine's College
Oxford

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