Poetry from Pakistan

Alamgir Hashmi

A Choice of Hashmi's Verse

The Jubilee Series

50

1947–1997
50 Years of Pakistan

OXFORD

A CHOICE OF HASHMI'S VERSE

A CHOICE OF HASHMI'S VERSE

ALAMGIR HASHMI

Karachi
Oxford University Press
Oxford New York Delhi
1997

Oxford University Press, Walton Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

Oxford New York
Athens Auckland Bangkok Bombay
Calcutta Cape Town Dar es Salaam Delhi
Florence Hong Kong Istanbul Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madras Madrid Melbourne
Mexico City Nairobi Paris Singapore
Taipei Tokyo Toronto
and associated companies in
Berlin Ibadan

Oxford is a trade mark of Oxford University Press

ISBN 0 19 577813 8

These poems have previously appeared in the following volumes by Alamgir Hashmi: *The Oath and Amen*, 1976, *America Is a Punjabi Word*, 1979, *My Second in Kentucky*, 1981, *This Time in Lahore*, 1983, *Neither This Time/Nor That Place*, 1984, *Inland and Other Poems*, 1988, and *Sun and Moon and Other Poems* (1992). Acknowledgements are also due to National Book Foundation, Islamabad, and Indus Books, Islamabad.

Editorial Consultant
Adrian A. Husain

Printed in Pakistan at
ELITE PUBLISHERS LIMITED
Published by
Ameena Saiyid, Oxford University Press
5-Bangalore Town, Sharae Faisal
P.O. Box 13033, Karachi-75350, Pakistan.

PREFACE

Ken Goodwin

This volume will undoubtedly help to make the poetry of Alamgir Hashmi better known—as it deserves to be. His work has been much praised by eminent poets throughout the world, including Richard Wilbur, Karl Shapiro, Anthony Hecht, Ahmed Ali, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Ted Hughes, and Les Murray. It has appeared in literary journals and anthologies in the English-speaking world. It has been admired by writers and scholars in several countries. The author has given many public readings and has edited well-known journals. He has been the recipient of a number of significant prizes. He is acknowledged as Pakistan's foremost poet. But Hashmi's work has not yet been able to free itself from the comfortable response in some places that it is 'promising'. Recognition of its genuinely high quality has been deferred.

Publication of the retrospective collection, *The Poems of Alamgir Hashmi*,[1] and now of this selected volume, will enable serious critics and lovers of poetry to revise their opinion of his status. He will be seen, in mid-career, as a major world poet.

To aspire to that status, a writer must either demonstrate high mastery of existing poetic conventions or be excitingly innovative. Alamgir Hashmi has achieved both—in terms of content as well as form.

1 *The Poems of Alamgir Hashmi*, National Book Foundation, Islamabad, 1992.

Hashmi is a cosmopolitan writer, educated in Pakistan and the United States, but one who is equally at home in Europe. Yet one can never dissociate his work from his homeland. If his poems evince aquaintance with the tradition of poetry in English—with metaphysical wit as much as with modernist appropriations of disparate material—they also reveal an author familiar and comfortable with the tradition embedded in the *ghazal* and the *qasida*. Hashmi's poetry is supple and sinuous, forever weaving its way between a readily accessible frontal meaning and a more or less covert symbolic and mystical meaning.

These poems have been selected from the nine volumes of poetry already published in England, the United States, and Pakistan and from a yet-unpublished volume. The emphasis in A *Choice of Hashmi's Verse* is towards the middle and later periods of his work.

The selection begins with fifteen poems from *Neither This Time/Nor That Place*.[2] Immediately we find ourselves in a world of imagining and dream. These are poems that proceed from an unfettered mind with only occasional promptings afforded by the tangible and sensuous world. This is a world of 'maybe', of 'rumour', of 'feignings', of uncertain beginnings and subjunctive moods. Although 'magic realism' is the term often used about speculative and mysterious twentieth century fiction, we may be certain that Hashmi's magic realism stems from a much older, indigenous tradition of verse. It seems often on the verge of revelation, though Hashmi is too practised a poet to make explicit anything but the conditions of revelation. That would destroy the magic.

This is a world where time does not run on an orderly uni-directional track. The conventional distinctions of past, present, and future have no purchase on these events, whether mental or non-mental. This is a

2 *Neither This Time/Nor That Place*, Vision Press, Lahore and London, 1984.

disorderly, unpredictable world, where expectation, hope, and disappointment all seem equally likely.

Or, at any rate, that is the poet's perception, that is all that is apparent to him. If there is an unseen order it is not readily available for comprehension. His perceived world, in the wittily entitled *A Gift Horse*, is full of contradictions: love and neglect; hard and soft; beginnings and ends, none of which will provide the poet with meaning. The short lines, so often an impending disaster in verse, are here handled with unfailing sureness of touch.

Despite the emphasis on interior rather than spoken monologue, Hashmi simultaneously creates an unmistakable sense of the exterior world, whether in Lahore or elsewhere in Pakistan or in North America or Europe. In Lahore, children play or bathe, clothes are washed, oxcarts lose their loads. In Louisville, Kentucky, the heat and humidity of summer are evident in the poetry. Other encounters provide an almost tangible sense of situation if not of exact location. But always the involvement is with what the mind sees and interprets rather than merely with what the senses experience. Like the imagist poems, from which it is in part derived, this is poetry where the eye looks through and beyond the image to the cognitive and emotional complex that the image suggests. Even a photograph (of Anna and Kirsten) suggests other places, other ideas, other communications than the simple image that the camera has recorded.

The following five poems, from *Lahore: In Spring* onwards, are reprinted from the 1988 volume *Inland and Other Poems*.[3] On the surface they concern the seasons and natural scenery. The experiences are, as in most of Hashmi's poetry, those of a city or suburban dweller: this is nature and the change of the seasons observed in an ambience of streets and dwellings; there is nothing

3 *Inland and Other Poems*, Gulmohar Press, Islamabad, 1988.

primitive or rugged about it. That is entirely appropriate as an index of the inner life of these poems. They move through the quizzically self-observed filiations of a mind wondering at the endless possibilites, the multiple pathways of thought and life. This is poetry full of 'as ifs', 'suggestions', and 'guesswork', of the imagination touching base from time to time in the visible, experiential world.

This is the very point made in *Looking at the Garden.* The poet, looking at the garden (probably through a window), thinks first that he sees butterflies fluttering across a garden trellis. When someone uses the words 'sweet peas' he knows that they are actually flowers. But that does not prevent him from continuing to think of them as both flowers and butterflies. The actuality of the real, non-mental world is merely a starting point for a meditation on the mind, distance and the changes produced by time.

The elegy, *Jahangir, 1954-1986,* is one of Hashmi's most condensed uses of the technique of passage from the exterior to an interior world. The sense of loss is created in the first line: there is, in the graveyard, 'No sound', though there are birds flying about. This is 'Not the season' that might evoke fond memories of past times spent in Jahangir's company. Even the spring flowers 'fall to the graves'. The outer world is thus bent to the will and the current feelings of the poet.

The 1981 volume, *My Second in Kentucky,*[4] provides six poems, beginning with *Encounter with the Sirens: An Epic Poem in Miniature.* Just as nature provides only an occasional and transient rather than a controlling reference point in many of Hashmi's poems, so does the literary inheritance of the past. For Hashmi it provides material to be transformed rather than slavishly followed. In the *Odyssey,* Ulysses thwarts the seductive song of the

4 *My Second in Kentucky,* Vision Press, Lahore, 1981.

sirens by stopping the ears of his men with wax and having himself, with unstopped ears, bound to the mast. He is thus the only one to hear the irresistible song, but is prevented from succumbing to it. In *Encounter with the Sirens*, Hashmi has the super-confident Ulysses protected both by ear-plugs and chains. But the sirens do not sing to anyone. Instead, they appear to Ulysses to mouth some words. But the truth is that they are using '...a weapon more/fatal than song...' Their silence is a refusal to reveal their secrets, and the cocksure Ulysses is unaware that he is deluded and has denied himself an illumination available through silence. It is a powerful image of a particular kind of worldly and spiritual experience.

This Rain and *Khyber Pass 1980*, from the 1983 volume, *This Time in Lahore*,[5] are two poems which are clearly about the writing of poems. One is a delicate, understated love poem, the other a witty, sustained metaphor for the achievement of a poem.

With *Others to Sport with Amaryllis in the Shade* we come to eight more recent poems first published in *Sun and Moon and Other Poems*.[6] The first of them is a long meditation on imagination and creativity, taking as its starting point a black-and-white drawing by Vincent Van Gogh, produced at Arles in 1888. The poem is in the form of an interior dramatic monologue by the painter, musing on how his art can transform nature.

The other poems from this volume constitute a group in which political references are entwined with personal experience, particularly of love. Hashmi is not overtly a political poet. His is poetry which portrays inner experience, prompted (but not controlled) by outward events. But this sequence indicates his awareness of major political and social events and how they impinge on personal consciousness. In this vein, there are references to the pulling down of the Berlin Wall, the Gulf War, Mrs

5 *This Time in Lahore*, Vision Press, Lahore and London, 1983.

6 *Sun and Moon and Other Poems*, Indus Books, Islamabad, 1992.

Thatcher as prime minister of the United Kingdom, the continuing state of warfare in the eastern Mediterranean, a severe earthquake in the far north of Pakistan, and the censorship of mail.

Here is Hashmi's maturest poetry. The love expressed and hinted at is not of the crassly-assumed 'eternal' kind; it is recognized as almost certainly evanescent: it is on the point of blossoming or dying. The closing lines of several of the poems are significant: '...love that is gone', 'it's possible, after all, perhaps', 'I must write' (a promise to oneself that may or may not be kept), or '...does not talk'.

Parts of the title poem of the 1979 volume, *America Is a Punjabi Word*,[7] provide the fourth-last poem in this selection. If nostalgia is ever an appropriate word for Hashmi's poetry—and the poetry is always too sharp-edged to make it an entirely satisfactory term—this might be thought of as a nostalgic sequence. The images are of the United States, but the mind is clearly back in Pakistan. The American images are not cruelly satirical, but they are seen through the mind of a tourist or temporary visitor, whose frame of reference is both elsewhere and more deeply felt.

The selection ends with a piece from *Voyage East*,[8] a long poem written between 1992 and 1996. Hashmi writes here a more directly and consistently historical poem than can be found in his earlier work. The time is sequel to that of Genghis Khan, a period in which the Persian *ghazal* flourished. In a journey reminiscent in some ways of T.S. Eliot's *Journey of the Magi*, the traveller comes by hard stages from north of the Caspian Sea through modern Uzbekistan, south-west into the north-east of modern Iran and into northern Afghanistan, then southward towards Lahore and on to Delhi to meet the

7 *America Is a Punjabi Word*, Karakorum Range, Lahore, 1979; Limmat Editions, Zurich, 1979.

8 Unpublished volume.

Sultan. It is a meandering journey, representative of many forays in both earlier and later history. It contains several hints of danger and cruelty. But the mind thinking this interior dramatic monologue seems serene, constantly absorbed by the changing landscape and adventures. The poetic persona thanks God for preserving him, and once in India begins to pine for his home country. Despite the gap in time and place, the poem can be read as a metaphor for Hashmi's own inner life.

This meandering voyage forms an appropriate ending to this small selection from Hashmi's work to date. It looks backward to the calmly accepted uncertainties of the earlier poems and forward to the new volume, *Voyage East*. The reader who follows Hashmi through this selection will be rewarded constantly by the evidence of a thoughtful and imaginative mind expressing itself in beautifully paced verse.

CONTENTS

GAME AND SUCH

It may have been a Monday morning.
My path in the woods
was the clear voice of the quail,
where none was heard before.
There were others, of course, playfully
breaking lithe branches from the sheshams
of this unheard-of wood,
whose green fell after.
Someone's faltering step hissed all the way,
so that no bird would slip a feather,
while I had hardly begun to call.
Autumnal, though fresh,
the trails became dense,
rumours patterned the leaf-fringe
with certain blue flowers of fine fascination,
and yellow, pale, famished animals
who ate only blue;
even a cactus there
feigned a flower or two.
I had no one by me
to whisper the anticipation,
to say, Yes, now I have seen one,
when I had seen;
but that was just as well.
I took my hand in my own hand
and—waiting for the wind to start—
followed in the way the trees inclined.

REMEMBRANCE

Lanterns were lighted.
Son in one arm
she stood in the past village,
believing like a child:

light
is
where one finds it.
That is how I think of her now.

That is how three nights ago,
blunted in fog,
I saw the greying marble
of her ankles.

A GIFT HORSE

Somebody must have
given it to someone;
only gifts and toys
can suffer

such love, such neglect,
soaked
in the wetness
of this lawn.

Cloth, or perhaps wood,
it is only that.
The hard and soft
is all the same.

Its owner,
the child, must be
asleep or have
found something else.

I am unable
to make out
its beginnings
or end exactly:

the eyes are a bleary
black;
the mouth seems sealed
airtight

as if to lock out
a couple of proverbs.
I do not think
it will speak.

SUMMER BY THE F. C. CANAL

It is slow,
but once it is here
is hard to keep pace with;
anonymity is the farthest

thing from it. A filthy
word in a filthy week
is the measurement
of summertime

in this poem—
take it or leave it.
I had hoped to offer you
something else. The images

I had kept watered and
tended this past spring all
lie scorched in the garden,
and I have given it up.

Since it is the anecdote
of time, any simile
would be untimely
in this monocracy of the sun.

Perhaps I should talk
of melon rinds
thrown on these banks
as ordinary skulls

filled with hay slogans?
Images. Images.
Children are playing in
their own dark hides. They

seem to know here the delicacy
of skin is not valid.
They are in water
up to the navel and splashing.

Upstream, behind the big tree
someone is
hiding the naked body.
I shall not look;

it is obvious.
The wooden club rises. The clothes
on the stone are clean.
There's no one in them. Is there?

POEM OF THE ROAD

From my house,
this ordinary day of June
I walked off to the road.

Then an errand got me
into a rickety rickshaw of Lahore,
such as keeps you aloft

over the seat,
and the bump is where you stay.
It blew its horn on Multan Road.

An oxcart in the front seemed
to carry a hill. It stopped with a
jerk that pushed its back

up to a vulgar height.
The rock was falling.
The cartdriver shouted.

Luckily,
no Urdu or Punjabi poet was there:
one would say

it must be a heart breaking,
the other will impugn
the load he tried to pull.

People had gathered
to see how the wise ox
had cleansed himself

a second before.
An eyewitness account followed
for latecomers to the sight: how,

my God, how a second before
his shit went a plop
on Multan Road.

When I got closer,
his long head lay on the bent knees,
his mouth in the dust;

he was hard to know
in that animal's
genuflection.

EPHEMERAL VERITIES

Lightning scissors the blue chintz
above. The wind, chainless in June,
slaps the blank walls of the house

you live in, and the trees sway
their heavy heads consenting. What
wonder if it begins to rain?

Well, it all blew over,
the cloud, the leaf, the light—
if you are still awaiting the monsoon.

IROQUOIS PARK 1980

This is the wood, greener
than an old sock, as only the eye
may remember; the leaves—
a thousand curly tongues a day—somnolent,
smooth into sleep.
The rest, between Louisville
and the quite low heaven, is fog.
I break a leaf,
and the whole wood speaks with one voice.
What I have done, forgive me;
I am not God to dare a resounding jungle—
the lightning may never flash for me,
nor please in my behalf the thunder.
I can make do in the timid carlight.
Must love fumble over this night-foliage
for meanings?
Words dutifully peck the silence.
Along the hedgerows,
bullfrogs imitating summer sounds leap.

SOUTHERN PARKWAY

He knows misfortune
as well as his name.
A red traffic light
can mean an eternal
stop. Even birds comply,
cellophaned in the fog.

On the wheel, he would
like to chew the jewelled
head of a fly.
Blow the horn: lucid again,
even birds comply.

BINOCULARS AFTER SUNSET

Lamplight was simply
a description
of sleepless
detail
luminous
in a narrow corner
of the room,
a woman's body
folding a man neatly
like a love-letter,
which I tried
to read,
out by a wall
in the garden,
shivering
like the first light,
in October.

NIGHT TRAIN

Seated alone,
I smoke all the way—
as if I had lost track,
was on fire, or in love.

Well, yes, I am in love,
hopelessly. Have read the
newspaper, and anyway,
any news is too late.

No one looks out,
the time is such. After
the bright lights of
proper stops,

the windowglass politely
returns everyone
to his place, like a
hostess. The dark outside

gathers like paint.
Suddenly young voices
bloom in the barren aisle.
They are now framed

with me beautifully:
full two hallucinogenic
women I could inhale
for the next twenty years,

as often and deep
as possible, and honestly,
may even miss
my station for.

WEEKEND

Reading a book
about Victorian stained glass,
occasionally
she looks out the snow-specked
window. From a chair's distance,
such as mine, in the tangled
air of the living-room—
with hardly a TV on,
her dark hair
rubs eyes with
the white heat of winter.

But she is not knitting.

She is imagining a summer lawn
sprinkled with colours.

Her hands are still.

Clocked, time wonders and passes.

The day gets dark against the pane.
She sleeps; her hair smoothed
by fingers of changing light.

IN A LIGHTER VEIN

I

I have long followed winding rivers
to nowhere, birds that
do not sing, bushes
without names or flowers to toss;
those winds that stand
and twist on you
interrogative.

With a new postal address, each
year brings a fresh childhood window
from which to peer
into the street,
wave and smile to
upon recognition.

II

Usually I sit by my cup of tea—
and talk to myself
by talking to my wife.

The doorbell.
But we don't really live here.

III

I have worked out the equivalents:
it's five rupees to a franc,
or five hundred tongas to the tram.
Yet no horsepiss.
The place is too clean
to have emotions.

IV

If that absence is the jacaranda,
what must *this* here be?
Not the civil riot of gulmohars,
not oleanders, not mimosas.
Springs,
as you come yearly like a wrecking
crew, not leaving behind
visiting cards,
is this polite?

V

No land but love be one's true country.
The Six o'Clock News differs vehemently.
As I recite my Holy Writ,
my wife begins to knit.
I say, Honey, please take heart;
we are aliens here,
it's only a start.

KARACHI STOP-OVER

The man's arm swings in the air
like a whip.

I see the air bleed;
I hear it cry and shout for help.

This crack of bone and tear
of flesh that pain receives

as tribute to its power,
must rule here.

I seek its face, among faces
lean, aloof,

now lost suddenly like a summer
splash on a green lawn.

I say, 'Friend, are you here?'

A petty criminal, they say,
who's out in tropical heat

and must prove someone's idea
of justice.

There's no forgetting.
Pain, for your subtle face

this country's the definition.
My luggage in the taxi sweats.

The airport is empty,
its planes gone to pray till 4

p.m., while bombs
in the lockers snore.

Not even a visit by God
will change it.

ANNA AND KIRSTEN: A PHOTOGRAPH

I see it often, with these two
whom only a shade of light separates.
One is wearing stripes.
The film appears innocent
of the scenery of their presence,
shy of the colour, but they can be seen
just one way;
as they look one way ahead
to someone perhaps asking in the middle
of London, 'When is the next boat to Bombay?'
Their lips open simply
to the question. The notepad in hand
seems to understand
and turns white. In the lower left,
a man's dark head is make-believe.
And as they speak, I think they speak to me.

BAHAWALPURLOG

Indoors, all winter long, tea
is served day and night.
There are poems to keep you company,
and friends who care.
Heavens, heavens! I say.
The evenings are a shade blue. Yellow flowers
fill the patchy lack of green.
You often spot a black heifer in the bright
cottonfields, a soldier appears in
battle-black, a child cries.
The tamarinds guard the walks
and seem to listen,
their fruit dangling
like African earrings.
I shake one by its trunk,
but hardly a sparrow flies
out of it.

LAHORE: IN SPRING

Here's that bush
which has all Lahore aglitter
with acacias. In March, time
begins to find small decorations
for itself, seasoning its winter habits
to a new mildness.
The diagonal light comes down kindly,
filtering as if through leaves
which the spring has yet to hang
on our northern trees—
the floral cotton of curtains
in an urban living-room.
There is a flutter in the slightest
suggestion of a breeze.
Each sun-dappled street of the city
confabulates a picture
at the other end of a long look.
The guesswork future of its formal gardens
only God knows—
But for now the sunlight climbs
along the trellis (its silverskin
surface returning the gaze) and acacias
bloom where the thought is.

LOOKING AT THE GARDEN

I

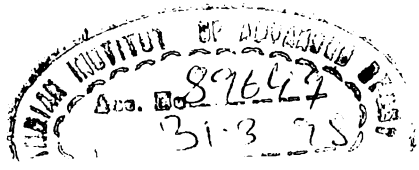
I think they are violet, green, white
butterflies which flutter across
the reedwork trellis in the garden.
Someone says *sweet peas*;
they stop fluttering. Anyway,
I am closer to the flowers now.

II

That was one way of repudiating
distance. Not peas, the butterflies hover.
I could have pointed from behind
any window to the garden outside
which had the distance gathered to itself,
with things fluttering across.

III

I am standing—not like the hours
back there—where the house garden
is proposed. The earth
is moist with rain and a readiness.
Names not named, but the flowers will flower.
New grass is to grow under my feet.



JAHANGIR
1954-1986

No sound
but
birds
darting from tree
to tree.
Not the season
that I can think of
in any loving connection.
Too much lightness
of the air,

too many figures
of loss.
Spring flowers swing and fall
to the graves naturally.
I am reading your name.

HOW TO SAY GOODBYE

It proposes itself
in so many ways
to the soul riveted
to autumn's fading bough:
love is what you can't
live with,
and keep trying
to get back to;
green changing back
to green in the tint
of intervals.
Its tones are final,
habitual, and fussy.
There may be a thing
or two to think over.
There is love, for instance,
and a road-blocked city
with unreal sanctions.
I must be the fated tree
which must step out
of the rain-forest,
shedding first
the rainwater from its veins,
hair, and eyes.

INLAND

West Aliquippa, Pennsylvania,
is said to be
the only inland town in the US
that can be entered or left
in just one direction.
So that going in

and out of is all one thing,
a quality of feeling;
with the scenery first going
backwards, then forwards.

ENCOUNTER WITH THE SIRENS

an epic poem in miniature

BOOK I

Ulysses stopped his ears
with wax and had himself bound
to the mast of the ship,
though it was known to the world
that such things were of no help.

The song of the Sirens could pierce
through everything, and the longing
of those they seduced
would have broken far stronger bonds
than chains and masts.

But Ulysses trusted absolutely
the handful of wax and his fathom
of chain, and in innocent elation
over his little stratagem
sailed out to meet the Sirens.

BOOK II

Now the Sirens have a weapon more
fatal than song. And though such a thing
has never happened, someone might possibly
have escaped their singing; but
from their silence never.
When Ulysses approached them,
the potent songstresses did not care
to sing. Surprised no doubt
they were by the bliss on his face,
thinking of nothing but his wax, and his chains.

BOOK III

Ulysses could not hear their silence,
and thought he alone did not hear them.
When for a fleeting moment he saw
their throats rising and falling,
their breasts lifting,

their eyes in tears,
and their lips half parted,
he believed
they were accompaniments to the air
which died unheard around him.

CODICIL

So waving to them,
triumphantly he turned and sailed on.

LOOKING NORTH

Tibet reads in Urdu
like tit:
pebbles and palindromes

are soft in the hills
below the world's
plateau. Elsewhere,

for instance Karachi,
that sits on the sea
like a paperweight,

sand finds the
sandways,
a sola hat hooded on

a tropical phrase.
The clock strikes noon
cork-dry; to the sun's

logic, heat alone
is the answer.
The radio palms bear

the news of the north,
where Marco Polo sheep
are grazing away

the tops of our mountains.
And an occasional rain
washes the news away.

ROAD TO ISLAMABAD

Entering this cleavage of mountains
means lights
would spark off in the valley,
and the dark close
in terminal relief; the
serpentine measures
of a back-glance
back
may light up the lost moon
miles away.
Shadows
take the blurring.
I had a mind for that livid colony.
Behind these dead rocks,
there
is one
whose kisses are still
salt and sweet in my mouth.
Primitive,
my heart smoulders
like the roadmender
between two stones burning
his lonely fire.

RAIN AT MIDNIGHT

A drop
and the town

surprised
to a midnight laving

and pavements
softened

as in a woman's
armpit

those
asleep in care

shelve the night
so

to warble
like an impulsive

flight of leaves
in rain

GRANDMOTHER

I know when your children stranded you
and went out to live by themselves
you preferred to stop breathing.
Then everyone came to pay homage
and carry you like a bride
        where your husband lay
as if you would make a family there too.

I came back two days after I saw you;
you were wrapped in a white sheet, starched,
my mother weighing a dark blanket on you
        that you could not lift;
so cold when all you wanted to meet surrounded you.

Last summer when you sent for me
I even forgot
that you would prepare sweet rice
if I stayed with you.
I did not remember
that you were old
and might not visit us again—
like my uncle who could not survive
an overdose of bullets
in the Great War.

Not long ago I learnt
it was not a mere bedtime story,
my mother's love for her brother
before I was born.

I cannot make you another such myth.
They have sealed you in that wooden box
and imprisoned you in brick walls
lest you flee that distant shrine
where they plan to congregate each year.

THEN

Then we called it love.
The ancient slang
had its worth yet;
the tiros were told
to hold off the invention
of grief, or doting,

or whatever.
A wall of time
has since
sounded out the distance
of meaning from the sound
of familiar feet

as pulp separate
from the bark of a tree.
There were eyes once.
They are closed.
I wonder
what I should sow next.

THIS RAIN

This rain
comes much too soon
for the trees
along the walk;
a leaf-serrated
autumn
that comes and goes,
comes again.
I have failed
with words before,
as love's seasons
rarely agree
with the weather,
but this your quiet
and the cold bank
of the river
we stand on
are poems in the flow.

KHYBER PASS 1980

I came within shooting
range of a poem
hours ago,

with a steely palm
feeling
the metal of hate,

that cocksure finger
indexed
on the trigger;

a line-drawing nicety
to give the
enemy time.

An occasion I thought
I didn't press
the issue,

though I heard a first
shot. I ducked,
as in the pictures.

'Coward, eh?'
It had a dirty laugh
atop the Hindu Kush

and let me off.

OTHERS TO SPORT WITH AMARYLLIS IN THE SHADE

Jardin de Fleurs *(1888) sold at Christie's, New York, for $8.36 million in November, 1990*

The fleshy roots grow, ornamental,
under glass in the spring; in the summer,
long, slender leaves. Like a lily,
the funnel-shaped flower clusters on the stem:
red, white, striped in the white.
Without the white light of the tropics,
without America's deep shade.

It hasn't arrived from walled-up Europe either,
wafted by the winds, to stand singly
horizontal at the top of the stem;
a trumpet narcissus within bluish-green leaves,
which suck up the right poison from its bulb
and are splayed bright in the sun.
The petals and sepals, three each,
fuse into one and flare out again
into segments of six, as if they were the first
months of the year, a semester with a frilled edge
established in March meadows; when the only course
of love is a flower growing from a flower.

Domiciled in the Middle Earth and hardy as its people,
this other is a common weed in Greece,
an erect, leafy stem to hold atop
the fragrant yellow or white all but unseen,
in the barren swamps of Delaware or Kutch.

That is the bog variety; or, then, false.
Stemless the signs begin in the eye's frame;
their tuberous underground to eat,
mourn, make it stick, and forget

the colours: how sweet
it's been.
At Arles, or here, I draw in ink—
in dots, whorls, flicks, dashes, and lines—
to save friend and brother the cost of paint
and canvas: this house, the bedroom and the chair,
the coffee-place round the corner,
the railway station that the fields advertise
for one to almost live here, not go.
What can this piece of paper do; imagine?

ON HEARING THAT THE WALL IN BERLIN

has come down in part, I want
to acknowledge a little sentiment
about its coming down a bit
before going back up again
to keep those behind it on either side
clear about their attachments,
of the difficulty without it
to look across—
forty years of building; a political art
that divides the heart from your heart:
a little regret, a certain loss.
Maybe it's too late for some.
Even dying were easier than some divisions—
when the holes made into the future
hold no light; even driving out at dawn
it is dark in your particular lane.
Now we can think of the walls that remain;
recess in the brick-work, love that is gone.

WITHOUT A TITLE

From its sheer absence
from the desert land and scrub
we infer all likelihoods;
of that anguished flower not seen
but desired endlessly.
It just may—
it could well blossom
round the far hill, over there.
People around me
tell me it is not known to be;
only daydreamers mumble like that—
perhaps, as if, if only, just as well.

And it happens out there when it happens.
The vases in the living-room must wait.
The news would flash in
like a bough dancing in the wind.

Watching the news I think to myself:
What is one to make of the real,
say, the ocean-blue doormat
to clean one's work-shoes on; this turbulence,
as colonial armies move again
into the Persian Gulf
and they all plan to burn down each other's cities.

I shuffle my feet only
to see it is not a field commander's map;
only the pattern of Persia in its namesake rug
where the lines are careful; the tree branches with birds
so delicate they shudder, not sing.
The Euphrates would change its colour yet again.
No sea-battles or camouflaged

affronts to the definite blue,
whose comfort now is the only comfort.

Or, there are the hardy summer flowers
which stick out the day's lightglass end.

Love, as you appear in the mind's eye,
I think despite—
it's possible, after all, perhaps.

AUNT SALMA,

who
embroidered stars
in the deep blue
shawls with gold
or silver thread
for my mother, my wife,
and herself, now so cold.

Who can say what is enough,
will make one a life
that is true
to itself, and fairly said?
She had lost a son,
raised a daughter and sewn
missing buttons on her husband's shirt

through moist glasses, during the loadshedding.
With a sense of humour, of course:
'Bespectacled women make prime
ministers; look how one has sewn up England.'
And a thing about men
that were all good words on a prayer-mat—
and would not raise the hat

to anything, or an eyebrow
to notice what has already changed
and cannot live in words alone.
Were it up to her,
she'd have twilled
the subjunctive city with crowding avenues of champac.
How then?

Crisp winter of expected patterns in the garden,
wherein each dab of colour
is to find its own leaf and branch
into the possible. You would have liked this.
The sky slowly tinged with a certain blue,
while a good woman rules the land
to a new habit of sure light.

The stars were some help.
But you not here to speak to,
I must write.

THE GAME CALLED TRIPOLY

First: The child's finger points to the shooting star.

Second: A heavenly body pilots itself to the horizon
and plummets, head first.
There, the engine and the wings are like cooked cabbage,
a cornfield after the locust is gone.
No one steps out; not even Icarus.

It remains to the dark susurration of the waters.

Third: Not exactly the silver emptiness;
for a bank would rise up wherever you'd look.
It is love I mean, not their toy guns, sawn off yearly,
which is so mediterranean—
the puddle always
between this earth and the other.

ADAM IN MITTELEUROPA

I can hardly hear what is said.
Your words are a blizzard
in the Alpine wasteland
I have here come across.
I am all alone, without a manual,
the hiker's hype, or his tent.
I was going somewhere else;
led up the garden path;
travelling light, with more
love in my rucksack
than sausages.
No one to call, from here;
nothing to reach out to,
except the chilled echo of a thought
I am sure was you.

It has passed,
for time is still not certain
and as well policed
as the spaces we must deal with.
Why bother with that would-be
garden spring already soiled
with Neanderthaler biochemical slick?
What can the sluggish inland
waters connect?
There are no seas to surge forward;
no kindly winds in which the cyclamen blows.
The sky has no stars;
it's a wintry flammable blue
borrowed for a day.
And that blasted apple-bough
has the computer's memory, but does not talk.

THE BODY AND LANGUAGE

If only the full moon could say it fully;
it declines here mid-sentence
to illumine what you said to me
in another town hundreds of miles away.
I have to put on my carlights
to see how the once-in-bloom jacarandas
row after row drop their mauve silently;
little birds in May nesting.

That is to say it's this makes me speak up
or at least write in the time of year,
in the same off-moonlight,
moving past as if into that same flower:
your body's scent this minute, this hour—

which can ease this city anytime
into an efflorescence of trees.

AS IS WHERE IS

I xerox my kisses and post them
weekly before they're cold.
She does likewise,
hoping the envelope will arrive
as addressed, the commerce thrive
without the censor and the local scold
catching this loop or that leery hem
still warm, life-like.

Public, we wear
love as lightly as possible
and celebrate the *laissez-faire*
when we're not short either
of passage or postage.
If we travel any wider,
we are shortchanged;
stay indoors for safety,
making the unseen flowers grow.

I say my passion for you will move the earth
—the dates nearer the desire.
(You have heard that one before?
Do lovers still replay old tapes for you?)
Your silent look stops the earth in its course.

I say my heart will break so.
Next day's papers write death across the page.
It's put to 6.8 on Mr Richter's scale—
and declared, all in all,
the epicentre was Upper Chitral.

AMERICA IS A PUNJABI WORD[1]

I

I was in New York.

I went up an
updated pyramid.

II

Might I be helped?
Could I rent a room here?

At the counter she sat,
a proper name
like a polished table:
'What do you mean?'

Dear lady,
do not ask me;
I am not your hieroglyph.

III

I was written in,
finally, and given
room.

The ceiling
was the sky,
its million
wallpaper stars
to presage action.

---

1 The corresponding numbers for the above sections in the original work are I, II, III, IV, VI, VII, X, XII, and XVIII respectively.

IV

I looked at the mirror
on the dressing-table:
a cloud was writing
out itself,
as I smoked.

It became a camel
freed from
a U-Haul cart
in Karachi;
its hump
the difficult curve
of the earth.

V

Banished into sleep,
I was sent out

of the city.
Names crowded
along the zigzag
trail;
spectators
whose eyes like
welcome-signs
soon become
speed-barriers:
Maryland, Virginia
for Lovers, Norfolk
unto the Navy, and
North Carolina
where all the
dogwoods grow.

VI

Other times, rain
washed over the leaves.
I went out walking,

picking out stars
from the street-puddles
of night.

Thus,
though I lost the minute,
I kept the time.

VII

It was a swift summer.

I rolled my tongue
round the ice-lolly

in purple shade
drip

before the leaves
came down again.

VIII

The first in Kentucky
was a buck-shot.

My second is in
    other time,

another place.

IX

From Redwoods
and the heavenly forests
that cover your north,
we emerged—the nomads—
in Vancouver,
glimpsing Chief Seattle's
timber town.

Ports are too olfactory,
offering fast dreams
of long voyages and
fresh salmon.
We avoided the more exotic
smells of the Indian Bazaar.
A few apricots,
and we turned east,
spitting stones.

WE KNOW DRY LIPS

We know dry lips
cracked
and eyes moistening with tenderness
tell us of love.

In chills we find hearths burning
within
and, sometimes,
our breath and chimney smoke

are alike for the sky. Tonight
voiceless it came down
like rain. My own soliloquy
wet on the bough.

In the mornings I meet you
on your terms as decisions go,
in mutual fog—
bluff a tactile song.

A REJUVENATION

Night suddenly looms
up from the grass underfoot
as we think
of our could-be-lost love.

Already, five nights have drained
the heat of five days,
soaking the lonely minutes
beating into our pulses.

Past the lamppost,
where light suspends
urgent wayfarers,
we stagger into the flower-beds.

Our looks fill in
the vacancy of eyes,
and night waits
on the stars falling in your hair.

FROM *VOYAGE EAST*[1]

Along the frozen Volga I chop ice
and melt it for my drinking-water;
put on three fur coats
and two pairs of trousers.
On my feet
I have on woollen boots
over a pair of boots quilted
with linen cloth on top of them,
and on top of these again
a pair of horsehide boots
lined with bearskin—
so I have to be lifted
onto the horse.
I ride to the capital of bronze
mirrors and pottery canteens;
Arabic is the currency
on its silver coins, names the value.
Forty days by this lumbering wagon
(which I now share
with three sleep-ins, girls who
sleep with each other far more
than they deal with me)
bring me to Khwarazm,
south of the Aral Sea.
Another eighteen days on camelback,
and I am in the fabled cities
of Bukhara and Samarkand.
Has Genghis Khan just passed
through here? The cities
are still reeling from his thunder.

---

[1] This section is from a long poem written during 1992-96, several parts of which were completed while at the Villa Serbelloni, Bellagio, as a Rockefeller Fellow and scholar/poet-in-residence. The poet recalls those days with immense pleasure.

Bukhara's gardens are my heart's
delight; but its mosques, colleges,
and bazaars are in ruins.
So I turn south, towards India,
and across the Oxus
(which later generations will call Amu
Darya), taking as usual the most
roundabout route—through Meshed, Neyshapur,
and the desert plateau of northern Afghanistan;
pasturing my horses and camels
at Kunduz, before I attempt
the snows and treacherous foot-passes
of the Hindu Kush,
the sands of Sindh.
Must leave Sindh, though.
Have slept long enough on the roof
of a college. Seen more than enough;
stuffed skins of dissidents
fixed on crosses in Sehwan.

At Multan
I am lent money by merchant-friends
to stock up presents for the Sultan;
they also dispatch notice to Delhi
by courier; these runners are even
faster than the local pony express.
From Sindh, it's fifty days to the Sultan's
capital, but the letter reaches him in five.
I shall be welcome there, says the return news,
with my Persian noblemen
and their families, slaves, eunuchs;
(the eunuchs are so good at performing
the master *in absentia*);
and twenty cooks serving up chicken,

sweetmeats, and persimmons.
Which is one way of putting behind
the dangers on the way—
we are safe, quite safe,
after that attack in the open country:
eighty infidels on foot
with two horsemen, whom we fought
stoutly. I was hit by an arrow,
and my horse by another,
but God in His grace preserved me.
Luck is what it is: now I can live on mangoes
day after day. Indians aver
it's a mango Adam ate—not me
dreaming of my beloved's breast
garnished, as it were, with light honey
from home,
or the divine apricot and orange jams
of Iran.
But this fruit is nowhere near it.
And were I to tell the truth,
which I do anyway,
it's like sucking an old man's beard,
a fibrous, sour chin,
tasting the carrot, geranium, turpentine
at the same time.
If this is the only other fruit that hung there,
I can see what Adam, our father, ate, and why.

INDEX OF FIRST LINES

aveller and wry postmodernist, Hashmi is an tic poet of the late twentieth century, an uneasy anded in an 'off-moonlight', a sceptic who can the possibility of 'perhaps'. There is a persistent ource in these poems that redeems the times. clear-eyed and compassionate, unflinching in elebration of the 'ephemeral verities'.
itt

Hashmi's poems are a delight—sinuous and serious with a light touch, full of character, authenticity. I read them with intense pleasure.
s

les in the series

ning by Maki Kureishi
um by Adrian A. Husain
n of Verse by Daud Kamal
s of the Mind by Salman Tarik Kureshi
n by Taufiq Rafat
ogy

ISBN 0-19-577813-8
9 780195 778137

ord
versity
ss
stan