

I conjured you in my poem with a sigh  
and grafted you to water, fire, and trees.

Forugh Farrokhzad, 'Reborn'. Tr. Sholeh Wolpe.

Just come out with it for the world  
To give reason to  
Perfect beauty  
Art outside Art  
By ripping the heart out from the heart  
Of the delight of night  
Into the heart of art

You will never be  
A Distant Memory  
Because you stole my soul  
'To heal the hole'

# Poems After Parveen Shakir

## Soliloquy

The people around me  
Seem to speak  
A totally alien tongue  
That Wavelength  
Whereby I was connected to them  
Has entered another dimension  
Either my language has become obsolete  
Or their definitions have changed  
Their grammars do not contain  
The glossaries of the paths  
Upon which my words take me  
I am dumb to the sanctity of words and cannot hold converse  
But with the solitude of walls or my own shadow  
I am terrified of the moment  
When I will entirely dissolve and disappear into myself  
Having forgotten that Frequency  
Upon which I used to soliloquise  
And am left repeating to myself  
"May day, May day"

# Loneliness

This scenic evening of ours  
Mingled with the perfume  
Of your garment  
With the burgeoning of my vision  
Will last some mere moments

Just now  
A star will unwind itself upon the horizon  
Just then  
Its winking will beckon to your heart  
A memory  
A tale of separation  
Something not done  
An unfulfilled dream  
Something not said  
To someone!

We should have met  
In an age of gracefulness  
In another heaven  
In a different country!

# Tomato Ketchup

In our country  
A woman who writes poetry is considered a curiosity  
Every man fancies himself as the addressed  
And since in actuality it is not so  
He becomes her enemy!

As such Sara Shagufta  
Made few enemies:  
Before she could marry a writer  
She had already become the sister in-law of them all  
Because she did not believe  
In offering expletives  
Every Tom, Dick and Harry claimed  
She had slept with him  
From dawn to dusk  
Every unemployed hack-writer in the city  
Bumbled around her  
Even those  
Who had jobs to go to  
Would leave their tatty files and worn-out wives  
And let her play in their hands  
(Oblivious of electricity bills, children's school fees and the wife's medicine  
For these were concerns  
Of the lesser mortals)  
All day long  
All evening  
*So late into the night,*  
Incensed talk would ensue on literature and philosophy  
When hunger struck  
They'd all chip in and order  
Bread and boiled pulse from the shack round the corner  
Great dignitaries would then be offered tea  
At her expense  
They told her she Pakistan's answer to Amrita Pritam  
Stupid gullible girl  
She fell for it  
Perhaps also because  
Those responsible for her bread and butter  
Always served her Kafka for tea  
With Neruda biscuits  
She survived  
Their drooling Compliments  
But how long for  
One day or other she would've had to escape this panther prowl and these flattering  
Connoisseurs of art  
She had been nibbled away alive by

Sara went one step further and left the jungle itself!  
In their symposiums  
They still drool at her name  
Except they can no longer eat her  
For in death they have relegated her  
To the status of Tomato Ketchup!

## A Poem of Maturity

Sobbing like a child he insisted  
That they bury him alive with his dead wife  
The lads nudged and winked  
At each other  
The elderly said 'He has gone mad'  
And the priests had a hard time dragging him back home!

Routinely he would go to Mewashah after work  
Carrying flowers and incense candles  
Then he would go every Thursday  
Then every ninth day  
Then on the 2 Eids, and then every Shab-barat  
Then annually  
Till one day he alighted from the number 60 bus  
Into the scorching sun  
And his eyes settled upon a tree  
As he remembered  
The new typist who'd arrived at the office that day  
He laughed  
Realising that the world  
Does not consist of one person alone

## Difficult Question

The face of a 12-13 year old child  
Peeping from behind thin curtains  
Fresh as the first  
Flower of spring  
As pure as  
First love!  
But the hands wrecked from too much  
Cutting of vegetables  
And those cuts embroidered  
With dry sand  
Hands 20 years older  
Than the face

## Advice from a Senior Executive

The Senior Executive where I work  
Called me rather unusually to his office one day  
Frowning uneasily he asked after a couple of files -  
And my non-civil pastimes  
Then shed light upon the standing of a poet in society  
The gist of what he said  
Was that a poet has the same role in a nation  
As an appendix in our bodies  
Absolutely Useless but able at times to cause great pain  
So there is only one way of getting rid of it – Surgery!  
A feint smile played upon his lips, as he imagined he had rid himself  
Of the appendix of my personality  
Then said  
'An ideal consultant  
Has no face  
First lips disappear  
Then eyes  
Followed ears  
Until finally poets lose their heads  
Without loss of lips, eyes, ears and brains  
Nobody can become, a Federal Secretary!'

To further enhance his argument he referred to couple of barmy diplomats  
But I think he must've read my mind or facial expressions  
That this fool is content merely to remain a Local poet  
Disheartened he permitted me  
To take my leave for the day  
And I the fool returned to my office  
Having found inspiration for a new poem  
Well aware of a possible entry in red ink  
In my A.C.R.\*

\* *Annual Confidential Report.*



## Upon Clifton Bridge ...

I have said that Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind.

William Wordsworth. *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*. 1801, 1802.

### Clifton Bridge

Well-travelled by the city Elite  
Upon which the high and mighty Traffic Policemen  
Are seen to perform their duties  
Around the clock  
Including, 6 or 7 undercover  
Not even an unconcerned bird may flit its wings around them!  
I saw her!  
In a deep ochre  
Gold sequined dress  
Every fold aligned!  
Her Lipstick so dark  
That my eyes were drenched in it  
Her Foundation dripping in the mid-May sun  
Seemed to say  
No amount of money can buy this\*  
Her face caked by the smoke of a cigarette  
Stuck between her fingers drowned in clear blue Nail Polish-drowned fingers  
With those captivating glances and such gesticulations  
She could easily have been arrested by the Police under Clause 294  
Parked at the Traffic Signal I thought  
Any time now, this PC will hand over an arrest warrant  
To this heroine of one of Minto's novels  
But before he could Book her  
A car with a navy-blue Number Plate  
Parked up  
And she disappeared into it  
Along with her Clause 294 persona  
While the plain-clothed P. C.  
Stood aghast!

\* Literally 'Wealth and beauty do not see eye to eye'.