Poems
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Poems

Abstract
TAXILA/MARGALLA, ACCORDING TO THE SCRIPTURES, FOR CHILDREN IN WARTIME

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Alamgir Hashmi

TAXILA/MARGALLA

Licked off the ground with tongues of steel
or crushed into stone floors
of these neo-Islamic houses
and the uptight slate of roads driven,
they cry with tears as big as boulders
rolling down their dark cheeks.
The umbilicus is cut;
the earth's gashes are ever-new,
unhealed: it rises here and there
with its amphoras for holding lovers
like liquid, surplus grain; to envelop
and conceal a maze of fine-ticking cities
from the wanton gaze of time –
future's the worst that could happen.
Now these leftover mountains
are moving away from here
on nervous feet,
looking askance,
for safety is in moving on.
Where they will go, split what country,
joint which continents - America
with Asia to repatriate Columbus? -
no one is in the know. Whatever
be the case, their silence is proverbial,
glistening old as the language
removing shard and reject,
or the edges of obsidian
from its thought.
Each hiking trail winces
at my approaching steps;
birds sound warning cries;
shrubs green out and get in the way
flaring like autumn leaves.
ACCORDING TO THE SCRIPTURES

Just weeks before the last frost
of spring, in equal rows I sow,
back and forth, in the rich loamy soil,
as both the Qur'an and Shakespeare
suggest I plough
this, my farm, well; and reap from its toil
a respite from the sun-drawn thirst,
until the leaves meet between the rows
and completely shade me in the ground.
Then a stem rises high enough,
bearing numerous yellow flowers.
It is time.
I bend over and kiss your turnips,
flattened, white-fleshed, loamy,
pink and then purple to touch, warm;
and they grow, upturn, invert
in the mouth –
crowned each by
a nipple.

FOR CHILDREN IN WARTIME

This is the art class.
The theme of the lesson
is Sarajevo in springtime.
On a sheet of A4 appears a street
with its men and women
scattered
on their backs;
red balloons
from their insides
pop
on the pavement.
Cars in the background
are shot full of holes.
The artist is twelve and a half.
In her neighbour’s piece,
a zigzag across the window
is perhaps a smashed windshield.
The roof is literally flying
off one house,
a twist of orange flame
spiralling upwards.

A hush descends as twenty
small heads bend over
a fresh set of drawings.
Doors, closed,
have the faces of people frightened.
Trees weep out tears the size of snowdrops.

A pair of spectacles lies on the street,
next to a man with closed eyes
looking very dead.
But that’s not me, hearing still
the mortar level the walls,
sniper bullet hit
somewhere across the courtyard.
Cities are going
but what’s to hold up a wax crayon?
Children know
that pictures cannot be stretched too far.
School’s in progress
as if it were a prayer –
about how it was supposed to be.