

My Mother's Darkness

. . . as perhaps at midnight, when all boundaries are lost, the country reverts to its ancient shape, as the Romans saw it, lying cloudy, when they landed, and the hills had no names and the rivers wound they knew not where — such was her darkness . . .

— Mrs. Dalloway

On the roof of her childhood home on the outskirts of a city once called Lyallpur sat a small storeroom where in the colder months the family kept the charpoys on which during summer nights the children slept, the stars sequined to the sky the last wonders they saw before drifting into sleep, the jute weave sagging beneath the weight of their tired, dream-starved bodies. The wooden frames held the etched initials of her oldest brothers, all of whom had left in a flourish of garlands and goodbyes for America years before she understood the thrum of true longing, a constant whir of an inner twilight humming through her marrow, while along the surface of her forearms and face there shone a melancholic radiance, the metallic blue skin of a fish.

Sometimes, when everyone else napped in the cooler confines of her parents' bedroom where the teak shutters let in thin ribbons of flayed sunlight, my mother snuck upstairs and, gulping down her fear of spiders and jinn, slipped into the darkness of the storeroom and stood amongst the charpoys, propped up like massive books, each cataloguing the mysteries of the Unseen world, replete with cartographic riddles and the secret names of oceans comprised of dead voices. There, a blank page, she listened to a scattershot of sounds filling up the empty lantern of her head — a machete hacking stalks of sugarcane, a merchant hawking wire-sliced slabs of ice from his shop across the street, the clapping of a horse-drawn carriage ambling from one somewhere to another, even the soft cellular clicking of young bones growing toward something akin to transcendence.

Only a girl then, the youngest of four sisters, she loved the penetrating stillness of the afternoon, when Pakistan suffered at the brute hands of summer's fury and she could find comfort in the way the entire universe grew soft like butter, when the edges of every wall and door, of every envelope sent from New York and Washington and London, began to blur in the heat, when the solidity of every guardian tree or



clump of earth lying upon the fresh graves in the cemetery wilted into dust, into the material from which everything sprouts upward toward heaven's sweet beckon.

She squeezed shut her eyes, plugged her ears, and found a space far from the interrupting orbits of scientists and holy men. And there she pretended to dissolve too, waiting for the atoms of her body to loosen their hold on one another and rush apart in search of new galaxies to call home, for the glowing plumes of her soul to wisp into the air like the gauzy yarn of an unraveling pashmina, for that hum of longing to commune with the wind-borne breath of every being, be it a now-gone thing, or one not yet birthed — such was the might and measure of her darkness.

And her mind, at times feral from having lived as the youngest girl in a crowded home in a country still mourning the loss of Jinnah decades after his passing, had discovered it could, within the sphere of her own inner burning, exist in every place on earth, in every moment of history at once. Within, she could mount undiscovered hills she would name after her favorite dolls — *Hawa, Majnoon, Lakshmi, Minerva, Clarissa* — and ride the meander of newborn rivers who shared their nascent journeys with no one but her. Inside this chamber, this storeroom on the roof of her family's home, a perpetual midnight endured, a time forever wedged in that liminal murk from which sprang the primordial voyages of clouds taking shape in the sky.

By the time her marriage had been arranged to the man who would become my father, my mother knew him already, had met him several times within the everywhere-ness of wonder, had come to know through his bleary eyes the grief-stricken coasts of the South China Sea, of Lake Michigan, of his own oceanic pain that traced its beginning to 1947; had come to know enough Cantonese and English to understand the agony embedded in his sleeping blabber, to recognize which ghost lurking behind the shimmer of his smile was his father's. Long before she saw him in the flesh, when all he was was a black-and-white photograph she kept hidden beneath her pillow, she had plucked the mole at the corner of his mouth and planted it in the center of her heart, recast it into a private qibla, deciding that, like the universe itself, her own possible lives — her pasts, presents, futures — could all be found, invented, transformed, perhaps even understood as blessings, in the simplified calculus of darkness.

□ If — she decided — my eyes cannot grasp anything because there is
□ no light, then what *can't* I see, what *can't* I claim?
□
□

FAISAL MOHYUDDIN is the author of *The Displaced Children of Displaced Children* (Eyewear Publishing, 2018), selected by Kimiko Hahn as the winner of the 2017 Sexton Prize. His chapbook *The Riddle of Longing* was published by Backbone Press in 2017. He teaches English at Highland Park High School in Illinois, serves as an educator adviser to Narrative 4, and lives with his family in Chicago.

