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“My Grandfather”Akhil Katyal

My grandfather

would ask us to read him
the shop-signs in Devanagari:

मिंटू आइसक्रीम
जगत हार्डवेयर
चित्र सिनेमा

All his life, he
only knew Urdu,
leaving Lahore at 18,
a young railway-clerk
new at the desk then.

In the early months here
he had struggled,
tried opening a cigarette-shop
at Panchkuiyan Road in Delhi,
before being given the same job
in the Indian railways
in Lucknow.

In all this commotion,
he never bothered
learning another script,
dependent still, at 73, on his grandchildren
to read him ice-cream signs
when he treated them to
an orange-bar.

Years later,
when I ached to read Faiz's letters
in his own hand-writing, I had to
write to a facebook-friend in Lahore,
or ask an old Jangpura neighbour,
or worse, use a translation app
which was like rubbing stones on silk.

As grandfather and I stumbled
in those years,

Urdu, Hindi
still looked on at each other
in an old mirror convexed by history
reaching around its opaque silver.

*

This year,
after my second Urdu class,
I get straight on the Blue Line,
- *nuqtas* arraying in my head -
for the Ramakrishna Ashram station.

Here, in this first city of his coming,
Panchkuiyan Road, where he tried
but failed at a living, पंचकुइंयाँ रोड,
that of the five old Mughal wells,
پنچکویاں روڈ, where grandfather and I
after the opacity of years,
find homework in a Delhi road-sign,
caress old shapes
into meaning, curve old losses,
draw water with
a new tongue.

Chikankaari

(Bahoran Tola, Chowk, Lucknow)

The needle hurts the cloth
into flowers.

Outside, winter drops a hint in the air.

Inside, the shop-owner
drapes the breeze on his shoulder.

Our eyes are struck into paisleys.

After two purchases,
he turns historical.

A Mughal queen
whose name meant 'the light of the world'
once saw a mosque in Persia so beautifully engraved
she wanted it on her tunic.

The artisans set about tracing the stone into air
the marble into chiffon.

Once Nur Jahan approved, they stitched a cloth
"from Kandahar to Kalkatta." He turns strictly rhetorical,
"You are holding it in your hands now."

We are convinced we've made a sublime bargain
barely noticing the woman who had come
in the middle of his story, head-scarfed in cotton,
unloaded a bundle near the doorstep
and sat on the ledge waiting
for his attention.

"Go wait at the backdoor."

He doesn't want her
to hear the price he's charging us
for the stole it took her two months to embroider.

She gets up reluctantly
squinting her eye.

She is deliberately slow.

As she leaves
we are still counting the paisleys.

Musa Bagh

(North-West of Lucknow, Winter 2017)

A lonely British officer lies buried.
His is the only grave for miles overgrown
with frantic nettle. To Captain Wale's left
a bleak river now flows as it had then when
he commanded the First Sikh Irregular Cavalry
and pursued the last of the rebels slipping away
to Faizabad when Lucknow was all but lost
in that red summer of 1858.

Chasing them for mile after mile of dust
as the evening of blood and skirmishes drew
to an end, exhausted, broken to the bone,
Wale gave orders to halt; it was 'then [that]
from the far side of a ravine, a solitary figure
fired his musket' killing him instantaneously.
In all this bloodletting, they couldn't even
find him a right place for burial.

His Acting Commandant, one L.B. Jones,
ordered his men to quickly erect a stone,
carved it with the hurried poetry of death
'as a token of regard for his officer, whom
he admired both as a friend and soldier,'
had him buried in a rush, and returned.

Captain Wale 'lived and died a Christian soldier.'
That March, evenings were whetted on the
hilts of swords. There was more red than could
be carried by water. In those days after the Mutiny
when 'hundreds were hung' each day,
punishment as clear as the piercing sun,
the gallows, those 'hideous erection of wood'
were also set up in Musa Bagh, a violent tree
shone for days, 'just to make the point clear'.
One of them was right behind Wale's grave.
He must have seen rebel after rebel now hung
in the disrespect of daylight, those who'd earlier
escaped Outram killing five hundred in one evening
when a palace had fallen and a Queen had fled.

Now the years have fallen into the river
carrying those years like silt, decades of history are
decades of unforgiven water. Refusing our consecration.
We visit one unassuming winter afternoon
and after miles of dust, when we're just about to give up
and return, find ahead of us, a ruin, the roof long fallen
through and bricks now the colour of time, still in parts
standing, refusing the sun. We climb up its small incline.
Wale's grave is now a shrine.

A white wash adorns it. The incense sticks have
blackened its edges into sacrality. The locals, we find,
call him 'Captain Baba', 'Gora Bhagwan' ('White God')

and offer him fruits, flowers and
cigarettes and beer bottles (because White Gods
have their own pleasures). They observe Thursdays
as auspicious days to visit his Mazaar.
Captain Baba, the caretaker tells us, is good
for women who wish to have children.
A friend once told me that if you can pray
for your enemy, it means you have forgiven them.
(It helps you more than it helps them.) What if,
I should have asked, if you pray to your enemy.
From the old banks of the river, Wale had chased the mutineers.
Now their people raise a shrine to him. How much forgiveness
must be needed by the Gods. How much forgiveness must we give
to those we make into our Gods. They forgive him with every prayer,
with every evening his atonement turns vinegar. Every word
they say, hushed against the sky, lets the red seep slowly
into the river, marigolds adorn his body, a red cloth seamed
with gold, flutters above his skin carrying on the years
of red into the river which is, even now, carrying the blood,
even now, carrying the prayers after the blood.



BIO-NOTE

Akhil Katyal is an Indian poet, translator and a Queer activist. Born in Bareilly, U.P. in 1985, Katyal is based in Delhi where he teaches literature in Shiv Nadar University. His writings have appeared in *The UCity Review*, *North East Review*, *The Four Quarters Magazine*, *The Bangalore Review*, *Ezra - Journal of Translation*, *Earthen Lamp Journal*, *Ivory-Tower* among several others. He has translated the works of Mangalesh Dabral, Wislawa Szymborska, Agha Shahid Ali, Om Prakash Valmiki, Dorothy Parker, Langston Hughes among others. He finished his PhD from SOAS, University of London in 2011.

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