

For Old Friends

By

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After great pain, a formal feeling comes –
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs –
The stiff Heart questions ‘was it He, that bore,’
And ‘Yesterday, or Centuries before?’

- Emily Dickinson

I

The Age of Water

I don't quite remember the exact moment the age of water began. One theory is what a Vedic astrologer once told me about my charts: “there are certain things you will suddenly fathom at a later stage in life – from having no hitherto knowledge of them, you will suddenly be devoured by them.” The way I interpreted this remark over the years was that since the discovery of my rising sign came later to me, so did its qualities. The rising sign is your moon sign, and we are all so familiar with our sun signs that we forget the moon too exists in the galaxy. My rising sign was Scorpio – a water sign. It is known for its intense secrecy and silence. Before I turned 23, I was simply fire signed impulsive Aries. It was my 23rd year that marked my introduction to the era of silence and mystery. Life stilled me – it is the year I lost language, friendship and the want to communicate with the world. The backdrop was the Karachi sea; my birthplace baptized me with a muted second life. The place my sense of loss began was as silent as I. She was quietly observing everything as it occurred and she was to be the only witness of the changes that were occurring inside of me. Her sea was vast and indifferent, but it alone passed no judgment on me. I wanted to disappear into this sea and I think I did that year. I walked straight into it and never looked back. I became water eventually – and thus the age of water began.

Inside water you are in an altered life. Everything you hear from beyond is warped – songs can seem to be assaults and normal exchanges can appear harmful.

It's a frequency of depth from the place where whales roam. You have entered a state where hitherto unimagined terrors breathe. This was my second or double life, whichever you please to call it. Apparently I walked on the streets of the city, but I was no longer the person from before. I carried the sea wherever I went now. I could always feel the pressure of the heavy water on me, but this was invisible and no one knew what I suffered but me.

It is not that I did not write before this point. It's just that I simply had never reached a dead end before. For the first time, there was no escape, no rescue, no light at the end of the tunnel. I had discovered endlessness – and thus, my writing which had been a sunlight familiar, now took a dark turn. I was initiated into the drop that is accompanied by bleak mystery and came to understand disharmonic chords. I also realized the terrible affliction of those who are cursed and cannot speak. But this was without the leniency the world affords to the mute – because apparently there was nothing wrong with me. All these changes had happened on my insides but there was no way to express this to anyone. Only my city knew, and she was mute in the same way as me.

There is a lot expected of you which you are unable to deliver if you exist the way I did. This causes misunderstandings till a time comes when you give up trying normalcy in communication altogether. This was the time a teacher from my previous life suggested that I was a poet and I must write. I could only look at him as words no longer formed in my mouth. But I did pick up a paper and pen and began to write. The writing was strange, obscure and ambiguous because I was sure I did not want to tell anyone my story and yet I wrote. This sensation was what the definition of poetry became for me that year - a paradox, a miracle or – the age of water.

II

Class 1 Sunflowers

No one really knows you the way your childhood friends do. Is it because they've seen you grow up? Can the knowledge of who you were at 6, become damning for you? What would Freud say about this? Are parents alone the keepers of the mechanisms of our instincts? How would this awareness be in the hands of our enemies? The Vedic astrologer saw bizarre data in my charts – he said: “Your friends in this life, are the enemies from your past life – and thus, the strong connection.” What on earth was this supposed to mean? I did not understand it when he said it, and of course I did not believe in astrology. It was just a fun and harmless pastime. I never thought otherwise. I still don't. But it is that damn beat of poetic doom about some of the things he said that draws me towards his words; that renders me helpless.

I grew up in Karachi and selecting the school I wanted to go to, was the first independent choice of my life. I did not choose the school my older sister attended, rather, when I got admission in both Mama Parsi and St. Joseph's, I announced that I was going to go to St. Joseph's since not only was it the 'big school' but also, my friend from kindergarten was going there. I chose my friend over family.

Shortly after, in Ms. Ann's class, which was named after sunflowers, we were asked what our favorite word was – mine was 'friend.' I somehow knew from that nascent time that I would build my own family. It would not be a family of blood ties, but rather of souls. I would 'select my own society' to rephrase Emily Dickinson's words a little. This idea – from wherever it came – grew stronger and stronger over the years. I grew estranged from my family and began to find refuge in those who I thought understood and cared for me more than anyone else in the world. That absolute trust is a fallacy is only easy knowledge for me today – it wasn't always the case.

Having said that, I'd still add that old habits do die hard and thus, this has amounted to another kind of double life. Perhaps it is like the impulsive, trusting Aries and the calculating, observant Scorpio existing side by side in the same person. My father once remarked that fire and water can't exist together – it's a fatal combination. However, my choices have always been defiant and perhaps my existence has become so too.

III

Christian

The first time I encountered Christ, it was not in a book or in a recitation. The first time was simply his statue on a cross that I used to pass by every day whilst walking to my class in the primary section of my school. I did not understand why he was there or who he was, nor was I too concerned about it. But there he was, right from the beginning. In a way, my city has always been there for me.

It is also true that though I travelled extensively over the years, every time I have loved with my heart and soul, it has happened in Karachi. Is this because I was born here? Is this true for everyone? I don't have answers as usual, and by now I'm quite used to this feeling of bewilderment. So much so, that it has become part of the background of my life. It is perhaps what Marquez means when he creates his magical realist stories so seamlessly – as if there was simply no other way for things to be.

We used to sneak into the church at the heart of Saddar, since it was located right next to our school. I spent eerily tranquil afternoons in the embrace of church silence as we sat philosophically musing over life or swearing to undying friendship till the last of our days. Sunlight would filter through the stained glass and sometimes I would wonder at the paintings of the scenes from Christ's life depicted on the church walls. This would be ephemeral and rather unconscious since what was more interesting was the frank and good-humored conversation between close friends. It

was really miraculous the way we'd finish each other's sentences, have a language of our own and endless topics to discuss. Or perhaps this is the case for all good friendships and what really marks ours with dark magic is its end rather than its life.

I don't know why the passion of Christ is not revered in the same way as I have heard certain renditions of the story of Karbala in our part of the world. Or again, perhaps it is – but I personally have not had the chance to meet these ardent followers taken by his suffering. However, there is another way to look at this. Perhaps it is possible to read and hear sacred stories without them really drawing your blood. It is like passing through life without ever experiencing love or deep friendship. This is still life, but hardly a lived one.

Or could it be that the nature of knowledge is so, that without personal experience, one may never really know the worth of anyone else's suffering? Kierkegaard of course, warns us that sacred fear and trembling is beyond our grasp. Though becoming a believer in someone's suffering calls for some kind of witnessing.

I perhaps don't understand betrayal even though I have spent years in trying to untangle its knotted roots. When all resources fail you, you turn to books, stories – you turn to God. I guess it's the story of one of His prophets that reaches me in these moments, and I really can't explain how – since I was sure nothing could reach me further. It is at this time alone that I feel someone has suffered far more than myself and I can't even imagine this pain. What I have instead is just a weak metaphor. Yet, I do feel that in the vast cosmos of time and duration, I am not alone.