

Dard

By

Tehmina Khan

Faiz writes of *dard*, suffering. His poetry reminds us that *dard* is an agent of change and that even in the throes of *dard*, one should not relinquish hope.

Kab thahrega dard-e dil kab raat basar hogi
Sunte the voh aaeinge sunte the sahar hogi

When will the pain stop, O heart?
How will I spend the night of suffering?
I hear she will come in all glory
I hear that dawn's twilight will break

5th May

I am flying home to the city where my mother gave birth to me.

A fourteen-hour plane ride will transport me from Toronto to the coastal city of Karachi. From the home my husband and I have made for ourselves and our children to the home my parents live in. At eight in the morning, Toronto time, my husband drove my daughter and I to Pearson International airport. At ten-forty in the morning, Karachi time, this flying box will land at Quaid-e-Azam airport. My daughter and I bring few of our own belongings. Mostly underwear and a few pairs of sandals in small, half-empty suitcases. But we have with us two over-sized cardboard boxes containing reminders of my parents' sixteen years of living in Toronto.

This October, my parents moved back to Pakistan permanently. My father is eighty-three and my mother is ten years younger. Karachi gives them what Toronto cannot. The comfort of home and of belonging. My parents have returned home to live out their end days, and so now, I fly to Karachi as often as I can to visit them.

Is *dard* this grief which sits in my heart when I think of my parents?

Is *dard* this wound which bleeds no matter where I am? In Toronto, I am home. I laugh with my children. I cuddle with my husband. I walk with our dog. I potter around our home. I chatter at street corners with our neighbors and the whole while, I worry about my parents. How are they? Are they well? Are they alone? Do they feel lonely?

Is *dard* this feeling I have when I walk into my parents' home? The feeling of being where I am wanted, yet knowing that I am wanted somewhere else too, by someone else. There are arms which lie empty in our bed in another continent. A barren spot which usually holds my body in the space next to his. How do I fly to him while still remaining with my father who holds me and tells me that he loves me more than I love him?

Is *dard* this heart which lies in pieces and doesn't know how to gather itself? When I am here, I am not there. When I am there, I am not here.

But *dard*, which is suffering caused by love, is also the answer to the suffering.

I miss my parents as they miss me. There is a longing for each other and so, there is also happiness when we meet. I miss my spouse when away from him, but I know he holds my spot on our bed vacant for me and soon, I will return to it and him.

7th May

It's half past six in the morning and I am walking inside the gated community my parents live in. I would prefer to walk outside this enclosed space. I like

exploring Karachi's streets on foot, and over the years, I have fought many battles with my husband, friends, parents and distant relatives over this need. But, for this trip, I have decided not to alarm my parents by walking outside their housing compound. During my last trip, my father and I engaged in heated argument. He told me that a woman of a certain class walking on Karachi's streets is a target. He told me that if I were abducted, raped, robbed or killed, I would achieve nothing other than causing my loved ones anguish. My husband, mother, in-laws, aunts, and various cousins have also told me this on numerous occasions. Little do they realize that as a child, a teenager, and an adult woman, I have spent plenty of time walking the streets of Karachi. I know how to pay attention. I am aware of the risk I take and that as an adult, it is my risk to take and not their place to cage me.

But for once, I will allow myself to be caged because my father has cancer and because I don't want to cause him unnecessary worry.

I walk on the clean streets of my parents' neighbourhood and steal *motia* and *champa-kali* flowers from the neighbours' front yards. The only other people on the streets at this hour are the maids. They enter the quietly through large wooden and steel gates, nodding acknowledgments at the drivers who are washing down cars which look new, shiny, and already clean.

In this country, as in all other countries, one is expected to know their place. In this world, the place for people like me is inside, slumbering away, while other people walk the streets of Karachi to arrive at our homes and prepare our breakfasts and wash our shiny, new cars and drive us to work or places of leisure.

In this world, as in all worlds, transgressions are not encouraged.

16th May

It's five in the morning and I am wide awake. I have been waking up every morning at five ever since I landed in Karachi. I sleep for exactly five hours. Usually I wake up in the bed in my parent's guestroom, but today my daughter and I are on a train to Sahiwal to visit a friend of mine.

I love the slowness of train journeys. The world drifting by the window. Sindh passed us by in the night. Punjab with its verdant fields is still rolling on by. The earth is scorching hot today. Pakistan is experiencing a heatwave and while the humidity and heat in Karachi are oppressive, Sahiwal is even hotter with temperatures soaring to the mid-forties. Despite the record-breaking heat, I see women in colourful clothes working in the fields. I see poor women on Pakistan's streets. I see them walking to work and labouring in fields. What I don't see is women engaged in leisure activities in public spaces. Even in this small town, which is now called Sahiwal but was once Montgomery, I see boys playing cricket, teenagers playing pool, and men hanging around street corners yakking. I complain about this to other people, but I am told that I am talking nonsense. Of course Pakistani society gives women complete freedom. Hasn't Islam placed Jannat beneath a mother's feet? I wonder why women are promised heaven in the future, while given so little in their present. I wonder why no one else seems disturbed. The women are used when needed and locked inside once the work is done, while the boys go out to play.

Perhaps women do need the promise of heaven to make it through their day-to-day.

19th May

Our flight back to Karachi has been cancelled and so my daughter and I have six hours to kill in Lahore before boarding the nine o'clock flight. I am counting the six hours as wasted time. This is time I could have spent with my parents.

It seems that in the years since I graduated from Kinnaird College in 1995, I have completely forgotten what heat can feel like. Lahore is a tandoor. I look at boys jumping in and out of the waters of the canal with envy.

Perhaps it hasn't occurred to anyone that young girls also feel the heat or that they too deserve to play as all children do. But in this world made by men, a girl can never be just a child. She is always a sex object first, and therefore, expected to be modest and hide, lest she tempt an innocent man.

22nd May

The evening is spent running errands. I collect clothes I am not sure I will have the chance to wear and return home to find my parents and my daughter reading in the living room. I take a few pictures, eager to capture this priceless moment before it escapes me. My father smiles and my heart melts altogether.

24th May

I wake up at five as usual and wake my daughter up soon after. We dress in a hurry. My parent's driver, Omar Hayat, is waiting outside. My daughter sits in the car while I wait for Omar Hayat to drive out of my parents' house onto the street so

that I can shut the wrought iron and wood gate behind us. My parents are sound asleep. This early morning outing was suggested by Omar Hayat because my daughter, Zara, wanted to visit the beach to collect seashells. Our timing is perfect. The roads are deserted. Most of Karachi is still asleep. We pass through areas I am familiar with from my childhood. I point out where, when I was an eight-year-old child, there stood rows of warehouses with asbestos roofs. When we drove by early in the mornings on our way to school, you couldn't see the gray of the asbestos roofs. All you saw were the thousands of parrots perched row upon row, painting the dull gray a vivid green. I wait for the warehouses as I tell my child and Omar Hayat about this childhood memory, but while the road still exists, the warehouses have disappeared. And there isn't a single parrot to be seen.

Further on, we pass uniquely decorated trucks. The men who drive them are sleeping on the flat beds attached to the back of their vehicles. Some sleep under mosquito netting, others sleep without it. An arm thrown over the eyes to shield from the sun rays which are already baking the earth.

We arrive at Hawkes Bay. Omar Hayat waits by the car while Zara and I walk along the beach. The sand is soft beneath our feet. The sun has rendered all it touches golden. I splash in the water, giddy as the girl I once was, who used to splash in this same ocean decades back. I feel the years fall away from me. Have I ever felt happier? I see an old man bathing his camel in the ocean water. I take pictures and make numerous videos. He takes such care with his camel and I can see how much the camel is enjoying the old man's loving touch. Zara has collected a bag full of treasure – rocks and seashells. We have kept Omar Hayat waiting long enough. I see a fisherman set his net sailing into the waves just as we turn around to walk back to the car.

25th May

We are flying home and I can't stop crying. I cry for two hours straight and then stop, exhausted. I have exhausted my own tears. Who can teach me how to live with my heart in pieces on two separate continents? And where is home? Is it Karachi, the city of my birth? Or is it Toronto, my adopted city?

I am at home in both places.

I am a stranger everywhere.

Copyright © Tehmina Khan 2022. All rights reserved