Rakhshan Rizwan

In Translation

Sir, anything else the waistcoated waiters indulge,
their mustached Punjabi sahabs, whose bottles of scotch gleam
under their suits, niet nodig I deliver with quivering
tongue, the rejoinder to the till girl’s sharp blue eyes
this thing called civilization
Tacitus wrote, was really just part of being
a slave, the fatness of my tongue resists
the prodding, refusing to wrap itself around,

Ik ben this, and ik ben that,
two years ago, my Germany having grated itself against
the impeccable standards and white skins of its owners
had become, sheer, wearable, like finest chiffon,

Du kannst sehr gut Deutsch they said, and even though
the sun warmed my face, my skin lost its Pakistani
tan, its berry browns, but now wrenching out
these delicately embroidered sequins of German articles,
from delicate tissue, replacing sehr with zeer, neun with negen,
makes me want to escape in my mother’s Punjabi and
in the streets of a city called Lahore, to lose
myself in its humid alleys, and in the warm articulations
of baji aithay, baji aithay, to be serenaded
with lawn and velvet at bargained rates,
because when my grandfather said, border-paar, his wife
didn’t understand; there was no word in Urdu for “border”,
and this lack of an Urdu equivalent
sent my grandmother’s life into a tailspin,
not knowing the words lost her an entire, 
country, a portent for coming generations,

when our tongues insist on having the interview 
in Punjabi jee, because our mouths can’t move beyond,

our mothers’ oily ghee and her puttar jee, 
or in Engels only because in Nederlands

we sound fragmented by way of our speech, 
our lives become precarious things,

Sir Syed, the only progressive Muslim ever born, 
insisted on taking the first swig, he poured English

into his mouth and cringed, it always burns the first time he said, 
tastes like molten piss, but then the stillness comes quickly, and spreads

its raiment over the barbed wire, and the bones, 
the fabric may snag on the jagged histories,

but at some point, the scab becomes skin, it’s a bitter medicine, 
but not a vat of acid, he called upon a sense of proportion to prevail,

I don’t doubt the benefits Sir Syed sahib, 
I wouldn’t dare, But India was never terra nullius,

my mother’s Persian couplets preceded, 
her velvety Urdu, preceded that’s really all

I wish to say to this thing called civilization, 
if it would step more carefully,

acknowledge the other bodies in the room, 
novels littering the table, effaced scripts on the walls,

someone’s love letters falling out of teak shelves, 
someone’s perfumed scarves scattered on the bed,

someone’s unraveled turban lying on the floor.
Mindscape

The way she says Lucknow, she wraps it between a morsel of roti and nutmeg-scented curry,

while smoothing the pleats on her Eid clothes,
when she says Lucknow, she says it with just her mouth,

her eyes remain unchanged, she says Lucknow as if it were any other word which could be formed

by the soft click of her tongue against her teeth, having spent six years in Europe,

the word Lucknow is the name of yet another decaying, South Asian metropolis,

that one leaves behind, when she says Lucknow she means loadshedding, nepotism, unemployment,

not peepal trees, mango orchards and havelis with expansive courtyards where the women of the house sat and braided each other’s hair, while reciting the ghazals of Ghalib, Josh and Mir,

Because when my grandmother said Lucknow she wrenched the name from her gut,

Lucknow was a leaden hole, a slow churn, when she said Lucknow,

her speech curdled, the veins under her skin became keen, Lucknow, the soil that eroded the papery bones of the beloved; Lucknow, the sway of palanquin rides, Lucknow, the postures of paisley,

When she said Lucknow, she meant a place where the scent of jasmine hung so thick, it cut through skin,

the residue of sweet peas and bougainvillea lined the streets, Because when she said Lucknow, she swirled it in gravy

with her trigger finger and fed it to her children, because when she said Lucknow, it rippled through mustard
fields, sun-seared streets, through barbed borderlands, leaves of peepal and neem,

before laying its cold cheek on our chests.