

November 2020

On Elsewhereness: Notes from the Road, 2016

Uzma Falak
University of Heidelberg

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya>

Recommended Citation

Falak, Uzma. 2020. On Elsewhereness: Notes from the Road, 2016. *HIMALAYA* 40(1).
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol40/iss1/13>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

This Literature is brought to you for free and open access by the DigitalCommons@Macalester College at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact scholarpub@macalester.edu.

On Elsewhereness: Notes from the Road, 2016

Uzma Falak

The Indian state's war-on-many-fronts against the people of Kashmir through its several occupational structures, entails among other things, a stringent regulation of affect, perception management and narrative control. The repetitive brutality and violence engenders unmitigated suffering which destroys language but also 'writes' itself through its own unspeakability, even as memory is torn asunder and memorialisation becomes arduous. *On Elsewhereness* attempts to restore the disrupted itineraries of memory and language without invisibilizing the disruptions and seeks to retrieve the singularity of acts of violence; challenging the state's regulation of affect by producing and circulating an alternate people's affect. Through a poetic inquiry based on autoethnography, bricolage and fragmentary narrative form, the text peregrinates between a traveloguesque imagery, an epistolary form, fragmentary memoryscapes, 'eyewitness' testimonials, newspaper excerpts, extracts from a physics primer, inventory-like accounts, and other intertextual materials. These textual

slivers not only interrupt and are interrupted by each other but they also converse with each other. Through the acts of the text, are explored, the complex meanings of home and elsewhere, belonging and dislocation, unmaking- making of history and memory. The piece attempts to foreground histories which haunt the sanitised spaces of official museums and memorials and dominant history-writing practices. The wayfaring text, including the writing in the margins, engages with the space of writing: the emplacement of words and worlds on 'paper'. The visuality of the text seeks to foreground both the unspeakability in the face of a repetitive and organised violence and the scream which renders itself possible, making its way through the impossibility and the impassibility, as a limitless war constantly inscribes upon and through us and the work of systematic annihilation goes uninterrupted. It invites and allows for a non-linear reading, which may be disorienting and disrupting – a mimesis of the permanent 'elsewhere' in its myriad meanings.

Please find enclosed a few abridged silences.

In Weimar's morning light in my worn out shoes I walk towards a window. There is a lapse before my eyes mould light into dark. Is dark just an absence of light?

In the Death Room light, listless, lingers on the poet's bed and chair bearing the memory of his death. *Mehr Licht*—more light, Goethe had said before dying on this chair. The poet's pillow sleeps in the shadows.

I feel repulsed by this beginning, by this account of light.

Kus Chuve, Who is it? He had asked me lying on the hospital bed, a day after he was shot in the eyes. The question lugged the weight of the last speck of light.

He had seen hundreds of stars before his eyes bled into darkness.
"The darkness was nothing compared to the pain
...Maybe I wouldn't have felt that pain so much if I could see something.
Maybe darkness added to the pain.
My days are like nights. Sometimes I simply cry."¹

I simply.

"One of the most striking phenomena of vision is the dark adaptation of the eye. If we go into dark from a brightly lighted room, we cannot see very well for a while but gradually things become more and more apparent and eventually we can see something where we could see nothing before."²

On the cobblestone streets, the 10 x 10 cm *Stolpersteine*, 'Stumbling Stones'—brass plaques commemorating victims of Holocaust—lie scattered like remnants of human flesh and belonging after an air strike or a bomb blast in faraway lands including the City of Seven Bridges where I was born: a limb here, a bone there, a bewildered shoe in the middle of the road like an exclamation mark or an apostrophe on a blank sheet, a bunch of keys calm on the stairs to the bridge, remnants of a cloth tangled in the barricades by the bridge, a torn umbrella on the sidewalks not waiting for its keeper— a number 12 or a number 30 in the morning newspaper, a broken earring in nobody's way in a quiet corner near the sewers, a rosary fallen apart, few broken porcelain cups near a bunker unable to reach home, bruised baskets of the fruit vendor at the mosque door, roses picked before dawn by the old perfumer to be burnt on slow fire in his perfumery now charred on the ground, and blood, pools of blood and breaths and memory which will be scrubbed and washed off with a broom and buckets full of water and forgetting, to clear the streets for another day, for there is no time to grieve in these faraway lands (and no home for a full stop)

On the brass plates of the *Stolpersteine* are engraved the names, birth dates, deportation, and death

'*Hier Wohnte...*'

'Here Lived...'

Mother walks through a military curfew upon shattered windows bearing no address. Upon little rocks still lugging the memory of the mountains they once were a part of. The phantom city, a thousand quivering lips, stammer into my ears through the long distance

impassable (adjective)
: incapable of being passed, travelled, crossed, or surmounted.

Roads and train tracks pass through (a reflection of my body) on the tram-door, freeing me of my corporeality.

In his Theory of Colours, Goethe states: "Light and darkness, brightness and obscurity, or if a more general expression is preferred, light and its absence, are necessary to the production of colour... Colour itself is a degree of darkness."

A friend had lent me a copy of José Saramago's *Blindness* - a chronicle of a sudden epidemic of mass blinding in an unnamed city; the characters lose their eyesight in a moment's blink, amidst their everyday, for instance, while waiting at a traffic signal. While reading the book, I would sometimes shut my eyes and walk around my house in dark. Few pages into the book, a sudden phone call stuttered news of a friend whose name means Life: "He has been hit by pellets. In his eyes. As he was walking home." I had seen him just a week ago.

I abandoned the book.

"Time is what happens when nothing else happens... What really matters anyway is not how we define time but how we measure it. One way of measuring time is to utilize something which happens over and over again in a regular fashion— something which is periodic. For example, a day. A day seems to happen over and over again."
-*The Feynman Lectures on Physics*

HERE LIVED ROSA SCHMIDT BORN
AS GRILL- FREIMANN BIRTH. 1882
DEPORTED 1944
MURDERED 1944 IN AUSCHWITZ

phone call punctuated with time lags, in many a broken languages that a native speaks.

Qayamat gai, Qayamat cha gasaan, Qayamat Karekh

In Kashmir, the Doomsday transforms from a noun to verb. From a day to the everyday.

Distance is directly proportional to Time.

Mourners extend their empty palms across miles, beckoning me to complete the semi-circle, the arch of singing bodies— bridges over a river of bruised metaphors, so they can begin to move to and fro around the dead and sing till nights and days turn to dust in their embrace.

I ache to plant *nun posh, aeshq pechaan, aarval3*, in this dust. There is a poem somewhere in the folds of this ache. But what is inside the ache itself?

Speed is inversely proportional to Time.

I steal a palmful of clouds of home skies and walk away like a gravedigger walks away after a day's work.

Pine cones lie scattered in gardens of the Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp in Oranienburg like shards of broken glass on *Kristalnacht*. The overcast sky— a vast foggy mirror.

The lettering built into the iron-entrance of the extermination camp reads, *Arbeit Macht Frei - 'Work Sets you Free'*

Should I mind the gap? Was I on the wrong train?
Should I enter as a tourist, as a witness, as a wayfarer?
I embody fogginess of the mirror—

The Stone Wall bordered once by Electric Fences

The Gravel of the forbidden Death Strip

The sign reading

Neutral Zone, *Es wird ohne Anruf sofort scharf geschossen*
(Immediate Shooting Without Warning)

Undressing Rooms disguised once as Shower Rooms

Gas chambers - 7 feet by 9 feet, once filled with Zyklon B

Ovens and Crematoriums

Posters and Photographs

Glass Case Displays: Striped Uniforms and Yellow Stars, Death Certificates, Medicine Ampoules, Graphs, Postcards, Poems, Drawings and Stamps

Barracks, Urinals and Gallows, Bunk Beds, Prison Cells, Height Gauges, Hanging Posts, The Roll-Call area, Execution Trenches, Watchtowers A Museum of Mass Graves, Camp of Silence, The Infirmary Barracks Corpse Cellar

Close to the Crematorium,
is a monument for those who died in the camp— three bodies fixed in stone—

two inmates hanging on to a cloth holding a corpse of the third

Historians might still write us down as a Valley of Flowers.

Humaira treasures a small box holding her dead mother's belongings including a comb entwined with a strand of her hair, and a mirror. Her mother, Hanifa, who was shot by the troopers in 2010, had sustained five bullet injuries and was paralysed for a year before she died. Humaira was 11 years old then.

An account of mirror is incomplete without an account of light. Can a mirror exist without anyone looking into it? Can a mirror exist in Saramago's unnamed city?

The first mirror was still water, sometimes collected in vessels. The first human-made mirrors were created from obsidian, a black volcanic glass. In *'The Mirror: A History'*, Sabine-Melchior-Bonnet attributing it to Socrates, writes: "The mirror, a tool by which to *know thyself*, invited man to not mistake himself for God."

There are many stories one could write about a mirror, like that of the Narcissus and his curse.

At the foot of the memorial visitors have left mementos: candles, pieces of paper with messages, flowers lying next to each other like graves in a cemetery, stones of all shapes
Spread on the concrete, is the flag of the State of Israel held down by tiny rocks opposing the winds, one on its heart, the blue star. Another such piece of cloth lies crumpled in the shadow of the three bodies fixed in stone.

That summer evening in the sitting room, days before I walked away clenching the skies between my teeth, my siblings and I were playing a word-association game, when the dispatch arrived like a sparrow with a bruised leg suddenly appearing at the kitchen window.

Moments later I stood at the window of my room and a sudden surge of wind took everything in its violent embrace; the washing line oscillated like the mourners, clothes like eager bodies wanting to throw themselves onto the dead. A phone call from a friend in another city— *Burhan*

Incapable of speech,
Her voice and my own became the howling of the wind.
The Proof, The Evidence

Windmills in the vast cornfields stand like sentinels against Berlin skies. A grasshopper clings to the front mirror of the car shrouding partly the safety warning—
objects in the mirror are closer than they appear

German radio broadcasts news from Kashmir drowning the roar of the speedy cars on the highway— I hear myself falling apart in many languages
Es ist ein blutiger Sommer in Kaschmir -
It's a bloody summer in Kashmir

Rain, fierce,
clatters against the windows
Lilies and daisies tremble by the railway tracks Car radio switches to Beatles
ob-la-di, ob-la-da, life goes on, brah

Shantanu and Nikhil present to you their collection *Kashmiriyat*, with a 'Bullet-Pellet Effect'
Two Hundred Thousand mourners,
Hundred funerals
Perforated guts
Lacerated backs
Gashed bearts
Ambulance sirens
Epidemic of Dead Eyes
Thousand Retinas
12-bore shotguns
A high-velocity projectile 2mm-4mm with sharp edges.
400-600 lead pellets

In the extermination camp, I walk from Tower A, the entrance, to Station Z, the exit, last stop for the inmates, housing the mass execution facility. The A-Z journey, according to the Memorial Site, meant to be a fascist joke.

When I say Rain, what comes to your mind? Don't say, Funeral.

In Speech Act Theory, 'performative utterances' are utterances which in the appropriate circumstances, are neither descriptive nor evaluative, but count as actions, i.e., create the situation rather than describing or reporting on it. They perform the action to which they refer. *Burhan* became such an utterance.

Grasshoppers can only jump forward.
They can't jump backward or sideways.

In '*The Interpretation of Dreams*' attributed to Ibn Sirin, locusts mean an adversity, a trial, a calamity, destructive rain, or an occupation by a vehement army.

Home, is a place where one's body will be flown to, where one is buried in.
Home is a place where to and in coexist.

1100 km/hour

9 July -11 August:

Three Thousand Seven Hundred and Sixty Five cartridges Four Hundred and Fifty metallic balls,

One Million Seven Hundred thousand pellets

Twelve eye-surgeries per day

To the cornea through the retina

“Mutilated retinas, severed optic nerves, irises seeping out like puddles of ink.

...

“Once it goes in the eye, it rotates...

and destroys everything there inside.

It’s physics. This is a high-velocity body. It releases a high amount of energy inside. The lens, the iris, the retina get matted up.

...

“Microscopic camera inside the boy’s eye...

At times the image is cloudy, a flashlight searching in the fog; at one point there are swimming glints of colored light, like those cast by a chandelier in the sun.”⁴

A heart with a metal pellet

X-ray scans

A constellation of wounds

Curfew imposed

Curfew re-imposed

“There will be no compromise on the security and integrity of the country and no compromise with the people who indulge in violence

... Kashmir has faced violence and wars, it needs development which was denied for past 60 years...”⁵

“We disapprove. But we will have to persist with this necessary evil till we find a non-lethal alternative.”⁶

All Party Delegation

Judicial Probes

“Mann Ki Baat: Every life lost in Kashmir is a loss to our nation.”⁷

In the children’s hospital, new-borns in glass cases briefly open their eyes, listening to the sounds of the city falling, breaking into a song of death.

Under Polish skies

in the streets of Warsaw’s Old Town

Roma children play accordion

I think of the solitary chestnut tree in grandfather’s barren orchard and

count the pine cones in my pockets

Body count in Kashmir kept rising that bloody summer

ob-la-di, ob-la-da

“Color is not a question of the physics of the light itself. Color is a sensation...”

- The Feynman Lectures on Physics

“With disbelief I touch my own hand.

It—is, and I— am...”

- Czeslaw Milosz

“...and to Thee is the end of all journeys”

- 2:285, The Quran

How many losses count as history?

Sincerely yours,

Uzma Falak is a DAAD doctoral fellow at the Department of Anthropology, University of Heidelberg. Her work has appeared in *The Economic and Political Weekly*, *Al Jazeera*, *Warscapes*, *The Caravan*, *Himal Southasian*, *Anthropology and Humanism*, *The Electronic Intifada*, and anthologies like *Of Occupation and Resistance*, *Gossamer: An Anthology of Contemporary World Poetry*, among others. Her film 'Till then the Roads Carry Her' has been screened at the 2nd Memory Studies Association Conference (University of Copenhagen), The 24th European Conference on South Asian Studies (University of Warsaw), *Cine Diaspora* (New York), University of Heidelberg, *Karlstorkino*, *Tate Modern*, *IAWRT Asian Women's Film Festival* among others.

She was an invited artist-scholar at *Warwick's Tate Exchange, 2018 (Tate Modern, London)*. Her ethnographic poem 'Point of Departure' won an Honourable Mention in the *Society for Humanistic Anthropology's 2017 Ethnographic Poetry Award*.

Contextual Note

In September 2016, following Burhan Wani's death, the Indian army launched Operation Calm Down in Indian-controlled Kashmir, which meant a deployment of additional 4000 troops strengthening the already existing military structures in the region. This was followed by an Operation All Out to 'flush out' the militants 'until there is peace'. However, it is the presence of more than 600,000 Indian troops and other occupational structures in Kashmir that the people see as a threat to peace. The term 'security forces' is a misnomer for the Indian troops in Kashmir who are seen as a violence-perpetuating machine responsible for killings, torture, enforced disappearances, rape, mass blinding, harassment, usurping of resources, exploitation, and other forms of *zulm* inscribed on landscapes, streets, homes, skies, and bodies. 22-year-old Burhan Wani, who was 15, when he had joined the armed struggle for liberation, was killed in an anti-insurgency operation on 08 July 2016. Moments after his departure arrived at every window in Kashmir, fervent gusts of winds roared across landscapes within and without as it began raining—softening the earth in which he, ferried by a sea of people, was to be buried the next day in his hometown Tral. Tens and thousands of people bid him farewell with unending final prayers, screams, cries, and songs. Mourners and witnesses made their way through this sea, wanting to pour the fistfuls of soil they had been clutching in their hands. The farewell defied closure. Amid a curfew and a stringent communication clampdown, hundreds were killed and thousands were wounded and

maimed in the following months. Many lost their eyesight forever. Hospitals struggled to cope up with what came to be called as an 'epidemic of dead eyes'. Five-year-old Zohra was wounded by pellets in her arms, legs and forehead as she was going to bed. Fourteen-year-old Insha had just opened a window when hundreds of pellets hit her face turning her eyes into wounds, forever embracing the dark. Fourteen-year-old Munaza died after inhaling PAVA (Pelargonic Acid Vanillyl Amide) shell smoke, advertised by the state, as 'non-lethal', like the pellet guns.

Blinding light shone upon the cobblestones. My eyes struggled through an amorphous in-between space, neither light nor dark, as I peered into the darkness of Goethe's room at the Goethe-Nationalmuseum in Weimar. I was haunted by the faces of so many people in Kashmir, for whom this struggle with light and dark, a quotidian life process—the ability of eyes to adjust to dark after exposure to bright light—had come to mean nothing, in a matter of seconds. My phone screen buzzed with pictures of bandaged eyes and X-ray scans of pellet-ridden skulls.

'Leaving', especially in relation to a place like Kashmir, is an intense and intricate emotion laden with fragility and fraught with several quandaries. I lugged 'home' across a rugged terrain of memory, death, survivors-guilt, fear, homelessness, disquiet, as I traversed across cities which couldn't translate me.

Goethe's home, a hospital bed in Srinagar, the Sachsenhausen concentration camp about 36 kilometres from Berlin, the space of a mirror, Warsaw's old town, aftermath of a massacre on an unnamed street, the small brass memorial stones called the Stolpersteine or the Stumbling Stones dotting the cobblestones in Germany, tram doors reflections, a funeral, phone calls from home, news: 'the year of mass blinding'—*On Elsewhereness*, dwells in and is dwelled by several worlds.

Endnotes

1. Excerpted from <<https://india.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/11/25/casualties-of-kashmirs-unrest-live-in-the-dark/>>
2. Please see Chapter 35 titled 'Color Vision', in *Feynman's Lectures on Physics* (Vol 1) by Richard P. Feynman
3. *Nunposh*, *aeshq pechaan* and *aarval* are names of flowering plants, in Kashur (one of Kashmir's native language). *Nunposh* refers to garden violets, *aeshq pechaan* is a kind of a flowering vine, and *aarval* refers to wild roses.

4. Excerpted from <<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/29/world/asia/pellet-guns-used-in-kashmir-protests-cause-dead-eyes-epidemic.html>>

5. Excerpted from <<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/No-compromise-with-those-indulging-in-violence-in-Kashmir-says-Arun-Jaitley/articleshow/53796379.cms>>

6. Excerpted from <<https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/kashmir-pellet-guns-chilli-based-shells-burhan-wani-killing-mehbooba-mufti-3011541/>>

7. Excerpted from <<https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/mann-ki-baat-every-life-lost-in-kashmir-is-a-loss-to-our-nation-says-pm-modi/>>

References

Austin, John L. 1990. "Performative Utterances." *Philosophical papers*, edited by J.O. Urmson and G.J Warnock, 3rd edition, 233-252. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Barry, Ellen. 2016. "An Epidemic of 'Dead Eyes' in Kashmir as India Uses Pellet Guns on Protesters". *The New York Times*, 28 August. <<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/29/world/asia/pellet-guns-used-in-kashmir-protests-cause-dead-eyes-epidemic.html>> (accessed on 09 May 2020)

Express Web Desk. 2016a. "Mann Ki Baat: Every life lost in Kashmir is a loss to our nation, says PM Narendra Modi". *The Indian Express*, 29 August. <<https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/mann-ki-baat-every-life-lost-in-kashmir-is-a-loss-to-our-nation-says-pm-modi/>> (accessed on 01 February 2019)

———. 2016b. "Kashmir unrest: From pellet guns to chilli shells, the full story". *The Indian Express*, 3 September. <<https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/kashmir-pellet-guns-chilli-based-shells-burhan-wani-killing-mehbooba-mufti-3011541/>> (accessed on 09 May 2020)

Feynman, Richard P., Robert B. Leighton, and Matthew Sands. 2011. *The Feynman Lectures on Physics, Vol. I: The New Millennium Edition: Mainly Mechanics, Radiation, and Heat*. New York: Basic Books.

Ibn Sīrīn, Muḥammad. 2007. *Interpretation of Dreams: With an Alphabetical Index of the Terms*. Beirut: Dar Al-kotob Al-Ilmiyah

Melchior-Bonnet, Sabine. 2001. *The Mirror: A History*. London: Psychology Press.

Miłosz, Czesław. 2003. *New and Collected Poems, 1931-2001*. New York: The Ecco Press.

Press Trust of India. 2016. "No compromise with those indulging in violence in Kashmir, says Arun Jaitley". *The Times of India*, 21 August. <<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/No-compromise-with-those-indulging-in-violence-in-Kashmir-says-Arun-Jaitley/articleshow/53796379.cms>> (accessed on 09 May 2020)

Rafiq, Zahid. 2013. "Casualties of Kashmir's Unrest Live in the Dark". *The New York Times*, 25 November. <<https://india.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/11/25/casualties-of-kashmirs-unrest-live-in-the-dark/>> (accessed on 01 February 2019)

Saramago, José. 2013. *Blindness*. Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Von Goethe, Johann Wolfgang. 1840. *Theory of Colours*. Vol. 3. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Mit Press.