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Uzma Falak

University of Heidelberg

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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, bricollage 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."

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.”

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
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 bod-
ies— 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
Sachsenhausan 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, ‘performat ive 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.”

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

All Party Delegation
Judicial Probes

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

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

How many losses count as history?

Sincerely yours,

“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
hundreds were killed and thousands were wounded and 
a curfew and a stringent communication clampdown, 
cocking in their hands. The farewell defied closure. Amid 
this sea, wanting to pour the fistfuls of soil they had been 
farewell with unending final prayers, screams, cries, and 
hometown Tral. Tens and thousands of people bid him 
bid him by a sea of people, was to be buried the next day in his 
began raining—softening the earth in which he, ferried 
winds roared across landscapes within and without as it 
arrived at every window in Kashmir, fervent gusts of 
struggle for liberation, was killed in an anti-insurgency 
Burhan Wani, who was 15, when he had joined the armed 
exploitation, and other forms of 
rape, mass blinding, harassment, usurping of resources, 
responsible for killings, torture, enforced disappearances, 
‘security forces’ is a misnomer for the Indian troops in 
Kashmir that the people see as a threat to peace. The term 
‘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, 
rage, mass blinding, harassment, usurping of resources, 
exploitation, and other forms of zulm inscribed on land-
scapes, 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 Elsewhere ness, 
dwells in and is dwelled by several worlds.

Endnotes
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.


References


