

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.