

AFZAL AHMED SYED

Poems from  
*Rococo And Other Worlds*

THE DEATH OF STELLA D'CRUZ<sup>1</sup>

On Anklesaria Hospital's fourth floor  
Stella D'Cruz  
died  
leaving over ten thousand unpaid in bills  
Proceedings were initiated  
for her last rites at Our Lady of Fatima Church  
for the overdraft at Allied Bank

A few days ago  
these two institutions had declared her persona non  
grata  
for kissing in public,  
and passing a bad check,  
respectively

With professional skill  
everything was settled  
Around the black coffin  
pews in Our Lady of Fatima filled up

Poorly recorded dirges filled up the church  
for  
the melodious Stella D'Cruz

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<sup>1</sup>“Iṣṭēlā Dī-Krūz kī Maut,” from the author’s collection *Rōkōkō aur Dūsri Dun-ya’ēñ* (Karachi: Āj ki Kitābēñ, 2000), 22–23.

WE NEED A WHOLE LOT OF FLOWERS<sup>2</sup>

A whole lot of flowers  
 to gather at the feet of the dead  
 we need a whole lot of flowers  
 to cover the faces of corpses in gunny-sacs  
 A whole annual flower show  
 should be preserved in Edhi's morgue  
 to keep at the foot of graves  
 dug in the police graveyard for the designated dead  
 A spray of flowers from the balcony in bloom  
 for the woman shot dead  
 at the bus stop  
 Sky-blue flowers  
 to tickle  
 the two youths lost to eternal sleep in a yellow cab  
 Dried flowers  
 to caparison  
 and restore a mutilated corpse  
 We need a whole lot of flowers  
 for the wounded  
 languishing in clinics  
 that neither have the Japanese rock-  
 nor any other variety of garden  
 We need a whole lot of flowers  
 for one half of them will succumb to their wounds  
 We need a forest of nocturnal flowers  
 for those who could not sleep for the report of gunfire  
 we need a whole lot of flowers  
 for a whole lot of rueful people  
 we need anonymous flowers  
 to cloak the stripped girl  
  
 we need a whole lot of flowers  
  
 We need a whole lot of flowers  
 on a whole lot of dancing creepers  
 that we could train to screen this city

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<sup>2</sup>"Hamēñ Buhāt Sārē Phūl Čāhiyēñ," in *ibid.*, 36–37.

FOR US<sup>3</sup>

A charming girl  
with Polynesian eyes  
shall sell invites to our benefit-dinner  
in a North American city

The old dames of Vienna  
shall gather for us cast off clothes  
that shall be shipped for Karachi  
from Marseilles

Brunei Darus-Salam  
shall accept from Karachi  
fifty foundlings

In Bangladesh  
a base minority  
shall demonstrate to show solidarity with us

Sarajevo's Stefanovski shall be commissioned  
to compile a directory  
of the Karachi dead

TIME IS AGAINST THEM<sup>4</sup>

They are not waiting for some Galileo  
to construct a giant clock  
to be installed into the city's commemorative wall

Besides reflecting our history  
this vacuum  
could be fitted out with a swing  
on the International Day of Women

The Chinese troupe  
could leap through it from off their stilts  
From it

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<sup>3</sup>"Hamārē Liyē," in *ibid.*, 42-43.

<sup>4</sup>"Vaqt Unkā Dushman Hai," in *ibid.*, 51-52.

an abridged corpse could be hung  
It could be stone-walled  
with bricks from Mohenjo-Daro

WHY WOULDN'T THE INDUS WASH AWAY OUR SORROWS<sup>5</sup>

Of all the blood  
that was spilled  
Charles Napier was absolved  
in his own eyes  
and so was the case, a century-and-half later  
with his successors

Even otherwise  
everything had remained unchanged  
but for Tabasco sauce  
that had replaced half-ground chilies  
in government institutions  
for use on women in physical remand  
and improved output  
that rendered it possible to sooner dispatch men  
to an elegant table  
where the official certificates  
of their death-by-natural-causes were gathered

ROBERT CLIVE<sup>6</sup>

“Take away all my riches,  
and leave me my good name!”

He was likewise treated

He had stopped taking opium to kill the pain

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<sup>5</sup>“Daryā-e Sindh Hamārē Dukh Kyūn Bahā Nahīn Lē Jātā,” in *ibid.*, 55–56.

<sup>6</sup>“Rōbarī Kilāṅv,” in *ibid.*, 61–62.

The ghost of Omichund no longer paraded before his  
eyes  
He was aware  
his monopoly over luck and truth had ended

The rains no longer  
would wet the enemy's powder  
Standing under his feet  
no ruler  
would offer him truce

Still he was the one  
who had won a historic battle  
for the loss of fourteen sepoy

He lived in a difficult world  
we could deplore his suicide

A PICTURE ON PAGE 163<sup>7</sup>

She has no occasion  
to remember her city  
sitting by a foreign river's bank

She is perfectly happy in the Mahakhali settlement  
which is the subject of discussion  
in a lecture delivered in Copenhagen

She could even swim  
to the garment factory  
where she started work  
after finishing her matriculation

Every week, on a shared VCR  
she watches three movies in succession  
And on the first of every month  
buys a whole kilo of hilsa-fish for home

She has no sick father,  
reprobate brother,

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<sup>7</sup>“Şafha Nambar 163 par Ēk Taşvīr,” in *ibid.*, 63–65.

or an unknown enemy

And it is not that  
she is fated to remain a spinster

There is a boy  
He teaches in a school  
And has no mind to become a driver in New York  
or a cook in Karachi

She is happy  
under her tin roof  
in her house of bamboo walls

When she was not chosen for a role  
in the community theater  
she felt no regrets

Just today she was included  
in a contingent of girls  
protesting outside the office of the water supply  
authority

Nobody taught her how to be happy  
She knew it by instinct  
She does not know where the poverty-line  
crosses her body

Her poor country  
has become independent twice

She is freer and happier  
than the rest of the world

#### WHY WOULDN'T AMINA JILANI WRITE<sup>8</sup>

Why wouldn't Amina Jilani write  
for the newspaper  
whose sixteen per cent subscribers  
spend twenty times our per capita income

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<sup>8</sup>“Amīna Jilānī Kyūñ Nahiñ Likhī,” in *ibid.*, 76–77.

on their wardrobe?

Why doesn't Amina Jilani write  
instead of bland anecdotes  
the numbers of Swiss bank accounts  
where our looted wealth is hoarded?

Why wouldn't Amina Jilani report  
that Tacitus wrote  
Nero had an old fixation with riding a four-horse-drawn  
chariot?

Why doesn't she allude to the black Mercedes as Nero's  
equipage?

To create sensation why wouldn't Amina Jilani report  
that in a reputable airline  
passengers are served kibble?

Why wouldn't Amina Jilani broach  
exhausted issues—  
Extra judicial murders? Water-famine?

It's not that Amina Jilani writes recipes  
for Noques de pommes and Polenta

Amina Jilani realizes  
the Clifton bridge is strongly-built  
and her current year was ushered in by an accident

Amina Jilani realizes  
that during an encounter with dacoits  
the dentist run over by a jeep  
is still in a coma

—*Translated by Musharraf Ali Farooqi*