

The background of the cover is a dramatic seascape. A large, multi-masted sailing ship is seen from a low angle, struggling against massive, white-capped waves. In the foreground, a small wooden boat is partially submerged and tilted, with a large anchor visible. The sky is filled with heavy, grey clouds, creating a somber and intense atmosphere. The overall color palette is muted, with greys, blues, and browns.

# **Alack, The Ashen Waves**

— of —

## **The Sea**

Selected Poems

**HIBAH SHABKHEZ**

**ALACK, THE ASHEN  
WAVES  
OF THE SEA  
SELECTED POEMS**

By  
Hibah Shabkhez

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*DEDICATION*

*This book is dedicated to my best friend, Maleeha Zaman Khan.*

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## A Melody

I transcend myself like a melody  
I ebb and foam like the tide  
I drown laughing like a torn city  
In the darkness of the night

I journey far like a grizzled swan  
I wax every day like the sun  
I wane again like the old elan  
Driven by age into a herd of one

I cast my net like a fisherboy  
I draw pearl-ashes like wildfire  
I shrink away like pain-singed joy  
Lest I drown me in mine own mire

## **Ash-Born Freedom**

Raw soul wrung out from the squeezed dishcloth of the pain  
Breaks me free of love-life-sorrow-wonder - even of the pain

Strips off French, Urdu, English, Punjabi - leaves fragments  
Of language floating upon the rim of the blood and the pain

One full-throated laugh in drizzling grey-dragon winter skies  
Weights the soul-scales over knowledge, liberty, over even the pain

She walks in beauty upon the razor edge of solitude's knife  
Devouring eyes willing her to wilt, demeaning even the pain

Merge memory and longing into the morning mist, Fairy  
Let us gloat over this ash-born freedom even through the pain

## **Black Roses**

I flee the jaws of Time's story  
As they snip me apart twig by twig

Black Roses nesting  
In the flesh that was broken  
Sand sweeps in, questing

Eternity's whittling me down to a sprig  
An Enting lost in a paper factory

## Blue Castles Of Wood

We scurry past each other, dipping heads in unison  
Ignoring the broken clasps slowly coming undone  
As out of her ancient valise a battered laptop peers  
And in my inkstained hand a grubby flashcard appears  
I swing onto the bus; she settles into the bistrot chair  
Both by our silent unsmiling nod made once more aware  
Of our unquenched yearning, a fellow burning-desire  
To build blue castles of wood in the heart of a forest fire

The garçon sets before her the swirling illusion  
Which wreathes her as the bus glides away  
It will sputter, fade, wither and grow cold  
Wasted, untasted, growing wrinkly and old  
To feed her dream of being loved one day  
While with one finger trembling but sure  
She stabs out letter after letter in a profusion  
Almost more stirring than quill-scripts, those  
Wild lurching things 'gnarled, snarled and obscure'  
Made of words a wistful hovering muse chose

"Hélas, Madame, she keeled over and died.  
Emailing a journal her 501st submission;  
Her only son sent a letter of permission  
Bidding us donate her things to the refugees."  
I see the old broken valise being untied  
And a child stroking the battered silver edge  
Making out her sprawling words by degrees  
I see them driven into misery like a wedge -  
"Ah non, Madame, I sold the ordi as scrap  
For they told me it was useless old crap"

Clinging to the walls of my flame-licked blue castle  
I watch hers burn down.  
No towering stone keep will follow it now.

## Bone Chopsticks

Lightning bolt shot through with gold  
Then a heart worn on a chain  
A trailer of cotton stacked to be sold  
Then drenched in the summer rain

A cold set of bone chopsticks  
Five. All alone, all useless  
The chill by the brake. The deer licks  
They add up to my own Loch Ness

A world of flies and sun-flecked earth-song  
Of dreams and Sunday painters  
Of ice and mango-demons dancing along  
Of screams and shooting strangers

## **Custard Suitcase**

O, look not upon me, upon how I curdle  
At the shrivelled bottleneck of my life;  
Lest the truth of my quaking at each hurdle  
Among the clinking teaspoons become rife!

For I'm the old custard suitcase in the room  
Now pretending to be made of new leather;  
For I'm the wilting rose skulking in the gloom  
Muttering prayers for springlier weather

## Daemons Of Langues Étrangères

The crimsoning cloud in its lead-blue quilt  
Turns grinning from the gnarled stone hand outspread  
For daisy-dishes from its furrows spilt

Musing schemes to win fresh sounds to a head  
Soaked hoary in the sounds of one seule langue  
It drifts on, eternal wandering shred

Of violin langue-daemons in shushed song,  
Preaching verbs to strings freshly foreign-gilt  
That upon the tongue like apricots throng

## Fleeced With Moss

A bleak pencil garden's grey smiling face  
Bled in with a stencil's fey laughing grace  
Will make a home of a stray unframed place  
Drape it all in familiar home-spun lace

Into the slate dish  
Thrust each quotidian wraith  
Forced into English

These skins of slaughtered goats demand a voice  
For this shadow of their souls beg a choice  
But they shall nathless be dragged in, squealing  
From blows of my pencil ashen, reeling

Betrayed heirlooms, fade  
In this bleak English corset  
Pose as rich warm jade

## Footprints

I dreamt of the Eagle's mountain  
From my nest upon the open plain;  
I dreamt of the river cusp reflecting  
My singed heart in a snow-fountain

My footprints upon the golden sands  
Were swept out by her trembling hands  
Lest the seeker unwarily should tread  
My path instead of the gilded lands.

## Five Fried Raisins

Five fried raisins frizzling in the sun  
I stoop at a ray and pick up one  
Searing scorching wizened brown bullet  
Slides relentlessly down my bruised gullet

Four fried raisins frizzling in the sun  
I stoop to scry and my hair comes undone  
Burning bronzing the twisting black curl  
Unwinds faster than the cobra's whirl

Three fried raisins frizzling in the sun  
I stoop to stem blood and let the water run  
Splashing splashing wheezing as it gluts  
Swells little brown rocklets to stout walnuts

Two fried raisins frizzling in the sun  
I stoop to speak to them one on one  
Blanching, blithering, away they turn  
Blustering brown and ready to burn

One fried raisin frizzling in the sun  
I stoop to search and I find none  
Like a wick licked by flame to the quick  
The sun devours and strides past with a click

## Gaze At The Stars

Gaze at the stars and spin me a tale  
Of a wish with a golden crown for a sail  
For a wind a child's sweet sobbing breath  
And the heart of a dragon that knows no death

Gaze at the stars and sing me a song  
Tell me I was right all along, yes, all along!  
To keep a handful of courage and barter the rest  
Tell me I did it all for the best, yes, for the best!

Gaze at the stars and veil them from me  
With those irises deep as a nut-brown sea  
Bury them deep, these clarion-bell voices  
That murmur still of honour and noble choices!

Gaze at the stars and weave me a net  
Cross your gossamer hair with twine and set  
My weary years a maze of elusive young ways  
A rest and escape for my dreary last days

Gaze at the stars and spin me a tale  
Of a wish with a golden crown for a sail  
For a wind a child's sweet sobbing breath  
And the heart of a dragon that knows no death

Gaze at the stars and lilt me a lay  
To keep wretched reality far, far away!  
Croon of the glitter of swords and of battle fey  
Never of the laughing dead – so young, so gay!

Gaze at the stars and draw me a throne  
Speak not to me of the splintering spine-bone  
Of the nation fated to bear me aloft  
Sketch instead my pennants fluttering oft!

Gaze at the stars and dream me a land  
All mine, all mine, in the palm of my hand  
Colour it smooth snow-white and not bright rose-red  
For the colour of victory is the colour of the dead!

Gaze at the stars and spin me a tale  
Of a wish with a golden crown for a sail  
For a wind a child's sweet sobbing breath  
And the heart of a dragon that knows no death

Gaze at the stars and fill me a cup  
With the sands of life stuff it quite up  
So when old man Time says I ought to be going  
I'll contrive somehow to keep it overflowing

Gaze at the stars and brew me a lie  
Sweeten the shrinking gazes that dart me by  
Fix me a potion, a potent antidote  
Staunch the stream of life, from birth to death devote!

Gaze at the stars and hew me a shield  
A screen I may between me and myself wield  
And bring back to me that hazily glimpsed hour  
When the fen of this world was an innocent flower

Gaze at the stars and spin me a tale  
Of a wish with a golden crown for a sail  
For a wind a child's sweet sobbing breath  
And the heart of a dragon that knows no death

## Grief's Eternal Day

Once upon a time in a stainless-steel dream  
Two famelicose smiles devoured a dead scream  
Chewing on its gristle, hollowing out its dune  
Crumbling stray cinders into a solid prune

In a withering wilting world upon a lyre  
I smudged scorched faults with a disdain  
That belied my quaking waffle's refrain  
Festering, blistering, seeping sputtering fire

"What if I did steal, if I did once lie,  
For the hunger that would not let me die?  
I am one of you again!  
Let me in, I paid!  
I am one of you, by pain,  
By shame endured, by the fell horror  
By the blood that washes away honour!"

But echoing in your husk, flétrie and flayed  
You heard the scream, only the dread scream  
That we hollowed out once upon a dream  
In a cage of stainless steel so dearly purchased

Crying: 'O sea-dragons, sea dragons, melt away!  
Come drown our dawnsun another day.  
Your pristine glory, born of quelled sorrow  
Shall never make a today of a morrow'

## Heal Me Slowly

Heal me slowly, O death, heal me slowly  
Leave me the day's dying light  
Come for me gently in the night  
Heal me slowly, O death, heal me slowly  
Leave me a little while my pain  
Let me watch a sun set again  
Heal me slowly, O death, heal me slowly  
The scent of new-born summer lingers  
Mingles with winter's cold fish fingers  
Heal me slowly, O death, heal me slowly  
Let me taste one more mango  
Leave me to dance another tango  
Heal me slowly, O death, heal me slowly  
Come for me gently in the night  
Leave me the day's dying light  
Heal me slowly, O death, heal me slowly

## Here

Here we lay etched upon the grass  
The sun rained down in broken rays  
Seared to smudges, fried-onion brass  
The colour that will haunt our days

Here we stood carved into a tree  
Wobbly letters at the ends of a spear  
Driven through a heart doomed to be  
The lodestone of every shattered tear

Here we sailed forth in a cockle-shell  
Round the world, round and back again  
Here the ocean sounded its old knell  
Whirled us back into the old pain

## Homespun Lantern

An hope shines brightest in the dark  
Light up the lanterns in a blazing arc  
For hope that shines is hope that pines  
And despair swells greater at every spark

Beyond the realms of human sight  
There dwelt anon a crystal light  
Bright as the darkness of day  
It vowed unto Moonsun to stay

Upon the lighting of the world intent  
Until the eternal lanterns were spent  
And across the sky soared the world's soul  
Trapped in the whinny of a newborn foal

'Oh Rose! Oh Rose!' Quavered the Nightingale  
'Grant me a scent of thy bittersweet ale!  
'Woulds't rob me of it?' 'Aye!' Came the reply  
'To sweeten for thee my desolate wail!'

Die, then, die, die and die again;  
Cling, cling to life and die in vain!  
Or live an instant of fire, an hour of desire,  
Die all at once with joy in your train!

## I Saw A Sea

I saw a sea from a rock  
I nudged it and it was deep  
I saw a sea from a rock  
I nudged it and it fell asleep

I saw a sea, a wonderful sea  
It was spread far and wide  
I saw a sea, a wonderful sea  
It sank not with the tide

I saw a sea the colour of tea  
Fill up the world like a flood  
I saw a sea the colour of tea  
Fill up the world with my blood

I saw my dry veins, gasping and hoarse  
Singing its praises in glee  
I saw my dry veins, gasping and hoarse  
Singing as merrily as merrily can be

I saw the bright dawnsun drowning  
In the dreams of my sleeping sea  
I saw the bright dawnsun drowning  
In the screams of my sleeping sea

## Leached Hearts

Listen to their fricking ticking hearts  
Hammering on like a halfboiled frog's  
Limp lifedraind leg-muscle that jogs  
Hurling in panic upon the lid

Listen to their ripping dripping hearts  
Hastening on like a well-trained dog's  
Limp onebrained leg-muscle that jogs  
Hopping only to do as is bid

Listen to their slaving caving hearts  
Heaping up gold to make me El Cid

## Leached Sand

The cloud-enshrined sun  
The waves leaching away the sand  
A whole world undone

Rose rayonnante de perle  
Soleil soudé aux nuages  
Un sourire de mère

Mussed baby petals  
A rose-stem cut ere the thorn  
A life rudely shorn

## **Life**

Ravaged forests again take root  
Life nestling within the sturdy acorn  
Cannot be throttled

Ashes reborn yield bitter fruit  
Fragrance scattered upon the winds  
Cannot be bottled

## **Life-Line, Line Of My Life**

Gmail, Facebook, blogs, Twitter, Amazon  
One slim black boxlet holds them all;  
My charger, the lifeline to turn it on -  
I need you; please do not let me fall!

Your pins are drooping, your plastic melting  
Poor burnt charger, your veins are kelting  
Ravaged from within by the fire they bore  
The currents they carried from shore to shore

## Marginal Voices

"We like marginal voices" He reassures me  
"Women writers and poets of every nation -"  
'Marginal' voices? But that would be  
Over one half of the world's population.

"All people of colour, handicapped, LGBT -"  
I look at him in some consternation.  
"Just who is left in your 'centre' then?"  
"Why - white, hetero, cisgendered men."

## Mirror Of Truth

A chiliad of voices in one reeling head  
Atop a scarlet thistle-down scarecrow  
Hail soul-silence with an eerie whistle  
Faltering into a vortex of its old echo  
And emerge as one blank incoherent cry

Outside, the pouched-porridge thinkers  
Hollering 'This abyss is false and fissile'  
Look on through starkly glittering blinkers  
And sneer 'Grow a spine and knock it dead  
'The fittest only may survive: do it or die'

The echo creaks, croaks, cracks; is splintered  
Becomes cold ash in a silver-chased urn  
Hissing 'Thus into eternity am I clinkered.  
'Look. Look. Look at what guilt can churn  
'Before you bleach your memory and fly.'

## Nightsun Country

Shall all birds fly to roost in the gloaming  
Even those nestled of old in my heart?  
Those upon the sea in the high tide foaming  
Would they let night nest them apart?

Come sleep, wash away travail and toil  
Bear the grit of misery out to sea  
Wring out the sands, let the waves uncoil  
The star-mantle of night – and let my birds be

Let them awhile in a twilight dream  
Be reborn upon a moonray to forsaken joy  
Let in not day's whiteness, stark as a scream -  
Let it not my dream-birds oust and destroy!

Sleep, be thou their vale of soft rainbows  
Be thou the land where the nightsun glows

## Offer Him A Raise

“Civilisation shall stand in the dock  
And answer for her ways!  
My poesie binds her  
The Guardian of my new age!  
‘How say ye now, Sir?’”  
“I say, Call up the Person from Porlock  
And offer him a raise.”

## O Melon, Mellon, Melna

Away, melna, from thy wincing flesh,  
Thy bitter sun-skin is stript and flung;  
Seed-children aslumber in the mesh  
With thy sun become debris unsung.

For we, canary of thy kind, seek straight thy flesh  
Succulent, yielding, melting on our thirsting tongues

Or worse, fall prey to gouging fingers,  
Birthed from their slimy cocoon of grace,  
Are washed, dried, cracked; the fell tongue lingers  
To devour seed by seed all thy race.

But we, canary of thy kind, seek straight thy flesh  
Succulent, yielding, melting on our thirsting tongues

## O Ye Scum Of The Earth...

I'm an unknown new writer, but then  
I've written stories since I turned ten  
Here's the ripping tale of a grey-winged hen  
Will you publish it for me, please?  
'Back! Scum of the earth, I bid ye cease!  
Begone! O ye scum of the earth, avaunt!'

I've a DELF a DALF, a TOEFL to match  
A sample of my translation I hereby attach  
But a native I'm not – there's the catch  
Will you publish it for me, please?  
'Back! Scum of the earth, I bid ye cease!  
Begone! O ye scum of the earth, avaunt!'

I have no diploma, no job, no PhD  
But I've got 'geek' written all over me  
I've written an article, a beauty,  
Will you publish it for me, please?  
'Back! Scum of the earth, I bid ye cease!  
Begone! O ye scum of the earth, avaunt!'

I'm here to study, to learn how to be  
Tagged and labelled so they'll listen to me  
I've written a thesis, I'd like a degree,  
Will you publish it for me, please?  
'Back! Scum of the earth, I bid ye cease!  
Begone! O ye scum of the earth, avaunt!'

## Quatrains

### **After The Raid, We Found**

One shard of a once-ripped soul  
One crude carving set in stone  
One ring faded and yet whole  
One old song for a bard to hone

### **A Poem On A Paint Chip**

Snow Flurries are fickle:  
Born furiously svelte  
On my skin they will melt  
Into an itchy trickle.

### **A Sun Dreams Of Immortality**

Alas! I am the sun that must set tonight  
O human! Seize my colours as they go!  
Cast them upon yon expanse of white,  
Let me be the 'art' your children know

### **Behold The Bard Turning Over In His Grave**

Fie! Ye laughable epileptics of yon smirched academe  
O ye barefaced bandits, ye glistering madcap mimics  
Your remorseless grovelling doth my oeuvre blaspheme  
Ye dwindle my dauntless folly to worthless gimmicks!

### **Frying The Sun**

I swiftly rip forth from the rich brown soil  
The gritty grey eyes mantling the precious sun,  
I slice and fry and wrap the sun in silver foil  
How their faces bloom as it comes undone!

### **Goodbyes**

I stand in the door, watch me drive away  
Half my heart thrills to the engine's purr  
Half wrenches back, yearns here to stay  
In my warm room upon my rug of fur

### **Heroes**

All ashes return not to ashes  
Not all dust to dust is kin;  
All thy souls perish not soulless  
Not all heroes must win

### **Indifference**

Love to hatred, hatred to love  
We are one soul, the viper and dove  
We are kin; 'tis indifference  
That served ever to drive us hence

### **L'aiglon**

His blood thrills to a drummer he never heard  
He dares not breathe the forbidden Word  
All questions strangled with a silken glove -  
L'aiglon, caged in the plumage of a dove!

### **I Walk Tall**

I walk tall upon the earth today  
Tomorrow I lie 'neath it and decay  
Alack, the ashen waves of the sea  
Lie between my soul and me!

### **Mama, Why Are You Never On Time?**

Missing boots and vanished socks  
Broken belt-hooks and keyless locks  
"Mama, we're late! Aren't you ready?"  
Crumpled clothes - "Yes dear, nearly!"

### **Moonless Nights**

Why does the thunder hunt me now  
Through moonless nights and sunlit days?  
Why would my soul thunder endow  
With leave to wrack in wondrous ways?

### **One Flash**

The great white flowers blossom and spread,  
Treading windshadows in the blackened skies;  
One flash, one whistle; the dead and the dread,  
Are choking the tears from my bloodlidded eyes

### **Raised On Lies**

Lies season my world; its eldorado is honesty:  
My stumbling stabs at truth are flawed, fleeting  
Children raised on oil cannot forever eat ghee  
This Manna turns sour at the second eating

### **Rereading Old Poems**

Hide me, hide me from truth's terrible eyes!  
I whittled life away in this paltry poésie?  
Cradle, clothe me again in your sweet lies!  
Dead, I! Dead for anon! No! This cannot be!

### **Skipping Stones**

The silence ripples gently over the river  
As my stone skips blithely across it  
The sheen of the stone does not shiver  
The soul sealed within cannot cross it

### **The Calendar Is My See-Saw**

When I fail, when I fall, when I die,  
Nature holds the fort: Fridays still come  
When I rise, when I soar, when I sigh  
Nature holds the fort: Mondays still come

### **Conundrum**

"Into the machine-world our modern youth is gone  
Too lost to live life fully, to manfully battle -  
The hideous demons that did test our mettle -"  
Aha! My new post! Just let this lappy turn on...

### **Sleep Soundly**

Sleep soundly through the cold dark night  
Wrapped up in the moon's gentle light  
Sway your branches softly, O apple tree  
Make the shadows swing from sea to sea

### **On My Way To The War**

Out on the briar bush in May  
The hen will lay a blue egg  
I'll pluck the egg on my way  
To the war that ate my leg

### **March Him Home**

He's broken at the eyes, my boy  
Broken forever like a glass toy  
Shrugging on a smile when bidden  
Sheepish heartbreak quietly hidden

### **What's In A Name?**

Every morning, round my fairy-me-myself-I things,  
I carefully drape the dark diamond-cloak of Parren;  
Then lock Parren securely in Sarusai-the-writer's den,  
And her in the final shell, Hibah-of-the-furled-wings

### **Emperor And Sons**

Crush the rebellion? Heaven forefend!  
An the rebel were not dearer to me  
Than the noble cause I do here defend -  
How could his rebellion come to be?

### **Season Of Life**

O season of love, of light, of laughter;  
Where do ye bide? Which one o' 'em are ye?  
Winter, spring, summer, or the fall after?  
Alas! Ten times four gone; and I cannot see!

### **Bury The Hatchet**

Our moonbeam children washed away in the flood,  
The fire ye rained on us blossomed into blood;  
Ye rev up yon iron birds, yet bid me start  
To bury that hatchet twitching in my heart?

### **I'll Know**

Through the blustering wind the azaan will soar  
Hacked up by the staccato in cheerful Punjabi,  
The stench of drains, the rich scent of biryani  
Then I'll know for sure: 'I'm home once more!'

### **Flow On Forever**

Flow on forever, gentle river  
Glide softly into the sea  
There yield your one-string quiver  
But - remember still to be!

### **Time**

I am the wind that filches leaves from the trees  
Then returns them gently by the night breeze  
I am the sea that leaches rocks from the sand  
Then carries them back to scatter over the land

### **In My Heart, She Lives.**

If I can hold her in my heart  
Cradle her in the lilt of a dream  
Is my baby real? Or for that part  
Must I see, touch, hear her scream?

### **Declaration Of Independence**

Never! Never again shall another decide  
The words I may say, the words I may write  
Today we the scum of the earth shall fight:  
Cast the yoke of expert authority aside!

### **Die, For I Crave Thy Corpse**

Little sea-drop snared in a shell  
Ye shall ache in vain for the wave;  
This stony clasp is your death-knell  
'Til I return for the pearl I crave

### **The Scene Cut From All The Stories**

'I have the heart of a lion, the resolve of noble Farhad  
Penniless tho' I be yet, I shall build you a ballad -'  
'Peace! What need has our daughter for streams of milk?  
Begone now, or buy a house, and three lengths of silk!'

### **Fan-Fiction**

Once I found a little book, and slipped gently within  
I made a round table for girls, a band of merry women  
My own world cast me stones, in books I found a haven  
Unto the day I did me betray, and all my bookish kin!

### **O Wanderer Mine**

Come home now, home ever to stay  
Home where life is safe and plain  
Home, away from this roving way  
For ever and ever and ever again

### **He's Tried Three Times**

The spider -silk laughter etched in a scar  
The old fey smile racked by stabbing pain  
Grey eyes drained of all that will not mar  
Flesh singed by the dread seeping again

### **Mourn Me**

Mourn me, little one, as ye go forth tonight  
The Lady of the Lamp now bears a flashlight  
I am paint-splashed plastic guaranteed to last  
An unornamental ornament clinging to the past!

### **Vengeance**

My pseudo-heaven is shabby and stale  
Pity me, O toilers, this my idle state  
Perched upon the spine of yon white whale -  
Her vengeance pursues unto hell's own gate

### **Pink And Grey**

Their eyes lock across the frost-hazed car-panes  
The rosy mittened lass, the nymph of the lanes  
One contently bright, one listlessly gray  
One twisted grin shared; then the car drives away

### **Hunger**

How does the world spin upon a horn  
One ear of wheat, one sheaflet of corn?  
How does my heart turn upon one name  
Rise in one instant to blazing flame?

### **The Man-Shadow**

Down a gauntlet of eyes I cringe my way  
In the shadow of the man not beside me  
The citadel crumbles from within; today  
I run from the guilt festering inside me

### **Poor Little Thing**

I work from dawn to dusk for my bread  
I work the hells ye angels fear to tread  
I work, that ye may dance and sing  
Laugh at toil, say: 'the poor little thing'!

### **The Burrs**

The burrs, see, the sly slurs, they sucked:  
My pure blythe self, the elven element;  
Left me refugeless, suddenly untrucked  
In secret sullen wretchedness to ferment

### **Blood-Traitoress**

Can I find me a means to mend my blood?  
The blood of heroes, of valorous women  
Money and sloth and fear now dam its flood  
I have not the nerve of a little red hen!

### **Science And Art**

Clip off a petal with one white-gloved hand  
Dice it, stain it, slide it under the 'scopes  
Or look at me, taste my breath in the land  
Stand on tiptoe and whisper me your hopes

### **Vera Rostova At The Louvre**

No one knows the secret of thy smile, Lisa  
No one knows thy secret save I, mi querida  
Not happiness, not valour, not old sorrow  
But a stolen gleam of the feast on the morrow

### **True Rebellion**

Wouldst dare the censure of the world?  
Then smile in the face of venom hurled,  
Hold the grimy hand of the orphan child  
Stand blood-kin to the free and the wild

### **That's All**

"But Mama, why don't the kids play with me?  
Am I so bad? So dumb? Am I so ugly?  
Is it my spots? Am I too fat, too tall?"  
"No! You see, we are – different. That's all."

### **Oh, I'm Resisting You**

Les enfants de la patrie  
Go on without me  
I am resisting the resistance  
I am savouring existence

### **The Old And The New**

What shall Lord and land and hall and bower  
Castle and fen and glade and tower  
Say to a world of Facebook and iron birds?  
"Well, google us to find the words!"

### **I And Not I**

Starkly from the depths back I stare  
I and not I, the wavering truth  
In the blue sea my soul laid bare  
Veiled again by nature's ruth

### **Fortress**

Brick by brick I build me a strong city  
A fortress braced by bittersweet memory  
Of that one last swallow of ice cream  
Of that one final reawakening dream

### **Mama Leaves For The Office**

Freshly-ironed, blow-dried, she marches  
Stone-smile stamped on without a crack  
Small faces pressing into window-arches  
Wait silently for that last look back

## Revelation

Anon we perched upon the roof-top pump's pipe  
I lagging last, cringing from the sun's knife,  
Leeching shadows from the whispering trees  
Wilting the queens of the night to snow grease

I am the first-croaked call of the ravens  
Who swore never to return to their glens  
Thine errand unfulfilled; but I, I made  
Another promise to the fleeing shade

In darkness wore they contours of eagles;  
Darkling eyes, wings of kites, curved falcon beaks  
Brooding silhouettes from high mountain peaks

They speak, erupted shadows, glump soot-freaks;  
And I echo through the defrosting skulls  
Of mountain peaks the sun to roof-tops dulls

## Selcouth Folly

Wrapt in the otiose aumbry of pride  
A glede hythe a quiff will gust aside  
Her folly selcouth  
Binds her fast to her wanweird  
To speak ever sooth  
She is thrawn, my sister, my coëval  
Into fell Truth's ghyll she will smiling fall

Morrow's dawnsun, rise!  
Drown in the throes of today!  
Sky dragons, melt away!  
Morrow's dawnsun, drown!  
Rise in grief's eternal day!  
Sky dragons, melt away!

## **Sister Blossoms**

Deep in the fastness beyond this glen  
A blossom pines tethered to a stump  
Sister blossoms on trees soar above the fen  
Watch loftily the withering tulip slump

Proud, aloof, beautiful; petals held high  
And a cold sour tear-drop sealed in a sigh

## Sternlight

Clouds, O gentle spaceship Clouds, hither fly  
Shield us from the piercing blue of the sky  
Save us from the sun's stern light  
Burning its bitter truths into our skin  
With stinging salt leeches from within

Bury the sternlight shafts in your cottony pages  
Choked in your shivery winds let them fight  
Until they shatter you and the tears pour out  
O how we long to sit in your silvergilt cages  
And sing loudly of the freedom without

## The Answer Sheet

The smooth snickety grate of pencil-lead snags  
Its way against the lines of the answer sheet  
Fixing the margins as it slices across, drags  
All my words into the centre, square and neat.

I fill it up with the many functions of blood  
In a blue-penned scrawl I double-circulate it  
The words that stray outside I instantly scud  
To the centre's shape my rogue thought refit.

Stacks of empty boxes, the margins yawn and clink,  
Doing nothing, saying nothing, outside the border;  
Yet – it is in them that the fatal red pen will sink  
Its cruel teeth to mark the worth of the centre.

## **The Delirium Of Daedalus**

Dark spinning avius, fly into the sun  
Icarus, Icarus, hold! Here we come  
Upon the soaring black wings of life  
To snatch my son from the Wave  
To snatch my son from the grave  
From dancing to the eternal fife,  
Icarus, Icarus, hold! Here we come  
Dark spinning avius, fly into the sun

## The Felt-Tipped Pen

And what, noble warrior, befell him then?  
Nay, Princess, 'tis too tall a tale for the telling;  
Bright day will in wonder to night turn, town into glen  
The trees of legend shall stand ripe for the felling!

But what, noble warrior, befell him then?  
My lady, equipped, provisioned, armed to the lip  
Across the burning plain we sought him, five hundred men  
And slew him, wresting back your blue pen with felt at the tip.

And what, noble warrior, befell him then?  
He lay dead, Princess, as all traitors should  
Though they say he went straight up to Heaven  
Lay abed minus his head, for all like a piece of wood!

But what, noble warrior, befell him then?  
He strolled up to Heaven's Gate, his head in his hand  
Slipped them a note, a coin, a nugget from his old den  
They grinned and let him in, into Never-Neverland!

## The Gift Of A Friend

Dear Lord, Dear Lord,  
Dear Lord, Dear Lord,  
Give me a gift,  
Give me the gift,  
The gift of a friend

Dear Lord, as Thou knowest full well  
My soul is full of tears I cannot ease  
Dear Lord, Thou that knowest the wail of Hell  
Grant it awhile Thy blessed peace!

Dear Lord, put Thou an end to this miserable tale!  
Have I a 'self', a being I may yet mar or make?  
Spurred by the frost of a steel-spun heart I rail  
Light Thou a tenderer path I still may take!

Dear Lord, tend thine aid in 'scaping this cage!  
Break my fetters, cast away of indifference the bar  
By giving me just the sorrow and the rage  
Of a blighted land ravaged by war!

Dear Lord, I ask not of Thee the loan  
Of delirious transports, passion, joy!  
I ask naught but a friend of my own  
A living heart to learn mine glazed heart by!

Dear Lord, Dear Lord,  
Give me this gift,  
This gift of tenderness, of amity;  
An it please Thee, send it to me  
And I shall evermore be dumb - upon my fealty!

Reveal, prithe, a glimmer of the dove  
To this mine heart of steel;  
Cast this iron into the fire of love

Bring back childhood's warmth and zeal!

I tell Thee all that time has sown  
I plead my cruel, barren lot,  
A starveling life which has never known  
Natural warmth even of the basest sort

Even if it is just to lose it  
Even if it is but the bond of ship and scend  
Even if I cannot keep so beautiful a rosette  
Just once give me a real friend!

Dear Lord, I hope as I could erstwhile never  
At the waning grey dusk of my piteous life  
I dream again of finding happiness, of fervour  
Is it naught but folly, worthy of Death's knife?

For this one last rhyme Thy shield send  
Grant me the will to act in another wise  
Dear Lord, even to deserts thou dost lend  
The rain that makes them blossom ere sunrise.

## The Golden Locket

See that little girl in white  
With the golden locket?  
She is what you could be  
She is what you would be  
If I had a penny in my pocket

L'artiste a son atelier  
Le fleuriste a son bouquet  
Écrivaine sans histoire  
Qu'est-ce que donc j'ai ?

## The Lament Of The Maiden-Daughter

O my father, why do they bear thee hence?  
O father, from this thy hearth and thy haven?

Thou, so tall, so proud, so brave, so strong!  
Thou to lie still, silent, stiff upon a pallet!  
Thou thunderless, as they bore thee along  
Thou, with thy voice blood-kin to a mallet!

Thou to hear unmoved our moaning wail  
Thou, to heed not my mother's broken cry!  
Thou, O my father, sooner than us fail  
Thou wouldst have cloven earth and sky!

O my father, why do they bear thee hence?  
O father, from this thy hearth and thy haven?

They bear thee hence, cruel cold callous men  
They are deaf to our entreaties and tears;  
They - art of their heartless number, then  
They who'll not spare a word for our fears?

They'll not bury thee 'neath that rude soil?  
They know thy hatred for a speck on thy coat  
They know how thou wouldst with fury recoil  
They know - and the wretches, they gloat!

O my father, why do they bear thee hence?  
O father, from this thy hearth and thy haven?

O father! The very walls of thy house  
O father! Cannot abide to bid farewell  
O father! Will their quiet grief not rouse  
O father! The soul that lived in this shell?

O father! The cherry-goblet, spilling over

O father! The orange and a half upon the wall  
O father! The Lord's house framed in clover  
O father! "Return! " they cry; hear them call!

O my father, why do they bear thee hence?  
O father, from this thy hearth and thy haven?

Surrounded, strangled, stifled by strangers  
Surrounded by life's scorching suns I stand  
Surrounded, O my father, by a host of dangers  
Surrounded - thy daughter, and thou not at hand!

Surrounded, slashed by frost, by wind and hail  
Surrounded with death, like autumn-stripped bark  
Surrounded by axes, by a shendful flood of mail  
Surrounded, bare, like Noah without his ark!

O my father, why do they bear thee hence?  
O father, from this thy hearth and thy haven?

Still through the mists clouding my eye  
Still through the bleeding wreck of my heart  
Still for thy sake I hold my head high  
Still thou wouldst have me play this part!

Still thy daughter, smiling and stiff-spined  
Still calm, dutiful as thou badst me be  
Still thy daughter, with thy edicts entwined  
Still about my heart in adversity!

O my father, why do they bear thee hence?  
O father, from this thy hearth and thy haven?

## The Not-Lily Flower

In the grey-streaked dawn I can barely glean  
A deck of petals expertly dealt out in a ring  
A clingy little flower, prest into the railing  
Of the dew-drugged garden already the queen

O rose with your luscious crimson promise  
Woolly chrysanthemum, the garden's adonis  
Sweet blooming dahlia with your heart of gold  
Carnation. Bulbous fragrant hyacinth of old –

Before this nameless blossom clean and white  
Your ebullient loveliness upon the grun  
Emerging vibrant from the sheath of night  
Is a perfect foil – suddenly blowsy, overdone

For this little pearl flower of my yearning  
'Lily', I whisper, trace her name in a reverie  
The not-lily flower stirs angrily, spurning  
The wind which would trust it with her memory

My laughing little sister all in white macaroon  
Scowls petulantly at the red sun's capsizing  
While I watch the lily-whiteness of the moon  
Fade into the golden splendour of its rising

## The Old Green Hill

Once upon that old green hill  
I waited alone in the rain  
Then, I cursed that bleak grey hill;  
Now, I would buy it back with pain  
One yellow mango  
A slice of the sun for me  
One fistful of glee

## The Plaint Of Joy

Twice, in a gloaming dream  
He called out my name  
But when, by the pale moon-beam  
I answered, with love aflame  
He simply did not know me

Fie upon the dulcet, stirring odes  
Of all the future may fly in;  
But O for a clean old set of clothes  
And a cool soft bed to lie in.

## The Song Of The Tame

Dark Cypresses creep up the window strangling my bars;  
Dark Cypresses, blotting out the stinging rain,  
The slit shadow of the hills that breathing mars,  
The sun's bar-split stripes that sting my palms again.

Dark cypresses, the chains of my captivity leave me still  
Dark cypresses, touch not these, the marks of my slavery!  
Avaunt! Let to me to freedom bend my will  
Avaunt! Away with your gentle lulling witchery!

Dark cypresses, ensconcing my cosy little cell  
Dark cypresses building a haven for a mole  
Cake and tinkling laughter in a pitch-dark shell  
A world within a word, stunched at every peep-hole.

Dark cypresses, avaunt! Yield ye to the battering rays of day,  
Dark cypresses, yield ye to one shove of my arm  
One thrust of my mighty fist as I brush ye away  
Vanish then, forevermore; halt your fatal charm!

Dark cypresses, alack! The puny hand droops unnerved  
Dark cypresses, the pale blue rose growing in your shade  
Dares long no more for wild nature flying full unfurled  
Captivity's blossom cringes; must by freedom be unmade!

Dark cypresses return! Cruelly have ye fallen away  
Dark cypresses, from this your trust of protecting me;  
The bar-less window shudders; the door creaks at every sway  
And I, trembling twixt lock and curtain, dare no longer Be

## The Tailor

[On Death and the Miser by Hieronymus Bosch]

'Now if we take it in a little at the waist, so -  
And drape the edge over the left arm -  
Then, good sir, be ye visiting high or low  
Ye shall give them goodly cause for alarm!'

So spake our worthy tailor to his grisly client  
Who returned him a smile to freeze a giant,  
Briskly professional, our most noble hero  
Did but survey him critically from head to toe

'May I ask, sir, an it be not too much of a liberty,  
Whose soul you mean to harvest for eternity?'  
'Oh, not at all' Death picked up his awful spear  
'Yon miser's relations will soon have cause to cheer'

'Oho!' thought our clever friend, 'Tis Uncle Jon!  
Angels and demons are gathered by his bedside  
And he lies there fuming while his attendants slide  
His money into their grubby pockets - hold on!'

Indeed our charming comrade made such good time  
He was there to hear the fatal doorbell chime,  
The maid's shriek, the hoarse 'I'll announce myself'  
And yet serenely unto the gold did he himself help.

## Throat Fonts

Into my darkness let meaning seep  
From unwittingly made  
Gut choices

Throat fonts  
Warning of danger  
Tasting of love  
Scented with joy  
Glazed with fear

Throat fonts  
Marking the stranger  
Heralding the shove  
Fashioned to decoy  
Intended to sear

May the bones of your speech keep  
Reposing in the shade  
Of voices

## Twelve Sharingan Eyes

[On Twaalf Spreuken by Pieter Brugel the Elder]

Behold a recipe for the ruin we all embrace,  
Who fuse fire and water into sublime grace.  
Behold twelve sharingan-eyes staring back at me  
Each holding a jutsu, a savage piece of folly  
In the sea screened from the sun to be all mine.

Do we not thus chug our way through upon a fife,  
Perched precariously twixt sense and madness ?  
Belling cats left and right we chase after the net  
Deserting the brick walls only to defy the moon  
Our blue cloaks fluttering upon the flickering life  
Of the soul-choking truth that runs through them yet

Unheard, unheeded, we sob, we murmur, we croon,  
Clinging to true lies as into the rotting-calf-well of sadness  
We shovel our bruised roses freshly trampled by swine.

## Vanished Smiles

My voice stands for the vanished smiles  
Of the silenced children,  
Whose innocence dies  
Starved and caged, in the knowledge  
Of having been undone  
By our self-serving lies;  
Who grow up to know  
Hell so intimately, they go  
Seeking it when sent to Heaven.

## Veiled Star Of Destiny

He strides over land like a colossus  
As Prosper glides into the sea  
Could he see which way to go  
O my daughter,  
If you did not twinkle so?  
She scurries over land, a singed Narcissus  
Cringing from water she dare not see

O paper-vessel of my hopes and dreams  
Sail forth, take my gaudy ink screams  
Draped in a lavish lie  
Writ on a blacklist:  
My name that cannot die  
For it never lived, until the day  
This flat gold ring cracked me to clay

## Vincit Omnia Veritas

Chattering, chuckling, shining like the sun  
They rush madly inside to claim the best seats  
Each certain in his happiness of being the one  
Reason why the heart of his world still beats.

All except him. Crouched at the foot of the stair,  
Hovering on the edge in blank bleak despair  
Sliver by sliver his stumbling fingers shred  
The soiled pink-tissue fabric of his dread

The laughing children's clamour is no more  
They fade into a misty mirage of delight;  
She sees only the one cringing into the door  
And knows the signs of terror's fell blight.

The children have learnt to shrug, leave him be  
There is no hurt, no trouble that they can see  
Bitterly the teacher yearns for strength to care -  
To not unsee the mute appeal, the sudden hope there -

To dare recognise the black rim of a bruise  
Carefully hidden under his buttoned-up coat;  
To run the gauntlet of glares, for once choose  
A child's soul over earning her daily groat

"This is none of our business, you absurd fool.  
We do not meddle in their lives after school."  
And so the menace of dismissal in disgrace  
Withers the stab of conscience at the base

She summons up her most vacuous little smile  
Says brightly, "Come, sit with your friends a while,  
You must talk more, participate, learn to be gay ..."  
And watches the broken spirit wither quietly away.

## Yellow Jackets

Look! Ink and Life mesh, blur, forge silken slats  
High-lit jackets from our Halloween hats.

My ink-world is burning, slowly turning  
To familiar ash; blossoming tangerine  
Over blazing tin crates, metal churning  
Soggy silver butter to burst on screen.

This smoke I know well;  
In our real-world gardens, we  
Grow this sand of hell.

## Yes-Person

All the long merry days of thy life, child  
Shalt evermore do as thou art bid;  
Lay aside now these fancies wild,  
Else shalt cringe when thou art chid!  
For the yoke upon thy fluttering heart,  
Comes not from the censure of the world;  
Were this cool defiance thy natural part,  
Wouldst tremble so as it unfurled?

Free, free as yon great bird am I  
To soar towards that blue, blue sky  
Do eaglets not come to their wings atrembling?  
My heart too has courage; behold it assembling!  
I am the purple thread 'pon the world's white robe  
An the pale-dyeing traitor lives within me,  
Does it not then more earnestly behove  
Me to cast it forth and my true self be?

Thy true self? Faugh! Blasphemy! Arrant knavery!  
Wast born to crawl humbly upon the earth  
Clip thy false wings! Return! Now be  
As beseems one who knows her meagre worth.  
Child, all I now in seeming cruelty say  
I say for the good of thee and thine;  
Wouldst from the creed of all our kind stray,  
Lay 'pon us the pall of ruin, shame me and mine?

No! Mother, no! Rather my right hand would I give  
To spare thee a moment's pain while I yet live!  
Yet whither shall the tempest within me turn?  
An I yield not, ye hurt; an I yield, I burn!  
The salt and the scum of the earth am I  
Oh Mother! Hast other daughters, a dozen sons  
Set me free to soar wild and high  
My fate was not written in thy buttered buns!

Hold! Set thee free! Never! Oh, God forbend!  
Set thee free to err in thy wilful way!  
Stay! With all my power do I thee defend  
To transgress my law for a single day!  
Go then! Follow thy brazen will an ye list  
I cast thee forth from my heart and my home –  
Else return my darling daughter; but then, desist!  
Forbid thy vagrant fancy evermore to roam!

Thou hast reason, Mother, the fault is mine  
If I cannot be as other maidens are;  
I doubt not, Mother, the true course is thine –  
Let thy gentle love not suffer me to wander far!  
All thy days of my life I yoke to thy law,  
Yes-person of a long race of yes-persons am I,  
I will obey thee evermore with trembling awe!  
Yes, I will. Yes, I will. Yes, I will. Yes, I will. Yes, I –

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## **About The Author**

Hibah Shabkhez is a writer of the half-yo literary tradition, an erratic language-learning enthusiast, and a happily eccentric blogger from Lahore, Pakistan. Studying life, languages, and literature from a comparative perspective across linguistic and cultural boundaries holds a particular fascination for her.

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Alack, The Ashen Waves of the Sea is a book of poems that would have you sing softly of love and light and laughter, of truth and of daring, of knowledge and innocence and fantasy. Let yourself soar feckless unto the sun, like Icarus, for the space of one glad smile.

