

The Jhelum River

My voice fades almost to silence
in the vast land called Kashmir,
where names of mountains
sound like tribes, and people are forever
trapped between ice, blue-green fields
of summer and tulip gardens
tourists come to see, with one eye open,
blind to the tragedies that unfold
under a heroic blue sky in a place
where women hold pictures of their dead,
under the shade of a towering *chinar*
whose leaves turn a burnt orange in fall.

In mornings laced with birdsong,
I fill notes with verbs and broken nouns,
unable to describe a corrugated house
on top of hills in a heartland
with castles named after fairies
and monuments for leaders, great
and then gone; standing on top of the cliff
I see streams, peat-brown, flowing into
the mighty Jhelum—water and wind racing
against time in a valley in motion.

Forsaken

In semi-darkness, the path ascends,
the moon in serrated shadows. We walk
together over heavy hills, through village lights
and apple branches along the road.

We approach the green lamp, the entrance
to the mammoth house nestled with a family's belongings:
an island of toys, a photograph of a boy
in green eyes, a bowl of sugar, his toothbrush and cups
black with cardamom, unwashed.

It was here.

These belongings like icons remain
frozen across vine-scattered shelves,
in a room weathered and old as trees.
Some say these things were ravaged by fire,
or a flood spiraling upwards in a column
of despair, washing away pretty women
and cattle and crops, everything but scraps of time,
and a closed area reserved for lovers.

It is gone.

We drift past eastern peaks, separated by
white-green trunks of fallen trees,
to the sound of the invisible current,
seeking forgiveness from ambiguous saints—
an army of God with no answer to the missing boys.

The Yellows

in moonlight the fields are all yellow
and mountain ranges a jagged cobalt
that gleam of light on lake water in
shades of gold; a pattern of leaves
parses through the forest,
a softened lemon ice
the way it has always been in
a centuries-old landscape,
untouched and unforgotten
by anyone who has lived through
the darkness and witnessed
a mosaic of colors spiraling
across a pigeon-blue sky
as the heartbreak of a cold sun
threads between yellow grass.

Kashmir is heaven enough.

