

Mera Asmaan

(Urdu to English translation: My Sky)

The summer I unearthed tenderness for sunrises
 was the summer I left the pen that gave me
 novel one
 novel two
 and journals six to eleven
 in Karachi.

Terribly cliché, at least to me,
 but don't dare to roll your eyes with such ease
 for fragmented hearts make
 wordsmiths out of even unlettered women
 (recall that *I* read in English when I was four,
 the animals in my dreams still saying jee instead of yes)
 and this is simply over mortal men -
 do not ask me to describe
 how it felt when Pakistan and I
 parted ways the final time,
 certain we must leave room for partners who
~~wanted day with night~~
 knew there was no option
 except for day and night.

Can I help it that the desolate sky is my only constant?

Shining here and there,
even if it is blue and hazy here
when it is black with silver fire there.
The ocean is deadly and full of rainbow dorados,
slippery turtles, whales so big a man could be
swallowed whole and live inside it -
But the sky?
But the sky!

The sky holds the summer suraj to her chest
as though it is hands that speak by signing, not singing,
though making music all the same,
busy showing daughter:
right thumb swiped across your cheek
like mother wiping crumbs off your lips,
fast enough to cut you,
followed by a swoosh
as your hand becomes a leaf falling from home
and lands in the open crook of your left arm.
Now, if only I had a fuschia hat.

When the earth tilted twenty-three-and-a-half-degrees,
towards the sun, not away,
I breathed again -
like normal, this time.
Difficult grasping this is what normal is.

My normal is
too much breathing.
I, too, wish I didn't know
that was a concern;
until me, Mumma didn't.
My lungs didn't know what to do
with normal
so they shook until a crack appeared,
imperceptible except to me.
Shhh -
it is our secret now.

That summer the sky looked like leftover cereal,
milky residue streaked with colors -
malta, saffayt, ferozi, peela, neela, gulabi, jaminni, sabs,
issi bhi aur khubsuraat rung jiskein naam muhje nahi malum hai
- in shades that don't exist on their own,
but rather when some third party forces them to mix.
I would slurp it up, would drink all the dregs;
it became my fuel.

Mumma would have freaked
if she knew I did not eat,
would have grabbed my curly
black hair and straightened it with her fist.
Eating is essential if you're breathing,

but you see,
when you breathe too much,
you must compensate elsewhere.

Her Urdu would not sound like a ghazal.
It would sound like the screeching wails
of a truly ancient Bollywood actress in a film
you would need a VHS player for.
She is very into breakfast,
but if she got mad, I would take her
the next day and show her.

The sunrise would not look quite
like froot loops anymore,
eternal snowflake that it is,
always drifting, but never two the same,
only close enough that we think it is.
I would grab her warm face and tell her
how it felt like eating french toast and
omelettes and strawberry-banana smoothies.

It is a different kind of energy, Mumma,
I would tell her. She would *hmp* and yell
at me to take better care of myself.

I would listen while the sky stripped -

it is a naughty, shameless being - and
changed clothes like it was going on a date:
from black to pink to yellow to orange.

*You look best in all three of
those, I'd say, just skip the black.*

I, too, often forgot that day and night
were palm and opisthenar.

When the sky felt nice it would listen to me.
I would stare at it as Mama continued
lecturing about metabolism,
but I would not give in,
and after a while her worry would sound
like a ghazal made just for my ears.