

Faisal Mohyuddin

Of the Punjab

Exile begins where rivers end.

I dream my limbs and head are the five rivers that make fertile
the land of my ancestors. I dream about wild music,
about longing, about an end to thirst.

My tongue ploughs through black silt, lifting scraps
of language, history, myth.

Along the Ravi, Jahangir's molecules have migrated
from his decaying tomb, into the whistling sweetness of water.
I taste the emperor's fishy eyes, his inky breath,
the aching vacancies of his toothless gums. I taste lost time.

Where my father lived as a boy, fatherless,
in a stone house with shuttered windows, a girl now sits,
her face caged by shadows, embroidering with golden thread a bouquet
by candlelight. Held like a thin drum between her knees,
a wood frame holds taut the black silk.

Her needle plunges, resurfaces. Gardenias bloom
in every *mohalla* of Lahore.

The sputtering moths orbiting the flame
grow giddy on perfumed air, lose their caution, burn.

Behind me, a blind cartographer beckons.
He promises a new empire, my claim upon it brokered by worms
and the wind-borne remnants of lost names.



I claw open a grave at the girl's feet. I recite the alphabet.
I unbraided the water from my blood and surrender to the soil.
I let darkness fall in earthy clumps until I am crushed.

The girl wraps the tombstone with the black cloth,
falls to her knees like a fellow pilgrim. She begins to hum.
I wake to the haunted chatter of rain.

