

The Beloved

God, I see your gray
cloak in the water,

your head
upon the stones,

the red clay
flowing in you

like blood, like tears.

She is standing
at the bank as lovers

scatter rose petals
before her. The river

is rushing to her
feet. She slips

out of her robe,
and you learn: You

were not sculpted
such as she.

You scatter
as she bathes in you,

fills in the universe
a God-shaped hole.

The night of the fourteenth
after Ibn-e-Insha

All night, *jaanum*, they sing
of you—

your cypress
sway,

your cheeks of silver.
Tell us, they say,

how black is her curl?
did you, Insha, pick
her thorns?

I laugh—
the veil is threadbare

yet. Let it darken
longer.

Kathak: The Dance of the Courtesans

i.

In the mirror, tilt
your chin
higher.

At the end of each
chakkar, return to your own
eyes.

Your breath, a spool of thread—
thin, sharp,
unravels. Pull, pull
it back in.

Shackle yourself until
your ankles
are gold;
hold your wrists
delicate
beneath your jewels.

Now dance; the city awaits you.

ii.

Goddess, beloved, flame, they say:
all beauty converges in you.

Men gather at saints' tombs,
but rush to your doorstep

with greater madness.
Let them gaze at you

until you begin to tremble;
allow yourself to be slight-

ed. You, fragile
as glass, will learn:

you were made to break.

iii.

In the final scene of the 1972 Hindi film *Pakeezah*, Meena Kumari's love is getting married to someone else, and she is performing at the wedding. She shatters a lamp, then dances upon its shards, leaving crimson footprints all over the white sheets.

the mosque an eyebrow, the tavern an eye

When on the fifteenth night
the moon began to wane,
centuries of copper,
of gold,
of marbled wrists

glinted once, then found the sand.

That night, no poets came
to the gatherings of the fair-faced,
no drunkard was banished
from their lanes.

All candles fell quiet.
The beloved hung on dry branches,
perfumed, silvering.

There was
no god.

In all the sky,
there was no God.

mirror of the world

— *after Faiz*

when the crescent pierces
the soft of it

the afternoon bursts,

forlorn
despite its light

upon light. I ask: whose blade
is sharpest? who holds
this sky today,

then tomorrow?

to whom belong
the flames at night?
is it your lovers, O Beloved,
or the executioners?

the breeze wakes us from the dark,
whispers:
if the wounds are blooming,
the roses will too.