

In  
Kashmir:  
Writing  
Under  
Occupation

*Selected Poems*

Ather  
Zia



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## Foreword

For at least the past fifteen years, Ather Zia's poems have been published widely across a range of venues, mostly on the internet, sometimes in print, seeking and finding readers in every corner of the globe. These poems have appeared, scattered like leaflets, in news magazines and niche poetry journals, on Facebook and Instagram. Sometimes, they have gone underground, pushed under by what Zia herself has called "the enforced disappearance of Kashmiri writing", but always to reappear as they do here, fists raised to the sky. To have Zia's poetic missives to the world now collected within a single volume, alongside her newer poems, is truly a gift to all those who seek to understand through both sense and intellect what it is to live and die "in Kashmir". This collection funnels the dispersed intensity of Zia's poems across several years into a gathered force that trains our collective imagination in the direction of justice.

Across these poems Zia—poet, anthropologist, and editor—speaks as a Kashmiri, as a woman, and always as a Kashmiri woman. In these poems, the scent of mustard oil wafts out from women's kitchens and lingers in the air along with pepper gas. Kashmiris speak through the poet: women and men, lovers, friends and militants, shoemakers, drivers and bakers, mothers and sons, and in one case, a non-human Kashmiri auto-rickshaw ("i take mothers to all the morgues"). History too speaks here, as the poems vibrate with bitter memory: the aftermath of the Babri Masjid demolition, the mass rapes of Kunan Poshpora, the torture chambers of Papa 2 and Hari Niwas, and the killings of Asiya and Nilofar Jan in Shopiyan, all are held here in Zia's poetic record. Zia's photographs add a visual dimension to the sensory world evoked by these poems, and the very first photograph of "*an abandoned Indian post box in downtown Kashmir*" pays homage to the late Kashmiri poet Agha Shahid Ali's much-loved 1997 collection *The Country Without a Post Office*. With this, Zia situates herself in a longer tradition of freedom-dreaming through poetry and invites her readers to join in solidarity with Kashmiris and all those who resist the forces of occupation everywhere.

Deepti Misri

Boulder, 25 March 2025

## Artist Statement

As a people living under a neocolonial military occupation & settler colonialism, camouflaged in the politics of democracy weaponized, its jaws dripping with draconian laws, there is a constant erasure of Kashmiri bodies, memories, and identities. The killable body of Kashmiris is afflicted with active forgetting to ensure survival. Poetry spurts at the frontier where the gaze of stark prose is constricted with barbed wires of multiple coercions. Not just an archivist, poetry makes one a witness. One's lifeblood, spiritual, physical, and political, lived, remaining, and forgotten coagulates into a poem; into an act of witnessing.



## Table of Contents

### **I. Poetics of Occupation**

Preface

Introduction

In Kashmir: Writing Under Occupation

Driving Without a License (Iasan) in Kashmir

At Papa 2 in Kashmir

Abode of the God?

Circa 2019-20, in Kashmir, all phones are dead –

An Exercise in Memory

1947, poems on the creation of India and Pakistan

### **II. The Gender of Witness**

Kashmiri Auto-rickshaw

The Ex-Fighter Returns

cutting braids 2017

Four corners of extreme pain

Asiya and Nilofar Jan in memoriam: how much imagination does it take to know what happened?

### **III. Azadi Rituals**

In Kashmir Friday is for Azadi (and every other day)

a day in a life that inches prayer by prayer

Hum Kya Chahte? Azadi

The 13th of July 1931

For 27th October 1947

### **IV. Memory Archive**

Grandpa's Last Memory

Prima Facie Nothing Has Happened

In Memory (for Jaleel Andrabi)

In Srinagar: a city under Siege

### **V. Love in a Time of Occupation**

i. will. cross.  
Don't bring any spice  
Love in Kashmir  
One lazy August afternoon from a childhood in Kashmir

### **VI. Languages of loss**

decolonizing my heart (I, II, III)  
In Kashmir everyone is a poet  
Be very very brave

### **VII. Distant Echoes**

No Rose Red in Kashmir  
For a good person (1 & 2)  
Babri Masjid, December 6

## I. Poetics of Occupation

## Preface

no sugar in my chai please  
there is a sweetness to knowing  
that all empires crumble





an abandoned Indian post box in downtown Kashmir, 2016

## introduction

A brief electoral history of peace  
there was no vote.  
— only war

\*

A Kashmiri beholding the noose –  
what would Shaheed Bhagat Singh tell me?  
Inquilab Zindabad, echo the walls.



'go India go back' graffiti found all across Kashmir

## In Kashmir: Writing under Occupation

they want us to write. in blood.  
and only write. of peace.  
they capture our land. make us sow rice that is not seed. kill us. rape.  
they tell us we are ungrateful. like children – who do not see what is good for them.  
holding us with many kinds of guns;  
they grimace at the world calling our blood on their faces –  
vermillion

they sell pens.  
we buy with blood.  
many of them, from their mythical land come to us, with clean hands, softened in the  
Ganges. they meet our eyes. that gaze, which through you goes elsewhere. behind  
their orange irises you see wheels turning.  
like the innards of a Swiss watch.  
precise.  
surgical.

they sell paper.  
 so much paper. we buy with blood.  
 they put the kettle on the boil. it whistles. the seduction of tea.  
 there is no better heaven. our pens poised. the next word will liberate.  
 an orgasmic lull prevails.  
 that next sentence. always in arrival. like that justice thing.  
 meanwhile, Ashfaq is no more. Maqbool has gone. Asiya and Neelofar, raped then killed.  
 Afzal hanged. Tufail, buried in two graves. the Ittar seller in Lal Chowk disappeared. they  
 found his bones with empty bottles; the kettle whistles.  
 the tea never comes.  
 our bones are made tired. waiting.  
 before the door of law from that overused Kafka tale. the only thing that grows after this  
 wait, are their swords—looming mightier. and this too, we write.  
 they exhort us to write. and write. in blood.  
 of peace.  
 of tulip gardens they grew on soils made fertile with our flesh, and bones.  
 and write. when they are at war with us.

### **Driving Without a License (*lasan*) in Kashmir**

the law has much blood on its talons. it's especially ethical if you don't have a *lasan*.  
 Between background checks and grease-money, the *lasan*, leaking from the law's stained  
 teeth, is what you need, get it maybe never.

anyways, it's a contrivance, a measure of know-how over a vehicle to transport people in  
 metal boxes when you already carry them in your heart, like your boy who died of a bullet  
 that grazed your chest and entered his.

in Kashmir when you drive without a *lasan* you drive on the right side of life.

I sleep to dreams of being a young, irascible driver from Maisuma, the invincible artery,  
 throwing stones at paramilitary his happiest past time (being with a Neruda or a Said is not  
 always the best you can dream), fed on a staple diet of an adoring mother's curses.

I am terribly in love and sore from heartache – without a *lasan* but that is my last worry –  
 probably till I have no money to bribe policemen who catch me every time I stop like a stone  
 unwarranted outside my beloved's house, not that she cares. I drive singing to  
 old Bollywood songs and cursing India in the same breath. Wishing every bunker melting  
 away like I believe, without license.

## At Papa 2 in Kashmir

all walls have been raised,  
with metal eyes, zooming in and out,  
mad cartographies  
technologies of death,  
this entire spectatorship  
of a nation without eyes  
your imperial sun on our  
subject, made wretched and puny  
our eyes blinded –  
our ears, anyway are like a bat's  
but, we have better things to do  
than hear you talk of murder  
and map-making skills  
after suffering the weight of  
spoiled rice, stale Indian lentils  
and soldiers who are plucked  
from worse desperations  
o how you envy us, we can tell  
you can't reach the downtown of our dreams  
those childhood alleys are full of freedom,  
no guns will give you those maps  
the mud that floods brought  
piles high,  
now no one tends to the vegetable gardens  
where squash tendrils hung  
like grandmother's oiled curls over soft bosoms,  
and crisp cabbage, firm eggplants  
kindest eyes picking luscious tomatoes,  
all gone; that you took –  
our bat ears know,  
the magnificent knocking on doors

to share bowls of soaked walnuts,  
is now the soldier's midnight knock  
marigold smells, warm salt tea,  
old love no more,  
no guts, only gore –  
our crowds are vast,  
dwellings short  
those strong, indefatigable Kashirr paan\*  
always toiling, always ready –  
their shawls are now museum curios  
the tips of their fingers are sieves  
yet they rise,  
like always they will part with their names  
again –  
and grow irises, tulips, daffodils,  
and wild belladonna, yes that too  
on beloved graves –  
beatifying the dead,  
on the day of the saints they will make a fire,  
cook a feast, serve and stay fasting  
and send blessings to the living  
we die now, yes –  
yet we force our way through  
the innermost slums of our hearts by Jhelum that waits  
whispering –  
*were you to succeed at this, you would gain nothing*  
*were you to succeed at this, you would gain nothing*  
nobody, no gun, reaches through here,  
to capture maps from those who died,  
or those who are dying, and those refusing to give in

---

\*Kashmiri body

### **Abode of the God?**

*In memory of those who were tortured to death and those who survived one of the known and notorious interrogation centers in Kashmir called Hari Niwas (Abode of God). Hari Niwas was a royal palace before it was turned into an interrogation center in the late 80's and 90's.*

a phantasm above,  
I am the bones under this earth  
where you plan to plant  
tulips, daffodils (so dear to my soil)  
trying to cover  
wide-mouthed pits,  
filled with  
shoes, limbs, amulets for protection  
unblinking eyes,  
a first love's charm bracelet  
husbands, sons,  
lovers,  
fathers

your rooms are clinging to their walls –  
the abode of God looks less so –  
no diviner dare carry a broom  
to erase my trace,  
in this dank darkness that is the color of red  
I am not yet done etching tremulous lines on walls  
I am not done memorizing faces that are gone,  
I am not done counting and keeping time which passed,  
there are those killed, still dying in certain rooms

**Circa 2019-20**

**in Kashmir, all phones are dead—**

in Kashmir,  
all phones are dead –  
the cold gag is strong in the air  
deep-rooted Chinars  
lift their icy arms to the heavens  
praying for the spring's thaw  
your Britain is cold too  
but your phones will always work

you can call mother  
when finally  
you decide  
to return her call  
i wish i could do that –  
you know,  
shrug my mother off –  
but she has too many worries  
her woman's world doubled  
soldiers crowd her dreams  
ghosts of the disappeared boys  
knock at the doors  
she never shuts  
tying countless worry knots  
praying to the god of mercy  
to watch over me because  
she cannot

Kashmir, –  
its anglicized Cashmere  
sounds like an old sweater  
moth-eaten, handed down  
but i promise  
even if it were a garment

the shearing,  
scouring, grading, sorting,  
carding, spinning, weaving  
was done in England  
so, this is your sweater  
(no sorry, – i mean, your story too)  
but Kashmir is not a ball of wool

Kashmir,  
is a hearty people  
and the softest, most fragrant earth –  
where the crown's yellowing phantom  
still exists in old files,  
unburied, in broken tin trunks  
shapeshifting  
into bullets, teargas,  
pepper gas (god, the spices still)  
pellets, prisons, and gags  
all the accouterments of torture,  
and tyranny

Jhelum  
is a slow, moving funeral  
carrying children  
killed, dismembered –  
whose mothers wait  
for a phone call  
praying  
they are just being  
like  
your young people,  
careless and alive

but mothers know  
they won't know –  
curfew is a glacier  
growing large  
in the heart of the city



streets are icy, cold,  
empty of breath  
except for silenced dogs,  
and soldiers

all.phones.remain.dead.

### **An Exercise in Memory\***

Dear comrades  
let us do an exercise / polish this new guise,  
an exercise in memory / memory will set us free

Let us begin, bloodied, let us bathe in memory / it is an urgent decree –  
before they whitewash us like frescoes of Shalimar / bury our bones under molten tar  
on which they make goodwill roads / that ease the flow of gun-toting hoards  
who fill the Rambiarah with their lies / there water with shame forever sighs –  
Let us bloody begin now / I will show you how –

I know we are worn, simpering and torn  
but like they said, the show must go on / on and on

the maestro Wagner / Zubin calls his music a slur  
In this shunning stance / Zubin gives memory a chance  
Wagner for Zubin and his ilk / is no gossamer / is no silk  
Wagner's notes are a bloody mesh / coarse memory of bones and flesh

So why not we / Give chance to our memory / feel / cry / see  
This exercise / might cut them to size / truth to lies / truth to lies

When you hear me say Wagner / like on spur –  
Shout on the shimmering waves of Dal / shout long live Maqbool, Long live Afzal

A battle-cry for our martyrs slain / shout this pain / into the ears of vain  
This as clear as day decree can't be quashed / memory cannot be whitewashed  
my dear weary brethren / prisoners of their own glen  
you are "free" – free I say that word with care / it is so dear

to choose the names for our battle cries / make sure the memory never dies  
names, that they blacken to whitewash their crimes –  
names, that are etched into hearts of our ravaged times –  
names, you can never show, those you say and never tell  
these names that blood and sacrifice spell  
Maqbool, Ashfaq, Ellahi, Mughli's Nazir,  
Parveena's Javaid, Tasleema's Deka, Husna's Ayub  
and that limping neighbor who went to buy milk  
and came back bathed in blood,  
Asiya, Neelofar, Tufail  
and Sameer Rah the 9-year-old,  
after whose killing all juicy pears turned into stones  
and stones turned into mighty rivers / sending shivers  
down their spine –

It's done, it's done / done and done  
they have sunk their boats / no more hostages are we to whitewashing notes  
that turn to quell us after guns and barbed wires / our own blood against us and Rakshak tires  
Wagner is your balderdash / this concert is your hogwash  
Let us begin, bloodied, let us bathe in memory / it is an urgent decree –  
When you hear me say Wagner / like on spur –  
Shout on the shimmering waves of Dal  
Shout, shout – shout  
Long live Maqbool, long Live Afzal

Beyi /more  
Hari Nawas, Gaza – beyi Wagner  
Long live Maqbool, long Live Afzal  
JIC, Sand Creek – beyi Wagner  
Long live Maqbool, long Live Afzal  
Papa 2 Namibia – beyi Wagner  
Long live Maqbool, long Live Afzal  
Kunanposhpora, Aushwitch – beyi Wagner  
Long live Maqbool, long Live Afzal

It's done, it's done / done and done  
they have sunk their boats / no more hostage are we to whitewashing notes  
that turn to quell us after guns and barbed wires / our own blood against us and Rakshak tires  
Wagner is your balderdash / this concert is your hogwash

\*In 2013, the well-known conductor Zubin Mehta performed a Peace Concert named Ehssas-e-Kashmir (Feeling for Kashmir). It was organized by the Kashmir government, proclaiming the event as representative of the masses who crave for peace. A mass protest erupted against this event. A parallel event named “Haqeeqat-e-Kashmir (HEK)” (Reality of Kashmir) was organized by the Kashmiri civil society to convey that the concert did not represent Kashmiri people but the government. HEK was an attempt to reclaim the narrative of Kashmir, which focuses on just peace and resolution under the UN mandate. This poem was read at the HEK event.

**1947, poems on the creation of India and Pakistan**

\*\*\*

August in Kashmir  
is a siege on steroids  
India wrapped in saffron  
Pakistan awash in green  
Kashmir as always  
soaks in red  
blood of its old  
and young  
those being born  
and those not yet

\*\*\*

cardboard cutouts  
these nations  
hastily drawn  
foreign ink  
native blood

they use their all  
to control  
the 'Line of Control'  
the line  
that, everyday  
cuts through the bodies  
of Kashmiris –  
dying to erase it  
and those who live  
if only  
to see it gone

\*\*\*

the partition  
has become a stone in hand  
answering bullets  
that kill and blind  
every day –

in Kashmir  
mothers  
live to wait  
for the disappeared  
fathers  
survive only to  
bury those killed

all epitaphs read  
Azadi  
Azadi  
Azadi

\*\*\*

the blood-soaked rags  
drying in Dilli and Lahore  
are fresh in Lal Chowk\*

here,  
the slaughterhouse is open –

Kashmiri bodies  
hung on hooks  
blinded eyes,  
tender tongues cut  
radical meat  
branded “Azadi”  
is the venison of nations  
hungry

---

\*A historic town in Srinagar, the capital of Indian administered Kashmir.

## II. The Gender of Witness

### Kashmiri Auto-rickshaw

i can snake into tight alleyways  
where mothers  
ever careful not to splatter hot oil,  
fry onions to mix with haakh\*  
that delectable old recipe  
and wait and wait  
and wait  
for the boys to come home for dinner  
and when they don't,  
i take mothers to all the morgues  
in the city, and beyond  
wherever they can sift for bones  
if any remain  
there are no maps  
i am noisy, rickety,  
heavy with old  
plastic hearts,  
film posters,  
prayer-knots  
my radio shut,  
no doors  
in this city where  
time stands still and  
runs – all at once  
doors can be dangerous  
I am open  
curfews,  
crackdowns,  
cross-firings  
and rain  
I am open but not free  
I am open but not free



---

\*Greens

### **The ex-fighter returns\***

She waits, like everyday  
For him to come home  
grease, gas, and sorrow marking his face  
he tries hard to remember to forget  
the phantom coolness of the trigger,  
the warmth of liberating his land,  
but now he coaxes unwilling vehicles to life  
in the garage where everything creaks with age  
and poverty, he keeps a worn-out map  
of old Kashmir behind the curled picture of his grandfather  
he rages silently at soldiers who patrol the alley  
bullying the old pickle-seller and ogling at women

She whispers, to herself –  
His lunch is getting cold,  
The nickel-plated, copper bowl,  
placed just right on the thread-bare mat  
filled with a glob of white rice  
wet with glistening collards looking like  
a laurel, twister wreath of peace –  
the cracked plaque of God's name  
glints faintly on the wall

She hears slogans rise like a faraway sea  
Khoon ka badla khoon se lenge/ blood for blood –  
Lal chowk lal hay/ red square is red today  
She closes the window,  
Shivering, she shuts the sunshine out,  
The noise dims but only for a moment

She wrings the dripping rag, seething  
cleans the already-clean kerosene stove,  
whispering, his lunch is getting cold  
“he does this always, be late, late, late”



She hears the slogans fill her room  
Khoon ka badla khoon se lenge/ blood for blood –  
Lal chowk lal hay/ red square is red today  
the weathered doorway is flooded with eyes  
and the aroma of cooling lunch  
he is home  
he is home  
cradled in a sea of tremulous arms,  
his face so peaceful, sleeping like he never could –

She shouts at him  
“your lunch is getting cold”  
he does not hear, like always –  
he has arrived, but he is not here  
and his lunch is getting cold

colder than ever

### **cutting braids 2017**

between the snipers and scissors  
that mysteriously snip their hair  
women’s battles have multiplied  
finished with measuring grains  
counting meals and shirts  
saving last drops of milk  
sweetest women warriors  
are stringing new battle songs  
every ladle is a secret weapon  
each day they are in a new battle  
amidst the old war  
now guarding their hair

\*This poem won an award in 2013 from the Society for Humanistic anthropology.

### **Four corners of extreme pain**

mother sits by the fire which licks the broken hearth,  
burning the bread which needed to be eaten,  
oranges from the funeral guests rot in the same corner with mother,  
she now turns the bread, that no one wanted to eat

father is almost hidden  
the smoke from the hearth surrounding him for years  
his pipe stuck to his mouth  
he looks like a patient in the ICU,  
his nostrils like little steam engines with no destination,  
his feet cold

the daughter sits huddled,  
her upper lip sweaty  
wrapping and rewrapping herself in the shawl  
torn from last night, nursing the wounds on her breasts  
the henna heart on her palm faded

in the final corner,  
beneath plastic flowers and a photograph posing with a pen  
is the son, face open all dressed for burial, soon maybe  
once they lift the curfew –

**Asiya and Nilofar Jan\***

**In memoriam: how much imagination does it take to know what happened?**

it was the end of spring  
daffodils were dying  
Asiya and Nilofar Jan  
left home  
for the apple orchard  
next to the army camp  
they would cross  
the Rambiar Nallah  
like always, the waters  
were only ankle deep

it was the end of spring  
daffodils were dying  
Asiya and Nilofar Jan  
did not return home,  
from the apple orchard  
next to the army camp  
frantic family searched  
the orchard, meadows,  
woods, the river  
all turned empty  
police called off the search –

it was the end of spring  
daffodils were dying  
Asiya and Nilofar Jan  
appeared mysteriously  
in the Rambiar Nallah  
dead bodies, bruised,  
battered, tattered,  
the police made it  
a case of drowning  
in ankle-deep waters  
the women crossed every day

\*Between May 29-30, 2009, in Shopiyan two young women Asiya Jan and Neelofar Jan were found raped and murdered. They did not return home after leaving to work in their orchard located next to the local army camp. A probe was ordered; the police claimed they had drowned in the Rambair Nallah, which at that time of the year was very shallow. No one was found responsible for the crime.

it was the end of spring  
daffodils were dying  
Asiya and Nilofar Jan –  
it was confirmed  
they were raped,  
*[but only after*  
*the townspeople*  
*did what people*  
*who are not seen do –*  
*pelted stones]*  
a woman doctor sobbed  
"what animals could do this?"

it was the end of spring  
daffodils were dying  
Asiya and Nilofar Jan,  
had been crying for help  
two men had heard –  
and seen a police truck  
on the bridge

the hukumraan\* at the time  
in the said order, first  
announced drowning  
later rape  
ensured a cover-up  
and after prima facie  
destruction of evidence  
ordered a probe

*how much imagination*  
*does it take to know what had happened?*  
at the end of spring,  
when the daffodils were dying  
and Asiya and Nilofar Jan  
tended the apple blossoms  
*flowers nurturing flowers*  
next to an army camp and disappeared  
only to return killed in ankle-deep waters  
they crossed every day

---

\*Rulers

## III. Azadi Rituals

**In Kashmir Friday is for Azadi (and every other day)**

in Kashmir  
every Friday is for Azadi,  
and every other day –

the Jhelum splashes as if aimless,  
over the rusted fence, the stuff of stars.  
there, stands an iron door leaning  
with utmost care into an old whitish wall.  
with plaster stains  
and many words so erased, that they remain.

the wall speaks. every friday. in dark ink.  
and every day when fresh blood soaks women's nested wails  
and men's scrawling silences.  
whispers of the ancient kind, now made illicit, take form.  
Azadi, Azadi, Azadi

every Friday  
woven in bunkers,  
the downtown and in the new city  
any rifts vanish, yet again.

the ancient door pulls the old wall closer.  
its multiple openings and closings  
sound like love does endure.

the wall re-etched.  
fossil-text. prehistoric cave carvings.  
a sickness of the must kind. love.  
Azadi, Azadi, Azadi  
the next day, again, grim painters return.  
with buckets of paint to smear  
all words of love.

yet next day the wall will again lend  
its paan to hurried scribbles.  
Azadi. Azadi. Azadi.  
the door stands by; a precarity of the loyal kind.  
never jealous. opening and closing,  
allowing all the mad lovers to enter  
and record their deeds. their cheap cigarette stained fingers

flying like the finest Ostrich quills.  
a must reenactment.  
Azadi, Azadi, Azadi  
every friday the witness of the river folds back smugly into its eddies.  
knowing, even before it is friday on Friday  
Azadi, Azadi, Azadi  
will return

**a day in a life that inches prayer by prayer**

subuh –  
get news  
from the baker's  
secretly open,  
smoky  
gash of a shop,  
between  
old groaning homes  
girddeh are hot,  
newspapers cold  
and only good  
for packing pickle –  
essential reading in Kashmir  
are the epitaphs

peshinn –  
walk the festering road  
keep watch with one good eye  
the pellet-blinded  
is painful, shut –  
with the empty hand  
shoo the flies  
that mistake  
your wounds  
for a meal  
try  
to get home alive  
guns cocked,  
soldiers in the streets  
are rooted,  
where Chinars stood once



*diggar*  
again, no Azaan  
sigh – watch from afar  
hungry pigeons  
garland the *Khankah* spire  
ashen, hopeful still –  
waiting for worshippers  
bringing dried corn,  
when the curfew lifts  
if ever –

*shaam*  
wonder if Zoon  
is still a Kashmiri?  
no longer a subject  
of the state  
but she is a forever friend  
to the valley skies  
and eyes that watch from below  
Zoon lights the waters of *Dal*  
made dark by the calls  
of those butchered  
on the hill  
and thrown in the *Jhelum*  
stones tied to their feet  
there are cries growing louder –  
heard clearer in the twilight  
hear –

*khoftan* –  
dreading dinner  
mother, has again cooked  
a favorite –  
*phohar maaz* with dried turnips  
and garlic she grew herself

qayam  
it has been a year  
of plague, tyranny, locusts,  
floods and angry seas  
in Kashmir it feels no different  
than the one past –  
enter the existential battle  
with curses, stones,  
poems, and prayers  
*[prayers are open-eyed dreams of the oppressed]*  
never stop,  
even if grandfather  
was killed praying  
hold on  
to the wings  
of dead butterflies  
they are safe in old books of meaning,  
beyond fragile, beyond beautiful,  
luminous portal to Chinars  
standing tall, bowing,  
their lush branches  
in *subhuk gaash*  
on the other side of the war

### **Hum Kya Chahte? Azadi\***

bullets fly close, closer –  
we are still wandering  
in the alleys  
at Jama Masjid\*\*  
between the hurried call to prayer  
and the stacks of rattling plastic toys  
my young son does not stop singing  
songs in a foreign tongue –  
the only language he has been  
taught to speak like it matters

bullets fly close, closer –  
clouds of pepper gas  
and shotgun pellets  
rain over puny stones,  
blood sings in my ears  
growing voices chant  
"Hum Kya Chahte?"  
"Azadi"

bullets fly, sparks are shooting –  
as we run for life  
my little one thinks it's a game of  
hide and seek  
i tell him to "duck"  
he quacks  
i again say, "duck"  
he quacks – again  
he did not know I meant stay down  
to escape this lethal version  
of hide and seek

my notepad tucked safe –  
we left the corner  
alive but not too intact,  
tearing up –  
and not just from the gas  
the cries of Azadi  
follow us home

---

\*A popular slogan in Kashmir; it asks, "Hum Kya Chahte" (What do we want?) and the reply given is "Azadi" (Freedom [from India])

\*\* A historical mosque and monument in Kashmir where Muslims congregate for prayers

### **The 13th of July 1931, a revolution for resistance**

in Kashmir,  
the seekers  
call to the prayer of Azadi –  
rising, one after the other  
the beloved, the lover

in Kashmir,  
lovers fall to bullets  
like human ninepins,  
only they are relentless  
scared, and fearless

in Kashmir,  
the dying martyr calls  
"I have done my duty,  
now you proceed"  
Azadi, has become a constant creed –

in Kashmir,  
resistance is  
an obligatory prayer  
offered with every gasp of air –

in Kashmir,  
we flock, rows upon rows  
foreheads upon the soil,  
breaking the liege  
of the tyrant's long siege

in Kashmir  
Azadi is a harkening  
to the foremothers  
and forefathers of resistance  
to the prayer that is still being prayed  
to the martyrs rising one after the other  
to the call that never ended: the call to Azadi  
to the Kashmir  
that bows before no one  
but the one and only

**for 27th October 1947**

You speak of "paradise",  
mountains that still stand,  
waterfalls, with some ebb,  
which still rush over  
their weary shoulders  
like knowing children  
in a crackdown in Maisuma

they are meaningless exercises  
in words, left empty  
by the presence of soldiers  
who guard wilting lotuses –  
and stone buildings of other tyrannies  
against soft bodies,  
and hard reserves of old Kashmiri flesh

yes, I am to be blamed as well,  
there should have been no poetry  
after Auschwitz,  
no words after Gaza,  
and the full list of other  
hell-holes of humanity  
but till you use the word "security forces"  
for Tufail's, Wamik's, Afzal's and Husna's killers  
there should be no paradise either

till the day your security  
makes everything insecure  
marking the exception  
from Gupkar to Zabarwan yonder,  
and beyond  
and every alley that I cannot see without permission,  
where bunkers ooze like sludge,  
muddying, choking  
my father's courtyard in old city,  
how do we know paradise or that we live in one?

## IV. Memory Archive



**grandpa's last memory**

grandpa's last memory  
is a blood red body  
at the checkpoint  
his palms wet  
grandpa walks no more  
to the store for the willful  
noisy, candy craving kids

grandpa sits in silence  
on the bed for years  
asking for water  
to wash his hands

**prima facie nothing has happened\***

circa 1989  
closed doors and windows,  
the Himalayan spring is chilly  
morning paper says  
another rape,  
this time mother-daughter  
army denies

circa 1991  
more mothers, sisters,  
daughters and sons  
unblurred faces stare from the front page  
medical examination report is awaited,  
prima facie nothing has happened

circa 1998

a probe has been underway

since years – swift to begin, simpering men in stiff uniform, hunched, inside jeeps fitted with badges and flags, guns and painted roses, investigate, their glasses reflecting the darkness in the blinding light, crisp papers, shining pens, ready, their words are hard, and easy to follow, if you know what they mean and don't, tea stains, safari suits, bonus, boot marks, scratches, no forced entry, no witnesses, compensation, not so innocent 10-year-old urine, rape-kit, set-up 'chalaak ladki' khatarnaak mard, swabs –

military, sputum, semen, pleasure, rolex, airfare, framed, nation, glance, youth,

virgin, hand-me-downs skiing, royal springs, golf, conniving mother – what, where, tampering, nothing –

circa 2008

newspapers keep measuring words like good deeds by the warlords of piety, "alleged rape", "evidence", "compensation", "interim relief", "human rights" newsprint is scarce, like food in third world bellies, and trees are precious

circa 2011

alleged 'rapists' deny charges, medical examination report is yet to come, prima facie nothing has happened... it seems nothing ever will

---

\*In memory of the living martyrs of the twin villages of Kunan and Poshpora; who await justice for mass sexual violence

### **In memory**

we must kiss. by the Jhelum. our lifeblood.  
whose trussed-up corpse in a burlap sack  
will bob on the waves again –  
a mother's son,  
beloved's beloved.  
hog-tied limbs, head – no eyes.

we must kiss. by the Jhelum. our lifeblood.  
the water – green,  
moss from our old homes peeling  
where we also exist as a tangle of thriving limbs  
our eyes shut to the touristy litter of plastic bags  
and tricolored flags floating so chokingly close –  
empty graves under mighty chinars whisper  
make the ancient floorboards sing

we must kiss. by the Jhelum. our lifeblood.  
we must make the sky fall,  
but only a little on those praying for centuries now.  
their chants must mingle with our rising breaths.  
marigolds kiss the idol's feet and perfume the prayer mats,  
rosary beads whispering sweet nothings, Gods of light and stone

we must kiss. by the Jhelum. our lifeblood.  
there is no other way  
heart is the only way to heaven

for Jaleel Andrabi

## In Srinagar: a city under Siege

### 1. Pain

this is pain the one that  
finds loss as the only place of belonging  
grief is home here  
home not just my own  
but for those  
who seek longing as a way of life  
who fear grief only when it passes,  
joy in this cup tangled in the barbed wires  
will run over, only  
when sorrow becomes explicit in staying  
and grief refuses to leave



A concrete army bunker covered in barbed wire, Srinagar City, 2015



River Jhelum flooded, Summer 2015



A camouflage design painted on a permanent Indian military bunker in old Srinagar

## 2. Medicine

sometimes medicine is to be avoided,  
the pus must run like a river in flood,  
the wound must fester,  
my mother's knee, your eyes and  
the neighboring butcher's hand must weaken together  
the river must curse you  
the soil must make sure it becomes stone  
that allows no unidentified graves  
once there, I will ask you to join me  
walk in the dusty post flood city,  
with no barbed wire, head held high,  
hand in hand we will trace the wound,  
perhaps the medicine

## 3. Freedom

you are like moss that grew on me in the Paleocene, when ducks had wings and no webbed feet, by the cave when the fire was all lighted, animals were sleeping, and we ate each other's bones, and drank blood like cocktails, and then drew on the uneven stone slabs chasing beasts that did not lurk outside –

you are like the moss that grew on me and remained, now a fossil, a stone spread like fire, not green anymore, just a shade of memory, clinging, noiseless –

## V. Love in a Time of Occupation

**i. will. cross.**

my love,  
i am at the line of control –  
inching –  
tonight, the moon is graying  
the darkness – perfecting itself  
or so I hope –  
the breeze is weakening  
like the old tyrant's hand  
i. will. cross.

my love  
senses are crammed –  
bright, blinding searchlights, again –  
i might as well be visible from space  
barbed wires, drones, electric fences,  
empty bottles of liquor. i taste blood.  
guns, lights, smoke.  
coughing, cursing, soldiers, dogs –  
and  
I see the dark beauty of our moonlit meadows  
your perfume on the other side is a paradise  
i. will. cross.

my love  
waiting to hold you has been such a joy  
how many lines will i have to cross?  
or infiltrate, as they say?  
i mind no more –  
i. will. cross.



my love,  
i fear this year's snow will again be sparse  
our thirst will only grow, i should not wait.  
i am a lover who is labeled a terrorist anyway  
i. will. cross.

my love,  
i will always be in love  
with your wadiyan\*  
your wildflowers. your wilderness.  
and winds that say my name.  
and your waterfalls.  
wading in growing puddles of blood  
i. will. cross.  
i. will. cross.  
i. will. cross.

\*wadiyan – valleys/meadows

**don't bring any spice**



Zero Bridge, 2016

don't bring any spice –  
for our last dinner together  
i will bring the only candle  
some sundried tomato that a neighbor shared  
warmed in borrowed mustard oil  
you bring chochwor\*  
if at all, the baker in your alley opens today  
don't bring any spice –  
my land the beloved besieged by a rabid army  
her lovers bleeding  
is laden with pepper tonight  
don't bring any spice –  
for our last dinner together  
if you crave salt.  
we have tears

\*Kashmiri bagel

### love in Kashmir

i returned home to broken gutters  
spilling onto doorsteps,  
bullet-casings, old bones

she had kept the roses  
from the garden gutted by grenades,  
winter had razed the rest

she never bid him goodbye,  
her eyes were red but from the teargas,  
in Kashmir  
lovers are suspected of seeking Azadi

### one lazy august afternoon from a childhood in Kashmir

crackdown oas\*  
all homes were empty  
of men, and young lads detained  
in verdant meadows turned prisons  
ashen ghosts of toddlers, and women  
remained in homes

another dull morning  
was leading to a hot afternoon  
taaph oas zaneh zalaan\*\*  
roses drooped,  
honeysuckle whiffs rose lazily  
white butterflies looked yellow  
the earth scorched our bare feet  
a far off radio

blared yesterday's khabar†  
someone in haste  
had forgotten to switch it off

\*It was

\*\*sun was scorching

†news

wozul\* bicycle, ridden too much  
when there was no curfew –  
and left too long in the sun  
burst a tire,  
everyone jumped,  
thinking they heard a bullet –

the soldiers not ever convinced  
by the natural order of elements  
did what they do –  
barging into homes  
demanding the imaginary guns

zulmitch hadh\*\*  
mothers doubled from chores,  
doubly made to feel female,  
half covered their faces,  
pointing  
to the glistening bicycle's  
plastic rupture  
towoon yeman†  
they cursed irresponsible children  
who forget moving things  
into shade, to safety –

the soldiers shook their metalheads  
not convinced  
by the natural order of elements  
and did what they do –  
proceeded to deliver  
customary kicks,  
staple curses, shoving,  
pulling threadbare scarves,  
zyaadti hez karekh^  
pummeling flesh, kicking dogs,  
hitting toddlers

\*red

\*\*limitless cruelty

†may plague fall on them

^they forced themselves upon us

mixing rice with kerosene  
a signature act,  
*rab te sab karekh kuni\**  
their wrath a national dumpster fire  
growing, just because it could –

their choicest prey  
of the day became *akh lokut ladke\*\**  
a puny tween, an annoying friend,  
a partner in banter,  
*su rotukh bechor†*  
he was hiding at home,  
trying to finish his overdue  
math homework  
teacher had given him a zero  
the soldiers  
pumped n-number of bullets into him  
we had learned addition together  
and nothing has ever added up after –

he once told me *hisaab^* would kill him  
but i also knew the red bicycle was mine,  
and mine alone,  
for many years which still qualified  
as childhood — even in Kashmir,  
i prepared for the hereafter  
where he would confront me  
for his killing and i  
would reason, he could have finished  
his homework on time –

---

\*mud has been mixed with a feast [by them]]

\*\*one young lad

†hapless! he was caught

^mathematics

## VI. Languages of Loss

### **decolonizing my heart**

I  
in the dying 1980's  
I finally received  
the most coveted compliment  
my last day of childhood melting besides  
the thawing glacier  
that left the mountain  
bare,  
vulnerable  
the valley thirsty, then,  
and in the long run

the compliment  
caressing my red cheeks  
became a whisper  
"meem" I heard,  
"you look like a meem"  
sigh –  
finally being compared to  
a rose complexioned English lady: a "meem"  
who would have leisured on the banks of Dal  
where I stood now cold and dry-eyed  
on the footprints of my foremothers  
who would have slaved  
to keep such a *meem* warm  
as would have our forefathers  
indentured

i received the ultimate compliment  
like a talisman  
an enduring assurance of finesse  
the white occupier's face  
is much coveted  
even by my current occupiers  
it's power is still the pinnacle of beauty  
the kind that slavery ignores in itself  
because all our mirrors  
are taken away

broken, if not taken  
trampled upon, if still unbroken  
our waters are muddied  
lest we happen to see  
any remnant of our reflection

lest we realize our own beauty  
man, woman, other,  
beast, dog, daffodil  
khar, hangul, she  
nails stained with henna,  
teeth whitened with walnut bark  
gums red –  
lest we realize what beauty this is  
that we always have been –

## II

it is 17 or 19th January 1991  
when my darling friend  
who is still a tender memory  
a Kashmiri girl  
they later called her “Pandit” first –  
did not turn up at the assigned hour

lal chowk was buzzing  
people seemed to have somewhere to go

I was also agonizing over  
operation Desert Storm  
the first war that i consumed like a TV show  
hooked, praying –  
described as the mother of all wars  
it changed the meaning of mother for me, forever –  
the noise of all wars to be born  
rang in my ears –

later  
the phone at my friend's house  
rang endlessly



no one told me she had left  
i read it in the newspaper  
which is also when  
I connected the dots  
of why our lunch boxes could not touch  
how even me, a *meem* look-alike  
could not enter a Pandit kitchen  
how once when I accidentally did  
an old godly man snarled at me,  
then cursed his family  
for letting the door be ajar  
for dirt like me to saunter in

2019

i write this and shudder  
i figured she unfriended me on facebook  
after we found each other  
and stopped at personal pleasantries  
the balm of innocent friendship  
was too simple to dress  
our twisted wounds, old and fresh  
wounds we did not know we carried

then  
she again took the easier way  
she left without telling me  
to my face  
what she saw in my eyes  
what she heard in my words  
my eyes – are only a mirror of her own  
the only mirrors we still possess  
with our waters muddied  
our looking glasses broken to bits –

III

**mourning my tongue (or postcolonial-colonialism)\***

when you speak broken Kashmiri  
and even if you misquote Rasul Mir,  
or twist Mahjoor's words  
you are still cute; even too cute  
and the universe of poetry  
is still fine –  
but hell brims over  
if your English is broken,  
your comma is ill placed,  
a fuck is ill positioned  
or you generally misspeak  
a word, from the thieving  
Queen's lexicon,  
the grammar of irony  
fortified, alive and well

\*\*

english, earns you bread  
arabic, will earn you prayers  
in the old mother tongue Kashmiri  
all that is left to do,  
is cuss –  
under your breath

\*\*

---

\*Goldie Osuri uses this term to describe the prevailing neocolonialism through this term.

**In Kashmir everyone is a poet**

our home by the mountain  
has long been seized.  
pastures are filled with landmines  
graves are paved for tourists  
there is nowhere to go

at night when dogs stop barking  
we hold words still  
keeping them from making noise,  
children are light sleepers.  
words are scarier with soldiers  
on prowl

everyone here is a poet  
war teaches you poetry  
of words  
and mostly of silence

**be very very brave**

pick a fight, show a love.  
lower your forehead, be in love.  
build a cage, face a lion and be a man,  
face a man and be a woman.  
take a sip, another sip, let night  
take on you like a losing game,  
morning, build a sun, put out the fire.  
blow up some stars, reach the moon.  
face the moon and be a tide.  
with the rigor of prayer  
now, kiss the ocean  
over and over –

## VII. Distant Echoes

### **No Rose Red in Kashmir**

the first rays of the sun  
suffuse the rubble  
behind my grandfather's  
garden, where roses grew  
when we last promised to meet,

quick shadows, nimble footed  
fall over the crusty red runnels  
a hasty dark spreads  
taking all the color away  
a cry falls silent

this far yet  
i am still there,  
in the alleyway behind  
where it all still happens

i trace the lines in the dark  
their crimson reminds me  
there is no rose red in Kashmir  
and  
the only rose red in Gaza  
oozes from your heart to mine...

Note: written around 2010 (Cerebrations Magazine), this poem was meant to repeat Kashmir towards the end, but Gaza slipped in. It was meant to be—to show up as a trace of love and affective solidarity for Palestine that lives deep in Kashmiri hearts, crossing all imposed borders and walls.

**for a good person (1)**

she writes to me from Kabul  
worried about Kashmir  
she is tired  
will she return home?  
i do not know where home is  
she only makes sure to mention  
where she "currently" is  
many horrors stick to my heart  
they all come off when  
she writes to me from Kabul  
worried about Kashmir

**for a good person (2)**

she counts the stars  
living inside the war  
a perpetual hostile womb  
where humanity  
bleeds, a constant miscarriage

she writes to us, again  
the blood has stemmed,  
there is no water either  
her thirst is as sharp  
as her grief,  
she must cry  
she insists –

people have been dying  
she is exhausted  
after each burial, she paints  
the dead faces, in color  
a constant witness  
of details that will be lost

each day  
she learns a new word  
synonyms of love, mercy, kindness  
there are not many,  
but enough she says

she leaves her door  
wide open during the war  
becoming its first victor

for Francesca Rechia



**Babri masjid, december 6  
in memoriam**

a nation lit fireworks,  
their God returned from exile  
smoke hung heavy  
on the city of the homeless,  
those eternally exiled –  
for months they coughed,  
sputtered, roofless, rootless

God returned from exile,  
only to find a house in  
another God's broken home  
between the exiled God  
and the roofless one  
the homeless kept coughing

Sometimes, it is not entirely clear whether the greater challenge is to fall asleep or to return to this world from a dream, whatever nightmare it may be. A world in which, as Ather Zia states, “force does not respect the natural order of the elements”, the order of love that makes life dignified. Ather’s poems locate this force in the Kashmiri weave of resilience that makes every survivor a witness and every witness a poet. In Kashmir, everyone is a poet, says Ather, placing poetic imagination and knowledge of injustice in an inextricable relationship. Between the two, she finds room perhaps only for the crimson of an absent flower, in this case a rose.

While reading poems in this collection, you simultaneously fear and await the next sentence; With each subsequent sentence, Ather’s poetic process that demands responsibility from the reader becomes clearer. These poems also demand, at the very least, an imagining of solidarity, if not solidarity itself. In the rifts between the hysterical cartography of colonial British power and its domestic heirs. Ather writes of persistent childhoods, memories of a grandfather, lovers branded terrorists, a mother dreaming of a table with everyone who is now gone; The fear of loss and then loss as the only place of belonging, unfinished tasks, the merciless imperial sun and the training of the memory of the forgotten. Ather’s poetry exposes the mechanisms of siege. Together, these poems point to the illusion of individual freedom because they come from a poetic tradition that sees poetry as the only collective language worth fighting for, for the survival of man as such. — **Aneta Vladimirov**

Ather Zia holds us within the layered intimacies of resistance in a land overshadowed by militarized control and historical erasure. Intertwining words as images and images as words, Zia’s poems delve into the felt realities of Kashmiris, where survival necessitates witnessing, remembering, and creating amidst systemic violence and enforced silences. With profound lyricism and political urgency, Zia documents the pain, loss, and yearning for freedom and honors the memories of the disappeared and the dreams of those who endure. This work is a testament to the undefeatable spirit of a people who, despite the crushing weight of occupation, continue to resist through the power of words, love, and collective memory. Zia soars with poetic voices that across time call us towards justice, solidarity, and bearing witness.

— **Efadul Huq**

Ather Zia's *In Kashmir: Writing Under Occupation* is a haunting cartography of resistance, memory, and love in a militarized homeland. From 'lasan' (license) to 'Cashmere' (Kashmir), chinar to curfew, Zia sets both colonial tropes and the rich earth beauty of the valley in stark relief with what has become the murderous mundane of a relentless everyday under occupation.

Acts of survival and defiance in the face of systemic erasure are soaked within familiar romantic Kashmiri imagery and suffused with the raw and tender grief of relationality and loss, from daughters and lovers to mothers and fathers - "oranges from the funeral guests rot in the same corner with mother", as the "slow, moving funeral" of the Jhelum river winds its way through the collection.

This is not just poetry—it is an urgent, overdue re-education in the form of metaphor, where every line revives and recentres a people who have long been denied the right to narrate their own lives.

— **Laila Malik**

### About the Author

Ather Zia, Ph.D., is a political anthropologist, poet, short fiction writer, and a columnist. She teaches at the University of Northern Colorado, Greeley. Ather is the author of *Resisting Disappearances: Military Occupation and Women's Activism in Kashmir* (University of Washington Press, 2019) and co-editor of *Can You Hear Kashmiri Women Speak* (Women Unlimited 2020), *Resisting Occupation in Kashmir* (UPenn Press, 2018) and *A Desolation called Peace: Voices From Kashmir* (Harper Collins, 2019). She has published a poetry collection "The Frame" (1999) and another collection is forthcoming. Ather's ethnographic poetry on Kashmir has won an award from the Society for Humanistic Anthropology. She is the founder-editor of *Kashmir Lit* and is the co-founder of Critical Kashmir Studies Collective, an interdisciplinary network of scholars working on the Kashmir region.

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