ALI SARDAR JAFRI (1913 - )

Born: Balmampur, Uttar Pradesh, India
Mother tongue: Urdu
University: Delhi University, B. A. (could not appear in M. A. final examinations because of political imprisonment)

Jafri became involved with the Freedom struggle in his student days. A communist sympathiser, he has been jailed for writing revolutionary poetry both before and after Independence.

A well-known editor, journalist, author and television producer, who has travelled widely, Jafri is known as an outstanding orator in both Urdu and English. He was appointed a justice of the Peace in Maharashtra State, and in 1967 received the Government of India's Padma Shree award. His other numerous awards include Soviet Nehru Land award for poetry, Mir Taqi Mir award and Bhopal Urdu Academy award.

No Living Urdu poet is more closely identified with the Progressive Writers' Movement than Jafri, who was one of its founders. Six collections of his poems have been published, as well as several works of prose in Urdu and English.
ON MOUNT SINAI
(To the astronauts)

'The earth holds secrets of flowers and trees; the sky hides secrets of galaxies, many and far.'

Mind, restless with one strong desire;
World, drenched in scents and colours,
Finite, nevertheless.
Where takes us now this brave new search
As we fly to the end of vision,
The sun and the moon, once boundaries,
Now drafted as companions on our voyage?

(Ghalib)

ON MOUNT SINAI
(To the astronauts)

‘Kya Fazli nahi laga-se koi kisise koi marha-jab
Aap kisi kisise mera koi toh koi’

Ghalib
Perhaps we have learnt some secrets of nature,
Yet many remain unexplored.
Our story is centuries old,
But still only a fragment.
Destinations have withered to dust.
But the caravan still journeys on
Drunk on the old wine of failure,
Our zest for fresh search remains young.

When eagerness severed our hands,
They turned into flowers of will.
When our lips were sealed by amazement,
Our silence became magic spells.
When mountains loomed up in our way,
We turned into quick flowing streams.
Imprisoned from birth in our globe,
We became lords of infinite space.
The desire to fly is a leap of mind,
From dust, we became heaven’s glory.
Clever wisdom now tells us
There's a dream place there on the moon,
That beauties await us, with bodies of fire,
In the glittering archway of skies.
A host of fair dreams lie awaiting
In the sleepless eyes of Venus and Moon,
To play once again with the tresses of our sky-blue beloved,
To hold the flame once again in our trembling hands.

Tell it forth in the wonders of sky:
That a seer has now come from earth.
Give beauty the boon of unveiling,
Though I've not yet pierced the veil.
The star that fell yesterday down from the skies
Has returned with moon on its shoulder,
And the cup of grief in its hands.
Face glowing with toil,
A skilled planet-maker enlarges
The host of all the sky's beauties.
The moon is not the most we can wish for.
The sky remains boundless.
Pleiads burn beyond Pleiads,
Galaxies whirl beyond ours.
Many more valleys beckon us on,
Alluring from infinite space.
Many more journeys’ ends, many more hurdles,
Many trials lie ahead now for love.

Today a madman holds the torch of knowledge,
The torch of wisdom, lighting heaven and earth.
This time, let morning’s message come
From all suns that dwell in all space.
Oh Sinai lightning, blaze forth once more:
We, not Moses, stand on Mount Sinai.
MORE BEAUTIFUL

Tomorrow, there'll be only you and me.
No smiling foe,
No cunning friend,
Will come between us.

The dew of spent life
Washes silver the night of your hair.
The blushing rose of your cheek
Will turn golden.
Every hue of twilight will blend
With moonlight, enchanting and delicate.
On your face,
Now a poem,
Time will write a story,
And from its many lines
All my love's kisses
Will burst into the smiles of myriad lips.

Culling dark shadows
From nights gone by,
Gathering tender strands
From mirthful days,
We will weave royal robes
To clothe our memories' nakedness.

Tomorrow, there'll be only you and me.
No smiling foe,
No cunning friend,
Will come between us.
Eyes of lust will no longer see
Youthful beauty in your cheeks.
Only my experienced eye will tell you
That the beauty of your old age
Is more beautiful than youth.
MY JOURNEY.

'Like the grass, I have sprouted a hundred times'
(Rumi)

The day will come
When the eye-lamps will fade
The hand-lotuses wilt
And the butterfly of speech forever fly
The flower of tongue.
All faces blossoming like buds,
Laughing like flowers,
Will one day, disappear
To the shadowy depths of the sea.
All pulsing blood, all beating hearts,
All melodies will be hushed.
On the velvet of blue sky
This shining gem,
This heaven, this earth of mine,
Without knowing, understanding,
Will weep tears of dew
On the handful of dust that is man.
From the temples of memories
Every single thing will have gone.
Then no one will ask:
Where is Sardar?

But I'll come here again,
Speak through children's voices,
Sing in the calls of birds.
When seeds smile under the earth
And seedlings, with nimble fingers
Caress the layers of soil
I'll open my eyes
Through every bud, each blade of grass.
On my green palm
I’ll balance the droplets of dew.
I’ll become the glow of cheeks,
The beat of melodies.
Like the blush of the modest bride,
I’ll sparkle through every veil.
When the wintry winds blow
And autumn leaves fall
Under the lively feet of travellers
My laughter will sound
In the crunching of dry leaves.
All golden streams of the earth,
All blue lakes of the sky
Will be filled with my being.
And the world will see
That every tale is my tale,
Every lover Sardar here,
And every love Sultana*.

*the name of poet’s wife
I am a fleeting moment
From the magic house of time.
I am a restless droplet
Busy travelling
From the flask of the past
To the cup of the future.
I sleep and awaken
And fall asleep again.
I am a play, centuries old,
Death makes me live forever.
REMARKS MADE IN PASSING

Your face is proud, now every heart is broken.  
Your eyes beam, now every flower lies dead.  
The garden now is barren as a desert,  
And you smile.

Somewhere in the breast must lurk a sigh,  
Which one-day will emerge, though not today.  
Once grown, it will leap into a blaze,  
A thousand-year-old fire.  
Consider – and foresee the fate of tyrants.
A MORSEL

His mother weaves silk,
His father spins cotton.
He left the womb’s darkness
For the black heart of a hovel.
When he leaves it,
He will fuel the mills.
To feed his innocent body,
He will feed the insatiable hunger of capital.
His hands will squander flowers of gold
And the body will spend its silver.
The bright burning lamps in bank windows
Will be fueled by the blood of his heart.
This child, so innocent, small,
Destined for capital’s maw,
Stands pleading silently:
Can nobody save me?
TWO LAMPS

A sound of flapping wings
Comes from the caves of darkness.
A bitter wind gusts,
Slashing with swords honed sharp on ice.

A wretched shop, gloomy, unlit,
A lamp and a maid.
It flickers; she stoops, subdued.
Through the long night of winter,
They struggle with darkness and wind.
Darkness rises from the fields  
Like an army of clouds,  
And the insolent hands of the wind  
Try to snap the tiny flame’s spine  
And snatch the girl’s dirty robe.  
She wraps it close to her,  
The flame flickers again and again,  
The naked old earth trembles.

The darkness now seethes a black ocean,  
The wind has gone mad.  
Either those two lamps must die,  
Or blaze up into a fire,  
Consuming the power of darkness.

Yet I believe in them.  
Under their meekness and silence,  
They are still flames.  
And belong to the tribe of lightning.
DON'T LOOK AT ME SO FONDLY

Don't look at me so fondly;
Shaded by your lashes,
Even the glare of sunshine turns to moonlight.
I have far to go,
And the desert sand is burning.
The soles of my feet glow like embers.
Yet love's tender gaze can die.
You may forget
The traveller crossing fidelity's burning sands.
Don't look at me so fondly.
MURDER OF THE SUN

Twilight stained by the murder of the sun.  
Horizon stabbed, evening blood-soaked,  
The fair cup of light, the dark rain of stones,  
Night triumphs from earth to heaven.

Trust is gone; we cannot even find doubt.  
No pain, no meaning to grief.  
Inertness unspeakable holds us,  
No will to live, no urge to enjoy,  
No bow to bend, no idol to bow to.  
Poemen have won,  
And our war's at an end.

The fire of grief is out;  
With no beauty to keep faith with,  
We can only bless the killer.
But this is that war without end,
Its end is beginning's beauty.
Thorns deck the flowery caravan's way,
Silence holds lips, longing for voices,
Hearts yearn for the sound of our songs.

The lamp wears the crown of the murder of sun;
Stars raise glasses of sunlight;
Tear lamps shine bright in every eye;
Dancing flames presage thunderbolts;
And embers fill the lap of night.

The earth tells sad tales from a thousand mouths
To a thousand mad listening ears.

Somewhere the black wall crumbles.
Somewhere flower swords sway.
A breeze stirs the sands of rebellion.
The cuckoo heralds the coming of spring.
Heart’s roses bloom in fidelity’s garden
And eyes and cheeks flow with wine.

From the forest of youthful dreamland
The wind breathes rebellion’s sweet scent.
They say, the rainbow caravan comes,
With a new sun on the shoulder of morning.
A HYMN TO HANDS

Respect these hands,
Honour these hands,
They run the world,
Salute these hands.
They make the circle of history turn, the wheels of industry whir.
The renew cultures, revive civilizations.
They make the story of earth, the tale of mankind.

Respect these hands.
The have seen the passage of time, they sift good from bad.
They are friends of the whole world, but they know their foes.
They are prophets of strength,
Trust in no other.

Respect these hands.
These flowers in vases are their wounds;
These wine cups were their emptiness;
These arches reflect their gestures of weariness.
Respect these hands.
These golden lamps on the highway, stretched electrical arm,
Chandeliers in palaces, dwellings of colour and light,
All these are our burning, lighted hands.

Respect these hands.
Quiet, they silence sounds in a hundred harps,
Weave melodies from strings, beats through drums.
When harps resound, it is our hands that sing.

Respect these hands.
These hands know magic, they turn silk into garments,
Stone into idols, soot into eye-black,
Dust into gold, silver into anklets.

Respect these hands.
They are ripples of lightning, harnessed waves of the Ganges.
Masters of earth's course, planets on the horizon of labour,
For hundreds of years they have healed the world,
But lie helpless victims themselves.
Respect these hands.
The fruits of creation’s travail, the chief work of nature,
In the field of endeavour they create and they build.
Flower-laden branches, they brandish swords too.

Respect these hands.
Poems and speeches mean nothing without them.
Man’s fate means nothing without them.
All wisdom, all learning, are but commentaries to them.

Respect these hands.
How light and delicate, shapely and fine.
They are masters of cunning, but guiltless as children.
In this world of foul lies, only they are the truth.

Respect these hands.
The stretch from frontier to frontier, from land to land.
Link arms with arms, and bind hearts with hearts,
And then become chains around tyranny’s feet.
Respect these hands.
To build is their nature, let us build a new world.
Make a new effort, forge a fresh fate.
Conjure a bright new dream, reveal a new meaning.

Respect these hands,
Honour these hands,
They run the world,
Salute these hands.
YOUR EYES

Your eyes:
Beautiful, clear, smiling, young eyes.
Behind the flickering shades of your lashes,
Under the arches of your brows,
Your eyes
Under their cool shade
My love and the night of my youth was blossoming.
Your eyes
In dark nights shine through the stars
In the courtyard of my jail.

As I write
Your lashes fringe the white paper with blackness.
As I read
Your eyes beckon under the brow of every word.
As I sleep
Your eyes your lashes seem to read stories,
I am surrounded again with friends, with comarades.
Roses of happiness bloom all around me,
As if your eyes’ flowers shed perfume.
When the police came to take me to jail,
You woke up in our bed,
Leaving your dreams unfinished.
Sleep hung heavy on your eyes,
But those eyes were still bright with grand flames of hate.
Your eyes were rousing the hells of scorn,
Searing with lightning the embellishment of tyranny and cruelty.
My love saw the beauty of its heaven.
My eyes rained love on yours.
My hopes, my desires beckoned.
Keep that grand torch of hate lit.
It is the flame of our love’s kingdom,
That lights up the paths of our dreams.
Your eyes:
They float in my heart
Like lotus buds.
By these, two more eyes are awakened.
Two little tiny sparks of diamonds,
Taking light from my eyes, shine through your robe.
Then some more eyes, some more, and yet more.
The chain will wind on for ever.
Rivers of star gems flow in the lap of time,
All will be yours,
All my eyes:
Our eyes that are leaping with flames.
But look, how near is that lovely tomorrow,
When our eyes will well with day-springs.
DAUGHTER OF THE SEA

'We have to change the standard of beauty'
(Prem Chand)

She hauls up her load,
Puts the basket on her head
And frames it in the rainbow of her arms.
Her neck, drawn like a sword
Gleams even prouder.
That gallant head will never bow
Except in maiden modesty.

Above her breast
The shapely neck proffers
The bouquet of her face,
The petals of her lips.
As if a delicate hand
Would give to love
The gift of beauty.

Bearing the silver catch
Shimmering in the morning sun
She passes through streets
As if elusive youth
Robed in her body’s glow
Wandered the town.
She floats like the breeze,
She flows like the stream.
Her bosom heaving under the load
Mocks both the sun and the moon.
Her brow’s gay arches
Grow taut with pride.
The strain of her waist and hips
Ripple down to her feet through quivering thighs.
She shares in the courage of time
Who for centuries
Has trampled on princes and kingdoms;
Laid to waste
Castles and thrones,
And freely passes by.

Mincing on high heeled shoes
Startled young ladies give way,
While the fisherqueen,
Bearing silver and gold,
Goes on her way.
Her hair and its flowers
Scent the air all about
And we hear from afar:
‘Fresh fish, come buy!
Fresh fish, come buy!’
Every morning the mermaid princess
 Comes forth from the pearly dawn
Disappears into the evening
Behind the curtain of twilight
While the sea sings its endless song.
I have seen her eyes gleam
From the walls of Ajanta.