Compromise

Warm and tendersoft, this chadur
Of compromise has taken me years to knit.
No flowers of truth embellish it
Not a single false stitch betrays it.

It will do to cover my body though,
And it will bring comfort too,
If not joy, nor sadness to you.

Stretched above us, this will become our home,
Spread beneath us, it will bloom into a garden,
Raise it, and it will become our curtain.

ZEHRA NIGAH
The Moonflower Tree

As if in a dream,
I remembered last night,
The tree in a corner of my garden,
Studded with flowers of moonlight.

I would play beneath its shade,
Sheltered afternoons long from the sun,
Swing on the boughs, meeting them as they swayed,
Touch the flowers and run.
Into its trunk had been sunk
Scores of nails.
Many a time had I been warned
Not to touch those nails.

That tree, they said,
Was haunted.
But a wise man
Had cast a spell on it,
Trapped the giant within,
Transfixed him with nails.
Should anyone pull out those pins,
It would release the genie within.
Which would devour every flower,
Which would sap every leaf.
Then this house, this home would burn
In a flash, into ashes it would turn.

Within the confines of this body and soul
Dwells such a moon-silvered tree
Its leaves I’ve always confided in
Each flower has been a friend to me.
Still, I dearly love
The shade of this, my tree.
And in its trunk until this day
Lives bewitched that same genie.
Even now I live in dread
If ever I should touch those nails
That ogre might escape
The flowers he may not devour
The leaves he may not want
But my home would surely burn!
Would it really into ashes turn?

ZEHRA NIGAH
My Crime: A Promise

My child I told you a story thousands of times
nestling in the veils of a lullaby
Sometimes I rocked you to sleep, cuddled and cradled
in my words
I touched your warm cheeks with my cold lips
I promised you something
that promise which is the destiny of human beings
of protection, of honour, of esteem.

My child
the tired and exhausted girl in the story
was not a princess, it was me
the enchanted palace
which burnt to a desert in an instant was my home
Where only the needles in the eyes remained*
those dreams were mine
And all those who besieged me
were not outsiders, they were my own kin.
In her story
lies my truth

*refers to the story of a young maiden who has to save a
prince by removing thousands of needles pierced into his
body by a sorceress. When the last few remain only in his
eyes her rival takes over and tricks him into believing that
she has saved him.
Where she looked back and turned to stone*
there was my love
and thousands of fields of fire
rainfalls of blood
All that was my story
all that happened to me.

My child, in that story
that tired and exhausted girl
was not a princess, it was me.

Where the story ended
my child,
there you came in
a symbol of life and happiness
a constant dream of desires
a guarantee of companionship and truth
where there were only happy endings to every fiction
My child, that's where you came in... where you came in.

My eyes were weary with the wounds of a promise
Your reflection was a balm to those wounds
My hands trembled with unkept resolutions
your company was a constant comfort

* the price of looking back in the story.
I admitted
I am only dust
and you beauty and adornment
I was aware
that I am fear itself
and you peace and comfort
I am the past
but you glow like a future heaven
I am tribulation itself
but you, like hope, are the solution itself

My child
my feelings and admissions both stand guilty today
Head bowed, I listen to the charge against me
Instead of roses I pick thorns from the chador of my

desires

Do you know
what the allegation is
that promise which is the destiny of human beings
Of protection, of honour, of esteem.

ZEHRA NIGAH
The Girl by the Lamp-Post

A storm raged in the night
the rain poured heavily
on such a night, who knows why,
I wandered aimlessly.
Across the road she stood
against the lamp-post,
her head leaned heavily,
as she waited
for a prospective client.

The make-up ran down her cheeks
in the pouring rain
The arrow-sharpness of eyeliner
was lost in the slush.
The brilliance of her hair
had blown to the winds.
I thought to myself:
this flood of winds and rain
would surely snuff her into ashes,
streak that made-up face
into a ghoulish spectre.
Yet, still, to pick her up,
a prospective client
would need the stomach!
But when the rain had washed away
those layers of make-up
Once again, fearfully,
I looked at her closely.

A plain, simple face it was,
On those innocent features
surfaced the colours of youth
washed by the rain.
A leaf-like pallid flower
tangled with her hair
A raindrop, like dew,
trembled on her eye.
Instead of ashes, I saw
The glow of a flame.

I felt as if she were
my own daughter
whom I had lovingly raised,
carried in my womb.
A swing dangling from the tree
A shelf laden with dolls I could see
She had left all behind her at home:
I’d gently rebuked her
for walking too fast
She had rebelled
'Gainst her hand being held.

I had lost her then at a fair
Snatched from me by the crowds
And in the darkness
she had not found
the door to her own house.

Suddenly my heart longed
to seize her in my arms
to grab her and run away
to take both her hands
to kiss her brow
to make up with her now.

I longed to turn my veil into a nest,
once again
I longed to shelter her in that nest
once again.

ZEHRA NIGAH
My Playmate

Bright eyes, oval face, a dark, sad girl
Her body wrapped in a white veil, she peeps through the French windows.

My playmate of many years, she’s known me for ages
With the setting rays of the sun she enters.
Her cold, thin hands cover my eyes
We play a guessing game: she loses.

A thousand storms the rose of our friendship has weathered
Yet still its fragrance blooms in our hearts
A thousand seasons have gone by, still the glow of our love
Shines liquid in our eyes, radiant on our faces
Though a thousand darknesses cast their sinister nets around us
Steadfast this flame of human love blazes.

She looks at the decor of the room carefully
Opens every wardrobe to look within
Spreads the sarees across her shoulders to see
Tries the jewellery, both old and new, then, before the mirror, she arranges her hair
Her gaze, seeking praise, goes straight to my heart.

I say to her, come, sit, I’ll teach you the ways of the world
Tell you about places where I have been
Let me teach you new ways, let me show you the latest style

All these things that you see, let me tell you about them:

All these sarees are from France, just look at the prints
All these bags are from Italy, see the matching shoes?
These sparkling stones are diamonds, did you know
These pearls are real, not artificial, did you know
So true, material goods are a fleeting pleasure
The perfume in this tiny bottle is the most expensive in the world, did you know

All this merchandise I’ve bought is matchless, honestly
I shopped in a thousand shops before I made a choice!

But, listen, why are your eyes moist?
Step out of your courtyard, into the huge world outside

Break out of the narrow bounds of those two, low-ceilinged rooms
The wet mud, the tree in the corner, leave them behind

The mud wall which sheltered your agony, knock it down
Pull down those broken screens in the verandah if you can

Come into my world, clean, sparkling, seductive
With its comforts and realities every colour glows.
All I have to say my playmate of many years knows
She hides a smile, gently agrees with all I say
Come, she says to me, let's play that guessing game again.

You say this world offers comforts and realities
What creates those comforts, what makes that reality?
What are the principles of truth, the substance of friendship?

On the brow of comfort shine my tears, did you know
In the blood of these realities flow my dreams, did you know
Behind those friendships live my heartaches and longings.

Those forgotten stories of truth were mine
I am the keeper of your dreams - you keep the memories that were mine
If you can, take away all these things you have shown me.

With the setting rays of the sun she comes into my house
With the waking rays of the sun she finds her way back
That dark, sad girl who has known me for years

Who can see, who can tell -
Whether she wins or loses?

ZEHRA NIGAH
Hudood Ordinance*

(To the girls suffering imprisonment under the Hudood Ordinance.)

In this tiny cell
I am both fettered and free
There's a tiny window
Almost as high as the ceiling
When the sun is about to set
it passes just above it.
A handful of rays
beams through the window
they form a kind of path
for me to tread on
so I can go home.
Even now my father brings me
bangles and combs from the city.
Apa** leaves my share of rojis***
covered in the bread basket.

Then she feeds it to the birds
Both my brothers still go
to the mosque to study
all God's commandments -
they hear and then repeat.

*This is an unpublished poem about the Hudood Ordinance,
under which some women are still being held. Please see
introduction for more details.
**Respectful address for older sister
***Unleavened bread, better known as 'chappatis' in the West.
Ma, crazed by her grief for me,  
Ma spends her time picking pebbles  
or she stays, talking to the birds  
as they peck at the birdseed  
She says when these birds  
understand what she's telling them  
they will pick pebbles in their beaks  
grasp stones in their claws to hurl  
And such a storm shall rage  
that every judge and every pulpit  
will shatter into smithereens.

3

And He shall be my witness  
Who rules the world  
Who is both just and gracious.

ZEHRA NIGAH