Dedication

I grew
Taller than my father
And my mother won.

ISHRAT AAFREEN
She belongs to the tribe of Ego*
This ruthless girl
And lives way beyond
The bounds of your territory.

ISHRAT AAFREEN

*Please see notes on Aafreen for an explanation of the term ‘ego’.
Introduction

Who am I
Don't scratch old wounds
Who am I
Not what you think I am.
I have grown up playing in the dust of my alleyways
I learnt to fight for myself at an age when others
dream dreams

I am that winsome bud which blooms on my
forefathers' graves
And must smilingly endure every punishment merely
because it exists

I have no name.
Call me by the name
Of the Great Ghalib* who came before me
By the name of Mir
Mir, who was hailed as the god of Poetics and verse
But who died in poverty
The Great Ghalib
Who had to beg for his wine.

ISHRAT AAFREEN

*Ghalib and Mir are both highly esteemed classical poets.
Migration

That silken girl from the tribe of Stones
imprisoned herself in the towers of tradition
In a charmed palace of self-deception she sat,
listening to the flowers sing an epic of loneliness.
The birds kept her amused.

Then a gazelle emotion ran into the valley of her soul
Pranced and disappeared into the ravines
This princess of the tribe of Stones, too,
Broke every shackle of trust
And seeking that gazelle emotion sadly came
to rest on the banks of the lake of sorrows
Pulling out thorns from the soles of her ego
Her lotus palms blistered, turned into roses.
Creased
Creased was the robe of her thoughts
Bloody, the body of her desires.

She left home in the pink of her youth
that silken girl from the tribe of Stones
And arrived into the tribe of love.

ISHRAT AAFREEN
Dialogue with an Incomplete Man

The final experiment proved:
with all your abundant skills
your stature
and your fine personality
you are merely
a boy, for whom
weeping girls
wounded, wingless butterflies,
boats tied to their anchors
and the sobbing anguish
riding on the broken wings of birds
provide sadistic solace
who, chasing a playful desire,
forfeits his own dignity.

How can I share with you my knowledge and feeling?
How can I take you along on my quest for meaning?

You are still younger than I am
You shall remain younger than I am
I am the mother of my forefathers.

ISHRAT AAFREEN
The First Prayer of My Elders

From the womb of the night
A tiny ray of Light was thus born
Night uncurled the lovely pink fists of Dawn
read her palm
whispered to the Morning breeze
and made the dew weep.
A Star laughed
Moonlight smiled and went tripping away

Turning on her side, weakly
my mother started, then keenly
she gestured

A flutter of movement, a whisper:
‘Oh! Is it a girl?’

Such deep sadness in that voice, O God!
The very first which wrote itself on to my hearing

In my very first breaths it stirred
the bitter poison of defeat as I heard

‘Oh, it’s a girl!’
‘A girl!’
Is this a girl? Pray for her good fortune, then.
It is still carved into my hearing
the first prayer of my elders.

ISHRAT AAFREEN
Liberation

Captives
Arise
rise and chisel the mountains
mountains of dead traditions
mountains of blind beliefs
mountains of cruel hatreds.

In the prisons of our bodies
countless restless bodies
and grieving souls sob
they wander round from stairway to stairway
asking us when we shall free them.

Our existence is for the future generations
we owe them,
those who will come into being
through us come into existence.

The severed head which gives birth to thousands
of heads
is no longer just a story.
That which throbs in the blood,
is whining,
thousands of eyes from the veins of the body,
peering restless eyes
are saying this:
Captives,
These, who sleep in a house,
of yellow stone
wrapped in sheets of insensitivity
tell them
to rise
and chisel the mountains.
We have to think of liberation.

ISHRAT AAFREEN
Ghazal

The hand, picking cotton - I love that hand
A perfect metaphor for the love of the land.

They battled with stormy seas, all night long, and lost
Those strange people, before they reached the land.

Like a fragrant bonfire the garden burned for me
Like stationary sparks the flowers glowed for me.

With eyes wrung dry, that couldn’t have been me
Dearer to you than your life, that couldn’t have been me.

That very night such torrents of rain had to pour
When my crumbling home was struck as never before.

ISHRAT AAFREEN
Ghazal

This city does not seek a revolution any more
The mirror we found, but the stone we do not have any more.

At such a time have my comrades found their crosses!
Those who remain have no heads on their shoulders any more.

In search of the ocean deep we came to the shores
Only to find, even as the sands, the sea was not there any more.

Why is this crowd still armed with stones?
Aazar* does not live in this city any more.

Weeping, the changing seasons hide their faces in bed
For, on its body, Light does not wear a raiment any more.

ISHRATAAFREEN

*Aazar was hounded for sculpting which is forbidden in Islam.
Ghazal

All their lives long prayers for marital bliss they heard
Yet they crushed their own glass bangles, to drink I heard.*

Enough poison there is of traditions to last us a lifetime
From sorrows they gave us knotted inside our veils.

Never was there a harvest in my village,
When the rose, not the kussum, should have dyed our veils.

To the fragrances of their apparel the wind owed a debt
Those sad princesses of all seasons who have now left.

Even kissing those fingers is a sin, I reckon,
Which inscribe on dust the verses of creation.

Who stole the levies on the harvest this year to keep?
Who owns these fields, and look, who got them to keep?

ISHRATAAFREEN

*Suicide — traditionally upheld as a virtuous way out of a bad marriage.
Ghazal

Come the rains this year, in every flower bed fireflies shall be planted.
The tears of the widows of peasants shall be planted.

How long will the havelis* of the landlords bleed the peasants?
How long will rosy cheeks in their foundations be planted?

Heaven knows whose voodoo has struck my green fields.
Charms will be dug in and magic shall be planted.

So long as those who suck the fertile soil dry still live,
My youths shall let the drops of their own blood be planted.

Hands that make flowers bloom from mind to mind
and dream to dream.
Rainbow colours, the moon, the fragrance of the notes of music shall be planted.

ISHRAT AAFREEN

*The distinctive, affluent home of the feudal landlord
Ghazal

Hidden inside me lives this delicate girl
Strange aspect, strange passions she has, this girl.

I can tell you why my hands bleed so:
Bare hands chiselled her from stone, this girl.

Again in the pagan temple of thought she stands
With her wounded hands – she must be Aazar’s* girl.

She died of grief, when they stole her dignity
So tender was the girl who lived inside this girl.

Why should you blame me for this art?
I am not the artist, nor am I Aazar’s girl.

Though she scatters into myriad crystals
She curls into the apparition of a flower, this girl.

The owners of the haveli** really wanted
To keep within the family their own girl.***

ISHRAT AAFREEN

*See note on p. 161
**See note on the previous page
***reference to arranging marriages within the family to conserve capital
Ghazal

The bitter taste of hunger on cold lips
Blood-spitting, cracked, dry, yellow lips.

Broken bangle, icy girl, rebellious age
Green body, stony eyes, and blue lips.

Bare courtyard, lone woman, long years
Blank eyes, damp veil, moist lips.

Blue poison from bitter words grazes
Peels off these peeling lips.

Begging for poison, refusing honey dew
Rebellious, stubborn, wild, wilful lips.

Derelict thoughts, bitter words
Lovely, gentle, red, juicy lips.

What will they say to all this talk:
'Girls, they say, must seal their lips.'

ISHRAT AAFREEN
Ghazal

Why do girls follow the destinies of their mothers? Why are their bodies deserts, their eyes the ocean deep?

Why do women keep their jewels locked in trunks To whom will they bequeath their legacy of grief?

Those who were themselves worthy of worship Why do they clutch stones between jasmine fingertips?

Those who remained hungry and barefooted Why do they never let their chadors slip?

When tragedies strike behind a closed door Why do the walls often seem to know?

Shining upon our union ask the rays of the morning sun Why are the nights armed with daggers when they come?

ISHRAT AAFREEN
Imprisoned in the *haveli*
the stalwart's darling daughter
crushed with fatigue,
drained by dissatisfaction,
laments the weather
feeling very tetchy.

Laden with the deep oppressiveness
waiting for the rain,
the atmosphere feels close.

Feeling suffocated, the girl
moves the golden silky curtains
a fraction
from the French windows
with a strange wistfulness.
Sits quietly
With her face towards the fields
where the girls
chattering
clinking their anklets,
wearing pink and light green scarves
walk around with a swagger.
For around their feet diligence has tied anklets
for in their hands is the harp of love for the soil
for in their eyes is the intoxication merely of the
warmth of wheat.

* See footnote on p. 165.
That daughter of riches
with great envy
watches these landless
poorly dressed
poorly fed faces
in which glows the true fire of life.

ISHRAT AAFREEN