

MONIZA ALVI (b. 1954)

ALVI WAS BORN IN LEHORE, PAKISTAN AND HAS LIVED IN ENGLAND SINCE SHE WAS several months old. She was educated at the University of York, Whitelands College, and the London University Institute of Education, and now works as a teacher in London. Her books are *Peacock Luggage* (with Peter Daniels, 1992), *The Country at My Shoulder* (1993), and *A Bowl of Warm Air* (1996). She was one of the poets selected as part of the promotional events introducing a "New Generation" of British poets in 1996.

In the second half of *The Country at My Shoulder*, Alvi includes poems meditating on her relationship to her country of birth, which exists for her there partly as fantasy, as a country she can "prise" off a map, and also partly as an identity produced for her by others, by "Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan." Mostly Pakistan is simply remote, even unwanted: "I could never be as lovely / as those clothes—/ I longed for denim and corduroy."¹ In another poem, "India is manageable—smaller than / my hand, the Mahandi River / thinner than my lifetime."² Identity as written on the body assumes more threatening possibilities in "The Sari," which imagines the poet as "Inside my mother" looking out through a "glass porthole" only to see everyone from her family to local politicians peering in at her; they insist that "*Your body is your country*."³ Still another poem represents the poet's origins as a stone "like the one that tries / to fill the mango. / Inside it is the essence / of another continent." While the poet fears the removal of this stone, she also knows it would be better to "race away with it!"⁴ Identity as it is shaped by the conflict between the discourse of others and one's own desires is mulled over in a conversational tone and manner owing something to Edward Thomas and Stevie Smith, the poems' simple if often idiosyncratic images also suggesting Jacques Prévert: these are three poets Alvi names as influences in her note for *Contemporary Poets*.⁵ *A Bowl of Warm Air*, which includes the three poems reprinted here, was written following Alvi's return visit to Pakistan. Here the difficulty of connecting with her origins and the incursion of the real often make for disappointment while, via simile, the poems incorporate details of life in Pakistan and India—as in "Grand Hotel," for instance, in which "Mock princes hover at table, / poorly paid, return / to shacks and open drains." A new consciousness of imperial history is suggested by "Fighter Planes," which begins with an image of green parrots

1 "Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan," *The Country at My Shoulder*, Oxford, 1993, p. 30.

2 "Map of India," p. 37.

3 "The Sari," p. 36.

4 "Domain," p. 42.

5 *Contemporary Poets*, 6th edition, ed. Thomas Riggs, New York, 1996, p. 19.

nesting in fighter planes as the speaker admits that she had once "thought I could fly / and peck at little / bits of the world." "And If" reflects a new syntactic complexity in keeping with a view of identity as layered, its elusive core finally "unbearable," its shape no less subject to definition "by someone else" in Pakistan than in England.

And If

If you could choose a country
 to belong to—
 perhaps you had one
 snatched away,
 5 once offered to you
 like a legend
 in a basket covered with a cloth—

 and if the sun were a simple flare,
 the streets beating out
 10 the streets, and your breath
 lost on the road
 with the Yadavs, herding cattle,
 then you could rest, absorb
 it all in the cool of the hills,

 15 but still you might peel back one face
 to retrieve another
 and another, down to the face that is
 unbearable, so clear
 20 so complex, hinting at nations,
 castes and sub-castes
 and you would touch it once—

 and if this Eastern track were
 a gusty English lane
 where rain makes mirrors
 25 in the holes,
 a rat lies lifeless, sodden
 as an old floorcloth,
 you'd be untouchable—as one

 30 defined by someone else—
 one who cleans the toilets,
 burns the dead.

The Wedding

I expected a quiet wedding
high above a lost city
a marriage to balance on my head

5 like a forest of sticks, a pot of water.
The ceremony tasted of nothing
had little colour—guests arrived

stealthy as sandalwood smugglers.
When they opened their suitcases
England spilled out.

10 They scratched at my veil
like beggars on a car window.
I insisted my dowry was simple—

15 a smile, a shadow, a whisper,
my house an incredible structure
of stiffened rags and bamboo.

We travelled along roads with English
names, my bridegroom and I.
Our eyes changed colour

20 like traffic-lights, so they said.
The time was not ripe
for us to view each other.

We stared straight ahead as if
we could see through mountains
breathe life into new cities.

25 I wanted to marry a country
take up a river for a veil
sing in the Jinnah Gardens

30 hold up my dream, tricky
as a snake-charmer's snake.
Our thoughts half-submerged

like buffaloes under dark water
we turned and faced each other
with turbulence

and imprints like maps on our hands.

1996

27: *Jinnah Gardens*: a popular park in Karachi

Grand Hotel

This is how life began—
with a Grand Hotel propelled
into the middle of India,

5

breathing fire and ice,
sucking in the world
and hurling it away.

All the living organisms roll
on the bed with stomach pains.
The bathroom almost gleams.

10

The carpet smells
of something old and fried,
though incense burns.

15

Mock princes hover at tables,
poorly paid, return
to shacks and open drains,

serve the invaders, oddly white
and semi-clad, armed with
sticks and cameras and maps.

1996

1996

135

Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan

They sent me a salwar kameez
peacock-blue,
and another
glistening like an orange split open,
embossed slippers, gold and black
points curling.
Candy-striped glass bangles
snapped, drew blood.
Like at school, fashions changed
in Pakistan –
the salwar bottoms were broad and stiff,
then narrow.
My aunts chose an apple-green sari,
silver-bordered
for my teens.

I tried each satin-silken top –
was alien in the sitting room.
I could never be as lovely
as those clothes –
I longed
for denim and corduroy.
My costume clung to me
and I was aflame,
I couldn't rise up out of its fire,
half-English,
unlike Aunt Jamila.

I wanted my parents' camel-skin lamp –
switching it on in my bedroom,

to consider the cruelty
and the transformation
from camel to shade,
marvel at the colours
like stained glass.

My mother cherished her jewellery –
Indian gold, dangling, filigree,
But it was stolen from our car.
The presents were radiant in my wardrobe.
My aunts requested cardigans
from Marks and Spencers.

My salwar kameez
didn't impress the schoolfriend
who sat on my bed, asked to see
my weekend clothes.
But often I admired the mirror-work,
tried to glimpse myself
in the miniature
glass circles, recall the story
how the three of us
sailed to England.
Prickly heat had me screaming on the way.
I ended up in a cot
in my English grandmother's dining-room,
found myself alone,
playing with a tin boat.

I pictured my birthplace
from fifties' photographs.
When I was older
there was conflict, a fractured land

throbbing through newsprint.
Sometimes I was Lahore –
my aunts in shaded rooms,
screened from male visitors,
sorting presents,
wrapping them in tissue.

Or there were beggars, sweeper-girls
and I was there
of no fixed nationality,
staring through fretwork
at the Shalimar Gardens.

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