

ON THE VOICE OF SHEILA CHANDRA BY KAZIM ALI

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Somewhere between the known and felt, in a metaphorized space burrowed out by the mind, Kazim Ali's poems dwell. Throughout *The Voice of Sheila Chandra*, Ali guides his readers as if they were learning of the world anew—objects as distant from one another as black holes and Sunday coffee, figures varied as Mohammed Al-Khatib and Orpheus “lying facedown in the dirt,” are revealed to be folds in a single canvas. For every element that participates in or communicates via a preexisting method of understanding the world, there are a dozen more for which Ali innovates his own—form, subject, and metaphysics all arrive as wholly unique to the project at hand, to the poet. In “Phosphorus,” Ali writes:

Take me back to my orbit
We are planets swung far
And yet

All of it, for the poet, hinges on that potent “And yet.” The persistent forward motion of the collection is derived foremost from its enactment of metaphor, metonym; the potency of one image transforming seamlessly into the next. The word “seamlessly,” perhaps, is wrong—in this project, there is great energy and attention given precisely to seams, edges, gaps. The work's many forms of petals—petals of glass, of blood, of light—all operate as both part and whole, each derived from the central stained-glass image of “enslaved workers bearing cotton along a road.” This pattern, “painted not last year or a hundred years ago but I mean yesterday or this morning,” looms over the collection, both as its cover art and in invocatory image (“Hesperine for David Berger”). The second poem of the book begins with considerations of the relationship between evil, defiance, and art. It opens with the unmistakable knowledge that the structure against

which the project rails is not a legacy, but a living thing; it identifies the stakes of the work at hand as both consequential and utterly real.

Per this shattered central image, much of *The Voice of Sheila Chandra* proceeds via mosaic. We begin in its minutiae—one segment conversing with the next via proximity, parataxis:

Hesperus the evening star shines with a cold light through the
tightest drawn evenings sharp-edged and dissolute

He came into work in the dining room everyday and he hated that
one image in the glass and one day he just

Only as the poet walks the speaker back, brings into our ken the full smattering of fragments and figures, do we begin to see the greater pattern for what it is. Precisely as Coltrane “[maps] the universe,” finds “the equation that tells”; precisely as God is meant, at the end, to “explain to you the differences you had,” we as reader are finding a “geometric pattern of branches swirling” in the noise—some congruence or conspiracy of matter, from which we might derive meaning.

At the center of this pattern, in the very “differences” to which he alludes above, Ali turns our attention to violence. As the poet tells us, “The first mortal death was murder”—so, too, the myriad uncountable ways of murder of which mortals have since conceived. In keeping with the poet’s unmatched sense of symmetry, it is for the tragedy of the 1972 Olympics, as it is for the human condition: “A gunshot begins the race.”

As I dive again into this collection, I’ve just finished reading Jorie Graham’s *Runaway*, and am struck by the parallel modes of thinking with which the two projects engage—though they are, indeed, very different works on whole. At the close of the poem “Sam’s Dream,” Graham writes, “One day you / glimpse it, the horizon line. You are so...surprised. / How could that be. What are we in or on that it stops / there but does not ever stop.” For Ali, as it is here for Graham, paradox is not a barrier—it’s a window through which the poet sees.

Via that paradox, the poems bypass hurdles otherwise unwieldy

for the brevity and irreducibility of the traditional lyric. We are able, for example, to grapple with the relationship between general relativity and quantum mechanics, to find in their apparent irreconcilability an insight into the project of the poet: to bridge cognitive and metaphoric gaps too great to see the other side. What—in another artist’s hands—would be befuddling, for Ali, becomes a threshold into an altogether new mode of thinking. Nothing is meant to escape the event horizon, and yet. Matter is meant to abide by rules, and yet. The particles of dead young men are meant to abide by those same rules, and yet—what is God? Within this subtle collection, elements of faith and science collapse into an earnest effort to parse and feel the unknowable world.

And it’s in this collapse that the project finds its greatest power. Art, for the poet, is inextricable from the culture it inhabits and from which it’s built. As Ali offers so succinctly, “to shit and to fuck are / Two main purposes of art” (“The Voice of Sheila Chandra”). The darkest pigment in (exclusive) circulation today, “Vantablack,” is first “made for missiles / or planes,” not the galleries it comes to inhabit; for Ali, as for the reader, each context refers to the other. Ali offers us another point-of-access in Agnes Martin’s “white absence,” deepened yet again by this aside on Sophocles: “I saw a Catalan *Antigone* and at the moment / Of her incomprehensibility the actress began / Screaming in English.” Illegibility and legibility; hurt and comfort; to shit and to fuck.

Just as the finest elements of Ali’s project can be encountered as both part and whole, individual poems stand outside of the work even as they participate in its making. As James Merrill’s epic *The Changing Light at Sandover* is guided by the apparition of Ephraim, so does Ali’s title poem draw from the absent voice of Sheila Chandra as its form, its occasion, its metaphysical center. Ali writes:

Sheila’s voice always in the background
Always disappearing into the music
Of what surrounds it the way one loses
Oneself in sex or death or the moment
Of shitting I got lost in Salman’s
Music he said it was a surrender of

Ego when he left me behind but really
It was a surrender of my will words too
Have god inside but for the prize of
The body they do not compete can-
Not hold the storm of time cannot
Hold the line do I touch the ocean
Inside will my family come to
My funeral

By this point in the collection, the speaker is at last laid bare, flayed open by the jagged edge of the work's many fragments. As in an essay (and indeed, the work at hand may well be a lyric essay for its momentum, its mechanisms, its revelations and discoveries), the gyre tightens to give us an ever-clearer view of our speaker—one reflected in the curation and consideration of the subjects he brings to bear. For all the myriad ways this book finds purchase in its reader, it's this intimacy—this access to the honest felt experience of the speaker—that I've found most lastingly plants the project in my mind. Within that vein of the personal, in "Phosphorus," Ali brings myth, story, and faith to bear in his own speaker:

But the myth goes badly wrong
I am not Isaac or Ishmael nor any other son who was saved
In this story I am the ram

It's no wonder that, in this trajectory toward a Janus-faced speaker—one looking both in- and out-wardly, toward past and future, with ever more energy lent to each—Ali's relationship to the atomic makeup of his poems changes. As the project proceeds, more and more often, the poet's trust in the phoneme becomes absolute—one syllable informs the next, every given word the sonic extension of its prior:

*Looking back at
heaven that
never was a
string that*

*could whole
him*

*Hold him
hole him
hymn there
sings*

As Ali offers, “Sound always lets you / But what if / just what if / Sound was a metaphor for something past it.” Even as the above display is nourishing enough to be an end unto itself, the poet reminds us of the mind at work beneath the surface, the multitudes that are afforded to any reader who is committed to listening for “something past it.”

This unique intelligence is applied anew again and again, culminating in a series of segments that turn liquid—their component letters forming to fit rectangular containers, asking the reader to constellate their base units into words. By this method, Ali shows “RAGE” buried in “COURAGE,” draws his reader to pull at the threads to which the greater manuscript asks us to attend:

O	R	I	V
E	R	I	T
H	A	S	B
E	E	N	S
O	M	E	L
O	N	G	T
I	M	E	S

At every scale of this stunning project, Ali develops his own ethic and aesthetic with which to encounter the world. Just as “Fire translates the forest to ash / Tree translates water from dirt into leaf,” Ali alchemizes the unknown into the familiar, participates in the cosmic reshuffling on which the work remarks:

All right radio tune into the blanket of sound of stars
Of matter between you and me as thick as unattended webs

Time capsized but sail across
Workers in the morning shattering
Bottles against cobblestones