

THE
STAINED-GLASS
WINDOW

STORIES OF THE PANDEMIC FROM PAKISTAN

Edited by
SANA MUNIR & TAHA KEHAR

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*This book is dedicated to the assiduous
and sincere services of the health practitioners
and health workers who have dedicated, risked
and even lost their lives bravely fighting
the COVID-19 pandemic.*

We owe you.

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LETTERS FROM THE EDITORS

Dear Reader,

The art of stained glass adds character to a pane of transparent glass by diffusing patterns and hues in it just like a prism multiplies a single streak of light by splitting it into a spectrum of colours. The Stained-Glass Window, as the name suggests, is more than an assortment of stories with a similar theme, for it is built upon the narratives of twenty-six writers, who experiment with genre and construct the anthology like a structured crescendo, with notes collected in various forms, shapes and colours to complete a pattern in book form.

The picturesque capacity of textual discourse shines through Navid Shahzad's short story, *The Fourth Day* wherein she discusses the essence of companionship within the realms of loneliness; Iffat Sayeed's venture into qissa-goī adds a distinguished spark to the collection. Her story, *Fertility and Fecundity* explores the chemistry of basic human touch; a simple act of connectivity which became horrifyingly fearful during the pandemic of 2019-20. A piece of flash fiction from Nighat Dad, is about people who cannot take it easy even when the rest of the world slows down; the burning issue of violence against women which was the first social delinquency to arise during lockdowns over the globe has appeared in a couple of stories, too.

The burden of the virus has worn heavy on the hearts and souls of those who have experienced it, lost someone dear to it, heard of it, feared its presence or those who have bravely fought it from the frontlines. Zofeen Ebrahim's story is drawn from her meticulous research on the subject of the pandemic while Farah Zia takes a classy bow with a letter from one life partner to the other to discuss the division of a book collection if their marriage is no more. Ilona Yusuf's vignette encapsulates the lives of those who walk the streets and in a way, become part of the scenery itself while Aamer Hussein's short form fiction in two parts has an effective narration which lingers on through its powerful imagery.

In terms of writing technique, the spectrum of *The Stained-Glass Window* is diverse. There is folklore set in the rural Punjab, an unreliable narrator experiencing lockdown in urban Karachi, there is diptych literature with sketches of scene upon scene formally moulding into one, the readers shall find reflective writing that transcends timelines with the mere shift of a sentence, a playwright's short form fiction has also been put through the process of translation from Urdu to English and there is postmodern writing from a teenager among several other sub-genres of contemporary literature. This anthology essentially inculcates stories of jest and humor, mirth and merriment within the folds of the pandemic, like the short story by Taha Kehar that subtly hints at the novelty of the internet, reintroduced to many during the lockdown. In other stories, there is self-mockery and farcical comedy, there is the question of classist hierarchy during a lockdown as well as commitment to the art of writing and splendour of poetry; speaking of which, an exclusively written poem by Mehvash Amin is a curtain-raiser to the book.

The Stained-Glass Window is just what it promises to be – a cobbled pathway where every stone has its own story; a kaleidoscope in which every hue has a purpose; a collection where experience, observation and retrospect form a medley of voices relative to us as a people.

These are our stories.

Sana Munir

July 2020

Dear Readers,

For months, our lives have been indissolubly handcuffed to a pandemic. The changes that have swept through the world are threatening to bury many shibboleths forever and bringing us closer to a new and daunting reality.

Paralysed by virus-induced lockdowns and strict curfews, we are now stuck in a waiting game. In the sterilised hallways and rooms of hospitals, medical professionals in PPE gears are battling a mortal enemy from the frontlines and waiting for the vaccine that will ease human suffering. In the cloister of our homes, many of us are waiting to escape the uneasy solitude and return to our distant yet familiar routines. Even so, our desire for normalcy has made many of us curious of what lies beyond our confined spaces and many trapped worlds.

The Stained-Glass Window seeks to transform this curiosity into a creative impulse. In this compilation, twenty-six writers from Pakistan have made a voyage between a familiar life that exists as a glowing miniature in their hearts and minds and a new world order that seems bleak and threatening. Rooted in reality, these stories are a window of sorts into the soul of a country grappling with a deadly virus.

At first glance, the mere mention of a stained-glass window conjures images of the towering walls of coloured glass in gothic cathedrals that bear pictorial representations of biblical stories. However, the stories in this anthology serve little or no didactic purpose and the title seems to have its genesis in a room of our imagination with a stained-glass window where sunlight dances in drifting patterns through the walls and floor. If you remain in this room from sunrise to sunset, you'll notice how a fascinating play of light alters the ambience and inspires drastic shifts in your disposition.

During this public health crisis, a similar play of light has animated the metaphorical rooms in our minds. Our emotions have seldom remained static in these lockdown days. In fact, they have often vacillated between hope and despair.

In this compilation, writers use these shifting patterns as their muse and, possibly, an opportunity to find catharsis. Unsurprisingly, many of these stories have the inner courtyard as their epicentre. Some writers have depicted home as an idyllic milieu, an escape from the calamities that surround us. The protagonist in Huma Sheikh's 'Gulmohar House' is a wounded survivor whose house is a shield against a brutal past and an uncertain present. Wajiha Hyder's 'The Unwritten Story' builds on a similar motif and delves into the fractured mind of a cynic who hides in his apartment to escape the duplicity of an uncaring world.

Other writers have rejected this rose-tinted view and have mined the dark, distressing possibilities of the domestic sphere. Navid Shahzad's 'The Fourth Day' forays deeply into the stark realities of an isolated existence while Kulsoom Bano's 'A Dead Daughter' depicts a harrowing tale of abuse and violence. Using the epistolary form to vivid effect, Farah Zia's 'The Last Letter' stoically brings a hapless marriage to an end. In a crisp, engaging narrative, Attiya Dawood's 'Unlearning the Ropes' presents sharp perceptions on the unequal division of labour in the household during the pandemic. Stories that venture into the public domain are equally insightful and appealing. Nirvaan Nadeem's 'Corona Man' is a clever tale of the misconceptions held about a life-threatening virus in a rural setting. In a similar vein, Rumana Husain's 'What a Time to be Alive' skilfully welds public calamities with private moments of sadness and comes through with a remarkable story of survival. Sana Munir's 'The War Zone' also engages in this delicate dance by veering away from the cosy parameters of home to lament the gradual corrosion of the healthcare sector in the face of COVID-19.

The Stained-Glass Window doesn't shy away from exploring those fleeting moments of joy that make life more bearable amid the perils of the pandemic. For instance, Mahnaz Mir's 'Being Positive' steers clear of the spiral of despondency and pessimism as it ventures into a first-hand account of what the dreaded virus can do to the human body.

This anthology uses the straw of ordinary lives to cultivate the

story of an extraordinary period in modern history. The world is passing through a dark phase that can't be dislodged easily from public memory. The narratives in this book put a spotlight on these chaotic times and may even bring us a step closer towards understanding the complex minefields they have produced.

Taha Kehar

July 2020

TO COVID-19: THE DEATHS I DO AND DON'T WANT

MEHVASH AMIN

*The fabric of these days
Is run through with death.*

*I do not want this
Sly droplet
To insinuate itself
Into the cells that make me,
Duping them into turning
Traitor. Surely my mind can
Dictate: "you are mine,
Don't surrender,
Don't surrender."*

*But we know
'Will' is just a word,
Made impotent by the
Cannibalising ferocity
Of this virus. It does not
Allow other inventions,
Other ballads of power.*

*Still, I dream of other deaths:
Say, splayed in a ravine.
The mountains would
Have been crenelated with cloud,
And a stone, wet and glassy
With rain, would have sent me
Hurling down. I would have
Seen the scree of stone spiralling*

*Upwards even as scenes from my
Life uncoiled like a badly made
Film. It would be quick. It
Would taste of blood
And adventure, and the sap
Of mushed vegetation
Filling my failing nostrils.*

*Or this: I take to
Driving long roads again
After years of cautionary tales
Of men inserting phallic guns
into windows to snatch purses.
I reconnect with the feral feel
Of speed eating asphalt.
Yet one inevitable night I
Step harder on the pedal.
A dog. A swerve. The holographic
Imprint of a tree-trunk, immovable
As memory. Perhaps, just before,
I would know that metal and blood
Taste more or less alike. A last byte
Of information before the brain dies.*

*Perhaps a less violent death;
I have lived a long life, and
My withered mind is devoid
Of dreams, empty of stories.
Now, with my children around,
I lie down a certain night, tell
My brain to shut down like
An ancient elephant would.
Thoughts start etherising*

*And the long spine of words
That has boned my being
Disintegrates sonorously
As I become the bed I lie in:
Ready to begin a new dialogue
Of dead wood to dead flesh.*

*One cannot choose one's death,
Is that what you want to say?
Yet this hiding at home from
A protein that bristles with fresh
Narratives wrenches the older
Human story from my guts.
We are made conches from which
Solitude and fear is blown out
In reedy notes into respirators,
Knowing our loved ones will not
Kiss our forehead when we die,
That people will not touch, gather,
Talk at our funerals. So know this:
If I die of you, I will blow hard
Into the respirator, blow lustily,*

*Noisily, fearlessly, heartily,
Till the crazed breath judders
To a well-earned stop.*

Mehvash Amin started writing after receiving a gold medal in English and French Literature from the University of the Punjab, and she then went on to study Modern Letters at the Sorbonne, Paris. Her poems have been published in an anthology Tangerine in the Sun, as well as in various literary

journals, like Vallum, New International Poetics (Canada), Sugar Mule (U.S.) and The Missing Slate. One of her poems, “Karachi”, was nominated for the Pushcart Award in 2018. The poem was also Pakistan’s entry in The Missing Slate’s Poetry World Cup, with poets from all over the world. She was runner-up in that competition. She has been editor of Libas International and other magazines. Four years ago, she founded the literary anthology The Aleph Review, of which she is the Publisher (Broken Leg Publications) and Editor-in-Chief.

THE FOURTH DAY

NAVID SHAHZAD

By the fourth day of the lockdown, the neighbours began to feel uneasy. It was impossible to ignore them any longer. At first, they perched precariously on wires and laundry lines flapping with bedsheets billowing like the sails of an ancient war galley. A large sheet ballooning close to the balcony sent the black, dust-coated feathered bodies scurrying for cover as though trying to escape being attacked. They were back the next day and began venturing boldly onto the balcony, hopping clumsily ever closer to the window. Eventually losing patience, they began pecking at it. The sound of the sharp staccato of hard bill against glass began circling round the neighbourhood like the night mewing of hungry alley cats. As though responding to a signal, the mynas flurried in from somewhere with their dusty brown bodies. Tilting their heads to a side with their yellow beaks open thirstily, they seemed to ask questions no one heard, no one answered. The window remained firmly shut.

“Strange one, that one,” sniffed the grocer. “Bought food for an army of people,” he said.

“Been living here for the last fifteen years, never heard her name,” he shrugged. “Wonder what she’s up to now?” he grimaced.

You could tell the city was thirsty. If you listened carefully, you could hear it whispering its complaint to a dry, sun-bleached, pitiless sky. Generous banyan and leafy neem laden with thick films of dust stood as still as Druid stones. Passing vehicles blew up puffs, which settled swiftly like a fine film on shoes, bare feet, paws and pavements like an old threadbare blanket. Stray dogs, their tongues lolling with each panting breath, sprawled on baking pavements. Choked with haze, the sky descended to an arm’s length, squeezing the breath out of everything that lived.

No wonder then, that she stopped to stare at the first soft drop as it

hit the pavement without a sound. The tiny splatter at her feet tinged the concrete a darker slate-grey and stared back at her with its cyclopean eye. By the time she reached home, it had started to come down in broad, silvery sheets swiftly staining the faded red coat that had seen better days. Soon it was descending like horses' hooves pounding on nearby tin roofs with artillery-like fire. The steady, calculated torrent of water opening up the skies like a great big sigh was no soft, warm and comforting rain but a sombre, unrelenting deluge at the end of a truly dismal summer. There was something almost sinister about the hiss of water as it fell without the usual ear-splitting thunderclaps or distant lightning forking down from the sky, heralding the start of another season.

With the rain chasing her like a phantom from the sea, she panted up the stairs, dragging the sodden grocery bags behind her. The first landing gave her time to catch her breath and she stood for a moment, trying to muster the strength for the next flight up. Her left knee pained horribly and she tried shifting the groceries to her right, but that meant she could not hold onto the banister to haul herself up. With her breath slipping in and out of her chest like a stiletto twisting in the ribs, she continued to struggle up the stairs, pacing herself a step at a time.

As the door swung open, she could smell the faint trace of leather and tobacco, which meant he had come. And gone. Closing her eyes for a moment, she smiled as her heart pulsated like a tiny clot against her chest. She could almost see him seated in his favourite chair, looking at the rain licking hungrily at the pane with a mug of steaming tea beside him.

But the kitchen was as she had left it. His mug, washed and dried spotless, sat on the counter while the plates stood geometrically aligned in their rack like soldiers at a parade. The kettle sat warm from its last pouring. This was what she loved the most about him: the attention to detail. When he rose from sleep, he would always smooth the bedsheet and leave the duvet folded neatly as though to signal that no one had slept there.

Occasionally, a pillow would tattle on him with its slight, soft indent and the faint trace of his cologne. Kicking off her wet shoes, she padded across the lounge to the bedroom, leaving the green apples, punnet of strawberries and new potatoes to catch their breath sitting on the kitchen counter. By now the slanting rain was beginning to knock insistently at the window with its tiny hands. Like a voyeur with a million eyes, it watched her as she took off her wet clothes, piled them into a neat heap and changed into a pair of old pyjamas and top.

Rain meant tea and she made some quickly, pouring the rabbit's blood tinted, steaming liquid into a chipped blue mug that she refused to part with. They had both come a long way and the delicate Wedgewood blue porcelain, now showing signs of age with its faint tracery of surface cracks, made with love by some unknown hand somewhere in the world, had lent much pleasure to her black, sugarless tea over the years. Sitting on his chair, she propped up her feet on a small pouf - the size of an egg cup - she had bought many years ago from a tiny shop in one of the alleys of the labyrinthine Kapalicarsi in Istanbul.

Swilling and cooling the bittersweet rose-scented liquid before gulping it down, she watched as the rain started to let up a little, as though fatigued by the ferocity of its own onslaught. By the time she finished drinking the tea, the rain had become a straight silvery sheet, trying desperately to sneak through the window frame's many hollows created by crumbling plaster and rotting wood. Lulled by the muffled sound, she slept a little.

By the time she woke up, the light was gone and the street lamp across the street was already casting a halo of amber fluorescence. The rain had subsided to a whimper and only a few lazy drops slid like afterthoughts down the length of the windowpane.

She saw him then. Silhouetted against the streetlight, he looked like a man on fire as the wet light encircled him. She rushed to the window to attract his attention, completely forgetting that it was dark inside and he could not see her. Stumbling with anxiety, she switched

on the floor lamp that sat near the chair. As the room flooded with a soft light, he looked up and she saw his face stretch in a small gentle smile. Pinned against the window like a child blowing circles on hoary glass, she waved to him and thought he waved back, but she could not be quite sure. Standing absolutely still for a moment, he seemed to sense what she wanted and stepped into the light. She caught her breath as his coal-black gaze pierced through the glass, to softly touch her body. Moving carefully, now bending, now turning, she allowed the warmth to embrace her whole body; all the while making sure he could see what she was doing. It delighted her to see his eyes, and what she thought was a quick flash of teeth as he laughed soundlessly. From her first floor window, he seemed taller than she remembered, and thinner; but she also knew she would never ever see anything more beautiful than his face lit by the rain-washed incandescence of streetlights.

At that moment, something like an electric current convulsed her body and sent it stumbling against the window. Pressed against the unyielding glass as if by a colossal force, she saw him turn to leave. He did not see her outstretched hand; but, for one brief moment, stood still as though he had heard the whispered murmur of his name drifting down towards him like a winter mist. A few breaths later, she despaired to see him step out of the circle of light and vanish into the soft, enveloping darkness. Why had she not asked him to stay, to hold her hand, to cradle her head against his chest, to let her hear his heart sing as he lay beside her, all passion spent?

On the fourth day, after the uprooted trees had been towed away, choked drains flushed of debris, leaking roofs repaired and puddles left to dry out like apricots in the sun, someone thought of breaking open the door. They found her like that, slumped against the window, eyes open, staring at something, someone below, with a little smile frozen on her ashen lips. With all of life's colours bleached away, she looked like a small crumpled roll of delicate parchment rather than what had been skin and bone. Dressed in a faded floral print pyjama

suit, she could have been a flower someone had left to dry in a book.

What left the police scratching their heads were the drawers full of elegant men's wear: watches and cufflinks and dozens of new silk socks neatly folded beside lengths of handmade ties and pristine linen handkerchiefs. A large closet sang a paean to designer wear as jackets, suits, trousers, shirts hung in impeccable symmetry above Italian real leather shoes size 10. One drawer yielded pashmina scarves while another sported sunglasses and accessories in sterling silver and gold. A tiny closet smelling of lavender revealed a faded red mohair coat with a button missing; five floral print dresses, which had seen better days; two sweaters; three pairs of linen pants; four pairs of well-worn shoes; and a drawer of the most exquisite silk lingerie.

The sparkling white bathroom smelled of soap, pine and citrus while the only items of use were a toothbrush and paste stood up in an ivory holder, a tissue box, six toilet rolls neatly stacked in a corner, an ivory comb and soft brush, a half-used bottle of Lancome's Oud with Roses, six fluffy white cotton towels, a small laundry basket and a shiny stainless steel bin. The kitchen was just as abstemious, with its four plates, mugs, two pans, a kettle, fryer and a refrigerator that was almost empty except for the apples, strawberries and new potatoes she had bought before the rain, a half bottle of milk and a few tomatoes. Spice bottles stood in a neat line on the single shelf beside the two-burner cooking range while a small bottle of olive oil looked particularly forlorn. A small glass jar packed tea leaves, another an amber honey and the last some dried leaves identified as plain green tea.

The neighbours swore they had never seen anyone come visit the old woman. The grocer swore she had lived alone since he lived above his store directly across the street opposite her apartment and had never seen anyone but her. The office workers swore they were sure she had never married since in the twenty years she had worked at the front office desk, she had never ever mentioned a lover, child or husband. The landlord swore she had never defaulted on her rent and that he had

always found her polite but distant, as she had never invited him in or offered him a cup of coffee or tea like most of his other tenants did.

A search of the apartment revealed no photographs, no documents, no books, diaries, records of any kind, except meticulously filed bill receipts; but for which, one would have thought that no one had ever lived there.

Only the birds flocking the balcony knew. Only they had the answer.

Navid Shahzad is a celebrated academician, associated with literature in English and the liberal & performing arts since the beginning of her career as a professor at the University of the Punjab. Being the first Pakistani to be awarded a First class First in the M.A. English Literature programme, she was awarded the Diamond Jubilee Purse. Her remarkable credentials as actor, writer, director, poet and academic have been recognised nationally as well as overseas. At home, she has been awarded the President's Pride of Performance Award for Literature, the Fatima Jinnah Award for Artistic Excellence and silver/gold medals by the Government of Punjab for her contribution to Pakistan Television; in addition to which, she is a Gold Star member of the Thespian Society, U.S.A., has been designated Distinguished Professor of Dramatic Arts at the Beacon House University where she set up the first Department of Theatre, Film and TV. As Principal, Pakistan School of Fashion Design, she was awarded the Best Crafts Person award by La Chambre Syndicale de la Couture, Paris and went on to found Pakistan's first university dedicated to the liberal arts. Ms. Shahzad started her career in television with the unparalleled satirical show Such Gup. The body of her work with PTV has won her several laurels, and two years ago she ventured into film with Punjab Nahi Jaungi. As Academic Adviser to one of the country's largest school chains, Ms. Shahzad is an acknowledged authority on media studies and literature. Seemingly indefatigable, her latest venture is a book, "Aslan's Roar: Turkish Television and the rise of the Muslim Hero".