

## Abecedarian in Dilli

Alphabets jumble across my mind. I try to line them up like  
buffaloes on these dusty roads, lumbering through this long  
city. It's a strange metaphor to use for order, but then again,  
Dilli has strange kinds of order. Nothing that can be  
explained or understood: one must just expect chaos, accept  
fate. Make no plans. Numbers will not line up, trees will  
grow out of place (thin green Peepal saplings lean off  
high-rise buildings, from angled cracks in walls where  
I would not be able to grow — but I should learn, should not be  
jealous). The wide-eyed children on these roads will  
kick up dust and recite their ABCs if you ask, if you're  
lost — but would that put things in order, would it begin to  
make sense then? *Miyaan*<sup>1</sup>, there are no right words here,  
no correct way to spell out these lives. There are hundreds  
of languages in these bottlenecked streets, and understand,  
please, that order for each is different, often at cross-ends.  
Quiet, you might be able to hear it: the madness of worlds  
rushing at each other like cars on concrete flyovers, all light and  
sound in this darkening night (but not like the Lal Qila show).  
The world ends and begins here every day. There are ruins of  
Urdu, Hindi, Punjabi words on our tongues, next to the English  
verses we collect as new heritage — after all the years, all the  
wars, all the silences, and all the muddy histories we tried to  
x-ray-analyze or close-read or think-through but eventually,  
you know, we tried to forget. Still we fit the world into ABC's,  
*zabardasti se*<sup>2</sup> sometimes, and sometimes with ease.

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<sup>1</sup> Urdu word meaning 'mister'.

<sup>2</sup> Urdu phrase meaning 'with force or violence'.

**Akhlaq to his Son**  
*a double golden shovel, after Patricia Smith*

Familiar call from the temple, same snaking streets,  
Sound travelling the kite-streaked sky,  
ever sound back,  
will not want, do fear.  
suppress in them, but what you will,  
I've been living here a long time, son:  
saga of silence, my mute house  
this whittled danger.  
believe. My silence, son,  
don't stand still without faith. A gleam  
I deserved blood-crushing blows.  
voiceless life. You don't deserve  
my ugly edges, or puddles of blood.  
recognized in men: low howl  
You'll survive the blows, this time  
expect, this time or next, an end bloody  
Don't assume: what if, instead of taut brink,  
I was left beaten and void, son, but the greasy

unfamiliar you and I.  
but you see I don't  
know quietly *they* don't expect,  
Us, our ash bones. It's not what you'll  
this time or next, recognize.  
this is *my* city, my  
among theirs, our voice  
What I say to you is not what I  
begs of you in the shadows: *don't*  
you can clasp. Don't believe  
Don't believe you deserve this  
to see this whole sordid saga,  
You shouldn't have to see what I've  
of violence so poorly suppressed.  
and next. Yet I know you will  
like mine: if an end to this all, if ever  
the string unravels into new sound?  
meat we did not eat was only familiar.

## Breakfast Downstairs

At breakfast, I try to keep my grief off the table.  
I eat my slice of melon, three almonds, a toast.

Behind me, a wide picture frame has frozen  
my grandmother's warm face into ice. My father  
lights an agarbatti every morning to help it thaw,  
his mouth sombre under sleepy eyes. I watch him,  
in t-shirt and boxer shorts, his flyaway hair  
more salt than pepper now.

I try not to wear grief on my face. It is 8:30 am.  
She has been dead five months now. I still forget.  
Grief slips into my voice and makes it ragged;  
I sip tea but burn my mouth, my muscled tongue.

I have nothing to say.

My grandfather has small dark spots on his face,  
like constellations. Three moles near his left eye  
make Orion's Belt. A shadow on his jaw like the  
North Star. He is thoughtful — or distracted, silent  
either way. He does not eat breakfast alone.

My father tells us the news: science, politics,  
relatives, and work. I slip through cracks  
in the conversation and end up elsewhere:  
where we are sitting for our meal is exactly  
where we laid her body, the day after.  
When I reached, it felt like a cruel carnival, all the  
weeping and watching, somebody clasping the hand  
of the corpse, nobody wanting to look. All furniture  
moved out and floor covered in white sheets, as if  
to hide real life away. It was the first time I saw  
a shroud, a body emptied of itself. Meanwhile,

morning routine moves on like clockwork. I spoon  
cereal into my mouth, still slanting between  
scenes. Everybody leaves.