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# Anatomy of a Siege

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For ASJ

1.

Things fall apart  
slowly.  
Then, faster.  
I've just arrived in Kashmir  
in uneasy air.

One of my first visits is to a journalist friend.  
Though the modest-sized TV is muted,  
aggressive graphics distract our conversation.

The journalist quit smoking months ago, cold turkey.  
His health has deteriorated, like everyone else's.  
"We need you for the revolution," I say brightly,  
though not bumming anymore was a drag.

Thousands of cigarettes were smoked here.  
We breathe the chemical blend *in & out*.  
Our uncertainty has somewhere to go.

Counting rumors like a pastime. The certainty of uncertainty, we joke, in a zone of  
occupation.

The sounds of war surround us: hums, press conferences, "*all the top brass*."  
Drones, helicopters, cluster bombs, and 35,000 more troops.

2.

On television, amphibious bureaucrats  
 insist that everything is normal,  
 that Kashmiris are creatures of paranoia.

My phone shakes with a security advisory: tourists and Hindu pilgrims—  
 carried up treacherous mountain passes  
 by generations of Muslim pony-wallas,  
 so that they may gaze at Shiva,  
 as Shiva gazes back at them—  
 must leave the state immediately.

Hermeneutic dispensations snap like rubberbands.  
 Maybe the state knows something we don't—  
 maybe, this time, the threat is real.

Residents of the world's most geopolitically sensitive place have a sixth sense.  
 Bodily perceptions, moods, attunements vibrate the air.  
*You feel history*, people tell me.  
*You learn* when to wait & when to act.

K., an American doctor, belly full of wazwan,<sup>1</sup> is evacuated later that day.  
 I read and re-read our Whatsapp exchange,  
 anger rattling through me.  
 Who gets to leave? Who has to stay?  
*When times get hard, the mice are the first to run.*  
 The sharpest words live in mother tongues.

Senses dismantled,  
 that old art.  
 Losing trust in each other,  
 our selves.

3.

Line of  
 Line of No Control  
 Rearming the most militarized  
 Bellicose gods shuffle.

This (one)  
 This begins in blue light.  
*No service*

Curfew starts (muffled)  
 We drive the deserted streets  
 Cool, mingling, air with skin  
 Boys play cricket  
*Click-clack, round sounds in the morning*

Czots<sup>2</sup> wrapped in yesterday's newspaper:  
*Kashmir gripped by fear of the unknown*  
 Today hasn't happened.  
 Newspapers have stopped printing.

In blue light  
 grammars of life and language stolen  
 In the name of: father, son,  
     Ter   ro    rism  
     Deve lop    ment  
 Women    minorities   rights rights wrongs.

4.

Prisoners feed.

Shrill whistles tell you, politely  
 Nobody is allowed        out.

*Go back (Go back, India, go back).*

All    prisons have their own economies.

*Kheer*<sup>3</sup> comes, we send apples & pears.

Time molds them.

Space divides.

We give and take.

We write letters, quote our poets.

We meet-- Tuesday, 6 pm, the  
bridge.

You don't yet know how to read minds.

*Where does a thought begin?*

5.

Two weeks later

The wardens open the gates.

No one comes out.

Bodies ~~have not~~ ~~been counted~~

Teenage boys snatched from  
unmade beds.

Shadow of a shadow.

You can lock everyone up.

But

you can't force them free.

Now, we invisibilize ourselves.

Keep the streets empty.

*Mashallah.*

6.

The sound of abandonment is static.  
*How many crows perch on the line?*

7.

Real poets write one poem for three years.  
 Tread carefully.

Al ham dulillah.  
 No one is starving yet.

What is  
 stillness?

a toothless old lady asks me.

I am sure I dreamed her.

Stillness,

*too much*

she says. stillness,

Stillness

portends

bloodshed.

***Ethnographic Statement*** *On August 5, 2019, the valley of Kashmir—under occupation by the Indian government since 1947 and currently the most militarized place in the world—was put under an indefinite curfew, siege, and communication blockade. The blockade, which affected more than eight million civilians, lasted for more than four months, making it the longest communication and internet shutdown in history. The blockade was done in order to facilitate the revocation of the region of Jammu and Kashmir’s autonomy and its demotion from a state to a union territory—decisions that were taken without consulting the population of the state, yet performed in the name of development and improved safety and security.*

*This poem attempts to track the effects of this siege phenomenologically—how it lives under the surface of everyday life, the way its presence is felt relationally, in the space between bodies and persons, through whispers and doubts. It also tries to capture the sense of ontological and epistemological uncertainty—but also premonition—that accompanies the arrival of major historical events in places of long-term conflict. I try to disrupt the linear form of the poem through this horizontal and disorienting reading. The omits or deletes key words, mirroring the disappearances and invisibilities that are part of the violence of the siege.*

**Notes**

1. A multicourse meal with dozens of different preparations of mutton.
2. Small sesame seed buns.
3. Rice pudding.