

BLOOD OF STONE

poems

TĀRIQ MALIK

CAITLIN PRESS 2024

Foreword by Prabhjot Parmar

First introduced to Kotli Loharan—the ancestral home of Tāriq Malik—in his collection of short stories, *Rainsongs of Kotli* (2004), I was catapulted back to it in his book of poems *Exit Wounds* (2022). Speaking from his location in Canada as the “other,” Malik, in his poems, had traversed geographies, including that of Kotli, to explore emotive themes emerging from myriad experiences as a native, as a refugee, as a migrant, and as a citizen. Traumatic moments—experienced or linked to the title *Exit Wounds*, led readers from the moment of rupture in 1947 when the colonial “kleptomaniacs” divided land and its people to the invasion of Kuwait in 1990, leading to Malik and his family’s displacement. The poignancy of “Ammi-ji’s Letter to Keshaliya” showcased his personal and collective loss as a result of partition; the visual memory of enemy bootprints in “The Home Invaded” and the tugging of heartstrings with a list of mundane yet irreplaceable things in “What We Lost During Our Third War” highlighted Malik’s poetic prowess. The verbal and visual darkness on the page and the world in “Eidh in the Time of Covid” demonstrated his sensitivity to the immediate and the global.

At its heart, a sensorial feast, *Blood of Stone*, is a homage to Kotli Loharan. The spatial distance from home and temporal distance from personal and historical events melds into evocations of moments, people, structures, and events of Kotli and other geographies. A feature in *Exit Wounds*, the braiding of text and image in *Blood of Stone* also situates thematic elements such as home, memory, loss, friendship, love, and mobility alongside the sensory. Notwithstanding the sensorial distance and deprivation, the memory of smell underpins Malik’s poetry. It emanates from the selected images of the homes and streets of Kotli included in the text. Engaging the olfactory, the man from the clan of the “last lohars” [blacksmiths] (*Exit Wounds*) becomes another artisan who deftly weaves the warp and weft of a thread of myriad colours and experiences to create a visual of weaving, of a tapestry to set in motion an immersive sensorial experience meticulously presented in three parts: Kotli in distance, mid-way, and Kotli beyond ko-eth.

For readers, particularly those from South Asia or the tropics, the pull into Malik’s world begins with the smell of warm earth and rain in his preface photo essay, “kotli petrichor.” If exhilarating moments of “kittu plots bo kaata!” and “raba raba meen barsa” capture the Punjabi ethos, then through the symbols of colour appearing in titles or in lines such as “the ochre of blossoms / the silver of the moon,” Malik captivates the reader with his mastery over the visual. “Kotli Petrichor” is peppered with images of relics of a bygone era for which there is a considerable longing. Photographs of ruins and rubble serve as reminders of the past, but there is a life in which vines grow, and

birds and insects find sustenance. The decaying architectural remnants have become nursery sites for non-human life that thrive without the threat of imminent violence and communal divides. Such symbolic metaphors elevate Malik's poetry to philosophical reflections rooted in the personal and the political.

Like *Exit Wounds*, Malik brings readers to motifs of portals that offer the possibility of opening or parting for passage and mobility (in "Shared Wall"). Or, "In-between the portals of History" reminds of restrictions, sealed fates, and histories of people waiting to be unlocked; for example, the image of a padlock securing an old wooden door in Kotli whose residents with centuries of lineage in its soil have not returned home since 1947. Similarly, the three poems in "Monopoly of Ink" offer a forceful critique of exclusionary practices in publishing.

Malik's poems capture the rural flavour that is often missing from poetry written in English, as most South Asian poets writing in English would be of urban origin. The rural idiom, the vocabulary that is either forgotten or seldom used thousands of miles away from Kotli, Pakistan, or India, would intrigue and delight readers. For instance, the translated short poems "Kujian: Earthen Bowls," "Pangurhe: The Cradle," and "Patolay / Ragdolls." South Asian readers, especially Punjabis, of a particular vintage would cherish the evocation of "takhati," "bo-kaata," and some of the other items rarely seen these days, especially in the diaspora in Canada. Others would be compelled to visualize the intimate, social, and communal conviviality. The beauty of Malik's poems lies in their accessibility for readers of any background, not just South Asian. Having taught *Exit Wounds* at different levels in university, I have observed first-hand student excitement as they engaged with his poems. I am confident that students and other readers will embrace *Blood of Stone* as enthusiastically. Its range and depth will (re)introduce readers to poems anchored in geography, history, and culture that reflect on past and present using sensorial, botanical, and ornithic imagery and, at times, photographs. *Blood of Stone* is, to borrow from Malik, "the spell of dream worlds / page by page."

Introduction

Hidimibi: “I taught him smell. The odour of roe and rabbit,
of morel and toadstool, the distant hint of petrichor.”

—Karthika Nair, *Until the Lions: Echoes from the Mahabharata*

Petrichor (/ˈpetri,kɔːr/) is the earthy scent produced when rain falls on dry soil. The word is constructed from Ancient Greek πέτρα (pétra) ‘rock,’ or πέτρος (pétros) ‘stone,’ and ἰχώρ (ikhór), the ethereal fluid that is the blood of the gods in Greek mythology.

In this follow-up to my previous poetry book, *Exit Wounds*, and my short story collection, *Rainsongs of Kotli*, I pick up the threads I had begun weaving into the Kotli narrative.

It takes a village to raise a child, and this book began as a love poem to one such village, Kotli Loharan, under the working title of Kotli Petrichor. Fortunately, I realized early on the difficulty first readers had with the titles of Kotli and Petrichor. I think re-naming it to *Blood of Stone* captures my aspirational and poetic conceit and the inherent thrust of this narrative.

Kotli is located in the Pakistani northeastern Punjab, and unfortunately for its inhabitants, it lies very close to the Pakistan–India Kashmir border. This fact has meant

that the chaos of the Partition and the traumas of dislocation and migration are still part of the recent personal history of the inhabitants of this land. The pages dedicated to *Shared Walls* explore the spatial and temporal intersections of that historical violence in Kotli.

I come from a generation that knew better than to name their infants before their second year. This is why, whenever I came home from my boarding school, my aging maternal grandmother, my nanni, would



say: *Come here, my precious babu, let me see you in the light by the window.* It was also the motivation for our older relatives, who lived so far that visiting them required a tanga ride, to begin hurling soft abuses at our parents as soon as they saw us entering their street. This was their way of showing us their love and concern for us and chiding our parents for having kept us apart from them for so long.

It has been such a long journey from their world of purdah, and the chadurs, dupattas, and shawls raised over their heads and only partly held open in front of the face like a radar pointing towards the mahram of the inner sanctum and away from the non-mahram.

My early life in Kotli abruptly ended when I was six, and attending a local school in the Urdu medium, when my family moved to Kuwait to join my father. After attending an Arabic school for another year, I was transferred to Burn Hall School, Abbottabad in Pakistan, an English boarding school. There, I was fortunate to have Father Johnson as my English teacher for the final five years.

I quickly learned that ever since his arrival in Punjab, our Father Johnson had been busy sabotaging “Macaulay’s Mandate” of converting us into “Englishmen in manners and skills, but still brown in colour.” As part of our high school curriculum, we spent five years learning, among other subjects, the social history of the Middle Ages town of Tankersham in central England so that at the end of these lessons, I could proudly describe in great detail the history, social conditions, and power structures established there.

One summer, before I set out on my holidays, Father Johnson assigned me a personal growth task: “When you get home, observe the seasonal crops for this time of the year. Ask when is the harvest time? What seasonal celebrations are your folks preparing for? Bring these details to me. And find out where the Tawi ends.”

I stared back at him in bewilderment. “What’s Tawi?” I asked sheepishly.

“Go and find out.”

Cloistered in Burn Hall, I knew everything and then some of the English town of Tankersham yet knew nothing of what was happening that day in backwater Kotli.



Though my eleven years of stay at Burn Hall were marked by acute homesickness, the final year was one of the proverbial rude awakening. I gradually began noticing the natural environment around me and taking notes. Decades later, these notes would find their way into my first book, *Rainsongs of Kotli*, and I owe more than that book to Fr. Johnson. My hometown of Kotli would eventually become my Mokondo, my Malgudi, and finally, my Tankersham.

In venturing across a river with no visible opposite shore, and having to cross the feared dark waters of *kaala paani*, the Kotli walahs were ever mindful to carry their Zamzam-soaked shrouds with them lest death overtake them and find them unprepared for proper burial. Wherever they fell, they all lie facing Makkah in the west, their bodies collapsed around their hearts, each the size of their fists, now in the company of their preceding generations. They lie beyond the reach of any generational griots who have also now fallen equally from relevance in an age that would rather perform a lobotomy on itself than recall its history.

Sometimes, they lie collapsed in the sands where they toiled, the caravans having marched on without them, and are buried in clusters so very close to each other, already one with their soaked shrouds, humbled by white cotton, loosely bound like the tunics for the Haj. And in the case of one troubled soul too beautiful for this world, Shafiq, the artist of radio wires, now lies all alone at the bottom of the shallow waters off the Arabian Gulf within an exploded, sunken vessel, the *MV Dara*.

Though my parents and I were born in the same village, *their* village was located in a different country, thanks to the whims of the entitled grifters camped inside our nation's doors. In the two centuries following our colonization, we would only escape the blast furnace of Raj's kleptocracy by scattering as collateral damage across the continents. Some headed for the Middle East, others to the east coast of Africa. Epitomizing the desperation of those early generations, an uncle, Babaji Feroze, would set out for Panama in search of employment, settle briefly in England before retreating to Kotli.

However, wherever they chose to settle, coming to the end of their stay, the tug of genetic memory would lead them to seek out the taste of their place of birth, and, like returning salmon, they would be delivered back home, broken in body and spirit, their sweat having nurtured infertile soils of thankless and churlish peoples. Their self-sacrifice was heroic in its aspiration to fling us as far as possible from the shuttered workshops and locked doors of Kotli. This book borrows from their lived experiences.

On these pages, besides my close family, we encounter a world inhabited by other characters from their generation. We meet Mohammad Din - kulfi walah, setting out at dawn, lured by the city with its promise of shiny lights and soiled coins; here is an aunt of fortunes whose personal misfortune had delivered her into our lives. Here is Kittu,

my seven-year-old alter-ego, making a comeback in pursuit of his obsession with kite flying, and also and a passing reference to my first big crush. A desert jerboa makes a brief appearance in seeking companionship.

Note: Wherever the reader encounters the word *ko-eth*, the colloquial Punjabi pronounce; please substitute it with the term 'the chickenshit planet of kuwait.' I want to stay faithful in recording my family's legacy (three generations and counting) of slaving in this meat grinder for over seven decades.

mohammed din — kulfi-walah

in summer

the first ritual involves his wife / churning boiling milk
 adding cardamom flavour / rooh afza essence / pistachio almond texture
 while he chips the ice block / packs the array of 136 ice-cream pockets
 & by dawn his giant frame folding on itself
 rough hands clutching flimsy handles
 the kulfi cart rattling in the dark
 the lit city with its shiny coins only 7 miles away
 then before dusk he heads homewards
 the nearly empty cart / tipsy on darkened road
 entering the village / he is beset upon by street urchins
 who demand *kulfi kulfi ifluk kulfi*
 but mohammed din – kulfi-walah / brushes them all aside
 until his return step alerts his children / who swarm around him
 for them he scoops out the soggy leftovers

silently

mohammed din — sabzi-walah

in winter

this second ritual involves whatever is in season

potatoes bitter gourd pumpkin spinach

before each dawn his giant frame folds on itself

wrapping the chadar tight around his shoulders

rough hands clutching the flimsy handles

the vegetable cart rattling in the dark

the lit city with its shiny coins only 7 miles away

then before dusk he heads homewards

the nearly empty cart / tipsy on the darkened road

entering the village / he is beset upon by street urchins

who demand *kulfi kulfi kulfi* / but mohammed din – sabzi-walah

is too tired to protest / *who buys kulfi ifluk kulfi in winter*

until his return step alerts his children / who swarm around him

for them he scoops up leftover leafy grits

silently

in the fall

this is the grist of the life & times of a mohajir giant feeding a family of six
 until felled at 37 in mid-step
 on the road to the lit city of shiny coin
 felled a mile short of home
 in the grip of deep freeze
 a lone nightwatchman rattles his stick for company
 comes to the end of his rounds
 spetstoof sih secarter
 over mute rutted
 centuries-old cobblestones
 his retreat marked by a nightbird's call
 hedgehogs scuttling underground
 frost crunching underfoot

silence
 descending

weaving spiderwebs over open wounds

the ambulance careens into spilled sunlight
 with the restraining bunkbed cold as the slab
 on which a coroner examined your body
 minutely
 for the worth of a life

you taught yourself early
 to weave spiderwebs over open wounds
 soothed our aches with mantras
nim leaves are bitter but heal

& five times daily
 guided every blossom in prayer
 to seek the illusive ka'bah
 behind every distant horizon

then late into this fracturing
 you believe each week a day
 closer to our visit
 & yet somehow through the cobwebs
 you are mindful not to ask too much
 our long absences
 the short distances separating
 as you fill the spaces in-between
 with generations hence
 their flung open arms
 your lap heavy
 with squirming drooling grandchildren

while you feed us childhood favourites
 gajar da halwa missi roti saag
 & cooling in a water tub
 ripe mangoes watermelons
 & under an inverted basket
 a live chicken awaiting fate
 for baba-ji already a decade gone
 you stoke the hookah
 hang out his starched turban
 & if you notice the setting sun
 you hug us even closer
 willing nightfall to suspension

 winding our way through desolation
 the ambulance lurches onto cemetery floor
 we wring our hearts
 to wilt the sun
 while your every blossom tracks
 the perpetually receding ka'bah