Winds of Dementia

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Published online: 8 April 2021

Received: 10 January 2021 / Accepted: 23 March 2021

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humming ghazals between
chai-soggy gums
he is hiding the pill
beneath his tongue
don't fall,
like smoke from damp cigarettes
on beetle-leaf phlegm
kurta unravelling, edema
beneath chappals, surahs
on silver saucers make the water
holy for swallowing
come back,
where mangos grow wrinkly
old people butts, we wash
with baby shampoo, he tells the ladies
i need a cane now!
i am old old old
rest here,
the way moons are lime
on pickled carrots
his veins copper
wires on rooftops
spit bubbles slowly, grind
wrinkled pink lips
tell me again how
ye hava khoobsoorat hai.
(this wind is beautiful).

Poet's Statement

This poem was written after my summertime walks with my 82-year-old grandfather in the path outside of his apartment in Toronto. My grandfather has dementia and vertigo and would frequently teeter on either side of the path, losing his balance. In the poem, I used abrupt gaps and choppy spaces between and within lines to convey the disconnected sway of our walks—him, veering to one end, and I, pulling him back. This motion also mirrors his neurological symptoms of dementia. Sometimes, he would veer into the nostalgia of his life in Karachi, Pakistan, where he is from, which I reflect through integrating Urdu words and specific imagery. (Translations of Urdu words used in the poem: *Surah*, a chapter of the Quran; *chappal*, sandal; *kurta*, a loose shirt-like garment; *ghazal*, a form of poetry, often sung by Pakistani musicians and poets among other cultures.) Other times, his speech and behavior reflected his fragmented memory, confusion, and fragility. In this poem, the back-and-forth between youth and age, remembering and forgetting, Karachi and Toronto, Urdu and English, and pavement and grass create a movement that is instructional in the care of persons with dementia. Indeed, as shown, there can be moments where his memory loss is less severe, his word-finding challenges decrease, and his confusion is less profound. Ultimately, the day-to-day presentation of the disease ebbs-and-flows, just as the wind, or *hava*, does. It is as nostalgic as it is unsettling and as beautiful as it is fragmented.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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