SUKUN

Kazim Ali

NEW AND SELECTED POEMS

“A monument to the ‘music [that comes] out of the woods,’ to the music that was inside us all along. This collection’s movements in and out of various forms, countries, emotional and spiritual landscapes, and decades amounts in the end to a rousing attestation to lyric possibility. A true gift.”
— BILLY-RAY BELCOURT, author of A Minor Chorus

“A comprehensive and stunningly beautiful collection of poems that explore the self in the world often through some form of remove, such as travel or being in a new place. The poems offer to lift us out of the mundane and into a sacred space or heightened brightness.”
— JUDY HALERSKY, author of Spring and a Thousand Years (Unabridged)

“A compilation from the heart and hand of an intense lyricist explores questions of queer love, spirituality, and the idea of home. Celebratory and poignant, vulnerable and wise, Ali works to honor a transnational lineage while also redrawing a genderless line of pilgrim prophet seekers.”
— SOHAM PATEL, author of all one in the end—water

“Exquisitely paced, Sukun is testament to Kazim Ali’s distinctive accomplishment as our wandering, ever-questing poet. As one word, one sound, gives birth to another, so these poems trace the path from son to a finally accepting family, from body to spirit, from earth to cosmos.”
— GILLIAN CONOLEY, author of Notes from the Passenger

The poetry of Kazim Ali “invites us to give ourselves over to the music of language” (Beloit Poetry Journal). Known for its lyrical and expressive language, “crafted with a controlled, delicate quality that never stops questioning, never stops teaching, and never stops astounding,” (American Poet), Ali’s work explores themes of identity, migration, and the intersections of cultural and spiritual traditions.

Sukun features a generous selection of Ali’s previously published work. This remarkable volume also includes twenty-five astonishing new poems and “Faith and Silence,” an afterword by the poet. Together, they allow us to trace Ali’s passions and concerns and to take the measure of his art: the close attention to the spiritual and the visceral, and the deep play of language.

Poet, editor, and prose writer Kazim Ali was born in the United Kingdom to Muslim parents of Indian, Iranian, and Egyptian descent and raised in Canada and the United States.

“A rich and daring poetic voice” (Library Journal), Kazim Ali is the author of numerous volumes of poetry, fiction, essays, and cross-genre texts. His collections of poetry include My Ward, winner of the Chizzana Book Award in Poetry; The Far Mosque, winner of the Alice James Books’ New England/New York Award; and The Face of Sheila Chandra, a finalist for the Foreword INDIE award for poetry. Among his books of essays and non-fiction are Northern Light: Power, Land, and the Memory of Water, the winner of the Banff Mountain Book Award for Environmental Literature. An accomplished translator and editor of several anthologies and books of criticism, Ali is currently professor and chair of the Department of Literature at the University of California, San Diego.
ALSO BY KAZIM ALI

POETRY
Crib and Cage: To Etel Adnan
The Voice of Sheila Chandra
Inquisition
All One’s Blue: New and Selected Poems
Sky Ward
The Fortieth Day
The Far Mosque

CROSS-GENRE
Sweet Nothing: Essays, Poems, Plays
Silver Road: Essays, Maps, and Calligraphies
Wind Instrument
Bright Felon: Autobiography and Cities

NON-FICTION
Northern Light: Power, Land, and the Memory of Water
Anaïs Nin: An Unprofessional Study
Resident Alien: On Border-crossing and the Undocumented Divine
Fasting for Ramadan: Notes from a Spiritual Practice
Orange Alert: Essays on Poetry, Art, and the Architecture of Silence

FICTION
The Citadel of Whispers: Choose-Your-Own-Adventure
The Secret Room: A String Quartet
Uncle Sharif’s Life in Music
The Disappearance of Seth
Quinn’s Passage
TRANSLATION
When the Night Agrees to Speak to Me by Ananda Devi
Abahn Sabana David by Marguerite Duras
L’Amour by Marguerite Duras (with Libby Murphy)
The Oasis of Now: Selected Poems by Sohrab Sepehri
Water’s Footfall by Sohrab Sepehri

AS EDITOR
New Moons: Contemporary Writing by North American Muslims
Shreela Ray: On the Life and Work of an American Master
(with Rohan Chhetri)
North American Women Poets in the 21st Century: Beyond Lyric
and Language (with Lisa Sewell)
Mad Heart Be Brave: Essays on the Poetry of Agha Shahid Ali
Jean Valentine: This-World Company (with John Hoppenthaler)
SUKUN
Kazim Ali

NEW AND SELECTED POEMS
TO JEAN VALENTINE

after late music a rest
CONTENTS

TERNARY
  Prayer for Chasm 3
  Golden Boy 5
  Exit Strategy 7

from THE FAR MOSQUE
  Gallery 11
  Renunciation 12
  The Agnes Martin Room 13
  Source 15
  Speech 16
  Agnes Martin 17
  Travel 18
  Departure 19
  Train Ride 21
  The Year of Summer 24
  Night Boat 25
  Rain 27
  Thicket 28
  The Return of Music 29
  Dear Rumi 31
  Maya or Maa’ 32
  Rhyme 33
  July 35

from THE FORTIETH DAY
  Lostness 39
  Morning Prayer 40
  Dear Sunset, Dear Avalanche 41
  Cave 42
  Vase 43
Ornithography 44
Sleep Door 46
Garland 47
Ramadan 48
Ursa Major 49
The Ninth Planet 50
Dear Lantern, Dear Cup 51
Naval Missive 52
August 53
Perish 54
Pip 55
Autobiography 56
Waiting for the Train 57

---

from BRIGHT FELON
Marble Hill 61
Carlisle 68
Cairo 75
Paris 84
Home 91

---

from SKY WARD
Divination 99
Fairy Tale 100
Frozen 102
Prayer Request Cards 103
Autobiography 104
The Escape 106
Sinking 107
Prayer 108
Rapture 109
Epiphany 110
Ocean Street 111
Adrift 119
Promisekeeper 120
The Wrestler 121
Dear Shams 122
Confession 124
The Promise of Blue 126
Hymn 127

from SILVER ROAD
January Is a Month with Two Faces 131
Drunk Text 135
All Ways to Know 136
Star Sailor 137
Newport Journal 138
Baggage Claim 140
Third Person 141
Dome of the Rock 143
A Cartography 144
Laramie Journal 145
Theft 147
My Chewed Book 148
My Life Strands 149
Glacier 151

from INQUISITION
May 155
The Earthquake Days 156
Flower Gate 159
Abu Nuwas 160
John 161
His Mosaic Prayer 162
Origin Story 163
Saraswati Puja 165
The Failure of Navigation in the Valley 166
Trick 168
Letter to Zephyr from the Once-Boy Hyacinth 169
The Labors of Psyche 170
Persephone as a Boy 172
Drone 173
The Dressmaker of Galilee 174
Marie’s Crisis 175
Yannis Ritsos 178
Random Search 180
Text Cloud Anthology 181
All One’s Blue 183
Apasmara Climbs to the Mountain Lake 184

from THE VOICE OF SHEILA CHANDRA
Hesperine for David Berger 191
from “The Voice of Sheila Chandra” 206
Phosphorine 226

from C R I B A N D C A G E
Sonne et 235
Good Boy 236
Glome 237
Sonner 238
Major 239
Minor 240
Drom 241
Chord 242
Calm 243
Trop 244
Prays 245

TANPURA
Junipero Serra Arrives 249
Crumpled Up 251
Pulse 253
Peter 255
The Dark Brother 257
The Unlikely Event of a Water Landing 259
Quiz 266
The Fifth Planet 267
Mulberry 268
Agha Shahid Ali Recites Lorca to an Orderly at St. Vincent’s Hospital 269
Icarus Turns Fifty 271
Afternoon Lecture 273
Orca Oracle 275
Saudade 281
Cathedral 284
Solace 285
Syrinx, or the Kiss 287
The Stillness of the World before Baudelaire in Bangla 292
Petrichor Lecture 294
Citizenship 296
Yield 297
Sukun 299

FAITH AND SILENCE 303

Acknowledgments 313
Notes 315
TERNARY
PRAYER FOR CHASM

What you ask for
Hold me whole
New moon wants you
Unseen unctuous
Willing to go to any length
To rise

You lie on your back
In cold spring lost
Or tossed
How they are the same
Both questions to a world
Unanswerable

You were never known
None can spell your name
So impossible you un-
Pronounce never in
Knowable days able to be
In a place be a person

Who speaks who thinks
Who does the laundry
Always instead this dealer
Of done deals of what’s
Done after dun plain
Grass wanting then to lie

At the beach sun and sky
And salt let it all have
You have at you
Jailed at the shore sure
That the near star will un-Ravel solar threads to spin

In gold squares a new
Narrative of normal the one
Where you stop answering
The one where you stop
Asking how deep this hole
The chasm between

Who you were are thought
You would be you do not
Cross are not afraid
The chasm is a thought
Who is thinking
I will live
GOLDEN BOY

Almost afraid I am in the annals of history to speak
   And by speaking be seen by man or god
   Such then debt in light be paid

Atop the Manitoban parliament building in Winnipeg
   What beacon to dollars food or god shine
   I hallow starvation

This nation a notion beneath the body hollowing
   Its stomach to emptiness and in breadth
   The river empties

Who sew spoke the craft born along
   Long echo and echelon grains of light
   And space we width one and other weight

The soul not the spirit breathe through
   Spirited went or wend why true
   Weave woe we’ve woven

A dozen attempts these tents pitched
   On the depth be made biped by pen may
   Perch atop the temple pool

Proven now prove these riches of wheat and
   Cherries and prunes what washes
   Over woven ocean

Frayed I am most sir desired
   Sired in wind seared and warned
   Once in wild umiyak sworn
We parley to mend be conned be bent
    Come now called to document your
    Meant intent your indented mind

Haul oh star your weight in aeons
    There in prayer money morrow more
    You owe and over time god spends

The spent river melt into
    Summer sound out the window
    Sound out the spender

Where does the river road end
    In what language can prayer or
    Commerce be offered

Ender of senses pensive atop
    Plural spires be spoken or mended
    Broken and meant for splendor my mentor
EXIT STRATEGY

I hear the sound of the sprinkler outside,
not the soft kind we used to run through
but the hard kind that whips in one direction
then cranks back and starts again.

Last night we planned to find the white argument
of the Milky Way but we are twenty years too late.

Last night I cut the last stargazer
lily to wear in my hair.

Here’s the hardest geography quiz I’ve ever taken:
How does one carry oneself from mountain to lake to desert
without leaving anything behind?

Perhaps I ought to have worked harder. Perhaps I could have
paid more attention. A mountain I didn’t climb. Music I yearned for
but could not achieve.

I travel without maps, free-style my scripture,
pretend the sky is an adequate representation
of my spiritual beliefs.

The sprinkler switches off. The grass will be wet.
I haven’t even gotten to page 2 of my life and
I’m probably more than halfway through,
who knows what kind of creature I will become.