

class mein urdu nahi boltey

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*class mein urdu nahi boltey*¹
this has been our mantra since 1947
class mein urdu nahi boltey

you wiggle in your seat
from 8am to 2pm
you're restless
you're counting the moments
until you can spring out of this classroom
tear off your white ironed shirt
and the skirt that weren't made for your
brown body

there is a discomfort
when your teacher forgets the word for recess in English
but isn't allowed to tell you to leave the class in Urdu
so she just points to the door: out.

there is a discomfort
when i sit down to take my CIEs
Cambridge international examinations
in an old wedding hall in Pakistan
because there were no "academic centers"
where they could fit so many of us
to be tested

there is a discomfort
when i get my results back
i'm ecstatic
i got an A in English as a second language
and a B in Urdu as a second language

¹ *don't speak Urdu in class*

*mujhey apni zabaan aati hi nahi hai*²

but that's how it is:
the poor kids study in Urdu
and the rich kids study in English

the dumb kids go to Urdu school
the smart kids go to English school

in the end—we're both losers.
still waiting for the white man's permission.
still waiting for that A that traveled in an envelope across the seas to tell
you: yes, you can speak urdu...as a second language, we mean.

I've graduated with two second languages.
and a case of Stockholm Syndrome with my colonizer.

i am now teaching the same class i used to learn in
and i see the little girls wait
wait for those moments in between
the teacher's breath and the marker's screech
when they can whisper to each other
*tum aaj lunch mein kya laaee?*³

*magar class mein urdu nahi boltey*⁴
class mein urdu nahi boltey

our classrooms are a cacophony. we don't speak the languages we learn.
we don't learn in the languages we speak. it hurts my ears to be in my
classroom because the words have a foreign-ness that i can't seem to get
rid of. but if they changed the medium of instruction to Urdu, i'd probably
fail out of class because while I can read Shakespeare without the "English
translation", I've never read an Urdu book for fun. i dream in English. i
write in English. i speak in English. i learn in English. and yet, every time
the words leave my mouth, they don't feel right, they don't sound right.
that's not me.

I wanted to perform this piece in Urdu. But I didn't have the words for it.

*kyun ke class mein urdu nahi boltey.*⁵
*yaad rakhna—class mein Urdu nahi boltey.*⁶

² *I don't know my tongue*

³ *what did you bring for lunch today?*

⁴ *but do not speak Urdu in class*

⁵ *why not speak Urdu in class.*

⁶ *remember—do not speak Urdu in class.*