

## Poems from Pakistan

Some lines from my poetic experience as a US expatriate in Pakistan.

Quetta Compendium

Balochistan Province, Pakistan

Balochi:

The Baloch in the beaded cap  
is a modern man, wears his beard  
on his sleeve, not his face. He'll even let  
his wife work after babies, if  
he's lenient. Sure, he'll lob a hand grenade  
over a wall now and again, but what's  
some shrapnel between long-lost enemies?

Pashtun:

The Pashtun, now, he's all tradition,  
gives you hell for glancing at  
his women, talks a language  
sounds like rocks between the teeth,  
wears those hats and turbans like

the Taliban. He'll serve tea, however,  
to the dirtiest of strangers, and die  
for you if you're his friend.

Everyone Else:

The rest, they're all settlers, even if  
they've been here sixty years.

The Sindhi with his hand-dyed cloth,  
the Afghan with his donkey cart, they'd  
better watch their backs, be thankful  
for a house at all, not just a tent  
like all those gypsy folk.

(Women:

There's a bit of burqa blue in Quetta,  
but mostly shawls, big as sheets, making women  
look like walking bolts of cloth. Cloth, in fact,  
is all that gets them out the house &ndash; the men can run  
the other errands, but won't go near  
the fabric shops. If you see a lady  
on the street, respectfully look away.)

## The Lost Ironic

There's another bomb, in Lahore  
this time. Waking up to the scenes,  
I lose my irony again. Oh, it  
will come back, just like it did  
after I lost it, the pundits said,  
after 9/11. They're almost always  
wrong, with their damn polls  
and mile-a-minute mouths. Why don't  
they shut it and come to Pakistan,  
where everything decries prediction,  
where images of orange-bearded guards  
with bleeding, shrapnel-shredded legs  
accost you from no-longer-safe Lahore,  
where you can laugh at the reports  
of a bomber's head found in a tree,  
stop laughing, laugh again, forever caught  
between irony and terror, brain  
pulling the pin on its internal grenade  
while your hands flutter in your lap  
as if to say, "By God, what a crazy place,"  
where almost every day you can lose  
satirical sense in a moment, get it back,  
lose it, get it back, over and over,

a joker in an execution cell now  
bound for heaven, now for hell.

Stairing Up

Mansehra, Pakistan

In Pakistan the concrete soars  
to second floors on heads of men  
stepping up  
a scanty frame of wooden boards.

Others tread a steeper stair  
to paradise fair, mounting there  
on wave on wave  
of volatile, tempestuous air.

We all work to meet our god  
whether we plod or, rapt, explode  
with rising flair  
into sweet smoke of our jihad.



To view an audio-visual version of this poem, the words voiced over footage of men carrying concrete to the second floor of an under-construction building (the scene that inspired the poem), click [here](#) or go to:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tOILtQVo3IU>