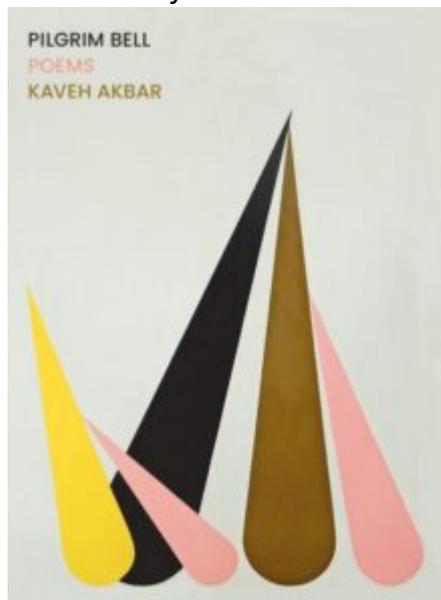


Preposition and Duration in Kaveh Akbar's Pilgrim Bell

written by Guest Contributor | October 26, 2021



Pilgrim Bell by Kaveh Akbar
[Graywolf Press](#), August 2021
[Bookshop](#) / [B&N](#) / [Amazon](#)
80 pages – poetry

This is a text to be read through the body. In *Pilgrim Bell*, Kaveh Akbar scouts the periphery of knowledge when “Heaven / is all preposition—above, among, around, within—and if you must, / you can live any place that’s a place.” We know the periphery but not the place. At the core of *Pilgrim Bell* is a question about the durability and temporal nature of the body, language and belief. If holiness is something solid all the way through, what are we making space for? Concerned with the prepositional, which is to say, the distance and methodology that separates, Akbar sets *Pilgrim Bell*, too, within the prepositional field.

The text begins with two distant sentences: “Any text that is not a holy text is an apostasy,” “Then it is a holy text,” presenting holiness as a duration, an ephemeral unit, the text invokes “then” as a term of order and duration, a statement that the apostasy, too, the holy, too, are ephemeral. So how short is the duration of meaning when we find “This poem wants me to translate it too”? One attempt at language still asks for another, but this collection rejects the notion that translation offers comprehension. “Idiot poem, idiot hands for writing it” to traverse some distance between meaning and knowing. “Idiot degradation that turned the stars / into us,” the body too, a messy translation, something lost in the transmutation, and yet the body is our frame for understanding:

bulged with old farm scars my father my

father my father built

the world the first sound I ever heard

was his voice whispering the azan

A child of immigrants myself, I cannot remove the pilgrim from the context of America, a country that asks us to make our histories understandable, though we know each translation is a step farther from ourselves. Though the pilgrim was not first, who else bears the image of the American more strongly in our textbooks? The only pilgrim that I believe in, my own immigrant parent, also a holy text in a language I half know, a history I know through her translation. And yet, what was her pilgrimage if not an attempt to close the gap between herself and her desired self? The only code I've broken is my mother's good intent—what else can I deem holy, I, who sits in the comfort of my parent's work, without understanding the labor:

America could be a metaphor, but it isn't.

Asleep on the couch, he coughed up a white duck feather.

Akbar shakes off the vestige of the separate speaker, of the metaphor, to close the distance between belief and the self, one door at a time. If America isn't a metaphor, neither is the feather caught in the throat. We are looking at the father's literal work. And the speaker, too, is not a metaphor for the self but the self. The speaker states, "When I say "myself" / I mean: obviousness / ruins things." In the context of Covid-19, vaccine hesitancy, and social justice, "knowing we dilutes/ my responsibility," I am less sure of the possibility that "we" offers vestigial wholeness. The "I" becomes the only space of influence, a space of our own duration:

like an arrow. Consider our whole galaxy

staked in place by a single star. I fear

we haven't said nearly enough about that.

"Fear," here, is not a reflex of speech but earnest concern about singularity, any sharp point "staked" and holding "like an arrow." Akbar winnows these poems toward something solid all the way through. In an [interview with the Paris Review](#) for their summer 2021 launch, he explains that "these poems began their lives as much longer poems, as my poems tend to. Sometimes they get whittled down." I am interested in the waste, the casting off and the make-up of what Akbar keeps.

In "The Miracle" the speaker presents "the air of doubt, crushing it out of his crushable human body" where we find "thus: literacy. Revelation." Linguistic understanding doubles as an act of compression which the poem demonstrates until the speaker, like Gabriel, commands a doubt: "Too crime to pay. Gabriel, no. Not anymore. You too gone to save." Gabriel, the angel most likely to talk, but what can we say back?

This is the self-effacing collapse repeated throughout a text seeking wholeness. If we can find the periphery of what we most desire, perhaps we are closer to revelation. I know desire. It is impossible to be rid of it, solid all the way through:

in your mouth, never still
in as much as you can

Let's go back to duration then, which is to say, desire too, has a periphery, a seasonal shift. Akbar's collection drives the reader towards a present which overwhelms our senses and shapes memory in any direction. The "Pilgrim Bell" in the title poems, despite all the efforts of the speaker—the full stops, the line breaks—pushes time and language forward:

The stillness you prize.

Won't prize you back. Two beefsteaks.

Ripening on a windowsill.

Finding humanity not immune to our own desires, Akbar offers us the consolation that "This is the season where grace. / Is the likeliest," an endearment that dispels the partition between ourselves and our more perfect selves, none of which will last our lifetime. Whatever state we inhabit, it is a season. This is not John Donne's "For Whom the Bell Tolls" crying mortality. Akbar's *Pilgrim Bell* is an impulse to disperse doubt; it is catharsis and command for both the secular and faithful.



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