MATHS EXAM 40 lines

In a triangle of sunlight from high windows in the gym

rows bow to lines of numbers as if in prayer,

a boy with sand-red hair in front of Naveeda,

looks up for an answer in cosmic dusty star space

and she watches him a second with dark eyes.

All heads bowed are bare, hers is covered black.

Tapping a calculator she goes for correctness,

tries deciphering new words.

A cough and a dropped protractor.

Ropes hang braided against walls,

beams are suspended guillotines.

The sign says: ‘The consumption of food,

drink, cigarettes, etc., is not allowed in this facility.

Signed: The Headmaster.’ And underneath:

‘Bollox’ with an ‘x’, not ‘c-k-s’.

Naveeda sucks the pencil end for mountain dreams.

You could see the salted points of Kashmir

from auntie’s doorstep, where little friend Azara played.

She smiled when she was sick and they sealed her up in dust

and let her soul slip star-like to salty peaks.

No, no. No one knows why Anna, Asha, Bhavani and Paul

all bought different sweets and got different change.

Is that the mean, the mode, the median?

The sunlight is the same here as the mountains in Kashmir.

The other sign says: ‘No tap dancing in the gymnasium

under any circumstance. Adult education notice.’

Teacher talked about Fred Astaire one day,

showed how to slip and click along the floor.

He slides along between heads now, hands crossed behind his back.

Kids called him Fred then. He made us laugh. And dance.

He could do it now, along the aisles: dance and dance and laugh.

I saw mountains outside the window, heard the faint sound of gunfire.

The silent tireless clock-face, white as mountain snow,

has an hour left for numbers to compute.

Azara would laugh at Fred. He’d hold her hand

weave in and out of desks clapping and clicking,

he’d kick away numbers and signs and words we don’t understand.

But no one knows why Anna, Asha, Bhavani and Paul

all bought different sweets and got different change,

and bollox isn’t in the dictionary.