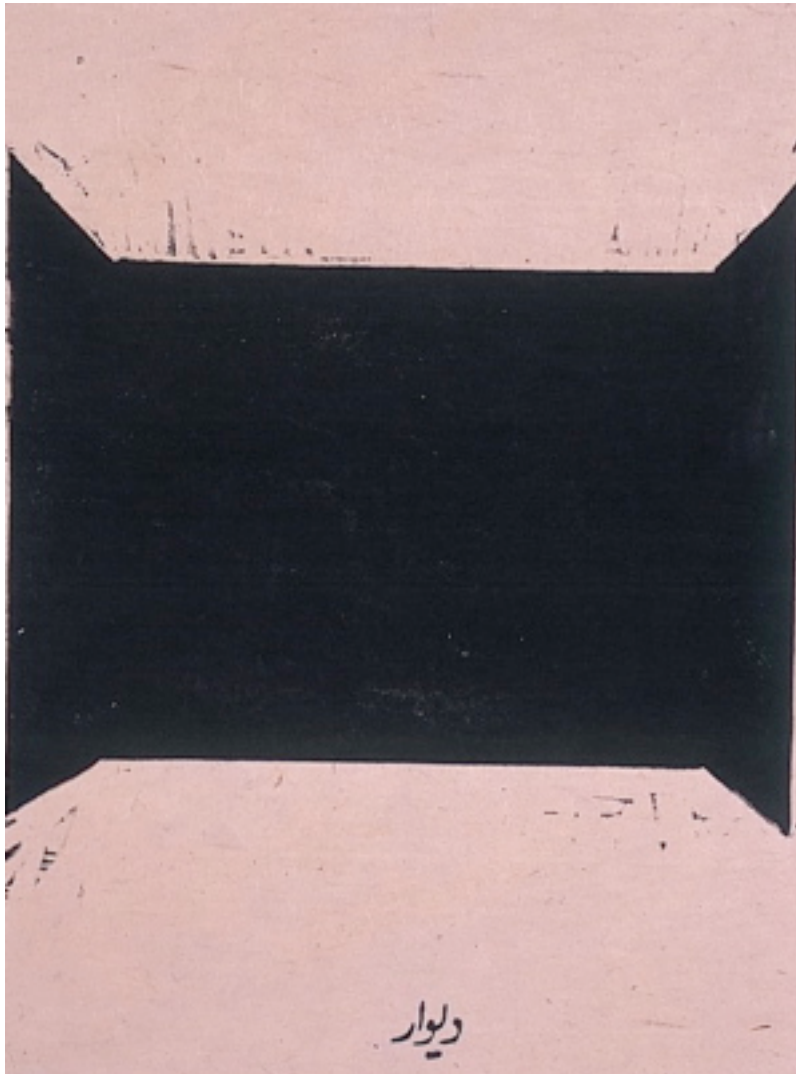


# House of Breath

**Meena Alexander and Zarina Hashmi**

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*The poem "House of Breath" was composed as a verbal response to a series of works on paper by the artist Zarina Hashmi. In particular I was inspired by her portfolio of prints "Home is a Foreign Place." The themes of partition, exile and migration are powerful in her work and have resonances in my own poetry. Though she was born before the Partition of India, and experienced it, and I was born after (hence lacking memories of it), I am able to use her work as a way to reach back into that historical moment. Both Zarina and I now live in New York City.*



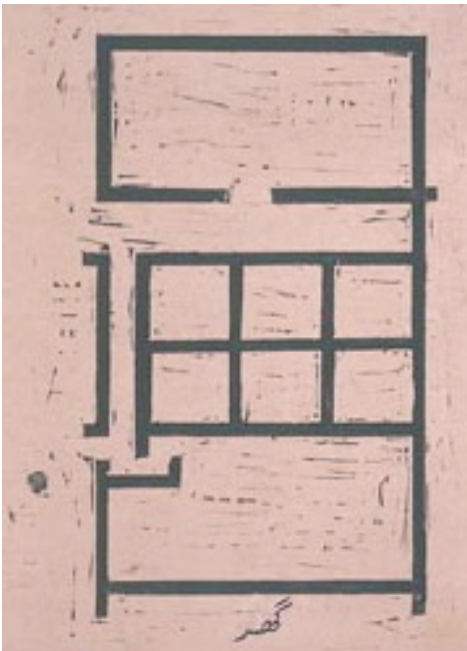
## House of Breath

The threshold – running water  
I understood this early  
And hot stones under the mango trees.

\*

When I ran out to play  
I had one house, then another and another.  
Also the sea, where all roads finish.

\*



\*

I wandered at land's end  
Feet bathed in mist.  
Who can touch a gold horizon?

\*

A bird sings in a garden  
Made entirely of paper.  
A brush stroke, a summit crossed.

\*



\*

I unpacked books, paper  
The burden of ink laid out  
In the first house, which is also the last.

\*



\*

The stench of bodies heaped up  
In the old city, the lorry with its canvas cover  
I was ten then, yes, that was it.

\*

Mirrors burst from their frames  
O the burnt skin of oxen!  
In the shelter I ate flat wheat.

\*



\*

To get here, in late October  
I ran in rain, my heart beating hard.  
Now I'm in a country that has no name.

\*

Grief has no borders.  
Past acres of barbed wire  
Damp stones, this house of breath.

\*



\*

Through ochre blossoms  
 A girl-child in flight.  
 Behind her, doors stopped with light.

\*

The garden floats  
 And I search for my mother.  
 Dark rain, dream of us.

*Home is a Foreign Place*

portfolio of thirty-six woodcuts with Urdu text  
 printed in black on handmade Indian paper  
 mounted on Somerset paper  
 sheet size: 16 x 13"  
 image size: 8 x 6"