Classic Poetry Series

Agha Shahid Ali

- 16 poems -

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Agha Shahid Ali (4 February 1949 – 8 December 2001)

Agha Shahid Ali (Kashmiri: □□□□ □□□□□ □□□, □□□ □□□□□ □□□;) was a Kashmiri American poet.

He grew up in Kashmir, the son of a distinguished and highly educated family in Srinagar. He attended the University of Kashmir, the University of Delhi and, upon arriving in the United States in 1975, Pennsylvania State University and the University of Arizona. Though a Kashmiri Muslim, Ali is best known in the U.S. and identified himself as an American poet writing in English. The recipient of numerous fellowships and awards and a finalist for the National Book Award, he taught at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, Princeton College and in the MFA program at Warren Wilson College. At the time of his death in 2001, Ali was noted as a poet uniquely able to blend multiple ethnic influences and ideas in both traditional forms and elegant free-verse. His poetry reflects his Hindu, Muslim, and Western heritages. In Contemporary Poets, critic Bruce King remarked that Ali's poetry swirls around insecurity and "obsessions [with]…memory, death, history, family ancestors, nostalgia for a past he never knew, dreams, Hindu ceremonies, friendships, and self-consciousness about being a poet."

Known particularly for his dexterous allusions to European, Urdu, Arabic and Persian literary traditions, Ali's poetry collections revolve around both thematic and cultural poles. The scholar Amardeep Singh has described Ali's style as "ghazalesque," referring to Ali's frequent use of the form as well as his blending of the "rhythms and forms of the Indo-Islamic tradition with a distinctly American approach to storytelling. Most of his poems are not abstract considerations of love and longing," Singh noted, "but rather concrete accounts of events of personal importance (and sometimes political importance)." Though Ali began publishing in the early 1970s, it was not until A Walk Through the Yellow Pages (1987) that he received widespread recognition. King characterized that book as "a surreal world of nightmare, fantasy, incongruity, wild humor, and the grotesque. Although the existential anxieties have their source in problems of growing up, leaving home, being a migrant, and the meeting of cultures, the idiom is American and contemporary." Ali's next book, A Nostalgist's Map of America (1991), relates a series of travels through landscapes often blurred between his current American home and memories of his boyhood in Kashmir. King contended that such "imagination links past and present, America and India, Islamic and American deserts, American cities and former American Indian tribes, modern deserts and prehistoric oceans," adding "there is a highly profiled language of color, paradoxes, oxymora, and other means to lift the poems into the lyrical and fanciful."

Ali's next books were widely praised. The poem originally called "Kashmir Without a Post Office" was published as the title poem in The Country Without a Post Office (1997). Taking its impetus from the 1990 Kashmiri uprising against India, which led to political violence and closed all the country's post offices for seven months, Ali's long poem is considered one of his masterpieces. Built on association and repetition rather than straightforward narrative logic, the poem is filled with recurring phrases and images. Ali dedicated it to his life-long friend James Merrill. Joseph Donahue, reviewing Ali's posthumous collected volume The Veiled Suite (2009) for Bookforum described The Country Without a Post Office as "the first of the two volumes that form the peak of his achievement." In the book, Donahue explained, "the poet envisions the devastation of his homeland, moving from the realm of the personal to an expansive poetry that maintains an integrity of feeling in the midst of political violence and tragedy. Kashmir is vividly evoked, all the more so for retaining an element of the fantastic."

Rooms Are Never Finished (2001) similarly yokes political and personal tragedy, again with a long poem as its focal point. Ali used a line from Emily Dickinson as the title for "Amherst to Kashmir," a poem that explores his grief at his mother's death and his own continued sense of exile from his home and culture. Noting how Ali continually stitches his work from cultural, political and personal events, Donahue described the poem as "a cultural inquiry as well as a personal lament. Ali threads the story of the martyrdom of the Shia hero Hussain throughout his elegy, keeping the history and hope of transcendental violence always before us, drawing strength from the strain of esoteric Islam that runs through his work."

Ali was a noted writer of ghazals, a Persian form that utilizes repetition, rhyme and couplets. As editor of Ravishing Disunities: Real Ghazals in English (2000), he described the long history of fascination of Western writers with ghazals, as well as offering a succinct theoretical reading of the form itself. In his introduction he wrote, "The ghazal is made up of couplets, each autonomous, thematically and emotionally complete in itself… once a poet establishes the scheme—with total freedom, I might add—she or he becomes its slave. What results in the rest of the poem is the alluring tension of a slave trying to master the master." Ali's own book of ghazals, Call Me Ishmael Tonight (2001), frequently references American poets and other poems, creating a further layer of allusive tension. The poet Michael Palmer alleged that Ali's "ghazals offer a path toward a level of lyric expansiveness few poets would dare to aspire to." The volume was published posthumously, following Ali's untimely death.

Ali translated the work of Urdu poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz in The Rebel's Silhouette (1992), and frequently alluded to the poet's influence on his own poetry. Joseph Donahue, reviewing The Veiled Suite, commented that "through those translations, Ali first challenged the poetry of our moment, and they resonate profoundly with the personal and cultural devastations he documents in his own life. Some of the finest lines in The Veiled Suite can be read as a response to…Faiz's." Reviewing the book for Publisher's Weekly, poet Mark Doty, however, saw Merrill's influence on Ali's poems "not only in terms of their formal elegance but in the way that a resonant, emotional ambiguity allows the poet to simultaneously celebrate love and lament a landscape of personal and public losses." Noting that Ali's "poems fill with letters, addresses, envelopes, lost messages and maps, and with images of home recalled and revisited in dreams," Doty concluded that "Ali so thoroughly inhabits his exile, in this haunting life's work, that he makes of it—both for his own spirit and for his readers—a dwelling place."

Works:

Poetry
Bone-Sculpture, Writers Workshop (Calcutta, India), 1972.
In Memory of Begum Akhtar and Other Poems, Writers Workshop (Calcutta, India), 1979.
The Half-Inch Himalayas, Wesleyan University Press (Middletown, CT), 1987.
A Walk Through the Yellow Pages, Sun/Gemini Press (Tucson, AZ), 1987.

A Nostalgist's Map of America, Norton (New York, NY), 1991.
The Beloved Witness: Selected Poems, Viking Penguin (New Delhi, India), 1992.
The Country Without a Post Office, Norton (New York, NY), 1997.
Rooms Are Never Finished, Norton (New York, NY), 2001.
Call me Ishmael Tonight: A Book of Ghazals, Norton (New York, NY), 2003.
The Veiled Suite: Collected Poems, Norton (New York, NY), 2009.

Other
T.S. Eliot as Editor, University of Michigan Research Press (Ann Arbor, MI), 1986.
(Translator) The Rebel's Silhouette: Selected Poems, by Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Peregrine Smith (Salt Lake City, UT), 1992.
(Editor) Ravishing Disunities: Real Ghazals in English, afterword by Sara Suleri Goodyear, University Press of New England (Hanover, NH), 2000.

A History of Paisley:

You who will find the dark fossils of paisleys
one afternoon on the peaks of Zabarvan -
Trader from an ancient market of the future,
alibi of chronology, that vain
collaborator of time - won't know that these
are her footprints from the day the world began.

(Oh see, it is still the day the world begins:
and the city rises, holding its remains,
its wooden beams already their own fire's prophets.)

And you, now touching sky, deaf to her anklets
still echoing in the valley, deaf to men
fleeing from soldiers into dead-end lanes

(Look! Their feet bleed; they leave footprints on the street
which will give up its fabric, at dusk, a carpet) -
you have found-you'll think- the first teardrop, gem
that was enticed for a mogul diadem
into design...

...three men are discussing, between
sips of tea, undiscovered routes on emerald
seas, ships with almonds, with shawls for Egypt.
It is dusk. The gauze is torn. A weaver kneels,
gathers falling threads. Soon he will stitch the air.

(The Country without a post office, 1997)

Agha Shahid Ali

Even the Rain

What will suffice for a true-love knot? Even the rain?
But he has bought grief's lottery, bought even the rain.

"our glosses / wanting in this world" "Can you remember?"
Anyone! "when we thought / the poets taught" even the rain?

After we died--That was it!--God left us in the dark.
And as we forgot the dark, we forgot even the rain.

Drought was over. Where was I? Drinks were on the house.
For mixers, my love, you'd poured--what?--even the rain.

Of this pear-shaped orange's perfumed twist, I will say:
Extract Vermouth from the bergamot, even the rain.

How did the Enemy love you--with earth? air? and fire?
He held just one thing back till he got even: the rain.

This is God's site for a new house of executions?
You swear by the Bible, Despot, even the rain?

After the bones--those flowers--this was found in the urn:
The lost river, ashes from the ghat, even the rain.

What was I to prophesy if not the end of the world?
A salt pillar for the lonely lot, even the rain.

Agha Shahid Ali

Ghazal

Feel the patient's heart
Pounding—oh please, this once—
—JAMES MERRILL

I'll do what I must if I'm bold in real time.
A refugee, I'll be paroled in real time.

Cool evidence clawed off like shirts of hell-fire?
A former existence untold in real time ...

The one you would choose: Were you led then by him?
What longing, O Yaar, is controlled in real time?

Each syllable sucked under waves of our earth—
The funeral love comes to hold in real time!

They left him alive so that he could be lonely—
The god of small things is not consoled in real time.

Please afterwards empty my pockets of keys—
It's hell in the city of gold in real time.

God's angels again are—for Satan!—forlorn.
Salvation was bought but sin sold in real time.

And who is the terrorist, who the victim?
We'll know if the country is polled in real time.

"Behind a door marked DANGER" are being unwound
the prayers my friend had enscrolled in real time.

The throat of the rearview and sliding down it
the Street of Farewell's now unrolled in real time.

I heard the incessant dissolving of silk—
I felt my heart growing so old in real time.

Her heart must be ash where her body lies burned.
What hope lets your hands rake the cold in real time?

Now Friend, the Belovèd has stolen your words—
Read slowly: The plot will unfold in real time.

(for Daniel Hall)

NOTES: Yaar: Hindi word for friend.

Agha Shahid Ali

I See Chile in My Rearview Mirror

This dream of water-what does it harbor?
I see Argentina and Paraguay
under a curfew of glass, their colors
breaking, like oil. The night in Uruguay

is black salt. I'm driving toward Utah,
keeping the entire hemisphere in view-
Colombia vermilion, Brazil blue tar,
some countries wiped clean of color: Peru

is titanium white. And always oceans
that hide in mirrors: when beveled edges
arrest tides or this world's destinations
forsake ships. There's Sedona, Nogales

far behind. Once I went through a mirror-
from there too the world, so intact, resembled
only itself. When I returned I tore
the skin off the glass. The sea was unsealed

by dark, and I saw ships sink off the coast
of a wounded republic. Now from a blur
of tanks in Santiago, a white horse
gallops, riderless, chased by drunk soldiers

in a jeep; they're firing into the moon.
And as I keep driving in the desert,
someone is running to catch the last bus, men
hanging on to its sides. And he's missed it.

He is running again; crescents of steel
fall from the sky. And here the rocks
are under fog, the cedars a temple,
Sedona carved by the wind into gods-

each shadow their worshiper. The siren
empties Santiago; he watches
-from a hush of windows-blindfolded men
blurred in gleaming vans. The horse vanishes

into a dream. I'm passing skeletal
figures carved in 700 B.C.
Whoever deciphers these canyon walls
remains forsaken, alone with history,

no harbor for his dream. And what else will
this mirror now reason, filled with water?
I see Peru without rain, Brazil
without forests-and here in Utah a dagger

of sunlight: it's splitting-it's the summer
solstice-the quartz center of a spiral.

Did the Anasazi know the darker
answer also-given now in crystal

by the mirrored continent? The solstice,
but of winter? A beam stabs the window,
diamonds him, a funeral in his eyes.
In the lit stadium of Santiago,

this is the shortest day. He's taken there.
Those about to die are looking at him,
his eyes the ledger of the disappeared.
What will the mirror try now? I'm driving,

still north, always followed by that country,
its floors ice, its citizens so lovesick
that the ground-sheer glass-of every city
is torn up. They demand the republic

give back, jeweled, their every reflection.
They dig till dawn but find only corpses.
He has returned to this dream for his bones.
The waters darken. The continent vanishes.

Agha Shahid Ali

K. L. Saigal

Nostalgic for Baba's youth,
I make you return
his wasted generation:

I know you felt
it all: the ruined
boys echoed

through you,
switched their sorrow
on the radio:

the needle turned
to your legend.
you always came

with notes of madness,
the wireless
sucked your

drunkenness:
you quietly died,
singing

them to a sleep
of Time
Counting the ruins

of decades,
the boys were left,
caressed

with the air's
delirium.
Now two generations

late,
you retreat with my sanity,
Death stuck in the throat!

Agha Shahid Ali

Land

[For Christopher Merrill]

Swear by the olive in the God-kissed land—
There is no sugar in the promised land.

Why must the bars turn neon now when, Love,
I'm already drunk in your capitalist land?

If home is found on both sides of the globe,
home is of course here—and always a missed land.

The hour's come to redeem the pledge (not wholly?)
in Fate's 'Long years ago we made a tryst' land.

Clearly, these men were here only to destroy,
a mosque now the dust of a prejudiced land.

Will the Doomsayers die, bitten with envy,
when springtime returns to our dismissed land?

The prisons fill with the cries of children.
Then how do you subsist, how do you persist, Land?

"Is my love nothing for I've borne no children?"
I'm with you, Sappho, in that anarchist land.

A hurricane is born when the wings flutter ...
Where will the butterfly, on my wrist, land?

You made me wait for one who wasn't even there
though summer had finished in that tourist land.

Do the blind hold temples close to their eyes
when we steal their gods for our atheist land?

Abandoned bride, Night throws down her jewels
so Rome—on our descent—is an amethyst land.

At the moment the heart turns terrorist,
are Shahid's arms broken, O Promised Land?

Agha Shahid Ali

Learning Urdu

From a district near Jammu,
(Dogri stumbling through his Urdu)
he comes, the victim of a continent broken
in two in nineteen forty-seven.
He mentions the minced air he ate
while men dissolved in alphabets
of blood, in syllables of death, of hate.

'I only remember half the word
that was my village. The rest I forget.
My memory belongs to the line of blood
across which my friends dissolved
into bitter stanzas of some dead poet.'

He wanted me to sympathize. I couldn't,
I was only interested in the bitter couplets
which I wanted him to explain. He continued,

'And I who knew Mir backwards, every
couplet from the Diwan-e-Ghalib saw poetry
dissolve into letters of blood.' He

Now remembers nothing while I find Ghalib
at the crossroads of language, refusing
to move to any side, masquerading
as a beggar to see my theatre of kindness.

Agha Shahid Ali

Of Light

At dawn you leave. The river wears its skin of light.
And I traced love's loss to the origin of light.

"I swallow down the goodbyes I won't get to use."
At grief's speed she waves from a palanquin of light.

My book's been burned? Send me the ashes, so I can say:
I've been sent the phoenix in a coffin of light.

From History tears learn a slanted understanding
of the human face torn by blood's bulletin of light.

It was a temporal thought. Well, it has vanished.
Will Promethus commit the mortal sin of light?

She said, "My name is icicles coming down from it…"
Did I leave it, somewhere, in a margin of light?

When I go off alone, as if listening for God,
there's absolutely nothing I can win of light.

Now everything's left to the imagination -
a djinn has deprived even Aladdin of light.

We'll see Manhattan, a bride in diamonds, one day
abashed to remind her sweet man, Brooklyn, of light.

"A cheekbone, / A curved piece of brow, / A pale eyelid…"
And the dark eye I make out with all within of light.

Stranger, when the river leans toward the emptiness,
abandon, for my darkness, the thick and thin of light.

Agha Shahid Ali

Prayer Rug

Those intervals
between the day’s
five calls to prayer

the women of the house
pulling thick threads
through vegetables

rosaries of ginger
of rustling peppers
in autumn drying for winter

in those intervals this rug
part of Grandma’s dowry
folded

so the Devil’s shadow
would not desecrate
Mecca scarlet-woven

with minarets of gold
but then the sunset
call to prayer

the servants
their straw mats unrolled
praying or in the garden

in summer on grass
the children wanting
the prayers to end

the women’s foreheads
touching Abraham’s
silk stone of sacrifice

black stone descended
from Heaven
the pilgrims in white circling it

this year my grandmother
also a pilgrim
in Mecca she weeps

as the stone is unveiled
she weeps holding on
to the pillars

(for Begum Zafar Ali)

Agha Shahid Ali

Shaving

In the mirror, the hand hacks at my skin
It belongs to the child who used his father's
blades for sharpening pencils, playing murder.

Full of cuts, I have the blood-effacing
instruments: water, water, and survival
tricks : I'm as clean

as glass, my brown face glistens
with oil, turns a fine olive green.
There's no return

to the sanctuary
of ripped paper-boat-journeys

This is morning, I must
scrub myself. A college lecturer, I smell of talcum
Old Spice and unwritten poems.

The mirror smiles back like a forgotten student:

The hairs die like ants in the basin.

My reflection gathers the night's dust,
I wipe it with the morning towels.

The girls drape their muslin shawls,
their necks turn on Isadora's wheels:

In the classroom I shuffle like unrhymed poetry

The blade, wet with Essenin's wrist,
waits with the unwritten poem.

Agha Shahid Ali

Snowmen

My ancestor, a man
of Himalayan snow,
came to Kashmir from Samarkand,
carrying a bag
of whale bones:
heirlooms from sea funerals.
His skeleton
carved from glaciers, his breath arctic,
he froze women in his embrace.
His wife thawed into stony water,
her old age a clear
evaporation.
This heirloom,
his skeleton under my skin, passed
from son to grandson,
generations of snowmen on my back.
They tap every year on my window,
their voices hushed to ice.
No, they won't let me out of winter,
and I've promised myself,
even if I'm the last snowman,
that I'll ride into spring
on their melting shoulders.

Agha Shahid Ali

Stationery

The moon did not become the sun.
It just fell on the desert
in great sheets, reams
of silver handmade by you.

The night is your cottage industry now,
the day is your brisk emporium.

The world is full of paper.
Write to me.

(The Half-Inch Himalayas, 1987)

Agha Shahid Ali

Storm

The rain dissolves its liquid bones
Humming the wind, the lightning grazes
the skin. A cloud descends :
My eye is vapour, this, the dream's downpour:
I must seal the tin-blue spaces.

I glued some scraps, made a paper boat:
Balancing a prophet's journey, the Great Flood in
the bathroom sink, I was six years old:
Mother, close the tap, Noah has
hit the night, his Ark will sink.

In the Atlantic's
pariah-blue, there are no survivors;
On the unsinkable Titanic,
I'm left all alone; Ice-bergs hide their whale-teeth:
I can't save Noah, God has picked his relic,

beaten me to it: He wears Noah, a charm
round His neck. On the empty deck,
no life-boat left, my fingers
capsize. My jacket
is ice, I hold on to its cold, to anything. Mother,

I'm alone, terribly alone.

Agha Shahid Ali

Taxidermist

First the hand, delicate,
precise, knows how to carve
where to take the knife, make
more alive than when alive:

No fur, no feather,
I am only skin-deep, so easy
to get to the cancer beneath:

He fills me with straw,
Yeats's tattered coat at twenty-five,
(not the adolescent fancy-dress-scarecrow
when I won the first prize!)

No hurdle now,
he reaches my hunger:
I've never felt so full before!

I scare eagles, the stuffed crows
in his room; they escape me,
freedom a synonym for the sky.

Caressed by the leopard's vacant eye,
finally warm, secure, in his skin,
I turn towards the bloodless direction.

The fan drones in my veins,
blood humming like chopped air;
my tongue hangs out, poems dead in its corners.

Suave pimp of freedom, here I am, ready
for your show-window:
Will you now bargain for me?

Agha Shahid Ali

The Wolf's Postcript to 'Little Red Riding Hood'

First, grant me my sense of history:
I did it for posterity,
for kindergarten teachers
and a clear moral:
Little girls shouldn't wander off
in search of strange flowers,
and they mustn't speak to strangers.

And then grant me my generous sense of plot:
Couldn't I have gobbled her up
right there in the jungle?
Why did I ask her where her grandma lived?
As if I, a forest-dweller,
didn't know of the cottage
under the three oak trees
and the old woman lived there
all alone?
As if I couldn't have swallowed her years before?

And you may call me the Big Bad Wolf,
now my only reputation.
But I was no child-molester
though you'll agree she was pretty.

And the huntsman:
Was I sleeping while he snipped
my thick black fur
and filled me with garbage and stones?
I ran with that weight and fell down,
simply so children could laugh
at the noise of the stones
cutting through my belly,
at the garbage spilling out
with a perfect sense of timing,
just when the tale
should have come to an end.

Agha Shahid Ali

Tonight

Where are you now? Who lies beneath your spell tonight?
Whom else from rapture's road will you expel tonight?

Those "Fabrics of Cashmere—" "to make Me beautiful—"
"Trinket"—to gem—"Me to adorn—How tell"—tonight?

I beg for haven: Prisons, let open your gates—
A refugee from Belief seeks a cell tonight.

God's vintage loneliness has turned to vinegar—
All the archangels—their wings frozen—fell tonight.

Lord, cried out the idols, Don't let us be broken;
Only we can convert the infidel tonight.

Mughal ceilings, let your mirrored convexities
multiply me at once under your spell tonight.

He's freed some fire from ice in pity for Heaven.
He's left open—for God—the doors of Hell tonight.

In the heart's veined temple, all statues have been smashed.
No priest in saffron's left to toll its knell tonight.

God, limit these punishments, there's still Judgment Day—
I'm a mere sinner, I'm no infidel tonight.

Executioners near the woman at the window.
Damn you, Elijah, I'll bless Jezebel tonight.

The hunt is over, and I hear the Call to Prayer
fade into that of the wounded gazelle tonight.

My rivals for your love—you've invited them all?
This is mere insult, this is no farewell tonight.

And I, Shahid, only am escaped to tell thee—
God sobs in my arms. Call me Ishmael tonight.

Agha Shahid Ali