



The Veiled Suite

THE COLLECTED POEMS

AGHA SHAHID ALI

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Advertisement (Found Poem)

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From  CALL ME ISHMAEL TONIGHT

I Have Loved

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Things

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Agha Shahid Ali was, by his own count, the beneficiary of three cultures—Muslim, Hindu, and, for lack of a more precise rubric, Western. He grew up mostly in Srinagar, Kashmir, though the family lived for a few years in Indiana, where he attended high school. He often said that English was his first language and Urdu his mother tongue; however, throughout his life he wrote poetry only in English. His poems—like his conversation, for that matter—sounded like no one else’s, no doubt because of the remarkable range and variety of his sources: the literatures of several continents; Bollywood, Hollywood, and art-house cinema; classical Indian and classical European music; and American pop. His later work in particular employs an unfashionable lavishness of diction and emotion, owing in equal measure, perhaps, to this extraordinary cultural inheritance, and an equally extraordinary generosity of spirit. (As a schoolmate once said of Gerard Manley Hopkins, “He gushes, but he means it.”) There are cries of joy, despair, and grief that come off the page almost literally as cries.

Shahid’s multiplicity of subject matter and reference poses a by now familiar problem, one that has been with us since high modernism, and particularly since the second half of the twentieth century, which saw a flourishing of—or, rather, a recognition of—hyphenated Englishes around the world. The dedicated reader has had no choice but to expand her range of reference as well. (And I can already hear the sound of scholars tapping away at their computers.) Islam exerts a particularly powerful gravitational force on many of these poems, which is yet another reason for non-Muslims to learn more about the faith. But for that matter, how many contemporary American readers of poetry possess the necessary theological apparatus to read *Four Quartets* unaided? Meanwhile, we might also console ourselves with the thought that certain great poems, and great poetries, are not incomprehensible, but *inexhaustible*; they reward rereading; they teach us and change us as we grow older with them.

However, I don’t want to exaggerate this difficulty; the poems I refer to are found mostly in two of the later books, *The Country Without a Post Office* and *Rooms Are Never Finished*, both of which include useful notes that are reproduced here. And context itself is a help. By contrast, his “American” book, *A Nostalgist’s Map of America*, is for the most part as wide open as the adopted country Shahid drove through while writing the poems. (He eventually became an American citizen in 2001.) Nor would a reader want to miss his light verse, for which he had a very deft touch. His chapbook, *A Walk Through the Yellow Pages*, contains half a dozen examples, including a few hilarious takes on the story of Little Red Riding Hood, parts of which, though, would have to be described as dark light verse.

When an interviewer asked Shahid about his philosophy, he replied, “I don’t have a philosophy; I have a temperament.” He might have said the same about his poetics. Though Shahid started out writing mostly in free verse, and then switched rather abruptly in mid-career to working in various demanding forms, he was never a partisan: he was willing to do whatever was necessary to put the poem across. But after *A Nostalgist’s Map of America*, he began to feel that, for him, certain aspects of free verse had become “too easy,” and he sensed the need for a new direction, new difficulties. His mother’s illness and death, and a chance meeting with James Merrill—who no doubt would have said “No accident!”—made the shift inevitable. His mother was diagnosed with brain cancer in 1996, which shook him to the core—years later he would say, repeatedly, “I can’t believe that Mummy is dead.” The pitch of grief in his poems about her is almost unbearable: such overwhelming emotion required new means. And Merrill’s friendship and example encouraged him in every way; he even gave Shahid his first rhyming dictionary.

Shahid's memory was staggering—late in his life he memorized the whole of “Lycidas” —and he was a fearsome mimic. He had an ear cocked at all times for the surprising turn of phrase, the unintentional joke, the fresh bit of slang—anything that might be of use. He once overheard a woman say, while arguing with her husband, “Your memory keeps getting in the way of my history!” The line appears several times, with permutations, in “Farewell,” in counterpoint with Tacitus's “They make a desolation and call it peace,” as well as—a line of his own, I presume—“At a certain point I lost track of you.” The magpie method is characteristic, as is the unexpected choice of form: the poem is written in monostichs, one-line stanzas. In fact Shahid made such daring choices as a matter of routine. His translations of the poems of Faiz Ahmed Faiz, collected in *The Rebel's Silhouette*, are entirely in free verse; given the stringencies of the ghazal, it may not be possible to achieve a translation that preserves the form. However, in a later translation of Faiz's ghazal, “Memory,” Shahid chose to work the poem into Sapphic stanzas, of all things. It was an audaciously intuitive decision, to translate a ghazal—a Persian form that predates Chaucer—written in Urdu by a modern Pakistani poet, into an adaptation of a classical Greek stanza at least as unforgiving as the ghazal itself. The miracle is that the finished English poem is a heartbreaking masterpiece.

From the beginning Shahid's work included political poems—or what might more accurately be called poems about injustice. However, as Allen Grossman said, “A poem is about something the way a cat is about the house.” These poems are never mere essays on political matters, for what would be the point? The most vexing of these situations admit of no easy solutions, and besides, why would we expect a poet to be a political scientist as well? (However, Shahid did write a brilliant essay condemning the McCarran-Walter Act for a special issue of *Poetry East*.) He once sent Merrill a new poem about Bosnia, who wrote back at once, criticizing it for its weak rhymes. He said, “There's not much you can do about Bosnia, but you can make this a better poem,” the wisdom of which reverberated for years.

Nothing caused Shahid more pain and outrage than the troubles in his beloved Kashmir. A general uprising against Indian rule broke out in 1990, followed by extremely harsh repression by Indian forces, which continues to this day. To my mind the most poignant of Shahid's political poems is “Hans Christian Ostro,” which was based on a report of a young Norwegian traveler in Kashmir who was taken hostage and killed by militants in 1995. Kashmiris the world over were traumatized by the news: after all, theirs is a culture in which generosity and hospitality are elevated to high moral principles. Much of the poem is oblique, but it ends with a particularly haunting image, perhaps of the Kashmiri people themselves mourning the young man's death:

And draped in rain

of the last monsoon-storm,
a beggar, ears pressed to that metal cry,
will keep waiting on a ghost-platform,
holding back his tears, waving every train
Good-bye and Good-bye.

In a grotesque coincidence, Shahid himself was diagnosed with brain cancer only a few years after his mother had died of the disease. I remember one afternoon, late in his illness, when his Brooklyn apartment was thronged as usual with family and friends, everyone eating and drinking and talking—always talking. From time to time he would ask, in his kind but now absent-minded way—by this time he was almost blind, and increasingly confused—whether everyone knew everyone else, whether any

of us wanted something to eat or drink. It was the reflexiveness of Shahid's questions, of his concern for our happiness, that so moved me. (Again, the cultural imperative: he told me that one summer in Srinagar so many friends and relatives came to visit the family that they had to give over the entire house to them and take up residence elsewhere for the duration.)

As we didn't know then, or rather tried not to think about, Shahid would be dead in a matter of months. He had written his final poem, his third canzone, the title poem of this collection. Its epigraph is a line spoken by himself in a dream, after his diagnosis: "Faceless, he could represent only two alternatives: that he was either a conscious agent of harm, or that he would unwittingly harm me anyway." Even the rationalists among us found the news of this visitation disturbing. Shahid died in Amherst, Massachusetts, on December 8, 2001. And now he has become not his admirers so much as his poems—or his world has become a book, as Mallarmé said it must. As Shahid himself would be the first to say, Welcome to it.

—Daniel Hall, Amherst, 2001

The Veiled Suite

*Faceless, he could represent only two alternatives:
that he was either a conscious agent of harm,
or that he would unknowingly harm me anyway.**

“No mortal has or will ever lift my veil,”
he says. Strokes my arm. What poison is his eyes?
*Make me now your veil, then see if you can veil,
yourself from me.*, Where is he not from? Which vale
of tears? Am I awake? There is little sense
of whether I am his—or he is my—veil.
*For, after the night is fog, who’ll unveil,
whom?*, Either he knows he is one with the night
or is unaware he’s an agent of night—
nothing else is possible (who is whose veil?)
when he, random assassin sent by the sea,
is putting, and with no sense of urgency,

the final touches on—whose last fantasy?
Where isn’t he from? He’s brought the sky from Vail,
Colorado, and the Ganges from Varanasi
in a clay urn (his heart measures like the sea).
He’s brought the desert too. It’s deep in his eyes
when he says: “I want you to be mine alone, see.”
What hasn’t he planned? For music Debussy,
then a song from New Orleans in the *Crescent*,’s
time nearing Penn Station. What’s of the essence?
Not time, not time, no, not time. I can foresee
he will lead each night from night into night.
I ask, “Can you promise me this much tonight:
that when you divide what remains of this night
it will be like a prophet once parted the sea.
But no one must die! For however this night
has been summoned, I, your mortal every night,
must become your veil . . . and I must lift your veil
when just one thing’s left to consider: the night.”
There’s just one thing left to consider, the night
in which we will be left to realize
when the ice begins to break down in his eyes.
And the prophecies filming his gaze tonight?
What will be revealed? What stunning color sense
kept hidden so long in his eyes, what essence

of longing? He can kill me without a license.
The moon for its ivory scours the night.,
Sent by the fog, he nearly empties in me all sense

of his gaze, till either he or I have lost all sense;
midnight polishes the remains of a galaxy.

What is left to polish now? What fluorescence?
Is there some hope of making a world of sense?
When I meet his gaze, there is again the veil.
On the farthest side of prophecy, I still need a veil.
Perhaps our only chance will be to ignite
the doom he sometimes veils in his eyes,
and the universe lost, like I am, in his eyes.

I wait for him to look straight into my eyes.
This is our only chance for magnificence.
If he, carefully, upon this hour of ice,
will let us almost completely crystallize,
tell me, who but I could chill his dreaming night.
Where he turns, what will not appear but my eyes?
Wherever he looks, the sky is only eyes.
Whatever news he has, it is of the sea.
But now is the time when I am to realize
our night cannot end completely with his eyes.
Something has happened now for me to prevail,
no matter what remains of this final night.

What arrangements haven't you made for tonight!
I am to hand you a knife from behind the veil
now rising quickly from your just-lit incense.
I'm still alive, alive to learn from your eyes
that I am become your veil and I am all you see.

(for Patricia O'Neill)

* From a dream in which I said this to myself (Spring 2000).

THE HALF - INCH HIMALAYAS

Postcard from Kashmir

Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox,
my home a neat four by six inches.

I always loved neatness. Now I hold
the half-inch Himalayas in my hand.

This is home. And this the closest
I'll ever be to home. When I return,
the colors won't be so brilliant,
the Jhelum's waters so clean,
so ultramarine. My love
so overexposed.

And my memory will be a little
out of focus, in it
a giant negative, black
and white, still undeveloped.

(for Pavan Sahgal)

A Lost Memory of Delhi

I am not born
it is 1948 and the bus turns
onto a road without name

There on his bicycle
my father
He is younger than I

At Okhla where I get off
I pass my parents
strolling by the Jamuna River

My mother is a recent bride
her sari a blaze of brocade
Silverdust parts her hair

She doesn't see me
The bells of her anklets are distant
like the sound of china from

teashops being lit up with lanterns
and the stars are coming out
ringing with tongues of glass

They go into the house
always faded in photographs
in the family album

but lit up now
with the oil lamp
I saw broken in the attic

I want to tell them I am their son
older much older than they are
I knock keep knocking

but for them the night is quiet
this the night of my being
They don't they won't

hear me they won't hear
my knocking drowning out
the tongues of stars

A Dream of Glass Bangles

Those autumns my parents slept
warm in a quilt studded
with pieces of mirrors

On my mother's arms were bangles
like waves of frozen rivers
and at night

after the prayers
as she went down to her room
I heard the faint sound of ice

breaking on the staircase
breaking years later
into winter

our house surrounded by men
pulling icicles for torches
off the roofs

rubbing them on the walls
till the cement's darkening red
set the tips of water on fire

the air a quicksand of snow
as my father stepped out
and my mother

inside the burning house
a widow smashing the rivers
on her arms

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.

My grandfather's painted grandfather,
son of Ali, a strange physician
in embroidered robes, a white turban,
the Koran lying open on a table beside him.

I look for prayers
in his eyes, for inscriptions
in Arabic.

I find his will:
He's left us plots
in the family graveyard.

•••

Great-grandfather? A sahib in breeches.
He simply disappoints me,
his hands missing in the drawing-room photo
but firm as he whipped the horses
or the servants.

He wound the gramophone to a fury,
the needles grazing Malika Pukhraj's songs
as he, drunk, tore his shirts
and wept at the refrain,
"I still am young."

•••

Grandfather, a handsome boy,
sauntered toward madness
into Srinagar's interior.
In a dim-lit shop he smoked hashish,
reciting verses of Sufi mystics.
My father went to bring him home.

As he grew older, he moved toward Plato,
mumbling "philosopher-king,"

Napoleon on his lips.
Sitting in the bedroom corner,
smoking his hookah, he told me
the Siberian snows
froze the French bones.

In his cup,

Socrates swirled.

• • •

I turn the pages,
see my father holding a tennis racquet,
ready to score with women,
brilliance clinging to his shirt.

He brings me closer to myself
as he quotes Lenin's love of Beethoven,
but loses me as he turns to Gandhi.

Silverfish have eaten his boyhood face.

• • •

Cobwebs cling
to the soundless
words of my ancestors.

No one now comes from Kandahar,
dear Ali, to pitch tents by the Jhelum,
under autumn maples,
and claim descent from the holy prophet.

Your portrait is desolate
in a creaking corridor.

(for Agha Zafar Ali)

Story of a Silence

While her husband
thumbed through Plato, spending
the dialogues

like a pension,
in whispers, his inheritance lost,
his house

taken away,
my grandmother worked hard, harder
than a man

to earn
her salary from the government and
deserve

her heirloom
of prayer from God. When he slept,
she leafed

through
his dreams: she wasn't in any
of them

and he
was just lying on the river's warm
glass, thousands

of him
moving under him. He was nothing
when he woke,

only his own
duplicates in her arms. Years later
she went

into the night,
in one hand the Koran, in the other
a minaret

of fire. She
found him sleeping, his torn Plato, his
pillow, the fire's

light a cold

quilt on him. She held him as only
a shadow must

be held. But
then the darkness cracked, and
he was gone.

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)

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