

Classic Poetry Series

Agha Shahid Ali
- 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](http://www.poemhunter.com/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."

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

A Pastoral

on the wall the dense ivy of executions
—ZBIGNIEW HERBERT

We shall meet again, in Srinagar,
by the gates of the Villa of Peace,
our hands blossoming into fists
till the soldiers return the keys
and disappear. Again we'll enter
our last world, the first that vanished

in our absence from the broken city.
We'll tear our shirts for tourniquets
and bind the open thorns, warm the ivy
into roses. Quick, by the pomegranate—
the bird will say—Humankind can bear
everything. No need to stop the ear

to stories rumored in branches: We'll hear
our gardener's voice, the way we did
as children, clear under trees he'd planted:
"It's true, my death, at the mosque entrance,
in the massacre, when the Call to Prayer
opened the floodgates"—Quick, follow the silence—

"and dawn rushed into everyone's eyes."
Will we follow the horned lark, pry
open the back gate into the poplar groves,
go past the search post into the cemetery,
the dust still uneasy on hurried graves
with no names, like all new ones in the city?

"It's true" (we'll hear our gardener
again). "That bird is silent all winter.
Its voice returns in spring, a plaintive cry.
That's when it saw the mountain falcon
rip open, in mid-air, the blue magpie,
then carry it, limp from the talons."

Pluck the blood: My words will echo thus
at sunset, by the ivy, but to what purpose?

In the drawer of the cedar stand,
white in the verandah, we'll find letters:
When the post offices died, the mailman
knew we'd return to answer them. Better

if he'd let them speed to death,
blacked out by Autumn's Press Trust
not like this, taking away our breath,
holding it with love's anonymous
scripts: "See how your world has cracked.
Why aren't you here? Where are you? Come back.

Is history deaf there, across the oceans?"
Quick, the bird will say. And we'll try
the keys, with the first one open the door
into the drawing room. Mirror after mirror,
textiled by dust, will blind us to our return
as we light oil lamps. The glass map of our country,

still on the wall, will tear us to lace—
We'll go past our ancestors, up the staircase,
holding their wills against our hearts. Their wish
was we return—forever!—and inherit(Quick, the bird
will say) that to which we belong, not like this—
to get news of our death after the world's.

(for Suvir Kaul)

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
to this wasted generation:

I know you felt
the fall: 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

Lenox Hill

(In Lenox Hill Hospital, after surgery,
my mother said the sirens sounded like the
elephants of Mihiragula when his men drove
them off cliffs in the Pir Panjal Range.)

The Hun so loved the cry, one falling elephant's,
he wished to hear it again. At dawn, my mother
heard, in her hospital-dream of elephants,
sirens wail through Manhattan like elephants
forced off Pir Panjal's rock cliffs in Kashmir:
the soldiers, so ruled, had rushed the elephant,
The greatest of all footprints is the elephant's,
said the Buddha. But not lifted from the universe,
those prints vanished forever into the universe,
though nomads still break news of those elephants
as if it were just yesterday the air spread the dye
(“War's annals will fade into night / Ere their story die”),

the punishing khaki whereby the world sees us die
out, mourning you, O massacred elephants!

Months later, in Amherst, she dreamt: She was, with dia-
monds, being stoned to death. I prayed: If she must die,
let it only be some dream. But there were times, Mother,
while you slept, that I prayed, 'Saints, let her die.'

Not, I swear by you, that I wished you to die
but to save you as you were, young, in song in Kashmir,
and I, one festival, crowned Krishna by you, Kashmir
listening to my flute. You never let gods die.

Thus I swear, here and now, not to forgive the universe
that would let me get used to a universe

without you. She, she alone, was the universe
as she earned, like a galaxy, her right not to die,
defying the Merciful of the Universe,
Master of Disease, “in the circle of her traverse”
of drug-bound time. And where was the god of elephants,
plump with Fate, when tusk to tusk, the universe,
dyed green, became ivory? Then let the universe,
like Paradise, be considered a tomb. Mother,
they asked me, So how's the writing? I answered My mother

is my poem. What did they expect? For no verse
sufficed except the promise, fading, of Kashmir
and the cries that reached you from the cliffs of Kashmir

(across fifteen centuries) in the hospital. Kashmir,
she's dying! How her breathing drowns out the universe
as she sleeps in Amherst. Windows open on Kashmir:
There, the fragile wood-shrines—so far away—of Kashmir!
O Destroyer, let her return there, if just to die.
Save the right she gave its earth to cover her, Kashmir
has no rights. When the windows close on Kashmir,
I see the blizzard-fall of ghost-elephants.
I hold back—she couldn't bear it—one elephant's
story: his return (in a country far from Kashmir)
to the jungle where each year, on the day his mother
died, he touches with his trunk the bones of his mother.

'As you sit here by me, you're just like my mother,'
she tells me. I imagine her: a bride in Kashmir,
she's watching, at the Regal, her first film with Father.
If only I could gather you in my arms, Mother,
I'd save you—now my daughter—from God. The universe
opens its ledger. I write: How helpless was God's mother!
Each page is turned to enter grief's accounts. Mother,
I see a hand. Tell me it's not God's. Let it die.
I see it. It's filling with diamonds. Please let it die.
Are you somewhere alive, somewhere alive, Mother?
Do you hear what I once held back: in one elephant's
cry, by his mother's bones, the cries of those elephants

that stunned the abyss? Ivory blots out the elephants.
I enter this: The Beloved leaves one behind to die.
For compared to my grief for you, what are those of Kashmir,
and what (I close the ledger) are the griefs of the universe
when I remember you—beyond all accounting—O my mother?

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 Prometheus 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

Snow on the Desert

"Each ray of sunshine is seven minutes old,"
Serge told me in New York one December night.

"So when I look at the sky, I see the past?"
"Yes, Yes," he said. "especially on a clear day."

On January 19, 1987,
as I very early in the morning
drove my sister to Tucson International,

suddenly on Alvernon and 22nd Street
the sliding doors of the fog were opened,

and the snow, which had fallen all night, now
sun-dazzled, blinded us, the earth whitened

out, as if by cocaine, the desert's plants,
its mineral-hard colors extinguished,
wine frozen in the veins of the cactus.

* * *

The Desert Smells Like Rain: in it I read:
The syrup from which sacred wine is made

is extracted from the saguaros each
summer. The Papagos place it in jars,

where the last of it softens, then darkens
into a color of blood though it tastes

strangely sweet, almost white, like a dry wine.
As I tell Sameetah this, we are still

seven miles away. "And you know the flowers
of the saguaros bloom only at night?"

We are driving slowly, the road is glass.
"Imagine where we are was a sea once.

Just imagine!" The sky is relentlessly
sapphire, and the past is happening quickly:

the saguaros have opened themselves, stretched
out their arms to rays millions of years old,

in each ray a secret of the planet's
origin, the rays hurting each cactus

into memory, a human memory
for they are human, the Papagos say:

not only because they have arms and veins
and secrets. But because they too are a tribe,

vulnerable to massacre. "It is like
the end, perhaps the beginning of the world,"

Sameetah says, staring at their snow-sleeved
arms. And we are driving by the ocean

that evaporated here, by its shores,
the past now happening so quickly that each

stoplight hurts us into memory, the sky
taking rapid notes on us as we turn

at Tucson Boulevard and drive into
the airport, and I realize that the earth

is thawing from longing into longing and
that we are being forgotten by those arms.

* * *

At the airport I stared after her plane
till the window was

again a mirror.

As I drove back to the foothills, the fog

shut its doors behind me on Alvernon,
and I breathed the dried seas

the earth had lost,
their forsaken shores. And I remembered

another moment that refers only
to itself:

in New Delhi one night
as Begum Akhtar sang, the lights went out.

It was perhaps during the Bangladesh War,
perhaps there were sirens,

air-raid warnings.
But the audience, hushed, did not stir.

The microphone was dead, but she went on
singing, and her voice

was coming from far
away, as if she had already died.

And just before the lights did flood her
again, melting the frost

of her diamond
into rays, it was, like this turning dark

of fog, a moment when only a lost sea
can be heard, a time

to recollect
every shadow, everything the earth was losing,

a time to think of everything the earth
and I had lost, of all

that I would lose,
of all that I was losing.

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
at 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
around His neck. On the empty deck,
no life-boat left, my fingers
capsize. My jacket
in 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.

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

Agha Shahid Ali

The Wolf's Postscript 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.

Vacating an Apartment

1

Efficient as Fate,
each eye a storm trooper,

the cleaners wipe my smile
with Comet fingers
and tear the plaster
off my suicide note.

They learn everything
from the walls' eloquent tongues.

Now, quick as genocide,
they powder my ghost for a cinnamon jar.

They burn my posters
(India and Heaven in flames),

whitewash my voicestains,

make everything new,
clean as Death.

2

When the landlord brings new tenants,
even Memory is a stranger.

The woman, her womb solid with the future,
instructs her husband's eyes
to clutch insurance policies.

They ignore my love affair with the furniture,
the corner table that memorized
my crossed-out lines.

Oh, she's beautiful,
a hard-nippled Madonna.

The landlord gives them my autopsy;

they sign the lease.

The room is beating with bottled infants,
and I've stopped beating.

I'm moving out holding tombstones in my hands.

Agha Shahid Ali