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“The Ghat of the Only World”: Agha Shahid Ali in Brooklyn^{*}

THE first time that Agha Shahid Ali spoke to me about his approaching death was on 25 April 2001. The conversation began routinely. I had telephoned to remind him that we had been invited to a friend’s house for lunch and that I was going to come by his apartment to pick him up. Although he had been under treatment for cancer for some fourteen months, Shahid was still on his feet and perfectly lucid, except for occasional lapses of memory. I heard him thumbing through his engagement book and then suddenly he said: “Oh dear. I can’t see a thing.” There was a brief pause and then he added: “I hope this doesn’t mean that I’m dying ...”

Although Shahid and I had talked a great deal over the last many weeks, I had never before heard him touch on the subject of death. I did not know how to respond: his voice was completely at odds with the content of what he had just said, light to the point of jocularly. I mumbled something innocuous: “No Shahid—of course not. You’ll be fine.” He cut me short. In a tone of voice that was at once quizzical and direct, he said: “When it happens I hope you’ll write something about me.”

I was shocked into silence and a long moment passed before I could bring myself to say the things that people say on such occasions: “Shahid you’ll be fine; you have to be strong ...”

From the window of my study I could see a corner of the building in which he lived, some eight blocks away. It was just a few months since he

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moved there: he had been living a few miles away, in Manhattan, when he had a sudden blackout in February 2000. After tests revealed that he had a malignant brain tumor, he decided to move to Brooklyn, to be close to his youngest sister, Sameetah, who teaches at the Pratt Institute—a few blocks from the street where I live.

Shahid ignored my reassurances. He began to laugh and it was then that I realized that he was dead serious. I understood that he was entrusting me with a quite specific charge: he wanted me to remember him not through the spoken recitatives of memory and friendship, but through the written word. Shahid knew all too well that for those writers for whom things become real only in the process of writing, there is an inbuilt resistance to dealing with loss and bereavement. He knew that my instincts would have led me to search for reasons to avoid writing about his death: I would have told myself that I was not a poet; that our friendship was of recent date; that there were many others who knew him much better and would be writing from greater understanding and knowledge. All this Shahid had guessed and he had decided to shut off those routes while there was still time.

“You must write about me.”

Clear though it was that this imperative would have to be acknowledged, I could think of nothing to say: what are the words in which one promises a friend that one will write about him after his death? Finally, I said: “Shahid, I will; I’ll do the best I can.”

By the end of the conversation I knew exactly what I had to do. I picked up my pen, noted the date, and wrote down everything I remembered of that conversation. This I continued to do for the next few months: it is this record that has made it possible for me to fulfill the pledge I made that day.

I knew Shahid’s work long before I met him. His 1997 collection, *The Country Without a Post Office*, had made a powerful impression on me. His voice was like none I had ever heard before, at once lyrical and fiercely disciplined, engaged and yet deeply inward. Not for him, the mock-casual almost-prose of so much contemporary poetry: his was a voice that was not ashamed to speak in a bardic register. I knew of no one else who would even conceive of publishing a line like: “Mad heart, be brave.”

In 1998, I quoted a line from *The Country Without a Post Office* in an article that touched briefly on Kashmir. At the time all I knew about Shahid was that he was from Srinagar and had studied in Delhi. I had been at Delhi University myself, but although our time there had briefly

overlapped, we had never met. We had friends in common however, and one of them put me in touch with Shahid. In 1998 and 1999 we had several conversations on the phone and even met a couple of times. But we were no more than acquaintances until he moved to Brooklyn the next year. Once we were in the same neighborhood, we began to meet for occasional meals and quickly discovered that we had a great deal in common. By this time of course Shahid's condition was already serious, yet his illness did not impede the progress of our friendship. We found that we had a huge roster of common friends, in India, America, and elsewhere; we discovered a shared love of *roghan josh* [*raughan jōsh*], Roshanara Begum and Kishore Kumar; a mutual indifference to cricket and an equal attachment to old Bombay films. Because of Shahid's condition even the most trivial exchanges had a special charge and urgency: the inescapable poignance of talking about food and half-forgotten figures from the past with a man who knew himself to be dying, was multiplied in this instance, by the knowledge that this man was also a poet who had achieved greatness—perhaps the only such that I shall ever know as a friend.

One afternoon, the writer Suketu Mehta, who also lives in Brooklyn, joined us for lunch. Together we hatched a plan for an *adda* [*addā*—by definition, a gathering that has no agenda, other than conviviality. Shahid was enthusiastic and we began to meet regularly. From time to time other writers would join us. On one occasion a crew arrived with a television camera. Shahid was not in the least bit put out: "I'm so shameless; I just love the camera."

Shahid had a sorcerer's ability to transmute the mundane into the magical. Once I accompanied Iqbal, his brother, and Hena, his sister, on a trip to fetch him home from hospital. This was on May 21st: by that time he had already been through several unsuccessful operations. Now he was back in hospital to undergo a surgical procedure that was intended to relieve the pressure on his brain. His head was shaved and the shape of the tumor was visible upon his bare scalp, its edges outlined by metal sutures. When it was time to leave the ward a blue-uniformed hospital escort arrived with a wheelchair. Shahid waved him away, declaring that he was strong enough to walk out of the hospital on his own. But he was groggier than he had thought and his knees buckled after no more than a few steps. Iqbal went running off to bring back the wheelchair while the rest of us stood in the corridor, holding him upright. At that moment, leaning against the cheerless hospital wall, a kind of rapture descended on Shahid. When the hospital orderly returned with the wheelchair Shahid

gave him a beaming smile and asked where he was from. Ecuador, the man said, and Shahid clapped his hands gleefully together. “Spanish!” he cried, at the top of his voice. “I always wanted to learn Spanish. Just to read Lorca.”

At this the tired, slack-shouldered orderly came suddenly to life. “Lorca? Did you say Lorca?” He quoted a few lines, to Shahid’s great delight. “Ah! ‘La Cinque de la Tarde,’” Shahid cried, rolling the syllables gleefully around his tongue. “How I love those words. ‘La Cinque de la Tarde!’” That was how we made our way through the hospital’s crowded lobby: with Shahid and the orderly in the vanguard, one quoting snatches of Spanish poetry and the other breaking in from time to time with exultant cries of, “La Cinque de la Tarde, La Cinque de la Tarde ...”

Shahid’s gregariousness had no limit: there was never an evening when there wasn’t a party in his living room. “I love it that so many people are here,” he told me once. “I love it that people come and there’s always food. I love this spirit of festivity; it means that I don’t have time to be depressed.”

His apartment was a spacious and airy split-level, on the seventh floor of a newly-renovated building. There was a cavernous study on the top floor and a wide terrace that provided a magnificent view of the Manhattan skyline, across the East River. Shahid loved this view of the Brooklyn waterfront slipping, like a ghat, into the East River, under the glittering lights of Manhattan.

We’ll see Manhattan, a bride in diamonds, one day
Abashed to remind her sweet man, Brooklyn, of light.¹

The journey from the foyer of Shahid’s building to his door was a voyage between continents: on the way up the rich fragrance of *rogan josh* and *hāk* would invade the dour, grey interior of the elevator; against the background of the songs and voices that were always echoing out of his apartment, even the ringing of the doorbell had an oddly musical sound. Suddenly, Shahid would appear, flinging open the door, releasing a great cloud of *heeng* [*hīng*] into the frosty New York air. “Oh, how nice,” he would cry, clapping his hands, “how nice that you’ve come to see your little Mos-lem!” Invariably, there’d be some half-dozen or more people gathered inside—poets, students, writers, relatives—and in the kitchen someone would always be cooking or making tea. Almost to the very end,

¹From Shahid’s ghazal, “Of Light,” in *Poetry*, 178.2 (May 2001), p. 79.

even as his life was being consumed by his disease, he was the center of a perpetual carnival, an endless *mela* of talk, laughter, food and, of course, poetry.

No matter how many people there were, Shahid was never so distracted as to lose track of the progress of the evening's meal. From time to time he would interrupt himself to shout directions to whoever was in the kitchen: "yes, now, add the *dabī* now." Even when his eyesight was failing, he could tell, from the smell alone, exactly which stage the *roagan josh* had reached. And when things went exactly as they should, he would sniff the air and cry out loud: "*Āh! Kḥānē kī kyā mahak hai!*"

Shahid was legendary for his prowess in the kitchen, frequently spending days over the planning and preparation of a dinner party. It was through one such party, given while he was in Arizona, that he met James Merrill, the poet who was to radically alter the direction of his poetry: it was after this encounter that he began to experiment with strict metrical patterns and verse forms such as the canzone and the sestina. No one had a greater influence on Shahid's poetry than James Merrill: indeed, in the poem in which he most explicitly prefigured his own death, "I Dream I Am At the Ghat of the Only World," he awarded the envoy to Merrill: "SHAHID, HUSH. THIS IS ME, JAMES. THE LOVED ONE ALWAYS LEAVES."

"How did you meet Merrill?" I asked Shahid once.

"I heard he was coming down for a reading and I told the people in charge that I wanted to meet him. They said, 'then why don't you cook for him?' So I did." Merrill loved the food and on learning that Shahid was moving to Hamilton College in upstate New York, he gave him his telephone number and asked him to call. On the occasion of Shahid's first reading at the Academy of American Poets, Merrill was present: a signal honor considering that he was one of America's best-known poets. "Afterwards," Shahid liked to recall, "everybody rushed up and said, 'Did you know that Jim Merrill was here?' My stock in New York went up a thousand-fold that evening."

Shahid placed great store on authenticity and exactitude in cooking and would tolerate no deviation from traditional methods and recipes: for those who took shortcuts, he had only pity. He had a special passion for the food of his region, one variant of it in particular: "Kashmiri food in the Pandit style." I asked him once why this was so important to him and he explained that it was because of a recurrent dream, in which all the Pandits had vanished from the valley of Kashmir and their food had

become extinct. This was a nightmare that haunted him and he returned to it again and again, in his conversation and his poetry.

At a certain point I lost track of you.
 You needed me. You needed to perfect me:
 In your absence you polished me into the Enemy.
 Your history gets in the way of my memory.
 I am everything you lost. Your perfect enemy.
 Your memory gets in the way of my memory: ...
 There is nothing to forgive. You won't forgive me.
 I hid my pain even from myself; I revealed my pain only to myself.
 There is everything to forgive. You can't forgive me.
 If only somehow you could have been mine,
 what would not have been possible in the world?²

Once, in conversation, he told me that he also loved Bengali food. I protested: "But Shahid, you've never even been to Calcutta."

"No," he said. "But we had friends who used to bring us that food. When you ate it you could see that there were so many things that you didn't know about, everywhere in the country ..."

This was at a time when his illness had forced him into spending long periods in bed. He was lying prone on his back, shielding his eyes with his fingers. Suddenly he broke off and reached for my hand. "I wish all this had not happened," he said. "This dividing of the country, the divisions between people—Hindu, Muslim, Muslim, Hindu—you can't imagine how much I hate it. It makes me sick. What I say is: why can't you be happy with the cuisines and the clothes and the music and all these wonderful things?" He paused and added softly, "At least here we have been able to make a space where we can all come together because of the good things."

Of the many "good things" in which he took pleasure, none was more dear to him than the music of Begum Akhtar. He had met the great ghazal singer when he was in his teens, through a friend, and she had become an abiding presence and influence in his life. In his apartment there were several shrine-like niches that were filled with pictures of the people he worshipped: Begum Akhtar was one of these, along with his father, his mother and James Merrill. "I loved Begum Akhtar," he told me

²From "Farewell," in *The Country Without a Post Office* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1997), pp. 22–3.

once. “In other circumstances you could have said that it was a sexual kind of love—but I don’t know what it was. I loved to listen to her, I loved to be with her, I couldn’t bear to be away from her. You can imagine what it was like. Here I was in my mid-teens—just sixteen—and I couldn’t bear to be away from her.”

His love of Begum Akhtar was such as to spill over into a powerful sense of identification. He told me once that the singer Sheila Dhar, who had known Begum Akhtar well, had told him that he even bore a resemblance to Begum Akhtar: “It’s something about our teeth and mouth.”

I said: “I don’t see a resemblance between you and Begum Akhtar.”

He directed a wounded glance at me. “Yes there is,” he said. “Sheila Dhar told me so.”

“Well,” I quickly corrected myself, “she knew Begum Akhtar, so I think she knows more about it than I do.”

He nodded. “Yes,” he said. “It’s something about the teeth. Her teeth were a little prominent (*dānt āgē t’bē*)—so are mine.”

It may well have been this relationship with Begum Akhtar that engendered his passion for the ghazal as a verse form. Yet, ardent advocate though he was of the form, he had little time for the gushing ardor of some of its contemporary American fans: “[I]magine me at a writers’ conference where a woman kept saying to me, ‘Oh, I just love guh-zaals, I’m gonna write a lot of g’zaaals,’ and I said to her, in utter pain, ‘OH, PLEASE DON’T!’”³ Always the disciplinarian in such matters, he believed that the ghazal would never flourish if its structure were not given due respect:

[S]ome rules of the ghazal are clear and classically stringent. The opening couplet (called *matla*) sets up a scheme (of rhyme—called *qafiya*; and refrain—called *radif*) by having it occur in both lines—the rhyme IMMEDIATELY preceding the refrain—and then this scheme occurs only in the second line of each succeeding couplet. That is, 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.⁴

³Agha Shahid Ali, ed. *Ravishing Disunities: Real Ghazals in English* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), introduction, p. 1.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 3.

Over a period of several years he took it on himself to solicit ghazals from a number of poets writing in English. The resulting collection, *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English*, was published in 2000. In establishing a benchmark for the form it has already begun to exert a powerful influence: the formalization of the ghazal may well prove to be Shahid's most important scholarly contribution to the canon of English poetry. His own summation of the project was this: "If one writes in free verse—and one should—to subvert Western civilization, surely one should write in forms to save oneself from Western civilization?"⁵

For Shahid, Begum Akhtar was the embodiment of one such form, not just in her music, but in many other aspects of her being. An aspect of the ghazal which he greatly prized was the latitude it provided for wordplay, wit and *nakhra*: Begum Akhtar was a consummate master of all of these. Shahid had a fund of stories about her sharpness in repartee. On one occasion he had accompanied her to the studios of All India Radio for a recording session. On the way in they met a famous singer, a man who was reputed to be having an affair with his *dhōbin* [woman who does the laundry]. Begum Akhtar greeted the Ustād with a deep salaam, as befitted his standing in the world of music. But then, in passing, she tossed off the line: "*Arē* Khān Sāhib, what a very clean *kurta* [shirt] you're wearing today..." Later, once they were out of the maestro's sight, they had fallen over laughing.

Shahid was himself no mean practitioner of repartee. On one famous occasion, at Barcelona airport, he was stopped by a security guard just as he was about to board a plane. The guard, a woman, asked: "What do you do?"

"I'm a poet," Shahid answered.

"What were you doing in Spain?"

"Writing poetry."

No matter what the question, Shahid worked poetry into his answer. Finally, the exasperated woman asked: "Are you carrying anything that could be dangerous to the other passengers?" At this Shahid clapped a hand to his chest and cried: "Only my heart."

This was one of his great Wildean moments, and it was to occasion the poem "Barcelona Airport." He treasured these moments: "I long for people to give me an opportunity to answer questions," he told me once. On May 7 I had the good fortune to be with him when one such oppor-

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 13.

tunity presented itself. Shahid was teaching at Manhattan's Baruch College in the Spring semester of 2000 and this was to be his last class—indeed the last he was ever to teach. The class was to be a short one for he had an appointment at the hospital immediately afterwards. I had heard a great deal about the brilliance of Shahid's teaching, but this was the first and only time that I was to see him perform in a classroom. It was evident from the moment we walked in that the students adored him: they had printed a magazine and dedicated the issue to him. Shahid for his part was not in the least subdued by the sadness of the occasion. From beginning to end, he was a sparkling diva, Akhtar incarnate, brimming with laughter and *nakhra*. When an Indian student walked in late he greeted her with the cry: "Ah my little subcontinental has arrived." Claspng his hands, he feigned a swoon. "It stirs such a tide of patriotism in me to behold another South Asian!"

Towards the end of the class, a student asked a complicated question about the difference between plausibility and inevitability in a poem. Shahid's eyebrows arched higher and higher as he listened. At last, unable to contain himself, he broke in. "Oh you're such a naughty boy," he cried, tapping the table with his fingertips. "You always turn everything into an abstraction."

But Begum Akhtar was not all wit and *nakhra*: indeed the strongest bond between Shahid and her was, I suspect, the idea that sorrow has no finer mask than a studied lightness of manner. Shahid often told a story about Begum Akhtar's marriage: although her family's origins were dubious, her fame as a beauty was such that she received a proposal from the scion of a prominent Muslim family of Lucknow. The proposal came with the condition that the talented young singer would give up singing: the man's family was deeply conservative and could not conceive of one of its members performing on stage. Begum Akhtar—or Akhtaribai Faizabadi, as she was then—accepted, but soon afterwards her mother died. Heartbroken, Akhtaribai spent her days weeping on her grave. Her condition became such that a doctor had to be brought in to examine her. He said that if she were not allowed to sing she would lose her mind: it was only then that her husband's family relented and allowed her to sing again.

Shahid was haunted by this image of Begum Akhtar, as a bereaved and inconsolable daughter, weeping on her mother's grave; it is in this grief stricken aspect that she is evoked again and again in his poems. The poem that was his farewell to the world, "I Dream I Am At the Ghat of the Only World," opens with an evocation of Begum Akhtar:

A night of ghazals comes to an end. The singer
 departs through her chosen mirror, her one diamond
 cut on her countless necks. I, as ever, linger⁶

It was Shahid's mother who had introduced him to the music of Begum Akhtar: "With her I'd heard—on 78 rpm—Peer Gynt ... / and Ghalib's grief in the voice of Begum Akhtar."⁷ In Shahid's later poems, Begum Akhtar was to become an image for the embodiment of his own sorrow after his mother's death. Shahid's mother, a woman of striking beauty, happened to have a close, indeed startling, resemblance to Begum Akhtar: Shahid's walls were hung with many pictures of both and I would frequently mistake the one for the other. What then of Shahid's belief that he resembled Begum Akhtar? There is a mystery here that I am content to leave untouched.

Shahid was born in New Delhi in 1949. Later, in one of the temporal inversions that marked his poetry, he was to relive his conception in his poem "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 River⁸

Shahid's father's family was from Srinagar in Kashmir. They were Shi'a, who are a minority amongst the Muslims of Kashmir. Shahid liked to tell a story about the origins of his family: the line was founded, he used to say, by two brothers who came to Kashmir from Central Asia. The brothers had been trained as *hakims* [physicians] specializing in Yunani [Greek] medicine, and they arrived in Kashmir with nothing but their knowledge of medical lore: they were so poor that they had to share

⁶In his *Rooms Are Never Finished* (New York: Norton, 2001), p. 97.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 99.

⁸I would like to thank Daniel Hall for bringing this poem to my attention.

a single cloak between them. But it so happened that the then Maharajah of Kashmir was suffering from terrible stomach pains, “some kind of colic.” Learning that all the kingdom’s doctors had failed to cure the ailing ruler, the two brothers decided to try their hand. They gave the Maharajah a concoction that went through the royal intestines like a plunger through a tube, bringing sudden and explosive relief. Delighted with his cure, the grateful potentate appointed the brothers his court physicians: thus began the family’s prosperity.

“So you see,” Shahid would comment, in bringing the story to its conclusion. “My family’s fortunes were founded on a fart.”

By Shahid’s account, his great-grandfather was the first Kashmiri Muslim to matriculate. The story went that to sit for the examination, he had had to travel all the way from Srinagar to Rawalpindi in a tonga. Later, he too became an official at the court of the Maharajah of Kashmir. He had special charge of education, and took the initiative to educate his daughter. Shahid’s grandmother was thus one of the first educated women in Kashmir. She passed the matriculation examination, took several other degrees, and in time became the Inspector of Women’s Schools. She could quote poetry in four languages: English, Urdu, Farsi and Kashmiri. Shahid’s father, Agha Ashraf Ali, continued the family tradition of public service in education. He taught at Jamia Millia University in New Delhi and went on to become the principal of the Teacher’s College in Srinagar. In 1961, he enrolled at Ball State Teacher’s College, in Muncie, Indiana, to do a Ph.D. in Comparative Education. Shahid was twelve when the family moved to the US and for the next three years he attended school in Muncie. Later the family moved back to Srinagar and that was where Shahid completed his schooling. But it was because of his early experience, I suspect, that Shahid was able to take America so completely in his stride when he arrived in Pennsylvania as a graduate student. The idea of a cultural divide or conflict had no purchase in his mind: America and India were the two poles of his life and he was at home in both in a way that was utterly easeful and unproblematic.

Shahid took his undergraduate degree at the University of Kashmir, in Srinagar. Although he excelled there, graduating with the highest marks in his class, he did not recall the experience with any fondness. “I learned nothing there,” he told me once. “It was just a question of *rattomaroing* [cramming].” In 1968 he joined Hindu College in Delhi University to study for an M.A. in English literature. Once again he performed with distinction and went on to become a lecturer at the same college. It

was in this period that he published his first collection of poems, with P. Lal of the “Writer’s Workshop” in Calcutta.

Shahid’s memories of Delhi University were deeply conflicted: he became something of a campus celebrity but also endured rebuffs and disappointments that may well have come his way only because he was a Muslim and a Kashmiri. Although he developed many close and lasting friendships he also suffered many betrayals and much unhappiness. In any event, he was, I think, deeply relieved when Penn State University in College Park, Pennsylvania, offered him a scholarship for a Ph.D.

His time at Penn State, he remembered with unmitigated pleasure: “I grew as a reader, I grew as a poet, I grew as a lover.” He fell in with a vibrant group of graduate students, many of whom were Indian. This was, he often said, the happiest time of his life. Later Shahid moved to Arizona to take a degree in creative writing. This in turn was followed by a series of jobs in colleges and universities: Hamilton College, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, and finally, the University of Utah in Salt Lake City, where he was appointed professor in 1999. He was on leave from Utah, doing a brief stint at New York University, when he had his first blackout in February 2000.

After 1975, when he moved to Pennsylvania, Shahid lived mainly in America. His brother was already there and they were later joined by their two sisters. But Shahid’s parents continued to live in Srinagar and it was his custom to spend the summer months with them there every year: “I always move in my heart between sad countries.”⁹ Travelling between the United States and India he was thus an intermittent but firsthand witness (*shāhid*) to the mounting violence that seized the region from the late nineteen-eighties onwards:

It was ’89, the stones were not far, signs of change
everywhere (Kashmir would soon be in literal
flames). . . .¹⁰

The steady deterioration of the political situation in Kashmir—the violence and counter-violence—had a powerful effect on him. In time it became one of the central subjects of his work: indeed it could be said that it was in writing of Kashmir that he created his finest work. The

⁹“I Dream I Am At the Ghat of the Only World,” in *Rooms Are Never Finished*, p. 101.

¹⁰“Summers of Translation,” in *ibid.*, p. 30.

irony of this is that Shahid was not by inclination a political poet. I heard him say once: “If you are from a difficult place and that’s all you have to write about then you should stop writing. You have to respect your art, your form—that is just as important as what you write about.” Another time, I was present at Shahid’s apartment when his long-time friend, Patricia O’Neill, showed him a couple of sonnets written by a Victorian poet. The poems were political, trenchant in their criticism of the British Government for its failure to prevent the massacre of the Armenians in Turkey. Shahid glanced at them and tossed them off-handedly aside: “These are terrible poems.” Patricia asked why, and he said: “Look, I already know where I stand on the massacre of the Armenians. Of course I am against it. But this poem tells me nothing of the massacre; it makes nothing of it formally. I might as well just read a news report.”

Anguished as he was about Kashmir’s destiny, Shahid resolutely refused to embrace the role of victim that could so easily have been his. Had he not done so, he could, no doubt, have easily become a fixture on talk shows, news programs and op-ed pages. But Shahid never had any doubt about his calling: he was a poet, schooled in the fierce and unforgiving arts of language. Such as they were, Shahid’s political views were inherited largely from his father, whose beliefs were akin to those of most secular, left-leaning Muslim intellectuals of the Nehruvian era. Although respectful of religion, he remains a firm believer in the separation of politics and religious practice.

Once, when Shahid was at dinner with my family, I asked him bluntly: “What do you think is the solution for Kashmir?” His answer was: “I think ideally the best solution would be absolute autonomy within the Indian Union in the broadest sense.” But this led almost immediately to the enumeration of a long list of caveats and reservations: quite possibly, he said, such a solution was no longer possible, given the actions of the Indian state in Kashmir; the extremist groups would never accept the “autonomy” solution in any case and so many other complications had entered the situation that it was almost impossible to think of a solution.

The truth is that Shahid’s gaze was not political in the sense of being framed in terms of policy and solutions. In the broadest sense, his vision tended always towards the inclusive and ecumenical, an outlook that he credited to his upbringing. He spoke often of a time in his childhood when he had been seized by the desire to create a small Hindu temple in his room in Srinagar. He was initially hesitant to tell his parents but when he did they responded with an enthusiasm equal to his own. His mother bought him *mūrtīs* [mini-idols] and other accoutrements and for a while

he was assiduous in conducting *pujas* at this shrine. This was a favorite story. “Whenever people talk to me about Muslim fanaticism,” he said to me once, “I tell them how my mother helped me make a temple in my room. What do you make of that? I ask them.” There is a touching evocation of this in his poem, “Lenox Hill”: “and I, one festival, crowned Krishna by you, Kashmir / listening to my flute.”¹¹

I once remarked to Shahid that he was the closest that Kashmir had to a national poet. He shot back: “A national poet, maybe. But not a nationalist poet; please not that.” If anything, Kashmir’s current plight represented for him the failure of the emancipatory promise of nationhood and the extinction of the pluralistic ideal that had been so dear to intellectuals of his father’s generation. In the title poem of “The Country Without a Post Office,” a poet returns to Kashmir to find the keeper of a fallen minaret:

“Nothing will remain, everything’s finished,”
I see his voice again: “This is a shrine
of words. You’ll find your letters to me. And mine
to you. Come soon and tear open these vanished
envelopes.”...
This is an archive. I’ve found the remains of
Of his voice, that map of longings with no limit.¹²

The pessimism engendered by the loss of these ideals—that map of longings with no limit—resulted in a vision in which, increasingly, Kashmir became a vortex of images circling around a single point of stillness: the idea of death. In this figuring of his homeland, he himself became one of the images that were spinning around the dark point of stillness—both *shāhid* and *shahīd*, witness and martyr—his destiny inextricably linked with Kashmir’s, each prefigured by the other.

I will die, in autumn, in Kashmir,
and the shadowed routine of each vein
will almost be news, the blood censored,
for the Saffron Sun and the Times of Rain. ...

¹¹In *ibid.*, p. 17.

¹²“The Country Without a Post Office,” in *The Country Without a Post Office*, pp. 48–51.

Among my notes is a record of a telephone conversation on May 5. The day before he had gone to the hospital for an important test: a scan that was expected to reveal whether or not the course of chemotherapy that he was then undergoing had had the desired effect. All other alternative therapies and courses of treatment had been put off until this report.

The scan was scheduled for 2:30 in the afternoon. I called his number several times in the late afternoon and early evening—there was no response. I called again the next morning and this time he answered. There were no preambles. He said: “Listen Amitav, the news is not good at all. Basically they are going to stop all my medicines now—the chemotherapy and so on. They give me a year or less. They’d suspected that I was not responding well because of the way I look. They will give me some radiation a little later. But they said there was not much hope.”

Dazed, staring blankly at my desk, I said: “What will you do now Shahid?”

“I would like to go back to Kashmir to die.” His voice was quiet and untroubled. “Now I have to get my passport, settle my will and all that. I don’t want to leave a mess for my siblings. But after that I would like to go to Kashmir. It’s still such a feudal system there and there will be so much support—and my father is there too. Anyway, I don’t want my siblings to have to make the journey afterwards, like we had to with my mother.”

Later, because of logistical and other reasons, he changed his mind about returning to Kashmir: he was content to be laid to rest in Northampton, in the vicinity of Amherst, a town sacred to the memory of his beloved Emily Dickinson. But I do not think it was an accident that his mind turned to Kashmir in speaking of death. Already, in his poetic imagery, death, Kashmir, and *shāhid/shahid* had become so closely overlaid as to be inseparable, like old photographs that have melted together in the rain.

Yes, I remember it,
the day I’ll die, I broadcast the crimson,

so long ago of that sky, its spread air,
its rushing dyes, and a piece of earth

bleeding, apart from the shore, as we went
on the day I’ll die, past the guards, and he,

keeper of the world’s last saffron, rowed me

on an island the size of a grave. On
 two yards he rowed me into the sunset,
 past all pain. On everyone's lips was news
 of my death but only that beloved couplet,
 broken, on his:

"If there is a paradise on earth
 It is this, it is this, it is this."¹³

Shahid's mother, Sufia Nomani, was from Rudauli in Uttar Pradesh. She was descended from a family that was well known for its Sufi heritage. Shahid believed that this connection influenced her life in many intangible ways; "she had the grandeur of a Sufi," he liked to say.

Although Shahid's parents lived in Srinagar, they usually spent the winter months in their flat in New Delhi. It was there that his mother had her first seizure in December 1995. The attack was initially misdiagnosed and it was not till the family brought her to New York's Lenox Hill Hospital, in January 1996, that it was confirmed that she had a malignant brain tumor. Her condition was so serious that she was operated on two days after her arrival. The operation did not have the desired effect and resulted instead in a partial paralysis. At the time Shahid and his younger brother Iqbal were both teaching at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. His sister, Hena, was working on a Ph.D. at the same institution. The siblings decided to move their mother to Amherst and it was there that she died on 24 April 1997. In keeping with her wishes, the family took her body back to Kashmir for burial. This long and traumatic journey forms the subject of a cycle of poems, "From Amherst to Kashmir," that was later included in Shahid's 2001 collection, *Rooms Are Never Finished*.

During the last phase of his mother's illness and for several months afterwards, Shahid was unable to write. The dry spell was broken in 1998, with "Lenox Hill," possibly his greatest poem. The poem was a canzone, a form of unusual rigor and difficulty (the poet Anthony Hecht once remarked that Shahid deserved to be in the Guinness Book of World Records for having written three canzones—more than any other poet). In "Lenox Hill," the architectonics of the form creates a soaring super-

¹³From "The Last Saffron," in *ibid.*, p. 29.

structure, an immense domed enclosure, like that of the great mosque of Isfahan or the mausoleum of Sayyida Zainab in Cairo: a space that seems all the more vast because of the austerity of its proportions. The rhymes and half-rhymes are the honeycombed arches that thrust the dome towards the heavens, and the meter is the mosaic that holds the whole in place. Within the immensity of this bounded space, every line throws open a window that beams a shaft of light across continents, from Amherst to Kashmir, from the hospital of Lenox Hill to the Pir Panjal Pass. Entombed at the center of this soaring edifice lies his mother:

...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. ...¹⁴

The poem is packed with the devices that he had perfected over a lifetime: rhetorical questions, imperative commands, lines broken or punctuated to create resonant and unresolvable ambiguities. It ends, characteristically, with a turn that is at once disingenuous and wrenchingly direct.

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?¹⁵

For Shahid, the passage of time produced no cushioning from the shock of the loss of his mother: he re-lived it over and over again until the end. Often he would interrupt himself in mid-conversation: “I can’t believe she’s gone; I still can’t believe it.” The week before his death, on waking one morning, he asked his family where his mother was and whether it was true that she was dead. On being told that she was, he wept as though he were living afresh through the event.

In the penultimate stanza of “Lenox Hill,” in a breathtaking, heart-stopping inversion, Shahid figures himself as his mother’s mother:

¹⁴From “Lenox Hill,” in *Rooms Are Never Finished*, p. 18.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 19.

“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!¹⁶

I remember clearly the evening when Shahid read this poem in the living room of my house. I remember it because I could not keep myself from wondering whether it was possible that Shahid’s identification with his mother was so powerful as to spill beyond the spirit and into the body. Brain cancer is not, so far as I know, a hereditary disease, yet his body had, as it were, elected to reproduce the conditions of his mother’s death. But how could this be possible? Even the thought appears preposterous in the bleak light of the Aristotelian distinction between mind and body, and the notions of cause and effect that flow from it. Yet there are traditions in which poetry is a world of causality entire unto itself, where metaphor extends beyond the mere linking of words, into the conjugation of a distinctive reality.

Shahid thought of his work as being placed squarely within a modern Western tradition. Yet the mechanics of his imagination—dreams, visions, an overpowering sense of identity with those he loved—as well as his life, and perhaps even his death, were fashioned by a will that owed more perhaps to the Sufis and the Bhakti poets than to the modernists. In his determination to be not just a writer of poetry but an embodiment of his poetic vision, he was, I think, more the heir of Rumi and Kabir than Eliot and Merrill.

The last time I saw Shahid was on the 27th of October, at his brother’s house in Amherst. He was intermittently able to converse and there were moments when we talked just as we had in the past. He was aware, as he had long been, of his approaching end and he had made his peace with it. I saw no trace of anguish or conflict: surrounded by the love of his family and friends, he was calm, contented, at peace. He had said to me once, “I love to think that I’ll meet my mother in the after-life, if there is an after-life.” I had the sense that as the end neared, this was his supreme consolation. He died peacefully, in his sleep, at 2 a.m. on December 8.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 18.

Now, in his absence, I am amazed that so brief a friendship has resulted in so vast a void. Often, when I walk into my living room, I remember his presence there, particularly on the night when he read us his farewell to the world: “I Dream I Am At the Ghat of the Only World.” I remember how he created a vision of an evening of ghazals, drawing to its end; of the be-diamonded singer vanishing through a mirror; I remember him evoking the voices he loved—of Begum Akhtar, Eqbal Ahmed and James Merrill—urging him on as he journeys towards his mother: “love doesn’t help anyone finally survive.” Shahid knew exactly how it would end and he was meticulous in saying his farewells, careful in crafting the envoy to the last verses of his own life. □

Brooklyn
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