

SHAHRYAR

Poems

[*Translator's note:* Urdu poetry is often understood to be about little other than courtly love and romantic excess, about the lament of the bulbul and the frenzied passion of the *shama'-parvāna*. In Shahryār's skillful hands, the Urdu ghazal and *nazm* have acquired a new potency and immediacy within their time-honored confines. The joys and sorrows of ordinary, lived experiences, the complexities and ambivalences of city life, the oppressive sense of melancholy and dislocation of the urban milieu—these and other such permutations form the rubric of his poetry.

Shahryār's songs for popular Hindi films such as *Umrao Jaan*, *Gaman*, *Anjuman*, and *Faasle* enjoy an enduring mass appeal. Taxi drivers in Mumbai are still apt to play “*Sīnē mēn jalan ānk'ōn mēn tūfān sā kyūn hai / Is shahr mēn har shakḥ parēshān sā kyūn hai*” decades after the film's release. Popular Hindi film playback singer, Asha Bhonsle, is still known to open many a concert with those haunting lines from *Umrao Jaan*: “*Yeh kyā jagah hai dōstō, yeh kaun sā dayār hai / Hadd-e nigāh tak jabān ghubār hī ghubār hai.*”

Despite early critical acclaim and commercial success, Shahryār has consistently refused to become a performer playing to the gallery at *mushā'iras*, or merely a successful wordsmith churning out hits from a plush Bollywood studio. For over thirty years now he has been straddling two worlds with consummate ease—that of academia and poetics. Honored with several prestigious national and international awards, including the Sahitya Akademi prize, Shahryār retired as Professor of Urdu from the Aligarh Muslim University. He now devotes his time entirely to his poetry, and, occasionally, to cooking exotic meals for close friends.

What sets Shahryār's poetics apart from that of other modern Urdu poets is the sheer lyricism, the sweet melodiousness that is all the more striking because it is garbed in an everyday, conversational idiom. The relentless probing of his own heart and of the human predicament is viewed through the prism of his intensely personal experiences. At the same time, there is none of the stridency or the militant ideology of any particular school of thought which mars much of the modern poetry coming out of India, irrespective of language. Instead, there is a collage of images that tell a story of their own. Sensual, multi-colored, delicately filigreed, these word pictures—tumbling out of a kaleidoscope of the known and the familiar—capture, with just a few deftly drawn strokes, the pathos and alienation of the urban individual. Unabashedly personal, Shahryār's *nazms*, such as the ones chosen here for translation, reach out to form an immediate bond, claiming a sense of kinship, touching a chord somewhere, evoking the tremulous wonder of dreams.

Dreams, in fact, are a leitmotif that runs through much of his poetry. Sleep, the ability to fall asleep effortlessly and to pass through the portal of consciousness into some magical land of dreams and into the vast, untapped subconscious are recurring concerns. So much so, that two of his collections revolve around them: *Khvāb kā Dar Band Hai* and *Nind kī Kirāññ*. The images, too, particularly in his *nazms*, have a dreamy, trancelike quality evoking a mindscape that is personal yet reaches out far beyond the immediate and the individual.

Reading poetry in translation has been described as an experience similar to looking at the wrong side of a carpet, for a translation can seldom match the color and sheen, the play of light and shade, the intricate word patterns of the original. Retaining the compactness and metaphoric precision of Shahryār's *nazms* while also carrying into English some of the rhythm and rhyme of the poet's own often idiosyncratic use of words and silences can be quite daunting. Unlike English, metrical patterns in Urdu depend on line lengths and lengths of syllables rather than stresses. There is also no preordained word order, and punctuation is seldom used, the poet preferring to allow natural pauses to do the job. Frog-marching the rhythm of the *nazm* into English results in ungainly, dangling sentences. And nothing can be more tiresome than a clumsy jumble of words being passed off as poetry in translation. I have found it best, therefore, to stay as close to the images as possible and let them carry the poem through where rhythm and rhyme have proved elusive.]



SHAHRYAR

DO YOU REMEMBER

Do you remember
you had sworn
placing your hand on night's palm
that the glitter and keen of morning's sun-sword
would no longer frighten you
And you would give away
the dream treasures
that you have hidden in your eyes
as gifts
to someone
braver and stronger
than you

IN THE DEFENSE OF SLEEPLESS NIGHTS

Think, my friends,
Open your eyes and see
This barren night
Is the enemy of all your dreams
Don't sell your sleeplessness
To this night

AN INCHOATE DESIRE

Take this dagger
And strike me
Cut me in a hundred pieces
Caress my battered body
Bathe me in the dew from your eyes
Be called my murderer
I live for that day

IT IS TIME TO REAP THE CROP

The time to reap has come
While sowing rootlessness in our fields
We never thought
The time to reap
Would ever come

CALL

How long shall I
scatter myself
in this opaque room
How long
gather and pick the pieces
Clinging to the walls
the paintings have grown weary
Eyes drenched with dew
Snuffed out candles
Will be lit again
Come ...

STAND BY ME

The green road has come to an end
In front of me
lies sand
And further away
a few rocks
What lies beyond
I do not know
Stay by me
Lest I waken
Place your hand in mine
A sheet of ice rims my lips
I see formless shadows
Drops of dew weigh down my eyelashes
The enchantment of sleep is about to break
Where are you
Stay by me
Place your hand in mine
Lest the green road ends
And I awaken

A PRAYER

Wind,
where do you wander

carrying the twitter
of lispings birds
on your shoulders

See,
how the rocks jut out
from every corner of the earth

See,
how lips, eyes, hands
sprout from the black rocks

Wind,
scrape the rocks clean
with your needle sharp talons
Where do you wander
carrying the twitter
of lispings birds
on your shoulders

COME

Come,
Come once again
To thread silences
Through my snuffed out breaths
The river runs as before
Your shadow slips away
With no hand to stop it
The half-broken moon
Is no longer with me
The wind whistles past
There will be lights and festivity
Doors will be unlatched
Pull down all the curtains
Stop,
Stop right here
This point will beget new lines

A NEW GAME

Come, let us go there
A little further away from the mist of solitudes
There, where a wide open space lies ahead
There a spectacle will be presented
One that no one has ever seen before
That is, in front of your waking eyes
The stars of voices, the moons of sounds
Will be hung from the cross of silences

DEATH OF A SHADOW

Day has shut its door, black night has come
Pathways begin to toss and turn
Sadness settles over the alleys
All the bustle and din, those excitements (the confidantes of day)
Are locked up in mute prisons
Come, let us go now
Let us look beyond our shell of loneliness
Our shadow, let us see where it goes in this black night
Which memories it lights up
Which moment it calls to ransom
What it loses, and what it finds today
How it grows, shrinks, then scatters
And how it dies

FROM ONE MOMENT TO THE NEXT

A footfall fluttered on the doorstep
A whisper brushed past my ear
A fragrance caressed my body
A shadow crept into my room
And then, the sound of a fall
As the wall of sleep comes crashing down
And a raging wind all around!!

—Translated by Rakshanda Jalil