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The Ghat of the Only World

Amitav Ghosh

A dying man, an expatriate from Kashmir, asks the author to write something about him after he is gone. The following piece is what Amitav Ghosh wrote to keep his promise.

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 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 tumour, he decided to move to Brooklyn, to be close to his youngest sister, Sameetah, who teaches at the Pratt Institute—a few blocks away from the street where I live.

Shahid ignored my reassurances. He began to laugh and it was then that I realised 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 fulfil 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 register¹. 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 neighbourhood, 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 rogan josh, 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*—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

¹ a poetic style



was on 21 May: 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 tumour 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 Lorca²'.

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.

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 *haak* 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* into the frosty New York air, 'Oh, how nice,' he would cry, clapping his hands, 'how nice that you've

² Garcia Lorca is Spain's most deeply appreciated and highly revered poet and dramatist.



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, even as his life was being consumed by his disease, he was the centre 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 *dahi* now.' Even when his eyesight was failing, he could tell from the smell alone, exactly which stage the rogan josh had reached. And when things went exactly as they should, he would sniff the air and cry out loud: '*Ah! Khana ka kya mehek 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. 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.'

Shahid placed great store on authenticity and exactitude in cooking and would tolerate no deviation from traditional methods and recipes: for those who took short cuts, 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 nothing to forgive. You won't forgive me.
If only somehow you could have been mine, what would not have
been possible in the world?

Once, in conversation, he told me that he also loved Bengali food. I protested, 'But Shahid, you've never even been to Calcutta³'.

'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...' 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. Shahid had a fund of stories about her sharpness in repartee.

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 7 May I had the good fortune to be with him when one such opportunity presented itself. Shahid

³ Kolkata



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.'

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.' Travelling between the United States and India he was thus an intermittent but first-hand witness (*sháhíd*) to the mounting violence that seized the region from the late 1980s onwards:

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

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 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.'

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 done so, he could no doubt have easily become a fixture on talk shows and news programmes. But Shahid never had any doubt about his calling: he was a poet, schooled in the fierce and unforgiving art of language. Although respectful of religion, he remained a firm believer in the separation of politics and religious practice.

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 ecumenical⁴, 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 *murtis* and other accoutrements⁵ and for a while he was assiduous⁶ in conducting pujas at this shrine. This was a favourite 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.'

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.' 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 son and tear open these vanished envelopes'...

⁴ involving or uniting members of different religions

⁵ other things that were needed for the activity

⁶ taking great care that everything is done as well as it can be



This is an archive. I've found the remains
of his voice, that map of longings with no limit.

In this figuring of his homeland, he himself became one of the images that were spinning around the dark point of stillness—both Sháhīd 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*...

Among my notes is a record of a telephone conversation on 5 May. 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 Sháhíd/Shahīd 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, post 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.'

The last time I saw Shahid was on 27 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 afterlife, if there is an afterlife.' 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 8 December.

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...'



READING WITH INSIGHT

1. What impressions of Shahid do you gather from the piece?
2. How do Shahid and the writer react to the knowledge that Shahid is going to die?
3. Look up the dictionary for the meaning of the word 'diaspora'. What do you understand of the Indian diaspora from this piece?

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