

Poems by Agha Shahid Ali

Ghazal

A language of loss? I have some business in Arabic.
Love letters: a calligraphy pitiless in Arabic.

At an exhibit of miniatures, what Kashmiri hairs!
Each paisley inked into a golden tress in Arabic.

This much fuss about a language I don't know? So one day
perfume from a dress may let you digress in Arabic.

A "Guide for the Perplexed" was written—believe me—
by Cordoba's Jew—Maimonides—in Arabic.

Majnoon, by stopped caravans, rips his collars, cries "Laila!"
Pain translated is O! much more—not less—in Arabic.

Writes Shammas: Memory, no longer confused, now is a homeland—
his two languages a Hebrew caress in Arabic.

When Lorca died, they left the balconies open and saw:
On the sea his *qasidas* stitched seamless in Arabic.

Ah, bisexual Heaven: wide-eyed houris and immortal youths!
To your each desire the say *Yes! O Yes!* in Arabic.

For that excess of sibilance, the last Apocalypse,
so pressing those three forms of S in Arabic.

I too, O Amichai, saw everything, just like you did—
In Death. In Hebrew. And (please let me stress) in Arabic.

They ask me to tell them what *Shahid* means: Listen, listen:
It means "The Beloved" in Persian, "witness" in Arabic.

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.

At the Museum

But in 2500 B.C. Harappa,
 who cast in bronze a servant girl?

No one keeps records
 of soldiers and slaves.

The sculptor knew this,
 polishing the ache

Off her fingers stiff
 from washing the walls

and scrubbing the floors,
 from stirring the meat

and the crushed asafoetida
in the bitter gourd.

But I'm grateful she smiled
at the sculptor,

as she smiles at me
in bronze,

a child who had to play woman
to her lord

when the warm June rains
came to Harappa.

April 1990