

Postcard from Kashmir

Last month 10 years had passed since the death of AGHA SHAHID ALI, one of the great contemporary poets of the subcontinent. The historian MANAN AHMAD examines some of his most haunting work, and the legacy he left.

There is a found poem titled "Suicide Note" in Agha Shahid Ali's *Rooms are Never Finished* (2001).
I could not simplify myself.
This one line lingers alone on a blank page.
I.

Agha Shahid Ali must have been a funny man. I say this because his poetry drips with a wicked smile. A wickedness born out of a tease, a glee at knowing something you don't, but will enjoy when you hear the punch line. It is a welcome wickedness. In those years I lived/happily ever after. And still do./I played with every Gretel in town/including Gretel, my sister. His small volume *A Walk Through the Yellow Pages* (1987) plays with Grimm's tales. The poem "Barcelona Airport" carries the epitaph "Are you carrying anything that could be dangerous for the other passengers?" and begins, *O just my heart first terrorist*. That is a laugh ringing out into the concrete and the steel of any airport. He must have been a fun person to hang out with — full of laughter and wine. I make an assumption about the wine, but then, what poet doesn't like *glasses filled/with the moon's dry wine*. When I picture him, someone I never met, I see him slightly tipsy in a crowded room, calling his love, *My finger, your phone number/at its tip, dials the night*.

In June, as the summer woke in Berlin, I carried Agha Shahid Ali in my bag. At a bus stop, sitting on the U-bahn, waiting for a friend at a café, I would dip into his work. Take some words (*the entire map of the lost will be candled*) and just stare at them in my mind. His work is built on images in stark relief. Even his commands. Especially his commands. *The world is full of paper. Write to me.* They force your attention back to the will behind the words. *Mad heart, be brave.* Or the oft-quoted *Call me Ismael tonight*.

The imperative makes me hear his voice. Not a "poet's" voice but that of this man alone: Agha Shahid Ali.

There is an immense amounts of love in his poetry — in the four major collections, *The Half-Inch Himalayas* (1987), *A Nostalgist's*



Agha Shahid Ali

Map of America (1991), *The Country Without a Post Office* (1997) and, finally, *Rooms are Never Finished* (2001) — though I make no quantitative claim. But listen: *In the midnight bar/your breath collapsed on me./I balanced on/the tip of your smile,/holding on to your words/as I climbed the dark steps*. That is modern love. *You were kind./reciting poetry in a drunk tongue./I thought: At last!* That made me smile, in recognition. As it must to everyone who has ever fallen in love. Or dreamed about it. *At last!* Such is the meticulous power of his words. I thought, here is a fine practitioner of teasing apart that intoxication of desire and willingness to submit. *Where are you now? Who lies beneath your spell tonight/before you agonize him in farewell tonight*. This last a Ghazal, even. I will write, I said, about the gorgeous ghazals he wrote or translated. Hear: *The one you would choose: were you led then by him?/What longing, O Yaar, is controlled in real time?/ Each*

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syllable sucked under waves of our earth -/The funeral love comes to hold in real time! The rhyme and the refrain. The ecstasy and the control. The language, you would have noticed, was English. Yet the words? The words could have come from Hafiz or Ghalib and Faiz. I am unsure if writing that is not a slight to Agha Shahid Ali's craft.

In a sense, Hafiz, Ghalib or Faiz (but really, if we are to talk of Ali, we ought to include Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, James Merrill, W.S. Merwin, Mahmoud Darwish) have their work enhanced by reams of commentary,

of scholarship and of cultural weight. Shahid Ali remembers that he grew up in a household where those names, and their words, were oft recited and fondly remembered. Ali, who died on December 8, 2001, has not attracted that kind of attention yet. By which I mean, specifically, an attention to his contribution to the language of human emotions. *Tonight the air is many envelopes/again. Tell her to open them at once/and find hurried notes about my longing/for wings. Tell her to speak, when that hour comes,/simply of the sky. Friend, speak of the sky/when that hour comes. Speak,*

CORRECTIONS
World Literature Today editorial board member Alamgir Hashmi graciously pointed out that writer Agha Shahid Ali's recently released poetry collection, *Rooms are Never Finished*, was mistakenly reviewed under the heading *Pakistan* (WLT 76:2, p. 145), when in fact all classifications (including self-description) have noted the author as Indian or, on occasion (following the author's arrival in the United States), as Asian American. Elsewhere, Douglas Adams was incorrectly identified as an American writer (WLT 76:2, p. 102). Adams was born in Cambridge, England, in March 1952 and died unexpectedly of a heart attack in May 2001. He had been living in Santa Barbara, California.

Ali's work has been a bone of contention for years, as academics and readers have repeatedly chosen to view his poetry through filters of identity and nationality (as above)

simply, of the air. Thus concluded the thirteenth, and final, canto of "From Another Desert" — Shahid Ali's telling of Laila and Majnoon guised in that Poundian structure. Yet what it contains — a rumination on love, on defiance, on the ways in which epic and belief coincide in religion and poetry — makes "From Another Desert" that rarest of creations, a masterpiece, one that Faiz would gladly claim for himself. Certainly that sour Muhammad Iqbal would.

II.
So what is separation's geography?/Everything is just that mystery he writes in "By the Waters of the Sind" — a poem that neatly ties both Agha Shahid Ali's pained gaze at his distant homeland and his wry shrug at having to bear the public burden of being a "poet of exile". ... *I stare at one guest/who is asking Father to fill them/in on — what else? — the future,/burnishing that dark gem/of Kashmir with a history of saints, with/proph-ecy, with kings, with myth,/and I want them to change the subject*. The poem is in his last collection. His first opened with *Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox,/my home a neat four by six inches*. Over those thirteen odd years, in that landscape between a postcard to his father's telling, lies the place from which Agha Shahid Ali came. Cashmere, Casimir, Kashmir — as he often played with words — rests heavy on his memory. But there is a transition that his

death has elided. He began as an immigrant poet, and when he died, he was a poet at home, conscious of those in exile. He himself was never in exile. Not like Edward Said or Eqbal Ahmad or Mahmoud Darwish or Faiz Ahmed Faiz — all whom he cites and writes for, in his last collection. That much we can move off the table. But Kashmir is not a representation of Agha Shahid Ali's exile — least from the nation-states of Pakistan or India.

Kashmir is his orientation. It pins his poetry, via bloodlines, to that map of his motherland. There are other maps, of course.

He became an American citizen shortly before his death, and clearly his poetry left Srinagar from the very beginning. By the end of his tragically shortened life, he had emerged as a voice that resonated, carrying songs of Kashmir out to the world. Akin to his contemporaries and analogues, the Mexican-American poet Gary Soto or Vietnamese-American poet Andrew Lam, he wrote for New York, for Delhi, for Srinagar and Amherst, for other poets, for other dreamers, in many registers. Still he is read only through one lens — the longing for Kashmir.

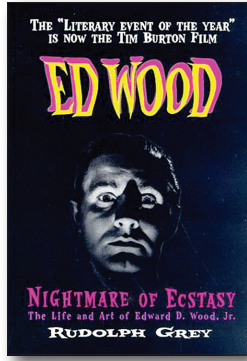
Kashmir is in my blood, too. In the blood of my mother, my grandmother and my grandfather. Like many, I was drawn to Agha Shahid Ali because of his Kashmir. But I stay in his land because of his humour, his love and that almost-drunk smile.

WORD SMITH

JAI ARJUN SINGH



A good book on a very bad director



There's a lovely scene in the 1994 film *Ed Wood* — a romanticised biography of the legendary "bad movie" director Edward Wood Jr — where Wood meets his hero Orson Welles. The sequence is fictional but it has a poetic aptness. Here is a man who made a series of eye-poppingly terrible movies (including the one sometimes called the Worst Film of All Time, *Plan 9 from Outer Space*) and here is one of cinema's greatest artists, the maker of some of the most influential movies ever made — and yet they are kindred spirits in some ways: they share a boyish passion for the form and its possibilities, and their personal visions have constantly been messed with by other people who lack that passion.

The differences are more revealing though. Welles once mused (perhaps in an attempt to cheer himself up) that the absence of limitations was the enemy of art; that good art usually came out of constraints, not from unlimited freedoms. In Wood's case, the many constraints (though they never produced anything resembling art) are probably what gave his story a romantic sheen. If he had received big-studio funding for scripts early in his career, his incompetence would

quickly have been exposed and he would probably have ended up a tiny footnote in Hollywood's long list of has-beens and never-weres. Instead, he independently made a number of barely financed, barely written D-grade movies, and some of them developed cult followings. Unwatchable as most of them are, they remain a

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mighty testament to what can happen when incredible zeal meets an equally incredible lack of talent. ("I am the patron saint of the mediocrities!" cries the composer Antonio Salieri in Peter Shaffer's play *Amadeus*, painfully aware that despite his lifelong love for music, he has none of Mozart's talent. But compared to Ed Wood, even Shaffer's Salieri was a genius.)

Last week a friend gifted me the book on which *Ed Wood* was based, Rudolph Grey's *Nightmare of Ecstasy: The Life and Art of Edward D. Wood Jr*. It's a remarkable biography, being entirely made up of reminiscences by people who knew Wood, and with no authorial intervention or commentary (apart from a short Introduction). The reminiscences are presented in the style of a book-length conversation — with each quote preceded by the interviewee's name — and the patchwork structure seems to mimic the disjointedness of Wood's films, which were full of individual scenes that had seemingly little to do with one another.

Reading the very first page, you dive headlong into Wood's life and career: you're exposed to a flurry of opinions by various people, some of whose identities are not obvious (an index at the end explains who all the interviewees are). But the chatty tone turns out to be very appropriate for this material. Consider this deadpan, hillbilly quote from Wood's mother: "Junior was born October 10, 1924, at 115 Franklin Street, off the main highway. Yep." (I love the scrupulous inclusion of that "Yep" at the end.)

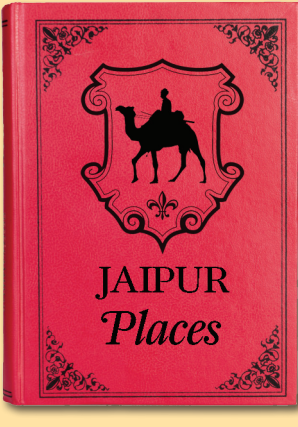
Wood spent most of his life and career off the main highway too. A man of many fetishes — cinema and angora sweaters being just two of the major ones — he thought up outlandish scenarios involving zombies, alien invaders and cross-dressers (in his universe, they might all be in the same living room or cemetery together!) and wrote laughably trite scripts for them. He shot on minuscule budgets, with discarded props and stock footage; little wonder that this book contains several matter-of-fact utterances like "The octopus had to be covered so that the broken tentacle wouldn't show."

The stories and perspectives vary wildly ("Ed Wood was a crazy genius, way ahead of his time," says one interviewee. "Ed had poor taste and was undisciplined," says another) and this gives the book the feel of a fascinating jigsaw puzzle that can never be completed. In his introduction, Grey writes: "Conflicting versions of biographical incident are often charged with meaning and moment. Discovering the objective 'truth' of an individual's life may be impossible beyond a schematising of life events." I think Wood would have smiled approvingly at these words — not least because they might easily be from the promotional material for one of his favourite movies, Welles' *Citizen Kane*!

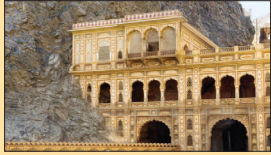
WORDS OF WIT

According to New York publishers, Bill Clinton will get more money for his book than Hillary Clinton got for hers. Well, duh. At least his book has some sex in it.

JAY LENO



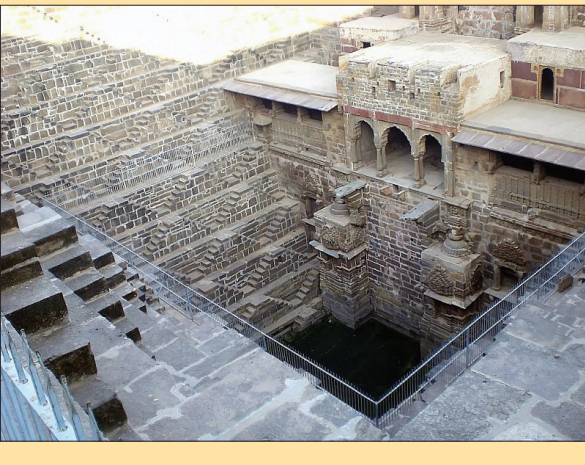
Galta Gorge



Situated about 10 km from Jaipur, Galta is a beautiful modest gorge with dozens of natural pools. These pools are believed to be holy and are surrounded by a number of temples. Its famous Sun temple is visible from every part of the city.


Chand Baori

Situated in Abhaneri, Chand Baori is one of the deepest step wells in India. This colossal structure is 100 ft. deep and comprises 13 stories and 3,500 narrow steps.



Anokhi Museum of Hand Printin

Housed in a 400-year old haveli in Amber Fort, this unique textile museum is dedicated to the ancient craft of hand-block printing.



Mirza Ismail Road

This bustling road is the business centre of Jaipur where you can spot several landmarks such as Sanganeri Gate, Raj Mandir Cinema and Grand Post Office. Famous for its eating plazas, the road is a chaat-lover's paradise.



Alice Garg National Seashells Museum

India's only museum of seashells has a collection of around 3,000 seashells. Rare shells are displayed here, along with beautiful pieces of shell craft.



Bapu Bazaar

Cheap and resourceful, this bazaar offers shoppers great bargains in traditional Rajasthani products ranging from famous mojari chappals, choorans, textiles, perfumes, handicrafts, and sandstone and marble products.

