AGHA SHAHID ALI, 1949-2001
A Life in Poetry: an Appreciation

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"And This the Closest I'll Ever Be To Home"

In the ways of primitive worship, when trees or rocks or springs speak, they become gods. The listener may be present by chance or by tradition, but if in the hearing there is connection, the one who hears feels guided and grateful. I have been this kind of a primitive in my response to Agha Shahid Ali's poetry. I feel an affinity to his spirit which brings me both consolation and pleasure. With this paper, I will share the delight of his writing—the beauty and the brilliance—and point to his conditions of exile, something common to many, many people. His voice inspires and informs. And his vigorous writing gives permission for a new poet to explore and to experiment.

My introduction to Agha Shahid Ali came when I first read "The Dacca Gauzes." This poem spoke to me with the precision and beauty of a most delicately crafted and perfectly struck bell. As one of the narratives recalling family legend in *The Half-Inch Himalayas*, the poem begins with exquisite description: "Those transparent Dacca gauzes / known as woven air, running / water, evening dew." The poet then tells what the gauze has meant to his family:

"No one
now knows," my grandmother says,
what it was to wear
or touch that cloth." She wore
it once, an heirloom sari from
her mother's dowry, proved
genuine when it was pulled, all
six yards, through a ring.
Years later when it tore,  
many handkerchiefs embroidered  
with gold-thread paisleys  
were distributed among  
the nieces and daughters-in-law.  
Those, too, now lost. (5-18)

These delicate fragments and the loss of them become metaphor for the greater tragedy that affects the Indian and Kashmiri cultures:

In history we learned: the hands  
of weavers were amputated,  
the looms of Bengal silenced,

and the cotton shipped raw  
by the British to England." (19-23)

The British muslins "seem so coarse," the grandmother says. Yet, there is a chance, however fleeting, to feel the Dacca gauzes again. Willingness to remember and to reclaim comes in the voice of the grandmother:

in autumn, should one wake up  
at dawn to pray, can one  
feel that same texture again.

One morning she says the air  
was dew-starched; she pulled  
it absently through her ring. (28-33)

In this poem, as throughout his work, Ali spares neither harsh detail, nor grief; but what he loses in the material world he reclaims in the realm of poetry and song.

Ali's most masterful interweaving of family loss and cultural loss comes with the later book, *Rooms Are Never Finished*, a complex story of the poet's mother's death and the trip to take her body from Amherst, Massachusetts, to Kashmir for burial. These poems occupied me for months as I was grieving the personal tragedies of my son's and my eldest brother's deaths. I found that by following Ali's demand for the formalities of
the traditional ghazal, I could address my own grief. I saw how the ghazal links poets and listeners through time and tradition, and so, for me, my own mourning gave up its isolating impact for a more universal sense of grief. My personal connection to this poet, then, comes with my appreciation for his example and guidance on how to bring the personal to the universal, and in that process to allow for transformation.

Agha Shahid Ali’s earlier poems are not the complex paisleys of his later ones, but the design is there and also the weave of repetitions and themes from poem to poem and collection to collection. Published in 1987, *The Half-Inch Himalayas*, begins with "Postcard from Kashmir." This poem shrinks Kashmir into "a neat four by six inches" (2) and is, the poet says, "the closest / I'll ever be to home" (5-6). With an extended metaphor of photographic process, he declares what this writing will be:

My love
so overexposed.

And my memory will be a little
out of focus, in it
a giant negative, black
and white, still undeveloped. (9-14)

It is as if he knows he has a vast landscape of emotion, personal story and history that he will address in time, but that he must reduce his Himalayas to a size he can hold so that he can dare to begin.

Poems in this collection are usually one page in length. Longer ones have short stanzas or are in sections. One can take hold of them readily. And, if one dare assume that these poems reflect his "real" life, they serve as introduction. He jostles perceptions of time in "A Lost Memory of Delhi." Here he imagines his parents on the night of his
conception and plays with time present. His father, he says, is younger than he is now while writing:

My mother is a recent bride
her sari a blaze of brocade
Silverdust parts her hair

She doesn't see me
The bells of her anklets are distant
like the sound of china from

teashops being lit up with lanterns
and the stars are coming out
ringing with tongues of glass

They go into the house
always faded with photographs
in the family album

but lit up now
with the oil lamp
I saw broken in the attic (10-24)

In "A Dream of Glass Bangles," Ali continues the narrative about his parents using, again, short lines and no punctuation:

On my mother's arms were bangles
like waves of frozen rivers
and at night

after prayers
as she went down to her room
I heard the faint sound of ice

breaking on the staircase
breaking years later
into winter

our house surrounded by men
pulling icicles for torches
off the roof

rubbing them on the walls
till the cement's darkening red
set the tips of water on fire

the air a quicksand of snow
as my father stepped out
and my mother

inside the burning house
a widow smashing the rivers
on her arms (4-24)

The startling opposites within these images, "icicles for torches" and "the air a quicksand of snow," burst across the mind, clearing space for emotions that build to "a widow smashing the rivers / on her arms."

In "Snowmen," the poet describes burdens that come by way of his ancestors:

My ancestor, a man
of Himalayan snow,
came to Kashmir from Samarkland,
carrying a bag / of whale bones:
heirlooms from sea funerals . . . (1-6)

This heirloom,
his skeleton under my skin, passed
from son to grandson
generations of snowmen on my back.
They tap every year on my window . . . (14-17)

I've promised myself,
even if I'm the last snowman,
that I'll ride into spring
on their melting shoulders. (21-24)

"Cracked Portraits" breaks into five parts to present the poet's Muslim paternal lineage. The great-great grandfather is "a strange physician in embroidered clothes" (2-3) and the great-grandfather "a shahib in breeches" (11). Of the grandfather, Ali says, "In a dim-lit shop he smoked hashish, / reciting verses of Sufi mystics / My father went to bring him home" (24-26). This line prepares us for the next poem, "Story of a Silence,"
which dispels romantic notions about the hashish-smoking tradition with this reference to his grandfather:

his house

taken away,
my grandmother worked hard, harder
than a man

to earn
her salary from the government and
deserve

her heirloom
of prayer from God. When he slept,
she leafed

through
his dreams: she wasn't in any
of them (6-18)

This paternal grandmother was one of the first educated women in Kashmir with several academic degrees. She became Inspector of Women's Schools, and she could quote poetry in four languages: English, Urdu, Farsi and Kashmiri (Ghosh "Ghat" 8).

Poems in The Half-Inch Himalayas give me an entirely fresh view of Muslim culture. In "Prayer Rug," women's foreheads—not men's—are "touching Abraham's / silk stone of sacrifice" (26-27). And the poet's grandmother is

also a pilgrim
in Mecca she weeps

as the stone is unveiled
she weeps holding on
to the pillars (32-36)
Views into the Kashmiri culture also surprise and delight. The Kashmiri reverence for poetry comes to life in "A Butcher" as the shop owner near a mosque in Delhi wraps meat:

- the ink of news
- stains his knuckles
- the script is wet
- in his palms: Urdu
- bloody at his fingertips,
- is still fine on his lips,
- the language polished smooth
- by knives (5-12)

The poet and the butcher each take a turn completing couplets the other quotes from ghazals by Urdu poets Ghalib and Mir (16-19).

In his memorial tribute to Ali, Amitov Ghosh describes a similar but even more dramatic scene in a New York City hospital where Ali has just had another in a series of unsuccessful operations for the brain tumor from which he later died. On leaving the hospital, Ali has refused a wheelchair and then stumbles. His companions hold him upright and call for an orderly. Here is what follows:

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 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 is 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 . . ." (Ghosh "Ghat" 3)

In this collection, Ali acknowledges his gratitude to Faiz Ahmed Faiz, whose poems he will later translate and publish, and to Begum Akhtar, a famous singer of ghazals, whom he has known since he was a teenager. In the poem, "In Memory of Begum Akhtar," he points to her influence:

Ghazal, that death-sustaining widow, sobs in dingy archives, hooked to you. She wears her grief, a moon-soaked white, corners the sky into disbelief.

You've finally polished catastrophe, the note you seasoned with decades of Ghalib, Mir, Faiz:

I innovate on a noteless raga. (11-18)

According to Amitav Ghosh, "Of the many 'good things' in which he [Ali] took pleasure, none was dearer to him than the music of Begum Akhtar." She was, he writes, "an abiding presence and influence in his life" (Ghosh "Ghat" 5).

Ali's stance as witness comes to light in The Half-Inch Himalayas. Ali did not consider himself a political poet (Ghosh "Ghat" 1), but his poetry recognizes suffering and injustice. In "A Wrong Turn" he writes:

In my dream I'm always in a massacred town, its name erased from maps,
no road signs to it.  
Only a wrong turn brings me here

where only the noon sun lives.  
I'm alone, walking among the atrocities,  
guillotined blood-scorched,  
gods stabbed at their altars . . . .(1-9)

Beyond dream, in the poem, "The Previous Occupant," the speaker imagines an identity and desperate circumstance for the man who just vacated the apartment he is to occupy. He finds a half-torn horoscope and uses it to establish the previous occupant as a traveler, someone from Chile, "blinded in some prison" (21). The poet realizes he cannot clean or clear the apartment of this man: "no spray will get inside the mirror / from where his brown eyes, / brown, yes, brown / stare . . . " (24-27).

This intensity of connection with the "other" carries through the final section of *The Half-Inch Himalayas*. In "Survivor" the speaker hears about a mountain climber's death and then becomes that dead man: "he sits at the table / practices my signature . . ." (12-13). In the poem "In the Mountains," this "other" becomes an aspect of the poet's life and "descends into wet saffron fields / where I wait to hold him . . ." (8-9). The poet also becomes one with the natural elements in the closing poem, "Houses," which refers to a letter he received:

"My father is dead," Vidur writes,  
and a house in my neighborhood, next to my parents', has burned down.

I keep reading the letter.  
If I wake up,  
my body will be water, reflecting the fire. (16-21)

~
"In Search of Evanescence"

Agha Shahid Ali first came to America when he was twelve years old. His father had enrolled at Ball State Teachers College in Muncie, Indiana, to pursue a PhD in Comparative Education. Three years later the family returned to Srinagar. In Srinigar Ali attended an elite Irish Catholic school (Benevenuto 2). He earned a Masters Degree in English from the University of Delhi, returned to the U.S. in 1976, earned a PhD at Penn State University, earned a Masters of Fine Arts in Creative Writing at the University of Arizona, and then began a teaching career at Hamilton College in upstate New York. He later taught at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, the University of Utah in Salt Lake City, with guest positions that included the Warren Wilson Masters Program in Creative Writing and New York University. His first books were published in Calcutta by the Writers Workshop: Bone Sculpture, in 1972, and In Memory of Begum Akhtar and Other Poems, in 1979. His PhD thesis, T.S. Eliot as Editor, was published in 1989.

Ali's writing reflects an open engagement with American culture; as an adult, he moved with ease between the United States, Kashmir and India. Writing about an interview she had with Ali in his home in Massachusetts in the late 1990's, Christine Benvenuto comments that although much of Ali's writing concerns displacement, longing and loss, in conversation he was "a self-described happy man who expressed impatience with the notion of exile in the lilting Anglo-Indian accent he said Americans love" (Benvenuto 1). He said:

You constantly meet people who are immigrants and who say, oh, I feel like I've lost my culture and I've lost my roots, and I say, please don't feel so fussy about it. The airplanes work. I mean, if you have a certain kind of income, whether you
live in Bombay and fly to Kashmir, or you live in New York and fly to Kashmir, for a certain group it really makes no difference (Benvenuto 2).

"For Ali," Benvenuto continues, "membership in the group for whom airplanes work was a given. He was born in New Delhi in 1949 and grew up in the legendary Vale of Kashmir, in a culturally sophisticated, socially enlightened upper-class Muslim home" (Benvenuto 2). Ali elaborates:

There were three languages, Urdu, Kashmiri and English, spoken at home all the time, and poetry recited in these languages, and poets and musicians visiting and I would say it was culturally a very rich atmosphere. There was never a hint of any kind of parochialism in the home (Benvenuto 2).

Amitav Ghosh quotes Ali as saying, "I always move in my heart between sad countries" (Ghosh "Ghat" 9). In a final interview with Ali, the writer Eric Gamalinda asks him if he would have been a lot different had he stayed in Kashmir. Ali replies, "I do believe environment influences you. I could have been as good a poet or as bad a poet or whatever. But I think it would have been different, because I am motivated by forces in this country: the literary work, what I read, the school I go to, my friends, lovers, all of that" (Gamalinda 48).

_A Walk Through the Yellow Pages_ is Ali's one all-American book. Published in 1987 by a small Arizona press, this chapbook has a glossy, yellow-gold cover, hand-drawn illustrations of telephones, yellow-gold titles for each poem and a mischievous, almost sardonic humor. His "Bell Telephone Hours" breaks into five parts, each headed with a play on words lifted from Bell Telephone advertisements, such as "Has anyone heard from you lately?" These poems describe frustrated communication, especially with
the dead. Humor shields what in other books Ali expresses as longing. In the fifth poem of the cycle, the speaker calls Information to ask, "Tell me, / when is Doomsday?" (13-14). The Angel of Death picks up the phone and answers, "God is busy. / He never answers the living. / He has no answers for the dead . . ." (15-17).

Three of the eight poems in this chapbook give clever interpretations to the Grimms' fairy tales about Red Riding Hood and Hansel and Gretel. In "An Interview with Red Riding Hood, Now No Longer Little" he writes that after the wolf has been killed, the father becomes a self-made man and cuts down the whole forest; the remaining wolves escape into the mountains "like guerillas;" and the grandmother is put in a home. The interviewer asks Red Riding Hood, "Do you have any regrets?" She answers, "Yes. / I lied when I said it was dark. / Now I drive through the city, hearing wolves at every turn. / How warm it was inside the wolf" (28-32).

*A Nostalgist's Map of America*, published in 1991, carries on the poetic spirit of *The Half-Inch Himalayas*. Ali wrote these poems in the years he began a friendship with the poet, James Merrill. In an audio clip from an Amherst College tribute to James Merrill, Ali describes his determination to meet Merrill when they were both in Arizona. He also gives a glimpse of Merrill in close friendship. Ali established himself in Merrill's favor by way of his gourmet cooking ("James Merrill: A Celebration"). He would send his poems to Merrill to critique and over the years dedicated poems to him. In turn, Merrill wrote this blurb for *A Nostalgist's Map of America*:

There are Moghul palace ceilings whose countless mirrored convexities at once reduce, multiply, scatter and enchant the figures under their spell. If I may speak for 'America,' it is a privilege to be held in so mercurial, many-faceted a gaze aa
this poet's, who goes to the heart of my troubles and turns them into bitter honey.

(Cover page)

The sensitivity and imaginative richness of these poems draw me to them. The second and central portion of the collection refers to the years at Penn State that his friend, Amitav Ghosh, says Ali "remembered with unmitigated pleasure." He says that Ali told him, "'I grew as a reader, I grew as a poet, I grew as a lover.'" Ghosh continues, "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" (Ghosh "Ghat" 9).

Emily Dickinson's "A Route of Evanescence" serves as epigraph for this section (Dickinson 619). The book's title poem reworks Dickinson's language, images, ideas and dashes, creating the narrative of a friendship recalling a shared drive through central Pennsylvania to Philadelphia. The speaker remembers that he had invented a hometown for his companion, naming it Evanescence, and thus putting it on the map of his America. He brings current phone conversations into the poem, because contacts between the two had been lost for a period of years and were now renewing. In the title poem, the friend has news to share: "Shahid, I'm dying" (38). A cycle of eleven poems follows under the title, "In Search of Evanescence." All of them concern the relationship with this friend. Images of light and water shimmer throughout, and in the first poem:

mirrors left lying on coffee tables
tore the glare from the windows
and glued vanishing rainbows
to the walls the ceilings (9-12)

The Dickinson images, language and style from the title poem of this cycle also reappear; and images from the desert of the southwestern U.S. and Georgia O'Keefe come into the shimmer as well. This cycle exemplifies Ali's work with repetition and
echo in language and image, how he keeps his poems fresh, intensifying the emotional impact. The ninth poem in the cycle moves with the pacing of slow train wheels. The couplets usually have twenty-four syllables, and they have the Dickinson dashes to keep a rhythm:

The way she had— in her rushes— of resonance—
I too— so want to eat— Evanescence— slowly—
in the near— faraways— of the heart. Like O'Keefe
also— in her Faraway Nearby— that painting . . . . (1-4)

The poet says to his dying friend, "I've bought tickets for us to Evanescence, Phil,/ and you will be with me as we pass the ghost towns . . . " (14-15). The train continues through the desert; the poet speaks again:

"Let his voice not change!" I'd almost prayed.
You fall silent as I give our tickets to Fog.

When he leaves, we see Light Coming on the Plains,
the last painting we own. As it too vanishes,

you say, "You're wrong. It isn't that my voice has changed.
It's just that you've never before heard it in pain." (36-41)

Elaborating on the theme of desert, Ali creates a thirteen-part cycle with the poem, "From Another Desert," which is his version of the Urdu and Perian love story of Qais and Laila. Qais is often called Majnoon, meaning "possessed" and "mad." In the traditional story, Laila's father is intent on keeping Laila and Majnoon apart at all costs. Laila eventually dies of longing for Majnoon, while he wanders in tragic search for his lost love. In the eighth poem in the cycle, "Majnoon was again sighted / in the streets,
intoxicated // as before, surpassing the rapture / of every made lover" (1-4). In the eleventh poem:

The prisoners know they've been
eclipsed, that someone
greater than them is now
among them. For though they know
the rattle of bound ankles,
they've never heard

such sorrow before,
this pounding, this beating down the floor (1-8)

In footnotes for this eleventh poem, Ali explains that this legend "has acquired a
political dimension, in that Majnoon can represent the rebel, the revolutionary who is a
model of commitment," and that "Laila thus becomes the revolutionary ideal, the goal the
Lover/Revolutionary aspires to reach" (65). This theme foreshadows the political/social
tragedies that inspire his later writing about Kashmir. However, it is not just tragedy of
the subcontinent that moves Ali. Poems also acknowledge the tragedies of loss among the
indigenous people of the Southwest and of striking laborers from the Bisbee, Arizona,
copper mines and their survivors.

The book concludes with "Snow in the Desert," a poem that takes place while Ali
is driving his sister to the Tucson airport. Again, he considers the layers of time:

"Imagine where we are was a sea once.
Just imagine!" The sky is relentlessly
sapphire, and the past is happening quickly:
the saguaros have opened themselves, stretched
out their arms to rays millions of years old,
in each ray a secret of the planet's
origin . . . . (26-31)

Later, while driving back home from the airport into the darkness of desert night,
he recalls a night in New Delhi when Begum Akhtar sang and the lights went out. Begum
Akhtar continued to sing, he writes, her voice "was coming from far / away, as if she had already died" (68-69). That night was, he says,

like this turning dark

of fog, a moment when only a lost sea
can be heard, a time

to recollect
every shadow, everything the earth was losing,
a time to think of everything the earth
and I had lost, of all

that I would lose,
of all that I was losing. (71-81)

This ending signals the beginning of what will become his most complex writing about Kashmir and what proved to be devastating personal loss.

A Nostalgist's Map of America appears in a bibliography on South Asian gay and lesbian concerns posted on the Internet by Columbia University Libraries ("Bibliography of Materials"). Ali, however, did not want to be marginalized as a gay poet, nor did he want any other categorization. In an interview he gave just before he died, he said:

Elizabeth Bishop refused to be part of any women's anthology. And I sympathize with that very strongly. One wants the work to be the primary thing. One wants that to be recognized, appreciated, or even disliked, but as work, not because you are from a particular background or ethnicity or sexual orientation or whatever. That I think, is in the ultimate sense a disservice to the poetry.

(Gamalinda 48)

But cultural values or obsessions can also do a disservice to the poet and as a result to poetry. As a homosexual male in Muslim Kashmir Ali would have found serious constrictions on his life. An internet site (www.religioustolerance.org) posts a disturbing
number of negative comments about homosexuality by Muslim groups and individuals who base their beliefs on quotes from the Quran. A briefing on Islam and homosexuality by the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association quotes the Muslim Hadith:

"Kill the one who sodomises and the one who lets it be done to him." Tirmidhi

"Lesbianism by women is adultery between them." Tabarani.

(Consider that death is the penalty for adultery.)

"If a man who is not married is seized committing sodomy, he will be stoned to death." Sunan Abu Dawud, 38:4448  ("GALHA Briefing")

This same site acknowledges that there are times and places within Muslim cultures where homosexuality was tolerated, but the writers note that "whenever and wherever the religion has been taken seriously by the authorities, and its laws enforced, the results for sexual minorities have been dire."

Hindu attitudes toward homosexuality have by tradition been more open. Ali must have been exposed to them by proximity to the Hindu culture, by his reading and perhaps from his parents' universality. In his interview with Christine Benvenuto, he says:

When I was a kid, I remember telling my parents that I wanted to build a little Hindu temple in my room, and they said sure. And then once I said I wanted a Catholic chapel with pictures of Jesus, and they said sure, they brought me statues of Jesus, they brought me statues of Krishna, they said go ahead, build your temple. It was a wonderful atmosphere full of possibilities of self-expression.

(Benvenuto 2)

As explained by the writer, Amara Das Wilhelm, the Vedic texts:
. . . divide the sex or gender of the human being into three separate categories according to prakriti or nature. These are: pums-prakriti or male, stri-prakriti or female, and tritya-prakriti or the third sex. These three genders are not determined by physical characteristics alone but rather by an assessment of the entire being that includes the gross (physical) body, the subtle (psychological) body, and a unique consideration base upon social interaction (procreative status). (Wilhelm 1)

Each individual, Wilhelm writes, "was seen as an integral part of a greater whole. Thus all classes of men were accommodated and engaged according to their nature." This included same sex marriage for gays and lesbians. And "transvestites were invited to attend all birth, marriage, and religious ceremonies as their presence was a symbol of good luck and considered to be auspicious" (Wilhelm 3). Wilhelm says that under the Vedic system "third-gender youths could find their place within society according to their nature and thus grow healthfully into adulthood. In modern society, however, people are afraid to even discuss third-sex issues" (Wilhelm 13).

In the Gamalinda interview, Ali deflects the question about whether he came out as a homosexual while at Penn State University and responds, "I don't want to go too much into that. But I'd say I realized myself before I came to America. But I realized the fullness of my being, I would say, here" (Gamalinda 48).

Yes, with the relative openness in the United States, despite continued homophobia, one can see that Ali would find his "fullness" here. Poems addressed to Philip Paul Orlando in A Nostalgist's Map of America speak for Ali’s passionate engagement. His may not have wanted to dwell on his homosexuality as a poet, but one
must consider it as another factor in his ability to embrace American life. Even though he made frequent trips to Kashmir and India, he was indeed in exile, as someone whose culture was disappearing because of wars in his home country; and, on some deep level, he must also have understood that as a homosexual he could find safe haven within this exile in America. Also, the magic in his writing, the willingness to engage deeply with emotion in his writing—these characteristics resonate with the Vedic understanding and respect given to members of the third sex who carry within them knowledge of male and female being.

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"Beyond English"

No language is old—or young—beyond English.
So what of a common tongue beyond English?

A child learns to speak by imitation and seemingly careless participation in making sounds. I have heard Muslims say that sound is the way into the Quran, that reciting becomes the mystical experience. Could this be what Agha Shahid Ali means by "beyond English"—the refrain he uses with a ghazal in Call Me Ishmael Tonight? The editors of this posthumous collection of Ali's ghazals, Agha Iqbal Ali and Hena Zafar Ahmad, write, "Shahid worked assiduously to establish a place in American literature for the formal discipline of the ghazal. He often used the phrase, 'the ghazal in America' in conversation . . ." (18). But only recently, a fine poet and editor told me he does not think the ghazal can be written well in English, that the form forces rhyming and, for him, this is unpleasant and awkward. Contemporary American writers have become shy of rhyme;
most use it on the sly. Yet the beauty of language, the repetition and the expectation of repetition can set poet and listeners down in new territory.

Ali describes the effect of the ghazal's repetitions on listeners in an essay about the ghazal in the anthology, *Ravishing Disunities*:

At a *mushara* – the traditional poetry gathering to which sometimes thousands of people come to hear the most cherished poets of the country—when the poet recites the first line of a couplet, the audience recites it back to him, and then the poet repeats it, and the audience again follows suit. The back and forth creates an immensely seductive tension because everyone is waiting to see how the suspense will be resolved in terms of the scheme established in the opening couplet; that is, the first line of every succeeding couplet sets the reader (or listener) up so that the second line amplifies, surprises, explodes. (8)

Ali does not clarify whether these particular gatherings are in Arabic, Urdu or English. But one can trust he would mean that such a gathering *could* happen with English speakers, because he, himself, wrote only in English.

Ali writes about his relationship with language in the introduction to his translation of poems by Faiz Ahmed Faiz, *The Rebel Silhouette*. He describes an incident with his grandmother, during a visit to Srinagar the summer of 1989, when his mother helped him translate Faiz. His grandmother, then eighty-eight, "quite by chance quoted Milton during a conversation" (xi):

Ever since I can remember, she quoted Shakespeare, Keats, and Hardy in English; Hafiz and Rumi in Persian; Ghalib and Faiz in Urdu; Habba Khatun, Mahjoor, and Zinda Kaul in Kashmiri. But I'd never heard her quote Milton. I was ecstatic:
once again I didn't need proof of my rights to the English canon . . . .

Significantly, not only was my training in school in English (I mean that I grew up with English as my first language) but, paradoxically my first language was/is not my mother tongue, which is Urdu. (I realize that in common parlance and linguistics there is no distinction between "first language" and "mother tongue."

But in my case, I grew up breathing Urdu in such a way that it is entitled to being called, at a culturally emotional level, my mother tongue, even though I used and use English for all practical and creative purposes; that is why I call English my first language). (xi)

Learning to leap across language and culture may also have given him his facility with disunities. He says that in the first edition of *The Rebel's Silhouette* he had described the difficulty he had as a young writer with his "simultaneous love of Urdu and of English" (xii). In that earlier edition, he says, he wrote that he wanted to qualify an assertion he had made at twenty in a poem:

> they call this [English] my alien language

> i am a dealer in words
>   that mix cultures
>   and leave me rootless . . . .

Rootless? Certainly not. I was merely subscribing to an inherent, dominative mode that insisted one should not write in English, because it was not an Indian language. But in those lines I had implicitly begun to protest this notion of English as alien, questioning the "they" who "call this my alien language."

Perhaps I was subconsciously aware that subcontinental English needed renewal and reworking, *translation* even, before I and other poets could use
it to meet the demands of a "hybrid" cultural situation. But it was mine, ours. (xii)

In 1996, wanting to entice American poets to try the ghazal's possibilities, Ali put out a call for writers to submit ghazals according to the traditional form. Published as *Ravishing Disunities* in 2000, the anthology includes ghazals by more than one hundred poets, including W.S. Merwin, Eleanor Wilner, Heather McHugh, Paul Muldoon, Forrest Gander, John Hollander and RWW's own Sharon Bryan. In the introduction, Ali gives a brief overview about the ghazal, which he says "goes back to seventh-century Arabia, perhaps even earlier . . . ." He explains:

Its [sic] descendants are found not only in Arabic but in—the following come spontaneously to mind: Farsi, German, Hebrew, Hindi, Pashto, Spanish, Turkish, Urdu—and English. The model most in use is the Persian (Farsi) of which Hafiz (1325-1389)—that makes him a contemporary of Chaucer's—is the acknowledged master, his tomb in Shiraz a place of pilgrimage; Ghalib (1797-1869) is the acknowledged master of that model in Urdu—the only language I know whose mere mention evokes poetry. Lorca also wrote ghazals—gacelas—taking his cue from the Arabic form and thus citing in his catholic (that is, universal) way the history of Muslim Andalusia. And, as Raymond Scheindlin has written, "The typical Hebrew love poem belongs to a genre known in the Arabic literary tradition as ghazal," which "flourished primarily in Andalusia from the 11th to the 13th centuries"—that is, in Muslim Spain. (1-2)

Ali also gives the formal rules for the ghazal and discusses one of its most complex aspects, the disunities. A ghazal may or may not have one theme. Traditionally
the ghazal has been without theme, and an emotional or mystical thread strings the
couplets. In the 1970's American poets, Jim Harrison and Adrienne Rich among many,
grasped this idea of disunity and called their poems ghazals. But they were free verse
poems. Ali writes that a "free verse ghazal is a contradiction in terms" (2). On the other
hand, many of the contributors to *Ravishing Disunities* kept to the ghazal's formalities but
were not fully able to embrace the disunities. The ghazal is made up of couplets:

each autonomous, thematically and emotionally complete in itself: One couplet
may be comic, another tragic, another romantic, another religious, another
political. (There is, underlying a ghazal, a profound and complex cultural unity,
built on association and memory and expectation, as well as an implicit
recognition of the human personality and its infinite variety.) (2)

Jane Reichhold, in an excellent discussion about disunity and learning to write in
new territory, suggests that learning the various techniques and methods of "renge"
linking is invaluable for ghazal writing ("Ghazal Gathering"). And Ali contributes these
ideas about cultural tone:

Perhaps one way to welcome the shackles of the form and be in emotional tune
with them is to remember one definition of the word *ghazal*: It is the cry of the
gazelle when it is cornered in a hunt and knows it will die. Thus, to quote Ahmed
Ali, the "atmosphere of sadness and grief that pervades the ghazal . . . reflects its
origin in this" and in the form's "dedication to love and the beloved. At the same
time, the form permits, in the best Persian and Urdu practice, delineation of all
human activity and affairs from the trivial to the most serious." (*Ravishing* 3)
If the July/August 2007 issue of *Poetry* is any indication, Ali's teaching has not been lost. Patricia Smith contributes a marvelous poem that swings as freely as the hips she celebrates and yet plays with many of the requirements of the traditional ghazal. The exceptions can still bring discussion, but the spirit, sass and delight are so in keeping with Ali's ghazals, that I can't imagine his doing anything but what the poem invites. Smith's poem works well as an example to show what Ali has taught about the form.

Ghazals are not usually named except for convenience. Because the poems in *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* are all ghazals, the editors choose the end word of each couplet to identify the poem. In *Ravishing Disunities*, Ali allows identifying titles. For his own work, Ali simply uses "Ghazal." With Smith's poem, one can only acquiesce to her titling it "Hip-Hop Ghazal."

Gotta love us brown girls, munching on fat, swinging blue hips, decked out in shells and splashes, Lawdie, bringing them woo hips.

As the jukebox teases, watch my sistas throat the heartbreak, inhaling bassline, cracking backbone and singing thru hips.

Like something boneless, we glide silent, seeping 'tween floorboards, wrapping around the hims, and ooh wee, clinging like glue hips.

Engines grinding, rotating, smokin', gotta pull back some. Natural minds are lost at the mere sight of ringing true hips.

Gotta love us girls, just struttin' down Manhattan streets killing the menfolk with a dose of that stinging view. Hips.

Crying 'bout getting old – Patricia, you need to get up off what God gave you. Say a prayer and start slinging. Cue hips. (*Poetry* 254)

Smith establishes the rhyme scheme in the first two lines of the first couplet, which is called the "matla" in Arabic. Within this first couplet, the last word of each line is the same: hips. The mono-rhyme "hips" is called the "quafia." And the rhyming words,
"blue" and "woo" are the refrain called the "radif." Once that rhyming refrain has been set, it comes into play only for the last line of each succeeding couplet. The "sistas" are "singing thru hips." They are "wrapping around the hims, and ooh wee, clinging like glue hips." They produce the mind-blowing "sight of ringing true hips." And they are "killing the menfolk with a dose of that stinging view. Hips." Smith's play with English proves supple within the formalities of "matla," "quafia" and "radif" and still meets our cherished American standard of "cool."

One given meaning for the word ghazal is "talking to women." In Arab tradition men used ghazals to talk and sing about wine and love. That Patricia Smith, an accomplished performance poet, claims the ghazal to talk with, for and about women, is just delightful. The ghazal, too, is often described in feminine terms, analogized to a necklace of pearls or jewels. In Call Me Ishmael Tonight, the editors call Ali's couplets "gems that can be plucked" (Foreword). With Smith's couplets one sees a long necklace swinging in counter rhythm to breasts and hips.

But Smith uses enjambment and thus dances from the traditional form. In "Basic Points about the Ghazal" in Ravishing Disunities, Ali admonishes, "ABSOLUTELY no enjambments between couplets—each couplet must be like a precious stone that can shine even when plucked from the necklace though it certainly has greater luster in its setting" (183). Smith's enjambments are not from couplet to couplet, but within them. Traditionally, each couplet is a poem in itself, and each line of the couplet is also a complete poem. Ali says, "There [sic] must be a turn, a volta when one moves from line 1 to line 2 of a couplet. Thus, certain kinds of enjambments would not work even WITHIN the couplets, the kind that would lead to a caesura in line 2. One must have a sense that
line 2 is amplifying line 1, turning things around, surprising us" (183). Smith achieves this just once—in the fifth couplet with "Engines grinding, rotating, smokin', gotta pull back some. / Natural minds are lost at the mere sight of ringing true hips."

According to Ali, "Each line must be of the same length (inclusive of the rhyme and refrain). In Urdu and Persian, all the lines are usually in the same meter and have the same metrical length. So establish some system—metrical or syllabic—for maintaining consistency in line lengths" (183). Smith uses fourteen syllables for each line—mostly. In the fourth couplet one line has fourteen syllables, the second has fifteen. That overage is adjusted in the next couplet when the next line has only thirteen syllables. In the last couplet she adjusts with fifteen syllables in the first line and thirteen in the second. This poem's got rhythm.

Smith honors another of the ghazal's traditions in the last couplet. Again, to quote Ali, "The last couplet may be (and usually is) a signature couplet in which the poet may invoke his/her name in the first, second, or third person" (183). This last couplet is called a "makhta." The pen name is a "takhallus." Smith not only addresses herself with style, she also pulls the reader into the intimacy with her confessions. On the contrary, in Ravishing Disunities, many of the contributors do not use the "takhallus," and one wonders if self-consciousness keeps them from that bold intimacy.

Amitov Ghosh has written, "If you look at British and American writing today, there's a fear of emotion. With Indian writers, it's just the opposite: there's a wish to connect with people emotionally" ("On Amitov Ghosh"). I think of Virginia Woolf's idea so beautifully spoken in A Room of One's Own, (46-57) that it may take many, many generations of women writing before we will have a female Shakespeare. Perhaps the
The ghazal writing of contemporary western poets will provide a compost of earnestness and willingness to feel foolish, as one does while learning a new language.

Ali translated the poetry of the Urdu poet, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, published as *The Rebel Silhouette* in 1991. The revised edition in 1995 includes a careful discussion of the ghazal, Ali's concerns about translation and language, and an appreciation for Begum Akhtar, who sang Faiz' ghazals. He notes that Faiz' ghazals reflect "the considerable influence of Ghalib, whose great laments reveal a highly personalized grief that historically must be seen in the context of British domination over India and the passing of an age, a way of life, a civilization" (xvii). The same appears true for Ali, that both Ghalib and Faiz serve as permission-givers for his expressions of grief in his writing about Kashmir.

The poems are in handwritten Urdu with the English translation on the facing page. Ali brings more than language translation to this book. As with his teaching about the ghazal, he guides the western reader into the less familiar territory of poetry valued and honored by people in Asia and Africa. Born in undivided Punjab in 1911, Faiz became a political/poetic voice during the turmoil that divided India and Pakistan. He was a socialist, and in the 1950's "spent four years in prison, mostly in solitary confinement under the possibility of a death sentence" (xvi). His poems in *The Rebel's Silhouette* speak mostly from prison and the voice is universal:

Here in this dark where separation is endless,
I see dawn: I take it through the bars
and pour it into the heart, the cup
where I mix yesterday's poison with today's exile.
I drink. (5-9)
In this introduction, Ali writes about "the nuances of images that would seem too lush to an American poet—images that recur shamelessly in Urdu poetry, among them the moon, the rose, the mother, the flame" (xiv). He gives the example of "the Beloved—an archetype in Urdu poetry—that can mean friend, woman, God." Faiz, he writes, "not only tapped into these meanings but extended them so that the Beloved could figure as the revolution. The reader begins to infer, through a highly sensuous language, that waiting for the revolution can be as agonizing and intoxicating as waiting for one's lover" (xiv). This explanation is important for a western reader, because throughout Faiz' poems the words "blood" and "rose" and "Beloved" repeat—one would think—excessively. Yet afterwards, in the backwash of reading, one sees these symbolic words as structural supports in the same way the formalities of the ghazal free the writer. The emotional impact is powerful; and the borders of nation, politics and cultures melt. In the poem, "Let Me Think," Faiz addresses the poet, Andrei Voznesensky, but he could be addressing all who are war-weary as he writes:

I have reached that age  
when one visits the heart merely as a courtesy,  
the way one keeps in touch  
with an old neighbor.  
So don't question me about the heart.  
Just let me think. (31-35)

Ali's ghazals in *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* not only visit the old neighbor heart, but they also give one time to think. He masters disunity, giving great mental and emotional space from couplet to couplet. One would have to know Ali personally, fully and well, and world literature, too, to understand all his allusions and asides. Yet one does not feel left out—quite the contrary. This man who said he could write comfortably with friends around in his living room (Gamalinda 49) invites them and the reader into these poems.
Many of the ghazals include lines from a friend's poems and are in turn dedicated to that person. With "Shines," for example, the opening couplet quotes a line, "you lean over this page, / late and alone, it shines," which comes from Mark Strand's "The Garden." Ali also refers to the first edition of Strand's Darker. In closing, Ali cleverly works with the takhallus: "Mark how Shahid returns your very words to you—It's when the heart, still unbriefed, but briefly lit, shines" (19-20). This poem, a tribute in itself, also entices the reader to search Strand's poetry for more references, subtle and direct.

Other ghazals are written as "after Ghalib," "after Hart Crane," and "after Wislawa Szymborska." A single couplet poem, "Air," sings of Emily Dickinson: "Drink this rain-dark rum of air / column of breath column of air" (1-2).

The editors write that Ali worked on these ghazals as he was being treated for brain cancer (Foreward). He confronts "God" and gods in many forms. He alludes to war in the Persian Gulf. He writes to the natural world of rain and stars, the elements of water and fire. He visits the stories of Abraham, Ishmael and Hagar. He questions mortality, reverently and irreverently. In "My Word," he says, "Yours too, Shahid, will be a radical departure. / You'll go out of yourself and then into my word" (25-26). In "From the Start" he asks, "Will the middle class give up its white devotions? / Feed their infants cayenne and tamarind from the start"(15-16). This poem is dedicated to Hayden Carruth and closes with these questions:

Who but Satan can know God's sorrow in Heaven?
God longs for the lover He undermined from the start.

“But I / am here in this real life / that I was given…."
To what else should we be resigned from the start?

You have dwelt at the root of a scream forever—
The Forever Shahid’s countersigned from the start. (19-24)
A moving ghazal, “By Exiles,” is dedicated to Edward W. Said and opens, “In Jerusalem a dead phone’s dialed by exiles, / You learn your strange fate: you were exiled by exiles.” (1-2) The poet continues:

By the Hudson lies Kashmir, brought from Palestine—
It shawls the piano, Bach beguiled by exiles.

Tell me who’s tonight the Physician of Sick Pearls?
Only you as you sit, Desert Child, by exiles . . . . (9-10)

The ghazal concludes:

If my enemy’s alone and his arms are empty,
give him my heart silk-wrapped like a child by exiles.

Will you, Beloved Stranger, ever witness Shahid—
two destinies at last reconciled by exiles? (21-24)

~

"Mad Heart, Be Brave"

In *The Country Without a Post Office*, published in 1997, Ali gives voice to conditions of loss and exile that affect the people of his native Kashmir. This is a mature book; Ali writes with urgency. Pakistan and India are tearing Kashmir apart, each claiming a right to the territory. Human beings have become objects. In the poem, "After the August Wedding in Lahore, Pakistan," the poet quotes a brigadier as saying, "*The boys of Kashmir / break so quickly, we make their bodies sing, / on the rack, till no song is left to sing*" (55-57).

Ali composes this collection with a variety of forms: prose poems; the letter; a villanelle; a sestina; the ghazal; terza rima; a pastoral; rhyming couplets; and quatrains,
sextets, septets, and octaves—some with regular rhyme schemes and some mixed. His virtuosity unleashes the complexity of story and emotion.

In the prologue, a prose poem inspired by Osip Mandelstam's "We shall meet again, in Petersburg," the poet writes the name Kashmir in all its variations of spelling, as a lover sometimes will write and rewrite the name of the beloved. This collection again highlights Ali's connection with Emily Dickinson, for whom "Cashmere" suggests the romance of what is strange and distant. As epigraph for "Some Vision of the World Cashmere," he quotes her lines, "If I could bribe them by a Rose / I'd bring them every flower that grows / From Amherst to Cashmere." He titles another poem with Dickinson's "Lo, A tint Cashmere! / Lo, A Rose!" Here the poet returns to Kashmir with his grandmother by way of "her dream within a dream within a dream" (12). His grandmother, he writes, is

still somehow holding the world together: she is naming the roses:

*God loves me, no, He's in love with me, He is a jealous God, He can't bear my love for you, and you are my favorite grandchild. My poet grandson, why don't you write of love?* (7-11)

But this book is all about love. In "Return to Harmony 3," the poet tells about his visit to the family compound in Srinagar. He has already established that the military took over the family home in "Some Vision of the World Cashmere." With this return, "A bunker has put the house under a spell. Shadowed eyes watch me open the gate, like a trespasser "(14-15). With the theme of undelivered mail, lost postmen and disappeared post offices that recurs throughout his work, he writes: "In the drawer of the cedar stand peeling in the verandah, a / pile of damp letters—one to my father to attend a meeting the / previous autumn, another an invitation to a wedding" (23-25). He picks up the phone
and it is dead, but thereceiver catches a transmission of a song from a film about war:
"Slowly, I so slowly, kept on walking, / and then was severed forever from her" (36-37).
Reminders of family and connection become painfully vivid: "On my shelf, by Ritsos and
Rilke and Cavafy and Lorca and Iqbal / and Amichai and Paz, my parents are beautiful in
their / wedding brocades, so startlingly young!" (42-44).

Ali dedicates The Country Without a Post Office and the title poem to James
Merrill. The title poem is the heart of the book and registers the poet's despair. "It's
raining as I write this," he reminds the reader in the fourth of four parts (9); and the rains
appear throughout this poem as if they are his own tears. Each of the parts has three
octaves with a rhyme scheme of ABCDDCBA. Because of the engrossing subject and the
emotionality of the imagery, one scarcely notices the composition at first. Yet this very
absorption may be possible because of the poem's orderliness.

In the opening stanza of the title poem, a "someone" (the speaker's phantom self?)
climbs the steps of an entombed minaret "to read messages scratched on planets" (4-5).
His fingerprints "cancel blank stamps / in that archive for letters with doomed / addresses,
each house buried or empty" (6-8). Many occupants have fled, becoming refugees in the
plains where they must "will a final dewfall / to turn the mountains to glass" (11). These
refugees, as the poet has in his life, will have to look back through the glass to see the
people of whom they are a part. Soldiers are burning their known world. Their houses are
"swept about like leaves / for burning" (19-20). The speaker joins the remnant faithful in
hanging wreaths on the doors of empty houses—houses, he says, they have already
buried. The time-sense is surreal (22-24).
In the second poem, a card lies on the street; its inscription speaks for the lost:

"We're inside the fire, looking for the dark." The speaker cries, "Phantom heart, // pray he's alive. I have returned in rain / to find him, to learn why he never wrote."

Communication with this "him," the lost self, goes unanswered, the "new stamps, rare already" have "no nation named on them." Yet this "him" may be alive, the speaker hopes, "opening doors of smoke, / breathing in the dark his ash-refrain: / 'Everything is finished, nothing remains.'" Sound and sight merge, and the speaker must "force silence to be a mirror / to see his voice again for directions." He is living a nightmare. "Fire runs in waves. Should I cross that river?" There is no answer. The narrative fractures. "Each post office is boarded up." He asks, "Who will deliver / parchment cut in paisleys, my news to prisons?" He answers himself, saying, "Only silence can now trace my letters / to him. Or in a dead office the dark panes" (1-24).

In the third poem of the title poem sequence, the dark visions continue. The phantom self cries, "I'm the keeper of the minaret since the muezzin died. Come soon, I'm alive." He cries again, "come before I'm killed, my voice cancelled." One feels that the poet is searching within a deep fear. "In this dark rain," he says, "be faithful, Phantom heart, this is your pain. Feel it. You must feel it." And the speaker says, "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." The poet realizes he must be faithful to the phantom, the "someone" who "climbed these steps / to read messages scratched on planets." He says, "I've found the remains / of his voice, that map of longings with no limit" (1-24). In closing the fourth sequence, the poet cries, "Mad heart, be brave" (24). The struggle within this poem seems to reflect Ali's urgent need to give voice to all he
must say before he dies. That he died within four years of the book's publication brings even more intensity to the poem.

"Longings with no limit" echo throughout the book. With "A Villanelle," Ali mourns the ruining of Chechnya and Armenia, linking their tragedies to those of Kashmir (8-14). In the opening poem of a four-part sequence of quatrains, "The City of Daughters," his awareness reaches back through centuries. He cries, "say farewell, say farewell to the city / (O Sarajevo! O Srinagar!), / the Alexandria that is forever leaving . . ." (11-12). In "First Day of Spring," as with the Shekinah in Hebrew tradition, "The Beloved, dark with excessive bright, withdrew / and the day was not perfect for forgetting God . . ." (5-6).

Agha Shahid Ali died December 8, 2001. His *Rooms Are Never Finished* came to publication shortly thereafter and became a 2001 National Book Award finalist in the United States. The first part this collection concerns his mother's death and the family's return to Srinagar, Kashmir, for her burial. The opening poem, "Lenox Hill," serves as prologue and begins with this epigraph: "(In Lenox Hill Hospital, after surgery, my mother said the sirens sounded like the elephants of Mihirabula when his men drove them off cliffs in the Pir Panjal Range.)" As this canzone unfolds, the words "mother," "Kashmir," "universe," "die" and "elephant" repeat, with the word "elephant" giving a sense of the pounding of elephant feet. His mother's grief over these elephants becomes Ali's grief for her:

I see the blizzard-fall of ghost-elephants.
I hold back—she couldn't bear it—one elephant's story: his return (in a country far from Kashmir)
to the jungle where each year, on the day his mother died, he touches with his trunk the bones of his mother. (44-48)
And then addressing the significance of her death to his own life, he cries:

_The Beloved leaves one behind to die._

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? (62-65)

The Pakistani writer, Muneeza Shamsie, in an appreciative review of *Rooms Are Never Finished*, says that with these poems, Ali "has introduced aspects of the marsiya or elements of shikwa" ("Across the Water"). An informing essay, "Urdu Nohay and Marsiya," describes the marsiya as an Urdu elegy, but not just something of "literary and poetic beauty, but also a medium of religious, cultural, and intellectual expression" ("Urdu Nohay"). According to this essay, the marsiya tradition has pre-Islamic Arab and Persian roots as elegiac expression, which later became a key way to lament the death of Hussain, a grandson of Muhammed, who was killed near Karbala "for refusing to pay allegiance to the Ummayad ruler, Yazid" (1). This lament for Hussain, and the grief of his sister, Zainab, has for Shi'a Muslims a similar depth of meaning that Christians give to the crucifixion of Jesus. In the opening part of the twelve-part cycle poem, "From Amherst to Kashmir," Ali explains: "For just 'as Jesus went to Jerusalem to die on the cross,' Hussain 'went to Karbala to accept the passion that had been meant for him from the beginning of time" (15-17). In this same poem, "Karbala: A History of the 'House of Sorrow,'" he describes a gathering of people specifically to mourn Karbala—a _majlis:_

One _majlis_
stays—Summer 1992—when for two years Death had turned
every day in Kashmir into some family's Karbala. We celebrated
_Ashura_ with relatives, in the afternoon—because of night curfew.
That evening, at home, my mother was suddenly in tears. I was
puzzled, then very moved: Since she was a girl she had felt
Zainab's grief as her own. (71-77)
With this cycle, Ali layers his own and his family's grief and the cultural and national tragedy they face in the early 1990's with the story of Hussain. "Zainab's Lament in Damascus" focuses on her mourning, but the third poem in the cycle, "Summers of Translation" takes on the wider dimension when

PARADISE ON EARTH BECOMES HELL.

The night was broken in two by the Call to Prayer which found nothing to steal but my utter disbelief. In every home, although Muharram was not yet here,

Zainab wailed. Only Karbala could frame our grief:
The wail rose: How could such a night fall on Hussain? Mother, you remembered perfectly that God is a thief. . . . (37-43)

That "God is a thief" brings Ali's point of view close to the "shikwa." "Shikwa" is a Hindi term for complaint or grievance, and an Urdu word, meaning grudge or grouse. It is a form of complaint to Allah for having let down the Muslims throughout the centuries.¹ In another cycle of poems called "A Secular Comedy," Ali addresses more grievances, God's limitations and Satan's devotion. However, this cycle, "From Amherst to Kashmir," is one of reverence; and in "Summers of Translation," the third poem in the cycle, Ali looks back to the summer of 1992, when his mother worked with him on the translations of Faiz' poems that would later appear in The Rebel's Silhouette. He writes:

As I begin "Memory" all by myself
(I'll hold on to your sleeve, blue god, till the end),

so many summers, so many monsoons, dimmed on Time's shelf, return, framed by the voice you gave each story, as when—in the last summer of peace—the heart itself was the focus: You read all of Faiz aloud to me:
We chose poems that would translate best. So strange:

¹ A discussion of the word "shikwa" and its translation from Hindi to English can be found at <http://www.proz.com>. Also, "Shikwa" is the name of a famous and controversial poem by Dr. Allama Mohammad Iqbal, written in Urdu, in which the speaker plays an oppressed and frustrated Muslim who is "complaining to Allah Almighty." See discussion at: <http://www.geocities.com/drmuhammadiqbal>.
Why did we not linger just a bit on "Memory?" (18-25)

In the fifth poem of the cycle, "Memory," based on the poem by Faiz, he continues:

Memory's placed its hand so on Time's face, touched it so caressingly that although it's still our parting's morning, it's as if night's come, bringing you to my bare arms. (9-12)

The legacy that comes by way of earnest translating appears in "The Secular Comedy" with the second poem "Earth." One must know Ghalib's poetry or have read Ali's discussion of translation in *The Rebel's Silhouette* to recognize the subtle connections, but such discovery becomes one of the pleasures of reading Ali. In that introduction, he presents several poets' attempts to translate one his favorite couplets by Ghalib. The transliterated version given by Aijaz Ahmad reads:

To him comes sleep, belongs the mind (peace of mind)  
belong the nights  
On whose arm you spread your hair. (xviii)

In this discussion, Ali marvels that W.S. Merwin caught the essence of the original Urdu, without knowing the language, in this translation:

He is the lord of sleep  
lord of peace  
lord of night  

on whose arm your hair is lying (xix)

poem about his ancestors, "Snowmen," but here he is also looking back at nights of love.

Taking Merwin's version of Ghalib's poem as reference, one must struggle to understand who is "lord" in this poem. Ali is certainly making reference to this Ghalib poem, because he asks:

Who will decipher grief then?
Grief's the question asked as the given answer:
Grief is the answer,

midnight shot with pearls: like his gaze that rushes
toward me, the rapids of separation
whirling loud, my face held below the water-fall of his time. He's

leaving? No, he's settling on me his gaze now,
entering my sleep. What remains of night he owns, and he's its message to me, awake, his hair on my shoulder. (14-24)

My sense is that this "he" is a current lover, who in turn represents potential grief, who in turn is lord, but that the poet, too, is lord, and grief-as-lover lies in his arms in the more submissive position. Identifying this meaning is like trying to find the beginning and end of pattern in paisley, the fabric so often a source of Ali's imagery.

This collection closes with "I Dream I Am at the Ghat of the Only World."

An oarsman waits for the poet at the river which is the "ebony ghost" of the Jhelum.

"I always rowed you across / the Jhelum. . . ," the oarsman says. "Every wave I left untouched became glass / to reflect you. I left you untouched, I left you / perfect" (14-18).

The poet moves in and out of conversation/prayer with people he has loved and who have died. To his mother he cries, "Will I wait here, alone, by this ebony abyss, / abandoned by you, alone?" (147-148). As the poem closes, he hears a most certain answer:
"SHAHID, HUSH. THIS IS ME, JAMES. THE LOVED ONE / ALWAYS LEAVES" (169-170).

In *Rooms Are Never Finished*, Ali gives exquisite interpretation to Mahmoud Darwish's lament over the Muslims' forced departure from Andalusia in "Eleven Stars Over Andalusia." This is a lovely introduction to Darwish and an invitation to read more of Darwish's work and Lorca's, too. So, in all his writing, Ali opens doors, as would a relaxed host, to the literature and legends of Kashmir, Persia, India and the Arab world. He also writes with appreciation and respect for the legacy of English language poetry. His formal poems spring from the page with musicality and emotional power, what Kelly LeFave talks about in *Ravishing Disunities* as the "liberating ground within which the lyric voice has the ability to shine" (4).

Eric Gamalinda describes his first meeting with Ali in 1995. They had been invited to conduct workshops at Williams College. When Gamalinda arrived, Ali had already begun his workshop. "I could hear only peals of laughter breaking out intermittently from his room; his wisecracks and off-hand remarks were giving the roomful of young students the most fun they'd had since the last keg party" (Gamalinda 44). As a reader, I am pleased to be one of his students. As a writer, when I hesitate at the edge of the cliff between one stanza and the next, I now hear whispering, "Jump! Jump!" Ali lifts one out of drudgery into the more perfect world of compassionate and masterful expression. Over the years, as I have mentioned Ali's name to people who knew him, the response is always one of admiration and delight, "Yes! Yes! Shahid!"
APPENDIX

An appreciation of Agha Shahid Ali's life in poetry must also recognize his PhD dissertation, completed for Penn State University in 1984 and published with revisions in 1986 as the book, *T. S. Eliot as Editor*. With this study, Ali examines Eliot's editing of *The Criterion*, which began in 1922, underwritten by Lady Rothermore, who wanted a chic, brilliant literary quarterly that "might have a fashionable vogue among the wealthy few" (15). For three years, Eliot accommodated his donor's tastes and set a high standard for contributions. As Lady Rothermore withdrew in funding and influence, Eliot, with backing by the publishers Faber and Gwyer, established full editorial control until *The Criterion* 's demise in 1939. He defined an editorial stance with his 1919 essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent." Ali writes, "This essay, essential for understanding Eliot's editorship of *The Criterion*, is alluded to or quoted from by contributors throughout the journal's eighteen volumes" (1-2). He continues:

The significance of having *The Criterion* as the main title of a journal should be apparent, especially if attention is paid to the use of the definite article (a certain elitism, perhaps snobbery, can be detected). The launching of *The Criterion* [. . .] was the launching of standards—though the standards were, as they should have been, redefined, as the journal responded to the events between the Wars. One standard was to try to make Classicism the spirit of the age, to have a base from which the individualist, irrational impulses associated with Romanticism could be challenged and rejected. It was in this spirit that Eliot congratulated Joyce, in 1922, for having [sic] "killed the nineteenth century." (10)
The concerns of Europeans and British writers in the twentieth century came to
the fore in *The Criterion*, as Eliot wanted to keep an international scope for the journal.
In retrospect, Eliot wrote that he

sought, therefore, first to find out who were the best writers, unknown or little
known outside of their own country, whose work deserved to be known more
widely. Second, I tried to establish relations with those literary periodicals
abroad, the aims of which corresponded most nearly to my own. I mention, as
instances, the *Nouvelle Revue Francaise* [. . .], the *Neue Rundschau*, the *Revista
de Occidente* in Spain, *Il Covoegno* in Italy. These connexions developed very
satisfactorily, and it was no fault of any of the editors concerned, if they
subsequently languished. (11-12)

"The aims of which corresponded most nearly to my own" is the source of interest
in Ali's exploration of *The Criterion*. He explains that although others have studied *The
Criterion* and Eliot from various angles, he is taking on Eliot's approach to editorship,
because none of these essays or theses "show how Eliot's selection of contributions
reveals his priorities—literary, social, and political—as an editor. Often, the contents of a
journal are the only way of determining these priorities" (12).

So, Ali takes the reader on a careful walk through the tumultuous years from 1922
to 1939 as reflected in *The Criterion*. He breaks the book into five sections that mark
changes in the quality and character of the publication until its closure. With this book as
guide, one can see the literary peaks churned up by the chaos following the Bolshevik
Revolution and World War I, and the rise of fascism in Spain, Italy, and Germany.

Although many of the names of writers published in *The Criterion* are already obscured
by changes in literary atmosphere, others like Proust, Pound, Woolf, Read, Auden, Joyce, Mann (one could go on and on) stand out. "To read through all of The Criterion," Ali says, "is to understand why writers holding views diametrically opposed to Eliot's often developed a strong loyalty to him" (14).

Eliot often wrote commentaries for The Criterion. Ali comments: "The reader is unable to escape from Eliot's insistence on matters of ethics and theology, from his tendency to see everything in an ethical light" (147). Yet, Ali says that Eliot changed his criterion to accommodate circumstance, even within one issue:

what becomes clear is the uncertainty of the editor's aims, the uncertainty of his priorities. The Criterion emerges as a vehicle through which one man's expanding (and shifting) view of tradition, however qualified and uncertain, and one man's aims, however obscure, are made available. The Criterion offers the reader a view of the years between the Wars—largely though one man's eyes" (141).

Sometimes, Ali writes, Eliot held to high literary standard; other times he included inferior theological poetry. Often he published Marxist writers, when the "criterion seems to have been Communism, against which Christianity had to sharpen itself." Ali continues, "It is as if he had to keep asserting to himself the validity of his Weltanschauung at the very moment it was being challenged in practice. This explains the often desperate voice of the editor" (147).

One would have to read all the issues of The Criterion to grapple with Ali's evaluations of the writers and the content. Although Ali points out how various the writers and philosophies were that Eliot published, he emphasizes the political conservatism reflected by Eliot and those he published who shared Eliot's views. Eliot
forced, he says, a distinction between politics and political philosophy, so that by the late
1930's *The Criterion* was irrelevant to the events affecting Europe. Ali agrees with a
*Times* review that points out that "*The Criterion* could not continue to pretend that
Nazism did not exist, but neither—apparently—could it bring itself to oppose it" (145). 
Ali asks, "What was to save Europe (as well as Eliot and those of similar intellectual
persuasion) from Western civilization" (145)? However, he leaves us with this image of
an editor

who, maybe reluctantly, realized that open-mindedness was the best policy.

It is Eliot's catholicity that leaves a lasting impression. It is hard to agree with
the *Times* reviewer when he says that the last thing *The Criterion* will be
remembered for is open-mindedness. Eliot's mind was too large to be confined
by its own theoretical formulations. (148)

How then did this early study of Eliot help form Agha Shahid Ali as a poet?
Certainly it underscores his right to the English canon, something that is not necessarily
recognized. In his introduction to *The Rebel's Silhouette*, Ali had to emphasize that
English was his first language and the tradition of English literature his own. So, in a
letter to the editor in the December 2007 issue of *Poetry*, Vivek Sharma comments about
a previous issue featuring Indian poets and reminds western readers that "since most of us
grow up using English as the primary language for our education, we emote and versify
in English as easily as in our mother tongue." The writer names Agha Shahid Ali along
with five other Indian poets as "poets that have not yet found an audience" (275).

One can also recognize that a writer born in the 1940's would want and need to
study the writing and thinking that influenced western literature in the decades preceding
his own. But there is something more: in his poetry, Ali writes as if he uses Eliot's stance as articulated in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" the way Eliot used the Marxist writing he published in The Criterion – as an edge against which to sharpen his own. For Ali the Witness, the effects of political thinking play out in his world with clear, urgent images. There is no detachment to keep the perspective "philosophical." And one senses Ali's personality immediately. Not that his poetry is "all about him" as we say; his private grief is universal grief. And this is what becomes exciting: Ali as a poet does not necessarily contradict the criterion Eliot puts forth in "Tradition and the Individual Talent." He exemplifies it. In his essay, Eliot analogizes a poet to platinum when it is the catalyst for causing oxygen and sulphur dioxide to form sulphurous acid. He explains that no trace of platinum appears in the acid, nor does this combining of elements cause a change in the inert platinum. Ali gives himself to poetic process. He assumes that he is the beneficiary of not just the Urdu and Arabic traditions, but those of western literary tradition as well. He works and plays with the orderliness of poetic forms from these traditions. As with Eliot, Ali grew up in one country and matured in another. And as Eliot did, Ali lived and wrote in a time of war. Comparing them heightens the degree of earnestness evident in each one.
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APPENDIX


