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Postcard from Kashmir and Other Poems

Author(s): Agha Shahid Ali

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# *Postcard from Kashmir and Other Poems\**

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Agha Shahid Ali

Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox,  
my home a neat four by six inches.

I always loved neatness. Now I hold  
the half-inch Himalayas in my hand.

This is home. And this the closest  
I'll ever be to home. When I return,  
the colors won't be so brilliant,  
the Jhelum's waters so clean,  
so ultramarine. My love  
so overexposed.

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

**(for Pavan Sahgal)**

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## Snowmen

My ancestor, a man  
of Himalayan snow,  
came to Kashmir from Samarkand,  
carrying a bag  
of whale bones:  
heirlooms from sea funerals.  
His skeleton  
carved from glaciers, his breath  
arctic,  
he froze women in his embrace.  
His wife thawed into stony water,  
her old age a clear  
evaporation.

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,  
their voices hushed to ice.

No, they won't let me out of winter,  
and I've promised myself,  
even if I'm the last snowman,  
that I'll ride into spring.  
on their melting shoulders.

## The Dacca Gauzes

*... for a whole year he sought  
to accumulate the most exquisite  
Dacca gauzes.*

— Oscar Wilde/*The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Those transparent Dacca gauzes  
known as woven air, running  
water, evening dew:

a dead art now, dead over  
a hundred years. "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 not lost.

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.

History of little use to her,

my grandmother just says  
how the muslins of today  
seem so coarse and that only

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.

**Homage to Faiz Ahmed Faiz**  
(d. 20 November 1984)

*"You are welcome to make your  
adaptations of my poems."*

1

You wrote this from Beirut, two years before  
the Sabra-Shatila massacres. That city's  
refugee air was open, torn  
by jets and the voices of reporters.  
As always, you were witness to "rains of stones,"

though you were away from Pakistan, from  
the laws of home which said: the hands  
of thieves will be surgically  
amputated. But the subcontinent always spoke  
to you: in Ghalib's Urdu, and sometimes through

the old masters who sang of twilight  
but didn't live, like Ghalib, to see the wind  
rip the collars of the dawn: the summer  
of 1857, the trees of Delhi  
became scaffolds: 30,000 men

were hanged. Wherever you were, Faiz, that  
language spoke to you; and when you heard it,  
you were alone – in Tunis, Beirut,  
London, or Moscow. Those poets' laments  
concealed, as yours revealed, the sorrows

of a broken time. You knew Ghalib was right:  
blood must not merely follow routine, must not  
just flow as the veins uninterrupted  
river. Sometimes it must flood the eyes,  
surprise them by being clear as water.

2

I didn't listen when my father  
recited your poems to us  
by heart. What could it mean to a boy  
that you had redefined the cruel  
beloved, that figure who already  
was Friend, Woman, God? In your hands

she was Revolution. You gave  
her silver hands, her lips were red.  
Impoverished lovers waited all

night every night, but she remained  
only a glimpse behind  
light. When I learned of her,

I was no longer a boy, and Urdu  
a silhouette traced  
by the voices of singers,

by Begum Akhtar, who wove your couplets  
into ragas: both language and music  
were sharpened. I listened:

and you became, like memory,  
necessary. Dast-e-Saba,  
I said to myself. And quietly

the wind opened its palms: I read  
there of the night: the secrets  
of lovers, the secrets of prisons.

3

When you permitted my hands to turn to stone,  
as must happen to a translator's hands,

I thought of you writing *Zindan-Nama*  
on prison walls, on cigarette packages,

on torn envelopes. Your lines were measured  
so carefully to become in our veins

the blood of prisoners. In the free verse  
of another language I imprisoned  
each line – but I touched my own exile.  
This hush, while your ghazals lay in my palms,

was accurate, as is this hush that falls  
at news of your death over Pakistan

and India and over all of us no  
longer there to whom you spoke in Urdu.

Twenty days before your death you finally  
wrote, this time from Lahore, that after the sack

of Beirut you had no address... I  
had gone from poem to poem, and found

you once, terribly alone, speaking  
to yourself: "Bolt your doors, Sad heart! Put out

the candles, break all cups of wine. No one,  
now no one will ever return," But you

still waited, Faiz, for that God, that Woman,  
that Friend, that Revolution, to come

at last. And because you waited,  
I listen as you pass with some song,

A memory of musk, the rebel face of hope.

**I Dream It Is Afternoon When  
I Return to Delhi**

At Purana Qila I am alone, waiting  
for the bus to Daryaganj. I see it coming,  
but my hands are empty.  
"Jump on, jump on," someone shouts,  
"I've saved this change for you  
for years. Look!"  
A hand opens, full of silver rupees.  
"Jump on, jump on." The voice doesn't stop.  
There's no one I know. A policeman,  
handcuffs silver in his hands,  
asks for my ticket.

I jump off the running bus,  
Sweat pouring from my hair.  
I run past the Doll Museum, past  
headlines on the Times of India  
building, PRISONERS BLINDED IN A BIHAR  
JAIL, HARIJAN VILLAGES BURNED BY LANDLORDS.  
Panting, I stop in Daryaganj,  
outside Golcha Cinema.

Sunil is there, lighting  
a cigarette, smiling. I say,  
"It must be ten years, you haven't changed,  
it was your voice on the bus!"  
He says, "The film is about to begin,  
I've bought an extra ticket for you,"  
and we rush inside:

Anarkali is being led away,  
her earrings lying on the marble floor.  
Any moment she'll be buried alive.  
"But this is the end," I turn  
toward Sunil. He is nowhere.  
The usher taps my shoulder, says  
My ticket is ten years old.



Once again my hands are empty.  
I am waiting, alone, at Purana Qila.  
Bus after empty bus is not stopping.  
Suddenly, beggar women with children  
are everywhere, offering  
me money, weeping for me.