

SARA SULERI-GOODYEAR

In Memory of Agha Shahid Ali

*Lāzim t'hā keh dēk'hō mirā rasta ko'ī din aur
Tanhā ga'ē kyūn? ab rahō tanhā ko'ī din aur*

WE would often talk about translation, my friend and I. We discussed the words; we pondered; we shook our heads as though in appreciation of beauty but actually in resignation at our inability to put into English the precision, the elegance of our desire. When we mentioned our master, Mīrzā Asadu 'l-Lāh Khān Ghālib, what salaams would arise from the shake of our heads! I distinctly recall the *she'r* above, and demanding from Agha Shahid Ali how it was possible to translate “*lāzim*”: as necessity, as a command, as an imperative that clearly delineated the grammar of grief? “Why don’t we try something as simple as ‘you had to,’” Shahid suggested. I shook my head. “No! Because the simplicity does not even touch the perfection!” He agreed. And so “*lāzim*” remained a vacant memory for us, a definition from Mīrzā Ghālib himself, claiming that he could not, would not, sit easily in English. “*Lāzim t'hā keh dēk'hō mirā rasta ko'ī din aur*”: Little did I know, my friend, that within a year I would be quoting that line again. And this time it would not be for ‘Ārif, Ghālib’s beloved nephew. It would be for you.

Agha Shahid Ali. Since the name “Shahid” has been completely usurped by my brother of the same name, I never addressed my friend without his full name, so that my mind would be quite clear about which Shahid was in reference. Even when he was cooking a delectable Kashmiri meal in my New Haven pocket-sized kitchen and set off all the smoke alarms, he never lost his names. When I returned below to find him beating at the alarms with a dishcloth amidst all those heady odors, all I could find to say was—with some reproach—“What are you doing, Agha Shahid Ali?” It reminded me of the occasion when we first had met, at some eminently forgettable conference, when within five minutes of our

first conversation he told me, “I am the best cook in the world.” I took note of the modesty with which he made that claim, and realized with exact precision that I would love him forever.

In a strange way, the bond between us was the ghazal. Agha Shahid Ali knew exactly what I meant when I told him, in one of our earliest conversations, that before I died I would long to have translated—not even an entire ghazal, but one *she‘r*, or even a *miṣra‘*—in a fashion that would allow me to sleep. Agha Shahid Ali looked compassionate. He advised me to choose something simple to begin with: why not experiment with a ghazal as clear-cut as one by Mōmin, for example? I reminded him sourly that Ghālib—doubtless—had claimed that he would have given his entire *dīvān*, his works, to have written one *she‘r* of Mōmin’s. I mentioned which one:

Tum mirē pās hōtē hō gōyā
Jab ko‘ī dūsra‘ nahīn hōtā

“Yes,” said Agha Shahid Ali, “that’s tough.” I belabored my point: “the entire *she‘r* sits on ‘*gōyā*,’ and what are you going to do with that?” “Try ‘as it were’?” “Can you really say, ‘You are with me, as it were, / When no other can be there’? Can you say that, and not feel like an imbecile?” Agha Shahid Ali agreed. We tried some other examples: “You are an eagle, flight is your task, / There are more skies ahead of you.” But all of our attempts sounded plaintive. I did not want to sound in the right for I would far rather be feeling happy, but on this occasion I was feeling a trifle of both. We turned to Iqbāl again: “No longer any passion in love, no longer that spark in beauty, / No longer Ghaznavī’s desire, nor that curl in the hair of Ayāz.”

That, too, was not right. Agha Shahid Ali had known Faiz, and was completely in agreement when I complained about his translations of Faiz in *The Rebel’s Silhouette*. “They are just not right!” I said, and Agha Shahid Ali looked happier for my claim than if I had given him ample praise. He knew the praise that he deserved: I would routinely teach *The Half-Inch Himalayas* in my courses, and will probably continue to do so in his absence. I told him that for a poet he had made the great mistake of finding titles for which no poem could do justice: *A Nostalgist’s Map of America* was one, as was *Country Without a Post Office*. The joke is that he agreed. “Then why won’t you change them,” I exclaimed in irritation. “Yes,” he said, “I will.” The annoyance was such that I could only grumble, with Agha Shahid Ali laughing at me, and saying—as unforgettable

as only he would be—“Sara, you write like a ghazal.” I paused, arrested. And then he repeated the greatest compliment that I have heard in my life, “Sara, you are a ghazal.”

I may have misheard, for we were talking about the anthology he was editing: it was a collection of ghazals in English, which he was the first to admit were of quite an erratic quality. It was titled *Ravishing Dis-Unities*, a name that I did not like, which we spoke about in no uncertain terms. It was the hyphen that most offended me, for that perfectly innocent symbol has been so misused in latter decades. At least he had not put brackets around “Ravishing,” which would have been completely unacceptable. But Agha Shahid Ali always rallied round a good fight; the title stayed in-tact and as usual he got the last word. “What about your contribution—‘Ideas of Order in An Afterword’—I asked you for an afterword, not a prose poem!” Strange to think that I should now be writing another afterword for him. □