

Witness - Shahid

*“Don’t tell my father I have died,” he says,
and I follow him through blood on the road
and hundreds of pairs of shoes the mourners
left behind, as they ran from the funeral,
victims of the firing.*

(I see Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight.)
Agha Shahid Ali

You saw Kashmir, Shahid! You remembered it. You wrote it in your poems. I’m not a poet, Shahid. But I also remember it. Often. All the time. You saw Kashmir from Delhi at Midnight, Shahid. I’m also in Delhi. I have been here for quite long. And I remember it every night, midnight.

Each year, I visit your, and also mine, The Country without a Post Office. Summers give me that chance.

There has been a change I wanted to tell you. A change in Kashmir. Nay! your lines are still relevant. I cannot write like you. And your words, filled with sadness, are healing. Sadness expressed is healing. I cannot express. I’m numb, Shahid. The feeling so intense that one stops feeling. So, I wanted to tell you the latest in your land.

That way, perhaps, I could write. For I hope you would understand.

Young teenagers still are carried by their fathers on their shoulders through the lanes and the by lanes of Srinagar. But they no longer seem to cry ‘Don’t tell my father...’ Their father’s somehow know that. More than three scores have lost their son’s in almost as the number of days. And the count, as always in Kashmir, keeps increasing. I fear to open the pages of the newspaper. And whenever I do, guiltily, I scan the pages for the number, the increase in the count.

I keep counting the dead from New Delhi at mid-night, Shahid. I mourn the dead from New Delhi. I feel guilty in New Delhi, every mid-night, Shahid, for I know that those bullets cannot reach me. And I continue to live. I die every mid-night at New Delhi, Shahid.

You wrote about Rizwan: The Guardian of the Gates of Paradise. I remember Tufail, 17 years old, the only child of his family... I remember Tauqeer, a 9 year old shot dead, who went out to look for his brother... I remember Yasmeen, while standing at the window of her room... I remember her last words, “Mummy, me haey aaw heart-as fire (Mummy, I got shot in the heart)” I remember Afroza, a 17 year old girl, shot dead. I remember Sameer, beaten to death... a kid just 9 years old. I remember the footmarks, carved into his skin, the edges blue with dried blood. I remember many others. I remember them every night. I try to forget them every night. The names, and their faces haunt me, Shahid. I remember them,

reconstruct their faces from memory. They stare me in the eye. I cannot look at them.

I don't know about your memories as you saw them, Shahid. Your name means 'witness'. I read your witness that in your written lines. But I remember a father carrying his son on his shoulders... and there were mourners besides him. They wanted to take him to the Martyr's graveyard of your city. And they were stopped somewhere between your home and mine, Shahid, in Srinagar. And then there was that noise, the deafening clatter, which has again become so common in Kashmir. But there is a change, which I wanted to tell to you. This time one doesn't have to listen to the exact sound, and figure out, who is firing on whom. This time its only one side that fires, for the young have taken to stones. Stones, do not make any noise, Shahid. Stones speak louder than the noise though. And the bullets as always kill. And they are killing. And we are dying, Shahid.

The father couldn't leave though. He couldn't leave his Rizwan. I remember those boots over his chest and the batons of gun hitting his neck. He still wouldn't leave. And they wouldn't leave him too. He didn't want to cut short his last conversation with his son, Shahid. Even if on his way to the grave. I remember him bleeding, Shahid. He fell on his dead son, as if hugging him. And the boys arm, stiff with death, lifted, as if trying to console him. Perhaps, he wanted to tell his father to go home. He must have needed his father besides him in life. He didn't want him besides him in death.

The victims of firing returned. And they lifted his body. And one more lying to the side. And they continued, mourning, shouting the slogan, which was always so common in Kashmir. They took the son towards peace, freedom. For Peace and Freedom, Shahid, in Kashmir are only in the grave.

Suvaid Yaseen