

1993

In Pursuit of Evanescence: Agha Shahid Ali's A Nostalgist's Map of America

Lawrence Needham

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Needham, Lawrence, In Pursuit of Evanescence: Agha Shahid Ali's A Nostalgist's Map of America, *Kunapipi*, 15(2), 1993.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol15/iss2/18>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

In Pursuit of Evanescence: Agha Shahid Ali's *A Nostalgist's Map of America*

Abstract

Moving on in the dark like some ghostly train in the desert, Agha Shahid Ali's *A Nostalgist's Map of America* charts a painful passage through wastes of history and nature on the way to Hope, an ever-receding horizon illuminated by the cold sapphire glimmerings of evening stars. His Night Train pursues an impossible destination that he names evanescence, the vanishing point and moment when fixities evaporate and possibilities waver is in the air to condense, through poetic resolve, into rare forms of ephemeral beauty like Black Iris in the wilderness.

LAWRENCE NEEDHAM

In Pursuit of Evanescence: Agha Shahid Ali's *A Nostalgist's Map of America*

Hope never knew Horizon— ... Moving on
in the Dark like Loaded Boats at Night,
though there is no Course, there is Boundlessness—
(Dickinson; L 871)

Moving on in the dark like some ghostly train in the desert, Agha Shahid Ali's *A Nostalgist's Map of America* charts a painful passage through wastes of history and nature on the way to Hope, an ever-receding horizon illuminated by the cold sapphire glimmerings of evening stars. His Night Train pursues an impossible destination that he names evanescence, the vanishing point and moment when fixities evaporate and possibilities waver in the air to condense, through poetic resolve, into rare forms of ephemeral beauty like Black Iris in the wilderness.

Fascinated with moments of change, transition – and, ultimately, transport – Ali is a sublime poet, as well as a student of the American sublime, particularly practitioners like Dickinson and O'Keeffe, whose voices contribute to the rich texture of *A Nostalgist's Map*. Ali's stark, yet sublime, poetics are well served by his choice of the American Southwest as the predominant ground and object of his writing. His subjects – lost tribes and vanished villages, vast deserts, geological epochs and cataclysmic changes – are able to support a resonant vocabulary of loss and desolation, as well as the mythic subtexts informing many of his poems. In the wasteland that he scours for traces of life and shards of history, the desert is a particularly apt scene of writing, being both the staging ground for sublime effects and the testing ground for his poetic powers. Indeed, one significant concern of *A Nostalgist's Map* is the nature and efficacy of the poet's vocation in the modern wasteland. Ali's sojourn through the American Southwest represents a period of trial during which he faces the severest test of a poet of the desert: the temptation to lose faith with the desert, to give up, or give out, in the face of stark desolation, to arrest movement and court death – or worse, in terms of his poetics, to resolve the dispersive force of the sublime into a settled representation of some

transcendental reality – some mirage of Truth, Beauty, or Art. He resists such reassuring closure and the last temptation: to consolidate a broken human world into a version of Self, writ large. Indeed, his poetry works in quite the opposite way; it shatters the Self and its comforting illusions, and subverts the historical understanding on which it depends.

The dispersal of Self into alien voices, the shattering of History into myriad stories is exemplified by 'Eurydice', the poem which prefaces *A Nostalgist's Map*, introducing many of its motifs. Set in a concentration camp in Nazi Germany, 'Eurydice' is startling in conception and execution, even though its central strategy – retelling the myth of Orpheus from the perspective of Eurydice – has been anticipated by Rilke, Rich, Atwood and others. Powerfully evocative of the holocaust – the crippled Eurydice 'limping to Hell' past 'howl-choked dogs' to disappear 'in a sudden/tunnel of mustard twilight' – the poem could trouble some who might feel that it cheapens or exploits, sensationally, a horrific event. Admittedly, 'Eurydice' flirts with the aestheticization of violence cultural historians decry in Nazism, yet, throughout the poem, aesthetics itself is put on trial, as Ali self-consciously reflects on the limitations of Art and the Artist under permutations of the Modern State (a concern of 'I See Chile in My Rearview Mirror' as well). Orpheus is portrayed as dis-engaging from life and the living, while his art is shown to be, at best, ineffectual, at worst, escapist, or even collusive with an oppressive fascist regime.

'Eurydice' invites and repays a second and third look, yet, as reading it can be a profoundly unsettling experience, the poem is judiciously placed outside the book's four-part arrangement, a tightly woven, interlacing structure reworking motifs from 'Eurydice' – of loss and separation, of departures and arrivals, of infidelity and flickering Hope – into a tapestry depicting the spiritual topography of the desert and other wastelands.

Part One of *A Nostalgist's Map* re-introduces the motif of sudden arrivals and departures, as figures wander through landscapes and human 'worlds' emptied of life, meaning, and significance. Striving 'only to connect' in the modern wasteland, human figures – and in particular, the figure of the poet – are betrayed by fragile shelters and false securities: personal relationships, religion, the routines of everyday life. 'Beyond the Ash Rains', a poem in which the speaker is promised never again to be exiled from his beloved's arms, is immediately followed by 'A Rehearsal of Loss', in which the speaker departs from his lover never to return. 'Crucifixion' witnesses the death of religion and religious faith, as a driver enters and leaves a timbered forest, oblivious to the futile attempts of Penitentes to incarnate a god. The meaningless loss of their brother, lying in a secret grave, has its counterpoint in the meaningless life of the driver who travels unawares past the violent scene of crucifixion and death, discovered and only partially redeemed in the poet's re-visiting. The second look, or regard, of the poet is the explicit theme of 'Leaving Sonora', in which the speaker, flying over the desert landscape, is momentarily

arrested, as the lights of Tuscon fade, by the vague outlines of a vanished village.

The absence of certainties and sureties in Part One initiates the poet's search for evanescence in Part Two. The section begins with the title poem, 'A Nostalgist's Map of America', in which the poet tropes the figure of turning and re-turning, playing off Dickinson's 'A Route of Evanescence', in particular its first two lines: 'A Route of Evanescence/ With a revolving Wheel.' Turning over in his mind an endless summer shared with a friend now dying, the poet attempts to redeem their loss and fulfill his pledge, made years before, to keep in touch and write, before their lives took separate turns. 'A Nostalgist's Map' testifies to the limits of language and art, which fail to take the measure of suffering and are powerless, even false, before death, yet it also records the poet's necessary fidelity to loss, as well as his struggle to remember the past without falsification or sentimentality. If I have any quibble with the volume, it's that its title is misleading – Ali rarely is nostalgic and, in fact, warns against the condition. Of course, acts of recollection inevitably risk this danger, and perhaps by naming nostalgia in his title, he hopes to inoculate both himself and his readers from a condition springing from fundamental dis-ease.

A better title might have been 'In Search of Evanescence', after the eleven-part poem of the same name, which follows 'A Nostalgist's Map of America'. Breath-takingly varied in technique; richly allusive, referencing Dickinson, De Quincey, O'Keeffe and others; resonating with phrases and images that are modulated subtly in different contexts, 'In Search of Evanescence' is a *tour de force*, too complex to do justice to in a summary. In terms of reference, section #9 brilliantly captures the tone – whimsy married to tragic seriousness – and form – staccato phrasing – of Dickinson, as well as the sublime perspective of O'Keeffe, when the poet takes imaginary passage on a Night Train in the Desert with his sick friend, Phil. Moving from the 'station of Faraway Nearby', past Pink and Green Mountains, Black Mesa, Ghost Ranch Cliffs, and Vast Nights with Lightning, the train approaches Light Coming on the Plains – which, appropriately in a poem on evanescence, recedes, then vanishes with no apparent apocalypse or reassuring closure; in this section, even art fails, its distancing formalisms giving way to a human voice in pain. Yet, as a unit, the poem – in essence, a posthumous letter to a friend – keeps the poet's promise to write and fulfills his duty to remember, and, in doing so, effects a partial redemption of loss. In this regard, lines from section #11 are especially apt: 'there's everything in this world but hope' and 'there's nothing in this world but hope', the sentiment underlying Part Three of *A Nostalgist's Map* as well.

Entitled *From Another Desert*, Part Three consists of thirteen poems which, like 'A Search for Evanescence', are variations on a theme, this time, the poet's search for the Beloved. Based on Urdu and Persian

redactions of the Arabic story of Qais' love for Laila, *From Another Desert*, though pared down and apparently simple, is richly textured, each image freighted with the weight of the traditions Ali draws upon. (The figure of the Beloved, for example, representing lover, friend, God, the Revolution.) A translation into a new context – another desert – of themes and motifs from the first two sections, *From Another Desert* is enriched by, and enriches, the poems preceding and following it, and is a perfect example of how *A Nostalgist's Map* gathers density, richness, and complexity as it unfolds. Significantly, Part Three raises the question of the poet's relationship to the political order, most notably in poems # 9 and #6. Poem #9 imagines Majnoon (another name for Qais, meaning 'mad' or 'possessed') excluded from a Persian miniature in which a world of privilege revolves without him. The scene is a royal hunt; riding the tiger, Prince Jehangir, his coat glistening with 'Ruby buttons .../ drops of blood/ that have caught him by the collar', will not dismount into Majnoon's wilderness of sorrow, a world of keenly experienced injustice. Yet that wilderness is inspiration for the poet, who, in poem #6, is 'ready to face doom' and write, in blood, the world's sorrows, his knowledge gathered from the silences of history's victims, his art intimating Revolution and the end of injustice.

Part Four revisits the American Desert, yet continues Ali's interest in retelling the story of history's victims. 'I See Chile in My Rearview Mirror' powerfully evokes the memory of the vanished in Chile after the coup deposing Allende. Beginning with a startling image – 'I see Argentina and Paraguay/ under a curfew of glass, their colors/ breaking like oil' – the poem records the speaker's efforts to shatter complacency and the mirror of official truth which glosses over and sanitizes other, sometimes horrific, realities. His is a desire to tear 'the skin off the glass', unsealing oceans that will sweep away frozen representations, leaving in their wake the traces of other histories. His dream of drowning, a wish for destruction and re-creation, is also a desire to recover the voices and stories of the forgotten from the flotsam and jetsam of history. Giving voice to those who have been silenced is the conscious strategy of 'Medusa' and 'The Youngest of the Graeae', poems, which like 'Eurydice', offer alternate versions of the 'true' or 'official' stories recorded in myth and legend. The three Gorgons of 'Medusa' and the three sisters of 'The Youngest of the Graeae', foreshadow the three white-haired women of 'Desert Landscape'. Backward and forward looking, gazing at death, while facing the dawn, these women of the desert are dark Grace figures, Ladies of Sorrow who raise up and elevate through the harsh ministrations of suffering. Evoking a memory of water in the hollow shell she brings to her ear, one woman anticipates the attitude of the speaker in 'Snow on the Desert', who recalls a memory of oceans in the desert's severe formations. In a context of change and transition, traced geologically in the desert's history and personally in his sister's hurried departure from Tucson, the speaker

experiences a moment when past and present collide, resulting not in Revelation, but in re-collection and a quiet calculus of loss and gain, a poet's reckoning of 'everything the earth/ and I had lost, of all/ that I would lose/ of all that I was losing' at the moment of evanescence.

At the finish – and all the way to the end of the line – *A Nostalgist's Map of America* is a thoroughly accomplished volume, evocative, haunting, and almost tragically beautiful. Its design and execution is equally impressive; like the artwork of that other poet of the desert – Georgia O'Keeffe – *A Nostalgist's Map of America* is a study in chromatics, a reworking of images and motifs in subtly varied hues and shades of difference on large, multiple canvasses. It invites and rewards careful reading and re-reading: Agha Shahid Ali's *Night Train on the Desert* gains power at every turning and provides its riders with wonderful passages and transport.

WORKS CITED

- Johnson, Thomas H. and Theodora Ward, eds., *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965).