

“Tonight”

By Agha Shadid Ali

Agha Shahid Ali (1949–2001) was a Kashmiri American poet known for blending Eastern and Western literary traditions with remarkable technical precision. Born in New Delhi and raised in Kashmir, he later moved to the United States, where he earned a Ph.D. from Pennsylvania State University and taught at several institutions, including the University of Massachusetts and the University of Utah. Ali is especially recognized for introducing and popularizing the classical Persian **ghazal** form in contemporary American poetry. His collection *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* (2003), published posthumously, includes the widely anthologized poem “Tonight,” which exemplifies his mastery of the ghazal’s formal constraints—refrain, rhyme scheme, and autonomous couplets—while addressing themes of exile, longing, love, political violence, and cultural memory. Throughout his work, Ali explored the emotional and political realities of Kashmir, often intertwining personal grief with national tragedy. His poetry is distinguished by lyrical intensity, formal rigor, and a deep engagement with literary tradition. He remains an influential figure in both South Asian and American poetry.

Pale hands I loved beside the Shalimar
—Laurence Hope

Where are you now? Who lies beneath your spell tonight?
Whom else from rapture’s road will you expel tonight?

Those “Fabrics of Cashmere—” “to make Me beautiful—”
“Trinket”—to gem—“Me to adorn—How tell”—tonight?

I beg for haven: Prisons, let open your gates—
A refugee from Belief seeks a cell tonight.

God’s vintage loneliness has turned to vinegar—
All the archangels—their wings frozen—fell tonight.

10 *Lord, cried out the idols, Don’t let us be broken;
Only we can convert the infidel tonight.*

Mughal ceilings, let your mirrored convexities
multiply me at once under your spell tonight.

He’s freed some fire from ice in pity for Heaven.
He’s left open—for God—the doors of Hell tonight.

In the heart’s veined temple, all statues have been smashed.
No priest in saffron’s left to toll its knell tonight.

God, limit these punishments, there's still Judgment Day—
I'm a mere sinner, I'm no infidel tonight.

Executioners near the woman at the window.

20 Damn you, Elijah, I'll bless Jezebel tonight.

The hunt is over, and I hear the Call to Prayer
fade into that of the wounded gazelle tonight.

My rivals for your love—you've invited them all?
This is mere insult, this is no farewell tonight.

And I, Shahid, only am escaped to tell thee—
God sobs in my arms. Call me Ishmael tonight.