

KAMILA SHAMSIE

Agha Shahid Ali, Teacher

THIS is a story that a friend of mine, like myself once a student of Agha Shahid Ali, told me about our former teacher some months after he had first been diagnosed with cancer: Shahid was riding the subway on his way to teach a class when he started to feel faint and began to black out. For a moment he thought, “I’m dying,” and then he told himself, “No. First I’ll teach my class, then I’ll die.”

My friend heard the story from another friend of ours who may or may not have heard it firsthand from Shahid. When I repeat it to people who didn’t know Shahid, I’m aware it has the feel of apocrypha. But for those of us who were fortunate enough to have him as a teacher, it has the ring of utter truth.

He was my first teacher of creative writing, and although I know that I walked into his class at Hamilton College, ten years ago, with a sensibility that was already beginning to form, with aesthetic preferences that were already taking shape, I also know that it’s impossible to separate the way I think about language from the way Shahid taught me to think about language. It’s impossible to say “before Shahid I thought...” because there really wasn’t very much “before Shahid” for me in terms of self-conscious thinking about words. And so sometimes it seems possible to believe that all he did was show me shortcuts, lead me to a place where I would have gone regardless of him or anyone else in the world. But to say that is merely to say that I can’t imagine the writer I would have been if not for him.

On the first day of the Introduction to Creative Writing class he told the sixteen of us in the room that he wanted us to become so attuned to the aesthetics of language that by the end of the semester we would be unable to hear a single word without registering a reaction to it. I remember thinking that he was overstating his intent. The world, I believed, was full of innocuous words over which I would never be able to

summon an emotion. I was, of course, entirely wrong, and it didn't take Shahid long to make me see that. His awareness of language—its aesthetic, its music—was so powerful that it was impossible not to be affected by it. I started reading all my work out loud after I'd written it—even long pieces of fiction, even entire novels—because of Shahid. The arrangement of vowels and consonants, the workings of rhythm and assonance became just as important as the meaning conveyed by my sentences. That I wrote fiction rather than poetry didn't mean his lessons weren't relevant.

As a teacher, what he absolutely refused to do was mollicoddle his students. That first class I took required us to write both fiction and poetry. For the fiction side of things we had to write two stories. First a story employing magical realism (when the term was still fresh and new and hadn't been beaten to death) and then a story in the voice of someone of the opposite gender. The old "write what you know" adage he exposed as unimaginative and cowering. Shahid encouraged us to look beyond our personal lives, beyond our personal notions of the plausible, and allow our imaginations free rein. He gave us Kafka to read, and Calvino. Fabulist writers whose stories expanded off the page. Expansiveness is the word I most associate with Shahid when I think of the ways in which he talked about fiction. When someone mentioned Raymond Carver he said that Carver was a wonderful writer to read but a terrible writer to try and imitate. What's wonderful in his stories, Shahid pointed out, is not minimalism but Carverism. Another time he was talking about a writer he greatly admired for his virtuosity and wordplay. "But ultimately," Shahid said, "my problem with him is that he always stops short of breaking my—and his own—heart." Shahid would say these things casually and, at the age of eighteen, I would hear them coming at me with the force of revelation.

Of all the things Shahid ever said in workshops about student writing, the one I've heard repeated most often is his famous: "This line should be put against a wall and shot." He uttered this to someone in a graduate workshop at the University of Massachusetts (where he went to teach during my senior year at Hamilton, and where I—not coincidentally—ended up a year later to do my M.F.A.). That remark is, in certain ways, quite telling about Shahid as a teacher. He didn't try to find ways of sugarcoating his criticism, but still he managed to proffer even the harshest critiques in ways which were so utterly Shahid that you couldn't take offense. I seem to remember that I heard that line from the very poet at whose work it was directed. She laughed when she told me about it and

said, “He was right, of course.” But for me, one of the most remarkable things about Shahid as a teacher was not his ability to pick out the weaknesses and flaws in a work. It was the delight he took in finding moments that worked in his students’ writing.

In that first class I took with him, my freshman year at college, he read a short story I had written and he commented that the opening lines were wonderful but the rest of the story didn’t live up to them. I had to find a way, he told me, to live up to those opening lines. To be frank, at the time I didn’t see anything particularly remarkable about those lines and would probably have forgotten about them. But Shahid didn’t allow that to happen. Year after year he would remind me of the lines and say that I couldn’t let them go to waste, I had to use those images somewhere. One night, in Massachusetts, more than five years after I’d first written the lines, Shahid asked again, for the *n*th time, what I was going to do with them. I told him that the problem was that once I started with those lines I didn’t know where to go with them. Shahid shrugged and, in a tone so light I almost missed the reprimand of my laziness that it carried, said, “Well then, don’t start with them. End with them.” It took a few days for that remark to reveal itself as epiphany, but once it did I finally sat down to work on a short story, more than five years in the making. When it was done I gave Shahid a copy and after reading it he told me to come over to his place to discuss it.

So, I went over, and there was Shahid, at his kitchen table, with my story in front of him, marked up in red ink. I looked down at the page, swept my eyes over the ink marks and said, “Shahid, you’ve given my story line breaks.”

It was extraordinary. I was nearing the end of my M.F.A., had already written the novel that was to be my thesis, and as I stood looking down at the page I recognized how unutterably stupid I had been in not showing more of my fiction to Shahid. With his red pen he had pared down sentences, created ellipses, removed dead language, and allowed the rhythms of speech and exposition to rise up to the surface. I didn’t agree with all of his changes, I’ll admit. The line breaks, particularly, seemed too self-consciously poetic. But when I went back to the story to change it into a novel—which was the form Shahid said it belonged in the first time he saw it—I realized that the line breaks functioned as sighs and pauses, and that’s exactly what the story needed. I was going too fast, throwing down layers of plot and dialogue, when what the story demanded was silence between words, room to breathe between one utterance and the next. Now when I read that novel, which I only finished last year—nine years

after first writing the lines that caught Shahid's attention—I can't help feeling that the best parts of the novel are in those pauses. If I look at them long enough I see line breaks. If I look at the novel long enough I know it exists because of Shahid's extraordinary generosity as a teacher which made him prod me for five years to use images that I would otherwise have forgotten a long time before.

Was he demanding—yes. Wonderfully so. I've only ever taken two classes that required me to write poetry—both from Shahid—and because of those two classes I've written, in addition to various free verse poems, a dramatic monologue, two sonnets, a sestina, two ghazals, and a *pantoum*. One day, Shahid brought in a *New York Times* article about a man who worked for Amnesty International and he said we had to write a poem that only used words that were in the article—we weren't allowed to even change the tense of a verb. It was a lesson in control, a lesson in working with the language of journalism to create moments of lyricism. It was also (to my way of seeing, though I have no idea if this was his intention) a demand that we search between words like "torture" and "deprived" to find "touch" and "skin." Most of all, it had the effect of making every word we used seem like a sought after thing. I remember the joy of finding the word "I" in that article. It changed everything in terms of my thinking about the poem.

At the University of Massachusetts, I never took a class with Shahid. That doesn't mean he stopped teaching me. It was impossible to be around Shahid and not receive instruction about language and poetry. I remember once sitting at a restaurant with Shahid and with my friend, Herman, who is a poet. Herman asked Shahid a technical question about the ghazal, and before I knew it Shahid had started writing a ghazal on a napkin, and made Herman join in. The *radif* was "blonde" and the *qāfiya* was "raw." One of my favorite memories of Shahid is the huge delight with which he reacted to Herman's suggestion of "Lahore blonde" to end a couplet. As a teacher, he was always delighted when his students thought up something cleverer or funnier than what he had thought up himself.

It's no exaggeration to say that in many of my best moments as a writer I reveal Shahid's influence on my work. But it's not as though I was exceptional among his students. Oh, certainly, Shahid made me feel as though I was somehow special to him—and I'm not saying there was anything false about that. But he made an extraordinary number of people feel that way—that's the remarkable part of it. It's easy to be a teacher who inspires one student, or two, or ten. But Shahid influenced and

shaped and inspired and moved his students in droves. This reminiscence can't begin to say what he was as a teacher—it only just begins to say what he was as a teacher to me.

After his funeral, a friend of mine—another former student of Shahid's (it occurred to me that only after he died could I start calling myself a "former student" of his) wrote to say: "It didn't seem possible or moral or legal, that we were all there to acknowledge the death of that most alive of men." I read that, and a little while later I remembered his critique of the writer whose virtuosity he admired, and I thought, "Shahid, you didn't stop short of breaking our hearts, not at all." □