

# Postcard from Kashmir

Agha Shahid Ali

Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox,  
my home a neat four by six inches.  
I always loved neatness. Now I hold  
the half-inch Himalayas in my hand.  
This is home. And this the closest  
I'll ever be to home. When I return,  
the colors won't be so brilliant,  
the Jhelum's waters so clean,  
so ultramarine. My love  
so overexposed.  
And my memory will be a little  
out of focus, in it  
a giant negative, black  
and white, still undeveloped.

Home is where the heart is.” It is glaringly clear that the speaker’s (the poet’s) heart belongs to Kashmir, his homeland as well as a region in South Asia that suffers from on-going territorial disputes among China, India and Pakistan.

- The word ‘Shrinks’ in “Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox” (line 1) suggests that the real, grandeur Kashmir diminishes to the tiny delicate picture printed on the postcard.
- Home (line 2), normal speaking, refers to a place where people are currently living in. Postcards are usually sent from a place people spend their holiday on. Yet, interestingly, for this time, the poet receives a postcard from his home, Kashmir. Apparently, the speaker has lost touch with his homeland. The ‘four-by-six-inch’ postcard simply evokes his memories towards his birthplace.
- The poet highlights that he always loved neatness (3). The adjective ‘neat’ refers not only to the regular shape of the postcard but also the neat and harmonious Kashmir in the poet’s memory.

- In line 3, the use of the past tense for the first and only time in the poem reveals that war-torn Kashmir is no longer as calm and peaceful as it used to be.
- The speaker then switches his focus to the mere ‘half-inch’ Himalayas, which is, in reality, the most gigantic and iconic mountain range in the world. The poet deliberately uses the same kind of contrast to express the wide distance between Kashmir and where the speaker is.
- Internal rhyme: “inches”, “neatness” and “Himalayas”
- Alliteration: ‘hold’, ‘half-inch’, ‘Himalayas’ and ‘hand’
- The tone of the poem is getting increasingly serious and emotional from line 5. “This is home. And this is the closest I’ll ever be to home.” (line5-6) What a powerful rhetorical repetition that emphasises poet’s deep affection towards the land he loves!
- Irony: the word “closest”. It is saddening to know that the poet yearns to be home but the chance to do so is thin.
- The poet continues to build up a bitter mood by imagining what Kashmir will be like when he returns. Torn by wars, Kashmir would not be so colourful. Bloodshed Jhelum’s water would not be so clean and ultramarine anymore.
- The repeated use of “so” in line 7-10 intensifies the poet’s pity and lament for the destruction of Kashmir.
- His emotion reaches the climax at “my love so overexposed” (line 9-10). The poet intentionally separates “so overexposed” from “my love” in order to achieve a rhetorical emphasis on his patriotic sentiment.
- “overexposed”: show how overwhelming the poet’s nostalgic love to Kashmir is in a somehow distorted and explicit manner, just like a piece of photography that are overexposed (too much light).
- “giant and negative”: the two adjectives help contrast the shrunken, idealized Kashmir in the postcard with the giant, grim one in reality.

- “Black and white”: a metonymy for things happened in the past. It contrasts the stark colour on the postcard.
- The last sentence of the poem is filled with quite a number of commas. This structure reflects that **memories are just pieces of flashbacks and feelings that tangle together. However enchanting his memories are, they are indeed messy and will gradually fade.**

On a final note, one should pay attention to the number of lines in this free verse poem. Surprisingly, there are actually 14 lines, which are identical to that in Shakespearean sonnets, a traditional format for **love poems**. It is glaringly clear that the ultimate aim of the poem is to channel the poet’s unbounded patriotic love to Kashmir, the place he is proud to call it home.

**Agha Shahid Ali** (4 February 1949 – 8 December 2001) was an Indian-American Kashmir poet. His collections include *A Walk Through the Yellow Pages*, *The Half-Inch Himalayas*, *A Nostalgist's Map of America*, *The Country Without a Post Office*, *Rooms Are Never Finished*, the latter a finalist for the National Book Award in 2001. The University of Utah Press awards the Agha Shahid Ali Poetry Prize annually "in memory of a celebrated poet and beloved teacher.

## Literary work

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Ali expressed his love and concern for his people in *In Memory of Begum Akhtar* and *The Country Without a Post Office*, which was written with the Kashmir conflict as backdrop.<sup>[8]</sup> He was a translator of the Urdu poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz (*The Rebel's Silhouette; Selected Poems*),<sup>[10]</sup> and the editor for the Middle East and Central Asia segment of Jeffery Paine's *Poetry of Our World*. He further compiled the volume *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English*. His last book was *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*, a collection of English ghazals, and his poems are featured in *American Alphabets: 25 Contemporary Poets* (2006) and other anthologies.

Ali taught at the MFA Program for Poets & Writers at University of Massachusetts Amherst, at the MFA Writing Seminars at Bennington College as well as at creative writing programs at University of Utah, Baruch College, Warren Wilson College, Hamilton College and New York University. He died of brain cancer in December 2001 and was buried in Northampton, in the vicinity of Amherst, a town sacred to his beloved poet Emily Dickinson.

## Poetry

- *Bone Sculpture* (1972),
- *In Memory of Begum Akhtar and Other Poems* (1979),
- *The Half-Inch Himalayas* (1987),
- *A Walk Through the Yellow Pages* (1987),
- *A Nostalgist's Map of America* (1991),
- *The Beloved Witness: Selected Poems* (1992),
- *The Country Without a Post Office* (1997),
- *Rooms Are Never Finished* (2001),
- *Call Me Ishmael Tonight: A Book of Ghazals* (2003).

