

This is the last poem. I'll read an elegy for a great singer of India, Begum Ahtar, who used to sing ghazals and thumri's and dadras, which are all like classical poems. She was a very great singer and one of the finest specimens of the feudal era, of a dead era. And she spoke beautiful and sang beautifully, and I was very close to her, I knew her. And when she died, her death hit me very hard, and I wrote an elegy when I was returning from her funeral, I was returning to Delhi on a train I started writing this poem.

"In Memory of Begum Ahtar"

1

Your death in every paper,  
boxed in the black and white  
of photographs, obituaries,

the sky warm, blue, ordinary,  
no hint of calamity,

no room for sobs,  
even between the lines.

I wish to talk of the end of the world.

2

Do your fingers still scale the hungry  
Bhairavi, or simply the muddy shroud?

Ghazal, that death-sustaining widow,  
sobs in dingy archives, hooked to you.  
She wears her grief, a moon-soaked white,  
corners the sky into disbelief.

You've finally polished catastrophe,  
the note you seasoned with decades  
of Ghalib, Mir, Faiz:

I innovate on a note-less raga.

3

Exiling you to cold mud,  
your coffin, stupid and white,  
astounds by its ignorance.

It wears its blank pride,  
defleshing the nomad's echo.  
I follow you to the earth's claw,

shouldering time's shadow.  
This is history's bitter arrogance,  
this moment of the bone's freedom.

4

One cannot cross-examine the dead,  
  
but I've taken the circumstantial evidence,  
your records, pictures, tapes,  
and offered a careless testimony.

I wish to summon you in defense,  
but the grave's damp and cold, now when  
Malhar longs to stitch the rain,

wrap you in its notes: you elude  
completely. The rain doesn't speak,  
and life, once again, closes in,

reasserting this earth where the air  
meets in a season of grief.