

*Village Voice*

December 23 - 29, 1998

'Out of the Past - Among the Exiles With Fazal Sheikh '

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*Afghan boy, born in exile, Khairabad, North Pakistan, 1998*

In his extraordinary new book, *The Victor Weeps: Afghanistan*, photographer Fazal Sheikh writes about his first night at the refugee settlement of Bizen Khel in northern Pakistan. His companions are the village's Afghan Muslim elders, all former Mujahedin freedom fighters forced into exile during the 10-year jihad against the Soviets and kept there by the subsequent civil war and the relentless rise of the Taliban. Most of these men have lived just across the border from their homeland for nearly 20 years, but they continue to gather in the evenings to reaffirm their commitment to Afghan traditions and hierarchies. Sheikh sits with them around a glowing gas lamp and listens to their stories of martyrdom and pained endurance, many of which he prints verbatim in between the photographs in his book.

Those photos make clear that Sheikh was touched by these weathered men, but when they've retired, he meets someone whose story strikes a more personal chord— a 19-year-old who was born days after his parents fled to Pakistan and has lived his whole life in exile. "As he spoke about his country," Sheikh writes, "I recognized the cadence of longing in his voice, not for politics or society but for something more intimate and less grand. It was a child's need for the touch and sensation of an animated history, the desire to inhabit a place that only exists in stories brought to him in the flickering evening light."

Sheikh's emotional identification with this young man born in exile will come as no surprise to those familiar with his earlier work. The photographs that jump-started Sheikh's career were his portraits of Sudanese, Somali, and Ethiopian refugees in camps across those countries' borders in Kenya. Shown in a small, now defunct New York gallery early in 1994, they were like no other pictures coming out of the camps, which had already been picked over by photojournalists airlifted in to grab shots of bloated children and skeletal mothers before the horror got too old. Sheikh's photos, later collected in a book called *A Sense of Common Ground*, were modest, respectful, and not just sympathetic but loving, as if he were recording not strangers in distress but an extended family pulling together for comfort and support. He underscored this feeling of community by identifying the people in his portraits, rescuing them from the black hole of Third World anonymity by giving each of them the simple dignity of a name— in many cases, the only thing they had left except one another.

"There must be some middle ground between journalism and art where you can be honest and still be supportive," Sheikh said at the time, and, though he had certainly located it in *A Sense of Common Ground*, he's continued to pursue that particular ideal. If the success of his first project sent him off on the international art whirl, he still found himself drawn to displacement and loss, to stubborn survival and community against all odds. What led him to Afghanistan and Pakistan was family in a more literal sense and a desire to share and understand trauma on a personal, intimate scale.

Though Sheikh bristles at the journalistic formula that summarizes him too neatly as the only son of a Kenyan father and an American mother, that background remains crucial. Now 33, he was born and grew up in Manhattan, graduating from Dalton and Princeton, but he spent summers in Nairobi with his father's extended family, sons and daughters of Indian-born merchants whose estates had once occupied large parts of the city. Sheikh says he was "always enamored of" his father's family history, especially the stories about his grandfather, the self-educated, philanthropic man after whom he was named. Sheikh Fazal Ilahi died 10 years before Fazal Sheikh was born, but, the photographer writes, "though I can never know him, I continue to search for part of him to call my own."

That search led him to his grandfather's birthplace in northern India, now Pakistan: "By visiting the land of my fathers, moving through the space linking the present to the past, I hoped to gain insight into who they were and by extension who I am." What Sheikh found there, over the course of two years spent among a population in extended exile, may not have been the roots he was seeking, but he was never at a loss for insight.

One morning, in the refugee village at Miram Shah, he had what he calls a waking dream prompted by the memory of his mother's "sudden death." She committed suicide when Sheikh was 21— an event that he prefers not to dwell on but one that marks his life and his work. In this dream, he sees and enters his own body, only to realize that it's also inhabited by another body— his mother's— that he embraces and is embraced by in "a moment of empathy and mercy."

The dream prompts him to ask the Afghan refugees about their dreams of the dead, and these, too, he records in his book (see Mazari's story below) alongside portraits of the dreamers. But his dream also allows Sheikh to suggest to the reader why he's considerably more than your average engaged observer. Asked if he's drawn to the uprooted, he counters with a question he was asked about *A Sense of Common Ground*: "What do you have in common with these people?" He deflected it at the time, and only answers it now with some hesitation and none of his usual verbal flair: "If you have experienced some degree of trauma or of deep emotional taxing, you may be drawn to people who have a similar level of experience. That's not to equate my experience with, say, their experience as refugees, but I am drawn to people who interact with one another on a more emotional or connected plane. Part of what I'm curious about is the nature of the sublime. When something's sublime, it's not just simply visually beautiful, but to be poignant sometimes it also may be tinged with sadness."

Even if *sublime* isn't a word you're comfortable with, there's something remarkable about Sheikh's photographs in *The Victor Weeps*, more than 50 of which are on display through January 16 at PaceWildensteinMacGill (32 East 57th Street). Though the book and the show include a number of full-length portraits that recall his African work, the most striking pictures are in a more intimate square format that brings us closer to the sitter. The result feels like an exceptionally thoughtful family album, full of yearning and concern. Sheikh gathers the elders around the gas lamp and bathes their sorrow and determination in the soft, lovely light. Women, even the most clear-eyed of his dreamers, appear wrapped in similar reveries of remembrance. Scattered among the portraits are images of hands offering other portraits— tiny pictures of dead brothers, sons, and husbands whose presence is as vital to the community as any living soul. At the end of the book, Sheikh introduces the children of the exiles and offers what he calls "a ray of hope." But don't look for sunny optimism here: these are mature, knowing faces, at once open and closed, apprehensive, grave, and terribly moving. "A lot of the better pictures were not so much what I did but what they brought to that space," Sheikh insists, and these kids brought more history than we can imagine.

"The only way I've been able to work in places and find a ray of hope was in the very specific," Sheikh says with his usual modesty. "Not to go with a notion of these grand political gestures, but to really just listen to the people and listen to my own sense of the place. Who knows what effect it has on the world? But to me it seems honest: that's what I have to offer." In this case, that's more than enough.