Remembering Anthony Shadid

Jon Alterman

I met him before he was Anthony Shadid. In the summer of 1991, he was just a skinny kid from the University of Wisconsin with a black mustache and an easy smile. We were studying Arabic together in Cairo. He was a third-generation Lebanese-American who had learned Arabic from scratch with an idea that he would become a Middle East correspondent.

Unlike many people I met in graduate school, Anthony was not smoldering with drive and ambition, or if he was, he didn't wear it on his sleeve. His Associated Press reporting from the Middle East in the late 1990s was solid but undistinctive, the way AP writing seems determined to be. He was a diplomatic correspondent in Washington for the *Boston Globe* around 2000, but his heart was in the field. He was excited when the *Washington Post* hired him in 2003 to go Saddam Hussein's Iraq. "That's where the story is," he told me, and he wanted to go.

It was in Iraq that he became Anthony Shadid, but not at first. At the beginning, he was the sort of one-man band that wire service correspondents are often forced to be, running from one daily news cycle to another and reporting the official utterances of spokesmen who are alternately trying to avoid saying anything and saying things that are only marginally true.

When the war came and the *Post*'s Baghdad bureau grew, Anthony's reporting grew distinctive. He described the suffering he saw, out of empathy rather than pity. He portrayed ambiguity and uncertainty. He gave a face to a country that was all too often seen through the windshield of a bulletproof vehicle.

A mutual friend who was reporting from Iraq at the time described Anthony's position with some envy. When there was news outside of Baghdad, the entire foreign press corps would decamp to wherever the news was happening, report for four hours, and then scurry back to the Green Zone in case news broke there. The *Post* had a large enough bureau that Anthony would go out with the press corps but linger for days, listening to stories that no other reporter had the time or patience to find.

Anthony became required reading in Washington. He discovered things that no one else knew, and he generously shared it with his readers. He connected with Iraqis who otherwise had no voice, conveying their fears and hopes and suffering. He worked poetry and song lyrics into his stories, and did so with increasing skill. He won a Pulitzer Prize, and no one wondered why.

His book about Iraq, *Night Draws Near: Iraq's People in the Shadow of America's War*, reworked much of his reporting from the *Post* into a sustained narrative. It is a masterful book, even more powerful than the original articles on which it was based. And after it came out, Anthony told me he was done with Iraq. It was just too painful to see what had happened, to remember all the stories that people had poured out to him.

Instead, Anthony had a new project in mind, to write about his great-grandfather's house in Lebanon, which he was rebuilding. He moved to Boston to reconnect with his young daughter, returning to the Middle East for reporting stretches and to work on the house. He won another Pulitzer. The *Post* knew what a treasure it had and tried to be as accommodating to his ambitions as possible, but when the *New York Times* came calling in 2009, the pull was irresistible.

It always seemed to me that Anthony's style changed with the *Times*, that he became more sure footed and that the stories read better. Maybe he had great editors, or the process of writing a third book honed his writing. But as political transformation spread throughout the Arab world in 2011, there was no more thoughtful or articulate chronicler than Anthony.

I last saw Anthony in Bahrain last October. We ran into each other by chance in a hotel lobby and hugged. We met the next day for lunch. He had been hop-scotching across the Middle East for months, but it energized him. There was a story in all these places, and he needed to tell it.

In typical fashion, Anthony acted like I was the star, not him. Eyes twinkling with that half-smile full of wonder, he'd tell me "It's really interesting you say that," then connect whatever pedestrian statement I had made to a subtle truth he had uncovered from dogged reporting.

Coincidentally, I had just finished reading the galleys of his forthcoming book, *House of Stone*. I told him it was absolutely magnificent, which it is. He reacted like I was the first person who ever gave him a compliment. He blushed and looked away, and told me how nice it was to hear. He was never the star of his own conversations, merely the witness to the thoughtful things that came out of others' mouths.

The book captures so much of who Anthony is. It describes his family in Oklahoma, and the struggles they had as immigrants to make a new life in a new country. It describes modern Lebanon, still haunted by the violence of the late twentieth century. It describes friends he made in his ancestral village, and how they helped him understand his own roots. And running through all of it is his physical reconstruction of his great-grandfather's home, a metaphor for how he was able to come full circle back to Lebanon

and make peace with the idea that in the Arab world, he was simultaneously a native and an outsider.

It is a bittersweet book, full of mixed emotions and ambiguity. The triumphs are mixed with failures, the happiness mixed with sadness. That's where Anthony found truth.

Anthony and I never discussed novels that we read, but I would think if he wrote one, it would mirror his own life. A young man sets out on his life's work, gaining skills along the way. He cheats death several times, finds and then loses and then finds love again, and comes to stand peerless at the top of his profession. And then, just as he is about to enjoy a great triumph, a book that captures what this journey is all about and what he is all about, he reveals his mortality.

It hits you right in the gut.

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