

# The Picture Tin

Father learned exile by television  
And this was wartime.  
Mother washed. I sat quietly with a tin  
Full of pictures. Night drew.  
My hands grew warm touching their faces  
In youth.

There was a roll of bills  
in a pocket in the closet  
But why had she shown it to me?  
Mother's hands made rough  
sounds on her uniform.  
It was green  
Like the tips of my eyes, now bedtime.

The corners I touched felt like tusks.  
"We say *elephant tears*," he once said.  
In my picture tin  
The war raged on: black and white  
A fugitive zebra on the street  
With my heart pulsing red in its mouth.

# Salam Alaikum

*Salam alaikum*

Once, when I was a girl

*I ni sógóma*

I believed in morning,  
like a hot, yellow apple

*Manda nabaasheyn*

We never tired. Father said,  
God is good

*Héré sira*

We slept in twos and threes

*Famil chatoor ast*

It was a matter of everyone

*Sómógó bédi*

Someone had work, someone didn't  
Someone always offered something

*Owlada khoob astan*

We were kids but we knew everything  
We belonged to everyone

*I sigi na*

After prayer, there was tea  
After tea, there was fruit

*Befarmayen*

Mother taught us to draw our feet  
To let others go first

*Aw ni tile*

In time, day gave way to night

*Jan-e tan jor ast*

Someone would show up asking for my body  
Then another

*I dógó cé ka kéné*

We would exchange brothers  
who were not our brothers

*Khudaya shukur*

The earth met us in different ways  
For some, it rained  
For others, there wasn't water for the stones

*A barika Allah ye*

We thanked God for blessing us  
and not our neighbors

*Khuda hafiz*

History was the first to leave  
and without a trace

*Aw ni wula*

Father said the night has hands  
Mother reminded me of the apple

*Shab bakhair*

In the dark  
I held nothing

# A Secret Life in Misspelled Cities

## *Kabul*

There was once. I remember. I think it must have been there. Just imagine.

## *Bamiyan*

I climbed your two vacuums and lost my breath. But I did not cry, seeing the women in the field balance pots on their wisdom bumps.

## *Wardak*

Malalai was taking me home. “There will be apple orchards,” she said. “And fighting,” laughed the driver, who was armed. I told him I was not scared, as we hemmed the narrow mountainside to the sound of something I could not name.

## *Paghman*

There is no explanation for it. No science or natural law. The story goes that if you take a single brick from this city, no scorpion will ever sting you. Father says, we kept ours with your mother’s gold.

## *Mazar*

1

Just stepping into the square, into the standing blue pool under the pulse of a thousand white wings, something happened. Something loosened, fell, or passed through me: a precision, a shudder, lightning, vivid as a heartbreak.

2

It’s true, I had a crush on the malang at the shrine, who marched in rags and tassels with a tail of children, calling, “Allah hu, Allah hu, Allah hu.” His hand never extended, but all of him untethered.

3

Better than a man: tarashak on a hot a day.

### *Qargha*

1

We were three in the back in black scarves that were dusted white by the time we got there. And seeing the old hotel for the first time in twenty-five years, father, whose corners are always straight, confessed a drunken boyhood.

2

Please don't tell anyone that we left work early that day and drove to the lake and ate kabobs and sour cherries and I lowered my scarf, being one with two beards and families peppered about and joy still in bad taste that I tried to be small, but there was the water just like that, wide and rare and like Florida, a clear sheet of possibility, and the whisper started, the itch spread, and grew and ballooned, and before I knew it—I leapt in—with everything on and with all abandon.

### *Panjsher*

1

The difference between a poem and a lion is an alphabet. The difference between five poems and five lions is slight.

2

We walk to the hilltop that watches over the valley. We remove our shoes and continue to water his hands, now that he is under a green hat.

3

We creep past the stones marked white for mines. We kneel and spread out our picnic. An ant, a shoe, a rocket—all of it suddenly level.