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 bědi*
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.
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.