

ZOHRA SAED

## **The Difference Between Rubies and Pomegranates**

i.

Heaven is at the instep of a mother's foot  
sharing the few inches with home.

The faint fragrance of blood thick when we are near.

ii.

When they tilted their heads back, their open mouths tasted  
water in the blue.

At 18, they were all like this, a sudden itch in their feet and static  
in their hair telling them to go, go, go! And they left, following  
the map of their veins.

The men in our family are deserts aching for the sky.

iii.

1947, the partition of India, a woman in a cocoon of pastel veils,  
her belly stretched-out like a drum. The heartbeat inside is a  
butterfly she may have swallowed while on a gondola in Kashmir.  
Barely sixteen, only her eyes cut through the pastel. Eyes so dark  
they drain the sun of its light.

### **Jalalabad**

A husband and wife return home to the secretly jeweled feet of  
the Hindu Kush. Afghanistan craves pomegranates through her

and limes, crates of limes for a young woman whose long neck and dark eyes remind the other women of a swan.

iv.

She asks for pomegranates. Her husband plants rubies on her neck. They are not the same.

She is too shy for her thirst, but the butterfly inside is a desert aching for the sky. There is never enough sweet in her water. An old herbalist, neck heavy with corals, advises in search of zamzam and for the desert that holds this sacred mineral water, thick with the shadow of God.

v.

A boy once abandoned for a thirst has grown, now with a daughter of his own. Baby girl dressed in bright yellow, the sun in his arms.

### 1976, Mecca

The call to prayer floats from the minaret like a wide ribbon. A mother who remembers her son as only a butterfly in her belly opens a door and finds him multiplied into three with a wife whose long neck and black eyes remind her of a swan.

He carries a salvaged snapshot of his mother, a few days after her marriage. She has an expression so shy, the edges of the photograph crinkle demurely from its effect.

Imagine its effect on a son.

vi.

Half of his father's body had turned into a gnarled tree after the stroke. So the son learns from an early age the frailty of roofs and walls. His father wants to visit Mecca one last time before he dies. Soon, soon they cross a border, father and son aching for

zamzam water (which the son hears, tastes like milk).

Together they reach only Karachi, Pakistan

1965

In a hotel room lit by fluorescent lights the father slips a rough ruby the size of an egg into his son's sweating palms. An inheritance stitched into the lining of his coat seventeen years ago. The boy holds the ruby to the light and sees a silhouette of a thin woman with hair so long it brushes the back of her knees.

This is what growth must feel like

A deep ache in the bones and a butterfly in the throat.

An eighteen-year-old boy, stranded alone in a hotel room with the body of his father. He reads the Holy Quran and weeps over him. A white-bearded man with a fancy wooden cane knocks on the door, he is named Abdul-Qadir. He says he is an old friend when the father owned many factories here, when the father drove many cars, when the father built homes for the poor . . . within an hour of Abdul-Qadir's visit, three busloads of men come to bury the father. The grave is wet from all the rose water people sprinkle. The angel that comes for the questioning of the soul in the grave is dizzy from so much rose.

The son is dizzy too.

vii.

The portion of his tongue that held her name can never taste sweet. Each year he tries, drops a sugar cube to dissolve, but still no sweet. Instead, he eats limes to the bitter rinds.

viii.

Once there was a woman who left.

Her name Latifa, meant gentle one. Her father made her

gentler by nicknaming her golpakhta, cotton blossom. According to the legend we dipped our ears into, her heart turned into a bird and slipped out of her grasp. Her husband, bed bound, could not stop her from leaving. Her newborn son could not stop her. The milk from her breasts ached for her son's mouth, but even milk could not stop her.

What was all this madness under her feet? A sickness the hem of her wide skirt spread to her toes.

Maps to be read in veins were reserved only for men. But the static that stung our men in the head and told them to go, go, go! must have been contagious, especially for one so bound in pastel veils. The static was electric from so many layers of silk rubbing against her skin.

ix.

Jalalabad: The orchard is streaming with iridescent voices. The trees are ripe with children and oranges, sometimes limes. A courtyard bubbles with a birthday party, the walls stagger from too much laughter. The house is bare except for suitcases. 1975.

My father's heart stung by an ancient bee and my mother, still shy with her daughter, sit on the last pieces of furniture while the elders tell stories of what the haj may be like, of what my grandmother may look like after all these years, living in the glow of Mecca and so near God.

Would her face have changed? Would she be more beautiful than she was when she left for the glittering gold of the desert without husband or son? The old men click through their prayer beads lost in this wondering . . .

Scandal, such scandal she had caused.

**Zohra Saed** is a Brooklyn-based Afghan American poet. She is co-editing the upcoming anthology, *Drop by Drop, We Make a River: Afghan Writings of War, Exile and Return*. This is the first collection of Afghan literature in English.

**Schuldt**, an artist and poet in English and German, divides his time between New York City and Germany. He is the author of sixteen volumes, acclaimed radiophonic works, and live and broadcast performances. He received the Scheerbart Award in 2000 at the Frankfurt Book Fair. Two of his works are in the English *Oulipo Compendium*. Schuldt's *Lustrufe aus Talmi-Welten*, an *a cappella* work in Croatian German for the *Berliner Festspiele*, premiered on January 1, 2000, at the Berlin Philharmonic.

**Shashi Tharoor** is the author of seven books, including the award-winning political satire, *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), and *India: From Midnight to the Millennium* (1997), a study of Indian politics, society and economic development after independence, as well as numerous articles, op-eds, and literary reviews in a wide range of publications. He is also the recipient of several journalism and literary awards, including the Commonwealth Writers' Prize. A United Nations official since 1978, Tharoor is currently Under Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information at UN Headquarters in New York.

**Tod Thilleman** is the author of *The Corybantes, A World of Nothing But Nations*, *The New Frequency, Wallpaper & Lightning, An Artist's Diary, Between, Blank Verse, Anatomical Sketches and Daemon of the World, Entelechy*, and is finishing work on a novel, *Gowanus Notecard Abduction*.

**Rodrigo Toscano**'s three books are *The Disparities, Partisans, and Platform*. His poetry has recently appeared in *Cross Cultural Poetics, Kenning Audio Editions*, and *Cities Of Chance: An Anthology of New Poetry from The United States and Brazil*. His work has been translated into Spanish, Portuguese, and German.

**Carmen Valle**, who is from Puerto Rico, has published numerous books of poetry, including, most recently, a bilingual edition, *Entre la vigilia y el sueño de las fieras*. Her poems have appeared in anthologies in Puerto Rico and the continental US, as well as in journals such as *The World, El Signo del gorrión, Scriptura, and The Por-*