

## SAHAR MURADI

*Sahar Muradi's poetry deals with the family, and through this storytelling, we enter an understanding of the experience of Afghans in America. The running theme in the following two poems is loss—its unspeakableness, its consequences. Exile is sometimes a physical manifestation, such as in the second poem, where feet are allergic to the new land they are shuffled around in. Homeland is a hologram, found in old textbooks and in her father's dreaming eyes.*

### Of My Mother

*Madar jaan, your face. Your face is more than language knows. I cannot explain your face. A handful of family photographs, from the last twenty years in America. And your face is the only challenge. Who but the mother has a face more than language?*

*Madar jaan, how do these pictures stay intact? How do you contain everything that you carry? How do you remain on these thin gelatin sheets with the feat of a dancer stuck on a page?*

*Did your mother sense in the dark of her belly how hard you'd live? Could she predict all your losses? Did she guess the pressure of her last embrace before we boarded the bus for Pakistan? Or the redness of your brothers' red eyes? Or the last flashes of your country through a dirty window?*

*Did she expect the three hundred days between the night of my father's escape and the morning of our departure? Or the number of weeks the black Beetle parked outside our house?*

*Or the number of knocks on our door each night before Shabnam answered that *padar* was away on business? Did she see the last flashes of your country through a dirty window?*

*Madar jaan*, did she see how wide my father would open the windows and condemn the *kalashnikovs* on the streets? Did she see the black ringlets of his name on the list of who would be snatched to hell? Did she see your nephew snatched? Did she see the last flashes of your country through a dirty window?

Did she guess the price you'd sell our house for at the last minute? Or everything you'd leave inside it?

Did she see your students ask you where you were going? Or when you would be back? Or the last flashes of your country through a dirty window?

*Madar jaan*, the last flashes of your country—!



On the bus sucking sugarcane. You give us sugarcane stalks to keep busy with, to keep our mouths shut with. If we speak, the soldiers who stop the bus will know we aren't border people. So you silence us with these sweet, sticky plants and keep us dirty. Two weeks, no baths, and wrapped in three layers. It's how we can pass. Border people have nothing, so we carry nothing. The hurt in Jawad's hands from the absence of his slingshot; he wonders if there'll be blackbirds where we're going. Shabnam tries to keep her feet still; there is a little itch, a tiny tickle in them, where the pedals of her tricycle fit. How long would it take to reach Pakistan on a tricycle? I think of my little bag, my *khalta-gac*, the pillowcase that I keep all my treasures in—apple seeds and lost buttons and little webs of lint. Your mother says she will keep it safe, for when we come back from the trip, with new treasures. But you, you have so many more things than we do, so your missing is so much bigger. It takes up all the room on our seat. It splits the vinyl, fogs the windows, and spreads to either end of the bus. It's already hard to be comfortable, with the rocks under the tires and the dust in our eyes and our lips sealed tight around the cane, but now your missing is coming off your face like steam, and none of us can breathe.



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*Madar jaan*, your face is more than one. It is not a single face. Someone once told me that I have so many different faces, and that makes me beautiful, that the measure of beauty is the ability to change expressions completely. After Kabul, you never kept the same face.

The three photographs we have from Afghanistan. The first, your portrait as a teenager, in black and white profile, your blouse of daisies, your hair in waves, the cool beauty of your face, eyes softly open, halfway dreaming.

The second, you newly married, sitting on a porch beside my father's grandmother and his great-aunt, in your pink bellbottoms and a brown and tan sweater that you designed yourself and that my father knitted in his factory (you said he finally got it right after four tries), with your long hair reddened at its ends and lazy smiling eyes.

The third, at a party with you in the center surrounded by your two daughters and your son. Shabnam, on your right, at five years and in a green gingham dress, mouth in a wide-open laugh and hands apart as if she'd just clapped them; me, at three, standing up on a platform between you and Shabnam, wearing a red gingham dress and a smile made of mischief, in my hands something small and blue; Jawad on your left at twelve in a red shirt with tan outline, in his right hand a cup and the cup at his lips, hiding his mouth. You are at the center in a dark skirt and white T-shirt on which is printed a black and white photograph of my father. In your hands, a plate of cake and a spoon between your fingers. Your hair is tied back, your face glowing a light pink makeup, and your eyes, your eyes are homes to tender things.

## Exile, or My Father's Elbow

Every day Bob walks into the café and asks my father, *hey, Ali, how's that elbow?*

My father stands behind the register, his elbow propped up on the counter, his head in his hand, and looks out the window.

Bob laughs, *don't work that elbow too hard now!*