

Zan, Zendegi, Azadi

A plea
آزادی، زندگی، زن، for the ends
of our daughters' hair
and imported tubs of dye
by our bathroom sinks promising
Western overtones in violet and blue.
For our interrupted narrative
where sunbeams still remember the ritual
of reaching through a window to catch
the careless toss of a handful
of hair out of a face, for highlights
growing out in tension and mistrust
at the same ordinary pace
as elsewhere. For our roots pounded
with surahs and solemnity,
pinned and pressed to grow yet lie
in place under the Imam's benediction,
our shelter from the imperialist threat,
when really, all our daughters need
is a little diversion, same as elsewhere,
volume, the cheerfulness of henna,
the stripping bleach of an influencer,
to be seen on TikTok, botox,
notwithstanding the dark and tweets
and the chirping discontent and filtered static.

Tonight, we feed our men lavash,
paneer sabzi, daughters refuse supper
and walk away, turning their backs
on the goldfish that swim
for their reflections, crossing the dusk
of courtyards where heavy-hearted, the pomegranates
crack and wash the autumn light in ablution.

Tonight, at every street corner perches
a wide-angle gaze boring into flesh.
0.68 caliber paint, plastic pellets, ammunition, cudgels

are made halal tonight, heaven ordained
to arrive from شرق, Gharb, the four directions
made halal tonight, in this twilight before
and after the maghrib prayer beatings
will be halal tonight. Surveillance cameras
roll and note the degree of coverage, the wantonness
of our girls whirling in Western ways, flames
devouring headscarves. The imported purple, neon,
crazed ends of millennial hair gawking in lipstick pink.

Tonight, the mobile phones
held high by a chain of sons corralled to document
a midriff bared on the pavement, the panic,
pinched tips of two petite dunes,
preadolescence, braless, and blood
flowing unrestrainable into a pattern
before she had a chance to bleed and be
kissed on one cheek then the other, by us mothers,
her aunts, great aunts, before مادر جان
had the chance to brush her clean, washed bangs
out of her eyes, kiss her forehead,
and compliment her for coming of age.

Poem Where I Come to on Nowruz Isolating

in another's bed. It's day four
and I've slept through that moment of the year
when light conquers darkness, my ancestral face-off
fought and won; an hour ago, Nowruz
was once again Pirooz, and I didn't even hop on FaceTime

to offer my blessings, my mother's old face
made up to look new, her tattooed eyebrows
touched up, her new dress, her new stockings
must have taken double the time
to slip on as this time last year. Feeling sorry
for myself I cry and cough at the rain.
It's D.C. where I am a stranger

to the faux-grilles windows, the tall and low
façades, rows of ruddy bricks
lined up like good teeth. I think on perfection

and the honeysuckle that grew crooked
to hide our brick wall back home, and windows
effulgent on the New Day, inviting the world
to step through, help itself to light

rebounding, the pallor of noon-berenji,
the sheen on cut diamonds of bakhlava,
to light fetching the four-leafed clovers
of noon-nokhodchi from their midst.
I think on sunlight victorious and savoring

the white specks of salt on the emerald-rose flesh
of pistachios, and the lean line of Persian cucumbers,
each standing a head taller than its neighbor,
circling the clean lip of the fruit bowl.

Swishing another sip of warm tea
back and forth, I think on what it would take
for the world to right itself. The bitterness
of Paxlovid in my mouth unconquerable.