

DREAMING MY ANCESTORS: A POETIC INQUIRY INTO LONGING AND LEGACY

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Abstract

This poetic inquiry traces certain aspects of my identity as the daughter of an Iranian immigrant growing up in the United States. I use autobiographic life writing (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, Leggo, 2009) to lay out (some of) the bones of a larger personal and family story, followed by a suite of poems addressing some of the mysteries, wonderments, gifts and reckonings that I am left with—and which are inherent to—my misplaced, scattered family history and lineage. Although my father shared little about his life in Iran before coming to the U.S., with the help of other relatives I have gleaned a few key details that reveal a sense of Iran the place, the culture, and our family history there, encircled by my own layered longings to experience and know all of this myself firsthand. Part imagined-travelogue, part memoir, this poetic inquiry embraces the idea that even things that are lost, never known, or left behind are part of a beautiful mosaic that resonates through time and place, telling stories of ancestry, memory, language, migration, and the legacies that endure.

Bio

Maya Borhani enjoys wandering and wondering outdoors to connect with her poetic and spiritual muses. Originally from Northern California, she has also dwelt on islands in the Salish Sea (in Washington state and British Columbia), San Francisco, Seattle and Vancouver, BC. Near to completing a PhD in Educational Studies, her dissertation engages autobiographical life writing and poetic inquiry to explore living poetically, poetry as performative pedagogy, and pedagogies of place. Uncertainties precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic have also beneficently revealed opportunities to engage a slower pedagogy, and deeper understandings of walking paths of a “lived curriculum” in place. Contact: mayatracyborhani@uvic.ca

Acknowledgments

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To begin, I would like to offer my respect and gratitude to the Nisenan (Southern Maidu) and Wašiw (Washoe) people, on whose traditional unceded territories I live and work here on western slopes of the Sierra Nevada mountains in Northern California. Heo!



As part of my autobiographical research into what it means to live poetically (Leggo, 2005) as a woman, poet, performer, researcher and teacher, I ponder and sometimes wrestle with aspects of my identity as the daughter of an Iranian immigrant growing up in the United States. Through poetic inquiry (Prendergast, 2009; Vincent, 2018), I seek to trace certain aspects of that experience, and to illuminate and consider ongoing questions that arise in the process. I also use autobiographic life writing (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, Leggo, 2009) to lay out (some of) the bones of a larger personal and family story that introduces the suite of poems that follows. As methodological enfoldment, autobiographical life writing blends well with poetic inquiry, which is also particularly well-suited to conjuring autobiographical and autoethnographic reflection. Remembering that “[p]oetry has the power to highlight slippery identity-negotiation processes and present more nuanced views of marginalized and stigmatized identities” (Faulkner, 2017, p. 93), these poems function as social research into those sticky identity negotiations of a lost (or misplaced) heritage, and repercussions thereof. These poems also perform as “exo-autoethnography” (Denejkina, 2017), or the “exploration of a history whose events the researcher does not experience directly, but . . . impacts the researcher through familial, or other personal connections” (p. 1). Exo-autoethnography has been used to address the generational trauma that children of immigrants sometimes experience when trying to make sense of their parents’ emotional responses (or lack thereof) to their immigration experiences (Denejkina, 2017).

Like other autobio-ethnographic approaches, poetic inquiry embraces care as a primary ethos in teasing out these threads of a tangled weave. Likewise, poetic inquiry enfolds embodiment and reflexivity into its creative processes, by contemplating marginalization and difference as it relates to language use, repudiating body-mind (and personal-public) splits, and offering alternative forms and formats for written/spoken words that can be directed toward social change and feminist concerns (Faulkner, 2018). For example, several of the poems herein speak to discordant aspects of my family’s patriarchal legacies, performing a feminist inclination. Poetic inquiry readily captures sensual details of field work in experientially evocative ways, infusing data with materiality; this is one way in which poetic inquiry “connect[s] writing as embodiment to ethnographic practice” (Faulkner, 2018, p. 18). As praxis, I think through things by writing poetry: poetry’s matrix, its flow and arrangement on the page (line, verse, white space) and in the ear (melody, rhythm, alliteration) offers a canvas, method and means, within which I respond to and explore the discordant and displaced details of my family’s history, helping me to make sense of jumbled facts and feelings. Thus, playing with poetic form and sensibility helps me think through difficult topics, and to organize the unorganizable in some sort of meaningful aesthetic manner.

Through the reflexivity inherent in poetry, I can explore murky truths and imagined fictions as I try to parse out who my family was, and who am I in that lineage. Embracing elements of “the confessional tale—revealing some of the personal aspects of fieldwork—allows for self-revelation and indiscretion. . . to blend autobiography with analyses” (Coffey, 2004, p. 46). Educationally speaking, sharing my family’s life stories may lead others to acquire insight into shared or similar experiences; we find our own story in the stories of others. This feels like urgent learning and social work, necessitated by continuing global migrations and crucial discussions around Indigenous sovereignty and the repatriation of traditional territories. We all just want to be home.

Poetic inquiry as critical social inquiry

Poetic inquiry is particularly well suited to ruminations on critical social questions. Through the medium of

poetry, difficult and painful truths find voice, venue, and safe space to seek traction in broader conversations. To that end, some of the poems that follow wonder about convoluted cross-fertilizations that occur through diasporic migration, and possible ways forward that might seek justice and reconciliatory action. Considerations of my immigrant family's arrival in America bump up against reflections on the storied and epistemological nature of land (Basso, 1996; Meyer, 2008), both as pertains to the politics and social realities of settling in contested territories, but also in wondering what doesn't, *can't*, travel with the immigrant to a new land: how can stories embedded in a particular landscape make the passage across oceans and continents? Where is the immigrant's place—as a new arrival—against a backdrop of ongoing colonial-settler projects (Chatterjee, 2019)? How does the immigrant's search for (a new) home(place) align with complexities of decolonization and the rematriation of Indigenous lands in that place? (See Coleman, 2019, for a discussion of distinctions and parallels between Indigenous place and diasporic space). These are questions too vast to answer in this essay, but they nag at the edges of my consciousness as I seek to decipher my own place and identity as a border-dweller within an immigrant diaspora I only half-inherited (yet feel half-empty without), living on colonized lands. Poetry helps me document, praise, untangle and decode the journey.

The immigrant's movement is different than mine: they are moving forward, toward something in a new land, seeking to leave something of the old place or ways behind; while I am moving ever backwards, seeking to retrieve find and reclaim something I never even had. Something lost never known; a distant time imagined presently. I think of my Iranian nomadic ancestors and wonder how much my steps inadvertently echo theirs, a rhizome sprouting from its own break, adapting to a (solo) nomadic-subsistence existence in a modern-day milieu, with car as my camel? I also wonder what I “know,” thanks to them, that I was never “taught.” Like how I know plant medicines, and how I've learned to “read” a landscape. Or how I love poetry like it's my own breath. Backward and forward in time and space, spiraling through “chronotopia” (Braidotti, 2011) and a parallel sort of *geographotopia*, I live constantly displaced and yet critically placed to ride that wave, seeking what David Greenwood calls a “cosmological homecoming” (2019); that is, awareness and presence in “practices that support our own becoming—in relationship with ourselves, each other, the land, and the cosmos” (2019, p. 371).

I agree with Greenwood that this is “soul work”: coming home to ourselves in place while wrestling with the complicities and complexities of decolonization and reinhabitation. Deep, ongoing soul work; the kind poetry is perfectly cut out for. Did my father lose touch with his soul when he left Iran and decided to leave everything—memories, stories, language, poetry—behind? Sometimes I feel I have spent my entire life playing catch-up, learning to feed my own soul as I continually search for “home.” I embrace the complexities of this journey: the jarring gaps between pressures of assimilation by indoctrination and reverence for my Persian cultural inheritance; issues around not quite “passing” as white, yet often being expected to; a sense of otherness around things I could plainly see and understand, and others I could not. Knowing that the Iranian homeland I imagine—and in some ways long to “return” to, or at least visit—is likely not as singular or as integrated as my imagination might paint it; sifting the threads of such distinctions now becomes part of the journey, and of stories yet to be told.

A Way In . . .

I no longer try to describe where I've been. It is not possible to capture in a few sentences the essence of a journey, a pilgrimage that is of the mind and heart as well as of the body. I am learning

that a pilgrimage is a private thing, not easily shared. There are places we go where the people we love cannot follow.

~ Gelareh Asayesh, *Saffron Sky: A Life Between Iran and America*

My father didn't share much about his life in Iran; neither his exact reasons for leaving, nor many details about his family or his life in that place that was a world away and yet seemed to me—an Iranian imprinted child who didn't look at all like the other kids in our sunny California hamlet—like the most mystical, magical place on earth. Partly yearning for knowledge of that ancestral home, and partly from that tender place that some children experience where they feel like a stranger in their own home, I craved details of life in Iran and our family there. The stories I made up (that I was the Shah's long-lost daughter, awaiting rescue from my suburban American malaise)—part fact, part fiction—were my child's way of trying to bridge a gap between the little I knew of my father's story and the mysteries shrouding his persona. (We do have some distant connection to the Shah's family; there were also murmurings of the Shah's secret police coming to call. I suspect these disparate threads jumbled in my child's imagination as I pulled from each the elements needed to story my own existence at the time.) I eventually outgrew my childhood princess fantasies. My imagination, however, remained eternally piqued; this fed my vocation for writing and later, my practice of writing stories (Richardson, 2000) as autobio-ethnographic identity reflection.

Imaginary “stories” of life in a country I knew little about—so distant, geographically, so foreign, culturally—countered that unexplained sense of displacement I felt within my own life. As a kid, the Iranian part of me stood out glaringly in an otherwise mostly white American milieu: my features heavier (dark eyes, dense lashes, thick brows), my skin olive-toned, my sensitive disposition embodying more emotional intensity than most of my peers (hands gesticulating, voice impassioned, dark countenance a storm cloud of fierce determination). Was this innate Persian affect coming through me (is there such a thing, as innate cultural affect in a child born far from shores of origin)? Or was it learned behavior, modeling my father's intensity at home? Both?

As a child, my earliest knowledge of Iran was gleaned from my dad's mannerisms, his slightly accented speech (which he tried so hard to disguise behind perfectly spoken English), and two books of Iranian poetry in our home. The first, a green leather volume of Omar Khayyam's *Rubiyat*, contained jewel-toned miniature paintings opposite a quatrain in Farsi, also translated into English, French, and German. This page-by-page translation (which my young mind considered and contemplated, linguistically speaking) sparked my interest in the French language, which I studied well into my undergraduate years. The Farsi script presented a complete mystery, much as I admired its delicate dots and swirls that looked like Morse code, and other than I understood that the book read from back-to-front to accommodate the right-to-left writing structure of the Persian language. This made the book (and all things Persian, by extension) that much more exciting and compelling to my childhood imagination: a secret world where things run backwards, anything possible. The paintings depicted dancers dressed in brightly colored scarves with facial features like mine, cradling lutes and drums as their skirts whirled about their ankles, turbaned men in relaxed garments, jugs of wine at hand, wild deer and exotic birds in the background. These scenes of pleasure and tranquility profoundly attracted me, while the simple quatrains infused me with my first experience of spiritual longing; poems that answered the big questions through the most mundane of metaphors: a prayer mat, the arc of the sun across the sky, singers in a tavern. The moral questions and riddles embedded in the quatrains seemed more interesting and more welcoming to me than the religious instruction I

was receiving at the time through my parents' Baptist faith, with its image of an all-fearsome God the Father demanding dutiful obedience (echoing how things had to be in our home). The little green book soothed me. It was one of the few things my father, a medical doctor, had brought with him from Iran, a fact that my young inquiry-inclined mind found particularly curious and crucial: Why did the man who dismissed poetry as a "soft science" carry this beautiful little volume across the world with him? Was it sentiment, a memory of something or someone? Had it belonged to his mother? Or had he once read and benefitted from the concise quatrains himself, appreciative of his own culture as I now was from this long distance removed? I never had a chance to ask him that question. He was not an easy man to know.

The small green *Rubiyat* sits beside a royal blue, coffee-table sized edition of *Shahnameh, The Persian Book of Kings*, Iran's national epic, composed in the 10th century by the poet Ferdowsi (and illustrated with over two hundred figurative paintings and illuminations). These two books fed my spiritual and aesthetic imagination about ancient Iran. They showed me (some of) the missing picture of a vast and beautiful culture standing behind my silent father. Combined with television news broadcasts from 1960s-early 1970s Tehran—a cosmopolitan and chic city dubbed the "Paris of the East"—I began to form a picture of a smart, modern society within an ancient country steeped in musical, poetic, and artistic traditions; a country and culture to be proud of, but which my father consistently dismissed as not keeping step with modern (Western?) norms. During this time, my early teens, we also witnessed on TV all the technicolor pageantry and regalia surrounding Reza Shah's celebration of the 2500-year anniversary of Cyrus the Great's unification of the Persian Empire. This was quite the spectacle, stirring a vague, unknowable longing in me even at the age of 12, seeing this sea of people who looked like me proudly celebrating their rich heritage of music, poetry, and dance, on parade in their shimmering silks and glittering gold bracelets, earrings, pendants, and rings. I could not understand my father's insistence on leaving this seemingly beautiful and bejeweled country behind him in the past, and not sharing the gifts of that cultural inheritance with us, his family.

Yet, some details slipped through this puzzling silence. A feast for Persian New Year every year at the spring equinox, dad suddenly jovial for that one day of the year. (I did not learn till I was in my 40s that *Nowruz*, as Persian New Year is known throughout the Middle East, is the most revered holiday of the year, and has been compared to Easter, Christmas, and New Year's combined, with its thirteen days of socializing, feasting, revelry and celebration of new life.) Picking pomegranates in early October before local teenagers could do so to splatter them on houses as a Halloween prank, we stored them in the cool garage (a trick my dad remembered from his youth in Iran) to eat all winter long, Persian-style: quartering the orange-red orbs and biting into their tightly clustered ruby seeds like an apple, savoring that delicious burst of wine-rich juices; or rolling and pressing the unopened fruit to burst the seeds within, then biting a small hole in the leathery skin and sucking out the sweet juice. Heaven.

Some revelations about dad's Persian ways were more jarring. At the beginning of the Iranian revolution, my aunt and uncle wanted to get their oldest child, a daughter, out of the country's bubbling political foment. They arranged a marriage for her to an older Persian man living in the UK. My 16-year-old sister and I (then 15) balked; how could they "arrange" her marriage? We'd grown up in the U.S. where (to our knowledge) such things didn't happen, not in the 20th century anyhow. We were shocked, but more shocking still was when our father turned to us and said in utter seriousness, "What's wrong with that?" This was the first time we really "got it" that for all his rhetoric of being "American" (read, "modern"), there was still an old-school Iranian patriarch living inside of him. Previously, we'd just thought he was exceptionally stern and an exact-

ing perfectionist, but with no context to ground those perceptions; this was the first time we connected those behaviors and issues to a cultural divide between us, and a patriarchal mindset distinct from the burgeoning feminism emerging in 1970s North America that was our everyday reality.

In the years since my father's death, I have pieced together a few more details of my Iranian family story. I still don't have anything near a complete picture of my father's life in Iran prior to his emigration, or our extended family's history. But I know this much: I am a carbon copy, quite eerily so, of my father's mother, the grandmother I never met; she died before I was born, a few scant years after my father's arrival in the U.S. I marvel at that remarkable resemblance that my father never saw fit to mention, wondering at the *gravitas* in that, the weight of holding all that inside. These many years later, I still don't know which is more stunning: that I look exactly like her, or that he never told me. I am left wondering (why(not)).

My father's younger sister and I also share a likeness in my grandmother's image, though not as startlingly identical. I first met my aunt in my mid-30s; sadly, I was only able to visit her a few times before she died. She spoke next to no English (nor I Farsi), but we bonded deeply through gazing into each other's eyes (our look-alike faces that undoubtedly would have reminded her of her long-dead mother), and a mutual love of music and dance. As traditional Iranian music played on the TV, she would circle her arms in the air above her head, smiling, snapping arthritic fingers, while I danced around her seated form, hips swaying, wrists circling, arms rising in a flutter of snake-arms, smiling back at her.

I am grateful that I grew up knowing my uncle (a doctor, like my father), his cosmopolitan wife (who looked like Jackie Kennedy), and their two children; they came to visit us twice in the 1960s, when we cousins were all kids. My cousins taught us to sing *Do-Re-Mi* in Farsi, the five of us singing happily together in the back of the big blue station wagon wherever we went. (*The Sound of Music* was a big hit that year: 1965; post-Cuban missile crisis; though still deeply embroiled in Viet Nam at the time, Nazism and fascism seeming far behind us, as a nation and a world. O, History.) Like children everywhere, we bonded over the universal languages of summer and water: swimming in Lake Tahoe, so similar in its evergreen-lined shores to those of our fathers' childhood idyll the Caspian Sea; building sandcastles, our brown Iranian skin only tanning darker, rarely burning; toasting and eating messy gooey "s'mores" over an open campfire, snow-capped peaks reflecting a rosy alpenglow long after the sun's descent. My cousin was studying ballet and could dance parts of *The Nutcracker Suite*; I craved dance lessons and copied her endlessly, but my parents thought piano lessons more suitable (than what, I never understood). Meanwhile, I danced my way through the world on my own (untrained) terms, jumping rope, skipping, spinning cartwheels, and as soon as I moved out of my parents' house I sought dance lessons in earnest, fulfilling that childhood dream and initiating a lifelong connection to dance and the performing arts.

My uncle and his wife escaped to the US during the 1979 Iranian revolution and remade their lives in California, where I visited with them frequently in the years that followed. From my uncle I learned about stuffing dates with walnuts and feta cheese for breakfast; my aunt churned out a delectable flow of *pollo* (rice), *Khoresh Bademjan* (traditional eggplant stew, my favorite), *Kuku Sabzi* (egg, greens, and onion pie, kind of like a frittata), and *Ash* (barley soup). Food and stories: stories of my cousins playing together every summer in Abadan by the sea; stories of my father and his brother as kids in Tehran, riding in goat-pulled carts; and occasionally, stories of my father the superhero who my other relatives all seemed to venerate and adore.

Some details that have emerged have illuminated old secrets, puzzling deceptions, and some tender and unexpected gifts. More gaps to be filled in, if they ever can be, now that my father's generation is all but gone (survived only by my uncle's wife, and my aunt's husband, in their 80s and 90s respectively). These more recent revelations have not yet had time to dwell fluidly under the flowing river of mind, letting water wash over them like stones of time, reflexively polishing their faceted faces with poetically inquiring autobiographical reflection. When they have had such time to rest and be replenished, poetry will surely help guide their stories to the light of day.

Meanwhile, we descendants are now a clan of daughters (my only male name-bearing cousin died young with no children, my own brother blessed with three daughters); as such, it seems that this branch of the name "Borhani" will pass away with my generation. Given this, my youngest daughter decided to name her firstborn son Cyrus, after the much-revered Persian emperor. "How we go on" (Snyder, 1983).

The more I discover of our family's mysteries and untold stories, the more certain I am that my father grieved his whole life for some(of the)thing(s) he left behind, and the things he never told us—omissions which then created a break in the "fragile sequence" (Stafford, 1998) that binds our family here in America to generations before us back in Iran. This intuitive knowledge of my father's grief emboldens me in my search for, if not answers, clues to the mysteries he left behind. And it softens me, reminding me we can never fully know another's story. I have no choice but to offer him my compassion, trusting that he, too, had to make hard choices in life, that things didn't always go according to plan, that perhaps he had to improvise, sacrifice, give up entirely—and in the fact of his emigration, start anew. There are moments, days, when I still yearn for more complete answers. I, too, grieve for what was lost and left behind.

Where there are mysteries unsolved, things deliberately left unsaid, hidden and forgotten, how does the student of one's history resolve these obstacles? There are questions that my father never answered, stories my surviving relatives may not know. Some of these stories may be lost forever to the desert sands that blow through Abadan, the forested slopes surrounding the Caspian Sea, or buried under the great oceans crossed to get to this migratory place. The older I get, the more at peace I am with that; just as I am at peace with looking back, pulling threads, knitting together (and/or making art) where I can from the holes in this fabric that wraps me in its history, that warms the roots of my life. This feels like giving thanks to my departed relations and those ancestors I never knew, for the gift of life they have given me. Without them, where would I be? Without their stories to guide me, how would my feet find their way back home?

Poetic inquiry helps me wander and wonder in these realms of mystery filled with missing details, mixed timelines, veiled innuendos, a few clear "facts," and curiously unaddressed ghosts and legends. Poetic inquiry helps me edge up against facts *and* fictions, speculations and unknowing (Seidel, 2017), as I parse loss, legacy, what's left behind, and what I get to keep. More and more I see these lost and muted legacies as beautiful pieces of a tapestry that was possibly once-intact (and possibly not), now torn apart and scattered in the four directions—scraps floating on the wind, lining a crow's nest, a shred of brightly colored silk here, worn embroidered brocade there. I gather and stitch together whatever pieces I can before they fly away again to unknown destinations and stories yet to be lost or sewn into place. The following poems help me find my way within those scraps, and to make up (fill in) my own story despite of, or perhaps because of, those very same far-flung pieces and missing details. After all, misplaced scattered pieces make a beautiful mosaic too; migration, memory, and mirrored murmurings of home resonate through time and space, coming to roost here in these poems about memory, language, ancestry, migration, and the legacies that endure.

This Persian Thing

Persian heritage,
no language—
part of the tangle.
Till I learn a few lines
from an archaic Rumi poem,
a sort of Shakespearean Farsi
useless in the modern world.
But little by little, words come:
morphemes and glottal stops,
the impossible *gh* and manageable *kh*;
a beginner's vocabulary.
Orality sings and holds the keys
to speech, to conversation, to melodious
harmony, nuance and affect—
I keep listening, forming sounds
with inexperienced lips
listening to the rhythms
and exultations
practicing my child's Farsi,
tongue rolls and stumbling consonants,
tasting a dream of Mashhad
until one day
I will make the long journey home,
home to hear the whole world speaking Farsi,
root tongue finally connected beneath my feet
to sprout and grow like a scented rose tree
every breath, every cell, every vocal cord blossoming
from the dry desert oasis this throat once was.

"A Mountain I Have Loved Will Not Forget Me"

Basho says, *The journey itself is home.*
No home but the lands we pass through
on our journey through life.
Leaving Ireland for America
for what she knew would likely be her last time,
never again to make that great sea voyage
never again to return
to the land of her birth
Irish poet folklorist Ella Young said,
"A mountain I have loved will not forget me."¹

Does a mountain I have never met
remember me?
I am thinking of Mount Tochal, outside of Tehran.
What is my children's inheritance
from this ancestral mountain we have never met?
Does circumambulating Tochal in my mind's eye
pass down to memory's feet?
Where does Mount Tochal live inside of me?

Daughters (For Petra & Elena)

Their twin pools of brown eyes pinned resolutely
on the future journey back centuries
to streets of Shiraz, Isfahan, Tehran
where great, great grandmothers gazed from wide
dark pools like their own, like my father's, like mine.

Dream of Mashhad

I trace my ancestry back
to the people of *Mashhad*
who walked in from the desert
with carpet-laden camels,
saffron, *sargol*
and a bride named *Eshrat*,
daughter of the tribal chief.
Eshrat, it's me—
your granddaughter in *Amrika*.
I carry your memory inside me,
shared heartbeat pulsing
across miles, years
a river of memories,
places and things I've never seen
but somehow taste, and know.
Pomegranate, *anar*,
jeweled seeds as red as garnets,
saffron as golden and generous
as sunlight.
Roses.
Your son taught me roses.
Soil mounded within a circular moat,
deep slow watering coaxing

luxuriant blooms of every shade
and hue, a scented pleasure garden
my enchantment and delight.

Ripe melons made sweeter with tangy salt
sprinkle of black pepper
figs, mulberries, pistachios.
Fragrant inheritance of a past
your son tried to forget
I was born to remember,
Mamaan-bozorg, Madar-jun,
Mamani—Grandmother,
this is *Nemat's* youngest daughter
who you never knew—looking
through eyes like yours,
lines of your face
identically mirrored in mine.
Mamani, I remember (dream) the places
your son left behind,
blue mountains, blooming orchards,
Caspian Sea,
(y)our smile, the old ways,
summer nights under a silken coverlet
a sea of stars turning worlds over our heads.

Mandorla of the Middle Ground²: A Meditation

what is ?
middle ground
?
(shift)

*mandorla*³

that in-between space
between
two overlapping
circles

Indigenous <—> Settler
(*mandorla* in the middle
almond-shaped eye of wisdom
this middle ground)

Indigenous <—> Immigrant <—> Settler
(*mandorla* sprouts lotus petals
around almond eye opened wide—
many middle grounds?)

triumvirate
the question of becoming
of/in/to
places we inhabit
life journeys
in/to the heart of places

(body is home)

no fixed assignments

fluidity between pillars of identity
like water flowing
over rocks moving
around/under/in-between

everything

slowly eroding
sometimes tumbling
massive boulders rolling downstream
in winter's churn and floe

water flowing through all
like music a language dancing
in our ears
flowing and dancing
through all

(*shift*)
middle ground

a meeting place

the center spirals
margins and middle
at on(c)e

curving edges

carving
lines of flight
in perpetual
motion

mandorla-eye reflecting all

an edge
cutting its own shape in the world
a margin
wrapping its arms around itself

*(is this the dynamic
of nomads?)*

all edges connect
margin becomes hoop
we flow in and out
of overlapping circles

(shift)
middle ground

mandorla of the heart

Language Comes Home

Language,
more than written words
more than speech or utterance
redolent with gesture and movement
drips down around us
like moonlight, stalactite, starlight,
saltwater brine, wave light,
the rhythm of tides.

Like breath.

Breath of life.
In language,
we are what we know.
A raised eyebrow,
angry words,
shiny gaze through tangled green undergrowth,
your mother's tender goodnight touch.

Cupped hands round a flickering flame
the light-struck face
this glowing halo
 a prayer of offering
 to Haq
 spirit
 that is
 breath
 smoke rising on tendrils
 of clear air
 now wind
curling up into unknown breezes
away into transition
translation
transliteration
transcription
turn of phrase, trick of the tongue
tra la la language traipsing away again
toward change, agent,
shifting rhizomatic growth
into something different,
something new . . .
Language,
that traveling minstrel
musical mythsinger,
wanderer wonderer émigré itinerant
indigent lover of life and lands,
my wandering, breathy, billowing mother tongue
storied in land sky and sea
in the call and response of voice and ancestry
language moving through me
always on her way back home.

A Persian Sestina: Veils of Remembrance⁴

Centuries part like a rippling sea: I hear murmurs,
ancestors breathing beneath lofted blankets
of silk and sheep's wool, dreams averting the panic
of pending immigration, its high generosity,
sights on a new land where children don't die dancing,
where you pull a deep breath and exhale.

Quiet cobalt blue night; the wind exhales.

Inchoate sounds sigh in chorus, the distant murmur
of memories surging within you, how dancing
invariably spells out a song, how a blanket
of stars, pillowed earth, suffice for generosity
and soothe your dreams of returning panic.

When morning sun illuminates dawn, does night panic?
Rising to greet first light, we bow in prayer, exhale,
make room for throbbing hearts, this generosity
unparalleled, whispered in muted red murmurs
that ripple and fold as if humming a blanket
of song to wrap me, ecstatic, in its dancing.

By the time I was born, your stories hushed, dancing
just served to remind you of the rising panic
of memories shoved under smothering blankets
of exile turned inward against yourself. Exhale.
Let the ancestors' song ease your mind, murmuring
to all four chambers of your heart their boundless generosity.

I gathered saffron from golden fields, generosity
rising from each slender stem, my bare feet dancing
in celebration, prayer of my own murmuring,
an offering to my ancestors, their hidden panic
finally healed in this long-awaited chance to exhale
songs of praise for the mosaic that is our blanket.

Who knows what stories lie inside a folded blanket
of wool and desire? What grief, what generosity,
what lost, what found, what taken away? Exhale
the past, but welcome nimble memory, dancing
on feet that kiss the earth when no longer panicked,
ancestors joining in this quiet circle of murmuring.

Hidden inside the murmur of time, a storied blanket
soothes panic in her wild generosity,
delivers dancing to the wind, sighs, and exhales.

La Émigré (Mohājer)

We've all heard how language
slipped into the suitcase,
sailed across an ocean and
popped up in Minnesota,

disguised as snow.
Language, that vagabond,
hitchhiker and thief,
escaped between prison bars
 like wind
stealing through an iron grate,
disappeared over mountains passes
dragging a misty, faded moon behind
showed up on the baby's tongue
in California, crying through the night,
babbling names from the old country
Ishtar, Salome, Jezebel, Eve,
singing love songs to a traveling moon
in a new country, with useful words
like *merci, baleh,*
thanks, and emphatically
 Yes!

* * *

 “Why did you stop praising?”
“Because I’ve never heard anything back.”
 “*This longing*
you express is the return message.”

The grief you cry out from
draws you toward union.

Your pure sadness
that wants help
is the secret cup.

Listen to the moan of a dog for its master.
That whining is the connection.

There are love dogs
no one knows the names of.

Give your life
to be one of them.

~ Jalal al-Din Rumi, “Love Dogs”

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Endnotes

1 Ella Young, 1945. *Flowering dusk: Things remembered accurately and inaccurately*. Dennis Dobson.

2 Concept introduced by Dr. Anita Prest, University of Victoria, where she drew a Venn diagram of overlapping circles labeled “Indigenous” and “Settler,” with a question placed in the middle, where the circles overlapped: “What is the ‘middle ground?’” (Personal communication, September 5, 2019.)

3 “Mandorla” refers to the space where two circles overlap, a liminal space offering perception(s) with/in the mythic realm. “The zone of two circles, an almond-shaped form used to represent the paradoxical union of two worlds; ‘neither-this-nor-that’ as well as ‘both this and that.’ Also referred to as *Vesica piscis*” (Deardorff, 2004, p. 215).

“Mandorla” is also the Italian word for “almond,” referring to the shape that results in such an overlap.

4 The sestina is built around six end-words (words at the end of a line) used in a repeating pattern for six stanzas, with an ending couplet that uses all six words one more time. This sestina was written with words drawn blindly from a basket of possible choices during a writing workshop as part of *Winter Wheat 2017*, held at Bowling Green State University, Ohio. Though not the most elegant sestina ever written, it’s always interesting to see where a poem goes with the random words one is assigned. I find it very interesting how the six words, chosen blindly, reflected themes already present in this poetic inquiry: murmur, blanket, panic, generosity, dancing, and exhale.

