

Foreword

American literature like America itself is a patchwork of ethnic influences. Today a new voice is joining that multicultural conversation. Afghan Americans are among the newest (and smallest) of America's ethnic communities, just several hundred thousand people distributed across the country in scattered pockets, a community born of a disaster halfway around the planet: in the last decades of the twentieth century, a revolution, an invasion from the north, a civil war, and finally a descent into chaos, utter chaos, which drove millions of refugees out of Afghanistan. Among those millions, a tiny minority had the means and motivation to make it all the way to the United States, and here, bereft of context and connections, cut off from their national history, family memories, and childhood dreams, they struggled to forge a new life as exiles in a strange land.

Out of this immigrant experience, a literature is now emerging. Most English-speaking readers got their first taste of the new voice from Khaled Hosseini's landmark 2003 novel, *The Kite Runner*. But in the wake of Hosseini's dazzling debut, and in the soil he tilled, seedlings have begun to sprout here and there. In 2007, my coeditor, Yalda Asmatey, and I published *Snapshots*, the first anthology of short works by young Afghan American writers. Now, Zohra Saed and Sahar Muradi have compiled this larger and far more comprehensive collection, an admirable achievement.

Every immigrant group in America grapples with similar issues—but similar only in broad outline. This collection reveals what it is that makes the Afghan American experience particular and distinct, what sets it apart. Art wells out of personal experience, and personal experience can never be severed from history. For this generation of Afghan Americans, there is but one definitive historical event, and it's not the long-ago founding of the Afghan kingdom, not the wars of independence from the British, not any of the usual conventional turning points that give a national narrative its shape. No, for Afghan Americans the seminal event of their shared history is happening right now. It is the violence that has been raging since the 1970s and the exile it engendered. The mythic narrative is taking shape in real time, and we're in the middle of its birth.

When Afghan Americans sit down at the keyboard to compose, their thoughts are drawn inevitably to the destruction of the world their parents were born into and to the riddle of identity that confronts them as

Muslim immigrants in the United States. There is no ignoring their disjunction from the society surrounding them nor their need to claim a place in that same society. At the same time there is no escaping the urge to look for roots in an ancestral homeland many remember only dimly or have never seen, a homeland that is even now undergoing a radical transformation, thereby intertwining the quest for identity with the metaphysics of time and change, evanescence and loss.

In short, this is a literature haunted by catastrophe. But those who took the brunt of the catastrophe directly are not the ones giving voice to it. That first generation of Afghan exiles, for the most part, were too busy surviving to shape their experiences into literature. It is largely their children who take up the work, and their experience has not been the same as their parents'. They grew up struggling to navigate the shoals and rapids of life in American high schools and suburbs, at work, on the streets, and in all the various arenas that define American public life, all the while trying to reconcile the worlds inside and outside their homes. But they grew up in the shadow of the catastrophe, and that darkness pervades the works collected in *One Story, Thirty Stories*, even when the writer is exploring a situation that might crop up in anybody's literature—such as the tormented relationship between a girl and her mother, as dramatized by Naheed Elyasi in her disquieting exploration of family dysfunction; or the pathos of dislocation in old age, evoked so delicately by Sahar Muradi in her fragile portrait of her grandparents. Some pieces in this book may have a light tone—and yet, even here, the Afghan American reader (or this one at any rate) can feel the weight of darkness leaning into the light.

Coping with catastrophe is not, of course, the end of literature. Art born out of a particular collective history, however wrenching, comes into its own only when it mulches history into meaning, when it weaves the warp of everyday life—those intimate dramas of love and loss, striving and spiritual effort, familiar to people of every culture—into the woof of great events that constitute a public narrative, a shared myth. By tapping the wellsprings of their own history, the writers represented in *One Story, Thirty Stories* are taking that crucial first step toward absorbing the unique experience of Afghan Americans into the universal themes that inform human experience as a whole.

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