Sonja’s Kabul

Kata Alvidrez*
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We were supposed to build toilets in a place where people squatted in the road, supposed to teach hygiene where men in filthy dashikis and American sports coats born near the Chinese borders were destined to sell sips of water from the burro’s skin, tied tight and filled with water, carrying the waterbags on their strong but humped backs up the sides of cliffs where the other poor but less Chinese people huddled in the shade behind chaderies, people genetically disfigured by their places in the social strata of this country of relationships and powers.

Middle-aged men, schismatic discards muttering their praises to Allah and fingering their prayer beads with frozen fingers caked with dirt and the oils of their last meal lying in their feces in the snow, bare and callused feet sprawling away from their bodies like old shovels left in the snow for the sidewalkers, customers buying sugar cookies inside, blind to the hunger of the children outside everyman’s door.
Cliffs of granite and shale
carved into little niches where
a devout Muslim could build his hutch
closer to Allah when the end came
for his starving children who could not
eat enough of the nan to feed their
growing bodies. Selling Marlboro cigarettes
to the Americans, buy one today
and another tomorrow,
every day hoping for a better price,
as if their hungry little boy faces were
unrecognizable day after day
for nothing stays when you are hungry.

Dinner at the Miami where the merry music
of Persian Sinatras pounds eardrums,
forgetting all but the sensory moments at hand
with other gobe-mouchés,
savoring our tender lamb kabobs
strung like Christmas lights with dripping
tomatoes and perspiring onions
all laid carefully on a bed of rice
hollowed out to hold a perfect raw egg
shipped like a china vase
to Kabul where nothing grows,
not even the chickens.
Sunny yellow yolks and the bright mark
of the rooster a delicacy
in a country where the government
subsidizes unleavened wheat flour
and black tea
so its people won’t starve to death.
Hiding in our tidy little houses, 
private adobe compounds built for the 
aggressors *du-jour*, the French building schools, 
the Russians building roads, 
German restaurateurs, 
American teachers, and the CIA. 
Running water pumped from wells 
deep in our basements, electric lights to 
read our Louis L’Amour novels in the night, 
and *bukharis* to burn the chips of wood 
always ready just outside the door, 
chopped by our servants who come into 
our homes by dawn’s back door 
and leave wordlessly 
returning to their own families in the night 
after feeding us our fill.

Sonja, you could have stayed away. 
You could have left with us, but 
you always saw love where we saw lack, 
a vision our American educations did not provide, 
an inability to see beyond 
the internecine war of classes, 
of Allah’s promoters, 
of poverty no one, not even this poet, could describe.
Jobs were assigned, mail boxes provided, and dysentery treatment was free. Homesick, we drank the granular wine of grapes and methyl alcohol earning headaches we bemoaned only because we could not see what was outside of our own windows. Carter knew, we were certain, but newspapers lie, not only our own, not only about the poor but about the rich who also cannot see the drops that become the river.