

Lament for an Afghan Mother
by Joyce Pace Byrd

A snapping wind stretches canvas to creaking-tight,
billowing the peaked tent like a bullfrog's gullet.
Buffeted by cold, parching gusts,
the world inside and out
wears the color of unglazed clay.
A chant issues from the leeward corner
as a young woman cradling small bundles in each arm
summons unseen spirits to attend tiny souls in swaddling.
Having slipped through a tear
in the weave of the world,
she sits alone with her babies,
torn between a mother's primeval instincts
and clenching doubt that this strange world
will offer her sons the glow of a family hearth.

Tent flaps flutter as her brother,
sincere and solemn, brings the aid worker.
Forcefully, eloquently,
the new uncle exhorts the besieged man.
But he, having seen it all so many times before,
leans heavenward, and recites the litany of no's.
No, the hospital is full.
No, there is no more fuel for this family.
No, the doctor will not be here until next week.
Blankets? Did they ask for blankets?
A soft "yes" slips out on sighing breath,
but listless little bodies silently declare truth.
Another blanket will warm
only the uncle's cold fear.

Emerald eyes,
vestige of the ancient nobility of her people,
encounter ordinary brown ones.
She knows.
Two babies come with spare reserves.
Their lives are forfeit
to the ruthless wind gods of the high plains.

Far removed from dismal tents and clawing winds,
at an inner oasis she remembers.
Once there had been a home, a village.
There when graced with new babies, celebration ensued.
Hand woven blankets passed lovingly from mothers to daughters.
Carefully saved lambskins were unwrapped with
ceremony from grandmothers' stores.
To warm and strengthen a baby in need,
the village chieftain would proudly present a bearskin.
Every woman in the village
advised, argued, fretted and prayed,
tended the dancing fires in their hearths,
nurtured bodies and souls at the wells of tradition.
Few babies died --
none at the bitter altar of the elemental winds.

But now, home is rubble and shards,
the gift of a new set of liberators.
The ancient tapestry of kinswomen
is shredded into shrouds.

Better to release them, these little souls.
May Allah grant them Paradise.

*We are linked, woman,
you and I,
in the Mother-Heart of the world.*

I, too, was graced with little boys
whose tiny bodies could not generate heat.
Dedicated warriors of mercy
entwined art and magic to help my babies.
A sheltering hospital,
arrayed with copper ceilings and verdant plants,
stocked with profusions of sophisticated technology,
rendered the cold and wind powerless.
Here, a luxury of resources stands guard
for children in need.
My sons grow tall.
The future weaves dreams for them.

You, my Afghan sister, haunt my soul.
How are such harsh and bitter realities reconciled?
Are the excesses of my world entitlement
and the deficits of yours mere misfortune?
What obligation comes with awareness?

Tell me, my sister,
what mystery redeems the heart
of a world that tolerates your tragedy
in the face of my abundance?

Tell me, my sister,
how do I live -
knowing of you.

*We are linked, woman,
you and I,
in the Mother-Heart of the world.*