

Pomegranates

by Persis M. Karim

In loving memory of my Baba

To root themselves in their new home
Mother and Baba planted native trees: madrone, oak
and the manzanita at the end of the drive.
To remind them of their foreignness
they planted olive, almond, quince, pomegranate.

The first time my mother packed one in my lunch
I shrank in embarrassment, quickly returning
the leathery bulb to the brown bag.
How to eat a pomegranate without being conspicuous?
It is a slow and exacting endeavor,
an act of worship.

You never slice them with a knife, my father would say
when the September heat made the trees
sag with the ornaments of autumn.
In his world, men sold them on the streets
for a few *toumans*, shouting, "*Anar-e Khoshmazeh!*"
"delicious pomegranates!" rolling the sun-flushed
hides between two palms.
Customers at the corner of a cart,
kneaded, coaxed the last of the blood-red juice
from a hole, allowing it to touch only their lips.

Our American sensibility refused this technique.
We never took their exotic form for granted.
"Throw them in the air, let them crack open!"
my brothers yelled, waiting for the quiet
thud and then, the invisible seam
that split them open like an unhealed wound.
We liked the splatter of color on face and hands,
evidence of pomegranate carnage.

In my twenties, I finally understood the fecund symbol.
A magazine in the chiropractor's office
advised women wanting to conceive.
Eat estrogen-rich foods: shrimp, scallops,
pomegranates. Like the larvae of some magical butterfly
the red ovules offered a cure for barren women.

There are two kinds of people in the world:
those who pluck the seeds from the waxy yellow
membrane, tossing them into their mouths--
And those who hoard the ruby jewels,
jealousy guarding the pile until the last
crimson kernel is extracted.

Once in a child's game of war,
my brother plucked a pomegranate,
tore its feathery crown, and with a heave
mimicked the sound of a grenade
exploding with his mouth full of saliva.
"Bury it!" I said, looking at its inedible remains.
Baba would not tolerate such sacrilege.

When I learned a Sephardic version of the fall--
that it was a pomegranate and not an apple
I felt a kind of secret pride.
It's too cold for apples in the Garden of Eden,
I told a friend, knowing with certainty
they wouldn't be wearing fig leaves.

This fall, my two-year-old son,
undaunted, eats his first pomegranate.
His tiny, probing fingers, harvest the seeds
one by one. With hands stained
by this baptism, he offers them to me
like the remnants of an untold story
inherited in the womb.

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