

# To a Land You Do Not Know

by Martha Shelley



A friend who has been working to rescue endangered Afghan women asked me to write a poem for them, and I sent the following:

## To a Land You Do Not Know

Welcome!  
to a land you do not know.

Told like Abraham/Ibrahim  
to get out, go forth, lekh lekha,  
you left your home, your family  
all that was familiar,  
everything but your dreams.

Welcome!  
In the name of those who came before you:  
Those who fled famine,  
who left when the rains failed  
and the new shoots withered.

Those who fled war,  
whose crops were trampled  
under the hooves, the chariot wheels,  
the boots of the invaders,  
those whose stores were pillaged,  
their cattle stolen.

Welcome!

In the name of my mother's uncle  
hiding for days in the reeds, in the mud,  
keeping his head down  
below the crossfire of opposing armies  
on both sides of the river,  
until they left and he got out,  
went across the ocean  
to a land he did not know.

In the name of my father's father  
who swam across another river,  
fled the pogrom, fled the tsar's army,  
and made his way across Europe  
to the port where he boarded a ship  
that crossed the ocean  
to a land he did not know.

Welcome!

In the name of my mother  
who went hungry  
when the farmers dared not plow  
and plant while the bullets flew,  
and she got out and crossed the ocean  
to a land she did not know.

Welcome!

In the names of my neighbors, my friends  
still speaking Spanish, Somali,  
Vietnamese, German, Mandarin,  
torn between their most cherished memories  
and those they most long to forget.  
Bienvenue, willkommen, ahlan wa sahan,  
mi casa es su casa.

I swear in the names  
of all those who came before you  
you are welcome here.