

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.