

# Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

October 30, 2017

A weekly poetry resource

from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



from 1971

v.

Two oceans between you, but still  
you can see her running a finger  
along the granite counter in the sun-

spilled kitchen, waiting for the tea  
to boil before she drives past old  
west Texas oil fields still bright

with bluebells. *But tell me*, she asks,  
*why couldn't you research the war*  
*from here?* Gather these materials,

these undrowned ceremonies—  
tea poured into a cup, a woman  
stepping lightly across green field

into a green pond—but don't tell  
her the country of her birth  
became a veined geography inside

you, another body inside your own—*Oh*  
*Maa*, she sobs. *I miss her so*. You open  
the door to step out to the concrete

veranda. Look: the moon is an ivory  
scythe gutting another pond across  
which the reflection of a young girl's

braid ripples. *Tell me*, you say, *about 1971*.

Tarfia Faizullah<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "v." by Tarfia Faizullah from *Seam*, Southern Illinois University Press. Used by permission.

## ☞ Reflections

This week's *Wellspring* is a bit of a departure and may be of a different kind of challenge for some. I offer today's poem in part to promote the next reading at Saint Stephen's; Tarfia Faizullah will be here on Thursday, November 2, to read from her work at 7 p.m.

I have a feeling, too, that sometimes my readers may be hoping for a more diverse range of subjects. I try to hold *Wellspring* as a space for inspiration, which I distinguish from a space for joy or even simplicity or peace or comfort. The standards for my choosing are that the poem—cheerful, bleak and all the in-between—lead us somewhere that helps explore the interior landscape and remind us that the world is worth examining. True, most weeks I reflect on work that is lighter and more hopeful in tone and many of my most cherished poems are ones that function as a kind of balm; other weeks, I know there are more intense and more complicated subjects to discuss. But this week's might be our most difficult yet and, in my mind, one of our most necessary.

Faizullah's work is indeed difficult—even graphic—and it is wrestling with something that many of us would rather avoid. The poems in her book, *Seam*, look directly into the face of violence and obscenity and they give even the most brutal act a form; they imagine what might be better left unimagined. As soon as I heard a voice inside me urge a softer poem instead, another voice countered and reminded me that simply because we do not wish to look at the ugly sides of humanity does not mean they cease existing. And what would it say of me to ignore what I know to be important, in this case the history of generations of women? I agree with Natasha Trethewey, former U.S. Poet Laureate, who says, "Tarfia Faizullah is a poet of brave and unflinching vision and *Seam* is a beautiful and necessary book."

What you need to know about *Seam*, and about the first section of the book, titled "1971"—the poem here is the fifth of five parts—is offered as an introductory remark written by the poet herself: "On March 26, 1971, West Pakistan launched a military operation in East Pakistan against Bengali civilians, students, intelligentsia, and armed personnel who were demanding separation of the East from the West. The war resulted in the secession of East Pakistan, which became the independent nation of Bangladesh. According to Bangladeshi sources, two hundred thousand women were raped, and over 3 million people were killed."

Faizullah's poems reckon with these atrocities, with war, with personal, familial, and global catastrophe. What I have excerpted here feels to me more of an invitation than a meditation—a defense of the poems' necessity. What her poems do is challenge us to understand the spiritual growth that might come from leaning into the challenges of history, of identity and inheritance, of legacy and family, and of the nature of forgiveness—how and when to offer it, how and when to withhold it. I can speak for myself that indeed this is uncomfortable work; there are times I want poetry simply to comfort me and affirm what I already know. But, my truer self knows that if this were all poetry was meant to do, or if all I was meant to think about was my own suffering and salvation, than I would be the lesser for it—less curious, less fulfilled, less conscious, less fortified. Am I haunted and horrified? Yes.

Do I wish to turn away? Yes. But does this poem lead me to an important place to which I am reluctant to go alone? Yes. And that is my more valuable ‘yes.’ That is the ‘yes’ that enables me to examine not only human brutality but also the complexity and resiliency of the human spirit, a reminder of what the writer Aimee Nezhukumatathil says poetry, specifically Faizullah’s poetry, can do: “to sing and disturb us awake, and leave us feeling more alive than ever before...it’s pure fire in your hands.”

Memory and history both have daunting and dangerous terrain. But I don’t think it means we should not travel there. Poetry can help us navigate that treacherous but necessary territory. And, if you’re up for the work this requires, the lyricism and courage of Tarfia Faizullah’s poems can guide you on your way.

### ✧ About the Poet

Tarfia Faizullah was recently recognized by Harvard Law School as one of 50 Women Inspiring Change. She was born in Brooklyn to parents who immigrated to the United States from Bangladesh in 1978. Her poems appear widely both in the United States and abroad and her work has been translated into Bengali, Spanish, Persian, and Chinese. She is the author of *Seam* as well as *Registers of Illuminated Villages*, forthcoming in 2018. Her honors are many and include two Pushcart Prizes, a Fulbright Fellowship, and POETRY Magazine’s Frederick Bock Prize. She co-directs OW!Arts, a collaborative publishing venture with the poet Jamaal May, and teaches at the University of Michigan.

She will read at St. Stephen’s on Thursday, November 2. The event is free and open to the public and will be followed by a book signing and reception.



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