



## Introduction

In our third, Nowroz-themed, issue, we bring in the new year with those in the diaspora, Afghanistan, and the surrounding region. We spotlight our new membership, and introduce our readers to an exciting new initiative, the Afghan Literary Futures project! We recap Laimah Osman's lithography workshop, Sahar Muradi's ghazal and landay session, and preview Gazelle Samizay's upcoming workshop called "Bi-Lingering."

## Fundraising Update

Together, we have now met and exceeded our fundraising goal of \$2,400.00 to file for non-profit status! Thank you all so much for believing in our mission of amplifying creative and scholarly voices in the Afghan diaspora! Your contribution will help AAWA apply to become a 501(c)(3) non-profit. By achieving non-profit status, we will be able to sustain our public facing programming and develop the financial infrastructure to continue advocating with and for the Afghan diaspora, and to create collaborative artistic and social justice initiatives. We are looking forward to the next steps and will keep you updated!

## Member Portrait

**Malahat Zhobin** has been a member



of AAAWA since 2018. Malahat is a Kabul born, California grown writer and artist based in Los Angeles. With an MFA in Creative Writing and a BA in Humanities and English Literature, her oeuvre is composed of a collection of poetry, short stories, screen and stage plays. Her forthcoming novel,

*Narenji Gulaabi*, is her endeavor at reentering the homeland she was once uprooted from and reexamining her early memories and the motifs that color and create her Afghanistan.

**Did you always feel connected to the Afghan American community? How has that connection changed/transformed over time? How has your religious identity played a role in that?**

*Malahat:* Growing up, my Afghan-ness always felt very delicate, sometimes conditional, other times even foreign. As a child, the fate of my Afghan identity seemed to be dangerously determined by a secret my family harbored. This was the secret of our faith; we were Christian Afghans living amongst Muslims who considered our family's conversion an absolute betrayal. For the sake of our safety and naam of our extended family, we had to live the small spaces between Islam and Afghan-hood. There was very little ground for us to stand on living in Islamic Afghan communities. With frequent disownings and the continuous dismantling of our identities, we had to construct a community of our own, a community where we could very much be Afghan while still being Christian. It was about fifteen years ago now when my family connected with some other Afghan Christians here in California and we started the first official Afghan Christian Church in Los Angeles. It was within this Afghan American Christian community where I finally embraced my Afghan identity as a young woman. I learned that I could very much be an Afghan American woman without being a Muslim one.

**How is writing informed by your lived experience, both as an Afghan but also beyond that?**

*Malahat:* Before I became the hyphenated self I am now, for a brief and beautiful moment I was once only an Afghan, born at home, rooted in native my land, hopeful to bloom where I was planted, but with the brutal change of a season I was torn from my home and transformed into refugee. When my family fled Afghanistan, we were stopped at a checkpoint and everything we owned was set ablaze before our eyes. Everything but our bodies disintegrated into ash, and with the blowing away of that ash, blew away the delicate strings that tied us to Afghanistan. There was no longer any tangible proof of who we were and where we came from.

It was my father who took the responsibility to retell our truths and rewrite our stories, stories that would save our lives, stories that would finally lead us to America and ensure the lives we live now. From then on, I learned the power of storytelling. I understood how writing could transform lives. I was living proof of such a transformation. From then on, storytelling became my primary source of self-expression. As a writer, it is my work to tell the stories of the self, of the personal, of the very primal and painful. I am interested in our origins, both of body and mind. My internal compass is set to find the core of it all, the center

of our humanity, before man's discriminations, right in the midst of a woman's meeting with God, her Creator, her origin.

### **What are some of the concerns and ideas that shape your desire for diasporic empowerment?**

*Malahat:* It is my hope and desire that the Afghan diaspora develops a tolerance and openness toward Afghans of other faiths. I believe that the Afghan identity needs a separation from Islam. Of course, I do understand how deeply ingrained Islam is within the Afghan identity and community. My entire extended family is still practicing Islam. The threads that connect me to them are of blood and eternal breaths. I can not deny my own roots in Islam, but I desire for a safe space where my Afghan-ness can be nourished without the influence of Islam. I do not mean to disrespect or dismantle what is or seems to be fundamental. I seek to create an atmosphere within our diaspora for Afghans who do not identify with Islam. I hope for the day when an Afghan is not disowned or worse sentenced to death for choosing to practice a different faith. Afghans should have the freedom of faith without having to jeopardize their Afghan identities. It is my desire for our diaspora to discover and celebrate what makes us all Afghans outside of religion.

### **How are you doing and feeling during this uncertain time? How have you found inspiration, solace, or hope?**

*Malahat:* During this uncertain time, I have retreated inward, partly because it seems safer to be alone and partly because it is really the only option. People, pandemic, panic... it just made better sense for me to pull back the floating hem of myself that I often allow billow near others. "Malahat, take this as an opportunity..." speaking to myself, calling upon myself by name, has become a practice I cherish now. Perhaps, I have spent too much time with myself, but this time has presented me with the chance to further explore the depths of my personhood. I spent nearly the whole of 2020 working on my forthcoming novel, *Narenji Gulaabi*. I presented the novel as my master's thesis in December of '20 and graduated with my MFA in Creative Writing. I am proud of all that I have accomplished and am looking forward to facing this brave new world as someone who knows exactly who she is and what she wants for and from this world.

## **Upcoming Events**



THE AFGHAN AMERICAN ARTISTS AND WRITERS  
ASSOCIATION (AAAWA) PRESENTS

# **The Afghan Literary Futures Project**

a multi-genre creative writing workshop series

We will be hosting a series of free monthly writing workshops in the spring and summer of this year! These workshops will be taught by teaching artists from the Afghan diaspora.

### **Project Goal**

Rooted in an anti-racist decolonial politics, the Afghan Literary Futures Project is designed to cultivate a unique literary space for Afghan Americans to study, create, and workshop Afghan diasporic writing in community over the course of five sessions from March to July 2021. Each participant will have the opportunity to grow in a group of 14 other emerging writers in a long-term creative community and meet with potential editors and mentors. While the workshops will be conducted primarily in English, we will encourage multilingual expression.

For our inaugural cohort, we will be hosting a series of free monthly generative writing workshops in the spring and summer of this year! These workshops will be taught by teaching artists from the Afghan diaspora. Although the application window is now closed, please stay tuned for opportunities to join future workshops.

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## **Bi-Lingering**



Bi-Lingering explores the power of language and the duality of existing between cultures. Artists Labkhand Olfatmanesh and Gazelle Samizay will investigate the way memories and trauma express themselves differently in one's native language vs. a second language. Bi-Lingering is an extension of Labkhand and Gazelle's ongoing collaborative project Woven, which uses their experiences as women of Iranian and Afghan heritage to look at the way cultural expectations and the effects

of war transcend borders. This is part of a 3-month residency program which began this month with [@sidestreetorg](https://www.sidestreet.org). Stay tuned for more!

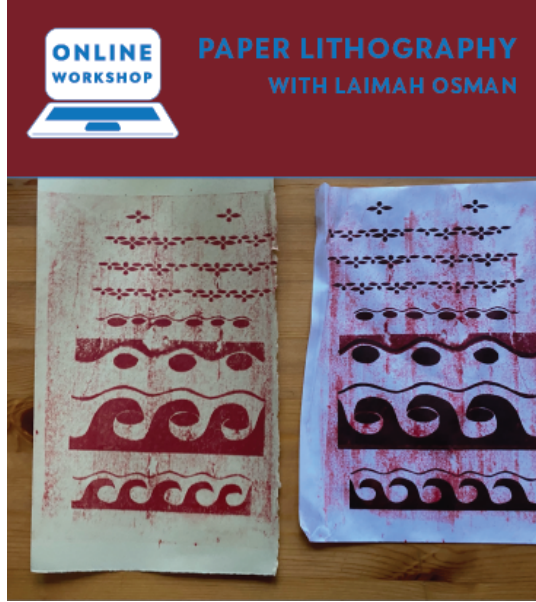
## **Events Recap & Review**

### **Paper Lithography Online Workshop**

**Event Review** On March 8, 2021, Laimah Osman led a printmaking workshop at the San Francisco Center for the Book.

In paper lithography, also known as gum arabic transfer, a Xerox





photocopy acts as a “plate” that gets inked and printed. Oil-based printmaking ink is applied to the treated paper, the toner areas hold ink, while the blank areas hold moisture and repel the ink. In this workshop, Laimah demonstrated this multi-step process and helped students troubleshoot their own work at home.

Laimah Osman is a visual artist and educator whose artistic production takes the form of drawings, prints, and artists’ books. Her work has been displayed in numerous exhibitions and

is archived in various libraries. She has been awarded residencies at The Lower East Side Printshop, Kala Art Institute and Women’s Studio Workshop as well as grants from Brooklyn Arts Council and Jerome Foundation. Currently, she teaches at Parsons School of Design and makes prints with local poets. She earned a BFA from Mason Gross School of the Arts, Rutgers University (1998) and an MFA from Pratt Institute (2010).

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## Forms of Liberation: The Ghazal and Landay in Perspective



**Event Review** Sahar Muradi led a Kundiman workshop on the ghazal on landay on February 27, 2021. The project explored two poetic forms for their audacious and liberatory qualities: the ghazal, whose non-sequential structure frees us from the bounds of linear thought and whose cosmology of language allows for an open critique of power; and the landay, whose creation, themes, and social exchange push against notions of authorship, feminine respectability, and the access to and function of

poetry. The ghazal form poses its own challenges. Westerners have long been puzzled by the outwardly fragmented shape of the ghazal, whose couplets often read as stand-alone thoughts without clear movement between couplets.

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## Ghostly Imports by Biz Rasam



**Artist Spotlight** "Ghostly Imports" is a piece that investigates the unknown elements that we carry or are imprinted upon us without knowing about them. These imprints can be traumas of war, even when we move to other lands and places. The ghostly past manifests in the everyday haunting us. In this case, a satchel that imprints a cultural indicator through its material usage and pattern that belongs to a place and people. Inside the satchel elements of war and violence, what we might be carrying as Afghans. For me, coming out of a war torn country, this piece represents our cultural bodies

that are forced to carry these destructive elements no matter where we go.

Biz Rasam is an artist whose practice is informed by themes and narratives of Afghanistan and its culture. Biz received his MFA from UC-Berkeley. His current work invites viewers to explore the rich culture and traditions of Afghanistan through a contemporary Afghan American perspective. The materials he employs consist of metal, plaster, wood, fabric, and foam which shape his practice as the medium becomes a post element to his work.



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## Desert Nights, Rising Stars

**Event Review** AAAWA member Seelai Karzai recently participated in "The Witness of Poetry" workshop, a generative and enriching space for poetic expression. Seelai, along with her insightful participants, walked through the difficult terrain of 'witness' through poems by Natalie Diaz, Solmaz Sharif, Ross Gay, and Martín Espada. Participants reflected on the obligations and liberatory aspects of truth-telling. The workshop ended with a reflective writing prompt that centered how each participant experienced a recent headline in the news.

## Happy Nowroz

We at AAAWA want to wish our readers a very happy Nowroz/Nowruz! May this year be filled with renewal, hope, and a better sense of the future. We have enclosed two events we are co-sponsoring to help reign in the new year. Nowroz/Nowruz Mobaarak!

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# Nowroz Events

AAAWA and Project Hajra come together to celebrate Nowroz in two special Zoom events.



Thurs. Mar. 18 @ 4-5:00 P.M. EST

## Haft Mewa Making & Story Sharing Event

Please join us in commemorating Nowruz with the Afghan tradition of creating Haft Mewa, a delicious mixture of nuts and fruit. Open to anyone with a personal connection to Nowroz.

**RSVP** below for the Zoom link.



Fri. Mar. 19 @ 4-5:30 P.M. EST

## New Day, New Year, New Spring: A Celebration

Celebrate Nowruz, a New Year holiday celebrated on the first day of spring! We'll create our own Nowroz table settings, have a scavenger hunt, and exchange music, poetry & stories.

**RSVP** below for the Zoom link.

RSVP

### Afghan American Artists and Writers Association

CA, United States



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