



City Lights Publishers (e)Broadside Series

By Ali Zarrin

The Book of I

(My gratitude to Lawrence Ferlinghetti for urging me to see that my poetry needs the “I.”)

I.

America, listen, I want to talk to you--
as Whitman talked to you, I want to open my heart to you
I want to give you my heart,
a small gift from a Persian poet who became American.

I want to be a part of the fabric of America,
I want to pay my debt to America.
I ask myself: do I love America?
Have I accepted America in my heart?
Is this my land? Will I die happy in America?
Will my ashes find a home in America?
Will my children be free of the burden
that came with being part Iranian?

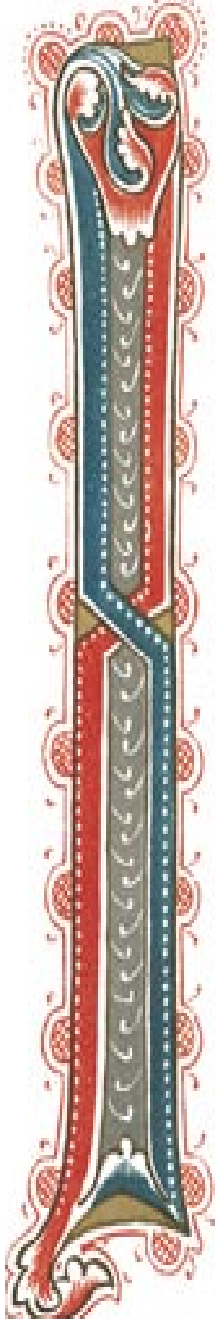
I am not a terrorist--I wouldn't even kill an ant or a bird--
my great-grandfather poet Sa'adi said:
“Don't hurt an ant that is carrying a seed home.
He is a living being and his life is sweet to him.”
America,
When will you love me and accept me--
I, who love you, America--
I, who accept you?

II.

America, I am the eye of the storm.

As a child in Iran, I walked to school or took the public bus--Mercedes mini buses for one rial--like a nickel or a dime--I would pass the British Consulate in Kermanshah, the beautiful solid mahogany interior, chairs and desks, the wonderful aroma of English-scented tobacco and European perfumes and eau de cologne.

Men in military suits, women dressed in brightly fluffed dresses of yellow, light blue, and light pink. Children in colorful shorts and t-shirts. I didn't know their language, their world was completely unknown to me, but I didn't hate them and looked for an opportunity to befriend them. When I was a child, my dad and I





gave rides to several French, German, British, and American tourists hitch-hiking across Iran. We loved doing that. My dad would turn the driving over to them and then the two of us would try very hard to communicate with them. Dad would use his limited knowledge of French which he had learned in high school. I don't remember how I communicated. I was just happy to have them in our car. Their presence illuminated my imagination and took me on the road with them. These were men and women who were drawn to travel, compelled to stay on the road--next they were going to Afghanistan and then on to India and sometimes Nepal. They were traveling light--very light--often with just a backpack--wearing khaki shirts and shorts and thick heavy leather boots. I loved their clothes. I would buy used British clothes from Khosravi, a town on the border that Iraq destroyed in the war. I bought overcoats--the last one I ended up selling to one of my classmates in Tehran--I loved it--so warm and cozy, so chic and foreign. I was the only one who had a British overcoat. With my Beatles haircut, James Bond briefcase and dark shades, I felt like I was half Tom Courtney and half Sean Connery.

One night in 1969 I was walking in front of Tehran University and I saw hundreds of little booklets--half the size of a letter envelope folded in two--scattered on the sidewalk. I picked one up. It was about the USA--all the states and their commerce, cultures, and commodities. I picked one and then two. They had been torn and thrown on the sidewalk by angry Iranian students, but I brought two of them back to the dorm with me and studied the map and the United States of America. I was fascinated by the vastness and variety. I was amazed how little I knew about "e-taz-uni".

The afternoon I took my younger sister to the theater--two pretty British girls approached us, asking for an address, and we took them there on the bus to their destination and gave them free bus tickets. They asked for our address. Months after that, when I had arrived in the USA, my sister wrote that they had sent us a postcard from England.

III.

America, the most violent place on earth--thousands of acts of terror every day--on your streets, in your convenience stores, gas stations, banks, post offices, prisons, bars, schools and colleges, and among families.

America, you are not better than anyone, unless you open your arms with the magnanimity of Walt Whitman, Langston Hughes, and Allen Ginsberg.

America, you punish small countries, starve children, deprive them of medicine and food.

America--the self-righteous, the moralist, the land of the moral majority, the kingdom of tobacco industry and alcohol moguls, the kingdom of the few owning more than all of us, the kingdom of the greatest army in the world policing the world for the rich of the world, the kingdom of boastfulness, the kingdom of the lynching of blacks, interrogation of gays and lesbians, encampment of Japanese, repression of women and minorities, the kingdom of war and machines of war.

America, I will tell you, I am Ali Reza Zarrin, the son of his father Habibollah, who worked thirty years for the National Bank of Iran, never being late one day, the son of my mother, Eshrat, who saved the once-used match sticks and burning them again--now



both living in America and their retirement pension reduced to less than \$100 a month, partly because America overthrew the democratically elected government of Dr. Mohammad Mossadegh, because America chose to support the Shah regardless of his policies of repression, because America sides with dictators every time that it fits its profit and power scheme.

America that goes to war over oil, kills for oil, mobilizes millions of people for oil and boasts of winning the war with less than two thousand of her soldiers killed. Open your eyes, America! Look at what happened to thousands of American soldiers after the wars, after the “mission was accomplished.” Look at all the Americans, Koreans, Vietnamese, and Iraqis that died in wars.

America, the warmonger, the instigator of wars, the conspirator of coup d'états, the gendarme of the world; America the bully, face up to your drunken brawls, to your one-upmanship, to your thwarted sense of justice, open your mind, look at the suffering you are causing and own up to it--act like an adult--grow up, take responsibility for your mindless actions.

America, live up to your tradition of democracy and not hypocrisy—let's be real. America, the unreal, the show-on-the-road, the entertainment capital of the world, the inventor of phony laughter for television programs, the inventor of 24 hour news and brainwashing propaganda.

America, where our children are turning into terrorists and drug traffickers, the children we abuse, neglect, exploit, and abandon. Abused because we leave them alone watching TV or playing “Doom” hour after hour; abandoned because we work 80 hours a week feeding the monster created by greed. We leave them to kill their pain and fill their emptiness at the mercy of the international drug, liquor, and tobacco tsars. We want to be forever young like them, while ignoring what they need. We worship youth by trying in vain to conquer death. Our youth, our gladiators, our army for hire!

America, I am confronting you and confronting my love for you!
America, the composer of the line: “Love it or leave it!”

America, I came to you, to walk your streets, to travel through all your states and make friends with all your people. America does not just belong to those born here. America is an idea, a bright place on the map of imagination; it's somewhere that illuminates the mind when the meaning of home darkens in your head. America doesn't belong only to those politicians who sit in huge chambers passing laws. Manicured men and women, bent on imposing America's domination of the world, thinking America is superior. America's superiority has to be in its generosity, its open arms to the needy and downtrodden. America is superior because it has chosen to become a haven for so many people from all over the world. America is strong because it's made up of people from all over the world.

America, my country today, will you be my country tomorrow?