



**RUBĀIYĀT:  
FOR THE MARTYRS OF TWO WARS**

Ruth Valentine  
Shahram Karimi, illustrator  
Hercules Editions  
www.herculeseditions.com  
42 Pages; Print, £10.00

The genesis of Ruth Valentine's *Rubāiyāt: For the Martyrs of Two Wars*, published in 2017 by Hercules Editions as a truly lovely, illustrated chapbook, lies in a trip Valentine took to Iran around the time that the Rouhani and Obama administrations negotiated the nuclear arms deal from which Donald Trump recently withdrew. Valentine was struck on that trip, she explains in her afterword, by "the disquieting gaze of the 'martyrs,'" young men who sacrificed themselves for their country during its eight-year war with Iraq in the 1980s — many, if not most, in the grips of an authentic religious fervor. These young men have been officially memorialized throughout Iran in portraits that "look down [on passersby] from lamp-posts and drinking fountains," not to mention the sides of buildings, both large and small —

constant reminders of the sacrifice to which Iran's government, in the name of the Islamic Revolution, calls its young men.

Giving context to Valentine's "disquieting" experience is Kamin Mohammadi's helpful introduction, which explains Iran's cult of martyrdom for those who are unfamiliar with it. That this explanation is even necessary reveals why Valentine found it impossible to write about the martyrs until she returned to England and read a newspaper story about "the death of a young Black man on the streets of South London." What that news story provided was a "second, complementary theme," rooted firmly — as the martyrs were not — in Valentine's own experience, giving her a way, as Malika Booker, says in her foreword "to make plain the fact that in both locations [Iran and England] boys are innocent victims, and ... to create a dialogue [about this fact] across geographical boundaries."

That's a tall order for a poem of just over one hundred lines, especially one that tries not only to elegize those boys, but also to provide a critique of the masculine nihilism that renders their deaths all-but-inevitable. Indeed, the front and back matter — of which there are more pages in the book than

*Read these four rubai aloud and you are carried along by the rhythm, played skillfully against the five fixed beats of iambic pentameter.*

poetry (ten vs. nine) — is clearly intended to account for the ambitiousness of this scope. It is, therefore, a testament to Valentine's talent that the poem is what commands our attention. Here, for example, is how she memorializes one of Iran's martyrs who never should have been one:

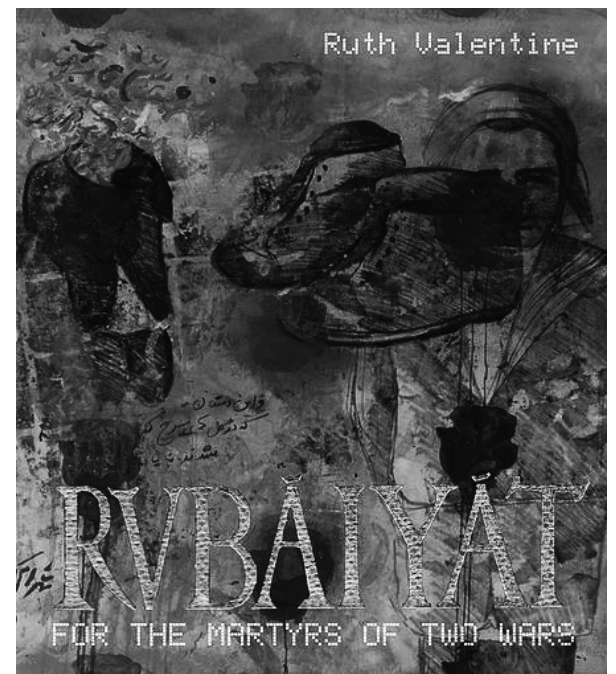
That boy too young, who lied about his age,  
Wanting revenge, indignant with the rage  
Of centuries of empire, battle, power,  
Thirteen forever in war's rusting cage.

This quatrain is a rubai, a Persian verse form most commonly associated in English with Omar Khayyam (rubāiyāt is the plural). Valentine writes about the aesthetic and political implications of her decision to use this form in her afterword:

I turned to the form not only because it felt culturally appropriate, for all my misappropriation, but because I found the rhyme-scheme provided a kind of stern certainty. As the sequence grew, the taut stanza both contained my growing anger and (with the enjambment) allowed it to overflow.

In fact, Valentine does not always strictly adhere to the form's aaba rhyme scheme, though the modulations she employs (about which more towards the conclusion) actually heighten the scheme's emotional power when, as in the example above, the rhymes do match up precisely. She achieves a similar effect in these lines about one of the boys from London:

This one a baseball-player, loose-limbed,  
tall,  
A good friend, joker, party-goer. All  
The young girls watched him move.  
The quiet one  
He'd loved since childhood saw him flinch  
and fall.



The power of these lines notwithstanding, it's telling that nowhere in the poem does Valentine explicitly identify any of the dead English boys by race or ethnicity, especially since she goes out of her way to locate the boys from Iran firmly in their Iranian and Muslim identities. This matters because it means we do not see — as Mohammadi's introduction allows us to see for the martyrs — the larger socioeconomic, cultural, and political context in which the deaths of the English boys takes place. Even if we grant that Valentine probably assumed an English readership already familiar with that context, the end result is a poem in which Valentine leaves significant portions of her "complementary theme" unimagined, eliding at the very least this significant difference between the deaths of the boys in Iran and the boys in London: the Iranian martyrs — or at least some, non-trivial percentage of them — truly believed they were giving their lives for a higher cause. They welcomed their deaths, in other words, in a way that the boys in London clearly did not.

We might intuit that the connection Valentine wants to draw between these boys is valid nonetheless, but the poem merely asserts that intuition, resulting in an argument that ultimately folds in upon itself in failure. Here are the four stanzas that precede the final quatrain:

If all deaths are in vain, on streets, in war,  
If all wars serve only to muffle more  
Women in mourning, if our young  
men are  
Invisible to the world until they die

And become image, harmless; if old men  
Envy and fear them, grab their revolution  
And fire it in their faces, and the old  
Oppression that they fought begins again,

If small boys learn at school that they have  
no  
Talent that can delight or serve us, no  
Laughter or song we'll value,  
thought or care,  
No work, no home, no joyfulness, we know

Death is all we've bequeathed to them.  
Vault down  
From flagpoles, fences, news-stands,  
Darian  
Michael, Masoud, Ali; help us  
make  
The sweeter world that should have been  
your home.

—Newman continued on next page

**FALL 2019  
UHV/ABR  
READING SERIES**



SEPT. 12 LADAN OSMAN



OCT. 3 CHRISTINE HUME



OCT. 24 A. VAN JORDAN



NOV. 14 AMARANTH BORSUK



DEC. 5 NICK MONTFORT

Before I go on, it's worth pointing out again just how well-wrought Valentine's verse is. Read these four rubai aloud and you are carried along by the rhythm, played skillfully against the five fixed beats of iambic pentameter, until you arrive at that last, dramatic, because perfectly iambic, line. And the rhymes as well: they're subtle enough, and irregular enough, that they don't call too much attention to themselves, but they help rein the rhetoric in, preventing it from becoming overblown and sentimental. Then that last word, home, which does not rhyme with anything else in the quatrains, but picks up the long o from "flagpoles," and from the long o rhymes of the previous stanza; the way the nasal m at the end of home chimes with all the previous partial rhymes ending in n — and all that sound play somehow cinches tight the thought these lines develop with a musically satisfying finality.

That musicality, however — and you might miss this if you don't read carefully — masks the fact that the last of these four quatrains is actually an admission of failure. Calling the dead back from death to help us remake the world that resulted in their deaths is not just a futile act of desperation.

It implicitly asserts our inability to do what the poem argues we need to do: teach "small boys" just how valuable and precious their lived lives actually are. Or, to put that another way, it is tacit acknowledgment that "the sweeter world" Valentine would like to imagine is, at least under the present circumstances, ultimately unachievable.

Here, too, it's worth considering what Valentine leaves unimagined, because the one thing she neither asks nor attempt to answer in this poem is why that might be. Boys get sucked up into the quintessentially male and seemingly endless cycle of violence in which "old men / envy and fear" and ultimately kill their younger counterparts, while women, and only women, are relegated to the role of mourning those deaths. The poem, in other words, locks men and women into very traditional gender roles, begging the question of who precisely is left to teach boys the different way of being Valentine's speaker rightly insists that we need to teach them. It's no wonder she appeals to the dead. Who else in the poem stands completely outside the world where those boys die? Who else has a perspective from which real change might be imagined?

You might think I have treated Valentine's *Rubāiyāt* more like an essay or a polemic than a poem, asking of it the kind of argument that all-too-easily turns poems into propaganda, and had this poem been, simply, an elegy, you'd be right to call my critique unfair. Valentine herself, however, wrote this as an argument for change. To take that argument seriously, therefore, is to take the poem seriously on its own terms; to say the argument fails is to acknowledge nothing more than that the poem, like all works of art, contains its own failure within itself. The poem itself remains a poem, deeply felt, beautifully crafted, and well worth reading.

*Richard Jeffrey Newman is the author, most recently, of Words for What Those Men Have Done (2017), a collection of poems, and The Teller of Tales: Stories from Ferdowsi's Shahnameh (2011), translations of selections from the classical Persian epic. He is professor of English and Creative Writing at Nassau Community College in Garden City, NY. His website is www.richardjnewman.com.*

## PERSONAL AND GENERATIONAL

Aimee Parkison

### SKY COUNTRY

Christine Kitano

BOA Editions, LTD

[www.boaeditors.org/products/sky-country](http://www.boaeditors.org/products/sky-country)

104 Pages; Print, \$16.00

Christine Kitano's *Sky Country* braids family lore and cultural history to illuminate themes of displacement in the lives of Asian immigrants in America. Focusing on Japanese and Korean Americans, Kitano's poems give voices to women often silenced by history in the mid-twentieth century and reveal the reality of life in the United States is much different from the sky country of immigrants' dreams. The book's title is taken from a translation of the Korean world for heaven, *ha-neul nara*, which translates to "sky country." Potential immigrants often used this word to describe the United States. Kitano's poems reveal the reality of the United States, a place of hunger, loneliness, and the struggle for acceptance, in stark contrast to the sky country of the immigrant lore. Displaced by racism, poverty, and misunderstanding, immigrants learn "how much fear will conspire to keep us silent. / And how our children will read this silence / as shame."

Weaving real and imagined immigration experiences of her own family, Kitano's poetry reveals the stories of her grandmothers, who

fled Korea and Japan, and her father, a Japanese American who was incarcerated during WWII. The collection travels through time, getting closer to the present day by allowing the reader to encounter the voice of a speaker who claims to be the poet. Coming face to face with herself at different ages, the poet speaker brings the collection full circle by combining the personal and the political. The immediacy of her voice increases the emotional resonance of the historical poems by confirming the ongoing personal and generational nature of family accounts.

*Sky Country* travels an intense emotional spectrum of immigrant experience, from hope to hardship, from pride to shame, and from tragedy to triumph. Kitano's poems visit diverse landscapes

***Sky Country travels an intense emotional spectrum of immigrant experience, from hope to hardship, from pride to shame, and from tragedy to triumph.***

of several generations of immigrant women and men. From poems like "February, 1943: Topaz Concentration Camp, Utah" to "I Will Explain Hope," these poems capture the beauty of the natural world in stark contrast to atrocities against humanity. The natural world is a constant saving grace, holding a deeper cultural meaning among generations of immigrants by refueling hope. In turn, hope feeds the stories that allow immigrants



to maintain their dignity and the concept of a new home on a journey embraced by the wonder of nature. The power of nature and culture is captured perfectly in "Fireflies": "My mother would say the fireflies / are the lights of soldiers killed in a war far away, / their spirits now wondering the earth in search of home." By focusing on the voices of displaced women, Kitano proves that the American dream is always evolving, but never more so than for immigrants in America. The collection often explores the life of an insomniac, whose isolation and aloneness within her body can only end in sleep, an act that "we all always do, alone." This focus on the insomniac illuminates the larger theme of the search for human connection, a struggle with loneliness that everyone faces.

As the poems progress over time, getting closer to our contemporary era, we meet working women with broken homes, mothers robbed by divorce, and women who remember themselves differently over time while facing an ever more complicated reality of assimilation. In the modern United States, where being an Americanized woman often means being divorced, abandoned,

—Parkison continued on next page

**CUNEIFORM**  
POETRY, TYPOGRAPHY, & ARTISTS' BOOKS  
[www.cuneiformpress.com](http://www.cuneiformpress.com)