

## The Alchemists

A poem for two voices, dedicated to Patti Quigley and Susan Retik

What is this mystery  
That takes the heavy lead  
Of your swollen bellies  
Weighed down by  
Unspeakable September 11 grief

Schoolchildren and senators  
Brought food and toys and quilts.  
“They gave us everything we needed,” you said,  
Except (you don’t quite mention)  
Your dead husbands  
Whose remains were poised in midair  
Trapped inside twisted steel  
Puncturing two towers.

Victims of terrorism.

Your alchemists’ skill makes use of the  
Searing heat of the Ground Zero inferno,  
Smelling of death

Your newborn daughters  
Will never know their father’s snuggling arms,  
But they will know their mother’s mysterious power  
That takes the heavy lead of grief  
And turns it into the gold of  
Hope and  
Possibility.

Perhaps this alchemy is a blessing from  
Patti’s Catholic God or  
Susan’s Jewish G-d,

All honoring the prophet Isaiah, who foretold this mystery:  
“They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their  
spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword  
against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.”  
Isaiah 2:4 (KJV)

And turns it into the gold of  
Chicks and incubators  
For fatherless children’s hunger  
And for widows to sell  
In Afghanistan’s women-only markets?

“But,” you protest, “those widows have *nothing*  
Except an eye-slit in a burka  
Whose head-to-toe modesty hides that they are  
Naked of rights,  
Stripped of all marital assets (now repossessed by  
Their dead husband’s families).  
Unable to leave the house without a man, some are  
Trapped between choices to send their children to beg,  
Or bend to the Taliban’s offer to feed and educate the sons.”

Victims of terrorism.

And tempers it to the  
Gentle warmth of incubators,  
Giving phoenix-like birth to  
New life-giving life.

But they will know their mother’s mysterious power  
That takes the heavy lead of grief  
And turns it into the gold of  
Hope and  
Possibility.

Or Islam’s Allah,

All honoring the prophet Isaiah, who foretold this mystery:  
“They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their  
spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword  
against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.”  
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