

PERSIS KARIM

THE IMPORTANCE OF SELF

Written by CHAD HALL

Persis Karim has a passion for poetry—and shaping the literature of personal experience.

Persis Karim is currently an associate professor of English and comparative literature at San Jose State University, where she teaches literature and creative writing. Karim's poetry has been published in several literary journals, including *Reed Magazine*, *Alimentum*, *Di-Vêrsé-City*, *Heart Lodge*, and *Caesura*. She is the author of numerous articles on Iranian-American literature, the editor of *Let Me Tell You Where I've Been: New Writing by Women of the Iranian Diaspora*, and co-editor and co-author of *A World Between: Poems, Short Stories, and Essays by Iranian-Americans*.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOURSELF?

I wear several hats. I'm a writer, poet, editor, and my day job (although at the moment I'm on a sabbatical) is as a professor of English and comparative literature at San Jose State University. I've been teaching literature and creative writing there for the past fifteen years. But my real passion is writing—mostly poetry, but at the moment I'm venturing into a family memoir. I've also been very involved in helping to shape the literature of the Iranian diaspora. I've edited three anthologies of Iranian-American writing.

WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE GREATEST MYTH ABOUT CREATIVITY?

That creativity or making art is the work of genius. I work hard at writing. Of course there is something called talent, but a lot of beautiful work comes from sitting oneself down to do it, to practice, to be available.

I think when people talk about genius, they're really talking about "being available." I think the biggest myth about art is that there is good art people are willing to pay big money for. But there is so much good art that is not recognized. Not even seen. I think the myth is that you have to have a book to be a writer. Or a poet. I don't think that way. I think I'll just keep writing because I have to express myself, have to express something. Not because I need others to validate me.

WHAT'S THE BEST CREATIVE ADVICE YOU'VE EVER RECEIVED?

Don't look for someone to teach you to create. Look inside yourself. Listen. Be awake to your own feelings and responses: don't get caught up in the conventions of making art. You might sell books, but you'll be a duller substitute of yourself. Art is about your own journey, your own voice, and it is difficult to find the road, but if you're committed to it, you'll find it.

WHAT WE'VE LOST

Airport-waiting faces down
drowned in the light
of cell phone/iPad
no one speaks or sees
nimble fingers press
against the flatness

where rounded conversations
live in glance and
smile, chance encounters
break us
open

in this surging on-off
switch

the letter once lived—

a handwritten page, folded,
stuffed where it meets
swell of envelope
fingers tucking
and licks that stamp
a destination, greeted
with delicious anticipation.

What we've lost is
our mother's penmanship,
her elegant sentences,
the casual way we stayed
in touch or lost contact
the word delivered
in recipes, newspaper
clippings, quickly-
scrawled notes.

*What was that time
when hearts met
and seduced
with eyes and voice,
tongues and hands?*

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