

★ **Above Us the Milky Way: An Illuminated Alphabet**

Fowzia Karimi

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Afghani American Fowzia Karimi immigrated to the US with her family after the 1980 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and grew up in Southern California. Negotiating the before and after of that seismic childhood event requires reckoning with the outsized power of trauma and memory. As such, *Above Us the Milky Way* borrows the alphabet's sequential framework to relearn Karimi's family story—a story that's both her own and a looking-glass other person's story, transformed by something more than mimetic truth.

The story of Karimi's parents, four sisters, and the swirling nexus that they create, leaving one land for another on the tide of war, is structured like an alphabet book. Its narrative of interconnected passages, headed by direct words or phrases, collates around individual letters of the English alphabet; they are interspersed with accompanying images. The simplicity of this structure, and its resonance with childhood, belies the wild depths that Karimi conveys as she grapples with the mythology of memory.

A skilled technician whose prose flows like intuition, Karimi parses the beats of her paragraphs with the attention of a poet. Rich with images and imagery, the book is beautiful, both illuminated and illuminating. Key elements of the story are referenced only in general terms, including the girls, the family, and the home, but Karimi maintains such specific, evocative focus that their reductions function as a counterbalance to their emotional weight.

Karimi's prologue says it best: "The pieces in this book are a collection of remembrances, dirges for the dead, and fairy tales—life experienced early and brought forth only after many years of distillation." Like a legend, the text walks the borderlands of what exists for Karimi, what might have existed, and what exists within us all as we project its pages into the strange afterlife of imagination.

LETITIA MONTGOMERY-RODGERS (March / April 2020)

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