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Introducing the *SRPR* Illinois Poet:
Zarina Mullan Plath

Zarina Mullan Plath grew up in a bicultural household in suburban Chicago, and as a young girl lived in Iran for a year and a half. This past year she received an Illinois Arts Council Fellowship and an I.A.C. Literary Award and has seen her poetry appear in a number of small press magazines. She received an Academy of American Poets Prize while finishing her biology degree at Illinois Wesleyan University, and the Ruth Lilly Poetry Fellowship of The Modern Poetry Association while pursuing a master's degree in literature and creative writing at Illinois State University. In 1995 she lived in Barbados and studied at the University of the West Indies. She currently lives in central Illinois with her husband and young son, and has started a freelance career in addition to co-editing *Clockwatch Reviews: An Online Quarterly of Books*.

Double Vision: The Stereoscopic Poet—
A Discussion With Zarina Mullan Plath

SRPR: Zarina, both by accent and in your poetics, I would say you are clearly American, yet many of your poems are suffused with Indian culture and myth.

Zarina: I was born in this country, had in many ways a typical childhood in the Chicago suburbs. But my father is from India, my mother your basic American hybrid. My introduction to India was through the cultural festivals and through the rituals I watched my father perform every day, and through my mother's Indian cooking—which she learned after she married from my paternal grandmother. I went to India once only, as a small child.

SRPR: Are your parents of the same religion?

Zarina: No. My father is Zoroastrian, and the Zoroastrians do not accept converts. There are only about 100,000 left in the world. My father is from a priest-caste family—that is, his father and grandfather and so on were priests, but my dad chose not to follow in their line. He moved to Chicago. The religion was there in our household but it wasn't an overwhelming influence. We went to the temple only for rituals, weddings, special occasions. Because my sister and I were born into it, we never had to choose. I did go through the Navjote, the traditional Zoroastrian coming-of-age ritual, when I was eight. I learned prayers with a Parsi, a priest, and we had the celebratory feast at my home.

SRPR: Where does the conflict expressed in some of your poems—for example, washing the Indian spice flavors off your meat and cutting your braids—come from?

Zarina: I always felt the two cultures pulling against each other. My school had lots of ethnic kids, especially Asian and Indian, but I was one of the few mixed blood children. I have always seen myself as mixed and balanced, but not homogeneous. There was a period of time, right before and during junior high, where I tried to fit the homogenous American mold. Salman Rushdie has a concept he calls stereoscopic vision: someone who is a product of two cultures simultaneously will always see the world as layered through both cultures. Even my vision of India is not a product of pure memory—I was very young when I went there and what I have are flashes of memory infused by the prior experience of America and with the practice of Indian culture in my American life. Also with reading and with Indian myth and lore as well.

SRPR: In many of your poems, though, everything is channeled through the Indian eye/I, whereas in your life this has not been so. It is interesting to me that poetry often becomes the place the

buried or non-dominant voice can speak, or the voice of the other inside. The most gregarious, jovial poets in real life often offer a dark, sorrowful voice and poetic domain in their work.

Zarina: I think I grew into an appreciation of my Indianness. Looking back, I wish I hadn't tried to Americanize myself. I regret I never learned Gujarati—the language my father spoke. Being cut off from that language I heard as a child and growing up, which I no longer hear and cannot speak, is like being cut off from my Indianness. I get it back through my cooking and through my poems.

SRPR: And through combining the two! So the Indian voice and Indian space of the child is what later spoke/speaks in your poems?—that part of you that finds its expression in the American daily culture only with difficulty, that could easily be Americanized out of existence? I have noticed that the language, voice, texture of your Indian poems, those in the series “Unbraiding,” for example, is different from your other poems—more dense and fluid at the same time, more metaphoric, more playful, more imaginative. Going from one type of poem to another must be like walking into different rooms in your mind.

Zarina: Yes, it is like that. But the poets I read—my handful of favorites like Derek Walcott, Sharon Olds, Li-Young Lee—are all disparate. I am sure they have influenced the tone and the variations in my poems, as have all the different roles I play in my life.

SRPR: Since the birth of your son, has the writing of the myth-infused Indian poems changed for you?

Zarina: Oh yes, they've gotten harder to write, not because of time constraints, but in the sense of how do I translate the reality of myself as mother into the mythic space of these poems? What in the myth symbolizes, what do these mythic characters convey about this real experience of being a new mother? Kavi, which is an Hindi word for poet, will eventually have a child, so I am looking at my son as a rough model—the way I have rough models in my own life that bridge the distances between the real and the myths, not as exact representations, but as a way of seeing and interpreting the profane through the sacred and the reverse.

SRPR: The characters in your poems are all real figures in Indian myth?

Zarina: Many are, some are not, some I make up, like Sohrab, who is also a mythic character, but Sohrab is also the name of my father and the middle name of my son. “Unbraiding” is an unraveling of all the different strands, the mythic and the real, the imagined and the lived, family history and mythic narratives.

SRPR: Sounds like you're making literary use of Rushdie's stereoscopic vision concept. Nowhere for me is this process of transmuting one realm into the other, the profane into the sacred and the reverse, more present than in the poem "Kavi": the landlocked, reality-oriented mother, the water-swimmer father "strong enough to cross the sea," who shares a "watery" language with the child who thought she was a mermaid until her mother would put an end to the water games, dress the child in her land legs and put her to bed. You've written a poem about what makes a *kavi*, a poet—a portrait of a young artist as a stereoscopic girl.