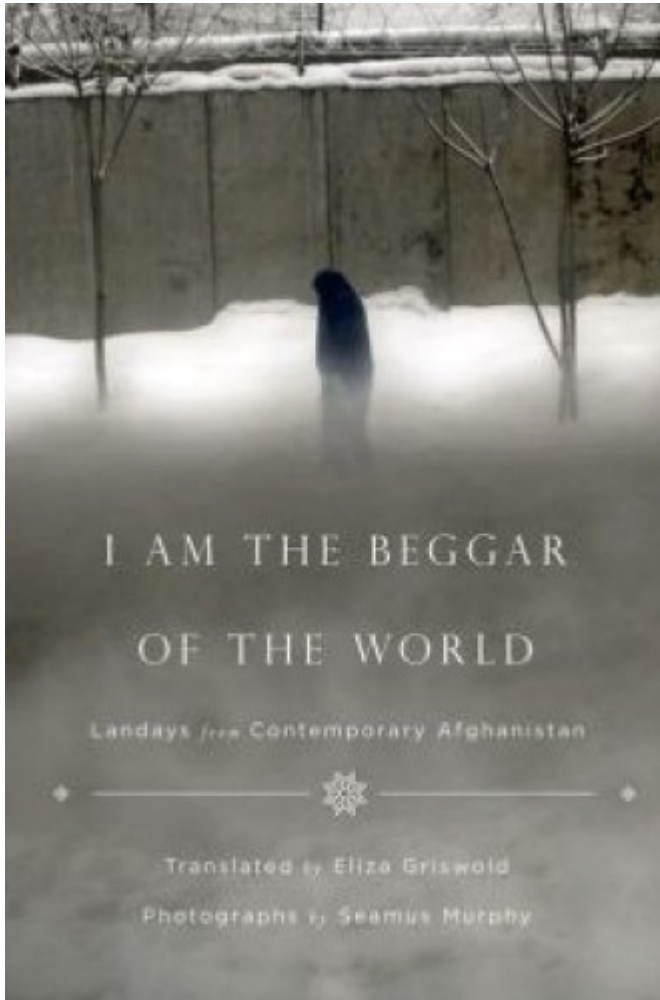


Forbidden poems

By [Richard A. Kauffman](#)

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In Review



I Am the Beggar of the World

By Eliza Griswold with photographs by Seamus Murphy
Farrar, Straus & Giroux

Rahila Muska, a teenage girl, lived in the Helmand province of Afghanistan, a Taliban stronghold. Muska was known for regularly calling into a radio program on which

women share landays, a traditional Pashtun form of poetry. Like most women who do this, Muska shared other people's poems, not her own—to acknowledge authorship would have endangered her life.

In 2010, Muska took her own life. She lit herself on fire and eventually died.

When Eliza Griswold heard about Muska's death, [the journalist traveled to rural Afghanistan with photographer Seamus Murphy](#) to explore Muska's story. Muska's father had pulled her out of school after the fifth grade. Like many women and girls in that region, she was not allowed to leave home. Her only continuing education was these landays, which she picked up from other Pashtun women and from the radio program.

Griswold discovered that Muska's self-immolation was provoked by an engagement story gone bad. At an early age she was engaged to a cousin. But once his father died, he could no longer afford the bride price. She was forbidden to marry him, which made her future very uncertain. Muska's only way of controlling her own destiny was to take her life.

In *I Am a Beggar of the World*, Griswold has collected and translated an ample sampling of landays. In Pashto these two-line poems have nine syllables in the first line and 13 syllables in the second; they usually end with a "ma" or "na" sound. They are typically sung to the beat of a drum, a courageous act itself since singing women are often considered prostitutes. For women who are kept hidden and silent, landays provide an outlet for social protest or satire—although one which endangers their own well-being.

Griswold organizes this collection into three sections representing the main themes of landays: love, grief/separation, and war/homeland. The love poems are not romantic so much as acerbic female expressions of the relationship between the sexes, which puts women at a great disadvantage.

You sold me to an old man, father.

May God destroy your home; I was your daughter.

Grief is never far away from the people in this land of strife:

In battle, there should be two brothers:

one to die, one to wind the shroud of the other.

In new landays and adaptations of old ones, both the Taliban and the American occupiers are targets:

If you hide me from the Taliban
I'll become a tassel on your drum.

Says another:

My Nabi was shot down by a drone.
May God destroy your sons, America, you murdered my own,.

Pashtun women resent what the coalition forces have done to their land and people, just like they resented the Russians before and the British before that. But they also fear what will happen when the Americans leave and the Taliban are free again to impose Shariah law. One thing these women will have to fall back on is their forbidden poetry.