The result of this harmonic interaction of opposites gives the cube, symbolic of material existence, the four states of matter, earth, air, fire, water.

—Robert Lawler, *Sacred Geometry*

It was a tea ceremony. I wouldn’t have called it a tea ceremony when I was growing up. But almost every afternoon for as long as I could remember, we would have tea in the kitchen after we got home from school. And on the weekends, after church, after our Sunday dinner, late in the afternoon, we would have a more-adult tea ceremony in the living room. Mama would bring out the china and the gold trays from Baghdad, the samovar and the delicate teapot elaborately decorated with camels and mountains and flowers. It sat on top of the samovar, like a bird on a nest, waiting to ripen enough to fly, she would say.

In the living room, Papa sat in a dark chair where no one else could sit. Mama sat on the gold satin couch, and Bryan, Chuck, and I arranged ourselves on the floor in a C, watching the twelve-inch screen of the wooden-cased television set Papa had spent so much money to buy for Mama. But he ended up enjoying it as much as she did, so he didn’t complain the way he did when she bought the couch. Still, he let her have just about anything she wanted, no matter how much against his judgment it was. He knew that when he had gone back to Persia to marry and had found an Assyrian girl, the daughter of the famous Doctor Baba, he had got more than he had ever prayed for.

Papa always stayed home on Sundays. It was his favorite day. He didn’t relish too many people or events. Mostly, he liked everything Mama did or said, and he looked forward to Sunday dinners and teas. Between the two feasts he loved to watch *The Lone Ranger* to get a sense of the rightness of things. He would settle in his chair several minutes before the show started.

After Papa turns to the channel where the masked man and his Indian companion appear, he waits patiently through the commercials until the music starts, when two horses riding through the remote desert gallop up to the highest mountaintop, and the Lone Ranger and Tonto come into sight.

That moment starts the trance, which doesn’t break until the show is over. Near the end, when the masked man pulls out his gun, steadies his outstretched arm, and aims, the distance between the barrel of the gun and the man in black facing the Lone Ranger is no farther than Papa’s chair from the television set.

Then, slow and steady as a come-hither invitation, the Lone Ranger pulls the trigger and lets go the thundering blast of the bullet. That moment—the immigrant man, his wife, his children, bone-burying work, hands dirt-etched, unquestioningly accepting grief, its reiterating pattern—makes an arc of vengeance as the bullet sinks into the one who is to blame, toppling him into justice. My father stares, sleepwalking through a vision. He knows this scene. He is called into this ecstatic moment, sure the next bullet is for him—unforgivingly, for him.

At the commercial break, Mama would paddle into the kitchen and begin the ritual of steeping, brewing, cutting, heating, filling the special china plates with baklava, honeyed donut holes, *chada*, raisins, walnuts, *galecha*, bowls of dates, figs, grapes, oranges, apples, homemade breads, *lawasha*, and cheeses. Slowly, she would bring the same overladen tray, empty it, and return to empty another, and another. The last tray would be the tea service itself. The pewter sugar bowl with its marching camels and palm trees sat between tiny finely curved glasses and tiny porcelain saucers. Mama would polish the bowl until it shone. It sat on three legs, and its rounded base sparkled with city lights and flickering oases. The miniature square sugar cubes made a small, angular mountain, beckoning me. Mama would ask Papa to bring in the samovar filled with small charcoals for heating the water. She made one final exit to the kitchen for the teapot, which she placed on top of the samovar. Then the serving began.
The brass table, a wedding gift Mama had brought from Urmia, Persia, held the abundance of food. She would move it from the center of the room to the space in front of her as she sat grandly in her place, in the corner of the gold couch. From there, she would pour the dark cinnamon-flavored tea into the bottom of each glass. Then, holding the glass at its uppermost rim, she would turn the spout of the samovar and fill the glass with steaming-hot water. The smell of charcoal mixed with cinnamon permeated the room, as if we were in the bottom of the tiny glass, breathing its steamy weather.

Mama would place the glass on the saucer and call out, “Papa, first,” and on it went until we all got tea, and she could finally fill her own glass. Placing it on the small imitation Louis xv end table near her, Mama would breathe a heavy sigh and repeat, “Praise the name of God for all we have, his poorest servants.”

When Mama starts to bring the food out, the end of the show has already begun—as if the end were the first guest of beginning. She sees herself backwards, her past, the desperate light of a queen who has left the roof of her childhood, hears the terrible silence of her own language, unheard and unspoken, the hollow voice of exile returns to the ghostly circle by reciting her Persian tales, ones that march through our rooms so we can’t tell what is true and what is real. Her love of her homeland and her hungering nostalgia for all that she’s lost mount the feast, as if she were preparing for a lover. She spreads her goods in this place of exile, saturating the air with the plenty of a prophet, full of praise and promise of the way things should be, and, by implication, damning the days she lives in this exile for what they are not. She, like Eros, the fickle god of love—a child of lack and plenty.

We feasted on both.

I reach over and take one cube of sugar, put it on the tip of my tongue, and tentatively sip the hot tea as I wait for the burnang, slightly bitter, cinnamon flavor to dissolve the cube’s sweetness. Up to a point each sip is sweeter and less grainy, but then the tea grows steadily more bitter, and I reach for another sweet cube.

All five of us sip the tea with the dry cubes resting hard and persistent on our tongues. Against the trickle of steaming-hot tea that first cube, isolated at first, dissolves as we sip in union, together, with each other, and into each other. Papa, Mama, the boys, and me—sink into the bittersweet, by turns sweet and bitter, until the sugar lumps drag us, limp, to some memory’s shore. When I think of my childhood, I think of Mama, Papa, the boys, and the taste in my mouth after the sugary grain dissolves, my tongue searching the roof of my mouth. I think now that these tea ceremonies were initiations into Mama’s and Papa’s collective memories—rituals of atonement, an attempt to quench the unnameable.

Then the conversations began, hard, fast, playfully competitive, serious and joking by turns, until we had finished the tea and the breads and the fruit. Finally full, we were sanctified, and emptied.

When I was seven, Mama and Papa made preparations for my Uncle San to arrive. He was Mama’s brother, the youngest one, sent by her father from Baghdad to America. Her father never gave a reason why he was sending him. He only said, “Please take care of San. He needs his degree. America is best for him.”

After Uncle San moved in, Mama’s attention turned back to the home she had left. She saw herself again as the princess—and San as the prince, her birthright regained. She and Papa paid for all his expenses: his schooling, his spending money, his tennis memberships, his clothes. Everything.

Charming and antic, dark and muscular, he roared his presence into our house. He was a djimm. Mama loved him, Papa admired him, and we three kids were whisked into another reality, a magical new landscape. San told us stories of genies and heroes, murder and mayhem, evil wizards and thrilling enchantments. Sugar cubes.

From the day he came to live with us, everything changed.

Every night for three years, Mama and Papa argued about the money they spent to pay Uncle San’s expenses. Uncle San was at the center even when he was not in the house. He was out almost every night with another “wild” woman, drinking, smoking, out with the boys, or in his room with a woman who had used a ladder to climb through his bedroom window. He was the nightly ghost between my parents.

Although Papa had given San an allowance from his paycheck every two weeks for two years, one Sunday during our tea ceremony that changed. Mama was serving tea. Papa had just turned off the television after watching The Lone Ranger. He was in his chair when he turned to Uncle San.

“I can’t give you the usual twenty-five dollars. I can only give you five dollars this time.”

Mama was silent, her head down.

“What do you mean? How can I live? What are you doing to me?”

“I’m sorry, San. But we can’t pay our bills. We have to do something. You can make it on five dollars. I go to work every day and all I have is five dollars. You can…”

As he was ending his sentence, Papa rose to get another sugar cube from the bowl. Uncle San jumped up, grabbed his arm, and knocked him to the ground.
“You stupid ignorant immigrant—the only thing you’re good at is making a dollar. What do you need with money? I’m the one who will be the doctor and contribute something to this world. Your money is for that. Now give me my share, miser.”

The Persian table overturned and all the fruit, bread, and cheese scattered across the rug. Outlining Papa’s arm were the sugar cubes he had reached for.

All of us froze. Uncle San reached down to grab his arm. “Here, let me help.”

In his first show of anger, Papa pulled his arm away from San, got up awkwardly, and turned his back. Then he turned around to face him, his face blotching red.

“This is my house, not yours,” he said. “You are no longer welcome in my home, brother of my wife. You have dishonored me in front of my children and shamed yourself by disregarding all I have done for you. I do not want to see you here again after this week. Take your possessions and go.”

Papa knew this scene…steadying his outstretched arm…there…the man in black…he aims…

Mama walked over to Papa, stood beside him, and awkwardly held on to his upraised arm. Papa lowered his arm, turned away, balanced himself for a split second against the chair, and then walked toward the back of the house. When
he returned, he had on his black coat, which partially hid his ballooning trousers. But his fedora was not at its usual roguish slant, covering his left eye. Having placed it hastily at the back of his head, he looked like a lost boy, unmoored.

At that moment, I saw a dire expression on his face—an unforgiving justice. As if realizing that I saw right into him, Papa bowed his head, lit his cigarette, and walked out of the house.

He was the one thrown down, he was the one who lost, he had not been strong enough—brave enough. His heart pounding, dizzy, he hadn’t been prepared for this, though he had begun to pretend he was. He had pretended—but this time he couldn’t.

Mama saw him fall, the children saw him fall. He felt shame and something else—futility. He could do nothing to change the scene. Nothing.

He had read his enemy’s heart in that battle, and he had to turn away. But it was his own heart he mourned. And although he had done what he could, he had fallen. Once he knew, he couldn’t go back to unknowing. And at that moment he knew he would carry this memory like fire in his belly.

After Uncle San left the house, Papa didn’t watch The Lone Ranger again. He would say he had seen all the shows already.

Memories of my family blur into the tea, its first steamy stream of heat, the sugar cube still hard as my tongue feels its dry, flat surface begin to dissolve, the crackling fissures, the jagged shards collapsing into grains, then avalanching under the backward wave of hot liquid. I know something of cubic natures I didn’t know then.

Now, when I think of my childhood, I think of Papa, Mama, Uncle San, the boys, and the taste of the sugary grains dissolving, my tongue at the roof of my mouth, slowly finding the bitter after the sweet. Cubed.