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eNTER **C**ONJUROR
CHRONICLE OF A CRISIS

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*f*riday, 8:33 P.M.

I have been asking myself for months why writing has become so difficult even though my passion for words, the urge to command their power and the need to express myself have not diminished. In fact, the passion, the urge and the need have consistently intensified as the desire to act has grown with the progressive polarization and the increasing attacks on the progressive in my country of residence and that of my birth. Perhaps what I wrote in my diary some weeks ago could be construed as an answer: *Each word becomes a wall as soon as it is materialized in the sequence of keys my fingers press.* But isn't this self-evident? Words are fleeting fragments of thought until they are trapped and concretized through the act of writing (or speaking). As I struggle to write these words, I realize that this answer was a self-fulfilling prophecy whose restrictive power does not merely lie in the quasi-truth it expresses—for I have read much concrete writing that has bounced me over historical, social and cultural walls to understand and share the thoughts and experiences of others—but in the boundary it creates between thought and matter, spiritual and physical—what all scriptural prophecies do—and in the latent fear it bears, the fear to cross the boundary, one that may have never materialized had the words not been scripted and taken as complete truth upon reading.

The answer itself is *the wall*. Paradoxically, its validity as a lived experience positions it as the ladder I must climb to discover what spreads beyond the wall. This paper chronicles the climb. As I progress, I will record the shape of the bricks, the cracks and holes and any windows I may come across.

Saturday, 3:14 A.M.

Admitting that I am not interested in, or indeed capable of, writing anything that does not directly or indirectly concern myself—that is, anything that does not help me overcome my ignorance and fears or satisfy my curiosity—I designate inside the wall’s enclosure—following our forefathers’ traditions—as the realm of the personal/private. Outside it—following the same traditions—is the public, hence the political, reign. I am aware, as a woman, in body and soul, of the spiritual and physical role these rigid designations have played, in the universal history of gender hierarchy, in preventing women from exercising their own ability to define the spaces of their life, to choose what is meaningful to them and, particularly, to produce *public* knowledge.¹ But, as a woman would have to, I have also learned the art of subversion, a kind of struggle that is effective not because it is loud and bloody but because it manages to preserve the spirit of resistance and non-compliance amidst the daily chores of survival. I, therefore, accept these binary designations momentarily only because I want to visibly and audibly break what fragments the spaces of my life and to reconstruct the fragments into a whole. Addressing the public/political from a private/personal space, then, is an act of transgression (or trespassing), in defiance of the established rules. Naturally. In this, writing from the personal space, there are many women, writers and artists, who are my role models², and countless more whose lives, invisible and silent yet vital and productive, inspire my actions. I have learned that I am never alone in my predicament, in spite of *the wall* which, as its primary function, imposes solitude. Voices of others

have always echoed in this enclosure.

Sunday, 11:28 A.M.

In the Western cultural psyche of the Cold War era, *the wall* referred specifically to the Berlin Wall which physically and psychologically stood as a divider separating the Free World from the Communist Block, the Good from the Evil. As a physical presence, *The Wall* stood for the Iron Curtain stood for the Other. With the advent of the New World Order, *the wall*, no longer standing, has acquired a definite and calculable consumer value, signaling the Free Market's triumph. (Apparently one can still buy chunks of the Berlin Wall, enclosed in boxes or metal frames, in West Berlin souvenir shops.) For me *the wall* has a more complex meaning, changing as I turn my gaze. *The wall* is a shape shifter:

Gazing out from the window of this cold room into my adoptive society, I see the homeless man standing in front of the McDonald across the street, begging for spare change, kept out in December cold by the wall that separates the haves and the have-nots. In despair, I turn my eyes away and stare at the wall in my room. The picture of a refugee woman, holding up to her chest a board, an identification number written on it in chalk. A *refugee*, writes Edward Said, is “*a creation of the twentieth-century state*”³. The word, he writes, suggests “*large herds of innocent and bewildered people requiring urgent international assistance*”. I see a wall rising in my solitude. In an attempt to make distinctions between people “*prevented from returning home*”, Said writes that the word exile “*carries with it...a touch of solitude and spirituality*”. The *exile* has a personhood, a solitary one which, precisely because it is solitary, is romantic and spiritual. He—for the exile like other manifestations of personhood is, nine out of ten times, male—is typecast into a disheveled, disgruntled, dissatisfied writer (often), scholar, diplomat, artist dissociated from where he lives because of his overbearing, ever-present

ties to the place he has left behind, a place of memories and lost loves. He often succumbs to a form of addiction—frequently alcoholism—and ends up committing suicide. The inexplicable spiritual pain he feels appears in brief, unannounced pangs; flashbacks of the horrors—the violence and the loss—he heroically endured. The exile doesn't appear in immigration records. His place is in literature and film. The refugees, on the other hand, are on prime-time news every other night, voiceless behind the reporter's commentaries, masses of people living in nowhere land, in limbo. Awaiting the viewer's benevolence, they are devoid of personhood, of human dignity. The refugees are products of conflictual political and economic circumstances. Their pain has a material substance, blood and dysentery, exposed on the screen for all to see, from the distance separating the couch from the television. The only persons capable of creativity and romance in refugee camps are the Western aid workers, sending messages of affection to their beloveds back home. Refugees are numbers in the camps. If they leave the camps, they leave as numbers. If they enter Elsewhere, they are numbers, humanitarian quotas. In panic, I look in the mirror. I have a face. Older, but without the black circles under the eyes, it belongs to the woman in the picture on my wall. *The wall* is a smoke screen. It is there to separate the spiritual/emotional from the political/physical. I blow on the wall. It dissipates and the solitude of my memories and lost loves runs into the number I was assigned when I arrived in Canada, inflating the digits. I look out the window. The homeless man is still there, begging for spare change. Is he a refugee or an exile in our world of new orders?

*t*uesday, 9:41 P.M.

I hate the myth of 'Muslim wom(a)en' and the image that goes with it, that of a submissive, subservient, subdued woman, submerged under the veil. 'Muslim wom(a)en' are a monolithic, black-clad mass, crows in cages, unchanged in the fourteen

centuries since the advent of Islam, at once symbolizing the Islamic claims of moral superiority and the Western criticism of Muslim inferiority. And they remain the objects of the Orientalist's fetishist gaze, concerned with penetrating harem walls and possessing (in reality or in imagination) their mystified bodies. I have read the works of many scholars, social and political scientists, who have dedicated their life to critically analyze 'Muslim womanhood' in social, political, economic and historical terms. The wealth of information they have produced, from inside and outside the borders of Islam, has created a discourse, which, contradictory as discourse must be, confronts the simple assumptions that have enveloped women living in countries labeled as 'Muslim'. So I have a bone to pick with *anybody* who uses the term 'Muslim wom(a)en' as an umbrella, a category, or an essence. 'Muslim wom(a)en' is a myth:

*What the world supplies to myth is an historical reality, defined, even if this goes back quite a while, by the way in which men [sic] have produced or used it; and what myth gives in return is a natural image of this reality.*⁴ [Emphasis is mine.]

So writes Barthes. And he explains that "myth is depoliticized speech" because

*in passing from history to nature, myth...abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essence, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth.*⁵

The myth, 'Muslim wom(a)en', is consistently evoked by people on all sides of the globe to indiscriminately signify millions of women who live in countries as different as Iran, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia. Different in their histories, political and economic systems and even in the particular brand of Islam their governments uphold or their people may practice. Different also in their cultures, the signs and their meanings. The myth conceals class, ethnic, religious and cultural diversities between the women of different countries and even between different women within the borders of any 'Muslim' country. Diversities concealed behind distorted representations—or is it *the*

wall?—in words and images, ‘Muslim wom(a)en’ is a myth rooted in men’s, Oriental and Occidental, desire to essentialize women. Islamic patriarchy’s stately power is not guarded just by the book and the sword: This power is protected by the illusion of a uniform and unique *ummat*—or nation—in which women are the bearers of the society’s honour, nurturing its morality and values. Western imperialist patriarchy has little reason to question the illusory Muslim homogeneity because its understanding of the ‘Muslim’ societies is deeply rooted in Orientalists’ notions, and because it has, openly brotherly or conspiratorially friendly, economic and political relations with most Islamic states. That Saudi Arabian *kingdom* wasn’t even reprimanded for its practices and policies toward Saudi Arabian women, who took advantage of the Gulf War to publicize their protests, clearly showed that the manufacturers of consent, from seemingly opposite angles, have high stakes in presenting women as a homogeneously, essentially and unquestionably ‘Muslim’ body, exceptions to whom universally accepted human rights need not apply. A quick scan of the ‘Contributors’ or ‘About Authors’ sections of the increasing number of anthologies by women about ‘Muslim women’, however, is enough to break any illusion of homogeneity. In their diversity of responses and political positions about the women’s issues in countries under Islamic rule, these authors best illustrate the vitality and dynamism which characterizes women’s struggle for their right to define themselves and determine their fate.

Unfortunately, even within this feminist discourse the term ‘Muslim wom(a)en’ is widely in use and unchallenged. In her introduction to an anthology about women’s human rights under Islamic rule, a feminist scholar slips from referring to *them* as *women* who “live in vastly different lands, climates, cultures, societies, economies and politics”⁶ to unifying them under the banner of ‘Muslim women’, all within the space of the very first paragraph. What qualifies this non-consensual unification across histories, nationalities, cultures, politics and economies is the fact that in all ‘Muslim societies’ women’s private life and their public participation is regulated by Shari’a

laws. I admit that this obviously creates similar (but not the *same*) predicaments in our lives and, thus, should be the ground on which to build solidarity in our struggles. But, why is it assumed, and this assumption is taken for fact, that if one is a woman and lives in, or is from, a 'Muslim country', one is a 'Muslim woman' whether or not she practices or believes in Islam? Is muslimness in our nature, or in our blood, because we are born in 'Muslim societies'?⁷ 'Muslim wom(a)en' excludes from the picture those women who are secular, atheist or have other faiths. It excludes women's subjectivity with regard to the religion, and, therefore, places the discursive weight on Islam, making it the shrine we circle, whether in devotion, in protest or in daze. In effect, it undermines our ability to challenge Islamic fundamentalism through non-Islamic feminist discourse and agency. Have we already declared fundamentalists supreme by letting them not only define the priorities of our struggles but also the language we use to fight back? I find 'Muslim wom(a)en' objectionable because, by depriving us of our diversities, it makes us the objects of generalizations that, though may be useful in discerning patterns, inadvertently suppress our dissenting voices and submerge our political agency. Generalization produces stereotypes. Perhaps it is because of these generalizations that an in-depth, multidisciplinary feminist critique of the term 'Muslim wom(a)en' remains to be produced. Looking back at what I have read about 'Muslim wome(a)en', I ask: Where are our voices? Where are our faces? Where is the record of our daily struggles and our subversive victories? It is quite ironic that often the only *subjective* voices that find representation in the intellectual war over women in 'Muslim countries' are those of Islamic fundamentalist women.

The myth 'Muslim wom(a)en' evokes the image of a veiled woman in a harem, a courtyard, a cage. The myth is *the wall* keeping her in.⁸

Wednesday, 1:12 P.M.

Sometimes, when I think about a woman in a ‘Muslim country’, Madar-e Khadijeh appears. Mother of four boys and a girl, she had moved her entire family from their village to one of the many shanty towns sprawled up around Shiraz, where her husband worked as a day-labourer. She was in a literacy class I taught. She wanted me to call her Madar-e Khadijeh, mother of Khadijeh, her daughter, instead of, as the tradition dictated, Madar-e Abbas, mother of Abbas, her oldest son. She was nicknamed kalantar-e mahal, ‘local sheriff’, because she knew everybody’s business. Nothing happened in the neighbourhood without Madar-e Khadijeh. And nobody could get away with nonsense around her. All the young boys in the Islamic Revolutionary Committee knew that they had to be careful and keep their G3 guns pointing down when she was around. She just wouldn’t take them seriously and called them ‘boys with toys’. Her clout ensured my safety and the continuation of our classes which were held at her two-room house when the local mosque refused to give us space. Twelve-year-old Khadijeh linked her mother to me. She is going to be like you one day, Madar-e Khadijeh would say, able to ‘stand on her own feet’. Educated and working, she would have a good chance to go into a ‘good man’s house’. Madar-e Khadijeh’s annoyed me every week with her private reports, which she whispered in my ear, about the ‘good’, come-of-age bachelor men she had tracked down for me, men who were ready to establish a home and were looking for a ‘good’, educated woman to be their wife, keep them company in bed, and bear their children. I always struggled to change the subject to her progress in learning the alphabet or to Khadijeh’s grades in school and even once to the irreverent cat who, scared by a gunshot, had run into the mosque where ‘the boys’ and their imam were holding their noon prayer and, in its confusion and fear, had peed on a brother’s prayer mat. The story was in all conversations in the neighbourhood. It was the first thing I heard that day when I got in for our class. I asked Madar-e Khadijeh, who was

describing yet another prospect, if she knew what had happened to the cat. She reported that a commotion had ensued with ‘the boys’ trying to catch the cat, but it had managed to get away. The cat knew the mosque better than everybody there because the mosque was the cat’s home. ‘The boys’ just kept firing in the air, shouting threats at the cat, she said while mimicing them, and we all laughed. Our meetings stopped when ‘the boys with toys’ finally established their rule and started their own literacy classes in the mosque. But the dream of Khadijeh standing on her own feet will forever remain my link to Madar-e Khadijeh, the strong, vocal woman who sheltered me with her own body on the day G3s came to her house to arrest me. I don’t know what became of the cat.

Sometimes, when I think about a woman who was a proffered Muslim, Alieh appears. Daughter of a *mojtahed* (a confirmed interpreter of Islam), she was the sixth in a line of eight siblings, married at age sixteen, mother of eight children. She was given the right to see, through the opening in the curtain hanging at the entrance to her father’s reception room, the man who had come to ask for her and to decide whether she wanted to marry him. He was good-looking and from a ‘good’ family, and he seemed confident in his thirty-two years of age, tailored Western suite, and thin, fashionable moustache. She said yes. But that wasn’t much of a choice, really, because her options were quite limited: Marry this man or marry another man. Her father sent her to her husband’s house with these words: “You leave my house in a white wedding veil, and your husband’s only in a white shroud.” She could only assert her will years later, when her husband announced that their oldest daughter had received enough education (nine grades) and was ripe for marriage. Alieh threatened him with divorce: My daughters will not be deprived, the way I was, of the opportunity to be ‘their own women’. His gentle nature notwithstanding, he, as the supreme master of the family, had the backing of the law. But Alieh stood her grounds solidly, and, eventually, he was the one who caved in. He never mentioned the girls’ education any more. At all. She supported them with the money she saved from the household allowances, and the girls learned to work to help

pay their way. Alieh, my mother, was not generally in the habit of saying what a ‘good girl’ or a ‘proper young woman’ should or should not do. But once, when I told her I wanted to be a snake charmer, she said: That’s not something for women. Why, I asked. Because you will have to learn to grab the snake by its neck. I can learn, I said. She responded: The neck is too close to the mouth; if you’re not careful, the snake can easily bite you. This was a clear challenge because everybody knew I was not a careful type of girl. I thought about this for a moment and came up with a perfect solution: I will wrap your veil around my hand so the snake can’t bite me. Obviously annoyed by my persistence, she said: Suit yourself. That’s what I have been doing, thanks to her.

Often when I think about ‘Muslim wom(a)en’, a faceless, voiceless and nameless woman appears like a shadow on a wall. Perhaps we need a moment of reprieve—from apologizing, analyzing, confronting, criticizing, describing, self-mutilating under the gaze of the Other—to look at ourselves and discover the depth of our resourcefulness and hear our laughter—the spirit of our struggle—breaking *the wall*?

*t*hursday, 7:50 P.M.

I am trained to observe and draw naked bodies. Bodies in motion and rest. From all angles and of all ages. I am best in drawing women’s bodies. I find men’s bodies, in their overall flatness—groin area excluded—uneventful. It may sound simplistic, but I think this is why most naked male bodies in the history of Western art—which, excluding the Middle Ages, has made human body its center of attention—have an overdeveloped muscular appearance regardless of their age. God the Father on the Sistine chapel’s ceiling is a prime example of this. He has the solid white beard and hair of an aged man and the firm legs, torso and arms of a thirty-year-old athlete in the best of the classical Greco-Roman tradition. When I draw men’s bodies, my lines are neither fluid nor solid. I too find that I have to exaggerate the muscles in order to bring a more

substantial quality to the lines.

When I think about patriarchy, it being a male construct, I often see it as a body, a male body. This is not very hard to do now that I live in the West because, although here too bodies, particularly men's, are often clothed, feminists have a lengthy tradition of stripping the covers and revealing what's underneath, the phallus, the muscles and the beerbelly all. But, sometimes, when I think about patriarchy in Iran, all I see is the cloaks that cover the body. We are used to thinking that it's only the female body that has been behind *the wall* (or is it the veil?). But the male body too has been concealed from view. This is not to suggest that women and men have been equally oppressed by patriarchy, which, as the operative system of social, economic and cultural status quo based on a hierarchy of genders, in Iran like everywhere else, has been enacted and guarded by the collective and individual presence of fathers, uncles, brothers, husbands, sons and (lovers). My point is, rather an obvious one, that the patriarchal body in Iran is concealed behind many cloaks. These cloaks I see are the various ideological rhetorics that—over the past nearly-one-hundred years of continuous political turmoil and social questioning—have performed the same function—whether they have been in power or in opposition—with regards to women: They have invariably, though from different perspectives and with different effects, justified gender hierarchy. That they have addressed the women at all is by itself the greatest sign of women's presence in the arenas of struggle, for no ideological discourse by a dominant group has a reason to acknowledge the group it dominates unless the latter threatens the rules of domination. Perhaps this should force us to replace the notion of male domination in Iran (or elsewhere) with the concept of hegemonic rule (the way Gramsci describes it). But this is a separate point really. I want to stick to bodies, these impenetrable walls determining our gender, our sex, our fate. I will focus on Patriarchal Body because patriarchy presents the clearest challenge to unobstructed engagement or even viewing of bodies. (I should note that although I am drawing a parallel between a socio-politico-historical

phenomenon and the body, the latter is not a direct representation of the former—for no metaphor is—but an imaginary one—as all metaphors are. The function of a metaphor is to evoke an image—visual or auditory—for things that may otherwise fall in the realm of the abstract or trivial. Back to the Patriarchal Body in Iran:)

I want to attempt to sketch this body. To do so, I must reduce a body, a male body, to its visual essence, freeze patriarchy in action by taking snap-shots from single historical moments, and hope that the connections I draw are clear enough. Before I make this composite image however, I have to perform another magic. I described ideological rhetorics as cloaks. Now I want to use the cloaks as the material of the body. Using the material of concealment to make the concealed is a shift in paradigms. Like all such shifts, it opens the way for imagination. In so doing, I repossess the power to define the world in a way I can best understand and, thus, enter the discourse of representation (as definition and assigning meanings) as a “key site of....struggle, since the power of *definition is a major source of hegemony*”. I must do this from a very personal place, obviously, because imagination remains at the very core of the personal. I will draw the body in a vertical ascent (or descent really because I will be writing down) which clearly lends itself to phallic imagery. The process will create a hierarchy among body parts but the hierarchy is not to be mistaken for superiority because body is a system that functions as a whole. I should also keep in mind that a snap-shot is only a fragment of a spatial and temporal continuity. It is a two dimensional image, it has height and width but no depth. Its spontaneous framing leaves a lot of room for interpretation. A hand, for example, that is cut out of the frame could be in the person’s own pants, in the next person’s pocket or holding a gun or a bouquet of roses. This is a challenge to the viewer’s powers of imagination and investigation.

On to the task at hand:

*f*riday, 2:11 A.M.

Nationalism as the feet and legs; concerned with traveling distances, progress.

Picture: Wearing a black *chador*, a woman leaves her house very early in the morning to buy bread from the corner bakery. She walks very fast and in the shadows cast by the walls so as not to be visible. Before reaching the bakery, just as she turns a corner, she comes face to face with a policeman. Armed with a baton, he insults her, threatens her and forces her to take off her *chador*. Close-up of the woman's face.

Imperialism as the phallus; concerned with penetration and possession.

Picture: A black screen.

Communism as the belly and chest; concerned with material sustenance.

Picture: A young woman arrives at a comrade's house for a meeting. Her hair is pulled back and she is wearing a pair of jeans, a loose shirt and a pair of sneakers. The other attendants are four men and a woman. The leader of the group, a young man with a thick mustache and metal-framed glasses, starts the meeting by reading a directive from the Central Committee, informing them that all women cadres are advised to wear hijab and not participate in the Women's Day march which is a conspiracy of imperialist forces and decadent women of bourgeoisie against people's revolution. Close-up of our young woman's face.

Fundamentalism as the arms and hands; concerned with tying moral knots.

Picture: The granddaughter of the woman in the first picture leaves her house to go to her job in a small dress shop. She is wearing a full skirt that comes down under her knees, a chemise and low-heel shoes. She walks very fast. On the street, the walls are part plastered with images of Ayatollah Khomeini and part covered with revolutionary

graffiti and palm prints in dripping red paint. She waits at the corner for a reprieve from the traffic to cross the street. A 4WD, khaki-coloured Toyota pulls in front of her and two teen-aged boys in pseudo-military uniforms and armed with G3 guns jump out of the car. Insulting her for not wearing *hijab*, they force her into the car. Close-up of the woman's face.

*f*riday, 5 A.M.

I changed my mind about becoming a snake charmer one summer afternoon when I saw a live snake for the first time. We had gone for a picnic to the neighbouring orchard. The men were playing backgammon or napping, the women were chatting away and we kids, from the top of one tree to another, were shooting cherry pits at each other. Suddenly news arrived that Pir Ali the Gardener had caught a snake. Skipping branches like I used to skip steps, I came down in no time, leading the pack of curious and raucously excited kids who were all running to see the snake. We caught up with Pir Ali the Gardener near the old well. It was a huge rattle snake. Half of its body coiled around the shovel that Pir Ali the Gardener was carrying on one shoulder. The other half was hanging in a curve from the end of the shovel stick, the neck tightly squeezed between the two prongs of a long-handled gardening fork and tied to it with a piece of rope, kept securely away from Pir Ali the Gardener's body. The snake, the part of it hanging, was writhing in the air as if dancing to a mad charmer's wild tune. By the time they, the man and the snake, reached the old well, the grown-ups, mostly women and a few men who were probably bored of backgammon or were loosing in the game, arrived at the show too. It was a commotion: Everybody was laughing and shouting in excitement, mixed with awe because the snake had a particularly long and thick body. And everybody had an opinion about what to do with the snake. But Pir Ali the Gardener was in no rush to follow anybody's directive. The snake's mouth at a safe distance, he was obviously

enjoying all the attention, being the man who had caught the snake. I was struck at first by a sense of awe which quickly changed to pity then to disgust then to fear. I began shaking uncontrollably and broke into a run, stopping only when the orchard's wall became just a thin, distant line.

Saturday, 6:58 P.M.

I have reached *the wall* and can't go any further. I can't imagine a head for the body I drew. Like Zarin-Kolah (Golden Crown), one of the women in Shahrnoosh Parsipoor's *Women Without Men*, all I see is a headless man:

Zarin-Kolah, a twenty-six-year-old prostitute, who was habitually cheerful but had lately become tired of her workload, getting ready to have breakfast one Saturday morning, was called to receive a customer.

Zarin-Kolah gave up the idea of breakfast, at least for the moment. She went back to her room in rage, lay on the bed, and opened her legs.

Then the customer came in. He was a man who had no head. Zarin-Kolah didn't even have the courage to scream. The headless customer relieved himself and left.

From that day on, all customers were headless. Zarin-Kolah didn't dare speak to anybody about this. They might think she was possessed. She knew of a woman who was possessed and every night at eight o'clock would start howling. This was the time when the devils struck. This had driven the customers away from the house for a while until the woman was kicked out.

Zarin-Kolah lasted for six months without telling anybody about the headless men. She would just go to the outhouse every night at eight o'clock and sing for half-an-hour. Later, she decided to confide in a shy fifteen-year-old girl who was just brought to the house. The girl listened to her with kindness and said:

- Well, maybe they really are headless.

Zarin-Kolah said:

- But if they really were headless other women would see that too.

The girl said:

- You're right. Though it's possible that they see them headless too but don't have your courage to say it.⁹

Is this all in my head?

It is almost eight o'clock. I shall go for a walk by the lake. There I can sing the demons to the lake, which shouldn't really affect the already-polluted waters that much.

S*unday, dawn.*

Where "people have decided to discuss certain matters of capital importance to the well-being of their community", in Trinh T. Minh-ha's remote village,

[n]ever does one open the discussion by coming right to the heart of the matter. For the heart of the matter is always somewhere else than where it's supposed to be. To allow it to emerge, people approach it indirectly by postponing until it matures, by letting it come when it is ready to come. There is no catching, no pushing, no directing, no breaking through, no need for a linear progression which gives the comforting illusion that one knows where one goes. Time and space are not something entirely exterior to oneself, something that one has, keeps, saves, wastes, or loses.¹⁰

S*unday, evening.*

Farzaneh Milani brings *the wall* and death together when she writes about the Iranian poet, Forough Farrokhzad:

At the height of her creativity and barely thirty-two, Farrokhzad died of head injuries in a car accident on February 14, 1967. Trying to avoid an oncoming vehicle, she struck a wall and was thrown from her car. Ironically, this woman who escaped and avoided walls for a lifetime was eventually killed by one, killed at a time when she claimed to have finally found herself...Like a dream cut short by wakefulness, her life and her art, characterized by a breathtaking dynamism and mobility, are stamped with the finality of a premature death.¹¹

But this so-called finality, with its touch of fatalism, should not be interpreted as the

end. The wall failed in its victory. Farrokhzad's poems—intimate and personal—have continuously been and remain in print and in demand (in spite of the severe censorship in Iran), right at the heart of the modern Iranian poetry. Indisputable arrows that have irreparably ruptured the wall. Thirty years after her death, Farrokhzad's is amongst the most discussed and analyzed modern Iranian poetry in and outside the country.¹²

There is a journey in Forough Farrokhzad's poetry. It is not only the "maturity of the poetic language" but the spiritual landmarks of finding one's own image, the process of "[giving] birth to a self in the image of her own likings and aspirations"¹³, that signal the course of this journey. The language, the writing, is merely a reflection of the spiritual, "with the intimate and the personal as an everpresent background."¹⁴ The titles of the five published collections of her poetry—four published in her lifetime and one posthumously—illustrate the point. Imagine a woman, imagine a woman breaking free: *Captive*, *The Wall*, *Rebellion*, *Another Birth*. These are the first four titles. We don't know if she indeed chose the title, *Let Us Believe in the Dawn of the Cold Season*¹⁵, for the entire collection that was printed posthumously. But even if she did, and even if we accept the apparent sadness and finality of the Dawn of the Cold Season—feelings which admittedly overwhelm the reader in much of the poem that lends its title to the collection—in the collection as a whole, as in this poem itself, there is a hint to a secret spiritual landmark:

*And in the martyrdom of a candle
There is a glowing secret which
That last and tallest flame knows well.*¹⁶

The landmark—and the secret to Farrokhzad's immortal presence in Iranian poetry—may indeed be this, in her own words in *It Is Only the Voice that Remains*, another poem from the same collection:

Remember the flight

*The bird is mortal.*¹⁷

The flight is what we all remember. All the Iranian women who have experienced, in body and in soul, the dawn of the cold season,

*living through the unforgettable period of Iranian history when rising fundamentalism, involving the most undemocratic, brutal and misogynist practices, was sweeping away the democratic achievements of the 1979 revolution.*¹⁸

Thus, Haideh Moghissi, begins her book, *Populism and Feminism in Iran; Women's Struggle in a Male-Defined Revolutionary Movement*, from which the above passage comes, with different lines from *It Is Only the Voice that Remains*:

*I am a descendant of the house of trees.
Breathing stale air depresses me.
A bird which had died advised me to
commit flight to memory.*¹⁹

Moghissi chronicles the development of the women's movement in Iran, from its emergence as a "separate political involvement [in] the national struggle for constitutional government during 1905-11"²⁰ to its polarization during the despotic Pahlavi reign "into two antagonistic spheres - the one, open and pro-establishment; the other, clandestine and anti-establishment"²¹, through to its emergence in the post-revolutionary period as "the first, and to a certain extent, the most effective challenge to the Islamic regime...courageously questioning the clerical authority to define the conditions of their lives"²². Turning her gaze to the right and the left, she analyzes the political forces, from the secular/nationalist to the capitalist to the socialist to the Islamist (there's the body I drew) which, patriarchy prevailing at the core of their understanding of women and in their leadership, submerged "women's cause in male-focused political struggle and political activities"²³, ultimately leading to the loss of many "personal and social freedoms"²⁴ women had gained. But this is not the end of the story.

Moghissi's story ends with a new beginning. Giving illustrations of "women's determination and their enormous efforts to escape the prisons of the femininity and sex-roles defined and guarded by the guardians of Sharia"²⁵ - the wall - she talks about women "jumping over the fence"—a kind of wall. At the beginning of her concluding chapter, Moghissi quotes these lines from Forough Farrokhzad:

*Dreams always fall from the height
of their naiveté, and die.
I am smelling a four-leafed clover
that has grown on top of the grave of ancient concepts*²⁶

and, talking of *autonomy* as *subversion*, echoes Farrokhzad in the final lines of the book:

*We revolt to survive, and our defiance and insubordination will shake up the entire society to eventually come face to face with reality and recognize the need to reconsider and transform the hierarchical, undemocratic and patriarchal values, presuppositions and relations that so fully inform this society.*²⁷

No loss is final so long as the *voice* remain. The *voice* that tells the story. Remembering the flight, I dream *the wall* away with these lines from Forough Farrokhzad:

*I have dreamed that someone is coming
...
I have swept the stairs to the roof
and washed the windows.
Why should only father
dream in his sleep
...
Someone is coming
someone is coming
someone who is with us in her heart, with us in her breath, with us in her voice
someone whose coming
cannot be stopped*

*and handcuffed and imprisoned...*²⁸

The window defies the wall and the roof ends it. I dream and *the wall* separating us disappears. Another story begins. It is the same story, but the voice is different.

*M*oonrise

*The story never stops beginning or ending. It appears headless and bottomless for it is built on differences. Its (in)finitude subverts every notion of completeness and its frame remains a non-totalizable one. The differences it brings about are differences not only in structure, in the play of structures and of surfaces, but also in timbre and in silence.*²⁹

Is *difference* a wall that will forever keep one in while keeping the Others out? Am I *naturally* different from those who do not share the specificity of my gender, class, history, culture? Am I *essentially* the same as any person who shares these specificities with me? If who I am, my identity, is an intersection of specific social factors—gender, class, history, culture—then who am *I*? If I remove these specificities, does anything remain that could or should bind me to other humans, ever? Thinking through identity, difference and subjectivity, these are the questions that fill my mind.

These are important questions to consider for a *diasporic* artist. Cut off from the context of my own national culture, I grapple every day in my practice with implicit or explicit questions about the relevance of my work—which, in form and in content, is informed by and often concerned with issues originating in my homeland, that place of safety and of terror—to *Canadian culture*. I am often burdened with a hyphenated identity—Iranian-Canadian—that is neither here nor there, a limbo that even immigration bureaucracies, these powerful limbo factories, don't honour. I have learned that in our *multicultural* society hyphenated identities are used by people to differentiate in an effort to include or to exclude. So I forego the hyphen and identify myself, because the

need arises from time to time, as a Canadian citizen from Iranian descent. But what is *diasporic*? Does it refer to a space, as *margin* is a space, or an identity, as *person of colour* may be an identity? The Concise Oxford Dictionary relates diaspora to *the Diaspora, the dispersion of the Jews among the Gentiles mainly in the 8th-6th c. BC*, thus defining it as *any group of people similarly dispersed or their dispersion*. In her book, *Cartographies of Diaspora; Contesting Identities*, Avtar Brah, “concerned with relations of power”, places the image of a journey “[a]t the heart of the notion of diaspora” to emphasize “the circumstances of leaving” and those of “arrival and settling down”³⁰. She deconstructs the notion of ‘diaspora’ as a single, all-encompassing signifier by pulling out the “economic, political and cultural specificities” which mark the multiple journeys of various “clusters of migrations”. She links diaspora with borders—arbitrary, “metaphoric lines” that are crossed in “trans-national movements”—and “politics of location”—“locationality in contradiction”—to propose a spatial mode for diaspora:

“Diaspora space is the intersectionality of diaspora, border, and dis/location as the point of confluence of economic, political, cultural, and psychic processes. It is where multiple subject positions are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed or disavowed... What is at stake is the infinite experientiality, the myriad processes of cultural fissure and fusion that underwrite contemporary forms of transcultural identities.”³¹

So, *diasporic* could relate to space(s) and identity(ies). Brah makes the notion of diaspora infinitely more complex than a mere dispersion or dislocation. Her “*diaspora space includes the entanglement, the intertwining of the genealogies of dispersion with those of ‘staying put’*”. It is “*the site where the native is as much a diasporian as the diasporian is the native*”.³² She argues that diasporic identities “*are not minority identities, nor are they at the periphery of something that sees itself as located at the centre, although they may be represented as such*”.³³ Brah’s theorization, therefore, more than my immigration papers and annual income tax forms, justifies my claim to an

active presence within the *Canadian cultural milieu*.

Fine. But am I different? Many social and cultural theorists³⁴ have discussed, contested or employed the concept of difference in a debate that has been labeled as *identity politics* (which, in my view, is a pejorative term sprung from the *reflexive impulses* of the cultures of dominance confronted by contesting cultures).³⁵ I don't want to enter in this debate except from a *subjective* position. Difference among individuals or groups of humans, after all, belongs to the realm of subjectivities—as the intersections of gender, economy, culture and history. This should not be construed as negation of *objective* (as in *observable, real*) difference nor as embracing such difference. Rather, this means that I am placing difference close to the center of my notion of subjectivity so that whether you raise a wall before me telling me I am different from you or invade my space telling me I am just like you, I will ask *Says Who?* In other words, this is a subversive strategy against *any* essentializing and differentiating politics and practice, a personal war against simplistic categories and representations that, in the long run, only benefit *marketeers* of ideology and merchandise. 'Am I different', therefore, should be replaced with 'can I make alliances' and 'can we make a politics which - as Stuart Hall puts it -

*works with and through difference, which is able to build those forms of solidarity and identification which make common struggle and resistance possible but without suppressing the real heterogeneity of interests and identities, and which can effectively draw the political boundary lines without which political contestation is impossible, without fixing those boundaries for eternity [?]*³⁶

I do not buy into postmodern cynicism and paralysis. Accepting subjectivity as a valid basis of my work does not mean denying the existence of *real* sufferings, exploitations and oppressions that abound in our world. My own subjectivity is informed by the specific forms of sufferings, exploitations and oppressions - the power

relations - that tarnish my memories of the country to which I am bound by blood and the one in which I came to seek refuge. I engage in what Hall calls “‘*war of positions*’ - *the struggle around positionalities*”³⁷ through daily rituals of solidarity and identification, rituals of transgressing *the wall*. And any crisis is a turning point.

I am a woman/artist concerned with creating a self - a voice - in the image of my own likings. As I create this self, voices of other people enter the enclosure of my subjectivity, filling the solitude of my exile, pushing the walls, trespassing the borders. Thinking beyond identity and difference, stories rush in, stories of my encounters with other humans who become a mirror and more, a mirror reflecting a distortion of the image I project, a wall breaking my voice, a canyon echoing it, a wind entering through the window, a sky pregnant with rain or snow, or filled with sunshine or stars or moonlight, a sea engulfing my body, a body accepting or rejecting my body, a mind at ease or in battle with my mind, a passing phrase awakening a memory, a gesture beckoning my imagination to travel in new directions.

I rise from the bottom of the basket, deaf to the charmer’s tune, not to dance in submission but to trace his every move, every position, fixing my gaze in his eyes for a crack to break free. When the moon rises, I am the snake and the apple is my voice.

- What appears when *the wall* disappears?
- A canyon, a sea, a wind traveling through the canyon and over the sea.
- What does the wind carry?
- The voice of a woman in a distant land.

The woman closed her eyes and dreamt in the moonlit night.

Notes

1. In her article, *Is There a Feminist Method*, Sandra Harding explains:

[E]pistemology answers questions about who can be a “knower” (can women?); what tests beliefs must pass in order to be legitimated as knowledge (only tests against men’s experiences and observations?); what kinds of things can be known (can “subjective truths” count as knowledge?); and so forth. Sociologists of knowledge characterize epistemologies as strategies for justifying beliefs: appeals to the authority of God, of custom and tradition, of “common sense”, of observation, of reason and of masculine authority are examples of familiar justificatory strategies. Feminists have argued that traditional epistemologies, whether intentionally or unintentionally, systematically exclude the possibility that women could be “knowers” or agents of knowledge; ...

2. Gloria Anzaldua, Marguerite Duras, Forough Farrokhzad, bell hooks, June Jordan, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Toni Morrison, Shahrnoosh Parsipoor, Adrienne Rich, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Alice Walker, to name just a few.

3. This and other quotes in this section are from Edward Said’s article, *Reflections on Exile*, in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Culture*, 1990.

- 4 & 5. *Myth Today* in “Mythologies”, 1972; pp. 109-159.

6. Mahnaz Afkhami in “Faith and Freedom; Women’s Human Rights in the Muslim World”, 1995. Here, ‘Muslim women’ is a *category* of personhood. It is a category not because there is a consensus among the women it refers to about their faith - after all, being a Muslim is a faith and, as such, it implies consent - and how they practice it. It is a category because it simplifies matters when addressing such diverse groups of people as women are in countries under Islamic rule. One can’t help feeling that there is a degree of elitism implied in this kind of simplification. While most of the authors who use the term would not necessarily divulge or proclaim their own faith, probably, as an exercise of individual choice, they inadvertently take this choice away from women who are the *objects* of their writings.

7. Afkhami by no means is the only person using ‘Muslim women’ as a category. Talking about images and representations in her article, *South Asian Young Muslim Women and the Labour Market*, Avtar Brah goes to some length to explain the diversities, differences, variations in the ‘Muslim’ “*lived cultures*” in Britain and states:

“it is critical ... that we distinguish between ‘young Pakistani women’, as an object of social discourse, and young Pakistani women as concrete historical subjects. The latter are diverse and heterogeneous people who occupy a multiplicity of subject positions. As is the case with other social agents, their everyday lives are constituted in and through intersecting discourses, material practices and matrices of power embedded in these.”

- Yet, she contradicts this statement in the title of the article as well as in much of its body by referring to the young Pakistani women she has studied as ‘young Muslim women’.

8. It is shocking that this familiar Orientalist image should be evoked by women defending the rights

of women in 'Muslim societies', as is the case on the cover of *Faith and Freedom*. Whatever the political aim may be - bringing attention to the urgency of issues discussed, for example - perpetuating the myth only hurts us in the long run.

9. This and the excerpt above it are from the short story *Zarin-Kolah*, in *Women Without Men*, by Shahrnoosh Parsipoor. Translation is mine.

10. Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other*; page 2.

11. Farzaneh Milani in *Veils and Words; the Emerging voices of Iranian Women Writers*; 1992, p 135.

12. As can be observed from numerous articles in every Iranian literary magazine in and outside Iran. Of course, this claim is worth proving.

13 & 14. *Veils and Words*.

15. I differ with Milani in translating the title of the poem. Her translation is *Let Us Believe in the Dawning of the Cold Season*. Though the difference seems minimal, it is important in reading the subtexts of the poem. *Dawning* implies a motion, an attack. *Dawn*, on the other hand, immediately evokes its opposite *dusk*, and, therefore, creates a never-ending tension. There is no finality in the dawn-dusk cycle. A literal translation would use the word *beginning* for *aghaz*, which is the original Farsi word in debate here. Although, similar to dawn, *beginning* would evoke *end* and create the tension that marks the poem, I personally like *dawn* both because it is closer in rhythm to *aghaz*, and because Farrokhzad repeatedly refers to *dusk* and *night* in words and in images she creates. This tension between the apparent opposites in a never-ending cycle, in my view, is the secret of the poem. Farrokhzad knows the *secret of the seasons*, "...dark clouds always / are the prophets of new verses of absolution". But much in translating, particularly translating poetry, is a matter of translator's *subjective* reading.

16. From *Let Us Believe in the Dawn of the Cold Season*. Translation is mine.

17. From *It Is Only the Voice that Remains*. My translation.

18. Haideh Moghissi in the preface to *Populism and Feminism in Iran*, page ix.

19. Moghissi's translation.

20, 21, 22, 23, 24 & 25. *Populism and Feminism in Iran*.

26. Moghissi's translation.

27. *Populism and Feminism in Iran*, page 190.

28. From the poem *Someone Who Is Not Like Anybody*, in the collection *Let Us Believe in the Dawn of the Cold Season*. Translation is mine. It is interesting to note that a prominent Iranian writer and critic, Ahmad Karimi Hakak, in *Anthology of Modern Persian Poetry* (Westview Press, 1978), assigns the male gender to the person whose coming is the thread of this poem. In Farrokhzad's original poem in Farsi, there are no gender indicators marking the person. The problem comes from a fundamental difference between English and Farsi because the latter does not, grammatically at least, discriminate between genders. So if we are to arbitrarily assign a gender, I'd rather the person was a woman. But, in fact, it could be claimed that she defies any gender demarcation, whatsoever, in these

lines of the poem:

Someone is coming / someone else / someone better / someone who is not like anybody, is not like father, is not like Ensi, is not like Yahya, is not like mother / and is like the person who should be...

29. Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other*; page 3.

30, 31, 32, 33. Avtar Brah in *Cartographies of Diaspora; Contesting Identities*; Chapter 8.

34. Among them bell hooks, Avtar Brah, Mary Maynard, Sheila Allen, Sturat Hall, Audre Lorde, Cornel West and others

35. It is interesting to observe that now that *multiculturalism* is no longer upheld as a government-funded enterprise, how often rejecting *identity politics* means exclusion of non-White (male or female) voices which at least had a token presence before.

36 & 37. Sturat Hall in *New Ethnicities*, in *Race, Culture, Difference*, 1992; page 255.

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