

Shadows of Authority

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These poems and prose pieces were written in response to encounters with the changing faces of authority; close or distant, but always face to face, whether its shadow trembles or its darkness expands. Curated in the fewest possible words, they do not recount but stage: the poems as fragments set in lines, the prose in paragraphs, both carrying scenes, each an image, a gesture, a moment suspended in space. Read together, distinct yet whole, they trace shifting terrains of exposure, relation, and resistance.

I

My dress
is the sail of a forsaken ship
sinking
into the depths of an ocean.
I am lonely.

II

As a child, the most terrifying nightmare was bombardment. That the city might be struck and we would all die. In a film I once saw, all were killed except those who hid underground. But these days my nightmare is no longer bombardment. It is the house-to-house search. When the city falls. When they enter each home. Executing. Occupying. How it feels to watch them shoot you; then live in your house, hang their pictures on your walls, walk your floors, under your roof. This is my nightmare: to remain alive, emptied of myself, hollowed of self. I hear their boots on the stairs. Hammering. Hammering the door.

III

We walk, a few steps apart
as if two dragons guard their towers and walls.

An old legend says:
if two dragons turn their heads to opposite sides at the same time,
time will stop
an eternal pause.

But we do not turn away.
Whistling
we step
we summon time.

You are close, only two steps away.
But! But!
The Great Wall of China is only a few steps thick
as thick as the space between you and me.

You are close, only two steps away.
But! But!
How long does a bombardment take
to destroy,
to kill,
to create a distance wide as a world
between you and me?

We move closer,
you and I
one step,
one kiss; hurried, hesitant, swift as wind.

We kiss.
Is this the act of building a bridge,
or an abyss?
We turn back
have we moved closer to death, or life?

We kiss.
Is this the act of stitching a wound,
or making one?
We turn back
is love turning to ash,
or flaring up?

We kiss.
Have we come closer to peace,
or to war?
We turn back
but we do not turn away.

Whistling
we step
we summon time.

IV

The memory of your arrogance that day
if I tie it to a wild horse
running through a burning desert,
perhaps, perhaps, perhaps,
it might be a little veiled in dust.

Try it
tie your hand to my horse's leg.

V

These days,
walking into the factory
is entering the Auschwitz camp.

Gun-wielding madmen!
Petty managers!
Dreams without meaning!
Plans without mind!

As if you were in a nest of snakes,
watching them coil around your legs
to drink your breath.

Even if you cross the border
on the far side of the waters
the emperors change,
and the money from days of toil in Auschwitz
is worthless paper.

New currency arrives
with new designs.
We are left
with empty boxes
and burnt moments.

In these songless days,
among fear and regret and fire,
when you take my hands
Auschwitz burns
and on its ruins
a mansion rises,
splendid,
climbing to your shoulders

your shoulders: beloved pillars!

And I can, calm and unafraid,
put on my pleated dress,
stand beside you,
and sketch the steps that wind upward
from my eyes
to your smiles.

VI

Rain is falling, and I sit waiting at the train station. The crowd around me talks about the fluctuations of oil prices in the world markets, full of murmurs, full of voices, ceaseless and continuous. And on this rainy night, within the confines of these closed borders and within these songless days, my thoughts return to the oil-company worker who, a few years ago, took his life at that oilfield, in despair and desperation. What has never left me, all these years, is the image of his shoes. He took them off before he took his life. Those old shoes! Worn down by so much running toward destinations never reached. Those shoes surely carried the memory of all his toil, all his running. Why did he take them off? As if he saw himself at the threshold of the sacred, as in an ancient ritual. Perhaps he was tired of wearing shoes, of running and never arriving. Perhaps he took them off so that we would remember him barefoot forever. The bare feet and the sorrow of no bread above the oilfield. Those worn shoes and those bare feet are, for me, a figure of a defenseless man kicking power in the face. Power, this demon that seems to turn human beings into iron in this age of iron and steel. As though a human being were made of iron, rather than of sigh and breath. The rain is still falling, clear as tears. I remember Ruzbihan Baqli in *Kashf al-Asrar*: “I saw a corpse borne on the shoulders of angels. They brought it and laid it upon the earth. I saw God perform the prayer for the dead over that corpse.”

VII

There is a ruin within me,
submerged, hidden beneath the water.
But you have no way to it
the water pushes the corpses back.

VIII

The death of Pirouz is bitter. Bitter beyond words. Pirouz; the Iranian cheetah cub, a symbol of hope for saving an endangered species. In northern Iran there is an old tale: Mina and the leopard. Mina was a girl and the leopard her lover, their eyes and their hearts glowing like rubies in wild love. The story lives within us like memory. As if at times we were Mina, at times the leopard. We grew up believing it. For me, since childhood, the forest was the leopard's home. With each leopard's death the forest loses its guardian. A forest emptied of leopard fills with demons. Ah, the death of the leopard! Ah, this land is being stripped of leopard, overrun with demons!

IX

The image of blood-soaked manes of horses killed in yesterday's bombardment at the border town is as grievous to me as the braid of a woman buried under rubble. They say the horses were trapped in their stalls, no chance to run. Horses that had run all their lives, for horse racing competitions, ran fast as wind; died in silence, terrified, locked. My heart shatters into a thousand pieces, and each piece is carried by the wind, toward horses, toward people, toward all the lives that have gone with wind.

X

Last night, crossing the street. A bus speeding from one side, a drunken madman staring from the other. I ran toward the bus. Had it not stopped, death was certain. In that instant I fled the grip of horror into the shadow of death. Horror felt more hateful than death. I stood numb for minutes, hearing only my heartbeat; pounding, pounding, pounding. That sound will stay with me always; that relentless pulse. It reminds me, in the midst of horror, death, and life, to be faithful to life, faithful to my heartbeat. This restless, anxious, defiant heart.

XI

I am sure something was shaken within people's hearts. Something is happening. This evening I crossed Enghelab Square in Tehran. In these days of the Woman, Life, Freedom Movement, the square was ringed with riot police. And there, someone was whistling *Bella Ciao*. The song of freedom in Italy's civil war. A melody that has become the sound of uprising. I turned; it was a street sweeper, working just steps from the guards. He whistled so purely, so easily, like rain falling. Who can forbid the clouds to rain? Something flowed within him. For me, this was the most beautiful scene; cracking the wall of silence. Something has truly begun.

XII

I do not move. I remain still. As if a tree of centuries, an eagle nesting above me. You do not know, within me, desire to depart has built thousands upon thousands of nests. The beak striking, again, again, insistent, relentless.