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Walls of Silence : Two excerpts from a book in progress

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Walls of Silence**

(Two excerpts from a book in progress)

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I.

Veil on Fire

In and out of the net, the world wept.

The past is now. February 21, 1994. A woman burned herself to death in public.

The gesture, non-nameable, is well-known today to the world through the media coverage of Vietnamese Buddhist monks' actions in the sixties. The woman's sister, who lives in the U.S., confirmed it to be an act of protest against the oppression of Iranian women. As expected, the Western media blamed it solely on religion. A magazine sub-headline typically made the accusation in bold red letters: "A Life Destroyed by Islam."

It was during that calm period of the day when the whole family took its siesta that the woman was said to have gone out of doors, to Tehran's crowded Tajrish Square, to bare and set fire to herself. Off went her headscarf, which she wore with a long overcoat, an acceptable substitute for the *chador*—what can be seen as a portable wall, the garment that shrouds female bodies from lustful male inquisition, and is referred to in the West, as the veil of submission and secrecy. As she poured gasoline over herself, she was reported to have shouted at the top of her voice, "Death to tyranny, death to oppression, long live freedom," before lighting a match and giving herself to the flames of revolt.

First Guilt. She was a brilliant physician and a professor at the University of Tehran School of Medecine. Information given on her mentions she had been politically active since her student days and was briefly imprisoned for her activities against the Shah's regime. A strong supporter of the 1978 revolution, she was also one of the two women who, at the time, met with prime minister Bani Sadr to present a list of women's demands. Unlike a great number of her fellow women, whose destinies were still determined by "arrangements" carefully made between male-dominated families, she was able to make the choice of her life on her own and her marriage was said to have been a rare love-match. But, said her sister, she was wife to a man in whose family women, all veiled,

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“would have never dared [to disagree] or even thought of disagreeing with their husbands.”

That Guilt. Having spoken out about the government’s restrictions on women, she was accused of not complying with *hijab*, with the dress code imposed on women, or more comprehensively, with the prevailing forms of physical and mental veiling. The pretext was enough. The ruling forces dismissed her from her position as director of the university clinic and followed up with further harassment in her private practice—haranguing her with phony appointments and dissuading her patients from coming back—until she finally decided to close down her office. The accusation of non compliance to *hijab* worked to ostracize her, for the veil has remained, despite all controversies, a strong determinant of a woman’s social identity—her appearance in public, her class, her status, her moral and political position, her ability to serve and to function in her family, community and society.

More Guilt. The sister married to an American man made all possible attempts to bring the living dead woman back to the U.S., where the latter had lived and practiced with her husband for ten years in the past, and was in possession of a U.S. passport. But all efforts were in vain as long as the husband refused to give his permission for her to leave. There, where she came from and returned to for the rest of her life, a woman’s husband legally owns her. The law gave him the right of possession, which he adamantly claimed as a natural right. The slightest move of hers away from Home requires full approval from the male owner—whether He is her life mate, her father, her brother or a further relative in charge of her. Having always been a threat to male sovereignty, the (free) movement(s) of women—and the Women’s Movement—continues all around the world to raise intense feelings of aversion and abomination among those whose “endangered” honor and dignity are sorely in need of official protection and reinforcement. Written authorization—the legal password—from the male member(s) of the family or the society is still literally a requisite if she’s to be granted a pass-port—or the license to cross boundaries.

The light slowly went out in her—in Homa, a name like pain like torment like agony.

Ten thousand people are said to have attended the memorial service for Homa Darabi in Tehran, and several more from the exiled Iranian communities attended services for her in cities across the U.S. “People now hail her as an Iranian Joan of Arc,” says her sister Parvin Darabi, who gave up her own business in the U. S. to start a foundation in Homa’s name to campaign for the rights of Iranian women. Politicized despite herself by Homa’s death, the sister refuses to let herself be silenced by the Iranian authorities who demand that her male relatives stop her from mobilizing support to voice her discontent.¹⁾

Die by the Third Blow

Suicide, murder or death? A body partly unvalled and out of bounds is put to spectacle and set on fire in broad daylight. A life is snuffed out—in frustration, isolation and helplessness. “Trapped,” “destroyed,” and “pure torture” are the words she used to

describe her life. But which life? That, it seems, not of a person alive but of a breathing corpse going through the motions of daily routines while answering to the call of death. How and when did she truly die? With outer doors sealed and external walls closing in to entomb her against her will, had she not at some stage closed in on herself, letting the light burn out and wasting herself away? Did she not watch life move out of her, before she decided, in the flaring up of a last spark, to face squarely the end of the road and to walk on in her own way? Rather than letting herself be subjected to a vertically imposed slow death, she resisted by accelerating it and consuming it, so to say, as she saw fit. The form of death preferred when it comes to disciplining women is more often than not one that is slow and muted—conveniently as noiseless as possible. If, for example, it is written (in the often-invoked article 116 of the Iranian penal law) that stoning to death is a suitable punishment for women in certain cases of offense, it is also specified that “stones used should not be big enough to kill the convict in the first or second blow.” For the laws require that shame be endured and pain be made to last, if consciousness is to be converted (albeit poorly), or if fear is to be installed, in the mind of the dying and the yet-to-die victims. The project, strangely or commonly enough, is not to end life, but to possess, disable, isolate, and control one’s relation to light and darkness.

Stone her, cover her, beat her and make sure to keep her in check, so that she may serve and serve only as stipulated by His laws. It took what is called “self-immolation”—the setting ablaze of her living-dead corpse—to rekindle the very last flame in her. The mere flame of revolt? (For there are many ways to kill oneself in defiance and resistance) Or the unforgettable burning light of death? The monk’s light. The fire of dis-appearance rising and dying through one’s body until one’s heart is all flame and one’s frame, a halo around a light. Sometimes the way to live on is to die: her victory, if victory there is in material death, is born of the renunciation of appearance. In losing its physical reference, the name, her name, “she” has become a no-body’s possession. It has been traveling far and wide while staying close to many people’s heart, and thank to the words passed on by other women, it has gone on living as a growing multiplicity. By her own combustion, she consumed and gave the light. Love and death here are but a fire whose heat and halo are to be shared and transmitted.

Homa,

Solitary are all walks carried on by the end of the road. And yet never was she at the same time more alone and less by herself than when she followed the call of death and yearned for its burning light. For on the same day as the day of her choice, in the same country, under the same laws, it was reported for example (most likely as no more than a minor news item), that another person of the same gender—a fourteen-year-old girl—had set fire to herself to break out of a forced marriage with a forty-four-year-old man. One case among many others, mostly unreported. One case too many, hence not one. Marrying off child brides to men twenty or thirty years their senior is, after all, together with rape, incest and other abuses of the second and third sexes, a worldwide practice that continues to thrive in male-dominated societies. No matter at what age one receives it, the “gender

blow” bides its time, to hit when one seems to expect it least. During her time as a physician, it was said that Homa Darabi received requests from parents begging her to certify that their daughters were “mentally incapacitated” in order to save the latter from the hundred and fifty lashes to which they were sentenced for wearing makeup. Also known to her were the numerous cases of women beaten and mutilated by their men in the name of God or of family honor; of virgin girls raped prior to their execution (for the law as it is written cannot be applied to virgins); and of female teenagers being *shut up* to death because, to use a common expression among male religious leaders, they’ve dared to “hurt the decent feelings of our nation” by . . . putting on lipstick. Upon Homa’s public death, the news was broadcast outside the country, while the Iranian press remained silent until much later, when the regime finally named and filed her case as that of a suicide committed by a “mentally ill” woman.

Immured, silenced, incapacitated. A slow death that usually wouldn’t show and would fit into one the societal categories devised to fool the obedient ear and eye. Madness is both her refuge and her prison; it is in its name that she is released from social codes only to be better condemned as an outcast. The wall inside and the wall outside seem at times dizzily interchangeable. And since everything goes through the same door, the same body, the one way out is to turn that inside out and outside in. Homa’s path to Tajrish Square is a trajectory from the individual to the societal, from personal mourning to communal grieving, from normative appearance to what endlessly resists being named. A careful scheme is kept secret from the family so as to make it unhampered to the public realm. A body is conformably veiled so as not to be stopped by the revolutionary guards on its way to the desired destination. An event unsurpassable in the shock it causes is unexpectedly thrust onto strangers and passers-by who become its involuntary witnesses. Each step away from Home is a step toward the shedding of her own shadow and of the *chador* that structures all relations between the private and the public realms. The extra-visibility of the usual all-black figure and the paradoxical invisibility of the woman behind the cloak (the highlighted visibility of her invisibility) seems to have taken on a different dimension here as the headscarf yanked off is quickly replaced by the flames enveloping her body. Unless one veil torn each instant is a hundred veils torn, it is as difficult to see in her gesture a simple step towards liberation as it is to reduce it to a mere act of desperation. Despite its obviously oppositional character, such a gesture ultimately never gives in to the ideology of unveiling and to the visible order so fundamental to Western modernization and liberalism.

*walls of silence and surrender
walls of servitude that hold up castles
bent walls of government
From the blessing of the attack of the masses
old walls
and middle-aged
these blind witnesses of yesterday’s disaster*

*these mute witnesses of oppression and torture
have just started talking
they have just started walking
but how fast they can walk . . . (Tahereh Saffarzadeh)²⁾*

II.

Out, into the Room

A room changes as the light changes—daylight, nightlight, candlelight, lamplight, all and one light. Modulating with the coming and going of each visitor or occupant, It feels as if one's own intimacy is being furtively stolen from oneself. What enters transforms itself in the room and with the room. This mere "fact" overwhelms certain life travelers with instantaneous agony and terror. The impossibility of existence without end (the intimate vision that one lives in order to die) intensely grasped with each visit to the mind's antipodes grows with one's inability to shut off a reality which does not comfortably limit itself to what the human eyes see in the universe of "normal" sense. Too far, too much, too naked. Raw, uncoded, neither meaningful nor meaningless. Each instant can suddenly become fatal. The breath of the world, one's own breath has become too loud to bear.

In a room too exclusively of one's own—all-mine, rather than simply a room—where the death drive has come to reign, self-asphyxiation is the risk often incurred. The breakthrough leads the anguished voyager to the brink of panic and destruction. The light needs a screen, for its full blaze is too intense to suffer, and its speed always non-scalar. Habit has it that, when exposed to strong light, one protects oneself by blackening out one's eyes and wearing dark glasses. But with the fear of light also grows the craze to shut it out, for even in dimly lit places, one continues to wear tinted spectacles. Dis-ease is a mind-altering condition. It returns the body to a state of unmediated sensations and reveals the familiar tri-dimensional world of daily experience as unremittingly strange. Still caught in the realm of dualities, the un-quieted one finds him- or herself suddenly invaded by cosmic malevolence and reacts with frenzied, desperate, murderous counter-measures in violence and suicide.

When fascination turns to sheer horror, the impulse to tear down the wall so as to force one's way out becomes an obsession. The ever-changing surface gets in the way and the intensity of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Yellow Wallpaper* remains hauntingly defiant to the normal mind: *When you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide—plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard-of contradictions.* If the barred front pattern of the paper does move, the woman narrator affirms, that's because the woman behind shakes it. Imprisoned within the room walls, trapped behind the two-dimensional bars of the wallpaper, the latter struggles to keep her sanity. She peels off yards and yards of the paper, and creeping round and around on the floor, she declares triumphantly that she has gotten out at last and that you can't put her back in. Trying to free the other woman in her, the protagonist has traded one prison

wall for another. Madness is, for reason of gender, her freedom. To survive, she quits being (in)sane when she succeeds to pull down and expose the layer of (in)sanity in which society wraps itself. *"I wonder if they all come out of that wallpaper as I did?"*³) She muses.

Blind words, blind walls. We think we have taken off, like that woman on the wall. What starts out as a woman-I, expands as a many-women-no-woman-no-man-It, and comes through as a woman again, but a woman whom the room now sees as She. A She/It/I whose return to everyday existence depends on the varying processes of the transformation. Entering the wall through the imprisoning wallpaper rather than through a door, she expands to all Four Corners to enter the room anew. But, although she has become large and can no longer hold herself down, she's reduced to creeping, crawling on a strip of floor and rubbing against life's dust and dirt. Fear in Fighting has sent her right back to where a woman belongs: to the institution of the home and the nuclear family, or in defiance of all the social and medical codes, to madness.

Greater delusion leads to a deceptive clarity in which survival means perdition in full daylight. Anguish, distress and loneliness take on many forms to create needs. Perhaps the impossibility to share the ever-growing solitude of the room is part of what, simply put, is the terror of being on earth while longing for the sky. Or else, of that horror of bliss—that bourgeois bliss the wallpaper embodies, which "disgustingly" serves to cover the sick situation of women's multicolored oppression. (Here, a usefully useless question: how does Gilman's wallpaper end up being "yellow" rather than let's say, "pink"—the color conventionally used across cultures for the representation of happiness, fair race, and female gender?) But, there's always a "but" to every statement. Thanks to sickness and to a revisionist system—by which the sick necessarily tends to the sick—the profound anomaly of normal life radically reveals itself in its methods of healing: by all means, be (as sick) a woman (as you please), heal by becoming sick, or else, fall sick to gain normalcy.

Suicide at the shoreline.

The surfing of the mind has no end. As soon as one is left alone with oneself, one falls into the delirium of deliquescence. But where, really, is one physically alone? With the room always populated by sounds from objects, radio, television, or from next door, from outside, one is always somewhere, and sanity like insanity, is a question of degrees in social dis-positioning. I too often wonder who She is, emerging from the wall in front of me. One's individual existence is as small or as large as the room one carries, and to feel secure, *"most people learn to know only a corner of their room, a place by the window, a strip of floor on which they walk up and down"*—Rainer Maria Rilke.⁴) Stranger to oneself, stranger to one's end, even and especially when one opts for early voluntary death. It is in one's own room that one gets lost and feels the rippling of solitude widening. One is alone with oneself in the entire expanse of one's room, and the smallest step taken resounds strangely in silence. In leaving a way for otherness, everything, including "I", is at once here and there. The solitude at work evoked and re-evoked by every single writer

as the *sine qua non* condition of writing is easily confused with the self-satisfied seclusion of individualism or the search for uniqueness in difference. And yet, it is in the dispossession of “me” that a solitude rich with silence matures, as it opens itself wide to the many forms of Someone or Something, and finds within itself the infinitely enriching possibilities of the void.

Her room is her quest. Virginia Woolf’s cause still resonates in the near distance of her tomorrow. To have a room of one’s own and a quiet room at that? Every woman writer owes to herself this challenging task, for the immaterial obstacles encountered remain far more daunting than the material ones. Having been kept inside for centuries, the walls of “*women’s rooms have been permeated by their creative force*” and are so overcharged that Woolf found it hard both to harness it and to let go. Her writings are “*moments of being*” and what each moment offers is the perpetual “*Voice of the Sea*.” The mere witnessing of one’s own room can be profoundly disorienting. The impulse to clean up is immediately followed by the query as to where to begin, for the task can be endless. Finding oneself and losing oneself without anything to lose may prove dangerous, if not fatal, in certain cases. Woolf’s final suicide was one she had contemplated again and again—at the completion of every single book she wrote. Terrified by her solicited encounter with the Void in her quest for the Moment, she affirmed her vocation as a writer through voluntary death. The wall ultimately broke down with her agony and passion, yielding to her powerful desire to die to the weaknesses of her individual being so as to remain all writing. Her death was her last judgement.

“*The solitude [in a book] is that of the entire world. It’s everywhere. It invades everything It’s a way of thinking, of reasoning, but only everyday thought . . . one should not kill oneself everyday when everyday one can kill*”—Marguerite Duras.⁵⁾ Time and Tone. And Rhythm. Sometimes suicide is averted, for the writer knows in killing oneself, agency does not necessarily lie in “I”. When I set out to kill myself, it is not I who kill but the (projected) other whom I judge, despise, reject, fear or abandon. Even in the final act of voluntary death, I am dispossessed of an “I.” I am, therefore I . . . die. In baring herself (and her words) down to the bone, Marguerite Duras insisted that she wouldn’t have made it all these years if she were not writing. Writing from her depths kept her living day by day. And yet, she was too sharp to lure herself into thinking that the woman whom many of her readers revered and fell in love with through her books is she. When she wrote, she was not. Whatever was there was larger than she—a *great* writer. So it also went for her death. The overdose of drugs taken was not she. Ultimately, the not-she, including alcohol and solitude, were Duras’ real killers; *they*, together with a host of invisible malevolent *others* who threatened her life, were the authors of her ending. *They* have suicided her.

As a closure that goes forward into the unknown, writing opens onto the night. With it, a life and work is made a passage through the wall with no visible door in or out. Light, precise and vertiginous like an aroma, an aura or a resonance, the tone is neither the style nor the voice of the writer, so it has been acutely noted. It is the force through which the latter becomes *no one* (not one, not any one, no-body, no listener, no writer) by imposing

on this incessant speech the intimacy of his or her silence.⁶⁾ Solitude is not mere loneliness or aloofness. The word is there to lure in the non-word. No matter how harsh a process of desensualization writing has undergone in its attempt to tap the truth, what sifts through takes flight as soon as it is named. Indirect and implicit words are thus all the more perilous, for they are the ones likely to retain tenderness in the damp intimacy of the room. Letters, lines, clusters, blanks, dots, dashes, colons, commas, and other mortal markings: all bound to fade into the hall of mirrors. Writing returns incessantly to its beginnings, reeking of darkness, advancing in irrational leaps, stalking openly on the page, and plunging wild all the while appearing tamed.

Page after page, the book with no beginning or ending surfaces only to disappear again and again into the bare wall. The sea is staring.

Notes

- 1) Information given on the Website in 1) Parvin Darabi's talk in Washington DC on the wake of her sister (1994?); 2) in Martha Shelley, "A Sacrificial Light: Self-Immolation in Tajrish Square, Tehran," (Fall 1994); and in Jan Goodwin, "Tradition or Outrage?" *Marie Claire* March (1997): 54–58.
- 2) Tahereh Saffarzadeh, from *Allegiance with Wakefulness*, quoted and translated in Farzaneh Milani, *Veils and Words*. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1992. 170.
- 3) Charlotte Perkins Gilman. "The Yellow Wallpaper." 1899. Rpt. New York: The Feminist Press, 1973. 13, 35.
- 4) Rainer Maria Rilke. *Letters to A Young Poet*. Trans. M. D. Herter Norton. New York: W. W. Norton, 1934. 68.
- 5) Marguerite Duras. *Ecrire*. Paris: Gallimard, 1993. 29, 31–32. (translation mine).
- 6) See *The Gaze of Orpheus*, 70–71.

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