

“Let Me Not Split Open the Breast of My Sohrab”¹

Farkhondeh Hajizadeh

You were not that strong hero of the *Shahnameh* with a dagger and with that formidable strength, and the war was not the Iran-Turan war so that you wouldn't see the armlet of your Sohrab, and so at last you end up with the split-open chest of Sohrab and the desire for the elixir of life.² In your innocent hands there were only a pen and a few sheets of paper. And sometimes your notes and first draft of your poems were written on the white papers you used to roll cigarettes. And of all the *Shahnameh* heroes you loved Siyavash most.³ The last time we saw each other, the last night, do you remember? (By the way, can you still recall any of these memories? Or maybe you are in absolute tranquility and have left the memories to us, so that we can drown ourselves in the old memories which from time to time come closer and closer, and in the innocent faces of our children which appear before us.)

You used to talk about the beauty of Siyavash who went through the redness of fire with his white horse. I felt sorry for Sudabeh, and your moon-like face was set on fire from anger. I stamped the ground with my feet, as I used to when we were fighting when we were kids. My fingers combed the hair of your Sohrab, and I considered the patriarchal Kavus the guilty one. We had experienced the bitter taste of patriarchy from our early years and the first years of school. From the very first day that the janitor in school hung you by your feet from the wooden ladder. . . He was going back and forth and every

1 This is a line from a poem by Hamid Hajizadeh. Hamid Hajizadeh and his son were killed in September 1998 in Kerman, Iran. For details refer to the Introduction.

2 The author is alluding to different episodes in the tale of Rostam and Sohrab. For details of the story, refer to the Introduction.

3 Siyavash is another character in the *Shahnameh*. He was accused by his stepmother of having made advances towards her, whereas it was she who loved him. Siyavash was asked by his father, King Kavus, to pass the test of fire. He went through the fire and came out unhurt. Still he was forced to leave Iran and go to Turan, where he married the daughter of the Turanian king, Afrasiyab. Later he was accused by the Turanian court of espionage and killed.

once in a while looked in your eyes. He laid his hand on your heart and ran to the office. I was howling, just as Mother howled after your death. She was howling and I wished for her death. Do you believe that? I had not dreamed that someone was coming.⁴ I had dreamed of your death, and how bitterly it was interpreted. The plane was caught behind the traffic of Time and there was no oxygen in the waiting area. There was silence, and when I asked: "Who is dead?" nobody said anything. Until a voice said: "They are all dead." From that very moment on, I wished mother was dead. The poor old woman was dying; she was calling for you, and I, desperate, barefoot, disheveled, was running down the stairs to the middle of the alley and in the middle of the night on the twenty-first of the month of Azar I was looking and waiting for the doctor to come. My efforts to keep her alive were not strong enough. I had escaped Mother's eyes, those eyes that, quietly, wanted me to bring you back.

For eighty-one days I had escaped Mother's eyes and her howling. But now I miss Mother. Of course not if you are not there! I miss the mother who, with a smile and her finger to her lips, used to talk about our childhood and your mischief. She talked about the days you ran away from school and took me along with you for three whole days. Those same days that we went to save the ants in the alleys by collecting them so that they wouldn't be crushed under the feet of the passersby. You used to think so much about the deaths of ants and crows and. . . Do you remember that when our pussycat died you placed two pieces of wood as a cross and wore one of the black shirts from Father's chest of gear for the ceremonies of mourning? You and Mohammad wore black for a few days, and Father grumbled: "You imp, a black shirt is for Imam Hossein's mourning." And I, who had not found any black shirt for a girl in that chest, said: "OK, I am going to dress my heart in black." And we sat and recited verses of the Koran for the dead pussycat and begged God to forgive her.

⁴ Reference to a line from Forugh Farrokhzad's famous poem "Kasi keh mesl-e hichkas nist" ["Someone who resembles no one else"].

Mother put on her chador and went to school, and what a commotion she raised! Do you remember? She told them that with so much misery she sends her kids to school to study and go to university and get somewhere, and you who run the school don't care a bit. Mother had found out that we had skipped school for three days, a school which had no rules and did not care. Mother never found out that after she left the janitor hung you upside down from the wooden ladder of the school.

In front of all the students standing in lines, the Vice Principal suggested that they expel you. The Principal did not agree, and I thought, If they expel you, then when the inspector from the Ministry of Education in that ironed suit of his comes, who will recite the poems of Hafez and Sa'di so that Mr. Principal can brag and straighten the collar of his jacket and put his hand on his chest and bend his head? So we remained in school so that we could recite for the inspectors who came from the Provincial capital the poem, "All men are members of the same body. . ." ⁵ so that they can lay their hands on our shoulders and say: "Wonderful, wonderful!" over and over. Do you remember that inspector who always wore a light brown suit and glossy black shoes? Do you remember he laid his left hand on my shoulder and with his right hand pulled my chin up and looked into my eyes? Mr. Inspector's eyes turned towards the principal and began saying something. I looked at the front bench. Mahrokh, Sakineh, Khubyar, Hossein and Ali had panicked. Mr. Inspector's hand got heavier and my shoulder sunk. I didn't hear Mr. Inspector who was talking to the principal and I just thought that maybe all men are not members of the same body, and then when Mr. Principal talked about the façade of the United Nations and Sa'di's poem, a crooked smile sat on my lips. I wished that Mr. Inspector in the light brown suit would never come back to our school. But I wished that black and red pencils, and colorful ball pens and exam sheets would keep on coming, somehow, so that Dad wouldn't tell us once every few days: "Well, go to Ali Shir's store and

5 A famous line of verse by Sa'di, the thirteenth-century Iranian poet. This poem is inscribed over the entrance of the United Nations.

tell him, 'My dad says give us a black pencil and a red pencil, and ten exam sheets. God willing, we will pay later.'"

Mr. Principal rested his back against the trunk of the weeping willow. The Vice Principal, the janitor, and two teachers who taught all the grades stood in front of him. You were pulled out of the line and were sentenced to eighty strokes with a cane. My heart trembled. You had to be beaten, and it was not possible to tell the principal that my dad says: "Don't hit him, God willing, we will take care of it later." Or "Sir, how much does each stroke cost? By God, please don't hit him. We will pay the whole thing in a few months. Please believe us, we will buy and sell eggs, and even the eggs that we receive as a New Year's gift, we will sell them, too."

As always, I came running out of the line. I held out my hands in front of the Vice Principal and said: "Please sir, please hit me instead." This was our usual trick. You got caught because of your mischief and my hands were held out, someone interceded and you were forgiven; but this time was different. You had ignored the school's laws and, more importantly, you had also deceived me, who was younger than you, and you had made me an accomplice in your mischief. And of course what was worse than everything else was that they had failed to find out about our absence, and so the reputation of the school would.

My hands remained held out in front of the vice principal and I was begging: "Please, sir, instead of him, . . ." Mr. Afrasiyabi stared at my mouth and with his eyes was asking me: "Keep saying that, again, again." And you who had the black shirt from the religious mourning chest on, shouted: "Nobody has the right to hit her. If you touch her I will make my father. . . ." Before you finished Mr. Principal said: "Hit the sister, but just ten."

Mr. Afrasiyabi came forward. He stood chest to chest with the principal. Mr. Principal shouted: "This is a school, sir. And school is a factory to turn out human beings. They should be manufactured and then sent out. It is good for them and for society."

The janitor with an innocent smile and steady steps went to the pool to bring one of the soaked willow rods which were to make us

human beings. About ten or twelve pairs of hands were held out in front of the Vice Principal: "Please sir, instead of ten hit me one hundred, by God, please, she is a girl. . . ." These are the same boys who still call me by my first name, and when they see the wide eyes of their wives or daughters or sons, they tell them the story.

When your shouting and curses soared, the sticks hit harder to the palms of my hands, and with every scream of mine your earlobes shivered.

Dad and Mom both cried. Mother cursed herself. She burst the blisters of my hands herself and washed off the blood. Dad pulled up the back of his shoes and went to school and heard that they love us, that they want to make us good human beings and their intention is to teach us not to defy the laws of school. But we neither learned to follow the school laws nor did we become the kind of human beings they wanted us to be.

Later on, you, who always forgave everyone, talked about those days very easily. But I never forgot the blisters on my hands, nor the fear which hid in your throat that day and sat forever after in your voice.

Mr. Afrasiyabi left the group of men who were all in black. He came towards the women's section. When he stood in front of me I pulled myself with difficulty from the arms of a woman who was holding me tightly. And I saw Mr. Arasiyabi's hands extending toward my shoulders. His voice trembled: "My daughter. . . ." His tears poured down his beard. Mr. Afrasiyabi pulled his hand which hung in the air away from my shoulder. He turned away and left. It was like that day, when he turned his back and left the school. And I didn't see him for thirty-some years. Until that accursed day. He had probably come to say: "Well, my daughter, where were your hands? Why did you allow them to take his hands? Why didn't your hands come forward?" Where was I? Were none of the people in that group of about fifty there? I don't know. Who knows? You know better. . . . All I know is that Mr. Afrasiyabi used to recite Hafez for us during the Natural Science period. And I had never dreamed about your hands. I had dreamed that you had left, that there is a distance of thousands of kilometers, and that my hands are shorter.

The coroner and the homicide detective said that at the time I dreamed you had already left. . . and nobody said whose hands you called upon in the heart of that darkness. . . so that the darling little hands of Karun appear, and every night I sleep, hoping that you would come, and you don't come, and you don't say anything. . . and I sit for days and think that you will once again come back from school with an armful of anemones and mischievously extend them towards me in such a way that as soon as I touch them the ground gets bloody from the fallen anemone petals. And when I cry and stamp on the ground and at times hit my head on the mud wall of the yard and say: "Look, you have scattered them!" to make you feel worse, you would put my head on your shoulder and say: "OK, tomorrow I will bring you their buds so they won't be scattered." And you didn't know that on a night when cruelty soars and the existence of your assassins makes the face of humanity disappear, the very buds have fallen and so the tragedy of the death of a father and a son is recorded, and in the middle of the night the blood of the dawn is shed,⁶ and Karun cries, and a ruthless hand rips his chest asunder, and his honey-colored eyes roll in blood in the green of your eyes, and the children will dream that you have come, and say: "Blood is the color of saffron." And the children use your poems for writing exercises, and the name Karun flows on the tongues of tomorrow's children.

⁶ "Dawn" was the pen name of Hamid Hajizadeh.