

I never sleep facing the Kiblah as others do

Rather I keep circling around my own face in an endless funeral

Out of necessity, I'm obliged to write my life profile; where I come from, when, and...

I won't write. I wouldn't be written; for if the words have the guts to petition, in me there's no courage for putting them down.

So be it!...

Now, the telephone rings. She, again; saying: "Your biography, please!" An MA student of Drama in Bushehr University, she based her thesis "Dramatic Features in Farkhondeh Hajizadeh's works" on some of my stories. She's been insisting for a while, and I haven't written; not that I don't care where, when, and into which family and in which milieu I was born.

I know well enough that the family I was born into, the historical, cultural, social and political conditions of the period, and the geography in which I learned how to toddle, have in fact shaped my present existence.

Yet, so hard it seems to write a "biography"; the energy to write has left me, for the lashing wounds congealed on my trembling soul.

The pain of wet pomegranate twigs on my palms at school, has now become a memory to tell my grandchildren (Rosha & Vandad), making them amazed. But what about my trembling soul, that cannot be written? Pieces of it I have endowed in the characters of my stories, or poured into words called poetry. Maybe someone, someday, sees or writes parts of those pieces. As for myself, I'll never be narrated. That's for sure!

Thus, I leave this "me" alone and write about the life profile of a woman on the verge of sixty, who is, and is not, me; a woman who is at times so far away to recognize. The one who on February 28, 1952, was blessedly registered number 29 by a registry official from Bofst province, temporarily settled in Bezanjan, who rode a horse or a mule with a saddlebag full of unregistered ID cards.

I wonder if July 10 was my real birthdate, or just happened to be written on my ID card. My father, when I asked about the day of my birth, said "I wrote it on the margins of a Qur'an manuscript." And mother said: "it was Aide-Qorban (Day of Sacrifice); right at noon!"

When my father died, I looked at the manuscript he had left in my house as a keepsake, and saw no handwriting. Now what? One or two months sooner or later wouldn't make any difference. Indeed, it made no difference when a misprint on the back of the title page of my first book, *Wandering Aunt of the Eyes* (khaleh-ye Sargardan-e Cheshm-ha), replaced 1331(1952) with 1332 (1951); and this date sat by my name to be registered in the National Library.

Long before starting to write, in her inharmonious surroundings and the visible and latent contradictions in her family and hometown, Farkhondeh experienced the battle of tradition and modernity. The same day that she, with three brooches hiding in her small hands, climbed the muddy stairs to the roof of a shop opening to the unpaved street, to see another view of her village. There was chaos. People were running everywhere. Mother, ignoring her daughter, was moving her hands to and fro and running with the others. School stuffs were scattered all over the street, and children had picked the brooches out of that stuff.

At night, father gave mom and the neighbors a dramatic description of how he, along with the other men, used his diplomacy to persuade the armed group sent with a tank to level their village that these people are called "tu deh-i" because they live "in center of the village" (tu-ye deh), not at the upper or lower parts of it!¹ Though the brooches were taken away from her that night, she had already seen that one of them had a name on it, Mosaddeq, and on another one was Iran's flag. That night father told her what a flag means, but said nothing about Mosaddeq and the other brooch.

The unrest in the village, which seemed to start with the opening of the telephone office, continued for a few days and ended with detaining a few women in the Baft gendarmerie and imprisoning some men at the Kerman police center. But the daring women protesters who, in claiming their rights, had beaten the gendarmes and the judge amid the turmoil, disarmed and confined the commanding officer, and stuck his hat on a piece of stick for mockery, added a line to the popular folksong that was repeated for a long time in weddings and feasts as a remembrance of the day, and so it goes:

Mr. Commander! / You left your hat, remember!

Of all those people who lived 164 kilometers away from Kerman in that hospitable village on

1. The writer plays with the Farsi word 'toodeh' which conveys two meanings, 'mass' and 'in village' The first meaning is also a reminder of Iran's communist party (Hezb-e Toodeh) which was then banned, after the coup in 1952.

the margin of Kavir, there's no sign left. Many died, some settled in the capital or other cities of Iran and other countries, and some changed their allegiance. Yet the village remained, as it were, by the name Bezanjan.

A village with such primitive facilities that you couldn't tell poverty from wealth; where on snowy days each and every child felt the cold of winter in the bones. Little difference was there between Farkhondeh whose mother spent her long winter nights making woolen gloves, those who knew nothing about gloves, and children born into a feudal family.

On one of those snowy days, she put on all her colorful cotton dresses and ran all the way to school. When she entered and said hello, her teacher looked at her with surprise. Then, he distanced himself from the cylindrical heater in the middle of the class, and lifted Farkhondeh's dresses one by one, laughing and saying: Saturday, Sunday, Monday...

All the students burst out laughing. She didn't laugh; nor did she cry. She just felt cold and shivered. Even the flames in the heater didn't warm her. A few decades later, in a poem, she said:

I've put on all my dresses

So cold is my body

Seven days a week, the teacher laughs with my dresses and students

....

Farkhondeh's family, who carried Deilami, Isfahani, or Darabi as a suffix to their names on their ID cards, lived alongside other villagers, with little difference. Her mother's grandfather, Sheikh Abdolhamid, had settled in a village nearby, after being released from imprisonment because of a conflict with the government (?). [As mother said when she was a child.]

Before long, the grandmother, Sakineh Deilami, was frustrated with the village life and ordered Abdolhamid to migrate; so concerned was she that her flowery daughters would fade away because of unhealthy conditions, or grow up illiterate and uneducated. Abdolhamid, although in love, could not bear the shame of obeying a woman; "What about honor and manhood, then?" Thus, Sakineh left for Kerman wishful that love would work it out and grandfather, hoping that maternal love would force Sakineh back, spent his days wandering around the village, singing:

Our beloved put on orange shoes

For whom she left us? No one knows

He sang and sang until he died from fever. Sakineh came over to take the children. The uncle who was their legal guardian stopped her and said, "No honorable man would leave two innocent little girls in the hands of a woman who sits at a Singer sewing machine unveiled in a place full of male-run shops, opens up the rolling shutter, measures out men's sizes, and rides a bicycle." Sakineh went back empty-handed. Soon she heard that the smaller girl had died from a simple disease, and the elder (Khadijeh, my mom) was straying alone in the family. Once more she came to take her. And once more she was disappointed; this time by the rules of patriarchal order according to which a woman who earned her living, was not like the other women around her, and held music classes at home, was not fit for custody. Sakineh had to leave, with the burden of ill fame, and submit to the Law that imposed caring of her child to the uncle's wife who might well have disliked it, who knows!

When my mother's first child was born, once again grandma came after her daughter and the family. Unlike grandfather, my father, Esma'il, agreed with her. But mother stood firm and said that she wouldn't give up a drop of the village streams for all the paved streets, tap water and sanitary toilets in the city [perhaps in return for having been left alone in her childhood]. The birth of every child increased grandmother's efforts to take her daughter and family, and her warnings about the number of children. Yet mother remained firm and headstrong.

I was five or six when grandma finally succeeded in taking us to the city for the summer. Summer started with well-fitted dresses made by grandma, the red shoes having a narrow band coming from the right to be fastened by a golden clasp on the left; or pink shoes, the heels of which clattered on the asphalt of the street. Grandma used to say I should wear them with the blue frilly dress with twisted pink stripes. There was also the smell of geraniums set around the diamond-shaped pool. Mom washed their leaves every morning and then sat on the brick step of the flower-bed which, with its triangular bricks, looked like a scalloped skirt and sang:

A lover had to suffer a lot

Before he met at Dajlah his sweetheart

And grandma, having spread the rose petals over the beddings, would come and stand a while on the terrace listening to her and say: "What a pity! Even untrained her voice overshadows Qamar," and then leave home on her bike, to be back at noon when the air was filled with the

smell of mom's adas-polo with raisins and cinnamon.²

Summers to us were not just growing familiar with another place called "the city" or experiencing another way of living; they were also a reminder of the warm soft ashes inside our winter rubber boots.

The grandparents on the father's side were only two names in Farkhondeh's mind. Zain al-Abedin with Darabi suffix along with his brother and a few other relatives had come from Shiraz to stay in Bezanjan (due to bankruptcy); supposedly with an armful of books and a poetic aura that justified their being broke. Soghra was a name attached to the admiring words father said about her once in a while, the white cotton bag that was given to father by mother's trembling hands, and the murmurings overheard behind the pillar when father returned. Father, turned pale, said: "Nothing was left of her, just the hair, that long braid and...." Mother asked with a sigh: "What did you do with them? You should have put it in our own yard..."

Later, when mother, not far from the village bathhouse, turned and followed the road to the cemetery, sat on her knees beside an anonymous small-stone next other anonymous stones, and made an X on it with a little pebble, Farkhondeh understood that grandma's long braid was hidden underneath. The reason became clear to her only when the new school was erected.

Long before her preschool study in the only sixth-grade school in her village, Farkhondeh heard the first stories of her life from her father who was a splendid storyteller. He used to sit by the pale light of the lantern on long winter nights and read her stories of "A Thousand and One Nights," "Shirin and Farhad," "Yusef and Zoleikha" and the tragic deaths of "Sohrab and Esfandiar." These narratives shaped a basis that prepared her for listening, years later, to other narratives of the world in Reza Baraheni's lectures.

In her childhood school, there were few girls and even this number so decreased in upper stages that in the fifth and sixth grades she was the only girl, in the class managed by one teacher in a large room. When she finished primary school, her mother, to save her only daughter from the same repressive fate as her own, moved the family to Baft; this way the boys would be relieved of the long walks to school, and the girl could have a safe and secure education. The family was determined to do anything possible for their daughter's education,

2. Qamar (Qamar-al-Moluk Vaziri), a famous and popular singer, was a pioneer in singing in public unveiled. "adas-polo" is a common Iranian dish made of rice and lentils.

yet soon enough the family married Farkhondeh to Iraj Soltani, who was 27 years old. Mother answered everyone with just one word: “fate”.

Fate separated Farkhondeh from schooling and made her a housewife. Ironically, before long she had to move first to Rafsanjan and then to Azarbaijan, due to Iraj Soltani’s military profession. Separated from the family, she realized the need to learn the mystique of married life and housework. She learned everything by experience, and herself still a child longing for a doll, there came Pejman with his bright eyes gazing at her breast, instead of the handmade cotton dolls of her mom she used to play with. To feed her child she learned cooking from *Zan-e-Ruz*, the weekly magazine she bought from the only kiosk in Jolfa. The second son, Payman, was born when she was eighteen. Afterwards, she continued her schooling and her progress was fast. In the same years, an incident at work led to her husband’s imprisonment, and she had to go back to Kerman with her two sons. Not long after her husband was released, she was admitted to the university to study foreign literature, but misogynist rules, written and unwritten, prevented her from leaving Kerman for Tehran. Looking for a job she applied to be a librarian at Kerman University and realized that the job required qualifications. Yet she took another chance, applied for teaching at the primary school of the university, and was accepted in an interview conducted by Shahindokht Kharazmi, then the head of the school. There were other job opportunities available at the time, such as clerical work in a bank or an Iran Air office and news reading at National TV station, but with the illusion that even the university walls spread knowledge, she chose the primary school, and in February, 1987, she became an employee at the Ministry of Higher Education.

Two years later, the school was closed down for political reasons by the new government. The teachers were sent to different places; Farkhondeh and two colleagues were relegated to the Central Library (with the emphasis that they were redundant and could somehow be fired). For years the three teachers knew nothing about this scheme. They worked so committedly and showed such persistence in study and training for various courses on librarianship that except one of them (who unfortunately died soon), Farkhondeh and the other remained at the job until their retirements. After the Cultural Revolution, while Farkhondeh ran the Literature Department’s library, set up by herself at Kerman University, she was accepted to study Persian Literature in Payam-e Nur University.

In 1989 Payman, seeking better music education than he could get in Kerman, set out for Tehran. Growing up herself alongside her sons, Farkhondeh had studied and learned with them, loved with them, and listened with them to the sound of the peasants’ *Neylabak*,

Neydavoud's *Tar*, and Beethoven's symphonies. So it wasn't strange that in the years when music was forbidden, she would hide her instrument under her veil and run through the alleys of Kerman to the tutor's house. Her hopes for Payman's potent hands and new look, reinforced by her own love of music, set her off to settle in Tehran and get a job in the literature department library at Tehran University. That same year she joined the Children's Book Council and started by providing music articles for the Children's Encyclopedia. To save time, she transferred herself to Payam-e Nur Library in 1991.

Playing with famous poems, before even knowing the alphabet, was a favorite game of Farkhondeh and her brothers. As far as she knows, her creative mind always made tales, some of which she still remembers; yet they were never written. "Green Illusion" (Vahm-e Sabz) was the first one she put to words on paper; in 1989.

Her childhood stories might have been violet, the color of tiny marshmallow flowers in their yard that her small hands picked every morning, to be dried and sold for more pens and paper, so she could extract pieces from her textbooks on history, geography and biology in summer. She did all the relevant and irrelevant homework teachers usually assigned to keep them busy, except for composition, which she often read by heart out of her empty notebook. She would rapidly describe the spring or the benefits of sheep and cow.

Her brother, Hamid, had colorful poems; Yellow quatrains, silver sonnets, purple sonnets and, most of all, red sonnets.

My thoughts came out red

My feelings blue, my grief violet

A rainbow, from the beginning

So was my soul, by fate³

The soul that finally turned red on September 21, along with his son, Karun, only nine years old. And it turned so much red indeed, by 37 strokes of a brutal knife, in the serial killings of year 1998.

She knew that Hamid's poems were red, but never found out the color of Mohammad's. The zeal for the art was epidemic in their family. Mother, though illiterate, always used poems and proverbs when speaking and had a good ear for music. Father was a unique storyteller who kept on reading to the end of his life. Eldest brother, who was so talented, inescapably

3. A poem by Hamid Hajizadeh

followed a different path and became a businessman. The other brother was interested in poetry and music, and a great supporter of the younger ones; Mohammad and Hamid were both poets. In 1975 they took her along to the literary society named in the honor of Khaju-ye Kermani. There it was that she read her free poems, and the established poets paternally advised her to follow prose instead of poetry. Poetry, meaning “classical poetry”, ruled the stage at the time, as it was in music, where the singer once had the highest hand. As a matter of fact, there are still people who grant all the honors to the singer.

The non-classic poets, too, asked about the “message’ in her poems. And she was not then prepared to say, “In its poeticness or...,” so she tore up all those poems, and for years either didn’t write any or threw them away. Afterwards in the literary society she read only the sonnets that were less hers than the product of her brothers’ corrections, especially Hamid. Those sonnets were introduced by Ahmad Assadollahi, a great poet of Kerman, in a 30-minute radio program (with the warm voices of him and Nasrin Novin). One or two of them were printed in *Javanan* magazine, due to kind attention of the well-known poet, Alireza Taba’i who was then the person in charge; and also appeared in different anthologies including *Kerman Poets Anthology* by Abdollah Dahesh and *the Stars of Kerman* by Hossain Behzadi Anduhjerdi, under the name of Farkhondeh Hajizadeh, pen name “fancy.” But the only published piece of those days which indeed belongs to Farkhondeh is a critical one relating an employment interview printed in a magazine in 1975.

In 1980, Farkhondeh joined the other students in Reza Baraheni’s workshop on poetry and fiction. This event opened a new and quite different view to her mental world and literary abilities after years of enduring the hard, crude, fanatic, and discriminatory conditions of the clerical work, for the love of books and the library and chances for everybody to read and know. About the same time, she had the short but useful opportunity of enjoying lessons by such teachers as Hassan Anvari, Sirus Shamisa, Hashem Tofiq Sobhani and Asghar Dadbeh, through remote system of Payam-e Nur, and learned rhythm from the well-known poet, Hushang Ebtehaj (Sayeh). Indeed, seven years in the workshop helped her find a serious look at literature.

Since 1989, she has published the following works:

1. *Wandering Aunt of the Eyes* (a novella)
2. *Contrary to Democracy* (collection of short stories)
3. *Literary Discourse Zero* (a reader)

I'm Scared of Your Eyes (a novel)

Myths and Religions Bibliography (research)

To the One Who Was Not My Murderer (collection of short stories)

My Name Is Tal' at! (collection of poems)

Reflections, no.1 (literary critique)

Report-story 1: “The Breast of Sohrab” (Report-story)

Report-story 2: “Which one is better, Ajam woman or TNT?” (Report-story)

Me, Mansour and Albright (a novel)

It Is Uncommon, Mr. Translator! (Bilingual short stories trans. by Parya Latifikhah)

Of these works, the stories “Contrary to Democracy” and “PIR” were turned into English by Mohammad Mehdi Khorrami and Shouleh Vatanabadi, and published one in *A Feast in the Mirror* and the other in *Another Sea, Another Shore*. There is also an English version of “The Breast of Sohrab” by Khorrami printed in his *Sohrab's Wars*.

Some of her works were translated into Turkish by Hashem khosroshahi, including *I'm Scared of Your Eyes*, *Wandering Aunt of the Eyes*, and the stories “*Contrary to Democracy*” and “*Continuation*”, along with a few poems. The first was published by *Donya Publications* and the others (except *the Wandering...*) were printed in *Autokiz* magazine, *Anthology of Iran's Contemporary Fiction ...* in Turkey.

There is an English version of the tale “Hands of Solitude” by Mansureh Vahdati, available at her website. Other English translations include “The Obstacle” by Ali Hodavand, “Garland” and “Immediate Decision” by Parya Latifikhah. “Contrary to Democracy” was also translated into Czech by Zozana, and “To the One Who Was Not My Murderer” is being translated into Italian by Leila Karami. And “Green Illusion” seems to have been translated into Kurdish, according to Marivan Halabchei.

Alongside writing and publishing her works, Farkhondeh has expanded her social and cultural activities. She has been in charge of *Vistar* publications since 1992 and the editor of *Baya* magazine for ten years. She is a member of the Iranian Writers Society, the Tehran Publishers and Booksellers Union, and the Tehran Book Dispatchers Cooperative. She is also a member and co-founder of the Women Publishers Cultural Union, and the Women's Cultural Foundation.

She has also participated in various events, such as the Contemporary Literature Conference held at New York University (May 2000), the Nima Literary Society in Chicago, the Odeon Literature and Music Conference in Paris (Sep. 2000), the Contemporary Turkish Literature Seminar in Ankara and Istanbul (2004), and different seminars at the universities in Gorgan, Zahedan, Sabzevar, Ahvaz, Sanandaj, and Babol. In 2002 she was granted the first Jeri Laber award for International Freedom to Publish by American Publishers Union and Pen Society.⁴

She used to hold gatherings called “Nights for Poetry and Fiction” every month on the first and last Sundays at the book-café in her bookshop *Vistar*. The nights’ project stopped when the place was demolished; and after reconstruction, restoring the project was not allowed.

Among her other activities are: publishing *Qal-o-Maqal* (a quarterly journal), setting up the library in Tehran Publishers & Booksellers Union, and acting as selected member in Iranian Writers Association Secretariat since 2008. There have also been some writings and interviews here and there and a reminder furnished by a photo in magazines and websites, yet with little sense of presence.

A great challenge with cancer and extensive chemotherapy sessions for ten years since 1999....

Farkhondeh was retired in 2008. And now, in her house on Proshat Street, she has an eye to the geraniums and a look at the monitor, lest the words suddenly disappear, reflecting on what she doesn’t recognize and yet here it is sitting by the words, at the corner of her trembling soul, without knowing where it is up to. Though, indeed, never has it been constrained by geography, never surrendered to the poor limited definitions imposed by borders, barbed wires, and iron walls. Here it is beside the words and draws on a line in her last poem to say:

Enough time is needed for dying

Too bad!

I don't have it.

She has not enough time, not that she is apt to ‘send a condolence to a newspaper’⁵, or finish another novel, poem, or unfinished project. No! She is staying to...

4. If interested, the texts related to this award may be downloaded from F. Hajizadeh’s official website.
5. Extract from a poem by Forugh Farrokhzad