

Fragrances of a Poem

MAHVASH SABET (from Gohardasht Prison in Iran)

translated by JOHN HATCHER and AMROLLAH HEMMAT

to my mother who eternally receives all my love

Sitting silent
Beside a lone pomegranate tree,
I bear the burdens
of all these captive women.

In every corner
amid broken shadows
within these stone walls
huddled women speak in whispers.

On one side
young girls are
barely able to walk
in the anguish of their pain.

Under the shelter
a chubby sparrow briefly sits
to sing in quavering song
ferried on a breeze, sweet, but forlorn.

A few women hang clothes
on web-like strings
sagging with the weight
of a ponderous load.

Autumn has come.
The lone tree is fruitless,
its limbs leaveless.

Kind Faraibá sits,
caresses the face,
strokes the hair

of an elderly one,
weak, bereft,
her pure breath screaming,
“Aged, scourged,
am I not Innocence itself?”

I soon drown
in tears of another,
so tired, frail;

I drown in the blood
Flowing from the
veins of a weary young girl;
I drown in her sobs.

Wordless after torture,
approaching death,
she raises a finger
to signal her defeat,
and I myself become
as dead.

Later I drown
in jubilant shouts—
one woman has been
saved from the gallows!

In the morning
awakening to shrill screams,
sickened by the tumult
of grief from another
battered soul,

I diffuse the fragrances
of my poems over
the cold, stale bread;
I paint the color of light
over jaundiced faces,
sickly, dark, stunned.

I bestow hope of waves
upon a languid pond,
destitute of tumult
and cheer.

Caged,
my feathered wings bound,
in my mind
I bestow on the sparrow
the hope of soaring
to summit heights.

As each woman
becomes deathly silent
under the boot of
of obscene injustice,
in time I, too,
must faint away.

Beneath the single pomegranate,
so slender, fruitless,
I am silent again,
trying to bear
on my heart's strings
the unbearable weight
of these captive souls.