Coming next spring:

ITALY

ATLANTA REVIEW

Vol. XVI, No. 2

ATLANTA REVIEW

IRAN

edited by

Sholeh Wolpé

5 new translations of Rumi
by Coleman Barks

Spring/Summer 2010

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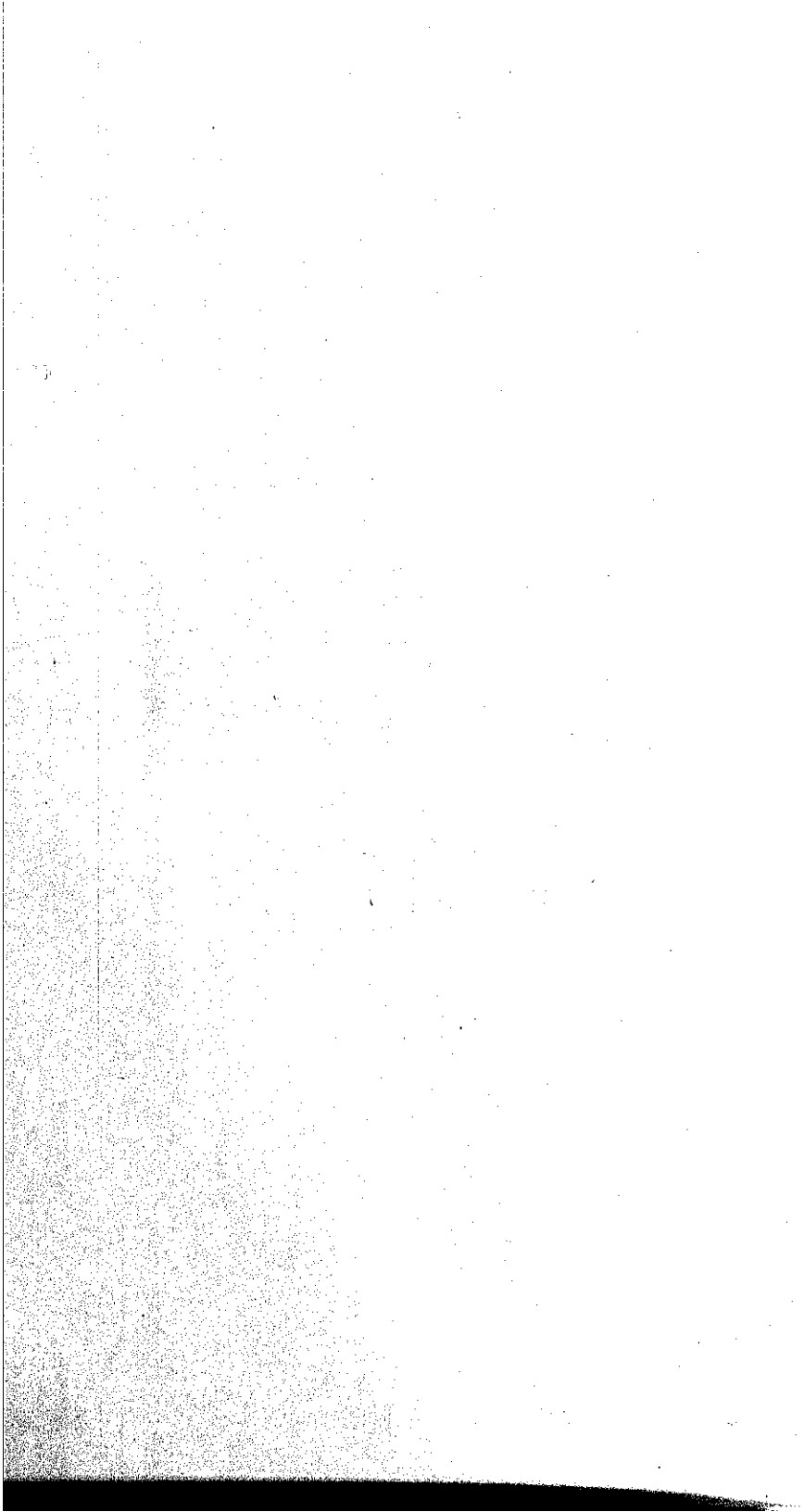

Volume XVI Issue Number 2

ATLANTA REVIEW

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Editor & Publisher Daniel Veach

IRAN Feature Editor Sholeh Wolpé

Senior Editors Memye Curtis Tucker
Lee Passarella
Alicia Stallings

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Welcome

Once again *Atlanta Review* takes you to the front lines and the front pages of world news, with the first collection of poetry from IRAN since that country's pro-democracy movement amazed the world. Iranian poet Sholeh Wolpé here reveals the heart and soul of the Iranian struggle for freedom and self-expression.

The poets of Iran, like those of Iraq, have played a leading role in that struggle—and they too have paid the price in persecution, imprisonment and exile. William Carlos Williams said that men die every day for lack of the news that is found in poetry. Once again we honor those who dare to bring us that news, no matter what the cost.

Before Iran there was Persia, and this issue also honors one of the world's most inspired poetic traditions. As a special treat, we have five new poems by Rumi from Coleman Barks, whose rapturous translations have made this 13th century Persian mystic one of America's best-selling poets!

The issue begins as we clear the ice of winter to make way for some (delightfully) distressing damselflies. Then begins a hike that will restore the cherries to your lips and the apples to your cheeks. We'll traverse the precipices of parenthood mounted on an invisible alpaca, say "tanks for the memory" from both sides of the turret, and shake a few dates to celebrate our arrival in IRAN. Afterwards, we indulge in some musing and amusing takes on technology, power, and poetry. All in all, it's an issue guaranteed to float your boat right into summer.

Poetry 2010 now offers easy online entry at *Atlanta Review*'s unique Home Pond: **www.atlantareview.com**. It's a great way to support your journal and perhaps win the richest single-poem prize in America. At least twenty entrants will also appear in the Contest Issue coming next fall. See you then!

Dan Veach
Editor & Publisher

damselflies

kicking away the ice,
the electrician of spring
wires the riverbank
for iridescence, and soon
it comes: their bodies
are exclamation points
of green; their wings
pulse darkly as hearts.
so they spend the whole summer
screwing: on the canoe,
on your hat, on the silk sheets
of the backs of your hands.
eventually, october's
grumpy landlord comes down
like he owns the place,
cools their jets, cuts
the juice, clips the jazz,
cleans out the junk,
saying decent people everywhere
are trying to get some sleep.

B.J. Best

Cherry Blossom Time

I can't help myself. I'm writing a poem about the cherry.
OK, I know it's been done before, and that
the current literati will deem it unseemly
to gush at the blushing blooms—too ostentatious,
too mindlessly pretty—all that a poem today should flee.
And I'll freely admit that I've got nothing new to say
about the cherry. So I'll repeat the same stale chestnuts
like some latter-day Columbus discovering the New World
all over again. I'll slyly paraphrase a dead Japanese scribbler
and proclaim that it's as if the rosy clouds of sunset
had descended to girdle the ebony branches. I'll compare
the sagging boughs to a madcap Santa bowed down
by his bulging bag of gifts. I'll proclaim that the cherry
is winter's pauper turned before our ice-bleared eyes
into springtime's pasha, and that this indeed is a Midas
amongst flowering trees—everything that it touches
turns to petal. I'll compare the windblown whirl of petals
to an April snowfall. You say you've heard that one before?

In that case, I'll adroitly shift gears and concede
that my ode may be a trifle cloying, but I'll cleverly deflect
the blame from my writerly failings to the benighted age
in which we live—an era when Truth is no longer,
as Keats would have it, beauty, but all that is ironic
and acerbic and grotesque. And in this ass-backwards world,
I'll declare that the cherry is not just another pretty face,
but a guerrilla warrior fighting the good fight behind
enemy lines, a garish slap to the postmodern kisser,
a flagrant violation of the current ascetic esthetic,
a florid embarrassment to fundamentalists of all stripes,
literary or otherwise, and their woefully unflowering God.
And to those who are still wondering whether a hard-boiled
modern can cherish the cherry, I'll cite the Japanese again,
who venerate the spare and the bare, but go bonkers
every year when the bombastic bursting of the cherry
blows them from their minimalist Zen waters.

So blow your mind too, if it's cherry time today,
by strolling down those ruddy-fleshed boulevards
of vegetable excess, like Columbus blundering upon
some delirious new shore. And if it's not yet the season,
I'll mail you this poem in a brown paper wrapper,
and you can read it again when no one is looking.

Richard Schiffman

The Fellowship of the Apple

1. Unlike grafted apples,
those factories and suburban tracts of taste,
pippins, with a name as mischievous and sprightly as any,
are wildlings sprung from apples mating freely.
Rampant with heterozygosity—
color ranging from white to nearly black,
size from nickels to grapefruit,
habit from columnar to sprawling—
in them long-dead languages of apple speak in new tongues,
sour, bitter, mealy, rarely sweet,
with undertones of flavor as complex
as a human heart.
Multiform the face,
cacophonous the voice
of apple.

2. Down from the village church,
behind the clapboard farmhouse—the orchard,
a leafy choir raising a silent hymn to Bacchus
in these vineyards of the 19th century North.
Come autumn, men in sheds like amorous schoolboys
plied their art and opened the sense-pores,
breathing the sweet apple essence bursting from skins—
the gush into mash, the run
sloshing with singular purpose into the frank pails,
pale amber gallons in glass,
the twinkle, the tang, the froth,
yielding the blessed deliverance of cider.

3. As a student in Austria, in the company of Austrians,
on a pilgrimage to a church on a road winding upwards
through fields, woods and mountains after mountains,
we'd pause at farmhouses asking for water, knowing
would come instead a sour *Apfulmost*
and a lively, red-skinned farmer tart with humor
wielding his wildling dialect words.

Cider, chocolate, schnapps, espresso beans
to chew, raw smoked bacon, hearty bread
multiplied like loaves and fishes,
and, filled with holy spirits,
we'd set forth again singing, looking for more God
to have on the way to church,
growing ever more fond of each other
in the fellowship of the apple.

Mark D. Hart

What Ever Happened to Sex?

Maybe back in the '60s,
when sex was more popular...
—freshman essay

Sex lives in a bungalow in the Hollywood Hills,
comes out only for special occasions—
anniversaries, holidays, the Oscars sometimes.
Old pals like Drugs and Rock 'n' Roll stop by,
checking up, always too quick with a compliment
on how well she's holding up, you know, considering.
Sex tries hard not to whine for the good old days
or blame her agent—*She says I should be doing*
TV! Can you imagine?—but in the evenings
after her friends have gone and the lemon sun
slumps behind the orange trees
she can't help but ache to be popular again,
to feel the heat rising from flash bulbs—
that electric thrill of being wanted—
god, to be wanted once more before it's too dark.

Amorak Huey

Art

Art, I miss you so much.
We used to visit the countryside together,
pastoral scenes,
vistas long-reaching before our eyes.

So many times you and I
sat together, stately
elegant moments of reflection
without the bother of being elsewhere in time.

Art, I wish still to have your eyes
with me to enjoy the fresh
captured color of flowers arranged
to grace a gleaming table set for us.

All that lies forgotten in dead hands.
Now I have geometrics leaping before me,
or random color splashes ruling canvas,
perhaps a toilet bowl placed in space.

All this modern psyche
trying to sort itself through art.
I cannot live with traffic circles
on my wall in place of my old familiar friend.

Dennis Herrell

Diver

Up here transparent turquoise fish with red stripes,
silver minnows—*thousands*—brilliant yellows
and greens and showers of gold simmering through
meadows of softly pulsing mauve coral fans
brighter than rippling light. Why dive deeper?
Here the sea is safe, a size to fathom.
Linger. Drift. Look and feel light and full.
Why challenge easy radiance? Maybe I should

dive deeper, down to the black zone
of big-mouthed eels, down to the muck and worms,
and dive deeper still, with and against my will,
forcing the burning sickness, to explore
the wreckage of a man-of-war, slave ship
of rotting chains, misery, death, nothing
I don't already know but can't resist
when, floating free in watery shine,
I look down from the depths of my shallows.

Marcus Smith

The Trouble With Seafood

It comes wrapped in shells and scales and full
of tiny bones that choke. I grew up by the sea

so I should like the smell of fish markets,
know how to crack a crab leg or open

an oyster. I should like shrimp cocktail:
pink ovaries, red sauce. The trouble

is that the ocean is feminine and the moon
makes her swell. Each creature pulled

from her salt smells like blood. Even in
restaurants where patrons are expensive

and pressed and leaned over white tablecloths,
the seafood is obscene. And impossible to eat:

all that prying and digging for the smallest
piece of meat. I never liked being a woman

and I am disturbed by my body of water.
I can be opened; I have a second mouth.

And I hate blood: its smells and stains.
Tourists wear bibs when they eat lobster:

that great cockroach boiled and served
with lemon. When I watch them tear it open,

hear the crack of the shell, I cross my arms, my legs.

Faith Shearin

Not Knowing

It is the not knowing that keeps us going,
the way we turn the pages of a book.
We don't know which October will bring
hurricanes and which will bring
the bright Conchs that hold open
our doors. We don't know whether
the Blue Heron is pensive
on his big stick legs or if he
has seen a fish. We don't know
whether the sea turtle's eggs will hatch
and, if they do, how many will find
the tides' tongue. We don't know if
the sick dog will get better, if
the argument continues or resolves.
We don't know which year the whales
will pass so close we could touch
their slick backs with our hands.
We try not to know that the story
is short: what matters now will vanish
like snow. We wonder if a friend
will visit, if a gift will arrive, if our children
will come home dusted in happiness.
Our island is disappearing: each year
another row of cottages erased by wind.
Still, we wonder which bright box will hold
onto the sand, which castle will last until noon.

Faith Shearin

Why I Love A Carousel

It is so old: this desire to ride on the back of an animal
carved before I was born. Give me an ostrich,

a wild pig, a cat with a fish still hanging from its mouth.
Buy a ticket and ride the seasons, birth to death:

rise and fall like a civilization. And the music!
I have never been happier to go nowhere, my hands

around a painted wooden neck. To hear one
in summer across a lawn is to hear your mother

dreaming before she met your father: her face
young and happy, laughter like a sky full of stars.

Faith Shearin

Bad Juju

You don't speak about your crack-addict sister's
recovering until she does, and stays recovered
while she finds a dermatologist husband, buys
a five-bedroom on Eden Drive, and her first child
is born perfect, with your mom's turquoise eyes.

You don't flush your nails or hair, do thirteen reps
of any exercise, squash a cricket in the house,
finish a good book or kill a bird before boarding
an airplane, or—if you write—give loved ones'
names to characters who die. It's bad juju.

You save all letters that include good news,
and shred anything that tells you gates are locked,
the bridge across some shark-filled moat perpetually
closed to you. The higher your IQ, the more
it's sure the shaman in your head will leap

from the cave-dark, and stop your logician's
heart cold—will rattle bones, and arsenic
your mathematician's tea—will blow smoke
in your physicist's nose until he shrieks and shakes
like a Holy Roller ringed by zombies. You never

count money where anyone can see, or brag
about your wife's beauty, or claim success
and fortune as your due. You don't admit ever,
ever, of your son, "He's my whole life," even if
(oh holy terror) it is true.

Charles Harper Webb

Invisible Alpaca

Stroking my son's hair, cowlicked with dreams,
and whispering, "Sorry, time for school,"
just sinks him deeper into sleep. But when I sing,

I'm an invisible alpaca; I don't make much noise.
I'm an invisible alpaca; I bite little boys,
the corners of his lips twitch up. He squeals

as I give his knee the pincer-squeeze my own
dad called a horse-bite, but I've blamed on alpacas
since the petting zoo. He spins toward me.

"I see you, Dad!" "I'm an alpaca," I squeak,
and nip and bite under the sheets until he's up,
sloshing in dawn's icy creek that sweeps him,

still dazed, to my car. "Alpaca's here," I warn,
"in case you give me grief." "I don't see him."
"He's invisible." "Yeah, right. Prove he's here."

"Not everything real can be proved," I insist.
Too soon, my young empiricist will boot Alpaca
into Babyland where Thomas the Tank Engine,

Barney, and Fooyuck Monster already pine.
Now, with new Shaquille O'Neal high-tops,
he kicks my car door closed. "Bye Erik,"

Alpaca cries. "Bye Dad," my boy sighs, waves,
and shrugs on his backpack big as a Marine's
as my car inches forward, others shoving up

to unload their own cargo. One last wave
and he starts down the stairs, head bouncing
as if he's riding an alpaca on a steep trail

carved by those cloud-dwelling magicians
who built Machu Picchu and, wood flutes wailing,
went invisible too.

Charles Harper Webb

In Japan

the rain.
Steady
like water pouring from a shower head.
Listening, it was as if we held conch shells over our ears.
The rain stops suddenly—one minute it's pouring
then nothing
not even a drop.

In the afternoon we made love slowly on tatami mats.
Burning tip of a mosquito coil
smell of straw
wood
incense
oil.

On Boys' Day we watched paper carp flying, filled with wind.
Boys, on their way to manhood, swim upstream like carp,
the guide told us.
They don't always get there.

Grief doesn't stop suddenly... or turn completely off
but you can turn it on all the way whenever you want—
it's important to know this.

Through the years the trickle inside changes the landscape
into a secret underground garden.
A bed of moss
tangle of green grass
clear pool to see one's reflection in.

After the baby died I kept dreaming of Japan and what I would do there.
Fly a blue kite,
make ceremonies of small things:
perfect pebble
spring leaf
blossom.

I would sit in a Zen garden
Listen to rain.

Kitty Forbes

Psalm of Birds and Birthdays

with thanks to Marjorie Evasco

You hold a small bird to your breast.
You who have mothered and know how
it is to nurse a second fluttering heart,
to let your body make space for another
as if it were the most natural thing

now shape your sure hand lightly into wing;
a gesture of compassion, like prayer, as free
of hesitant desire as the hatchling is of fear
and what must surely come, one cloudless day
in unmistaken whispers. This is Hope:

the clear eye fixed beyond the narrow frame,
the fragile talon poised on no more firm foundation
than this flesh, the ruffled down sufficient and at trust.
I, a weak father, lack the language and the innocence
to call down angels. Once I found a fallen nestling

whose parents' unschooled artistry did not after all
withstand the previous evening's storm. Blind,
leathery and clawing, ants come already to plunder,
I scooped it (not untenderly) to shade, covered
it with leaves. Was the decent thing to have kept vigil

or leave quietly? My daughter, 4, knows that goldfish
go to heaven when they go, but more to the point,
that they don't come back. She leans on my arm, asks
me never to die, her small heart strong enough to love
and not tire. What do we do to earn our time on earth?

Alvin Pang

Near Rotterdam: On the Banks of the River Waal

Hard to imagine
this landscape crushed by tanks,
spindly cypress with their painted strokes
that curl a rutted road to some tiny village, by
Hobbema, perhaps,

smoke floating
out of chimneys in the green,
hidden glades churned to mud and the
grunt of engines. And the great noise of boots
and marching voices

madly in the lanes
passing the bonnet girl by the hay
rick, her eyes still bright in the stalled
season. Look anywhere in this world without engines,
disappearing down

a dull canal behind
leafy interstices, an old mill,
its wheel still cupping water like the
hands of the dead. Orchards hold their dark shade
like covens, behind

thatched-roof barns,
in pockets of the scene, nesting
birds coo their peasant gossip, and the human
scale of things, no two houses alike, not
even windows of

a tenement cut
to the same size, windmills and
bridges off center, the uneven wheels
of an oxcart irregular and oddly formed, creaking
down a cobbled

road. Over the
canebreaks a flock of blackbirds
leave their brittle stalks scudding southward,
the river turns and doubles back, wedges of birds flee
the scene (where

do they go in
their certitude?) and Breughel's
peasants reappear in Citröens! How orderly
the passersby, their minds swept clean of memory.
They could be

you and me riding
into market, the sun striking
our faces through the trees, they could
be relatives of our relatives shopping in bazaars,
the world still

turning on the
trivia of necessity. The same
fears befall them, the same unenviable
innocence as in the ruts of tanks new flowers
bloom. A ground

cover sweet with
peonies and pink-tipped grasses
spreads over the lanes, lightens the planted
woods and tumbles into the river (O silver passage
and alchemist of

time!) Where have
the lorries gone that ran these roads to Carentan?

Ron de Maris

Cloud Fishing

I

Mirrors of irrigation laid carpets of floating cloud
all around us, square ponds pierced by spears of rice shoot.
Churning more horsepower than Custer's whole cavalry,
our juggernaut rumbled down levee road, we four riding
shotgun up top, flack-jacketed, helmet-headed, heavily armed,
and armored, our sweat a crusted glaze of arrogance.
Getting drunk on fumes of diesel thunder,
giddy as football heroes on a homecoming float,
we fancied ourselves Centaurs of mechanized armor,
deputies of manifest destiny, brandishing our badge of authority—
the white star that branded flanks of our one-five-five millimeter
self-propelled howitzer.
Zig-zagging dragonflies, irrigation-mirrored, couldn't tell friend
from foe, so tried war, or sex, with reflections.
Swallows strafed mosquitoes, and imperial cumuli glided
like sun-gilded galleons on water as in heaven.
Sprouting rice battalions did not impale or impede them.
Our threatened fire power did not intimidate or delay them.

II

But when mud road sank our tonnage to a quagmire crawl,
pistons pounding, low gears whining,
bellicose moods dissolved in simmering heat to fear.
At steamroller speed, we neared three old men fishing,
50 yards off. They were clad in peasant black,
natural as charred stumps, knee-deep, and still as herons.
Each branched a bamboo pole, line taut,
a fire-fight's spent lead for sinkers no doubt,
barbed and baited hooks unseen—
inverted wire questions, tethered, glossed over,
so we saw only cloud where sunfish lurked.
Broad coned hats veiled the ancients in shadow;
edited them into a prickly calligraphy
of reed and sprout
that no well-schooled soldier could decipher.

Perched like a plough bird on war's tractor,
an Alabama farm boy shouted, *"Any luck?"*
We expected a red betel-nut grin,
and back-home's mute answer, the lifting of a stringer.
Would the chain, if raised, hang heavy with carp,
clouds, rainbow trout or Alabama farm-boy scalps?
Aloof as ink on silk, they fished on, weathering
our passage as if an afternoon monsoon blowing through.
Our tank treads stirred mud thick as putty, headed
for higher ground. Looking back, now and again, we saw
there was no answer impatient invaders ever wait for.
Armies advance faster than age—or wisdom, slower
than cumuli drift. The big one, clouded in myth,
never takes the bait.

Tim Leach

Parade

Snare and trumpets tumble and cut
haze, an August afternoon—
half of Plymouth congregates
Main Street in Sunday best.

Old soldiers draped in dry-cleaned
blazers hooked by rank and medal
mingle with mothers, children, fathers
waiting to honor a son's return.

Banners lilt from lampposts.

A herd of Harleys
fills Saint Peter's parking lot.
Men in beards and black leather
sprawl on church steps where we learned
to serve the Lord by serving others.

The veterans pep band clarinet
takes lead in Yankee Doodle.
A blond boy in a Red Sox shirt
shears peanut shells and trails them
on the sidewalk while he dances.
His sister spits watermelon seeds
to whistle and twirls her curls.

Deli plastic flags unfold
free with cups of lemonade.
Children wrap their faces,
view the world through colored veils.

A palsied vet sucks breath through a tube.

Trumpet, clarinet and snare
break into our anthem,
announce the soldier's coming.
We stand with practiced reverence.

I think of my older brother,
another soldier flying choppers
in a desert I can't pronounce.
He visits after six month tours of duty.
War has worn his chin to stone....

The black Buick rolls
like a thundercloud toward us.
A pressed flag wraps
the casket flanked by a dozen
white lilies dying of thirst.

I am glad and guilty
the dead boy's not my brother.

Stephan Delbos

If You Listen You Can Hear the End of Things

While this may come as no surprise to you,
my good Constantius, it seems
that I've become a laughingstock, at least
among my more urbane associates,
and all because I said I wanted just to live
a simple life. Ah well, I leave them their
ephemeral chateaus, Elysium
of cul-de-sacs. When summer comes I'll climb

another way, the old road following
the Little Walker, spate of snowmelt loud
between the canyon walls, basalt abraded
through millennia of ice and sun.
Abruptly blue across the still wet meadows,
the wild irises return, clouds
of minor fliers shift and whine above
the river pools, at dusk the bats come

tilting for mosquitoes. Here I spend
my summers, scrambling the heights, alone
among a thousand peaks and canyons. What
precedents I have: Han Shan
inscribing poetry on trees and stones,
Li Po wandering, intoxicated,
singing to the waning moon. Your last
letter reached me from Persepolis,

where, as you report, not one stone stands
upon another. It seems your travels through
the wider world have brought you nothing
but exquisite ruins. You of all our old
acquaintances remember this place
fondly, and I'll expect a visit, good
Constantius—we'll camp this summer where
the herders camp, beneath the canyon's head,

listen mild nights to sheep bells grazing
meadow grass, the endless voice of water
falling. We'll trace the ancient trading route,
still visible among the pines in places,
climbing toward the ridgetop. We'll claim paths
branching east where Piute and Shoshone
summered, routes that once wound west to meet
the vanished trading nations of the Coast.

Larry Ollivier

Exile

Dawn finds you high on the mountain ledge.
Startled sheep scuttle into the scrub;
thorn-shrubs bending away from the wind,
stunted limbs struggling to anchor themselves
in a thin pelt of earth.
March light strikes a lone pine,
listing in its slant of shadow.

From here, ring forts dimple the fields below,
scored out in tiers of green, hedges gauzed
with mist like milk beaten thin.
The shoreline scalloped by the white bite of the sea
where gulls pitch and lift, cries piercing the wind.

Half-way to the cairn, your hand ponders
the stone you carry, its dense language
of minerals: feldspar, quartz, mica, schist.
A red thread of carnelian veins its smooth dome,
its obdurate, blind soul drinking heat from your palm.

Underfoot, dwarf ruffs of Lady's Mantle
wrestle into crevices, beads of mist
like shivered glass in their cupped hands.

Suddenly the cairn,
naked in the stark northern light,
inured to the wind's attrition,
stone heaped on stone—
raised altar to a hungry god.

Peggie Gallagher

Journey

I have traveled widely in Concord.
—Thoreau

Through the leaf-strewn yard of autumn—
oak, hickory and sweet gum, maple and persimmon—
I hear roughly the same hush under boot,

and the snap of dry twigs. Because my home
is on the ridge top, I drive through the hills
that follow Sulfur Fork, greet turkey and deer,

speak kindly to the old black Lab
who sleeps in the road by her barn.
I've stopped to watch a kestrel, copper

and gray sentinel, scour a field for mice.
I've read the pecking order of buzzards
feeding on a doe's belly, studied how

they tear the rich viscera, then hop
and squawk with a relish of joy.
I've seen children tour an ancient cemetery,

reading epitaphs and names. I've studied
grave diggers, shoulder deep in soil,
shoring up a shadowed grave as an egret

fished a hill-top pond, and dusk drowned
the sun in a scurry of mauve. Follow
the sycamore leaf's downward spiral

and learn of the heart's meter,
that in an average life it echoes
two and half billion beats. How long

I failed to heed what childhood taught me—
the slowing of the pulse as night comes on,
the sound of the earth beneath my feet.

Bill Brown

Date Palm Plantation, Iran

...and the desert shall rejoice and blossom.
—Isaiah 35

At the date palm plantation,
scantily clad barefoot men
shimmy up palm trunks
to shake loose ripe dates,
which fall to the soft ground like

manna from heaven. Sun
has begun its descent behind
fronds of a hundred palms. But
it stops—the eternal now takes
over as date-shakers shimmy down

one, up the next trunk graceful
as rhesus monkeys, free from
Teheran's trappings and dreams
of grandeur—movers and shakers
are they, of a different sort,

moving from tree to tree
shaking diligently.
Free as the breeze, or so it
seems. Only one thing for sure:
you, the watcher from your

donkey-drawn cart,
are suddenly set ablaze
with gratitude and praise
for the date, its shaker
and its maker.

Diana Woodcock

International Feature Section

The poetry of

IRAN

Edited by

Sholeh Wolpé

Introduction

Sholeh Wolpé

One Saturday afternoon while walking down Melrose Avenue in Los Angeles, I gave in to the urge to stop people at random and ask them what came to their minds when I mentioned Iran. Here are some of their responses: Islamic government, human rights violations, a nuclear threat, sponsors of terrorism, Holocaust deniers, women in veils, anti-Semites, Khomeini's fatwa on Salman Rushdie, enemies of Israel and the West, the 1979 hostage crisis. Only one person had anything positive to say, and it had something to do with a great kebab dish he'd had at a Persian restaurant on Westwood Boulevard.

I was disheartened to find that few people had much regard for an ancient civilization rich in poetry and the arts—one credited with the invention of the windmill, refrigeration, the first teaching hospitals, alcohol in medicine, chess, polo, and even ice cream. Moreover, I suspect most Americans know very little about the role of the United States in Iran's recent history—the CIA-backed coup that overthrew the democratic government of Mohammad Mosaddegh in 1953, the subsequent installation of Reza Shah, the support of the Shah's government despite his notorious human rights violations, and finally the sale of weapons to Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq war.

Why doesn't the average American know about these facts too? Perhaps the answer is that the citizens of any country, even those in a great democratic nation such as the United States, may often not be aware of their own government's actions. A people is not always its government, and conversely, a government does not always represent its people.

What *does* represent a people is their literature and the arts, those created freely and not as a part of a propaganda machine. Poets, writers and artists are able to gift us with the power of empathy. Their words, films and canvases can serve as the antidote to the disease of apathy and to the poison of religious and ideological fanaticism. I believe it is paramount that human beings throughout the world connect through the web of literature and culture. Otherwise we run the risk of perishing in the worst way possible—losing our humanity.

The brutal murder of Neda Agha-Soltan, a young Iranian woman who was killed June 20, 2009, during a peaceful street demonstration in Tehran, and to whom this collection is dedicated, brought the human struggle against a repressive regime closer to millions of people throughout the world. The Green Movement, formed after President Ahmadinejad's theft of the election, has become a struggle not only to conduct an honest and democratic electoral process but also to regain the most basic human rights so tragically lost after Khomeini's rise to power.

The brutality of the present Islamic Republic, with its army of fanatical and well-funded Basiji militia, attacking the young and the old, women and children, is so shocking and widespread that even a number of their own clergy—such as the highly respected Ayatollah Montazeri—have spoken loudly and vehemently against the present state of affairs. In Montazeri's words, the Islamic Republic of Iran is now "A political system based on force, oppression, changing people's votes, killing, closure, arresting and using Stalinist and medieval torture, creating repression, censorship of newspapers, interruption of the means of mass communications, jailing the enlightened... and forcing them to make false confessions in jail."* He further declares the regime to be "condemned and illegitimate."

Why did the people of Iran allow such a regime to take root in the first place? Two years before the 1979 revolution, The Writers' Association of Iran accepted an invitation from the Goethe Institute to organize its annual meeting. This resulted in an unprecedented ten nights of poetry readings heavy with political overtones. In a country where poets have the status of rock stars, these readings, which became known as *dah shab* (The Ten Nights), played a major contributing role in the Iranian revolution two years later. The diverse views—leftist, Islamist, secular, etc.—were unified by a single resolve: to end the Shah's oppressive regime and bring about a prosperous democratic government where freedom of expression, religion, and individual rights were respected and enforced.

The 1979 Iranian revolution was a people's revolution hijacked. Whether Muslim, Jewish, socialist or atheist, all fought side-by-side to end one tyrannical regime, only to find themselves in the clutches of another, even more ruthless and oppressive. Khomeini, returned from exile, was supposed to act as a benevolent leader until a democratic government could be formed. Instead, appealing to the deep religious sensibilities of the masses, he promptly began to execute or banish anyone he considered a threat to the strict Islamic government he was

planning to establish. The war with Iraq (1980-1988) only served to solidify his base by bringing the nation together to fight its common enemy. Voices were silenced, religious tolerance completely disappeared, women's rights were reduced to the theocrats' own interpretation of the Quran, non-Islamic music and literature were banned, dance was forbidden, and the freedom of press was squelched. In short, a dark world darkened even more, and the torch bearers—the poets, writers and artists—were driven deep underground.

But in a country like Iran, literature, and particularly poetry, is like rain—it cannot be arrested. Vast umbrellas of censorship can be raised, people can be forced underground and into dungeons, but the water will eventually seep in, cleanse, nourish, and create a new landscape. This is true about many other countries and cultures. Indeed the first who recognize literature's power are the tyrants themselves. From Moscow to Beijing to Tehran, they fear the poets, jail them, torture them, and send them into exile, but they cannot silence their words.

As a strategy to combat the powerful voices of Iran's poets, the Islamic Republic began a campaign of advocating and creating their own brand of literature, enticing the younger generation, many of whom had been born under the repressive regime, with generous financial support to write, organize poetry workshops and give readings. As a result a whole new brand of propaganda literature, produced in earnest, was born. This, they named Islamic literature. Yet, despite this clever effort, they could not suppress such untarnished voices as that of Simin Behbahani, whose poem "And Behold" is so well-known in Iran that it is often recited by heart. In this poem, Behbahani compares the camel's legendary rage with the anger brewing in people over a government controlling their destiny.

The poems I have selected for this special Iran issue of *Atlanta Review* represent the young, the old and the ancient. I suggest you read this collection in the order in which I have arranged it. Each poem is a musical note carefully sequenced so that by the time you finish the last poem you can hear the powerful symphony of the poets' voices in unison. While poets such as Pegah Ahmadi, Mohsen Emadi, Mana Aghai and Granaz Moussavi seek to bring to light their social reality in Iran, others such as Nader Naderpour and Solmaz Sharif sing of love and hope, and others still like Persis Karim and Peyman Vahabzadeh help us to see the humor in it all.

I have included a good number of poems written in the diaspora. Historically, writing in exile has not been a part of the collective Iranian experience. However, what makes the Iranian exile poems interesting is that they are not homogeneous. One can observe a vast landscape of expressions and an arch of evolution in style and content that have richly developed over the course of the past thirty years. This is partly due to the extent of the dispersion of the poets throughout the world, a factor that has contributed new dimensions and color to the tapestry of Iranian poetry.

Despite the Islamic Republic's use of any and all available methods to quell dissent—including propaganda poems, novels and films—in a country where even the uneducated bricklayers recite poems by heart, the voice of the poets cannot be silenced. Like rain it will seep into every crevice and feed the seedlings. In Iran's Green Revolution we see signs of saplings that have broken through pavements and are growing fast in the streets and squares. Anthologies such as this empower these saplings. This power does not just come from their fellow Iranians, rather it comes from all human beings in every corner of the world; it comes from readers like you who allow into your lives the transformative power of literature.

Sholeh Wolpé
Los Angeles, December 2009

**Los Angeles Times*, December 22, 2009

This issue of Atlanta Review *is dedicated to the memory of*

Neda Agah-Soltan

a 26-year-old Iranian woman and student of philosophy who on June 20, 2009, while at a demonstration in Tehran protesting the vote-count fraud in the reelection of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, was targeted and shot in the heart by a Basiji.

The name Neda *in Persian means "The call."*

I Am Neda

Leave the Basiji bullet in my heart,
fall to prayer in my blood,
and hush, father
—I am not dead.

More light than mass,
I flood through you,
breathe with your eyes,
stand in your shoes, on the rooftops,
in the streets, march with you
in the cities and villages of our country
shouting through you, with you.
I am Neda—thunder on your tongue.

Sholeh Wolpé

99 Name of Exile

Adam & Eve
Afflicted
Afraid
Alien
Banished
Beggar
Castaway
Colonist
Condemned
Crippled
Dangerous
Dark
Deportee
Deserter
Detested
Different
Dirty
Disgraced
Disinherited
Dismissed
Disowned
Displaced
Dispossessed
Dyke
Emigrant
Ethnic
Evil
Exotic
Expatriate
Expelled
Extraterrestrial
Foreign
Forsaken
Fugitive
Guilty
Heretic
Homeless
Homesick
Impure
Infectious
Inhuman
Insurgent
Invisible
Ishmael
Jew
Kashmiri
Lost
Malefactor
Marooned
Mysterious
Nigger
Non-citizen
Non-conformist
Other
Outcast
Outlaw
Outsider
Overseas
Pariah
Queer
Refugee
Resident Alien
Runaway
Scapegoat
Squatter
Stateless
Stranger
Street Arab
Terrorist
Traitor
Trespasser
Unclean
Uncorrectable
Undesirable
Undomesticated
Unfit
Unfortunate
Unidentified
Uninvited
Unknown
Unnamed
Unrecognized
Unskilled
Unspeakable
Unthinkable
Untouchable
Unusual
Unwanted
Unwilling
Unworthy
Victim
Villain
Virus
Wanderer
Witch
Wrong
X
Yellow
Zero

Kaveh Bassiri

And Behold

Do they not consider the camel, how it was created?
—Quran, Sura 88:17

And behold the camel, how it was created:
not from mud and water,
but as if from patience and a mirage.
And you know how the mirage deceives the eyes.
And the mirage knows not the secret of your patience:
how you endure the thirst, the sand, and the salt marshes,
and gazing at the immense presence with your weary eyes.
And behold how this gaze is marked with salt grooves
like the dry lines remaining on your cheeks after a stream of tears.
And behold the tears that have drained from you
all means of consciousness.
With what nothingness should you fill this emptied space?
And behold in this emptied space the agitation of a thirsty camel,
made mad beyond the limits of its patience,
reluctant to carry meekly its heavy burden.
And behold its two incisors gleaming madly in a row of angry teeth.
Patience spawns hatred and hatred the fatal wound:
behold with what vengeance the camel
bit through the arteries of its driver.
The mirage lost its patience.
And behold the camel.

Simin Behbahani
translated by
Farzaneh Milani and Kaveh Safa

Airport

Search my bag.
What's the use anyway?
The sigh hidden deep in my pocket
is all too familiar with: Halt!

Leave me alone!
As a matter of fact, I'll sleep with the raspberry bush
and won't be faced down!
Why do you always target a woman
who abandons her walls,
pins a heart to her shirt?
There's nothing in my suitcase
but innocent hair.
Leave me alone!

I dreamed I've stolen this heart from God,
and that I won't reach tomorrow.
I dreamed the place to which I'm going
my shoes stick to Friday.
What if God's land has leukemia?

I'll tell my fortune with a dandelion, release its petals to the moon:
come back Fridays of my childhood,
come back to me with that same boy
whose hands sprouted kites
and I, with all my ten counting fingers,
fell for him.
Why do you always target a women
who has pinned a heart to her shirt?

Here, in the bows and arrows of war's streets,
or in the muddied bellies of slack clotheslines,
the flights are always delayed.
The bats will eventually grow old.
At least give back my childhood photo.

Lonelier than a kite abandoned in a closet,
I am finally stamped, and I miss home.
The antenna shoots for the sky but
my dress on the clothesline embraces God.

Granaz Mousavi
translated by Sholeh Wolpé

Untitled

1.
Inside me there's a tree gone crazy,
like no other tree—
a tree that likes to run unfettered, free
a tree that is not ashamed of smoking, hysterical laughter, public nakedness
a tree that was transplanted in her youth
to the suburbs of Stockholm,
her roots reaching out from the palm trees of the South
to the orderly forests of pines in Germany.

2.
My tree is free of care and guilt, and loves her homeland with abandon.
If she pulls up her roots, it's only to replant them.
Freedom, for her, is sunbathing under the Vikings' frozen skies.
She claims the right to make love to the wild wind at her whim
and, after each tryst, the right to breathe fresh air again,
something that everyone needs to grow and thrive.
She doesn't worry about her brother's saw,
couldn't care less for the axe and its revenge.
She runs and runs, with no care at all
about when or where she will ever find a forest.

3.
If I said that I left my homeland under the glaring sun
    of the seaport, I'd be lying.
Like the pit of a date, I've planted my homeland in my pillow.
My mother says a homeland is a garden
whose thirst must be watered every day.
But my sister won't plant her feet in any country.
Her only homeland is a small green hill
in section 19 of Stockholm's Solna cemetery
where we trusted our father to the earth two years ago,
10,000 miles from the place that he was born.

But I say that my homeland is a tree
growing in the jungle of my dreams.
How many trees do we have to sacrifice
to write a single letter?

Mana Aghai
translated by
Dan Veach and Melody Moezzi

The Poem

for Reza A'lameh-zadeh

1
Words are the burying ground of things.
The trot of a horse through these lines
is a sound I haven't heard since childhood.
Your laughter wilted in my teenage years.
I write
as if on pilgrimage to the city of the dead.
If time by chance slips backwards,
my father's murmurs will echo
in the ears of the text, the sound of a bullet
will disturb the sleep of these lines
and a wild-haired poem will pace
a room that's been decayed for years.
Words have been arranged along the faded lines of a house:
Here is a window,
behind the window a courtyard. No one knows
which nightmare awakens the poem. It sees
sometimes, at the window, the glance of a neighbor's bride,
sometimes the swing and the bicycle,
or the wall with its cheap paintings.
It looks at them
until they come alive
then, to the inhale and exhale of living things
goes back to sleep.

2
Years ago my father's murmurs
lost their way in the text of sleep
and the poem lit three thousand candles,
built three thousand paper boats
and offered them all to the sea.
Now that I have packed my bags
and wait for the first train
that would not return me here,

the poem is riding a bicycle;
trembling and in haste
it pedals through bumps and puddles,
rings a door bell, stares at whispers and sobs
afraid of being heard.
But the whispers are so loud in the ear
it is impossible to hear the whistle of a train.
I am still in the station
and the poem in *Khavaran*
protects the dead of these past years
from the gaze of the guards.

3

A year ago
the poem slipped through barbed wire
where soldiers patrolled the hills of your breasts,
stole your lips,
your hands;
recreated you piece by piece.
This year, soldiers guard the edge of nothing:
your body long stolen.
In the station,
my bench is occupied by a dead
whose name the poem doesn't know.
(It wouldn't learn your name either.)
Bullets and warm blood
find their way into the lines—
no paper can stop the bleeding.
The station is full of passengers who are dead.
The firing squads
and the hanging ropes
are not waiting for any train.
Mumbling gravediggers
ring the doorbells of three thousand homes.
Three thousand abandoned bicycles
litter the alleys.

Khavaran was a Baha'i cemetery in Tehran later used for prisoners of conscience killed in the mass execution of 1988. It was reportedly demolished by the government in January 2009.

4

The poem is not standing in front of a firing squad.
Nor does the firing squad
know where, on the poem, to aim at.
They simply hike the price of utilities,
the rent, and burial expenses.
I cannot buy cigarettes for three thousand dead
but I can bring them all back to life.
I don't want to make the poem
send them back to a cemetery
that doesn't exist anymore;
I only want to remind it
that all the abandoned bicycles have decayed by now,
that no one will ever again hear the jangle of their bells.
The dead will remain in the station
and if the poem can secure a ticket from each reader
it will send them off on the first one-way train.
In my country
three thousand dead in a station is normal.
Three thousand dead on a train is normal.

5

At the border stations
they arrest our tongues.
Our words decay when they cross that line.
I let go of your hands outside the station,
the train's whistle hurries my words.
Words have filled up all the cabins,
they dream thousand-year nightmares.
My words are young,
just thirty years old,
but they have piled up
layer by layer
under this prison garb.
Yellow was not the color of my first school shoes,
nor was red the color of my piggy-bank,
or blue the color of my first bicycle.
Words grew up with the colors of your dress;
they were a herd of fleeing horses,
a rainbow that you would take off

and send curving through the air,
falling into mud and dirt,
into handcuffs, darkness, and the command to shoot.

6
I'm not standing in this long line for bread and milk.
I stand here to surrender my tongue.
Everything crossing the border becomes lighter.
I stand to be translated.
A bicycle rides my borders
over bumps and puddles.
The poem considers conjunctions and prepositions,
the distance between I and I,
the me to-from-on-or me.
It is raining
on conjunctions and prepositions,
on relationships.
In the rain
the distance between us widens,
and in that distance, *Khavaran* grows larger.

7
In my language
every time we suddenly fall silent
a policeman is born.
In my language
on the back of each frightened bicycle
sit three thousand dead words.
In my language
people murmur confessions,
dress in black whispers,
are buried
in silence.
My language is silence.
Who will translate my silence?
How am I to cross this border?

Mohsen Emadi
translated by Shirindokht Nourmanesh,
Dan Veach, and Sholeh Wolpé

Marco Polo

Maybe it's the natural
extension of immigration. Maybe

it's the awesome travel
bugs, making my wife's feet

uncommonly itchy. I'm not
surprised, at any rate, to hear

the pediatrician's nickname
for our son. "Marco Polo" becomes

his in-utero trajectory
along the Silk Road, from

Kublai Khan's Forbidden City
to the snow-covered stones of a *caravanserai*

in central Turkey. Not to mention
the Australian interregnum

where ultrasound scans
clarified his gender. But our "Marco"

probably won't pen a *Travels*
as he won't know the other side

of unending expedition, say
cherished waterways of Venice, in short

a concrete home. Are we monstrous
parents? Why have we conceived

and delivered a life unto the world
in transition? If held to account

by a solicitous young man
with my eyes (and my wife's better

eyebrows) one day, accused
of depriving him of his deserved

comforts of sedentary genesis
("motherland," "mother tongue,"

two ebullient grandmothers, etc.)
I can only offer an image: removing

picture frames, tribal ornaments
from the hooks; clearing the drawers

of wrinkled notepads with withered ideas
and perforated socks; tearing

the hooks off the walls. And then
the bright outline of the picture frames

vacated on the otherwise drab
dust-darkened surface of the wall. It's this

record of the passage of time
the contrast between the original

shade and color
and the rest (ditto our lives) dog-eared

by mold, sunlight, scratches
of nature and accidents. It's this

visible discrepancy between
what we were and what we've become,

the chance to uncover
and see it. The nomad's treasure,

wisdom: the reality of aging
towards death. You see, "Marco"

—I'll tell him—if we can see
death looming, like a dark island

on the navigator's horizon
then we won't be shocked when

time's run out. This means
a life without our primal fear. That's why

we travel.

Ali Alizadeh

In Praise of Big Noses

I am the only one of four sisters
who hasn't gone under the knife.
I resisted the pleas of my aunt and sisters
to become "more beautiful," "more you."
I've kept my stately proboscis
intact—choosing not to excise its grandeur.

It suits me, I suppose—evidence of my father,
those people who live in the dryer, hotter climes
of the Mediterranean, in high desert plateaus,
cooling themselves with naso-thermo-regulation.
My old Jewish boyfriend used to say *how do the* goyim
breathe from those things anyway?

On my wedding day, my husband, also Jewish
and rather plentiful in that region of his face,
completed his vows by saying "there is no guarantee in love,
but of this, I am certain: if we have a child he or she
will have a really big nose." When I nuzzle him
with mine, he pulls back his face, jumps

at the coldness of its tip. Contrary to popular belief, the nose
is not merely cosmetic—it can gauge temperature beyond the body.
And that's another thing I've realized about the nose—
that smell is an underrated sense, perhaps a gift.
Imagine the possibilities for amplification: aromas
of jasmine, apple pie, saffron, lemon, rose

might grow more intense, depending on the height
and angle of that fleshy mound. I admit to having no
scientific evidence for this, but I do wonder
what happens when a person alters
the things they were born with.

Whole industries were born from Iranian women
watching blonde, petite-nosed movie stars
who made them forget their own striking beauty
took thousands of years to evolve, only to be undone
by someone who decided that the hairless, plucked, tucked,
sliced, nipped, and trimmed were the loveliest
of them all. I like to think of the nose as great art
waiting to be discovered. Like those large-nosed kings
depicted on sides of temples, on papyrus, on caves, in colorful
Mayan pictographs like the *Popul Vuh*. Noses were signs
of nobility and prowess. Any king with a puny one
might have been thought of as small and impotent.

These days, I get a steady stream of emails offering penis
enlargement. But that's hidden, visible only
in bedroom interludes. The nose is the public display
of one's endowments—the relief map of a human face.
I study people's noses in order to read their origins—
to situate my gaze, to find how far out

in the world they really are.

Persis Karim

Depression

One heart was beating between us,
one heart was beaten between us
when suddenly
we were led out of that small familiar cell.
Prison walls lined up
to prevent passage to other side.

On the other side of the window
each time a passerby coughed,
a star released a dagger.

On this side of the window,
a whip reared its head from the calendar
every 24 hours.

The rock's large heart did not pound
and the leaf could not hear
its own heartbeat
except in the rain.

Calendar, whips
and wide walls
escorted us to
24 coughs,
24 daggers.

Yadollah Royai
translated by Sholeh Wolpé
and Ahmad Karimi Hakkak

189 Steps

I trip down 189 steps
To wash my grey eyes in the blue sea,
And along with green ivy
Reaching out through fences,
I long to touch a woman
Who carries with each step
The sense of my loss.
One: my wife executed in Tehran.
Two: my mate leaving me in Venice.
Three: my son living between two homes.
Four: my sister giving birth in prison.
Five: my brother buried in an unmarked grave.
Six: my failing eyesight.
Seven: my sorrows of exile.
When I go from top to bottom
I hitch myself to the clouds
Which sometimes cover the sun
And sometimes leave it naked.
When I go up from the bottom
I see my naked suns
Behind dancing women.
At each landing
There are bottles of water
And a black cat is peeking out
From behind a white towel.
I surrender myself
To this sweet fatigue.
I go up ten times
And go down ten times
And at the last steps
Along with my mother's gaze
I dance down from Masuleh's rooftops
And free myself in the Caspian sea.

In Santa Monica, California, near Pacific Coast Highway there are 189 stairs between two small streets where people "do stairs."

One: the elegy for my wife.
Two: the mate I have met.
Three: the roots my son found.
Four: the books I have written.
Five: the years I ran in the Marathon.
Six: the day I wore cap and gown.
Seven: the home I have found.
Ah,
189 steps to joy.
189 steps to unity.
189 steps to my sacrificial altar.
Oh, magic number,
I pray to you
And I wash myself within you.
I am now a Horufi mystic
And I see Nasimi alive in me.
I stand at the top of stairs
And I raise both of my arms
Looking at the blue sky.
A woman arrives
In blue sweatpants
And tennis shoes.
I show her the altar
And chanting, I retreat.

Majid Naficy

Horufi a member of a fifteenth-century Iranian mystical sect that believed in the sanctity of letters and numbers.

Imad-Dodin Nasimi (1369-1417) an Azari poet who was executed for his Horufi beliefs.

Twittering

We lower our heads to our chests
sunshine falls off the swing
we raise the swing to our chests
it falls off the frame.

I have never been so much a child!
With my voice unaccompanied by the sound of Kamancheh!
I have never climbed to the moon through the alley
have never reached the bottom of my childhood with a sigh!
And that's the tepid reason
on this unique night
why the wheat sheaf of my hair is tied to your dreams!

Come up one more rooftop
higher than this mouth that breathes through your boots
higher than this air that ties its vein to the moon!

Stretch your feet through the sky behind me
I feel sleepy, Cotton!
I feel sleepy!
And my sleep keeps delaying my birth, come on!

Last night, from among all the afflicted nights up on the moon
no city had been left along the way
except for my soaked land.
Tonight, I am the whole of this shoreless sky
and night pulsates in my temples
its stairs lost.
And all that's left of the heart is a man
who *passes by the wet trees.*

wet trees from a lyrical poem by Forugh Farrokhzad,
"Let Us Believe in the Dawn of the Cold Season."

I have never been so much in love
Never been so beautiful
Never been so much a poet.

And my heart is this very poem
that comes *along the wet trees.*
And I have no doubt
that my most chest-cherished memory will be
this very thing
this twittering!

Pegah Ahmadi
translated by
Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak

Hezbollah

It is absurd to close your eyes
and pretend that the Bahá'ís
have never been slaughtered or forced
to convert to Islam,
as if the executions of political prisoners
or the Kurds were just part of a game,
an unwritten law in a lawless land.

Extended customs, mute prayers,
grave to grave, Tehran cemeteries
black from the flesh of the youth,
and on the faces of the mothers
chipped beliefs and spreading tears.

The News shows the Godzilla regime
—mourning over the tassels of demolished
homes of the homeless in a country
not even close to my land—sits on tinplates
of power and announces another castration.

This perhaps is a blessing from God
that when there is a Friday Prayer in Tehran,
we still cry over the Arab-Israeli War.

Sheema Kalbasi

Hezbollah meaning "Party of God," it follows the distinctly Shiite Islamist ideology developed by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, leader of the Islamic Revolution in Iran.

Bahá'ís the Bahai faith is a global religion found by Bahá'u'lláh in the 19th century in Iran. It is the forbidden faith in post-revolution Iran.

The Shah and Hosseinzadeh

the Shah has granted full authority
to Hosseinzadeh

once he mustered six of us blindfolded
we were loaded on a truck an hour before
dawn they took us out of the city then they
brought us back to the city it was
as though we were traveling from one city
to another in our dreams then we were
unloaded and bound to six iron posts
then the command of that familiar voice was heard:
squad!
attention!
prepare to fire!
fire!

all six of us pissed our pants!

they removed our blindfolds
Hosseinzadeh and Azudi stood in a corner
pissing themselves with laughter!

say *Doctor* Hosseinzadeh! and *Doctor* Azudi!

Reza Baraheni
translated by Michael Henderson
and Reza Baraheni

Ass Poem

When a thick-necked agent rides your neck
and your pants are pulled down to your knees
When two rape-kings politely offer each other your ass
saying, "You first"
One
is not reminded of long ants with
one leg broken and the other leg
unable to carry the ant
And one is not reminded of the words of his late grandmother to
learn perseverance from the ants who
run fearlessly on and on—
even if they may have lost their heads and asses—
One is not reminded of Mozaffaruddin Shah who died of a hernia
or Reza Shah who died of syphilis
One is not reminded of the blond girl
whose womb the Shah recently inflated
One is not reminded of his consumptive Aunt
One is not reminded of anything at all
Only
he sees a beast bigger than himself
piercing through the depths of his bones
and the spell of degradation is nailed into his bloody ass hole
as if the order "Wanted: Dead or Alive"
was tacked on his ass
And then one addresses his mother in his mind
saying
Why
don't you pull me up the way you put me down, why?

Reza Baraheni
translated by David St. John
and Reza Baraheni

Martyrs of Iran

In ghazal couplets martyrs of Iran
Write about being martyrs of Iran.

The poet struck the beat upon his back
With his own belt for martyrs of Iran.

Though I pray for them, I'm far from dying
For all the Shia' martyrs of Iran.

Americans shop to honor heroes.
Persians give blood for martyrs of Iran.

Killed for his politics, my Uncle N.
Is not among the martyrs of Iran.

The executioners manifested
The greatest love for martyrs of Iran.

The thread of incense spelled Allah's ninety-
Nine names, all linked to martyrs of Iran.

One Aunt shows us her wrinkles, another
Bags under her eyes (martyrs of Iran).

Outside Iran, Karbala made Ali
The most supreme of martyrs of Iran.

"Dear Roger,

We T'ank you for this poem
About our sons.

Love, the mot'ers of Iran."

Roger Sedarat

A MOB! TUMULT!

Six million people
—shift and shove—
waiting in line.

(You see, tonight
they are supposed to shoot all the poets.)

I look everywhere
but can't find myself.
I am terrified.

—"Don't be afraid! Maintain a revolution-style calm!
Those of you whose turn has not come tonight,
feel assured that we will hang you by next week!"

I am relieved.
I'm sure I'll find myself
by then.

Payman Vahabzadeh
translated by Sholeh Wolpé

Untitled

My father always said:
"Piss on all poetry,
go after bread!"

I listened to the wisdom of that sage,
pissed on poetry
and went
after bread.

Now
for thirty-five years
I've been eating bread
that tastes like piss.

Peyman Vahabzadeh
translated by Sholeh Wolpé