

# **On The Oceanic Waves Of Ahmad Shamlou's Poetry**

(A Selection Of Poems)

This Translation Is Dedicated To  
All Fallen Revolutionaries



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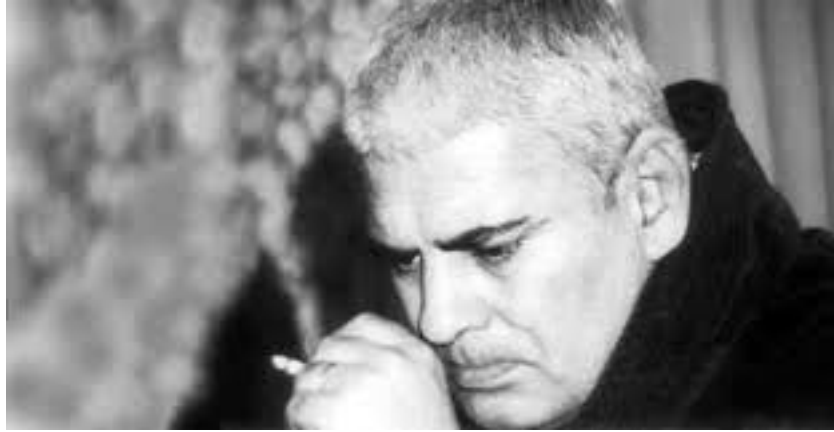
## Note:

Translating is often challenging due to cultural and historical differences but the challenge becomes even greater when translating poetry where the particularities are most pronounced. In the translation of the poems presented in this selection, I have tried, first and foremost, to maintain the integrity of the poems, although occasionally some modifications have been made in order to make them sensible in English. It is indisputable, however, that no translation is ever a complete mirror, and that it will always remain an approximation.

The 41 poems in this book have been selected from 14 different collections published by Shamlou himself over the decades. The poems from each collection are presented in individual chapters. All chapters, as well as the poems in each chapter, are catalogued alphabetically. Some of these poems have been inspired by or dedicated to social political personalities or events for which brief biographical notes have been provided. These notes appear at the end of the corresponding chapters.

All poems, including their dates, have been authenticated by reference to Shamlou's official website at <http://shamlou.org>.

The image used on page 2, is Francisco Goya's famous painting "The Third of May 1808" in commemoration of the Spanish resistance to Napoleon's armies during the occupation of 1808.



## Introduction

Ahmad Shamlou (1925 – 2000) is needless of any introduction to most Iranians, however, to most non-Iranian readers, he is, sadly, unknown.

Ahmad Shamlou is a multi-faceted, multi-talented artist. But he is particularly known for his unique poetry. He is an internationalist in the humanist sense of the word. For him, humanity is sacred and this sanctity is everything. Nothing better than his own words describes the claim:

I am a close relative of any human being who doesn't hide something up their sleeve, neither do they look down upon anyone else nor is their smile a pretence in order to violate the rights, the livelihood and the welfare of others. I favour neither Iranians over non-Iranians, nor the opposite. I am a Luri who is a Balochi who is a Kurd who is a Persian, a Farsi speaking Turk, an African European Australian American Asian, a black yellow red white man who not only has no problem with others but in fact feels the fright

of loneliness and death under his skin in the absence of others. I am a human being amongst other human beings on planet Earth, who has no meaning without others.

Shamlou explicitly rejects “art for art's sake”. Instead, he adheres to Committed Art. He is an artist with a cause, and his cause is to right the wrong. Wrong, for Shamlou, is anything that violates the sanctity; the dignity of humankind. And he passionately refutes and even detests indifference or neutrality. In an interview, he stated:

“Art without commitment is worthless to me. An artist is always in opposition to rulers and not in support of them... art ... must be ashamed of neutrality. The virtue of an artist in this diseased world is to find a cure and not an opiate, to aim at educating and not decorating, to be a sympathetic doctor and not a shameless jester”.

Shamlou's perplexing ability to forge words, his mastery in poetic imagery, his encyclopedic knowledge of people's folklore and idiomatic expressions, his unswerving radical socio-political stance, together with his sharp and critical language in defiance of social injustice and in defence of freedom and democratic rights of the oppressed, all in all, have made him into an unassailable fortress. A rebellious libertarian fortress with iconic towers, one of which is poetry.

Poetry for Shamlou, however, is not a colour palette to beautify the world, nor is it a lullaby into slumber. On the contrary, poetry for him is rather a wake up call and a lantern to awaken and to take a good look at the grim face of life with



bleeding wounds and old scars all over. But Shamlou's poetry has yet another merit: it is a pictorial narrative in the language of poetry of moments within Iranian social and political history. And like a portal, it takes you to those moments where scenes of the reign of tyranny, raid and repression, defiance and bravery... come to pass before your eyes.

Shamlou's poetry is mesmerizingly eloquent and, at the same time, highly critical in thinking and complex in content, and of course extremely expressive in tone. In general, the language of Shamlou's poetry is not easy to comprehend. And sometimes it is even like a coded language<sup>1</sup>, so you need to decipher it if you can. But that is the beauty of his poetry: Shamlou does not spoon feed!

For decades now, Shamlou and his poetry have turned into an emblem, a persona, a language synonymous with freethinking and resistance against injustice and oppression in Iran. Shamlou's emblematic personality, and his idiosyncratic poetry were indeed fashioned in the furnace of life itself where artists are censored, persecuted, imprisoned and even murdered for their views and artistic creations. Under "the iron heel" of despotic regimes such as that of the Shah and the Islamic Republic in Iran, artists must be resilient, must be daring if they are to remain committed to the masses. Like the mighty trees of the Savannah that signify the triumph of life in a barren land, or the formidable force of water that overcomes the toughest of

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<sup>1</sup> Needless to say that under despotic regimes heavy censorship in itself forces intellectuals to speak in a coded language even if they do not so intend.

rocks, committed artists prevail over the harsh conditions that stem from tyranny.

Shamlou personally experienced imprisonment in the aftermath of the 1953 coup in Iran and his poetry was subject to censorship. In fact, some of his poems were seized during the Shah's regime. In addition to his own experience, he also witnessed the forced exile, the imprisonment and even the murder of other intellectuals as well as social and political activists, all of which led to the birth of some of his most monumental, proverbial poems. Shamlou is the necessary product of a society in chains, as Committed Art is necessitated by the "diseased world" itself. Shamlou's words are the arrows of committed art that pierce the heart of darkness, be it of injustice or be it of ignorance. And Shamlou's magnificence lies mainly in this.

In conclusion, Shamlou's poetry is not Pure Poetry. Quite the opposite, it is a haunting ballad of human suffering, and a manifesto for emancipation. The rest is entirely up to you! You might be intimidated or even discouraged by its often cryptographic language. You might be saddened, you might be shaken, but once you do connect with his poetry, it will be hard to depart from it— as it has been for the people of Iran. Shamlou's poetry lives on in the people's hearts, as the people themselves live with it and within it.

A. Behrang  
July 2020

# Abraham in the Fire

- Abraham's Song in the Fire
- Nocturne
- Nocturne
- The Birth of He Who Fell Amoriously

## Abraham's Song In the Fire

( In memory of Mehdi Reza-e <sup>1</sup> )

Within dawn's bleeding rubble  
There stood a man,  
A man from a different world  
A man who wanted the earth most lush  
And love to be worthy of  
The finest of women,  
For in his eyes  
Life was not so worthless a gift  
To be offered to  
A pile of dirt.

What a man!  
What a man!  
A man who would say  
Better for the heart to bleed  
From the seven swords of love  
And better for the lips to speak  
The bonniest of names

And a loving man as such  
— a lion-hearted iron mountain of a man —  
Was brought down  
As was Achilles upon the bloody battlefield of fate  
An immortal hero  
Whose secret lies

In grief from love  
And in sadness from solitude.

□

“O, you the woeful Esfandiyār!  
If only you had closed your eyes!”

□

“But was a **No**  
— Only a simple **No**—  
Enough to seal my fate?

I only bellowed **No**!  
I refused to fall into the abyss  
I was just a sound  
Just a shape  
— a shape among shapes —  
Until I found a purpose,  
I **was** and I **became**  
Not a bud that blooms  
Not a root that germinates  
Nor a seed that grows into a forest  
But rather a common man  
Who becomes a martyr, a saint  
Before whom the heavens shall bow

□

I was not  
A meek docile servant  
Neither was the path to my heavenly paradise  
Docility and servitude,  
I deserved a different god  
A creator praiseworthy of a creature  
Who does not bow for his daily bread.  
Thus I created a different god.”

□

Oh! Alas!  
What a lion-hearted iron mountain of a man you were  
And like a mountain  
Mighty and unwavering  
You died before falling.

Neither god nor demon,  
But rather a deity sealed your fate  
A deity whom others worship.  
A deity worshipped by others.

1974

## Nocturne

If in vain is the beauty of night  
Then  
For what  
And for whom  
Is night so beautiful?

Night and the beeline river of stars  
That frigidly passes by.

And the long-haired mourners  
On both sides of the river  
Are weeping over the mark of which memory  
With the eerie requiem of frogs,  
When each dawn is riddled  
By the synchronized sound of twelve bullets?

□

If in vain is the beauty of night  
Then for whom is night so beautiful?  
For what is night so beautiful?

**March 16, 1972**

## Nocturne

There is neither a door  
Nor is there a path

It is neither night  
Nor is there a moon

Neither a day  
Nor a sun,

Standing outside of time we are  
With a bitter dagger  
Stuck into our backs.

No one speaks to anyone  
For silence itself speaks a thousandfold.

We gaze at our dead  
With a smile of reminiscence  
And await our own turn  
With no smile at all!

April 4, 1972



## The Birth Of He Who Fell Amorously

( In memory of Ahmad Zibarom <sup>2</sup> )

Look how modestly spreading upon the earth  
He whose thin sapling hands  
Omnipotent are of love!

And before whose wrath  
Even the depth of hell is cold.

He who dies  
Not by the wound of a hundred daggers  
But by "submission"  
And whose death befalls not  
Unless upon him  
Dishonour befalls.

A great fortress,  
Whose gate's charm  
Is the simple word Friendship.

Denying love so tenaciously,  
You must have a hidden dagger. —  
For the lover shouted his confession so  
That into a single clamour  
Turned his soul.

Look how modestly

It shatters before the gates of grace  
A countenance that no storm dare conquer.

How modestly  
Falls before you  
He who could embrace  
The seas within his arms.

Look how magnanimously  
Lays his head at your feet  
He whose death  
Was the uproarious birth of a thousand princes.  
Look!

1974

**Note:**

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1 – Mehdi Reza-e, (1952 - 1972) was a member of The Organization of the Iranian People's Mojahedin, who was arrested and tried in a military court which sentenced him to death. He was executed on September 7, 1972, at the age of 20 by the Shah's regime.



**Mehdi Reza-e speaking during his trial**

In his trial, as part of his defence, Mehdi Reza-e stated:

“I am being tried for the crime of loving people and fighting for them. Our goal is to establish the conditions within which all human beings can reach the highest point of progress and humanity... So long as there is oppression there will be struggle, and so long as there is struggle there will

be victories and defeats. But ultimately the victory is the people's. This is not my claim but rather history's claim. The heroic fight of the people of Vietnam affirms it. The people declare it and the people tell the truth".

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2— Ahmad Zibarom (1944 - 1972) was a member of The Organization of the Iranian People's Fadaee Guerrillas whose epic death on August 19, 1972, in a clash with the intelligence service of the Shah's regime left an unforgettable mark in the psyche of the masses.



**Ahmad Zibarom**

On that day, Savak, the political police of the Shah's regime detected Ahmad Zibarom which lead to a pursuit in the streets of Naziabad, a deprived working class neighbourhood in the south of Tehran. Zibarom ends up in a dead end and enters an open door where he meets the owner

of the house with her young child in the courtyard. He asks the woman for her chador and kindly pays her for it. Then he sends them into hiding in order to protect them from the shooting. Savak agents rain their bullets on the house. Shots are exchanged for some time, but before they succeed capturing him, Ahmad Zibarom ends his life with his last bullet as all revolutionary guerrillas would attempt in order to prevent the possibility of giving up information under torture.

The Shah's regime had cunningly, through the media, portrayed the armed revolutionaries as cold hearted terrorists who work for foreign powers and who have no regard for the lives and livelihood of people, expecting the masses to believe its lies. But revolutionaries like Ahmad Zibarom shattered these lies. The details were later described by the very woman from the house to news reporters which soon became public knowledge. The story left the masses in awe. They would ask themselves, how could armed men like Zibarom be terrorists when in the midst of a life and death situation, they are concerned not with their own lives but the lives of people, and they are so aware and considerate of the dire circumstances of the poor that they even make sure to pay for a piece of cloth? Thus in the eyes of the people, they appeared not as terrorists but rather as selfless heroes.

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# Aida in The Mirror

- Of Death...
- Recurrence
- Rendezvous
- The Dead

## Of Death...

Never have I feared death,  
Although its hands were  
More crushing than banality.

My fear though  
Is of dying in a land  
Where the gravedigger's deed  
Is valued far more than the freedom of human beings.

To seek  
To discover  
And then,  
To choose with free will  
And to fashion a fortress  
Of oneself—

Worthier than all this  
If death could be  
Then no, never indeed  
Have I ever been afraid of death.

December 1962

## Recurrence

The forest of mirrors shattered into pieces  
And a rank of wearied prophets descended  
Upon this hopeless plain  
Prophets whose bible  
Was none other than  
The chronicle of names,  
Names of those  
Who made martyrdom recur  
In their very life story.

With scorched hands,  
They wiped away the dust  
From the countenance of the sun  
To recognize the faces of their own executioners  
In the mirror of memories.  
Only to realize that  
Their very own executioners  
Were but the oppressed, the shackled,  
Towards whose freedom  
Their blood-drenched uprising  
Had grown as tall as a cypress.

And look now!  
Gaze upon how they; the oppressed, the shackled  
Guard both the prison and that of their own  
Devoid of belief, devoid of song.



Take a good look!  
Take a good look!

The forest of mirrors shattered into pieces  
And a rank of wearied prophets descended  
    Upon this ominous plain,  
    Whose screams of anguish  
— when torture was ripping their skin off—  
    Were such:  
“Our book of prophesy is kindness, is beauty  
    So that the songbirds of a kiss  
    Will sing on the branches of the cedar.

We have yearned for the poor to become the victor,  
    The slaves to become free  
    The desperate to become hopeful,  
    So that the divine race of humankind  
    Will redeem its eternal kingdom on earth.  
Our book of prophesy is kindness, is beauty  
    So that the belly of the soil  
Will not be imbued with the seeds of hatred.”

The forest of mirrors shattered into pieces  
And the wearied prophets joined the martyrs.  
    As so did the poets  
Just like free birds that are slaughtered by servants  
    So as to garnish the masters’ banquets.

And it was so

That songs and beauty vanished from the land that  
No longer belonged to humankind.

There remained a grave and a trace of grief.  
And humankind  
Lingered for eternity  
Shackled in the yoke of enslavement.

**March 1963**

## Rendezvous

I love you  
Beyond the borders of your body.  
Give me the mirrors and the desirous butterflies  
Give me light and wine  
The towering sky  
And the stretched bow of the bridge too

Give me the birds and the rainbow  
And play the *pis aller* in a loop  
Play it in the same scale  
You are playing now.

□

I love you beyond the borders of my body.

In that farfetched distance  
Where the calling of bodies  
And the flames and the fervour of  
Heartthrobs and desires subside altogether  
And every single meaning departs from the frames of words  
Just as the spirit leaves the corpse at the end of the journey  
Only to be finished off by vultures

□

I love you beyond love  
Beyond all veils and hues.

Beyond our flesh  
Let's have a rendezvous.

**May 1964**

## The Dead

( On the twentieth anniversary of the Warsaw ghetto heroic uprising )

Of those who zealously stared death in the eye  
Of those unsubmissive brethren in the dark quarter  
No one is alive.

Of those who shouted the rebellious rage in their bare fists  
Of those heavyhearted sistren in the dark quarter  
No one is alive.

Of those who remained  
unfamiliar with the aroma of fresh bread or the bustle of school  
recess — for their window between the crib and the grave was so  
brief —  
Of the terrified and desolate children in the dark quarter  
No one is alive.

O brethren!  
Blow out the candles  
So that perhaps the eyes of the stars can find an image  
resembling anything of Yahweh amongst these corpses — half  
filled with torment half with death — who have joined the void in  
the passageway of the devil's dream.

□

They have turned death into a song.  
They have addressed death so gloriously, so uproariously  
That Spring has, like rubble, crept into the veins of hell.

O brethren!  
Right before reaping, these green panicles have sung a chime  
So enchanting that the reaper has gone mad with envy.

Lower your beacons  
For all through the speechless ghetto  
Nothing bears the mark of the Almighty  
Other than the faces of the executioners.  
They mirror death more than death itself.  
They resemble an unending death.  
They are like a slithery silhouette  
That has an eternal movement  
Throughout the woeful realm that God has forgotten.

**March 1963**

# Aida, Tree, Dagger and Memories

- **Nocturne** (The Age of the Gargantuan Glories of Edifices...)
- **Nocturne** (I Love Her...)

## Nocturne

(The Age of the Gargantuan Glories of Edifices...)

The age of the gargantuan glories of edifices  
And that of lies.

The age of the epic hordes of hunger,  
And that of the most gruesome silence  
When the copious hordes of humanity  
Were fed into the mouths of crematoriums.

[Now go ahead and scream of this till you turn blue! Just know  
that the walls are of thick concrete]

An age when shame and rights  
Are irrelevant subject matters,  
And love is merely a misunderstanding  
Which can be forgotten by a single "sorry".

[When you politely tip your hat and give a generic smile, then  
wipe your tears with your *pochette* behind the bushes ]

An age when watching the hanging of a convict  
Is rather an exciting occasion  
— and not the cheap dawn of obscenity and downfall,  
But rather the fount of many memories:

[It was seventeen days later when I met you for the first time, my  
love!]

Not an egregious insult or the apex of disgrace,  
But rather a journey



To climb the ladder  
By hook or by crook and by connections:  
[You can see his death rattle a lot better from the roof of the car  
than from the stalls of the flea-market]  
And then gossiping and eating sunflower seeds  
Waiting for the curtains to be drawn  
Followed by a cadaver  
Whose life was but  
A self accusation of ever having lived before dying.

An age of the most disgusting teeth in a smile  
And the most desperate moans of hopelessness.

An age where it is not your hand  
That writes your fate,  
And where your will  
Will get you nowhere.

An age when the return of fortune to you  
Is but the price of a tea that you save  
With your prominence to pawnbrokers and nuns;  
And it is the amalgamation of themes as such  
That turns the city into an ode  
With rhymes and order  
And verses all harmonious  
And its ladderlike appearance  
— which itself is the motto for excellence —  
And if you satisfy the thugs and the racketeers  
And if you hop on the boat of those

Who never doubt and kill others  
— just as skillfully as our primary school shabby-looking  
instructor sharpens pencils —  
And in the kiosk of their faithlessness  
They sell  
Anything you want  
In exchange for money,  
Then you get to see the sea.

An upside-down age,  
Where the generals die without a scratch  
Yet people resentful of war  
Die with torn chests  
And skin that looks like sacks  
Filled with lead.

An age where men of science  
Send both anguish and obscenity  
On their rockets to the guts of God  
And feed their children by beggary from the garrisons,  
Whereas prisons are packed with minds  
Who see the uniform as an insult  
For the mission of humanity was never this,  
No, it was never this!

An insulting age  
Where humanity  
Is but a dead man already  
With a short break before departing,

And he is the farthest from his own merits  
Than he is from all other spheres.

An age so colossal, so colossal  
That one must take the same arduous journey  
To win one's bread as it takes to preserve one's dignity.

1964-65

## Nocturne (I Love Her...)

I love her  
For I know her  
In friendship and oneness.  
— the city is all but estrangement and enmity —

Holding her kind hands  
I realize her saddening loneliness.  
Her sorrow is a sad sunset  
In estrangement and loneliness.

Just as her happiness  
Is the rising of suns  
And breakfast  
And warm bread,  
And a window  
That opens out  
To fresh air  
Right in the morning,  
And the vibrance of the geraniums  
Around the pool spillway.

A spring,  
A butterfly,  
And a little flower  
Fill her with joy  
As well as an innocent despair

From her burdensome sorrow:  
That her Dawn  
Has written no poem  
For so long.

Soon after I would say  
“Tonight I will write a poem”  
She would fall into a deep sleep  
With a smile upon her lips  
Like a rock by a lake  
And a Buddha in Nirvana.

And at this point  
She resembles a little girl holding  
Her favorite doll  
Tight in her arms.

If I would say  
Bliss is a mistaken coincidence;  
Sorrow would take over her  
Like a lake to a rock  
And Nirvana to Buddha.

For she has recognized bliss nowhere  
But in the realm of love  
A love that is none but a naked understanding.

On the face of my life  
Where every groove

Speaks of overwhelming sorrow  
Aida is a merciful smile.

At first,  
I looked at her for quite some time  
So much so  
That when I received a look back  
Everything around me  
Had turned into her countenance  
From then on I realized  
That never more  
Could I be away from her  
Ever.

1964-65

## **Fresh Air**

- **From the Wound of Aba-e's Heart**
- **Of Your Uncles**
- **The Bright Horizon**
- **The Death of Vartan**
- **Universal Love**

## From the Wound of Aba-e's Heart

( In memory of Aba-e <sup>1</sup> )

Maidens of the fields!  
Maidens of awaitment!  
Maidens of bounded hopes on boundless plains,  
And of boundless yearning in sombre hearts!

Maidens of pining for a new yurt  
— While doomed to yurts a hundred years old! —

O, you Maidens!  
If only you could blossom out  
From the armour of your garment,  
Then the wild wind would unfurl  
The long mane of the stallion of desire...

Maidens of murky rivers!  
Maidens of a thousand pillars of flames  
Beneath the high, smoky ceiling!  
Maidens of long lost loves  
Maidens of days toiling in silence  
And at night wrapt in exhaustion  
And nothing more!

Maidens of tireless toil all day long  
And of crumpling in humiliation  
When night falls!



In the garden of which mystery  
And in the intimacy  
With which man,  
In which love,  
In the monastic blessed dance  
To the quenching of which desire  
Will you girls raise your fountain-like arms?

Alas!  
Locks of hair  
Looks in the eyes  
Would be in vain, would only tarnish  
The perfume of the poet's words.

Maidens of commuting to and fro on foggy plains!  
Maidens of modesty  
of innocence  
of humility  
Maidens of tending herds!

From the wound of Aba-e's heart  
Into the bosom of which one of you  
Has his blood seeped?

The breasts of which one of you Maidens  
Have blossomed to the springtide of his pubescence?  
The lips of which one of you Maidens,  
The lips of which one, tell me  
Have infused secretly in his mouth

The fragrance of a kiss?  
Throughout the dim nights of drizzling rain  
— when you toil no more —  
Which one of you Maidens stays up  
In the bed of brutish despair  
In the suffocating bed of despondence  
In the bed of the agonizing thought of your secret  
So that the memory of he  
Who was of indignation, and of courage  
May shine through your open eyes  
Into the small hours of the night  
The flames of fire?

Which one amongst you Maidens, tell me which one,  
Will sharpen Aba-e's sword for the day of vengeance?

**1951 Turkmen Sahra**

## Of Your Uncles

( In memory of Morteza Keyvan <sup>2</sup> )

Not for the glitter  
Nor for the glory  
— But rather for the bare silhouette of his humble home  
— For a song  
A song even smaller than your tiny hands

Not for the forests  
Nor for the sea  
But for a single leaf  
For a single droplet brighter than your eyes

Not for a bulwark  
But rather a hedgerow  
Not for the sake of all  
But for the sake of his enemy's baby perhaps  
Not for the whole world but for your nest  
For your wee surety:  
— that humanity is a world in itself—  
For my wish to be beside you  
For your tiny hands  
In my grownup hands  
And for my grownup lips  
On your innocent cheeks  
For a swallow in the wind when you cheer  
For a dewdrop on a leaf when you are asleep

For a smile when you see me beside you  
For a ballad  
For a tale  
In the coldest of nights  
In the darkest of nights  
For your dolls  
Not for grownups,  
For the cobblestones that lead me to you  
Not for the distant highways

For the eavestrough when it rains  
For the beehives and the little bees  
For the white chandelier of clouds  
In the vast peaceful sky

For you  
For every little thing  
For every pure thing  
They fell to their death  
Remember!  
Of your uncles,  
Of Morteza I speak.

1955

## The Bright Horizon

One day  
We will once again  
Find our doves  
Then  
Kindness and beauty  
Will hold hands

□

The day  
When the littlest song is a kiss  
And when  
Every human being  
Is brethren to every other human being.

When no one locks their door  
Locks are fairy tales  
And the heart is all one needs to live.

The day  
When the meaning of every word is to love  
So you wouldn't need to look for your last words.

The day  
When the rhythm of every word is life  
So I wouldn't look for a rhyme for my final poem.

The day  
When lips are but songs  
So the littlest song would be a kiss.

The day  
That you would come  
And you would come forever  
When kindness and beauty  
Would be one and the same.

The day  
We would once again  
Feed our doves...

□

And I will be looking forward to that day  
Even if I'll be no more.

1955

## The Death of Vartan

( In memory of Vartan Salakhanian <sup>3</sup> )

“Vartan!

Spring has smiled  
And the redbud has bloomed.

Inside the house  
Under the window,  
Blossomed the old jasmine.

Don't cling onto doubts  
So tackle not cursed death!  
'Tis better to be than not to be  
Especially in the Spring..."

Vartan did not speak,  
Gnashed his weary heart proudly  
And vanished...

□

Vartan did not speak,

"Speak dear Vartan, speak!  
For the bird of silence is hatching  
The brood of a calamitous death in its nest!"

Vartan did not speak,

Glittered he sun-like  
From within the dark,  
Tumbled in blood  
And vanished...

Vartan did not speak,

A star he was:  
Shining for a moment  
In this tyranny of night  
Bolted  
And vanished...

□

Vartan did not speak,  
A violet he was  
Bloomed and heralded:  
"The winter is over!"  
And vanished he so...

1954



## Universal Love

( In memory of the executed officers <sup>4</sup> )

Tears are a mystery  
Smiles are a mystery  
Love is a mystery

The tear shed that night  
Was the smile of my love

I am not a tale to tell  
I am not a song to sing  
I am not a sound to hear  
Nor something to see  
Nor something to discover...

I am common pain  
Cry me out!

Trees converse with forests  
Grass with plains  
Stars with galaxies  
And I with you

Tell me your name  
Give me your hand  
Share your thoughts with me  
Open your heart to me

I have discovered your roots  
I have spoken for all lips through yours  
And your hands know mine

In the brilliance of intimacy  
Together with you  
I have shed tears for the living  
And on the dark burial grounds  
I have sung the finest of songs,  
For this year's dead were the most loving amongst the living

Give me your hand  
Your hand knows me  
O' my long lost friend  
I am speaking to you  
As clouds to storms  
As grass to plains  
As rain to seas  
As birds to Spring  
As trees to forests,  
For I have discovered your roots  
For my voice knows yours.

1955

## Note:

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1— Aba Aba-e (1921 - 1946) was a young devoted Iranian Turkmen teacher who was shot and killed on August 14, 1946 by the police forces raiding a cultural event organized by local popular progressive Turkmen artists in the city of Gorgan in northeast Iran.

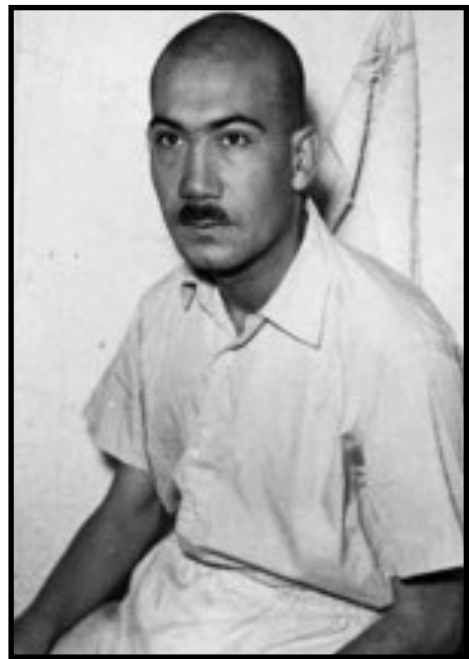


**Aba Aba-e**

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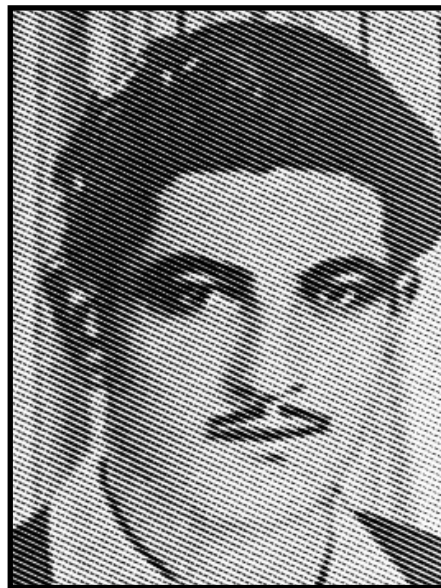
2— Morteza Keyvan (1921–1954) was a literary critic, journalist and a poet; an enlightened and well respected personality within the literary community who had joined the Tudeh Party in 1945.

In the dark and repressive atmosphere following the CIA orchestrated 1953 coup in Iran, Morteza Keyvan was arrested in September 1954 for hiding three officers from the clandestine network of the Tudeh Party in his home. He was executed on October 19, 1954.



**Morteza Keyvan in prison**

3— Vartan Salakhanian (February 1931 - May 1954) was a young Armenian-Iranian worker who had joined the Tudeh Party in 1952. He was arrested together with his comrade Koochak Shoostari in May 1954 while transporting Party publications by car. He was savagely tortured in order to reveal the names of the other members and the location of the clandestine printing house. But no matter what torture they applied, Vartan did not reveal a thing. The interrogators themselves admitted later that Vartan had said to them: "I know but I will never tell!" A promise he kept to the end.



**Vartan Salakhanian**

Shamlou himself was in the same prison at the time and by chance saw Vartan in passing. Shamlou stated later on, that they had tortured Vartan so badly that there were deep scorched grooves peeling from his face.

In the end, demoralized and enraged by his unbreakable silence, the Shah's hatchet men cowardly killed him by drilling into his skull, and then threw the mangled bodies of both Vartan Salakhanian and Koochak Shoostari, who was also killed under torture, into a river.

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4— According to Shamlou's official website, this poem was written about the execution of a group of military officers from the clandestine network of the Tudeh Party in 1954-55.

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# Little Songs from Abroad

- Lovesong
- In This Dead End
- The Children of the Abyss
- The Endgame

## Lovesong

The world is but a roost  
Between sin and hell  
The sun comes up as a malediction  
And daybreak is like an irremediable disgrace.

Oh, say something before I drown in tears!

Trees are like the ancestors' sinful ignorance  
And zephyr is like a wicked temptation.  
The autumn's moon is like a blasphemy  
That putrefies the world.

Say something, before I drown in tears, say something!

Each and every window of marvel  
Opens up to a site of punishment:  
Love is like the disgusting dampness of defilement  
And the sky is a roof to sit under and weep for your fate.

Oh, before I drown in tears, say something,  
Whatever that may be!

The springs pour out of coffins  
And the dishevelled mourners are the honour of the world.  
Don't be holier than thou to mirrors  
For adulterers are more deserving of it.

Little Songs from Abroad

Do not remain silent for God's sake,  
Before I drown in tears say something of love!

**August 1980**

## In This Dead End

They sniff your lips  
Lest having uttered I love you.  
They sniff your heart  
**O dear, strange times are upon us!**

And they are lashing love at the checkpoints.  
**We must hide love in the attic!**

In the winding dead end of the cold  
They keep the fire going by burning songs and poems.

Thinking is prohibited, think not!  
**O dear, strange times are upon us!**

He who knocks on the door in the middle of the night  
Is he who has come to kill the light  
**We must hide the light in the attic!**

There they are the slaughterers  
Stationed on the sidewalks  
With blood dripping cleavers  
**O dear, strange times are upon us!**

And they are cutting the smile off from lips  
And songs from mouths.  
**We must hide happiness in the attic!**



Canary barbecue on the flames of burning lilies and jasmines

**O dear, strange times are upon us!**

The devil— drunk on victory—

Is having a feast on our grief.

**We must hide God in the attic!**

**July 22, 1979**

## The Children of the Abyss

(Dedicated to the martyrdom of Ahmad Zibarom)

They grow up in cities with no streets  
In the serpentine network of byroads and dead ends,  
Stained with the fume of the furnace  
And that of smuggling and impetigo  
Knucklebone pieces in their pockets  
And slingshots in their hands

The children of the abyss  
The children of the abyss

Faced with the swamp of merciless fate  
And followed by the curse of weary fathers  
The damnation of irritated mothers in their ears  
And nothing of hope for tomorrow in their hands

The children of the abyss  
The children of the abyss

They blossom in Springless forests  
And from rootless trees they bear fruit

The children of the abyss  
The children of the abyss

With blood-drenched throats they sing

Little Songs from Abroad

And when they fall to their deaths  
They hold a soaring flag in their hands

The brave-hearts of the abyss  
The brave-hearts of the abyss

**1975**

## The Endgame

( 1 )

The Infatuated  
Passed by ashamedly  
Embarrassed of their ill-suited serenades.

Thus the alleys rendered  
Empty of their crooning  
Empty of their commotion.

The soldiers  
Passed by  
Broken, weary  
Riding on the cadavers of horses  
With discoloured shreds of inverted pride  
Dangling from their spears.

How dare you brag to the world  
When every speck of dust  
From your cursed path  
Abhors you!

How dare you speak of gardens and trees  
When you have spoken to the lilacs  
With lashes!

Wherever you have stepped

Little Songs from Abroad

Plants refuse to grow,  
For you have never believed  
In the virtue of earth and water.

Alas!  
Our history  
Was the bogus epos of your soldiers  
Returning from the conquest of  
The fortress of prostitutes.

Wait for what the curse of hell will make of you,  
For the mothers in black,  
— the mourners of the finest descendants of the sun and wind—  
Have not yet ended their orison!

**January 16, 1979**

**Note:**

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1 — This poem was written on January 16, 1979, the day the Shah fled Iran. On that day, masses of people poured onto the streets and celebrated the fall of the Shah.

At this point, both the political advocates and courtiers of the Shah's regime, as well as the officers of his so-called imperial army lost their hitherto fervent royalist steam. The passionate political serenades of the former and the deafening pledges of allegiance of the latter to the Shah swiftly sunk.



People taking down the statue of the Shah

# Manifesto

- A Ballad for February's Human

## **A Ballad for February's Human**

( In memory of Taqi Arani <sup>1</sup> )

You do not know the enormity of  
The roars of a titan  
When they do not repine  
Under the torment of a defeat!

You do not know the immensity of  
The look in the unblinking eyes of a brave captive  
When they stare the cowardice captor in the eye!

You do not know how dying permeates life  
When one has defeated death

You do not know what life is, what triumph is  
You do not know who Arani is

And you don't know  
That when you filled his grave  
With the skin of earth and the bones of bricks  
And your lips flowered a smile of relief  
And your mouth ripped open with  
The explosion of laughter  
And when you thought  
You had deboned  
His life from his body  
How he pounded the red drum of his life



Manifesto

In the pulse of Zirab  
In the pulse of Abadan  
And he began the stormy epic of his poem  
With three mouths  
A hundred mouths  
A thousand mouths  
With three hundred thousand mouths  
In the rhyme Blood  
In the word Human  
In the word Movement  
In the word Leap  
With the march of the coming day  
Which walks, falls, rises up  
Rises up, rises up, falls  
Rises up, rises up  
And walks on as fast as blood explodes in the pulse  
And walks through history,  
In China  
In Iran  
In Greece  
Human  
Human  
Human  
Human beings...  
And who runs rapidly like blood  
Through the veins of history  
The veins of Vietnam  
The veins of Abadan  
Human

Human

Human

Human beings...

And like the flood that overflows the dam

It overflows onto its own formidable verse

From the walls of a thousand rhymes:

The rhyme for Secretive

The rhyme for Darkness

The rhyme for Covertly

The rhyme for Crime

The rhyme for Prisons facing Humans

And the rhyme that Adolf Reza Khan wrote

For each verse ending in "d":

The slippery rhyme

The rhyme of blood!

And the sonorous flood

Crossed over a thousand rhymes of blood:

Blood, human, blood, human

Human, blood, human...

And from each human,

A flood of blood

And from each drop of each flood

A thousand humans:

The undying human

The human of February

The human of Pulitzer

The human of Jacques Decour

The human of China

Manifesto

The human of Humanity  
The human within each heart  
And the heart within the blood of each  
And the blood within each drop  
The human within each drop  
And from each drop a pulse  
And from each pulse  
Each and every life  
Is total humanity.

And the life's poem of each human  
That ends in the red rhyming of blood  
Is the eternal crucified Christ of a history.

And humans who write their own history  
To the drumbeat of their blood  
Are the Universal Apostles of one religion.

And the vomiting of blood  
From the mouth of each execution  
Withers the **satisfaction** from self-enrichment  
On the Zaqquum tree by a heaven's gate.

And each and every drop of blood  
Of the human standing before me  
Is a flood  
That destroys a bridge  
Behind the wolves of history

And the hole left by every bullet in every body  
Is a gateway through which  
Three people  
A hundred people  
A thousand people  
Three hundred thousand people  
Pass towards the emerald tower of tomorrow.

And the hole from each bullet  
Into each flesh  
Is the mouth of a dog  
that chews  
The costly crown in Les Invalides.

And the gobbet  
In the mouth of a deceased rascal king  
Reza Khan!  
Is indeed the honour of  
A vile king.

And whoever does  
What you, **Reza Khan**, have done  
To the lifeblood of a history:  
To have  
One garment on yourself, so many more in your possession  
One bite in the mouth, so much more in your hand  
One property in town, so many more in the country  
Is not worthy of the name human  
No, he isn't human, he isn't

Manifesto

I do not know what he is  
Other than a tyrant!

□

And the Spring of verdure with **Arani's** blood  
And the bone of disgrace in the mouth of  
The dog of **Les Invalides!**

□

And the poem of his life  
Rhyming with blood  
And the life of my poem  
With the blood of his rhyme.  
And how numerous they are  
Those who bound the book of  
The poetry of their lives  
In the red shroud of blood.  
And how numerous they are  
Those who killed their lives of slavery  
So that their mastery over their history  
Could be born.

They wrote the poem of their lives  
With the sonata of each death  
With the guitar of a Lorca  
And as I, they were poets  
And poetry was inseparable from their lives.

And they wrote a history  
With the red epic of their poems  
In which the people's kings  
Did not come to the throne  
With the silly neigh of a horse,  
And those who lynched people  
With the rope of their scale of justice  
Were not hailed as Just.

Poetry was inseparable from their lives  
And it had no other rhyme  
But Human.

And when they took their lives  
The epic of their poetry became stormier  
In the rhyming of Blood.

A poem  
From three mouths  
A hundred mouths  
A thousand mouths,  
From three hundred thousand mouths  
A poem rhyming in Blood  
Along the word Human  
In the march of Tomorrow  
A poem that walks, falls, rises, leaps  
And in the speed of the explosion of a pulse  
Within a moment of life  
It walks upon history,  
In Indonesia,

Manifesto

In Iran  
And it beats like blood  
In the heart of history,  
In the heart of Abadan  
Human  
Human  
Human  
Human beings...

□

And far away from the endless caravan of  
All these words  
All these lives  
The guard dog of your **Les Invalides** will die  
With the bone of your disgrace in its mouth  
The bone of disgrace  
The bone of greed  
The bone of one garment on, so many more in the coffer  
The bone of one gobbet in the mouth, so many more in your  
hand  
The bone of one property in town, so many more in hell  
The bone of  
Historylessness.

**February 1951**

**Note:**

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1 – Taqi Arani (September 1903 - February 1940) was an enlightened Iranian scientist drawn into Marxism while studying abroad. Upon his return to Iran in 1928, he engaged in cultural political activities.

Taqi Arani and a group of 52 other intellectuals were arrested between 1936 and 1937, during the reign of Reza Shah whom the people referred to as “Reza Khan The Thug”. They were arrested for having communist views. The group was later known as the Group of 53. Taqi Arani was killed by the regime while in prison in February 1940.



**Dr. Taqi Arani**



# *Moments and Always*

- I Turned Death Into ...

## I Turned Death Into ...

Lo! The heavy-crawling surge of time  
Is passing through me.

Lo! The heavy-crawling surge of time  
Like a stream of iron is passing through me.

Lo! The heavy-crawling surge of time  
Like a sea of molten steel and stone is passing through me.

In the passageway of a breeze  
I sang a different song

In the passageway of the rain  
I sang a different song

In the passageway of shadows  
I sang a different song.

In you, there were lilies and rain  
In me, daggers and roars.

In you, fountains and fantasy  
In me, mere and murk.

In your passageway  
I sang a different song.

I turned leaves into a song  
More emerald than the woodland

I turned waves into a song  
More pulsing than humankind

I turned love into a song  
More sonorous than death

More emerald than the forest  
I turned leaves into a song

More pulsing than the heart of the sea  
I turned waves into a song

More sonorous than life  
I turned death into a song.

**November 1961**

# On the Threshold

- On the Threshold

## On the Threshold

At the gate with no chime bell  
One must pause and ponder  
For if one would be expected  
The gatekeeper would be awaiting  
Otherwise  
One's knocking would beget no reply.

The gateway serves all as Commoners  
So unload your Crown!  
Like a well-made mirror you could be there  
So to see your own self  
Before entering,  
— Beware though  
That the uproar on the other side  
Is but your own illusion  
Not the multitude of guests,  
For no one would be awaiting you there  
Movement maybe,  
But not a moving soul would be there  
— No phantoms, no ghosts  
— No holy spirits with camphor in their hands  
— No cursed Pan with ardent mace in his hooves  
— Nor fallen angels with horns on their heads  
— Nor the lawless mix of opposing absolutes  
But rather you and you alone  
Are the only absolute reality

— *L'essere Supremo!*

For you live on  
In your own absence  
And your absence  
Is indeed the definite presence of wonder.

You passing through  
The inescapable gateway of Time  
Is like a minuscule droplet of tar  
In eternal darkness:  
— Alas, oh alas!  
If only there were  
A judgement day,  
A judgment,  
A judge  
Someday,  
Somehow,  
Someone to judge —  
If you had the ability perhaps,  
You would hear  
The echo of your own downfall  
In the silent halls of  
Sunless galaxies  
Like the sudden rubble of regret:  
“Oh I wish, I wish, I wish  
A judge, a judge, a judge  
To judge, to judge, to judge...”  
Yet, the judge is sitting  
On the other side of the gateway

On the Threshold

Without  
The judges' ominous robe  
Its essence; profundity and fairness  
Its form; Time.  
There,  
Your memory will be judged  
Forever in the passageway of Time.

Adieu!  
"Adieu!", said Dawn; the poet:  
Dancingly,  
I pass through the threshold of inevitability  
Content and thankful.

From without to within  
I have emerged.  
From the scene  
To seeing  
To the seer  
I have become  
— Not in the countenance of a plant  
— Nor of a butterfly  
— Nor of a rock  
— Nor of a pond  
— But in the countenance of "WE" I was born  
— In the magnificent image of humankind  
So that  
In the springtide of plants  
I would gaze

Upon the rainbow of butterflies,  
Appreciate the arrogance of mountains,  
And hear the enormity of the seas,  
So that I could grasp my own limitations  
And with my own efforts and within my time  
Add meaning to the world  
For no trees or birds  
For no rocks or falls  
Are ever capable  
Of grand tasks  
As such

Being born human  
Was the incarnation of *noblesse oblige*:  
The ability  
To love and be loved  
The ability  
To hear  
The ability  
To see and to speak  
The ability  
To be saddened and to rejoice  
The ability  
To laugh from the depth of your heart  
And to cry from the core of your soul

The ability  
To raise your head high  
On the Olympian heights of humility



On the Threshold

The sublime ability  
To carry the weight of a vow  
And the heart-rending ability  
To bear loneliness  
Oh loneliness,  
Loneliness,  
Utter loneliness.

Being human,  
On the other hand,  
Is the hindrance of the task.

My shackled hands  
Were not free to embrace  
Each and every scene of life  
Each and every sound  
Each and every Spring  
Each and every bird  
Each and every full moon  
Each and every dawn  
Each and every mountain peak or tree  
And all other human beings too.

Oh, I traversed the chance of living  
Enchained and mute,  
Enchained and mute  
We traversed the chance of living  
And saw the world's *tableau vivant*  
Only through the crack of malice

Within the boundary of depravity  
And now,  
There the humble gateway with no chime bell before me  
And now  
There the awaiting gatekeeper beckons!

Looking back at the narrow passageway I have gone through  
Bidding adieu:  
The chance was short,  
The journey arduous  
Yet  
Irreplaceable and complete.

"Indebted and grateful I am," said Dawn, the weary.

**November 20, 1992**

## Panegyrics Without Rewards

- And Thus the Earth Spoke to Man
- I Am the Masses' Collaborator
- I Wasn't Born Yesterday...
- I Wish I Could Be Water
- To Think...

## **And Thus the Earth Spoke to Man**

Thus the Earth began to speak whilst Man, ashamed of his own deeds, was sitting on a rock fatigued, forlorn and pensive.

And the Earth said to Man: — To you I gave bread, to your livestock vegetation, even tender herbs to go with your own bread.

Man said: — I am aware.

Then said the Earth: — With each and every voice I spoke to you through the sound of zephyr and wind, by springing fountains out of rocks, or by the downpour of waterfalls, by the rolling of an avalanche when I would see you oblivious, or by drumming thunder and cannon crackers of tempest.

Man said: — I know, I know but how could I decipher the mystery of your message?

Then the Earth said to Man:

— Not only easy it was, numerous too were the messengers. You knew that I loved you as a worshiper loves... And more so, as a requited lover; nay, as a bondwoman with free will I was at your service and loved you so much that whenever you touched me, my body and soul answered you with a thousand sweet songs. Just like a new bride in her wedding gown whose moans of pain turn into a song of discovery, of pleasure, or a harp that

answers to every pluck with a pleasing tone. — Oh, what a bride who came to your bed every time a virgin!

In which meadow did you dig a well where I didn't satisfy you with salubrious water? With your tearing hands — which the burning anticipation for its fertile caress is still within me — where did you put a plough into me that I did not reward you with a hefty harvest?

Once again said Man: — But how could I decipher the mystery of your message?

The Earth replied: — You knew! You knew that I obediently adored you. I sent you message after message, gave you sign after sign in a thousand voices to turn your eyes away from the heavens, for the revelation comes not from the sky but indeed from beneath your feet.

Message after message I sent you: that indeed, not the servant but the Lord you are in this realm, and that what raised you to this place was not the grace of Heaven but the mercy of Earth. — Oh, what a kingship in the endless arena of the universe it was my state of servitude out of love, for I was budding and blossoming because of your magical powers until you; the master of my soul, threw me away humiliated while your hands on the chest and forehead on the ground in your asinine servitude of the sky!

Pensive, fatigued and ashamed lamented Man from the depths of pain whilst the Earth continued: — I was entirely yours, surrendered like the four walls of an abode.

My love gave you such might to outshine all. Alas! As if my fault was that under your feet I was!

So that you could nourish on my blood, I swallowed the pain helplessly like a mother who bears the pain of being suckled in order to nourish her baby off of her own self.

I taught you to tear up my loving bosom in search of zinc and iron. And all this was in order to have given you a tool in return for the coarse caressing that I expected from your hands. But you turned away from me for you found zinc and iron to be deadlier than the stone which had shed Abel's blood. Thus you began impregnating the soil with the victims of your own malice. O, the forlorn Earth! O, the forsaken Earth, left with her own loneliness!

Man murmured: — It was fate, or perhaps the sky demanded a sacrifice.

— No, rather a cemetery out of me demanded the sky! Said the Earth.

And know you no shame, how dare you speak of "fate" which is but the cowards' excuse for surrender!

That trickster preaches to you on the supremacy of heavenly justice over Earthly love. — Oh, alas! For if love was the order of

the day, never would there have been any injustice to begin with so that there would be a need for a vain justice as such. — Thus he blinds your vision and puts a blade in your hand of the iron that I gave you to forge your plough!  
Behold now the necropolis the sky has made out of justice!  
Oh what a barren ruin I am, alas!

□

The night and the rain were conversing at the ruins when the wind arrived, seditious and fire-raising. Thus, it didn't take long before conflict befell amongst them and the clash heightened all over the land, hence giving no respect to the hushing roars of the thunder.

□

The Earth said: — Now we have come to where we must part. There is no way for you to escape the shame of your own uselessness, now that you have surrendered to a fraudulent fate; at least be true to yourself!  
But in this cold loop and for I, who's been ruined for you, the story is not yet done: like a lover who slips under the sheets of her lost beloved in search of his scent, I too, year after year after year, come to your birth point with tears of reminiscence in my eyes!  
The memory of Spring falls upon me without bearing the seeds of a new cultivation or feeling the growing of any roots within me; and the clouds, by the weeds and reeds that they will put

onto my bosom and with their infertile tears, they will try to console me.

Yet there is no consolation for my soul:

I will ponder upon the painful absence of you; the subjugated emperor of galaxies defeated by the curse of malevolence.

And I will trace your fingerprints on my downhearted body in weeping recollection!

### **The Summers of 1964 and 1984**



## **I Am The Masses' Collaborator**

I am a collaborator  
I am the masses' collaborator  
For as long as they conspire to break their shackles  
For as long as they jeer and rejoice  
And spit on the conjurer's beard.

But I have no brother  
Nor would I ever have a brother  
Who would say, "Yea":  
A sordid soul who would say Yea to the plague  
And accept its tainted bread.

1981

## **I Wasn't Born Yesterday...**

I wasn't born yesterday,  
No, I've seen the aeons of the world.

My closest memories are centuries old.  
They made us bleed numerous times, remember!  
And the only outcome of the carnage  
Was a dry crust on our wretched table.

The Arabs deceived me  
So I opened the door to the termites' tower  
With my callused hands,  
Thus I and every one of us was pillaged,  
Then beheaded.

I stood in prayer yet I was massacred  
For they saw me as a heretic.  
I stood in prayer yet I was massacred  
For they saw me as a Qarmatian.  
Then they incited us to kill our brethren  
As the shortest way to heaven!

Remember,  
The only outcome of the carnage  
Was the worthless shroud for our pubis!

The naivety of your brethren incited the Turks

Thus you and I were beheaded.  
My lunacy incited the Mongolians  
Thus you and everyone else were beheaded.  
They shackled us  
They put us to ploughs  
They rode on our backs  
And grooved such a boundless necropolis  
Whose survivors still shed tears of blood.

Remember, the lonely exodus!  
From exodus to exodus,  
So that searching for our faith  
Became our only virtue.

Remember:  
Our history was but turmoil  
Neither a conviction  
Nor a country.

No,  
I wasn't born yesterday.

1984

## I Wish I Could Be Water

I wish I could be water  
If one could be what they wanted to be.

Alas!  
To be human  
Is a dilemma bordering on impossibility,  
Can't you see!

Oh I wish I could be water — I say to myself —  
Turning a young sapling into a fruitful tree  
[So they chop it down with the whack of an ax to be burned?]

Or giving an everlasting bloom to the fragile seedling of a pine  
[Before they turn it into a cross stained with the pointless  
shedding of blood?]

Or feeling content in quenching one's thirst  
[even if they have brought them to their knees  
In a square boiling over with the sun and the clamouring  
Only to behead them?  
Doesn't it astound you  
To become the Cain of your own brother  
Or the executioner of dissidents?  
Or to even think of a barely grown tree as lifeless firewood?]  
I know,  
I know,

Panegyrics Without Rewards

I know,  
Despite all this,  
I wish I could be water  
If I could be what I wanted to be.

Oh  
I wish I were a drop of rain  
Chaste,  
Oblivious,  
On a mountain ridge  
And not a lost frail wave  
In this cruel ocean of tussles.

**September 21, 1989**

## To Think...

To think...  
To think yet silent.

The one who thinks  
Is compelled to silence  
But when the time,  
— scarred and chaste —  
Calls upon them to testify  
They will speak with a thousand tongues.

1981

# Phenix in the Rain

- Elegy

## Elegy

They said:

“We don't, no, we do not want to die!”

They said:

“Enemies! You are the enemies of the people!”

How simple, how simply they said it  
And how simple, how simply they were killed!  
And their death was so hideous, so outrageous  
That an attempt to stay alive  
Seemed most painfully foolish:  
A harsh and bitter odyssey  
Through twisted and tangled labyrinths  
All for nothing!

□

They did not want to die  
Or to bear the burden of degradation before death.

Thus they said:

“We don't, no, we do not want to die!”

And as if this was a spell

That suddenly

From the horrid hazy heights

Some horses descended upon the plain



On their backs men  
With their swords unsheathed.  
And before they could say their farewell  
Nothing other than the wind was left.  
Nothing other than the wind  
And their own blood,  
For they didn't  
They did not,  
They did not want to die.

**March 1966**

# Poniard on the Platter

- A Funeral Oration
- The Split
- The Wind Is Dead! You Said

## A Funeral Oration

( In memory of Ernesto Che Guevara )

The unaware are submissive  
Only the tempest bears rebellious offspring.

The submissive are shadow-like,  
Cautious near the boundaries of light  
In the bodies of the living are the dead.

And there are those who dare  
— the fire keepers  
— those who live alongside death,  
Nay, ahead of death

Forever alive even after death  
And forever with the same name they always lived,  
Before whose memory decadence passes by  
Ashamed and demoralized.

The discoverers of headwaters,  
The humble discoverers of hemlock  
The questers of happiness  
In the passageway of volcanoes  
The magicians who conjure smiles  
From pain's *chapeau*  
With footprints  
More sonorous than joy

In the flyways of birds.

□

They look thunder in the eye,  
Light up the house,  
Then they die.

**May 1975**

## The Split

( In memory of Khosrow Goleh-Sorkhi <sup>1</sup> )

Being born  
Upon a dim spear,  
Like the gushing birth of a wound.

Cutting across  
The one and only Book of chance  
Incessantly  
Right to the end.

Burning to the last spark,  
In one's own flame  
In the flame of the reverence  
The slaves have thus found in his path

Blooming upon the thornbush of blood  
So red, so radiant,  
And so proudly crossing  
The lashing grounds of insult  
Thus cutting the road of life short  
With absolute abhorrence.

Oh of whom am I speaking!  
We live with no whys, no wherefores  
They die knowing the whys, knowing the wherefores.

1975

## The Wind Is Dead! You Said

You said:

“The wind is dead!

Though having flowed on a river of blood,

It hasn't lifted a single curtain

It hasn't smashed the fortress of tyranny

It hasn't brought down a single palace

The wind has died!”

You said:

“On the mountain ridges

With its blood-drenched body

Disheartened is the wind!”

Time and time again

You have been shamed by your life before the dead.

[I've sensed this as one senses a fever

— just like a fever that dries up the blood, I've felt it.]

□

When in despair and distress, you said:

“The wind has died!

On the mountain ridges

With its body soaked in blood

Woeful is the wind!”

Those who shared the air

With the warden  
In the torture chambers  
Said to you in reply:

“Alive!  
Alive and well, is the wind!  
Soaring is the wind!  
The Final Tempest  
That’s what the wind  
— in the workshop of thunderous thoughts —  
Is shaping!

How to bring  
the heinous arrogance of a mountain of wrong  
down to its knees  
That’s what the wind is teaching!”

[Their conviction is a blend of blood and rocks and eagles]

□

They said:  
“The wind is alive  
Watchful in its deeds  
Vigilant in its deeds is the wind!”

“Nay,” you avowed, “nay, the wind is dead!  
The wind has received a mighty mortal wound from the  
mountains!”

— Oh, you wretched soul,  
Time and time again  
You have been shamed by your life before the dead  
I have sensed this  
Like a fever that freezes the blood in my veins.

**February 1975**



**Note:**

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**Khosrow Goleh-Sorkhi speaking during his trial**

1 — Khosrow Goleh-Sorkhi (1944 – 1974) was an Iranian revolutionary journalist, poet and literary critic who grew up in the repressive atmosphere ensuing the CIA orchestrated 1953 coup in Iran which overthrew the democratically elected government of Dr. Mohammad Mosaddegh and reinstated the despotic regime of the Shah.

The reign of repression throughout the 50s and the 60s blocked all democratic parliamentary venues for change. The outright violation of major social and political rights and freedoms by the Shah's regime such as freedom of conscience, freedom of expression, freedom of association, freedom of press, etc., together with the absence of a revolutionary vanguard to create a balance of power, resulted in hopelessness, passivity and submission throughout society. The emergence of the revolutionary armed movement in February 1971, however, changed that state of socio-political stagnation.

On February 8, 1971, a group of revolutionary communists — later on known as The Organization of the Iranian People's Fadaee Guerrillas — ignited the armed movement from the forests of Siahkal in northern Iran. In the same year, another group — later on known as The Organization of the People's Mojahedin — took up arms against the Shah's regime. The revolutionary armed movement, like a renaissance, changed the dominant state of submission and surrender in the psyche of the oppressed. Its flames melted the thick ice of silence and spread the seeds of hope for change. Fear turned into courage, passivity into movement, weariness into vibrancy.

Khosrow Goleh-Sorkhi embraced the revolutionary armed struggle, became a fervent proponent of it, and expressed it proudly in his views and in particular through his poems. Goleh-Sorkhi was arrested together with a group of other intellectuals in 1973. They were framed for an assassination attempt against members of the royal family.

In their military trial which was televised nationwide, Khosrow Goleh-Sorkhi together with Keramat Daneshian, another member of the group, refused to speak in their own personal defence. Instead, they both defended the necessity of armed struggle, knowing the dire consequence. But why? The fact is that the Shah's regime was hoping that everyone on trial would plead for their lives and that this being televised nationwide would, in turn, spread hopelessness, demoralize the people and undermine their sympathy towards the armed movement. To thwart this hideous plan, Goleh-Sorkhi and Daneshian indeed sacrificed themselves and chose death over submission.

During his defence Goleh-Sorkhi stated: "I will not bargain in this court for my life or even for its length. I am a minuscule drop of the glory and

the grief of the militant people of Iran... Yes indeed, I will not bargain for my life, for I am the son of a militant and heroic people.”

Both Khosrow Goleh-Sorkhi and Keramat Daneshian were sentenced to death and executed on February 18, 1974.

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# The Anecdote of Moons'

## Restlessness

- Nowruz in Winter
- The All-Night Vigils

## Nowruz In Winter

One year  
Nowruz will come  
Without swallows, without violets  
Without the frigid movement of bergamot leaves on the water  
Without the spinning of coloured eggs in the mirror

One year  
Nowruz will come  
Without wheat sprouts and without a banquet  
Without the pantomime of the fish in the crystal bowl  
Without the pious dance of the flame in the lantern

One year  
Nowruz unannounced will come  
Together with men returning home  
With the heavy weight of their years on their backs  
So that the wounded tulips  
Would once again remember  
Their forbidden names  
And so that the shelves of sin  
Would once again be sanctified  
With the touch of forbidden books.

Along the hallway of carnage  
The candles of memory will be lit  
Closed gates will suddenly be opened

The avid arms will reach out from the hatchways  
The sealed lips will unlock with a smile  
And Spring will be greeted  
From a passageway of uproar  
All the way  
To the weary town

One year  
Yes,  
One year Nowruz  
Suddenly so will begin.

**Nowruz 1978 and the Autumn of 1993**

## The All-Night Vigils

All night long  
I was dazed —  
Dazed by the awakened city,  
The lamps of whose eyes were lit  
And which thought not of sleep  
And the murmur of its orison  
Filled the dark sky  
Patch by patch  
Like the musty steam  
Out of a malodorous swamp fills the air.

All night long  
I was dazed —  
Dazed by the awakened city  
Whose song on its lips  
Was nothing but a babbling putrid litany:  
The sleepless city  
With the fummy oil lamp of its wakefulness  
On a Night of Power as such  
On a Night of Power.

“You haven’t slept, have you?”  
I said to the city,  
“You haven’t slept all night long,  
Only whispering anxiously!”

“For the coming of the day we kept a vigil,” the city said,  
“Only the power of prayer may raise the sun”.

“Your prayers are answered then, here comes the dawn!”, I said.

“Now with full confidence  
We surrender to the sea of slumber,” the city said,  
“For our desperate wish has so been granted.”

**March 28, 1994**



# The Elegies of the Land

- Hamlet
- Poetry is Emancipation
- With Eyes

## Hamlet

To be  
Or  
Not to be...

That is not the question,  
'Tis the temptation rather.

□

The poisoned wine in the chalice  
And the sword forged in venom in the enemy's hand.—

Everything is clear, well calculated ahead of time  
And the curtain will fall at the exact moment.

Was my father asleep in **Gethsemane** garden!  
That my role is to inherit his delusive trust  
And the bed of his deception my uncle's place of pleasure!

[all this I discovered suddenly,  
accidentally with a glance at the watching audience]

Oh God!  
Oh God!  
If only trust  
As yet another Satan

Had not sung a lullaby  
To yet another **Abel**  
At yet another **Gethsemane!**

□

But what a deception,  
What a deception!  
That the one who has been watching  
From behind the pale curtain of darkness  
Is well aware of the whole tragedy  
And knows my grief  
Word for word.

□

From behind the pale curtain of darkness  
Those eyes have paid in silver and gold  
To watch my pain  
So they would gain joy  
From the free exposure of one's wilful weeping  
While his voice and breathing break down  
The wilful weeping of the one who looks  
Theatrically suspicious at the truth.

Why am I seeking help  
From those  
Who eventually  
Will demand a bow

From both  
My uncle and I equally,  
Even if my misery would have called upon them  
Claudius is no longer a name for uncle  
But rather an unclear concept.

And the curtain...  
At the inevitable moment...

Despite all this however,  
From whence the truth became clear to me  
— like a restless wandering ghost —  
And from whence the stench of the world stung my nostrils  
— like the fume of a torch in staged scenes —  
Not the question  
But rather the temptation is this:  
**To be**  
**Or**  
**Not to be.**

1969

## Poetry Is Emancipation

Poetry is  
Emancipation,  
It is salvation and freedom.

It is  
A doubt which will turn into certainty  
And a bullet that is shot to do the job.  
It is a sigh out of relief,  
Out of contentment.

And if it is the only way to free the body,  
Then poetry is like the decisiveness of the stool  
To be removed from under the feet  
So that the body snaps by the pull of its own weight.

□

It wasn't a bird that led me to this land,  
I had sprouted on my own in this sombre soil  
Like wild mint without the meddling of a grower  
Just by the brume of a tiny brook

Which is why  
Some give me a look  
As if I feed on the fruits of their labour  
As if I contaminate by my wretched breath

The air of their dwelling  
Whereas indeed  
When they did rise to this realm,  
The one  
Who greeted and opened the gate to them,  
Was I.

1969

## With Eyes

With eyes  
Aghast by this misfitting morrow  
— A frozen image of a high-noon sun  
Pinned to the forehead of the unborn tomorrow —

I released my hands  
From the chains of slumber.

I shouted:  
**“Here people, here is a magic light!  
So you can tell apart dawn from midnight  
If any sight is left in your blinded eyes  
Before you miss it all  
Look and see well:  
The flight of the sun in the midnight sky!  
And with your deafened ears listen to:  
The singing of the sun in midnight’s semitone!”**

**“We saw,” half of them said, “yes, we saw its bright flight!”**

The other half cheerfully shouted:  
**“We heard its clear singing within our souls!”**

But I, astounded, answered:  
**“Oh! Rubbish**

**Rubbish**

**That is rubbish, people!  
Are you drunk or are you dumb,  
Or perhaps only playing dumb?  
Of the night, a third still remains  
Penitent, pure and Muslim if you are  
No call for prayer has yet been called!"**

□

Each and every gross foul hole suddenly became a mouth  
And turned into a glowing volcano of rage:

**"Look at this fool  
Who's asking for proof  
Of the shining sun."**

[Storm of laughter...]

**"Ignoring the sun  
Relying on his alarm clock  
He's trying to convince the poor people  
It's not even past midnight."**

[Storm of laughter...]

And I,  
Pain running through my veins  
Pity in my bones



The Elegies Of the Land

Something like fire came upon my soul.  
As if something squeezed my entire body  
Until a drop as torrid as the sun  
Boiled out of both my eyes.  
Seas bitter as they are  
I drank my own tears of desolation.

They were enchanted by the sun  
For the sun was their only real thing  
A sense of their own presence it was  
Its shine and warmth  
The meaning of true camaraderie

Its glow  
The meaning of true veracity

□

(Oh! If only they could learn from the sun  
To be generous both  
In pain and in happiness  
Even with their dry bread. —  
And would reach for their knives  
Only to share.)

□

Alas!  
The sun meant unfailing justice and

They were mad about justice and  
Now with a lookalike sun  
They had been so deceived!

□

Oh! I wish  
I could cry the blood in my veins  
Drop by drop  
So they would believe me.

Oh! I wish I could— even for a moment I wish I could—  
Put on my shoulders  
The countless masses  
Carry them around this globe  
So they can see with their own eyes  
Where their sun is  
And believe me.

I wish I could!

1967

# The Garden of Mirrors

- On the Cobblestones
- Poverty
- The Garden of Mirrors
- The Hour of Execution
- The Punishment

## On the Cobblestones

My unknown comrades  
Fell upon the somber land  
Like dead stars  
So frigidly  
As if the earth were doomed  
To an eternal starless night.

Then, what was I?  
The silent owl  
Upon the dark nest of my own pain  
I put down the broken stringed harp  
I took a lantern  
I went to the town square  
Roaming in people's alleyways  
And this shout  
Flew out of my mouth  
Like sparks:  
"Hey!  
Look out your windows, see the streets!  
See the blood on the cobblestones!  
This may be the blood of dawn,  
Within whose drops  
The sun's heart is pulsating..."

A swift wind  
Passed by the dead of this land

And toppled the abandoned nest of the crow  
From the naked branches of the garden's old fig tree...

“The sun is alive!  
In this dark night  
[May the darkness, which from head to toe has turned itself into  
a mouth, eat itself up from shame]  
I heard the sonorous sound of the sun's heartbeat  
More resonant  
More enraged  
Even more thunderous  
Than before...  
Look out your windows!  
Look out!  
Look!”

□

The young foliage of the sun  
Sprouted on the vines  
Near the old garden's door.

The coquettish lanterns of the stars  
Hung on the awning of  
The sun's passageway...

I returned  
My soul full of hope  
My heart full of rhythm.

I strung the broken stringed harp  
I sat by the window  
And with the song I sang so fervently  
I awakened the ice-cold lips of the street martyrs  
Into the sneer of victory:  
"Hey!  
This may be the blood of dawn  
Within whose drops  
The sun's heart is pulsating..."

Look out your windows, see the streets!  
See the blood on the cobblestones!  
The blood on the cobblestones..."

**1957**

**Police detention centre**

## Poverty

I am wearied by a pain that is not my own  
I live on a land that is not my own  
I live with a name that is not my own  
I cry from a sorrow that is not my own  
I am revived by a joy that is not my own  
And I am giving unto a death that isn't my own.

1959

## The Garden of Mirrors

A lantern in my hand,  
A lantern before me.  
I am waging war on darkness.

The cradles of weariness have ceased to rock  
In their back and forth motion,  
And a sun from the depths  
Sheds light on the cremated galaxies.

□

The rebellious roars of thunder  
— when hail is conceived  
In the womb of anxious clouds.  
And the silent agony of grapevines  
— when tiny sour grapes germinate  
At the tip of long intertwined branches.  
My outcry was but an escape from pain  
For in the most terrifying of nights  
I had wished for the sun  
With hopeless prayers

□

You have come from suns  
From dawns



You have come from mirrors  
From silk.

□

In the void where there was neither a god nor an inferno  
I had wished for your gaze, for your trust  
With hopeless prayers.

A serious matter in between two deaths  
In the emptiness between two singularities—  
[Such is your gaze and trust!]

□

Your happiness is merciless yet generous  
Your breath alone turns into songs, into verdure  
In my empty hands

I get up!  
A lantern in my hand,  
A lantern in my heart.  
I wipe the tarnish from my soul.  
Then I place a mirror in front of you  
To make an eternity together with you.

1954

## The Hour of Execution

( In memory of Colonel Ezzat Siamak <sup>1</sup> )

A key turned in the lock

A smile shimmered on his lips  
Like the dance of water on the ceiling  
Reflected by the rays of the sun

A key turned in the lock

□

Outside

The sweet colour of daybreak  
— like a lost note —  
Was wandering around  
On the apertures in the woodwind  
Looking for its home...

□

A key turned in the lock  
A smile shimmered on his lips  
Like the dance of water on the ceiling  
Reflected by the rays of the sun

□

A key  
Turned in the lock.

1962

## The Punishment

There are four prison wards in here  
In each ward two corridors  
In each corridor many cells  
In each cell many men shackled...

Of these shackled men  
One has murdered his accused wife  
In a blind rage.

Of these men  
One has — on a hot summer day —  
Murdered a cruel stingy baker  
To feed his own hungry kids.

A few of them have  
— in the quiet of a rainy day —  
Ambushed a usurer.

Some others have broken into someone's home.

Some were  
— in the belly of the night —  
Pulling out the dead's gold teeth.

But I have killed no one on a dark, gusty night.  
But I have ambushed no usurer.

But I have broken into no home in the middle of the night.

□

There are four prison wards in here  
In each ward two corridors  
In each corridor many cells  
In each cell many men shackled...

Amongst the shackled  
There are men who love only the shell of a woman.

Amongst the shackled  
There are men who dream every night of a woman  
Frightened to death.

But I  
Shall not find fault  
— should that soul mate, should that other half of mine —  
One day be suddenly not content.

But I  
— deep in the mountain ridges of my dreams —  
Give ear to nothing  
Other than the icy echo of  
The forbearing song of these weeds  
That grow and rot and wither and fall.

Had this not been my chain

The Garden of Mirrors

Perhaps one day  
I would have escaped  
— Like a distant and slippery memory —  
From the flat plains of this frigid land...

This is the crime!  
This is the crime!

**Detention Centre 1957**

## Note:

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1 — According to Shamlou's official website, *The Hour of Execution* was written about the execution of Colonel Ezzat Siamak and nine other officers from the Tudeh Party's clandestine network within the national army, originally known as The Officers' Organization.<sup>1</sup>



Colonel Ezzat Siamak in custody

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<sup>1</sup> The formation of The Officers' Organization and its eventful and tragic history is a subject matter on its own and does not quite fit in a book of poetry. But it must be asserted here that although these officers were members of the Tudeh Party, some of them were critical of the Party leadership and believed it lacked a revolutionary program. In fact, this was the reason The Officers' Organization took matters into its own hands and, independent from the Party line, initiated a revolt against the establishment in 1945 known as the Officers' Revolt. The revolt was immediately crushed. Some were killed or arrested, some escaped to the USSR and a few including Colonel Ezzat Siamak remained undetected who subsequently reorganized the remaining officers and formed the clandestine network.

Despite the fact that the Tudeh Party— throughout its history— never proved itself to be a revolutionary organization, many of its rank and file members both within the military and amongst the civilians were sincere militant elements who gave up their lives for the greater good. Therefore, one should draw a line of demarcation between the leadership or the official policy of the Tudeh Party, and the militant workers like Vartan, committed intellectuals like Keyvan or fallen heroes from The Officers's Organization. The latter group left an honourable legacy in Iranian political history while the former's legacy is not so honourable. Indeed, Shamlou himself clearly expressed this distinction when he wrote his epic poem "The Letter" in prison in 1954 in rebuke of the conciliatory conduct of the Tudeh Party.

## The Garden of Mirrors

Colonel Ezzat Siamak was a founding member of the clandestine network. He was arrested in the summer of 1954, and executed alongside nine other officers from the network on October 19<sup>th</sup> of that year.