

Michigan Quarterly review:

<https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/mqr/2019/04/second-slice-of-darkness/>

Second Slice of **Darkness**

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Translated from the Persian by Sara Khalili

“Sit right here!”

The woman held her shoulders and turned her slightly so that her back would be to the wall.

She sat down. They had thrown a large white sheet over her head. She couldn't see anything. It was morning. Near dawn, still dark. The corridor was empty at that hour. It was quiet. The woman guard must have still been standing there, otherwise she would have heard the heels of her tired shoes dragging away.

The wall she was leaning against was cold. Cement. She raised her chin a little, hoping to see something from under that dark tent. She saw nothing. It was quiet and the cloth reeked. It reeked of darkness.

She moved an inch away from the wall so that its chill would not seep into her body. She wished she had gone to the bathroom earlier. The loudspeaker crackled and ... it shut off. She shuddered. She realized she was sitting under it, near the door.

The night before, she had again had the dream. The girls had all stayed up until dawn for her. But they had remained silent. Only once, she had heard them quietly whisper and realized they were not sleeping. Like her, who with eyes closed lay awake.

She put one hand over the other to stop them from shaking. Last night, while washing the dishes, a tin plate had slipped from her fingers and fallen on the floor with a loud clang. Nargess had hurried over and taken the sponge from her.

“I’ll wash the rest.”

With her eyes closed, she had said, “No, no! ...”

Her wet eyelashes kept sticking together.

Nargess had taken her hands, held them under the running water, and with her shoulder had pushed her aside and stood tight against her in front of the sink. Another girl had taken her by the arm and pulled her back.

“Your turn will be tomorrow.”

But tomorrow was today and she was sitting there waiting for her name to be called on the loudspeaker.

«Poor Morteza ... »

Her nose was running. She slipped her hand under the sheet to wipe it. The woman guard grabbed her wrist and yanked it away.

She raised her head and looked at her ... Her face was dark.

She stared at her. At her thick eyebrows and the black hair above her lips. She wanted to ask to go to the bathroom ... but she didn't. Her nose started to itch. Perforce, she turned her head, leaned it to one side, and rubbed her nose against her arm and shoulder. And again she sat motionless. Waiting. And again there was only silence and darkness that smelled of camphor.

The tip of her nose was cold and as she breathed she could feel the wet spot on the sheet against it.

The night before, she had again had the dream.

The dark was spreading in every direction and the silence was growing heavier ... she gradually stopped feeling even the length of fabric shrouding her. She felt as though she were sitting naked in dense darkness ... with nothing but emptiness stretching far away ... Nothing.

She listened intently. She heard nothing but the distant hiss of a florescent light that sounded like it was half burned and probably glowing yellow, and ... flickering.

«Poor Morteza ...»

She was cold.

May I go to the bathroom?

She thought it. There was no response. She pressed her thighs together ... their warmth was pleasant.

The loud speaker above her crackled again and a moment later a voice dryly announced, "Mehri A. ... Mehri A."

Her entire body started to convulse.

"Get up!" the woman guard snapped.

She suddenly felt drained. She could not. The guard grabbed her under the armpit and pulled her up to her feet. Her knees were weak. She took a step forward and one of her slippers

stayed behind. Her feet had sweat. The guard waited for her to put it back on. With the tips of her toes she felt around and found it.

She walked a few more steps and heard the steel door open. Hard. Loud. She felt the cement ceiling silently move away and ... fresh air. It was colder outside, the chill pressed against her sides. She needed to pee. A few people were talking a short distance to the side and farther away she could hear cars. The cold snuck under her cover and her nipples hardened. She felt a drop trickle from her. The girls had told her that there is an abandoned wasteland behind the prison, that it smells of wheat, that at night you can hear dogs howling there.

With every step she took, she was careful not to let her slippers slide off her feet. One foot felt looser than the other. She pushed her toes deep in so that she could curl them and clamp onto the tip of the slippers.

Several pairs of boots stomped briskly toward her, the woman guard let go of her arm and handed her over. They must have been men, they grabbed onto the sheet covering her in a way that their hands would not touch her as they pulled her along.

Further ahead, the ground was no longer paved with cement. It was dirt and rocks. She hoped the woman guard was still with them. A few small stones got stuck between her toes. Each time she raised one foot, she wriggled its toes to shake them off. But a few remained trapped between her two small toes.

She wondered why the dogs were not howling.

Soon, the ground sloped upward. Then it flattened again and they walked past something that smelled putrid. As they continued down a gentle slope, she heard commotion in the distance. She realized a crowd had been brought there ahead of time to watch.

Last night, when she had closed her eyes, she had again had the dream. The people were not there, but she could hear them. Near and far. In every direction.

She smelled wheat.

The guard walking to her left was pulling her harder, as though in spite, in a way that her back and shoulders were tilted to that side. A few times she almost fell.

Several nights ago, she had jolted awake screaming. The girls had gathered around her and Nargess had ran and brought her a cup of water.

“Here, water ... Drink it.”

Her eyes were still squeezed shut in horror. Nargess had held the cup to her lips.

“Water ... Drink.”

Someone had quietly asked, “Why is your forehead bruised?”

And she had remembered the dream.

“It’s swollen!”

Nargess had gently touched the bruise and she had screamed in pain.

She had dreamed of rocks.

The girls had suddenly grown quiet. She had taken the cup from Nargess and carefully held it against her forehead ... it was cold ... the throbbing had eased a little.

It sounded as if a minibus was approaching from some distance away. Its rumble was growing louder. It moved closer and closer until it was nearby and the smell of dust and exhaust whirled in the air and crept under her covering.

The screams of a few women emerged from the minibus one after the other and spread in the dark ... From where they were, they could probably see her draped from head to toe in that white cloth. Their wails grew louder.

“Oh, my daughter, my Mehri! ... Oh, my precious, my Mehri!”

It was her mother, and the other two sobbing were her sisters.

She instinctively shifted toward them, but darkness menacingly yanked on her cover, meaning, Do not move!

“Mr. Saeed! ... Mr. Saeed! ... Forgive her! ... Forgive her!”

She realized Saeed was there. He probably had not slept the night before either. Her brother-in-law should be there, too. The one who had seen her in a car with a man, a stranger, and had hurled a brick at the windshield and yelled, “You shameless harlot!” And he had run off to tell everyone.

«Poor Morteza ...»

The crying and weeping stopped for a moment. She thought her mother must have fainted, her sisters must now be splashing water on her face to revive her ... so that she could again sob and scream ... and again faint.

“Hello, Haji Agha ...”

“Hello, Haji Agha ...”

Someone had just arrived and those around her were greeting him quietly and respectfully. The man responded by mumbling, “Hello ... hello ...”

They pulled on the sheet and moved her a few steps to the side.

“Stand right here!”

There was malice in the voice.

She stood still. Again, she subtly pushed her sweaty feet into the slippers and felt the pebble still lodged between two small toes.

“*Bismillah al-rahman al-rahim* ... In the name of God the compassionate and merciful ...”

The man's voice coming over a megaphone silenced everyone. She thought he must be the judge. His pronunciation of the letter H was thick and guttural.

"Qala Imam al-Sadiq alayhi as-salam, al-rajmo hadd Allah-u akbar va al-jaddo hadd Allah-u asqar ... Imam Sadeq, peace be upon him, commands that stoning is the greater punishment and flogging the lesser punishment prescribed by the divine."

Hearing the word stoning, her mother shrieked and her cry sailed into the depths of darkness.

"For the love of your forefathers ... Si—r! ... Oh, God! ..."

"The adulteress Mehri A., child of Cyrus, twenty-eight years old ... found guilty of committing adultery as a married woman ..."

It was his voice, the same fat mullah who had refused to look at her while questioning her and had panted and wheezed as he wrote down her sentence.

"... Pursuant to Article 221 and 225 of the Islamic Punishment Laws and based on the testimony of four Muslim men ..."

She thought, Saeed and his brother ... but who were the other two?

"... and further to the judgment passed by the Fifth Branch of the Provincial Penal Court, which has been approved by Division 27 of the Supreme Court, the accused is sentenced to the greater punishment."

There was pandemonium. Screams and shouts rose to the sky from all around. This time, it was not just her mother's cries, but her sisters' too, and that of other women who were probably, or perhaps, prisoners standing in the distance, at the far end of darkness, brought there to watch and to learn from horror.

"For the love of God, have mercy on her! ..."

“Have mercy! ... ”

“I beseech you ... for the love of God! ... Mehri—i!”

“Silence! Silence!...”

“I swear to God, this woman is innocent! ...”

“Mehri—i! ... Oh, God! ”

“Stone me instead! ...”

And a man shouted, “You shameless tramp!”

Another hollered, “Adulteress! ...”

There was chaos. From every corner of the dark someone yelled something, drowning out the voices of the guards barking, “Quiet! Quiet!”

They pulled on her cover and made her take a few steps forward. One of her slippers came off again and just as she tried to put it back on, darkness pushed her and blackness opened its maw and she shrieked as she plunged into a dark pit.

She was up to her chest in the narrow hole. The cloth had twisted tightly around her, pinning her arms to her sides. Terrified, she clawed and tore at it. She could barely breathe when she heard shovels grating and rasping behind her, in front of her, next to her. And dirt and rocks rained on her trembling arms and breasts and poured down to the bottom of the hole, onto her bare feet. She tried to stand on her tiptoes, to ...

“Don’t move!”

... to pull her weight up. Stones rolled under her heels, her toes twisted and clenched onto her single slipper, small pebbles slid between them, and her toenails dug into the dirt. She was panting, her face was wet from the steam of her gasps. She wanted to scream, but the cloth was clinging to her face, muzzling her mouth. Sound could not escape her lips. With her shoulders,

chest, and her entire being she struggled to pull herself up, but a guard wearing boots kicked her in the back.

“I said, do not move!”

And she did not move.

The pit was cold. One of her pajama legs had rolled up. Her shin was aching from the chill and her knees were shaking from fear, and ... she wet herself. Warmth trickled down her inner thighs ... down the inside of one knee and onto her icy ankle. She felt a drop linger on her anklebone.

“It rests upon every Muslim to carry out God’s judgment and let divine justice flow upon the earth ... by casting stones.”

Again, there was chaos.

“Adulteress!”

“This is what you deserve, you brazen hussy!”

“Liars! Liars! ... What sin has she committed? ... What crime?”

“Damn you, slut!”

“Quiet! ... Quiet!”

“Are you not a Muslim, man?”

“An adulteress must be punished by stoning.”

“Who are the other two who claim to be witnesses? ... Who are they?”

“The judgment is the judgment of Islam.”

“The blood of an innocent woman will taint and haunt you!”

“Fear this mother’s grief! ...”

The uproar grew frenzied. The cries and pleas blended in with the curses and insults ... but the megaphone was the loudest ...

“... and given that the adulteress has neither confessed nor repented ...”

She could even hear him breathe.

“The first stone must be cast by one of the witnesses.”

She didn't know why the crowd suddenly grew quiet. She tore harder at the sheet. The dark grew denser and weighed down on her. Someone must have crouched down to pick up a rock. Saeed ... or perhaps his brother. She didn't know when they would hurl it at her. Her breath was trapped in her chest, she was afraid of making the slightest move.

“Listen carefully ... After they throw the first stone, you are allowed to try to get out of the hole. Not before. You have to pull yourself out. Do you understand? With every bit of energy you have. No matter how. Struggle. Drag yourself out. The more time passes, the worse it will get, the more difficult it will be ... they will keep throwing stones ...”

Before they had taken her for the rite of repentance and ablution for the dead, Nargess had held her tight and again quickly repeated it all.

“If you manage to crawl out, it will all be over. Try as hard as you can. Drag yourself out of that damned hole. Do you understand what I am saying? ... Are you listening to me?”

And suddenly a rock hit her on the forehead. Right on the bruise she had gotten in sleep. Her head snapped back and her forehead burst with pain and blood splattered. Her neck swung to the side and warm blood oozed over her eyes, trickled down the side of her nose and onto her lips.

“Pu—ll ... you—rself ... o—ut! ...”

There was mayhem, but the voices were now muted, indistinct.

The lobe of her nose started to itch, her lips quivered, and she tasted the saltiness of blood.

Nargess's voice rang in her ears, repeating over and over again, "Pull yourself out! ..."

And she suddenly came to. She twisted and turned her torso. She dug her toes deeper into the dirt, pushed up, and raised her chest. The uproar grew louder. She could hear her mother and sisters and all those standing farther away in the dark screaming and pleading for her to drag herself out of the pit.

"Come on, Mehri! ..."

"Come out, my Mehri! ..."

"Pull yourself out! ..."

"Try! ... Hurry! "

"Pull yourself up ..."

"Bravo ... yes ... try, my girl! ..."

"My child ... my life ... come, come on out! ..."

"You can do it! ... come on ... pull yourself out ..."

Terrified and short of breath, she was silently sobbing and gasping for air. The sheet, wet with blood and steam from her mouth, clung to her face. But the voices she was hearing were giving her strength. She fought. She wriggled her waist and lifted her chest above the edge of the hole. She clambered up with her toes, dug her knees into the side of the pit, and tried to inch her way up. But it seemed darkness had grabbed onto her legs and would not let her climb out ...

She had had this dream time and time again. The frenzied crowd, the first stone that had hit her on the forehead. She had tried to scramble out of that dark pit, and in sleep and wakefulness she had heard the roar of people shouting, "Pull yourself out! ... Pull yourself out of that damned hole!"

She could hear them pleading.

“Come out, Mehri—i ...”

Her toes dug into the dirt and her knees pressed against the hole.

“Hurry! ... Get out! ...”

She was now bending at the waist and pushing her chest over the edge of the pit.

“Quickly, girl! ... You can do it! ... Hurry!”

And she turned on one shoulder, used her elbow as a lever, and stabbed her knees into the pit’s belly. She shoved her feet back, inched her heels up the wall, and jerked her body higher. Her chest lay on the ground.

“Yes! ... Yes! ... Bravo! ... Come on! ...”

And the crowd cheered as she wrenched her shoulders left and right and crawled out on her stomach, sat on her knees, stood on one leg, limped forward, and ran ... ran ... faster ... faster ...

When suddenly, another rock hit her right eye and her eyeball burst and her face crumpled and ... she realized she was still in the pit.

And rocks rained ...

And rocks rained ...