

GHAZAL MOSADEQ

If

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editor: David Buuck

assistant editor, design & layout: J. Gordon Faylor

editorial assistants: Lara Durback & Coco Fitterman

minister of information: Fadl Fakhouri

co-founding editor: Yedda Morrison

Cover design: Houman Mortazavi

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If the Bab-e Homayoun and the
Golestan palace existed / but you
knew Reza Shah was nothing / less
than a land-grabbing pig / nothing
more / than an illiterate Cossak
Iranian / on the payroll of the
occupiers / if you knew / he was / in
awe / of the crown / on that fat child
king's head / who walked down those
stairs / and if the road was expand-
ed / and if you knew you could get
closer /

a eucalyptus lined street / the
waterway / a rill / made of stone / in
the south garden / if it looked in
different order / in a canary's eyes /
if you were that canary/

'if things had been built to order
differently' / and yes / if there were
azaleas / the skin / and the
apparatus of modern life / I mean /
if and only if / we all agreed / that
there was a negative force there /
from the beginning / but back then
/ when I kept walking on the buffer
zone / the oil was in neutral zones /
in Khuzestan / by the Karun river /
and constitutionalism was still
breathing / in Tabriz / in Isfahan / in
Rasht / and if we kept its story alive
/ for many years / but forgot / about
our famines / if we agreed that a pact
of words can contain our mistrust /
yet we chose silence as a method of
self-care

and if Nasseredin Shad had not lived
/ for one million years / and if the
Golestan palace / maintained its
light forever / and if you passed the
Bab-e Homayoun and the door
stood ajar and you saw the Thames
running in its rills /

If I had become modern
enough / to fill the chasm of
Nasseredin feeling inferior / and if I
repeated / and kept repeating / but
it still didn't connect me to anything
new / if I believed in myself / if I was
true to myself / if I repeatedly said "I
love you" / to myself / peeping into
a mirror / if I called my claws royal
fingers / if I controlled the fragments
of my psyche / as they threatened /
to fracture again /

if I purchased / that hand cream /
which I could buy / if I paid more /
then could I say / if I applied that
cream / if I counted the number of
streets / leading to the palace / if I
passed the rills and the garden / if I
entered the building / if I went inside
to see a class of statesmen smoking
qualiān / and if they saw me / if only
they saw my crisscross—pigeon-toed
and wobbly / but if
they took me /

as a symbol of a nomadic uprising /
and if / just this time / they cared to
listen / to the voice of Amirkiz /
coming out of my chest / as a
birdsong / but if I was found out / I
mean / if they realised I was not a
nomadic uprising / that I was
passing / between spheres of
influence / of lost territory / no more
/ than a small piece in a great game /
remember that game? / that
tournament of shadows? / just
passing / the nineteenth century /
and the twentieth / as a canary /
passing the Bab-e Homayoun /

before thinking of entering the
palace / and I cared nothing / at that
very moment / for the monotony of
statesmen / instead / I was free
enough to be transformed / into
anything /

If I didn't want to be transformed /
into the Tehran police force / since
1906 / or six dynasties back / Tehran
wasn't there but the police were / not
with that name / no / they were
Gazmeh / no? / or the Darougheh /
but if they were the Darougheh / and
if I passed from the Bab-e
Hodayoun / if it occurred to me that
some sort of resistance was tolerated
/ just a little / if that little could be
communicated / to the
municipalities / before everything
crumbled / I mean / if there was a
name for the nightmare daydream I
am capable of /

but if / the famine returned thrice /
in forty years / and if despite the
cover-up we knew / that half the
population had been wiped out /
but if the occupiers didn't buy the
crops / and the landowners didn't
hoard them / and if / the allies
didn't prevent the import / and if / I
myself / hadn't found huge bags of
wheat / under the fat child king's bed
/ and if / we knew where to line up
the corpses

If the springtime arrived again / if
there was a residential unit on the
left hand side of the palace / and if it
was demolished / and if and only if /
that belonged to the last poet
laureate of Tehran / and if his name
was Bahar / and if he was known to
have a canary / and if and only if a
man / with the same garment as
Bahar / was assassinated instead of
him / outside of the newspaper
office / and if Bahar / had written an
elegy / for that dead man / and the
canary had read that poem /

and if the cage / had been left open
/ and if / it was a summer night / dry
/ and dark / and the crickets singing
/ and if / I found myself right at
Bab-e Homayoun / at sundown /
and if the door stood ajar / and if I
found the Thames / running in the
rills / and if there was a
constellation of the elite / the
statesmen / sitting there / smoking
qaliān / and if I were allergic to
smoke / and if I were a canary /

And if I was to avoid all the cliché /
and yet I was a canary / at a Qajar
society / and if / before me was my
father / and before him was his
grandmother / and if she was a
nomadic woman / but if it was the
Kashf-e Hejab era / but the
grandmother was too old to leave
the house anyway / I mean / if
unconsciously I gave an affirmation
/ that changed my lifestyle on the site
of an architectural structure / and if
the Qajars were still looking at the
canary / and if uttering a song was
mimicking your own sound / if you
couldn't repeat yourself /

instead / you thought why am I not
included in this / in this life of mine
/ and if Bahar was / the name of a
street / only in springtime /

If the infamous cluster of cronies /
in the Golestan complex / in the
east / were the last / to see a bird
flying in from the Orsi / diving
through the smoke / and they
thought “There is Bahar” / and /
“There is a canary” / but / the
constitutional revolution wasn’t
going to live long enough / to
accommodate all of us / our
chandeliers and prayer rugs / and
still be there on every / drowsy
afternoon / and if the wall
constructed a labyrinth / within

itself / and if you knew where there
were no white walls / where there is
no silence / and if it wasn't just a
multiple dream / and if / this was
not one of those dreams / where you
go to the office in your pyjamas
/ or cry for your dead living mother
/ dead again / alive again / but—if
a pointless excursion took you /
through an Orsi / and if the Orsi
stood ajar / and / who are you not to
fly in? / but / if there was smoke in
the labyrinth / and if the adjacent
house was not / and you / didn't
care if the whole world was / on fire
/ and if / the charcoal / on a qaliān /
was defusing carbon monoxide / and
if / you felt nauseous /

if / you thought the passing of time
had got the better of you / and if you
began to fall to the floor / if you went
into a tailspin / if the floor got
uncomfortably close / closer / and
then

if your beak cracked / from the
impact / if only a bird might wish /
there was a pole / a single wire / it
could perch on / but if that was not
the solution / if a revolution was the
only way / not all birds / on
powerlines / face the same way / but
one bird / thinking all birds are
muted tightrope walkers

And if a doctor held your wrist / at
the juncture of your radial and ulna
bones / and pushed gently / and
you liked it /

if you knew / that in this life / you
would choose displacement over
disembodiment / but / if you were
half dead / and you were stepped
on / by a statesman / before the
doctor found you / and if the canary
dreamt of being airlifted to a hospital
/ just to survive / if you loved your
life that much / and you sacrificed
everything / and yet / your beak
moved / in spasms / as if
to say no / no / no / and if / between
coma and death / you were ready to
choose coma / every time / because
you could keep your breath / and
body / together / if you happened /
to love your body / but you weren't
a narcissist / if your death / was right
there / if your death paid great
attention to you / but the famous
epiphany / was nowhere close /

If you knew / there was a cat / alive
still buried in the wall / and you were
nothing / but a canary / with
countless possibilities / of being
maimed / or buried inside the wall /
or beneath the mezzanine / to be
buried alive / and the worm you
always dreamt of eating / crawled
toward your skull as if to eat you /
but if all this imagining / was not
even the worst thing happening to
you /

If you began / to understand / that
the noise was gone now / but there
was still no silence / if there were no
white wall in Golestan palace / and
if you were no longer sick / but you
didn't want / the doctor to let
go / if through the window / meant
/ against the window / if you took
on the precariousness / of an
injured canary / at the edge of a
window pane / but then again / if
you were no longer sick / not from
falling / but from what you had
overheard / when you were in your
coma /

If you had overheard /
Turkamanchai / the tea-drinking,
colonized, backward Mum-e Vatan /
and the friendly thieves of Baghdad
/ if you heard boundaries
unexplained / whilst raising a cup
of tea / over the Aras river / one
summer afternoon / and if / and if
you knew / a cup would be filled
above its brim /

and if the tea did rise / above the
brim / and if the tea continued to
rise and rise / to form a bubble / and
if the bubble expanded / reaching
for maximum / and then / if you
heard / there were to be no limits /

yet / pressure waves / were predicted
/ so you imagined / in your delirious
state / that what you were hearing
was / an expansion of air / a growing
bubble / expanding / into a sphere
/ and then into the oval / of the
Shahneshin

and if it grew further / and you
could hear it / and you could hear
the chinking / of twenty million
silver rubles / ready to be taken out
/ of the room / and you were drowsy
/ and lethargic / and ruffled your
feathers / and you knew / that what
filled with air in 1828 / would fill
again / years later /
and if the smoke oozed into the
bubble /

and / years later / with two major
bullies / if you suddenly realised /
you never could have imagined /
how everything was going to turn
out / if you were less reticent / if we
all agreed / that life was going to end
/ very shortly / and if you agreed /
that there wasn't really any need for a
reminder / but if we said it anyway /
and could not take it back / because
it was going to be saved / somewhere
/ and a hundred years passed and
you still / couldn't take anything
back /

If the conclusions were somewhere
close to the beginning / if you could
continuously create and expand the
possibilities by blowing in them /

if we slurped on our tea of choice / if
the sun set / and if 'hurry up, it's
time' / didn't move us anymore / and
lying / on the ground / recalling all
you heard / was just not enough
/ and if the smoke hovered over you
/ like a caring mother / and if you
could see colours in the smoke /

and if you received news that the
Mum-e Vatan / had been working
hard / since 1906 / and even before
that / to get off her feet / only to
crash land / forty-six years later / if
someone stepped on a grape / but
we were not thinking / about a
breakdown / but we were /

if she thought / anyone can fall back
/ on a mountain of previous
collapses / if I said / it's not a
jabberwocky / it's loose emotional
control / or it's the statesmen / it
was them / but if it was / only them

and if it was only their valor / zeal /
manliness / and javanmardi / the sort
of stuff the Mum-e Vatan /
singlehandedly / carried in heaps /
tripping over again / and again /
because there wasn't / a big enough
market for it / she couldn't even
smuggle them / somewhere / if they
crumbled / but were still there / and
if you could / fly over them / did
they not reek of fear / or if you
simply could fly again /

if the one-sidedness of love / led you
/ in the only direction you could take
/ with an arrow / that points to
where all things end / a milestone / if
that house of many houses / the
Golestan palace / broke you into
pieces / before reflecting every piece
of you / in the mirrors / of the
Diamond Room / if a canary on the
ground / failed to see its reflection in
every mirrored fragment / if and
only if / it could know why images
make sounds when they fly from one
mirror to the next /

if you heard Reitzug / or Reiterzug /
Veidmann zieren / Weingeeh / or
Winegay / Brautigman / Reedidea /
Gootyarh / Quakeea / Parakikah /
Peethea / Treweethea / or
Schwarzgebühh / or just
chip-chip-chip-chip / repeated three
or five times / followed by /
whit-whit-whit
/ that was not me / that was an
English bird / I was somewhere
between the true song / and the
subsong / and my significance / lay
in my silence

—January 2020

This is not an afterword to this poem. It is an afterword to the silence the poem points to.

Since David expressed interest in publishing this long poem and suggested I write an afterword to it, I have been changing this little note. The words stay the same. The message stays the same. Yet I find myself trying to place it within the shifting context of what happens each day.

Today is the fourth day of American-Israeli strikes on Iran. Last night, Golestan Palace, where this poem takes place, was damaged by an American-Israeli missile that hit close to Bab-e-Homayoun Street. The Talar-e Aineh, the Hall of Mirrors, was damaged. Its intricate glasswork fractured. Mirrors shattered, the coloured glass panels broken. In pictures posted online, glass was scattered across the floor. The Talar-e Salam, the ceremonial hall where the Peacock Throne stands, was also damaged. The Brilliant Hall, with its mirror-clad walls built by Naser al-Din Shah Qajar, was shattered. I saw its grand forty-lamp chandeliers covered with cloth and dust, hanging from above.

I am sitting in London, far from home. Sometimes I feel I could extend my hands to protect the building. To protect the people from the bombing. No, I cannot. I cannot even get up to make dinner. I sit and stare at the news all day. In horror.

There is a canary in this poem. It belonged to the last poet laureate of Tehran, Mohammad-Taqi Bahar. Mohammad-Taqi Bahar Street, in central Tehran, has also been hit. He did have a canary. This canary moves back and forth. Not through places. Through time. The poem takes place between 1906–1911 (the years of the Constitutional Revolution) and 1953, the year of the American-British coup

d'état that overthrew the democratically elected government of Mohammad Mosadeq. I only share a last name with him. Yet I feel as if we are related by blood.

You hear Mohammad Mosadeq's name a lot these days. As if the times have returned. He nationalised Iranian oil. Tried to stop Britain from exploiting Iranian oil. It was not tolerated by the same forces that are always eager to bring freedom and democracy wherever there is a drop of oil.

There is much to say. I do not want to go into all these details. Sometimes, when you come from what is seen as a peripheral history, you are expected to explain everything. You are expected to clarify. There is an unspoken expectation to give context. To guide the reader before you can even make your point. The intention in this poem was to resist that. I left the names of places, events, and historical moments unexplained. That is why I hesitated for a long time to write an introduction or an afterword. Even now, I feel I am still sidestepping it.

There should be a point in letting misunderstandings, mistranslations, and gaps remain as they are. We are not going to be experts in every part of the world whose literature we read. I accept that. The point of coming together might be to recognise that there is a gap in knowledge. A lack in the narrative. It can be right to reflect silenced voices with silence. To leave it as it is, rather than fill it with comforting, spoon-fed explanations that are often just that.

This is not an afterword to this poem. It is an afterword to the silence the poem points to. Strange timing for the publication of this text I wrote over six years ago, when the very palace I wrote about has been wounded. The same place in which I spoke of the tyranny inside. A place that has endured for-

eign intervention. That has witnessed famines forced upon the country. That housed princes and statesmen who did little of worth. Those times have passed, but the artwork of the architects and the glasswork of the artists remained for years. And it breaks my heart that this poem appears at a moment when the glass of the palace is shattered.

— March 2026

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Ghazal Mosadeq is a poet, editor and translator. She is the founder of Pamenar Press, an independent publisher of poetry, translation, hybrid and critical writing. Her own work has been published by Ugly Duckling Presse, *Shearsman*, *Fence*, *Arc Poetry*, *Fiddlehead*, *Asymptote*, *Modern Poetry In Translation* and *Words Without Borders*, among others. She is a member of the editorial advisory board for the *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*.

