
Shahrnush Parsipur

Artist's Statement

As a writer I began my work at the age of 14. I wrote a short article for a magazine without mentioning my name. They published it. So I wrote more and more. At 67, I have now 14 books published and, in the meanwhile, I have translated several books into Persian.

Without writing I wouldn't know what to do. Now, at 67, I haven't much to write. I know that it is very difficult to change the world. It is almost impossible. When you think of changing the world, it is the moment when the world is changing you. When we are young, we are serious. As an older person, you always have a smile on your lips. Life is more beautiful and the sun is more 'the sun'. At night you can look at the moon, and you are happy with your life. You don't want to change anything, so you have nothing to write. I am sorry that I can't look carefully at the sky. The lights in the street don't allow me to see the sky and the stars.

At the same time, I am sorry that I can't go back to my native land. 'There' all my books are banned, and 'here' nobody reads my books because they are in Persian. I live in a limbo, but I smile, because life is beautiful.

I think of death. I like that too. With death I can mix with the earth, and help the flowers grow better. But I can't write about death, because it is like life, and it is difficult to write about life.

Every week I run three programs for Radio Zamaneh in the Netherlands. As material for the programs, I concentrate on the stories I want to write. After that, writing with style is very difficult.

The only message I have for you is that life is beautiful, just like death.

Shahrnush Parsipur

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The Blue Spring of Katmandu* (Tehran, 1969)

The window in my room overlooks a large garden with a well and a green stretch of poppies and petunias. Sometimes I see the owner of the garden pulling the weeds. From a distance he seems old. He wears blue overalls and works on the flowers while wearing gloves. He cuts the hedges, pulls the weeds, and waters the lawn. And when he is done he takes off his gloves, sits on the bench by the gravel road, and looks at the lilies floating in the pond.

My room is a very nice room. It has a big window facing the garden and another opening onto a busy crowded street. Everyday the sun is guest of my room's mosaic floor covering it until noontime. Somehow I have this silly notion that if I sit by the window overlooking the street, I will see lovers pass by hand in hand. Of course, through guess and presumption the condition of being in love can be projected onto passersby. Here people do not kiss each other on busy streets, nor do they walk hand in hand in public. Perhaps they would do so in very narrow and uncrowded streets. But our street, of course, is wide and full of speeding cars. I always think that somehow two blocks away from our house everybody is in love. But, of course, that is an altogether silly thought.

My room is a very nice room. The walls are blue, and the garden can be seen in the mirror. The ceiling is white, very white, and there are four cherubs, one of which has a broken nose, in each of its four corners – cute, chubby cherubs with no pupils in their eyes. I have put a table and chair next to the garden window, and I eat my lunch and dinner there. My bed is in the northeast corner of the room along the street-side window...and there is a corpse in it. He has a regal countenance and skin that has turned amber in death. This man has been dead ever since I can remember. He is tall and broad-shouldered with a graceful mustache. He has a copper crown – rough on the surface – its prongs shaped like the parapets of ancient castle. It covers half of his salt-and-pepper hair and part of his high yellow forehead. His clothes are made of satin, his robe of red velvet. The hem of the robe is embroidered with white thread in the shape of lilies. The person who made the robe did not have very good taste. The lilies are not identical, and the hem is threadbare. The dead man has a silver ring with a big turquoise stone. The ring has become black with age. His relatively long fingernails are dirty. The skin of his fingers is wrinkled. And though his face looks fifty, he is much older than that.

I exercise when I wake up in the morning. I stand before the garden window and exercise – light, free, and liberating movements. I take deep breaths, and, when I get out of the shower, the sound of the samovar boiling has already filled the room. Then I drink my tea on the table by my window and look at the flowers in the garden. Sometimes I watch the cockroaches climb up the legs of the bed and disappear inside the man's velvet robe.

* “The Blue Springs of Kathmandu” is published in Farsi in the collection *Tea Ceremony in the Presence of the Wolf* (Adab-e Sarf-e Chay Dar Huzur-e Gurg; Los Angeles: 1993). This English translation was also contained in *Tea Ceremony in the Presence of the Wolf*, trans. by Steve Macdowell and Afshin Nassiri (Portland, OR: Nur, 2011), 20-25.

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I used to sleep next to the man on the bed. But I could never change the bottom sheet; moving the corpse was too difficult for me. He has such a forbidding appearance that one does not dare touch him. So I could only cover half of the bed with clean linen. Sometimes, in the middle of the night, I used to wake up and find myself close to the man with my hand on his chest. It seemed to me that the man was staring at the ceiling.

The cockroaches were the worst. Sometimes one would lose its way from under the man's robe and come to my side of the bed. And, when I would move my arm or take a deep breath, it would pause for a moment, then flee in haste. I would feel its footsteps for a while on my arm. What an awful feeling! Late I bought a leather reclining chair and put it by the window next to the table. I have been sleeping there for a long time now.

I feed the canaries every morning and dust the room until it shines all over. But I can't do anything about the cockroaches. Their number increases every day. I bought poison and cautiously poured it under the man's robe. But it didn't help.

So, that is the work I do before lunchtime.

Again I sit by the garden window, and, while I eat, I look at the noontime garden. It looks damp and humid. The idleness of the afternoon begins. Sometimes I take a nap, and at other times I walk on my tiptoes around the room. Sometimes I knit, and sometimes I fix the holes in the man's robe.

Then, in the afternoon, the newspaper boy comes and rings the doorbell. I know his ring, two shorts and a long one. Immediately I lower the basket down the window, and the boy puts the paper in it.

"Have they caught the murderers?" I ask shouting down to him.

"They captured one. The rest haven't been found yet," he replies.

The newspaper boy and I both admire the murderers, but we never express it to each other. They say that would not be nice.

The newspaper is a real nice thing. One could say that if the paper didn't exist the paper boy wouldn't have existed either, and that if the paper boy didn't exist, neither would the whole world. I don't really know what's going on out there. Sometimes I hear cars blowing their horns. I see people coming and going and cannot even find out if they are in love or not. The newspaper is full of people. People buy stocks. People kiss each other before the cameras and get their photo printed in the paper. A group of them goes to war. With the paper I go around the world – to Chile and Bolivia. In the jungles of Bolivia – to be safe from poison ivy and mosquitoes – I spread the paper on the ground, lie down on it, and watch the sweaty green trees overhead with the yellow sap flowing down their trunks and becoming brown at the bottom. Ducking so as not to get shot by bullets flying overhead, I hold the paper in my hand and swim across the Suez Canal. The Canal looks the same as in the poster for the movie *Lawrence of Arabia*. I play on a slide in Siberia, and in Vietnam I dress the wounds of the injured and cover them with the newspaper.

Such is the newspaper. Sometimes I talk to the newspaper boy before I buy it. One day near the end of spring, I remember asking him, “What is new in the bazaar?”

“Black cherries have just come into season,” he responded.

“Will you get me some?” I asked and threw the money down to him. The boy got me a bag full of black cherries and sent them up in the basket.

“Do you want to come upstairs?” Suddenly it occurred to me to ask. He nodded and walked toward the door. I hauled on the chains connected to the door and started to wash the cherries. As the boy’s footsteps were getting closer, my movement grew faster and the samovar boiled harder. Then I saw the boy’s shy face through the half open doors. For a while he looked at me with curiosity and timidity, as I watched him and his changing emotions. It had been a long time since I had seen a human being up close. He had a red face like somebody from the mountains, and his plump cheeks were still chapped from the weather a few days ago. His eyes were hazel, and his brown hair covered his forehead. He looked like the cherubs in the corner of the ceiling, the only difference being the blood circulating under his cheeks. This you could see without any difficulty.

“Come and sit over there,” I said. Awkwardly he walked toward the chair, sat on it, and with curious eyes looked at the cherubs.

“They look like you, don’t they?” I remarked. He blushed and turned toward the garden. Smiling at him, I put the cherry basket before him and sat in a way that would block his view of the corpse. Droplets of water were rolling down the cherries and their bright color had an incredible sheen. As a matter of fact, everything seemed incredible as I began to think that if I could somehow get two blocks away, I would positively find people in love – positively.

“Do you like murderers?” I asked. He nodded.

“Me too, and if they need help I would hide them in my house...Do you know them?” I asked eagerly. He shook his head and suddenly saw the corpse. He froze, and it felt as if the samovar suddenly stopped boiling. I said, “Perhaps once in the old days, he too was murderer, and if you and I had been around we could have loved him.”

“Forgive me for coming in with dirty shoes...”, he said with his eyes frozen on the corpse.

“It doesn’t matter, now eat some cherries,” I interrupted, pushing the basket toward him. Then I went to the other window to get some damn thing or another and, when I turned around, he was gone.

I said all this to explain why one could sometimes feel so depressed. Of course, sometimes nobody comes to visit and one gets very lonely. Some other times one doesn’t want a visitor, but still feels depressed. I sometimes get like that and sit on the couch for hours watching my big toe move, or I pace the room. And I have to confess that even the newspaper can do nothing for me in such an unhappy condition – whichever country one goes to there’s a long and wide street named after the leader of that country and then there’s a big square with a large

statue of him in the middle. It is in this way that monotony depresses a person. A depression such as this hit me at the sunset of the day I went to Katmandu. The previous evening I had read something about Katmandu in the paper, something about its temples. Katmandu has so many temples. I went to sleep that night, woke up and cleaned the room in the morning, had breakfast, made lunch and ate it. Then I had a ridiculous, boring afternoon watching my toe for a thousand hours and occasionally wiggling it. Eventually boredom gave way to hallucination, and I went to Katmandu. Katmandu was on top of a tall mountain and from a distance its temples' towers seemed to touch the clouds. Along with other people, I was hiking up a road. The newspaper columnist had forgotten to write how long it took to reach the city via the road. In fact, he had completely forgotten about the road. It was a vague, complicated, and mountainous road, for Katmandu is a city in the mountain. It was noontime and very humid. My whole body was sweaty, and the city looked like a mirage in the distance. Then we reached it. It was the same as I could have imagined it to be. I can never pay attention to details. I don't feel like doing that when I'm outside my home. Katmandu had a major street named after the king, and at the end of that street there was a square with his statue in it. The columnist was correct in saying that the city had many temples. I visited a few and then went to a temple with a large stone-paved yard. Grass had grown in between the cobblestones. The temple had a blue dome and a few towers. The people's faces were hazy and unclear. Actually, I didn't enter any temples. I only entered their courtyards. I imagined that they were burning incense inside, and that a man was sitting at a corner chanting and that perhaps a few corpses were sitting, waiting inside the shrine for burial ceremonies. Perhaps there were things like that inside the temple. I lay down on the stone-paved floor. I was very tired, and the newspaper in my hands was sweaty. Above my head there was the blue dome of Katmandu's afternoon sky, the ceiling of my prison and temple. The sky was very blue, and in the west streaks of sunlight penetrated down, and the composition of the blue of the sky and the blue of the temple's domes and the sunlight made white streaks that sometimes arched to the middle of the sky. And in such a state I fell asleep in Katmandu.

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