

Sense of an ending: when water becomes the ashen face of a dream

Shara Atashi

When I was a child, the 'Life-giving river' was a miracle, as was Isfahan, the magical blue oasis with its illuminated bridges and blue domes built by Persian slaves many centuries ago. To children, everything is miracle. There was the 'Forty-Column Palace'. I could count only twenty columns. So I asked my mother why forty? She said: look at the pool! There are the other twenty! The reflection of the columns in the water is embraced by the name of the palace. The water is its name-giver. Now there is no water for the pool to multiply the columns. But the name will remain.

Now the life-giving Zayandeh Rood, the largest river of my lost homeland, has died. Lost homeland? For me, yes. I doubt that I will ever go there again in this life. Dead river? No. I can't think that a river can die, not this river, because 'life-giving' is embraced in its name. And the name will remain. The Zayandeh river rises in the heights of Zard-Kuh, the Yellow Mountain, out of reach of idle patriarchs in their loafers and long black cloaks who drained the river for industry. From high above, the river used to flow 400 kilometres, travelled through the desert and passed Isfahan, to end in the salt marsh Gavkhuni. The marsh is dry, too, but the salt will remain for ever. Though dry for a very long time, the river is not dead. Will it recover in the next 43 years? That is the length of time its slow but steady destruction has taken. I can only see the pictures in the news. There is my memory of the blue water and the illuminated, vaulted arch bridges, the Siosepol with its 33 arches, the Khaju Bridge ... Pictures of the empty riverbed at Isfahan

have been shown in the news for decades. A portrait of thirst, a portrait deprived of serenity, a serenity that invited birds and humans. Now the bed is filled with screams and blood. Screams and blood of protesters. The blood and tears from their eyes travel to the salt marsh, as the water used to do for millennia. The stronger the fury blows, the more salt is set into motion. I let it remain a miracle of transformation: where once the sweet water joined the salt marsh, now salt joins salt, the salt of tears and blood joins the salt of creation.

The patriarchs in loafers have ordered them shot, bloody and blind, those protesting against thirst, against the killing of the river. The patriarchs shut down the World Wide Web to blind the whole world. But they can't anymore. The flood of protest has broken through the border to the rest of the world. Because the river wants to live. Because those who first named it Zayandeh Rood knew about water and thirst millennia ago. The patriarchs of the past 43 years have no idea. At the recent Global Climate Summit, it was apparent that the majority of the world's influential authorities don't think much about thirst either. But children do. They believe in miracles. The river will rise from its source once more and civilisation will take shape again.

Iran was formed in the desert over millennia. All other civilisations were formed near water; Iran was an exception. Iranians invented the preservation and management of this life-giving element which they worshipped. They examined existing rivers to understand the water's movement and voice. Then they invented their own irrigation system and brought agriculture and rose gardens to the desert. Their creation was a reflection of the divine.

Last Friday in a sermon, a loafer in a black cloak explained the drought as the will of his god. It is now that I sense an ending. We are almost there. The river, the river will rise again, and live on, sometimes as the ashen face of a dream, sometimes as the portrait of serenity.

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Shara Atashi is an author and translator based in Aberystwyth, Wales. She is the daughter of the Iranian poet Manuchehr Atashi. Her mother is a visual artist. In 1979, at the age of twelve, she travelled to Frankfurt, West Germany with her mother in the hope that the new cleric regime in Iran wouldn't last long. That journey became a life-long exile and Shara, who was an antifascist from an early age, enjoyed an anti-authoritarian schooling and later a liberal education at the Goethe University, where she read law under a number of influential leftist scholars involved in the work of Germany's Federal Constitutional Court.

Shara worked for lawyers representing prominent clients, including sympathisers of the Baader-Meinhof Group, and later witnessed the fall of the Berlin Wall. After working for the European Patent Office in the Hague she relocated to London and settled down as a translator.

Her works have subsequently been published in several journals. In 2021 Shara was awarded a place at Literature Wales's campaign against racism and is now dedicating her entire time to writing and literary translation. Her most recent work, 'Large Glass', published by *WritersMosaic* earlier this year, is an extract from her upcoming memoir *Tomb at Bushehr*.

A recording of this talk can be found at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

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