The Forbidden Gender

Saba Vasefi
Translated by Sheema Kalbasi

Saba Vasefi is an award winning human rights activist, poet and feminist filmmaker. She is the Director of the Sydney International Women’s Poetry & Arts Festival, Director of the Diaspora Symposium and an Asylum Seekers Centre Ambassador. She was the recipient of the Premier’s Multicultural Medal for Art & Culture, an Edna Ryan Award for making a significant contribution to feminist debate and also a finalist in the Women’s Agenda Leadership Award. She was twice a judge for the Sedigheh Dolatabadi Book Prize for the Best Book on Women’s Literature and Issues. Her articles have been published in media outlets such as the BBC, the Guardian and Daily Life.

The road had potholes,
the school had veils,
and the students
lay dead under their burqas in a well.

When the sirens rang,
silence sat at the back of the classroom
and waited under the stairs
wanting only to harm us,
and suicide pills
were the best hope for ambitious students.

The world was not heavier than a cat

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and life was a black market for the men; 
and we were the forbidden gender 
cudgelled in the back of stores.

In the mornings 
in black packages 
we went to school 
to learn 
how to live in tents, 
not fear the heat 
and be cautious 
the eyes wouldn’t swallow us.

Spent cartridges at the foot of the blackboard, 
power outages, 
water shortages; 
but scarves were always on sale 
and beatings were low priced. 
The veil was a necessary addiction 
for our eyes 
and the gray sacks we covered our bodies with 
were the uniforms that taught us 
to forget about life.

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Instead, we were free
to die as much as we desired—
at the frontline,
under rockets,
by stones
thrown at us ever since childhood.

In the martyred elementary school
classmates fled their land like shrapnel;
kissing was banned,
happiness an unaccustomed term,
and the only mascara available was tears.

No one knew how to pencil
their eyes
or line around their lips,
and the only line to follow was Imam’s.
All the lines were red:
alarm,
fire,
war,
this is what childhood presented to me.
Starling on a tree,
the year in evil,
that child, born in the eighties,
who is holding her knees
and exhaling oil exports,
doesn’t know how to blow out
smoke from the shockwave of war’s homework.
Only these days
no, no, no stinking principle
is ringing the bell of my release.