HEIRS OF POETRY AND RAIN

FARZAD KAMANGAR'S LETTER FROM PRISON TO HIS STUDENTS

FARZAD KAMANGAR

a Kurdish school teacher, poet, and activist, was imprisoned and tortured by the Islamic Republic of Iran for four years. In prison, even after being sentenced to death, Kamangar continued to advocate for human rights and justice for Iran's minority communities in letters that he smuggled out of prison, sometimes in fragments, addressed to his young students and other political prisoners. The Islamic regime executed Kamangar at age thirty-five in 2010.

Translated from the Farsi by TYLER FISHER
& HAIDAR KHEZRI

A DAY AFTER THE DECREE OF EXECUTION

HELLO, CLASS.

My heart constricts from missing every one of you. Here in prison I compose the poem of life's eternal song, day and night, with sweet recollections and dreams of you. Every morning, in your stead, I greet the sun. I wake up alongside you within these high walls and laugh with you and sleep by your side. Sometimes, something like the tightness of heartache overwhelms me with longing.

I wish we could release the dust of our day's weariness to the village spring's crystal-clear hands of forgetfulness, like in the old times when we returned, exhausted from all the excitement of our games in the fields (an "official school field trip," we called it, of course).

نامه های یک اعدامی

نامه ی فرزاد کمانگر، معلم محکوم به اعدام، به دانش آموزانش - اسفند ۱۳۸۶

یک روز بعد از اعلام حکم اعدام

بیه ها سلام،

دلم برای همه ی شما تنگ شده ، اینجا شب و روز با خیال و خاطرات شیرینتان شعر زندگی میسرایم ، هر روز به جای شما به خورشید روزبخیر میگویم ، از لای این دیوارهای بلند با شما بیدار میشوم ، با شما میخندم و با شما میخوابم . گاهی چیزی شبیه دلتنگی همه ی وجودم را میگیرد .

I wish we could, as in old times, surrender our ears to the "Footsteps of Water,"1 and our bodies to the caress of flowers and grass, and start our class with nature's beautiful rural symphony, and put our math book under a stone with all the world's unknowns still to solve, because when a father can Add no Bread to his Children's table—the most basic ABCs, rudimentary math—what difference does it make if pi equals 3.14 or 100.14? And I wish we could set aside the science lesson about all of the world's chemical and physical changes, and contemplate changes in matters of love and miracles, and study the breezes and convoys of clouds, awaiting a change that would avoid sending your lively little classmate Kurush straight from the classroom to the construction site, and, as a teenager, keep him from tumbling off a building in search of bread and leaving us forever—instead, a change like that of the New Year, bringing everyone a new pair of shoes, a set of fine clothes, and a basket brimming with candies.

I wish we could again furtively practice our Kurdish alphabet, far from the principal's stern eye, and compose poems for each oth1. A poem by the renowned Iranian poet and painter, Sohrab Sepehri (1928–1980).

كاش ميشد مانند گذشته خسته از بازیهایی كه آنها را گردش علمی مینامیدیم، و خسته از همه ی هیاهوها، گرد و غبار خستگیهایمان را همراه زلالی چشمه روستا به دست فراموشی میسپردیم، کاش میشد مثل گذشته گوشمان را به «صدای پای آب» و تنمان را به نوازش گل و گیاه میسپردیم و همراه با سمفونی زیبای طبیعت کلاس درسمان را تشکیل میدادیم و کتاب ریاضی را با همه ى مجهولات دنيا زير سنگى ميگذاشتيم چون وقتى بابا نانی برای تقسیم کردن در سفره ندارد چه فرقی میکند، عدد پی سه ممیز چهارده باشد یا صد ممیز چهارده، و کاش میشد درس علوم را با همه ی تغییرات شیمیایی و فیزیکی دنیا به کناری میگذاشتیم و به امید تغییری از جنس «عشق و معجزه» میماندیم و لکه های ابر را در آسمان همراه با نسیم بدرقه میکردیم و منتظر تغییری میماندیم که کورش همان همکلاسی پرشورتان را از سر کلاس راهی کارگری نکند و در نوجوانی از بلندای ساختمان به دنبال نان برای همیشه سقوط نکند و ترکمان ننماید، منتظر تغییری که برای عید نوروز یک جفت کفش نو و یک دست لباس خوب و یک سفره پر از نقل و شیرینی برای همه به همراه داشته باشد٠

کاش میشد دوباره و دزدکی دور از چشمان ناظم اخموی مدرسه الفبای کردیمان را دوره میکردیم و برای هم با زبان مادری شعر می سرودیم و آواز er in our mother tongue, and sing and dance hand in hand, and dance and dance.

I wish I could again be goalkeeper for the first-grade boys, and you will score goals against your teacher with the dream of becoming Ronaldo, with hugs to celebrate every goal. Ah, but sadly, in our land, dreams and wishes gather the dust of forgetting even before it settles on picture frames. I wish I could again join in the "Ring-around-the-Uncle" game, leading the chants of the first-grade girls, you girls who, years later, at the corner of a page in your diary will write: "I wish I wasn't born a girl."

Now I know you have grown up and will marry. But for me, you're the same pure and graceful angels with traces of Ahura Mazda's³ divine kiss still clear between your beautiful eyes. And really, who knows, if only you angels were not children of poverty and sorrow, you wouldn't have to go everywhere, paper in hand, collecting signatures to support women's campaigns for equality. And if you had not been born in this godforsaken corner of the earth, you would not be forced to bid farewell to school for the last time at age thirteen, with eyes full of tears and regret, under the white veil of be-

2. This sentence does not appear in the manuscript letter but does appear in the printed version, a difference which reflects the difficulties Kamangar and his relatives faced when smuggling these messages out of prison in writtenfragments, via transcriptions from phone calls, and other means.

In Zoroastrianism, Ahura Mazda is the supreme beneficent god, creator of the universe. میخواندیم و بعد دست در دست هم میرقصیدیم و میرقصیدیم و میر قصیدیم.

کاش میشد باز در بین پسران کلاس اول همان دروازهبان میشدم و شما در رویای رونالدو شدن به آقا معلمتان گل میزدید و همدیگر را در آغوش میکشیدید، اما افسوس نمیدانید که در سرزمین ما رویاها و آرزوها قبل از قاب عکسمان غبار فراموشی به خود میگیرد، کاش میشد باز پای ثابت حلقه عمو زنجیرباف دختران کلاس اول میشدم، همان دخترانی که میدانم سالها بعد در گوشهی دفتر خاطراتتان دزدکی مینویسید کاش دختر به دنیا نمیامدیم.

حالا میدانم بزرگ شده اید، شوهر میکنید ولی برای من همان فرشتگان پاک و بی آلایشی هستید که هنوز «جای بوسهی اهورا مزدا» بین چشمان زیبایتان دیده میشود، راستی چه کسی میداند اگر شما فرشتگان زادهی رنج و فقر نبودید، کاغذ به دست برای کمپین برابری زنان امضاء جمع نمیکردید و یا اگر در این گوشه از «خاک فراموش شدهی خدا» به دنیا نمی آمدید، مجبور نبودید در سن سیزده سالگی با چشمانی پر از اشک و حسرت «زیر تور سفید زن شدن» برای آخرین بار با مدرسه وداع کنید و «قصهی تلخ جنس دوم بودن» را با همه ی وجود تجربه کنید. دختران سرزمین اهورا، فردا که در دامن طبیعت خواستید برای فرزندانتان پونه بچینید یا برایشان از

coming a woman, and would not experience, with every fiber of your being, the bitter story of the second-class gender.

You daughters of the land of Ahura Mazda, tomorrow when, in the folds of nature's skirt, you pick minty pennyroyal leaves or weave a flower-crown of violets, remember to recite all your childhood innocence and joys.

You sons of the land of nature and the Sun, I know you are no longer able to sit with your classmates, to read and laugh, because right after the tragedy of becoming a man, the grief of earning your daily bread will seize you by the collar. But remember not to turn your back on poetry, on song, on your lovers and your shared dreams. Teach your children to be heirs of poetry and rain, for their homeland, for their todays and their tomorrows.

I entrust you to the hands of the wind and sun. Until that notso-distant tomorrow, recite the lessons of honesty and love for our homeland.

Your friend, companion at play, and childhood teacher, Farzad Kamangar Rajai-Shahr Prison of Karaj 28 February 2008 بنفشه تاجی از گل بسازید حتماً از تمام پاکی ها و شادی های دوران کودکیتان یاد کنید.

پسران سرزمین آفتاب و طبیعت میدانم دیگر نمیتوانید با همکلاسیهایتان بنشینید، و بخوانید و بخندید چون بعد از «مصیبت مرد شدن» تازه «غم نان» گریبان شما را خواهد گرفت، اما یادتان باشد که به شعر، به آواز، به لیلاهایتان، به رویاهایتان پشت نکنید، به فرزندانتان یاد بدهید برای سرزمینشان برای فرزندانتان یاد بدهید برای سرزمینشان برای امروز و فرداها فرزندی از جنس «شعر و باران» باشند به دست باد و آفتاب میسپارمتان تا فردایی نه چندان دور درس عشق و صداقت را برای سرزمینمان مترنم شوید.

رفیق، همبازی و معلم دوران کودکیتان

فرزاد کمانگر - زندان رجایی شهر کرج

1719/17/9

مع بان روز بعد از احلام حدا عداد عرزوى الراع هروز بلعه فاى الم ورسد وزعيرى ول ار الى ايون و بوارها كالمند باسماميرار مرسوم ، باسم بهمدم وما سما ويحوام کار صری سد دلتنی هری وجود) رام کرد ... Establish only it is a light of the وحسترازهمى هياهوها تردوعبار خسكي هايدان راحرامز للايحراب روستا بديد م أموسي من سردم كاس من لا مدل الديث توشى مان واله صداى باى كاسوسمان راس موازس على وكياه من مودم وهراه بالمسعودي من طاس در از التيل م دادم و تن سرا مي داراهدي ولات الرَّر من منذا عنم بون وقيها الاي واي فن ورد فره مرارد مع فر عامل سر معيز جارده لا يا عد معيز جارده در امر تصدری از حسی عقد معمر و کله های لیر را درا کا دراه را ماسید بررم میکردیم و منتقل تعسری می ما نوم که کورک های عماری برمورتان والزسركاس راح كارترى نكنه وورنجاني ازملوال ا مال و درا ل فرادم ای عسد مقط منذر و ترکاد تا مر



מול ב את לית סין בול וול בוע בים ניתנע בני ۳) سالکی باحیکان براز انگ وحسرت زیرتر رصیر لکی نن مکرن برارا فرسه بار با مدرسه ودان کنید و وقعه ت لم صس دوم بو دن رابا هدي وجود خريك ليمر دعران مرزمين أهورا ومزدا ورداكم دروامان طبعت واستروا وزرزان در دسد با بات ن مارنس تاجازی سازیر . حَمَا از ماع با کی هاو گاربای دورا به دوری ال بر المرزورة عمدًا بوطبيعة عدان كرور الم موالير بام کلای مایدان سسفر و مرا بد و مندر جود مدار معیت مردو مرد مرده بم فریمان ما را خواهد فرفت نان برووان م دمایاد آن با مرکه بر عرب آواز بم لیلاها یکا و لیت الند يه عرز مراسان يا در موس على مرز مين كان مرام امروز وفرداها غربرى ازها عنى عرما ران بالنزويدس بادواتار م سیرمنان کا فردای نامند لادور درای ع کاوجراف الرای سرزسین مان میتر نم نوبر معدادى دوس معلم مران اودى مان والما

TRANSLATORS' NOTE: Farzad Kamangar was a Kurdish primary school teacher, poet, journalist, and human rights activist who was executed, age thirty-five, along with four other political prisoners on May 9, 2010, in Iran's notorious Evin Prison. Kamangar was born in the city of Kamyaran, in the Kurdistan Province of western Iran. As a Kurd, he advocated for greater cultural and political self-determination for his minority community, and his advocacy extended to environmentalist causes, women's rights, and educational reforms. His writing, for periodicals published by Kamyaran's Department of Education and by a regional human rights organization, displays his dual commitment to beautiful literary expression and unflinching documentation of human rights abuses in Iranian Kurdistan.

In July 2006, Kamangar was arrested in Tehran while accompanying his brother for medical treatment. After years of imprisonment and torture, Kamangar was

sentenced to death on charges of Moharebeh (waging war against God) and undermining national security. The Iranian Islamic regime's application of the term Moharebeh to Kamangar's case follows a pattern of recurring historical oppression because it has been applied to Iranian Kurds since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Iran has invoked this "crime" as grounds for executing political prisoners in 1988, condoning the Serial Murders of Iran (1988-1998), cracking down on the presidential election protests in 2009, and suppressing the current "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement. As a non-Shi'a Kurd, Kamangar was especially vulnerable to this charge as a minority by religious sect, ethnicity, and language.

Just days after receiving the death sentence, Kamangar penned, in Persian, the letter we have translated into English. This letter is the first of several he wrote to his students immediately following the decree of execution. He managed

to smuggle the letters out of prison, one by one, when members of his family visited. These letters, which express Kamangar's unbounded love for his students and for his Kurdish homeland, survive as a vivid testimony of his unquenchable spirit. Of particular note is Kamangar's sensitivity to how forces of socioeconomic class and gender would inevitably shape his students' lives, in a context wherein girls typically leave school at the age of ten or eleven and marry young into a restrictive domestic radius. Boys, for their part, tend to spend more years in school and enjoy greater social freedoms, yet face the high incidence of industrial accidents and exploitative manual labor for subsistence. Kamangar recognized the Kurdish struggle against intersecting factors of oppression yet expressed an indomitable hope for the Kurds' future.

The brutal conditions of Kamangar's imprisonment, the physical and mental torture to which he was subjected, and his execution brought global condemnations of the Islamic regime of Iran from many organizations, including UNICEF, Education International, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch. Protests have marked the anniversary of his execution in Paris, London, Berlin, Washington, D.C., and many Kurdish cities.

The legacy of Kamangar's resistance and struggle for justice, in the face of the atrocities of his imprisonment and execution, has reverberated in Kurdish literature. Shêrko Bêkes (1940-2013), the renowned Kurdish poet, wrote an elegy for Kamangar, titled "Republic of Execution" with reference to the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Kurdish Iranian director Bahman Ghobadi dedicated his film Rhino Season (2012) to Farzad Kamangar and Sanea Jaleh (1985-2011), a Kurdish student who was shot dead in the protests that marked the Iranian Green Movement. In 2020, Ava

Homa, the Kurdish writer, journalist, and activist, dedicated her novel, Daughters of Smoke and Fire, to "Farzad Kamangar for imagining otherwise." His letters from prison invite his readers to imagine greater possibilities, higher ideals beyond the Islamofascism that sought to obliterate his native language and liberties. As Iran's authoritarian regime yoked the forces of theocratic fanaticism and the nation-state in the service of a Persian and Shi'a Islamic Republic, exclusive of and discriminatory towards ethno-racial and religious minorities, Kamangar counters with a primary school teacher's mild-mannered defiance and irrepressible dreams.

Kamangar's letter to his students, which has not been previously translated into English in full, is as much a prose poem as a letter. Its poetic qualities repeatedly remind the reader that this is no ordinary letter. Parallelism and repetition (anaphora and alliteration), together with an onrushing polysyndeton,

convey an outpouring of memories and reverie, channeled within his careful artistry and the epistolary form. He expresses a confluence of soaring ideals and winsome whimsy alongside the ordeals of political imprisonment, ethnic repression, and social inequities. Our translation sought to preserve the letter's stylistic and thematic interplay. We have kept domestication to a minimum, especially when the letter evokes an excursion into the Kurdish countryside with young students. The Persian children's circle game, Amoo Zanjir Baf (literally, "Chain-Weaver Uncle"), for instance, is lightly modified to "Ring-aroundthe-Uncle," recognizable yet recognizably distinct.

TYLER FISHER completed his doctorate in Medieval and Modern Languages at Magdalen College, University of Oxford. He is now an Associate Professor in the University of Central Florida's Department of Modern Languages and Literatures.

His book-length translations of poetry include José Martí's Ismaelillo (Wings Press, 2007) and Federico García Lorca's The Dialogue of Two Snails (Penguin, 2018), and he has also published translations of poetry from Catalan, Kurdish, and Aramaic.

HAIDAR KHEZRI completed his doctorate in Middle Eastern Comparative Literature at Damascus University. He also gained ACTFL/ ILR OPI certifications for Persian/ Farsi and Kurdish (2017), and for Arabic (2021) from the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. He designed and developed the first and only Central/ Sorani Kurdish curriculum for North American universities under a Title VI U.S. Department of Education Grant, and through Indiana University's Center for the Study of the Middle East. In 2019, he became the University of Central Florida's first Assistant Professor of Arabic, a key role for building the university's capacity to teach Middle Eastern languages and cultures. Khezri is the author of Comparative Literature in Iran and the Arab World, 1903–2012 (Tehran: Samt Press, 2013; second edition, Cairo: Egyptian Cultural Academy, 2017) and It Is Only Sound That Remains (Erbil: Salahadin University Press, 2016). He is currently working on a book-length project about the reception of Franz Kafka in Middle Eastern literary cultures.

Together, Fisher and Khezri have published collaborative translations of Kurdish poetry in *The Bangalore Review, The Brooklyn Rail, Y'alla,* and *Poet Lore,* as well as in the anthologies *My Moon Is the Only Moon: The Poetry of Nali* and *Essential Voices: Poetry of Iran and Its Diaspora.*