

FARNAZ FATEMI

## *Sister Tongue*

On the plane to Iran I inventory what I need. Words, ways to speak them, moments when they matter. These are the things I have promised myself I'll remember.

*Eshgh.* How the word *love* sounds in my other language. I hear the word, the back of my mouth closing in unison with the speaker's *gh*, heart quickening, chest relaxing. With a different passport, my eyes move right to left on the page, my tongue tastes different, curls and loops, then drops back into my palate.

*Eshgh.* The sound of cooing made-up words I could have said to other children when we were young. An intuition. Back when we understood each other no matter how the words were spelled. I meet a woman on the streets in Teheran who's come from New York for a few days. We share the half-tones between English and Farsi. I recognize how she points and swears, she understands how I flip my hair. We've only just met. I know I know her.

This is how it feels to sound out *joon*. To say *eshgh-e-man*. To tell you I will kiss you when you're asleep.

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On my first month-long trip to Iran as a grown woman, with my mother, my grandmother, my twin sister, I do not talk much. My grandmother and mother do the work for us, though in the mornings, before getting so exhausted from paying attention that I space out, I listen, to understand—I learn that listening is work, too.

We wanted to cool off from the swelter of boulevards in Teheran. It was June and the air was thick and we felt our manteaus—our almost fashionable, somewhat tailored coats—shutting us inside. It was early: I hadn't yet learned how to wear one without hiding in it. The pockets—I had thought they were such a good idea—added layers and my hips sweat nonstop. The space under my bra-line was soaked. We wanted to cool off. In a small grocery market we lingered at the melons. The store sold ice cream cones—lemon-hued and rose flavored. My aunt asks me to order my own. She has seen me listening, knows how I'd feel if I could. I do. I don't know what it sounds like: I'm too busy watching the man's face as I speak to see if I'm understood. I am. I remember the ice cream from 25 years before. I move into the language carefully, hoping to make just enough sense, and my aunt's eyes light up—as if she were me, sounding out the words, putting one word on the string of words behind the previous one, hearing the click and clack of the words coming together as a full strand, a whole meaning. She smiles, then whoops one of her half-inhaled, half-screamed laughs. She looks at me and tastes her ice cream, thinking about how I braved out of my silent shell for a moment. Yells, “*Ahf, Farnaz, kafe mikonim!* Do you know what kafe means? Oh, Farnaz, kafe is like, ‘we are having a blast.’ Aren't we?!!” I smile, bewildered.

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Though I've been hearing Farsi all my life, this still happens: I learn how to use a word in the right place, at the right time, and my head feels saffron bright, pure sunlight.

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A chorus: *Khariji-ast?* Are you a foreigner?

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The *azan*, *allah-o-akbar*. The call to prayer.

Allah's not god to me; he's my mother and my great aunt's god: creature with a name I never say. When I've said God, I've said I'm not sure I believed there was one, though I know Amejoun's Allah was real. I heard her say the word, and I saw her kneel into the carpet in her room and pull a chador up around almost everything and leave her hands with her beads and her small Quran in her lap, whispering words about him—to him, with him.

When I'm in Iran the call to prayer is a call to God, an invocation. I join. My blood moves when I hear the phrase, Allah-o Akbar, sung like music. It's not music. It's the sound of crave, of need, insistence. My skin hairs become pert, feel warmed, independent—as if they could get a crush on the sound of a phrase that is so trite when translated; God is great, as if saying it makes it true.

The voice stops dogs in the street, incites admiration, self-erasure.

My shadow self: everything I don't say, can't. Or wish I did. But also the self I never had to become, the family's remains buried at the base of a different tree. Thought of by no young mother, missed by no one. The twilight lifetime that lingers in songs other people sing.

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We are in our mother's country. We listen to our mother's tongue. Our language shifts and it shifts us, tectonically.

*Biah*, I say. You hear it as demand. *Chehra nemi-ayid?* A complaint. Twin, in our mother's country we cling to each other dizzy with disorientation. *Az dellam ta dellatoon*, daughter of my mother. Our tongues divide us. The words haven't changed. But here, when we hear them, we do. I crane my head to find you: *Negah-kon*.

All the things my sister thinks she doesn't know pull her away. She doesn't buckle, lets herself be pulled. She is headed into a canyon of silence, and surrenders.

I use all the easy phrases I have, every word I've learned and practiced, each success following another, a line of stones. She gets smaller as she gets farther away, so I turn to retrace my steps. I'm afraid to go too far ahead alone.

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Board the bus to cross the tarmac and two women, younger than I am, move towards each other to free up a seat for me. They smile at me, talk about their boxes of cookies, say what they are going to do on the island we're headed to in the gulf. I understand whole sentences, can translate their giggles, feel cajoled and embraced, the way I'm meant to.

But no language comes. I had over thirty years of moments before this one, and I recognize the reckless flirtation of phrases, the invitation. Each of those moments have led me here, my tongue split to muteness. I want to giggle back to them in Farsi, spill laughter over them with words. All I can do is smile, and it is a poverty. They are an island themselves, huddling with their shirini, and I am unmoored and floating away.

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*Noush-e-joon.*

When I tell the chef of the house how delicious her food is, she will say back, *Noush-e-joon*. A blessing that goes deep—a giving back of more than just the meal.

*Noushejoon*. I say it now. Sometimes I just say it in my head, because I know the person eating my food doesn't know what it means. But I mean it. It comes without me ever learning it literally. It comes from wanting to keep the gratitude in the open, not shy.

I want to explain:

It has little to do with, "So kind of you to say." It's close to, "You've tasted my love and given it back to me. I give it back again. I deposit it deep inside you." I knew all that before I ever had to ask. I even knew it when I pronounced it wrong, said, "moosh," another word for *cute*, because I could tell how sweet it sounded. I learned it before I learned it. When I say it now, I want to say it raw, I don't want to stop myself, even though I often do. I am intimate. I want to sound like my aunts saying it to me: Hear my love in your ears, swallow it.

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I have always heard Farsi, though I stopped speaking it when I was very young. There wasn't one moment when I was a girl that my mother suddenly began speaking it to us. Most of my early memories are in the cold, white fake marble entry hallway where I was 3, 4, 5, and my parents are yelling at each other in Farsi, and my mother is crying. I'm sure I didn't understand the words then, though I understood the meaning: my father, defensive, on his way out; my mother trying to get the scene to end differently. By that time, I'd visited Iran already. Perhaps I spoke Farsi as a toddler. It was no doubt spoken to me.

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For a summer after my grandmother moved from Iran to LA, we lived with her. After summer school, my sister and I made our way to her house. We'd memorized how to tell her about the bus ride, and we knew we were allowed to throw in English words like "beach" or

“shopping”—we knew she knew them. We could tell her when we felt sick, and we knew how to say school, and friend, and foods and objects. One day, I got stuck. I felt sure I knew the word for plastic bag and I needed one for a sandwich. I asked her where they were. I stood there, holding my sandwich, waiting, 13 years old. She was confused. “*Che-mikhai, azizam?* What do you want, sweetie?” “*Pah-kat,*” I repeated, reciting the word for envelope as if all young girls took them to the beach. She started to laugh and moved to the drawers, pulling out a plastic bag, and asked me something like, “Is this what you want?” I nodded, taking it in. She said, in Farsi, “this isn’t an envelope, this is a bag” her eyes beaming with affection. My own bugged out. I realized my mistake, and tried to burn the word in my head forever. I tried to laugh, but I was overwhelmed, annoyed by own muteness. I retreated for the rest of the day. For years, when I’d try to remember the word for bag, I’d think of the word for envelope instead.

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When I speak my Farsi, I see gold flakes floating in the pan.

I taste the plum colored pomegranate-walnut in the sounds of *azizam* when my great aunt looks at me from her tiny, scarved head. And the mint dressing she makes is summoned by the words she uses to love me when I am young and nervous at a new school that is near the house where she lives.

When I speak Farsi, I always speak imperfectly, hazarding conjugations, connective syllables.

When I speak Farsi I see the thick-toothed smile of my grandmother, sounding out the words in a whisper under her breath. She is rooting for me, in her elegant pants, holding her carefully packed pocketbook, proud wet eyes.

When I speak Farsi, the memories from my childhood are all good ones. I am in a parallel universe of joy and generosity, in my grandmother's Teheran living room, crooked words stretching out in front of me. I am not afraid of who I am—only curious. When I speak Farsi all the people who love me have their hands on either side of my face. Turn by turn they spend one long moment seeing who they hold, and I see them.

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It's the women I want to share the most with, who frighten me most because they matter. Is it obvious to them how I want them to say more, how hard I believe if they just kept talking I'd find sentences in my pockets I would pull out and lay around their necks? Everything else is either possible or isn't. The women are who I would have been, though they smile much more and wear more lipstick. They take more chances.

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In shops I begin to hear a phrase we never used at home. "Ghabel nadareh"—which means, literally, it has no worth. I ask about the price of an old wooden box at a bazaar, or a small kilim at the carpet seller's; *it has no worth*. It is a gesture of humility—as if it is not worthy of me, as if I could take it for free. I have to ask again: what is the price? Well, for you...The phrase is polite, full of deference for you, the one who might give the seller the honor of buying something; you, the one with power and choice because you possess the money and not the thing. It's a sign to start a relationship. Everyone knows: shopkeepers are the ultimate negotiators, their bargaining is cut throat, there is an ingrained acceptance that the men with the goods are doing you a favor by selling them to you, at whatever price. Even as this contradictory palimpsest is built up, everyone also listens for the *Ghabel nadare*, the "I am not worthy" chant, the deference with which the changing of money can only take place.

*Ghabel nadare*; then the gloves come off. It has no worth, but don't insult me by offering next to nothing. If the bargaining doesn't start off respectfully, neither party will be happy—no matter who “wins.” Because it will actually feel like a battle, with a victor, and the unspoken desire in all 1:1 transactions is for both people to feel like they had power to the last—that they were able to make choices about money, language, possession, exchange. This can only happen if both sides avoid the temptation to take advantage of the power they begin with.

I say 20 toman, and he says 80. The distance is broachable. We breathe a little easier. Now we can take our time, listen more thoughtfully to the proposals, feel we've not lost ourselves inside the money that might change hands.

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I'm apologizing (again) for my scratchy words, my unkempt phrasing. “I just came from California, I--” and I'm interrupted. *Dast-e shoma dard nakonid*. “May your hands not be hurt by all the effort.”

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It didn't take long to fall in love with Iran. Between the “fuck this headscarf, I am so freaking hot” and the loneliness of not being able to sound out letters to make words, or words to phrases, I saw my father's youngest brother, a man only a few years older than I am, swoon over the great square in Esfahan. Here was a working guy, someone who'd made his fortune with pizza places and was now helping relatives get footing the same way. He'd say, “Do you know how old these buildings are? Do you see what beautiful architecture was being built here, rivaling—better than—great European cities?” He'd point to the top of an elaborate domed building and tell me what era the dome was from. He'd take me to the beautifully kept garden courtyard of the Abbasi

Hotel, on a warm spring night, and we'd eat a scrumptious dinner or have tea and sweets. We'd pull over on the road near the river where an older woman and her young family roasted corn over a giant can stove fire, eating while we stood between the car and the park nearby. He'd watch with approval as I devoured the corn without pause. "Isn't this the BEST," he'd say, not waiting for my answer. "When I was in England I tried to make this." And shake his head.

I came to understand that one could get a lifetime crush on Iran. I feel this way still. I was embarrassed about this love when I came back the first time, effusive, ignorant about the privilege of my smooth entry into and out of both my countries. Others couldn't. They explained how they'd been told not to try, wouldn't be able to get the paperwork to return to their original home. Or had left the states and, presenting their green cards or provisional cards on return, met the bureaucracy of non-belonging at the U.S. border.

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As a welcome, my aunt has stocked the kitchen with the beginnings of delicious meals. She's chopped the vegetables and stewed the meat for the obgusht; she has diced the greens for the ghormeh sabzi.

The meals unfold over our first few days. I'll slurp the soup of the obgusht, and wish I could ask all the questions I want to ask but I don't have most of the important words. Monir's seasonings conjure sick days when I was a kid. I think of phrases I could use to ask about the upcoming election, but each one feels stiff, translated word by word. I know that more language will help me think differently, and the words will come uninvited, one day. It only feels right to listen, absorb, wait, bite into a tender chunk of lamb, wipe my chin when I drip. But it also feels like I'm stifling some kind of opportunity.

I know the food will keep coming. I see the sense in tasting before talking. I remind myself there are other ways to be here, inside language but beside it, too, in order to let my brain change. As if it's sitting in a new chair and needs to learn how to relax back into it and find the right position.

I say to myself: what's different about this meal? How is it changed by eating this dish you've known all your life, here, in Teheran, at the age of 32?

I keep practicing listening.

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I dream my mother leaves me behind at a river crossing. There is a flood that fills streets, makes moats between houses. She makes it to shore. I stroke to a rooftop. I'm yelling, Mommy, Mommy and she's saying I know, just let me go to the bathroom first, and I say no, it will be too late. I start screaming help, help, but I know she can't hear me over the rushing water, so I scream louder. I wake up trapped on the safety and vantage of the top of a roof without a voice.

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When I learn to speak Farsi, even the people around me change. Tayebah, almost an aunt to me, speaks with me in her own tongue for the first time that I can remember, though I've known her since I was a small child. She sounds different in Farsi. We feel different to each other. Her jaw is less nervous, her scope bigger, she is a someone I want to know more.

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How it feels to be corrected: to not let what it sounded like be the right sound.

Or what it feels like to be smiled at with recognition: a face that wants to hear more, wants me to say more. The way Mamanjoon listened. When Farsi words are entrances to a world. When they say, *befarmahid*.

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In the bank in Mashhad, I piece together the phrases to explain my hundred dollar bills, I tell the story of my months in Iran and my need for more toman. I am a few months in and I have phrases—chunks of meaning tethered to each other by my smiling, my looking in the eye when I bring out my Farsi. These days I'm less concerned about my own comfort than I am with that of the person who is trying to understand me. Such luxury. The man behind the counter is delighted. He can't stop telling me how good it is that I am here, how important it is that I am coming back to visit my country. No matter how many times I hear it, "my country" startles me. He is a stranger to me, but in these moments, our lack of intimacy isn't relevant—in fact he acts as if I am a niece, like my experience matters. If there weren't other customers, he'd ask me questions. How am I finding things, how long will I stay, where will I go next. Like the cab drivers who ask me about America, but in Farsi, and I realize they want to see who I am. I am a citizen here to look, and it feels so *just* to be looked at back. I realize I've come to welcome it because it makes me feel like I belong.

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My muteness. It isn't usually real. It is like trying to speak while dreaming. In some dreams I want to yell, which means I know how I feel. I can't say how many times I've wanted to yell in Farsi, but it's not that many. Sometimes I could go deep enough in the fantasy

that I could understand whole sentences I imagined other people saying. I suppose it means I learned this language some deep way when I was very young and my dreamed-up conversations with my aunts and uncles are real.

Is that what is happening when I want to speak Farsi to my uncle Mohammad, a man who has lived in the states for over 50 years? After being in Iran I went to visit and his accented English engaged my Farsi heart—something inside me leapt awake. You won't believe me if I say this surprises me, but it does. I was raised to speak English. I was a suburban southern California kid with a name no one tried to get right. I didn't blame them. The only other Middle Easterner in elementary school, aside from me and my twin sister, was named Shubby Ali. Shubby was from Pakistan, and he was dark skinned and he could turn his eyelid inside out.

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I am leaving Iran after six months. I know I have too much luggage and am not worried when I'm sent to a special counter to get my bags wrapped, pay extra fees. There is a line but it's not unforgiving and I wait.

He is a small man, like many Iranians, just a couple inches above my head, but he is sitting at his counter on a stool so he is above me. I bring up my bags: a large suitcase, a stuffed duffel, a smaller suitcase, and a santour, strapped and tied into its case. He will weigh them. The man asks me about them. I explain what I have done, how I've fallen in love with the music, how much I'm trying to bring home with me. I tell him the size of the carpets folded up inside, the number of kilims, mention the uncles and aunts who helped make it happen. At first I think I am justifying all the stuff. But I think I see his eyes pool, and then he says, *you are a daughter of this place and I hope you plan to come back.*

He fills out his forms, pressing hard to make the copies, and calculates what I owe, taking my toman from me and shuffling the papers as he stamps them. He hands me the documents and points out where I need to go next, now that my bags are ready. Then he gently gets out of his stool, moves off to the side to stand up for me. For emphasis. He says, *it is so good that you came back. What a good thing you did.* All I can say is *thank you*, over and over, and then I think I say, *I'm so happy that I came.* I walk away from him, looking for the next line, but my heart is beating so fast my face heats up.

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I learn to read the Farsi alphabet in the backseat of a Volkswagen bug, with my sister and 2 girl cousins, their parents and my mother. We are driving from Teheran to the Caspian Sea and I am not yet 7 years old. I will keep this book my whole life, though it isn't what I use when I return to learning to read in my thirties. I know sounds and words already, but have never looked at them on the page. On each page, large letters: we see *baba* and the picture of the father, we learn *beh*. My aunt points to a sound, and I say it. "Ob." Water. Now I see it on the page. Grasping the way the letters fit together to make the words doesn't seem out of reach. I take a pencil, trace the dotted lines on a page, do it over and over in each of the spaces left to do it, feel myself learning. My sister does it too. Neither of us is nervous. Other people are watching, but right now they are encouraging, and I'm not afraid to mess anything up. They don't seem to mind helping us learn letters during this hot ride north. Years later my aunt can still recall the trip. "Do you remember that trip to the sea? How many of us were all in that car!" I say, "I learned to read the aleph-beh on that trip." "Yes! You two were working so well on your letters. I

remember the books.” I can see she wants to pinch my cheek, or muss my hair. But I’m an adult now, and she just smiles wide, and I can see her remembering the kid versions of us, her daughters and nieces, and then she remembers to see me now, beautiful and grown up, still practicing my reading.

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There were famous singers of famous songs that the young martyrs of the war with Iraq listened to before running out to be killed. They had these voices in their head as they ran.

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Language is geological: a process of accumulation and accretion, accompanied by landslides. I have to do my best to keep adding to the pile, while not giving up when a storm comes along to upturn it. I say this to myself a thousand times.

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If someone says, you’re beautiful, the phrase in response is, your eyes just see so beautifully.

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My shadow self. Everything I don’t say, can’t. Or wish I did. But also the self I never had to become, the family’s remains...the twilight lifetime that lingers in songs other people sing.

I was the kind of kid who didn’t question the systems, a girl who kept her mouth shut. I welcomed the chance to be obedient. There was an order to that. A promise that it might matter in my own personal

future, if I was or I wasn't. Like many young women, when I got to college, I learned that my obedience hadn't got me that much. And I feel grateful I learned it as early as I did.

Outside the apartment door in Esfahan, on the street, two twenty-something women lean in close to each other, smiling, as they stroll by. One says something emphatically, leans closer and puts her hand on the part of her friend's arm near the shoulder. "Do you know what I mean?" she says as she slaps her friend on the arm, then leaves her hand there as they continue. They are lost with each other to the circumstances of the street: they don't see me, they could be anywhere. They're not: their headscarves are tied, their makeup just moderate enough, but their hearts are spilling out onto all of them, and even this foreigner can see it. I am not that woman, though I've long wanted to be. Long watched women this effusive, this gushing about whatever it is they feel, long known how close I am to the emotion, how far from the physical gestures of it. I remember my aunt Monir's loud laugh when I was young and how it scared me. How I was afraid other things would disappear inside that mouth, that her joy could consume people around her, or me, on a summer visit from another land—I might be swallowed by the size of her laughter.

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Late April, 2003. It is the first time I'm picking up the phone to make my own call in Farsi.

I'm making my first friend, here. We go out for Turkish coffee and talk about her life. She tells me it's her fate to not be married. I listen, repeat the word for fate in my head when she says it, think about whether I agree. In the grounds at the end of the coffee, I tell her I see an ear in her cup, knowing this is what happens when women are done with their coffees—they read them. She says, oh, "listen to what your mother tells

you.” I say, “no, listen to what your heart says,” piecing together the nouns and the possessive forms correctly, “I can hear.” She stares hard into the cup, and I can see she is smiling under her hard face. I am trying to share who I am and she is paying attention.

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When I’m alone, wherever I am, I am often talking to myself out loud. I figured out that as an adult, it’s how I know I’m listening. Of course I mean in English. One morning in the middle of a month in Iran I commend myself about my Farsi, and I say it in Farsi. And then I say, in English: see, it’s goofball Farsi, but it’s yours, and that’s how it’s going to have to be. I am looking in the mirror in my grandmother’s apartment in Teheran. I have the place to myself. In a couple of years she will sell it to one of my cousins. She will never be back here.

Looking at myself putting on my headscarf, getting ready to go outside, get a taxi, visit some relatives, I recognize myself. And I recognize the voice I’m using, but it’s different. I have things to say in Farsi, things that won’t translate. Things I can’t say any other way.