

Setare S. Arashloo

A Séance



In 1974, at the Ghasr Prison in Tehran, a group of women political prisoners turned the space between their bunk-beds into a stage to perform "*Arbab Jamshid*."

I have chased the thread in my mind during this quarantine for a thousand times by now, trying to find the best beginning, most truth to this story! I have procrastinated writing; I have started and abandoned. Today, I'm deciding that the thread in my head started with a death three years ago, the death of Vida Hajebi Tabrizi in March of 2017, an activist, writer and collector of prison memories, who inspired me to research more about her life and read her books and lead me to the performances.

Vida Hajebi Tabrizi died in March 2017, in exile in Paris. I was living in my studio in Brooklyn, mostly dealing with the practical and emotional consequences of (the then newly signed) Muslim travel ban. I heard the news about Vida's death while sitting at my desk working and passively listening to the report in a mode I would call "news-noise-zombie".

My setup at that time reminded me of my grandfather, or Babayi's, corner, where he used to sit most of the time at home, while he was awake. The floor of Babayi's corner was carpeted with Ottoman pillows on the back wall. He would surround himself with old transistor radios, each set up on one news channel. Babayi would sit in his corner for hours with his back itch scratcher/the remote for the radios, turning off one radio and the other on, instead of tuning and searching for another news channel.

In my news-noise-zombie-mode that evening, I heard Vida's interview on BBC Persia. I reached out to my keyboard with the bottom of my pencil and stopped the news. Who was Vida? I searched for "Vida Hajebi" and started digging. Vida, who was a Marxist activist, is known to have become the first woman political prisoner in Iran.¹ Her imprisonment gained international attention concerning human rights issues in Iran during the second Pahlavi period in the mid and late 1970s. She was a close friend with Farah Diba in Paris, where they both studied architecture in the 1950s. Vida writes in her memoir *Yad-ha*² that she and Farah were the only Iranian students at the School of Architecture in Paris at that time. Farah became the Queen of Iran³, and her stylish picture even now serves as the nostalgic western media's example of "the good old days" where women in Iran were "free." Vida went to Venezuela after a brief stay in Iran, to join Oswaldo Barreto, her partner, and the father of her soon to be born son. Vida mentions in her book that she was encouraged to write a formal apology or a request for help from her old friend, Farah, in order to receive forgiveness. She refused.

I had fallen in love with Vida and wanted to spend time with the dead, so I read her book *Daad e Bidaad*⁴, a collection of testimonies by her fellow inmates during her political imprisonment between 1972 and 1979. These were years of heating revolutionary movements and increasing oppression by the authoritarian Pahlavi regime. Vida was imprisoned in the women's political section at Ghasr Prison, which grew exponentially while she was incarcerated due to the heating revolution and the growing oppression.

Most testimonies in *Daad e Bi-daad* are credited to people with their first names only. Also, only a few among the fast-growing but yet small group of these women survived the waves of execution and secret agency (SAVAK) raids of their "hiding houses." I recognize a few names such as Roghiye Daneshgari, Marzie Dabbagh, and Ashraf Dehghan. To my surprise however,, I found an even more familiar name in the table of contents: Farideh Lashai, an Iranian artist mostly known for her abstract paintings and combining them with animation.

Farideh went back to Iran in the early 1970's after a few years of studying and living in Germany and Austria. She was in her early 30's and wanted to participate in the movement that was seeking political change. After Farideh died in 2013, Vida wrote in a note in her memory:

"Farideh is the dear who I met at the Women's section of the Ghasr prison in 1975 (1974). She entered the cell with excitement, which, as she said in *Daad e Bidaad*, was because she believed at the time that the worthy people's place was in prison!"

In slowly getting to know Vida and Farideh from their writings, I set up for the Seance:

1) In 1974 [Columbia University](#) sociologist Allan Silver^[3] personally took a letter of protest signed by the Canadian Association of Sociologists to [Iranian Embassy](#) in [Washington, D.C.](#) regarding her [detention](#). [American Feminist Kate Millett](#), the [National Organization for Women](#) representative and [Anne Roberts](#), [Amnesty International](#) representative and other concerned U.S citizens publicly denounced the treatment of women [prisoners of conscience](#) in Iran.

2) Havebi, Vida, *Yad-ha*, 2010

3) Farah Diba married Mohammadreza Pahlavi and became the Queen of Iran in the second Pahlavi era.

4) Hajebi, Vida, *Daad e Bi-daad*, Forough Book, 2004

Farideh: I had heard that you (Vida) had directed Brecht's *The Life of Galileo* before. Everyone was impressed with the famous line:

[Andrea: Unhappy the land that has no heroes!...]

Galileo: No. Unhappy the land that needs heroes.

I decided to get to work too. Although I knew you to have a dry personality, I used to come to you in these situations. You were full of paradoxes. Your reactions gave me courage.

Vida: Although we had minimal access to any text in prison, by adapting (recreating) Brecht's famous play, which she [Farideh] titled *Arbab Jamshid*, *The Little Prince* by Saint-Exupery, and *Hamlet* in comedy, she not only created fun and exciting moments for her fellow inmates, but also made clear that art can have a role in building solidarity and increasing empathy.

Farideh: We practiced the plays in one of the rooms. Atefeh, with her knowledge and experience, would safeguard the place or entertain the prison guards... The pick of our theater work was when we played *Arbab Jamshid*, which was an adaptation of Brecht's *Mr. Puntila and His Man Matti*. We didn't have access to the text. I knew it well, though, and we re-created the dialogues, poetry, and the scenes. Elaheh was singing with finger-snapping:

Arbab (master) Jamshid
Three days straight
Would drink in a cafe
One and lonely
When Arab Jamshid drinks
He becomes another person

Then the actors came to the scene...

Farideh explains that they divided the floor between the bunk beds, drawing with chalk, to show the living room, the bath, the garden, etc.

Farideh: You were master Jamshid's driver with a mustache and a hat. Haleh, who played Master Jamshid's daughter, had fallen in love with you. In a scene, she was chatting with you in private when suddenly her dad, whom I played, and her fiance, shows up in the yard. She dragged you in the bath, on the square, which we drew with chalk on the floor, and started flirting with you. But you took a pack of cards out of your pocket and began to play like a gentleman without paying attention to the flirt."⁵

[long silence]

5) All of the Farideh's quotes are translated with little changes from Farideh Lashai's "Hamlet in Prison", a text that she wrote for *Daad e Bidaad* collected by Vida Hajebi

I can't hear more just yet. In the loud solitude⁶ of my quarantine, I hear gunshots and fireworks from the window, trying to distinguish the shots from sparks, and sometimes fooling myself that it wasn't a shot, it wasn't another shot in a black person's body. I ask myself: Where does history live? Can we remember? What and how do we remember it?

6) Borrowed from Bohumil Hrabal's fiction "Too Loud a Solitude" published originally in 1979

Setare Arashloo was born and raised in Tehran, graduated with a BA in Painting from the University of Tehran, and received a post-baccalaureate certificate in Fine Art at Maryland Institute College of Art and MFA in Studio Art at Queens College, CUNY, New York. She is an alumnus of AIM fellowship at the Bronx Museum. She teaches at Empire State College, SUNY. Her works have been exhibited in Iran, US, Afghanistan, France, Germany, Australia, and Canada.