

East/West Fantasy

Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh and Stephane Herbert
1994-2004

Prelude

Stephane Herbert and I met in Tajikistan in the summer of 1994. He had a camera and I had a notebook. He was the professional photo-reporter and me the eternal student. When war came for an unexpected visit to Dushanbe in October of that year, he jumped on the train with the thousands of refugees fleeing south to Afghanistan, while I boarded a Russian military plane with the families of border guards and flew north to Moscow. We lost track of each other, one more friendship interrupted by war. In 1999 he sent me a photograph he took in Yazd. I wrote a few words of how I felt about it and kept it in the drawer. When we met again in 2004 in Paris, he showed me what he had written himself as text to his published photo. We compared notes and laughed.

Stephane's story : Veil and Shadows Published in *Doctor's Review Canada*, 1999

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En faisant défiler les photographies de mon site web, l'iconographe du magazine *Doctor's Review* s'est arrêté sur cette image énigmatique prise à Yazd en Iran : une petite rue étroite, la lumière intense d'une ville du désert, et une silhouette propice à la composition se profilant entre les ombres. Haut les cœurs ! Mon secret ne le sera plus pour longtemps... Au cours d'une de mes pérégrinations en Orient, j'étais dans cette ville iranienne de la Perse méridionale située en bordure du plateau central. Pour quiconque se livre à ses premières impressions, cette région, qui a depuis longtemps servi de sujet à tant de poèmes enthousiastes, ne présente pourtant a priori, que paysages austères et rigueur morale. Les Persans ont cependant toujours fait preuve d'une excessive courtoisie extérieure, d'un véritable raffinement et de l'esprit le plus vif. Les habitants de Yazd sont croyants et vertueux. Surtout les femmes. Celles-ci sortent si bien drapées dans leurs voiles, qu'elles ne laissent presque rien apparaître de leur personne. J'ai cependant souvent eu l'occasion de croiser des regards espionnes, voire effrontés, sous leurs grands *tchadors* noirs.

Ainsi, autour de la Mosquée du Vendredi, dont les minarets faïence d'azur surgissent de tous les horizons, j'ai volontairement cherché à me perdre dans le dédale des ruelles. De longs murs de terre abritent chaque demeure et son jardin de roses. C'est l'après-midi et un fort soleil écrase leur parfum ainsi que toutes couleurs. Seule une poussière brûlante fait vibrer une lumière blanche et révèle les ombres. Pas un chat, ou presque : une lourde porte en bois grince et claque sèchement. Sortant brusquement, une dame me dévisage avec curiosité. - "Que regardez-vous ? ...", me lance-t-elle d'une voie étouffée en réajustant son voile. Un visage aux traits des plus gracieux se découvre entre les plis du tissu serré entre les dents : grands yeux frangés de longs cils soulignés de *kohl*, sourcils finement arqués que la nature a reliés au-dessus du nez. Pour avoir intercepté un regard émanant de ces prunelles ravissantes, je reste pétrifié d'émotion. - "Des yeux charmeurs je suis esclave" : la citation du grand poète persan Hâfez me revient en mémoire, dissipant mon trouble. - "Tue-moi d'un clin d'œil si tu veux, pas d'autre sort qui me convienne !" me retourne-t-elle, amusée, avant de s'éloigner telle une flamme indécise. Clic, je tire la photo.

Shahrbanou's story, published in her head

She is fleeing in the afternoon sun, her chador a bit too short, her shape a fledging triangle as it maneuvers around the maze of narrow dusty streets, mud walls with no windows. She saw him from the corner of her tightly held chador, him, tall, handsome, obviously foreign, numerous cameras dangling from his neck. She saw him as she turned the corner, hesitated for a slight moment, but dashed on, oblivious to his gaze. There was no confrontation, he let her go. As soon as she was a few meters away from him, he caught her, trapped her from behind, captured her for ever as a triangular black splash of ink, to which only the wave at the bottom of the chador gave any hint of movement. She was the fleeing mysterious woman, him, the perpetuator, a mobile stain in her landscape. The sun blinded his eyes, she was moving a contre jour. He was excited at the prospect of a darker than usual photograph, the play of shadows. The sun made her tired, she longed to get indoors, sleep by the pond in the courtyard. She could hear the clicking noise as he followed her through the maze. The water will soon silence the unpleasantness. I will follow you until the end of time. Perhaps he will get lost in the maze. There were dishes to be washed. Put them on the large bronze carrying dish, take them by the pond, rinse the tea cups. One by one. I will put the sugar cube in my mouth, then sip the tea from the saucer, like I've done since I was six. I will lay by the pool, let the water reflect on my face. I will close my eyes. I am the silence. He runs out of film. He stops, takes out a new roll from his bag, does a quick exchange. The photos will all be the same, except for the undulating wave at the bottom of her chador. Turn around, please, turn around. Smile at me, talk to me, yell at me, look at me. I'll take you where you want, I'll give you a home, I'll show you Paris. You can bring your son with you, you can write to your husband. I will treat you well, I will not be dominating, chauvinistic, condescending, patriarchal. I'll let you work, I'll change the diapers, I'll wash the dishes. Her throat is dry. Perhaps the tea is brewed just right now. Mother is waiting for the bread. Maybe her wild cherry jam is ready. I will take a spoon of jam with my tea. I will sit on the floor by the pond. The sun will warm my bones. I am tired. Water will lullaby me until I fall asleep.