



REMEMBRANCE SUITE

A Sonnet of Sonnets

SHIRIN SABRI

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Zenobia

Hypatia

The Unknown Women

Khadíjih Bagum

Ṭáhirih

Navváb

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Grandmothers

Hajar

In consequence of His (Abraham's) exile a Moses and a being like Christ were manifested from His posterity, and Hagar was found from whom Ishmael was born, one of whose descendants was Muhammad.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá

In smooth stone spice scented halls, a princess
heard the prophet speak, chose belief
and wed and joined His household in the wilderness,
a stranger among them. She, a leaf
blown by God's breath to a strange land
had not yet seen the slow dip of an angel's wing,
nor water bubbling from crusted sand
nor swift birds calling a new people to that spring

when she was sent away, an emigrant. She would be exiled
once more by scribes, her story's threads undone, rewoven
to show a handmaid overreaching, show her reviled,
and weave a tale to suit the tribes of men;

the wayward slave-girl left to rot
and Hajar's choice, her courage, willingly forgot.

Hatshepsut

*In past ages noted women have arisen in the affairs of
nations and surpassed men in their accomplishments.*

‘Abdu’l-Bahá

The daughter of Amun tried on Pharaoh’s robes and found
they fit the person she had grown to be. She knew that war
had deluged Egypt, pillaged, ebbbed; left the ground
rich in unaccustomed thoughts and her people poor.
Eyes alight, she planned the temples they would build again,
the royal fleet that would sail again; she put to sea
aboard a long-oared ship to southern shores to regain
lost links of trade, and brought home cedar, gold, a living tree

of scented myrrh, treasures that she heaped in Egypt’s lap.
But queens die, and when this one did order was restored
and war resumed. The next king scratched out her name, left a gap
where she had been, poached her triumphs, cleansed the record

so that no sign of her was seen, and it seemed that naught
remained – that her name would forever be forgot.

Aseyeh

*...the daughter of Pharaoh ... left the court of Pharaoh
with its grandeur and sovereignty and became perfumed
with the fragrances of holiness. Then she assisted in the
service of His Holiness (Moses) — upon him be peace!*

‘Abdu’l-Bahá

Pharaoh’s daughter heard from far the slow cadence
of her lost son’s voice, ran, caught up, kissed
his dusty hem and breathed the fragrance
of a sacred fire. Ordered to desist,
to lie, to deny, she stood alone
in her father’s court and bore bold witness.
Dragged from her home, smothered with stone
on brass hot ground; she was the world’s sweetness

and its renouncing. Yet when the story’s told
there is one glimpse of her among reeds,
waiting at the river’s edge to fold
the babe in her arms. Then she recedes,

confined to child-care, a role we easily allot
to women, while God’s fierce champion is forgot.

Maria the Jewess

*As for thy question regarding the statement of Maria: The root
for the operations of Maria is in the white and the red resin.
The red resin she took out from the white resin. Whosoever hath
attained unto it hath attained the final goal.*

Bahá'u'lláh

Like Alexander, Maria sat at wise men's feet
to learn. Pen scraping on papyrus, she sought
to understand the mysteries of heat
and constancy; the instruments required, she wrought
herself, pursuing knowledge. Her careful eyes
intent, brow creased, she pondered while slow steam curled
through copper tubes; wondrous things she might devise
filled her mind, while Alexander's army laid the world

waste. All that he won was swiftly lost,
yet we tell stories of Alexander, recount
tales of weeping, burning towers, unique books tossed
to the turbid river near Persepolis, the unscalable mount

his men climbed, and his cheating slice through the Gordian knot.
Maria's works are valued still, their maker's life forgot.

The Magdalene

*My hope is that each one of you may become as Mary Magdalen -
for this woman was superior to all the men of her time and her
reality is ever shining from the horizon of Christ.*

‘Abdu’l-Bahá

He died. After swamping grief came a dragging undertow of doubt
where men floundered, near drowned, till Mary’s still voice called
the foundering world back to its centre. Fearless, she set out
for Rome on a slow swan-necked boat; neatly shawled,
eyes warm, she spoke of the spirit’s long journey, taught
travellers and merchants and then an Emperor that death
had no power. She sailed further, on distant isles brought
healing, made churches, shared knowledge to her last breath.

Saints followed where she led, but then came priests, fear
and shrill men clambering onto pulpits with their claim
that the lady of Magdala was a whore. They did not hear
the angels’ sharp intake of breath as they took Mary’s name,

stained women with it, used defaming inks to blot
out her true face, to let the Magdalena’s honour be forgot.

Zenobia

Among them was Zenobia, Queen of the East, whose capital was Palmyra. Even today the site of that city bears witness to her greatness, ability and sovereignty ...

‘Abdu’l-Bahá

A Caesar who had brought down Caesars grasped power in crumbling Rome. Zenobia paced her court’s long colonnade, scowled at despatches, at maps, sighed, tried to see how her armies could protect the silk road’s vital trade, her voluble markets, synagogues, churches built by those drawn to Palmyra for refuge. Hair in a high coronet, red cloak flying, she rode against the multiplying foes battering her gates and won, and won, and lost. Beset,

she yielded for her people’s sake, but scorned Caesar’s bed. Thwarted, he flaunted her in a long, tawdry parade; crushed with jewels, shackled in gold, she marched, led by elephants, monkeys and slaves. She is so portrayed

in Romantic paintings; as a defeated woman, chained, not the Queen who ruled the East—and all her victories are forgot.

Hypatia

*Certain women of superlative capacity and determination
have appeared in the world, peers of man in intellect and
equally courageous.*

‘Abdu’l-Bahá

Imagine brisk steps on a tiled floor, a teacher who appears,
cloak looped over one elbow, hands quickening
with numbers, calling up the singing symmetry of spheres,
training Christian and Pagan alike in the art of true reckoning.
She tells of the seen and unseen, of a glistening strand
near Alexandria where soughing waves erase
all tracks from the shining, sea-smoothed sand;
in ciphers seeks a trace of One who leaves no trace.

Hooded fanatics hunted, caught her, tore her
flesh from bone, burnt her befouled remains in a church
long since destroyed. Some say all learning ended with that horror—
not so, but more than a body guttered. A shared, converging search

for truth was lost. All that Hypatia said or wrote or taught
is lost, the story of her death a weapon, and her work forgot.

The Unknown Women

At last this century of light dawned, the realities shone forth, and the mysteries long hidden from human vision were revealed.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá

There are too many—that girl in her safe, dull
room, consoled with pretty earrings;
she could not still the muse, the one that sings,
and kept the joyous voice prisoned in her skull.
The painter, sometime model, who so loved spring’s
rich flowering—in her self-portrait the eyes mull
over men who admire her profile, not her skill.
We enter now an age when hidden things

surface, when buried names come to light;
a fledgling age, shifting sharp elbowed wings,
awkwardly gathering itself for flight.
We have lost many stories, and learned to regret
the loss, for we are shaped by stories; this era brings
new sagas, lived by those whom we will not forget.

Khadíjih Bagum

*We have revealed for thee a remembrance which neither
the affairs of the centuries nor the passing of the ages
can obliterate.*

Bahá'u'lláh

She decides to climb those stairs, pauses
dazed, hovering in the doorway, to gaze
bewildered, seeing not lamps but a blaze
of light so bright it causes
a conflagration of the self and sends her dancing, like dust
afire, a corona round one originating Point.
In a remembered dream, she had breathed the scent
of flowers where He walked; now, in the hushed,

expectant night she wakes, the first to make that choice,
to believe. It is dark again when her Love is taken. Steadfast,
she mourns alone. Then a call from Akka, that dear, familiar Voice—
she would go—she cannot. A kinsman denies her heart's last

wish. This must be borne; caryatid lifting a sacred burden, leaf
upon the Tree of sorrows, she, too, is acquainted with grief.

Táhirih

*Salutations be unto her, and praise. Holy be her dust,
as the tiers of light come down on it from Heaven.*

‘Abdu’l-Bahá

She went down into the Beloved’s garden, out of the veiling past,
advanced, lit by long, leaf barred shafts of light streaming
onto her naked face; she was an army with banners, gleaming
upon the hillside, the high clear shout of a trumpet blast.
Prisoned then, a fire captive in a hearth, she taught, traced
in the carpet’s intertwined flowers the pattern of justice, the seeds
of love; wrote on smoothed paper with ink of herbs, her reeds
cut from broom straws, waited, prayed, fasted, paced

the confines of that room. They came for her when the moon had set.
An ink black pool mirrored stars below cypress spires; there, they
crushed her body in a pit (as she required), and meant to forget
she ever lived. They buried her deep, no mark shows where she lay;

her grave’s paved over, a bank built there, all that royal demesne long gone.
Love’s seeds uncoil below; supple springs of silken white to heave up stone.

Navváb

*May God have mercy upon him that draweth nigh unto
thee, and remembereth thee through the things which
My Pen hath voiced in this, the most great station.*

Bahá'u'lláh

There behind the curtain, where the women go,
her slender hands console, mend, her head bends,
listening, tender to each need. It is her world, it ends.
She goes out into poverty: offers a little flour in the hollow
of her palm; snips off jewelled buttons to barter
for bread; searches her baggage in the lampless night,
fingers finding salt she does not want; in the height
of winter, scrubs clothes, her hands red raw in icy water.

They seem familiar, a mother's hands. Then comes twilight
in the barracks, chanting on the rooftop, the open skylight,
the fall. It is her youngest, her darling, offering up his
life and she runs, grips the hem of her Lord, pleads, 'Accept this.'

She has surrendered her self. Doors unlock, the exchange made,
with those twin gifts of agony, we see our ransom paid.

Bahíyyih Khánum

*Through My remembrance of her a fragrance laden
with the perfume of musk hath been diffused...*

Bahá'u'lláh

The fleeting, precious glimpses we can catch of her suggest
a presence greater than we know; her unrecorded words set
like careful stitches (the best mending goes unseen) that let
torn hearts heal; those tireless, skilled, sorrow blest
hands forever making good. Her days were filled with endless fine
detail, the children's lessons, managing the kitchen, keeping the poor
and pilgrim fed; so much at ease with sacrifice that even the door
of her room was not her own—it guarded a waiting shrine.

This was her lifelong dance of leaf with branch, of warp with weft,
she and her Brother sustaining each other—till the day
He was gone. She would catch the stumbling world then, in her bereft
embrace, her frail arms used to too much weight, ready to allay

the burden settling on an heir so young; one who must go on alone,
his anguished task to lead us out of her heroic times, into our own.

Rúhíyyih Khánum

*Her example, which will retain forever its splendour,
illuminates the hearts of thousands upon thousands
throughout the planet.*

The Universal House of Justice

At first, she journeyed with her mother, and so learned
the ways of one who mothered countless yearning
souls. It was her Guardian, though, who, turning
to her said, ‘Your destiny is in the palm of your own hand.’
She held that compass—perched high on a long canoe;
driving her jeep through mud and slithering scree;
treading upon ice crisp sands at the edge of the Arctic Sea;
flying down the purple ranges that edge the Great Karoo—

kept its needle turned toward true North. She had the art
of governance, ruled lively streets, glittering towers,
held sway over that brilliant city—her own heart—
before she set out in full array to conquer ours.

She came well-armed, ready to take us with her, to school
us in the discipline of love, the joyous rigour of self-rule.

Grandmothers

*Among the miracles which distinguish this sacred
Dispensation is this, that women have evinced a greater
boldness than men when enlisted in the ranks of the Faith.*

‘Abdu’l-Bahá

Laura asked her questions, that earnest, frowning gaze
firm upon the Master as she worked to understand;
Nettie dragged a baby carriage to consecrated land,
hauled the first stone of the Temple Corinne fought to raise;
while Susan had her calling to run a clinic in Tehran,
helped the hidden Persian women to educate their
girls; and Martha, like the falling petals of a living prayer
spread unstinting sweetness from the Andes to Japan.

There are so many women who voyaged out alone
in defiance of convention, whose courage let them see
roads to a different world. Our vision of ourselves has grown
with them, they have shaped our sense of what might be.

So, tell their stories, breathe upon history’s blood red ember
and light their lovely faces with that flame. We will remember.

Notes on the Epigraphs

Hajar - ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 12

Hatshepsut - Compilations, *The Compilation of Compilations* vol II, p. 375. *The Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks Delivered by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá during His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912*, pp. 133-37

Aseyeh - ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Tablets of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, v1, p. 218

Maria the Jewess - Maria the Jewess - Bahá’u’lláh, from the *Lawh-i-Maria*, *Ma’idiy-i-Asmani*, vol. 1, pp. 26-45

The Magdalene - ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Divine Philosophy*, p. 50

Zenobia - ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 134.

Hypatia - ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 281

The Unknown Women - ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 74

Khadíjih Bagum - From the Remembrance Tablet revealed by Bahá’u’lláh for Khadíjih Bagum, quoted in *Leaves of the Twin Divine Trees* by Baharieh Rouhani Ma’ani, p.58

Ṭáhirih - ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Memorials of the Faithful*, p. 203

Navváb - From the Tablet revealed by Bahá’u’lláh to be recited at the resting place of Navváb, quoted in *Leaves of the Twin Divine Trees* by Baharieh Rouhani Ma’ani, p.117

Bahíyyih Khánum - Compilations, *Bahíyyih Khanum*, p. 3, a compilation from Bahá’í sacred texts and writings of the Guardian of the Faith and Bahíyyih Khánum’s own letters Compiled by The Research Department at the Bahá’í World Centre 1982

Rúhíyyih Khánum - The Universal House of Justice, *Riḍván Message B.E. 157*, 2000, p. 10

Grandmothers - Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, pp. 57-58

*“We enter now an age when hidden things surface,
when buried names come to light”*

Shirin Sabri has given us a rare gift in this precious jewel-box of sonnets. It contains the lives of great women long-forgotten and lovingly retrieved, the names of lost heroines at last restored to their original lustre. It is particularly poignant to trace these erased identities within the tight confines of the sonnet-form, which so perfectly reflects the way women have found spiritual freedom and achieved prominence in spite of the restrictions imposed on them. - *Bahiyiyih Nakhjavani*



Shirin Sabri Australian poet Shirin Sabri spent much of her childhood in Papua New Guinea, and has, since then, lived in Israel, Cyprus, Britain and Australia. She currently works as a teacher of History and Literature at the Townshend International School in the Czech Republic. Her poems have been published in *The Bahá'í World*, in *Canadian Bahá'í Studies* monographs, *Imago*, *Poetry Australia*, and, more recently in the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, *Vahid: Bahá'í Inspired Literary Magazine*, and in *Tokens: An Occasional Magazine of Bahá'í Inspired Poetry and the Arts*. She is currently a contributing poet to the Choral Tales Project, a Los Angeles based venture that sets out to present folk tales of the world through dance and song.

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