

Tulips and poppies

Behesht-e Zahra (Paradise of Zahra) is the name of a huge cemetery outside Tehran on the highway to Qom. Conceived and partially built before the revolution, it is being rapidly filled, though not quite finished, as if testifying to the fulfillment of a grotesque prophecy. There are areas designated for common folk dead of common causes, for martyrs of the revolution (those killed on the streets in 1978-79), martyrs of war, and even executed political prisoners.

Entering the grounds very early on a summer morning, having left home at dawn to avoid the mad traffic of downtown Tehran and the scorching midday desert sun, we are relieved by a gentle breeze drifting from a generous stream of fresh water running through the main boulevard. A row of fountains spouts into the hot air enormous volumes of precious water that is piped across vast arid plains that produce little more than a few basketfuls of scrawny eggplants sold by barefoot children on the side of the road.

Visiting the cemetery is considered virtuous in Iran. It is customary for large family groups to spend whole days at the gravesite of a departed relative. Women are left alone to wail or pull their veils over their faces and silently weep. Men, laying a hand lightly on a tombstone, may recite a *fateheh*, or drift off quietly talking among themselves, while children run about and play. Trees and shrubbery are therefore essential for people to take refuge in the shade—to eat their lunch or take naps.

The area of Behesht-e Zahra containing the common dead is developing into an oasis. Lots here are planted with

greenery and flowers with greater or lesser degrees of care. In some parts, luscious flowering plants bloom in defiance of the unrelenting sun, while in others overgrown weeds and nondescript wild plants cover neglected tombs. Water faucets are plentifully provided and visitors fetch water to rinse the dust from their relatives' gravestones. The dead and the living alike partake of the cool water that is almost miraculous in its ubiquity in the heart of the desert.

At the epicenter of the area designated to the martyrs is the now famous Fountain of Blood. This is a multi-layered, circular cement construction with a single fountain in the center of the smallest uppermost level. The fountain oozes a red liquid that falls in thin ripples from each level to the one below. The liquid is watery, not quite as deeply red as blood, and the structure is most disturbing when the fountain is turned off; the cement platforms bring to mind the permanently stained floor of a slaughterhouse. It is difficult to assess the site's impact by the expressions of the passersby. Faces show nothing.

The fountain of blood is a symbol without an agreed-upon referent. It was erected as a tribute to the legacy and legitimacy of martyrdom, but it represents more readily the human cost of the legacy of the Islamic Republic. Mourners and visitors stay clear of it for the most part now that its unsightly novelty has worn off. Children avoid it in favor of the water faucets on the periphery of the fountain area, where they hover over the gushing water and wash their hands and faces tens of times over.

To drive the point home, however, the Islamic Republic brings the fountain of blood to families individually. I have heard that a miniature replica of the fountain is sent to stand by the door of the house of a recent martyr—but they seem to quickly disappear. Traditional *hejlehs*, on the other hand, are visible everywhere throughout the cities. These chandelier-like structures lit by gas-burning lamps symbolize the wedding chamber (*hejleh*) of a departed unmarried youth. Standing on street corners and decorated with glass

and crystal tulip-shaped candleholders, they display a flower-strewn framed photograph of the dead young man. At night, the light trapped in the cuts of crystal gives off a melancholy glow around which the friends of the deceased gather in their black shirts. The *hejleh* stands for forty days and nights.

At Behesht-e Zahra *hejlehs* are brought to mind by the glass encasements raised on metal stakes on the graves of many martyrs. These are the families' private contributions to the otherwise officially laid-out landscape of the *Qat'e-ye Shohada* (Martyrs' Lot). They may contain combinations of childhood photographs, a poem or two, letters or other memorabilia, a copy of the Koran, plastic flowers. The permanence of these simplified forms of *hejleh* call for artificial flowers, since the contents of the sealed-off glass shrines are not easily accessible.

While *hejlehs* are posthumous celebrations of male virginity, tulips are symbols of martyrdom. A red tulip is the flower par excellence that springs from the earth where innocent blood is shed. The Islamic Republic adopted this symbol early on and displays it pervasively. It is printed on stamps and posters commemorating the revolution. In crude sculptures it stands in front of government buildings and in town squares. It is donated in one form or another to families of martyrs, and, of course, it "springs up" in any cemetery.

Entering a small town in Gilan, travelers are greeted by a floating banner that declares: "The tree of Islam grows on blood." The town square is encircled by a metal fence in the shape of entwined long-stemmed tulips on which are posted photographs of the young men of the town whose blood was offered to the tree of Islam. In the Martyrs' Lot of the local cemetery, overgrown with the semitropical greenery of Gilan, the huge, brightly painted red tulip memorials erected on individual graves give off a hollow metallic ring when awe-stricken and dazed children bump into them.

Deeply ingrained in Persian poetic consciousness, the most conventional representation of this symbol is literary. The *laleh* is as likely to appear in canonical texts as in folklore, and most recently it has come to permeate the lyric utterances

of revolutionary fervor. The title of a short-lived collection of poetry which appeared soon after the revolution and was printed several times, "Tulips of Shahrivar," is an allusion to the massacre of "Black Friday"—Friday the 17th of Shahrivar, 1357 (September 8, 1978)—when troops opened fire into the crowd demonstrating at Jaleh Square. "Tulips rising from the blood of the country's youth" is a favorite cliché phrase of the Islamic Republic. And the metaphor is developed as in a poem titled "Behesht-e Zahra" in a monthly publication of the Revolutionary Guards Corps, *Payam-e Enqelab*: "For the blooming of a single tulip / The flower of joy withered in the gardener's heart. / The bed of tulips springing in this plain of sorrow / Must be called the stream of the Blood of God."

But in the burial ground of the political prisoners at Behesht-e Zahra, neither water nor flower is permitted. This lot lies on undeveloped outskirts of the cemetery. Driving on the wide, paved road surrounding the area—taking care not to slow down conspicuously—visitors can observe shattered tombstones, broken glass, and upturned earth. Bodies are buried here anonymously, and should the family of an executed prisoner find out the location of a grave and place a stone over it, the stone is promptly crushed by the authorities. Some families designate an approximate location by a secret landmark, while others who dare to visit the lot grieve over any and all of the undistinguished graves. Very infrequently a particularly brave family might leave flowers behind, introducing a temporary speck of color in the wasteland landscape.

Recently executed prisoners, however, may be buried in the areas allotted to the non-political dead. These graves, no longer anonymous, are dispersed among the new lots to minimize the possibility of a politically motivated congregation. By matching the inscribed burial date on the grave of a friend's executed husband we could find a few other such carefully tucked away graves. Prisoners are executed in planned-in-advance batches. But even not knowing a particular burial date an acute observer can pick out these graves: The stones are plain, bearing no words of lamentation or poetry, and the

birth dates usually fall within the last two or three decades.

A friend whose husband was executed a couple of years ago told me that she felt lucky to have a place to visit. She takes the bus to the cemetery after work every Thursday evening, bringing flowers and pouring fresh water over the sun-baked stone of her husband's grave. She also goes to make sure that the stone on which, in defiance of the authorities, she had a red poppy engraved remains intact. Keeping an eye out for visitors of other execution graves, she often spends her evening in their company, camouflaged in the heavy traffic of weekend common visitors.

Khayyam is not a poet typically quoted on tombstones. In his *dahri* world view death is too material, too final, and too utterly devoid of tribute to individuality to be of consolation to most people at the death of a loved one. But I was surprised to come upon a single Khayyam line on a neglected stone somewhere on the margins of the lot dedicated to the martyrs of the revolution:

*Beware not to reveal this secret:
A withered tulip will not bloom again*