

One

Darius Rejali

One cut his throat with some glass he bought.
 Our man and others stood in the dark.
 They knew the seasons from the guards,
 The days by when they were fed.
 Each evening, the guards named twenty
 To be deceased the next time they ate.
 He was named several nights
 And repeatedly amnestied instead.

So many in that cell, they took turns
 Sitting down. Just as many died
 As those who committed suicide.
 One cut his throat with some glass he bought,
 Twice, our man lined up, like all the rest,
 At the prison's acid bath.
 He watched men boil in front of him
 Then reprieved, went back to rot.

On his way to torture he often saw
 Women tortured. The guards
 Hit him hard, once too hard,
 So they left him in a cell and fled.
 The State Examiner found him nearly dead.
 Several stitches, no anesthetic, and the guards
 Said he struck first, untrue of course.
 He remembers the suicide had bled.

The doctor now administers the protocol:
 Blows to the body and the back, Falaka
 (Struck on soles with a nail-studded plank).
 In open text, the pen goes on to note:
 Fingers twisted,
 Right arm broken, starved,
 Suspended with arms behind,
 He's troubled by the one who cut his throat.

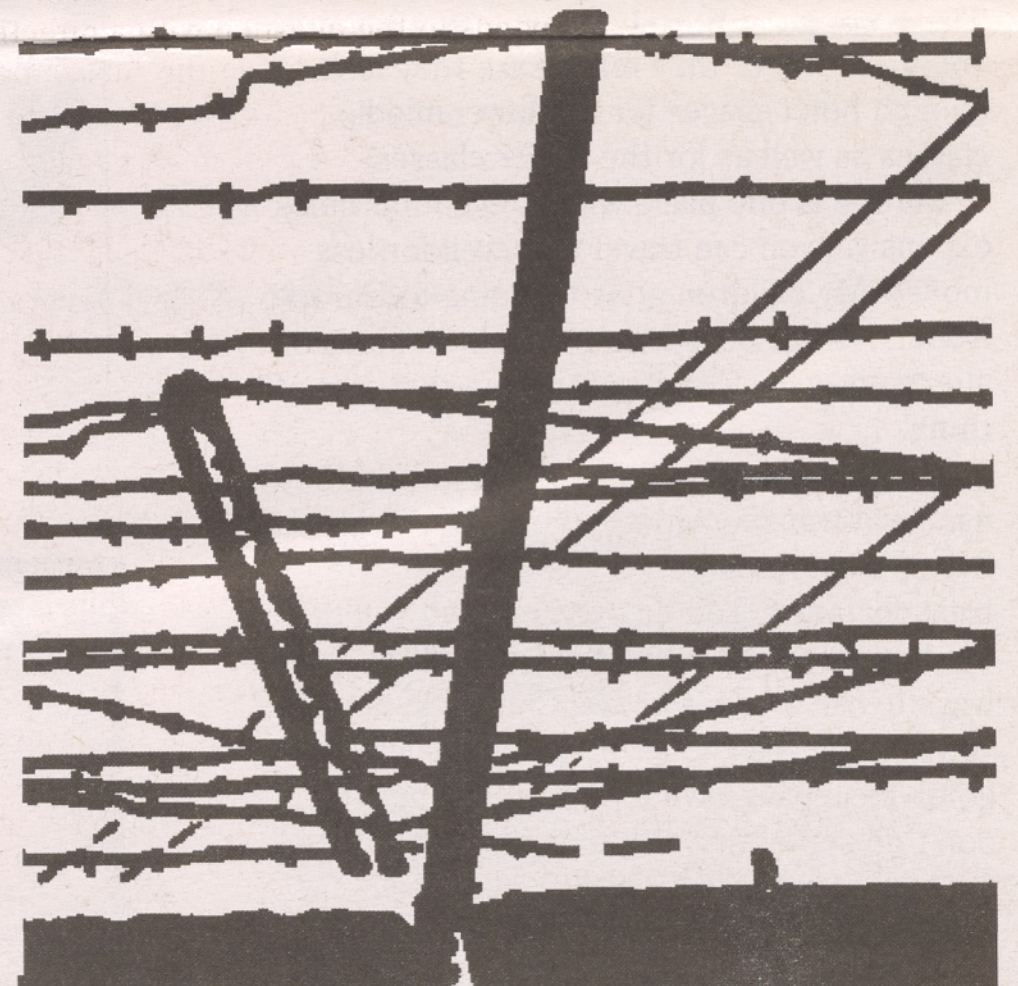
The worst tortures? Well, none on the list.
 There's a sweatbox with walls of red.
 Stuffed inside, he could not move.
 His muscles screamed. The walls stood fast.
 And he remembers the one whose name
 Was read one night, had bought some glass.
 Resistance or despair, how to judge
 An event twenty years past?

He ate bread with sand. Two years was
 A hundred thousand. And when released
 The police asked every week:
 Where had he been? And when?
 He fled to Saudi to a desert camp.
 He saw some lose their minds or hang themselves.
 He thought, I'll manage.
 I'm not as badly off as them.

His wife was at a different camp.
 Both unwanted, Europe took them
 And from there, he shouted back.
 So guards took his family, instead.
 "Cease your activities, return," they said.
 His mother begged him, but he did not.
 The Coalition found his father later,
 And young brother, buried among the dead.

All this began when he was seventeen,
 When he wrote on a classroom desk,
 "Saddam is criminal." Or was it,
 "A dictatorial regime"? Nothing novel.
 He can't remember the accidental phrase
 That cut his throat. But the State took offense
 And made him grovel, and grovel,
 And grovel, until, anonymized, he was a novel.

Last question:
 Why did the Examiner save our lad?
 What was the point of sparing him
 When in any case he should be dead?
 Because the Examiner knew cruelty
 Hides in guards and teachers too,
 Even in poets and their lovers,
 And points at the generals instead.



*Reed College professor Darius Rejali gained international celebrity in 2007 with the publication of *Torture and Democracy*, a massive study that won the Human Rights Book of the Year award from the American Political Science Association. Since then he has been sought after by lawyers, journalists and newscasters around the world. Currently his daily work involves reading hundreds of psychiatric and somatic evaluations of Iraqi torture victims, going back 30 years. In other words, he is now obliged to think about torture on a daily basis. — Martha Gies*