

ISH AL-ASFOUR
By Linda Rogers

They are a concert of women, all black notes,
could be the crows of the desert, tricksters
translating themselves in private. *Ish al-asfour*
means bird's nest in the language of the harem.
No wonder these ladies smile behind their veils.

I think of smalls pinned up on clotheslines in the
hanging gardens of Babylon, the natural aviaries
embroidered in Syrian lingerie. Who would believe
the ladies stepping out of their limousines in *hajib*
at Harrod's in London would be heading straight
for exotic undies, or that our modest Chinatown
granny's might be wearing the crotchless panties,
sewn in the brothels of old Victoria, underneath
their plain black pajamas. Watch these elderly
ladies, way past pulchritude, squeezing melons in
the Fisgard markets and imagine them wearing
brassieres that play tunes when they are squeezed.

Was it any comfort to orphans who went blind
sewing beautiful trousseau's in convent
orphanages that they could hear swallows
singing in their pubescent nests after vespers?

When we were nervous, our singing teacher told
us to imagine our audience was naked, or better
still, wearing embarrassing underwear. Now I
close my eyes and think of the Queen of England
astride her throne. Since she is so careful to turn
out the lights in her castles, would her frugal panties
show signs of wear and mending, or does she wear
feathers to awe the footmen who bring her
glasses of warm milk and crumpets at bedtime?

Now that the ozone is full of holes, what will
it take to hold up the sky full of birds that dries
the silk panties hanging on clotheslines and
breathes song into the women who wear them?