THE POETIC POLITICS OF FORUGH FARROKHZAD AND SIMIN BEHBAHANI

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Fluttering cursive covers the walls outside a shop. Bold Farsi strokes ripple in the wind as a man raises a flag. In Iran, the most venerated art form is not the novel or the painting, but the poem. Whether they are quoting Rumi in daily conversation or writing protest verses on napkins, Iranians have long used verse to paint portraits of their nation[1]. Although some of the most famous Iranian poets were male, female poets were essential to the development of the modern Persian literary canon. The works of Forugh Farrokhzad and Simin Behbahani, two of the most famous female poets in Iran, speak from a feminine perspective to criticize the oppression of women and the political turmoil of their respective lifetimes[2].

Both poets' works were reflections of cultural and political conflicts during their lives: Farrokhzad wrote during the tumultuous period before the 1979 Islamic Revolution, and Behbahani wrote during and after the Revolution, when Iranians were still struggling to forge a new path forward. Most scholars of Farrokhzad home in on her more personal poems, whereas scholars of Behbahani often focus on her socially critical poems. However, there is no substantial research on the way the themes in their work and their distinct styles reflect the periods they wrote in. Although both poets' analysis of female love in their personal poems are similar, Farrokhzad's use of free verse in her socially critical poems is more effective for her discussion of the harmful effects of modernization under the Pahlavi monarchy, while Behbahani's use of the ghazal form for her social criticism is more suitable for her reflections on post-war Iran through a traditional lens.

Farrokhzad's use of dark, sinful imagery to describe female love in "Sin" demonstrates her goal to reshape the way her patriarchal society viewed female desire. In the 1940s and 50s,

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[1] Muhammad Ali Mojaradi, "The Key to Understanding Iran Is Poetry," New Lines Magazine, July 6, 2022, https://newlinesmag.com/essays/the-key-to-understanding-iran-is-poetry/.
[2] Rivanne Sandler, "Simin Behbahani's Poetic Conversations," *Iranian Studies* 41, no. 1 (February 2008): 47, https://doi.org/10.1080/00210860701786603.

many middle-class women were trapped in an ideological conflict between the increasingly Westernized Pahlavi regime, which promoted the image of a modern, Western woman as the standard for "the ideal Iranian woman", and more conservative Iranians who argued that the "ideal woman" was a modest, devoted housewife[3]. "Sin", published in 1956, struck a chord with women confused about their place in society, despite being widely controversial for its unabashed portrayal of female desire. The poem protests the way her patriarchal Iranian society dictated how women should live.

Farrokhzad begins the poem with,

> "I have sinned a rapturous sin
> in a warm enflamed embrace,
> sinned in a pair of vindictive arms,
> arms violent and ablaze."[4]

The use of the words "enflamed" and "ablaze" draw parallels to the fire imagery traditionally used by male poets to describe the "flames" of their passion, allowing Farrokhzad to indicate that women can feel the same passion as men. Some scholars analyze the phrase "I have sinned" as a confession of shame[5]. However, others believe that the reference to "sin" throughout the poem is an act of defiance against conservative Islamists who use religion to limit the rights of women[6]. The ambiguity between admission of guilt and political protest could highlight Iranian women's struggle to form their identities and express their emotions without significant backlash. Despite being a love poem, the personal nature of "Sin" elucidates the struggles of women grappling with the consequences of a cultural shift in values.

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[3] Haleh Esfandiari, *Reconstructed Lives: Women and Iran's Islamic Revolution* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).
[4] Forugh Farrokhzad and Sholeh Wolpé, *Sin: Selected Poems of Forugh Farrokhzad* (University of Arkansas Press, 2010), 3.
[5] Kamran Talattof, *Personal Rebellion and Social Revolt in the Work of Forugh Farrokhzad: Challenging the Assumptions*, ed. Dominic Parviz Bradshaw and Nasrin Rahimieh, *Forugh Farrokhzad, Poet of Modern Iran*, 2010.
[6] Roghieh Dehghan Zaklaki, "The Construction of Female Subjectivity in the Poetry of Forugh Farrokhzad," *New Academia*, n.d.

Farrokhzad also uses the imagery of darkness in the poem to separate the concepts of love and sexuality and emphasize the more intimate side of female relationships. She frequently repeats the phrase "quiet vacant dark" regarding the dark room she and her lover dwell in. "Darkness" draws parallels to images of Hell, alluding to the narrator's confession of "sin". However, the "quiet vacancy" evokes a softer image that draws the reader's attention away from the "sinful" nature of desire, affirming love as something greater than "sin". By embracing love through her sensuous description of female desire, Farrokhzad defies the confining societal standards of her patriarchal society and encourages women to forge their own identities.

Beyond musings on love, Farrokhzad also reflects on the feelings of women who are trapped in a domestic life through object imagery in "Wind-Up Doll" to urge women to take responsibility for their individuality. In the late 1940s and 50s, although the Shah's pro-Western reforms expanded possibilities for women, middle and lower-class women were still expected to become mothers at a young age[7]. Farrokhzad criticizes the way women became complacent in domesticity during this period in "Wind-Up Doll", writing,

> "Inside eternal hours
> one can fix lifeless eyes
> on the smoke of a cigarette,
> on a cup's form,
> the carpet's faded flowers…
>
> fixed in one place, here
> beside this curtain…
> but deaf, but blind…
>
> content with unimportant words."[8]

[7] Joanna Scutts, "Feminize Your Canon: Forough Farrokhzad," The Paris Review, October 13, 2021, https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2020/11/19/feminize-your-canon-forough-farrokhzad/.
[8] Farrokhzad and Wolpé, 25.

The woman and her household objects are “lifeless” and “faded”, demonstrating the mundanity of domestic life through her “eternal” boredom. Her life is “fixed in one place”, leaving her unable to form an identity beyond the confines of her home. Farrokhzad denounces the woman’s “contentment” and cites her “deafness and blindness” to her plight as the main reason she is still trapped.

Farrokhzad expands on the “lifeless” identity of the woman by comparing her to a doll, writing,

> “Like a wind-up doll one can look out
> at the world through glass eyes,
> spend years inside a felt box,
> body stuffed with straw,
> wrapped in layers of dainty lace…
>
> for no reason one can cry: Ah, how blessed, how happy I am!”[9]

Phrases like “glass eyes” and “body stuffed with straw” accentuate the artificiality of the doll and further reveal the “lifeless,” “fixed” lives of married women. She mocks the way these women claim they are “blessed” even though they are oppressed, and acknowledges the role of men in this oppression, noting,

> “In the oppressive arms of a man
> one can be a robust, beautiful female–
> skin like leather tablecloth,
> breasts large and hard.”[10]

The woman in the poem’s identity is inexorably linked to the “oppressive arms of a man,” confining her to her single duty as a wife. Additionally, the objectification of her body as a “leather tablecloth” further reduces her value to that of a simple household object and implies

[9] Farrokhzad and Wolpé, 27.
[10] Farrokhzad and Wolpé, 26.

that she cannot feel “beautiful” unless she is in a man’s “oppressive arms”[11]. Farrokhzad satirizes the plight of middle and lower-class Iranian women to demand that they take responsibility for preserving their individuality so they do not turn into a “lifeless doll”. Through object imagery in “Wind-Up Doll”, Farrokhzad questions society’s predetermined roles for women and persuades trapped women to form their own identities.

Farrokhzad also reflects on the struggles of other marginalized groups in the socially critical poem “I Pity the Garden' to call attention to the deterioration of her country under the Pahlavi government. She wrote the poem amidst the sociopolitical turmoil of the 1963 White Revolution, a series of reforms by the Pahlavi administration meant to rapidly modernize Iran. While the revolution granted more rights to women and passed some land reforms, many viewed it as corrupt and exploitative to the lower classes and resented the government for worsening their suffering[12]. The poem uses a traditional garden metaphor to highlight numerous examples of Iran’s deterioration towards the end of the Pahlavi monarchy’s reign through the sufferings of each of her family members. For example, the narrator’s brother

> “calls the garden a graveyard.
> He laughs at the plight of the grass
> and ruthlessly counts the corpses of the fish
> rotting beneath shallow water’s dead skin…
> he sees the healing of the garden in its death”[13].

The narrator’s brother’s cynicism was common among Iranians, tired of the countless reforms and counter-reforms that only further illuminated the corruption and inefficiency of the government. The use of words such as “graveyard”, “corpses", and “rotting” underlines the garden’s decay, and represents the “rotting” of Iranian society and the eventual “death” of the

[11] Farzaneh Milani, “Love and Sexuality in the Poetry of Forugh Farrokhzad: A Reconsideration,” *Iranian Studies* 15, no. 1–4 (1982): 117–128, https://doi.org/10.1080/00210868208701596.
[12] Ali M. Ansari, “The Myth of the White Revolution: Mohammad Reza Shah, ‘Modernization’ and the Consolidation of Power,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 37, no. 3 (July 2001): 1–24, https://doi.org/10.1080/714004408.
[13] Farrokhzad and Wolpé, 100.

Pahlavi regime. Yet in classical Persian literature, gardens are places of paradise with spiritual connections to Sufism. Consequently, Farrokhzad's reference to the "rotting" of the garden could represent a physical and spiritual corruption of Iranian society[14]. Furthermore, Farrokhzad often references gardens in her love poetry to symbolize the blooming of love[15]. Thus, by describing the traditionally idyllic garden as a "graveyard", she can better emphasize the problems she identifies in her society.

Farrokhzad's use of free verse in "I Pity the Garden" is better able to capture the trapped feelings of Iranians suffering the consequences of the Pahlavi reforms. Because the poem has no rhyme or meter, there are no confines to the topics Farrokhzad can write about, allowing her to explore how modernity has negatively affected multiple facets of her society. She uses modern imagery such as "machine guns" alongside traditional images of "gardens" to contrast the problems plaguing modern Iran with a more peaceful image of the past. Furthermore, without meter, Farrokhzad can explore different stanza structures and repeat phrases such as "Our garden is forlorn" to form a free-flowing poem that is more reflective of the range of emotions Iranians felt during a turbulent period in history. Farrokhzad uses modern free verse and classic themes effectively to express her love for her country and her people, despite their shortcomings.

Similar to Farrokhzad, Simin Behbahani also blends elements of traditional Persian poetry with modern themes in both her love poetry and her socially critical poetry to make statements about the rights of marginalized groups, particularly women. The government dramatically tightened many of the societal constraints for women present in Farrokhzad's lifetime during Behbahani's lifetime. Before the Revolution, the Pahlavi regime's pressure to

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[14] Julie Scott Meisami, "Allegorical Gardens in the Persian Poetic Tradition: Nezami, Rumi, Hafez." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 17, no. 2 (May 1985): 229-231, https://doi.org/10.1017/s0020743800029019.
[15] Meisami, 232.

modernize Iran culminated in the contentious 1936 hijab ban, a major source of women's resentment. As seeds of revolt grew among the political forces that opposed the shah, some women hoped participation in the revolution would grant them more autonomy and independence. Some joined branches of anti-shah political parties like the Democratic Association of Iranian Women, affiliated with the communist Tudeh Party, while others protested the Westernization of Iran by donning veils and modest clothing to support conservative Islamic values. Although women played a major role in the toppling of the shah and the formation of the Islamic Republic, the Revolution did not grant them the rights they had previously advocated for[16]. Under strict sharia law, women lost not only their bodily autonomy but also family autonomy through mandatory hijab orders, harsher divorce laws, and greater restrictions on child custody. Some women protested during the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution by taking off their hijabs and dressing in tight-fitting clothes. Their subsequent executions fostered an atmosphere of fear that left many afraid to advocate for themselves[17].

To push against the fear that discouraged women from expressing their wants and needs, Behbahani stresses the beauty of women in love in "Ancient Eve". Instead of shaming women for showing desire, she describes love as a heavenly emotion and urges women to find solace and joy in love. Behbahani begins the poem by writing,

> "I can't breathe a word;
> my mouth's sealed
> shut with your kisses,
> their tongues of flame…
> You, I, us tonight

[16] Haleh Esfandiari, "The Women's Movement," The Iran Primer, March 17, 2016, https://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/womens-movement.
[17] Esfandiari, "The Women's Movement".

with a wine so delightful
where's the room for restraint?"[18]

Like Farrokhzad, Behbahani uses the traditional imagery commonly associated with lovers with a description of "tongues of flame" and "wine so delightful". Like Farrokhzad, by referencing historically male themes in her work, Behbahani claims women can feel the same intense passion as men. The use of words such as "breathe", "mouth", and "tongue" also evoke more intimate body imagery for women, accentuating Behbahani's wish to develop a distinctly female voice[19].

Behbahani adds to her expression of passion by writing,

"Love and shame and my body
warm with lust. I burn
with fever…
and as long as he is here
I dwell in heaven."[20]

The dichotomy between the darkness of "shame", "lust", and "burning", and the purity of "heaven" also draws parallels to the Hell imagery in Farrokhzad's work. However, despite committing "sinful" acts, the narrator delights in her "heavenly" love, going against Iranian society's expectations for modest women. Through her direct portrayal of female "lust", Behbahani raises a defiant voice against the Islamic Republic's strict laws for women.

Most scholars do not focus on the poems Behbahani writes about love, as her socially critical poems usually overshadow them[21]. However, it is important to analyze her love poems as well. Behbahani seeks to "be able to reveal the world within through reacting to and [being]

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[18] Aria Fani and Adeeba Talukder, "'Ancient Eve': The Ghazals of Simin Behbahani," Tehran Bureau, n.d., https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2012/07/poetry-ancient-eve-the-ghazals-of-simin-behbahani.html.
[19] Mahdi Tourage, "Text and the Body in a Poem by Simin Behbahani," *Iranian Studies* 41, no. 1 (February 2008): 61–74, https://doi.org/10.1080/00210860701786645.
[20] Fani and Talukder.
[21] Maryam Ebrahimi and Mokhtar Ebrahimi, "Women Issues from the Point of View of Simin Behbahani, an Iranian Poet," *Journal of History Culture and Art Research* 6, no. 3 (June 18, 2017): 138, https://doi.org/10.7596/taksad.v6i3.667.

provoked by the outside world."[22] "Ancient Eve" protests societal expectations for women by highlighting the beauty of female love amidst political reforms that placed extreme restrictions on female autonomy. Like Farrokhzad, Behbahani demonstrates that a woman's love is just as important as a man's, encourages women to embrace their desire, and proves that understanding one's social conditions benefits one's understanding of one's self.

Behbahani also uses traditional imagery in "My Country, I Will Build You Again" to illustrate her love for her country despite its decaying foundations, and her use of the ghazal form creates parallels to historical themes of martyrdom. Behbahani wrote the poem in 1987, shortly before the end of the Iran-Iraq War, which took the lives of countless Iranian soldiers and left the country in a state of social unrest[23]. In the poem, Behbahani mourns her broken country after the war, writing,

> "My country, I will build you again,
> if need be, with bricks made from my life…
> I will inhale again the perfume of flowers
> favored by your youth.
> I will wash again the blood off your body
> with torrents of my tears."[24]

While ghazals are typically love poems, Behbahani typically subverts the ghazal form to reflect her social milieu and conditions and often incorporates modern speech patterns, and adjusts certain lines of meter to suit her needs better[25]. In "My Country, I Will Build You Again", she uses a traditional ghazal format to invoke the style and imagery of historical poems about martyrdom. The imagery of "flowers" and "washing blood" off of a body with "tears" alludes to

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[22] Simin Behbahani, Farzaneh Milani, and Kaveh Safa, *A Cup of Sin: Selected Poems (Middle East Literature In Translation)*, First Edition (Syracuse University Press, 1999), xiii.
[23] "Iran-Iraq War: Causes, Summary, Casualties, & Facts," Encyclopedia Britannica, November 29, 2022, https://www.britannica.com/event/Iran-Iraq-War.
[24] Behbahani et al., 68.
[25] Dominic Parviz Brookshaw, "Revivification of an Ossified Genre? Simin Behbahani and the Persian *Ghazal*," *Iranian Studies* 41, no. 1 (February 2008): 75–90, https://doi.org/10.1080/00210860701786736.

the pain, destruction, and bloodshed of war, and is very common in poems celebrating the sacrifices of martyrs in Iranian history[26]. Ghazals often use flower imagery to describe lovers; however, Behbahani uses flowers in this context to mourn the deaths of soldiers and assert her love for the people of her country. She pays respect to the sacrifices of historical patriots while denouncing the violence that caused their deaths. She continues the martyr imagery in the next few lines, writing,

> "The resurrector of old bones will grant me in his bounty
> a mountain splendor in his testing grounds…
> I will begin a second youth alongside my progeny.
> I will recite the hadith of love and country
> with such fervor as to make each word bear life."[27]

In historical poems about martyrs, poets use Quranic imagery to explore the mysteries of death and rebirth, drawing connections to the sacrifices made by ancient prophets in Islamic history. A "resurrector of old bones" is another name for Allah, describing how Allah restores the bones of a dead person's body on the Day of Resurrection, and a "hadith" is a collection of sayings by the Prophet Muhammad[28]. Behbahani invokes the "resurrector of old bones" and the "hadith of love and country" to describe her fervent love for her country as similar to Allah's love for martyrs, who believed so strongly in their religion that they sacrificed themselves for Him. By writing in the ghazal form and referencing the traditional theme of martyrdom, Behbahani is better able to express her love for her country as well as mourn its destruction after the Iran-Iraq War.

Both Forugh Farrokhzad and Simin Behbahani reference themes of love to underscore the beauty of female love and criticize societal constraints for women in their social commentary.

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[26] Asghar Seyed-Gohrab, *Martyrdom, Mysticism and Dissent: The Poetry of the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) (Studies on Modern Orient Book 34)*, 1st ed. (De Gruyter, 2021).
[27] Behbahani et al., 68.
[28] Mohammed Siraj Uddin, "The True Tale of the Tailbone: How the Resurrection of Our Bodies Will Take Place," Aljumuah Magazine, January 5, 2022, https://aljumuah.com/the-true-tale-of-the-tailbone-how-the-resurrection-of-our-bodies-will-take-place/.

However, Farrokhzad's free verse focuses more on the negative effects of Iran's modernization before the Islamic Revolution and Behbahani's ghazals are more focused on a traditionalist view of modern issues. Although the Iranian government has censored many of their poems, people around the world continue to read and treasure them in secret, and Iranians still quote their work to protest the government's treatment of women[29]. Farrokhzad and Behbahani's words serve as a rallying call for people around the world to advocate for what they believe is right and to use their words to promote greater justice in the world.

[29] Mojaradi.

Appendix

1. “Sin” by Forugh Farrokhzad:

I have sinned a rapturous sin
in a warm enflamed embrace,
sinned in a pair of vindictive arms,
arms violent and ablaze.

In that quiet vacant dark
I looked into his mystic eyes,
found such longing that my heart
fluttered impatient in my breast.

In that quiet vacant dark
I sat beside him punch-drunk,
his lips released desire on mine,
grief unclenched my crazy heart.

I poured in his ears lyrics of love:
O my life, my lover it’s you I want.
life-giving arms, it’s you I crave.
crazed lover, for you I thirst.

Lust enflamed his eyes,
red wine trembled in the cup,
my body, naked and drunk,
quivered softly on his breast.

I have sinned a rapturous sin
beside a body quivering and spent.
I do not know what I did O God,
in that quiet vacant dark.

2. “Wind-Up Doll” by Forugh Farrokhzad

Even more, oh yes,
one can remain silent even more.

Inside eternal hours
one can fix lifeless eyes
on the smoke of a cigarette,
on a cup's form,
the carpet's faded flowers,
or on imaginary writings on the wall.

With stiff claws one can whisk
the curtains aside, look outside.
It's streaming rain.
A child with a balloon bouquet
cowers beneath a canopy. A rickety cart
flees the deserted square in haste.

One can remain fixed in one place, here
beside this curtain…but deaf, but blind.

With an alien voice, utterly false,
one can cry out: I love!
In the oppressive arms of a man
one can be a robust, beautiful female–
skin like leather tablecloth,
breasts large and hard.
One can stain the sinlessness of love
in the bed of a drunk, a madman, a tramp.

One can cunningly belittle
every perplexing puzzle.
Alone, occupy oneself with crosswords,
content with unimportant words,
yes, unimportant letters, no more than five or six.

One can spend a lifetime kneeling,
head bowed,
before the cold altar of the Imams,
find God inside an anonymous grave,
faith in a few paltry coins.
One can rot inside a mosque's chamber,
an old woman, prayers dripping from lips.

Whatever the equation, one can always be a zero,
yielding nothing, whether added, subtracted, or multiplied.
One can think your eyes are buttons from an old ragged shoe
caught in a web of anger.
One can evaporate like water from one's own gutter.

With shame one can hide a beautiful moment
like a dark, comic instant photo
rammed deep into a wooden chest.

Inside a day's empty frame one can mount
the portrait of a condemned, a vanquished,
a crucified. Cover the gaps in the walls
with silly, meaningless drawings.

Like a wind-up doll one can look out
at the world through glass eyes,
spend years inside a felt box,
body stuffed with straw,
wrapped in layers of dainty lace.

With every salacious squeeze of one's hand,
for no reason one can cry:
Ah, how blessed, how happy I am!

3. "I Pity the Garden" by Forugh Farrokhzad

No one thinks of the flowers.
No one thinks of the fish.
No one wants to believe the garden is dying,
that its heart has swollen in the heat
of this sun, that its mind drains slowly
of its lush memories.

Our garden is forlorn.
It yawns waiting
for rain from a stray cloud
and our pond sits empty,
callow stars bite the dust
from atop tall trees

and from the pale home of the fish
comes the hack of coughing every night.

Our garden is forlorn.

Father says: *My time is past*
my time is past,
I've carried my burden
I'm done with my work.
He stays in his room from dawn to dusk
reads History of Histories or Ferdowsi's Epic of Kings.

Father says to Mother:
Damn every fish and every bird!
When I'm dead, what will it matter
if the garden lives or dies.
My pension
is all that counts.

Mother's life is a rolled-out prayer rug.
She lives in terror of hell, always seeks
Sin's footprints in every corner,
imagines the garden sullied
by the sin of a wayward plant.

Mother is a sinner by nature. She prays
all day, then with her "consecrated" breath
blows on all the flowers, all the fish
and all over her own body.
She awaits the Promised One and
the forgiveness He is to bring.

My brother calls the garden a graveyard.
He laughs at the plight of the grass
and ruthlessly counts the corpses of the fish
rotting beneath shallow water's dead skin.
My brother is addicted to philosophy
he sees the healing of the garden in its death.
Drunk, he beats his fists on doors and walls
says he is tired, pained and despondent.

He carries his despair everywhere,
just as he carries his birth certificate
diary, napkin, lighter and pen.

But his despair is so small
that each night it is lost
in crowded taverns.

My sister was a friend to flowers.
She would take her simple heart's words
—when Mother beat her—
to their kind and silent gathering
and sometimes she would treat the family
of fish to sunshine and cake crumbs.

She now lives on the other side of town
in her artificial home
and in the arms of her artificial husband
she makes natural children.
Each time she visits us, if her skirt is sullied
with the poverty of our garden
she bathes herself in perfume.
Every time she visits she is with child.

Our garden is forlorn
Our garden is forlorn

All day from behind the door
come sounds of cuts and tears
sounds of blasts.
Our neighbors plant bombs and machine guns,
instead of flowers, in their garden soil.
They cover their ponds, hiding bags of gunpowder.

The schoolchildren fill their backpacks
with tiny bombs.

Our garden is dizzy.

I fear the age that has lost its heart,

the idleness of so many hands
the alienation in so many faces.

I am like a schoolchild madly
in love with her geometry books.
I am forlorn
and imagine it is possible to take the garden to a hospital.
I imagine I imagine
And the garden's heart has swollen in the heat
of this sun, its mind slowly drains of its lush memories.

4. "Ancient Eve" by Simin Behbahani

Love at Eighty?
Admit it: it's bizarre.
Ancient Eve is, once again
offering apples:
red lips and golden tresses.
Beautiful,
but not divine.

If my face has color
it's just makeup, a deceit.
But in my chest a heart
beats its wings wild with desire,
every seventy of its heartbeats
multiplied by two.

Love and shame and my body
warm with lust. I burn
with fever, a fever
past any physician's cure.
But at my side is bliss,
my lover
kind and faithful
and as long as he is here
I dwell in heaven.

I can't breathe a word;
my mouth's sealed
shut with your kisses,

their tongues of flame.
Oh, my thirsty lover!
Look at my happy fortune:
You, I, us tonight
with a wine so delightful
where's the room for restraint?

Adam! Come see the spectacle.
Leave behind your denial and conceits
and watch as the Eve of eighty
rivals the twenty-year-old she.

5. “My Country, I Will Build You Again” by Simin Behbahani

My country, I will build you again,
if need be, with bricks made from my life.
I will build columns to support your roof,
if need be, with my bones.
I will inhale again the perfume of flowers
favored by your youth.
I will wash again the blood off your body
with torrents of my tears.
Once more, the darkness will leave this house.
I will paint my poems blue with the color of our sky.
The resurrector of old bones will grant me in his bounty
a mountain’s splendor in his testing grounds.
Old I may be, but given the chance, I will learn.
I will begin a second youth alongside my progeny.
I will recite the hadith of love and country
with such fervor as to make each word bear life.
There still burns a fire in my breast
to keep undiminished the warmth of kinship
I feel for my people.
Once more you will grant me strength,
though my poems have settled in blood.
Once more I will build you with my life,
though it be beyond my means.

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