



WRITERS MOSAIC

Quarterly 02

Iranian women's voices

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FROM THE ROYAL LITERARY FUND



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WritersMosaic, a division of the Royal Literary Fund, has been online since 2021 at www.writersmosaic.org.uk. The print *Quarterly* was launched in May 2025, focusing on the legacy of Malcolm X. In our second edition, writers and artists reflect on the present situation in Iran and dream for the future.

Editorial

When I met with my co-editors Shara Atashi and Marjorie Lotfi to plan an issue of *WritersMosaic* focusing on the voices of Iranian women today, we kept returning to the celebrated Iranian poet and filmmaker of an earlier generation, Forough Farrokhzad (1934–1967). Forough's poetry flows through the writing of all the contributors to this issue, despite our vastly different backgrounds and the diverse forms and themes we sought to explore. Some contributors wrote in direct response to one of her poems, 'O, You Frontier of Gems', while others cast only a passing glance at her work. But as Nietzsche famously said, 'If you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you'.

This guest edition features Shara Atashi's article, 'My bejewelled land', and Marjorie Lotfi's poem sequence, 'Song and Wind'. Though both writers have spent most of their lives outside Iran, their work reveals how Iran has continued to live within them. My own contribution, 'Iranian women's defiant art of resistance', explores the artistic forms of resistance that have emerged in Iran in recent years.

Five further pieces enrich this edition: 'A three-act dream', a fusion of poetry and prose by Razieh Khoshnood, a poet and translator based in Tehran; 'Flesh', a long poem by the Iranian poet Sepideh Jodeyri, who is based in Washington D.C.; 'Revisiting Forough Farrokhzad's ironic depiction of "O, You Frontier of Gems"', an article by Laleh Atashi, an academic based in Iran; Forouz Zarei's 'Poems of resistance' exploring body, migration and the struggle to create and remember amidst displacement, repression and resistance; and 'The return of the God of the 1980s' by Atash Shakarami, a painter based in Tehran.

Most of the writers featured in this edition were commissioned months before the recent twelve-day war between Israel and Iran, but Atash Shakarami's piece – commissioned later – emerges as a powerful personal reflection on war, repression and the enduring struggle for justice in Iran. I am pleased to invite you to read Iranian Women's Voices.

Sana Nassari



Forough
Farrokhzad
Courtesy of wiki
commons

My jewelled land

Iranians have their own unofficial national anthem, 'Ey Irân', that glorifies the motherland and veils the inglorious truth: O, Iran, you frontier of gems, / O, your earth the fountainhead of art... Tell me, what can I do without your love?

In Forough Farrokhzad 'O, You Frontier of Gems', the poet uses the first line of the anthem as a bitter-sweet, ironic reflection on Iran in a distorted mirror of self-delusion. Still today, women visit Forough's tomb, sit and recite her poetry, as if drinking from the ancient wine of our history to find solace for incurable wounds.

Within the polyphony of Forough's poem can be heard individual voices of generations of women, prompting us to dig into the nature of Iranian identity. It begins:

**O, you frontier of gems (Ey Marz-e Por Gohar)
I have won,
I got myself registered,
I've adorned myself with a name on an identity card,
And my life is now defined by a number.
Well then, long live 678, resident of Tehran, as issued by precinct 5.**

Forough evokes Iran's 'earth, the fountainhead of art' as the dust of cow dung and the smell of garbage and urine, breathing it 678 times deeply into her lungs. Such realities have never ceased to exist, but are augmented today by the haze-filled air that forces the authorities to impose lockdowns.

Maybe Iranians use more veiled metaphors in their colloquial conversations than people in other cultures: the social and political air chokes us, the hangman's rope strangles us if we speak out. We have a word for this, *khafeghan*, encompassing all forms of oppression and suffocation.

Forough was born into an era of pseudo-freedom for women. She was not forced into a chador, the Iranian veil, or even a headscarf. But she had to undergo all of the other traditional and religious humiliations women were exposed to back then, and are still now, after the 1979 revolution introduced compulsory veiling. For Iranian society and her own parents, Forough's rebellious nature made her an indecent woman whose child had to be taken away from her. Poetry was all she had left to survive the darkness floating over a solitary existence. Poetry – and the rudiments of an 'official' freedom prescribed by order of a new king.

My maternal grandfather, a military official, did his best to implement the official freedom for women in rural areas. He would encourage my mother, when she was still a little girl, not only to dress in shorts but also to cycle around the village. Two 'sins' at once! Anonymous figures threatened to cut my mother into pieces. But that was even more reason for the 'General' to challenge the cowards. My mother, baptised in this fear of death, grew into the bravest woman I have ever met. Her last words to me were, 'There is a giant in you and a weakling. Don't let the weakling prevail.'

Iran's unofficial anthem and Forough's poem capture a cleavage between Iranian identity and women. The key is in the words 'gem' and 'frontier', meaning also worth and border: a border enclosing the existence of women throughout our history, in an attempt to diminish our worth, our 'essence' (another meaning of the word gohar, or gem). Women are too often thought of as tainted fruit, spoiling over centuries of patriarchal attitudes in conformity to social and cultural norms. But there are two forces in every individual, the conformist and the creative. And it is the creator who rebels, searching to liberate and reshape something pure within life. In the hidden depths of our subconscious, it is the rebellious creator rebels who awaken vigour in their readers.

Hengameh
Golestan,
March 1979,
Tehran.

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Golestan, Courtesy
of Archaeology of
the Final Decade.



SANA NASSARI

Iranian women's defiant art of resistance

History, particularly modern Iranian history, is punctuated by extraordinary acts of women who have pushed against the rigid boundaries of patriarchy. Among these trailblazers is the poet and filmmaker Feroz Farrokhzad (1934–1967), who fearlessly wove the corporeal and emotional agency of women into her verse and whose life was an embodiment of rebellion and revolution. Her poem 'Ey Marz-e Por Gohar' ('O, You Frontier of Gems' as Shara Atashi translates it), transcends the personal and enters the audacious realm of satire and public dissent.

Feroz strips away the veneer of a masculine, tradition-laden literary culture, turning the 'terrifying voice of law' into the farcical 'clatter of a rattle'. This subversion of the masculine voice foretells the ongoing fight of Iranian women today, who challenge patriarchy through personal autonomy and public defiance.

In Iran, women's opposition to tyranny often takes the form of a performance – a raw and powerful expression of agency. Consider the recent viral story of a woman who, following a confrontation in an airport over the mandatory hijab, boldly seized a cleric's turban, unravelled its fabric and wrapped it around

Arous (Bride)
series,
Wedding Party,
Darreh-e Gorgi,
Yousefabad,
Tehran, 1975.

© Hengameh
Golestan, Courtesy
of Archaeology of
the Final Decade.



her own head like a scarf. The act was theatrical, challenging not just the cleric's authority but the symbols of masculine dominance encoded in law and religion.

One of the most poignant examples of this creative defiance is the story of Parastoo Ahmadi, a young artist and singer determined not to forgo her right 'to sing for the people I love' and 'the land I adore'. Knowing that under the laws of the Islamic Republic solo public singing by women is forbidden, Ahmadi staged an imaginary concert with only musicians within the walls of a traditional caravanseraï. Wearing a strapless dress and live-streaming on YouTube, she performed without the state-mandated veil, pausing after each song to smile and thank her imagined spectators for their applause. For many viewers, it echoed the message of Shirin Neshat's *Turbulence* (1998), a video art installation that dramatized an astonishing vocal performance by an Iranian woman to an empty theatre. Like Neshat's exploration of silence and sound, of male and female spaces, Ahmadi's performance blurred the lines between art and protest, private and public.

Such acts go beyond protest. From dancing in public squares, like the teenage 'Ekbatan girls' in Tehran as part of the Woman, Life, Freedom uprising, to reclaiming other forms of performance to make their demonstrations, Iranian women are carving new spaces for themselves.

Then there is Sepideh Qolian, a political activist who refused to wear the mandated hijab in court, defying the authority of the judicial system at its core.

The radicalisation of Iranian women's actions reflects two key dynamics: the pressure of suppression building towards inevitable explosion; and the widespread reach of consciousness-raising campaigns, particularly those catalysed by the Woman, Life, Freedom movement. This is vividly illustrated in the November 2024 incident at Tehran's Science and Research Branch of the Islamic Azad University. Confronted by university officials for her so-called 'inappropriate hijab', a young female doctoral student, Ahoor Daryaei, stripped down to her underwear and walked defiantly through the campus grounds. The bewildered security forces were caught scrambling to consult their superiors. Daryaei's spontaneous action embodies a simultaneous protest and performance art – a raw, visceral outpouring of anger and assertion of agency against oppression.

The future of Iranian women is both complex and promising. The younger generation, particularly among women, is keenly aware of the state's suffocating grip. They recognise that the nation itself has been imprisoned by the Islamic State's authoritarian rule. Knocking on the prison doors, they've learned, elicits no response from the jailers. Their solution? A collective uprising to break down the door.

MARJORIE LOTFI

Song and Wind

i. Prelude

*I am a crow disguised
as a nightingale. I sing
the warbling notes
that lead my people
to easy sleep, content
that all is well beyond
their window. Listen
and I will tell you*

*all you wish to hear:
that I am warm enough
beneath these feathers,
that I don't miss those birds
that flew away in the storm,
that this pencil-thin branch
is all the home I need.*

*My heart, of course,
is all crow - oiled
black feathers, the repetitive
squawk of a muscle
that knows better. It beats
against my chest – peck,
peck – asking only what
it needs to survive.*

ii. Before

On leaving Tehran my mother –
usually a nightingale – disguises
herself in swathes of black, hides
between her husband and son
on the way to the airport, her words
(if any) lost to the roar beyond
the windscreen. I turn away from
the noise to see a bird crouched
between my father and brother.

The only black crow I've known
all my childhood, my grandmother
Maman Bozorg, is left behind.

iii. Transition

Why is a bird born with wings
if not to stretch its feathers
and fly? Its song never alters
as it moves across hemispheres,
continents. Settling on new land,
it doesn't forget a cliff, the shape
of a body of water, its own nest
in the crag of some far-flung stone.
What is a haven but song and wind?

iv. Official

After twenty-five years, I have *now been made official*. I pass a test, then make the application and wait.

A letter says my case is *exceptionally complicated*, but little else. I take out my Iranian passport, its leather cover

opens like the black wings of a bird. My pigtailed-girl-self stares back at me, eyes still dark, with hands smelling

of Shomal roses and the pine trees at the shore that filtered the summer light. Now I can hear Maman Bozorg's

voice, gone a decade. Some nights I fly across the frail border to visit. But my papers arrive, the swearing in,

the taking of their solemn oath. I am a citizen of another – my third – country. I'm told I'm British.

v. Memory

This shore could be the Caspian, the sand a shade of oat or straw, shallow waves along

a lip of clear water. How can I have spoken out loud for forty years without a mother tongue?

What is speech but a conversion, the flip of thought, an attempt to be understood; words form one

from another as waves approach a shore and are let go. How do you lose a language? Will it ever be

as simple as the spent swell drawn back into a waiting sea, the bird tapping against your window,

one ripe pomegranate picked from the bottom of your garden, a knife laid ready across the empty plate?

vi. Present

Here at home in southwest Scotland one thousand crows roost in pines at the shore. When they raise into sky

the dark cloud blots out the light, their wings silenced by shrill cawing. They shift from tree to tree and never

leave. In this part of the world, there are no nightingales. Someone tells me I am not Iranian enough, then asks me

to write *what little I must remember*. Who doesn't recall childhood? Who could forget the stand of pines behind

our shore finally bending to the autumn wind? Who doesn't hear her grandmother's voice in prayer, just before the day ends?

The return of the God of the 1980s

This is not a report. And today, as I write this note, it is Saturday, the 14th of Tir (5th of July). I record this timestamp because life in Iran is so unstable and unreliable that you have no idea what will happen in a day, even an hour's time – events and shifts shaped by the misguided decisions of a handful of reckless old men. These decisions descend upon you like fate. Like gravity, they are inescapable.

This is the Middle East – land of prophets and oil, the throat of the Silk Road, the crossroads of catastrophe. And I live in Tehran.

Tehran. Twelve days under missile fire – no sirens, no shelters, full of checkpoints, haunted by the fear that the god of the 1980s might rise again... defenceless Tehran!

And I, a 45-year-old woman, a painter, and a seeker of justice for [my niece] Nika – killed during the Woman, Life, Freedom uprising by the mullahs' regime.

And still, **our greatest battle**
– after survival
– **is the fight for equality.**

Exactly the sort of coordinates the Israeli fighter jets should have known with precision – they were supposed to protect civilian lives. And yet, we saw what that so-called precision really meant: explosions in ordinary homes, missiles dropped on Tajrish and Evin Prison...

Evin Prison: a place where, for 46 years, opponents of the clerical regime have been imprisoned, tortured, and executed. The Khavaran cemetery – site of mass graves – is one piece of evidence among many. And now, in the twelve-day war between two criminal governments, this prison has become the target of yet another crime.

I keep wondering how much agency a person from the Middle East truly has – how much choice, how much capacity to shape their destiny – when I, as an Iranian, know I am caught in the grip of patriarchy and fundamentalism, in the chokehold of oil, natural wealth and cursed geography. As long as this land remains strategically valuable to global powers, any talk of agency becomes a cruel irony – because every major decision is grounded in money and power, and the world is passed from one group of reckless old men to another. They speak of diplomacy and defence, but what they mean is control – of bodies, borders, resources, narratives.

The modern history of my country is full of struggles – struggles to achieve a form of government founded on human



rights and dignity. From the Constitutional Revolution (1905–1911) to the Woman, Life, Freedom movement, we have shed blood for democracy for at least 120 years.

Even these words I speak now have been repeated so many times in Iran's history that they feel tedious. But I say them again because silence is the accomplice of violence.

I think of the reckless old men in the White House, Tel Aviv, and Tehran. I think of our rage, our breathless exhaustion – and how every turning point in my life has been shaped by immense suffering. The suffering of living in a land where resources feel more like a curse than a benefit. A land that has seen more prophets than any other. Prophets who have all been men – whose preoccupation has been women, and how to dominate them.

And still, our greatest battle – after survival – is the fight for equality. I often ask: which is more essential, when a life without dignity is not worth the effort it takes to survive?

This is my lived experience. And my spirit is shaped by it. By death, anger, and grief. By wound upon wound.

Hengameh Golestan, March 1979, Tehran.

© Hengameh Golestan, Courtesy of Archaeology of the Final Decade.

I am a painter. For the past three years, I have been, in a way, under house arrest. The regime has either cut off all channels of communication or made them possible only within strict, monitored boundaries. Since the outbreak of the twelve-day war, any dissenter has been arrested under the accusation of spying for Israel. This, alongside pressure on civil activists and added economic hardship, is among the consequences of war. For criminal regimes, war is an opportunity for repression; for civil society, it is a blow, a setback. It stalls breath, dims ambition, and narrows all futures to a single, bare act: survival.

Red! A colour that, since the beginning of my artistic career, has been the dominant one. Sometimes fire. Sometimes the colour of blood that doesn't sink into the earth – but flows across it, coagulated, refusing to disappear.

The red siren.

A siren that never sounded in Tehran.

A three-act dream

Act I:

I am dancing cheerfully, and my friends are singing 'Happy Birthday', when suddenly the door to my apartment opens and my mother enters, with the same angry look I remember from childhood.

I was five years old, I went out without a headscarf, forgetting to cover my hair, and suddenly I saw my mother coming towards me. I ran into the house to hide. I don't remember if I was beaten, but I still clearly recall that angry look.

Now she enters with the same anger in her eyes. I run into my room and lock the door. She starts knocking. No matter how much I look, I can find nothing to cover my hair and shoulders.

Someone kicks the door open. Behind my mother, who is no longer her usual self – neither fully woman nor man – I see several police officers, who kindly invite me to go with them. I want to resist, but my body is paralysed. I try to scream, but I have no voice. One of them grabs my hair, drags me down to the street and shoves me into a Morality Police van. I wake up screaming.

Last night, after the guests left, I fell asleep on the sofa. The half-burnt candle from my 48th birthday is still on the table. My daughter is sleeping on another couch. I can never talk to her about my fears. She may never understand that I did my best to pave the way for her.

Act II:

What is it about Forough Farrokhzad that makes her an everlastingly bright star in the Persian literary sky? While we may not label her strictly a feminist or activist, we cannot limit her significance to her poetry, not when her contributions continue to open paths to women's freedom.

It is the combination of her life and work that makes her so luminous. As Hannah Arendt wrote, 'the revelatory character of action, as well as the ability to produce stories, become historical, forming the very source from which meaningfulness springs into and illuminates human existence'.

I recall watching Susan Sontag on Instagram, objecting to Norman Mailer's use of the term 'lady', which she found patronising. I believe Forough felt similarly. She would have preferred to be recognised as one of the best contemporary Iranian poets, without being confined to the 'female' category.

If we remove Forough's name from 'The Frontier of Gems' and read it anew, we encounter a poet critiquing the old order, not limited to patriarchy. In acrimonious words, she attacks rotten minds, ignorance, poverty and misery, and uncovers an underlying unkindness in the 'compassionate embrace of the Motherland'.

Now, nearly 60 years after her death, we see a new generation confronting the same old order. The Woman, Life, Freedom movement is not just about the hijab; it is about fighting an ideology that hates life and celebrates death. This is why dancing, the most vibrant act of expression, has become one of the most beautiful forms of protest. After almost every young person killed during the uprising, a video of them dancing surfaces online. It feels as if they are dancing from their graves – celebrating life and inviting us to join the dance.

Act III:

You haven't won – yet.
 You got yourself registered, though,
 On the nerves of the streets,
 In the veins of the cities,
 With your bleeding dancing bodies.

God knows how many years they were
 singing
 That intoxicating lullaby,
 And poisoning you with opiate words,
 To send you to sleep.

So, you sleep your dreams away,
 And wake up dreamless.

Awake, more than ever,
 You lived your dreams,
 And danced your dreams –
 Fire in your eyes, blinded by brutal
 bullets,
 Bravery in your hearts, torn
 by merciless bayonets.

You gathered your wounded scattered pages
 From the minefield of their ruling speech,
 Redefined yourself
 In your own words,
 Crafting a new lexicon of resistance.

A river of stinging, stubborn sound
 Flowed through the deafness of silence –
 A relentless current of defiance
 Carving new pathways
 Through stone walls of tyranny
 Guarded by rusty thoughts.

Through the darkness, you shone,
 Constellations of bravery,
 Lighting the night sky,
 With sparks of your magical hope.

You went on, undeterred,
 Your voices together echoing like thunder
 Through the labyrinths of power,
 Shaking the foundations of once unshakable
 towers,
 Awakening dawn in the hope of buds
 beginning to flower.

You haven't won – yet.
 The battle is not over.
 For every heart that beats,
 For every soul that dares to dream,
 The freedom lives on

Image © Missohio Studio

Poems of resistance

From the age of four, I became aware that just having this body would deeply affect my life. I sensed that something was not right within me. I longed to be free, but it felt as though something external controlled me – deciding how much of myself I could express. And yet, at the same time, this body was a wellspring of joy, pleasure, and peace. Beneath it all, I carried a quiet shame – unspoken, but always present. Holding such opposing feelings was like fighting a silent battle inside me.

That first secret kiss in my teenage years became a tender moment of truth. It made me feel I had to win this battle: I had to express myself honestly – embracing both what I felt and what I longed to experience. Art became both my weapon and my shield.

After completing my academic studies in art, I began searching for my own language – only to discover that the human form, my own body, had become the central subject of my work. Through art, and through the quiet rituals of daily life, I began to reclaim myself – with authority. In doing so,

I found myself confronting not only the state control imposed by my government, but also the heavy burden of patriarchal norms deeply embedded in my society. But my ultimate goal was never to exhibit in galleries. It was to survive the war within.

The day I left my home, I carried everything I had inside me. My skin became a refuge – a space where I sought relief from the pain of homesickness and longing for my family. Not only because of my immigration, but also because I was born into a war-torn family that was always trying to build a home and a life. I, too, lived a life of constant movement – with little space to create.

Space itself became a fundamental challenge and set me on a path to find a material suited to my life – something I could carry everywhere. I needed a way to work anywhere: in the corner of a room, in a park with my child, even without a desk or a dedicated space. Choosing this material – and continuing to create despite everything – became my form of resistance.

Hengameh
Golestan,
March 1979,
Tehran.

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Golestan, Courtesy
of Archaeology of
the Final Decade.



If freedom could sing a song
small as the throat of a bird,
 nowhere would **a wall**
remain crumbled.

From 'Greatest Wish Song' by Ahmad Shamlou translated by Sholeh Wolpé

Flexible, simple paper, alongside various fabrics, felt like the most honest and intimate materials. They didn't require a studio or a fixed corner to sit and create. I wanted to carry my materials everywhere – just like my memories, which follow me wherever I go. They are who I am.

Art became my only form of healing – a way to witness my memories and confront my pain; a safe hug that reached into all the empty spaces in my heart. Unlike many who encouraged me to forget the past, I chose to remember – not only for myself, but out loud. I began to capture those memories through my art.

Leaving Iran felt like a kind of death. It was a source of both pain and joy. It left me unable to confront authority the way I once could. But after Women, Life, Freedom, I told myself: Be who you are.

I have never censored myself. But even abroad, homesickness once held my voice back. Now, I know that returning to Iran is risky. Still, my love for my country gives me strength.

But now, three years after Women, Life, Freedom, and still holding on to what I once told myself – 'Stand up for yourself in the face of authority' – I find myself confused, searching for hope, as war machines march not only through the sky but also trample over my memories.

How can I lose my hope and my voice, when a tiny bird sings above the ruins?

Holding on to hope in the face of this massive machine isn't easy – but I need it. Hope itself becomes a form of resistance. Unfortunately, the authority I've known since I was four still doesn't feel far from me. It changes its form, but I am aware that I can stand against it – again and again.

In the end, as always, with a longing for freedom, I return to Ahmad Shamlou's poem 'Greatest Wish Song' once again, with myself.

Flesh

Your mouth turned into a valley,
And I
In sequence, tasted the defeat of my
swears

My body is riddled with fissures
Sometimes, it has the sweet allure
of an eye,
Sweet,
And heavy.

My body works,
Like a heart,
And like a clock,
Like listening that has moved from
your scent
Towards you.

Everything
Is submerged in weighty words
That have no flesh,
I have flesh,
And laughter,
Which reaches the highest point of
the body,
Flesh lies beneath.

The most comprehensive words we speak
Are heavy-set, short thighs,
And your deep hands
Reach out to no one else.

I am not of your wind and lightning,
One day, gather my death,
And pour it into a corner.

My chocolatey form is becoming flesh in
your mouth,
Your mouth is becoming flesh.

My singular hearts have been carried
away,
And I, beside a large stone,
Am a target for not being shot.

Eyes full of flesh,
Mouths full of flesh,
My fleshly generation has swelled beside
the flesh,
Right beside this corner,
That could have been,
Its waters could have been vegetation,
Its kisses could have been vegetation,
And its love acts.

All twelve years of my life
Were in black eyes,
That could have been,
That would not catch anyone's eye.

The canary is a cage,
In becoming a canary,
I'm most caged.

I sat ten by ten beside tranquil sunsets,
Beside bustling and worn-out sunsets,
And weariness has such a thrill,
weariness.

How your yawns have one sound
At the timeliest spot of the body.

A stranger has come from behind,
Like a dagger,
Exactly from behind,
Slipping group by group, all over.

Like a finger without a head, it is strange
to you.

To break a sunset,
And dawn,
Is strange to you.

Weeks have been in such a way,
In my mouth, I hold it like a gaze,
From this side,
To the other side of the ungazed,
To that great height,
And sunsetter.

My heart wants you,
Oh great height,
And sunsetter!

And you say, how cool and juicy
is my flesh.

To the ears that I offer,
From the back of the head,
From the front,
Where I gnaw like a mouse
Your heart-struck words,
Your heart-struck ribs,
Your heart-struck feet,
And that heart-struck private part of yours,
I swear!
How cool and juicy is the flesh!

And its flag is taller than mass graves,
Sleep, oh collective loves! Sleep!
Sleep, oh commander!
Your orders are detailed, like discerning a
strand of hair from another,
Your kisses are detailed, like discerning a
strand of hair from another,
Your eyes are detailed, like discerning a
strand of hair from another,

For you, I was a larger century,
A century entirely metallic.

Image © Missohio Studio

And you
say, **how
cool and
juicy** is
my flesh.

Revisiting Forough Farrokhzad's ironic depiction of the 'Frontier of Gems'

Very often, I read self-congratulatory essays about how bravely Iranians resist tyranny, how successfully they have pushed the boundaries. However, as a woman living in Iran, though never intending to dismiss any civic achievements, I find it difficult to accept such self-reassurance. In order to imagine and bring into being a better world, we must first acknowledge the stark reality. There are many acts of protest – often costly – exhibited and exaggerated in the media, and sometimes translated into acts of 'heroism', depending on the stance of the publication, but in the long run, countless sacrifices have rendered society indifferent to injustice.

As an academic who sees trips to other countries as a far-fetched dream – thanks to a devalued Iranian currency and because of the hardships of travelling with an Iranian passport – here I am, in my small apartment, reading poetry and writing essays. The university is closed due to energy shortages and so we have to work remotely. Although thinking about Iran and writing this in 2025, I can seek consolation in the poetry of Forough Farrokhzad, who in her 1963 collection, *Another Birth*, and in particular the poem, 'O, You Frontier of Gems', lamented the predicament of derailed modernisation.

In 'O, You Frontier of Gems', as Shara Atashi translates '*Ey Marz-e Por Gohar*' – words taken from the opening of Iran's unofficial national anthem, '*Ey Irân*' – Forough announces her triumphant victory in gaining an identity within a bureaucratic system. And out she pours the tale of her successive failures to identify with the state-sponsored discourse of patriotism, her inability to breathe clean air, to pay bills, to find a job, or to write modern poetry in the midst of traditional rhyme-seeking versifiers. She cannot find herself a place in journals with erotic women on their covers and cannot participate in radio programmes that only broadcast banal games catering to the lowest levels of intelligence. She is frustrated to see Iranian intellectuals, beholden to the West, translating disempowerment into poverty and leaving ignorance untouched.

She feels like Iran's legendary river: 'Yes, I am alive, like Zayandeh Rood, and shall drink from what is alive in the confines of the people'. She imagines participating in lotteries and after 'puffing grams of first-class pure stuff

/ and gulping not-so-pure Pepsis / and uttering some mystic aahs and oohs', hopes to become an official member of the pensive philosophers. She mocks the scientism of her era, recounting the inventions as artificial clouds and neon lights. She sneers at the huge swan statues in the squares of Tehran, and despises the angel statues that advertise stasis.

Throughout the poem, she does not get out of her room. Despite expecting to step into existence, she only peeps out from behind a curtain, to be met with the ominous, dark vistas of Bullet Park and Execution Square. She wants to deliver a lecture, and gives an imaginary speech from the ledge of her apartment window in front of an imaginary audience about the necessity of living – ending the image with cleaving the top of her own head with a pickaxe as a ceremonial opening rite. A last ironic comment on her triumph comes in the final stanza, when she speaks of throwing herself from the ledge to be embraced into the bosom of the motherland –in the free fall of fake poetry, fake intellectualism, fake scientism, fake art and fake media.

As a woman living in Iran in 2025, sitting in her room typing this essay, I feel the poet's exuberance: the end of the poem is eerie, the failure to exist so desolate, but the book's title, *Another Birth*, reminds me that Forough is alive, and that the suicidal jump symbolises a radical birth into a different world, a world sensitive enough to be traumatized each time it confronts tragedy and capable of responding to it.

Countless sacrifices
have rendered
society indifferent
to injustice.

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An Iranian documentary photographer, her subjects include everyday life and the March 1979 demonstrations in which over 100,000 women protested against a new law on the compulsory wearing of headscarves.

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Hengameh Golestan,
March 1979, Tehran.

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