

Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season: A new translation of Iranian poet Forough Farrokhzad's work

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Forough Farrokhzad (1934-1967) is one of the most influential modern poets in Iran and enjoys an international reputation. For many, she symbolizes the secular, cosmopolitan Iran that began to emerge during the period following World War II. Yet as an intellectual and independent-minded woman, she faced considerable social opposition stemming from conservative traditions that had not been shaken off. A new selection of her work, *Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season* (2022), translated by Elizabeth T. Gray, Jr., provides English speakers with an opportunity to discover or reassess her poetry.

Farrokhzad was born in 1934 and grew up in a middle-class neighborhood in Tehran. She lived during the rule of the Pahlavi dynasty, which was installed by a British-backed coup d'état and strengthened by a CIA-organized coup in 1953 that brought down the parliamentary regime of nationalist Mohammad Mosaddegh. During her youth, Farrokhzad demonstrated a rebellious streak and began writing poetry. While still a teenager, she married a distant cousin against her parents' wishes. The couple soon moved to a provincial town and had a son.

Feeling stifled, Farrokhzad threw herself into writing, and literary journals began to publish her poems. Her parents and in-laws disapproved of the fact that she wrote at all, let alone her candid expressions of emotion and desire. A recognizably female speaker, especially one who acknowledged physical pleasures, was a new phenomenon in Persian poetry. By the time her first book *Captive* (1955) appeared, Farrokhzad was separating from her husband. Moreover, rumors were circulating about her affair with the editor of a literary journal. Farrokhzad thus gained notoriety at the very beginning of her brief career.

After publishing her second book, Farrokhzad spent 14 months in Europe, and the experience broadened her perspective and helped to develop her writing. When she returned to Tehran, the literati welcomed her back. She

began studying film, and her short documentary *The House Is Black* (1962) is now considered a forerunner of the Iranian new wave.

In her fourth book *Another Birth* (1964), Farrokhzad moved beyond personal themes and began training a critical eye on Iranian society. Not only the thematic, but also the formal and emotional aspects of Farrokhzad's poetry had become richer, and the book was widely acclaimed. Tragically, the poet was killed in a car accident in February 1967. A posthumous book of poetry, which gives the current collection its title, was published in 1974.

Gray included only one poem, "Captive," from Farrokhzad's first book in this selection. The following two books are represented by four or five poems each, while the bulk of the selection is dedicated to *Another Birth*. Farrokhzad's posthumous book is included in its entirety. Gray writes that she chose the poems that spoke most to her, and her selection also reflects the deepening maturity of Farrokhzad's writing over time.

The poet's style is informal, though not colloquial. Nor is Farrokhzad's style highly "literary," although she effectively uses devices like metaphor and simile to describe scenes and evoke emotion. Natural images such as the moon, stars, wind, soil and rivers recur. References to human society do not usually evoke a particular historical period. These characteristics give Farrokhzad's writing a certain timelessness.

The first lines of "Captive" introduce themes that run through Farrokhzad's work. "I want you, and I know that never / will I hold you as my heart desires," she writes, evoking love, frustration, and grief. The speaker imagines herself as a caged bird and her lover as the "clear bright sky." She does not have the resolve to leave her cage—and if she did, she would not know what to say to the innocent boy who greets her every day. The poem likely expresses Farrokhzad's sense of imprisonment as a newly married woman in a provincial town.

“I sinned a sin full of pleasure,” the speaker confesses in “Sin,” which appeared in Farrokhzad’s second book. It is a frank and intense account of a night of passion with inescapable autobiographical overtones (appearing, as it did, amid rumors of Farrokhzad’s extramarital affair). Lust and fear commingle. The lover’s arms are “vindictive and made of iron,” and the tryst takes place in a “dark and silent sanctuary.” Farrokhzad’s repetition of certain lines not only provides emphasis and unites the poem, but also establishes a sense of fate. She uses this technique consistently over time and with increasing effect.

A clear development in Farrokhzad’s writing is evident in the poems from *Another Birth*. Innocence has given way to experience. The poet commands her emotions rather than surrendering to them. The poems become longer; they are sustained expressions rather than brief moments. “Those Days,” the first poem from *Another Birth* to be included here, explicitly bids youth and naïveté goodbye.

“Pair” and “The Victory of the Garden,” printed side by side, offer a striking contrast. Together, they illustrate not only our contradictory nature, but also Farrokhzad’s artistic assurance. In spare lines, “Pair” describes a couple’s lovemaking in the dark. The aftermath brings “two red dots / from two lit cigarettes” and “two solitudes.” By breaking the poem’s restriction to external details, the final line gains significant power.

“The Victory of the Garden,” in contrast, is a moving affirmation of love and of man’s connection with nature. “Everyone is afraid” but the lovers, not because the latter ignore the world but because they embrace it. Love is not “the flimsy linking of two names,” but “the intimacy of our bodies in the slipperiness / and iridescence of our nakedness.” It is one with “day and open windows,” “an earth that bears fruit” and “birth and evolving and pride.” Through its luminous images, the poem expresses not innocent wonder, but joyful acceptance.

But such affirmations sit side by side with expressions of despair, loss and self-doubt. “Ah, I was full of lust—lust for death,” Farrokhzad writes in “Realizing.” This, and piercing lines in other poems, suggest that the public reproaches she endured for her affairs and her rebelliousness were making her question (and torment) herself. “I listened to my whole life / A disgusting mouse in its hole / shamelessly singing / a stupid meaningless song.”

In “Green Illusion,” Farrokhzad refers to “this fraud, this paper crown / that stinks on the top of my head.” In such lines, she questions her own literary acclaim and the value of her writing. Yet the emotional power of these lines illustrates the very value that she seems to deny. Farrokhzad’s persistence in writing suggests that, at bottom, she understood it, too.

The poem with the most explicit social commentary is also, unfortunately, the weakest. Doubtless influenced by her stay in Europe, Farrokhzad excoriates her native country in “O Jeweled Land.” She points to many ugly things such as manure, a plastic factory and the dried-out Z?yandeh River. She mocks “fat superstars,” “intellectual chickenshits” and the Sufis and their music. A current of adolescent sneering runs through the poem, which gives off an unbecoming sense of superiority. The sophistication that Farrokhzad may have gained abroad cannot turn sarcasm into wit. Moreover, the symptoms that she describes are implied to be subjective failings. Farrokhzad does not consider how British and US imperialism have shaped Iranian society.

(Some of the difficulties facing left-wing, secular Iranian intellectuals find expression in the fact that the lover of Farrokhzad’s last years, Ebrahim Golestan, had been a member of the Stalinist Tudeh Party from 1944 to 1948, apparently quitting in disgust at Soviet intervention in the region.)

Other poems have different weaknesses. At times, Farrokhzad’s images become too abstract, her meaning too elusive, and all that remains is a feeling (generally of wistfulness or sadness). Such concerns arise with the title poem and “Window.”

Nevertheless, Farrokhzad’s international reputation has a solid basis. Although she has been held up as a feminist icon, she believed that gender was irrelevant to artistic merit and that literature had to address fundamental human issues. *Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season* demonstrates that Farrokhzad put her beliefs into practice, which is why her work endures. The current translation will be a valuable contribution to literature if it renews discussion of her poems or brings them to new readers.



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