

The Servant's Rebellion

Forugh Farrokhzad

A shadow of a secret question haunts my lips;
inside my heart, a restless, life-consuming anguish grips.
The riddle of this rebel soul, condemned to roam,
I mean to share with You today - and bring it home.

Though from Your threshold You may drive me far away,
while I am here Your servant, You are God where You remain;
my darkened tale can never be a tale apart
from You - its end, its origin, its every pain.

At midnight, cradles gently sway themselves to sleep,
unmindful of the wounded march that humankind must keep.
A hidden hand draws me, a skiff that shakes and strains,
rowing me onward to the hungry mouth of hurricanes.

Faces in my gaze are strange and cold as stone;
over roofs, the stars shed tears on homes unknown.
The terror of the prison, the chain-ring's sudden light -
such lovely tales of grace from the One God of night.

The cold breast of the earth, the graveyard's spreading stain;
inside each greeting, one dark farewell waits again.
Hands that return empty; and, in a distant sky,
a fever-yellow sun hangs sickly, left to die.

A search without an ending, a mute and useless fight;
a road drowned deep in darkness, a foot worn out by night.
No trace of fire upon Mount Sinai's sacred crown,
no answer from beyond this door forever bolted down.

Ah - does my grieving ever find its way to You,
to dash Your cup of self-adore against the stone in two?
Come sit with me one moment - me, this child of clay -
and drink creation's anguish from the poems that I say.

For years I froze within myself; today I rise,
a flame that leaps to burn Your harvest to the skies.
Either still this rebel cry that will not cease,
or I will teach You, God, another way to be.

I know You drive me from Your threshold, far away;
still I am here Your servant, You are God where You remain.
My darkened tale can never be a tale apart
from You - its end, its origin, its every pain.

What am I? The child of one voluptuous night,
driven down this road by someone hidden from my sight.
Once, one body wound itself around another's frame;
I entered life unasked, without consenting to my name.

When did You set me free, with open eyes, to choose
the form that I would call my own - the flesh I could not lose?
To name whomever I desired "mother" from the start,
to place my foot upon my road, free-handed, of my heart?

I was born into Your world for this alone:
to be the fruit of two hot bodies, flesh and bone.
Before that hour, when had You and I once met?
I came to life before I was myself - and in Your debt.

Days went by and spilled into a blackened gaze,
the darkness of Your blind, unending nights and days.
Days went by; the lullaby grew faint and died,
and all my ears were filled with nothing but Your voice inside.

Childhood, like a bright-winged swallow, left the ground
and flew toward other heavens, where no wall could hold it bound.
The seed of thought awoke and stirred inside my head;
an unknown guest came knocking at my door instead.

I ran through deserts conjured out of fevered dreams;
I sat intoxicated by the sides of springs and streams.
I broke a branch from mystery's ever-thickening tree -
another sprang at once from where the first had ceased to be.

My road ran onward to the farthest reach of plain;
I floated in the river of my thoughts like rain.
I crept into the heart of waves condemned to roam,
and tore the straps of darkness from my feet, to journey home.

At last, one day, I asked myself in quiet fear:
What am I? From what beginning did I first appear?
If I am wholly made of life's warm, living light,
from which veiled heaven do I fall and burn so bright?

Why do I think like this, in silence, night and day?
Who cast the seed of thought in me, then turned away?
The harp is in my hand; am I its proud musician -
or did another place it there and write my part's condition?

Had I not been, or lived within some other sphere,
would thought's strange power still have risen, sharp and clear?
Could I have found a passage, could I have pierced through
the riddles of this secret world I never chose or knew?

Afraid, pursuing that veiled answer through the night,
I set my feet upon a maze where dark devoured light.
You cast the shadow of "the End" - and then I knew:
from head to foot I'm nothing. Nothing. Nothing through and
through.

You cast the shadow of "the End." Within Your hand,
a rope ran out, its farther end at every neck of man.
You dragged the people through the crooked lanes of years,
their eyes fixed on the promised world beyond their fears.

“The fire of Hell shall be the blasphemer’s share!
Whoever chooses Satan over Me - beware:
the fire of Hell shall take his soul and hold it fast;
the fire shall burn him, hard and deep, and everlast.”

I saw myself: a mirror emptied of its own,
where every hour Your hand impressed another tone -
now the image of Your power, now Your tyranny,
now the image of Your own self-worshipping eyes in me.

A sheep bewildered in the middle of the flock;
the shepherd leaves the road unbarred, inviting in the wolf.
The shepherd, drunk upon the pleasure of the game,
lies easy in a corner, warm, untroubled, free of blame.

“The fire of Hell shall be the blasphemer’s share!
Whoever chooses Satan over Me - beware:
the fire of Hell shall take his soul and hold it fast;
the fire shall burn him, hard and deep, and everlast.”

You made this damned and banished Devil with Your breath;
You made him rebel, drove him toward us, bearing death.
It was You - yes, You - who took one spark of flame,
made such a demon, set him on the road, and gave his name.

You granted him reprieve while earth and time endure,
to kindle fires with fingertips profane and impure;
to turn to savage pleasure in a quiet bed,
to turn to kisses on the lips that thirst had set aflame and red.

All that was beautiful You gave him, without ruth:
he turned to verse, to cries, to love, to youth;
became the scent of flowers scattered on the plain,
the color of the world, life’s sweet, deceiving stain.

He became the wave along the dancer's swaying dress,
the fire of wine that made the vat boil in excess;
he raised such roaring in the souls of those who drank
that "Drink! Drink deep!" rang out from every ruin, bare and blank.

He became the music twisting in the harper's hand,
a tremor over silver breasts no will could countermand;
became the laugh that flashed the moon-faced beauty's teeth,
the cup overturned, the wine-bearer's reflection underneath.

The magic of his voice in nights where darkness grew
became the guide for desert wanderers who had lost the clue.
His footsteps danced within the sanctuary's heart;
his lightning eyes became the pilgrim's lamp when roads went dark.

All that was beautiful You gave without remorse,
then loosed him in the path of those who worship beauty's force.
And afterward Your wrathful shouts, Your raging cry,
made our turquoise dome resound beneath the shaken sky.

Our eyes brimmed over with his sorcery and glow;
we fell before Your feet in worship, bending low.
Yet red with blood, before our sight, forever stood
the blackened fate of Your own people, Thamud.

You waited until they were wholly in Your power,
then by a storm dried them like weeds within an hour.
Your furious gale descended on the tribe of Lot;
You burned them - burned them with a lightning searing hot.

God, what a game - what agonizing play!
Why turn us into toys and move us in this way?
We are prayer beads turning in Your tireless hand;
You spin us hot and hard, and race without command.

The moment that our eyes met life and learned to see,
we met the veiled, bewildering word “sin” by Your decree.
You made transgression; it awoke, attacked our breath,
and in the end we grew to be transgression’s flesh.

Had You been with us, had Your grace remained our guard,
could any Devil win our love or find the road unbarred?
Could this insurgent spirit, surging like a sea,
have held one trace of him, one footfall’s memory?

You drag us, one by one, into the fighting ring,
only to say: “You could have been a different thing.”
You make us stages where Your might can strut and shine,
then bring the cold steel hammer down on every spine.

What is this Devil, driven from the gates above,
who lingers in our silent house, a guest we cannot move?
Whose hand across his burning, weightless body spills
the perfume of the world’s delights, its sweetest, darkest thrills?

What is he, except exactly what You willed:
a darkened soul, a darkened life, a dark sight never filled;
a dark smile laid upon those lips that never smile;
a dark beginning, God - and a dark end to crown the trial.

When was his will the cause of this embittered state?
When did You ask his vote or let him choose his fate?
Had You released him, let him simply be his own,
no mark of him would ever stain the world we’ve known.

How many nights he came inside my troubled sleep,
his eyes two springs where tears and blood ran deep.
He groaned so hard; I saw upon his mouth and face
his grief was bare of sorcery, stripped clean of charm and grace.

Ashamed of that disgraced and filth-encrusted name,
he sought a corner to escape himself and shame.
His body wore pollution's color; still he cried,
and begged for strength to tear himself from what he was inside.

How many nights he spoke with me until the dawn;
my ears, it seems, are brimming still with that old moan.

Spit on existence - on this agonizing breath!
Spit on a life so hateful it resembles death!
He is my maker; why, then, in His creatures' ear,
does He declare I chose to be the thing He fashioned here?

If I am Satan, cunning, faithless - what's my crime?
He will not let me be another thing in time.
His Hell was burning, yearning for a victim's cry;
He placed the hunter's trap in hand and tamed me to comply.

I snared a thousand creatures as He bade me do -
then suddenly the world roared out my name as though it knew.
His Hell was burning, yearning for a victim's fall;
His angels of affliction stood awaiting all.

The fiery spears, the tents of smoke in ranks arrayed,
were thirsty for the countless sacrifices He had made.
The bitter fruit of Zaqqum's savage tree still clung,
unused and purposeless, from every branch where it was hung.

The drink steeped in the boiling springs of Hell below
had lit no fresh flame in a human heart to glow.
His Hell stood empty of the screams of living pain;
His Hell flared up and shone - and all of it in vain.

To paint another color on that emptiness,
He taught me how to lure His creatures to distress.
What am I? Merely one more wretch whose feet are tied
in bonds of blackened destiny, knotted, multiplied.

O followers of mine, O wanderers astray,
He weighed and chose with care the road that we obey.
O followers of mine, O lost ones seeking through -
there is no road by which a road may lead to You.

How long will you keep beating earth to find the way?
The road is hidden; we ourselves are bound His way.
O followers of mine, His curse on us, His cry;
O followers of mine, our cries to Him reply.

We are His tyranny - His tyranny on us;
and every happy laugh we own comes down from Him to us.
We are no sea that can become its own free wave;
we are no storm that can command the rage we crave.

We fell for nothing from the reach of His two eyes;
why strive to be our own sight, sovereign and wise?
We are no embrace that burns by its own fire;
we are no song that shakes itself with its desire.

We are not "we," that guilt could justly be our due;
we are not "He," that we should fear ourselves clear through.
Had we escaped one snare and gone upon our way,
He'd spread His trap again beneath some fresh display.

For His hot Hell, forever burning, fever-fed,
He raises newer prey with every moment sped.
O followers of mine, O wanderers in shame,
I loathe this filthy, infamy-encrusted name.

Though He has labored long to lull my soul to sleep,
I - who am Satan - God, alas, am wide awake and deep.

How many nights beside him in that dark I cried;
I shed my tears, again, again, there at his side.
How many nights, when Satan's lips had lost their speech,
I kissed them softly, where no comfort else could reach.

How many nights my hands came down with tenderness
upon that wrinkled face, to stroke its old distress.
How many nights, the moment that his voice arose,
my knees without a thought bent down in their repose.

How many nights he longed to cast his red cloak by,
to leave it for a moment, naked to the sky;
he longed to be a spirit cleansed and bright and free,
not god of half this mean and fallen world's misery.

Lord, what is born from all this vanity of Yours?
We are the fallen, helpless poor outside Your doors.
In every deed and every thought that passes through,
we see no hand, no sorcery, no mark but You.

You made this earthen world, and You already know
from head to foot it's one mirage, one painted show.
We are the puppets; Yours, the hands that make us move -
our disbelief, rebellion, should be nothing strange to You.

You said, "Give thanks," and so we gave our thanks on cue;
but for how long must we keep thanking only You?
You close the road, then laugh at those who seek the track.
Where are You - where - so we may find our way to You and back?

If we take form like wax beneath Your molding hand,
what is this fable of the Judgment You have planned?
Why must we burn so fiercely in the mouth of Hell?
What is this bitter punishment, remorse's cell?

This world itself has turned to Hell, ablaze entire,
all made of lamentation, every breath a fire;
hot fetters, heavy chains around the feet of all;
cold smoke from dusty bodies lifts above the squall.

The wet and dry together burn inside the flare:
the cloaked ascetic and the tavern rogue are there;
the heartsick seller, and the wine-drunk libertine;
the radiant cup-bearer and heaven's sage serene.

This world itself is Hell, a furnace fierce and vast;
and still another Hell awaits us when it's passed.
We have no shelter, and Hell's hard-hearted sentinel
keeps telling us that He has helped us, served us well.

Remember that wise elder, blessed in thought and way,
whose black-starred fate named "Satan" as the part he had to play;
bewildered by Your justice and the work You do -
I came to know that every word he spoke was true.

Here I am, the rebel servant whose poor name
Your hand adorned with all these sentences of blame.
Woe to me - my rebellion, my uprising, my cry;
whether I speak or hold my tongue, my place is Hell nearby.

Again, upon the Resurrection's final day,
You'll fault this speck for blasphemies I dared to say.
You'll place my burdened sins upon Your scales, to prove
my nature dark, rebellious, impossible to move.

One pan brims over with the burden of my sin;
what fills the other, Lord? What weight will You put in?
What is Your measure in this secret reckoning -
the wish inside Your heart, or some dark desert stone You bring?

How easy, on that dreadful day, to face me there
and speak about "my self" as though the choice were fair;
to seek upon Your scales the honor You erase
from creatures, moment after moment, face by face.

In some book - or perhaps a dream, I cannot tell -
I saw the court where Your supreme dominion fell.
You sat in judgment; yet Your balance, to my shame,
held only falsehood, falsehood - sanctimony's game.

Be angry, then - but do not frighten off my cry.
Tomorrow I am dust; what should I fear, and why?
I know too well what waits when all my words are through:
You, hungry; I, O God, a meager catch for You.

You, hungry; Hell beside You with its jaws spread wide;
its only trees are venom-snakes on every side.
Their breath makes all the atmosphere grow black and ill;
its wine is burning filth, poured hot enough to kill.

Beyond the walls that stand unbroken, hard and high,
Hawiya - the final pit of fire - lies by;
it spreads itself to seize, at one unguarded breath,
our useless earthen bodies and consume them into death.

If only You had never given us this breath -
or, once bestowed, our being had been ours till death.
I'd drink this purple wine; and afterward, at last,
nonbeing would be our own hangover when the feast had passed.

For years we little puppets, servants at Your feet,
danced to a thousand melodies You chose to beat.
At last Your fire of fury burns us through and through -
and now, at last, we understand what "justice" means to You.

So we poor, dark-starred souls would call You just and kind,
You veiled Your face in mercy's silk before the blind.
You spun from Paradise a secret tale, then gave
its promise upon credit, taking life in cash from every slave.

Afraid of being, frightened of existence's cost,
for years they rubbed their faces on the prayer mat, lost.
Your name was on their lips; but in their dreaming eyes,
a cup of wine, a houri's face from Paradise.

You broke the goblet of their "today" before their eyes,
then mocked their "tomorrows" with a hatred in disguise.
They turned into their graves - and, O You rain of grace,
the centuries went by; no drop fell on that place.

Why call this crimson flower-wine forbidden here,
when through Your Heaven rivers made of wine run clear?
Why is the righteous man's reward, when life is through,
a houri out of Heaven, offered up by You?

With every breath You charm us by some fresh deceit;
You draw us to a sea, then vanish from our feet.
Within this prison's blackness, where no dawn is seen,
You light a dreamlike candle from Your garden green.

If in this roofless, doorless world we chose to drown
ourselves inside a burning cup and drink it down,
Lord, still Your hand is working in the deed we do;
why say the deed was wrongful, when it came from You?

Beside the springs of Salsabil, we do not crave
that golden sleep, that jeweled dream beyond the grave.
Let good men keep the shades of Sidra and Tuba's tree;
we give this "divine mercy" back to You - take it from me.

Hafez, that ancient who contained both world and sea,
sold all this garden for one stream, and walked away free.
Who am I, then, not to trade it for a cup?
Brand my accursed name with shame; I give it up.

What is this perfumed, many-colored fairytale?
This magic-laden dream beneath enchantment's veil?
Who are these houris, clusters fashioned out of light,
their dresses woven from thin silk of abstinence and white?

Jugs in their hands; around their tender legs there flow
the dreamlike ripples of their skirts, now high, now low.
From door to threshold, calm and graceful, on they glide,
their breasts asleep in coral cradles where they hide.

Waters purer than the drops a weeping eye lets fall;
rivers slipping over newborn grasses, green and small;
fruit like glowing ruby seeds on every bough,
some gathered, some forever ripe and hanging now.

Soft-bearded youths, all grace and loveliness and bloom,
the banquet's cup-bearers, who steal the heart's own hoard;
their beauty never fades, while Heaven's blessed eyes
turn now toward them, now toward houris in surprise.

Palaces - their walls are undulating marble seas;
thrones on diamond-studded legs beneath the frieze;
curtains like green silken wings drift through the air;
the heady breath of jasmine seeps in everywhere.

Here we kneel at feet of wine and lovers, cast aside,
branded drunken outcasts, shamed and vilified.
There, in the other world, You give both love and wine
to guiltless, pious faithful men, as their reward divine.

That bitter, burning “sin” for which we spent our breath,
with all our haste and hunger for embrace till death,
within Your Paradise receives another name:
there, Lord, the very sin becomes reward, untouched by blame.

All that we have comes from You - You Yourself declared:
“My love’s a sea; my wrath’s a storm for the ensnared.
Whomever I desire, I darken in his heart;
whomever I elect is chaste and clean apart.”

What do we gain, then, from this useless toil and ache,
striving for rooms of ivory we cannot take?
Drive us away or call us near - the wish is Yours;
we cannot turn away from what Your will ensures.

What are You, source of all the being that we claim?
What, but two warm hands playing out a private game?
While others work the clay, You breathe into its breast
and make another servant, lost and dispossessed.

What are You, source of all the being that we know?
What, but the wall that blocks us everywhere we go?
At times You crush us in the talons of Your rage;
at times You come and smile upon our little stage.

What are You? Servant of Your majesty and name,
watching in the world-mirror Your reflected fame;
turning that mirror, every moment, so Your eyes
may better watch Your deathless splendor multiply.

The lightning of mirage-eyes; color born of lies;
the sap of cursed nights; the grave where darkness lies.
Perhaps You are that ancient bat asleep above,
thirsting in rage for crimson blood, the enemy of love and light.

Your self-worship, God - Your self-worship, nothing more.
I blaspheme: make me dust, make me a thorn outside Your door.
You stained me with a thousand shames; but if You're God,
then enter my heart - sit there - and cleanse the ground I trod.

For one brief moment, pass us by - let us be our own.
Afterward burn us, if we burn by fire we've known.
Afterward: tears, or laughter, or a final cry -
but grant us time to gather what we need before we die.

For one brief moment, pass us by - let us be our own.
Then, if You burn us, let the fire be ours alone.
One breath for tears, one breath for laughter, one for song -
one chance to choose the road, and bear what we chose wrong.

Though from Your threshold You may drive me far away,
while I am here Your servant, You are God where You remain;
my darkened tale can never be a tale apart
from You - its end, its origin, its every pain.