

Simin Behbahani, the “Lioness of Iran”

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Simin Behbahani, poet, died on August 19th, aged 87



EVEN as a child, she knew how poetry should sound. The rhythm of the rhyme her teacher gave her to recite—“I am a yellow rose, the Sultan of all the flowers, the Sultan of all the flowers”—was wrong. She envied the verse bestowed upon a friend, which scanned so much more sweetly, as much as she coveted the red ruffles of her dress, so much finer than her own yellow organdy.

So, at the age of 12, Simin Behbahani began writing her own rhymes. She wrote in the style of the old Persian poets: Hafez, Rumi and Sa’adi. Her contemporaries had abandoned traditional forms such as the *ghazal*, a sonnet of sorts, with its stiff, restrictive structure. With heads full of modernism they used rhymeless, formless verses to criticise their country and its rulers. But she embraced the old ways. After all, that was the sort of poetry that Iranians knew, the sort they could recite from memory, the cadences of their history.

She borrowed the styles of the masters, but not their substance. They wrote of goblets of wine, and nightingales, and laments for their beloved. She wrote of love, too, but also of politics and of life’s darker realities. “O moaning starving masses, what will you do? O poor anguished nation, what will you do?” asked the first line of her first published poem. Later she wrote about prostitutes hustling in the streets of Tehran, and about the pain of a mother unable to afford pistachios for her son.

She was 26 when the Americans and the British deposed Mohammad Mossadegh, Iran's democratically elected prime minister. The autocratic rule of the Shah, whom the West found more palatable, sharpened her desire for justice. As the years passed, like many others, she began to dream of revolution—not because she yearned for an Islamic state, but because she wanted an end to repression and the fear of the secret police.

In 1979 the revolution came, in the form of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and his Islamic Republic. But as the new state began a crackdown of its own, the dream soon soured. Ms Behbahani recalled being unable to bear the sight of lorries full of the bodies of executed prisoners, dripping with blood as they rumbled down the road. But she could still write:

I can't look: a corpse lies on the ground,
its horrifying outline punctuated by bullets,
the swamp bubbles that were his eyes
expelled from their sockets,
emptied of all joy and sadness,
separated from all hatred and love.

Then came the long war with Iraq, grinding and vicious. She remembered the sky over her head, blackened with the smoke of missiles, the ground ruined by exploding bombs, and again the lorries full of bodies, this time of dead soldiers being hauled to the cemeteries.

This turbulent poet

The old poets were men, their *ghazals* addressed to women and young boys. She dismissed all the attention paid to the fact that she was a woman. She wanted to be simply a poet. Still, outspoken and independent, an advocate for women's rights, she represented everything Iran's clerical rulers could not bear. One story tells of her marching for International Women's Day. Her hijab was defiantly light, her lips were slicked with carmine and her eyes ringed with kohl. The police threatened her. "What are you doing?" a woman demanded. "This is Simin Behbahani." The police were unimpressed. A man ran towards her. "Did you not hear?" he cried. "This is Simin Behbahani!" He would set himself on fire if they touched her, he vowed. They beat her anyway.

The danger, she knew, was in doing the censors' work for them, by heeding the voice in her mind that had begun to warn her: "don't write this, they won't allow it to be published." In her later life she was forced to put poems online that could not be published on paper.

Still, she was freer than many. She couched her criticism in metaphor and allusion, but it was still pointed, and Iran's rulers could never quite silence her. Ordinary Iranians had committed her verses to memory. They reached for them in the same way as they reached for the old rhymes. Others reached for them too; Barack Obama quoted her in a New Year message to Iran.

Despite the interrogations and the intimidation, despite the murder of her fellow writers, she never lost her patriotism, which was so fierce that it bordered on chauvinism. For her, Iran and the Islamic Republic were not the same thing. Her cause was Iran, and that meant dealing with all that came with it.

If the snake is domestic,
I will give it shelter.
I will be fond of it still,
even if it does cruel things.

Some of her contemporaries fled. But she loved her country too much to leave. When she did travel, to read her poetry in freer places, she counted the nights and days until her return. She never doubted that Iran's future would one day be bright. Western nations had suffered their dictatorships too. One day, Iranians would establish their country anew. And when they did, she hoped to be part of it:

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.

Clarification: in the original version of this piece, we neglected to credit Farzaneh Milani as the translator of Ms Behbahani's poetry. We apologise for the oversight.

[From the print edition: Obituary](#)