

# Comparative Woman

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## 5 poems

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## Artist Statement

“Not by art does the poet sing, but by power divine,” Socrates said. His words are my artistic credo. While I have a strong analytical bent (as might be expected from a fulltime scholar and university professor), I do not choose my subjects. The way in which I write is determined by many factors that are external to me. My subjects come to me, sometimes reluctantly, sometimes oppressively, and I do my best to accommodate them.

Many muses move me: the muse of language, of history, and of philosophy, as well as of poetry. When I am immersed in creation, the muses merge, along with the subjects they represent.

I was born in the American Midwest, and soon moved with my family to California, where I lived until I moved after graduating from UC Berkeley to New York City. In between then and my migration—permanently I expect—to the UK, I have lived, studied, and passed significant portions of my life in Tehran, Isfahan, Damascus, Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Cairo, Tbilisi, and Yerevan.

My work is inspired by the cities where I have lived throughout the Middle East and the Caucasus. In many of these cities, I have fallen in love or otherwise undergone profound personal transformations while absorbing history and literature from past centuries. My research and travels throughout the Islamic world have expanded my horizons, and have enabled me to see beyond provincial American perspectives. In my poetry as in my scholarship, I am a modernist and a classicist, someone who links medieval Islamic and medieval European worlds to the postcolonial present.

My travels and study of the Middle East have also given me a sense of the political potential of poetry to reshape the world. Poets whom I take as models include Mahmoud Darwish, Alesander Wat, Langston Hughes, Eavan Boland, Bertolt Brecht, and Faiz Ahmed Faiz. The Russian poets Osip Mandelstam and Marina Tsvetaeva gave me my first taste of poetry in a foreign tongue, followed by the medieval Persian poet Khaqani of Shirvan, who was the subject of my dissertation. Of the poets I have translated, the Georgian modernist poet Titsian Tabidze and the modernist Iranian poet Bijan Elahi are closest to my heart.

Nearly every poem I have written is rooted in a person or a place I have loved. As Jane Austen says in *Persuasion*, “one does not love a place less for having suffered in it.” To this I would add that the suffering associated with a place can become a source of inspiration when it compels me to put in words what I have experienced there. As for places, so for people: the negative scars that many relationships etched into my consciousness has not diminished my need to give verbal form to the memory of that experience, not least in order to enable future readers—and my future selves—to access the emotional terrain I have traversed.

At the basis of all my poems—and indeed all my writing—is love: love for other humans, and for the gift of being human during my short time on earth. My poems are in search of ways to enshrine love in language in a way that enables others to experience the love I have felt and to transmit it to their beloveds. The search for love animates my bleakest poems, that mock romantic feelings, that brazenly subvert the institution of marriage, and that are sometimes consumed with jealousy and anger at having been denied the opportunity to express the desire that was flowing from me in a given instant.

At their best, poems create spaces where we can express the love that we feel, for others, for ourselves, and for the universe with an honesty and directness that may be denied to us in our everyday lives. In many cases, this means challenging norms of gender and sexuality, and questioning age old institutions for organising our intimate lives, especially marriage and the monogamic norms with which is associated. Virginia Woolf’s memorable statement that “I meant to write about death, only life came breaking as usual” describes my own experience with the written word: often an impulse to depict the darkest and bleakest experience ends up unexpectedly becoming a paean to the beauty of existence. Language itself leads me to that brighter shore.

I am enamored of the second-person voice as an instrument of truth-telling and revelation. Poetry is the only medium I know where the second person is a standard mode of address, enabling me to address my interlocutors on the same terms of intimacy as if I were addressing them in person. My academic articles and monographs are typically in the third person. In keeping with scholarly convention, they erase my voice as much as possible. My creative and personal essays are generally written in the first person. Even creative nonfiction is limited in the experiments it can perform in the

second person voice. Unlike poetry, prose cannot consist entirely of conversation. Poems are for me uniquely suited for the second person voice; they are often the only space where I can address long-lost lovers, the dead, and the unborn without the conceit of mediation.

Among the greatest challenges of writing is managing the tension between art and life that results from the aesthetic imperative to objectify the people and places who inspire me, and whom in many cases I relate to in life in ways differently than I do on the page. While all of my poems originate in an experience, poetic license enables me to transmute that experience into art. Well-thought through distortion is a crucial tool in the poet's repertoire. Using the second person voice helps me to bridge the gap between art and life, while preserving an intimate relation to my subject, who shifts from becoming an other to becoming myself during the composition process.

I am most at home in four-line stanzas (sometimes experimenting with shorter forms), and draw inspiration from Persian, Russian, Georgian, and Arabic formalist poetics, with which I am on intimate terms and which I regularly translate from, but which are not easily adapted to an Anglophone aesthetic. The American poets Philip Levine, Donald Hall, and Agha Shahid Ali have shaped my sense of what the English language can do with words. Adrienne Rich has expanded my sense of what it can do with politics.

When I stumble while working on a poem, uncertain what to say or how to say it, the best remedy is to turn to translation, sometimes by myself, or sometimes with a co-translator. It is here, amid poems in Persian, Russian, Georgian, and Arabic, that I am able to discover myself in another tongue. Translation is like the search for love: both are ways of finding one's self in an other.

### On Leaving Iran

The plane ascends. Women disrobe,  
crossing into Turkey's airspace.  
Their hair cascades like waterfalls.  
I lift my skirt to let my legs breathe.

So much sin is compressed  
between my toes & my teeth!  
I stride over the pavement.  
The wind runs through my hair.

I am happy to unveil—  
for myself rather than a male guardian—  
to return to my body,  
to desire myself for myself,

in this corner of the cockpit  
poised between two countries,  
without male eyes  
watching over me.

## Denying Apartheid

“We don’t serve Arabs,”  
said the man behind the counter.  
He fixed his eyes on me &  
awaited my consent.

My Arab taxi driver  
was unfazed.  
Racism is an old story  
in the land of David.

Politeness took over.  
We headed for the car.  
The ride was smooth & silent.  
Barren valleys cascaded one after another.

God is a strange creature,  
I thought to myself.  
What idiot would choose a land like this  
for launching his career?

We reached Bethlehem: checkpoint 300.  
I disembarked.  
Arabs are not allowed  
to cross as freely as white women

with American passports.  
I journey by foot to the white limestone  
two-storied home where  
I had temporarily taken up abode.

I pass tourists in t-shirts  
Banksy portraits  
& soldiers armed with kalashnikovs.  
Like the racist at the counter—

like every American politician—  
like every international law—  
the armed soldiers avert their gaze  
to avoid the revealing glare of the sun.

## Partisan Friendship

As I sift through  
texts on debts,  
a memory of you  
arrests me—

day dawns  
in your London chambers.  
I call, requesting  
legal counsel.

Philosophy unearths  
the link between  
law & justice.  
You transmit to me

your dead teacher's legacy.  
When the gods yield to bureaucracy,  
our teachers' death  
becomes our mortality.

You, whom my poems  
may never reach,  
are my partisan poetics'  
only muse.

In your absence,  
the words you gave me  
are suspended perpetually  
between Dworkin & Rawls.

While our dreams for a better world  
melt into Plexiglas,  
the memory of our dawn  
makes the world new.

So long as you exist,  
your truth-telling  
at daybreak softens  
the law's taut sinews.

### The Problem of Twoness

As we strolled through Bab Moussalla,  
holding hands, falling in love  
grape leaves trembled overhead.  
You kissed me so perfectly

I thought it would never end.  
Then we moved to Berlin.  
In two months it was over.  
Damascus became Isfahan.

Over wrought promises  
became rusty with neglect.  
The emptiness of being  
with someone

and being alone  
in your union  
is the sole constant  
of my fluctuating

dual partnerships.  
Marriage is no salvation  
when my soul mates do not  
share my destination.

## Objectification

I am not allowed to objectify you  
because I am a woman.

Objectification is wrong.  
I can strive to be beautiful.

I can try to be your muse.  
I cannot objectify you.

I can make my body better—  
can stop biting my nails—

stop tearing my hair.  
I can make it easier for you

to turn me into poetry.  
I can ease your burdens

by softening life's blows.  
I am not permitted to generate

My own words, ideas, desires,  
or representations of you,

who flitted through my existence,  
casting inspiration everywhere,

leaving me wordless,  
hopeless, nameless,

unable to capture your beauty  
because you are male,

& only women can be beautiful.  
& muses for them are banned.