Nader Naderpour

Nader Naderpour (June 6, 1929 – February 18, 2000): Born in Tehran and receiving his early education in Europe, Nader Naderpour returned to Iran to publish his first collection of poetry in the 1940s. In the later 1960’s, he helped found “The Association of Writers of Iran” and directed the literature department of the Iranian National Radio and Television Department. He left Iran after the revolution in 1980, living in France until the late 1980’s, when he moved to the United States. Regarded as one of the leaders of the movement of “New Poetry” in Iran, he published nine collections of poems. Naderpour was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature and was awarded the Human Rights Watch Hellman-Hammett Grant in 1993.

Roger Sedarat

Roger Sedarat is a poet and translator. His collection of poetry, Dear Regime: Letters to the Islamic Republic won Ohio UP’s Hollis Summers Prize. Another poetry collection, Ghazal Games (Ohio UP), is forthcoming. He teaches poetry and translation in the MFA program at Queens College, City University of New York.

Rouhollah Zarei

Rouhollah Zarei received his PhD from University of Essex with a specialty in the writings of Edgar Allan Poe. He lectures in the English Department at Yasouj University, Iran.

Roger Sedarat (right) and Rouhollah Zarei (left) met on a panel at a translation conference in Stirling, Scotland, in 2009. Both were presenting papers on Hafez, the great classical Persian poet. After discovering each other’s mutual admiration for Persian and American literature, they decided to collaborate on a modern Persian poet, opting for Nader Naderpour in part because of his stronger, later work. The two regularly correspond by email, sending notes along with corrected drafts.

Roger Sedarat on translation: Though I have benefited as a poet from the workshop setting for over a decade of serious writing, I’ve rarely had a chance to improve as a translator in any kind of community. I think many translators would say the same about the isolating nature of the work. While I’m able to offer students in the MFA program at Queens College both translation workshops and craft classes, I typically serve much more as facilitator than as participant. Rouhollah, through our email exchanges, provides me an opportunity to daily hone my skills as a translator. As we question every verb and adjective, writing and rewriting each other’s drafts, I feel like my own craft greatly improves. I’m also motivated, because someone else depends on my input, to adhere to deadlines.

Rouhollah Zarei on translation: “As a teacher of English literature in Iran who has conducted literary translation courses, I have had hard times with my Iranian students translating from Persian into English. They usually fail to transfer not only the connotations of words but also the overall mood or the spirit of poems. This is often the case with famous Persian poets already translated even by native speakers of English. Translating new poems with Roger has been a unique experience. Our process betters insures both accuracy along with the literary spirit of the original. I am fairly familiar with Persian and English literature and Roger has the double advantage of being an Iranian-American poet writing in English as well. Our back and forth email process provides us with fresh ways of looking at the poems as we draft and redraft new versions for each other.”

Rouhollah Zarei on choosing Naderpour: “Naderpour is a poet less known in the English speaking world. He is a poet whose romantic sensitivities can evoke forgotten memories in Westerners’ minds. He speaks in a language familiar to us through the universal themes of nature, romance, eroticism, youth, passage of time, old age, and death. Because his poems were written over the course of decades and cover a variety of subjects, it’s hard to pigeonhole him with just one school of poetry or one generation of poets.”
Apostrophe - for Dr. Mohammad Hossein Mostafavi

You fluent green!
You impossible simplicity!
You sacred script written on the silk night!
You Holy Verse inscribed on the dawn!
You hymn acclaming the four seasons!
You open book of heaven’s epithets!

You whose wave of Persian letters makes every dot a bird!
You whose every drop becomes a sign in the message from a cloud.
You whose sorrowful absence and eventful presence
become a momentary story on the shore.

You eloquent green!
You extended opening of a lyric!
You profound meaning of an epic!
You birthplace of the word “sun”!
You rising meter of the moon’s rhyme!
You sign of smooth and easeful expression!

You sea, a body of metrical waters!
You spot for words’ collusion!
You dervishes’ dance!
You knotting and un knotting of speech!
You meaning of breaking meters!
You periodic brilliant sentence (between western and eastern crescents)!
You joining of jungle with mountain and galaxy!

You capsized city with inverted inscriptions
full of ups and downs,
covered with outlines and sketches of stars!
You green suspended heavens!
You Sasanid monument in Kermanshah!

You verse! You boiling essence with more fluid than the magic sap
of life in a tree’s root!
Saturate me with the echo of your call!
You lion, roaring with your mane blowing in a wind-storm,
Pull down my body, quench my soul!
Rip and tear my trachea!
Pull off my subjugating shackles
and smash this agitated rowboat of my being
on the sun’s golden rock!

(continued, without stanza break)
You deep, you high, you dread, you threat, 
you green, you Caspian Sea!

Glance

On the glass, the big broken spider 
had woven a cobweb.

The diamond of your eyes etched a line. 
In the silence of trees, glass shattered.

Now just the moon and your gaze 
stare into my eyes.

Narrative

The black hen brooded on the white egg, 
telling the embryo beating within, 
“Look, you eyeball! My womb of lime 
is not a dark cell; 
It’s full to the brim 
with the simplicity of dawn. 
The sun sleeps in its whiteness, 
covered better than sleeping eyes.”

The night drowned in the simplicity of dawn, 
the rooster’s cock-a-doodle-doo reaching as far as the morning’s horizon, 
but before the yolk of the sun emerged 
a hand appeared in the dark nest. 
The white egg separated from the dark hen.

The Last Supper - To Nasser Amiri

From the beaches of an unknown night 
the wind spread the odor 
of the men’s roasted body 
on our tablecloth. 
We toasted our glasses, but within us 
the bottle of faith had shattered. 

None of us looked the other in the eye. 
Our mouthfuls of blood 
were gulping back tears 
as we sobbed to ill-timed 
spasms of laughter.

In a night when the kiss smacked of betrayal, 
we burnt the kind and vigorous face of the friend 
encircled by a divine halo 
with a tongue redder than flames; 
we sold our love for the kiss of hatred. 

(continued, with stanza break)
With the rough immoral stone,
at the enemy’s infernal gallows,
we bruised Hallaj1 who shouted the truth.
we transferred power from our saints to Yazid2;
we, more pious than all the impure,
dipped our fingernails into our friend’s blood.

We put the high stool of thought
like Aristotle’s nine suspending spheres
under the lame feet of flattery.
We built towers out of skulls.
We wrote of our conquests on shrouds.

We, the blind-eyed,
looking for essential wisdom,
slid fingers blinder than hearts
on embossed words and lines
to read the names of the most crooked
raised higher than moles upon idolized beloveds.

We built adobe houses on water.
We threw stones at mirrors;
Like Arabs of old, wandering in the wilderness,
we dug graves for honorable girls
in the salty waste land of ignorance.

We carried our dead on our shoulders;
we reaped and sowed
grains of tears and sweat
in farms of fear and shame;
We forced the spirit to serve the body.

In the casino of history
we lost our legacy of ancient generations,
the same way we had already lost our fame.
We tasted our captivity in time
as if from a bottle.

No sign of dawn in the sky.
The deep wound of the sun’s dagger,
like an old keepsake from the distant past,
burnt our cold hearts.
The plant of our salvation
decayed with incessant rain.

We picked up crumbs from the earth’s table.
We dipped pieces of our friend’s body
in bowls of blood;
In the black Iscariotic night
we were guests at the Last Supper.

1 One of the early sufi mystics executed for heretical claims that he himself manifested divine truth.
2 The second caliph of the Umayyad Caliphate responsible for the tragic massacre of Karbala.
Poem as Wine Flagon

You are like a wine flagon:
the crystal spiral,
thanks to the glass blower,
runs down on the delicate frame
like the curl of hair.
You are like a wine flagon:
in the glitter of morning
from the slope of the chest to the narrow neck,
full of fervid inebriation and light consciousness.
My poem, you are like a wine flagon.

How can I ignore your fragility?
How can I, at times, not consider breaking you?
If you break you will spill my thirst.
An associate of mirrors,
you know the language of flowers;
Your momentary rise between light and the world is blissful.
You are the sun in the horizons of springs and grass.

Your lips: the mouth of the rose at dawn.
A breeze of a word will open them;
You are the best word on the tongue of the flower, the wind.

Tall crystal,
turn me into wine and pour it in your throat.
Let me into your transparent chest.
Grant me the heat of a greenhouse in winter.
Drink me all over,
or grant the last drop to the drunk.

(continued, without stanza break)
Not Plant or Stone, but Fire  - for Parviz Soltani

I am born from the pure seed of the sun
in the dry lonely desert,
my splendor rooted in salty soil.

I am born from the inertia of stone,
the effort of wind, the speed of fire,
and the patience of water.
Under the evening's golden dome,
I stretch my arms toward the sky;
In the desert’s glorious night
I am the last walking passenger.
The root of me, this old tree,
the desert’s wise elder,
remains full with the free essence
of living, half-living, and dead plants.

The root of me, this old tree,
this valiant recluse
remains full with the youth of sprouts,
fresh songs,
rivers’ sediments,
and the transparency of sky.
My fresh fruits: small birds;
My dew drops: bright stars;
These birds of day,
these stars of night
having emerged from the opening of my broad chest
heralded love,
newer songs,
more pleasant intimations.

The wind like a mother plucking a few grey hairs
from her daughter’s head
has shaken the yellow from my green leaves.
The sky above my branches,
softer than a dove’s chest,
has spread blue velvet.

Harder than a heavy rock
through the whirlwind of years,
I remain with outstretched arms
rooted to the blazing fire,
made not of iron, plant, or stone,
free of both fame and shame
incapable of hesitation.

Years have passed and my eyes
remain open towards the sky
(continued, without stanza break)
with the promise of a great miracle:
the return of a man
who once passed my way.

Under the Shadow of Two Blue Fingers

In the morning light
it perched on a flower
with multi-colored wings,
sinking its head

into an imaginary spring
reflected in the dew.
The antenna motioned
at the alien light

feeling the weight of the sunbeam
on the scale of its two wings.
As it pretended to sleep,
the wind rocked it to sleep.

And in its sleep
it saw the flight
of a light-speckled shadow
around its cradle of petals

attempting to fly away.
The shadow crumbled.
With colorful wings
it landed

on paper,
no longer with the weight
of a sunbeam
upon its flight.

Under the blue shadow
of two fingers
a pin pierced the head
of the butterfly.