



# DEFIANCE *of the* ROSE

SELECTED POEMS BY PERVEEN SHAKIR

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# Selected Poems for Reading

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## When the wolves come

Moments before  
the wolves come,  
a sharp stench  
shoots through the woods.

Today, in my house too,  
my sixth sense  
has picked up  
a similar stench.

In this short time alone,  
three of four times already,  
every corner of the house  
with rose petals I have strewn.

These shields of roses  
will they save me  
when the wolves come?

## Those with the memory of camels

My tribe is one of its kind.  
It traces its line back  
to the nomads of the sands.  
It sets up camp on the shifting dunes,  
wrenches its morsels  
from the fangs of desert snakes.  
In scorn of those who flee for fear of death,  
a worthless man they will sell for a thousand coins,  
a loyal camel they hold much dearer.

The companionship of centuries  
has created such harmony  
between camel and man,  
that no one can  
draw a line between them in the sand.  
Along with swiftness, the camels have absorbed  
the endless patience of slaves  
and on the backs of these men is  
an invisible hump.

Along with thrift and obedience,  
every woman knows how to rip out  
the image frozen in the pupil  
of her dead heir's eyes,  
and every man, given the chance,  
can grind the bones of his  
quick-tempered lord.

In the language of my tribe,  
there is no word for forgiveness.

## **Our dilemma is this**

Our dilemma is this  
we are so caught up  
in the romance of denial  
that we are only at ease  
declaring every being a non-being.

We present ourselves  
as self-proclaimed geniuses,  
sometimes posing as Socrates,  
sometimes using words of Mansour  
like a visual trick  
to dupe simple-minded folk.  
No one considers themselves  
less than Voltaire or Rousseau.

Every evening,  
asking forgiveness  
of the ruler of the land,  
every morning,  
seeking new reasons  
for being interred,  
that is our specialty.

Sipping wine with wealthy tycoons  
or in retrogressive embassies of the second world  
or in the homes of loathsome bureaucrats,  
we portray ourselves as edgy revolutionaries  
of the third world.

Like low lives bitten by curs,  
we can no longer see running waters now,  
and even if they wanted to,  
how could anyone possibly show us  
how much water beneath these bridges has flowed.

## Snake-stung

Between innocence and idiocy is a moment's mile

Last year, post-monsoon, in my town,  
such a nerve-wrecking perfume shot around  
that, caught in its bribe,  
all the wise men of my tribe  
have muddied the membrane of their eyes.

They were always simple to begin with --  
now, near jasmine bushes and pointy reeds,  
stung senseless by the poison, they sleep.

No sooner than the vapors in their mouth begin to glide,  
that thorns should turn to roses, that is no surprise --  
what's strange is that  
despite the presence of the bushes on fire,  
these heirs of the milky founts of Paradise,  
mistake this mucous for the elixir of life.

Between innocence and idiocy is a moment's mile

## **Prostration**

Under the spell of the body's desire  
when your jugular crackles in the fire  
and between you and me  
a moment fainter than a hair's breadth  
begins to shatter,  
in that moment,  
seeing only the pain in my eye,  
to rip off the wagging tongue of every desire  
is a great nobleness.  
And before that greatness  
my lips still bow to your footprints.

## Will

### Wolves

on all four sides,  
eyes bulging out of their sockets,  
tongues falling out of their mouths,  
breath running like bellows,  
they guard me like sentinels,  
a moment's slip await  
in the manner of seasoned hunters.

There's lure of sustenance and gold,  
there's threat of accusation,  
there is promise of rank and pomp,  
there are traps of every kind.

But, all around me,  
shines such a sacred halo  
that despite every ploy and trick,  
these beasts, with all their fangs,  
are forced to keep their distance.

Into the ring of fire  
the beasts dare not step.

**Beyond the Night**  
(For Parveen Qadir Agha)

When my head lay bared  
and I was locked out  
of my own house  
'You are dead for us',  
the family's steely silence pronounced  
and without as much as a word  
I left forever my father's house.

I looked towards my lover  
with a quiet knowing confidence  
but the lakes of his eyes had frozen over  
as if never a water lily had ever bloomed there for me.  
I stood alone under the bare sky  
clenching my son to my chest  
'Oh god! Where should I go?'

A night that loomed ahead like a mountain's crest  
blood-thirsty wolves on all four sides  
and hounds tracking down woman's scent.  
Vengeful eyes seeking blood,  
lecherous eyes making a pass,  
scornful laughter that ripped me to shreds,  
and a bellow from hell  
that rang like death's knell.  
Roaring gusts of wind like raucous belly laughs,  
rain that stung like sarcasm's pangs --  
I was stoned in from all sides.

The gossamer veil of a night  
stood between me  
and my sanity's flight.  
Suicide itself was waiting to ensnare  
I almost walked into its lair  
when a kind shadow approached and said  
'No matter what the world says,  
You are dear to us as you are.'

I cried so much that day  
that were the world an empty cauldron,  
my tears would have flooded it over.  
To this day remains in her embrace  
my lament of an existence -

God  
sometimes  
his angels sends  
on earth,  
some grieving hearts to mend.

## Macbeth

On a sunset-tinged mount  
three witches, three sisters in evil, are meeting again,  
muttering a name in their chants,  
watching their surroundings with darting snake-like eyes,  
with the insatiable, timeless gluttony of vultures  
slathering their slimy tongues across crusty, crimson lips.

A seemingly pleasant news steeped in poisoned waters  
they are waiting to deliver to that lowly being  
in whose empty chest no gem of gratitude jingles.  
He who sought the office is also apprised of the news of battle,  
the devotion of a lifetime fetched not a farthing in the balance.

But what will become of that rose coloured dagger,  
still clutched between trembling hands  
whose bloodied scent drills down to the roots of the house?  
In the fearful heart haunted by demons of its own conjuring  
no trace of sleep passes,  
startled eyes are accursed to eternal wakefulness.  
Sleep slips through the eyes like fish through fingers  
as if it has a premonition of nightmares to come.

Like the wakeful eye, this dreamless hour  
has come upon a trembling hand too.  
On the lip of the coast of Arabian Sea,  
an old woman seeks a cure  
of musk and ambergris.  
Her hand is in the water  
and in her eye has dawned  
a thirst for all the oceans of the world.

## Talking to Myself

All these folks around me  
speak a whole other language,  
it seems.

That wavelength at which  
I was connected to them  
has fallen through to another orb.  
Either my diction became foreign,  
or their idiom turned strange.  
The way I say the things I say,  
they say those things another way.

I am silent to preserve  
the sanctity of words.  
This, then, has become the sum of my talks --  
my shadow, this solitude and these walls.

I shudder to think  
as I continue to shrink  
deeper and deeper  
within myself --  
what if I lose the frequency  
at which I talk to myself,  
and one day, I am left behind,  
screaming 'May Day!', 'May Day!' in the void.

## Karachi

Karachi is that dispensable whore  
that, from across the planet's rim,  
any man with wallet fat or slim,  
spends the night with at his whim,  
and when he's done with her,  
as soon as daylight peeps through the curtain's flap,  
on her right cheek, gives a tight slap,  
and, expecting her to turn the other cheek,  
drunk already on the stupor of the night to come,  
jaunts off to work, his livelihood to eke.