

FIGURES IN A GARDEN

Roger White

from *Witness of Pebbles*

George Ronald, 1981

The essence of true safety is to observe silence,
to look at the end of things
and to renounce the world.

Bahá'u'lláh
Words of Wisdom

The speakers are the Persian poet Táhirih (1817/18-1852) and the American poet Emily Dickinson (1830-1886).

...just as the rays of the natural sun have an influence which penetrates into the darkest and shadiest corners of the world, giving warmth and life even to creatures that have never seen the sun itself, so also, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit through the Manifestation of God influences the lives of all, and inspires receptive minds even in places and among peoples where the name of the Prophet is quite unknown.

J.E. Esslemont
Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era

Tihrán, Persia, 1852

The very name is fragrant,
slides silkily across the tongue
and I weep in knowledge of it
as I once wept in longing to know it.
It has the good of honey on the mouth,
this name – a flame in the mind,
and its echo in the burning heart
a cool sweet water. Drink of my heart,
I would tell them. Drink and know His name!
Be nourished of the knowledge of the Lord!
It becomes an easy thing to die
with this name on the lips,
this ultimate feast. I who loved sweets
now given this, the nectar of figs!
I speak while there is yet time.
Children, children forgive me,
but I have known the poem made manifest,
shall I deny the author?
And if your father cast me away,
shall I deny the verse?
And if I be driven from the land,
could I ignore the book?
Do not imagine I overlook the danger
of the name, this greatest branding.
It is a jeopardous career the lover chooses
and the master's ownership forever marks the slave.

From the uncurtained niche I would tell this name
or from the minaret. Scholars, servants, sisters –
all would I tell, till my tongue be silenced
and my companions be the stones.

They, too, I would have know, and the cypress,
and the sea. Into a million, million bottles
would I seal the name and send them in
the waves' white hands to all the corners
of the world. And deserts cross and mountains climb
to breathe it to the deaf sand and the proud eagle.
Observe how this intoxicant assassinate
all dusty loyalties.

Come with me, husband! Give me the strength
of your firm arm. Join me, children, light my path
with flowers and your laughter.
Are you content to be stones?
Let us streak across the firmament
like maddened comets!
They do not hear. Doors close.
Then tears will be my progeny
and I shall string abuse into a necklace
to adorn my throat. If I wrench off my veil
it will be to tear the indifferent eyelid
of a sleeping world and if I die
my pale face will imprint itself on the moon
and float above the world announcing his name
to those who would read.

Mark me, women, my compass is set for madness.
The pole of Am I not Thy Lord? is my magnet
and I its Verily, Thou art! None shall stay this course.
The passage will be stormy, women,
watch it well and pray.
The sea before us is of blood
and its dolphins the severed heads of lovers.
I could lend you courage if you lean on me.

Listen! The sea speaks!
Put down your needles and listen, sisters,
the sea speaks my name.
Soon you shall see where its tumult
will carry my craft and marvel that
it sweeps me to a garden where
my song will end.
I shall go from home no more
but shall wear a white gown
and choose silence.

Amherst, Mass., 1853

I shall not go from home
but shall wear a white gown
and choose silence
and my world will be my garden.
I shall fit myself to the small contours
of my life as a meek accommodating moss
crochets itself about a stone
and in the silence there shall speak
that intimation that nudges the mind in dreams
which my stirring lashes banish
as they lift reluctantly to light.

If the village declares me mad
I shall offer no defence.
Twigs of gossip will catch at my skirt
as I move toward the alyssum at dusk
to breathe its scent dim as memory
but unconcerned I shall stoop
to press my face in its cool circle
mysterious as a footprint
from which I conjure the sped quarry.
Taunts will gather in my hem
unnoticed as lint and if mocking laughter
insinuates itself through the evening air
my slim hand will brush it away absently
as it would the frail architecture
of the tenant of lilacs which
intimidates stickily my face.
It is not the spider I seek here
though we are sisters in industry.

Eternity sweeps around me like a sea
lapping me with sounds
that drown the braggart heartbeat
and the fatuous pulse
leaving me weak and grateful.
One word I ask, one name -- speak!
I would make my home in the
green palace of the sea's voice
but she gives back only murmurous sighs
drenching me with her sad reluctances
dearer than the sun's noon-day avowals
which the strident crow has by rote.
One word would be inundation
if it came from the sea!

My heart grows as still
as the lilac's dark leaves.
What name does my love wear?
They rustle in opaque reverence
but do not tell
and now the sky's silver aborigine
slips from the ribcage of the trees
to ride quietly in the black lake overhead
tantalizing me with her calm authority
and faint hieroglyphics carved by pain,
a halo to my madness.
Tell, mother, tell!
But love or terror has silenced the moon
and her eyes are incontinent as mine.
Where is he? What have they done to my Lord?
A cloud modestly veils her wan face
and in shame I draw my questions

about me like a cloak and move toward the house
where the bright rooms chirrup with trivia,
simmer with responsibilities.

Tomorrow when the tawny moths gather
to embroider the twilight
I shall steal again to the garden
to beg the moon to yield up her immortal secret,
to implore the sea to spell the perfumed name
that its accents may inhabit my silence
and my soul dissolve as its syllables find admittance.