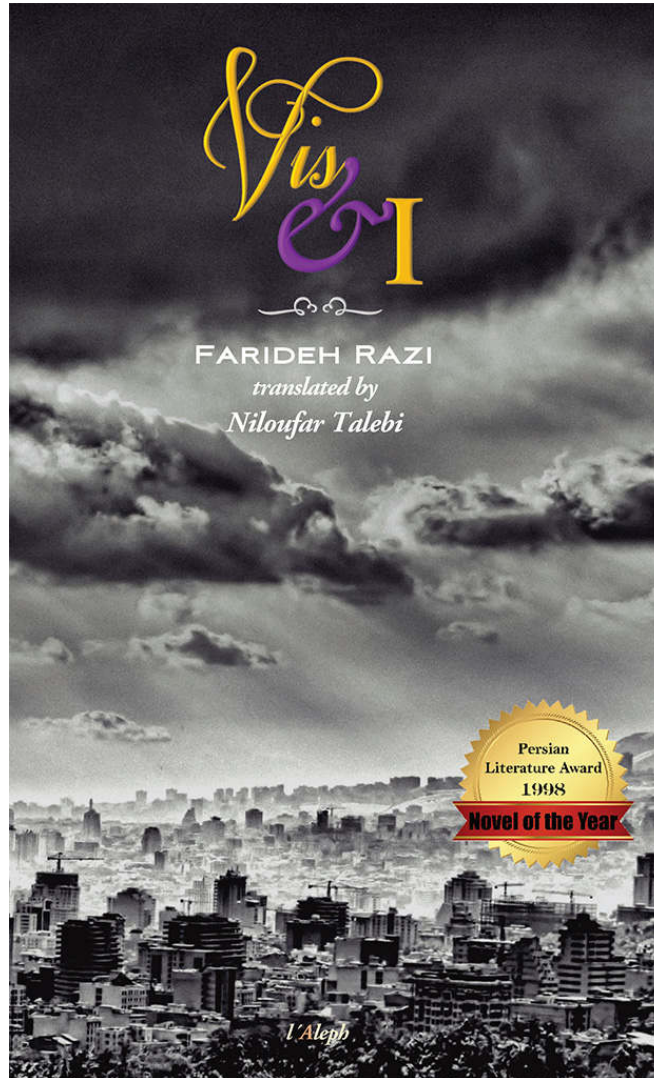


**Spotlight on Women in Iranian Literature:
Excerpt from the Award-winning Novel *Vis & I* by Farideh Razi
Translated from the Persian by Niloufar Talebi**



We're delighted to share an excerpt from the riveting novel *Vis & I* (l'Aleph, March 15, 2017), winner of the 1998 "Novel of the Year" Literature Award, written by the acclaimed Iranian writer Farideh Razi and translated from the Persian by the accomplished writer, translator, and multimedia artist Niloufar Talebi. *Vis & I* is an interior monologue during a harrowing cab ride through the streets of Tehran as Pardis rushes to the airport to stop her lover from leaving. Multiple narrative threads and flashbacks, real and imaginary voices--primarily that of Vis, the heroine of the Persian epic romance, *Vis & Ramin*--interweave in this gritty, postmodern love story. *Vis & I* poses the ultimate challenge: to exercise the strength of will that Vis has come to represent in the Iranian literary canon and psyche in the vindication of a forbidden love and being true to oneself. This is a compelling read we hope it will transport you. Happy National Translation Month and happy reading!

—Claudia Serea and Loren Kleinman

He said: *Pain is creation.*

Vis knelt down and pressed her head down to the ground, surrendering herself to the very instant that trickles away from time, making a wish: *I wish I were music that could lodge itself inside you the way sounds that already exist within you do, as do particles of light in the sun.* And I look at the reflection of leaves on the car's window as it moves. An instant is on the verge of happening. Instants become so beautiful sometimes. I get closer to seeing you. Wait up, so that we can either leave together or turn back together, together regardless of what happens, that is what's important. Your face ripples on the glass. I can see clear as day that you're looking at me and you're worried! What are you thinking of? Do you know that I'm on my way!...

Vis was griping about why I hadn't left earlier, why had I transformed, incapable of making a decision? Didn't I know that I could never stay back without him? Now was the time for another beginning: I felt what it was to be me, what I really was, without doubts or the temptation to be self-centered. I could see *Pardis*, the distinct depth of my existence, and the space it occupied. It was time to call upon myself! And I did.



The whole house was covered in bedding. You had to be careful not to step on anyone if you wanted to walk around. But we were calm, we were together and if a bomb landed on us, we would all go together. Siamak kept nagging: "Mommy, let's go home where my bicycle is, I can't play here, I absolutely won't sleep on the floor tonight, I want to sleep in my own room, I don't like it here."

Zohreh yelled: "Shut up, I'm not in the mood, go sit your ass down in a corner or I'll beat the shit out of you." And he retreated to a corner and glared at his mother. The radio continuously announced a state of emergency and we kept jumping into the hallways without looking at each other. We all wanted to pretend we weren't afraid and that it didn't faze us, but inside we were on edge. While waiting for the impending disaster to happen I would close my eyes in order to concentrate on you, to be able to tolerate it all...

In the afternoons, we would gather in the streets with the neighborhood kids. We played in groups of boys versus girls. We had a

beat-up plastic ball over which we fought and made up. We launched volleyball games, or played chase. We were so giddy that we tagged each other nonstop just to keep horsing around. When was all this? It was yesterday! The sound of running water, Father's voice, Mother's laughter, the sound of being carefree. And now, the sound of sirens, and panting children and their inquisitive eyes gazing deep into ours. Sirens going off twice an hour was unnerving. I looked over at Siamak who was standing in the corner of the room, shaking. I walked over to him and gently took his arm. He was ice cold, drooling from the corner of his mouth, his tiny body shivering. I closed my eyes to block it out...

Back when we used to summer in the country, frolicking in the hills every day, we would jump into the river (without knowing how to swim) around noon, and when we were good and exhausted, dithering away freezing our bottoms off, Mother would feed us watermelons she had cracked open and sliced, and relish watching us eat. Sometimes she had to repeatedly holler that lunch was ready, but we would pay no attention until it drove her crazy, and we would carry on with the pranks, splashing the pond water with wooden sticks from the mosquito net so the fish would surface and we could count them, but the sludge would also surface and that would get on Mother's last nerves.

Nowadays when there was an explosion, we would all gather in the hallway, young and old. This is what we did every time there was a radio announcement. Now the force of the explosion shook the wall we were leaning on and we were thrown on top of one another. Screaming and crying and shouting, what mayhem! My lids were glued together and I couldn't (I was too afraid to) open them. They were forced open by the sound of someone crying, to the sight of Zohreh's protruded stomach bulging out. At the end of the hallway a few people were crouched in the corner staring into the distance, rocking back and forth like a cradle, one of them talking to himself under his breath, another looking at Zohreh and telling the person next to him: "Can you believe it! A child under these circumstances? Are they so blind that they can't see what's going on around them? I guess they don't have anything else to do but make babies!"

Zohreh sucked in her stomach and lowered her head in shame. I looked over at Siamak who had horrified pitch black eyes, grabbing Zohreh's skirt, wrinkling it, and slobbering all over himself.

I said: "Siamak!"

He said: "A..."

I said: "Siamak, Siamak, answer me!"

He said: "A-a-a..."

Zohreh screamed: "See how my child has gone mute! How much longer...? God, where are you? How patient do you think we are? Enough is enough!"

Someone from the end of the hallway recited prayers of repentance. Someone else said: "What does god have to do with it? We're at the mercy of the two-legged creature."

I looked over at Siamak, a wet stripe stretching down his cheek. He struggled to talk and couldn't. Zohreh was beating herself and I kept thanking god, grateful that we were all still there! Somehow. That we were still breathing was good enough!

Vis moaned: *Look how selfish you've become! Everyone is blaming someone else, Siamak has gone mute, Khosrow's child has gone blind, they still haven't pulled the shards of glass out of Bahman's chest, and the shrapnel still embedded in Homayoun's spine doesn't seem important. What does it matter that someone's stuck under rubble somewhere—it's only good enough that you and your people are fine. Our quality of life isn't important! Simply existing is what matters. Looking without seeing, moving without thinking!...*

I put my head against the wall to avoid thinking, to travel beyond myself. Zohreh was moaning and Daryoush was shouting: "Damn it! Maybe he's just scared, freaked out! Why don't you stop your whimpering! Let's find out first what's going on. But god forbid, god forbid if..."

Zohreh shook her head and writhed some more. One hand was holding on to Siamak and the other was pressing her stomach. Daryoush was spinning around himself, pulling Zohreh this way and that by the hand, clueless as to what he was doing, while grumbling: "But it's not time yet, it's only been seven months, we still have two more months."

I said: "Brother (when there was something important at hand, I said, *Brother*), have you forgotten the car is out of gas? We were in line since midnight last night, but didn't get rationed any. Besides, the street is blocked now—the bomb dropped on one end of it—and anyway the hospitals are going to be mobilized for the injured."

“Are you blind? Don’t you see the baby’s coming?”

“I do see, but what can I do? Wait until I fetch the doctor upstairs—he’s a cardiologist, maybe he can help.”

“A cardiologist! How’s he going to deliver a baby? Me, I can’t think anymore. I don’t know what to do. Do whatever you want! It’s not important, it’s not important.”

He put his head in his hands and settled in a corner.

I went to fetch the doctor. It was late and I was embarrassed. By the time the doctor opened the door, I had almost forgotten what I was there for. I got flustered. He smiled and greeted me. I got myself together and told him what had happened. Without skipping a beat, he said:

“I’m sorry, this isn’t something I can do. I’m not an obstetrician. That has its own protocol.”

I implored, said mother and child would both perish, this would be their only chance, the baby’s almost crowning and we don’t know what to do, we can’t move her, I’ll have to be the one doing it if you don’t come, there’s no other way. Mumbling under his breath, the doctor started following me. When we got downstairs, Zohreh was wailing at the top of her lungs. We all got to work—as far as it was possible—preparing boiling water and birthing gear.

The doctor said: “Push!” Zohreh hollered. We were all huddled behind the door, listening to her scream, until one long drawn-out scream escalated and finally stopped. The sound of crying, of a birth! I leapt in. The doctor was holding the baby upside down, slapping its back and motioning to me. I traced the line of the motioning gesture, but didn’t understand. I got closer. No, I must have been wrong! They must have hidden the baby’s arm behind its body. It must be the face that’s bloody, because there’s no way one side could be dark, no, no, this can’t be! It’s not possible...A baby (I couldn’t speak), a deformed baby! The doctor shook his head.

Zohreh, who was drained, asked: “Is it a boy or a girl?”

“A boy.”

And then she relaxed and went to sleep. I quietly stepped out. Siamak was chewing his shirt collar and glaring at me. I said: “It’s over.”

He said: “A.”

About the author

One of Iran's acclaimed contemporary writers, **Farideh Razi** is also a translator, playwright, poet and scholar. Born in Tehran, she studied English and Persian Literature, and Art and Philosophy at New York University, The New School, and Tehran University. She worked as researcher at the Ministry of Art and Culture and the National Library in Iran. Selected as the Best Novel of 1998, the critically acclaimed *Vis & I* is an inventive work of fiction that opens a revelatory window onto what it is like to live, love, and be an artist in Iran.

About the translator

Niloufar Talebi is a writer, librettist, award-winning translator, and multidisciplinary artist. She is the editor/translator of *Belonging: New Poetry by Iranians Around the World* (North Atlantic Books, 2008), and creator/performer of multimedia works based on her translations. Her operas and other texts for classical music have been commissioned by and presented at Carnegie Hall, the Kennedy Center, and Brooklyn Academy of Music. Talebi's work received accolades from the *New York Times*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *SF Classical Voice*, and the *Huffington Post*.

