They are Dead and We are Not:
Remembering the Revolution in Iran

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Masters of Research Thesis

February 2016

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To the memory of Rafigh Bijan (1954-1982)

Abstract

This paper consists of two components: one: creative writings and two: theoretical explorations. The creative section is a representation of personal experiences from the days of the Iranian Revolution and my involvement in student political activism. It is through the process of remembering the past that I attempt to make sense of the events, people and above all my own subjectivity. The theory component includes an exploration of the theories of 'remembering' and of 'abjection: subjectivity as a process' (Mansfield 2000, p. 79). This thesis is a reflection on a moment of acute crisis, both the personal and historical, a moment of the sheer embodiment of 'abjection'. Abjection, as developed by Julia Kristeva, 'is what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules' (Kristeva 1982, p. 4). By employing a critical and cultural studies approach, in an analytical study of various theories, I seek for new interpretations, opening up new paths and welcoming new voices into my narrative. Recalling past events and people from a time of living through utter abjection, causes narrative to disrupt and shatter around the theme of suffering, making my narrative representations fragmented, ambiguous and discontinuous.

Acknowledgment

I like to acknowledge the following people for their help in completing my thesis: Vivienne Burridge, Dorothy Kass, Nick Mansfield, Jena Mokany, and Willa McDonald.

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Introduction

On the evening of December 5, 1981 I was arrested on a Tehran street and taken to the notorious Evin Prison. Leaving life behind, I passed over the threshold, through the giant iron doors of the prison; I stepped into the enigmatic world of extreme fear and death. I was released on January 11, 1986, passing back over the threshold, to the other side of the long impassable walls of Evin, into the world of the living. Yet I found myself facing an unknown world, where I was left without language. Soon I realised that one could be released into society, and in some ways still remain entrapped inside.

In a sense, I have never left the prison. I still inhabit my solitary cell, in which I went through periods of interrogation; where I lived through a constant inexpressible pressure beyond one's ability to endure; where I was pushed to my limits in every moment. It was there that it happened; the crucial event of the shattering of the self; shattering *my* self. Was that possibly the moment of losing language?

Speaking of language, I am reminded of little Hamid, a part of my experience of the same period. In that infamous *Solitary Cell Rows 209*, *Evin Prison* (1983) there was an 18-year old informant girl, who for a while would distribute food to the cells. Hamid was with her. About 3 years old, he could not speak and yet every now and then he would cry out and scream, "mum"… reverberating in that cold, bare small corridor behind the closed heavy iron door of my cell. I was told that he did speak before the event when his parents, living in an underground cell, were killed in front of his eyes, in an armed conflict with authorities. The little boy, who could not speak any more, was moved to the prison, and the girl volunteered to

look after him. I really don't know the rest of his story, yet the memory of his cries echo in me, beyond time and space.

I left Iran in 1994, soon after the remainder of my prison sentence expired and I was given a passport. I travelled and lived in different places around the world and I finally settled in Australia. However, it was only after studying Critical and Cultural Studies at Macquarie University (2007) that I eventually found the language that I sought. This new language allowed me to read and interpret the text of my past when personal and collective experiences were entangled. My life was shaken by the 1979 Revolution with all its delirious moments and yet catastrophic consequences.

This thesis is a narrative description of my lived experience during the Iranian Revolution (1978-1981). It is also a theoretical reflection on the process of remembering; of reminiscence and remembrance; of mourning and melancholia (Olalquiaga 1998; Freud 1917) and how my subjectivity is created through this process (Kristeva 1982). My main incentive in writing these stories is to give an account of those who did not survive that historical moment, those who may have not left any trace at all or only a name and perhaps a few lines about their short lives amongst the long forgotten lists of martyrs on Internet sites. Through this process of remembering, reflection and writing, my subjectivity is formed and reformed.

The thesis is composed of two parts. One is the fragmented creative written reflection of my lived experiences during the Revolution (1978-1979), and my involvement with the political movement of the Organisation of Iranian People's Fadai Guerrillas (OIPFG) until my arrest (1979-1981). The second is theoretical contemplations on 'memory' and 'abjection' and 'subject-in-process', the theoretical foundation on which the stories are grounded.

Abjection

The concept of the abject theorised by Julia Kristeva (1982), is of particular relevance to my project. According to Kristeva, the abject is

what disrupts and unsettles the borderline between the division of subject and object, an example being flows crossing the limits of the body, such as blood, vomit and sweat (p. 2). Abjection more generally, is a disruption to the whole system of order and meaning, an ambiguity and uncertainty.

My thesis is the process of remembering a moment of crisis, both external and internal, the 1979 Revolution and my own lived experiences; a memoir of a fragment of the time of contemporary Iranian history. It is a textual depiction of a moment of disruption of a seemingly ordered and stable society and the experiences of living through that moment. It is a fragmented representation of an uncertain and ambivalent instant of in-betweenness, a dangerous moment of resurfacing of the repressed.

My aim in the 'Abjection' chapter is a better understanding of the events of the past, in the light of Kristevan theory of 'abject' and 'subject-in-process'. A fresh reading of the past through remembering and the application of the concept of the ambiguous state of betweenness; crossing the boundaries, orders, identities and systems of meaning.

Reminiscence and Remembrance

In the 'Reminiscence and Remembrance' chapter, I discuss the issues of memory as explored by Sigmund Freud (1917; 1923) and Celeste Olalquiaga (1998).

Freud (1917) distinguishes between two responses to the experience of loss: mourning and melancholia. Mourning is a process through which the work of grief is completed and the emotional tie with the lost object is severed. This, Freud states, is the healthy reaction. Yet some people fail to reach the decisive end and detachment from the lost object, which is the melancholic state and considered pathological (p. 244). In his later work, however, Freud suggests that the mourning process, in the case of the loss of a very significant object, may be an endless process (1923, p. 306). Julia Kristeva (1989), in the tradition of Freud's earlier theory (1917), studies Marguerite Duras's body of works as the representation of historical melancholy. Kristeva argues that Duras's 'heroines are a crypt

inhabited by a living corpse' (1989, p. 233). To her, Duras's impotent heroines are unable to complete the mourning process. The chapter considers Kristeva's interpretation of Duras along with the contrasting interpretation by Karen Piper (1995). Mari Ruti (2005) also writes on mourning and melancholia, problematising the dichotomy. She argues that mourning is never closed and is always open to reinterpretation.

Writing in relation to a collection of objects in order to remember certain events, Celeste Olalquiaga (1998), offers another possible interpretation. She distinguishes two ways of perceiving events both of which are connected to memory: reminiscence is the conscious mode of remembering, and remembrance is the unconscious mode. In the former, the mind focuses on the positive aspects of the event and remembers it in a continuous sequence, which is totally fictional and conventional. In the latter, the work of the unconscious, the mind is obsessed with the intensity of the brief lived moments of loss and death.

Olalquiaga's distinction resonates strongly with my own experience in writing short stories. Sometimes in the fashion of reminiscence the memories are colourful and bright positive images of an event. Yet they are disrupted by a fierce reflection of death and loss, representing a crossing between the two concepts of reminiscence and remembrance. In the process of remembering days of the Revolution, I simultaneously find myself under the spell of mesmerising moments, merging into a profound feeling of loss and bleakness.

While drawing from a wide variety of methodological approaches, in this paper I employ the genealogical methodology devised by scholars mainly working in the field of Cultural Studies. As the cultural and critical theorist Nick Mansfield asserts (2000), the *metaphysical* exploration aims to define the truth of a certain argument, whereas, in the *genealogical* methodology, it is the theories themselves that are taken under scrutiny (p. 5). In the context of this paper, the aim of a metaphysical approach would be to arrive at the point where the ultimate truth is discovered; and a coherent, complete and finalised narrative presented. A genealogical approach, however, allows for a variety of representations, new interpretations that are not coherent and fixed, but ambiguous and obscure.

This introduction will now provide a historical and personal background, and conclude with a consideration of problems inherent in writing about personal memory.

Historical and Personal Background

The Revolution

It all started when, on January 7, 1978, an article appeared in a Tehran daily, insulting Ayatollah Khomeini, who had been in exile in Iraq since 1963. The students of the theological school in the city of Qom protested. Police cracked down on them and a number of people were killed. This became the ignition to the engine of the revolution that led to the Shah regime's overthrow on February 11, 1979.

Commemorations of the fortieth day after the killings in Qom, according to the Shi'a tradition, turned into occasions for generating protests. From then, the chain of events began. Mosques and bazaars became Khomeini's informal network, joined as a coordinated protest organisation. In less than a few months, demonstrations were organised in cities throughout the country including the capital Tehran.

As protests against the Shah's rule continued during the spring and summer of 1978, the Iranian government declared martial law. On 8 September, thousands gathered in Tehran's Jaleh Square for a demonstration, despite the fact that the government had declared martial law the day before. Thousands were killed. This became known as Black Friday and marked the point of no return for the Revolution. It also played a crucial role in further radicalising the protest movement, uniting the opposition to the Shah and mobilising the masses.

Protests spread with workers at Tehran's main oil refinery on strike, followed by workers at refineries in other cities, culminating in a nationwide general strike most damagingly in the oil industry and the print media.

Hoping to break Khomeini's contacts with the opposition, the Shah pressured the Iraqi government to expel him. Khomeini left Iraq, moving instead to Paris. The Shah hoped that Khomeini would be cut off from the protest movement. Instead, the plan backfired badly and his supporters flooded Iran with recordings of his sermons. Khomeini immediately put himself into the spotlight of the Western media seeking to free his people from oppression.

In January 1979, the Shah left Iran. Much of Iranian society was in euphoria about the coming Revolution. Secular and leftist politicians piled onto the movement hoping to gain power in the aftermath. Khomeini returned to Tehran on 1 February 1979, welcomed by a crowd of several million Iranians. He was now not only the undisputed leader of the Revolution; he had become what some called a semi-divine figure. The final collapse of government came on February 11.

For me, the Revolution became serious with the opening of university, 23 September 1978. I was studying Interior architecture at the Faculty of the Decorative Arts in Tehran. It was and still is located on the main street of Tehran. Being raised in a secular family, I had never heard Ayatollah Khomeini’s name. I remember The Black Friday, when masses were slaughtered. Political prisoners had been freed step by step during 1978. Among them were my brother and my cousin, both university students and still teenagers, who had been arrested in 1977 as left wing student activists. Not far from my university, one of the main places where public meetings were held was the University of Tehran; on Shah-Reza Avenue which was itself a major venue for mass demonstrations.

It must have been sometime in October 1978, when, for the first time, I saw the Organisation of Iranian People’s Fadai Guerrillas (OIPFG, *sazman-e cherikha-ye fadai-ye khalq-e Iran*) flyer on the huge brown iron door of our campus, with its red logo of a crossed sickle and hammer. From their intersection rose a hand holding a machine gun, from the map of Iran, in the context of the whole world. I let the giant tides of revolution sweep me in.

I recall clearly when, in one of the huge demonstrations in 1978 on Shah-Reza Avenue, I was trying to be both in the line of demonstrators and then running out to be able to take photographs. It was then I decided that I did not want to be a bystander and just take pictures of the people. I wanted to be a part of the whole.

In one demonstration in late 1978, we, as the whole faculty, were organised behind a giant picture of Khomeini on wheels and scaffolding. It was there when some of us were shouting 'long live Khomeini, long live Fadai that people shouted to us, 'you must not utter Khomeini's name, you are *Najess'*. *Najess* is a derogatory term applied to non-Muslims.

Throughout the twentieth century Iran has gone through intense stages. Since the Constitutional Revolution (1905-1907), it has been a scene of competition for political power between religion, nationalism and communism, against the state and against each other. However it was during the Cold War era, after the 1953 CIA and MI6 backed up coup d'état, that the Nationalist, Islamist and Communist movements were crushed and suppressed.

I was born and raised in the aftermath of the coup d'état, when the Shah established his dictatorship with the help of the CIA and MI6. He had built a bleak, cold and terrorised atmosphere through the intelligence services. In a secular family, which appreciated education and social justice, I still can vaguely remember my feelings, from the discussions in family gatherings, how the idea of this setback would cast a shadow of darkness in my mind, as something opposite to life. Today, I would say that is called trauma. I am positioned in the present, looking back and remembering and interpreting the residues of my feelings and images of the past, moments through which the whole country was marked by successive traumatic events.

My uncles, mother's brothers, both university students, were engaged in political activism. One was a member of the Communist Party and a public speaker and the other was following the National Front of Iran. My mother would also proudly mention her involvement, going to the Communist Party's meetings, although this was only as a young high school student.

I recall vividly when I was in grade seven, at high school, my Persian literature teacher would bring us books by Samad Behrangi,[1] to be read out loud in the class. Behrangi's stories, while depicting poor rural children and their struggle to survive, were written to encourage and motivate changing the situation. His most famous story, *Little Black Fish* (1968), became the embodiment of 'armed struggle'.

The *Little Black Fish* is a tale about the longest night of winter, down in the bottom of the sea, where there is a grandmother who tells the story of the little black fish for her thousands of children and grandchildren. This is the story she tells: Once upon a time, a little black fish that used to live in a pond kept dreaming about the big blue sea. One day he decides to leave behind the pond and his family in search of the sea. On the way, a lizard gives him a sharp dagger, since the path to the sea is dangerous. Some fishes join him along the way, scared of the thought of pelicans. After a long journey, once they reach the big sea, all are eaten by a pelican. The little black fish uses his weapon and kills the pelican but before that he manages to free all the other fishes. After this no one has ever heard from the little black fish again. The grandmother ends her story here, and so all the fishes go to sleep except one little red fish who all night long thinks about the sea (Behrangi 1968).

Behrangi was a member of a circle of intellectuals, a part of the new Communist generation, in the process of finalising the theory of 'armed struggle'. In a way his children's stories paralleled the new Iranian Communist movement in the 1960s that underwent a generational change.

> The vanguard is not able to organise the masses for the revolutionary cause if it is not itself the flaring torch and symbol of devotion and resistance.
>
> -Jazani[2]cited in Behrooz 2000, p. 48

[1] Samad Behrangi, a young schoolteacher, had worked among rural Azeri children and had come to identify with their suffering and despair. His short stories in defence of armed struggle were addressed to a new generation of Iranians, who, he believed, were unwilling to accept the status quo. Indeed, his *Little Black Fish* and *Twenty Four Hours Adrift* inspired a whole new generation and were widely read (Behrooz 2000, p. 45).

[2] Bijan Jazani (1937-1975), theorist and one of the main founders of Fadaiyan. In Persian, the Arabic adjective 'Fadai' is made plural and pronounced 'Fadaiyan'.

> [B]y the end the decade [1960s], a large proportion of Marxists would come up with a new agenda, … This decade represented a period of transition and revival for the movement …. A reverence for the Bolshevik revolution, hallmark of the previous generation, was diluted by the experience of Chinese, Cuban, Algerian and Vietnamese revolutions; the new had emerged from the bosom of the old. With sheer courage as their only capital, without expecting aid from the outside with little or no experience in armed action, this generation challenged the imperial regime at the height of the Shah's power and stunned the old generation, most of whom were outside the country.
>
> -Behrooz 2000, p. 37

This was all happening during my teenage years. Besides the official reflections on the news such as, 'Some terrorists were killed', there were whispers circulating within the family. My parents' original birthplace, the province of Mazandaran in the north of Iran near the Caspian Sea, was one of the main places where guerrillas emerged, so you would hear the unofficial news in more detail. My youngest uncle was imprisoned, along with another close relative during this time.

Furthermore, there was the influence this new movement had on cultural artefacts such as songs and movies, implicating the 'event' only subtly though, due to the strong atmosphere of censorship. The Iranian 'new wave', cinema that had emerged in 1971, focused on political and social dilemmas, albeit as subtly as possible.

On the horizon, however there were some larger than life human beings, Fadai Guerrillas who, against all this bleakness, had arisen holding their Kalashnikovs offering themselves for the cause. In a melancholic atmosphere of repression, restraint and frustration, reflected through intellectual and cultural products, the sheer heroic acts of guerrillas were astonishing, something far beyond my imagination. They were mythic heroes, beyond reach, everywhere and nowhere.

I started University in 1976, my dream to study cinema put aside for architecture. I was in the process of returning to this dream when the tides of revolution washed that possibility away and the story took a dramatic turn.

The Organisation of IPFG held its first open commemoration of the Siyahkal operation,[3] on 10 February 1979, in Tehran University. Tens of thousands of supporters joined the organisation. A dream came true. The demonstration overlapped with the beginning of armed conflicts with the Imperial Guard. I still vividly remember, the point through which we could not march further, since guerrillas with covered faces and holding rifles were in charge of the street. They would only let armed people pass through to get to the clash site, the Tehran air force base.

When a curfew was announced by the state on 10 February, Khomeini asked people to break it and stay in the streets. We did. When the next day, at 2 pm on February 11, the Supreme Military Council declared itself 'neutral in the current political disputes' and ordered all military personnel back to their bases, effectively it was the Revolution taking power.

After the Revolution

One of the main reasons for the movement (OIPFG) to emerge, the Imperial regime of the Shah, had collapsed and with it the 2500 year old monarchy in Iran. Yet they had not secured power yet. The dramatic changes in the whole life of the country caused profound discussions about the quality of the new regime.

The polemics around the concept of 'armed struggle' was the main issue around which more splitting happened. The first split in the organisation happened in 1976, just after the death of the mythic leader of the movement, Hamid Ashraf,[4] by rejecting the 'armed struggle'. When the Revolution happened, other branching took place. The most effective one was the breaking of the 'Minority' from the 'Majority' on 3 June 1980. While the 'Majority' renounced 'armed struggle', they saw the new regime as a revolutionary regime against Imperialism thus supporting their goal of moving towards socialism. The 'Minority', however, would refuse to discuss the issue of 'armed struggle', since the priority at the time was the new

[3] 8 February: The Mountain group initiated guerrilla activity against the Shah's regime attacking the gendarmerie post in the village of Siyahkal, in northern province of Gilan.
[4] Hamid Ashraf (1946-1976).

anti-revolutionary regime, which should be overthrown. The split came as a shock for us. However, after a couple of months wondering, I joined the 'Minority'. I could not break with the Fadai myth yet.

There were hasty changes in post-revolutionary Iran and its political system with three main forces in play: Islamists, Nationalists and Communists. Internal conflicts were intensified in the context of the invasion by Iraq, backed up by its western supporters. On June 20, 1981 the Organisation of People's Mujahedin Of Iran[5], the main opposition Leftist Muslim organisation, declared its move to a militant phase and took all its members into the streets of Tehran. From that point on, the overt militant conflict between the state and the oppositions aiming at the overthrow of the regime changed the face of the country. The state announced such organisations as illegal and confronted them aggressively. Terror and horror overshadowed the Iranian sky.

The organisation I was with, the 'Minority', went underground, while forming militant cells with the Mujahedin. June 20, 1981 is marked as a turning point for both sides; the state and the opposition entered into an extreme battle for power, while the war was continuing on the southern and western borders of Iran. However, clearly the state managed to erase all oppositions, even those who were supporting the regime as a revolutionary state, such as the 'Majority'.

I stayed and worked with the 'Minority', in an atmosphere soaked in fear of torture and execution, until the day I was arrested on December 5, 1981. That became the turning point in my own life when I crossed the threshold through which I have never returned.

Some problems

While it is true to say memory is often unreliable, or that we change over time, it is noteworthy to mention that, to tell a story means not to tell

[5] People's Mujahedin Of Iran (*sāzmān-e mojāhedin-e khalq-e irān*) founded by a group of leftist Muslim university students in 1965, was originally devoted to armed struggle against the Shah of Iran, capitalism, and western imperialism. In the immediate aftermath of the 1979 Revolution, it at first sided with Ayatollah Khomeini against the liberals but by mid 1981, it was fighting street battles against the regime. The group was given refuge by Saddam Hussein, during the Iran–Iraq War, and mounted attacks on Iran from within Iraqi territory.

other stories. Here, I would like to draw attention to a couple of problems I faced in my writing. Firstly, related to the problem of remembering, the question is 'from whose point of view is what I am remembering?' 'From what time in history does the voice and language of my memories come?' Secondly, linked to the issue of selection, the question is, 'how does one choose what to tell and what to omit?' 'What are the reasons behind leaving things out?' How selective am I? Do I leave things out because they are sensitive, or ambiguous, or even are they maybe too personal? Every narrative involves selection, and yet there is always the danger of misrepresentation, the danger of distortion.

My thesis is about that process of remembering and how my subjectivity is created and recreated through remembering; which includes that conscious selection. Can these issues of boundaries be clarified? I don't know. Yet, I am confident that there would be always moments of crossing the boundary, and there would always be people who exist on both sides of the boundary.

PART I

Narratives

1. The nest

I want to tell your story.
Yesterday, you, comrade Bijan, killed yourself, for the 32nd time.

The year is 1982, and the place, Tehran. You are stopped, while driving a car for a random check carried out by the prison squads. It is not you who draws their attention. It is her, the young woman sitting next to you. They search the car and ask a few questions.

It is enough to suspect that you might be 'counter-revolutionary' to arrest you and take you both straight to *Evin*. Passing through the giant iron door of the prison, you two are separated. You are left in two different rooms for further interrogations.

It is there, that you make your decision. You would have thought this is the end. No more escape. Trapped in the cursed abyss of *Evin*. You would have thought. You blindfolded, sitting on a chair, bite on your cyanide and drift into the void.

You are twenty-eight. It is autumn.

The cell

I don't remember the exact date I first met you, comrade Bijan. But I know it was in the spring of 1981.

I was re - appointed to an underground publishing cell. The cell, I was told, was not only one of the most secretive ones; it was also in the Workers Section. I was interviewed several times and asked my political views. I met up with a couple of people from the 'top', as part of the

security checks. All of these took place in the streets of Tehran. It was still spring. One day, finally, two comrades picked me up and drove me to the cell. 'It would be better the address is unknown to you', I was told. I had to bend down in the car, while driving around the streets, to make sure that I would be completely disoriented. Eventually the car stopped.

There we were, in front of a three storey building. Accompanied by two comrades I was led down the stairs to the flat in the basement, on the left. I could hear the heating system of the block located on the right.

It is Sheida who opened the door and welcomed me with her large smile and strong voice. We shook hands. As I walked in, she introduced me to you 'my husband, Bijan!'

There it comes, the image of you in my mind. You are standing in the middle of the room, next to the dining table. You are in your blue jeans and blue and white checked shirt. Your face is hazy though. The light comes through a small window behind you. You are standing there in that stilled frame of mine.

I instantly recognised him and asked if he was studying at the Fine Arts Faculty, University of Tehran. One of my closest friends was his classmate and I would often go to their campus. Bijan was known as the top student by my friends. I also knew that they were disappointed by the fact that Bijan was married and very reserved.

To my naïve question, you naïvely replied, yes.

We would later laugh at the situation, me, Sheida and Bijan.

2. The mountain or the sea?

I have come to Gloria Jean's coffee shop at Chatswood, convinced that I will see you. It's unlikely. It is more than thirty years that I last saw you. You might even be dead. I believe that when you genuinely want something, you will have it. It could be anything.

Sipping on my chai latte, I lapse into the warmth of nostalgia. Your image is never a still picture. It is always moving. Except for the one registered in my mind as I was introduced to you. In that frame, in which the light is coming through a small window behind you, your face is not clear any more. You are standing still there.

The next time, I met up with Comrade Ali in the street and he showed me how to get to the flat on my own. It was not that far from where I lived with my parents. I had to catch the bus to Yusef-Abad and get off just one stop before the end. Although, after the Revolution, the suburb's name was changed, people still called it Yusef-Abad. I would cross the road and walk down a long street on the other side. Half way down the street, there was a public phone box, on the right hand side of the corner of an alley. I rang Sheida, before going to the flat, to check it was safe. I would let the phone ring a couple of times before hanging up. Then, I would ring again and on the second time Sheida would pick up the phone. I would ask if she wanted me to get her anything. If she said 'Yes, some cake', she meant the flat was safe. And if she said, 'No, just bring yourself', it meant that it was not safe to go there. Something like that. The memory of those phone conversations has faded away and I can't hear her voice anymore. Somehow they are not retrievable no matter how hard I try. Thirty-three years is a long time, isn't it? Thirty-three years.

Yet one image is so vivid in that yellow phone box. While I was holding the handset waiting for Sheida to pick up, I would turn to my right. And there it was. A red geranium in a pot on a windowsill, its euphoric glowing colour smiling at me.
In three minutes I would be ringing the doorbell. Down the stairs, Sheida would welcome me.

The flat

I entered the flat, the bedroom was on the left. The kitchen and bathroom were on the right. The living room was partitioned and screened from the entrance as an office for Bijan. Beyond the living room was a narrow yard. The main yard and garden were at the top of a few steps and the walled garden connected to the street by a large iron door. The flat was specially chosen because its location and design suited its purpose as a cell.

On my first visit to their home, that they gave me a tour of the flat, I saw a little wooden sculpture of Sheida's name, on the bookshelf between the living room and Bijan's office. It was the first gift made for Sheida by Bijan when they were still in high school. They were neighbours then. Bijan, two years older than Sheida, helped her with her studies, especially maths. That was how they fell in love. Their families disapproved as they were from different religions. Bijan was a
Zoroastrian[6] and Sheida a Muslim, although neither of them was religious. They got married, anyway. Expelled from The Industrial University of Ariyamehr,[7] Bijan studied architecture at Tehran University. Bijan and Sheida, as Fadai sympathisers had run a publishing cell since before the revolution.

The proximity of a freeway to the building was an advantage. Bijan said. The noise concealed the rattles of the printing machine. The empty lot next door was also an advantage. In the case of a raid on the flat, we were to climb the ladder in the little backyard, jump into the field and run to the freeway. In the worst-case scenario, when escape was not possible, there must always be a last bullet in our gun to kill ourselves.

[6] Zoroastrianism is the original Persian religion, prior to the Islamisation of Iran.
[7] Changed to The Industrial University of Sharif after the 1979 Revolution. Ariyamehr referred to the Shah.

The little backyard was connected to the kitchen. Hung on the two walls in the kitchen were pictures from an old calendar. "Which one is your favourite, comrade?" Bijan would ask. They were images of mountains, the sea, fields covered with wild flowers, and country cottages scattered on a vast lush green.

I have always loved the sea. My memories of the Caspian Sea resonate with enchanted moments from the summer holidays of my childhood, which I spent at my grandparents' in the north, close to the sea.

But there was also the picturesque mountain, epic, vigorous and transcending. Mountains are a symbol of strength in Persian literature, and a symbol of resistance for the Left. The ritualistic practice of mountain climbing connected us with the memory of all fallen heroes.

I could not choose between the mountain and the sea.

"I love both," I would cry. "I can't choose only one."
"You have to choose one, comrade," Bijan commands, smiling. "I wish we did not have to," I would argue. He would go for the mountains, no doubt.
I felt some guilt for not preferring the mountains, and I was concerned my ambivalence and hesitation were a sign of weakness in me. "As strong as Mount Damavand, we offer ourselves to the cause," we would chant while climbing the Alborz mountain chains.

I don't have any recollection of Sheida's selection. I am pretty sure she would not challenge Bijan. Not only on this matter, but in others. All I remember is that she deeply and dearly loved him anyway. And that she longed to have children. 'No'. Bijan was firm on the principle. "This is not the right time."

There was an old saying, "a guerrilla only lives for six months."

The mountain or the sea comrade?

3. Huck is there!

I saw you last night.
You could not see me. You were still as you were 30 years ago.
You didn't know why I was crying.
You were only 28 and you didn't know that you were dead.

Hassan-Abadi 2008
(My translation)

Now I am in this coffee shop at Chatswood, believing I will see you. I wonder if you will recognise me.

Every now and then I dive into the deep blue ocean of my memories. Memories of the time that I spent with you two in your nest: Huckleberry Finn and my dress.

One night Bijan came through the front yard where he had parked his car. He carried some boxes in with him. Closing the living room curtains, he unpacked them. The boxes were filled with flour in which were hidden bullets. Bijan and I sat on the sofa, facing the entrance door, and began to wipe the bullets one by one with cloths that Sheida had brought us.

While I was sitting on the sofa next to him, Bijan noticed the different way we were holding the bullets on our laps. I had my legs parted, as I was wearing a dress. He kept his legs closed to keep the bullets from falling. I can't recall who made that dress for me, but I was very fond of it. To me it was autumn in Darakeh Valley; designed in the colour of turning leaves. Wearing that dress I would be transported to the valley in the mountains. I would even hear the sound of the chilly streams running

through the valley. The dress was the embodiment of the valley's presence; such a dear little thing to me it was.

Climbing the mountains was a ritual in the culture of resistance in Iran, especially for those on the Left. Sometimes we chose to go through Darakeh, on the outskirts of the picturesque Mount Alborz in the northwest of Tehran. The bus would take the hikers to Darakeh Square at the end of an old winding road. From the bus you could get a glimpse of the Evin prison, which was sitting down in the valley on the left side. From the Square we would start our climb, beginning with the twisting and turning alleys of the little mountain village filled with tiny shops, old houses, alley-gardens with wattle and daub walls and rusty roofs.

Suddenly the long curving wall of the village ends and the valley appears on the right hand side of the path. Carpeted with scattered trees it hosted the streams of water twirling and dancing at the feet of the trees on their way down the mountain.

Autumn in the valley was a celebration of colour: yellow, orange, red, gold and brown. The dancing, singing river ran down through the rocks, vigorously, ecstatically. Engulfed by smoky fog, we university students, filled with hope, climbed and chanted:

Oh autumn is here.
Pigeon nested, in the midst of trees
Escaping rain drizzle
In spite of all his pride, the sad sun,
Cries behind the black clouds

Running through my lips, the poem of being
Climbing mountains peak,
Marching across path,
Alongside comrades,
Through the storm …[8]
(My Translation)

[8] *Autumn is here* is a rework of an old folkloric Armenian song, sung by the Left during and after the Revolution.

Bijan said the night he brought in the boxes filled with flour and bullets reminded him of a story. It was the tale of a boy having adventures on a river. At one point the boy enters an elderly lady's house disguised as a girl. The old woman suspects him. One night when they are all sitting around the fireplace, she throws a ball of wool onto his lap. Surprised, he keeps his legs closed, even though he is wearing a skirt. So the lady finds out that she is a he.[9]

"That is what you are doing right now," Bijan said. Me being a woman in a skirt, I had stretched the dress across my open knees to hold the bullets.

Some years later, in *Ghezel Hessar* Prison (Golden Cage), some books including novels were allowed in following a reform. Since they were limited in supply and we were so longing to read, we would book in to be able to read for one hour during the 24 hours of a day. I made a booking and woke in the middle of night to read for my one hour in the silence of the cell-block. All of a sudden, I found myself in the scene Bijan painted for me while cleaning bullets.

"Huck closed his legs to get the knitting piece despite wearing a skirt." In an instant, I totally forgot where I was. Overwhelmed by a subtle feeling of sweet excitement, I bounced up to shout, "Hey look, Comrade Bijan, I have found it, it is there…"
It happened in the fragment of a second, in the middle of a ghostly dead land, such a sweet resurrection, too soon followed by dying once more.

[9] *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) is a novel by Mark Twain . Mrs. Loftus becomes increasingly suspicious that Huck is a boy, finally proving it by a series of tests and he is exposed.

4. The first teacher

Last year, in Iran, I was walking through Amir-Abad, not far from where I last saw Sheida. I noticed a small second hand bookshop. The books in the window located like they came from the days of revolution. They reminded me of the books we found in University of Tehran's Avenue bookshops and street stands; novels from the beginning of the Soviet era. Scattered on a dark green velvet cloth, the aged books with their covers worn on their edges were in harmony with the dull window light.

I passed the shop, ignoring the temptation to walk in. After no more than a few paces, I returned and entered the shop. A gloomy unexpected space hosting a couple of hundred books clumsily placed. They must have survived the time when people burnt dangerous books or abandoned them in the street. Looking through a hazy screen, everything was old, even the lady behind the counter with all her elegance and beauty. The lady wearing a black furry garment stopped talking to the other woman sitting next to her.

"Hello, I am looking for an old book; *The Mother's Tale and Jemile*, from the days of the revolution." Hesitant I asked and attentively traced her eyes to see if that would ring a bell. She went straight towards the window. Picked up a book and handed to me. A typical Russian novel with a cover designed of strong and determined peasant women harvesting wheat together.

"This is not the one." Though short-lived, hope is always sweet.
"That is by Chingiz Aitmatov. I am actually looking for *The First Teacher* that was published in that collection." I added.
"I am afraid we don't have that, then," she said, placing back the book in the window. Turning back she passed me and sat on her chair.

"It might have been printed in another selection." I persisted.

I couldn't detect a spark of recognition.
"May I ask you a question?" She asked.
"Sure," I nodded, wondering what that might be.
"Why would you be looking for that book?" Beyond the strangeness of that question, I felt somehow connected to the warmth of a time and space in which I belonged, a land in which we were still alive. Why did I feel that she knew where I was coming from?
As if her question was a reflection of my existence. In the same way that the wandering angel would only be seen by children, in Wim Wenders' film *Wings of Desire.*[10]

Her question reassured me of my existence. Even if for only a split of second. Like the very presence of that shop itself, in the midst of an utterly different space and time. A souvenir, reminiscence.

"About 30 years ago a very dear friend of mine recommended reading it. I would like to reread it now."
"Why did you lose such a precious gift then?"
"Oh, I haven't. It was his book. And he is dead."
"Was he your boyfriend?"
"No. No. He was just a very dear friend. He was married."

"Read The First Teacher*, in this book, comrade! That is such a good story."*

I still can see that image in which he is holding the book towards me. His face blurry though.
I did read it. The story was set in the early 1920s, the Soviet era. A young Komsomol[11] started a school in a ruined shed on a hill, in an isolated village at the foot of the mountains. The brightest in his class was a young orphan girl who ended up going to the city for education and to be a famous professor.

[10] *Wings of Desire* (1986), directed by Wim Wenders.
[11] Komsomol: An organisation for communist youth in the former USSR.

In middle age, she came back, to take part in the celebration of a new high school in the village. She was greatly welcomed, admired and honoured. It was during the ceremony that she got a glimpse of the village's old post-man who was handing in some telegrams of congratulation before rushing to his next delivery. The old postman was the same first teacher of the village.

All I remembered from *The First Teacher* was a vague line of story touching profoundly on the notion of love and dedication to ideals. He was something would bond me to the memory of Bijan and the way he lived his short life. I have been looking for the story for a while, yet without luck. I have encountered a different version of *The Mother's Tale*, in which this particular story was not included. It was only recently that I searched the Internet and there it was in English translation. It did not seem to be the most impressive version though. That made me wonder about the one I had read in Persian. Besides the fact of translations from various languages, I am reading it through the span of three decades. Not only were those decades far from being static, there were also in them days as long as centuries.

Carried away by the story, I am overwhelmed by the utter sadness of the first teacher, Duishen's life story. The first teacher metamorphoses into Bijan.

"Read The First Teacher *story comrade, in this book."*

In re-reading *The First Teacher*, I am back to a scene in which I can sketch my young self, mesmerised by the romanticism of the cause; drawn to the icon of Lenin and his status as the immortal leader; similar to how it was painted in this story through the eyes of the young orphan girl. Lenin was the first word that the village kids learnt. Lenin's picture was the only image pinned to the wall of that mud-brick. Wearing a baggy army jacket, Lenin's face, looked strained with a longish beard. His wounded arm was in a sling. "Children, if only you knew what a beautiful future awaits you!" The girl would hear his voice, and see his kind, calm and eager eyes. And there it was, that intense sense of sudden glimpsing into a wonderful new world.

"Lenin is dead." The teacher had told in a breaking, husky voice. He commanded the students to stand up, look at Lenin's picture and mourn in silence alongside the people around the world.
"Remember this day," said the teacher.

لحظاتی هستند که دوران سازند
کلماتی که دل انگیزتر از آوازند
مردمانی که تو گویی آنان، از دل پاک حقیقت زادند

There are instants through which epochs are made
There are words that are more euphoric than music
And People born as though out of the pure truth[12]

"Children, if only you knew what a future awaits you!"

"Do you remember that I once told you about a comrade who everyday salutes the huge picture of Hamid Ashraf,[13] hung on the wall of his room?" asked *Bijan*, one day.
"I do. The same comrade who keeps Hamid Ashraf's semi-machine gun, doesn't he?" He nodded and whispered.
"He was killed."

He, comrade Eskandar, was in charge of the armed faction of the organisation. On October 5 1981, as the leader of a team of three, he drove to Amol, a city up in the north, for a bank robbery. Things didn't go the way they had planned. The area around the bank was so busy that they failed to find a spot to park. Thus they had to keep driving around the city till they got lucky. It was a chaotic time. The revolutionary guards were on patrols everywhere.

[12] A piece from a poem to the memory of Van Troi, the first publicly executed member of the Viet Cong (National Liberation Front) in 1964. The poem was very popular through the circle of the radical Left in Iran (My translation from Persian).
[13] The mythic leader of Fadaiyan, killed in 1976.

On a freeway-belt around the city, they were stopped by patrols. They opened fire. One guard managed to escape while the rest were killed. The three of them ran into the harvested rice fields spreading along beside the road. In less than 20 minutes they were surrounded by 200-armed troops. Exiting from another road, they stopped a car that happened to belong to an attorney and his bodyguards. In that final scene of the battle, they were all killed.

The background team, working behind the scene, returned with the news. All of them were dead. As simple as that.

They were unknown to the authorities so an ad was placed in the papers to see if anyone would claim their bodies. Their families collected the bodies on the condition of a quick and quiet burial.

The organisation planned to hold a customary commemoration for them, 40 days after their deaths, in Eskandar's birthplace, a village in Loristan province, where he was well known with his solid revolutionary background.

In that public announced memorandum, the state enjoyed the arrest of tens of activists, who were on their way to the event. As simple as that.

5. A pot of tea

"Who has made the tea?" Bijan called.

"I have," I yelled from the living room where I was taking a break.

"There is not enough water in it, comrade!"

"What do you mean?" I rose to join him in the kitchen.

"How do you expect the tea leaves to draw properly and release their colour and aroma in such a tiny amount of water?"

"Well, that's how I do it. To get the essence of the leaves you don't need that much water. The less water, the stronger the tea."

"It doesn't work that way. Have you forgotten your school chemistry? Remember osmotic pressure?"

I did remember but couldn't make the connection to the tea. Making tea was not such a big deal.

"I never liked chemistry anyway."

As Bijan continued to explain the science of tea making, I tried to argue for my own method, but he always knew more than me.

In the months that followed, Bijan would frequently call out from the kitchen.

"Is it you, comrade, who's made the tea again?"

"Ah, how much more water should I have put in? Isn't this enough then?"

I was never sure.

"The osmotic pressure," he would say. "Always remember, comrade!"

It's a game I have been playing. Not back then, not at all, but later. Once we had all been washed away by the gigantic tides of events. All that could bring those of us who remained back to the shore were the glittering memories, the reminders of not being completely drowned.

Making a pot of tea connects me with the memory of you. As I pour the boiling water into the pot, you appear, emerging through the curling dancing steam.
"How much water, comrade? Look, is it enough yet?"
You always stand on my left side, next to the stove, wearing your jeans and blue and white checked shirt, your foggy face dissolving into the echo of your voice.
"Enough, enough, comrade, stop it now."

I never am confident. Will I ever get it right? If that means making you disappear, comrade, well I don't want that to happen, ever. I want you with me. Your presence helps me avoid the horror of being unable to see in a nightmare, the eerie feeling of looking at a house with bricked-up windows and doors, a face without eyes. The terror of forgetting, losing my memory. The abject.

I don't care that I can never win the argument. I relish the curling steam that carries your image and the echoes of your fading voice. When my kitchen threshold turns into the mirror through which Orpheus[14] crossed in Jean Cocteau's film, I step through and see you standing there, in front of the stove, wearing the same jeans and blue and white shirt, the snow

[14] Orpheus (1950), directed by Jean Cocteau.

capped mountains behind you, on the wall. The more I hesitate, the longer you hover. As long as I ask, *"Is it enough yet comrade? How about now?"* you are present, there in the kitchen.

"Is that you, comrade, who has made the tea?"

You always knew better than me.

6. One-day comrade!

"What kind of home is this you have? There is neither sunshine, nor any view of the mountains."
"One day comrade," Bijan replied following a pause, gazing at something beyond me, "I would buy you a sun and mountain!"
Then it became like a mantra that I would chant every once in a while to which he would say, "Wait comrade, wait."

Children, if only you knew what a beautiful future awaits you!

Last year in Iran, I visited the suburb of Yusef-Abad hoping to find some traces of my time with Bijan and Sheida. Not that I expected to find everything intact after thirty-three years. I longed to walk through that chapter of my life, where it was originally written in that part of Tehran. Just the thought of it was soaked in such sweetness.

The bus stop was at the same place at the end of the street. There it was, the picturesque chain of Alborz Mountains, eternal, dignified, saluting me, over and beyond the city to the north. As I remembered it, I could have taken street 36 or street 38 on the western side of the road. Oddly, these numbers were on the east. I must have been wrong then, all these years. I had no doubt that I had to cross the road. That meant they were street 37 and street 39. I clearly recalled the narrow entrance to the northerly street that broadened a bit further along, going up and down the hills until it reached its end.

Yet nothing looked the same anymore. The whole area was either redeveloped or in the process of construction. I felt totally disoriented and out of context. I went down street 39 where I was sure the yellow phone

box used to be. Everything looked different. New houses and apartments with recent designs, materials and colours were pushing me out of the frame. There was no sign of any phone box either. What if I was wrong? It might have been in the other street, number 37.

That did not sound right either. Yusef-Abad was bombed during the war, so things had changed, but I doubted it was in that street. I was overwhelmed by the thought that I couldn't trust my memory. I went back and started again from the beginning of street 39. I tried to draw on my other senses to find where the phone might have been located, or even to find the window from which the glowing geranium would smile at me. The more I wandered through those streets, the more I felt that I did not belong in that time and space.

At the end of the street, I turned left heading south, towards Sheida and Bijan's place. I was walking through a nightmare of unreality: newly built housing blocks and the school made of crème bricks combined with blue tiles. In that enigmatic and impenetrable universe, I was simply and absolutely lost. I was there. Yet not there. It was confusing; an in-between space, where nothing made sense. In the thirty-three years since I had been there, the whole aura of the area had evaporated. I was uprooted. Lost. It felt like being thrown into a galaxy with no anchoring point.

I had to accept the fact that I had lost them. But hadn't I already lost them many years ago? What did I expect?

This time though it was for good.

Everything was the same the day I was taken there, in a prison van.

"I have to call first," I announced to the two men in the car. I remembered the phone number. In the phone box I called once, and while waiting, I turned to see the geranium. The empty windowsill was covered in snow. There was no answer on the other end of the phone. As I expected the phone rang out. Bijan and Sheida should have evacuated the place soon after finding out that I was captured. But you never know.

"There is no answer," I told them back in the car.
"How long have you been in prison?" one of the guards asked.
"One year and two months."

I even took them to the door. I got out of the car and rang the doorbell. I felt myself falling into an abyss and screaming silently into the vast black void. What if there was still someone at home?

"There is no answer." I scrambled back into the van. There was no reaction from those men. They took me back to prison without another word.

I did not know then that five months earlier Bijan had been captured. He was gone and buried in Khavaran.[15]

In the parallel universe I now found myself in, there was no corner building where Sheida and Bijan once lived. No flat in the basement. No empty lot next door. But the freeway was there. Instantly, bliss washed over me. The nightmarish scene vanished and I touched the ground. Anchored. The freeway still existed behind the small streets and apartment blocks, winding up towards the mountain. The same marvellous mountains, solid and stable; embracing the people hovering on their outskirts.

I started to take pictures of the area where I imagined the flat had been. It all looked strange to me. How could I possibly capture those shimmering whispering drifting moments? None of which existed anymore, just there, in that spot Yusef-Abad.

Amid the enchanting memories of my life with Sheida and Bijan in their flat, there would intrude another image. A vivid picture of a young man's tragic death in a neighbouring flat. It happened in the middle of an autumn night. Sheida and Bijan were woken by the roar of gunshots. At

[15] Located in southwest of Tehran, *Khavaran* is a burial place for some communist political prisoners, with unmarked graves, since 1981. It is also the site of mass graves of the 1988 mass executions of political prisoners.

first they had thought that they were being raided. Terrified in their basement flat, they peered through the small windows up into the streets.

The gunshots were pouring into an apartment across the street
The battle lasted an eternity throughout which they expected the guards to enter their place at any minute. That would have been the end of their story. A story, which was not meant to end in that way.

That night the area was soaked in ammunition, bullet shells and smoke. The battle stopped when the young man set himself on fire, and the woman with him was captured.

The next morning Sheida and Bijan drove to my place to give me the news. They asked me not to go to their flat for the next few days.

It was only in prison, that I realised that the young man was the brother of Shohré.

Shohré was still alive, when her younger brother set himself on fire in a small flat across the street from Bijan and Sheida's place, in the middle of an autumn night.

That was a couple of months before she was called by the loudspeaker to the warden office; her name read out from an endless list; a list of people on death row.

It was Saturday, December 26, 1981.

Lunchtime. The inmates in the ward including our cell were sitting on the floor. We had just started eating. The food placed on long, blue plastic strips we made from bread packets.

The universe stopped. Everything and everyone froze, except the voice screaming through the loudspeaker reading down a list.

Shohré was petite. Her face as pale as a corpse that I had seen once, of a young man killed in the street during the revolution, pale and coldly serene.

Shohré was already dying. She knew she was to be executed. She had begun to die on the day of her court appearance the week before. "Tell us where your father is hiding?" they demanded. In the fast moving politics of Iran, her father, once a well-respected politician of the National Front of Iran, now found himself in opposition to the state. His first daughter was killed during the Shah's regime as a Fadai guerrilla.

An answer was the only thing that could save Shohré. But how could she have even known? She had been in prison for the last three months.

During the week of her long death, Shohré only spoke to one close friend; here and there; whispering amid the loudness of the overcrowded cell. Just the two of them, here and there in Evin Cell Block 240, top floor, room 6. Until the winter's day she was called.

" Shohré Modir-Shanechi, to the warden office with all your belongings."

When her younger brother set himself on fire, in the middle of an autumn night, at Yusef-Abad, somewhere near where I was last year, Shohré was still alive.

So was Bijan. Standing next to Sheida glimpsing the night through those small barred windows.

They are the same windows Bijan stands against in my fixed image of him. The windows he was next to when I was introduced to him by Sheida, one sunny spring day.

Not a trace of those little windows remains in this long street. Yet, this nothingness does not mean that they never existed; or that I did not experience life … in that little publishing cell.

One day, comrade! I will buy you a sun and mountains …

7. You are a jewel! The jewel in the crown!

The flat is always there. In my mind. Good memories and sad memories.

I call to double check, just before going there. Sheida is welcoming with her wide smile and strong voice. Bijan is at home; so is comrade Ali. The table is set. All are waiting for me to bring the lunch; a special dish cooked by my mum, from Babol, my parents' original hometown. I start serving the food, still warm in its pot.

'Here you are, our *Morgh-e Tursh*.[16] 'Bon appétit,' I, proudly say.

The enticing scent of cooked fresh local herbs intertwines in the air with the sweet aroma of rice and saffron, filling our souls, under the skin of a city drenched in a Kafkaesque dream.

Bijan was the first to be served, sitting at one end of the table with his back to the small windows.

Next to him sits comrade Ali. "There you are comrade Ali!" I catch his gaze as I pass him the dish.

Through all these years, the memory of that look stayed with me. The memory of a moment, wrapped in a fusion of aromas. The warmth of the recollection. The drift into the delightfulness of a deep memory where there was yet a touch of sorrow or regret.

[16] *Morgh-e torsh*, a divine dish made with chicken, local fresh herbs, walnut and pomegranate sauce.

His gaze, beyond and through the decades, haunted me. Where was he drifting? What was he thinking of at that moment? It would remain a '*Raz-e Sar-be-Mohr'*, in the poetry of Persian, a sealed secret.

After I was freed from prison years later, I would feel that look every now and then. The serenity of it enveloped me in a blue-green sea of reminiscence; swimming in the Caspian Sea in summer; dancing shafts of trembling sunlight under water.

What was in that enigmatic stare? Not at me, but at what I was doing.

I have always thought my actions, passing him his food, reminded him of something or someone. He seemed to be looking through me, looking at something else beyond me, while I felt good serving delicious food they hadn't tried before.

Comrade Ali was gentle, quiet and shy. He must have been in his thirties, judging by the deep lines on his forehead. To me at the time that seemed pretty 'old', much older than the rest of us. He was originally from Lorestan, a mountainous province of western Iran.

Comrade Ali was not a man of words.

Once when Sheida and I had a meeting with him, he told us a story. 'Last night, when I was on the way home, I noticed that someone was following me. A woman. I paused, pretending to look for something in my bag. She overtook me, then turned back and said, "I am madly in love with you, sir."

"What?" both Sheida and I screamed.

"She said that she lives in the three-storey house, behind the building where I have rented a room. She said she has been watching me from her window; that it overlooks my place."

Laughing softly, he went on. "I don't know how though. Because I am very careful to close the curtains, especially at night. And during the day, no-

one could see in, not from that distance with the yard in between. She even said to me, 'You are a piece of jewellery, sir!'"

Sheida and I burst into laughter.

"I told her, 'Madam, you'd better be very careful; looking from such a distance, the jewellery might be fake!'"

Comrade Ali laughed with us. I can still see his face, his sparkling tears of mirth.

In my image of him, he has fair skin and honey-coloured eyes. He wears white shirt and dark trousers.

"What should we do, if we're arrested?" I asked him once. Anxiously. Hesitantly. It was during one of our reading sessions, when the horrible news of tortures and executions had been exchanged.

"Wouldn't it be a good idea to set a certain length of time after being arrested when we resist? But after that, we tell them what we know? Wasn't that the case for guerrillas before the revolution? And they were trained, weren't they? Unlike us."

"Just say, 'Down with Khomeini' comrade, and they will execute you on the spot."

Of course. Bringing up such a question was a manifestation of my weakness. I should have thought of that myself. I felt embarrassed and ashamed. How could I have ever thought of such a silly question when everything was so clear?

Especially as Sheida kept silent, as usual.

"Just say it."

8. Why would you travel to the north?

"Why did you go to the north?" Sheida asked me, frustrated.

Indeed, why did we? My sister and I had travelled north when the *Sar-be-daran* group, based in the northern mountainous forests around Amol, had drawn state attention through their armed operations.[17]

Why did we go at such a time?

Bijan was going to be away for a while so Sheida was going to stay with her mother. That meant I could not remain in the flat and would have to find a place to stay. It was Wednesday, 2 of December 1981.

Where was I supposed to go?

On September 21 two comrades were captured on the streets of Tehran. My sister and I were told to leave our homes for a while, as they had both been our supervisors at some stage.

Where would we go?

First we stayed with a very close family friend, someone we called 'aunty'.

My mother had moved to Tehran from Babol, a small city in the north, to live with my father, after they married. Aunty lived next-door. She was

[17] By the end of the summer of 1981, the Union of Iranian Communists (*Sar-be-daran*), mobilised its forces in the forests around Amol, where they declared armed struggle with the state. Most of them, however, were from the International Students Confederation, returning to Iran after the 1979 Revolution. Their attempt to seize *Amol* on January 26, 1981 failed and most of the leaders were executed in the same place, on the anniversary of the event in 1983.

single at the time and living with her parents. She helped Mum with all of us four children and it was dearly appreciated. Their friendship lasted for years until the day Mum passed away three years before.

My sister and I stayed with aunty and her family for a couple of nights. She conveyed the message that we were not welcome in their place any longer.

By then, it had been three long apocalyptic months of wildfire and terror, blasting and executing through the country, from both sides of politics, state and opposition. On the southern and western borders of Iran, the Iran-Iraq War was taking its toll. A long list of executions carried out by the state was announced every night on the national television news. These were said to be in retaliation for violence by the 'anti-revolutionary movement', which, they said, killed the prime minister and the head of justice. The nightly news was a flood of atrocities.

Not everyone would be welcoming, not in such a situation.

Where would we go then?

We went to another family friend, wondering if the game would be played by the same rules. Within a couple of nights, she too asked us to find somewhere else to stay. The eldest daughter of the family, who was not living at home, was a member of the Pro-Russian Communist Party that at the time was pro-regime. To them the dissidents were aligned with western Imperialism in opposition to the revolution led by Khomeini.

A sympathiser with our organisation offered us her home where she was living with her mother and grandmother. They were people with hearts and souls as immense as the sky, as profound as the ocean, soaked in sheer compassion, but we were advised by our organisation that it would be better if only one of us stayed with them.

It was in these troubled times that Bijan and Sheida took me in for a couple of months. But then Bijan was going away – for an unspecified length of time – which meant so was Sheida. I decided to go to the north -

to my grandmother, my mother's mother, who lived in Babol, about 200 kilometres north of Tehran.

The enchanted memories of my childhood visits to the north were filled with an immense serenity, with long lasting unforgettable delight, joyfulness and bliss. Travelling to my grandparents' house near the Caspian Sea in summer, playing in the heavenly orchard with cousins and siblings, going to the seaside and making sand castles, where the happiness would be completed by swimming in that immense sea. We playfully competed with one another, trying to see who could climb the sand hills the fastest.

It was a risk. Sometime before, we realised we needed to remove from our parents' home any politically marked books and papers, which could put us in danger. After destroying most of them, we asked our great uncle – a truck driver working on the road – if we could take some boxes with him to Babol. We loaded the boxes into the truck at night without telling him what was inside. But as soon as we arrived and were about to take them to the basement, grandma demanded to know what they were. She became hysterical, and screaming, "I won't let you hide these books in my house!"

We could not believe it then. And to tell you the truth, I still cannot believe it now.

It was our aunt, mum's younger sister living next door, who interceded and allowed us to hide the boxes in her basement instead. We heard later the builders who were working on a construction site behind our aunt's house found some books buried in the ground. Our books. Our aunt then admitted it had been too risky to keep them.

"You look very smart comrade!" Bijan said once dropping me off, on the way to his parents on a Friday morning. "Yet your clothes shout that you are a lefty!"
"Only we would realise that though, comrade!" I replied. "I doubt the guards are that clever." I was somehow convinced that the government patrols would not recognise us simply by the way we dressed. What I

didn’t realise was that, by then, there were plenty of ‘us’ working for ‘them,’ informers who would accompany the guards in their street patrols all around the country.

The uncertain boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’ would change the rules of the game.

On the road to the north, patrolling forces stopped our bus. I was the only one to be picked out from all the passengers. I was commanded to follow them down to their office for a short investigation. I had to leave some identification in order to be released to continue to travel. I left my Medical booklet.

Once we arrived at the Shir-o-khorshid Square in Babol, my sister and I found it strangely dark. Eerie. Though it was only around seven on a late autumn evening, we smelled the terror that kept the people in their homes. We decided to call Ma’mad, our cousin, and asked him to pick us up.

We stayed one night with Grandma; then moved to our cousin's place. Ma’mad and my brother were childhood friends, both twenty-one years old and medical students in the city of Mashhad. As a result of the so-called ‘Cultural Revolution’ and the closure of all universities, Ma’mad was back in Babol, and living with his parents.

All of us were originally working with the same organisation but when the organisation split on 3 June 1980, my brother and cousin stayed with the ‘Majority,’ that at the time believed the state was anti-imperialist, and should be supported against its global capitalist enemies. My sister and I broke away and joined the ‘Minority’ group that believed the regime was anti-revolutionary and must be overthrown.

I called Sheida the night we arrived in Babol, telling her our bus had been stopped and that I had been forced to hand over my ID. I asked her for advice. In a subsequent call, she told me to ask my mother to come to Babol and accompany us back to Tehran. I set a time to meet Sheida once

we returned to Tehran. I would see her at the usual place, the Sepah Shop at Fatemi Avenue on the coming Saturday afternoon, December 5 1981.

On the night before we left Babol, while staying at Ma'mad's home, we had a long heated discussion into the early hours of the morning about the current political situation. Ma'mad was experienced. He had been imprisoned with my brother, during the Shah's regime and freed by the Revolution. He was also knowledgeable and mature. He told me not to worry; that the authorities were too disorganised to make use of my Medicare Booklet.

I will never forget the way he then looked at me, asking: "Do you really believe that we are in a revolutionary situation right now?"

His words struck me. No, I did not believe that we were going through a critical revolutionary situation, as Lenin would have theorised it. But I was supposed to keep face for my organisation and defend all its political views, even if I no longer believed in them. I asked Ma'mad for a list of books to read that would help me think through the situation we were in. He complied and gave me a list, hand-written on a piece of paper. I had it on me when I was arrested, yet managed to swallow it on the way to Evin prison.

Ma'mad himself was arrested in 1984, while I was still imprisoned. He was killed in the mass execution of political prisoners of 1988. He was 28.

Since the time of Ma'mad's execution, every time I want to retreat to my childhood memory, the winner of the sand hills match is Ma'mad. But once he gets to the top of the hill, there is always the thunder of a storm, of a firing squad aiming at him.

My mother came to Babol with Aunty to take us home. The same day we returned to Tehran via a different route, far from the *Sar-be-daran* area of operation. The image of Mount Damavand, sitting beyond reach, splendid and covered in snow, stays with me.

… As proud as Damavand, we offer ourselves for the cause …

Back in Tehran, I went to see Sheida. It was our last meeting.

"What do we do, if arrested?" I asked comrade Ali once, in agony.

"Just say, *Down with Khomeini*, they would execute you immediately!"

9. Sheida

Once dead and buried, what would happen to one, in thirty-three years comrade? I don't know. What I know though is the oceanic essence of memory. That is serene and glimmering one moment, and yet menacing and enigmatic the next.

Where is she in my text? Where is Sheida?

Whenever I recall Bijan, she is also there in the picture, quiet and observant. Yet it is in the process of interpretation of my memories that she ended up invisible. She is overshadowed by the strong presence of Bijan. It is in the void that she exists. The tragic death of Bijan has denied her existence in my story. I need to look for her and let her speak. Being aware of the differences we once had in our ways of seeing the world may give me a way to yet understand her better. I need to do it now, before everything turns into emptiness and void in the terrain of my memory.

Prior to my joining the publishing unit of our movement, I worked in the Student Section, '*Pishgam*' (*Vanguard*). After the closure of all universities in Iran in 1980, in the name of the so-called 'Cultural Revolution', the Student Section was disbanded and reshaped into the other groups. I was reappointed to a cell in the Worker Section, and discovered Bijan was also

a student. That Sheida had not been to university sounded strange to me, I guess because the radical Left had originally emerged out of the student movement, and that was a pivotal point in my perception of it. She and I did not have much in common to talk about, apart from our practical responsibilities in the organisation concerning printing. In our book readings and discussions, I don't remember her having any particular questions, points or ideas. So I came to the conclusion that Sheida was only there because she loved Bijan.

Yet, there are two moments, which stand out vividly in my mind. One is our discussion about my friends who were Bijan's classmates. Sheida disliked them. She found them snobbish and unapproachable. Looking back, did she have the same feelings towards me?

The second image is a night scene after Bijan had left for the north. Sheida and I are sitting on the sofa watching a film, the story of a resistance group in Europe, during the Second World War. At one point, she turns to me and says, 'I would love to have children'.

We are in the living room. Sitting on the sofa. A Persian rug spreads towards the television, which is in front of the partition. On the partition is the wooden sculpture of her name made by Bijan, 'Sheida'.

"But he says no."

I felt sympathy for her as I listened. She would have read it on my face. The impossibility of that simple human desire, at that historical moment, was very obvious to me. I did not say a word, but I thought,

"How could you want to have children while expecting death at any minute!"

Naïveté is cruel.

How could I possibly have understood her? Saturated deeply, as I was, in a rigorous belief system in which there was no space for a personal life.

The forty-first I

It was 1976 when I first watched the film *The forty-first.*[18] It was at the Boulevard cinema in Tehran. A Russian film set during the civil war that was the aftermath of the 1917 Revolution. The Whites are fighting against the Reds. The 19 year-old Maria, the film's protagonist, is the only female in her group and the best sniper. In the backstory, she had shot forty Whites. Now Maria misses her forty-first target and takes him captive instead. There is a moment of intense attraction between Maria and her prisoner, Vadim. Maria has to transfer him to a prison camp. In the Aral Sea they are caught up in a horrific storm. Everyone dies but Maria and Vadim who reach an island. Vadim is extremely sick and unconscious. Maria cares for him tenderly, doing everything she can to bring him back to life. He survives and Maria is overjoyed. They are deeply in love and plan for their future. But how can they ever be together? 'We can run to a city that I know of where it is safe. We can get married', says Vadim. Time passes. After a while they spot a ferry on the horizon. It belongs to the White Army. Vadim excitedly runs along the beach towards the ship,

[18] *The forty-first (1956)*, directed by Grigoriy Chukhray.

shouting for the crew's attention. Maria calls to him to stop. He won't. Maria grabs her rifle. "I will shoot you if you don't stop."

He wouldn't stop.

She shot him. He fell, just there where the waves meet the beach.

She ran to him, then held him into her arms. "Open your dear blue eyes."

He was the forty-first.

The forty-first II

The second time I watched *The Forty–First* was in 1988. Iran had gone through the 1979 Revolution and the eight-year war with Iraq. When you are in such a scene yourself, things appear differently. As I sat, about to watch the film, I had mixed feelings, volatile joy mingled with anxieties. "What if I find it insignificant? Will it make me question my past? My very existence?" In the security of the darkness of the movies, I watched the story unfold. The civil war, the Reds and the Whites against each other.

There it was: Maria and Vadim all alone on an Island, far from war, far from being Red or White. No colour. There was love and the safety of the island. Until the boat appeared on the sea, approaching the shore.

Don't shoot Maria, don't…
She shoots…He falls…

"Open your dear blue eyes."

Once again, it happened, the same pattern. The unbearable weight of being trapped.

What else could she have done in that situation? Could she have just waited till the Whites rescued them? Away from the island, Maria was a Red and an enemy. How could they remain lovers? Maria would have become a prisoner. She had to shoot him.

The film stopped there. We don't know what would have happened to Maria later. Did the boat stop? Did they find her? Did Maria have to bury her lover? Surely she would have killed herself with him.

"Maria! What if you didn't shoot him?"

"Then what? Should I have waited and watched till the Whites came to shoot me?"

The forty-first III

It's been a few decades since my first encounter with *The Forty-First*. Why did that ending move me so profoundly and haunt me over decades? Was I Maria, confined within the logic of a group searching for utopia, a logic that was fatal?

Don't shoot, Maria. Put your gun down.

There is always an end to every revolution, every war, every disaster. I know that when you are there, in it, things appear differently. Only from a distance you can recognise it as just a slice of history. The war between Reds and Whites finishes, sooner or later.

Put your gun down, Maria!

How could I have ever understood Sheida who, in a time soaked in the horror of death, longed to be a mother?

PART II

Theories

Abject: subject in process

The concept of the abject and the subject-in-process theorised by Julia Kristeva, the French-Bulgarian linguistic and psychoanalytic philosopher, has been of particular relevance to my project. Traditionally, the idea of the abject is associated with bodily uncleanliness and feelings of disgust. Kristeva in *Powers of Horror* (1982) develops the notion of abjection and horror as fundamentally and inextricably entangled with disruptions of order in systems of meaning. Abjection is present not only as a descriptor of revulsion but is inherent in the body, the subject and the law; a disruptor of society's norms,

> Abjection is what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous and the composite.
>
> - Kristeva 1982, P. 4

She uses two main metaphorical physical examples: the first is the skin that forms on boiled milk; it falls as something in between the dividing line of physical states of 'milk' and air, that is being 'not-milk', an ambiguity. Second, is Kristeva's example of the corpse as the 'utmost' of abjection (Kristeva 1982, p. 4), the strongest manifestation of abjection as being simultaneously human and not- human, shifting from the known 'alive' to the unknown 'dead' and thus, creating a distinct feeling of unsettledness. There is a disruption in the whole system of order by something considered 'abject'. These states of being happen, according to Kristeva, because of the permanent 'de-stabilisation of meaning and of the subjects' (Kristeva interviewed in Eagleton 2011, p. 333).

Here what I like to draw on in my own writing is the idea of abjection manifested through disrupted orders, identities and systems of meaning. This informs one of the main themes of my project, writing fragmented memories of the chaotic moment of the Revolution, when living on the

borders was literally the state of being. A time marked by battles between two sides of order, law, systems of meaning and identities; both in society and personal lives.

Kristeva began as a scholar of linguistics who later 'converted' to psychoanalysis (Guberman 1996, p. 7), with a fundamental focus on language and psychic life in her projects. Although she draws on Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, the so-called fathers of psychoanalysis, she also exposes the imbalances in this field of knowledge, such as the absence of the female. In many ways her work addresses the discrepancies in these traditionally patriarchal modes of analysis (Mansfield 2000, p. 80). In my work I have been conscious of her writing in this matter, as in reflecting on the past, I could see that although women have been offering themselves for the cause, yet it was the logic and language of patriarchal laws that constructed our version of Marxism-Leninism.

Although Freud and Lacan are devoted to 'stability, order and a fixed and constant identity,' Kristeva developed a model that shows 'beneath the father's ordered world, a host of uncertainties and unresolved images and emotions' (Mansfield 2000, p. 80). For Kristeva, the concept of the unconscious is similar to Freud's definition, in which the repressed materials arise in dreams, slips of the tongue and neurotic symptoms. Yet, she argues, there is a zone between conscious and unconscious mind in which repression of unconscious material is incomplete. Rather than passing through the unconscious and arriving at a state of fixed and stable identity, as suggested by Freud and Lacan, the subject for Kristeva is never complete, finalised and fixed. As she asserts: 'A 'fixed identity': it's perhaps a fiction, an illusion – who amongst us has a 'fixed' identity? It's a phantasm; we do nevertheless arrive at a certain type of stability (Kristeva interviewed in Eagleton, 2011, p. 334).

However, it is in this incomplete repression, that the process of abjection takes place, at the very 'site of instability':

> The 'unconscious' contents remain here excluded but in strange fashion: not radically enough to allow for a secure differentiation between subject and object, and yet clearly enough for a defensive position to be established … As if the fundamental opposition were between I and Other

> or, in more archaic fashion, between Inside and Outside. As if such an opposition subsumed the one between Conscious and Unconscious.
>
> -Kristeva 1982, p.7

What interests me in this passage is Kristeva's distinction of a zone where the 'excluded' materials dwell in 'a strange fashion'. They are not driven away and locked into the unconscious where they could be clearly separated from the outside conscious world. In my memoir, the defining moment of my imprisonment became the embodiment of what Kristeva calls the 'moment of instability'. I inhabited the state of the 'abject', the enigma of in-betweenness and ambiguity. Imprisonment unleashed repressed ambiguities and uncertain thoughts and feelings, all of which were denied and rejected by the logical system of the movement, which always saw things in black and while polarised terms. Since, its claim to the singularity of ideological truth, logic of order and system of meaning, would not allow in-betweenness, obscurity or contradiction.

Suzanne Clark and Kathleen Hulley (1990-91) suggest that it is from the perspective of the subject-in-process that Kristeva addresses the great crises of modernism. Grounded within psychoanalysis and cultural history they argue,

> …[T] he Kristevan subject-in-process emerges at the point of the unconscious, which is not, structured 'like' a language but rather is the materiality of language, the semiotic. The Kristevan subject is furthermore, postmodern, located at a historical moment of crisis, at the rupture of a structure, the rupture of an equilibrium. This rupture of identities is both internal and external, the permanent crisis of 'modernity'.
>
> -1990-91, p. 154

The crisis in the subject that Kristeva writes about is entangled with the crisis in modernity, which manifests itself as the failure of reason and religion and an inadequacy of the theory of modernity as a language to describe the condition of society. Postmodernism was a response to this crisis of reason. Clark and Hulley continue,

> Kristeva's subject can never be a self-sufficient unity. On the contrary, for Kristeva, the individual is an intersection of intertextuality, a subject-in-

> process, and a subject in dialectical crisis … The Kristevan individual is already positioned in language and ideology and, therefore, in history.
>
> -1990-91, p. 154

Critical and cultural theorist Nick Mansfield, in *Subjectivity From Freud To Haraway* (2000), investigates the notion of subjectivity in a genealogical approach in which he explores the historical development of the subject since the enlightenment and the epoch of reason. He outlines two opposite poles of those who believe in a knowable and stabilised subject (Freud, Lacan) and those who are resistant to the concept of a fixed and coherent subject (Nietzsche, Foucault). He states, while drawing on psychoanalysis, Julia Kristeva has developed the idea of 'subject-in-process', in which the 'subject is always in flux'. To her, this subject that is always changing, comes from the blurred zone between unconscious and conscious where the repression of materials is incomplete and there is always the danger of resurfacing of unconscious materials (Mansfield 2000 p. 80-81).

My project is set in 'a moment of crisis; both external and internal' (Clark and Hulley 1990-91, p. 154) a memoir of a fragment of time of contemporary Iranian history; the 1979 Revolution and my own lived experiences. It is a textual illustration of a moment of disruption of a seemingly ordered and stable society and the experience of living through it; a moment of in-betweenness; a dangerous moment of 'the return of the repressed'.

My aim is to use Kristeva's notions of the abject and subject-in-process, to offer a new reading of that blurry moment of a disruption in the ongoing conversations and critical analyses of the past. By employing her conceptualisation of the 'abject' and the 'subject in process' I look at the events of the past in the hope of a new reading as an embodiment of one of those sheer moments of 'destabilisation of meaning and of the subject', an exemplar of the state of instability and in-betweenness. To Kristeva, 'creativity as well as suffering comprises these moments of instability' (interviewed in Eagleton 2011, p. 334). In other words, my memoir is an attempt to find a language through which these states of instability are depicted: 'where language, or the signs of language, or subjectivity itself are put into 'process'' (interviewed in Eagleton 2011, p. 334).

How Kristeva's theory of abjection and subjectivity in process, is illustrated in my writing? How is the connection between her theories and my account of the Revolution depicted? In remembering the days of the Revolution, my narrative web is relentlessly threatened by rupture. Recounting a time, when the carnival transformed into apocalypse, when narrated subjectivities are unbearable, when the boundaries between life and death are ambiguous and uncertain, the logic of the narrative is challenged. Hamid, a three-year boy, who had witnessed the death of his parents in an armed conflict, in their underground home, lost his language, narrative. Every now and then, he would merely scream and cry out one word, "mum", and nothing else. Hamid was the utter embodiment of the state of abjection and, as Kristeva argues, it was his narrative, his ability to use language coherently, that was the first thing to be challenged, something I witnessed while in the depths of utter abjection myself, surrounded by others (Kristeva 1982, p. 141). If the narrative continues, she writes, 'its makeup changes; its linearity is shattered, it proceeds by flashes, enigma, short cuts, incompletion, tangles, and cuts'. It is the same with my narratives; shattered linearity as the reflection of shattered subjectivities; disrupted by the intensity of pain and suffering, fragmented flashes, ambiguous, obscure and enigmatic; cuts from images and emotions.

Reminiscence and Remembrance

> The urge to collect objects, for individuals as well as societies, is a sign of impending death.
>
> -Paul Morand, 1929 cited in Celeste Olalquiaga 1998, p. 67

Visiting Iran in 2013, I went back in search of some traces of the time I had lived with Bijan and Sheida in Tehran. There were none. Except the same winding freeway leading towards the picturesque mountains, which are still sitting to the north, it all had vanished from the face of the earth. The entire chapter of our lives written in that spot had disappeared. I found myself completely disoriented and destabilised, as though walking in a parallel world, an in-between state, the abject. Yet, I could somehow feel and see the things from the past, hovering in the air, opaquely and silently though: the cell, Bijan, Sheida and the young me - my memory. As though the earth, in an attempt to ignore us, had pushed away the flat, as the embodiment of the apocalyptic event, to its unconsciousness. Consequently, no trace remained visible on the earth's face or consciousness. Yet it remained not only intensely etched on my own consciousness, but also part of my own subjectivity.

Paul Morand's interpretation of collecting objects as 'a sign of impending death' corresponds with the urge to recount and write my memories of Bijan. Although I always wished to be able to tell the stories of the past one day, it must have been the intensity of facing the absence of our being any longer in that spot of Tehran, that became for me 'a sign of impending death'. There was no trace of the flat, the place where my entire memories were created. Was that a sign of the inevitability of the disappearance of the memories of the past in my mind? Oblivion? Or was

it merely a sad reminder of my own imminent departure?

The concept of collecting objects in the presence of "impending death" also resonates with my experience of incarceration. Once arrested and moved into Evin Prison, I was overwhelmed by successive arrests. Each night saw mass executions carried out. I was moved to the women's ward, packed with inmates. Over time, I began to notice an obsession with gathering anything that was around us to make handcrafted items. Things such as pebbles, the threads from the towels, bones from meat, dates' pits, bread dough and fabric cut from our clothing; all were converted into necklaces, purses, bags, chess pieces, figurines and the like.

We were living in a space engulfed by the cruelty of unnatural death, loud and ugly. Yet in the midst of such bleakness, the life itself would flourish in each and every small thing such as making souvenirs. The process of creation would take place in order to filter out the presence of 'impending death'; our conscious minds would push that away to the unconscious, and make it invisible. Making souvenirs was intrinsically the very embodiment of our longing to stabilise life and make it eternal and stop death from creeping into our existence.

One of my fellow inmates sewed a grey purse for me out of cloth from her robes, beautifully embroidered with two-viola pansies.[19] The intricacy of the work she did was remarkable. I have carried the purse with me in all my wanderings around the world, and now I have it here, in Australia.

Now I am writing fragments of the past, perhaps for reasons similar to those behind the making of souvenirs in prison. Recording memories before they vanish, in the way that the colour in old photographs fades away.

It is merely after writing the fragments of memory that I ironically find my narrative heroic, despite my aim to reject an authoritative mode of narration. In my narrative, I have portrayed Bijan as a hero. How did this happen? I strongly agree with cultural historian Celeste Olalquiaga's

[19] In Persian culture, the violet (viola pansy) is a sign of welcoming the spring. It is also an implication of having faith and hope that spring would follow winter and figures in resistance literature.

analysis of the concept of souvenir and kitsch. For Olalquiaga obtaining kitsch is a feature of life in a 'culture that does not accept death and seeks to capture life at whatever cost, even that of sacrificing real life for the sake of a fleeting imaginary perception' (1998, p. 68). The past is lost and ungraspable; the present is fragmented and ruptured. Yet it is in this very paradox that the dialectic of kitsch takes place, as the embodiment of impossibility.

Perhaps my representation of Bijan is a wish for his or our own immortality, where the utopian aspiration of life beyond death (1998, p. 69) is reinforced. My tale is the story of a transitory moment of living a fragment of time when the vision of utopia still existed. Indeed, this is the story of living the utopia, comradeship and hope, in the period of one of the most turbulent times in our lives. I attempt to bring back into life a time that has passed, in the face of its absence and in spite of the influence on me, a participant in a culture that does not accept death.

Olalquiaga's work on the concept of souvenir and kitsch opens up new possibilities and interpretations. Drawing on German philosopher and literary critic Walter Benjamin, she posits there are two basic ways of perceiving events, both of which are connected to memory (1998, P. 70). Olalquiaga distinguishes between a conscious mode, which leads to reminiscence, and an unconscious mode of remembrance proper.

In reminiscence, that is the work of consciousness, the mind focuses on the positive aspect of the event and remembers it as a continuous sequence, which is totally conventional. Here consciousness pushes away the disturbing aspect of the event in order to be able to recall it at will. In remembrance, however, the perceptual process calls up the intensity of the lived moment and focuses on all 'those distressing sensations that consciousness cannot afford to indulge' (Olalquiaga 1998, p. 71). Obsessed by the transitoriness of lived moments, remembrance is founded on what ceases to be: loss and death (1998, p. 74). Olaquiaga's work on reminiscence and remembrance is relevant to my own writing, of fragmented memories.

> What guides [poetic] thinking is the conviction that although the living is subject to the ruin of time, the process of decay is at the same time a

> process of crystallization, that in the depth of the sea, into which sinks and is dissolved what once was alive, some things "suffer a sea-change" and survive in new crystallized forms and shapes that remain immune to the elements, as though they waited only for the pearl diver who one day will come down to them and bring them up into the world of the living …
>
> -Hannah Arendt cited in Olalquiaga, 1998

The words of Hannah Arendt, the German thinker and philosopher, paint beautifully the way Bijan appears to me, caught in a deadly storm, drowned alongside the ship and sunk into the deep ocean. In his long profound slumber, he goes through the process of crystallisation: Bijan turning into a pearl, waiting for a diver to bring him back to life; a journey from unconsciousness to consciousness. Can I dive into the deep blue and retrieve the pearl? Can my reminiscence and remembrance, reach into the state between death and life, where we both, he and I linger in the very ambiguous and enigmatic zone of existence, the abject?

He flourishes in my narrative. Caught in the silent conversation between his long dead body imprisoned in a grave, and the memory of my lived experiences of him, my text is born out of the tragic moment of his death. My narrative is dependent on that brief fatal moment of rupture; I was arrested; he was killed. Yet, for me the memoir is more than merely a homage – 'an object that will never age, or an entity that met its emergence through a natural need' (Olalquiaga 1986, p. 76).

I have been living in Sydney for the last twenty years. Oceans away, worlds apart, years gone by and it is the fear of forgetting that is driving me to write. When I felt able to start my story; there he was, Bijan. Why him?

In the process of remembering and reflecting on my memories of Bijan, I am reminded of our dreams at the time. Bijan is a ray, a spark, a transitory instance of a lost world to which I once belonged. Dancing with his memory, I step into a faraway forgotten universe, saturated by hope and passion for changing the world and building a new one. A world with its shining sun, where people would work shoulder to shoulder, a world without prisons and wars, instead there would be schools and hospitals, kindness and empathy… Bijan was a beautiful person.

My mind, subjectivity (the nest) is harbouring Bijan. Yet oblivion is invading my subjectivity, the temple that he inhabits. What if I lost my memory, which would make me a temple filled with forgotten corpses; like the earth itself and Bijan's grave? How long would that take for a corpse to dissolve into earth?

There are various responses to the experience of loss discussed by scholars and theorists. Sigmund Freud in his early classic work (1917) distinguishes between two responses. Both may emerge in 'reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, ideal, and so on' (p. 243). They both have similar symptoms: 'profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, [and] inhibition of all activity' (p. 244). However, in a healthy response the process of mourning is completed, and the person arrives at a decisive point where the emotional ties to the lost object are severed (p. 245). In melancholia, which is a 'pathological' response, the mourner refuses to accept the loss, so the process of overcoming the grief remains incomplete.

Mourning involves the gradual severing of ties to the lost object and substitution of new objects and endeavours, while melancholia resists such a separation and instead stubbornly clings to the memory of the lost object, which challenges the logic of wellbeing.

Both may appear either in response to death or symbolic loss, mourning is an experience of a grief and a process of working through that grief in which the mourner abandons emotional ties to the lost object (p. 245). According to Freud, mourning is a healthy response to loss, where the mourner completes the process of overcoming the grief of loss.

The subject of melancholia finds the experience of the loss unbearable, and thus encompasses the lost object into its own subjectivity. In this way, as Freud puts it, 'by taking flight into the ego, love escapes extinction' (1917, p. 257). In other words, the object physically is kept alive and the subject continues loving it. Melancholia, therefore, provides

the subject with an indirect means of sheltering objects that it considers so precious that their loss seems inconceivable (Ruti 2005, p. 639).

Freud suggests that the main difference between mourning and melancholia happens because the melancholic experiences 'an identification of the ego with the abandoned object' (1917, p. 246). As a result of melancholic identification, the individual cannot define or become conscious of what has been lost, leading to an inability to achieve closure. Freud concludes, 'in grief the world becomes poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself' (p. 246).

Although I find Freud's concepts of mourning and melancholia relevant to my own experiences, I find the classification of melancholia as 'impotent' problematic. The concept of 'mourning' is applicable to my lived experiences after the event of my imprisonment. Condemning our past, we survived and were released back into society. The only way to proceed with our lives for many of us was not to allow the past to engulf the present; 'do not look back!'[20] However, that was not my story. I deliberately chose not to forget what I had witnessed, and to harbour the memory of all those who did not survive.

In *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholy* (1989), Julia Kristeva suggests a loss theory of melancholia in the tradition of Freud. In her analysis of Marguerite Duras' body of works, Kristeva situates them as the representation of a non-cathartic historical melancholy where the permanent identification with the object of mourning is nonetheless absolute and inescapable. Because of that very fact, mourning becomes impossible and changes the heroine into a crypt inhabited by a living corpse (1989, p. 233). To Kristeva, Duras' heroines are amongst those who cannot pass through the mourning process.

Kristeva writes:

> [e]ven the soundest among us know just the same that a firm identity remains a fiction. Suffering, in Duras' work, in a mannered way and with empty words evokes that impossible mourning which, if its process had

[20] Orpheus (1950), directed by Jean Cocteau

> been completed, would have removed our morbid lining and sets us up as independent, unified subjects.
>
> -Kristeva 1989, p. 258

Karen Piper, in contrast to Kristeva, in 'The Signifying Corpse: Re-Reading Kristeva on Marguerite Duras (1995) argues for the resistances through which Duras' texts are developed. Duras' aim is far from restoring the 'independent, unified subject,' through the completion of suffering, Piper argues. Instead, 'active and bodily disruption of structural domination is Duras' credo' (1995, p. 169). Her melancholia is not an individual psychic disorder moving to 'independent, unified subjects', but a mode and result of social production. Her characters desire to eliminate themselves as objects, yet that is far from 'an impotent suicidal response to depression'. That is; an attempt in restructuring of how these knowledge-objects such as 'man' and characters are structured and controlled. Duras has stated in a collection of interviews, *Woman to Woman*, that her work is an attempt to destroy 'the illusion that man determines himself' (2004, p. 105). It is through destroying the delusion of self-determination that Duras restructures subjectivity around a different order. As Foucault has suggested in *The Order of Things*, '[m]an is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end' (1994, p. 386). 'Man' as object is eliminated, but only under the *melancholic* gaze of a woman (Piper 1995, p. 160).

I respond to Piper's reading of melancholia as a productive resistance in Duras' work. In my own experience, I resisted letting go of the world I had experienced and its loss. I had promised myself to never forget what had happened to us 'there' and to always remember those who did not survive. However, in comparison with most of my friends who went through the same experience of imprisonment, in one way or another, I identify more with the notion of melancholia, in which I find myself in an open-ended process of mourning. Drawing on the idea of 'elimination of man as object', I intend to disrupt the order of things where man is the object of knowledge and with a single truth. I hope that these breaks, disruptions and gaps, reflected on the fragmentary form of my narratives, allow for new voices and interpretations.

Through a rather different methodology, Mari Ruti (2005) has written a very perceptive paper, in which she discusses the circumstances in which 'the melancholy subject's refusal to abandon its lost objects represents an entirely valid response to loss' (p. 638). After discussing Freud's concepts of mourning

and melancholia, she maintains:

> The subject's melancholy refusal to surrender the memory of its loved objects can therefore be a valid means of venerating those who have touched it most profoundly. It is, moreover, important to keep in mind that melancholia has frequently been associated with the imaginative capacities of the psyche.
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> -Ruti 2005, p. 645

Ruti suggests that, through work on the imaginative potentials of the psyche, a person can possibly move from melancholia to a state of creative production. From a post-structuralist point of view, she challenges the dichotomy of mourning and melancholia, arguing that the past is never permanently closed off or static, but instead remains open to reflective reinterpretation (p. 651). The past, like the future, embodies a changing space of creative possibility that remains highly receptive to the subject's attempts to read it in inventive ways. For her, to look to the past is not only to confront something that is dead, as in classic melancholia, but also to discover something 'already living' within us. In other words, the past is always present in our psyches, and it is through learning the 'how' of its living within us, we can learn our potential.

For me to remember and hold on to the past and to write about my memories is not something only pathological or entirely negative, but, as Ruti argues, can be considered to serve other purposes such as 'loyalty' or 'commitment to love' (2005, p. 640). The episode of the days of the Revolution and the experience of comradeship remains as the most significant event of my life, a past 'already living' within me. The inevitable state of melancholia would not make it desirable though. Yet, I believe it is through 'loyalty' and 'commitment to love' that these stories possibly find a voice to speak.

CONCLUSION

I alone have lived to tell the tale.
-Ishmael, *Moby Dick*

Why would one remember a revolution? There are perhaps infinite and various reasons; for me though, the 1979 Revolution in Iran was the most significant event of my life. A period during which 'I' along with a large part of my generation, sprouted and promised to blossom, but those vulnerable sprouts were caught in a deadly storm. Many of us then died, thousands and thousands; and many more who did not, sheltered the dead, carrying them within. No matter how hard one might try to leave the past behind, to distance oneself from the scene of the events, it remains embedded; the whole episode and its history is with you; heavy and bleak; interwoven with silky glimmering instances; a combination both of death and life; in-between.

What would one achieve in contemplating a long lost dream and its experience in a time and space oceans away? What was it about the events and the people of that era that marked my subjectivity so profoundly? Isn't the notion of loss inherent in any revolution, loss for the greater good? Not that I experienced loss during the period of the 1978-1979 Revolution, no. From where I was standing and experienced it, it was all victory. There were others who did: some who lost their lives, some who were wounded and those who disappeared. Many associated with the Shah's regime were executed, others abandoned everything they had and fled the country. Those of us who were in favour of the revolution did not care about the executions at that point though.

At that crucial moment of crisis, I was going through the process of rebelling; of moving to study what I had passion for; cinema instead of doing interior architecture; against my mother's wish. That moment of

personal crisis overlapped with the collective rebellion in the society as a whole, 'the rupture of a structure, the rupture of an equilibrium', as Kristeva terms it, 'abject' (1990-91). The Revolution, released the 'suppressed' side of Iranian society, from a variety of economic, cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

My life story became entangled with the story of the Revolution in the fast paced events of those days, a complicated atmosphere of freedom, anarchy, chaos, and power struggles between the different sides of politics. Things became more complex with the invasion of Iraq and the eight years' war. It was as though the dreams of *The Little Black Fish* had partially come true: reaching the unbounded blue sea, although both the fish and his creator lost their lives for the cause. We were almost there on the path towards socialism and communism. Every story comes to an end and the carnival turned into a never-ending nightmare. Thousands lost their lives, and thousands survived. Yet the dead live on in those who survived. Sheltering in us, asking us not to forget them. We will not.

What is the reason behind clinging to the memories of a time long lost, the desire to tell stories of the time, to write about events and people? Why now after more than thirty years? Is it the fear of oblivion, death? Or is it about acquiring the language that enables me to recount those fragmented memories in a form that would encompass the thoughts, and theories and themes that interest me now? Is it about having the freedom to move through the different facets and the different parts of my own subjectivity, especially the unconscious zone where the repressed materials are hovering and wondering on the border? Thus, with a shifting subjectivity, which is not fixed, coherent or unified, I am attempting to 'carry myself into the language' (Kristeva 2006 p. 167).

The time frame, which I am reflecting on, is a historical moment of crisis, at what Kristeva calls, 'the rupture of a structure, the rupture of an equilibrium'. The rupture of identities is both internal and external. That is the utter abjection; the disruption of identity, system and order; the collapse of systems of meaning; destabilisation of balance and equilibrium; a moment of uncertainty when the borders between subject and object, life and death are blurred and mixed.

Freud in his classic text, 'mourning and melancholia' (1917), classifies two responses to the loss of a loved person, or the loss of some abstract values such as liberty or ideals. Mourning, the 'normal' reaction, according to Freud, is a process of grieving that reaches to a decisive point where an emotional tie to the lost object is severed. As opposed to the state of melancholia in which the mourner stubbornly resists abandoning the lost object and fails to detach itself from the lost object, which to Freud is the 'pathological' response. In his later revision (1923), Freud suggested the possibility of mourning as an open-ended process.

Julia Kristeva (1989), by following Freud's earlier concept of melancholia (1917), in an exploration of Marguerite Duras' oeuvre, locates them as representation of historical melancholy. To Kristeva, Duras's heroines unable to pass through the abyss of melancholy and depression, inhabited by a living corpse, are impotent (1990-91).

In response to Kristeva's interpretation of Duras heroines as the representation of a historical melancholia, I suggested that my own refusal to surrender the memory of my loved objects can be a valid means of honoring those who have touched my being most profoundly; an interpretation discussed by Mari Ruti (2005). Like Piper (1995), I also find Kristeva's dichotomy problematic and utopian. Reflecting on my own lived experiences, I strongly believe that mourning is a never-ending process and is always open to reinterpretation. This takes me back to Celeste Olalquiaga's poetic re-interpretation of memory where she draws on Walter Benjamin who distinguishes between reminiscence, the stuff of conscious euphoric moments, and remembrance in which disturbing instances emerge from the unconscious. In the process of remembering the days of the Revolution, past and yet present, I plunged into the boundless sea of memory. In swimming around inside the drowned ship, I looked for those treasures that once were alive. I intended to bring them back and weave them through my narratives, yet it was me I found reflected through their tales. My own subjectivities blended and merged with theirs; once crossed the threshold, one becomes inhabitant of both worlds; we are dead and they are not.

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