

Tehran Memoirs and Diaries:

Winter 1979 and Summer 1997

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The following piece is a personal reflection, originally composed with no clear analytical or literary considerations in mind. Professionally trained in history, I am, however, also interested in literature and aware of the complex relations between the two fields. But my experiments with the kind of writing presented here have been mostly unconcerned with academic discipline. In a sense, they have been therapeutic or self-analytical. If I thought of an audience, it remained largely illusive and undetermined.

Having filled several notebooks and computer files with my "non-academic" writings over the years, I began to think that some of these might be of interest to others since they contained historical narratives and information, as well as concrete glimpses into an individual life. I read a few examples to my students and friends who encouraged me to publish them.

The "essay" that follows consists of two distinct parts, written at different times, in different languages, and with different intentions. The first section is taken from memoirs I wrote in English in the early 1990s, trying to remember and reflect on a crucial period of my life. The events described had occurred slightly over a decade before and had consequently led to my

becoming an exile in the United States. At the time of writing these lines, Iran was an inaccessible world to me, existing only in memories. I did not know when and in what circumstances I might return there in reality, or if I could ever do so.

More specifically, I wanted to capture a sense of what it had meant to participate in a rare historic event, the 1978-79 revolution that changed the course of Iranian history and the lives of millions of people, including mine. However, this "testimony" is that of one individual and I speak only for myself. Clearly, the moments depicted are the "dramatic" ones that stood out more vividly in my mind. I have tried to describe them as accurately as possible without claiming total recall or objectivity. As in any narrative, a lot is left out in each reconstructed episode, but I have not made up anything, at least not consciously. Only personal names and minor details are changed and some explanatory notes are added to clarify the historical context.

The second part is a translation from the pages of a diary I kept in Persian when finally returning to Iran in 1997 after 18 years. Intermittently, I had written both memoirs and diaries during the 1990s, but this

particular one was different. I was consciously recording another turning point in my life, not knowing exactly how to structure my encounter with a powerful experience. Therefore this segment is even more direct, personal and, perhaps, self-indulgent. The language used was Persian, in which I am more "private" and less likely to publish an "autobiographical" narrative.¹ What made me consider translating and publishing these selections was their apparent immediacy in conveying a sojourner's experience, as well as the way they connected to my "exilic" memoirs. Many passages in the diary showed a pattern of going over the physical and emotional grounds previously covered in the memoirs of my last stay in Iran during the revolution. The two pieces somehow fit together and I decided they could be complementary as an essay in English. Again, I have made only minor changes to make the English translation read more smoothly.

Winter 1979 (Memoirs Written in English in the Early-1990s)

I arrived at Tehran's Mehrabad airport late one night in December 1978. My father had waited long hours for the delayed flight. I cannot recall our exact conversation, but I remember the exhilaration of having a deep common yearning realized. He had passed on to me the political idealism of his youth, along with the frustration of having witnessed its defeat.² And now the utopian dream had reappeared in a mesmerizing outburst: In less than a year Iran had suddenly come to the brink of a popular revolution. Thousands upon thousands were taking to the streets demanding all kinds of changes and calling for the Shah's downfall and death.³

Growing up in Iran, I had never heard the Shah's name mentioned in public without utmost respect and fear. How could such defiance be real? How far could it go? And would it not end in yet another dark disillusionment as had happened to my father's generation? Neither my father nor anyone else had answers. Be-

sides, I now had strong convictions of my own. During my four years in the U.S., I had been an avid student of politics and revolutionary literature; and now I was eager to smelt my book-knowledge in the fire of an actual revolution.

In 1978, I was completing the last year of a bachelor's degree in history at California State University in Los Angeles. That fall I had enrolled in all the courses offered in modern European history, plus a special course on the French Revolution. But as protests and demonstrations in Iran mounted, it no longer made sense to study revolution in the abstract when I could actually take part in it. Finally I decided to drop out of school and go back to Iran. My favorite professor suggested taking a year's leave of absence, since, as he put it, life could still go on after the revolution. I listened to his advice.

My sister, cousin and friends seemed to admire me for taking the plunge into the unknown and appeared uneasy staying behind in the U.S. At the airport, I made a last-minute call to Alice's Restaurant to surprise Nina, the young red-haired waitress, with the news of my imminent departure. She sounded confused by the abrupt declaration and I thought that she might now regret being lukewarm to my romantic overtures.

During the London-Tehran flight, a friendly African-American man was sitting next to me and we soon got into discussing the current situation in Iran. It turned out that he was with the U.S. military and perhaps anticipating my negative reaction, he explained this was merely a job allowing him to provide for his family. Before parting ways in Tehran, he said he understood how Iranians felt about the Shah, wished us success and even added that being involved with the Iranian military, he knew that it too was full of discontent. I was delighted to hear all of this from the other side.

My flight's delay had put us several hours beyond the time when the nightly curfew of martial law in Te-

hran went into effect. Special airport cabs, however, could move passengers through the curfew. Cruising cautiously in darkened roads, our cab made about ten stops before finally delivering us home. Each time we would hear a loud cry ordering us to halt, turn the headlights off and slowly pull up to an army checkpoint. The soldiers were standing by small fires warming themselves or hidden in darkness, perhaps to guard against guerrilla ambushes. As the cab slouched toward each checkpoint, they sized us up with powerful flashlights. Some just motioned to the driver to pass, while others stopped us and checked our papers. In one instance we were taken out for body searches and forced to lie down on the freezing asphalt. I enjoyed the whole ritual thoroughly. It reminded me of scenes in the Costa Gavras film "The State of Siege."

The next morning my father went to work. He managed the finances of a few industrial companies whose owners had already fled the country in the face of increasing worker militancy. But my father stayed and kept his job through the revolution. I too had worked in one of these companies during a visit to Iran two summers before. My objective was to observe a factory situation first hand. So I took a job in the storage section where I could mingle, talk and eat with the workers. (After the revolution I learned that many students had taken factory jobs in those years for similar reasons.) Yet, my experience was disappointing since I discovered an almost complete lack of political consciousness among the workers. Eventually my cover was blown and when everyone found out I had been a student in the U.S., the younger workers showed much interest in knowing whether I had lived the kind of life they saw in American movies and television shows. Shortly after my return to the U.S. that summer, an official from the political police (SAVAK) visited our house in Tehran.⁴ This had been a well-dressed young man who politely requested to

speak with me. Probably a minor inquiry, in the wake of my factory experience, but letting me know that I had a SAVAK file.

Back in December 1978, on my very first day in Iran, I managed to get out and join the street crowds. I had been in anti-regime demonstrations in the U.S.,⁵ but it was almost inconceivable to be able to yell "*marg bar shah*" (Death to the Shah) in the streets of Tehran. My father only told me to be careful. He could not ask me not to go. But that first morning, and many other days, we parted with repressed emotions, while each evening I could see his silent joy in having me back safely as well as his anxiety about the next day's repetition of the cycle.

During the first week, some old friends took me to the *Behesht-e Zahra* cemetery on the outskirts of Tehran. In that cold and dusty place, I began to absorb what soon became an almost violent sentiment: the extreme grief and anger of crowds mourning the daily killing of their members by the armed forces.

By my second week in Tehran, I had established a routine. In the morning, I would take the bus going south from our house near Hoseinieh Ershad,⁶ on the Old Shemiran Road to Shahreza Avenue,⁷ a political "fault line" connecting the leftist stronghold around Tehran University to the more religious neighborhoods of central Tehran. Several government offices and the U.S. Embassy were around this axis, as was the radical Polytechnic Institute, located next to Alborz High School, which I, and before me my father, had attended.⁸ This was an ideal base of operations also because at the end of the day I could go back either to our own place or to my grandmother's house on Ray Avenue near the *Majles*.⁹

I had reached Iran when General Azhari was prime minister, with martial law fully in effect. Random shooting of unarmed demonstrators continued, even though the conscript army showed signs of serious strain. Part of our daily routine as demonstrators was to talk

to soldiers who were sitting and waiting in Soviet-made army trucks or standing guard on the streets. Their reactions were unpredictable. They might be sympathetic and emotional or cold, quiet, and scary. You never knew how a group of soldiers might act. They could kill you, shoot over your head, refuse the order to open fire, or even turn it back on their officers.

One day, I was with a crowd more religious than those I usually joined around Tehran University. A young man with a well-groomed beard, wearing a stylish trench-coat and leather gloves, walked in front of us, leading with mostly Islamic chants. I imagined him to be a Paris-educated son of a bazaar merchant. Moving east on Shahreza Street, past the Old Shemiran Road, we came up against a contingent of soldiers guarding a police station. Their commanding officer picked up a bullhorn and warned they would shoot if we marched any closer. The restless crowd continued walking. Then the soldiers came to the middle of the street, knelt down and aimed their machine guns at us. I was in the first row and directly in the line of fire. But it did not really matter where you stood at this close range since the powerful German G-3 machine guns easily cut through several rows of human bodies. The crowd halted in silence for a moment. Then it let out an uproar as people began to shout "*Allahoakbar*" (God is Great), saying their final prayers. I was furious and scared. "Martyrdom" was not exactly the goal of my life. But neither was it easy to just step aside so that others would take the bullets. Then I noticed our young leader in agitated discussion with the officer in charge. He ran in front of us and said the soldiers were not going to shoot if we marched past them silently. The crowd accepted: we could all live with that compromise. Such encounters could get bloody too. One early winter afternoon, I was in a demonstration near my old High School Kharazmi, almost adjacent to Tehran University. Several trucks filled with soldiers were there to contain our

mixed crowd of different ages and political types. We would scatter each time the soldiers moved too close, only to regroup and come back around the block. There was constant shooting as we moved back and forth, trying to evade direct confrontation with the soldiers chasing us on foot.

An old man running next to me insisted I remove my pointed night-watchman's cap. It would make me stand out and be a more likely target for sniper shots, he said. Machine guns were blasting and smoke, from garbage piles and tires we burnt to create road-blocks, had darkened the sky. I saw some people restraining a young man struggling to run toward the soldiers. "My friend was just killed here," he was shouting, shaking and twisting violently. "This is him; this was my friend," he repeated, raising up what looked like torn pieces of human brain in his hand. People finally pulled him away. By this time we had moved dangerously close to two army trucks. One of the drivers had his head down, resting on the steering wheel. When he looked up his face was filled with tears.

A few days later, I was strolling down Takht-e Jamshid Avenue, near the U.S. Embassy, in search of an event. A kid of about fourteen or fifteen caught my attention. He was hard at work trying to open the trunk of a parked car with a pocket knife. When a woman from a balcony began yelling at the boy, he apologized and walked away. I followed and saw him try the same thing with another car; then I approached and asked what he was doing. Checking for SAVAK cars, he said, since he knew about their particular makes, colors and license plate numbers.

Unconvinced but curious, I continued walking and talking with him. He said I could join his friends in an attack on a SAVAK safe-house. I accepted, thinking it was necessary to save an innocent household from kids playing revolutionary hide and seek. Soon the group assembled at a designated intersection,

marched into a side street and stopped by an alley. My new friend pointed to a house and led the other kids toward it. I was screaming at them to stop bothering people when bullets began flying around us. The shots were fired from the second floor of the house. We ran out of the alley and nobody was hit. But the teenagers were not going to give up. Rather quickly, they found a cooperative dump-truck driver who backed up his vehicle into the alley toward the house, with the kids taking cover behind its raised backside. Bullets poured down again but they only hit the metallic rear of the truck and flew away smashing windows in all directions. Thus safely reaching the house, the kids jumped out and started setting fire to its wooden door. At this point we could hear army trucks approaching to rescue the SAVAK house. We had to run away, taking refuge in the neighborhood houses that had their doors open to fleeing demonstrators. I got into a house and climbed the wall into the next building, which was an abandoned half-constructed high rise. There I waited for some time and then went back to the street as the situation calmed down. Later I looked for that boy in every demonstration but never found him again.

The bloodiest event I witnessed was the funeral of Kamran Nejatollahi, a young professor killed by SAVAK snipers during a sit-in strike at Tehran University. His funeral procession, beginning from a hospital near the University, turned into a gigantic demonstration.¹⁰ I felt a strong sense of belonging with this crowd in which university students and professors seemed to predominate. Tens of thousands must have been involved and the end of the lines could not be seen. Several foreign reporters were present and one of them, Joe Alex Morris Jr., of the *Los Angeles Times*, was later shot and killed by the soldiers.¹¹ I also remember seeing a few young foreigners, who looked like students, shouting slogans in Persian along with their Iranian friends. Army helicopters were

flying above, tanks were stationed around hospital gates and soldiers were standing guard everywhere. We started our procession behind the slain hero's coffin, reminiscent of the scene of General Lamark's funeral in *Les Misérables*. My sister, back from the U.S. during her school break, was also there with one of my close friends.

As the front lines approached the 24th of Esfand Square from the north, the soldiers opened fire. The crowd split up, with people fanning out in all directions into side streets. I ran into an alley and lost sight of my sister and friend. Reaching a dead end, I tried in vain to scale the walls that were impossibly high. Then I ran back, letting my favorite Greek fisherman's hat and long red scarf fall behind. A door opened and I jumped in to join dozens taking sanctuary in somebody's house. But there were too many of us in that place which now felt like a trap as the sound of uninterrupted machine-gun fire drew closer. Those who could climbed the walls to get out. I managed to get on top of a wall and jumped into the next courtyard in full view of an entire family watching me from their living room. They looked so scared that I immediately scaled the wall onto the next building, which luckily turned out to be vacant. There, I waited a while, but the shooting was getting too close again. The front door was locked and my furious attempts at kicking it open failed. Giving up, I climbed yet another wall that connected to an alley. The view of the side street was terrifying: the whole place was filled with soldiers holding drawn out machine guns. Had I kicked that door open, I would have broken into their midst.

Cautiously, I came down on the other side of the wall into the alley. But it too was a dead-end and now I was totally trapped. Desperately looking around, I noticed a man and a woman watching me from a window. My pleading gestures failed since they closed the curtain and no doors opened. Then I saw a young woman in a second story window motioning for me to

wait. A door opened and I was given refuge. This was the small apartment of my savior and her brother who were about my age and obviously political types. We sat down and tried to relax by talking while the commotion continued outside. They let me call home and find comfort hearing that my sister and friend had also called and were safe. Gradually the machine guns quieted down. It was almost unbearable to sit still thinking that any of these bullets might end a human life. Finally, as the night descended, the gunfire stopped and sparrows began to haltingly sing again. It was time to leave. I thanked my hosts and said good-bye. Most of the soldiers were gone but the streets looked like a war zone with small fires burning, cars turned upside down and fallen tree trunks everywhere. The air was thick and heavy with smoke. I walked for a long time, drifting toward my grandmother's house, where I was looked after better than at our own home. I felt indebted and vaguely attracted to the woman who had saved me. Later I ran into her in a leftist demonstration but was repelled by the inanely pro-Soviet slogan on the banner she was holding.

Next morning, I went to a hospital near the 24th of Esfand Square where some corpses from the previous day's killing were kept. It was my first time inspecting humans shot to death. They were simply placed on the floor in long rows for everyone to observe and for their families to identify them. The ones I looked at were fairly intact and many had their eyes open, appearing frozen in resignation like dead fish. The burden of grief was devastating: these very people were running the streets with me only hours ago, full of life and intense feelings that we shared; and now they just lay there, forever extinguished. I went home to my father's. Some relatives were over for dinner and heated political discussions were raging. I did not want to talk and somehow felt out of place, thinking I too might have been lying down cold on the hospital floor with the others. Throughout that winter,

the killing of unarmed demonstrators and the accumulation of pent-up frustrations continued. With Iranian newspapers, radio and television networks joining a nation-wide anti-government strike, people spent the evenings listening to foreign radio stations, especially the BBC, for the latest news and proclamations of Ayatollah Khomeini and other opposition leaders and groups.¹² The nights I recall most vividly were those at my grandmother's, or at my friend Omid's, sitting by the radio and planning the next day's event as ever-thickening blankets of snow covered the streets of Tehran, where soldiers waited in their trucks or patrolled on foot, enforcing the curfew. I remember long bus-rides to Omid's house in the Tehran Pars district, watching the stores close down and pedestrians hurry home in the pre-curfew rush hour. The green and black flags, displaying the colors of Shii Islam on mosques and rooftops, appeared as symbols of defiance, to which I would add imaginary red ones.

Some days I met Omid at the office of his father, an ex-air force pilot who had spent long years in prison after being caught trying to escape to the Soviet Union in his fighter plane. Omid and his brothers grew up while their father served his sentence. Later he set up a small construction office, which now functioned as a neighborhood base of political activities, complete with the overnight transformation of their errand boy into a revolutionary, who dressed, acted, and looked like John Travolta in the movie "Grease."

Omid and I constantly argued with his father and grandfather, another pro-Soviet stalwart whose credentials included imprisonment in the 1930s as a member of the famous Marxist "Group of Fifty-Three."¹³ We saw them as the old left generation whose ideas, especially rigid loyalty to the Soviet Union, were conservative and outdated. And they, of course, called us Trotskyists, Maoists, and anarchists.¹⁴ Many evenings, however, Omid's father would drive all of us to his home in his old Mercedes

Benz, after stopping at his favorite Armenian deli to pick up the night's supply of vodka and cold cuts. We then had dinner in their kitchen while chatting and listening to the Persian programs of the BBC and Radio Moscow. Omid never missed an opportunity to make fun of his father's obsessive attachment to the Soviet Union. He insisted, for example, that the man wore a special after-shave called "Moscow Nights" as part of his ritualistic preparation for listening to Radio Moscow.

Late in the evenings, we would go to the room Omid shared with his teenage brother, Payman, to spend the rest of our "candle-light revolutionary nights." Tehran's electricity was periodically cut due to power shortages and so our agitated and endless conversations were often conducted under the soft glow of candles. Payman always tried to get involved in our projects and debates; but thinking him too young and naive, we ignored or made fun of him. We argued politics, planned the following day's activities, watched the snow dancing beautifully in the backyard and listened to revolutionary songs. I especially remember a somber and melancholy hymn to the leftist Fada'i guerrillas, sung without music by Hamid Ashraf, their young leader, who was reputed to have fought his way out of 12 ambushes by government forces. On his 13th attempt, the security forces gave up on capturing him alive and demolished his safe-house with rockets fired from a helicopter.¹⁵

I felt a strong bond with Omid. Formerly a childhood acquaintance, he had quickly become my closest friend and "rafiq" (comrade). He was the rough-and-tumble sort of revolutionary who hated the shah passionately and believed in "fighting for the masses," without worrying too much about what might happen afterwards or distinguishing among the Shah's religious, nationalist or Marxist opponents. I felt he was capable of withstanding prison and torture, trusting and liking him better than "bookish" leftists. After gain-

ing his trust by running around in enough demonstrations together, he told me some of his friends were preparing for "armed struggle" and suggested we join them. In fact, his circle of friends were already involved in amateurish but deadly serious projects.

Perhaps because of my own "bookish" background, I decided we needed first to study guerrilla strategy and tactics before engaging in such professional activities. So I obtained, from the black-market run by street vendors, a copy of the Brazilian revolutionary Carlos Marighella's famous "Mini Manual for the Urban Guerrilla" and began learning my crash course. The neighborhood "guerrilla" circle we had run into was part of a general tendency among young activists like ourselves who were desperate and ready to strike back at the regime by any means. But the monarchy collapsed more quickly than any of us could anticipate. As neither repression nor concessions worked to contain mounting countrywide opposition, on January 16, 1979, the Shah left Iran for an "extended vacation" from which he was never to return. That day I shared in the triumphant jubilation of huge masses of people, dancing in the streets, burning cash (that bore pictures of the Shah), kissing and congratulating each other.

Still, people died as the Shah's caretaker government and army generals maneuvered and negotiated with opposition leaders. Khomeini's return, for example, was at first resisted and when he eventually arrived in Tehran, victory over the monarchy seemed to be at hand. Like thousands of Tehranis, I went to see Khomeini in his provisional headquarters at a school in my grandmother's neighborhood. The experience was moving as one could feel the frenzy and ecstasy of crowds pushing and pulling toward him, sobbing and crying "Allahoakbar" (God is Great) and "Dorud bar Khomeini" (Khomeini be Praised). I was not a Khomeini follower, but admired his steadfastness against the monarchy. My dream was that once a

popular revolutionary process got under way, the more conservative tendencies would be swept aside and a truly radical leadership, uncompromising and independent of all foreign influence, could emerge. The precondition to that, however, seemed to be what Khomeini and his followers wanted too, i.e., the overthrow of the Shah's regime, the one objective that had united an entire nation.

Pages from my 1997 Journal (Translated from Persian)

Tehran, 9 July 1997/ 6 a.m.:

It is my fifth day in Tehran after 18 years. The jet-lag makes me wake up at about 4 or 5 in the morning. Right now, I am sitting in "our own" kitchen. Tea is brewing. Soon my stepmother will wake up to perform her morning prayers and set the breakfast table. Ironically, I feel closer to her now than ever before. I am in emotional turmoil and yet a curious calm sustains me. These few days here have been so different from two decades of "exilic" life in the U.S. that I can hardly begin to process my feelings and impressions. Despite their intensity, they seem unreal and fleeting. My father is at work.

The morning following my arrival, I went to my grandmother's house where, after her death, my uncle lives alone. I could not have found the place without my sister's help. She had lived in Iran several years after the revolution. It is strange to see her in the mandatory scarf and long dress. In fact, the image of women in "Islamic dress" everywhere is the most striking visual change in the environment. We take to the streets: "The Old Shemiran Road, by Hoseinieh Ershad" is no longer part of an inaccessible address written endless times on airmail envelopes. It now leaps out into solid existence, as if dreams and nightmares could materialize instantaneously into some hyper reality. I am dazed and like a child hold my sister's hand to cross the street. We switch taxi cabs and

buses four times. To counter massive traffic jams, public transportation vehicles move only in designated routes. Those wishing to go somewhere directly must pay much more to use private taxi service. Most buses are divided into male and female sections. My sister says this is better because formerly men used to bother and touch women on the bus. We get to central Tehran, near the Majles, the neighborhoods that make up my earliest childhood memories. Again I feel dizzy: unable to handle the flood of images and emotions. A change in the middle of the famous square facing the Majles catches my attention: Here stood the statue of an angel driving a spear into a demonic figure, fallen at her feet, Freedom annihilating Tyranny. Now, replacing both, there is the statue of a famous cleric pointing to the Majles.

Getting closer to my grandmother's house I am overtaken with grief as everything feels hollow and unreal without her. She was my emotional anchor in the landscape of old Tehran, which now suddenly appears like an ancient lost city. My uncle and I have not spoken for years. Still, he is the man whose kind and caring presence was so vital to me and my sister after our mother died. Standing by the door waiting, he greets us with a familiar phrase from our childhood: "Are my little babes here?" He is old and haggard looking: thin with a white beard, hunched back and bent shoulders. Yet his face is as radiant as before. I am not sure what to say. We enter the small courtyard where my grandmother too used to stand waiting for us, half-hidden behind the door. Her sickly pomegranate tree has survived and now fills the whole yard, towering over a dry little pond. My uncle has abandoned his mother's rooms on the ground floor. As we take the stairs to the second floor, I stall to take a glance at her rooms. The paint on the ceiling is peeling and the floor, covered with fading carpets, has caved in. Her comfort chair and the red oak table, under which my aunts and uncles had scribbled their

names, stand in one corner, opposite a wall bearing a clock, pictures of the shrine of Imam Reza and a calendar.¹⁶

I hurry upstairs, blinking quickly to dry my eyes. We sit in the "guest room." Here too everything is falling apart. My uncle says he does not care about the collapsing house, his own failing health or anything else; whatever God ordains will happen. He tells us about the difficult last years of his mother and how she spoke with dead family members and other invisible beings at nights. I shudder to think of his own lonely days and nights in this house.

But let us not dwell on this anymore. I had decided not to become sentimental in these pages. Considering a writing style and an authorial persona for my "Return to Iran" journals, the minimalist and detached posture of Che Guevara's *Bolivian Diaries* had seemed appropriate. I had recently heard passages from it read in the voice-over narrative of a new documentary film on Che's life. Yes, Che...and perhaps with a touch of Edmond Dantes' *The Count of Monte Cristo*, whose adventures, familiar to me from childhood, I had been rereading as if to debrief myself on the theme of "Return and Redemption..."

We do not stay very long with my uncle. He thanks my sister for the new shirt he is wearing rather awkwardly on top of his patched-up pants. We were worried he might not accept gifts coming from the U.S. But he does; and again appears pleased receiving a blue Gap shirt from me and some medicine from my sister. She is better at giving gifts and her being a doctor often adds more weight to what she offers.

The journey home begins by first taking a taxi. It is the inevitable "made-in-Iran" little *Paykan*, already carrying three passengers. We push ourselves in the front seat with me squeezed between the driver and my sister to observe Islamic propriety (something which I later see constantly ignored as female passengers are packed next to cab drivers and/or pas-

sengers.) In fact, I am sticking so improperly close to the driver that he shifts gears literally between my knees. His radio is on and the melody I suddenly recognize, as we crawl through the traffic near the Majles, intensifies the surreal atmosphere: it is the theme from the movie "Johnny Guitar," played without the singer's voice. "What took you so long?" I think of the famous lines from the tense reunion scene of the film's long-separated lovers.

Later, we walk a short distance to the bus-station. It is unbearably hot. Perspiring heavily in my short-sleeved shirt and loose cotton pants, I feel guilty seeing my sister soak under her scarf and layers of clothing. Two little boys are begging us to buy chewing gum. They must be about seven or eight, with dirty, beautiful faces and torn clothing. She gives one of them some change and gets a piece of gum. But they run after us insisting we buy more: "For God's sake Khanum, please buy four," "Please, please, buy some from me too." She is shaken. The streets are full of children like these. I am nauseous and sleepy when we finally get home.

12 July 1997/ 10 p.m.:

Yesterday I went on a tour of the neighborhoods from my revolutionary days. I took the bus down the Old Shemiran Road (now named Shari'ati) and began the search on foot, going west on Takht-e Jamshid (now Ayatollah Taleqani) boulevard.¹⁷ With neatly painted anti-American slogans on its reddish-brown brick walls, the U.S. Embassy was of course closed down. In vain, I tried to find the apartment of my friend Sadeq, on Villa Street (now named Nejatollahi, after the slain professor whose funeral I had attended 18 years ago). But I did find "Iran Super," one of Tehran's very few American-style super markets in the 1970s, where I used to buy comic books. It is now a branch of the Kowthar¹⁸ chain of stores, displaying shoddy clothing and household items. A few blocks away stood the high-rise where I had taken refuge on the day of the

attack on the SAVAK-house.

Continuing westward I reached the intersection where Mrs. Mell's "European" bookshop had been located. In its place was a dilapidated store selling school books and cheap stationery. The unfriendly young man behind the counter assured me this had not been Mell's. But on the shelves at the opposite end, I could see English-language mystery and crime paperbacks with covers blacked out where pictures of women showed too much skin.

I took a break at a corner deli, cooling down with a large glass of melon juice mixed with sugar and crushed ice. A sandwich would have made this a perfect lunch, just like "the old days," but a huge cockroach strolling inside the glass-door of the refrigerator changed my mind. A while later I was in front of Alborz High School. After some negotiation, including a promise not to take pictures, the gatekeeper let me in. The front yard was at first unfamiliar, but glimpses of recognition began to come in waves as I stared into the round pool where gold fish swam lazily through the water made dark green with thick algae. Going north around the administration building, past the soccer and basketball courts, I stopped by the ugly concrete structure where my class had been.

Pretending to know my way, I enter and go upstairs to the third floor, finding a room that might have been my class. I sit at a desk, looking at the windows, trying to see again the tree-lined distant view I liked to watch during boring lessons. Ghosts of my friends and teachers are resurrected in my mind: especially Sa'di, my best friend and intellectual rival, and the venerable Mr. Bouzari, who had been my father's teacher too. Above the blackboard, pictures of Khomeini and the current supreme religious leader have replaced those of the Shah and the royal family. The board itself is cluttered with schoolboy banter, in the midst of which the hard-liner candidate running for President is called "a donkey." As if in a trance, I walk up to it and write: "I

came back." Then I look across the hallway into the class next door and read "welcome," written in huge letters on the blackboard. This kind of thing should not happen to one who does not believe in mystical moments.

I take my time walking down the stairs where we used to rush up and down to and from our classes, pushing and shoving each other. Outside is the shaded area with benches under tall pine trees where I would take lunch breaks, relaxing or preparing for afternoon classes. I sit on a bench for a while and listen to a few students talk about their exams. Finally I leave, turning from Alborz Alley into Shahreza (now Enqelab, i.e., "Revolution") street. Looking for familiar sights, I see the sign of "Original" stationery. This landmark little store has been around since before World War II. I have bought precious exotic items here: glossy pictures of rare animals, beautiful postcards and imported coloring pens. Now some notebooks and postcards, yellowish from over-exposure to sunlight, are gathering dust in the window. The front door is closed and remains so despite my repeated knocking. It must be the long summer lunch hour. I continue walking westward. The heat is pressing hard and exhaustion is building up. The City Theatre is another landmark to revisit. It used to stage modernist and avant-garde performances. Now it is besieged by peddlers selling religious and self-help books and tapes: "What a Youth Must Know," "Secrets of Success Taught in 10 Minutes" and "The Ideal Muslim Woman."

Kharazmi High School and Tehran University are my next stop. The rows of bookstores are still around and the place is filled with students, mixed with people from all walks of life, a crowd rather different from what you saw in these quarters 20 years ago. The high school is turned into a government office which I am not allowed to visit; and the university lacks its former luster and vibrancy. Somehow I do not even

feel like trying to enter its grounds. But “France Pars” is holding its ground firmly and irresistibly, and its café-glaze tastes as great as ever. Checking the streets where we had run back and forth in many demonstrations, I am baffled by the graffiti on some walls: “Victory is Full of Holes” and “Death to Independence.” It takes a while to comprehend that “Victory” and “Independence” are Tehran’s leading soccer clubs.¹⁹

Reaching the 24th of Esfand (now Enqelab or “Revolution”) Square, I turn north on Amirabad (now Kargar, i.e., “Worker”) Street. My goal is to find the house where I had taken sanctuary during the shootings at Nejatollahi’s funeral. After several attempts, I think I have found it: a dead-end alley and a little three-story house with round window frames and ivy hanging out over orange brick walls. I ring the bell for the second floor, holding my breath. There is no answer. Then I ring the first floor and a middle-aged woman, a chador wrapped around her waist, opens. I am not sure what to say: “Excuse me Khanum, a young brother and sister living here 18 years ago saved my life. Where are they?” No. Instead I ask if a family, a brother and sister, live or have lived on the second floor. She stares at me for a long moment and then says, in a cold, non-Tehrani accent: “No sir. People living here are not your type.” I apologize and she closes the door.

15 July 1997/ 10 p.m.:

Today my father drove us to Omid’s house in Tehran Pars. I never liked these neighborhoods. Their generically straight boulevards and tasteless urban planning are like parodies of southern California’s San Fernando Valley. Omid’s mother opens the door. She is much older than what I remember. We exchange the usual pleasantries. She leads us to the guest-room, takes the protective nylon sheets off of the “guest furniture” and serves the obligatory but refreshing iced cherry drink. A tall bookcase stands against

the entire length of one wall and embroidered copies of French landscape paintings decorate the others. I recognize something of the old aromas of their kitchen, now mixed with stale air.

No one lives here anymore. Omid and his youngest brother are in France with their exiled father. Payman was executed two years after the revolution. Only Omid’s mother spends part of the year in Tehran by herself. Inevitably the conversation leads to Payman’s death. She must have been through this endless times and yet her agony feels fresh. He was a kind and innocent boy, she says, a child really. His arrest and quick execution were unbelievable shocks... I cannot listen to or look at her anymore. Does she think I saved myself while her family was destroyed? Payman’s bravery had verged on recklessness when Omid and I finally let him join us in demonstrations. What were we trying to prove?

The woman sitting in front of me is wiping her tears now, explaining how she regularly meets with a group of mothers who have suffered a similar fate. They are not going to forget what Payman and the others died for, she insists. I remember how during the revolution she was apolitical and frowned on our youthful enthusiasm. My father offers some consoling words and we begin to say goodbye. Before leaving, she takes us to a corner where a large portrait of Payman is hanging next to framed newspaper photographs of him and Omid in a demonstration. Payman’s portrait is an oil painting done postmortem by his grandfather. I let my eyes linger on the shining red star the old man has left next to his signature.

Notes

I am grateful to Jasamin Rostam-Kolayi, Daniel Crecelius, Mino Moallem and the anonymous reader of *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*, whose comments helped improve this essay. Obviously I am solely responsible for the piece as it appears.

¹ On the problems of autobiographical writing in Persian see, for

example, Farzaneh Milani, *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1992, ch. 9, "Disclosing the Self: Autobiography."

² Like many modern, educated urban youths of his generation, my father was drawn to the communist Tudeh party, Iran's most influential political organization in mid-20th century. And again like many Tudeh members and sympathizers, he was greatly disillusioned with the party's fanatical following of the Soviet Union and its apparently easy collapse at the hour of reckoning during the 1953 military coup in which the CIA and British intelligence led Iran's conservative forces to overthrow the country's popular nationalist government, restore a right-wing monarchy, and destroy the left. On the Tudeh party and the history of the Iranian left see Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982, and Maziar Behrooz, *Rebels with a Cause: The Failure of the Left in Iran*, London & New York: I. B. Tauris Publishers, 1999.

³ The 1978-79 Iranian revolution was a sudden eruption of populist, anti-imperialist and anti-monarchist sentiments on an unprecedented scale. Following his 1953 restoration to power, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi's rule (1941-79) grew increasingly autocratic and repressive, supported directly by the United States. Opposition existed only underground and mainly took the form of Marxist and Islamist guerrilla movements and recurrent student protests in Iran and abroad. In the 1970s, a minority faction of the clerical establishment joined the radical opposition, following the exiled Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and left/Islamic thinkers and guerrillas. When a revolutionary situation developed in 1978, Khomeini's populist Islamist faction quickly pulled ahead of its secular nationalist and leftist rivals in the leadership of the opposition.

Once the monarchy was overthrown in 1979, the revolutionary coalition fell apart as Khomeini's followers waged an intense struggle to set up a regime ruled solely by the clergy. Eventually all opposition was destroyed in a Reign of Terror (1981-83) that firmly established "the Islamic Republic of Iran." See Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions* and idem, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

⁴ SAVAK was the Shah's much dreaded and hated political police, under whose fearful shadow my generation had grown up. It was known for having secret agents everywhere, for arresting and kidnapping individuals, and for torturing political prisoners. The acronym SAVAK stands for the Persian title *Sazman-e amniyat va et-tela'at-e keshvar* (the Organization of Information and Security of the Country). SAVAK was organized in 1955 with the help of the CIA. It was dismantled after the revolution and replaced by the security apparatus of the Islamic Republic.

⁵ During the 1960s-70s, tens of thousands of Iranians studied in

European and American universities. At this time, while opposition inside the country was severely repressed, one of the world's largest, best-organized, and most vocal student movements existed among Iranian students abroad. Increasingly influenced by the radical leftist and anti-imperialist sentiments of the 1960-70s, the Iranian student movement abroad played an important role in politicizing the educated elite, discrediting the Shah's regime internationally, and supporting the numerous victims of repression in Iran. See Afshin Matin-Asgari, *Iranian Student Opposition to the Shah*, Costa Mesa, CA.: Mazda, 2000.

⁶ Hoseinieh Ershad is one of Tehran's political, cultural, and religious landmarks. It is similar to a mosque, with a blue tiled dome sitting on top of a rectangular-shaped lecture hall and prayer room, decorated on the outside with a marble façade. Financed mostly by bazaar merchants, it was established in the 1960s as a religious and cultural center in northern Tehran, where it was meant to attract the more affluent and educated Tehranis to a modernist version of Islam. Its main luminaries were Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari (d. 1979) and Ali Shari'ati (1933-77), both of whom were influential in the regeneration of a modernist Islamist political culture in pre-Revolutionary Iran. See H. E. Chehabi, *Iranian Politics and Religious Modernism*, Ithaca & New York: Cornell University Press, 1990, pp. 202-10.

After the revolution, forced Islamization became government policy and the kind of interpretation of Islam advocated at Hoseinieh Ershad gradually suffered reversals. In 1999, for example, I attended a meeting commemorating Ali Shari'ati at Hoseinieh Ershad where strong secular nationalist sentiments were expressed. The gathering was raided and broken up by security forces and vigilantes.

⁷ Named after Reza Shah (r.1925-41), the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty, Shahreza Avenue was modern Tehran's major east-west boulevard. It became the main site of revolutionary activities in 1978-79, marking a shift in Tehran's political geography. During the revolution, Tehran's north-south urban hierarchy of the Pahlavi era was challenged by a move to politically realign the city around an east-west axis, where modern middle and lower class districts had grown. See "Taghirat-e baft-e shahri dar Iran," an interview with Bernard Hourcade in Ramin Jahanbeglu, *Iran va Modernite*, Tehran: Gofar, 2000, pp. 69-72.

⁸ Alborz was 20th-century Iran's most distinguished high school. Many of its graduates were members of the cultural and intellectual elite and even those who, like myself, had attended Alborz only briefly, often cherished the association. The roots of Alborz go back to the American School for Boys in Tehran, a Christian missionary institution opened in 1873 for Jewish and Armenian students. It later began admitting Muslim boys and by 1913 became a 12-year ele-

mentary and high school. In 1925 a college program was added, with a degree corresponding to an American BA. During the 1930s, all foreign and missionary schools were brought under Iranian government control. The American College was then named "Alborz," after the great mountain range to the north of Tehran. To the older generation of its graduates, like my father, memories and stories of "Alborz College" were linked to those of its president, Dr. Samuel Martin Jordan, who arrived in Iran as a Presbyterian missionary in the late 19th century and became one of the country's pioneers in modern education. See Ali Pasha Saleh, *Cultural Ties Between Iran and the United States*, Tehran, 1976, pp. 159-215.

⁹ The *Majles* was Iran's parliament. Since the 1906 Constitutional Revolution, Iran was in theory a constitutional monarchy, where the parliament (*majles*) had considerable legislative powers. In fact, however, the Pahlavi dynasty (1925-79) ruled mostly as a modern autocracy.

¹⁰ Dr. Kamran Nejatollahi was a 24-year-old professor at Tehran's Polytechnic Institute and a leader of academic and student opposition. At the time of his death, he was taking part in a sit-in strike, with about a 100 university professors, demanding the opening of the universities and high school (that were closed down by the military government). After the revolution, Vila Street was named Nejatollahi in his honor. See *Javan*, 5, December 4, 1978, pp. 14-15, 44; and Baqer Aqeli, *Ruzshomar-e tarikh-e Iran: az mashruteh ta enqelab-e eslami*, II, Tehran: Gofar, 1981, pp. 382-83, 385.

¹¹ "Joe Alex Morris Jr., Times Writer, Shot to Death in Iran," *Los Angeles Times*, February 10, 1979, part I, pp. 1,3.

¹² Listening to foreign radio broadcasts in Persian was, and continues to be, a major source of news and information in Iran where the official news media have been and are censored and not trusted. During the revolution, foreign radio programs would let us know about the opposition's day-to-day progress and the strategy of its leaders in Iran and abroad. Hearing the dramatic news of our daily struggles echoed internationally was also a great encouragement. The BBC has had the most comprehensive coverage in Persian, including the opposition's proclamations and news. This is sometimes cited as evidence of the British encouraging Islamist opposition to the Shah; but the BBC has continued the same policy vis-à-vis the Islamic Republic. See, for example, Mahmud Tolu'i, *Sad ruz-e Akhar*, Tehran: Alam, 1999, p.326. On the media and the revolution see Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ali Mohammadi, *Small Media, Big Revolution: Communication, Culture, and the Iranian Revolution*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994.

¹³ "The Group of Fifty-Three" was a circle formed mostly of intellectuals engaged in propagating Marxist ideas in the 1930s. Its members were arrested and some of them emerged from prison to be-

come leaders of the Tudeh party in the 1940s-50s. Anvar Khomeh'i, *Panjah nafar... va seh nafar*, Tehran: Diba, 1983.

¹⁴ To the old (pro-Soviet) leftists, in Iran and elsewhere, the 1960s-70s generation of non-Soviet radical left was formed by "anarchists," "Maoists," "Trotskyists," "infantile adventurers," etc. These were political labels used without much distinction or concern for their actual meaning. However, as part of an international trend in this period, there were Iranian Maoist organizations active both in Iran and among the student opposition abroad, especially strong in the U.S. in the 1970s. Small Trotskyist groups also appeared in student circles in the U.S. and England in the second half of the 1970s. On these groups and their activities, see Matin-Asgari, *Iranian Student Opposition to the Shah*.

¹⁵ On the Fada'i guerrillas and their impact on the opposition see Behrooz, *Rebels with a Cause*, pp. 43-70 and pp. 65-68 on Hamid Ashraf.

¹⁶ In the Twelver Shi'i religious tradition, the eighth *Imam* (legitimate successor to the Prophet Muhammad) was Imam Reza, whose tomb is the holiest Shi'i shrine in Iran. It is located in Mashhad, the capital of the northwestern province of Khorasan.

¹⁷ See note 6 above on Ali Shari'ati. Ayatollah Mahmud Taleqani (1912-79) was a left-leaning clerical leader in the anti-Shah opposition.

¹⁸ Kowthar is the name of a river in paradise.

¹⁹ "Azadi sulakh sulkah shod!" and "marg bar Esteqlal!"