

Seeking for Story—Mattalgard

(an unfinished translation)



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A thesis submitted for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Trinity 2024

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Abstract

My DPhil project proposes a performative practice of relating words and bodies to articulate a diaspora aesthetics in-between queer and Iranian. How to story the subject? Through an exegesis of *The Faggots and Their Friends Between Revolutions* (1977) by Larry Mitchell and an encounter with the *Nurafkan* Archive (1943-1950) by Ali Mirdrekvandi, my thesis develops practice-based methods for embodying research in the aftermath of sexual and cultural identity. In the act of reading, I seek to playfully translate "his story" into "my story." What possibilities does the history-mystery continuum offer practice? Through wordplay, fantasy, and storytelling, I bring together coherent contradictions between Self and Other, East and West, Persian and English to give shape to a research-body: an ecstatic configuration of names, gestures, and materials that signify the subject of diasporic knowledge. The project consists of a 22-minute film, *Seeking for Story*, showing how an encounter with an imperial archive from World War II Iran touches and is touched by a subject; documentation of a collaborative, somatically informed, performance-making process; and a collection of short stories that move between the English word 'faggot' and the Persian word 'Luti' to narrate associations of history, identity, language, and desire.

Acknowledgements

A dear friend recently told me that he had stumbled across a quote that made him think of my DPhil project:

"Literature is the attempt to interpret, in an ingenious way, the myths we no longer understand, at the moment we no longer understand them, since we no longer know how to dream them or reproduce them."¹

To remember that one is held, for better or for worse, so mysteriously in the Other's thought is one thing, surely, that requires gratitude. But to feel momentarily understood through the in-between of others' words, especially when one's own words would never, could never articulate *it* as such, is a blessing - perhaps, even, the very source of myth.

I commence this opportunity to acknowledge all those others who have made this project possible with a brief anecdote because, as I hope it will become clear in the following pages, *the subject stories*. And if storying is a practice that insists on make belief, despite (or because of) no longer knowing, then the subject must believe in the not-knowledge of others.

To my supervisors Anthony Gardner and Oreet Ashery I owe the deepest thanks. They have held me from the outset in all my maddening, manic too-muchness, giving me the space to spread out while guiding me towards making sense out of the scattering. They took my stated desire to seek out transformation at its word, nurturing not only the project but my artistic development overall

¹ Deleuze 2004, 12

with care, compassion, challenge, and rigour. To have been witnessed by them is an intimate honour and an unexpected gift.

To the friends who took up the call to go out and gather faggots with me, each of them holds a special place in my heart as companion, collaborator, and colleague. The long conversations with Jesse Darling over the years have created a space of honest inquiry and vulnerable wonder. Natis Hertes has shared his passionate path of study with mine as we both attempt to story the subject. The love, loyalty, and patience Sholem Krishtalka has shown me is too real and too true for this world. Natascha Sadr Haghghian has preciousely shared with me the depths of her beautiful soul, teaching me her great wisdom and nourishing my growth lovingly. And Virgil B/G Taylor, my *chavrusa*-soulmate, never ceases to amaze and inspire me in his dedication to the journey of our friendship.

To my interlocutors Cecilia Macfarlane and Mariam Motamedi-Fraser, this project would not have taken its shape without them. Whether rain or shine, all those special days in the land with Cecilia moving and making together, playing and sensing out embodied variations of intimacy - mentor/student, mother/son, stranger/friend, Crone/Luti - have been vital for the emergence of an other knowledge. Mariam's trust, honesty, sensitivity, and wit have grounded me in the archive, a delicate reminder that study never takes place alone but always builds up on the work of those who have come before. She opened her home and heart to me in ways I could have never dreamt when I first wrote enquiring about her story.

To my psychoanalyst Berjanet Jazani, I remain gratefully in awe at her art of listening. Without her elegant and powerful presence accompanying my discourse over the past years, I would have never been able to articulate my desire to know.

To my sister Farisa Sepahvand, I am thankful for all the ways she reminds me of who I am and where I come from. As for my father Morad Sepahvand and my mother Farideh Sattari, I cannot account properly in words for their unimaginable sacrifices. I remain, in both joy and melancholy, indebted to them for the undying gift of their memories and traditions.

I wish to thank my peers and tutors at the Ruskin School of Art for the invaluable conversations and inspiring encounters while at Oxford. Zully Adler, Valerie Amani, Miriam Austin, Sabrina Chou, Natasha Gasparian, Jasmine Johnson, Kelly Lloyd, Dorota Michalska, Harman Randhawa, Jason Waite, Frank Wasser, and Frances Whorrall-Campbell have all provided a vibrant sense of community and camaraderie over the years that has vitally remedied the solitude of pursuing a doctorate. Sarah Jones, Graeme Hughes, Onyeka Igwe, Ian Kiaer, Daria Martin, Harold Offeh, Giulia Smith, David Tolley, Lee Triming, and Nina Wakeford have each left their mark on my doing-thinking, whether formally through seminars, tutorials, or examinations or informally over drinks and chats at the pub. A special shout-out to Jon Roome is in order, who helped me with all things technical with his expertise, humour, and calm, especially as I was editing my film.

Many thanks to St. John's College for providing me with generous support, especially for the purposes of acquiring books and travelling for archival

research. My college advisor Catherine Whistler has always been so attentive and encouraging. It's been a real pleasure to spend time with her over lunch and coffee dates. I'm thankful for the Bodleian Libraries Special Collections staff, in particular Gillian Evison, Keeper of Asian and Middle Eastern Collections, for making my stint in the *Nurafkan* Archive so accessible and inviting. Special thanks go to the eminent Jonathan Katz, University Orator, who so warmly and enthusiastically met me to share his personal recollections of John Hemming and R.C. Zaehner.

Without the incredible support of the Arts & Humanities Research Council - Open-Oxford-Cambridge Doctoral Training Partnership I would not have had the luxury and privilege of studying without having to worry about finances. Their special needs training scheme and generous extensions have allowed me to fully focus on my doctoral project for the past five years, a true rarity indeed. I am grateful to the Oxford Cultural Programme for believing in me and my artistic practice. They have provided me with their maximum-possible project funding to make my film *Seeking for Story*, while offering the most professional production assistance. Special acknowledgements must go here to Holly Knights for her diligent and caring work throughout.

I appreciate Amy Budd and Jessie Robertson at Modern Art Oxford for curating my film into their programme and for accompanying my project with curiosity, kindness, and grace from our initial conversations up to the screening event and its follow-up. I must thank Sneha Krishnan for her fantastic contribution to the post-screening conversation. The amount of care and engagement she showed towards me and my research was above and beyond the call of duty.

To everyone who worked on *Seeking for Story*, I am amazed by all your brilliant talents and grateful for everything I've learned from our collaboration: Lou Macnamara on camera, Harri Davies in the editing room, Anna Barsukova with her colour magic, and Andreas Reihse with his sensitive ear. I'm especially thankful for the impactful and pleasurable sonic collaboration with Dalia Neis and Susannah Stark. Thank you for your trust and for bravely showing me that there is so much more language to be sensed out beyond speech.

There have been several institutions that have supported the development of my doctoral research. To the curatorial collective Qalqalah - in particular, Virginie Bobin, Vir Andres Hera, Line Ajan, and Montasser Drissi - thank you for offering me the space to work through my doing-thinking and publish earlier drafts of parts of this essay on your platform. To Kaya Behkalam at Künstlerhof Frohnau in Berlin, thank you for offering me, the faggots, and the friends rest, retreat, and respite amongst the trees where I could experiment with writing and performance over the years.

The question (or problem?) of home is a recurring one within diaspora, and I've been fortunate to be able to call many different places "home" all at once. I must thank the late Professor David Edwards and his wife Laetitia Edwards for offering me the best accommodation deal in Oxford: an entire house to myself on tranquil Osney Island, with the most beautiful study room, for an impossibly low rent. Living there has been integral to my artistic transformation and I'm honoured to have been able to document and commemorate this unique domestic space in my film. I'm grateful to David Taylor for allowing me to stay in his spacious and comfortable flat in London whenever necessary. This has been a privilege I do not take for granted. My studio

collective in Berlin, Atelier Oh!, provided me the best possible co-working environment imaginable in my last few months of work on the thesis. I'll never forget that I finished writing this essay there.

Travel and time with friends, new and old, have been a crucial part of sustaining my practice. Erfan Aboutalebi, Azin Feizabadi, Shirin Mohammad, Neda Saeedi, Setareh Shahbazi, and Farkhondeh Shahroudi form my Iranian family in Berlin. I am deeply thankful for the warmth and nourishment of the culture we share and the inspiring influence each as artists has respectively had on my work. My friend, teacher, and healer Manuela Heider de Jahnsen in Berlin has shared her profound knowledge of the body and creative sense for movement and touch with me for over a decade. Andrew Kerton, George Henry Longley, Manuel Ramos, and Prem Sahib form my queer family in London. I'm grateful for the long histories we share and the tender sensitivities we've nurtured for one another as we've grown up from boys to men. While researching in Ithaca, I had the fortune to spend time with Ned Asta and David Hirsch, Larry Mitchell's old friends, who were so wonderfully kind, thoughtful, and generous towards me. To my New Yorker Iranians, I'm grateful to Tiffany Malakooti, who found any and every film I needed for my research, and Zeynab Izadyar, whose gorgeous, handmade garments I just can't get enough of.

And of course, last but not least, I wish to acknowledge the life, work, and memory of Ali Mirdrekvandi and all he has given to our imaginary friendship in and out of time. سخن به که ویران نگرده سخن - *Beautiful speech, so that speech may not be ruined.*



History into Mystery



I. CamScan documentation of family photograph tracings with refracted light from disco ball, 2020

A couple of years ago I signed up for a weekend-long grief workshop at a dance studio in London. It was three intense days in a room, crying together with strangers. Maybe it was delirium, but on the last day I had a vision that's become foundational for me in my work.

I was looking out the window and saw an imaginary garden that looked like the family orchards outside of Hamedan I so fondly visited as a child. There was a stone house and my vision shifted to the parlour indoors. I saw both of my grandmothers - especially strange, as I've never met or seen my father's mother - sitting there on the carpeted floor wearing their festive chadors, white, semi-sheer coverings imprinted with colourfully detailed floral patterns. It was a party. They were clapping rhythmically to the music and in a good mood. A mirror ball hung in the room, casting shimmering flecks of pinkish-purple light over the scene. A group of shirtless, muscular, bearded men in denim and leather, straight out of a cliché '70s gay disco were dancing sweaty and sultry, while my grandmothers whistled, clapped, and snapped. *Gher-o-ver.*

Already a bit astounded by this amusing, if not contradictory combination, my vision shifted to a parallel scene outside of the house, in the orchard of cherry, walnut, and mulberry trees. I saw my two grandfathers dressed handsomely. My maternal grandfather, an urban middle class merchant, wore a light summer suit, a fedora, and polished leather shoes. My paternal grandfather, a rural, landowning tribesman - I've never met or seen him, either - wore a felt hat, baggy high-waisted trousers, and an elegant chest harness with a rifle slung around his shoulder. The garden had become a voguing ball straight out of *Paris Is Burning* (1990) and my grandfathers

were in the middle of the circle in full on battle mode. *The category is...baba-bozorg realness.* The queens around them were cheering my grandfathers on as they posed and performed, proud and serious. *Cunty.*

For a brief, wondrous moment, this vision allowed me to hold together times, peoples, and places I had told myself were separate and unrelated. The historical scripts of my multiple belongings as a subject - Iranian, diasporic, queer - each dissatisfactory on their own, were not reconciled here. Rather, these imaginaries were superimposed onto one another, like drawing figures from different photographs onto sheets of tracing paper, layering these, and moving them around gleefully, restlessly. Each spread and shuffle reveals a different configuration. I thought about how the times of this vision were times I could not say I truly know without lying. *Isn't identity based on lies?* The worlds I had envisioned had anyway been deformed and scattered. They remain as memory, nostalgia, and fantasy, dangerous stuff to play with carelessly.

It felt like these figures of my imagination were meeting one another somewhere in-between. They were coming to meet me where I am, rather than forcing me to choose an orientation or allegiance. I felt recognised: they knew where I come from, that I am from the in-between. I felt confirmed: my in-betweenness is the only thing I can name with certainty. It's both a condition and a desire, my symptom as much as my mode of enjoyment. It's also in the sense of the word *barzakh*, which signifies in Persian and Arabic 'passage,' 'separation,' or 'obstacle,' and whose true meaning is otherworldly. For the Illuminationists, this was the liminal world of forms,

the transitory space of the imaginal.¹ The barzakh is a parallel and simultaneous possibility in this world of an Other's world. Maybe a bit like Duchamp's *inframince*, that elusively shared vector of mingling, trace, difference, and play, "when tobacco smoke smells too of the mouth that exhales it, the two odours marry."²

There are impossible connections in this vision. All its incongruous elements - an immigrant childhood, a family's lineages and geographies, Iranian domestic architecture, Castro clones, Harlem ballroom dance - each have a discrete history. Their simultaneity within my imagination, however, is a mystery. *I want to see it all, all worlds, all times.* Mystery doesn't make sense; it can't be known. It must simply be believed. *I don't want to make sense. What I am working through is the desire to move from history into mystery. I want to make belief.* Though this desire comes from a sadness, dissatisfaction, and dis-identification I feel towards history, it moves towards the joyous, ecstatic, and unknown in my own storytelling. Bringing together and bundling displaced elements, only to unbundle them, spread them out, and start all over again. I like the pun between "my story" and "mystery." It works well in counterpoint to the classical feminist wordplay on "history/herstory." I'll play with these words, too: *I want to translate His Story into My Story, History into Mystery.*

Departing from the performativity of my vision, I'm confronted by "an entangled surplus of subjectivity [...] full of tugs, pressures, and

¹ Doostdar 2018, 214

² Duchamp 2017, 11v

pleasures."³ I turn to words to describe what I have seen and to convey signification. Every attempt at language feels tentative and overwhelming. Between queer and Iranian, so much wants to be said and yet, it can't ever all be said. As I try to give an account of myself, I encounter insecurities and instabilities in the narrative. I trip up on the details, thinking this or that won't be understood, and regularly find myself lost down a rabbit hole of historicism. One version of the story radically gives way to another, as the project undergoes seemingly never-ending transformations. My materials accumulate and expand, exceeding the framework of any story's capacity. The too-muchness is irresistible and frustrating.

The knowledge I am seeking cannot be articulated through the category of identity, sexual, cultural, or otherwise. Identity is a trap laid by the ego, and the ego is a liar. What persists in my vision is not *who* the figures are, but *that they are*. Their imaginary encounter remains opaque, rich with signifying ambiguity and mimetic fragmentation. I haven't envisioned an image, I've imagined a methodology, approximating Ariella Aïsha Azoulay's invocation of *potential history* as "a form of being with others, both living and dead, across time, against separation."⁴ The History-Mystery continuum points to the limits of academic knowledge and the ordering technologies of Empire that make certain stories plausible and others not. Though my vision draws upon a notion of the past as enunciated by archival memory, its configuration as mystery offers a *Querbild*. Grasped in the dual sense of 'queer image' and 'skewed perspective,' this *way of seeing* cuts across the detritus of the historical to awaken in the body a temporary spark of intimacy.

³ Taylor 2003, xv

⁴ Azoulay 2019, 43

with the struggles of those who resisted their worlds being destroyed, even if (and especially because) they had failed.⁵

I know I must let go. I can't control where the story goes and what it means. Instead, I will allow for displacements in language to occur so that unexpected senses may arise. Rather than approaching the subject *from the head*, my intuition lays out several fantastical itineraries, experimental-embodied routes that obliquely trace the spatiotemporal spread of signs, gestures, and practices. Thinking becomes diasporic: it scatters along unknown trajectories, shifts between dialects, moods, and styles, composes its shape from fragments, makes do with what's here at hand, and longs to belong.⁶ There is a melancholy in all this, for it means that much of the story will never be known or must remain hidden, private, and inaccessible. Yet, in my story's unknowability, there is a spectral act of transfer.⁷ Untranslatability prevails. A question drives me to posit an answer: *How to story a subject?* I give up thinking I know what I am saying. *Instead, I attempt to feel out what the story's words say that I don't yet know.* Not knowledge, but fantasy is at stake: that which cannot be interpreted, what must be traversed instead. *I want to not know.*

⁵ Azoulay 2022

⁶ Gopinath 2018, 16-18

⁷ Taylor 2003, 2

A collage of various objects including leaves, a feather, a branch, a knife, and a blue bag, arranged on a textured paper surface. The objects are scattered across the page, with some overlapping. The background is a yellow and white floral pattern.

Part I

*what does a word know
about time, where it goes
about ends, where it turns
to find that some burn?*



Reading the Last Chapter of His Story

begin slowly ——— move from ———
the men's deathly dance
to ———
stillness

no movement —————

————— high invisible energy

begin slowly ——— food decrease need
drugs
sex
love decrease activity

—— no-thing ———

cease - to - be - other

the men need ———
the other

to no longer need the men ———

—— to know who they are not

to be a person ———

—— love not need

the deathly dance ——— of the men

it shall wane

———— a new dance ——— emerges

———— the third revolutions ——— enjwfs

II. Documentation of notetaking practice, 2019

When I read, I no longer take *proper* notes. I bring a large, A2 drawing notebook with me into the library. I like its expanse, how it spans the length of my arms, how I can get lost on its surface or dive into its depths. It invites a dance. Mostly, I scribble words and phrases that move me onto the page and spread them out, enjoying the empty spaces in-between.

Sometimes I trace lines from one word to another. It's more a choreographic intuition, a haptic expression of touching-thinking, than any indication of relevance or intention. This helps me to let go of the words. There's a fantasy of relation at play, a longing to touch the subject and be touched by it, *erotohistoriography* as Elizabeth Freeman calls it.¹

I had been reading *The Faggots and Their Friends Between Revolutions* (1977) by Larry Mitchell. However enchanting, I needed to remind myself that he was just another North American, white, wealthy, gay man. His story wasn't universal, despite his (or my) unconscious commitment to "the homosexual desire for history."²

Reading the last chapter of his story, I was struck by its fantasy of revolution. "The faggots and their friends and the women who love women can, they begin to know, stop and do no-thing. That is something for them to do."³ The mystery of this statement stuck out sorely against the bittersweet after-image of history. The faggot ideal would soon be eclipsed by the AIDS crisis and its devastating effects on the homosexual subject. It was also no

¹ Freeman 2010, 96

² Chitty 2020, 150

³ Mitchell 2019, 109

coincidence that when this text was written, the Iranian Revolution was just starting. Its effects on Iranian subjectivity have been disastrous, too. My story was hidden somewhere between these histories, coaxing me to seek out its aftermath. How does my in-betweenness hold within it a *post-revolutionary* condition? Is it possible to describe a shared state of withdrawal between my two historical identities, faggot and Iranian? Both are characterised by a shattering of revolutionary idealisms, the rupture of traditions, and the disorienting sense of an "after." When it comes to the story of revolution, though, perhaps *I'm over it.*

New York ↔ Tehran



III. Documentation of the house on Lavender Hill, 2021

"Why don't you leave New York and go to Tehran?"

The historian smiled, a mischievous shimmer in his eyes. His question, delivered as a titillating flourish at the end of our tutorial, had left me promptly unsettled.

"You can always make it all up," he suggested, sensing my confusion.

I had spent most of the hour rambling about the faggots and revolution. I was angry about the men and how they had not ceased to be victorious. I resented how revolutionary desire's promise of liberation seemed to have rendered itself empty. For so long I had wanted to believe that *our sexuality was special*. Over time I had become sceptical of the normative discourses of visibility and representation, just as much as I found myself unsatisfied by the reactionary discourses of anti-sociality and hedonism. *My gut told me that barbarism had tainted the way "queer" stories were transmitted*. Could the faggots ever be anything other than nostalgic?

I wanted to resist the romance of revolution, so I wrote a letter to Larry. It read like a disgruntled lover's rant. I shared my wish to have a time machine and go back and to attend my parents' wedding in 1978. I wondered what it might have been like to go out disco dancing back then, what fun I must have missed out on. I lamented about ruins and displacement, crisis and annihilation, asking if recovery is possible or if history is doomed. The hardness that infused my address, irreverent and inconsolable, would accompany me for a while. It was necessary for pushing back against history,

to speak loss and lack into being, and to make relation with failure in my own storytelling.

Is the revolutionary symptom interminable? Or is its narrator's position - a need to progress, an obsession with the event, a fetish for the new - what compels the story to repeat itself? I remembered Lacan's infamous retort to the student protesters in May '68: "What you aspire to as revolutionaries is a new master. You will get one."¹ A cruel man, *comme d'habitude*. Putting aside his notorious cynicism, perhaps the irritating function of the statement served as a reminder that 'revolution' means a return, a recurrence, a cycling back to the beginning. To try and change, to fail, to try again, and to fail again. "We must take seriously what brings us back to where we started, what stops us or drags us back."² Lacan wasn't simply dismissing the revolution; in fact, he wanted to take it *at its word*.

Sometimes going forwards means going backwards. Not knowing what to make of the historian's suggestion, I counter-intuitively returned to New York, traveling to Ithaca during an unbearably hot and muggy summer. Larry had lived here while writing *The Faggots and Their Friends*. The story's lush, lavish, and horny shenanigans were based on his many years as part of the Lavender Hill Commune. I spent my days at Cornell's library going through Larry's papers. I had no idea what I was looking for.

There were Larry's syllabi from the course he taught at Columbia from the mid-70s on, the *Sociology of Men*. Here his politics and the discourses that

¹ Lacan 2007, 207

² Parker and Pavón-Cuéllar 2021, 10

informed his story of revolution became most apparent. The course was structured around three questions about "the men": *What do THEY do? Why do THEY do it? Where is this going?*³ Readings included *Women and Madness* by Phyllis Chesler, *The Male Machine* by Marc Fasteau, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World That Slaves Made* by Eugene Genovese, *Begin at Start*, by Su Negrin, and *The Lavender and Red Book: A Gay Liberation/Socialist Anthology* among other titles. Later courses also included Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality*.⁴

I read through a script he had written as part of the Pink Satin Bombers Collective, *An Evening of Faggot Theater* (1978). A delirious intro of sodomites and witches persecuted and burnt at the stake was followed by a brutal roll call scene at a Nazi concentration camp. A sociological interlude with reportages of sexual deviancy and police entrapment was paired with a choreographic stylisation of contemporary gay alienation at a cruisey dive bar. The play concluded with a celebratory outro of cheerleaders reclaiming the word 'faggot.'⁵

By the end of the '70s, faggotry had articulated its political identity as if it were a minority ethnicity or a religious revival.⁶ Its anti-assimilationist, anti-imperialist orientation was celebrated as a juxtaposition of what Emily Hobson has called "limp wrists and clenched fists."⁷ With its networks across North America, faggotry allied itself with revolutionary movements in the Global South through activism, social work, and publishing initiatives. But the structural divides of class and race

³ Sociology of Men Transcript in Larry Mitchell Papers, 1976

⁴ Course Outlines in Larry Mitchell Papers, 1974-87

⁵ "An Evening of Faggot Theater" in Larry Mitchell Papers, 1978

⁶ Chitty 2020, 164

⁷ Hobson 2016, 69

persisted, generating political and epistemological contradictions that undermined the universalising assumptions of sexual identity. Despite the "fantasy of self-authorising freedom" as Elizabeth Povinelli terms it,⁸ an identity politics based on desire would never be able to conjure a coherent *ethnos* or creed. The sexual revolution, like every revolution, would re-establish its social contract with the state. What would it do to the story to admit defeat?

I set Larry's papers aside and instead scoured the pages of radical queer periodicals from the late '70s. Were the faggots paying any attention to what was happening in Iran? *Fag Rag*, for example, had consistently heralded political struggles in Latin America.⁹ Why was the Iranian Revolution being ignored? The few documented Western positions that articulated "Gay Tehran" around 1979, as Afsaneh Najmabadi has shown, fell into the trap of sexual liberation's progressivist desire of "finding the same everywhere."¹⁰ Diasporic accounts of queerness in pre-revolutionary Iran weren't necessarily any more reliable, having acquired a sensibility for Western-style identity politics. What was I looking for between New York and Tehran? The question of inclusion wasn't the right thing to be asking, but my curiosity had gotten the better of me. Beyond their respective failures, what *potential* could faggot revolution and Iranian revolution share?

One notorious faggot was speaking about Iran and, in many ways, about sexuality, too. Michel Foucault visited Tehran twice in 1978. In a series of

⁸ Povinelli 2014

⁹ Shively 1978

¹⁰ Najmabadi 2014, 122

newspaper articles and published interviews, he articulated a highly contentious position around what he had witnessed. His critics accused him of Orientalism, intellectual inconsistency, romanticising religion, ignoring feminism, and a privileged blindness towards what was obviously impending political doom.¹¹ But Foucault was a philosopher, not an activist or a pundit. He was interested in the mystery of the revolutionary and what it might mean for how bodies practice, not the historical script of revolution and its reformation as an administrative project.¹² "Political spirituality" is what he called this *revolution against Revolution*, a movement that would break, rewind, and unlearn the teleological momentum of forward-racing modernity.¹³ Foucault was proposing to consider *the status of knowledge* amongst those who enacted revolt. *What happens when bodies come together?* What if the revolutionary were grasped as an *Eros of creativity*?¹⁴

No matter what ended up happening in Iran (or amongst the faggots), its instance as an "erotic interval" could not be denied, for the potential history of the erotic has not yet been fulfilled. By invoking spirituality, Foucault in Iran was trying to articulate a refusal of Empire's onto-epistemic dividing lines between civilisation and its Others. This counter-modern interpretation of the revolutionary would drive his philosophical interests further toward the subject of truth and the care of the self. Foucault imagined "a different economy of bodies and pleasures,"¹⁵ one in

¹¹ Afary and Anderson 2005, 179-277

¹² Cornell and Seely 2014, 18-19

¹³ Ghamari-Tabrizi 2016, 62-63

¹⁴ Ghamari-Tabrizi 2021, 178

¹⁵ Foucault 1990, 159

which speaking-beings are no longer subjected to identity, modernity's most cherished epistemic category, and with it the fantasy of rationality.¹⁶

In Foucault's final seminars at the Collège de France, political spirituality shaped his close readings of the Stoics and Scholastics. The real rupture between medieval and modern, he argued, lay in the twilight of the mystics and the rise of the theologians. For the mystic, the price of knowledge was the irreversible transformation of the self, the subject's undoing. For the theologian, knowledge could be possessed as if it were nothing more than private property, inconsequential for its sovereign-knower.¹⁷ The radical possibility of *Eros* receded under the idiotic materialism of *Thanatos*.

What if the word 'revolution' were discarded?¹⁸ What comes *after*? Not the day after, with its dreams of statecraft, nor the after of eschatology, with its sublime of a new world. Instead, the aftermath of a concept, what lies in the wake of a word and all its notions of world, time, sovereignty, and speech. This would surely require the subject "to fall out of modernity."¹⁹ There must be a way to speak this post-revolutionary condition. It would involve an approach less concerned with officiating an origin story or demonstrating cause and effect, of laying blame and announcing victors, and more interested in embodying riddles and sitting with unknowns. Like an oracle whose arcane ambiguity invites knowledge but disavows its possession.²⁰

¹⁶ Buck-Morss 2021, 224

¹⁷ Foucault 2005, 27

¹⁸ O. Brown 2009, 91

¹⁹ Buck-Morss 2021, 225

²⁰ Campagna 2021, 97

Is there a secret language of the defeated? I realise this has been the question I've been asking while reading faggot revolution in Iran. "The experience of defeat allows for a retrospective differentiation of what was counter-hegemonic, in homosexuality,"²¹ writes Christopher Chitty, acknowledging a queer repertoire of stranger-intimacy, the eroticisation of public space, and political solidarity with the world's oppressed. Though no longer revolutionary qua homosexuality, this repertoire may yet translate into "how some precarious bodies link up with others in future struggles."²² The question remains of bodies and the practices that bring them together into transformative configurations of speech, gesture, and movement. *More precisely, it's a question of bodies of knowledge and the not-knowledge of bodies.*

The historian's suggestion to leave New York and go to Tehran wasn't about squaring the circle by bringing Tehran back to New York, as if the master narrative could be supplemented or repaired by including its Others. It was a provocation for writing another kind of story, to *lose the plot* altogether and embark on a visionary journey that risked neither arriving at its destination nor being able to return to whence it came. In the contradictory spacetimes between New York and Tehran, there could only be what Saidiya Hartman has called *confabulation*, "the refusal to fill in the gaps and provide closure."²³

²¹ Chitty 2020, 191

²² Chitty 2020, 191

²³ Hartman 2008, 8

Before leaving Ithaca, I met some of Larry's old friends for dinner at the legendary Moosewood restaurant. I enjoyed listening to their reminiscences. They asked me what my project was about, and, for lack of a better answer, I lied and said I'm translating *The Faggots and Their Friends* into Persian. They were impressed. *That should be very important for the queer community in Iran, it's so repressive there,* one of them remarked. I winced but didn't want to make a fuss about it. Another friend offered to take me up to the old house on Lavender Hill where Larry had written his story. Its garden spread out across a scenic rolling hill. There, I gathered a small bunch of twigs and branches, binding them with a piece of purple ribbon to take with me as a souvenir. Though I kept telling myself I wanted to forget Larry's story, there was nevertheless something I needed to remember.



A Wordly Faggot



IV. Documentation of burning practice, 2022

I'm tired of thinking with my head. There's nothing to know. I decide to go back to words, to feel out what they're trying to say, to separate the speaker from the spoken. Maybe words know something their speakers don't?

Take the word 'faggot.' Caught between the pejorative and the proud, the word splits the homosexual subject between hurtful insult and politicised self-designation. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, its original meaning from the 13th century is a bundle or a bunch of sticks, twigs, or brushwood used to start a fire.¹ From its literary outset, the word is subject to displacement, having migrated into English from Old French *fagot*, with a disputed etymology leading back to the Latin *fasces*, a bundle of rods representing the Roman Emperor's sovereign right to kill.² This symbol was, in turn, re-appropriated by modern Fascism. While considering this philological plot twist, I catch myself in an irresistible pun: *There's always a fascist in every faggot.*

I write out all the associations 'faggot' has signified in its thousand years of use onto cigarette rolling papers I've licked and stuck together to form small scrolls. *Fag papes*. There are bundles for fuel, bunches of flora, groupings of peoples, stubborn hags, effeminate men, and subservient schoolboys, all loose configurations of sense. I recite the words monotonously, avoiding any emphasis on one or the other. I light the scrolls on fire. The cigarette paper burns eagerly. There's hardly any ash left behind; only a faint puff of smoke hangs in the air. It took so long to write

¹ OED 2018

² Dumézil 1988, 96

everything out and no time at all for the names to disappear. Still, there's something remembered on the tongue. A trace of speech in silence, a subtle, charred smell infusing the room. It's nice, this nothing. I know what I've done: I've sacrificed a faggot. I haven't destroyed anything; no, I've been seeking transformation. I've given something concrete away to get something unexpected in return. It's an erotic economy. *The gift must keep on moving.*³

In Stoic philosophy there's a beautiful word, *lekta*, meaning 'sayables': words may not be material, but their immaterial persistence maintains corporeal existence.⁴ Everything is anyway moving toward cosmic conflagration. What if the fate of the faggots is to burn? The question points to an irresolvable tension within speaking-being whereby 'nothing' is always 'something.' What if words possess speech like a spell, deploying their secret not-knowledge with every utterance? In the case of 'faggot,' how does disentangling the word from the clutches of identity challenge what sexual subjects think they know about themselves? "Not thought of the Other, but the Other of thought," as Edouard Glissant poetically phrases the dilemma of thinking alterity.⁵ **What happens when 'faggot' stops making sense and starts instead to be sensed out?**

Out of a *love of words*, I embark on a philological *dérive*. Diasporic consciousness guides my story, mobilising it with "analogies across lines of difference" that bespeak the subject's multiple belongings and simultaneous senses of self.⁶ Susan Buck-Morss argues for a practice of *wordliness*, an

³ Hyde 2012, 8

⁴ Grosz 2017, 38-39

⁵ Glissant 1997, 154

⁶ Buck-Morss 2021, 25-26

exegetical sensibility for how words conceal and reveal an uncontrollable aesthetic drift throughout historical time. How do meanings from the present imperfectly align with names of the past?⁷ Words become a portal into the ghostly arcades of an unfinished story, where narrative figurations spread out and "various languages clash, marry, meet, befriend, mingle with, and confront one another."⁸ Buck-Morss carries on Foucault's late interest in transcendence and relates this to Walter Benjamin's theory of translation. Transcendence is untranslatable in the language of modernity. It is the work of translation, dedicated to wordliness, that can rupture chronology and grab a hold of other, evanescent temporalities. When taken seriously, words are always fugitive. They escape the constrictive concepts and binary oppositions of the modern, returning as volatile drives and unconscious truths, "a language full of particulars."⁹

Am I translating faggot into practice? A wordly approach seeks out unstable constellations from the historical scattering of meaning. I remind myself that faggots originate as material. They are a configuration of dead wood, gathered, bound, cut, carried, and stored until ready to be used as kindling. Faggots have a form and a use. They are bundled, they shall burn. Their materiality indexes an entire history of medieval economies and energy regimes, while implying an aesthetics of indefinite form and a diasporic practice of gathering that which is scattered. As the word settles into its times of use, there is an ongoing translation between peoples and things, things and peoples. Working against the contemporary urge to valorise sexual

⁷ Buck-Morss 2021, 217

⁸ Buck-Morss 2021, 34

⁹ Buck-Morss 2021, 224

identity and insist on 'faggot' as a positive, progressive resolution to yesterday's blame and shame, what would making-relation with the fateful burning of the faggots do to the story? Or, as Sylvia Wynter asks, how to want "to live imaginatively through the furnace of the past?"¹⁰ How does the story of the subject's belonging transform when the fullness of a troubling lineage is embraced?

¹⁰ Scott 2000, 148



This Place Meant



V. Documentation of somatic practice with faggots, 2021

I want to feel the word on my feet and in my bones. I want to be moved by a word; I want a word to move. I ask six friends to go out and gather faggots with me. Each friend chooses where we will go and brings a material to bind the bundles we collect. The friends lead the way. Gathering faggots becomes a way for us to do nothing, which is very much something to do.

Our conversations meander as we tread the city's parks and forests. We circle around heavy-minded concerns - colonialism, femininity, madness, apocalypse - in a casual, associative manner. Between the faggots and the friends, a cosmogony is being invoked.

Everywhere we go, we always pass through or near cruising areas. A friend points out how that hill over there, where the men are loitering, was built from rubble piled up after the Second World War. Bits of ruin and slabs of concrete stick out from the earth. "What does it take to break a bunker?" she asks.

I take the faggots out with me to the countryside for a week. Each is an unknowable body, with its own shape, personality, gestures, colours, textures, and weight. There remains the memory of the friends, possible interpretations in their respective choices of binding, all traces of human over-signification. I'm trying to avoid this symbolising habit. I yearn to encounter the faggots in their strangeness, otherness.

A year earlier, I had been training in somatic practice and felt great resistance. It was the whitest of spaces. Round after round of sharing revealed how those around me were preoccupied with the discovery of *having*

a body. All I could think of was how I had lived my entire life not having but *being* a body. For the first time, I lost the ability to listen. I felt rage and resentment. I didn't want to empathise anymore with white lament around property.

I listened to a lecture by Fred Moten about the role of *Bildung* for the Western citizen-subject: "the capacity to imagine oneself is a fundamental pre-requisite for self-possession. You have to have a picture of yourself to know yourself, own yourself, gather yourself in a certain way."¹ The somatics instructors led guided visualisations asking us to imagine the ground and the breath. *There is always ground, there is always breath.* It was so assured and reassuring, so sure of universals. Following Cheryl Harris' argument of whiteness as property-relation,² the universal subject of somatics is practicing self-possession. It can *have it all*, including its own body. For bodies of colour, displaced and over-signified by culture, corpo-reality is always to be a body. There is an untranslatable alienation within the diasporic subject. Rather than ignore it, it must be sensitised.

Why does white somatics turn away from the dark? I imagine another meditation, one unafraid of encountering antagonism:

What if there is no ground?

What if it's slipped away?

¹ Moten 2022

² Harris 1993, 1725-26

What if there's nowhere to land?

What about the displaced?

What if the air is toxic?

What if the disease gets into the lungs?

What about those who can't breathe?

What would a dark somatics feel like?

How can the body work through the diasporic symptom of losing ground, with its anger, sorrow, and shame? *How to move towards a pleasure in lack?* Moten offers a poetic prompt, combining the lines "dis place --- the space between" by M. NourbeSe Philip and "the place/meant of people" by Amiri Baraka to compose the neologism 'dis place/meant.' The word is intended "to operate in a ruptural resistance and refusal to the ongoing history of 'displacement' spelled regularly."³

Dis place/meant asks the story to de-dramatize diaspora, to turn toward its irresolution and radicalise its permanence. By letting go of a metaphysical diaspora that awaits its end, another diaspora emerges, messy and embodied: of here-ness, being thrown-into-the-world at large, always already other in the subject's particularity. The question of undoing the drama confronts

³ Moten 2022

practice "beyond the bounds of the sovereign's theatre."⁴ Theatre, as a space where actions can be repeated, imitated, and played out, is mobilised under Empire as *the stage of history*, with its Aristotelian notions of an overarching dramatic plot: crisis, climax, denouement. For practice to unlearn this narrative compulsion, a lack must passionately be kept in the foreground, a hole in what assumes to be whole.⁵

This place, its meanings. I sit with the faggots in a reading circle. I lay down with them to rest. I take them outside and we dance. I stroke and caress them. I unbundle one faggot and place its branches up my sleeves and down my shirt. I tie another faggot to a tree and sway my hips, mimicking its shape. It's a full moon, so I improvise a ritual. One faggot makes me cry, my tears and spit soak into the wood. One faggot annoys me, I growl and bark at it.

The placement of meaning, the meaning of place. I invite the friends to join me and the faggots for the weekend. It's the first of May. A celebration of fertility, the warding off of malevolent spirits, the burning of effigies, the marches of labourers in solidarity. We've decided to perform a death ritual with the faggots as our body. We cook a feast, dance until we drop, then adorn and adore our body in silence.

This meaning, its places. The next morning, we rise early and carry the body through the woods. Two of us to hold, two in front to lead, two behind to guard. We don't know where we're going, but once we pass by a bubbling stream, we know we've arrived. As we unbundle the faggot and give the body

⁴ Azoulay 2019, 384

⁵ Lacan 2018, 21

over to the waters, a friend recites the Mourner's Kaddish. Not far away from where we stand, there is the site of a former concentration camp.

This is it; it is this. Since then, I've been drawing a radiant figure. It's surrounded by an energetic forcefield of lines and colours. It appears as a warm afterglow, a throbbing haze, or a pulsating hue. Is it a trace of what once was? Is it a transformed being, a spirit or a soul? Is it an otherworldly creature, an angel or demon? Is it a haunting, a friend or an enemy? Is it an incorporeal, an envelope of the imagination resonating within words? What am I trying to remember?



The Romance of Pine and Eucalyptus



VI. Documentation of play in the land practice, 2021

One of the friends puts me in touch with a dancer in her 70s. It's a bit awkward at first; there is enthusiasm and reserve. We're sniffing each other out. We want to get to know one another, so what better way than through play?

I meet the dancer on the bridge. It was her idea to come out here and play in the land. She tells me how with another playmate, whenever they reach their site, they take a moment of silence. And so, we do it, too.

We are in the woods near my house. What used to be an industrial gasworks is now a nature reserve. There's a railroad that cuts through the land, on the clock the sound of hurling metal. There are remnants of small parties, ash heaps, clumps of litter, and signs of the homeless camping out in makeshift tents. *The ruin is always there, one must simply know how to look for it.*

We arrive silently at a circle of pine and eucalyptus trees. Here we will play out our romance. The railway tracks run right up behind, and nearby there are dense bushes where we notice lonely men waiting around idly, staring at each other. They must be cruising. Desiring trajectories converge upon us.

I've brought with me a dictionary. We take turns reading out the definitions of 'faggot.' We play with voice while moving around the trees, touching, looking, and listening. Sometimes when she recites, there's an impulse to echo. My turn next: as I read, she begins to sing. Some words evince shock, others curiosity. She likes the word 'crone.' It's both offensive and ugly, like hag, as well as fantastical, evoking fables like the 'Woman of the

Mists' or the mystique of the cyclical goddess. She's anyway been reading a book about ageing, *Crones Don't Whine*.¹ She tells me later how working in the land permits her to confront her body as an older dancer, to seek out another source of power beyond the visible and the beautiful.

We meet throughout the autumn and the winter, the season of the faggot-gatherers, our time to hold together in this unexpected intimacy. There's a simple score that guides our play: *go out and gather faggots*. We start literally and end up loose.

One early morning we take turns carrying a faggot on our backs. It's a large, heavy bundle. As one of us bears its weight, the other asks it questions. The reply is in movement.

Another day, we spread out images, objects, and materials onto the forest floor. Everything is scattered and displaced, it's all just a pile of scraps. There's a relaxed and playful bringing-together of disparate elements. We bundle and unbundle, using a variety of colourful bindings. The practice reveals unexpected associations as much as it conceals definitive meaning.

The desire to make sense unravels.

She's lost a son. I'm recovering from heartbreaks I've never admitted. Death, grief, and longing surround us here in our sanctuary. Each time we meet, she builds a shrine. We sweep the ground clear of fallen flora, she drags large branches while I crabwalk with a hand-broom. We offer orange peels and

¹ Bolen 2003

chicken bones to the spirit world. One time, a robin joins us, content to stay while we play. She goes quiet, turning inward. "It's him, I know it."

"All the leaves are eyes," she tells me, "the ground is covered in eyes." What would a worm's eye see when looking up at us from below? There's a strong desire to go down; we are pulled toward the ground. We don't mind getting our hands and faces dirty. We sense ourselves becoming creaturely, our bodies distorting, branches for bones, topsy-turvy limbs, mouths agape. Between us there are gestures of tenderness and obscenity, fragility and force, valour and horror. I'm often on all fours, barking and licking, *good doggie, wild man*. She likes to rest amongst the boughs, slow and solid, *a strong crone*.

On the coldest day of the year, we make a fire. The flames lick our fingers as our hands dance above to keep warm. She's brought her little red dress to hang from the trees, I'm wearing my bright, neon-coloured socks to show off later when I flip upside-down. *Is this how traditions are created? The energy of doing without knowing.*



Women's Wisdom



VII. Documentation of tracing practice, 2022

I'm tracing a figure as it travels through time. When I trace, I feel closer to the image. Tracing helps me to see, to insist on simultaneous vision.

There's a photograph from September 1945 in Berlin, taken right after the war ended. An old woman walks along a city street lined with rubble, a sack of firewood on her back. In her hand, another tote is filled with branches. *Woman Staggering Under Her Load of Faggots* reads the image's caption.¹ The choice of words is evocative. 'Stagger' sounds like what it describes: a piercing sibilant followed by a sluggish consonantal cluster evokes the rhythm of staccato steps, an exhausted ambulation.

I place a sheet of tracing paper over the image and follow her outline. I want to feel the weight that wears her down. I remember as a child carrying my mother's sense of loss, her loss of homeland. Whenever we travelled, I lugged our bags and put them on trolleys. I held her hand and asked for directions, speaking for her. My backpack was very heavy. I wanted to carry it all. It made me feel strong. Did I choose this or was I commanded? I don't know, but I enjoyed it.

The photograph resembles Jean-François Millet's paintings of the faggot-gatherers. After the 1848 Revolution, the disenchanted artist moved to Barbizon, a village on the outskirts of Paris undergoing slow ruination by modern industry.² Amongst the many tropes of vanishing peasant life he depicted, the faggot-gatherers were always women. As much as there is a simple, earthy joy in these compositions, there's also an unsettling

¹ Keystone 1945 in Hulton Archive

² Clark 1973, 76-77

darkness. It's difficult to trace these paintings. Round, full bodies, solid and sturdy, bend to carry faggots double their own size. Hardly any details are visible. The lines blur and blend. The figures' contours merge with the shadows. The image feels like it's disappearing.

I trace a still from a documentary film, *A Zoroastrian Ritual: The Yasna*.³ It's a close-up of the magi's hands touching the *barsom*, a sacred bundle of twigs - a ceremonial faggot. The barsom today are delicate silver rods, though once they were slender branches gathered from sacred trees and bound together into a tight bundle. As the magi cut the branch off with a consecrated blade, he recited the mantra *Ashem Vohu*, an ode to truth. Finely crafted, golden votive plaques from the Oxus Treasure dating to the 6th-4th centuries BCE, now in the British Museum, depict engravings of magi holding such barsom.⁴ This image of power strongly resembles representations of Roman lictors holding the *fascēs*, possibly a shared Indo-European symbol. Over the course of the *yasna*, the barsom are touched occasionally like electric wires or a divine battery in order to activate a cosmic current between Man and God. With this gesture, the Priest-King seeks to master the elements and control the unruly forces of nature.⁵

I layer the tracings all together and combine the figures: the staggering woman, the faggot-gatherers, the magi's touch. I move them around to find an appropriate arrangement. A mysterious knowledge is at play between the transparent sheets of skin-paper. Their sudden configuration envisions all

³ Boyd and Darrow 1982

⁴ Boyce 2001, 67

⁵ Williams and Boyd 1993, 56-57

those things that tend towards invisibility: the ruins of the men, the invention of nature, the resilience of women.

'Faggot' came to mean old or disorderly woman in the 15th and 16th centuries.⁶ The emergence of early modern capitalism ruined the lives of the Western European peasantry through its enclosure acts, land privations, persecution campaigns, trade professionalisation, and spiritual dispossession. As Silvia Federici has argued, it was the women who carried it all, unbearably. Vagrancy, vagabondage, and the refusal to labour were important forms of struggle in these times of shifting social relations. While peasant women resisted the de-valuation of their know-how, their subjectivity was being rendered thingly, its worth questionable.⁷ The word 'faggot' remembers how that which was once useful became useless.

There's a common folk etymology that originates 'faggot's association with homosexuality in this period of great upheaval. Unruly women were accused of witchcraft and burned at the stake alongside vagrants, heretics, and sodomites, a motley crew of all those who frustrated capital's fantasy of productivity.⁸ Not only does this story project a contemporary notion of identity politics onto the past, it distracts from the crucial fact that it was women who were first subjected to the signifier 'faggot.'

What fantasy moves a language to configure femininity as materiality, to associate this with alterity, and to derive from the procedure a threat of

⁶ OED 2018

⁷ Federici 2014, 61-132

⁸ 2 Hen. 5. Stat. 1. c. 7

inoperativity? Perhaps the infamous psychoanalytic statement "Woman does not exist" can be of help here.⁹ Its scandal discloses an attempt to think through how "Woman" only *appears* in male fantasy. In this phantasmagorical operation, "Woman" signifies the source and engine of life - womb, hearth, heat, and *oikonomia*, the order of the home - as well as the primal cause of death and decay - desire, excess, flesh, flow, blood, and sin. Whatever else *women* may be is ignored and repressed.¹⁰ This representational critique concords with a feminist materialism, whereby "Woman" exists only as a naturalised designation for a hegemonic class relation: that which is subordinate, and thus, thingly to Man.¹¹

The psychoanalytic formulas of sexuation are not concerned with biological reality or social constructivism. "Woman" and "Man" are not reducible to either bodies or performances. Rather, each *positions* the way in which a subject becomes entangled with its knowledge.¹² Indeed, the ongoing concern for "Woman" in psychoanalysis is bound up with the origins of the discipline itself, a recurring clinical return to Freud's central and unanswerable question posed to the hysteric's discourse: *Was will das Weib?* This is commonly translated as "What does a Woman want?"¹³ *Weib*, however, signifies in German not just any 'Woman,' but an *unruly* one.¹⁴ She is a faggot. Perhaps it's more generative, then, to push the question further towards its discursive futility: *What does a faggot want?*

⁹ Lacan 1998, 72-73

¹⁰ Theweleit 1987, 288-363

¹¹ Wittig 1992, 15

¹² Copjec 1994, 201-36

¹³ Lacan 1998, 129

¹⁴ Duden 2024

In this hystericized sense, 'faggot' holds the radical promise of becoming-useless, what Sara Ahmed terms *queer use*.¹⁵ Uselessness implies more than just a lack of utility, but an other of use altogether, something that cannot be made to work properly and thus works against the straight and the proper. Put differently, what kind of knowledge does the subject grasp when it lets go of having-to-know? This is the onto-epistemic position of feminine sexuation, whose psychoanalytic truth is that *She* is beyond the scope of Man's discourse: she enjoys the uselessness of an *other knowledge*, a pleasure that has never been and will never be mastered.¹⁶ Is this what is meant by *women's wisdom*?

¹⁵ Ahmed 2019, 204-07

¹⁶ Lacan 1998, 73-89



Translating 'Faggot' into Persian



VIII. *Luti and Crone Will Have Aroused the Attention of the Men,*
mixed media painting on paper, 42 x 60 cm, 2022

I was invited to teach an online seminar with young artists in Iran. I wanted to share a text I had written about the faggots, but it needed to be translated. I decided to do it myself.

For a long time, I believed my Persian wasn't good enough. I lacked the right vocabulary, my syntax was full of errors, I had an American accent. I was ashamed of speaking improperly. I was afraid to confront my vulnerability in the (m)Other's tongue, to feel powerless through her, because of her. I was embarrassed by my broken Persian, often making the excuse "*Zabanam kharabeh*" before I spoke - *my tongue is ruined* - as if my life in diaspora had deformed some ideal and proper original.

What does it matter if a language is broken when the times are in ruins? What if my diasporic tongue was the strange future of a language that had long already started to become Other to itself? In deciding to translate the text, I was choosing to re-phrase my former apology. Instead of brokenness being some fault or failure of my tongue, what if the story were that of language in the ruins - *zaban dar kharabeh*. Dumb matter, stupefied speaker, a joy in the improper. After all, *kharabat* (the ruins) is a mystic trope in Persianate poetry, approaching the subject's worldliness as a *spiritually* diasporic condition.¹ The *ruin of the tongue* embraces here-ness in the broken world, where the exiled soul must survive. The ruin is not the end, but an ends.

¹ Dabashi 2013, 21

How do I translate 'faggot' into Persian? I wanted a word that carried the same polysemy as in English. Not the same meanings, but a similar, expansive sense. An incongruous translation that, to paraphrase Walter Benjamin, seeks out the resonance of an echo on the edges of the language forest.² By asking what 'faggot' could be in Persian, I'm asking *what is my speaking-being?* It's a question of unexpected overlaps and coherent contradictions. There are choices to be made: to follow conventions of communicability or to play with the potential of untranslatability. Importantly, the question confronts failure. There can't be any definitive answer. Every proposal will remain contingent. It's a problem that goes beyond words, though words lie at its core.

I choose to get it wrong. This is the most precious gift of diaspora. Scattered between languages, displaced from origins, unable to satisfy authenticity, diaspora presents the subject with a melancholic symptom as much as a heretical *sinthomme*.³ The former repeats copying the lost original, trying to say it more, better, and right. The latter refuses reparative compulsion, risks getting it wrong, and, in doing so, creates an *other culture*. Within diaspora, the work of translation remains unfinished.

If 'faggot' signifies a particular alterity in English, then its movement into Persian requires translating the spectacle of the Other. My father once recounted how when he was a child, a group of *Luti* came to his village. He wanted to run away with them. I found his story confusing. 'Luti' was a word I was familiar with from Arabic. It derived from the name of the Prophet Lot

² Benjamin 1996, 258-59

³ Lacan 2018, 3-7

and indicated the sin for which his people were punished. I laughed and asked why he wanted to run off with a bunch of pederasts. He didn't see the humour. They were performers, he said, implying I should have known better.

Curious about my misunderstanding, I consulted the *Encyclopaedia Iranica* entry for 'Luti.'⁴ As the word migrated into Persian from Arabic in the 13th century, its primary sense of 'sodomite' began to undergo significant transformation, a similar timeline to 'faggot's arrival in English. In its thousand years of use, the word has signified a variety of carnal subjectivities, *les damnées* in Frantz Fanon's sense of turbulent outcasts:⁵ mystic, dervish, vagrant, vagabond, bandit, wrestler, roughneck, thug, musician, performer, and entertainer. All these figures are marginal, bodily, and spectacular.⁶ 'Luti' conveys an historical constellation of class, labour, spirituality, and sexuality that incongruously touches the wordly aesthetics of 'faggot.' In-between the two, dynamic agencies and unexpected forms of solidarity arise, without one needing to subsume the other. I had found my translation.

⁴ Floor 2010

⁵ Martin 2018, 113

⁶ Bell 2015, 7-8



Victory in Defeat



IX. Documentation of ash and oil experiments on paper, 2022

Maybe my little white lie back in Ithaca wasn't far off from the truth. Maybe I have been translating Larry's story into Persian. I re-read *The Faggots and Their Friends Between Revolutions*, treating each page as a prompt to write *The Luti and Their Friends After Revolution*. My story is not updating or revising history to include the Other, as if the self were universal, identity timeless, and sexual liberation a globally coherent idea. Instead, my story speaks parallel to his story and presses against it. There is a plenitude of boundary-figures, whose story is the mystery I desire to believe.

There's a marginal moment in Christopher Chitty's *Sexual Hegemony* in which he conducts a loose reading of Renaissance paintings depicting the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. He focuses on the "Cities of the Plain" burning in the distance. These come to represent the modern space of early capitalism: its displacement of the peasantry, reliance on urban form, fear of inutility, transformation of social desire, and an orientation towards new worlds across the seas, the realm of liquidity and expansion.¹

While he fixates on the background, I consider the foreground. I see figures moving in the land: Lot and his wife and daughters are fleeing Sodom. The story goes that Lot's wife is punished by being turned into a pillar of salt.² The orthodox interpretation is unconvincing. Apparently, by looking back at the Burning, she proved she could not leave behind an evil past. I try to imagine her world-shattering experience of displacement and her justifiable suspicion of apocalyptic futurity. Why should she *not* look back?

¹ Chitty 2020, 68

² Genesis 19: 1-38

Why should she *not* want to remember home? Why should she *not* claim the right to view her forced departure as unfreedom?³

If the Cities can be read as ciphers of capital's unsettling contradictions, then the complex family constellation of Lot's flight and his wife's elemental transfiguration might be viewed as an aporia of defeat. Lot's fate is to live uprooted and groundless. Only in death shall he regain ground. His wife chooses to become part of the land rather than abandon it. Her dying is transformative. As precious salt, she nourishes the emergence of other life forms. Who is victorious here?

A friend recommended Shahrokh Meskoob's lectures on the *Shahnameh*, the 'Persian national epic.' A pioneer of Iranian literary theory, Meskoob returned to Tehran from Paris in the early 2000s and held a series of private seminars at his home. These recordings are uploaded onto YouTube. I enjoy listening to his sincere and gentle voice. I take pleasure in how he rambles. His thinking moves in circles. He is devoted to the marginal, often apologising for having wandered off into the periphery of discourse, distracted by exhilarating fragments of cosmology or philology. Though he's speaking to a niche audience about the minutiae of Persian semiotics, his speech is a veiled address about contemporary Iran. Indeed, his personal diaries describe how after the revolution his initial political elation yielded to increasing doubt, anxiety, and the eventual, horrifying realisation that he and his family must quit home. Meskoob mourns his time

³ Mills 2015, 185

in exile, while remaining attentive to the deformations of the imagination such fixation on loss can incur if not vigilant.⁴

Refusing both the nationalistic hubris and monarchist melancholy that characterise the *Shahnameh's* orthodox interpretations, Meskoob re-reads the story as fundamentally a meditation on defeat. To have been conquered, first by Alexander, then by the Arabs and Mongols, yet each time the "fabulating function"⁵ of the Iranian imaginary makes sense of the conquest, transforming its conquerors as much as it is transformed by them. The politics that emerges here he names *victory in defeat*, that is, the potentiality of freedom from mastery.⁶ *To not have to rule over others is the gift of having been defeated.* Rather than fantasising power-over, the imagination can attend to power-within.

I switch timelines again and revisit Larry's story. It's taken on a different message now. Rather than dismissing it as some valorising romance of a once-fabulous people, I can sit with his story as an enigma of defeat, a metaphor for the post-revolutionary:

"They can play with the men's categories and try to neutralise the men's guns. Yet this will not make them free. They begin to know, from the inside, that they cannot be free until this dance is stopped...And when the faggots and their friends cease being the faggots and their friends, the deathly dance of the men will begin to wane and a new dance will begin to emerge."⁷

⁴ Meskoob 2000

⁵ Deleuze 1997, 4


⁶ Meskoob 2021, 91

⁷ Mitchell 2019, 110

The faggots will have been vanquished. The subject of identity undoes itself.

The ending of his story is a mysterious opening that spreads out multidimensionally, converging both the impossible politics of the revolutionary past and the politics of impossibility that revolution's *after* makes possible. I return to translating history into mystery. My story's untimely times are fed with ceaseless fantasy, abounding in a heatwave of volatile desires. This has been the case ever since the Burning, an infernal event I've confabulated that will have scattered the Luti and their friends. Was it a fever that will have spread, a wasting dis-ease? Was it an invisible light that will have scorched vision, a blinding enlightenment? Or was it a mutant radiance that will have flared, an atomic glow in the bones? How to grasp defeat as transformation through loss?

I write every morning for a month, a page a day, written by hand. The routine starts to get tedious. It's a habit of mine to overdo things. I've exhausted myself again. *I give up, grasping that the story never needed to reach an end.* It was a secret writing for me alone, like a prayer. I offer my words to the fire. I try to take photographs of the process, though I should probably just sit and watch the words burn. Looking into the camera, it's easy to miss the thrilling speed of the page igniting, the liquid complexity of the flames as they grow unpredictably, suddenly dimming towards anti-climax. The remaining white ash is velvety and inviting. I gently gather it to mix with oil. I will use the substance to paint. Transformed through sacrifice, the story's words have now become the very stuff of the image. What *figures* in the aftermath of the faggots?



Part II

*what does a name know
about a secret that grows
in desires diverse
even if it's a curse?*

I Didn't Know



X. Still from *Seeking for Story*, 2024

"I'm listening," she says softly, her accent unplaceable.

I stretch my legs out on the couch. I never quite know how to begin.

To my left, her bookshelf looms over me. The angle of the couch is slanted in a way to make it feel as if the books are about to fall. The books' positioning suggests an embrace. They're the big spoon and I'm the little spoon. I can tuck myself securely into them and hide.

The psychoanalyst sits behind me. I can smell her. I look at my feet, lifting my legs up off the couch and moving them around in the air. It's a playful, childish gesture. Would she mind if I touched her books with my feet? My irreverence discloses a seductive wish. I fantasise turning upside down. My body in reverse, my legs reaching upwards, my feet would approach the bookshelf vertically, unsure of where to land. They are seeking out a point of contact. *The wrong part of the body strives to touch the books. It wants to trample over knowledge.*

"Can I look at your books a bit longer?" I ask. She agrees without a word.

"Are they a threat?" she says, eventually.

I ignore the question and start my discourse: "I like being close to the ground...It's comfortable...It reminds me of my grandmother, childhood summers in Tehran...Our displacement."

Time passes.

I told her the story of how my surname used to be something else. How when Reza Shah constructed the Trans-Iranian Railroad in the 1920s, it cut through Lorestan and displaced the nomadic tribes.¹ The region was suffering from plague and famine after the First World War. The tired tribes rebelled. The Shah sent in his army to quell the uprising.² Some of the clans collaborated with the invaders. Our family betrayed their kin. As a reward for their loyalty, the Shah renamed my forefathers. Relocated to another village, they were given deeds to new lands and appointed as local tribal chieftains. As if title and property could absolve them of their treachery.

Why was I telling her this? Like every story, the subject is elsewhere.

While searching for our forgotten name, I had found a census report from the H.M. Levant Service, published by the Royal Geographic Society in 1922.³ A list of the tribes from Bala-Gariveh, where my father's family originally hailed, named "Derikvand" as one of the major regional clans. I looked for the name online and found a Wikipedia entry for *Ali Mirdrekvandi*:

"An Iranian author, known for *No Heaven for Gunga Din*, a fable, and *Noorafkan* (trans. *Irradiant*), a popular epic, both written in broken English in the mid-20th century."

Had I found a distant relative? What was his story?

¹ Koyagi 2021, 1-17

² Cronin 2007, p. 113-32

³ Edmonds 1922, 344

My tone shifted from recounting yet another history to the energetic rush of fantasy overtaking speech:

"What if we're from the same place? It's confusing, but I need to be from there. You know, it's not about him, it's about *me!*" I asserted.

A delusional confidence burst forth as I raised my voice to declare:

"What if I'm a prophet...*I want to know!*"

I cackled, unable to control the impulse to howl.

Suddenly, the psychoanalyst stood up: "That's it, stop right there!"

I was getting *the cut*. Suspense hung in the room. Her energetic presence radiated power. My heart was racing, my skin tingled. I felt strangely commended, a defensive sensation that helped mute out my palpable disorientation.

"Should I write what I said down?" I asked, unsure what to make of the moment.

"No, you said it, you have it," she replied in her gentle, puzzling way.

I got up, she opened the door, and I left. I had spoken the truth.

Underneath the desire for genealogical resolution, I had briefly touched upon a drive to relate to the Other not with knowledge, but through its undoing. By invoking the prophet, I revealed my longing for an ecstatic position, one whose knowledge is *not-knowing*.⁴ I didn't know that though the history of Ali's story was my father's story was my story, its mystery was that of the pleasures of displacement for speaking-being, of *lalangue* in ruins.⁵ I didn't know how it was the question of the rupture between mother-tongue and father-language that was calling me out. I didn't know that I was drawn to the problem of brokenness, a disharmony in translation, a something not-quite-proper in speech, a getting-it-wrong that nevertheless says-it-right. I didn't know that *I already knew it*.

Ali's story, much like Larry's before, is a mask. I must put it on to perform his story, all the while gesturing towards my story. The question of belonging is crucial: to be in longing for conflicted origins, to make myself long, to spread out within the "psychic and temporal remove" that marks diasporic subjectivity.⁶ The faggots and their friends moved me to seek out a family constellation of relating to and with unexpected others. In translating my elective affinities into Persian, my story was suddenly confronted with the burden of patrilineal descent. *What* is "I" and where does *it* come from? A relation with the symbolic must be re-negotiated. As my discourse weaves mystery out of the histories of those who've come before, real and imaginary, what does it do to the subject to narrate *ancestry* from peasants, performers, heretics, and the damned?

⁴ Campagna 2021, 104-05

⁵ Lacan 1998, 44

⁶ Gopinath 2018, 13

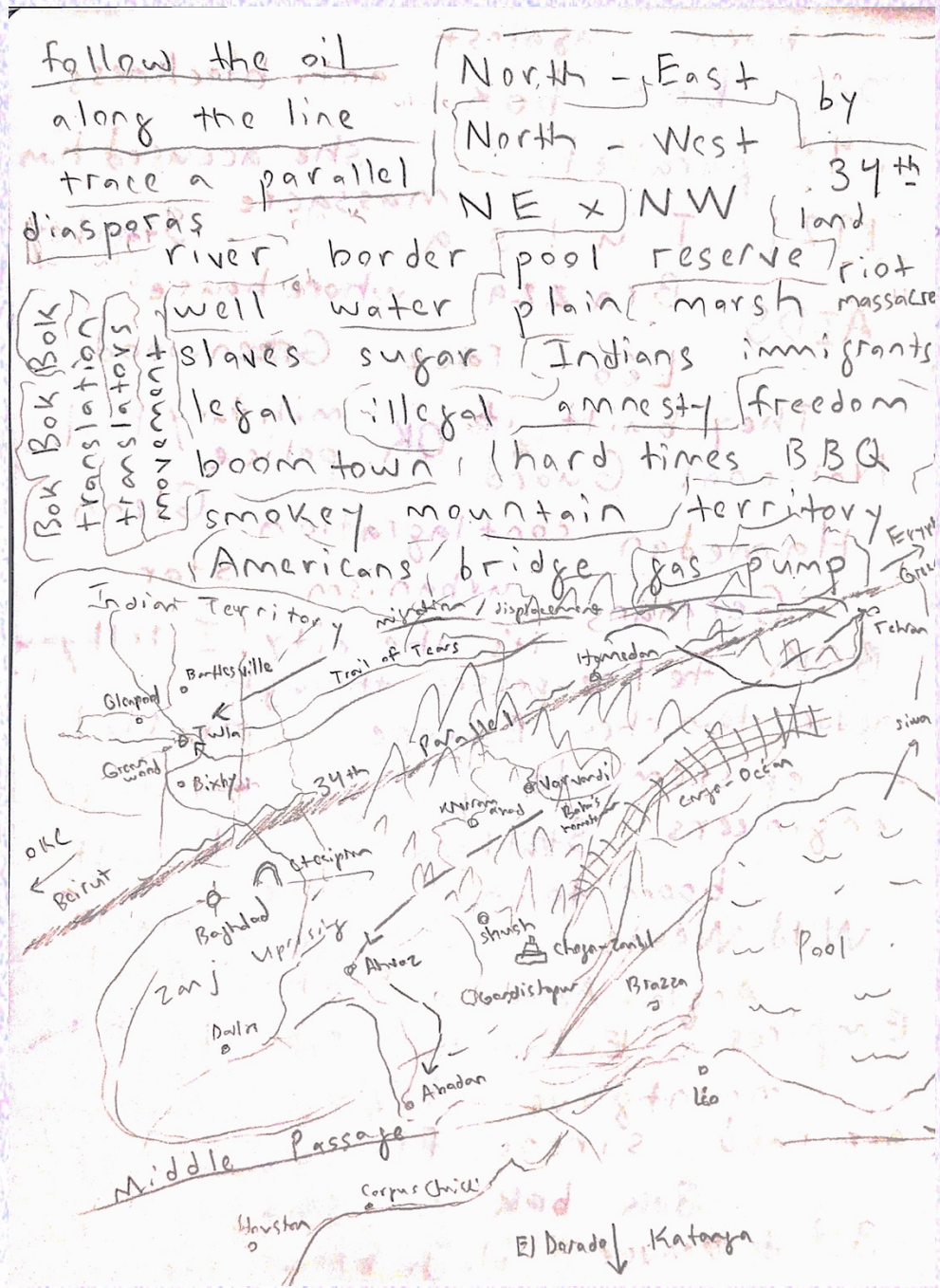
Speaking-being in diaspora is make-believe, and so I am driven to make belief. Following Gayatri Gopinath's proposal of a *queer diaspora aesthetics*, I return to the archive to practice another spatiotemporal sensibility.⁷ The orthodox agreements that locate and maintain the fixity of peoples and places will be ignored. The conventional orientation of diaspora towards a horizon of return and redemption will be refused. Instead, I will meander through the past-present to conjure "bodies, desires, and affiliations rendered lost or unthinkable within normative history" into being.⁸ As the translation movement from 'faggot' to 'Luti' has made clear, what I am seeking is a *configuration of aftermath*.

Ali's story is one of victory in defeat. A servant who teaches himself the master's language, yearns for the conqueror, overwhelms the Other, and, in the end, disavows speech altogether, choosing to disappear. The aesthetic-epistemic limitations of Empire's sensory apparatus are exposed and transgressed with every detail of his story. My task here is phantasmagorical: I must traverse a trajectory that precedes its interpretation, insisting that *what* the story says isn't my concern, rather, *why* a subject speaks. If the experience "on the couch" revealed anything, it's that my desire for history must be worked through. That is, all I didn't know that I know.

⁷ Gopinath 2018, 16

⁸ Gopinath 2018, 8

Speak English or Die



XI. Documentation of mapping practice, 2020

Ali Mirdrekvandi was born around 1918 in the village of Reyghan in Lorestan. He lost his parents during the tribal uprisings and was sent away to a nomadic school where he learned to read and write. Afterwards, he drifted between cities along the newly built Trans-Iranian Railroad. While working as a sweeper in a coffeehouse in Tehran where storytellers would perform their popular repertoire, he found an English dictionary. There were rumours war was coming and with it, jobs. It would be wise to learn the conqueror's language.¹

The Allies invaded Iran in late 1941, forcing Reza Shah to abdicate and re-mobilising the country's infrastructure to produce and ship arms, machines, goods, and supplies to the Soviet Union as part of the global war effort.² The British and Americans were headquartered in Camp Amirabad outside Tehran. It was there that in 1943, Ali approached Major John Hemming, a British lieutenant and head of Pioneer Labour Corps, with a letter he had written in English, introducing himself and asking for a job where he could practice his language skills. "I have promised to myself to learn English unless to be killed," he proclaimed.³ Intrigued and impressed by the savage's unexpected address, John assigned Ali to the soldiers' mess hall, where his responsibility would be to gather faggots and light the boiler room fires. John offered to read and revise any letters Ali might write to him. Though he appeared to be encouraging the peasant's need for self-expression, John was also seeking out personal amusement.

¹ Nematpour 2013

² Wright 1942, 367-71

³ Mirdrekvandi letter to Hemming dated Aug 19, 1943 in Nurafkan Archive

I imagine their encounter through a scene from Parviz Kimiavi's film *O.K. Mister!* (1978), a camp satire about the 1908 British discovery of oil in Iran. Cinderella has been summoned by William Knox D'Arcy to a Persian village to seduce the locals into servitude with her beauty. The scene I have in mind poignantly stages the ambiguous eroticism between master and servant. Dressed as a colonial officer, Cinderella sternly delivers an English lesson. She over-enunciates sentences for repetition: "Your country is rich. Your country is not rich." A peasant keeps disrupting the exercise, mispronouncing the words and speaking out of turn. Frustrated, Cinderella confronts the wretch, plunges her fingers into his loose, unruly mouth, and reshapes it to mirror her proper speech. *With a mixture of shock and arousal on his face, the subaltern gives himself over to the fateful pleasures of an imperial tongue.* "Your country...is my country," repeats Cinderella, slowly. He replies in resignation with an orgasmic "OKKKKKKKK..." She is satisfied.

His story repeats. My father prefers the "pulling oneself up by the bootstraps" version; though in reality, his subjectivity had been decided for him by history.⁴ Born a peasant in the village of Varvandi in Lorestan, as the son of a tribal chief my father was also sent off to the nomadic schools established by the Shah's Ministry of Education.⁵ There he would be prepared for a future role as a bureaucrat or governmental administrator. After school, my father worked as a tax collector, first in the southern provinces, then in the capital. Never losing sight of his humble origins, he'd frame himself as some kind of Robin Hood, pressing the rich to pay up and ignoring the debts of the poor.

⁴ Lambton 1969

⁵ Hendershot 1975

Before the revolution, my father was sent to Tulsa, Oklahoma on a government scholarship with the hope of returning after his studies to a promotion in the Iranian civil service. After the downfall of the Shah's regime, my father was stranded out in the Wild West. His precariously designed social mobility had been rudely interrupted. He had no choice but to work odd jobs - cook, cleaner, cashier - until he could save up enough money to start his own business. Eventually, he opened a restaurant and later, a gas station.

I draw a map trying to connect Tehran to Tulsa, collapsing timelines between cities ancient and modern. The 34th Parallel North connects the two places, passing through Lorestan, Hamedan, Baghdad, and Beirut, all the way to America. The map follows the fuel. I imagine the railroads, pipelines, communication cables, electricity wires, supply chains, and routes of migration that hold the most far-flung places together. The lines along which energy, information, people, and power travel, inscribed into a world-system of unequal want, need, and use.⁶ The lines connect capital by dividing peoples and cutting through lands. I realise that in the end, my father's job was to provide energy for both bellies and machines. Oil was struck in Oklahoma around the same time as it was found in Iran.⁷ Cycles of boom and bust attracted young men to leave their homes behind and seek out opportunity elsewhere. A few may have succeeded, the rest toiled and were forgotten.

I grew up in Tulsa and left as soon as I could. Ever since I've been displacing myself, circling around imperial centres. I still can't believe

⁶ Yusoff 2018, 14-16

⁷ Dunbar-Ortiz 2014, 158; Abrahamian 2018, 56

in *where* I am. I'm stuck on a libidinal loop, a pleasure in never-arriving and always-departing. I remember how on the first day of school, the teacher gave me a pack of crayons and some paper. I sat in the corner, stuck mutely within myself, removed from the other children. I had recently arrived in America and didn't speak a word of English. My only relief on that terrifying, overwhelming day, surrounded by strange sounds and appearances, was to draw. I was learning the *jouissance* of inhabiting imaginary worlds. Sometime later, the teacher called my parents to say she was worried I was stupid. Maybe she wasn't wrong.

My next memory of school falls on Valentine's Day, six months afterwards. I have an image of myself in the act of giving a hand-drawn card. My mouth is moving. I must have already been speaking English. I don't know what I'm saying, neither do I see to whom I'm giving the gift, boy or girl, nor their reaction. Will they accept or refuse me? What I do not remember is what matters. The time in between silence in Persian and sound in English. The time in between an impression of stupidity and a demand for love. The time in between a blank piece of paper for a solitary self and the finished inscription to be offered up to an Other. The time in between the knowing and learning, failing and forgetting of languages, the mysterious movements of a mouth, and the unpredictable reception of speech. Sometimes I wish I could un-speak English, to disavow myself of Empire's promise of power through articulation. I want to be stupid again.

I imagine the mouth as a sacrificial threshold. The sounds come out, exuberant and vital, like fire burning brightly, never the same in its flickering, hard to affix. Thoughts, something somewhere else behind, beneath, or beyond

the mouth, fuel the flames. They are sacred food for the fire. The words that take shape in their sensual reception by the Other are like heat or ash, the energetic and material effects of the burning. An ephemeral sense of liveliness, a lost remembrance. The leftovers from the sacrifice are open to divination. Meaning appears in its disappearance. The ritual exchange signifies the unknowable workings of language.

I look at all the books, dictionaries, and papers on my desk. I'm surrounded by words. I light a cigarette because it's something to do with my mouth. I'm speaking even when I'm not saying anything. My mouth always wants to feel something. There is hunger, passion, desire, and disgust. I suck, sip, blow, and breathe the tobacco smoke. It's enjoyable. I stick out my tongue and think of my father and my mother. I imagine myself as a pretty little mouth, a pitiable idiot, a fearsome creature. I fantasise licking, chewing, and swallowing the words, eating some and spitting others out. There's overwhelm in *the mystery of the speaking body*.⁸ Am I consumed by knowledge, or do I consume it? I choose to deface the mouth, a site of power, pleasure, and violence in speaking oneself into being. I stretch my mouth open as wide as I can and stick my fingers inside. I make myself gag. The saliva accumulates into drool, everything is moist and messy. I contort my mouth to make uncomfortably strained shapes, as if I'm devouring my face. I look ugly, of that I'm sure. I stutter, stammer, groan, and goon. It feels right, even if it's wrong.

⁸ Lacan 1998, 131



What Makes a Man?



XII. Still from *Seeking for Story*, 2024

Ali and John developed an intimacy that's difficult to name. The asymmetry of their positions and the incongruity of their worlds can only be grasped as an outline of imperial power. Having advanced in his language learning through letter writing, Ali is encouraged by John to compose a story. In the delicate and painful exchange that ensues, neither party emerges blameless nor unscathed. John must convince himself their relationship isn't based on betrayal or trickery. Ali employs techniques of deference and politesse to mask his desire and seduce the foreigner. In nightly sessions together, John reads through pages Ali has delivered, questioning and influencing the tale. He provides Ali with new words to learn and gifts him books for expanding his vocabulary - first the Bible, then *Great Expectations* and *The Pilgrim's Progress*. They converse in the dingy, dark, candlelit boiler room where Ali works and sleep. Theirs is a queer interlocution.¹

A naive part of me seeks a *love story* between them. A diasporic queer tragedy set in the most unexpected of times and places, World War II Iran. *Fantatising their intimacy reveals the shame and discomfort as much as the thrill and fascination I feel in my own desire for the conqueror.* There's a sodomite imaginary at play, in that the unlikely desire between two men, unequally labouring under the shadow of Empire's hegemony, intensifies most acutely around property.² In this case, words and their possession, but also the self as proper or improper to itself, subject vs. abject. Though there is no sexual act to be proven, the non-existence of their *rapport sexuel* persists.³

¹ Hemming diary entries dated 1944 in Nurafkan Archive

² Chitty 2021, 26-27

³ Lacan 2007, 154

I gaze at a photograph of Ali. He is dressed in all white, smiling coyly, clean-shaven, posing with a pencil and notepad. Behind him are barrack-like buildings. I recognise the dark, heavy brow from photos of my relatives. He has a typical Luri face, ears sticking out awkwardly. I find myself projecting a sense of femininity onto him. His hips are wide and curvy, his shape appears to me androgynous. I don't find him attractive, however much I will it. I'm afraid to know what John looks like, what lust his likeness might arouse in me. I'm confused by my conflicting fantasies of masculinity and the uncomfortable distinctions I'm making between Ali and John in their desiring.

My father shows me photographs of Mr. Zandi, his schoolteacher. He's very handsome. "He wrestled," my father says admiringly. The man stands out against the clouds of dust and raggedy children with his piercing eyes, neat moustache, broad shoulders, and fashionable dress. I trace his photograph onto installation views of the Lorestan bronze displays in the British Museum, layering the two spacetimes. My longing to belong feels imaginary. I want to be near it, him, them.

When I was a child my father would come home from work, strip naked, lie on the ground, and ask me to walk on his back. I'd make nervous excuses like "I don't want to hurt you" but now I know that I was just afraid of my desire for his body. He was muscular and hairy, he stank of sweat, cheap cologne, and cooking oil. In his youth, he had been a bodybuilder. He'd boast about his rebellious feats, sharp tongue, and passionate disdain for ignorance, cowardice, and untruth. I wish he would have touched me, but he never did.

The first time I met my father's family, they dressed me up in tribal drag for a playful photo shoot. I wore loose cropped pants and a work shirt, donning my grandfather's brown leather harness and gripping his Brno rifle. *Mountain peoples are fiercely independent*, they say. I performed tall and proud for the camera, pretending to be a man. It was all so camp. All day I fantasised stealing the harness and wearing it out to parties back in gay Europe. I wanted to re-imagine this broken male inheritance, to make it *fabulous*.

I don't want to be a bad man is a wish I've often stated without ever considering what I'm trying to say. Am I concerned about my moral reputation as a male subject, or am I afraid of failing at masculinity? To sense out the difference, I return to the figure of Luti. At the centre of his story lies a tension around what makes a man, where "good" and "bad" as much as "masculine" and "feminine" are unstable, mutable, and porous signifiers.

The Luti trace their legendary line to the medieval *futuwwat*, spiritual brotherhoods and anarchic underground clubs established after the Mongol invasions of the 13th century.⁴ Theirs is a performative tradition of "noble banditry" as Eric Hobsbawm terms it,⁵ one that embraces the chivalrous values of *javanmardi*, a pre-modern masculine ethos. Then as in now, the Luti are known to frequent the *zurkhaneh*, a private gymnasium and communal homosocial space, where they demonstrate sportsmanship, physical prowess, and confraternity.⁶ They are said to value courage and honour, while being

⁴ Bell 2015, 9

⁵ Hobsbawm 2001, 46-62

⁶ Chehabi 2019, 400-02

rumoured to have loose sexual mores – after all, they are *ahl-e-Lut*, the people of Lot.⁷ Over the course of Iran's modernisation project, the attitudes and idealisations of Luti masculinity, historically positioned at the carnal fringe of Persianate society, gradually came to be considered menacing, chaotic, unruly, and unbecoming of a man. The antinomies that Luti had previously enjoyed were now an irritating contradiction.

Indeed, the “manly” sense of Luti had, by the end of the 19th century, come to be negatively associated with what Stephanie Cronin designates *the dangerous classes*: the urban poor and disreputable.⁸ The Luti constantly evaded, cheated, and resisted the discourses of mastery that tried to reform them into citizen-subjects.⁹ As industrialisation progressed in Iran, Luti's sense shifted simultaneous to the criminalisation of the poor. It became increasingly unclear what distinguished Luti from the addict, cutthroat, mobster, or pimp. Though Luti upheld the rights of their neighbours and were committed to serve their communities, they readily used violence, theft, and intimidation. Though they organised and participated in religious rituals, they gleefully drank alcohol, played music, and gambled. Though they strived to embody manly virtues and hold the safety of women and children to account, they had a reputation for homosexual deviancy and pederasty. Though they idealised an anarchic notion of a masterless society, their *realpolitik* could be bought and sold by various patriotic, nationalistic, and reactionary projects.¹⁰ Depending on where one stands and speaks in time, these entanglements either make complete sense or frustrate it completely.

⁷ Floor 1981, 86-87

⁸ Cronin 2021, 106-107

⁹ Cronin 2019, 94

¹⁰ Martin 2013, 213

Vanessa Martin has noted how during this modern shift towards moral ambiguity, the Luti developed performative modes of over-identification with *hamasi*, the storytelling culture of epic narrative. This permitted the subject to imagine nobility and fame when confronted with social and political hardship, so that "when oppression [became] intolerable, any cutpurse or footpad could become Kaveh the Blacksmith or Rostam."¹¹ Ideals of selfhood re-narrated Luti masculinity through the literary figure of the *pahlevan* (hero or champion), storying the subject via references drawn from an entire oral folk tradition of Iranian myth and Shi'a Islamic tragedy.

The interface between masculinity and performance is not a coincidence.

Alongside the emerging sense of Luti as ruffian or rowdy, they were also considered part of the "entertainment class," a government-regulated trade in the late Qajar and early Pahlavi periods.¹² The Luti formed itinerant troupes composed of different skills and talents. Though based in cities, Luti travelled the countryside, visiting villages to perform and recruit new members, accompanied by musicians and trained animals such as dancing monkeys or bears. At the royal court and in the private houses of notables and merchants, Luti were hired to entertain for weddings, receptions, and other celebrations. As a kind of jester, the Luti played with improvised forms of dramatized truth-telling, alluding to local situations and familiar personalities through farce, satire, mimicry, and wit, replete with song and dance.¹³

¹¹ Martin 2018, 126

¹² Floor 2005, 37-40

¹³ Floor 2005, 46-48

I gaze at a 19th century miniature painting depicting *A Luti with his monkey*. I'm obsessed with his appearance: Luti wears a tight petticoat with epaulettes, layered robes of chintz and suzani as if a woman's dress. A dagger is nestled snugly in a floral sash, a drum slung behind his back, a delicate rod in one hand (is it a faggot?) and a thin leash in the other, a cute monkey trailing behind. He dons a Phrygian cap and dainty, pointed shoes.

The image reminds me of other, more well-known paintings from the same era showing beautiful women providing palace amusements. There are dancing girls, gymnastic tumblers, elegant musicians, and reclining odalisques. Moon-faced and almond-eyed, their bodies are voluptuous, their gestures seductively counterpoised. Warm and rich shades of carnelian, indigo, and gold captivate the eye. Coquettish glances, adornments of pearl and ribbon, sheer veils, and henna-painted palms suggest lust and luxury. Their tits are usually out. Why does Luti resemble these female entertainers? Perhaps Luti isn't a man? Perhaps the dancers aren't women?

These musing are not only my present-day queer whimsy, but they were also serious, anxiety-inducing questions that Iranians were asking of their tastes as they encountered colonial modernity. Afsaneh Najmabadi has analysed how the traditional aesthetics that constituted male and female corporeality were the cause of acute tensions in *fin-de-siècle* Iran. Confusion and shame developed around the apparent blurriness between the sexes. Though European judgements and misunderstandings of native phenomena were a contributing

factor, an internal interrogation was taking place around what the *modern* Iranian subject was supposed to find desirable.¹⁴

The painterly introduction of bare-breasted women in Qajar portraits appears to confirm the Orientalist trope of amorous excess and harem decadence. At the very least it must have been an imitation of European eroticism. Najmabadi argues against this interpretation, suggesting that the sudden display of the breast in painting was a discursive device to emphasise that, in fact, *this is a woman*, "another way of making unambiguous...the figure of desire."¹⁵

The Iranian eye/I was being confronted with a revision of its imaginary. As more breasts appeared, the former androgynous figure of the *ghulam* or *amrad* disappeared. These "beardless beauties," young boys edging pubescence, were long the object of male fantasy in poetry and art. They were considered a third sex, neither male nor female, rather, a transitory gender.¹⁶

A consequence of the *amrad*'s obsolescence was a rupture within the cultural practices that signified a subject's proper desire. Gazing was how beauty could be encountered and appreciated, as well as resisted and disciplined. The one who received the subject's gaze was considered a witness to beauty in its divine form.¹⁷ By changing how the witness signifies its desire and dispelling any gender ambiguity through overexposure of the body's signs, these new paintings had a profane intention: to fixate the gaze on Woman - no longer God - as the *object cause of desire* and thus, transform desiring beings into sexual subjects.

¹⁴ Najmabadi 2005, 38

¹⁵ Najmabadi 2005, 41

¹⁶ Najmabadi 2005, 15

¹⁷ Najmabadi 2005, 17

The objectification of the performer's body is simultaneous to the formalisation of Luti as a category of labour, marking its modern emergence as a visible people. Whether member of the entertainment class or affiliated with urban bandits, Luti's appearance was ambiguous, its allegiances opaque, its practices libidinal, its productivity an accursed share.¹⁸ Amused and offended, exoticized and eroticised, the discourses that speak Luti into being labour desire upon the flesh. Luti must be body, only and always body, and as such, is corrupt and corrupting, which is to say, Luti speaks the pleasures and pains of human mortality.

I called my mother to recount the tales of Luti and the dancing women, plunging her into nostalgia. She remembered the joyous celebrations of her childhood, distinctly recalling what every woman wore. She spoke enthusiastically about a distant cousin dressed in pistachio-coloured satin, her face powdery white with bold, burnt orange lipstick. "What an elegant woman. I wish you could have been there to see," she said. For her own wedding, my mother received a mirror and candelabra set decorated with green enamel and finely painted, golden flowers. Traditionally, the bride should solemnly gaze into the mirror while its reflection, multiplied by candlelight, fills her eyes with a visionary beauty that spills out onto the world. In every photograph of her enacting this ritual, my mother's eyes are closed.

¹⁸ Bataille 2007, 37-38

I'm jealous of her. My mother's stories warm my heart, but something cruel in me is resentful. She's taken something away, despite her attempts to pass it on. The transmission has fallen short and gotten stuck. A part is irretrievably lost. Her memories aren't enough. *I want more*. I remind myself that a whole world has disappeared and it's not her fault. *Nevertheless, her past has become my primal scene of exclusion.*

Again, I fantasise theft. This time I steal my mother's bridal mirror. When I gaze into it, however, I don't meet beauty. Instead, I encounter an unsettling surface. There's a price to pay for coveting her treasure – a crisis of self-imagination. I keep my eyes open, ready to witness lack. I know I must separate from the (m)Other, that I have become over-entangled with her desire. And yet, I yearn for union with what she signifies: a beautiful elsewhere, the sublime of self-dissolution. Am I rehearsing my own death?¹⁹

If I'm going to die, then I might as well make myself pretty. I prepare the *haft-qalam*, a cosmetic palette of seven pens: zinc for lightening the skin, woad to draw in the eyebrows and moustache, antimony for lining the eyes, rust for rouging the cheeks, gold for decorating the forehead, henna to dye the hands and feet, soot to pin on a beauty mark.²⁰ To ornament the flesh is to write the self. My face bears the mark of a materiality that exceeds me. In making myself up, the mask gives *it* away: how the earth defaces man, how the real confounds the subject. The figure I witness in the mirror is fated to be mis-recognised in the language of imperial desire. *Mama's boy, father's*

¹⁹ Bersani 1986, 44

²⁰ Soudavar Farmanfarmaian 2000, 286

son, a brown faggot, a genderbending Luti, a diasporic queerness that isn't universal, a mask that unmask masculinity as masquerade. Whatever I am becoming, it's not what "I" thinks. The horror of recognition gives way to joy in loss.



Too Much



XIII. Still from *Seeking for Story*, 2024

As Ali's story kept on storying, the words expanded beyond John's capacity to revise and record. He was no longer controlling the lessons. Ali wasn't just practicing his English. Something more urgent and unknowable was going on. John was at a loss, inept and impotent. The writing surged beyond the apportioned time of their togetherness. Its effervescent articulation bore creative and destructive powers, overwhelming both writer and reader. *It was a too-muchness that could no longer properly be said to be enjoyable.*

The war ended and Ali was still writing *Irradiant*. The words were a flood, a storm, an uprising, an appeal. Ali wrote letters to John back in England. His story was a transmission from his grandfather and the women in his village, tales unknown to anyone else, he boasted.¹ He likened his story to "a piece of excellence land on one of the last places of the metropolis." The story was "a beautiful ground in the middle of some bad grounds." It was masterless, for "the master has fallen sick with a dangerous fever." It was a "secret mine of gold," out of reach, though "some engineers are smelling it."²

The logorrhoea took its toll. Ali was plagued by unemployment, illness, winter, and demons, "surrounding and seeing destruction from everywhere."³ Boils broke out on his flesh; feverish visions overtook him. At night, strange creatures appeared from the dark, plunging him into a state "so wondrous that the people around me wondered."⁴ Years passed until he finished his story - or, until the story finished him. Its exhaustive words were

¹ Mirdrekvandi letter to Hemming dated May 8, 1947 in Nurafkan Archive

² Mirdrekvandi letter to Hemming n.d. in Nurafkan Archive

³ Mirdrekvandi letter to Hemming dated July 16, 1949 in Nurafkan Archive

⁴ Mirdrekvandi letter to Hemming dated February 26, 1947 in Nurafkan Archive

delivered to the British Consulate in Ahwaz and posted to England. They were enough to stuff seven canvas diplomatic bags.

I grew up intimidated by my father's books. The collected works of Marx and Lenin, samizdat editions by the Iranian left - Bijan Jazani, Jalal Al-e-Ahmad, Ali Shariati - and multiple volumes of poetry by Ahmad Shamlou, Sohrab Sepehri, and Mehdi Akhavan-Sales decorated his shelves. When I was eight or nine years old, I pulled out a copy of Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra* from his library and flipped by chance to the page where the line "God is dead" appeared.⁵ Enraged and offended, I marched up bravely to my father and told him this was an evil book, and he wasn't allowed to have it. As I tore it up in vengeful defiance, he laughed.

Any chance he'd get, my father would go off monologuing pseudo-Marxist romanticisms. His one-liners against capitalism were constantly denouncing *them*. I'd like to believe I've developed a more nuanced discourse, but I'm not so sure. I think of my closest friends, their idealism and activism, all those late night, druggy chats posturing radicality. Despite the pretence of transgression, I was secretly seeking out the familiar, stagnant comfort of a father's inarguable declamation.

Recently, I asked my father about his books. He admitted he hadn't read most of them except, of course, the poetry. I noticed how many of the books had loose, handwritten sheets of paper folded and stuck between their pages. My father's Persian hand, dense and calligraphic, was indecipherable to my eyes.

⁵ Nietzsche 2005, 11

These were letters and poems he had written to my mother. He had never given them to her. It was his own secret writing. He often confided to me how he wished he'd had the time and energy to write more. "I would tell my story," he pined, exhausted from work. I couldn't help feeling that he was hoping I would write it.

I had read an article by a scholar who had come a decade before me. She was most probably the first Iranian to have worked on Ali's archive since it was deposited in the Bodleian Libraries. A passing comment in her essay intrigued me: "[In 2013] I finished a book, *Yeki Nabud (One There Wasn't)*, which is inspired by the *Nurafkan* archive. The title, *Yeki Nabud*, reflects my preoccupation with 'wheres' and 'nowheres,' absences and presences, visibility and invisibility."⁶ I couldn't find any indication her story existed, so I wrote the scholar and asked directly. She replied: *Yeki Nabud* was finished, but she had decided against publishing it. The story didn't feel right, too clever, too unwieldy in its research. It was too academic, "too much head-knowledge."

Since then, she had written another story, *The Strangest Tale of Many and Innocence*. This one came "from the stomach." It was an intimate story, only shared with close friends. It had to be written, if only to redeem her first attempt, but the scholar still couldn't shake off the feeling that the reader would lack proper information. Or rather, it never felt truly comfortable to let go of the need to inform. *If the other story was too much, then perhaps this tale was not enough.* People told her it read like a dream. She couldn't

⁶ Motamedi-Fraser 2013

quite tell if this was meant as a compliment or a critique. When I wrote back to say I was planning to meet Ali soon, she responded jokingly, "don't catch archive fever!"

At the Bodleian, the librarians sat me next to a wall of dictionaries in the Persian, Arabic, and Hebrew language reference section. There were numerous manuscript listings and books on lexicography. A title caught my eye: *How to Read Persian Hand*. It was a scholar's guide to *nastaliq* and *shekasteh*, otherwise known as "broken script." A grey cardboard box containing thirteen notebooks lay in front of me. On the inside cover of the first one was the lines: "Novel/For Correction/and devision/Romances. New words. Dear my best philanthropic lieutenant Hemming, devise my letter please."⁷ On the backside there was the English alphabet, each letter written carefully in cursive. It was Ali's hand.

My body felt slow and sluggish. Feeling tired and overwhelmed, I was content to just sit there and touch the words. The servant's handwriting appeared blueish purple in faded pencil, like a bruise on the page's thin skin. I was disturbed by the jarring ink marks of the master's corrections scrawled all over the manuscript. Words had been crossed out, sentences underlined, revisions in bold, black pen. While the author's trace was ephemeral, the editorial inscription will have been permanent. In this silent, still, deadening space, I rocked back and forth to awaken, enliven, and focus. It was challenging to read the handwriting. I felt the urge to recite it, so I

⁷ Irradiant Vol. 1 in Nurafkan Archive

covered my ears to hear my faintly whispered mouthing better. This way the mumbling could resound in my head without disturbing others.

Lurking between the lines of his story, I read the madness of Empire arriving to Iran. Words and worlds collided, merged, mutated, and collapsed. *Div* rode aeroplanes, *pahlevan* were chased by military police, *pari* were asked to show their IDs. The story was an epic, in that epic is "the time of the Other," a mode through which a people come to know what they will have become through an encounter with alterity.⁸ *The dangerous-foreigner arrives to disrupt the city's order; the hero-native wanders abroad to be transformed amongst strangers; the hated-conqueror becomes a most beloved ruler.* It was a romance, in that romance is less a plot or a style and more a "structure of desire" that transacts difficult negotiations with history.⁹ Despite these formulations of genre, I couldn't help but think that the story was, ultimately, boring. A boy wrote it, after all. *Irradiant kills so and so, so and so tries to kill Irradiant.* I let go of the pressure to read and understand. I decided to enjoy the strange movement of my mumbling and swaying. *It occurred to me that perhaps the story as such wasn't important. Don't look for content. Ignore the plot. There's nothing to understand. There's nothing to discover. It's not about that.*

"The archive and the repertoire work in tandem," writes Diana Taylor,¹⁰ whose work on post-Conquest performance in the Americas informs my story. Embodiment exceeds the archive's ability to capture it and yet, the body is

⁸ Meskoob 2021, 29

⁹ Heng 2003, 3

¹⁰ Taylor 2003, 21

mediated by historical scripts. In the context of colonial power, the role of the archive - as writing, documentation, and representation - has traditionally superseded the repertoire, "all those acts thought of as ephemeral, non-reproducible knowledge" such as memory, orality, and gesture.¹¹ Though history would like to declare the Conquest as *fait accompli*, mystery would have it otherwise. On the one hand, the asymmetrical displacement of European, Indigenous, and Black peoples in the settler colony destroyed each of these respective worlds as discrete experiences.¹² On the other hand, as Sylvia Wynter has argued, an unintentional process of transculturation was initiated by coloniality. As a result, foreigner and native, invader and indigene, suppression and resistance, historical and mythic have become inextricably bound up in a collective project of *creating a world*.¹³

Despite practice, the overwhelm of the archive is irrefutable. The manuscript of *Irradiant* alone tallies 600,000 words, alongside the extent of John's papers and correspondences spanning forty years. The surplus is a distraction. Its documents frequently propel me into a manic spiral of academic obsession: modern Iranian history, popular Persianate literature, Zoroastrianism and its scholarship, all these subjects I should know, want to know, need to know *in order to understand*. My initial excitement to learn yielded to an insecure panic around my discursive lack. *Jouissance* feeds off the frustration in not being able to say it all. What was once enjoyable had deformed into a burden. The scholar had also reflected on the archive's excess and proliferation, suggesting that perhaps "these materials do not

¹¹ Taylor 2003, 20

¹² Lowe 2015

¹³ White 2010, 135-37

want to tell; or at least, that they are not for telling about; and certainly, that they will not be told."¹⁴ *Knowledge-about* was getting in the way, obscuring the bodily signs of an *other knowledge*, a form of knowing that's not about saying, rather, of sensing and showing.

The scholar's distinction between head-knowledge and stomach-knowledge points to a tension between *failure to enjoy* and *enjoyment in failure*. *The curse of the archive is the gift of the repertoire*. I wrote her a letter to update on my progress. Unexpectedly in return, she sent me her *Strangest Tale*, as if acknowledging our growing intimacy through story. *It is generous to be accepting my giving*. I read a scene she's confabulated in the boiler room-turned-theatre where our storytellers sit side by side exchanging personal assessments. Gestures aren't lost to the scholar's imagination, either. Many offers Innocence cherries and cigarettes; he refuses. *Is it because my hands are dirty?* asks Many, offended. *You misconstrue me*, pleads Innocence, embarrassed. She's portrayed the two as if they were in an amorous spat. Many accuses Innocence of not refusing stories, however. "You are *Mattal-gard. Mattal*. It means story. And *gard*. It means seeking. So *Mattal-gard* means story-seeking. It is not a Persian word. It is Lorestanian-language word. It is our own savagery language."¹⁵

The scholar invites me to her home. I've found the perfect gift to commemorate our encounter: a toy sparrow, referencing *30sparrows*, the avian narrator of her *Strangest Tale*. *30sparrows* itself alludes to the legend of Simorgh, a magical phoenix whose name translates into "thirty-birds." Simorgh appears

¹⁴ Motamedi-Fraser 2012, 94

¹⁵ Motamedi-Fraser n.d., 19-21

throughout Iranian mythology, with its best-known incarnation in Farid ud-Din Attar's *The Conference of the Birds*. Here, a group of birds embark on a journey to seek out the Simorgh. After traveling through seven valleys and encountering a variety of hardships, risks, and challenges, the group finally arrives at the Simorgh's abode to find the creature absent. As only thirty birds remain, the rest having perished or abandoned their search, the birds realise that they themselves are, in fact, the Simorgh. Though this truth has always existed between them, the journey had been necessary for the birds to unmask the divine-within. The story is a parable for the paths of the imagination, the mysterious workings of wisdom, and the ceaselessness of storying the subject.

The gifts never seem to end. The scholar shows me a box in her study where she has stored research materials from her stint in the archive. We open the box, digging our hands into the collection and rifling through its pages. We take turns pulling out documents, each emerging with *oohs* and *ahs*. Our hands dance together like a children's game. We sing a nursery rhyme to accompany our play, *Attal Mattal Tootoleh*, the Persian equivalent of *Eeny-Meeny-Miny-Moe*. Its opening lines are said to be nonsense, but we've both learned that 'Mattal' means story in Ali's language.

There are articles on post-war Iranian politics, declassified MI6 files from the 1953 coup d'état, a study on bird migration patterns in southwestern Iran, a map of downtown Tehran, a collection of fables from Lorestan, a copy of John Hemming's essays on spirituality, and many more moments of wonder, intrigue, and association. It doesn't matter what's in the box; what matters is that we're together because of it, despite it, without knowing it. [How](#)

does the box open us? "Unlearning with companions,"¹⁶ as Azoulay describes it, a method that "consists in repeating and reactivating what others have already said, established, performed, or written at different conjunctures before us."¹⁷ We are *rehearsing* together. We laugh, joke, ponder, and converse. Though the archive fascinates and perplexes, we recognise how history falls short in its capacity to account for intimacy. We insist on the repertoire, the ways in which storying is always taking place between words and bodies, leaving the subject behind as a fragile trace.

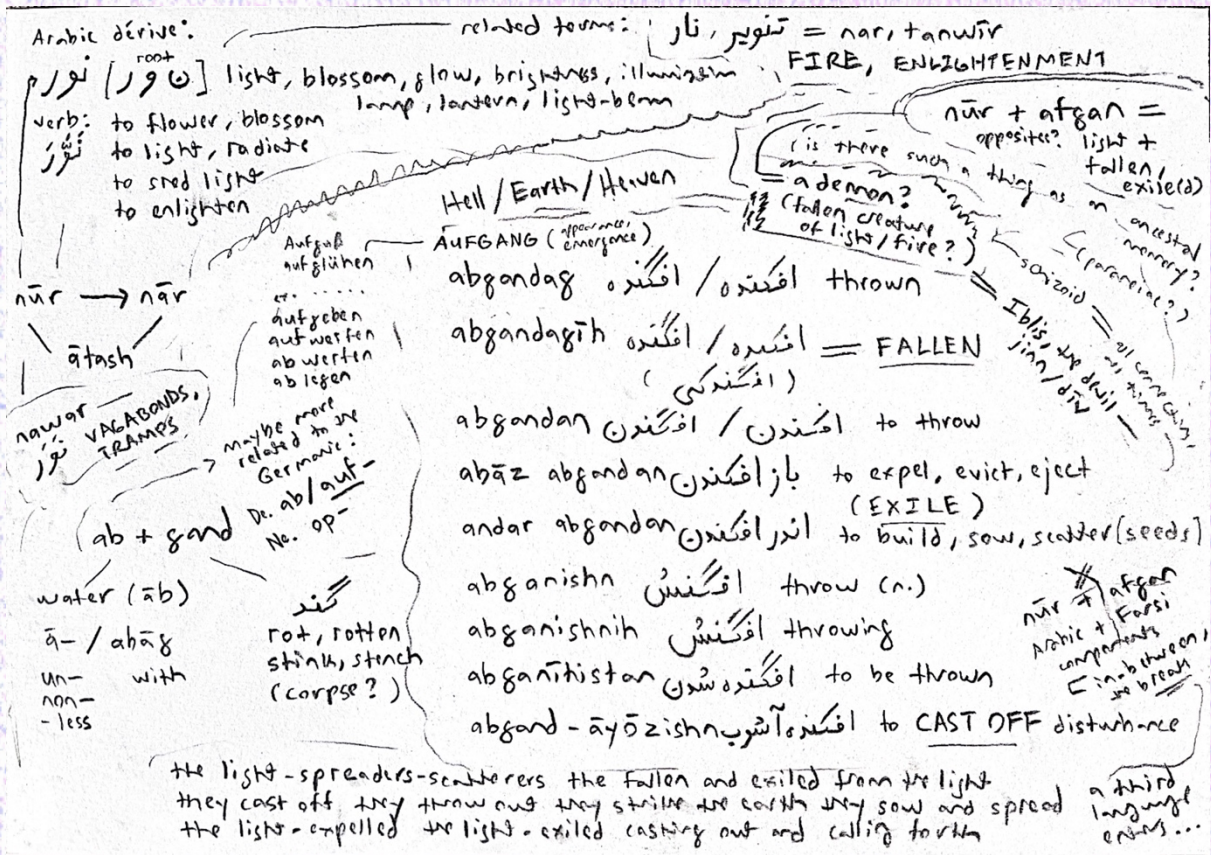
Back in the archive, I'm acting out the consequences of becoming possessed by words. I, too, am *Mattalgard*. Immersed in the thickness of an Other's discourse, not knowing *how* to make of it, I write letters to Ali. I tell him I'm obsessed with his glossary. I ask him if writing is a mirror. I confess how he mediates a parental scene. *I wonder about my father's joy in bemoaning his brokenness, do we share this, too?* The words aren't enough, or perhaps they're obscuring something, so instead I look for Ali's gestures around and within me, re-reading bodily signals held within Empire's stasis. I copy his handwriting; I repeat his wordlists. I trace his drawings of demons, hags, heroes, and dragons. I get my hands dirty; I eat cherries and smoke cigarettes. I mimic his labours along the railroad, sweeping, carrying, journeying. I want to body the subject into history. I'm working against the redemptive wish to represent and making space for the fantasy that can hold there-then and here-now together. In the repertoire, the past is always incomplete, and practice never disappears.

¹⁶ Azoulay 2019, 15

¹⁷ Azoulay 2019, 44



Hellishes-on-Earth



XIV. Documentation of translation landscape, 2023

Though now in possession of Ali's story, the story shall possess John as an unbearable demand. In ever more exasperated letters, Ali does not tire of making clear what's at stake: *Irradiant* must be published, for he needs the money desperately. Ali's been counting on it – this was a cunning wager all along.¹ Publishers, however, are unwilling to take on *Irradiant*. It's far too long and convoluted and even if it were to be published, the post-war global paper shortage wouldn't allow for a decent print run.

Frustrated and helpless, John reaches out to Victor Gollancz with Ali's materials. The London-based publisher sees a niche opportunity hiding in plain sight. At some point in the overwhelm of composing *Irradiant*, Ali had fortuitously taken a break to draft a novella titled *The British and American Officers' Book*. The much shorter fable portrays a gaggle of British and American officers lost in the Milky Way after a devastating nuclear world war. They are searching for Heaven. Their faithful Persian servant Gunga Din trails behind, carrying all their belongings on his back and lighting their cigarettes for them. He hardly ever speaks a word. Once they've arrived at the Gates of Heaven, the Judge denies the officers entry, noting their many sins during the war. Enraged and offended, the officers are unwilling to accept the finality of his judgement. Instead, they declare war on Heaven, bombarding Paradise daily for years. God eventually succumbs to their stubborn campaign, half-heartedly allowing the British and American nuisance into Heaven. As for Gunga Din, the story reveals him to be irredeemable. Despite the officers' intercessions, the Judge announces that "his great and wicked desire"² for the war to have continued so that he would remain employed

¹ Mirdrekvandi letter to Hemming dated May 8, 1947 in Nurafkan Archive

² Mirdrekvandi 1965, 115

by the British and Americans is unforgivable. Gunga Din's desire for being-conquered is his final act of self-sacrifice, dooming him to Hell where he shall suffer an inhuman eternity of burning.

Gollancz rejigs the story with a catchier title and asks John to contextualise it with a heartfelt, personal introduction. *No Heaven For Gunga Din* is printed in 1965 and achieves immediate commercial success. It's marketed as a "delightful" linguistic aberration, a "heavenly mix of innocence and wisdom," catering to the imperial sensibility of patronising amusement at the "unsophisticated" savage who "has no right to be literate," as phrased by the Oxford Orientalist and infamous British spy R.C. Zaehner in his pedantic preface to the first edition.³

Overnight, Ali becomes a millionaire. His prayers have finally been answered. But he is nowhere to be found, having long ceased correspondence. In his final letters from 1949, Ali embraces defeat with his characteristic penchant for drama. Through an epistolary performance of self-condemnation, Ali deploys the language of heresy to grapple with the consequences of failure, the injustice of the world, and his disappointment in the Other. He invokes an image of his own wretchedness that must now reckon with the prophets, angels, demons, and God. Addressing himself directly to the divine, Ali vows to become a "forceful heathen" by the year 1950. He shall then leave and forget all the "earthly friends" while embarking on a sacred journey to search for his Creator, "waiting to be worthy for speaking."⁴

³ Mirdrekvandi 1965, 7

⁴ Mirdrekvandi Praise Plan dated January 1, 1949 in Nurafkan Archive

Only rumours remain. It is said that Ali lived an outcast, beggar existence in the towns and villages of Lorestan. He dwelled in ruined shrines and wrote impromptu stories in return for charity. Legend goes that he would read out loud what he had written, only to burn it right after. One time, someone asked him why he didn't just give the story away if he didn't want it. Ali replied, mysteriously: "You heard it didn't you? You have it."⁵ By the time news of the manhunt for *No Heaven's* improbable author spread throughout the Iranian press, those who purportedly knew Ali reported he had died a year before his big break.

From the perspective of history, Ali and John are losers. The story has defeated them. Any expectation of who's the enemy or the victim, who speaks the truth or lies, all is laid waste by the cruel indifference of time and the capricious vagaries of fortune. They ruin each other, unsurprising given that the ruinous surrounds them. It's what has brought them together in the first place. John fails to redeem himself by delivering *Irradiant* to the world. He bequeaths the story to the Bodleian Libraries upon his death. Ali fails to claim his brief tenure at fame. He condemns himself to Hell on Earth. Between them, phantoms of misrecognition fracture the historical record. From the position of mystery, what persists is how they enjoy speaking their mutual ruination. The question of fate disturbs the tragedy of their discourse, not some notion of blind predetermination but the courage of choice to live on in a vanquished state, to survive being-defeated. *Amor fati*.

⁵ Nematpour 2013

The psychoanalyst has been listening in her usual silence. The story of Gunga Din in Hell instigates a counter-transferential remark. "It's similar to the *Ardavirafnameh*," an association offered without further explanation. The analyst's discourse doesn't aim to interpret the story, rather, to disrupt its sense for words. The *Ardavirafnameh* is a medieval Zoroastrian *Divine Comedy* of sorts, an apocalyptic vision of Heaven and Hell written two centuries after the defeat of Sassanian Iran to the invading Muslim Arabs.⁶ The story discloses an emergent symptomatology of post-Conquest subjectivity, situated as a tension between heresy and orthodoxy. I choose to ignore the misplaced temptations of historicity and focus instead on a single, mysterious Persian word, *duzakhian*. It literally translates into 'Hellishes,' a name for the inhabitants of Hell. In the *Ardavirafnameh*, the Hellishes are beings who've been condemned for their wicked desiring. Mostly, they are unruly women or unmanly men. 'Hellishes' is also the word Ali utilises in his story, an English neologism that opaquely reveals a process of re-translation in the author's imaginary out from the Persian.

I spend a few days reading a Middle Persian dictionary, studying the words of a dead language. Is it the unconscious of a living speech? The words for border cluster around the words for intercourse and touch. I turn the page and the same sounds shift ever so slightly to form a cluster of new words signifying men, snakes, and death. While perusing the ancient idiom, I listen to an audiobook rendition of the *Ardavirafnameh*. The orator's voice reminds me of my father's recitations. As he reads through the vices of the Hellishes, he stumbles across the arcane word *kunmarz*. It means 'sodomite' in Middle

⁶ Haug 1872

Persian. The voice can't bring himself to say, let alone explain the word to a modern listener. Suddenly, I feel shame. In the orator's discomfort all I hear is my father's judgement. I don't feel ashamed *for* my sexuality; I sense shame *within* my desire. It occurs to me that what has been moving me towards Ali's story is this strange intimacy with damnation.

'Duzakhian' is the word chosen to render Fanon's *damnées* in the Persian translation of *The Wretched of the Earth* from 1969.⁷ The word's theological esotericism was actively recouped to give name to a modern decolonial urgency. The medieval *Ardavirafnameh* was written from the sole perspective of orthodox clergy. Its sinful Hellishes are doomed to silence and stasis. If in the heresy of translation 'duzakhian' comes to re-signify damnation as both worldly status and a contemporary struggle for redemption against Empire, then its Hellishes-on-Earth may yet lend voice to the postcolonial lack of the Other.⁸ It's in this heretical spirit that Ali closes his novella. Haunted by disturbing dreams after Gunga Din's brutal sentencing, the British and American officers decide to pay him a visit in Hell. The servant, whose presence in the story had mostly been mute, suddenly emerges with very much to say. His detailed report on a typical day amongst the Hellishes is just the beginning; in fact, there is so much to tell that it can't all be written.⁹ Ali stories the subject by withholding narrative gratification. By giving his own story the cut, he reclaims the knowledge of one who says, "I don't know."

⁷ Sadeghi-Boroujerdi 2020, 4

⁸ Thakur 2020, xvii

⁹ Mirdrekvandi 1965, 125

The same year as Fanon's Persian translation, Simin Daneshvar published her modern masterpiece *Savushun*. The story is set in Allied-occupied Shiraz during World War II. From the position of its female protagonist Zari, a wife and mother, Daneshvar describes how war breaks worlds, ruptures identities, and deforms traditions. On one of her regular charity visits to the local sanatorium, Zari encounters Ali, her favourite. Ali spends his days reading an *Essential English III* textbook and refuses to speak a word of Persian, preferring a made-up language instead. It's an uncanny fictionalisation. The confabulated Ali shocks Zari by suddenly, and unexpectedly declaiming in Persian: "A pincer's movement equals typhus plus famine plus cheating on examination. Oh, mad men [*divaneh-ha*] of the world, unite!"¹⁰ There is a metonymy of the disaster at work in Ali's revolutionary utterance. Invasion, disease, and misery converge upon study. A grave institutional accusation nullifies the subject's prospect to have his knowledge formally recognised. This ultimate injustice demands a familiar call for revolution, in which *the workers* and *the mad men* are now indistinguishable by virtue of having been denied *the status of knowledge*.

'The mad' are much-more and not-only. The word knows: though the Persian *divaneh* commonly signifies 'mad/crazy,' it contains the word *div*, a mythological figure that is at once demon, fiend, queer being, technical master, and monstrous creature.¹¹ 'Mad' in this case may very well be *d(a)emonic*. It's the *div* who, in the days of the first men, revolt against the king. Though their sedition is defeated, they survive by sharing their artful *savoir-faire* with humanity: "they taught the king how to

¹⁰ Daneshvar 2017, 114

¹¹ Omidshahar 2011

write...showing him how the letters are formed and pronounced...and his heart glowed like the sun with this knowledge."¹² The letter appears to empower the master; what if it secretly holds a spell against mastery?

It's impossible to *prove* the imaginary conversation I've drawn up between Ali and his writerly contemporaries. Yet, its words persist beyond its various speakers. Hellish-speech is not a fantasy of the subaltern finally speaking once and for all. It is a reworking of language to disrupt its reception by denying comprehension and withdrawing amusement. Just because there is something-to-say doesn't mean it wants to or can be said. That *there is a saying*, that *it is being-said*, this is all that matters. The so-called master will never understand.¹³

Thick amidst the search for Ali, R.C. Zaehner went to Tehran in 1965 to deliver his lecture "Zoroastrian Survivals in Iranian Folklore" at the British Institute of Persian Studies. He had made an academic name for himself a decade prior with his dubious postulation of a 'Zurvanite heresy' in late Sassanian religion.¹⁴ Now, he was to prove that *Irradiant* held the clue to the perennial existence of a heretical, pre-Islamic, demon-worshipping cult in Lorestan. Zaehner's delirious (mis)reading of the story aimed to decode the secret sect's heathen doctrines. In an astonishing conclusion, he admits how at a crucial point in the manuscript where it seemed the reader would surely be initiated into Ali's mystery, there is a "maddening lacuna" - *forty-two pages left blank* with the following author's

¹² Ferdowsi 2016, 5

¹³ Vafa 2022, 8

¹⁴ Zaehner 1955

note: "It is very difficult to write..."¹⁵ Zaehner's Orientalist disappointment exposes how the master's *lack of grasp* implicitly depends on the servant's *grasp of lack*.¹⁶

I linger on the fantasy of Ali in the aftermath of the letter, speechless like a dervish in a tree or a Luti in the ruins. Though he has sacrificed himself to an Other's literature, he evades all attempts to master his story. There's heretical knowledge to be had here. The word 'heresy' means "to take for oneself" or "to choose," a subjective act that amounts to evil from the perspective of medieval theologians.¹⁷ The poor, the mad, the useless, the desiring, and the damned – in sum, Hellishes-on-Earth – embody configurations of Self and Other that are crucially entangled with the Jester's original heresy of "the pursuit of human knowledge."¹⁸ Sylvia Wynter traces how the rise of literary vernaculars and popular folkloric forms, the performance of alterity by amusing "anti-types" such as the rogue, clown, or fool, and the aesthetic-epistemic reclaiming of laughter, incomprehension, and stupidity served to expose the irreparable deformations of human life in late European feudalism.¹⁹ The Jester's role is dynamic and contingent; the new heresies it mythopoetically enacts eventually settle to institute new orthodoxies.²⁰ The flourishing of the Renaissance begat the ruinousness of Empire. Thus, every age requires its Jesters. Its trans-historicity signifies a performance of *un-writing* the Other's knowledge. In re-enacting the heretical position, the subject may be storied again.

¹⁵ Zaehner 1965, 96

¹⁶ Lacan 2007, 22

¹⁷ Kolakowski 2004, 263

¹⁸ Wynter 1984, 21

¹⁹ Wynter 1984, 31

²⁰ Kolakowski 2004, 258

I choose to follow Ali into heresy. My re-enactment invokes a mythical lineage bound to the hazy origins of performance in ancient ritual. Neolithic pottery from Lorestan depicts masked dancers appearing as birds, lions, and other half-human creatures, possibly in ecstatic acts of worshipping the sun god Mithra.²¹ I put on a mask to dance the creature dance. The wandering minstrels of ancient Parthia sang now-forgotten lyrics of heroic romance and mournful lament.²² I yearn and grieve, too, embodying a repertoire of speechlessness full of language. Celebrants of the cult of Anahita, goddess of waters, conducted fertility and funerary rites by gathering "bundle[s] of young budding twigs tied with ribbon."²³ I commemorate life and death by offering faggots and flowers. My dance revels in the beauty and horror of bodies. Its fantasy of an ahistorical heathenism will surely condemn me to Hell. *So what* if I am damned?

²¹ Janati-Atai 1954, 97

²² Boyce 1957

²³ Floor 2005, 16



Unfinished



**XV. CamScan documentation of *Irradiant* notebook
with invisible ink and refracted light, 2023**

Ali left John detailed *commandments* for how he wished his story to be published:

"Will you put my picture in the first page of Irradiant's story? O, thank you. Will you put many demons pictures into the story? All right, thanks. Will you put a beautiful British boy's picture into the story instead of Irradiant's picture? And will you put a British beautiful girl's picture into the story instead of Twinkling-Starlet's picture? O.K. thanks."¹

If John couldn't publish *Irradiant*, then maybe I can try. The notebook I have brought with me into the library is filled with words, scribbles, doodles, tracings, and hand-drawn copies of archival images and documents. What if I sacrifice this object to his story, giving it over to be transformed by Ali's instructions? To begin, I invert his photograph onto a sheet of carbon copy paper. I transpose this negative onto the first page of my notebook. Ali's after-image is inscribed into ozokerite. This is not only the paper's waxy base, but also one of the materials conceded to the Anglo-Persian Oil Company in 1901 for perpetual extraction. Ali appears faintly outlined and blackened. The endless burning amongst the Hellishes has stained him the colour of the darkest night.

I remember how Ali loved to smoke cigarettes, a pleasure we both share. Cigarette manufacturers like John Player sold their product during World War II with collectible cards and silks. I hunt down on eBay a set of vintage cards depicting a beautiful English boy and girl, a pair of silks with the

¹ Mirdrekvandi letter to Hemming dated May 8, 1947 in Nurafkan Archive

British and American flags, and – in a fanciful deviation from Ali's requirements I can't resist – a card with the Lion and Sun standard titled *Persian Lines of Communication*. These all go into the notebook's pages.

Of course, there must be images of demons. The archive offers many, what seem to be John's own tracings copied over from an illustrated lithographic edition of a popular modern romance, the *Falaknaznameh*. A slip of paper stuck into the book notes it as one of Ali's few private possessions. I find out the *Falaknaznameh* was used in the nomadic schools during the 1930s to teach reading in Persian.² Its amorous and entertaining content made it suitable for instruction, alongside its many illustrations of heroes, lovers, monsters, and demons that surely captivated pupils' imaginations. These figures, too, I carefully re-draw into my notebook.

I've been drawing Ali out of the archive and into my world. It's yet again another fantasy, in which all along I've been stealing his story from the Bodleian. I've smuggled, snuck out, and re-appropriated it with my own hands. I'm reminded of Ariella Aïsha Azoulay's film, *the world like a jewel in the hand* (2022), in which she refuses the violence of the imperial archives that name her Arab-Jewish lineage extinct. She develops a set of gestures that invite re-imagining and re-inhabiting the past in the present. These include writing over historical books, tracing images with pencil, cutting them out with scissors, and re-assembling these into compositional figurations that animate worldly simultaneity. Through the stubborn persistence of practice,

² Zolfagari 2019, 76

a joyous encounter with *a knowledge that is lacking* is enacted, something lost that nevertheless subsists in the body.

There's a sudden somatic urgency – I need to move. I sit with my notebook, realising it's no longer mine. The object before me has transformed into something precious, other, holy, even. I start to sway in my chair, I mumble a prayer in undertone. I don't know what I'm doing, but I let the unknown move me. Research has turned into ceremony, a practice for sustaining the overwhelm of story. I light a candle and strips of scented paper. My hands are grimy. As I open the notebook, my fingerprints leave their greasy marks on the surface of the page. Visible traces from an invisible dance of hands. Flipping through, I can no longer read the words I've gathered during my studies. They don't matter anyway. The words are within me, *I have them*, this I know. *Reading has become a performance of touching words and longing for worlds.* I'm staging an erasure; it's a celebration of disappearance.

In this gesture of transfer, his story merges with my story. The cultural and literary inscriptions that have subjected Ali enact an intervention within my own imaginary. What brings us together in-between is a fascination for the conqueror and an admission of defeat, or, better put, *a desire for surrender*. This isn't about passive submission to the Other, rather, of storying the subject through insistence on volatile contact with uncontrollable, external forces. The subject persists in its always-already becoming Other.

As every good storyteller knows, it's important to let the tale linger, spurring on desire in its inexhaustible trajectory. Ali grasped this when he

offered one last important instruction: "You can divide IRRADIANT STORY into about 100 short stories...at the end of every one you will put the word 'UNFINISHED'."³ My notebook ends with this word, too: *UNFINISHED*. The story remains open. Though in the variations I've charted it's taken on forms particular to mystery, there are more ways for history to be told that have yet to be articulated. The story, like the subject, lives on because of its incompleteness.

³ Mirdrekvandi letter to Hemming dated July 16, 1949

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