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NEW WRITING

Bijan

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Abstract

'Bijan' is a representation of personal experiences from the days of the Iranian Revolution and my involvement in student political activism; an interpretation of 'a moment of crisis' and 'abjection'. Abjection, as developed by Julia Kristeva, 'is what disturbs identity, system, order'. Recalling past events and people from a time of living through utter abjection, causes narrative to disrupt and shatter around the theme of suffering, making my narrative representations fragmented, ambiguous and discontinuous.

Keywords

remembering; subject-in-process; abjection

I want to tell your story.

Yesterday, you, comrade Bijan, killed yourself, for the thirty-fifth time.

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

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

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

You are twenty-eight. It is autumn.

The nest

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

I was reappointed to an underground publishing cell. The cell, I was told, was not only one of the most secretive ones; it was also in the Workers' Section. I was interviewed several times and asked my political views. I met up with a couple of people from the 'top', as part of the security checks. These took place in the streets of Tehran, just after the Persian new year holidays. One day, finally, two comrades picked me up and drove me to the cell. 'It would be better the address is unknown to you,' I was told. I had to bend down in the car, while driving around the streets, to make sure I would be completely disoriented. Eventually the car stopped.

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

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

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

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

To my naive question, you naively replied, yes.

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

The mountain or the sea?

Sipping on my chai latte at Chatswood Gloria Jean's coffee shop, I lapse into the warmth of nostalgia. Your image is never a still one, comrade. It is always moving. Except for the one

registered in my mind as I was introduced to you, in which the light is coming through a small window behind you, your face is not clear any more. You are standing still there.

The next time, I met up with comrade Ali in the street and he showed me how to go to the flat on my own. It was not that far from where I lived with my parents. I had to catch the bus to Geisha and get off just one stop before the end. Although, after the 1979 Revolution, the suburb's name was changed, people still used the old one. I would cross the road and walk down a long street on the other side. Half way down the street, there was a public phone box, on the right-hand side of the corner of an alley. I rang Sheida, before going to the flat, to check it was safe. I would let the phone ring a couple of times before hanging up. Then, I would ring again and on the second time Sheida would pick up the phone. I would ask if she wanted me to get her anything. If she said, 'Yes, some cake,' she meant the flat was safe. And if she said, 'No, just bring yourself,' it meant that it was not safe to go there. Something like that. The memory of those phone conversations has faded away and I can't hear her voice anymore. Somehow it is not retrievable no matter how hard I try. Thirty-six years is a long time, isn't it? Thirty-six years.

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

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

On my first visit to their home, they gave me a tour of the flat. I saw a little wooden sculpture of Sheida's name, on the bookshelf between the living room and Bijan's office. It was the first gift made for Sheida by Bijan when they were still in high school. They were neighbours then. Bijan, two years older than Sheida, helped her with her studies, especially maths. That was how they fell in love. Their families disapproved as they were from different religions. Bijan was a Zoroastrian and Sheida a Muslim, although neither of them was religious. They got married, anyway. Bijan and Sheida, as Fedai Guerrillas' sympathisers had run a publishing cell since before the revolution. The Iranian People's Fedai Guerrillas had emerged as a radical Marxist-Leninist force in 1971, to overthrow the Pahlavi regime at the height of the Shah's power.

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

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

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

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

I could not choose between the mountain and the sea.

'I love both,' I would cry. 'I can't choose only one.'

'You have to choose one, comrade,' Bijan commands, smiling. 'I wish we did not have to,' I would argue. He would go for the mountains, no doubt.

I felt some guilt for not preferring the mountains, and I was concerned my ambivalence and hesitation were a sign of weakness in me. 'As strong as Mount Damavand, we offer ourselves to the cause,' we would chant while climbing the Alborz mountain chains.

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

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

The mountain or the sea, comrade?

Huck is here!

You'd come in the figure of thirty years ago
Holding my hand, walking me through people
I was crying for I'd known you were dead
You hadn't known for you were thirty

Hassan Abadi, 2008¹

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

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

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

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

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

Oh, autumn is here among the trees
 nestled pigeon escaping rain drizzles
 Crying behind the black clouds
 the grieving sun, despite all her pride

Running through my lips
 the poem of Being, ...

Climbing mountain peaks
 Alongside my comrades,
 Marching across the paths
 Through the storm ...

Now, sitting next to Bijan in my autumn dress and holding the bullets differently, reminded him of a story. It was the tale of a boy having adventures on a river. At one point the boy enters an elderly lady's house disguised as a girl. The old woman suspects him. One night when they are all sitting around the fireplace, she throws a ball of wool onto his lap.

Surprised, he keeps his legs closed, even though he is wearing a skirt. So, the lady finds out that she is a he.

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

Some years later, in Ghezel Hesar prison, where I spent the final year and a half of my sentence, some books including novels were allowed in, following a reform. Since they were limited in supply and we were longing to read, we would book in to be able to read for one hour during the twenty-four hours of a day. I made a booking and woke in the middle of night to read for my one hour in the silence of the cell block. All of a sudden, I found myself in the scene Bijan painted for me while cleaning bullets.

'Huck closed his legs to get the knitting piece despite wearing a skirt.' In an instant, I totally forgot where I was. Overwhelmed by a subtle feeling of sweet excitement, I bounced up to shout, 'Hey look, comrade Bijan, I have found it, it is there ...'

It happened in the fragment of a second, in the middle of a ghostly dead land, such a sweet resurrection, too soon followed by dying once more.

One-day comrade!

'What kind of home is this you have? There is neither sunshine, nor any view of the mountains.'

'One-day comrade,' Bijan replied following a pause, gazing at something beyond me, 'I would buy you a sun and mountain!'

Then it became like a mantra that I would chant every once in a while, to which he would say, 'Wait comrade, wait.'

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

Last year in Iran, I visited the suburb of Geisha hoping to find some traces of my time with Bijan and Sheida. Not that I expected to find everything intact after such a lengthy time. No. I

yearned to walk through that chapter of my life, where it was originally written in that part of Tehran. Just the thought of it was soaked in such sweetness.

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

Yet nothing looked the same anymore. The whole area was either redeveloped or in the process of construction. I felt totally disoriented and out of context. I went down street 39 where I was sure the yellow phone box used to be. Everything looked different. New houses and apartments with modern designs, materials and colours were pushing me out of the frame. There was no sign of any phone box either. What if I was wrong? It might have been in the other street, number 37.

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

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

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

This time though it was for good. Was it?

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

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

'There is no answer,' I told them back in the car.

'How long have you been in prison?' one of the guards asked.

'One year and two months.'

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

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

I did not know then that five months earlier Bijan had been captured. He was gone and buried in Khavaran. Khavaran had been a burial place for some communist political prisoners, with unmarked graves, since 1981. It was also the site of mass graves of the 1988 mass executions of political prisoners.

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

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

Amid the enchanting memories of my life with Sheida and Bijan in their flat, there would intrude another image. A vivid picture of a young man's tragic death in a neighbouring flat. It happened in the middle of an autumn night. Sheida and Bijan were woken by the roar of gunshots. At first, they had thought that they were being raided. Terrified in their basement flat, they peered through the small windows up into the streets.

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was Sunday 27 December 1981.

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

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

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

Shohré was already dying. She knew she was to be executed. She had begun to die on the day of her court appearance the week before.

‘Tell us where your father is hiding?’ they demanded. In the fast-moving politics of Iran, her father, once a well-respected politician of the National Front of Iran, now found himself in opposition to the state. His first daughter was killed during the Shah’s regime as a Fedai guerrilla.

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

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

‘Shohré Modir-Shanechi, to the cell-block office with all your belongings.’

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

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

They are the same windows Bijan stands against in my fixed image of him. The windows he was next to when I was introduced to him by Sheida, one sunny spring day. Not a trace of those little windows remains in this long street. Yet, this nothingness does not mean that they never existed; or that I did not experience life ... in that little publishing cell.

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

Why would you go to the north?

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

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

On 20 June 1981, the Organisation of People’s Mujahedin of Iran, with a left Muslim ideology, declared its move to a militant phase and took all its members into the streets of Tehran. It was a turning point for both sides; the state and the opposition entered an extreme battle for power, while the Iran-Iraq war was still going on the southern and western borders of Iran. My organisation, the ‘Minority’, went underground, forming militant cells, sometimes with other organisations. By November 1981, the Union of Iranian Communists (*Sar-be-daran*), a Maoist organisation, mobilised its forces in the forests around the city of Amol, where they declared armed struggle against the state.

Most of them, however, were from the International Students Confederation, returning to Iran after the 1979 Revolution. Their attempt to seize Amol in January 1982 failed and most of the leaders were executed there, on the anniversary of the event in 1983.

Why did we go at such a time?

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

Where was I supposed to go?

On 2 October, two comrades were captured on the streets of Tehran. My sister and I were told to leave our homes for a while, as the comrades had both been our supervisors at some stage.

Where would we go?

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

My mother had moved to Tehran from Babol, a small city in the north, to live with my father after they married. Aunty lived next door. She was single at the time and living with her parents. She helped mum with all of us four children and it was dearly appreciated. Their friendship lasted for years until the day Mum passed away.

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

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

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

Where would we go then?

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

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

It was in these troubled times that Bijan and Sheida took me in for a couple of months. But then Bijan was going away—for an unspecified length of time—which meant so was Sheida. I decided to go to the north, to my grandmother, my mother's mother, who lived in Babol, about 200 kilometres north of Tehran, just past Amol.

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

It was a risk. Sometime before, we realised we needed to remove from our parents' home any politically marked books and papers, which could put us in danger. After destroying most of them, we asked our great uncle—a truck driver working on the road—if we could take some boxes with him to Babol. We loaded the boxes into the truck at night without telling him what was inside. But as soon as we arrived and were about to take them to the basement,

Grandma demanded to know what they were. She became hysterical, and screaming, 'I won't let you hide these books in my house!'

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

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

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

Once we arrived at the main square in Babol, my sister and I found it strangely dark. Eerie. Though it was only around seven on a late autumn evening, we smelled the terror that kept the people in their homes. We decided to call Ma'mad, our cousin, and asked him to pick us up. We stayed one night with Grandma; then moved to our cousin's place. Ma'mad and my brother were childhood friends, both twenty-two years old and medical students in the city of Mashhad. Because of the so-called 'Cultural Revolution' and the closure of all universities, Ma'mad was back in Babol, and living with his parents.

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

I called Sheida the night we arrived in Babol, telling her our bus had been stopped and that I had been forced to hand over my ID. I asked her for advice. In a subsequent call, she told me to ask my mother to come to Babol and accompany us back to Tehran. I set a time to meet Sheida once we returned to Tehran. I would see her at the usual place, the Sepah shop at Fatemi Avenue on the coming Saturday afternoon, 5 December 1981.

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

I will never forget the way he then looked at me, asking, 'Do you really believe that we are in a revolutionary situation right now?' His words struck me. No, I did not believe that we were going through a critical revolutionary situation, as Lenin would have theorised it. But I was supposed to keep face for my organisation and defend all its political views, even if I no longer believed in them. I asked Ma'mad for a list of books to read that would help me think through the situation we were in. He complied and gave me a list, hand-written on a piece of paper. I had it on me when I was arrested, yet managed to swallow it on the way to Evin prison.

Ma'mad himself was arrested in 1984, while I was still imprisoned. He was killed in the mass execution of political prisoners in 1988. He was 29.

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

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

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

Back in Tehran, I went to see Sheida.

'You shouldn't have gone to the north!' Sheida repeated.

'Now, you can't come to our place. Wait until I contact you.'

That was our last meeting.

In about half an hour I was arrested in the streets of Tehran.

About the author

Vahideh Aboukazemi is a PhD researcher in Critical and Cultural Studies, Faculty of Arts, Macquarie University. She is working on a project about imprisonment experiences (1981–1986) in Iran.

Notes

1. Ali Hassan-Abadi, *Solitary Confinement*, Forogh Danesh, Tehran, 2008, p. 45 (author's translation).

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