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Dislocation and Remaking Identity in Selected Contemporary Australian and Persian Fictions; Creative Novella with Dissertation

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Statement of Originality

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

Hasti Abbasi
Abstract

Dislocation, whether enforced or self-inflicted, can in many ways be a disaster for a writer, who immigrates to a new country but does not experience a sense of belonging. However, a greater creative capacity can also be cultivated and even become a source of creative expression, once the individual in question experiences transnational existence and the feeling of belonging. This study, therefore, reflects upon writing from the experience of settling in a place away from home or even at home where characters re-evaluate their perceptions of expected life journeys after experiencing the unlikelihood of surpassing the ties of location.

There are two major components to this work. The exegesis examines dislocation and writing by highlighting how writing can express the affective force of deep experiences of individual subjectivity and unity with their surroundings and other beings. It includes a literary analysis of dislocation, with its social and psychological manifestations, expressed as an evolving process of remaking identity in Shahrnush Parsipur’s *Women Without Men* (1989/ Eng.1998) and David Malouf’s *An Imaginary Life* (1978). By discussing writers both from Iran and Australia, this research shows that despite the uniqueness of each individual’s experience of dislocation, a writer is always in a process of redefinition and re-articulation in response to place, whether it be exile in Malouf’s Ovid, or socio-cultural/psychological dislocation in the case of Parsipur’s women. I draw on this analysis in order to explore these themes in the second part of the project, my novella, ‘And the Raindrops Fill the Sea’ (2016).

My novella shares with *An Imaginary Life* and *Women Without Men* not only moments of physical and existential dislocation, and a socio-cultural sense of loss and alienation, but also a search for connection through interpreting and making story. My premise is that sense of place functions as a touchstone for remaking individual and national identity. This happens through the interrelationship between landscape, individual and society and the influence that changes in surroundings have on individuals’ perspectives and experiences of being. I focus on the imagination’s creative force in my chosen authors, and on their characters’ quests to remake their identities in a new context; I aim to show that although a dislocated writer might not be able to develop a sense of absolute belonging, there is no internal limit to the imagination to help the writer to make new connections through writing place.
In sum, this study investigates writing and the idea of the self in exile in three ways: through reflections on my sense of personal and cultural dislocation from the familiar, and through the act of writing my novella ‘And the Raindrops Fill the Sea’ (2016), through a reading of *An Imaginary Life*, with reference to Ovid’s experience and changing perceptions of his banishment from Rome; and finally through a reading of Parsipur’s *Women Without Men*, where I explore the idea of the feminine and women’s writing in a society where female identity is defined by dissonance and dislocation.
Dedications

To my family; for your love and support.

To my brother, Mohammad. You are the most kind-hearted person I have ever laid eyes on.

To Ryan. Your love gives me courage to live and a reason to write.
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Sections from Chapters I, III, and IV of this thesis have been edited and published/accepted for publication in the form of scholarly papers, of which I am the sole author. The bibliographic details for these papers are:


An extract from the creative work in Chapter VI of this thesis has been accepted for publication in a Special Issue of the journal Southerly. The bibliographic detail for this story is:


Additionally, extracts from Chapters I and II of this thesis have contributed to the development of a co-authored paper with my Supervisor, Dr Stephanie Green, accepted for publication in a Special Issue of the journal TEXT. The bibliographic details for this paper including all authors is:

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Additionally extracts from Chapter III of this thesis have contributed to the development of paper, submitted to Contemporary Women’s Writing. The bibliographic details for the paper which is still under revision is:


Hasti Abbasi  17/02/2017

(Countersigned) ___________________________ (Date)_________________

Dr. Stephanie Green
Introduction

This research aims to foreground key literary works in Persian and Australian culture, which deal with the representation of exile and dislocation. The study takes a step towards the recognition of Parsipur in Australia and engages closely with her characters’ perception of life in a place of exile. It provides socio-cultural insights into Iranian and Australian society during the period in which the stories were written; thus, it contributes to readers’ socio-cultural knowledge of both countries related to the significance of the stories. Moreover, the main theoretical premise behind this research is that the exploration of exile/dislocation, as a narrative that needs to be explored through imagination and meditation, provides a mechanism for creative writing practice.

In this study, the acts of researching, reading critical theory and producing creative writing act as components of a larger creative research project and are reciprocally related to each other. This comparative critical study with creative writing arises out of my own wish to investigate and understand the process of dislocation in crossing boundaries and adapting to social norms, despite their sense of loss and/or nostalgia for the home country and/or past life.

I undertake an investigation into dislocation and the remaking of self as a writer through critical reflection and creative expression. This study explores the influence of dislocation, the inextricable links between human and the natural world, language, and imagination in the selected Australian and Persian fictions. Through cultural and literary analysis and creative research, this study investigates the influence of dislocation on self-perception and remaking connections both through the act of writing and the attempt to transcend social conventions.

Writing is a cognitive process that is replete with the personal insights of authors as they put their world under the microscope. To me, as an immigrant creative writer, the focus of reflective research becomes the subjective, lived experience of individual perspectives and emotion, offering a way of investigating the quest for identity among dislocated people. I often face the question of why I left my country, and whether this departure results in a loss of my relationship with those valued places where I grew up. During my first months of being a migrant in Australia, like any other international student, I experienced the challenge
of dislocation, the uncomfortable sense of alienation, and a longing for my former identity. I migrated to Australia by choice in search of freedom, comfort, and higher education; however, I often experienced moments of cultural in-between-ness as if I were in an exile position. As I struggled to locate and stabilise my identity in Australia, I felt a rupture between my past and present and realised that I was moving beyond a conventional Iranian culture/identity and creating a transnational identity. ‘Raindrops’ emerges from my struggle with the self: self-defining an identity, self-exploration, and self-transformation. In ‘Raindrops’, I use the moment of transition as a perspective from which I reconstruct home through fiction and imagination as I mediate between past and present, human and nature.

This study combines literary analysis with creative writing in the form of an exegesis and a novella, which offer both a creative and critical exploration of dislocation and the search for a self-defining identity. The exegesis comprises five chapters. The first chapter “Writing in Exile” explores the idea of writing in exile as one of the most practical ways in which I can keep up my imaginative practice and independence. The second chapter, “Malouf’s An Imaginary Life” examines Malouf’s attention to the creative connection between language, nature, and imagination through the acts of writing and how the novella represents the ways in which landscape reflects various phases of self-understanding. It argues that Malouf’s romantic perspective of Australians’ sense of marginality involves the reconsideration of Australia as a place where individuals can become reconciled with their surroundings through the experience of exclusion and exile. In Reflections on Exile, Said claims that exiles feel “an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives” (2000, p. 177) and much of the exile’s life is taken up with “compensating for disorienting loss by creating a new world to rule” (p. 181). Therefore, exiles choose “to see themselves as part of a triumphant ideology or a restored people” (p. 177). By triumphant ideology, Said means nationalism, in the sense that exiled persons relegate complete truth and superiority to their nation and deceit and inferiority to outsiders. However, I put forward the claim that Malouf’s Ovid does not let his underlying conceptions develop into dogma. His is not so much a triumphant ideology, but rather what we might term a romantic connection developed through the interrelationship between language, imagination, and nature in an act of writing.

While there was no simple or singular romantic movement, certain aspects of Romanticism are especially pertinent to the question of exile that underpins An Imaginary Life. In particular, the state of exile can represent the self-consciousness of the romantic
artist, which is “the product of a division in the self,” (Hartman 2004, p. 183) and which the artist seeks to overturn through a return to the “Unity of Being” associated with childhood, imagination, and through “recovering deeply buried experience” (ibid.). To Malouf, the suffering of exile can be healed when past and present homes co-exist happily without exiles attempting to allocate complete truth and superiority to themselves in relation to social and political power, and deceit and inferiority to outsiders. He pays careful attention to the creative connection between language and nature by representing the means in which landscape reflects the various phases of self-understanding. As Kate Rigby puts it, “The Romantic reconceptualization of nature as a dynamic, self-generative unity-in-diversity, of which humans are integrally a part ... did foster a new awareness of the pertinence and power of place as well as of time” (2004, p. 53). In this sense, Malouf’s romantic perspective of Australians’ sense of marginality involves the reconsideration of Australia as a place where individuals can develop an experience of reconciliation with a sense of self and unity through exclusion and exile, independent of historical and social relations.

The third chapter, “Parsipur’s *Women Without Men*” attempts to place an analysis of this novella in the context of Parsipur’s overall literary concerns and themes with references to some pertinent works of Farzaneh Milani and Kamran Talattof, who were among the first scholars who introduced Parsipur to Western readers. It discusses Parsipur’s experience of dislocation within her home country and her dissatisfaction with the 1979 revolution through her portrayal of the 1950s, a period full of challenges where a nation’s conflicts and hopes stood together. By choosing to write in an oppressive situation where writers were denied freedom of speech and literary expression, Parsipur faced the inevitability of an existence in exile. Despite the fact that the Islamic Revolution promised freedom of expression, it resulted in increased religious, political, and physical censorship. The formation of new public and private restrictions, as Milani believes, “eventually generate[d] internal ones” (1992, p. 212). Parsipur contributed to the emergence of Iranian women’s literature after the 1979 revolution when the state’s religious and suppressive policy supervised the social and cultural structures of feminist perspectives in literature. Parsipur represents the female characters’ feelings of being exiled and dislocated within their own culture, and their dissatisfaction. The novella reflects upon their routine encounters with male domination, and their different reactions to them: ignorance, resistance, and fantasy. Moreover, drawing on the feminist theoretician Rosi Braidotti’s conceptual analysis of nomadic subjects, this section puts forward the claim that
Parsipur’s characters can be interpreted in terms of nomadic experience as they attempt to go beyond the emotional and cultural sense of dislocation. It also reads *Women Without Men* in reference to the Algerian/French feminist writer and philosopher Hélène Cixous’s *L’Ecriture Feminine* coined in *The Laugh of Medusa* (1976) as a model that follows feminine desire and the language of the body in pursuit of a nomadic experience of being.

In the fourth chapter, “Writing And the Raindrops Fill the Sea”, I reflect on the process of writing ‘Raindrops,’ which was a process of rethinking my subjectivity both in relation to my country of origin and my new setting. The inspiration of my novella comes from my personal experience of transnational relocation; as an attempt to transform the exile experience and sense of alienation.

The fifth chapter, “Conclusion”, explains the embodiment of *An Imaginary Life* and *Women Without Men* in my creative writing. I was drawn to *An Imaginary Life* specifically because its central themes—exile, crossing geographical, social and cultural boundaries, and the process of remaking identity—were so closely related to the concerns of my writing. These themes also connect with my interest in Parsipur’s novel *Women Without Men* which represents the process of becoming other and crossing the boundaries in a society that is under the influence of historical, political and social changes. The sixth chapter comprises my novella, ‘And the Raindrops Fill the Sea’.
Exegesis
Chapter 1

Writing in Exile

Exile literature has emerged from the desire of writers to create a sense of identity and belonging out of the experience of geographical dislocation. The search for a new identity as a writer and a new way of writing emerges from the transformative struggle between the loss of a familiar world, the cultural adjustment, and an emerging new identity. Kaminsky supports the view that, regardless of how exile is experienced, it is inherently unstable, “a process rather than a singular state” (1999, p. xvii). The exiled writer is, broadly speaking, one who has been uprooted from his or her homeland and who makes sense of the experience of crossing boundaries through writing. However, as Pavel maintains, exile as a form of imposed “human mobility across geographical and political space” is different from “voluntary expatriation” (1998, pp. 26-27), and the politics of exile cannot be ignored in terms of how a writer’s work is positioned, since forced expatriation necessarily intensifies the writer’s sense of alienation in terms of both their identity and creative work.

Braidotti posits a distinction between the migrant, the exile, and the nomad. She believes that an exile has a “hostile perception of the host country”, and exile literature has a “diasporic side to it”, and is based on a sense of loss, “a lost horizon from the home country” (2011, p. 59). In exilic condition, memory acts as “a sort of flow of reminiscence” (Braidotti 2011, p. 59). The migrant, however, is no exile: “she has a clear destination and set paths; she goes from one point in space to another for a very clear purpose” (Braidotti 2011, p. 57). In migrant literature, the emphasis is on nostalgic feelings, “the past acts as a burden,” and memory has the effect of “destabilizing” (Braidotti 2011, p. 59). Braidotti perceives the nomad, as opposed to exile and migrant, as one who has “critical consciousness that resists settling into socially coded modes of thought and behaviour” (2011, p. 26), involving “transitions and passages without predetermined destinations or lost homelands” (Braidotti 2011, p. 60).

The self is easily disrupted when individuals are dislocated—either physically and/or emotionally—from their culture of origin and from the sense of having a familiar personal identity within a well-known social context. For a writer, for whom literary communication is vital, being cut off from their original language of expression in a foreign milieu can prove a
double estrangement. Further, for the expatriate writer, exile may be a condition of dissent within the country of origin, which places the writer in an ambivalent position within the new society: feted or disparaged or forgotten. Exile is also a metaphysical condition, and, according to Brodsky, “to ignore or to dodge it is to cheat yourself out of the meaning of what has happened to you, to doom yourself to remaining forever at the receiving end of things, to ossify into an uncomprehending victim” (1990, p. 103). Whether the writer’s condition of exile is literal or metaphysical, creating artistic work in a foreign language and in a different socio-cultural location, while negotiating the personal sense of dislocation that the experience of exile brings, is a challenging enterprise fraught with obstacles but also promise. Initially, the experience of banishment or dislocation can cause the individual to feel a sense of alienation. However, for a writer, the sufferings of exile can open the way to a potentially radical form of creative and intellectual enlightenment, fostering as it does “self-awareness” and a “scrupulous … subjectivity” (Said 2000, p. 184). The new country offers opportunities for new writing to emerge and new perceptions to explore. Learning to write in a new language can reshape the exiled writer’s identity as nomadic. This is necessarily a partial re-identification. The writer who feels dislocated starts a personal journey towards self-identification and self-understanding in the new country through writing.

Self-expression becomes more complex after one’s arrival in a country where a foreign language is spoken, and daily encounters with incomprehension lead to questions of belonging and a quest for identity. Moreover, a sense of dislocation can lead to a preoccupation with cultural exclusion with regard to the writer who strives to recreate a sense of home in the new place. Nonetheless, exile can provide an ideal therapeutic process through writing that might lead to new insights. Living away from one’s home does not mean the loss of the writer’s memory and imagination in writing about it. Carlos Fuentes’ *The Death of Artemio Cruz* (1962/2009), Octavio Paz’s *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950/1994), José Donoso’s *The Obscene Bird Night* (1970), and Julio Cortázar’s *Hopscotch* (1963/1987), Herta Müller’s *The Passport* (1986/1989), and J.M Coetzee’s *Slow Man* (2005) are a few examples of literature in which exile leads to new beliefs and perceptions of the self as well as a broader cultural, geographical and political perspective.

The interrelation between space and state of mind and the identity process of characters of different cultures placed in Australia and Iran are influenced by my own experience of feeling dislocated. MacRobert develops the claim that “there is a tangle of
correlation between the world of the writer and the world she is creating in the text that is
difficult to unravel and explain” (2013, p. 65). Accordingly, my creative writing expresses
only a part of the characters’ challenges as well as my own, as a writer, in the new country,
due to the loss of a supportive community; feelings of alienation, concern and guilt for
leaving the ones with whom I share mutual love, and all other cultural dilemmas with regard
to remaking my identity.

My sense of dislocation evokes both a liberating feeling from traditional constraints in
my culture, as well as deep feelings of mystery and confusion in me about the source of my
writing. In an interview with Ivor Indyk, Malouf says, “I think writers are the people who say
‘I have never understood any single little bit of it, and I still don’t.’ And that’s what the
writing comes from, that sense of everything being a mystery, everything being perplexing”
(2014, p. 2). Therefore, to release myself from the existing paradox is to re-evaluate my sense
of dislocation through constructing characters who live restlessly in-between ignorance and
knowledge, and who experience vital in-between moments in their quest for identity. The
question of belonging and quest for identity is reflected in the relation between characters’
experience of being and place, the in-between spaces, the use of symbolic landscape, and the
nostalgic rendering of Australia and their memories of life in Iran. ‘Raindrops’ explores how
the characters place their ideas in a new context and alter them to fit a new tradition of beliefs
within different surroundings. To inform my vision as a writer with a sense of dislocation, I
have taken some steps which include my travel around Queensland, Sydney, and Melbourne;
friendships I have formed with Iranian and Australian people from different educational,
family, and cultural backgrounds; and my reflection on their insights, lifestyle, and their self-
defining identity. In my novel, I have given my characters a number of worlds, both fictional
and physical, to explore and reconcile with one another. This encompasses the geographical
Australia I find myself in, as well as the inner worlds of emotion and imagination I have
experienced since migration.

For me, a certain satisfaction can be achieved through producing a creative work
away from the sense of dislocation. Brodsky puts forward the view that, “given an
opportunity, in the great causal chain of things, we may as well stop being just its rattling
effects and try to play at causes. The condition we call exile gives exactly that kind of
opportunity” (1990, p. 109). Writing a work of fiction is one of the most practical ways in
which I can use the opportunity of exile to maintain my imaginative practice and independence.
Chapter II

Malouf’s An Imaginary Life

Exile and Romantic Writing

This chapter will investigate writing and remaking identity in exile through a reading of David Malouf’s *An Imaginary Life* (1978) with reference to Ovid’s experience of banishment from Rome. This exilic story represents Ovid’s dislocation from his native culture, and Augustus’s imperial rule and discourse, to Tomis, where his native Latin is entirely futile and he yearns for wholeness and unity with the natural world. He experiences integration with the universe through imaginatively recreating his past and present in the process of writing.

Exiles are cut off from their roots, their land, and their past. They generally do not have armies or states, although they are often in search of them. Said claims that exiles feel “an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives” (2001, p. 181) and “much of the exile’s life is taken up with compensating for disorienting loss by creating a new world to rule”. According to Said, exile is a condition of terminal loss, “an unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home”, which involves “the crippling sorrow of estrangement” (ibid., p. 173). He declares that exiles choose “to see themselves as part of a triumphant ideology or a restored people” (ibid., p. 177). By triumphant ideology, Said means a form of nationalism, in the sense that the exiled persons relegate complete truth and superiority to themselves, and deceit and inferiority to outsiders. The only way out of exile is a retreat into the nostalgic notion of a formerly reassuring sense of heredity, place, culture, and identity. Said also argues that “the crucial thing is that a state of exile free from this triumphant ideology designed to reassemble an exile’s broken history into a new whole – is virtually unbearable, and virtually impossible in today’s world” (ibid., p. 177). On the surface, Said’s theory of triumphant ideology seems to apply to David Malouf’s ideology of exile reflected through Ovid in *An Imaginary Life*. However, it is not so much a triumphant ideology but rather what we might term a romantic idealism that underpins Malouf’s construction of Ovid’s metamorphosis.

Malouf differs from Said in his view of what the relations between coloniser and colonised are like. While Said’s theorisation of exile involves nationalism, and the desire to
create the previously comforting sense of roots and identity in the new place, Malouf seems to suggest it is more like recreating perceptions of culture, nation, and identity. Malouf’s romantic idealism is preoccupied with an imaginary world in which man sees exile as an opportunity for a romantic unity with the people and the new surroundings, rather than a nationalist view of the new place in which man attempts to enforce the preconceived notions and dominate new people and new surroundings.

The trace of Romanticism is reflected in An Imaginary Life in relation to Ovid’s embrace of nature, most noticeably realised through his encounters with animals and the strange wild Child, a part of himself perhaps, that is unleashed by his new way of seeing. In one part, he says: “I lie for a moment looking up at the stars, which seem very close, and they fade into me, through me” (p.46). This recognition enables Ovid to gain enlightenment and inner resources that he had not experienced in his previous situation in Rome: “I have become braver in my old age, ready at last for all the changes we must undergo” (p.134). In this romantic journey, the Child leads him “into the sighing grasslands that are silence”. The principal object of romantic literature is to give everyday events and experiences an imaginary colour. Therefore, Malouf emphasizes the active nature of the imagination, and the acting of the mind to restore the freshness of a new world, draw things together, perceive the value of a different world, and respect similarities between prior experiences and new learning. Ovid’s romantic sense of revaluation and rediscovery of the place, which according to Rigby is, “the art of dwelling ecstatically amidst the elemental, the uninhabitable, and the incomprehensible” influenced me while creating characters’ romantic conceptualization of nature as “a dynamic, self-generative unity-in-diversity, of which humans are integrally a part” (2004, p. 53). This can be linked to Malouf’s idea of imagination, which is creative by means of harmony and synthesis.

An Imaginary Life is an epistolary account addressed to an unknown audience in the first person. It is told in five chronological sections with flashbacks to Ovid’s previous life. Tomis, this unknown landscape to Ovid, brings him into line with its residents. Feeling a loss of individual dignity and identity in Tomis, Ovid describes himself as a “comic old man, grotesque, tearful, who understands nothing, can say nothing, and whose ways, so it must seem to these dour people, are absurdly out of keeping with the facts of our daily existence” (p.9). Being in exile, he feels like an outsider “transformed ... into one of the lower species”

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All future references to the novel use the mentioned edition and will be incorporated in parentheses in the text.
Ovid describes the place as “centuries from the notion of an orchard or a garden made simply to please” (p.7), and as “unmade earth” where the wildest seeds grow “together in their stunted clumps or blowing about at random on the breeze (p.23). During his nostalgic yearning for a fullness of identity, Malouf’s Ovid does not reconstruct his broken life by choosing to see himself as part of Said’s specific sense of “triumphant ideology” or a “restored person”. On the contrary, the ideology of exile in An Imaginary Life is predicated on Ovid’s turn to imagination and language in attempting to convert his disempowering experience of exile into a narrative of significant necessity and consistency. Malouf’s work signifies existential experience from a sense of isolation and fragmentation into unity and belonging demonstrated through the act of writing and relationship with the surroundings. To Ovid, the imaginative correspondence between things and a reconnection with the past can heal the emotional and physical sense of dislocation.

Ovid’s feeling of physical and cultural marginality, of being dislocated from the center of things, and his desire for what Nettelbeck calls “a fullness of identity” (1994, pp.103-4), reflect an impulse towards romantic connection. In his journey away from the civilized Rome, Ovid realizes that “the facts of history, whether meagre or plentiful, require a work of synthetic imagination” (Randall 2007, p. 42). In particular, the state of exile can represent the self-consciousness of the romantic artist, which is “the product of a division in the self.” Accordingly, in a similar fashion to the exile, the artist seeks to overturn this division through a return to the “Unity of Being” associated with childhood, imagination, and through “recovering deeply buried experience” (Hartman 2004, p. 183). This is typically—though not always—achieved in a purportedly “natural” setting, through the act of writing. Indeed, Malouf signifies a state of fundamental liminality between an alienated past and an imposed, displaced present through the in-between situation of being in exile, and through “an enabling fiction” (Seidel 1986, p. xii). This allows Ovid to maintain that there is a home he can inhabit in his imagination. Malouf brings “mental and imaginative capacities beyond the ordinary” (Collini 2007, p. 54) to the public conversation to allow us “to live a new life there” (Malouf, Happy Life, p. 87). Ovid writes: “But we are free after all. We are bound not by the laws of our nature but by the ways we can imagine ourselves breaking out of those laws without doing violence to our essential being. We are free to transcend ourselves. If we have the imagination for it” (p.62). Bill Ashcroft similarly states that “Ovid sees the evolution of man as a process of inhabiting the imagination that goes out ahead of the progress of life. This is in part a process of creating the place that will contain our transformed selves” (2014,
p. 3). Exile forms a foundation of reflective imagination through which Ovid’s newly learned language extends the influence of dislocation and provides a place of imaginary belonging. Ovid comments that:

We have some power in us that knows its own ends. It is that that drives us on to what we must finally become. This is the real metamorphosis. We have only to find the spring … Such changes are slow beyond imagination. They take generations. (p.58)

*An Imaginary Life* arguably depicts exile as a phenomenological prerequisite for a writer’s self-transformation, demonstrating the necessity of an exilic journey of becoming that may entail geographical, cultural and linguistic mobility. In this light, Peter Bishop emphasizes that “once the legal, literal, physical, exile has been accepted, a qualitatively different, psychological journey can be attempted. Exile can then be explored as a new place in its own right. New roots and the formulation of a new centre of reference can occur” (1982, p. 420). For Ovid, movements through the life process of individuation and across borders are specific emblematic descriptions of psychological processes providing personal development as well as development as a writer. Ashcroft believes that Malouf’s novels “while finding the words for ‘the grandeur and terror of things’ also explore the ways in which art and literature continually push the boundaries of our understanding, the limits of our ability to imagine a different world, whether it is a world of the future, a world that might be possible, or the same world magically revealed—our other history” (2014, p. 2). This is demonstrated through Ovid’s careful attention to the creative connection between language and nature and the means in which landscape reflects the various phases of self-understanding.

Malouf’s romantic perspective of Australians’ sense of marginality involves the reconsideration of Australia as a place where individuals can develop an experience of reconciliation with a sense of self and unity through exclusion and exile, independent of historical and social relations. In having his character develop in this way, Malouf draws on key aspects of romantic connection through which “he offers grace and intelligence and craft. He gives us the gleams and tremors of existence, and the impression of knowing the intricacies of the heart” (Hassan, 2014, p. 2). Ovid’s attempt at compensation for the disorienting loss or healing the rift of exile arises with the exilic crossing of linguistic and cultural borders rather than with the attempt to create a new world to rule.

In *An Imaginary Life*, the exiled Ovid begins to transcend his experience of alienation through writing about his perceptions of the natural beauty of his surroundings, by
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documenting observations and focusing on inner passions and struggles. The dislocation of the exiled writer is often refigured as a reflective world of a poetic language, thus a viable cause of re-creating the past. Exile is necessary for Ovid’s transcendence. As a writer, Ovid will go on writing to his wife and his attorney, but he argues that, “in the other half of my life, I know that if the letter came, I would not go” (p.90). His changing stance towards the place of exile arises from the fact that through his journey of self-identity, he learns that the means by which he interprets and interacts with the world have come to be constituted in reflection on his own imaginative thinking. The writer’s sense of self and the world is thus no longer regarded as static and oppositional. Rather, he begins to see himself as implicated in the place to which he has been forced to come.

Initially, Ovid’s existential experience does not correspond with the romantic experience associated with a sense of belonging and unity with nature. The narrative of An Imaginary Life, written in five parts, takes the form of a letter by Ovid, Roman poet of the Tristia, to an unidentified reader in the future. In the novel, Ovid is banished from his own culture and language beyond the limits of the known world. Metaphors of stuntedness, barrenness, and emptiness indicate not only Ovid’s melancholy at being in exile from Roman society but also his disconnection with the natural world around him. His exile causes him a material loss, raising questions of dislocation and unsettlement in him. Completely dissociated from his native Latin and Augustan culture, Ovid struggles to cope with quotidian life, the everydayness of things, to expose the myths underlying a familiar structure.

However, as a procreative force, writing offers Ovid the assurance of completeness and human reciprocity, moving him from his initial sense of disconnectedness and alienation from humanity beyond the borders of life and death where Ovid and the Child enter each other’s existence, and “the desolateness” (p.7) of the place turns into a fertile one, as an emblem of romantic transformation. Malouf seems to be signifying the importance of breaking the ignorant and restrictive circles of individual, society, home, and language, while at the same time imaginatively and artistically restructuring them. This is imaginatively demonstrated when Ovid dreams of himself as a pool of rainwater. Without any sense of hurt or fear, he is “filled with tenderness” for the deer that drinks from him. He feels part of him moving away as he “breaks in circles” (p.56).

The following sections include a detailed study of natural language, the Child, Other, Australian sense of exile, symbols, and sexuality. These aspects contribute to Ovid’s
individual growth of consciousness and altered perception, leading to his self-transformation and a yearning for continuity and unity with the new surroundings.

**Ovid’s Poetic Language**

Malouf explores the relationship of individuals with their environment once they are placed out of the usual structures of their language. As he explains:

> What interested me first in the Ovid figure was that problem of the poet who’s exiled not just to a wild place, but beyond the bounds of the language he can use ... the peculiar punishment was of language: that was the whole point. (Davidson 1980, p. 331)

Although Ovid’s exile signifies the imperial power of language generating a sense of belonging, he realises the restrictions of its language at the “edge of nothing” to convey a meaning to others. He, therefore, enters an entirely new world of possibilities; a world of silence. Ashcroft suggests that, “The ambivalence of poetic language lies in its constant negotiation with silence, with presence” (2014, p. 6). Ovid writes: “All my life till now has been wasted. I had to enter the silence to find a password that would release me from my own life” (p.26). This idea seems to be signified by Ovid’s happiness upon discovering a poppy and feeling a sense of belonging to the new surroundings. Ovid recognizes the poetry residing in his work of net making (p.64). As the narrative proceeds, Ovidrealises that to experience reconciliation and unity with the other, he does not necessarily need to speak the language; Malouf considers silent speech as “true language” (p.94)applied to the creation of intricate poetic language, a speech “whose every syllable is a gesture of reconciliation” (p.94). Malouf suggests that language needs to be changed rather than imposed as he applies the mutuality of language learning and teaching as a means of connecting to the world of the other.

In Malouf’s fiction, language acts as an important medium of creative expression and of enabling the expansion of imaginative scope for Ovid as a writer, opening up his frame of reference through understanding and empathy. The mutuality of language learning and teaching in this novel connects the world of the other, “particularly when language use is applied to the construction of complex, autotelic patterns – as in text-making or poesis” (Randall 2007, p. 51). *An Imaginary Life* represents the overcoming of a frustrating gap
between words and reality. The lack of a shared language in exile forces Ovid to express his experience of existence in an internalised monologue through a lyrical language. There is a particular amalgamation of lyrical and theoretical elements through *An Imaginary Life*. Malouf’s sense of the detachability of words from objects and of the unavoidability of verbal communication coincides with a deep belief in the magical force of language to invoke external reality. “The word implies frameworks constructed by human understanding – metaphors and tropes, imaginative maps and terms of reference – that go beyond physical topology” (McWilliams 2009, p.25). Moreover, Indyk demonstrates that Malouf shifts so easily between poetry and theory in his fiction so that they seem to be characteristics of the same dialogue, “one which scans its own imaginative constructs as they are created, reinforcing the poetic flights of fancy with a rational or intellectual underpinning” (2001, p. 27).

The initial dramatic moment at which Ovid begins to realize the beauty of his exilic surroundings is expressed through the word image of a “little puff of scarlet” of a poppy (p.24). Malouf attempts to signify the importance of names through the ‘magic’ of repeating the word over and over. Ovid keeps repeating the word ‘poppy’ over and over to himself. Ovid feels the power to acknowledge his real self upon the discovery of a poppy. He says it is “as if the word, like the colour, had escaped me till now, and just saying it would keep the little windblown flower in sight. Poppy. The magic of saying the word made my skin prickle ... I am Flora. I am Persephone” (p.26).

Ovid experiences the spiritual state of “wordless being-in-the-world and being the world itself” (p.51) through surrendering to the language of birds and animals, Latin, and Geltic. To put it in Nettelbeck’s words, Malouf uses romanticism symbolically to “move beyond a culture of division and to gesture towards tolerance and reconciliation” (1994, pp. 103-104). It is from a world as distinct and detachable from words to a condition where speech and truth are one and nature articulates itself through perception. McDonald argues that, “We may treat this conclusion as a point of departure for an exploration of the role of language — as subject of the text and as metaphor within it” (1988, p. 49). From this perspective, one aspect of my novel will be the negotiation of cultural boundaries and identity processes that take place in the complexity of borders. Ovid writes: “I too have created an age. It is coterminous with his, and has its existence in the lives and loves of his subjects. It is gay, anarchic, ephemeral and it is fun” (p.19). This theme of language symbolically discloses
the general strategy of the politics of peripheral identity at play in Malouf’s imaginary world.

Untamed Nature as a “Background to Human Drama”

*An Imaginary Life* is about striving for knowledge of the essence of life, and crossing the boundaries of the self and culture through nature, a marginal realm where characters go through a desire of “experiencing change and renewal”. The natural realm in this novel acts as a site for an “escape from the constraining etiquette and corrupt influences of society ... it acts as a borderline, as the ground of transition between one circumstance and another” (Nikro 2006).

Ovid’s journey of self-discovery takes him from the sophistication and excitement of Rome to a world where fully aware of the restrictions imposed on human beings; he tries to fit into the natural environment. In other words, exilic displacement allows Ovid to conceive a delayed desire of unity and protection through his imaginative connection with nature. Writing on this novel, Indyk argues that, “the imagination, in its creative aspiration, has lost contact with nature. Human beings have become separated from the natural world and must find their way back gain, presumably through imaginative apprehension, directed downward towards the source” (2001, p. 29). Ovid’s journey is, in effect, about attempting to cultivate and exploit the natural world for the purposes of his own need for belonging.

*An Imaginary Life* is, in part, about an individual journey from a state of being dislocated from a known urban culture to a state of cultural isolation, where Ovid now exists in close contact with a nature untamed by the Roman Empire. Ovid’s perception of his surrounding reflects his emotional and psychological state as much as his literal position in Tomis. Distanced from his Roman identity, the poet cannot relate to the new landscape or its inhabitants. Within this context, he initially describes himself as perceiving his surrounding through that Roman cultural construction and thus suffering exile. *An Imaginary Life* depicts a vision of nature where there is very little evidence of civilization and human life. Metaphors of stuntedness, barrenness and emptiness indicate Ovid’s melancholy at being in exile from Roman society. The effects of setting and physical surroundings on life explored through Ovid’s state of mind are reflected in one of his descriptions: “It [the landscape] is a place of utter desolation, the beginning. I know it like the inside of my head” (p.24). The river flats and the wormwood scrubs depict his removal from fruitful and pleasing gardens, symbols of
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the grasslands beyond, all lead to a sky that hangs close above us, heavy with snow, or is empty as far as the eye can see or the mind imagine, cloudless, without wings. But I am describing a state of mind, no place. I am in exile here (p.8).

However, despite his sarcastic and dismissive attitude in the early pages of the story, Ovid is not a static character but one who struggles to come to terms with new surroundings and his fellow men. It is the alterity of the desolate landscape of Tomis that allows Ovid to revisit his experience of the Roman spring to find out that “[m]etaphor is the power of metamorphosis” (Loughlin 2007, p.128) and realize that to cause the flower to “flash again on the eye” (p.25) and make the spring, he only needs to say the “[m]agic word on the tongue” (p.25).

To begin a new life, Ovid moves beyond his former sense of self in a moment of revelation when “you will be separated from yourself and yet be alive” (p.26). In the new environment, Ovid begins to conform to the villagers’ lifestyle and the hunters’ traditions. Ovid observes that to understand the source of life, he needs to communicate with nature and its elements. This is followed by his dream in which he sees himself as moonlight, surrounded by centaurs that are half-men and half-horses, as he walks across the river. Ovid realizes the beauty in the “new life” of the “the original bleakness” of the landscape waiting to be perceived by him when he encounters a small poppy which he can name. The text reflects a sense of the significance of self-transcendence. For Ovid, this insight begins with an experience of aesthetic appreciation of nature when Ovid least expects it because a relaxed and receptive mind is more open to new insights. In terms of character development, this allows Ovid to imagine that he has experienced “spiritual solace and redemption” (Nikro 2006).

Stanners and Stanners declare that in exile, Ovid’s “fears and insecurities begin to be replaced by developing intoxication for the restorative qualities of nature” (2005, p. 69). Malouf uses natural elements—weather, processes of growth and decay, seasons, river, flowers—to demonstrate the continuing and recurring nature of individual search for integration and belonging regardless of cultural sophistications. Landscape does not simply describe the natural features of a specific geographical place. In nature, Ovid experiences a framework of binary opposition between nature and culture of Rome, where there is an epistemological power allowing political languages of acceptance, pedagogy, gender inequality, and finally the sense of duty among individuals. Nature renders Ovid’s experience
of being more understandable to others, free from constraining forms of human understanding or historical discourse. The link between human beings and the natural world is represented from the early stages of Ovid’s journey through the wolves: “Later I heard, from the goatherds perhaps, that there is indeed some part of our nature that we share with wolves, and something of their nature that is in us” (p.2).

Malouf reflects upon the beauty of a world in which the Roman language, knowledge, and letters are not the only means of communication, a world in which the literate and illiterate recognize their own limitations “as prime determinants of one’s cultural identity” (Ramsey-Kurz 2003, p. 130). This shift in perception occurs when Ovid recognizes the significance of landscape per se rather than as a mere “background to human drama” (Malouf, qtd. in Spinks 2010, p.10). Malouf’s Ovid becomes united with the nature when the story ends with his ecstatic death in the vast emptiness of the plains. Ovid moves into a space that is boundless, timeless, and empty: “The days pass and I cease to count them” (p.144); “I no longer ask myself where we are making for. The notion of a destination no longer seems necessary to me. It has been swallowed up in the immensity of this landscape” (p.144). This relates to Braidotti’s theorization of nomadism that outlines the intense desire to go on and transgress, and be always in the process of becoming.

**The Child: Beyond the Limits of Self-identity**

Beyond the border of Rome, there is the possible realization of a language that is defined only by the undefined silence it ceaselessly speaks. Ovid exclaims that this silent language is like “talking to oneself” (p.146) beyond certain limits that impose conventional existential finitudes. This kind of language, which in some way needs no sense of dissection or difference by which to describe itself, is expressed through Ovid’s interaction with the Child as his other self. According to Massey and Abu-Baker, “The I of each person actively coordinates the me into a self-image based on past and present experiences and future anticipations of self with others” (2009, p. 14). In his ongoing interrelation with the Child as the other, Ovid also communicates with himself, and experiences a new perception of life that takes him beyond the limits of his former self-identity.

The relationship between Ovid and the Child towards wholeness and fulfilment appears as a fundamental movement to experience unity between self and other, even beyond
the limits of sensuality. The Child, who mirrors a landscape beyond words or the norms of civilisation, can symbolize Ovid’s Other, and a manifestation of his feelings of loneliness, and isolation. Ovid exclaims that:

My life has been so frivolous. Brought up to believe in my own nerves, in restlessness, variety, change: educated entirely out of books, living always in a state of soft security, able to pamper myself … I couldn’t see; never for a moment challenged by more than a clever boy can handle, who has learned early…Tomorrow I am to go with the old man’s hunting party to birch woods, where are there are deer. (p.32)

Therefore, this alternative appreciation of difference, regardless of the means of communication, requires that Ovid experiences the very otherness of his self through the silent discourse between himself and the Child. By questioning the identity of the Child, when Ovid asks “Who is he” (p.46), he questions his own identity as well. The child is the beginning of a new vision—a new story—of the world. This is a significant breakthrough in Ovid’s process of understanding himself and experiencing a new sense of self: “I lie for a moment looking up at the stars, which seem very close, and they fade into me, through me” (p.46).

Free from any Imperial rules, the Child’s language has no distinct borders between culture and nature. Having “no notion of the otherness of things” (p.96), the Child helps Ovid revive his interaction with innocent periods of his life, and natural world, and thus a revaluation of his accepted beliefs, life experiences, and existence. Ovid starts reflecting on himself more and changes into a “different man” as his relation with the Child grows deeper: “I think and think. What must steps be? How should I begin? Kindness, I know, is the way - and time” (p.71).

After glimpsing the Child in the birch woods, Ovid recalls his childhood imaginary companion, “a wolf boy perhaps”, with whom he spoke “in a tongue of our own devising” (p.1). This might refer to the childhood language when imagination is a place of harmony. Also, the figure of the horseman reminds Ovid, in a circular imaginary movement, of his past, his brother’s death and his alienation from his father helping with his experience of inner metamorphosis. He writes: “when my own body began to change and I discovered the first signs of manhood upon me, the child left and did not reappear, though I dreamt of him often”
The Child is the child who left, never to reappear (p.4), after Ovid reached puberty. The child is one way to represent this playful, embodied self. Initially, remembering his dream of being drunk as a pool by the Child, Ovid recognizes him as “a creature of my will, a figure in my dream” (p.103). This rediscovery frees Ovid from the burden of the past; it seems that he breaks the circle of time by retracing it. Ovid develops a new identity. He transforms from a Roman celebrity to a person who seeks fulfilment through integrating himself into the new society, and nature.

Ovid’s initial desire to maintain a privileged sense of identity and his later experience of passing the borders of self-identity and the constraints of Being (or of physical location), structures the colonial and post-colonial reading of Ovid’s experience. In his attempt to overcome his exile, Ovid denies the privileges of other villagers and their culture because he considers his culture to be superior. He considers the Child as inferior and shows the authoritarianism of the colonisers by enforcing the Child to learn Getae and to mimic their language. Ovid tries to “have power” over the Child and nature. He experiences a breakthrough in bringing the Child under his control, such as, when the Child responds to Ovid’s hands, pen, ink and other external stimuli. In attempting to teach the Child the language of imperial Rome, Ovid employs the same imperial notion that has banished him. Ovid helps the Child step into the world, while he himself strives to learn the reality behind his poetic language. Ovid nostalgically thinks that Latin is “that perfect tongue in which all things can be spoken, even pronouncements of exile” (p.13).

However, it is the Child who leads Ovid towards a state of belonging. As Ovid narrates, “the beings we are in process of becoming will be drawn out of us. We have only to find the name and let its illumination fill us … Now I too must be transformed” (p.26). Therefore, Ovid needs to integrate himself with the other to experience a meaningful life and sense of belonging. Both Ovid and the Child “undergo transformation as the roles of protector and protected are reversed” (Stanners and Stanners 2005, p. 48). Byron believes Ovid both transcends himself and observes the Child’s transcendence when he develops a new awareness as a self and as another, as an I and a You (2005, pp. 82-83). Ovid and the Child experience a fundamental linguistic transformation in which Ovid becomes less dependent on communicative skills and the Child learns to smile, which, to Ovid, is distinct from laughter. Ovid also instructs the Child in human language and unity: “The spirit of things will migrate back into us. We shall be whole” (p.92), while the Child introduces him to the pure state and language of nature of Romanticism. Both Ovid and the Child transgress
different boundaries during the process of their transformations. Ovid experiences transformation through his relation with the Child, as a symbol of innocence, who is depicted as a part of nature: “I have found myself more and more often slipping back into my own childhood” (p.77). Through the interaction, Ovid develops a new self-realization. He declares that: “When I try to articulate what I know, I stumble suddenly on what, till that moment, I did not know. There are times when it comes strongly upon me that he is the teacher, and that whatever comes new to the occasion is being led slowly, painfully, out of me” (p.91).

Ovid discovers the other language that “speaks an apparent senselessness, that speaks the potential of an unanticipated otherness defined only by the indeterminate silence it incessantly speaks, an otherness that somehow requires no sense of division or distinction by which to define itself” through the Child (Nikro 2006). Having obtained language and later transcending it, Ovid unites with the Child and the landscape. Likewise, the Child develops an identity of humanity after he learns Ovid’s language. As the ultimate consequence of the Other’s entrance in the narrative, Ovid and the Child transcend physical and linguistic binaries and find reconciliation through a unity in which they need no language to comprehend each other:

Wandering along together, wading through the high grasses side by side, is a kind of conversation that needs no tongue, a perfect interchange of perceptions, moods, questions, answers, that is as simple as the weather [. . .] as thoughts melt out of one mind into another, cloud and shadow, with none of the structures of formal speech. It is like talking to oneself (p.146).

Malouf’s position here is clear: in the process of acquiring the language of the people of Tomis, Ovid questions the imperial structures of meaning, and longs for a form of writing distinct from the Roman language. During this identity-forging process, Ovid experiences an imaginary salvation where he no longer considers a distinction between himself and the Child, nature and culture, man and woman, and body and soul. The Child acts as Ovid’s lost childhood companion and Ovid meets his death when nature/culture and the other/self are bound together. Ovid and the Child continue a “series of beginnings, of painful settings out into the unknown, pushing off from the edges of consciousness into the mystery of what we have not yet become” (p.134).
A Sense of Exile

Being a son of an English Jewish mother and a father of Lebanese Christian heritage, along with his experience of settling in Australia, has always influenced Malouf. Randall declares that Malouf’s belonging in Australia has been debated in his own lifetime “not only because he has resided in England and in Italy. He has been susceptible to construction as an other in the society of his birth. His attraction to otherness, and the high value he places on it, may well come out of his own historically ambiguous relationship with Australian identity” (2007, p.11).

When Australia moved towards Federation in the last decade of the nineteenth century, fiction authors moved from writing fiction based on romantic and melodramatic stories of colonisation, in which readers were considered as British consumers who expected familiar stories. These writers started to depict being an Australian “from an insider’s point of view; the Australian landscape and ideas about the Australian ‘national character’ moved to the foreground in fiction around the turn of the century” (Goldsworthy 2000, p. 105). Many works of Australian fiction from the 1950s to the 1990s try to explore contemporary Australian history and its “short post-settlement history” (Jose 2009, p. 546). Australian authors from the 1950s onward, like Patrick White, Tim Winton, David Malouf, Peter Carey, Robert Drewe and Fay Zwicky use landscape “not just as descriptive settings but as a narrative presence in their work” (Bird 2000, p. 194). Their emphasis is mostly on landscape and nature. Nicholas Birns construes Malouf as the generation of Australian writers after Patrick White: “It is productive to contextualize his place in ‘the Patrick White succession.’ Here this phrase does not refer merely to any Australian writer after White chronologically, but rather to writers who had a concrete relation to White’s work and explored analogous themes in analogous styles” (2014, p. 2).

Although Malouf’s novel is not set in Australia and does not feature the Australian landscape or sense of place, it reflects an important aspect of the Australian cultural narrative, a sense of exile in which the individual is cut off from his/her original culture, language, and connections. Malouf (1998, p. 32) asserts that individuals in Australia have a sense of dislocation because “we have our sensory life in one world, whose light and weather and topography shapes all that belongs to our physical being, while our culture, the larger part of what comes to us through language for example and knowledge, and training, derives from another”. He suggests that to heal this sense of dislocation, Australians must “possess the
world we inhabit imaginatively as well as in fact … (n)ot legally, and not just physically, but as Aboriginal people, for example, have always possessed the world we live in here: in the imagination” (ibid., pp.39-40). Malouf declares that Australians must acknowledge their own ethnic and racial identity rather than deny it. In *An Imaginary Life*, Malouf seems to be seeking a sense of belonging and cultural unity with others. Malouf wants Ovid to depart from his colonial identity, break the barrier of his terrifying fear to discover the unknown, and create a sense of belonging in the new place. Rather than adopting a colonial attitude towards place, Malouf wants Ovid to be open to the unfamiliar and root himself in the new place through the power of imagination. Therefore, Ovid’s initial decision to tame the desolate landscape to the extent that he asserts: “I shall make whole gardens like this” (p.26) is replaced by his subsequent openness to the child and the aim to pass the boundary of Ister: “the Child’s world” (p.143). Ovid perceives what lies beyond bounds of the observable Ister as “the border beyond which you must go if you are to find your true life, your true death at last” (p.135).

Ovid believes that he should help the Child “discover what he is” (p.71). However, in the end, cultivated Rome, as the place of Ovid’s native culture, no longer stands in opposition to Tomis, which in the beginning of Ovid’s exile derived its meaning only or at least primarily from its resistance and inferiority to Rome. That is why in the end Ovid’s transformation is dependent on his openness towards others as a celebration of his departure from a colonial self-enclosed identity and experience of romantic idealism rather than a triumphant ideology in a place of exile. Ovid states of the Child: “But he, in fact, is the more patient teacher. He shows me the bird whose cry I am trying to imitate” (p.93).

Ovid realizes that identity is not solid and universal in a place where cultures are confronted and that it is rather a state of mind. As Malouf argues, “The greatest thing in the world is to know how to belong to yourself” (Malouf 2011, p. 6). Hall asserts that, “Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a ‘production’ which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (1996, p. 210). This idea seems to apply to *An Imaginary Life*, in which exile not only causes constructive cultural exchange, but also ultimately leads Ovid to a joyful interface between these cultures. In a television documentary on *An Imaginary Life*, Malouf declares that: “what gives you [possession of a country] finally is taking it into your consciousness … possessing it imaginatively, and I think
that’s the only way in which we can possess anything in the world.” This idea is reflected in the imaginary world of silence that allows Ovid a movement toward hospitality and sociability in the realm of reality, and reflects the concrete expression of his initial recognition.

Metamorphoses and Metamorphoses

Written as a letter of defiance addressed to someone of assumed significance in Ovid’s previous life, Malouf’s story of Ovid represents the process of metamorphoses that Ovid experiences during his epic journey. Malouf leads Ovid to experience a new vision, which seems to not necessarily be accompanied by a loss of self-esteem but rather by a lower sense of narcissism. Rycroft suggests that, “the discovery that one is not the only pebble on the beach and that the world was not constructed solely for one's own benefit involves a loss of narcissism” (1972, 116). This is reflected in Ovid’s movement from his earlier selfish state of mind and narcissistic pride about his culture, language, and history to an acceptance of the otherness of his new surroundings. Ovid moves towards the revival of a self before he can proceed. Malouf’s Ovid develops a spirit of harmony and wholeness with others that Ovid’s Narcissus in Metamorphoses (8 AD) lacks. Claassen credits Ovid, author of Metamorphoses, as being the creator of “the literary genre of exilic poetry” (1999, p. 241). Malouf refers to the Metamorphoses in two ways: the movement of ‘Ovid’ as the well-known, complicated author away from the prestigious Roman life into “the last reality” of a spiritual unity with the infinite nature of the Danube, and the Child's opposite drive into humanity through his linguistic acquisition (p.141). Ovid says: “He is not at all beautiful, as I had imagined the Child must be. But I am filled with a tenderness, an immense pity for him, a need to free him into some clearer body, that is like a pain in my own” (p.71). This poetic and inventive scene might be motivated by the Narcissus story from Greek mythology that Ovid retells in Metamorphoses. In this configuration, Malouf is attempting to construct a new perception of the Narcissus mythology through Ovid. In discussing the definitions of narcissism and its relations to psychoanalysis, Freud (1914) utilizes the term narcissism to describe human beings’ initial relationship to their body and the experience of their withdrawal from the outer world. Ovid’s Narcissus in Metamorphoses does not succeed in transcending his self-image because he is fascinated with his own reflection. Ovid’s Narcissus says: “Whenever I move to kiss the clear bright surface, his upturned face strains closer to mine. We all but touch! The
paltriest barrier thwarts our pleasure. Come out to me here, whoever you are! … You nod when I show my approval. When I read those exquisite lips, I can watch them gently repeating my word” (Ovid vol. III, pp. 451-62). Being obsessed with his love and its inaccessibility, Narcissus is oblivious to his surroundings and any others. Individuals need to develop a valued self-image as well as the ability to not be consumed by it. However, even after Narcissus moves from unconscious to conscious engagement with his reflection and recognizes his own reflection in the water, his vanity and love do not let him pass the borders of self and break the circles of self-image: “I know you now and I know myself. Yes, I am the cause of the fire inside me, the fuel that burns and the flame that lights it. What can I do? Must I woo or be wooed? What else can I plead for? All I desire I have…” (Ovid vol.III, pp. 463-6). By referring to author Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Malouf reflects upon romantic preoccupation with the idea of metamorphosis and unity with the natural world.

Malouf reflects upon the subject of the interrelationship between individuals and place, and the influence that alterations in the surroundings play on their perspectives and experience of being. Initially, even the spiders and insects seem to him as speechless and marginalized creatures that exist “in the cracks, in the gaps of our lives” (p.12). However, in the process of the story, the presence of a real and imaginary landscape moving throughout Ovid’s narrative of discovery leads him to an understanding and acceptance of a world that is foreign to him. This leads him to new insights about change as a necessary condition for existence, and that this in turn informs his vision as a writer and thinker. Ovid perceives his experience of exile as both challenging and liberating, and realizes the need to be always in the process of becoming. This recognition enables Ovid to gain enlightenment and inner resources that he had not experienced in his previous situation in Rome: “I have become braver in my old age, ready at last for all the changes we must undergo” (p.134).

Ovid observes nature and its elements in terms of self-reflection, rather than of society, and perceives forces superior than cultural boundaries and social convention. This notion may be seen as an expression of the romantic idealisation of unconstrained nature. Accepting Tomis as his own country, Ovid no longer complains about unfamiliar details of his environment; rather, he begins to create his own garden. Soon Ovid knows “how to work the spring” which occurs after the winter, when he recalls the colours and flowers. At this point, his metamorphosis begins: In a community of no shared language and communication
but full of the beauty of nature, he allows nature to separate him from his former self yet still being “alive” (p.26).

As a narrative of exile, *An Imaginary Life* is inevitably connected to loss. It attempts to represent what was lost prior to the moment of Ovid’s exilic rupture. A significant step in Ovid’s process of metamorphoses is his imaginary reconciliation with his past. As Straumann declares, “the family serves as a core trope of the home, whether it is configured as a site of happiness or discontent. In the context of exilic loss and displacement, family and home narratives are so resilient because they may displace as well as stand in for other (related) issues” (2008, p. 21). Irrespective of its particular figuration, the imagination of a home is necessary for Ovid in order to live in a certain psychic stability and identity. Having reconciled with his dead brother and father, and therefore the childhood he has left behind, with whom he spoke “in a tongue of our own devising” (p.1), Ovid experiences a “moment of exhilaration” (p.37). This happens when he engages in the horseman’s burial ceremony in which he shouts out “a horseman’s death cry” (p.37) as he scatters a handful of grains on the ground. In this significant step towards freeing his soul, Ovid joyfully exclaims: “I am Roman and a poet. But that breath and the sound it carries moves out from my body into the world and I feel freer for it” (p.38).

*An Imaginary Life* deals with the multi-level purpose of language, allowing Ovid to re-evaluate Imperialist culture and its definition of self, perceive history differently, and question the importance of knowledge assigned by the Emperors. This narrative describes metamorphoses a process of recovery of the self. Leer construes the world of *An Imaginary Life* as “all about the ‘self’ – an entity comprising the subconscious and the conscious, imagination and memory” (1985, p. 4). To familiarize human needs to the natural world, as Ovid puts it, it is also “our self we are making out there, and when the landscape is complete we shall have become the gods who are intended to fill it” (p.22). Ovid realizes that within each person, there is the potential to transcend and experience metamorphosis and to shape the self: “[o]ur further selves are contained within us, as the leaves and blossoms are in the tree” (p.58). Ovid declares that his journey of self-realization shapes “the final boundary of my life, waiting to be crossed” till the “true death” that “is not entirely unfamiliar” (p.135). No longer tied by physical limits, Ovid develops a sense of embodiment the moment he starts merging with the universe: “My body feels almost no ache, only a kind of remoteness from itself. I feel sometimes as if I were moving on two separate planes” (p.142).
Malouf describes his work as “an attempt to render the way I see the world, or at least the way I want to read the world… Who knows what something we call reality is, except as we read it?” (Kavanagh 1991, p. 251). Therefore, to bring a new experience of reconciliation to the world, Malouf leads Ovid to subvert his imaginary circle of selfhood and superiority and recreates a new circle of equality and harmony with the world. Randall argues that:

Through circular movement the mind renews experience, discovering new meanings, and new clarity of self-understanding. It is a rediscovery that frees Ovid from the burden of the past; he breaks, it seems, the circle of time by first retracing it”. (2007, p. 48)

Ovid redefines the meaning of the circle as a sign of selfhood to a path of uniting the boundary of self and other. Malouf seems to be signifying the importance of breaking the ignorant and restricting circles of individual, society, home, and language, and imaginatively and artistically restructuring them. It is merely by crossing beyond the encompassing circle of selfhood that one can communicate spiritually and satisfactorily with the Other. This is brilliantly demonstrated when without any sense of hurt or fear, Ovid is “filled with tenderness” for the deer that drinks from him. He feels part of him moving away as he “breaks in circles”. This breaking out of the self and conventional restraints is eventually exposed as a significant means of comprehending the beauty of the Others’ being.

Initially, the epiphanies about language, metamorphosis, unity with child and nature occur through Ovid’s recurring dreams of metamorphosis. He dreams that he is walking on the river Ister and “[is] moonlight” (p.16). As Seger argues with reference to Indyk, An Imaginary Life “offers, in the image of Ovid’s self as a pool of water, lapped and ‘broken’, a perspective on the self’s dissolution that according to Indyk is at once sexual and transcendental” (2005, p. 146). Malouf takes Ovid away from the realm of reality into the world of dreams, where there is no language required, and the hunters are transformed to “part of the woods” (p.55) or dreams of himself as “warm in the sunlight, liquid, filled with the blue of the sky” (p.55). Moreover, in the process of breaking his self in circles and entering into the world of the other, Ovid dreams of a deer that drinks from him, as from a pool.

As time passes, Ovid completes his journey of self-discovery and perceives the same place as the beginning of a new life after which he becomes more receptive to nature: “it was
as if some fear went out of my breath and left my spirit clear” (p.38). By presenting to the mind the poignant reality, Ovid recognizes that the new place of exile can act as a healer if “we can imagine ourselves breaking out of those laws without doing violence to our essential being” (p.62). Ovid feels he has grasped the truth of life and nature and becomes united with the universe when he discovers he has gained authority and control over his own perspectives and worldview as a ‘real’ metamorphosis (p.53). For the “final metamorphosis” (p.92), Ovid imagines himself as a bird while learning to imitate a bird’s cry. He perceives no distinction between himself and his surrounding world as he imagines himself as a pool in the forest, regaining a sense of masculine power of procreation.

In this process of self-definition, time also acts as a great healer: gradually Ovid learns to adapt and integrate with others as well as assert a new identity of his own. He no longer regards exile as a punishment or unfair destiny but rather, he realizes that, although he has “still not grown used to it” (p.107), it is the true destination he has been seeking; the destiny which offers him a “second chance” (p.90) to live his life. The landscape described in the final page reflects a promising moment in which the Child, Ovid, and Nature are united: “It is spring. It is summer. I am three years old. I am sixty. The Child is there ... I am there” (p.152). This embodies a further step in Ovid’s journey of self. Trusting in universal goodness, and understanding that humanity has finite knowledge about the infinite reality of life and the changing universe, Ovid’s worldview about his past and present leads to a sense of “immeasurable” (p.152) happiness that accompanies him till death.

Exploring the boundaries of human nature, Malouf does not symbolize Ovid’s death as an emblematic representation of the perception and totalisation of identity. Taylor suggests that “the ultimate nonoriginary origin ... the living human body which incorporates, if only momentarily, the warring diversity of the universe in a brief escape from the temporal, in a triumphant evasion of history” (1999, p. 13). As the story of a poet and his relation to words and the world, An Imaginary Life, can also be perceived as an allegory about society. Ovid’s journey can be interpreted as the process of challenging socially imposed identity and its constraints.

Thus, Ovid’s death is not the end of his journey; it is accompanied by an inner realization of an “endless process of creation and survival and death” (p.147). Ovid dies being absorbed and merged in nature without being “lost”. He writes: “The earth, now that I am about to leave it, seems so close at last” (p.146). Through his death, Ovid reconciles with
his past, and experiences a sense of immeasurable happiness, away from a lifelong exile caught within the boundaries of culture, language, and adulthood. Ovid’s journey of self-discovery ends at the shore where the river and the land come together within an everlasting unity in a timeless space:

He is walking on the water’s light, and as I watch, he takes the first step off it, moving slowly away now into the deepest distance, above the earth, above the water, on air. (p.152)

Ovid dies crossing the geographical, national, cultural, and linguistic borders; “the passage out of life and the lived experience of personal identity, the collapse of the border between self and alterity” (Randall 2007, p. 54). Schimanski and Wolfe discuss borders as a dynamic experience of being: “phenomenon constantly undergoing processes of both fixing and blurring” (2007, p. 13) resulting in a new experience of being, thinking, and behaving. Gaining new insights leads Ovid to a better understanding of himself and to his authorial and literary metamorphosis.

*An Imaginary Life* reflects upon exile as a prerequisite for transcendence and demonstrates the significance of a sense of inner exile in individuals before they embark upon an outer exile. Ovid’s journey of self-defining identity and self-discovery ends by achieving true freedom not at home, but in exile: “I have come to realize that this place is the true destiny I have been seeking, and that my life here, however painful, is my true fate, the one I spent my whole life trying to escape” (p.90). Eventually, Ovid realizes in himself the power to free himself from exile by showing unity with others and by the process of transforming rather than adhering to the fixed identity of Roman Empire.

**Symbols: Garden and Seasons**

Ovid who regards himself in exile, gradually begins to undergo a symbolic rebirth and experience an aesthetic relation with the universe without resting on a fixed identity or destination. To put it in Braidottis’ terms, Ovid rather rests on a “multi-layered, dynamic vision of the subject” (1992, p.7). He listens “to another meaning” in the nature “having no language” (p.17) of his own. Malouf represents Ovid’s perception of identity, as a process of becoming rather than as a fixed sense of self and entity, through his symbolic experience of
becoming and creative rupture. The garden, as a symbol of spiritual and psychological awareness and work, that Ovid creates in the Getae village manifests his earlier identity as the poet of *Metamorphoses*; not only does Ovid become aware of the psychological sophistication of Roman culture, but more importantly, he realizes that it is a ‘false’ sophistication. It involves the relinquishing of the safe, but largely unconscious world of ‘home’. It is a challenge to reach a fuller sense of belonging, not literally, but psychologically. Malouf represents the possibility of an alternative centre beyond the realms of social values and perspectives. Realising the significance of integration of self and the world surrounding it, Ovid’s spirit expands to “become the whole landscape” (p.142). Significantly, it is exactly in the move towards poetic imagination and creation of the garden that the displaced Ovid experiences a place of habitation and belonging.

Malouf uses seasonal changes as a metaphor for Ovid’s emotional state and spiritual transformation. Seasons and settings, as symbols in the story, play significant roles in the impression Ovid makes on the readers. The cycle of seasons represents the cycles of life, and Ovid’s inner state. For example, Ovid’s death is predicted through seasonal imagery when Ovid writes: “now at last, in the early light of a late winter morning, at the very edge of spring, I make my way toward it [River Ister]” (*IL* 136). Late winter signifies Ovid's approaching death in contrast to the very edge of spring which symbolizes his spiritual rebirth.

Summer, autumn and winter keep recurring throughout the story to suggest their respective archetypal meanings. To represent the early stages of life-like youth and joy, Malouf utilizes spring both in the prologue and in the last part of the novel. Stanners & Stanners demonstrate that “spring represents not only the thawing of the harsh cold and ice of winter but a thawing of Ovid himself” (2005, p. 56). In spring, the ice breaks itself into water; there is fluidity and the sun shines over the water, and the light sparkles. Bishop points out that spring symbolizes “first enthusiastic blooming of an inner activity, a trace of anti-intellectualism and anti-culture, which is an understandable, but ultimately a destructive standpoint” (1982, p. 421). Ovid declares his own perception of spring in the second part of the story:

Now that spring is no longer to be recognized in blossoms or in new leaves on the trees, I must look for it in myself. I feel the ice and myself cracking. I feel myself loosen and flow again, reflecting the world. That is what spring means. (p.60)
Ovid describes the following winter “as if our wits had turned to sharp little crystals in our head” (p.47). This is in strong harmony with images of violence. For example, Dacian invaders are “yowling, yelping like wolves” (p.49). The autumn in which the unsuccessful search for the Child begins is then followed by another winter to emphasize Ovid’s state of mind. More significant than other seasons is the new spring that follows, in which Ryzak’s stories “straight out of the nightmare landscape of this place” (p.52) and the Child is finally found. Moreover, Ovid experiences a new being by being immersed in the world and dreaming of himself as a pool of water: “But I am afraid suddenly to be just a pool of rain in the forest, feeling the night creep over me ... I consider what it might be like to freeze” (p.56). Ovid and the Child communicate when the Child starts drinking from the bowl of gruels that Ovid provides for him.

Ovid experiences beauty in the following spring, stops “finding fault with creation” (p.64) and learns to accept it when he also plants flowers. Randall argues that the “poesis of spring necessarily spurs re-creation and [an imaginative] transformation of self which Ovid at this very point of the narrative first acknowledges as needful” (2007, p. 50). To represent the process of transformation, in a moment of spiritual and psychological awareness, Ovid begins to make a garden at Tomis: “I push [seeds] into the earth with a grimy forefinger and they sprout. I have begun to make, simple as it is, a garden” (p.59). This represents his change of perceptions and his connection with nature: “frivolous, part of the old life I have not quite abandoned. Only the time I spent upon them is play” (p.61). Moreover, it is in spring that Ovid finds the name for things when the flowers burst into colour: “suddenly my head is full of flowers of all kinds … I am Flora. I am Persephone” (p.25).

Ovid’s internal world reflects his external surroundings. In winter, Tomis is described as an intimidating place symbolizing Ovid’s inner thoughts as well as the tough conditions of life that make Ovid and the villagers “move about in a dream, or if our wits had turned to sharp little crystals ...” (p.47). Winter stands in contrast to spring during which the emotional relation between Ovid and the environment allows him to feel himself “loosen and flow again, reflecting the world. That is what spring means” (p.60). Ovid attunes noticeably to the qualities of winter especially after he and the Child flee from the village: “the noise is defeating, the groaning, the cracking, the grinding of the whiteness under us” (p.136).
Sexuality and Desire

Malouf pays considerable attention to Ovid’s sensual experience of being, a fulfilment of sexual desire, as a vital part of his metamorphosis in his journey of self-discovery. Damien Barlow believes that homoerotic desire is significant in Malouf’s fiction which “has consistently explored same-sex desire between men in a range of complex configurations that capture the multifacetedness and often contradictory nature of such non-normative erotic feelings and experiences” (2014, p.1). Physical pleasure and utilitarianism are inevitable aspects of life: ignoring or being deprived of those may deprive people of enjoying and experiencing higher ladders of happiness like spiritual fulfilment, love and contentment. Malouf believes that in the twenty-first century, one of the most significant features of what is thought of as an individual part in the world “is the return of the body as our most immediate, and in some cases our only, assurance of presence, of the rich and crowded and actively happening world-we-are-in” (2011, p. 49). This idea is reflected in the territory as the limit beyond which Ovid cannot pass, unless through his relation with the Child, ending in the death of one, and the life of the other. Ovid says: “Our bodies are final. We are moving all of us, in our common humankind, through the forms we love so deeply in one another, to what our hands have already touched in lovemaking and our bodies strain towards in each other’s darkness” (p.23). Malouf’s fiction with its profuse moments of same-sex desire between men can be perceived as both “articulating and disarticulating homoeroticism and possible homosexual identities and relationships” (Barlow 2014, p. 1). For example, when the Child, if considered as the symbol of a lover, leans close to Ovid, his breath shivers Ovid’s surface, and he “scoops up a handful, starlight dripping from his finger in the bright flakes that tumble” (p.57). To Ovid, for the Child, the emblematic nature of desire is “naked against the dusk, already moving away from me in his mind, already straining forward to whatever life it is that lies out there beyond our moment together” (p.150). Indyk considers An Imaginary Life as a drive towards sexual and transcendental experience. He believes that Malouf offers a clear description of sexual climax, and of the emotions that are followed by the fulfilment of sexual desire in Ovid’s dream.

That his drive towards the apprehension of primitive continuities is also, at the same time, the claiming of territory, beyond the prohibitions of the social world, where homosexual desire can be freely imagined and expressed, is clear from the progression enacted in the dream, for the deer’s lapping, intense though it is, is only
the prelude to the Child’s drinking at the pool, in a climax which is simultaneously sexual and transcendental. (1993, p.15)

In a scene of amazing intensity and desire, Ovid breaks the restraints of self and attains a high level of satisfaction in this world as he approaches the threshold of death: The Child’s body, the sunlight playing on it, and the dazzling waters. Indyk considers this as erotic; however, he construes this eroticism as “subsidiary to a more powerful blessing, the promise of an existence beyond death, which the Child offers the childless old man, as he wades deeper into the light” (1993, p.18). Upon building his relationship with the Child, the two boundaries of living in definite surroundings become obvious, as they both reflect upon their being through the existence of the ‘other’. Ovid knows of what he is composed, arising from his sense of interconnection with otherness. He writes: as if the energy that is in this fistful of black soil had suddenly opened, between my body and it, as between it and the grass stalks, some corridor along which our common being flowed” (p. 147). Stimulated by physical and linguistic exile, Ovid experiences metamorphosis through a growing mystical and sensual intimacy with the Child and the new surroundings, culminating in spiritual rebirth and a sense of unity with the natural world.

Brief Conclusion

*An Imaginary Life* is underpinned by romantic idealism of celebrating the power of imagination to inspire the process of transforming the individual’s perceptions and thereby initiating change. The changes are exemplified by experiences of sense of exile, relationships with the natural world, and a sense of cosmic unity regardless of cultural or geographical displacement. It values the act of writing in which the writer sees everything as continually evolving as he develops an awareness of his own spiritual wholeness. It also celebrates the process of becoming in the journey of self-discovery rather than developing a fixed entity.
Chapter III

Parsipur’s Women Without Men

The previous chapter examined Malouf’s account of Ovid’s forced exile. This chapter considers ways in which the condition of exile may also relate to experiences that are not explicitly defined as the imposed exclusion from one’s home. Instead, exile may refer to intellectual and internal displacement within the borders of one’s country. As Allatson and McCormack (2008, p. 11) argue, “a form of internal banishment applies to many native peoples”. Arguably, in writing in an oppressive situation where authors are denied freedom of speech and literary expression, the Iranian novelist Sharmush Parsipur (1946–) chooses an existence in exile while attempting to traverse ideological boundaries. Parsipur had not left Iran by the time she fashioned Women Without Men (1989/Eng. 1998). In Women Without Men, home is represented as a source of negativity, and a place of imprisonment, silence, and monotony as opposed to Iranians’ ideal notion of home as a place for love, discussion, and a source of support. This study perceives exile as a metaphor for the alienation of Parsipur as a writer whose identity is constructed and continually reconstructed, rewritten, and reinterpreted through writing the forbidden. Moreover, this study puts forward the claim that Parsipur’s characters experience nomadism in their effort to go beyond the cultural and social borders of their oppressive society.

Parsipur is an Iranian writer, born and raised in Tehran. She received her B.A. in sociology from Tehran University in 1973 after which she studied Chinese language and civilization at the Sorbonne University from 1976 to 1980. The Iranian government banned Women Without Men in the mid-1990s, which placed pressure on her to desist from writing such novels. Parsipur was arrested immediately after Women Without Men was published because it was a radical portrayal of social customs, sexual ideologies, traditions, and the aggressive process of male socialization. Parsipur finished her fourth novel, Blue-colored Reason in 1990, which remained unavailable in Iran until early 1992. She left for the United States in 1994 and, two years later, Prison Memoirs, her traumatic account of being held in various prisons on four occasions, was published in Sweden in 1996. She is the recipient of the first International Writers Project Fellowship from the Program in Creative Writing and the Watson Institute for International Studies at Brown University. Since 2006, she has been
making various programs for Radio Zamaneh which is situated in Amsterdam, Netherlands. She gained new attention twenty years after the novel’s first publication, when Shirin Neshat adapted it for her film version which won the 2009 Venice Film Festival Silver Lion for Best Director.

Parsipur’s works such as *Tuba and the Meaning of Night* (1989/ Eng. 2008), *Tea Ceremony in the Presence of Wolf* (1993/ Eng. 2011), and *Prison Memoirs* (1996) investigate gender inequality and trace the biases and the cultural and social issues in Iran. *Tea Ceremony in the Presence of Wolf* includes Parsipur’s stories and essays that together express the author’s view on complexities of identity, sense of dislocation, and the experience of being in the modern world. In *Prison Memoirs*, she provides a traumatic account of the period she spent in and out of prisons in post-revolutionary Iran. It captures the surreal experiences of being imprisoned and narrates the author’s profound and honest observations about the prison conditions as well as questions related to sexual relationships involving women and men, and gender inequality. She exposes the political and literary conditions of Iranian women writers before and after the revolution. In *Tuba and the Meaning of Night*, one of Iran’s best-selling novels, Parsipur juxtaposes reality and mysticism and covers eight decades of cultural, political, and religious history of Iran. From a distinctly Iranian viewpoint, Tuba, the main character experiences the rapid ideological and social changes that Iran undergoes in the twentieth century while at the same time discovering the reality of women’s existence in a patriarchal society. Tuba attempts to assert her identity and womanhood and the right of an independent existence. This novel expresses the author’s dissatisfaction with the male-dominated culture of Iran. These ideas were first reflected in her novella *Women Without Men* that will be explored in detail in the following sections.

**The Story of Parsipur’s Women and Patriarchal Subjugation**

*Women Without Men* chronicles the intertwining lives of five Iranian women all trapped in seemingly poignant and oppressive situations. These women are as follows: Zarrinkolah, as a reflection of the victimization of women in Iran in the 1950s, is a prostitute who is confined in a brothel. One day she thinks one of her customers does not have a head. From that day on all of the customers appear headless, which leads her to feel that she is losing her mind. To clear herself of all the nastiness and indignity, she goes to a public bathhouse and scrubs her
body. She feels “an urge to prostrate herself, naked as she was, in prayer and plead for God’s grace. It occurred to her that she did not remember the required formalities and incantations for such an appeal. She then remembered Imam Ali and his Agony in telling his secrets to a well. She thought of invoking his name and asking for his intercession with God on her behalf” (p. 65). After that, she goes to the garden to free herself of her guilty past in the hope of re-attaining self-respect and innocence.

The second woman is Farrokhlaqa, a well-off, middle-aged housewife. Laying emphasis on the convention of marriage and fictional narrative as primary objects of her work, Parsipur challenges the ideal of the compassionate wife to call into question the role that historiography and fiction have accomplished in portraying the ideal and honoured Iranian woman. Parsipur reveals the consequences of disaffection in matrimony triggered by diverse dispositions, as well as social and familial backgrounds. She represents this through Farrokhlaqa’s unfulfilled desire, an aristocratic woman who is trapped in a loveless, male-centered congenital marriage, in which her husband provides financial support, thereby expecting a set of ongoing obligations from her:

whenever he was in the house she would, she would lose her ability to move, and she would hide in a corner. She has a thirty-two year habit of not moving. She had gotten used to immobility. She knew only this and she knew instinctively, that when Golchehreh went out, mobility and happiness would come to her. (p.56)²

Her husband Golchehreh never speaks kindly to her, constantly jibing her about her increasing age; some comments include, “You’ll be fifty-one next month … You’ll be menopausal, Fakhur Dear” (p. 53).

Farrokhlaqa can never be happy with her husband because she has previously experienced another man’s love. She has kissed his lips many times and he has been affectionate and kind enough to remind her of her extreme beauty calling her “Vivien Leigh!” (p. 49). She has searched for those moments during the thirty-two years of her marriage including his compliment to her about her blue dress: “Always wear blue,” he said as he sidled up to her; “It becomes you so well” (p. 51). They had met after ten years and he had told her: “A woman of exceptional beauty, you didn’t have the right to marry. You should

All future references to the novel use the mentioned edition and will be incorporated in parentheses in the text.
have given all the men in the world the opportunity to feast their eyes” (p. 50); such feelings she had never experienced with her husband. Foucault suggests that, “Day dreams have the presentiment of what we want, need and lack, what we hope to find. Unlike dreams, they are not repressed or forgotten desires and experiences, they point to real possibilities” (1998, p. xxxii). Therefore, emotionally distant from her husband, Farrokhlaqa often daydreams about her imaginary life with Fakhroddin, her girlhood sweetheart. As Bhabha suggests, “On the one hand, the subject’s wandering, whether mental or also geographical, figures as a liberating escape from a suffocating over presence. Its mobile vagrancy celebrates a seemingly boundless imaginary which avoids any curtailment. On the other hand, the ‘exilic’ wandering of the mind also articulates that things are literally not in place, that the home one flees from is marked by inconsistencies and fissures (2008, p.29)”. When Farrokhlaqa’s husband speaks to her kindly after thirty-two years of their marriage, the shock causes her to respond by throwing out her hands and inadvertently pushing him down the stairs to his death. Milani suggests that, “the husband’s death/murder translates into his wife’s remorseless freedom and boundless mobility” (2011, p. 194). Farrokhlaqa longs for the opportunity to express herself and all her oppressed talents. She longs to cultivate associations with influential people to compensate for all those years spent in the presence of her husband. Therefore, she purchases a stunning country garden where the other women congregate and starts by writing poetry after her husband’s death:

Farrokhlaqa furnished the parlor as a music-cum-party room, equipped with comfortable furniture, chandeliers, and bookshelves displaying dozens of poetry anthologies that she had ordered from a book-store”. (p. 90)

The third character in Parsipur’s novel is the traditionally minded Faezeh. When Faezeh is going out “at four, in the afternoon on August 5, 1953” (p.10) to visit her friend Munis, her grandmother warns her of the demonstrations being everywhere (p.10). She is nervous about whether Munis’s brother Amir Khan will be at home or not as she murmurs, “he loves me, he loves not.” Her grandmother asks Faizeh to wear a chador to be safe and she chooses to do so without any disagreement: “Wordlessly Faizeh turned around and went upstairs. From under piles of clothing she brought out the black chador she wore at funerals and on religious occasions” (p.11). Faezeh looks aged because she has never enjoyed her life; she spends all her time thinking about her virginity, her clothes which must follow strict Islamic codes, cooking, and dreaming of marriage. Faezeh has been protecting her own virginity in the hope
of marrying Munis’s aggressive brother. However, on their way to the garden, two violent men rape both Munis and Faezeh.

Munis, another spinster like Faezeh, is always careful about her virginity. The story of Munis is narrated in three parts, leading the reader from a realist to a surrealist vision of the world. Parsipur ridicules society’s prevailing ideas about virginity and sexual relationships through Munis. After confining herself inside the house for twenty-eight years to vigilantly protect her virginity, Munis feels betrayed and devastated when she recognizes that she has been misinformed about the nature of her body upon realization that her virginity is not an easily torn curtain, but rather an orifice: “When she was eight years old, they had told her that God would never forgive a girl who lost her virginity. Now it had been three days and two nights since she had found out virginity is a hole, not a curtain. Something inside of her had broken. She was filled with a cold rage” (p.30).

Munis becomes so distressed and hopeless that she commits suicide by jumping off the roof of her house into the street in which she has never been allowed to freely walk all through her life:

From the roof she watched the street thick with crowds that seemed to be running back and forth, as if chasing each other. Then a convoy of trucks packed with people went by, followed by a procession of tanks. The sound of machinegun fire could be heard from a distance. Munis was thinking obsessively that for as long as she could remember she had looked at the garden through the window convinced that virginity was a delicate, vulnerable membrane. At the age of eight she had been told that God would not forgive a girl who lost her virginity in any way. Now, a couple of days ago she had learned that virginity was not a curtain but an orifice. Something had broken inside her and a cold rage penetrated her body. (pp. 24-25)

Nasrin Rahimieh identifies patriarchal discourse as the source of Munis’s anger: “she has not maintained her virginity but that she has taken the term too literally. In other words, language has made it possible for her to be terrified and ignorant of her body and to submit to the logic of the patriarchy” (1992, p. 110). Munis’s act of buying the book *The Secrets to Sexual Satisfaction* includes a sense of revenge of a lack of recognition of her sexual desires and body. Later on, Munis is strangled and killed by her brother for standing up to him. Munis’s death and resurrection and further death and resurrection all undermine what appears at first to be a realistic mode of presentation. Munis decides to broaden her feminine and social
knowledge during a journey to the garden after she reflects about the inequity and humiliating aspects of her life. Munis’s murder, revival and resurrection, and the superpower bestowed upon her to read others’ minds in every situation she encounters, make her realize the unfairness and the tyranny of existing mental structures in her life as she moves towards self-knowledge. When Farrokhlaqa asks her if she can read minds, she says, “Yes, Ma’am. For instance, Your Ladyship, you want to become a member of parliament. That poor girl over there was a prostitute until yesterday. I just know these things” (p.85).

Mahdokht is a former teacher with an intense fear of sexuality, who quits her job as a teacher after her colleague asks her out. Mahdokht, the fifth character of the story, visits her brother’s garden in Karaj where she witnesses an illegal sexual encounter between Fati, the maid, and Yadolla, her brother’s gardener. She thinks of reporting everything to her brother, Houshang Khan, and his wife but she knows that he might murder Fati for committing such a disgraceful act. Finally, she promises not to tell anything to her brother when Fati pleads to her and swears that Yadolla wants to marry her. However, Yadolla leaves the garden suddenly, leaving everybody surprised by his unannounced departure. Mahdokht cannot abide the burden of her virginity anymore, and therefore proclaiming her virginity like a tree, she decides to plant her feet in the earth, sprouting roots and growing leaves:

Soon it would spread to the rest of the continent. Americans would buy shoots of it to plant in California and colder climates, although they would mispronounce it “Madokt.” Soon, as a result of widespread usage in other languages, the name would be corrupted to “Medok” or “Madok.” Four centuries from now etymologists would passionately argue that both the terms share the same root, “Madik,” and it was originally from Africa. The botanists on the other hand would raise objections that a cold-climate tree could not grow in Africa. (p.9)

Mahdokht considers a sexual relationship as an unforgivable taboo. In Iranian society, colleagues are addressed by their family names followed by Ms or Mr unless they are very close. When Mahdokht’s colleague invites her to a movie, she becomes so annoyed that she refuses to go to school anymore. One day Mr. Ehteshami asked her, “Miss Parhami, Would you like to go to the cinema with me tonight? There is a good movie playing” (2011, p. 3). As long as Mr. Ehteshami talks to her about school matters and students, she is contented to be the centre of attention. However, once he moves one step further, she feels shy and reacts very strongly. Imagining that her female colleagues smile at her when Mr. Ehteshami talks to
her, she goes “pale, not knowing how to deal with this forwardness. What did the little man think?” (2011, p. 3). Arguably, Mahdokht is both a symbol of women’s victimisation and a follower of the rigid social norms poisoning the minds of so many Iranians. She represents Iran’s cultural collective conscious in which male and female socializing processes or relationships are governed by religious and traditional beliefs.

The five female characters in this work, whose names form the subject and title of two chapters, congregate in ‘The Garden’ on the outskirts of Tehran. The remaining three chapters that come in the middle of the story are named as ‘Two girls on the road,’ ‘Farrokhlaqa’s Garden,’ and ‘The Garden’. They have to undergo a major re-evaluation of their beliefs by disturbing the cultural assumptions of masculine/feminine territory to voyage deep into the midst of dangers and intrude into what are assumed to be masculine spaces.

Parsipur represents the female characters’ feelings of being exiled and dislocated within their own culture, and their dissatisfaction, both through reflecting upon their routine encounters with male domination, and their different reactions to them: ignorance, resistance, and fantasy. *Women Without Men*, reflecting upon recent Iranian history, is a magic realist depiction of female subjugation, freedom, success, and failure. Moreover, “these women’s common attraction to and ultimate arrival in the garden is closely related to these preoccupations with the virginity and chastity each woman has been taught to cultivate” (Motlagh 2011, p. 108). Dislocation, as a narrative that needs to be explored through imagination and meditation, provides some advantages for Parsipur and her women. Dissatisfied with the home’s real living conditions, Parsipur’s women have a tendency towards fantasising and imaging a more democratic life. All of these women suffer from the lack of a steady, respected subjectivity, and are in search of self-determination.

**Writing about Taboos and Ridiculing the Imposed Ideologies**

Parsipur sets her novel in the early 1950s of a brutal, conservative regime, when the US-backed coup d’état overthrew the democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh and supported the dictatorial rule of the Shah. Parsipur represents her dissatisfaction with the 1979 revolution through her portrayal of the early 1950s (See Appendix). Parsipur implies that the coup d’état paved the path to eventual 1979 revolution in which the imposition of Islamic hijab over women was just one of a number of mandatory
ways to impose restrictions on women’s freedom of expression. This is because although people struggled for political and religious freedom—rights for ethnic minorities and women’s rights and gender equality—the 1979 revolution ended up replacing one dictatorship with another (see Appendix for the historical and religious context). Accordingly, Parsipur attempts to represent the similarities of the notorious 1953-coup d’état and its oppressive regime with that 1979 revolution and the subsequent years leading to 1998, the year the novella was written and read. Parsipur comments obliquely on post-revolutionary Iran in which none of the challenges within Iranian society—gender inequality, lack of freedom of expression, restrictive social conventions—had been resolved in the last 35 years.

Fereydoun Hoveyda claims that the Islamic regime aimed at “the reestablishment of traditional institutions and the removal of all modernist reforms” (2003, p. 91). Consequently, Iranians faced “secularist modernization on the one hand and religious orthodoxy and traditionalism on the other” (Hoveyda 2003, p. 1). Eventually, this censorship extended to books and any subjects that were viewed as a threat to religious and social beliefs. There was a severely dichotomous view of gender in which the women’s domain “was a private world, where self-expression, either bodily or verbal, was confined within the accepted family circle” (Milani 1992, 46). It was assumed that “public disclosure of any of these aspects of a woman’s life was considered an abuse of privacy and a violation of societal taboos. Thus, a woman’s physical invisibility was completed by her silence, her public nonexistence”. This traditional society demanded that “a woman’s body be covered, her voice go unheard, her portrait never painted, and her life story remain untold” (ibid.). In light of that, the Iranian-born French artist and writer, Marjane Satrapi (in an interview with Kaufman 2006) describes sex as “a big taboo in any country in which you don’t have democracy” and explains that, in *Embroideries* (2003/ Eng. 2005), she wishes to discuss female rights to sexual pleasure “in a nonaggressive way” because “[it] is the first key to the open door of freedom and democracy because until this problem is solved, of course we cannot talk about democracy”.

The representation of women as ignorant and uneducated remained influential in Iranian feminist discourses well into the twentieth century. Milani states that the female body “has been increasingly used as a battlefield, a metaphor, an emblem” by the Iranian government “in the name of Islam or nationalism” (2011, 51). Afsaneh Najmabadi maintains that Iranian modernity necessitated the construction of “a veiled language and a disciplined de-eroticized body.” Therefore, the woman of modernity’s “very disciplined language and
body became the embodiment of the new order” (1993, p. 510). These factors explain Parsipur’s imprisonment immediately after *Women Without Men* was published: it advocates a fundamental change in women’s literary discourse, and gender and social power relations through making women more conscious of their marginality, and the rigid dress code and obvious demarcations of a patriarchal system that allow women to find themselves in a murky zone between such binary oppositions as the inner/outer world, utopia/reality and the past/present. Motlagh argues that Parsipur “re-examines the conventions and ideals of the social realism that dominated prose fiction before the revolution” (2011, 18), a time when literature emphasised patriarchal concerns rather than equity and freedom of speech.

Parsipur contributed to the emergence of Iranian women’s literature after the 1979 revolution when the state’s religious and suppressive policy is inspired through supervision of the social and cultural structures of a feminist perspective in literature, its themes, metaphors, symbols, characterization, and settings. Talattof argues that, “literature goes beyond the aesthetics of self-expression to serve as a powerful social and collective reaction to prevailing social conditions. Parsipur reflects this powerful devotion to bring about change” (2000, p. 175). Parsipur’s writing provides a profound representation of the complex nature of femininity and of the complexity that may exist when it comes to relationships between women and men.

The sexualisation of the female body and the ideology of male dominance and sexual control of women deprived them of their sexual agency and women’s subordination to men. Under these new circumstances, new viewpoints for women’s literary discourse and their sexuality were provided. Parsipur has been highly influential in the critical interpretation of social norms and popular culture and sometimes in the development of contemporary female writers in Iran after the 1979 revolution. It was a time when censorship extended to books and any subjects that were viewed as a threat to religious and social beliefs. The imposed ideologies have inspired Parsipur to reclaim a woman’s personal identity. According to Najmabadi, “the desexualisation of women’s bodies was necessary to facilitate the shift from traditional “homosocial” spaces to a “heterosocial” space in which men and women were encouraged to socialize” (1993, p. 489). In response to Golbarg Bashi’s (2006) question of where she found the courage to write so publicly about taboos like moments of eroticism and sexual intimacy, Parsipur explains:
You see, Golbarg jan, from the time I was a young woman I discovered some secrets. And that was that unless you have sexual experiences you cannot enter the domain of public work and social activities. Those in power know this fact and thus transform women to sexual objects. I mean they first and foremost repress and denigrate women, and then they direct them to put a wedding gown on and go to their husband’s home and come out wearing the shroud. I mean to say that they train women in certain limited roles. So the most important barrier in front of a woman who has ambitions in creative work and wants to do something important is to overcome her fear of sexual taboos and matters. It is very funny that in our society you come across women who are more than seventy years old and still don’t know what an orgasm is. You come across young girls who go to a public bath and are afraid to sit down for fear of getting pregnant by some semen that might be floating around. There are some strange fears around which must be overcome. The way to do so is to talk about sexual matters as much as possible openly and honestly. In order to make it possible for women to get to know their own bodies. So she knows who she is and where she stands. (In an Interview with Golbarg Bashi’s, 2006)

Parsipur, however, attempts to prevent women from being considered as subjects in the hands of men through the act of writing about taboos, including female sexuality, thus challenging the sense of self-exile and un-belonging in women. Cixous is in favour of a difference “rooted in the sensual and sexual experience of the body” (Blyth and Sellers 2004, 26) that “becomes most clearly perceived on the level of jouissance” (Cixous and Clément 1986, 82). Cixous focuses on the woman’s perspective about sexual relationships and the way her image of her body consolidates mental, physical, and spiritual aspects of the female experience. Cixous’s ideas can be usefully traced in Parsipur’s work through criticising the society where virginity is a significant criterion for men to choose a girl. She represents this through Faezeh’s concern to make sure that Amir Khan knows she is a virgin. In another example, Parsipour explores Mahdokht’s “psychic state—a ‘feminine’ mode which exempts her from the demands of clarity and permits multiple meanings”: “Well, I am not an acorn, but a tree. I should plant myself (8).” In a magic realist scene, her seeds travel with the water to all corners of the world and she no longer needs to worry about her virginity and womanhood. Mahdokht fulfils her desire to function in the society through turning into a tree, a fertile virgin who can produce many creatures like herself: “She would become thousands and thousands of branches. She would cover the entire world” (23). The garden is feminised
through Mahdokht who is irrigated by the kind gardener and Zarrinkolah. She becomes covered with blooms and accompanies “the chirping birds by singing a haunting song” (91). Additionally, as Zarrinkolah’s pregnancy advances, the contour of her body changes: “Zarrinkolah became increasingly translucent, like crystal, with light shining through her. Munis would sometimes look at the river through her as she sat by the window watching the currents” (94). Nasrin Rahimieh suggests, “that Parsipur creates female characters whose bodies vanish into thin air or abandon their human shape, indicates a need to take women’s bodies out of the clutches of a patriarchy at once obsessed with and terrified by female sexuality” (1992, 111). By breaking taboos about female identity, virginity, rape, and male violence, Parsipur attempts to overcome exile. She not only denies the patriarchal social conventions, but also she struggles against the male-dominated literary traditions and innovations at the time in which the novella is set.

**Feminine Writing**

Parsipur gives voice to her characters, allowing them—representative women from Iran—to articulate their thoughts on issues like virginity and rape in the patriarchal world of post-revolutionary Iran in a way that few authors have. Teresa de Lauretis considers feminist identity as “multiple, shifting, and even self-contradictory” (1986, p. 9). Feminist theory thinks of women “as a multiple and internally contradictory category” (Robinson 1991, p. 3). For Cixous, female writing extends from écriture féminine, which “derives pleasure from this gift of alterability. I am spacious, singing flesh, on which is grafted no one knows which I, more or less human, but alive because of transformation” (1976, 889). Cixous’ medusa, used as a metaphor of diversity applied to women’s mind and body, opposes the control of female sexuality and voice. The writhing serpent heads symbolize multi-layered aspects of female sexuality that attempt to overcome the social and ideological frameworks that suppress women within personal, literary, cultural, and historical contexts. Cixous defies the patriarchal system and emphasizes the significance of the fluidity of feminine writing to unleash their repressed desires and derive “pleasure from this gift of alterability” (1976, p. 889). Through language a woman can express herself as the “dispersible, prodigious, stunning, desirous and capable of others, of the other woman that she will be” (Cixous 1976, p. 890). The woman as Medusa “rejoices” (Cixous 1976, 892) through “life, thought, [and] transformation” (Cixous 1976, 893), and is the one who “nourishes life—a love that has no
commerce with the apprehensive desire that provides against the lack and stultifies the strange; a love that rejoices in the exchange that multiplies” (Cixous 1976, 893). Accordingly, Parsipur opposes long-established restrictions of femininity, and allows herself and her women to experience happiness through female empowerment and écriture feminine.

Patriarchy has conditioned women to be terrified, even appalled, at the thought of their own sexuality. However, Parsipur does not follow the traditional literary pathway in which women write from male-oriented perspectives to have their work accepted and appreciated. Her work can be read as a consciously feminine endeavour when she discusses the absence of a central female character based on masculinists ideologies of an idealised woman. She utilises her own feminine emotions and feminine language to explore the characters’ concerns and challenges through love and feminine-oriented perspectives. Amy Motlagh declares that because “women writing about women have produced some of the most compelling experiments in postmodernism, it is tempting to suggest that it is the supplementarily of women’s narratives—suddenly available in spades after the revolution (1979)—that deconstructs the façade of truth in representation that the masculinist tradition of Persian realism presented” (2011, 101).

Cixous celebrates pregnancy and motherhood as a positive and concrete symbol of a woman’s mind and her productive “non-finite” (Cixous 1976, 891), influenced by female affection and love which “touches you, the equivoice that affects you, fills your breasts with an urge to come to language and launches your force; the rhythm that laughs you; the intimate recipient who makes all metaphors possible and desirable” (Cixous 1976, 882). The mother within a woman represents the “thousand and one thresholds of ardour,” and this contrasts with “the old single-grooved mother tongue” (Cixous 1976, 885). Parsipur reclaims women’s physical self-expression and provides an insight of the creative mother within her female characters through actual childbirth. Parsipur expresses her creativity through Zarrinkolah, who has been devalued by men all through life but in the end gives birth to a flower-like girl before abandoning the liminal, temporary garden for the possibility of a more promising future. In the end of the story, Parsipur writes:

Zarrinkolah married the Kind Gardener and became pregnant. In time, she gave birth to a morning glory. She loved it as her own child. The morning glory flourished on the bank of the river. “Zarrinkolah,” her husband called her, “we must go on a journey.” Zarrinkolah cleaned the house and packed a bundle of clothing for the
journey. “But we don’t need clothes where we’re going. Leave your bundle behind.” She obeyed and took her husband by the hand. They embraced the morning glory. The morning glory wrapped its foliage around them and they all rose to the sky in a puff of smoke. (p.113)

The characters’ journey to and from the garden symbolizes the possibility of passing the borders of religious and societal conventions. The garden emblems the dislocated female characters’ psychological and cultural experience of being by positioning them between the states of exilic experience and the possibility of remaking place and identity in response to dislocation. The garden also signals the significance of movement; for Parsipur’s women need to overcome exile by confronting the limitations of their conservative society.

**Of Other Spaces: Garden and Heterotopias, Re-evaluation and Restoration**

Female sexuality in this novel is represented by the symbolic garden, as a site of pleasure, healing and growth. Khansari et al argue the centrality of garden to Persian life:

> It is here [in the garden] rather than in houses that Persian life is fully lived. Few people cherish gardens more; in few cultures are its images so pervasive. From the beginning, its water and trees, its flowers and birds informed Persian religion, imagination, language, and arts, and this was so no matter who the ruler or what the belief. It is as if a great flowering vine stretched back through the millennia; blossom, leaf, and tendril unbroken by the swings of a turbulent and often tragic history. (2004, p. 17)

The garden, as an obvious motif of the Mashreq and Maghreb, is a very ancient symbol that predates Islam and even the Arabs. The oldest texts of Babylon, and some of its architecture, deal with the garden—a secret, private and sacred space—devoted to love and the deity. It symbolizes the Garden of Eden, which the ancients placed at the source of four different major rivers, variably, in Iran, Asia Minor or Iraq. Babylonian, Assyrian, Persian and Egyptian as well as Indian and Chinese art are all focused on the garden and its beauty, so it is of little surprise that the Bible also uses the garden as a metaphor of the female body and the act of love (Bresheeth 2010, p. 756). Neshat claims that:
The concept of a garden, as a mystical environment, has been central to the mystical literature in Persian and Islamic traditions, such as in the classic poetry of Hafez, Khayyam and Rumi where the garden is referred to as the space for ‘spiritual transcendence’. In Iranian culture, the garden has also been regarded in political terms, suggesting ideas of ‘exile,’ ‘independence’ and ‘freedom.’ (2010, cited in Palmer-Mehta 2015, p. 85)

The garden, still unaffected by social customs and traditions, is a place of mutual understanding and of feminine regeneration well beyond oppressive, hierarchical structures. In the garden, women learn a new experience of self-belonging and a different reality free from traditional cultural and historical narratives. As Milani puts it, “in the garden the women experience freedom through different activities: they turn it into a literary salon of sorts. They read each other’s poetry, offer criticism, exchange ideas, reinvent themselves, and break out of the prison they lived in” (2011, 196). The garden serves as a place in which women find calming strength and serenity, and come to terms with their existence. Motlagh suggests that, “The garden explicitly becomes the site in which women’s problems are buried, but that burial is regenerative—it is the burial of the seed, not of the corpse. From such burials, these problems may—like Mahdokht herself—nonetheless produce their own antidote” (2011, 109-110). Therefore, the garden is feminised through Mahdokht, who is irrigated by the Gardener, and through Zarrinkolah, the former prostitute. She gets covered with blooms and accompanies “the chirping birds by singing a haunting song … she was fed human milk for three months. Toward the end of April the pressure within her had reached explosive force. It burst out suddenly and violently” (91, 105).

Foucault argues that “the garden is the smallest parcel of the world and then it is the totality of the world” (1986, p. 26). Individuals can create their own garden, and achieve reconciliation, through listening to the language of nature. One “symbolic importance of the garden image is the domestication of nature” (Askeland 2008, p. 71). To have a beautiful garden, the kind gardener, Munis, and Zarrinkolah put energy into “fertiliz[ing] the tree” (p.88), learning “bricklaying, tree planting, landscaping” (89), and collecting dewdrops to “irrigate the tree” (91). All the women get involved in renovating the house in the garden: “Zarrinkolah would prepare the mortar; Munis would take it to the building; Faezeh would carry bricks in a wheelbarrow” (87). The garden and the house are not shaped without human effort; nature and humans need to be united for a new beginning in these women’s lives.
It is significant, however, to mention that, although the garden in this story provides the means to some positive transformations including Zarrinkolah giving birth to a flower, it does not function as a permanent utopian place, but rather serves as a “heterotopia”. The state of nature in which the characters are placed acts as a mirror reflecting the characters’ society, a valuable impact of their self-discovery and a new experience of change and development. This reminds the reader of Foucault’s idea of heterotopias described as “localisable” utopias or “actually realized” utopias, which contrast with that of utopias. Foucault suggests that heterotopias, generally associated with marginality, conflict, disobedience, and hybridity, are other spaces, a sort of counter-arrangement (1997, 357). He draws attention to gardens, and Persian gardens more specifically, as the oldest instances of heterotopias that take the shape of incongruous sites:

One should not forget that the garden, an astonishing creation now thousands of years old, had in the Orient very deep and seemingly superimposed meanings. The traditional garden of the Persians was a sacred space that was supposed to bring together inside its rectangle four parts representing the four parts of the world, with a center space still more sacred than the others, that was like an umbilicus, the navel of the world (it is there that the water basin and fountain were). All the vegetation of the garden was supposed to be distributed in that space, within this sort of microcosm. (2008, 19)

Foucault’s reading of the garden can also be extended to Iran’s post-revolutionary period represented in its literature. It offers a kind of a real or virtual space that is outside of all social, political, and cultural places of Iran, and that has been thrown into complete confusion after the coup d'état. Parsipur’s garden functions as a site of self-reflection for women’s nomadic experience “in which all the real arrangements, all the other real arrangements that can be found within society, are at one and the same time represented, challenged and overturned: a sort of place that lies outside all places and yet is actually localizable” (Foucault 1997, 351).

These women all find refuge from the patriarchal system that controls all decisions and actions. However, their unity and original bond do not survive and they begin to argue and separate along class boundaries. They become distracted by trivial jealousies. Consequently, their worldly needs motivate them to act against their imagination of an utopian life. The novel discloses several references to the psychological disagreements
between Farrokhaq and the other female characters after their peaceful gathering in the garden. Farrokhaq becomes tired of Faizeh and Mahdokht’s arguments and angry at Zarinkolah for not giving them a hand when there are so many guests in the garden. Farrokhaq does not want to return to the garden because she does not have the patience to tolerate them. She marries so that she can make some “progress” (p.112). After Faizeh settles in the garden, she finds it irritating that Zarinkolah spends most of her time alongside the Kind Gardener, tree planting, landscaping, humming and enjoying incessant jollity. Some signs of jealousy are expressed as Faizeh is single by then and feels “a tinge of sadness” when she thinks of Amir Khan: “deep down she nursed a longing to be married to him, not so much out of love for him but a desire for vindication. To have him as a husband would vindicate her womanhood” (p. 89). She even envies the “prostitute” whom she believes has won too easily, “having achieved the sanctity of light, as spontaneously and effortlessly as laughing” (pp.100-101). Therefore, although the garden promotes rejuvenation and rehabilitation in women, by helping them go through the process of independence, relief and companionship, this terminates when they return to the society from which they had escaped after a re-evaluation of it. Yet, this garden allows the women to re-evaluate their society before returning to the society. The restoration is, for example, demonstrated when Munis asks the Kind Gardener:

“How can I turn into light?” There was no answer. She lacked the potential to become a tree, it wasn’t in her nature. She was not fertile either. She knew that she was rotting from within. She knew that what led to the clarity of light was love, something she had never experienced in her life. She had progressed to the edge of wonderment, but love was oceans away. She knew that love would come if she could sincerely feel the essence of a tree past the roughness of its bark. (p.100)

Finally, the Kind Gardener tells her: “Now I tell you to go in the search of darkness anew. Descend to the depths, to the depths of depths. There you will see the light aglow in your hands, by your side. That is being human. Now, go become human” (p.110). Munis turns into a tiny whirlwind and rises to the sky: “Seven years passed and she passed through seven deserts, fatigued and aged, devoid of hope and vision, but replete with experience. That was all. She arrived in the city after seven years. She bathed, put on fresh cloths, and became a simple schoolteacher” (p.110). Munis’s transformation into a teacher is what Parsipur values as Munis is a realist character who educates herself and experiences the realities of society. She turns into a useful individual who no longer acts according to the patriarchal system.
The Kind Gardener in this work functions symbolically as a new experience of being. When Farrokhlaqa asks the Kind Gardener about his real name, he answers: “‘What is the point of knowing my real name? Everyone calls me ‘Kind Gardener.’ You too can call me that’” (p.80). By just touching a bush, the Kind Gardener who “did have a green thumb” turns the garden into a flower grove: “it blossomed into a hundred flowers the following week” (p.87). He can even make Mahdokht sing for the guests in Farrokhlaqa’s party:

As soon as the gardener left, singing could be heard in the garden. The guests fell silent, transfixed where they were. It was as if they were all encased in a drop of water the size of an ocean. Slowly seeping through the layers of the earth, the drops joined a myriad of elements at the earth’s inner core in a dance, a perpetual, harmonic movement with no beginning or end. It was simultaneously slow and rapid. The guests’ arms lifted and began to swing overhead, hanging like ropes from the sky, moving so quickly they appeared as a shadow. (p.93)

Women’s experiences in this story might be explained through Relf’s theory of retreat which is “positive strategy; as an evolutionary, necessary, but temporary and recurrent part of an oscillatory process, as communities arises out of structure, only to settle and solidify itself once more into structure” (1991, 139). Faezeh and Farrokhlaqa’s situations are not, as the narrator declares, utterly flourishing and pleasing after their return to mainstream society. Faezeh’s married life with Amir “is neither good nor bad. It just goes on.” Farrokhlaqa marries Merrikhi:

They both made progress. Merrikhi went to the parliament. Farrokhlaqa got involved in charitable activities. He was awarded a medal for meritorious service. She became the honorary head of an orphanage. He was appointed to a foreign-service post in Europe. She went with him. They have a fairly good relationship, not torrid by any means, but not frigid either. (p.112)

The garden can, therefore, be perceived as both a place of refuge for a more free and democratic society and a space of exile that is finally influenced by the socio-cultural constraints and apprehensions that women bring with them. While not thoroughly hopeful, Parsipur seems to be implying that women can live a brighter and more hopeful life through following their own desires.
Nomadic Experience of Women Without Men

The borders of identity and nature are central in *Women Without Men* in which characters struggle for a sense of belonging to the society to which they nationally belong but cannot conform to its conventions and regulations. In Braidotti’s terms, Parsipur’s women’s nomadic consciousness consists in “not taking any kind of identity as permanent” (1994, 33). The nomad confronts the ideological and social constraints and then passes through them to another level of identity. The theme of nomadism in this story is the recognition of the lack of place for women in both public and personal life in the Iran of the time in which the novel is set. The theme of nomadism is echoed through Munis who believes in the inefficiency of traditional customs, lacks a strong sense of belonging to home and is determined to be in an everlasting, though slow, mobility. She has no fixed place in her life and wishes to live a life of constant movement even if at a snail’s pace. When Farrokhlaqa asks her if she would like to stay in the garden, she replies:

> Of course. Unfortunately it is still not a time for a woman to travel by herself. She must either become invisible, or stay cooped up in a house. My problem is that I can no longer remain housebound, but I have to, because I am a woman. Perhaps I can make a little progress at a time. But then I will have to be stuck in a house for a while. Maybe this is the only way I can see the world, at a snail’s pace. That is why I gratefully accept your invitation (pp.85-86).

Parsipur’s novella intersects with Braidotti’s work on nomadic subjects, who, according to Braidotti, “are those who have a peripheral consciousness and have forgotten to forget injustice and symbolic poverty: their memory is activated against the stream; they enact a rebellion of subjugated knowledges” (2011, 60). Moreover, through writing, Parsipur never completely takes on the limits of one national, fixed identity. Rather, she draws upon her embodied experience of dislocation to transcend the limitations imposed by patriarchal society and to explore questions of identity and creativity.

The garden does not bring everlasting satisfaction to them but helps them to develop the ability to make up decisions rather than following others’ instructions and social customs. The brief-lived utopia that the women make in the garden terminates when they decide to go back to the society from which they had escaped. Through Zarrinkolah’s uniting with the kind gardener and giving birth to a flower-like girl, Faezeh’s marriage to Amir Khan, Farrokhlaqa’s attempt to compose poetry and do painting and, finally, her marriage to
Hasti Abbasi

Merrikhi, Mahdokht’s planting her feet in the garden, and Munis’s turning in a tiny whirlwind before becoming a teacher; all decide to “coexist in the positive expression of their respective differences” (Braidotti 2002, 172). Parsipur’s women need to be in motion to overcome their traditional backgrounds, and live their lives based on their new life perspectives and ideologies, together with a spirit of cooperation and compromise. To put it in Bogue’s words, they live by “an unfixing of identities and inauguration of a process of metamorphosis” through “subversion of categories” (2010, p. 20) rather than struggling with them.

**Brief Conclusion**

A questioning feminine voice emerges through *Women Without Men*, in which dislocated female characters avoid acting according to the norms of a society, which has imposed on them a limited idea of what it means to be a woman. Parsipur’s dislocated women experience becoming nomadic in their attempt to cross boundaries, without having a determined destination, and discover “a non-unitary vision of the subject” (Braidotti 2011, 92). *Women Without Men* explores the boundaries and the ways that women attempt to experience a more fluid life through transgressing the imposed rigid norms of selfhood as well as genre and social boundaries.
Chapter IV

Writing ‘And the Raindrops Fill the Sea’

I arrived in Australia after months of waiting for PhD admission and visa approval. Finally, I was in the airport where there were no familiar sounds, faces, sights, smells, sympathetic environments, and memories of my home. Out of the airport, I was confronted with an environment that was completely different from my place of origin. From the very beginning, this land with its smiling people triggered a deep sense of loss of my once coherent sense of identity. Yet at the same time, it spelt freedom and self-realization in me. The inspiration for my novel comes from my personal experience of exile. In my first encounter with another reality, another culture, and most importantly another language, I strongly felt the loss of my family, a lack of ability, anger, and depression. In my attempt to fit myself mentally and psychologically, I used my adventurous soul to seek new knowledge and make new connections in the new culture. I tried to adopt the culture of Australia and participate in its cultural environment and activities. After a while, I felt less worried and less homesick. However, this period did not take long because I missed the genuine smiles of my family and close friends and I felt people did not care much about the immigrants’ experiences. Feeling alienated affected me in every aspect of my life, from language, perception, and culture to identity and “the loss of a living connection” (Hoffman, 1991, p. 107). This exilic mode of living on boundary-lines produced a constant relativisation of my culture, language, and self in my memory. In my attempt to reach a higher level of proficiency in English, I felt incomplete and less at home by the borders of language. Moreover, the more I missed my family, the more I felt guilty for leaving them. I still do. I kept on dreaming of my mother. Once I dreamed she was lying sick in a bed in a large room behind a glass wall. I wanted to hug her but I could not find a way inside. I cried and begged people around to show me the way in but nobody really seemed to care. I woke up crying in the middle of night. After some minutes, I set my laptop on my bed and wrote down about my dream, confusion, and homesickness. I felt so much excitement and so much relief after I finished writing. It was then when I realized I needed to continue my writing as an attempt to transform the exile experience and sense of alienation.

Writing in one’s mother language provides “the seamless connection” (de Courtivron, 2003, p. 1) between emotions associated with the language, and “discarding one’s native
tongue is also profoundly unsettling; it means constructing a new identity syllable by syllable.” (Kellman 2003, p. xiv). Dorfman reflects on the immigrants and their experience of a new language:

All migrants through history have invariably transferred with them the syllables and significances enclosed in the language they learned as they grew, the language that gave them a slow second birth as surely as their mother gave them a relatively rapid first one. That language, which contains the seeds of their most intimate identity, will be put to the test once the voyage is over, especially if the migrants happen to be unfortunate enough to move to a foreign land. Because waiting for them at the new location are multiple others—with their own dead, their own ceremonies and cemeteries, and of course, their own tongue. It is more frequent in our globalizing world that those who arrive on a hostile shore are faced with an alien tongue. And will therefore be condemned to live a bilingual fate. (2003, p. 30)

During the process of looking for the self in writing in a new culture and language, which is far from “the sounds of home and childhood and origin” (de Courtivron, 2003, p. 1), the exiled writer needs to alternate his/her feelings and identities while switching languages. Reflecting on his experience of writing in English, Ferré comments that, “writing in English is like looking at the world through a different pair of binoculars: It imposes a different mindset” (2003, p. 138). Ferré believes that being a bilingual writer means two different experiences:

A bilingual writer is really two different writers, has two very different voices, writes in two different styles, and, most important, looks at the world through two different sets of glasses. This takes a splitting of the self that doesn’t come easily and can be dangerous. In traversing linguistic borders, there is a real danger of finding yourself stranded in the connecting labyrinths of words, of losing contact with the spring of the unconscious from which ideas flow. (2003, p. 138)

However, I believe writers do not need to cut off connections with their childhood and memories to write in a second language. On the contrary, writing in a foreign language provides the writer with a great advantage of reflection on and revelation of self and a new sense of belonging. As Ferré suggests, “having two different views of the world is profoundly enriching” (2003, p. 138). Writing in a second language and most importantly creating characters in a new concept and culture, can function as an instrument of integration, thus
contribute to a new self-perception. Moreover, I believe the bilingual writer has the opportunity to draw and keep the readers’ attention in the new country by making connections between people and cultures.

Writing in English is difficult but it is also deeply encouraging to experience a new understanding of the self while creating a bridge between words and worlds. After difficult periods of confusion about the relation between language and identity in exile, I decided to reconstruct identities and allow the two languages to cohabit in me through writing about Iranian characters who live in Australia and have brought with them their cultural heritage, memories, and dreams. In Hoffman’s view, “It is possible now to go back and forth with the knowledge that both languages that have constructed me exist within one structure; and to know that the structure is sturdy enough to allow for pliancy and openness—and, who knows, perhaps for new discoveries yet” (2003, p. 54). During the process of thinking and writing in English, I sometimes felt a strong sense of belonging to this country. Writing in English made me feel an emotional tie to the new culture. It let me experience a different identity and perceive the world differently, all of which made me appreciate my experiences more. I rarely thought about what it meant to be a Persian writer per se but I often reflected on what it meant to be a Persian writer who tries to make connections with the new culture through writing in English and explore self-identity and self-esteem while shaping the discourse for my audience. The bridge I made between words and the world helped me to realize that identity is not necessarily a fixed thing but rather changeable. I still do not feel I thoroughly belong to the new country. However, I believe while my Iranian cultural identity plays a significant role in my experience of the world, my personal identity developed through words and new experiences can take me to the other side of the bridge.

Becoming is a persistent challenge to me; therefore, informed by the knowledge that it is not the place where one writes that is important, but rather the nature of the creative work and in my desire for change and connection to the world, I tried to push myself “to the limit in a constant encounter with external, different others” (Braidotti 2011, p. 35). Braidotti subscribes to the idea of nomadism as “not fluidity without borders, but rather an acute awareness of the nonfixity of boundaries” (2011, p. 66). In view of that, creative writing helped me to adapt to different cultural realities, redefine the boundaries between myself and others, and thus transcend the very variables of culture, class, age, and language. Home is not merely a physical location, but also the connection between self and specific features of life in a specific place. I desire to discover a home, which as the philosopher and playwright
Gabriel Marcel puts it, “should be essentially a here” (1947, p. 77). Marcel perceived the world as a transitional place in which he tried to “extend as much as possible the region where one is at home.” My creative writing confronts the challenge of exile through constructing a story that involves the internal and physical exilic experience, and the possibility of transforming the situation. Creating an imaginary world could help restore the gap between my past and present. Judith Melton suggests, “Writing process itself creates a transformation for the exile, helping him or her to overcome the psychological trauma of the experience” (1998, p. xviii). Therefore, I sought to transcend my condition through re-creating my sense of continuity; a world inhabited by people that is reminiscent of my home, Iran.

My creative work, ‘Raindrops’ interweaves the stories of three women and two men. Marjan, a single mother in Iran; Sara, an Iranian lesbian writer; Baran, an Iranian pregnant woman; Arsalan, an Iranian singer; and Dylan, an Iraqi university student. Baran, Sara, and Arsalan are immigrants in Australia, Dylan was brought to Australia from Iraq when he was one year old, and Marjan lives in Iran. All characters are on a journey towards a new experience of being in a place where they are either culturally, emotionally, and/or physically dislocated. This novel provides diverse prototypes of life among individuals of different cultures and worldviews. Apart from their individual dilemmas and their ways of dealing with them, all these characters share the concept of a journey towards remaking their identity and the idea of attaining happiness. This novel partly explores the ways in which the individuals perceive and misperceive themselves as well as others, how they come to know each other more willingly and profoundly, and how they overcome their emotional and mental misjudgements about others and their surroundings. Imagination in ‘Raindrops’ has a social function; it enables the characters to feel for one another and as one another. By empathising with others, they can understand and resolve their problems in a place of dislocation. My novel draws on investigations relating to place, culture, regulations, traditions, and social spectrum. My experience in ‘Raindrops’, a little like that of Ovid and Parsipur’s characters, is achieved through encounters with the landscape, relationships, imagination, and language. Through imagination my characters are enabled to connect the variances and opposites in the world of appearance. ‘Raindrops’ intertwines the characters’ imaginary perceptions of life and dreams with the reality of places and experiences that have inspired them. For Marjan, these dreams are inspired by Dostoyevsky’s The White Nights (1848/2009) that she has read several times in a week. Marjan is the mother of an eight-year-
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old boy. She fell pregnant with Arsalan; however, Arsalan left her without answering her phone calls and messages. As a single mother, Marjan needs to deal with all the difficulties of bringing up a child who is suffering from health issues. To avoid public stigma, she has never told anyone about her past and all her friends think that her husband died before she gave birth to her son. Marjan mostly experiences distress and gloom in nature in Tehran. She seems to be in emotional turmoil and suffers from a deep sense of alienation. Although she aspires to escapist fantasy, she experiences strategic imaginative procedures that affect her life perspective in her hometown where she is emotionally in exile. However, she confronts the reality of her life towards the end of the story: the impossibility of her dream coming true. With this awareness also comes the implacable understanding of her inescapably vulnerable loneliness. Nevertheless, she convinces herself to accept reality in its indispensable otherness the way she appropriates it within her dreams.

This novel is both driven by the crucial role of emotion as well as narrative and particularly focuses on romantic notions of imagination, language, and nature, “as a dynamic, living, self-transforming whole” (Rigby 2004, p.24) through which the characters relate to each other, as well as friendship and the codes of conduct between them. This is well exemplified by Dylan’s experience of environment. Dylan is an illustration of an exile in which a person feels a strong sense of loneliness and rejection. Landscape represents Dylan’s feelings and perceptions thoughtfully and passionately. It displays his methods of dealing with his life, and of appreciating it or detesting it. For Dylan, home is a place where he feels a sense of belonging and acceptance, and open and honest communication with his parents.

This novella asserts that remembering past and family relations can help characters in their journey of remaking identity. It emphasizes the individual’s psychological growth, and moral identity development from a self-focused vision toward the capacity for an affirmative perception, achievable through dialogic empathy. The combination of the momentous awareness of the fantasy with the equally disturbing reality brings the characters to the recognition that they need to appreciate unavoidable yet enjoyable mundane. Baran who acts as a woman of ideas exemplifies this. She attempts to cross the boundaries of her past, culture, and her sense of guilt. She is a self-propelled woman who encounters the realities of the world, interacts with others, rethinks, and reconstructs her set values and in the end appreciates her own unique subjectivity. Moreover, she re-evaluates the former relations between herself and others and in doing so she overcomes her weakness and dependency on other men who misused and consumed her. Implicit in her character is the belief in the
contemplative nature, the thread of contact with nature, and the importance of the imagination, as a way to step out of her ideologies and thoughts that disturbed and led to her devaluation of herself. Another case in point is Arsalan; he finds a way of dealing with his constraints as he becomes aware of the non-fixity of his condition. Indeed, he comes to the realization that there is a sense in which not being in his home country, and experiencing the place in which he lives as migrant is of the very spirit of dwelling. He realizes that what matters is to welcome the unknown and the mysterious.

‘Raindrops’ affirms the characters’ unique, even eccentric, experience of their surrounding not only as the natural setting for them but also the natural state of their soul. Human being is entangled within diverse interrelations with natural environment. This is why I evoke images and symbols from the natural world to create meaning and provide insight into the characters’ experience of their being. In my example of Sara’s emotional journey in search of something valuable to write about, and through her dreams and writings, the reader becomes aware of Sara’s concerns, perspectives, and her mother’s death, and her relation with her father since he realized she is a lesbian. Landscape illuminates something profoundly within her. Through her deep observations and relation with others, her life perspectives undergo a noticeable change. Sara is a lesbian who has been blamed by her father. He is embarrassed by his daughter’s sexuality and refuses to invite his friends or relatives over. Eventually, he encourages her to go abroad to do a Master’s degree so that he no longer needs to hide his daughter’s sexuality among his relatives and friends. I have created Sara as a writer to demonstrate the power of artistic work. She creates a definition of her identity in writing, not only writing a record or memory, but also fictionalising and re-evaluating her perceptions, insights, and body. To Sara, writing is a way of escaping death, exploring the self and the other, the inside and the outside, and transcending her concerns and judgments. Writing tells her something about her existence and her body. When writing, she can dream and confront ideological frameworks. Also, to manage her fear of breast cancer, writing is the only way for her to avoid complete disappearance. Sara tries to gain “pleasure from this gift of alterability” (Cixous 1976, p. 889) of writing and to express herself as “dispensible, prodigious, stunning, desirous and capable of others, of the other woman that she will be”. She writes herself and reclams her body as a “new insurgent” (Cixous 1976, p. 880) to gain confidence and power to express her place and identity in the world. Sara frees her body from literary constraint and writes about her gender, which has never been accepted by patriarchal traditions. She breaks out of the snare of silence and does not accept her
father’s ideology. The main objective in Sara is the capacity to interconnect with others while at the same time creating the self. The emphasis is on transcending the coded values and identity restrictions imposed on her as a lesbian. For Sara, this sense of being is the process of becoming. It is the woman as a creative force, a writer.
Chapter V

Conclusion

The Embodiment of *An Imaginary Life* and *Women Without Men* in my Writing

I was drawn to *An Imaginary Life* specifically because its central themes: exile, crossing geographical, social and cultural boundaries, and the process of remaking identity, were so closely related to the concerns of my writing. These themes also connect with my interest in Parsipur’s novel *Women Without Men* which represents the process of becoming other and crossing the boundaries in a society that is under the influence of historical, political and social changes. Malouf and Parsipur’s characters rethink their ideals and question the societies’ well-established norms before taking their next step.

Malouf and Parsipur transform everyday experience of being dislocated, either as a migrant or an exile, into something other as they step across the threshold into another world and remake their identity through the seminal moments of writing. A writer’s identity is constructed and continually reconstructed, rewritten, and reinterpreted through discourse. A nomadic experience for a writer can be interpreted as the attempt to go beyond the emotional and cultural sense of dislocation. Being an exile or migrant does not necessarily mean that one cannot or is unwilling to cross the boundaries. Malouf and Parsipur never take on fully the limits of one national, fixed identity. Rather, they draw on their embodied exile/migrant experience to negotiate their way in cultural and geographical borders and explore questions of identity and creativity.

*An Imaginary Life* displays a delicate attention to the creative connection between self, language, and nature through representing the means by which place reflects the various phases of subjective understanding. If we interpret Malouf’s post-romantic writing (Archer-Lean 2014, pp. 2-3) as speaking to the Australian cultural narrative of colonial and post-colonial marginality, this may also lead us to a reconsideration of Australia as a place where a writer arriving from another land may journey towards a new becoming through reconciliation with a sense of self in relation to place. Such a writerly position in a post-colonial context cannot be regarded as independent of historical and social relations. Whether or not we read *An Imaginary Life* as a parable of hope for creative reconciliation, or for
writers and writing in the context of cultural exile, the novella is nevertheless a highly
nuanced expression of the possibilities of transformation and imagination that can be drawn
from the experience of Otherness and exile as a sustained condition of becoming.

In the process of the story, the presence of a real and imaginary landscape moving
throughout Ovid’s narrative of discovery leads him to an understanding and acceptance of a
world that is foreign to him. The natural realm in An Imaginary Life is represented as a site of
“escape from the constraining etiquette and corrupt influences of society ... it acts as
a borderline, as the ground of transition between one circumstance and another” (Nikro
2006). This leads him to new insights about change as a necessary condition for existence,
and this in turn informs his vision as a writer and thinker: “Ovid serves as the classic example
of the connection between exile and poetic creation” (Berg 1996, p. 5). Malouf’s writing
reflects a belief in the dynamic and active power of the imagination and the development of a
symbiotic and changing relationship with the natural environment and others (Archer-Lean
2014, pp. 2-3).

Malouf’s reflective and imaginative prose style is set in a realistic natural world
narrated via sophisticated descriptions of Ovid’s inner emotions and thoughts. In An
Imaginary Life, the exiled Ovid begins to transcend his experience of alienation through
writing about his perceptions of the natural beauty of his surroundings, by documenting
observations, and by focusing on inner passions and struggles. His changing stance towards
his place of exile arises from the fact that, through his journey of self-identity, he learns that
the means by which he interprets and interacts with the world has come to be constituted in
reflection on his own imaginative thinking and writing. The writer’s sense of self and the
world is thus no longer regarded as static and oppositional. Rather, he begins to see himself
as implicated in the place to which he has been forced to come. For me, self-expression
became more complex after arrival in a country where a foreign language is spoken and daily
encounters with incomprehension challenged my identity. I felt limited or cut off from
resources that fed my creative imagination. However, inspired by Malouf’s perception of
exile and the idea of writing as a new experience of being, the conditions of exile and the
perception of difference enabled a creative rupture which heightened my perception in ways
that were crucial for the emergence of new kinds of writing and being.

This exilic story represents Ovid’s dislocation from his native culture and discourse to
Tomis, a primitive and uncultivated place, where his native Latin is entirely futile and he
needs to learn the natural language in order to be integrated with the universe. Being in exile, Ovid feels like an outsider “transformed ... into one of the lower species” (p.13). He describes the place as “centuries from the notion of an orchard or a garden made simply to please” (p.15), and as “unmade earth” where the wildest seeds grow “together in their stunted clumps or blowing about at random on the breeze” (p.30). However, it is the alterity of the desolate landscape of Tomis which allows Ovid’s imaginative and physical metamorphosis, and brings him to the poignant observation of his own changing features of mind and physique in response to the new environment: the experience of the writerly self as linked with the journey of becoming. The transformative effects of his physical surroundings on Ovid’s ‘state of mind’ are reflected in one of his descriptions: “I have even begun to find my eye delighted by the simple forms of this place, the narrower range of colors, the harsh lines of cliff and scrubs, the clear, watery light (p.60)”.

An Imaginary Life reflects on the necessity of an exilic journey of becoming that may entail geographical, cultural and linguistic mobility. Malouf represents a move out of a fixed urban consciousness into the mystery of “what we have not yet become” (p.134) by interweaving Ovid’s imagined world with an exiled place and relationships that help him reconsider his pre-established conceptions of meaning and how life should be lived. As he draws closer to the natural world with its unfamiliar practices of brutality and rural cultivation, Ovid realizes that being a writer does not rely upon a single, stable idea of self or a sense of being at one with the urban centre. Rather, his outsider status is a necessary part of his transformative self. In Braidotti’s terms, Ovid’s development, his “space of becoming”, occurs in “a dynamic marginality” (2002, p.129). Indeed, Ovid’s discovery is that the writer must be at the edge of things, noticing differently, available to possibility, able to embody and to channel being as metamorphoses through creative expression. This is exemplified when Ovid pushes off “from the edges of consciousness into the mystery of what we have not yet become” (p.134).

Moreover, Malouf’s positive attitude towards the world inspired me to maintain an optimistic outlook on life and the beauty of my surroundings while constructing my story. As Haskell (2014, p.2) suggests, “Malouf is by temperament an optimist; all his writing exhibits a sense of wonder about the world’s details, its arbitrariness and fragility, a gift that might be taken from us as quickly and easily as it was given but a gift nonetheless”. Ovid’s journey of self-discovery provides a fundamental basis to the themes and techniques of ‘Raindrops’.
This novel explores how the characters alter their ideologies to fit a new tradition of beliefs within a new context. In the novels under discussion, the characters’ knowledge of their selves is multiple, indefinable, perhaps incomprehensible, and that knowledge itself is implicated with their subjectivity. The characters are each affected differently by their relations with the natural world, which produces a tension between them and their affiliation with their cultural perspective and the new physical environment. ‘Raindrops’ traces their efforts to write of, speak of, and understand the still unfamiliar places they come upon in an attempt to assimilate and build a cultural body of knowledge from their existing concepts. After experiencing alienation, my protagonists undergo an inner journey that is influenced by a changed perception towards life. The impulse to create and destroy the self is both strong in Malouf’s Ovid as well as the characters in ‘Raindrops’: Dylan, Sara, Arsalan, Baran, Marjan. They experience the alteration between self-creation and self-destruction, which involves their ego hovering between personal experiences, aesthetic experiences and critical thinking and viewing its own desires with disillusioned objectivity. For Arsalan, one part of him constantly reminisces his traumatized past, while another positively adjusts to the present and appreciates the opportunities that immigration offers.

Dislocation allows Ovid to move from the “trope of scepticism and division, to synecdoche, the trope of belief and unity” (p.46) so that he stops finding fault with creation and learns to accept it (p.64), making the “discoveries that will lead him, after so many years of exile, into his inheritance, into the society of his own kind” (p.81). Ovid’s exile started when he left the innocence of childhood behind, even “more than other men” (p.83), to become an intellectual and sophisticated poet in metropolitan Rome. However, in the natural realm, Ovid develops an appreciation of the landscape as inspirational rather than threatening after he accepts what he cannot change: his physical and literal exile. Ovid, therefore, develops a new notion of existence and the self, and a sense of respect towards his surroundinds and its residents to whom he initially attributed the characteristics of primitive barbarians for their lack of immediate understanding of Latin language, and their distance from Roman culture. Imagination allows Ovid to create a palatable alternative, to fuse his past and present and to reconnect with his lost identity. His exile soon develops from its initial limitations of physical and cultural boundaries when Ovid realizes that he has been alienated from his sense of connection with his identity as Rome’s most renowned poet. Ovid also draws on his imagination to achieve further inspiration, and to triumph over his fears. By accepting the reality of his new situation, Ovid recognizes that the new place of exile can act
as a healer if “we can imagine ourselves breaking out of those laws without doing violence to our essential being” (p.62). Ovid’s process of self-discovery ends by achieving true freedom not at home, but in exile: “I have come to realize that this place is the true destiny I have been seeking, and that my life here, however painful, is my true fate, the one I spent my whole life trying to escape” (p.90).

Both central characters of Malouf’s *An Imaginary Life* and the protagonists in ‘Raindrops’ have left their homelands, whether by force or volition, but all realize that they need to engender within themselves new structures of meaning and knowledge, and deconstruct conventional forms of consciousness in order to discover some glimmer of affinity with their place of exile. Reading Malouf’s work inspired me to produce a novel filled with memories of my country, while respecting my yet unfamiliar surroundings and enjoying the new world in front of me to explore. There are a number of ‘spots of time’ that are important to my protagonists’ perceptions of who they are and that help them to have a ‘renovating virtue’ to repair and nourish in times of need. To give an illustration, Sara feels unity with the old man who passes her after which she notices a possum walking on a cable. She attempts to capture the immediacy of the moment or experience, and is intensely aware of the nature’s endless variety, of its constantly changing light and mood.

In ‘Raindrops,’ the characters illustrate markedly different responses to their surroundings and sense of dislocation. I position my characters in a nature that they try to comprehend; this leads to an experience of the mental and emotional empowerment, one in which they either join with or hold their own perspective against this artistic power. My characters do not attempt to speak for nature but to speak and write inside nature where they experience both solace and aggravation. Sepiedeh and Sara somehow manage to overcome their emotional misjudgements and disillusion, which only a disinterested cynicism can provide about life, as they walk through Brisbane immersed by the beauty of its nature. Baran links her past to her present through imagination and natural elements. Sara reacts to the fact that she is no longer wanted at home through writing, attention and respect towards her surroundings. She finds in nature the means to compensate for her unintended migration from her physical home.

The theme of language symbolically discloses the general strategy of the politics of peripheral identity at play in Ovid’s imaginary world. Upon his arrival, his Latin language, originally so deeply missed, becomes almost entirely distanced from the veracity of the
natural world. He writes: “I know the names of seeds, of course, from having used them for the beauty of the sound itself. In poems I have written: coriander, cardamom. But I have no idea what any but the commonest of them look like” (p. 14). Moreover, Ovid’s thoughts on the language of Tomis represent the Romantic concept of Ursprache: “in which signs, although arbitrarily posited by the will, are still mimetically connected to nature” (Redfield 2003, p. 211). Ovid says: “It isn’t like our Roman tongue, whose endings are designed to express difference ... This language is equally expressive, but what it represents is the raw life and unity of things ... somehow it seems closer to the first principle of creation” (p. 59).

Malouf, therefore, reflects upon the beauty of a world in which language, knowledge, and letters are not the only means of communication, a world in which the literate and illiterate recognize their own limitations as chief elements of one’s cultural identity. Rebelling against the social conventions of language, Malouf suggests the possibility of a merger between the self and other through a connection with the environment and the loss of the ‘I’. Ovid expresses his ending words: not ‘I am' or 'I am here', but 'I am there' because having passed the constraints of Being, he is no longer restricted to selfhood. The last stage of his journey represents Ovid embracing Mother Nature in a mystical moment and celebrating his presence in the new surroundings, which takes him into a state of “immeasurable, unbearable[el]” happiness (p.152).

Language is the medium of Ovid’s self-recognition. At the heart of Ovid’s inner journey in Getae is accepting a new language and a new way of relating to his surroundings, which lead him to this previously undiscovered capacity for ‘bearing witness’, including the imaginative possibilities of exile. McLennan (2004, p. 122) resists this idealising stance in relation to the production of exile literatures, observing that “the condition of exile exposes the writer to a new linguistic environment, one that may provide greater creative possibilities, but to see such acquisitions as a step toward ‘freedom’ … is highly problematic”.

Human identity is partly defined by language, the loss of which may lead to the loss of one’s cultural identity. Nabokov describes the switch to English from Russian as “exceedingly painful - like learning anew to handle things after losing seven or eight fingers in an explosion”. For me, a sense of linguistic conflict resulted in a perceptible change in my linguistic and cultural sense of identity. I find myself agreeing with, Wilhelm von Humboldt (1999, p. 24), who argues that languages are “bound dependent on the nations they belong,” thus, “there resides in every language a characteristic world-view (ibid., p. 66).” Accordingly,
in addition to the sense of dislocation, both physically and culturally, I developed a sense of isolation in Australia on account of the loss of my “characteristic world-view”. Initially, I felt dislocated in a new linguistic environment and found it very challenging to write in English. Therefore, I faced a dilemma about whether to hold onto Persian, my familiar language, or venture forth to English. I knew that writing in English constituted adjustment challenges related to English proficiency to create factors like focus, rhyme and voice. Nonetheless, inspired by Ovid’s perception of the transnational identity of a writer, I attempted to cross linguistic boundaries regardless of my native language. To establish my identity as a writer, I decided that I could not be an English writer per se, but an Iranian writer in an English-speaking country. As Steinitz (2013, p. 4) asserts, literary work that “bilingual, translilingual, and transnational” writers create, “challenges the conventional national categorization of literature, which relies on recognizable national borders and on linguistic coherence as an expression of national identity”.

I was not experiencing the same sense of exile which Parsipur and so many other writers of my country had experienced. This was mostly because I was not forced out of my country due to socio-political reasons or my controversial writings but rather I applied to pursue my studies abroad of my own free will in search of a new world. However, Parsipur’s portrayal of human reality in her imaginary world helped me to foster a deeper understanding of the possibility of transcending exile and remaking identity and culture through feminine writing. In my attempt to find some ground upon which I could relate to the new world, I found the act of writing, as an interpretation of the reality of my life, amazingly efficient in pulling me into an imaginary world in which cosmic unity is possible.

In this psychological and embodied journey of exile and recovery, Parsipur’s women serve as models for other women of their society to resist the oppressive social norms that control female bodies and their sexual relationships, thus evoking a sense of self-exile and un-belonging in women. Parsipur’s protagonists are involved with the norms that suppress them. The imposed ideologies have inspired me to join Parsipur, among other female writers, in a quest to claim a self-determined identity. ‘Raindrops’ is influenced by Parsipur’s representation of feminine desire, her courage to break taboos about women’s sexuality, and the idea of nomadism through which her characters try to experience different possibilities each in their own ways. They experience different possibilities each in their own ways even if they do not find a balance between submission and resistance to oppressive power, rather
than experiencing a recurrent sense of exile. As Talattof puts it, Parsipur’s women “may live independently or choose to become whatever [they] want—even a tree. [They] may turn into smoke to ascend into the skies. [They] may decide to remain on earth to pursue a 'normal' life” (1998, p. xiv). Braidotti declares that, “The point about being a nomad is the crossing over of boundaries, the act of going, independently of a given destination” (1992, p. 8). Experiencing a new experience of the self, women in *Women Without Men* represent their femininity in their own terms regardless of the social constructivism defined by men.

I was inspired by Cixous’ celebration of pregnancy as well as Parsipur’s artistic representation of childbirth, to create Baran as a pregnant woman. To me, Baran’s pregnancy is an example of conceptual and physical creation. As a symbol of maternity, Baran experiences the outstanding fulfilment of relationship with the baby inside. Her pregnancy acts as the restoring force of her mind and deepens her relationship with others.

Parsipur inspired me to create characters that do not have a final destination, and rather experience the act of going and crossing over social norms and consequently undergo a process of becoming that brings about transformation in their identities. Moreover, influenced by *Women Without Men*’s manifestation of a sensitivity toward women's confinement to their homes, and their struggle against sexual oppression and unequal gender relations in a patriarchal society, ‘Raindrops’ addresses the existing male-dominated literary canon of Iran, in a society where women are denied an equal voice in modern Iranian society. I have shown this through the story of Baran who has been raped in her childhood by her father’s friend, and has been in a one-sided love relationship all through her early twenties, only to be betrayed by her partner who pretended he was in love with her. However, he was in a relation with another woman with whom he migrated to Germany.

Growing up in a country where the government has authoritative and censorship control over literary work, I have always sensed a kind of social, religious, political and even individual self-censorship. Therefore, in my writing, I attempt to release myself from the linguistic constraints of masculine oppression and a system that defines women as sexual and linguistic commodities, traded and prescribed by men. I focus on my female protagonists’ perspective about sexual relationships and the way their image of their bodies brings mental, physical and spiritual aspects of female experience together.
Tropes of dislocation recur throughout Parsipur’s multi-voice narrative that challenges gender relations, the denial of women’s voice, and the traditional concept of female virginity as a symbol of virtue. Likewise, ‘Raindrops’ addresses “women’s ontological desire, women’s structural need to posit themselves as female subjects, that is to say, not as disembodied entities but rather as corporeal and consequently sexed beings” (Braidotti 2011, p.124). Parsipur offers, through individual female characters, a path that may afford women strength in the process. Women in my story suffer from powerlessness, self-distrust and their own non-fulfilment. However, influenced by Parsipur’s insight, my characters resist the ideological mandates of society and consciously try to express their own being and respect their sexuality, desires and femininity. They assert their own sense of selfhood and rejoice in their physicality through reconciliation with desire.

Moreover, like Women Without Men, in ‘Raindrops’ the characters feel a strong emotional connection to the natural world. This novel stresses the individual’s relationship with nature, and challenges taboos in current Iranian society. It represents the subjective experience of women both as single mother (Marjan), a lesbian (Sara), and a pregnant woman who has been raped as a child (Baran). In ‘Raindrops’, individual experiences of transition and transformation allow the characters to become other than what they are or have been. Women in this novel attempt not to consider themselves as “the complementary and specular other of man” but rather “as a subject-in-process; a mutant; the other of the Other; a post-Woman embodied subject cast in female morphology who has already undergone an essential metamorphosis” (Braidotti 2002, p. 170). Experiencing a new perception of themselves, they represent their femininity in their own terms, disregarding of the social conventions defined by men.
Chapter VI

‘And the Raindrops Fill the Sea’
Sara

Out on the balcony, Sara lifts her arms and rests them on the railing, feeling the air touch her underarms. “There should be something more to life,” she whispers, feeling light-headed. Exhausted, she remembers the day she walked into the kitchen to be confronted by her mother’s dead body lying across the floor. Her bloodshot eyes half-open, her mouth agape. Shocked and unable to make a noise, Sara had remained there for a long still moment, until her father came into the kitchen, the cherries and peaches falling from his hands. The tiniest details of the scene pass through her mind: the dusty brown sheen of her father’s hair, the upward quirk of her mother’s left eyebrow, the red scar below her right eye, and the pink lipstick smeared around her lips.

Sara goes to her laptop in the living room and makes flicking movements with her fingers on the keyboard: \textit{There will always be a part of us, our emotions, past, existence, left in the places we breathe, no matter how short-lived.}

Bing bing! Her lips crinkle in a half smile upon reading Georgia’s message on her phone: \textit{Hi hon! What are you up to?} \textbf{Sara replies}: \textit{I’m about to pop a pizza in the oven; would you like to come over and help me eat it?}

Sara stretches out on the couch before the TV. “Is this life? End of the beginning, beginning of the end?” Sara murmurs, staring fixedly at a gecko walking across the ceiling. “Why are you trembling, you little creature?” She is distracted by noises, the kitchen tap’s vicious dripping, the clock’s restless ticking, and the neighbour’s spoiled kid laughing loudly. She flips through the latest novel she is reading. \textit{Goldfinch}. She reads loudly:

“Caring too much for objects can destroy you. Only—if you care for a thing enough, it takes on a life of its own, doesn’t it? And isn’t the whole point of things, beautiful things, that they connect you to some larger beauty?”

“Some larger beauty,” she whispers several times, staring at the picture of an eagle above the piano. She sits down at her laptop and begins to type, her left breast tense and painful: \textit{Death seems like a tunnel. It is either light on the other side or dark.}

Twenty minutes later, Georgia is there. “Hi honey,” Georgia whispers against her lips, and pulls Sara deep into her mouth, nuzzling her neck. They fall sleep pretty quickly.
Trying desperately to figure out why everybody is encouraging her to marry a man with two children, Sara gazes at a mirror, delighted by the different shapes on her face: triangles, squares, circles, trees, flowers, all in very small sizes. She looks wonderfully beautiful, with a blue scarf tied above her head, featuring a small sunflower. A large number of people are accompanying her to a man’s room. The next moment, it is just her and him, a total stranger. Everybody else is behind the door. “I have no idea why I should marry you; what will happen to your wife if you leave her?” Sara asks, looking anywhere other than him. Catching her by surprise, he licks her thumb, and then wraps his arms around her. “You look like an angel,” he murmurs, embracing her tightly. Staring at his unreadable eyes. “I’ve never been in love with my wife.” Sara feels a sudden surge of anxiety and her breathing becomes shallow and rushed. “I’m not in love with you either!” she says, striking his chest with her cold fingers. He smirks, stroking her breasts with his rough hands through her white dress. “Eat me,” he says. “Leave me alone!” she cries out. He drops passionate kisses on her lips, rolling his tongue in circles inside her mouth. Circling. Flicking. Sending a rush of blood into her heart. She groans, pushing her face down on the floor. Her subconscious is screaming at her to stop but she cannot help her body writhing erratically against him as her breathing quickens. Within seconds, his soft submissive smile turns into an overbearing voice. He thrusts inside her. He reaches to grab her breasts while she moans helplessly. Suddenly, pushing her away, he asks, “What’s happened to them?” She stares down at her breasts. There’s nothing there. Only two big holes.

Sara wakes up on a tear-soaked pillow. She waits for her breath to slow. Georgia is fast asleep. “This isn’t real,” she cries. Her eyes open wide, staring at the dark blue stars of the ceiling with a cry of utter horror, her nightgown covered in a thin layer of sweat, her muscles freezing. Slipping out of bed, she glances at the clock. 1:00 am.

She reaches for her mobile phone that is resting on the ground. One notification from Baran on Twitter: *If things did not happen as they did, we would never celebrate the existing moments.*

“I’m not celebrating the existing moments exactly because things happened as they did,” Sara whispers. Now fully awake, she walks into the living room. “You have no idea what it’s like to be raped,” Baran once told her while watching a movie in which a man was breaking into a young girl’s room. “Do you?” Sara laughed. Baran forced a weak smile to her lips and changed the subject.
It was eight years ago when her Dad insisted on her marriage. “He’s educated, rich, intellectual, and comes from a very good family,” he had said. “What else do you want? What’s wrong with you?”

“I have no intention of marrying.”

Her Dad had drunk a full bottle of water. “Don’t do this to me.” He had not come home that night nor had he answered her phone calls.

Sara has a message from Julie.

September 3rd, 1:10 am
Hi Sara, just a reminder of our meeting tomorrow 😊

Sara scrolls up to read previous chats:

August 17th, 5:33 pm
Hi Sara, was charmed to meet you properly last night. Send me some of your work!!!!!!!!!!! And then let’s meet up and chat about art and words.

Hi Julie, Nice to meet you too. I finally pressed send.

September 1st, 10:51 pm
Hey Sara, Your writing’s unique. But of course there are some issues.

Hey Julie, I’d love to hear about them.

September 1st, 10:55 pm
Sure Sara. I have to run now. But how about we meet up on Tuesday?

That sounds great. Let’s meet up at nine.
7:30 am. Georgia has already been gone for a couple of hours. Lying face down under the weight of a heavy blanket and listening to Nirvana’s *Smells Like Teen Spirit*, Sara can lose herself for hours, dreaming of her characters. Not possible today though. Glancing up at the blue and pink ceiling and then her watch, Sara throws the blanket halfway down the bed and lurches upright. She puts on a red bra, slips into white shoes, and climbs into jeans and a shirt, all in seven minutes.

Sara crosses the street to catch the bus without looking for cars. A taxi driver slams on his brakes and the car skids. The pile of books Sara is carrying flies out of her hands as she glances down at the right side of the street, where the sounds of breaking glass and the crunching of metal hit her ear. She glimpses blood streaming down the face of the woman who has gone right through the windshield. She feels as if it was her own body slammed against the seatbelt of the Mercedes.

Sara hears the sirens off in the distance as she boards the bus, fixing the bra strap that is dropping down over her right shoulder.

Julie might not have enjoyed my story, Sara thinks as she heads off to the St Lucia university campus where they are supposed to meet. She walks up the stairs into Lakeside café. “How did you like the story?” Sara asks Julie when she finally arrives, fifteen minutes late. They both order mochas. There is a water-serving station with a choice of orange or lime-infused ice water in the middle of the patio. They both choose the lime.

Julie believes Sara should be more creative and avoid self-doubt in her writing: “Turn all the rules upside down and write as recklessly as you want.”

The café has a view to a lake where several pelicans, grebes, and ibises fly in and out, either feeding on the surface, or resting and bathing. Sara looks at a pelican that is resting on a pillar. She says, “Ha ha, that sounds very professional, I might not be able to get away with it.”
“You will if your heart’s in it. By the way, why does your main character keep silent most of the time?”

Sara spears her fingers through her hair, feeling foolish as she realizes that Julie has not read the whole story.

“She doesn’t want to lie, but she talks in the end.”

“Oh, OK. Sometimes silence can justify lying.”

“I’d rather she offers no excuse than lie.”

A little drop of coffee clung to Julie’s lips reminds Sara of the message she had sent to her mother at a family gathering. Mum, there’s a little drop of strawberry juice on your moustache, clean it. By the way, I’m so bored, they’re all talking nonsense, let’s go.

The host’s eight-year-old son had rudely read the message, running around the table before her mother had managed to grab the phone from him. Everybody turned back to look at Sara who had just come out of the toilet. “There really was a drop of strawberry juice on her lips,” the naughty boy said. Tugging at the end of her scarf, which had become hopelessly tangled, and shaking all over in embarrassment, she tried to straighten it out: “I was just joking.”

“This café’s very crowded; let’s go somewhere else to discuss our thoughts,” Julie suggests.

“Yes, let’s.”

They sit in the far left corner of the library where there are two comfortable red and orange sofas. Sara sits on the red one opposite a Chinese girl and an Australian girl playing a game on a big flat screen TV. Tilting her head back and forth in a hyper-focused way, and sticking her tongue out every thirty seconds, the girl seems to have embarked on a goal to beat her friend. There are two young men a bit further down. One of them, slumped in the straight-backed chair, is talking on the phone and laughing loudly. The other is holding his laptop tightly and typing so fast, as if he is competing in a typing championship.

“Ha ha, are you sure this is a library?” Julie laughs.

“He would not leave his laptop even in case of a zombie invasion.”
“Excuse me, I’ll be right back,” Julie goes towards the boy, gently leans over the desk, and disappears behind the screen. “Just wanted to make sure he’s not studying,” Julie whispers as she returns, sitting next to Sara.

“Facebook?”

“Nooo.”

“Soooo?”

“Twiiitter.”

There is a big scar on Julie’s right hand. Buried memories of existence through the deepest wounds. “This happened when I was eighteen,” Julie says, following Sara’s eyes. “I’m getting old. Ah, did you have an argument with your jacket? You’ve thrown it miles away.”

Sara diligently stretches out her left arm to grab her purple, double-breasted jacket. “Hmmm, yes, I did. It considers itself very inferior to the other jackets and thinks accordingly at every single laugh at it.”

“Wow, you have the potential to be an aspiring comedian. You’re very creative, Sara. Usually when I ask my friends these kinds of questions, they say: “Me? No, we haven’t had an argument, why?”

“Ha ha, thanks.”

“What’s happened to your knee?”

A tall, thin girl bounds up the stairs to the quiet room.

Ten years ago Sara and her friends had reached the summit of Mount Tochal and were making their way down when she slipped on hard snow, felt herself losing her grip, and crashed against rocks. She tried to hold on to anything she could see as she tumbled down. She drifted in and out of consciousness, so she does not exactly remember what happened in that tight spot before she saw two friends standing above her head and trying to reassure Sara that everything was under control. She had no pain and it was in the hospital that Sara discovered the full extent of the injuries. As well as a severely broken leg, she had dislocated her left elbow.
“I fell down a mountain in Iran.”

“Oh. That’s terrible; how did you get to hospital?”

“I was airlifted.”

The same girl comes down the stairs, spinning, and somehow managing not to fall. Sara stares at the anchor on her dark pink T-shirt that goes well with her light pink hair.

“How incredibly awful it must have been for you.”

“Yes, I was very lucky though.”

They hear an announcement that the library will be closing in five minutes and so they need to leave. Julie slings her backpack over one shoulder and holds the purple jacket out for Sara while she puts the books into her bag.

Sara turns right to the toilet to put on some lipstick and perfume her neck before they head to the sports stadium. Opposite the library, they sit in the fourth row of the blue stadium seats, where Julie has suggested.

“It’s quite disappointing that so many people don’t know of this place.”

“I didn’t know either. It’s the first time I’ve come here.”

“Write about this stadium.”

“About what?”

“People, running, jumping, racing.”

Sara wants to ask a question like ‘who defines the importance of things?’ but she just looks at people running and jumping. “I wish I could,” Sara says, smiling.

“When I look at these athletes, I remember myself running home from school with my shoes which were always worn thin on the inside,” Julie says, looking at the fit young girls running back and forth. “Well. They’re just eighteen or nineteen, and they’ll grow stout and round at my age too. Julie tucks her hands into her curly black hair, which is moving in all directions.

“You know the reason why they invented double doors?”
“No?”

“Because of people like me.”

“You’re not fat,” Sara says, laughing. “If I were to eat every time I feel hungry, I would be eating 24/7.”

“I’m really hungry; let’s have a breakfast somewhere nearby.”

“Just to let you know, I have a doctor’s appointment at 10:45.”

“Hope everything’s okay?”

“Yes, just a regular checkup.”

The woman and her son in the front row split a big chocolate cookie. “Thanks, Mum,” the boy says.

They leave the stadium where young boys and girls are still living their lives, breaking each other’s records.

Julie rushes towards her navy-blue car to move the books, binders, and papers to the backseat. “I can do that,” Sara says. “No way,” Julie laughs.

Good these things do not fly around when she is driving, Sara thinks.

“I could buy a new car, but why should I? I don’t need it,” Julie says.

“Ha ha, I don’t know.”

“Consumerism, the invisible pressure to make its people dissatisfied with the things they already have.”

It is the process of buying something that makes us happy because we live to believe we are worth life. If we don’t thoroughly consume life, we’ll think there’s something wrong with us, Sara thinks. “Tell me a secret,” she says.

“A secret? OK. We spend half of our lives impressing people we don’t like and the other half justifying ourselves to the ones we love.”

“Very true.”
“It’s your turn.”

“We consume people to get the things we love.”

“Interesting. If I knew I would never meet you again, I would tell you my biggest, personal secrets.”

“Like what?”

“Like the number of people who are living within me.”
The people look like sardines in a tin. The battered wooden boat is an antique. “This is too small,” I say, crying. “What if it sinks?”

“Don’t worry. A bigger ship will be waiting at sea,” the smuggler says. Dad gives him some money before getting on, saying, “It’s all I have.”

It’s our second day at sea. The emaciated faces of people surround us. A marvellous smell of cooking wafts through the air and into the wrecked boat, making me feel hungrier. A man with a scar on his forehead is vomiting.

In a perfect world, a boat’s engine never breaks down. In my world, it does. There are no sails or paddles to keep the boat going. Dark unwelcoming water keeps leaking into the boat. It bobs like a cork, moving without any control or guidance, crashing against the rocks. “We are sinking!” a woman shouts. Mum holds Peyman tightly and prays, “God, save us. Oh Prophet Muhammad! Oh Martyr. Abolfazl!” Peyman is my six-year-old brother. He is fast asleep in mum’s arms. Exhausted, lonely, and feeble.

Now, Peyman and I are passengers of gloomy-looking strangers on motorbikes. The sky is so dark. “Where are my parents?” Peyman asks. “You’ll be reunited with them in Pakistan.” Peyman cries. “I’m not going anywhere without them. What are we doing in this desert?” One of the riders looks angrily at him and says, “You have no choice.” He is a short, narrow-shouldered man with ears the length of a donkey's ears. “I want to go back! I’m burning!” Peyman shouts at the top of his lungs.

Peyman and I are standing in front of a massive hospital. Some people have spread their rugs on the pavement. They are eating cheese and bread. We enter the hospital. Mum begs the receptionist to help us. “I’m only responsible for registering the names and giving tickets to the patients,” he intones. There are a couple of beds here and there in the main emergency hall, which are reserved for those who have had accidents or are in a really bad condition. Blood squirts from the wound on an old woman’s face. She screams in pain. A young boy stretches out a hand to press against her wound and stop the flow of blood. His other hand is injured, bandaged up. Mum grabs a doctor in uniform, begging him to take a look at Dad. The doctor, who has moved further down the corridor, turns a glassy gaze on
“You should’ve left your kid at home,” he says to her, abruptly looking me up and down, making me more conscious of my worn-out shoes. “There’s nothing we can really do for him,” he goes on flatly. Mum’s froth of white hair grows whiter. I am being pushed into the mattress. I am aware that I am dreaming, but I can’t wake up nor open my eyes.

A finger of sunlight through the gap in the curtain awakens me. “Oh God. No more dreams.” I whisper. I vividly recall the sound of the air raid siren and bomb explosions some minutes after my uncle took a photo of Peyman and me. All those years of the Iran–Iraq war. The terrifying sound of fighter jets some kilometres above our house made the windows rattle and the house shake. Dad took us to the basement. Mum shut her eyes and covered her ears with her hands. It was that night that Dad decided to leave Iran. “This is no longer a safe country,” he said to my uncle.

It is a radiant morning. I swing my legs off the edge of the bed, pick up the guitar that is leaning against the wall, and place it on my lap, closing my eyes. A fly buzzing from the other side of the bed reaches me. I think and think, not really knowing what to think and what not to.

It was in the tenth year of my life that I learned of such a thing as music class. I spent several sleepless nights, my small mind full of hopeful seconds thinking about learning music and being the centre of attention, even if just for a few minutes.

I walk towards the refrigerator, take out the apple juice and pour it into a blue-and-white ceramic glass. Two of the ice cubes that I take out from the ice tray slip through my fingers and settle against the ceramic. I gulp the juice down before the ice cubes melt into water. That’s me: I rush through life like there’s nothing important to miss out on. I go to the living room and dial Baran’s number. “Please leave a message.” Annoyed, then alone, I feel hungry with no appetite for a proper breakfast. I usually rest before being tired and eat before being hungry. I don’t rest when really tired and don’t eat when really hungry.

Bits and pieces of my childhood memories flicker. In the old days, I had an insatiable appetite, especially at lunchtime. Going home from school, I knew we would either have potatoes, or rice and tomatoes, in the kitchen, which stank like damp quilts. On a Thursday, looking at the other side of the street on my way back home from school, I lied to my friend and ran towards the Do Lopi pizza shop: “I’m not coming, just remembered that my mother has asked me to buy bread for lunch”. My stomach churned with biting hunger when I put my
face in my hands and gazed steadily at a fat, middle-aged man, gobbling up slice after slice as. Fits of bitterness within my stomach, I discovered in myself the ability to satisfy it. A young boy stood at the counter and the only waiter hurried past the customers to bolt the door. Three middle-aged men and a woman stepped into the shop. The boy in a white T-shirt asked for a Coke. His wrapped sandwich lay limp on the table behind him. A woman in a black chador was unsettled by something beyond my comprehension. She did not seem to fit in with her friends, who were talking animatedly about their favourite pizza. She was staring thoughtfully into space, at the ground, and unfortunately at me.

“Do you need anything?” The waiter asked.

My hungry stomach ached for an extra-large pizza. “A hamburger,” I hastened to say.

“It’ll be ready soon.”

Dressed in a grey uniform, I moved my worn green bag from my left shoulder to my right and refused to meet the woman’s gaze. I traced the wrapped-up sandwich of the white T-shirt boy with my fingertip to guess whether it was sausage or my favourite, hamburger. I picked it up, moved back towards the door and bolted down the three stairs. Running. Running. And running. Only to stop after ten minutes, completely out of breath as if I’d been running since the crack of dawn. I unwrapped it. Then swallowed it. Hungry, eager, and a little shameful. I was eleven years old.

Baran is not eating enough recently.

In the bathroom. Warm water flows through my cold fingers as I feel the stare of Baran’s smoky-blue eyes on my face. “Have you ever thought about having a baby?” Baran asked a few months ago, curled like a foetus on the bed. She raised herself in the bed, and lay on an elbow. Then said, “Last night I dreamed I had a baby, there were so many people surrounding me, all congratulating and laughing. They all disappeared as I walked towards the baby to pick it up. The nearer I got, the more anxious I became. I think it was because of the looks on the people’s faces. The baby was lying on the ground, naked. He was very beautiful, but there was something wrong with him. He looked up at me and laughed loudly. Then there was blood all over the floor, I looked around and nobody was there. It was just me standing in the middle of a vast desert. There was a huge green cherry tree far away from me. I started walking towards it, and when I got nearer to it, I heard a voice. It was the baby,
washing his hands in the river next to the tree, smiling happily at me. Who are you? I asked. You’ve no idea how real it was.”

Baran had trouble sleeping through the last night.

Water splashes on my head and body, hitting my legs. All the tickets are sold. History has seen limitless marvellous performances, paintings, books, theories, music, and songs. So why should people be interested in mine? When I was very young, I knew that one day I would leave the world of my birth behind for a land of music. Rarely had it occurred to Mum not to show her dissatisfaction at my dreams. “What’s the point of throwing yourself into all this trouble?” She would ask. “Live your life and be thankful.” I walk out of the bathroom, wrap myself in a blue towel and enter the bedroom. Baran’s white bra is on the bed, beside my lyrics, reminding me of the touch of her breasts. Where is she? I rarely return other people’s calls, but I get very uncomfortable if somebody, especially Baran, does not answer mine.

The memory of the first time I met Baran pulses forward again. It was at the Tehran English Institute, in Iran. She was wearing a red scarf, red jeans, a short white uniform and a strange expression on her face. She folded and unfolded her hands as her eyes met my admiring gaze. Both coquettishly and proudly. She changed her position to her left hand side to lose herself in the movement of the secretary’s fingers on the keyboard. How non-smiling and arrogant, I thought, imagining her life: A spoiled trouble-free life, with wealthy and supportive parents, a private university education, and never-ending dissatisfaction. There was a spark of life about her though. “Sorry, do you have the time?” I asked.

The cigarette falls down from between my middle and index fingers. A busy spider is moving along a small cobweb in the back-left corner of the bedroom.

“It makes me choke when I see you smoke,” Baran said the second time I smoked in front of her. She finished polishing her long square nails, took a deodorant can out of her bag, and sprayed it on her nails: “I can hear it blowing through your lungs, then whistling in your bones beyond their ability to tolerate it.” She frowned down at me as a wisp of her hair brushed over her cheek. She rubbed her nails with a napkin. Her imagination of how cigarette smoke moved in my body was so funny. I exhaled a lungful of smoke before crushing the burning end against the ashtray. She looked at the red curtain on the window over the kitchen
sink. “If I could choose to be a colour, I would be orange.” I smiled, then said, “You belong to another dimension of existence.”

I plug the guitar in, and strum ‘Comfortably Numb’ remembering my feet sinking into the ground during my first experience in a recording studio. It was the only place I believed dreams would come true. The producer asked his musicians to record the basics with a click track before they led me to the living room. I changed the strings to capture the sound from the daisy chain of my guitar more easily. Never had I been that hopeful and anxious, passing through a sound lock from the control room. At the back of the control room, a young, handsome man sitting on the edge of a red old sofa was discussing his song with two middle-aged men. In the living room, there were a couple of microphones on floor stands. There were lots of spare cables all over the bottom of the walls. The recording started. Each breath took an age. It was disappointing. There was a layer of sweat on my forehead and my hands were wet. I raised my shivering right hand to wipe off the sweat, and started singing ‘Winter’ by the poet Mehdi Akhavan Sales. Lost in the absurdity of the moment, I thought no sound was coming out of my throat. It was as dry as a desert. I looked at the producer at the last minute, expecting a touch of disappointment on his face. A happy light was glistening in the centre of his eyes. The second take had felt more right. The producer came forward, smiling sympathetically. Two of his buttons were loose at the bottom of his shirt, protruding out his quivering, round stomach. “You have a great voice. You should taste huge success with your first album.” I was twenty and had worked three months nonstop as a labourer on a building site to make the money to book the studio. Had no idea that singing a song in a studio in front of three amateurs and receiving compliments would not help that much with the difficult path to success.

While listening to the track a month later, my music teacher took me by surprise, asking about the amount of money I was able to afford to record six or seven songs for the first album. No beauty of life can truly be attained without money. I looked at him, took in his dark, shaggy goatee, heavily flecked with grey, wet my dry lips with the tip of my tongue, and said, “I don’t think I have enough money.” My hands searched clumsily for a pen to play with when he said, “It’s impossible to find a sponsor without becoming famous in the first place at your own expense.”

Thirty minutes later, I tapped my way down the stairs towards the taxi station. Darkness fell. The gusting wind blew in any direction it wanted, covering the surroundings in
a shade of crimson dust. The ground looked yellow grey. It did not matter to anybody if I pursued my dream no further. I pressed my hands into my jacket pockets, shielding them from the bitter cold. What life offers might never accommodate your vision. Nobody might ever take your thoughts seriously or find you significant. You might never detect within yourself a slight sign of happiness, but that might make you more determined. My sitar, along with the other instruments, is tuned. I tilt my head to the side and clean the outer part of my right ear with a cotton swab. “Please don’t put that cotton swab in your ear. Take it out. It’s very dangerous,” Baran said, the first time she noticed me doing it.

“So how can I remove this damn earwax?”

“If you really feel it has impacted your ear, you need to see a doctor.”

I indulged in a loud and odd-sounding laugh, and then sat near her on the edge of the bed, taking The Death of Ivan Ilyich away from her lap. My hands traced her body from her shoulder to her back, her breasts, her lips, and her eyes, pulling her glasses off of her nose. “How many times are you going to read this book?”

“Tolstoy was trying to make sense of the meaning of the life he had gone through, towards a sorrowful death.”

“Did he?”

“When Ivan dies, everybody’s happy that it’s not them to whom death has occurred.”

“So?”

“Death is just a matter of time.”

“What matters is that I LOVE YOU.”

That was five years ago in Hotel Majestic Rom in Italy, two days before my performance in Accademia Filarmonica Romana.

The leaves that sway back and forth as the breeze gently touches them. I step back from the window, lean across my desk and reach for the fountain pen; the one Marjan gave me. She had thick curly hair, white braces on her capped teeth, small eyes far apart, a straight-edged nose which had definitely experienced cosmetic surgery, an oval-shaped face, and a short, thin body. Kind of awkward, her face was. A face like a bucket of smashed crabs.
How angry she seems, I thought the first time my eyes met the right side of her face in a taxi in Karaj. She touched a pen on a piece of paper. The ink was dried up. She stuck the tip of the pen to her tongue. “You can use my pen,” I said. She smiled, tapping the pen against her lips. “I bet you’re a teacher,” I said as we exited the taxi. She cleared her voice and straightened her shoulders. “No.”

“May I have your phone number?” I asked. That kind of went hand in hand with my problem of rushing everything. Eyeing Saviz Cinema on the other side of the street with hopeful eyes, Marjan gave me her business card. She was a lawyer.

We met in her house. The fragile glow of her face looked like an ancient photograph on a yellowish frame. “Do you live on your own?” I asked. Marjan looked at the patterned window of her bedroom. “Yes, lost my parents in a car accident,” Marjan whispered, her dreamy eyes helpless. “Sorry to hear that.” She drew out a drawer, and took out a box wrapped in colorful paper. “This is yours.” It was a luxurious fountain pen. There was something truly solitary about it. There still is something solitary about it. “Why are you giving this to me?”

She breathed warm against my neck and we lay in her bed. “Just because.”

We were together for another three nights in a row. “Don’t leave me alone,” she said. “I’m sorry, I can’t.” I guess I responded that quickly because I looked into her eyes and realized she would expect more from me than I would be capable of giving. The rain was slacking a little. She slipped back into her chair, with her hair spreading around her face.

I haul myself out of the past. The world has seen so many young girls, faces covered in makeup, who come to the mirror to blink at themselves and take a photo. Then wash their face, and go to bed. All alone. Exhausted. Fragile.

I start to write my speech: Dear ladies and gentlemen.

The blaze of memories of my childhood burst into flames. To avoid any confrontations with my perpetually drunk father, I would count as far as my knowledge let me with eyes tightly closed to fall asleep. “You will be nothing,” my father would say. “You’re of no use.”

I continue to write the speech: Dear ladies and gentlemen, I highly appreciate your enthusiasm and support.
I call Baran. No answer.

Frustrated, I stare out the window at the yellow house further down the street. An old couple emerge through the gate, hand in hand. The woman seems to be smiling. The sapphire sky is blazing.

My concert manager John calls again. I’ll call him later. I force myself to continue writing:

_I sometimes wonder how I survived childhood with my pitiable, illiterate, super-religious parents. My pious mother who observed all religious obligations and added some more from her own imagination, my addicted father, and the public school where there were at least fifty of us in a small classroom. Grow up, my father would say. To him, growing up meant making money. Everything I have would not be possible without my father, and yet I hate him. Dear ladies and gentlemen, the rage-filled heart I have developed over the years would never stop surprising me. I tend to accuse myself of so many things, and once an individual is accused of something, it will never be entirely unfounded. I want to tell you of the music for which I abandoned everything, my mother, and my history. Talking about my Mum, putting the ones you love in the grave with crushed breath, empty heart, and cold hands, coming back home without them, convincing yourself that death is just another stage, a new horizon where I will meet them soon. Grief and time do not lead to healing and personal growth. The longer you live, the deeper you miss them. One by one, you lose the ones who are the most valuable reason for your existence. If you are lucky not to lose them, they will lose you. Which is even worse. There is no third option._

The thought of Hamid does not leave my mind. Why does he want to see me? I had first met Hamid in a chance encounter in Chicago five years ago while I was on one of my concert tours. Hamid asked me to take a photo of him, with the _Cloud Gate_ sculpture in the background. We started talking, and then exchanged emails and numbers. I hadn’t seen or heard from him until yesterday morning when he called to say he would arrive in Brisbane today, and that he needed to talk to me.

Peyman could not make it to my concert in Melbourne and Sydney, so he promised to attend this last performance in Brisbane. He lives in Germany. His flight has just landed and he is supposed to take a taxi to our house, but I want to welcome him at the airport. I call him on Viber. “I’m on my way to the airport.”
“There are so many more important things for you to do today than pick me up.”

“Don’t worry, everything’s ready for the concert.”

Bocelli’s songs scare away my fright. I turn the volume up. Because We Believe. Nobody offers you power, you just need to be strong enough to take it. Power to build, or power to destroy. I think I am above the speed limit. A police car pulls out of a side street. Thankfully, it overtakes me.

There is an exotic sense of liberty at airports. The incessant sound of suitcases and concrete, the pleasant sound of the chatter, and happy people in the coffee area make me more curious about the faces around. A child of five or six, in blue-striped pyjamas, is holding small sunflowers, white daisies and purple asters arranged into a beautiful bouquet. His older brother, seven or eight, is waving an Australian flag. I wear my glasses to read the red and white words written in a child’s handwriting on the flag, ‘Welcome Home Aunty Belinda.’

Home.

How long before one might call a place home? To Aunty Belinda, home might mean these lovely kids. How often had I thought of home, moving from one rental room to another in our first years in Brisbane. Passing by high-rise buildings around Sydney and Melbourne, looking for any part-time job available, and thinking how happy their residents would be. The whole world can never feel like home. That is just in stories.

The first time Baran invited me over to her family home. It was a magnificent, warm evening. She had cleaned every board and marble of the house. I was sitting there, trying to look relaxed, except that I was tracing the design of the red carpet with my right foot the whole time and staring at every individual wrinkle in the dining room curtain. Her mother and her sister, Niloufar, were laying the table in the blue dining room for most of the time. I was as uneasy as a rabbit with its ears cut off because Baran’s family had a high social status and were very concerned about their daughter’s future.

They had a two-storey spacious house overlooking a quiet park. It had an impressive chandelier at the top of the entrance hall. The royal golden furniture seemed very expensive. Facing her dentist father and then changing my angle, I thought he disliked my not-yet-straight teeth, especially the top ones. Suddenly, he opened his mouth. “You said you are
graduating this term?” he asked. “Yes, it’s my last term and hopefully I’ll do my Master’s at the same university,” I said, feeling shortness of breath. My foot struck something under the coffee table, which made my face grow sober. “Is there any possibility of your finding a job then?” The dentist asked.

His eyes hovered over the sofa I was sinking deeper and deeper into. “Well, I’m mostly thinking of putting an album out in the next couple of months, I’m working on it at the moment.” I asked God to make him forget to ask about my family or where I lived. It was the most draining indigestible world of moments. Every second was an illusion of desolation. My handsome and muscular body in the warmth of that blue morning was impressive and would have made the parents feel a bit more trusting of me. “I love your daughter,” I said. Another example of how I rush into things. A loud-sounding cough came from her surprised father. Her mother avoided looking at me directly. I realized the reason for her empty, frightened eyes years later when Baran revealed the secret of her twelfth birthday. For the first few months after my discovery, I felt betrayed. But I did love her.

“Will you give me a ride home, sir?” Somebody asks, tapping me on the shoulder.

I turn to Peyman’s voice. He is three years younger than me, but looks so much older in his face.

“I thought you were really joking when you hung up.”

We give each other a warm hug before heading to the café opposite us.

We seat across from each other. I take a long look at the bags under Peyman’s bloodshot eyes as I pour sugar into my green tea. “What is it?” he asks, his face as pale as a porcelain plate.

“You promised me you’d stop smoking marijuana.”

“Is that what you want to talk about?”

“Have you brought the train you’d promised?” The boy with the flowers asks his Aunty Belinda as she stands at the counter, ordering coffee. “Wow, this aunty is incredibly tall,” Peyman says. She bends down to eye level with the child, “Of course, love.”

“Where do you think their mother is now?” I ask, looking at the kid’s dad. “Maybe at home, waiting for them with a big breakfast.”
Over Peyman’s beige flat cap, I glance at the Aunty and her family disappearing down the corridor, and then lower my eyes to the cold tea, a warm flush creeping across my ears. “I bet he’s divorced,” Peyman says. “I’m twice divorced and have a child, so I can tell a divorced man at first sight.” My hands fall in bewilderment. My gaze locks on Peyman’s eyes as I raise my head with a pained expression of surprise. “Are you divorced?”

“My wife cheated on me about six months into our marriage.”

“Are you kidding me?” My fingers sweep the red scarf away from my neck. “Why didn’t you call me?”

“No love lasts forever. If there is anything called love at all, it was when Mum would go to rich people’s houses to do their laundry with the hope that her children wouldn’t wake up hungry in the middle of night. The timing was wrong.”

“What timing?”

“We should’ve been born before Dad, we should’ve been his father, and then everything would’ve gone much better. There were so many things that the doctors could have done for Dad if only we’d had the money. He didn’t die of lung cancer; he died because his parents were so poor that he had to spend any money he earned as a boy for them as a labourer, and why? Because he never got the chance to go to school, to know about so many other ways to make a living, to know that he didn’t have to smoke to prove that he had grown up.”

“How come you relate everything back to them?”

Peyman stirs his coffee to a whirlpool, round and round.

Childhood days. The unwritten law. We were supposed to busy ourselves around the courtyard while Dad making himself. The many nights I would stay awake and stare at Dad snoring like a bear, with the clock ticking loudly into the cold dark room. Dad was arrested and imprisoned for carrying ‘just a little opium’, as he said, once before he decided to involve us in his next two failed attempts to reach Australia illegally. We missed Mum and Dad a few days after the second unsuccessful attempt. Peyman and I waited for them for three days after we arrived in a village in Pakistan. We were flown to Thailand where we were promised that we would meet them. But they were not there either. We refused to eat anything. Peyman got really sick. Everything calmed way down when they accepted our return to Iran. My parents
had not succeeded in crossing the Pakistan border. On a Thursday night, a few days after we joined our parents in our house, we took Dad to Imam Khomeini Hospital in Tehran. He was hospitalized several times before that. But this time he died. Mum cried so much that she lost most of her sight.

On the way home, I am on the phone the whole time, either calling Baran or talking to John.

“Welcome home,” I say as Peyman steps inside the house.

“Wow, this is even more beautiful than the pictures showed,” Peyman says. “I love these Persian carpets and porcelain miniatures.”

“Baran’s mother has shipped them all via air-freight,” I say, anxiously placing the mobile next to the mole on my right ear. “I’ll be leaving home in twenty minutes. Make yourself at home.”

“I’ll lie down for at least an hour. It was such a long flight.”
“Baran, will you stop running?” Maryam asks as her voice trails off. It seems there is no such thing as a toilet for miles. The coldness on her face does not match with her delicate features. The pizza shop opposite the sushi restaurant is empty except for the salesperson. I take a biscuit from my blue backpack and start to bite it eagerly, as if it is supposed to immunize my body against a destiny that is never to be realized or prevented.

Sorry I can’t be home for your birthday again, Sahand. Sorry for all the moments I have missed being with you, Mum. How many more years should I live without you? How many more birthdays will we celebrate without being together? I feel dislocated when you are living in Iran, 12,722 km away from me.

The wind carries the rain away to stop it from falling on a little girl’s blond hair on the other side of the street. Her mother is busy with sliding a black umbrella out of her bag.

Maryam takes a small silver mirror from her brown leather handbag. Her eyes belong to the cover of a fashion magazine, like those of Sina’s, twenty-seven years ago when my parents were sitting in the backyard, watching their children fight over every trivial thing. “Be careful and more respectful to each other,” Mum frowned at us. Niloufar was playing hide and seek with Sahand. He was making a joke about her clumsiness: “Niloufar, I wonder why you are this stupid and silly while the rest of us are so clever,” he said. “Dad, are you sure you didn’t find Niloufar in a basket on our doorstep?” This led to her nonstop crying until Dad said, “Your tears will prevent you from seeing the stars, darling.”

Sina, the youngest of us, wasn’t dead then. He was sitting on a red curtain near the basement. Nasrin Khanom, a local woman who helped Mum with household chores, was supposed to wash it. “I’m the most handsome among you,” our six-year-old Sina said, playing with an ant walking between the broken tiles near the basement. In those seconds of life and passion, everything was so joyful. Suddenly, I felt the rumbling of the ground underneath us, shaking the stillness of the moment and dancing as if it also wanted to participate in the beauty of our movements. It trembled in an intolerable movement, oblivious to the frightened faces of my parents, begging it to stop. I could hear a tremendous amount of noise, people crying and screaming for help, windows breaking in the distance.
It seemed like a train was coming nearer and nearer as Dad sheltered Sahand and Niloufar under his strong, trembling body. To protect them against the brutal earth. “Come here Sina, don’t move Sina. Baran stay there, stay where you are,” Dad begged nonstop. The whole yard felt as if it was jumping. Mum had gone inside to make some cake for us. Nothing seemed purposeful and orderly anymore. There was a cloud of dust everywhere. The sky was shocked and tasted bitter, resenting having to witness the ground rolling over and over with people bleeding, running and shouting in front of their collapsed houses. I heard my breath accompanying Dad’s, but not Sina’s. My eight-year-old mind couldn’t bear the thought of him being lost, let alone dead.

“Sina, Sina, Sina—Dad, Sina! Mum, Sina. Sina—Mum,” I called out to him as loudly as possible, each time raising my voice higher and higher. It didn’t make any difference though, as Sina had fallen down the basement stairs before my father could run to pick him up. There was a loud boom before everything stood still. Dad rushed towards the phone. Mum was standing over Sina’s head in shock, looking at his wide-open blue eyes that were not given a chance to even justify their existence. When it comes to her own children, Mum forgets all her knowledge of medical treatment. Niloufar and Sahand were both standing there wetting themselves. No instrument could measure the vibrations still rumbling through my body.

“What are you thinking about?” Maryam asks. “Are you OK?”

“I If only Sina weren’t near those damn stairs.” I enter the shopping centre complex on the other side of the street where there is a range of local designs. “Maryam, help me choose something.”

“You should try to forget that day,” she says, pointing to a leather brand watch. “What do you think?”

“I can’t decide.”

“How about having a coffee and then going to the second floor?”

Like her, I order a cappuccino with extra foam. In our first months of arrival, I felt myself getting really anxious when I wanted to order something, even coffee. I could not understand the servers well enough and sometimes got something else instead of what I had in mind, especially when I wanted to order a sandwich at Subway. I thought I would never be
able to communicate with them in English. I was somewhat right. There has always been a language barrier that makes me uncomfortable among English native speakers. I’m afraid of offending someone or misrepresenting my thoughts. And if they don’t understand me, it makes me even more uncomfortable. “Anything else?” the cashier asks. “That’s it, thanks,” I smile.

“I dreamt of Sina last night.”

“You usually do.”

I sip my coffee. “It’s kind of strange. I felt so close to him.”

She laughs. “You’re just twelve and still have a long way to go.”


“Ha ha. I just meant you’re too young to die.”

I lick the spoon clean and place it beside the mug. I feel anxious, remembering the darkness of the number twelve.

She smiles weakly. “What about cologne? Something that reminds Arsalan of a very special occasion or moment.”

I had bought him one for his twenty-sixth birthday. He had it on the first night I spent with him. “I don’t think that would be a good idea.”

“You’ve never told me how you became friends with him,” Maryam says as she pushes her chair back and stands up. I try to stand up as well but my legs disobey me, and feel like bricks. “It’s a long story, no time to go slacking off now.” There is nothing more annoying than waiting for your strength to find its way into your legs. I lack a whole dictionary of words to describe what I have in my mind. I assume everything is a dream. Everything happening around me and me happening around everything. We pass the bakery, the flower shop, and the fragrance shop. A green balloon passes me. It might be living with a small orange boy, whose necklace is the sun.

What is all this rush about? Where are these people going? We have exited the shopping centre complex. A woman is pushing her toddler in a purple pram. Why not
orange? A man is running towards a car where somebody is waiting for him: a young lady with a red scarf around her neck. The image of an old beige man passes my mind. The man, who has been living in a breeze, has not combed his hair for years, and yet smells like orange, or a circle of thick mountains surrounded by amazing rivers, where three bears are waiting for a fish to share.

“Maryam, there must be so many men who wish to marry you.”

“I haven’t seen any man I could decide to share the rest of my life with. Coming home every night, knowing the same man is waiting to fuck you, looking at him burping to show his satisfaction with food, or listening to him farting in bed and then bursting into laughter, and having to go to the edge of the bed when he sprawls out naked in his most flattering position, and blowing his nose before hugging you.”

“If I were a man, I would kneel before you and ask you to marry me,” I say and laugh loudly. She moves towards a massive flower shop on the right side of the street. “You say that because you’re not a man, ha-ha.” A blue stretch limousine stops at the crosswalk to let us pass. There are so many buckets placed throughout the shop, all full of cut flowers. “Whatever you buy, you also need to buy a bunch of flowers for him,” she says. I miss somebody. My daughter, maybe. The daughter I never had. Or never let myself to have. Do I have a history? What if I still have a great deal to give?

“Are you even listening to me?” Maryam asks in a dominating voice. The first time I saw Maryam, her long blond curly hair, which contrasts deeply with her ebony eyes, caught my attention. The Iranian community is not that big in Brisbane. Almost everybody knows each other. We met at a mutual friend’s party. “I’m listening,” I say. Maryam might have said something in a moment of my absent-mindedness.

The smell of scented candles brings back memories of my grandmother’s house where I used to spend weekends with my siblings and cousins. “I have cleaned the courtyard for you, go play there,” grandmother would say. “What a relief!” Our parents would probably say when we were not in the living room to distract them. It was the right time for them to discuss the news and rumours about other relatives.

Let There Be Light. It is the name of the bookshop we pass by. Light. The moon tends the Earth and keeps it company. Despite its dark side, it never leaves the Earth. It feels too much, that’s why it becomes so weak and pale.
I like the black-and-white photographs of different flowers on the tan-coloured walls, all shots of single-stemmed flowers, and the soothing music emanating from the space. On other occasions, I would sit in one of these comfortable lounge chairs and read some poetry. For the time being though, I’d rather go in, choose a book, pay, and leave. Like the time I met Hamid when he appeared out of nowhere and said, “That’s the right book.”

“Pardon?”

“Morrison’s Beloved is my favourite. I’m Hamid.”

“Baran.”

“Nice name. This is my favourite bookshop. It usually has any book I look for.”

“Yes.”

“May I offer you a ride?” he asked as I walked down the stairs. I turned back to see his dazzling, shiny dark eyes piercing my insides. Why are you following me? Who are you? Do you usually give everybody you meet a ride? These were the words I was at the point of saying. “No, thank you,” I heard myself saying hurriedly. It was totally unlikely that I would get into his car. I did though after he said, “You’ll never discover fulfilment and pleasure in so many things if you try to find a reason for not doing them.” Never would I guess what awaits me.


“You’re very young. Maybe twenty-one?”

“Twenty-two.”

“I sometimes paint. I don’t have the right creative passion though.”

“What do you paint?”

“Animals and my dreams”
“Painting of dreams reminds me of Sohrab Sepehri’s poem, Remembrance.”

He recited it with his mysterious eyes. “Wow, I can never recite any poem,” I said. He smiled gently and took my hands in his own. It made me very uncomfortable. “I might paint a portrait masterpiece one day,” he whispered.

“Of whom?”

“Of an indifferent scarecrow that has knowledge of the absurdity of life.”

I let go of my hands before asking, “Like Meursault in The Stranger?”

“No, like Estragon in Waiting for Godot. Estragon is needy, helpless and forgetful.”

“Really? Do you like his indifference towards everything?”

“I like his ultimate portrait of the universe’s indifference towards humankind.”

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The long shadow of the clock’s pendulum
Was oscillating over the endless plain

To and fro
To and fro
And I was drawing the image of my short dream
On the shining sands of the plain,
A dream that had drunk the burning heat of hell
In whose air my life had melted …
There was a close-up portrait of a terrifying tiger on the wall behind the cashier. Animals are not troubled by the idea of pretending to be someone else or looking ideal, I thought and asked, “Why do you paint animals?”

“They’re simply what they are without minding what others might think of them. Isn’t it wonderful?”

This man, whose long thin face spoke of his endurance, and whose black hair sometimes faded to red, had an opinion on anything I raised. He looked like a cloud to me.

When the owner of the bookshop, with her defeated face, asked if we needed anything else, he answered, “I have a long list of books to order.” I took a look at the list out of curiosity, Disgrace, The God of Small Things, and The Passport. The lady picked it up. We were left alone with our tea. They had the service desk right in the middle of this rather dark bookshop. The books Hamid had ordered were all for me.

Maybe I should buy Arsalan a fountain pen. He believes there is something special about fountain pens. Maryam has probably lost me. How could Hamid read all those long poems and theories, and memorize them? I asked him once.

“It’s my job, Baran. I teach literature.”

“Does it help you?”

“With what?”

“Life.”

“It might.”

You would walk in a street, talk to a baby, listen to a man begging you for a penny, watch a bird flying, and learn more of life than in reading a book. Is there any border in the sky for birds? Where has Maryam gone? A calendar, a big one. Yes. Maybe I should buy Arsalan a calendar. “Excuse me. May I have a look at your calendars?” I ask the saleswoman. With her pointed chin and hair that resembles a fluffy white cloud, she looks like my grandmother. Except that I have never seen my grandmother without a chador in public.
“Let your poor head get some fresh air, granny,” Sahand would say and laugh. Making sure her chador would not slip off to reveal her red henna hair, she would say, “I feel more safe and comfortable wearing my chador.”

How kind she was.

“Sure, we have calendars of different sizes and qualities,” the saleswoman says gently.

“I need a birthday calendar, full of photos and poems.”

“Well, let me see. These are all the calendars we’ve got. Here’s a fantasy one; you can write the important birthdays in this separate sheet attached to the calendar.”

Having been pitted against a lot of yes’s and no’s for so many years, the old saleswoman does not seem to have any passion for her job. Has she got a memory of her childhood when she might have had an imaginary friend? Looking at her, moving from one shelf to another, I have an intense feeling that I have been living between two objects, two extremes, or two worlds, that however unknown and indifferent to me, initiate and will end in me.

No, just one birthday, which I will highlight inside the calendar. He must notice it. “I’ll get it.”

It’s Maryam passing, with determined steps.

“Maryam?”

She turns back to me with a light of anger in her eyes.

“Baran, where were you? Why’s your mobile off?”

What are those in her hands? I’m sure she was empty-handed.

“I thought I should give Arsalan a present too. I found these interesting.”

“You didn’t need to.”

“A fountain pen and a book. It’s Neil Young’s *Waging Heavy Peace*. Did you buy anything?”
Still confused about Maryam’s idea of buying a fountain pen for Arsalan. How does she know Arsalan likes fountain pens? What’s the secret behind her eyes? Is there anything one can be certain about? Or anyone? A friend, a decision, a moment, a feeling? What surprises me most after feeling confident and stable, is the gloomy suspicion, the hidden resentment and disapproval in the subconscious part of my mind. Who is supposed to interpret the sea’s enthusiasm and hope in its every green ebb and flow, to blow on a white blossom in the hands of humanity?

“Follow me,” Maryam says.

“Isn’t it my car?”

“Yes, it is, Ms Clever.”

“Will you drive?”

Once, Hamid and I were talking about food when he said, “I’ll cook anything you want.” He told me things were more complicated than they seemed, that he needed to show me something and invited me over to his house. I accepted. It was snowing. I went off on my own to take a look around. There were four rooms, each furnished with a big bookshelf, a table and some chairs. “You’ve got such quality books,” I said.

“Do you want to see the rest?” Hamid asked.

“You mean there are more?”

“Follow me.”

I was so inexperienced I would make the worst follower. He showed me around his house from its basement and yard to the second floor where there were hundreds of books, some of which seemed rather antique. I asked him if he had bought them all. “I’ve inherited them.”

My mind and body were obsessed with him, his lifestyle, glances, generosity, and thoughtfulness. His magical charisma of a kind I’d never experienced before. He took me in his arms. “Tea’s ready,” he said. Trying not to surrender to my feelings, I smiled at him and removed my hand.

Then, I held Jean Christophe in my hand and sat on a chair.
“No, don’t be silly, I just wonder what will happen to them in the long run. What are those letters spread out over the table?”

“The mother of one of my students is in love with me; she sent them to me,” Hamid answered. My mind went blank. “I don’t even read her letters,” he continued to say. The feeling circulating through my veins grew deeper and deeper. It reached its greatest depth and left me shaking. “Will you turn the heater on?” I asked. Hamid returned to the room and brought a coat. “I need to fix the heater,” he said and helped me put on the big green coat. I was twenty-two, head over heels in love, and not even sure if I had reached the age of reason. “Let’s go to the other room, it’s much warmer there,” he pressed my hands gently and kissed me softly on the lips. It was the living image of something. My eyes had been opened to the dirtiness and cruelty of adults so many years ago, so how could I trust a man thirteen years older than me, giving him the right to be thirteen times more inhuman, selfish, brutal, and oppressive? “I need to go.” I said.

He gave me a lift home in absolute silence.

Yet, soon after, I ended up going to his house every week. I would make a salad in his kitchen when he was in the bathroom, shaving his neck and chin. I would cut the cauliflower in half. It looked like a dense, rounded tree. Cauliflower is one of the luckiest vegetables, grown in sandy soil with plenty of access to water. “I could eat a whole cauliflower without even trying,” he would say. He should have shaved from the bottom of his neck upwards to prevent razor burn and ingrown hairs but had found it easier to shave his neck downwards. He would sometimes tell me the story of a blue worm that lived very happily. You could see him out walking up the stairs, connecting the sea and the sky, creating an incredible struggle from the ordinary scene before him.

“Let’s dance,” Hamid said once.

“I’d rather talk than dance with you.”

“I’d rather dance than talk with you. Pleaaaase.”

I’d been to ballet classes for three years. The first day, Mum did my hair and asked me to close my eyes. There were a pair of white pointe shoes, a cute pink top and a white skirt set on the table when I slowly opened my eyes. “I haven’t been dancing since I was
twelve,” I told Hamid. I put the flowers he had bought for me in the vase. “I’m afraid of
dancing.”

“Does it remind you of anything?”

“No.”

I lied. It reminded me of my parents’ bedroom where I danced for that man. My
grandmother had so many roses growing in her garden where Niloufar and I would play in
the sand with bare feet, digging, sifting, pouring water into great channels we’d carved, and
enjoying the smell of its earthiness. I was almost ten when I first met that man at my
grandmother’s house. Somebody knocked at the door. “I’ll get it,” Niloufar said and picked
up speed. I could feel my bare feet against the cold tiles in the yard as I ran faster to take the
lead. His empty gaze bore down on me as I opened the door. I had no idea what tragedy
awaited me.

“How come you fall into your thoughts all the time?” Maryam asks, annoyed. “Get
into the car. You worry me.”

“Sorry, I was enjoying the butterflies.”

Four butterflies flit in and out of my sight near the car. I could sit and watch them for
hours. How beautifully they flap their brightly coloured wings. Lightly, kindly, and quickly.
A small butterfly rests on a leaf. It splashes a little shower of rain in the air. I feel soaked to
the skin. Their life span is too short for such beauty.

Maryam takes State Route 33 to Waverley Road in Taringa. Radio Javan is playing a
song. A single tree is growing on the right side of the road. It’s amazing how a tree standing
all alone struggles with all the force of existing dangers, to live, full of hope and longing, to
lead us into the depth of life. “What’s the name of this song?” I ask. “‘Tehran Is Mine’ by a
group called ZedBazi,” Maryam says, smiling uneasily. How many of this song’s lyrics have
I heard before? You’re not like us when you’re not here to see. Do I need to be there to be one
of them? I try not to think about what being an Iranian really means.

Maryam turns the music up, tears streaming down her face. “You okay?” I murmur,
bewildered. There are a few moments of heavy unbearable silence. “See you at the concert
tomorrow,” she says, nervous, when we arrive home. There is a confused pause before I say,
“Let’s have a cup of tea before you go, OK?”
As we enter the kitchen, Maryam slides around the table and sits on the edge of it. Seven years ago, the first day we moved into our first house, I did the same, seating myself right on Arsalan’s lap. I handed him a gift, a miniature guitar carved on a big white Mercedes. Happiness shone in his eyes. “I love you,” he said.

Arsalan is not home. There is a big brown suitcase in the living room. I think it is Peyman's. I had completely forgotten that he was arriving this morning. I switch on the kettle.

“I miss the sense of safety of my childhood house,” Maryam says, pressing her lips together. “Mum never managed to persuade me that drinking peppermint tea would increase my IQ and make me more relaxed.”

I reach out to put my hand on top of her fluttering hands. “Do you miss her?”

“I never tried to understand her. I had no faith in her.”

Why? What was her fault? I would like to know. She gives a dismissive look, then says, “I love this tea’s exotic taste. ‘Enjoy your life, who knows if we are alive tomorrow?’ Mum would say every day but she never wanted to know the truth.”

She soon leaves, leaving me more confused than ever about the mystery behind her life. After some minutes of chaotic thoughts, first about Maryam, I give Arsalan a call. He must be very frustrated that I have not answered his phone calls this morning. No answer. The house smells of a mixture of rotting watermelon and banana. In the absolute silence of the street, I can hear a car passing. How long has it been since I talked to Sahand and Niloufar? Three days? No. Four days. I miss you, my lovely siblings. A strong feeling of nausea leaves me dizzy. It takes enormous effort to drag myself upstairs to the bedroom.
Dylan

Back home. ‘Mum’ is taking a bath. Her smooth body is probably stretched in a pool of scented soaps. She is Australian and Dad is Iraqi. I have never liked it when people say I look like him. I have a face only a mother could love. Dad’s is even worse. His small narrow eyes are set farther apart on either side of his oval face than mine are. Rosa, my little sister, does not look like the rest of us, with her platinum blonde hair and bright blue eyes.

A Cardiologist. That is what Dad is. Me: a second-year university student, not in cardiology but literature. The reason he is disappointed with me. I still live with my family. Iraqis rarely leave home before they marry. The good thing; I never have to worry about food. The bad thing; I can never bring a girl to my room. Not that I am not allowed, but the way Dad would throw the girl an accusing look makes me decide not to. These days, Dad paces round and round, or up and down the study like a man struggling for his life. Dad’s youthful dreams were the same as a paraplegic’s desire to reach the summit of Mount Everest, but who falls to his death on the first cliff he climbs. We no longer talk of the ‘trivial things’ going on at my university or of his youthful dream of winning Academy Award for Best Actor. Rather, he debates Iraq’s never-ending political and social troubles as he presses the phone to his reddened ear: “Yes, it hurts like hell. It’s more than a conflict between men over their religion. It’s like a slow painful death for those who are alive.”

Dad retreats into the study all the time to create a world with ‘words’ rather than ‘guns’. ISIS will not read you before killing others, I wanted to tell Dad last night when Rosa asked him to play with her and he instead started making a long speech about the significance of his book, Let There Be Light, for humanity and the reason why it should be published soon.

The front door opens with a sucking sound. “I didn’t use John’s toilet because it was brown. I flushed the toilet, but the brown didn’t flush.” Rosa starts crying, her hands clasped in front of her. John is our next-door-neighbour’s little son, the only kid Rosa gets along well with.

My window overlooks our rose garden, where Rosa is now running back and forth among the leafless branches. I hold my mobile against my ear, turn up the volume of the music, close my eyes. I am a descendent of uncertainty and filth, the most evil corporations
on earth. I sing along with Dream Theatre’s “Moment of Betrayal”. However, the sound of arguments from downstairs soon fills my head: “I’ve never said anything to humiliate you,” ‘Mum’ says.

“You’ve done that to me WITHOUT saying a word.”

“STOP pretending to be what you’re not.”

I rub myself dry with a yellow towel after taking a shower. They have not yet reached a ceasefire. There will always be so much to endure. So much. I’m thirsty. There is a bottle of water on my desk. With a sudden, aimless pace across the room, I throw it out of the window. A small passing cat runs away into the garden next door as the bottle collides with it.


A gecko in the corner wiggles its tail slowly, its triangular head arched up, looking through a gap between the window and its frame. Rosa calls me down for dinner. It feels uncomfortable forcing myself to eat across from them at our rectangular table. I have always had a sense of un-belonging to this house.

My life has taken on a never-ending journey. I go down the stairs whistling loudly. Of the many things I long to discover, I do not expect to notice a hole in my pants pocket. Entering the kitchen, I open a drawer next to the sink, pull out a knife, grip its wooden handle, and turn it upside down. Dad is standing near the stove, looking exasperated. He is in his usual outfit: brown pants and a beige shirt. ‘Mum’ is in a light purple dress that goes with her dark purple earrings. Her dazzling, chocolate brown eyes seem terrified. The knife handle sits firmly in my palm. “Okay,” she says in her honey-sweet voice. “That’s enough. Put the knife down right now.” Her long, dark brown hair flows in waves as she approaches the table. A smile dances on my face. I saunter to the fridge, take out a big red apple, put the knife aside, and bite the apple, turning my gaze to Dad who looks at me, mouth wide open and terrified. His eyes are melding into three lit candles on the table. ‘Mum’ puts on a CD and sets the plates, laden with fish and rice. The candles are extinguished by the strong breeze that blows in through the kitchen window. How long ago was it that I realized the truth about my existence? Rosa picks her teeth with her fingernails. Her plate skids across the table and onto the floor as she reaches for the salt on the far side of the table. “Sorry,” she says. “See
what you did?” ‘Mum’ raises her skinny-tailed eyebrows at her. Rosa shakes her head violently. “It wasn’t my fault.”


I go back to my bedroom and stare at the large picture of myself surfing, tacked up on my bed head. You never know what to expect from the next wave. I had my friend type it at the bottom of the picture.

A door slams loudly. I set my ears against the wall to hear ‘Mum’ and Rosa.

“I’m sorry, Mum.”

“It’s okay.”

“Somebody tickled me non-stop when I was sleeping.”

The unfortunate sight of a huge urine stain on the pink mattress comes to my attention. “Get out of my room!” Rosa blinks tears away from her eyes as she curls up under a blanket on the ground. ‘Mum’ is exhausted and frantic from Rosa’s chronic sleep difficulties.

There is little point in living if I can’t leave home anytime. I tiptoe across the living room where Dad’s wallet is sitting on the couch. I catch a glimpse of ‘Mum’s’ picture in it, take some money, and sneak out of the house. The sky is bruised. The street is empty and there is no light except for that of the moon. I curve my way to the right. It’s easier to destroy than being destroyed, and to hate than being hated. Is it why we destroy, kill, and sacrifice hearts? I find myself walking through a line of endless trees. ‘Mum’s’ vague voice rings through the air. How does she define ‘faithful’? How the hell did I end up here? It’s like the middle of nowhere. There is nothing to worry about. I need to go back home. I’m not afraid of darkness, the wind roaring around me, nor the rustling of leaves. I glance over my shoulder. Gee, I’m lost. There are neither ghosts wandering nor any wild animals to attack me. I still find myself running as fast as I can, dodging obstacles and ducking beneath low-lying branches.
Any moment now, animals will leap at me out of nowhere, armed to the teeth, growling out of the ground. I’m running like a cat being chased by a dangerous dog; my heart beats through my chest as my arms pump faster and faster by my side. “Stop lying,” her voice echoes in my ear. Moonlit shadows are hiding in the trees to my right. All at once, there is a long, loud crack of glass. Nothing feels right, neither death nor life. My moments feel more than loneliness and confusion. I blink several times to understand the dim shine of light from a distance. Fuck everything that’s in my head. With icy cold fingers, I wipe the tears flowing out of the corners of my eyes and my runny nose. I prefer to walk rather than stand still, but I feel paralysed. Still trembling, I stumble towards the traffic light. I don’t know why I have left home. I wave at the cars passing and scream my lungs out. Stop—Help—Please. They don’t stop; instead, they accelerate, passing like shadows before my eyes. The wind rushes by me. The whole surrounding world is drained of colour. I turn right at the intersection and head down a road that seems more familiar. The immense ground, light, streets and walls all seem like alien creatures watching my every move. This road seems endless. Everything is twisted.

There is a house on the right side of the road.

The leaves of the trees next to the house start flying off the branches. A feeling of heaviness overtakes my feet as if they are stuck in cement. I push my legs towards the house with utter hopelessness. The hair rises at the back of my neck as I knock on the door. The ghosts loom over me. My hands ball into fists and knock more loudly. There seems to be nobody inside. I let my hands rest at my sides and take two deep breaths, allowing the air to pass through my parched throat. I walk away from the house with shaking legs. My pace picks up, and start running, running, and running again, each breath ragged. After a few minutes, I round the bend into a long wide street. This is unbelievable. Our house is at the end of the street. Beads of sweat roll down my neck and chest as I fumble around my jacket for the key and turn it in the lock. There is a stinging pain in my right leg. Looking down, I notice that my knee is bleeding. I rummage in my pocket. The money and the photo aren’t there.

I open my eyes to find myself lying in bed soaked in sweat. I look at my watch. It can’t be. 1:20 am. On the way to the bathroom, a dim light filters through their slightly ajar door, which is never the case when they are asleep. In spite of myself, I push the door open. ‘Mum’ is rocking herself silently in her chair. I decide to sneak out. Suddenly, the sky begins
to grumble. She looks up and sees me leaning against the doorframe. Her mouth is set wide open as if she wants to spill everything she knows, any second now. “What are you doing here?” she asks, her eyes firmly fixed on my lips.

“Where’s Dad?”

“They called him to the hospital.”

She gets up in her spectacular pink nightgown to fetch a book from the ground on the other side of the bed. Her well-shaped breasts and her nipples are pointed slightly upwards. The sound of the rain grows louder and louder. My body aches. She sits down next to me, moving progressively through the book’s pages. She starts reading a poem by Rudyard Kipling:

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too;
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, don’t deal in lies,
Or being hated, don’t give way to hating…

She hands me the book. “Read the rest later,” she says. Her nails are polished orange, her face is puffed up around her eyes. Has she been crying? There is an urge to say some affectionate words in reply. Why is she reading this to me? She, many times over a liar, is telling me not to ‘deal in lies’? I am sweating like a pig. How does she feel about my presence in this house, in her life? I start breathing heavily through my nostrils. “Who are you?” a voice in my head makes my lips to form the words. I do not let them come out though. That’s the thing about destiny. It takes you anywhere it wants. I’ve had no other choice over my life, have I?

She stares meditatively at me and grasps my face in her hands as the tip of her nose touches my forehead. The world crashes around me. I leave the room.

The alarm goes off. 7:30 am. I get dressed and go downstairs to the dining room, my eyes glancing from Dad to ‘Mum’, then ‘Mum’ to Rosa when I get there. Rosa sticks her tongue out as she takes the pencil in her right hand. Dad sneezes like a lion, followed by a reversed sneeze that sounds very strange. He is listening to the news about the Iraq conflict.
She is sitting on the green swivel chair next to the dining table. “ISIS has seized control of Iraq’s biggest dam,” Dad says. He takes a deep breath, spreads carrot jam on the toasted bread and moves it up to his wide-open mouth. “Hi,” I say.

Rosa looks out through the blue floral kitchen curtain across the back yard and asks, “Dylan, do you like rain?”

“Yes.”

I follow ‘Mum’ up to the bedroom where she immerses herself in her wardrobe of fashionable dresses, takes out a long blue dress, applies moisturizer on her smooth face, and puts dark pink lipstick on her lips. She presses them together, smiles at my reflection in the mirror, and sighs. Smell of cigarettes on her breath. A gust of wind blows through the bedroom window, lifting her skirt.

This strong impulse to keep staring does not leave me, just as you might have a ferocious impulse to scratch your inner self. She disappears through the door and down the stairs. The cold breeze coming in through the window stirs my T-shirt, creating a feeling of danger. A shadow is passing over me, the ghosts that might eventually haunt me.

Dad calls up to me to get ready. As I come down the stairs, I see him pushing his thick, curly, black hair underneath his cap.

Getting into his car, I look through the window. My licence was suspended after I got four speeding tickets. Rosa’s small shaking hands appear at the kitchen window. Whenever it rains, she sits by the window and counts the raindrops that fall one after the other. “Weren’t you supposed to take today off?” I ask Dad.

“Why?”

“No reason.”

As we pull up to the university, I see a blonde girl with short legs kissing my German friend on the sidewalk. They are both in their third year of studying law. My first kiss was seriously awkward, a weird peck on a girl’s cheek right before science class when suddenly she grabbed my face, and I sucked her lower lip into my mouth and licked it with my tongue.

When was your best kiss of all time? I want to ask Dad but prefer to keep silent. He starts one of his boring speeches, “When you choose a path, you should go on with that decision towards the future. Then, no matter whether you like it or not, you will sometimes
stop to ask yourself what you have done to deserve this life.” I know this more than you. “See ya.” I get out of the car. He nods. He always nods.

David and another guy are fighting in front of the Frank White building. They are surrounded by three other guys who are cheering for David. I first met David in Urban Climb at West End. I had coffee with him a few times, but stopped hanging out with him after I realized that he is an alcoholic. The other boy’s red, fierce eyes pop out of his head when David pulls his hair. He tries to punch David under the chin but gets mostly air. David kicks him in the belly and then gets his head under his arms. David is choking him. I take two steps towards them, and look at David who seems to have all the energy in the world in him. His eyes meet mine as he punches the other guy in the stomach. He is on the ground, all blood. David looks around as if to say, “Anybody else?” I, the most timid twenty-year-old, turn my face to see if Dad is gone. Two security guards arrive. David runs away. I head towards the bus station.

Kitty and Natalie get off the bus. They are my classmates. Kitty is wearing her curly, purple-dyed hair in a side parting. She's wearing a skirt that sits above her knee. “Hi Dylan, how ya goin’?”

“G'day. Fine.”

Kitty smiles, her eyes glistening with naughtiness and excitement.

“See ya.”

“See ya.”

As usual, Queen Street Mall is crowded. I still flinch at anything that moves, even a breeze blowing against my face. There are two bored, broad-shouldered guards in uniform marching up and down a big jewellery shop. Their suspicious, wondering eyes are waiting for thieves.

There are more fancy items on display on the second floor. I stop at a surf shop to have a look at the surfboards on sale. Two teenagers pass me, talking about Olympic FC. I enter a clothes shop that has its summer collections on the rack. An old lady with pure silver hair fixes her mournful gaze on me as I search through the racks of bras for a bargain. A sales assistant about half my size asks me, “Do you need any help?” “I’m fine,” I say, with a look on my face that says ‘don’t disturb’. The air is filled with a sweet smell as a young girl passes
me to the cashier counter. She is not wearing a bra and her nipples are pointing through her loose V-neck top.

An unknown number keeps calling me. I answer.

“Hi Dylan, this is David.”

“David? What do you want?”

“Into some beers?”

“No.”

I press the end button with shaking fingers. Why has he called me? I enter the perfume shop and ask the saleswoman for fashionable fragrances that are popular among young girls. Her thick, uncombed hair moves in the air as she takes five perfumes out from the top shelves behind her, whispering something and laughing to herself. She lays them on the counter as her pale eyes wander to my mouth. What does David want? I choose the oval-shaped perfume container that has a red-haired girl on it. The saleswoman puts the wrapped container in a decorative box. “She’ll like it,” she says through her yellow teeth.

“Who?”

“Your girlfriend.”

“It’s for my ‘Mum’.”

A message from David: Your Dad won’t like it if I tell him about your smoking habits.

My head screams at me to delete it. He sends an address which I Google. My fingers barely touch the buttons. Another message: Dad’s mobile number. I get so weak in the knees that I glance around to see if there are any seats. Dad will not excuse me smoking, especially marijuana. My breathing hitches as a sharp pain squeezes my chest.

What the hell will he do with Dad’s number? I follow the map’s directions; just eight minutes and I’ll bash his brain in.
Radmehr and his classmate, Kamran, sit on a bench at the left corner of the schoolyard. Kamran opens his lunchbox and slowly takes his lunch out. Radmehr can’t take his eyes out of the fish and chips. “Kamran, why don’t you eat your lunch?”

“I don’t like it.”

Radmehr shakes the dust off his brown cotton pants. “Okay,” he says, putting his hands in his pockets and looking at the long uniform and black scarf of the teacher who walks past them. How ugly my teacher is! He thinks. “Do you want to change lunches? Mine is very delicious.”

“Yours is half the size of mine.”

“But it has salad, which is much better than your chips.”

“Okay, let’s.”

With wide eyes and racing heart, Radmehr struggles to look indifferent. “Sure?”

“Yes.”

Everybody looks at Marjan as she walks across Radmehr’ schoolyard to the principle’s room. She bumps into his teacher who asks to speak to her in private. “We’ve had three parent complaints over the past three weeks regarding your son exchanging his snacks with their children. One of the mothers was so angry she wanted to talk to him directly,” she says. “I just passed him in the corner of the schoolyard and he was having Kamran’s chips.”

“I’m very sorry. I’ll talk to him. It won’t happen again.”

Marjan gets in her car, starts it up, and drives up slowly down the street. I would add ice cream, chips, and chocolate cake to his diet. The doctor exaggerates about his high LDL cholesterol levels. How easy it is for him to recommend that Radmehr must lose at least fifteen kilos, she thinks. “At least,” Marjan says, furious.

Why must a life-shattering decision emerge from every calorie Radmehr might consume? Is there any way I can unburden myself from life? Marjan wonders. She stops her red car on the side of the Tehran highway, pushes the door shut carelessly, and then walks a
few hundred metres along the road. Some men honk their car horns as they drive past. Her gaze sharpens at the sight of a big green car on the left side of the road.

She hurls herself towards the car as it approaches.

The driver frantically blows his horn. “Are you out of your mind?” he shouts. Her eyes are still shut.

She is unhurt.

“What if I didn’t manage to stop?” the driver yells, driving off without stopping to check if she’s okay.

Marjan presses her trembling foot against the gas pedal. Nobody knows what it is like for my son, the burden of his apple-shaped body in this skinny-obsessed world. I never chose that for him,” she says into the rear-view mirror, tears rolling down her cheeks.

She slowly drives home.

As part of the exercise routine Marjan has created for herself, she walks on the treadmill for fifteen minutes and does eighty sit-ups. Then, sitting near naked by the balcony, she drinks her green tea and reads ‘White Nights’. With a vacant stare, she twirls a strand of thick curly hair, watching how her breath makes it dance on the air. She pushes her chair back and gets up to go to the kitchen.

She dries her hands on the purple towel hanging near the sink. Then she steps back to place the electric mixer on the counter, and mix the butter and sugar together in a large red bowl that they bought last week.

The now-creamy bowl and dreams of the most delicious cake Radmehr will ever taste bring a smile to her face. Her phone rings. Marjan moves fast for the phone and puts her finger on the screen to slide it. The slider refuses to move fully to right. She tries again. It moves half way then jumps back. “Damn it,” she says, holding the green button for a few seconds and then sliding it again.

“Hello?”

“Hi Marjan. How are you?”

“Oh, hi, Elham, fine. And you?”
“Good. We’re having some friends over for dinner tonight and would like you and Radmehr to join us.”

The utensils are jammed under the upper edge of the cutlery drawer and prevent it from releasing. Marjan beats her fists against the outer edges of the drawer.

“Thank you for your invitation but as you know Radmehr should not have rice and fried food at night.”

Noticing the strands of a cobweb flapping behind the coffee container, she opens the kitchen window to the crows squawking from the branches of a dead tree without leaf.

“Not at all. Kiss Radmehr for me. Bye.”

“Bye.”

Bang! Bang! Bang! She can hear her heart beating furiously beneath her hands. The earth is falling away. She throws the phone down on the kitchen counter and wonders about the last time she cooked something without worrying about the quantity of each ingredient. She adds the mix of coffee and water to the batter. Can having a hamburger be less important than the ability to walk? Her mind asks, remembering a paralysed girl she had seen on her way back from Radmehr’s school today. “Not if you have to walk around being ashamed of your appearance,” she murmurs, pouring the mixture into a large square cake pan and smoothing the surface with the back of Radmehr’s Spiderman spoon. “Why do you like Spiderman more than Batman?” she asked him last night. Radmehr threw the ball straight up. “Because I think he’s better,” he replied, watching the ball hit the ground.

“What makes you think so?”

“Hmmm. He’s just better. I don’t know. May I go to the yard and play?”

“Yes, but only after you give Mum a kiss.”

Is being a better person the same as being superior to your former self? Life is not determined by possessions, but rather by good looks and physical attractiveness. How can you learn to like yourself when the mirror does not allow it?
Marjan inserts a skewer into the centre of the cake, which comes out clean with no crumbs attached. To feel powerful, people try to cast guilt on others who can’t defend themselves, she thinks.

The mixture is pale and fluffy. Should I continue? Beat it more? Add more icing sugar? I should notify my client that I am withdrawing from his case tomorrow morning. I’m becoming a very irresponsible lawyer. Does one have to work to be respected? Yes and no, she tells herself. Provided you have plenty of money, you do not need a specific job title. Why hasn’t Radmehr told me anything about the lunch exchange? Was he afraid? What’s he doing now?

“I want to own a restaurant when I grow up,” Radmehr used to say when he was four, unaware of the fact that he would end up in hospital if he did not watch his diet for the rest of his life. There are some parents whose children are worse off than mine: mental disorders, skin disorders, digestive problems, asthma, cancer, eye problems, she thinks. I’m very lucky.

The week before, his music teacher said to her, “Radmehr’s incredibly talented; there’s something about his playing. He gets the message behind the song.” Rsadmehr flew his plastic plane and said, “I’ll have a big concert when I grow up, but will anybody attend it?”

“Of course, why not?”

“People prefer to go to a tall, skinny musician’s concert. Not mine.”

His music teacher tickled him. “Music has nothing to do with somebody’s weight, Radmehr. By the way, you’re the most stylish musician I’ve ever seen.” Radmehr giggled. “I’ll master all piano songs and impress them.”

She cuts the cake in half horizontally and spreads cream mixture over the bottom layer, before putting the other layer back on top.

The round brown clock on the coffee table says three. He will be home in an hour. She spreads the chocolate icing.

“Almost done,” she whispers, a smile curving her lips. “A dreamer.”
Marjan glances at Dostoyevsky’s *White Nights* on the bookshelf. She has read it several times wishing that the first time she met Arsalan could have been as romantic as *White Nights*’ story. She knows it is just a fantasy but closes her eyes and dreams the first night as follows:

It is a wonderful night. Marjan takes a long walk before standing at a canal railing. A man approaches her. She walks towards her house, her knees weak with fear. He pursues her. She races as fast as her high heels will allow. He runs and stops in front of her. She utters a stifled shriek. Afraid. In a flash, a young, handsome man steps up onto the sidewalk. Her pursuer runs away. He tells her that he is a dreamer and that he often daydreams of a girl with whom he can talk without feeling ridiculed or timid. With gleams of passion in their eyes, full of feeling, they walk towards her house. Shyly, Arsalan tells her that he will be dreaming about her all night, and that he will meet her at the same place they met at the same time the next day. She likes his timidity and honesty. She agrees. Pleased, overwhelmed, and intoxicated.

Out of her dreams, Marjan remembers she should ice the cake. She grabs a pastry bag filled with icing. I LOVE YOU, she writes on top of the cake. If only I could let you have as much as you wanted, she wishes, recalling the night before Radmehr’s birth when she felt a dull ache in her abdomen. Then came a lot of pressure in her pelvis. “My baby’s coming,” she smiled. Then tears started to stream down her face. She walked over to the phone and called her aunt. “Hello,” the aunt said, “hello?”

The pain became more intense. Marjan did not know what to say. Another sharp pain. She dropped the phone, began screaming, and beating the wall with her fists. “Oh! Oh! Oh! No! No! God!” Her son was about to come out every second. With her wild cry, her upstairs neighbors came down and knocked on the door. She had lied to them that her husband died when she was in her fourth months of pregnancy. She tried to hold in her screams as she walked over to the door. Her neighbors rushed her to the hospital, all the way asking her if she wanted them to call anybody. “No,” she said, winding her fingers into her long black hair.

They released her form the hospital two days later. She took a taxi home, holding her tiny baby in her arms. All the neighbors guessed that she had lied to them and kept spreading rumors about her.

A month later, she moved out to Niavaran, a district in the north of Tehran’s foothills. Marjan shifts onto her right side and smiles at Radmehr’s photos on the wall. She gets out of
her bed to extract three photo albums from under it. For a long time, she sits motionless with the cover of the first album in her hand, half opened. “wish you were here Mum.”

For a second, she imagines herself living in Brisbane and driving through its streets towards the concert hall. I wish I were not living in Tehran, wish I had found a way to immigrate to Brisbane when Maryam told me that Arsalan lives there, she thinks, but her anger towards Arsalan makes her feel guilty for such a thought. She goggles his name. She has been doing this almost every day since Maryam told her that the tickets to Arsalan’s concert were sold out. She pushes the albums back under the bed and leaves the room.

She takes her English books from her bag. “Damn it. Lots of assignments,” she grumbles to herself. Then begins to write a one-page story using the grammar they were taught in the previous lesson. Present perfect and present perfect continuous. “I need to call Maryam.” Not now, it’s very early in the morning in Australia. “I should look for a better English institute. I’ll never learn the difference between these two tenses.”

There are fifteen minutes to Radmehr’s arrival. She pours a teaspoon of olive oil on the warm roasted vegetable salad before putting it on the table next to the grilled salmon. Then she sits on the sofa, tilts her head back slightly on its headrest and flipping through White Nights, dreams of her imaginary second night with Arsalan:

They meet in the same place. Arsalan has been there for two hours already. She asks him to talk about himself. He tells her that he has no secret or romantic history. He also says that he has kept to himself, utterly alone. Marjan tells him that she is a dreamer. He asks her name. “I’m Marjan,” she says. He talks about himself so splendidly, as if he is reading from a book. He says that he can create his life as he wishes it to be at any time in his dreams. He thanks her for helping him reconcile with himself. He confesses that he can no longer be happy in his dreams now that he has experienced happiness in reality beside her. She asks for his name. “Arsalan,” he says. Now Marjan holds his hand, and talks about her loneliness after the car accident in which she lost her parents, about her aunt’s house where she grew up, and about how terrible it has been to carry her smashed face throughout her life. Arsalan reassures her that he can be her companion and recites a poem by Rumi:4

The beauty of the heart

4 Rumi, also known as Jalâl ad-Dîn Muhammad Balkhî, was a 13th-century Persian poet, jurist, Islamic scholar, theologian, and Sufi mystic.
is the lasting beauty:
its lips give to drink
of the water of life.
Truly it is the water,
that which pours,
and the one who drinks.
All three become one when
your talisman is shattered.
That oneness you can't know
by reasoning.  

Somebody rings the bell. Out of her dreams, Marjan can see the cake through the rubbish bag. She has just put a small piece in the fridge. To keep it out of Radmehr’s sight, she hides the bag on the balcony. She checks herself in the mirror next to the video intercom. Marajan’s blood turns cold when Radmehr appears at the door. She cannot take her eyes from a bruise around his left eye and a bump in the middle of his forehead.

“Who did this to you?” she hears herself asking loudly.

“I was running towards the bus when I lost my balance and fell,” he replies in between sobs, furiously looking at her with his bewildered eyes. She loops her arms around his tawny neck and kisses his tears away. He does not tell her that his tall, thin classmate tripped him, and that when he tried to stand up, another thinner classmate punched him in his eye, and knocked him flat again.

During lunch, a pleased but bemused look crosses Radmehr’s face when Marjan says, “We’ll have a nap and then go to the show if you’re not tired.”

“Hooray! I thought you told me we’ll go to the theatre next week. Mum? Was Dad there when I was born?”

She drums her long, blue nails on the table.

“No, he wasn’t.”

“Was he strong?”

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Mathnawi II, 716–718.
“Yes, love.”

After lunch, Radmehr goes up to his bedroom. An hour later, Marjan slowly presses the handle down, and pushes the door open to reveal Radmehr’s bed where he is asleep under the ceiling which has dark yellow stars on a light blue background.

She goes to her own bedroom where she reaches for a bag at the back of an antique dresser. Inside the leather bag is a silk skirt, which smells of roses. She bought it a week before giving birth to Radmehr. I’ll wear it if Arsalan ever comes back. That is what she thought at the time. She takes the skirt out and puts the empty bag in the drawer. With the skirt, she wears a blue cotton blouse. “So green,” she whispers.

“I love your skirt,” Radmehr says as he walks into the room carrying his guitar, his face happy and open.

“Thanks, hon. I thought you were asleep.”

She rests her cheek against his and lets her mouth move towards his forehead.

“Just woke up. Miss Shadi said she would give me a gift if I play this song without any mistakes.”

Radmehr sits on the end of the bed and clamps the guitar to his white, sweaty shirt. Marjan notices a small piece of cake on the shirt. He whistles a happy tune. “Miss Shadi said the strings are getting old. She said I should buy new ones.”

“We can buy them tomorrow before going to the institute. Play a song for me,” Marjan says, waiting for him to reply with the usual, “Not now, Mum.”

To her surprise, he smiles and starts playing a gentle melody.

Marjan leans closer to Radmehr to hear the sound of his breathing as the guitar’s serene tone rings in her heart.

His cheeks change colour and the tip of his nose throws off sparks when Marjan claps her hands over her head. “I’m hungry,” he says as his chubby hands put the guitar down. You had your lunch one hour ago. Today you had more than you should, how come you’re still hungry? All these thoughts are running through Marjan’s mind. However, “Well done my love, would you like to have a piece of cake with milk?” comes pouring out of her mouth,
with an uneasy smile. A beam of sheer delight lights up his face. “Hooorrрааay,” he says, running out of the bedroom towards the fridge.

She puts the guitar on the bed. Outside, rain pours down heavily. Marjan turns off the light as she leaves the room. Lightning flickers in the sky.

When she steps into the kitchen, he is pouring two big spoons of sugar into a glass of milk, shoving the rest of the cake into his mouth. She draws a short breath at the sight of the empty plate. “That’s the best cake ever,” he murmurs happily, gulping down the milk. You are somebody who never existed before. Isn’t it strange and terrifying? You just appeared out of nowhere, during one of the four times that Arsalan and I slept together. Exactly when I completely believed in not wanting a child, Marjan whispers in her mind. “I love you, Mum,” Radmehr says, noisily licking the remaining cream off his fingers. “What time are we going to the show?”

Her feeling of irritation does not go away at the thought that he should not have any ice cream and cake at least for the next ten days. “I love you too. In an hour.”

“So, can I watch Tom and Jerry before that?”

“Yes, love, you’re off for three days, so you don’t need to do any homework today.”

“Thank youuuu,” Radmehr says jumping up and down, and then running into the living room.
Sara

Sara arrives at the clinic at 11:00 am. The receptionist is greeted by her facial expression—no embarrassment and no sense of apology. “You’re never on time,” the receptionist says softly, half-smiling. “Next time, if you’re running late for your appointment, please call the clinic to inform us.”

After the appointment, Sara finds herself marching along the riverside near the Eagle St Pier, feeling her life floating fast, like the air escaping from a freshly burst balloon. She sits on a bench opposite the Bavarian Bier Cafe and looks at the boats on the surface of the river, sitting so firmly as if they would never move. “What a wonderful young lady!” a voice says. Sara turns back to glance at the woman who has a huge smile on her red lips and a hand shading her eyes. “Maryam!!!” she says happily. “How come you’re here?”

“I knew you always come here after your doctor’s appointments. What did he say?” Maryam asks after they give each other a big hug. Sara tries to remember the doctor’s suggestions, but instead falls into an overwhelming sense of the memory of the warm, magical tulip smell in Saadat Abad Park in Tehran. It was where she and her friends would pull sleds down the park’s hill in winter. Sara shrugs. “Nothing interesting,” she says. “Your buttons are done up the wrong way,” Maryam says, laughing. Sara makes a face like ‘who cares?’ She unbuttons and re-buttons her shirt.

“How did your meeting with Julie go?”

“She gave me some comments.”

“Like what?”

“Like that if writing about one story bores me, why don’t I try writing several short stories of different lives and then weave them together?”

“Ha ha, great promise, small performance.” Maryam wipes her nose with a handkerchief. “Do you want to know my advice? Write about people’s habit of blowing their noses into their handkerchiefs, making such a shocking noise without apologizing, making you want to bang your head against a brick wall. The funny thing is the same people apologize to you for coughing, yawning, and even sneezing, even if they’re ten metres away.”
Sara laughs at the sight of her friend’s nose wrinkling in disgust. “Don’t be stupid.”

“I mean it. Don’t get mad at me but I’m still half-hoping you’ll make it to the concert tonight. You should talk to Baran. I went shopping with her yesterday. She wanted to buy a present for Arsalan and asked me to join her.”

Sara uncrosses and recrosses her legs. “No.”

“Why not?”

“Some things are better left unsaid,” Sara starts loudly, but her voice trails off to a whisper.

She takes a pack of chewing gum from her bag, picks out two pieces, and starts chewing them noisily. “The afternoon I spent most of her time walking up and down the halls of Dey Hospital. How could I know Mum was tumbling over in the kitchen, seeking help?” she mutters in a husky voice. “Baran had slashed her veins and swallowed pills. She did not want to have another victim added to the world, but she never knew that her stupid suicide attempt would take my mother’s life instead. I could have helped Mum, could at least have listened to her. I’ll never know why Mum didn’t try calling Dad, Mina, my uncles, my aunts, her friends. There were all these people who loved her. She called me just a few minutes before her death, four times, probably coughing and grabbing at everything she could, and I had not answered her because I was busy with trying to save Baran’s life.”

“I’m sorry Sara, I truly am; I know it must have been very difficult for you,” Maryam says, patting Sara’s shoulder soothingly.

Sara looks at the people passing by. “Vacant faces, do you ever notice them?”

Maryam makes a puzzled face. “No. To me they look like hamsters stuck on a spinning wheel. Listen Sara, your mother might’ve had a heart attack some minutes after the call, which had nothing to do with the reason why she’d called you. Her death is neither Baran’s fault nor yours.”

“I had a weird dream last night.”

“What was it?”
“I died in a hot room where I felt drowsy. The moments were as clear and weighty as crimson and orange sunsets. Despite me crying out to stop her, Mum lay down on a bed, staring into space. I found myself floating in the air, then dropping onto her stomach, gazing at her eyes that were filled with tears, hope, and anger. Suddenly, her small belly was split open, as far as her vagina. Fearlessly, I pushed my head inside it, before my whole body shrank smaller and smaller till it all disappeared. Adrift in the air, I glanced around to see where I was. Nothing. Nobody. Then I stood somewhere near the bed, guiltily, to watch Mum’s belly heal and return to its previous shape. Everything had faded into airless light. Inside her. And I could not believe it was the end. It was raw and painful. I was freezing. There was a ringing sound in my right ear. Mum’s voice was lost in the midst of a snow storm with black and white wind howling through the window.”

Maryam runs her hand very gently back and forth on Sara’s arms. “Sounds like a fairy tale,” she says uneasily, trying to conceal her sorrow. “I’m sure you’ll feel much better after seeing your father. My advice,” says Maryam, “is to have a coffee, walk down the river towards the botanic garden, and then go back home to get ready for the concert. And no excuses.”

Two men are sitting on the grass about a metre away from their bench, deep in their own world. The heavier, older-looking one scratches his back with long black nails. Sara feels that a strong smell of spoiled tomatoes emanates from him. For a second, her eyes are shocked by the revelation of the chubby one kissing the fit-looking man on the lips. How wonderful it is to have the right to be who you are, Sara thinks.

“I was thinking of having salmon for lunch.”

“Salmon was thinking of you, too,” Sara laughs, digging her hands into her pockets. “There are three important things about me.”

“He he, insipidity is the first, what are the two others?” Maryam says, gnawing the side of her thumbnail.

Sara wonders how deep the river can become when solid ground is expected. “My God, that man is drowning.”

“Where? Who?” Maryam asks, panicked, as she quickens her steps, her long purple hair flying in the strong breeze.
Ten horrifying seconds later, Maryam inclines her head in Sara’s direction. “You just saw the second part,” Sara says, amused.

“Silly girl,” Maryam says, bumping her shoulder against Sara’s as they walk towards ARIA restaurant.

“You wonder if anybody’s at work,” Sara says, looking at the only vacant table in the restaurant. “How does it feel to eat vegetables all the time?” Maryam asks.

“Fabulous.”

“It doesn’t save the animals from suffering.”

“Saves me from participating in the act.”

Maryam is about to say that all vegetarians have a despondent look. Instead, she glances at Sara’s eyes and traces her fingers along the red damask tablecloth, which reminds her of Isfahan. “About fifteen years ago, my brother and I saw a teenager in Bazare-e-Bozorg in Imam Square. He was making a hand-printed tablecloth in a small workshop. “He’s probably your age,” I told my brother. “How old are you?” the boy asked. “Thirteen,” my brother said. The boy smiled at me and said, “I’m two years older, which means forty-eight hand-printed tablecloths to my family. This is the sixty-second tablecloth I’m making, want to buy it?”

“No,” I said.

“You’ll regret it one day,” he said, casting his humiliated eyes on my expensive brown leather boots. “Regret what?” I asked. “Nothing,” he said. I always regret not having bought that tablecloth, not having told him what beautiful eyes he had, not admiring him for his wonderful skill, pride, and so many other things in him I couldn’t figure out then.”

Sara opens her mouth to say something when Maryam’s phone chimes its maddening, sharp tone. She stares at the screen, pursing her lips. “Anything wrong?” Sara asks.

“It’s Marjan. I don’t know what to say to her.”

“Who’s Marjan?”

“It’s a long story.”
Two tables away on the corner, a dark-haired man asks for some water. “What’s happiness to you, Maryam?” Sara asks, playing with her food.

“I’ll die one day and nothing’s going to last forever. This is great happiness. Why do you write?”

“As a resistance to admitting what life makes me experience without asking for my permission.”

A little boy enters the restaurant, trudging reluctantly a few steps behind his father, rain-soaked.

“Don’t you find it fascinating to imagine strangers’ lives?” Sara asks.

“Like their thoughts, eating habits, favourite music, childhood, concerns, anger, hatred, and love?”

“Yes, yes. Even more.”

“No,” Maryam says in a playful tone.

“Look at the bump on the tip of his nose, the tender skin on the inside of his arm, his painful sore lips, his cold fingers moving uneasily inside his shallow pockets, the dimple on his chin. He might have smacked his knee against a seaside rock,” says Sara, without taking her eyes off the child, in a voice so emotional that Maryam glances at the child, guiltily, as she gets up to go to the bathroom.

“What’s life?” Sara asks when Maryam comes back. She leans forward and says, “A movement from womb to tomb,” an absurd expression on her face. Sara stands up, and folds the linen napkin on the table. “They didn’t order anything and now they’re going. I’ll call you later.”

“You’re really crazy, Sara,” Maryam says, realizing that Sara is going to follow them.

Maryam walks towards the Myer Centre in Queen Street Mall to do some grocery shopping. There are just a few people in Coles. Half an hour later, when her trolley is half full, she receives a call. “I’ll be back soon,” says Maryam. She is heading for the cashier when a box of coloured pencils catches her attention. She walks past it, and then turns back
towards it, her hands quivering. Feeling tension in her shoulders, she looks left, then right, then left again, a strange confusion covering her face. She gingerly takes the box.

Sara has been following the man and his son for twenty minutes. She gazes critically at the man walking on the sidewalk. The child is at least a metre away from his broad-backed father, Sara one metre more, her blood running cold every time the child tries to catch his father’s hand before being refused. The child gallops desperately, his hands moving back and forth, talking effortlessly, and trying to capture his attention. “Dad,” the child says enthusiastically, glancing up at him, taking fast steps. “I saw him again.” The pointlessness of her time, the rushing of the moment, and the opening and closing of the clouds, all make Sara feel exhausted and outraged. But to her surprise, she sees the father strolling towards the child and kissing him several times. Lightness creeps over Sara. She can stand there, in this otherworldly mesmerized moment, forever. Miraculously, the child turns and waves at Sara with a warm, toothless smile before entering an apartment.

When we know nothing of somebody’s fantasies, we imagine their life based on their family, education, financial status, and claims. Then one day, we convince ourselves to fall in love with one of them whose fantasies might be like ours. We start a relationship, everything seems to be going well, or at least we think so, until one day, we meet a person in a bus, a supermarket, a concert, a club, a seminar, a pool, anywhere. Then we know, at first sight, we understand her on the inside, regardless of her fantasies, family background, education, and all the other criteria we were always carrying with us. And we wish time would stop. Because we know some minutes later, we’ll be having dinner with another person to whom we have said I love you a hundred times.

These thoughts pass through her mind before she decides to sit under a tree and add a note on the memo: *I can’t fight against the cancer that is moving freely and cruelly in my breasts. At least, I’ll meet death, the one honest symbol of existence. It’s a weird feeling to know you do not have much time before you, that you might never again have the chance to observe the impulse of your heart.*

2:30 pm. “I need to call Dad,” Sara murmurs uncomfortably, staring momentarily at the blue apartment. She opens her messages. All three are from Julie: Message #1: Hi, how’s your day going? Message #2: Remind me to send you some writing samples. Message #3: How about meeting up on the weekend?
Sara types as she walks: *A reminder: Please send me some writing samples. Thanks.* 😊

“Excuse me,” an old voice says, deeply thrusting into her thoughts. “Watch your step, darling.”

Sara glances down with a disapproving look at the short woman. But her lips curl up in sympathy at the sight of the white cane in her hands. “I’m sorry,” Sara says. The woman fogs her glasses with her breath, and wipes them with the corner of her shirt, then glances at Sara for a few long moments. “My house is very near.” Her heart begins a nervous pounding as the woman makes her way towards the blue apartment. I live on the second floor. “Would you like to have a cup of tea?” She asks. Feeling at once peculiarly elated and confused by the situation, Sara looks back at the shiny red and yellow leaves on the ground. “Well, yes. I’m craving one.”

Darkness. Lights switched off. The curtains drawn. Turning the dining room light on, all sorts of special scenes come back to Sara, such as a few moments previous when the man kissed his son, casting a distinct spell of hope in the air. Or the heartbreaking look on Georgia’s face last night when Sara asked her to stop. Or the morning when the doctor had cast a look of displeasure at the test results and, after a reluctant smile, had announced that she must have surgery. It would be wonderful if we could skip death exactly when we are supposed to look it in the face, Sara thinks. “Do you live alone?” she asks the woman.

“Yes, I do.”

The woman takes the kettle over to the tap, removes the lid and fills it. She’s not blind, Sara thinks, leaning against the fridge, and staring at the long stitch on her trembling leg.

“My children are living in the US. All three of them.”

“Why don’t you live with them?”

Moving towards the corner of the dining room where a small bookcase stands, she brushes the hair from her eyes. “These are some of their latest photos,” the woman says. “Their happy voice and enlightened eyes reflected an unbelievably bright light in the house.”

“They all seem beautiful and happy,” Sara says, allowing the woman to hold her hand. “You have a nice collection of books.”
“They remind me of my kids.”

Sara looks at the small red basket of tea bags on the countertop above the dishwasher and the sticky gunk of dust on the range hood.

The woman looks at Sara, with her small, penetrating eyes. “What do you do?”

There’s a great distinction between people who believe they feel and understand what they read and see and others who feel and understand what they don’t read and see, Sara thinks.

“I’m trying to write a story.”

“Why do you write”?

Sara leans against the table and thinks. To live for the moment is an ideal state of being, but what does it really mean? Doesn’t it mean to consciously ignore the parts we have left behind?

“I don’t know.”

“I used to write unpublished book after unpublished book.”

“Why unpublished?”

“I never thought I was good enough to publish anything I wrote.”

She hands Sara a photo. “My husband died four months ago.”

“I’m sorry.”

“We got on. I felt I could die for him from the moment I first saw him but I never loved him. You want my advice? Never start a relationship with someone who’s on the wrong terms with his own being. They are always standing against the wind, complaining that it is blowing too hard, not soft enough, cold enough, at the right time, at the right moment and so on.”

Memories flood her mind again: They were sitting in the dining room watching TV. She and Sepideh. Her friend. A cute brown girl who was wearing pink lipstick and a white jacket. When her father came to the door to view the weather, he caught them kissing. He waited for an explanation from them. They both left the room in silence. This was two years
after her mother’s death. Her father never invited over relatives or friends anymore. After that, everything about her made him angry.

“Ha ha. Hope you have good neighbours?”

“None of them cares if I’m alive. There’s only this guy living above me with his five-year-old son who sometimes asks me if I need anything. His wife left them after she became pregnant with another man’s baby.”

Sara agonizes over every word the woman utters. Fear. Confusion. Knowledge. “Right,” Sara whispers, reaching guiltily into her bag for her phone. “This was a nice tea. Thank you very much. It’s time I went.”

“Would you like to have the books?” the woman asks in great distress.

“I’m not the right person to have them.”

“Keep my books, will you?” she holds the books against Sara, her eyes sparkling over them.

Sara bends down to embrace her. “I’ll get them typed up and returned to you. I’ll keep a copy of them.”

The woman laughs a happy, loud laugh. “Thank you, thank you.”

Walking up the stairs, Sara finds herself at the man’s door. She smells the aroma of a delicate lamb curry. She stares fixedly at the doorknob, feeling herself weightless. No longer interested in getting to know the man and his son more, she sits at the top of the staircase and opens the first page of the thinnest book the woman has given her: The strangeness we feel in looking at the intricate contour of ourselves is that of the confusion of miscellaneous distinct selves who live in us. Words never cease to amaze me. The magic they perform. The words we breathe have the power to illuminate the corrupted universe. If we want others to have a glimpse of our soul, we should know it is just the depth of honesty and the content in which the words are used that can make them respectful and trustworthy.

Back in the street. After a ten minute walk to Eagle Street Pier, she sits on the grass facing the City Hopper and opens another memo on her phone: Crippled inside, you will always think your pain is beyond others’ understanding or respect, so you keep smiling at others, believing there’s no way to confront it. However, one day, three miracles might free
you from the deepest and longest wounds: Either another Pain. Love. Or Death. The only abstract healings required to be thoroughly felt.

Two black-and-white striped butterflies chase each other in a spiral flight, circling around her happily. Sara imagines herself moving laterally in the fast, swirling currents across the river, feeling weightless, leaning over a friendly tree. Her thoughts are interrupted by a message from Baran: Hi Sara, I’d love to see you tonight.

That morning Sara was on her way to the gym and thought to drop by and say hi to Baran. “She’s in her room,” her mother said. Sara opened the door to find Baran shaking on the ground. Her pupils were dilated. Standing there frantic, with a shock of sensation amounting almost to hallucination, Sara yelled out for help and then called for an ambulance. Baran was unconscious for a few minutes, and then started having seizures. “Open your eyes,” was what Baran’s mother shouted repeatedly. In the hospital, they pumped her stomach, took a long rubber tube and put it down her nose before taking her into the operating room. Three hours later, the doctor said she had overdosed. “She will live but we couldn’t do anything for the child. She was in her third month of pregnancy. I’m sorry.”

Sara was the only one who knew she was pregnant. On the way back from the hospital, the weather had turned; the trees were stripped of their leaves to celebrate their upcoming death.

Sara tries not to think of the Ghormehsabzi, pomegranate salad, yogurt, and orange juice all set on the shiny table when she went home the same evening to confront her mother’s death.

Images of happy days pass: She and her sister Mina would chase each other in circles. Her parents would kiss them. She was nine, still unaware of the metamorphoses awaiting her.

On her twenty-first birthday, she got a boy’s haircut and no longer wore earrings that were her father’s deliberate birthday present. “Wear them,” he said.

“Sorry Dad, my pierced holes are blocked.”

He stormed out of the decorated room, muttering “It’s not possible.”
“Would you like to go abroad for a Master’s degree?” her father asked a few months later. Sara lowered her eyelids and pressed her fingers against her slender neck, “Are you trying to get rid of me?”

That night, they sat sideways on the couch. “I’ll apply for a Master’s degree in Australia,” she said. Across from where they sat had once been a green armchair on which her mother would usually sit. She had once hugged Sara and said, “You’ll be the most beautiful bride ever.”

Shortly after, she catches the ferry to South Brisbane. With great force, she pushes against the ground with her feet. In the silence that overshadows the ferry, Sara takes another look at the message before pressing the send button: Thank you Baran. I’ll join you.

She calls her hairdresser friend to have her hair cut before heading home.

Back home. Sara opens an old photo album, touching all her mother’s photos with her finger. Sara feeds the neglected fish. Feeling guilty, she lingers over the aquarium and watches them hanging around the top of it waiting to grab their lunch or dinner. “You poor fish,” she says. “You deserve a more responsible owner.”

Suddenly, the Viber message tone grabs her attention. It’s Mina.

Mina: Hi sis ❤️❤️

Sara: Hi Mina, how are you? How’s Dad?

Mina: Dad’s been reading ‘What We Talk About When We Talk About Love’ since this morning

Sara: Take a photo of Dad and send it to me, just now.

Mina: It costs a fortune.

Sara: Pleaaasee.

She feels struck by the flashing lights of that day, in which, for whatever reason, looking at two black birds in the sky, she had thought that Baran needed her. Quite right. Having saved Baran’s life, she had finally gone home, after all those vacant, vain, intolerable moments, and found Carver’s book on the table, the last book her mother had read.
She does not hear Julie’s loud knocks at the door the first four times. “Don’t you ever look at your mobile?” Julie says as soon as Sara opens the door. “My driver’s licence is in your bag, remember?”

“Oh yeah, sorry.”

“I’ll be waiting here.”

“No, come in.”

Holding on to her hair, Sara bends down to take the licence out of her bag. Gazing fixedly on the far side of the sofa at the books on the ground, Julie seems about to say something, but instead tries to kiss Sara as soon as she turns her head. “What are you doing? You stupid girl,” Sara shouts, pushing her off.

“I’m sorry,” Julie says. “So sorry.”

“Get out,” Sara points to the door.

She closes the door behind her and then takes a fortifying breath after hearing the echoes of Julie’s steps down the corridor.

Tears roll down her cheeks. Sara removes her glasses and polishes them on her sleeve.

She checks the walking distance to the conservatorium from her place. Fifteen minutes. Not worth driving, she thinks.

Chin-length straight hair. Moderate make up on her brown face. And light orange lipstick. Walking up the street in her black mini skirt and yellow top, an obscure exchange happens between her and a young man on the sidewalk blowing a big bubble with his chewing gum while trying to unbuckle his watch. Ghostly lights above the long buildings. Busy cafés and restaurants. Careful drivers behind rain-splashed windscreens. Happy-faced passers-by.

Some kinds of loss are absolute. And no amount of self-realization will change that. Sara walks into a bar. The young man from the sidewalk follows her into the bar and sits on the chair next to her. He takes a long, languorous swallow of beer and smiles a watery smile. “You see that lady over there?” he asks, giggling and hiccupping.

“The one with the long red dress?”
“A famous politician. You see how overwhelmed that pink and swollen guy is in her presence? I have a strong feeling that all politicians are wealthy criminals in disguise.”

How do you know them? Sara thinks, smiles, drinks her Carlton Draught, and gets up.

A strong blast of wind blows through Sara’s body as she walks out of the bar. She pushes her hair around with both hands to see an old, bent man, alone, his hands behind his back, looking straight ahead, smiling radiantly. At some point, when he walks past her and turns his gaze to her, all space appears to evaporate between them and he captures a piece of her along with him. Her thoughts are occupied so much by this figure that she no longer hears the voices around her. Only the sound of silence. Pushing her glasses back up on the bridge of her nose, she turns back to look at his fragile knees. And then his unseen, untouchable hands. She vividly feels herself stepping out of her present body as part of him. Within him. In the faraway future, walking in another street. Sara looks up to see a possum walking along the electricity wire despite the possibility that it might fall on its next movement. It is the first time she has seen a possum up there. Sara makes a fast, flicking movement with her hand when her phone chimes loudly.

Arsalan

I drive towards the Brisbane Entertainment Centre. I check my emails while waiting for traffic lights. There is an email from Hamid.

I open the attachments. What is Hamid talking about? My thundering heart doesn’t let me breathe. I take off my jacket. I dial the number that Hamid has emailed to me. “Who’s
this?” A woman asks. It’s Marjan’s voice. I keep quiet and listen. In stillness. “Hello, who’s this?” She asks in a loud voice. Her voice comes out not from her throat but from her whole body, it sounds like a voice screaming in pain from underground tunnels. I hang up. What’s wrong with Brisbane? Sandgate Road has never been this long. I run my fingers along the strange letters in the email. R A D M E H R. M A R J A N. I begin to feel the letters harden under my touch.

It is raining and raining and raining. I don’t know whom to hate. I hate myself. A cheater, yes, I am a cheater. My life has been like a game of chess. The chess pieces were arranged prior to my existence. Not all my movements were decided by me. Life decided I would move second, to fight against checkmate. “You don’t need to ask others about their being honest with you, just look at their eyes. They are the only honest things in the world,” Marjan told me the first day I went to her house, after I told her about my distrust of others.

I walk slowly down the hall of Brisbane Entertainment Centre. From the corner of my eye, I notice John’s lips moving. “What’s wrong with you? Fourteen-and-a-half thousand people will be attending the concert. Are you sure you can manage it tomorrow without any more practice?”

Here I am. A man of success. And I am freezing. I’m freezing to death, and twisted, like iron in winter, or like the branches of an aged tree in a pale frozen forest. A man of no value, a man of failure. “I’m fine,” I nod. “This will be my best performance ever.”

I follow him to the meeting room. They all look forward to performing what they have been practising for three months, the musicians say. Just for an instant, I feel Hamid’s presence in the room when my eyes meet the Cloud Gate, the mirrored bean-shaped sculpture on the screen of my mobile.

“Arsalan, let’s make sure we have covered everything. So, Nick will play ‘Upside Down’ at six-fifty. You’ll be on stage at seven, after the lights turn off. So everybody, see you tonight at Black Hide Steakhouse for some relaxation and stress relief!”

The sound of cold rain.

4 p.m. There is a tiny brown stain on my white jacket. Three hours left until my concert. I grab a take-away coffee from The Coffee Club, pass the receptionist at the Meriton Hotel,
take the lift to level 6, and walk to Room 618. I stand at the door, and knock. There is a loud sound of jazz music coming from inside the suite. The doorknob twists.

Hamid leans against the frame in his green checked pyjamas. His eyes are swollen and red. He presses his hand tightly against his stomach and whispers some words to himself. Then he looks straight into my eyes and says, “My daughter died in a car accident today. The DVD proves I have taken pills. I’ve written about Radmehr in the email I sent you an hour ago—He’s your son.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’ll be back.”

He crawls up towards the bathroom. Some minutes later, he exits the bathroom and lies sprawled on the ground.

I quickly stand up from the blue lounge chair that I have been sitting on outside on the balcony and walk towards him. “You all right?”

His lips begin to move. “I never deserved her. I wasn’t honest with her.”

I grab his deathly cold hands, looking at his vacant eyes.

“With whom? Have you taken any drugs?”

He murmurs words I cannot understand. He averts his eyes. I call the ambulance.

“What’ve you used? Open your eyes. Look at me.”

The world disappears under his eyelids. I take my eyes off Hamid’s bruised left ankle. There is a note written in thick red marker pen folded neatly on the table: Life’s nothing but a big lie.

The distant sound of an ambulance siren brings me back to the threatening reality. I put an unlit cigarette in my mouth. Hamid’s eyes are staring at the ceiling. I step outside. Then inside. To grab my coffee. I’ll wait for the ambulance. And the police. The coffee tastes bitter. No, I need to go. Soon, the paramedics will be here, bombarding me with questions. They will pronounce him dead. Then, the police and the hotel manager will come. They won’t let me perform tonight. I look around; sweat rolling down my forehead, my nose, my
upper lip, my neck, my tummy, and my back. A DVD is on the desk in the corner. “I’ve committed suicide” is written on top of it.

I leave the room.

The roads are as hot, crowded, and choking as life has so often been. Fire is being blown up by wind from all sides as I drive towards the Southern Cross Motorway. All life and then nothing? Like it did not exist? How come Hamid’s daughter is dead? Radmehr! No. He can’t be my son. How come I have been a father to a fatherless child for eight years?

6.30 p.m. and half an hour left till my concert. I thread my way among the excited curious crowd towards Baran, amazed by the length of her long straight hair done in a waterfall braid. I marvel at how fabulous her tall slim body seems in her navy blue dress. “Baran.”

She hears and turns to expose the upturned corners of her smiling mouth to me. A nostalgic feeling creeps into my body. It has been many years since I have seen her wear red lipstick. I wish to breathe into her soft red lips and lose myself there. Neither of us speaks a word during the long seconds it takes us to get out of the sight of people.

“Isn’t that John?” Baran asks, looking at him walking anxiously towards us.

“Sure is.”

“Hi Baran,” John says, giving her a quick hug. “You look gorgeous. Half past six and you’re still not even wearing your suit.”

“Five minutes and I’ll be with you, okay?”

“I’ll be waiting around,” he says, scratching his head. I gently push Baran towards the meeting room.

“Where were you today and yesterday?”

“Shopping”

What kind of shopping? Was it necessary? I need to tell you something very important. Hamid is dead. His daughter is dead. I have a son. Radmehr. My son thinks his dad died a few months before he was born. I’m so sorry. I’m terribly sorry. All these pass
through my mind just before Baran takes a piece of paper out of her bag. “This is yours,” she says. “I could not think of a gift better than this.”

“What’s this?” I ask in a small voice.

“Read it.” She says after a moment of silence.

My cramped muscles help me avoid falling down. It takes me a few minutes to ask, “Are you pregnant?” and for Baran to nod her head. I move forward and cradle her in my arms. No. This can’t be true. Why now? Baran turns down the collar of my jacket. The warmth creeps up my hands. John knocks on the door. My eyes move to the doorframe, against which the shadow of Hamid leans.

7 p.m. I walk down the corridor towards backstage. The sound of crazed fans cheering at the top of their lungs, laughing, clapping, jumping, waiting in anticipation, looking around, crying, the smooth boom of the violin, the smell of different perfumes. None of it distracts my mind. It is already preoccupied by all that is about to take place.

The stage is wide, full of lights and amps. The bass and sound thump through the crowd as I enter the stage. My eyes have flickering lights in vision when I am hungry. And now I find myself becoming overly hungry. I begin to feel lightheaded. There are a large number of figures in front of me jumping up and down, swaying back and forth, and moving according to the beat of the heavy metal music that is now playing. My heart beats to the music as if it is my first time standing on a raised platform five feet away from others, away from Baran, Peyman, Dad, Mum, Radmehr, and Marjan. Craig, the violinist, plays his most popular song, ‘The Whisper’. The whole room of listeners transform into one giant doll, singing the lyrics brokenly.

The piano that is set up behind me. I slide the microphone into an attached cradle. All the other musicians stop playing. I step over to the piano. The keys make the rhythm, much louder and exciting than what I have been practising in the last few months. The colour shooting out from the crystalline ball glows like a star on a clear night.

Off in the distance, an explosive sneeze permeates through my ears. Like an atomic bomb. One after the other. Each time more piercing. A man walks outside. How short he is. A heavy silence falls as I set my guitar stool at the centre of the front of the stage and sing my
favourite song, ‘And the Raindrops Fill the Sea’. The audience gives me a big round of applause, like leaves dancing frantically. “Well,” I say, waiting for people to keep silent.

They do.

I remember my speech: *Well, nobody probably knows how shy I am before the public, which is maybe why I usually close my eyes when singing before a large crowd. I was very naughty when I was a child. My mother thought I would be skinny when I grew up. I am. My father said that I looked like a beggar or robber. I did. I was great at climbing up our neighbour’s walls and stealing their fruit. White berries. Pomegranates. Plums. My heart still beats anxiously when I see white berries. One night, I dreamed we had a piano at home. I had turned into notes and lyrics and a voice moving in the air, echoing my dreams. People kept asking me to play their favourite music. Among them was a neighbour of ours. An eighty-year-old man. “Take your chance with music,” he told me after everybody left. The next day I woke up to the sound of the neighbours screaming and crying. The old man had died during the night. Dear ladies and gentlemen, we are responsible for our decisions forever. We need the courage to admit it. My responsibilities began in my dreams. Yet, I never thought I would be that responsible for others’ lives. For participating in somebody else’s existence. Being. Birth.*

I feel as tongue-tied as I did in my childhood.

“One more song, and I’m finished,” is the only thing I utter. The crowd cheers. “This is a song for those who were born on a winter’s day and the ones who’ll be born on a spring day.”

Baran puts her hands on her stomach.

A few policemen appear at the rear of the stage.
The sun beats down in the room through the huge double window on the right, bathing *The Birth of the Venus* hanging on the wall in orange light. I open my eyes. I think I’ve been asleep for almost an hour.

Helen, the cleaning lady, knocks on my door and waits. “Anybody home?” she almost shouts. Three years from now, at forty-two, she’ll become a psychologist, a very famous one, after marrying Scot and having her first daughter, Laura. She tells me every time she is here. “For a time, I might stop working if Laura is very demanding but then I’ll begin another academic career while working as a psychologist in a private clinic.” These have been her dreams for over a decade.

“Come in, Helen,” I say. She pushes the door open.

A pleasant smile forms on her pale lips when I tell her Arsalan and I will be leaving for dinner soon. “I thought you would ask for a proper dinner now that Arsalan’s brother’s here.”

“No tonight. Maybe in a couple of days.”

She closes the door tightly behind her. Every second of the day Sara spent to save my life passes through my mind. I’m so sorry. So sorry for ruining your life, Sara. I wish I could change everything. I wish you saved your Mum rather than me.

I call Mum.

“Hi, my beautiful girl. How are you? I missed your voice.”

“Ha ha, how come you missed my voice, we just talked yesterday. I wish you were here.”

“Did you tell him?”

“No—Yes— Not yet.”

“It’s okay, darling.”

Someone knocks on the door. I assume it is Helen again.
“Come in.”

The door opens to Peyman in his white suit.


“Thanks, Baran. How are you?”

We give each other a quick hug.

“I’m fine. When did you arrive? Where is Arsalan?”

“Arsalan went to the Brisbane Entertainment Centre a couple of hours ago.”

The luminous dial of his black leather-band Gucci watch displays 5.35.

“I’ve never seen you wear white. It looks good on you.”

“Thank you. It was such a long flight, I was sleeping in the room you prepared for me.”

Why are his eyes insistently staring at my stomach? I bend and pick up a blue thread from my dress off the floor, feeling bare and embarrassed.

“That’s good. Now you can join us for dinner with the concert crew.”

“Well, I’d rather get more rest tonight. I don’t really enjoy having dinner with people I don’t know.”

Outside, it’s pouring heavily with rain. We exchange an uneasy glance.

“I see. It’s okay.”

“You look pale.”

“I’m fine. Red lipstick will do me a miracle.”

He moves to stare at himself in the mirror. He is strikingly handsome but he looks so aged compared to the last time I saw him.

“The mirror is the worst judge of reality,” he says, taking a small parcel from his jacket pocket and placing it on the dressing table.
“What’s this?”

“This was Mum’s only possession. ‘I’ll give it to Arsalan’s child,’ she would say every time I asked for it.”

It is a pendant. When I move it to the left and right, it displays a bird turning into the sun and then the moon. My whole being is mesmerized by this thick golden necklace.

“It had passed to her from her great-grandfather. She never sold it.”

“Arsalan never told me about this before. Thank you so much for your kindness.”

A vague smile touches the corners of his mouth. I sink back against my pillow as he closes the door behind him. Does he know I am pregnant? I remember their mother. That snow was endless. The sun was just setting. Clenched round the whole city were snow-flakes rushing forward through the air, sticking stubbornly to the earth, beating against the window glass, freezing the house, disrupting everyday life, and silencing the city. She wanted to shovel snow off the roof but she fell just three steps off the ladder and broke her nose. And head. She was bleeding terribly. Her eyes were struggling with the pain of faithlessness. The swirling mass of snow was spinning stubbornly under the wheels of the ambulance. That snow silenced her proud and poor existence. She lost consciousness on her way to hospital. The snow covered everything as far as the eye could see. Three hours later, she was pronounced dead.

My heartbeat accelerates and I feel my entire body quakes by an overwhelming feeling of uncertainty as I walk down the stairs to Arsalan’s voice. He gives my forehead a kiss and asks me to get ready soon.

Black Hide Steakhouse. So many familiar faces of musicians and singers. They have been working with Arsalan for a couple of years. “We’re late,” Arsalan whispers softly as we walk towards them.

“Hi everybody,” I say. “Sorry to have kept you waiting.”

“We’ve just arrived,” John says. He is sitting next to his new girlfriend, the sixth one since I have known him. I don’t know where he meets all these beautiful girls. “This is Katherine,” John says. “She’s a pianist.”
We sit next to her. “That’s wonderful,” Arsalan says. “When did you start learning the piano?”

“When I was three. My father was a piano teacher.”

“You’ve been very lucky then.”

“Well, I wouldn’t say I was lucky. It wasn’t something I chose.”

I look at the two young women having dessert at a table in the corner.


“I don’t play any instrument.”

“That’s weird. I rarely see musicians or singers marrying people who aren’t into music.”

“You don’t need to play an instrument to enjoy music.”

Craig, the drummer, asks Arsalan how it feels to play in front of such a large group of people.

“After the last three concerts, I feel less nervous and more confident.”

Katherine sinks deeper in her chair but then gets up, probably to go to the toilet. She is short, as opposed to John’s other girlfriends.

“I need to go to the bathroom,” I whisper in Arsalan’s ears. He places his hand on my shoulder, his eyes indifferent. Still frustrated with me.

In the toilet, I throw up almost everything I’ve had since the morning. It smells like shit.

“Excuse me, are you okay?” asks an old voice.

“I’m fine.”

“Do you need any help?” asks a young voice.

“No. Thanks.”
I wipe my mascara-stained face with my cold trembling hands. The sparkles below my eyebrows have decided to stay there persistently. I take a Zantac out of my bag and swallow it, re-apply my makeup, apply some perfume, and make my way out of the bathroom, smiling.

Oh my God, I can’t breathe. Everything is fast-forward. I try to take a step forward but it’s more like a stammer. This can’t be happening. He has changed a lot but still I recognize him immediately, his dark brown hair, broad shoulders, and the large, black birthmark on his neck. Hamid.

Nothing.

Silence.

Noise.

My ears are ringing. I make my way towards the receptionist, feeling like I am drowning. “Excuse me, where did that tall guy with the orange T-shirt go?”

“He asked some questions about the menu and left. Anything wrong?”

“No—Yes—No.”

I walk out of the restaurant, straight across the street, looking around, with my heart on fire. I am stepping off the edge. Cars, bicycles, crying children, paralysed parents, moving all around me. I might pass out in the street. Not knowing what to do, I look at the stars screaming in the sky.

Arsalan looks at me with a worried expression when I stumble back to the table. He needs a thorough explanation about my whole existence.

“.Sleep well tonight so you have enough energy for tomorrow,” Arsalan says when we return home. I feel light-headed.

“It’s a dangerous world.”

“What makes you think so?”

“I don’t remember my birth. Do you?”
Conscious of his hand around the back of my neck, pushing me calmly towards the bedroom, I say, “I want to brush my teeth.”

“I’ll be waiting for you in bed.”

Quietly, I pour myself a red wine, feeling like I am on the witness stand. When I push the door open, Arsalan is sitting on the bed with a piece of paper in his hand. Gloomy. Thoughtful. Worried. “What’s this?” I ask.

“Not what I meant to write.”

I sit on the bed as he turns out the light.

All these thoughts start coming to my mind again. The process of aging. My glory fading. We wait all our lives, for the real moment to feel alive. And when dying, we wonder why it never happened.

“You’re not eating much these days.”

He knows that I am awake. What should I tell him? Arsalan rolls to face the wall. I’m sure it was Hamid, with his fixed eyes and his usual way of leaning forward with his left knee bent.

Waking up to the sound of rain is nice. Drip. Drip. Drip. Arsalan begins to itch. He’s had a world of pain. Not all at once. Gradually. Day after day. He seems to be dreaming about the truest words in the world of music, free from the treacherous burden of humanity. I stare out of the window at the rain, and try to think of good things, like Arsalan singing his song **Hope** tomorrow.

I run my fingers through my hair, go to the sink to have a glass of water, then sit at the table in the kitchen, rolling my head against the chair and checking my mobile. One message. I squeeze my eyes shut for what seems like an eternal dreadful moment, and then re-open them. *I’ll send you an address. Need to see you. Hamid*

It takes several minutes before I realize that I am not standing in the flames. Where am I? What will quench my thirst? So it was Hamid! How does he know my mobile number? To top everything else off, he sends me another message: *You belong to the rain.*
Being soaked alone is cold. I walk out into the street, and bend down under the red tree to see the ants, all gone. The rain falls, smelling like the ocean, with the glorious coldness of nature, the mysterious obsessions of humans, and the branches, and the grass below. The rain slips through my hair and my fingers. The patter of rain reminds me of the first day we arrived in Brisbane. It was raining toads. “Do you think we will like this city?” Arsalan asked. “We’ll love it,” I said.

The door to the yard opens to expose Arsalan. Sleepy. Wet. “What are you doing out here?” He asks. His contained shiny eyes catch the aggravated wandering of my gaze. A heavy and gleaming interval of time casts a magical shadow on us. “Kiss me,” I say, shivering. It takes him a long blurry moment to realize what I said. He smiles, special and beautiful.

10 a.m. Nine hours left til Arsalan’s concert. I leave home.

The blazing sun throws a mystical light against my eyes. A feeling of hunger casts a shadow over me. I wipe the dusty nectarine that is on the passenger seat on my blue khaki shorts, and sink my teeth into its red skin. When did Mum and Dad get old? How could I be so ignorant of them? Who is Arsalan supposed to meet today at 4 p.m.?

Driving through the Riverside Expressway that runs parallel to the Brisbane River is very calming. “One day, I’ll live somewhere where I can drive without a scarf, where the wind can blow my hair, away from my face,” I once told Hamid while we were watching The Beautiful Mind. “The wind and the freedom have placed more responsibility on people, turning them into slaves. Slaves of pride, liberty, and wisdom,” he said.

Sunlight pushes through the river, to hide the undiscovered inhuman side of me. I wear my sunglasses. The driver behind me honks a few times. I am going 30 km/h under the speed limit.

Sina. My little brother. In a world without you. Years have passed.

Why did Hamid leave me without any explanations?

Twenty minutes later and I have not knocked on the door yet. What will happen after I go inside? All my emotions are frozen. I should not knock on the door. With a sudden flow of cold sweat appearing on my hairline and my upper lip, I sit down. I am stuck in a labyrinth of absolute obscurity. I should return home. Hamid opens the door.

“Baran!” he says. Not a single word comes to my mind. “Are you okay?” He asks. I have to say something, smile, or at least get up. “Hey,” he cries, his voice stifled and worried.

Through my half-opened eyes and layers of smoke and haze floating in the air, I can see him standing next to the window, softly humming a song, and looking at me with concern. He throws the cigarette in the bin and moves towards me.

“You didn’t used to smoke.”

“Doesn’t matter,” he says, smiling restlessly.

Everything that comes to my mind is so vast and abstract, I nestle my head against the pillow.

“How did you find me?”

Very slowly, his hand moves through my hair. I want to push him away but I remain as silent as a lamb.

My mobile rings.

Watching him light another cigarette, a disappointing, almost violent curiosity takes hold of me. “It reminds me,” he says, “of your parents calling all the time when you were in my house.”

He points to my orange leather bag and shoes, “Still your favourite colour,” he smiles.

“Yes,” I walk back past him towards my bag. It’s Arsalan. I turn my mobile off, feeling hollow in my stomach. “What are you doing here?”

His eyelids flutter. The stream of water is running through the glassy door of the balcony. He takes the same small cassette player we used to carry with us everywhere, and turns it on. Shajarian’s ‘Morghe Sahar’, my favourite song:

morgh’e sahar, naale sar kon - morning bird, mourn
morgh’e sahar, naale sar kon - morning bird, mourn

daagh’e ma ra taaze tar kon - further renew my pain

z’aah shararbar, een ghasas raa - with a sigh that rains fire,

barshekan o, zeer o zebar kon - break this cage and overturn it

Reading Rumi, and listening to this song was the second-best thing we did together in bed. The first one was kissing each other. We could do that all night long. I sit motionless on the chair in disbelief.

“You were always looking for someone to recognize your value and observe you as a human being rather than an object.”

“So what?”

He stares deep into my weary eyes. There are fine lines and wrinkles on his face, hands, neck and few grey hairs.

“I’ve been in Germany since 2004. I have a daughter,”

Faintly, I walk towards the window to get some fresh air. The street is full of people like me, ignorant of emaciated moments of their lives.

“What’s her name?”

“Baran.”

In the heavy intensity of the room, nothing seems real to me anymore. “I need to go to the bathroom.”

There is a black picture of me with an orange shadow in the mirror. I splash cold water on my face, the shadow is torn in two.

“Show me their pictures, your daughter and wife,” I say resolutely as I exit the toilet.

The haze, the heat, and the time all start moving around the room. He comes near me, and draws me into the other room, which is in absolute darkness. He turns on the light. The room is adorned with orange, green, white, and blue counterpane curtains, Persian carpet, and abstract pictures. “Your colours,” he says.
Nothing in my life has ever made me think about suicide more than your absence. I was not brave enough to wake up in a world where you were not beside me. It was like waiting to be dragged over stones and gravel in the darkest caves where no one listened to my cries. These and so many other things, I want so badly to tell him, but instead I stare at him. He grimaces. “Do you remember the letters on the desk, when you asked me about them?”

“You said you didn’t even read them.”

“She used to follow me everywhere, to send me letters, to ring me, to come to my house. One night, I opened the door and there she was. She said she just needed to say a few words before leaving Tehran forever. She came in and I was drunk and I couldn’t make her go.”

The freckles on his cheeks.

“We went to Germany. We divorced two years after my daughter was born. She is twelve now.”

GOD. Help me. I don’t know what to do, where to go, what to believe. Just help me.

“I managed to immigrate to Germany with Rozhan when she was three months into her pregnancy. I didn’t know what to say to you. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

So, her name is Rozhan. The more he talks, the more his words bring up a strong sense of disbelief in me. Heat is rising from the floor, circling around him, and sitting in my throat. Choking me. Has he come all this way to lie to me? “What do you want?”

“I want you to forgive me,” his hands shake beneath the cassette player that is on his lap.

The time I had lined forty-five pills on the desk, swallowing them one by one as the clock ticked patiently into the fake vividness of the yellow walls, hiding all my shame and sorrows. I was pregnant with your daughter when you left me, I want to confess. I get up with an awful spasm in my neck. He moves towards me. I shove him aside and throw open the door.

Repeatedly pushing the elevator button, a strong feeling of suffocation creeps up my neck. The chubby man standing next to me wears a big smile on his face, which freezes as he looks at me. “Are you OK?” he asks. I keep the hysteria out of my voice. “I’m fine.”
The stars are finding their way through the clouds. Without much sense of direction or purpose, I walk down the street. Evaporate me, I beg the clouds. They smile at me. And my eyes start raining. Grandma was right. It’s always too late to return the journey to our dreams once we have walked over them.

I turn on my mobile. Eighteen missed calls from Arsalan.

In the middle of George Street. I have parked my car in the hotel. On my walk back, a voice calls my name but when I turn back there is nobody there.

No name.

No sense.

No trust.

I drive straight home. Crescent Road is very quiet, no traffic, as opposed to Moadress Highway in Tehran, where I would always get stuck in traffic from Fereshteh Avenue on the way to Hamid’s house in Mirdamad. “I like the rush hour traffic,” Hamid once said when driving me home. “Nothing is funnier that watching traffic lights turn red, green, and yellow, with you in my car.”

I had kissed his left hand on the gearshift.

Anger is rising like bile in my throat. I’m freezing. I hate you.

I get out of the car and walk towards the house. My gaze falls to the ground, then to the door, and then to the sky, letting the sun burn my head.

The sky is like powdered silver growing dimmer and dimmer into deeper and deeper shades over a complexity of lies.

Helen has meticulously cleaned the house.

There is a bouquet of white roses on the table opposite the main front door, casting their delight and sweet fragrance over me. Jarred by realizing that there is nobody home, I look across the living room and go to the backyard, curl on my side in the long grass, and melt into the imperceptible breeze and dancing of alien insects. I recite Forogh Farrokhzad’s ‘Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season’, and cry. The loudest cry of my life:
The raindrops startle me from half sleep. Some of them are louder than the others, as if proud of their existence. I take a long breath, and go all the way back through the trees and the grass into the house.

I lie in the tub. On the wall opposite there is a picture of Arsalan and me. Me lying up against a tree and him standing above my head looking down at me, smiling. Getting detached from the stream of life and diving into a world of fantasy never guarantees a delightful life. You realize you have missed so much, right when it is too late.

“Imagine how great it could be if I could hold my concert in the bathtub,” Arsalan said last night. “That would be huge success.”

6 And this is I
a woman alone
at the threshold of a cold season
at the beginning of understanding
the polluted existence of the earth
and the simple and sad pessimism of the sky
and the incapacity of these concrete hands. Time passed,
time passed and the clock stuck four,
struck four times.
today is the winter solstice.
I know the season’s secrets...
I handed him the towel. “Maybe you can build a bathroom on the stage, rather than bringing people over here.”

I go straight to the bedroom where the window opens to the kind loneliness of the sun. And the flower behind it smiles at the beauty of the dusty hands that pick it.

The weak, small body of the bird on the branch of the tree is moving her tail from side to side. Are their feelings and excitement stronger than ours?

My cold hands dab foundation on my sweaty face. I feel nauseous. “How does it feel to sit before the mirror for three hours?” Dad used to ask.

“Daddy, you should be proud of your beautiful girl.”

How many sparrows does it take to make this heavenly sound? Had it not been for them, I would never have accepted the move to this house. I loved our previous house more. Arsalan insisted that we sell it.

“What are you doing?” I asked him once, two years ago, when he was sitting at his laptop, thoughtfully pressing the buttons.

“Have you ever thought about moving house?”

“No. I love this house.”

“What if we have to?”

“What makes you ask this?”

“Nothing.”

Three months later, I found out the reason. “Every time I come into the house, I remember the time you fell down the stairs,” Arsalan finally said, in a disappointed but adequately polite voice.

One thing of which I was quite certain was my undoubted guilt. It had happened three months ago. Dizzily, I had risen to my feet. I hadn’t eaten anything since that morning. I fell. And our three-month-old foetus died inside me.

I forced a polite smile at Arsalan. “I understand.”
He reached into his pocket, pulled his phone out, and shoved it under my eyes. “Look at these houses,” he said, delighted. “They’re fabulous.”

There were several houses to which I said no. No, I wanted to say to this one as well. The street seemed quiet, too quiet to me. It was then that a flock of yellow birds soared through the sky from behind a clump of trees opposite the bedroom window. High in the sky, an upside-down rainbow was shining through a thin screen of minute ice crystals. Two of the birds flew past me towards the balcony railing, pecking and clawing at something. Then they initiated a mesmerizing chant floating from their throats, into the still air. “I like this house,” I said.

I refresh my hair and makeup, get dressed, and wear my blue high heels. Feeling its beauty across the floor. Experiencing my physical presence in the room. Sensing the proximity of the moment.

I call Arsalan.

“Hi, Baran, this is Scott. Arsalan’s dealing with some issues, he asked me to talk to you in case you called. I’ll send the driver to come pick you up.”

“I’ll take a taxi.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, yes. Thanks, Scott.”

Stars gradually extinguish, and the grasshoppers attack eggs in the soil. There is a loud sound of wind. How much does it cost to live?

And that afternoon.

That afternoon I insisted on changing my birthday dress after Sahand spilled strawberry juice all over it. Dad had gone to the florist to buy me twelve roses. That’s why he was not there to drive me home to change my dress. That man, Dad’s friend, offered to drive me home. Grandma’s house was twenty minutes’ drive from ours. Mum was busy with the guests, so she accepted his offer. When we arrived home, he left me in my room to change my dress. When he came back, he stared at me for a long minute, with a feral excitement in his eyes, of a kind I had never seen before. He left the room and came back two minutes later.
“I’ve hidden some photos of Sina in your parent’s bedroom,” he said. “Where are they?” I asked, enthusiastically.

“First, you need to dance with me in their bedroom.”

I did, my heart beating faster and faster.

“Just lie on the bed and close your eyes. It’s a big surprise.”

He laughed nervously. His face grew mischievous and pale.

“How old is Sina in the photos?”

“He’s five, a year before his death, don’t open your eyes before I tell you.”

“Okay.”

“If you tell anybody, even your parents, I’ll kill them,” he said as I felt his hands on my breasts and something on my mouth.

It’s 6:30 p.m. Just half an hour left to Arsalan’s performance. I call a taxi and wait outside, listening to sparrows talk to each other, and wondering whether they feel the beauty of their flying, whether it is their wings that help them fly or their beliefs.

“Birds might get sick of having to fly everywhere,” Arsalan said last week when I told him how much I wished I could fly, anytime, anywhere.

Inside the building. I call Arsalan, confronted with the half-blind gaze of the bartender who is old enough to be my grandfather.

“How can I help you?” he asks, smiling to expose his teeth that lean inwards.

How much I wish to have a cold drink now. My phone rings.

“Hi Maryam! Where are you? I’m in the building—but haven’t found Arsalan—in the main entrance hall.”

Somebody taps me on my shoulder. I turn back. “Baran,” Arsalan says, giving me a kiss on my forehead.

I follow him to one of the meeting rooms, head down, feeling watched from every angle.
“Where were you today and yesterday?” he asks me as he gently pushes me towards the meeting room.

There is something you should know. I’m pregnant. I want to say.

“Shopping,” is the only word that pours out of my mouth. He stares at me for a long, silent moment. “This is yours,” I say. “I could not think of any gift better than this.”

For an instant, he looks deep in my eyes, as if seeing my insides. “What’s this?”

“Read it.”

I push back tears as my throat tightens up, staring at his mouth, and thinking about the years he was waiting for today. I’m sorry I wasn’t completely here for you today. He moves forward and cradles me in his arms. “Are you pregnant?” he asks.

John opens the door and comes in. “Johnson says he needs to talk to you and the musicians about some important points.”

“I’ll be there soon,” he says, not taking his eyes off me.

Maryam calls me when he leaves and says that she needs to see me immediately. “—No, Arsalan is not in the room—why toilet? —Okay, okay.”

How funny our childhood concerns were. Sahand would always have an explanation after getting out of the toilet, “Mum, there is a bad smell in there and I swear I didn’t do it. Baran was there before me.”

“You don’t need to talk about it, Sahand,” Mum would say. “Do you mean you didn’t notice Niloufar spending ten minutes in there?” I would ask. “Stop it please,” Mum would say.

There is a calming fragrance as I push the bathroom door open. Maryam is there. “He saw me shoplifting,” she says, nervously cracking her fingers.

“What?”

“Craig saw me shoplifting.”

“You mean Arsalan’s friend? Shoplifting? Why would you be doing that?”
“I don’t know—I’m seeing a psychologist,” she says, with a teary wobble to her voice. “I felt his hand across my back when I was putting them in my bag.”

Feeling her pounding heart on my skin, I try to clear my head of the cloudy feelings chattering inside. “What do you do with the stuff you steal?” I ask wistfully.

She shrugs, then takes a deep unsteady breath, and tilts her head, her silken hair blowing in her face. “Don’t judge me. Pretend it was a funny joke between you and me when you see Craig. PLEASE,” she says, looking world-weary.

Feeling too shaken to say anything else, I look at the piece of paper in my hand.
Dylan

The house façade looks very luxurious from the outside. Part of it is made of yellow schist. I’m at the side door, I message him. Push the door, go through the yard, then walk up the stairs, and turn right. You’ll find us in the first room. He writes back.

He is lying on an orange sofa, his face flushed. His pointed crooked teeth stand out as he says, “I knew you would come.” There is a near-naked girl on a chair, smoking a cigarette. Huh, it’s Natalie. I push David against the wall, putting my hands on his throat. His alcohol-infused breath washes over my face. “Where did you get my Dad’s number? You’re a fucking idiot!”

David coughs nonstop, his eyes turning black. Natalie pushes back the chair that she has been sitting on and stumbles forward. “David has asthma!” she says loudly, wearing an ugly, sudden expression on her face.

I keep backing up until I hit the wall. “Are you fucking insane? You’re total wankers.”

Laughter permeates through the spiral staircase as Natalie walks down it. Before she leaves, she gives a monstrous wink in the direction of a room next to the staircase and asks, “Would you like to join me?”

Everybody disappears into darkness. Two soft hands touch me from behind, followed by a husky voice. “It’s good to have you here.” I turn around.

“Kitty!” I say, confused.

She holds out a long, welcoming hand. Her tiny red lips do not let me notice the other parts of her face, except her purple hair. “Have this,” she says invitingly.

“What’s that?”

“The best drink ever. Come on.”

“I’m leaving.”

Kitty’s eyes glitter as she smiles sweetly at me with dilated eyes. She mumbles sarcastically, “Hey, let’s have some fun.”
I take the glass, ignore the disturbing thoughts in my mind, and drink it all down like a glass of water. Tasty. “Put your backpack down.” We walk down the stairs. “Let’s have another,” David says. “Not you, you’re legless,” Natalie orders.

Kitty brings over three champagne glasses. I catch a quick glimpse of her straight hair, take a sip, turn around and sit down on the sofa. Blood flows rapidly through my head. It’s far bitterer than the first drink. I swallow the entire glass in a big, long gulp, feeling like an asshole. David asks for another glass of wine as he giggles and hiccups. “I—I need to go to the loo,” he stumbles forward and grabs Natalie for support. “H-h-h-heeeeeeey!”

We drink Pure Blonde. Kitty crosses and uncrosses her legs a few times and then starts to play with herself. My stomach flips with ecstasy as she gets up to pass me to go to the room on my right. I pretend I am going to the kitchen. On the way, I hear moaning from the room. I swing the door open with my shoulder. She is lying on the bed in her underwear, her head on the bed and her feet in the air.

David is dancing aggressively in the living room. “Wassheanyfun?” he laughs when I go back to the living room. Natalie falls back into the chair behind her and lights a cigarette, “Shut up, David.”

“It’s one-thirty, I gotta go,” I say. David strolls around the house and begins to walk towards me, squinting his eyes, “Ya sorta make me up-upset,” he giggles. “Say hi to your parents for me.”

“If you ever go near them, I’ll shit in your mouth.”

“haha you makeme shit mypants, illdoanythingiwant.”

I shiver involuntarily. He gives another giggle, drunkenly. Now, the whole scene seems totally bizarre to me. I take a step back, feeling a bit tipsy, as he takes a step forward. His face is as red as a pomegranate. He pushes me on the chest, “I’llripyou apartif ifIwant.” My heart skips a beat. I have no intention of confronting him while he’s like this. “Leave me alone,” I say, vaguely conscious of Kitty at the top of the stairs. “Calm down David, you take everything to extremes,” she says charmingly.

He draws back his right arm, and punches me in the face. My lips burst with blood. I put my right hand in my pocket to touch the blade of a knife, but my fingers grasp the hole. He has made up his mind to bury me here, in this house, at this hour. My mind feels like an elastic band stretching. I unroll the sleeves of my shirt, clench my hand into a very tight fist,
and punch him in the face. My knuckles hurt so much. David kicks me in the thigh with his left foot. I yank his arms down and lay his face flat on the ground. I lunge forward with my left foot, give a quick punch on the back of his head and lift him up into the air, noticing a huge welt on his face. David is totally dazed. He is down, flat on his back, covered in blood, eyes wide open. “You’re nothing,” I say.

I wipe the dust off my pants with the dirty sleeve of my shirt, throw my bag over my shoulder and head downstairs to the front door, half running. Stumbling across the pavement, I enter a 7-Eleven store to buy a cola, chewing gum, and peanuts. Leaving the store, I walk in the centre of the road. The cars honk at me. There is nothing more than deserted houses, exhausted trees, and the dirty car windows in the city. I am shuddering like a leaf in a storm. I turn around, having no idea of where to head to. I stop at a spot by the river. There is a breeze moving across the water, waiting to devour people. It is very deep. We are all doomed to die. We deserve it. I wash my face in the river.

I walk up and down the outside of my house for an hour, thinking about different excuses to offer for my bruised face. I stop to catch my breath before walking up six slippery tiled steps that lead to the front door. After barely ten minutes, I step into the hall and hear the soundtrack of a cartoon.

‘Mum’ is sitting cross-legged on the floor, looking at numbers in the phonebook. She closes it solemnly as soon as she feels a fourth presence in the house. She goes to the stove, and droplets of oil splash out from the food sizzling inside the pot. Sitting at the kitchen table, Dad says nothing, but collects the grains of rice with his finger, coils them up into little rounds, and places them in his mouth without a crumb being spilt or wasted. He then holds the bowl aloft and drinks the soup in one gulp. This is how he eats when he is extremely angry. He laughs vigorously as his glance travels from my hair down to my toes. Then slowly moves his bold scalp up and down. I glance down at myself rapidly and discover my trousers’ stuck zip. Fuck. He sits very straight. “Where have you been? We have called you a hundred times.”

“There is a huge bruise on your face,” Rose says, “near your eye.” Dad looks right through me. I drag my sorry ass to the fridge. Some memories stand out vividly from the first years of my life; the time they would leave me at my granny’s to celebrate their anniversary. “Happy birthday,” I say to ‘Mum’ as I drink orange juice straight out of the carton in front of
the open fridge. She looks at me straight in the eye, which is exactly what I don’t want her to do.

“Thank you.” With a great effort, she manages to stop her tears from streaming down her face. Dad looks at her in complete surprise. “Sorry darling,” the now round-eyed Dad says. “No need to be sorry,” she says bitterly. “The birthday of a person who has done nothing for the world is not worth remembering.” I am sure she doesn’t mean it. What she means is; you should be totally ashamed of knowing the number and identity of people killed each day in the war, but not remembering your own wife’s birthday, a woman with whom you have slept a thousand times and who has kept your secret all these years.

“What has your best present ever been, Mum?” Rosa asks in a thoughtful voice.

“You,” she says piously. Without hesitation.

“Me?”

“Yes, I found out I was pregnant with you on my birthday, six years ago.”

Rosa jumps right off the chair looking at me with a satisfied smile. I stand still, staring at Rosa and then ‘Mum’ and then Dad and then Rosa, as if to identify myself. Dad heaps his plate with salad. “Did you forget her birthday?” I ask wickedly, looking at the fork in his trembling hands. For all the self-distrust that flows within me.

Rosa goes over to the TV and, melting with pleasure, sings: “Happy birthday to you ... Happy birthday to you ... Happy birthday dear Mum ... Happy birthday to you.”

I stumble, longing for Zahra whom I have no memory of at all, through my whole body. The sound of waves, waves, waves, I listen again, waves.

I burst out laughing, stare at them, laugh again, then go towards ‘Mum’ and give her the present. “This is yours,” I say. There is a weak diffidence on her face. “I didn’t mean it,” she says. “You are both my best presents ever.”

Dad collapses down on his black back on the sofa. He looks fatter lying down. I go up the stairs. The air is heavy with humidity. I long for the sea. I stop before the last step. Words hurt more than silence. This is what I have been doing for the last two weeks. “Did you love Zahra?” I ask him, in a voice louder than I intended. Dad’s angry gesture changes to one that is mingled with pain and humiliation, like mine when I first realized my real Mum is back in
Iraq. He scrutinizes me for a second. I fight back my tears. I will cry afterwards, not now. Rosa does not dare look at us; instead, she nervously tugs at her tights. “Rosa, go to your room,” ‘Mum’ says, steadying herself with her trembling hand on the wall, and her frightened eyes on me. Dad gazes at me in confusion. My voice goes on. “You came to Australia because it is the farthest country from Iraq, to have the furthest possible distance from the reality of your life. Didn’t you?”

“We need to talk, Dylan,” ‘Mum’ says caustically.

Against my better judgment, I feel thorough disgust at myself. Dad circles the room for a while, till I feel all his joints lock when I drop my voice to almost a whisper, “Zahra could flush me down the toilet like a greasy slug with you standing there and laughing.”

His eyes shrink to a third of their normal size. I go on, saying, “You didn’t think of aborting me, you came to Australia and married her, all because of fear. How does a coward like you dare to take a surgeon’s knife and cut open a living body and then come home and write stories of Great Adventurous Men?”

He does not know what I intend to do next: to let him drown and leave this world in darkness. A prolonged, successful drowning. Transform into grief. Rage. Fear. When did you read my novel? Why did you do it without my permission? How do you know about Zahra? How desperately he wishes to know. A strange sense of déjà vu. That is probably because I have repeatedly replayed this scene in my mind. The difference is these are not the words I had practiced in the last fourteen days. I massage my shoulders with angry hands. My family shrinks. Dad does not ask any questions. Instead, he shatters like a glass. Inside. “You need something to remember yourself by, that’s why you’re always on your phone with your Iraqi friends.” He takes his coat from the sofa, drapes it across his shoulders, and heads out. Alone.

‘Mum’ drinks a glass of water. Then she wraps her arms around herself, holding herself tight. “Betrayal is a nice word,” I say, against my will, and go to my room. Trapped inside a big lie.

Some minutes later, there is a light touch on my door.

“It’s me,” Rosa whispers. She enters the room, and flops onto my bed as she holds her doll firmly in her hand. I stare and see in her a great sadness and the terrible feeling of loneliness. We sit in silence for a while. “Do you want me to tell you a story?” I ask, nuzzling her.
“Say something real,” she says, glancing out the window that is facing my bed.

There is nothing in the world we can call real. Everything is a fantasy of our imagination. Even our imagination is a fantasy. Of what, I have no idea.

I calmly push my fingers through the silky strands of her hair. She moves her mouth upwards into a mysterious smile that shows a glimmer of white teeth. “If I tell you something, do you promise not to tell anyone?” she asks.

I hold her close. “Sure.”

She wipes the biscuit in her hand on the side of her tights, and blinks several times. Her open fingers make their way to her eyes. “I pee my bed, then tell Mum it happened when I was sleeping. I can go to the toilet but I don’t,” she says with a serious, calm expression.

My eyes widen in surprise by the sheer enormity of her secret. “Why do you do that?” Out of frustration, I smile at her. There is something radiant inside her eyes. She runs her fingers down her body and smiles back. The smile stays in her eyes for a long time. Some veins start to bleed through her neck, arms, and legs. Or maybe it is just me imagining them doing this.

Footsteps.

“Doesn’t matter.” She tucks her hair behind her ears. Then, she puts all her weight on her hands and jumps over the bed, thumps her feet up and down on the floor, and leaves me with the promise I have to hold. My stomach is clenched. Exhausted by the strain, I open my laptop, only to curl up in my bed. Parents’ mysteries. Children can leave their parents behind like they never existed, can never mention their names, avoid thinking about them, or even hate them. What they can’t do is to neglect the effects of having them as their parents. A light appears and disappears in the sky, heading off towards its ultimate death. There are a hundred people inside me, all with their own concerns and dilemmas, each from a different family, each enraged at the other. ‘Mum’ opens the door. There is a mixture of pity and anger in her eyes. I look at my watch. 3:15 pm. I wait for her to say, “Let’s go to your favorite beach. I’ll tell you everything.” Surfers Paradise. I walk to the wardrobe and grab a T-shirt. She follows me through the corridor to the stairs. “Where’s Rosa?”

“I sent her to play with John.”

We drive in complete silence.
Having parked, we walk on a path that runs parallel to the sea. A small creature is lying in the sand with his legs in the air. ‘Mum’ leans down. “This cat’s broken a leg,” she says. “We need to take it to a vet.”

She picks up the cat. I don’t mind if I suffer for what you’ve done to me, but I do mind if Rosa does, my lips are about to say as she turns away and heads towards the car. “Give me my surfboard from the back of your car before you go,” my voice says grimly.

A woman appears and disappears in front of me as I walk towards the sea. A shiny red swimsuit on her fair round body makes the hairs on her legs that look like coiled wires seem less noticeable. It would be fun to watch this elderly woman, maybe a grandmother of five, getting drowned. Like a joke. That would make some great news. I deliberately shove her aside. “I’m sorry,” I say. “It’s okay,” she smiles with a touch of skepticism. I follow her, feeling my rage increase. A life can be continued within a war, a fight, sex, hatred, and love, but not within an imaginary being. Maybe all I need to do is to lose my memory of everything.

A flock of geese is flying in V formation above the sea. I lower my gaze to outline a route, knowing that I need to go somewhere where the sky and the earth are more familiar.

I always read Dad’s writings secretly. The truth is that what should have taken a larger part of his memory or concerns has taken not a single line.

My knees feel the water. I move my way deeper and faster through the water, again and again remembering Rosa’s secretive deep blue eyes. Like an unrealisable dream.

The rest of their secrets. I hold my head high and push my body forward. In silence. The woman with hairy legs approaches me. The sun shines full on her happy cheeks. She disappears in to the vibrant, cold water.

Distant voices and then “Come out of the water.” A number of girls and boys lined up in the shore stare at me in the dappled sunlight. Rosa’s blue eyes always glisten when the sunlight reaches them. The fish are jumping up and down feverishly in the sea. A set of waves appears on the horizon. The sky begins pouring with raindrops, and the raindrops begin filling the sea.

Deceit has covered the whole area, in every man’s thought, deceit, to win over life. Dad has used it properly. I gulp to swallow the water. A strong wave grabs me and sweeps
me some hundred yards away from the beach without asking for my permission. I am breathing heavily. The deeper I dive, the colder the water gets. I frantically try to find a thread. Something to connect me with life.

Dad had had a cold and was asleep in his bedroom the night I read that email, when the reality of my being was revealed.

I am not moving an inch. I am glued to the sea. My body is deliberately and willingly pushing itself down. My eyes sting and burn intensely, and my entire body feels numb. I have been surfing for thirteen years and should know how to manage this situation.

Without meaning to, I twist. It is as painful as it is astonishing. The sand is displaced below my feet, dragging me inside like a vacuum. The more I struggle, the more the wave drags the air from my lungs. I push with my arms and legs but find no leverage. My lungs scream for more air. Cold water fills them and blood pounds behind my eyes. There is no more point in fighting it. Life is slowly slipping away.

Everything turns white, absolutely white. The onset of a cramp. I flail my arms, trying to gain freedom. Everything seems to be in slow motion. I tilt my head back to turn my face up, feeling the pressure of a light blanket over my nose and mouth.

Am I climbing a nonexistent ladder from the sea? The waves. Nothing has ever welcomed me this graciously, not even my parents. I inhale some water, splutter, cough, and inhale more. An elephant is on my chest. My head is going to explode any second.

Somebody approaches me and extends his left arm. I want to grab him but he pushes me away. He reaches for me and puts his hand in each of my armpits and grabs a firm hold of them. It’s just now that I realize I’m naked. “Stop struggling. Stop struggling. Stop struggling,” his voice rises considerably each time he repeats it. There is no use in dying if you have not lived your life. I need to live. No matter if it is not an equal chance.

Deep inside every man, there is a strange mixture of betrayal and honesty. I should’ve answered her emails. Zahra. I should’ve let Dad know about the email she sent him two weeks ago. I happened by chance to open her unread email on Dad’s laptop and wrote back to her with my own email. I pretended that I was Dad and threatened her to never send any other email. ‘I will tell Dylan that you left him on purpose and make him hate you till the end of his life’, I wrote to her.
Stopped any movement, but it doesn’t seem to be working to save me from the intense force of the water. Has anyone ever gotten out of life alive? People are coming near me. I turn my gaze to the sky, feeling unconscious.

“Turn his head to the side,” a voice says.

“Anybody know CPR?” another voice asks.

“I do,” the first voice says.

Solid ground.

The excruciating heat and the painful restlessness creep up my body. Like a spider. Like a snake. “Look at me,” somebody says. My brain feels hot. My airway burns. Everything that seems dull and meaningless to you will be valuable, interesting and full of meaning once you are at the edge of losing it.

Darkness.

David’s house and whatever happened there crosses through my mind. Kitty is lying in her underwear, her head on the bed and her feet in the air. I walk calmly inside, seat myself on the side of the unmade bed, and take my mind off everything outside this room. “Kiss me,” she says. I draw in a breath. She moves her face downwards. I slowly move my hands around and then lie on top of her body. She’s not Kitty. She’s ‘Mum’. I’m at home. My parents’ bedroom door is set slightly ajar. I push it open. She believes my closet has regurgitated its contents, but theirs is even worse. Their wedding pictures have filled all the walls. My eyes wander over the pile of clothes left on the floor next to the overflowing trash bin. It needs to be cleaned up with a shovel. I pick Zahra’s picture from the ground. It smells like a flower with a hint of musk.

Back to reality. Somebody is pushing on my chest and stomach. My concerns about eternity, the world, and being have been fixed in my mind before I was born, but they have been made to seem as strange and overwhelming as the first time I thought about them.

Rough fingers are tracing my cheeks and forehead. A man asks me if I can remember what has happened. I want to have the time to stop all misunderstandings. It just crosses my mind that I might have been dead for years, perhaps since I was born. That those days, weeks,
months, and years I have lived have all been part of my dead life. I wonder what sort of
death, life, death in life, life in death, or maybe life in life this is.

Is this a hospital? When did I get here? ‘Mum’ and Dad will not be able to make it to
Arsalan’s concert. He’s Dad’s favourite Iranian singer. It was actually because of Arsalan
that I learned the truth about my life. Dad booked the ticket for his concert and checked his
email on my laptop to make sure the ticket was all confirmed. He forgot to log out though.
Five minutes later, I was just about to log into my own email when I saw this strange email
by a person called Zahra. The subject line was “Please read this, for the sake of our son.” I
opened it and read it and closed it and opened it and read it and read it. It was all about how
much she wished to hug her son at least once in her life.
Marjan

It takes them one hour to drive to Haft-e-Tir Square near Talar Honar. Radmehr is silent all the way there. Marjan slows the car down as she approaches a red light. I wanted to take revenge on my ugliness by giving birth to a pretty baby. Or maybe to take revenge on Arsalan, she thinks.

A little girl taps on her window for the second time, pointing to the packages of pink-and-red strawberry chewing gum in her hands. “Oh my God, you scared me to death,” Marjan says, tugging at her scarf. She rolls down her window. “How much is it?”

“A thousand and fifteen hundred.”

“Unlike me, you must love traffic lights.”

Marjan reaches for her wallet in the back seat. As she does so, she spots a man on the other side of the street, standing motionless, a cigarette hanging from his lips.

“Do you know that old man with blue pants and checked shirt over there?” she asks the little girl, filled with hatred towards him.

“Yes,” the girl says softly, her eyes suddenly filled with terror and tears. “He’s my boss.”

The traffic light turns green. “Sorry,” Marjan says, as she makes a right turn onto Shahid Mofatteh Street. Through the side window, she sees the figure of the girl in her torn and dirty grey manteau and black scarf. “Why didn’t you help her?” Radmehr asks.

“The light turned green.”

“You should’ve done it faster.”

“Next time, I’ll buy all her gums.”

I won’t, Marjan thinks. She won’t have any money by the end of the day. He’ll get all her money before allowing her to have dinner. “Why aren’t there any trees in this street?” she mutters. She cannot breathe at the thought that all those street children would probably never
They sit outside the café on the terrace. “There are no birds on that tree anymore,” Radmehr says. She sips her steaming cup of organic green tea and wishes she could light a cigarette. Marjan looks at the few trees at the lower end of the street. The scattered, fluffy sheep-like clouds above her do not seem to have the slightest intention of raining. She feels the clouds all change their direction towards her, trying to revolve inside her body. She dreams of the third night she met Arsalan:

It is a rainy day. Marjan is filled with impatience. She feels that they are fond of each other. She squeezes his hand so hard that he almost cries out. But she worries he is not in love with her. She believes God has sent him, and tells him she does not know what she would have done if Arsalan was not with her now. He seems to listen attentively to what Marjan tells him. Different feelings arise within her. She feels grateful, mischievous, talkative, gloomy, and happy. He begins comforting her. Life will be much easier and happier for you, he promises, pressing her hands warmly. She feels that she likes him more than anybody else in the world, far more than herself.

“This green tea tastes very different,” Radmehr says, wiping his mouth on the back of his wrist.

They walk over to pay the coffee trader. “That’s a beautiful parrot,” Radmehr says, pointing high above the seller’s baldhead to the top shelf. “Does your parrot talk?” Radmehr asks.

“Yes, he does.”

“Salam,” Radmehr says, looking excited.

“Salam,” the parrot repeats.

“I teach her to speak, and she helps me communicate with others,” he says, narrowing his already-small eyes under his black, bushy eyebrows. “Your son’s full of life, rich with cheerful colour, like your husband.” Marjan’s heart feels numb as she leans her hands against the dark brown counter to keep herself from falling. The cashier’s lips move up, down, left, right. “I always remember your husband. He ordered four ice creams, two coffees, and four
pieces of cake, and when I asked you if somebody was going to join you, the young man said we’d have it all. I took a photo of you eating them, remember? It was years ago.”

She exhales against her horrified lips. Why did you never tell me anything of that day, all these years I’ve been coming here? Marjan wants to ask him, looking around at the dark wooden benches and the old blue walls. “Next time you come here, I can show you the photo. This is my number, just call before you come.” He laughs at Radmehr squeezing on his mother’s hand. “Thanks,” she says, her lips blue. “Let’s go, Radmehr.”

They enter the theatre space. She looks around Talar Honar foyer. The queue for the face painting is huge. A few children are chasing each other. They are thin, very thin, Marjan notices. Lucky them. I wish Radmehr were this thin, then I would buy him anything he wanted to eat, cook him anything he desired and never make him go swimming, running, and skating four times a week.

“Can I have a tiger face, please?” she hears Radmehr asking the young girl who is painting the children’s faces.

Marjan raises her eyebrows in disbelief. How did he jump to the front of the queue?

Ten minutes later, they are directed to the brown theatre chairs in the first row.

“Did Dad eat a lot?” Radmehr asks as they dim the lights in the theatre.

“Yes, love. He did.”

“Let’s get his photo from that man tomorrow.”

“Hello children, hope you’re all doing well. I hope you were all spoilt and had a great day. Get yourself ready for a night full of laughs and happiness,” the host says.

They turn off the lights.

Such a relief, Marjan thinks.

In her, the silence awakens the real memory of the first time she met Arsalan: in a taxi. She was twenty-four at the time. “I fell in love the first time I heard your voice. It was soothing, flawless,” she had told him during their fourth meeting. How could it be possible for him to fall in love with an ugly girl? So she did not ask him if he liked her too, letting him stay silent.
She has forgotten some of the many things they talked about during their four meetings. However, one special moment would never leave her heart. You have a nice smile, he said in the third meeting. She still feels the gaze of his eyes. She felt calm and self-possessed next to him, escaped from loneliness. You’re the most voracious eater I’ve ever seen in my life, she had thought, and smiled. After the fourth meeting, she tried several times to reach him, but he never returned any of her messages or voicemails. When she realized that she was pregnant, she called him a hundred times. No answer.

She remembers they are in the theatre when Radmehr and the other children shout, “Behind the tree, behind the tree!” Dressed in a wolf outfit, the man hides behind a tree, his mouth bleeding. The chorus of enjoyment and chattering from the children, who are trying to help the lion find the wolf, warm her heart. She turns to look at Radmehr. You deserve better, she thinks.

The lion grabs the wolf’s hand and takes him to the jungle, where all animals wait for his trial. Everybody keeps silent. Marjan holds Radmehr’s hand, very tightly, very securely. It was only one hour after you were born when they discovered you had a problem with your tummy. The diet had worked, and you really looked beautiful. You didn’t have the slightest similarity to me. But that’s life, surprises come when they are least expected.

“Stupid,” the driver told her in the morning. I didn’t mean to kill myself. I just wanted to know the feeling. I’m not stupid, she thinks. It’s horrible to bring a person who never asked to be born into the world, but it’s worse to leave him alone. She closes her eyes and dreams of the fourth night she met Arsalan:

It’s nine o’clock. Marjan is standing at the same canal railing. “There is something I want to tell you,” Arsalan says. “What is it?” Marjan asks, looking at him attentively. It’s impossible, but I love you, Marjan! There it is! Now everything is said, Arsalan announces with a wave of his hand. Marjan’s eyes drop in sudden embarrassment under his piercing gaze. “I thought you would never love me,” she says. She lays her head upon his shoulder, then upon his chest, and weeps bitterly. “You are the only one who can bring me happiness and love”, Arsalan says, tears gushing down his face. “But I need to leave Iran.” The sobs stifle her voice. “I’ll be coming with you anywhere you go. I love you,” she says. “When I come back, if you still love me, I swear that we will be happy. Now, it is impossible,” Arsalan quotes from White Nights. Marjan cannot utter a single word anymore. For a long time, she stands looking at him as he disappears from sight.
She hears ringneck doves cooing among the branches. She opens her eyes. The cast and stage crew are taking a bow in front of the audience. “We hope you liked our story,” the director says as they turn on the lights.

Marjan drives home and tucks Radmehr into bed. She reclines on the chair on the balcony and drinks two large glasses of red wine. Eyes shut, she sees herself running and laughing through the stars. She feels Arsalan’s hand on hers. They are flaring up, flashing, and fading.

Her phone rings. She picks it up and checks. Messages and phone calls from her colleague, Sam. Message #1: Hi Marjan, why don’t you pick up your phone? Is everything OK? Message #2: I think I deserve a response. I am worried about you and your son. Message #3: Where are you?

Marjan types: I’ve once damaged my son’s life. Won’t do it again by dating you, who ask out any woman you come across.

She deletes that, and types: Please don’t call me again.

After a slight hesitation, she presses the send button.

On their way home, Radmehr had asked her not to prepare any lunch for Tuesday but to give him some money to buy a sandwich instead. “I promise to buy a small one,” he said. “I also promise not to eat anything for dinner on Sunday.”

How long will he continue arguing with me over his lunch? How many times should he stare hesitantly at me when he wishes to eat something? I’ll look for a better nutritionist tomorrow. There should be something more I can do for him, she hopes. She receives a phone call. She presses the phone’s speaker button. “Hi Marjan, how are you?”

“How, Maryam, glad to hear your voice. I’m fine, thanks.”

“I bought the fountain pen you had asked me to buy for Arsalan. I’m on my way to his concert. Will send you some photos. Did you decide what you’re going to do?”

Marjan looks at the moon that is not very far, shining up there in silence. She sips her wine and says, “What if you had never gone to that party and met his wife by chance. I would never know where my son’s father is now.” She gazes out at the BMW that parks opposite her apartment building. A young man helps a laughing girl exit the car. The man hugs her
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tight and presses a kiss on her forehead. A long kiss. Marjan feathers her fingers through her hair. “Do you think Arsalan will believe me?”

“What’s this DNA thing, then? By the way, Arsalan and Radmehr look way too much like each other.”

The man leans in and crushes his lips against the laughing girl’s lips.

“I don’t know. What about Baran? She seems very nice, doesn’t she? Also, how do I tell Radmehr that I have been lying to him all these years?”

“Yes, she’s very nice, very nice indeed. I don’t know. Maybe better late than never.”

Marjan can hear them both laugh loudly as they enter the green building. “I need to think more about it.”

When Marjan ends the call, she stumbles into the bathroom. Some minutes later, Radmehr knocks on the door. “Mum, I can’t hold it anymore.”

She comes out very soon, and then waits for him to come out and go to his bed.

“Mum, I dreamed I was extremely thin. We were in a restaurant. There was a big fish tank in the corner and there were three fish in it. You allowed me to have two sandwiches. Then I went towards the tank, but when I wanted to feed the fish, I woke up.”

Marjan grabs his face in her hands and kisses all over his face and neck. “Maybe we should think about having a beautiful tank of fish in our house.”

“Yeeees. Good night Mum.”

The End
Appendix

Religious and Historical Context of Women Without Men

Parsipur sets her novella in the early 1950s. It was the time when the Shah tried to replace Islamic laws with western ones and forbid traditional Islamic clothing. SAVAK, the Shah’s secret police, suppressed, censored, and silenced any kind of cultural products, including literature, that did not adhere to their regulations or offered any alternative ideologies. According to Naghibi, the new Unveiling Act legislated by Reza Shah in 1936 which forbade women from appearing veiled in public was represented as “an effort to democratize gender roles by unveiling women and by encouraging mixed social gatherings at official state functions. While many women in Iran had protested the discarding of the veil, the fiction of democracy and of equal access to public space was nevertheless underscored by the violent enforcement of this law that ostensibly liberated women while denying them the freedom to choose how to present themselves in public” (2007, 45). The Shah suppressed and marginalized his opponents, initiating dissatisfaction in the society, mainly among intellectual elites. Political and religious factors contributed to censorship in Iran in that period (Caso 2008, x).

The 1953 coup d’état and the secular regime of the Shah influenced the Iranian mindset significantly, laying a religious foundation for the subsequent 1979 revolution. Keddie suggests that Western intervention created “two cultures” in Iran: “those with Western-style education and employment who mimicked 12 Western ways; and the peasants, nomads, bazaaris, urban migrants, and ulama who profited little if at all” (1983, 11). Not surprisingly, the 1979 Iranian Revolution enjoyed enthusiastic support of the second group whose religious values influenced their actions and who experienced negative effects of Western intervention and social exclusion. Lewy defines religion as “… a cultural institution, a complex of symbols, articles of faith, and practices adhered to by a group of believers that are related to, and commonly invoke the aid of, superhuman powers and provide answers to questions of ultimate meaning” (1974, 4). Hence, “those who are dissatisfied- politically, economically, socially, or spiritually- may find in religion strong support for their attack upon the status quo” (Lewy 584). This spiritual dynamic of revolution is particularly strong in the 1979 revolution, which is in part a religious ideological justification deeply influenced by Shi'a Islamic ideology.
The 1979 revolution in Iran resulted in the overthrow of the Pahlavi dynasty, which was replaced by the Islamic republic. After the revolution, Khomeini, the new leader of Iran, implemented the Veiling Act in 1983, which imposed the hijab on women as a means to exclude them, and reconstructed their new identity according to an Islamic definition of the righteous Muslim female. To restrict women, they imposed strict rules “on women’s dress in the street; a continued ban on music and dancing in public; there was propagandistic output of radio, television and the press”, and there was also “a constant fear of reprisals if they expressed their disenchantment too loudly” (Hiro 2011, 262). The secular authoritarian regime of Mohammad Reza Shah was replaced by clerics’ restructured religious rulings: compelled censorship, gender inequality and discrimination, the imposition of hijab, and the minimum age for marriage. According to Middle-East historian and scholar Bernard Lewis (1984), the West-oriented autocratic monarchy was replaced by a theocracy based on Guardianship of the Islamic Jurists. The Shi’a clergy who were given more powerful positions were extremely religious, traditional, and opposed to Westernisation. Moreover, the state’s policy inspired through supervision on social and cultural structures of feminist perspective in literature, its themes, metaphors, symbols, characterization, and setting. Despite the Islamic Revolution promising freedom of expression, it resulted in increased religious, political, and physical censorship. The aim of this exclusion was the marginalization of women’s public voices, and the destruction of their sense of identity, subjectivity, ideology, and dreams.
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