

*Love and Pomegranates*

وہ اخبار



*Love and Pomegranates*  
*Artists and Wayfarers on Iran*

Edited by

Meghan Nuttall Sayres



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For  
Manda Jahan

To  
Iranians Everywhere

With  
Special Thanks To

Brian H. Appleton

### **A Note about the Text and Persian Words**

You will find a square ■ at the end of several of the essays, poems, etc. This indicates that the author has provided additional material related to the piece, which is featured at the back of the book under Notes.

In most cases we chose the phonetic spellings for the Persian words; however, for several names we chose common transliterations instead, such as Hafiz and Rumi.

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# Preface

Xenophon, an Athenian mercenary and adventurer who wrote a glowing biography of Cyrus the Great, wasn't always sure he wanted to travel to Iranian lands. After all, the Athenians had fought Iran at the epic battles of Marathon and Salamis, both traumatizing and foundational moments in the history of Western civilization. Though Xenophon lived a full century after those close calls, he felt enough trepidation to seek out no other than Socrates, who advised him to consult the oracle.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, Xenophon knew little of Iran before he headed east, and we today seem to know less still. Iran's political battles appear to us in shocking sound bites on the nightly news, usually following a brash statement from an Iranian politician, translated literally to cause the most alarm. In a country where regular greetings include phrases like, "I will sacrifice myself for you," and "step on my eye," it doesn't take much to take things out of context. Yes, we know very little about Iran, but the little we do know seems to make us want to proceed with caution, as Xenophon did before starting on his long journey some 2,200 years ago.

So what should we know about this land before embarking on our trip? The history and character of Iran is too vast to cover in a book, let alone a few pages, but some basic facts are essential. To start with, Iran is a very old country. It dates back some 2,500 years as a Persian-speaking nation that has for centuries been centered in the Iranian Plateau, a region that extends east from the Zagros Mountains on the border with Iraqi Kurdistan nearly to the Indus river. In contrast to Iran's longevity, most modern-day countries in the Middle East are in one way or another products of European colonial influence, with their national identity consciously honed by their leaders only in the last century.

Unlike most of its neighbors Iran is not an Arab country, but a diverse collection of ethnicities, which has traditionally been dominated by ethnic Persian culture and language, with origins in central Iran. Persia, or Pars, was a hub of Zoroastrian religious life in pre-Islamic Iran, and it was this name that the Greeks used for all of Iran. Until the 1930s, when leader Reza Shah asked the West to stop calling his country "Persia,"

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most maps in Europe and the United States were still using the “P” word. Today, ethnic Persians comprise a plurality of the country, with Azeri Turks, Kurds, Luris, Baluchis, Arabs, and others making up the rest of the Iranian quilt.

Religion has also made Iran unique in the region. Iran today is a predominantly Shi‘i Muslim country in a region that is mostly Sunni. Iranians usually tend to play down the differences between themselves and Sunnis, though many of their neighbors—particularly the more radical Sunnis—remain skeptical, even hostile to Shi‘ism and Iran. Given Iran’s unique character and history, and given its sheer size (70 million) it has had to go out of its way to reassure Arab countries that it is not hostile toward them. In fact, many of Iranian leaders’ aggressive anti-American and anti-Israeli statements play well with the people of the region, and have ironically led to the increased popularity and security of an otherwise isolated Iran.

Iran’s history begins with the reign of Cyrus the Great, who in 539 BC captured Babylon and famously freed the slaves and ordered the Temple of Jerusalem rebuilt. It was Cyrus, or at least the collective memory of him, that instilled in Iran a profound sense of what benevolent rule looks like. In the narrative of Iranian nationalism, Cyrus’s cuneiform cylinder of laws is considered the first human rights charter.<sup>2</sup> This was at the dawn of the Achaemenid Empire, whose ruins at the winter palace of Persepolis still stand as a testament to the grandeur and achievements of the Iranian superpower. Its majestic sandstone pillars, its walls carved with images of Cyrus’s adoring subjects, exemplify the architectural, engineering, and artistic genius of ancient Iran.

By the last pre-Islamic state (the Sasanian Empire, 224-651 AD) Iran’s Zoroastrian faith became a codified, hierarchical, and priestly institution. Today, remnants of Zoroastrian practice are still felt, and the Persian New Year is a pagan holiday that comes second to none in Iran. Zoroastrians made use of earth, fire, and water in their rituals, and venerated a plethora of deities. Above all, however, was the supreme creator Ohrmazd (Ahura Mazda), whose importance makes the faith almost monotheistic in character. It was during the Sasanian era that the neighboring Byzantine Empire was codifying Christianity, and the Jewish communities of Iranian-ruled Babylon were doing the same with Judaism. Organized, monotheistic religion, as we know it and understand it today, was born in the Fertile Crescent at this time.

But there was another religion that would emerge in late antiquity: Islam. The Muslim faith began with the first revelations of the Prophet Muhammad in 610 AD, and soon formed the basis for a new Arab state. After Muhammad, the Muslim Empire—called the Caliphate—engaged in a lightning-fast military campaign that brought down Sasanian Iran and ushered in a new era in the Middle East. A gradual period of conversion began in Iran, and today the country is predominantly Muslim.

Iran, often called a land that conquers its conquerors, did manage to leave its mark on the Muslim faith: Islam eventually adopted the Zoroastrian staples of land endowment (Arabic: *waqf*) and the office of a religious judge (*qadī*). As time passed, Iranian-Islamic architecture—with its non-representational geometric art and iconic blue tiles decorated with Quranic calligraphy—blossomed in Central Asian hubs such as Bukhara and Samarqand (modern-day Uzbekistan); and Iranian poets (Hafiz, Sa‘di, Ferdowsi, etc.), philosophers (Mullah Sadra, al-Ghazali, etc.) and scientists (Khayyam, Ibn

Sina, etc.) seamlessly married Iranian aesthetics with Islamic theology and morals over the course of the centuries.

Politically, Iran saw periods of national revival and decline. By the time we get to the nineteenth century, however, Iran was thoroughly weak and divided, and left open to British and Russian exploitation of its economy and natural resources. This led to a series of popular movements to rid Iran of foreign intervention, which in 1905-6 touched off a period called the Constitutional Revolution—mass protests and grassroots civic action that led to the creation of a parliament and a written constitution.

During this time many in Iran had viewed the British as the source of most of the country's ills, but the transition of world power into US hands later in the century led to a rise in anti-Americanism. This was especially true when in 1953 the CIA orchestrated the toppling of prime minister Mohammad Mosaddeq. In protest against poor royalties and general mistreatment, Mosaddeq had nationalized the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company just two years prior, dealing a financial blow to Great Britain and prompting fears in Washington about the potential for a communist takeover.

After the coup, Mohammad Reza, the *shah*, or king of Iran, began to crack down on the nationalist opposition using his notorious secret police, the SAVAK. Iran became increasingly dictatorial, and in 1975 Amnesty International declared that the Shah “retains his benevolent image despite the highest rate of death penalties in the world, no valid system of civilian courts and a history of torture which is beyond belief.”<sup>3</sup>

So long as the oil flowed to the West, however, US administrations looked the other way and continued friendly relations with Iran. Protests against the government became increasingly extremist and anti-American in nature, and Iran witnessed the emergence of a radical and politically charged clergy, along with secular militant groups seeking nothing short of revolution.

Revolution finally came in 1979, and Iranians got their political independence—but at great cost. That year, a group of students overran the US embassy and took hostages, keeping 52 of them for 444 days. In the meantime, neighboring Iraq planned an invasion to take advantage of Iran's internal unrest and international isolation. The Iran-Iraq War lasted eight years (1980-88) and proved to be one of the most serious existential threats in Iran's long history: Both world superpowers, the Soviet Union and the United States, joined forces with most neighboring Arab states to support Iraq. Iran hung on and the borders remained unchanged, but in the process an estimated one million lost their lives on both sides.

Just as the previous political system had done, the Islamic Republic of Iran has inspired increasing discontent, particularly around the strict enforcement of their version of Islamic law—which could include beatings and imprisonment for public displays of affection by unmarried couples, and in most extreme cases the death penalty for adultery and homosexuality. While Iran's government is on many fronts less politically restrictive than that of the shah, women and religious minorities have been worse off, given the state's interpretation of Islamic governance as male-dominated and compulsively “moral.”

There are, however, positive developments in the society. Despite government quotas that have been established to bar women from several fields of study, women still

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make up the majority of university students, and women hold positions at every level in the public and private sectors: many are university professors, business CEOs and parliamentarians, and Iran has had a female vice president. In the area of health care, Iran has also made great strides. The country's revolutionary methods of rural health are now serving as models for access in remote parts of the southern United States. Iran's long artistic history, which is at the heart of its age-old identity, flourishes today. The work of Iranian writers, artists, and especially the country's great filmmakers, have left an indelible mark on global culture—illuminating bookshelves, gallery walls, and movie screens in such cities as Dubai, New York, and Cannes.

This youthful and creative energy of Iran has only fueled opposition sentiment in the political realm, which reached fever pitch following the elections of June 12, 2009, when president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was proclaimed the winner before the national vote could realistically have been counted. While Iran does not have a democracy, and real power officially lays in the clerical position of the Supreme Leader, the presidency has always been an important mechanism for citizens to express their political preference. The lack of respect for the voters ignited unrest on a scale not seen since the 1979 revolution.

The story of Iran is still being written. Politically, it remains divided, with its citizens clinging to different versions of what Iran should be, but all of them embracing the concept of justice, as they see it, and as established in the narratives of great leaders like Cyrus the Great. It is only fitting that the memory of Cyrus was the vehicle for Xenophon's writings on Iranian virtue. It wasn't a complete picture of the nation, to be sure, but it was an important part of the story, lost amidst the vitriolic memories espoused in Athens and the West. Xenophon's stories, not unlike those told by the authors of this book, are simply the other side of the coin.

Today, Iran continues to play a unique role in the Middle East, not only as a non-Arab, non-Sunni country, but as one that inspires both awe and consternation, with its controversial nuclear program and its aggressive tone toward the West. Iran is, and will likely always be, at the center of the world's attention—just as it was when Xenophon and Socrates sat down for a talk over two thousand years ago. ■

Nathan Gonzalez  
Orange County, California  
January 28, 2013



Iason Athanasiadis



# Introduction

Prior to my first trip to Iran in March 2005, when I was invited to speak at the country's First International Children's Book Festival, I had looked for a book to help relieve doubts about my decision to go. At first, I found none. Then a friend gave me a copy of Alison Wearing's *Honeymoon in Purdah*. Wearing's account of her travels in Iran during the summer of 2000 helped me to deconstruct the myth that Iran is a haven of sequestered women and armed masked martyrs. Her book—infused with humor—showed me that I, too, would be welcomed there.

*Love and Pomegranates: Artists and Wayfarers on Iran* came about because my friends, colleagues and I have developed a profound appreciation of Iranian culture and an abundance of stories about the friendships we made and the generosity we received in Iran. On our journeys we found another Iran, one that lies in stark contrast to the ominous picture of their culture painted by the American and other Western mainstream media, which has repeatedly tainted our collective perspective on Iran. A recent study discovered that half of Americans view Iran as a threat and opinions of that country have worsened in recent years; yet, two thirds of us have never met an Iranian. Perhaps the study suggests that the media's focus on our nation's foreign policies and on the idea of national security prevents us from considering the richness of Persian history and culture, which reflects a long-held tradition of peace and hospitality.

Perhaps the bias against Iranians is bound up in a bias against Muslims. After the capture and killing of Osama Bin Laden in 2011 polls revealed that the perceived threat from Muslims living in the United States and abroad increased significantly. While many Iranians in the US and Iran are Muslim, they are also secular, Christian, Jewish, Zoroastrian, Bahai, or follow other spiritual paths. An Iranian acquaintance of mine living in Tehran attends her father's mosque and her mother's Catholic church. Dr. Carl

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Ernst, a professor of Islamic Studies at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill estimates that there are at least 300,000 Christians in Iran today. Historically, in Sasanian Iran, Christianity was a prominent religion and home to a number of Eastern churches that were considered heretical by the Byzantines.

Whatever the cause, the purpose of this anthology is to counter an insufficient understanding of a nation and its people. We hope this anthology of essays, interviews, poems and blogs from people who have traveled or lived in this country of golden deserts, cypress-scented mountains, and inexpressibly-beautiful tiled mosques, will help readers to better interpret the disinformation and stereotypes about Iran that might eclipse what the human heart may discover: a warm, educated and artistic people, whose dreams are much like our own. We are hopeful that this collection will help to inspire others to get to know their Iranian neighbors at home and perhaps even travel to Iran.

Indeed, I made many new friends and acquaintances in Iran. So have all the contributors to this collection. This volume is enriched by their varied backgrounds; here are voices of botanists, a Persian *dafs* musician, a radio show host, professors of Persian history and literature, filmmakers, grandmothers, teachers, carpet dealers, adult and children's book writers. Many are of Western ancestry and thus have little or no familial ties with Iran. Few knew each other prior to submitting their work for this anthology. I think of each of them as "missionaries in reverse," a term borrowed from musician Cameron Powers, who has traveled in the Middle East connecting with people through the love of music as founder of Musical Missions of Peace. The American contributors in this anthology did not go to Iran to promote Western culture or to preach any religion. They went to learn from our supposed foe, to enrich and enlighten their own lives through their experiences. Reading their work, I felt a rind peeling back and seeds of a new garden spilling over me—a leafy space where a fresh breeze of conversation flows. Their testimonies bestow a pomegranate-like radiance by which others may see.

The Iranian contributors' memories and praise for Iran spoke of love: of friends and relatives missed; of a deep yearning for the sands of their homeland; of Persian cooking, art, classical literature, music and traditions.

Many of the contributors visited Iran for a few weeks, others worked and lived there for several years. Some grew up in Tehran, but now live in the United States and other Western countries. A few of them have always lived in Iran. What the non-Iranians have in common are fond memories of those they've met during their stays in Iran. As Rowan Storm writes in her blog, "These everyday meetings with vulnerable and open-hearted people are what provide the foundation for making a difference in this world." The Iranian voices of the diaspora and of those living in Iran give us a seldom-heard view of their homeland, one which defies the bleak picture painted by some expats whose voices have become hostages of yesterday's demons. The Iranian writers in this collection move beyond the past with an open mind, give us the opportunity to hear their questions and know their assessment of us, from which we may grow.

Dr. Martin Luther King said during the Vietnam War, “The world now demands of America a maturity we may not be able to achieve.” He called for a worldwide fellowship “that lifts neighborly concern beyond one’s tribe, race, class and nation,” and for “an all-embracing and unconditional love for all men.” The writers in this anthology from both East and West, who have made an effort to find themselves in others, help show our diplomats and public officials a path toward that maturity. The synchronicity, the friendships, and forces that drew these writers from many different continents together in this book is—to borrow a notion from the late Cistercian monk Thomas Merton—“an epiphany of certainties we could not know in isolation.” An epiphany that affirms a deep belief that there is a more sympathetic way to live and gaze upon this world. President Barack Obama’s rhetoric toward Iran seems to suggest a willingness to undertake a small but crucial step toward Dr. King’s dream of a mature America. One that may lead the world to a more inclusive vision of compassion.

### **In This Collection**

Within, you will find a communion of spirits among new voices from many countries: America, Iran, Greece, New Zealand, Britain, Turkey, and more. Original essays will take you, among many other destinations, into a bakery in Tehran to bake bread; on a journey from Tabriz to the Turkish-Iranian border in search of a lost passport; alongside a painter whose work is transformed at the foot of Hafiz’s shrine in Shiraz; into the heart of an Iranian poet as she questions her new American identity; high into the Alborz Mountains to discover flowering lamb’s ear (*Stachys byzantina*) in its native haunts; deep into the woods on a dark winter night to witness a Zoroastrian fire ritual; and beneath a bridge over the River Zayandeh to smoke *hookah*.

*Love and Pomegranates* opens with the section *First Impressions and Persian Hospitality* which captures immediate reactions to Iran as written in blogs as well as reflective essays on returning to Iran after a prolonged absence. It also holds stories of Iranians of the diaspora stepping foot on the soil of their ancestors for the first time and tales of random acts of kindness experienced by Westerners, such as a spontaneous all-day tour with a stranger. Natives talk about tourists they’ve hosted or welcomed to their country. In the section *Finding Ourselves in the Other* Westerners talk about Iranians they’ve known and loved, and about finding common ground with others they’ve just met. Iranians living outside of Iran write about their adjustment to their adopted countries, their nostalgia for the traditions of their homeland and what it means to be part of the diaspora. The sections *Arts and Culture* and *Islam and Other Faiths* share stories by artists and scholars who traveled to Iran in pursuit of their muse or work. They express their admiration for Iranian musicians, painters, writers, Islamic saints, Sufis, nature, art and architecture. *A New Path Forward* touches upon the United States’ past and current relationship with Iran. It includes thoughts on how the West might move toward

## *Love and Pomegranates*

a better understanding of Iranians at home and abroad through cultural, academic and medical exchanges, as well as other creative avenues.

A theme running through many of these essays by contributors from both East and West, involves having experienced in Iran a sense of ecstasy—a communion with a larger reality, a universal light. It seemed fitting to include in this collection poems by the classical Persian Sufi poets Hafiz, Sa'di, Khayyam, Ferdowsi, 'Attar, Rumi and others, writers who call us to a deeper consciousness and who remind us that only love will help us evolve. No book celebrating the richness of Iranian culture could be without them. In keeping with Persian tradition, some of the selections of these poems were made by the contributors opening books by their favorite poets to a random page. This age-old practice has proven that the words found in the poetry offer wisdom or even an anecdote for whatever question or problem the reader or seeker might be experiencing at the time. We encourage you to read this collection in a similar spirit of openness.

It is my hope that the depiction of life in Iran in this anthology will lift you out of this period in history in which we sometimes reduce people and nations to simplistic groupings of good and evil. *Love and Pomegranates* is a gesture of peace. ■

Meghan Nuttall Sayers



*Bazaar* - Fahimeh Amiri





*First Impressions  
and Persian Hospitality*

# *The Fragrance of Naan*

Shahrokh Nikfar

*In March 2000, Shahrokh Nikfar, a US citizen who was born and raised in Tehran, returned to his homeland for the first time in 21 years, having left just prior to the 1979 revolution.*

I am dead against it!” Nahid had said. From the moment I had brought up the idea of going to Iran, my sister began to worry. For a month before my trip, she called me nearly every day to discourage me. And there her voice was again, warning me at an altitude of 30,000 feet, on a plane bound for Tehran.

“This is not the same Iran we grew up in. That Iran has been lost and the people have changed. Iran has turned into a dungeon and you will be lucky if you get back alive!”

I tossed and turned in my seat, trying to shut out her voice. But admittedly I had my own reservations and worries to struggle with. I wondered if my relatives in Iran would resent me for moving to America, or call me an anti-revolutionary and turn me over to the authorities.

The temperature in the cabin seemed to drop. I felt cold even after pulling the flimsy blue blanket over me. I leaned against the window and decided to focus on something positive: the event that inspired my trip—the welcome back party I attended for my friend Saeed and his wife Shelly, just after they returned from Iran. I had expected a story of doom and gloom. But when I asked Saeed if the Iranian officials gave them a hard time, he said no.

“In fact, we felt ignored by them.” He told me they were met with hospitality everywhere they went. I was surprised by his answer, attributing this warmth to the nature of his Iranian relatives. But then his story changed. “A pick pocket stole my wife’s purse!” he said. “So we went to the police station to report it.”

Uh-oh! I thought to myself; what an idiot. Didn’t he know he should have avoided all contacts with anybody who carried a gun or had any affiliation with the Islamic

Republic?

“What did they do to you?” I braced myself for the inevitable story of how they were abused and mistreated once it became known that they were from America.

“Nothing,” he said. “In fact, they were so embarrassed that a guest in their country was robbed, they passed around a hat and got a collection to reimburse my wife for what she had lost.”

“What?” I said, almost yelling. “Are you making this up?”

“No, Shahrokh. That’s what happened!” Saeed spoke about how wonderful everyone was and how much fun they had in Iran. Remembering that night, as I looked into the darkness outside of the airplane window, my sister’s voice faded away as I slowly fell asleep.

When we landed at the airport in Tehran, the cabin filled with movement. In what seemed like an orchestrated effort, the female passengers started covering themselves with headscarves and raincoats to hide their hair and flesh. Once off the plane, I joined a line for customs. It all seemed normal, but I felt the collective anxiety. As I moved up the line, I saw a bearded man wearing a suit but no tie, a look that designates one’s position as an official with the Islamic Republic. I had heard they had the authority to whisk anyone away, never to be heard from again. The official seemed to be inspecting the passengers, as if he were waiting to catch someone making a false move. I tried not to look at him, but felt him watching me. I couldn’t help but feel like something bad was about to happen. Sure enough, he started walking toward me. The other passengers distanced themselves as he approached. With an ominous expression, he asked for my passport and then ordered me to come with him.

With my heart racing and my knees quivering, I followed him to his desk. I recalled my sister’s warnings about going to Iran and began to regret that I didn’t heed her advice. I pictured her waving an index finger at my corpse. “Didn’t I tell you not to go?”

“What is the purpose of your visit?” the official asked.

I took a deep breath. “I have been away for too long.” My hands shook. “It was time for me to come home.”

When he was done entering my passport number into his computer, he locked eyes with mine and handed back my passport. Then, he smiled. “Welcome to Iran.” In a state of shock, I walked out the door and into the reception area, where a dozen of my relatives and old high school friends swarmed around, hugging me, kissing me on both cheeks and telling me how happy they were to see me.

Every day I was greeted by relatives and old friends who came to welcome me back and to express their desire to host me at their homes. Many of them weren’t financially well off, yet they managed to prepare the most scrumptious meals and gave me many generous gifts. I felt guilty, yet out of respect, I couldn’t refuse their generosity.

I really liked everyone I met, but there was one person in particular who left a lasting impression. His name was Mohsen, and at sixteen years old, he was the eldest

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grandchild of one of my hosts. From the moment I arrived at his family's house in the late afternoon, Mohsen kept asking me to go for a walk with him. After dinner, I agreed to go. Mohsen was overjoyed. As we left the house, I noticed a small crowd following us everywhere we went, and I couldn't help but wonder if it was a gang out to rob us. After a couple of blocks, I asked Mohsen, "Have you noticed that we're being followed?"

"They're the neighbor kids who have been waiting outside to see you," he said, blushing as he looked down and kicked a pebble. "I've been bragging about you and they wanted to meet my cousin from America."

So I turned around and said hello. They greeted me with the sweetest and most innocent smiles I'd ever seen. The younger kids giggled and kept saying in English, "Hello," as the older ones welcomed me back to Iran. And then came the questions.

"Have you met Sylvester Stallone?" one kid asked. Then, another asked if I knew Arnold Schwarzenegger. The queries were followed by offers of food and invitations to their homes. I thanked them and asked if they would walk with us instead, a request that they met with exuberance.

Strolling near a barber shop lit up with neon signs, Moshen took my hand and pulled me inside. The neighborhood entourage followed. Moshen told the barber, "Haji Ali, this is Mr. Nikfar. He is my cousin from America." The man had a kind face and offered me a free haircut. "You are my guest," he insisted, a refrain I'd hear often in Iran.

Deeper into the neighborhood, I smelled freshly-baked *naan*. Just as I finished telling the kids that in America I have no access to this kind of bread back home, they turned toward the bakery. I tried to tell them that I was still full from dinner and could not eat another bite, but they were determined to get me the bread. It felt as if I had rubbed a magic lamp and my little genies were trying to fulfill my every wish. But there was a line of about fifteen people in the bakery, so I suggested we turn back. The kids wouldn't give up so easily.

"Move aside, our guest is from America and he wants some bread!" Mohsen said. And just like the parting of the Red Sea, a path appeared for us to walk through to the front of the line. At first I was horrified of having insulted the people in line, but no one seemed to mind. As if I weren't amazed and grateful enough, the bakers gathered around me to shake my hand and offer me their best baked bread. After introducing ourselves, I told them about how as a child I always wondered what it would be like to work in a bakery. Then, before I knew it, one of them took me behind the counter and put an apron on me. Another showed me how to knead the dough and stretch it across my knuckles to make a large disc, much like preparing a pizza. The crowd had tripled by this time and I could hear voices saying that I was from America. Everyone was smiling, not minding the delay, and when I proudly pulled my first baked naan out of the oven, the crowd cheered.

Sometime later we finally left the bakery and headed back to Mohsen's house. But

the kids had a hard time letting me go. “Would you come and have dinner with my family tomorrow night?” several asked. One of the older kids invited me to visit him the next time I’m in Iran. “We’ll get you some kabobs to go with the bread,” he said. I told them I would come back soon, and wondered if I was making a false promise. I simply didn’t know how long it would be before I could take this journey again.

On the day of my departure, my flight home was at 3:30 AM, so I decided to take a nap after dinner before having to leave for the airport. But friends and relatives kept dropping by to see me one last time, and they all came bearing gifts. My two bags were already full, and so now I had to come up with an extra suitcase. I was overjoyed by their generosity.

The next surprise was that everyone stayed until midnight and then insisted on going to the airport to see me off, even though it was a one-hour drive each way, and they all had to be at work in the morning. But no matter how hard I tried to dissuade them, many of them came. However, that wasn’t the end of the surprises that night.

When we arrived at the airport, I was shocked to see Mohsen and one of the neighborhood kids there with two of the bakers. Like the others, they’d brought gifts, as well as freshly-baked bread, which they’d wrapped in a beautiful cloth. It took all my strength to keep from crying.

Sitting in my window seat staring at the airport lights, all I could think about was my family and friends in Iran. They had helped me reconnect with the place my soul was born. Everyone I had met was warm, beautiful and gentle, and how even going for a walk had become a joyful experience for me. I recalled kids playing on the streets, young couples walking hand-in-hand on the tree-lined sidewalks, and street musicians humbly peddling for a few coins. Contrary to my expectations, nobody resented me or wanted to take me hostage or hurt me. All they wanted was to be friendly and to go about their daily lives as they worked to make ends meet.

As the plane lifted, I started to re-examine my previous feelings for Iran, realizing now what had become lost to me over the past couple of decades: The real Iran was totally different from the images I had formulated in my head with the help of the mainstream media. The events of the past 21 years do not represent what Iran and its people are about. Iran is a land of poetry, compassion, love and respect. It’s a place of great generosity.

Catching a whiff of the bread on my lap, I opened the cloth and ripped off a piece. I chewed it slowly, savoring its taste, knowing I would have to go back soon, to feed my soul.

# *Stones in a New Garden*

Aphrodite Désirée Navab

As the Iran Air plane was landing in Tehran's international airport, I began to tremble. Excitement mingled with fear, making my leg shake against my neighbor's seat. "It has been 21 years," I said, attempting to explain the trembling to my neighbor.

It was August 2001. I made my way through the airport, as if I had been there only a month before. I grabbed my suitcase from the conveyer belt and got in line. Once my passport was stamped, I stumbled out of the building, stunned by how easy and uneventful the arrival process was.

The past and present curled themselves into one corner of my mind. I was nine years old, wailing in unison with my three siblings. Each child clutched the other's hand in a line with our mother. A shadow of paper cut-out figures moved along the airport's floor. We kept looking back at our father, who was not allowed to go beyond the security checkpoint. He stared until his entire family disappeared. Two years later, after getting permission to seek medical care abroad for his heart failure, my father joined us. As a family, we never returned to Iran.

A slender woman in a red headscarf and brown raincoat, pulling me out of past recollections, pushed her way through. As she got closer to me, a bigger and older version of my cousin Nooshin appeared:

"Désirée!"

"Nooshin!"

"Désirée!"

"Nooshin!"

We repeated and confirmed each other's call, until recognition was complete.

"Come. First, let's take a taxi to my apartment and stay overnight. Tomorrow you can take a bus to Esfahan," she said, slipping her arm through mine and forcing me to skip as we did when we were children.

“So absolutely wonderful,” the tall and talkative taxi driver kept remarking, with typical Persian hyperbole, “that your Esfahani accent is so strong after 21 years of living outside!”

“Thank you so much, I know,” I replied, equally sincere and insincere. I looked at Nooshin who rolled her eyes. His statement conveyed both a compliment and a simultaneous insult. “It is so great that you have not forgotten your language,” he said, but “the years have not softened your provincial accent,” is what he was implying, too.

Once on the highway, I cracked the window open. An enormous sign overhead traveled across the sky. Like a title across a movie screen, I saw my family’s name: Navab Highway: *Bozorg rah-e Navab*, written in both English and Persian.

“There is such a thing as this?” I said, looking at Nooshin and then the driver, pointing at the sign. “There is such a highway as this?” My heart pounding with pride.

“Of course, that’s the exit for it over there,” the driver said. “And not only that, there is a Navab station on the metro, too. It’s a very old Esfahani family.”

I looked at Nooshin. We squeezed each other’s hands, smiling. I closed my eyes. One highway marker wiped away years of shame in the United States: *Go back home Navab! Go back home you dirty Iranian!* Across the sky, I saw my family name. Home is where they know your name.

Distant relatives and food filled Nooshin’s apartment. I spent the whole night re-connecting to the family and dishes that I had no access to for 21 years. When I tasted the dried watermelon seeds or *naan-e sangak*, bread baked with stones, I remembered the taste as if it were yesterday. I talked through the night with Roshanak, catching up on experiences we did not share. The time that went away, brought us closer. The next day, I took a bus from Tehran to Esfahan. At the bus stop I caught a taxi. Entering Esfahan at night, I chanted lines I’ve pondered before: “A stranger to my homeland, even if you should take my hand. Even if we should exchange sand, strangers we will be. The home you were, you are not now. The child I was, I put away inside, all these years and years outside” (Navab, 2009, p. 316).

The closer the taxi got to my childhood home, however, the more the child inside me came out to direct him. I rolled down my window to be led by my senses. The summer air had the same smoky, sweet smell of old. The street names had all changed but the look and feel of my neighborhood had not. The scent of *balal*, barbecue corn, and kabab from street vendors permeated the air, alternating between the scent of roses and cypress trees. Each scent came back to me as though my child and adult selves had become one.

“Over there, near the Khaju bridge, you make a right. My home is in that *koocheh*, alley.” I told the driver. I lived near the Zayandeh river, in the center of the city, but I saw no water in it that night.

“Why is there no river?” I asked.

“There has been an awful drought. Mismanagement of water. They say that the water will be redirected in a month,” he said.

“Can you stop for one moment?” I asked.

## *Love and Pomegranates*

An urge took over me. I got out of the taxi, walked past the grass, down the steps and onto the dry riverbed. I kneeled down and kissed the sand. Twenty-one years earlier, my three siblings and I kissed the tarmac when we arrived in New York City.

“You have been away a long time, haven’t you?” the taxi driver asked me.

“Yes, too long.” I climbed back in.

“But not so long that you still don’t know your way home, eh?” he winked.

“Twenty-one years is too long,” I said, looking out the window. “I wanted to hug my grandparents, Hajkhanom and Baba Navab, like I always could,” I adjusted my headscarf, hiding my tears. “I would hear their voices when my father would call them on the phone. But the connection grew weaker and weaker until it stopped altogether.”

I heard sniffing that wasn’t coming from me. I looked at the driver; tears were flowing down *his* face!

“Honoring your ancestors is a great thing to do. I have to share your story with my wife. Good things can come from America,” he said.

“Good things can come from either direction,” I responded, thanking him.

A few minutes later, we arrived. Luxury apartment buildings that were not there before, surrounded my childhood home. Even if overshadowed, my former house still held its ground. My father’s sister Ameh Meri had moved into this home with her husband and two children, shortly after my father joined us in the United States. She moved my grandparents in, too, and took care of them until they died. She has lived there ever since.

As I walked into the living room, time stood still. The same relatives whom I left, whom I could neither see nor hold for 21 years, were right there—older, more fragile, but sitting right there.

Only my grandparents were not. My heart searched for their faces in the crowd, while my mind saw their images in picture frames. In one month I would visit their graves, resolving heart and mind.

The lights went out and I panicked. It took me back to the revolution when there was martial law, no electricity and we had the gas lamps on. *No, it can’t be!* I thought to myself, shrinking to the terrified child I once was.

Out came my Amoo Reza from the darkness, wrapping me in his arms, reassuring me: “Don’t worry, it has something to do with the drought and electricity. It’s been going on like this for weeks, but it’s random.”

Seconds later, the lights came back on, weaving my past memory into a new one, marked by the joy of reunion.

A few days later, I was having dinner with my relatives at an outdoor restaurant. A stranger came up to me, placing a firm hand on my shoulder.

“Do you recognize me?” she asked with confidence.

I had no clue at first, growing uncomfortable. *Who is this woman?* She had a nose job and heavy makeup, veiling herself further.

“I never thought I would see Désirée Navab in Esfahan again! I am Niloofar,” she said. “Remember we used to play at our parents’ parties? Remember we used to play soccer together and swim in my pool. We used to put...”

“...black pepper in our brothers’ sodas. Yes, Niloofar Mohee, I recognize you!” I hugged her. We talked for hours and days thereafter, deafening the years that had gone silent.

Encounters like this would happen every few days, disorienting and reorienting me. A month had passed and the Zayandeh river flowed again. Families celebrated from dawn to dusk by swimming in its waters and picnicking on its banks. It was time to talk to my grandparents.

Ameh Meri, her daughter Nooshin, and I took a car to the cemetery. They taught me what I had to do, Iranian-style. We bought bottled water to wash their graves. We bought flowers. I brought an empty glass jar.

As I walked past rows and rows of stone graves, I noticed that unlike any cemeteries I had seen thus far, no vegetation was allowed to grow on or around the graves. As I looked ahead in the distance, a sight arrested me. From a respectful distance hundreds of Cypress trees stood at attention surrounding the graveyard. I wept at the funeral procession that we never saw.

As I washed my grandparents’ graves, writing appeared on the surface: their names engraved in Persian calligraphy. Abol Hassan Navab and Esmat Navab. I knelt and kissed the letters. My grandparents lay side by side.

I then lay down on their graves. Pressing my face against the wet stone, I whispered, “Hajkhanom and Baba Navab, I am here.” I could picture them. Memories came to me of gigantic pots of kebab and rice that Hajkhanom made for my family every weekend. I saw a pretty and plump woman in her translucent and flower-patterned chador, smoking tobacco from the hookah. With henna in her nails and her white hair, I would see orange and white shapes bob up and down, as Hajkhanom did her prayers three times a day. Baba Navab would sit in the garden, sipping his tea with a cube of sugar between his teeth, while reading the newspapers in Persian and German. A thin man always in an elegant suit, how wise and peaceful he seemed. Once governor of Esfahan, he was entrusted with the inheritance of orphans.

As I sat back on my heels and looked into the polished stone of my grandparents’ graves, a Rumi poem came to me. *Keep polishing and polishing your soul, until it reflects the beauty of the world.* Reflecting on the graves were the cypress trees, the desert sky, and the grieving granddaughter.

I filled a glass jar with the stones and soil that made a home on their graves. I took over a hundred photographs to mark the reunion and bring it back with me. I witnessed that from the deepest sorrow, delight—her sister—can grow. I would replant the stones and soil on a new continent.

As a child in Esfahan I used to stare at the evening sky from a family swing in my courtyard. I was convinced that each time a new star appeared in the sky, one more cricket jumped into my garden. At first solitary and slow, but then crowded and fast, the stars joined the crickets in a symphony that I continue to carry within me.

From my terrace in New York City, I stare at another skyline. As each skyscraper window alights, cars flash in rhythm along the FDR Drive. In my terrace garden, I can’t tell anymore which are the stones that were transplanted.