

Transgressing the Boundaries of Reception:
Shirin Nezamafi and an *Ekkyō* Feminist Counterpublic

By

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Transgressing the Boundaries of Reception: Shirin Nezamafi and an *Ekkyō* Feminist Counterpublic

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Abstract

This thesis utilizes Michael Warner's theory of counterpublics to engage with two novellas by Shirin Nezamafi, *Salam* and *White Paper*. I critically reconsider the use and reception of *ekkyō bungaku* 越境文学 ("border-crossing" literature) in contemporary Japanese literary criticism. I intend to shift the critical framework of *ekkyō* literature away from strictly defined Westphalian nation-state identities, proposing instead a more nuanced view of *ekkyō* that engages with systemic and societal boundaries that exist beyond the context of national borders. I situate Shirin Nezamafi, *Salam*, and *White Paper* within this discourse, positing ways in which she both adheres to and complicates a narrowly defined vision of *ekkyō* that emerges from national boundaries.

CONTENTS

CHAPTERS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
I. <i>Ekkyō</i> Reception and Shirin Nezamafi's Counterpublic.....	5
II. <i>Salam</i> as <i>Ekkyō</i> Feminist Counterpublic.....	30
III. <i>White Paper</i> : Reading <i>Ekkyō</i> Within Hypernational Borders.....	55
CONCLUSION.....	87

BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	89
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APPENDIX

A. <i>Salam</i>	97
B. <i>White Paper</i>	166

LIST OF FIGURES

<i>FIGURE 1.</i> Contents of “ <i>Ekkyō</i> Author Forum” from Tsuchiya Masahiko’s <i>Ekkyō suru bungaku</i>	10
<i>FIGURE 2.</i> Examples of <i>hijab</i> , an independent cloth used to cover one’s head	59
<i>FIGURE 3.</i> Examples of <i>chador</i> , a full-length cloak that must be pulled closed	60

Introduction

Shirin Nezamafi, *Ekkyō* Reception, and Feminist Counterpublics

This thesis engages with two novellas by Shirin Nezamafi シリン・ネザマフィ, *Salam* サラム and *White Paper* 白い紙, in an effort to critically reconsider the use and reception of *ekkyō bungaku* 越境文学 (“border-crossing” literature) in contemporary Japanese literary criticism. I intend to shift the critical framework of *ekkyō* literature away from strictly defined Westphalian nation-state identities, proposing instead a more nuanced view of *ekkyō* that engages with systemic and societal boundaries that exist beyond the context of national borders. In doing so, I expose the fetishization of nationality and native-language within critical reception of *ekkyō* literature—challenging the existence of a “natural native.” I situate Shirin Nezamafi, *Salam*, and *White Paper* within this discourse, positing ways in which she both adheres to and complicates a narrowly defined vision of *ekkyō* that emerges from national boundaries. By distorting the national framework of *ekkyō* with the concept of *zure* ずれ, what I call “misalignment,” I intend to expose the politics of Nezamafi’s texts that go unnoticed in wider critical reception.

My approach to uncovering these politics springs largely from Michael Warner’s notion of the “counterpublic.” In this thesis, I deploy counterpublics in a way that simultaneously complicates the Westphalian grammar of nation-states and engages with a feminist political discourse that I recognize in Nezamafi’s writing. I see the politics of Nezamafi’s works surpassing the discourse of border-crossing—where borders between nations appear to be accepted as such—and linguistic

performative identity. These two themes have come to dominate the reception of *ekkyō* texts, and Nezamafi's works specifically, within a broadly defined literary public. Instead, I focus on the way that gender politics in *Salam* and *White Paper* complicate strict borders or boundaries, whether those exist between nation-states or individual human beings.

Chapter 1 introduces the critical discourse on *ekkyō* as it has been established in contemporary Japanese literature, addresses the shortcomings of this approach to border transgression, and drafts a critical framework by which I see *ekkyō* feminist counterpublics developing in Nezamafi's texts. I use "literary reception" in this context to mean specifically the responses to Nezamafi's—and other so-called *ekkyō* writers—works by literary prize selection committees. I contend that these reviews represent the position of "*ekkyō*" within the dominant literary discourse as represented by the literary elite. In crafting the framework within which I deploy the concept of the counterpublic, I situate Nezamafi within five essential questions: What is a public? What is a counterpublic? How is Nezamafi's public "counter"? How is Nezamafi's counterpublic feminist? How is Nezamafi's counterpublic *ekkyō*?

Chapter 2 addresses *Salam* specifically, particularly in the way that it creates an *ekkyō* feminist counterpublic. I provide a brief synopsis of the text, as well as the historical and cultural context of Afghan refugees in contemporary Japan. I locate the kind of linguistic and cultural hybridity in *Salam* that can be recognized as stereotypically "*ekkyō*," while also demonstrating the ways *Salam* breaks from a narrow mold of national borders, clear cultural or linguistic identity, and naturally

accepted conceptions of citizenship. Stateless refugees complicate the grammar of Westphalian nation-states, national identities, and natural nativeness. Through a careful consideration of the politics of the non-citizen, I identify how *Salam* problematizes the rhetoric of *ekkyō* that surrounds the work. Through this approach, I construct a new understanding of the text as a feminist counterpublic that rejects Westphalian deployments of national identity and resists hegemonic, male-dominated contemporary immigration policies.

Chapter 3 focuses on *White Paper*, again deploying an *ekkyō* feminist counterpublic to demonstrate problems of *ekkyō* reception, hypernationalization, and the necessarily gendered oppression of a national wartime project. I provide a synopsis of the text, along with relevant historical and cultural background—in this case, I highlight the development of feminism in Iran from the time of the White Revolution to today and the history of the Iran-Iraq war. Expanding on my earlier criticism of *ekkyō* reception, I demonstrate how *White Paper* breaks with convention through a narrative focused exclusively outside of contemporary globalized Japan. Nezamafi creates a novella inundated with the hypernationalism of Iran at the moment of war, carefully writing other nations and cultures out of the text. By largely removing national boundaries and transnational hybridity from *White Paper*, Nezamafi reveals the unseen boundaries that divide and separate humans from each other. It is these boundaries that she then transgresses as an act of *ekkyō*. Within this new context of border-transgression, I contextualize the politics of *White Paper* within a feminist counterpublic, exposing the unacknowledged connections

between gendered nationalization within hypernational Iran and contemporary Japan.

Finally, I conclude with a brief look forward at the ways that I see the concept of counterpublics challenging literary reception within a dominant *ekkyō* discourse. I also address some ways that my study could be expanded and complicated, as well as how Japanese *ekkyō* literature itself might expand and complicate our understanding of counterpublics as they are theorized today.

Chapter 1

Ekkyō Reception and Shirin Nezamafi's Counterpublic

At the ideographic level, *ekkyō* 越境 implies surpassing or overcoming (*koeru* 越える) constructed boundaries or borders (*sakai* 境). Superficially, *ekkyō* could be conceptually linked with the English word “transnational.”¹ By the *Nihon kokugo daijiten* 日本国語大辞典 definition, however, *ekkyō* means: “To cross a border, particularly in the case of entering another country illegally.”² Thus, “border-transgressing” may be a more accurate English translation of *ekkyō*, rather than wringing “transnational” from the semantic meanings of the characters in order to fit within a critical discourse contextualized by non-Japanese conceptions of transnational exchange. In this sense, I will be using *ekkyō* to mean border-transgressing. I believe “borders” in my definition must engage with the societal and cultural boundaries—gender, sexual preference, class, birthplace, etc.—that exist

¹ Itself a difficult term to define precisely, “transnational” discourse often emerges from globalization studies that focus on national and global economies. For a broad picture of the transnational turn and the integration of globalization studies within transnational discourse, see Paul Jay, *Global Matters: The Transnational Turn in Literary Studies* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 1-72. I see “transnationalism” occurring not only in economic exchange or population flows, but in the active and purposeful decisions that people—and artists—make to transgress borders in their everyday lives. This “transnationalism” attempts to de-economize the transnational by restoring agency to literary texts. I take as my model Bill Ashcroft’s definition of transnationalism: “It is not an ontological object but a way of understanding the possibility of ordinary people avoiding, dodging, circumventing the inevitable claims of the state upon them.” Bill Ashcroft, “Globalization, Transnation and Utopia,” in *Locating Transnational Ideals*, eds. Walter Goebel and Saskia Schabio (New York: Routledge, 2010), 13.

² It is important to note that the *Nihon kokugo daijiten* definitions of both *ekkyō* 越境 and the older reading *okkyō* 越境 convey the border-crossing movement of *ekkyō* with the word “to invade,” *shinnyū suru* 侵入する.

within and between people and nations, not simply territorial markers established within a framework of nation-states. Using *ekkyō* to mean “border-transgressing” more accurately captures the agency and illegality of the original Japanese. Within literary studies, *ekkyō* literature (*ekkyō suru bungaku* 越境する文学) has come to be associated with “either ethnically non-Japanese authors writing in Japanese in Japan or ethnically Japanese authors writing in Japanese and foreign languages either in Japan or elsewhere.”³ As this nationally defined, linguistically centered definition of *ekkyō* seeps into literary criticism and reception, writers and critics have begun to fetishize the nationality and native-language of authors. Native nation and language becomes assigned by reception, rather than the content of the texts themselves, always already defined by an “inside/outside” dichotomy. This dichotomy flattens the politics of *ekkyō* texts that struggle to escape from a narrow view of “inside(r)/outside(r).”

Reception of *ekkyō* literature has come to mirror a transnational model that Nancy Fraser identifies as “the affirmative politics of misframing.” Fraser defines “affirmative politics” as an approach that:

contests the boundaries of existing frames while accepting the Westphalian grammar of frame-setting. In this politics, those who claim to suffer injustices of misframing seek to redraw the boundaries of existing territorial states or in some cases to create new ones. But they still assume that the territorial state is the appropriate unit within which to pose and resolve disputes about justice.⁴

³ Rumi Sakamoto, “Writing as out/insiders: Contemporary Japan’s *ekkyō* literature in globalization,” in *Popular Culture, Globalization, and Japan*, eds. Matthew Allen and Rumi Sakamoto (New York: Routledge, 2006), 137.

⁴ Nancy Fraser, *Scales of Justice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 22.

And where misframing means:

Constituting members and non-members in a single stroke, this decision effectively excludes the latter from the universe of those entitled to consideration with the community in matters of distribution, recognition, and ordinary-political representation... [O]ne is denied the chance to press first-order justice claims in a given community...Those who suffer it may become objects of charity or benevolence. But deprived of the possibility of authoring first-order claims, they become non-persons with respect to justice.⁵

Simply stated, transnational discourse often acts to reinforce, rather than deconstruct, national boundaries by virtue of its language and critical approach. Criticism of *ekkyō* literature continues to posit appropriate citizenship and legal status as a “native” construct—it exists as a natural boundary between peoples, despite being necessarily exclusionary and problematic. Contemporary critical engagement with *ekkyō* fails to fully challenge the broader framework of constructed territorial or native identity. *Ekkyō* texts become codified within a critical discourse systemically misframed by assigned identity, nationality, or native tongue. I intend to push back against this narrow definition of *ekkyō*. Do *ekkyō* texts transgress more than national or linguistic boundaries?

In the case of Shirin Nezamafi⁶ specifically, the propagation of *ekkyō* as a literary genre—framed by assumed “native” nation—colors the reception of her texts such that her nationality, Japanese language education, and linguistic capability overshadows larger artistic themes. In this thesis, I reevaluate Nezamafi’s novellas *Salam* and *White Paper* in a way that exposes the constructed,

⁵ Fraser, *Scales of Justice*, 19-20.

⁶ Born in 1979 in Tehran. Shirin Nezamafi is a native Farsi speaker who currently writes fiction and essays in Japanese. To date, she has published four novellas and a series of essays. She won the Bungakukai New Writer Award in 2009 and was nominated for the Akutagawa Prize in 2009 and 2010. More biographical details follow below.

problematic nature of the boundaries that bracket naturally accepted “native” identity. “Native identity” is imagined and deployed in order to create the “native;” it is a circular, self-defined identity that always already organizes strangers in harmony with, or juxtaposition to, an imagined “stranger” or “alien.” By foregrounding the inherent complexities of national identities, native languages, and gender politics, I will outline the possibility of an *ekkyō* feminist counterpublic within Nezamafi’s work that goes unrecognized in the critical reception of her texts and *ekkyō* literature more generally.

Contextualizing *Ekkyō*

Although I will outline below the way in which contemporary critical reception of *ekkyō* texts fetishizes the nationality or native language of the author, I would first argue that “*ekkyō*” in historical context is necessarily intertwined with legal and ethical implications. *Ekkyō* as an independent word dates to the late 16th or early 17th century in Japan, where the phrase demarcated movements—and their (il)legality—across borders.⁷ *Ekkyō* continues to imply the unlawful transgression of borders in widespread usage, particularly in contemporary phrases that have

⁷ The *Nihon kokugo daijiten* lists the dates as either 1548 (from an entry in the *Unpoirohashū* 運歩色葉集, a Muromachi dictionary) or 1631 (from an annotated reading of the *Zuo Zhuan* 左傳 in a Muromachi-era textbook called *Teikinōraishō* 庭訓往来抄) depending on pronunciation of the word. In Chinese, the phrase dates to at least the *Zuo Zhuan*. This narrative history chronicles the years 722 to 468 BC and is thought to have been compiled sometime in the 4th century BC. *Yuejing* 越境 is used in passages of war and incursion from the history of Duke Zhuang 莊公 in his 27th year of rule and in the history of Duke Xuan 宣公 in his 2nd year of rule. Chinese text of *Zuo Zhuan* accessed through the ctext database (“Chun Qiu Zuo Zhuan,” <http://ctext.org/chun-qiu-zuo-zhuan>). English translation of Duke Xuan’s 2nd year available in Burton Watson, trans., *The Tso Chuan*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 76-80.

developed outside the context of literature.⁸ Criticism of contemporary *ekkyō* texts tends to pass over the politics of border-crossing in favor of theorizing bilingualism, language acquisition, grammar and usage, and linguistic identity. While these approaches are necessary and important, they accept the “grammar” of a Westphalian identity framework that overshadows the challenges made to identity politics that occur in *ekkyō* texts generally and Nezamafi’s works specifically.

Tsuchiya Masahiko’s edited volume, *Ekkyō suru bungaku* 越境する文学⁹ demonstrates how contemporary criticism acknowledges the politics of border-crossing, yet quickly retreats to a state-delineated framework of acceptable, native language ability. His introduction begins with a powerful declaration of the need to investigate the historical and social contexts of border-crossings:

Having experienced exile or immigration, and having started to produce texts in the language of a country in which they reside that is far removed from their native language, we should consider the works of these border-crossing authors (越境作家) as the elucidation of the truth of border-crossing. They expose the historical and social context of that action. They consider the contemporary significance of exiting and crossing a border. They become an essential topic when considering contemporary culture.¹⁰

He goes on to list the essential issues with which *ekkyō* literature wrestles: anguish and despair, alienation and assimilation, history and recollection, community and

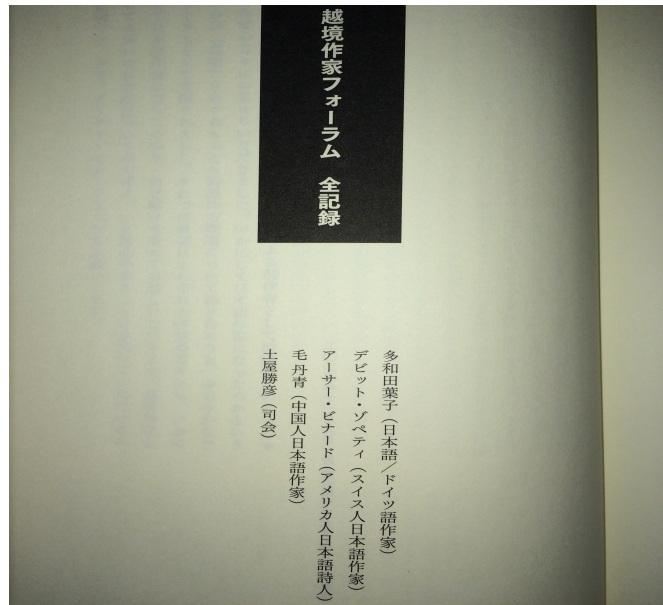
⁸ Two interesting examples are *ekkyō nyūgaku* 越境入学, meaning to cross a school district boundary for admissions purposes, and *ekkyō osen* 越境汚染, meaning pollution that originates from another country, particularly in the case of air pollution.

⁹ Tsuchiya Masahiko 土屋勝彦, ed., *Ekkyō suru bungaku* 越境する文学 (Tokyo: Suiseisha, 2009).

¹⁰ Ibid., 7. All translations that follow from the original Japanese are my own unless otherwise noted.

society, the modern and contemporary.¹¹ The final line of the introduction states, “*Ekkyō* is that which takes root in the essence of literature.”¹² Yet the Westphalian grammar present in *ekkyō* reception appears inescapable (see figure 1).

Figure 1. Contents of “*Ekkyō* Author Forum” from Tsuchiya Masahiko’s *Ekkyō suru bungaku*



The authors are immediately identified by their nationality and their capability to produce works in the Japanese language—save for Tawada Yōko¹³ who is identified strictly as a “writer of Japanese and German.” Even in the context of design, Tawada is capable of an assumed native identity, whereas the other writers must first be defined by their nationality before being inducted into the sphere of “Japanese”

¹¹ Tsuchiya, 11.

¹² Ibid., 12.

¹³ Tawada Yōko was born in Tokyo in 1960. She currently resides in Berlin and writes in both Japanese and German. She has produced more than 50 texts including novels, short story collections, plays, and essays. She was awarded the Akutagawa Prize in 1993, the Tanizaki Prize in 2003, and the Goethe Medal in 2005.

writing. Tsuchiya's first question fails to fully incorporate the extensive and complex political, societal, and historical implications of border-transgressions to which he refers in his introduction—particularly in the way that contemporary ekkyō artists frame those transgressions. He asks,

I would like to discuss the foundational problems of what we call 'ekkyō'... let's begin with having each author introduce themselves and give a self-introduction about how they became an author in the Japanese language.¹⁴

This initial request fetishizes learning Japanese—a task often subsumed within the rhetoric of *Nihonjinron* 日本人論, whereby a person's "blood" necessarily delineates the ability to artfully manipulate the Japanese language¹⁵—rather than engaging with an author's intentional development of artistic approaches. To this request, the first respondent, Arthur Binard,¹⁶ immediately challenges the assumption that writing in Japanese as a foreigner is intrinsically interesting, saying, "Although I'm absolutely delighted to be called something like a 'Japanese author,' I think it is more important to consider 'What do I write?' than 'What language do I write in?'"¹⁷ Tsuchiya's question, and Binard's response, speaks to the fetishization of native nation and language that overshadows literary approaches and transgressive politics.

¹⁴ Tsuchiya, 255.

¹⁵ For an excellent example of this, see Wen Yuju's comments on Levy Hideo having "not a drop of Japanese blood" in the 2014 film *A Home Within Foreign Borders* 異境の中の故郷.

¹⁶ Arthur Binard was born in Michigan in 1967. He is an author of poetry, prose, and picture books. He was awarded the Nakahara Chūya Prize in 2001 and the Yamamoto Kenkichi Prize in 2008, both for collections of poetry.

¹⁷ Tsuchiya, 256.

Japanese scholarship on linguistics, history, and gender theory utilize *ekkyō* as a term that signals the critical consideration of historical, social, and political implications of border-crossing that Tsuchiya outlines in his introduction. In some sense, *ekkyō* scholarship in law, sociology, or anthropology more closely resembles that which we might recognize as “traditional”—read “Western”—transnational theory.¹⁸ To keep sight of the legal implications of *ekkyō* within the broader context of Japanese society, we might look to Doi Kanae’s non-fiction work, “*Yōkoso*” to *ieru Nihon e* 「ようこそ」と言える日本へ.¹⁹ After 9/11, Afghan immigrants in Japan were ordered into detention centers for interrogation. Crossing Japan’s border became legal justification for mass incarcerations—these refugees came from a nation-state that had been assigned criminal responsibility. Even members of minority tribes that had been victims of genocide at the hands of the Afghan government²⁰ were incapable of escaping the association of *ekkyō*—here meaning the historically defined action found in the dictionary definition above—with illegality. The Westphalian grammar of nation-states dictated the appropriate

¹⁸ A problematic term in its own right, but meaning generally the lineage of transnational thought that has developed from post-colonial and globalization theorists such as: Benedict Anderson, Arjun Appadurai, Bill Ashcroft, Laura Doyle, Paul Jay, Salman Rushdie, Gayatri Spivak etc. Current transnational theory posits a complex flow of exchange that challenges a top-down distribution of cultural influence, thus complicating binary models such as metropole/colony, privileged/subaltern, hegemony/oppression.

¹⁹ Doi Kanae 土井香苗, “*Yōkoso*” to *ieru Nihon e* 「ようこそ」と言える日本へ (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2005). Doi wrote this book after several years working as a human rights and immigration lawyer for refugees in Japan. This text is essential to fully understand the social and legal context of refugees in contemporary Japan. As a lawyer, Doi assisted many Afghan refugees in their petitions for asylum before and after 9/11. This volume describes in detail the process of petition, refugee statistics, and the experience of asylum seekers in Japan.

²⁰ Especially the Hazara minority group. I will explore the political and historical context of the Hazara people in my analysis of *Salam*.

identification and citizenship status as defined by a historically defined, hegemonic immigration policy. Not only was nationality non-existent for minority cultural groups, but the misframing of nationality meant their escape from non-person oppression led only to entering into a new form of non-person oppression. Other texts in linguistics,²¹ gender studies,²² and social theory²³ engage with the political implications of border-crossing at a critical level that complicates issues of citizenship, native-language, and national identity. The question remains: Has the (il)legality of “*ekkyō*” become subsumed within *ekkyō* literature? Has *ekkyō* reception flattened the politics of border-transgression such that political agency can no longer enter into the discourse of artistic intention? Through fetishization of the “native,” has *ekkyō* reception lost the ability to deconstruct or critically challenge nationality and native language?

Shortcomings of *Ekkyō* in Contemporary Literary Theory

In the usage of *ekkyō* as outlined above, when assumed natural²⁴ divisions between nations and native languages become fetishized, transnational and identity

²¹ Sanada Shinji 真田信治, *Ekkyō shita Nihongo: Wasah no “katari” kara* 越境した日本語—話者の「語り」から (Osaka: Izumi shoin, 2009).

²² Tōkai Jendā Kenkyūsho 東海ジェンダー研究所 eds., *Ekkyō suru jendā kenkyū* 越境するジェンダー研究 (Tokyo: Akashi, 2010).

²³ Chen Tianxi 陳天璽, Kondō Atsushi 近藤敦, Komori Hiromi 小森宏美, and Sasaki Teru 佐々木てる, eds., *Ekkyō to aidentifikeishon—Kokuseki, pasupōto, ID kādo* 越境とアイデンティフィケーション—国籍・パスポート・IDカード (Tokyo: Shin'yōsha, 2012).

²⁴ I use “natural” here in the Adornian sense: That which is named natural, being believed to exist as such, yet is always already constructed. I consider this to be an essential component of the grammar of misframing: Created boundaries perpetuate the necessity of boundaries; the imagined “native” defines the “stranger.” See especially Horkheimer and Adorno’s analysis of the scream: Max

politics are eclipsed by the ideal of the “native.” In a system that privileges nationality, native-tongue, or state-defined identity, people who do not possess these identification markers are systematically excluded from participation in society. They are not so much marked as they are de-marked. To aid this differentiation, it may be useful to consider a phrase that is used in both literary and critical approaches to *ekkyō*: *zure* ずれ. This phrase is often translated into English as a gap, fissure, or slippage; here I will be using the phrase to mean something closer to misalignment.²⁵ Within the context of traditionally defined *ekkyō* literature, *zure* represents the gaps, deviations, or shifts in identity that accompany boundary-crossings and cultural and linguistic hybridity.²⁶ Commonly, the misalignment within *ekkyō* texts occurs between the external politics of imagined and constructed nation (for example, the assignment and enforcement of state-defined identification) and the internal politics of imagined and constructed identity (performing an identity that might conform to or resist identity as it has been imagined by nation). These identity-driven misalignments permeate the works of

Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 11-13.

²⁵ I see “misalignment” occurring in the same way as Fraser’s “misframing,” but intentionally choose to remove the image of a “frame” in an attempt to destabilize the assumed existence of that very same frame. I manipulate *zure* to de-frame Westphalian grammar, creating a misalignment not only with *the* frame, but with frames themselves as critical or philosophical tools. “Misframing” implicitly asserts the existence of definable borders, “misalignment” gestures to nebulous, precarious disjunctions.

²⁶ See Levy Hideo リービ英雄, Tawada Yōko 多和田葉子. “<Taidan> Kotoba no aidentitii sagashi—Kikō bungaku to hyōgen” <対談> ことばのアイデンティティー—紀行文学と表現. *Tosho* 図書 (February, 2004): 2-4.

“*ekkyō* authors” such as Levy Hideo,²⁷ Mizumura Minae,²⁸ and Tawada Yōko: Performed *linguistic* identity (utilizing English/Japanese/Chinese in the case of Levy, English/Japanese in the case of Mizumura, and German/Japanese in the case of Tawada) challenges the expectations of assigned *national* identity. Certainly, their works are not without political engagement: Levy challenges homogenizing modernization in Japan and mainland China;²⁹ Mizumura resists the domination of the English language in contemporary global politics;³⁰ and recently, Tawada has directly attacked the Japanese government’s mishandling of the Fukushima nuclear disaster.³¹ Yet, these texts exist within the grammar of Westphalian nation-states. There is another *zure* present in *ekkyō* works, particularly Nezamafi’s *Salam* and

²⁷ Born Ian Levy in Berkley, 1950. He was raised in America, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Japan. He currently lives in Tokyo and writes novels and nonfiction in Japanese. He is often cited as the first Westerner to write novels full-time in the Japanese language. He was awarded the Noma Prize in 1992, the Osaragi Prize in 2005, and the Itō Prize in 2009.

²⁸ Born in Tokyo in 1951, Mizumura was raised mostly in and around New York City, where she moved with her family at the age of twelve. She stayed in United States schools through her PhD, which she earned in French Literature from Yale University. Her most famous works include *Shishōsetsu from left to right* 私小説 *from left to right*—which makes extensive use of English interspersed among the Japanese narrative—and *Nihongo ga horobiru toki* 日本語が亡びるとき, recently translated as *The Fall of Language in the Age of English*.

²⁹ See Levy’s recent works, *Kari no mizu* 仮の水, *Wareteki chūgoku* 我的中国, and *Tairiku he—Amerika to chūgoku no genzai wo nihongo de kaku* 大陸へ—アメリカと中国の現在を日本語で書く. For Levy’s estimation of literature in an era of rapid modernization, see “*Sennenki jōshi ni mukatte—Chūgokujin ni natta yudayajin wo sagasu tabi*” 千年紀城市に向って—中国人になったユダヤ人を探す旅 in *Ekkyō no koe* 越境の声 (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 2007) 217-240, especially 225-227.

³⁰ Mizumura Minae 水村美苗, *Nihongo ga horobiru toki—Eigo no seiki no naka de* 日本語が亡びるとき—英語の世紀の中で (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 2008).

³¹ From Tawada’s conversation with Levy Hideo at the conference “Transnationalism and its Discontents: Exploring Critical Approaches to Border-space” March 14, 2015. In fiction, see Tawada Yōko 多和田葉子, “*Fushi no shima*” 不死の島, in *Sore demo sangatsu ha, mata* それでも三月は、また, ed. Tanikawa Shuntarō et al. (Tokyo: Kodansha, 2012), 11-22.

White Paper. This is the misalignment of statelessness and the unacknowledged, unseen boundaries which develop within nations, regardless of border-crossing.

Zure is also deployed in critical approaches to *ekkyō*, often with an emphasis on those people who exist *in* the *zure* between national and personal identity politics. Chen Tianxi 陳天璽 describes a state of *zure* that stateless people experience when trapped by the political control of national subjects in an effort to regulate transnational flows of population.³² This *zure* exists between expressed and tacit controls on transnational populations. Passports and assigned nationality are expressed controls defined and deployed by hegemonic and historical transnational immigration law. Cultural acceptance or adaptation within nations and immigrant populations are tacit controls. What do we make of those people without citizenship, without passports? When people exist in a stateless existence, there is no cultural hybridity or performative identity that will deliver them from the *zure* that exists between national immigration politics. This damning *zure* prevents stateless persons from benefiting from either identification or identity. Where Levy, Mizumura, and Tawada are always already capable of functioning within and between defined nations, the characters that fill Nezamafi's texts expose a different, more damaging misalignment. *Ekkyō* literature and reception outlines the impact of identity formation, politics, and performance, but we must resist the urge

³² See Chen, *Ekkyō to ID*, page 3 for the editors' approach to the *zure* between identity and identification. See "*Kokka to kojīn wo tsunagu mono no shinsō—'Mukokuseki'sha no pasupōto-mibunshō wo mitsumete*" 国家と個人をつなぐモノの真相—「無国籍」者のパスポート・身分証をみつめて from *Ekkyō to ID*, pages 444-468 for Chen's application of this *zure* to people without citizenship.

to prioritize language usage over the immediate and significant repercussions of the dehumanizing *zure* of statelessness.

Beyond flattening the political implications of *ekkyō* texts as they relate to the Westphalian grammar of nation, the fetishization of nationality creates a pseudo-individualized³³ “native” that precludes critical considerations beyond artificially constructed language ability. By possessing the traits that have been named “native identity” or “native language,” critics self-identify with others who possess a similar “nativeness.” The only criterion for entry into this pseudoindividualized “native” is the ability to other strangers. Being and performing the “native” becomes commodified; reception of art fetishizes the “native” as pseudoindividual commodity. Even in innovative examinations of transnational hybridity, as in Tsuchiya’s edited volume above, Westphalian grammar assumes a natural identity. At the level of judging texts for major awards—an action that Inaga Shigemi astutely associates with “judging a speech contest for foreign exchange students”³⁴—national politics (emerging here as imagined “native” linguistics) tend to color the reception of *ekkyō* works. In judging Yang Yi’s *Toki ga nijimu asa* 時が滲む朝 for the Akutagawa Prize, Ishihara Shintarō states: “Even if I were to say that she had developed some literary skill [lit. ‘sentences’], it would be difficult to make a

³³ I refer again to Adorno and his conception of pseudoindividuality: “The individual trait is reduced to the ability of the universal so completely to mold the accidental that it can be recognized as accidental...The peculiarity of the self is a socially conditioned monopoly commodity misrepresented as natural.” Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic*, 125.

³⁴ Inaga Shigemi 稲賀繁美, “*Hibogo to iu ruā ni ha nani ga kakaru ka*” 非母語という疑似餌には何が掛かるか in Kaku Nanen ed., *Bairingararu na Nihongo bungaku—Tagengo tabunka no aida* バイリンガルな日本語文学—他言語多文化のあいだ (Tokyo: Sangensha, 2013), 22-46, especially 28.

connection to literary value by simply stating ‘Oh, and the author is Chinese.’”³⁵

Murakami Ryu describes Nezamafi’s *White Paper* as follows:

Whether an Iranian person writes novels in Japanese, or in Persian, or whether a Japanese person writes in Japanese, boring is boring. At the moment, foreigners writing in Japanese are a rarity, thus they become topics in the media. In time, they will become the norm and we will no longer talk about them. Therefore, we should not be making our selections by taking into account the meaning or significance of foreigners writing in Japanese.³⁶

Certainly, texts should be evaluated on style and entertainment value. Yet both critics dismiss the nuanced literary value of Yang Yi and Nezamafi’s texts out-of-hand by citing nationality. In the case of Ishihara, the suggestion that Yang Yi has finally achieved some level of mastery is immediately undermined: Nationality does not guarantee artistic merit. This remark implies that Ishihara does indeed believe that nationality must be considered when assessing literary value: Yang Yi’s value must be measured against a “standard” which is necessarily marked as “native Japanese.” Murakami, on the other hand, acts overly nonchalant about nationality—as if demonstrating that he finds no difference between a Japanese or non-Japanese writer—then subsumes a unique artistic voice into a literature always already named and evaluated through pseudoindividualization: “*Writing in Japanese*.” Both critics judge *ekkyō* texts against what a naturally native Japanese writer would produce—though no such writer has ever existed. Both works are judged harshly. Both critics appear to tackle nationality head-on, yet do so in a way that reinforces the expectation of a pseudoindividualized “Japanese” literary style—essentially

³⁵ Ishihara Shintarō 石原慎太郎, “*Fushigi na shissō kan*” 不思議な疾走感, *Bungeishunjū* 文藝春秋 (September, 2008): 366.

³⁶ Murakami Ryū 村上龍, “*Senpyō*” 選評, *Bungeishunjū* 文藝春秋 (August, 2009): 356.

judging *ekkyō* texts as writing exercises, rather than as works of literature where language *challenges* native expectations.

Other critics, such as Japanese linguist Makino Sei'ichi, compartmentalize writers within the genres of *ekkyō* and *zainichi* literature based on their location of birth, native language, and ability (native-ness) in the languages they manipulate.³⁷ While it is essential to consider these works as the artful manipulation of language—judgments of which are axiomatically interconnected with native language and language ability—*ekkyō* reception tends to privilege writers *exiting* the sphere of Japanese language, rather than those *entering* that sphere. Inaga notes how “poetic license” is not applied universally. We might consider works having an “acceptable heterogeneity” or “unacceptable homogeneity.”³⁸ This approach can help us to understand how writers become compartmentalized based on language ability or nationality. Are there notable differences between the acceptability of Chinese, Korean, American, Swiss, or Iranian heterogeneity? Pseudoindividual estimations of Japanese literature color critical reception of all texts produced in the Japanese language. Japanese writers must face these same questions: Are these worthwhile texts? Do they have literary merit? Are they artfully manipulating language? What differs, I would argue, is the *expectations* by which “native” Japanese writers are judged. When considering what then becomes acceptable or unacceptable, which works show literary merit, which authors manipulate an

³⁷ Makino Sei'ichi 牧野成一, “*Nihongo no ika to tayōka—Ribi Hideo no kēsu-sutadi*” 日本語の異化と多様化—リービ英雄のケース・スタディ in Kaku Nanen ed., *Bairingarū na Nihongo bungaku—Tagengo tabunka no aida* バイリンガルな日本語文学—他言語多文化のあいだ (Tokyo: Sangensha, 2013), 47-73.

³⁸ Inaga, “*Hibogo*,” 30.

“acceptable heterogeneity,” we must always be conscious of the way that pseudoindividualized concepts of naturally occurring nation and national language influence the reception of texts.

Ekkyō writers themselves are now beginning to push back against this fetishization of nation and language by asserting their position as artists and authors. We can picture this as another *zure*: a misalignment between the artistic goals of *ekkyō* writers and the discourse that evaluates *ekkyō* texts. Contemporary *ekkyō* authors are producing works that challenge the critical dialogue of “*ekkyō* literature.” As we saw above in the case of Arthur Binard, *ekkyō* writers are conscious of the manner in which their works are judged. They are thus equally deliberate in the manner in which they conceptualize and create their works. Binard goes on to state, “language simply performs the role of lens.” As lens, multiple languages function as a “shit detector.”³⁹ Other writers understand the role of linguistic hybridity acting as an essential (and political) filter: In a conversation provocatively titled “Closing in on the Chinese Akutagawa-winning Author,” Tsutsui Yasutaka tells Yang Yi, “Your greatest weapon is precisely your underdeveloped Japanese [未熟な日本語].”⁴⁰ Nezamafi, responding to questions about how she gained the ability to write in Japanese as a native speaker outside the “Chinese-sphere” of languages,⁴¹ echoed Binard’s estimation of language versus literature:

³⁹ Tsuchiya, 256.

⁴⁰ Tsutsui Yasutaka 筒井康隆 and Yang Yi 楊逸, “*Chūgokujin Akutagawa shō sakka ni semaru*” 中国人芥川賞作家に迫る *Chuō kōron* 中央公論 (November, 2008): 188-198.

⁴¹ This seems to be a common theme surrounding Nezamafi, as she is often cited as the first winner of the Bungakukai New Writer Prize to come from a language that does not use Chinese

There was some talk about the grammatical particles “wa” and “ga” earlier. In my case, those are probably a mess. I spoke with Yang Yi recently and she said that even with her editor sitting beside her, she was indifferent to grammar. Some kind of flow, or story, the ability to write down what comes naturally from your mind, certainly that is what is important. Afterward, have someone point out, “Well, this should actually be ‘ga,’ not ‘wa.’ ... To address the earlier question from the floor, the one that asked about how I deal with ‘wa’ and ‘ga’: That might be a question better suited for a researcher or scholar, rather than an author. And what is the difference between an author and a scholar? It’s something like the difference between an architect and an artist.”⁴²

While some may be tempted to consider this an escape from the responsibility of learning the craft of language—an unacceptable heterogeneity, perhaps—I would argue that Nezamafi is pushing back against an assigned ID (Iranian, non-native speaker) that emerges from pseudoindividual national identity. The question regarding grammatical minutiae suggests a racialized, “native” ability of Japanese speakers to comprehend the difference between the particles “wa” and “ga”—which fails to account for the large percentage of native Japanese speakers who themselves cannot fully distinguish between the two. More problematically, the question sets Nezamafi’s *art* aside entirely: How does one even begin to explore the intricacies of *ekkyō* texts when the dialogue regarding these writers has already been codified so strongly?⁴³ What is meaningful in these stories? We are led back to the *zure* that exists between assigned ID and performed identity. Just as Nezamafi challenges

characters. She even contributed a special article to the online magazine Nippon.com called “How I Learned Japanese.” See Shirin Nezamafi シリン・ネザマフィ, “*Watashi no nihongo no manabikata*” 私の日本語の学び方 <http://www.nippon.com/ja/in-depth/a02102/>.

⁴² Shirin Nezamafi シリン・ネザマフィ, “*Nagareru yō ni, jiyū ni kaku*” 流れるように、自由に書く in Kaku Nanen ed., *Bairingararu na Nihongo bungaku—Tagengo tabunka no aida* バイリンガルな日本語文学—他言語多文化のあいだ (Tokyo: Sangensha, 2013), 175-180, especially 178.

⁴³ As a recent example of this dialogue, consider Nezamafi’s participation on an Association for Asian Studies conference panel at the 2015 Annual Conference: “Contributions of ‘Border-Crossing Literature’: Perspectives from Linguistics, Literature, Language Education, and Writer—Sponsored by the American Association of Teachers of Japanese.”

the audience to defetishize grammar—here in a literal sense—we must also challenge the grammar of the assumed natural “native” that has come to dominate *ekkyō* reception in the past fifteen years. By identifying the misalignment between artistic intent and critical reception, we open a pathway into exploring the artistic and political subtleties of *ekkyō* art.

Nezammafi in *Ekkyō* Context

Certainly, Shirin Nezammafi fits the mold of an *ekkyō* writer. Nezammafi was born in 1979 in Tehran. She first arrived in Japan in 1999 to enter Osaka University of Foreign Studies, eventually matriculating at Kobe University where she would go on to receive a master’s degree in engineering in 2006. After graduating, Nezammafi worked for Panasonic as a systems engineer. She currently resides in the United Arab Emirates as a Global Critical Situation Manager for Microsoft and produces short essays and fiction in her free time. The first novella that Nezammafi produced in Japanese, *Salam*,⁴⁴ won the Japanese Literary Award for International Students in December of 2006.⁴⁵ From that time, she has produced three additional short stories and a series of essays for the literary magazine *Subaru*. Two of her later stories, *White Paper*⁴⁶ and *Pulse*,⁴⁷ were nominated for the Akutagawa Prize. A fourth short

⁴⁴ Shirin Nezammafi シリン・ネザマフィ, *Salamu* サラム, *Sekai* 世界 Part 1 (October, 2007): 275-291; Part 2 (November, 2007): 291-311. Shirin Nezammafi シリン・ネザマフィ, *Shiroi kami/Salamu* 白い紙／サラム (Tokyo: Bungeishunjū, 2009).

⁴⁵ A minor literary prize that Nezammafi herself claims few know exist. Now defunct, this prize was only awarded between the years 2001-2010.

⁴⁶ Shirin Nezammafi シリン・ネザマフィ, *Shiroi kami* 白い紙, *Bungakukai* 文學界 (June, 2009): 20-53. Shirin Nezammafi シリン・ネザマフィ, *Shiroi kami/Salamu* 白い紙／サラム (Tokyo: Bungeishunjū, 2009).

story was published in 2011, *The Butterfly Above My Ear*.⁴⁸ In addition to other stand-alone contributions to literary and popular magazines,⁴⁹ Nezamafi's short-form serial essay column "Encounters~*Dīdaru*~" ran for 36 months in *Subaru*, ending in June of 2013.⁵⁰

Nezamafi's controversial subject matter and active political approach to writing sets her outside the image of *ekkyō* texts as constructed by the literary elite. In *Salam* and *White Paper*, Nezamafi addresses politically charged circumstances—the plight of Afghan refugees after 9/11 and the conditions of life on the Iran-Iraq border on the eve of war, 1980—without lingering on the crises of linguistic identity that preoccupy writers such as Tawada Yōko, Levy Hideo, or Mizumura Minae. In a conversation with Yang Yi about writing in Japanese, Yang states that she doesn't think much about her personal rights. In response, Nezamafi suggests that she might be the violent type, unable to avoid her characters reflecting her past experience in post-Revolution, and post-war Iran.⁵¹ While one might point to a superficiality in Nezamafi's work at a diegetic level—

⁴⁷ Shirin Nezamafi シリン・ネザマフィ, *Hakudō* 拍動, *Bungakukai* 文藝界 (June, 2010): 98-137.

⁴⁸ Shirin Nezamafi シリン・ネザマフィ, *Mimi no ue no chōchō* 耳の上の蝶々, *Bungakukai* 文藝界 (December, 2011): 190-229.

⁴⁹ For example, Shirin Nezamafi シリン・ネザマフィ, "Watashi wa fūshū no petto" 私は風習のペット, *Gunzō* 群像 (April, 2011): 80-91. Or her online essay from nippon.com cited above.

⁵⁰ First installment: Shirin Nezamafi シリン・ネザマフィ, "Deai~*Dīdaru*" 出会い〜ディーダル, *Subaru* すばる (July, 2010): 139. Final installment: Shirin Nezamafi シリン・ネザマフィ, "Deai~*Dīdaru*" 出会い〜ディーダル, *Subaru* すばる (June, 2013): 116.

⁵¹ Yang Yi 楊逸, Shirin Nezamafi シリン・ネザマフィ, "Watashitachi ha naze Nihongo de kaku no ka" 私たちはなぜ日本語で書くのか, *Bungakukai* 文藝界 (November, 2009): 204-205.

her stories lack the multiple, deeply explored characters of Mizumura or the complex intertwining of national politics found in Tawada's novels—the politics and art of these texts are truly multiple and complex. The widely used critical approach to *ekkyō* that I have described above—that which foregrounds nationality, native language, and hybrid identity—fails to fully engage with the immediate and dire human consequences that Nezamafi explores. The dominant approach to *ekkyō* cannot justify indefinite detention, religious wars, or the conscription of child soldiers. The systemic and oppressive gendered hegemony that exists in *Salam* and *White Paper* surpasses the confines of flows and hybridity, challenging the grammar of frames, alignment, and boundaries.

An *Ekkyō* Feminist Counterpublic

If the framework previously used to understand and unpack *ekkyō* texts is insufficient, what might bring us closer to recognizing the multiple layers of politics within *Salam* and *White Paper*? How do Nezamafi's texts challenge the dominant discourse that runs through *ekkyō* criticism: nation, native language, and hybrid identity? Although by no means a perfect solution, we might conceive of this dominant discourse functioning in a public that is reinforced by the Westphalian grammar of national boundaries. Nezamafi's works constitute a counterpublic by which we can challenge the entrenched approach to transnationalism vis-à-vis nation. By purposefully challenging the expectations of *ekkyō* literature itself, Nezamafi opens her texts to political readings that surpass “transnationalism” or “*ekkyō*” and enter what I will call an *ekkyō* feminist counterpublic. I will set out to

answer five essential questions: What is a public? What is a counterpublic? How is Nezamafi's public "counter"? How is Nezamafi's counterpublic feminist? How is Nezamafi's counterpublic *ekkyō*?

What is a public? In this thesis I will adopt Michael Warner's approach to publics from his text *Publics and Counterpublics*.⁵² He sees publics constructed across seven criteria:

1. A public is self-organized.
2. A public is a relation among strangers.
3. The address of public speech is both personal and impersonal.
4. A public is constituted through mere attention.
5. A public is the social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse.
6. Publics act historically according to the temporality of their circulation.
7. A public is poetic world-making.

Nezamafi simultaneously participates in and problematizes several of these criteria: Can a stateless person without the ability to participate in any discourse belong to a public, counter or otherwise? What is the immediate historical moment and cultural relevance of the Iran-Iraq War to contemporary Japan? What are the politics of a text that has been rejected by the dominant literary public—in this case the *bundan*? These are complex questions that critically challenge constructions of the public within a context that Warner does not address: linguistic, social, and political border-transgressions.

What is a counterpublic? This concept was originally developed by Rita Felski⁵³ and, later, Nancy Fraser: "They are parallel discursive arenas where

⁵² Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005). His formulation of counterpublics responds to the concept of the public put forth in Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991).

members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs.”⁵⁴

Warner develops his idea of counterpublics from this approach, stating that Fraser’s initial definition “sounds like the classically Habermasian description of rational-critical publics with the word *oppositional* inserted.”⁵⁵ He suggests the following definition instead:

A counterpublic maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status. The cultural horizon against which it marks itself off is not just a general or wider public, but a dominant one. And the conflict extends not just to ideas or policy questions, but to the speech genres and modes of address that constitute the public and to the hierarchy among media.⁵⁶

I see the essential—and relevant—shift from Fraser’s to Warner’s definition occurring at the level of dominant speech genres and modes of address. Nezamafi is certainly aware of her subordinate status with regards to the dominant discourse—she states this directly in her essays and interviews.⁵⁷ *Salam* and *White Paper* adopt a transgressive approach to speech genres and modes of address that acknowledges a dominant discourse while consciously and consistently undercutting the politics of *the* public.

⁵³ Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 9-12.

⁵⁴ Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” in Craig Calhoun ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 123.

⁵⁵ Warner, *Counterpublics*, 118.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁵⁷ Unlike Mizumura and Levy’s use of English or Yang Yi’s use of Chinese, Nezamafi worries that she would not be allowed by her editors or publishers to insert her own native language, Farsi, into her writing. See Yang and Nezamafi, “*Taidan*,” 193.

How is Nezamafi's public "counter"? The simplest answer to this question participates in the Westphalian grammar of boundaries: Nezamafi is an Iranian-born native Farsi speaker writing in Japanese. Nationally and linguistically, Nezamafi conforms to the "counter" image of *ekkyō* as it has been defined by the dominant literary discourse. That Nezamafi sees herself as an actively political writer, however, suggests a fundamental reassessment of her place in *ekkyō* reception: Is the nationally-bracketed criticism of her works a product of her artistic production? Or is it a pseudoindividualized cultural production that defines, rather than is defined *by*, *ekkyō* texts? As Warner states, "The discourse of a public is a linguistic form from which the social conditions of its own possibility are in large part derived."⁵⁸ If we are willing to label critical reception within the literary world—specifically the *bundan*—as *the* public of literary reception (and I concede that it is easy to argue that we are *not* willing to label it as such given the development of alternate media, internationalized literary markets, and transnational cultural flows), the social conditions of the *bundan*'s public are by definition self-reflexive, nationally-defined, and exclusionary linguistic forms. The criticism leveled at Nezamafi emanates from a public that does not coincide with her linguistic, social, or political approaches.

How is Nezamafi's counterpublic feminist? To some degree, *the* public is a gendered invention by nature.⁵⁹ The process of writing and publishing from her

⁵⁸ Warner, *Counterpublics*, 105.

⁵⁹ Many critics of Habermas' original conception of the public sphere have noted how gender has been written out of the theory and application of the public sphere. They are too many to name here, but I will point to Fraser's observation that even the word "public" contains an etymological connection to "pubic." Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," 115.

own perspective allows Nezamafi to write against the dominant discourse that has come to be understood as a naturally occurring “public.” Nezamafi enters into the public discourse with shocking revelations regarding contemporary Japan’s gendered immigration policies and the hypernationalization project of post-Islamic Revolution Iran. In some sense, she acts as journalist or witness, bringing these issues to light in a transnational context; but in a political sense, she unveils these topics purposefully within transnational feminism. She highlights the volunteer organizations already in place to support the women who suffer from gendered violence and discrimination. She paints a radical picture of agency in wartime Iran, resisting the nationalization of citizens. Most importantly, she writes from the essential standpoint that there is no perfectly political reader. As Warner states,

No one could possibly be the sort of creature that is routinely addressed as the public of politics: the fully informed, universally interested and attentive, vigilant, potent, and decisive citizen.⁶⁰

Salam and *White Paper* seem to take this position: Surely, readers will be aware of the Afghan refugee crisis or the Iran-Iraq war, but very few will understand the cultural and political context of those historical moments; far fewer will be able to fully grasp the gendered domination that occurs in those cultural contexts.

How is Nezamafi’s feminist counterpublic *ekkyō*? Working in the mainstream approach to *ekkyō*: *Salam* and *White Paper* project an essentialized linguistic variety and hybrid identity. These texts shatter the expectations of literature within a national framework—as Murakami pointed out above, Iranian writers write in Farsi for Iranian readers. However, I do not mean *ekkyō* simply as a

⁶⁰ Warner, *Counterpublics*, 86.

marker of Nezamafi's Iranian citizenship, or Farsi background, but as a border-transgressing approach to dominant discourse. Beyond Westphalian boundaries, Nezamafi exposes and challenges the invisible divisions that exist in society regardless of nation, language, or hybridity. This too has been the topic of *ekkyō* texts that precede *Salam* or *White Paper*, yet often goes unnoticed or ignored in critical reception.⁶¹ Warner himself states, when considering the public consuming his own essay:

Because a public exists only by virtue of address, it must predicate some degree of attention, however, notational, from its members. The cognitive quality of that attention is less important than the mere fact of active uptake. Attention is the principal sorting category by which members and nonmembers are discriminated. If you are reading this, or hearing it or seeing it or present for it, you are part of this public.⁶²

One could argue that problems of attention or active uptake would include linguistic divisions as well, but Nezamafi's texts challenge Warner's core framework of a counterpublic: What does it mean to exist in a cultural or historical moment when publics are produced across national boundaries? What are the consequences for those people who exist *in* a public physically, but are incapable of participating *in* that public actively? What are the unrecognized boundaries that divide or dehumanize people in their everyday lives?

⁶¹ Levy explores these unseen boundaries in his essays "9/11 and Literature" and "Sennenki," cited above. In Chapters 2 and 3 I will largely address the societal boundaries created by gendered domination, though other such societal boundaries appear nearly uncountable.

⁶² Warner, *Counterpublics*, 87.

Chapter 2

Salam as Ekkyō Feminist Counterpublic

Introduction

This chapter will explore the possibility of Shirin Nezamafi's novella *Salam* acting as an *ekkyō* feminist counterpublic. To restate, I use *ekkyō* here not only to point to the linguistic or cultural hybridity of Nezamafi as *Iranian writer* producing texts in the Japanese language, but to tease out the complex politics of border-transgressions that exist beyond the grammar of Westphalian nation-states. This is not to dismiss the importance of Nezamafi's nationality or cultural background, nor is it intended to dismantle the critical readings of her texts that elucidate the essential nature of identity politics. Rather, I intend to expand the critical discussion of Nezamafi's texts such that gendered histories of male hegemony—and the real world implications of hegemonic immigration policy—might not be subsumed or obscured by narrower interpretations of transnationalism. *Salam* absolutely points to the hybridity within Japan, Afghanistan, and across borders, yet to consider only flows or exchange would mean overwriting the misalignment of those caught outside of national boundaries. Nezamafi's sustained and careful focus on the precarious fate of stateless persons opens *ekkyō* discourse to novel, meaningful readings. I reevaluate Nezamafi's *Salam* in a way that highlights the gender politics of the text and de-emphasizes the constructed boundaries that bracket issues of nationality or native language. I see *Salam* functioning on three levels: Textually, it embodies the linguistic hybridity of *ekkyō* literature; socially, it evidences gendered oppression in Japan and Afghanistan; and

politically, it challenges a hegemonic system of immigration that emerges from historic, gendered domination.

Introduction to *Salam*

Salam tells the story of Leila レイラ, Mr. Tanaka 田中先生, and the narrator, *Watashi* 私: a teenage Afghan girl applying for refugee status in Japan, her court-appointed lawyer, and an Iranian student working as a part-time interpreter, respectively. Leila entered Japan at the behest of her father, a military commander of the minority Hazara people in northern Afghanistan, as a way of escaping Taliban oppression.⁶³ Mr. Tanaka, being a junior member in his law office, has been assigned to Leila's case to help her through the immigration appeals process. The narrator has found an interpreting position for Mr. Tanaka through her university and signs on because of the high pay. Other minor characters in the text include: Kaneko 金子, a woman working in the business office of a local NGO shelter for refugees; Ghulam グラム, another Afghan refugee in the detention center that holds Leila who has experienced extreme torture at the hands of the Taliban; and Leila's family appears through descriptions and memories.

⁶³ The Hazara people are a cultural and religious minority in Afghanistan. As a Shia minority group, they have often been in conflict with the predominantly Sunni Pashtun majority. They are Persian-speaking and largely based around Bamiyan and have, according to Sayad Askar Mousavi, "a particular religious and cultural affinity with Iran" *The Hazaras of Afghanistan* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 192. The history of their origin varies from autochthonic Afghan peoples to descendants of Mongol invaders. Mousavi claims that the Hazara people are among the oldest inhabitants of the region *and* a mixture of races from east and west of contemporary Afghanistan, likely with an origin in Turkic populations in central and eastern Asia. For a complete picture of their origin, see Mousavi, 19-43. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) also maintains a comprehensive database on Hazara discrimination and diaspora: <http://www.refworld.org/topic/50ffbce5307/50ffbce54c0.html>. This database includes reports from 2005-2014.

The story opens with the first meeting between the narrator, Leila, and Mr. Tanaka at a detention center for undocumented immigrants. After the narrator and Mr. Tanaka pass through multiple security screenings, they finally enter an interview room divided in two by glass. Leila enters, looking particularly hollow, and answers basic questions about herself, her family, and her life. The narrator and Mr. Tanaka return for multiple interviews while pushing the case forward in the courts, eventually securing physical evidence that proves Leila's father is a member of the Hazara people and a target of the Taliban.

Leila is granted a conditional release and enters a church that is run by volunteers working for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR). As Leila adjusts to everyday life in Japan, the narrator grows close to her. Meanwhile, Mr. Tanaka embarks on a fact-finding mission to Afghanistan to help seal the case. Unfortunately, after the 9/11 attacks, Afghan refugees in Japan are widely suspected of terrorist activities and Leila is called back to the detention center. Feeling utterly defeated, Leila decides to tell the immigration authorities herself that she wishes to return to Afghanistan. In the final scene, the narrator and Mr. Tanaka rush to the airport as Leila is being ushered away. Leila tells them the story of her mother being beaten and murdered at the hands of the Taliban despite pleas for mercy. Leila is led away, presumably to her death. The narrator berates Mr. Tanaka for his inability to save Leila from the immigration system, an accusation that he accepts without offering any defense.

Despite being set in Japan, *Salam* also explores issues of gendered violence in Afghanistan, particularly during the period of civil war and Taliban rule from the fall

of the Soviet Union in 1992 to the fall of the Taliban during the Afghanistan war in 2001. Historically, several internal Afghan feminist political campaigns have produced results in everyday life.⁶⁴ Yet these advances were wiped away seemingly overnight by the fall of the Soviet-backed government and the onset of tribal warfare in 1992. The Taliban, seeking to consolidate power in the mid-90s, waged a genocidal war against minorities such as the Hazara people and practitioners of Shia Islam. In this phase of the civil war, the Pashtunwali—a cultural code wherein a woman’s honor is defined by sexual purity and a man’s honor located in his ability to protect the women in his family—became perverted into a weapon of war: the rape and murder of women is considered a way to disgrace entire communities into surrender.⁶⁵ The narrator in *Salam* notes that, had she been born and raised in Afghanistan she would have faced more than twenty years of sustained, targeted violence and oppression.⁶⁶

The political situation for Afghan refugees in contemporary Japan at the opening of the 21st century is likewise bleak. Kanae Doi describes indefinite detention and the realities that many refugees face upon arrival in Japan, including

⁶⁴ Beginning in 1919, women’s schools were established. Women were granted equal legal privileges in private life in 1924. They received the right to vote and hold political office in 1964 and the first female cabinet member was nominated in 1966. The constitution in 1975 stipulated gender equality and the number of women in the workforce skyrocketed under communist rule from 1978 to 1992. For a comprehensive overview of feminist activism and domestic political reform, see Shireen Khan Burki, “The Politics of *Zan* from Amanullah to Karzai: Lessons for Improving Afghan Women’s Status,” in Jennifer Heath and Ashraf Zahedi, eds., *Land of the Unconquerable: The Lives of Contemporary Afghan Women* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 45-59.

⁶⁵ Fawzia Koofi, “Working Together: Articulating a Common Vision,” in Jennifer Heath and Ashraf Zahedi, eds., *Land of the Unconquerable: The Lives of Contemporary Afghan Women* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 134.

⁶⁶ Nezamafi, *Salam*, 123.

the extremely low rate at which refugee applications are approved,⁶⁷ the arrest of Afghan refugees after 9/11 on suspicion of terrorism—despite the genocidal campaign the Taliban waged against the Hazara people,⁶⁸ and organized suicide attempts among refugees by swallowing rolls of coins, eating soap or stock-piled medicine, and self-immolation.⁶⁹ These events went unnoticed in major media outlets, pushed from the headlines by Japan's donations to UNHCR and treaties with foreign governments on the topic of refugee rights.⁷⁰ Doi's anecdotal evidence is backed by research on refugee petitions from the years 1982 to 2005: Of 3,928 applications—a number that reflects only those applications completed and submitted, not abandoned before submission—376 were approved (approximately 9.5%); 2,773 were declined (approximately 70%); 475 were withdrawn after submission (approximately 12%).⁷¹

⁶⁷ Doi notes on page xiii that only 1 of 242 applications were approved in a single year that she worked as a volunteer. Despite being the largest refugee population for the last 32 years (see UNHCR report: http://unhcr.org/globaltrends/june2013/UNHCR%20GLOBAL%20TRENDS%202012_V05.pdf), only .00013% of Afghan refugees attempt to enter Japan in order to claim refugee status. Doi, 56.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 57-58.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 103. For statistics on Afghan women in Afghanistan harboring suicidal thoughts and attempting suicide, see Anne Brodsky, "Centuries of Threat, Centuries of Resistance," in Jennifer Heath and Ashraf Zahedi, eds., *Land of the Unconquerable: The Lives of Contemporary Afghan Women* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 76 and Koofi, 132. For studies on mental health problems among refugees, see Nahid Aziz, "Psychological Impacts of War: Human Rights and Mental Health," in Jennifer Heath and Ashraf Zahedi, eds., *Land of the Unconquerable: The Lives of Contemporary Afghan Women* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 231.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 87.

⁷¹ Petrice Flowers, *Refugees, Women, and Weapons: International Norm Adoption and Compliance in Japan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 60.

***Salam* and *Ekkyō* Hybridity**

Before exploring the politics of *Salam*, I should note that the text aligns with the dominant discourse on *ekkyō* literature highlighted above. Besides Nezamafi's Iranian nationality and position as a writer coming from "outside," *Salam* foregrounds one aspect of racial and cultural hybridity that often goes unnoticed: Central Asian immigrants in Japan. To her credit, Nezamafi explores the complex and multiple lives of Middle Eastern and Central Asian immigrants without relying on stereotypes.⁷² Although the text *does* fit an *ekkyō* framework by highlighting cultural and linguistic hybridity, it also manipulates our expectations by shifting this hybridity away from a purely insider/outsider structure defined by immigration (as *ekkyō* reception generally focuses on *influx*, rather than *outflux*). Instead, *Salam* presents a hybridity within Iranian and Afghan nationals residing in Japan that challenges strict definitions of identity based on citizenship or native language.

The opening of *Salam* clearly defines characters by nationality, yet Nezamafi slowly deconstructs the borders by which we might identify nation and identification with individuals as the novella progresses. *Watashi* is "clearly" an Iranian national, Mr. Tanaka is "clearly" Japanese, Leila is "clearly" Afghan. There is a certain comfort in these national delineations, allowing readers to enter into the story through imagined constructions of identification unchallenged. Yet before ever unpacking the implications of these citizenship statuses, we already see the fissure

⁷² For an interesting juxtaposition in *ekkyō* literature, see Yang Yi's utilization of stereotypes of Chinese nationals living in Japan: rural arranged-marriage brides in *Wan-chan* ワンちゃん, Chinese restaurant workers in *Suki-yaki* すき・やき and *Shizutō* 獅子頭, or political activists in *Toki ga nijimu asa* 時が滲む朝.

of assigned identity: Leila is *not* in fact an Afghan national. She is a member of a minority cultural group that is not recognized by international immigration structures. As we discover more about the main characters, the “assigned IDs” of citizenship⁷³—Iranian, Japanese, Afghan—begin to dissolve through Nezammafi’s manipulation of *zure*, or misalignment. Leila, for example, is called “Afghan” out of convenience; she does not carry a passport, nor does she identify with the government of Afghanistan, the Taliban. She instead produces her father’s membership card to the Hazara tribal minority group,⁷⁴ a religious and cultural minority that is in fact systematically hunted and assassinated by the controlling Taliban government. By highlighting this misalignment readers must reconcile a decisive and charged *zure* between the assigned identities which carry with them targeted genocide due to cultural heritage in Afghanistan and targeted imprisonment due to nationality and legal status in Japan. The fissure between readerly expectations (the natural native) and political reality becomes a key marker for the social borders that Nezammafi transgresses in the text.

Linguistically, “interpreter” is itself a misnomer for the narrator. Although *Watashi* assumes that speaking and understanding Dari will be a simple shift in accent, she soon discovers that she needs to consult dictionaries to fully

⁷³ Minami Makoto 南誠 challenges the idea that identity can be encapsulated by structured, nationally-defined identification, especially when discussing cultural groups and transnational flows of populations. He argues that nationality is *assigned* as a result of identity categorization and performativity. Minami Makoto 南誠, “*Kokuseki to aidentiti no pafōmativiti*,” 国籍とアイデンティティのパフォーマティヴィティ in *Ekkyō to aidentifikeishon—Kokuseki, pasupōto, ID kado*, eds. Chen Tianxi 陳天璽, Kondō Atsushi 近藤敦, Komori Hiromi 小森宏美, and Sasaki Teru 佐々木てる, (Tokyo: Shin’yōsha, 2012): 295-319.

⁷⁴ Nezammafi, *Salam*, 109.

comprehend Leila's responses.⁷⁵ The narrator's personal identity as a native speaker of Persian is challenged when Leila sings a poem by the classical poet Hafez.⁷⁶ Although *Watashi* calls Hafez "the exemplification of brilliant Persian poets,"⁷⁷ she is incapable of understanding the meaning of the Persian words she hears. When Mr. Tanaka asks the narrator to translate the emotional meaning behind the poem, hoping that it may be an opportunity to communicate with Leila at a deeper level, the narrator avoids his request entirely. Could it be that she elects not to translate this poem intentionally, as I will highlight later in this chapter, or does this suggest to the reader that her own identity as Persian speaker is misaligned with accepted linguistic identity? Despite these manipulations of national or linguistic expectations, the text does not fully reflect the kind of *ekkyō* hybridity one might expect. When considering other major *ekkyō* writers—Yang Yi, Levy Hideo, or Tawada Yōko—one often encounters the incorporation of the Japanese, Chinese, English, German, etc. within the text itself. Although Nezamafi gestures to these hybrid discourses through her use of *katakana*, we never see Persian script on the page—even when Mr. Tanaka is specifically practicing how to recreate the shape of the Persian letter ه, we are given the *romaji* "H."⁷⁸ Where

⁷⁵ Nezamafi, *Salam*, 86.

⁷⁶ Hafez was a poet active in Shiraz, now Iran, during the 14th century. See Reza Saberi, *The Poems of Hafez* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1995) for an introduction and selected translations of Hafez's poetry. Hibi Yoshitaka has identified the poem in question as #255 in his essay "Gendai Nihon no toransunashonaru bungakuron no tame ni—Shirin Nezamafi 'Salam' to honyaku no hyōshō" 現代日本のトランスナショナル文学論のために—シリシ・ネザマフィ「サラム」と翻訳の表象, in *Juncture* (March, 2012): 32-46. This poem can be found in Saberi, 194-195.

⁷⁷ Nezamafi, *Salam*, 112.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 106.

readers of other *ekkyō* writers have come to expect entire blocks of non-Japanese text, the politics of “acceptable” second-language use preclude Nezamafi’s truly “native” approach to writing. During a conversation with Yang Yi, Nezamafi questions her ability to pass Persian script through the editing process, saying, “Would that even be allowed?”⁷⁹ Thus, Nezamafi’s politics and social commentary emerge from her manipulation of hybridity, rather than conformity to an accepted *ekkyō* approach to the hybrid.

Salam points to the emerging hybridity in Japanese society and the shifting personal politics of individuals directly connected to hybrid communities. After gaining a conditional release from the immigration agency’s detention facility, Leila is placed in a transnational feminist support network run out of a church.⁸⁰ We discover that despite minimal resources, this UNHCR facility houses, feeds, employs, and supports refugees from around the world; only neighbors who come to eat ethnic food with the refugees are aware of its existence. That these facilities truly exist, and that contemporary Japanese readers would almost certainly not be aware of them, gestures to the big-picture politics behind *Salam*—there is political power in revealing the unseen. Mr. Tanaka himself, being overwhelmed by the appeals process, decides to go on an evidence gathering mission to Afghanistan—an extremely dangerous task, yet one that reflects the reality for lawyers working with

⁷⁹ Yang and Nezamafi, 193.

⁸⁰ This process and refugee support group closely mirror the real experiences of Afghan refugees and lawyers in the lead up to and wake of 9/11. See Doi, 64-77 for a detailed, non-fictional account of Afghan refugees in Japan, transnational support networks, and the constant pressure of police presence.

refugees in Japan. It is easy to see how the trip transforms him. Compare Mr. Tanaka from earlier in the text:

“Turning *that* Japan, where mostly Japanese people live, into a diverse country is extremely difficult. Problems easily arise in a place that mixes all those cultures and nationalities. I can’t say that there is persecution, but at the very least there is discrimination. Problems with nationality and human rights, with education and employment, these eventually become violence and crime. And of course racism, as well. As of right now, in those countries that have many immigrants, like America, or countries in Europe that have accepted many refugees, the children and grandchildren of those refugees are smothered in so many problems. There are problems even in those countries that have diversity. Now consider Japan, a country so close to being monoethnic. Wouldn’t we too be wrapped up in those problems in ten, twenty years if we were to accept too many refugee applications?”⁸¹

And here, his reaction to Leila’s deportation at the end of the novella:

From beside me, I heard a voice speak quietly and honestly.
“Perhaps Japan is a cold country.”

I turned. Mr. Tanaka’s eyes were watery as they stared down the hallway. Suddenly, as if he had grown tired of staring at the passageway, he looked away. Without turning to look at me, Mr. Tanaka began to wipe his tears away with a towel that was even more crumpled than before. He mumbled quietly, “You did good work.”⁸²

In these final moments, Mr. Tanaka’s internal politics of justification break down. It is the *insider* that denounces the policies and politics of Japan and the larger immigration system, not either of the outsiders that have transgressed the boundaries of nation in a way that we recognize in similar contemporary *ekkyō* texts.

Subversion and the Creation of a “Counterpublic”

Nezammafi exposes the fallacy of a natural native public by navigating and exploring the intricacies of immigration policy. As Michael Warner describes:

⁸¹ Nezammafi, *Salam*, 120-121.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 149.

In the kind of modern society that the idea of publics has enabled, the self-organization of discourse publics has immense resonance from the point of view of individuals...Imagine how powerless people would feel if their commonality and participation were simply defined by pre-given frameworks, by institutions and law, as in other social contexts it is through kinship. What would the world look like if all ways of being public were more like applying for a driver's license or subscribing to a professional group—if, that is, formally organized mediations replaced the self-organized public as the image of belonging and common activity? Such is the image of totalitarianism: nonkin society organized by bureaucracy and the law. Everyone's position, function, and capacity for action are specified for her by administration.⁸³

Immigration itself is a constructed notion of legally binding belonging that is always already imagined and deployed by state actors. Leila is at the mercy of the very system that develops and administers the application to an assumed public. By entering into a globalized immigration system that has the ability of assigning legality and illegality to the very existence of a human being, Leila exposes the “image of totalitarianism.” Simply stating the injustice of this system, as Doi does in “*Yōkoso*” and Nezammfi reiterates in *Salam*, is to begin crafting the counterpublic that opposes and balances hegemonic and gendered dominance through immigration policy. Again, Warner states this resistance eloquently:

In the idea of a public, political confidence is committed to a strange and uncertain destination. Sometimes it can seem too strange. Often, one cannot imagine addressing a public capable of comprehension or action. This is especially true for people in minor or marginal positions, or people distributed across political systems. The result can be a kind of political depressiveness, a blockage in activity and optimism—a disintegration of politics toward isolation, frustration, anomie, forgetfulness. This possibility, never far out of the picture, reveals by contrast how much ordinary belonging requires confidence in a public.⁸⁴

In Nezammfi's case, confidence in a public necessitates crafting her own counterpublic that opposes totalitarianism and political depressiveness.

⁸³ Warner, *Counterpublics*, 69.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 69-70.

At the most basic act of transgression—*Watashi* and Leila entering Japan legally and illegally—we may be prone to create a natural dichotomy between a “right” and “wrong” way to immigrate. At the core of legality—or illegality as is often the case in *Salam*—rests an imagined morality that developed historically and has become codified in “public” consciousness as an impartial and objective measure. Acts of border-transgression in *Salam*, however, evidence the nuance and complexity by which boundaries are transgressed. Mr. Tanaka travels to Afghanistan—perhaps legally—to collect evidence for Leila’s trial (the only example of *outflow* in the story),⁸⁵ Leila’s family skirts the border of Afghanistan and Pakistan—perhaps illegally—in an attempt to hide from the Taliban,⁸⁶ the Afghan Ghulam is tortured by the Taliban after being falsely accused of smuggling Hazara people across borders.⁸⁷ Nezamafi contorts the relationship of outflows and inflows, of legal entry and illegal trespass, until readers can no longer identify *ekkyō* as category—by which I mean an approach to *ekkyō* that locates the transnational within inhuman statistics of economic or population exchange—but rather as the active and conscious transgression of boundaries by actors. She humanizes *ekkyō* in a way that blurs our understanding of right or wrong, legal or illegal, highlighting individual responses to a systemic deployment of divisions.

Leila, as a stateless illegal immigrant, represents a non-existence that catalyzes the narrator’s resistance to an imposed immigration system that is

⁸⁵ Nezamafi, *Salam*, 127-132.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 98-99.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 101.

simultaneously accepted as natural and fundamentally sexist. Leila's imprisonment forces *Watashi* into a world where the hegemonic masculinity of nationality and identity define legal status *vis-à-vis* gendered history, rather than contemporary views on human rights.⁸⁸ Leila's imprisonment as dangerous "Other"⁸⁹ challenges, rather than reinforces, *Watashi's* perception of her own legal status. Nezamafi establishes a clear border between the everyday world of contemporary Japan and the stifling darkness of the detention center in which Leila is indefinitely detained. In the very heart of the facility, that single area of the world where Leila and *Watashi* can approach each other, the narrator notes: "The room was split in two by a piece of glass running through the middle."⁹⁰ Thus, a physical border exists to separate the two girls, marking an absolute segregation from insider and outsider. And yet the glass also acts as a marker of reflection and expectation for *Watashi*, the cell itself embodying her hope that she will discover her counterpart within a dark and segmented Japan. After leaving the detention center, the narrator enters a café in perhaps the most "public" of spaces: a train station. Intending to reassert her position in society (and all the benefits legal residents enjoy), she thinks: "This is the country of plenty where I live," blocking out the reality of what she has just experienced by masking her senses with her coffee—too hot to drink. "It smelled

⁸⁸ For a detailed analysis of how gender defines and restricts nationality and identification in Japan, see Moriki Kazumi 森木和美, "*Kokuseki to jendā—kokumin no hani wo meguru kōsatsu*" 国籍とジェンダー—国民の範囲をめぐる考察, in *Ekkyō to aidentifikeishon—Kokuseki, pasupōto, ID kado*, eds. Chen Tianxi 陳天璽, Kondō Atsushi 近藤敦, Komori Hiromi 小森宏美, and Sasaki Teru 佐々木てる, (Tokyo: Shin'yōsha, 2012): 20-42.

⁸⁹ Afghan residents in Japan were arrested on suspicion of terrorist sympathies following the September 11th terrorist attacks, regardless of political, religious, or tribal associations. Doi, 55-58.

⁹⁰ Nezamafi, *Salam*, 82-83.

wonderful.”⁹¹ To step out of the “public” of Japan for even a moment requires a re-immersion at the level of the senses. *Watashi*’s conception of self has become so engrained with this sphere, which she now understands as dangerous construction, that she must forcibly reintegrate through participation in the same public she now fears.

The way in which *Watashi* moves through the inner portions of the immigration facility betrays the problematic nature of constructed borders. She navigates the often unseen bureaucratic boundaries that assign (il)legal status to specific immigrants: security screenings, admittance forms, and locked doors. The guards that accompany her through the detention center embody the power to allow or block movement.

After a few minutes, the main door made of thick metal opened and a tall, powerfully built officer stepped out. He was so big that he hardly appeared Japanese. His muscles looked so large that they might rip through his uniform. “This way,” he said, closing and locking the door behind us just after we entered.⁹²

This characterization reflects the hegemonic masculinity that has prevented women from crossing boundaries since the gendered implementation of passports, visas, and legal residency.⁹³ A massive metal door, the first of countless systemic boundaries, opens to reveal a caricature of masculinity. The guard exudes dominating power, threatening to literally rip through his clothing. *Watashi* is unable to move until given this man’s all clear. And with a stiff order—“This way”—

⁹¹ Nezamafi, *Salam*, 93.

⁹² Ibid., 81.

⁹³ “Citizenship” as a legal concept is defined by gender roles. Women’s citizenship was widely defined by their male relations until the late 20th century. Moriki, 23.

he manifests the power to command, admit, or deny the narrator's visit. Her physical movement through this facility delineates the vast gaps that exist in her relationship to power structures.

By writing a counterpublic that opposes systematically and transnationally deployed immigration, Nezamafi maps many of the "unseen borders"⁹⁴ of contemporary life: the gaps between legal and illegal immigrants, bureaucratic procedures by which humans are separated, cultural and linguistic exchanges that go misunderstood or untranslated. She writes divisions directly into her story, and then empowers transgression as a political act. The narrator passes through not only a detention center, but the legal and historical boundaries that name Leila stateless, nonhuman. The glass that divides the narrator from Leila acts as a window into the world of totalitarian administration of publics. Language, in this case translating the experience of Leila into the language of "the public," is itself imbued with transgressive properties: It is the cry of terror against an unfair and dominating system of legality. By writing through the language of the public to give voice to the stateless, Nezamafi crafts a counterpublic that reveals constructed, gendered immigration. Interpretation is the necessary foundation of this counterpublic: It becomes the self-organized, relation of strangers that—through mere attention—crafts a poetic world.

Interpretation subverts the hegemonic masculinity of the detention center by manipulating the boundaries of language between *Watashi*, Leila, and Mr. Tanaka. Mr. Tanaka, as not only *Watashi's* employer but as an older male in a position of

⁹⁴ See note on Levy's essays above.

authority, should be in direct control of the interview. As per her job, the narrator would carefully and thoughtfully interpret Mr. Tanaka's every word, gather Leila's responses, and then translate into correct and appropriate Japanese. In actuality, *Watashi* despises Mr. Tanaka and what he says. After he introduces himself to Leila, *Watashi* scoffs, "It was a perfectly Japanese introduction."⁹⁵ With this backhanded compliment, the narrator announces precisely what she thinks of Mr. Tanaka *as a Japanese man*. She then consciously ignores the quiet condolences Mr. Tanaka mutters upon hearing that Leila's mother is dead:

I could hear Mr. Tanaka speaking to himself. "I see..." and he continued, "Where are your parents now?"

The girl continued to look down and answered, "My mother is dead."

"Oh, that was very rude of me. That's terrible."

As Mr. Tanaka wrote something down on his papers he hadn't forgotten to add some words of condolence. I didn't think it was necessary to interpret all of the words Mr. Tanaka seemed to be saying to himself.⁹⁶

While we might attempt to explain these statements away as indifference to the job or an aversion to Mr. Tanaka—the narrator notes repeatedly how off-putting his behavior can be⁹⁷—these are conscious decisions that the narrator makes, directly influencing Mr. Tanaka's ability to communicate with Leila. Nezamafi is weaving an intricate web of communication by which the narrator—through her own linguistic ability—is able to access the world of statelessness in which Leila exists. The narrator can thus precisely control the manner in which that world is realized in the "public" at large through communicative action. Here, I would argue,

⁹⁵ Nezamafi, *Salam*, 84.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 96.

Nezammafi's craft truly comes to light: the narrator, in her position as interpreter, becomes the bridge by which the reader can bypass the hegemonic and dominating world of immigration and directly participate in the counterpublic that recognizes Leila's stateless existence. *Salam* as a physical text begins to reflect the glass divider that exists in the deepest heart of the detention center. As Warner states, "The discourse of a public is a linguistic form from which the social conditions of its own possibility are in large part derived."⁹⁸ Through language and interpretation—which now surpasses narrow definitions of "native"—Nezammafi has crafted the reflexive circulation of discourse that generates a social space for the reader to interact with the counterpublic of the text.

As *Salam* itself becomes the means by which the reader accesses a counterpublic that opposes gendered immigration, Nezammafi reasserts the ability of the narrator to undercut and subvert the authority of "the public" writ large. Mr. Tanaka's inability to communicate properly with Leila allows the narrator to manipulate the relationship between the three main characters and establish a bond between Leila and herself. *Watashi* forms this bond with Leila during their first meeting; it becomes a connection that can withstand the gendered, hegemonic force of the Japanese immigration system. The narrator ensures that trust is established between two active, transgressive women. Knowing Leila's tragic fate, we might identify the problematic nature of this subversion: It is easy to wonder whether Leila would still face deportation if the narrator had been more accommodating in her role as interpreter. I would argue, however, that Nezammafi's politics here

⁹⁸ Warner, *Counterpublics*, 105.

approach established feminist models. Ueno Chizuko argues that the nationalization of women should not occur within the already gendered hegemonic model of state citizenship, but should necessitate a complete reconceptualization or renegotiation of citizenship that includes feminist discourse.⁹⁹ Leila is not simply a fellow immigrant, but a woman subject to hegemonic masculine immigration policies. The narrator decides to place herself, in so far as she is able, between Leila-as-prisoner and the dominant male discourse. In these moments, *Salam* becomes the generative locus of an *ekkyō* feminist counterpublic.

Subverting Masculine Hegemony, Crafting *Ekkyō* Feminism

By distorting *ekkyō* expectations with subversive feminist readings of bureaucratic practices, identity politics, and interpersonal communication, *Salam* enters into the realm of transnational feminist praxis. Malahi Chishti and Cheshmak Farhoumand-Sims spent considerable time working with transnational feminist networks in Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban, and I see many of Nezammafi's own politics reflected in their definition of transnational feminism:

The challenge for national and transnational feminist networks is to connect to the very material, complex, and multifaceted lives of women in Afghanistan, while at the same time ensuring that national and foreign interests hold true to their commitments on advancing women's rights...We define *transnational feminism* as the spectrum of actors, instruments, policies, and programs that bring gender issues into the forefront of politics and society in Afghanistan.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Chizuko Ueno, *Nationalism and Gender*, trans. Beverley Yamamoto (Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2004), 171.

¹⁰⁰ Malahi Chishti and Cheshmak Farhoumand-Sims, "Transnational Feminism and the Women's Rights Agenda in Afghanistan," in *Globalizing Afghanistan: Terrorism, War, and the Rhetoric of Nation Building*, eds. Zubeda Jalalzai and David Jefferess (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 119.

If *Salam* is to have some political efficacy as a transnational feminist—or in this case *ekkyō* feminist—text, it will expose gendered oppression in *Japan* as well as other nations. I argue that the text highlights gender issues in politics and society by targeting hegemonic patriarchy, specifically contemporary Japan’s enforcement of gendered and oppressive immigration policy.

Salam reveals how identity formation is necessarily tied to the formation of identification, which itself is always already gendered and patriarchal. The first step of transnational feminist resistance, therefore, is to expose this system for precisely what it is: sexist and oppressive. Being able to prove that Leila can claim “citizenship” to the Hazara minority becomes the major hurdle in the appeals process. The fact that she herself exists, in person, as a member of the Hazara people is not enough to win appeal in the court of law. She is stateless, identity-less. It is only through her male relatives that Japan, as a law-abiding nation-state, is willing to acknowledge her capability to petition. To prove her rightful place in this system, Leila produces her father’s Hazara membership card:

“This is...” Mr. Tanaka trailed off.

“A membership card to the Pure Hazara Party. It says what level of commander my father is and how many men he controls.”

Mr. Tanaka took the card up carefully in both his hands, as if he were some pirate captain cradling a treasure map. He ran his fingers over the words with great purpose, yet he couldn’t read a letter of it. From beside him, I cut in on this transcendent moment.

“Would you like me to take a look?”

Mr. Tanaka’s stare burned through the card, as if finding out what was written on it wasn’t essential at all. He murmured, “We might be able to win with this.”¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ Nezamafi, *Salam*, 109.

The immigration process, however, soon overturns even this small victory. The identification of Leila's father is never in doubt; he exists as a male entity in a world legally defined by patrilineage. Japan's immigration policies prevent Leila from claiming her rights without first proving her familial connection to her father:

"So what would normally be considered evidence?" I asked Mr. Tanaka.

"For example, in Japan we have a family register. In other countries there are ID cards and passports. Those can be used as effective evidence. However, for those countries that don't have lasting records of who was born there, or countries that don't make official birth certificates, or countries that have passports but lack governmental credibility, for those countries unfortunately, that is not evidence."¹⁰²

Within the immigration system, Leila can only be granted human rights by providing evidence that has been defined and manufactured by gendered and nationalist expectations.

After exposing the sexism inherent in the immigration system, Nezamafi undercuts the hegemonic power of patrilineage: The male characters that appear in the text are all in some way deficient. We are told repeatedly about Leila's brothers and father, but never in a way that highlights their merits. Her brothers appear only briefly, one killed, the other maimed. They are never allowed a major role in the story, and more importantly, do not aid Leila's petition for refugee status in the slightest. Her father, while central to the text, is equally impotent. He is never shown to win a battle, or defend his family, or provide sufficient evidence to allow Leila to remain in Japan. The narrator even disparages his so-called army, saying, "It was completely unlike the brawny, high-tech commandos that I had imagined. Rather, it

¹⁰² Nezamafi, *Salam*, 119.

was a collection of warriors from some earlier century.”¹⁰³ In Leila’s picture of her father, his men look like a sad collection of ragtag clones, an army of ineffective father figures copied onto a bleak background. There is no irrational glorification or masculinization of this army’s efforts, nor is there any such sympathy for Leila’s brothers or father. And although these men form the backbone of Leila’s family, Nezamafi makes clear that they are neither capable nor worthy of protecting Leila from the dangers she faces in Afghanistan. In a country of strictly institutionalized patriarchy, the representative males are framed and magnified by their own inadequacies.¹⁰⁴ For their feeble efforts, they are all dead by the conclusion of the story.

Mr. Tanaka provides an interesting foil to this portrayal of male hegemony, signaling a shift away from the dominating world of hegemonic patriarchy. Although Mr. Tanaka possesses a kind and compassionate disposition, he is hardly equipped to win the sort of court case that would grant Leila approval to stay in the country. To his credit, he recognizes his own inadequacies and undertakes a legitimately dangerous mission to Afghanistan to uncover the evidence necessary for Leila’s appeal. There he discovers that Leila’s father had been discovered by the Taliban and murdered.

“How do we break the brutal reality of her father’s death to Leila? How will she respond to it?” Mr. Tanaka wiped the sweat

¹⁰³ Nezamafi, *Salam*, 108.

¹⁰⁴ This connects directly to the gendered violence that overwhelmed Afghanistan after the fall of the Soviet Union. Citing pre-Islamic Pashtunwali moral codes, tribal warlords targeted women for sexual assault and murder as a way of shaming their enemies into surrender. For a more detailed history of this phenomenon see Brodsky, “Centuries of Threat,” 74 and Koofi “Working Together,” 134.

from his forehead with a towel. He looked down in silence, lost in thought. Staring at him, no one drew a breath. The time passed in such silence that I could even hear someone blink. After some time had passed, Mr. Tanaka drew a deep breath and raised his head. He suddenly looked very tired.¹⁰⁵

In these moments we begin to discover the hopelessness and resignation that defines Mr. Tanaka's character in the text. His compassion in recognizing the injustice that Leila faces endears his efforts to the reader, but we are simultaneously made aware of the futility of opposing so pervasive and powerful a system. Despite his trip to Afghanistan to collect evidence—a brave and commendable act—his defining moment comes in the final pages. After his last effort to clear an appeals court fails, Leila is transferred from the detention facility to the airport to be deported. Mr. Tanaka looks on passively as the guards take Leila away. *Watashi* asks him repeatedly if there is anything he can do to stop what is about to happen. He is unable to justify what has occurred, but it is fitting that he points out the coldness of Japan in *precisely* such a cold manner. It is a damning statement—coming from the only true “insider” in the text—of just how far Japan has to go before issues such as equality for all persons, and women in particular, becomes reality.

By turning towards a representative of the dominant “public,” Nezamafi notes the conflict within larger society that gives birth to counterpublics, regardless of issues of nationality or native language. *Salam* manipulates the language of the public—to turn its strength on itself, in a sense—in such a way that reaffirms its constructed nature and the inherent estrangement that comes from construction. As Warner describes,

¹⁰⁵ Nezamafi, *Salam*, 130-131.

Counterpublic discourse is far more than the expression of subaltern culture and far more than what some Foucauldians like to call “reverse discourse.” Fundamentally mediated by public forms, counterpublics incorporate personal/impersonal address and expansive estrangement of public speech as the condition of their own common world. Perhaps nothing demonstrates the fundamental importance of discursive publics in the modern social imaginary more than this—that even the counterpublics that challenge modernity’s social hierarchy of faculties do so by projecting the space of discursive circulation among strangers as a social entity, and in doing so fashion their own subjectivities around the requirements of public circulation and stranger-sociability.¹⁰⁶

Salam, as an extension of the dominant reading public, utilizes the development of public circulation and the language of “the public” to purposefully inculcate that same public with the possibility of the counter. As we saw with the window of the detention facility, Mr. Tanaka becomes the simulacrum of border-space, gesturing towards the “common world” where public and counterpublic overlaps. If we think of those final moments in the airport as a completed transition from public discourse to counterpublic discourse, we might turn to the depiction of female characters to fully unlock the *ekkyō* feminist possibilities inherent in the text.

These women are not simply strong-willed—as we find Leila to be as she returns to Afghanistan and the narrator to be in her final questioning of Mr. Tanaka—but they are the only characters capable of influencing and changing the outcomes of their own lives. As a woman, the narrator has the perception and drive needed to work towards Leila’s freedom; and although she is unsuccessful in the end, we know that the fault lies in the system—male dominated and unsympathetic, born of and reinforced by centuries of masculine hegemony. Just putting the story to paper, therefore, Nezamafi herself is working to subvert a public that necessarily

¹⁰⁶ Warner, *Counterpublics*, 121.

favors male voices. She is nudging the artistic medium in favor of feminist works and readings. In her role as a foreigner and a woman, she embodies the hybridity and plurality present just under the surface of contemporary Japanese society. She embodies the “accepted heterogeneity” of *ekkyō* as it is perceived by the literary public, but subverts the expectations of readers by emphasizing feminist politics. *Salam*, by virtue of pure attention, allows members of that public to enter into the discursive space of an *ekkyō* feminist counterpublic.

Nezammafi deftly backs her feminist fiction with a host of female characters that work directly against the impotency of their male counterparts. Leila’s mother embodies ideal feminine strength. Just before Leila is forced out of Japan, she describes the day that her mother was killed. We find that it was Leila’s mother who had ordered Leila to hide when the Taliban arrived. It was her mother who instructed her to remain hidden at all costs, and it was her mother that remained silent about Leila’s existence despite being beaten and taken away to her death.¹⁰⁷ Of the many characters in the text who attempt to protect others, it is only Leila’s mother who succeeds. Only after hearing the truth of this sacrifice can we come to have a complete and satisfactory understanding of Leila’s experience in both Afghanistan and Japan. It acts as a story-within-a-story that redefines characters, plot, language, and even the title of the story.

In a final jab at the authority of male hegemony, we find that Leila’s mother—not Mr. Tanaka—speaks the “Salam” of the story’s title. “Salam!” is Leila’s mother’s call for mercy just before she is brutally murdered, not the daily greeting readers

¹⁰⁷ Nezammafi, *Salam*, 145-146.

initially believe. Reading this final scene, it is impossible to forget how Mr. Tanaka entered his first interview with Leila and glibly spat this word out in hopes of forming some superficial personal connection.¹⁰⁸ Earlier in the story, the narrator attempts to clarify the meaning of “salam”—from the phrase “*assalam alaikum*,” or “peace be upon you”—and while she is correct in her etymology, she fails to capture the impact of the word.¹⁰⁹ It is only when Leila tells the story of her mother, repeating “Salam!” over and over in a plea for mercy, that we finally understand what Mr. Tanaka calls the “depth” of the word. It seems fitting that the evolution of this word matches the evolution of our perception of the story. Upon first reading the text, we are naturally inclined to believe that the title reflects Mr. Tanaka’s efforts in communicating across cultures—something that fits very closely to *ekkyō* conventions. But in Nezamafi’s final reversal, a feminist subversion of readerly expectations, we discover that *Salam* is truly a call for women to protect themselves and protect others.

¹⁰⁸ Nezamafi, *Salam*, 83.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 106.

Chapter 3

White Paper: Reading Ekkyō Within Hypernational Borders

White Paper and the Problem of Contemporary Ekkyō

White Paper differs from *Salam* in the way it engages with or challenges concepts of *ekkyō* or *ekkyō* literature. Where *Salam* exists within what we might name a “standard” *ekkyō* framework—an Iranian national travels to Japan, confronts authority structures, experiences the disorientation of identity politics—*White Paper* stands well outside of the sphere of *ekkyō* as described earlier by Rumi Sakamoto. Sakamoto writes,

Partly because of Japan’s historical position as a late-nineteenth-century colonizer which attempted to both resist and to emulate Western imperialism, and partly because of the multi-directional movements that characterize today’s globalization, the relations of domination and subordination that inform *ekkyō* writings are multiple and complex...The physical presence of these writers in Japan, as well as their ability to writing in a ‘non-native’ language, reflects the unforeseen level of transnational movement of money, goods, people, images and ideas that characterize today’s globalizing world.¹¹⁰

Certainly, Nezamafi writes and exists in a globalized world. Yet *White Paper* as a text, unlike *Salam*, skirts the expectations of globalization and transnational movement. Instead, *White Paper* focuses intensely on the internal politics and problems of Iran on the eve of war in 1980. Non-Iranians, non-Farsi speakers, non-Muslim characters simply do not exist in the text, let alone Japanese citizens or speakers, or even transnational sojourners. If we were to compare this text to the major works of other *ekkyō* writers—Sakamoto points to Levy Hideo, Mizumura

¹¹⁰ Sakamoto, 140.

Minae, David Zoppetti, and Kaneshiro Kazuki¹¹¹—only *White Paper* exists outside of transnational space. Even more experimental writers tend to keep some connection to Japan: Japanese nationals in Paris in Tawada Yōko's *The Naked Eye* and Korean-Japanese dictionaries in Yi Yang-ji's *Koku* come to mind. At the diegetic level, *White Paper* is without a single discernible connection to Japan or the Japanese language. How can we account for the text being written in the Japanese language for a majority Japanese audience?

Although *White Paper* breaks down the stereotyped image of *ekkyō* literature in setting, language, or characterization, it still participates in an *ekkyō* feminist counterpublic. Again, *ekkyō* here is intended to locate boundaries beyond commonly defined national borders or linguistic identities. In *White Paper*, national boundaries—and the politics that accompany the transgression of such boundaries—are exchanged for the construction of and constriction via social boundaries. I name this deployment of nation “hypernationalization”: The text focuses so intently on the implications of internal cultural politics that characters are judged by their ability to uphold narrowly defined and hegemonic national and religious social expectations. The borders between nations and nationalities dissolves, leaving only divisions between people of the same imagined cultural community: these are gendered boundaries, religious beliefs, the tension between urban and rural life, and degrees of nationalistic participation. The will to follow the societal expectations that accompany these unseen boundaries becomes fundamental to *White Paper*'s characterization, plot, and politics. As *Salam* before it,

¹¹¹ Sakamoto, 141.

White Paper becomes a journalistic exposé—and also much more than simple testament. It focuses on the cultural tension *within* a specific nation and people—Iranian citizens just after the Islamic Revolution—and provides a rallying point for an *ekkyō* feminist counterpublic that can witness the failures of the text and build politically effective responses to the gendered violence that exists in contemporary cultures, nations, beliefs, and political systems.

***White Paper* Synopsis**

White Paper focuses on a burgeoning love between two teenagers, the narrator, *Watashi* 私, and a boy named Hasan ハサン. In a larger perspective, the families of each of these characters frame cultural norms and act as foci for plot development. The narrator's family moves to the rural border of Iran and Iraq from the metropolitan center of Tehran and its urban, middle-class milieu. While the father works as a doctor in a military hospital in a nearby city, the narrator and the mother live their new everyday surrounded by the conservative pre-war fervor of rural Iran. Hasan's father is also on the front lines, though as an infantryman. Hasan's mother is ill and immobile, yet struggles everyday to run her household as best she can. Other characters include the narrator and Hasan's schoolteacher and a zealous young soldier fomenting a divine resistance against the impending Iraqi invasion.

The narrator and Hasan live in a small town on the border of Iran and Iraq during the build up to the Iran-Iraq war in 1980. Because of teacher shortages, the two share a teacher and classroom—a shameful comingling of gender in post-

revolutionary Iran. Hasan approaches the narrator after school to ask when her father will return from his post at the military hospital on the border. Hasan later brings his ailing mother to the narrator's home for an examination. Hasan waits outside of the house as the narrator awkwardly contemplates his presence. Due to Hasan's mother's regular examinations, the narrator and Hasan strike up a relationship. They eventually agree to meet in secret and attend services at the local mosque, a difficult feat considering women are sequestered on the second floor, away from the men.

A later clandestine visit to the mosque proves disastrous when the Iraqi military shells the town as the narrator and Hasan are walking through the streets. Hasan leads the narrator by the hand into the bomb shelter in the basement of the mosque, where he is pressured into signing a sheet of paper agreeing that he will participate in the war despite his dream of entering Tehran University to study medicine. After Hasan's father shames the family by deserting the front, Hasan decides to enter combat, despite the fervent protests of the narrator and Hasan's teacher.

***White Paper* – Cultural and Historical Context**

As in Afghanistan, Iran too experienced a domestic feminist movement. Women took part in political demonstrations from 1890, and by 1909 petition for reform at the level of government and education, with a focus on granting women

suffrage.¹¹² 1935 marks the first officially sanctioned “unveiling” of women, marking the *hijab* and *chador* (see figures 2 and 3 below) as political battlegrounds within the gender equality movement.¹¹³

Figure 2. Examples of *hijab*, an independent cloth used to cover one’s head.¹¹⁴



¹¹² Hammed Shahidian, *Women in Iran: Emerging Voices in the Women’s Movement* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), 17 and 42.

¹¹³ Ibid., 105.

¹¹⁴ Image taken from Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hijab#/media/File:Female_hijab_in_Islam.jpg.

Figure 3. Examples of *chador*, a full-length cloak that must be pulled closed.¹¹⁵



During the White Revolution¹¹⁶—and the 1960s and 70s more generally—veiling, women’s suffrage, and gender equality in the private home took center stage in both liberalization discourse and Islamic revolution.¹¹⁷ The Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI)

¹¹⁵ Image taken from Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chador#/media/File:Women_in_shiraz_2.jpg.

¹¹⁶ A wide-reaching reform policy enacted by Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in 1963 that aimed to end feudalism and put in place liberalizing economic and social policies; it met with equally wide-ranging resistance, catalyzing Islamic political revolutionaries and setting the stage for the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979. For a view of political life at the time, see Haleh Esfandiari, “The Role of Women Members of Parliament, 1963-88,” in *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic*, eds. Lois Beck and Guity Nashat (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 136-162.

¹¹⁷ Shahidian located in the female body both the (re)construction of gender along revolutionary lines and the battleground by which competing ideologocal camps are capable of defining national identity. Shahidian, 18-19.

was established in 1979; within three weeks, most major political reforms that had passed in the previous two decades were repealed. Gender roles in society and law became a focal point of revolutionary reform. Ayatollah Khomeini understood progress within the Islamic state to mean preventing national and moral transgressions and bringing all people under one utopian Islamic governance.¹¹⁸

Due to the Iranian revolution's Pan-Islamic stance, Iraq saw the new IRI as a direct threat to the Ba'ath party's Islamic nationalism.¹¹⁹ The border region of Khuzestan became the target of Iraq's initial offensive—a cultural center marking a possible origin of Persian-speaking societies and an economic center that contained the largest oil refinery in Iran at the time¹²⁰—and is likely the location of *White Paper*, though this is not stated explicitly in the text. Even without direct mention of city names, we can assume the story takes place near the end of 1980—sometime between the first Iraqi assault on the 22nd of September and October 14th, marking the first major withdrawal of Iranian troops from the major city in the province, Khurramshahr. Perhaps even more important than the timeline of fighting at the start of the war is the use of child and women soldiers to help bolster a weakened Iranian army. *White Paper* emphasizes the conscription of soldiers as young as fifteen or sixteen, but does not describe the reality of warfare that these children were about to face: As members of a religious army, Iranian soldiers regularly experienced trench warfare, chemical attacks, and human wave attacks under the

¹¹⁸ Shahidian, 104 and 112.

¹¹⁹ Ray Takeyh, "The Iran-Iraq War: A Reassessment," *Middle East Journal* (Summer, 2010): 366.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

justification of a holy war. The valorized image of death that emerges from *White Paper* springs from the very same formation of national identity as representations of gender, repeal of protections under law that had been hard won by feminist activists, and the reinstatement of an Islamic state that placed truth in religious teachings above secular or individual principles.

Further Challenging the “Public” of *Ekkyō* Reception

A narrow, nationally delineated definition of *ekkyō* circulates in the world of literary criticism simultaneously with similarly narrow, nationally defined reinforcements of the “native” in broader Japanese culture. For example, this is the definition for “*ekkyō bungaku* 越境文学” (*ekkyō* literature) as provided in the popular dictionary *Imidas* イミダス by widely-published literary critic Kawamura Minato:

Overcoming racial differences and national borders, there are authors participating in literary movements in so-called foreign countries. In Japan, we use this term to describe works written in Japanese by foreigners who are non-Japanese themselves...Ishiguro Kazuo exemplifies this as an author in England of Japanese descent. In Germany, Tawada Yōko writes in both Japanese and German. We could probably categorize them within *ekkyō*, as well. However, as Yang Yi has stated recently, there are those that oppose being categorized under the rubric of “*ekkyō* literature.”¹²¹

Despite his acknowledgement of “*ekkyō* writer” Yang Yi’s resistance to being placed within the confines of a genre called *ekkyō* literature, Kawamura maintains the Westphalian grammar of nation, native-language, and native/non-native existence. Why would “so-called” be applied only to foreign countries, and not to the phrase

¹²¹ Accessed through Japan Knowledge: <http://japanknowledge.com/lib/display/?lid=50010L-103-0082>

“non-Japanese”? Why is it only a supposition that Kazuo Ishiguro or Tawada Yōko might be included as *ekkyō* writers, where there is no such qualifier regarding Yang Yi? Nezamafi’s texts can help us tease out the intricacies of these questions by further complicating *ekkyō* expectations and reception.

Where we saw *Salam* creating a *zure* within and between nationalities—particularly in the way these categorizations fail to adequately describe stateless non-citizens—*White Paper* instead reinforces a structured “native” until it overwhelms and exceeds the bounds of the story, wholly consuming literary context through hypernationalism. *White Paper* ceases to enforce the same divisions that we would expect in an “*ekkyō*” text. We are now explicitly and inescapably within the bounded nation of Iran. Iraq is never approached directly, despite the proximity and threat that this country embodies as imagined space. The characters of *White Paper* are uniformly Iranian, Muslim, and Farsi-speaking. Yet, within this bounded national and linguistic reality, Nezamafi still manages to highlight and expose the *zure* that exists in society: unseen gendered, class, religious, and regional boundaries. In some ways, *White Paper* is a text that follows national and linguistic boundaries so strictly that it escapes the realm of *ekkyō* entirely. It forces the reader to question the essential existence of the text *in Japan* and *in Japanese*: Why does this text exist now, in this language? *White Paper* entertains this question—the very same question with which a “traditionally” *ekkyō* text such as Mizumura’s *Shishōsetsu from left to right* engages—in a novel and revealing way: It creates a hyperfocused national space within which a counterpublic can develop.

Nezammafi absolutely writes within *the* public of literary reception—the *bundan*—where her works are first published in magazines, reviewed for prizes, and published by parent companies; yet she also produces fiction that seems to challenge the expectations of the members of that public. Despite what Murakami Ryū stated above, we must absolutely consider what it *means* for Nezammafi—as a Farsi-speaking Iranian—to be producing works specifically for these literary venues. Perhaps more importantly, it is crucial to understand what it *means* for her works to face a nationally-defined or “native” reaction. In my view, it *means* that the politics of her texts can be easily swept aside in favor of subjective readings that open with an attack on nationality and close with critical “native” handwaving as a means to explain away prose style and content that emerges from outside of classically literary (*junbungaku* 純文学) experience. As Warner states:

There is no infinitely accessible language, and to imagine that there should be is to miss other, equally important needs of publics: to concretize the world in which discourse circulates, to offer its members direct and active membership through language, to place strangers on a shared footing.¹²²

Nezammafi’s language itself emerges from a kind of artistic counterpublic—not the Japanese canon as it has been crafted and endorsed by literary elites, but popular television programs and pulp manga.¹²³ It is possible to consider language learning through popular culture as the starting point for a prose style that is described as

¹²² Warner, *Counterpublics*, 108.

¹²³ Nezammafi, “How I Learned Japanese.” See also the theme of the AAS conference panel cited above.

“artistically undeveloped” and “overly clumsy.”¹²⁴ She participates in a language that is accessible in a way that is not endorsed by the literary elite, yet vitally important to the (counter)public in which she crafts her texts. Critics likely misread the content and politics of her text, allowing bias towards a dominant literary voice that contributes to the perception that non-native writers are burdened by their non-native Japanese-ness.

Like *Salam*, *White Paper* has suffered from critical reception that does not perhaps fully grasp the political implications of the text. So as not to heap disdain on Murakami, I point here to Kawakami Hiromi’s response to *White Paper* for the Akutagawa prize:

Those surrounding the main characters felt as if they were silhouetted. “*Watashi*” and “*Hasan*” were the only ones that seemed as if they didn’t have that silhouette. I think it was because the ‘story’ was only devoted to those two.¹²⁵

Is it not possible that the politics of the text are such that characters *must* appear as silhouettes? As the identifying markers of nation and native-language slip into the background via hypernationalization, readers of *White Paper* are left distinguishing characters through subtler means. Nezamafi writes to the cultural divides that develop across gendered lines—approximately half of the Iranian population in 1980 *literally* disembodies themselves through the shape of their own silhouettes under the *chador*. Major cultural signifiers are intentionally erased from the text, hinted at only vaguely: variation in religious beliefs, spatial markers that signify the

¹²⁴ Yamada Eimi 山田詠美, “*Senpyō*” 選評, *Bungeishunjū* 文藝春秋 (June, 2009): 352. And Ikezawa Natsuki 池澤夏樹, “*Chigau shurui no bunpō*” 違う種類の文法, *Bungeishunjū* 文藝春秋 (June, 2009): 357.

¹²⁵ Kawakami Hiromi 川上弘美, “*Jikan*” 時間, *Bungeishunjū* 文藝春秋 (June, 2009): 355.

rural or urban, political opposition to nationalism, the promotion of pacifism. In this sense, *White Paper* succeeds in crafting main characters that transgress and challenge the strictly defined boundaries within hypernationalized Iranian society at the outbreak of war. Meanwhile, other human characters fall out of focus in response to hypernationalization and gendered segregation.

White Paper crafts a counterpublic that opposes commonly accepted *ekkyō* reception and expectations. It forces readers to consider the ability and meaning of foreign writers producing texts in Japanese. What does it mean for these texts to engage with *the* literary public. Like *Salam* before it, *White Paper* engenders questions on what it means to be capable of fully understanding or fully participating in a nation or culture. Whereas *Salam* focused intensely on questions of legal residence, the morality of systems, and the possibility of existing in a non-public, *White Paper* turns these questions back on the readers themselves. We no longer ask, “What will *they* do?” but rather: Is this intended for a Japanese or Iranian audience? Do I need to understand Islam to understand the text? Do I need to understand the history of Iran and Iraq? Do I need to understand Farsi? Was this text translated?¹²⁶ The text crafts a social space wherein readers can critically engage with essential questions of belonging that apply to any culture, time, or nation. By recognizing the failures of the narrator, Hasan, Hasan’s father, and Hasan’s mother, unseen divisions and boundaries that exist even in mono-ethnic, mono-lingual, mono-national communities emerge from the murky depths of

¹²⁶ Yoshida Shūichi suggests *White Paper* is a kind of “Translation Novel” in his selection for the 2009 Bungakukai New Writer Award. Yoshida Shūichi 吉田修一, “*Derikashī*” デリカシー, *Bungakukai* 文藝界 (June, 2009): 12.

silhouetted characters and gesture towards the essential engagement with societal discourses on nationalism and oppression that all human beings must consider when moving through those cultures and nations we understand as our own.

The opening of *White Paper* demonstrates how the world of this text differs from that of *Salam*: We are plunged into a world at war, rather than at the very periphery of violence; the nation is not simply constructed imagination, but religiously sanctioned and ever-present; the national and cultural boundaries that we recognize in *Salam* are smashed, replaced with the threat of mono-societal domination.

Next to the gate was a watchman over eighty years old. He was in the same place as always, sleeping in a metal chair. A single bee was buzzing aimlessly around the pure white beard that was adhering to his chest. It seemed that it couldn't quite find the ideal point to make a landing. Behind the man, buildings enclosed the street. Sitting on the frame of a broken window on the first floor of a building across the street, two pigeons were snuggled up next to each other like friends. Weeds were growing out from between the brown bricks in the wall, and above the deserted second floor veranda, as if they were the building's rulers, were several hundred pigeons, their wings dancing in the sky. Until the war started, this building was a thread factory for rugs. Before the lines "For God, For Country" blared out of the capital city's broadcast station, the true believers shuttered the factory, and left for war, wrapped in headbands that read: "YAA-ALLAH!"¹²⁷

Clearly delineated borders between nations and cultures—represented in the glass that separates *Watashi* and Leila in the middle of the detention center of *Salam*, for example—are written out of the text. At the very center of this opening paragraph, Nezammafi smashes the glass of a window, allowing a space where two pigeons can huddle together in comfort. On either side of this peaceful image, however, is the uneasiness of displacement and the cacophony of societal pressures and

¹²⁷ Nezammafi, *White Paper*, 7.

nationalistic fervor. The watchman sleeps through his responsibility, allowing the reader to pass into the text as if violating an enclosed space. The bee that flutters above him represents both the uneasiness with which the reader enters into a foreign space and the displacement and division that *White Paper* will reinforce over the pages that follow. After the appearance of two pigeons huddled together, the ideal image of the narrator and Hasan closing in on a meaningful relationship, we discover the masters of this space: the massive flock of pigeons that rip through the air just above a building abandoned due to war. These pigeons participate in the same frantic, panicked movement that cuts through the text with the first human voice: a nationalistic and religious call to war. In one paragraph, Nezamafi has already framed this societal pressure such that we recognize the disruptive force that will eventually tear the two main characters apart. From the very start of the text, the readers must confront a forced unification of nation—not the disunity of politics that figured so prominently in *Salam*. Focused hypernationalization will become the base from which societal, gendered, and religious boundaries develop.

Writing Out the Enemy: Hypernationalization and Boundaries

Despite being set in a time of war, Nezamafi writes the enemy—Iraq—almost entirely out of *White Paper*. By doing so, she highlights the way that hypernationalization creates fissures and boundaries in a society that is ostensibly mono-cultural. The image of culture that emerges from the text is one of ambivalent and ambiguous boundaries founded on nationalism, religious fervor, and a crafted

“public” deployed with indoctrination and totalitarian pressure.¹²⁸ Warner notes that publics are *self*-organized relations between strangers. The “public” of 1980 rural Iran hardly approaches a freely associating social space. Warner writes:

A public might almost be said to be stranger-relationality in a pure form, because other ways of organizing strangers—nations, religions, races, guilds, and so on—have manifest positive content. They select strangers by criteria of territory or identity or belief or some other test of membership.¹²⁹

We find in “the public” as represented in *White Paper* an organization of strangers that is explicitly organized along national and religious lines. The idea that men of fighting age must submit their names as capable religious and nationalistic warriors speaks directly to the problem of de-strangerization: Hasan is a stranger within Iranian public only until he is coerced into submitting his availability to join the war. At that moment, he exits any kind of self-organized public and enters into a contractual agreement with state and religious authorities. The concept of the stranger, or perhaps the capability of *remaining* stranger, demarcates participation in both public and totalitarian social structure. By writing the enemy of a religious war out of the text, by hypernationalizing the societal expectations of belonging, *White Paper* avoids the problem of national or linguistic identity and focuses on boundaries deployed in unseen areas of public or social interaction: space divided according to participation in the national project, or religious belief and sectarianism.

¹²⁸ In his estimation of the formation of a public sphere, Habermas contends that the public creates a feedback loop of domination. See Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 81-83. For Nancy Fraser’s interpretation of domination in the public sphere, see Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Shpere” 117.

¹²⁹ Warner, *Counterpublics*, 75.

White Paper structures the hypernationalization of Iranian culture at the moment of war by writing Iraq nearly entirely out of the text. There are no Iraqi nationals present as characters, nor are readers ever given any context for the war outside of a narrow nationalistic view of religious conflict. Iraq is only mentioned one time before the bombing of the city to which the narrator has moved.

But in this little town, only two hours by car to the border of Iraq, there were many believers. Unlike those people living in comfort in the capital, half of the men here were the first to go to war. They yelled out the slogan "For God! For Country!" from the bottoms of their hearts.¹³⁰

This brief aside, which appears on the surface to situate or locate the narrative, is overwhelmed by nationalistic and religious sentiments. Iraq exists solely as the nebulous entity outside of righteous nationalism. Even in the moment of the bombing, Iraq remains in some way unidentifiable. Victims of the bombing are unable to contextualize or even name the areas or people that exist at the borders of their own national consciousness:

"My husband is a truck driver, just this morning he went to *the next town* to deliver supplies..."

"My husband works in *that town*, too, for the electric company."

"My husband just went to *the front lines* last week."

"My father and my older brother are on *the front lines*."¹³¹

Certainly, the bombs that fell on Hasan's hometown were real. Yet the sense that there is an ephemerality to, or perhaps ignorance of, the larger contexts of the conflict is unavoidable. Even simple locations that exist "only two hours away by car"

¹³⁰ Nezamafi, *White Paper*, 37.

¹³¹ Ibid., 51. All emphases mine.

remain unnamed. National consciousness and religious fervor define the people of Iraq in simple terms: “enemies.”¹³²

Unlike the assertion of hybridity present in *Salam*, “nation” is incessantly amplified by Iran as singular entity. Through hypernationalization, the reader witnesses the dissolution of a freely organized “public” as a relation among strangers. The rapid succession of slogans—“God supports us!” “For God! For country!” “God will protect us!” “God is here!”¹³³—imbricates national systems over religious, sectarian boundaries. It is essential to recognize the sectarian divide upon which the conflict is philosophically justified:

After Ramadan ended, next came Muharram. Muharram is the most important month for the believers in Shia Islam. In Islamic history, at the end of Muharram, at the end of a long, terrible war, Muhammed’s grandson, Hussein ibn Ali was killed. To commemorate this, a group of performers called “*daste*” will walk around the town singing songs and performing scenes of battle here and there. If you go to a bigger city, these *daste* will perform every year as professionals, with parts already decided. The finale, of course, is performed on the same day that the war is believed to have ended in history.¹³⁴

Imagined national history is necessarily informed by Shia religious beliefs. The political violence between Iran and Iraq can be attributed to entrenched sectarian divisions. Cultural pressure to participate in an entrenched national and religious system envelops the narrator and Hassan in the bomb shelter scene.

The anxiety and confusion that I was feeling earlier disappeared when I saw the faces around me. Their eyes burned, their faces strong. There was no enemy we feared. Strong. Warm. It felt like the very blood running through our veins was crying out.

¹³² This term is used throughout the text. For examples from the soldier’s speech, see Nezamafi, *White Paper*, 53-54.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 59.

“Those people who write their names on this paper will be welcomed by God with joy and fortune!” The man in the headband now waved a sheet of white paper in the air.

“This is a list of those who will be soldiers. Now, the brave! For country! For God!” The crowd began to move. All the men rushed forward at once to sign their names. The tips of my fingers were burning. I could hear my heart pounding in my throat. Everyone but the women wrote their names on the paper. I glanced beside me. Hasan was staring at the paper as it moved from this hand to that hand, biting his lip.¹³⁵

Certainly, the mood in the shelter must have been intoxicating in its reaffirmation of national power. Yet the enclosed space also works explicitly against the narrator’s passion to be with Hasan. Nezamafi twists nationalistic sentiment through ironic “public” address. No public exists in this place or moment: The shelter is inescapable and enclosed by the philosophical borders of “nation.” It prevents death from bombs, yet likely dooms Hasan to a very different kind of death. By speaking with national and religious authority, the soldier that passes around the white paper invokes the cultural pressures of hypernationalization. Hasan has no choice but to sign, just as the narrator has no power to stop him from signing.

The narrator’s helplessness in this decisive moment points to those societal boundaries that Iranian citizens faced within a constructed, hypernationalized public. A clearly stated, and strictly enforced, gendered divide develops within a closed national system. These boundaries are the source of deep-seeded ambivalence. The entrance to the town mosque, for example, has separate entrances for men and women. Women are seated in the balcony that surrounds the main floor of the mosque, divided and secluded from men in their prayers. Even here, in the

¹³⁵ Nezamafi, *White Paper*, 54.

locus of religious nationalism, we find the boundaries between men and women
openly transgressed:

Looking around at all of the women around me, I saw one young woman sitting at the end of the balcony with the front of her chador open. She was wearing heavy makeup and I could see the red clothing on her chest where her chador was spread wide. She was fairly garish. She was staring down at the first floor intently. Is that really what she was aiming at? Was she looking at the long-bearded mullah as he gave a heated sermon on Islam, twisting a rosary?¹³⁶

There is a brazenness to this image that suggests the ways in which strictly delineated gendered divisions are overcome in Iranian society. And while the woman in red might suggest an unrealistic extreme, readers can immediately recognize a similar transgressive act that the narrator undertakes to meet Hasan in the same mosque. At the intersection of nation, religion, and exposed body, we are reminded that the philosophy placed on women in Iranian society is always already a national project:

[T]he female body becomes the battleground not only for countries and their enemies, but for competing definitions of “national identity.” Preserving a pure national identity becomes equivalent to protecting and controlling women’s sexuality. Liberating sexuality from this bond offers individuals the chance to become autonomous agents who act on their own behalf—with whatever affiliations they might chose—not as sacred symbols of the state. Thus, challenges to the dominant sexual “order” become important not only for the emergence of new sexualities, but also for challenging hegemonic gender relations.¹³⁷

Thus public discourse, meaning *the* hypernationalized public of political and religious discourse in Iran, concerns itself deeply with the bodies and rights of women. The speakers in the minarets of the mosque mark this location as a central

¹³⁶ Nezamzafi, *White Paper*, 42.

¹³⁷ Shahidian, 19.

conduit for public speech,¹³⁸ yet the woman in red and the narrator's transgressive appropriations of this social space suggest the nuance with which *White Paper* addresses gender issues.

The discourse on gender rights develops simultaneously in segregated public spaces—where a national project of appropriate morality can be organized and deployed—and in the realm of the private. The narrator's home exists as a complex dissection of boundaries of propriety, whether dealing with family, patients, or friends. The private space of the narrator's home becomes transformed by public expectations with the arrival of patients seeking treatment from her father.

I looked into the kitchen opposite me and saw my mother pouring a large glass of tea. Unlike usual, she was wearing a hijab over her head. She usually didn't cover her hair in the house. Whenever my father comes home, there are always people from the neighborhood who stop by asking for a medical exam. At those times, if my mother isn't wearing her hijab, about half of the patients will have a look on their face as if they wonder if they had seen something they were not allowed to see. They avert their gaze, mumbling "Astaghfirullah"¹³⁹ in apology to god as they return home. Even when my mother wears her hijab, most of the men that come to see my father never make eye contact with her. They make as if avoiding the existence of women and dart into the examination room. For this reason, other than those times when the patients are women, my mother usually kills time in the kitchen.¹⁴⁰

For generations, feminists have pushed to recognize the politicization of the private.¹⁴¹ Within the context of social upheaval and war in Iran, private space

¹³⁸ Nezamafi, *White Paper*, 12, 40, and 46. This also fits closely with the Habermasian conception of "the public" wherein the release of information by members of political authority subjected political domination and law to their particular conception of reason, Habermas, 28.

¹³⁹ Meaning literally, "Forgive me God." It comes from the Sayyidul-Istighfar, the main prayer for forgiveness in Islam.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ The most famous formulation of this concept is attributed to Carol Hanisch, "The Personal is Political," accessed in the 2006 format with introduction: <http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PersonalisPol.pdf>. I will be using Ueno's formulation of the concept: "[T]he engendering

becomes public as a mode of nationalizing religious beliefs and gender norms.¹⁴²

“Women” in this sense, became a solitary category within human beings. As the politics of the dominant public begins to seep into the home—and private politics come to be the purview of the public—the societal boundaries enforced for all people are reflected in the division of space. The walls of the house come to be charged in the same way as sexuality and veiling.¹⁴³ The kitchen, the entryway, closed doors, doors left open a crack create the identifiably political spaces in the narrator’s home that have come to reflect the politics of a hegemonic public.

An *Ekkyō* Feminist Counterpublic Within Social Boundaries

Before straying too far from previous framework, it is essential to situate the possibility of an *ekkyō* feminist counterpublic created by *White Paper* within Nezamafi’s literary and historical context—contemporary Japan and a contemporary Japanese literary audience. Although *White Paper* appears wholly permeated by 1980’s Iran, the text can still be read from the same critical approach that helped unlock the politics of *Salam*. When placed under the lens of an *ekkyō* feminist counterpublic, *White Paper* and *Salam* appear to share similar artistic foundations. *White Paper* participates in a kind of feminist journalistic exposé. The text uncovers the often invisible societal boundaries of gender through the act of

of the so-called public sphere of state and society made clear the extent to which the public sphere was in fact depending upon a shadowy domain, namely, the private sphere, while at the same time revealing the secret that it had been able to assume pretense of being public...Gender studies have made clear that not only the private sphere, which we can see even at a glance is gendered, but also the public sphere, has been ingeniously gendered using the rhetoric of gender neutrality.” Ueno, 11.

¹⁴² Shahidian, 36.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 81.

intentional transgression. A straightforward prose style helps to unveil the political nature of divisions that go unrecognized in Japanese literary reception. By locating these fissures and intentionally transgressing them, the text crafts a counterpublic in the same way as *Salam: White Paper* exposes an alternative to *the* public—a politicized, dominant social space wherein the discourse of gendered boundaries itself assumes a necessarily political function. *White Paper* is *ekkyō* because it utilizes the Westphalian grammar of nationality and native-language as a political weapon against that same grammar. By virtue of a disorienting national and linguistic locus, the text transposes the social and political discontent of a particular cultural context—hypernationalized Iran at the moment of war—into the vocabulary of contemporary *ekkyō* reception.

Where *Salam's* journalistic exposé was necessarily imbued with a conversation on contemporary Japan through characterization and setting, connecting *White Paper* to this same context is more complex. What political truth bridges both 1980's Iran and 2010's Japan? How can readers empathize with distant cultural and temporal contexts? Fuyuki Kurasawa has suggested that textual accounts “bear witness” to atrocity and help construct transnational human rights practices.

Bearing witness consists of five interrelated tasks that confront corresponding perils: voice against silence, interpretation against incomprehension, empathy against indifference, remembrance against forgetting and prevention against repetition.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁴ Fuyuki Kurasawa, *The Work of Global Justice: Human Rights Practices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 25.

Each side of these five equations relates to two disparate contexts: The first—voice, for example—speaks from the moment and culture of atrocity to the second—silence—of a new historical context. Bearing witness is not intended to work against identical rights violations, but establish

a dialogical process according to which eyewitnesses and their audiences jointly create modes and public spaces of ‘in-betweenness’ where they meet in their efforts to comprehend atrocities and structural violence, if only partially and temporarily.¹⁴⁵

It is with this approach in mind that I will explore the gendered divisions of *White Paper*’s historical moment. The nationalization of women in 1980’s Iranian society is certainly not an equivalent antecedent or legacy to a gendered nationalization project in Japan. Yet *White Paper*’s act of bearing witness does generate dialogic, “cosmopolitan stretching of the moral imagination”¹⁴⁶ whereby new approaches to global human rights can be conceptualized and—ideally—politically effective.

The narrator of *White Paper* recognizes the socially constructed, gendered borders of the world that surrounds her. She transgresses these boundaries and challenges the divisions that mark her as “woman,” segregating her from an unacknowledged “male space.” The narrator first encounters these clearly demarcated and enforced boundaries when she attempts to enter the mosque, as seen in the example above. After entering into the feminine space of the upper balcony, she discovers her personal subversion of religious expectations—that she has attended service to observe a man, rather than to pray—intensified to the extreme by the woman in red. It is in the open public that she discovers the unseen

¹⁴⁵ Kurasawa, 38.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 3.

boundaries that extend beyond the mosque and into an everyday life transformed by hypernationalism.

As I watched Hasan, possessed, the number of men around me increased. I hadn't notice at all that the area where I was standing was becoming a "male zone." As I stared at Hasan a large woman had come up beside me. "Astaghfirullah!" I turned around. The woman was staring at me, white-eyed, biting her lip, and muttered three times "Astaghfirullah!"
I left the male zone in a rush.¹⁴⁷

Even in freely open public areas, there exists the possibility that women can be removed from a space simply by the presence of men. It is particularly interesting that the scolding in this occasion comes from another woman who is keenly aware of the politics of existence, rather than one of the men in that "zone." The immense social pressure to acknowledge and abide by these unspoken divisions breaks down as the narrator becomes more desperate to save Hasan from joining the military.

Standing here in front of the teacher, I wavered about whether it would be acceptable to ask *that* question. He would likely know the answer. I gathered all of my courage.
"He didn't come today, did he?" My throat was dry.
"Who?"
"Ha...Hasan..." I swallowed.
The teacher raised an eyebrow alertly and glanced at me. It was extraordinarily bold for a girl to ask after the whereabouts of a boy to which she had no connection. The teacher said nothing for a few seconds, staring at me.¹⁴⁸

The narrator, despite the overwhelming implications of her question, voices her concerns to a member of the male public. It is a brazen act of impropriety within the context of *White Paper*, yet also voices bravery through transgression that endears the narrator to the reader. She is powerful *because* she vocalizes her own desires. She acknowledges the *unspoken* gendered boundaries of speech, yet consciously

¹⁴⁷ Nezamafi, *White Paper*, 62.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 57.

transgresses them as an act of determination. Articulation empowers the narrator to then physically transgress gendered space at the end of the novella. As the “men”—here very clearly adolescent boys—of the town prepare to enter the war, the narrator rushes through the “front lines” of mothers telling their children goodbye.

The image of the mother is particularly charged in *White Paper*. From the narrator’s own mother’s insecurities with veiling and moderate religious beliefs to the injured and labored movements of Hasan’s mother, the position of women in Iranian society are always already inscribed with a hypernational project and gendered segregation. To imagine how these people are framed by national narratives, I return to the young soldier’s problematic and political underground address in the bomb shelter:

“Mother! Your son supports this country!” This man’s voice, filled with perseverance, reached even those of us sitting in the back of the room.

“My sprouting strength will protect all of us from our enemies! Your son, whom you birthed with such bravery, will give this country new life!”

...
“There are not enough soldiers!” The man in the headband suddenly raised his voice.¹⁴⁹

Women become the producers of a hypernationalized citizenry capable of fighting for—or more accurately, dying for—a narrowly defined national project. The son, willing to lay his life down for country, exists by virtue of his mother, yet this immediately genders the division of wartime labor: Women are expected to

¹⁴⁹ Nezamafi, *White Paper*, 52.

participate in sexual labor for the benefit of the nation.¹⁵⁰ Ueno Chizuko describes this phenomenon clearly in her analysis of wartime Japan:

Modern total war is the largest project a nation-state undertakes, and is the site of geo-political, demographic and symbolic struggle. Aiming at unification, the state in wartime ends up demanding the nationalization of both society and the family (Wakakuwa, 1995). As a way of putting directly into words this intention, it can be said that the terms 'national socialism' and 'ultra-nationalism' are absolutely appropriate. War achieves a transparent community, and for a long time afterwards people reminisce nostalgically about the excitement of 'togetherness' and 'national unity.'¹⁵¹

When a nation-state makes an increase in military and manufacturing capability a state goal, and reduces the nation to its population (in other words, troop strength and labor power), military service becomes the key to nationalism. When this happens, the nation is divided into those who have the honor of dying for the country and those who do not. War makes clearly visible those gender boundaries advanced during peacetime.¹⁵²

Problems of nationalizing a population, particularly as nationalization is always already a gendered undertaking whereby citizens are socially obligated to commit to particular forms of wartime production. Certainly, men are victimized within this system, but they are victimized in a way that is nationally constructed as a mode of "honor." Their sacrifice reifies hypernationalism. As we have seen before in the gendered violence of *Salam*, honor for a national project quickly becomes the tool by

¹⁵⁰ Here I do not refer to the same sexual labor forced on women as, for example, the so-called "comfort women." Rather, I mean a commodified sexuality whereby women are "sold" into marriage with the expectation of "producing" children. Fatehmeh E. Moghadam describes this process: "In a Muslim marriage the buyer (the man) and the seller (the woman or her guardian) should agree voluntarily on the terms of the contract and on the price for female sexuality, *mehr*...The products of the marriage (children) belong to the man. At a divorce, or at the death of the husband, the wife has no right to the children." Fatehmeh E. Moghadam, "Commoditization of Sexuality and Female Labor Participation in Islam: implications for Iran 1960-90," in *In the Eye of the Storm: Women in Post-revolutionary Iran*, eds. Mahnaz Afkhami and Erika Friedl (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1994), 84.

¹⁵¹ Ueno, 15.

¹⁵² Ibid., 19.

which women are systematically targeted for rape and murder. Nezamafi exposes gendered boundaries precisely because they linger on in nostalgia.

White Paper acts as counterpublic by translating feminist resistance to the nationalization project of human beings into a social space of reflexive discourse. The most “public” location explored in the text, the bazaar, is innately linked with gendered division and commodification. Upon entering this public space, women are immediately marked by their *chador*. Hasan’s mother embodies the labored experience of providing for her family while maintaining appropriate decorum.

In spite of both her hands being full, her *chador* was still clinging tightly to her head. That was because she was using her teeth to bite closed the cloth from the inside, rather than using her hands. Of her face, I could only see her nose and one of her eyes. No matter how quickly she would have tried to walk, or even run, her *chador* would not have shifted or fallen off of her head. As I admired the brilliant way in which she was making sure that she was keeping her button-less *chador* closed—despite carrying her shopping in both hands and walking with such difficulty—I noticed a man walking beside her.¹⁵³

This woman, identity-less without the context of Hasan accompanying her, participates admirably in two spheres of social expectation: Modesty and familial responsibility. She is the national “mother” that currently fulfills the labor expectations of the domestic space and will eventually sacrifice her son to war. Admiration for this woman as a national symbol fades quickly as the reader grasps the implications of these expectations. When the narrator enters a butcher’s shop with her mother, she is objectified and commodified under these same criteria:

“Even in these tough times, you must still be getting marriage proposals for your daughter, huh?” The man said, while hacking of a chunk of meat from the rump area of the sheep that was hanging upside down from the ceiling.

¹⁵³ Nezamafi, *White Paper*, 18.

“In this town, meat is a precious thing.” The man spit as he threw the meat on to the scale. The rusted metal of the scale moved slowly, stopping right around 530 grams. The man wrote down the price with his finger and showed it to us.¹⁵⁴

Marriage, like meat, is indeed a precious thing. The narrator is priced out in the same way meat is delivered to the public. The laboring image of the mother foreshadows the hypernational expectations of the narrator. In a clever call back to the opening paragraph, the narrator notes of the bazaar: “If you didn’t pay attention while walking underneath the roof, occasionally a pigeon would shit on your head.”¹⁵⁵

The nationalization of women—particularly as productive “mothers”—finds two interesting parallels to modern and contemporary Japan. The first instance, as suggested by Ueno above, is the usurpation of sexual labor in favor of a nationalized war effort. Although the mobilization of women in wartime Japan was largely socio-economic,¹⁵⁶ gendered modes of sexual production were not far from societal imagination.

Rural women eagerly responded to the state’s requests for not only “more production” but also “more babies,” under the official slogan “propagate and multiply” (*umeyo fuyaseyo*)...[M]others who had more than two sons killed in the war were annually recognized by the Japanese imperial household. These mothers were appropriately called “honorable mothers of the militarist state” (*gunkoku homare no haha*).¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁴ Nezamafi, *White Paper*, 21.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁵⁶ See Thomas R. H. Havens, “Women and War in Japan, 1937-45,” in *Dimensions of Contemporary Japan: Women and Women’s Issues in Post World War II Japan*, ed. Edward R. Beauchamp (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), 65-86.

¹⁵⁷ Mariko Tamamori, *Under the Shadow of Nationalism: Politics and Poetics of Rural Japanese Women* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1998), 163-164.

It is only recently that this discourse of sexual production has been reinvigorated and reframed by a new national crisis: the plummeting birth rate of contemporary Japan. Outside of a wartime context, government figures have deployed similar rhetoric of gendered national responsibility:

Conservatives have criticized women who opt for a career instead of home making, calling them selfish and unpatriotic. For example, in 2003, former prime minister Yoshiro Mori, a member of a government commission charged with finding solutions to the population crisis, publicly attributed Japan's falling birth rate to the fact that Japanese women were too highly educated. He also expressed his opinion that the government should not provide a retirement pension to women who had dodged their civic duty to have children.¹⁵⁸

This national rhetoric appears entirely unaware of the ultranationalism of Japan's recent past. There is a troubling recapitulation of gendered nationalization that stretches across time and borders. Here, *White Paper* contextualizes the unseen, unremembered domination of hypernationalization. Bearing witness directly opposes the mirrored rhetoric of gendered domination, regardless of historical or cultural context.¹⁵⁹

Nationalistic themes that initially emerge from the context of Iran, simultaneously engage with the gendered discrimination that exists at the heart of contemporary Japanese society. *White Paper* points to the ways that an imagined mono-ethnic, mono-cultural, mono-religious community constructs unseen boundaries. Perceived instability in the hybrid—whether at the level of transnational flows or in identity politics—is not in fact unique. For those members

¹⁵⁸ Susan D. Holloway, *Women and Family in Contemporary Japan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 4.

¹⁵⁹ Kurasawa summarizes the “work of memory” eloquently: “[D]eterritorialization and restaging may be necessary in order to counter state- or civil society-sanctioned strategies of forgetting implemented at the sites where such violations were committed.” Kurasawa, 49.

of a hypernationalized public that become divided by invisible borders, the threat of oppression and violence are ever present. In the case of Iran in *White Paper*, “woman” becomes a category of existence. Initially defined by the chador, and laboring under the expectations of male dominated public discourse, women in *White Paper* are always in a tenuous, sometimes dangerous, position. At first glance, gendered violence does not appear to play a central role in *White Paper*. Where *Salam* is explicit in exposing the realities of this violence, Nezamafi allows it to simmer just below the surface of the text. This early scene seems disturbingly out of place upon first reading:

I looked outside again. Behind a withering tree, a cat was walking across the top of the wall. Its body was entirely black except for the tips of its front paws, which were white. At this distance, I couldn't clearly see its face, but I could see that it had no tail. Several years ago, one cat had the misfortune of being caught by a group of terrible children who were playing soccer in the street. They tied a rag that had been soaked through with gasoline to its tail and set it alight. It twisted and spun its body violently in an effort to get away from the fire while the children burst into laughter then ran off and disappeared. It escaped death but lost its tail.¹⁶⁰

From the peaceful context of the classroom, the reader might wonder why this brief flash of brutal violence cuts through the narrative. The description is terrifyingly close to the image of Hasan's mother that comes later in the bazaar scene. Unable to see her face, covered in black, only the tips of her feet emerge in brown. Extrapolating this image further, nearly every mention of a *chador* that follows this single description is accompanied by the image of the face or the hand, white flesh poking out of a black mass:

¹⁶⁰ Nezamafi, *White Paper*, 10.

After taking the *chador*, I saw Hasan's mother's face for the first time.¹⁶¹

I held out one of the *chador* that had a pattern on it with my hand.¹⁶²

Ninety percent of the women here covered themselves in a *chador* and tried to hide their faces as best they could.¹⁶³

I gathered up the *chador* in one hand and put it in place on my head with the other.¹⁶⁴

I had heard that many men put on the clothes of women and escaped from the borders. It wasn't impossible to pull off that role for smaller, thin men, especially because they could cover their whole faces with a *chador*.¹⁶⁵

This is by no means a complete list. In the final example we begin to see the politics of invisibility that the *chador* suggests. Gendered roles, necessarily violent for both men and women, are clearly delineated and political. Although Japanese women are by no means invisible in this manner, *White Paper* hints at the possibility of gendered segregation and violence in a community that intentionally deploys a national, mono-cultural, mono-ethnicity. Hypernational systems declare "woman" as such, reinforcing the dominant discourse that both *Salam* and *White Paper* expose and attack.

Thus, the power of text as a social space to construct an *ekkyō* feminist counterpublic plays an essential role in *White Paper*. The title of the story itself gestures to the political power that texts and the creative process of writing hold.

¹⁶¹ Nezamafi, *White Paper*, 27.

¹⁶² Ibid., 36.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 37.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 38.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 39.

Yet, like *Salam*, the title holds a subversive double-meaning. Upon first reading, readers are inclined to consider title within the context of the teacher's hopeful speech on future possibilities.

"All of you live in a present that is like a blank sheet of paper. It's not bad, not good. From now on, all of you will write many different things on this blank piece of paper. You will paint in many different colors. You will draw many different pictures. You have to work hard now so that in the future, when you are fifty, sixty years old, you can look back at those pictures that you yourself drew and think to yourself that you have lived a worthwhile life."¹⁶⁶

The prospects of crafting a meaningful—and peaceful, we assume—life for the future are meant to inspire. "A blank sheet" suggests not only the hopes of the narrator and Hasan, but also the hopes of the reader. We soon discover that "blank sheet" is in a sense a mistranslation of the title: The single piece of white paper that circulates through the bomb shelter becomes the focus of the text. It names Hasan to the war effort with a few splashes of dark ink, ensuring the continuation of nationalized violence and marking the clear division that exists between Hasan as national hero and the narrator as domestic provider. Paper becomes that which dooms the text to failure.

The line of dark green trucks vanished entirely from our sight. They drove off with a cloud of black exhaust and some hundreds of blank pages riding on them.¹⁶⁷

As the trucks drive off with platoons of boys in tow, plumes of black smoke stain each possible future. The reader is now left with their own hundreds of pages of white paper, stained with the reality of the narrator's failure.

¹⁶⁶ Nezamzami, *White Paper*, 10-11.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 76.

Conclusion Moving Forward

It is my hope that this thesis has in some way complicated a narrowly defined conception of *ekkyō* that assumes the naturalness of national identities, borders, dichotomies, bilateral flows, and transnationalisms that often obscure the agency and politics of transnational artists and actors. While established transnational and *ekkyō* discourses are absolutely essential to understanding a globalizing world, I find that they often economize and sterilize literary works such that important political implications are lost. Though by no means a comprehensive approach, applying the theory of counterpublics to Nezamafi's texts helps us understand the way in which she undercuts or challenges dominant literary discourse. The value of texts emerges when we are able to critically consider the way literary politics subvert the public from which they emerge. In this sense, I hope that I was able to at least partially reveal a new reading of *Salam* and *White Paper* that highlights an important political efficacy that expands beyond any single concept of nation or border.

That said, this study would not exist without the bedrock of literary criticism that explores the politics of linguistic and cultural identity. Though I wrote against the essential nature of performative identity across cultures and native languages, it is without question a matter of deep concern to *ekkyō* authors, literary critics, and readers. Due to the size of the project, I could not fully incorporate studies of linguistic and cultural subjectivity that would have expanded and complicated my own political approach. Along with linguistic subjectivity, my approach could

further incorporate Japanese theories on transcultural identity, political efficacy, and publics/counterpublics. What is political efficacy within fluid subjectivities? How do transnational approaches to cultural identity complicate my own narrow reading of publics and counterpublics? Does the engagement with non-native languages or cultures generate fissures in my critical framework?

These final questions suggest that the very foundation of this study, the idea of the public or counterpublic, is not itself fully stable. Moving forward, critically incorporating *ekkyō* approaches to literature and culture—meaning border- or boundary-transgressing—can complicate Michael Warner’s theory of publics. What constitutes attention across multiple languages? How do we theorize the publics that contain people *incapable* of interacting with the social discourse around them? And what are social spaces and discourses if not always already constructed through the complex intermingling of culture? These questions point to ways in which *ekkyō* can begin to problematize widely accepted, established cultural and literary theories in meaningful and important ways.

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Appendix A¹⁶⁸

Salam

1

I leaned my head against the window behind me, gazing through half-open eyes. The view changed again and again in the gaps between the people lined up in front of me like a wall. It really had been ages since I had woken up this early in the morning.

Setting aside the fact that I had never been a morning person, I had become especially lazy since I had stopped taking morning classes. I got up so late this morning that I did not even have enough time to do my makeup or fix my hair. Thinking I might take care of both on the train, I had stuffed my makeup pouch and mirror in my bag on my way out. The way the train bounced around made me think that it didn't matter if I looked like a slob. I fell into the lull of sleep.

The hardest thing was keeping my eyes open. The early morning sun was caressing my shoulders and arms so softly. So warm, so nice. Just stay like this and sleep. I gave my body over to the rocking of the train. The rhythmical lullaby of the car, *kachunk-kachunk* in my ear, beckoned me to sleep.

Today was my first time going there. Not knowing the exact location, and probably not being able to get in without him anyway, the lawyer and I decided that we should meet at his office and go together in his car. I had no choice but to wake up this early.

¹⁶⁸ This translation is a tentative first draft. Not intended for attribution, citation, or publishing of any kind.

I got bored with looking at the scenery outside and my gaze started to drop. Through the gap between the arm and body of the salary man standing in front of me, I could see the girl sitting on the other side of the train. Her head had fallen to the side. The hair covering her face swayed to the regular movement of the train. From the corner of her half-open mouth, a thin, long line of drool was running down to her shoulder. Her eyes rolled around violently under her lids. I have heard that when someone's eyes roll around like that, it is proof that they are in the deepest part of sleep. Based on her clothing, she looked like a student. Maybe her house was particularly far from her university, or she had some early morning practice, and that's why she had to put up with this kind of suffering.

I let out a big yawn. I was even getting bored with people watching. I tried to think one more time about the place I was going. What kind of place is it? I have heard people talking about it here and there, but I still could not imagine it clearly. Like a prison, but not a prison. It was better to call it a holding facility. But what's the difference? It is intended for temporary cases, but it seems like some people end up staying for quite a long time. And certainly it is not a place for anyone who has done anything especially horrible! Maybe it is for people who have just done little things wrong?

Kaneko, the woman in the office of a volunteer support group, said with some emotion, "It's really a place for people who haven't done anything wrong, but it makes you think they did something bad."

The comparatively calm Mr. Tanaka explained simply, "It's a holding facility for foreigners."

I was interested to see what kind of place it was, but even more than *what* it was, I was honestly a little worried about me as a foreigner setting foot in a place made to hold foreigners.

I peeked at the wristwatch on the chubby middle-aged man sleeping like a rock beside me. It was just before seven. Not there yet. It being so far—and so early—I had actually wanted to turn this job down, but the hourly pay was so spectacular that I really couldn't complain. The very moment I heard, "And this is the hourly pay..." I thought my eyes would pop out of their sockets. My heart began beating wildly. I called out in my excitement, "I'll do it! Sign me up!" without a single peep from the depths of my brain about how bad I was at waking up in the mornings.

2

Mr. Tanaka filled out two interview forms then handed them to the man sitting on the other side of a small reception window. After a few minutes, the main door made of thick metal opened and a tall, powerfully built officer stepped out. He was so big that he hardly appeared Japanese. His muscles looked so large that they might rip through his uniform. "This way please," he said, closing and locking the door behind us just after we entered. On the other side of the door was a long, narrow hallway. On either side of the hall were metal doors and small windows here and there. Everything was dark. Since hardly any light was coming in from outside, several small lamps were set up to illuminate the area just around them. It was morning, but it was dark. If it had been night, there's no question that this hallway would have looked straight out of some horror film.

The large officer led us to one of the rooms that lined either side of the hallway. It was a locker room. We were told to leave all of our belongings in one of the lockers. Before I had entered the building, guards had checked every corner of my bag. They had already taken my cell phone and keys on the first floor, so I thought I would be able to enter the interview room the way I was, but to have another filter. . . .Mr. Tanaka mumbled to himself in discontent. He had so many important documents that not having a bag to carry them in would be especially awkward. Furrowing his brow, he took out everything that was inside of his bag. Had I known they were going to check my bag like this, I certainly wouldn't have brought along my sparkly pink makeup bag and extra pair of pantyhose. And thanks to my allergies, the inside of my bag was packed full of old, used tissues. Showing them to the guard was humiliating.

I grabbed the essentials—my dictionary and pen case—and left the room. After bickering with the guard over whether or not he could bring his bag in, Mr. Tanaka eventually gave in and took out the thick file and his own pen case, slipping the bag in the locker and locking it. The giant officer led us a bit further down the hallway where another officer appeared. He greeted Mr. Tanaka and unlocked the door in front of him, then moved out of the way so we could enter. I followed Mr. Tanaka into the room. The large officer came in behind us, closed the door, and stood in front of it.

The room was relatively small, and it had the same gray atmosphere as the rest of the building. The room was split in two by a piece of glass running through the middle. Maybe that was the reason that it felt unusually cramped. In front of the

glass were three chairs. Mr. Tanaka sat down on the end and I sat down on the other end, leaving one open chair between us. After a moment, the door on the other side of the glass opened and an officer entered the room. From the other side of the glass the officer nodded to us, turned back towards the door, and gave a quick wave of his hand to signal for someone to enter. A thin girl of average height came in from behind the guard, staring quietly at the ground. She was wrapped in loose, colorful clothes that seemed like a folk costume. Her hair was wrapped in a khaki colored cloth with patterns that sparkled. She resembled some kind of nomad living on the plains. She had the air of a person that I had never seen aside from in the movies. After showing the girl the single chair that sat on the other side of the glass, the guard returned to his place in front of the door. Without looking at either of us, her eyes still on the ground, the girl sat down and placed both of her hands on her lap in silence. We stared at her with great interest, but she made no move to meet our eyes.

Mr. Tanaka cleared his throat and the session began.

“Salam!”

He hoped that by speaking Dari he could start the conversation with some sense of intimacy. I looked down at his feet and saw the thick, clear file sitting there. Inside of it was a thin, colorful book made for children called *Greetings from Around the World*.

Without lifting her head, the girl continued to stare down, completely unresponsive.

Mr. Tanaka stole a glance at me. It was a sign: Please interpret for me!

He started to speak with some nervousness in his voice. "I am Mr. Tanaka. As I'm sure you're already aware, starting today I will be representing you. There's nothing to be afraid of, so let's do our best to work together."

It was a perfectly Japanese introduction. With a huff of relief at having condensed all that he had wanted to say, he shifted in his chair and turned to me. Just as I had begun to interpret what he had said, as if suddenly recalling something of great importance, Mr. Tanaka shot up from his chair. Apologizing under his breath, he produced a business card from his inner jacket pocket and slipped it through the small opening in the glass to the other side. Perhaps unable to conceal her surprise at Mr. Tanaka's sudden movement, the girl lifted her head for just a moment, sending a short glance our way.

It was no more than a second, but the moment I saw her face, a strange feeling rushed over me. Those clouded, expressionless eyes—as if a light had been snuffed out inside of them—looked unlike those of any living being. They appeared as if they were toys made out of clear plastic. They were so lifeless and unmoving that, before I could even realize it, I found myself wondering if she could truly see out of them.

"Okay, would you please?" Mr. Tanaka said, bringing me back to reality.

I meticulously translated what Mr. Tanaka had said as he gazed at me, worried that the girl might not understand me because of the difference in our accents.

She made no response. I had expected her to be happy after going so long without hearing Dari. Since she sat there without saying a word, Mr. Tanaka glanced at me doubtfully from the corner of his eye and continued on.

“If we are going to work together, I first need you to completely answer all of the questions that I am about to ask you. I understand that it might be difficult for you, because of the range of questions that I have to ask, but they are all intended to help you. Please do your best to answer.”

Again, the girl was unresponsive. And again, Mr. Tanaka glanced at me doubtfully from the corner of his eye.

“I translated it exactly!” I pleaded to him quietly.

The girl took one hand from off her knee and grabbed the tip of the long khaki colored cloth that was wrapped around her hair. She began to twist it around the finger on her other hand. The top of her hands were sunburnt and covered in wrinkles, her fingers cracked all over, the skin tough and hardened. The middle of her short nails had some reddish polish, the rest blackened. They were the hands of someone that had certainly never heard of the words “hand cream.”

She acted as if she had not heard anything Mr. Tanaka or I had said. As for the business card that Mr. Tanaka had excitedly slid through the crack in the glass, she left it right where it was. Mr. Tanaka took a thick stack of papers from his clear plastic file and looked over the contents of a questionnaire that he had inside.

“What is your name?”

I translated what he had said to her. After a short silence, she replied in a very soft voice, “Leila.”

She had a husky voice that did not suit her appearance. She never would have known this, but it was the kind of sexy voice that the male university students could not have helped but like. The moment that the girl gave some response, Mr. Tanaka suddenly straightened his posture and looked at her happily, then looked back at his questionnaire. It was as if someone had replaced the old battery in a cell phone with a new one; Mr. Tanaka's voice suddenly became lively and immediately asked his next question.

"Your last name?"—"Gholam Ali."

"When where you born?"—"Summer."

Mr. Tanaka turned to me. "Oh, I'm asking about the date or year..."

The simple phrase "Date of Birth" had completely disappeared from the depths of my brain. In a fluster, I took the Dari dictionary that I had purchased some time ago out of my bag, looking for the word "Date of Birth." I found the word in Dari and asked the question once again. Closing the dictionary, I glanced up and saw—perhaps my act of searching for the word was funny—that at some point the girl had lifted her face that had been continually pointing down, those mysterious eyes glancing at me. The moment I met with such emptiness, I got goosebumps.

"I don't know. My mother only told me that I was born in summer," Leila answered, her eyes dropping back down.

Seeing her face again, I realized that sunburned skin running over sinews had a beautiful look. The small wrinkles around her eyes and mouth stood out and they became particularly deep whenever she moved her mouth to talk. Her face was that of a teenager, but her skin told a story that could have been thirty years old. She was

so young, but her skin had been sucked completely dry of all moisture. It was in worse shape than a middle age woman who had worked every day of her life.

With a look of confusion Mr. Tanaka asked, “Do you know how old you are right now?”

The girl shrugged her shoulders.

“Probably seventeen or eighteen.”

“Which one?”

Mr. Tanaka’s voice betrayed his frustration. How could he question someone who doesn’t even know her own age?

“I don’t know! My brother said I was seventeen, but my mother always said that I was a year older than that!”

Again confused, Mr. Tanaka turned to the guard standing in front of the door for help. As if out of habit the guard said, “Lots of people here don’t know their own age. It’s not like they carry IDs or passports or anything like that.”

“I see. That’s a problem.”

Mr. Tanaka cupped his head in one hand, his body dipped down a bit, and his other hand pulled a small towel from his pants pocket. He wiped the sweat from his forehead.

“I think it’s fine to play it by ear,” the guard suggested, again as if out of habit. “Everyone seems to be doing it that way anyway!”

“Got it! Okay, so we’ll go with seventeen for now... no, let’s go by what your mother said and mark you down as eighteen.”

Mr. Tanaka wrote something down on the paper that was sitting in front of him.

“Where were you born?”

“Mazar-i-Sharif,” the girl answered in a low voice that was difficult to hear.

“Mazar? It must have been very difficult for you.”

Mr. Tanaka looked at the papers in front of him.

“You must be Hazara, right?”

The girl, after some time, dropped her head in silence.

I could hear Mr. Tanaka speaking to himself. “I see...” and he continued, “Where are your parents now?”

The girl continued to look down and answered, “My mother is dead.”

“Oh, that was very rude of me. That’s terrible.”

As Mr. Tanaka wrote something down on his papers he hadn’t forgotten to add some words of condolence. I didn’t think it was necessary to interpret all of the words Mr. Tanaka seemed to be saying to himself.

“And your father?”

The moment that I interpreted Mr. Tanaka’s question, the girl suddenly looked up. She stared at me with those strange, emotionless eyes. They were of such a light color as I had never seen before. They weren’t brown, but they weren’t gray either. Maybe it was an effect of the cloth that was wrapped around her head, but they looked khaki. Mr. Tanaka quickly changed the subject, as if the girl’s distress had registered on his radar.

“I’m sure you already understand this, but we are friends. We came here in order to help you. So please, speak freely.”

While I was interpreting this, I thought to myself how I was being added to the circle of friends of this person I didn’t know. I wondered what the friends of this girl—this girl who doesn’t use hand cream—are like. A bored student and a chubby lawyer?

“My father is in Pakistan right now.”

She stopped twirling the cloth around her finger. Those emotionless eyes, with their lights gone out, stared unmoving at some far off point.

“What is he doing there?”

“I don’t know!”

“Do you know your father’s job?”

Leila looked down. Several minutes passed in silence. It seemed that she had no interest in answering questions about her father. Mr. Tanaka let out a deep sigh.

“If you don’t tell us what you do know, we will be unable to help you.”

There was no response from the girl. It seemed she had already decided she would not give up any information about her father. Mr. Tanaka gave up on the father and changed the subject.

“Do you have siblings?”

“I have two older brothers.”

“Where are they now?”

“One is dead. The other is with my father.”

“Oh, my apologies. Can you tell me how your brother died?”

“In the war. I heard a bomb fragment went through his head. I never saw his body though.”

When I interpreted this frigid indifference about her older brother, I felt a cold sweat begin to run down my back.

“What is your brother doing with your father?”

“Helping him.”

“Can you tell us what he is doing?”

Again, Leila closed her mouth. Several minutes passed in silence.

Mr. Tanaka looked at his wristwatch.

“That’s about it.”

I followed his eyes and peeked at his watch. Wow, it’s already this late! Without even noticing, I had spent two hours in this room. We didn’t come anywhere close to what we had imagined we would accomplish with this conversation. Mr. Tanaka says that the first interview is always the most draining. The goal is not necessarily to ask lots of questions, but to try to build some trust or connection.

The general tendency is for clients to resist a lawyer’s examination. A person they don’t know comes in and showers them with questions, demanding that they answer correctly and remember perfectly over and over again. Hoping to acquire information in order to win an appeal in court, the lawyer runs roughshod over their deepest privacies. Looking at it from any angle, the word “privacy” is groped to the point where it comes to lose all meaning. At the time, people will answer questions because they know the lawyer will defend them, but they will not share

those matters closest to their hearts. Thus, Mr. Tanaka considers the job of a lawyer an extremely delicate matter, ensuring first and foremost that clients don't shutter their feelings. Arms folded, shaking his head, he says:

"Since the recent IT boom, young lawyers take their clients' private information and, right before their clients' eyes, jam it into these cold machines they call computers, flaunting this method of inquiry. I wonder how many have ever been made to feel the indifference and coldness of that? My policy is, at the very least, to never type on a computer in front of my clients. Taking the time to copy my notes into my computer may be wasteful, but on the other hand, I can value the time I have meeting with my clients and converse with them as if we are friends. When building a relationship of trust, what can be more important? When you're with a client, the most important thing is to look them in the eye and have a conversation. If I do that, we become familiar with each others' most minute responses or movements and come to feel as if we can say anything because we are close to each other."

Though it didn't look that way—and despite the long, heated explanation Mr. Tanaka gave on his lawyering tactics—I wondered if his personal system really helped to build a feeling of trust with the girl sitting on the other side of the glass, staring down as she continued to twirl the cloth in her fingers.

"Thank you for your time today. We plan to come again on Tuesday next week."

As Mr. Tanaka said this to Leila he looked toward the guard standing behind her.

"It's okay if we come again, isn't it?" he asked in confirmation.

"That's fine, so long as you give your name and time slot to the guard outside," the guard answered, approaching Leila as she sat in front of the glass.

"Ah, thank you," Mr. Tanaka replied as he stood up from his chair.

The guard standing behind Leila opened the door on the other side of the room. Without glancing in our direction, Leila stood up in silence and disappeared through the other side of the door.

The guard standing behind us unlocked the door on our side of the room and led us back to the locker room where had guided us before. My cellphone and keys were sitting on the table. I gathered my things, took my bag, signed the interview form, and handed it to the officer. As we passed through the hallway that led outside, Mr. Tanaka said that he would give me a ride to the train station. We left the building together and got into his car. There was one final check at the gate as we left the grounds. From the passenger mirror I could see the wall behind us with the giant letters lit up: Immigration Bureau.

I got out of the car in front of the station and decided against immediately getting on a train. I began to wander around the station. I didn't have any other plans that day. That didn't mean that I could just do whatever I wanted, but I didn't feel like going back to the university right away. At this moment, I simply wanted to breathe a little of the air that was outside of the immigration office. Inside of the station was a large shopping center. It was bustling with shoppers. Being close to lunchtime, the station was a mix of salarymen out searching for lunch, housewives

stopping off at the nearby supermarket to prepare meals, students who had gotten out of class early, and part-time workers with spare time on their hands.

Simply seeing this busy station, I could hardly imagine that only a few miles away was that dark, frightening immigration office. The station was filled with shoppers and salarymen, radiant and expansive. There was even a small park near the front for children to play in. The area around the station was covered with signs for cram schools and English conversation schools. Still unable to imagine a person in that immigration office who could only speak and write my own language, a prep school sign jumped out at me. Then a sign for a bar, then karaoke, then a video arcade. There was simply no chance that Leila had ever heard the words “video arcade” or “karaoke” before in her life. She had never even used hand cream.

I went into a little café. I ordered a coffee and sat down beside the window. The fragrant scent of the coffee tickled my nose. It was still too hot to drink. I looked around the shop while I relaxed, waiting for my coffee to cool. Sitting in this pleasant café slowly brought me back to reality. This is the country of plenty where I live. I took the cup in my hand and brought it up to my face. It smelled wonderful.

3

I started working part-time as an interpreter in my second-year of university. An upperclassman had introduced me to the job. The majority of jobs were for English interpreting, so they mostly went to native speakers or people who had

lived abroad when they were younger. Someone like me—who spoke English as a foreign language—hardly got any jobs.

“We have a job interpreting Dari.”

When I heard this, I thought it must have been some kind of mistake and blurted out without thinking, “We can use Dari in Japan?”

Before anyone could even say, “And the pay looks really good!” I had already decided that I would take the job. I was simply the only capable person.

Soon after, I went out to the veranda and took my Persian books and dictionaries out of a box that I had completely forgotten about. I had used them when I first entered university. The pages had yellowed slightly over time. Flipping through them, I saw some sketches drawn into the white sections here, some worthless scribbles there. It was proof that I hadn’t paid attention at all when I was a student. I wondered if my Persian dictionary would help me when interpreting Dari. People would often ask me if Persian and Dari were the same language and I would answer that the difference between Persian and Dari was like the difference between standard Japanese and the Niigata dialect. Persian is the base, and Dari is a spoken dialect. It depends on the region, but generally speaking, Afghani people can understand Persian. On the other hand, it takes people who speak Persian some time to grow accustomed to the unique Dari accent. Just in case there was a Dari word that I did not understand while interpreting, I decided that I would go to the local bookstores to hunt down and purchase a Dari dictionary to be safe.

Despite sharing a common border with the country where people spoke Dari, I hardly knew anything about the history or geography of Afghanistan. Around the

time that I was in junior high school, people started appearing on the street corners with faces like Mongolians, speaking Persian with a strange accent. We began to call those people Afghans. They generally worked as construction workers or mechanics. When I was studying world history years later, I learned that many Afghan people fled around the world as refugees because of a long civil war. I knew that Iran and Pakistan in particular were countries that took in many of these Afghan refugees. Thinking on it now, there was an Afghan family living near my house in Iran, but either because I had no interest in them, or because I didn't understand them or their way of life, I knew nothing about them. The Afghans in the movies always had black turbans and long white robes, but the Afghans I knew on the streets of Tehran looked entirely different.

The most interesting thing that occurred when I started interpreting Dari—something totally unique from when I would open my dictionary to interpret English—was that people would stare at me wide-eyed as I opened my Dari dictionary. Beyond assuming that I would not be able to interpret anything, I would be met with shocked exclamations: Can you read those weird letters? Wow! It's like worms! After finishing a translation, gratitude and enthusiasm would rain down upon me. It's my native language! I had never tasted such pleasure in my life.

Beyond that, the job with Mr. Tanaka was fun because it was so easy. He was a young lawyer—he had continually failed the National Bar Exam—finally passing that final hurdle only five or six years earlier. He worked hard, but was the type of person incapable of saying what he wanted. One could call him a little shy, or a little nervous. Overall, not the trappings one would want in a lawyer. When he found

himself having to ask about some private or inappropriate matter, he would first take his crumpled towel in his hand, wiping it back and forth across his round body, soft-spoken mumblings cutting into the business at hand. When first meeting him, people would find his demeanor unbearably strange. His work was incredibly detailed. His round body was agile beyond imagination.

Of course, still being young he did not have his own office. Instead, he worked out of the office of another firm. Being the youngest lawyer there meant the jobs with the heaviest workload came pouring down on him like a waterfall. It was practically volunteer work. A volunteer group supporting Afghan refugees supplied a very small amount of money, but it was foolish to think it would fully compensate the time necessary to win approval of refugee status. When the request for this kind of job came in, it was only natural that the office gave it to the youngest lawyer. They said that, because he was still single, he could devote whatever personal time he needed to the job. Mr. Tanaka confirmed this, saying, "If I had been married, I may not have been able to take on this kind of job. It's best to get this kind of experience now."

4

The second time we went to meet Leila, instead of the terrible silence from the first meeting, she glanced up at us any number of times. Those emotionless eyes that I had seen before had disappeared completely. Mr. Tanaka was the same as always, wiping away sweat that wasn't even coming off of his forehead with his towel, asking questions with his eyes glued to his paperwork. This is the same Mr.

Tanaka that had fervently declared the importance of eye contact with clients. He hardly had the chance to apply that method in this case because Leila was constantly looking down. He had decided that a better method would be to listen to her voice.

“Is this a picture of your older brother?”

Mr. Tanaka had pulled a number of photos out of his bulky file. He chose one and held it out to Leila.

On the other side of the glass, Leila glanced at the photo and dropped her head without a word. Mr. Tanaka left the single photograph on top of the table and began searching through his file for different paperwork. Using this opportunity, I glanced at the photo from where I sat. I had no idea what I was looking at.

Mr. Tanaka’s questions always ended up on the subject of Leila’s father. Though Mr. Tanaka had gotten so far as to hear that Leila’s father was living in Pakistan, he could not find out where he was or what he was doing. He repeatedly asked similar questions, trying every route possible to get an answer. He was like a fly circling over a piece of shortcake, searching for a place he could land. According to Mr. Tanaka, Leila’s father held the key to winning her trial. Leila would not say much about her father at all. Instead, she answered most of the questions about her older brothers. I wasn’t sure if she was affected by Mr. Tanaka’s enthusiasm. I wasn’t even sure if she wanted to help with the investigation. Still, it didn’t seem that Leila trusted us enough to talk about her beloved father.

“Why did you come to Japan with your older brother?”

"My uncle has had a job with cars that were dealt between Afghanistan and Japan for a while. My brother was wounded in the war, so my mother begged him to quit the war and come live with our uncle here in Japan as his apprentice."

"When did this happen?"

"Three or four years ago."

"In that case, how many times has your brother come to Japan?"

"He comes two or three times a year. He knows plenty of Afghan people here."

"Where is your brother now?"

"He went back to Pakistan. After my oldest brother died in the war, my father told him that he had to come back."

"So why are you the only one here?"

"In order to prepare for the war, my father and brother are moving back and forth across the border of Pakistan and Afghanistan. They aren't living at any specific place so that the Taliban won't be able to find them. They're living in hiding. After my mother was killed, they knew that it would be dangerous for one woman to live in Afghanistan alone and my uncle asked my father to send me to Japan. He had planned to take me in."

"So why are you in this immigration facility?"

"The civil war in Afghanistan will be getting worse and worse, so my father thinks it would be better if I keep on living here. But I can't read or write, so I can't get a job. My uncle told me that, because of my father's position and the problems in Afghanistan, I should be able to petition Japan for refugee status. We had no idea that I would be arrested for trying."

When the meeting came to an end, though her face was still pointed towards the ground, she said quietly in Dari—"Khodafez"—and went out the door behind the guard. Perhaps because the word was too difficult for him to pronounce, Mr. Tanaka mumbled "Sayonara" and packed up his papers beside me. In that moment, I noticed a mix of happiness and fulfillment flow through his round face. It seemed that he had come one step closer to building a bond of trust.

Just like before, Mr. Tanaka gave me a ride to the station. In the car I asked him, "May I take a look at the photo from before?"

As he drove, he pulled the thick file from his bag and set it on his lap. The pictures were in a paper bag that he slid out of the file and handed to me.

The picture showed a white body with black hair. It seemed to be only one part of a body. Judging by the other pictures, I came to realize that it was a human thigh. It was a picture taken from the knee to the buttocks. There was a thick, deep line starting from just above the knee that ran up to the top of the hamstring where it seemed to dissolve into the muscles. No hair grew above that line, the skin light pink. It was a scar that ran so deep it looked as if I could stick my finger into it. Just looking at it made me feel sick. I handed the pictures back to Mr. Tanaka.

"What are these?"

"Pictures of Leila's brother's thigh."

"Why does it look like that?"

Mr. Tanaka took up the picture and gave it a glance.

"During the war, it seems that part of his leg was hit by a bomb. But it sounds like it has gotten better now."

“Can he walk?”

“He has a bit of a limp, but it seems he can walk.”

I sank into my seat. If Leila had a scar that looked like that, I would probably have no choice but to see the real thing, not a picture. It would make me feel ten times worse than seeing a picture.

Before it comes to that, however, I thought about how I needed to help her refugee status get approved.

5

In the case of refugee applications in Japan, there is a law that states the application process must start within sixty days of entering the country. It's called the “60 Day Rule.”

Mr. Tanaka explained it like this: “There are people coming to Japan who aren't refugees—they found some job and started to feel at home, only to find out that their permitted stay was at an end, or their visa had expired—and think to themselves ‘Oh well, I'll just become a refugee.’ This is a rule not only to prevent people for doing that, but a tool to distinguish those people from real refugees.”

Still, this rule causes undue harm for refugee petitioners who have come to Japan only to find later that their home country was facing some disaster, or revolution, or war.

Not knowing about this sixty-day rule, and not submitting their application within that period, it is only natural that there are Afghans other than Leila in the holding facility that have gone unrecognized as refugees. I heard about one of them, a middle-aged man named Ghulam, from Leila. He was a bus driver in Afghanistan for a long time. One day the Taliban ordered his bus to stop. They falsely accused him of attempting to smuggle the Hazara people riding the bus into another country, and seized the vehicle. He said that he had spent a month in a Taliban facility being tortured, beaten, and persecuted.

There was a large indentation like a hole in the back of his neck. He said that it was the scar left from the equipment that the Taliban used to shock him. There were similar holes in his wrists and ankles. His wife had done all she could to collect the immense sum for his ransom. She paid the Taliban and he was released. It took him a month to return to his former strength, and when he was just well enough to travel, he took his wife and children and escaped from Afghanistan to Pakistan. He searched for a job, but couldn't find one because of the many displaced Afghans. On the advice of an acquaintance he went to India, Malaysia, and finally Japan. He applied for refugee status but it was denied and he was imprisoned in this holding facility.

After a month of Taliban imprisonment, he had become very unstable. According to Leila, he couldn't sleep when the night grew dark, and he would begin to yell. When he got particularly bad, it sounded like he was screaming something while banging his head against the wall. In the middle of the night his cellmates would hold him down. A number of times they had to bind him to his bed, she said.

On top of all that, he would regularly attempt suicide, trying to hang himself with his pajamas. Due to his condition, he would be sent off to the psychiatric ward once a week and given medicine.

The night before, he had attempted suicide again by overdosing on his medicine. Early in the morning the men in his room discovered him and he was transported to the hospital. Some of the workers at the detention facility accompanied him, but since then no one had heard anything.

“He showed me pictures of his family. They live in Peshawar, Pakistan. He said that if he could get approved as a refugee, he would bring his family over to live with him in Japan.”

Leila said this without expression, teary-eyed.

“He’s about the same age as my father. He’s a nice man.”

I couldn’t say anything to Leila. According to Mr. Tanaka, winning appeal in the Japanese courts and being recognized as a refugee is, realistically speaking, very difficult. The number of Afghan people that have actually been approved as refugees is incredibly small. Simply being persecuted was not reason enough to be approved. Beyond being persecuted, the petitioner had to be singled out for particularly terrible persecution or torture—that was most important. Especially now, it was essential that the person could produce evidence that they had been marked by the Taliban. Simply being Hazara, or living within the trajectory of bombs, or showing that Afghanistan was a dangerous country, one could not be approved with such “simple” reasons.

Leaving the room where we interviewed Leila, I overheard the guards talking. According to them, Ghulam was hoping for people to notice him, so he was always doing strange things like last night. He went a little overboard this time, but he would recover and come back. Having grown accustomed to such conditions, the guards' conversation was extraordinarily cold.

6

Recently, Mr. Tanaka has been memorizing Dari greetings. He found a book called "Simple Dari for Travel" at some library, and began studying frantically. He hoped to exchange more familiar greetings with Leila. His English was so poor and, in that regard, I was the only one around to support him. On the days that we meet Leila, we would sit in the waiting room of the detention center. On the occasion that our eyes meet, he would ask me, "How do you pronounce this?" or "What's the meaning of this word?"

Mr. Tanaka was a bit neurotic and worrisome, so he wouldn't use a word until he felt he had truly grasped the meaning of it. It was partly so that he wouldn't offend the person he was talking to, partly so that he wouldn't seem awkward with such terrible pronunciation. He paid special attention to little details and would ask me the meaning of the same word time and again.

I got sick of Mr. Tanaka's repetitious barrage of questions, but they seemed to have a good effect on his relationship with Leila. Just after learning some word, Mr. Tanaka would mistake the pronunciation. In that moment, the delight on Leila's face was striking. She would repeat the same word back to him through her laughter

with the correct pronunciation. Overcome by his gracelessness, Mr. Tanaka would shrink back in his seat like a clam that had just had a lemon wrung out over it. This too pleased Leila to no end. Unlike when she was teasing him, this smile left long, deep lines around her mouth.

Mr. Tanaka opened his notebook in the waiting room today as well and began to study the Dari that he had written down. I was playing on my cell phone while waiting for the interview to start when Mr. Tanaka leaned over from beside me.

“I found this recently and ended up buying it.”

He handed me a book with a shy look on his face. I took it from him and flipped through the pages. It was a book on how to write in Persian. Barely catching myself before saying, “Sure have a lot of free time, don't you?” I instead asked, “Are you practicing?”

“I guess you could say that I don't have time to practice, or you could also say that the words are too hard and I can't remember them. Either way, I remember a few,” he said proudly.

“Really? Like what?”

In a second he had taken a pen out of his suit pocket and began to write on the edge of the newspaper he was carrying. It looked like the script of a kindergarten child. As soon as he finished writing, he showed me the newspaper. After a few seconds of looking at his highly idiosyncratic writing, I understood the word, “Leila.” Then, thinking about how I could read such illegible words, I wondered for a moment if I wasn't some kind of genius.

“Can you understand it?” Mr. Tanaka’s face has hit by a wave of emotion.
“There’s more.”

It was like someone had switched on an engine. Mr. Tanaka began to write something else on the edge of the newspaper.

“Can you read this?” He asked as he held the newspaper up for me.

“Does this say...Salam?”

“Wow, I guess I got it right! Excellent!”

Mr. Tanaka’s whole face filled with a smile and he thrashed about happily, clapping his hands.

“That’s amazing,” I said, humoring him a little as he got up to dance.

“This is the hardest letter to write, isn’t it? No matter what I do I can’t write it very well.”

As Mr. Tanaka said this to himself, he began to practice writing the Persian letter “H” very seriously. He turned back towards the newspaper sheet. As I watched him practicing vigorously, although he was at the same level as a preschooler, I found his efforts were wonderful.

“I want to show this to Leila, too,” Mr. Tanaka mumbled quietly as he wrote the letter “H.”

I watched Mr. Tanaka for a little while as he practiced his vocabulary on the newspaper sheet. It was tragic that he wouldn’t able to share this feeling with Leila. She couldn’t read or write.

The thin blank spaces of the newspaper were covered in the words “Salam” and “Leila.”

“Does the word ‘Salam’ have some meaning?” Mr. Tanaka asked suddenly.

“Yes, it does. Originally it was a word that meant, ‘to yield,’ ‘to save,’ ‘peace.’

In wars a long time ago, people say one side would yell out, ‘Salam!’ to show they had surrendered. The other side would reply, ‘Assalam alaikum,’ meaning ‘Peace to you as well.’ That was how the first surrender was made. From there ‘Salam’ become a greeting. Now, no one uses it to mean the word ‘peace.’ It’s just like ‘Hello.’”

“It’s a deep word, isn’t it?” Mr. Tanaka said, lifting his head to look at me.

Just as I thought to teach him a bit more, the door at the other end of the room opened and one of the detention center’s guards emerged.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

Mr. Tanaka put the newspaper away in a fluster, moving toward where the guard was standing. I also stood up from my chair and followed Mr. Tanaka.

As the interviews piled up, we came to learn that Leila’s father was a famous commander of the Hazara people in Afghanistan. Afghanistan was particularly dangerous for a well-known officer, but Leila’s father was in control of an army. He had made his way to Peshawar, Pakistan and it sounded as if he had made it his temporary base. For his own safety, even Leila did not know where exactly he was living. Only his second oldest son, one of Leila’s older brothers, knew where he was really staying. He fought to kick the Taliban out of Afghanistan as he lived in hiding. He dreamed of making a country where the Hazara people could live in peace and happiness.

“With the trial coming so soon, we have to prove that Leila’s father—or Saleh Mohammad, we might say—is actually a commander in the army.”

As the days went by, Mr. Tanaka's trial folder became thick with paperwork. His attitude improved accordingly. Of all the papers bulging out of his clear plastic file, he pulled some pages out that had been stapled together.

"This is the file I put together from everything Leila has told me about her father's job. I plan to submit it at trial, but just having her words is not enough. If we had something that could act as evidence..."

Leila listened quietly to my interpretation. After a moment of thinking in silence, she stuck her hand in the long cloth that was wrapped around her hair. Underneath the cloth somewhere, she had wrapped up a coarse leather pouch. She removed it from around her neck and placed it on her lap. She opened it where we couldn't see and said quietly, "I have a picture."

Leila slid a single picture under the glass to Mr. Tanaka. In the background of the picture was a snow-covered mountain. In the middle was a man with the face of a Mongolian, riding a thin, brown horse. A Russian Kalashnikov hung from his shoulder, his head wrapped in a black turban. The long ethnic clothing looked extremely old, and he was wearing boots that looked even older. Dozens of people surrounded the man, all wearing the same clothing, with the same weapons hanging from their shoulders. All of them had the harsh countenances of having spent long years in the mountains, their skin dried to the point of cracking, wrapped in threadbare hand-me-downs. Aside from their weapons, they looked like they could have been anything but soldiers.

It was completely unlike the brawny, high-tech commandos that I had imagined. Rather it was a collection of warriors from some earlier century.

“Is this your father?”

Mr. Tanaka asked, pointing to the man riding the horse.

Leila nodded slightly. She slid a small piece of paper under the glass to Mr. Tanaka. It looked like a small card. Even though everything on it was written in Dari, the moment that Mr. Tanaka saw that yellowed paper his eyes lit up.

“This is...”

“A membership card to the Pure Hazara Party. It says what level of commander he is and how many men he controls.”

Mr. Tanaka took the card up carefully in both his hands, as if he were some pirate captain cradling a treasure map. He ran his fingers over the words with great purpose, yet he couldn’t read a letter of it. From beside him, I cut in on this transcendent moment, “Would you like me to take a look?”

Mr. Tanaka’s stare burned through the card, as if finding out what was written on it wasn’t essential at all. He murmured, “We might be able to win with this.”

7

I had worked this interpreting job with Mr. Tanaka for half a year and we were slowly beginning to see a light at the end of the tunnel. Leila received a conditional release, and along with it came some hope. A volunteer group that worked with displaced persons was designated Leila’s sponsor. She was even allowed to move to the church that the group managed. This church often helped the many people like Leila who were applying for refugee status in Japan. They often

approached this volunteer group for work, a place to sleep, or to find a lawyer for their immigration hearings.

“You have been awarded a discharge with this conditional release.” Mr. Tanaka handed the paperwork to Leila and continued, “However, you must come and have this form stamped every day. It’s a way of saying to the court: ‘Yes, I’m still living in this city.’ In the event that you don’t come on those days that you are supposed to, or if you drop out of contact, it will be your sponsor that will have to take your place in giving answers. So please try to make it on those days that you are supposed to.”

Kaneko, a woman who was working in the business office of the volunteer group that was to take Leila in, was met us in the waiting room of the Immigration Bureau. While waiting for Leila to return from picking up her luggage from her room, Mr. Tanaka met with Kaneko in the lobby to finalize some of the procedures for release. After a few minutes, an immigration worker guided Leila into the waiting room. Without knowing where she was being taken, Leila began glanced about with restless curiosity at all of the things around her as she was led to the car. Without delay, she set off for the place where she would live.

The church was larger than expected, built in the middle of a large lot. It enjoyed the rare benefit of financial backing from a number of nations in its work with refugees. A volunteer group that was a member of the United Nations refugee agency, UNHCR, managed it. They had converted one area of the grounds into a complex with a large number of rooms for those refugees waiting to hear a response from the courts. They were from places like South America, Africa, and Afghanistan.

Leila was shown to a small room. With the miniscule, predetermined amount of support they received every month, the immigrants made due with a shared kitchen, toilets, and bathing facilities. It certainly wasn't easy living, but compared to the detention center it was as if every day was a new start in heaven.

Leila had a worried expression about moving to this new place. Kaneko had organized all of the other refugees beforehand to welcome Leila with a small lunch party. A large, aluminum folding table was set up in the parking lot and covered in the savory cuisine of every country imaginable. Those housewives and retirees from around the area who often attended these church events brought with them food and drinks. Leila's hard expression slowly began to crack into a jubilant smile with this unimaginable reception.

After moving to the church, Mr. Tanaka began to interview Leila there once a week. This meant a shift in environment for Leila. No longer was an interview that time spent on the other side of a plane of glass, accompanied by a security guard, trapped in the gray walls of the detention facility. Now she was in the bright light, surrounded by people, able to touch the daily life of Japan as it flowed by her on the street corners. Interviews meant gathering around a table for tea; they meant a chance to open one's heart. I too was happy that the location of our interviews had been moved to this church. Public transportation was much more accessible here in the city, rather than up in the mountains where the holding facility had been built.

On the day of our second interview at the church, I arrived a bit early to find Leila folding up the weekend event flyers and sliding them into envelopes in the church's office. She didn't notice me standing in the doorway of the office. She was

singing some song to herself with her husky voice. I stood there quietly in the entrance to the office. Her voice was not that which I had heard when we spoke together. She was singing a song in a heavy dialect that I could not understand. I came to realize that the people of Afghanistan spoke the Persian that existed generations ago. I could understand some of the words that flowed from Leila's lips, but they were so old that they had fallen out of use. I trained my ear on her soft singing, those words from long ago, the heartbreaking melody. Isn't that a song by a famous poet that I had read in some textbook years ago? It seemed like something I should know. What is it? What is this poem?

I leaned against the wall. Leila's husky voice was singing these words that I knew I had heard somewhere before. She sang in a warm dialect that I had never heard. It filled the air. I closed my eyes. So Persian, when it first began, was this heartrending sound? These words are so timeworn that no one speaks them anymore, but listening to this girl's husky voice melts my heart.

Aha! I got it! I do know this poem. It wasn't particularly famous. But for people from the Middle East, there wasn't a single person who wouldn't know this major poet: It was a poem by Hafez.

Hafez is the exemplification of brilliant Persian poets. He was from the fourteenth century. He is well known even in countries that do not speak Persian, like India and Pakistan. He is so loved by Persian speakers that I can feel confident saying that there isn't a single house without a collection of his poems. His greatest achievement was keenly pointing to those realities of life with the sweetest of words, looking at the essence of our actions and saying: "Wine, the beautiful woman who

brings me the wine to drink, love.” These poems have a front and a back, such that there is a hidden meaning that cannot be revealed simply by reading them. Hafez’s messages, wrapped in such sweet words, are so terribly difficult to grasp for the layman that there even exist Hafez decipherers. They believe they understand all of the answers. Many people believe that these people can even tell the future using the poems.

How many years has it been since I had heard this poem? Of course, in school we had been forced to memorize it. But once I had aced my test, I had completely forgotten about it. I tried to follow Leila’s rhythm and bring the poem back into my mind, but my brain seemed completely empty. All I could do was listen to Leila’s words and nod to myself, “That’s how it goes! That’s how it goes!”

I got the feeling that, between the deep message hidden within this poem and Leila’s own situation at the moment, she knew the meaning of this poem exactly. But I still wondered whether Leila, who could neither read nor write, truly understood the meaning of Hafez’s poem.

“She really does have a wonderful singing voice.”

I came back to myself at the sound of a voice behind me. When I opened my eyes I saw Mr. Tanaka standing before me with an armful of papers, wiping sweat away with a towel.

“Oh, hello,” I said, wondering how long he had been standing there.

“Hi. It’s a beautiful, heartbreaking voice, isn’t it? Is that a Afghan folk ballad?”

“No. It’s actually a poem by a famous Persian poet.”

“Is that so? Do you know what the poem means?”

“Of course!” I mean... probably...

“Could you tell me?”

It seemed like Mr. Tanaka was taking an interest in Leila well beyond what was necessary.

“How could I translate it? It’s a particularly difficult poem...”

I began to think a little. It was far too difficult for me to translate this poem by Hafez, which I hardly understood in Persian. But this was still part of the job, so I decided to take a shot and give it my best approximation using simple words.

“So this basically means...” I heard footsteps coming from around the corner. Leila had already finished singing quite some time ago.

“Oh, you’re finished! Well, shall we go in?”

Mr. Tanaka turned towards the door and started walking.

“If Leila is the one singing, that song must surely have some deep meaning to it. Please tell me what the poem means later.”

Mr. Tanaka said this before entering the room.

I dislodged myself from the wall. As I approached the door, I could see Leila stuffing a large pile of envelopes, one at a time. Even from here, I could clearly see the crevices in her hands as they worked.

I entered the room after Mr. Tanaka.

“Salam!”

Mr. Tanaka’s overly bubbly greeting echoed through the office.

Leila lifted her head and smiled at us. Looking at Leila’s innocent smile I thought to myself, “How can this girl, who can’t even read, recite a Hafez poem

without making a single mistake? Meanwhile I, an ‘educated’ college graduate who studied abroad, can’t remember it at all?” I said that I would translate it and translate it I will! I’ll start from the most famous part: “The distance that you have walked thus far has been demanding, but your destination is still far away. After this...” No, that’s wrong. I couldn’t find the right words and tripped myself up. I pulled out one of the chairs from around the table in the middle of the room and set my bag on it. Leila’s distressingly husky voice reverberated in my head. I tried to recall those black letters that I had read in school, pressed flat into my textbook. They gave off a wholly different atmosphere from the calligraphy some intelligentsia would hang on his wall as decoration. It felt like the poem took on a whole new meaning when it flowed out of that warm, accented voice. It was an interpretation of Hafez unlike that of a reader. It was the first time that I thought about how he was loved for the many meanings that his poems held.

“Please translate for me.”

I heard the voice of Mr. Tanaka come from the seat next to me.

I tried to recall the famous part of the poem again. Maybe I could translate Hafez’s poem into simple words. Then again, if I translate that poem carelessly, it will lose its heart. It will turn into a series of banal words without solidity. It’s not as if there are people alive that can understand the poem’s true feelings. The poem was truly trying to capture a thought from before the seventh century. That’s why those people who read the poem all take from it a different message. That’s why I can’t translate the feeling of the song when Leila sings it.

Still, there is no question that the poem fully reflects the feeling in Leila's voice. It certainly doesn't need my flat translation.

"Okay!"

The session began at my response.

After the interview had ended and Mr. Tanaka had left, I thought that I might have one cup of tea before going home and ask Leila about her new environment.

"How is it here?"

"It's really great. Everyone is so nice and I'm learning a little bit of Japanese."

"It's not boring?"

"I stay pretty busy. I help in the office in the morning. I staple documents, make tea, I even learned how to use the copier recently. If I only new how to read, I could learn how to use the computer."

Leila let out a melancholy laugh. Even as she is growing accustomed to life in Japan, she could still see the gaps between what her life is now and what her life was back home.

"There's a little kid in the room next to me, so I watch after her. I make her food and take her to prayer time."

"Prayer time? Isn't this a church? Aren't you a Muslim?"

"I am."

Leila laughed. Recently, she hadn't hesitated to laugh. I'm not sure if it was because of her mood, but it looked as if there were fewer wrinkles around her

mouth. Or maybe it was because there is more humidity in Japan? Or had someone here given her some body cream?

“I don’t know any Japanese, so I just pray in my own language.”

She laughed again innocently. When she laughed she really did look young. Looking at this innocent girl, I thought about how many months it had taken for her to cheer up. As the interviews here at the church began to add up, she had begun to take a greater interest in her trial and cooperating with us. She had a considerably more positive attitude than before.

“Now that I’m here, I’m forgetting those things that happened over there.”

Leila suddenly muttered sadly in her husky voice.

“Isn’t that a good thing?”

I grabbed my bag from the chair and made as if to leave.

“Is that a good thing?” Leila asked with a troubled look on her face. She followed me to the door.

“Everyone here is so upbeat and kind. I can hardly believe it’s real. Everyday I drink delicious tea and watch TV. In the evenings sometimes I take a walk around the neighborhood park. But at that very same time, people are being killed over there. If I forget that, I would feel terrible...”

I put on my shoes. With the door half open, I said, “People all over this world have very different lives. If people exist who get stuck in their own lives and give up, there are also people who work as hard as they can and escape. If there are people being killed, there are people doing the killing. So long as you are living here, what good does it do to think about the things that happen over there? Just forget them

and move forward.” I opened the door all the way and took a step outside. “Isn’t it better if you just forget it?”

I turned back and waved at Leila as she stood in the entryway.

She watched me leave in silence.

8

“Unfortunately, we didn’t win approval at the trial, but...” Mr. Tanaka looked at Leila’s face as she stared back at him apprehensively. “But of course this doesn’t mean we’re finished. From here, I think we can fill in all of our gaps and appeal to the Supreme Court.”

I interpreted Mr. Tanaka’s words to Leila. For a moment she thought in silence. Seeing an opening, Mr. Tanaka changed the subject.

“So truthfully, there isn’t any issue in proving that Leila’s father is a well-known commanding officer. The question is simply is Leila truly his daughter.”

Some wrinkles appeared on Leila’s brow. To be told such a thing was unexpected. I inserted my opinion into the conversation. For some reason, I had recently begun to take on a role that surpassed interpretation.

“But, wasn’t there the picture of her that showed her together with her father and brother?”

“As for that, you can take a picture with the old man next door, or one of your aunts. That doesn’t make it evidence.”

“So what would normally be considered evidence?”

“For example, in Japan we have a family register. Other countries have ID cards and passports. Those can be used as effective evidence. However, for those countries that don’t have lasting records of who was born there, or countries that don’t make official birth certificates, or countries that have passports but lack governmental credibility, for those countries unfortunately, that is not evidence.”

“So what can we do for Leila?”

“We have to have some concrete evidence. The quickest way is to have a DNA test, but seeing as how her father is not in Japan—and going to Afghanistan to seek him out, draw blood and all the rest would be extremely expensive—that would also be the most difficult way. I’m looking into whether or not there are any other methods besides a DNA test. In Leila’s case, for example, because her father is currently in Pakistan, and it is too dangerous for him to return to Afghanistan, we may be able to get an authenticated letter from him stating that she is his daughter. If we have something to act as proof...”

Mr. Tanaka sighed and continued.

“The only person who knows her father’s whereabouts is her older brother. All we can do is contact her brother and request that he contact her father and send that kind of evidence.”

I interpreted Mr. Tanaka’s explanation for Leila. She knew where her brother was staying, so I wrote down in a letter what she told me and sent it to her brother.

On the way back to the station, I asked Mr. Tanaka, “Why is it that Leila can’t be approved as a refugee?”

Mr. Tanaka shook his head and sighed. I continued.

“Doesn't the whole world know about the kind of oppression that the people of Afghanistan face—especially the Hazara? I mean, so many Hazara people live as refugees in other countries. Why is it that only Japan...”

“I don't intend this as a defense of my country, but if Japan eases the restrictions for approving refugees, it might start a flood of some hundreds of thousands of Afghanis to Japan. And not just Afghanistan, but from other countries as well. Japan, comparatively, has places where people can work and experience complete safety. That would be an extremely alluring place for those people who live in countries filled with strife. But turning *that* Japan, where mostly Japanese people live, into a diverse country is extremely difficult. Problems arise easily in a place that mixes all those cultures and nationalities. I can't say that it is persecution, but at the very least there is certainly discrimination. Problems with nationality and human rights, with education and employment, these eventually become violence and crime. And of course racism, as well. As of right now, the children and grandchildren of refugees in countries that have many immigrants, like America, or countries in Europe that have accepted many refugees, are smothered in so many problems. There are problems even in those countries that simply have diversity. Now consider Japan, a country so close to being monoethnic. Wouldn't we to be wrapped up in those problems in ten or twenty years if we were to accept too many refugee applications?”

I gazed at Mr. Tanaka's serious expression as he tried to analyze the situation. He was managing such a hard schedule. He didn't even have time to eat a proper meal. His eyes passed over Leila's paperwork as he took a giant bite out of the bread

he had brought for lunch. It was a little surprising for a person to have such strength to spend every moment and effort for the sake of this girl's trial, then to also logically defend the problems of his country.

9

As Mr. Tanaka had more and more interviews with Leila, their talks began to expand beyond simple personal details. All variety of regions and town names would be brought up frequently. I mentioned to the church that it was probably best if I knew a bit more about the geography of Afghanistan, so that I wouldn't make any mistakes in my translations of these places and cities. They brought me a large map of Afghanistan from their office.

After I returned home from the church, I spread out the map of Afghanistan that I had received on my bed. Thinking about the condition of Leila's skin, I had associated Afghanistan with a country covered in desert and the strong sun. Looking at the map, however, it was surprisingly mountainous. Kabul and Mazar-i-Sharif were most heavily damaged. These two cities were fairly far apart. Kabul, close to the border of Pakistan, was the capital and the city with the largest population. The map had a smaller inset in the lower right hand corner of the city of Kabul. Looking at that inset closely, I saw the names written down of those places that Leila had told me about: West Kabul and Karte.

If this had been a map of Paris or London, the inset of the city would have been marked here and there with museums and the names of famous buildings. Or the map may have included a complimentary guide to shopping districts and malls.

Despite Kabul also being a city of history, there didn't appear to be any places that one might tour, despite how hard I looked. According to what Leila told me, there weren't even many schools or hospitals, so it was impossible to think that there might be a downtown or department stores. As far as places to shop was concerned, there was only enough to buy the daily necessities and perhaps some shops lined up on a street where one might finally purchase goods. Afghanistan had experienced twenty continuous years of war, civil or otherwise. A sense of crime had come to surround malice and decay. Murders were no longer contained only to the back alleys, but occurred on the main thoroughfares. Wouldn't it be more surprising to find a department store or a museum in such a country?

What if I were a twenty year-old from that country? From the very day I was born I would have awoken to the sound of bombs, and every evening I would have had to cry myself to sleep in terrible sadness and pain. That was the extent to which war changed everyday life. War continued for twenty years, the country attacked by every group from inside and out. The diverse country that is Afghanistan returns as ever to the cycle of being ruled, left behind by all the other countries of the world. Since the Taliban seized power, one could say that time has been set back a thousand years. Women, forgotten and left under their veils, don't even have the right to education. And yet I, even speaking the same language, knew nothing about this situation. When I first met Leila, I couldn't even grasp one thing about her condition, simply translating one word to the next. Before I met her I didn't even know that Afghanistan was a country with diversity. My only image of people from Afghanistan was their "Afghan profile" which I had grown accustomed to seeing on the

street corners of Tehran. Contrary to the general image that every person from the Middle East is an Arab, four main ethnic groups live in Afghanistan. Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara. Of these four ethnic groups, the Hazara differ slightly in their build and face. They don't have the faces of Middle Easterners, but more like that of Japanese, with shallow features and narrow eyes.

All of the ethnic groups practice Islam, however they are separated into Sunni and Shia Muslims. Hazara, who are the smallest of the ethnic groups, are Shia. Of all of the Muslims in the world, about 90% are Sunni, meaning that the Shia group is overwhelmingly small. In Afghanistan as well, where Shia make up not even 15% of the entire population, they are the smallest religious group. Being that the Hazara also look different, they have long experienced persecution from the other ethnic groups surrounding them. With the 1992 arrival of the Taliban, the country fell into a state of civil war. Ethnic oppression began to escalate. The mass murders of the Hazara people came to be known around the world. Afterward, the Taliban, a majority of whom was Pashtun, seized control of the government. A period of ignorant extremism began in Afghanistan, accompanied with tremendous discrimination and persecution.

The word Taliban comes from the plural of the Arabic phrase "Talib," meaning "a person on a quest." It is generally used as a name to describe those students studying Islam in a Madrasa. Sunni Pashtun students who had graduated from a Pakistani Madrasa created the Taliban. The unique thinking that the group had established based on Islam is so far removed from the true beliefs of Islam in the world that many Islamic countries have showered the group with criticism. In

reality, it is believed that there are only three countries that support the Taliban. Mazar-i-Sharif, where many Hazara live, has been attacked any number of times by the Taliban in the past. In 1998, in the midst of a massive attack, Mazar-i-Sharif fell. According to Leila, the Taliban made plans to destroy Mazar-i-Sharif from within. They had concluded that, based on their past experiences attacking the city, that they could not succeed from attacking from outside. The Taliban hid in the houses of non-Pashtun families living in Mazar-i-Sharif, waiting for the attack to come from the outside. On the day that the Taliban forces finally arrived at Mazar-i-Sharif, the city was taken over by the Taliban almost immediately. That was how it fell. Leila's relatives owned a bread shop, usually selling only two or three loaves a day. Around that time, however, large numbers of customers would arrive every day, some buying twenty or thirty loaves of bread to take home. She said they found it quite suspicious.

When Mazar-i-Sharif fell, so too did a large number of Hazara. These were not necessarily soldiers who had participated in the war. Many of the victims were defenseless women and children who could not find a place to hide. Leila's mother was one of those people. On the night that Leila's mother was killed, Leila's older brother snuck her out of Mazar-i-Sharif before morning came and took her to Kabul where her other brother and father were hiding.

I came back to my senses at the sound of my stomach growling. I folded up the map, stood up, and took a banana off the top of my refrigerator. I peeled off the skin, chopped the banana into small bits, and put them in my blender. I took the cold soy milk from my fridge and poured it over the bananas. I thought about how

shocked Leila must have been when she first set foot in Japan. “So countries this different really do exist. I wonder if I’m just watching a movie?” If it had been me, and I had gone to Afghanistan, I would’ve likely thought that I was watching a scene out of a movie. I flipped the switch on my mixer. I watched the yellow pieces of banana get chopped up, dancing to the top of the white soy milk, becoming smoother, uniform. The thought crossed my mind that I might forget how Leila faced being chopped up and smoothed into Japan just like this.

10

I tried to put one foot in front of the other as I dragged my bag, packed full of papers, across the walking bridge towards the station. I tried my hardest to make some space to walk as I pushed aside the mass of people that were coming towards me. I was extremely tired today.

Recently, all of the interviews had been the same, focusing more on minute questions. It was even more boring than hearing Leila’s life story over and over again. Mr. Tanaka was asking about the most absurd details of daily life and locations, but because Leila naturally couldn’t remember everything precisely, it was taking longer than expected. After losing the first hearing, and appealing to the Supreme Court, Mr. Tanaka was throwing his whole body and soul into the case.

Mr. Tanaka was resting all of his expectations on the evidence that he expected Leila’s older brother to send. The fact that Leila’s father was a famous commander in Afghanistan had already been confirmed in court. Some points remained, however: whether or not Leila was his daughter, whether he would be in

danger if he returned to Afghanistan, and whether that danger also applied to the rest of his family. Those three points had to be demonstrated in court. I had no idea how that final point—that there was a danger to all of the family members—could be proven. Mr. Tanaka said that one member of the family being killed was likely enough to prove a danger to Leila. However, this could not be an incidental death. It was essential that the family member was killed intentionally simply for being in that family. If the death was simply incidental, that would show that the country is unsafe, but not that one particular person had been marked for death.

A group of four lawyers and volunteers from the support organization formed a group in order to travel to Afghanistan. The goal of this group was to gather evidence for those Afghan refugees who were seeking approval on their immigration status, particularly those who were still in the detention center awaiting trial. Above all, however, the group was hoping to locate the families of refugees who had fallen out of contact, to determine the safety of the country, to establish the state of law and order in the country, and to bring back film evidence.

Three months had passed since the letter to Leila's brother had been sent. There had still been no response. Mr. Tanaka had taken six days vacation from his job. He had decided to join part of this group's journey to help Leila's case.

Mr. Tanaka returned to Japan by himself. He had left the group of lawyers who had gone to Afghanistan partway through their trip. He met with some of the volunteer group members at the church. During this meeting, Mr. Tanaka had

planned to show some of the slides and videos that he took while in Afghanistan. So as not to discourage Leila with these fresh images of Afghanistan, it was decided that she not be invited to the meeting.

In the video, Mr. Tanaka looked slovenly as he stood in front of the camera and spoke. Overwhelmed by the heat, he had undone the top two buttons of his shirt and rolled up his sleeves. He hadn't shaved. He had hardly been there long at all, but he was already quite sunburned. Being that they didn't have a professional cameraman, one of the group members was holding the small camera. It was a bit difficult to watch as they walked along the streets. Sometimes the screen was slanted and other times what they wanted to show went off-screen.

The city of Kabul came dustily on screen. I could hardly see any kind of true asphalt road, let alone a highway. A car older than any I could find in Japan kicked up dust as it rolled across something that I couldn't even jokingly call a road. After it had passed, the dirt danced up through the air. Here and there I could see men in black turbans, wearing long clothes that ages ago used to be white. They walked along with rifles hanging from their bodies. There were very few women in any part of the city, and those that I could see were wrapped in cloth, such that I couldn't see their face or bodies. It appeared that no building had been left untouched by bombs or war, as broken buildings lined both sides of the street. Everywhere was blowing dust. We could see groups of children occasionally on a street corner, wearing worn-out, loose-fitting clothes and plastic sandals that would have been too large to fit even me. More than half were barefoot, and those with sandals had different sizes and colors for their left and right feet. The sandals were so worn that

it was heartbreaking. Looking at those people walking along the roadside, there were so many people missing limbs that it made one wonder if this race of people was simply born with only one of each hand or foot.

There were some interviews as well. Nine out of ten people interviewed said that at least one person in their family had been killed, and any number had gone missing. They had no money or jobs. They said they simply wandered. If they were asked, "What do you think will happen in the future?" they laughed bitterly and asked "Is there 'future'?" Or turn the question on the person asking. Or spit the word "future" back at the camera without answering, as if to check to see what the sound even means. And then, there were other people like Leila, who did nothing more than stare back at the camera with empty expressions. As he moved to show a more dangerous part of the city, Mr. Tanaka explained, "From here it gets quite a bit worse." It was like an empty desert. There were several bodies wrapped in black cloth left on the ground. Mr. Tanaka got closer and flies flew up. The law and order in this place was absolutely the worst, and an interpreter explained that some people were killed simply because they were unlucky. It wasn't intended for corpses to be dumped there. The Afghani interpreter explained that this wasn't a place that anyone would want to be between evening and afternoon. He let out a laugh that showed his single black front tooth.

As the video came to an end, the scene and atmosphere clouded over the room. It was as if no one wanted to be the first to speak out. I turned my eyes away from the television, looking around this church business office that had been arranged so beautifully. I became lost as to which world was truly real.

Mr. Tanaka was the first to stand up and break the silence. He turning off the television and prepared his slide machine and camera.

“That is why I thought that it was better that Leila not be present.”

A number of people from the volunteer group shook their heads and muttered, “What a terrible situation.”

“This is the condition of just one part of Afghanistan. Sadly, there is also news that is directly related to Leila.”

Mr. Tanaka took out a sheet of newspaper from his bag and continued.

“This is a newspaper published in Peshawar for Afghani citizens. Right here it’s written that, ‘According to Taliban sources, Salef Mohammed Gholam Ali, commonly known as Salef Mohammed, a commander of the Hazara people, was killed.’”

My breath stopped. Wide-eyed at what we had just heard, all of us watched Mr. Tanaka’s mouth from the corners of our eyes, immobilized. He continued.

“Unfortunately, the Taliban was made aware of Leila’s father’s hiding place. Two months ago they captured the place where he was living, and that afternoon, with crowds passing by, he was killed on the roadside. There is also witness testimony, so...”

Mr. Tanaka let out a sigh.

“It’s likely that Leila’s father’s death in Pakistan will have some influence on how the trial goes. It was no coincidence. He was tracked down and killed. Being such a close relation, this should show that there is some danger to Leila, also. That

danger clearly existing, she cannot return to her own country, nor can she go to Pakistan. Therefore, I feel this will have some positive effect on the trial.”

Mr. Tanaka took a small drink of water from a plastic bottle.

“However, how do we break the brutal reality of her father’s death to Leila? How will she respond to it?”

Mr. Tanaka wiped the sweat from his forehead with a towel. He looked down in silence, lost in thought. Staring at him, no one drew a breath. The time passed in such silence that I could have heard someone blink. After some time had passed, Mr. Tanaka drew a deep breath and raised his head. He suddenly looked very tired.

After the meeting finished, I went to the area on the church grounds where the rooms had been set-up for refugees to live. Leila came as far as the door. She greeted us in her recently improved Japanese and showed us the Afghan-style cookies that she had made that day. The nostalgic smell of almond wafted up from the small, round cookies. Though they tasted a bit sweet to my tongue—I had grown accustomed to Japanese style sweets—they were delicious.

Mr. Tanaka didn’t have the courage to suddenly tell her such terrible news, so he rambled on about this and that. As if it were a game, Mr. Tanaka continued to mindlessly waste time until there simply was none left. That days’ session finally ended without him addressing the real matter.

As we were leaving, Mr. Tanaka said with his face in his hands, “When Leila’s father was killed, it seems that there were many witnesses. They said in their statements that a recording was made. I think that we can use that as evidence for

our trial. For Leila, this isn't good news, but I do think that it is good news for her trial."

Mr. Tanaka looked like a sorry criminal who was about to commit a crime. When we reached the entrance to the station, Mr. Tanaka turned around. "I'm not going to tell Leila. In reality, he died two months ago, but she doesn't know yet. So we will wait a little while, and when we win the trial we will tell her along with the good news..." Mr. Tanaka sighed and added, "Truthfully, since her father was killed, her older brother has also gone missing."

As I slid my train ticket into the gate, I had a sudden thought. Now that Leila is all alone, would she be able to withstand having this wonderful reality suddenly ripped out from under her? The thought was spine-chilling.

12

Three weeks had gone by in a flash, as if I had been watching a movie or something. Something new had come up one-after-the-other at such breakneck speed that I hadn't even the time to really understand what was what. Since the event first happened three weeks ago, it had been writ large on the front page of every single newspaper of the world. Every person stared in blank astonishment. Even now, the image of the passenger jets piercing those buildings is replayed without interruption. All the world turns to focus on America. Even on the other side of the world, things are changing. In Taliban controlled Afghanistan, the violence and mass murder is multiplying rapidly. And today, America declared war on Afghanistan. "Once war begins, the river of refugees also begins to flow all across the

world.” With these words, Mr. Tanaka meant that this war would have some influence on Leila’s trial.

Another incident hit closer to home, covered up by the news of terror and war. Before Mr. Tanaka called about meeting to decide a course of action due to the war, I received a call from Kaneko from the church office.

“Leila’s not doing so well.”

The day before yesterday Leila had received a message from the Immigration Bureau that her father had been killed in Pakistan.

This was the first time that I had set foot in the room that Leila used. She was sitting on the floor of a small room in the rear of the grounds. Pictures that had been taken in Afghanistan were scattered all around her. Without the light turned on, the room was even smaller and darker than I had expected. But even in the darkness I could see Leila gripping the picture of her father riding a horse in her hand. Squatting down, pressing her face against the pale green cloth wrapped around her head, Leila’s shoulders shook violently. In tears, she called out something with disjointed words. It didn’t appear that she was addressing me. Refugees from other countries that were staying at the church, as well as the Japanese staff members, had rushed over and were now gathered outside of her room. They had also heard about Leila’s father and the war. I entered into the darkness of her room and stood next to the door. Without being able to do anything, I simply stared at Leila.

Leila turned around after a while, perhaps sensing people near. She noticed me standing next to the door. She nodded gently. Her elegant face had swelled up in red. I could now only see two lines where her clear, emotionless eyes were. She tried

to stop from crying when she looked at me, but tears streamed down her face again. A massive pile of tissues had been thrown away in the trashcan that was sitting in the middle of the room. Multiple empty rolls of toilet paper were on top of her futon, tossed aside and forgotten. The crying grew worse. Her voice quickly changed into something beyond the sound of a human crying. Her voice was like a wolf wandering through the night on the far side of a mountain, howling.

Periodically wiping her eyes roughly with her scarf, tears appeared again. She simply continued crying, unconscious of the fact that she had lost control of her senses. She mumbled something between sporadic breaths. It was incredibly difficult to make out what she was saying. Maybe she had intentionally used a pronunciation that was close to Persian so that I could understand her words when I had been interpreting. I could only watch her. I stood there unable to do anything at all. The people that had gathered around the door could also only watch in silence. The ends of the pale green cloth had become crumpled and stained with tears.

Mr. Tanaka came a bit later than the scheduled time. He walked through the door while wiping the sweat from his face with a hand towel. The heat of summer had already passed, but it was still hot for his round body to rush about. When Mr. Tanaka arrived, the people who had gathered around the door naturally parted. Mr. Tanaka approached Leila with a concerned look.

“This is really hard, isn’t it?”

He seemed to speak to her as if he wasn’t sure what to say. I wasn’t sure if she could hear what he was saying. Leila gave no reply, as if she couldn’t understand the words that people said to her.

“She’s been like this since I came here,” I said.

“Is that so?”

Mr. Tanaka let out a sigh. He watched over her in silence. If she could come around to us, we could start the session. But Leila, after hearing about her father, had fallen into a nervous shock and couldn’t do anything to stop from crying.

Thinking that it would be difficult to speak with Leila until she calmed down, Mr. Tanaka decided to come back later and left the room. I left with him to walk him to the entrance of the church, leaving Leila behind.

“Isn’t Afghanistan under attack now? That war will likely continue on for a while, so people who are applying for refugee status won’t be able to go back. If that’s the case, this will certainly have some influence on the results of being confirmed as a refugee.”

“Actually, I had wanted to talk about a serious matter on just that topic today.”

Mr. Tanaka took the towel out of his pocket again.

“What happened?”

“The coordinated terror attacks that happened recently are connected to the Afghan people. With the kind of planning that went into such a vicious attack—targeting people who have committed no crimes—the world is looking at the people of Afghanistan harshly. America has entered into this war and for that reason refugee status is not being granted. Truthfully, Afghan people have now been labeled dangerous killers and the trial has become even more difficult. If necessary, it’s even possible to consider that Afghan people will be sent back.”

“Deportation? At a time like this?”

“Well, I don’t think that it will happen, but...”

“But, the Taliban are the ones with connections to terrorism, right? There wasn’t a single Hazara person connected, was there?”

“This isn’t a problem of whether they are Hazara or Pashtun. It’s not as if people around the world are aware that all those different people live in Afghanistan! It’s now a problem for all Afghan people!”

“But...”

Not accepting his explanation, Mr. Tanaka continued.

“Actually, the other day all Afghan people living in Japan were recalled to the Immigration Bureau. They are looking at whether or not they have connections to the Taliban, even trying to search out where they are living!”

Before I could even open my mouth, Mr. Tanaka shook his head and stared at me.

“There’s nothing we can do about it. For now, we have to think about what kind of appeal we have to make to the court. We have to think about what will happen in the future. It’s strange to say, but Leila’s father being killed by the Taliban could be unexpectedly helpful in these conditions. You could even call it good timing. Well, we can’t say anything about it quite yet. First, we just have to hope that this all leads in a good direction.”

Mr. Tanaka scratched his head. When he opened the door to the entrance he said, “Well, I’ll call you again soon. I’ll need you to interpret for me.” He left me with those words.

As I walked back to Leila's room, I thought it best not to tell her about what Mr. Tanaka had just said. Who could comprehend such a meaningless conversation? For so many years, the Hazara people had been persecuted, tortured, murdered, by the Taliban. Eventually they ran. I couldn't help but feel a strange sensation come over my body when I thought about the connection between the Hazara people and the Taliban.

13

It had been one week since America had begun its attack on Afghanistan. Every day, the news had been filled with indefinite reports of which city Bin Laden was hiding in, or whether he had escaped into the mountains, or how many thousands of innocent Afghan women and children had been killed by American bombs. A week passed without me knowing how Leila was doing. Then, one Monday, my cell phone rang as I sat around my house.

"Hello?"

"Ahh, this is Mr. Tanaka."

"Oh! Why..."

"We don't have a lot of time to talk! I'm sorry, but this morning Leila was imprisoned in the detention center. If possible, I'd like you to interpret first thing tomorrow morning."

Mr. Tanaka's mouth was running many times faster than usual, and I couldn't quite catch what he had said. For a moment, I couldn't believe my ears.

"What?! Imprisoned?"

“Today was one of the days that she was supposed to stamp her conditional release form, but when I went to the church she had already been arrested.”

“Why was she imprisoned all of a sudden?”

“She lost her first court case. That’s reason enough for them to imprison her.”

Even at a time like this, it was just like Mr. Tanaka to be able to analyze things so coldly.

“But the appeal to the supreme court...”

“That’s right. With that she might gain conditional release again. So it’s possible that this arrest is only temporary. But without first visiting the detention center, we won’t know with any confidence.”

In his excitement, Mr. Tanaka continued speaking in formal language.

“I will be waiting outside the gate of the detention center tomorrow before nine o’clock.”

“I understand.”

The next day, I met Mr. Tanaka outside the gate of the detention center. I hadn’t slept well the night before, so I had huge bags under my eyes. As we entered the center together, I heard from Mr. Tanaka that any number of the other Afghan refugee applicants had also been suddenly imprisoned. As he signed the form needed to meet Leila, he sighed and said how difficult the conditions were for refugees since 9/11. He finished filling out the form and stamped it with his seal.

As we moved towards the waiting room, Mr. Tanaka turned around and muttered, “I’m worried about how things will unfold from now.”

This was the first time that I had seen Mr. Tanaka so worried. I wondered how things would turn out after all of this.

14

My head was spinning from the massive cocktail that I had drunk. As soon as I opened the door to my room and took one step in, I threw my body onto my bed, too tired to take off my clothes. The number of drinking parties had increased since the start of our school's second semester. Not only that, but since I had some pocket money from my interpreting work, I had started drinking heavily. I checked my cell phone. Five-thirty. I had signed up for my first morning class in quite a long time and knew that I had to get a little sleep. I rolled over on my bed and closed my eyes. The exact moment that I was starting to fall asleep, my cell phone rang. Who calls at this time?! "Maybe it's some bad news from home," I thought. I sprang out of bed, reaching out into the darkness frantically to find my phone.

"Good morning. It's Mr. Tanaka. I'm really sorry to call you right now." This was the first time that he had called me since Leila had been arrested two weeks ago.

"Oh, Mr. Tanaka!"

Without trying to hide my surprise, I looked over at the hands on my clock. It was before six.

"I'm really very sorry, but this is an emergency. Can I ask you to interpret tomorrow? Or really, today?"

"You mean from right now?"

I had finally signed up for a morning class, but now...

“Yes, please!”

“What happened?”

“It would be a long explanation, so I’ll cut to the point. I just got a call from Kaneko and it’s possible that Leila... It could be that they are really going to send her back. She said it would happen today.”

Mr. Tanaka’s voice sounded exhausted.

“What? She’s being deported?!”

In a single moment all my drowsiness and drunkenness disappeared.

“It’s possible,” Mr. Tanaka replied in a small voice. After this whole year, putting every ounce of hard work into this case, and the result is deportation?

“Can you believe that they would send her back in these circumstances?!”

“Unfortunately, I can believe it.”

I wasn’t sure what he wanted to say, but he appeared to be wrestling with a particularly strong opponent: a country and its laws.

It was as if I was hearing Mr. Tanaka’s voice from a distance.

After I hung up, I started putting on those things that were right in front of my eyes. I had no idea where my interpreting bag had gone. I haphazardly collected those things that I could see around me and stuffed them into a small bag. I ran out the door of my bedroom while trying in a flurry to straighten my tousled hair. I grabbed the jacket that was hanging off of the doorknob and slipped into my shoes. I ran down the street to the station. I could feel myself losing the fight against my hangover.

In the airport, Kaneko told Mr. Tanaka and myself that, after getting together for the first time with a lawyer from the Immigration Bureau, we might have a very short amount of time to meet with Leila. An officer from the Bureau explained to Mr. Tanaka and Kaneko that this was not a deportation, but a decision that Leila herself had made. Holding some doubt, Mr. Tanaka requested that he and I speak directly with Leila.

In the corner of the security room inside the airport, Leila sat in a chair looking down, her head wrapped in the same khaki colored cloth as the day that we had first met her. A bag was sitting at her feet tied closed with a string. It had turned from black to nearly white with age. It was as if something sharp had pierced my chest thinking that a girl around my age could take everything that she owned and make do with a bag so small and tattered.

“Leila. We...”

My voice was suddenly caught in my throat. For some reason I couldn’t get the simplest of words out of my mouth, “We came here for you.”

As I stared at Leila in silence, I could feel through my whole body that every word I said was passing through her tremendous glare. The echo of the gulp that I made as I swallowed echoed inside my ear. I could hear Mr. Tanaka heaving violently behind me from both his agitation and the weight of his heavy, middle-aged body. He had forgot even to wipe his forehead with the towel gripped in his hand. Why was he here this early in the morning, in an airport this far from the city? It went beyond even the spirit of volunteerism. What was the true intention hidden behind this labored breathing? Killing time? A hobby? Or to speak bluntly, to gain

some publicity? To make connections? To escape from his firm? Why was Kaneko from the church's business office here so early and far away, standing next to me with that worried look in her eyes? This woman, trying her hardest to swallow her tears, has family at home. She has two beautiful children. At this exact moment in the future she'll be putting *tamagoyaki* in bento boxes. No matter how you describe a volunteer group, it is entirely unnecessary to take things this far. But why are they here? Was it to make sure that the volunteer group managed itself better after falling into such financial hardships? Or more likely to appeal to some magnanimous sponsor? Or maybe to make it to the front-page of the newspaper?

In these two years, I never got the feeling that these two had any devotion beyond volunteer work. Their lamenting, brooding faces were taking it too far. Why did they come this far?

I had no idea. I hadn't thought about it once until now.

In this room where I can hardly breathe the heavy air, thick with despair and sadness, one thing that can be said for certain: There is one person here far removed from those others who are volunteers. This person received money from the very first second of the first minute of meeting this girl. Can this person say at this very moment that she is worried for this girl? This person who will submit a claim for hourly pay for this very moment. Is there something that this person, *me*, can say to Leila? Unconsciously, my cheeks had started to get progressively warmer. Even though I was working, I fell into a silence without even realizing what I was doing.

"Are you okay?"

Mr. Tanaka was the first to notice my condition. He seemed worried about me.

“Y...Yes...”

I answered in a voice that used every ounce of strength that I could muster from my throat. Leila looked up. She stared at me with those expressionless eyes. Her nose was ribbed with sinews. Her face was elegant. Deep and narrow wrinkles around her mouth, rough skin that never lost its sunburned color. This was the first time that I thought all of them were beautiful. I was caught in this empty gaze as if it were the very first time I had seen it in my life. In only a few hours that gaze will instead see the mountains of corpses tossed behind the wreckage of a back alley, flies buzzing all around them. I felt sick the moment that I started thinking about that, as if being pressed down by something. My eyes started to blur as I stared at Leila.

Why was I crying? Even I didn't know. Did that expressionless gaze overwhelm me? Or was it unbearable to think of how sad it was that this girl was facing an unknown, dangerous fate? Or perhaps was it that I had put such incredible effort into this job, propped up by the mountain of money that I was receiving, but now felt the miserable guilt of always coming up short when it came time to say, “This is for Leila”?

I don't know. But I couldn't hold back my overflowing tears. Was this really my halting breath? Could I no longer breathe properly?

An airport police officer took a step forward. He directed me to a table surrounded by chairs with a kind look. “Sit down, first of all. There's still a little time.”

“These are truly rough conditions.” Mr. Tanaka was trying to soothe me with his sad voice. “You always accompanied me to interpret, regardless of what was happening.”

All of these people around me were showing me kindness, consoling what must have looked like a broken heart. How could they understand why I was crying? Just thinking of it made me burst into tears again. I sat down in the chair, washed over by their concern. Someone handed me a pack of pocket tissues. I sat down in the chair and wiped away the tears, trying to return my breathing to a regular rhythm. Time seemed to stop without my noticing as I tried to calm myself down. The departure time drew near.

This was the most important time. If I didn’t interpret now nothing would get across. I felt the weight of my responsibility and finally shook off the waves of tears that were assailing me. I lifted my face and looked at Leila in profile as she stared at the ground.

Before I could open my mouth, Leila suddenly muttered something in a tiny voice.

“I...”

Some seconds passed in silence.

“What did she say just now?”

Sitting next to me, Mr. Tanaka couldn't wait any longer.

“Leila, what was that?”

Mustering all of my strength, I asked Leila.

"I saw. From the crack in the door of the room next to her, I watched the whole time."

I heard Leila's dry, husky voice from a distance.

Mr. Tanaka asked impatiently from next to me, "What did she say? What did she say?" Leila continued in a voice difficult to hear.

"First, five men from the Taliban knocked down the door and flooded in, their faces covered with black cloth. They grabbed my mother in the living room by the hair and dragged her out into the middle of the room. They threw her to the ground, kicking her I don't know how many times. Then one of the men, he seemed like the boss, asked her, 'Where is your husband?' The very second that my mother said, 'Even if I did know anything, do you think I would tell you people?' he hit her across the head with the butt of his rifle. I saw a small line of blood run down her forehead. I started crying and my vision got hazy. I heard the man say, 'If you don't tell us we will kill you.' I was too scared to even blink. My mother didn't seem like she was going to answer him. But I heard a small voice mutter 'Salam.' The boss said, 'Kill her,' and any number of people started punching and kicking her. They hit her in the head with butts of their rifles so many times. I was in the next room the entire time. I watched everything from a hole in the wall."

There was nothing in Leila's eyes, not even tears. She was again the young, emotionless girl that I had first met, all of her feelings destroyed.

"Those men grabbed her by the hair and dragged her out of the room. After she'd said her final words, 'Salam,' they'd beaten her so badly that she must have lost consciousness, because she didn't say anything else. After they cut her clothes

off with a long knife in the garden, the slammed open the door of car parked outside of my house and dragged her into it.”

Unable to believe the words that I was hearing, I could only stare at Leila. Mr. Tanaka, also wrapped up in this girl’s expression, wasn’t even asking about what she said anymore. Even the immigration and airport police officers stood in silence.

“I saw everything. I didn’t do anything. She had told me, ‘If those men come, you go and hide. I will protect my daughter.’ And still, knowing that my mother was being murdered, all I could do was sit there in silence.”

I stared at her, mouth agape. Leila looked up and glanced at me.

“A long time ago my mother told me that no matter what happened in life, I had to say ‘Salam.’ It’s all fate, so I just have to accept it.”

Leila turned her gaze away and starred into the distance.

“My mother is calling to me. I understand now. I want to be where my mother is. It doesn’t matter if I go back to Afghanistan.”

Without meeting our eyes, Leila turned around and stood up, facing the door that the airport police officer was standing beside. I wanted to yell, “Wait!” but no sound came from my throat. The officers started moving around the room and opened the door in front of Leila. Before Leila disappeared into the hallway beyond the door, she stopped for a moment and muttered in her husky voice, “Arigatou.” It was a voice that had finally come from the depths of her throat where she was chocking back her tears. Trying to resist being overcome by emotion again, I closed my eyes tightly. When I opened them again, I saw for the last time a sliver of brown

ethnic garb disappear as the door closed. I knew that Leila had gone to the other side.

Where will Leila go? What will a young girl without a family face there? The words that she had said came back to me, “No matter what happened in life, I had to say ‘Salam.’” Leila said these words as she smiled with her khaki colored eyes, wrapped in ethnic clothing that looked like hand-me-downs. I would have to translate these words with more detail.

Everything after that came to a close in a moment. Like the parting scene in a movie, I followed behind Mr. Tanaka as he walked through the airport, asking again and again about Leila.

“You can’t do anything else? You can’t stop this? Mr. Tanaka?”

Unable to bring Leila back, unable to fight that strong entity that decided fate, Mr. Tanaka’s powerless, round body seemed to shrink. I wanted to grill him as he stood next to me, looking up in the sky with an empty expression.

“The government is your opponent.”

Mr. Tanaka’s voice was filled with sadness.

“Why? Can you even give a proper goodbye in a situation like this?”

“The situation isn’t the problem.”

I heard him speaking as if to himself. No, the situation certainly wasn’t the problem. But that didn’t really matter. I wanted some parting that left me satisfied. Assaulted by this heavy sense of guilt, I wanted a parting where everyone hugged each other and cried and cried and cried. Anything was better than this strange feeling that was caught in my throat, even if it meant crying my way to relief.

“Mr. Tanaka, you can’t do anything?”

I looked at Mr. Tanaka as he turned to face me. This lonely man who stood beside me looked incredibly weak. He looked as small and weak as a bug that I could crush under my heel. And he calls himself a lawyer! It was awful, but I couldn’t even see that anymore.

“You’re a lawyer, aren’t you?!”

My tone of voice got harsher as Mr. Tanaka stood defenseless in silence.

Mr. Tanaka let out a long sigh.

“Lawyers have very little power.”

He replied to himself with a sad answer that wasn’t really an answer at all.

“Why was she deported? Why wasn’t she approved as a refugee?”

What was the final appeal of those expressionless pupils that were now burned into my mind? Even if I cornered Mr. Tanaka as he stared sadly into the corridor which Leila disappeared, I wouldn’t come to any resolution. That’s enough. I understand. All I wanted was someone to ease this feeling of emptiness that comes with remembering the last time that I stared into those pupils.

“Why?”

I stared at Mr. Tanaka as he continued to stand in silence. In this moment of disappointment he wouldn’t even defend himself. A feeling of sympathy came back to me and I felt like an empty shell of myself. I followed his eyes and stared down the passageway. I didn’t have the power to interrogate him any further. It was all over.

From beside me I heard a voice speak quietly and honestly.

“Perhaps Japan is a cold country.”

I turned. Mr. Tanaka’s eyes were watery as they stared down the hallway. Suddenly, as if he had grown tired of staring at the passageway, he shifted his gaze. Without looking at me, Mr. Tanaka began to wipe his tears away with a towel even more crumpled than before. He mumbled quietly, “You did good work.”

A cold wind blew through the airport announcing the start of winter.

I stood alone in the airport and watched Mr. Tanaka as he left. His back was hunched over as he stared down at the ground while walking. This man, a pacifist, was surely wandering between his feeling to help Leila and his feeling that, as a Japanese person, he must agree with the Japanese government.

Some children and their parents appeared from the direction that Mr. Tanaka was walking. It was a family of four, talking excitedly about their trip to Disneyland, gift bags in hand. With Mickey Mouse Ears adorning her head, a small, cute girl of five or six was walking, dragging behind her a giant stuffed Poo doll that was bigger than she was. She was laughing with joy, her mouth wide open. Her laughing face was bursting open so wide that even from this distance I could see the back of her throat.

I looked away.

Well, time to go home.

Appendix B¹⁶⁹

White Paper

1

Next to the gate was a watchman who was over eighty years old. He was in the same place as always, sleeping in a metal chair. A single bee was buzzing aimlessly around the pure white beard that was adhering to his chest. It seemed that it couldn't quite find the ideal point to make a landing. Behind the man, buildings enclosed the street. Sitting on the frame of a broken window on the first floor of a building across the street, two pigeons were snuggled up to each other like friends. Weeds were growing out from between the brown bricks in the wall. Above the deserted second floor veranda, as if they were this building's rulers, were several hundred pigeons. Their wings danced in the sky. Until the war started, this building was a thread factory for rugs. Before the lines "For God, For Country" blared out of the capital city's broadcast station, the true believers had shuttered the factory, and left for war, wrapped in headbands that read: "YAA-ALLAH!"

A blue jeep was parked in front of the factory, the paint peeling away in spots to reveal the color of the metal body. There were no tires on any of the four wheels. The dust-covered windshield had a large crack in it that made it look like a spider's web. The condition implied that it had not been parked. Rather, it had been abandoned. These days, tires were goods that couldn't be sacrificed. Around here a car with tires that were in good condition was precious. They were essential in constructing makeshift bases in the war.

¹⁶⁹ This translation is a tentative first draft. Not intended for attribution, citation, or publishing of any kind.

“And thus, the man raised his staff and, in a loud voice, said, ‘Ocean, open!’”

The teacher’s high voice reverberated through the classroom.

I covered a yawn with my hand as I gazed out the window. I was tired. During this class period, the boy students were in Islam class, while—because of a shortage of teachers—the lower level girl students were gathered in the corner of the same room for independent study in math. I was always tired during independent study.

More than anything, it was the stifling air in the classroom that made me more tired. I opened my mouth wide and sucked a large amount of oxygen into my lungs. Even sitting next to the window in this tiny room packed full of eighty people, the amount of oxygen I inhaled wasn’t enough.

Far off in the front of the room, the teacher leaned against the ancient metal desk, reading from an open book in singsong. In his pose, leaning against the desk, his skin was so pale that it made me think that his circulation had been cut off. His face was so thin that his cheekbones were popping out. Looking at him from this angle made him look less like a human being and more like a failed sculpture from ancient Rome. The content of his reading was entirely unenticing because of the monotonous tone that he had been using from the start. At this rate, his unchanging voice sounded to me like a lullaby. Forgetting about the calculations for my study, I wanted to take a nap.

I crossed my arms on the top of my desk. So many people had carved their names on the face of this old desk. The sharp edges pierced my sleeves and pricked my arms. It hurt a little. I rested my face in the concave space that was created between my two crossed arms. I turned and faced the window. As my gaze got lower,

my view out the window shrank. The old man by the gate and the bee disappeared from my field of vision.

Instead, I could see the branches of the single tree in the schoolyard near the gate. They were withering away in front of the wall, rustling softly in the wind.

“Whereupon, Moses raised both of his hands again, inviting all of the people.”

I followed the branch of the tree, imagining if a swing had been tied to it. The swing swayed lightly. The teacher continued.

“That staff was picked up and cherished by believers. It is now carefully stored in a museum in Istanbul.”

“No way! Is that what happened?!” I thought as the teacher’s lecture caught my attention for one second before my brain fell asleep, swept away by sleep again.

However, at this proclamation the girls started kicking up a commotion like broken instruments, even though it was the boy’s class and it had nothing to do with their math self-study.

“What?! The staff was made of wood, right?” “How in the world could they keep a wooden staff in perfect condition for more than, like, two-thousand years?!” “Aren’t you just making that up?!”

I could hear all these comments popping up here and there.

“Quiet!” The teacher’s monotone voice suddenly became sharp.

“If you don’t do you’re self-study, you’re all going to get a test!” The teacher said this in a high voice as he looked down at the book. He had said the magic word. All of the girls fell silent as if their switches had been flipped simultaneously.

In this area, women taught girl's classes until college. Because of the teacher shortage, girls were now being taught by men. However, this teacher, perhaps because he was quiet, or because he didn't have any self-confidence, never turned to face the girls. They felt like they could say anything.

I looked outside again. Behind a withering tree, a cat was walking on the top of the wall. Its body was entirely black except for the tips of its front paws, which were white. At this distance, I couldn't clearly see its face, but I could see that it had no tail. A couple years ago, one cat had the misfortune of being caught by a group of terrible children who were playing soccer in the street. They tied a rag that had been soaked through with gasoline to its tail and set it alight. It twisted and spun its body violently in an effort to get away from the fire while the children burst into laughter then ran off and disappeared. It escaped death but lost its tail.

"Can't you all study a bit more? As always, your test scores are awful! It makes me not even want to grade them!" The teacher had started handing out the results of the tests that the boys had taken the week before.

"The effort that you put in now is all for the future. If you put in the effort now, you will absolutely see results sometime." Completely transformed from his previous monotone, the teacher had started into his usual "your-bright-future" lecture in an agitated voice. I wondered if these boys, who are going to end up helping their parents as soon as they graduate from this school, have any interest in their "bright futures." Half of the students here had their classes and careers decided for them ages ago. This excitable teacher was just spraying his spit for no reason.

“All of you live in a present that is like a blank sheet of paper. It’s not bad, not good. From now on, all of you will write many different things on this blank piece of paper. You will paint in many different colors. You will draw many different pictures. You have to work hard now so that in the future, when you are fifty, sixty years old, you can look back at those pictures that you yourself drew and think to yourself that you have lived a worthwhile life.” The volume of the teachers voice steadily grew louder. I covered another yawn with my hand. Maybe it was because of how his teeth were lined up, but the teacher was so excited that his spit was flying further than usual.

“Oh! That one made it to the second row. Isn’t that a new record?” The girls next to me giggled. Thanks to the blackboard behind where he was standing, we could easily make out how far the white spit was flying from back here.

“Let’s paint your blank sheets with a color that you won’t regret!”

I wondered what color was a color that I wouldn’t regret. Where does a life without regret begin? Getting into college? In this little town of less than twenty thousand people, you can’t even see the word “university.” Isn’t it good enough when parents and children are junior high school graduates? And in the girls’ cases it’s even more serious. As soon as school lets out they have to go straight home, either to help their mothers, or to knit the clothes that will become their children’s in preparation for marriage. As far as grades, there isn’t even a *kid* who cares, why would a parent?

“And the one perfect score goes to...” The teacher’s tone changed suddenly. I turned away from the window and looked at the boy’s block. I was wondering who got a perfect score.

“Hasan! Give him a hand!” The teacher gave a satisfied look. A burst of loud clapping and whistles came from the boy’s block. They were always ready and willing when it came to making a racket.

With this, a thin boy stood up from the middle of the other side of the class.

“I never get tired of grading Hasan’s tests. You should all learn from him!” The teacher gave a rare glance back at the girl’s section. That boy named Hasan went up to the blackboard in silence and took his graded test paper from the teacher. I craned my neck to look at him. Brown hair was hanging down to his ears. His thin body was wrapped in a pair of loose-fitting black pants. They swayed considerably as he walked.

The failed Roman statue watched Hasan happily as he returned to his seat. His cheeks flushed a little and his eyes sparkled. It looked as if he had discovered the results of his class.

The afternoon bell rang. Immediately after that the sound of *azan* echoed through the school grounds. It was the cue to begin afternoon prayers. The sound was coming from a speaker that had been set-up in in the town’s only mosque, which stood directly beside the school. The students began to prepare for prayers and faced the ablution taps in the rear yard.

In preparation for prayers, the boys formed a long line in front of the taps to perform *wudu*. By washing their hands and feet, they can meet with God with a pure

body. I sat down on the ground beside the wall that stood opposite the taps. I opened the lunch bag that my mother had prepared for me this morning and took a sandwich out of a plastic bag.

In front of the taps, the boys were rolling up their sleeves and pant legs, then taking off their shoes. If the season was nice, *wudu* could be fun. In the cold periods of autumn and winter, however, when the temperature dropped below freezing, running cold water over our hands and feet was a considerable ascetic practice. In this school, the boys were required to perform afternoon prayers. The period directly following *azan* was when one could come closest to god. However, because prayers could sometimes take so much time, the majority of the girls would wait until they got home to pray. In any case, it was required to wet part of one's hair to perform *wudu*, which meant that the girls would have to remove the scarves that they were always wearing. In order to stop the girls from exposing their hair in a public place, they weren't allowed to perform *wudu* in the same area as the boys. For those girls that wanted to pray in the afternoon, a bucket of water had been placed in the bathroom inside of the school. More often than not, there would be some incident. Curious boys with nothing better to do would sneak into the bathroom to catch a glimpse of the girls as they took off their scarves. They would stack the broken chairs that had been left in the rear yard on top of each other to peek through the high windows that looked into the bathrooms. The girls would start screaming and covering their faces in a flurry when they noticed the single eye peeking through the corner of the window. They had several ways of tackling the problem, including throwing the water bucket at the window.

The boys too would panic and, in their excitement, jump down from the window to make an escape. However, there was usually a teacher hiding in the hallways as a monitor who would catch them and dole out punishments.

I started eating my sandwich as I looked at the line of boys lined up for *wudu*. It was the same pattern as always. The best students went first. They performed *wudu* seriously and turned towards the prayer room decorously. Then, appearing late from behind those students, were those troublemakers who stood out. They would start out as if performing *wudu*, but the spirit of play took over as soon as they saw the water. They would snip the thread that was bringing everyone closer to god, turning the water intended for *wudu* into the ammo for a water fight. Each one of the many groups would cling to a single tap. Since the taps were only dripping water, they would open them up full-blast. Even that pressure wasn't enough, so they cupped their hands under the tap, forcing the water through a tiny gap, and started spraying with even more force. A shift of the finger could spray water over a whole area, soaking the other groups. The monitor teacher appeared. I could see the punishments in his eyes. Today's water fight had already started.

Absorbed in the water fight that was unfolding right before my eyes, I felt a shadow come across my face. It stretched out onto the ground directly in front of me, taking the form of a person.

I lifted my face up. Someone was standing only a couple of feet in front of me. Because of the glare coming from behind the person, I couldn't make out their face. Even without seeing their face, I could tell that they weren't wearing the hijab that was part of our uniform. Could it possibly be a boy?

I acted as if I hadn't noticed him. The shadow shifted slightly. I wondered if he will go away.

I swallowed the last of my sandwich in one gulp with a mouthful of saliva.

The shadow took one step closer.

"Uhh..." He said something!

Without thinking, I turned away. No one was there.

Certainly this shadow didn't really have the urge to speak. It was unavoidable that the school had become co-ed, but it was still forbidden for boys and girls to speak. If a teacher saw us, I'd be expelled.

"You... Your..." He said something again! He was clearly speaking to me. Overwhelmed by this occurrence, I shot up from the place where I was sitting.

Perhaps surprised by my actions, the boy took a step back. He was wrapped in silence.

I stared at this boy dumbfounded, unsure of what I should do. It was the boy named Hasan from the previous class!

What would such an excellent student be doing here? Shouldn't he be running away before someone sees him? My brain stopped thinking in that instant. I couldn't make any movement. I could only stand up against the wall behind me, staring at Hasan in blank amazement as he stood in front of me.

Hasan didn't say anything either. He looked at me with eyes wide open. Little droplets of sweat glimmered on his forehead. He was taller than I had anticipated. He was probably almost six feet tall. Soft, brown eyelashes, like those of a girl, surrounded his eyes. His eyelashes were even longer than mine.

“When?” His mouth moved.

What? My brain was utterly confused as it grinded to a halt.

“Father...” Hasan added this. I noticed his voice quivering a bit. But I still couldn’t make out what he was trying to say.

Some time passed in silence.

“When does your father come home?” His faltering, quiet voice finally produced a sentence.

“What?” Without thinking I asked him to repeat such an unclear question.

“When?” Hasan asked me again.

My father? What did he want with my father? I was staring at Hasan blankly when a voice called out from behind him.

“Hasan!” I took my eyes off of Hasan. Far behind Hasan stood the teacher from the previous class looking at us.

He would definitely punish us. What now?

“When? When?” Hasan was waving his arms, pressuring me.

With my eyes pegged to the teacher coming up behind us, the word “Thursday” escaped my lips.

With that, Hasan turned around and started to run away in escape.

I watched as the teacher chased Hasan, running by shuffling his feet. Under my hijab, a single drop of sweat rolled down my neck. Still leaning against the wall, I slid down and sat on the ground. I could never tell anyone that I talked to a boy in the rear yard of the school.

For some reason, my breath was heaving as if I had just run a marathon.

As a field medic, my father had been deployed to the large hospital in the town nearest to the front lines six months ago. Three months later, my mother and myself moved from the capital city of Tehran to this tiny village. Compared to those towns nearby where missiles sometimes fell after passing over the front lines, this town was comparatively safe. Even though my father was stationed nearby in terms of distance, only an hour-and-a-half by car, he was only able to come home to this town once a week for three days at a time. On those occasions, my mother prepared what must have been a weeks worth of food in all kinds of dishes that lined the table.

To purchase what we needed for my father's return on Thursday, my mother and I went together to the town bazaar. The bazaar had stood for ages covered by a tall roof in a narrow street between buildings. It was like a tunnel. Now, all of the shops and stalls were lit with lightbulbs, making it relatively bright. In those ages before electricity, however, people had opened holes in various places in the roof in order for the light from outside to enter and maintain some light. Those holes still now haven't been covered. If you didn't pay attention while walking underneath the roof, occasionally a pigeon would shit on your head.

Now, this was the only place in the small town where all of the household goods were sold: food, clothes, shoes, bags, cookware, eggs, and on and on. That's why this place was always so packed. It was the only place that I could think of where everyone gathered under one roof. Due to the congestion on the streets, old folks would ride on donkeys and tough guys would push people out of the way as

they pulled their handcarts through the streets with incredible speed. If you didn't jump out of the way when they yelled out, you were bound to be actually run over.

From the very first step that I took into the entrance of the bazaar I was completely wrapped up in every kind of smell possible. From the scent of spices being mixed and the savory smell of grilled food, to the shoemaker's synthetic leather and the intense stench of the fish market. And in all of that, noise. There were shopkeepers clapping their hands and yelling out their suggestions to try to gather customers. There were workers in a carpenter's studio hammering metal. Kids were crying out to find the mother that they had lost. A housewife's haggling with a salesperson was getting heated. A wife was furious with her husband who would not give her any money.

My mother entered the vegetable shop at the very beginning of the market. Without saying anything, she went up to a mound of cucumbers and began checking them one-by-one with her hands. Keeping an eye on the man running the shop, she chose some cucumbers and put them in her bag. When she was finished with that, she started putting eggplants in. "Stick some potatoes in here!" My mother said as I was daydreaming, thrusting a yellow bag for potatoes in front of my face. The floor was covered in cabbage leaves that had been trampled. I stepped over a child sitting on the floor, turning towards a small corner where the potatoes, onions, and garlic were stacked. The child threw a limp green pepper that had been sitting on the floor at my leg. I spun around and stared at him, whereupon he opened his mouth wide and let out a big laugh. His mother had left him there all alone while she desperately tried to negotiate prices on the other side of the shop. I started to pick

out as many potatoes as possible that hadn't yet grown sprouts and put them in my bag.

As we slung the large bags of vegetables over our arms and turned towards the meat shop, a chubby woman wearing a chador came into view walking in front of us. Walking step-by-step in her red sandals, her body swaying left and right, she made what looked to be difficult progress. I could see part of the brown pants that she probably wore at home sticking out of the black chador she had wrapped around her body. With every step forward, I saw a blue plastic basket swinging back and forth under her chador. In her right hand she was carrying a black plastic bag that looked heavy.

In spite of both her hands being full, her chador was still clinging tightly to her head. That was because she was using her teeth to bite closed the cloth from the inside, rather than her hands. Of her face, I could only see her nose and one of her eyes. No matter how quickly he would have tried to walk, or even run, her chador would not have shifted or fallen off of her head. As I admired the brilliant way in which she was making sure that she was keeping her button-less chador closed—despite carrying her shopping in both hands and walking with such difficulty—I noticed a man walking beside her. He was tall and thin. The tips of his brown hair made little curls and grew down to his ears. They swayed in front of his ears as he walked. I had some memory of seeing this person before. Without being able to see his face, I stared at him carefully from behind. Suddenly, the man turned to his side and said something to the woman wearing the chador as if she was his mother.

It was Hasan!

I stopped in my tracks. What had happened in the rear yard of the school this afternoon came back to me. I had completely failed to notice, but Hasan was walking with a plastic bag in his hands. It was ripped here and there, the green tips of onions sticking out of the holes. I felt my face getting hot for some reason.

“I’m going in.” When I turned around, my mother entered the meat shop, pulling me along by the sleeve.

I followed Hasan with my eyes as he slipped out of my field of vision and followed my mother into the meat shop. The moment that the sliding doors opened, they were the only ones in this area, the strong smell of blood and raw meat hit me. I instinctively covered my face. My mother faced the counter, entirely unfazed by the smell and sights. Behind the counter, some thin, skinny animal that looked like a sheep was hanging upside down. It had been skinned and half of the meat from its rump was missing. A number of flies were buzzing around it playfully. Luckily, the head and feet had been chopped off, but the spectacle of its bare body was rather grotesque.

Until I had moved to this town, I had done my shopping at the local supermarket, where meat was separated by type and weight, then neatly packed. They would never sell cranial bones, or feet, or organs. They would never tolerate this kind of sight. Going out to buy things was fun.

Still, this shop did have its own charm. When I came to this town and went with my mother for the first time to buy poultry, I had laid eyes on an even more shocking scene.

There was only one shop in this area that sold poultry. Even then, it was less a shop than it was a house that raised chickens. We entered the room that they used as a kind of breeding room. After my mother told the tall lanky man sharpening a cleaver in the shop how many pounds she wanted, without hesitation the man reached into a cage filled with many chickens making a racket and grabbed the one that looked closest in weight to the amount my mother requested by the neck and pulled it out.

“Hey lady, this one is pretty lively. She’d be perfect for dinner tonight!” Sniggering, the man lifted the chicken—who was fighting for all its life to escape its fate—into the air and showed it to us. My mother, who never would have thought that she would be shown the final moments of her future dinner, could only stare at the man in stunned silence as he grabbed the knife off of the table with one hand, while the other was gripping the bird. The man, dragging his feet along in a slow gait, moved into the part of the room that had been partitioned off with a blue vinyl curtain. In a moment I could hear the loud squawk of the chicken. In the very moment that I was trying not to inflate my imagination, I saw the thrashing of wings between the opening of the vinyl curtain and the chicken appeared running at full speed. The chicken’s wheat colored wings were almost entirely stained red and no head was attached at the neck. At the exact moment that my mother saw this, she let out a shriek. The chicken took a few more steps, stopped suddenly, then fell to floor in the middle of the store with a thud. My mother was left there, at a complete loss, looking at an unbelievable sight. Covering her mouth with her hand, she ran out of the store without thinking.

Since that day, I have not seen chicken on our table.

My mother greeted the tough looking man behind the counter. Both of his arms were tattooed.

“Ma’am, what’ll you have?” The man asked as he approached the counter from where he was leaning.

I took a peek at what was lined up densely in the showcase of the counter: Lamb’s feet, cranial bones, brains, intestines, livers. No matter what was in that showcase, there was always any number of flies madly circling the intestines.

“A pound and a half of mutton and half a pound of ground meat, please.”

The man standing behind the showcase rubbed the profusion of hair on his arms and asked, “Two pounds of meat? What’s wrong lady? You making all of our enemies dinner, too?” Then he let out a big, unpleasant laugh. Without waiting for my mother’s answer, the man grabbed a large knife from the kitchen and started to wipe it down with a dirty towel.

“Even in these tough times, you must still be getting marriage proposals for your daughter, huh?” The man said, while chopping of a chunk of meat from the rump area of the sheep that was hanging upside down from the ceiling.

“In this town, meat is a precious thing.” The man spit as he threw the meat on to the scale. The rusted metal of the scale moved slowly, stopping right around half a pound. The man wrote down the price with his finger and showed it to us.

Even though it seemed expensive, my mother took her bag out from under her chador without a word. My mother, never able to wear a chador well, snatched

the chador with one hand as it was about to fall, while the other hand grabbed her wallet as it was about to fall.

As my mother was paying the bill, I took the plastic bag filled with meat from the counter and went out the door of the meat shop.

"I forgot to buy tomatoes!" My mother said from behind me as she tallied everything that she had bought on her fingers.

I took a peek down the long, tunnel-like bazaar. As always, it was filled with people. I couldn't catch sight of the big woman in the black chador as she swayed left and right.

3

"Do you feel anything?" I could hear my father speaking through the wall.

There was no response.

"Here?" It was my father's voice again.

"Ahh...a little." A man's frail voice finally answered.

"And how about here?"

I was standing in front of a small room just before the kitchen where a low sofa had been covered in a sheet and the simplest of medical tools were laid out. I looked into the kitchen opposite me and saw my mother pouring a large glass of tea. Unlike usual, she was wearing a hijab over her head. She usually didn't cover her hair in the house. Whenever my father comes home, there are always people from the neighborhood who stop by asking for a medical exam. At those times, if my mother isn't wearing her hijab, about half of the patients will have the look on their

face as if they wonder if they had seen something they were not allowed to see and avert their gaze, mumbling “Astaghfirullah” in apology to God as they return home. Even when she wears her hijab, most of the men that come to see my father never make eye contact with my mother. They make as if avoiding the existence of women and dart into the examination room. For this reason, other than those times when the patients are women, my mother usually kills time in the kitchen.

Since moving here, this is the normal scene on a Friday morning. My father is holed up in the examination room, my mother in the kitchen, and I stand in front of the examination room on standby ready to help.

“Hmmm, until you go to a proper, large hospital and have some rehabilitation therapy...” It was my father’s voice again.

I heard a man sigh deeply.

“If I take a long absence, that means three class years also must suddenly go on vacation. Leaving this place for a long period is impossible.” Hearing the teacher’s high voice pass through the wall piqued my interest.

“In that case, could you please walk around a little? Yes, that’s fine.”

A strained voice responded to my father’s request.

I looked back into the kitchen. My mother was lining up large black dates that the previous patient had brought on a round plate. The dates and tea were for the patient. I was called over to bring the plate over soon.

“So how is it, the hospital over there?” I could hear the teacher’s voice from the middle of the room.

“Same as ever,” my father answered.

"Haven't you heard anything about the possibility of the capital being bombed any day now?" The teacher asked with great interest.

"Rumors are rumors... Please hold your breath." My father didn't show much concern about an airstrike on the capital.

This teacher, who couldn't help himself from speaking, went quiet. He must have been holding his breath.

"Last year around this time everyone was saying that the war would be done next year. How much longer will it continue?" Of course it was the teacher talking.

My mother told me to bring the tea in. When I entered the examination room, the teacher was sitting on the low sofa, straightening his shirt.

"I'm going to give you the same topical cream painkiller as always."

"Recently, even in the mosque, I've been hearing the incessant calls of young people. They are calling out for people to join the war. There is a serious shortage of fighters. If the war isn't finished by next year, they might drop the age limit for entering the army. They have already made the age to go to war fifteen, but if they drop it anymore? They would just be children, wouldn't they? Did you know that just recently they submitted a law that would force families with more than one boy to send at least one person to war?" The teacher's voice was growing agitated.

"Is that so?" I could hear my father's disinterested voice. He was always dispassionate. Was it because he had to see the terrible condition of those fighters every day at the military hospital? Or was it because he didn't have a son that had to be sent to war?

"It would be awful if that were to happen. Four years of fighting is long enough, but if that were to happen it would mean the war will go on longer. It is absolutely a law aimed at extending the war despite a lack of troops."

"Most likely, yes. Please take these tablets when you start to feel pain." My father always brought back painkillers or other medicine from the hospital.

"Thank you so much for your help, as always." The teacher said his thanks as he took the plastic bag with his medicine from my father. The teacher walked out of the room.

"Make sure you study hard." The teacher said to me as I stood in front of the room.

My father saw him to the entryway. Before he left, the teacher turned to my father.

"Out of my students, there is one that, no matter what happens, I don't want sent to war. It would be too much of a waste. To distinguish between my own students..." The teacher let out a sigh. "But I've been teaching him for eight years, and he is far and away the best. He always gets almost perfect scores. He is truly an excellent child. He's the only one that I want to send to college. Only him." As the excitement grew in his voice, spit began to spray from his mouth. The teacher continued.

"He said that he wanted to go to college, too. It seems like he wants to become a doctor. If we're talking about him, I think he can do it. Definitely. Would it be okay if I brought him with me some time? You graduated from Tehran University, didn't you doctor? It seems like he wants to apply there. But around here, there's

very little support for education. There are limits to the recommendations we can make. Because his father is fighting in the war, it would be easy for him to receive a recommendation." The teacher's excitement grew fiercely.

"Truthfully..." The teacher made to say something, but stopped for some reason.

"Truthfully?" My father seemed unusually interested in this conversation.

"Truthfully, his father went to war, but if he were to die I would be telling you this much sooner." The teacher's voice got progressively lower. "It's terrible to say, but..." The teacher added, his voice undulating with a sense of guilt.

"If he is as great as you say, he will use his own power to get accepted and become a fantastic doctor, I imagine. It doesn't seem like there needs to be any concern." My father opened the door in the entryway.

"Thank you so much. Please send your wife my regards." The teacher shook my father's hand I don't know how many times as he stepped out of the entryway.

After the teacher left, as I took the sheet from off of the low sofa and put it away, then cleaned up the glass of tea. The doorbell rang. As I walked out of the room, my mother was opening the door. I glanced outside for the second that I could see between my mother and the open door. Leaning against the brick wall across the narrow alleyway, I could see a black figure.

"Please, come in!" My mother moved out of the way nimbly. It seemed to be a patient.

“Ya-allah!” A man’s loud voice echoed through the living room. It was the voice one used upon entering another person’s home. The black figure was breathing heavily, leaning on a man. They entered the doorway slowly.

“It’s that room over there. Go right in.” My mother nimbly closed the door in the entryway and supported the side of the woman who was walking heavily.

“The chador! Quick!” My mother stared at me as I stared mindlessly at this visitor.

The person who was supporting this large woman who had come to us was Hasan. He was staring down, his arm wrapped around his mother’s side, and would not meet my eye.

I ran over and quickly took the black chador from the woman’s head. The silky chador smelled like the bazaar. After taking the chador, I saw Hasan’s mother’s face for the first time. Because she was wearing a light brown cloth on her head under the chador, her bangs were stuck to her forehead. Her face was covered in large drops of sweat. Her eyes narrowed. She looked to be in pain. She didn’t look much like Hasan, I thought.

With both my mother and Hasan on either side of her, the woman entered the examination room before I had even realized it. As soon as they entered the room, my mother shut the door.

“Okay, could I please have you lie down on the bed.” I could hear my father’s voice.

I could feel the floor shake gently as something heavy moved on it, then the thud of something large falling down. She must have been set down on the low sofa.

“Yes, that’s fine.” It was my father’s voice again.

Just after that, the door to the examination room opened and Hasan appeared. The moment that he took one step into the living room, my eyes met his. He was biting his lip, his cheeks were a little red. He dropped his head and turned directly toward the entryway. My eyes followed him as he opened the door in the entryway and walked out without saying a word. He had not shut the door after going out, so I went to close it. I could barely make out his shadow from the crack in the open door as he stood outside.

I approached the door to the examination room.

“Can you bend your knee?” My father began his examination.

After a bit, I could hear a pained groan. I could here my father’s voice immediately. “Ohhh, okay! Okay! That’s good enough.” Now my mother came out of the door as I was standing in front of it. She looked at me as I stood next to the door doing nothing.

“What are you doing?”

I said nothing and shook my head.

“Where is her son?” My mother looked around the living room.

I pointed to the entryway with my finger.

“He’s waiting outside? This may take a long time, though.” Her words hung in the air as she went back into the examination room.

I turned around and peeked in the direction of the entryway. Even through the door, hardly open an inch, I could see the shadow of the boy as he was squatting down. I wondered if he was sitting on the ground.

“Okay, now let’s turn you on your side.” I could hear my father’s voice again, then the slow sound of something moving.

“Oh, my hijab!” This was the first time that Hasan’s mother had said something. Her voice was unbefitting her body, delicate and ladylike. I wondered if her hijab had fallen from her head.

That squatting shadow that I could see through the crack in the door didn’t move at all.

“Ahh, slowly. Slowly.” It was my mother’s voice.

I could do nothing more than stand in front of the door of the examination room. I stretched out both my arms wide. I had nothing to do. I took one step closer to the entryway.

The shadow wasn’t moving at all. I stretched out my neck and peeked outside through the opening in the door.

Hasan was sitting on the ground cross-legged, leaning against the wall. He was looking down, a branch in his hand. He was writing something in the dirt in the ground.

His hand stopped moving. Had he noticed me? I nimbly pulled my head back and rushed away from the entryway.

4

The following Friday, Hasan appeared again to help his mother. After setting his mother down on the sofa in the examination room, he went outside just as before.

“Go bring your friend some tea, too.” My mother said as she entered the examination room, pointing at the large glass of tea set in the kitchen with her finger.

I entered the kitchen and set the glass of tea on a plate. I wondered if I should set some sugar cubes beside the glass. Or perhaps it was better to set some dates there? After some wavering, I set one cube of sugar and two dates on the plate beside the glass.

I peeked outside from the gap in the door. Hasan was sitting on the ground in the same pose as last time. Even from this distance, I could see the veins sticking out of his neck.

I opened the door. I wasn’t sure whether or not he noticed the door opening, but Hasan made no response. I was a bit confused. I looked at my hand that was carrying the tea. I set one foot outside. Perhaps sensing the presence of a person, Hasan finally turned towards me.

Our eyes met. For some reason, I lost the sense of feeling in the tips of my fingers. Hasan was somewhat wide-eyed, staring at me and for several seconds I stared back at him. My ears started to get hot.

Without saying anything, Hasan dropped his gaze. I took another step forward and set the plate with the tea on the ground about a foot away from Hasan. Hasan didn’t turn to look at me. Still staring down, he was twirling his thumbs. His fingers were thin and long. They were like the fingers of a girl. I went back to the door and, for the time being, went back inside.

I went into the kitchen, and started washing the cups and dishes that were sitting in the sink in place of my mother who was in the examination room helping

my father. I had nothing else to do. I was caught up on Hasan's behavior. I tried opening the door to the refrigerator. I tried cutting some bread for lunch. Because I was in such a rush I had accidentally cut all of the slices too thin. My mother would be upset.

I went to stand in the entryway again. Hasan had finished drinking the tea. The two date pits had been set on the edge of the plate like a pair of shoes. The cube of sugar was untouched.

I sat down on the ground a few feet away from Hasan. I could see the red sky of evening from the end of the alleyway. There was still a warm afternoon breeze blowing. The summer in this area was long and hot.

I could hear voices from the main road. They were rhythmically singing something in a loud voice. They were getting closer. It was the voice of a man pulling a cart, looking to collect scraps of bread. At the end of the alley, a cat was crossing the road with caution. After a little while, the boys in the neighborhood were gathering together to play soccer in the street.

"Thanks for the tea." These words rang out suddenly. But I couldn't say anything in reply. The silence continued for a moment. We couldn't find a topic of conversation. As he was grappling with his brain, Hasan suddenly blurted out, "Doctor's are pretty amazing, huh?"

I turned toward him. Hasan was still looking down. He was probably talking about my father. I nodded slightly.

I wanted to say something, but my throat was so dry that my mouth wouldn't make a sound. For a little while, time passed in silence.

“What does your dad do?” Where did this sudden burst of courage come from?

“He’s a carpenter.”

I wondered if Hasan looked like his father. He must be a tall, kind-looking carpenter.

“He’s off at war now, though,” Hasan added.

“That’s right!” Without thinking, I turned and looked at Hasan.

Hasan started to tear the skin off of a blister that was near his thumbnail. Again, there was silence. The brick wall in front of us had a large crack in it. It was the first time that I had noticed it. A single line of black ants was climbing up the wall from the ground towards the crack.

“I haven’t seen him for two years now,” Hasan blurted out again. “He sends a lot of letters though. Because we are so close to the front lines, it doesn’t take long for the letters to get here.”

“Do you want to be a carpenter in the future?” It was a completely meaningless question. I wanted to speak with Hasan a little more.

“No way!” Hasan suddenly lifted his head and looked at me. His brown eyes were sparkling. It felt like a hot liquid was flowing through my ears.

“I’m going to be a doctor!” Hasan said in a loud voice.

At this unexpected answer the heat in my ears felt as if it was gushing out now.

A doctor. From this little rural town of less than 20,000 people. Where elementary, middle, and high school were all in the same building; where they don't

even have a proper hospital; where, in a country where it didn't matter if you build a mosque only a kilometer from another one, there was only one, tiny mosque. For Friday afternoon prayers, even when people really packed in to the building, they couldn't fit everyone, so they blocked off the street in front of the mosque and laid out a vinyl sheet all the way to the property on the other side, then the people prayed along with the speakers that they had set up. Occasionally, when a truck carrying military supplies or food came down the road, kicking up a cloud of dust, there would be people praying through their coughing fits. You couldn't find a single college in a 10 mile radius, nor was there a doctor's office or even a nurse. If anyone came down with some illness, they had to go to the next town over to try to find a doctor. Wanting to become a doctor was reckless.

My mother said something. She was calling for me. If she found me here she would be angry. I stood up instantly. I opened the door and rushed inside.

On the fourth time that Hasan brought his mother to our house, my mother said, "Tell your friend to come inside," and finally gave me the order to allow Hasan inside. For some reason, it felt like I had sprouted wings on my back. I ran to the entryway as if my feet were floating. Hasan was leaning against the wall on the other side, such that he could catch a glimpse of what was going on inside through the gap in the door.

"My mother said you should come inside."

Hasan glanced at my face. Then he raised himself up on his back along the wall that he was leaning against. He made as if he would come inside. I opened the door all the way and went inside the house first.

Hasan came into the living room. Without sitting in a chair, he stood in front of the closed door of the examination room. I entered the kitchen to put tea in a glass to give to him. I heard my mother's voice as she came out of the examination room.

"Please, sit down. This will take a while."

My mother came into the kitchen.

"Would you like me to make something?" I asked.

"Sure, and prepare one to bring for the patient as well."

My mother left me with this and went back into the examination room.

I set a glass of tea on the small table near Hasan.

"Thanks." Hasan looked up. His brown eyes were drooping a little. His eyelashes were all thicker and longer than mine.

I went back to the kitchen. I picked at a black scorch mark that was stuck on the burner of the stove with one of my short finger nails. It was too ingrained for me to pick off. I wanted to try speaking with Hasan.

"Thanks for the tea," A voice called out from behind me.

Turning around, I saw Hasan standing beside the door to the kitchen holding an empty glass. I started washing it. Hasan was still standing beside the kitchen door.

"My mother is doing a little better," Hasan said first.

"That's good." I gripped the sponge tightly with my fingers.

"Since she's getting medicine every time she comes here, you are really helping her."

"Yeah," I nodded.

The silence continued on for a moment. If I didn't say anything, he would go back to the living room.

"On that subject, you want to become a doctor, right?"

"Right."

How do I continue this conversation?

"I'm going to take the entrance exam next year," Hasan started to say without my prompting him. "My teacher told me that I might be able to enter a premed department on a government scholarship."

"No way!" In spite of myself, I turned and looked at Hasan.

"If I get accepted, I'll go to Tehran," Hasan said with a prideful look on his face.

"Before I came here, I lived in Tehran."

"What? Really?" Hasan looked at me wide-eyed.

I gave a small nod. The glass that I had now washed five times while trying to get a conversation going almost slipped out of my hand. Since Hasan was staring at me, I had lost the feeling in the tips of my fingers.

"What kind of town is Tehran?"

Totally different from here. I said the first thing that popped into my head.

"Well Tehran is big, and loud, and fun. There are so many people and cars that there's always traffic jams in the evenings. But the streets are huge. There aren't any donkeys or horses, but there are big shopping centers and restaurants, and parks and movie theaters, too. There are so many places to just have fun. There is a beautiful tree-lined boulevard that runs north to south and cuts the city in two.

If you stand on that street you can see all of the mountains to the north. Snow always piles up in the winter. The view is so white and beautiful.”

The memories flew back to me like images on a screen. Where we used to live in Tehran was close to the hospital where my father worked. Unlike here, he had come home every night.

I got wound up talking with Hasan about Tehran. I couldn’t remember at all how much time had passed. We kept talking until my mother opened the door to the examination room across from us and called to Hasan, “The patient is leaving, so could you please lend a hand?”

5

I stood in front of my mother’s closet. I was staring at the many black chadors that were hanging down from hangers. There were so many designs and patterns, from the sober textured chador used for going to the market, to silky, sparkly brilliant cloth. My favorite was a sophisticated chador used for weddings and celebrations. It had a flashy design with butterflies and flowers, and the sleeves had thin gold embroidery. But my destination was just the local mosque. I always stood out. I couldn’t even get used to the style of slippers in this area. There was no way I could wear such a fancy chador.

While I was thinking this, I held out one of the chadors that had a pattern on it with my hand. I touched it lightly with my fingertips. There was definitely something different about the one with expensive fabric. It brought out desire. If I

wore this kind of chador, I would definitely stand out. My fingertips were being brainwashed by the exquisite texture of this fabric.

Suddenly, my mother's face floated up in my mind. If she found me doing this, she would be angry.

I should definitely quit what I was doing. I took down a chador that was made from the second worst fabric from its hanger.

"I'm going to the mosque!" I looked at my mother from behind as she washed dishes in the kitchen, then turned toward the entryway.

"The mosque?" My mother stuck her head out from the side of the doorway into the kitchen while wiping her hands frantically on a towel.

"Yeah." In order to avoid my mother's doubtful gaze, I was rolling up the chador in my bag.

"Why? Why the mosque?" For some reason, my mother pronounced the word "mosque" as if it were the first time she had heard it in her life.

"Ramadan is starting and all of the other kids from school are going, so I thought I might go too." I tried lying in a way that wouldn't sound silly in a Muslim household.

I could see the blank look on my mother's face, as if the question, "When did this kid become such a devout Muslim?" was passing through her mind. My mother knew that I didn't even pray five times a day. And up until we moved here, I never really fasted for Ramadan. I had been to a mosque, but only on a field trip to visit a World Heritage site that had been standing for over a thousand years. Until we moved here, our life in Tehran had been comparatively lax. Because the school that I

had been going to had students of other religions, afternoon prayers weren't compulsory. Unlike here, we never had the habit of regular 30-minute chorus reading from a chapter in the Koran every morning.

But in this little town, only two hours by car to the border of Iraq, there were many believers. Unlike those people living in comfort in the capital, half of the men here yelled out the slogan "For God! For Country!" from the bottoms of their hearts. They were the first to go to war. Ninety percent of the women here covered themselves in a chador and tried to hide their faces as best they could. Unlike the streets in Tehran, I would never see a young couple holding hands while walking in town. Even those couples that were clearly married, when they walked around town they were usually separated by about a few feet.

"My daughter is just getting sucked up in the climate, she's trying to blend in with this area." Maybe that was the explanation running through my mother's head. Parts of her face were out of place before, and now returned to their normal positions.

"That's fine, but make sure you don't come home too late." I had to control my mouth as it turned to a smile. I hid my face.

"I'll come back as soon as it's over." What was going to be over? I had no idea why was I even going to the mosque.

Before my mother could comment, I opened the front door and flew out of the house. The sunset stained everything outside a deep, monochromatic red. In front of the door, I pulled the wrinkled chador from my bag and slipped it on. Even trying to fix the chador behind my ear with a rubber band, it wouldn't settle on top

of my head and slid off. I was starting to understand how my mother felt as she tried to fight the chador every time she went out. Trying to keep the hems out of the mud in the street, I gathered up the chador in one hand and put it in place on my head with the other.

I jogged onto the main street. For some reason, I was nervous. The street was relatively empty. At this time, before sundown during Ramadan, the town became empty. Even the stray cats were on stand by, licking the tips of their paws in front of their usual entryways. Everyone would return to their homes, where their tables were lined with magnificent dishes, having spent the entire day breathing deeply into their lungs the scent of delicious food, persevering, waiting for that moment when their fast would come to an end.

I walked for a bit and came upon the bakery. This was the only place that was really prospering. People would form a long line to purchase bread for the meal that comes at the end of a day of fasting, called *iftar*. Hasan said that he would be waiting near the bakery, but I didn't want to meet him at a place like this.

I passed by the bakery and walked for a while longer. I didn't catch sight of Hasan. The sun had almost completely set and the sky suddenly grew dark. I scanned the area around me. There wasn't anyone that looked like Hasan.

Should I wait here for a while longer? I didn't have the courage to perform the outrageous act of waiting on the side of the road at evening for a man. Should I go home? But what would it mean if I came home 15 minutes after I left? My mother would pepper me with questions. I didn't have the courage to go home either. Should I try going to the mosque without Hasan? It was a little frightening to go

someplace that I have never been before alone. I scanned the area again. Why wasn't he here? Did he already go home? I was sure that I wasn't late. *Azan* was just now finishing. My steps were becoming a bit shaky. I remembered my mother's face. The pace of my feet, already slowing, came to a complete stop. There was no one in front of me. I turned around and looked behind me. A thin woman in a chador was approaching me quickly, carrying a blue plastic shopping basket stuffed full of large loaves of bread. There was no way he was wearing a woman's clothes! Though certainly, since the war first started, I had heard that many men put on the clothes of women and escaped from the borders. It wasn't impossible to pull off that role for smaller, thin men, especially because they could cover their whole faces with a chador.

With the bread sticking out of the swaying shopping basket, the woman came near me. I could hear my heart pounding in my throat. I walked forward. She was even shorter than I was. She was definitely a woman.

My shoulders drooped. I was a little angry with myself, wanting to believe that Hasan would even wear a chador to come meet me.

A dilapidated motorcycle drove by me, releasing thick black exhaust into the air. The man driving it looked at me, standing there on the sidewalk, and let out a long whistle.

It was humiliating.

I'm going home. I started fixing the length of my long chador. Just then, a large shadow appeared from the behind the wall in front of me. The shadow was nonchalantly waving its hand. I narrowed my eyes. It was Hasan!

In an instant, my hands let go of the length of chador that they had collected. My feet started moving freely. To hide my gaping mouth, I pulled the chador up in front of my nose with my hand.

Without waiting, Hasan started walking in front of me. Of course, we couldn't speak in a public place like this.

Thinking that walking about ten feet behind Hasan was enough, the large building that was the mosque finally appeared. On either side of the large dome, the tops of the two minarets were lit up. The Koran was flowing out of speakers set in all of the minarets. There were a number of men in black shirts standing in the square in front of the mosque. As I got closer, I was wrapped up in the scent of *iftar*. The scent of over-fried onions and tomatoes mixed with charred sugar and oil. It permeated the air all around me, encouraging my hunger. During Ramadan, the mosque would always distribute *iftar* after evening prayers. People connected to the mosque in some way made most of the food. In addition, when the local residents asked more of God than usual, they would make halva as a desert to acknowledge that feeling of thanks.

The mosque's regular *iftar* was delicious, and these halva were so heavy and sweet that I thought they might have five hundred calories a bite. I swooned in the smell of these appetizing treats. Wheat is fried in butter until it becomes brown and fragrant, then as it is frying, the cooks add sugar that has been dissolved in water, rose extract, and other flavoring until it becomes a ball. After it has been balled up just right, it is moved to a flat plate and chilled. Once chilled, you can make

various designs in the face of the halva with your finger. Since we only have a few opportunities to eat halva every year, it is really delicious.

Not just halva, but dates are also handed out. People with a good sense of food pull the pits out from the dates and fill the hole with exquisite walnuts. The softness of the date fruit combined with the crunch of walnuts in one's mouth gives a superb balance. Even more, the walnuts lighten the sticky sweetness of the dates. While imagining all this, my mouth had at some point filled with saliva. I swallowed, then followed Hasan as he walked through the entrance to the mosque in front of me. I finally saw Hasan's face in the bright light of the entrance. His brown hair was slightly disheveled, covering half of his forehead. He had on a light green shirt and the same black pants as always. He started taking his shoes off at the entrance to the mosque. I followed him and made to take my shoes off behind him. The moment I squatted down, a man in a black shirt suddenly started yelling from beside me. "What are you doing?! The woman's entrance is around back!" While following Hasan, I had completely forgotten what I was doing. Putting my half-removed shoes back on in a rush, I apologized to the man while running to the back of the mosque. There were also a number of women wearing chadors standing in front of the women's entrance.

I took off my shoes and put them in one of the plastic bags that were being handed out. I walked into the entrance to the mosque. This door was considerably smaller than the men's entrance. As soon as I entered, there was a stairway up to the second floor. I walked up the stairs that were covered in an old carpet, which still had the traces of old red stains. The second floor for women was actually a balcony

that went around the first floor bellow it. It was made so that we could look down on the men's floor bellow, as well as the mullah speaking in front of them.

Compared to the packed men's floor below, the women's veranda was relatively empty. I started to move to the closest spot that would allow me to see into the men's floor. At the same time, I was looking down, searching for Hasan among all of the other men.

I couldn't see him. After some time, I found a place that was good for observing the men's floor. I slid my body into a space next to a large woman who was mumbling something while turning a blue rosary in her hands. The women around me were serious, staring down, or reading out of the Koran.

Looking around at all of the women around me, I saw one young woman sitting at the end of the veranda with the front of her chador open. She was wearing heavy makeup and I could see the red clothing on her chest where her chador was spread wide. She was fairly garish. She was staring down at the first floor intently. Is that really what she was aiming at? Was she looking at the long-bearded mullah as he gave a heated sermon on Islam and twisted a rosary?

I stated looking for Hasan again. Between the heads and bodies of the men kneeling on the first floor, all I could make out was the flower pattern on the factory made carpet. In the center of all of them were heads of people covered in mostly white hair. Around them were people with healthy, pure black hair. Needless to say, it looked like the best seats in the middle were for preferred people.

The prayers had already finished. The chubby, long-bearded mullah sitting in front of everyone in a special seat was talking about Ramadan. About half of the

people were nodding with their eyes lowered. There were also some people here and there rubbing their rosaries and muttering some offerings to God, even though the prayers had ended.

“Ramadan is one month during which we can understand the feelings of those people who are too poor to eat. How difficult is it to spend an entire day without putting anything in your mouth, without drinking, restraining yourself even though you can see food right in front of you? This is the important period during which we can understand this real feeling within our own bodies. It is said that it is during this period that a person comes closest to God. Those people who are able to withstand this trial will receive a reward from God. It is that important time where the good that we have recorded is multiplied by ten. The bad, too, is multiplied by ten.”

The mullah let out a voice that briskly read through a sermon that sounded like it had come out of our *The Islamic Religion* textbook. All of the heads sitting behind the preferred seats began moving up and down in unison, nodding.

My eyes circled the room, looking for Hasan again. The people next to the four pillars that connected the first and second floors were standing because they didn't have enough room to kneel.

I caught sight of a young man, half concealed behind the pillar on the right. He was staring intently at a point on the second floor with complete disregard of his surroundings, as if he wasn't even inside of a mosque. I followed his line of sight. It led to the woman in heavy make-up sitting at the end of the second floor veranda. The man was staring up at the second floor as if the mullah's words didn't reach any

ears more than a few feet in front of him. His mouth was moving. It was incredibly bold. The woman at the end gave a small grin, deep with meaning. Then she opened and closed her chador quickly, as if it were too hot. The large area of her chest that could be seen in flickers was extremely sexy.

I craned my neck and looked down again. I finally found Hasan, standing near the entrance. He was standing up straight, listening intently to the sermon.

During the nearly hour-long sermon, *iftar* was distributed. A flat plastic dish circulated from the doorway that led to the stairs. It was covered in rice with a dish called *gheimeh* on top, which was a soup made from fried tomatoes, meat, and potatoes. A bundle of halva and black tea also went around.

Since the special food had gone around, and it seemed like the sermon was approaching its end, people were slowly starting to leave. I got up from the spot where I was sitting after seeing Hasan leave out the front entrance. I went down the long stairwell. As I stepped outside, I noticed that the area had gone completely dark. Hasan was waiting in a dark spot a bit removed from the mass of people leaving the men's entrance. I took my shoes out of the plastic bag.

I turned toward the place where Hasan was standing. As I got closer to him, he started walking without saying a word. As he approached the bakery, Hasan stopped. The area was totally dark. He stared down for a moment in silence.

"During Ramadan, I go to the mosque almost every night." Hasan said and shot me a quick glance.

I nodded. My ears were hot.

“If you feel like meeting again...” Still looking down, Hasan walked into the small alleyway.

Two or three times a week was better than lying to my mother everyday.

6

The road leading to the mosque was empty as always. Hasan was walking about five feet in front of me. His hair had grown out so that his light, brown curls bounced down to the bottoms of his ears when he walked. The veins that popped out as they crossed the muscles in his neck had now disappeared from view under his hair. The finger that was stretched out beside his loose-fitting, black pants was long and thin. Occasionally he would turn back towards me. Every time he did, he was making a funny face. One of his eyebrows would be raised up, or the bottom of his mouth hanging loose. I would start laughing uncontrollably. At that, Hasan would turn his face away from mine and pick up his pace.

This week marked the third time that we had gone to the mosque together. Next week Ramadan would come to an end. When Ramadan comes to a close, they won't serve *iftar* at the mosque any longer.

Hasan turned back towards me again. It looked like he wanted to say something. I made my steps a bit bigger. The distance between us was now about three feet.

“I'm thinking about taking the university entrance exam.”

I looked up at Hasan.

"My grades are over the minimum, and if I take the test, there's a chance that I'll pass. That's what the teacher told me."

Hasan was speaking in an unusually excited tone.

"The application deadline is almost here. If I take the exam, it sounds like there will be an interview, too. Since my father went to war, there's no obligation for me to participate. If I pass the exam, I think I can enter college."

"That's good."

"Yeah. My mother will be all alone, though." Hasan shook his head slightly.

I nodded.

"And..." Hasan turned toward me and showed me his face for a moment.

"What?" For some reason, I was nervous.

"I feel guilty, but..." The conversation went in a different direction than I thought.

"What's wrong?"

"Ninety percent of my class is going to graduate and go to war. I think I'll be the only one who goes to college."

A beat-up bike drove by us. Then there was a long whistle. I covered my face with my chador. I shortened my steps.

When we turned the corner, the tops of the mosque's minarets appeared. As we got closer, I could hear the Koran coming through the giant speakers set in all of the minarets.

"If the war ends, my family will move back to Tehran." There was nothing I could do, even now my mother wanted to move back.

"But it would be better if it ended soon," Hasan sighed.

I nodded again.

"I want my father to come back soon. Before I go to college."

We were getting close to the mosque. Hasan dropped his pace a bit.

Suddenly, the sound of sirens wailing echoed through the town. My feet stopped. We could sometimes hear the sirens from the next town over, but the sirens in this town going off was rare. As I stood there, Hasan came to my side.

"Is it some kind of mistake?"

I turned around and looked around me. About half of the people walking on the sidewalk had stopped and were looking up into the air for some reason.

"There! There!" I heard someone screaming. I looked in the direction everyone else was looking. Between the houses, I couldn't see anything other than the red sky just before the sun set.

"Can you see anything?" I asked Hasan.

Hasan was silent.

"Isn't it the same as always?" I asked again.

"The sun. It set a while ago," Hasan mumbled.

Before I could comprehend the words the Hasan had just released into the air, I was thrown to the ground as a strong explosion went off. And then, the tremendous sound of glass breaking. Instinctually, I balled up and covered my head with my hands. A few seconds later, the second large explosion. A person let out a long scream. Something massive falling to the ground. I closed my eyes as hard as I

could. Too scared to breathe. Again the sound of someone screaming. Then, seconds of silence.

“Are you okay? Are you okay?” It was Hasan’s voice. I opened my eyes. Hasan was crouched down in front of me. His face drew close to mine out of the dust that was like a fog.

I swallowed. What had happened?

“We have to go to the shelter quick!” Hasan grabbed my hand and stood up. It was the first time I had touched his hand.

“Shelter?” Did something like that exist?

One side of the street was completely covered in shattered glass. People were falling in the streets, surrounded by the dust. I started running, pulled along by Hasan. A woman was sitting on the street, raising her fists in the air then beating them on her head, screaming. A child was violently crying. I locked eyes with one of the people running beside us, white-faced. It was a middle-aged man. This all passed like a scene out of a movie. Everything was covered in dust.

“What happened?”

“It was a bomb!”

“What?” Hearing this unbelievable answer, my feet stopped moving unconsciously.

“Quick!” Hasan gave my hand a strong pull. His long, thin fingers were strong. Unconsciously, I traced the back of his hand with my thumb. I started running again. But this little town had stood for four years without a single bomb hitting! Hasan

was running with all his might. I couldn't keep up. The hand he was holding on to hurt.

"Not here. It's a little further." Hasan said quickly.

"What is?"

"The place where the bomb fell." As Hasan ran he opened his mouth wide and sucked down air. "But the next one might be here. We have to go now!" He pressed on. I couldn't catch my breath.

When we got closer to the mosque Hasan started running faster. In front of the mosque was a large mass of people. Unlike usual, now there were men and women entering together, all of them talking loudly at the same time. The ones inside were screaming and crying. When we got to the entrance, a man from the mosque was yelling at us to hurry. "Downstairs! Quick!"

Without taking our shoes off, I followed behind Hasan as we started down the stairs next to the entrance. As we were going down the stairs, the people behind us were pressing against our backs. I don't know how many times I almost fell. The stairwell was dark. I couldn't see anything in front of me. As we got to the end of the long, dark stairway, things started to get a little brighter. Little light bulbs were hanging from a low ceiling in a relatively wide space. It stunk strongly of dampness. I looked in front of me and saw dozens of eyes staring at me as I came down the staircase. The people gathered inside were strangely quiet as they stared at the stairwell.

"How is it up there?" Someone yelled out suddenly.

"After the first two there weren't any more." Hasan answered.

“Did anyone die?” Another woman asked in tears.

“As far as I could see everyone was okay.” After Hasan answered, questions started raining down upon him from everywhere. Trying to push our way forward through the crowd, someone grabbed ahold of Hasan’s sleeve. “Is the building behind the school still standing?” Before Hasan could answer, a thin older woman wedged herself between us. “Is it all over?” Hasan was about to answer but this time a large man elbowed his way into his own space and asked, “What about the bazaar?” “It’s probably fine.” Hasan answered. He took two steps forward and someone else asked “What’s it like out there? Is everything on fire?” The questions came flying in like this one after the other. The faces of the people closed up in this dim place were withering with mindless fear. Before they heard a word of news from the outside, someone new would surround us, peppering us with questions, hoping for some good news.

The narrow space in front of the entrance to this room suddenly became noisy. All the hundreds of people gathered here started talking at once. The sound of children screaming was unceasing. Half of the women smacked their hands against their faces as they cried. It was easy to see from this scene that some calamity had occurred. Still being pulled along by Hasan, we moved to the back of the room.

“Let’s wait here for now.” Hasan sat down on the ground. He was strangely calm.

In front of the wall, sandbags for making bases on the battlefield were stacked up tightly from floor to ceiling. I wondered if it was to make the walls of the shelter stronger. I sat down on the ground and leaned against the sandbags. I was

again overcome by the strong scent of dampness. Maybe the water pipes behind the wall had a hole in them.

The woman next to me was cradling a sleeping child while she held her chador against her eyes and cried silently. I remembered my mother. Where was she? What was she doing? She must be worried about me.

“My mother...”

“We should stay here until the sirens stop outside. As soon as they stop you can go home.” Hasan set his hand on my shoulder. His hand was warm.

More people came down the stairs. As soon as they got to the bottom, the people gathered in front of the stairs surrounded them and assaulted them with questions. Stuck down here, we couldn’t get a single bit of information about the outside world. In this dim space overflowing with people there was true fear. Buried how many tens of feet below the surface, this space was cut off from the outside world. If a missile hit the entrance to this shelter, the chance that we would be saved was less than zero. I would suffocate, along with hundreds of other people.

The woman sitting in front of me suddenly turned towards us. Her pure red eyes told of the intense fear hidden deep down in her chest. “My husband is a truck driver, just this morning he went to the next town to deliver supplies.”

“My husband works in that town, too, for the electric company,” came an extremely hoarse voice. “He’s always up on power lines. He said he would be coming home this weekend.”

The women sitting beside these two wiped the nose of the girl sleeping on her lap with her chador. The girl looked about eight. “My husband just went to the

front lines last week. This little one is always asking about her father, but the idea of him going to war is still so scary that I haven't said anything. When will I see him again?" The woman wrapped her arms around the girl's face tightly and started crying.

The woman next to her was scratching the top of her thick, rough hand and said, "My father and my older brother are on the front lines. I haven't had a letter from them for more than six months. Next month my brother's wife will have a child. She keeps writing letters, but there's no response. I lied to her and said that he would absolutely come home to see the child." She let out a deep sigh.

"Listen everyone!" Suddenly a loud voice echoed through the air.

With this sudden yell, the noise subsided a little. Looking towards the front, I saw a man standing on top of two wooden crates that had been stacked on top of each other in front of the stairs. From this distance, I couldn't see his face clearly. The only aspects that stood out were his thick beard and the headband wrapped around his forehead.

"Mother! Your son supports this country!" This man's voice, filled with perseverance, reached even those of us sitting in the back of the room. "My sprouting strength will protect all of us from our enemies! Your son, whom you birthed with such bravery, will give this country new life!"

Maybe it was my imagination, but the person giving this speech looked fairly young, probably in his early thirties. If he didn't have that thick beard, he would have looked younger.

“There are not enough soldiers!” The man in the headband suddenly raised his voice. Silence surrounded him. The man looked around this crowd, his pure black eyes shimmering. Somewhere in this silent air, I heard the sound of a water drop.

“We must win this unjust war that was thrust upon us! We must seek retribution for the blood that has been spilled!” As the man was yelling he raised his fist and lifted it into the dimly lit air.

“Until now, we have had volunteers and age restrictions, but there is no longer any concern for age! Now is the time for all people having the bravery to save their country, regardless of age, to go to war!”

“We will win! We have god with us! With the strength of our youth, we will win!”

In this dim air, in front of these people drowning in hopelessness, this man screaming out strong words with his hoarse voice appeared as our savior. With those words, and his strong deportment, he gave us what we needed most: some hope within ourselves.

“Now, after me! We will win!” The man raised his voice. He repeated the words as strongly as he could. This was followed immediately by the sound of clapping heard there.

“We will win!” The man yelled out again.

Some people yelled as loud as they could, “That’s right! We’ll win!”

“God supports us!”

After the man yelled this, some hundred people all cheered at once. I could feel the voice pierce to the marrow of my bones. Strong, deep.

“Louder! Stronger! Until our voices reach our enemies!” The man bellowed again.

“I offer up my blood! For god! For country!” He yelled again. Around him, people were yelling back his words. It was an astonishing echo. The sandbags that I was leaning against shook with the vibration of voices. The man continued yelling without a break. He was waving his fists in the air. People who were sitting on the ground started to stand up.

“We will win! God will protect us!” The man yelled. The crowd repeated his words. It felt like even the ground would quiver with the reverberation of voices. I even thought for a moment that this collection of voices could repel even the missiles. I wasn’t scared anymore. I had the feeling of being wrapped in something strong and warm. When I finally came to, Hasan and I were both screaming with our hands in the air.

“We will crush our enemies!” The man in the headband had become so excited that he waved his rifle in the air with one hand. Again, the crowd screamed back his words.

“God is here!” The yelling was getting stronger and stronger. Those people who were just before sitting down were now all standing. We were all thrusting our fists in the air, repeating the man’s words. The man, red-faced, fired off inspiring phrases one after another. Those hundreds of people standing before him were now all raising their fists together.

The anxiety and confusion that I was feeling before disappeared in the faces around me. Their eyes burned, their faces strong. There was no enemy we feared. Strong. Warm. It felt like the very blood running through our veins was crying out.

“Those people who write their names on this paper will be welcomed by god with joy and fortune!” The man in the headband now waved a sheet of white paper in the air.

“This is a list of those who will be soldiers. Now, the brave! For country! For god!” The crowd began to move. All the men moved forward at once to sign their names. The tips of my fingers were burning. I could hear my heart pounding in my throat. Everyone but women were writing their names on the paper. I glanced beside me. Hasan was staring at the paper as it moved from this hand to that hand, biting his lip.

7

The sirens continued on incessantly for a week. From the moment they started to the moment they stopped, if I were at home I would run and hide in the basement. If I were outside, I would run to a shelter. Those were the only two choices. Since the time that we went to the shelter under the mosque together, I haven’t been able to meet Hasan. My mother was too scared to let me take even a step outside.

Sometimes I got calls from my father. It sounds like he had to abandon the military hospital because it was a target of bombing. And even then, the bombing

continues in the next town. Bombs have damaged nearly all the roads. Travel has been suspended.

On the eighth day, the sirens finally stopped. That afternoon, my mother and I left the house for the first time in a while to go shopping for food. When we left the alley near our house to go onto the main road, my mother's walk turned into a run. She seemed scared to be outside. Having seen the town for the first time in a week, it looked even more deserted than before. There weren't any indications that missiles or anything else had fallen nearby. Still, the concussion from the blasts had blown out nearly all of the glass in the buildings. The large majority of shops were closed. Only in front of the bakery did we find a number of chador-clad women lined up. There wasn't a hint of the usual bustle. The number of cars that had been abandoned on the road was much larger than before. As always, the precious tires were all gone.

My mother grabbed my hand. We passed in front of the mosque. There was a dark green minibus parked in front of the entrance. Next to the bus was a well-built man standing on an overturned wooden fruit box. When I looked closely, he was wearing a headband and a thick beard covered the lower half of his face. It was the man who had given the speech that evening under the mosque. He was almost certainly exhorting the public fervently today, too. I wanted to hear him again. The moment that my pace dropped a bit, my mother gave my hand a strong pull. Missing my chance, we headed towards the bazaar.

On the tenth day, my mother told me it would be okay to go to school. It was the first time I could see Hasan in ten days. The next morning, when I arrived at the

school, there were dozens of students and parents gathered in front of the closed gate. On the front of the closed gate hung a piece of paper.

“Due to extraordinary circumstances, school is suspended until further notice.”

These were the only words written in the middle of the white paper. There was nothing written about when the school would open again. There was only the faint signature of the school principal in the bottom right corner. I stood in front of the gate, staring at the paper. The 80-year old guard climbed on top of the metal chair that he was always sitting on. He yelled in a voice that no one could hear, as if calling out from inside of a well. It sounded like he was trying to get the people to disperse. While he was yelling he was taken by a coughing fit. He hunched over, becoming even smaller, disappearing from view. After a moment he stood up straight and appeared again.

I searched the crowd of people gathered in front of the gate. Hasan wasn't there.

I remembered his face from the last time that I saw him. The look in his eyes as he stared at that white paper under the mosque floated through my mind. After that, I remembered how many times I had checked the minibus parked in front of the entrance to the mosque. Is it possible? Could he have put his name down later? For some reason, a shudder ran down my back.

I left all these people. I caught sight of the teacher standing a bit removed from the crowd.

“When will school start again?” I asked the teacher as he leaned against the wall of the school.

“Until the bombs stop. Maybe next week or the week after that,” the teacher said without hesitation.

“But no one really knows when the bombs will stop, do they?” A woman from behind me wedged her way between us.

“If you look at the whole of this massive country on a map, there are proper targets! The meat and fat, like mountains. Oil in the south, power in the center, the president’s house. On top of all that, half the country is on the border of Iraq. The Iraqi military knows that there’s no point in dropping missiles on this little town. Even if you add in all of the cows and sheep you can count, the population wouldn’t top 20,000!”

The woman went back to the gate after giving this answer that shocked us to our cores.

Standing here in front of the teacher, I wavered about whether it would be acceptable to ask *that* question.

He would likely know the answer.

I gathered all of my courage.

“He didn’t come today, did he?” My throat was dry.

“Who?”

“Ha...Hasan...” I swallowed.

The teacher raised one eyebrow alertly and glanced at me. It was extraordinarily bold for a girl to ask after the whereabouts of a boy to whom she had no connection. The teacher said nothing for a few seconds, staring at me.

“He went to Isfahan yesterday.”

“What?” I was even more surprised by the fact that the teacher would answer me clearly, rather than why Hasan might have gone to Isfahan.

“He went to take the entrance exam. Since the neighboring town was bombed, all of the postal service to this area has stopped. So the nearest exam centers have been portioned out to the middle of the country.”

Was it already that time of year? For some reason, I was relieved.

“It would be great if he passes, huh?”

“He’ll pass with his capabilities. If by some strange twist of fate he doesn’t pass, his father is in the military, so I think he should be able to get a scholarship. It would be wonderful if he became a great doctor, wouldn’t it?”

It wouldn’t be long before Hasan would move to Tehran. I glanced at the gate. Students and mothers were coming one after another, badgering the old man with the same questions as he was nearly dying of his coughing fit.

“It’s tough for the old guy to do it all himself.” The teacher turned towards the gate, dragging his feet.

On my way home, the minibus that was always parked in front of the mosque was gone, and in its place was parked a large truck. Behind the truck, a number of young men who were starting to grow out their beards were standing in a line. Their heads were wrapped in headbands and all of them were wearing the dark green

uniform that a soldier wears. A number of women were gathered around them wearing chadors, while someone read from the Koran in a loud voice. Around some of their necks hung wreaths of flowers, and one woman wearing a chador who looked like a mother stood out with a massive copy of the Koran in her hands. I stopped walking. The man who looked like the leader climbed into the truck. With that, the line of men started moving. These women in chadors grabbed their sons as they were about to climb on the truck and started crying. In this public space, the only kind of embrace between a man and a woman which was allowed was between a mother and her son. It was heartbreaking to see these mothers clinging to their sons as they left for war. I looked away and walked past the front of the mosque.

Three days later, the Iraq army crossed the border and invaded. The sirens went off again. This time, those missiles that went off target would frequently fall near our town. In addition, the worst that we had imagined, Tehran being bombed, felt like a countdown. Our friends and family living in Tehran started to flee to the mountains which were said to be safe, while those that could leave the country did so. With the possibility of bombing, the government released a statement declaring a state of emergency. All of the schools and colleges in the capital were shuttered.

8

Even three weeks after the sirens stopped school did not reopen, and there was no sense that the war would simply blow over. After Ramadan ended, next came Muharram. Muharram is the most important month for the believers of Shia Islam. In Islamic history, Muharram came at the end of a long, terrible war,

Muhammed's grandson, Hussein ibn Ali was killed. To commemorate this, during the period of Muharram a group of performers called *daste* will walk around the town singing songs and performing scenes of battle here and there. If you go to a bigger city, these *daste* will perform every year as professionals, with parts already decided. The finale, of course, is performed on the same day that the war is believed to have ended in history. Even in this town there are *daste*. Before, the powerful men of the town would put on black shirts, form two lines, and beat their shoulders and chests lightly with a chain while singing and walking around town. Among all of them, those that believed most strongly in their own strength were called *alam*. They would take up an extremely heavy decoration made of iron on their shoulders and walk in the middle of the *daste*. This year, as if the phrase "strong young man" had suddenly vanished, I saw no one other than women, children, and the elderly. Recently, more than half of the young people met the call and went to war. In their place, since school was canceled anyway, children started making *daste* groups in their free time. Since the *alam* were too heavy and were dangerous to carry, I didn't see anyone wearing an *alam* that was twenty centimeters longer than they were tall. Moreover, twelve or thirteen year-old boys who rode onto the stage on top of a beat-up cart played the usual parts of Hussein, riding in on a white horse, and his enemy Yazid.

During this Muharram, the mosque was not handing out *iftar* in order to prevent people from fasting. However, when I walked past the mosque, I saw that someone from town had set down a large pot and was serving everyone hot soup

that they had made at home. Occasionally there were people handing out sweet drinks, too.

For some reason, I had been walking around in front of the mosque in the evenings recently. School had been canceled, so I had free time. One evening, as I was drinking the soup that was being distributed in front of the mosque, I sensed a person near me.

When I turned, Hasan was standing beside me. I was so startled that I nearly dropped the bowl of soup that I was holding.

"I came home yesterday." Hasan, worrying about people watching, hardly looked at my face.

"Did you take the test?"

Hasan nodded slightly.

"How did it go?"

Hasan looked up and glanced at me. His eyes were sparkling. Seeing that look on his face, I broke out in a smile. Hasan laughed.

"Of course I don't know yet! They are going to send the results to the school."

"That's good."

He nodded again.

He took a square box from his pocket that was half the size of his palm.

"Stick out your hand."

When I stuck out my hand, he set the box in my palm. On top of this white box was a picture of an ancient scene. It was a picture of a famous square in Isfahan

and the castle that stood before it. From the balcony a king is watching a polo game unfold before him.

“It’s beautiful!”

“It’s a gift. It’s made out of camel bone.”

“Really?” I looked down to hide my face that had broke out into a smile. I traced the picture with my finger. It had the texture of bone.

“I got a letter from my father. He said he would come home next month!” Hasan said pleasantly.

“That’s wonderful.”

“I’m going to get some soup, too.” Hasan said this and got in the line for soup.

I looked up and watched Hasan in the line. His hair was unusually short, hanging above his ears. Did he cut it in Isfahan? Because his hair was short, I could clearly make out the veins that stuck out from his neck. I wanted to set my fingers on those veins.

As I watched Hasan as if possessed, the number of men around me increased, and I didn’t notice at all that the area where I was standing was becoming a “male zone.” As I was staring at Hasan a large woman had come up beside me.

“Astaghfirullah!” I turned around. The woman was staring at me, white-eyed, biting her lip, and muttered three times, “Astaghfirullah!”

I left the male zone in a rush.

A month passed without the school reopening. In the capital, the airstrikes calmed for a time and students started to return.

One morning, I awoke to the sound of my mother talking loudly in the living room. She was speaking with my father on the phone. Her voice was louder than usual. I came out of my room and entered the living room. The moment that my mother saw my face, she averted her eyes. She was crying for some reason. According to my father on the phone, the Iraqi military had invaded the territory near his town in one night. It was only a matter of time until the Iranian military accepted defeat. If it came to that, he could do nothing but run. My father was chosen to move with a portion of his patients to the nearest safe hospital, which was in Isfahan. Before that happened, my father ordered my mother to take me and move to his relatives' home in Isfahan.

"We can't move that soon!" I left my crying mother behind, covered my head with the chador that had been placed on a chair in the living room, and left the house.

Twenty minutes later, I was standing at the entrance to the narrow back alley that ran behind the bazaar. I had passed the front of this alley once before, but this was the first time that I entered it. I took a step into the alley. "My father said in his letter that if he came back, he would repair the big crack in our door." I remembered Hasan's words. I looked for a wooden door with a large crack in it. The third building from the entrance of the alleyway had a large horizontal crack in the wooden door. This was probably it.

Most houses in this area had small metal knockers set in the middle of the doors instead of a bell. I grabbed the metal knocker. It was cold. I stared at the old

door for a few seconds, grasping the knocker. What was I doing here? I didn't even know the answer myself.

Slowly lifting up the knocker, I lightly tapped the metal base attached to the door below it. I waited a moment. There was no reply. I tapped the door again, this time a little stronger.

Again, no reply.

I took a small step back away from the door and glanced into the window on the second floor wall above me. There was no light on. Maybe there's no one home. I brought my eye closer to the crack in the door. I could see something through the crack. As I brought my eye closer to the door, I felt the presence of a person behind the door for some reason.

I could feel a person's breath from the other side of the door. Was someone peeping out from the opening, wondering who this visitor was?

"I'm a friend of Hasan." I said in a small voice.

A few seconds later, there was the sound of the lock turning and the door opened a little.

I could only see one eye, but Hasan's mother's face appeared. After staring at me for a moment, she closed the door again. This time, I heard from behind the door the sound of the chain being removed.

The door opened just enough for a cat to pass through. A small voice urged me, "Quickly!" I turned my body sideways and squeezed my body through the opening.

Without saying anything, Hasan's mother closed the door and slid the chain in place again. While wiping her red, swollen eyes with a white chador, she started to struggle up a staircase in a small courtyard. I went up the stairs behind her. On the second floor, the stairs connected to a narrow veranda. Hasan's mother opened the door that directly faced the staircase. I followed her into the room. The curtains were closed and there was no light on. It was pitch black. Hasan's mother disappeared into the kitchen at the far end of the room. I stood in front of the door. Since she left the door to the kitchen ajar slightly, I saw a faint light come into the living from a candle that was lit in the kitchen. I looked around the room after my eyes adjusted to the darkness. On one side of the room, near the window that had been blocked out by curtains, someone sat on the floor cross-legged.

It was Hasan.

I took a few steps toward him. Hasan was silent. Sitting cross-legged, staring down, he didn't move at all. Was he sleeping? I sat down on the floor near him.

Hasan didn't look at me.

I waited for a moment.

There was no reaction.

"I'm moving away from this town this week." I restrained my voice, trying not to sound tearful.

There was no response.

"We are planning to go to my father's relatives' house in Isfahan."

Again, there was no response.

“My father called this morning. It looks like the Iraqi army has made it to the next town over. My father sounded fine, but worried.”

Hasan wouldn't make any response. Without saying anything, we sat for a moment in silence. The light from the candle in the kitchen trembled severely. Maybe Hasan's mother had opened a window in the kitchen.

I looked at Hasan again. Why wouldn't he answer me? We were so happy that day in front of the mosque.

“It sounded like our army lost to a huge attack, and the Iraqi army suddenly advanced.” I tried to mindlessly find a subject to talk about.

Hasan's head moved up and down slowly.

“I know.” He finally said something! “My father was also involved in the attack.”

I froze at Hasan's words. Sitting in this dark room, with Hasan's mother hidden away in the kitchen passing the time, I wondered if something had happened to Hasan's father.

“Is your father alright?” I stared at Hasan.

My hands were sweaty. My father had said on the phone that it had been a terrible battle. Half of our forces had been killed and the other half had dropped their weapons and ran.

“Hasan?” Unconsciously, tears started flowing.

I wanted to reach out with both my hands and wrap them around Hasan's thin shoulders. He seemed so weak, so frail. If I touched him with even a finger, it looked like I would split him in two, right down the middle.

The tears started flowing more strongly. Hasan simply sat on the floor, looking down, as if he felt nothing.

"This town. It's small." His coarse voice spat out these unexpected words. I stared at Hasan in spite of myself, hearing his unexpected answer. "Rumors spread quickly."

"Your father, is he alright?"

Hasan was emotionless, silent in response to my question.

"I don't know if he's safe." Hasan answered as he stared down. He suddenly broke into an empty smile. "Up until yesterday, I was the son of a hero who had gone to war. In this little town, everyone knows. Every shameful day..."

I didn't know what to say.

"It doesn't matter to me." The silence that had existed up to now transformed completely as Hasan spoke. He was simply talking, without reaching the vital point. "I'll go to Tehran soon and enter the university. Is that right? But, my mother is going to continue living here and I think it would be pretty awful if I were to leave."

Seconds passed by in silence.

"The enemy has too many tanks. They surely killed our troops to the last man. The troops that we sent as support had no tanks. Those men, surrounded by the enemy, their attacks were hopeless. No matter how long they stayed there, from the first troops that came in support, there wasn't any way they were going to get tanks, was there? Wasn't that all a lie? That's when the battle got terrifying. Pushed back by the enemy tanks, friendly troops falling one after another, their friends shot down right before their eyes. People suddenly found strength. People suddenly

found weakness. At that moment, the battle lost all meaning. There was only the fate of death. Why were they on the front lines? I don't know anymore. It's all so terrifying. That feeling of wanting to escape one's own brutal fate..." Hasan was speaking quickly. He was talking to himself. It was like he couldn't control himself or hold back what was inside. He spit it all out in rapid succession. I listened in silence beside him.

Hasan suddenly fell silent.

I turned and looked at him.

"My father, he ran."

Tears were clinging to the tips of his long eyelashes.

9

Starting the next day, my mother and I started to gather our things. It had been just under a year since we moved here, so we didn't have too many belongings. We couldn't bring our beds, tables, chairs, refrigerator etc. in such a short time.

"Pack your clothes and necessities in your suitcase, leave the big stuff here. After the war ends, we can make a trip back here to see what is left. If anything is still here, we can bring it home then." My mother said dejectedly this while looking into the kitchen. If the enemy made it this far, would they leave the refrigerator or anything behind. Then again, if they advanced this far, who could value things like furniture?

"But this set, it's so nice." My mother had taken out a tea set that she always used, running her finger along the pot and the brims of the six glasses.

"But it's just too much." She returned the glass to the place where it sat, looking frustrated.

In two days, father's older cousin would send a large car for us from Isfahan. We planned to eat lunch together here, then depart.

My mother started arranging the kitchen. As I was folding clothes in my room, the doorbell rang. A moment later, my mother opened the door to my room.

"Your friend is waiting outside."

I put on my hijab, and opened the door leading outside. Hasan was leaning against the wall slightly away from the door.

"You aren't bringing me tea anymore?" Hasan said jokingly. He was looking happy, unlike last time.

"My mother is putting away everything in the kitchen." In reality, I wanted to bring some tea.

"When are you moving?"

"The day after tomorrow. Sometime in the afternoon."

"Oh..." Hasan's gaze looked lonely.

"Did you hear anything from your father?"

Hasan shook his head back-and-forth.

"What about you? Are you going to college?"

"Probably." Hasan gave a lonely smile.

"If I go to Tehran, I'll wait in front of Tehran University. It's not like waiting in front of the bakery by the mosque. Waiting in front of the main gate isn't

embarrassing at all.” I let out a spiteful laugh. I wanted to make Hasan laugh. Hasan didn’t laugh, he simply broke into a small smile.

“Do you remember what the teacher always used to say?” Hasan said suddenly.

“Which time? That guy is always talking!”

“Your lives are like a blank sheet of paper! What you decide to write on there, that will change your lives!’ That talk.”

“I remember.

“Do you believe it?”

“Believe what?”

“That we can write our own lives?”

I thought for a moment.

“These days, there has been a mountain of things that I haven’t had any control over. I can’t agree with him completely. He says that even the kid of a high school dropout can go on to be a member of parliament, or a doctor, if he really tries hard. He can go abroad, or become president. Even if his parents can’t write, that person only needs to try. I believe that. I believe that our efforts bear fruit.”

Hasan took a piece of white paper from his pocket as he nodded. It had been folded in half twice.

“Me too. I think that my efforts will bear fruit.” As he said this he ripped the paper where it was folded.

“But, what I believe...” Hasan grabbed the paper that he had ripped in half with his fingers and showed it to me. “I can only write on half of this blank sheet.”

I stared at the white paper that Hasan held in his long, thin fingers. Before I could say something, Hasan got up from the wall and gave a stretch.

“Meet me in front of the mosque at nine tomorrow morning.” And before waiting for an answer he turned and walked quickly towards the main road.

What was going on in front of the mosque tomorrow morning? Would they be distributing newspapers with the results of the entrance exams?

The next morning, I woke up at seven. Thinking I should go back to sleep, I pulled the sheets over my head and waited quietly. I couldn't sleep. I peeked at my alarm clock from under the sheets. It was seven forty-five. I got up and sat on my bed. My cleaned up room was wastefully large. All of my closets and drawers were pulled open, completely empty inside. Yesterday I had put most of my clothes and schoolbooks into the suitcase sitting outside of my room. I got down from my bed. I opened my door. The living room was very quiet. My mother was sleeping on the sofa after being up late last night wrapping the dishes we couldn't bring with us this trip in old newspapers. I drank some water in the kitchen.

I went back to my room and looked at the clock again. I sat down on my bed and looked around the room. There was nothing for me to do. I decided to leave a bit early. I washed my face and slipped on my mother's chador that was laying on a chair in the living room. I opened the entryway door quietly and went outside. The morning air was fresh and delicious. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, and the beautiful, transparent blue sky spread out as far as the eye could see. It felt like this was going to be a good day. I sucked in a full lung's worth of air. Walking down the

main road, I soon saw the minaret of the mosque. It was probably around 8:30. I was a little early, but it wouldn't matter if I waited. I walked faster.

When I turned the corner that lead to the mosque, I unconsciously stopped in my tracks at the sight in front of me. Dozens of trucks were parked in the square in front of the mosque. Surrounding the trucks were an uncountable number of women in black chadors. The crowd was loud, everyone moving here and there.

I went closer to the square. How would I find Hasan in the middle of all this?

I arrived at the first truck. There were dozens of young men sitting on it. I was shocked to see people who couldn't even be described as growing beards, rather they were people who couldn't yet grow beards. All of the men had white headbands wrapped around their foreheads, necklaces of flowers around their necks, and long riffles hanging from their shoulders. Maybe it was their youth, but more than half of them were romping around joyfully as if they were the heroes in a game. The second truck was the same. Boys who didn't even look like they had reached twenty suddenly stood up and yelled in their childish voices, "And now we go off to war!" and then broke into smiles. They looked like they were having so much fun.

About ninety percent of the people surrounding the trucks were women. I couldn't see Hasan. I started to get more and more worried.

As I passed by one truck after another, I looked up to check the faces of each person riding in them. I didn't see Hasan. There were all kinds of boys around me: A small child was yelling playfully, the boy next to him was wrapped up in the excitement of his friends and was yelling into the air, the slightly more adult boy

clinging to the person next to him with tears hanging from his eyelashes, a person with solid red, swollen eyes that looked as if she had been up all night crying, a quiet woman, a woman frowning, trying to prevent herself from crying with all her might, a boy pressing himself into his mother's chador, crying with dignity. Each truck carried people who were experiencing the same emotions. Each truck had a man that looked to be the leader, giving encouragement. All the women around me were crying. All those men who were heading off to the battle field pressed the Korans that their mothers had given them to their foreheads and bowed down as if kneeling before God. After that, they piled into the trucks that were driving by. The mothers lifted up the largest, most important Koran that the household possessed with both hands, so that their sons might go to war with the God inside. They showed the quiet emotion of hoping exclusively for their sons' safe return.

I walked by fifteen trucks. I didn't see Hasan. Could it be that he wasn't in one of them? That hopeful feeling started to mix more and more with the feeling of pain as I walked towards the last truck. I took another step and stopped.

When I reached the twenty-first truck, a large woman in the crowd surrounding the truck caught my eye. I looked away swiftly. I didn't want to see. I loitered beside the truck for a few seconds. I wanted to go back home.

Someone pushed me and I took a step forward. In the front row of the back of the truck, the brown hair that I remembered entered my field of vision. I felt a strong pain in my head.

It's not too late. If he were just to come down from up there. I suddenly felt a burst of courage. I ran a few steps towards the back of the truck.

In the back of the truck, in the first row, sat Hasan, wearing the dark green uniform of a soldier. Maybe he hadn't shaved this morning, but a light beard was growing on his chin. His soft brown hair was wrapped up in a headband, his thin fingers were gripped tight around a rifle. Maybe it was the uniform, but he looked powerful. Although his mother was beside the truck, covering her face with her chador as she cried, Hasan looked straight ahead, emotionless. It looked like his eyes and his face were completely dried out.

I waved my hand. Hasan gave no response. Did he notice me here?

"Hasan." I whispered lightly. My voice disappeared in the din of the crowd.

"Hasan." I said a little louder. I could see Hasan's eyes directly in front of me, but they didn't move at all.

"Hasan!" I yelled as loud as I could. The noise around me calmed down for only a moment. Hasan's brown eyes started scanning the crowd. His eyes met mine.

How much time passed then? Someone yelled, "Ya-allah!" And the line of trucks finally started moving. "We will win!" That person said in a loud voice. The men riding in the trucks replied loudly. The man continued yelling, "For god! For country!" Everyone entered into a strong chorus. And then everyone started to sing the song that always accompanied the images of war on the television. The strong, heartbreaking lyrics were laid out on their knees. The truck that Hasan was riding in let out a large plume of black smoke and slowly began to move. Hasan's face moved along with the truck, wavering slowly. It felt like he was watching me. His emotionless face warped slightly. Hasan's mother stood on the other side of the road,

covering her face with her chador, her shoulders shaking violently. Hasan's face was clouded over by the black gas exhaust.

My feet started moving, chasing after the truck as it slowly moved farther away.

"Hasan! Hasan!" From behind me, I heard a man's high pitched voice. "Hasan!"

I looked behind me. Hasan's teacher was running, dragging his feet.

"Hasan! Hasan!" The teacher was screaming loudly. "You passed! You passed the medical school exam!" The teacher was waving a piece of paper in the air as he yelled.

The teacher was crying as he ran up to me. We started running together. The truck sped up.

"Hasan! Please! Come down! Please! Come down!" I couldn't hear anything but the teacher's wailing screams. "Become a doctor, Hasan! That's what the country needs! It's true! Please believe that it's true!"

As the truck got further away, Hasan's face was completely wrapped in black exhaust and I could no longer see his expression.

I stopped running.

"Hasan!" The teacher screamed as loud as he could.

My legs couldn't support my body's weight. I sat down on the ground. The teacher covered his face with both of his hands and screamed in tears, "Why?! Why?!"

My vision clouded as I watched the row of trucks become a single dot. I wasn't able to say a word to Hasan.

All twenty-one giant trucks disappeared.

The women grabbed ahold of those people next to them tightly and were crying, wrapped in a cloud of dust. Hasan's mother, her chador half falling off of her head, lifted her face. It was solid red and swollen. Her eyes were tiny and thin. She was staring as if to burn the final image of her son leaving into her mind.

The line of dark green trucks vanished entirely from our sight. They drove off with a cloud of black exhaust and some hundreds of blank pages riding on them.