

Poetry as Salve for Persian Exiles

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Introduction

With the coming of the 1979 Revolution and the Iran–Iraq War (1980–88), Persian poetry entered into a new phase. While the revolutionary poets wrote about the ideals of the revolution, motivating young soldiers to go to the front, many established poets were persecuted, imprisoned, or executed, and some chose exile. From this period onward, a rich corpus of Persian poetry about exile has been created. With minds in their new homes and hearts in the homeland, the poets reflect on a wide range of new experiences. What strikes me in reading the poetry of exiled Iranians is that their poetry, as well as their other writings, usually starts with traumatic experiences in prisons before and after the revolution, followed by reflective narratives about their flight from Iran, and a period of adaptation and even acceptance of the new culture, elaborating

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on life in exile with all its hardships and problems. In these three phases, poetry often functions as a salve, offering poets a space for reflection and contemplation. The authors have recourse to classical Persian poetry, which conveys the ephemerality of life, to universalize the theme of exile by relating it to a mystical longing of the soul for its original abode and to the uncertainties of mundane life. While classical poetry is restorative for pains and tribulations, the exiled authors also compose their own poetry depicting a bitter and souring process of acquiescence to an uncertain life in the diaspora.

In this essay, I will first give an example of how classical Persian poetry is used by the diaspora in an exilic context, and then, I will analyze the poetry of three Persian poets: Nasim Khaksar, Pegah Ahmadi, and Fatemeh Shams. There are a large number of Persian poets in the diaspora whose poetry deserves to be analyzed. Each of these poets, whether they are established, amateur, or novice, reveals a new aspect of life in exile.

Diaspora's Use of Classical Persian Poetry

Some thirty years ago when I was a student, I worked incidentally as a translator. I was struck by the use of classical Persian poetry in Iranian and Afghan refugees' asylum applications. One popular couplet was the following by Hafez (1315–90):

ما بدین در نه پی حشمت و جاه آمده‌ایم از بد حادثه اینجا به پناه آمده‌ایم

We have not come at this door for pomp and position
Because of misfortune, we have sought refuge here¹

For the Dutch, it is most remarkable to see a verse from a fourteenth-century poet in an asylum application. What does it mean to let Hafez speak to European governmental organizations? Is it a humble

¹Muhammad Shams al-Din Hafez, *Divan*, ed. P. Natil Khanlari (Tehran: Khvarazmi, 1362/1983), p. 734, ghazal 359. For a poetic translation of this ghazal, see Dick Davis, *Faces of Love: Hafez and the Poets of Shiraz* (Washington, DC: Mage, 2012), 86–87: “We haven’t travelled to this door for wealth or mastery, / We come here seeking refuge from misfortune’s misery.” (Quotation on p. 86.) The translation in this article is mine, as are all others unless otherwise noted.

way to inform them that the writer is a learned refugee, to exclude the possibility of being stigmatized as an economic migrant? Do the refugees not know that citing Hafez in this context is strange, or is it, indeed, an original way to gain attention and convince authorities of the writer's refugee status? In any case, this couplet conveys an emotive element, inviting the reader to reflect on the life of a refugee. Hafez's poetry is famous for its multilayered significations, oscillating between heaven and earth, allowing both spiritual and earthly interpretations.² One mystical interpretation of the original ghazal points to the poet, who is intimately supplicating to God (*monajat*), expressing his frail position in the material world and the longing to return to the original abode, to be united with the Creator.³ The metaphor of the door implies that the poet is at a closed door, imploring God to open the gate. He is clearly not praying out of any desire for material gain or position. Rather, his soul has experienced a misfortune: expulsion from the spiritual world. This might be a reference to Adam's expulsion from the heavenly gardens. The poet is now knocking on the door to find a refuge in God's propinquity. The ghazal has also a panegyric character, allowing the poem to be used in a mundane courtly context. The word *door* in Persian also alludes to a "court."⁴

The salient feature of this single couplet is that Hafez does not identify the addressee, making the poem timeless, allowing it to be used in a wide range of contexts, including the secular sphere. In this reading, the poet hopes to strike up a relationship, detached from material gain.

²There are many studies of Hafez in English, the most comprehensive edited by the late Leonard Lewisohn, *Hafiz and the School of Love in Classical Persian Poetry* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010). See also the valuable entries by various authors on *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, www.iranicaonline.org/, under Hāfez.

³M. Este'lami, *Dars-e Hāfez: Naqd va sharh-e ghazal-hā-ye Hāfez* (Tehran: Sokhan, 1382/2003), 941–43.

⁴The appellation *Dari*, signifying the Persian language spoken in Afghanistan, derives from the name of the Persian language as a literary and courtly language, in contrast to literary Middle Persian (Pahlavi). For an elaborated definition and analysis, see Gilbert Lazard, "Dārī," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, 2011, www.iranicaonline.org/articles/dari. Also see K. Talattof, "Social Causes and Cultural Consequences of Replacing Persian with Farsi. What's in a Name?," in *Persian Language, Literature and Culture: New Leaves, Fresh Looks* (London: Routledge, 2015), 216–27.

What are the salient features of this single couplet that have made it usable in all types of situations, even seven hundred years after its composition and in a European context? What are the features of good poetry that is timeless? In what follows, I will try to analyze this couplet to show how and why poetry functions as an emotional home for Persian speakers, especially those living in exile.

The couplet assures Iranian refugees that they are not the first to experience this misfortune, and gives them words to depict the situation of refugees who have lost everything and are seeking safety in a strange country. It is used to exclude any possibility that the speaker has come to the new homeland for material benefits or positions. It says that the speaker has suffered a traumatic experience, and therefore, they find themselves at the door, which has connotations of both desperation and hope.

The couplet is the opening line of a ghazal of seven couplets.⁵ Persian poets exert themselves to find the catchiest opening couplets to attract the attention of the audience, their patrons, or their beloved. This technique is called *hosn-e matla'* or “the beauty of the opening couplet.” The line is attractive in several ways. First, it is written in an inimitably simple style so that even a dull child can understand the message. Compared with Hafez’s convoluted style, in which he often weaves different themes, metaphors, and motifs into one line, this couplet is straightforward. Second, Hafez is using one of the most effective vehicles to communicate—namely, emotion. A feature of good poetry is to move the reader or listener. And this couplet moves the audience without requiring them first to puzzle out what the words mean.

This emotive and reflexive aspect of the couplet gives an air of informality, which is completely opposed to the formal asylum applications. While maintaining the hierarchy of high and low, rich and poor, safe and unsafe, this colloquial formulation creates an equality

⁵See Mohammad Shams al-Din Hafez, *Divān*, ed. P. Natel Khanlari (Tehran: Kharazmi, 1362/1983), 734, ghazal 359.

and a sense of honesty and familiarity between the poet and the addressee. The couplet sets the tone. The interpretation of the couplet affects how the reader treats the rest of the applicant's text. The key term here is *panah*, which means "asylum," "refuge," and "protection" and appears in common phrases such as *be kasi/khoda panah avardan/bordan*, "to seek refuge with a person/God." The word's emotive aspect is further emphasized by the phrase *az bad-e hadethe*, which is literally "[as a result] of a bad accident" or "bad luck." Without any adjectival modification, the word *hadethe* in Persian refers to misfortune, disaster, or calamity, but the adjective *bad* emphasizes the intensity of the events that caused the poet to flee. Simon Vestdijk (1898–1971) provides an excellent analysis of John Keats's (1795–1821) opening line of "Endymion" (1818), "A thing of beauty is a joy for ever." According to Vestdijk, Keats's original version, "A thing of beauty is a constant joy," could never be as successful as the later version, because the use of a combination of Roman adjectives and Saxon nouns, and vice versa, in the later verse increases the flow and beauty of the language.⁶ In Keats's line, "thing" is Germanic and "beauty" is derived from the French *beauté*. But in "a constant joy" (*une joie constante*), there is no variety, and the balance in the word combination is broken.⁷ I would argue that in Hafez's case, the beauty of the couplet also lies in this variation of formulation and the combination of Arabic and Persian words. The Arabic *heshmat* ("pomp") is combined with the Persian *jah* ("position") in the first hemistich, while the Persian adjective *bad* is combined with the Arabic noun *hadethe*. The sequence of Arabic, Persian, Persian, and Arabic words creates a balance, as well as a contrast. While *heshmat-o jah* alludes to worldly possessions and status, the compound *bad-e hadethe* refers to the loss of material goods. An oppositional contrast is created: there is dissonance between *heshmat-o jah* and *bad-e hadethe*, and a positive association between *dar* and *panah*. Aside from the musicality, which is created through the meter, assonances, and dissonances, the formulation of

⁶John Keats, "Endymion," *The Complete Poems of John Keats*, ed. P. Wright (Hertfordshire, UK: Wordsworth Poetry Library, 2001), 61–167. Quotation on p. 61.

⁷Simon Vestdijk, *De glanzende kiemcel*, 1950. (Amsterdam: Nijgh & Van Ditma, 1991), 13.

words makes this couplet attractive. The words are formulated in such a way as to guide the reader to the key word almost at the end of the second hemistich, *panah*. The negation in the first hemistich makes the reader wonder how the poet has come to be at the door, emphasizing the urgency.

After the depiction of the pungent calamity afflicted on the poet, the word *inja*, “here” (literally, “this place”), creates an antithetical space, contrasting it to the place of mishap. Using ellipsis, by not mentioning the place from which the poet has fled, he conveys a feeling that he does not want to think about it. The focus is on “this place.” It is here that the poet can find protection. The poet’s begging for shelter is further amplified by the emphasis on not seeking any fortune and position in this new place. His plea is minimal: safety.

There is also a vigorous dynamic in the line, expressed through the *radif* rhyme *amade-im* or “we have come.” This emphasizes the vitality but also the completion of the journey. The Persian ghazal has a monorhyme (aa, ba, ca, da, etc.). The *radif* rhyme consists of an “independent word, a phrase or a personal suffix added repeatedly to each rhyme.”⁸ In this case, the word *amade-im* emphasizes the arrival, the sense of urgency that the poet is out of danger but not yet safe, as he is standing before the closed door and hoping that the door will open and he will find protection.

The easy rhythmic flow of the Persian original also allows the couplet to be a kind of mantra and easily memorized. The meter is *ramal-e mothamman-e makhbun-e maqsur* or -0--/00--/00--/00- (where - stands for a long syllable and 0 for a short one). One can imagine refugees repeating it in their minds as they set out, and as consolation in the uncertain conditions of a foreign land. The individual key words remind them of their reasons for fleeing their hearth and home, seeking safety. The couplet is a poem on its own, independent

⁸See J. T. P. de Bruijn, “*Ghazal* i. History,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, 2012, www.iranicaonline.org/articles/ghazal-1-history. On the Persian ghazal, see de Bruijn’s excellent chapter, “The Ghazal in Medieval Persian Poetry,” in *Persian Lyric Poetry in the Classical Era, 800-1500: Ghazals, Panegyrics and Quatrains*, vol. II, ed. E. Yarshater (London: I. B. Tauris, 2019), 315–487.

of the rest of the ghazal, which is a love lyric. This independence has allowed the couplet to become a proverb. It has been calligraphed in splendid Persian scripts and used as a decoration in private and public places. No longer a line in a book, it becomes art on the walls and is spoken and heard. While the Persian literary tradition is very much a written tradition, with a complex infrastructure producing magnificent and lavish manuscripts, this textual tradition interacts with oral transmission, as these poems were performed in a wide range of social rituals. Refugees would be familiar with this couplet in both forms.

I was told that this couplet is carved on the gravestone of a young Iranian man buried in a cemetery in The Hague, the Netherlands. This person committed suicide when his asylum was rejected. After his death, people found this couplet, written in his own handwriting, on the wall of his tiny room. In this particular case, the couplet becomes a symbol of perpetual exile, as the poem reminds the reader and visitors that the buried young man is far from his homeland.⁹ The chiasmus created between homeland/foreign land and unsafe/safe embodies the emotional pain many Iranian refugees experience.

The use of couplets such as this in everyday life presupposes that speakers have a repertoire of apposite verses. Hafez composed this couplet seven hundred years ago for a completely different situation, yet the ambiance he has created with a few words is of such a timeless quality that it matchlessly corresponds to the situation of Persian speakers today. While such usages of the work of Hafez and other poets show how poetry is part and parcel of the lives of Persian speakers, they also demonstrate how poetry soothes personal pains and sufferings in exile.

Through analysis of this splendid couplet, I have tried to show the prominent place of poetry in the lives of Persian exiles. A study of the

⁹Persians use poetry at cemeteries and have continued this in the diaspora. The use of poetry on the graves of the Persian-speaking diaspora is one of the projects I am working on, examining the types of poetry and the choice of poets, such as Hafez and Khayyam. For poetry on graves in Iran, see Fatemah Shams, "Dialogues with the Dead: Necropoetics of Zahra's Paradise," *Iranian Studies* 53 (2020): 893–909. Also see Fritz Meier, *Die schöne Mahsaṭī: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des persischen Vierzeilers*, vol. I (Wiesbaden, Germany: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1963), 22–26.

use of classical Persian poetry among diasporic Persian communities is certainly a desideratum, as poetry is employed not only in festivals such as Nowruz (21 March) and Yalda (21 December) but also increasingly in digital forms, especially on social media to comment on sociopolitical developments in Iran.¹⁰ In what follows, I would like to show how Persian diasporic poets use their own poetry in exile and how this poetry creates a space to reflect on traumatic experiences and process their emotional wounds.

Nasim Khaksar's Poetry on Exilic Life

Nasim Khaksar is commonly known for his prose fiction and literary criticism. While his prose fiction limns the lives of fictional characters in exile in detail, his poetry creates space for multiple interpretations of exilic life, allowing readers to fill in their own experiences. Khaksar was born in Abadan in the southern province of Khuzestan in Iran in 1944.¹¹ After finishing school, he undertook teacher training in Hamadan and later in Isfahan. As a teacher, he served at various schools in several towns in Khuzestan Province. His literary career started in this period; he was also faced with the suffocating repression and censorship of the Pahlavi Dynasty (1925–79) in the 1960s, when pressure on intellectuals, especially literati, increased.¹² He was arrested in 1967 and jailed for two years. After his release, he resumed his literary activities under the

¹⁰For English translations of Persian exile poetry by female poets, see Dick Davis, *The Mirror of My Heart: A Thousand Years of Persian Poetry by Women (Bilingual Edition)* (Washington, DC: Mage, 2019), 390–485. The majority of poets translated in this part by Davis are diasporic Persian poets. The book has just been republished by Penguin Books (New York: 2021). See also Sholeh Wolpé, *The Forbidden: Poems from Iran and Its Exiles* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2012).

¹¹For more biographical details, see Nasim Khaksar, *Wees Mooi: Gedichten van Nasim Khaksar*, trans. K. Parsi (Leidschendam, Netherlands: Quist, 2011), 7–10. My information is based on Parsi's introduction in the collection of Khaksar's poetry translated into Dutch.

¹²On the suffocating situation of the Iranian intellectuals during the Pahlavi regime and after the 1979 Revolution, see Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak's indispensable analysis of several key authors in his *A Fire of Lilies* (Leiden, Netherlands: Leiden University Press, 2019) and chapter 17 of his *Bud-o nemud-e sokhan: matn-e adabi, bāftār-e ejtemā'i va tārikh-e adabiyyāt* (Los Angeles, CA: Sherkat-e ketab, 1394/2016) and the book's second print (1397/2019), which analyzes three works by Shahrokh Meskub, 497–517 (pagination in the second print). Also see A. Frühwirth, *Ökonomien des Weltverlusts: Die Prosa iranischer Autorinnen im Exil* (Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2016). Frühwirth devotes her attention to the analysis of the prose works of Sorour Kasmai, Chahla Shafiq, Nahal Tajadod, Fariba Hashtroudi, Ruhangiz Sharifian, and Chahdortt Djavann.

pseudonym Behrouz Azar. He won recognition for his literary stories for children. After the 1979 Revolution, he fled Iran and has lived in the Netherlands since 1983.

Most of the poems of his first years in the Netherlands show the poet intensely haunted by nightmarish experiences of persecution, imprisonment, and torture. The following poem, "The Sad Melody of Exile" (1984), depicts a sense of uprootedness combined with aloneness as a foreigner in a new country. The emotions depicted here are the reluctant bidding farewell to one's homeland, the unwillingness to accept life in a foreign country, and finally, the long process of mourning. Being incessantly haunted by the memories of imprisonment, torture, and flight, the poet depicts these emotions while living in a new country, cold, raining, and often covered by clouds:

The Sad Melody of Exile

ترانه غمگین تبعیدی

The rain falls,
And drop by drop
Splashing at times on the window pane.
I'm here
far from my birthplace.
There's no sun here,
and ash-gray colours
recede into far distances.
The morning rain
is different to the rain at noon.
The morning rain
is different to the rain at sunset.
The morning rain,
is not like rain at night.

باران می بارد
و چکه چکه
گاه بر شیشه می خورد
من اینجایم.
دور از زادگاه
آفتابی اینجا نیست
و رنگ خاکستری
تا دور دست می رود
باران صبح،
باران ظهر نیست
باران صبح،
باران غروب نیست
باران صبح
مثل باران شب نیست

Weeping in all sobriety,
in the dawn of memories;
the feeling of loneliness
in the first light of understanding.

هوشیار گریه کردن
در پگاه خاطره
و حس تنهایی
در بامداد شعور

I travel
with a sail of sorrow,

من سفر می کنم
با بادبان اندوه

with words imbued with memory,¹³
I come in the wind, searching for you.
I will collect the smell of pine trees
from the creeks of memories,
And I will not stay in the abyss of apprehension.
No!

This is not the end of being human:
an exiled man
a homeless man
an exhausted man
lethargic
without refuge,
a man without pride.
No!

This is not the end of being human:
to forget
the name of water lilies,
and the memory of palm trees
and your sorrows,
O you, your soil most defenseless.
The cracked lips of your hollow places
have remained open,
thirsty for the rain.
The morning rain,
Is the rain of memory,
the rain of tears,
the rain of memories,
the rain of wind,
the rain of leaves,
the rain of being born
in the narrow streets of a flourishing village.
The morning rain
is the morning rain.¹⁴

و با واژه‌های حافظه
در باد به جستجوی تو می‌آیم
و بوی صنوبر را
از جویبار خاطره می‌چینم
و در ورطه‌های هول نمی‌مانم
نه!

این سرانجام انسان نیست.
انسان تبعید شده
انسان درپدر
انسان خسته
کسل
بی پناه
انسان بی غرور.
نه!

این سرانجام انسان نیست
که نام نیلوفر را
از یاد ببرد
و خاطره‌ی نخلها را
و اندوه تو را
ای بی پناه ترین خاک
که لب حفره‌های پوکات
در عطش باران
باز مانده است
باران صبح
باران خاطره است
باران صبح
باران گریستن
باران یاد
باران باد
باران برگ
باران میلاد
در کوچه‌های یک ده آباد
باران صبح
باران صبح است

¹³The word *hafeza* literally means “the retentive faculty.”

¹⁴Khaksar, “The Sad Melody of Exile,” in *Wees Mooi*, 69–73.

Coming from Khuzestan, notorious for its blistering heat, reaching sometimes 45°C or even 50°C, the poet expresses displacement by depicting the cold, wet, and cloudy climate of the Netherlands. The diametrically opposed climate becomes a symbol to evoke memories, reminding the poet of his exile. While there is a complaint in describing the incessant rain, there is also a starting point of accepting the uneasy sense of belonging in the new homeland, as the rains falling at different hours of the day each have a different meaning. It is as if the rain is becoming the poet's companion, reminding him of who he is and where he comes from. It even reminds the poet of the rainless and hot seasons of the original homeland, when due to the blazing heat, the earth shrinks. The poet imagines his homeland as a living being with cracked lips longing for water. The shape of the hollows in the earth is compared to lips. The incessant flux of rain contrasts with the arid and dry homeland and the flourishing village of the new home in exile. Rain has become a symbol of safety, shelter, and a flourishing culture. Most of Iran is dry, so for Iranians, rain is a blessing. But the poet is paradoxically reminded of his alienation by the superabundant rain of the Netherlands. The rain, denoting alienation here, becomes a sense of belonging to the new homeland in his later poetry. In addition, there is a contrast between *baran* or "rain" (implicitly, "water") and *khak* or "soil," "earth," or "homeland."¹⁵ The poet uses direct speech to address his homeland: "O you, your soil most defenseless." It is as if the homeland is dying of thirst while the poet had to leave it behind, living in a country abundant in rainfall. The contrast between rain and thirsty soil evokes many fragmented memories, foregrounding a kind of homesickness combined with a feeling of guilt for having abandoned the homeland in an unsafe condition. The homeland becomes a living being.¹⁶

¹⁵There are several excellent studies on the notion of homeland in Persian literature. See, for instance, Afsaneh Najmabadi, "The Erotic Vatan [Homeland] as Beloved and Mother: To Love, to Possess, and to Protect," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 39 (1997): 442–67; Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, "From Patriotism to Matriotism: A Tropological Study of Iranian Nationalism, 1870-1909," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34 (2002): 217–38. For a historical meaning of the term *vatan*, see Shafi'i-Kadkani, *Cheragh-o ayene: dar josteju-ye tahavvol-e she'r-e mo'aser-e Iran* (Tehran: Sokhan, 1392/2013), 641–71.

¹⁶The homeland as a living being, even part of one's body, is a motif in many exilic poems.

While in the previous poem, the poet is still homesick, smelling the pine trees of the homeland “from the creeks of memories,” he conveys that he will not allow himself to fall into the “abyss of apprehension.” Here, one can sense a mourning process: Persian words are imbued with memories, and expressing them will open new wounds, while the poet also links the rain, a feature of life in exile, to his memories. In his later poetry, the mourning is completed, the haunted glimpses of torture are processed, and there is space to appreciate the new land, which starts to feel like home. In several of Khaksar’s later poems, he limns an event, a feeling, a memory, or an object as a magic potion that cures the invisible wounds of exile. Reading a poem secures hope. The following poem, “You Have Come So Far Well” (2003), depicts an individual’s attempt to reach their destination. The individual is walking a steep road while exhausted:

تا این جا خوب آمدی
 آدم عاقل باید بداند
 کجا بایستند خستگی در کند.
 هیچ لطفی ندارد
 وقتی توانش را نداری
 با زور بی خود
 لنگ لنگان
 سر بالائی را طی کنی
 که نتیجه اش فقط نفس زدن است
 چایت را بخور
 برای نوشیدن یک قهوه ام وقت داری.

This motif is inspired by the nineteenth- and twentieth-century poetry on the concept of *vatan*. See, for instance, Mahmoud Darwish’s allusions such as “Where can I free myself of the homeland in my body?” and “No. This is not my homeland. No. This is not my body.” See Darwish, *Unfortunately, It Was Paradise: Selected Poems*, trans. and ed. Munir Akash and Carolyn Forché (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 15 and 177, respectively. Such references are abundant in collected poetry of exiled poets. See, for instance, Fatemeh Shams’s poem “A Poem for Iran,” in which she states: “You’re a fistful of dirt, wounded, a winter, a distant land, how much I miss that fistful you’ll never understand!” See *When They Broke Down the Door: Poems*, trans. Dick Davis (Washington, DC: Mage, 2016), 98–101, quotation on p. 99; *Daftar-e she’r-hā-ye Fātemeh-e Shams: 88* (Berlin: Gardun Publishers, 2013), 5–6, quotation on p. 5.

به خصوص که حالا حالا ها
معلوم نیست
آب و سی برسد.

You have come so far well.
A wise person should know
where to stop and rest.
There's no point
if you do not have the power.
A pointless attempt,
limping and halting
to climb up the road
that only leads to panting.
Drink your tea;
you've time enough to take a coffee too.
Especially now, when
it's not certain for a long time
whether
a bus may arrive.¹⁷

The poem is couched in the form of a dialogue, but the addressee is absent. The poet describes the events. Is the poet talking to his own alter ego? The poet advises the addressee to pause, to drink a cup of tea or coffee, instead of limping on the road and running out of breath. Also, the poet advises the addressee not to wait for a bus, because it is not clear when or whether it will arrive. One should travel the road well, pacing oneself and enjoying each step, as the journey may last for a long time. Does the road stand for exile? Is the bus a symbol of good tidings of returning to the homeland? Does the traveler symbolize life in exile, struggling to reach an unknown destination on this steep road? These and similar questions come to mind, but a soothing thought, which is also the kernel of the poem, is that the poet gives hope, inviting the traveler to rest and drink something because there is much time left on the road. In the space the poet creates by amplifying the contrast

¹⁷Khaksar, "You Have Come So Far Well," in *Wees Mooi*, 31.

between mobility and immobility, rootedness and rootlessness, and belonging and lack of belonging, the dialogue leans on undecidedness, irreversibility, and a bitter uncertainty, which cannot be cured.

While in the previous poem, the poet's concerns are to take the time and enjoy the moment as the situation is irreparable, the following poem, entitled "From the Beginning, It Looked Like a Game" (August 2003), shows another aspect of exile:

از پیش هم مثل بازی بود
فقط وقتش گذشته بود
یعنی وقت بازی گذشته بود.
انگار بد نیست گاهی
در زمینی یک طرفه
توپ بزنی.

Even before, it looked like a game,
but a game whose time was up.
In other words, the time to play was up.
Sometimes it is not bad
to kick the ball
in half a playing field.¹⁸

Here, one sees a poet who has accepted that half a playing field may be enough for a player. This is a sad but emotionally laden message of an exile who has lost one part of their life. As in the previous poem, the poet invites his reader to accept the situation, as "it is not bad / to kick the ball / in half a playing field." Does living in exile become a game restricted to one part of the field? The poem subtly allows various interpretations. Does the half field that is denied represent half of the poet's life, or is it the home country? Is the exiled poet unable to form roots in the entire soil of the new home? The half field also represents a rift in the poet. While the half field that is barred may stand for the original homeland, creating a sense of longing through inability to play on the other part of the field, it may also symbolize the feeling of

¹⁸Khaksar, "From the Beginning, It Looked Like a Game," in *Wees Mooi*, 27.

not being accepted by the culture of the new homeland. Does the half field refer to discriminatory experiences, to being excluded in the new homeland, causing the poet to retreat and accept being limited to half the field? This type of physical and emotional split appears in other poems, as well.

The split introduced in the following poem refers to engagement or the lack of it, the emotional divide from the home country, and the unreality of life in exile. The separation is just a mirage, as memory always remains. This poem, entitled “It Disappeared from Sight” (n. d.), splendidly exhibits the inner struggle between connection here and connection there:

گم شد از نظر
مثل پشت برگهای این درخت
فترهای این ساعت کهنه
عقربه‌هایش را
از یاد برده است

Like the back of the leaves of this tree,
the gears of this antediluvian clock
have forgotten
its hands.¹⁹

This superb metaphor for being cut off, neglected, and disengaged with what is essential displays how exile has stolen half of the poet’s existence. While this half is always present, it is not necessarily visible. The movement from the floral imagery to the industrial metaphor of the clock marks the boundary between the homeland (Iran) and the industrialized country (the Netherlands). Time has a different implication in exile. It is as if time has stopped. The exiled person is stuck in time and may be active, yet nothing changes. The poet compares this person’s two halves to the two sides of a leaf: neither can see the other.

In another poem, entitled “Perhaps” (12 May 1997), the poet acquiesces to the situation, creating a philosophical doubt about life. An individual

¹⁹Khaksar, “It Disappeared from Sight,” in *Wees Mooi*, 59.

who has followed his ideals all his life, suffering persecution, imprisonment, flight, and the bitter taste of exile is now questioning the object of his longing. The poet does not define his quest, inviting the reader to contemplate with him their own goals, stating, “Perhaps what I longed for was in fact the far distance itself.” Is the exiled poet turning his focus from politics, which caused him to flee Iran, to a mystical quest?

شاید
شاید آنچه در دورها می خواستم
همین پیرامون باشد
دستم اما به پیرامون نمی رسد.
اشیاء در تاریکی گم شده اند
و پیرامون مرزهایش را تا بی نهایت برده است
جائی آنسوی هیچ
آنسوی بیداری
آنسوی خواب
آنسوی عطسه کودک در صبحگاه
شاید آنچه من می خواستم، اصلاً خود دورها باشد
شاید من اصلاً چیزی
چیزی نمی خواستم
شاید

Perhaps
Perhaps what I long for in the far distance
Is also here, nearby.
But my hand does not extend to “here.”
Things are lost, in darkness.
And “here” has stretched its bounds to infinity.
Somewhere, on the other side of nothing,
the other side of wakefulness,
the other side of sleep,
the other side of a child’s sneezing at dawn.
Perhaps what I longed for was in fact the far distance itself.
Perhaps I was not, in fact,

longing for anything.

Perhaps²⁰

Pegah Ahmadi

While Khaksar's poetry may be characterized as accessible, Pegah Ahmadi's poetry demands more attention because the language becomes a space of refuge. Ahmadi belongs to another generation of Iranian exilic poets.²¹ In Khaksar, one finds a clear line of development from traumatic experiences such as imprisonment, torture, and flight in his early poems to a voice of acceptance and bitter certainty of life in exile in later poems. In Ahmadi's poetry, one finds overwhelming allusions to the Iranian Revolution (1979), the Iran–Iraq War (1980–88), and political events taking place in Iran.²² In addition, both Ahmadi and Khaksar have become poets of their respective new homelands, commenting on happenings related to Muslim zealotry, extremism, and terror.

Ahmadi's close attention to the theme of language makes her work quite distinct from that of other contemporary Persian exilic poets.²³ "Alexander's Note" (19 April 2016), published in her volume *Sheddat*, is a good example of her poetic language, and also illustrates how the poet takes refuge in the elusive space of poetry.

²⁰Khaksar, "Perhaps," in *Wees Mooi*, 49.

²¹She has published several volumes of poetry in both Iran and Germany. Among these publications are *Sardam nabud* (Bremen, Germany: Sujet Verlag, 2010); *Majmu 'e-ye she 'r-e ru-ye sol-e pāyāni* (Tehran: Entesharat-e negah-e sabz, 1378/1999); *Majmu 'e-ye she 'r-e kādens* (Tehran: Entesharat-e negah-e sabz, 1378/1999); and *Āvāz-e 'āsheqāne-ye dokhtar-e divāne, tarjome-ye gozide 'i az she 'r-hā-ye Silvia Plath* (Tehran: Entesharat-e negah-e sabz, 1379/2000). Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak translated twelve poems for the Dutch Poetry International in 2008. See "Translation of Twelve Poems by Iranian Poet Pegah Ahmadi," 2008. Also see Davis, *Mirror of My Heart*, 435–38.

²²Ahmadi devotes several poems to the political upheavals taking place in Iran. See, for instance, her poem on Neda Agha Sultan, a twenty-six-year-old student who was shot on the streets in Tehran during the 2009 demonstration usually named the Green Movement. The shooting was broadcast live via Twitter and Facebook around the world.

²³On Ahmadi's poetry, see Koushyar Parsi, "Del-e afzun-khah: barabari-yi ehsas va ta'qqol," *Ava-ye tab 'id* (1397/2018), avaetabid.com/?p=608. Also see Nasim Khaksar, "Nafas hamin bazist," *Akhbar-e ruz*, 9 Esfand 1398/28 February 2020, www.akhbar-rooz.com.

In this collection, Ahmadi uses various derivatives of the Arabic root *shadda*, such as *tashdid*, *shadid*, and *ashshad* to emphasize the intensity of emotions and violence. The Arabic root means “firm,” “fast,” “solid,” “hard,” “strong,” “vigorous,” “robust,” “vehement,” “violent,” and “intense.”²⁴ While the same connotations are present in the Persian usage, the word also has connotations of “assault,” “charge,” “affliction,” and “hardship.” Before giving a brief analysis of the poem, I will translate it in its entirety:

یادداشتِ الکساندر
 فلج شدن میانِ فنرهای سُرخ
 انسان که انفجارِ دائمِ شوخی ست
 دوباره با تشدید
 حدّ شدیدِ شاهرگی را زدن
 دریا را شبیه یک لغت از ته، شکافتن
 به وحشت انداختن
 با کف، بیرون کشیدن اش
 به هوش نیارودنِ حروف از درد
 فرارِ فواره ای که در فراموشی ست
 صورتِ شدیدِ راهروهایی
 که مثل شلیک، خیره می مانند
 اعصابِ صورتِ میشا، کامیل، سابین
 فرار با گردن، با شانه با دهن
 شکستن چمدانی که کوچه ای قرمز
 به جنگ می بخشد
 زبان، اشدّ مجازاتِ ماست
 زبانِ سرخپوشِ زنی پشتِ نفت و تیر آهن
 زبانِ سوریه در شعر “رامی العاشق”
 زبانِ زنده های الکساندر
 وقتی صفِ رکیکِ صدا پشتِ سیل می ماند
 نوبت های خون

²⁴See J. M. Cowan, ed., “shadda,” *Arabic-English Dictionary: The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, 3rd ed. (New York: Spoken Language Services, 1976), 459.

وقتی سیاره‌ای به هوش می‌آید
 زبان که مثل دراز غیب، می‌رود بیرون
 زبان که مثل پرنده می‌میرد
 و ابر را به ابد می‌برد
 زبان که می‌ماند
 در منقار بادبمان
 شبیه خراشیدن دهان با تیغ
 شبیه چنگک در سکوت بی قلاب
 شبیه غیبت در تنی که می‌باشدبمان
 زبان ام را
 شبیه مرثیه دشوار کن
 به هوش بیا مثل خون
 دارم لخته می‌شوم از درد

Alexander's Note

Paralyzed between coiled crimson springs²⁵
 Humans, who are a constant explosion of impudence
 Once again, with violence
 Cutting the jugular with utmost force²⁶
 Splitting the ocean like one word from the depth
 To throw it into terror
 To pull it out, with foam
 As if the letters in their pain, were not to be revived
 The flight of a fountain that lives in oblivion
 The violent appearances of corridors
 Stuck in astonishment, like a volley
 The nerves in the faces of Misha, Camile, and Sabine

²⁵The word *fanar* or “springs” refers here to the metal compression pressure device.

²⁶According to Steingass, the word *hadd* means “Setting bounds; defining; boundary, term, limit, extremity, extent,” but it also means to punish and is used with the auxiliary verb *zadan*. See F. Steingass, “hadd,” *Persian-English Dictionary*, 1892. (London: Routledge, 1963), 413. The compound verb was increasingly used after the 1979 Revolution, alluding to the punishment of anti-revolutionary individuals. Because of the emphatic *shadid*, the primary meaning here refers to imposing a severe punishment on the jugular, and the connotation is of limiting or blocking the jugular.

Escaping with neck, with shoulder, with mouth
 The breaking of a suitcase
 That offered a red alley to war
 Language is our most severe punishment
 The language of a woman in red behind the oil and the iron beam
 The language of Syria, in the poems of Ramy al-Asheq
 The language of the lives of Alexander
 When the coarse row of voices remain below the flood²⁷
 The ebb and flow of blood²⁸
 The moment a planet comes to her senses
 The language, like a door from the unseen, that opens out
 The language that dies like a bird
 And carries the clouds to perpetuity
 The language that remains
 In the beak of the wind
 Stay!
 Like a razor wounding the mouth
 Like a hook in hookless silence
 Like an absence that is sprinkled in a body
 Stay!
 Make my language
 Tough, like a requiem
 Come to the senses, like blood
 I am clotting with pain²⁹

In this poem, the poet foregrounds language, interweaving several existential experiences with it. The language provides certainty in an uncertain situation, acknowledging and even documenting the poet's existence. Here, the language becomes a central locus of suffering. While it expresses the traumatic experiences of war, despotism, and exile, the same language is "our most severe punishment." It is the language that "like a door from the unseen" opens out, to what? Perhaps

²⁷Literally, "behind the flood."

²⁸Literally, "turns of blood."

²⁹Pegah Ahmadi, "Alexander's Note," in *Sheddat* (Bremen, Germany: Sujet Verlag, 2017), 20–22.

to the hint of transcendence and the ineffable quality of the moment, in the images of the cloud clasped in the mind of a dead bird and the woman in red, or to massacre, blood, suffering, and experiences one is left to imagine? The sharp images Ahmadi employs remind the reader of the imagist poets, for many of whom movements of individual objects and agents they depict define their style.³⁰ The images define the indescribable in a polyphonic fashion, inviting the reader to ponder the intense events. In this poem, Ahmadi universalizes the destinies of the oppressed, who may become exiles. Focusing on Syria, she alludes to the poetry of Ramy al-Asheq, a Syrian–Palestinian exile in Germany, whose poetry “lays bare the experience of revolution, war, imprisonment, and exile that followed the 2011 ‘Arab Spring’ in Syria.”³¹ Her reference to the language of Syria shows that “language” in this poem does not mean Persian: it is the “language” of exile itself. Arabic and Persian are different, but the shared vocabulary of war, fighting, and flight, the grammar of relief and guilt, and the punctuation of asylum applications and decisions bring the exilic poets together.

Ahmadi’s poetry not only depicts such traumatic experiences, but it also creates a new poetic Persian, which demands pondering and reflection. She creates new compounds, imagery, and metaphors to depict the intensity of violence. For instance, the opening line, becoming “Paralyzed between coiled crimson springs” may refer to a bloody death between two forces, “Cutting the jugular,” or to life in suspense between implacable, ponderous systems. The poet forces the reader to ponder the scene for which she gives only the sharp image. Does “paralyzing” allude to the motionless corpse of a person just killed? Are the springs the springs of a mattress, which have become visible because of destruction? Does the color crimson refer to the blood of a victim, dyeing the springs? Or does it express the energy of the springs themselves? In such forceful language, soulless objects participate in assaulting the victim. For instance, the corridors have “violent

³⁰See, for instance, Andrew Thacker, *The Imagist Poets* (Tavistock, UK: Northcote House Publishers, 2011), 4.

³¹Levi Thompson, “Poet Ramy al-Asheq: ‘In the Sea’s Playground,’” *ArabLit Quarterly*, 7 September 2017, arablit.org/2017/09/07/syrian-poet-ramy-al-asheq-in-the-seas-playground.

appearances,” and they are shocked, witnessing the destruction with astonishment. The poet compares the corridors to a volley of gunfire that is focused on destroying one object.

Such terse descriptions make the poetry of Ahmadi distinct from that of the other Persian exilic poets. Also conspicuous in Ahmadi’s language is the use of antithesis, as in the line “Like a hook in hookless silence”: the silence is hookless in the sense of being invariable and irreversible, but language, or perhaps specifically poetry, must remain as a hook, a tool, a handle. She also uses paradoxes, as in the line, “Like an absence that is sprinkled in a body.” These images are so intense that they are easily understandable to those who have personally experienced war, bombardments, and killings, but the images also invite the reader to contemplate. On the physical level, one thinks of shrapnel, while the other side of the metaphor is language, or poetry, which is present in life like an absence: a sharp reminder that there was, is, or could be something more.

Fatemeh Shams

Another poet writing about the theme of exile is Fatemeh Shams, whose poetry depicts concrete experiences in the Iranian diaspora.³² Her scholarly work analyzes sociopolitical events in Iran, while her poetry treats topics and themes ranging from the experiences of an exile in a new country to people’s protests against the Islamic Republic to human rights. Several of her poems focus on reminiscences of life in Iran, showing how an exile longs for union with loved ones, suffers from the lack of familiar objects and landscapes, or is haunted by horrible memories. In this part, I will focus on a number of examples chosen to demonstrate her style and the way she uses poetry as a salve to ease the hardship of a life in exile.

One subject running through many of her poems is loneliness, a type of forlornness, mystical in essence, yet also emotional and physical. In one poem entitled “The Marsh” (*batlaq*), loneliness or aloneness

³²For a short biography, see Shams, *When They Broke Down the Door*, xi–xiv; Davis, *Mirror of My Heart*, 468–77.

(*tanhâi*) is personified. The poet knits various characteristics to this aloneness and confides secrets to it. Being alone is an *ettefaq*, which is hard to translate with a single word, connoting “happening,” “chance,” “accident,” “approaching one another,” or “coming to pass.” The poet gives positive traits to *tanhâi* as a being: “O my most eternal chance” (*ey hamishe-tarin ettefaq-e man*, translated in elegant literary English by Dick Davis as “My commonest, my constant plight”).³³ This *tanhâi* is presented as a singer in the poet’s lampless night, a melody in seclusion, pain’s blossom. It grows to become an almost concrete individual, invited by the poet to “lay your head against my shoulder here, my burning sight.”³⁴ By ascribing human traits to *tanhâi*, the poet creates an ideal partner, challenging herself to confide her innermost thoughts to aloneness.

Part of this aloneness concerns bidding farewell to the life of Iran, a leitmotif in Shams’s poetry, as for many other Persian diaspora poets. Allusions to Iran swell in the poetry at special moments, such as the Iranian New Year on 21 March. One poem, entitled “Home” (n. d.), reads:

اگر چه در خانه نیستم، ولی به جان دوست دارمش
 میان آغوش هر بهار هنوز جا می گذارمش
 شبیه راز نگفتنیست، جنون ویران غریتم
 به دور از چشم عاقلان، به شعرها می سپارمش

I’m not at home, but even so I love home in my soul,
 I leave home in spring’s arms each time that spring
 comes back again
 The madness of my exile’s like a secret left unsaid,
 I place it in my poems far from glances of the sane.³⁵

The construction *agar che* (“although,” here translated as “but even so”) in combination with the term “home(land)” may be taken as a

³³Shams, “The Marsh,” in *When They Broke Down the Door*, 34–35. Quotation on p. 35.

³⁴Translation is by Dick Davis. Shams, *When They Broke Down the Door*, 35.

³⁵Translation is by Dick Davis. Shams, “Home,” in *When They Broke Down the Door*, 41.

homage to Simin Behbahani's (1927–2014) famous poem starting with the line "Once more, I will build you, my homeland, though it be with the bricks of my soul," in which the poet uses *agar che* six times.³⁶

In the following short poem, "Freedom" (n. d.), one part of life that has been exchanged for freedom is "kisses," "memories," and "poems." Is the poet alluding to loving memories of her family, of her love, of the cherished memories that give meaning to life, and of the poetry celebrating life? All these are left behind, even destroyed for the price of freedom. As in Khaksar's poem in which the poet conveyed how an exile lives in half of the playing field, experiencing a physical and emotional split, here one sees how the poet expresses the price she has paid for a "lifelong freedom:"

آزادی
بوسه هایم را فروختم
خاطراتم را
شعرهایم را سوزاندم
چمدانم را برداشتم
و رفتم
به قیمت یک عمر آزادی

Freedom
I sold my kisses
My memories
I burned my poems
I picked up my suitcase
And I left
As the price of a lifelong freedom³⁷

Perhaps the most conceptual description of an exilic life, referred to frequently in Persian diasporic poetry, is an emphasis on the split, living two separate lives, and an inexorable wish to weld the two worlds

³⁶Simin Behbahani, "dobare misazamat, vatan," in *Majmu'e-ye ash'ār* (Tehran: Negah, 1982/2003), 711–12. Quotation on p. 711.

³⁷Shams, "Freedom," in *Daftar-e she'r-hā-ye Fātemeh-e Shams*, 66.

together. Edward Said's (1935–2003) words fittingly express this split, this rift:

Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile's life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever.³⁸

In the next poem, entitled “Amphibious” (n. d.), the poet depicts such a life as an amphibian being. The compound for the class of Amphibia, *do-zist*, derives from “two existences,” meaning living in water and land, and also implying the larval and adult stages. It is a vivid characterization of life in exile, in hybridity. The term generates a series of antitheses and paradoxes from human associations with land and water. Land could be associated with safety, trust, and the known, while the sea is associated with insecurity, distance, and the unknown. The exile has paradoxically left the land for the sea. It is this image that expresses the exile's uncertain, feeble, and unstable position in the new homeland marked as the sea. By using the image of Amphibia, the poet is stressing that human beings are not amphibians and are simply unable to live such a life; nonetheless, the exile feels like an amphibian in a new environment, in the betweenness. The word *amphibian* could also imply living happily in water and on land, but the exiled poet here lives in water, having exchanged the safety of the land to the limited safety of the water. Does the image of the Amphibia also refer to the exile's cold-bloodedness? Are all the other humans around the exiled person cold? Is this a contrast to the warm-hearted people the exiled poet left behind? Does the term *amphibian* allude to having

³⁸Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays* (London: Granta Books, 2001), 173.

become an intermediate being, as the amphibian appears to be between the fish and the reptile? Before starting my analysis, I cite the poem in its entirety, followed by Dick Davis's translation:

دوباره مرگ، دوباره زوال و نیست شدن
دوباره مثل وزغ خسته و دو زیست شدن
دو زیست یعنی در سراب جان دادن
به خواب، یک بدن مرده را تکان دادن
دو زیست یعنی اینجا کم است یک چیزی
میان خاطره‌ها مهیم است یک چیزی
دو زیست یعنی آنجا شبیه یک دریاست
کویر، فاجعه‌ی بیکران ماهی هاست
دو زیست یعنی: مردم! نفس کم آوردم
غزل کم آوردم، هم‌قفس کم آوردم
شبیه آدم برفی، شبیه بستنی
شبیه رابطه‌های کج گسستنی
شبیه حلقه‌ی زنجیرهای پاره شده
شبیه شعر بزک کرده استعاره شده
شبیه لحظه پرواز و بغض یک چمدان
شبیه حسرت پرواز تا ابد تهران
دو زیست شد دل من تا نمیرد از دوری
شبیه خاطره‌ی سرد سنگ بر گوری

Once again death, once again fading to nothingness
Once again, like an exhausted frog, amphibious

Amphibious, which means dying in a mirage's gleam
And shaking a dead body within a dream

Amphibious, which means that something's missing here,
Among vague memories there's something that's not clear

Amphibious, which means that over there is like a sea,
A desert, for the fish a limitless calamity

Like a snowman, like an ice-cream disappearing
Like wrong relationships unravelling
Like a link from broken chains, or
Like a tawdry poem's metaphor

Like the moment of take-off and a suitcase's grieving
Like endless regret for Tehran that you're leaving

In exile my heart's become amphibious to survive
Like the cold memory of a stone that marks a grave.³⁹

In this poem of nine couplets (couplet five is missing in Davis's translation), the poet depicts the fear of the painful process of becoming an amphibian. In the opening, the poet emphasizes that she was not born an amphibian but is experiencing this transformation. This alteration is likened to death: to departing, to declining, and to eventually perishing. This transformation from life to death is compared to a wounded and exhausted toad, an amphibian. From couplets two to five, the poet employs the rhetorical figure of anaphora, repeating the words *do-zist ya 'ni* or "amphibian means," followed by a definition. The use of this particular figure of speech is culturally marked since anaphora is abundantly used in Persian elegies to praise, memorialize, and mourn the deceased.⁴⁰ In the definitions the poet offers, amphibious life is attributed to the exile's experiences in the new land. The first definition is the metaphor of mirage, longing for water in a desert. The Persian word for "mirage" is *sarab* (literally, "fountainhead"). The poet's use of this image while living in the West creates a kind of contrast: the wetland of Northern Europe becomes a desert where the thirsty poet is looking for water.

³⁹Translation is by Dick Davis. Shams, "Amphibious," in *When They Broke Down the Door*, 85.

⁴⁰A lucid example is Farrokhi Sistani's splendid panegyric elegy on the death of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna. See Sistani, "qaside 41," in *Divān*, ed. M. Dabir Siyaqi (Tehran: Zavvar, 1371/1993), 90–93, ll. 1692–1760. For an English translation and analysis, see C. E. Bosworth, "Farrukhī's Elegy on Mahmud of Ghazna," *Iran* 29 (1991): 43–49. Also see J. T. P. de Bruijn, "Elegy," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, 2011, www.iranicaonline.org/articles/elegy.

The next definition of being amphibian is that “something’s missing here.” Is this the mystical call for a better, ideal situation, or is it the loss of a feeling or memory? In couplet four, the poet contrasts the sea and the desert, from the point of view of a fish. This juxtaposition of the desert and the sea is meaningful for the exile. While Iranians in exile are like other human beings, like fish in the sea, yet they feel they are in a desert, a boundless catastrophe (*faje ‘e*) for any fish. The metaphor also shows the destitute situation an exile may find themselves in. In couplet five, the poet in the first person says, “I am dying!” and in parallel, “I have come short of breath,” which has a literal signification, but is also an idiom for lacking stamina to continue. This “coming short of” is repeated in the same couplet in combination with poetry and a cage mate. It is as if the poet is saying that she is unable to finish her poem, or she is all alone and has no “cage mate.” The entire couplet reads: “Amphibious, which means that I am dying! I have come short of breath / I have come short of a poem, I have come short of a cage mate.” Does this imply the transformation of a monoculture into a hybrid one, the death of the older cultural identity, and the experience of a hybrid culture? The compound *ham-qafas* refers both to the poet’s memory of being imprisoned with a friend, and to the poet’s having no friend in exile. The space of the exile is here compared to a cage. This couplet also marks the end of the anaphoric use of the amphibious being and the start of another series of anaphoric similes.

From couplets six to eight, the poet uses the simile construction and the ellipsis of the words “Amphibious, which means that.” Here, the poet offers a comparison between an amphibian and the process of gradual perishing, already highlighted in the poem’s opening. An amphibian is like a snowman that melts, an ice cream, and a crooked relationship that is doomed to fail. An amphibian is also likened to “a link from broken chains” and “a tawdry poem’s metaphor.” Couplet eight constitutes a climax, in the comparison between the amphibian and “the moment of take-off and a suitcase’s grieving.”⁴¹ The images employed here are so

⁴¹The suitcase could be seen as a motif in exilic poetry. See, for instance, Mahmoud Darwish’s poem “Diary of a Palestinian Wound,” where he states, “My Homeland is Not a Suitcase and I

familiar to refugees because they will remember the exact moment they left their beloved country. The word *boghz*, used in this couplet, refers in contemporary Persian to the moment when someone bursts into tears because of some intense sorrow.⁴² *Boghz* is the pressure in one's throat before tears come. In the same way that the throat is a container for *boghz*, the suitcase is filled with *boghz* and can at any moment burst. The transference of the container from a body part to an object also signifies the transformation and movement of the person from one place to another. In addition to this geographic transformation, perhaps even more marked is the expected change of identity: the identity is not any more part of the body but is outside the body; it is transmutable and can be negotiated. Moreover, this *boghz* is a symbol for the emotional memories that are collected and which the refugee will take to the new land, regretfully leaving behind their hometown, Tehran. In the concluding couplet, the poet reverts to the word *amphibian*, giving the reason why her heart has transformed into such a creature to survive in exile. Life in exile is compared to "the cold memory of a stone" on a grave. The penetrating images, metaphors, and rhetorical figures the poet has employed offer a vivid picture of the exile's feelings and emotions.

Conclusion

Several conclusions can be drawn from the poetry of the diaspora poets discussed above. First, a good part of this poetry is introspective, referring to the poet's experiences in the homeland and in flight. In many ways, this introspection works therapeutically: the poet writes

am No Traveler, I am the lover and the land is the beloved." See Dalya Cohen-Mor, *Mahmoud Darwish Palestine's Poet and the Other as the Beloved* (Potomac, MD: Palgrave, 2019), 2. Also see his poem "Sarhan Drinks Coffee in the Cafeteria," where he says, "They come, the sea if our doors, Rain took us by surprise. No God but Allah. Rains and bullets took us by surprise." As quoted by R. Abou-Bakr, *The Conflict of Voices in the Poetry of Dennis Butrus and Mahmud Darwish* (Wiesbaden, Germany: Reichert Verlag, 2004), 80.

⁴²The word is Arabic, coming from the root *baghiza* ("to be hated," "to loathe"), but it also appears in Persian. In classical Persian poetry, it has varied shades of meanings, ranging from "hating; hatred, spite, malice," to "grudge, rancour; malignity; revenge." See Steingass, "baghz," *Persian-English Dictionary*, 193.

of their anxieties and of haunting memories of home. Paradoxically, limiting the poem to a personal experience or feeling gives it a universal character, voicing the experiences of a broader Persian exilic community. Second, the bitter certainty of remaining an exile forever encourages the poets and offers them a new space to comment on sociopolitical events in Iran and in the new homeland. In these poems, the poets show that exile is not merely being physically separated from the homeland. The notion of home is composed of diverse physical, emotional, and historical elements anchored in a person's life. These poems offer a unique insight into the thoughts, feelings, and emotions of the exiled person and how the person pictures the homeland, how they perceive life in exile with all the possibilities of the new homeland, but also how discrimination and exclusion wound the soul, and how the exiled person tries to come to terms with their new homeland. The rift created by the flight from the homeland is an element that recurs in many Persian poems. It is as if the poet desires to pass over the period of exile and return to the original home. This reminds me of a Syrian girl about ten years old who, speaking on a Dutch TV program, asked her mother, "how long are we going to be a refugee?" She had not yet realized that she would quite possibly be called a Syrian refugee all her life. It is as if the trait of "exile" becomes an inseparable part of the individual. Shams compares exile to a wandering bullet in her eponymous poem (n. d.):

فشنگ سرگردان
 مثل فشنگی سرگردان و سمج
 بازمانده از سال های دور
 در خونم راه می رود
 غربت

It's like a wandering, nagging bullet
 Still there after many years
 Traveling in my blood
 Exile.⁴³

⁴³Translation by Dick Davis. Shams, "Wandering Bullet," in *When They Broke Down the Door*, 91.

Persian poets in exile depict new dimensions of the loaded appellations of *refugee* and *exile*, based on their lived experiences. These poems are gentle reflections on separation and the hope for union. It is in this tender universe that the poems become a cure, showing how the poet has accepted life in a new home, even if half of life remains invisible for them.

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