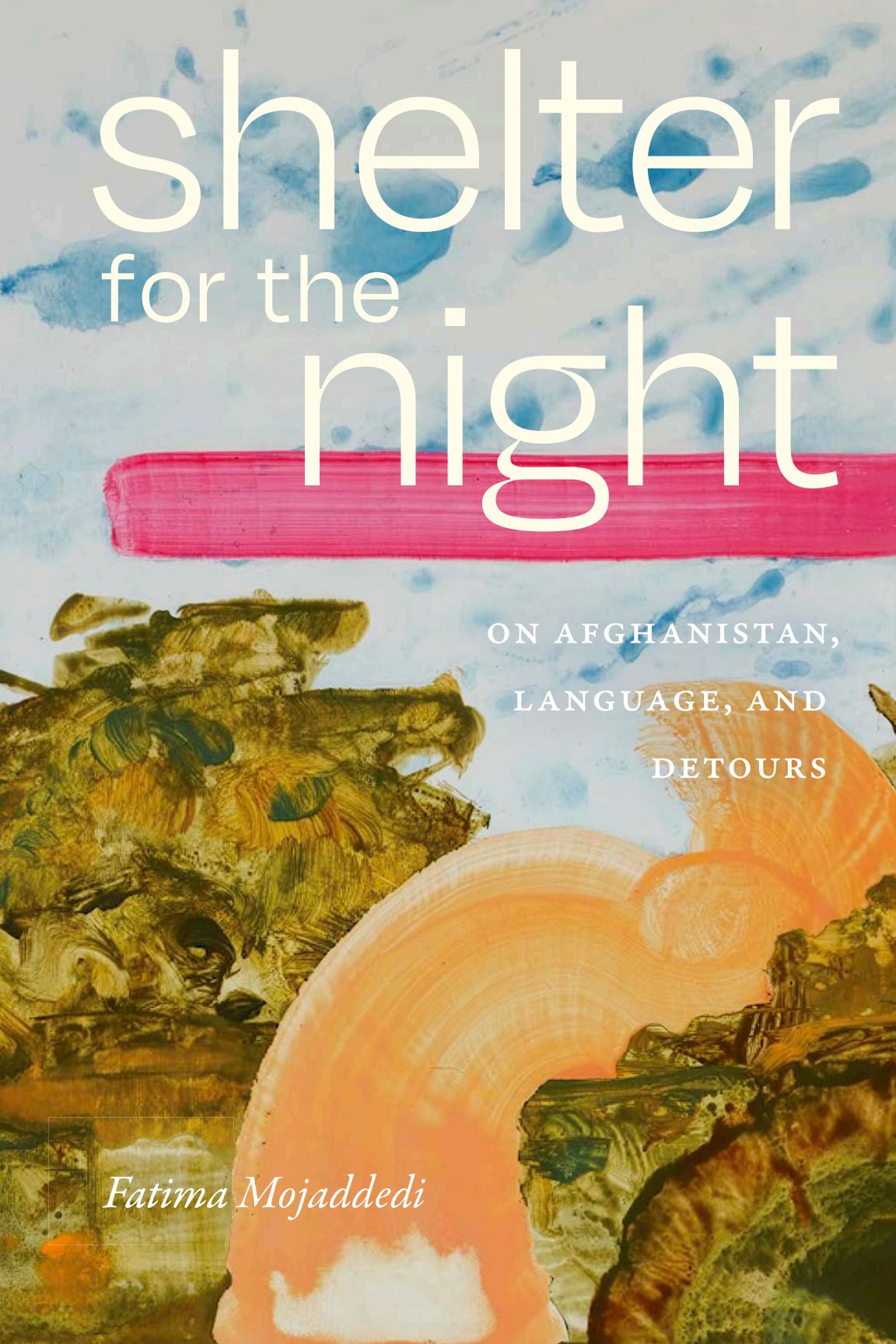
shelter
for the
night
ON AFGHANISTAN,
LANGUAGE, AND
DETOURS
Fatima Mojaddedi

Shelter for the Night

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On Afghanistan, Language, and Detours

FATIMA MOJADDEDI

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In loving memory of Monena.

For my parents, and for Krystyna,
who made writing possible in different ways.

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Prologue

Open Windows and Houses

The house will also fall to dust.
—LE CORBUSIER, *Towards a New Architecture*

We have long forgotten the ritual by which the house of our life was erected.
—WALTER BENJAMIN, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*

Houses, lines of houses, streets, miles of pavements, piled up bricks, stones. Changing hands. This owner, that. . . . Shelter for the night.
—JAMES JOYCE, *Ulysses*

Nadia, who believes she is now in her eighties but isn't sure, liked to open the windows of our sixth-floor apartment first thing in the morning, because she proclaimed, "The sun is cleansing," and she liked to look out at the street and city of Kabul below.[1] It was not so much a habit as a sense that what is true and good can be both outside and inside. It was a sovereign moment like the kind Walter Benjamin describes as the sudden courage to look through an aperture "for the tiny spark of contingency" and find the undefined point where "the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it."[2] It was a moment about living life on her own terms, and the open window set her free: "Ah! That's so much better. It opens my heart."

In "A Berlin Chronicle" Walter Benjamin describes the city from a nostalgic, sometimes melancholy distance, and from the perspective of his own discontinuous past in which the "imprint of a collision" between society and self was clear.[3] When I think of my childhood in Hanover, I mostly think of the German winter and of lush piles of snow against the gray sky, but also of Herrenhäuser Gärten, with its magnificent fountain

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that spouts water eighty feet high at its center, and in our neighborhood next to it, a small children's sandbox and an imposing brick archway that led to our block. From Nadia's perspective, starting the day with light and air was about joy from within. Looking out at the city did not owe itself to a physical crossing. When I asked her if she had visited the terraced Gardens of Babur, where the first Mughal emperor is entombed, or the ancient Bala Hissar fortress she asked, "Why would I go there?" Looking out at the city was more like a "voluptuous hovering on the brink."[4] The light would flood the room, and she would lie down in the one space on the floor that she proclaimed as hers. It was as small as her petite and hunched body. There was no balustrade or trellis framed with climbing vines, no pictures on the windowsill to stand in front of, and no paneled shutters to create latticed lines or interfere with her light. Put differently, there was no *punctum* (Roland Barthes's term) in front of her, only the kind of new direction and clear symmetrical arrangement Le Corbusier praised in a different era for its equality and modern openness. Unlike mere holes in the wall, which make a room unempathetic and dismal looking, like an enclosure, he wrote that windows must "serve to admit light . . . and to see outside."[5]

Nadia talked of spiritual, moral, and medical changes, and about hearts that break and stop suddenly, but not from inevitable decline. "When they cannot take any more," she said, "they just stop." She yearned to travel far away, but most days she was content to stay home and lie in the sun. She had been told sunshine possesses curative powers and that the air it passes through should move through windows and pervade the inside of homes and rooms, into the smaller rooms where wet clothes are hung to dry, and therefore onto bodies and furniture and tabletops, extending its cleansing and healthy effects to homey, familiar things.

Nadia's kind of faith in the world, like the willingness to convince and "conquer without conception,"[6] is matched by her fiery sense of justice and her discourse on reason and the importance of writing, reading, and sharpening one's mind. "Did you ever want to learn to read?" I asked her one afternoon. She didn't really answer, but she said that in old age, the more one attempts to understand exactly how the world works and why people disappoint us, the more one feels defeated. She confesses her own mind is less agile than it was, she cannot read or write, she never could, and now her patience for new and different things has diminished. There is also no room for calamity in her life. If a single tragedy transpires, she says, her heart will immediately stop. More generally, she has a proclivity for candor.

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And because she did not tell me why she wanted to lie down first thing in the morning or how she slept at night, I did not ask about her dreams. In a routinized, less keen, and more obtuse way, I only asked if she was physically comfortable—knowing her back, legs, and rheumatic hands bothered her—but never if she actually enjoyed having her own private bedroom where, as Le Corbusier said, one could "walk at ease," stretch oneself, and where "each thing can be put at once in its right place."[7]

The things we asked each other and answered were more like zigzags. We found ourselves in the space of a shared mother tongue and in the grip of words and silence, but also in the rough outline of an undecided relationship. I had hired her to come to my apartment to sleep at night, so I would not be alone. She once told me she had never had a room in her life, not in her father's house nor in her husband's, where she knew she could not dream of it, and that not many people in the country had a room of their own. But now, like a *Bibi*, lady of the house, she is on the high floor of a new concrete apartment building close to the Kabul River with views of the Hindu Kush Mountains and their undulating foothills, the green-domed local mosque, and the bustling neighborhood of Qala-e-Fathullah.

She said sometimes at night in bed, she would lie and imagine herself lying in her bed in her bedroom on the sixth floor of the apartment building in the center of Kabul and feel like a queen. Living there made her feel different, better about herself, and she told everyone about the apartment *emirates* (towers) that were new and modern, in stark contrast to the Soviet mass-built gray and dreary apartment blocks in the neighborhood of Microrayan. She said she used to admire those, years ago, but now she can see they are plain and ugly. Her perspective is different. She tells everyone who calls or visits her about the windows, tiled and heated floors, her own bathroom, electric heating, and her general sense of well-being. She tells them about the elevator that goes so fast but makes her nervous because there could be an electricity blackout while she is inside—or worse, what if a man is stuck with her? "Oh, Allah, you are the true protector," she says. One morning, she was at the elevator door with our next-door neighbor, a kind man in his forties, but she would not go in when the door opened. He kept asking her to go in first, and she would say: "Oh no. No, I could not possibly sir, please you first" and he would reply: "No, mother, you first, please I insist, you are my white-haired elder," and so on. She seemed to enjoy this back-and-forth for a bit, then abruptly grew tired of it, threw on

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her long flower-embroidered headscarf, and ran down the stairs. He took the elevator. "You can never *truly know* another person," she would say.

……..

In his prologue to *The Kingdom of This World*, Alejo Carpentier proposes that European surrealism produces the marvelous "by means of conjuring tricks, bringing together objects which would never normally meet: the old and fraudulent story of the chance encounter of the umbrella and the sewing machine on an operating table, which spawned the ermine spoons, snails in a rainy taxi, and the lion's head in a widow's pelvis of the surrealist exhibitions."[8] His point is that surrealism is both customary and absurd, and it cannot evoke the power of the marvelous or the transformation of reality, whatever that might be. The artistic representation and discourse of the marvelous fails to account for the extent to which the belief in "the marvelous in the real" is already an enormous, transformative power. Carpentier is also saying that miracles are not only about the enlarged domain of expectation but also the willingness to see in some previously ordinary, even banal fact of social life, a new and energizing potential, and thus, a kind of joy and "amplification of the measures and categories of reality, perceived with peculiar intensity due to an exaltation of the spirit which elevates it to a kind of "limit state."[9]

Nadia told me that those who do not believe in saints and angels cannot reasonably expect them to later intervene on their behalf when they are in trouble. Belief and expectation cannot be too far apart from each other. But the home has a certain dignity, and the miracles and blessings inside it, she said, are revealed if one believes a home is different from everything outside it. The room and the street are not the same thing: One could look out at the street from a window, but those on the street should not be able to look back in. "One must never let any stranger into the home or reveal the affairs of the home to the outside world. Every window needs curtains," she instructed. A home is not marvelous, but it also is not merely a structure with windows or just another thing to build or possess; it touches on matters of the imagination, the heart, and therefore life and death. After being stuck in a torrential downpour in Berlin, reminiscent of a "primeval forest," and having no direction at all, Benjamin stumbled upon the same truth and recalls the life-giving feeling of reaching "the bronze lions' mouths on our front door with their rings that were now life belts."[10]

And when Benjamin writes about the confidence and prosperity in the bourgeois person's house, he describes the opposite impulse as a street-facing

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openness: "The domestic interior moves outside. It is as though the bourgeois were so sure of his prosperity that he is careless of façade, and can exclaim: My house, no matter where you choose to cut into it, is façade. . . . The street becomes room and the room becomes street. The passerby who stops to look at the house stands, as it were, in the alcove."[11]

I think my home and her room were a kind of escape for Nadia: her inside and outside, a place where she slept, left during the day, and returned at night; she once quipped that the best part of the day was coming home to her new room, her shelter for the night. Relative to other commodities, houses stand not on their feet but on heads full of ideas. In the late 1950s, my mother would play "house" with her friends. They would play with their dolls using the trees in their long, terraced garden in Kabul: One large, beautiful tree was their doll's father's house, and the other, smaller surrounding trees were all future husbands and their homes. House, husband, and father were the same thing. In turn, each of them would bequeath one of the dolls to a tree, pushing it in a wooden wheelbarrow to her fate, and they would fake tears of separation, lament, and then sit under the tree alongside the newly married doll in her new "home." On one impassioned occasion, my mom's doll divorced after a few minutes, telling the tree, through my mom's voicing: "I've had enough of you! You make my heart feel closed. I want to return to my father's house." She ran back to the father tree with her doll and told it all her marriage woes.

Nadia's childhood, a decade earlier than my mother's, was a time of hard, concentrated modernity, especially in Kabul, where iron, steel, and great public works were more visible than ever before. Between 1943 and 1946 the Royal Afghan Public Works Ministry placed "urgent" orders for fifty tons of dynamite for road building in the mountains, heavy-duty power and drag shovels, pile drivers (from Chicago and Milwaukee), crawler-mounted power shovels from Ohio for canal construction, 315 tons of reinforced steel, building materials (there was a global scarcity of wire nails at the time), and seismological and meteorological instruments.[12] The earlier suspicions of European government officials that factories in Kabul were secretly being used for bombmaking by Bolshevik agents like Dr. Abdul Hafiz had largely dissipated, and imports were skyrocketing so much that more goods were being ordered than could be supplied by the United Kingdom, United States, or India alone.

The dreams of modernity and of a modern city filled with new and more solid, but also smaller, delicate things pressed on. They were part of a growing expectation. New objects began to fill homes and businesses

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FIGURE P.1 The austere form of this fort-like house echoes architectures of defense and endurance, evoking the house as not just a shelter but a philosophical and material threshold. Kabul. Photographer: Burke. Source: Album photo 430/3, photo 174, India Office Records, British Library.

too: hedge cutters, wall sockets, white enamel bathtubs, Bakelite and porcelain ceiling roses, stainless steel cutlery from Thomas Turner and Company (Sheffield), table knives with ivoried handles, meat choppers, sugar tongs, ice-cream freezers, household scales, letter scales (also used for income tax purposes), Wilkinson's tailor scissors, and Vulcan hair clippers. The furniture factory in Kabul ordered one hundred saw blades, twenty-four mortising machines, and sixteen chisels with core drivers.[13] The total weight of items ordered was more than two thousand tons. But perhaps most tellingly, because the house is never severed from the desire to look outside, and thus to be elsewhere, there was a surge in the demand for windows and for sixteen thousand yards of green window screens.[14] These made the difference between inside and outside, and between a home and an ordinary house.

Color and paint were everywhere. Spanish brown, bright red ochre, deep blue, mid-green, jet black, burnt sienna, lemon chrome, sweet yellow, straw, and middle Chinese green were ordered in dozens of tons for painting homes. White oil paint was used on ceilings, factories, buildings, schools,

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and government ministries. Copal varnish was used inside mosques. One government school in Kabul, the War Ministry, and a sugar factory 160 miles away in Baghlan were all painted exactly the same shade of ultramarine blue.[15] Nadia grew up in this vivid, more open era surrounded by color, the building up of the city, and the promises of modernity. And today as well, the city is still in the same process; the building of workplaces and neighborhoods gives people a sense of closeness-in-change. The detached, windowed homes—ranging from modest to gilded, gated monstrosities—reflect the desire for a private life with the possibility of looking out at others on the street. Like before, for those who want to live in modern and secure homes, the materials for building, furnishing, and segregating come from abroad, previously as glossy images in magazines and now on television, which Nadia watches whenever she can.

But no house or social relation between things could have prepared her for the growing unease that came with old age, or the divide between literate and illiterate people that determined fortunes and lives. She told me it was now, in 2013, common to hear that people were producing papers against one another, even within families. Kids were producing false documents, birth certificates, and counter-deeds, usually to take their parents' home or money from them. It was not quite the world of Nikolai Gogol's *Dead Souls*, but for her it was close enough. There was a lot of scheming and deception, and the added power of the written word made these more violent. And it was not just a matter of writing, even though writing intensified these patterns. She said bad words also played a role because bad words come from bad thoughts that are at the origin of the evil plans later put in motion.

Violence, Hannah Arendt argues, is different from strength and power because it needs implements, and because it "harbors within itself an additional element of arbitrariness."[16] Those implements include writing and people's words. The violence of old age and illiteracy is the unknown quality of Nadia's future. She accepts that her own body will increasingly betray her, that her body will slow down and fall apart, and that these infirmities are part of the obvious changes of life in this world. Nadia grapples with the fact that we always live in our bodies ("I accept death but I do not want to suffer in pain") and in a society with others, some of whom have money, power, bad thoughts, more powerful bodies, and mechanisms to kill and destroy with, meaning that evil is always possible. She does not take for granted that any of her relationships will last for the rest of her life. For her it seems that with age the small spaces between people are eventually "lit up by an almost intolerable, piercing clarity in which they are scarcely able to survive."[17]

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Nadia's husband, severely hunchbacked and illiterate like her, died around the age of one hundred in 2016. "I've seen all the kings," he said. When I called Nadia in Kabul from New York to give my condolences, she told me she wished that all the years he lost (how many was she thinking?) would be added to the lives of her friends and to mine, and she said if I was feeling up to it, I should come around for a mourning lunch. In the last years of his life, he worried about his daughter, who can read and write. He feared she would steal the deed to his house or produce a counterfeit copy of her own. He slept with it at night, fearing she would bribe a government or court official or corrupt judge and put "everything, the whole of it, everything in our life" in her name. If she didn't do it of her own volition, they feared her husband would drag her into it. The hardest thing to understand, he would say, is another person. One afternoon he visited me after the bodies of a mother and daughter were found, beaten to death and barely covered up, in an alleyway behind their neighborhood. "These things happen," he said. I asked if he truly believed his daughter would betray him after a lifetime, owing simply to the fact that she could write. "What do you know? For the sake of a house," he said, "people do anything!" Then he asked me for a Coke.

Loneliness and old age, like family and the inside of a home, are about language and silence. There are exactly two courses of action: one can speak or not. And writing, Freud proposes "in its origin is the voice of an absent person."[18] When I asked Nadia what she thought about her daughters reading and writing (all three of them are literate), she turned the question around and asked why I do it so much. When I was in Herat a year prior to meeting Nadia, a little boy of five or six saw me writing in my notebook and asked, "So do you walk around with that all day and write everything?" In Nadia's case the matter is simpler and more personal: There are too many words in language, and they are more difficult when they are arranged on paper like the teeth on a comb.

If she could become literate magically or through one act of sheer willpower, she would do it in a heartbeat. It would give her latitude and connect her to the world and to many more people. But the neatness of what is put on paper does not match the way the words occur to her in her mind or resonate with her general style of life. I offered to read on her behalf whenever she needed it, but she said she is never involved with paperwork and that even when she is, it does not corrupt her, because her thoughts and memories are full of good things and good people. I took this to mean that if alphabetic writing baffles her, she has recourse to her own mind and

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to the memory of language, which she believes to be more reliable. Besides, she said, paperwork is the problem of young people and the rich.

Different kinds of voices reach her. She often proclaims that she loves living in a modern society. There is mass media: ninety-six television stations, sixty-five radio stations, her favorite Turkish soap operas, and more than nine hundred print publications she cannot read. She does not know these numbers, but it is their proliferation she claims to enjoy. And she is glad other women are reading, and doing much more than that; she sits within an inch of the television screen, almost attaching herself to it, to take it all in and see their lives up close. We regularly watched the Turkish soap opera *Öyle Bir Geçer Zaman ki* (Time goes by) in which Captain Ali Akarsu, the husband, cheats on his wife, Cemile, with a blond European woman. "A fool in a funny hat if there ever was one!" Nadia said. She hated Ali. These were moments when I thought of the television as an extension of her "whether of skin, hand, or foot," and I was convinced it affected her "whole psychic and social complex."[19] During the news hour, she would sit farther away and curse under her breath. She told me the politicians were old and useless. They walked around with pens, signed their names on everything, and tore up bits of paper when it suited them, and they took all the money and land. But even during periods of high inflation, when cash was tight and talk of corruption was omnipresent, she redecorated and painted her home.

The sense of a plan and detailed scheme for achieving something was circulating in the city and across the country; it was winnowing with and without the details, facts, and numbers through television and radio into homes during the noon and 6 p.m. newscasts as the promise of a new government and social order. Nadia was buoyed by some of these forecasts, but on other days knew better than to believe that having a plan meant either peace after war or peace during war. Huge swaths of the country were not under government control, which made the plans more important, secretive, and ambiguous than ever before. Nadia said the problem is that nobody knows where to begin because other people cannot be known to us, and this has been true for all of time in "all of history" as she sees it. I imagine that for her, individual memories of a grievance are like persons figured in a photograph and drifting, as Sartre writes, "between the shores of perception, between sign and image, without ever approaching either."[20]

Her possibly violent son-in-law mistreats her favorite, literate daughter. Her daughter has the power of the word, and he is irresponsible and

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contemptible. Her daughter would run away to her parents' house, then return to him soon after, leaving Nadia confused but determined to come up with a plan of her own to put an end to it.

NADIA: She is better off in her old hunchback of a father's house!

AUTHOR: Yes! How should we do this? We can also bring her here to the apartment. We will hide her.

NADIA: No, that is a terrible plan. Look at me asking a girl who has never married how to run away from a man's house!"

Most days would start for her with natural light and boldness but then, like clutter in her path, an inertia and rethinking would set in and change her aim and outlook. She changed her mind when she wished. She proclaimed how difficult her life was because of her illiteracy. Then she said she wanted nothing to do with the new way of being she saw all around her, which included reading and writing. She would become cautious, baffled by the old habits of killing, revenge seeking, and bad words. She was happy her grandsons were in school and learning to read and write, but given the numerous suicide bombings in the city, what, she asked, would she do with herself, if they were killed? To me it seemed that if there was a bold opening or radical perspective—something like the call of the other and the city in the grand sense, evoking the vivid "panorama of dialectical images" Benjamin associates with his vision of Paris as a scene of possibilities—that the event lost its excitement and left her behind to discern its remainders.[21]

AUTHOR: Do you speak to your children about the things you fear?

NADIA: Some things I tell them. Some things I do not!

AUTHOR: What kind of things?

NADIA: They don't have much time. Running here and there. They are making a living.

AUTHOR: Yes, they work hard.

NADIA: Work! Work! Work! It is like you and all your writing. What about taking care of their parents? Why do you think people bring children into the world, then?

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AUTHOR: What do you most want in life?

NADIA: For my children to live long, prosperous lives, of course!

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Thinking about windows and outlook Walter Benjamin also wrote: "The interest of the panorama is in seeing the true city—the city indoors. What stands within the windowless house is the true. Moreover, the arcade, too, is a windowless house. The windows that look down on it are like loges from which one gazes into its interior, but one cannot see out these windows to anything outside. (What is true has no windows; nowhere does the true look out to the universe.)"[22] Thinking about her window and the happiness of others, the Iranian modernist poet Forough Farrokhzad wrote: "If you come to my house, friend / bring me a lamp and a window I can look through / at the crowd in the happy alley."[23]

Windows are not only about light but also perception and truth and the return of the other. The panorama reveals the city that lies within, in the arcade, behind the door, in passageways and alleys and in the windowless house as the enclosure of a reality. The truth of the city hidden in its interior does not seek our gaze. But the window reveals the street, the crowd, the other, and the facade that is everything and has its own truth revealed but only through the gaze and the help of the gift of light and an opening.

For Nadia the truth is not enclosed or removed from the world of the window or gaze. Seeing the truth is a question of interpretation not as a distortion of reality but an image of that distortion in her mind's eye: She sees her world, city, and relations for what they are, mutable phenomena she cannot control or prevent from becoming something else. Husbands die. Children grow distant. Elevators get stuck. Kings vanish; politicians replace them. Neighbors become violent. Her open window onto the city street; her recommendation to close the curtains; the inside of her room; the inviolable sanctity of the home; her concerns and ambivalence about her children, her mind and body, the future, the government, the paperwork, betrayal and dirty hearts, Captain Ali Akarsu from the soap opera—all of these are an introduction to how to think about the other and the problem of interpretation in collective life, but also about the other side of truth and knowledge that reveals itself in the gap between self and other, speech and writing, the breakdown of collective thought and the transcendence of that failure in order to gesture, dream, sacrifice, and say something other than this.

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These are flashes of memory and history but also a history of language-encounters that transform how she views her life. In Nadia's imagination of others, there is a sense of indeterminacy whereby the people in her life, and their subjectivities, agendas, and desires, become other than they are. This indeterminacy has nothing to do with text or discourse, but it is nonetheless discernable to her through their words and actions and exemplifies a textual practice in the broadest, most dynamic sense. In her encounters, through her language and shared memories, the deferral of meaning enables her to keep open a space in her mind—an ethical choice rooted in the recognition of the impermanence of life, relationships, and even language itself—and it transcends mere ambivalence or her belief in kismet. This improvisational openness embodies an ethic of transgression rather than conformity, enabling her to encounter those she already knows anew within the realm of language, where the fantasy of identity is repeatedly displaced by a metonymic and radical otherness.

Seen in this light, a language-encounter, as the concept of arche-writing also suggests, encompasses knowing the other and recording memory, historical events, desire, death, translation, and absence. In this way, the release she envisions becomes a more radical freedom of existence. It is a way of living that continually redefines itself through her pursuit of understanding others and the difference in historical time such that she is always writing, *sous rature*, but still writing. For me, this constellation of concepts is best approached through detours and by demonstrating the discontinuous process of thinking and knowing the other and its implications for our understanding of symbolic life. It is also best captured by a mode of ethnographic writing that draws on the insights of literary and psychoanalytic theory to accomplish a close reading of those realities where the fantasy of self and knowing come undone; in other words, a perusal of traces, cracks, and detours that operate as the principle of collective consciousness in a world with a terrifying void at its center.

To pursue these detours is to approach them as an open-ended text, full of ambiguities and, as Roland Barthes describes, a world of voices and words ad infinitum, a "tissue of citations,"[24] through which the idea of signification is displaced by the counter-theological practice of reading the phenomena through which all identity, including that of subjects, authors, and concepts, is lost. Encounters within and between ethnographic openings are marked by a caesura in meaning such that the question of who and what the other is in relations of love, absence, historical memory, and practices of translation is radically undone. Yet, it is precisely in this undoing that a

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symbolic order emerges and suggests to us that collective life depends on the ability to arrest meaning and identity. For me and my process of writing, Nadia's relentless insistence that things can always be other than they are opened a series of questions and quilting points that move through the chapters and hold together a dialogue between two dimensions of this project: the place of subjectivity in language and the new forms of social violence that raise the question of how to imagine collective life amid profound upheaval.

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INTRODUCTION

Cracks and Detours

What we cannot reach by flying we must reach limping.
. . . The Book tells us it is no sin to limp.
—AL-HARIRI OF BASRA, from the *Maqâmât* (translation by Friedrich Rückert)

. . . to diverge ever more widely from its original course of life and to make ever more complicated *détours* before reaching its aim of death. These circuitous paths to death . . . would thus present us today with the picture of the phenomena of life.
—SIGMUND FREUD, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*

The topic of this book can be envisaged in the image of a crack rising to the surface of collective life and consciousness in Afghanistan. It moves across subjective relations, forms of speech, and action characterized by loss, not knowing, ambivalence, and sometimes a tragic arc where a social bond was hoped for instead. How far it will grow is impossible to say. It emerges as a historical dilemma, and in the contemporary moment it fissures through the transformative, difficult relationship between language and being. *Shelter for the Night* pursues this crack through a series of what I call *language-encounters* in the domains of war, interpersonal betrayal, and translation, and it reveals how these bear on possibilities of collective existence. I invoke language-encounters because the content of my ethnographic stories is myriad and complex, ranging from deception to love, sacrifice, and accusation. Yet, each story shares the sense that the place of language in social life is marked by rupture and discontinuity rather than coherence or shared meanings. In other words, by thinking of language as a space of encounter, where the words, discourses, and interpretations of others shape possibilities of being, I seek to bring to the surface the idealism

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and violence my interlocuters experience in their lives and the cascade of domino effects they struggle to contain.

The unifying theme of this project emerges in relation to a larger poststructural analysis of the forms of sociality no longer defined by the cohesion of symbolic life but by its rupture and discontinuity; that is, the play of representations, signifying practices, decentered political forces, insurgency, urban life, multiple crossings, and interpretive anguish that mark the experience of subjectivity and new, often devastating forms of social violence that unexpectedly enable collective life and survival.[1] The image of a crack captures the fact that these two sides are not separated. It also connects a series of encounters and sites with my larger question of how the difference separating the speaking (the symbolic) from an immediate identification (becoming, possessing, and embodying) can be imagined. In a sense, the political and subjective problem of becoming other, estranged, fungible, or dead is also a moment when this gap—across which language ideally would facilitate communication and understanding—fails to hold the symbolic and real apart.

Conceptually, I approach this failure in two ways: my interlocuters' experience of life and society closing in on them (the closing of the gap), and the opening of something beyond that, a crack or fissure in which social life remains possible.[2] In 1952 Frantz Fanon wrote about the terrifying logic of the former, a nightmare of waking life, in his description of the Malagasy people, who dream of pathways, guns, and oxen, among other things. The nature of collective trauma is such that Fanon suggests even in the oneiric world, the rifle is not a symbol for something else (it is not power, the phallus, and so on). Instead, the rifle is merely denuded of its own symbolic capacity as an ambiguous sign.[3] It is a weapon of death, and its emergence is how the real interrupts the dream rather than the dream being an escape from the real. Some of this logic will appear in the pages of this book and suggest to us that when the metonymic quality of a signifier fails (that is, when a sign does not defer its meaning to another sign) ambiguity cannot be tolerated and we are no longer insulated from the real. In other words, when language fails to enable communication, mediate between individuals, or represent a shared reality, the nature of social violence also radically shifts. It becomes intensified and deadlier in ways that are tragic and often difficult to contain. In the chapters of this book, social violence occurs as one dimension of all the ethnographic encounters I seek to mediate. Examples are the story of Sami, a failed suicide bomber, who is betrayed by his mother almost to the point of his death; the urbanite translators

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whose condescension in relating to rural persons becomes deadly for both sides; and the place of translation in modern, cosmopolitan thought, in real-world, irrational violence, and even in the realm of love, which gives us more than we expect.

As an analytic device, language-encounters include the obvious aspects of linguistic life, such as the place of dialogic speech in establishing or destroying social relations, practices of translation and intelligence gathering, testimonial strategies, illiteracy, and rhetorical life in general. But I invoke *encounters* because there is a dimension beyond dialogic speech that touches on questions of life and death, what it means to know something, *how* we know, new forms of accusation, and the complex mediations that transform subjectivity from the fantasy of being into the most primal place where we experience difference and signification (what Jacques Lacan describes as a signifying cut) even as that experience cannot always be put into words.[4] When I think about this, one poignant moment rises to the top. During his trial, Sami was asked about his intention and willingness to die, and he replied: "Oh, I cannot say what I mean!" And yet, Sami later did speak, perhaps most strikingly when he addressed me directly in court to say he was tortured by the Afghan police with a glass Coke bottle. Why does he address the judges through me, and why does he call me "sister"? What is he unable to say?

The unsayable captures what Benjamin describes as "not only the flow of thoughts but their arrest as well" and the inevitable but generative failure of signification. By this I mean the failure and impossibility of signs and meanings totally coinciding between the sayable and the said, intent and reception, sound and mishearing, the hard blows of life and blowing up one's life, translation and its others; in other words, the kind of coinciding that would bring the communicative act and the movement of signs to a point of rest and felicity: a kind of death, really. For me, this noncoinciding captures the crack where Sami is both defeated by language and turns to it in a fateful bid to make his condition known to others. The crack is marked by a caesura in thought and expression whose force of immobilization and excess leads to a metonymic opening: sometimes to a halt or stutter, at other times to voice and the outpouring of words and catharsis.

In 1920, when Freud formulated his theory of the uncanny, the psychic rupture that constitutes the foundation of subjectivity, he also introduced the concept of Thanatos, or the "death drive," as distinct from Eros, the life-affirming drive rooted in pleasure. Freud arrived at this idea through his study of dreams, accidents, and child's play. He wrote that the death drive

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does not reveal an impulse toward literal death or destruction but is instead a fundamental principle of movement, a flow of "ever more complicated *détours*" and "circuitous paths" through which the subject creatively lives, evades, dreams, and pushes back against the specter of total dissolution.[5]

This alternation and movement, including toward an elsewhere both past and future, is a radical but essential dimension of language irreducible to the uncertainties of interpretive life. It includes that but is fundamentally more. It is about the persistence of a life-sustaining and aporetic opening that recurs, creates detours, haunts us, holds knowledge in suspension, and emerges when we least expect it to include people we may or may not be able to entrust with our lives; and it suggests that desire for a particular kind of "Other" in collective life only operates through deferral and movement.[6] In this book, alternation and movement are the groundless ground on which a series of events and pharmakonic worlds emerge in relation to new forms of political action, intersubjectivity, global imaginaries, and translational power.

SHELTER FOR THE NIGHT

Shelter for the Night started as an attempt to grasp the formation of a highly speculative economy and to understand the notion and transmutation of value as it enabled new forms of exchange, extractive violence, and modes of living in Kabul. In Afghanistan the spectacle of war gripped the national imagination as a source of fantastic power, a kind of theater where war created spectacular value even as it destroyed so much through intensive bombing and combat-related damage. In this context, from 2010 to 2013, I witnessed a collective fantasy about value creation in the hydrocarbons and minerals underground and the commodification of linguistic and cultural expertise, translation, spoken English, and literacy, all of which were incorporated into the apparatus of a US- and NATO-led counterinsurgency campaign.

But through the detours of fieldwork inside courtrooms, mosques, the Green Zone, government ministries, national and colonial archives, security compounds, corporate headquarters, and people's homes, I encountered a different kind of dilemma: the tension between engaging with others through a shared language and the recognition that a more general failure of representation is part of the experience of collective life when communication cannot be taken for granted. And yet, the other side of this predicament

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is that, even amid a military and political culture of intensified surveillance, arrest, and interrogation with far-reaching and devastating effects, my interlocuters spoke freely with me. They asked me what I had come to learn through them and how my thinking evolved, and they shared either insights they felt they understood or questions that continued to elude them. The majority of my interlocuters were incorporated into facets of a war economy ranging from governmental to the corporate and scientific worlds of mining and linguistic translation. Others worked inside the militarized Green Zone in Kabul's Wazir Akbar Khan neighborhood as security guards, cooks, cleaners, or drivers, or they were entirely removed from this scene, living in poverty-stricken neighborhoods where they were unemployed, subject to restrictions on mobility into central Kabul, and usually illiterate. Still others I encountered through a dialectic of observation and the gaze, mediated by two distinct experiences of the law: those within the dangerous reach of its corporeal and punitive practices; and my experience, observing these practices unfolding within courtrooms and high-stakes tribunals—spaces where I, too, was subject to observation and judgment and to address without dialogue.

As I will show, the predicament of these trials is not only the violence of veridical or regulative ideals but the fundamental problem of knowing, encountering, and communicating with others. When both the judges and defendants presume these others are dissimulating their "true" (*asli*, *raast*) selves, this raises questions about the place of "reality" (*haqiqat, vaqiat*) in social life. This predicament reflected a general sentiment about the nature of political life, in particular distrust in the notion that through representation by the state or national politicians, recourse to political violence could be supplanted by dialogue and mediation. More specifically, in the lead-up to the 2014 presidential election between Dr. Ashraf Ghani and Dr. Abdullah, delayed for months by widespread fraud, a pervasive sense of falsehood shaped views of Afghanistan's future. This distortion reflected a new, pragmatic judgment of others and the social milieu, which emerged alongside crime, insurgency, counterinsurgency tactics, heightened security, and black-market profiteering.[7]

To many Afghans, the state was an ineffective entity mired in corrupt or criminal schemes; it was on the verge of collapse, complicit with insurgents, or controlled by an oligarchy in Kabul and Dubai. People believed the Taliban were biding their time in places like Logar or Ghazni, awaiting an opportunity to take the city but hindered by poor and unpredictable road conditions. Other rumors suggested the Taliban used their own currency

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in villages; administered a parallel system of justice; operated legal and illegal mines; negotiated with foreign governments like those of Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and the United States (a rumor that turned out to be true in the lead-up to the Afghan government's collapse in August 2021); and executed Afghans for crimes that included being translators or soldiers in the Afghan National Army.

The fluctuating prices of commodities like oil, gas, land, housing, and food became part of a discourse of speculative yet reasonable truths that gained epistemological force. Rumors circulated that government ministers had transferred their funds to foreign banks in Dubai and Abu Dhabi and were preparing to flee the country. People lined up at Kabul Bank, Afghan International Bank, Azizi Bank, Afghan National Bank, and other banks to withdraw their money, fearing a collapse like the one in 2012, when deposits worth $900 million were embezzled by bank officials and people with government ties, including former President Karzai's brother.[8]

Corruption (*fesad*) and fraud were suspected to underlie every aspect of economic life and were braided into a discourse of the other that addressed violent forms of gain and the fundamental dissonance between one's outward appearance (*zahir*) and inner truth (*batin*). Precisely because language and representation are defined by a signifying function, it follows that political disillusionment was not limited to abstract critiques of governance but also shaped collective consciousness and the struggle to render oneself or others legible. People experienced this representative failure within contexts of social violence, where attempts to find answers, others, and connection seemed to produce the opposite effect: People dissimulated, conned, betrayed, and condemned one another without clear intentions or narratives. Here, subjective life was carried out through rumor, narrative, fantasy, and accusation—not through knowing but through a continuous *working-through* in which language generated referents and spectral effects that were reasonably present but never fully manifest.

In this negativity, new social phenomena came into existence that were hard to communicate or "represent" and might even refuse to be contained by language. And yet through all this, people continued to narrate stories, to translate their experiences into words, and in the process helped to create worlds that were fundamentally different but that also made sense. When Sami said, "Oh, I cannot say what I mean!" he was also saying that the nature of saying can signify something altogether different from what seems to be said or expected or experienced. On one level we can think of this communication breakdown as being due to the putatively exceptional state of

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war and upheaval, but on another level, war reveals truths that were always already existing, making it possible to talk about things that were before invisible and unsayable.

On that threshold of translation, I reflect on language-encounters as a relation between representational failure and a collective unconscious in which deferral, play, and detours converge. How do we witness and translate moments when language fails to deliver or delivers something other than what we hoped for? How do we move in a pharmakonic world where the erratic aspects of language coincide with the formation of collective life and its unannounced "elsewhere"?

WRITING IT DOWN

Cracks, gaps, and fissures in the symbolic and in the fabric of knowing and living with others—who carries them and how do they bear on people's lives? What is at stake in writing about this era of Afghan society as a site for the examination of symbolic and psychic life? How does a certain form of equivocation become the basis for collective life and relationality? Inspired by a psychoanalytic ethos of listening attuned not only to what is said but also to what is not said or is stuttered or misheard, I draw on the idea of ethnographic concepts and ethnography as a "concept-making genre."[9] Together, these perspectives inspire a mode of anthropological writing that invites dialogic voices, primarily those of my interlocutors but also those of the theorists of modernity and psychic life who inform my thinking. Drawing on both philosophical and psychoanalytic thinkers and a rich body of works from a poststructural canon, my approach emphasizes the fragmentation of collective life not as a clash of opposing ideas, forces, or discourses but as fractures embedded within their very conditions of possibility.[10]

The book centers on four ethnographic stories and one historical narrative, exploring the uneasy relationship between forms of social violence and living made possible in language, including, historically, the language of modernity in the colonial world, versus a more ambiguous equivocation that, while not undoing this violence, signals possibilities for recuperating and recasting possible futures. In the realm of experience, the violence of this duality is vivid, especially when signification is displaced by direct violence, but it has another dimension where forms of deferral and uneasy knowing and living-with gesture toward other forms of social life. On one

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hand, this dimension is about subjectivity in language and the sense, intuition, political frustration, and social reality of psychic and social fragmentation, in other words, those moments when people cannot be shielded from the violence of the nightmare. And on the other, it is about persons and dilemmas that are open-ended, expressed as the problem of writing or speech, understood as violence or love, sometimes tragic but always about the way signification creates new, arbitrary sites and ways of being that render social life imaginable. This, I think, is the dream.

The analytic encounters in the chapters trace the twists and detours my interlocuters experience in a period of national disillusion, following the deferrals, betrayal, and engagements that reveal how a social imaginary and political unconscious emerge in linguistic encounters with others. For example, a false abduction in chapter 1 becomes the problem of a real accusation of abduction between husband and wife in chapter 2. The unexpected arrival that becomes deadly in the story of Zia in chapter 4 is contained through the exchange of an enigmatic gift for his friend Matin in chapter 5. I situate these stories within a dense and fraught political and economic context in which individuals find themselves separated not only by the power of their speech or the lack of power of speech but also the binaries of inside and outside that characterize social life amid an insurgency: inside or outside of the law; on one side or another of moving battle lines, interrogations, or scenes captured in a photograph; in or out of love, with or without the power to write. I suggest that in these stories, ordeal and hope each appear, like a trace that cannot be explicitly described but that we follow through descriptive writing in different places. In essence, my aim is to engage in the kind of exploration that ethnography does best.

Chapter 1, "What's the Use Between Death and Glory?" mediates a series of knowledge gaps; the aporia resulting from illiteracy, gossip, and the breakdown of a local symbolic order that are not only sources of confusion but also catalysts for action, often with tragic consequences. In the dramatic court trial of Sami, a young man who attempted to carry out a suicide bombing at the Intercontinental Hotel in Kabul, a crime initially assumed to be tied to insurgent politics, we encounter a desperate act of love and sacrifice grounded in misunderstanding and the relationship between a man and the social norms he feels obligated to violate. Sami's story and testimony reveal his complex motive. He agreed to carry out the bombing in exchange for the release of his sister Mina, who had eloped with her lover but whom Sami falsely believed had been abducted by the Taliban. But his defiance of norms stems from a misunderstanding rooted

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in the limitations of language to convey shared meanings while also reflecting the simultaneous nature of *linguistic being*, in other words, he embodies both the rupture and sense in signification, the *différance* of meaning that is not fixed but deferred, without a final interpretation or ground to make his actions legible.

At the same time, I demonstrate that his action is not the consequence of a lack of true knowledge so much as it is fueled by the desire to know and take seriously the discourse of the other. Thus, his story unfolds in the space of juridical reason and its normative categories of good and evil, but also in two domains of language: the realm of speech, including his own, and the absence of writing that, through a profound distortion, is taken by others to mean he does not understand the nature of events and signs around him. It is here, in the collapse of knowing, being, and doing—in the idea that Sami, a simpleton, is exactly as he appears—that an ethic of radical devotion is informed by the knowledge found in the discourse of others.

Chapter 2, "Rumors of Love" is about the gift of love and the conceptual problem of the other amid the breakdown of social exchange. It follows the story of Sohrab, a young policeman whom his wife accuses of abducting her. I trace the emergence of desire both in the world of dialogue and in Kabul, the scene of intensified forms of insurgent and counterinsurgent activity, social anomie, and demilitarization. In this context, love, accusation, sacrifice, and absence recur as the problem of how to know the other: again, it is about the difference my interlocuters refer to as the *batin* (essence) and *zahir* (appearance) of subjective life as it is mediated by uncertain exchanges and speech. The second part of the chapter considers the nature of the accusation against Sohrab and the place of images, photographs, and testimony amid the loss of representative capacity and its unexpected recurrence.

Together, these two chapters trace multiple incoherencies and the idea of action and accusation each being mediated by the other. What do we know? How do we encounter a speech without writing and, sometimes, a speech without recourse to the fantasy that one can escape in the city, in love, in dialect, or in the interior world? I take up these concerns again in the second part of the book but in relation to translation as a metaphor for modern history and a form of engagement across historical lifeworlds and persons, and in rhetorical and dialogic life. In these chapters, the problem of the prior and the Afghan hinterland, imagined to be a linguistic scene that bears on the being of its inhabitants, guides my attempt to understand the status of wartime linguistic translation as a symbolic act of mediation

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inseparable from the gap between urban and rural life, logos and its mimesis, and the fear of the future as a return to the past.

Chapter 3, "The Alternation of World and Word" marks my conceptual turn toward the place of translation in the historical and contemporary experience of social difference. I take a broad perspective to consider the historical problem of translation as a concept-metaphor for global transformation, as Walter Benjamin and the nineteenth-century Afghan thinker Mahmūd Tarzī perceive it, as well as in the imperial experience of the Afghan frontier as a site of ideological danger and excess. This modernist history is crucial to mishearing, misinterpretation, and intersubjective violence in Afghan provinces, where translation is deployed as a cultural weapon in the Afghan War but is mired in the perception of Afghanistan as a hinterland in the global imaginary. By tracing the historical, conceptual, and ethnographic place of translation in encounters between places, lifeworlds, and persons, I illustrate how the nature of translation determines encounters with social difference—for example with the stranger, the "brute," or the outsider—and is a reflection of historical and national experience. I also examine how the violence of translation is the ideological heir to an earlier global moment when a fixation on oral culture and politics was inseparable from the fear that in an oral culture, where written propaganda is of little use, political momentum and rebellion against empire could be as straightforward as harnessing the most resonant and passionate forms of speech.

Chapter 4, "Discourses of Another Other" is about a scene of speaking and mode of being in language as commodified linguistic expertise. It examines translation as a porous, mobile form of relation that is about mediation, social difference, and existential violence. I trace the experiences of Zia, a wartime translator from Kabul, and his fear of the Afghan hinterland and its population. This is a population he is hired to represent as a translator but that he also perceives as an itinerant, irrational threat to purity and order in Kabul. I attempt to understand his anxiety in relation to the spatial and conceptual frontier he reckons with as a translator as well as in the idea of Kabul coming to terms with its own history as a center within peripheries. I limn a series of representational and narrative practices through which Zia inscribes the other as lacking reason and being prone to thievery, invasion, itinerancy, and impulsivity while constructing his own speech and subjectivity as the ideal. Through Zia's experiences, translation is caught in a crisis of representation that emerges through the metaphor of the stranger as an object of fear and is symptomatic of a crisis that unfolds as much in rural space as in certain voices and rhetorical

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lifeworlds that he deems strange and foreign. How are those voices spoken and heard? What is the price for his mediation? How does translation reveal a dangerous fixation with social difference?

Chapter 5, "Between Ground and Sky" follows the experiences of Matin, Zia's childhood friend and a fellow translator. I extend the analysis of translation to consider its symbolic mediation in the form of play, mimesis between insurgent and state security forces, uncanniness, and the complexity of gift exchange in lieu of violence. In expanding the idea of translation, I consider the mobile crossing of reason and its absence or perceived mimesis as part of the work and failure of translation but also as what opens the possibility for the gift. Again, what structures this chapter is an urban translator seeking out the rural persons on whose behalf he seeks to translate, while also narrating the fear of a return to the past in the future of his city. This chapter follows the logic of a chase in discourse and dialect and in the forms of reason, unreason, and symbolic activity that characterize life and the possibility of communication amid a grueling counterinsurgency campaign.

The epilogue, "A Vita Detoured," considers the vita (biographical sketch) as a text but also a path in life alongside the ethnographic phenomenon of sistering. I illustrate the ways of being, knowing, and calling on the other that defy the enclosure of tragic downfall and instead insist on new conditions of possibility to come.

DETOURS, ENCOUNTERS, CRACKS

At the heart of this book is the idea that the collective experience of language harbors an incessant desire for elsewhere, a drive toward something beyond the immediate, the said, or even the thought-image we take for granted as the thing in itself. This movement is intrinsic to signification, and it has profound consequences for the nature of collective life in which encounters with oneself and others (in dreams, translation, desire, and haunted action) are always incomplete and full of zigzags. What matters profoundly in this regard is that fissures emerge within this detour, without a transcendental ground, and that signification is not about the presence or absence of meaning but rather how it is *not where we expect*, or better yet, how it is precisely where we fail to look.

These detours, elusive and beyond our full understanding or control, are described by Michel de Certeau as both "the deceptive mask and the

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operative trace of events that organize the present."[11] They reveal how language, irrespective of the ways we intend to inhabit or use it, works through us "to signify something altogether different from what it says."[12] They suggest that the attempt to grasp modes of living and being must first confront the idea that consciousness and subjectivity are seized in the aporia of time, language, and the distortions of psychic life, a stratified terrain Freud compares in *Civilization and Its Discontents* to an ancient city of ruins governed by endless displacement and erasure, a place of metamorphosis without a map.

If Freud's ancient city of Rome is characterized by ruins and the buried buildings and strata that double as a metaphor for psychic life—the place where thought is concealed rather than consciously constructed—the same is true for the nature of psychic life and its forms of knowing and not knowing. Knowledge, especially in relation to the other, arises not in moments of deliberation but precisely when we do not know we are thinking. In this sense, speech, thought, intention, and consciousness are fundamental failures born from the psychic and trace structures that bring them forth, each an "act of homage to missed reality" that remains unresolvable "for an anthropology which is not freed from the naive realism of the object."[13]

To demonstrate this erratic dimension of language and its "elsewhere" requires engaging with the pharmakonic worlds that emerge from the fact that language, whether spoken or written, is fundamentally structured by the movement of difference it seeks to overcome.[14] At the same time, I look at how this gives rise to a series of atmospheric figures like uncanniness, ruin, sabotage, rumor, illiteracy, and excess and how these push on, tear, and linger at the edges of interpersonal and political life. And yet, there is an incompleteness in these spaces that, I argue, shows us the crossroad between the deferral of meaning as a condition for sociality, one that allows people to act, mediate, love, and speak into the void, and a renewal of imagined futures.

THE SIGNIFYING CUT

Detours, encounters, cracks: These terms anchor my engagement with the idea that language is never fully comprehensible, and that relations between people, including in desire or representation, are driven by displacement and what Lacan identifies as the discourse of the Other in unconscious life. In this sense, I want to reclaim the conceptual and philosophical legacy of psychoanalytic and literary thought to understand subjectivity in collective life

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as a site of fundamental incoherence where desire "envelops the pleasure of knowing" but is still "caught in the rails of metonymy, eternally extending toward the desire for something else."[15] For Lacan the elsewhere, the same idea he mobilizes against the bourgeois and conciliatory discourse of American ego psychology, is fundamentally topographic. It is a site of ontological insecurity I try to capture in the image of a crack that transforms subjectivity into a scene of radical undoing fractured by the same signifying chain that subverts knowledge and moves in unforeseeable ways to transform who we love, speak for, and sometimes destroy in the process.

But wherever there is a crack there is also psychic labor that spans the oneiric world of dreams, the work of culture (*Kulturarbeit*), and even processes of mourning and detachment, enabling us to find new objects and to give the world another chance. This labor is inherently psychic, collective, difficult, and occasionally dangerous; it forms the backbone of the stories in this book. These stories reveal encounters that belong to a symbolic order which might otherwise make translation, love, and trust possible but which is somewhere on the run. Yet, they also suggest that this very loss is deeply regenerative: It enables established, emerging, and approximate ways of thinking, relating, and working through in place of the agony of symbolic collapse or the paralysis of not knowing.

Although this book is not structured by the kind of rich dialogic relation João Biehl prioritizes in *Vita*, it is inspired by his poetic devotion to a proliferation of words, writing, and testimonies that inspire people to rethink "the literalism that made possible a sense of exclusion," and to "demand one more chance in life."[16] In this I am also in conversation with Stefania Pandolfo on the forms of ambivalence that constitute both psychic drives and the ethic of an ordeal to which "the subject is called to respond." Pandolfo situates this ordeal as an ethical break in the context of symbolic disorder and cultural pain, when generalized despair results in the spiritual condition of "soul choking" but remains part of a "pedagogy of the imagination . . . aimed at creating conditions in the heart for a renewed receptivity to the divine message."[17] This concept is partially reflected in the metaphor of hearts tightening or opening (*dil tangī* or *dil e bāz*) my interlocuters invoke as the process of either turning away from the social or giving it another chance. Seema Golestaneh reveals that such openings of the heart involve gnosis, or "unknowing" (*ma'rifat*), at the beginning rather than the conclusion of the life of the mind. Writing on Iranian Sufism, Golestaneh frames unknowing "as a fundamentally generative enterprise . . .

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moving forward into the "nothing" until all life is lived at the level of an improvisatory gesture."[18]

Language-encounters begin with stories, words, dream-images, and rumors but encompass issues of desire, life and death moments, and the politics of the drive: the doing, acting, loving, sacrificing, and killing that produces excess in every relation and every effort to convey to others what a person means or intends to be.[19] But how do these encounters, including the forms of knowing and ignorance they entail, enable people to live with aporia? To compromise with each other during political and cultural upheaval?[20]

In the tragic stories of Sami and Sohrab, the uncertainty over what forms of knowledge and action to pursue become part of the encounter with others in language where narrative, rumor, and falsehood fragment subjectivity along a path of deferred meanings, meanings that expose new desires but also the old violence of how to constitute the self in relation to others. Both men are constituted, violated, and potentially violent amid voices, narrative gaps, rumors, and the words of others. And later, they are summoned and reconstituted through their own words in court, where dialogic exchange moves them through another interrogatory and truth-finding "itinerary of a signifier."[21]

When Sami learns that his sister, Mina, is missing, he relies on his mother to understand what eludes him because he is illiterate. The "meaning" of Mina's absence is produced later through his mother's discourse, a discourse that determines her own place in the story and reflects her fear of collective speech in the form of rumor and gossip in their local village. This fear of gossip generates the need for a story of "abduction" to circumvent the more vexing questions of What will people say? or Where has Mina *really* gone? This story, in turn, becomes the answer to Sami's desire to know and do more: to become the kind of subject who knows how to act in the world of rumors and who can return Mina to her rightful place in their home. His mother says his sister has been abducted, so he must do whatever it takes to free her.

Mina's absence and his mother's dialogue encompass the way action and desire are relayed through each other such that no single intention is legible to others and no single person is capable of controlling the outcome. Mina is possibly unaware of her mother's fabrication, Sami does not know Mina is in love and has eloped, and their mother cannot foresee the consequences of her words. The Taliban, who use their local knowledge to manipulate Sami into a suicide bombing by pretending to be Mina's captors, do not know

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if their dangerous gamble will pay off. The people in the Intercontinental Hotel that day had no idea what had almost befallen them.

For me, these moments of narrative and speculation mark the excess of social and intersubjective life that emerges in language but attaches itself to forms of action that are politically oriented but are not confined to the political sphere as such. I imagine that as words are exchanged, and the meaning of this story unfolds, so does Sami's internal conviction that he must sacrifice his own life and kill others that Mina may live. The more willing he becomes to sacrifice and kill, the more easily he is co-opted into a suicide bombing against the Afghan state. The disappearance of Mina is not only about where she might be but also about a moving predicament between subjects that is foundational to political and social violence; thus, these moments of blowback and nearly blowing up are also when symbolic disorder performs its most brutal, unforgiving violence.

RUMOR HAS IT

The absence of persons and reliable narratives, and the fact that being missing and being talked about as missing are not the same thing, open onto different forms of action and retaliation, onto different notions of symbolic return to one's "rightful" place. This is an order of speech that owes no loyalty to the truth. It is a two-faced kind of speech that, despite the collective understanding that it is not true (after all, we all know not to believe rumors) continues to accumulate power through its retelling.

In the ethnographic stories in this book, the deferral of meaning enables rumors to proliferate, not as falsehoods or deceptions per se, but as narrative drives that possess and compel individuals in powerful, sometimes violent ways. Where does a rumor begin and end? And how does it transform desire relative to fantasies of love and heroic action? In the criminal case against Sohrab, the threat of spreading rumors was one of the charges his wife raised against him: She accused him of forcibly abducting and marrying her on the threat that if she refused, he would spread rumors and put photographs of her up on walls and billboards around Kabul. In turn, Sohrab, who maintained his innocence and claimed he rescued her from her abusive mother through marriage, fears that rumors and gossip will circulate about him in the aftermath of his trial if word gets out that he, a former police officer, was arrested and charged with the abduction of a woman.

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The alternation of rumors that are spread and deflected raises the question of the Other not as a predicament of desire or lack but as a dimension of knowledge irreducible to truth or logos. As a matter of historical and political experience, particularly during the acquisition of new communication technologies (such as the telegraph, telephone, and radio), this tension between the expressed and unexpressed, and between truthful discourse and deception, took on added significance. It shaped the collective consciousness of what it meant to communicate with the so-called third world, a world perceived to be overdetermined not by forms of communicable truth but by a proclivity for dissimulation. In other words, there is a world of alterity that does not disclose itself but moves dangerously through signifiers on the loose.[22]

In the contemporary moment, language-encounters, including the experience of love, reveal the limits of representation and the fluid tie between desire for a certain kind of self and other versus the absence or deferral of understanding of who one is, who one falls in love with, or what a shared future might entail. In this context, rumors and whispers are not the excess or remainder left behind by logos but its inviolable double, its other face and atmospheric manifestation. As Mladen Dolar provocatively suggests, this is the place where our fantasies of the "big Other" are met with something else entirely: "It is as if we have to do here with two opposing faces of the big Other, with no common measure: on the one hand, the big Other that can (and should) provide the epistemological foundation of proper knowledge, based on logos and aiming at truth; and, on the other hand, another big Other based on nothing but hearsay, on the wind, but nevertheless standing fast and sticking."[23]

Despite this porosity, rumors are powerful and possess a coherence ordinary language struggles to achieve such that "the other big Other is more powerful than the official and celebrated one; rumors, trivial and unfounded as they are, have the capacity to outwit logos, which seems to be no match for them."[24] Isn't this the appeal of gossip and rumors: the knowledge that they will achieve some effect irrespective of how untrue we know they are? This is an example of language and the word achieving the power not only to produce referents but also to "produce (the specter of) something that isn't there."[25] And once in motion, it is impossible to make a clean break because no matter how "untrue" the rumor is, it follows its object like a shadow. How can Sohrab defend himself against the rumor that he wanted to spread rumors? The point, as we will see in chapter 2, is not that either Sohrab or his wife lie to the court but that all speech is gossip

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insofar as there is no speech that lacks the cannibalism of untruth and is free from this "other" side of logos. Perhaps this is why, in response to the judge's questioning, Sohrab simply replies that he should have known better than to believe in Razia's declaration of love, to believe, in other words, in the one-sided truth of her words.

And yet there is another, more open-ended way of understanding this structural imbrication that is not one or the other but always dual. Desire that unfolds in response to the speech of the other is crucial to subjective undoing and to political and social violence. After all, these are stories of a failed suicide bombing of a hotel and an alleged abduction of a wealthy woman. And yet, each story bears the trace of something that cannot be contained by the narrative of abduction or violent sacrifice; each marks a moment when the ambiguities of meaning and claims of truth open a space of equivocation as the condition rather than just the violence of social life. After all, these are not simply stories of a failed suicide bombing or an alleged abduction; they are also a call to the other and the search for love.

DREAMWORK AND THE REAL

How else can we think about this kind of uncertainty? And where does it leave us? When Zia returned to Kabul from his translation missions in the countryside, he worried that his face would be recognized and that he would be killed in an act of revenge. Being seen for who he was and what he had done meant getting caught, and getting caught meant he was a dead man. His actions and the way he treated others elsewhere, in the places he always described in the language of distance and anachronism, followed him to Kabul, the city where he fantasizes that reason holds sway in lieu of blood codes and honor but where his eyes, facial expressions, clean-shaven face, sunglasses, and hats all become elements of danger. These were his urban means of camouflage and deception but no matter how hard he tried to hide, he still felt he was being seen without being able to return the look.

He only saw clearly in his dreams: He had a vivid nightmare about being recognized by a burly man who had previously encountered him during one of his "missions" and was now out to kill him. Fear and dream and repressed actions were part of the same overdetermined drive, a drive to kill that could only be seen, in other words condensed, into signs in the dream-world where the violence of the real was not experienced but translated

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through the symbolic language he woke up to and interpreted as a deadly serious warning to alter his appearance in Kabul.

In psychoanalysis, most clearly in Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the perpetual detours of understanding, and on occasion, their distillation in moments of knowing, serve as principles not only of psychic life but also of collective experience. The interplay between language and the deferral of knowing finds a powerful echo in the realm of dreams, where Freud's insights reveal how the enigmatic quality of a dream's manifest content (the memory we wake up with) stems from the simultaneity of effects formally articulated through the rhetorical tropes of metonymy and metaphor, a kind of rebus that uses images and symbols to translate abstract thought through *condensation* (metaphor or distillation) and *displacement* (metonymy or contiguity). The simultaneity and playfulness of effects operate as a structural grammar of the unconscious that translates, subverts, and distills the diversity of the dream into overdetermined signs. Thus, the idea that the structure of language exists in the unconscious, later theorized by Lacan, also means that subjectivity and common sense, knowing, and dreaming are all transformed by language.

It is that transformative split, not the event itself, that necessitates a mode of interpretation which reaches beyond the division of psychical and "real" in order to account for aspects internal to language and its translation. Zia's dream is an eruption of the real into the symbolic order that speaks to the mimesis, blowback, and backstabbing we find in language to reveal, as Fanon theorized, an experience of embodied and ontological disorder. This demands a theory of the subject (and the gaze) that exposes our dependence on an experience of language in such a way that it is impossible to escape its inscriptions, body schema, codes, and entrapments or to fully articulate the real.

To understand this theory, I also draw on Michael Taussig's idea of a "space of death" as a threshold of meaning and consciousness where terror illuminates and extinguishes a lifeworld.[26] Taussig's approach to conceptualizing terror reveals not only the dislocations of colonial violence but also the displacement of signifiers from their referents, echoing Gilles Deleuze's notion of the perpetual misalignment between an itinerant "occupant" and a "slot" that accounts for the structural genesis of signs.[27] In this sense, a "space of death" is also a space of floating signifiers and meanings; it is "the admission that there is always indeed something more meant than (or in) what we say; the mode of insistence of the unconscious in the conscious" and in collective life.[28]

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The disruption of dreams and bodies, and the crack between a representation (including how one sees or dreams of oneself) and the worldly experience of a "flaw that prohibits any ontological explanation" is part of the deeply embodied encounter with the other's racialized gaze, one Fanon experiences in the colony, while riding in trains, and in every place where "a slow construction of myself as a body in a spatial and temporal world" becomes the dialectic between self and world.[29] But the crack is also a product of the failure of a certain dream of representation, a failure that becomes most apparent in moments when surface agreements, bodies, contact, skin, games, gestures, play, and cheap words collapse under the weight of what they cannot hold or convey through exchange alone.[30]

Consider another nightmare, this time a real one: Before returning to Kabul, where I met him, Matin and his military unit initiated an improvised game of soccer with local men in the province of Kandahar, in exchange for safe passage through their village. As the game and its putatively shared rules unfolded, the local men stumbled and fell over the makeshift ball, and the soldiers began to take photographs and videos to capture the funny but soon-to-be-deadly moments. They laughed and ridiculed, a cruel enjoyment, a *bazī* (game) that was meant to be in fun but got elevated by the jouissance of the invader. The following morning, local men, presumably those who had been humiliated, planted an enormous roadside bomb that nearly killed Matin and the soldiers. This is the kind of serious play that is real; it is not funny. Instead, it is meant to deliver the final laugh and blow, a blow directed within an atmosphere of surfaces, where literalism almost prevails: Falling over is just falling over, so what's the big deal? But in the mimesis of play as violence, where every sign and gesture assume the force of a weapon, nothing is just play; every laugh is a sovereign blow, becoming both gift and death. This is what escapes the rules of the game and cannot be defeated. It is the excess that is not symbolized or articulated and can only be "said" through the unsayable explosion—"take that!"—to end all talk. Yet, Matin unburdens himself when he talks to me about these experiences, saying, "Sometimes I feel myself *dil tang*, you know, like my chest is closed, but I feel better when I talk to you."

BEFORE THE WORD, VIOLENCE

These moments, when hard blows and harsh reality violently intrude into the symbolic, are inflicted to silence the other and put an end to dialogic reply. Insults, mockery, and the laugh of the invader foreclose exchange:

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Dreams feel close, kidding is deadly, talking back becomes explosive. Nobody is kidding. Yet, these closures are rarely final; instead, they generate more shocks and blows, replies, and new forms of inscription. (Zia carved the date he was caught in a roadside bomb attack, May 9, 2010, into his bedpost, and Matin told me about the scars on his leg from the incident after the soccer game.) Stories like this one, which Matin conveys as an instance of violent cannibalism, are a botched jeu where bodies eat up sensemaking and words in the most brutal way.

But to me, this exchange in which forms of speech collide and people seek out, play, and hit one another through semantic distortion illustrates not the failure of social relations but rather the condition James Siegel describes as a failure of "socially determined thinking" projected onto the question of linguistic power precisely at the "points where no definition of social reality can take place—where, therefore, phantasms and, often violence occur."[31] These points are not about the failure of relationality but rather a failure intrinsic to language itself. And they exemplify the pharmakonic aporias that result from the fact that language, whether in speech, writing, dreams, blowups, or laughter, is always marked by the structure of difference and violence it attempts to surpass. Thus, its practices are constituted by the same arabesque detours of meaning they seek to ground.

That we are fragmented subjects, divided by the limits of knowing and lost to traces of memory and new forms of repression, must also account for the presence of a crack in the experience of written language versus speech. For Nadia, writing is a source of freedom she does not possess. It is part of the desire for proximity to others and to a global cosmopolitanism she cannot access because she has never lived outside of Kabul. Being in the world and with others is the same unified movement as writing, the same completion and decisive escape. It is not that Nadia feels disconnected from the world or is incapable of understanding how it works; rather, she believes that if she could read and write, she could put that understanding to work in a meaningful way.

But if writing is an escape, this break is redoubled insofar as writing also enables the archiving of memory and reveals the "extent to which memory and thought can be said to belong to the possibility of repetition, reproduction, citation and inscription."[32] Writing escapes the attempt to restrict it in form; that is, to frame and therefore restrain it as a material or alphabetic inscription—as a technical dimension rather than an indeterminate process of substitution whereby meaning, others, and knowing are constantly deferred. In this sense, as Derrida famously contends, speech and

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writing never stay clear of each other; writing is not a secondary medium of inscription but an elsewhere. It is an undetermined site where signification is perpetually deferred, exposing the arche-violence of language that unfolds both in writing and in speech, each taking from and interrupting the other through traces and difference.

But where in collective life do we encounter this interplay? How do the absence of writing and the power of speech become limits to fantasies of knowledge and action? In Sami's trial, like other cases involving illiterate defendants, case files acquire an air of mystery and power, but the law is truly written on bodies through torture practices fantasized as a means of obtaining the truth through oral confessions otherwise deemed unreliable precisely because the defendants are illiterate. If you cannot write and support what you speak of, then the truth is not in what you say but somewhere deeper, in the mind, the body, maybe the soul, and as Elaine Scarry brilliantly observes, truth becomes part of a strange inversion in which every question is a motive and every answer a betrayal: "It is only the prisoner's steadily shrinking ground that wins for the torturer his swelling sense of territory. The question and answer are a prolonged comparative display, an unfurling of world maps."[33]

Sami finds himself somewhere in this map when the Afghan police sexually assault him with a Coke bottle during his initial interrogation. I will return to this event as a startling moment of revelation in court, but aside from its raw violence, it also reveals how the valorization of writing and the idea of terror as the latent, irrational desire for violence find their dialectic bond, becoming part of the notion that men like Sami are inherently beyond the law and language, and that the pain of torture inscribes truth into a speech otherwise devoid of testimonial value.[34]

Sami is defenseless in the face of a law not accountable to his speech and to the writing on his body, a mythical machine that moves between a collective fear of primitive violence, crimes against the state, and the extraction of "truth" in a confession.[35] Law, word, silence, bombing, question, answer, and torture are all examples of what Fanon describes as the eruption of the real in the domain of symbolic mediation, those moments when ambiguity and openness (even in speech and writing) become the nightmare of the body and mind.[36] As Fanon describes it:

> The Senegalese soldier's rifle is not a penis, but a genuine Lebel 1916 model. The black bull and robber are not *lolos*, "substantial souls," but genuine irruptions during sleep of actual fantasies. . . . Sometimes there are *black*

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infantrymen; sometimes there are *black* bulls speckled with white on the head; sometimes there is actually a very kind white woman. What do we find in all these dreams if not this central idea: "To depart from routine is to wander in pathless woods; there you will meet the bull who will send you running helter-skelter home again."[37]

To this I would add that sometimes Coke bottles are the most powerful weapons of all. And yet, in this world of literalism, there remains the possibility of what Pandolfo calls a "testimony in counterpoint" that moves through the encounter between self and other, speech and writing, knowing and not knowing and, most dramatically, between action and self-sacrifice.[38] The complexity of this encounter, including in Sami's life and trial, requires us to think about concepts not as theoretical forms but in terms of how they are made and unmade in the worlds they play out in.

WHEN A VOICE GETS THROUGH

The fact that writing is a "strange invention" and material practice that can be denied to some persons does not mean speech fares any better. Illiterate individuals, especially the young men implicated in terrorism, offer a different perspective on speech compared to Derrida's critique of phonocentric bias.[39] In rural areas on the fringes of state or insurgent control, their speech becomes another pharmakon, unable to convey the coherence expected of it. Perhaps this is why Sami acknowledges his illiteracy at the start of trial and states that he does not know how the world works, presenting himself as an antiheroic figure who refrains from seeking knowledge or acting.

Our voice and our exposure to the voice of the other entail vulnerability. What else can account for our fear of public speaking or of hearing our recorded voice or its source of power: the influence, authority, charisma, and ability to access knowledge in transcendental or intersubjective life? The voices of prophets, oracles, healers, and witches (including the voices they hear) testify to this primordial power. For Sami, it was his mother's voice, the first voice and dialectical tie, that turned her speech into his mission of radical self-sacrifice. Because he believes his mother's understanding of events surpasses his own, he cannot disregard her speech or what she makes clear to him is his responsibility toward his sister. Sami took her story as the ultimate command to do whatever was necessary to bring Mina home.

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Reflecting on this transformative moment, I return to the question of what it means to hear a voice as an irreducible demand. For me, these tensions reveal the alternative metaphysics of voice Dolar describes, something overlooked both in the phonocentric bias of Western thought and in deconstruction, which cannot account for the other, darker histories of discourse, speech, and voicing as sites of inviolable danger and passion that are difficult to control. For Dolar "there is a history of the voice receiving a metaphysical vote of no confidence. Not just writing, but also the voice can appear as a menace to metaphysical consistency and can be seen as disruptive of presence and sense. Lacan did not have to invent the ambiguity of voice and its perilous reverse side; metaphysics has been well aware of it all along."[40] In my book, the same disruption of presence and sense occurs repeatedly, but the consequence of an "ideal" voice covering up the existence of a destructive or "lawless" voice is never just conceptual; it is deeply imperial-historical and ethnographic, forming a critical juncture between the experience of reason and its other(s), truth and dissimulation, and ultimately between life and death.

In the historical and geopolitical context of Afghanistan, the meaning of this tension, the emergence of the "other" voice as both disruptive and uncontrollable, transforms the ambiguity Dolar highlights from a metaphysical problem to one of historical belonging. This more ambiguous opening is articulated by the nineteenth-century Afghan intellectual and writer Mahmud Tarzī. Tarzī's poetic invocation to "listen to the telephone" because "the time of speechlessness is over" grounds this duality in a specific historical moment at the beginning of a fraught global modernity irreducible to any single place or tradition of thought. For Tarzī, the problem of collective life and language is bound to the place of Afghanistan in the world as it is transformed by its "peripheries." And in the contemporary moment, the same dialectic between global forces and the experience of the power of language, including thinking about what constitutes its power, is a crucial feature of life and why Afghanistan is crucial for rethinking our present moment.

TRANSLATION: FRAGMENTS OF A VESSEL

What is the language one calls one's own? And what does "possession" of this language mean? When I first met Matin and Zia, two childhood friends and Persian-speaking translators from Kabul, they each remarked

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that they trusted me like a sister.[41] This became the opening between us and, because we share a mother tongue, the possibility of our dialogic exchange. But outside of Kabul, where their linguistic and translational expertise was in demand as part of a larger counterinsurgency effort across the country, one that commodified linguistic expertise into a weapon for winning "hearts and minds," this kind of opening was rare. The illusion of monolingualism, the idea that we fully inhabit and know our own language, takes hold of Matin and Zia precisely when a desire to master, know, assess, narrate, and translate the other confronts fragmentation in language. This fragmentation takes the forms of gaps or partial meanings, deceit, rumor, and senseless talk. In their narratives, translation undergoes a transformation, attempting to contain two functions it cannot reconcile: On one hand, it is part of the endeavor to decode rural subjects who do not possess a command of language (who are illiterate, clumsy, speak in strange dialects, live dangerously, and so on) and whose subjectivity threatens the future. On the other, their own lifeworld (literate, settled, urban, fully ontologized) must first dissolve this threat to survive in the modern world, where they believe rationality, truth, and prosperity go hand in hand. These contradictions perpetuate each other: The belief in translation is upheld by the social body that translation also seeks to read and dissolve, while the specter of social disorder (in Kabul, where they live) is intensified by the presence of the other on whose behalf the translator is summoned to speak but cannot erase.

In part this problem is a historical one. In Afghanistan, for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the anxiety over being seen and heard (and overheard) was about the place of the global other in the experience of technology through telegraphic, telephonic, and radio connectivity, each of which contributed to cosmopolitan consciousness among Afghan government officials and the elite. These technologies were gained and interwoven with the latticed dream of global belonging; the experience of contact, images, letters, calls, and travel; and the feeling of being part of the world. This was a response to something large but still undefined in the cultural imaginary and was part of a general desire for global belonging. And yet, in the colonial imagination, Afghan political discourse communicated via those channels was characterized by deceit and a lack of grounding in truth or moral judgment; this deceit was made worse by technologies of mechanical reproduction whose authenticity could not be assured in a predominantly oral culture, where political speech was thought to covertly disseminate Bolshevik, pan-Islamist, and pan-Asian ambitions.

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In this history, the problem of voicing and communication assume yet another dimension: Again, speech (over the telephone or radio) and writing (in telegrams) are not loci of truth or revelation but threats to political order and the global sphere.[42] During the conflict in Afghanistan, this idea still informed attempts at translation during deadly encounters between Afghan translators and civilians, encounters in which mishearing the words of the other is inextricable from the fantasy that translation should enable transparency and persuasion, that illiteracy can be a target of translational labor, and that the other's speech and its political force can be contained. Matin and Zia carry this fantasy and the violence of linguistic commodification with them on their missions, and these are part of what they later reveal to me in their narratives of what they saw and experienced on military missions, in Kabul, and even in the oneiric world of their dreams.

What begins to feel impossible in their translational encounter extends itself to social life more generally. Matin and Zia talk about national decay, invasion, dirt, poverty, economic crises, empty factories, heat, smell, illiteracy, broken speech, unfathomable dialects, and a sprawling and poor hinterland; they hear an uncanny and chthonic discourse of the stranger through which the other engages in the mimesis of intellect as a means of dangerous play. They discover that the other side of translation is not the articulation of fragmented meaning but a topographical and subjective scene that is impossible to surveil and formulate as anything other than madness unbound in speech. Borrowing from Julia Kristeva, these are the descriptions and moments of symbolic collapse when translation is met with the fantasy of monolingual power: "A signifying sequence, necessarily an arbitrary one, will appear to them as heavily, violently arbitrary; they will think it absurd, it will have no meaning. No word, no object in reality will be likely to have a coherent concatenation that will also be suitable to a meaning or referent."[43]

Matin and Zia enter a scene of nonrelation. They recall to me the experience of uncontrollable encounters, moving closer to death, and feeling bewildered in the places where they hoped their words could facilitate truth and understanding. At times consciously and at other times without knowing what they project, they are immersed in the old political fantasy that the other is the source of phantasmatic, dangerous speech, removed from the guarantee of writing and slated for self-destruction. And yet, behind these moments of closure and symbolic breakdown are deferrals of meaning that unexpectedly surface and make an alternative possible. These are the moments that vividly reveal how translation is not reducible to an

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act of linguistic exchange but is a metaphor for the experience of disjunction that is internal to meaning and difference.

For Benjamin, the figure of the translator gives up the idea of transcendental meaning to embark on a more ironic journey, like a critic, to reveal the original as incomplete rather than the self-same or an origin to be preserved. He describes this in different ways. He writes that the translator stands not at the center of the language forest but "facing the wooded ridge." The translator's aim is a totality that is an "echo of the original" and is "midway between poetry and doctrine." And finally, a translation is recognizable just like the fragments that "are part of a vessel."[44] I read an opening in these descriptions that can allow us to trace possibilities other than symbolic disintegration or the breakdown of meaning that Matin's and Zia's encounters suggest as the place of translation in ideological and actual scenes of battle. Through these images Benjamin tells us that the work of translation reveals an original in need of a supplement. This logic, between the "original" and translation, the familiar and foreign, unfolds in a metonymic way that is always partial and never a sovereign point we can describe as pure or original. Fragmentation and retroactive meaning defer the fantasy of a whole farther and farther beyond, carrying it away not to "home" but to a permanent state of exile that inhabits all languages "especially the language one calls one's own."[45]

Where do we draw the line between the urban and rural populations whom Matin describes as being as distinct as "ground and sky"? The more they seek to translate this concept, the more they grapple with the place of textuality in their own life and its absence in others' lives. They are in doubt over what thoughts and actions to pursue. They are uncertain of what they know and of their own prospects for life in Kabul, where ideally, they should be free to speak and live but are afraid to. The deeper this division pushes, the more they become other to themselves, perhaps most dramatically when Matin hides in the mountains where insurgents typically take cover, becoming and living like the barbarian in the ultimate act of mimesis. Then in a later, more poignant moment he mistakes a bomb for a gift, only to realize it was indeed the gift of a bomb defused by the giver out of concern for Matin's life.

The collapse of stable meaning in these encounters allows us to see the fragmented but radical dimension of translation Benjamin alludes to through the metaphor of the vessel. In Benjamin's hands, the vessel is a palimpsest of traces, voices, and remnants that can exist only in a continuous realm of transformation. In seeking to find out and know about the

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other, Matin and Zia know less than they did before and less than what they need to know in order to negotiate their encounters without violence. After seeking to preserve and build up the dream of a modern future in Kabul, where they speak their mother tongue, including with me, they return to find a city in material and symbolic ruins. In seeking to speak and live only in the world of their mother tongue, Matin and Zia encounter others who, to borrow again from Kristeva, are "foreigners in their maternal tongue."[46] This alternation between self versus other, discourse versus madness, and the place of signification in social life versus its wanton violence are crucial to the social world of translation; it underlies symbolic life and signification, in some instances exerting pressure until forms of exchange erupt into unconditional sacrifice, the appearance of a radical gift, or betrayal. It is precisely these unpredictable detours, I argue, that enable individuals to inhabit aporia—sometimes but not always tragic—and still give gifts, trust they can be listened to, love others, fulfill their duties, and allow the symbolic order to sustain rather than inevitably condemn them. Finding and following this meandering crack through collective life is the goal of this work.

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Notes

PROLOGUE. OPEN WINDOWS AND HOUSES

1 Nadia and all the other names that appear in this book, including those of military bases and camps, are pseudonyms.

2 Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, part 2, 510.

3 Benjamin, "A Berlin Chronicle," in *Reflections,* 14.

4 Benjamin, "A Berlin Chronicle," in *Reflections,* 11.

5 Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, 120.

6 Benjamin, *One-Way Street*, 47.

7 Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, 114.

8 Carpentier, Prologue to "The Kingdom of This World" (1993), 28.

9 Carpentier, *The Kingdom of This World* (1957), 10.

10 Benjamin, "A Berlin Chronicle," 10.

11 Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 406.

12 "Shipment of Goods to Afghanistan: Equipment + Material Required for Public Works," L/P&S/12/599, Political and Secret Department Records, India Office Records, British Library, London.

13 "Supply of Goods to Afghanistan: Window Glass," L/P&S/12/608, and "Supply of Goods for Afghanistan: Horse Shoes etc.," L/P&S/12/613, India Office Records, British Library.

14 The Afghan government ordered 77 long tons (172,480 lbs.) of grade A and B window glass and 16,000 yards of window screens.

15 "Supply of Goods to Afghanistan: House Paint," L/P&S/12/636, India Office Records.

16 Arendt, *On Violence*, 4.

17 For Benjamin, in the face of money, social relations are lit up only to crumble: "All close relationships are lit up by an almost intolerable, piercing clarity in which they are scarcely able to survive. For on the one hand, money stands ruinously at the center of every vital interest, but on the other, this is the very barrier before which almost all relationships halt; so, more and more, in the natural as in the moral sphere, unreflecting trust, calm, and health are disappearing." Benjamin, *One-Way Street*, 55–56.

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18 Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 38.

19 McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 19.

20 Quoted in Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 20.

21 Benjamin cited in Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 106.

22 Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 532.

23 Farrokhzad, "Gift," *AllPoetry*, accessed April 13, 2025, https://allpoetry.com/poem/14330518-Gift-by-Forough-Farrokhzad.

24 Barthes, "The Death of the Author."

INTRODUCTION. CRACKS AND DETOURS

This chapter's opening epigraph is an English translation of the last lines of the poem "Die beiden Gulden" (The two coins) by Friedrich Rückert. These are, in turn, Rückert's rendition of one of the *Maqâmât* of the twelfth-century poet al-Hariri of Basra, in modern-day Iraq. The quotation and its original source appear as the last sentence of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 78.

1 In thinking about these questions, I draw inspiration from Kathleen Stewart's *A Space on the Side of the Road*, a critical, poetic reimagining of the other and the ruins of postindustrial America as a site of proliferating signs, memories, and talk. Stewart urges us to consider how life in "an occupied, betrayed, fragmented, and finally deserted place might become not a corpus of abstract ideas or grounded traditions but a shifting and nervous space of desire immanent in lost and *re-membered* and imagined things" (17). How do we scan for signs to read and interpret? What are the "expressive signs in all their density, texture, and force" that are also naturalized in the perception of "the world as it is" (20)? In thinking about the natural or primal and what is represented by it, *through* it, for example, the place of *pneuma*, breath, I am also inspired by Maria José de Abreu's *The Charismatic Gymnasium*, an account of the rise of "Catholic charismatics" in a setting where political practice, media, and bodies merge to reveal contemporary theological and political life.

2 I would like to be clear that the gap between the symbolic and real refers to the registers of experience either held apart or forcefully closed by language and signification. The metaphor of a crack is what emerges alongside, beyond, and despite that closure.

3 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks.*

4 The Lacanian subject is constitutively "bound up" in the process of signification. In "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious" he writes about this condition

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of boundedness in relation to discourse and the real as the recipient of a cut: "The cut made by the signifying chain is the only cut that verifies the structure of the subject as a discontinuity in the real. If linguistics enables us to see the signifier as the determinant of the signified, analysis reveals the truth of this relationship by making holes in meaning the determinants of its discourse." Lacan, *Écrits*, 678. This is Lacan's attempt to understand discourse as false or fundamentally empty but also to transcend that, to say discourse is the structural bind by which "I" am fractured by language and thus a subject without knowledge that moves toward death.

5 Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 46.

6 For Lacan, the distinction between other(s) as people, objects of desire, ideological commitments, and relationships is distinct from the Other that constitutes the ground of symbolic life; that is, language and the possibility of signification. He famously captures this difference in the claim that "the unconscious is the Other's discourse," meaning that it is structured, enabled, and overdetermined not by what it seeks to possess, desires, or fears but by the very symbolic structure of language. See "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud," in *Écrits*, 436.

7 From 2002 to 2014 the Afghan economy was rocked by a huge influx of foreign money that was distributed in a storm of private contract awards to foreign and "50 percent Afghan National" business arrangements. At the same time, economic activity in the rural provinces and Kabul, including the activities of various politicians, was believed to be connected to global geopolitical interests. In general, economic activity was a metonym for larger political shifts and power relations.

8 On the destruction of public confidence in the banking sector see Emma Graham-Harrison, "Afghan Elite Ransacked $900m from Kabul Bank, Inquiry Finds," *The Guardian*, November 28, 2012, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/nov/28/afghan-elite-ransacked-kabul-bank.

9 De la Cadena and Blaser, *A World of Many Worlds*, 5.

10 In seeking to introduce a multiplicity of voices and conceptual registers, I am deeply inspired by Rudolf Mrázek's beautiful undertaking of ethnographic-historical writing as the dialogic form in which the cultural, national, philosophical, or epistemic others can be evoked, especially his evocation of the memories of Jakarta's aging intelligentsia in *A Certain Age*, which is a magisterial example of cultural history in the last decades of Dutch colonial rule and zooms in on the fragmented dreams, anxieties, and languages of desire with which its inhabitants imagine.

11 De Certeau, *Heterologies*, 3.

12 Lacan, *Écrits*, 421.

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13 De Certeau, *Heterologies*, 51 (the first quotation is citing Lacan). In relation to practices of academic writing that signify the real, see Klima, *Ethnography #9*. This sense of writing as the space in which the real is conjured and represented but is always fiction informs my understanding of the forms of academic writing we engage in, but more importantly, reflects the idea that writing in Afghan society is a buttress for speech, logos, and other "real" phenomena that are never quite as they seem.

14 By invoking this distance that is moved through or "overcome" I refer to Barbara Johnson's analysis of the Derridean critique of phonocentrism and the sign. She underscores how deconstruction does not seek to reverse the speech/writing binary but rather to show that this conceptual binary and the ability to oppose the terms occurs on the basis of other binaries (presence/absence, immediacy/representation, inside/outside, signifier/signified) and that speech is *equally* (not *only*) structured by deferral and discontinuity. This structuring characterizes the differences that are language (not the difference between languages) and the possibility of signification as such. Johnson writes, "The very fact that a word is divided into a phonic *signifier* and a mental *signified*, and that, as Saussure pointed out, language is a system of differences rather than a collection of independently meaningful units, indicates that language as such is already constituted by the very distances and differences it seeks to overcome. To mean, in other words, is automatically *not* to be. As soon as there is meaning, there is difference. Derrida's word for this lag inherent in any signifying act is *différance*, from the French verb *différer*, which means both 'to differ' and 'to defer.'" Johnson, "Translator's Introduction," ix.

15 Lacan, *Écrits*, 431.

16 Biehl, *Vita*, 18.

17 Pandolfo, *Knot of the Soul*, 4.

18 Golestaneh, *Unknowing and the Everyday*, 5.

19 A masterful example of this kind of ethnographic undertaking is James Siegel's *Naming the Witch*, an analysis of contemporary witchcraft accusations in Indonesia not as the "other" of modern disenchantment but as violence arising from state crises and the failure of socially determined thought to account for death, accident, and dissolution; in other words, as the ambiguous and sometimes violent confrontation between thought (including the fantasy that one can think about the world in order to fully understand it) and the place of detours in collective life.

20 On the role of primordial symbols as a form of political speech and dialectic recognition see Aretxaga, "Dirty Protest."

21 The phrase "itinerary of a signifier" (*Écrits*, 7) appears in Lacan's seminar on Poe's "The Purloined Letter" both as a metaphor for the

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movement of the stolen letter in the plot as well as in reference to Freud's conception of the subject not as an ontological reality but as a site, scene, or juncture that receives its arbitrary determination through the process of signification. I also invoke this phrase to gesture toward Lacan's more formal theorization of this process, depicted in his famous graph of subjectivity. The inverted U-shaped image represents a structural process best described as an itinerary through which meaning and subjectivity emerge retrospectively and in relation to others. See Lacan, "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious," in *Écrits*, 681–92.

22 On this and other matters related to modern technology and modernity in Afghanistan see Mojaddedi, "Notes on the Wire," 49–72.

23 Dolar, "On Rumors, Gossip and Related Matters," 146.

24 Dolar, "On Rumors, Gossip and Related Matters," 147.

25 Dolar, "On Rumors, Gossip and Related Matters," 147.

26 Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man*, 4.

27 Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*.

28 Mehlman, "The Floating Signifier," 24.

29 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 89–90, 91.

30 In thinking about this in relation to narrative practice and an embodied history of political memory, I am also inspired by Allen Feldman's *Formations of Violence*. Feldman explores oral history in Northern Ireland as a site of ideological contention, tracing symbolic, material, and narrative practices that forge political agency. His insight shapes my own effort to integrate sociopolitical and economic contexts with the words, sacrifices, bodies, and desires of my interlocuters.

On the failure and volatility of representation as a dialogic act see also Mitchell, "Representation," in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*.

31 Siegel, *Naming the Witch*, 1–2.

32 Cadava, *Words of Light*, xviii.

33 Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 36.

34 This perception of Sami contrasts with that of Pierre Rivière, a twenty-year-old French peasant who killed his mother, sister, and brother and left behind a written statement "in whose beauty some were to see a proof of rationality (and hence grounds for condemning him to death) and others a sign of madness (and hence grounds for shutting him up for life)." See Foucault, *I, Pierre Rivière*, xi.

35 More generally, in Afghan trials during this era, the idea of criminal action was increasingly understood as part of a representational complex in which writing, case file photos, and the meaninglessness of the defendants' oral testimony constitute a hermeneutic complex of guilt. That guilt is read through material and oral signs and the idea, held by most judges, that repetition-compulsion (that is, the defendant's repetitive thoughts and behaviors) are the surest index of

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how enemies work against the state and of more insurgent violence to come.

36 I think of this law that inscribes itself on the body of the prisoner as a moment of "justice" without meaning, akin to what Andreas Gailus describes as the machine in Kafka's "In the Penal Colony," which "embodies the fantasy of a symbolism without semantic mediation, of a supreme and transcendent language so pure as to be untranslatable into ordinary words. Gailus, "Lessons of the Cryptograph," 297.

37 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 86.

38 Pandolfo, "Testimony in Counterpoint."

39 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 112. For Derrida the material violence of writing as historical practice masks two more primary levels of "arche-violence" in which the classification of thought and inscription of difference are achieved. To illustrate this, he turns to Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques*, where scenes of "writing" and its absence fail to secure the very distinction as such.

40 Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 43.

41 I use *Persian* throughout this book to refer to the language spoken in Afghanistan, Iran, and elsewhere, following standard English usage. In Afghanistan, speakers typically use the endonym *Farsi*, while the Afghan state officially refers to the language as *Dari*, a term introduced in the 1960s. Neither *Farsi* nor *Dari* denotes a distinct language. The term *Persian* provides a consistent rendering of this shared linguistic tradition across regional and political boundaries.

42 On what remains of this "voice as the object" after the violence of phonocentrism and the deconstructive turn that "tends to deprive the voice of its ineradicable ambiguity by reducing it to the ground of (self-)presence" see Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 42.

43 Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 51.

44 Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 76, 77, 78.

45 De Man, "Conclusions," 33. To be part of this exile also means, as de Certeau describes, that every autonomous order is founded on what it represses and tries to exclude, and the remainder that "re-infiltrates the place of origins," is the contradiction that lies between original and translation but also between self and other. De Certeau, *Heterologies*, 4.

46 Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 53.

CHAPTER 1. WHAT'S THE USE BETWEEN DEATH AND GLORY?

This chapter's title is taken from a 2005 song by Babyshambles. The chapter's third epigraph quotes the words of Salar, a failed suicide bomber who was tried in the same court as Sami. Salar, who was

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