Moniro:

I first met Moniro Ravanipour the Iranian writer in Tehran. She for a while attended some of the meetings of a literary group I was at the time a part of, run by the prominent Iranian writer, Houshang Goshiri. She was introduced to us as a new young writer. Except for her stories I knew little about her. One thing I remember well: she seemed to be in constant motion, making me feel as if within her thousands of darts were moving in different directions. Even when she was sitting and stationary I had the impression that she appeared on the periphery of my eye, then quickly disappeared, materializing at a different location.

At the time in Iran we were too overwhelmed by what was happening to us on an everyday basis to pay attention to our stories, our own or others.' Fear was a household companion, within that literary group most of us had something to be afraid of, not just political offences, remember, refusing to wear the mandatory veil or listening to music could be considered a punishable offence. Moniro like the rest of us, would not divulge her stories there, too dangerous.

I got to know her better when both of us had immigrated to the United States and she contacted me. That was when she opened up. I realized that state of restlessness and motion I had sensed in her was based on her life at the time, when she was literally on the run.

We came from different backgrounds, to begin with she lived most of her childhood, and teenage years in small Southern villages and towns, closed societies that were radically different from my city, Tehran, the capital and largest and most cosmopolitan city in Iran. But I discovered we had something very important in common, we both from childhood had loved stories, and stories had

played an active role in rescuing us in the most turbulent times of our lives. We both connected to the two countries we called home through reading, writing and telling stories. Neither of us had known that this passion for stories would be the most enduring one and it would help us confront the traumas we faced, including a war and a revolution.

She talks in an interview about what it meant to live in the Southern Iran: “there exists a rich but very different culture from the rest of the country. In the South, the characters from mythology are part of our lives” She went on to say that they lived with mermaids, with magical creatures from the air and water. Her father drove a truck around villages and secretly distributed political pamphlets from the National Front organization. Then at home he would recite poetry to his children. While her grandmother would tell her fairy tales. She mentions that her father was a member of the National Front, her cousin a teacher, supported the Marxist Tudeh Party. During their late night drinking they would recite love poems, and poems written by political activists while they argued over politics.

Moniro believes this mix of politics, poetry and fairy tales were decisive factors in shaping her life. Her reading list included different authors from different parts of the world: the first foreign author she read was the Russian revolutionary writer, Maxim Gorky. Her first Western writer was Mickey Spillane, later she read John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath,* along with Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy. She was fascinated by Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude.* At the University she read Beckett, Brecht, Sartre, Camus and Shakespeare.

She later speculated that part of the mishaps happening to her family was because of the small town mentality and jealously that was exacerbated and ran out of control by the revolution. Her family was very well educated, they had travelled and studied abroad and this made some in her town jealous and vindictive. There were those, among them clerics, who had not participated in the revolution and did not believe in it, but now opportunistically took advantage of the chaos and became extremists, telling on their neighbors and fellow town people, participating in raids and lootings of innocent peoples' homes. The cleric who ordered Moniro's 19 year old brother's death sentence before the revolution had been supported financially by her father who felt bad about the dire circumstances the cleric lived in. While on the run from the revolutionary regime, their house was looted, mainly by people they knew, some of whom had claimed to be friends. Extreme conditions have a way of bringing up both the best and the worst in us--the most decent people become capable of the most indecent acts.

The more I discovered about Moniro's life at the time the more astonished I became. She said she did not talk about this in Iran in the intellectual circles she frequented, because it would have scared people away.

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She says in an interview how in the first years of the revolution her 19 year old brother was executed, her second sister and husband were sentenced to death, but they escaped Iran, her older sister's husband was jailed four times and her 12 year old sister was arrested while two other

siblings aged 11 and 13 were expelled from school. Her father's assets in the Southern city of Bushehr were confiscated and their house looted. They moved to another city, Shiraz.

Her young brother at the start of the revolution had been very excited about Ayatollah Khomeini and had joined the revolutionaries. But soon he had become disenchanted with the revolution, telling his family how the revolutionary militia had raped a 15 year old girl in prison. He then joined the opposition organization, Mojahedeen. He was arrested and executed.

But the execution was just the beginning of a harrowing experience for Moniro and her family. She was in Tehran when her brother in law who himself was on the run called her to say they have killed her brother in Boraz jan, a city in Southern Iran. "They had shot him in the heart," Moniro wrote me, "and had him wrapped in plastic. They wouldn't allow us to bury him. They said he is an unbeliever/apostate. The family had to ask permission for burial from the district attorney's office, but that office wouldn't issue a permit." The family's heartbreak took on another dimension. It was not enough that the regime had killed their son, and was harassing and making life difficult for them, but some among their former friends and acquaintances, living in their small town, like the cleric who ordered Moniro's brother's death sentence or those who looted their house, would betray them. Added to their jealousy was the fact that these people were trying to appease the new regime and to find a niche for themselves in the new hierarchy, what better way to do that than to betray their generous minded, sophisticated town's people? During the first years of the revolution there were many incidents similar to what happened to Moniro's family.

“My father said let’s take him to his own village, Deh rouni.” Moniro wrote me, “There in the village, my father’s best friend was standing with a club to prevent us from coming in. Newly religious youth were standing there, shouting slogans against us.” What was frightening was not just what the regime was doing to the citizens but what some citizens were doing to others. Moniro felt a stranger in her own village and country. In a profile of her she says, “As a writer in Iran, I am a foreigner in my own country. They are looking for the enemy and I am the enemy.”

“It was close to evening,” Moniro wrote. “No Muslim can have his corpse without burial past sunset. My mother said, to hell with it, we are apostates. We took his corpse to a relative’s house, put it in the living room and lighted the lantern.” Moniro’s mother suggested throwing the body into the sea. But they had to hide it from the police, because for that they also needed to have a permit. In the morning her father and her older sister’s husband went to district attorney’s office and paid 100 thousand toomans extra and got the permit. “When he returned my father was so happy that I thought he has lost his mind,” Moniro wrote. “Those days I wrote a story, Give my Heart to the Sea, that is still in Iran in a friend’s house. It’s about what my mother and cousin who was a fisherman said, and the way things were during those few days…”

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In her emails Moniro talks about how she was on constant move, from city to city, taking refuge in relatives and friend’s houses, spending more and more time in buses moving from one place to another until one day in spring of 1982, two weeks before the Iranian New Year on March 21, she too was arrested. She was lucky that her brother in law had gone to her place and destroyed all the

politically incriminating documents, so the militia and revolutionary guards could not find anything incriminating.

That was the first time being a writer came to her rescue, although she had not yet published anything. She decided to play the role of a literary personage who is too eccentric to know anything about politics, in response to her interrogator's questions Moniro would quote some of Iran's classical poets, pretending to be ignorant of politics. Finally she was released. But she was still on the run for years to come.

Constantly on the run, changing homes and cities, once in ten months she had changed home 12 times. While staying at friends and relative's homes Moniro would ask them to tell her their stories. "This was when I realized that traveling, listening to other people's stories and writing one's memories is a way of confronting depression and trauma, I very instinctively and automatically chose this in order to save my life." She said. There was no hope of publishing what she wrote, she just wrote because "I felt good, I felt alive, the thought of publishing was a distant mirage, incredible…like a miracle that finally happened to me."

(Interview with Miranda Mellis.) When she was in jail one night she vowed if she gets out of jail she would write. "For years I had completely forgotten about that night until I came to the U.S., and realized that when I'm not writing anything, I feel short of breath. I returned to these memories and discovered that I write so they can't kill me, that I write to stay alive."

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I see myself in those years while Moniro was on the run: during eight years of war with the rockets falling on Tehran and other cities, I took refuge in reading and writing; when I could not find a way to publicly say what I wanted to say about freedom and democracy I would say it through books and stories; when I was inarticulate not knowing how to express myself, I did it through a story; on those anxious nights when I worried about the execution of a former comrade, the fate of cousins who had gone underground, wondering if the next raid would be our house, I read and I wrote. And when in America, my other home I felt the ignorance regarding my country of birth I wrote the story of my people in Iran and how we connected to the world through its works of imagination, through books, art, music, film,; when I felt that American democracy was in danger, I wrote and I read about America; and all through the pandemic I have done the same thing. In Moniro I had found a kindred spirit, for I too like her, “write so they can’t kill me, I write to stay alive.”

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