Forugh Karimi, "Sepia Veils and White-Flowered Branches"

Translated by Anna Learn

Translator's Preface

Forugh Karimi was born in 1971 in Kabul, Afghanistan. She attended medical school in the capital until 1996, when she was forced to flee the country following the Taliban takeover. Karimi sought refuge in the Netherlands and has made a life for herself there as a psychiatrist, psychotherapist, and acclaimed Dutch-language novelist, publishing three novels in just the last three years. However, her first foray into writing took place in Dari Persian, with the short story "Sepia Veils and White-Flowered Branches," which she published in 1989, at the age of 19, in the popular Persian-Pashto Afghan magazine *Zhwandūn* (meaning "life" in Pashto).[1]

The story is narrated by a young man in Soviet-occupied Afghanistan who is grappling with the lifelong absence of his father and the recent departure of his mother. Through childhood memories and feverish adult visions, the narrator comes to believe that everyday objects—a Chinese teacup, a painting of white flowers, a flowerpot—can stand in for those missing family members and can help him to make sense of his own identity. Slowly, we see the narrator disassociate from the grim, Soviet-style apartment building where he lives in Kabul and fall down a nightmarish rabbit hole, replete with disembodied voices, moving plants, and racing animals. In his delusional state, the narrator's sense of self shrinks, expands, and is ultimately shattered.

I was drawn to Karimi's story because her stylistic movement from somber realism to frenzied surreality is striking in the literary context of 1980s Afghanistan. In contrast to the socialist realism officially sanctioned by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) at this time,[2] Karimi's story is fiercely dreamlike and symbolic, focusing more on inner psychology than on collective revolutionary struggles. While translating, I was struck by the language

[1] This translation comes from the version of Karimi's text published in the multiple-author short story collection *Dāstān-e zanān-e Afghānistān* (Afghan women's stories), compiled and edited by Mohammad Hussain Mohammadi and published by Inteshārāt-e Tāk in Afghanistan in 2017.

[2] For more, see Nancy Dupree, "Socialist Realism in the Literature of Afghanistan," *Journal of South Asian Literature* 27, no. 2 (1992): 85–114.

the narrator uses to describe his adult life in Soviet-occupied, nominally socialist Afghanistan. He feels "sadness," "depression," and "loneliness"; he aches to be connected to his family but is alone, surrounded only by objects, dreary architecture, and the violence of war. His inability to firmly set down roots—within a family or a broader community—seems to be at the core of his psychological malaise.

At first glance, "Sepia Veils and White-Flowered Branches" seems to defy a classification within the framework of the Islamicate. The story does not focus on cultural or social practices associated with Islam, and the narrator appears to be isolated from any meaningful sense of community, Islamicate or otherwise. The young, male narrator is trying to find his way in the world and understand himself, but this process is made harder by the fact that he is surrounded by war, has very little control over his own future, and is cut off from his family. But even though "Sepia Veils and White-Flowered Branches" could not easily be called a religious story, it contains passing references to God, prayer, and religiously sanctioned dress, through which lingering traces of the Islamicate can be glimpsed. In this way, Karimi's story encourages us to think of the subtle ways in which the Islamicate manifested in late 1980s occupied Afghanistan, when modes of social and cultural cohesion and identity-making were dissolving and being recast in new forms.

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The “Makrurian” apartment buildings. Credit to Kiyana Hayeri, Etilaat Roz newspaper.

"Sepia Veils and White-Flowered Branches"

The evening that my mother left, the clouds grew heavy; as the sky darkened, the clouds turned black. I was aimlessly pacing this way and that on the pavement outside our building. Snowflakes softly impressed little white dots on my black overcoat. A vague sadness hung over me, and I was depressed. Finally, I realized that I needed to go home. When I got near our block, I ran into one of the neighbors. He was a young man who lived with his family in the apartment above our own. When he saw me, he asked, "Doctor,[3] did she leave?"

"Yes, she left."

"You're all alone now, aren't you?"

". . ."

"How long will she stay abroad?"

"Six months."

"That's not too long."

He paused, then added, "Still, no matter what, a mother is a mother, and even one day away from her is hard."

And he slapped my shoulder a few times and grandly repeated, "Don't worry, we'll take care of you."

I was so tired and drained of life that it was hard for me to say "thank you," but I still croaked out my thanks. The neighbor didn't move on and said again, "Pray for your mother to get well soon and come back safely."

I managed a smile and used the intensifying snow as an excuse to free myself from his grasp and head home. Even though my mother was almost always working at the hospital and was rarely at home, her absence had a noticeable impact on the apartment's atmosphere. Every object I saw reminded me of her. My heart felt constricted and weighed down by sadness. Wherever my mother was, I was sure that she could sense me missing her at that moment. She would surely get upset, curtains of tears sweeping over her eyes. Her absence

[3] Forugh Karimi told me in our personal correspondence that, in Afghanistan, every medical student is addressed as "Doctor" from the first year onward, as a sign of respect. The narrator is still a medical student and not yet a certified doctor. He is possibly studying at the Kabul Medical Institute, just as Karimi herself was at the time of writing this story.

hit me hardest when I realized that I had to make food and tea for myself. I sat down without eating and found myself staring at a painting that my mother had always loved on the wall in front of me. It was an image of white flowers, framed in wood and covered with glass. The painting had been unremarkable to me up until then, but that night it suddenly seemed so unbearable to me that I had to turn my face away from it.

Right then, the place was quiet and calm. Only the sound of footsteps and the occasional shout came from the floor above. A family with a lot of children lived there. The sounds of their feet always shook our apartment. It seemed like they were perpetually wrestling, dancing, and jumping. At times, this family and their countless children disrupted my studying with their ruckus, and especially during the time that I was first joining the Faculty of Medicine, studying had become almost impossibly difficult for me. My mother would exclaim, "Good for them; they have fit one enormous family into three rooms. We are just two people, but these three rooms are like a prison or a tin can for us. If it weren't for necessity and loneliness, I would never bow my head and submit to these trials and tribulations. A village neighborhood at least gives a person life, but this place is like a prison."

When I recalled my mother's words, the apartment seemed more suffocating and prison-like than ever before. Of course, if it wasn't for the "problem of loneliness," my mother never would have agreed to live in this Makrurian[4] apartment complex with me. My mother loved nature. I remembered that when we lived with my grandfather's family in his large house, my mother would go around watering the gum arabic plants and trees and would cultivate white

[4] A calque on the Russian word "microcommunity," these "Makrurian" blocks of residential complexes were built in western Kabul by the Soviets, beginning in the 1950s and lasting well through the Soviet invasion. In our personal communication, Karimi told me that living in the Makrurian apartments was a childhood dream of hers, since it was understood that only the very wealthy and fashionable could ever dream of securing one of these apartments. However, when Karimi was 18 (right before she wrote this short story), her parents were selected from a pool of candidates to have the right to live in one of the apartments, and so they moved into a three-room Makrurian apartment. Only a short time later, however, the war in Kabul began. Although the Makrurian apartments were an aspirational, modern home for many, as the narrator shows in this story, the apartments were often small, dark, and overcrowded in reality.

flowers in small pots. When I was little, I imagined that the pots of white flowers resembled my father. When I was alone, I would secretly choose one of the pots and talk to it, confiding all of the things in the pot that I guessed I should say to my father. One time, when I was talking to the flowerpot, my cousins were hiding behind the wall, eavesdropping. They burst out laughing from behind the wall and repeated what I had said. I ran to our room, the room where my mother and I stayed, and cried and cried . . .

My cousins always played with one another, but they never let me into their games. Sometimes my grandfather would come over and scold them. He would take me by the hand and make them include me. But as soon as he left, they would make fun of me again, calling me a crybaby.

When we played hide and seek, they would cover my eyes with a blindfold, and everything would go dark. I ran toward their laughter, but I never caught anyone. I would fall down, run blindly, and fall again. A lump would rise in my throat, and finally I would sit down in the dirt and cry at the feet of one of the women in our family. Then all of them would laugh at me . . .

Back then, I hated everything. In that whole place, there were only three things I liked. My grandfather, my mother, and the pots of white flowers that my mother had put in the entryway. And that was because one day my mother had taken me to the children's branch of a public hospital to see a doctor. We had sat in an exam room together. A door opened, and a tall man entered, wearing white clothes, just like my mother would wear when she went to work. When his eyes fell on us, he immediately left the room. Then, for some reason I didn't understand, my mother left too. A while later, the same tall man came in, and knelt down in front of the bench that I was sitting on. I was too embarrassed to look at him and kept my head down. He said my name. I looked up at him. He gazed at me sadly, then asked, "Do you love your mother?"

I nodded my head. Smiling, he said, "Will you also become a doctor like your mother when you grow up?"

I blushed and lowered my head. He kissed my forehead and left. The last thing I remember about him was that he had strands of

white hair at his temples that stood out against his black hair. When I came home that day, it seemed to me that the white flowers in the pot that my mother had put in the entryway bore an uncanny resemblance to the doctor. I thought that if I had a father, he would be like that doctor. From then on, one of the white flowerpots would turn into my father. Every time I felt sad, I watered the flowerpot with my tears, and every time one of my aunts talked badly about my mother, I cried to the flowerpot.

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The sound of dripping water from the boiling tea brought me back to the present. I blew on the tea. For some reason, while I was sipping the tea, I thought of my grandfather. He had a bowl-like Chinese cup that he really liked, and he would never drink tea from any other cup. The cup was covered, inside and out, in designs of white-flowered branches. My grandfather would sit down cross-legged, cradling the cup in a particular way in his fingers, and would drink the tea in a few sips, as if the tea had a special taste when drunk from that particular cup. He gave a small *hm* of satisfaction after every sip. No matter how many cups of tea I drink, I have never found the satisfaction of my grandfather's *hm hm*s. Perhaps such a taste can only be found in my grandfather's Chinese cup. I was 10 when my grandfather died. One day, almost 10 years ago, I was coming home from school, and I saw that there were a lot of women gathered around our house. My grandfather was stretched out in the middle of the room. They had wound a white cloth around his head and had tied it in the back. The women were crying profusely. As hard as I tried, I couldn't get my tears to come, but when I saw that my cousins were crying, I rubbed my eyes and forced out some tears.

Up until that day, I had thought that I was an inconsequential presence to my mother and that I wasn't that important, but on the day of my grandfather's death, I heard my mother say, between sobs, "Oh, father! I am all alone; you left, I am all by myself."

The other women told her, "Don't be so self-centered! God kept your child alive; God has not left you without anyone."

After that, I felt like the man of the house. I had to support my mother; she was depending on me. The day that the Fatiha recitation for my grandfather ended, my uncles and their wives sat down together and all started talking at once. Everyone was saying something, so it was impossible to make out who was saying what. In the middle of all of this, I realized that my oldest aunt was talking about my grandfather's gold watch. But then my uncle and his wife said something to her that I couldn't quite make out, which made her slide her eyes to the edge of her chador and say, "Oh father, they won't give even one watch of yours; they won't allow me even one remembrance of you."

My youngest aunt then asked for my grandfather's gold ring, and the others asked for other things. Amid all of this, my mother was dozing off in a corner, quietly looking on at the others from time to time. She didn't ask for anything. I thought to myself that she must be suffering, and, for some reason, my thoughts drifted to my grandfather's Chinese cup. I went to the kitchen. There was no one there. Stealthily, I found the cup in the black, smoke-stained armoire and smuggled it away with me.

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Until now, my mother had kept the cup among her dearest things in the armoire in her room. I suddenly felt a powerful desire to drink from my grandfather's cup. I tried to convince myself that the idea was senseless. But I couldn't. This strange desire had taken root in me. I went to my mother's room. I knew in which part of the armoire she had put the cup, but when I went to pick it up, I caught sight of a photograph of my father with his gold watch resting among my mother's prized possessions, and it unsettled me; I closed my eyes so as not to see it.

I felt the photograph of my father looming over me as I drank the tea. I hated him. Some time ago, when I imagined that his spirit was hiding in the pots of white flowers, he had been like an impossible dream. Now I had nothing but hate to dedicate to him. One day after the death of my grandfather, I found out that my father had never died; rather, he had abandoned my mother and taken up with another woman. That day, my oldest uncle's wife had kicked

us out of the house that they inherited when my grandfather passed away. She called my mother a "divorced woman." After that, I figured everything out. My mother showed me the photograph of my father for the first time. His face seemed very familiar. Maybe he looked like me. Or maybe he was like that doctor that I had seen years earlier in the hospital, who had kissed my forehead. It was all very odd. Because while I had been imagining that my father was in the pots of white flowers, my mother had also been calling my father her "white flower." When we realized that we had both associated my father with white flowers, we cried together. Years passed. My mother's "white flower" stayed alive in her mind with the same whiteness and freshness, but my "white flower" withered.

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And now the man's photograph that had been so beloved by my mother had become nauseating to me. I brought the cup of cold tea up to my mouth. Again, I thought I saw my father's image reflected in it. But no, it was my own reflection, strangely similar to his—even the pockmarks on my face looked like the pockmarks that stood out in his photograph. I quickly set down the cup and went to my room. I put myself to bed and covered my head with the quilt. I was upset, and I realized that silly things like a teacup wouldn't calm me down. I was up half the night, battling with myself. An unknown force was pulling me toward my grandfather's cup, which was still sitting on top of the kitchen table, full of tea. It was as if I needed to see my reflection in the tea one more time, or maybe it was that I wanted to observe the similarity between my father and I again. As hard as I tried to force myself to accept that this desire was absurd and senseless, I couldn't.

Although I don't know exactly how it happened, I suddenly realized that I was back in front of the painting of the white flowers. But this time, it didn't affect me. In my sleepy state, I stared at the painting. I sensed that a misty, sepia-colored veil was separating me from my reflection in the painting's glass. My image seemed to double. All of a sudden, I seemed to be drowning in a dream. I fell into the painting. My soul somehow transferred from me into the painting. The person who was sitting in the kitchen, bent over the cup of tea,

had become a body separate from me, a person who looked at me from inside of a wooden frame, from behind a sepia veil.

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Little by little, this other body grew larger in front of my eyes. I realized that it was I who had grown smaller. Small, like a drop of tea. I found myself in a dim, sepia space. It was as if a lamp was sending out a weak light into a dark night. Images of white-flowered branches appeared around me, images that maybe, until 10 years ago, had given that special taste to my grandfather's tea. The images came to life and began to move. The vision drew me in, and I instinctively stepped forward, but something beneath me pulled me straight to the ground, as if my feet were weighted down with heavy stones. The sound of mocking laughter rolled through the sepia space. I felt humiliated. I stood up. The laughter stopped.

I noticed the images again. The white-flowered branches had been replaced by faint images of animals. I wasn't surprised at all. I said, "Why am I not surprised?"

And then I laughed. The sound of my words and laughter echoed in the space and several times I heard "Why am I not surprised? Why am I not surprised? . . . Why?"

"I am so good, better than everyone else. The others are so hateful."

I shivered. Because the sound did not come from me, some unknown person was speaking, like a voice from the past. Then the unknown voice echoed in the space again: "Me! Me! Me! Oh, I am the most lovable!"

The echo of "Me! Me! Me! Oh, I am the most lovable!" blew through the space like a gust of wind. Suddenly the faint images of the animals took on life and started to move. I saw a cat chasing a mouse, a fox chasing the cat, and a great big panther running after the fox. I heard the sound of them panting. All of them were running in a circle. Their running had no end. Beetles and cockroaches were crushed and ground into powder beneath their feet. For a moment it seemed to me that only the mouse had no purpose. But, no, the mouse was running after the panther. For the first time, I was surprised. Invisible hands started to sweep brooms in the air, and the

brooms moved toward the animals. The broom that went in front of the panther, moved by an invisible hand, pushed the panther toward the fox, and the broom that was going in front of the fox pushed it toward the cat, and all of the other brooms pushed the cat toward the mouse, and the mouse toward the panther.

Once again, the cackling laughter filled the sepia space. I looked up. The face of the person on the other side of the veil filled the sepia sky, and brooms were hanging from his pockmarks. I was afraid. I looked down. There was no sign of the animals, and once again, the white-flowered branches appeared on the walls around me, which had, at one time, given my grandfather's tea its special taste.

The cackling fell silent. Terror enveloped me and chained my feet down. I couldn't turn around, for fear of falling. The ground all around me had transformed into large, broken rocks, and a deathly silence reigned, adding to my terror and fear. The thought of escape broke my chains of fear, and I stepped forward. I managed one step, two steps, three steps, but I fell on the fourth step, and my body crashed into the rocks. Mocking laughter once again resounded throughout the space. I felt humiliated. I tried to get up. The laughter stopped. But my heart had been wounded. Suddenly, I saw that the white-flowered branches that appeared on the walls had been overtaken by white wisps. A burnt, smokey smell reached my nose. I suspected that the white wisps around me were clouds or gunpowder and that the burning smell was smoke. Little by little, this mixed with the smell of rotten blood and the sound of my mother crying. The clouds mixed together with the sounds of sobbing. The clouds started to move around me. There were so many of them. They went this way and that, and, from a distance, I saw my mother crying among pots of white flowers as the clouds swirled around her. Then the clouds separated us. Or maybe it was smoke or gunpowder that came between us. An echo rang out in the sepia space: "Me! Me! . . . Oh, I am the most lovable!" mixing with the mocking laughter. My terror rose, but over time, the sounds became less frequent, and in the distance between them, I made out familiar words and sounds:

"Pots of white flowers."

"Oh, I am the most lovable."

"Beautiful, beautiful, I am beautiful."

"You are so ugly and clumsy!"

"Brooms . . . brooms!"

The echoes grew louder and became terrifying as they condensed. My surroundings began to shake. I ran in horror. I ran without a goal. But every time I stepped forward, I tripped on the rocks and fell down hard. Suddenly, the clouds combined with the billowing masses of smoke and gunpowder, and in that instant, a beautiful, fairytale-like body appeared, smiling entrancingly. Then there was a bolt of lightning, but its sound was just like thunder, like the sound of something breaking.

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I came to. My grandfather's teacup was in front of me. My reflection still wasn't clear in the tea. The painting of the white flowers had fallen from the wall in front of me, and the glass had shattered.