

## The beast in the Belly

REZA FIYOUZAT\*

When I was four years old, a kidney infection led to other, more serious problems, which could not be successfully taken care of by the surgeons operating on me repeatedly. This was happening in Abadan, the city where I was born, in the southwest corner of Iran, on the border with Iraq. A city mostly known not for what it was originally, but because of the gigantic oil refinery built by the British Petroleum, and its accompanying company town, to which, in later years, a petrochemical plant was also added to ensure an impeccable air quality that only the British industry could provide. There were times that the British prohibited the Iranian locals from entering certain parts of town, protected by Indian troops and British officers. One neighborhood was still called Sikh Lane, when we still lived there; it must have been the Sikh soldiers' quarters.

After several operations by incompetent surgeons, my parents, alarmed, decided to take out a small loan, fly me to London, check me into a children's hospital recommended to them, and let some English doctors wield a scalpel or two, hopefully to better effect. And fortunately, for the most part, the English succeeded splendidly where our own

brethren had failed miserably, to the point of almost killing me.

Children have amazing abilities to suppress pain, and get used to completely abnormal conditions such as months spent in a hospital, and to instead concentrate on the good things. I loved the ice creams, the cakes, and there was a never-ending supply of playmates! And far fewer adults. I played with other kids, seldom experiencing communication problems that would stop our games. Life and play went on.

### 2

Certain moments become definitive by sparking a realization, inducing a crisis, leading to resolution or breakdown, or conversely to enormous success, or profound confusion. I had one of those during my first six-month stay. The female orderly was cleaning the floor in our room. As she went about her work, I was struggling with a realization. It was the first time that I felt the frustrations of dealing with another sound system of signs, and I examined the idea of 'another language' was being examined in some detail. I had accepted that it was possible for other languages to exist and for some people to practice them, but I still didn't know that my own language was not a universal language. I was



\* **REZA FIYOUZAT** teaches English language at the Center for Language Education of Josai International University, in Togane city, Chiba prefecture, Japan.

realizing that the communication problems I experienced at least once in a while in the course of play were of a nature other than what I had imagined.

The orderly lady must have thought I was babbling while playing. She kept her attention on her work. I was talking quite loudly to myself, testing the hypotheses that they wouldn't understand, so there was no need to keep my thoughts in my head. I was saying, "How can you idiots not understand me? I am speaking a very plain and very easy language that everybody understands. You are the ones speaking this nonsense that only you understand. Why don't you stop ignoring me and talk my language? Look at you! Why don't you understand me? Look at you! You and your silly-looking hands!!" At this point, she was at the foot of my bed, and stopping her work she looked up, looking concerned, and said something that I didn't understand at the time. I immediately shut up and froze, in shock and shame. "She must have understood me; and my insult!!" I thought. But I still didn't understand her! I apologized, was very confused, and kept my bad thoughts in my head from then on.

### 3

So, there were other languages! I had discovered to my amazement. There were parallel worlds. That too I had discovered. These other languages feel different. Not just sound, but feel different. Sometimes they even have their own smell. After two six-month stays in England mostly in hospitals, English language smelled like industrial alcohol.

After recovering completely, and through the years of my schooling, my parents consistently made sure I kept up with my English language education in some extra curricular form or another:

either I took a class, or my father would work with me and my sisters, instructing us in all things from spelling and vocabulary, to reading and translating.

My parents' motivation was, of course, economic. They were firm believers that English language ability was one of the tools for social mobility and success in the contemporary world. Besides this vocational motivation, other, more enigmatic ideological forms too contributed greatly to keeping alive the interest of the masses, myself included, in the culture as well as the language. Yes, that overtly seductive ideological form: Hollywood. Who has not seen a Hollywood movie since the 1950s?

### 4

In 1980, I left Iran, in the middle of my first year at Shiraz University, and by lucky coincidence, two weeks before the Hizbollahi vigilantes attacked all universities across Iran simultaneously, as part of a plan by the religious fundamentalists that would climax in the total shut down of universities in Iran for two, some cases three, years to choke out the leftist democrats, socialists, and communists, all of whom had naturally built comfortable strongholds in the universities.

It took the religious factions one year before they were ready to execute their plans for establishing complete monopoly over the state apparatus. First, the religious mob got rid of their coalition partners with whom they had formed the first revolutionary government. Next, they attacked the people and their autonomous organizations. So, universities students were high on the list of those to be eliminated.

In that one year, Hizbollahi worked hard and worked fast to organize their mobs, re-arm, re-group, and get ready for the

big crack down. This attack, which culminated with the mass execution of thousands of civilians, obtained more news coverage in the West only in the part related to the taking of hostages in the American embassy. While this was going on in Iran, I was comfortably ensconced in England. I was on a two-and-a-half-year layover, before the American hostages were freed and I could continue my journey further west, into the belly of the major beast.

Although I was glad to be away! from the religious bully boys, who were raping the country, it felt like I had committed a most selfish treachery. The alcohol-laden smell of the English now intermingled with the smell of guilt. With each word spoken I was drifting farther away from myself. This other language was swallowing me.

## 5

It took me a long time to learn and accept that there was nothing I could do, short of committing actual suicide by trying to force my way back into Iran. This knowledge and acceptance took a lot of negations, numerous transformations, enough to bring me back to a general sense of that initial force of conviction, or vision that propelled me on. Not to where I started; that never happens for anybody. To transpose this personal understanding to a more general idea: even if you live on the same spot of land on this planet for all your life, you don't simply 'maintain' some imaginary 'self.'

## 6

I started my university studies in hard sciences, but I finished in political science, and then linguistics in graduate school. My parents couldn't understand why. They wanted a doctor, or at least a pharmacist! I had other plans, though. Politics had changed our lives. So, I had

to know it, at first, and then to own it, so I could regain a better meaning from life.

After I finished my undergraduate studies, I worked mostly at jobs that required no professional training. So, when the time came for me to grow up and get a real job, I looked around, and thought: some professionals become functionaries in the management of capital, or become engineers and add value to capital, others become doctors and add capital to themselves mostly, and do some good no doubt; others become scientists and help create deadly technologies, always delivering the best profit margins, and yet others try to help the IMF or the World Bank, or use their mental prowess to benefit! the political branch of capital with research on whatever pays best about whichever country Uncle Sam is planning to screw next.

I didn't want the best years of my life and creativity (no matter how little I may have) to benefit the designs of this or that business cartel, nor any governmental apparatus that protects their conditions of rape and plunder. So, I chose teaching and studying of a language. English language; not the literature, the sociology, history, economics, or anthropology. No ideology. I teach the language, so that those who wish to use it to their benefit may do so.

## 7

Felipe Guaman Poma was a Peruvian citizen of some noble status, who in the early 1600s addressed a letter of protest to King Philip III of Spain, lecturing the him on the history of the Peruvians over whom he so brutally ruled, and teaching the king the principles of ethical administration. ! This never delivered letter, titled, *Nueva coronica y buen gobierno*, used an imaginative mixture of European literary forms, Western



Christian iconography, Andean sign forms, always using different languages, from Spanish to three dialects of Quechua, thereby in form too refusing to accept the authority of the language of the oppressor, while demonstrating the multiple literacies mastered by its composer.

Should even one student I have worked with in the past, or will in the future, somewhere, some day decide to follow the example of Guaman Poma, and should that student in that moment remember me as a force (no matter how tiny) that prepared her to cease that moment, my spirit, wherever it may be, shall rejoice.