

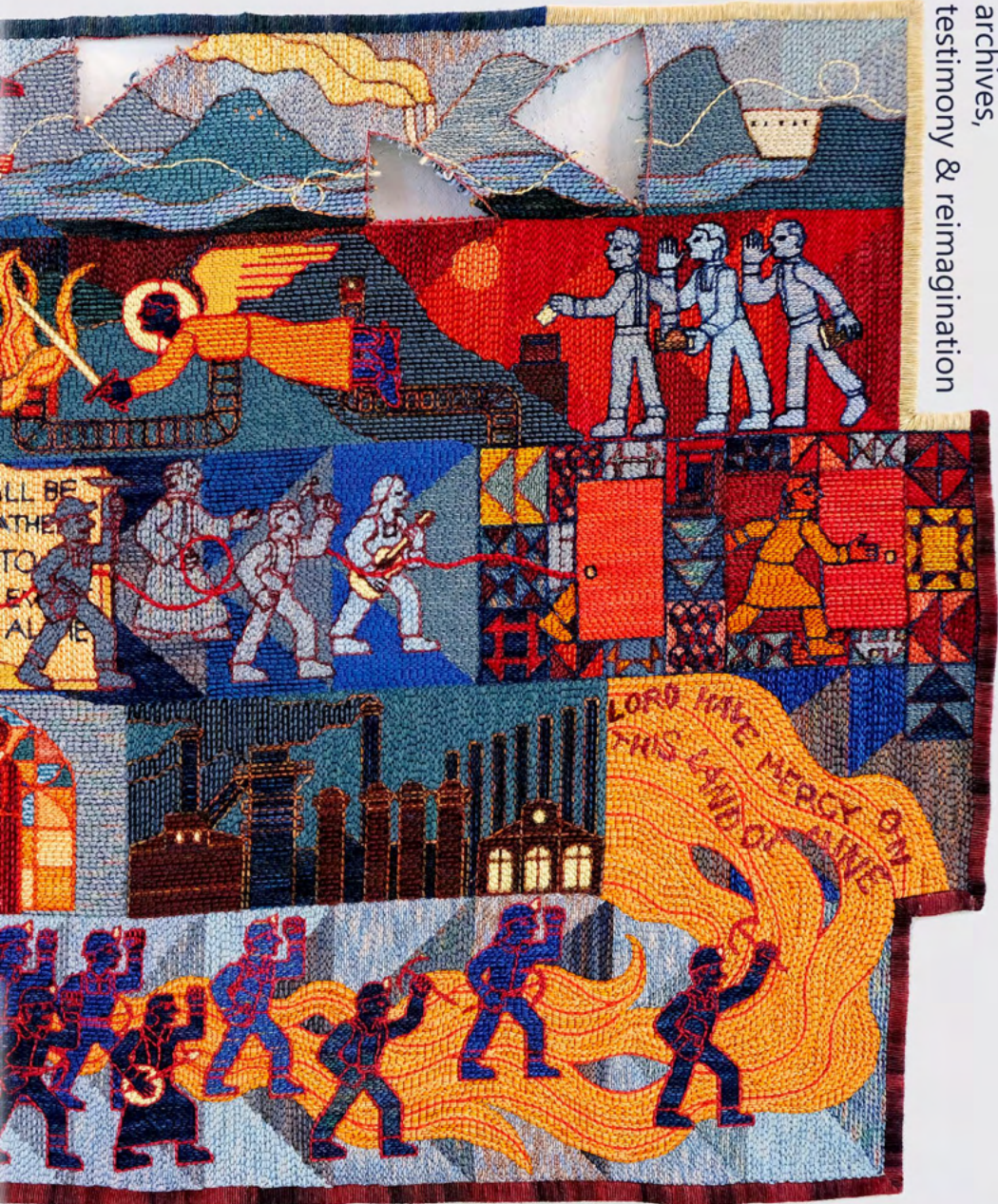
# Michigan Quarterly Review

Fall 2023

\$10.00

## TRANSVERSIONS

archives,  
testimony & reimagination



a special issue guest edited by **ALEX MARZANO-LESNEVICH**

PUBLISHED AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

# Michigan Quarterly Review

Volume 62, Number 4

Fall 2023

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MICHIGAN QUARTERLY REVIEW (ISSN 0026-2420) is published quarterly (January, April, July, and October) by The University of Michigan, 3277 Angell Hall, 435 S. State St., Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1003. Subscription prices, \$35.00 a year, \$65.00 for two years; back issues, \$10.00. Archived issues are available six months after publication via Michigan Publishing, 3277 Angell Hall, 435 S. State St., Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1003. Periodical postage paid at Ann Arbor, Michigan. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Michigan Quarterly Review, 3277 Angell Hall, 435 S. State St., Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1003. Copyright © University of Michigan, 2023. All Rights Reserved. ISSN 0026-2420.

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The Helen Zell Writers' Program



COVER ART: Tabitha Arnold, *Gospel*,  
2023, tufted wool yarn on linen cloth.  
Courtesy the artist © Tabitha Arnold.

## RECORDING REVOLUTION

LEILA CHRISTINE NADIR

*rec·ord* | 'rekərd | رکورد

*Middle English: from Old French record 'remembrance',*

*from recorder 'bring to remembrance',*

*from Latin recordari 'remember',*

*based on cor, cord- 'heart'*

—my laptop dictionary app

Every night after dinner, my father dropped into his News Chair to watch the CBS Evening News with Dan Rather. Dan got it. Dan understood. Dan knew Afghanistan was the center of the universe, and no other American did. One of my father's frustrations with Americans was their ignorance of Afghanistan's role in international politics. Ever since World War II—my father was born in 1943, two years before the world war's end—the US and the Soviet Union had been in a Cold War battle over Afghanistan, a battle fought ideologically and psychologically, with educational and infrastructural gifts. When the USSR broke this tradition of non-confrontation by marching troops across the border in 1979, my father knew the story was huge. No way the US could let this go. The US would have to act. Yet when he spun the TV's dial searching for updates, it was like the invasion never happened. The networks scarcely mentioned it. American reporters didn't care. Except for one guy: a CBS anchorman from Texas named Dan Rather.

The News Chair was a khaki-colored tweed armchair, part of a sofa set purchased by my parents because the fabric's rough weave hid the grime of their four wild country kids who rubbed their dirty hands all over everything. The chair was positioned in the living room directly across from the wood-paneled TV, the space between them covered by an Afghan carpet the color of red wine (a substance never once consumed in our house). Sometimes, my little brother, Mohammed, and I snuck our bottoms into the News Chair when Baba wasn't home, though this felt mutinous. Like that time my class field-tripped to the Wayne County Courthouse and I climbed into the judge's bench with another girl and we laughed and laughed and

banged the wooden gavel. “Order in the court! Order in the court!” If the judge had showed up, which thank God he didn’t, we would’ve scooped in a jiffy. *No problem, sir, don’t throw us in jail!* And that’s how it felt when Mohammed and I planted our butts in Baba’s News Chair. I didn’t call it the News Chair as a kid, but that’s what it was: Baba’s special chair for watching Dan Rather’s news on the televizoon after dinner. Now be quiet.

Dan’s sneaking around. Dan’s in disguise. Dan’s deep undercover. Dan’s wearing tan perhan tumban, tan shawl, a turban; Dan’s got a grey stubbly beard. Dan climbs rocky mountains and steals across Pakistani borders. Dan interviews doctors. Dan interviews refugee camp directors. Dan interviews refugees who surprise him with English answers, and he gasps, “You speak English?” Dan interviews guys my father recognizes from Kabul University. *Hey, that guy—*Baba yells from his News Chair to my mother in the kitchen—*Did you see him? We were in class together at Kabul University! He studied Engineering too! I didn’t know he was a mujahideen leader!* Dan gets shelled by Russians. Dan breathes heavy into his mic. Dan hides behind boulders. There’s no moon out. It’s a dark night. Here comes another artillery round.

I sat on my hands during Dan’s broadcasts. My feet dangled from the couch between Baba’s fierce gaze in his News Chair and the *taka-taka* of machine guns on TV. I crossed my ankles, I hooked my toes, careful not to kick or I’d block Baba’s view of Dan, and if that happened, Baba would start shouting because he didn’t want to miss a single detail. Dan’s Afghan segments—usually thirty seconds, sometimes a whole two minutes—were my father’s only chance to see inside Afghanistan since he came back to the States to be with me and my mother, the Slovak-American undergrad he met at the small rural college in New York State where he attended grad school. And Dan’s reports were the only video footage that I—their eldest child, ten years old at the time—had ever seen of Afghanistan, the nation my father said I came from, the nation we were supposed to return to one day.

Before Dan, I’d seen some photographs of Afghanistan in a book called *Afghanistan*. My father insisted we display this book on our coffee table, and if he ever found *Afghanistan*, the book, buried under other books, dirty dishes, or old newspapers, that was another thing he shouted about. Sometimes I propped my heels on the coffee table, opened *Afghanistan* across my thighs, and turned its glossy pages. Published by an artsy press, the book was the work of a hippie French couple who drove a VW bus

across Central Asia in the seventies. I didn't know anything about hippies or artsiness back then or why Westerners loved old-style Afghans so much. I thought *Afghanistan*, the book, represented the One True Afghanistan. The book was endorsed, after all, by my real Afghan father. Something about *Afghanistan*, the book, and the photographers' immaculate focus, told me it was okay to gawk at these images of the people I came from. There was nothing they could do about it. Old men's faces magnified so big—their wrinkles like topographical maps of mountains—their turbans twisted and draping, their eyes lined with kohl, thicker and blacker than my mother's eyeliner. In *Afghanistan*, the book, Afghan men handled animals a lot—birds, sheep, camels, dogs. They drank tea from porcelain cups. Sometimes they gave haircuts on street sidewalks, all of which made me feel like Afghanistan was a far-away timeless romantic place, overflowing with colorful textiles and simple people. Nothing like the hard-partying chai-chugging Afghans I was used to. And in *Afghanistan*, the book, women's faces were always covered. Nothing like the fancy Kabul ladies in their high heels and pencil skirts. I didn't know what to make of the dissonance. After another confused browsing session, I placed the book back atop the clutter on the table. I couldn't imagine moving there, away from the maple trees, away from my pond, away from the frogs and chickadees of my backyard at the edge of our rural small town called Marion.

The *Afghanistan* book and other Afghan trinkets and mementoes just seemed to appear in our home—bronze plates in the china cabinet, prayer rugs hanging on the railing, carpets on wood floors, frames of the shahada in gold calligraphic letters tacked over doors, my perhan tumban outfits—I didn't know where they came from. Just like the postcards my father broke out one day, which he arranged and taped into a collage. Before he hung it in a frame on the living-room wall, he asked me to write افغانستان on a slip of paper he'd taped in the top right corner. (I had nice handwriting, award-winning, in fact—a substitute teacher gave me a quarter one time for having the neatest penmanship in class.) If anyone were to be confused, افغانستان made it clear these tourist hotspots—the Buddhas of Bamyān, the Blue Mosque of Mazar-i-Sharif, and the bluest lake I ever saw, which I later learned was Band-i Amir—these were Afghanistan. Hippie photos, tourist souvenirs—these were the only images we had until Dan Rather broadcast yet another Afghanistan into our home.

Mujahideen, Dan said, means “Freedom Fighters.” This is not literally true, but who was checking? “Freedom Fighters” was the translation chosen by President Reagan because *rebels*, *insurgents*, and *guerrillas* didn’t tell the right story. (“Freedom Fighters” is what Americans like to call mujahideen when they’re on the US’s side. Otherwise, they’re “warlords” or “terrorists” or something.) Dan showed Americans that the mujahideen were good people who loved freedom just like Americans. They loved God just like Americans. They hated communism just like Americans—and by the way, take a look at their useless weapons. Would you want to fight a nuclear superpower with clunky antique guns that hold only ten rounds of ammunition? If we didn’t help these “eighteenth-century” people defend themselves against Soviet planes, helicopters, tanks, and also napalm, if the communists weren’t stopped, the USA would be the next. Yes, Americans, you will go down. Communism will take over the planet.

The Freedom Fighters were in “a Holy War against the Soviets,” Dan said, “a war they say, if they get weapons from us, or anyone else in the Free World, they will win.”

Even Hollywood got on board. The most expensive film ever made at the time, *Rambo III*, told the tale of a very muscular Vietnam vet who journeys to Afghanistan to save his friend from the evil USSR Army. Along the way, Rambo joins forces with the mujahideen—I mean, Freedom Fighters—and kills a bunch of Soviets.

Send weapons. Send lots and lots of weapons. Even Rambo knew what to do.

Dan Rather told the first chapter or maybe the prologue—or maybe I should call it an advertisement—of the official US narrative of the so-called Afghan-Soviet War. Baba in his News Chair, the rest of us spread on the carpet or slouched on the sofa, my mother, my brother, my sisters, and me, united by the glow of the screen lighting our faces. We watched and we breathed and we took it all in. None of us imagined how the story would end.

\* \* \*

Baba shouted a wall-shaking *ARAAM!!!* from his News Chair if Mohammed, Fatima, or I made any sound during Dan’s broadcasts. And if a map of Afghanistan floated in the square beside Dan’s head, you really better watch

out. Ya Allah, Sweet Jesus, freeze your bones, don't move an inch, not even a tippy-toe across the rug. Because floorboards squeak, knees crack, you might, khoda-nakaneh, trip and fall right on your well-meaning kid-face, and Baba would yell "ARAAM!!!" even louder this time, followed by the offender's name—usually mine, because I was the eldest and also clumsy, plus I was sure I got blamed all the time for stuff my siblings actually did. Though sometimes it was my little brother's name my father shouted because Mohammed was always running around and flexing his He-Man muscles. And that was the worst, hearing your name, because that meant you weren't respectful enough during Afghan news, which meant you didn't love Afghanistan and you probably didn't want the Freedom Fighters to win, and if that were true, then you didn't care about your two aunts stuck in Kabul, whom you'd never met but you'd heard their voices recorded on cassette tapes mailed across the Atlantic Ocean, and the other aunt stuck in Pakistan with her husband and six children, who also recorded tapes and mailed them across the Atlantic Ocean, and all of this meant, in case you were wondering, that you were ignorant of global politics and what was happening to Afghans and Muslims and Palestinians on the other side of the world, and the very least you should do is respect Dan's news, and since you can't do that, you're as bad as know-nothing Americans, which means you have no respect for anything that matters, no respect for all the loves, hearts, and revolutions, and the memories of beautiful nations, recorded on audiotapes moving back and forth across oceans.

He'd say some version of this later. Right now he couldn't talk. After the calling of your name, all that was required was for you to walk your jello-legs to the News Chair, which was such a bummer because who wants to report for duty for a clunk on the head or the twisting of your ear? Fortunately, the disciplining wasn't too painful—more humiliating than anything—because my father tried to refrain from physical punishment of his kids. (He was more into emotionally battering us.) Also he was distracted. He had to record every Afghan segment presented by Dan. When the Afghan map appeared, Baba panicked. The remote control—where was it? He flung papers from the coffee table, he pushed *Afghanistan*, the book, aside, he tossed throw pillows and couch cushions until his hand gripped the remote, which he aimed at the VCR, firing RECORD repeatedly with his thumb until the gears cranked into motion.



He filled VHS tapes, seven hours each, with Dan's CBS segments and occasional special reports. Most clips missed the first few seconds, the time it took for the VCR to crank on, and since it took a few more seconds to press STOP when Dan broke for a commercial, most clips ended with actors shilling products and services, like Carnival cruise-lines (*what?*), Maalox for stomach cramps (*who's got gas?*), Sinutab for stuffy sinuses (*hey my Mom uses that!*), Advil for headaches and backaches and neck-aches (six or seven bottles in the bathroom closet), and Pam, the state-of-the-art cooking spray in a red can that prevents food from sticking to pans. My mother never sautéed anything without the help of Pam. We sprayed it on every cooking surface.

The videotapes came with a sheet of tiny black stickers, one square per letter. My father pressed the stickers onto the video-case spines as straight as he could, but the eleven letters spelling his homeland's name always ended up slanted, edges uneven.

AFGHANISTAN TAPE #1.

AFGHANISTAN TAPE #2.

AFGHANISTAN TAPE #3.

\* \* \*

“What are we gonna do with a VCR and a VHS camera?”

This is my mother two years earlier, in '83. She's late-stage pregnant with my youngest sister and leaning back on the couch, rubbing her belly, red bandana around her matted blond hair, as she watches my father, on his knees, slicing cardboard boxes open and unwinding cables. I'm in this scene too, reading a picture book to three-year-old Fatima on the Afghan carpet. I have no idea that in one year this little sister will be reading full sentences, and I have no idea one day I'll look back on this scene and think this was the moment my family's media revolution started—the moment time detached from place and broke away from a single flow, the moment my family divided up and got channeled into different stations.

My father huffed and puffed and pulled the TV from the wall, ignoring his wife's question.

She asked again, this time stretching out the acronyms as if they were foreign words. “Really, what are we supposed to do with a V – C – R and V – H – S camera?”

From behind the TV, he laughed. It was a haughty laugh, one I heard many times growing up, a proud pompous chuckle, which contained an unspoken question: *How could it be that he, a man from a little landlocked country that no American had heard of (except for Dan Rather), how could it be that he was more technologically advanced than his wife from the Big Ol' USA?* He got a real Third World kick out of this. Afghanistan's capital, his home for thirty years, was a global destination, a city of international hotels, high-rises, night clubs. Knee skirts and high heels turning heads alongside chadars and burqas on sidewalks. Automobiles beeping horns, steering around wagons. Some of the most renowned American artists of the twentieth century, like David Brubeck and Duke Ellington, played gigs in Kabul. University students—socialists, Maoists, anti-imperialists, Islamists, pro-democracy activists—waved signs, shouted slogans, protesting for their nation's future, while hippies rolled into town in rainbow VW buses on the search for the famous hashish of Central Asia.

Baba looked over the TV at his wife, combover hanging in his eyes, and answered her question about what we'd do with the new VCR and VHS camera. "You'll see," he said, and looked back down to do more cable stuff. I'm still surprised he didn't realize the mistake he made that day.

My father was an engineer at a radio-surveillance-satellite-media company in Rochester, a company that helped invent many technologies modern people enjoy—GPS, Wi-Fi, Doppler radar—and tactical equipment used by the US military, like high-altitude precision bombs, space electronics, night-vision goggles, missile-accuracy and spying systems. Technologies of freedom-fighting. Weapons of holy wars. My father was aware of the globe-changing effects of powerful media, yet he installed right there in his living room a big tech-workaround to his ban on American entertainment. Except for Dan Rather, no TV was allowed in our house. This rule was meant for his children, but of course, it also affected his wife. No shows with the potential for men and women to flirt, or to stare into each other's eyes, or, Allah forbid, touch, even worse, kiss—and that includes just about all programming in America. Believe me, I learned early, the United States cannot imagine a single storyline without the Obligatory Premarital Kiss. My father had to stop those kisses from contaminating his Muslim home, and his methods worked for a while. But he wasn't detail-oriented, and he was also naive. He never realized he was up against a wife and four kids who

lived American culture in ways he never would. We thought things, we tried things, we wanted and plotted things he'd never predict.

This was the VHS Revolution.

\* \* \*

My father's original plans for the VCR and the VHS camera included recording his kids' soccer games, band concerts, and Mohammed's karate sessions. Last summer break, Mom snuck my siblings and me into a matinee of the PG smash-hit *Karate Kid*, and it transformed Mohammed permanently. My brother began karate-chopping imaginary enemies nonstop. He rounded corners with defensive kicks in case of lurking attackers. He punched into closets to neutralize bad guys hiding behind jackets. He invented these self-defense moves himself and performed them with such overacted tough-man grimaces on his sweet-cheeks face, and in such a terribly untrained and pathetic delusional manner, that my parents felt bad for him and enrolled him in lessons at the dojo opened by a former truck-driver one town over. When Mom saw Baba's first video of Mohammed sparring in his karategi, white belt knotted at his waist, under Sensei Roger's tutelage, she wiped her eyes. How could it be, how fast the time, how quickly kids grow, wasn't it just yesterday, black-haired baby swaddled in blue at the hospital, now breaking very thin boards with six-year-old fists.

Fatima's pre-school ballet recitals were how my tech-savvy father introduced the town of Marion's populace to the practice, soon to overtake the nation, of watching your daughter's pliés with a media device in front of your face. When he balanced the camera on his shoulder in the school auditorium, the microphone protruded into the air like an oversized insect antenna. I peeked over the back of my seat to see what our townspeople thought, and I saw many a parent craning their neck around Baba's tech-apparatus for an unobstructed view. This wasn't, as they suspected, some inane behavior displayed by the only brown person in the room. In a few years they'd be recording time too, transforming life and love into magnetic tape in a sea of black bulbous appendages floating across the auditorium.

Fatima was a show of chubby legs and infantile choreography in her pink ballet tights. Bend knees, unbend knees. Bend, unbend, repeat. Though I don't believe she cared about the art form as much as the clothes. Fatima wanted to be a ballerina or a bride or a fairy princess or a fairy-princess

bride. For this precocious reader who would skip kindergarten next year, any hyper-feminine ideal would do. She'd recently been a flower-girl in a family wedding—dreamiest day of her life. Mom had made her a pink satin floor-length gown for the event, and ever since Fatima couldn't be kept out of the dress. Mom would yell something like "No Nice Clothes in the House!" and Fatima disappeared into her room, as if to comply, but she must've gotten lost mid-task in a fantasy about belonging to a royal family that lived in a castle and ruled over the poor masses, because three minutes later, she sashayed by, still in pink satin, now with a magic wand in her hand from last Halloween's Tinkerbell costume.

And my littlest sister Aisha. She was born shortly after the VCR installation, and two years later, her life's mission was to suck on her finger and barrel through the house in her yellow plastic walker, always toward the same destination: the floor-level cereal cupboard to the left of the kitchen sink, where she snuck her grubby hands into boxes and shoved fistfuls of Cocoa Puffs and Trix into her drooly mouth. She knew exactly when the family was distracted, and off she'd go, tiny toes pattering, wheels a'rolling, to gorge on Kellogg's cereal. I convinced Mohammed to help me make a documentary about her once—reality TV before Reality TV. Writing a story with a much steeper arc than I'm capable of now, I cast Mohammed as the investigative journalist, a role I modeled unconsciously, I think, on Geraldo Mustache Rivera from his live on-air search for the secret catacombs of Al Capone. (Rivera's special was approved by my father for a family viewing. No kisses, no romantic tension—plus it was the vaults of Al Capone!) Ten-pound camera on my shoulder, I directed Mohammed, "Clutch your heart, say your line," and Mohammed clutched his heart and said his line: "Oh my God, where in the world is Aisha? Nobody can find her!" He held a hairbrush to Mom's lips. "Ma'am, have you seen her?" Mom mumbled encouraging syllables to push the plot forward, relieved her kids were amusing themselves for once, thank the Lord. The drama proceeded into the kitchen, where Mohammed discovered our missing sister. Following my script, he jumped for joy as if he'd discovered great treasures, shouting into the camera, "Thank God, We've Found her! She's Dived into the Cereal Cupboard! What in the World Could She Be Doing in There?"

I zoomed in on Aisha's face. Industrial food coloring caused semi-permanent stains on her skin, or else Mom was skimping on bedtime

wash-ups, because for days at a time, Aisha's mouth displayed impressionistic pastel smudges the colors of Froot Loops, pink, orange, yellow.

\* \* \*

My mother finally saw the value of the VHS camera, and soon she discovered the subversive potential of the VCR. I remember her sitting beside the TV after school one afternoon, instruction manual in her lap. She blew on her glasses, wiped them with the end of her blouse, and began pushing VCR buttons. When Aisha rolled up in the yellow walker and pulled on her arm, Mom called to me, "Can you grab your sister? I think I can program this thing to record shows when we're not here—without the TV even being on."

"What? How?" That sounded like magic. I pulled Aisha out of her walker and placed her on my lap on the couch. I smelled unpleasantness. I sniffed, "I think she needs a diaper change."

Mom pushed a tape into the machine. "Let's see if this works." She dropped next to me on the couch, and we waited. We watched the VCR. And we waited. Mom looked at the wall-clock. And we waited. And I said, "Aisha's diaper, eww," and then something—gears? parts?—shifted, and the digital display rearranged into a glowing green RECORD.

"Oh my God, it worked!" Mom rushed to the VCR. "It will record without us even touching it. I won't have to miss *The Young & the Restless* when I'm at school anymore! Or movies—we can watch movies! Like the Saturday Night Specials we always miss! Or Jerry Lewis films!" She looked at me. "Remember that time we saw *The Disorderly Orderly*? You love Jerry Lewis!"

*Disorderly Orderly*? I'd almost forgotten about it. That movie was hilarious! I stopped jostling Aisha on my lap. Was it possible—could I see another Jerry Lewis flick?

Mom grabbed the newspaper off the coffee table, flipped to the entertainment pages. "Your father will never know!" She handed me the TV listings. "What do you want to watch?"

\* \* \*

After Dan's report, my father adjusted the antennae of his short-wave radio on the table beside his News Chair and tuned into the British voices of

the BBC. He frowned at the latest updates, which were never good—1985 was the deadliest year since the Soviets invaded—and he heard clicks, taps, gear-sounds, from the TV side of the room.

“What was that?” He lowered the radio volume. “Anyone hear that?”

Mohammed round-housed a boogeyman. “HI-YAH! Take that!”

Fatima twirled the pink ribbon in her hair. “Whaaaa?”

Mom yelled from the kitchen, too cheerfully, “In the kitchen, honey, can’t hear you!”

Aisha sucked her finger, eyes wide, in the yellow walker.

I looked up from my crossword. “Chii?”

We were in this together, deflecting him, and he shrugged, tuning back into the BBC, his cheeks bunched around his nose with worry. Were his sisters safe? Their husbands and children? How soon could he save them? Should he write his congress-lady again? He never voiced these questions, but I know they were on his mind. A decade from now I’d get a job at that congresswoman’s office, and one day, while organizing files into metal cabinets in a storage room, I’d notice a hefty stuffed folder labeled with my family’s name in all-caps. *What were the chances?* I opened it and found letter after typed letter from my father asking for help reuniting his family and bringing his sisters to safety in the States.

The next time he drove to Rochester on a Saturday afternoon to help a newly arrived Afghan family find a place to live, the rest of us would be watching a clandestine recording of *Superman III*.

\* \* \*

My mother was no passive partner submitting to her husband’s moral reign. She agreed, for example, no pork, of course, against Islam, no problem. But dig a hand into the frost-bitten recesses of the overfilled freezer, where husbands who don’t do housework never look, and you’d find a tin-foiled bundle, and under the foil a plastic-wrapped package, red barn on the label, and inside, slices of factory-raised pig. She fried the bacon early mornings on summer breaks after her husband left for work, exhausting the smell with a fan in the kitchen window for the rest of the day. She’d stab a strip with a fork, hold it to my nose. “Try some, it’s aaaa-mazing.” I stepped a foot back. I couldn’t do the most haram act in the world. Too much double-dealing. Plus eating animals made me sad. It wasn’t worth angering Baba, or Allah,

for something I wasn't wild about anyway. But Mom's other crusades? Like Christmas? Who doesn't want lots and lots of presents?

My father tried a few times to stop our celebration of the holiday—"Muslims don't celebrate Christmas!"—but the last time Mom shut him down for good. Just like his VCR mistake, he'd armed her with the perfect weapon for dismantling his rules: an English translation of the Holy Qur'an. He'd hoped it would convince her to convert to Islam so we wouldn't be such a house divided, but instead she used it to fact-check his religious claims. She ran over to our special Qur'an bookshelf and opened her personal copy. "I read here"—she flipped through the Prophet's revelations—"hold on, let me find it"—until she found an earmarked page and pointed at a passage: "It says here Jesus is one of Allah's prophets. So what's wrong with recognizing his birthday?" My father was stupefied. He was a math-and-engineering man. His wife's flawless logic stumped him. Never again did he criticize Christmas, but my mother didn't take chances.

Every December, she hauled our plastic tree upstairs from the laundry room, sneezing and sniffing from the dust on the needles because the laundry room had gone about a decade without seeing a mop or a vacuum. She opened a mildew-stained cardboard box filled with ornaments (more sniffs, more sinus snorts, I itched my eyes and scratched my chin, signs of oncoming allergy and asthma attacks). Mohammed, Fatima, and I wanted to go slow hanging the ornaments, consider the history and meaning of each one, most of which we'd made ourselves, but she pushed us to go faster. "Hurry, Christine! Angel on top!" She looked at the clock. "Your father will be home any minute!" When he arrived and walked into the living room in his socks, the tree was already loaded with lopsided snowmen, popsicle-stick reindeer, cardboard Santas, and crude ceramic bells and candy canes made by his offspring stabbing away in Art class, plus a bag's worth of glittering tinsel. The electric lights blinked in his face.

He probably felt, but didn't know how to say, that Christmas symbolized Muslims' marginalization in the US. Mistletoe in the streets, baby in a manger, "Oh Starry Night" through every public speaker. And he probably felt, but didn't know how to say, that Christmas marginalized him in his own home. His homeland was at war with itself, and here in the States, his kids never knew if Eid was coming or going. Yet on the 25<sup>th</sup> of December Mom hoisted the VHS camera onto her shoulder, Mohammed thrashed

open boxes, Fatima tried on new pink dresses, Aisha got sugar-buzzed after eating too many Hershey Kisses—all of us splashing and cackling in a river of ripped paper, awash in an overflow of presents purchased with funds overdrawn from Mom’s Teachers Credit Union Christmas Account.

One year my mother bought a real fir tree from the parking-lot stand at Wegmans. This was the year of an unfortunate lineup in the Christian-Gregorian and Islamic Hijri calendars. When you straddle solar and lunar calendars, life can proceed swimmingly for years and then suddenly—an epic clash of spiritualities. Imagine Peter Cottontail, grown adult male bunny, sneaking into children’s bedrooms with baskets of candy on the night of the bloody martyrdom of Imam Husayn in Karbala. That hasn’t happened yet (that I know of), but what did happen the year of the real fir tree was the near overlap of the birthdays of Prophet Jesus and Prophet Mohammed. So instead of non-observing the Islamic prophet’s birth, which isn’t traditionally celebrated, the Nadir children were ecstatic over the birth of the Christian savior. After we opened presents on Christmas morning, I poured water into the tree stand, and Mom drove us kids to Binghamton to visit Grandpa. Baba stayed home with the scent of fir needles wafting through the house, so merry and natural.

When we returned two days later, the tree was gone. The place by the stove where it had stood, ornamented and twinkling, was empty. Into closets, around bedrooms, into the basement’s dark corners, Mohammed and I checked and inspected. I studied Mom’s face, hoping for direction, but it was blank, like nothing had happened. I looked at Baba’s face, but I knew better than to ask him anything, especially since he was in his News Chair, clipping his fingernails, his preferred activity for conveying I-don’t-care-ness, which made him look guilty. But it was a tree! *Clip*. It was big! *Clip*. How could he hide it? *Clip clip*. Mohammed and I were ready to give up when I passed a window. I leaned on the ledge, looked through glass, and saw—by the woods’ edge—the tree!—thrown upside down, angel-first, into a snow heap. *Clip*.

Mohammed, Fatima, and I pushed our feet into our moonboots and tromped into the wintery whiteness outdoors. We circled the tree and removed our mittens to untangle our art projects from the needles. I wiped ornaments on my jacket. Cardboard wilted, ink seeped, glitter glue loosened. Only the glazed ceramics held together. I remembered which ornaments



I'd made, which were Fatima's, which Mohammed's. I remember my bare fingers, cold and wet and numb from the snow. No video documentation of that day, but none was necessary. That Christmas was more memorable than any of them, more indelible than recordings of birthday cakes or karate sessions or back-to-school outfits or ballet recitals—and not because it's sad and not because this is some climactic dramatic moment. I really don't feel sad or dramatic about it. What my parents gave me was a gift: I came into consciousness with every sentimental cliché already blown up before I was suckered into believing them.

The real revolutions always go unrecorded.

\* \* \*

A tumble of VHS tapes piled up on our bookshelves—nobody could find anything—until Mom sorted them, rewound and fast-forwarded them, and indexed every segment in a box of alphabetical flash cards, making it easy to find, say, video of my artistic début under School Musicals, 1985, *Tall Tales and Heroes*, in which I played the American Revolutionary War legend Molly Pitcher. What a geopolitical contradiction that whole experience was for an Afghan kid like me.

I'd actually wanted the part of Calamity Jane so I could sing the solo about how I used to be Plain Jane but look at me now, bitches, I'm not so plain anymore, I got guns on my belt, bang-bang, check me out. The lyrics really did go like that, with snare hits for gunfire, without the bitch part. But I didn't get the role, which isn't as much of shocker to me now as it was back then. Here are two things to know about my appearance at age ten: First, during asthma flare-ups my mother made me hang an inhaler around my neck on a crochet chain she'd needled up. I couldn't hide it in my locker because she taught at my school and warned my teachers I could die or something without it. Second, my adult teeth had jammed through my gums at all sorts of disordered angles. It was so bad I had to keep my lips clamped at all times, or people's eyes would drift down my nose—they couldn't help it. They tried to resist, tried to tug their gazes back to my eyes, but my teeth, oh Lord, so big and jagged, so oversized and shiny, pearly-white and new, like teeth for a giant on a little-runt girl. They beckoned people to take them in, don't fight the urge, zero in. My interlocutors all eventually gave up and settled their eyes on my mouth area with a pained wince-stare, and

this made me mad because I didn't like people feeling bad for me. There's this weird thing about pity. It's top-down and involves people thinking they know more about you than they actually do, which means they're taking away an essential part of you. (That part is called your humanity.)

I didn't feel pitiful. I could read good. I had award-winning penmanship. I easily solved math problems and logic puzzles. If I was so pitiful, why did Mrs. Botts call me "cheeky"? She'd misspelled a word on the board during class. Of course, she'd want to know her mistake, so I raised my hand. I was trying to be helpful (I swear!), but she shot a face full of serious over her shoulder at me in my desk. "You don't have to be so cheeky about it." All day long I held onto that word until I could get home and look it up in my dictionary. It was a weird word. I couldn't figure out if I should be insulted. Was I cheeky? Can anyone truly remember their childhood personality? *I'd make an awesome Calamity Jane. Pick me!*

Miss S chose a blond girl with straight teeth and healthy lungs to play Calamity, and every time she fired her plastic guns in her rodeo fringe-jacket—in rehearsals and then on show night, the whole audience clapping—I felt like she, somebody, something, someone had shot me in the heart. Some force had pushed her ahead of me on some map nobody told me about. These Other Girls—the ones who got things and were good at things, the ones at "try-outs" who weren't trying out anything at all—they were a mystery. I was calamitous, I was bad news, I had an inhaler on a crochet chain banging on my chest. I was cheeky and disastrous. I knew I could rock out and do Calamity Jane better. I just didn't know how to go from being a crooked-tooth asthmatic to over there.

Miss S cast me as Molly Pitcher, no speaking lines, go figure. As Molly Pitcher, I rushed across stage in a prairie dress and bonnet (which, by the way, looks exactly like American hijab, just saying), carrying a bucket and pouring ladlefuls of make-believe water into the dry mouths of supine boys pretending to be Revolutionary War soldiers. *These boys are at war! We're not a colony! Go away, British! Nobody wants you here!* These boys were Freedom Fighters too! I performed the part of a mythical American heroine who supposedly tromped through mud to help wounded soldiers defeat their colonizer, a woman scholars agree probably never existed. All the while, a much more real history played out in my family's split-level ranch.

A family was living in our basement right then, survivors of an American war nobody at school talked about, a war no children's school musical has been written for, a war not mythologized or commemorated in the US, a war forgotten (if it was ever known) by US citizens. Because it was never formally declared: the American government's secret war in Afghanistan against Soviet communism.

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Ever since World War II, the US government viewed Afghanistan as critical territory for winning the Cold War. In 1947, when my father was four years old in Kabul, President Truman spoke before US Congress, the podium heavy with microphones to capture his historic statement: "It must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures." This was Truman's freedom-speak way of announcing the US would shell out any resources necessary to stop communism's spread. Whatever it took to help people. And the strategy for Afghanistan back then was presents. Lots of presents. The Soviets sent presents too. Control of Afghanistan meant control of the planet. It wasn't time for sending weapons yet.

Afghan leaders played the competition to their nation's advantage. Balancing superpowers had long been part of the job. Between Safavids, Ottomans, Moghuls (empires way back in the day). Between the British and the Russians (in the 19<sup>th</sup> century). And now between the US and the Soviet Union in the twentieth century. During the first decades of my father's life, the game seemed to work. My father grew up in an Afghanistan transforming with American and Soviet gifts into a modern industrialized state. Canals dug. Rivers dammed. Bridges constructed. Roads paved. New fertilizer plants, new factories, new pipelines, new gas-extraction facilities. Airfields, airports, and Ariana Airlines. The longest tunnel in the world at the time, the Salang Tunnel, was blasted through the Hindu Kush by the Soviets, and American scientists tried to import the ecosystem of California's verdant agricultural belt into Afghanistan's Helmand Valley by rearranging the flow of water. All this bursting infrastructure needed management, so the West sent instructors to found new schools, to stand at new chalkboards in new classrooms, to teach young Afghan boys, including my father, science and math. The community of Afghan exiles in which I grew

up was full of engineers. My father became part of Afghanistan's new Cold War technocratic class.

There's a story Afghans tell about Afghanistan's President in those days. Daoud Khan, they say, liked to brag about lighting his American cigarettes with Soviet matches. The French photographers were in Afghanistan during this time, but no sign of the Cold War of Gifts made it into their romantic book. Neither did any mention of Daoud's assassination. Around the time my father returned to the United States to be with me and my mother, the Soviets became concerned about Daoud's smoking habits—too many US cigarettes without enough use of their matches—so they strengthened the Afghan Communist Party, which staged a coup in '78, three months before my third birthday, and murdered Daoud along with seventeen members of his family. That's when the CIA mobilized to support the mujahideen—I mean, the Freedom Fighters. No more bridges, dams, canals, schools, pipelines, or airports. It was time now for the US to support free peoples with weapons and Islamic education. Lots of weapons, lots of religion. A year and a half later, when I was four, opening Christmas presents under the tree in Marion—one-year-old Mohammed in Baba's arms, Mom pregnant with Fatima—the USSR invaded Afghanistan to prop up the new communist government, which faced widespread mutiny. (Turned out, imprisoning, torturing, and executing tens of thousands of civilians did not make the "people's revolution" popular.)

Sometimes bad stuff happened to my father's friends before they made it out. I overheard stories. Like the time I sat at the picnic table in our sunny front yard while the men drank tea and shuffled cards on the Afghan rug that my father had unrolled over the grass. I pretended to work in my puzzle book while I eavesdropped. One guy on the rug, another engineer, he'd gone to prison—or maybe it was worse than prison because it sounded like he was tortured by bad policemen. Something about fingernails ripped off or pins stuck under them—it seemed this was quite painful. A few days later I pulled a pin out of the red tomato-shaped pin cushion next to my mother's Singer and slipped the tip under my thumbnail. I gave a little nudge. *Oooowwwwwweeee sweet Allah Jesus!* I shivered, my crooked teeth clenched. And I'd barely poked! Next time I saw this guy at one of our Afghan parties, and Mom sent me out of the kitchen with fresh tea or fruit to deliver

to the men on the rug, I winced when he reached for a grape cluster off the platter. I was scared to see his mangled hands, but I guess I wasn't too scared because I took a long gawking stare. His fingernails looked normal—what a relief—like they'd healed alright, and he seemed okay. I knew he had a nice house, a nice job, a nice wife, and two kids whom I disliked because they acted bratty about their backyard swimming pool, yelping way too loud when they jumped into the deep end. Terrible things happen, I concluded, but then everything turns out fine and you can have a swimming pool and rotten-spoiled children in the future.

But the family in our basement—father, mother, three kids—they didn't have a pool. They didn't even have an apartment. They didn't have fancy Kabul degrees or educations. They didn't even speak English. And they didn't speak Persian. They spoke Pashto, a language I'd never heard before. They didn't wear regular pants or button-up shirts or polyester skirts like the other Afghans I knew. They floated in baggy cotton perhan tumban in neutral colors. They ignored the forks I placed beside their plates and ate rice with their hands. The mother covered her hair, and the father, hand on heart, bowed his head, thanking my father all the time. Their kids didn't brag and shout or jump in pools; their eyes, round like full moons, were filled with questions.

My father had begun volunteering with a Rochester nonprofit, and this family was the first of many we'd greet at the airport, the first of many I'd watch walk toward us down the jet-bridge at the gate. Fathers holding babies, mothers holding kids, everyone grey, tan, tired, drab, nothing in their hands except each other and a couple of thin bags. They knew no one in the States, except for us. The families stayed a few days, sometimes a few weeks, sleeping in a room my father furnished with cushions and pillows—until he found them apartments, until he collected enough donations of household items, until the men started English classes and found jobs, until Baba showed them how to parallel park and read traffic signs, until Mom showed the women how to push metal carts with wobbly wheels through sprawling supermarkets. The family in our basement, and all the families that came after, were refugees.

As Molly Pitcher, I performed my part as an American citizen, rehearsing legends of a righteous US on the elementary-school stage, while I lived

the other side of that myth, delivering tea and blankets to the shaken people downstairs, the indigenous displaced to make modern nations great.

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My father sat in his News Chair. He listened to war reports. He had a Masters in International Relations. He was proud of his grasp of global politics, but he never mentioned—did he know?—that Afghanistan had resources and the Soviet Union wanted them. Iron, chrome, uranium, copper, manganese, oil, natural gas. As one of their Cold War gifts, the Soviets had performed geological surveys. They knew where the minerals were and how to mine them. My father never mentioned—I don't think he realized for a long time—that the US never wanted the mujahideen to win. The CIA's goal was to ensnare the USSR in its own debilitating Vietnam War. "A Vietnamese quagmire," one US official called it. My father never mentioned—how could he have known?—that the US had been destabilizing his homeland, mobilizing religious extremists, before the Soviets even crossed the border. The "aim was not to oppose that invasion," one historian wrote, "but, if anything, to provoke it." And after that, to make sure the Soviet Union couldn't withdraw. I don't think my father knew—I certainly didn't know until decades later, and Dan never mentioned—that the US designed and published special Jihad Literacy primers for use in Afghan classrooms. While I sat cross-legged on the floor with my kindergarten class, singing my ABCs as my teacher pointed at colorful drawings of Apples, Balls, and Cats, the sons of Afghans in refugee camps were taught that **ا** was for Allah, **ت** for tofang (gun), and **ج** for jihad. In fifth grade, while I stood at Mrs. Bott's blackboard, chalking solutions to my first multiplication tables, American-made textbooks asked Afghan boys, "If a Russian is at a distance of 3200 meters from a mujahid, and that mujahid aims at the Russian's head, calculate how many seconds it will take for the bullet to strike the Russian's forehead?"

National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski would one day brag that he'd "started the mujahideen" with his boss, President Jimmy Carter: "What was more important in the view of world history? The possible creation of an armed, radical Islamic movement, or the fall of the Soviet empire? A few stirred-up Muslims or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the Cold War?"

While Afghan boys studied the alphabet of war, my mother and brother and sisters and I watched covert recordings of *Superman*, *South Pacific*, *Sound of Music*, episodes of Mr. T's *A Team*, *The Young & the Restless*, and so much more. And my father, in his News Chair, clenched the remote control in his hand, recording every Afghan update on Dan's evening news. Perhaps he thought he'd review his VHS archive of Afghan news later in life, reflect back on that short-lived war back in the day, a blip, so brief, a fleeting disturbance in the nation he described as "most beautiful place in world." He didn't know he was logging only the earliest skirmishes of a decades-long unraveling—a holocaust, some call it—that had only just begun.

In 1985, he was only on AFGHANISTAN TAPE #4.