

## *from Death in Persia, a novel*

Annemarie Schwarzenbach (translated from the German by Chris Schwarzenbach)

**Note:** The daughter of a wealthy Swiss textile family (her mother was a Von Bismarck and a Nazi), Annemarie Schwarzenbach rebelled against the rigidities of her background. A lesbian, a drug addict, and a passionate anti-fascist, she was, as Thomas Mann put it, “a ravaged angel.” She was also an extraordinarily talented writer and photographer, producing more than ten books, both fiction and nonfiction (most of which remain in print in German, from Lenos Verlag [<http://www.lenos.ch/>]), and nearly 3,000 photos (held in the Swiss National Archives).

Best friends to Thomas Mann’s children, Klaus and Erika, she has become, in the words of Amy Winter, curator at the Godwin-Ternbach Gallery, Queens College, “a cult figure in Europe similar to Frida Kahlo in America. She was an exquisite if tormented individual who held fascination for many of her contemporaries . . . Roger Martin du Gard . . . thanked her ‘for walking the earth with the beautiful face of an inconsolable angel’ . . . while others described her as a ‘noble being of captivating charm.’”



*Annemarie Schwarzenbach.  
Photograph by Ella Maillart.*

During a visit to the United States to photograph the effects of the Great Depression in the American South, she met Carson McCullers, who promptly fell in love with her. In 1941, McCullers would dedicate *Reflections in a Golden Eye* to her Swiss friend. Always struggling with depression and addiction, Annemarie died in 1942, after a fall from her bicycle in the Engadine. She was only thirty-four. Two films deal with her life and writings, the documentary, *A Swiss Rebel: Annemarie Schwarzenbach 1908–1942* (2000), and the feature, *Journey to Kafiristan* (2001).

Annemarie spent considerable time in the Middle East, and her *Death in Persia*, though labeled a novel, appears to straddle the divide between fiction and autobiography. Translator Chris Schwarzenbach, a part-time Helena resident, is Annemarie’s first cousin. He is dedicated to making her work more widely known in the English-speaking world.

### *Part I:*

#### **In Teheran**

The heat was so great in Teheran that it seemed to breed in the walls, as in earthen ovens, and to emerge in the evenings, saturating the narrow alleys and the new, wide, shadeless streets, preventing the entry of even a breath of night-cooled air. The gardens of Shimran stayed a little cooler. Leaving them, one was immediately assaulted by a white and shimmering light veiling, due to the heat, the rising mountain wall of the Tauschal in a light gray transparency. Veiled also was the far too white sky, and the plain below was cloaked in a

white haze. Just a month ago the plain of meadows, ploughed fields and fields of grain had still been light-green, yellow and earth-brown. Now it was a barren desert. And, beyond Teheran, where you find the ruins of the old city of Rhages, a dust cloud billowed up and down. There, the camel caravans stretched out on the road to Qom, bells still chiming. . . .

Qom is a holy city. If you are driving from Teheran to Isfahan you can see, across a broad expanse of water, its golden mosque, but the highway makes a detour around the city, so you cannot enter its bazaars and courtyards. Another golden dome can be seen in Shah-Abdul-Azim, an oasis village next to the ruins. But the most golden and holiest is the dome of Meshed, far to the Northwest, on the age-old road to Samarkand.

A few weeks ago the Shah forbade the wearing of the Kula-Pahlevi—named after himself—and recommended instead the wearing of European hats, but he then also allowed women to dispense with the Chador and even to appear unveiled in the streets. One heard about protests here and there, particularly in the holy cities. Although the Kula was a very unprepossessing, indeed ugly, visored cap making the wearer look like a tramp or criminal, it allowed the wearer, when praying, to turn the visor around to the back and then touch the ground with the forehead, without uncovering his head, as was officially required. That was simply not possible with a European felt hat, or a little straw cap, or a derby—and therefore the Mullahs thought their moment had arrived, and they preached the holy scriptures in secret meetings and also quite openly, in the mosque courtyards.

One read in the newspapers of how joyously the people greeted the civilizing innovation, and ministers and governors of the provinces gave dinner parties at which the invited wives were compelled to appear without the Chador. The multitude crowded around the entrance to see the spectacle of the arriving coaches from which the shamed and confused ladies descended. During the dinner the servants removed the invited guests' Kulas from the cloakroom. So, when the guests then departed, they had no choice but to put on one of the conveniently provided Farangi hats, so as not to return home bareheaded. That was indeed a perfectly planned, one might say Western, operation! Just the way Peter the Great had removed the beards from the Boyars! Those beards lasted longer in Persia; instead the Iranian diplomats may henceforth wear a bi-point, which the progress-frenzied West reintroduced only with the French Revolution, together with Human Rights: one can see from this which has greater longevity. The Magyars in Hungary are required to grow long mustaches, if they wish to sit in Parliament, and thoroughly wax the boldly up-twirled tips, and thus prove their patriotism. But where could the Shah have found a model for the introduction of the good, old Human Rights?

The Bazaar in Teheran had to remain closed for three days because of the Kula Pahlevi. Was there really gunfire in the holy mosque in Meshed? One hears that the soldiers refused to shoot at the sanctuary, and at those of their own faith, and that they had to be replaced with Armenians and Israelites. The number killed is mentioned.

Those were the hottest days of the Persian summer. Some of the gardens of Shimran, surrounded by walls that were too high

and choking with dense vegetation, became stifflingly hot, as in a greenhouse. Mosquitoes swarmed over rotting pools. I became ill with malaria for the second time. When later I first left the garden, the surroundings of Teheran seemed scorched. In the uniformly leprous-yellow of the city, the gardens lay like dark islands. A young officer was walking ahead of me on the country road, his shoes and puttees white with dust. He was carrying a handbag and a box with his helmet. I stopped and let him get in. He smiled, sweat running over his suntanned face. We drove through the trembling air, between the withered fields and through the small bazaar of Dezashub, which seemed pitch black except for the faces of the salesmen, the children, the women's white shawls, shining like patches of light. The square in Taedshrish was large and empty, except for the coaches and their thin white horses, standing as if drugged, under the sun. I watched the officer walk away, through the empty square saturated with dust, and through the vibrating light. A policeman showed up at the other end of the square and signaled with his arm, apparently to me. But surely he didn't expect me to respond. In this heat everyone had enough to do just looking out for himself. . . .

Next I turn through the large gateway into a garden. Darkness and shadow roll over me like waves. A scent of coolness, earth, foliage; an avenue and the root of a tree leaps up ahead, and, if one tries to enter the curve too fast, bumps the car to the side. Now in third gear, up to the house! I park the car in the shade, get out, walk across the terrace, past the double doors made of fine mosquito screen. A piano can be heard, coming from the living room. I think: Zaddika is still practicing. Nothing has changed here—and I breathe more easily, relieved of the nameless fear, the result of the long drive through the

open countryside, exhausted and transformed by the relentless sun.

Zaddika is thirteen years old. She is one of the most beautiful creations in this world. A band, like a hoop around her forehead, holds her dark hair back: a combination of an old-fashioned girl's haircut and a Nubian small child's head. Large, soft, gold-colored animal eyes in a delicate brown face. Her nose starts out wide, as if Zaddika always breathes with open nostrils. She sniffs eagerly and her voice is tender, flattering, with child-like enchantment. Like the little heads of Echnaton's perfect and charming daughters, Zaddika also has a bud-like, slightly opened and protruding mouth, a chin full of child-like and defiant resolve, a very thin throat, a neck, curved as if a little proud or in light sorrow. She is more child-like than her years, yet serious, attentive, reserved and affectionate far beyond her years. Each encounter with her brings renewed delight.

Zaddika's oldest sister is lying next to me under a large tree. They have brought us cushions and ice-cold water in frosted glasses.

"I am leaving," I say.

"To your English friends?"

"Yes. To their camp in the Lahr valley."

"When?"

"Tomorrow."

We are silent for a while. One hears calls from the tennis court, and the dry impact of the balls.

“And if you get fever again up there?”

I looked at her. She was resting on her elbows, and her hair fell like a shield over her face. She was beautiful, but she did not resemble her little sister at all. I thought that she had Circassian or Arabian blood. Her face, much too pale, was drawn from exhaustion and her eyes had a feverish glitter.

“And you?” I asked.

“I don’t keep track of it any more,” she said. “I always have a temperature. But my case is different. Nothing can be done about it.”

“The climate is bad for you,” I said.

She shrugged her shoulders. “For all of us,” she said, “but look, I can’t climb up into the Lahr valley! I wouldn’t survive the trip.”

“Shouldn’t one try it at least?”

She slid her hand gently across my mouth. “Forget it,” she said, “you will feel great up there!”

### **Climb up into the Happy Valley**

The mules were waiting in Abala. It was eight o’clock in the morning; the sun slid down the pass towards us. The road from Teheran was

behind us. It ran from Teheran through the stifling desert plain; then onwards into the congealed sea of hills, up and down through the yellow dunes, up to the top of the pass, at which point it drops precipitously, with frightening curves, into the Rudahand basin. Two hours in the car, but now everything was far away, now everything vanished—a new day lay ahead.

At first our trail took us through a valley, nestled between hills. The green banks of the brook seem to overflow, as over the edges of a basket, until they met the descending hillsides. Eventually we came to a grove of nut-trees, soon after that, grapes.

Then the pass started. I watched Claude lead off, his pith helmet pushed into his neck. The mules patiently dug their little hooves into the scree. The pass took us up high; into wind and racing clouds. And once up there we could look back, over the distant plain, and watch the clouds, dissipating, leaving only the sky and the barren earth, in a suffocating embrace. We turned and looked ahead: —there, on the far side of a valley, lay one of those extraordinary mountain ranges, consisting of sand, and only sand, steep, broad, with perpetually rippling slopes, reminiscent of snow slopes. Any minute a slab could come loose and plunge into the valley, or the uncanny rippling might coalesce into an avalanche. Crowning the sand slopes, a silver-colored rock band stood motionless in the blue sky.

From the top of the pass we climbed down into the valley, which was almost an abyss between two mountain ranges. It was a dead valley, far removed from the earth, far removed from plants and trees. Instead, it was all stone, saturated with gripping heat. Gray vipers,

gray lizards, motionless and coiled up delicately: —only their eyes were alive, black pinheads and a little tongue. . . .

Even in the dead moon-valleys there must somewhere be a spring. What we found was a circular depression; within it a quiet water surface, stirred only faintly by the entry of a tiny stream of water, as by a bird's beating heart.

We drank, resting on our hands. The mules stood next to us, half asleep, and sheep waited in a circle on the stony slope, all heads down and turned inward, seeking their own shadow. They were waiting for the end of the day.

We started the climb to the second pass, like sleep walkers. Not even the drivers were singing now, even though their song had been surprisingly similar to the sleepy pace of the mule caravans in the midday mountain wind.

We are far above the tree line. Still further up, cliffs plunge from the sky, like seashore cliffs into the sea. And suddenly we see camels, like legendary animals, their stretched-out necks strangely parallel to the narrow grass bands along which they are striding. They pluck grass and raise again the long necks, in rhythmical cadence. They stand still above, and are so big and threatening that we fear they are about to fall heavily through the sky down upon us. Instead they trot downward with swaying humps and dangling legs, and we meet, exactly at the top of the pass. And there, behind them, the cone of the Demawend emerges, an enchanted image.

We now proceed, always toward the Demawend. The pass drops gently, leading through a stone ravine and runs out into a broad valley. It takes us an hour to traverse it; the Demawend at its end does not become smaller; it is like a moon, a smooth cone seen from any side. In winter it is white: a supernatural cloud-white. Now in July it is striped, like a zebra. Above you can see the gentle plume of sulfur vapors emerging from the age-old crater of the Bikni-Mountain. The Assyrians gave it that name, as they recorded that a new people, the "Distant Meder," had spread out up to its base. But they did not know that it had been a fire-spewer. Now extinct since three thousand years! Since time immemorial!

This wide basin is not yet the Lahr Valley. Many valleys, some with names, others nameless, with foaming brooks, end up here—upstream they merge into the blue mountain ranges. Nomads are camping in the green grassy bottomland through which we are passing. Their black goat-hair tents are the same as in the deserts of Mesopotamia, the Kurdish mountains, in fertile Syria, in Palestine. Ahead of me I look at the route which I took through the old lands of Asia Minor. . . . at its end I find this valley floor! Burnt, yellow! The black goats and yellow cattle move across it, a fluffy mass, and the sound of their thousand pattering feet is like a rustling wind. A different rustle comes from the several thousand scarecrows—one is walking over the dry stalks, over their parchment wings and bodies, over living matter, reminiscent of a widening conflagration. . . .

My mule stumbles and falls. The Pustin slides down over the neck; I leap to my feet. Was I asleep? The drivers curse. We go on. . . .

Eight hours have passed when we finally reach the rim of the depression, and a narrow pass, a gateway between rock outcroppings. Behind the bend in the trail the white tents await us.

### **The white tents of our camp**

The white tents are lined up on the grassy banks of the river. They come from India and are called “Swiss huts,” and have a double construction, with a sunroof over the smaller interior which is lined with a stretched yellow material. This creates a sort of shady porch in front of every tent, where one can sit in the mornings with books and writing materials, and the river flows by our feet, rapidly and peacefully, down the valley. And down there, at its end, the steady, brilliant pyramid of the Demawend rises. On both sides of the valley: the gray, rocky mountain range, gray: so light that it is almost silvery, and above that, to the south, the dark blue sky, spotless and incredibly bright.

In the afternoons the sun causes the valley to look white. Towards five o'clock, when the shadows become longer, we retrieve the fishing rods from behind the tents. The water is still silvery, soon it will be black. It is still a pleasure to undress and climb into the river and to let oneself be carried away by the strong current. One must cling tightly to the round, smooth stones. . . . There is always a wind on the riverbanks; one dries quickly, feels the sun's heat on the nape of the neck, and shivers at the same time. . . .

The *Tschaikhane*<sup>1</sup> is on the other riverbank, opposite our camp, on top of a gravel mound. Built like our huts in the Alps, on the highest sheep pastures along the Julier pass, the rounded stones are placed

under the protection of the slope, so that roof and hillside merge. That's where the Afje pass ends, an old mule-track leading from the valley of the Djarder Rud into the Lahr, and from here, around the Demawend, down to Mazanderan.

The sound of that name is wonderful: Mazanderan, a land of the tropics on the Caspian Sea. Jungle, primeval forest, humidity, malaria are in command down there. In Gilan, in the province to the west, they drain the rice fields and the Chinese teach the malaria-peasants the age-old art of cultivating tea. The Russian caviar fishermen live in the small coastal villages.

To the east the steppes begin, grazing lands for the Pendinic and Theke-Turkmenic people, with their red- and camels-hair-colored carpets, their tent rows, their saddlebags. They breed horses; in the fall seven-year old boys ride them in the great horse races. The Russian railroad begins in the port of Krasnowodsk, a lonely thread of rails running through the steppes: to Merw, Buckhara, Samarkand. And there we are already near the curly-haired Tadjiks, living up there in the Pamir in their soviet state. Asia. . . .

From our tents we watch the activities on the other side of the river. Mule caravans come around the corner, with jingling bells and driver calls. Others are coming up the valley, and one sees them from a long way off. Donkeys and riders are coming and sometimes camels. Caravans, nomads, soldiers. The soldiers, slit-eyed and deeply tanned, sit in their saddles, stretch their legs forward and

<sup>1</sup> *Tschaikhane*: a caravansary

gallop, with flying reins. All stop in front of the Tschalkane; many spend the night there.

The animals graze along the river where the grass is abundant or they roll in the sandy banks. We see over there in the darkness a red fire. It fills the doorway of the Khan, where men sit around the samovar.

### **Memory of Moscow**

Beginning of August. One year ago I was in Russia. It was hot, the streets of Moscow were burning, white clouds were always in the sky, and the aviators were cruising over the airport, tumbling and recovering, like sailors before the outbreak of the storm. The parachute jumps excited the young people; the jumpers threw themselves into the dizzying void from five thousand, six thousand meters, falling like stones and singing, to avoid being killed by the air pressure. Scraps of their heroic songs reached us. Then, already very low, already down to the silver tips of the radio towers, they yanked the parachute open and descended slowly to the ground. How long did it take? Minutes? One watched them fall, terribly slowly, and then just floating. All in a fraction of a second. A seventeen-year-old working girl jumped from three thousand meters and was killed. Later she was found, her hand clutching the shoulder harness instead of the ripcord, which should have opened the parachute. Would she be declared “heroine of the people”?

The young people were driven with ambition, filling the streets in white overalls or in the oily uniforms of the metro workers. Until late at night. On “youth day” it took ten hours for all of them to move across the Red Square. And they crowded around the entryway to

the Hall of Congress and in the corridors of the old house of the aristocrats, to get a glimpse of the poets. First Gorki, then all the younger ones. Books were asked of the poets: about Russia, about the sailors, the fliers, the scientists, metro workers, Kolchese workers—about the women and the school children, the parachute heroes. One might well become alarmed about the art. . . .

Malraux asked me: “What is it you seek in Persia?” He knew the ruins of the city Rhages. He also knew about the passion for excavating. He had thought deeply about human passions and could see through them, and he was inclined to hold them in little esteem, except for what ultimately survived: suffering. He asked: “Just because of the name? Just to be *far away*?” And I thought of Persia’s terrible sadness. . . .

At that time I was often together with Eva. Her husband was a party member and spoke sternly and passionately about the need, also in modern times and especially today, to fight for a community which would be the society of the future.

He called himself Comrade (Tovariche), and yet his loneliness among them was much as a man with exceptional gifts might stand apart and still yearn to be accepted. He had been a Jesuit apprentice, had rejected the “credo quia absurdum,” bitterly disappointed. He had given up lofty spiritual satisfactions and had refused the compromise which accepts the shortcomings of the world by condemning them, rejecting the compromise which holds the obedience of the suffering masses while rejecting their claim to happiness in the afterlife, and is even able to misdirect the revolutionary impulse of youth (always

a guarantor of humanity's quest for progress), into the service of the ruling power, by military discipline and idealizing their sacrifice. He had rejected all of that, as he became aware of the severity and urgency of the distress of his companions, and of the abuses to which they were subjected, and to their increasing resistance and suffering.

"Have you read Spengler's years of decision?" he asked. "So much wisdom, so much foresight . . . but why does this 'brave pessimist' side so unequivocally with the dying world? Why does he hate everything that is new and progressive, everything having labor-pains and growing-up problems? The workers, the part of the world which is Asia, its populations awakening to an awareness of history. Why should the ever-so-constitutional monarchies, unable, despite their officer corps, to prevent the revolutionary change in history, get preference over all innovation? He is rigidly, nauseatingly and subserviently dedicated to that part of the world which rules. We, on the other hand, a generation destined to fight and to die, wish at least to be on the side of the future."

He worked day and night. Exhausted, emaciated, smoldering with an inner fire, he resembled a militant monk, and at times, an intellectual. He was dressed in bourgeois clothes, carelessly wore dark blue suits, a tie. His wife was delicate, blond, quiet, consumed by homesickness. She had grown up in a farmstead in Holstein, and she should have spent her whole life there, with younger brothers, and busy with making fruit preserves, baking, chickens and a huge flower garden. Her husband now would go to Siberia for six months, and that really frightened her.

"What do you expect," he said (the three of us were having dinner), "a revolution is not for fun, and is not created at a convention for poets."

"Couldn't you take me along?"

"Impossible. You would only get in my way."

"Then maybe—in Switzerland?" she asked shyly.

"In Switzerland," he repeated angrily, "to Ascona, to friends—why not straight to Germany? Are you serious?"

She was crying.

He turned to me. "Couldn't you explain it to Eva?" he asked. "I'd like her to stay in Moscow and become a worker in a weaving mill. Try to explain it to her: my responsibility to my comrades won't permit me to have a wife who travels to Ascona for pleasure. I must have a wife who contributes her share."

"She is homesick," I said.

"And you?" he asked roughly, "maybe you're not homesick? Why did you choose an uncomfortable life?"

He left, to some kind of night meeting. Eva and I remained seated at the table. She's thinking of a meadow in Holstein, I thought, with spotted cows and red currant bushes. And I: of a lakeshore at home. . . .

Eva had stopped crying.

One day I found myself, alone, on a small Russian steamer on the Caspian Sea, and the next evening we landed at Pahlevi. It was raining. A white-tailed eagle was squatting on the rain-whipped sand and was gazing across the sea. It was September, the summer was over, and Russia too was behind me: I watched the vineyards, the green hills of Georgia disappear and then came the semidesert between Tiflis and Baku, the return of Asia, and far away a camel caravan track and the first camels. . . .

The Grusinian Military Highway is now already nothing but a memory. Gorges with cool, rushing waters and high rocky ranges behind them, then, suddenly appearing out of the clouds in the blue sky, the Kasbek's pointed summit. The summer evenings in the villages. . . .

A friend met me in Pahlevi. We drove along the beach, so near the water that occasionally a wave rolled under the wheels and soared high into the air like a flag. The wet sand was heavy, like snow. Darkness descended upon us, and behind the dunes lay the jungles of Rescht, in fog and twilight. Fires glowed through the fog, in open huts where the farmers of Gilan were sitting under thick straw roofs—one could see their ghostly pale faces next to the reddish lamps. The wind was blowing through the trees which had become parched during the summer and were now shedding their leaves. The bazaar alleys in the villages were illuminated: a lamp was burning in every store, the bakers stood in the glow of their round ovens and threw the lightly-browned flat bread on a cloth to dry. One could

buy melons and eggplant, violet and dark green, and hundreds of vegetables and spices. There was Vodka and Arak in white bottles. The merchants squatted quietly behind their baskets.

We spent the night in Rescht. The next day it didn't stop raining. We drove through the valley of Sefid Rud and up the high Kaswin pass. Beyond it lay the plain with the city of Kaswin in an oasis. Behind its colored gate the plain stretched out, down to Teheran.

#### **End of the world—**

Sometimes we call this valley “end of the world,” because it is well above other high earthly plateaus and we cannot be led any higher, except by the super-terrestrial, super-human, something that touches the sky,—the smooth cone of the giant. He blocks the exit from the valley. Yet when one moves up closer to his snow-striped body, even though remote as the moon, he remains an overpowering presence.

I said “exit from the valley”;—it must therefore lead down to somewhere. Its water must flow down to somewhere. The shepherds point with their hand: to the right, around the foot of the Demawend. (How big might his foot be? Down there where the water flows, might there still be fire and molten rock?)

Indeed, the valley leads down to Mazanderan, at first through green alpine meadows, then through woods that soon become a primeval forest. Bears, wolves, panthers and wildcats live there. Then come the tropical jungles, the dunes, and finally the Caspian Sea, gray between wind-ruffled patches. The villages are bewitched, animal skulls bleaching on the slopes, surrounded by their territory in a windless

silence. Yet, protected by the dunes that wall them off from the sea, one can imagine the restless murmuring of the waves and the cries of the birds, migrating to the easterly steppes.

Where the river narrows and divides into different branches the Lahr Valley gets lost among the black crags. Then its branches emerge again into a plain, a wide basin, where nomads have pitched their tents. In the evening the water lies still, mirroring, like silver veins in the shaded grassland. The cliffs tower behind. Oh, to climb up there! To look beyond the roof of Asia, with its rim of mountains and precipices! Down the pass of the old woman, to the blue of the Persian Gulf, to the narrow streets of its harbors: Bender Bushire and Bender Abbas. That's where you find the decaying consulates of the Europeans. An English civil servant, left behind, enters the bar of a harbor hotel in the evening, around seven, and sits among the smugglers and port police in a white dinner jacket, sipping his gin-and-vermouth. It's hot down there. The ships entering the port have purple sails. Sometimes one sees a fire on the black horizon and thinks it is a burning ship. But it is only the rising moon. Sometimes the coast, languishing in the heat, is enveloped by a sandstorm. The same storm had torn through India four hours earlier, was observed in Karachi, flew across the sand deserts of Baluchistan. Now the sand covers the houses of Bushire, like snow. Outside, the Bakhtiari wait in their mountains, and the Arabs stand by, their Kufija tied over their mouths and ears. Sand-spouts wander around, erratically and hurriedly, through the night; entire hills are blown away. Suffocated animals lie in their tracks. Gazelles with their beautiful eyes broken. . . .

“And he viewed the beauty of the world,”—outside, from the last

street opening to the sea, you can see the island Ormus, once a jewel defended by the Portuguese. The ruins, ashlar in thick brush, are reminiscent of fortresses and churches in Mexico.

Far away from there, in the high plains and surrounded by mountains, the columns of Persepolis still stand, like ships under sail. The royal terrace rises to half the height of the mountains, an expanse of ruins, testimony to a perished nobility. Sometimes it is covered with snow. Further up, over the graves of the Achaimenides, there are herds of ibex and mufflons with thickset bodies and strong horns, twisted backwards like curls. At night, watchmen live in the tombs, and the light of their torches sliding down the high walls brings the reliefs to life: ghostly processions of hunters, shepherds, bearers of tribute, kings.

The great shepherd dogs and woolly herds of sheep sleep in the plain below, bathed in white moonlight. A modest Tschaikhane of unbaked clay stands on the road to Schiras; trucks and stacks of gasoline drums crowd the courtyard. The chauffeurs, workers and one opium smoker are seated there as well. They look up toward the Terrace where, at one time, the palaces of their kings could be seen. Alexander, drunk after a festive meal and in love with the treasures of Darius' library even while hating them, had the palaces set on fire. It was like the end of the world, as the roof, carried by the gigantic columns and animal bodies, started to collapse. Smoke and flames were picked up by the mountain wind and carried, as a dark cloud, across the terrace and out over the plain. The youthful king was delighted by the spectacle of destruction as his soldiers, in uncouth greed, hurried like shadows through the flames, robbing and snatching what they could, only to

be struck down by the collapsing roof.

The inhabitants of this country are so terribly lonely! You would have to wear seven-mile boots to get to one village from another; and what separates them is desert, rock, some kind of wasteland. In the thirteenth century the Mongols arrived from the plains of Asia and overwhelmed the Persian cities. Arab writers narrate that in the blooming city of Rhages one million people were killed. In the mountain village of Demawend the peasants fled to the Mosque. It did not help them; the Mongolian riders stormed through the streets and destroyed everything. They even found Alamuth, the castle of “the old man of the mountain,” hidden away on a cliff from where the Ismaelite would send his hashish-eating youths down as assassins to carry out his murder contracts; all the way across the desert, as far away as the crusader town Antioch, as far away as Egypt. The castle Alamuth had already become a legend; the only way up the cliff was on rope ladders. But the Mongols found the way and obliterated it.

In those days people fled from the flat lands into the mountains—as they did when the sword of Islam overran Persia—and now in the most remote valleys the villages have Persian names, and their inhabitants had neither mixed with Arabs nor with Mongols. High mountain ranges separated them from the others. In the plains it is the empty semi-deserts, rolling moonscapes, that undulate under the wandering light, like the sea. And the road runs straight across them, endlessly straight. On the top of a hill, far to the south, one finds the city Jāzdi Chast. It rings the hilltop, house next to house, like a castle, and casts the shadow of its fantastic silhouette down onto the plains. But the houses are dilapidated, the masonry crumbles between the

wooden beams, and the wind whistles through the empty windows. And, below the town, sheep graze on a broad, light-green strip of grass running around the cliff, providing a touch of charm.

Those are the people from the villages, the high plains, the dunes and swamps of Mazanderan, from the port cities on the gulf. Those are the nomads from the Bakhtiari range, the shepherds, the horse breeders in the Turkmen steppes, the caviar fishermen. Those are the farmers and traders in Basar and the craftsmen: bakers and coppersmiths, lacquer artists, carpet washers. Those are the caravan drivers, the truck drivers, the workers and soldiers, the beggars. I once asked in Moscow why the communists did not propagandize Iran. The Persians must be the poorest of all people. . . .

“It’s impossible,” they told me, “the people there are not cohesive, no common consciousness. They are so alone that they are not even aware of their poverty and misery. They don’t even know that life can be better and happier; they think god has hit every individual with his misfortune.”

But much lonelier than Jāzdi Chast and the lonely mountain villages and the tents of the nomads of the steppes, much lonelier still is the Lahr Valley: already superhuman, like being above a treeline. Even the nomads and donkey drivers who pass through the valley in the summer leave it after a few months, and then the winter snow covers it over.