

On being both (and neither)

Marjorie Lotfi

'You have your whiteness to fall back on,' a friend said to me recently. I wanted to point on a map to where both sides of her family had lived for generations as the thing *she* could fall back on, but I knew that her family – like mine – had left that home in a hurry decades ago because of political unrest. Instead, I just smiled.

I grew up in Iran, with a blonde American mother and Iranian father. My earliest memories are of my mother learning Farsi and navigating the practicalities of her new life. She was a fast learner and settled in quickly, teaching English at the University of Tehran. When the Iranian Revolution made it dangerous for her stay, she resisted leaving because the government wouldn't let my father out. In the end, she and my brother and I got lucky and caught a flight out after the airports had shut down.

When we arrived in the US, I'd had enough of being the child of a foreigner. I didn't want to be Marjorie Lotfi, half one thing and half another. I wanted an ordinary

surname like Johnson, with a run-of-the-mill first name – preferably Cindy – to match. If the genie of childhood fairy tales had appeared from a lamp and granted me three wishes, Cindy Johnson would've been my first.

In those first years, I had another fantasy: that one morning I'd wake up and find I'd somehow swapped bodies with one of my 'American' friends. I imagined lying on her bed, hearing her mother shouting up the stairs to hurry up and get ready for school. I'd choose from her clothes for the day, guessing which toothbrush was hers in the family bathroom. Then I'd do my best to play along with the family routine, speculating about what she usually ate for breakfast and which seat at the table was hers, all the while remembering to say as little as possible, so I didn't give myself away as Marjorie disguised as their daughter. I pictured the other child in this daydream trying to convince my parents that even though she looked and sounded *exactly* like me, she was really that other child, and wanted to be taken home.

Despite all the evidence proffered to the contrary, in this fantasy I would never admit that I was actually Marjorie and, as I let it play out over and over again, it turns out that I never needed to – both sets of parents would eventually tell us to knock off the elaborate hoax. The other child, stuck in my body (and now, my life) would cry at the injustice of it all, but what could she do? What parent needed more proof that I was their child than a blonde head of hair, their own sky-blue eyes looking back at them, a smattering of the family freckles?

Don't misunderstand me; I loved my parents and brother. I just wanted to be exactly like everyone, or even someone, around me (and in that desire, I know now that I *was* like every other child). My problem was that there wasn't anyone else that I *was* actually like, including my parents – I wasn't American or Iranian. Even during the Iranian hostage crisis of 1981, when no one in the US wanted to be labelled Iranian (and we all became Persians overnight), I'd have preferred being an Iranian to my halfway house. Around that time, given the bullying at school, my parents decided that we'd suddenly become an entirely American family, which meant no more Farsi at home, only American foods, and no reference to the life we'd left behind. If only it had been that easy.

One Halloween during those same years, I insisted that I wanted to dress up as Barbie, and somehow wheedled my way into a shop-bought costume, a plastic sheet with a classic Barbie dress printed on it. When the day arrived, my mother was embarrassed to let me go trick-or-treating in the shabby outfit. She doctored it at the last minute by sewing a bit of pleated blue tulle around the waist to add a real, three-dimensional skirt, under which you could see the printed dress on the plastic. I had no choice but to let her make these alterations, though again this left me looking only partly like the other children. Perhaps as a trade-off, I convinced her to let me wear a blonde wig and was even allowed powder blue eyeshadow. In pictures of that night, the wig and makeup make my skin look even darker than usual; I'm a brown girl in a white girl's blonde wig and makeup, pretending.

Over the next four decades, I've become more adept at downplaying my difference from others, on both sides. Instead, I'm often on the boundary line of any circle, sometimes taking part but mostly observing, almost waiting to be asked to step outside. However I'm passing, I know that I'm passing.

'Lotfi is a quiet and faithful witness. There is no self-indulgent introspection. She insists on seeing what she sees,' Carol Rumens wrote about my poetry in *The Guardian*. It's no surprise that I've leaned into the observational quality of poetry. The 'showing not telling' narrative serves as a kind of pact with my reader: I'll tell you what I see, and you decide what you'll do with it. I know that to write like this is a kind of privilege, earned in part by having lived through conflict and displacement. Some might call it trauma, but I learned to watch events happening around me while they were happening to me – perhaps the daydreams in the years that followed were a natural continuation or consequence of that learned skill.

These days, I won't often look horror in the eye and name it. The memoir I'm writing about my childhood comes most naturally in the third person; I don't need to own those experiences if I write about them as someone else's, another child's. In that way, perhaps being half Iranian and half American while living in Britain – on the inside and outside of three cultures – has suited me well. When I turn the lens on my life, it's a way of simultaneously looking at and away from myself; I see someone I know and someone still foreign to me. Not one thing or another, just herself.

Marjorie Lotfi

Marjorie Lotfi was born in New Orleans, moved to Tehran as a baby with her American mother and Persian father, and fled to the US during the Iranian Revolution. She settled in the UK in 1999 and has lived in Edinburgh since 2005. Marjorie was joint winner of the inaugural James Berry Poetry Prize in 2021, and her first book-length collection *The Wrong Person to Ask* (Bloodaxe Books, 2023) is a Poetry Book Society Special Commendation.

Marjorie is one of the British Council/UNESCO Cities of Literature 2024 ILX 10 'Rising Stars of UK Writing'. Her poetry has won awards, been published widely in journals and anthologies in the UK and US (including *The Rialto*, *Gutter*, *Ambit*, *Magma*, *Rattle* and *Staying Human*) and been included in *Best Scottish Poems 2021* and in London's 'Poems on the Underground'. She's currently finishing a memoir about her interrupted childhood in Iran and subsequent arrival in a small town in Ohio.

A former corporate lawyer in New York and London, Marjorie later founded the Belonging Project (considering the experiences of refugees with over 1,500 participants) and is now Co-Founder and Director of Open Book, which runs over 1,000 shared reading and creative writing workshops each year across Scotland.

A recording of this text can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

© Marjorie Lotfi