

## REORIENT

REORIENT is a magazine celebrating contemporary Middle Eastern arts and culture

[About](#)

[Contributors](#)

[Contact](#)

[Totes!](#)

[Tees](#)

[Advertise](#)

[Search](#) 🔍



MARCH 14, 2016

## Seeing Red

By Joobin Bekhrad

[Like](#) 48

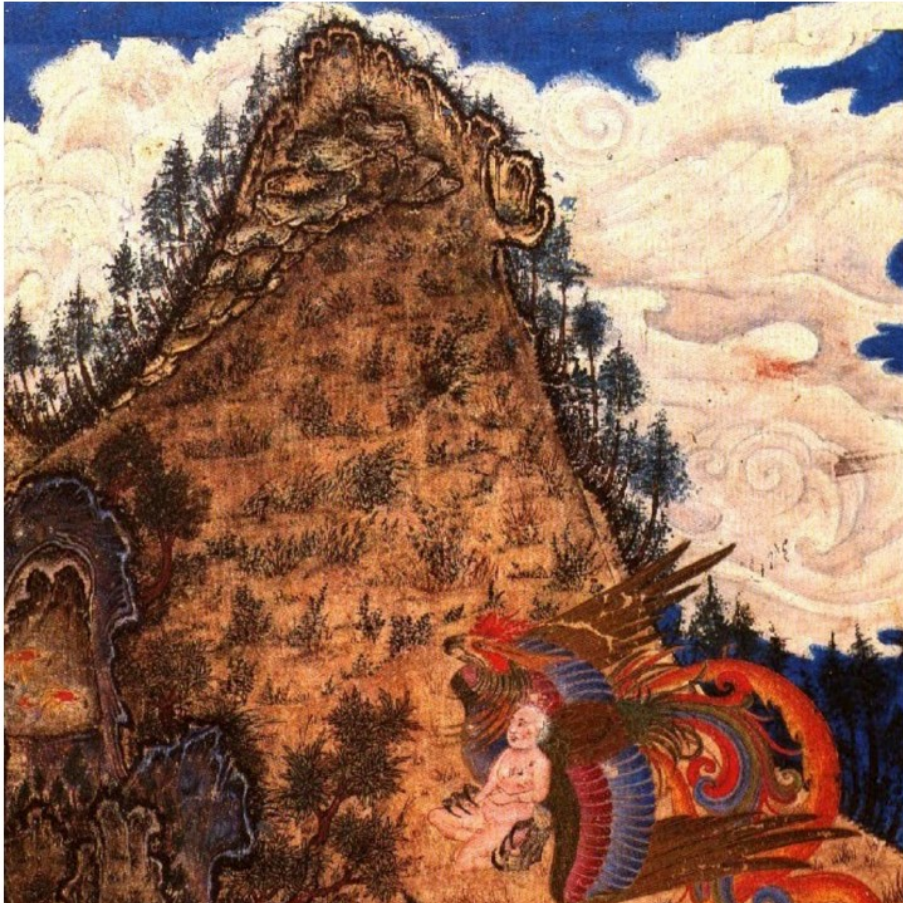
[Tweet](#)

[tumblr](#)

Nomad. Rocker. Lover. The story of Reza Derakshani, an Iranian.

He stood there, motionless before the rusty microphone, not knowing what to do with his tanned, wiry hands. A haze of smoke and flowers lingered about in the air, and, in the corner of his eye, he could make out the longhair delicately rolling a joint and smacking his lips. He didn't make too much of it at first, just as he hadn't recognised the fellow in the corner after the gig at the boozier in town. It came on like a slow burn, like some supernal, numbing high, inching its way up his knees towards his damp navel and rumbling viscera. A spate of blurred images rushed past his eyes: shining leather trousers, a woman from the city of angels, drawn-out afternoons spun away by hot, scratched vinyl, the glow of blood-red pomegranates. It was then that it hit him: how had he

come all that way, from the sleepy village of Sangsar, to be where he was at that particular moment in time? His hands moist, he awkwardly grappled with the forlorn microphone before clearing his throat with a curt cough. Once, many moons ago, an American poet had howled into the same hunk of metal before him, telling tales of loneliness, bacchanalia, and rapture; but as soon as he opened his mouth, the phantom of old Jim fizzled away into those folds of smoke, out of which appeared that of the bard of Shiraz, kindler of hearts. He could feel his knees again; with eyes closed, looking inwards towards a warm, lambent space, he remembered what the stars looked like atop the Alborz mountains.



The mythical *Simorgh* carrying Zal to the peak of Mount Damavand (from a 1370 edition of Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* (Book of Kings))

He remembered the stars, and days of insouciance and idleness on the outskirts of Damavand near bustling Tehran. It was in his blood, and written on his forehead: as an Iranian, he would always be a nomadic soul on the move. Come summertime, his family would head towards the pastures of idyllic Damavand, while in the wintertime, they would make for Sangsar in the east. There, in Damavand, were only fields of flowers, black tents, snowy mountaintops, and plains of grass on which the sheep would feed; for the sheep, as they all knew, *must live*. In the shadow of his father, who appeared to his child's eye a 'Persian cowboy', he found confidantes in stray dogs, and atop wild horses could espy in the silence of dawn the peak of mighty Damavand itself. Only later, as with the microphone, would he realise the significance of it all - the horses, the ancient tongue of the nomads, the state of constant movement; he was continuing in the tradition of his ancient Iranian forebears, who had set out from the frozen hell of the steppes towards the fertile realm they would come to revere as *Aryanam Vaejah*.



A golden model of an Achaemenid (ancient Iranian) chariot discovered in the Oxus Treasure in present-day Tajikistan (5th - 4th century B.C.)

Even then, riding astride rufous mares in what seemed to him to be the middle of nowhere, he knew he wanted to be an artist. Perhaps it had to do with his picturesque surroundings; or, it may have been a desire born out of necessity. His father, soon enough, found himself penniless; and, as the sheep needed to survive, so did the boys. His older brother, an artist and a teacher, set an example for him. It was also then discovered that the lad had a voice, which, during those hot, dusty evenings in the countryside, reduced the womenfolk to tears. By the age of 12, the young boy was not only painting reproductions of European masterpieces commissioned by clients, but also works of his own that surprised even him. By this time, his family had moved again, albeit to less bucolic environs. Initially, they settled in perfumed Neyshapur, but later moved to Sabzevar, and finally, Semnan. There, beneath the stifling sun of Semnan, he felt like Van Gogh himself, as he whiled away lazy afternoons painting the ancient landscape.



Sangsar in the mid-20th century

The next move he would make would not be elsewhere in the Iranian heartland, but on, as he and those around him used to call it, 'the other side of the water'. After finishing his BA degree at Tehran University, he decided to pursue higher education in Los Angeles; but, unluckily, he found himself in the wrong place at the wrong time. Back home, a million miles away, there had been a revolution. The King of Kings had flown away in a white jet plane, and in his stead had come the man on the moon in flowing, chestnut robes. Things were getting heavy, and fast. Before he knew it, there would be a hostage crisis involving his country and the land of milk and honey, and soon afterwards, a war, which, although instigated by Saddam Hussein, would degenerate into one between the *world* and Iran. The ones they would call 'fearless Iranians from hell' would walk on mines and throw themselves onto tanks, while their star-spangled brethren would enjoy life as *personae non grata*. Though his homeland would later be in vogue again, things hadn't always been so *gol-o-bolboli* in America. Iranians simply weren't appreciated, he found, even in cultural centres like New York City. Though in the thick of his studies, he ditched university and did perhaps the only other thing he knew: he made a move. And so, during the first year of the Iran-Iraq War, with Khorramshahr ravaged and awash in its own blood, he left sunny Los Angeles for Tehran.



An anti-Iranian demonstration in Washington, D.C., 1979 (photo by Marion S. Trikosko; courtesy the Library of Congress)

The stint in the Iranian capital was short-lived. Feeling again the urge to ramble, he, along with his wife and son, left for Los Angeles. This time, the move was not as linear; en route to the States, the family stopped over in Italy, the only place where they could obtain a 15-day travel visa; but, instead of staying for two weeks, they ultimately ended up living in Italy for a year with almost nothing and not even a place to rent. In the spirit of Khayyam, the cupbearer was nevertheless called, and the wine poured forth; *why lament tomorrow's misfortunes today?* Eventually, the trio made it to Los Angeles, although only six months later, he would set out again for Italy. New York City would become the closest thing to 'home' for an uncharacteristically long 16 years, even though he'd move yet again, and again, and again. Down and out in the Big Apple, he couldn't even afford to rent a studio, as a result of which he began to focus more on his music. All he needed to record was his *tar*, a small room, and a heart brimming with the blues; and boy, did he have the blues.



Exiled Kings and Queens (courtesy the artist)

He had always liked the shape of that thing, the *tar*. Oblong and smooth, he enjoyed the feeling of pressing its round bowl against his stomach, no matter however much it was prone to slip down his thighs. At an early age, he had made a connection with the masters of classical Persian music, and soon began connecting the dots. In his teenage mind, the difference between Qamar-ol-Molook Vaziri and Janis Joplin was only superficial. They were the same emotions, the same feelings that were being expressed; it was only the outward form of the music that struck his ear as different. *What of the husk? The kernel seize!* After *tar* lessons, during which he would study the *radif* repertoire, he would play Pink Floyd and Doors records in his bedroom. Standing there before the microphone, he remembered how he had once idolised Jim Morrison, whose decaying apparatus he was holding between his sweaty hands. His whines and wails were a far cry from those village verses that had gathered tears; but, just as he had always been a nomad at heart, so too had he been a rock and roller.



Mirror of Time (courtesy the artist)

Beneath the hot white lights of the stage, he struck and swung around his diminutive *setar* with all the abandon and swagger of the rock star he'd always wanted to be. That night in New York City, he was expressing the musical equivalent of a fulsome *fuck you* to a crowd of New Age poets, charlatans, and pseudo-intellectuals. Quite naturally, then, was he caught unawares when he put a face to the sound of a gaunt, moustachioed member of the crowd who introduced himself backstage. It was, he later found out, none other than John Densmore, the man who had provided the backbeat and drive to Morrison's unrestrained ecstasy. Fiddling around with a *daf* frame-drum he found lying around, chains and all, Densmore and him soon broke out into a jam and hit it off. Later, spurred by his desire to collaborate with the rock and roller and Densmore's interest in 'authentic' Persian music, the duo recorded albums and played a string of concerts together, to much acclaim. It was during one of these heady days that he found himself feeling like jelly before the old microphone and its patina of sweat and rust. *You've come all the way from Sangsar, he thought to himself that afternoon, and you're singing into Jim Morrison's microphone. Ey Khoda!*

***Isn't it funny? he thought, fidgeting with a cigarette he was trying to light against the wind one cold morning; you don't realise how much you love a place until you leave it***

Life, he admitted, was good. Things had picked up in the art department, and he was rocking with the greats. He had a proper studio of his own, and to all outward appearances wanted for nothing. In the same little depth of his being, though, in which he could see clearly the stars shining atop Mount Damavand, he saw arched eyebrows, towering cypresses, and everywhere, *red*: the red of the lover's rose, of the pomegranate, of houses of baked clay, of the 'Bloody City', Khorramshahr.



Khorramshahr, Iran, 1982 (photograph by Ali Fereidooni)

He didn't have any expectations; in fact, he didn't know *what* to feel. It seemed like ages since he'd been in Tehran, and there, knee-deep in the quotidian pandemonium of its leafy, soot-stained streets, he felt as if only those mountains, ever looming in the distance, were familiar. *Hell*, he thought when he was offered a solo exhibition in the capital, *I don't even have a passport*. Things were arranged, though, and not only did he receive a gold-imprinted burgundy document allowing him to travel to all but Occupied Palestine, but was also met by an unlikely reception. Maybe it was something in the air, the smell of change, of better things to come; it was, after all, the Khatami era. Regardless, they loved him there. New York City had become 'home', but he wasn't one to forget his roots. He knew he'd come from those mountains, those stony monoliths whose traces streaked through his bones. By their foothills, he had seen the stars for the first time; and though he was always on the move, they followed his every footstep. The stars, he felt, didn't look the same anywhere else, though they weren't any different. To see them, he knew he'd always have to return to Tehran, to Damavand, to *Iran*.



Untitled (courtesy the artist)

His peregrinations almost got the better of him there, but he couldn't bring himself to move again. He was jealous, almost, of his compatriots there; they all had their own studios, and were enjoying the luxury of having their own solo exhibitions. They didn't know how much they'd had it made. But there were words left unsaid, words that *couldn't* be said, and lines that could only be crossed once. In his mind, deciding to stay there was the artistic equivalent of committing suicide. New York, cold and grey on the other side of the world, was calling; again, he would be torn from his beloved mountains. He didn't know where he belonged, or what had been etched upon his brow in the crucible of time. He only knew, as he looked down on his manic, beloved metropolis from way up high, awash in incandescent daubs of orange and yellow, that he would miss those stars.



Dark Mountain (courtesy the artist)

*Isn't it funny?* he thought, fidgeting with a cigarette he was trying to light against the wind one cold morning; *you don't realise how much you love a place until you leave it.* Walking on the dirty boulevard, he felt like Johnny. He saw those horses with their big, black eyes, *coming in in all directions*, in all imaginable colours. The ashen skyscrapers before him gave way to the mountains – *his mountains* – and all around him, voices whirled in Old Persian and Sanskrit, hailing *daevas* and damning them at once, singing the hymns of the *Gathas*. There, buffeted by the wind in bleak Manhattan, he felt as if he were riding with the nomads of Sangsar, with the ancient Indo-Iranians themselves in Aryanam Vaejah. They were atop the very steeds, which, chained to the chariot, enabled them to conquer and give their name to Iran. But why such urgency? What were they after, and wherefore were they tugging at their bowstrings? *Ah*, he realised, dropping his half-burnt cigarette in awe by the curb: *the hunt!*





Hunting Pink (courtesy the artist and the Salsali Private Museum)

He was running back to his apartment, but couldn't feel his legs; it wasn't they that were carrying him, but some supernatural force that swept him away with the fervour of a dream gone wrong. He could only see a thousand horses, the white peaks of the Alborz mountains, and glowing apertures in the sky. He arrived home in a lather, and instinctively made for his studio. Frenzied, he knocked aside the cans of paint on the racks onto the mottled floor; *no, not that one*, he whispered beneath his breath in frustration. He had only one colour in mind: *red*. But it wasn't just any shade of red that would do, that would capture that euphoria and hallowed madness. He had seen it in the wanderings of his mind; *the red of the lover's rose*, he thought, *of pomegranates, of houses of baked clay* ... He had only one wish, then, during a moment not when sons forget their mothers, as is said, but when lovers lose sight of the stars: to drown himself in the deepest red, to paint a thousand horses, to drink the Magian draught and sink his teeth in the daughter of the vine



My Wicked Persian Carpet (courtesy the artist)

The smoke hanging thick and heavy in the viscid air, he opened the book he'd brought along to a page at random. The man in the corner cast an inquisitive glance, but he was blind to all around him – even Jim's battered microphone. Resting his yellowed, slender fingers on the undulating, dotted curves before him, he closed his eyes and sang the song he had been born to sing:

*Ravished hath my heart become, and I, dervish unaware,  
Know not why yon ravenous wanderer setteth her snare.  
Like a willow do I tremble, losing my faith to the breeze;  
That arch-browed infidel hath my worrying heart seized.  
Oh! I feel the need to ramble, to make for that rumbling sea;  
What secrets lie within this drop? Impossible 'tis to perceive.  
May I caress that wisp of sorrow, that coy, winsome lash,  
From which floweth her elixir in life-bestowing draughts.  
A hundred drops of blood drip from my beloved's sleeve;  
Her hand, even steady, doth mine aching heart aggrieve.  
Weeping and downcast, to the tavern I make my way;  
Why, at the thought of such affairs, do I feel this shame?  
Neither shall Khezr live forever, nor Alexander's realm remain;  
To trouble thyself with this worthless world – why, dervish, deign?  
Not every back, Hafez, bendeth towards the hand of the beggar;  
Seek thou the riches worth more than Korah's treasure!*

- Translated from the Persian by Joobin Bekhrad (from the *Divan* of Hafez)

*'Reza Derakshani: The Breeze at Dawn'* runs through April 23, 2016 at Sophia Contemporary Gallery in London.

Cover image courtesy the artist and Sophia Contemporary Gallery