

Sohail Inayatullah

CITIZENSHIP ON THE EDGES OF HUMANITY

"Soda," she said.

"Is anyone called Soda, here?" she said a bit louder.

I looked around at the handful of us in the naturalization room of the Honolulu, Hawaii Immigration and Naturalization Service. No one looked like they could be called Soda but me. In any case, I suspected she was yelling out my name as I was used to its numerous pronunciations. Finally, I stood up and said: "Do you mean Sohail Inayatullah?" She smiled and nodded. We walked over to her office. I expected the examiner to be an intimidating tall white Texan male whose nose could ferret out illegal aliens; instead, she was a heavily tanned local Hawaiian/Japanese woman. As the interview began, she asked me to raise my hands—perhaps to ensure that I had no concealed weapon—and repeat after her. I swore to tell the truth, all the while pondering the nature of truth and identity. I just hoped she wouldn't ask me if I believed in the overthrow of the American government.

Fortunately, the citizenship questions she asked were about the three branches of government, the Bill of Rights, and the Constitution. I answered them correctly, even giving her the Latin term for the law of the land, *Lex Legis*. I had studied the hundred questions passed out by the Honolulu Kalahi-Palama immigration center over and over. In that many-times xeroxed copy, there were questions like: What is the color of the flag, who said "give me liberty or give me death," who helped the settlers when they came to the new land? I had wanted her to ask the question: What were the benefits of gaining citizenship? In my crib-notes, the answer was the very honest: to get a federal job, to bring my relatives over to the US. But I was looking forward to saying, "to vote." By voting I could finally participate in representative government. I could make the difference between democracy and despotism, between freedom and tyranny, I could save the United States from another four years of ...

Born in Pakistan, I had never had the chance to vote, largely because we were always out of the country, and when I had lived there, I was too young to vote. In any case, there was usually a dictatorship running the show. In Indiana, as an elementary school student, I was too young to vote. Later in Hawaii, I was a foreign student and then, as a permanent resident, I could not vote either. I remember once in Hawaii, on election day, a man walked by me smiling and told me how good it felt to vote. The power of participation in his face overflowed. I should have said nothing but I told him that I hadn't voted. He walked away dejected, perhaps feeling that the republic had lost its legitimacy now that one of its citizens had not voted. I should have told him that I was not a citizen. But I guessed that he would know anyway by my color or look.

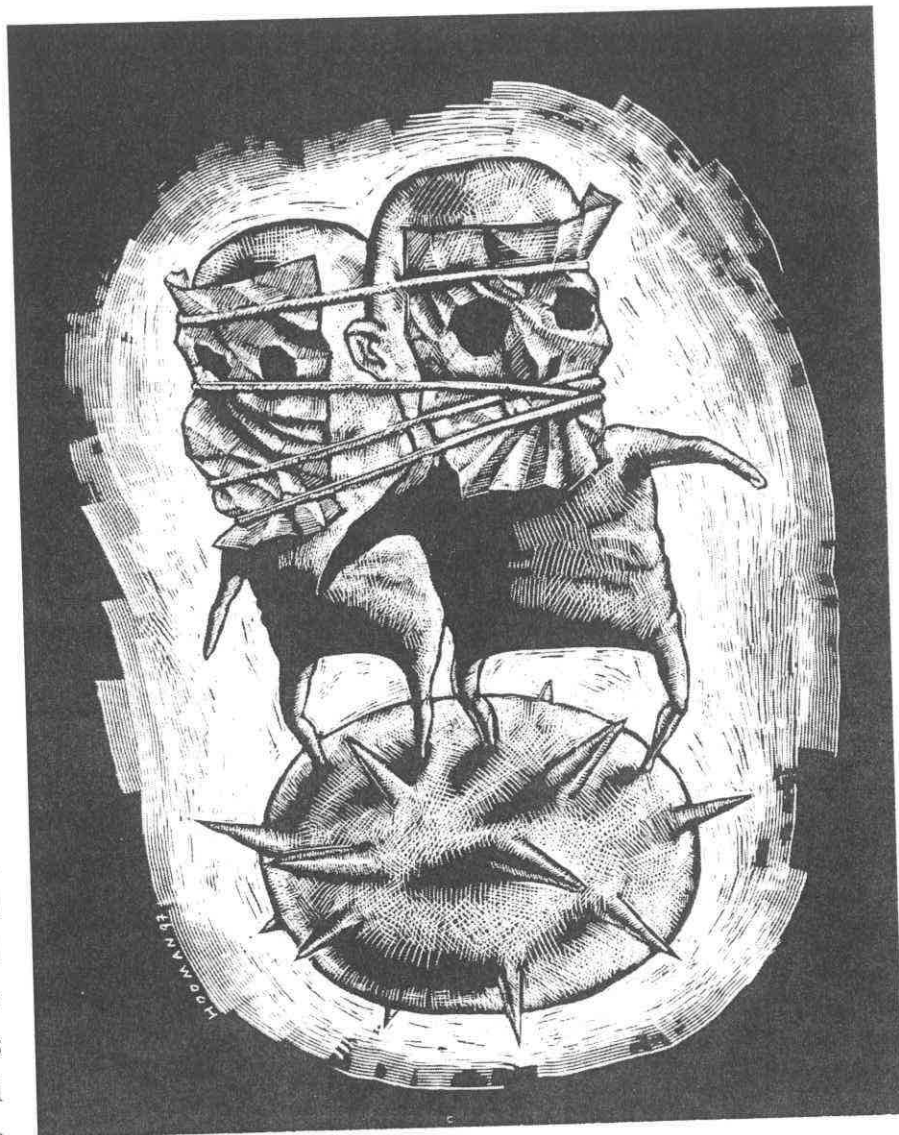
It was this look that the examiner asked me about next. She asked me what type of skin complexion I had. "Brown," I had written in the citizenship form.

"No. The only categories we have are fair, medium, and dark."

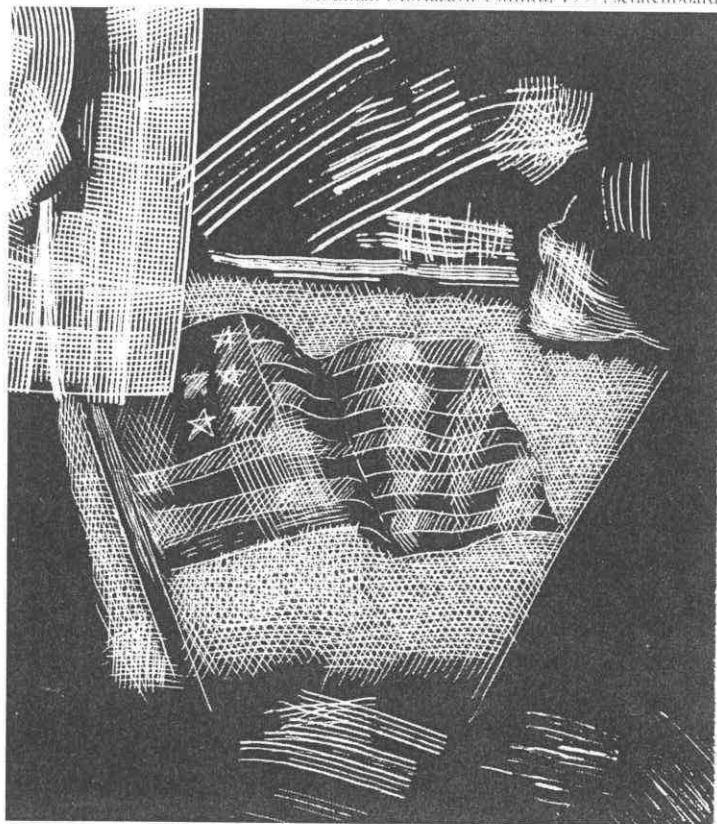
"Well, I am not dark and I am not fair."

She wanted to argue that I was dark. Me being medium made her color problematic, since she was not fair and she was clearly not as dark as me. We both fought for the middle spot, with her finally relenting.

Next, we could not find the category for my profession. Immigration had not heard of political scientists, planners, or policy analysts. I did not try to have her look up "futurist,"



Homayun Morozavi, *Untitled*, 1998, scratchboard

Houman Mortazavi, *Untitled*, 1997, scratchboard

the profession with which I am most often identified. She asked me if she should look under biology or physics. I thought of the new approaches of quantum politics and biopolitics but asked her to try social scientist. She found it, and after a few signatures—which had to be legible instead of the scribbles which I normally used to represent myself—the exam was over. I walked out to the corridor among the other Asians and Europeans.

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This exam had been easier than the earlier one, five years ago, for permanent residency. Then my attorney had argued that I was a world expert in forecast-

ing for court bureaucracies. The US Immigration and Naturalization Service believed him, forgetting to ask why anyone would want to forecast in state judiciaries since budgetary decisions are often based on local politics and not on expert foresight. Earlier, a doctor had cleared me of all types of venereal disease, and I promised the naturalization officer that I would not get any political diseases, like communism.

But at least at the green card hearing there was no questioning of my name. I did not mind the “soda” incident, but now, before I signed the final paper, the naturalization examiner asked me if I wanted to change my name. I took it personally. For years, my name had been a source of trouble. I still remember the time in Manila when the immigration officer surveyed my passport and my body and finally asked me if I was any relation to the Ayatollah Khomeini. I laughed nervously and said he was my uncle. The officer smiled and then suggested appropriate bath houses where I could enjoy my stay in the Philippines.

I now made the same joke to the American naturalization officer and then commented that I was glad that my first name was Sohail, from the Arabic Al-Suhail, the southern night star, and not Saddam. She did not smile. She asked me one more time if I wanted to change my name. Sodaullah did not sound right, I thought. “How about Saddam Ayatollah,” I said. She cringed in her seat. I tried to save the day by softly telling her that Inayatullah meant “the beneficence of God.”

In the questionnaire prior to being granted an interview, one is allowed to request exemption from military service if one believes in a Supreme Being who deems such actions inappropriate. But this request cannot be based on a political, sociological, philosophical, or personal moral code. That is, it must stem from one of the recognized religions. God as guru, as a tree, or as the eternal zen nothingness of Mu would not qualify. God must be objective but based on belief. Like voting.

I wonder if my Pakistani-born Muslim cousin, Aslam, knew of this when he became a US citizen. After Queens College, he joined the Navy. Unfortunately, his first assignment was in Beirut, possibly shooting at other Muslims. He began to wonder whether he was American or Muslim first. His career in the Navy did not last long.

In any case, the naturalization officer was not impressed with my humor.

True, citizenship would mean changing my identity and becoming Americanized. But I did not want to be called "Sam," like my friend Saleem. I merely wanted to make it easier to travel, and to enjoy the fruits of Pax Americana (after all, first as a worker on a professional H-1 visa and later as a permanent resident, I had been diligently paying American taxes for many years).

My Pakistani passport invited all sorts of intrusions. In the summer of 1990 when I traveled to Yugoslavia, where I was to lecture at a conference on "Third World Visions of the Future," the immigration officer, suspecting I desired to use Yugoslavia as a point of entry to Italy and Europe, questioned me extensively as to my intentions. Finally he was convinced I had a job somewhere and let me in. In Hawaii, when I worked for the justice system in the 1980s, I was frequently tested by custom officers to see whether I really did work for the Hawaii courts or if I was using the judiciary as a front for an international heroin smuggling operation. Indeed, once the FBI stalked me, thinking I was part of an operation selling passports or drugs to and from Indonesians. They later apologized.

Even entering Pakistan I was once pulled to the side when the officer did not think I was Pakistani. He believed that I was an Afghani or Soviet spy. "Where and how did you get the Pakistan passport?" he demanded. I did not say I forged it so that I could enter Pakistan's dynamic and high-paying job market.

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Years later, when I desired to travel to Yugoslavia to visit my pregnant wife while we waited for a job in Australia, the Serbian authorities denied me a visa. They argued that I was a quasi-intellectual using marriage as a ruse so as to write negative portrayals of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. That we had traveled through Macedonia in the previous year made my getting a visa nearly impossible. I tried to tell the officer that the