The fourth of Khordad was no
different. The morning sun broke
over the distant horizon, grazing
the face of
the Alborz
Mountains to
the north, and
from Mehrabad
Airport I
looked onto
a city stirring
itself softly
awake. This
early morning
I would be
making the
hour and a half long flight west
to Kermanshah, one hundred miles
from the Iran-Iraq border. I would
be traveling with a group from the
Society for Chemical Weapons
Victims’ Support, an NGO based in
Tehran with which I worked.

Our ultimate destination would
be Qasr-Shirin, a small and simple
town situated along the Iran-Iraq
border. Qasr-Shirin would serve as
a base camp as we made daily forays
into villages scattered throughout
the region with one common
characteristic—they and their
peoples were subject to chemical
bombardment during the Iran-Iraq
war of the 1980s. As we arrived in
Qasr-Shirin, the quiet of late
afternoon belied this tragic history.
Unlike the dry heat of Tehran, Qasr-
Shirin’s air was weighed down with
the kind of humidity that nurtures
groves of date palms.

From Qasr-Shirin we headed
southeast to the village of Dereh.
Cradled in a valley along the
border, Dereh is a plain agricultural
village—small, dusty, and backed
by a stretch of green pasture. As
our minibus approached the village
square, villagers gathered eagerly,
awaiting our arrival and a chance
to tell their stories. They held
themselves with a pride that did
not begrudge their humble lives.
Instead, they embraced the humility
of their circumstance. What they
also embraced were their stories
of anguish, still fresh even years
after their exposure to mustard gas.
One could not fathom the strategic
advantage gained by bombing a
place like Dereh, but perhaps total
war’s ambition is not strategic
advancement; rather, it is calculated,
total destruction.

I met a young man in Dereh. He
was twenty-four years old, only three
years my senior. Affable, handsome,
and hardened in the
fields of Dereh, he
was also exposed
to mustard agents
toward the end of the
Iran-Iraq war, only
two or three years
age at the time. He did
not recollect much,
but could relate the
stories that would later
color his memories—
how as the bombs fell,
villagers initially thought it to be
simply another aerial bombing, with
nothing particularly more heinous
behind the deed. When livestock
fell to their deaths and lungs and
eyes began to burn with insufferable
pain, people knew something more
insidious was in the air. They ran
for the river to cleanse themselves;
they sought medical attention at
distant hospitals only
to be turned away at
security checkpoints
and often did not
receive adequate
medical care until
upwards of a month
later. This was the
heart of the no-man’s
land.

Another village
we visited was
Zardeh, elevated in
a hollow between
several mountains,
carved on a scale of
time unimaginably
large. The memory
of chemical bombardment was heavy.
Scattered between homes and in
quiet groves of trees were flat slabs
of marble marking burial places.
I inspected one row of five in the
summer shade. A villager leaned
over and whispered, “brothers.”

One early morning in the mid-
1980s, Saddam’s planes dropped
mustard gas munitions directly
onto the source of the spring that
watered the village below, perhaps
purposefully, perhaps not. As
residents realized the calamity at
hand, they clamored to cleanse
themselves downstream. Little did
they realize theirs was a fatal bath.

These were only a few of the
stories I gathered during our visits
to “chemical villages,” as they
unfortunately have come to be
labeled. While hearing them, it
slowly began to be impressed upon
my mind the place of personal
narrative. It is a simple fact—
everyone has a story, and everyone
ought to have it heard, particularly
those on the periphery, dealt a harsh
hand and no soapbox.

Perhaps there are too many
stories to be heard. Like row upon
row of library books, to read them
all would be a fruitless challenge,
one that ultimately gathers dust.
Yet in the valleys and plains along
the Iran-Iraq border, villagers
patiently awaited an opportunity
simply to be heard. I came, listened
and transcribed, took photos, and
indefatigably tried to prod further,
to find an entry point where I could
adequately empathize with suffering
on a scale completely foreign to me.

The Burch Fellowship gave me
an opportunity not only to work
with the SCWVS, to
take language courses
at the University of
Tehran, and, for three
months, to explore a
country and culture
hopelessly distant
in the eyes of many
in the west—it also
allowed me to learn
enduring lessons of
who I am, where I fit
into the intricacies of
the world, and what
justice really means.
Justice begins with a
receptive audience.

When stories of unconscionable
suffering are told, we ought listen
in order to promote the change that
prevents the cruel irony of history
being repeated from being repeated.
The Burch Fellowship gave me an
opportunity to truly experience this
insight. For this, I am ever grateful.