

**Title:****Town mouse and country mouse: a conversation with Nazrullah and Ehsanullah****Author(s):**[Rachel Lehr](#)**Source:**[Faces: People, Places, and Cultures](#). 22.7 (Mar. 2006): p14.**Document Type:**

Article

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Nazrullah, age 12

My village, called Amla, is situated in the mountain valley of Darrai Noor. Everyone in Amla lives in buildings called qala, which are high-walled fortresses with large, open courtyards and huge wooden doors that we lock at night. I also know what city life is like because my family were refugees in Pakistan and we lived in a big city there. Two years ago, we returned to our land and home in Afghanistan. Unlike the city houses of brick or concrete, here in Amla our houses are made of shela, sun-baked mud brick. Inside these walls, we have two small buildings with a couple rooms in each.

My mother is the first one up each morning, before dawn She builds a fire and sets water to boil for cha'i, the green tea everyone in Afghanistan drinks. My favorite breakfast is bread dipped in patinik, the cream off the top of the milk. Six days a week, I walk a kilometer (about 2/3 of a mile) to school. Because I could not go to school for a few years during the war, I am only in 3rd grade. School lasts from 8 to 11:30 A.M. The best part of school is passing through the bazaar on the way home. I always make sure to have some money to spend on a treat such as cookies, marbles, or a water gun. I'm not all that into school and would rather skip days to hunt little birds with my chapar, my slingshot. My sisters roast them over the fire and we all enjoy the tasty treat.

When I get home from school, I greet my parents and elders and help out wherever I'm needed. This could mean running errands for my mother to the store (women in Afghanistan mostly stay inside the compound) or serving tea to the guests. As we don't have phones here, sometimes I'm asked to bring a message to a neighbor. My father, who lost a leg in the war, needs my help carrying alaf, feed for the cows.

My favorite lunch is lubiya, beans, and for dinner we often have greens, fruit, or juguri, yogurt. We eat dinner after dark, lit by kerosene lanterns. My father says we will get a generator soon to have a light bulb for the evening. The children in our house often go to sleep listening to adults talking, telling stories,

and gossiping late into the night.

I think I will grow up to be a farmer like my father. I like working on the land.

Ehsanullah, age 11

My family lives in Kabul, where my father works. We also have land and a house in the countryside that we share with Nazrullah's family. Our fathers are brothers. Like our fathers, Nazrullah and I were born in the same house and grew up playing together. We all went as refugees to Pakistan but when we returned to Afghanistan my family came to Kabul and his went back to the land.

We live in a two-floor rented house. Downstairs is my father's office and upstairs is our living space. My grandparents live in one room, my uncle and aunt and two cousins live in another room. I have four sisters and I am the oldest of three brothers; we live in the third room with our parents. Like most homes in Afghanistan, our house has walls around it and a door we keep locked. We get our water from a pump behind the house and have a generator for electricity. We only run the electricity at night to have lights and watch TV. I like seeing sports on TV, especially American sports.

I get up early each morning and go to school with my brother. Although he is two years younger than me, we are both in 2nd grade. We didn't go to school when we lived in Pakistan, so we are working hard to catch up. I like school and am trying to be the best in my class. Math is my favorite subject. School lasts from 7 to 9:30 every morning but Friday. After school, we help our parents and elders with errands. I like to be sent out to the corner store to buy things for my mother, because there is often a little change left I can spend on a treat. My grandfather is crazy about birds, all kinds of birds.

If I continue in school, I could be a doctor someday. Although I enjoy the lifestyle on our land out in the countryside, the open fields, and running freely with my cousins, I want to make something more of my life.

Meet Gulafruz

Gulafruz is about nine years old. She doesn't know for sure, as birthdates are not recorded in Afghanistan. "Gupsik" (her nickname) lives in the capital city of Kabul and goes off with her brothers to a school near her home. They get up early in the morning and put on their uniforms. For her brothers, that means pants and a clean shirt. For Gulafruz, it is a black tunic and pants and a white headscarf, or chador.

Although they go to school together, their classes are separate, girls in one part of the building, boys in another. Six days a week, they leave for school at 7 and return at 9:30 A.M., finished with school and famished. That's when they get breakfast. Her older sisters are busy all morning preparing bread dough, cleaning the house, and getting breakfast ready for the return of "Gupsik" and her brothers. They change out of their uniforms and into everyday clothing as soon as they get home and then eat their breakfast of green tea and scrambled

eggs scooped up with bits of bread, nan.

Gulafruz has been in 1st grade for a couple of years. Her family has moved several times around the city, and she has had to stop and start school each time. She is learning to speak, read, and write Dari, one of the two national languages of Afghanistan. At home, her family speaks their own tribal language, so learning Dari is difficult. Her favorite school subjects are math and calligraphy. Dari is written in a beautiful flowing script, and even 1st-grade students learn to use reed pens and black ink to form precise and fluid letters. Team sports aren't available for all girls in Afghanistan, but "Gupsik" really likes calisthenics, the physical exercises that the teacher leads in the classroom.

Homework gets done when there is light available, either during the day or at night when there is electricity, which is not all the time.

Gulafruz says, "I hope I will be allowed to keep going to school and even graduate from high school. Then I might be able to become a doctor." R.L.

Meet Qazibim

Qvazibim, 13, lives in the alley of Darrai Noor in eastern Afghanistan. With two brothers and five sisters, her family is about average size. As in most Afghan families, her father is a farmer who works his land growing corn, wheat, rice, and vegetables in season. Qazi's mother takes care of the family, and tends the cows and chickens. This year, Qazi is not allowed to go to school anymore. She was able to attend school until the second grade last year, but now she is prevented by her father, who says she is too old.

Lack of security due to years of civil war and the rule of the Taliban kept many children out of school in Afghanistan. Qazi, like many of her peers, finally did get a chance to go to school despite being several years beyond her grade level.

When Qazi went to school, her favorite subject was the Pashto language--the official language of eastern Afghanistan. Although Qazi's community speaks a different language, called Pasha'i, she likes learning other languages. For three years, her family lived as refugees in Pakistan, where she learned to speak Urdu.

"One of the best parts of going to school was walking home," Qazi recalls. "My father would give me a few coins everyday to buy something on the way home. School was about a half-mile walk up the road. We passed through the bazaar on the way back. I used to buy little dolls, rings, earrings, or a snack on the walk home. Now that I'm too old, I cannot go out to the bazaar and don't get to run errands anymore for my parents. My younger sister and brothers go to school and they bring me things from outside sometimes." In Afghanistan, many young women are restricted by custom and tradition from going outside, and, at 13, Qazi is considered a woman. In fact, her father would not allow

Qazi's photograph to be taken for this article.

For Qazi, a typical day starts by sweeping the open area of the courtyard and then outside around the walls. It is dusty because there is no concrete, just the packed dirt ground. Next, she washes the dishes from the night before. "We pump the water from a well outside our walls and, balancing the containers on our heads, carry it into the house. We do this over and over throughout the day."

Qazi helps her older sister with the cooking by cutting up tomatoes, rumi, and onions, pyaz. The older sister does most of the cooking now, but when she gets married it will become Qazi's job. Darrai Noor has none of the modern conveniences such as gas or electricity, so cooking is done over a wood fire. Qazi serves tea to elders, helps her mother milk the cows, and helps her father bring water for the animals.

Qazi is philosophical about her future. Accepting her fate, she says matter-of-factly, "I will be married (hopefully not too soon) to someone my parents choose. I wish I could have been a doctor if I had continued at school, but I won't be anything like that now." Qazibim realizes she will live like her mother and grandmother before her, tending children and animals in the countryside of Afghanistan.

Rachel **Lehr**, who lives and works part-time in Afghanistan, interviewed male cousins: Nazrullah, who lives in the country, and Ehsanullah, who lives in the city. She asked them to describe where they live, daily life, and their future plans.

**Lehr**, Rachel

**Source Citation** (MLA 7th Edition)

Lehr, Rachel. "Town mouse and country mouse: a conversation with Nazrullah and Ehsanullah." *Faces: People, Places, and Cultures* Mar. 2006: 14+. *General OneFile*. Web. 5 Aug. 2013.

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**Gale Document Number:** GALE|A146497285