

TO LIVE AS AN ORGAN WITHIN ONESELF

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Artist's text

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To the coming home
and leaving
and coming home again



“They stand firmly because they stand nowhere,” says Subhuti in describing the Bodhisattvas. We too wish to stand firmly yet stand nowhere, to act as two rather than as one, to incorporate difference into the felt sameness of existence. Between presence and represence—to paraphrase T.S. Eliot—falls the shadow. Things blur into universals, experiences into metaphors, objects into objective correlatives. In a sense, to stand in two places is to stand both in presence and representation. ¹

I am between two towns. One knows nothing of me, the other knows me no longer.²

These countries are tunneling through me vertically, like reversing an explainer animation for urban development, the high-rises that retreat instead of dawning. Piercing through, they leave holes.

I am in between places.
The eternal limbo: between lands, between identities, between languages, between emotions, between paragraphs.

I’m in Podgorica’s central bus station, stuck in the heat wave, in front of a café where the men ogle me. I escape their stares by locking eyes with a little girl looking up at me with a questioning gaze. I must seem centuries into her future. She looks like my thousands of years ago. She is trying on her mother’s heels — her little legs are uncertain: saplings once seeded and now growing out of those very soles. The way a drop of ink spreads out and assumes a shape on the watered paper, she will perhaps slowly grow into the limits of those heels.

Across the station,
on the other side of us passengers,
a woman sits on the ground, in the middle
of her long skirt, with one hand held out, palm up,
prayer form and head resting on a raised shoulder.
From where I stand it is not fully clear if her bust is
protruding out of her skirt or drowning in it. A few meters
away her children play barefoot in a sea of garbage bags.
A little girl pushes the carriage of a littler one around, playing
house, playing doll, mastering a typecast role.

We are on the winding roads that circle the waists of the mountains
holding Albania and Kosovo the way Roma mothers hold their
babies against their hips, the way their babies look like
extensions of their bodies — a smaller land attached to an
island moving freely to the untrained eye.

My curiosity for these lands
dims by the falling night, by my tired eyes,
by the hours gone by, by my legs suddenly feeling like
awkward accessories. My fascination is sullied by the blood be-
tween my legs, by the pain splitting my back, by all the borders we have
crossed slicing a once unified body, all the fingers that have leafed through my
passport, and the eyes that have looked down, and the eyes that have looked up,
and the eyes that have looked back down.

Border in, border out. I keep it to myself that a fascination with the legally invisible, the
illegally visible has drawn me here. Border in, border out. I register the psychology of bodies
and how they move, tethered or in all their un-belonging-ness to the land.

Suddenly,
shamelessly I become
the exotifying exotified and
I think, what if, like abuse, this
was a vicious cycle since day
one.

I envy the boy and girl talking on the front
seats of the bus, both of unassuming beauty. I envy all
the words they share; their minutes wrap up faster than mine.
They are as foreign to me as I am to myself. I exist somewhere much
smaller, cat-to-human-scale smaller, within myself:

A body island.

To live as an organ within oneself.

To be this island's permanent resident.

Like

two unhappy fish in a tiny tank,
the taxi driver and I are stuck in the heavy
immobile traffic of a rush hour Tehran weekday.

Rush hour or not, weekday or not, the clogged arteries of this
city, its congested throat and sinuses, have a way of not letting you go.

A thick smog has covered the air like an ochre photo filter, one of those that
add a washed-out effect, a vintage kind of look, that add grain, age, false
history. The *Hemmat* highway is tiled with dirty slightly colorful cars; from north
to south, east to west, as far as our eyes can see, as in the desperate search for land
aboard a ship for far too long. The driver has long run out of things to complain about,
deeply sunken in thoughts, lungs filled with the very toxic fuels of sanctioned gasoline that make
his humble living with one hand and take it away with the other, through a looming inevitable lung cancer.

A flock of wild ducks spill

on to the dirt road in the middle of the rice fields of Mazandaran.

Lying bare between planting seasons, the fields, knee deep in shallow waters,
stay awake in the screams of those ducks performing their natural weeding day shift.

Tiny alarm clocks, they hold their necks up high and follow the waving arms of a
rice planter. A little way down, a pond is beautifully patterned, polka-dotted
by a sea of Russian swans on their seasonal migration.

I am sinking in the back seat, in the indentations from the bodies that have been here before me.
My hair has long revolted against the headscarf now tugging at my neck.
Longing for a surface to sit on, to perfectly belong to, I either hover above or sink into spaces.
A bouquet of daffodils presses against the slightly open window and some of the blossoms get in
through its crack. They are clinging to a pair of small dirty hands. Behind them, a child's voice lingers,
inaudible for the car stereos and honks. I look at the little boy moving to the next car.
I have painted him before, many of them, holding up their white bouquets like peace flags.

To represent a presence as a relic.
Like a beautifully coloured wing of a rare
bird, that lives by itself. Meticulously studied
into a labored painting, it boasts only that and
nothing of the wing owner, of whom they were and how
they lived.

To represent a presence in parts, like an exotic creature —
to render it legible in bits and pieces.

I speak four and a half
languages and can only express myself in ink.
This time I will paint him featureless, loose, fluid and phantomlike.
A silhouette, a form, an impression of the body that contains no more
knowledge of its owner than it dares to claim. Only the way it exists in relation
to the space framing it, to the bodies overlapping as in a group photograph.

This is how my bodies have become homelands and sites, like a wordless map.
What sets them apart and gives them identity are their borders, where the water
dries sets the limits within which they exist.

Since the start of my trip
back Home, I have been feeling
something caught in my throat, a thing lost
in translation, heavy as the land itself.
I say, I am done with politics, but will it ever be done with me?

This website cannot be viewed in your geographical region
pops a message on the screen.

That in the sinking into the hollows of taxi backseats and the grasping for
fresh air denied, what troubles me most are not the nuisances of everyday
life here, a life I have become so foreign to —
“Geography my dear is a curse” says a voice in my head —
it is the random however infrequent pangs of belonging that catch me off
guard on a turn of a street or in the scent of daffodils heaved into my
face in the middle of a heavy traffic.

When nostalgia becomes the
trademark of a deracinated
generation, one turns presents into
memories to read them better.



A few weeks later, body open
on a gynecologist's chair somewhere
west of Montreal, the doctor asks me nicely to move
further down. With a long cotton swab in hand, he tells me to
ease up, to let go as he starts asking me questions about "back home".
I think of the dichotomy between letting go and back home.
I feel the weight of it like a chain at my feet. When he asks me about how things are
back home I tense up and purse my lips. As I use all my force not to let go of the words
that he both expects and is indifferent to hear, they drip down and splatter the floor beneath
us, short, reductive answers, like drops, like stains.
When I say, "Not ok," he responds "I thought so," and he swabs my culture.

Endnotes:

1. Thomas McEvilley, *Art & Otherness: Crisis In Cultural Identity*. McPherson & Company, 1992. p. 106.
2. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*. Camberwell, Penguin, 2010. p. 240.

Thinking With:

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Inspired by:

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