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# A Landscape of Days

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by

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*for Kassandra*

I badly wanted a story of my own. As if there were proof in spelling. But what if my experience were the kind of snow that does not accumulate? A piling of instants that did not amount to a dimension? What if wandering within my own limits I came back named, with features too faint for the mirror, unequal to the demands of the night? In the long run I could not deceive appearances: Days and nights were added up without adding up.

—Rosmarie Waldrop

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# I

# In Search of a Language

1.

Why, when trying to think of memories, am I expelled from them? The singularity of one moment blurs into another, years apart. I depend on location, on spatial construction of images, in order to remember. I cannot remember significant moments of my childhood, my adolescence. In a photo, taken by my father, I stand on a pier. In the background the Hudson River floats by; in the foreground my face, almost pressed to the camera's lens, is painted into a purple, glittered butterfly. It is my sixth birthday. Without the photograph, I cannot imagine this day, nor any other day during that time in my life; without benchmarks—structures built in the archive of memory that house lasting objects and geographic images. Something has caused me to erase so much: I dropped the memories of my father into an arid, bare field. Something triggers my face to fall into an empty state when I feel vulnerable, exposed; I run from where I am, from what I hear and see. "I am here but 'I' am not here." This behavior senses when there is pain or danger and separates what is happening from my ability to feel it. I am not in danger. I am afraid. I hide from knowing the disappointment in the actions of my father, because my father is not his actions.

2.

Thinking about Lyn Hejinian's essay "The Rejection of Closure" and how a text becomes a *plaything*:

*Children imagine language as their plaything. Their rhymes produce relationships, less a blur of rivers than discovered limitations. They exist between the world and words, chant glossolalias, correctly objectify their encounters. We, as children, render language the object gap. We riddle our known words with the blurred river, displace the parallax of incorrectly objectified encounters, discover the gap is an analogy for what we might know. We displace what we imagined as object, as when we made the world our plaything.*

3.

I stand in a room positioned at the entrance to face the cornered space. The single window on the left wall is open, raw air cries as it enters the room. On the walls I paint over marks left by the sun against objects previously hung—paintings no longer there, a mirror moved to another space. I remain aware of the mirror's reflection though it has gone, and see myself as I look around the room. I see, beyond the window, a fragment of escape, a landscape of trees; a perspective I do not realize is my own. Outside, wind tears through maidengrass. The stalks yield to the wind as seeds rip from the flowers in a hope for the multiplication of existence. A crate of oranges appears on the windowsill; a draft of their thick skin into the room, the air singed with citrus. The language of my sensation is cast into the fragrant air, the room becomes an experience of remembering my past.

In her essay, "Vagrancy in the Park," Susan Howe writes: "I go on with these flower names not only because I enjoy making lists—but also to remind you, the reader, how words supersede and displace the reality of an object sensed in space and time." Howe quotes Wallace Stevens: "the least syllable counts, the least sound and the least syllable." In his view, the objective of the poet is to articulate the "ever shifting sensations" felt or seen in life by way of experience in reality and imagination—"a summer drive, something noticed on the way to the bus, a greenhouse badly in need of paint." William James finds reality is unable to articulate itself; Howe feels reality is displaced, altered, shifted into new and simple sensation through language and its command. The nature of poetry is reflective of nature and its poetry, out of which grows a relationship between reality and imagination. "A poem is a glass, through which great light is conveyed to us."

4.

In *Species of Space,* Georges Perec writes: "The resurrected space of the bedroom is enough to bring back to life, to recall, to revive memories, the most fleeting and anodyne along with the most essential." My memory of home is captured in a space of images, in the way space is taken up. *Everything within our enumerated walls was hidden behind a hideous orange. Identical to the orange suede love seats framing the entrance to their bedroom.* Perec continues to recollect the image space, describing it as "a chaotic flood of details so vivid as to leave [him] speechless." The construction of space, its vivid map, is imprinted in my memory. Connections form between space and imagery within myself; the structure of memory liberated from my connection to the past, to spaces once taken up; sound, taste, touch once felt. *The same orange whose color flooded down from above the dining room table. Hundreds of bulbs swept into a bouquet of light, a dim hum circled our heads during supper, where we sat in silence.*

*The tone of memory is bathed in sound and sense. In formative experience and connections to the form of my childhood; not trapped in memory but liberated from it by the structure of memory.* I wonder about the space of human sound in memory. What would Perec think? If he remembered the sound of the woman who brought tea to his bedroom, would a stronger, colorful resurrection of memory appear? When I attempt my own resurrection, I only remember the sensation or sound of objects in space, not the sounds of those who occupy space. *Adolescently constructed from images, within images, everything I have learned: the sensation of socked feet on hard wood, the acrid taste green tea on my young palate, my father's gait when he wore his alligator skin boots. Not memories of the house's enclosure but memories of feeling; of knowing why I often think of that certain, smooth textured floor pocketed by abrasive jags, catching my socks as I glide across its shiny wood.* Youth spills outward onto the image.

5.

*When the house is besieged by idealism, winter becomes a white cottage. Underlined in the quiet passage, Baudelaire feels that we are living in the solitude of the center, the protected center. Swathed in artificial nests, we pause in the beloved cold and dream of an exaggerated current of communication. Recollection comes home; here men dream of concepts involving the reign of oneirism, where happiness inhabits the roof of the drowsy cottage and the dialectics of the universe are colored. The cottage becomes a non-house, and we each become a non-I. Everything in the outside world muffled and blurred by the whiteness of snow. Intimacy is sensed by the quality of our intensities.*[1]

[1] These words were 'collected' from part I of "House and Universe" in Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*

6.

Lyn Hejinian: “For oneself, one can write, say, Boot, or Inclusion, and summon the cogent images and their array of meanings. For others, however, explanations are due—and in the journal, they are forthcoming. The journal is not, then, a private document; it is sentimental and public.”

Where does the emphasis lie? “Boot, or Inclusion” become subjects, not objects or definitions, used to explain how words often associate memory to image. *Apple* does not mean fruit but sweetness, red, dawn; the sweetness of a red dawn. Explanations are due to fasten content to writer, writer to audience. Where, in the image, does language enter? Before the recognition of language? “What syllable are you seeking, / Vocalissimus, / In the distances of sleep? / Speak it.” Wallace Stevens’ poem, “To the Roaring Wind,” demands the figure, *Vocalissimus,* to articulate his desire. The figure, from the Latin adjective, *vocalis,* meaning “vocalist, utterer of sound,” is not asked to give *language*, but *sound*. Here, Stevens’ interest lies in the pre-recognition of language, focusing on the shape of its sound. Lyn Hejinian writes of her remembered memories pre- and post- language: the wallpaper of her childhood home, the “small pink roses on the yellowing paper” of her grandmother’s room. She succumbs to the image without language, finds its shape, its color. “Words are not equal to the world,” “a blur of displacement exists in the relation between things and the words for them.” Language obscures the image; I find words to fit a memory, though it will never color as an image would. If we treat the image in this way, attach language so the object or experience can find itself in another mind, the image settles. Does this transfer of an image onto the page allow one to measure the circumference of the articulated language?

7.

How do “words supersede and displace” the object and its reality, its relation to time and space? Do we exploit words by making lists and so emphasize how language obscures these coordinates?

*grass, naked tree, green, sculpture, rock, fallen leaf, yellow, bird.*

List-making displaces objects. Is it that the imagery is obscured and broken by the comma? Words push against one another without cohesion; a description is repurposed into a list, alters the time and space of objects and nature, objects in nature.

8.

When I think of morning, I imagine Thoreau writing under the birth of dawn. “Morning is when I am awake and there is a dawn in me.” In a longer passage from *Walden*, Thoreau calls morning the most intelligent hour, the hour of the gods and the holy—“morning brings back the heroic ages.” The present day transcends those of the past and the future.

The morning, in its serenity and complete connection to our natural state, to nature, becomes the time I look back; I bring what I have learned into the present moment. The morning is when I am aligned, most lucid with myself. In the morning I am in solitude. I am aware of the isolated motion in my body and its reaction to the process of my thought. “Then there is least somnolence in us; and for an hour, at least, some part of us awakes which slumbers all the rest of the day and night.” I rise and find strength in internal solitude. The blue dawn grows longer as the days progress to winter; shadow my sense of time in those first moments. I am lifted into a wakeful quietude.

9.

Sign of a vibrant winter: as evening approaches, clouds give way to the sun's flat, red disk. D. and I find a stone bench overlooking the Hudson River in the distance. The particular rolling hills form a structured landscape. Moss, doubled over large, horizontally lengthened rocks, dampens the surrounding air. Across the frame, the Catskills roll along to the north and south; the river's current passes slowly; the whistle of a train sounds below. Our view from the stone bench is severed by two erect, naked trees. Remnants of the cloudy day draw streaks of sunset across the sky, lining these open spaces in a hot pink rouge; dull orange bleeds into the greying blue of the outer rings. I am disgusted by this pink, but I cannot look away. I divide the image into vision and sense, undo the trees before me, think myself as the repugnant rouge.

Barthes: "To understand—is that not to divide the image, to undo the I, proud organ of misapprehension."

10.

*Winter confers upon our memories, takes back snowy days as though the house was too old. This presents us in a passage, whose evenings become the great stories of our ancestors; those who believed in the end of the world. Bachelin believed in fairly tales of men under memorial, cataclysmic signs—images in the mind of a child. We come to take the preceding storm, the lonely house in our powerful arms.*

*I stand in the garden, applaud the trees that twist along the side of the house. House becomes space juxtaposed by the snow. My imagination awakens from daydream, sees the white hurricane, leaves confident and calm. The old home is born out of the lived.*

*The house is once more besieged by idealism. Built on the great river, its humble author prepares us for the weather where sound and movement will silence the immense space. Sound colors its body, leaves pure sensation of something boundless, complete, shadowed. I am overwhelmed by the motionless passage.*

*In this vast space of the center, time narrows. The wind lifts its lungs into the storm, the house resists against its voice, trembles with fear. The other winds rush along the soil but the house clings to the earth through the night.*[2]

[2] These words were 'collected' from parts II & III of "House and Universe" in Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*

11.

When I use my hands to spin a mound of clay into a recognizable object, I lose sight of both the surrounding environment and my mental state; I enter the world of this organic matter. Within a few hours, my back aches, my hands tire, my arms and legs give their moisture to the wet clay collected on them. I think now of a conversation I once had with my professor. I told him of how, when I work on the wheel, I become transfixed, carried into a meditative state. It was then I learned, as he told me, that the spinning motion of clay on the wheel activates alpha waves in the brain—those waves which are active during mediation. I note this as important to self-reliance and self-discovery. I press down on the pedal, the wheel spins faster, alpha waves activate, I look within. I am aware of the pressure and strength that can flow from my hands down into my feet. I become present in this moment of connection; nothing else within my touch. Before I can throw a vessel, I must center the clay. If I am not centered, if my mind is somewhere else, if I am filled with anxiety or fear, the clay will never center. It will never spin as one unit. It will be wild. It will be rough. It will be untamed, and I will never find the self I crave.

12.

I receive an email from a dear friend, Z., a past love, who now lives in Berlin. He tells me I am, to him, *viridian*. Viridian, *n*. and *adj*. from latin *viridis,* green: "of or pertaining to this color." Its name is an encompassed ideal of green, the green of a perfect lawn, yet its color is synthetic, a blend of blue and green. Not the dark, spring green where I stand, between sky and ground. I have never imagined myself as a shade of green. But if I had, I would be an olive green, a shade that is a reminder of its namesake's thick, brackish flavor.

# II

# On the Meridian: A Language of Gesture

13.

Antoni Gaudí, influenced by structures in nature, constructed buildings with nature's form in mind. On the floor just under the roof of one building, objects in illuminated glass cases are arranged according to the what he had modeled after their structure. Shells, branches, leaves, animal skins, fruits, bones. Their outlines and shapes reoccur in large-scale throughout Barcelona. A milieu of work thickened by nature's design; a city scattered with honeycomb.

D. and I walk up the stairs of Casa Milà, one of Gaudi's apartment buildings appropriated as a tourist sight, though we are not sure where we are going. The smooth plaster stairwell is stained olive green, the steps are salmon. The roof is hot. Large, erect sculptures trim the circumference, ascend and descend across the surface by way of cream plaster stairs. The body of each sculpture is thick and formed into a tall, organic shape—a cylinder of clay twisted at its base. At the top of the sculptures, an abstracted head just at the threshold before livened into the caricature of a warrior. I spread my hands across the cream plaster surface of each figure, ask them why they are here. The British guide speaking into my ear gives no answer. (I later learn they, in fact, are to resemble warriors; protecting the inner workings of the building—pipes, chimneys, electrical panels.) The sculptures radiate an inexhaustible energy along the top of their helmut heads, traveling across the roof and through us, the tourists. I feel pressed within their doubling height. D. and I sit in the shade at the base of one sculpture, mosaic detail embedded in its plaster. We watch our fellow tourists guided by their cameras, wondering why they would choose to experience all this through lenses.

14.

We are guided by D.'s desire for unfamiliar foods and move through the city on a search for fatty jamón, fresh cheese, grassy olive oil. As a chef, D. accumulates his knowledge through flavor. We taste everything we see as he searches for new techniques and processes. I welcome each flavor, though my body begins to drag. Between meals we walk gently, saturated in rich fats and oils, through the city. The pervasive aroma of Spanish foods, lifted by roasted garlic and tomatoes, follows me around Barcelona. We visit churches and museums, but our thoughts are elsewhere, distracted by the city. I focus on the details: tall, industrial buildings meet those stacked by stone—the city's past colliding with the present. It is a clouded day; we are lost climbing a mountainous area of Barcelona. Our breathing slows, the air fills with dust. We reach an abandoned amphitheater; beside it, a baroque, unkept garden with gilded archways just before the Joan Miró museum. We follow a red brick floor into and through the museum. Panes of glass separate the hallways from the courtyard, where three cone sculptures stand, carved into the wall, staring at me. We fall asleep during a short film of Miró's career and decide we had better head back toward the hotel. Walking down the hill I try to name our experience at the museum. I can only remember how insistent Miró was on murdering painting.

15.

Between Barcelona and Valencia the sun reflects the deep green and orange shades of the grove; we accelerate in our toy-like car. Mountains in every directions bow toward us; their tips are bare, their bodies striated with limestone, mossy rock, sheets of feathery trees. We zag along the coast and back inland, passing small towns that perforate the seaside. Their villas are uniform in shape and structure—terra-cotta dressed in white to face the blue sea. We drive down a road that led, centuries earlier, the Knights Templar on their forthcoming journey. A church stands alone on a distant, tall mountain. I imagine the knights climbing the mountain to be cleansed of their sins, believing the hike to be the first step toward salvation. At lunch I eat blood sausage for the first time and learn of how their production reflects their bloody name. Red clay mountains dotted with spiny bushes welcome us into their valley. Almond or olive bushes? We pass too quickly to be certain.

16.

Driving along the narrow road, we are again between mountains and orange groves. In the distance, one large house stands alone, *restaurante* painted in black across its adobe facade. The scene quickly moves from distant mountains and flatlands of orchards to roads carved into and between mountains; pathways so near to rock I can see budding fruits on each tree. D. and I share a mandarine as we climb the side of a mountain village in our toy-like car. Our anticipation increases as the temperature drops, the sky grows clouded, shade moving across pistachio tree mountains. Slowly, we come upon Granada.

The small Andalucían city at the foot of the Sierra Nevada has its own national fruit, *granada,* or pomegranate. I do not see any pomegranate trees, but as we wind our way into the city's streets, Granada becomes the belly of the *granada*. I drive into the Albaicín, an Iberian village whose narrow, inclined streets move two ways but are only as wide as one car. Through the unmapped, labyrinthine roads I make blind turns until we reach a wider stretch of pebbled road at an overlook. We pull off to the side, let cars in the other direction pass, and look out onto the city below. The whitewashed walls of the buildings seem to me the veined white core, and the uneven pebbled streets the sweet seeds of the *granada*. Against our view, skinny coniferous trees dot the network of adobe tile topped roofs in the distance.

It has been four years since I have been here; the streets are familiar, my presence on them is not.

17.

The air in Granada is thick with a threatening rain. D. and I visit the Alhambra; in Arabic, *the red one*. The intricacy of detail in the architecture of the palace is arresting. Reflective of the first monarchy of the Nasrid dynasty, the twenty-six acre palace and citadel forms an intricate map of houses and gardens, revealing an antiquated Mudéjar design; Arabic inscriptions and geometric patterns, carved in stucco, form traditional arabesques. The rooms lead to column arcades surrounding a courtyard of marble fountains, trimmed hedges, and primary-colored mosaic panels. On the walls are poems written by Muslim poets in Arabic. "…We do not know of any other garden / more pleasant in its freshness, more fragrant in its surroundings, / or sweeter in the gathering of its fruits…" The ceilings are tiered in triangular shapes; they layer and drape over one another —crests of Islamic history. On one wall, carved plaster lays beside an engraved cedar doorway. I finger the wooden frame, its deep color still fragrant, and try to sense how much time has passed since a man stood here fashioning this door. "In here is a cupola which by its height becomes lost from sight, / beauty in it appears both concealed and visible… / The bright stars would like to establish themselves firmly in it, / rather than continue wandering about in the vault of the sky…" In the center of one courtyard, a tall, white wall contrasted against teal-and-yellow mosaic panels. The marbled floor is centered around a large stone shell, a reserve of water pools in the interior; an iridescent reflection of the inscribed poetry. We reach the end of the palace: a windy rooftop looking out to the grey city. D. and I find the exit, the same passage from where we entered, and walk back down the steep hill that holds the Alhambra in silence.

18.

In my first encounter with Morocco I cannot find English. Arabic and French take up the sound space around us, the call to prayer screams through the loudspeaker every few hours. I had forgotten what it was like to find myself surrounded by languages I cannot understand. I am compressed into Muhammad 5 Airport airport in Casablanca without fresh air or communication; D. and I impatiently wait for a connecting flight. We arrived before dawn, sleepless and in search of English. The barrier taunts me: the man behind the deli counter tries to sell me yogurt for 5 dirhams—a steep price, D. warns. It is now midday. Sleepless and disoriented, my perception of spatial awareness dims; the people beside me are out of reach, those in the distance bend toward me. I give up the fight to communicate and wake D. who sleeps upright beside me. I feel vulnerable against those who will judge me for my ignorance of their language. I am thirsty. The loudspeaker barks above us. D. walks to find water, using gesture as language.

19.

We walk through the Kasbah, centering ourselves in a city where we are misaligned. An older man in a dark green *djellaba* and white pointed slippers, *babouches*, approaches us. He seems to speak faster than his tongue can pronounce words; every few minutes they collide in a stutter and his eyes jolt shut. He introduces himself as *Abdul-ah* and, before either of us can gather words to stop him, he is telling us the significance of each street in the Kasbah and motioning for us to follow. We walk behind him along the paint-chipped, stucco walls—sun-faded pinks, blues, yellows, and greens. We tell him we do not need help, that we want to get lost, but he insists. *You came to Morocco to understand our culture, please let me tell you of my city.* He is right, of course, and refuses when we offer money. *Nothing in Morocco is free,* I remember D. saying as our boat cut through the Mediterranean and into the port of Tangier. I have trouble pulling apart Abdul-ah's vowels from consonants. He speaks flatly, causing his questions and statements to end in the same downward tone. There is a pause between his question and my answer while I reconfigure what he is asking.

Abdul-ah brings us to a mosque, identified by its arched doorways and the tall lip along the base of the door. He tells us that this mosque was the first built in the Kasbah, constructed with the bones of camels and reinforced by mosaic tile. We are led down streets as wide as my shoulders to the homes of ex-patriot writers like Paul Bowles and William S. Burroughs. I am lost in gates with long rectangular patterns, toothed and tampered designs on the perimeter of the roofs, jeweled slippers pointed and patterned by women sitting in the back of shops. We lose our guide. The streets of the medina overflow with Moroccans selling produce, contraband, or *msemmen*—flat bread made with semolina, water, and butter. Women on the streets fold and refold the dough, their hands gleaming beneath layers of the thick, fermented butter, *smen,* which gives the bread its flaky, crepe texture. The streets smell of fragrant fruits; large yellow bins hold strawberries, oranges, and other produce I cannot identify. A man sells tiny iridescent fish on a towel brought from home; *sardines*, D. points toward them. I am overwhelmed and feel my internal compass vanish. Before I lose complete sense of direction and language D. pulls me into a restaurant adorned with traditional couches and arabesque designed pillows. We order lamb tagine and couscous. Our first meal in Morocco.

20.

The blue of Tangier is alive. The air feels blue at each breath, the sky's blue paler than the Mediterranean. Fractions of the sea's salted waves move across the window of our riad. I see them through gaps in the weathered Moroccan sculptures above the stone wall across the way. I wonder, will I ever see these blues again?

*Love, love his and hers*
*if they are not here, where did they go?*

*Yesterday, yesterday I asked my eyes*
*when we will see each other again?*

*And when you change the landscape*
*is it with bare hands or with gloves?*

*How does rumor of the sky smell*
*when the blue of water sings?*

— Pablo Neruda

Outside of the medina there is no blue. We ride in the back of a white minivan, the streets dusted with pulverized red clay. A red hazed sun. The car snakes through the Rif Mountains, *greener than the Atlas*, our driver tells us. The quartz mountains are arid and thick with shadow. Hundreds of miles wide, the smell of the mountains' earthen bodies, clay, stone, minerals, permeate the air. We find Chefchaouan, sitting as though the mountain carved itself away for the city, just after the blank stretch of road where we encounter a man who makes creamed goat cheese and porous Moroccan street bread. Chefchaouan, "the blue city," known for its medina, is dressed in shades of blue. Outside of the blue cobbled streets, blue doorways, blue building facades that cover the medina, there is no blue. Where does the blue go when we leave the old cities of Morocco? In Tangier, I see the blue fade into the sea. In Chefchaouan, the blue stops as I step outside the medina walls.

Escaping the bleak removal of pigment, I look above to find the changing sky reflects the sea's blue song.

21.

*The circle of life: to live, love, raise children, die.* Our taxi driver had paused his cyclical speech of the city's history to give me this lesson. *Who sees more does more.* He turned his head back toward me, held up four fingers to represent each of these tasks, and slowly nodded; a smile under his wiry beard.

On every street there is a man insisting I follow him to the tannery. *This street is closed. Turn left to the blue gate.* I think they want me to be confused, to be tossed into a deluge of primary colors and incense, so they can rescue me. The medina, the oldest in the country, has over 9,000 streets. I am already lost before the men, their mouths full of Arabic, call to me. Here it smells of smoked wood and stiff leather.

The people of Fes, except for the beggars and hustlers, radiate a kind of yellow energy: warm, methodical, worn, devout. This yellow aura is from the burning sun and cool shade, the chipped walls and unpaved streets, the honey soaked almond cake and astringent mint tea. The intimate tone in their voices convinces me they all know one another. The final call to prayer begins, the muezzin sings out to us. 8:24 pm.

22.

We are led down a narrow alleyway by a man with one arm and a missing front tooth. He speaks to himself in Arabic. I follow behind D. through the cobbled alley and into a small basement shop smelling of leather and fresh olive oil. Three men face us, their eyes blankly looking up at a television bolted to the ceiling, its flickering color dulled. The walls are covered in family photos, prototypes of Moroccan *babouches*, small swatches of raw leather. In the center of the wall there is a framed photo of the King wearing a coy smile. We ask to see their work; the three men unfold cuts of leather still possessing their animal curvatures. They do not speak English, though they look at me expecting an answer to, what I figure to be, questions about who I am. I nod, smile, and step back, unsure if they are comfortable with my presence in the space. From what I have observed, women are muted in their demeanor, moving or cooking or weaving but never speaking; they are adored for these qualities.

Like a child I make myself unseen behind D. One man with a wiry white mustache, older than the others, motions for me to come to him; I do. He looks at me, pointing to a water bottle filled with the fragrant olive oil I had smelled upon entering. I watch as he spreads the oil across his fingers and rubs them against bisque-colored leather until it turns dark brown. He, again, looks at me, smiling at the power he possesses to manipulate color. I begin to understand the mens' dialogue through the expression of their hands; their shape articulated to argue over who will spread the leather flat. With rigid and strong fingers, they stumble over the blade, push one another out of the way, believing they each know the correct way to peel the leather away into strips. I focus on the elder man's hands, clasped within one another and tucked into the lining of his apron, as he tries to, like me, remain unseen.

23.

I spend the first day in Marrakech asleep. I am roused every few hours by the call to prayer. The muezzin's thick, glottal sounds, invade my sleep as the day passes—an indication for the depth of my rest. When I finally wake, it is approaching evening. Abdu, the caretaker of the riad, brings us almond cookies and rose & saffron tea from his wife's kitchen. D. is enjoying a cup of the tea and a plate of cookies in the parlor when I find him; I cannot resist them even though I feel ill. The cookies taste of almond paste and *smen*. They slowly melt when I bite down and take a sip of the aromatic, thickly sweetened saffron tea. I can feel the sugar melt on my tongue like sandpaper against the roof of my mouth.

Later D. and I go for a walk. The riad is temperate and cool. There is a garden in the courtyard where orange trees and pink flowers grow; a mosaic fountain sits in the center, pale gray-and-blue birds flock there. It seems we are the only guests here, since the riad is being restored after 18 years of abandonment. The calm atmosphere I have been sleeping in abruptly changes when we leave the house. Dust from the unpaved road is kicked up in front of us by sputtering motorbikes, shopkeepers beckon us to come inside, gypsies and performers drift through the streets. They follow us until we aggressively tell them to go away. I am exhausted; I am hungry.

As we arrive at the city's center, *Jemaa el-Fnaa,* the sun falls beside the mosque. I laugh at the cliché of this image. Across the sky a thick haze allows us to look directly at the sun. Beside the sun, the oldest mosque in Morocco stands erect, the tip outlined in emerald green mosaic. Below the sun, crowds of tourists and locals entertained by snake charmers, contortionists, fortune-tellers.

The lights in the night market flick on. I am guided by the aroma of Marrakech: amber, saffron, semolina, diesel, grilled meat.

24.

In the Imlil valley, 2,000 meters above ground level, a young girl, cheeks rouged from the high altitude and bitter wind, smiles at tourists who pass through her village on their way to the peak.

Behind one peak, the azure sky draws an outline across the mountain's frame. As light moves across the valley, I watch the distant, flat image take on the depth of a body.

In another village, nestled in a flatbed of mountain, an elder woman weaves a red carpet. Her husband, home from work, places a pot of tea on the stove.

In this same village, a young boy boils sage tea for two tourists in his father's shop. Two plastic white chairs around a plastic table are set on a pink adobe balcony. They all look out on the mountain's body.

The mountain guide, a gap between each tooth, finds a walnut on the trail and with a smooth, flat rock, breaks open its shell. He offers its meat to the tourists, smiling through the gaps.

*Come to my house,* he says. *I have many walnut trees. I will show you how we crush the walnuts into oil.*

The call to prayer breaks silence in the valley. The voice of an aged man sings out, his tune drifting through the body of the mountain.

25.

In the morning we drink sage & thyme tea and eat *msemmen* on the roof of our riad. I spread a thin layer of *smen* and lemon jam over the warm bread and find my place in *The Quarry* by Susan Howe. "It takes space to fold time in feeling." In her essay on film criticism, Howe finds a moment of poetry to suspend the narrative. I play in the silence, folding the space of the morning into our time in the Atlas Mountains. I feel my heart rate increase, hear the pulverized rock crush beneath my feet, see my body lean over the edge and look down onto endless space dusted by rocks and grasses. The air is raw and absolves my stiff body of its fatigue. When we walk through Marrakech, my body becomes rigid with self-consciousness; I become aware of fear. I stay out of the eyes and words of Moroccan medina boys by remaining conservative and strong: *Big welcome Where are you from This way is closed Let me take you to the square You're going in the wrong direction Beautiful lady A piece of art.* My muscles tense, I forget to breathe. I lose the vibrancy of the reality we are in.

26.

The Moroccan man selling carpets woven by the Berber people asks my name. I tell him slowly but he can only pronounce the last two syllables: "sandra." I have no strength to correct him. I am lethargic and full of *mishwe* —lamb tied to a thick branch of beech wood, smoked in a clay pit for many hours, and served with golden disks of sweet Moroccan bread and cumin salt. The men who unveil the carpets roll them across the white linoleum floor until we stand in a sea of white, red, and yellow wool. The man who sells carpets asks me what I do. I tell him I am a student. *Of what*, he asks. *Writing*, I say. I hold in my hand an imaginary pen and draw, gesturing across the dust and wool bitten air. I have learned to accompany sentences with gestures in an attempt to make clear what I am trying to say. *You should write a story about Morocco, A Murder in Morocco, perhaps?* He continues. *Have you ever seen that film by Hitchcock?* He continues to ask questions but I am focused on the men unrolling and refolding the carpets. They drag their feet across the carpet sea in plastic sandals that do not fit, shifting weight and direction based on what the man selling carpets tells them to do in a curt, Arabic tongue. The four men take to different sides of the room, search among the towering stacks of rugs arranged by color. Before gathering the fervor to open each rug, the men look at one another to synchronize their motion. D. and I sip mint tea and stare, mesmerized as we watch the folded knots on the underside of a carpet transform into a vibrant blanket of cherry red. The texture is alive and thick, the pattern a traditional Berber style. *I haven't seen that Hitchcock film,* I tell him. The men roll a faded saffron carpet across the center of the sea, its pattern weaves geometric lines toward the center, softly blending greens into the yellow hue. *Well you must see this film and then write the story, A Murder in Morocco.* He goes on; *it can begin with you meeting the man who sells carpets in Marrakech.*

27.

In the evening teenagers inhale something toxic out of the skin of a lamb's bladder in front of the twenty-four hour parking garage. Across the street a young boy asks us to buy him a bag of chips after he, without our asking, tells the man behind the counter to sell us water. We see him saunter this street each day. The air of Marrakech swells with aromas: diesel, raw semolina from the bakery, cumin and harissa from the lamb cooking in the community oven. In the square, the night vendors smell of fried fish and boiled eggs. Across the square, the citrus men share ground with the men who sell incense. Pressed grapefruit and dried rose. On our evening walk I notice two columns that frame a front door. Ceramic tiles in soft, primary colors are arranged into a intricate abstract design. I imagine the men, bent over and cross-legged, tapping at clay tiles until they break into small triangular and circular pieces. Eventually these small pieces become neglected parts of an intricate whole; a delicate, shifting mosaic used to display this family's wealth in a poor community. My hands smell like almond paste and petrol as we walk back to the riad.

28.

In the days I have spent walking through the medinas of Morocco, I have yet to see a Muslim pray. Medina, "city of the prophet;" the ancient maze is separated from the modern city by a tall, surrounding adobe wall. Saturated in culture and in color, the thin streets brim with fluorescent spices and sharp tongued men, fragrant street food and American contraband. A low Arabic hum swarms me, the call to prayer echoes behind.

From our car I see a man fall to his knees on the sanded sidewalk; his eyes close, his palms face out. My body tenses; from where I am I can no longer see his body. The image of him, his brow furrowed, his body limp, is unnerving. The veil between us passes; I see him sitting on his knees, head bent to the ground. In the middle of the medina, *this* man is praying.

I have noticed men quietly slip away from their tasks to take their prayer. I remember the day D. and I bought two carpets from a man in the modern area of Marrakech. At the call one of the men helping us reached for a small rectangular rug in a pile on the floor and walked slowly away.

So I wonder about this man in the street. I wonder if the call to prayer sang and he was too far from a mosque to wait. I wonder if he grew up without much of a home, and the streets are just as familiar to him. The part of me angry with the Moroccan who takes me as foolish enough to believe his false seductions, wonders if this man is putting on a show for tourists. He kneels at the entrance to the south side of the medina, a tall horseshoe arch dividing the modern world from the ancient; those who would drop to their knees in the street for Allah and those who would not.

29.

Outside on the yellow mosaic table a sheep, skinned and barely recognizable, is secured to a branch of beech wood. Around the table men are dressed in black tracksuits, their mouths dripping in a tongue I do not understand. I nod in agreement, wave my hands to declare attention. Together they lift the sheep, walk toward the clay oven, and lower the body in. Above they stand, lean their heads into the now smoldering pit, admiring their work. I imagine that their expressions shift into a desire to return to a more primitive age; when bravery and strength would be awarded for the kill and this style of cooking. I watch as they haul a clay lid over the pit and pack fresh, wet clay around the circumference to seal the heat in. *The moisture must remain within*, they tell me in gesture.

30.

*Paradise is beneath the foot of your mother.* The taxi driver follows roads cut into the clay rock of the Atlas Mountains. I lean deeply to my left as he winds right, his mouth full of Islam. *You may kiss the bottom of her foot but you will not find Paradise so easily there.* His Arabic accented English is robust, his words fall from a reservoir of memorized passages. He tells me one of the greatest achievement in a Muslim's life is to memorize the Qur'an, an endeavor that has taken most of his lifetime; he is still a young man. I follow his eyes in the rearview mirror, unsure if he can see me as I see him. The driver, Heshim, asks me if I have a faith. I am ashamed to say no. Why? I do not believe in a God as he does. I have faith in the power of decision and a fated world: my inability to make decisions eased with the belief that every choice I make will lead me to where I am supposed to go. I harvest my decisions from experience, giving myself the agency to follow my present mind. I am not afraid of Heshim, nor of his faith. I am afraid of the discrepancy between our cultures, between the way his mouth falls and the way mine runs, a stream of water, an ocean, between the possibility of agreement. He tells me he believes others have a right to their own faith. *If you were to tell me there is no prophet Mohammad, I would say ok. But in my heart I know he is real.* For a moment I am envious that, in his faith, he finds a home. The fourth prayer rings clear, another sharp muezzin in another valley of clay.

# III
# An Affair with Images

31.

My dream is crimson. Everything liquid, everything moving. I walk beside my father; he drags his bicycle beside him, the clicking sound of the wheel seems to catalyze the motion. He stops before a dimly lit bar and asks if I would like a drink. We drink red wine and talk in still tones, my attention unfocused. I look down into the glass, the crimson liquid spins in the center. Why do I look happy? I look up at my father; his hair grows into the same silver as my grandmother's, his face hangs from bells palsy and abused drinking, his blue eyes kind, lose their glint. *Not the same father I hold in memory.* He gets up from his seat, walks to the bathroom, and has a heart attack. The scene fades into crimson chaos. When I wake my eyes are damp and my throat tight.

*Not the same father I hold in memory.* The longer I watched him, the more I believed my father to be a brilliant man. My image of him: he stands at a tall stature, his dark hair curling at the base of his neck where it hints of silver, his face full, like mine, his eyes bright and vital, his hands careful and warm. My father and I, lying on our wooden floor, spread drawings from his youth around us. Cars, disappearing faces, landscapes—graphics mimicking reality. Always silent, we speak a language of gestures. He holds my hand in his, places it on the image, and draws my hand over its surface, articulating his once perfected movement. I watch as he quietly moves about the house, praying to myself that I will become just like him.

32.

For most of my childhood I was not allowed on the fire escape; or, it didn't feel appropriate to sit on a structure meant for emergency. I could not look down on the people passing below. Instead, I spent time looking inward. The windows, narrow and tall, lengthened toward the ceiling and multiplied across the north wall of the apartment. The pipes ran along the ceiling forming geometric shapes; the final images I would see before passing into sleep, before waking. I memorized patterns of movement to avoid the four white cement columns structured along the central line of the space. I had hoped one day to encompass their girth by spreading myself around the stable pole, my hands holding one another. Their size would always be too great.

When I think of home, I am brought to an archive of sensations: fingering the clear plastic corrugated wall in my mother's room; spinning her lamp, blue shaded and slender, to cover the three white walls in a tungsten hue. I remember a weight of darkness that slept there. Those memories are soaked in the spaces of our apartment's design, in the vision of my mother.

When I think of home, I think of entrances and exits: the ways I could have left, or entered, or been able to see through; the passage from one space to another. I lose connection between exterior and interior—a self-reflective experience that ends abruptly. *I am not another, I am myself. I am whole.* A statement lodged within itself, within the interior. *My memories cannot exist here, where I have separated father from mother.* I ask the windows: what do you challenge me to see? I see myself, young and curious about the fire escape, reflected in the windows across the street and below as I sit on its metal, slotted edge.

33.

In an undertaking of the role of objects in her life, Jennifer Moxley writes about the iconic song "Favorite Things" from *The Sound of Music*. In the final remarks of her essay, she comes to the conclusion of the song's import—"the way in which what we love not only makes us who we are, but can protect us from giving in to fear." Objects and images come into the world through association of things. "What we love" brings us into a sculpted sense of self, an assurance that we are moving in the directions we desire. *I loved the orange chairs that framed the entrance to my parents' bedroom. I remember sitting in one, small enough to curl myself into a square shape. I would rub my cheeks against its fabric, watch the orange color brighten as the fibers changed direction.*

*I have lost my home* and now find objects and images to reconfigure a misshapen identity. I create memory by forming attachment between things from my past and the home they lived in; the objects and images become experiences themselves. I find a porcelain figurine of two young pigs in a sled wrapped in tissue paper under a spiral bound book filled with playbills, I pause over the beach rocks I keep on my windowsill; I am led into the object's time and feel the sense of home outside of the *real* place I am within.

*I have lost my home. When I was nineteen my mother and I spent the winter looking through everything we owned, throwing away what we felt wasn't important, and packing the rest. I endured the formative stages of childhood in that apartment and, since leaving, I have struggled to find home without the images of its interior. I lose security, I falter. My flailing sense of self drowns in detachment from the past, from memory, from the ability to find comfort in space. I lose the things I love; they can no longer "protect [me] from giving in to fear." I remember the tone of the hum and the heat of the bulbs from the bouquet, the variation of orange, the young pigs, I begin to feel stability.*

34.

A's hand rests on my thigh, its warmth spreading out toward the seam of my pant leg. I lay my hand on her's, match each finger to her own, notice how the tops of my fingers spill over, brushing my own leg. *My mother used to play the piano on my hand*, she says, *I found it so comforting*. She lifts each finger up in a waved pattern, mimicking the memory as my fingers react to the force. *We had a piano in our house where I grew up, a real baby grand. I miss that*, she says, eyes rolling into the past. An image of her follows in the heat moving across my thigh: a young A. approaches the piano. She moves toward it, as though intimidated by its doubling size, and shimmies up onto the bench. She reaches out to the ivory and black keys and hears a sound react to her touch. Is it then she understands action and reaction? She presses lightly against high C, a velvety note sings through the instrument. She bangs her finger against a low G, a vibrating base tone ricochets against her. I begin to play the piano on A's hand. Fashion my own scale, G-A-B-C-D, and watch as she finds melody in her memory.

35.

I sit in a screening room at MoMA, and watch the 1925 silent film based on Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan*. My attention falters between the moving images of the characters and the motion of my body against the mustard upholstered seat. There is a doubling; the surrounding sound pulls me into a conscious state, emptying the liminal, visual reality constructed for me. I think of John Cage and his infamous declaration: "There is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time. There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact, try as we may to make a silence, we cannot." I sit still, try as I may to not make a sound, yet I am soaked in it.

This is the first feature length silent film I have seen. My experience: I am not mindful of camera movement or lighting, the way the characters interact with one another. What I am told to look for, visual cues, relationship to shadow, I pass over. I fixate on gesture: Lady Windermere's delicate, porcelain hand trembles as she unfolds her laced fan; when she sees the Lady for the first time, her mother's eyes soften, panning across the details of her daughter's face and clothing. The film is an opening for intimacy. I begin to notice how the characters bodies move, how the students around me shift, delicately, deliberately. I am in an affair with the images, with the precision of detail and acute advancement of motion.

36.

I walk through the Frank Stella retrospective at the Whitney Museum in the wrong direction. Beginning in "The Recent Decades," I find a quote printed on the wall, and for the rest of my disjointed path through the decades of his career, I think of his idea of employing motion. "Virtual space has no ground. That's the beauty of it. It's about destroying the ground so you can explore all the dimensions and viewpoints." I move through the exhibit, apathetically experience his work, walk past giant metal sculptures in primary colors. I come across one piece that takes my attention: part assemblage and part painting, it is set into the wall and therefore flush with the *true* wall while also creating physical depth. Thick geometric shapes cut into and across the canvas—a layered tangram in its final composition. The negative space overlaps in muted, organic colors. This work, created before Stella's idea of exploring "the dimensions and viewpoints" of virtual space, becomes reflective of a later body of his work. As the piece is set into a wall and, further, set into carved canvas, it gives the initial experience of a painting. When I stand close to the piece it loses the experience of painting and becomes an experience in sculptural form. Stella destroys the "ground" of the experiential work to create tension, leaving me to ask how to experience what is in front of me.

37.

In a dream, the seasons take our house as though centuries had gone by. We come, contrary to the manifested storm, with arms ready to hold concepts. I rest my eyes in a milky bath and sit beside Federico Fellini as he watches his film, *8½*. We see images move into another dream space.

The scene opens: through the back window of Guido's car we see him trapped under an overpass. He soon notices he is being watched, surrounded by familiar faces. Smoke begin to fill the car and, realizing he is trapped, he bangs on the windows to escape. The faces watch him without worry. Guido escapes; his body rising into the air and across the city as a kite, floating to the landscape of a beach.

Today I float across the landscape of a beach.

The film travels to Guido's childhood; he runs, chased by an elderly woman, around the dark brick interior of a home until she brings him to the bath basin. I follow the visual elements, ignoring the subtitles changing at the bottom. I hear a mess of Italian women laugh, children bob in the bath; the children are swept into towels and carried to bed.

In her essay "The Thought is the Bride of What Thinking" Lyn Hejinian remembers: "From the earliest period of my life, the period before language, come other purely visual memories. I remember, for example, particular wallpapers—the small pink roses on the yellowing paper in my grandmother's room, the dark green unpatterned paper of the long living room…" My childhood differentiates from another's because of visual memory. We all remember the advent of unfamiliar sensations and feelings, but what we saw, and how we saw it, differs. The only memory I have of myself at three is rolling around, each day, on a mustard yellow leather couch; the same one that sat in my parents' office for years, until the cotton stuffing began to spill out of its cracked skin.

Later in the film, the cast of women prepare a bath for present-day Guido in what appears to be the same basin as in the flashback to his childhood, their beauty ever present in his memory.

38.

I face a small theatrical group. The director asks, *what does your death look like?* I cannot answer her, unable to connect language to image.

When I try to visualize death, an unfathomable space opens, where my thoughts and memories, cast in shadow, fall in suspended time. This is a space where components of the self cannot recover; as if entering the moment before an event horizon, reaching the "point of no return."

In a moment during Godard's film *First Name: Carmen*, the image is focused on a hand as it slowly moves, with the affection as a lover's caress, against a television tuned to blue static. The camera pans out; a young male character's body embraces the TV, his arms wrapped around its hard, synthetic width. In his lover's absence, the young man, Joseph, cradles a device that exists to expose a collection of concurrent lives; the static doesn't allow him an image of life—the object, instead, opens for him a perverse, voyeuristic world.

The film reminded me of my relationship to Joseph, my high school sweetheart, wondering if, had I left him when I should have, like Godard's character, he would have ended up embracing a lifeless machine. But we each needed the other in order to imagine our possible stories.

If I stare into the snowy light of a static TV, I begin lose my sense of self. The imageless space resembles the way I imagined the shadowed space of death. Pablo Neruda: "Will your destruction merge / with another voice and other light?"

39.

I want the whole sky, but it cannot be mine. If only I could hold onto it, then I could find the moment where time slows and stop the day from becoming night. I want to demonstrate my experience with its beauty rather than describe its color: *oh how blue it is!* I could write words that taste of blue sky.

What I desire: to know my desire. Where do I find it, surrounded by others, or in solitude? I want the feeling of oneness with the knowledge of wholeness. Rainer Maria Rilke to Franz Kappus: "To walk inside yourself and meet no one for hours—that is what you must be able to attain. To be solitary as you were when you were a child." If I walk, with my eyes to the sky, will I become as solitary as I was when I was a child? Why does that sunlit azure allow me to become whole?

When I float in the sea I look to the sky and merge with their two blues; I rest in the lucidity of still time.

# *Coda*

I am Kassandra Thatcher.

You will not know this, dear Reader, but the above declaration has taken me months, maybe years, to write. Still, I do not feel comfortable having written it, but I am sure of its resounding experience within me as I say the words.

Perhaps the past hesitation of experiencing myself as the protagonist of my name is in part due to the name itself. I am often asked if my first name is in reference to the myth of the Greek prophet, Kassandra, who, because she would not yield to Apollo's desire, was cursed with the gift of prophecy, which, in turn, no one would believe. In my childhood I empathized with Kassandra; no one seemed to believe me until I proved them wrong, just as no man believed my namesake when she foresaw the Trojan war.

If I had been named after the prophet Kassandra, I would have felt proud. Instead, I was named after my mother's mentor, a middle-aged woman who dropped dead of a stroke one afternoon while putting on her makeup. As long as I have known of *Sandy*, as my mother called her, I have felt separated from my name—as though it was not meant to label *me* but the traits of my mother's beloved friend. I have always had the sense that my father didn't have a say in what my name would be. He was along for the ride. Perhaps he was always just along for the ride.

This is not to say what I achieve in these prose passages is the overdue assurance of speaking my given name with conviction. Still, overcoming the shame I felt when telling others my name has been monumental. What I *have* achieved, in addition to feeling *I am* the name I was given, is this: through writing I have learned how experience gives structural insight to *who* I am.

Before, I had always felt an experience of confusion when answering questions about who I am. How does one define oneself? Through one's passions? One's pursuits? By explaining one's past? Dreams and desires? I suppose a larger question, which holds these smaller ones inside of it, is what catalyzed these passages: what is my relation to the world? In order to answer this question, I began to use language—my own language and the

words of poets and other writers I admire—to talk *about* language; to understand how it constructs my experience and reality. Here, language begins to inform who I am.

What is my relation to the world? In answering a question as grand as this, an answer that can inform one's life, I had to lay my own world before me, take out the key figures—mother, father, myself, my memories—, and begin to act in conversation with these characters, breaking the habits of thought I had formed, and allowing new understandings to emerge.

I struggled with this; at times, I had to dig for each word and even then it wasn't right. I felt afraid, dear Reader, of what you would think of my experience. I was terrified of articulating the truth. Yet I wanted, more than anything, to understand who I was and why I had formed *these* opinions and habits and memories. Would it be interesting enough? Would it be exciting? Would I make you think in new ways? Perhaps this fear came from my relentless inability to communicate with the *unknown*; perhaps I find myself fearful of your judgement of my experience and my decision to detail it like so. What began to surpass this fear, though, was an evolving acceptance of its presence.

Once I realized that I was slowly accepting the fear, I wanted to find out if my habit of detached observation would bring me closer to an answer. How could writing give me a stronger sense of myself in the world? What I needed to do was not be afraid to ask questions like these in my work. I needed to write about my thoughts through the lens of direct observation. Ultimately, discovering my relation to the world meant understanding both memory and experience, and questioning how to use language in this pursuit.

What I desired, to have a stronger sense of the world and my place in and relation to it, became these prose passages. Questioning memory, seeking the right word, traveling, having purely sensory experiences, watching film, and thinking about home; writing about these details and moments in my life through a sense of urgency to *know* language—this was how I found my sense of a world.

Being able to name the world as I see it has allowed me to become Kassandra.

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