

Speaking In Waves  
Naghmeh Sharifi



I had set out to be a bandit of peoples' accidental poetics. Alas as I sit here enveloped in the tonal grey of these past weeks everything comes out forced and false. I let it take me backwards in time, my pen, my fingers, their trickle and tottering on the keyboard. Out-of-rhythm tap dancers.

Things come to me as revelations, like fortune cookie fortunes, in the depth of rained-on back allies filled with optical instances.

At home walks don't mean discovery. "Nothing is new or exotic anymore, you know everything all too well".

There are new things still; those blue metro cars that nearly glow. They pull into the station like subtle suprises.

صدای کنده شدن یک شهر

I wanted to start out at the end. At the Lyon Part Dieu train terminal; the moment of departure.

De parture, Di sappearence Di vorce  
Words that start with the letter D  
Brittle words, like calcium deficient bones

The three notes preceding a station announcement; sound of a city getting pulled away from me. A sound that feels like Velcro but is much kinder. If irreversible change had a tune those three notes would be it. Similar to how in films the orchestra has a set of notes; a fixed melody to hint suspense or looming disaster.

I walk on by one of the two rivers splitting the town in halves, like long hair down a person's back. I walk for hours unnoticed and every once in a while in the quiet of the foggy night from a distance I see a bar with outdoor seating. From the dead-end of the street-quiet I find myself slowly approaching the crowd. The smell of beer, the webs of smoke magnifying as they leave the cigarette body and as I get closer they get tangled in my hair. And suddenly everything drags and drops but doesn't break like fresh caramel strings and it is as if the rhythm changes as I walk by, the rhythm changes my legs turn to jelly and I feel myself slowed down and my sense of being becomes relative and the how of my sense of being becomes relative to those strangers;  
Sitting  
drinking  
smoking  
indifferently looking at me passing by. And it is the direction of those gazes that prove I am there with my feet moving rhythmically on that sidewalk. Like a scene in a film or a music video a few moments and everything sitting on those moments, like clothes on a clothing line, stretches out in a yawn.  
And things resume their former pace as I walk past. Many meters ahead I find myself alone again in an empty street I had never crossed before.

وقتی که حس بودنم نسبی همیشه  
و حس چگونگی بودنم نسبی همیشه

It feels like a lifetime of winters, every year at exactly this far along in the calendar, the sky has depleted its resources giving unconditionally; liquids and watery solids to the ground. The other day I booked a bed and breakfast near the village, in the city I live in. I packed a few things and looked all wide-eyed and unsure checking maps in the underground. There was a girl in the metro occasionally smelling her hair, smiling under her scarf and texting. Perhaps she was trying to detect the scent of her secret lover's touch. "Secrets are not hidden information, if they were we would lose them easily. They are simply archived separately, in separate shelves; marked "secrets". The B&B was a 19th century house with the walls painted cold yellow and rustic wood window shutters you could bar out the last breath of light with. The décor was Victorian to the best of my limited knowledge of what Victorian décor looks like. I could have been anywhere; to play the traveller without going the distance; "At any given moment, we are all traveling around the sun at 30 km per second". Every dawn, that same sun quivers and hesitates for a brief moment between her narrow choices of reaching or melting.

دندونِ طلايِ آسمون و رفت و برگشت های ناگزیرش

There is a beautiful wine glass and scent of aged wine in the spacious cold loft-shaped studio of the old actor, there is a portrait of Sohrab or is it the actor's youth on an altar-shaped out-of work-radiator. There is a night bus to Paris and it is 2 am and I am buried under my fall coat with a thick shawl wrapped around my neck like a snake. I am writing to you in desire, I am waiting for you in my sleep and there is a night bus to Paris and it is 2:30 am and the dim lights, no the cold, no the thrill of reading you wakes me up in microscopic intervals. The tip of my nose feels like an ice cube and the road to Paris stretches under us in despair with the end of it an infinite dark yawn sucking us in and the darkness swallows. There is a night bus to Paris and it is some minutes past 3 am and I am half dreaming half wishing I would dream but I am writing to you in desire and you are asking me to sleep and there is a beautiful wine glass on the table of the cold loft-shaped studio of an old actor who is reciting free verse and we are all trapped inside the whale-belly of the night bus to Paris. We grow old in here and I keep waking up to read you

جاده در امتدادِ مسیرِ ما، زیرِ شکمِ این نهنگِ در هیبتِ اتویوس،  
کشِ میادِ اما نمی شکنه

Karen this picture of your studio you sent me is lovely. It captures the feel of it perfectly. I am back in Montreal now or at least partially. I am struggling with being back and going to school and making work. I have to pretend that the past five months never happened, or that this is the final extended chapter.

It is like a bad hangover post an event whose details I vividly remember.

It was my first day in Skopje and I'd experienced an episodic waking up. At 5 am the windows started rattling like a bad cough. My tired, jetlagged body that had endured a 48 hour travel time could not take the fact of an earthquake seriously enough to prop itself up. Nor were my survival instincts strong enough to overcome my desire for sleep. Hours later I woke to the aftermath of the sweep of panic down the street into every neighbors' front and back yard where they had taken to for shelter.

As a child of war I have vivid memories of running to the basement with my parents and a flock of neighbors following an air raid siren.

My childish logic making conclusions;

Out you go for a natural disaster,

Down

For

An

Unnatural

One. I remember a few years after the war (not young enough to forget, nor old enough to suppress) I heard a recording of that same siren at the end of a Disney cartoon on a bootlegged VHS and broke into a cold sweat. If irreversible damage had a sound, I thought, that would be it.

Later that same day in Skopje, standing in the front yard I met Karen; the only other artist in residence. I looked up and saw her bending over the balcony fence under a luscious line of freshly washed linens gently swaying back and forth. She had the flu and a crusty red nose standing out against her pale blond features. She introduced and excused herself simultaneously in a thick German accent and disappeared back inside for the rest of the day.

Karen quickly became my guide and the girl who could never find her things; studio keys, house keys, loose tobacco, lighter...me. I learned that she grew up in Dresden in a very communist household, had moved to Berlin a few years back and was already sick of what the hipster-hype has done to the peace and quiet of the gloomy capital. So she would often rent out her flat and sleep in her studio or do residencies for months on end around the world. Her surprises, pleasant or not, were often expressed in Spanish. Her affection in a broken Portuguese. She was sick nearly the whole duration of her time at the residency. She wanted to be in shape for Mozambique, where she was going next to give a series of workshops through the German cultural center. After my exchange semester in France and on my way back with a stop over in Berlin, I got to see her one last time. Sick again and full of stories from Maputo; the pearl of the Indian Ocean.

From Karen I learned that the people who live near the ocean speak in waves, and you cannot find the answers to your questions till you learn to ride those waves like a skilled surfer.

On a six-kitten four-puppies sort of day, giant boiling pot over the stove, crowing of roosters a little ways down and stench of a pigsty closer to the fences; at Ankica's parents' farm we exchanged dreams and helped with Ajvar preparation. All day we were crouched over buckets of freshly barbecued red sweet peppers (elephant ears) lying belly up under the sun in cold water we would fish them out one by one, peel and gut them of their last remaining seed. It was ceremonial and almost sacred, the way the produce market was filled with cartons and cartons of those red peppers. I imagined how the city would look stained with fresh blood drops from high up. Everyone would gather and sit around on low stools elbow deep into the buckets till they would get old hands, the kind one gets from steeping their fingers in the water too long. The place reminded me of my grandparents' village in the north of Iran, filled with spruce trees and the summer lethargy of a farm.

It's funny how one experiences a place by comparing it to another, an experience with another and a person to another.

رخوتِ تابستونیه یک باغ

I spent that first Month in France in an overpriced private residence, more like a room that had swallowed a tiny kitchen and a tiny bathroom. A room of my own; I can hide here and have indecent thoughts, I can hide here and have clean thoughts; a vital dormancy. I can think about you.

The particles we are made of, our matter, how much of us is water, metal, fiber, air

...

How much dead skin is resuscitated against  
how much dead skin when you touch me ...  
and if two deaths cancel each other out

مرگِ ميليوني سلولي

Karen I am glad you are enjoying your time in Maputo. Please tell me more about it. I finally found a place. A girl who goes to the same school offered to share her loft with me while her boyfriend is away, though he will come back in a month. All I know is her first name, she is not sure about mine, as nobody ever is. I do not really have a room, just a small mezzanine separated by white curtains from the rest of the place. The apartment is beautifully decorated. "It's very lived-in". This will do for now.

Marie's mom would come for a visit every Sunday, she was staying at a psychiatric care institute where she was free to spend her Sunday afternoons however, long as she was back there by nine. She would show up with a plastic bag full of tiny butters and tiny jams like Christmas stocking stuffing. What they would serve her there and she wouldn't eat but gathered preciously. She was frail and delicate and overtly sweet to me. I was the archetype of that sad little girl in Persepolis that had once touched her so. Sometimes late at night I would overhear Marie's conversations with her over the phone; giving her mother advice. Their roles were reversed. Through the thin white curtains I could hear everything. Without walls there was little filtering; our happiness, sadness and all those in-between feelings had nowhere to hide. If they did, they'd look like snickering children playing clumsy hide n seek, those whose hiding place is not a secret to anyone but their own wishful minds. We spent the next three months living under that same roof. By we I mean; Marie, her boyfriend and I, with curtains of our own. Three artists breathing the same air; that perfect of all imperfect combinations.

Our insecurities bubbled up and settled down like freshly poured soda in a glass.

Marie had three giant cookbooks, two on botany and an appropriate number of plants for an apartment that size. "You see this cactus? You can break off a leaf and lay it on some dirt, on its own, and it will make babies"

Sometimes when Marie's mom was over they would shower together and comb each other's hair afterward and I would leave home and walk off the Sunday gloom grieving a world in which this was "too" intimate and my distance from my own mother.

Our place lay on top of a hill overlooking the whole city. At the turn of our street, there it was, like a miniature painting; the panorama of the town, the two rivers, the faux Eifel, the clay rooftops of all the dollhouses. A painting I could enter everyday by walking to school along the river Soane. One of those things one gets nostalgic for, at the moment of discovery. One of those things that I missed as I stood immersed in it. Because I knew this circadian climbing out of the mine-like metro into the dull halogen-lit hallways could never compete with all those colours, all that light.

At Christmas, at the other home, the original version, I got to sit between my loved ones on a plane then a boat all the way to the south, the red island of Hormuz. I went to store some sun and bring back the burnt golden mood of it for the grey days ahead. There were fishermen, smugglers, camel drivers and women with delicately embroidered trousers. Island people moved at island speed. Nothing would ever follow the rigid ruling of our clocks; the must-see-this-and-that-and-that-other-thing and check-it-off the list. Travel touches on the surface of things and gives you the illusion of having a full grasp of their depth.

These glimpses  
simple-minded,  
sudden-wisdoms,  
moving between time-zones and realities, when my only  
responsibility in the face of their existence is to pass  
through. “ The gazelles don’t come around here any-  
more, they are terrified of people. There are  
not a lot of jobs here, so the poor animals  
are often hunted for their meat or sold  
in the black market.”

Last year this time when five was turning into six I was holding three cacao beans in the palm of my hand. Central America was holding me. Time somehow gallops on stubborn and oblivious to where you and I stand. And now that six is turning into seven, my three will soon be four. My twin and I slowly step into that contemporary middle age. In the midst of all this with no prediction or resolution for a series of numbers that trade places; I hang on to the clustered aroma of a bitter orange, a souvenir of Alhambra gardens. Passing from one chokepoint to another in the span of less than a week, from the Strait of Hormuz to Gibraltar; simultaneity changes and everything else including myself, remain the same. Content with the wounded skin of this bitter orange in the palm of my hand, every time I dig my fingernails deeper in, its scent spreads like an invisible halo. An orange planet with a scented aura, and history and geography continue to lose their meaning.

“I thought of how vast we are and how small we exist “

پارسال این موقع ۵ که ۶ میشد سه تا هسته کاکائو تو دستم بود و خودم آمریکای مرکزی، نه این که تاریخ یا جغرافیاش مهم باشه، زمان یه جورِ خودسر و بی اعتنا به اینکه من کجام و تو کجا می تازد و الانم ۶ که ۷ میشه و دو سه هفته دیگه ۳ من و نسیم ۴ و میریم آهسته و نرم سمتِ میان سالیِ معاصر، این وسط بدون هیچ پیش بینی و آرزویی برای یه سری عدد که جاشونو با هم عوض میکنن من دلم خوشه به عطر این نارنج، یادگار عزیزِ از باغِ الحمراء غرناته ... از تنگه ی هرمز به جبل الطارق، همه چی و هیچی عوض میشه و کمابیش همینه که هست، من جمله خودم، دلبسته به همین نارنج که هر وقت ناخونمو تو پوستش فرو میکنم عطرش پخش میشه تو شعاع چند سانتیش و تاریخ و جغرافی مدام اهمیتشونو از دست میدن

The other day when there was a warning for strong winds, I was lying on the couch looking out through bare windows. At the tangible speed the wind was dispersing the clouds, a few minutes felt like a whole day was going by before my immobile feet. It felt like the day was going through me for once, like a lover who suddenly takes charge. It was an iteration of those few seconds when the train opposite yours is moving and you feel yourself move instead.

One of those days where life feels more alive

I could have been lying on that couch holding you against that simulation of a lifetime; we could have gone through an entire relationship within those few minutes. "Love is a solo decision, it has so much to do with our imagination and so little with the other person. A relationship; that takes two people." As I watched those clouds and thought about how the word time-lapse doesn't translate as a phrasal word in Farsi. It essentially says a passage of time; the definition of the word instead of a sound that makes you feel it. I never lived a time-lapse in Farsi.

Words that carry their weight in meaning

There is a pit in my stomach that is sucking the whole of me, in this swirling, flushing motion, inside. Perhaps what will come out are clear waters and calm streams. And if I do not resurface? if this bottomless feeling churns me in and traps me there? If I am not recycled, refined? Every time I sink so low inside myself, I am more afraid of never coming back and then I think...we will all just live together; me and my organs, blood and bacteria. A big happy unhappy family. You say I poison myself, I don't. I just fall into my own gaps, over and over again.

کم همیشه، زیاد می شه، زیاد از حد می شه، لبریز می شه، سر می ره، می ریزه دور تا دور خودش

Outside, it is pitch black. There is a mock up of a spring on its way, old and breathless by now; a hand-me-down. It looks like all the steps it has climbed, to get this far up north. Ali came by, sat down in front of me, saw my puffy eyes, stared at his fingers spread out on the vintage wooden table of the café, looked back up and back down. The appropriate trajectory of a look, I thought, at times like these.

Words that stay in as thoughts  
Words that spring out of a dead gaze  
Thoughts that are thought out hushed

مسیر مناسبِ یک نگاه

What now?

“I needed to realize that *there* was not a permanent option for me to live”

And here?

“Here is not a permanent option for me to live.

And it is okay.”

“You don’t know me that well, so you have no idea what it means for me to have reached this peace”

زن هم بالاخره کنده میشه، جدا می شه، خلافِ میلش حرکت می کنه؛ در جهتِ خطیِ برگشت ناپذیرِ این زمانِ لعنتی. زن تنهاست.

Naghmeh...you come back and everything seems like nothing changes - we all are full of ourselves.....this is what we learn...not just them - you and me, too - but we are full of our experiences and this is what counts at the end.....I got you in my heart now and we will meet again - no matter how, when and where.....And we have to learn that we need time for arriving - me, you and all the others who were at home during the time we travelled.....Nagmeh Linda....  
um beijo grande....I go to bed now....  
I worked the whole night.  
Karen