The impersonation artist: A novel with critical afterword: Displacement and dissent in fiction and art.

Flora K. Schildknecht
University of Louisville

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THE IMPERSONATION ARTIST: A NOVEL

WITH CRITICAL AFTERWORD:

DISPLACEMENT AND DISSENT IN FICTION AND ART

By

Flora K. Schildknecht
B.F.A., University of Louisville, 2009
M.F.A., Spalding University, 2014

A Dissertation
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In Humanities

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University of Louisville
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A Dissertation Approved on

April 17, 2024

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Dr. Nicoletta Vallorani, Outside Reader
DEDICATION

For Ron, whose love made it possible.

For Hugo, whose love of life is an inspiration.

And for my mother, always and forever.
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I must first thank my dissertation creative director, Dr. Ian Stansel, for his belief in the creative project as it grew in scope and his essential close reading of the novel at every stage. In the same breath I must thank my critical director, Dr. Ranen Omer-Sherman, for his unwavering support of my critical writing and research, both before and during the dissertation writing process. I’m truly grateful to committee member Dr. Christopher Reitz, for his investment in the dissertation and for lending his curatorial expertise to the project. My sincere thanks to outside reader Dr. Nicoletta Vallorani, whose acumen as both a novelist and a humanities scholar I value deeply.

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opening the door to university teaching for me, and to the late Nona Burns Schildknecht, for her friendship.

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ABSTRACT

THE IMPERSONATION ARTIST: A NOVEL

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Flora K. Schildknecht

April 17, 2024

This dissertation consists of a creative project, The Impersonation Artist: A Novel, supported by a critical afterword, “Displacement and Dissent in Fiction and Art.” On a narrative level, The Impersonation Artist engages the question of how, and if, participatory art can reveal and intervene in oppressive conditions. In the novel, I employ a stylistic methodology in which the use of multiple narrators and narrative fragmentation formally gesture toward the complex dilemma of how artists might intervene in contemporary problems in the face of conflicting ideologies and ever increasing precarity. I take formal literary inspiration from contemporary novelists from around the globe, including Man Booker International Prize-winner Jokha Alharthi from Oman as well as Pulitzer Prize-winner Jennifer Egan from the United States, both of whom use multiple narrators and fragmented narratives to create multifaceted story worlds.

The novel opens on an artist in self-imposed exile: Sarah, a white artist formerly based in Chicago, has been disgraced after mishaps related to Project Hijab, a performance in which she casts herself and participants as Muslim immigrants with the
aim of revealing discrimination and creating empathy for ostensible others. Post-pandemic, and after giving up performance art, Sarah has taken up work as an international house sitter, and she initially narrates from her newest position in Singapore. When she encounters a disturbing news article about a past participant in *Project Hijab*, a troubled young man named Francis, Sarah must reexamine the circumstances that drove her both to begin, and later to abandon, her performance practice.

Additional characters present differing perspectives in narratives that occur before, during, and after *Project Hijab*. Cam, Sarah’s niece by marriage, is skeptical of Sarah’s belief that art can effectively address the world’s problems. Cam leads an itinerant life of participating in environmental protests, such as the Just Stop Oil protests in which demonstrators glue themselves to works of art. Cam’s actions explore dissentious dimensions of youth culture today.

The perspective of the participant Francis—who eventually takes the idea of performing as an immigrant to dangerous extremes—further complicates the novel. Enamored with white nationalist and anti-immigrant rhetoric, Francis begins to emulate Franco A.—an actual German military officer arrested in 2020 for leading a double life impersonating a Syrian refugee with the aim of committing violent crimes to foment political unrest and hatred of Arab immigrants.

Sarah’s employment as an international house sitter allows her (and the novel) to engage the affective experiences of encountering cultures as a foreigner. Sarah’s frame narrative takes place in both Singapore, and in Venice, Italy, and this transnationality underscores the global scope of the questions that the novel thematically engages,
including: What are the limits of art in generating empathy? Can art (ever) intervene in the face of fanatical hate and xenophobia?

Bringing together the fields of comparative humanities, art history, and narrative analysis, the critical afterword, “Displacement and Dissent in Fiction and Art,” examines art and fiction that inform novel. The first chapter charts the aestheticization of displaced subjects 21st century fiction and art, the second chapter investigates transnational and resistive participatory art practices in light of the history of relational aesthetics and contemporary precarity, and the third chapter investigates the use of multivocality and narrative fragmentation in novels to humanely convey conflicting worldviews. While each critical chapter is more or less autonomous, together, they trace the overarching trajectory of the research undertaken in support of the novel.
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DISPLACEMENT AND DISSENT IN FICTION AND ART

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ELSEWHERE

A figure, no more than a blasted X of a human form in the yellow desert.

Bleached the color of bone, the thin pine trunks that make up the body are lashed together in the middle, and it’s dressed in the discarded clothes of some migrant, some fugitive.

Denim pants in tatters.

A hooded sweatshirt, maybe it began as black but now it’s a battered grey.

The head—and the man knows it’s not really a head, but the shape of a head made by the empty hood—lolls to one side, its neck broken.

He wants to know who made it, but his own head feels full of sand, his mouth a dry empty nothing, and thoughts move too slowly. Why did he come here? Even simple thinking takes time. Is this where Daniel wandered before he died? The name, that perfect name conjures him. Dan! Bone cracking smile, shaved head, blue eyes—the man can picture the eyes like they are there, watching.

The sun shines so brightly that the yellow sand turns white. The man is falling now, familiar dizziness setting in, the slick soles of his sneakers sliding in the sand, and it’s hot, so hot he can’t think, can’t breathe. The thing just hangs there, a person strung up. Inside the hood, in that dark hole without a face, he can almost see Dan’s blue eyes in that void.
A tiny shard of an idea glints. He was right. The figure is surely a sign. And there is a roaring that shakes the air like a howling storm, and then the smell of gasoline.

Another thought. The Arizona desert is nothing like Illinois.

And then the voices of men, and thick arms that pull the man from the sand. He sees a face, a guy with jowls and stubble and sunglasses. The face bares its big teeth. The man can’t say a thing and he lets himself go limp, he lets the sun fill his mouth as he gapes at the sky.
PART I.

How small the dolls.
How insignificant
the hands that move them.

— Marcelo Hernandez Castillo,
“Immigration Interview with Don Francisco”
I was not prepared for the water. Sheets, buckets, walls of water came slapping down
daily from the sky in Singapore. Never mind what the woman whose lavish apartment I
was housesitting had said about monsoon season when I accepted the position, her word,
torrential, didn’t even start to cover it, the sky disgorging itself every January morning
I’d been there so far, the downpour briefly stopping around noon, usually just long
enough for me to scurry to Tiong Baru Bakery for a late breakfast. I’d only been in
Singapore a week, I was already getting into the habit of walking down Yan Kit Road
whenever the sky wasn’t either crying its heart out or pissing on me.

A pedestrians-only route that passed both small, stucco-coated flats with winding
exterior staircases as well as a gleaming high rise with three towers linked by an enclosed
pedestrian throughway over a hundred feet in the air, Yan Kit was a walking path that to
my foreign eyes seemed like an improbable swath of pavement cut through a steaming
jungle. While to the little boys spidering across the monkey bars at the playground beside
the lane this was everyday life, to me it was a fever dream of contradictions that left me
wobbly and sweating.

Perhaps it was the unlikely sight of wild roosters and hens scratching contentedly
in the dirt under the alien trees, every gigantic serrated or folded leaf bursting with
obscene vitality, alongside structures designed by teams of megalomaniacal architects
from the future. Perhaps it was the cumulative dislocation of living in seven countries in
the past year, as my post-art occupation of international housesitting both allowed and
demanded.
Or, perhaps it was the yawning black hole that threatened my heels, whispering that I was no longer making meaningful work. No performance, no photography. Wasting my time with flimsily pursuits. Possibly, it was just my own ability to be out of sorts in general, when I knew I should be grateful or even “happy.” Instead, the overwhelming feeling I had after just a week in the country was of a lack of knowledge about the very nature of the world, like being perpetually on the wrong side of the platform as the train pulled away. It was not entirely unpleasant.

While I was not prepared for many things in Singapore I was not prepared, most of all that morning, to see the face of a ghost in the paper. I was about to take my seat at what was becoming my favorite outside table at Tiong Baru, the second one from the end of the row so I could see the street and the market beyond, when I saw his photograph in the Times. I tried to sit but missed the edge of the chair and landed hard on the wet pavement, right in front of everyone. Clatter of the tray holding my breakfast falling to the pavement. A high pitched, “All right, Ma’am?” as the server swooped in. Gasps and lip-biting stares from a trio of sandy haired undergrads from overseas. I was making a scene. I drug myself back to standing as the server fluttered, leaning in so close I could smell the long braid of hair that extended just past her narrow waist. Lavender. Her eyes, dark underneath blue contact lenses, were full of concern. She was probably someone’s good, hardworking daughter.

“Fine, fine!” I waved the server and her dark braid away, except everything was not fine, fine because I had just seen Francis in the paper and the caption said he was dead, and not only was he dead but he had done terrible things.
“Can bring another,” the server reassured me, plucking my ruined croissant and shards of ceramic from the concrete before retreating. I settled myself, back into the damp chair. I pictured him, and because I pictured him, naturally I thought in the next instant, I thought of you, Cam. How could I not? Newspaper on table, I looked closely. It was our Francis. But changed, darkened: the boy we knew, inverted. I looked again and tried to bring his face to mind, but now that I’d seen this other Francis, the one in the *Times*, my mental vision of the pale young man, the one whose head you’d held, Cam, as he lay prone and shaking, that image faltered. The more I tried to focus on him, the more blurred he became. I wondered if I had ever had a clear picture of him. In other words, Cam, I began to doubt.

“Okay lah,” the server said, setting a new coffee and croissant in front of me. As soon as she was gone, I rubbed the paper, smeared the inked image of his face and brought my darkened thumbs to my nostrils, breathing in the chemical scent of newsprint, proof of the physical reality of the paper itself. One of the overseas students, a tall boy with a big nose and floppy, wheat colored hair eyed me, clearly thinking, *this is a crazy woman*. I eyed him back and kept inhaling the ink smell. He looked away. I’d imagined what Francis might have done many times. He went back to college and took drawing classes. He returned to a wretched hometown, took a job in some mind-numbing light industry, sired a yowling infant. But nothing like what I was reading here. A subterranean existence, a whole identity running underneath the surface, so carefully hidden that the authorities were only just discovering, on his death, that it existed at all.

“Finished, yes?” asked the server, but it was not a question, not really. She was already sweeping up my empty dishes. The sky was milky with clouds and rain would
soon be hurling itself down on the streets, so I started back towards the housesit
apartment. I glanced back to see the server watching me leave, her look of concern,
possibly I’d imagined it to begin with, replaced by contempt. The sky flickered with
daytime lightening, strobing over the server. She was tall, this young woman. I hadn’t
noticed before, but she was very tall, as tall as you, Cam. And without warning I was
afraid. Afraid, and full of longing to see you.

Trying on houses is like trying on lives, like slipping into the extended body of another
person. And after the end of my performing days and my period of illness and seclusion,
I’d tried on houses, apartments, condominiums in succession, taking on the domestic
roles of their inhabitants. Dusting their paintings, thumbing through their books, poking
my feet into their slippers, finding near fits but never the exactly right fit and never
needing to. The pleasure of the housesit is its impermanence. My international
housesitting enterprise had grown quickly, primarily through word of mouth, and while
there was a storage unit back in Chicago, I had not lived in that city in three hundred and
eighty-seven days when I arrived in Singapore.

This success was partly due to my unique skill set, fine art conservation was not a
common resume line for a house sitter, and was partly due to the first connection Jonas
made for me. While it had been eleven years since the end of our marriage, he had his
network, and was willing to offer me a leg up after my bad spell, as he put it. Jonas
arranged the first client, a philanthropist and collector in a London suburb who was
traveling to Iceland for the opening of a museum for which he had been a primary funder.
The collector came back to find everything shining and dust-free, every piece more attractively displayed, thanks to my subtle tweaking of the lighting. From his triptych of Ai Weiwei dropping the vase rendered in LEGOs to his four-by-six-foot photograph by Vik Muniz of Caravaggio’s *Narcissus* recreated in garbage from Rio’s massive landfill favellas, everything gleamed. Ecstatic, the collector gave my information to a critic and friend in Stockholm who was planning a month-long sojourn elsewhere, and that was all it took. I hadn’t had more than a week’s downtime, since.

My clients no doubt also appreciated my disappearing skills. I was careful to erase all visible evidence of ever having been there. Not a single hair was left in a sink basin, not a single towel was left damp, and I made sure to air out the place twenty-four hours before their arrival to remove any smells of my person from the rooms. My goal was invisibility, to return their dwelling to them comfortable and lived in but, as if by magic, showing no trace and no mark of person who had been tending the hearth while they were away.

The thing clients really appreciated, without knowing it, was my ability to pretend, to create, to perform. I would imagine myself living a life in their home, in their city. I would look at their collections and imagine the person I would be if I lived there, then will her into being. After I’d created that woman, I’d let her add some small object to the dwelling. A tiny, filigreed dish for the soap, purchased at a secondhand shop. A lacquered box for a pair of the real owner’s earrings, found at a rummage sale. A minute figurine of a bird placed next to one of their houseplants, bought from a street vendor. Upon their return, the clients found that my performance of life within their walls had make their rooms feel, in some indescribable way, more like home.
The truth is I’m not sure I’ve ever felt at home anywhere, Cam. Maybe the two years married to Jonas came close. He had his circle of friends, and I had my performance and photography, living near the shore in that lovely house, but it was not enough, and I left. Who would have thought I’d jettison a husband but retain you as—what? You were too close to my own age to be a daughter, and how do the binding ties of a short-lived marriage sustain between two women whose connections were never clear-cut enough to come with a name, anyway? Step-aunt? Ex-step-aunt? There was no readymade for what we are, or were, to each other.

Safely inside the Singapore apartment, I removed my shoes and undressed. Sitting cross-legged in my damp underwear on the blue and gold Turkish rug, I looked out the large plate glass windows as the rain walloped against them. I unfurled the damp *Times*, the paper moist against my thighs. Could I have imagined seeing him? No. There he was. Francis. Or, as you called him, *that lunatic*.

If you were here, Cam, you would have fallen out of your chair, too, on seeing his picture, I’m sure of it. He looked like a possessed man, with an aura that made me regret ever putting you in a room with him. And you’ll think I’m being melodramatic, waxing maternal (as if I could!) but it’s not an exaggeration to say that Francis looked evil, murdering the camera with his gaze, like he was seconds away from violence. But how could this be? He was completely vulnerable when we had known him, or so I thought. Of course, you had doubts, but I ignored them, and then he was gone, and so were you.
FRANCIS

Francis stood on the gravel track that passed for a road leading away from Mama’s aluminum sided house naming the things he saw and drawing their outlines in his notebook, because there was nothing else left to do. Mama had been gone for days now and he and Daniel had no money, and nothing left to eat but cereal.

The field of rusting girders from the defunct steel mill, he named *The Boneyard*.

The pools that used to be part of the Calumet River, pockets of grey water heavy with slag, he named *The Terrible Tar Pits*.

The stacks of the two refineries spitting ribbons of fire hundreds of feet into the orange twilight sky became *God’s Dirty Fingers*.

The humped backs of the huge oil tanks became *The Giant’s Eggs*.

Beyond where the *Eggs* huddled together was a wall of black that must be Lake Michigan, since that’s what Mama had said, but he’d never been there and Mama was gone, and no telling when she’d be back. Godforbid but Francis, watching the sky go from orange to blue and tasting the slick of oil on his tongue, was about to cry. He made the long mark of the Lake blacker and blacker, and rubbing the pencil blunt across the page.

And then there was Daniel, barreling out of the growing dark and pelting Francis with a handful of gravel, an eruption of grey powder and rock. *Moon Dust*. But how could he draw dust? With a howl his brother was on top of him, the notebook knocked away and Daniel’s sweaty boy-smell everywhere, his sturdy limbs overpowering Francis, and they were rolling on the Moon, both laughing, when the crunch of tires stirred up more dust and a spray of smaller rocks. Headlights shone yellow on them and they froze.
The engine died, and into the headlights stepped Gran. She was a big woman and ungainly. Gran’s wide, pale face was dotted with liver spots, her lumpy nose stuck out from her otherwise flat face. The lips of her small mouth had a bluish cast from being pressed together most of the time, and she stared down at the boys like she’d just come from another planet and they were a couple of green skinned aliens.

“Well, for shit’s sake get in the car,” Gran finally said, but Daniel gripped Francis tighter, hugging or strangling, like he’d no intention of ever letting go. “And get off each other,” she added with a snort, “Godforbid the neighbors get the wrong idea.” What neighbors? Francis looked at the half-built shack they’d lived in most of their lives, a few trailers on either side with folks that came and went and never cared squat what he and Daniel did, or if Mama was home and wired up, or if she’d run off again. The giggle that escaped Francis was contagious, soon Daniel was in on it too and even Gran let out a kind of hoot that broke down into a fit of phlegmy coughing.

Once they were in the old Buick and pulling away Francis wondered when they’d be coming back, and when they’d be seeing Mama, Mama who’d been gone now for longer than ever before.

“She loved you. For sure she did. It just weren’t enough. And now she’s gone off to who knows where and won’t be back until who knows when, so you’d both better hunker down with me,” Gran said. “For now, at least,” she added.

But whatever Gran said out loud, really, she’d come to get them for good. Francis knew it then. Mama had most likely left them for the boyfriend. The boyfriend was neither boy’s daddy, but whupped them just the same whenever he got the chance.
Two days ago, the city had shut off the water, so good thing Daniel, always thinking, had filled the empty two-liters of Mountain Dew with water beforehand so there had been water to drink. But the boys had had to do their business in a bucket they emptied out behind the bushes, in a trench that Daniel had dug and proudly dubbed their “Army shitter.” Francis had bawled like a useless two-year old when the water was shut off, but Daniel just laughed his crazy laugh, “Man up, knucklehead!”

This would be like camping, Daniel said, and hadn’t Francis always wanted to go camping, but with no daddy to take him? Well, here was his camping. Besides, the power was still on, for now, and they could still blow people in Call of Duty on the Play Station, just like they had during Mama’s three-day card games. The boys were both ten, but Daniel was almost eleven: born eleven months apart, there was a slim fingernail of time each year when they were the same age on paper.

Gran’s place was nicer than the half-built house that Francis had been raised in. There were no holes covered over with heavy plastic where spaces for windows had been made but actual windows had never been put in, and the boys would stay in the guest room, a whole room just in case someone came to visit and wanted to sleep there.

Mama had never had visitors, not besides the ones who stayed up all night and all day at the kitchen table, playing euchre and poker and twenty-one, doing lines of shards and drinking Mountain Dew like if they stopped the world would end. The walls at Gran’s were freshly painted, the gabled living room had a big TV always beaming in the News, and the beige carpet was so new and clean it gave off a sweet chemical smell—all courtesy of the checks from the Insurance Company. But there were rules, not like at Mama’s.
Rule One: Never startle Gran. She’d been working the laundry in an airport hotel in Gary, Indiana, when an airplane crashed through the lobby, and the fire burned off all her hair and killed all the other women working in the laundry, which was in the basement. These dead women had refused to leave through the burning building with Gran. As a result, Gran took lots of Xanax and would talk in tongues if you jumped out and said, “Boo.” This was where the money came from, from the Accident and the Insurance Company, and this was why Gran had been able to leave her old neighborhood by the toll road for Windy Acres, the subdivision where her tidy house now stood.

Rule Two: No Mexicans, Blacks, Jews, or Arabs in Gran’s house. It was a half-Mexican boyfriend who had gotten Gran knocked up with Mama, and she would never trust them again. And the Blacks were everywhere now, she told the boys, and it was a Black pilot that had wrecked the plane that wrecked Gran’s mind and body, her hair still grew funny after she’d been burned bald. Gran had never to her knowledge met a real Jew, but she’d heard about them, so she added them to the list. As for the Arabs, ever since the Twin Towers fell just thinking about them made Gran crazy.

At night, when she thought the boys were asleep, that was when Gran would go crazy. At first the boys shared the guest bed, two burning ten-year-old bodies pressed together. The third night after their rescue Francis had untangled himself from the covers and walked into the living room so Daniel could rub one out in peace. He could tell the older boy was going to, by the way he kept wiggling, and he’d rather not have to pretend not to notice. He’d thought the living room was empty. The fancy air conditioner made a low hum that Francis had quickly come to love. He could just curl up on the sofa and listen to that nothing-sound until morning.
But there was Gran in her nighty, on the floor in the dark with her knees drawn up, eyes locked on the corner of the room. Her face was sunken around the jaw like a zombie face Francis had seen in a movie once. She spoke, and without her false teeth her mouth was bare and pink inside like an infant’s. “The Devil has followed you boys,” she said, so quietly that Francis wondered if he’d heard right.

“The Devil is on his way,” she said again, louder, and looked at Francis like he was supposed to answer.

“How d’you know, Gran?” She stared at the electric outlet on the wall. This was what she’d been looking at the whole while, the empty electrical outlet.

“When you hear the fiddle music playing from the sockets. That’s when you know he’s coming.” Francis stared at the outlet. He tried to hear the music Gran heard. It was very faint, but if he listened hard, he could just about make it out.

“Don’t worry, Gran. I won’t let the Devil get in.” Francis took the lamp off the side table and plugged it into the outlet. Then he took the clock radio from its place on the linoleum kitchen counter and plugged that in, too. “There,” he told Gran. “Now he can’t mess with us.” Gran just smiled her baby mouthed smile at him, her eyes shining. And, sure enough, Francis couldn’t hear that faint fiddle music anymore. The Devil might be coming, but he would have to wait.

FOREIGN

What do I look like? Who do I look like? Let me tell you a story, Cam, a story that happened because I look like nobody in particular, or because I look like a person in a story some people might have on reserve, a story waiting for me. My parents were white,
pale even. But I fall on the olive side of the spectrum. Left to its own devices, my hair has always been mass of dark curls, and the more time I spend in the sun the darker I become. As a child in Ohio, people sometimes asked, Where are you really from. Around thirteen, I began to realize I could be mistaken for not-white just by being the darkest person in the room. Or by not being in a room at all, but on a sidewalk alone after dark. Almost white is how I began to think of myself, half accepting of this identity I owned half the time.

Of course, in the beginning I’d thought of myself as white, meaning I thought nothing at all. Slowly, an awareness emerged. I didn’t automatically place as a real member of the invisible, everywhere tribe the rest of my family effortlessly laid claim to. I stayed out of the sun. I bought a series of straightening irons for my hair and kept them hidden in my sock drawer like contraband. It wasn’t as bad, later. My mutable appearance is something I’ve developed into an asset, a tool for my work. To inhabit a face that can transform, or be transformed, is a kind of gift in performance.

On the train, I became foreign and in a matter of minutes, and I wasn’t even performing. The train was full to bursting. Bodies pressed together made the air a physical thing, a stale presence that pressed itself to every inch of my exposed face. My hair, full and dark, was covered, in the wind I’d wrapped my scarf over my head and around my neck and over my mouth to keep my hair and some body heat contained.

I never saw the man who spoke in my ear, just as the train barreled into the darkness of a tunnel. Go back where you came from, his voice said, just quietly enough that I wondered who was speaking, and if they were speaking to me. Don’t think I can’t kill you if I want to, the voice whispered. We were still in the darkness, his mouth so close to my ear it seemed the man was speaking inside my head, intimate and insane.
Out of the tunnel and nearing a platform, florescent flashed through the windows as we squealed to a stop. The voice spoke again. *Terrorist bitch.* Next, the shove that would have sent me flailing, except my hand had become welded to the metal pole inside the train. I looked around at the other faces as people jostled out and shoved their way in. A young Black man in a tailored tweed suit stared at me from his seat. A middle-aged white woman with blond hair bobbed short and a big gold chain peeking out from her black wool trench looked straight through me. Who was I to these people? What did they see when they looked at me?

Off the train, I staggered into a corner and stood there, cheek pressed to the cold brick. I walked home avoiding my reflection in shop windows, not meeting people’s eyes as I shouldered past, until I couldn’t hide from her. There she was, my reflection, in the mirrored side of the elevator, her dark hair covered by a black and white scarf. A woman I didn’t recognize. A foreigner, her face a mask of grief with its carefully applied makeup ruined by tears. The abject immigrant. Or worse. The terrorist. It was a violation I’d had no control over, a public assault I didn’t ask for. I looked at the woman reflected back and tried not to blame her, Cam. What could she do, such a woman, a woman with a face nobody wanted to see? How could she fight back, except by making them look, and then make them see themselves, looking.

**SISSY**

It was Daniel who saved him. Daniel with his desire to fight, Daniel who was his punisher and his redeemer. In eighth grade, it was Daniel who held Robby Mullen’s head in the toilet until he retched and then barked Robby’s teeth on the porcelain rim, all
because Robby was teasing Francis about the usual. His sissy name, his unknown bastard Daddy, his tweaker Mama, his nut-job Gran, his notebooks full of weird drawings.

No one teased Daniel, not ever. He bulked up fast, he even got Gran to buy him a weight bench for in the garage, and after a few years there was no hint of weakness, just a muscley cheerfulness undercut by a vibe that suggested the ability to grin happily while bashing your head in, if need be. Alone in the bathroom at Gran’s, Francis tried on Daniel’s grin in the mirror—lips back, teeth and gums flashing, scalp shaved clean to show off the skull. He’d call himself Daniel—or better, Dan in his head, and mouth it like a chant in the mirror: Dan, Danny-oh, Danny-boy, Dan-my-man. What was the difference between them, except a name? But like his name Francis was weak, bookish, and didn’t fit. But he could do things Daniel couldn’t—read well, spell well, solve algebra problems using the quadratic equation.

Until his junior year of high school, Francis avoided the weed that seemed to keep Daniel going. One October night he came along with Daniel and his thuggish friends, all white boys with home-made tattoos, to smoke up in the park by Wolf Lake. After just one crackling hit of the seedy stuff and he felt his head swell up like a water balloon and all the bones in his face go thick and rubbery. He coughed and almost puked, and looking at Daniel and his buddies he knew, with terrible clarity, he knew. There was this thing, this thing that separated them from him. They were the type of boys who hunted others, and he was the type of boy who was hunted. Harley, Daniel’s scary shadow for the past year, smacked his lips at Francis.

“How about a kiss, pretty boy,” he rumbled.
Silence. What on earth could Francis to say to that? Then Daniel and Harley and the other two laughed, an ugly animal sound, and Francis ran, through the trees stripped naked by the corrosive air, down the narrow road where the old men fished and sat with their battered coolers and would not meet his eyes as he passed, back to the car parked on the spit of land that cut through the Wolf Lake.

The sun sank until the sky was lit only by God’s Dirty Fingers in the distance and the rhythmic clangs of the great machines mixed with the needle whine of insects rising from the reed-fringed banks. Francis was sitting in the passenger seat wishing Daniel had left the car keys when the star spoke to him. Not spoke, really, but tried to communicate, one star in the greasy sky shining brighter and brighter, making him so dizzy he couldn’t think, until the star was inside his head and his entire brain was shining with whatever the star wanted to say. If he just listened hard enough, he would know what the sign was supposed to be, but the star was so loud it wiped out everything, first language and then light.

And then Francis was alone in the seat of the car, head lit up with the star’s echo and the sweet metal taste of blood in his mouth, blood drying on the growing stubble on his chin. The sky was that much darker, the speaking star gone.

Daniel and his friends got back stinking of weed and the Night Train Express wine that Harley’s drunk of a daddy bought by the gallon. Daniel and Harley just stared at Francis, breathing on his neck, daring him to flinch. They’d laughed earlier, but now the use of fists was eminent, a beatdown likely or inevitable. Francis wished he’d just left and walked the narrow road back to the highway where he could have tried to hitch a ride to Gran’s. But this was not what he had done, and now here they were, and it was a test,
this much Francis knew. But what were the rules and how would he pass? What were they waiting for, and wouldn’t it be better just to take his pounding and have it over and done with?

Whatever it was they were waiting for, it didn’t happen that night, or the next one, or the one after that, and Francis said nothing about the speaking star or the test he’d surely failed, because who would he tell, anyway?

The rest of the year Francis watched as Daniel got immense, truly ripped. Daniel wasn’t smart in the same ways Francis was, but he knew how to get what he wanted. He had a plan. First, he’d do two deployments in the Infantry. Next, advanced training for operating unmanned aircraft systems, so he could rain down hellfire on the jihadis from an airconditioned trailer.

After Dan, as he went by now, enlisted, he got a tattoo on his bicep of a flaming American flag and a screaming skull with razor teeth, its mouth wide in a yell of triumph. Francis knew this was smart—the guys in basic would know not to mess with Dan.

Dan was lucky to be going away. He could be someone else, somewhere else, first in basic training at Fort Huachuca, in Arizona, his first trip out of the great state of Illinois, and after, who could know? Iraq maybe, or Afghanistan, Dan said.

He’d be doing the work of the Lord, Gran liked to warble, the News a constant behind her, green night vision footage of the wars playing out on the screen. He’d be keeping the terrorists eating sand over there, instead of spreading sharia and jihad here in the Heartland, this land of the hard beating, strung-out hearts of all those unlucky enough to be born into the wrecked beauty of the Illinois Rust Belt.
Francis was in his narrow bed at Gran’s, drawing Dan’s soul eating skull tattoo in a hundred variations in a notebook when Dan stuck his head into the room and told Francis he should come to a last party with the guys, one final bash before basic.

“How can I leave without partying with my brother, my knucklehead little bro?” Dan said that night, through a cloud of smoke from the bong. Francis, who didn’t smoke but wanted to be there more than anything, felt himself grow that much taller. He was Dan’s brother. And it didn’t matter that he had a sissy name, Dan wanted him there and not even Harley, who had shaved his head like Dan even though he wasn’t going into the Army at all, even Harley couldn’t say shit. Not even the fact that Francis was clean or straight-edge as Dan put it could keep him out.

Francis watched them, these guys, these hunters, do their lines of coke (never speed, Dan said, since that was what took Mama down) and talk big about all the pussy that would jump into Dan’s lap once he was an Army Man. They flexed and preened. They were men now. Francis had never seen anything or anyone so great as his brother, shining and ready to be someone in the world, a world that would always him from his boyish brutality.

In the morning Francis drove Dan to the Greyhound bus in Gran’s Buick. Dan was glassy-eyed and his skin was yellowish. He looked almost afraid as he hoisted his puke green Army-issue rucksack on his shoulder. He gripped Francis in a hard, embarrassed hug (Dan only ever touched Francis with the friendly fist). He whispered, “Look after yourself, knucklehead,” in a voice that made it sound like a warning. And then he was gone, leaving Francis to watch the bus pull away and wonder if he could
survive without his brother, his twin who could always be counted on to protect and
frighten and punish and love him.

VEILS

The day the package came with my hijabs I secreted it from the mail room, holding the
garments close to my body as I scurried back to the elevator. Back in my apartment, I
pulled the little cord on the mailer like I was defusing a bomb, not that I’d ever done that,
but once the word entered my mind, bomb, there was no getting it back out. I pulled the
shade, blocking out my prized view of the Lake, and turned the bolt on the door before
taking the hijabs from their tissue paper wrappers. I’d ordered one light pink and one
black, because wasn’t black the color you always expected them to be?

Fingering the soft, blameless fabric, I reminded myself that wearing the hijab
strictly performance: who would ever choose to be shrouded like that, if they had the
freedom to decide otherwise? Of course, I was aware, Cam, that this point of view
centered on my own idea of freedom. It was my thinking and my project, but these ideas
didn’t come from me alone. A garment could transform, could make you foreign, no
matter how open you made your eyes, how generous you made your mouth. Garments
and faces are the same: changeable, mutable, potentially if not always deceptive. A face
tells you nothing: If you fish by the face you fish for trouble, or so the saying goes.

Still, it would be unpleasant to wear these things. A necessary abasement. But
then the fabric whispered against my cheek. The cloth cradled my face like I was a
precious, delicate creature in need of swaddling, and sounds were muffled by the fabric
covering my ears. I was unprepared for how secure I felt, wearing the hijab. It was the
The first time I thought that just maybe there was more going on with these garments than I’d imagined. For me, that was where the *Project* began, slipping the fabric over my head, and looking out at a world that somehow did not look the same.

The photographer I hired was fresh out of grad school and hungry for any gig that paid. Syd seemed to think the *Project* was beneath her, she wore a poker face that broadcast either stoic professionalism or extreme boredom. Still, Syd was a quick study and had a good sense of color. She obeyed the rule of thirds and made compositions according to my one and only directive: communicate conflict. Beyond that, it didn’t matter, Syd herself was unimportant then.

At the post office: an attempt to buy stamps resulted in a request for identification. Syd captured the driver’s license in my hand and the next customer staring me down, thinking he could look without being seen. High drama under the intuitional fluorescents.

At a huge playground downtown: hills made of brightly colored rubber bits, two-story tube slides snaking under a swaying drawbridge, screaming children and anxious parents. I was now wearing a more conservative khimar that not only framed the face but covered me to the waist. Every bench was packed, except the one where I sat alone, reading. Syd reveled a woman in isolation, every face directed away, disavowing my draped figure.

From the hundreds of photos Syd shot, I printed and sent the Gallery the ones where onlookers either ignored her or stared at her, the veiled woman I was performing.
So many faces were captured, frozen in looks of unguarded animosity. The narrowed eye, the downturned mouth, the refusal to look at her head on, became the motifs of the series.

Sales of the large format photographs at the Gallery were strong. I was invited to be part of an upcoming group show at the Museum of Contemporary Art, titled “Local Group: Women Artists of Chicago and the Body.” Wren, you remember her, of course, Cam, Wren was ecstatic. She kept reminding and warning me that any potential sales had to go through the Gallery, per our contract. She talked of pulling strings and getting a review of my work into e-flux, saying I was ready, telling me that things were set to explode, in a good way. I just had to keep doing what I was doing.

My collection of coverings grew. I eventually ordered a full burqa, although I only made one set of photographs with the garment—somehow wearing it anywhere crowded seemed like too much, like asking for trouble. Despite her grumbling, I got Syd to meet me at the Lake at dawn. It was early December, and the concrete steps descending to the frozen water were silvered with ice. Only a few fanatics were grinding by on the black ribbon of the running path. The total seclusion of the black garment shaped my body into an anonymous form. I knelt, tucking my knees underneath me and arching my back, making a boulder of my body.

I shaped myself like a rock by the sea, folding an arm into an arch, exposing one hand to the stinging air, making my head disappear. I shifted my covered body into a range of landscape forms as the sun rose higher, turning the sky lavender and then gold. For a moment that seemed to stretch on indefinitely, the only sounds besides my own movement were Syd’s breathing and the metallic clicks of the shutter.
There was a slab of stone near the path, and I placed myself there, stomach down. I slowly raised my arms and legs. The granite pressed cold against my belly and the fabric of the burqa billowed out like wings. “Crazy,” spat a grey-haired white man as he sprinted past us, fighting to get the word into the icy air. Syd exposed what would turn out to be a particularly successful image: the cloaked woman soars out towards the Lake, seeming almost suspended in air. The spandex clad jogger stares, the frozen miasma of that word twisting away from his mouth. I had a series of five printed, and each sold within a month and went out into the world.

As we packed up, Syd’s pale face was blotchy and raw, but she was smiling like she knew what a good shoot it had been. For the first time I noticed a charming gap between her front teeth. “You are crazy,” she said, with something that almost sounded like admiration.

MASTERPIECE

It was not Cam’s favorite painting in the Rijksmuseum, Wheatfields with Crows, but it would do. On loan from the van Gogh Museum and reported to be the great impressionist’s last painting, it had been called Wheatfields Under Troubled Skies in Cam’s art history textbook and it seemed a good painting to glue one’s hand to in protest. Wheat, a riot of yellow, vertical lines lashing upwards. Birds, no more than suggestions of birds, cutting the dark sky, and the troubled thunderheads hanging low, blue and pregnant, but bearing what? Wheatfields Under Troubled Skies was totally a better title. The path, sable bordered by a chunky impasto of green, disappeared all too fast at the
horizon, lost in the burnt wheat, under those heavy clouds, and Cam couldn’t look at the painting without thinking of endings.

The floors of that part of the Rijksmuseum were pale wood, smooth and full of Dutch pride, and the walls in their self-important navy paint, along with the pastel-painted crown moldings twenty feet above Cam and Vance, signaled that they were in the presence of art to be revered. This was art that didn’t need to apologize for anything, not colonial history, not the extractivism that continued to ravage the planet, not even for persisting in calling the (admittedly brilliant) old dead white painters the Dutch ‘Masters.’

Cam laced her fingers together with Vance’s and his milk-tea complexion made Cam’s hand look even paler, and it was cliché she knew, to think it, but she didn’t care. They were the same in all other ways, more or less. Straight hips—clad in black cigarette jeans terminating in white high-top sneakers. Hair—hers yellow and his bleached and dyed yellow, shaved underneath and four-inches long on top, ready to flop over eyes or be gelled and sprayed and tortured into any number of configurations. Chests—identically flat now that Cam’s top surgery was complete, covered in the white tee-shirts they had stenciled earlier that day in Vondelpark under the watchful bronze gaze of the of Joost van den Vondel, apparently a seventeenth century Dutch poet and writer of plays who had a thing for John the Baptist and wore a cape and a tasseled waistcoat. Over the shirts were light-gauge sweaters spun from something synthetic that felt like cashmere but that was, of course, not cashmere. Regrettably, the sweaters probably had some kind of petrochemical-derived synthetic fibers in there, or were made in a sweatshop, or both, but considering that fact didn’t stop Cam from admiring the non-curve of her chest, and
imagining the words stenciled there, *Stop Oil Now*. Her newly re-shaped body that could belong to anyone, be anything. Appearance had been nothing but a curse for Cam since she began to ‘blossom,’ her often-absent mother’s hateful word for Cam’s body’s betrayal at thirteen, when her chest went volcanic, complete with crimson latices of stretch marks under the swollen mounds that began to extend from her once-perfectly smooth ribcage, drawing the attention of anyone in the vicinity like a magnet. Even a toddler she babysat had groped her once, and even on the bus or in the cafeteria eating her macaroni people would stare. It had an alchemical effect, the combination of boobs and blonde hair, that soon made every interaction about Cam’s body. But now here she was, free from all that, and yes there was numbness and yes there was some pain and more to pain to come, later, but the drainage tubes were out at last and her body was hers again, and here was Vance, tender and alive, his pulse flickering at his clavicle, and in his hand was Cam’s hand and there, in his other hand, was the tube of fast-drying, industrial-grade adhesive, and they were really going to do it, glue themselves to the frame of van Gogh’s last painting.

Surely, the people at Stop Oil Now would accept them after this, even if they had been denied by that cross British lady with the grey hair and the lazy eye who wanted volunteers who were not just committed but “reliable,” who would take the time to complete the mandatory nonviolent resistance training, and who “understood the gravity of the climate crisis in concrete terms.” Who else would understand it more than two twenty-three-year-olds? Hadn’t Greta Thunberg, that beloved Swedish troublemaker with her glinting eyes and second-hand flannels already proved that it was really only the young, the soon-to-be-inheritors of the messed-up, tapped-out, carbon-saturated planet
that *could* get the urgency of climate death? Maybe it had been Vance’s propensity to
stare too long without blinking or Cam’s bouncing enthusiasm that bordered on mania,
but the organizers they met with in Bristol had not invited them to block the M25 or to
glue their hands to the frame of a Turner painting in Manchester, so they would go it
alone, and why not? Like everyone on their side of the partition between the awake and
the sleepwalking, what did they have to lose?

Vance had nearly opened the tube of glue when a security guard walked past
them, heels clicking on that polished floor, her long nose slanting down to make her lips,
sharply outlined in mauve, even more angular. The woman was white, forties, with
brown hair pulled into a bun so tight it looked painted on. The Dutch. Her thighs were
probably unforgivably hard from years of bicycling. Like the masterpieces on the walls,
the van Goghs, the Vermeers, the Rembrandts, this woman was unapologetically in
charge, and she was looking at them hard. Cam pulled Vance into the center of the room
and slipped her tongue into his mouth, waiting for the guard to pass.

“I have to pee,” Vance finally said.

“Let’s find another painting,” Cam said, pulling Vance past a series of canvases,
none that seemed as fitting as the van Gogh. They passed an enormous oil of a swan,
luminous wings outstretched to protect her eggs, then a group portrait of serious looking
statesmen with pale foreheads, velvet robes, shining black eyes. Vance pulled his hand
away, which was of course fine. They had decided early on only to touch when they both
wanted to, agreed not to conform to expectations of obligatory contact. *Love Letter*, the
painting they stood in front of, was a Vermeer depicting a young woman of some stature.
Her sunlight-colored robe was trimmed in ermine, a dollop of a pearl hung from her ear,
in her left hand was a lute or some other teardrop shaped renaissance stringed instrument. The woman held an unopened letter in her right hand, apparently just delivered by the other woman in the frame, likely a laundress, judging by the basket of garments at her feet, her brown dress of coarse fabric, slightly bulbous nose, and hair wrapped in a utilitarian white swath. Working-class posture, hand on hip, she flashed a knowing smile at the other woman, her lady, for she was undoubtedly not just a circa-1600 woman but a lady, that much was clear. The lady looked up at her laundress, eyes shimmering with anticipation, and there was a tenderness that pulsed between them. Clearly, from the shadowed bedroom in the foreground that Vermeer had used to frame the women, they were alone and away from the watchful gaze of the other household members; the young women’s fretful mother and her brooding, overbearing father were safely out of sight.

“What do you think is in the letter,” Cam said.

“It’s called The Love Letter, so it must be romantic,” Vance said, but he sounded irritated, bored. How he could he just take things at face value like that. What was the point of gluing yourself to art you weren’t even interested in?

“We should do this one,” she said. “We can guess what’s in the letter while they arrest us.” Vance, usually quick to laugh, shifted nervously while staring at the painting.

“It might be bad news in that letter,” he said.

“It could be anything, good or bad. It’s the moment before that’s the subject of the painting. The point isn’t even really the letter, it’s the way they’re together, those two, when everything changes for one of them. The woman in yellow might elope, and her maid goes with her. She thinks she has it made, but the man who sent the letter turns out to be a real shit, he smacks her around, and then the two women run off together. Either
way, it’s this moment between them that makes the painting interesting, when they’re alone together, and everything is about to change.”

“I still have to pee,” Vance said, and turned away, starting down the corridor without waiting for Cam to reply. Cam had said everything without really planning to, the words had tumbled out as she thought them, like they always did when she was excited, and it was just idiotic, to use a word so old-fashioned. *Elope*. What had she been thinking. She would just sit on the luxuriously padded leather bench facing the painting and wait.

When Vance did not return after what seemed like more than enough time to find and use the bathroom, Cam stretched herself, her chest ached when she sat still too long, and started down the corridor Vance had disappeared into. Soon there was one of those clean little museum hallways, all white and modern, that led to a water fountain and two doors. Pulling on a black ballcap, Cam pushed open the door marked *Heren*, with her height and new shape, she could usually enter any men’s room without drawing attention right away. Peeking under the stalls, she saw no feet. Not Dutch feet in pointy polished leather shoes, and not Vance’s white sneakers, either. On the counter was the tube of adhesive, but Vance was gone.

How could Vance just leave like that, how could he walk out on her, now, on his lovely slender feet, when they were poised to make such a solid gesture of protest? The night they had met outside of Sheffield, in the trespassers’ encampment in the forested glen, a place that smelled of rain-soaked oaks woolly with moss, and of smoke from scavenged windfall pine, Vance had pressed his lean feet against Cam’s in the communal tent. Until dawn they had rubbed their soles together, contact that was uncomplicated by
feelings other than the need to touch and be touched. Cam had intuited that Vance had graceful feet, and in the daylight, she saw that each long toe was tipped with a perfect, pink oval of nail with an immaculate white edge. They were the feet of a visionary. When the officials came—they were advocating for communal land rights by squatting on acreage belonging, in theory, to a British electric company—it had been only Vance and Cam, among the Americans, who understood that signing the permits the officials offered would defeat the purpose of everything. Vance had explained, with infinite patience, that the land really belonged to everyone, and since it did belong to everyone, no one should have to sign a permit to occupy what was already theirs, should they? Vance had said the same thing, again with absolute calm, as they were handcuffed and taken away in the orange van, and he’d said the same thing again, to anyone who would listen, after three nights of bunking in the nearby detention center, once they had been released. He would do it all over if needed.

Cam unscrewed the cap to the adhesive and squished a big line of the stuff, viscous and reeking, on to her left palm. Tossing the remaining tube in the wastebin, she walked back down the hall and returned to Love Letter. There was the woman in her ermine and yellow robe, still receiving her letter from the maid, but now it seemed her sidelong glance at the other woman was full of dread. Vance had been right. This was not necessarily a love letter, perhaps it was a letter of abandonment, or worse. Wasn’t the moment before something important happened always better than the movement something actually happened? In the just-before there were still possibilities, still choices to be made, but in the just-after, certain possibilities were gone for good. Still, a person had to go forward, a person had to do the thing.
Lightly closing her fist so not to smear the glue, Cam peeled off her sweater and pressed her hand to the side of the Love Letter’s frame. She turned away from the women in the painting and stared at a point fixed across the room. Already someone saw her—a thin man in a rumpled suit hiccupped or gasped, pulled out his phone and started waving it in Cam’s direction, tapping away. Like she’d been waiting, the security guard with the sharp mouth sprinted over, museum staff carrying partitions, screens made of black cloth in metal frames, darted in front of Cam, mostly blocking her from the view of the gathering crowd. Cam watched through a gap in the fabric as the skinny man with the phone filmed her, and waited for what would happen next.

WOMEN

I came to the Project, Cam, not out of a misguided desire to appropriate, or to exacerbate stereotypes about Muslim women (as certain less-than-kind critics have suggested) but to inhabit the discomfort of being mis-identified, and to share that discomfort with others so they might grow from it. Participants might experience pain, but only so that those pains might be growing pains. You will remember, before Project Hijab, my other work, Getting to Know You? This was when you were on the lam, as Jonas put it, although from what or whom I was never sure. But I mailed you a key to my apartment in Chicago, and a few weeks later you showed up wearing an alarmingly skimpy outfit with an infected septum piercing.

You offered no explanation, and I didn’t ask for one. Instead, I told you all about Getting to Know You. I’m mentioning that project because I want to remind you: the first time I put on someone else’s face, it was the face of another white women. My goal, in
these performances, was to create women who both existed and did not exist. Yes, they were constructed personas, but they were constructed from people’s very real ideas of who and what a woman might be.

Do you remember the first woman from *Getting to Know You*? She was a woman that had been not so unlike myself back then. Early thirties, single, except this woman had bleached hair, loved to bake cookies, and wore pastel sweaters. Like me, this woman had no children. *No kiddos yet*, her Match.com profile proclaimed with just the right mix of optimism and desperation. Unlike me, this woman had a steady job as a bank teller.

“Amy,” as I’d named her, was a hit with the men on Match. And even though Amy’s potential lover, Chad, knew she’d been created as part of a performance, even though he’d signed the informed consent and had known, from the start, that all of his exchanges with “Amy” would potentially be displayed in a gallery, he couldn’t help believing in her. Eventually, he wanted to meet, *IRL*. This was when I pulled the plug on “Amy” and her profile and moved on to “Beatrice.”

When I explained this, you wrinkled up your pixie nose, crusted septum ring and all, in disbelief. You asked what I’d said to Chad. I told you it was simple enough: I messaged him that phase of the project was finished and changed my cell number. “Stone cold,” you said approvingly, sinking further into my swampy leather sofa and throwing up your hands for emphasis. You asked, “Why Beatrice next?”

Your hair spread over breasts barely contained by your camisole; a nearly six foot tall nineteen-year-old, you had no sense of appearance as anything but an asset. I’d just shrugged in reply to your question about names.
In truth, I’d made a whole alphabet of profiles of potentially datable women—designed partly in response to suggestions for ‘improvements’ I’d received from actual men met through online dating after the divorce. “Beatrice,” it turned out, was a much easier role for me—I staged her as a Mexican American Catholic, which seemed more plausible. But my final woman for *Getting to Know You* had been my favorite. “Zoey” was edgy, with a purple streak in her dark hair and musical taste that included nineties house, ska, and grind core. For Zoey I lost twenty-one pounds, which was easier than you’d think. It turned out all you had to do to lose weight was stop eating, simply shut the mouth.

Do you know, Cam, that I liked the feeling of dissipation that came with thinness, and would lie in bed, my pelvis pointed to the ceiling, listening to the traffic, sensing the sounds move through me. I had never before been admitted to the club of the thin and had only vaguely known such a club even existed.

At the opening, thin acquaintances voiced their approval. You look *great*, they said, with just a smidge too much emphasis on that last word. You watch what you eat, now, don’t you, the gallery assistant Michael had said, approvingly, standing with his identically thin husband, Hakim. After saying this, Michael stared down a corn chip, sans salsa, and ate it in one bite. I realized I had never actually seen him eat before. I nodded and said nothing, just sipped my sparkling water. For now, I’d be this kind of woman, a woman who ate little and said less, while versions of me/not me stared back from the gallery walls. All the women asking the invisible men before them: *Does looking at me make you feel more real? Am I the one you want?*
In his college dorm room, the heat stayed on whether it was cold outside or not, and the walls were the color of mud. But Francis didn’t care about the room or about his roommate who was always eating bags of chips and farting the whole night through. Nobody pushed him or cornered him, and that was enough.

Dan was long gone, but he sent messages, sometimes.

Shindand, Afghanistan. That was where Dan had landed in for his first deployment after basic training in Arizona. The President said Shindand was an essential location in the war. Dan was needed to stopper up what was sure to become a vacuum filled with terrorists, without Dan and those like him. Probably, his brother was a hero just by being there.

Francis pictured his brother doing about a thousand push-ups, the tattoo grinning its razor toothed grin on his bicep, the sand whipping by like yellow wind.

Francis pictured the three-a.m. perimeter sweeps. Was the sand still yellow in the dark of night, or was it blue?

Francis would draw the desert and his brother in his notebook, after his roommate was asleep. He used a ballpoint pen at first, but then he found, at the campus store, a set of felt-tips with impossibly small points. He made it all from tiny dots, the endless, folding hills of sand, and his brother there in the center of it all. It was hard to draw whole people, always had been. He made the pictures so they only showed parts of his brother. The spread of his bare shoulders, the corded arms he knew so well. If anyone ever saw the notebooks, Francis would surely die.
While nobody bothered Francis, nobody noticed him either, which was better than he’d hoped for. Who knew that beyond the torture of high school, beyond the royal beating he’d taken right after Dan left from Robby of the curbed teeth, beyond all of that and out in the real world, nobody cared if he was skinny or had a weird family or a loser name. The students at City College, where he felt lucky and humiliated to have landed a need-based scholarship, they did not care. They all looked through him. The teachers, students, everyone.

It was beyond him the way they just put it all out there for everyone to see. The girls on the sports teams, tan bellies and hips wrapped in spandex, marching past him in the musty halls. The lanky basketball players, column-like thighs folded under them in class. The punk girls, skin all tatted up and pressed through grids of fishnet tights, he had to admit they owned their crazy, sick bodies.

Who had given all of them permission go out into the world like that, so visible, so unafraid? No one had ever given him permission to be anything. There was even a student in College Algebra, he’d herd her name spoken and it was Nour, who always wore black headscarves and had a high-class kind of look. Dan would’ve had few choice words about girls wearing those things in America, but still.

He missed the slap of Dan’s palm on his back, knocking the breath out of his lungs and sometimes knocking him off his feet. At least then he knew he was real. If no one ever looked at him, was he even real in this place?

But there was a student, who was not like Dan at all, a heavy kid with brown eyes and a soft jaw, who did look at Francis. The student had a slope to the top of his back where his shoulder met his neck that was covered with about a million fine brown hairs.
This guy sat behind Francis in English, and he carried a backpack with a frayed padded strap leaking stuffing. Couldn’t he hide his poverty any better than that? It was an embarrassment, a disgusting embarrassment.

On the last day before Thanksgiving break, Francis was not thinking about this student, or any other student at all. They’d just read a poem that made Francis think of Dan. Francis never drew in class, but he couldn’t help it, the poem stirred something up, and he was drawing the desert again, and a young man’s hand in the foreground in a defiantly clenched fist. He repeated the last part of the poem over in his head:

When you’re wounded and left on Afghanistan’s plain
And the women come out to cut up what remains,
Jest roll to your rifle and blow out your brains
An’ go to your Gawd like a solider
Go, go, go like a soldier

In his mind his brother was splayed on the sand as a dark figure approached, then multiplied into a sea of figures. One dark mass, knives glinting in the blinding sun. The tiny dots from his pen were collecting and building, filling the page. Class ended but Francis kept on drawing, until the student spoke to him. His voice was deep, not the voice of some misfit but of a hunter, like Dan and his tribe. “You draw?” he asked.

Hundreds of the fine brown hairs crept up from the front of the student’s shirt, too, and Francis didn’t know how to talk to this person who was suddenly looking at a drawing that he had never meant to show anyone, except maybe Dan if he ever got back from Afghanistan without anyone cutting him up.

“I run a game room. Guys like us only,” said the student, leaning in and scratching his cell number on the blank facing page. “At seven. Every Saturday.” Francis just nodded. The room had emptied, and when Francis didn’t say anything, the student
shrugged and ambled to the door, but turned back at the last minute. “See you there,” he said, and it sounded so much like a command that Francis knew he would come, he would be there, whatever it was, he would be there. Then the student was gone, and there was the number, and Francis suddenly did not care about the student’s ugly backpack or his soft jaw, because Francis was not invisible anymore.

Saturday Night, and Francis had done it, he’d texted the number, and now he was with Kyle, because that’s the student’s name, in Kyle’s off-campus apartment with something like hope stirring inside him.

Markers of neglect all around, from the scuff marks on the flimsy door and the bent place by the doorknob where it looked like someone had tried to pry their way inside, to the cheap carpeting and black fridge slowly leaking onto the worn linoleum. Three computer consoles gleamed against the cruddy backdrop of the apartment. There was an empty seat next to another guy, this one cave chested with shocking red hair sticking up around his headset, a kaleidoscope of images reflecting in his black framed glasses. “Welcome to my humble abode,” Kyle said, sweeping his hands grandly like the room was really something special.

“What’s computer game is he playing?” Francis asked, nodding at the flame headed boy.

“Doug? He’s in Variance. And dude. No one says computer games.” Doug clicked and scrolled like crazy, his glasses suddenly washed in red reflections before the screen went black. Doug sighed, ran the pointed tip of his tongue over his lips, then pulled off the headset and rubbed his eyes.
“What’s Variance?” Francis finally asked. Kyle and Doug exchanged a glance, like this was a question only a moron would ask.

“You don’t know?” Francis looked at his feet. It had been a mistake, a huge mistake to come here. But Kyle sidled up and gave Francis a solid slap on the back. “That’s okay. We’ll get you up to speed. Isn’t that right, Doug?” Doug said nothing but grinned at them both, nodding and tapping his foot and cracking the knuckles of his thin hands before pulling back the chair, offering him his seat, giving permission for Francis to sit, to join them here.

PHOTOGRAPHS

I was tired of thinking of the Project, Cam, how it started, how it went bad. I was tired of looking for news of Francis, beyond the newspaper article, tired of looking and finding nothing besides what I’d already discovered, that he was dead, and that he was not really one person, but two people, at least.

I was also tired of my own clothes, so I slipped into one of her dresses. The Singapore homeowner was a collector of contemporary East Asian art—paintings and photography, mostly—and was also apparently something of a clothes addict. The custom-built closets bulged with the evidence of several sartorial binges, and after two weeks of rain and of dusting her photographs, I choose a black and white number, sleeveless and fitted on top and sightly flared at the waist, an asymmetrical hem above the knee. The pattern of the fabric was of some kind of abstracted diamond shape, woven, not printed, and the texture evoked fabrics curated from someplace ancient and far away
while the cut of the dress was very much of the moment. In short, it was a perfect dress, and it fit me perfectly.

I turned this way and that in front of a floor-length mirror. Behind me, a massive digital photo of a man posed as a multi-armed buddha, each hand holding money, soft drinks, or plastic toys—talismans of the religion of consumerism and profit. If I placed myself just right, it looked as though I was the owner of those many arms. I was considering my options, should I wear my hair up, or down, when the doorbell rang. I froze, then edged across the thick Turkish carpet towards the door. My armpits went swampy—the dress!—but any extra movement might give me away so I stayed planted by the closed door, listening. I had every right to be here. I was being paid to be here. I had nothing to worry about. Then the knocking on the door, persistent, increasing in intensity, until there was nothing for it but to fling the door wide.

On the threshold was a short Chinese woman. She carried a large black umbrella and wore a boxy outfit of beige linen, and she had the thickest shock of paperwhite hair I’d ever seen. This was not the hair of an old lady, the frothy white clouds orbiting the heads of the matrons who sat, gossiping, on the benches lining Yan Kit Road. Thick and lustrous, this was the hair of a girl in the prime of life, except that it was purest white, and the person was not a girl but a woman closer to my own age, a narrow oval of a face with smooth, high cheeks, and dark brown eyes that looked at me with the sharpness of a bird of prey eyeing a small mammal. “You are not Victoria.”

“No. Victoria Lee is away.” She looked at me like I was an idiot. “I’m the house sitter,” I added, uselessly.

“Victoria has dinner with me. Every third Thursday.”
“Victoria isn’t here.”

“That’s what you said. Once already, you said this.” She looked me up and down, and I was just waiting for the hammer to fall, for her to say something about the dress, or worse, to call Victoria, putting an inexcusable black mark my record of perfect housesits.

Dinner every third Thursday? Victoria had so many dresses. What were the chances this woman had seen this particular dress? “We will go to dinner. Together.” The woman looked at me again. “You will need shoes,” she said, and turned to wait outside.

The woman, who said her name was Mei, moved like a quick fish through the streets and to keep up I had to walk briskly in the fitted dress, following the beacon of her white head. Mei’s route took us through the narrow, shophouse-lined avenues of Chinatown, past food courts where roasted ducks swung from vendors stalls and old men perched on stools and drank beer from small cups, arguing in sharp Hokkien, then through wide thoroughfares with sleek buildings, terraces dripping with sumptuous green plantings. In front of one glistening black structure, a street cleaning robot the size of a large child rolled by, a digital smile on its wide face as its bristles nudged debris into a vacuum. The robot politely steered around me as I hurried to catch up with Mei’s white head.

Tung Lok restaurant was inside a multilevel shopping mall overlooking Clark Quay, where the Singapore river curled around British colonial buildings in candy-colored hues that gave the entire place the appearance of an amusement park. Everything inside was celadon green and white and although the restaurant was empty of other guests, possibly not even open yet for the evening, Mei’s small form sailed in, and we were greeted and shown to a table overlooking the river. The server was a very fat young
man dressed all in white, head shaved nearly bald, and Mei addressed him in hushed
Mandarin, flicked her wrist several times at the menu and that was that, my menu was
whisked away. Apparently, Mei had ordered for us both. Perhaps this was part of the
ritual she had with Victoria, maybe they took turns ordering for each other, or maybe as
an obvious foreigner I was not to be trusted with a menu.

“These are our photographs,” Mei said, handing me a terribly large mobile phone
and indicating that I should scroll through.

Photo after photo of them together: in Singapore, or some other overgrown
hothouse, in front of a long white stone building with a hillside jungle pulsing behind it;
in front of the Sydney Opera House, the cavernous, shell-like shape shining white in the
setting sun; in front of what must be the Seine, because the Eifel Tower was in the
background. I looked at closely at the last image. Victoria was wearing the same dress
that I now wore.

A trio of servers in white uniforms materialized and performed some kind of
ritual of placing certain utensils and removing others from the table before presenting us
each with the first course, a barrel shaped wooden bowl of creamy soup smelling
delightfully of the sea. I’d broken out in a cold sweat and couldn’t imagine eating a thing.

“It fits you well. Better than on Vicki,” Mei said, placing a few drops of vinegar in her
soup and slurping down a healthy spoonful.

“I’m a performer,” I tried to explain, “Or, I used to be.”

“And what did you preform?”

“Women, mostly.”
“Well, that explains some things. Some very strange things,” Mei had almost finished her soup, and was running her finger around the rim of the bowl. Her fingernails were very short, her hand dexterous as she brought her index finger to her lips. I still could not place her age. “Why was it, that you did these performances?”

“I did it because,” I started, but fiddled with the folds of my celadon napkin. What I wanted was not so easy to put into words. I had wanted to force people to understand how their looking shaped women, how appearances were everything and nothing, how they shouldn’t be so quick to judge based on garments, on skin, on hair. Or that’s what I’d told myself. Maybe I just wanted the freedom to be someone else, but I was in no mood for a confession to Mei.

“There’s a kind of magic that happens. When you’re playing different parts. It’s a little like traveling to a new place, you get to be someone else for a change. Imagine the woman you would be if you weren’t you.”

“Wah! Looks to me like you’re still playing a part.”

“I’m just the house sitter. Her clothes happened to fit. I hope you won’t say anything.”

“Vicki left without telling me she was going. Very strange thing, even for her to do.” I was holding my breath, willing Mei to think more of her friend’s unpredictability than my own transgressions. “I don’t have to mention it to her,” Mei said. I exhaled with relief, dribbled some vinegar into my own soup and began spooning up warm mouthfuls, salty and sweet, the silky broth laced with small, chewy gold filaments of something I could not identify. “But while Vicky is away, we will eat. Every Thursday, we will do this.” The soup was almost gone, and Mei’s strange offer was not wholly unwelcome.
“You will wear Vicky’s clothes.” At this I paused, but then, thinking of my reputation as a house sitter, just nodded. I mirrored Mei’s gesture from earlier, running my index finger around the rim of the little barrel and licking it clean.

“You like soup, I see.”

“What is it?”

“Shark fin. A specialty of this establishment,” smiled Mei, her teeth small and pointed.

ARRIVAL

Here was the airport Cam knew so well. Once again, Cam was in O’Hare, once again, doing her dead-eyed jet-lagged shuffle over the blue carpet to customs. Cam used to love airports, the way you go through a series of doors and you can be anywhere, but since she became carbon conscious they only filled her with dread. The bigger and glossier the airport the bigger the sense that all the travelers there were blithely strolling along on the brink of imminent disaster. The GASSAN diamond store at Schiphol airport in the Netherlands might have filled her with desire when she was younger, but now signs of conspicuous consumption made her feel the system straining, made her feel the whole experiment of capitalism and its rape of the planet driving them all off a cliff into real oblivion. Drought. Wildfire. Hurricane. The horsemen of a man-made apocalypse. Before boarding her flight, she’d sipped a beer in the Star Alliance lounge and looked out at the jetway and imagined it slammed by a hurricane, as unlikely as that was given the airport’s actual location. But just the same she’d felt the eerie quiet, seen the sky go yellow and the power go out in the airport, heard the stupefied gasps just before the gale
force winds picked up a 737 and slammed it into the window of the airport. Of course, this was just the beginnings of a panic attack. As her well-meaning but worthless counselor had said, she had to be able to recognize the difference between reality and fantasy. What was not fantasy was the article she’d just read about the latest group of migrants drowned crossing the Mediterranean, two hundred fifty-seven, the article had said, and how many of them fleeing untenable existences that looped back to ecological destruction. People thought there were other issues. Religious fundamentalism, the spread of this or that oppressive regime, the whims of this or that dictator. But Cam knew it was all tied to the devastation of the global ecosystem and to a warming planet that was headed the wrong direction, unless people, her included, could get their shit together and make some hard choices. She’d knocked back the beer and ordered another.

The flight had not been much better. She’d told herself it was a necessary evil, spending twelve hours hurtling over the ocean spewing yet more carbon into the atmosphere. True, given the scale of the catastrophe at hand, her little flight probably didn’t matter, but that thought just sent her spiraling. She should have crossed the Atlantic in a sailboat, like Greta had done for the Climate Action Summit. If she was not terrified of the ocean and had the money—her trust fund was generous but not that generous—she could have done it. Eventually she’d drifted off to sleep in an Ambien induced stupor. In her dream, Cam was in a black ocean on a boat that was sinking with her and a massive press of people on it, hundreds of people. She slid helplessly across the deck toward the abyssal mouth of the hold and could hear the thumping of the engine and the pounding of the waves. Should she try and save herself or try and save the weaker passengers? How could she save anyone when she was drowning too? She was in the
water now and a fish slid over her, its scales sharp against her skin and dark as oil. The single fish became many fish, and their scales cut her stomach and her arms as she tried to move past them. She grabbed one of the creatures to fling it away only to realize it had a human face, ghost grey with glassy, unseeing eyes.

Cam woke with a wrenching pain in her neck and her chest on fire, her post-surgery enemy continued to be stillness. She hated being still because it made her chest ache, and as long as her body was moving, she could avoid thinking about Vance. It had been three weeks since Cam had been pried from the Vermeer at the Rijksmuseum, and she had not laid eyes on him since before her arrest. Her few days in police custody had been less unpleasant than she’d feared. Everyone spoke English, and they took care of her hand, tended the patch of skin melted by the solvent used to separate her and the gilded frame. The food was surprisingly good. They had wanted to know if Cam needed a vegetarian meal and seemed puzzled when she declined, but the chicken with couscous had actually been good, and would sparing one chicken really make a difference? After she’d been released, she’d taken the tram straight back to the hostel, planning to give Vance a good slap and then a kiss, whether he liked it or not, whether it was “mutually agreed upon physical contact” or not. But there was no sign of Vance, nothing waiting for her but her own pack, which thankfully the manager had stowed for her when she did not return. Vance had checked out without explanation. He did not reply to her texts, and no matter what she was not going to call him. The whole time she’d been in custody, she’d imagined what to say to him, rehearsed it in her head, but now he was not going to give her the satisfaction.
Finally, she’d decided to go back, to the one person she could go to and not have
to answer any questions. Sarah. A few days before her departure Cam bought a few
grams of hashish at a café with a mosaic over the bar of two skeletons entwined, Kama
Sutra-like, and she bought a box of gourmet chocolates. Slitting the back of each
chocolate with a small, sharp knife, she’d pushed a cellophane wrapped ball of hash
inside each piece, carefully resealed the box and mailed it to Sarah’s address. Leaving the
post office, she’d wondered if she should have included a note: Do Not Eat. But if Sarah
was as obsessive about her weight as she’d been the last time Cam visited, there was no
need. Thinking of that box of chocolates waiting for her at Sarah’s apartment gave her the
motivation to get through the custom’s line at O’Hare and go out into the cold night air.

Cam’s key to Sarah’s apartment still worked, even after four years. Sadly, a check of the
mailroom did not produce the box of hash chocolates, so she resigned herself to waiting a
few more days, cursing herself for not paying for express mail. The apartment had been
almost completely refurnished since the last time Cam was there, the only item she
remembered was the sagging green leather sofa, that Sarah must have kept for some
sentimental reason. Everything else was minimal and upholstered in tasteful neutrals. Not
expensive and nothing lux, of course, Sarah never had any real money. The furniture was
all matchy-matchy, like her aunt was trying to perform a successful, stable life. The
exception was the guest room. Cam opened the door expecting to find the old futon
where she could always crash if needed, but instead walked right into a large rack of
flowing garments, mostly black. Long sleeved dresses and flat pieces of fabric on
hangers. Was this how Sarah dressed now?
Even though her body said it was the middle of the day, Cam fell asleep on the sofa with the television humming in the background, bathing her in its numbing glow and sending Cam into a blissfully dream-free blackout. Cam woke when Sarah walked in the room and for a split-second Cam thought that no, this could not be the woman she knew. Trampled, like she’s been run over, that’s how bad Sarah looked, and she stared at Cam like she was about to call the law, or scream, or maybe spray her with her pepper spray, if she still carried it. But then her eyes were on Cam’s chest, and then there it was, recognition of Cam’s change. Her pretty aunt, her would-be big sister, sat down on the old sofa beside her and said nothing. She touched Cam’s shoulder, ran her hand down to where her left breast used to be. A sound wrenched out of Sarah, dry and low at first and then loud and rattling, like she’d been waiting to cry all day, like Cam’s non-breasts had given her the reason she’d been looking for to let go of something. It was not why she’d come here, to be the one to comfort her aunt, but Cam wrapped Sarah in her arms, she buried her face in the older woman’s hair while Sarah cried.

DOLLS

This is how the Project started to go wrong. I met Kelsey in the lobby of my apartment building, and Kelsey, who had driven from Evanston, looked at me with relief—here was another late-thirties woman, waiting for her in an immaculate, recently refurbished lobby that, with its cream and grey finishes and understated leather furniture, promised that nothing unusual or frightening would happen inside. I know you would have sneered at her, Cam, this suburbanite with her light hair, nails lacquered pale pink, diamond
wedding set, and small gold hoop earrings. She followed me to the apartment like a timid interviewee, saying nothing, smiling too much, until we were alone in the apartment.

“Will I be able to leave my clothes on, under the thing?” Kelsey had asked.

“Under the, … you know. Under the veil.”

I told her she could wear whatever she wanted, and she said she was relieved, but she sounded disappointed. I should explain that this was what the women always were most excited about, and the word veil was often uttered with breathless expectancy bordering on desire.

I left her alone to fill out the paperwork, a release stating that she consented to being photographed during the performance, while I chose our garments. I selected floor sweeping abayas with long sleeves, underscarves of soft jersey, and matching khimars. For Kelsey, I chose dark blue, for me, a deep luxurious black. When I came back, Kelsey was looking out my big window at the Lake, it was sunny, and the water and sky were so many strata of blue piled on top of one another. Kelsey’s blue eyes picked up the color and were amplified. To hell with it, I’d thought, it would be a good test of my methods to see if those eyes could be made foreign by simply covering the rest of the woman.

Kelsey let herself be dressed, holding so still as I wrapped her headscarf it was like dressing a mannequin. When she confronted her own face in the mirror, she said she didn’t think she’d recognize herself. “I look just like one of them,” she’d said. Of course, she looked nothing like ‘them.’ She looked like herself in disguise—a disguise, I worried, that everyone but Kelsey herself could see straight through.
Going to a mall was probably a bad idea. But swishing off the escalator in my abaya and khimar, with Kelsey breathing heavily next to me I felt the zing I always did—invisible yet visible. Let them pretend not to see us, I dared them all. None of them, except of course Kelsey and Syd, knew we were performing. Syd was waiting at the entrance to the store, which sold somewhat life-like dolls of girls in every color and hue, and fell into step a few yards behind us. Kelsey asked if Syd was the photographer, a waver in her voice. Beads of perspiration hung in her pale lip hairs, the khimar circled her face making it a perfect oval, flat and smooth like a picture of an egg. She smiled a twitchy smile, a messy smear of lipstick on her front tooth.

I passed her a hand mirror, and Kelsey fixed herself. I tried to reassure her, but my words, and the mirror, seemed to make Kelsey breathe even more rapidly. Over the threshold of the store the population became upwards of ninety-nine percent female. Syd was looking particularly innocuous in a beige sweatshirt and jeans. Like she didn’t exist, in a good way. The looks started coming. A woman dressed much like Kelsey had been, earlier, pulled her little girl by the hand to avoid us. A trio of Black tweens giggled and pointed from behind a display titled: Summer! with dolls in swimsuits basking under a cardboard sun.

This was before I learned to give up control, to make myself vulnerable to the Participant, as I did with Francis. At this stage in the Project, Participants had a role to play, but that was it. Participants were instructed never to improvise. Participants weren’t even supposed to speak! But at that moment all I could think about was that, hopefully, Syd was getting shots of everything with the tiny and expensive digital camera as Kelsey squirmed at the girls’ giggling. We reached the target for our purchase, an Eid costume.
for one of the store’s dolls marketed as “Middle Eastern.” There was a little girl doll of medium complexion happily wearing the costume, including a hijab in an improbable fluorescent pink. The doll looked just like she did when I’d visited the store earlier, but the rack of the actual costumes was empty.

Kelsey looked relieved. The performance would apparently end without us making the planned purchase. But I led her by the hand, such a small and sweaty hand, to the register. I told the cashier that we’d like to buy the Eid costume, the one that appeared to be sold out. The cashier, a sixty-something matron, scrunched her face like she’d tasted something sour. “You can’t have whatever you want. The floor models aren’t for sale,” she said, then added in a hiss, “You can’t just come here and make demands.” The cashier turned away, and that might have been it, if Kelsey hadn’t decided to improvise.

“Demands?” Kelsey said, in what sounded like white-lady-outrage if I’d ever heard it. “Excuse me, but we just asked a question?” I gave Kelsey’s arm a tug. The woman was backing away. “I’m speaking to you. A customer is speaking to you. I think you should go and get the manager.” Kelsey’s voice arced up an octave, and a pair of security guards materialized nearby. One guard motioned for Kelsey to step away, and when she didn’t budge, he touched Kelsey’s shoulder. For a moment I could feel the man’s sausage fingers on my own arm. Later, I would imagine or wish he had grabbed me, instead. But Kelsey turned and shoved him back. And then the guard tackled her, and then the real police were there.

The photos of Kelsey, and of me, being led out of the mall in handcuffs were on the news, all over social. A particularly unlucky photo of Kelsey’s fabric wrapped screaming face, lips pulled back in a snarl revealing perfectly white teeth smeared with
blood-like lipstick, was the photo that Wren showed me when she called me into her office a few days later, to tell me she was pulling my work, all of it, and taking my name off the Gallery website.

Instead of looking at Kelsey’s face gleaming on the screen of Wren’s phone, I eyed the nine-foot-tall paper mâché bas-relief figure of one of the Colossi of Babylon that commanded the space behind Wren. The work, by Michael Rakowitz, had been purchased from the gallery next door for eighty-five thousand dollars. A friend price, given to Wren as a fellow gallerist.

Wren was saying something else, something about a complaint from the Chicago Arab Women’s League, but I was barely listening. I was thinking instead of how, years ago at one of Rakowitz’s events, I’d eaten a plate of Iraqi fried chicken followed by Iraqi Baklawa made by an Iraqi refugee and served by a one-handed Iraq War veteran. Enemy Kitchen, it had been called, and it was about bringing people together with food. Was my work really so different? But Wren was circling back to her repeated point, that she and the Gallery were no longer going to represent my work.

“Even Getting to Know You?”

“Even Getting to Know You,” Wren confirmed from across the gleaming expanse of her raw-edge reclaimed timber sit-to-stand desk.

I took the train from North Loop to Belmont. Not in any costume, just dressed as myself. I watched people and thought about money. Money I wouldn’t have to make payments on the glacier of debt, money I wouldn’t have to pay an assistant, and money I wouldn’t have to travel or even buy a latte if I didn’t get back in Wren’s good graces. And of
course, there was the apartment, the view of the Lake I would quickly no longer be able to afford.

What if I went forward, without Wren, without the photographs. Wasn’t the real product of the *Project Hijab* the experience itself, the form of the *Project* made up of the feelings and knowledge that came from wearing otherness? But there was money, always, the question and problem of it, inescapable. This was the kind of puzzle best solved by not solving it, and a glass or a bottle of red wine consumed on the sofa with the lights off, watching the outlines of the people in the building across the way doing what they did, their vague presences reassuring me. Actively *not thinking* about next steps. That would help.

But when I opened the door to my apartment instead of quiet and darkness there was noise and light, the TV was on. Instead of empty space, there was another person. Guts turning to liquid, I saw it was a boy. White, hair a phosphorescent blonde, imp nose, no more than twenty. Then the boy spoke, and of course I realized this was in fact you, Cam. But you, transfigured. Cam without her cascade of hair, Cam taken apart and put back together, Cam without breasts.

**VARIANCE**

There were hidden places he found in *Variance*. Now that he had a machine of his own, even in his closet of a dorm room he could travel.

There were rooms and servers, countries and worlds, endless multi-player environments online where Francis was visible. Even better than visible, he could be anyone. Worlds like magic, every landscape possible, and you could be a person made of
pixels, and that person could have a head shaped like blocks or a head shaped like a human head, and it could be a head of a woman or a man or of someone not either. There were a thousand perfect faces to choose from, more than that, more than a thousand. The number was infinite.

You could talk to people, people like you who lived in the ether, in the world alongside the everyday world. Here, people were not afraid to say the things everyone knew but wouldn’t say, things you could see if you looked, but that nobody wanted to look at. The way Islam was spreading like a virus, even where English is spoken. England. Australia. New Zealand. Canada. Even here in America. The way that whites would wake up and find they’d been replaced if they weren’t careful. You had to be looking to see it. You had to be smart to see it. The invasion was happening in the in-between spaces.

Even in the world of Variance there were more worlds-between-worlds: the Backrooms, where you could clip in by stumbling through the edge of the space. Walk through a corner, and another area would open. That was where to meet avatars who could take you to the invite-only servers. That was where the serious players were. Where the talk got real.

There was one Backroom called the Void, and you had to fall off a cliff into what looked like oblivion to find it, but instead of dying you just fell and fell, in darkness that went on forever. But there are people in there, also falling, also floating. And that was where he found the person, the dark cloaked avatar with green glowing eyes, who extended a green glowing hand, and asked, in a speech bubble as they plummeted together through darkness: U wanna see it?
See what?

U have no idea.

Francis was both in front of the curved screen with his headset and he was in that outer dark, a place just as real as any he’d been in real life, and he wanted to go further, more than anything, and he wanted to see this thing, whatever it was, because somehow he knew it would be major. He typed back: I’m in.

Let’s get this party started, said the avatar, and then Francis had the server link and a password, just a string of nonsense letters and numbers as usual, and he opened a new screen, and there was a video, and this video was like a game, like a game he and Dan played a long time ago. There was a rifle, an automatic, in front of the camera like he was the one holding it, and he was looking at a door, and then a man opened the door, a brown man with a beard and a long robe, and the man greeted the camera, “Hello, brother,” and then the shooter, the camera, it might as well be Francis himself, cut him down, and the gun was moving forward, and the building was a mosque, and he was shooting it up. Bodies of bearded men danced in the spray of bullets, and Francis could not breathe, he wanted it to stop, but he couldn’t stop, and was it a game or was it not a game, and if it wasn’t a game, how could this be happening?

He saw a play button and clicked it over to pause, then started it again. So yes, this was a video, not live, and he was relieved, but why he didn’t know, because just to watch didn’t make him guilty, did it? And it had already happened, he couldn’t stop it, and after all, who could stop it? He looked again at the men falling to the ground, and realized they couldn’t be men, couldn’t be human beings.
He felt a part of himself go blank, the place where he would be screaming for the shooter not to kill these people, people lifted off their feet before falling to the floor, but they were not people, could not be, because this was the only way any of it made sense. The man filming wouldn’t stop, that was the only thing Francis knew, and he thought of Dan. Dan far away in the desert, sweating under the uncaring sun. Dan would understand this. There was heat and tightness in his belly, and Francis grabbed the plastic wastebin just in time to vomit into it.

Nothing made sense, but when he stopped heaving, he felt weightless, scraped clean. The dizziness was coming, and it had been so very long since the star last tried to speak to him, but the feeling was the same, except he was awake, completely and totally awake.

He un-paused the video and watched it through to the end, and he wanted to cry, wanted to make it not real, but he did not cry, and he knew it was real, probably the realest thing he’d ever seen. Something unfamiliar bloomed in the newly empty place in his chest, and he realized this was what people must feel when they had power. And Francis did feel powerful, just watching it, watching this man who had the strength to take life, to stop the spread of the jihadis, the radicals, the terrorists.

After the video ended, Francis watched it again. He knew he’d found something the rest of the world didn’t want him to see, but now that he’d seen it, nobody could take it away.

PAINTINGS

There was an opening at Wren’s gallery, and we were going.
On the train, I looked at you, again, Cam, and realized you too had become a
shape shifter. Your short hair was slicked back, and the all-black dress, one I’d lent you
since it no longer fit me, hugged your straight hips. Your makeup was all matte, all
‘natural,’ but with strategic glimmer and shine that sculpted your high cheekbones, made
the nose point up even more. You were like a girl from the future, but a future that was
foreign to me. A tall youth, a white boy with a shaved head, languorous in a track suit
and like you, terribly thin, eyed you with uninhibited lust, and you eyed him back,
challenging him to keep looking.

At the gallery everyone looked at you and nobody looked at me, their eyes slid
around me to take in your lean form. The opening was for two painters, Mira Abibola, a
local, and Chiara Enzo, an Italian. Both painters took the surface of the body as their
subject.

In Enzo’s diminutive paintings, slightly smaller than the body parts depicted, the
perspective was so close they were almost abstract: a neck wrinkled like crepe de chine; a
dark shoulder with goose pimples and a constellation of moles; the fold of a pale belly,
still blue-lined from the waistband of some pinching garment. Photo realistic, except the
surface of each painting nicked and pocked like the surface of a body itself: grotesque
and alluring at once. The skin of each figure was a medium complexion. Maybe Asian, I
thought, then wondered if I was doing it, too, classifying people, and not even people, but
fantasy renderings of their skin, taken as fragments that made it impossible to really
know the details.

Abibola’s paintings, by contrast, were about the Black female body writ large. A
sloping back, stretched like dark hills on a canvass that spanned eight feet of the gallery
wall. Lips, full lips coated in a red so rich it looked wet, pulled back to reveal teeth, shiny and flawless. A sinuous neck, arching up from the muscular shoulders of a young woman with hair in elaborate braids that encased the back of her skull commanded the center of the main room, pushing up into the white space of the Gallery, asserting something—although what I’m not entirely sure—about the power and undeniability of the physical forms of Black women. Both painters had carved up the body, taken it into its constituent pieces in a way that seemed violent, but at least Abibola’s paintings told you who you are looking at, as opposed to Enzo’s paintings that left you guessing, trying to fill in the details of race and gender.

The gallery was full. Lots of familiar faces, but nobody spoke to me. I was aware of how sharp the contours of these people looked. I was feeling puffy and worn out next to them, my sweater faded from black to almost-black, the fabric pilling, little bits of fuzz working away from the weave. It had been a very long time since I was here in my thin stage, so controlled I exerted silent pressure on everyone in the room. Now I was spilling and seeping, a total mess. Wren minced over. Clearly, she’d noticed my isolation and was coming to my rescue, passing by critics and buyers. After all, she had been more than a gallerist, she was a friend. “Why are you here,” Wren asked. Her mouth, a mouth that could be so inviting with its full lips and perfectly straight teeth, was a line.

“I brought my niece. That’s Cam,” I nodded toward you, narrow spike of a girl. You were standing by one of the smaller paintings, a square canvas tight in on a ribcage that arched back, the neck disappearing into the plane beyond the shallow depth of field the painter suggested. It was one of the least special ones, a real fragment. You were looking at the painting with a Black woman with long braids piled atop her head. The
woman wore all white and a ring of bright red. Something you’d said must have been terribly funny, because the woman let out a peal of laughter, and laid her immaculate hand on your shoulder.

Wren watched you and the woman, sizing you up, Cam, taking in your easy manner, thinking I’d brought you here as an excuse to return where I’m not welcome. This was the way Wren’s mind worked. Strategies and alliances. Subtle and not-so-subtle ways of attaching oneself to those ascending and stepping away from those on their way down. It was part of what made her so successful.

“It’s pretty ballzy of you, coming tonight,” Wren said.

“Is that one of the painters? Maya Abibola?” I couldn’t keep my eyes on Wren’s closed off face, so I looked at you and the woman instead.

“Mira Abibola. Yes. And don’t,” Wren said, warning me with her eyes. But I was already walking over, Wren clicking her tongue in irritation. You and the painter saw me approaching, and there was a withdrawing, a reigning in of some new-found comradery, somehow you were both casting me in the role of intruder. But then you flung out your arm if to draw me in, and I hated to need you like that, but gratitude made my heart pump and my palms moist.

You introduced me to Abibola, the painter, who has a roundness to her vowels that indicated foreignness, perhaps Nigeria. Everything was friendly, at first. I admit I was anxiously mirroring your contrapposto stance, hip out to the side, shoulders angled across hips, and I said something about the texture and surface of Enzo’s paintings and Abibola smiled her approval. “They invite contact, like they are asking you to touch
them,” I said, starting to relax, but you and Abibola shared a glance. Another shift the room’s weather. And then, Cam, you looked conspiratorially at the painter.

“Actually, I was thinking about them as boundaries,” you said, all serious. “Like, the skin of a person is where the border is, where you can’t go any further, even if you want to know them. People make all kinds of assumptions based on skin. Once someone sees your skin, they can put you in a box. You’re manageable, and before you know it, you’re managed. So, if you look at the paintings and try and get the subjects figured out on skin color alone, you can’t tell, really who you’re looking at. They resist your gaze. Like they know you’re looking, and they fight it.”

“Oh, I get it.” My voice was a little too hard, my stupid sweater too warm.

“Did you have that issue? With Project Hijab?” When you mentioned the Project, Cam, your voice was innocent enough, but Abibola’s eyes went wide.

“You’ve heard of it?” I noticed the sweater had pills not just on the sleeve, but on the midsection. I vowed to throw it out the minute I was home.

“My friend, everyone here has heard of it.” Abibola’s voice was sympathetic, but her eyes hardened and there was a sudden opaqueness to her. She said friend but what she meant was something else entirely. The rest of the conversation juddered along, and I looked around for someone else to talk to. There was Michael. I waved, and when Michael didn’t acknowledge me, I walked towards him anyway, then ducked out the front door of the Gallery once out of sight of you and Abibola.

From the outside, and the lights and talk of the Gallery were fuzzed. Clinking glasses, laughter, a pleasant blur inside a sealed bubble. I stood there for a moment, weighing the consequences of leaving you behind, Cam, since the opening had become
unbearable. But then Michael stepped out, plastic cup of white wine in one hand and phone in the other, like he was checking a message or getting some air. But this was a front, I could see he was really out here to dig up some dirt on me and my catastrophe.

I saw that Michael was still thin, but his chest pushed against his too thin lavender shirt in a way that suggested he’d been working out. And his hair was different, short on the sides and wavy on top, maybe a perm? He’d worn the same understated sweaters and unremarkable denims since I met him five years ago. I searched his face for clues. Could things have gone off the rails with Hakim, who for once was nowhere to be seen? I would feel just a bit better if I weren’t the only one suffering. It was chilly, but the armpits of Michael’s shirt were damp, and he anxiously jabbed the screen of the phone. “Did you come out here to be with the exiled,” I said, keeping my voice light. Eyes still fixed on the phone, Michael’s words had an overly measured quality.

“See, that statement sums it up, right there. It’s your story, your little drama.”

“Meaning?”

“The problem is this, and I’m sure you’ve thought about it. You’re taking on a whole set of issues and they’re not really yours.”

“Not mine.”

“Well, you’re not really one of them, are you? An immigrant? And you’re not Muslim, and neither were those women. Certainly not that woman.”

“The point is to imagine a different you. It’s supposed to change their outlook,” I blubbered.

“Sure. But they’re not really going to change, right? These white women who pay to do Project Hijab? It’s just their privilege to try on the identity of someone who’s
oppressed. And then they get to feel virtuous, forgiven. Afterward, they probably think they’re both enlightened and innocent.”

Michael was stating the obvious, but was being completely obtuse about the point, the point being, that you experienced the world not as you are but as someone else. What was the point of any performance, but to imagine the position of another person, to try it on, to get a sense of a subjectivity that’s apart from your own? And all of this was in the copy. Wren helped write it, and Michael installed it in vinal cut letters on the gallery wall. What could Michael know about my suffering, how all I had to do was cover my hair to become a terrorist? Who was Michael to say I was out of my jurisdiction? He’d been so proud when he’d sold the first image from the photographic series of the Project to a collector from Toronto for full price.

The two of us had stood in the Gallery less than a year ago, admiring the unscripted elegance of the photo—my own veiled form in half profile on the train, a space cleared around the woman I was portraying, all of the passengers looking and not looking, except for a child, a little girl wearing a sweatshirt with a rainbow on the front, staring at the veiled stranger with unguarded malice. Michael had called the work smart. He’d said I’d looked saintly as he’d taken it off the wall and into the back of the gallery to be cocooned in layer upon layer of plastic and secured in the wood shipping frame. My throat was tight with rage, and what could words do, anyway.

“Just think about who you are and what the limits are,” he added. “Remember there are limits. Even for you.” Michael swilled downs his wine and turned back to the Gallery, and in the moment the door was open Wren’s laugh clattered out, and when the door shut again there was a feeling of a closing, of a shutting off from that world, and
already I was turning, walking back toward the train, because going back through that
door after Michael was not an option.

As the Gallery receded, I realized with some dread that I had prints remaining, in
the back of course, from Getting to Know You. Maybe if I left them, they might go back
up at some point, when things calmed down, but that was ridiculous. It was over and I
knew it. Things were turned inside out, and there you are, Cam, flat chested even, just
sailing through, even more limber, even more yourself. You would say, later, that I
betrayed you by leaving that night. But you could find your own way back, so there was
no reason to stay. You’d always been resilient girl. And you weren’t even a girl anymore.
It wasn’t late, but that time of year it got dark early, and the few thin trees planted in their
spaces were covered in withered leaves that rattled as the train passed overhead. I walked
quickly, thinking about limits and how to go past them. Mine, and everybody else’s.

TORSO

It was a modestly sized work of tempera, pastel, and color pencil on cardboard, porous
and imperfect. The flat chest of someone, a woman or man, takes center stage, and the
painter’s eye has pushed so far into the center of the chest that there’s no telling if breasts
would appear on the sides of the image or not, were the focus widened. The ribcage rises,
thin waves on barely disturbed water. Cam was at an opening, and there were people,
many people. Tinkle of glass and ice, chatter ricocheting off the white walls. She had just
been speaking, laughing, even, but it had been like she was watching from slightly above
her own head, gazing at the outline of her skull through her gelled hair.
On the painting: the neck, a vertical pillar, suggests the promise of a face. A tendril of light brown hair trails down towards what would be a shoulder. Without that lock of wrong-color hair, it could have been her. It could have been him, but that was a thought she refused to think. Cam had decided that Vance was officially a garbage person for leaving her in Amsterdam, and she’d also promised herself to stop thinking about him.

Stopping thinking was almost as hard as stopping feeling, but the past few weeks at Sarah’s she’d practiced doing both. The hash, which had taken a week to arrive, had helped. But she’d smoked the last of it before coming here, using a little pipe she’d carved from an apple. Sobriety loomed in her near future.

Focusing on the painting also helped. Both beyond and between a simple portrait, Torso celebrated the mixed-up muchness of the human form, body as both boundary and point of contact. It was easy to invite these thoughts. All it took was sustained looking, and looking at a painting hurt less than thinking about everything else. All she had to do was open her mouth and the thoughts came out as sentences, without her even having to try, which proved it, she was okay. See, I’m having a good time, she’d wanted to say to Sarah, but Sarah had ditched her, right in the middle of their conversation with the painter they’d just met, Mira.

Mira had not painted Torso or the other small, imperfect paintings like it. Her glossy works were all huge, all close ups of Black women. On the pointer finger of her left hand, Mira wore a shining ring of red, which flashed in the light as she gestured to everything around them, the paintings, the people, the air. Sarah had looked like she was
having fun, but when Cam brought up Sarah’s performance piece about women wearing hijabs, things had gotten awkward.

Sure, Sarah was touchy about the whole thing, since the project had tanked, but it was Sarah who had wanted to go to the opening, who had insisted Cam wear one of Sarah’s black dresses, so she’d *look the part*, whatever that meant. Cam got it. She was just a prop, an accessory. But she could insulate herself from almost anything. It was her new superpower.

Now Mira was saying something about the painter who did *Torso*, explaining she was not there tonight because her flight from Venice had been delayed by flooding. That news was like a gut punch, a real kick in the stomach, since everyone knew Venice was going to be one of the most of spectacular casualties of rising seas. And there was the despair again, so close she could touch it if she wanted to. Instead of engaging, Cam observed the feelings like so much weather, tried to stay in the conversation as the storm clouds gathered.

Humor also helped, sometimes, and Cam made a morbid joke about the obvious, *We’ll all be drowning soon, ha-ha-ha*, and Mira actually got it, laughing bitterly. Cam liked this painter. Maybe later she’d tell Mira about gluing herself to the Vermeer. She would not tell Mira about what she’d found on the internet, when she’d run a search on herself, would definitely not tell her that a representative for No More Oil! had disavowed her, had labeled her *an amateur* whose efforts were *rubbish*. She would not tell Mira that, worse still, the unaffiliated, the die-hards, the people in the grittier circles who took their own direct actions like shutting down logging camps with sit-ins in forest canopies and spikes in the flanks of ancient redwoods, that they’d labeled her
sentimental. If she’d been hardcore, Cam would have glued her hand to the painting itself, instead of just the frame. She might as well be a collaborator.

“It’s a real shame about your aunt,” said Mira, bringing Cam abruptly back to the now. “It’s going to be hard, very hard, for her to show work in this town. It will take time for people to forget what happened.”

“I guess I don’t understand,” Cam said. Mira blinked at her, her fluttering hand with the red ring stopping midair, but Cam pressed on. “What did you mean, a minute ago, when you said everyone had heard about Project Hijab?”

“The best art is always disobedient,” Mira said, annoyed. “That project, though. She took it too far. How can she know what it’s like to be a woman like that?”

“Like what?”

“You seem like such a smart girl,” Mira said, no longer speaking from a remote, manageable distance but right there, too close. “Appropriation is a dangerous game. Haven’t white women said enough about some things, already? Do brown women really need white women to tell them they’re hated?”

In Cam’s head, a gauzy mess. Sarah herself might have explained there were layers at play in her work, that it was not so simple. But what could she say that didn’t feel flimsy or fake.

“I think Sarah would tell you there’s more to it, more to it than that.” Mira sighed and looked Cam up and down, like she was trying to figure out how she could be so clueless.

“Well, even if she wanted to explain it, I don’t think anyone is going to listen. Not now,” Mira said, more gently.
Away from Mira, Cam leaned against the white wall of the gallery near the drinks table, the chalky paint marking the side of the borrowed dress. She wanted to leave, but where to go? She knew no one. She was wearing someone else’s clothes. She looked back across the room at Torso and heard Vance laughing. He’d always laughed about things she thought were important, things that, to him, faded in the cold light of one reality: *ecological death on a planetary scale.*

Vance would have said it was a massive waste of time, but she knew she could make things better. She could help Sarah restart her project. Sarah made work that mattered. Sarah mattered. Vance always said art was unimportant. *Paintings never saved a single tree.*

But Vance was not here.

**TRANSLATE**

Thursday night, and for once it was not raining. Mei had appeared at the apartment half an hour earlier and now we walked down Yan Kit towards to a culinary destination unknown, or unknown to me, at least. I wore another of Victoria’s dresses, synthetic with a raised pattern of green and black ovals. Palm fronds cut the setting sun into bright triangles that played across Mei’s shock of white hair, white leather bag, and white one-piece linen pantsuit, a sleeveless garment that revealed the trim geometry of her arms. I’d almost started to think of us as friends.

Mei never told me where we were going, and she always paid the bill. Each meal taught a lesson. So far, I’d learned never to put wasabi on the trembling, pale flesh of
hoshi garei starry flounder sashimi (an insult to the fish and the chef). I’d learned to carefully roast translucent strips of beef, as wide and supple as my own tongue, right at the table at the Korean barbecue (the fat turned to liquid if it touched the coals). I’d learned that Mei was more willing to talk about food than about herself, which was fine with me. You will remember, Cam, how much I dislike talking about personal things. Usually, there’s nothing to tell.

We passed a cluster of miniature, multi-level houses, pastel metal and plexiglass structures that had a mid-century modern sensibility. These tiny houses were inhabited by the city’s wild chickens, jungle foul, as Mei called them. I walked here nearly every day but never tired of looking at the birds. A flame-colored male with iridescent green feathers sprouting from his rear flapped to the top of the structure, spread his wings, and crowed. King of his castle. I stood transfixed while Mei stood by impatiently.

A little boy and his mother passed, and the kid couldn’t take his eyes off me. He asked his mother something, glancing sideways and pointing. The mother pulled his hand down, pointing was very rude, and said something to him in Malay. I couldn’t understand the language, but she’d clearly spoken to the boy using the voice of an expert.

“She told him in your part of the world they don’t have birds,” Mei said, once they were out of earshot. “That’s why you can’t stop staring,” Mei laughed. I had no way of knowing if she was telling the truth or just making a joke at my expense. I held my words for as long as I could, hoping Mei would offer something. But Mei didn’t share my discomfort with silence.

“How can she know what part of the world I’m from?” I asked, finally.
“Cannot know. Just knows you’re not from here.” This was a thoroughly inadequate answer. I’d seen people of every color and persuasion in the streets, on the bus, in the subway, all perfectly at home.

“It must be useful. To know so many languages.”

“Wah! Languages, she says.”

“Well. With all the languages here, it must come naturally,” I said, feeling like an idiot.

“English. Mandarin. Only those languages count. Name one thing you want to do, where you can’t use English? English speaking American like yourself doesn’t even need Chinese. Unless you want to buy roast duck in the market,” Mei said. “And why bother with Malay? Unless you want to hear what a bored housewife has to say about you.” She was smiling just a little, the light a diagonal slice across her face, half of her in darkness. It was not lost on me that Mei enjoyed having me at a disadvantage. The fact that I depended on her for translation was vital to our relationship, whatever that relationship was.

I might have turned and gone back to the apartment, put my own clothes back on, emailed Victoria demanding a return date, and gotten my own dinner. But on my budget that would have meant a trip to the hawker stalls or to the supermarket for instant noodles.

“Duck sounds pretty good.”

“I thought you might say so.”

We rounded a corner and stepped onto a courtyard that appeared to have been transported out of France. Brasserie Gavroche loomed before us, the colonial building
painted a smart blue, the cobblestone courtyard stuffed with tables draped in white cloth, each laden with an elaborate dinner service. Water burbled in a three-tiered wrought iron fountain, urns brimmed with red begonias, string lighting flickered in concave arcs between real gas lanterns.

I could see the evening ahead. Mei chatting up the waitstaff in French—another language I’d neglected to learn—and ordering dish after dish that I would need to be schooled in how to eat. As much as I liked having Mei direct our evenings, I hated needing to have everything explained.

“I think I’m not hungry, actually,” I said, and turned to go. Mei grabbed my wrist, her fingers strong and quick, her eyes panicked.

“Don’t be a fool,” Mei whispered. “Besides, our table is ready,” she added loudly, and nodded over my shoulder to the hostess, a tall young woman with upswept blonde hair. The woman nodded back, gesturing to one of the tables by the fountain. It was too late to back out, now. I smiled at Mei, making my face open to her, making myself pliant. Her grip loosened and we walked to our table and sat down together, just like old friends.
PART II.

let no one say we didn’t try
to let a different kind of life bloom
and let no one say we didn’t touch
what was there from the beginning

— Jenny Zhang, “ted talk”
INSTRUCTIONS

To the Participant:

I will play the role of the woman, the Performer.

You, the man, will play the role of the Director.

You will give me instructions, and I will carry them out.

You will recognize me by my garments:

I will wear all black.

My hair will be covered.

My face will be exposed.

You will see me sitting at a table with a red handbag in front of me.

You must try to observe me without staring.

The performance will be more interesting if I cannot not see you.

When you are ready for the performance to begin, send the message:

1-START NOW.

You can then direct my actions via text message, preceded by a number.

For example, after starting the performance you could send:

2-DRINK COFFEE.

Then you could send:

3-PLACE YOUR HANDS TOGETHER, AS IF PRAYING.

Then you could send:

4- SMILE A FARAWAY SMILE, AS IF LOST IN THOUGHT.

Then you could send:

5-PUT ON YOUR JACKET. Then you could send:
6-LEAVE THE BUILDING AND WALK DOWN THE STREET, SINGING.

These are only examples. They are not intended to be suggestions.

For ten minutes, you may direct my actions as if my body were your own.

You may direct me to do anything you want.

Anything you think a woman who covers her hair could do in public.

Anything you think a woman who covers her hair should do in public.

I give you full control.

There are no limits.

After ten minutes the cellular number you are texting will deactivate.

After the performance ends, you will not be able to use this number again.

DREAMS

He played the games. He watched Kyle and the Doug play the games. They traveled worlds and systems alongside each other from the same room, sometimes crossing paths in *Variance*, but mostly not. Was this a substitute for life? Some days, he wondered. But life was what it felt like, and Francis wanted it, wanted life. Some days he asked himself, what did Kyle and Doug think of it all. Wanted to talk to them, ask the kind of questions you don’t ask, about what they needed. Touch them, even. Grab their shoulders, even, and shake. But touching was not what they did.

Some days, like today, it was as good as a dream.

Doug was in a subgame of *Variance* he played nonstop, *Rebellion*, piloting drones and shooting down rioters the old-fashioned way, in first person.
Kyle’s subgame was something else, *Tycoon*. The point was to get rich, filthy rich. Kyle already had a dozen cars in his mansion’s garage. He’d just downloaded a modpack that let him burn money, actually set cash on fire.

Francis was in a subgame, too. He walked down a hall that went on forever, with a thousand branching corridors. Red, everywhere. Dark red wallpaper with little dots. Two of the dots opened, and they were eyes. First two, then four, then eight, then countless eyes, all looking at him.

The frame rate sped up and he was running, no choice but to run. The ground shook, and hands erupted from the floor, hands as large as a person in this world. The hands belonged to a dark figure covered in eyes.

His job was to run, and he went faster through the corridors. In his headset he could hear the entity’s heartbeat, or was it the heartbeat of his avatar? No telling, but he could see the fingertips of those many hands. Fingertips crowded in, spread across his field of vision. In the dark of the hands more eyes, shining like they were alive as they closed on him. It was a devouring, an obliteration, an end he could survive. Kyle let out a yelp of joy from across the room. He’d just scored a token that made him a quadrillionaire. The thrill of the unexpected. That was what Francis liked most.

**OBSERVE**

Sarah sat in the café with her hair covered, her face exposed, and a red handbag in front of her. The burner phone lay on the table, by the bag. Alone or in groups, every face was lit by a screen. Phone. Laptop. Tablet. Cam sipped a latté and looked, but what was she seeing? Sarah, impassive in her black garments. A young man entered. White, medium-
whatever color hair, button-down shirt, fitted jeans. Another man walked in, dark hair, turtleneck sweater, camel colored and too tight. Each man got a coffee from the counter and sat. After a minute, each took out a phone and started texting.

Sarah had told Cam she was to play the part of the observer, like a witness. Cam didn’t know who the Participant was, or what he looked like, and neither did Sarah. The Participant was allowed complete anonymity, given total control. Sarah had warned her: *don’t stare.* But here she was, anyway, hungry eyes searching the faces of these two, looking for any kind of sign.

The appointed start time, three o’clock, had passed nine minutes ago, and Sarah was still there, the woman she was playing was still there, just sitting. Coffee in front of her getting cold. Then something. Sarah looked down discreetly at the phone. Did her eyes widen, or did Cam imagine it? The woman’s hand moved from the table, sliding between her legs. Her face remained a blank. The hand worked back and forth. Cam forced herself to stay rooted to the spot.

Sarah stared straight ahead, the rest of the guests not looking at her. Ten minutes, Cam knew, was the limit. Ten minutes, and the performance would end, the Participant would be locked out. On the stopwatch on Cam’s phone: *Three minutes, fifteen seconds.* Then Sarah’s hand, the woman’s hand, stopped its movement between her thighs and rested on the handle of the coffee cup. The hand lifted the cup to Sarah’s mouth. She drank. The hand set the cup down, and Cam breathed out, finally. *Three minutes, fifty seconds.*

Sarah, playing the woman, leaned forward until her head rested on the table. She lifted her head a few inches and brought her forehead down on the wood with a *thwack.*
The coffee rattled on its saucer and a few guests looked, then quickly looked away.

Sarah’s head was still resting on the table. She raised her head a few inches and brought it down again. “Hey! You all right?” the girl behind the counter called. The two men who’d entered near the appointed time, the suspects, both toyed with their phones, either refusing to see or not noticing the woman who had just bashed her head on the table.

Sarah brought her head down again, this time with enough force to leave a mark shaped like a diamond above her eyebrows. “You can’t do that in here, psycho,” the barista snapped. Everyone was politely ignoring Sarah now, as she rose and walked out the door with only the phone in her hand. Cam seized Sarah’s red bag from the table and followed the woman, followed Sarah, from a few yards distance down the narrow sidewalk.

The woman was disappearing in a stream of pedestrians, speeding up as she approached an intersection, cars blasting through ahead. The woman lurched to a stop at the sidewalk’s end. Her hand shot out to steady herself on a utility pole just as Cam closed the space between them. Parting her lips, Sarah slowly and deliberately licked the utility pole, her tongue passing over fragments of flyers from events long gone.

“Stop,” Cam pleaded. Sarah’s eyes revealed nothing as she licked the pole again, specks of dirt and wood collecting on her tongue. *Ten minutes, thirteen seconds.* “It’s over,” Cam choked out. Sarah stayed unfocused for a moment, staring into nothing, before she came back to herself. Then, she hawked a dollop of grimy spit into the road. Sarah remained stoic. She shook her head, *not here,* and took the red bag from Cam. As they headed back towards Sarah’s car without speaking, Cam looked back at the street,
the café, both ruined for her now, transformed into places of fear. She didn’t even know
who to blame. Some faceless stranger, or Sarah herself.

**TRAVELERS**

If I were going to be completely honest, Cam, I’d tell you that I’d always felt just a
twinge envious of how you’d traveled so freely. Looking at Victoria’s collection of travel
books, it was clear she’d also had the luxury of travel for pleasure. Had Mei accompanied
her on her trips? Or, had she traveled alone, so she could reinvent herself without the
company of her friend keeping her tethered to her everyday self? I imagined this was
what some people did, what you did, in new countries. Reimagined yourself, made
yourself a new person in settings not already sullied with memories.

But of course, one always has to leave, eventually.

I thumbed through Victoria’s glossy books on the Swiss Alps, the French Riviera,
Angkor Watt in Cambodia, the Galapagos Islands, Majorca. Who would I be in those
places? I stopped cold on a book on Tanzania, and Zanzibar, that terrifying place our
story together began.

From the first day of the safari, it had clearly been a mistake for me to come. I’d
told myself that an all-expenses-covered, lavish vacation with Jonas’ family would help
me get to know them, would help me establish myself as the new and dazzling addition to
their ranks: *the artist*. But watching your family, and Jonas, stand blithely by as their bags
were carried off the chartered plane by Masai porters in traditional red togas, all I felt was
the desire to escape.

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We were a group of sixteen, in total. Besides us, there was just one other family on the tour. You will remember the plastic surgeon from Long Island, his twin ten-year-old daughters, his silent wife, and his shrunken parents, blinking in the white-hot African sun. I’d hated that surgeon, the way he’s lorded it over them, a sunburned despot in garish tropical shirts, marshaling his little family through Darkest Africa.

We’d seen the sights in ridiculous luxury, canvas ‘tents’ with wood floors and hot showers. The Big Five. The Great Migration. The Great Rift Valley. The cradle of humanity, Olduvai Gorge. Everything larger than I could have imagined, especially the sky. But Jonas was embarrassed by my curiosity. Instead of sharing in my wonderment, he was shamed by my amazement at the talk by the famous paleontologist, hired to give a lecture to our group on the fossils of early human ancestors found nearby.

Jonas had just stood there, close to the spot where some of the oldest known hominids had been discovered, obviously bored, rubbing the toe of his boot on the dusty floodplain. He couldn’t be bothered to care about the lecture, never mind the nearby sisal plants with five-foot leaves covered in barbs that looked like fangs. My new husband, he’d seen it all before. People in his family’s strata were apparently above wonder, above interest.

But you were more interesting than any of it, Cam. At first, I thought of you only as the girl. The girl, who also looked at everything, fascinated by it all. The girl, who was fourteen but looked much older, and laughed a laugh both easy and derisive. The girl, full of disdain for her mother. The girl, whose heavy chest attracted everyone’s attention but who ignored it. The girl, who interrogated the British guide about the ecological toll of every excursion, ripping into him over the use of disposables, “What do you mean you
don’t even *recycle*?” You ate only salad, while the rest of us had slipper lobster and steak au poivre.

The final night of the trip was at a hotel on a beach near Stone Town, in Zanzibar, just past the port where countless men and women were shackled and shipped to destinations around the world to be enslaved, as you had loudly reminded everyone, to the deep annoyance of our guide. At sunset we all walked out in the water, past the shallows to a long and snaking sandbar.

Naked to the world, a trio of local teenage boys splashed through the waves about a hundred yards from us, dark skin shining, ready to be consumed by our foreign eyes. Everyone feigned embarrassment, pretending they would look away if they could. But not the girl. You blatantly stared at the boys as you ran towards us in the surf, leaping through the crystalline water and whooping with joy, until with a shriek, you folded over, clutching your foot.

We splashed clumsily back to you and the surgeon pulled you onto the beach. A three-inch sea urchin spine was lodged in the pad of your foot, Cam, a purple needle that went in at least half an inch. The surgeon ordered his wife to fetch his backpack, and produced a leather pouch holding an array of scalpels and other implements. Do you remember, Cam, how the surgeon’s ten-year-old twins crept close like hungry cats, ready to watch their father get to work? Your mother wailed, heaving bosom barely contained by her swim dress, useless.

The plastic surgeon grasped your heel and prepared to extract the spine, but you shook free of his grip. “I want *her* to do it,” you said. I could not refuse. The surgeon, in his hideous shirt with his lean, no doubt expert fingers, just shrugged. He handed me the
scalpel and a pair of extra-long tweezers. You never looked at your foot but kept your eyes on me.

There was less blood than I expected, and the knife easily parted the thick outer skin, the snowy, marbled fat. The tip of the spine was lodged in something firm, tendon or bone. I tugged hard and told myself it was okay if it hurt, this had to be done. I gave a good yank, you inhaled sharply, and it was over. I’d kept the spine in my makeup bag ever since. Sometimes, I used it to tease apart my eyelashes. Afterward, the surgeon had disinfected and wrapped the foot, the mother had blubbered in the sand, and my new husband had looked at me with queasy distrust.

I could taste the salt and feel the adrenaline just looking at that book. There was a picture of the very beach, the one near Stone Town. That place of joy and terror, where you let me be your rescuer. I saw your face. The pointed chin and nose, the sheen of sweat, the wild trust you placed in me. How I told myself, afterwards, I’d never let you go, I’d keep you safe. But of course, that was impossible.

In Victoria’s apartment, I reshelved the book on Zanzibar but faced it inward, turned its face to the wall. I pushed it to the back of the shelf, and I put another book in front of it, a guide to Buenos Aires, a place I’d never been. I crawled into the downy raft of Vicki Tan’s bed, under her percale duvet. I decided to dream of being Victoria, instead of myself. I closed my eyes, but all I could see was the purple cone of the urchin spine, its fine point tipped in red.
KINDNESS

The visit back home, Metra then a cab. Plastic on the furniture. Her body, draped in a flowered nighty, on the mechanical bed from Hospice in the living room. The skin loose where the flesh underneath had gone, the hands swollen up fat. The clear bag of urine lashed to the leg of the bed. He tried not to look at it.

Her color had gone all yellow and blotchy. Was this the color of a person?

It couldn’t be, was not. But if this, then that. If chemo, then no hair. If breathing was needed, then so was oxygen. If fresh air was needed, then a fan in the window. That rattle in her chest, like something had broken loose in there. He knew, he knew. If sickness, then death.

Francis wanted away from her smell. Her breath like rot, apples gone bad. Her paw of a hand was resting on the bed palm up, and she curled her fingers in with two quick flicks, like grabbing under a girl’s skirt. Come here. Francis helped Gran pull the oxygen mask away.

“Yeah, Gran?”

“You watch out for him, you hear?”

“Who, Gran?”

“Your brother. My Danny.” Her Danny. He’d known it from the start. She loved Dan more and here was the proof, her almost gone and wanting his brother, half a world away in some desert. “You watch him, that brother of yours.”

“Gran, you don’t have to—”
“Quiet,” she coughed, and he obeyed. The television was still on, like always. The News, muted now, flashed its red and blue banners over the room. “Not much money, not now. But enough. You got to keep your nose clean. You got to be looking out—”

“Dan can take care of himself, he—”

“Now you listen. If your Ma comes, sniffing for a handout now I’m gone—”

“You’re not gone, you—”

“A tweaker once, a tweaker for life.”

“All right. But she’s not coming.”

“They always come. Lord in heaven, all of them, coming for you. You keep your eyes open.”

“Who, Gran? Who’s coming?” The wide features of Gran’s face deflated. Some invisible force pulled on her. Like gravity. Like water. Gran let out a moan, a low sound that it hurt Francis to hear. All that time gone by, and him grown or nearly grown, and here he was, a little boy again with Gran in this room, wanting to save her. But this time there was nothing, nothing he could do that mattered.

Francis fetched the morphine from the kitchen like the nurse had showed him, earlier. Parted the blue crinkle of Gran’s lips, pressed in the plunger. Gran swallowed, then sighed. Finally, she began to snore. He was killing her, in a way. Or was he saving her? Had Dan killed any enemies yet, the hero off doing the hero’s work?

Francis marked off the dose on the log sheet and put the empty in the bin in the fridge, like he’d been told. The nurse’s brown hands touching Gran’s yellow-white cheek. It was a kindness, she’d said, that Francis could visit. Her dark lashes had framed her big eyes, eyes that had looked at Francis with so much pity he couldn’t take it. He’d
refused to look her in the face. Gran would never have let her in if she could help it. It was against her rules. Couldn’t be helped, though. Not now.

When Hospice phoned to say she’d given up the ghost, Francis missed the call. He was at Kyle’s place and Doug was there *tap-tap-tapping* away at his controller, his avatar dying over and over and him not caring, just letting the red pixels wash over him. Kyle had gone out for a pizza and Francis was kind of watching Doug—the man was a beast—and scrolling through pages on a Discord server on the Great Replacement, some earth-shaking stuff if even half of it was truth.

The message Hospice left was not from the nurse he’d met, but from some stranger. He listened. He’d have to do things. Sign papers. Make arrangements. Kyle was back with the food, the box grease-damp and steaming. He watched Kyle’s mouth move as he shoved in piece after piece, oil on his chin. He watched Doug pick off pepperonis and eat them, one by one. That was it, she was gone, and nothing to do but eat, even if the food that filled his mouth had no taste.

**REALITIES**

Mei and I stood in front of the tilted screen, the reflected light from the projection giving her face an alien blue cast. I had decided to test Mei, probe her intentions by telling her what I wanted. Not dinner, but art. She’d agreed, saying she was bored with restaurants, anyway. Of course, this was highly unlikely. From what I’d witnessed so far, Mei’s one true religion was food, but I wasn’t going to press the issue. I liked to think Mei was as honest with me as she could be, but who can be truthful all the time?
The exhibition hall was in a warehouse by Singapore’s southern industrial port, and the rideshare had let us out a few blocks from the entrance. On the way in, we’d walked past cargo ships hauling stacks of shipping containers like skyscrapers flipped on their sides, their contents a total mystery, the stuff of the world, bridging continents and economies.

I could now almost imagine we were inside such a container, as the cavernous, rectangular space echoed with the techno soundtrack of the video installation we’d come to see. The supplicating 4/4 house beat moved through our bodies, willing our fleshy insides into a synchronized rhythm. I considered reaching for Mei’s hand in the dark but thought better of it.

The film was about a group of young people trapped in a futuristic labor camp, forced to dance in a motion capture studio to create artificial sunlight, an energy source for some multinational banking firm based in Germany that routinely used drones to surveil and execute protesters.

As far as I could tell, the dancers resisted by playing a massive multiplayer online game. Respawning endlessly, Liquid Easy, Shiny Snake, and Big Boss Hard Facts kept coming back, even after being ‘killed’ in virtual reenactments of uprisings in Seattle, Berlin, and Singapore. The avatars all had big eyes and anime hair, and costumes ran the gamut from Stalin-chic military trenches to Marie Antionette-baroque to Che Guevara-style fatigues and berets.

The work, by a German video artist, pulls from all kinds of images, shots of the CGI avatars intercut with low-rez junk footage and shifting real-or-maybe-not-real green screened sets. A ruddy newscaster speaking in German subbed in English reports that
preemptive drone strikes on protesters are necessary for world security. All protesters are terrorists.

Behind the mock-newscaster, a stock market-ticker soars with each proclamation. In the motion capture studio, a young man a skin-tight gold suit is ‘shot’ over and over. Each time he collapses, he gets back up. It has to look convincing, says the camera operator, a young woman with a shaved head, also in a gold jumpsuit.

He clutches his side and lifts, like he’s been pinioned by a shot from a drone. He falls. He falls again, seen from another angle. His hair, long on top and shaved on the sides, lifts and flops back down in slow motion repeat.

I wanted to look away, but kept watching, anyway. I reminded myself it was just a film.

Mei sat beside me in the dark, light catching in the white shield of her hair. The floor had been gridded out in electric blue lines, and Mei’s sat in the middle of one such glowing, blue-lined square.

“My daughter,” Mei said, out of nowhere.

“What daughter,” I asked.

“She moved out because I wouldn’t let her protest. Her friends, they wanted to stop the Sentosa Aquarium from importing a whale shark.” Even in the dark Mei seemed to sense my confusion. “The whale shark is a fish. Biggest fish in the world. In the world! Huge attraction. Would have drawn lots of tourists, lots of business. In Osaka they have one, and it is fine. So why not here?”

This was the most animated I’d ever seen Mei. Two twenty-something women, the only other visitors, turned their heads, channeling disapproval. Mei paid no mind.
“The rights of the big fish, suddenly they are more important than her future. So, they hand out flyers. They make signs. So stupid!”

“Why is that stupid?”

“In Singapore we do not indulge in these things. Civil disobedience, this is not in our vocabulary.”

“So, she moved out?” The video was ending now. Apparently, the workers had escaped, either merging with their avatars or dissolving into a field of pure light—I couldn’t be sure which. My grasp of local history was slippery. I remembered reading something about protests in the sixties, famous protests, led by Chinese students. Why couldn’t Mei’s daughter protest now?

“Yes. My only daughter leaves home. She leaves university, she tells me, to work at a bakery. Cannot live with her overbearing mother. And the whale shark plan?

Scrapped. Never mind, the authorities say. We don’t really need a whale shark, they say. I think to myself, what was it for? She didn’t need to protest anything. It all worked out.”

We stepped into the lobby, rain sifting against the building making a sound like television static but a hundred times louder. Mei already had her phone in hand, getting ready to summon a rideshare to take her back to whatever affluent part of town she lived in.

“Does she look anything like you?”

“Ha. Is she just like her mother, a large goose with white hair, you mean? No. My Lydia is so fine, so slender. Her hair is long and black. She takes after her father. Malay.”

“I hope she comes back. Your daughter.”

“Do you have a daughter?”
I thought of you, Cam, but only shook my head. How could I say I had someone, someone like a daughter, but I’d lost her? Too complicated. Too messy.

“Then you cannot know how they work. When a daughter decides to leave, hope cannot bring her back. She comes back only when she needs to. When she is too hungry to do otherwise.”

With this, Mei poked the air with her umbrella, a kind of salute and goodbye I’d become accustomed to, then she slipped into the rideshare that had just arrived. Before I could think of what to say, the car had pulled away into the slanting rain, and she was gone. An image of you flashed, Cam. I pictured the boy falling in the video but saw your face, your unshut mouth, your long limbs outstretched.

INHERITANCE

It turned out there was money, enough for Francis to get his own place and move out of student housing. The estate lawyer said he could have the house sold or take possession, so sell, sell, sell. Francis was listed as executor in Gran’s will. He got half and Dan got half, right down the middle. As for their Ma, she hadn’t been around in years. And for whatever it was worth Gran had cut her out, anyway.

Dan’s face on the video call was unreadable, his head a pixelated mask, the hair shaved closer than ever. Not much Francis could report, beyond the facts. Dan said he’d finally gotten some action, finally seen combat, but the news came through the weak signal like so much static, and all Francis could think of was Gran’s crinkled mouth, the way her body had sagged when the morphine went down. Everyone where they’d lived
knew someone who’d got sick, cancer was part of life and it was common knowledge it could happen, did happen. But still.

The estate sale went down with Francis just glancing at a few photos of her things laid out on tables. The pitcher Gran would put the orange juice in. A portrait of Jesus in a thin gold frame. The old clock radio. Stuff Francis had stamped into his memory circuits that was now just junk, junk that wouldn’t have brought her back even if he’d kept every scrap. Even Dan’s precious weights in the garage reduced to dumb metal, sold off. The old Buick, he let it go.

Francis stopped going to classes. How could he? The calls from the Office of Student Services came in until they didn’t.

He needed something to do, because a man was nothing without a task at hand, so Gran had said. Gran! He woke nightly in his bed, the first bed he’s ever bought on his own, tangled up in thoughts of her failing body. The thick arms that held him as a child gone limp, her sturdy body wasted.

He wished he’d been man enough to do something, to take better care of her after everything she’d done for him and Dan. She’d taken them in when they were nothing, and she’d died with strangers watching over her. He was still nothing, but at least he could work.

The plant that took him as a temp was light industrial. He learned to make the packaging for router bits and other tools made of metal, screen printing on clear vinyl before heat sealing it into pouches. His shift ran from seven at night until six in the morning, with an hour’s break in the middle. The material came in ten-by-twelve-foot sheets, and he
printed it using an industrial-sized screen printer. Most packages had at least two colors, and he had to align the vinyl just right, get everything in register, or he’d screw up the print and ruin the batch.

He found a rhythm fast enough to meet his quota but slow enough not to get the prints out of alignment. He was wary around the printer’s steel frame, a frame large as a wall that could break your arm when it came down. The robotic head that squeegeed the ink through the screen could rip the fingers from your hand, Mindy, a long-ftermer, had told him. She’d held up her left to prove it. Pinky gone and the next finger down to a nub.

Ten stations like his in the big printing room, and a clang and whirr that felt like home, his first home in the shadow of the great machines. A chemical smell, caustic and a little sweet, like burning sugar. Other temps came and went but there was a group of long-termers, old biddies not that much younger than Gran had been.

Around their mouths and noses the long-termers had rashes, like teenage flare ups of pimples. Francis couldn’t figure it, they were long past that age. A month on the line and he had it, too. The little dots of red erupted wherever breath entered his body. He only walked a little, but his arms were always lifting, tugging, twisting, and the muscles and tendons hardened up. The place coaxed his body into new shapes. Nights ran together running prints and clearing screens, hosing them down with pressurized solvents and re-exposing them for a new run.

The best part about the night work was that it never ended, not really. The shifts added up, pages in a book, scenes in a movie. Together, the nights became Night. Night was its own time, without a beginning or an end.
By day, there was *Variance*. Francis found other videos, other forums, and began his real education. It was complicated, but he was starting to see the underlying webs of control. The leftists, the woke liberals, and the Jewish elites, all working to replace whites with foreigners. The governments, either blind or straight up in on it, opening borders, welcoming them in.

He learned of threats to his kind from all sides, learned how even the colleges tried to make whites ashamed, just for being themselves, tried to blame all the problems on them. He drew patterns of infinite complexity now in his notebook, layer upon layer of repeating and interlocking shapes. He drew and drew, and the patterns were as dense as life. They resolved into slabs of near black, the pages dimpled with impressions from his pen. The patterns were there if you looked hard enough.

He still met up with Kyle and Doug at the apartment. In their eyes he’d leveled up, he was living in the real world, now. Francis started to see them differently, too. They were like children. Kyle’s pudgy fingers gripping sweating cans of soda. Doug’s coppery hair growing long and stringy because nobody told him to wash or cut it. Like children, ready to follow where he might lead. They were his to shape if that was what he wanted.

**COLLABORATION**

Thinking of it now, I should never have asked you to watch that first performance, the one where I gave the Participant full control. It hurt to look at you, Cam, your face twisted with pain, as you told Syd about the encounter, about what you’d had to watch.

“No,” Syd said. “No, seriously. Screw all of *that.*”

“Agreed. And we have no idea who it was.”
“So, they just get away with it? Sarah, you can’t tell me that’s okay. If you’d photographed it. If you’d protected yourself—”

“No. That’s the point. Total vulnerability. Total surrender to the experience of—”

“I’m sorry. The experience of what? Of being violated? Because some rando can control a woman like a puppet, for ten minutes? And there’s no image, after? No way to reach an audience?”

“The Participant is the audience. At least he’s been made aware of his own capacity for violence, his own capacity for cruelty. Cruelty to women he perceives as Other.” I could see I was getting nowhere with Syd. You just gave me one of those looks.

We were having this conversation at your request because I’d refused to call off the performances. You’d called it a ‘creative meeting,’ and insisted that Syd come. We sat clustered around my dining table, and you’d pulled the curtains against the daylight, giving the whole thing the air of a clandestine meeting.

“Okay, Participant is audience,” Syd said, trying her best. “But if there’s no photo, it didn’t happen.”

“Look, Syd. The performance, the action, that’s the real thing. The photographs, well. Don’t take this the wrong way. They were essential in getting the work out there, but they’re not the real products, now. The performance. The interactions. Those are the products.”

Syd worked her gapped front teeth over her bottom lip. “But, with no documentation, there’s nothing to sell.”

“Not like anyone is buying,” I said, not liking the self-pity in my voice. I hadn’t wanted to tell you, Cam, or Syd, about the open letter about Project Hijab posted by the
Arab Women’s League. The gist was that a review of the images from Project Hijab, and the news coverage of Kelsey, revealed a lack of cultural sensitivity on the part of Wren’s gallery, and on the part of North Loop galleries in general, which still showed a disproportionate number of white artists.

The League had asked, in this open letter, for Wren to issue a public apology—did she realize the implications of a Jewish-owned gallery carrying work that slandered Arab womanhood? They also demanded I agree to undergo sensitivity training—particularly around issues of cultural appropriation. Neither Wren nor I had replied. I tried a different angle. “Look, Syd, think of it as performance for the sake of performance.”

“Okay, sure. It’s performance. So do it in a theater. Sell tickets, or whatever,” you said, not helping.

“If it’s on a stage, it’s too safe. If it’s not in the real world, it doesn’t matter.”

“Fine. If you want to do performances that are ‘for real,’ that’s what we’ll do, so it feels like it ‘matters.’ But Syd has a point. It might as well haven’t happened if there’s no image. All that happens is you suffer, and we watch.”

“You don’t know that. The next Participant might be harmless.”

You just glared at me and stalked into the spare bedroom, which you had reclaimed without asking, installing a futon there, just like before.

“Okay. What if you do another performance, but I film you? And make sure the Participant knows you’ll be filmed,” Syd said, working that lip between her teeth, “Seriously. I want to. You don’t even have to pay me.”
“I would still want the Participant to remain anonymous. Part of the point is to see how people act when they think they won’t be seen.”

“Cam,” Syd called out, already leaning into something with you that I knew I’d be left out of. “What do you think? Sarah tries again, and I film the whole train wreck?”

“Sure,” you said, stepping from the spare bedroom, your face framed in one of my hijabs. “One condition. This time, Sarah gets to watch.”

FORREST

The plants were enormous. Green stretched up on either side of Cam, prehistoric conifers, arching trumpets like Jimson weed, but at the scale of redwoods. Mutant philodendrons everywhere, some bigger than a man’s thigh and some as small as her little finger, writhed and merged in curtains of life that hung from the dark canopy above. Forms moved and chattered nearby, part plant, part animal, and she was not afraid.

She was walking up a hillside, following Vance from a distance. He turned and smiled, and he looked different from how she remembered, taller and with longer hair, and maybe a few extra teeth.

She tried to call out but couldn’t, he was moving away from her, disappearing into the vegetation, and she wanted to catch up to him, more than anything, she wanted him to stop and come back for her. The moist ground sucked at her feet, she was climbing and sinking all at once. The forms in the undergrowth multiplied, turned more solid, and she was sinking, descending further into the loamy earth, unable to move as the creatures approached.
When she woke up, Cam was in the room, her room, at Sarah’s. She knew she should feel safe, but she was paralyzed. Sarah’s costumes hung like phantoms on the rack, their folds a denser part of the darkness surrounding her. It was a very long time before she was able to move, to crawl out of bed and turn on the light. She pulled out her phone did what she’d told herself she would not to do. She checked her email for a message from Vance. Naturally, he hadn’t sent one.

TRUTH

Two weeks ago, at the end of our dinner at Brasserie Gavroche, Mei had pulled three books from her bag with some ceremony, just after we’d finished our saffron crème brulés. “To fill in the gaps on art, here in Singapore,” she’d said. I’d asked her what gaps she was talking about, exactly. “The gaps in your thinking,” she’d said, pushing her dish away and standing to leave.

I wonder if you would have recognized me, Cam, as I sat in a puddle of early morning sunlight on Victoria Tan’s sumptuous rug, wearing her waffle weave Egyptian cotton bathrobe, reading the books Mei had lent me. I felt like someone not myself, which was of course an immense relief.

Mei was meeting me at the apartment again that evening for dinner, and I wanted to finish, or almost finish, the books before she arrived. I’d read enough of the one by the Thai critic with the incomprehensible name, Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook: “To be an artist is like being shit in a clogged toilet, stubborn shit that can’t depside whether it wants to be flushed or to stick around.” Rasdjarmrearnsook’s position was less than illuminating. I’d read all of the book by the Singaporean critic, S. Raoul: “Art does its job of saying the
obvious and unpleasant, thus stirring the stick through the soup of public outrage.” I liked this S. Raoul better, more whimsical, less vulgar. I planned to say as much to Mei; she’d hinted she might be able to introduce me.

The third book was a slim novel, a copy of Don DeLillo’s *The Body Artist*, and it looked like a relief compared to all that theory. I settled in, planning on stopping in time to dress for dinner. Instead, I didn’t stop reading until the sun was low in the sky, painting gold onto the pale acacias and feathered palms just beyond the window.

In DeLillo’s book, I found the fictional performance artist Lauren Hartke, stripping her body down to almost nothing, tortured by grief and mostly alone except for a spectral male companion. She was working up to one singular performance, which she finally gave, alongside a group of demented people doing nasty things, driving nails into themselves and the like, and calling it truth.

Horrifying stuff. Insanity. Transformation. Obsession that makes one thing become another, woman into man, living person into ghost. Why had Mei given me *this* to read? When her I heard her now-familiar knock, quick and sharp, at the door, I opened it without even caring that I was still in the robe. She looked at me with a kind of blankness, her expression made even more unreadable by her all-black sheath dress. Then her eyes fell on the book, still in my hand.

“So. You have enjoyed your reading?”

“Is this what you thought, when I told you I used to do performance?” I shook the book at her, not inviting her in.

“Ah. This ‘body artist.’ She’s also a woman driven to find a new life. Yes?”
“This is nothing like what I do. What I did. It’s a book about an extremist. A zealot.” Mei sighed and folded her arms, standing at the threshold, not inside, but not outside either. She cracked a tiny smile.

“Sarah. Think of the well-knowns in your country. Your Marina Abramovich. Your Yoko Ono. These women took performance to the limit and would not stop there. Such a woman is uniquely driven. Are you saying to me now, that you are not driven?”

“You’re talking about them like they’re fanatics. I don’t care if you think of me that way, but it isn’t exactly realistic,” I said. Mei just pressed her lips together, eyeing me with merciless impassivity. “I’ve never been obsessed with anything in my life,” I continued. “I might have wanted to make a point or two. I might have wanted to help myself imagine something. Other possible lives. But to call me ‘driven’ blows everything completely out of proportion.”

Mei shook her head, seemingly unmoved. The more contained she looked, the more aware I became that I was in a bathrobe, talking loudly in a way that was very not-Singapore, that was in fact very ugly-American.

“I only try to help you see yourself. And to make good conversation. Dinner conversation. But you feel you need to make difficulties.”

“You’re the one making things difficult,” I said, and pulled the robe tighter across my chest.

“We will try again. Next week,” Mei said, and added, “When you feel better.” With that, she turned and left, well-heeled shoes clicking on the steps as she went. I was suddenly sorry. Now I would not get to talk to her about the critic I liked, S. Raoul. Not to mention the meal itself.
Of course, she was right, Cam. I had been driven. What else could have made me bring you into a performance with no clear outcome, a performance with no safety net, in case things went sideways?

PARTICIPANT

It was Kyle who saw the advertisement online. Francis leaned in over Kyle’s screen, looking at the oddity he’d found: *Wanted: Participants for Anti-Xenophobic Performance. Men Only.* The directions were strange, and the invitation even stranger. Meet a woman, an artist, disguised as a Muslim, in a public place. Direct her actions for ten minutes, using text messages. She’d be filmed for some kind of art thing, some kind of show in a gallery or museum.

Why would anyone want to dress up like a jihadi? You had to be on your guard, online, sometimes it was hard to tell what was for real. The listing claimed the point was to understand something about how power works. Whatever know-it-all artist wrote the thing must think she was pretty slick. “Says here, she’ll do anything you tell her,” Kyle said.

“Think about it, bro. Like, *anything,*” Doug added, eyes swimming behind the smeared lenses of his black framed glasses.

“Stupid. They call this art? More elite-ass bullshit,” Francis said, just to try out a new phrase on them, to watch them nod. But he eyed the number in the listing, committed it to memory. The listing said the performance could be set up through text messages. Francis liked that. No words to be spoken, no embarrassing mix-ups. Things get weird, you can just ghost.
He’d always thought conversation was overrated. How we lived now was the way it was meant to be. All you had to do was type in the right words to catch your frequency, find your tribe. Like finds like, same attracts same. *Variance* had taught him that. But you could use those same rules of attraction to catch someone from the other side, if you were smart. Observe them up close, those who were up to no good, who would make a white man feel like less of a man, just for being who he was. Make him feel the need to apologize.

Francis waited six entire days before sent the text. He’d thought it through, listening to the clang and pound of the machines during his shift, all the things he could do to her, this stuck-up, so-called artist looking to shame men, looking to make some kind of joke. There were some things you just didn’t joke about. The spread of Islam. The replacement of whites. This lady wanted to know about power? He’d give her an education. He just had to decide what kind. He could make her take off her headscarf. He could make her lie on the ground. He could make her do nothing at all, just to mess with her. Just sit and watch her squirm.

He went into the windowless bathroom in his apartment to send the message. It was near noon, and the night shift had him skittish of daylight. Sitting on the cold porcelain can, he caught his reflection in the mirror. He’d bulked up in his own way, wife beater showing off a new tightness in the biceps and neck, chest pushing against the ribbed fabric. He flashed a grin at the mirror, looking nothing, nothing like the boy who used to hide behind his brother. That boy was long gone and this raw devil, this man of the hour, was standing in his place.
He texted the number, *I’m in*, and waited for a reply. He watched that reflection, held the grin until it hurt, until it looked like a scary mask. But maybe it wasn’t a mask. Maybe he was someone to be feared.

The message back was like one from a bot, made him answer yes/no questions. Male? *Y*. Willing to participate? *Y*. Willing to be filmed? *Y*. But when the last text came with the date and time, just a few days away, it must have been from a person, from her. Francis pictured her. Her smug, painted mouth. Her soft hands. Was she one of the foreigners? He couldn’t know for sure, so he pictured her every way he could think of. Light, dark, fat, thin. The picture of the lady in his head kept changing, she just wouldn’t let him pin her down. Better to keep things on the down low, he’d decided. He would tell Kyle and Doug nothing.

PERFORMER

Cam knew this time things would be different because this time she would be in control. This time, Sarah would have to sit on the sidelines and watch the covered woman do whatever some stranger commanded. Syd would film it all, from a safe distance. The head covering itched her scalp. The abaya made her sweat. The place they’d chosen for the performance was near downtown, a pocket park with a fountain. There was a cart where you could buy a drink or a gelato, kids and dogs. Cam almost felt guilty they were about to mess it all up.

The Participant showed up, early. Sure, it was supposed to be anonymous. But here was this white guy with weedy brown hair and so scared he’d drop dead if you looked too closely at him, and it had to be him, no other possible option. Strange eyes
that looked everywhere and nowhere all at once. He had some kind of rash between his
lip and nose and kept scratching there. The guy was clearly on high alert, wound up for
fight or flight.

He took out a thick notebook and started messing around, working a pen across
the page like crazy. Cam was not, absolutely not, supposed to let the Participant know
he’d been made. But how could you not look at a person who was staring at you and
drawing like a maniac? At a table across the way Syd had out the small, high-resolution
camera. She looked at the Participant and then back at Cam, raising an eyebrow, telling
her to sit tight. Sarah was acting like she was reading a newspaper. Cam got it then, the
reason it had to be done here, in public, where things were for real. Sure, it was a
performance, but out here you were preforming for yourself, the only audience that really
mattered in the end.

The burner phone sat there on the table without a sound, right next to the red bag
Sarah had insisted Cam use—an identifying object, she’d called it. The Participant was
still scribbling. Then the hand holding the pen flexed and stiffened. He made a sound, a
cry. Eyes rolled back in the head. Mouth worked open and snapped shut. When he fell to
the ground, it was almost graceful, like someone falling in slow motion.

On the pavement his limbs jerked wildly, yanked by unseen forces. Cam was with
the man, on the brick walkway next to him before she knew her body could move like
that, could move that fast. There was so much spit, foam mixed with blood from where
he’d bitten into his tongue. Breathing. Was he breathing? Yes, but not like a normal
person, drinking the air but choking on it, too. He arched back, smacking his head on the
brick.
Sarah was beside her, first. Syd ran over, still filming, the camera now out in the open. “We have to call someone, paramedics or someone,” Syd said, but Sarah shook her head. Nearby, a child started crying. The man’s eyes stared without seeing, blinking rapidly, his hands curled into claws.

“It’s better if we take him with us,” Sarah said, hooking an elbow under the other side of the man, signaling for Cam to stand up, to hoist this stranger to his feet.

“What? We should under no circumstances do that,” Syd hissed, stuffing the camera into her bag. “What if. Just think what could happen if—”

“Syd. We’re helping him.”

Cam shook herself free and stood. At the table where the man had been just moments before was the notebook. On the notebook: an image of Cam herself, rendered in swift but expert strokes. Her hair covered, her face framed in black. How had he made the page so dark so fast? But the drawing was of her and also not of her. She looked closely at the square set of the jawline, the high wall of the cheekbones, and saw she was not looking at herself at all, but at a drawing of a young man, a young man who looked very much like her, but was nevertheless another person entirely.

DOUBLE

It was her face that wrecked him. He hadn’t guessed she’d be so young. So pale. That she could look just like Dan. It was like time travel, like seeing his brother again, as a boy. Distance between then and now, gone. But it was not his brother, was not, could not be. He knew that. Hold steady, he told himself. *Man up, little bro.*
There was nothing he could do but draw her, this mixed up messed up creature. Couldn’t even been sure she was a woman. No tits, for one thing. And the shoulders looked too muscular for a girl, even under the veil. Just straight up weird. Nothing to do but commit the whole freaky thing to the pages of his notebook.

He’d never made a picture so fast or so well, his hand was moving, his pen flying, the face formed right there on the page. Then the sound. Just like the first time, but this time louder, deafening. The dizziness came on fast as the star expanded inside him, filled him with a language he couldn’t understand, made him a stranger in his own head. If only Dan was here! He cried out to him, but there was no Dan, of course. Just the white light, everywhere. And then the void. Not even dark, just nothing.

Back from all that not-being, he was in someone’s car. His head was in the girl’s lap, his face against the cloth of her black robe. Her hair was uncovered, and she was tow-headed just like his Dan. It had to mean something, because everything meant something. Didn’t it? Nothing, in the big pattern of things, happened by chance. So much pain in his head. He tried to get upright, to get a better look at her face full on. He raised up on one elbow but collapsed again, something telling him he’d be out for a very long time.

GUEST

The boy lay so still he might as well have been dead. I was alone with him, Cam, in the room with my costumes, and you were in the kitchen with Syd, sulking. You thought it was a mistake to bring him here at all. But what did you know. He’d heaved in the car, not even aware of where he was. Up close, he reeked of chemicals. You and Syd had
shared a stony silence on the way back, joining forces against me in your disapproval, but cooperating, just the same. Together, we’d put him on the futon, despite your objections. He wouldn’t be there that long.

I’m not ashamed to say I felt some pride in rescuing him, like he was someone needing saving, and here I was. And yes, things were not going the way I’d planned. I’d set out to make myself a vessel for racialized, gendered hate. I’d wanted the performance to serve as witness to that malice, show it for what it was, right up close and personal. But instead of a villain, I’d found someone who needed help.

In the dim room, I looked him over. His clothes would have been impossible, even if they hadn’t been spattered with bile. The denim pants looked like they’d been washed a thousand times, toes of his sneakers stained with some kind of ink. The hooded sweatshirt, black and clean enough, but cheap. Poverty trying to pass. I checked his pockets. A single key on a ring. A phone with a cracked screen. A half-empty pack of mint chewing gum. A wallet holding four wrinkled dollar bills and an expired City College ID card, “Francis Adams.” A nice sounding name.

It was true he’d showed up as a Participant for the Project, and this made him suspect. But this was not a person in a position to hurt anyone. He looked uncomfortable in his clothes, so I removed them piece by piece, until he lay there in his white underwear.

I looked at the shape of him, his messy brown hair. His eyes roving behind his eyelids, the skin threaded with tiny red blood vessels. The thicker veins, blue on the undersides of his white arms. The bundle of his genitals pressing against his briefs, the
clot of darker hair visible through the thin fabric. I decided the best thing was to let him sleep, at least for a little while.

LATER

“Oh, my god,” Syd gasped. “Tell me you didn’t take off his clothes?” Cam watched as Sarah walked past them through the kitchen and chucked a greasy looking bundle in the wash. Syd looked around wildly, catching Cam’s eye and holding it. “Aren’t either of you going to say something? Are we not going to acknowledge the fucked-up-ness of this situation?” In the past few weeks, Cam had come to appreciate Syd’s directness. Directness was what the moment called for.

“Acknowledged.”

“Syd, try and relax,” Sarah called from the laundry, slamming down the lid and starting the machine before joining them at the table. “He’s harmless.”

“Harmless? More like a lunatic.” Cam slid the heavy notebook over to Syd and Sarah and watched them thumb through it together, page after page of drawings in pen. Landscapes, imaginary landscapes, expanses of sand, and sometimes a fragmented figure, a man seen only in parts. Syd started working her lip between her teeth when she got to the pages of only black, filled edge to edge. They all stared at the pages in silence.

“Okay,” Sarah said, after a while. “I agree. That’s strange. But we knew people who signed up for the Project would be … unusual.”

How could Sarah not get it, that this was the biggest red flag possible? Cam flipped to the picture that was her but not her. “What about this.” They all looked.
“Well. He hasn’t done the nose or the cheek bones quite right, but still, the resemblance is striking,” Sarah said.

“Sarah, this isn’t me.”

Sarah squinted at the page, shook her head. Cam’s face was getting hot, the back of her neck prickling. How could Sarah not see it?

“She’s right,” Syd volunteered. She had started rocking back and forth in the chair and was now biting her fingertips. “That’s not Cam. That’s a guy.”

“What? No.”

“This. Is. Not. Me.” Cam shoved the notebook in Sarah’s direction.

“It’s actually not a bad drawing,” Sarah said. Shit. Naturally, that was what she’d say. Sarah was going to see what Sarah wanted to see. Cam took the notebook and shoved it under her arm.

“You ready to get out of here,” Syd said, pulling on her jacket.

Cam tugged off the abaya she’d been wearing over her jeans, she’d left it on even after she’d used the headscarf to wipe the spittle off the guy’s face in the car.

“Just to be clear? I’m not staying here while he’s here.” Sarah’s face went all pinched, but she didn’t make a move to stop Cam from leaving or taking the notebook.

In the hallway, Syd crumpled against the wall. “Think she’ll be okay?”

“Don’t know,” Cam replied. “Guess we’ll find out.”

Syd nodded and wrapped her arm around Cam’s shoulder. Cam shuddered, picturing Sarah alone with the stranger in her apartment, but let herself be led away, down the brightly lit hallway that to wherever Syd would take her.
DAWN

The girl must be just plain nuts. Not Gran-level crazy, but crazy in another way. Francis had woken up in a soft bed, stripped to his skivvies and with his clothes washed and stacked beside him. Had she undressed him? Hanging nearby had been the things, the burqas and whatnot, just tons of them. He’d pulled on his clothes without turning on the light, the goal to get out quick and quiet.

Now he stood in the living room of the nicest apartment he’d ever seen. It was just like you’d imagine, how the people on top lived. Everything soft colors and matching, like in a catalog. Huge windows took up just about a whole wall, and even in the dark he could make out the Lake, long and black and going on forever.

It was a nice place. How could a girl with a nice place have a whole room full of those things the jihadi women wore? She had to be sick, somehow.

Francis was at the window with his hand on the glass, trying for a clearer view, when a lady walked into the room. Not the girl, the Dan look-alike, but older.

His fingers had left a smudge of grease on the glass, and as she got closer, he tried to wipe it clean with his sleeve, before she saw. Like he should even care. “How’s your head,” she asked. Her voice was matter of fact, like Gran had been when she asked him about this or that bruise from school, and it dawned on him that she was the one pulling the strings. This was the so-called artist, not the girl. Shouldn’t she be afraid, afraid to be in a room alone with a strange man? His fingers found a knot on the back of his skull. It was the size of a peanut, and tender.

“Fine,” he muttered.

“Has anything like that ever happened to you? Before?”

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“No.”

“Is there someone I can call, to pick you up?” Up close you could see the way the skin folded around her mouth and eyes, how the edge of her lip shook when she talked. She would be easy to throw to the ground.

“I’m Sarah,” she said, “Are you Francis?”

“Yeah, I suppose,” How did she know his name? The lady smiled at him, and her teeth were a little crooked. Was she white, or not? He couldn’t be sure. She pressed a folded paper into his hand. Her fingers were hard, calloused. Nothing like he’d thought.

“Where is she,” he finally asked, and she dropped his hand.

“You mean the Performer, Cam? She left,” she said, turning away. Out the window, the sun was just coming up, the water going from black to blue. If he lived up here, he’d see it every day. But that was just stupid. No way could he ever have a place like this.

“I have work,” he said, because even if it wasn’t true, it sounded better if he had somewhere to be.

“You can call, if you need something.” Was that some kind of joke? “If you need any help,” she added, and he got it. She felt sorry for him. That, he could not stand. He moved past the lady, out the door and into the hall. “Wait, wait—” she called after him, her voice a rising whine.

Francis passed the elevator and took the service stairs, pounding down flight after flight, concrete echoing underfoot. Soon he was outside, on the sidewalk. He had no clue where he was. How to get back to his apartment? He just knew it was South, so he kept the sunrise to his left.
He’d only been walking ten minutes when it hit him. The notebook. He’d lost it, somehow. He hated thinking of that crazy lady touching the pages, fingerling his drawings. But maybe she didn’t even have it, maybe the notebook was left in the park, sitting out where anybody could see it. That turned his stomach, too. Either way, it was gone.

Francis walked and walked, and started working on forgetting the whole thing, making it so it hadn’t happened. But the name. Cam. It stuck in his head. It wouldn’t matter soon, he knew. There would be Night. There would be Variance.

LOOK

“Do you ever feel like the world’s about to end,” Syd asked, exhaling a cloud of smoke, and reloading the bottle green, electric one hitter before passing it to Cam.

“All the time.” Cam took a deep, oily hit and let the THC curl its fingers around her brain. She’d only been in Syd’s apartment for an hour, and already she felt more at home than she had for the past month at Sarah’s. Cam had just let it all out. Vance. The Vermeer. Everything. Syd had listened.

Sarah had said Syd was a great photographer for the Project because she was practically invisible and had no strong opinions. Wrong! Syd was down for making things happen. She’d gone to a die-in at Navy Pier demanding no new fossil fuel investment. Her laptop had a green sticker with an hourglass and the slogan, Hope Dies. Action Begins. She was even vegan! How come Sarah didn’t know any of this? It was the middle of the night, and they were sitting on Syd’s tiny balcony, knees almost touching, surrounded by Syd’s collection of potted succulents.
“So, I’m just going to ask. Did it hurt?” Syd nodded at Cam’s chest. Cam hadn’t talked with anyone about her top surgery, not since that first night when Sarah had told her she’d ‘disfigured’ herself. Sarah had tried to take it back, but Cam considered the topic of conversation closed. “Sorry, scratch that. Stupid question. Does it still hurt?”

“What hurts is that Sarah doesn’t see me. Like, she thinks I looked more like myself, before.”

“Pretty messed up. I mean, coming from her. The woman obsessed with being liberated from appearances, and revealing the violence of looking,” Syd said, talking low and knitting her eyebrows together, a perfect impression of Sarah at her most serious. Cam giggled and coughed at the same time, almost dropping the one hitter off the balcony. Syd was looking at her with a kind of intensity, like she was really paying attention. Cam liked that.

“Yeah. That she is.”

“Don’t you think it’s weird she’s wearing these things, and she’s never asked any women who are actually Muslim how they feel.”

“Go on.”

“So, it’s like, it’s not really about that, on some level. It’s about her. Don’t get me wrong. I have respect. She wants to force people to see how messed up it is, to be a not-white woman in this country. Ditto that for anyone who reads as ‘Muslim.’ Seriously disruptive.”

Syd tapped the ash out of the one hitter and walked into the apartment, returning with a fleecy blanket that she threw over their laps. The blanket had blue stars on it, and when Syd pulled it around herself, she looked like a little girl. “But I’m all for ditching
identity politics in favor of, you know. Actually not killing the planet.” Syd grinned, like she believed things could change. Sarah had been wrong about Syd being invisible. It was just that Sarah refused to look.

KNUCKLEHEAD

At first, Francis thought it was some kind of prank, something Kyle and Doug had cooked up. Ever since his run-in with the crazies, the women with the burqas, he’d been in no mood for games. It had taken the better part of the month to forget them. When his phone rang and the voice on the other end said it was Dan, said he’d finished two deployments and was on leave, living in Sierra Vista, Arizona, near the base since September, Francis wasn’t about to take it at face value, like some sucker.

He was on break at the plant, middle of the night. He’d bought himself a cheap Dodge to have a place to chill during breaks, even if the caffeine needed to make it through the shift made actual sleep next to impossible. He sat on the cracked leatherette seat, almost sure it was a set up. Like America’s Funniest, but not funny. The timing was wrong, and the voice was gimpy, none of Dan’s rumble and bass. But then the magic words came through the cellular network. “Hey, knucklehead, you there? You listening to me, little bro?”

That was all it took for Francis to feel the near forgotten need for his brother. How long had it been since he’s seen his brother face to face? More than five years had passed, Dan reminded him, five big ones. But why hadn’t he called sooner? Francis made himself man up, voice the question. And why not. He had every right.
“How come you’re just now calling? How come you get back, and just, *nothing*, man?”

Silence on the line. Was the connection dead? The seconds stretched on. Francis listened to his brother’s slow breathing, so close, it could be his own. “Forget it, bro,” Francis said, at last. “ Doesn’t matter.”

When Francis went back to his shift, back to the warm, dangerous bodies of the machines, for the first time in a long time he let himself wonder. What had his brother seen. What had he done, in Afghanistan. He let himself picture what Dan looked like, now. Then he tried to see himself through Dan’s eyes, wondered if he’d measure up. He needed something to show for his time on his own. There was work to be done.

**APOLOGY**

There was a time, Cam, in the weeks after you left with Syd, when I was angry. I admit it now, I was angry with myself, and angry with you. I was angry with Syd, for not doing what she was told. I was angry with the Participant, Francis, for being even more of a little freak than I’d expected, with some undiagnosed freak illness, that I couldn’t have planned for.

But how could I blame him, really.

The irony? Francis was probably the most blameless of any of them. I was angry with Wren, for not standing up for the work she’d encouraged, for bending to pressure. Wren and Michael both. I’d thought of them as allies but they’d dropped me, just as soon as there was pushback. As soon as I wasn’t profitable but was a liability.
You already need a kind of willfulness to do performance. You will every act into being, and you have to engage in radical self-belief to just stage something, anything. You’ve got to believe in the material, you have to have a kind of mad faith in your ideas. You have to insist, to yourself, there can be something there. Of course, there’s always the risk that it will fail, but sometimes an interesting failure is as good as success. I needed to see Syd’s footage of the performance to know what we’d gotten, to know what I had left to work with.

When I called Syd, two weeks after the two of you had left, I tried to make my voice light, my affect one of reason. I was a reasonable person, making a reasonable request. I sat at the kitchen table and called. She picked up after nine rings, with a wary, "Hello?"

"Syd! You sound great!"

"Thanks," she replied, then went quiet, before adding, "We felt bad. Leaving you that night."

"Don’t worry. I didn’t expect you to stay."

"Okay," she said, sounding relieved. "So, … you’re calling, because?"

"Right. I just wanted to know when I could get a copy of the footage."

"What?"

"Syd. The footage you shot of Cam. And the Participant."

"Oh. I don’t think—"

"—I really just need the footage you agreed to shoot. Even if things didn’t go as expected, I’d like access to the material, just to see if—"

"—Didn’t go ‘as expected?’ Okay. No. And I don’t think I even saved it."
“What does that mean, ‘you don’t think’ you saved it? You save everything, even the trash shots.” Here, Cam, there was a big pause on the other end, like Syd had muted herself, and was talking to someone, probably you. When she came back to the line, Syd spoke like she was reciting lines, lines given to her by another person. Her performance was less than convincing.

“I wiped the card, Sarah.”

“Uh-huh. Is Cam there? She hasn’t answered my texts.”

More silence, the clean silence of the mute button. I tried something else:

“Syd, can you please tell Cam I need that notebook back? The one she took from the Participant?”

“That lunatic? You’ve got to be kidding.”

“I’m completely serious, Syd. And he has a name. Francis, and that’s actually his property,” I said, keeping my voice very flat, almost monotone, stating the obvious, the facts.

“You know what? I have to go now,” she said. In the few seconds before hanging up, I heard your laugh, Cam, coming from close by, carless in your joy and merciless in your judgement of me.

The midday sun was sliding over the flat, gray surface of the Lake. From that angle and in that light, it looked made of stone.

I dug up the number I’d extracted from Francis’ phone and sent a message: Found book of drawings. Yours? LMK if you want to pick up.

As I waited for a reply, I thought, with one side of my brain, what insanity this was. What if Francis wrote back? But I knew he’d write back, could feel it like it had
already happened. So, the other side of my brain already knew, it knew exactly what I would do. I would send him to Syd’s, to get his notebook back from you. I told myself this was not something I was doing out of anger, not to punish you, or to punish Syd. It was an act of care, of returning left property.

When the text came from Francis: *K. Tell me where*, that was exactly what I did.

GONE

Sometimes the universe handed him things. First, the call from Dan. Now, the chance to fix his screw up, to cover his tracks had come, along with the chance to see her again. The Hag, that’s how he thought of that crazy artist lady now, had texted. The girl had his notebook. All he had to do was show up, make good. The Hag had even handed over her address and number, the girl’s number. Trust like that? Didn’t exist in his world. Trust like that was a luxury of the elites. Or stupidity. Or both.

Now, he was outside the building, and it was another nice building, now that he was here. Not *as nice* as the building where the Hag lived, but still. Stone in big grey blocks, balconies with metal railings. Each private ledge had its own thing going on. One with Chinese lanterns, one packed full of green plants in pots, and another with its ugly rainbow flag. Another with a big, fancy looking grill and the stars and stripes hanging from the rail, dirty and torn. There should be more respect for the flag, but that was not why he was here.

You had to be buzzed in, but Francis hated that, talking into a box. What to say, anyway? He’d just wait it out. She’d have to come out, or go in, eventually. An hour of waiting, and he was proved right, because there was the girl walking up, wearing just a
pale blue hoodie over some of those tight black leggings he liked to see girls wear, the
kind that bunched up around their little asses and smoothed out their thighs.

She was tall, and she was beautiful. It was a word he hadn’t thought in forever,
beautiful, and its sound in his head made him ache, but he didn’t know why.

She moved like she meant it. Like she knew what she wanted. Face smooth like a
mask. What would she say to him, and had she looked at his drawings? She had keys in
her hand, then her hand was on the door, and if he waited any longer, she’d be inside.
He’d really be screwed, then. He cleared his throat. “Hey.”

A shadow crossed her face, like it got darker from the inside when she looked at
him. But he hadn’t asked for this. All he wanted was his stuff.

“Yeah?”

“Hi,” he said, and this was why he hated speaking, because it was so stupid, really
stupid to try and use words in the moment, especially with strangers.

“You shouldn’t. Be here, I mean.”

“She said you have it,” he tried, but her face gave him nothing.

“Who? Who said?”

“Her. Sarah,” he said, and the gathering storm in her face darkened. Up close and
without the veil, she looked even more like his brother as a boy, Dan, Dan-oh, Danny,
Danny-boy. Now, she looked like Dan had looked, gearing up to deliver a serious ass-
whupping to some unlucky kid dumb enough to cross him.

“What did Sarah say I had—”

“It’s not worth nothing. Just some sketches. Belongs to a friend—”

“You can’t. Cannot be here.”
“It’s a public street.”

“This is a place. A home. You need to go.”

“Give me what’s mine. And I’m gone.”

He watched her chewing on it, judging him. Then either something in her softened up, or she’d thought on it, and this was the only way to get rid of him.

“Wait here.” She turned the lock and was inside in a hurry. Minutes went by, and Francis wondered. Was she ever going to come back out? A cop drove by, real slow, and he tried to look like nothing was going on. Nothing was going on, anyway, so he shouldn’t have to fake.

Some hajis walked by. Two guys with beards and brown skin, just yucking it up, one of them laughing and looking at a something on his phone. It burned him up. That’s who the police should be scoping out, not him. He saw the way those two just got away with it, acting like they belonged. There should be a law, he was thinking, a way to get them to move back where they came from, and then, there she was. The girl. She’d come back out, after all. She shoved a paper bag at him.

“There,” she said, “Now we’re done.” Peeking out of the sack was the black cover of his notebook, the edges of the pages smudged in places, just like he remembered. Her hair was so light he could see right through it, the outline of the pale cup of her skull. Her blue eyes were so light in parts they could be white, and she looked at him strange, a sad look, like a little kid who’s been picked on all the time. Not like he should care.

“What were you thinking. Why did you want to do it?” he asked, finally.

“What?”
“Want to look like a, like a …. you know,” he said, tucking the package under his arm.

“Like a what?”

“You know.”

“What I know is you showed up, to play a part. And couldn’t handle it. What I know is that you need some help. Like with your illness. And like, your whole outlook. You won’t find it here.” She’d pulled the hood up over her short hair while she was talking, and now she was smiling. It was a mean smile. A high-mighty smile, like she had him figured. He was sure of it, then. She’d looked. Seen his drawings. And he was proud and ashamed all at once, because drawing was a sissy thing to do, but he was good at it. But still. That was private.

“Forget it,” he said, “Whatever.” Then added, “Whatever, Cam.” It was like he’d slapped her. Her smug face got all crumply and scared when he said her name. He knew he’d won. Names meant something, after all.

Back in his Dodge, he pulled the notebook from the bag and flipped through it, the pages like scenes from his own memory, but more real. Each image carried the story of him making it, making the world make sense. But then at the end, the picture of her, of Cam in the veil, was missing. Not even a ragged edge was left in the book’s spine. She’d gone and made his picture of her disappear, like it was never there.
BODY

I think, Cam, that the reason I was so deeply cut by Mei’s delivery of *The Body Artist* was this. It struck too close to home, in its title. The body is where all my work has happened. Mine is, you could say, a body of work located in the body. What does it mean, not to take your work home with you, but to know that your body is the process and product, to know that work is never finished? When I’m not performing, who am I? Is there ever a time, really, we’re not making ourselves up, as we go along?

I don’t know any of the answers to these questions. But each woman I made in *Getting to Know You* was lived, by me, in the flesh. What made it to the Gallery, the screenshots blown up, then dye-sub printed on aluminum, the transcriptions of the suitors’ online messages—hopeful, cloying, lewd—those were just offshoots, relics, flotsam and jetsam. Selected, cropped, color corrected, curated, presented, by me. But they were never the work.

It was the same with *Project Hijab*, Cam, and I think you might have gotten just a taste of that, for those few minutes you performed, wearing those transforming, confusing garments. When things started happening you had to improvise, and your body rushed over to that boy, Francis. Your body lengthened, and you became one black arc to meet his falling form. There was no more identity theater, just the shape of you, the shape of him. I’ve replayed it in my mind so many times, Cam. In my head, it’s become its own *Pieta* moment, your draped female body holding the male convulsing body.

But in my vision, it’s not at all like those marble bodies from long ago, cold and elegant and stylized, a frozen pantomime of suffering and care. Instead, the raw messiness of it, the shock wiped across your face, the blood on his chin. Your own
improbable body, that I admit I’ve never gotten used to looking at, made it all the more transcendent. Here are the people of the world today: imperfect, butchered, and writhing.

Looking at you and Francis that day, I learned that all performance is located in the body.

FINE
Cam watched from behind the blinds, trying to see the figure of the man who had just cornered her on the front steps. She looked for a figure of about his size, tried to picture what he was wearing and discovered she had no idea, none whatsoever. All she could conjure was the grey flatness of his eyes, the angles of his face, the worn looking hands with long, calloused fingers—she’d seen them when he snatched the notebook back from her.

She’d done it, she’d told him off and made him leave, and now she sagged to the floor, heart thrashing in her chest and hands numb. How could Sarah have told this maniac she’d be here, that she had his stupid drawings. It would be over now, at least. He had the notebook, so what else could he want. She’d kept that last weird drawing, the one she’d tried to show to Sarah, as evidence. After she’d used one of Syd’s X-Acto knives to razor it out of the book, she’d folded it first thirds, then in half, and slipped it into her wallet. She would deal with Sarah, later.

Syd was out working a wedding, so she’d be gone until late. While Syd acted like the wedding photography was just a side hustle, a temporary fix, weddings were the only work Syd had taken on since she’d moved in. But it wasn’t Cam’s place to judge. Bills
had to be paid, even if she could have taken the rent out of her trust without blinking. But
Syd hadn’t wanted that.

Cam looked out the window for a few minutes, just to see who was out there. She
wanted to leave but didn’t want to be outside alone. Stupid, to feel that way. Sarah’s fault
that she felt that way. She would just wait here, for Syd, and everything would be fine.
The sun dipped lower, and Cam waited on the couch, where she’d been sleeping since
she’d left Sarah’s. The longer she sat there the more the apartment seemed too full.
Besides the plants and poster art from different protests, Syd’s photography dominated.

One of a young Black woman smoking a cigarette seemed so sad that Cam
wanted to cry, but probably that was just the adrenalin leaving her system. The woman
glittered and glowed in an outfit covered in iridescent sequins. Behind her, a blur of
motion at a club, the ghost forms and light tracers that evidenced a long exposure. Only
the woman was still, looking to the side of the frame, waiting for someone she knew
wasn’t coming.

All Syd’s portraits were of people in public spaces, all caught in moments of
isolation: A middle aged Asian woman in a skirt suit, apparently passed out in exhaustion
in the lobby of an office building. Shot from above, the woman had put her feet up in a
chair, a beam of anemic sunlight dividing her in half at the waist.

A white teen, a boy with delicate shoulders that seemed to quiver beneath his
floral print button up, reading a novel on a train in front of block of stern looking adults
in so-called business casual wear. The boy looked too gentle, too good for that world.

The clear theme was the self’s alienation in contemporary urban life, and when
Cam had said as much, Syd was floored, “You said it better than I could have,” and she’d
immediately gotten Cam to talk about each photograph while she wrote it all down, “For
the website I’m going to make,” Syd had explained. Something about all those
photographs made Cam wonder what she looked like, sitting alone in an apartment. She
closed her eyes, let them watch.

It had been dark for a long time, maybe a few hours, when Cam finally heard the
key scraping in the lock. Syd set her bags of gear on the table with a thud. She acted like
she didn’t see Cam, until she sat down on the sofa. “You’re still up.”

“You smell like frosting,” Cam sniffed, wrinkling her nose. “And stale booze.”

“Yeah. Probably so.” Syd pulled out the one hitter and started loading it up, but
then looked at Cam hard. “What’s happened,” Syd asked. “What’s wrong.” She put her
hand on Cam’s face and ran her thumb over Cam’s lips, and her hand smelled salty,
sweaty and a little rank. Syd’s eyes suddenly didn’t seem tired at all, but very hungry and
a little hopeful. Desire uncurled in Cam’s belly. Everything about Syd was tender, from
the puffy softness of her cheeks to the curve of belly gently folding over the waistband of
her black, nondescript work pants.

She didn’t have to ask if it was okay, as she pulled Syd’s thumb into her mouth
and sucked, working the digit between her lips, or as she undid the buttons on Syd’s shirt.
Syd groaned softly and used her other hand to start tugging off Cam’s sweater. Cam felt
everything start to speed up, all she wanted was to put her mouth on every inch of Syd’s
skin. But once Syd’s shirt was off, Cam saw both upper arms were tattooed with half
sleeves, strategically placed so that the intricate botanicals were hidden unless Syd
wanted to show them.
The flowers were too delicate for Syd’s ample arms. Without wanting too, Cam pictured the flaccid upper arms of aging women. Syd’s tattoos had been chosen wishfully, in the dumb hope that her body wouldn’t droop, sag, and wrinkle. It made Cam feel kind of sorry, and it made it worse that Syd was smiling at her, an unguarded, open-lipped smile, her gapped front teeth making her look childish, wanting Cam to be excited about her tattoos.

Why not play along, anyway. “Nice,” Cam said, and she ran her hand over Syd’s left arm and pinched the underside, hard enough to leave a mark, before kissing her on the mouth. Syd kissed her back, her tongue pushing past Cam’s teeth, forceful and searching. And it was okay, okay to hurt Syd a little if it made things seem more real. Whatever happened, it wouldn’t matter. Touching Syd didn’t fix anything, but it didn’t break anything, either.

GENIUS

Francis had long made his peace with it: there was no way to tell where the information online really came from. Kyle and Doug, they’d believe anything. QAnon, the deep state, moon landing as a hoax. With all the stories out there, you had to check sources. Confirm things, or else you’d get duped. But more than that you had to trust your gut. That’s what Gran had said, anyway. If his gut said a story was good, he trusted it like it was gold standard.

He was on 8kun, used to be 8chan, but guess what, government shut it down, when he found something his gut said was genius. Just to be sure he checked it out and the story was everywhere, even the on fake news outlets, mouthpieces for the liberal
elites—clearly legit. It was about a man. Franco, a man who made himself two men, who now sat locked up in a German prison. Franco was a hero, like Dan. A lieutenant in the German Army, the Bundeswehr, it was called, and Franco had tried to save Germany from drowning in refugees, invaders flooding in from the broke down Middle East.

The genius part was how Franco became the enemy to fight the enemy. How like magic Franco had made his Syrian alter-ego, David Benjamin. All it took was thinking backwards, doing what no white person would think to do. Franco darkened his face with his mother’s makeup, put shoe polish in his beard, walked into a refugee center in Offenbach, and became the enemy, became David Benjamin. Franco used David’s English, clumsy, immigrant English, to fake out the authorities.

*In what country were you born?*

*Syria,* Franco told them, speaking as David.

*How did you get here?*

*CROSSED THE CONTINENT ON FOOT.* Francis imagined the words, words coming from a mouth already getting used to being not one but two mouths. Laughable English worked in the mouth, and Arabic wasn’t needed, the story said. French was claimed as the first language and was worthless to the Germans.

*Give us your papers.*

*Papers? Lost,* the mouth said. Francis saw the hands, David’s hands with Franco’s hands slipped inside them, grubbing in the pockets of David’s sweatpants, pulling out foreign coins and a broken cell phone. *I have nothing,* the hands, the mouth, and the eyes, said.

*Help me,* they said. And the authorities did.
They took the fingerprints of the hands. They photographed the face. They put the face and a new registration number on an identification card. And there was a picture of the card, of the identification card of David Benjamin, Syrian asylum seeker and legal person in Germany. A sanctioned person with *subsidy protection*, the story said. ID number 00000D15722484571.

For fifteen months David Benjamin got his aid package. He claimed asylum seekers’ quarters in Erding, Bavaria. His double, Franco, lived as an officer in Offenbach whenever he wasn’t in the barracks in Illkirch, France, where the Franco-German 291st Infantry Brigade was based.

Francis liked to picture the Brigade in their crisp uniforms, marching in never-ending rows in those places, places where there were castles and mountains, pure places, places worth defending. When he wasn’t undercover as David Benjamin, Franco was a lieutenant. A soldier like Dan, hunting down bad guys and ending them, but on another continent with another name.

If he had completed his secret mission, Franco would have worn the face of David Benjamin and done all the things the invaders did but were never caught at. It was about changing public opinion, the smart way. Shootings and protests at borders just poked the bleeding-heart liberals’ sympathy buttons, even as they were being replaced. This, this would have worked, if some low life janitor hadn’t found Franco’s pistol, stashed in a toilet in a Vienna airport. But that’s how it ended, how Franco was caught, going back for that gun.
Francis pulled up the story on a dozen sites. There was the real face, Franco’s face on the screen. Franco’s eyes were eyes that could see the hard facts and look without flinching. Could see what needed to be done and do it, whatever the cost. Not caring. And it was perfect, the name. Franco, like a version of his own name, but better. Nothing sissy-assed about Franco. That was what he would have been named, if he was going to be a real man.

CONTACT

Cam hadn’t expected anything when she checked her phone. Three in the morning, Syd’s arm was thrown over her, and she quietly pulled the device to her in the dark, trying not to wake Syd, who hated screens in the bedroom, anyway.

Actually, Cam didn’t like sleeping near the phone, either. But she had to put up some resistance to all Syd’s well-meaning, life enriching tactics. Turn off the lights when you leave a room. Don’t swig almond milk from the carton. Rinse the cap to the mouthwash before putting it back on, so the bottle doesn’t get sticky. She’d started checking the news as they lay in bed just to retain some sense of dignity.

The message washed its spectral blue light over her:

Cam,

I hope you don’t mind me writing, now.
Would you believe me, if I told you I wanted a new world?

Yes, I think you would. That’s why you were there, too, in Sheffield, in that cramped tent, by the fire with the pine smoke. I hated that smoke! I bet you’d think
that's funny, because where am I? Back in another forest, if you can believe it.

Sitting by a fire!

I hope you’re not too angry with me, Cam, for leaving you at the Rijksmuseum. Surely, the past is behind us, now?

I’m here, at Terrain, and everything is better.

There are so many of us here.

What do we do? Everyone works the gardens. We all have to do our part.

Otherwise, we’re free.

Don’t think, even for a second, that I’ve given up. We fight by living carbon neutral, even carbon negative. We fight by caring for each other, like one body.

Living like one organism. We call it unconditional communal love.

You will love it here, too. If you come.

— V.

After Vance had proved he was a complete garbage person by leaving her in Amsterdam, Cam had resolved she would not answer such a message. The plan, if such a message came, was to delete it without reading. The plan was not to weasel out of the suddenly suffocating bed to sit on the chilly balcony, where she read Vance’s message over once, twice, three times, and then over again. The plan was not to reply, I miss you.

WIN

Who would have thought. The way to get back what’s yours? Become someone else.

The best way to safely get in and out of the place was to go looking like a foreigner, like a thief. But he was not a thief. That drawing, it had started as a picture of
the girl, but it was really a picture of his brother. He knew that, now. And it was his. He needed to see that face, the face of Dan, as a boy, but there’d be no way to explain that to the cops if they showed up, and no way was she was going to just hand over what was his. Weeks ago, he’d given her the chance. All she’d done was smart off. Act like he was the one sick in the head.

He darkened his face with bronzing makeup and looked at the mug in the mirror. A stranger’s face, all right. He almost laughed, because he’d fit right in with the foreigners he saw everywhere. His hair was a problem, though. A black beanie took care of it. A little makeup in the eyebrows, and he was good to go. For once, he wasn’t jealous of his big brother’s baby blues. His eyes had always been a nothing color, grey. But who’d have thought, sometimes nothing was a good thing. A useful thing.

He’d scoped the place out, nights he had off from the plant. He’d found out she had a roommate, a fat girl. They had a rhythm, those two. Most always, they’d both gone out by ten in the morning, so he posted up to watch the door around nine. It was colder than last time. The air was freezing the makeup to his face, or that’s what it felt like. Good thing, to hide his hands he’d put on gloves.

First the roommate left. He waited some more, and she came out. His Cam, blinking into the tilted sunlight like an animal coming out from its den, looking more pure than other people, somehow. But then she pulled on a huge pair of black shades and drew up the hood of her puffy coat, and boom, she was like all the rest. Maybe, he could try something else. Text her and say, what? Sorry, but can I have my drawing of you back? The one that looks like my bother. Not happening.
The door to the hall opened without a fight when he hit it lightly with the pointed end of the prybar. Inside, no trouble finding the right door, single gear bike out in the hall would have given it away, even if he hadn’t had the apartment number. Which he had.

An eclectic eye winking at him, the oval of a security camera. When Francis looked at it, hard, it was a dummy cam. He’d put one up himself back at his place, before he could get the real deal. He knew the game. He slid off the back just to make sure, and guess what, it was empty inside, no circuits, just a fake camera in a fake world to give them a fake sense of security.

The apartment door gave in without resisting. One firm tap of his bar, one inch down from the knob, was all it took.

Inside, lots of big, weird photos of people alone, and some lefty posters: *Save Our Mother. Action or Extinction. People are People and Can’t Be Illegal.* Please. Plants everywhere, too many plants, like they’re playing at being forest fairies. He laughed at that. *Forest fairies.*

A strange cactus-like thing, with a mess of thin branches sat in the corner in an ugly pink pot. Just for fun he kicked the pot, shocked the plant toppled, the pot cracked and broke into pieces, getting dirt on the clean floor. He looked in the closets, in the cabinets in the bedroom. The bookshelf in the living room. Nothing. No drawing, not anywhere.

He just wanted what was his. Was that so bad? Was that a crime? It was his picture, his picture of his brother, and it was the best picture he’d ever made. He checked under the mattress. Nothing. Threw the mattress to the floor, turned over the dresser. Where would you hide something like that? The pots and pans from the kitchen shelves,
the napkins in the drawers, the jars of spice from the rack on counter. He scattered it all, a tornado ripping through the apartment. Nothing.

His reflection in the shiny surface of the fridge, warped and bent and dark as sin. Focus, focus was what he needed now. Footsteps and voices in the hall. He stood dead still and listened. Panic expanded in his chest, tightened in his lungs and gut, made his mouth water. Made him want to scream. But of course, that would have been suicide. The footsteps came closer, a man and a woman, his voice low, hers a shrill giggle.

They passed and down the hall a door slammed from farther way. Another cackle from the girl, softened by the walls separating them from him. His chest loosened. Blood pounded in his ears, and he pictured Cam coming home and seeing. Knowing. She was not untouchable. But his drawing wasn’t there, he was sure of it.

As Francis left, he told himself there was one good thing, anyways. If enough people passed him on the way out, and then heard about the break in, they’d be on their guard, the next time. Next time they saw a foreigner in their building, in their path, they’d know to watch their backs. Leaving, he passed white woman coming in who must have lived there. Sixties, white hair, and a big gold watch. She shrank from him, saw his face and trembled. Seeing the scared in her watery eyes, the right kind of fear, of the real invaders, he had the thought. Maybe, this was still a win.

Back at his place, he took off the makeup in the bathroom mirror with Ponds Cold Cream, just like Gran had used. White and heavy, the cream lifted away the foundation like it was nothing, leaving just a wad of paper towels smeared with a mix of white and mud brown. He looked at himself. Half his face still dark, half his face white again, and
he understood. He’d made his very own David Benjamin. No, better. He grinned back at the person in the glass, one side a demon and the other side a soldier. He’d made his own Franco.

ORIGIN

I can see now, Cam, why you felt you were betrayed, when Francis showed up at Syd’s, asking for his drawings.

And, looking back, I can say that I was hurt by how you left. I can admit that now, at least. You called, and it was going to be the last time we spoke, but how could I know that? The sun was high, or as high as it was going to get that time of year, and it was just after four. I was in the neighborhood and walking past a park with a coffee. The light was slicing through the black branches of trees like there was nothing wrong, but everything was wrong.

I remember:

Your voice on the phone—high, twisted with anger.

Your overactive imagination—Syd’s place had been trashed.

(You just knew it was him.)

Your child-like vehemence—you swore that I’d seen the last of you, for good. I stopped walking and sat down, the metal bench cold even through my coat, and my face went completely numb when I heard what you said, my belly seized and my throat got dry when you told me there had been a break in.

I was afraid, Cam, the way I imagine a mother might feel afraid, knowing her daughter is in danger. I hated feeling like that. The helplessness, the sense of spinning
out, of touching the thin barrier between terrible things that should never happen, could
never happen, and had already happened. The awful, illuminating knowledge that there
was no barrier. The horror of facing that the world is a violent place, and any illusion of
safety is a lie, especially for a woman.

I had never wanted children, Cam. I knew this from the time I was fifteen and was
asked to babysit a cousin, once, during a wedding. Have I told you this story? Probably
not.

I was the only one willing to watch her. Her hands were sticky, and she insisted
on getting in the bed with me, not asking but climbing in. Her body too long and lean for
a child and her head enormous and hot, the hair brown tufts sticking out. And her smell,
like sour milk. She pushed her feet against my thighs. Fine. If I held her long enough,
she’d sleep.

There was a storm, and the trees scratched their fingers over the windowpanes,
and she was afraid, and then I was afraid, too. And not just afraid, but terrified, for her,
for this child and her fear. And I hated that. Children: they transmit their fear of the world
to you and make you want to protect them. When I could tell by her breathing that she
was asleep, I watched the way her mouth worked around. Three years old, and that mouth
was still a little triangle, shaped to find and hold a nipple. I knew it then: I never wanted
one.

I wanted to leave, Cam. To pry her limbs off my own. But if I did that, she’d
wake up. It’s a murderous thing to be held hostage by a tiny human. I waited for an adult
to come and save me, but no one came. Just the unreal, miniature face, in the wash of
shadow from the window.
I flattened my body to the mattress and started to slowly crawl away, like maneuvering through a trench in a warzone. I slid out of the bed, to the floor, shifting my weight from elbow to elbow. It took ten minutes, maybe more, and when I could finally rise, I looked again at the sleeping face, so pale, so perfect. And people say that children are blameless or even innocent. A useless word. My resolve not to have children formed early and was absorbed at the level of bone and muscle.

So, when you told me, Cam, on the phone, that there had been a break in, that you could have been there, that it was because of me, I didn’t want that. My body told me the truth, I’d broken my promise to myself. I’d made a space inside my chest labeled daughter, and I’d put a picture of you there. And now there was trouble, and I couldn’t stand it. And I did it, I hung up first. I shut you out, never thinking that afterwards you’d disappear. That it could be that final.

DEEPFAKE

Ever since the night he created Franco, Francis had been stepping up his game. He was trying, now, to post the video he saw and downloaded forever ago, the one where the guy went all first-person shooter at a mosque. He’d love for Dan to get a load of that action. And for Dan to know Francis posted it. He’d been sending Dan stuff on the regular, stuff Dan would get, after being over there, putting a stop to the invasion. Mostly, Dan couldn’t be bothered to respond.

But it turned out the thought-police governments didn’t want people seeing stuff like the video, which he’d found out was from New Zealand, all the way on the other side of the world. Godforbid, you show the white man standing up. Just like they said on the
boards he’d found, whites were the only race not allowed to show any of pride, to stand up, avoid their own extermination. No videos of whites taking back what’s theirs. He had to be smart uploading it. Posters on the boards, ones that still believed in freedom, told how to doctor the goods.

There were mods you could add to the video. Make it look more video-game-like, so the algorithms used to detect violence failed, even if the original was watermarked.

Put a rendering filter on, for starters, make it look smoother and more pixelated. Cover the ground in a gradient mesh to make it uniform.

Then add smoke effects for the rounds fired—funny, in the real thing there was no smoke—and to Francis it looked way more realistic, not less, when a steady stream of smoke came pouring from the barrel as the shots ripped out. But, whatever.

He downloaded a face-swapping app, and put faces of random characters, AI generated hajis with usual beards and whatnot, on the faces of everyone gunned down in the video. It was simple stuff, kids’ stuff, but would fool any gatekeeping AI from taking down the doctored video. He put a Hollywood Yellow filter on it all, a tint that made it look like some mosque out in the desert instead of in New Zealand, like it was a stupid game no one would care about.

He posted the doctored video on his proxy social media account (he wasn’t stupid), and planted links in *Variance* sub games. Just something extra for kids to find. Next, he sent the link to Dan. Francis pictured the grin that would spread across Dan’s face. It all looked familiar, like those old-school first-person shooter games in the time before, back before Gran’s, camped out at Mama’s. Sending the video to Dan completed things, somehow. Made it all make sense.
UNCONDITIONAL

The road had led them to what appeared to be a nothing, a mud-slicked trough of a path that had taken Cam, with Syd’s help, the past eight days to find. She’d tried to tell Syd she didn’t have to come. That things might be complicated with Vance. That if this place, Terrain, was any good, Cam could let her know. “I’d hate for you to have to go all that way, alone,” Syd had said, drawing out that last word, alone, like it was a bad thing. It wasn’t that she didn’t like Syd. In fact, Syd was great. Trustworthy. Caring. So much so that she might never leave. So here they were, together, the last week and a day spent tromping through damp, muddy fields, past campsites huddled between forested cliffs, and around castles and crumbling piles of houses from centuries ago.

The first part had been easy. Direct flight to Charles de Gaulle from O’Hare, then an express train from Montparnasse to Gare de Bordeaux-Saint-Jean. The relief of being away! Everything had felt delightfully foreign, just like before, visiting France so many times with her Francophile mother. Sure, they’d mostly fought. Cam had snuck off to find her own adventures, lurking in Montmartre, drinking Stella Artois and espresso at sixteen and staying out too late. The filter of another language that had to be deciphered, muffling all the overheads, feeling herself slip sideways into a buzz that told her she wasn’t locked into being her mother’s daughter, she could be anyone she wanted to.

Of course, it would have been so much easier without Syd, who had never left the States, and who clung to her at every turn. How could she admire it all, with Syd wanting to hold her hand, to hold her down. Still, she was out, she was moving. Twinkle and grit of airport and city. Stomach dropping whoosh of trains. Even the cold had felt inviting, never mind that Syd complained it was “even colder than Chicago.” Exhausted, blackout
sleep, and no bad dreams. Poached eggs, fruit compote, crusty toast, and then leaving
frost dusted cobblestones of Bordeaux, two trains and a bus to Gare des Eyzies, in
Périgord, where they slammed to a halt.

The final set of directions to Terrain, given as part of a set of geocaching
coordinates, had brought Cam and Syd to this unlikely place. The small towns in the
Dordonge were popular in the summertime with enthusiasts of prehistoric cave paintings,
but not so much now, when the aging hotels were drafty and dank. The area was pocked
with modest castles, old farmhouses, and off-brand Cro-Magnon themed attractions,
shabby little parks with mannequins in ratty fur loincloths, closed for off-season. Each
day, they’d tried a new location, a new rented room. Each day, they’d had skeptical
rideshare drivers, three times now it had been the same ancient man, drop them off in a
different area that they’d then marked off on their map once they confirmed that there
was no collective, no renegades living off grid encamped there, hidden in plain sight.

“Nothing out here for you, mademoiselle, just caves,” the repeat driver had
protested, again, when he dropped them off today in what appeared to be an abandoned
pasture. A wrinkled grandfather with a small gold stud in his ear, the driver had shaken
his head as he drove off, his sleek Fiat kicking up dust as he left them there with their
packs.

They’d tromped across the pasture, over whorls of long grass made into soggy
nests by wind and rain, until they found another road, the one that led to the path now in
front of them. Weirdly, there was strong and open access WiFi everywhere. It was the
most promising sign they’d encountered so far. Cam pointed up at the slick path that
wound up and into teetering limestone bluffs, a passage fit for goats.
Cam was afraid. Afraid of not finding anything and afraid of what they would find, if there was anything here. Cam let Syd’s fingers graze her palm and told herself to just observe the nay-saying, fortune-telling thoughts, the ones that told her she was going to get them both killed in this backwater, that they were going to die in a rockslide, or of venomous snake bites, or be shot by some cantankerous farmer for trespassing, or all of the above, that they’d disappear into this place and the moss would grow over their bones. At least if she disappeared for good, it would serve Sarah right.

_Just because you think it, doesn’t mean it’s true_, the new climate-anxiety-conscious therapist chided in Cam’s head. Syd had referred this therapist, aptly named Joy, with whom she was clearly smitten. A newly minted devotee of CACBeT, the idiotic acronym for climate aware cognitive behavioral therapy, Syd had developed a habit of quoting the therapist’s truisms throughout the day until Cam was ready to slap her.

They shouldered their packs and started climbing. They’d gone about a mile when the sun slipped below the humped outcroppings of grey and tangles of green and the rain started to fall, cold rain that was almost snow, pelting down like wet ash. Was sleet the word for it? Moist, icy chunks as big as quarters soaked their coats, clumping the down stuffing into useless soggy masses, plastering strands of Syd’s hair pitifully to her face. The temperature was dropping. “Time to go back?” Syd suggested, hopefully. Cam shook her head. They’d come this far.

It was truly dark, woolly clouds blocking out any stars, when they heard the voices. An atomized chorus, pockets of voices calling out to each other from different spots in the hillsides surrounding them, voices echoed in what sounded like French, words she couldn’t understand. Then a group of voices called out in English, “We love
you!” from not that far away. Without waiting for Cam, Syd opened her mouth and belted out in return, “We loooooove you!” Syd grinned at Cam and elbowed her in the ribs, and Cam called out with her, “We love you!” and let the wet snow fall into her mouth. It was a crazy thing to shout into the night for any number of reasons, and when had Cam ever told anyone she loved them?

They ran down towards a clearing edged in shadow structures illegible in the dark, toward the voices, and even running blind, Cam was sure this was the right way to go. The wood smoke filled Cam’s nose and stung her eyes, and they panted forward, stubbed booted toes on roots and nearly fell, but didn’t fall, raced toward the crackling firelight, where they found a rough circle made of many people. And there was one thin figure at the edge of the crowd, the person Cam had longed and dreaded to see again. There was Vance, alive breathing.

Cam ran up to him, and was almost going to throw her arms around him, but that would have just felt wrong, after how he’d left. It was true, she’d come here for him, but she was also here for something else, for what was in that letter, for that new world. Cam wanted to be angry, but when she looked at his face, she was not sorry, not sorry for any of it. His face that was more fragile than she’d remembered. The cheeks hollowed, the skin a little less brown and more translucent. The face was asking: Can you forgive me? Of course, she could.

Instead of embracing him, she took both his hands and pulled him to Syd. Syd looked at Vance, sized him up, probably thinking he was gorgeous. Or, possibly thinking she was an idiot for coming here at the invitation of this twig of a man. Maybe there was a flash of recognition that passed between them, or Cam thought there was. She hoped,
anyway, because these were the only two people she had left who she wanted to trust. She’d been wrong before, about trust. She’d trusted Sarah, unconditionally, and look where it had led. But being here wasn’t just about getting back at Sarah, it was about something else, about doing something that mattered, about finding another way to live.

PRIORITIES

“Listen,” Dan’s new voice rasped through the line. “Shit has got to stop.”

Francis thought it was a joke, so he put his feet up on the desk, his own desk in his own apartment. Doug was over, blasting away at something on his new laptop.

“Seriously, bro. Don’t send me no more of your twisted … stuff. I got my own things, my own troubles to deal with. You know?”

“Dude. I thought you’d get it.”

“Listen close. You keep posting that wacko stuff? You’re just asking for it. Looking like a balls-out little fascist.”

“Whatever. You’ve been out there, fighting. Standing up for us, for our country, and—”

“—Afghanistan? We shouldn’t even be there.”

Across the room, Doug had stopped clicking and was making like he was checking out the home defense stuff Francis had gotten. Split-screen monitor, one side for the camera outside the door, the other on camera outside the window. On the monitor, snow fell past the lenses filtering everything in a grey-white static. Doug was getting fidgety, he got up and hefted the baseball bat beside the door. Francis had put a bat like it in every room, drilled out and filled with ball bearings. Francis watched as Doug tested
the weight, swung a few times, and mouthed *Pow*, like he was hitting an intruder upside
the head. *Pow, pow, pow!*

How could Dan have said what he just said?

“How could Dan have said what he just said?”

“Dude. You can’t listen to the *media*, it’s—”

“—You listen, little bro. You don’t got a clue what’s going down over there.”

“I know what I need to. I got sources. People out there, the media, they hate the
truth …”

“Francis,” Dan said, and how long had it been since he’d heard it. His name.
Spoken like that? It shut him up. “Like I been trying to tell you, knucklehead. Shit is
messed up. I lost, something. I lost—”

“No. Doesn’t matter. You’re a soldier. You do what’s got to be—”

“—Just don’t send me no more stuff. Nothing you could get in trouble for. I don’t
wanna see it. You wanna play white power? You do that. Just leave me out of it.”

Dan must have hung up then. Or the call got dropped, more likely, because when
would Dan hang up on him like that? Not ever. Not even if he’d been brainwashed.

“You good?” Doug asked. Francis had almost forgotten he wasn’t alone in the
room.

“Yeah.”

“Didn’t *sound* good.”

Francis just looked the snow falling. On the monitors. Outside the window. Why
couldn’t Dan see it, that what he was doing, getting the word out, was just another way of
protecting the country, a way of standing up for the true Americans, for white America.
“Bro,” Doug said, his long hair pulled back into a greasy copper ponytail, his blue eyes like water behind those smeary lenses. “You know I’m down.” And it was true. Even when Kyle had gotten weird about a stupid White Pride poster he’d put up, Doug had stayed rock solid. “Don’t worry about him, bro. Just check out the crazy shit they got going on in China.”

On Doug’s screen, masses of yellow faces, covered in medical masks up to their eyes. An old lady in an oxygen mask. “Wuhan lab made this killer virus? Then they let it loose on their own people.” Doug crowed. Without wanting to, the sound of Gran’s wet, struggling breath came back to Francis, the smell of her so real and close, she might as well have been there, in the room. Dying all over again. “Any luck, they’ll all kill themselves with it,” Doug sneered, and scrolled down to rows of plastic wrapped things being stacked by a forklift operated by a hazmat suited driver. It took a second to see that the things in the plastic were people.

Doug clicked tab after tab. More masks, more inhuman faces gasping for air. Oxygen tents and breathing machines. Officials blocking off roads and buildings. Stacks of dung crusted cages of chickens and freakier animals, some of them like possums with brown scales. “Or they got it from eating these ugly little fuckers,” Doug laughed.

“Yellow-ass virus better not come here,” Francis said. It was good to get his mind focused, get his priorities straight. Remember there was a whole world out there. Bigger stakes than what Dan wanted to believe. Dan would be all right. He just needed time to come around.
In the dark, Vance had led Cam and Syd away from the circle of people around the bonfire, pointing out the sixteenth-century structures as well as newer buildings, sprouting up between the leaning stone houses like plexiglass and steel spaceships. No artificial nighttime lighting was allowed, it was part of their sustainability plan, Vance had said apologetically. As if he’d needed to justify the enclosing darkness and the scattered handfuls of diamond stars in the moonless sky above them, once the clouds had gone.

Cam’s wet coat clung to her back as Vance had bounced and chattered just ahead of them, going on about the robust solar grid, the satellite internet, the completely advanced and inoffensive self-composting toilets, the embarrassment of riches of practical tech that made life at Terrain not just possible but pleasurable.

Vance pointed out one larger structure squatting on a rise above them. The off-limits residence and workshop belonging to the artist who’d bought up the land and had once planned to make it all over as an expat time share development. The artist, who was named Norman but went by Normandy, was outrageously successful with mosaics. He made them large and sold the originals at market, but made the real money on postcards, fancy notebooks, posters, tea towels. The merch was where the money was, Vance explained in an expert voice. Normandy had lived in the residence with his wife until recently. But, after a completely toxic divorce, left to drink himself to death in his original home in, of all places, Alabama. The way Vance said toxic, the way he looked Cam’s way when he said it. His face, that face that used to be hers to touch, held
something like an accusation. Or maybe, it was Cam’s imagination. She couldn’t tell in the dark.

Eventually, Vance led Cam and Syd to a room they could share in one of the farmhouses, a semi-round enclosure that smelled of fresh hay that they reached by climbing a winding staircase that tilted sharply to the left. The ancient plaster walls were painted a sunny yellow, and a slick geothermal radiator bubbled under the window, filling the room with blessed heat. Sleep came without any effort at all.

Now it was just before sunrise, and a tall white woman with silver dreads stood at the door, watching her and Syd sleep. Syd’s mouth hung ajar, and her hair was a matted tangle. The woman looked like she’d been standing there a long time.

“Salut,” Cam said, nudging Syd awake.

“Good morning,” said the woman, in crisp English.

The woman, who introduced herself as Noreen, said she had a task for Cam and Syd. Then she waited, her lean frame had the coiled energy of a python ready to strike. Apparently, Noreen was not going anywhere until they were up and moving.

“Is Vance around?” Cam ventured, as they followed Noreen across a field in near dark.

“You will see him,” Noreen called over her shoulder. “First, you must do your part, in the Kitchen.” Syd made a face at Cam behind Noreen’s back, and Cam began imagining their return trek, should they have to make a break for it. Ahead of them, a long stone barn glowed from inside. Something savory wafted their way through the air that had a moment before smelled only of cold. Inside, a buzz of motion and noise,
people of all ages and shapes stood at stainless steel tables and stoves chopping, sorting, sautéing, and stewing as if to sustain a small army.

“Can you cook?” Noreen asked.

“Of course,” Cam said, aware that Syd was giving her serious side-eye. “We cook all the time.” Noreen shrugged and led them to a table on the side of the enormous room.

“Alphonse will get you started,” she said and left them with a man with dark skin and hair shaved very short, he was either meticulous about grooming or covering the fact that he was under thirty and going bald, or maybe both.

“Right,” he said, handing them each a knife and pointing to a cloth sack overflowing with garlic. Papery white skins veined with purple, each bulb was the size of a child’s fist. “All of this, thin sliced, if you please.” So, this was how Vance planned to resist? By cooking? “Look,” said Alphonse, like he’d read her mind. “We start small, here at Terrain. Community care means a lot of things, but first it means food.” His broad smile, along with his British accent, made it hard not to smile back. “Family has to eat, yeah?” he added, before leaving them to it.

Cam had gotten through a third of the garlic, once Syd had showed her that she had to actually peel the skin from *each and every clove before cutting it*, she found the task took much longer than she’d hoped, when Vance came in. All smiles, he looked a little too proud of himself, like he’d given her the world by inviting her to this place.

“Let me take you to one of the gardens,” Vance said. Syd nodded, unaware or pretending not to get it, that this was a good time to step off, for five minutes, even, and let Cam figure out what was up with Vance. Vance led Cam, with Syd close behind, to a
building like a Quonset hut from the future: a half-cylinder made of cells of bent wood, each fitted with a membrane-like window of plexiglass, like a hive.

The air was moist and hot, Cam felt her pores opening as she walked through the series of plastic curtains sealing the entry. Vertical hydroponic gardens made use of every inch of available space and the hum of high-powered lighting vibrated through Cam’s body at a cellular level. One tall green pillar glistened with radishes, their fat magenta orbs dripping.

“Truly? I was thinking more dirt-bag hippies, less tech,” Syd said, with such a sweet smile that Vance threw his head back and laughed, the artificial sunlight disappearing down his throat. “No, really. What is it you people are after, exactly?” Syd asked, direct as always.

“Us people? We want what everyone wants.” Vance plucked off a radish and tossed it to Syd, who caught it in midair and chucked it gracefully back.

“Yeah? And what does everyone want?”

“Simple. Ongoingness.” Vance carved into the radish with his teeth. Its flesh was a radiant white inside.

“So, just to go on? Is ongoingness even, like, a word?”

“Okay. So, we don’t just want to go on. We want to go on without junk time, without pointless living, living in denial. We recognize that by being in the world, we also create it. We all tend the reality we want to live in. A better reality.”

“So, you like, resist by living better?”

“Here, we just take living better seriously, try to be conscious of it. You have to think. What am I? Am I a single, autonomous being living in a bubble? Or am I part of a
larger human organism, shaping the world with my awareness and actions? If so, where
do all our hyperconsumptive pursuits lead except to ruin?”

“Hyperconsumptive? Okay. You’re making that one up.”

“Maybe. But tell me the meaning isn’t completely and totally clear.”

Cam watched Syd smile at that. Clearly, Syd was eating this up. But where was
the Vance she’d known, with all his drive to disrupt. Where was his climate rage?

Already, just look, look at the spread of drought, of flooding, and of pathogens like that
virus ripping across China while they just sat here? Syd and Vance were going on and on,
Vance had just asked Syd what she thought it meant to be human in the Anthropocene,
totally without any idea how stupid that sounded, when Cam finally cut in.

“Wait. I thought you said you ‘hadn’t given up.’ Isn’t that what all this is? Like
turning away from everything that’s happening, like saying, ‘okay, so planetary death,
well, too bad! Let’s make soup in a barn and be mindful, lah-lah-lah!’ What happened to
stirring some shit. To making people see the truth about what’s happening? What good is
living in some utopia if everything else crumbles?”

Syd was chewing on her lip, and worse than that she was looking at Vance, like
he was the sane one, like she was being unreasonable. Vance coughed a little, and when
he spoke, he used that voice, that infuriating voice he’d used on the authorities so long
ago in the encampment where they met, speaking sweet and slow like he was talking to a
well-meaning idiot.

“I think you need to look at yourself, and your relation to the world. Is being
unhappy going to solve anything? Just consider it. Really think about that question.”
“You think you can be happy here?” Cam asked, and Syd opened her mouth like she was going to say something, then shut it.

“Is there something bad about happiness?” Vance smiled.

Cam left them then. She would find Noreen. At least she had the sense not to grin like an idiot all the time.

DESCENT

Have you ever wondered, Cam, what happened after you left? Let me tell you another story, one that starts in March of 2020. The call came like such calls do, late at night or early in morning, what some cultures think of as the dying time, when the veils between this world and something else are thinnest. Just after three in the morning, and I was bathed in the glow of my laptop, doom scrolling away about the mysterious virus. When the phone rang, I jumped to answer it, hoping it was you, Cam, saying you’re on your way back before everything shut down.

Instead, it was a nurse from ICU at Northwestern, who said I was listed as Jonas’ next-of-kin and medical surrogate, who asked, could I come, because decisions needed to be made.

In the hospital, I wore a sticker stating the time and date of the temperature check from the gauntlet at the front of the hospital. There was an air of quietly unfolding panic, but maybe, I thought, this was the usual vibe for Intensive Care? On the monitor, images of Jonas’ brain, monochrome Rorschachs that meant nothing to me.

I looked over at the wreck that was Jonas, a tube snaking down his throat and a mass of sensor wires threading themselves under the pale scrap of hospital gown. A
neurosurgeon came in, a white man with a softness at the corners of his mouth, discreet bouquets of liver spots on the backs of his hands.

He took out a pad of yellow sticky notes and started drawing on one. I remember thinking it was a weird thing to do, using sticky notes to explain something medical and crucial, but my head was buzzing with these kinds of random thoughts. I couldn’t stop noticing every detail, whether I wanted to or not.

“So, you’re the wife?” the neurosurgeon asked.

“Formerly. Ex-wife, now.”

He sighed at this, as if my loyalty or ability to make decisions for the patient was now in question, which was more than a little insulting. I was there, after all.

“Well,” he said, pressing the diminutive, sunshine colored note to the monitor. He’d drawn a what looked like a doodle, semicircular shapes and squiggles. Abstract art of Jonas’ messed up brain.

“This oval here, this is your husband’s skull.”

“Ex-husband.”

“And inside that oval, this is the dura, a membrane separating your husband’s brain from the skull. In between, we have cerebral spinal fluid.”

The doctor tapped with his pen at two pointy ellipses. “And these here are the two hemispheres of the brain.” Next, he traced over a pair of shapes, like elongated, smushed jellybeans, one inside each hemisphere.

“These vernicles, they always hold some fluid. But on this side,” he took his pen and made more squiggles inside the left jellybean, “On this side, your husband has too much fluid, and some of that fluid is blood.” He looked at me, either trying to assess
whether I’d understood, or waiting to see if I was going to correct him again about my marital status.

“You see, the bleeding is \textit{inside} the left ventricle. That’s why it’s called an intraventricular hemorrhage.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Now, that fluid makes pressure in the brain, too much pressure, and this is why we have these, \textit{phenomena}. Inability to breathe independently, to speak, walk, and so on.”

I took in the shape of Jonas’ skull. The prominent brow, filaments of silver-blonde hair, angular, Nordic nose.

“So, the procedure you’re authorizing. I’ll put in a drain, redirecting that extra fluid.”

“Okay.” I signed the papers on the clipboard he placed in my numb hands.

“Good.” He turned to leave, then added, “You’re doing the right thing for your husband,” before going. I didn’t correct him, at this point I was resigned to performing whatever role was called for. The mask I’d put on rubbed the flesh under my eyes all wrong, and it was this, not any emotion, that threatened tears. There was no room for feelings in the current role.

Behind Jonas, another doctor was standing before an assembled team of the lower-ranked. \textit{God the Father}, I thought. Apparently, he was delivering a lecture on how everything was going to go smoothly, national emergency or no national emergency, rouge virus or no rogue virus.
The underlings nodded their approval. Yes, they seemed to say, We’re up for it. Of course, they really had no idea. The curtains were open to a room behind this little tableau, and a figure lay prone in a bed held up at an incline. Ghastly white, no hair. The mouth drawn down, a mask of Greek tragedy. A hydra of tubes penetrated the figure, filling assorted hanging bags with vile substances. The arms were extended, the legs swallowed by boots that inflated and deflated with a pneumatic hissing, audible even as the doctor held forth. Crucifixion, I thought, and then couldn’t stop seeing everyone and everything around me as sacrificial.

Shortly after, I followed Jonas on his gurney to another floor, where his head was shaved, his brow both large and fragile, and he was taken to surgery. And that, Cam, was the start of a year I could not ever have imagined. Much later, after I’d seen Jonas through the worst of it, moved back in and back out of the big place we used to share in Evanston, after he could walk and talk, he’d ask how it happened, how I lost you. And I’d have no good answer to give him at all.

FRANCO

The first time he did it for real, it was something small. He put on the face of the enemy, went brown from forehead to collar. Because there was something crazy going on with the China Virus, everyone was supposed to wear a mask, and that let him hide the bottom part of his face.
You could hardly buy the things anywhere, the masks, since the Chinese couldn’t make them fast enough to keep up with their own sickness, their own spreading disease. Lucky for him, he had a stash from when Gran was sick. Probably, he could sell the things. Make a killing.

It was his night off, and thanks to the night shift, 10:30 at night might as well be 10:30 in the morning. He’d picked out a train station way North. Nice part of town, perfect place to bring a little fear. He waited. Looked for the right target: a white woman, someone who could tell her man, her men, afterwards.

The one he picked was short, a little fat. Middle-aged, almost the same as the Hag, but he squashed that thought down and the shame that came with it. She had light hair and a red wool coat and matching wool hat. He started in behind her. Hood up, head down. Just close enough so she noticed his dark face. The fear signs were all there.

First, a look over the shoulder behind her. Puff of breath left to float in the icy air.

Next, the tightening hold on her bag. Just like a woman, clutching like that.

Then, the hurried crossing of the street. Big lady, so she had to hustle.

He crossed after her. As she looked behind her, he looked up to meet her face. It was all there, in the way you could see the white part of the eyes, the way the painted mouth twisted and bared the teeth: she saw his dark face, and she saw terror.

She’d started to run now, no hiding, no pretending she wasn’t scared for her life. He was almost on top of her, and she was too panicked to even scream, to even do anything.

He passed so close he smelled her sweat, high and sour.
He kept running, didn’t stop until he reached another station. Nobody even looked at him. He took a seat on a train headed South. He watched the few people on the train from the corner of his eye. Nobody suspected a thing. They all ignored him, like he was invisible.

Underneath his mask, Franco grinned. The Hag, that crazy lady, that wanna-be artist had been onto something, dressing up as the enemy. She’d just been doing it all wrong.

TRANSMISSIONS

Of course, Cam had heard about it already, she knew the virus had appeared for the first time outside of Asia in Bordeaux, just a few hours away, a few weeks after she and Syd had moved into Terrain. Noreen had said, with her usual terseness, that it was only a matter of weeks, of unchecked viral particles transmitting themselves in human hosts before the thing went worldwide. But Noreen was a true pessimist, a non-human-centric-humanist, she liked to say, convinced bacteria ran the show and would be here long after Homo sapiens bit the dust.

Cam had quickly learned that when talking to Noreen, worst-case scenarios were the norm, and it made Cam feel better to talk to someone who didn’t try and make it sound like everything was going to be okay, which it definitely was not.

Noreen had been out in “the field,” as she called it, for longer than Cam had been alive. she’d crewed with Greenpeace on the Rainbow Warrior, had cut her teeth at the Battle for Seattle twenty plus years ago. When Cam had finally asked Noreen how she thought living off-the-grid would change everything, Noreen had just looked at her. “It
doesn’t change everything,” she’d said, “It changes me. And if we’re all going down, honey, that has to be enough.” The woman had grit. Sarah would have liked her, maybe. But out-front resistance was never Sarah’s thing.

Not surprisingly, it was Noreen who spoke first at the meeting when the real lockdown started, once travel out of Terrain by the usual means was impossible. In the Kitchen, around fifty humans gathered, fifty thinking-self-aware-living-body-souls, as people at Terrain liked to call themselves.

They stood in a circle since they did everything in circles, Fire Circle, Conference Circle, Main Circle, for dinner, and so on. The circle, they said, was the most egalitarian shape possible and led to lateral communication, which made sense. It was also the same shape used for morning meetings at preschools, but Cam had kept that thought to herself.

“The question before us isn’t about individual choice,” Noreen said, stepping forward. “It’s about collective well-being.”

Murmurs of assent rippled through the circle, some in French and Italian, some in Slavic tongues. Mostly everyone spoke English, but when pressed, many went back to their first language. Syd, who had just showed up with Vance, slid into place beside Cam and squeezed her hand. She was looking flushed, her fingertips a warm throb in Cam’s palm.

“If we’re going to live together, we have to be accountable,” Vance added.

“Being accountable means being accountable for our shared microbes,” Noreen called out, a rhythmic beat to her voice, projecting like she was at a rally. Shouts of Accountability! Accountability! rose around the room.
“Already, we have full sustainability, yeah?” Alphonse shouted, motioning with his hands for everyone to quiet. “So, the question as I see it is this. How long? How long can we wait it out.” A restless kind of quiet spread through the Kitchen. “I’d say indefinitely,” Alphonse added, but his voice wavered, making it more a question.

“That’s crazy! Confinement won’t last more than a week,” shouted a tall man wearing coveralls who had been speaking a minute ago in French, his anger barely concealing his panic. Across from Alphonse, a woman Cam had noticed before, with striking red hair and a piercing between her eyes that made it hard to look at her without staring, shouted, “You can’t keep us confined here, Noreen!” More shouts started coming, and the man with the accent shouted, “We will leave if we want to, microbes or no microbes!” More shouts and jeers spread.

“Of course,” said Noreen. “No one would be forced to stay.”

“But it’s the community we have to think of,” said Vance, then added, more loudly, “We cannot allow reentry, after someone leaves.” This made everyone fall silent. Cam didn’t want to look at any of their faces. As much as she’d loved the energy of crowds, of every march she’d been too, there had been unity there. But here, fractious energy glanced around the room like an electric charge. It was Noreen who stepped forward, holding her hand solidly above her.

“No reentry,” Noreen called. Vance’s hand went up, but nobody else moved.

“No reentry,” called Syd, in a voice so clear and high it sounded like truth. There was a shout in French from the tall man, and he and the redhead woman left, him stomping and her slamming a pot to the floor where it clanged and echoed. Cam raised her hand. “No reentry,” she said, trying to sound like she meant it. More hands went up, a
clear majority. Syd wrapped her arms around Cam. “That was the right thing to do,” she whispered, sounding very certain. But Cam was not certain at all. She pictured Sarah, at her big window. Her hair falling like a dark curtain over her back, the few recent strands of silver glinting in the early light. Was she looking at that black tree visible by the lake, waiting for the sun to rise? Cam hoped she was also putting up walls, bracing for whatever was coming.

FAMILY

What did it look like, where you were? That’s what I thought of so many times, before and after I left the hospital with Jonas. I stayed with him, Cam, mostly sleeping on the little bed-like platforms they put in hospital rooms. Somehow, I’d had the foresight to pack an overnight bag before heading to the hospital. First in ICU, where he landed after surgery, a little tube, thin and nearly flat like a cheap cocktail straw, going from his drilled skull to bag of limpid fluid, hung low on the bed for gravity’s sake.

The fluid, I was told, had to be measured, had to be weighed. I waited. Turned the rolodex in my head of people to call, declined them all. I even thought of calling your mother, Cam. Jonas’ impossible sister. I could have told her I was alone, with her older brother or what remained of him, arms belted to the sides of the bed so he couldn’t rip out the tube. I’d say to her, here I am, and here’s what’s become of me. I could have asked where you were, Cam, if she knew if you were safe. But then, that would have meant telling her I had no idea where you were.

The nurses were more harried by the day. One with bleached hair and dark roots complained about wearing the mask at first, tsk-tsk-tsk, so silly, such an irritation. By day
nine, she stopped complaining, sanitized obsessively when she pulled open the shower
curtain partition separating us from the rest of the miserable patients. On day eleven, the
red-eyed nurse told me they weren’t letting family come in anymore. “You can stay on,
but if you leave, we can’t let you come back.” The blue paper of her mask sucked in
when she spoke, into the moist little cave of her mouth. On the bed, Jonas pulled at the
restraints, growled or moaned. He wasn’t speaking yet, but the nurses said making sounds
was an improvement. “I’ll stay,” I told her.

Then, after the drain came out, we moved to a lower level, lower stakes ward.
Nineteen days had come and gone but in hospital time there was not day or night, not in
the same way those divisions take shape in the real world. But what could you know
about hospital time! You don’t know that world exists until you’re in it. There were two
gifts in this new room. A wider bed-like platform, and a window: a slice of grey,
buildings layered against buildings. If I pressed my face to the glass, I could look up and
see sky. The first day, it was a slab of blue with no clouds. Afterwards, mostly it was
grey. What were you seeing, from where you stood, Cam? Or were you among the
infected?

Day twenty-nine was when it happened. I was curled in reclining the chair, watching a
nature show with the television muted. Jonas was propped up in the bed, a beanie pulled
over the bandaged spot where, I was sure if I looked, I would see a hole going straight to
his brain. I tried not to picture it. After all, Jonas had been doing almost everything a
person with a brain injury could be asked to do, except speak clearly.
The lead of the care team, a young man named Elmer with hair shaved on the sides and a gelled mass of curls on top said he had good news, they would discharge Jonas within forty-eight hours.

“You must happy. He’s shown significant improvement,” he said through his mask, a chunk of icy cubic zirconia bobbing in his left ear. Jonas raised his eyebrows, a thread of drool creeping from the left side of his mouth. I stared at Elmer in disbelief. He’d been a reasonable, kind presence up to this point. He’d joked about his name, like Elmer Fudd, like Elmer Glue. He’d brought me an extra blanket, even, and he usually didn’t try and pretend that anything was normal. But Elmer looked away when he spoke next.

“He’ll go to skilled nursing, and you won’t have to worry. They’ll take care of everything. But no visitors.”

“For how long?”

“How long what?” Elmer was already busying himself, taking blood pressure readings, checking oxygen, typing it all into the rolling computer console. Jonas followed Elmer’s movements with watery eyes, “Good, good, good, morning,” he stuttered.

“Good morning!” Elmer’s voice was way too cheerful, way too loud.

“What are the other options?”


“What family?” I asked, and Elmer pretended not to hear. Conveniently, Jonas’s IV had gotten misaligned, red was creeping up the tube of clear liquid running to his arm.

“Sorry, big guy, we’ll have to go for arm two.” Jonas just nodded.
“I’ll take him home,” I said, trying to sound authoritative.

Elmer shook his head. “Whatever you say.” He prodded Jonas’ arm, the skin bruised and flaccid, trying to get the needle in place. An eager trickle of blood escaped and spattered the shining linoleum floor, and then the IV was in. I had the feeling I get, Cam, when I’m taking a wrong turn. What did I feel for Jonas, besides pity and, if I’m being honest, revulsion? “I’ll get your discharge paperwork going,” Elmer said, patting Jonas on his slumped shoulder. “You’re a lucky guy!” He said, glaring at me over Jonas’s head.

Jonas had a beatific smile on his angular face. It was a face that didn’t wear a smile well, and I knew then that I was in for it. No matter what I did here, it wouldn’t get me what I really wanted, none of it would fix things. None of it would bring you back. I tried to tell myself this wasn’t a choice at all, that Jonas needed me. I tried to tell myself this was an experiment, a role to play. But even I was smart enough to know that in taking on Jonas’ care I was leaving what I knew about life, about living, behind. But hadn’t we all left that behind, anyway?

TEST

Everything had gotten worse for the world, but everything had gotten better for Francis. Now that the plant was temporarily shut down, now that he could slide into Franco whenever, he did it just about every night.

The best part was their faces. Faces that reflected back the power he had over them, reflected that power back as fear. He hadn’t done anything drastic. Just a push from behind, or a shove from the side. Enough to make them afraid. New location, new train
stop each time, so he didn’t leave a trail. Masks made it even easier, no chance of him being recognized.

Pretty sure it wasn’t even a crime, to just frighten them like that.

It was a service, really. He made them aware of the real danger, of the dark men that kept coming, coming right through the borders, either legit or sneaking in like animals.

Afterwards, he drew the parts of their faces he remembered in his notebook. Just a mouth open and ready to scream, just the widened eyes, the clenched hand. He blacked out the page around the body parts, making them glow in their whiteness. Pieces of righteous fear, he called them, the word righteous ringing inside him like a bell.

Tonight, he’d been almost at the train, all suited up, brown this, brown, that, brown everything, when he realized his mistake. He’d forgotten the gloves.

Someone less good at what he did might have just said, screw it, and gone on with the night. But Franco was nothing if not a pro. Nothing could be left to chance.

He walked back quickly, head down. Someone had graffitied “Whore Nation” on a wall near his apartment, and he thought they’d got it about right, they’d nailed it, how the bleeding-heart liberals and Jews brought foreigners in as so-called refugees. People needed to wake up, but the truth was hard to look at. That’s where he came in. He was making people see the truth.

Back in the apartment, he couldn’t find the gloves in their usual spot by the door, he had to go all the way back in the bedroom.
He was coming back out through the narrow hall, all the lights still off, when he heard Doug walk in. “Hellooo? Bro, you in here?” Doug called. “Door’s open.”

Francis would remember later that his breathing got very slow and very steady when he realized what had to be done. What Franco had to do. It happened when Doug walked back further in the apartment, into the dark of the narrow hall. His hand found the baseball bat by the door, hefted it. Tested its weight in the dark.

“What the fuck—” Doug yelped, as the weighted bat met his temple, breaking the black frames with a crack. Francis saw the look, the wide-eyed stare, the mossy teeth bared as Doug gasped for breath, staring up at the dark face above him. Doug whimpered as the bat found the soft parts of him. All curled up, he made his lower back an easy target.

It was a test, Francis understood that much. Like way back, when Dan and Harley had cornered him at Wolf Lake, waiting for something, waiting for him to take his beating. And now he finally knew what he had to do. He had to fight.

It didn’t matter if Doug was his boy, it didn’t matter if he was down, if he was loyal. Franco had to follow through.

When Doug stopped making sounds, he tossed down the bat and made for the door, then forced himself walk slowly, slowly, back to the train. Control. He was in control. He rode the train late, pushed away the sound of Doug’s glasses breaking. He hadn’t hurt him so bad. He’d had worse, himself. What else could he have done? Doug had left him no choice.
PART III.

Here is a flower I folded for you
when I thought I would not see you again
& here are my empty hands

— Michael Broek, “What Chen Cannot Say”
I had thought so much in the past few weeks about your leaving, Cam, about how I managed to ruin everything, about my plague time with Jonas, that Victoria’s message that she was returning in two weeks caught me by surprise. There had been too much time in Singapore, no firm exit date, until suddenly it was nearly over, not enough time remaining. In truth, I was scrambling, Cam. I could go back, if nothing came up. Back to Chicago. Jonas had said I could always have a place in the Lake house. But who wanted that? To be a kept woman.

So, when the opportunity came to go to a party I had no business attending, I took it. I’d survived a year of isolation, and now here I was, enough time already spent looking in the rearview. When Mei had asked me to come, I’d agreed right away. No negotiations, just yes.

On the way to the party, I grew increasingly uneasy as the rideshare driver wound through the densely populated CBD and then up narrower lanes that cut up the side of a great hill, apartment towers giving way to compound-like dwellings built directly into the hillsides.

“This is the place, Madam,” the wiry little man said, and handed me his card. Madam! Embarrassingly, I still swooned at that word. “You need a pickup, can do. Just call,” he added hopefully, glancing up furtively at the low slung, rectilinear structure of white stone and dark wood behind sturdy gates.

I was greeted by a flushed man, sixties, very blonde and wearing a too tight suit, who scrutinized my invitation and passport. High-fliers of middling age in designer labels milled, drank, chatted. The terrazzo floor sparkled, and ten-foot-tall doors of red
mahogany and brass led to an entertaining room, where a painting by someone important was to be unveiled, a gift to the Irish Ambassador from the Ministry of Culture.

Mei was nowhere in sight. I downed one champagne, and then another, deciding that the best survival strategy was mild drunkenness.

I eyed a tiered array of tiny delicacies—miniscule cream puffs and diminutive, gelatinous rainbow-hued stacks of layered color—all being constantly replenished and tidied by attendants in suit jackets. Not surprisingly, lots of Irish nationals were about, and my head swam with champagne and Irish brogue. Like a big dummy, I was always two seconds behind what anyone said, another reason not to talk to anyone but Mei.

I slipped into the room with the artwork and the podium, relieved to find the space empty. Sofas, overdone in mauve velvet, lined the walls, and rows of white upholstered folding chairs had been arranged on the main floor to face the podium. I was about to sit when I heard snoring.

I was not alone, after all, boy of about ten was splayed out on one of the sofas, smart blazer flung open, mouth ajar. Probably some dignitary’s child. Perversely, his messy brown head and unconsciousness recalled Francis, out cold after the botched performance and his episode. The past was hunting me, Cam, or so it seemed.

Backing away from the sleeping boy and into the main hall, I ran right into a server, a tall young woman whose long, dark braid reached past her waist. I recognized her right away as the server from Tiong Baru, the one who’d brought me another breakfast after I’d dropped mine, when I saw Francis’ ghost in the paper. Again, the past! But she showed no sign of recognition, just plastered on a smile, “Pardon, Madam.”
She bowed a little, and brushed past me towards the kitchen, but stopped abruptly when she caught sight of Mei, cutting an impressive figure in heels and lipstick.

Mei said something to the server in sharp Mandarin. Clearly, it was an admonishment, and one delivered with both force and intimacy.

So, this must be Mei’s runaway daughter, Lydia. Mei saw me and snapped her fingers.

“Sarah! I have been looking for you. Stay there!” I had no desire to encounter Mei in her current mood, but shrank against the wall, all the same. Mei turned back to her daughter and said something in a ferocious whisper.

The younger woman narrowed her eyes and adjusted herself so that she was standing very straight, a full three inches taller than her mother, even in the heels, and replied in an even voice, issuing what sounded like a biting comeback.

Mei looked like she’d just been struck, but pressed her lips together and replied with the slow deliberation of someone convinced she’s right and is delivering the rhetorical kill shot.

Lydia deflated a little, and I saw this as my opportunity to retreat. I swept past mother and daughter, out through the kitchen to an off-limits portion of the Ambassador’s Residence, an enclosed lawn with a long swimming pool, a rectangular slot of black that backed up to a pool house larger than most homes I’d lived in.

I walked to the edge of the pool and slipped off my glittery and hellishly uncomfortable sandal (actually, Victoria’s sandal) and dipped a toe in the water. It was warm and smelled like salt. I heard someone cough and smelled cigarette smoke. I lost
my balance and nearly fell into the water, before catching myself and taking a wobbly step back onto the lawn.

The cough became a laugh. A lanky Malay man with straight hair falling to his shoulder, fifties, stepped from beside the pool house. A skinny cigarette dangled from one hand, the other held a polished pair of patent leather wingtips with a sock balled up inside of each. The man had a little moustache, almost comically thin, and had an infectious, bubbling laugh. “You know, I thought when I came out here, that nothing could compare to a night swim.”

“I thought I was alone,” I said, and nodded at the cigarette, “Isn’t that against the law here, or something?”

“Not when you have the Ambassador’s blessing,” the man said, and offered me a drag. I’ve never smoked, but I took a big draw that made my lungs implode and my head spin.

“Raoul,” he said to me, introducing himself.

“I’m Sarah Harper,” I said, and thrust my hand at him, immediately worried about being too familiar.

“Ah! The performance artist. I have heard about you, from Mei Yue.” He took my hand, his skin smooth and cool. “Mei says you are looking for new opportunities. To perform?”

“She does?” I said, sure I’d missed something.

Raoul looked at me quizzically, “You are looking for new opportunities, yes? She did not tell you about Venice?”
“Oh, yes, she did mention something.” Was that the right answer? Mei had said nothing about Venice, at all. The word made me think of fetid lace collars and carnival masks.

“Good, good! And she explained the social sculpture that I need performers for?”

“Not, not exactly, but—”

“—but you are interested?”

“Oh yes, I’m interested,” I said, which was a risky thing to do, Cam, since by now I was completely unsure what we were talking about at all. But Raoul had snatched up my hand again and was holding onto it in a peculiar grip, both light and urgent. Way, way too intimate for someone I just met.

“Good, good! Then we must talk more. The opening is late April. Of course, there will be accommodations. Mei says that you will need accommodations, yes?”

I just nodded, trying to figure out how to gracefully extract information about what I had just signed up for, when a high-pitched yell came across the lawn. “Papa!” the voice of a child called, “Auntie is looking for you!”

Silhouetted against the yellow rectangle of the door was the boy, and next to him was Mei, her angular white hair shining in the dark.

“You will excuse me.” He sat gingerly on the stone lip of the pool and began pulling on his socks and shoes. “I was just getting the lady a cigarette!” he called back.

He was just about to say something, when across the lawn the boy started jumping up and down, calling even more insistently, “Papa!” Raoul sighed and stood, then walked with the grace of a wolf across the dark lawn. I stuffed my damp foot back into Victoria’s wicked sandal and hurried to follow.
Francis had been driving for what felt like hours. A rest area was just up ahead. Pulling into the lot, he was on automatic. *Drive the car, park the car.* The light above on the pole was a sick sodium fluorite green. Francis put his head on the steering wheel, felt its hardness, its reality.

Doug had looked like a pile of rags on the floor, not a person. But Francis had held it together. He’d put his hand out and found Doug’s chest. He should have felt him breathing, a rise and fall of the ribs under his shirt.

Was that what had happened, in another reality? Had Doug been breathing? Was he breathing still, in another world?

Doug had looked like he was asleep, but there had been that coldness.

Now, a whole truckload of loud Mexicans, seven of them, pulled up in a jalopy with one headlight.

There had been a truck at Wolf Lake that he’d passed, earlier. But it was not the same truck, could not be. Whatever they were doing, out on that work truck with all their water coolers and shovels, bunch of illegals, had nothing to do with him. A big one with a white trucker hat stained yellow looked his way, then turned down his eyes and walked, bow-legged, to the shack with the bathrooms.

At Wolf Lake, there was a place off by the edge of the water, a place where a burned-out trailer was half sunk in the reedy edge.

Back in the day, Dan had told him it was a burned out meth lab, a place where some guys used to cook until a batch went wrong, blasting the trailer to bits in a fireball
of corrosive poison. Everyone stayed away, everyone knew it was toxic, even the old
guys who fished in the slaggy waters of Wolf Lake because you didn’t need a permit.

That was where he’d taken Doug, back to Wolf Lake.

The frogs had been singing, the mosquitos had feasted on his face. Somehow,
he’d wrapped Doug up in the Army duffel he’d brought at surplus. He’d always thought
he could use the bag if he went on trip somewhere. But he’d never gone on a trip, never
got to go anywhere.

The great machines had banged in the distance, clang and grind of belts bouncing
off the flat water. The trailer a ribcage blown open, the plastic skin of it melted, its
skeleton gone mossy in the years since he’d seen it last.

Trees nearby like starving girls shimmying in the breeze, just like when he’d been
a boy. Doug had been a boy! But that thought was useless, not a solider thought, not a
Franco thought, but a pussy thought. He’d laid the bag in the center of the trailer. He’d
covered the bag then, covered it good with sticks and a log and metal from the wrecked,
charred seats. It had been okay, okay to do this, because none of it had been on purpose,
and the thing he’d gripped through the canvas was not his boy. Was not, could not be.

The Mexicans were back now, not looking at him. They said lots of things in
Spanish, an ugly sounding way to talk, like they were making dirty jokes. The one in the
hat cracked open a Coca-Cola, took a swig, and climbed into the truck. He knew nothing,
the spic bastard. Belch of diesel fuel from the truck’s tailpipe, and then he was alone
again.

Francis started the engine and got back on the highway. The other cars sped past.
Lights on big trucks like eyes, like eyes of giants. Everything was choked with light.
Blazing lights everywhere on the highway, even if few folks were about, everyone scared of the Wuhan flu. It pressed in, cars and people, until it didn’t.

He passed through Aurora and the lights fell away. Cars spread out, got rare. The nightscape opened up, clean and empty in all directions.

He would be okay. He would drive the 1,717 miles between him and his brother, between him and Sierra Vista Arizona. He would find Dan. He would get there, and Franco would keep him safe on the way. Franco would protect him. That was what Franco had done so far, protected him, kept him alive. He was meant for good work, for hero’s work. He had to remember that, to remember that and keep going. What he had done to Doug was not his fault. And he couldn’t be sorry, not for what he’d had to do to keep things under wraps.

His brother the soldier, his brother the hero. If Francis belonged to anybody, he belonged to Dan. They belonged to each other. Dan would get it.

The purple sky was going red at the edge. He would drive until daylight. He would keep going as long as he could.

WINDOW

In daytime, Cam could forget about Sarah for long stretches. It was the mornings that were bad. She’d wake thinking she was back in her room at Sarah’s, she’d look for the long folds of black cloth swaying nearby. Then she’d see the yellow stone wall of her farmhouse room and smell the sere grass, an ocean of tan and light green waving beyond the open window now that it was late summer, and she’d remember.

Sarah’s voice on the phone, dry and broken, when she’d told her she was leaving.
Sarah’s eyes, following her, as she shut the door on her and left with Syd.

Worse, she’d picture him. The lunatic that had stalked her. Sometimes without wanting to she saw his hands, ink stained and cracked, reaching around her aunt’s throat, and had to remind herself that just because you think something doesn’t make it real. More real, probably, was the other vision, the one of Sarah infected, fighting for breath, in one of the apocalyptic wards she’d seen in news feeds, before the vote to do their own media blackout at Terrain.

Work made things better and that was what Cam was doing now, digging a trench that would be the border of a new outdoor garden. The sharp sound of the blade passing through earth, the scent of life and cut roots, it tethered her to the now, instead of the before, which was of course gone. She could cut into the ground until her shoulders and chest screamed, and it didn’t hurt a thing, in fact she was being productive, she was doing her part.

Something in the ground beside her shovel squirmed and wriggled. The French dirt was always alive with the bodies of earthworms and the larvae of beetles, but this thing was shiny and green with black stripes, the underside a pale greenish-white. In digging the trench, she’d chopped a small lizard in half. Using the shovel, she lifted both halves of the doomed creature—they’d all made a pact at Terrain to respect life. She placed still-squirming parts together and covered them with dirt. The tiny black eye stared up at her, the pink trapdoor of the mouth opened and closed uselessly.

It is the not the same as being imprisoned, to choose to stay with people who are good, who are mindful. Even if you couldn’t leave, even if leaving meant death, you always had
a choice. Cam thought that word, *choice, choice, choice*, over and over in her head like a mantra as she carried the lizard-killing shovel to the door of the off-limits artist’s house. Strange how if you repeated a word enough times it lost all its meaning, became just empty sounds.

    Cam was ready to wedge the crusty blade into the edge of the wood door and pry when she thought to try the doorknob first. The heavy brass oval turned easily in her hand; it wasn’t even locked. She took the shovel in there with her. Somehow, she felt safer with it, even if she had no reason to fear anyone at Terrain. Like Noreen said, they all part of one human family.

    The house was obviously grander than the other buildings on the property. The farmhouses were claustrophobic and dark, but here high ceilings and leaded glass windows that pointed up at the tops let in the light differently. The walls were stone coated in plaster like the others, but Norman’s mosaics, in frames from farmhouse lapboard to tacky baroque gold, were everywhere.

    Cam could see why the mosaics were so popular. Flowers, botanical forms in a thousand glittering hues, interlaced with geometric diagonals that lent a highly graphical quality to the work. And that was it, an endless parade of gem like flowers. No story, no cry for freedom, just lazy beauty.

    Up seemed the right direction to go. Cam ran her hand over the surface of a two-foot-wide purple pansy as she walked up the stairs, and a glass edge nipped her index finger. She sucked it clean and held her breath, stepping as lightly as she could. On the second floor, she walked through a workshop holding several designs in progress in huge frames, and cases upon cases of glass and ceramic chips, bright as pots of paint.
The third floor held a bedroom dominated by an ancient bed with spiraling posts of turned wood thrusting ridiculously up, and attached to the bedroom was a bathroom that had been completely covered over in mosaic. The clawfoot tub had been set in front of a mosaic of a setting sun with starry sky above it.

The other room had built in bookcases stuffed with moldering volumes and a desk, another carved wood artifact from another time, facing a big window looking out over Terrain. Cam could see the farmhouses and the hydroponic greenhouses, and past those she could see the fields, and past the fields she could see the limestone bluffs beyond. On the desk was a computer.

At first, there had been lots of watching the implosion of Outside, as everyone had started to call the world at large. Phones, laptops, tablets were their windows to the catastrophe, their extra appendages, or second brains as Noreen liked to joke. Then, Vance had insisted they’d all be much happier if they focused on here, on Inside. That had made sense, at first. Everyone, even Noreen, had agreed. Then, they’d made a rule, through a vote at Main Circle, to not share any personal information on social media. Not like they were doing that anyway! Terrain was too good a thing to just hand out passes to, even more so during lockdown.

Quietly and voluntarily, people started deleting accounts.

Alphonse had been first, “Severing my persona from the network of pain and general shitbagery, yeah?” he’d said, showing them all, proudly, how a search with his name and birthday brought up a whole gaggle of people, none of them him.

Cam had hesitated at first, but after clicking the delete button on the first account herself, she’d been gripped with a wild joy and had wiped everything she could—there
was something radical and resistive in refusing to be seen. What about Sarah, she’d thought, just as the last accounts were expunged. But if Sarah hadn’t reached out yet, why bother? But this had been near the beginning, when there was more rage to draw from.

Cam shouldn’t be here, in this place forbidden to them by their absent host, but what was any of that compared to breaking the directive to maintain communication silence with Outside. What was the shape of isolation, and how did it form? Cam set the shovel down, and booted up the computer, old but functional—thankfully, there was still WiFi.

The electric whirring stirred something in her. Cam felt the draw of information, of Outside, pull at her like a magnet. The familiar search engine that everyone knows shone its innocuous light over her. She typed Sarah’s name into the search and pressed Enter. The results gave her nothing she could use. News from last year, problems with Sarah’s Project, expulsion from a group show, her canceling chronicled but nothing else. More news seeped in. Mass protests. Mass deaths. Vaccines, soon, soon, but not yet.

It was getting dark, and Cam drew the heavy velvet curtain over the window—she didn’t want anyone to see her light winking in the tower. She scrolled down the list of results for Sarah’s name, finding nothing and more nothing. Then a page called Sarah’s Window. It was in a whole directory of windows, apparently organized by some people trying to outsmart isolation.

The window: St. Albans, UK. On the sill, orchids. Two of them. One pink, one white with magenta centers. Litter of spent blooms underneath. Clear hourglass, white sand trickling through, about a third to go. A pewter elephant candle holder, cheaply bejeweled.
Outside, typical British brick housing block. Young trees tossed their spindly arms back and forth across the street, leaves fluttering, Hello! Here we are, and a hedgerow separating the gardens from the road. Room tone: Whoosh of traffic, but only occasionally. Otherwise, stillness. A cat yowled somewhere else in the flat. The hourglass had gone empty.

It was enough to break a person, that simple scene.

This was how we lived now? This was what we called living? There was a Sarah living in St. Albans, a woman who thought to livestream her window but didn’t care to sweep up the spent flowers from the sill. A Sarah using these flimsy technologies to wave at the world from behind the glass, Here I am! I still exist. A woman who spelled her name like Cam’s Sarah but who was not her person, just another person, also alone. Cam put her head down on the desk for a long time, at least half an hour. Then, she opened another window, and another, and another, until the world came back, one piece at a time.

STORY

I walked down Yan Kit, past the splendid, scratching wild chickens, again past the three towering pillars of the community center, back to Tiong Baru. By this time of year there was less rain, but the surrounding plants pressed against the sides of the path steamy and moist, as if they produced their own water.

Mei was waiting for me at a table outside, a carafe of fresh orange juice in front of her. Raoul was meeting us here, to talk about the project he wanted to hire me for, Intuition. When I sat down, Mei poured us each a glass and then gave me a long look. I hated how she could deal with silence, while I couldn’t.
“Where’s Raoul,” I finally asked, as much to fill the void as anything.

“You think you can come here, pretend to be someone else, and have it work out for you?” Mei’s voice the same kind of brutal precision I’d heard her use on Lydia at the reception the other night. “This is not that kind of story,” she said.

“Oh? Then what kind of story is it, then,” I asked, sounding defensive. Mei pressed her lips together and smoothed back her silver-white hair, which for once had lost its uniform straightness. The cut, which must need at the very least a bi-weekly trim, was starting to grow out of its shape. “Is it the kind of story where you tell your friend that I need a job, when I have a perfectly good thing going, a perfectly good thing, with housesitting?”

Mei sighed as if I was being very stupid. She sipped her juice and shook her head.

“It is not easy to talk about these things. But know that when I ask you to go with Raoul, it is not just for your benefit that I ask.”

“Oh?” I sipped my orange juice through the biodegradable straw, its tip quickly going soggy in my mouth.

For the first time since I had known her, Mei looked tired, exhausted, even. She had the beginnings of crow’s feet at the corners of her eyes. Did she usually cover them with make up? Had she been too harried to apply some kind of nighttime serum, likely made from some unlucky and exotic critter?

“I have a family situation. It is difficult. Raoul is a nephew. Actually, my husband’s nephew.”

“But, Raoul must be nearly as old as you are,” I blurted.
“Wah! It is complicated. This is our family, complicated. I would not expect you to understand it.” Mei looked at me hard then for what seemed like a long time before saying, all matter-of-fact, “My husband, he is no longer living.”

“Oh. I’m sorry,” I offered, but unfortunately it sounded like a question. Mei waved my words away like she was shooing a gnat.

“Here is what I need. Help Raoul with his project. He needs a win, a success. His reputation …” Mei stared across the street, into the market beyond, trailing off before righting herself. “He needs this to work. I need someone capable, to go with him to Venice.”

“I don’t want to go to Venice,” I said, and it was true. I’d been to Rome once before, with Jonas. Terrible place. Swarms of tourists. Unhappy memories of a drunken argument by the Coliseum. Mei had finished her orange juice, and was now pinching the tip of the straw, rubbing it down to nothing, staring at the empty glass like it held an answer she desperately needed.

“Please,” she said, quietly, before reaching across the table and grabbing my wrist with her quick fingers. Her eyes were rimmed with red, almost panicked. “I just ask that you go with him for a month. It is a paid position,” she said.

And all of a sudden, Cam, I wanted to tell Mei Yue. This woman who was a friend, even if she was a very strange kind of friend, I needed to talk to her about you. I needed, Cam, to tell her our story. I was getting ready to speak, the sugary juice stinging a weak spot in a molar, when Raoul stepped around the corner. A ripple of something, maybe longing, maybe aversion, passed across Mei’s face.
“So,” Raoul said, after kissing Mei on either cheek, something she appeared to only just tolerate. “You are here to talk.” He took his chair and twirled it backwards, so he was straddling it. A rather flamboyant gesture. He was fluttery with energy, birdlike.

I nodded, but my mind, my heart, Cam, was elsewhere. Your name had been in my mouth, I had been ready to say it, and now here was this man, in my way.

“Mei tells me you are an expert in the relational, in social interaction as art,” Raoul said, raising his eyebrows. His face was narrow, his eyes turned up at the corners, his face was like a boy’s face. Again, I nodded. Mei sat stone still. Was this a performance that she’d seen before?

“Tell her, Raoul. What is expected of her. She needs details.”

“Yes, of course she does. Let me start with a question. What does intuition mean to you?” He looked at me with complete seriousness, and I tried to muster a serious response.

“Intuition,” I said, clearing my throat, “Intuition is when you know something is going to work, but you don’t quite know how. And then you go forward, blindly, and somehow, it works. You meet the person, you do the thing, you take the step.”

Raoul was nodding, looking impressed. “Exactly, my friend, exactly. And, this project, Intuition, is about unplanned connection, nothing less than the most important topic, the most important thing we can offer each other. You will be the first performer, you and I will stay in the flat I’ve rented for this purpose, and we will go about the business of … being.”

“Being?” I asked, trying to look like I was still taking the whole thing seriously.
“Well. Being with the locals, being with the Biennale guests. This is the last, the last mind you, not-completely-gentrified sestiere in Venice. So, we talk to people.”

I must tell you, Cam, this was sounding more and more inane by the second. Talk to people? About what? How could living be considered a performance? How would this make any meaning whatsoever?

“Well, I know what you are thinking.”

“You do?”

“Well,” he said, pulling nervously at that teeny mustache of his, “You wish to know, is this an official part of the Program, of the Biennale. Intuition is, shall we say, Biennale adjacent. You will not find us on the list of official offerings or exhibitions. However, this is why when people do find us, it is even more of a gift.”

“And that happens how, exactly? That people ‘find us,’ I mean?”

“Have you been to Venice,” he asked.

I knew about the Biennale, Cam, but I’d never been there. I shook my head again.

“Once you are there, you will understand,” Raoul said, with a stagey kind of wink.

“But Raoul,” said Mei, with a terseness that conveyed deep annoyance. “Tell her what you will do.”

“Yes! We will collect stories. We let people speak, about whatever comes to mind. We film, and we project the stories back. We make a space for connection, for intuitive connection.”

“Okay,” I said, trying not to laugh. Raoul beamed at me and shot Mei a triumphant look.
“You see, she understands! She understands that in Venice, we will create something magical.”

I could see now what was needed. A babysitter. This was why Mei wanted me on board, to keep tabs on her charming, delusional nephew. But then again, Cam, what if there was something there, something that Raoul believed in that could work, that could be something? If he would just shut up, shut up and leave, I could talk with Mei, could really tell her about you.

“I’ll consider it,” I said, and Raoul clapped his hands and Mei’s eyes snapped back to me, full of an intensity I could not read. “I’ll consider it on one condition,” I added. “Mei will come with. To Venice.”

“All right,” Mei frowned. “I can come. For a few days, only.”

“Wonderful,” Raoul beamed.

“Thank you,” Mei said, looking away again.

Perhaps, now that I had agreed to be a performer in his project, Raoul would leave us alone for a minute. I could say to my friend, Listen. I have someone I need to find. Her name is Cameron. She is like a daughter, but more important.

But then, Lydia appeared from inside the café in her server’s black and whites and set down three cappuccinos. She flicked her hand over Mei’s shoulder, pretending to brush away a stray hair. But really, I could tell, she was coming in for a little bit of contact, a subtle sign of affection. I wondered, Cam, if this could ever be us. Mei smiled at her daughter. With her exhausted, happy face, Mei smiled, and Lydia smiled back.
GHOST

Five nights now, he’d been on the road. He’d tried his best at sleeping in the backseat, truck stop blanket over his face, camo colors and a photo of trees and scrub printed there, covering him.

More times than not, the heat made him move. Lying still, was he asleep or awake? The slam of car doors, his own thirst would push him from the car. He’d hang inside the rest areas, all different but all the same. Speckled floors, lemon smell of disinfectant, maps showing where to go, if you were on vacation.

The smaller highways were better, safer. Not like he had anything to worry about. Not like there could be anyone flowing him. Sometimes, when the press of the empty road at night was too much, he’d dose on the shoulder in the driver’s seat. But his phone would buzz, or that would be what he thought, but then no message, no missed call, nothing but the fear.

At the places he stopped, the big truck stops and the little shack stations, nobody cared about his freaked-out eyes, the look that still floored him when he caught himself in the mirrors of bathrooms, sometimes just a shiny piece of metal bolted to a brick wall.

Old biddies, pimply teens, hardened dudes all tatted up, all the cashiers just gave him a quick up and down then looked away. If even. Most looked past him, through him. So what. Invisibility suited him.

Lots of them still wore masks, flaps of paper over their mouths like that would stop the sickness from getting them. Stupid. When fate comes for you, it comes. He knew that, now.
He’d made okay time at night, watched the land change around him, even in the dark. Green hills and a river in Missouri. Kansas City, with an interstate exchange that could have killed him if he’d let it, if he’d wanted that. Too many cars and too many snaking beltways all over the place like black rivers of mad traffic.

After Kansas City, flat expanse of brown. For days now, just brown and sometimes yellow, and the endless ceiling of the sky. It was just so, so big. Why hadn’t he known the world was so big! This great country. He wanted to love it, did love it. Reminded himself, he loved it. That was why Franco had to exist. That was why this country needed soldiers.

The car was getting too hot to sleep in, it was a fact. It was creeping towards summer, temperature climbing up, the thermometer at the last rest stop wall saying one hundred and five, but that couldn’t be right. He was seeing double, anyhow, seeing haints, as Gran had called them, dodging the corners of his vision.

The sign on I-58 read Boise City Oklahoma, that was where he would stop, would sleep in a bed. The place looked like a place you could disappear if that was what you wanted. The guy at the Townsman Motel was bearded and old. He didn’t say a word as he handed Francis the plastic keychain, a rust-colored diamond with 103 stamped into the plastic.

Someone had painted the brick on the outside of the place a peachy color, and that seemed weird. It was a sissy kind of color.

Francis’s hand shook as he fit the key into the lock, but why? Stupid to be afraid of stopping, of feeling, of hearing the snap Doug’s glasses had made when they broke. A worthless fear, he knew.
Inside, his body found the bed, and he didn’t even remember falling asleep. When he woke, the setting sun was slicing the thin white curtains, falling on a painting on the wall, done on velvet. Trees with white bark, a river, and a mountain. He’d slept through the day.

He showered, walked outside and down a street with a sign that read Main Street. He hadn’t been outside, walking in the daylight since he left. Was this what they meant, when they said the heartland? Rows of buildings with wood fronts, a real-life General Store? He’d thought the valley of the machines was the heart of the nation. Could a nation have more than one heart?

He sensed her before he saw her. Someone walking up to him on the narrow sidewalk. Walking fast. Swinging her stick arms, sandaled feet crunching the broken safety glass glittering on the cracked pavement. He’d have drawn it using a thousand tiny triangles. Diamonds, diamonds on the concrete.

Francis looked at the lady, and Godforbid but there she was, his mother. Of course, it wasn’t really Mama. He knew that. But it might as well have been. Same slight build as Mama, wisps of sandy hair like Mama, but gone grey now. Like Mama, she had the hollowed-out eyes of a tweaker.

You could tell she’d been spun out for years by how her face was folded up in the middle, the way the ropey veins stood out on her twig legs and arms.

The lady was jabbering, over and over, “Five dollars, five dollars! You got five dollars? He locked me out, I can’t get back in and I need five dollars…” Just on and on like she was stuck on repeat.
She was pulling a wheeled basket behind her stuffed with rags and plastic bags crammed with who knew what. On top of it all, two busted phones, a clock radio, and a toaster. Once when he was six, Mama had gotten crazy with the electronics in their old place. She’d used a ballpoint pen to color everting red, starting with the VCR. Francis hadn’t thought of it in forever, the sound of that pen, scratching.

This old nutjob here had been sprayed with something, her face and hair were covered with blue powder. How’d something like that even happen? It made her look even crazier.

“You got five dollars, boy,” she said, so close he could see the spittle caked at the corners of her mouth.

“I got nothing, lady,” Francis said, his voice weak, hatefully weak, like a child’s.

She staggered to him, breathing rot his way. “Five dollars. I’m locked out. I just need five, he’ll let me in.” She was looking at him, looking at him like she recognized him.

But it couldn’t be Mama. Was not, could not be Mama, because Mama was dead. Eyes down, Francis tried to walk past, but the lady let out a holler behind him.

He turned then, gripped those bird shoulders, thin under the stained blue windbreaker. She bucked, stronger than he’d guessed, but he threw her down and the cart went over with her. Looking at all her ratty treasure tossed on the street, he howled. A fresh scrape ran the length of her calf, her chicken little leg all tore up.

She was wailing now, and Francis thought maybe he should help her up and took a step towards her. The women let out a shriek and looked at him like it was his fault she
was on the ground, like she hadn’t asked for it, like she hadn’t made him push her. He gave her a kick, toe of his sneaker meeting her ribs. This time all she did was gasp.

Stupid to try and sort why it made tears want to come when he left the old lady on the pavement. What would Gran think of him? He wondered. But it didn’t matter since Gran was gone. Dan wouldn’t give it a second thought. No, Danny boy wouldn’t give two shits about this old tweaker.

And she would have been beneath Franco. Too low for him to even touch.

Franco, who’d lived in a basement apartment right underneath his own mother, while he stockpiled his righteous weapons and made himself over as David Benjamin. Franco would never have bothered with a burned-out old nobody.

Then he knew, he understood. It had been Franco who came up inside him and shoved the old bag, Franco who had gotten him out of there. It turned out, Franco could come to him without the mask. Franco could do things still, even in daylight. He didn’t have to be afraid, not ever. His brother was with him.

OUTPOST

There was something about the double life that was addictive, that was like a drug. Cam went every night now. In the daytime, she jonesed hard. She worked the earth. She cut beets and carrots and garlic for Alphonse in the Kitchen. She went to Noreen’s Tai Chi class. But during Main Circle, when the fire lit every face and sweet smoke from the deadfall they burned filled every lung like they were cave people, that was when she would slip away.
Sometimes, she’d look back and see Vance and Syd silhouetted by the orange flames licking the sky, her swaying her heavy hips as if in a trance, him straight like a piece of wire pulled taught. More often, she looked forward and walked the back path she’d made to the side door of the Outpost. That was what she called it in her head, her secret access to the forbidden Outside, the world that the rest of Terrain was determined to keep out.

Tonight, she ran there under a clear sky, black and glittering. A trio of stars, one red and blinking, slid across the sky. *Satellite of Love*, proof that the world was still going on, proof that we were persisting. She blew it a kiss.

Inside, the computer monitor cast its blue light across the room. It was still weird, being in a big old house by herself. At first, she had looked out the window every few minutes, just to be sure she was really alone, that she was getting away with it, touching all those other stories Noreen and Vance thought would just make them miserable. But they were so, so wrong. It was like the disease sweeping planet was waking people up. Protest was sweeping the world. People everywhere were rising up. Somehow, people suddenly gave a shit, about the police killing Black people, about killing the planet, about women, about democracy. About children in jails at the US Mexico border. From inside their houses and apartments and in the streets, people were on the move, somehow becoming not just people but *The People*.

It wasn’t just the illness, the microbial-bacterial-viral uprising that Noreen, in her reverent doomsaying, predicted would finally bring Homo sapiens to their knees. The death of George Floyd had mattered. They had burned it down in Minneapolis. The images of the blazing police station from just a few months ago filled Cam’s head, but
she couldn’t say anything to anyone here, not to Vance, and not to Syd who was hopeless. She was seething with it by day, knowledge of the world. Hope was a dangerous thing.

And what of Sarah? Was she out there, fighting for what she wanted in her messy, self-centered way? Was she still worrying about women and race and perception and all those things she held onto like it was her own special wound, that made her hurt and proved she was real? Cam cared about all the things, too. All those oppressions. But everything she read backed it up, what she’d known for years, what she’d known when she met Vance. After two more degrees of warming, it was a death sentence for one billion of Earth’s poorer humans. Climate death equaled annihilation, annihilation for those who couldn’t buy their way out. The science was clear. To stop things from getting so much worse there was one path. *Stop burning fossil fuels.*

Tonight, she was charting all the resistance she could find, Chalking up the wins for disruption in the name of survival. They were throwing soup at van Goghs—she should have thought of that. They were shutting down highways and airstrips. There were stirrings on the deep web that there would be massive demonstrations in Glasgow at the Climate Summit. That joke. Every country’s resources for sale. But you had to try, you had to push, to strain until you broke, make things better or die trying. She could be part of that. If she were Outside.

“Cam?”

It was Vance’s voice. Cam whipped her head around, and there he was, a lean shadow in the stone doorway. God. How long had he been standing there. She was
blinded, the glow of the screen washing out everything else in the room. His face was unreadable.

“Well. Now you’ve found me.”

Vance stepped into the light, peered over her shoulder at a picture of a girl in a surgical mask with purple standing in front of a jet on a runway as police in riot gear closed in, batons raised.

“Damn,” he breathed. The he reached over and started clicking. She’d been at Terrain for eleven months. Vance had been there nearly twice that long. Cam watched as Vance’s breath got shallow and rapid as he looked, as he woke back up to Outside. There were about a million words to say, about a jillion ways the conversation might go. Cam watched Vance’s brown eyes fill tears, with the sights of The People resisting. She watched him, and she waited for what would happen next.

SMALLNESS

I left Tiong Baru, Cam, with all the words I’d failed to say about you to Mei still stuffed down my throat, unspoken. I walked out into town, away from Victoria’s apartment, thinking of the time I’d wasted. The time spent apart from you, Cam, and the time spent apart from myself. I was not an artist anymore. I was impersonating an artist. Why was I always running? But now I really was running, or almost running, the sweat beading on the back of my neck and staying there in the humidity, as I trekked up Duxton Hill. It was a narrow corridor packed with antique row houses in pastel hues, all scalloped roof tiles and arched windows, that led to an MRT station, sleek new glass slammed up against history, like usual here.
Inside, I swiped my card and was walked past the gate into the expanse of polished tile and air conditioning. You will remember, Cam, how I’d grown fearful of trains. They could be places of humiliation, or worse. But here, it was not like home. There was a kind of enforced order, a sanitized vibe that told you you’d be fine so long as you obeyed the rules, posted in each car in big red letters in blocky English, in intricate Mandarin, in curling Malay, and in other languages that I confess I could not read or name.

I rode the almost full train in silence, Cam, and there were so many languages around, contained by the people, the people not speaking but thinking, and it was like I could hear it. All the difference, everything that to me was foreign. But really, it was me who was out of place, I was the one not from here. Could I ever at home anywhere besides where I’d come from?

At Bugis station, I walked out into the one part of town I’d avoided, Cam. I would be leaving soon, and there wouldn’t be another chance. I walked out of the station and into the Arab neighborhood. I walked smack into color, Cam, into murals and tea stands and food and brightness, everywhere brightness. The walls of buildings dripped technicolor, rainbows and Aztec pyramids and unicorns and cats and flowers and robot armies covered low stucco shops, and above it all the gleaming towers of metal and glass in the nearby CBD held forth.

A woman in a full burqa was waving people into a halal café, and she was hopping around, her horn-rimmed glasses pushed up on her nose, the only visible part of her face. On her feet, a pair of immaculate white Adidas. She smiled under the black
folds; I could tell by her eyes. She waved at me, Cam, and I wondered what I was supposed to feel.

This was supposed to be the part where I punished myself, Cam, for thinking I could put on garments and be a willing target for all that hate, back in the States. I was supposed to feel my ignorance, to feel like a fool for thinking I could do it, light up all the ways that women are made into objects, into enemies, and have it matter. Have it change things. I was supposed to see the world and get smacked in the face by everything I didn’t know. I was supposed to feel like it had been a mistake. I was supposed to feel regret, to get schooled for my own small-mindedness.

But Cam, I was not sorry. Not about the Project.

I was sorry I hadn’t listened to you.

All that shame when that man had pushed me on the train, those nasty words, terrorist bitch, still ringing in my inner ear. It had been criminal, but it had been so small, too. So small in this huge world, this world where there was not one right way, but many ways. That smallness was the killer. I knew that. I had already known it. Was it so wrong to try to push that smallness into the light? To try, at least, to make it clear that there we were all choosing our stories every day, and that we didn’t have to choose smallness, we could think, or be, or do, differently?

There had to be a next thing, there had to be a way forward. There had to be a new project, or I would have let that smallness win. I walked past the Sultan Mosque, its gold domes shining. I walked past a bookstore, with a sign in the window reading: Movement from nonexistence to existence is the essence of love. You know I’ve never been one for religion, too many heavy symbols telling a person what she should do, how she should
feel guilty. As if we don’t do that enough already! But existence was something different. That was something I wanted. If I found you, I would tell you about that. About wanting to exist. I promised myself that, Cam. I hurried back in the heat, past the tea stalls and the shops and the murals, past the café with the burqa-clad woman who was taking a break, fanning herself with a menu.

I hurled myself back into the anapestic light of the MRT station and onto a train back towards Victoria’s where I could shut it down, pack it up, and get ready for whatever was coming, whatever Raoul’s thing would be in Venice. Probably just so much air and imagination. But then again, what did I know.

SONORA

The place had no name, just a nowhere spot on the endless stretch of highway. A diner, a tin box lit up on the roadside, near empty and glowing. Booths with vinyl seats, dark green. Table with a metal rim with grooves the size of his pinky finger, plastic top printed with rectangles.

The waitress, a Mexican, took his order without meeting his eyes. Short hair, like man, but a sloppy body underneath her uniform. She’d scare easy, if that was what he wanted. He knew it by the way her hand shook when she put down his coffee, sloshed it over the rim before running back to the kitchen.

He was so close now, less than five hundred miles to go. Phone buzzed like crazy. Kyle, Kyle from way back kept calling, leaving voice messages. Delete without listening. No distractions. Francis had nothing for him. Every time the phone vibrated he felt the fear rise in his throat like bile. Just swallow hard. Push it down.
On the car radio, there was real trouble. The border was under siege. They came through the desert like insects, like roaches. Sent their lice infested kids ahead of them.

Local paper in his hand. Fresh smell of the ink like the plant, like the place he’d worked. Where he’d learned about Night, how it could go on forever.

He ached for that closed-in feeling, for a place he knew what was asked of him. Knew what was asked, and just did it. But that wasn’t what a soldier would think.

The paper, the paper said some bleeding-heart liberals were leaving water in the desert, big barrels of the stuff. Traitors. Did they want drugs and crime? Did they want the rapists getting in? The President was on it, but only so much one man can do.

He read. Some guys, some heroes, went out and did their own patrols. Peacekeepers, they called themselves. He liked the sound of that. They shot the barrels full of holes, and if they found a wetback in the desert, well. Who knew.

The desert was huge, and it had a name like a woman. Sonora.

Sometimes the migrants left signs, warnings. People made of fence posts and sticks and old clothes. The Peacekeepers shot them up, too.

The phone buzzed again in his pocket. He fingered the silent button through the cloth.

What did it feel like, to hold a gun? He wondered. Hot and heavy in the hands? Dan had things like that, he’d be willing to bet. Dan, Dan the man would show him. Maybe Dan was a Peacekeeper. It would be just like his brother. Out there, doing right.

The brown waitress brought more coffee, and the bill. She turned to leave, but Franco snapped her back with a word. “Hey.” She froze, turned. He’d got used to making
Franco’s voice low and slow. Funny thing. If you talk quiet, they know you mean business. “I’m not done yet.”

She bowed her head and picked the bill back up, waiting for him to order something else. He just stared, drilled her with his eyes until she looked away, until she lowered her heavy eyelids and left. Francis pulled up his hood and smiled to no one, to himself, and to Dan. Dan, who was about to see his little brother, his knucklehead little bro, all grown up.

Nº5

They’d gone round and round for the two hours. Vance telling her how she’d broken the trust of the Collective, of all the remaining thirty-seven thinking-self-aware-living-body-souls there at Terrain. The Collective, the Collective! The collective was all he could think about, all he could talk about, even as Cam showed him the fires, the marches, the terror and the hope. There would even be a vaccine soon, she was sure. He wanted Cam to tell Noreen and the others, ask forgiveness, for Christ’s sake. As if! They were stuck, there was no going forward, Vance too stupid for his own good, as usual.

Now, Vance was sitting folded, praying mantis-like, on the creaky desk, head in hands. Suddenly he lifted his face, like he’d figured it out. “Did you see the bathtub in here,” he grinned. Finally, he’d had a useful thought! Unasked for, a vision of his body, all sinew and cord. Cam smiled at him and said nothing, better to just see what happened.

The clawfoot tub was in a room that had been almost entirely covered over with mosaic tiles, a panorama of a sunrise pressed glinting in the dark. At least Vance had enough sense not to flick on a light and bring the Collective running. Thankfully, the
Euro-style on demand gas water heater was still hooked up, and it sparked to life as Cam turned open the tap.

Ransacking the closet, Vance produced a bar of French milled soap, a silky woman’s robe printed with ugly flowers, and a hefty, pink bottle of Chanel N°5 bubble bath. Grinning, he dumped the whole thing in the water before stripping down and shimmying under the heap of bubbles that puffed up from under the cascading water. Cam had hoped he’d reach for her before getting in, but whatever.

“This is like, a hundred-fifty-dollar bath, you know,” Cam tossed her own clothes in a heap next to his. She stood in front of him, willing him to touch her, to grab her hips and pull her onto his face, like he used to. After about three minutes it was just awkward, and she slid into the opposite end of the tub. Vance seemed not to even notice her body, he just smiled like a retarded eight-year-old. Why had he asked her to take a bath, anyway?

“I guess this is the wife’s stuff,” Vance said, looking out the arched window, glass wavy with age. The mosaics covered the wall around the window, too, and there was a big mirror in a gilt frame that glowed in the starlight. “Ex-wife,” Vance corrected himself. Cam extended her foot to trace the outside of Vance’s thigh under the water but he ignored her. She’d thought about him. A lot, actually. Hadn’t he thought about her? He took her foot in his hand and squeezed it hard, and then let go. What was his problem, anyway?

“Cam,” he said, “Syd and I …” He trailed off, looking out the dumb window again, at the smear of stars through the glass. God. It was too obvious. “We didn’t think, I
mean, we didn’t want to hurt you.” Cam just looked at him darkly, letting him dig the hole.

Cam replayed the last few months on fast forward and realized she’d known it already, seen it already without seeing it, had known for some time that Syd and Vance were going to sleep together. And not just once, not a one-off fuck for the sake of body heat on a cold night and a temporary end to the soul crushing loneliness of being in a dying body on a dying planet in some crack-pot neo-hippie collective. She should have seen from the start. Vance and Syd were going to be a thing. Were already a thing. Vance was climbing out of the tub now, soap clinging to his narrow chest, steam like a curtain rising from his smith shoulders.

“It’s like being part of the Collective. Collective life, it nurtures us. Makes existence bearable. Syd sees it, she gets it. She deserves to be happy…” There was that awful word again, ‘happy.’ Only an idiot could be happy! He was covering himself with a towel, the coward, turning away from her now.

“You don’t have to say anything. Syd really cares, Cam. She cares what you think.”

“I know,” she said, hating the smallness of her voice. This was a bad time for words, there was nothing words could do to help her. He toweled and dressed, at least looking sheepish. She sank herself lower in the water and waited for him to leave. Finally, he did.

Cam waited for the sound of the door, further down, in the bowels of the house. Once Vance was really gone, she submerged completely. The water was in her nose, in her mouth, anyway, and she opened her jaws underwater and screamed. Head woozy with
the heat, Cam stepped out of the water, smelling like a million bucks. And there she was, in the mirror. Amazing body, her very own, just the way she had always wanted it. The diet at Terrain had made her even more narrow, even more smooth and hard. She loved everything about this girl in the mirror, how her body could be anything she wanted it to be. Her yellow hair was already growing down to her shoulders, plastered there like wet sunlight.

Sarah had always loved her hair, had wished it was hers, even. As if it would have changed something for her, as if it would have made her happy. But where was her pretty aunt, now? Cam hated the way her hair touched her shoulders with its silky weight. She couldn’t wait to cut every bit of it off. She pulled on the ugly robe and started digging in the closet for some scissors.

CHECKLIST

I was on edge now, Cam, I was doing the housesit checklist, cleaning Victoria’s apartment like a madwoman. I was shaking out that Turkish rug, I was reshelving the books, I was steam cleaning the slippers I’d worn with the iron to get the smell of my own toes out of there. I was going down the list of what to do, how to get the place ready, how to erase myself once again, like I was an artist of erasing, of erasure. I cleaned the front of the many-armed buddha of consumerism, and my face looked back at me in the glass like I was already gone.

Did you ever wonder, Cam, why I really kept that sea urchin spine? The one I pulled from your foot? I wanted something to cast a spell, to make a link between us. And I know that sounds like a crazy thing to do. But sometimes, Cam, when I wanted you
to come back to me, I’d hold that spine, long and sharp, and press it to my own palm. I’d make its point bite into me just a little, press just hard enough to leave a mark. Sometimes it had worked, I was sure. I could summon you, I thought. Silly, right?

What I wanted to say was this, Cam. I was mistaken, I was wrong, I am sorry. Would you come back if told you these things? I should never have gotten you tangled up with that terrible man, Francis, I never should have let him into our lives. It wasn’t my job to save him. And just look at what the paper said he’d done. Of course, it had taken them a long time to find out.

I swept the apartment and made good to leave, and I wished I’d brought you here, Cam, I wished I had listened to you, I wished the world hadn’t become infinitely scarier since you left, because you were in it, like it had swallowed you, Cam. I wished I could have shown you the wild chickens.

I said it all in my head, that I understood why you’d left, that I would have left, too. I said it all and pressed the tip of the urchin spine into my thumb until a miniature red pearl appeared, a tiny fish-egg, a translucent bead of life. It hurt, to break the skin. I licked up the blood, and I placed the spine on the sill of Victoria Tan’s big plate glass window.

I would have liked to show you the prehistoric plants outside that window, the way they greedily sucked up all the light and water and made air. I think it would have made you happy. I left the urchin spine there, Cam, and I walked to the door, and the I walked out of it, into the brutal heat. I wanted to make you come back, I wanted to pull you to me, but if I was going to live again, Cam, I also had to let you go.
The call came in the early morning, sun not even up yet. He’d just got himself a room, and the sky was going pink at the edges, time to tuck in. He wouldn’t have picked up, but the area code was the same as Dan’s.

But it wasn’t Dan on the line. It was some lady. She said she was Staff Sergeant Reyes. A foreign name. She asked too many questions.

“Just confirming your identity, sir. As next of kin, sir,” she said.

Francis, shoved the phone under his ear, undid the latch and walked into his room. He’d gone all out this time, Best Western, breakfast included. “Yeah?”

“The US Army expresses our deep condolences, sir. But there’s been an accident, and Private First-Class Daniel Elliot Adams is deceased, sir.”

His mouth and head filled with something dark and thick, like molasses. “What?” he said, “What did you just say?”

This staff sergeant cleared her throat, like she didn’t like giving bad news. But it had to be a mistake. A mistake or a lie. Dan was not dead. Was not, could not be.

The door shut behind him, solid and heavy and real. He was sinking, sinking to the floor and leaning on the side of the big bed. The blanket was white cotton that smelled of bleach, strong enough to make you puke.

Maybe he said something. Maybe he said, “How?” Or maybe his breath just left his mouth like he was the one dying, like he was the one drowning under the room’s lights that were suddenly just way too bright, just too terrible a color of light for him to think.
“Sir, suspected unintended weapon discharge is the official cause of death,” said that voice on the phone, that sneaky voice. What in hell did ‘suspected’ mean?

“Suspected?” He mouthed it, but did the word even come out?

“My condolences for your loss, sir,” Staff Sargent Reyes said from was very far away. The carpet had a diamond pattern. Dark green and brown.


“Suspected negligent discharge. That is the official cause of death, sir.”

Silence that wasn’t like silence, but like radio static, like a thousand whining mosquitos at Wolf Lake, like the silence of the air conditioner turned way, way up at Gran’s. He looked up, up, up at the ceiling, and the sky was above it, outside of it. But you’d never know it, that the sky was out there, because the white ceiling was a kind of silence, too, a silence that was cotton in his ears and cotton stuffed into his mouth, and on the phone, the lady was saying something, but her voice was no match for all that silence.

And then the call was over, and he was there alone, he was the only one left. And the lady, she was going to call back with instructions, or that’s what she’d said before she hung up. There was a whole world inside him but that world had been emptied.

Everything had been taken out of him, even Franco, even Dan.

Dan! The name was in his mouth like a plea, and he would have begged anyone, he would have done anything. But there was nobody and there was nothing but the silence and the smell of chlorine, the smell of the emptiness that had taken over.
BLUE

She was absolutely not leaving because of them, because of Syd and Vance, Vance and Syd. Cam stood in the semi-round room with stone and plaster walls painted yellow, the room she’d shared with Syd in the farmhouse since they arrived. She’d slept all night at the Outpost, in the stale and expensive 800-thread count sateen sheets on the ridiculous antique bed. When she left the covers were still damp from her head, and if anyone cared to check they’d know the bed had been slept in. Not that it mattered.

Syd was gone by the time she’d climbed the tilting stairs to their room, probably in the greenhouse, her power zone, or so she claimed. Also, where Vance worked. Whatever. It was time to leave this place of futile hope and hiding. True, it had been a good shelter. Here she was, alive after a year when death had been sliding around the globe like miasma, while humans had been shown their place in the world, realized how gigantic their mess had become, and how small their bodies were.

A thin sweater. A pair of hiking sandals. The charging cables for her phone with Euro plug adapters. She stuffed it all into a small green day pack, along with some underwear. It was enough. Her larger pack would be an instant red flag if anyone saw her. She didn’t want trouble. From under the mattress, Cam grabbed her wallet. She hadn’t touched it since she and Syd had slogged through the woods, belting out, *We love you*, like lunatics. Like children.

Inside the wallet there were some US dollars and several hundred Euros, still crisp from the currency exchange at Charles de Gaulle. A tattered piece of paper with Sarah’s address, folded and creased from when she was still a child, on some hotel stationary from Zanzibar. A place so far away she couldn’t even picture it now.
Behind the Euros another paper was tucked away, and just running her finger over it made Cam cold, like she’d been dunked in an icy stream. She pulled out the sheet that she’d taken out of that notebook, the cursed thing that had made her let go of Sarah, the one person she should have been fighting to hold onto. She smoothed out the wrinkles and looked.

On the paper: a face, a face like her own, and not like her own. Surrounded in a cloak of black. Nose turned up, strong jaw, a delicate chiaroscuro defining the contour of the cheek, fine crosshatches making up the brow. But the eyes, the eyes gave it away as totally not her. They were eyes that looked out like they would eat you up, eyes that thought the world owed them.

Cam pictured the hand that had done the drawing, and there must have been a thousand tiny movements of that hand to make those hatches, do that shading, and make the black a sheet of opaque pigment. Cam thought of those ink-stained fingers and shuddered. Looking at that face, the eyes looked up at her with beastly intent. Somehow, she knew those eyes were blue. Somehow, she knew she never wanted to see the drawing again as long as she lived. She took the paper, folded it up, and left it on her pillow. That way, Syd would know she was really gone.

She left without crossing paths with anyone, avoiding the Kitchen and the rest of Terrain. Soon she was walking down a steep path between limestone bluffs. Cam regretted, only for a moment, not saying something to Noreen. Dear, pessimistic Noreen. But that was not how you got gone, that was how you got tangled up, how you got talked down, how you got coaxed back to the circle by people who said they only wanted what was best. It would just get messy.
She’d been alone before, and it was always exactly what she wanted, until she had it. She did better with people around, it was just a fact. Because without people, people who knew you, you could start to disappear. Before Vance, she’d gotten that way, almost transparent. She could go for days without eating, she could imagine she was invisible. You needed people to see you to be real. But people were all so very, very disappointing. Just take Vance with all his stupid happiness, diddling Syd just because he could. Running away from the world’s problems, just because he could.

She could disappear and be part of the real world again. She could throw her body and her mind at resistance, at being a voice for the planet, the planet that was sick, sick, sick, but was also heaving with life, with struggle, with marches and interventions and infections and tears and joy. She walked down the rocky path that opened onto the field, and there was the sky, open and unreachable all at once, all that blue clobbering her. She would go back into it all and tell no one, she would go where they could not follow.

TOURIST

When I first arrived in Venice, Cam, I thought this is never, never going to work. I’m too old to be a tourist, I thought, as I walked towards St. Mark’s Square, dragging my small suitcase behind me, the Grand Canal glittering and tossing, the chug of vaporetti and the screams of seagulls wheeling overhead filling my ears.

The wide avenue by the Grand Canal was packed, and the sun was high. Compared to Singapore, everything was loud, so loud, and so old. The buildings I’d passed on the Canal sagging into the water with their Moorish pointed windows, the porous quality to all the stone, as if it had been drinking in sea and air for a thousand
years, all overwhelmed me. Everywhere, I heard the rolling, musical tones of people
calling out in Italian, which somehow sounded more foreign than Mandarin had. The lack
of cars, of vegetation, of order, and of English, it was all disconcerting after Singapore’s
sleek flanked buildings, its lusty plant life, its regimented chaos.

To reach the apartment Raoul had rented, I had to pass through St. Marks.
Everyone wanted the same thing: a photo in front of the Cathedral. The green-blue domes
of the church, each topped with a blade-like cross, were like a small city presiding over a
central open space surrounded by colonnades teeming with bodies. A group of Japanese
women in sensible hats that protected them from the sun were taking countless
photographs near the arched entrance of the Cathedral. Would taking all those photos
prove anything? I watched them without looking away until one woman, with kind eyes
and very short hair, looked back at me with curiosity and asked, “Picture?” She nodded
towards my phone in my hand.

“Okay,” I said, wanting to be polite, stomach clenching at the thought of being
photographed. As I turned to face her I could feel the Basilica behind me, exhaling cool
air heavy with incense. Even from outside, you could see how its innards glittered with
mosaics and shone with marble, red and veined as raw meat.

“Smile,” the woman said, “Smile,” and it was like a plea. The woman handed
back my phone, proudly showing me the image of myself, looking stiff and wearing a
forced smile.

It took me a long time to find the apartment, Cam, and a lot of weaving through
what felt like alleys but what were actually regular thoroughfares. By the time I reached
the Castello sestiere, it was getting dark, and the light bouncing off the brackish water made me feel like I was drunk.

The address Raoul had provided, 1657A, led to a what looked to be a store, but the store was shuttered for the night. There was a heavy door, old green wood with a brass knocker shaped like a lion’s head and a little gridded six-inch wide window looking into an unlit hall. I had texted the number that Raoul had given me earlier, but he had not replied. I took the brass ring in the lion’s mouth and tapped the door and waited. When nothing happened, I banged on the door harder. “Raoul?” I called into the little window. A man’s voice called out angrily in Italian from the building cross the way. Not only was I a bewildered tourist, but I was also an annoying one.

Above me, I heard a window creak open, and immediately smelled cigarette smoke. “Sarah?” Raoul’s voice called from above. I heard him clatter down the stairs and a few seconds later he opened the door, shirt half tucked in, his shiny hair half pulled back with an elastic. “Sarah!” he greeted me, reaching out with his slender hand to bring me inside, taking my bag. “Is this all you’ve brought?”

I nodded in mute exhaustion. We must have been making too much noise, since the loud shouter began hurling insults that echoed against the buildings outside. Raoul closed the door gently behind us. “You must forgive him,” Raoul said in a hushed voice, “All the neighbors have been quite friendly, except Silvio. I think he is slightly…” Raoul twirled his index finger by his ear, apparently indicating insanity. Inside, I saw that the main level of the building had been set up with two long tables, one stacked high with books and pamphlets, one with camera equipment, presumably for the interviews we
would film. Outside, the man was releasing what seemed to be a string of obscenities and a woman’s voice had joined in, guttural and filled with words I didn’t understand.

“What about her,” I asked Raoul.

“Well,” he said, running his hand through his hair and mussing it further, “She is also, what would you call her in your American English? Mrs. Marcello is a tough customer.”

I suddenly felt very tired, Cam, very tired and very hopeless. This, this was where I was going to make so-called social sculpture, with Raoul? Here, with the locals who wanted us gone? I cried then, Cam, I dropped my tings on one of the tables and cried.

Raoul, at a total loss, hopped this way and that, saying, “Oh, oh!” and messing his hair with his hands. I thought, Cam, with mounting dread, I’ve found myself another lunatic. There was no way I could help this flimsy, helpless man make something here. I couldn’t even help myself.

DUST

It was a good thing there was no way people could see inside his head.

Not anybody, and not this lady Staff Sergeant who Francis was talking to, because she’d absolutely freak.

He knew when to keep his mouth shut. Now was one of those times. The office was in a metal trailer just inside the gates of Fort Huachuca, where Dan had been supposed to report for a third tour of duty at Shindand in Afghanistan.
He was sitting in a junk folding chair across from Staff Sergeant Reyes, in army green with a paper cone of a mask over her face. In person Reyes had pale skin. She didn’t look foreign. Above the edge of her mask there was a round dot of a mole.

Reyes handed him a metal box with a bag inside it, and in that bag, Godforbid, but in that bag was his brother, what was left of him.

She explained it, how when Dan went AWOL, how after a week, they’d found him in the apartment. She explained everything, except how his brother, a trained Infantryman, had made a mistake with a rifle. She said, the weapon that Dan fired, unintended or not, was not his service weapon. It was a hunting rifle.

The deceased, she kept calling Dan. The deceased may have made a fatal mistake while attempting to clean his weapon. It was very hot in the trailer. Her armpits stank. Inside Francis’s head, he snapped Staff Sergeant Reyes’ neck like a branch, like a nothing, like Doug’s glasses.

“The landlord said you could go there. Collect his things, sir.” Reyes was looking at him now, looking at Francis from across her metal desk, and there it was. She felt sorry for him.

“Yeah,” he said, talking quiet.

“Sir?” she said, softly.

“Yeah, I’ll get his things.” She smiled at him, and he could see it. Her pity. He stared back, waiting for her to do it, the thing people do when they’re ready to stop looking at you, like you hurt their eyes. He was waiting for her to look away. Why wouldn’t she look away?
“Your brother was a fine solider, sir. He’ll be missed.” She nodded curtly at him. Unbelievable. She was sending him away. Damn her. Damn her and her lies. A fan turned above them, marking out the time in seconds.

He counted to ten. He counted to ten again. Reyes would not do it. She would not look away. Finally, he took the box, the box she’d given him, the box holding the dust that was Dan. He took his brother in his arms and left that place, walking out into a land so alien it could have been the moon. Why hadn’t his brother told him he’d left the planet, left the entire world behind.

PRAGUE

Cam stood with the others on the pale limestone steps leading up to the green coppery mass of the Jan Hus Memorial in Prague’s Old Town Square. The sky was tight with bruised clouds and light rain misted down over the protesters packed into the grey cobblestone expanse that wrapped around the statue. Exactly how many people were there she couldn’t tell, but at least over a thousand. Maybe twice that. None of them looked over thirty. Cam looked out across the mass of humans and saw mostly pale faces, clothes in shades of black and grey.

Czech flags, each with a triangle of blue pushing in into a field of white and red like an arrow, and signs with demands, *NO MORE OIL!*, were held up in the chill air by gloved hands. As one body, they pressed up to the chunky yellow stone of Town Hall under the sharp spires of the Týn church, its two squared off towers topped black points like something out of a medieval nightmare. At the base of the Town Hall and lining the shuttered restaurants with their cream and mustard facades, the riot police were already in
place, their creased, bulldoggy faces rigid. Two mobile command units stood in front of
the church, at the ready.

Cam had found this protest on the message boards and had brought her own
folded sign, *END OIL NOW*, written in permanent marker in big black letters on a white
sheet. Cam also had a pint of red paint in her backpack, for the big show. She knew no
one. This was the beauty of reddit, of the massive chats on whatsapp. You could be part
of the action and at the same time avoid any permanent connection. This was key,
avoiding people. Sure, she’d always had suspicions, Vance had called it ‘trust issues.’
But in the year since she’d left Terrain, she’d confirmed it. People were the worst. She’d
been held, after Glasgow, for over a week in the dank dormitory of a detention center.
She’d been tear gassed in Paris, after a rally led to cars being torched, which had not been
her idea. She’d had her sandaled foot trampled in Leeds, big toenail on her left foot torn
off to the ragged nerve.

A guy with shaggy brown hair, stubble, and lip ring he kept pushing his tongue
into stood beside Cam on the stone steps. He nodded at the looming copper statue above,
a pile of tortured figures, one with a hand thrown out, one clutching a book, and one old
white guy presiding over the lot, looking pompous and pious despite the grey pigeon
happily crapping all over his robed shoulder.

“They burned this bugger at the stake,” the guy said.

“Yeah? What for?”

“Dunno. Heretic,” the guy smiled.

“Worse ways to go,” Cam said, not smiling.
Now the crowd was chanting, *A livable planet is our RIGHT! Youth UNSTOPPABLE, Another World POSSIBLE!* Cam opened her mouth, and let the words come out. The words filled her, vibrated in her chest as she added her voice to the rest. The syllables almost stuck in her throat they were so thick with hope.

A girl near Cam who couldn’t be more than sixteen with glitter on her eyes and her hair in braids had a megaphone, and the most important word came out amplified and ear splitting. *POSSIBLE!* On the edge of the square, the riot police began their press in, the *thwack thwack thwack* of their batons on their black plastic shields a counter beat to the chants. But their voices, the collective voices of youth, were louder. The first warning blasted from the amplifiers mounted to the mobile command units. *DISPERSE IMMIDITATLY. YOU CANNOT GATHER HERE.* They repeated it frantically in English, then in French and next in the Czech that to Cam still sounded indistinguishable from Russian.

The guy next to Cam was climbing up onto the statue, right up onto the ledge by old Jan Hus himself, and he extended his hand down to Cam. Why not. She let herself be pulled to the top of the statue, and from there it was clear, the action was coming, the police had put down their visors. A ripple of electricity surged through Cam. When they hid their faces, that’s when you knew it was about to get real.

Cam yelled until her lungs could split. *“Youth UNSTOPPABLE, Another World POSSIBLE!”* At the perimeter the electric crackle of hundreds of firecrackers going off ricocheted across the wet cobblestones from different positions, clearly a planned action. There was a roaring, rushing sound, and a chorus of screams came from the west side of the Square. Bodies flew, pressed to the ground as the police aimed their water cannons.
With the edge weakened the riot police came pouring in, pressing with their shields, swinging batons.

“Shit,” the guy with the lip ring breathed and scrambled down the side of the monument. Cam watched as he ran for the edge of the Square, only to be taken down by a baton to the back of the knees. A knot of five police rushed towards the monument steps, and teargas canisters whizzed overhead. People were still chanting, even as they fell to the ground. Cam up looked at the smug, green face of Jan Hus. It was now or never, the police had hoisted one of their own onto the monument, his face shield totally black except for a red ID number 451 Bravo 120, and he was shouting at her, unintelligible, but clearly a version of Stop! and Immediately! But it made no difference because she had the paint in her hand now, the lid off, too late to back out.

“Another world possible!” she cried as the paint leapt out ahead of her, a flash of red that hung suspended before landing on the statue, blinding its eyes, covering its bird dropping crusted shoulder. And then the hands of the cop, 451 of Bravo 120, were on her, hands that pulled her to his Kevlar covered chest as he brought them both down to ground level, to the foot of the monument steps, where the other four got the zip ties and grabbed each of Cam’s kicking legs and bound them together, even as she was tied she kicked, and they drug her over the stones toward the mobile command units.

She’d never been touched before, not like this, never. “I’m an American,” she tried to yell, but there was no way to be heard, not over the yells and the stomping and the police bullhorns gargling out DISPERSE! The gas filled her mouth and eyes with a million flaming needles. Above her the sky churned and the rain pelted down. She started counting to five, over and over, to keep calm. She willed herself to let this moment
happen. To know that whatever happened she was living, she was here, and she was not
defeated. She was youth, unstoppable.

INTUITION

Raoul was an eccentric, but he was not completely helpless. In fact, Cam, I think you
would have liked him. Raoul, who was so full of energy he bordered on manic, except
when he fell into periods of despondency when he questioned if what we were doing was
working, if it was good enough. Raoul, who would not stop telling me how Mei was his
favorite aunt, who talked about serendipity and embodied experience and chain smoked
throughout the day. Raoul, who it turned out, had arranged for university students from
Singapore to be put up in a hotel around the corner from the building he’d rented, to help
mind the “storefront” and film the locals.

I think you would like the building, Cam, with its with pale green stucco walls
that descended into the canal on one side and onto a slim medieval lane on the other. Up
top were two apartments, one for Raoul, and one for me. The place was small compared
to Victoria’s Singapore apartment, a monastic cell almost, with blond wood floors and
dark beams supporting a white plaster ceiling that angled up at the wall that faced the
lane. As I’d suspected the night I arrived, the first floor where we set up shop used to be a
convenience store, and had wide windows that passersby could see into once the shutters
were opened.

Inside, the table stacked with free literature was a big draw. The art tourists, as I
liked to call them, would swoop in and snatch up the brochures and papers and shove
them into their red Biennale bags. Distinguishable from the typical throngs taking selfies
on the Rialto bridge as a more art-centric breed of international visitors, the art tourists ranged from middle aged women dressed in loose fitting but expensive black clothes and startlingly bright eyeglasses in reds and blues, to smartly dressed men in tailored suits, to youthful hipsters in their musty vintage wardrobes. But all art tourists had one thing in common: they loved to take anything shiny and bound, any art literature they could grab, especially free copies of Raoul’s biography, *History’s Malcontents: The Life and Times of S. Raoul*. From what I could gather, he’d completely made up everything in the book, but maybe that didn’t matter.

Venice was almost mild in April. Yes, there was too much sun and not enough plants, but it was not like the gritty June heat in Rome that I’d found so oppressive. It must have been all the water. And in spite of my fears that first dreadful night, Cam, many of the locals were happy to talk to us, it delighted them to tell us about how terrible the cruise ships were, how one had just crashed into a pier last month, how the city was sinking, sinking, and the good jobs were all in Mestre, back on the mainland.

Somehow, the idea of having their words recorded opened them up. We filmed all of them, Cam, the locals, the art tourists, using one of the many cameras the students had brought, apparently for a variety of filmic ‘looks.’ As much as people loved to complain, they loved hearing we were here on so-called intuition. Each wanted to add their story. They all had an idea what intuition was.

Fabio, who owned a laundry next door, said it was chance, and explained that just by chance he’d inherited the building and the business from an uncle. A tourist from New York, Julia, said it was luck, and then told me how she’d met her husband, all because she’d gotten locked out of her apartment one night. The stories went on, and somehow
people felt seen, felt real, felt like they existed. We projected them all onto a wall inside the storefront.

Today was a slow day, and Raoul and I were alone. “Why don’t you go out, Sarah,” he said, flashing his infectious smile at me and lighting one of his cigarettes. The smoke hung in the air around him like a halo. “Go and see the rest of the Exhibition. Be *inspired,*” he said, with a wave of his hand. If I didn’t go out, he would just make small talk with me until I couldn’t stand his cheeriness, smoking endlessly. Maybe it would be good to take a break.

I set out to visit the Aresnale campus of the Biennale. There were still parts of the huge Exhibition that I hadn’t seen, and I planned to explore more, to find something new. Haunted by its maritime past, the cavernous Arsenale complex was where assembly line ship building had been perfected. I’d read on a sign that in its late medieval heyday Arsenale could churn out a ship a day. The structure itself was a nexus of political, economic, and military power, and this thought remained with me as I was again confronted with almost life-sized photographic portraits of the ultra-poor in Bangladesh.

I’d seen these photographs each time I visited; they were impossible to escape. And as someone with a background in photography, they both intrigued and repelled me. The aesthetic was that of a poorly exposed snapshot, the scale monumental. The portraits were taken at night with a flash that froze the subjects in an unflatteringly hard light that obliterated the background. I paused before the skeletal face of a woman, her dark skin shining in the artificial light, her soiled red sari with embroidery of gold pulled taut between her hands and across her forehead. The teeth were bared, the eyes were lost, abandoned in the face. The photograph was mounted on an ancient looking brick wall
that was weeping something white and crusty. When I touched the stuff, if left a powdery coating on my fingers. I brought my hand to my lips and tasted salt. Looking at this woman, I wondered what it meant to her to be photographed. And what did it mean for me to look at her, here? Disturbingly, Cam, I had no clear answer.

I returned to the storefront to find Raoul watching a German woman talk about how Europe was on the wrong path, it had been her intuition for years now, and Brexit had proved it. So what, I thought. Something was wrong with the moving image. No, Cam, it was not this image that was the problem, but the fact that this image floated there, on the sterile wall, with no context. Yes, we could have people talk about intuition all day and play it back, but where were we? Where was the site-specificity? Did it matter that right outside the city was sinking, that the water in the canals was too polluted to see through? That the as we sat in our comfy position in this rented building, the thing that made Venice special, the water that was its heart and lifeblood was being ignored?

Next to me, Raoul was frowning, too, as felt it as well. The lack of seriousness, of context. “This image,” he began. “This image needs something.”

“I have an idea,” I said.

I took a camera from the gear table, a little black box that was supposed to be able to be submerged in water up to ten meters. I took a push broom I’d seen in the closet and unscrewed the bristly head, leaving just the handle. There was lots of heavy duty tape around, “It comes in handy!” Raoul had said, and I used the tape to lash the camera to the broom handle. As I rushed out the door, Raoul gave me a look, “Sarah,” he called as I left the apartment, “Am I going to like this idea?”
“We’ll see,” I called back as I strode out into the sunlight, not at all sure if what I had in mind would work, but going for it anyway.

I walked deeper into the labyrinth of buildings and waterways to a particularly fetid canal, and after looking around to see if anyone was paying attention, I pressed record and plunged the camera into the swirling, oily water. This part of Castello was not frequented by tourists, and I was the only foreigner in sight. A group of fishermen, their faces like suede from sun and salt, smoked at a rickety table outside a nearby bar and looked at me like I was something odd they’d caught in their nets, a fish that they couldn’t decide whether to gut and cook for dinner or throw back. The youngest one, with bronzed forearms and a belly that strained against his grease-stained shirt approached, squatted beside me. I continued to kneel, holding the submerged broom, no doubt looking crazy, even for an American.

Back at the storefront, I found Raoul sitting there looking petulant, still smoking and reading his own book. He was a strange man.

“Is something wrong,” I asked.

“It is flat, Sarah. The whole thing is flat. We have it up and running. But Mei will not be impressed when she comes.” He ground out his cigarette and sighed, a little melodramatically, I thought, even for him.

I took memory card from the camera and loaded the footage of water I’d recorded into the laptop Raoul used to sequence the interviews. “Raoul,” I said, “I need you.” My idea, Cam, was to bring the canals, those lovely, impractical, damaged waterways, right into the show. With Raoul’s help, I layered a clip I’d made by submerging the camera beneath the oily swirl of water over the footage the German woman. Raoul showed me
how to visually transition between clips layered on top of one another in the timeline. The process was easy to understand. The image that was on the top was visible, the image underneath was not. But if you lowered the opacity of the top clip and made it translucent, you could partially see the clip underneath.

I adjusted the opacity of the clip of the water so that it started out very low: only a hint of water swirled over the woman’s face. As I increased the opacity of the water clip, the German woman became less visible, as if she were slowly being submerged as the camera descended deeper into murkier water. On the audio track, the woman said, “I have a sinking feeling, that we are all headed to the brink.” Raoul laughed and fluttered his hand over to my shoulder, his eyes welling up with tears. “Too much?” I asked. “Too on-the-nose?”

“No, no,” Raoul said, wiping away tears, “Mei will love it.”

I played the sequence back and felt joy pulse through my gut. He was right. Mei would love it. What would you have thought, Cam? Would you have loved it, too, or would you have said that thing you used to say, that paintings and art and performance never saved anyone?

MIRROR

Dan’s apartment was a little grey box in a low bank of other grey boxes. The complex backed up to the Sonora. In the distance, big rocks like something he remembered from long ago, like giant eggs, were set in all that sand like they were floating in an ocean. But that made no sense.
The apartment manager met him there, the man so brown Francis took him for a Mexican until he spoke, told Francis in his twangy tobacco choked voice that Dan had always been a quiet tenant, and he’d always paid the rent on time. He jangled the keys in front of Francis, “Boy, you don’t look nothin’ like him.”

Francis wanted, badly, to knock the teeth from his head. He and Dan were the same, the same in every way that mattered! But you had to nod, to look like you were thinking something like a normal guy would think. You had to keep what was inside on the inside. He’d learned that much it he’d learned a thing.

“You don’t wanna be getting lost out there,” the man’s tobacco-stained chin jerked at the desert. “That’s where the coyotes bring ‘em through. No-man’s land out there, boy.”

Francis made like he understood, walked in through the door as the landlord swung it wide. “Have what you like. Everything that’s his that the Army left, that’s all yours now.”

What would he even take? How could he even be sure Dan was really gone? It looked like his brother had just stepped out for a bit, everything neat and tidy, except that the carpet was torn out in the corner of the living room, in front of the easy chair.

The landlord looked like he was sorry, seeing that carpet. “You got a place to stay?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I got a room,” Francis said, but all of a sudden, Godforbid but tears were coming. He coughed and turned away.

“Guess it’d be all right if you stay here. While you get your brother’s things sorted out.” Francis just nodded, wanting the man gone.
The landlord took a key off his ring, held it out to Francis in his gnarled hand, but why should this make him want to die. Why did he always have to be so weak. Where was Franco, when he really needed him.

“He’s paid through the end of the month. Just take your time, boy.”

The man almost touched his shoulder, Francis was sure, before thinking better of it and walking kind of gimpy to the door before turning back, a black outline before the blazing rectangle of outside. “Almost forgot,” he said, pointing to the side of the building. “Rooftop lookout up there. Just take the stairs.”

“Thanks,” Francis managed to croak, before the man finally shut the door, leaving Francis alone it the dark of Dan’s apartment.

After standing there, listening to the landlord’s tires on the gravel as he drove off, Francis was finally able to move, to look. He tried to find something that was surely Dan’s, some proof positive of the man himself. Free weights in the corner. Beers in the fridge. Cans of beef stew in the cupboard. Goodwill couch covered with a rainbow-colored Mexican blanket, like they sold at truck stops.

Was this the life of a hero? Was not, could not be. Nothing of Dan he could grab or touch, not even a ghost. There was one thing, on top of the chest of drawers. A photo.

Out in front of what looked like another box in another desert, guys arm in arm, mean mugging for the camera, all shaved heads and swagger. Tech camo fatigues, colors all blocky like pixels. But none of them looked like his brother, not one of them looked like Dan.

The guy front and center had a messed up face. The left side like raw meat, all shiny and twisted up, even the mouth had a twist to it, at the corner. And the ear looked
like it wasn’t all there. Poor bastard. But then he looked closer, saw this brother’s skull under that mask of pain. Under all that tortured flesh, there was Dan. He held the frame in his hands, tried to wipe off the damage from the face. It stayed.

Without thinking he slammed it to the floor. His hands were on the dresser then, he turned it over on top of the photo. Then he took the table, the table by the easy chair, and threw it across the room. It was too light, it bounced off the wall like nothing, like it wasn’t real. Was any of it real? He picked up the dresser, the drawers sliding out, bottles of weird vitamins spilling across the carpet, folded up undershirts and shorts, clean and white, all in a pile. But none of it mattered, he could tear the place to pieces and it wouldn’t change it. What he’d seen.

Moving the dresser out of the way, he worked the picture from the cracked frame, careful not to tear it. Hands shaking, Francis folded the photo in half. Now the good side was all that showed, and he could draw the other half of his head. In his mind Francis drew it perfectly, his brother’s face, not divided but whole. That was how he wanted to keep it, but instead he kept mirroring the wrong side, the wrecked side, until all he could see of Dan’s face was that messed up part. No matter how hard he looked at the good half, all he could see was the bad.

Why could he only mirror the bad things? He could hear something, it was either the wind whining outside the window or fiddle music, thin and high in the air. It was hard to catch the notes but if you listened hard, if you put your mind to it, you could just barely make it out.
DOWN

The overnight detention center in Pankrác prison had pale green walls. There were twenty-eight women in the dormitory and when Cam was pushed inside, she saw everyone had the same uniform: soaked, torn clothing, puffy eyes from tear gas. By the time she’d been dragged from the mobile command unit and fingerprinted, she had stopped feeling unstoppable.

Now, she’d been there for nearly eight hours, curled on the plastic mattress of a lower bunk. Her left leg had a deep, band-shaped abrasion from where the zip tie had dug into her leg as she was dragged. It seeped through her pants, weeping yellow and red into the grey fabric. The face of a woman, black hair cut short, peered over the top bunk.

“Hey,” the face said, through raw lips.

“What,” Cam said, turning to face the wall.

There was a thump as the woman, lanky and wearing green fatigues and a ripped grey sweater, jumped down in front of Cam, agile as a cat.

“Was that you up on the statue?”

Cam turned to face the woman, who was probably around Sarah’s age. Sarah! She wouldn’t let her mind go there. Cam offered the woman a weak smile, “Yeah, that was my great idea.”

A grin spread across the woman’s face. “I told you lot! It was her!” She called over her shoulder. A Black woman a bleached blonde crew cut and a bruise on her nose pumped a fist, and another woman whistled.

“I’m Beatrice. I go by Bea,” she offered, extending her hand. Cam took it for a second before letting go.
“Cam,” she said.

“Cam. Right. So, you’re American, they’ll probably let you off in a week or so. But listen. After this, we’re heading to Venice. All of us,” She nodded at the seven other women that had come up behind her and stood at her back in a half circle. “You could meet us there.”

“Look, Bea,” Cam said, “I’m going it alone.” It was too much to make plans, too much to pretend you could trust anyone.

“No, I get it, I get it.” Bea held up her hands, facing her soot-blackened palms toward Cam. “It’s a loose coalition, not a marching band. We’re all individuals here. But,” she glanced over her shoulder, “If you want to have impact, you have to get organized. Have to time things right, if you get my drift?” Bea clapped her hands together and shouted, “Bang!” and a ripple of laughter spread through the women. They must have coordinated the fireworks at the Square.

“Hey, what you did with the paint was brilliant. What I’m saying is, you won’t wanna miss this. We could use someone like you. This will be legit. High profile.”

Cam raised her eyebrows. Her leg throbbed, oozing onto the bed through her pants.

“Well, you know the Venice Biennale, right? That big-ass, pretentious art show? Tons of press, and all the art is like, Look how bad it is! Climate change! Poverty! Oppression! Boo-Hoo! And then all these artsy buggers, they jet in, hundreds of thousands of these pricks, adding like a few million metric tons of carbon to the atmosphere, and feel like they’re making a difference! Like if you just feel bad about the state of things, you’re absolved from doing shit about it.”
“Go on.”

Bea laughed, “Well, this time we’re giving them a show they’ll never forget. We’ll have global coverage, guaranteed.”

There was a loud squawk over the speaker in the cell: *Smith, Michaels, Diop, Culver, Meany, McKee, Jameson, and Langston—OUT.* The electric lock buzzed and clanged, and two officers materialized at the gate.

“That’s my number love,” Bea said. “Disruptor 88, whatsapp. You just message, if you’re down.” Bea and the rest walked out of the cell, Bea calling out as she left, “One month. First week of May.”

Bea and the others disappeared into the florescent lit corridor, the gate shutting behind them with a heavy clang. Cam turned Bea’s words over in her mind. Global coverage. Venice. It didn’t take thinking, she already knew, even without knowing Bea’s plan. She was down.

**TODAY**

I had been in Venice almost a month, Cam, and Raoul’s project, our project, had come a long way. We still projected the interviewees talking about *intuition* on the storefront walls, but their recorded voices and faces spoke with the silty waters of the Lagoon swirling over them like primordial soup. Everyone loved it, especially Raoul.

What was even better was the product I’d devised. Everyone wanted to take a piece of Venice with them, to say to themselves, *We exist! We have been through the plague, and we are here!* You could see it in the way they posed in front of Saint Mark’s, the way they snapped selfies in front of Vivaldi’s church, the way they photographed
their food. Why not let them take back the intangible, I’d told Raoul. Get jars, little containers, and fill them with air. Write intuition on the jars in marker and let visitors keep them, as art, or as a souvenir. Everyone wanted one, so much that Raoul and the students were kept very busy finding containers. Apparently, Venetian air was a hot commodity, after all.

Yes, it was in some ways a ridiculous project, but it was movement forward, Cam, it was something. I could feel my own life, as someone who made things, who did things, coming back into focus. I wanted you to be able to find me, to be able to come back if you wanted. Today, the storefront was being looked after by one of the students, and I was in my little garret room looking out the window at the laundry stung out across the lane, white shirts and sheets like sails waving in the sunlight.

I picked up my phone and called Jonas. He answered without on the second ring, even if it was after midnight in Chicago.

“Sa, Sa, Sarah,” he said, in his now slightly impaired way, a tick he’d kept after he got his ability to speak back. “I was hoping to get in touch. Was going to call you, to, to, tomorrow, or the next day.”

“Jonas,” I said, and took a deep breath, and just asked. “Have you heard from Cam?”

“Ca, Ca, Cameron?” He sounded genuinely surprised. “Not, not since before, since before the hospital,” He sounded worse than usual, but I pressed on, even if talking about you would likely upset him.

“Listen, Jonas, if she gets in touch, I’m in Venice. I—I’m working again, Jonas.”

“The Biennale? That’s, that’s big, big, big time,” he stuttered.
“Well, not exactly. We’re adjacent. The show, I mean.”

“Oh. I understand,” he said, sounding smug, even though his speech impediment.

“Just tell Cam I’m here, Jonas, if she comes back. If she contacts you.”

“Sarah, I have a housesitting client for you. A big job. In San, San, San Francisco. The place is amazing. They collect Chihuly. House is full of his glass, the seaforms.” He was speaking more clearly now, getting into his stride. He always liked having something to offer.

“When? How long?” I asked, looking out my window at the laundry snapping in the sun. I could smell the Lagoon from here, and someone was singing something, words unclear to me drifted in on the salty, diesel-tinged breeze.

“In two weeks,” Jonas said proudly, “For a month, at least. I, I, I could fly you there,” he added. He was trying to be nice, but what he really liked was having me need him, need his help.

“I don’t think so, Jonas,” I said, “I have work. Here.”

“It could be a long-term position,” Jonas sulked, and I could picture his frown from across the Atlantic.

“I appreciate it, Jonas. I do,” I said. He just sighed into the phone in reply. I added, “If Cam is in touch, tell her I miss her,” before hanging up. It would be easy work, in San Francisco, good work, I was sure. But how could I leave when Mei would be here soon. Any day, she was supposed to arrive. I took my camera, locked the antique door with its lion headed knocker behind me, and went out into the street, ready for anything that might happen.
He’d been up here every day. Up on the roof, letting the sun do its thing. The old landlord had been right to call it the lookout. You could see far off, into the desert. Things moved out there. He’d see it from the corner of his eye. Flash of light, then gone.

He’d been working at it, at making Franco real. Taking the tanning pills, eight hundred milligrams of melanin a day. Letting himself get good and dark. Before long, nobody would recognize him. He’d shaved his hair clean off, drawn the razor right across his skin.

He’d gotten rid of his phone after Kyle had texted: *You hear about Doug?* He’d typed back: *Doug straight ghosted, bro.* Kyle had sent another message: *Cops came by. Things are messed up.* That had been a week ago, a week ago that he’d taken the phone and driven over it until it was just a pile of plastic and glass.

He’d been up here all day, darkening up, laid out on the plastic lounge chair someone had left around. His head felt light, the skin on his face tight and hot. He had to take monster piss. He must have slept. The was sun dipping behind something on the horizon. So much haze, it could be clouds, could be mountains. Hard to tell what was what, out here.

He looked across the sand, and there was something like a man standing with arms spread wide. He watched and watched, but the man didn’t move, just stood like a statue in the purpling light. But that made no sense. He would find out what it was, after he slept. Back inside the apartment, he hit the bed and was out.

Francis woke to darkness. It was still early, the sun not even up yet. He looked down at his hands. It was working, for sure it was working. Every day, his skin got
darker. The hands were his, but they were not the hands of a white man. Brown fingers flexed when he made a fist.

The pills had messed him up. His head hurt, and he had to piss like a mother again, but just look. Just look at him now. He’d never felt so close to Franco.

He’d seen something out there, in the desert. Like a man standing there, far off in the distance past the big boulders. The figure had to be something important, was surely some kind of sign. He needed to know what it meant. He needed to walk where Dan had walked, out into the Sonora. He would go now, while it was still dark, before it got too hot.

At the edge of the property there was a chain link fence, the wires cut and twisted apart. Before he stepped through, he looked behind him. The row of grey boxes where Dan had lived, where Dan had died. It was nothing like where they’d come from.

A kind of a path, a flat place in the sand where there was less scrub, stretched out between the hills. Francis followed it for an hour or more, his sneakers sliding in the sand. The sun was coming up now, and he knew it would be hot soon. He was sure his brother had come this way, had walked this trail before. He just had to remember where the thing he saw from the roof had been, so he could find it.

DEMONSTRATION

Cam was watching from a safe distance as Bea died in front of the entrance to the Arsenale campus of the Biennale. Bea wore a skinsuit that showed every ligament and was a pale, flesh color. The suit had been painted to look like it was covered with blue veins, making it look like Bea was diseased, and all the right body parts had been drawn
on, wine dark areolas, and so on, so she looked completely naked, like a corpse stripped bare. The cobblestone streets shone chalky gold in the afternoon light, and Bea lay still, completely still, until she flung out her arms and began to shake, to tremble like she was flying apart in a million pieces.

A Biennale docent came running up, red badge flapping from his neck, alarm twisting up his otherwise rather pretty features. “Mi scusi, signora! You speak English? You cannot demonstrate here! You must stop, stop at once,” he yelled, as more serious looking security, all in black with what could be stun guns or what could be real pistols at their hips came up behind him, the leather of their boots shining black in the sunlight. Cam saw herself reflected back in the sunglasses of an approaching officer. Hair wild and short, her body a slim arc, a reed ready to be cut down. But this cop hadn’t made her, not yet. To him, she was just another Biennale tourist, a slightly scruffy one.

Cam looked at Bea, writhing there, as some of the others beat drums in unison. Bea had been telling the truth about the whole loose coalition thing; they’d organized the whole disruption via text. Cam had her part to play, but she was still comfortably alone, just the same. There were fifty-five of them, separated in to five cells, and everyone had her own role in the creative direct action, as Bea called it.

Cam looked at them all, and then she looked at the narrow winding path between the buildings, across the canal to Via Girabaldi. She hated to admit it, but she was afraid. After her leg had gotten infected, she’d had to stay a week in the prison clinic then another two weeks in detention. The counselor assigned to her had advised her to involve the US Embassy, but that would have meant contacting family. Her mother. Her uncle.
She was not going to do that. She wanted to stay gone. After Terrain, she’d stayed out of the trap of friendship, made her peace with being a party of one. With that, she was fine.

But, now that another arrest seemed likely, she wasn’t so sure. She didn’t want to be a quitter. That was not who she was. She was down, she was down with resisting. But this wasn’t the only moment. She could just take a vaporetto back to the rental on Lido. Some of the others were already waving their banners that they’d folded and kept under their jackets for this very moment: *Feel Bad Art Won’t Fix This World!* and *Carbon Zero Now!* and *Art $$$ = Death*, a slogan that, even if it wasn’t exactly true, was sure to get some attention.

Tourists in big sunglasses and floppy hats crowded in, just like you’d expect. But none of it seemed to matter the way Cam wanted it to. What was wrong with her? Why couldn’t she get into it? She saw the other women, she recognized them from their profile pictures, and they were reaching into pockets, squirreling fingers into fanny packs, and Cam herself felt the weight of the pouch of fake blood she’d prepared in the pocket of her sweatshirt, warm from being against her own skin.

She took it in her hand, the fake blood she’d planned to spray all over Bea with the others in her cell, all over the entrance to the Biennale, and set it gently on the street. She hadn’t taken out her own banner yet, *Yes to the Planet! No to Capitalism!*, so no one was even looking at her. The cop had set his sights on one of the drummers, a woman with bright red hair and a white shirt with one word, RESIST, stenciled on the front in green letters.

Cam turned away and started walking the other direction, to a part of Venice she hadn’t been to yet. She took one turn, then another, and behind her the drums beat faster,
the shouts echoing off the old stone buildings, then a collective yell, as everyone in her
cell doused Bea with the fake blood. Cam kept walking, looking at her feet, looking at the
walls, crossing a stone bridge and following a narrow canal.

There was the smell of brine in the air, and the ghosts of a thousand syphilitic
renaissance painters, the sagging cathedrals, lovely and decrepit, all of it was saying to
Cam that this moment was not the only moment. This was not the only time we’d all
come to the brink, it was not that simple. Minnows flashed in the water under the one of
the bridges, quick as thoughts. Sunlight filtered through water that was dirty but
beautiful, nevertheless.

The buildings were closer together now, with less daylight between them. A
convex corner where a neglected church met a small osteria was adorned with a stack of
the droppings of Venetian dogs, bagged and unbagged. The water was a rich translucent
green, and a row of steps descending into the canal were encrusted with barnacles. A
rainbow of oil floated on the water’s surface, washing over reflections of the buildings
edging the waterway, pale green stucco gone hairy with seaweed at water’s edge. Even
ruin could be lovely, if you let it.

Beside the canal there was a woman. Her hair was a mass of dark curls threaded
with silver, tamped down by a headband. She wore black linen pants, long and wide, and
a similarly constructed top. In her hands was a long pole with something lashed to the
end with duct tape, something that looked like a tiny camera. She was squatting down
beside the water, and she was shoving the contraption into the canal, looking away from
Cam.
A boat came motoring around a bend, driven by a slender man with a light brown face and shoulder length hair like the wing of a blackbird. Beside the man was a Chinese woman with the straightest, shiniest head of white hair Cam had ever seen. The woman with the pole looked up and waved at them, shouted “Mei!” The woman on the boat smiled broadly, pointed teeth flashing in the sun. And without doubt the woman on the edge of the canal was her. It was Sarah.

She had gotten heavier, and she had more creases next to her eyes than Cam had remembered, but there she was, her person. And Sarah was smiling so broadly, calling out something the man on the boat who was pulling up closer, mooring the boat to a pole jutting from the water. Sarah laughed, and it was so clear. She was living, she was doing something. The man proudly held up a straw basket filled with a variety of little jars that looked like they’d been pulled from a garbage scow, and Sarah threw back her head and laughed.

Cam watched her aunt, saw how effortlessly she pulled up the pole, pressed a button on the device at the end of it. The Chinese woman was grinning, and in a flash, Cam knew that this was someone who loved her Sarah, who was down for her, down all the way.

The smell of seaweed was everywhere, and sweat was running into Cam’s eyes. She wanted to take it all in, everything that was happening. There would always be the after, the things that came next. She wanted to remember what it felt like in the last remaining moment before. Before she called out to Sarah, before she came home.
The man is awake now. The thunder has gone, and the sign of the figure has gone. The star has spoken to him, he’s sure. Taste of blood in his mouth and the feeling of being emptied, purified.

He’s been left by a water barrel, a blue, plastic thing stenciled with letters: A-U-G-U-A. Riddled with bullet holes through and through, nothing but sand inside, he knows, he’s sure.

The sun is a murderous eye, a ball of fiery hate above him. What has he done to deserve that burning god, staring at him. He tries to move, but somebody’s done a number on him. His arms are bound with silver duct tape in front of him. His hands are dark, but that can’t be right, because that’s not who he is.

Dark skin, brown hands. The colors of the enemy. And he gets it, then. The big joke. The men who found him, the Peacekeepers who pulled him from the sand, they thought he was the enemy. They didn’t know about his mask. He would laugh, but his mouth is covered. More tape.

He catches a whiff of himself, and Godforbid but he must have pissed his pants. The smell is on him, on him strong. Dan can’t see him like this. Not Dan his brother, Dan of the blue eyes and bone cracking smile. Not his other brother, Franco. His German twin, his other solider.

The word soldier is an alarm in his head, and other words find him, Go, go, go, and he remembers something, but not enough:
When you’re wounded and left on Afghanistan’s plain… But this was not Afghanistan, even if the sand was everywhere, everywhere and blazing white.

Would this desert be like an ocean at night? Blue under the moon? He wonders. How could you draw something like what he sees now? White on white on white? He used to do that. He used to draw things, draw the world one line at a time, until it held still. Until it made sense.

When he sees Dan, he will tell him. He will tell him that if you can just draw something, you can understand it. You draw something, and it’s yours. Even all this terrifying brightness.
CREATIVE OVERVIEW AND RESEARCH NARRATIVE:

The creative portion of this dissertation, *The Impersonation Artist: A Novel*, is a work of fiction for our precarious times that engages multiple contemporary currents in fiction. Here, I offer a brief introduction to some of the aesthetic works and cultural realities that provoke, inspire, and inform the novel. To begin, fictional engagement with the experiences of immigrants, refugees, exiles, and ‘others’ is currently an international trend observable in a range of novels, just a few of which include: *Exit West* (2018) by British Pakistani novelist Mohsin Hamid, *Canción* (2022) by Jewish Lebanese Guatemalan novelist Eduardo Halfon, translated by Lisa Dillman and Daniel Hahn, *Lost Children Archive* (2020) by Mexican American novelist Valeria Luiselli, as well as the short story collection *The Refugees* (2009) by Pulitzer-Prize winning Vietnamese American novelist Viet Thanh Nguyen.

While not presuming to present immigrant, refugee, or exilic perspectives directly, *The Impersonation Artist* engages the subject of how such individuals are represented and perceived through one of the central characters, Sarah. A white performance artist with an ambiguously dark complexion, Sarah casts herself and participants in roles of Muslim immigrants with the aim of revealing anti-Arab sentiment...

Sarah’s counterpart in the novel, Francis, is a troubled young man from an impoverished midwestern white community. Devastated by the departure of his brother for military service in Afghanistan, Francis becomes enamored with anti-immigrant rhetoric and white supremacist ideology. Imitating the actions of an actual German officer arrested in 2020, Francis disguises himself as an ‘invader,’ and commits acts of intimidation while wearing skin-darkening makeup with the aim of provoking hostility toward non-white immigrants.

Not unlike Swedish Ugandan author Johannes Anyuru’s fictional exploration of the perspective of a would-be terrorist entangled in the planning of an attack on a Swedish bookstore, based on the actual attack on the French satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo*, in *They Will Drown in Their Mother’s Tears*, translated by Saskia Vogel (2019), Francis’ perspective provides a fictional exploration of real-world, anti-immigrant mania that increasingly leads to tragic violence. To support content in the novel that deals with the international spread of white supremacy I draw on critical sources that include Daniel Byman’s *Spreading Hate: The Global Rise of White Supremacist Terrorism* (Oxford

Both Francis’ malicious, and Sarah’s ostensibly well-intended, transgressions of racial boundaries place my novel in dialogue with recent novels that tackle issues of race through the lenses of identity shifts and misapprehensions. A brief list of such fiction includes Mohsin Hamid’s novel *The Last White Man* (2022), in which a white protagonist awakes to discover that he suddenly has dark skin; Chinelo Okparanta’s satirical novel *Harry Sylvester Bird* (2022), in which a white protagonist, in an effort to reject his bigoted upbringing, begins to identify as a Black man; and Mithu Sanyal’s novel *Identitti*, translated by Alta L. Price (2022), in which a German South Asian doctoral student’s life is thrown into turmoil when she discovers her mentor, previously assumed to be Indian, is in fact white. Such books touch on ongoing debates about cultural appropriation and arguments about how, and even if, novelists and artists should create across racial or cultural boundaries.

Sarah’s actions during *Project Hijab* as well as Cam’s participation in protests engage the resistive potentials of participatory art and the increasingly porous borders between acts of performance and acts of protest. To better understand the forms that socially engaged participatory art currently takes, my research includes field work as a participant-observer of Rirkrit Tiravanija’s *who’s afraid of red, yellow, and green* (Wrightwood 659, Chicago, 2022), an interactive event in which visitors share bowls of curry while local artists trace images on the walls from documentary photography of anti-government protests in Bangkok, Thailand, as well as Chicago’s Black Lives Matter marches and other protests.
In fall 2022, I traveled to Venice, Italy, for the 59th Venice Biennale to conduct in-person research on participatory art, including Shubigi Rao’s *Pulp III: A Short Biography of the Banished Book*, an installation that includes a printed volume and a single-channel film, *Talking Leaves*, presented at the Singapore Pavilion. An exemplar of socially engaged relational art, Rao’s decade-long project uses interview, film, prose, and poetry to chart the banning of books as well as the state-sponsored destruction, and dissentious preservation, of libraries in a range of transnational contexts. In summer 2023, I met with Ute Meta Bauer, curator of the Singapore Pavilion, to discuss Rao’s relational approach. Together, these and other works of participatory art inform the novel in direct and subtle ways. Rather than offering a definitive answer to the question of whether artists can successfully intervene in contemporary problems, the novel raises questions about how artists might expose such problems, and perhaps imagine new social forms.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW AND RESEARCH NARRATIVE:

Bringing together the fields of comparative humanities, art history, and narrative analysis, the complementary Critical Afterword, “Displacement and Dissent in Fiction and Art,” consists of three autonomous chapters that examine works of fiction and art that inform the creative project. An international frame of reference that includes both anglophone works and literature in translation, as well as art from around the globe, ensures that the chapters highlight the diversity of contemporary approaches in both disciplines, fiction and art.

As the novel’s subject matter engages representations of immigrants and perceived ‘others’ through Sarah’s performances, the novel is complemented by the
opening chapter in the afterword, “Figures of Displacement: Immigrants, Refugees, And Exiles in 21st Century Fiction and Art,” a comparative essay tracking representations of the figural “displaced person” in contemporary novels and in performance art and installations. The first chapter engages how questions intrinsic to the global human condition—how we ascribe worth to human life, how we define ourselves in contrast to perceived others, how we create a sense of belonging, and, how we survive in the absence of such belonging—are aesthetically explored through the figure of the displaced person. Works discussed include British Pakistani novelist Mohsin Hamid’s Exit West: A Novel (2017), that charts the plight of refugees who travel through a series of magical doors, and The Walk’s site specific, interactive performances with “Little Amal” (2021—), a puppet representing a ten-year-old Syrian refugee that has become an international icon.

Chapter 1 engages and adds to existing scholarly discussions in comparative studies on the aestheticization of displaced individuals. Recent monographs in comparative literature and humanities including Mary Jacobus’ On Belonging and Not Belonging: Translation, Migration, Displacement (Princeton University Press, 2022), Simona Bertacco and Nicoletta Vallorani’s The Relocation of Culture. Translations, Migrations, Borders (Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), and James Dawes’ The Novel of Human Rights (Harvard University Press, 2018) indicate sustained scholarly interest in comparative literature projects that consider the aestheticization of displaced individuals and novelistic engagement with human rights concerns.

Likewise, essays that chart the formation of literatures of migration, such as Robert Young’s “Irrecoverable Histories” (Recherche Littéraire/Literary Research, 2021),
demonstrate the depth and variety of international fiction that responds to the fact of mass migration. The critical afterward builds on comparative studies addressing how immigrant, refugee, and exilic subjects are portrayed in contemporary fiction by examining such fiction in light of art interventions addressing those same themes. Chapter 1 engages aesthetic, narrative, and conceptual similarities and differences across both disciplines, fiction and art.

Another thematic trajectory of the novel engages the dissentious and political potentials of participatory art today. The second chapter in the critical afterword, “Legacies of Relational Aesthetics: Transnational and Resistive Participatory Art Today,” charts the course of “relational” art, a concept initially articulated by Nicolas Bourriaud in his foundational text, *Esthétique Relationnelle* (1998), translated as *Relational Aesthetics* (2002). Ongoing discourses and art practices continue to make use of Bourriaud’s proposition of relational art as: “A set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space.”¹ In Chapter 2, I propose that a primary legacy of relational aesthetics today is the proliferation of art in which the audience/participant plays a vital role, and in which new social forms are imagined or enacted.

Chapter 2 examines works by three artists working in relational modes today, including the aforementioned interactive exhibitions, Tiravanija’s *who’s afraid of red, yellow, and green* and Rao’s *Pulp III: An Intimate Inventory of the Banished Book*, as well as Tania El Khoury’s *Maybe if You Choregraph Me You Will Feel Better* (2011), an

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interactive performance that explores relationships between power, violence, and Arab womanhood. The second chapter adds to existing scholarly discussions by considering these works in light of legacies of relational aesthetics as well the current moment of precarity. Recent monographs including Yates McKee’s *Strike Art: Contemporary Art and the Post-Occupy Condition* (Verso, 2017) demonstrate an urgent scholarly interest in discussing socially engaged participatory art, and conferences such as the 2019 Verbier Art Summit in Switzerland, “We are Many: Art, the Political, and Multiple Truths,” investigate the aesthetic, political, and human rights value of participatory art practices, while relational art interventions continue to gain international attention at venues such as documenta in Kassel, Germany, led in 2022 by the Jakarta-based, alternative lifestyle artist collective rurangrupa, demonstrating the relevance of participatory art today.

Multivocality and narrative fragmentation and are key formal features of *The Impersonation Artist*, and the third chapter, “**Multiple Worlds: Multivocality and Narrative Fragmentation in Three Novels,**” explores how the use of multiple narrators and narrative fragmentation to humanely articulate co-existing, yet often contradictory, subjective worlds in three novels: Sunil Yapa’s *Your Heart is a Muscle the Size of a Fist* (2016), A.B. Yehoshua’s *The Lover*, translated by Philip Simon (1977), and Jokha Alharthi’s Man Booker International Prize-winning *Celestial Bodies*, translated by Marylin Booth (2019). The novels discussed demonstrate the value of narrative fragmentation and multivocality for creating empathetic representations of characters that hold deeply conflicting worldviews, such as the generational divides opening in a swiftly modernizing Oman in *Celestial Bodies*, the conflicting perspectives of protesters and law enforcement in the 1999 Seattle World Trade Organization protests in *Your Heart is a
Muscle the Size of a Fist, or the seemingly irreconcilable positions of Jewish and Arab Israelis during the Yom Kippur War in *The Lover*. As a comparative, critical study that is specifically geared toward fiction writers and students of the novel, the third chapter explores the meaning-making capacities afforded authors by multivocality and narrative fragmentation.

My approach to narrative analysis draws on the methodology articulated by Suzanne Keen in *Narrative Form* (Palgrave, 2003). Keen’s writing on how form functions as meaning-making in fiction draws on both structuralist and post-structuralist modes of interpretation. While sensitive to the structuralist levels of narrative, story (what happens) and discourse (the transmission of those events through narration), Keen’s narrative methodology considers not only a text’s structure and subject but also the social significance of a text’s emergence. This sensitivity to form and to content—and also to the context of a text’s creation—is essential to comparative study of the novel in the context of human rights, as Sophia A. McClennen and Joseph R. Slaughter assert in “Introducing Human Rights and Literary Forms,” an introduction to a special issue of *Comparative Literature Studies* (2009) on human rights discourses in comparative literature.

The chapters in the critical afterword build on my published and unpublished critical writing on literature and visual art, including “Memory and Migration, Narrative and Image: An Exploration of Nujoom Alghanem’s Video Installation *Passage* at the 58th Venice Biennale,” (*The International Journal of Social, Political, and Community Agendas in the Arts*, 2021), “To “Throw Off the Cloak of Representation”: Absurd and Precarious Aesthetics in Hito Steyerl’s *How Not to Be Seen*,” (Conference Proceedings in
The Harold Pinter Review, 2022), “‘Garments Shed by Ghosts’: Magical Realism and Trauma in Short Stories of Displacement” (under review, Canadian Review of Comparative Literature), and the unpublished essay “Resisting Orientalism/s: Jokha Alharthi’s Poetics of Liminality in Celestial Bodies,” as well as copy written for the Speed Museum exhibition, Promise Witness Remembrance (Louisville, KY, 2022), that places activist street art depicting Breonna Taylor in dialogue with Amy Sherald’s posthumous, presidential-level portrait of Taylor. By intentionally engaging both fiction and art, the critical chapters illuminate the interrelatedness of literature and art today. My aim overall is that the Critical Afterword, together with The Impersonation Artist, will assert the value of the arts now, as resistive measures to inhumane conditions and oppressive worldviews.
CHAPTER ONE: FIGUSRES OF DISPLACEMENT:
IMMIGRANTS, REFUGEES, AND EXILES
IN 21ST CENTURY LITERATURE AND ART

On a warm September afternoon in downtown Cincinnati a crowd of hundreds gathered under a nearly cloudless blue sky. Many waved banners and carried handmade signs, and one group hoisted ten-foot-tall paper mâché flowers into the air. As a performance by the percussion group Drums for Peace ended, shouts of “Welcome!” and “We love you, Amal!” rose from the crowd. On an elevated stage facing the Ohio River, Covington, Kentucky, Mayor Joseph Meyer and Cincinnati Mayor Aftab Pureval greeted a ten-year-old Syrian refugee. At just over twelve feet tall, “Little Amal” dwarfed both men.

A full body puppet operated by three puppeteers, Little Amal is the central figure of a series of interactive public theater performances and festivals collectively titled The Walk. Since July 2021 Amal has visited fifteen countries and has engaged over two million people in 440 live events.¹ A co-production of Palestinian-American Amir Nizar Zuabi, The Walk’s New York-based artistic director, and the Australian Handspring Puppet Company, The Walk has taken Little Amal on a series of events in which she engages the general public, as well as politicians and religious dignitaries, artists,

performers, refugees, and advocacy groups in community-specific events connecting local participants and audiences with global narratives of displacement.

The stated purpose of *The Walk* is to remind the world of the plight of child refugees and to generate empathy for displaced people everywhere—and to deliver a message of hope. And indeed, the mood was hopeful the day of Amal’s theatrical meeting with Mayor Pureval. Amal’s official welcome team as well as hundreds of supporters had just walked across the Ohio River on the Roebling bridge that connects Covington, Kentucky to Cincinnati, and onlookers filled the plaza and pressed towards the stage, each vying for the best possible view of Amal.

With her large, doleful eyes with heavy lashes and her long, dark hair lifting in the wind, Amal was a striking sight—both improbable and at the same time endearing. “In this country where over ninety percent of the population are descendants of immigrants, we have developed a schizophrenic attitude toward immigrants and refugees,” Pureval said, to shouts of approval from the crowd. “Cincinnati is a city where all are welcome, where a first-generation immigrant, like me, can become Mayor. And that is why as of today, September twenty-second will be known as Little Amal Day.” The crowd cheered, and Amal demurred. Amal’s right hand, operated by one of her three puppeteers, joined with Pureval’s in an outsize handshake. And despite, or perhaps because of, the spectacle of the moment, a sense of genuine goodwill and excitement seemed to surge through the group of onlookers where I stood.

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Thanks to the international scope and mass appeal of The Walk’s performances and festivals, Little Amal is perhaps one of the most widely recognized artistic representations of refugee youth today.\(^3\) While it is unusual for a single artistic representation of a refugee to gain such a wide audience, representations of immigrants, refugees, and exiles proliferate in 21\(^{st}\) century literature and art, and not without cause. The contemporary crisis of migration, in which over 110 million people are displaced worldwide, is unprecedented in scope.\(^4\) An increase in anti-immigrant sentiment can be observed on a global scale—whether directed at those seeking refuge at the Mexican American border, on the shores of Italy and Greece, or in the cities of northern Europe. At the time of this writing, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the resulting war has displaced over six million Ukrainians globally.\(^5\) Most recently, the Israel-Hamas war incited by the October 7, 2024, Hamas attacks in Israel have displaced as many as 1.8 million Palestinians internally,\(^6\) while a disturbing resurgence of antisemitism as well as increased anti-Arab and anti-migrant rhetoric can be observed the world over. At the same time, climate change continues to be a main driver of forced migration that shows no signs of abating.\(^7\)

\(^3\) In addition to the two million people that have engaged Little Amal in events of welcome, over ten million people have engaged with her online. See “Home,” The Walk Productions Limited, 2023. [https://www.walkwithamal.org/](https://www.walkwithamal.org/) Little Amal is recognized in the 2024 edition of the popular Guinness Book of World Records as having earned the distinction of “Longest Distance Travelled by a Full Body Puppet.”


\(^7\) In Climate Changed, ethnographer Dan Briggs uses oral history evidence from over 120 interviewees to investigate the conditions that compel refugees from the Global South to migrate to European countries. Briggs contends that the reasons that force refugees to move, including wars and scarcity of recourses, are often underwritten by climate change caused by the practices of neoliberal capitalism. See Daniel Briggs, Climate Changed: Refugee Border Stories and the Business of Misery, (London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2020), 38-45.
The need to understand and witness displacement through aesthetic engagement has never been greater, and this chapter investigates how representations of displaced individuals in literature and art can reveal multiple cultural meanings ascribed to 21st century displacement and can address questions intrinsic to the global human condition. How we ascribe worth to human life, how we define ourselves in contrast to perceived others, how we create a sense of belonging, and how we survive in the absence of such belonging constitute some of the key concerns articulated aesthetically through the figural displaced person.

INTRODUCTION: SITUATING THE FIGURAL DISPLACED PERSON

Negotiations, wars of national liberation, people bundled out of their homes and prodded, bussed or walked to enclaves in other regions: what do these experiences add up to? Are they not manifestly and almost by design irrecoverable?

— Edward Said, “Reflections on Exile”

A polyvalent figure capable of articulating dissent, trauma, and resilience, the figure of the displaced person also poses particular representational challenges in literature and art. As so much of states of displacement are by nature, as Edward Said puts it, “irrecoverable,” how do literature and art aesthetically represent that which defies representation? It perhaps comes as no surprise that the subject of migration, with its fertile aesthetic challenges and ethical imperatives, has held enduring currency for American authors. Writing for a recent special issue of American Literary History (ALH) with a focus on “Exiles, Migrants, and Refugees” (2022), ALH Editor Yogita Goyal proposes that literary exploration of exilic and immigrant subjects is more than a flash-in-the-pan trend fueled by the current migration crisis but is, and has always been, intrinsic to American literature. In Goyal’s words, “Questions of home and belonging, uprooting
and mobility, flights from persecution, and dreams of settling have always been at the field’s core. […] Wandering and settling, exile and banishment remain center stage.”

Moreover, aestheticizing contemporary states of displacement is arguably a major itinerary of not only of American literature but of global literature as well.

Writing on the rise of the migrant in literatures from around the world, Robert Young has proposed that a key representational task for contemporary global literatures of migration is to render the ongoing ambivalence of displaced subjects who settle in an adopted country and have the experience of “being regarded as an alien to it, and as a consequence negotiating the turmoil of dislocated or split identities.”

This chapter explores several facets of such representations, including the ways in which narratives of displacement might find resolution—when such stories lend themselves not to tidy endings but to ongoing states of liminality, and the ways in which literature and visual art might render the traumas of displacement—without reinscribing those traumas.

Proceeding from the proposition that the bodies and psyches of the figural displaced person are potent sites of cultural inscription, this chapter examines works of both literature and art created in the 21st century that address displacement; the figural displaced person serves as a prism through which to understand some of the multiple cultural meanings and affective experiences of displacement in our time. While recognizing the differences of legal status and of motivation for movement that separate the categories of immigrant, refugee, and exile, my conception of the figural displaced

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person encompasses representations of these and other subject positions relating to people who have been compelled to leave one place for another.

Rather than erasing or eliding differences, the broad aesthetic category of the figural displaced person makes space for exploring both the commonalities and the particulars of a range of representational displaced figures, whether those figures would fit the definition of immigrants or migrants, refugees or asylum seekers, political exiles or voluntary expatriates. In essence, the figural displaced person represents one who, out of necessity, moves across geographies and cultures, across landscapes and languages, and who must reckon with the affective and practical experiences of being out of place, and often unwelcome, in one’s surroundings.

Following Simona Bertacco and Nicoletta Vallorani’s premise in *The Relocation of Culture: Translations, Migrations, Borders* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), the processes of migration and displacement can be productively viewed as translational movements in which subjects change, transform, and translate themselves, their lives, and their languages when moving from one nation to another.\(^\text{10}\) The figural displaced person in literature and art is, in turn, a figure that translates (or makes legible, visible, or comprehensible) the affective experiences of actual displaced subjects, as well as the cultural meanings that cohere to migratory narratives, for the reader or the viewer.

Encounters with the figural displaced person have the potential to disrupt a reader’s own sense of belonging by undermining the assurances of nation, of state, and of homeland. For surely, if the displaced person has lost these assurances, then it follows that the ‘placed’ person’s own status might also be revealed as vulnerable. Additionally, if

the national borders that serve to create the citizen’s stability and belonging also, by
definition and design, serve to exclude the displaced from stability and belonging, then
the citizen’s own complicity with and implication in systems in which some individuals
are created as illegals or as ‘aliens’ becomes legible.

As Goyal proposes, engaging literary representations of migration and borders
“reveals truths not just about those without documents, or the circuits of power at the
checkpoint and the detention center, but crucially, about those who live within the
enclosure of national borders. Reading the refugee entails denaturalizing the category of
citizen…”11 Here, Goyal alerts readers to the fact that the act of “reading the refugee” can
have the function of implicating the reader in what Michael Rothberg, in a phrase adopted
from Simona Forti, describes as “transmission belts of domination.”12 Expanding on the
writings of Hannah Arendt and rejecting the victim/perpetrator binary, Rothberg puts
forward the of the figure of the “implicated subject” as a political positionality that
acknowledges the fact that: “Although not guilty of what precedes us, we remain captive
to a communal responsibility by virtue of our participation in a collective way of life.”13

An important aesthetic function of the figural displaced person can be to provoke not just
empathy for the displaced, but a sense of “communal responsibility” stemming from
recognition of one’s enmeshment in a “collective way of life” that produces the category
of actual displaced people.

If one considers that we are all, through participation in globally connected
communities, nations, and webs of commerce, implicated in the situations and lives of

12 Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford
13 Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject*, 47.
those who are displaced, then the importance of literature and the arts as modes that can illuminate that implication and inspire solidarity with displaced subjects becomes even clearer. My formulation of the figural displaced person takes inspiration in part from Rothberg’s formulation of the implicated subject, and as I will discuss in the sections that follow, one of the most important aesthetic potentials of the figural displaced person is to collapse the affective and ethical distance between those who comfortably live “within the enclosure of national borders” and subjects who are displaced.

Moving beyond reiterating well-meaning-but-threadbare calls to ‘amplify forgotten voices’ through literature and art that engages displacement, giving attention to the aesthetic category of the figural displaced person allows for explorations of displacement that unsettle assumptions that forced migration is a tragic peripheral to contemporary life. Instead, focusing on the figural displaced person serves to center displacement as mode intrinsic to contemporary existence. In this way, aesthetic figurations of the displaced person take on central relevance to the question of what it means to be human in the 21st century.

An additional source of inspiration for the figural displaced person, the figure of the migrant as a political subject category is explored at length by Thomas Nail in *The Figure of the Migrant* (Stanford University Press, 2015). For Nail, the figure of the migrant is “the political figure of movement,”¹⁴ and Nail’s contextualization of the migrant as a political figure that is transtemporal and transcultural reveals the potency and ubiquity of migratory subjects. In his own words:

Creating a concept of the migrant allows us to understand the common social conditions and subject positions of a host of related mobile figures:

for example, the floating population, the homeless, the stateless, the lumpenproletariat, the nomad, the immigrant, the emigrant, the refugee, the vagrant, the undocumented, and the barbarian.\textsuperscript{15}

Nail proposes that the figure of the migrant is often envisioned as a peripheral figure existing in a liminal space between the primary and fixed categories of the country of departure and the country of arrival, so that migration and movement are perceived as lack. The political consequence of this perception is that the migrant becomes “the political figure who is unrepresented but still exists socially as \textit{unrepresented} in the system.”\textsuperscript{16} For Nail, to relegate the figure of the migrant to the periphery elides the fact that the conditions that compel migration are brought forth by social expansion. Nail instead centers the migrant as a persistent, if often disavowed, political subject category inextricably tied up with more visible categories such as that of citizen.

Nail’s centering of political migratory figures informs my own concept of the aesthetic figural displaced person as a central representational figure in literature and in art today. And, while my formulation of the figural displaced person is firmly rooted in the domain of aesthetic representation, Nail’s explorations of the political implications of migratory figures are of great value in investigating the modes of migratory politics and cultural conditions that such aesthetic figures make visible.

While Nail develops the migrant as a political category, the purely literary figure of the displaced protagonist has been productively developed by James Dawes in \textit{The Novel of Human Rights} (Harvard University Press, 2018). Dawes’ figuration considers the displaced protagonist primarily in terms the protagonist’s function, within the overall structure and plot of the novel, as an allegorical figure representative of the differing

\textsuperscript{15} Nail, \textit{The Figure of the Migrant}, 12.

\textsuperscript{16} Nail, \textit{The Figure of the Migrant}, 12.
ways in which human rights concerns are conceptualized and acted upon. Notably, Dawes also proposes that the displaced protagonist is an impure figure, entangled in human rights struggles on multiple levels. As Dawes puts it:

The recurring fictional device of the displaced protagonist in the justice plot—the one who is both at home and away, who has authority and doesn’t, whose motives are both pure and suspect—offers a way of thinking about the strategies of human rights and humanitarian organizations working in emergency zones around the world.\(^\text{17}\)

Dawes’ positioning of the displaced protagonist as one who is neither a pure victim or a perpetrator but one whose motives are at once “pure and suspect” resonates with Rothberg’s conception of the implicated subject. Once again, the aesthetic exploration of implication and entanglement, and of shared responsibility, arises as a significant facet of contemporary literature of displacement.

For Dawes, both the movement of the displaced protagonist within the plot of the novel and the protagonist’s physical and psychic attributes are sites of cultural relevance. Like Dawes’ conception of the displaced protagonist in the novel of human rights, my conception of the figural displaced person includes the entirety of the representational figure—while expanding the field of considered figures to also include those in visual art, film, and performance. My evaluations of the texts that follow consider the physical body as depicted—or, as evoked through bodily absence—and consider the emotional and psychic features of displaced figures. This chapter proposes that the figural displaced person serves as a locus where both belonging and unbelonging are articulated and where the actual struggles and life-building of the displaced can be translated into fictive, imaginative, and allegorical modes. As a primary zone of engagement in which readers

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and viewers encounter the displaced, the figural displaced person can be productively understood as a site of inscription of multiple intersecting cultural understandings of displacement today.

This chapter is also an invitation to recognize the figural displaced person as a mode of aesthetic inquiry in itself, used by authors and artists to make sense of the nearly incomprehensible scope of forced migration in the 21st century. As an assessment of select examples from literature and the arts, what follows is not an attempt to delimit modes of representation of displaced subjects, but an opening that outlines just a few of the specific aesthetic-conceptual forms that figural displaced persons may take. Rather than discuss texts in groups based on the particular geographic or political context of displacement engaged, the discussion of texts is organized around the following three figural registers.

One: Symbolic and allegorical figurations of displaced persons that depict larger-than-life stories of quintessential experiences of displacement that, in their broad strokes and abstraction of displaced figures, allow space for audience/participant association and connection. Prime examples of such works include Palestinian-American Amir Nizar Zuabi’s *The Walk*, an international series of interactive public theater performances staged in collaboration with the Australian puppeteering group Handspring Puppet Company and featuring “Little Amal” (2021—), and Emirati artist, filmmaker, and poet Nujoom Alghanem’s dual channel, site-specific film installation, *Passage* (2019), commissioned for the 58th Venice Biennale.

Two: Subjective and polyvalent figurations of displaced persons that use narrative to portray individuals with rich interior lives and multiple cultural and political
affiliations. This section offers a close reading of Israeli-American novelist Moriel Rothman-Zecher’s *Sadness Is a White Bird* (2019), and of Pakistani-British novelist Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West* (2018). In both novels discussed, displaced figures inherit or lay claim to a range of social and political positions that intersect on multiple planes. Such figural identities are dynamic and are shaped by both the traumas of the past as well as by future-oriented hopes for self-determination.

Three: Absent, fragmentary, and re/constructed figurations of displaced persons in which figures of displacement are created, *in absentia*, from the material and digital traces left behind by actual immigrants as they navigate border zones. Works in this figural register reveal the displaced through the absence of a complete figure. Two groups of works are discussed: the photographic, sculptural, and musical collaborations of American photographer Richard Misrach and Mexican-American sound artist and composer Guillermo Galindo in *Border Cantos* (Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, 2017), and the immersive video installation and text-based works of Palestinian-American duo Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme in *If only this mountain between us could be ground to dust* (Chicago Art Institute, 2022).

The discussion that follows highlights the aesthetic and cultural significance of these works on displacement gathered from an international assemblage of authors and artists. Each text discussed constructs figures of displacement through innovative aesthetic approaches, and together, they make a strong case for the value of literature and the arts for revealing, and potentially reframing, displacement today.
ONE: THE SYMBOLIC AND ALLEGORICAL FIGURAL DISPLACED PERSON

In this section, I propose that the stylized forms of Amal in the performances of *The Walk* and Falak in Nujoom Alghanem’s video installation *Passage*, and the allegorical nature of their narratives, compel audiences and participants to construct a sense of the figural displaced person, and her value and intrinsic humanity, through empathetic relation.

While the artists of each production employ differing strategies to create the figural displaced person as a symbolic representational entity, the stylization of the figures and the broad and allegorical form of the narratives are key to both projects overall. This differs markedly from the approach used, for example, in the novels of displacement I discuss in the following section in which the authors present the reader with a rich interior life for the figural displaced person. In both *The Walk* and *Passage*, the main fictional characters are created using stylized modes of representation that do not directly communicate the characters’ interior life, prompting audiences and participants to imaginatively construct the characters’ subjectivity based on their own empathetic responses.

THE WALK AND “LITTLE AMAL”

“Little Amal” is not a real girl, but that fact does not lessen her appeal and it does not prevent people from imagining her as one. Thanks to *The Walk’s* 440 performances and festivals, Amal’s online presence, and news coverage of high-profile events such as Amal’s 2021 meeting with Pope Francis at the Vatican and her visit to the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP 26) in Glasgow, Scotland, Amal is now known and adored by millions. She has become an unofficial ambassador for Syrian refugees, and a
symbolic figure representative of refugees everywhere. The initial scripted narrative for Amal’s 2021 journey from the Gaziantep, near the Turkish border with Syria, to Manchester, Great Brittan, was of a girl searching for her mother. A straightforward, unassailable story with mass appeal, the action of a child looking for her mother stands as a ready allegory for the refugee or migrant’s search for home, for safety, and for belonging.

Amal’s story has proven to be an effective allegorical narrative for raising awareness of the plight of refugees as well as donations for refugee relief efforts, and her larger-than-life features and seemingly uncomplicated story arc situate her figuration squarely in the register of the symbolic.18 And yet, Amal’s audiences and operators routinely relate to her as an individual; Amal is a figure that audiences and participants alike often ascribe personality and even agency to. As reports from interviewees and my own observations of Amal in Cincinnati make clear, these empathetic responses to Amal are made possible because she operates in a symbolic register that invites audiences and participants to create a sense of identity for her through acts of participatory theater.

Amal’s relatable persona is not achieved through realism. In fact, the opposite is the case. At just over twelve feet tall Amal is unmistakably a handmade puppet. The articulating joints of her neck and mouth are exposed, her movable, blinking eyes with long eyelashes recall the mechanical eyes of dolls, and each of her hands is operated by an in individual puppeteer walking alongside her. The “heart” position puppeteer—who walks on the stilts that form Amal’s legs, articulates the movements of her head, and

18 At the time of this writing, The Walk’s 2023 US tour has raised approximately $850,000 for The Amal Fund with Choose Love that supports refugee legal fees, shelter, food, and education: https://www.walkwithamal.org/the-amal-fund/.
operates her facial features—is clearly visible through the open cage of her chest. As The Walk Artistic Director Amir Nizar Zuabi states, having Amal’s mechanisms and puppeteers exposed was more than a practical choice, it was an aesthetic decision made with the intent of compelling audience engagement. In Zuabi’s words: “It needs to be a leap of faith. Audiences need to go okay, we see how it works and we don’t care, we still want to believe. And that was a very good choice, because it meant that everybody needs to invest [for themselves].” Zuabi’s creative strategy results in a figural displaced person that compels audiences to become participants, engaged in the act of story creation.

In my view, the overall effectiveness of The Walk stems from the fact that audiences are invited to utilize the figure of Amal to translate stories—their own, as well as stories of the displaced—into a personalized experience that, in its fantastic elements, opens a creative space apart from the quotidian. While mainstream stories of refugees are often framed in terms of lack—of space, housing, resources, documentation—The Walk’s performances create opportunities to reframe displacement in terms of hope, and to emotionally invest in an individualized story involving the figure of Amal. In my own encounter with Amal as part of a registered welcome team that accompanied her across the Roebling Bridge during the September 22, 2024, Cincinnati event, it was clear that many in the crowd were already emotionally invested in the idea of Amal as a person even before she arrived.

I observed that participants in my immediate vicinity, a group that included adults and children as well as a delegation from the advocacy group Kentucky Refugee

Ministries, related to Amal as an individual—and somewhat of a celebrity at that. On the Covington, Kentucky, side of the bridge, people anticipated her arrival, many rehearsing the lyrics to a short song, “Lead with Love,” composed for the occasion and distributed beforehand to the welcome team. When Amal did appear—moving with surprising speed and agility given her great height and her sturdy, child-like form—excited comments rippled through the crowd and individuals rushed forward to welcome her. Although Amal’s core puppeteering team includes four individuals, the two hands, the heart, and a puppet director who walks in front of Amal and relays instructions to the heart via headset, the dialogue I overheard as she approached referred only to the arrival of Amal herself; participants related to her as an individual rather than an object controlled by a team of performers.

Outside accounts confirm that Amal’s transfiguration from puppet to girl also occurs among her puppeteers. In her seventy-page, independent evaluation of the initial 2021 performances, commissioned by The Walk Productions, Melita Armitage reports that:

In the language that surrounds this project, people had conversations with Amal, speaking less in the abstract and more directly to her. […] This sense of Amal reacting to her situation was often described by the Company. […] In this way, she remained captivating to those that knew her the most and for those that encountered her only briefly.20

Notably, Armitage seems to take part in the very phenomenon she describes, referring to Amal as someone to be known well, or to be encountered “only briefly.” Interviews conducted by Armitage with members of the Company reveal that puppeteers often reported Amal’s specific emotional reactions to new places, including not only curiosity

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and wonder but also fear and distress, and on occasion even impatience. As puppeteer Rachel Leonard explains:

[T]hose sort of formal events sometimes felt a bit frustrating when Amal is needing to be a good girl and stood beside listening to a speech in a language she doesn’t understand. ... Well, she did sometimes start to sort of fidget, and you know, just sort of blurt out a bit of movement.\footnote{Armitage, \textit{The Walk 2021}, 13.}

Evident in Leonard’s explanation is the sense that it is Amal, and not the puppeteers, who are feeling irritated and bored, just as a child might feel when having to listen to a tiresomely long speech. To be sure, some of Amal’s perceived emotional reactions are the result of scripting. Each performance has a set dramatic action in which Amal does the things that a child would be expected to do, such as accepting food, listening to a bedtime story, going to sleep, or even, as in Naples, having a tantrum in response to sensory overload from a loud performance of traditional drumming. Nevertheless, the widespread emotional investment on the part of participants and crew alike that fill Armitage’s report demonstrates the effectiveness of Amal’s symbolic figuration to illicit an empathetic response. Amal’s stylized and clearly representational form demands, as Zuabi put it, “a leap of faith” on the part of both operators and audiences—both are called upon to take part in the empathetic formation of Amal as a figural displaced person. This form of engagement makes Amal a particularly potent symbol for the humanity and individuality of refugees everywhere.\footnote{The collaborative creation of Amal’s persona has to do in part with the nature of puppets, and the nature of puppetry: the act of animating puppets is quintessentially an act of make-believe. To quote long time director of the Vermont-based Bread and Puppet collective Peter Schumann, “What speaks out of a doll’s eyes is often beyond control. […] What’s in them is hidden in their faces and becomes clear only through their functioning. They are born from the raw clay.” See Peter Schumann, “The Radicality of the Puppet Theatre.” \textit{The Drama Review} 35, no. 4 (1991): 75–83, 71.}
ANOTHER FIGURATION: PUBLIC SPACE AND THE WALK

Perhaps equally as compelling as the allegorical figure of Amal herself is the refiguration of public space that occurs around Amal due to the physical presence of the audience/participants. Of course, no two performances of *The Walk* will be aesthetically identical, and no two places on the route of *The Walk* will be engaged in exactly the same mode. Indeed, a major strength of *The Walk* is its ability to connect the local to the global. At the Cincinnati event, for example, Amal encountered strains of the Underground Railroad, observing a performance of “Wade in the Water” by a local vocal trio and dance troupe, and visited the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center for a performance by the Cincinnati Chamber Orchestra and local choirs performing music selected for the event. However, beyond this commendable site-specify that engages a range of arts and cultural institutions, what *The Walk* also does very effectively is to fill public spaces with large groups of regular people who have come together, ostensibly to support refugees.

I propose that this transformation of public space, with its aesthetic similarities to protest, forms an extended figuration of displacement with political potential. To return to Thomas Nail’s assertion that the figure of the migrant is a figure that exists within social systems as unrepresented, the refiguring of public space by Amal’s supporters insists on social representation for and of the displaced. The net effect of large groups of people gathering together, asserting the value and visibility of refugees with the physical forms of their own bodies and the sounds of their own voices, creates an aesthetic of solidarity with the displaced.

The growing appeal of mass events in general my contribute to the success of *The Walk*, and it’s important to note that the early 21st century has seen a renaissance of mass
gatherings and movement politics: Occupy Wall Street, the Arab Spring, School Strike for Climate, Just Stop Oil, #Me Too, Black Lives Matter, as well as Woman, Life, Freedom, have made mass gatherings a now-familiar sight. And, while conceived as performance rather than protest, The Walk’s public gatherings recall Aidan McGarry’s recent writing on the political potentials and aesthetics of protest in the 21st century:

> The democratic public performs its existence through resistance: it demands recognition, embodies visibility, articulates a political voice, and communicates ideas/demands. In doing so, protest constitutes ‘the people’, and through the aesthetics of protest, rupture conventions of doing politics.²³

Following McGarry’s articulation, a specific if temporary “democratic public” is created by participants through the act of performing their solidarity with Amal and, by extension, with displaced persons in general, potentially rupturing the political understanding of displacement in the communities affected.

Considering The Walk’s potential to create solidarity with refugees, the heterogenous nature of The Walk’s audiences and participants is also significant. Armitage’s report notes that many of the puppeteers have themselves experienced displacement, and refugees are often present in the target audience by design—one of Amal’s first events at the start of her 2021 tour took place at a center for young Syrian refugees Gaziantep, Turkey. The provisional publics that The Walk creates bring together groups and individuals that might not otherwise interact, in this way creating a figuration that resembles more the open ended, societal mashup of protest than the closed circuit of planned performance. Participants in The Walk routinely make puppets of their own in collateral workshops and use these and other handmade objects of “Amal art” in

performing acts of welcome for Amal. The figuration of a mass of participants, carrying improvised materials that often employ slogans such as the popular “People are People and Can’t be Illegal,” is more in keeping with the visual culture of protest than with that of a theatrical production. As a \textit{collective} figure, the participants in \textit{The Walk} perform their resistance to dominant dehumanizing narratives that frame refugees as a problem to be dealt with or an invading force that must be deflected.

While the impression one gets from reading descriptions of \textit{The Walk} is that that the events are typically convivial, accounts from \textit{The Walk}’s co-producers in Greece make clear the potential for much more contentious transformations of public space. One might assume that the quintessentially vulnerable figure of a child searching for her mother—as in the dramatic meta-framing of the 2021 production—would garner supportive responses from audiences, however Amal has also been met with hostility and violence. This should perhaps come as no surprise: if the figural displaced person, and by extension the public spaces refigured by \textit{The Walk}, can be productively understood as sites of inscription of multiple intersecting cultural understandings of displacement today, then it follows that some encounters will prove antagonistic.

There were several occasions during \textit{The Walk}’s 2021 passage through Greece when it became clear that not all communities were ready to welcome Amal. The local council of Meteora, in central Greece, voted to ban Amal from walking through a village that is an UNESCO World Heritage site and home to many Eastern Orthodox monasteries. In addition to the council’s fears that the presence of Amal could encourage more refugees to come to the area, the mayor of Meteora, Theodoros Alekos, stated his
objection to bringing a “Muslim doll from Syria”\(^{24}\) into an area sacred to Orthodox Greeks and popular for Christian tourists. In Athens as well, \textit{The Walk} events were canceled due to protests from anti-immigration groups. The strongest backlash occurred in Larissa, where right-wing groups organized demonstrations against Amal and spread hostile messaging on social media, inciting citizens of Larissa to disrupt \textit{The Walk}. Here, the country producer for Greece narrates the negative response to Little Amal in Larissa:

Following hostility and threats on social media, we had police protection. […] We started walking with 300 children aged three years and up, holding little hand-made puppets, singing a traditional kids song adapted to welcome Amal. After a few minutes, twenty people appeared and started screaming abuse and throwing shoes, watermelons, oranges at us. It was terrifying but no-one was badly hurt. The police didn’t react. The hostility on social media intensified, and Amal appeared on every website and newspaper."\(^{25}\)

Returning to the proposal that the body of the figural displaced person is a site where cultural understandings of migration collide, this aggressive response to a performance with child participants highlights the stakes of presenting the migrant body, writ large, in a public space. This negative reception also reveals the potential of \textit{The Walk} to rupture politics-as-usual regarding representations of refugees. The refiguration of space in Larissa—with folk music, a larger-than-life refugee girl, and with local children preforming solidarity with refugees—was potent enough to provoke both community support and resistance.


The aggression in Larissa outraged not only the families of the children marching with Amal but many in the general public as well. As Armitage explains: “As a result of the hostility Amal became a stronger totem for Greek citizens enraged by the behavior of their fellow citizens. As the media picked up the stories, it meant that the anticipation of Amal grew alongside the coverage and ensuing debate.”26 The reports of Greeks “enraged” by actions of their fellow citizens recalls Rothberg’s call for an understanding of implication that leads to a sense of communal responsibility by virtue of participation a collective way of life. For some Greeks, encounters with The Walk, and reports of antagonistic responses to The Walk, prompted them to see themselves as responsible for the community’s treatment of Amal—and perhaps by extension, the community’s treatment of refugees. For some supporters, these acts of solidarity with the figural Amal may translate to solidarity with the actual refugees that Amal symbolizes.

“FALAK” AND AMAL HAWIJEH IN NUJOOM ALGHANEM’S PASSAGE

In Passage (2019), Emirati filmmaker, poet, and artist Nujoom Alghanem’s twenty-six minute, site-specific, dual-channel video installation for the United Arab Emirates (UAE) National Pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennale, two linked narratives of displacement take place.27 Alghanem’s stylized portrayal of the fictional migrant Falak creates a symbolic figuration that allows her narrative to be taken as representative of the journeys of a range of displaced subjects. Beyond presenting the fictional character of Falak, Alghanem

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makes the unusual choice in her dual-channel film to also present an apparently
documentary account of her own work as a director with the actor who portrays Falak, Amal Hawijeh, originally from Syria but now residing in UAE. Alghanem’s double move of presenting the character Falak, as well as the displaced actor who portrays her, underscores the Falak as an allegorical figural displaced person. In presenting the both the dramatic product of the film and the collaborative artistic processes used to create Passage, Alghanem productively complicates the relationship between fiction and nonfiction filmmaking.

The two sides of Passage are projected on two large, three by six-meter screens, placed back-to-back in the Sala d’Armi in the Venice Biennale’s Arsenale campus. Alghanem’s doubled visualization of displacement aesthetically recalls Edward Said’s description of the ways in which exilic states of existence can lead to a “plurality of vision” that “gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions.” At the same time, Alghanem’s ostensibly nonfiction presentation of the actor Amal Hawijeh as an actual displaced subject gestures towards the complexity of translating displacement from the realm of the actual to the realm of the representational. In this way, representation of displacement becomes as much the subject of Passage as are the affective states rendered by displacement itself.

Alghanem’s presentation of Passage splits and reverses the typical side-by-side diptych form, and viewers must walk around the screens and move between the two sides of the Pavilion to view Passage in its entirety. The interconnected but distinct sides of Passage are linked visually—both sides portray the journeys of women of a similar age

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and appearance—and aurally—both films share a single soundtrack. The reverse-diptych form compels viewers to travel back and forth from one side of the installation to the other to make sense of the linked narratives, and this formal choice gestures to the oftentimes fragmentary nature of memories of displacement. Although Passage runs for just twenty-six minutes, viewers must spend a minimum of twice that amount of time to watch the film in its entirety—although viewing the two sides consecutively also frustrates viewer expectations, as each of the two sides of Passage must be viewed with the other side in mind to apprehend the sounds, gestures, and images that link the two sides together. To engage the dual-channel film fully, viewers must remain in motion.

One screen follows a fictional displaced woman, Falak, on an arduous journey that takes her over varied terrain including desert and sea and, eventually, to the centuries old Sala d’Armi in which Passage is projected, to the exact location where viewers stand, observing Falak’s arrival.²⁹ Alghanem’s voiceover narration at the start of Passage gestures towards Falak’s displacement as a condition that anyone might conceivably find themselves in: “One woman is taken by all of this / She could be me, she could be someone like me, or perhaps a twin of mine from a time long forgotten.”³⁰ This identity-blurring statement, along with the site-specific gesture that situates viewers in a physical location of Falak’s journey, recalls Thomas Nail’s statement that “As a social position or figure, the migrant is a subjective formation that anyone may become.”³¹ Importantly, Alghanem’s opening words ask viewers to identify with Falak through empathetic

²⁹ Palpably near the sea, the Sala d’Armi apartments date back to the 1400’s, and were originally used to store munitions, or, to entertain honored guests. See https://www.labiennale.org/en/venues/sala-d’armi.
³¹ Nail, The Figure of the Migrant, 15.
imagination. Passage calls on viewers to see themselves in Falak’s enactment of displacement, placing viewers in emotional and perhaps even ethical proximity to the narratives of displacement that Passage engages.

The stylized figure of Falak herself conjures thoughts of an archetypal migrant. She carries an old fashioned, battered brown leather suitcase and is clad in a bright yellow raincoat that stands in chromatic contrast to the near-monochrome settings in the film. Falak’s highly visible props, which also appear with Hawijeh in rehearsal on the “documentary” side, reinforce Falak’s fictionality. Additionally, the fact that on her journey Falak speaks only in an invented language, wordless and tonal, underscores Falak as an allegorical displaced figure representative of the struggles of many. Falak traverses a variety of locations but seems at home in none of them; many of the bleak natural landscapes evoke the sense of antagonistic indifference one might find in a Casper David Friedrich painting. This high level of stylization persistently reminds viewers that they are looking at a representation, and this is particularly the case in scenes in which Falak is in a small rowboat in the open ocean. As images of actual boats used by migrants to cross the Mediterranean and other bodies of water are typically and often tragically packed full of actual displaced people, Falak’s solo journey by boat presents a defamiliarized aesthetic of migration by sea.

In contrast to Falak’s journey, the narrative that simultaneously unfolds on the opposing screen appears to document the reality of the production of the fictional narrative film. The “documentary” narrative follows the endeavors of actor Hawijeh and writer/director Alghanem on their own journey of making the dramatic film. It should be noted that Hawijeh is also the subject of Alghanem’s documentary film, Amal (2010). In
casting Hawijeh as Falak, Alghanem not only creates an opportunity to address displacement in a fictional/non-fictional mode, but nimbly sidesteps potential criticism of Passage that might arise from casting an actor who has not personally experienced displacement. Audiences observe the two women in intense rehearsals that render each of them at times vulnerable, at times powerful, and at times seemingly separated from each other and their shared goal of filmmaking. These scenes take place on location in empty theaters, Alghanem’s studio, and the like, and stand in contrast with the clearly staged settings in on the “fictional” side.

The seven distinct chapters of Passage rely on doubled content, which is to say content from both screens; although the sides of each chapter are separated spatially, they are unmistakably joined units. In the chapter suggestively titled “You Are Me,” Alghanem coaches Hawijeh during rehearsal in a black box theater. Hawijeh struggles to portray Falak, who simultaneously inhabits the opposite “fictional” screen as an aestheticized portrait of displacement, searching for shelter in a blasted landscape dominated by the skeletal remains of half-constructed buildings. On the “documentary” screen, Alghanem gives Hawijeh a series of situational prompts that the actor responds to with improvised sounds and movements: “rain falling on thirsty lips / eagles descending on a prey / the beating heart of a woman about to meet her lover.” Hawijeh performs with intense physicality and emotion, until one prompt stops her short: “finally returning home.” At this, the actor stops and asks, “Home? Which home?” before sitting down on the stage, apparently reflecting on her own experiences of displacement.32

Simultaneously, on the opposite “fictional” screen, Falak disappears into a field of tall

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reeds and grass. In this collision of the representational with the real, we see Hawijeh’s apparent struggles to portray displacement. Hawijeh’s translation of displacement into the fictional journey of Falak appears to be an unsettling experience that involves confronting her own disrupted sense of belonging. Additionally, the narrative doubling between the two sides recalls Said’s assertion that the plurality of exilic vision gives rise to a “contrapuntal” affective experience: in Passage, each side serves as counterpoint to the other.

On the “documentary” side of the Passage, Alghanem also reveals some of her own experiences with displacement through her relationship with friends who lived and died in exile. The chapter “I Have Nothing to Hide” is staged at a poetry reading at an art gallery that contains a sculpture made of hundreds of shoes by Alghanem’s close friend, the late Emirati artist Hassan Sharif. In a packed courtyard, Alghanem recites her seminal poem, “The Passerby Collects the Moonlight” [“al-’abiru yalta-qitu dhaw’a-l-qamar”], that she and curators Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath selected as a starting point for the installation. Alghanem composed “The Passerby Collects the Moonlight” in 2009, after the sudden deaths Sharif and another close friend, both of whom died in exile. During her recitation, which rhythmically punctuates Falak’s determined journey across a range of landscapes on the “fictional” side of the film, Alghanem is overcome with emotion. It seems that for her as well as for Hawijeh, the act of translating memories of displacement into a representational mode takes an emotional and psychic toll. And yet, the opening stanza of “The Passerby Collects the Moonlight” specifically positions the act of storytelling as a restorative process for the displaced “passerby”:

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The passerby collects the moonlight
to weave more stories for the evening
and heal the darkness
that weighs heavy on the lake.
He comes, stiff hands clinging
to the little warmth in his body.
As for worry, it leaves its taste on his breath:
“You can’t be a noble immigrant
without worries,”
he tells the air that flies around him like an angel.
He fosters some peace of mind
whenever his misgivings betray him,
he invents joy to dispel the gloom
of the dank and lonely days
from his soul,
and to deceive
the reproachful voice in his heart.\(^{34}\)

Here I quote Alghanem’s poem at length to emphasize the ways in which her verse,
recited with a sense of loss and longing on the “documentary” side, and creating the
soundtrack for Falak’s unceasing migration on the “fictional” side of *Passage*, calls
attention to the value of the act of artistic translation of displacement. In the opening, the
speaker asserts that the passerby is collecting moonlight for a specific and restorative
purpose: “To weave more stories for the evening / and heal the darkness / that weighs
heavy on the lake.” With these lines, Alghanem constructs a figure who possesses the
power to heal, specifically through the art of storytelling.

Far from the stereotypical, abject immigrant often portrayed in mass media,
Alghanem’s poem describes a figure of displacement who can endure, in spite of
affective and practical experience of being out of place. The ending of the stanza
describes how the passerby copes with sorrow through subtle acts of narrative self-
deception: “He invents joy to dispel the gloom / of the dank and lonely days / from his

\(^{34}\) Nujoom Alghanem, “The Passerby Collects the Moonlight” in *Nujoom Alghanem: Passage*, by Nujoom Alghanem, Sam Bardaouil, and Till Fellrath (Cinisello Balsamo, Milano: Silvana Editoriale, 2019), 125.
soul / and to deceive / the reproachful voice in his heart.” With these lines Alghanem’s speaker not only articulates the restorative power of storytelling, but also suggests that translating experiences of displacement into stories—and by extension film and performance—can “deceive,” or perhaps by extension, can create imperfect or incomplete translations.

Alghanem’s work appeared at the Biennale within the context of a migration crisis in Europe that was acutely felt in Italy and that continues at the time of this writing. While *Passage* does not attempt a realistic depiction of migration, Falak’s journey, particularly over water, both aestheticizes and calls attention to the plight of migrants attempting to reach Europe by sea. In 2019, as many as 123,663 migrants arrived on the shores of the Mediterranean, while an estimated 1,510 migrants were presumed dead or missing. The deadly stakes those crossing the Mediterranean add an additional level of horror to scene in which Falak, attempting to cross the open water, eventually disappears beneath the waves. In “To the Surface,” the final chapter in *Passage*, we hear a body plunge into the water and the sounds of labored breathing. On the “fictional” screen, Falak floats under a dark swell of water in the open sea. Falak’s boat and suitcase bob nearby as she appears to hang suspended beneath the waves. On the “documentary” screen, Hawijeh writhes in dark water—the situation seems dire, until a cameraman surfaces near Hawijeh, and the tight shot pulls back to reveal that Hawijeh is in a swimming pool and a full-scale film crew including a drone-mounted camera are standing by, Alghanem at the main camera. The camera pulls back further, showing that the pool is on top of a skyscraper. A drone operated camera lifts into the sky, revealing

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the metropolis of Dubai glittering like an island in the desert. On the opposing screen an identically timed aerial shot lifts us up over the open sea—Falak’s boat can be seen as a speck on the water, but Falak herself is no longer there.

The aesthetic and cognitive effects of these interlocking “fictional” and “documentary” narratives’ collision might well be to collapse the affective and ethical distance between the audience for Passage—which at a venue such as the Venice Biennale is likely to enjoy the benefits of citizen status and freedom of movement—and the migrants that Falak’s stylized character symbolizes. Moreover, Passage opens up important conversations about the importance of translation of actual experiences of displacement into literature and art—while acknowledging the inherent imperfection and fallibility of such aesthetic translations. Like the figure of Amal in The Walk, the figure Falak in Passage operates in such a way as to draw attention to the fact that she is a representational figure. Although markedly different in scope, both projects invite audiences to empathetically engage with the figural displaced person, and to recognize the ubiquity of migration narratives in contemporary life.

TWO: THE SUBJECTIVE AND POLYVALENT FIGURAL DISPLACED PERSON

“It’s a mistake to expect literature to teach us how to live our lives. But the practice of reading does, to my mind, serves a moral function. On its most basic level, literature instills in us the capacity to be rapt and beholden to a stranger’s voice, to do everything possible to hear and heed that voice in such a way that it illuminates something. Sometimes what it illuminates are facets of ourselves—even our former or future selves. This to me feels like a very vital moral experience.”36

—Tracy K. Smith, 22nd Poet Laureate of the United States

What does it mean to become “rapt and beholden” to the voice of the stranger, the immigrant, the refugee, or the exile? In a sense, opening oneself to the fictional subjectivities found in the novel of displacement is an act of vulnerability, a pact one makes with the author, but also with the fictional subjectivities that the author creates, to listen intimately to the voice of the other. As former Poet Laureate Tracy K. Smith suggests, the process can be illuminating, revealing not just the intricacies of the world of the novel, but of the world at large and our place in it. In this section, I discuss two novels in which authors create highly subjectivized figures of displacement that not only have rich interior lives but that are enmeshed in displacements that have both historical dimensions and that are take place in real time. In both Israeli-American novelist Moriel Rothman-Zecher’s *Sadness Is a White Bird* (2019), and Pakistani-British novelist Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West* (2017), displaced figures migrate through a range of social and political positions. Dynamic and shaped by the traumas of the past as well as by future-oriented hopes for self-determination, the subjective and polyvalent figures of displacement discussed in this section aesthetically translate acutely felt affective experiences of displacement for the reader. At the same time, the bodies and psyches of the figures in these novels serve as potent sites of cultural inscription for multiple and sometimes conflicting understandings of displacement.

**SADNESS IS A WHITE BIRD: A NOVEL**

Moriel Rothman-Zecher’s debut novel *Sadness Is a White Bird* takes the form of a coming-of-age story of an Israeli American youth caught in contemporary 21st century
struggles of Israel and Palestine. While at the time of this writing the horrors of the current Israel-Hamas war make hopes of peace in the Middle East seem distant, Rothman-Zecher’s provocative novel serves as an urgent plea to imagine a coexistence of Israelis and Palestinians in which all roads do not lead to violence and destruction. In the multilayered psyche of the novel’s first-person narrator, Jonathan, Rothman-Zecher creates a displaced figure shaped by the inherited Holocaust trauma of his family, his identity as a Jewish Israeli, and his desire for connection Palestinian others. As Jonathan discovers his capacity to deeply love his Palestinian friends, twins Nimreen (female) and Laith (male), he also must confront the how traumatic remembrance of the Nakba (the displacement of Palestinians during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War) shape his friends’ perceptions of the world that they share. Generous in nature, Rothman-Zecher’s novel affords both heterosexual and same-sex desire equal relevance and urgency, and at the same time refuses to sacrifice the humanity of either Israeli or Palestinian characters.

Jonathan finds his loyalties divided between his recent enlistment in the Israeli military (compulsory at age eighteen) and an increasingly sexually charged friendship with Nimreen and Laith. Set mainly in Haifa, Rothman-Zecher’s novel is narrated completely in first person by Jonathan. Laith serves as Jonathan’s implied narratee throughout the novel, which is related in both extended reflections and through a frame narrative that takes place in an Israeli military prison where Jonathan has been confined after a breakdown following a tragic accident during a deployment of his platoon. As Jonathan relates his story, it becomes clear he has unintentionally committed a devastating act of violence and thinks he is responsible for Laith’s death.
After shooting a tear gas canister directly into a demonstration at an Arab village set to be razed for a settlement, Jonathan believes he has mortally wounded be his friend and would-be lover, Laith. While Jonathan learns, near the novel’s conclusion, that although his action did likely result in the death of a young Palestinian man, he did not in fact cause the death of his beloved friend, Laith, this news brings only partial relief. Instead, the revelation brings to the fore a newly linked set of narrative tensions, namely, if Jonathan will be able to reconcile his new identity as someone responsible for a wrongful death with his passion for life, and if Jonathan will be able to sustain his identity as both a committed Israeli, a defender of his family and loyal to his heritage, and at the same time a friend to Palestinians. Wisely, Rothman-Zecher lets those questions hang fire at the novel’s end.

_Sadness is White Bird_ aestheticizes the tension and torsion of Israeli Jewish exilic perspectives informed by the Holocaust and the exilic perspectives of the occupied Palestinians. In reading Rothman-Zecher’s novel an appreciation of the displaced figure as a prism through which to understand some of the multiple cultural meanings and affective experiences of displacement is particularly useful. While both Jonathan and the Palestinian twins Nimreen and Laith have experienced generational displacements they are at odds with one another about the meanings of those displacements. The conflicting interpretations of memory in Rothman-Zecher’s novel bring to mind Rothberg’s conception of multidirectional memory—an alternative to schemas in which traumatic histories compete with one and other for recognition and validity in a zero-sum game in which one group’s victimhood threatens and cancels out another’s.\(^{37}\) In contrast, a

multidirectional approach to memory can create opportunities for solidarity between groups, something that Jonathan, as well as Nimreen and Laith, yearn for.

The high level of interiority and subjectivity afforded readers through Jonathan as a first-person narrator make his affective experiences of displacement particularly keenly felt. Born in Israel but having spent most of his life in the United States, nineteen-year-old Jonathan is a character that is both from/not from Israel: he has both the affiliations of a native but in many ways has the affective experience of an immigrant. Jonathan’s navigation of these dual subject positions in a place that is at once home and foreign productively complicates his journey from a character who sees himself as a bystander, on the sidelines of Palestinian displacement, to someone who is directly implicated in the displacement of people who are not unlike his close friends.

Although written in English, Rothman-Zecher’s prose, with its inclusion of both phoneticized Hebrew and Arabic speech and extracts of the poetry of renowned dissident Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, conveys the complexity of the linguistic situation that informs Jonathan’s polyvalent identity. It helps that Jonathan is drawn as something of a budding polyglot, speaking English, Hebrew, and Arabic, and is keenly attuned to the pronunciations and peculiarities of all three. Jonathan reports shifts in his own identification along with shifts in use of language. In one early passage, Jonathan narrates the uneasiness of these transitions. For example, Jonathan describes: “Trying to steady my voice as I shifted from Arabic to Hebrew, and from Jonathan the Curious to Yonatan the Patrol Commander,”38 after a confrontation on patrol with a Palestinian civilian whom he had just hopefully and, many readers might think naively, tried to make a connection

with. Throughout the novel names of places and of people are presented as contested sites of memory and identity. A similar tension as that between the Americanized “Jonathan” and the young Israeli paratrooper going by the Hebraicized “Yonatan” is felt in the double nomenclature of the settlement Ahihud, built over the ruins of the Palestinian village of Al-Birwa.

Early in the novel, Nimreen and Laith take Jonathan to Ahihud/Al-Birwa, hoping to make him aware of Palestinian dispossession. Sharing a joint while the twins recite Darwish’s well-known poem “Identity Card” in an olive grove situated overttop of the ruins of Al-Birwa, Jonathan recalls another bonding experience: this one with his group of Jewish friends during a class trip to Auschwitz. Remarkably, while both scenarios are freighted with intergenerational trauma, Rothman-Zecher’s prose infuses youthful hope and desire into both reported experiences. In a “dingy hotel in the middle of Poland,” after an emotionally devastating trip to the extermination camp, Jonathan and his newly formed band of friends take part in an animated sing-along to Queen’s “Bohemian Rhapsody,” in what amounts to, as Jonathan narrates, “a graceful sort of fuck you to the ghosts of our people’s tormentors: because we were here, pulsating and alive, filled with sex and meaning, boys and girls with fast approaching draft dates…”39 Likewise, over the ruins of Al-Birwa, even as political tensions threaten to boil to the surface, youthful desire emerges as a possible alternative for interpreting conflicting histories of trauma competitively:

Emboldened by the familiar tingle of tetrahydrocannabinol in my bloodstream, I asked, “Does Darwish have any poems that aren’t so political?”

Nimreen took a deep drag, and when she spoke, her voice was wrapped in a cloud: “There is nothing ‘not political’ in Palestine, habibi.”

39 Rothman-Zecher, Sadness, 28.
She blew out a beam of smoke. On another day, I might have taken issue with the fact that she’d called this place, all of it, “Palestine,” but on that day, as the wind darted through the shimmering fields around us and kissed its secrets into the pores of our teenage skin, I only cared that your sister, Nimreen, had called me “habibi.”

Here, contention over what constitutes “Palestine” takes a back seat to Nimreen’s affectionate words, and it seems that a less competitive view of history, one in which Palestinian and Jewish Israeli traumas might both be considered valid, might be allowed to emerge. It’s also worth noting that this section, with its intricate nesting of narratives related in first person, serves to effectively simulate the subjective experience of remembrance: Jonathan is recalling, from prison, his experience in Al-Birwa/Ahihud as well as his recollections from Poland while he was there. This elegant construction further underscores Jonathan’s own psyche as a site of colliding memories and demonstrates the way in which he is entwined in multiple histories of violence.

A similar contested doubling of names and of histories of trauma is explored in the novel’s treatment of Salonica/Thessaloniki, the Greek city from which Jonathan’s maternal grandfather emigrated to (what was then) Palestine before the Holocaust. It is in Salonica/Thessaloniki that some of the novel’s core thematic and narrative tensions are most directly articulated. In a conversation with Nimreen via Skype that begins with a mild contestation of the name of the Greek town before progressing to a debate over Jonathan’s encounter with an antisemitic hostel manager and then escalating into an argument about whether Zionism amounts to colonialism, it becomes apparent that not even the deep affection that Nimreen and Jonathan feel for one another may be enough to bridge the divide formed by conflicting interpretations of histories of trauma:

40 Rothman-Zecher, Sadness, 32.
“Jews came to Palestine, displaced and murdered the indigenous people,” Nimreen said. “They turned us into refugees and took our land, closed the borders, turned al-Birwa into Ahihud, and Palestine into Israel ... Khalas. That’s it. That's colonialism. It’s not so complicated.”

“My grandfather didn’t come for gold or cheap labor, Nimreen. He was cheap labor, actually. For my grandfather, Zionism wasn’t about greed or getting rich. It was about survival. Without Zionism, I probably wouldn’t be alive.”

“Okay. But think about it: for us, what does it matter if it’s gold or if it’s fear?” Nimreen said. “The results, on our backs, in the Nakba, in Kuft Qanut ... It’s the same either way, Jonathan.”

We can’t be together, Jonathan, she didn’t say.

“It has to matter, Nimreen! How can you not have compassion for someone seeking refuge from genocide or someone trying to save their people from extermination?” How can your love for me not conquer everything, Nimreen? I didn’t say.⁴¹

In the passage above, Nimreen and Jonathan debate the shared histories that impacts them both, and Rothberg’s concept of the need for a multidirectional, rather than competitive, appreciation of memory is keenly felt, as is the intractability of the situation between the two displaced characters. Moreover, the embattled conversation reveals the struggle Jonatan feels between his love for his family and his justified pride in his grandfather’s survival, and the mounting realization that the life-saving migrations that occurred during the creation of the State of Israel have proved life-attenuating for many Palestinians.

Jonathan seems torn, as Said puts it, between the exilic desire to see himself as part of a “restored people,”⁴² and Nimreen’s insinuation that Zionism has been the undoing of her people. The layers of implication and responsibility are intricate, and this realization, for Jonathan, might well lead the sensitive reader to consider her own complex implication in histories of migration and displacement.

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⁴¹ Rothman-Zecher, Sadness, 174.
While taken as a whole, *Sadness Is a White Bird* serves as a poignant humanitarian plea for compassion on both sides of the struggle in Israel and Palestine. Moreover, the novel serves as an exploration of Jonathan’s evolution as a subject as he grapples with his own complex implication in histories of displacement that include both his own grandfather’s flight from Salonica, as well as Nimreen and Laith’s extended families’ displacement and terror in 1948. From a craft perspective, Rothman-Zecher’s prose succeeds because both Jonathan and Nimreen’s political and historical arguments of are tied up with their thwarted desire to continue their intimacies. Rothman-Zecher’s strategy of embedding the political stakes of the novel in a particular and compelling narrative tension keeps the novel from veering towards the didactic. As readers, we learn as much from what is left unsaid as what is said in the above passage. As Jonathan narrates: “How can your love for me not conquer everything, Nimreen? I didn’t say.” Here, core dramatic and thematic tensions of the novel are articulated in the unspoken sentence at the end of the passage. How, the novel asks rhetorically, can the need for connection not overcome the traumas of the past? Perhaps more importantly, how can the need for connection transform the injustices of the present?

Jonathan ultimately fails to rekindle his intimacy with Nimreen, but while in Salonica he has a sexual encounter with another Jewish man that seems to sum up his desire, and the desire of the novel, for an expansive humanism that makes room for both recognizing trauma and also for love and life. In a vivid reflection on the encounter, Jonathan narrates: “... everything felt strange but also safe, Laith, because he was a stranger, and a man, but he was also a Jewish man, and there was room for this, room for
me to be with him like this, and to still be part of my family, part of my people…”

The need for “room for this,” for intimacy and connection that exceeds the limits of the usual, that disregards established boundaries in favor of the chance at meaningful connection, is in fact a leitmotif of *Sadness Is a White Bird*.

In Jonathan, readers are presented with a character that strives for an expansiveness and for a sense of belonging even in the face of multiple historic displacements, and the impingements of those past displacements on the present. The figure of Jonathan himself serves as a site of inscription for multiple intersecting cultural understandings of displacement—as we see in his reported thoughts, in his physical intimacies, and in his acts of aggression as a solider. Rather than making clear any possible answer to the multiple displacements and conflicting histories in Israel and Palestine, *Sadness Is a White Bird* productively complicates readers’ understanding of the situation with the aesthetic assertion that there is validity to the histories, and value to the lives, of all those entangled.

EXIT WEST: A NOVEL

The narrative of Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West* (2017), a finalist for a Man Booker Prize, follows Saeed and Nadia, a young couple at the beginning of a romance in an unnamed Muslim city (resembling Lahore) taken over by Islamic militants. In contrast to the overt realism of *Sadness Is a White Bird*, in which a very specific time and place are engaged, and the cost of violence are unflinchingly realized, *Exit West* translates the very real traumas of war and displacement using a magical realist mode. This is not to suggest that

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Hamid’s novel shies away from the affective truths of displacement or the horrors of war. In fact, the use of magical realism in *Exit West* serves the function of translating affective states of displacement into concrete sensory terms so as to make them accessible to readers. Saeed and Nadia eventually escape their war-torn city together—through a magical door—to the Greek island of Mykonos where they find an encampment of other refugees from their own country and from many others. In the years that follow, Saeed and Nadia travel through a seemingly endless series of such doors looking for a place that will accept them, as well as multitudes of other stateless refugees.

Saeed and Nadia’s desperate need to exit their country of origin is magically manifested, first through rumors of the magical doors, and then through the actual magical door that the couple use to flee throughout the novel. Related in third person by an unnamed narrator, the novel is focalized through a range of characters, but primarily through Saeed and Nadia. This formal choice allows Hamid’s unnamed narrator to access both the thoughts and sensory experiences of Saeed and Nadia, as well as to comment on both primary characters with some measure of narrative distance. In contrast to the intense and singular subjectivity that Rothman-Zecher creates in Jonathan in *Sadness Is a White Bird*, Hamid’s use of a floating third-person narrator allows forays into multiple subjectivities as well as an ability to comment reflectively on the shared situation of Saeed and Nadia. Near the novel’s conclusion, Hamid makes use of short vignettes focalized through unnamed, ancillary characters, some whom choose to move and some who choose to remain as their local areas are transformed by migration, allowing for a kaleidoscopic imagining of mobility and its impacts. Using the device of the magical door, *Exit West* aesthetically translates experiences and social understandings of
migration most acutely through the closely related experiences of Saeed and Nadia, who are repeatedly forced to travel to survive.

While roughly the first half of *Exit West* is devoted to aestheticizing the trauma of living under siege that precedes Saeed and Nadia’s migration, the affective experiences of border crossing become a prominent feature once Saeed and Nadia gain access to their first magical door. At the midpoint of the novel and after months of hiding in the war-ravaged city, Saeed and Nadia find an “agent” who can take them to a magical door. Nadia’s observations of the qualities of the door create it as a physical object that is fully congruent with the world of the story, firmly situating the door within the plane of what is “real.” The words used to describe the door connote the uncertain future Nadia faces as she becomes displaced: “She was struck by its darkness, its opacity, the way that it did not reveal what was on the other side and also did not reflect what was on this side, and so felt equally like a beginning and an end.”44 Here “darkness” and “opacity” underscore the many unknowns Nadia’s new life as a stateless person will entail. The passage in which Nadia passes through the door uses concrete sensory details to imaginatively render the process of displacement as one that fundamentally alters a person’s life and identity:

> It was said in those days that the passage was both like dying and like being born, and indeed Nadia experienced a kind of extinguishing as she entered the blackness and a gasping struggle as she fought to exit it, and she felt cold and bruised and damp as she lay on the floor of the room on the other side, trembling and too spent at first to stand, and she thought, while she strained to fill her lungs, that this dampness must be her own sweat.45

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45 Hamid, *Exit West*, 104.
Here, the description of passage through the door as “both like dying and like being born” recalls Bertacco and Vallorani’s description of the borders of southern Europe as “loci of translation,” in which those who are people and citizens on one side emerge as “Refugees,” “migrants,” and “asylum seekers” on the other.\textsuperscript{46} The fact that the crossing of the border, defamiliarized as a magical door, feels for Nadia like “a kind of extinguishing” both aestheticizes and makes legible the loss involved in her translation into statelessness.

In a later section of the novel Saeed and Nadia arrive in London, where they and other refugees take over whole apartment blocks and sections of the city, squatting in houses containing magical doors after the original occupants have fled. As the ranks of migrants swell, the government cuts the electricity to the occupied sections of the city, creating a new “dark London,” continuously monitored by drones, helicopters, and surveillance balloons. In the physically precarious and hyper-surveilled fictional bodies of Saeed and Nadia, the vulnerabilities of multitudes of actual stateless individuals coalesce. Descriptions of the physical qualities of the status-quo sections of London— with access to electricity—compared with the intentionally darkened sectors such as those occupied by Saeed and Nadia underscore this bodily precarity:

\ldots in London there were parts as bright as ever, brighter than anyplace Saeed and Nadia had seen before, glowing up into the sky and reflecting down again from the clouds, and in contrast the city’s dark swaths seemed darker, more significant, the way the blackness in the ocean suggests not less light from above, but a sudden drop-off in the depths below.\textsuperscript{47}

Here, Hamid employs both a metaphorical and a material stratification of human bodies in the city: while the legal citizens enjoy the brightness of lives lived in the “above,” the

\textsuperscript{46} Bertacco and Vallorani, \textit{The Relocation of Culture}, 75.
\textsuperscript{47} Hamid, \textit{Exit West}, 145-146.
illegal persons must survive in the darkness of the abyssal “depths below.” The figural bodies of Saeed and Nadia are made all the more vulnerable by the refusal of the nations they attempt to find refuge in to recognize their presence as sanctioned or lawful; the conditions of dark London further translate the two as undesirable illegals in a figurative mode that illustrates the actual swelling of anti-immigrant sentiment and policy in Europe and Great Brittan.

Like other authors and artists discussed in this chapter, Hamid conceptually situates the distress and precarity of actual experiences of displacement in the fictional bodies of the displaced characters. Saeed and Nadia that continuously move though the series of magical doors, each time seeking a better situation than the one before. And yet, while the embodied displacement of Saeed and Nadia clearly brings with it loss, hardship, and assignment to an underclass of illegal persons, over time that displacement also brings with it both individual transformation and transformation of the relationship between the two. Rather than articulate a displacement that is defined purely by loss, Hamid’s novel conveys that displacement can also be transformative to both individuals and to the relationships they are enmeshed in. As Hamid’s narrator reflects:

> Every time a couple moves they begin, if their attention is still drawn to one another, to see each other differently, for personalities are not a single immutable color, like white or blue, but rather illuminated screens, and the shades we reflect depend much on what is around us.48

The observation that during long-term experiences of migration individuals are translated anew is illustrated by the unnamed narrator’s assertion that personalities are reflective of their surroundings, rather than “a single immutable color.” If the acute border experience of the moving through the door is akin to a birth or death, the experience of living in the

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48 Hamid, Exit West, 186.
newly found country brings another kind of transformation that occurs over an extended duration.

The continuous migrations of Saeed and Nadia—they move though Greece, England, a city that resembles Dubai, and a camp in Marin, on the outskirts of San Francisco—lead the couple to grow in different directions. The unnamed narrator summarizes some of the more significant changes that begin to take place for Saeed and Nadia so:

He was drawn to people from their country, both in the labor camp and online. It seemed to Nadia that the farther they moved from the city of their birth, through space and through time, the more he sought to strengthen his connection to it, tying ropes to the air of an era that for her was unambiguously gone.49

While Saeed becomes more religiously devout and gravitates to those from their old country, Nadia feels compelled to seek out those from other parts of the world; the relationship that is changed is not just their relationship to one another, but the relationship of each to his or her country of origin.

Rather than relate these changes as destructive, Hamid’s generous treatment of both characters lets them humanely evolve in differing directions. In time the couple separates, and Saeed forges an intimate bond with another migrant, an African American daughter of a Christian preacher, while Nadia awakens to her own capacity for same-sex desire, eventually forging an intimate bond with a white woman who works as a cook in a cooperative of refugees in a suburb of San Francisco. For Nadia, such a relationship would have been unlikely if not inconceivable within the social strictures of the city that the couple first fled, in which heterosexual gender norms were strictly enforced both

49 Hamid, Exit West, 187.
before and after the revolution that forced Saeed and Nadia to migrate. Likewise, Saeed’s relationship crosses racial and religious lines in a manner that would have been nearly impossible in the country of his birth. Through the narrator’s closely focalized descriptions of Saeed and Nadia’s interior transformations, readers encounter them as highly subjectivized figures with a range of changing affiliations. Although Saeed and Nadia experience tremendous loss, and although their past lives are, as Said would say, “irrecoverable,” they successfully translate themselves in ways they could have never imagined in their unnamed country of origin.

The doors of migration in *Exit West* also serve to transform the areas that they open onto. Near the conclusion of Hamid’s novel, an elderly woman who has resided in Palo Alto in the same house for her entire life reflects on the changes that the doors have brought. The woman now knows none of her neighbors, and in an apparent response to the internationalization of the area, her own adult granddaughter has inexplicably begun to appear to her to be “Chinese.” The narrator reports here that the woman now feels like a foreigner in her own home:

[N]ow all these doors from who knows where were opening, and all sorts of people were around, people who looked more at home than she was, even the homeless ones who spoke no English, more at home maybe because they were younger, and when she went out it seemed she too had migrated, that everyone migrates, even if we stay in the same houses our whole lives, because we can’t help it.

We are all migrants through time.⁵⁰

This passage, as well as other brief narrative vignettes in which the characters related are unnamed and make no further appearances in novel, comments on communities that experience demographic shifts over time due to migrations. By the novel’s close, much

time has passed and migration, and the position of the migrant, have become the norm rather than the exception in a reality-adjacent, speculative future in which migrants seem to outnumber citizens.

The change and transformation that accompany migration are a leitmotif of *Exit West*, and Saeed and Nadia find themselves repeatedly transformed, first through the acute experience of border crossing through the doors, and later from the cumulative effects of living in multiple countries and interacting with other migrants. For some readers, the narrator’s comment in the passage above that “We are all migrants through time” might seem to have a universalizing bent that threatens to flatten or remove difference between, for example, a long-time elderly citizen of Palo Alto and a young couple forced to move to multiple countries due to hardship. Yet within the context of the novel, I interpret the narrator’s remark as one that serves to center migratory action both within, and outside, the world of the story. Migration and the personal and social change it brings are not peripheral, the novel seems to argue, but are central to our shared contemporary existence. If the reader is willing to listen to such a message, related though the highly subjectivized figures of Saeed and Nadia, or to “heed their voices,” as Smith would suggest, then the effect may be transformative. Here, the act of “reading the refugee,” to borrow Yogita Goyal’s phrase, may productively unsettle reader assumptions about displacement and the displaced, provoking readers to reframe displacement as a condition that impacts us all.
THREE: THE ABSENT, FRAGMENTED, AND RE/CONSTRUCTED

FIGURAL DISPLACED PERSON

While the texts discussed so far in this chapter present complete figures of displacement, the group of artworks discussed in this section operate instead by emphasizing the absence of the complete figural displaced person. Rather than creating named fictional characters, which in the previous sections can be visualized as occupying a continuum that ranges from the highly stylized figure of Little Amal in The Walk to the highly subjectivized figure of Jonathan Sadness Is a White Bird, the works discussed in this section construct incomplete, fragmentary figures of displacement from the material and digital traces left by actual displaced subjects. Here, the term “re/constructed” applies most accurately to the nature of representation employed, since these artists piece together fragments—material and images of clothing and personal effects, or recovered visual data from surveillance footage—to construct new and intentionally incomplete figures of displacement.

BORDER CANTOS: SIGHT & SOUND EXPLORATIONS

FROM THE MEXICAN-AMERICAN BORDER

This section might well begin with a question: What are the sights and sounds of absence? Experimental composer Guillermo Galindo attempts to answer that question by employing an aural and sculptural aesthetic of displacement, marked by the absence of complete figures, in his collaborative project with photographer Richard Misrach, Border Cantos (2016). Misrach’s commanding and formal large format landscapes and
evidentiary grids of the material artifacts of migration along the two-thousand-mile American border with Mexico, along with Galindo’s musical instruments and compositions created from and inspired by items left behind by migrants, invite viewers to imagine the journeys of untold numbers of individuals. In doing so, Misrach and Galindo create a mode of figuration that relies on the power of absence to calls on viewers’ empathetic imaginations to do the work of creating displaced figures.

Shown at and Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art under the title Border Cantos: Sight & Sound Explorations from the Mexican-American Border (Bentonville, AR, 2017), and presented in a photographic, dual language English/Spanish book (2016) and sound recordings on a project website (2016), Border Cantos takes an archival and imaginative approach to the situation faced by undocumented immigrants who have crossed the Mexican-American border. The images, instruments, and compositions translate migrant struggles to survive in the liminal and often unforgiving places along the border wall including the Sonora Dessert. Misrach’s large format photography of the landscape, often bisected by the border wall, conjures an aesthetic of the immigrant body in absentia, as do Misrach’s documentary style photographs of discarded items—form children’s toys to American border patrol person-shaped targets riddled with bullet holes.

The compositions of Misrach’s imposing, often six-foot-wide color landscape photographs constructs the migratory space of the border as both pastoral and deadly, Misrach frames each shot in such way so that the border wall appears at once menacing and improbable. In one image, taken from afar, mountains scrape the roof of a misty sky and desert scrubland feathered with green and umber vegetation is sliced in two by the
rusted seam of the border wall, which seems to go on without beginning or end.\footnote{Richard Misrach, Guillermo Galindo, and Josh Kun, “Wall, Jacumba, California, 2008,” Border Cantos (New York: Aperture, 2016), 25.} In another image, vertical sections of the wall march down a sandy incline and terminate twenty meters out in a choppy sea, a discarded boot and pages of a destroyed novel in the foreground; the accompanying text identifies the book as a Spanish translation of Dr. Zhivago.\footnote{Misrach, “Wall, [with boot and El Doctor Jivagol], San Diego, 2013,” Border Cantos, 8.} Large format photographs that include the blue fifty-gallon water drums set out by humanitarian organizations reveal the containers’ exposure to the elements, their sides bleached by the sun and their identifying flags worn thin; often, Misrach’s photos reveal that the water stations have been vandalized and drained.\footnote{Misrach, “Bullet-ridden water station, Carrizo Creek, California, 2014,” Border Cantos, 137.}

Misrach’s formal landscapes are completed by grids of enlargements of smaller photographs, often taken straight on with an i-Phone, of personal items abandoned in the desert—water jugs, children’s backpacks and toys, and religious items such as pocket bibles and crucifixes take on an evidentiary aesthetic. In Misrach’s photographs, it is the absence of the migratory figures that compels viewers to imaginatively construct the people who are the former owners of the lost things, or whose bodies have been impacted by the landscape and by the border wall. The power of Misrach’s photographs is twofold: First, they demand an empathetic response towards the items’ absent owners, as the act of viewing compels one to imagine the feelings associated with the actions that led to the item being abandoned—walking through the desert for days, suffering from thirst, being tracked by border patrol agents. Second, they demand that American viewers situate themselves, as citizens, within a system that constructs people attempting to migrate to
the United States as ‘illegals.’ The material conditions and cruelties of such a system are laid bare by the evidence provided, and provided eloquently, by Misrach’s photographs.

Complementary to Misrach’s approach, Galindo’s experimental musical instruments are made from the debris of migration, and the musical compositions he performs often evoke scenes of pursuit and encounters with the inhospitable landscape. These material and aural investigations of displacement productively complicate representations of absence. While the stories of the items’ owners are irretrievable, Galindo’s instruments and compositions compel viewers to imagine them. Galindo’s process also involves the reinterpretation of representations of migration—migrant death maps, Misrach’s photographs, and border patrol targets peppered with bullet holes—as musical notation. Galindo’s compositions can be productively understood as translations of such cartographic, imagistic, and material evidence of migration into musical scores. Like the multiple stories of migration that they reference, several of Galindo’s scores can be read as modules to be arranged in any order, formally evoking the palimpsest of human life and movement that Misrach’s photography documents. As Galindo explains:

Translating photographs into scores also allowed me to challenge the traditional Cartesian tradition of reading music from left to right. These photographs inspired me to think of unexpected events coming from all directions all at once or at different times: a polycentric universe where anything can happen at any given time. 54

The polycentricity Galindo describes gives meaningful form to the content of the multiple migration stories evoked in Misrach’s photographs. Galindo’s non-linear compositions atomize the stories of many, calling attention to the sheer numbers of individual

54 Galindo, Border Cantos, 195.
migration stories encompassed within the landscape of the American Southwest. Viewers and listeners are invited to re/construct the displaced figures in their own minds.

Guillermo’s scores, performances, and instruments require viewer knowledge of the provenance of the materials for one to connect what they are seeing or hearing to displacement. For Guillermo, this emphasis on materiality draws on pre-Columbian conceptions of an instrument’s meaning in the world and the sounds it produces as being intrinsically linked to the instrument’s material origins and Afro-Caribbean musical traditions of re-purposing items left behind by enslavers as instruments, as well as with the Chicano artistic/survival practice of mending or repurposing items for use in new contexts.55 Guillermo proposes that the instruments are evidentiary in both a material and emotional capacity: “They are the evidence of an ongoing human tragedy that is happening before our eyes. These musical objects sing to us about their invisible owners.”56 The instruments in *Border Cantos* evoke and make visible the unseen struggles of their former migrant owners. While Guillermo’s instruments are evocative as objects, the figural displaced person is perhaps most effectively evoked in Guillermo’s compositions that incorporate multiple instruments to create soundscapes with flows of tension and release that gesture towards the movement of immigrant bodies through the American Southwest.

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55 Galindo states that his own practice is influenced by the Chicano reuse and repurposing concept of *Rasquachismo*. "*Rasquachismo* is a “nonintellectual, visceral response to the “lived reality of the underdog” where things are not thrown away but saved and recycled often in different context… 'things are not thrown away but saved and recycled often in different context [e.g., automobile tires used as plant containers. Plastic bleach bottles becoming garden ornaments...] — writes Tomás Ybarra-Frausto." Galindo Guillermo, “Imaginary Stories/Historicas imaginaries,” in *Border Cantos*, Richard Misrach, Galindo Guillermo, and Kun Josh, (New York: Aperture, 2016) 192-243, 194.

56 Galindo, *Border Cantos*, 195.
Take for example Galindo’s performance of “Limpia/Cleansing” (2017),\textsuperscript{57} that features Galindo’s \textit{Zapetello} (2014), an instrument constructed from a discarded boot, a glove, a border patrol drag tire fitted with rawhide to form a drum, border patrol shooting targets, and animal bones found in the desert. A mechanized percussion instrument, the \textit{Zapetello} is about as tall as a person, and is operated by turning a crank that rotates the targets and causes the boot and glove to beat the drag tire drum in a syncopated rhythm. In “Limpia/Cleansing,” the \textit{Zapetello} creates a rising and falling percussive counterpoint to the sounds of a shaker made from a discarded water jug, \textit{Agitanque}, and Galindo’s \textit{Piñata de cartuchos}, a metal sphere strung with discarded shotgun casings recovered from a border patrol shooting range. The sounds of the \textit{Agitanque} and the \textit{Piñata de cartuchos} build in speed and intensity, seeming to chase after the drumbeat created as Galindo cranks the \textit{Zapetello}. There is a dry, hollow texture to the sounds made by the \textit{Zapetello} that contrasts with the sharp and metallic sounds of the \textit{Agitanque} and the \textit{Piñata de cartuchos}. The desert seems tonally present, and the performance evokes a narrative of pursuit across an arid landscape. The tempo of the drumming increases to a climax and then eventually slows, finally fading to silence and leaving the perusing sounds of the \textit{Agitanque} and the \textit{Piñata de cartuchos} to circle one another.

Alerted to the origins of the materials incorporated in the instruments, listeners are invited to imagine a range of displaced figures fleeing capture or violence from the border patrol agents invoked by the shooting range targets and discarded shotgun shells. There is a poignant irony to Galindo’s use of the drag tire, a low-tech but effective method of tracking immigrants, as a drum that makes aural reference to immigrants’

\textsuperscript{57} Galindo, “Limpia/Cleansing,” \url{http://bordercants.com}.
physical attempts to evade border patrol agents. The artifacts that compose Galindo’s instruments bear material witness to the expansion of American border policy and law that not only criminalizes movement, but as Nail puts it, “aims to maintain direct control over as much criminalized movement as possible.”\footnote{Nail, \textit{The Figure of the Migrant}, 211.} The artifacts in the instruments sonically call on listeners to envision the actual people whose individual migration stories may never be recovered. “Limpia/Cleansing” offers no clear resolution to the composition’s implied narrative of pursuit, gesturing to the un-knowable and perhaps even untranslatable qualities of some narratives of displacement.

One of Galindo’s most figural instruments, \textit{Efige} (2014), is an ekphrastic response to Misrach’s photographs of mysterious objects in the Sonora Desert that resemble scarecrows dressed in the discarded clothes of immigrants. Whether intended as warnings to immigrants or as markers of safe corridors of travel, the effigies’ human-like forms are composed of a central body, arms, legs, and a head, and are often positioned with arms flung wide in a pose that recalls crucifixion or lynching. Galindo’s \textit{Efige}, a stringed instrument that can be plucked or bowed, takes the form of an \textit{X} and is clad in a tattered black and red letterman-style jacket and white pants spattered with large patches of red dye. The hood of a red hooded sweatshirt hangs limp between the ‘arms’ of the instrument. The heavy piano wire that crosses the instrument’s ‘back’ and spans the space between its ‘arms’ could serve to suture the form together or to bind or restrain it. The distressed nature of the garments, along with a pose that alludes to violence done to a body restrained, speak to the physical harm that threatened the garments’ previous
owners. While the individual items of clothing likely belonged to multiple individuals, in
Galindo’s Efige those multiple garments are re/constructed into one figure.

In his performance of “Efige/Effigy,” Galindo hammers the strings with a heavy
and blunt hammer, creating a low and ominous pounding.59 He bows the strings, creating
atonal chords that seem to reference the open expanses of uninhabited desert that the
discarded clothing, and Misrach’s photographs, originate from. More spare and abstract
than “Limpia/Cleansing,” “Efige/Effigy” nevertheless begins to take on narrative
qualities with the introduction of plucked notes near the end of the performance.
The quick and comparatively high-pitched pizzicato notes contrast with and seem to rise
over top of the bowed notes, and one can easily imagine the flight of undocumented
immigrants traversing a desert landscape, perhaps at night. Efige evokes not so much a
singular figure as the imagined figures of many, and the main aesthetic is one that calls
attention to the absence of the people who left behind the material artifacts of migration
used to create the instrument.

Taken together, the woks in Border Cantos create an aesthetic of the migrant
body in absentia and depend on the empathetic imaginations of viewers to render
complete figures. This emphasis on absence allows Misrach and Galindo to evoke the
traumas of migration in the American Southwest—being tracked and apprehended by
border patrol and exposure to the elements—without reinscribing those traumas or
recreating scenes of overt violence. Instead, viewers are compelled to imagine the
affective experiences of attempting to cross the desert for themselves. The open-ended
nature of these works resists clear resolution, as the fates of the previous owners of the

items are unknowable. What is made clear is the at the border zone in the Southwestern United States has the effect of translating people who cross without documents into ‘illegals’ and ‘aliens.’ In making this translational effect clear, *Border Cantos* may productively unsettle viewer assumptions about the legitimacy of status-quo politics and policies at the American border with Mexico. The sensitive viewer may also see her complicity, as citizen who lives within the enclosure of the border, in a system that seeks to criminalize movement and migration.

**IF ONLY THIS MOUNTAIN BETWEEN US COULD BE GROUND TO DUST**

In their multichannel video installations, Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme employ techniques of digital compositing, computer modeling, motion capture, and projection to create figures of displacement that, like the work of Misrach and Galindo in *Border Cantos*, employ an aesthetic of absence to comment on processes that create bodies and subjects as illegal or alien. Rather than utilizing the material traces of displacement, as Galindo does, Abbas and Abou-Rahme use appropriated digital surveillance footage of Palestinians to lament and protest displacement, surveillance, and violence. While created before the horrific violence that is, at the time of this writing, unfolding in context of the Israel-Hamas war, the work of Abbas and Abou-Rahme provides a deeply unsettling vision of affective states of displacement experienced in the highly controlled border zones of the Gaza strip.

The first exhibition of the artistic team’s work in a large-scale museum in the United States, Abbas and Abou-Rahme’s *If only this mountain between us could be ground to dust* (Chicago Art Institute, 2022), curated by Maite Borjabad López-Pastor,
includes a text-based installation commissioned by the Chicago Art Institute, *Once an artist, now just a tool* (2021), presented in an antechamber at the entrance to the exhibition, as well as an immersive video installation consisting of updated versions of two multichannel video works, *Oh shining star testify* (2019–21), and *At those terrifying frontiers where the existence and disappearance of people fade into each other* (2019–21). The text-based work, *Once and Artist*, presents erasure poetry composed from the duo’s archive of Twitter commentary on various Arab uprisings and protests of the past decade within a fragmented array of phrases that seem to indict the museum space itself as a site of Eurocentric cultural production: “Bodies / not / supposed / to be seen / like this / exhibitions / surrounded by / smiling European / experts…” Here, the text serves as a preview for both the focus on the body as a site of contestation as well as for the fragmentary aesthetic that Abbas and Abou-Rahme employ in the main video works of the exhibition.

In the first of the two video works, *At those terrifying frontiers where the existence and disappearance of people fade into each other*, the figural bodies of the displaced are re/constructed from the raw material of surveillances footage itself. *At those terrifying frontiers* collapses images of many into images of individuals, and presents hyper-real, computer graphic avatars of Palestinian protesters in the immersive projection space. The avatars are composites, created from surveillance images of participants in the 2018-19 March of Return protests in Gaza, and their movements are keyed to the movements of the artists as they perform a de-constructed, sung version of Edward Said’s essay, “After the Last Sky.” The text extracted from Said’s essay appears in fragmented form on the screens, including the lines, “We emerge as effects / errata / counternarratives
when homecoming is out of the question / you learn to transform / the mechanics of loss
into a constantly postponed / metaphysics of return.” The text serves to inform the
movements of the avatars which turn and maneuver on the screens as if constricted or
attempting to run in place.

In a sense, the avatars can be thought of as digital stand-ins both for the artists
themselves and for the surveilled bodies that provide the provocation, and substance, for
their forms. Although the avatars’ movements are controlled by the artists, the action-
matching of digital-to-human motion is both imperfect and aesthetically unsettling. While
at times the avatars’ movements are smooth and naturalistic, more often they stutter and
jerk, and the soundtrack oscillates between disjointed and melodic. The resultant
haunting, sometimes hypnotic video blurs the line between the beautiful and the
grotesque. While the avatars have the super-smooth skin and the almost doll-like features
one might expect from computer-rendered, idealized human figures, the faces and bodies
have gaps and gashes, places where important digital information seems to have been
violently erased.

These disfiguring marks are the result of missing digital information that was not
obtainable from the surveillance footage. As Abbas and Abou-Rahme explain: “The
algorithm in the avatar software renders the missing data and information (due to the low
resolution of images circulated online) in the original image as scars, glitches and
incomplete features on the avatar’s faces.”60 The artists also propose that the inclusion of
the glitches reference physical harm done to Palestinian bodies and the “embedded

60 At those terrifying frontiers where the existence and disappearance of people fade into each other, Basel
Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, https://baselandruanne.com/At-those-terrifying-frontiers-where-the-
existence-and-disappearance
violence of representation itself in the circulation/consumption of images.” At those terrifying frontiers leans into a current in contemporary visual art focusing on the potentialities, both violent and restorative, of circulated images most notably taken up by Hito Steyerl. Additionally, the work opens up possibilities for use of appropriated surveillance footage for creating digital registers of dissent. The artists, who were in Palestine at the time that the marches took place but could not access them due to security restrictions, saw the avatars they created as an intimate bridge between themselves and the protesters—the avatars go where the artists cannot, and in this way evade the restrictions imposed on the physical bodies of the artists themselves.

The second video work in the exhibition, Oh shining star testify, takes the death of Yusuf Shawamreh, a fourteen-year-old Palestinian boy, as its provocation. Shawamreh was killed by Israeli soldiers after crossing the separation fence near Hebron to pick akub, an indigenous edible plant native to the region. The CCTV footage (circulated on the internet before being removed) that Abbas and Abou-Rahme appropriate for Oh shining star testify documents the moments leading up to and just after Shawamreh’s death: two boys cross through a gap in a fence and then cross a highway, clambering over a guardrail and out of the frame. A military vehicle approaches, and adults with rifles follow the boys. In the next shot selected by Abbas and Abou-Rhame, a solider pulls a

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61 At those terrifying frontiers, Abbas and Abou-Rahme.
63 Oh shining star testify, Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, https://baselandruanne.com/Oh-shining-star-testify
boy’s limp body under the guardrail—the implied narrative is that the boys were tracked and shot by the Israeli military.

The grainy black and white footage is shown in fragmented segments and is overlaid with gold- and green-hued projections of plants, including akub, growing on rocky plains and being gathered by a person who never faces the camera. Sitting or standing between the floor mounted projectors viewers are caught in the light spilling from the videos and there is a sense of being inside the work; the bodies of viewers further activate the space as the light plays over them. While the intercut CCTV footage is truly horrifying, the tone of piece—in great part because of the melodic quality of the music and the gold-hued colors and calm scenes of the landscape—slants toward the contemplative rather than the sensational. Nevertheless, viewing Oh shining star can be a deeply unsettling experience, as one sits in a darkened room with strangers viewing the moments that led up to the death of a teenager.

Beyond the discomfort caused by the content itself, the arrangement of the projectors that by design catches viewers in the projections, might well prompt American viewers to consider their potential complicity in the creation of Palestinians as illegal persons. In this specific showing of the work in the United States, Michael Rothberg’s figure of the implicated subject is evoked by the melding of violence occurring at great physical distance and on another continent, with the physical plane inhabited by American viewers. While not directly responsible for violence in the binary, victim/perpetrator paradigm, viewers find themselves in an uneasy and haunted place of implication. Of course, as Rothberg forcefully argues, the point of realizing one’s position as an implicated subject is not to dwell on or in that position, but instead to “reopen
political struggles beyond defensive purity of self-contained-identities.” And while like other authors and artists discussed in this chapter, Abbas and Abou-Rahme do not provide political solutions to the problems they make visible, they do seek to unsettle viewers’ sense of “defensive purity,” by presenting fragmented figures that confront viewers with their own entanglement in systems that create some people as illegals.

In this chapter, I have argued that the figural displaced person, in a range of registers, serves as a locus where conflicting understanding of displacement are articulated and where the actual struggles and life-building of the displaced can be translated into fictive, imaginative, and allegorical modes. The texts discussed run the gamut from emphasizing figural absence, to creating symbolic figures, to creating highly subjectivized figural representations, making clear the validity and value of a range of figural registers. Together, these works of literature and art make a strong case for the potential of the displaced figural person to unsettle the reader’s sense of belonging and to even bring to light possible implication in the systems that create displacement. Moreover, the range of situations and contexts that these works engage make clear that displacement is far from an accidental or peripheral phenomenon but is indeed a mode of existence that is central to the contemporary human condition.

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64 Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject*, 201.
I’m in Chicago, standing in a line with about forty strangers, waiting for what promises be a delicious bowl of curry. There’s a sense of anticipation in the air, and the people in line chat about which of the three curries they’ve tried before (green is a clear favorite) and, most importantly, when the food will be served. It’s June of 2022, and the majority of guests are attempting to observe social distancing; I watch a masked artist perched atop a mobile scaffold use a thick piece of graphite to trace the face of a young Black man onto the white gallery wall. The face of the young man is agitated. He’s been caught in motion as he turns to one side, his lips parted in what appears to be a yell—of protest, of support, of fear, or maybe all three. His image is surrounded by images of other protesters, police, and banners and signs emblazoned with slogans: “Black Lives Matter,” “Defend DACA,” “Close the Sky,” and “Stop Putin’s War.”

The images of protest are selected by hired artists, mostly students from School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and are taken directly from documentary photography from local, national, and international journalism. The photographs are projected onto the walls from transparencies taped to overhead projectors so that their outlines can be traced—a low-tech but effective method of image transfer. And, although the resulting drawings are by design photo-realistic, the figures themselves are rendered in a range of scales and are partially, or sometimes completely, extracted from their source frames of reference. A
continually growing, surreal palimpsest of images of protest from the US and beyond surrounds the guests hungrily waiting in line.

I notice a young white woman with dreadlocks beside me who’s also looking intently at the image of the Black man, and I consider asking her if she’d been to that particular protest (here in Chicago) or seen this image before. But then, the food arrives. We quickly collect our bowls and move through the line. I sit to eat with a group of strangers and enjoy an improvised luncheon in the gallery. As promised, the green curry is delicious.

For those already acquainted with Rirkrit Tiravanija’s practice, this 2022 iteration of who’s afraid of red, yellow, and green (2010—) at Chicago’s Wrightwood 659 museum might seem typical of Tiravanija’s interactive “situations.” Indeed, many of Tiravanija’s now-iconic earlier works also feature the cooking and serving of Thai food to gallery guests, such as pad thai (1990), and free/still (1992-1995), both of which were recently performed at MoMA’s PS1 as part of Tiravanija’s first US retrospective of his nearly forty-year career, A LOT OF PEOPLE (October 2023-March 2024). However, the framing of red, yellow, and green within the visual culture of global protest movements constitutes an important shift from Tiravanija’s more well-known situations. Rather than cultivating a purely relational aesthetic based solely on the encounter, red, yellow, and green explicitly engages not only the world beyond the encounter but specific protests, and by extension, the precarities that undergird those protests.

One of the several artists featured in Nicolas Bourriaud’s groundbreaking exhibition of interactive art, Traffic (Bordeaux, 1996), Tiravanija is widely accepted as a progenitor of “relational” art, a term coined by Bourriaud to address a range of artistic
practices, primarily in North America and Western Europe, emphasizing human interaction. Given that many of Tiravanija’s previous relational works focus nearly exclusively on the communal act of sharing food, it is significant that red, yellow, and green addressees protests external to the gallery encounters: first in Bangkok, Thailand, and later in Washington D.C. as well as Chicago. Such a move puts Tiravanija in dialogue with other artists with transnational practices who create interactive works that are resistive, and that seek to address specific issues through the space of the encounter between artist and audience. It is the exploration of such works—relational, resistive, and transnational—that are the concern of this chapter.

While in Chapter 1, I put forth the figural displaced person as a lens through which to apprehend multiple cultural meanings and affective experiences of displacement today, in this chapter I take an art historical approach to contextualize and present close examinations of works by three artists who use interaction as a resistive mode to intervene in a range of oppressive conditions. The chapter is divided into four sections. In the first section, I chart the formulation and reception of relational art and aesthetics as articulated by Nicolas Bourriaud in the late nineteen-nineties, and then situate relational art more broadly within a field of interactive art practices that range from prosocial, extended duration “social practice” works to shorter-term “participatory works” that sometimes take a more antagonistic approach. This leads directly to a discussion of legacies of relational aesthetics in play in participatory art today, in light of contemporary precarity and protest culture.

The following three sections each present close examinations of select works by three contemporary artists working in relational modes, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Tania El
Khoury, and Shubigi Rao. Importantly, the artists discussed here all work transnationally. Tiravanija, a Thai national born in Argentina, has an established presence in North American and Southeast Asia, while British-Lebanese live artist El Khoury has performed primarily in Lebanon, Malta, and Great Britain before relocating to New York to direct the Center for Human Rights and the Arts at Bard (CHRA). Singaporean visual artist, filmmaker, and author Shubigi Rao has exhibited widely in Southeast Asia, and traveled around the globe during the five-year research process for her exhibition for Singapore’s National Pavilion at the 59th Venice Biennale (2022). I propose that transnationality is a key relational aspect of the works discussed, as the interpersonal connections generated in their creation traverse geographic, cultural, and linguistic borders to offer encounters that expand the potentials of engagement.

While each artist discussed employs distinctly different relational and disciplinary approaches, the nature of the works examined is by and large resistive. By resistive, I mean to say that the works address issues of inequity and oppression with the aim of disputing those oppressive circumstances. While Tiravanija’s recent work began as a conciliatory response to violent and divisive protests in Bangkok, the project grew to incorporate engagement with protests in North America. El Khoury’s work has engaged mysogyony, islamophobia, and police surveillance in Great Brittan, as well as the changing role of the Mediterranean Sea as a place that is at once a passage for refugees to Europe as well as a site of increasingly commodified tourist destinations. Rao’s decade long project *Pulp*, of which the Biennale exhibition was the midpoint, charts histories of banned books, destroyed and underground libraries, and languages threatened with extinction in the Malay linguistic sphere, as well as in Italy and Bosnia. Together, the
works by these three artists demonstrate the resistive potential of interactive art today and reaffirm the value of relational modes to generate solidarity across borders of all kinds.

A BRIEF GENEALOGY: FORMULATION AND RECEPTION OF RELATIONAL AESTHETICS

Exhibition venues in the Euro-American world were inundated in the early 2000s by artwork and art discourse on the theme of “relationality.” Provoked largely by Nicolas Bourriaud’s exhibition Traffic (CPAC Musée d’art Contemporain de Bordeaux, 1996), and a related text, Esthétique Relationnelle (1998) translated in 2002 as Relational Aesthetics, “relational” became a watchword for groups celebrating or decrying art that promised new modes of democratic access, resistance, and transnationality. Ongoing discourses continue to make use of Bourriaud’s proposition of relational art as: “a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space.”¹ While not all artists working today in participatory, social, or collaborative modes would claim their work to be “relational art,” a primary legacy of relational aesthetics is the proliferation of art in which the audience/participant plays a vital role, and in which new social forms are imagined or enacted.

Bourriaud’s formulation of relational aesthetics envisioned audiences not as individual spectators but as participatory, if provisional, communities. If the “practical point of departure” for a work is “the whole of human relations,” then the artwork, dependent on human relations, ceases to be an independent work for private consumption

and is in this way democratized, so the thinking goes. Typified by situations such as Rirkrit Tiravanija’s shared meals in galleries, relational works provoked interactive experiences, “so as to restore the social bonds lost to the atomizing forces of capitalism,”\(^2\) as Yates McKee puts it. For Bourriaud, the political potential of relational art has to do with creating what Claire Bishop has termed a “microtopian ethos.”\(^3\) Rather than transforming the public political sphere, for Bourriaud, the political significance of relational art is its turn away from “future-oriented manifestos” and toward utopias lived “in the real time of concrete and intentionally fragmentary experiences.”\(^4\) In other words, the “relational” focus is not on the future or on permanent interventions, but on the here and now.

Artists creating these “fragmentary experiences” employ a range of methods and modes; a short list of works include Liam Gillick’s minimal structures of steel and plexiglass, reminiscent of office spaces, that serve as platforms for open-ended interactions, *Discussion Island: Projected Think Tank* (1997)\(^5\), Felix Gonzales-Torres’ *Stacks* and piles of sweets at *Traffic*, in which visitors were invited to take something from the work itself,\(^6\) Christine Hill’s practice that involved giving visitors shoulder massages and setting up a second-hand clothing store at documenta X (1997)\(^7\), and most well known of all, Rirkrit Tiravanija’s open ended situation-performances in which food shared in communal meals is a leitmotif. Bourriaud also conceived relational art as a

\(^4\) Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 45.
\(^6\) Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 39
\(^7\) Bishop, “Antagonism,” 260.
response to (and reflection of) the shift from a goods-based to a service-based economy and some, such as Bishop and Anna Dezuze, have expressed concerns about these experience-based artworks devolving into an entertainment commodity in which museum goers pay a fee to have an ‘experience’ as part of an in-group, thus undercutting the political potential of such works.

Critiques of relational aesthetics are not limited to relational art’s potential for commodification, but also extend to how the “relations” of “relational aesthetics” are judged and evaluated. No other critic has been more outspoken on these issues than Claire Bishop, whose critique of relational aesthetics, in brief, is that Bourriaud’s formulation sees positive, democratic political relevance in interactive art practices simply because they are interactive. Bishop proposes that the kinds of interactions produced by interactive art need to be assessed, without privileging harmony or togetherness over social disruption, which Bishop argues should be valued for its ability to critique social ills. Nevertheless, as Grant Kester states, after Relational Aesthetics the interest in participatory, collaborative, and “dialogic” practices has “increased dramatically within the art world,” while the range of parallel modes of interactive art have likewise multiplied.

“RELATIONAL” AND “PARTICIPATORY” ART

While relational art strives to create temporary social bonds, often within the space of the museum or the gallery, participatory art serves as a broader category with its own

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8 See Anna Deuze, “Introduction in The Do-It-Yourself Artwork Participation from Fluxus to New Media, edited by Anna Deuze, 15-17.
9 Bishop, “Antagonism,” 263.
agendas, often working within communities at large to address social needs. The pioneering work of Suzanne Lacey’s *The Oakland Projects* (1991-2001) laid the foundation for a type of art intervention categorized as “social practice” art in the US. Spanning a decade, Lacey’s series of installations, performances, and political activism with youth in Oakland, California, consisted of eight major works and addressed issues of youth relations with police and the community, youth pregnancy, and youth relationships with staff and teachers in schools. Notable in terms their high visibility, sustained planning periods, and multidirectional involvement with education, health, probation, and truancy departments in Oakland, Lacey’s projects created new social formulations to address community problems.¹¹

In an international context, Grant Kester has documented and praised the innovative projects of *Dialogue Collective* and their collaborator, Mumbai-based artist Navjot Altaf, in the Bashtar region of central India. As their name suggests, *Dialogue* works collaboratively with local indigenous populations to address issues such as clean water and housing. In their *Nalpar* project (2000—), *Dialogue* created functional sculptures to update water pumping stations that had long been a source of discomfort and disease, replacing the outdated pumps with platforms that facilitated water carrying labor and were designed to reference indigenous symbols for water.¹² It should be clear that while both social practice works, *Nalpar* and *The Oakland Projects*, operate in terms of “social relations,” unlike the “relational art” Bourriaud’s conceives of, they seek lasting results instead of the creation of temporary “micro-topias,” and they involve active collaboration with communities instead of open-ended situations in a gallery.

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¹² Kester, *The One and the Many*, 82-86.
setting. Despite the shared reliance on human interaction as an integral part of the work, “relational” and “social practice” artworks have differing trajectories in terms of duration, impact, and modes of social engagement.

While the above examples demonstrate prosocial interventions, works categorized as “participatory” may also take more antagonistic forms. An illustrative example of an antagonistic participatory work, Francis Alïs’s project for the Third Ibero-American Biennial of Lima, When Faith Moves Mountains (2002), recruited 500 unpaid student volunteers to move a 1,600-foot sand dune less than a foot from its original location using only shovels. Alïs emphasizes the intentional futility of the endeavor, framing the project as a “poetic act” entailing the deliberate “suspension of meaning.”\footnote{Kester, The One and the Many, 71.} Other prime examples of art that creates social dissonance include Santiago Sierra’s in/famous projects in which he pays impoverished people to take part in damaging or humiliating activities, such as 160 cm Line Tattooed on Four people (2000).\footnote{Bishop, “Antagonism,” 270.} In contrast to prosocial “social practice” participatory work, projects such as Sierra’s and Alïs’ use interaction to critique and lay bare existing inequalities and conditions of alienated labor.\footnote{Bishop, “Antagonism,” 270.} While “relational art” seeks to temporarily restore social bonds, antagonistic works of “participatory art” follow an almost opposite trajectory.

LEGACIES OF RELATIONAL AESTHETICS: PARTICIPATORY ART TODAY

The current moment—shaped by global mass migration and social, political, economic, and environmental precarity—impels artists today not only to reveal but to intervene in
those precarities, and to question relationships between art and power. The position of institutional and blue-chip gallery art as a constituent part of the global luxury economy and as an elite commodity has increasingly come under fire, particularly in the wake of Occupy Wall Street (OWS). As Yates McKee discusses in detail, during OWS participants occupied Zuccotti Park (2011) to reimagine art “as direct action, collaborative affect, and political subjectivization” in resistance to the injustices of local and global capitalist conditions.16

Globally, protest movements continue to adapt strategies of creative direct action and to use aesthetic approaches that, as Aidan McGarry explains, “are attuned to adapt to and support rapid social change engendered by protest movements”17 to intervene in oppressive conditions. And, as Nikos Papastergiadis states in his discussion of the global proliferation of art with a social dimension in and outside of biennial circuits, “The idea that the place of art is above life is an illusion that no longer has much meaning.”18 Within a context of global protest aesthetics and renewed pressure for art to be of, rather than apart from, the world, artists operating in prestigious galleries and museum spaces are compelled to evaluate the positions of their own practices—within the capitalist systems implicated in the oppressive conditions that many artworks would seek to expose or intervene in. There is renewed pressure for art to be a force for imagining, but also for creating, more humane conditions.

16 McKee, Strike Art, 6.
While relational aesthetics sought to distance itself from lasting or future-focused interventions, its legacy, of bringing participatory practices in general into the mainstreams of art systems, manifests in the ways in which curators and artists think about the role of art in a time of precarity. Indeed, many see participatory practices as a choice mode to engage pressing social problems. Citing a United Nations Human Rights Council’s (UNHRC) report on the current number of displaced individuals, Terry Smith positions displacement as *the* challenge of the twenty-first century, and proposes that participatory art is uniquely positioned to articulate and respond to the ongoing migration and refugee crisis:

> Community-oriented, participatory art practices are coming to the fore as being more immediately useful and potentially longer-lasting responses to current conditions than representations of crisis that have the art world as their first and last audience.”

Smith articulates a now common notion—that art of the future can, and indeed ought to, interact with communities to help reshape the world we live in. Biennials and art exhibitions increasingly present work that engages social horizons or that seeks to create platforms for re-imagining the ways that people interact. While artist collectives are often invited to high profile exhibition venues such as the Venice Biennale, the decision to have the Indonesian collective ruangrupa curate the entirety of documenta XV prompted a great deal of discussion as to how the Jakarta-based artist collective would approach the exhibition. Known for their collaborative practice spaces and free arts school in Jakarta, ruangrupa’s conceptual framework takes as its inspiration the traditional Indonesian

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concept of nongkrong, “an informal hanging out with friends that leads to shared practice.”

In keeping with their focus on collectivist practice, ruangrupa pitched a lumbang (rice barn) curatorial approach to the organizers of documenta XV, “a concept in which collaboration, redistribution, and collective governance are key to the process and material realization.” Selecting artist collectives primarily from the Global South as the main participants, ruangrupa redistributed a significant portion of their curatorial budget to these groups to do with as they saw fit to create arts interventions and projects in Kassel. While the exhibition kicked off with shared music and food, the convivial mood was quickly derailed with the discovery that a 20-year-old banner containing antisemitic content had made it into the show through one of the collectives that ruangrupa selected. While the unfolding scandal and its implications are beyond the scope of this essay, the utopian aspirations of documenta XV were in many ways overridden by this unfortunate occurrence, which eclipsed the inventive attempt by ruangrupa to co-create a different kind of art community in Kassel.

The idea of art, in particular participation-based art, as a vehicle for the co-creation of a different kind of world is also a concept engaged at a recent annual Verbier Art Summit in Switzerland, titled We Are Many: Art, the Political and Multiple Truths. Addressing the 2019 Summit, artist Olafur Eliasson, known for his environmentally

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22 For an in-depth discussion of the scandal, see You, “What Politics?”
focused works that emphasize participation and sustainability, proposed that individuals, and in particular artists, should be accountable to the world we share:

Do I actually acknowledge that, with sensing the world, comes a degree of responsibility? Do I, in the way I see the world, also co-produce it or produce it or share the narrative or perhaps even have the role of authorship?23

Here, Eliasson’s rhetorical question suggests that the individual (artist) is implicated in the co-creation of an existence shared with others, and it would follow, has an ethical imperative to create a world that is more sustainable and just.

While “relational aesthetics” may not have been a watchword at Verbier 2019, figures whose work involves interaction featured prominently among a list of artist speakers who in addition to Eliasson included Rirkrit Tiravanija, Ernesto Neto, and Tania Bruguera, known for Tatlin’s Whisper #5 (2008), in which off-duty police performed crowd control of museum guests inside the Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall.24 Tiravanija gave the keynote address, calling on attendees to consider art as a vehicle not only for participation but for change: “Everybody can change things; and everybody can make art. […] Don’t just sit in your comfortable place. Do not stay behind, you have to go forward.”25 This statement, in particular the call to “go forward,” seems to signal a turn to a more politically engaged practice for Tiravanija, who Claire Bishop credits as having “done more than any other artist to propel convivial and open-ended participation into the intuitional mainstream.”26 Moreover, while in the iteration of who’s afraid of red, yellow,
RIRKRIT TIRAVANJAVA: AESTHETICS OF GLOBAL PROTEST AND THE COMMUNAL GESTURE

In *Relational Aesthetics*, Bourriaud positions Tiravanija’s communal meals as exemplars of relational art in their open-endedness, transitivity, and resistance to definitions, rhetorically asking of Tiravanija’s offering of shared food and drink in *Traffic*: “Is it a sculpture? An installation? A performance? An example of social activism?” In contrast to what Bourriaud praises as extreme open-endedness, the original iteration of the *who’s afraid of red, yellow, and green* at Bangkok’s Tonson Gallery (2010 —), and future iterations, are created with the explicit intent to bring people together in the wake of protests.

The title of the work is a reference to the three curries served, but also to the opposing factions involved in the deadly 2010 Red Shirt Protests in Thailand. Over ninety people were killed and over 200 wounded during the 2010 anti-government protests in Bangkok, led by the rural-based United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD), also known as the “Red Shirts,” who fought both with military as well as the more urban, royalist “Yellow Shirts.” Tiravanija explains that Tonson Gallery is located adjacent to some of the most devastating clashes, and says that he

staged the initial iteration of *red, yellow, and green* in the desire to help the Bangkok artistic community suture social bonds after the fracturing effects of violence:

> I felt he need to address that (fragmentation) and brought all the imagery from the first protest movements in the 1970’s, which was the first time people, mostly students, (in Thailand) made their voices heard and made real change, a change in government. […] And many of the people now who are fractured at this moment used to protest together and used to march together against the military. So, I felt the need to rethink where we were coming from and what we were fighting for.29

Tiravanija hired student artists to illustrate images of protest photography dating back to the 1970’s that Tiravanija and another collaborator had collected, layering image on top of one another, until the walls were “completely black” with images. Throughout the month-long installation, and food a constant in the gallery setting.

Here, three aspects of the work are notable. First, while the typical gallery visitor might only stay for an hour or so, in keeping with the typical encounter-based engagements of relational art, an extended duration, social practice dimension is also present in the goal to repair a community fractured by violence. Second, there is a significant research dimension to the installation, which relies on collaborative sourcing of historic and contemporary protest imagery to provide the raw material for the student artists to create the visual content of the installation. Third, the employment of the student artists constitutes a sustaining act that provides material support for the students that has a social practice dimension in and of itself.30


30 The hiring of the student artists in Bangkok was inspired, Tiravanija says, by an earlier project in Mexico City, in which he hired student artists to illustrate images of protest he had collected, and then sold the illustrations to support his art residence foundation, The Land, near Chiang Mai, in Northern Thailand. The goal here was to support the precarious lives of student artists and the foundation, to provide “an economic framework” for sustaining both young artists and The Land. See: Rirkrit Tiravanija and Mark Beasley, “Meet the Artist,”, July 16, 2019, https://youtu.be/hB59A2D7qqA.
in significant ways from earlier relational work in its social and political dimensions, arguably, in response to contemporary precarities.

When staged at the Hirshhorn (2019) and later at Wrightwood (2022), local protest photography, both historic and recent, was added to the trove of images that the student artists were able to draw from. In this way the work itself becomes a kind of transnational visual archive of protest, aesthetically connecting the 2010 protests in Thailand that were the original provocation for the work to global protest culture. Protest itself is depicted as both historical and ongoing; the accretive process by which the images are acquired generates a (selective) visual history that reads as at once familiar and unfamiliar. On the one hand, the images scontain the visual tropes of protest—people holding signs, police, fists raised in the air, and so on, and will be in this way familiar to most viewers. On the other hand, the range of scales employed by the artists and the collaging of images from different events, rendered in visibly mutable, tactile charcoal line drawings, differ markedly form the typical photographic, small-scale, screen or print based presentations of the images, and in this way deviate from the expected presentations of protest photography, and distance the images from the visual grammars of protest reportage.

At the same time, the work builds on Tiravanija’s leitmotif of bringing people together to create a “platform for time to be experienced differently,” apart from the often time-sensitive and transactional interactions of daily life. This call to be aware of alternate ways that we might relate to one another, is itself resistive in that it asks participants to imagine, albeit briefly, communal ways of being together. Tiravanija sees

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his work as situated in a lineage that includes Fulxus and Alan Kaprow’s happenings in the 1960’s, and while he embraces Bourriaud’s idea of the relational, he resists the notion that this work operates in an aesthetic register. Here’s Tiravanija, in conversation with Mark Beasley of the Hirshhorn on the 2019 iteration of *red, yellow, and green*, on what he thinks of “relational aesthetics”:

> I like the idea of relations, but I don’t really enjoy aesthetics. [...] I’m not really looking at things aesthetically that way. And I’d rather look at the relation, and I wouldn’t aestheticize that. [...] I mean, it’s of course partly about the image that’s on the wall, partly about the cooking that’s in front, but really for me what’s very important is actually the people in it.32

Here, Tiravanija rather adamantly downplays “aesthetics” as a structuring element of *red, yellow, and green*, perhaps wishing to defend his credibility as something of an anti-aesthete, committed to putting humble interactions of people above any aesthetic agenda.33 And yet, while for the moment sidestepping the question of in what ways groups of people interacting with one another might be considered as aesthetic forms, it’s worth asking what role that the re-presented images of protest play in terms of shaping “relations” in *red, yellow, and green*. To my mind this is an essential question, since as a participant I observed that the relational experience was directly impacted by the images of protest being continually rendered on the gallery walls.

Indeed, I would argue that the relational experience of *red, yellow, and green* is potent and notable in that it generates interactions that would not occur outside of the platform provided by the work and all its specific elements, but in particular the archive

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33 Tiravanija’s statement about his desire to “Take Duchamp’s urinal off the wall and piss into it” is often quoted as shorthand for his desire to re-instrumentalize objects separated out of life/time continuums as artworks and put them to real use to make people aware of time and their actions. See Francesca Grassi, *Rirkrit Tiravanija a Retrospective (Tomorrow Is Another Fine Day)*. Zürich: JRP Ringier, 2007, 7.
of global protest imagery that it presents. The affective texture, as well as the content, of the relational experience is directly informed by the aesthetics of the specific images of protest being traced in black charcoal on the white walls of the gallery by the student artists employed by Tiravanija. In other words, the conversations about the protests depicted, as well as the encounter of sharing a communal meal with strangers, took specific affective forms as a direct result of the aesthetic presentation of the documentary images of protest.

I observed that transnational aspects of resistance were discussed in plainly spoken, conversational registers over the bowls of curry, and that many comments centered on the actions and expressions of the protests that were depicted. Many wondered aloud about the nature of the protests in Thailand, some had participated in the Black Lives Matter march depicted, or in recent protests calling for a no-fly zone over Ukraine, and many remarked on the expressions of the protesters depicted. Of course, all this took place within the relational context of feeling compelled to make conversation while eating with strangers. The need to converse was heightened by the recent isolations of the pandemic, and many commented on the rarity of conversation with strangers in a face-to-face encounter.

The overall affective experience, and visual aesthetic, of many strangers together in the presence of the familiar-yet-unfamiliar depictions of protests culled from news outlets creates a distinctly aesthetic-social form that alludes to the act of demonstration itself. There is a clear referential quality to eating food and talking with strangers with the social forms of protest. To return to the question of gatherings as aesthetic forms, the embodied exploration of protest, of the communal meal, and of togetherness in who's
afraid of red, yellow, and green is one that to my mind expands the possibilities of interaction for socially engaged, participatory art today. Moreover, in creating communal experiences for participants—and creating space for connection and contemplation of international histories of protest—there is a resistive aesthetic at work. Resistance, after all, need not always be realized as conflict. And, while the communal gesture of sharing a meal creates only a temporary gathering, in this situation it is perhaps enough for the start of a sense of solidarity with the struggles of those beyond one’s immediate sphere.

TANIA EL KHOURY: ENCOUNTERS, RESISTANCE, AND TRANSNATIONALITY

“The true artist is interested in the art object as an art process, the thing in being, the being of the thing, the struggle, the excitement, the energy, that have found expression in a particular way. The true artist is after the problem. The false artist wants it solved (by somebody else).”

— Jeanette Winterson, Art Objects

Whenever I think of the works of Tania El Khoury, I can’t help but remember Jeanette Winterson’s words about the “true artist.” Despite the fact that Winterson’s essay is concerned primarily with the visual and the literary, rather than the performing arts, she could just as easily be describing “the struggle, the excitement, the energy” present in El Khoury’s intense and often intimate performances. El Khoury, whose decades long practice embodies process as product, is truly, as Winterson puts it, “after the problem.”

Currently serving as founding Director of the Center for Human Rights and the Arts (CHRA) at Bard College in New York’s Hudson Valley, El Khoury’s body of performance-based works engage a range of concerns, from misogyny, to state

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surveillance and violence, to the plight of victims of Syria’s civil war, to the shifting politics of the Mediterranean Sea itself.

A Lebanese-British artist whose work has been performed around the world, El Khoury resists thinking of her work as theatrical, and prefers the term “live art” for “relational reasons,” as it offers “a more flexible space between maker and performer, artist and spectator.”35 Her work departs from traditional drama in that agency is shared with the audience, who play a pivotal role in the realization of each performance. Often international or cross-cultural in scope, these performances often rely on intimate interpersonal connection as a core aspect of the situation. El Khoury describes the value of performance so:

“Performance work has allowed me for years to create work globally and relate to others in shared intimacy and vulnerability. My interest in live work is essentially an interest in the possibilities of the encounter with an audience. This encounter is where politics happen, politics shift, and politics are practiced.36

In my own correspondence with El Khoury and in her writings, the idea of “the encounter” repeatedly comes to the fore as a site where intimate and transnational connections can be made, and where solidarity with groups beyond one’s own may be generated. The emphasis placed on the encounter between artist and audience as a site of political activity places El Khoury’s work in dialogue with relational works that are typically short term and experiential, as well as with social practice works with an extended duration. It is within the embodied experience of the encounter that El Khoury addresses the problems that form the central axes of specific works.

36 Tania El Khoury, in correspondence with Flora K. Schildknecht, February 7, 2024, email.
A key performance in this vein, *Maybe if You Choreograph Me You Will Feel Better* (2011) was commissioned by London’s Battersea Arts Centre and was a winner of the Total Theater Award for Innovation as well as the Arches Brick Award. In *Choreograph Me*, a male audience of one directs the movements of the artist in a public space using a wireless headset. The audience is instructed to direct the performance based on his desires and assumptions about how an Arab woman might behave in public. The male audience often becomes abusive—directing the artist to walk into walls, touch herself, cry, and punch the pavement—illustrating seemingly inextricable connections between power and its abuse.\(^{37}\) *Choreograph* demands that the audience actively explore ways in which power and violence intersect gender and identity.

From a relational perspective, *Choreograph* stands out as a work that creates unique affective experiences and power dynamics for both artist and audience. On the one hand, the artist hears the directions of the audience in an intimate mode of communication through the headset and must, per her own parameters, submits to the audience’s control. She carries out his directives publicly, in front of passersby who are not aware she is performing. On the other hand, the audience directs the artist while observing her from the window of a nearby building and experiences both control and comparative anonymity.

Occupying a third position beyond the invited audience and the performer, the incidental audience of citizens or even authorities who happen to be in the vicinity add another unpredictable set of relational positions, sometimes resulting in harassment of the exposed artist, but not harassment of the audience, who is shielded by his physical

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remove from the scene. During some performances of *Choreograph*, incidental audience encounters have proved antagonistic, and El Khoury has been both “racially abused while performing in Edinburgh, and stopped by the police for ‘looking suspicious’ in Lisbon.” These interactions are part of the power dynamic the piece investigates, laying bare multiple layers of implication in the creation of female Arab ‘others’ in European spaces.

Another of El Khoury’s quintessential public performances also commissioned by Battersea Arts, *Jarideh (Newspaper, in Arabic)* (2010) uses audience interaction to explore public dimensions of anti-terrorist and anti-Arab paranoia. In *Jarideh*, an audience of one meets with El Khoury in a café and attempts to identify the most suspicious person in the room. The audience has been directed in advance to dress too warmly for the weather and is instructed by El Khoury to pantomime reading an Arabic-language newspaper that has been altered to contain the London Metropolitan Police’s tips on “how to spot a terrorist.”

After surveilling the café, the audience is directed to leave a backpack in the middle of a street monitored by law enforcement on CCTV, thus ‘casting’ the audience in the roles of both surveillant and surveilled, and revealing, as El Khoury puts it, the “social paranoia in the so-called war on terror.” One-on-one performances of *Jarideh* can be productively understood as occupying a ground between participatory art interventions and drama. Rather than taking place in the relative safety of a gallery or a

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theater, however, El Khoury’s public performances implicate the invited audience and passersby in the production of racially inflected paranoia.

Commenting on the form and content of *Jarideh* and *Choregraph*, El Khoury emphasizes the value of performance as a vehicle to contest oppressive systems. In her words:

> These pieces are commentary on the power dynamics of either state or patriarchy. They weren’t meant to merely expose them but to push through them, to start from those power dynamics as a laboratory for encounters with audience and see where they take us. The works assume that we all know what we are dealing with and want to look closely at how these powers are exercised and what do they do to our bodies and souls. [...] To look together on specific areas of the society and play with them, research them, and dig deeper into them.\(^{40}\)

Despite El Khoury’s stated desire to not just expose but to “push through” power dynamics, *Choregraph* and *Jarideh* might seem at first glance to reproduce, albeit in absurd registers, the profiling and abuses of power they seek to disrupt. However, I would counter that in fact these performances are decidedly resistive in that they ask the audience to actively take part in the investigation into those problematic power dynamics. By interacting with El Khoury in performances about misogyny or islamophobia, the audience is offered a unique opportunity to consider how they themselves might be implicated in those social constructs.

*Jarideh* and *Choregraph* clearly take human relations and their social context (as Bourriaud would say), as both the form and content, the process and product, of the work. And while those relations are key, there is a figural element that is essential to both pieces that is worth considering, as well. One could say that a *relational* figuration is realized through the bodies perceived or created as “Arab” in predominantly white, western

\(^{40}\) Tania El Khoury, in correspondence with Flora K. Schildknecht, February 7, 2024, email.
spaces. Notably, it is the body that is read as specifically Arab and female in *Choreograph* that becomes the plane for the relational “research and play” that El Khoury cites as essential to the work. Likewise, in *Jarideh*, the invited audience refigures their own bodies as ‘foreign’ and ‘suspicious’ through their directed actions. The body is brought into focus in both works as a zone in which ideas of foreignness are translated into the realm of public social interactions.\(^{41}\) In observing and participating in that translation, the invited audience denaturalizes ingrained notions of foreignness often ascribed to bodies perceived as Arab in western Europe.

While the state surveillance and islamophobia explored in *Jarideh* are serious matters indeed, it is important to point out that there is a significant sense of play evident in the work. In a recorded compilation of performances, El Khoury speaks with a young woman in a café as she shows her the newspaper. The instructions are narrated in voice over: “Do not look at me when I’m talking to you. You can pretend you’re looking at the front page of this paper. It’s in Arabic, so it’s read right, to left … I’m sure you already knew that.”\(^{42}\) El Khoury’s voice is both warm and conspiratorial, as she continues: “This is a secret mission, and for it to succeed, no one should know it is happening.”\(^{43}\) The intimacy and playfulness in this dialogue are key. Besides an investigation paranoia, which typically spreads through the café once customers realize they are being observed, *Jarideh* is also an exploration of trust between artist and invited audience. Importantly, the audience is asked to place their trust in El Khoury, in her own words, someone who is

\(^{41}\) For a discussion of the borders of southern Europe as “loci of translation,” in which those who are people and citizens on one side emerge as “refugees,” “migrants,” and “asylum seekers” on the other, see Bertacco and Vallorani, *The Relocation of Culture*, 75.


\(^{43}\) El Khoury, *Jarideh*. 
“clearly foreign, and most probably Arab.”

El Khoury leverages of her appearance to create an encounter in which both ideas of foreignness and trust are both part of the interaction.

El Khoury’s live art discussed here takes a pointedly different form than Tirivanija’s who’s afraid of red, yellow, and green in that the actions of audience/participants have parameters that are less open ended and that interaction with the artist is direct, rather than indirect. And yet, both offer relational models that expand the potentials of interaction to offer opportunities for audiences and participants to connect with those hailing from other cultural and identity groups. Whether resisting the cultural construction of Arab ‘others,’ or repairing social bonds after divisive protests, or simply offering a platform for the increasingly rare communal meal, elements of planned as well as unscripted interaction offers space imagining alternative kinds of social relations. And, while the precarities that inform El Khoury’s performances or Tirivanija’s situations are often deeply troubling, the work itself may offer the chance for unexpected connections and even joy. As El Khoury herself says: “Just because the world is depressing, the art form doesn’t need to be.”

SHUBIGI RAO: ALTERNATIVE ARCHIVES OF RESISTANCE

How does one begin a discussion of a work that is at once a book, an installation, a film, and a five-year, international research endeavor? Any attempt to effectively discuss Pulp III: A Short Biography of the Banished Book, Shubigi Rao’s project for the Singapore National Pavilion at the 59th Venice Biennale, runs up against the question of which of

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44 El Khoury, Jarideh.
45 El Khoury, correspondence.
these aspects, if any, are primary. Speaking with Ute Meta Bauer, curator for Rao’s installation at the Singapore Pavilion, she asserts that the relationships generated in the making of *Pulp III* “are just as important as the film and book presented in Venice.”\(^{46}\) This statement rings true when one engages the material artifacts of Rao’s multivocal relational project, which even with its ambitious, archival collection of narratives, retains a deeply personal quality.

_Talking Leaves_, Rao’s ninety-minute, single channel film for the Singapore Pavilion, brings together a range of interviews conducted during Rao’s five-year, transnational, solo project exploring libraries, their destruction and preservation, and the lives of those dedicated to books and languages—from antiquarian book sellers and librarians to linguists and activists. Described by Rao herself as a “polyvocal, mythopoetic film about the censorship of books, destruction of libraries, assaults on knowledge and free press, and the loss of languages in embattled communities,”\(^{47}\) _Talking Leaves_ is more meditative than documentarian in tone.

The film is presented at the endpoint of Rao’s installation, located in a second-story apartment in the _Sale D’Armi_ on the Biennale’s Arsenale campus, and to access the viewing area for _Talking Leaves_, visitors first walk through an architectural paper maze installation. Wall-sized, vertical leaves of white paper guide visitors toward a pallet of the accompanying book: *Pulp III: An Intimate Inventory of the Banished Book*, a 360-page color volume dense with text, images, and Rao’s own handwritten marginalia and printed annotations. A limited, first-edition of 5,000 books are layered in a rectangular stack (a rough pyramid at the time of my visit) that gradually shrinks as visitors take copies with

\(^{46}\) Ute Meta Bauer, in conversation with Flora K. Schildknecht, June 30, 2024, Singapore.

\(^{47}\) Shubigi Rao, descriptive text, _Talking Leaves_ (lower res mp4.m4v) [https://vimeo.com/755936336](https://vimeo.com/755936336)
them. Viewers next pass by a mural, a tree with associative terms provoked by book-banning and other repressions tipping each branch, to a viewing area where *Talking Leaves* plays in a loop. Rao’s installation requires not only extended viewing on site, but extended reading beyond, to fully apprehend the work. This demand for sustained engagement is part of the intentional relationality that Rao cultivates.

Viewing *Talking Leaves*, one is soon struck by the primacy given to the voices of the interviewees and the visual absence of the filmmaker herself. Rao’s cinematic techniques include long hand-held shots that situate the camera as a wobbly, tenuous presence; the camera lingers on interviewees’ hands as they gesticulate, turn pages of antiquarian books from Europe and Southeast Asia, examine rare botanical prints, diaries both published and unpublished, and even charred remains of books intentionally burned. This sustained focus on hands visually anchors the range of images Rao presents in the plane of intimate human interaction. The film unfolds at the unhurried pace of the subjects, refusing to gloss narratives or succinctly relay information.

For Rao, interviewees must be allowed to speak for themselves, as themselves. And, while there is a great deal of Rao the author in the book *Pulp III* in terms of first-person narration of interview situations and Rao’s reflections on the project itself, Rao describes her reluctance to allow the mediating voice of the artist to override or order the narratives she collects. As Rao reflects in an interview in *Pulp III* with linguist Stephani Pillai:

> There is this persistent idea that filmmakers, writers, and artists can come in from the outside and have the final interpretation of the content. I am trying to repudiate some of that appropriative method, whilst still retaining
the artistic nature of this endeavour. [...] I believe the participant must have more autonomy, more control, over their content.\textsuperscript{48}

Here, Rao is responding to Pillai’s description of the methods she uses in working with indigenous speakers of endangered languages in Singaporean and Malaysian contexts. Rao draws a methodological connection with Pillai’s own practice, which is based on mutual consent and vulnerability, when working with indigenous communities. This lateral sharing of agency, as Rao and Pillai discuss at length, is at odds with conventional academic methods and at odds with conventional notions of auteur- and author-ship.\textsuperscript{49}

One way Rao’s project demonstrates this shared agency is through the sheer volume of stories collected. This insistence on a multiplicity of voices, like a library itself, challenges the primacy of any single, author-imposed narrative. \textit{Pulp III} functions is a transnational record of resistance, taking as its starting point the city-states of Singapore and Venice as long-standing centers of print production. In Italy, Rao interviews writer Anna Toscano in her personal library in Venice on her special collection, that survived the flooding of 2019, of books of rare literature and diaries of women writers. She meets with Federico Bucci, a Venetian antiquarian bookseller specializing in banned books and medieval propaganda. Rao interviews and Massimo “Mao” Valpiana, at Nonviolence House, a library of books of nonviolent resistance in Verona.


\textsuperscript{49} The need Pillai and Rao discuss here, to reimagine connections between art, activism, and academia is in fact a key aspect of the current relational and institutional work of Tannia El Khoury. Here, El Khoury articulates a similar emphasis on shared authority and lateral, instead of hierarchical, collaborative models: “The concept of CHRA is to take both artists and activists seriously as producers of knowledge. This is meant to counter the extractivism that the art world employs in places of conflict while also offering alternatives to the instrumentalization of art for political causes. The creative engagement is that of a horizontal encounter between art and activism through innovative forms and critical thought processes.” El Khoury, correspondence.
In Singapore, Rao speaks with author Melissa De Silva on the preservation and heritage of Kristang, a creole language with Melakan and Portuguese roots. She meets with literary historian Faris Jormani at Aliwal Arts Center in Singapore to discuss print production and cross pollinations of Malay, Indonesian, and Arabic languages through literary markets. Rao interviews representatives of the Workers’ History Archive in Seoul, South Korea, on their collection documenting over a century of workers’ struggles; she meets with Dana Haddad, cofounder of Baynatna, an Arabic-language library in Berlin, carrying books banned in Middle Eastern countries and situated in the same building as a refugee shelter.

The above are just a few of the many situations Rao presents in *Pulp III*, that together speak to the multiplicity of resistive measures taken to preserve marginalized histories and voices. This is not to say that the information is presented without aesthetic considerations in mind, as the editing of *Talking Leaves* makes clear. Sequences deftly move from one image to the next, visually referencing the associative browsing one might do in a library. For example, in a section that leads into a particularly urgently presented narrative on violence in the Balkans, an illustrated limerick (in English) about a man who liked to read in the company of birds cuts to birds on a roof, to a page with the heading “Trauma and the Archive,”50 to a flock of birds in flight silhouetted by the setting sun, to a squadron of military helicopters similarly backlit. The soundtrack slowly comes

50 Under the heading “Trauma and the Archive,” the passage reads: *I have a mania to observe everything, tell everything, and note down the facts... We are poor and we live on the banks of the river. The riverbanks are places for garbage and the marginal people. People of the favelas are considered marginal. No more do you see buzzards flying the riverbanks near the trash. The unemployed have taken the buzzards’ place.* — Carolina Maria De Jesus, *Child of the Dark.*
into focus as the sounds of roaring fire, and the tone turns from humorous to contemplative to ominous.

From the helicopters, Rao cuts to an interviewee who describes the destruction of volumes containing birth and death certificates by the Serbian military: “The town, in Croatia where my father was born, the Serbian occupation army, they came to the town and they burned the entire vital records book. The book of bones, and the book of death. [...] And people are lost—now people have to prove that they were born.”51 Subsequent shots show charred books in reliquary-like glass boxes, each bound with strips of linen paper and sealed with a red wax stamp—the remains of books destroyed in the intentional shelling of the Oriental Institute in Sarajevo during the Bosnian war in 1992. As Rao layers more interviews and images, a clear line is drawn between the deliberate destruction of books and the destruction of people. A firefighter present during the burning of Sarajevo’s University library, Vijećnica, narrates:

In the night between 25th and 26th August 1992, we were informed that Vijećnica was on fire. At that time, Vijećnica housed extremely important books dating back a long time, or simply put, the whole history of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The entire city was covered in charred book pages, papers were scattered everywhere, and as soon as we arrived at the scene, we ceased feeling human. It was an attempt to kill what was good in people and the world. It took us two days and three nights to put out the fire.52

I quote here at length to communicate something of the texture of this interlocuter, whose affect is at once stoic and heartbroken. The interview is intercut with harrowing documentary footage of Vijećnica engulfed in flames. In voiceover narration, the firefighter relates that under constant shelling from heavy artillery his brigade removed as

51 Shubigi Rao, Talking Leaves, 00:19:50-00:22:00.
52 Rao, Talking Leaves, 00:23:20-00:24:30.
many books as they could for transportation outside of Sarajevo, although in the end, over two million books were destroyed.

Rao develops this line of narrative tension further in interviews with Selma Asotić, poet, translator, and co-organizer of the protest group, The People’s Reading Room. We see Asotić conducting protest readings in front of Vijećnica, which was reconstructed in 2014, but has since been occupied by the city council—while the remnants of the library’s collection are stored outside of Sarajevo in a re-purposed stable. Asotić explains that she organized the readings outside of Vijećnica to alert the public that the building remains empty of books: “Politicians from the ruling party insist on saying that Vijećnica is the symbol of Sarajevo; empty buildings cannot be the symbol of anything.” As a whole, the Balkan sequence of Talking Leaves is a multivocal protest of cultural destruction that itself contributes to the persistence of narratives that could all too easily be erased or fall victim to cultural amnesia.

Of the works discussed in this chapter, Rao’s stands out for its multidirectional relationality. Pulp III compels us to ask: what do we consider to be the work itself, or ‘product,’ and what do we consider the to be the preparatory work, or ‘process?’ Rao’s project challenges those dichotomies. We must consider both the long-term connections Rao makes directly with her interviewees, as well as the shorter-term encounters of Biennale visitors, who see the installation and film and take a copy of Pulp III with them, as both relational process and product. Likewise, relational process and product extend to the experiences of individuals who will encounter transplanted copies of Pulp III later,

53 Rao, Talking Leaves, 00:35:00-00:35:30.
perhaps in the home of a friend or acquaintance, and will connect with Rao’s alternative archive of narratives of resistance.

The private, inherently intimate act of reading is of course a mode of relationality itself, and Rao’s homage to books as resistive, intimate carriers of knowledge and culture is certain to find new audiences through the books’ dispersal via the international audiences of the Biennale. As I annotate my copy of *Pulp III*, I add my own flags to pages that feel important, that resonate. I write in pencil next to the author’s handwritten annotations, reproduced in the margins in red ink. My hands turn the pages, and I’m reminded of the repeating images in *Talking Leaves* of the hands of Rao’s interlocutors holding books, turning the pages as they speak. It’s not an exact equation, more of an alchemy, but somehow I feel connected to these other readers, these other lovers of books.

Author Hisham Matar recently wrote that our age “fears books,” that as in days of old, the powers that be are rattled by the subversive, humanistic potential of bound volumes that “risk disrupting the official narrative, make those whom we have decided are fundamentally different from ourselves vivid, present, and equal.”54 Rao’s *Pulp III* certainly bears witness to such fears, through the cataloging of intentional destructions and suppressions. But even more emphatically, *Pulp III* revels in the power of the book as a relational vehicle for making perceived others “vivid, present, and equal,” it celebrates the printed page as a haven for cultural and private identities forced to the margins. As an

alternative archive of resistance, *Pulp III* testifies to the power of forging connections through print communities and through the arts.

This chapter has offered a brief genealogy of the formulation and reception of relational aesthetics and has explored the diverse relational practices of three contemporary artists who work across genres, disciplines, and national and cultural borders. While building on the legacy of relational aesthetics through a focus on social interaction, Tirivanija’s *who’s afraid of red, yellow, and green* responds to contemporary pressures of global protest to acknowledge the social and political precarity of the world in explicit terms. Pushing the generic boundaries of both theater and participatory art, the provocative live art of Tania El Khoury, *Maybe if You Choreograph Me You will Feel Better*, and *Jarideh*, create embodied encounters for participating audiences to explore, and perhaps even unmake, received notions of foreignness and of the position of women. Operating in a range of relational modes, Shubigi Rao’s *Pulp III: A Short Biography of the Banished Book* asks us to reconsider the scope of what resistive art can be, and to move beyond inadequate dichotomies of process and product, at least where participatory art today is concerned.

The legacies of relational aesthetics manifest today in the proliferation of participatory, social, and collaborative modes, whether in the practices of in individual artists, or in collectives such as ruangrupa, in Indonesia, at art summits such as Verbier, in Switzerland, or even in the form of growing academic institutions such as Bard’s Center for Human Rights and the Arts, which with El Khoury’s directorship, seeks collaborative modes of working with artists and activists as producers of knowledge. The works of Tiravanija, El Khoury, and Rao discussed here demonstrate the potency of participatory
practices to address some of the most pressing concerns of the precarious present. As relational arts continue to evolve, the works by these artists constitute not the formation of a canon, but the foundation of something far more rhizomatic, more fluid, and more interesting, in terms of participation and of artistic resistance.
CHAPTER THREE: MULTIPLE WORLDS:
MULTIVOCALITY AND NARRATIVE FRAGMENTATION IN THREE NOVELS

This chapter explores the use of multivocality and narrative fragmentation in three novels: Sunil Yapa’s *Your Heart is a Muscle the Size of a Fist* (2016), A.B. Yehoshua’s *The Lover*, translated by Philip Simon (1977), and Jokha Alharthi’s *Celestial Bodies*, translated by Marylin Booth (2019). In each novel, multivocality and narrative fragmentation create complex and fluid novelistic worlds that resist the oversimplifying, zero-sum rhetoric of “us versus them” that all too often dominates political discourse today.

Together, these novels demonstrate the value of multivocality and fragmentation for creating empathetic representations of characters who hold conflicting worldviews, such as the opposing perspectives of protesters, law enforcement, and international delegates in the 1999 Seattle World Trade Organization protests in *Your Heart is a Muscle the Size of a Fist*, or the seemingly irreconcilable positions of Jewish and Arab Israelis during and directly after the 1973 Yom Kippur War in *The Lover*, or the generational divides separating the members of an extended family in a swiftly modernizing Oman after the 1970 abolition of slavery in that country in *Celestial Bodies*.

While the previous two chapters develop arguments about the cultural circulation and significance of specific novels, participatory art, and filmic art installations, this chapter also considers the making of meaning in the novel through the use of multiple
narrators and narrative fragmentation from a craft perspective. Here, I use an interpretive method that is geared to the needs of writers of fiction. While emblematic novels are discussed in terms of the connecting theme of creating humanizing portraits of characters with opposing worldviews, the novels are also discussed in terms of how authorial choices, specifically in regard to the use of multiple narrators and narrative fragmentation, function to meaningfully structure the novel, formally underscore thematic motifs, and enhance the vividness and complexity of characters.

Moreover, as each of these novels presents subject positions that would seem to be in direct opposition to one another, protesters versus law enforcement, etc., multivocality and narrative fragmentation comes to the aid of each author in avoiding the polemical. In particular, the fluidity afforded by multivocality allows for a complex treatment of character that, on the whole, makes for compelling fiction. To my mind it’s this complexity that saves each of these novels from the potential pitfalls of the didactic or from letting any political issue, message, or agenda take precedence over the aesthetic and narrative dimensions of the novel.

I bring up this point specifically because, as any aspiring writer of fiction who’s ever felt compelled to write about that thing that moves them knows, striking a balance between thematic, structural, and aesthetic needs can be tricky business. It’s all too easy for a thematic agenda to work its way into the project of the novel in such a way that characters end up feeling more like mouthpieces for the writer’s keenly felt beliefs, rather than the vivid, fictional persons that one hopes to create as a writer, and that one finds memorable and captivating, as a reader.
This is not to say that social allegory is necessarily artless, that fictional characters cannot effectively engage the political as well as the personal, or that fiction should shy away from engaging the pressing issues of our times. In fact, as I’ve argued in the previous two chapters, I believe that literature and art are some of the best means we have at hand to reveal and intervene in oppressive conditions and worldviews.

However, if a novel is to engage such issues as art, political agendas must not be allowed to drive the project, or to appear to drive the project, or else the human element of story will be lost and the novel will likely lose the reader, as well. If one likens the novel to a car tootling down the highway, it must be the characters’ human needs that take the driver’s seat—politics must stay firmly buckled in the back. I repeat, this is not to say that novels cannot be at once moving, lyrical, and political, but to say that for the politics to work, the story must work, first.

ON NARRATIVE SITUATION AND MULTIVOCALITY

The novels discussed here are selected with an eye towards variety of narratorial modes to present a range of strikingly different and effective ways in which multivocality can be brought to the service of the novel as a whole. Each selected novel employs a multivocal, yet distinct, narrative situation, and modes of narration used include third person narration, first person narration, and combinations of the two; the less often used second person address does not appear in the selected example novels.

But what is meant by “narrative situation?” As Suzanne Keen writes, students of the novel are likely familiar with first drawing distinctions between first and third person narrators. Next, one might differentiate between so-called omniscient and limited third person narrators, the former having access to a range of information about multiple
characters and the world of the story and existing on a narrative level apart from the
story, the latter often being restricted to the knowledge and perceptions of a single
focalizing character—not to be confused with the narrator. Keen, however, proposes that
these ready-to-grab terms can be misleading, and I agree.

The problem with these terms stems partly from their connotations of
absoluteness, of either god-like omniscience or of the limitations imposed by a single
caracter’s perspective. For Keen, more accurate alternatives to these terms are provided
by Franz Stanzel,1 who visualizes “authorial” and “figural” narrators as points on a
continuum:

In the authorial narrative situation, the narrator exists outside the story
world of the characters and possesses capacities consistent with an
external perspective. […] In the figural narrative situation, the
perspective of a reflecting character inside the story world overwrites the
narrator, whose presence is downplayed.2

Notice that the emphasis falls on the positionality of the narrator relative to the characters
and to the story world, and the degree to which the narrator is personified (and not
whether first or third person address is used). As Keen observes, the externalized
authorial narrator has overarching access to the characters in the world of the story, like
an author, while the figural narrator relates perceptions shaped or reflected by a figure, or
figures, within the world of the story. Rather than rigid absolutes, the terms authorial and
figural allow us some flexibility in interpreting the shifting tensions between levels of
personification and a narrator’s distance from, or enmeshment in, both reflecting
characters and the world of the story.

1 See F.K. Stanzel, A Theory of Narrative, Trans. Charlotte Goedsche, (Cambridge: Cambridge University,
1984) 5.
While many authorial third person narrators operate covertly, avoiding direct address of the reader and personification, some may be highly personified or operate in an overt register. In first person narration, the overt narratorial position is automatic.\(^3\) These distinctions between authorial and figural, overt and covert narrators prove extremely helpful in the discussions of the novels in this chapter, particularly in the case of Yapa’s novel, in which one of two authorial narrators is reflected through a rotating ensemble of characters and also oscillates between covert and overt narration, directly addressing the reader at key moments in the text.

Rather than assuming a static narrative situation, the axes of overt—covert, and of authorial—figural, allow one to describe shifts in the modes of narration used over the course of the novel. Being able to accurately describe narrative situation is not about a pedantic obsession with detail. Importantly, specific choices in narrative situation both open \textit{and} delimit creative possibilities in the novel, and are therefore deserving of attention, both from a critical and a craft perspective.

**ON NARRATIVE FRAGMENTATION**

At first glance, to call a novel “fragmented” might connote something of a lack, or give the impression that the fragmented novel is in some way less complete than a chronologically straightforward book. Indeed, the \textit{OED} defines the fragment so:

\textit{“fragment, n. A part broken off or otherwise detached from a whole; a broken piece; a (comparatively) small, detached portion of anything.”}\(^4\) Not very encouraging for the fragmentary novel. However, narrative fragmentation—defined very broadly here as the

\(^3\) Keen, \textit{Narrative Form}, 40.
use of discontinuous narration, elliptical or disordered treatment of story chronology, formal presentation of a novel in short segments or epistolatory dispatches such as the personal letter, email, or text message—abounds in modern, postmodern, and contemporary works of fiction.

I propose that the appeal of fragmentation has to do with the enhanced flexibility that the form can provide. As James Wood writes, the fragmentary novel can offer “prismatic and discontinuous forms” that allow the novel to “dart around,” presenting a “lovely, complex variety of elements.” This sounds infinitely more dynamic and appealing than OED’s “broken piece,” and may explain why so many compelling and lyrical novels today make use of fragmentary forms, from Richard Powers’ Pulitzer-Prize winning The Overstory (2018), in which the voices of a cast of characters come together across space and time to protest the destruction of Earth’s forests, to George Saunders’ Man Booker Prize-winning Lincoln in the Bardo (2017), a fantastical portrait of Lincoln’s grief over the death of his son, to Colum McCann’s riveting Apeirogon (2020), that engages the real-life tragedy of two girls killed near the Israel-Palestine border, to Valeria Luiselli’s Lost Children Archive (2019) that blends fact with fiction to address the child migration crisis at the US-Mexico border, to Akwaeke Emezi’s magical debut novel, Freshwater (2018) that explores a young Nigerian-American woman’s struggles in the face of multiple personalities and spirit possession.

As limit cases for what constitutes a novel, Jennifer Egan’s Pulitzer Prize-winning A Visit from the Goon Squad (2011) and its sibling book The Candy House (2022) further 

expand the potentials of narrative fragmentation. Read together, Egan’s books create a rhizomatic, interconnected story world in which each section makes use of a unique narrative situation. Across both collections, recurring characters are presented in an array of settings, times, and forms—email exchanges, PowerPoint slides, an interview, and a spy manual—creating a non-linear, exploded view of a fictional world that to be grasped in entirety must be accessed through its constituent narrative parts. Paradoxically, it’s fragmentation that allows this unity of vision, and an expansive fictional world, to take shape. In the novels discussed and in the examples above, fragmentation serves a carrier of meaning rather than a barrier to understanding.

SUNIL YAPA, YOUR HEART IS A MUSCLE THE SIZE OF A FIST, 2016

“Son,” Bishop said, “suffering is everywhere. I see it every day. And if you wear your heart on your sleeve, the world will just kill you cold.”
“What’s that mean?”
“Stop caring so goddamn much.”

— Sunil Yapa, Your Heart is a Muscle the Size of a Fist

A finalist for the Pen/Faulkner Award, Sunil Yapa’s novel Your Heart Is a Muscle the Size of a Fist is a fictional rendering of a single day of the 1999 World Trade Organization (WTO) protests in Seattle, also known as the Battle of Seattle. Yapa’s novel is formally innovative in that it is related through multiple focalizing characters and, arguably, not one but two distinct authorial narrators. For the majority of the novel, Yapa employs an authorial, mostly covert narrator, focalized through an ensemble of six individuals swept

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up in the protest. The “ensemble narrator,” as I will call this narrative voice, is successively focalized through the six characters in chapters devoted solely, or nearly solely, to the experiences of each.

The primary dyad of characters in this ensemble are Victor, the marijuana-selling, bi-racial, estranged son of the police chief, Bishop, and Chief Bishop himself. Secondary ensemble character dyads include King, a hardcore ecological activist running from her violent past, and John Henry, a preacher turned nonviolent-resistance leader, as well as one police officer who survived violence in her native home of Guatemala and another officer who survived the Oklahoma City bombing. Eric Leuscher praises Your Heart is a Muscle for its representation of the entanglement of individuals with differing affiliations in contrast to flattening mass media representations of protest, and I agree that Your Heart is a Muscle productively complicates readers’ understanding of the gamut of human concerns in play at the 1999 WTO protests, and in protests in a broader sense. Indeed, representing the complexity of positions and the diversity of deeply held convictions in play in protest scenarios is itself a key thematic concern of the novel, which seems to ask how, in the face of such fundamental differences of opinion, we can manage to recognize one another as human.

In Yapa’s fictional rendering of the protest the protestors block the streets, preventing the WTO delegates from attending their meetings, and over the course of the novel the demonstration turns violent as the police deploy tear gas, pepper spray, and

7 “Ultimately, where the literature of protest succeeds best is in humanizing the faceless representations of protest seen in the media. [...] What the literature of protest reveals is that the protest is a web entangling the protester, the police/authority, the administration, the radical protester, and the bystander.” See Eric Leuschner, “The Literature of Protest and the Consumption of Activism,” 73-74, The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association 52, no. 2 (2019): 71–94. http://www.jstor.org/stable/45400731.
brute force in an attempt to clear the roads. Filtered through the perspectives of both protesters and police, Yapa’s fragmentary chapters come together to make a compelling portrait of the protest. By virtue of the multiple perspectives neither side is demonized, even if the novel’s sympathies are overwhelmingly on the side of the anti-WTO position. Passages in which Chief Bishop yearns for his estranged son or fears for the protestors he must police go a long way in rendering Bishop empathetic:8 “He had protected these people for thirty years—first as a beat cop, and then as a captain going to the community meetings,” the narrator reflects, as Bishop looks at the fifty thousand protesters blocking the streets, “and now here he was as their Chief, their leader—and, now, why did they see the need to come marching like lambs to the slaughter?”9

Although the unnamed, mostly covert ensemble narrator is reflected closely through the six individual characters, the ensemble narrator at times becomes an overt narrator, speaking in direct address and asides, often imploring the reader to “look at” specific characters. These narratorial shifts into an overt, rhetorical mode evoke a sense of urgency, and are deployed to underscore the importance of certain moments or ideas, such as in this reflection from Bishop on his estrangement from Victor:

He saw them there in his mind’s eye, two men, blue-eyed father and brown-eyed son, breathing and talking in the son’s room, and him so blind, so alive and blind to the intensity of his son, of what it meant to live as a brown man, a black man. […] I love my boy. Me, a man who only wanted somehow to protect this younger, more vulnerable version of himself. Tell me what else is there to it?10

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8 Narrative empathy, in which a reader feels with rather for a character, often through an experience of first person or close third person narration, can be particularly useful in helping readers to identify with characters that take actions that readers might otherwise react adversely to. See Suzanne Keen, “A Theory of Narrative Empathy,” Narrative 14, no. 3 (2006): 208.
9 Yapa, Your Heart Is a Muscle, 25-26.
10 Yapa, Your Heart Is a Muscle, 28.
Here, a shift occurs between a covert version of the authorial narrator who closely describes Bishop and a more overt version of that narrator who addresses the reader and demands, “Tell me what else there is to it?” This oscillation from a covert to an overt narratorial stance underscores the urgency of the memory and heightens the tension in what might otherwise be a tidier, but less dynamic, reflection.

In a similar maneuver the ensemble narrator, while focalized through John Henry, directly addresses the reader imploring them to look both at and with John Henry at the protesters:

Look with him at his people. […] John Henry, who had lost his church, look with him at his people. […] Look at how they come from the darkness of their homes, backs stiff, stretching and tying their bandannas tight, checking one another’s faces for an idea of what violence this day may bring. Look at these wet American faces, ordinary and beautiful, and tell me you don’t feel more than a little bit afraid.11

Here, Yapa’s ensemble narrator shifts to an overt mode, directly addressing the reader and alerting them to that fact that they should be “more than a little bit afraid” of the violence to come. Notice how the tone and timbre of the narrator becomes more intense with the slide towards overtness: “tell me you don’t feel more than a little bit afraid.” The tension is increased by the ensemble narrator’s challenging stance toward the reader—it’s as though Yapa is turning up the volume, demanding that we pay close attention.

While the bulk of Yapa’s novel is devoted to the individual sections focalized though the ensemble characters (presented chronologically as the day of protest continues), the novel is punctuated by five numbered “Intermissions” marked with the time in hours until the meeting of the delegate from Sri Lanka, Dr. Charles

11 Yapa, Your Heart Is a Muscle, 14-15.
Wickramsinghe, with then-President Bill Clinton. Arguably, the narrator of the intermissions is distinct from the narrator of the ensemble in that this narrator stays firmly rooted in the reported experiences, memories, and thoughts of Charles. Unlike the overt/covert ensemble narrator, the “intermission” narrator is almost indistinguishable from Charles, staying tethered to Charles through very close narration that James Wood would call free indirect style, in which a covert authorial narrator all but disappears into the focalizing character. 12

A calm observer that provides relief from the intensity of the sometimes-confrontational ensemble narrator, the intermission narrator lucidly relates Charles’s evolving position. Charles initially pins his hopes on Sri Lanka’s entry into global trade, but eventually awakens to the exploitation of ‘third world’ countries by the WTO. The intermission chapters, some just a few pages in length, meaningfully structure the novel and allow Charles to completely reverse his position on the WTO, something that no other character in the novel does. Even as Victor, Bishop, and the others come to regret the violence that unfolds, their worldviews do not undergo complete reversals. Charles, on the other hand, goes from idolizing to abhorring the WTO.

In addition to fragmenting the novel between the ensemble timeline and the intermissions timeline, Yapa also frequently shifts between characters’ memories and in-the-moment experiences. The past is interwoven with the present in a manner that makes characters actions in the present-day of the protest seem organic to their own interpersonal wounds and dreams. This is particularly evident in the case of Victor, who has traveled the ‘third world’ for the past three years after an encounter with his father.

that estranged them from one another. Early in the novel, we learn that when Bishop caught Victor reading his late mother’s revolutionary books and smoking marijuana, Bishop flew into a rage dislocated Victor’s shoulder, and then burned all the books in a bonfire behind their home.

As Victor recalls his father’s burning of the books, he also recalls Bishop’s admonishment that he shouldn’t “care so goddam much” about people in other countries. These are the words, and the actions, that Victor remembers at the protest, and it is this memory that apparently spurs Victor to go into “lockdown,” linking himself to a human chain in which protesters padlock their hands together inside PVC pipes:

His father lit a match and threw it towards the pile, and the books went up in flame, [...] saying, shouting up at the window, “This, this, this. This is what happens when you care too much.”

“The blindness of the heart which capitalism demands,” John Henry was saying.

“Alienation,” Edie said. “This is our enemy.”

Victor nodded. “Sure,” he said. “Me, too.”

Then he looked at King. “I’ll do it.”

“You’ll do what?”

“Lockdown,” he said. “I’ll be the one.”

Here, Victor’s recollection of his father’s speech runs seamlessly into the present-day experience of the protest. Notice how John Henry’s words directly oppose the past words of Bishop. While Bishop wants to protect his son from caring “too much,” John Henry wants his followers to look at, and stand against, the blind cruelty of capitalism.

The scene above is pivotal. In deciding to take direct nonviolent action in protest of the WTO, Victor makes himself a target of brutal violence at the hands of the police—led by his

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13 Yapa, Your Heart Is a Muscle, 82.
14 Here, John Henry seems to demand that the protesters both recognize and resist their implication, as American consumers, in the “transmission belts of domination” that Michael Rothberg sites in The Implicated Subject, and that I discuss in Chapter 1. See Michael Rothberg, The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020), 200.
own father. The braiding of the fragmented past into the present signals to readers that Victor’s decision to go into lockdown is about more than resisting the “alienation” and the “blindness of the heart that capitalism demands.” As Victor’s integrated fragmentary memories reveal, his decision to go into lockdown is not just the result of adoption of anti-WTO ideology, it is also a rebellion against his father.

Yapa takes a rather less successful approach to balancing the novel’s ideological agenda against its aesthetic needs in an encounter between Dr. Charles Wickramsinghe and an American actress. In the first-class cabin of an international flight from Sri Lanka to Seattle, the intermission narrator relates Charles’ initial physical attraction to the unnamed actress. Reader expectations are primed for a connection, maybe even an erotic encounter, but these expectations are upended with the following dialogue, in which the actress explains her reasons for travel:

“Charley,” she said, “2.9 billion people are going to make less than two dollars today. Do you know how much I made for my last movie?”

He held her gaze, her eyes two impossibly blue bowls of ice above the embroidered rim of the blanket. […] “Do you want to know why I was really in Sri Lanka, Charley?”

He waited silently.

“To adopt a child. I make millions of dollars pretending to be other people. […] I want a child. So I fly to another country. What kind of world is this, Charley?”

Here, I would argue that this caricature of American greed, heavily symbolized through the actress, reads as rather didactic. It’s as if Yapa does not trust the reader to come to the intended conclusion, that American capitalism is callous, extractive, and childlike, so he spells it out through the arch figure of actress. Shaken, Charles recoils from the encounter. While he had hoped entry into the WTO would elevate his country to the ranks

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15 Yapa, Your Heart Is a Muscle, 103-104.
of ‘first-world’ nations, he now frets, as does the novel, that Sri Lanka’s entry into the WTO would in fact come with significant moral compromise.

Yapa takes a more sophisticated approach with Victor, whose motivation to join the protest is linked to his richly imagined, ambivalent position as a son who both loves his father but at the same time resents his father’s unwillingness to see the injustice and inequity that the WTO perpetuates. Likewise, Bishop cares deeply for his adopted son, yet he also cares for his officers, while at the same time he feels compassion for the protesters. From a craft perspective, there is deep, baked-in ambivalence in both Victor and Bishop, and readers are invited to empathize with and relate to them as people. In the case of the encounter with the American actress, on the other hand, readers are steered, along with Charles, to be disgusted by the actress’ conspicuous consumption, so limitless that even an adopted child is another thing to be bought.

Overall, Yapa’s use of multiple perspectives through the ensemble narrator allows for the articulation of viewpoints that, while they are completely irreconcilable with one another, are allowed to coexist humanely. Furthermore, the novel’s treatment of characters’ traumatic pasts as fragments that interpenetrate the present makes characters’ actions in the present authentic and organic to the world of the story, connecting ideological conflicts with characters’ specific interpersonal tensions and stakes.

A.B. YEHOShUA, THE LOVER, TRANSLATED BY PHILIP SIMON, 1977

“It’s a real art, you don’t appreciate it, to live this kind of double life among us, to live our world and to live its opposite.”16

— A.B. Yehoshua, The Lover

Related entirely through short chapters, let’s call them fragments, each labeled with one of the six figural narrators’ names, A.B. Yehoshua’s *The Lover* presents a prismatic look at the lives of six individuals living in Haifa during the Yom Kippur War. Like *Your Heart is a Muscle*, *The Lover* takes a specific historic event as its context but creates interpersonal stakes for the characters that both intersect with and stand apart from the anchoring historic moment. Yehoshua’s novel stands out within this chapter, indeed within this critical afterword, as the only work under discussion not authored or created in the 21st century.

My inclusion of this novel has much to do with the fact that the book is an exemplar of multivocality, and the fact that its unique approach to narrative situation proved useful to me in my own efforts at writing a multivocal novel. While Yehoshua (1936-2022) published eleven novels in total, *The Lover* was his debut novel. Unlike the other two novels discussed in this chapter, *The Lover*, which has been translated into twenty-three languages, eschews the use of authorial narrators completely. The entire novel is related through figural narrators speaking from first person points of view, which presents a particular set of aesthetic limits and possibilities.

Yehoshua’s novel employs a multivocal mode that illustrates how the characters’ identity affiliations—Jewish Israeli and Arab Israeli—both generate a sense of belonging but also prevent the characters from understanding one another as human beings. *The Lover* follows an Ashkenazi Jewish family, Adam, his wife Asya, a teacher and doctoral student, and their teenage daughter Dafi, in the wake of the disappearance of Asya’s lover, Gabriel, who had returned to Israel after a decade in France to collect an
inheritance from his grandmother, Veducha. Gabriel, upon returning to Israel, finds that to his surprise Veducha is simply in a coma, and not dead, after all. Drafted into the armed services at the start of the war, Gabriel promptly disappears (for the majority of the novel); upon waking from her coma, Veducha is cared for by a teenage Arab boy, Na’im, who eventually becomes Dafi’s lover—if only for a day—despite the gulf between them.

Na’im, who has his own prejudices, has been coerced into caring for Veducha by Adam, who also enlists Na’im to accompany him on night towing work—a cover for looking for his wife’s missing lover Gabriel. Adam more subtly uses Na’im as an emotional stand-in for his own son, who was tragically struck down by a car not far from the family home. Na’im, on his part, tolerates living with Veducha as he believes caring for her will bring him closer to Dafi, who he has fallen in love with despite (or perhaps because) she is off-limits to him, first as a Jew, and second as the daughter of his employer. Sitting with Veducha in her home Na’im refuses to engage in political arguments and instead sets his hopes on connection with Dafi:

I wasn’t going to get too friendly with this old woman, so I sat there quietly reading Ma’ariv and that surprised her, she thought it was odd an Arab reading a newspaper in Hebrew. [...] I’ll have to be on my guard here, sit quietly and not get into arguments, otherwise things will be unbearable. I’m not here for politics but for love.”

Na’im’s assertion that he’s there not for politics “but for love” broadcasts his hope, which to many readers may seem both truly admirable and truly naive, that the cultural gulf between himself and Dafi can be overcome.

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17 Yehoshua, The Lover, 204.
Parallel fragments narrated by Veducha reveal her contradictory sentiments about Na’im:

I asked him to read me something from the paper, to see how he would read, perhaps his voice might reveal something of his intentions. […] He began to read, reading very clearly, and the gist of the article that we hit upon was something I have known for years, that the Arabs have no thought other than to destroy us all. […] And he actually paused, thought for a moment, looked up at me and said, “Do you think I want to destroy you?”

“Of course,” I wanted to say, “but you can’t, thank God.” But I said nothing. He was so sweet when he asked that question, full of sweetness. 18

Veducha adores, fears, and needs Na’im, who reveals through narrative fragments that he, too, wishes to connect, but cannot overcome his sense of Veducha as a fundamental other. During the course of the novel, Veducha becomes ever more dependent on Na’im, and while he at first feels elated with his new life, even dreaming that he declares, “I’m a Jew, too,”19 he eventually feels that he’s been abandoned at Veducha’s home and resents her mix of cloying care and suspicion.

The scenes that transpire between Na’im and Veducha are emblematic of the many missed connections in The Lover that together pose the question how, and or even if, in the political context of the novel connection is possible despite opposing identity affiliations. More broadly, repetition of missed connection, understood by the reader through access to the six figural narrators, poses the thematic question of whether one can ever know another person in entirety. This thematic concern is in fact articulated early in the novel through Dafi’s nocturnal observation, during a bout of insomnia, of an unknown writer in another village:

18 Yehoshua, The Lover, 208.
19 Yehoshua, The Lover, 228.
I discovered him by chance a few weeks ago. A bachelor? Married? I know nothing about him. In the daytime, the curtains are drawn, he appears only at night, alone there in the light, working at something, writing without a break. Every time I see him, I’m determined to visit the neighborhood across the wadi, find out which is his house and what his name is. I’d phone him and say, “Mr. Typist, I watch you at night from the other side of the wadi. What are you writing? A thesis? A novel? What’s it about?”

Here, the image Dafi narrates, of the observable but unknowable stranger, stands as an analogy for one of the novel’s key thematic concerns. Are any of us, and the secret, subjective worlds we inhabit, every completely knowable to others? Dafi never does visit the writer and he, as well as the inner lives of the other characters, remains opaque to her.

Another feature of the multivocality in *The Lover* is the marked absence of any covert authorial narrative voice. At the novel’s opening, Yehoshua uses this absence of an authorial narrator to great aesthetic and dramatic effect in the treatment of Veducha.

Veducha, Gabriel’s Sephardi grandmother, narrates from her coma in a series of surreal fragments. Veducha’s emergence into consciousness, her lucid period in Na’im’s care, and her eventual decline and death meaningfully structure the novel, but initially it is unknown who is speaking and why:

> A stone laid on a white sheet. A big stone. They turn the stone wash the stone feed the stone and the stone urinates slowly. Turn the stone clean the stone water the stone and again the stone urinates. The sun disappears. Darkness. Quiet. A stone weeping why am I only a stone weeping stone. […] A stone not a stone dying and sprouting a stone sprouting a stone a plant among plants among stillness burrowing in the dust rising from darkness a strong branch and more branches. Strong growth a plant clad in leaves among leaves.21

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In this very first of Veducha’s fragments, readers are presented with a voice that greatly differs in texture from the other characters introduced so far, Adam, wife Asya, and daughter Dafi. The use of lyrical and almost poetic language, the repetition of the image of the stone, and the unlikely blending of the inanimate with the biological pique readerly interest. The question of who is speaking and how provides its own set of dramatic tensions that are resolved only as Veducha gradually regains consciousness.

Here, it’s important to note that it is the specific mode of multivocality that Yehoshua employs that makes such initially inexplicable passages of narration credible. Since Yehoshua relies only on the use of figural narrators, there is no authorial narrator who might come to reader’s aid and explain the mystery of Veducha. If there were such a narrator, readers might well wonder why information about Veducha’s identity is initially withheld. Instead, the specific narrative situation makes Veducha’s fragments tantalizing pieces of a puzzle readers feel compelled to solve. The opacity of Veducha’s dream-like state to the other narrators further dramatizes the thematic concern of the interior lives of others’ being only partly knowable.

From a craft perspective, The Lover also functions as an object lesson in employing multiple figural narrators’ perspectives in service of dramatic irony through parallel renderings of the same scene, such as a sequence in which Na’im truthfully tells Adam he has been pulled out of school by his father to work at Adam’s garage, and Adam assumes that Na’im lies about this fact.22 Readers are also made privy to parallel renderings of moments in which Dafi and Na’im make incorrect assumptions about each other’s romantic intensions; the dissonant perspectives of Dafi and Na’im do, at last,

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22 Yehoshua, The Lover, 127, 131.
come together in a single harmonized fragment in which the two share a meal and a sexual encounter. Titled “Na’im — Dafi,” the dual narrators gradually collapse the distance between the voices of Na’im and Dafi, finally resolving in a conversation rendered in pure, untagged dialogue.23

At the center of the novel, Adam magnetizes others to him with an enigmatic power. Although a keen observer of those around him, Adam seems incapable of truly understanding his own motivations. With his many contradictions, Adam, a bearded and contemplative garage owner, a man without a high-school diploma who employs “thirty Arabs,” is a figure ripe for interpretation; Halevi-Wise Yael has proposed that Adam functions in part as an allegoric figure representative of a working-class Zionist ethos.24

But from a craft perspective, Adam stands out most as a portrait of a human being who paradoxically sees but cannot see. For most of the novel, Adam searches for the lover, Gabriel, who he surreptitiously matched with wife Asya, who he loves but feels no physical attraction towards. As Adam visits overburdened military offices looking for the missing man and drives through the night in his tow truck, he becomes inured to the futility of his search, all the while becoming more removed from his own family.

Out of step with conversations on Jewish-Arab relations and recent terrorist attacks that his wife has with her educated friends, Adam speculates much about the motivations of his many Arab Israeli workers, but in the end, only seems to know that the lives of his workers are unknowable to him:

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23 Yehoshua, *The Lover*, 331-342.
24 Halevi-Wise Yael links Adam’s persona to the “Labor Zionist ideology of *torat ha’avodah* with its *livnot ulehibanot* (‘to build and be rebuilt’) ethos, which guided early Zionist pioneering efforts.” See Halevi-Wise Yael, “A. B. Yehoshua and the Novel of Vocation.” *Prooftexts* 37, no. 3 (2019): 688-710, 693. https://doi.org/10.2979/prooftexts.37.3.19
It’s a real art, you don’t appreciate it, to live this kind of double life among us, to live our world and to live its opposite. And when you’re talking again in your Friday-night armchairs, unable to keep off the subject, quibbling about elite groups and voluntary suicides and frustrated fanatics, I want to laugh or cry […] Today he’s a worker in my garage, humble and patient, smiling and reliable. And tomorrow—a savage beast […] I watch my workers closely. I employ thirty Arabs and I have time to watch them […] You ask yourself, what are they thinking? Does anything matter to them? Do they have any idea what’s happening?25

Here, Adam is on the surface discussing the behavior of the workers after a terrorist attack at the university, but his words also cite the thematic dilemma of having an internal life that is in conflict with one’s external presentation to the world. Adam’s phrase, “to live this kind of double life,” is rich with connotative value as there are myriad “double lives” playing out in the novel itself. Separated from others by his many secrets, Adam is also separated from his wife’s social group, and from the lives of the Arab workers he uneasily co-exists with every day. Nevertheless, distrust of Arabs doesn’t stop Adam from emotionally attaching himself to Na’im, nor does that attachment stop Adam from making use of Na’im, engaging him in the search for Gabriel and installing him at Veducha’s house in case the missing lover should return.

Adam sees and does not see his actions as manipulative; he seems to observe his own misdeeds, even the statutory rape his daughter Dafi’s teenage friend Tali, with a sense of remove, reflecting after the act: “Will it be possible to deny all this? I want to tell her to say nothing, but I can’t. What I’ve lost, I’ve lost.”26 If one is looking for a hero in Yehoshua’s Adam, one will be disappointed. And, while the weight of the perspectives falls heavily (five-to-one) on the side of Jewish as opposed to Arab narrators, the picture

25 A.B. Yehoshua, The Lover, 150-151
26 A.B. Yehoshua, The Lover, 262.
of modern Jewish Israeli family and community life that Yehoshua’s presents is far from idealized. Instead, Yehoshua offers readers an array of imperfect human beings seeking connection with one another, often without success.

While *The Lover* was originally published in Israel within just five years of the Yom Kippur War (October 1973), the aim of the novel is not to justify any one position so much as to present the lives of Israelis, both Jewish and Arab, in all their contradictory complexity. Here, the story drives the novel, and while the political is never far removed, it is the characters’ struggles that captivate readers’ imaginations. As in Yapa’s novel, multivocality and fragmentation formally underscore thematic concerns and insist on the humanity of opposed groups. In *The Lover*, history provides the context for the character’s conflicts, but what fuels the narrative overall are interpersonal and character-driven stakes.

JOKA ALHARTHI, CELESTIAL BODIES,
TRANSLATED BY MARYLIN BOOTH, 2019

Teacher Bill said: Why didn’t you learn English when you were little? Now do you realize how important it is? It’s the most important language in the world.27

— Jokha Alharthi, *Celestial Bodies*

Jokha Alharthi’s *Celestial Bodies* holds the distinction of being the first novel translated from the Arabic to win a Man Booker International Prize. Kaleidoscopic and multigenerational, Alharthi’s novel includes no less than thirty-four named characters,

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helpfully listed in a family tree in the opening pages of Marilyn Booth’s English
translation of the book. The novel is related primarily by a covert authorial narrator that is
reflected through this large cast in turn. A primary group of characters, a trio of sisters,
Mayya, Asma, and Khawla, along with Mayya’s oldest child, London, are given the
majority real estate in the novel, however the sisters’ mother, their father Azan, and his
Bedouin lover, Qamar are also featured.

Most of the chapters employ close third person narration related through a single
reflecting character in past tense; on occasion, the reflecting character switches mid-
chapter, such as in chapters that relate experiences of both Azan and Qamar. The novel is
punctuated by short, connective vignettes narrated in first person by the figural narrator
Abdallah, Mayya’s husband. Abdallah’s narration takes place over the duration of an
international flight from Muscat, Oman, to Frankfurt, Germany, during which he laments
and reminisces about his childhood and marriage, and the temporal-structural device of
the flight braids together and unifies the other fragments and shapes the narrative as a
whole.

Abdullah is of particular interest as he appears both as a narrator himself and as a
character featuring in chapters devoted to the other characters. In other words, Abdullah
exists both within, but also somewhat apart from, the main narrative level of the world of
the story. Abdallah’s in-flight recollections revolve about his unsatisfactory marriage to
Mayya (who does not return his love), his concern for adult daughter London (who is a
successful doctor but bereft that her marriage has ended in abuse), and his contradictory
feelings of longing and abhorrence for his deceased, abusive father Sulayman (who was a
slave merchant). Abdallah also wrestles with his regret at not caring for the enslaved
women of African descent who raised him, Zarifa, who died in poverty after being freed from the family.

Similar to the treatment of the past in Yapa’s novel, Celestial Bodies’ fragmentary treatment of time incorporates the often-traumatic past with the present. This chronological limberness allows the novel to be read not only as a family drama, but also as an allegory of the country of Oman’s struggles to reckon with its recent (1970) slave-owning past and to interface with western nations as globalization connects Oman to the world. This collision of past and present manifests in London’s plotline, as London breaks with expected gender roles by perusing a medical degree—funded by wealth inherited from her enslaving grandfather. London also goes against tradition by marrying for love instead of by arranged marriage, but experiences verbal and physical abuse from her spouse rather than liberation. London seeks Abdallah’s help to end her marriage and both Abdalla and London emerge damaged—from the forces of history, rapid cultural change, and loveless marriages.

The interweaving of the fragmented past into Abdallah’s in-flight dreams and memories illuminates how characters’ past actions reverberate across generations into the present. Indeed, the power that past to exert pressure on the present is itself a core thematic concern of the novel. Within his first mid-flight recollection of his father’s death, Abdallah’s narration makes it clear that the past, for him, is still very much alive:

My father’s lips turned black, his eyebrows receded, and spit flew in all directions from his mouth. Boy—have you tied that thieving slave Sanjar to the eastern column yet? I took his hand and kissed it, but he pushed me away. Father, the government freed all of the slaves and Sanjar... the government, Father. He growled under his breath as though he had finally heard me. What’s the government got to do with it? Sanjar is mine, he doesn’t belong to the government. ... I bought his mama Zarifa for twenty silver thalers!
...What does the government have to do with any of this? My slave, mine.28

Here, Alharthi skillfully interweaves Abdallah’s longing for his father’s approval, “I took his hand and kissed it, but he pushed me away,” with the historical fact of the abolition of slavery in Oman, and with Sulayman’s resistance to abolition in the chilling declaration, “My slave, mine.” Like The Lover and Your Heart is a Muscle, Celestial Bodies operates in a political and historical context but wisely lets the interpersonal stakes take center stage. Would readers care about the rants of the dying enslaver, Sulayman, if the figural narrator Abdullah were not desperate for his affection? Maybe. But readers would doubtless not care as much if Sulayman were portrayed as only a villain and not also as the object of his Abdullah’s filial devotion, however misguided.

The novel is also concerned with the modernization of Oman, and Oman’s opening to the world after the discovery of the country’s rich oil reserves in 1960. Oman’s burgeoning transnationality plays out in the younger generation’s desires for western objects of material wealth, and in their acquisition of English language skills—something that Abdallah himself struggles with. In the following passage, Abdallah recalls his family’s demands of him in the context of the country’s rapid modernization:

London said: I want a BMW, it suits my status as a doctor and as the daughter of the House of Merchant Sulayman. Why did London have to mention her ties of blood to her grandfather?

Salim said: I want the new PlayStation. […]

Teacher Bill said: Why didn’t you learn English when you were little? Now do you realize how important it is? It’s the most important language in the world.

The most important language in the world. In the world. The world. The world is very big. Very small.29

Abdallah’s perception of the world as at once overwhelmingly large and “very small” is underscored by the demands of his children, London and Salim, as well as his teacher’s reproval of his lack of English skills. Rather than relying on abstraction to convey Abdallah’s sense of the shrinking world of contemporary Oman and his own unsteady place in it, Abdallah’s narration roots his unease in interpersonal encounters with his family and friends.

As descriptions so far of indicate, Alharthi’s maneuvers between decades and generations create an aesthetic that simulates the lived experience of reminiscence. What then, is the ‘primary’ timeframe of the novel? Is it Abdullah’s international flight, or is it the decades in which the dramas narrated by the authorial narrator play out? In a sense, both past and present function as primary chronotopes, as actions past and present converge during Abdallah’s flight, suspending him between then and now in the liminal zone of remembrance. In the final surreal scene of the novel, Abdallah’s family members appear to him on the Gulf’s shore. There, they morph into one another, tormenting and tantalizing Abdallah through actions and speech, before finally disappearing and leaving Abdallah free, if only in his dream.

Balanced against this surreal, almost magical approach, detailed and accurate historical framing in Celestial Bodies ties characters to the long shadow of slavery in modern Oman. The authorial narrator relates that on the day that Zarifa is born, the 25th of September 1926, an international accord is signed into law in Geneva abolishing the slave trade in the linked Sultanates of Oman and Zanzibar, although ironically, this has no bearing on Zarifa’s enslavement whatsoever. Readers learn from the authorial narrator,

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30 As Emily O’Dell explains: “Slavery was an integral component of Zanzibar’s economy under the rule of the sultans from Oman. In 1698, Zanzibar officially fell under the control of the Sultanate of Oman, after it
who becomes more remote when conveying historical context, that Zarifa’s fifteen-year-old mother, Ankabuta, is unaware of the treaty or even of the existence of a “a place called Geneva.” In this, as in other sections that include factual exposition, the authorial narrator is reflected through the character only briefly before moving towards a more removed authorial mode. We’re given the long view of Zarifa’s life as if she, too, is part of history:

She [Zarifa] would become a slave worker and a concubine. She would be his [Sulayman’s] beloved, and the only woman who was ever close to him, while he was the only man she would love and respect, and that until the day of her death. In him she saw her liberator from the insults of Shaykh Said’s sons, and the beloved who showed her the pleasures of the body, as the instigator of the game of harshness and jealousy. In the end, he was the elderly shaykh who returned to her embrace to die.31

Some readers might find it disconcerting that this gloss of Zarifa’s life, conveyed with the air of impartiality often imparted to a remote and authorial (some would say “omniscient”) narrator, also includes the statement that her enslaver Sulayman was “the only man she would love and respect.” Even more perplexing, Sulayman is described as “the beloved who showed her the pleasures of the body,” a man who in advanced age, “returned to her embrace to die.”

Here, Alharthi’s fiction boldly acknowledges the complex entanglements of enslaved and enslaver that often existed, until quite recently, in slaveholding Omani households. As one might expect slavery in Oman is a topic many Omani authors would prefer to avoid, and as critic and translator Emily O’Dell has stated, Alharthi’s

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31 Alharthi, Celestial Bodies, 140.
novel “may usher in a new age in which the real stories of slavery in Zanzibar and Oman, silenced, for so long, may finally be spoken and shared.”\textsuperscript{32} In \textit{Celestial Bodies}, the trauma of slavery haunts the present-day lives of the characters, while at the same time, the legal abolition of slavery is not welcomed by all and fails to yield positive results for everyone. The fact that Zarifa herself resists emancipation, and that she is portrayed in closely reflected passages as a powerful woman with needs, wants, and desires, helps to convey the historical problem of enslavement through a lens that is personal and specific, rather than didactic or sermonizing.

Overall, \textit{Celestial Bodies} stands out for its virtuosic use of two differing narrators, each of which serves both thematic and practical purposes. The first person figural narrator Abdallah ties together the traumatic past, both personal and historic, with the precarious present, creating Abdallah as a vivid and complex character and allowing him to witness and to comment on Oman’s rapid modernization. The authorial narrator’s observations of characters’ daily lives in reflector mode gives readers a sense of the tensions that exist between characters, while this narrator’s occasional historic panoramas, relayed in a more removed authorial mode, help readers appreciate the novel’s sweeping temporality. In \textit{Celestial Bodies}, as in Yehoshua’s and Yapa’s novels, multivocality and narrative fragmentation work in concert to present humane portraits of characters with radically opposing perspectives, while at the same time addressing the political and the historical without making the novel play handmaid to those agendas.

In this chapter, I’ve discussed a range of multivocal narrative situations that

\textsuperscript{32} O’Dell, “Yesterday Is Not Gone,” 398.
include: the use of multiple named figural narrators within the world of the story in *The Lover*; the use of two authorial narrators, one covert/overt and reflected through multiple characters, and one consistently covert and reflected through a single character in *Your Heart is a Muscle the Size of a Fist*; and a combination of both a figural narrator embedded in the world of the story as well as an authorial narrator that is focalized through a cast of reflecting characters in the case of *Celestial Bodies*. From a craft perspective, these varied narrative situations demonstrate the value of just some of the many possible forms of multivocality in the novel.

Throughout this chapter, I’ve also explored the authorial latitude provided by narrative fragmentation. Valeria Luiselli recently wrote that “In novels of fractured time, the sequence of events must be governed by a logic of its own, one justified by the book’s central questions.”33 Luiselli’s words ring true for each of the novels discussed, as each makes use of a fragmented treatment of time to underscore key thematic concerns. Furthermore, I would propose that the narrative fragmentation used is not only “justified” by each book’s central questions, but also helps the authors to form those questions. For example, fragmentation allows Yapa to entangle deeply held opposing viewpoints of protestors and police in *Your Heart is a Muscle the Size of a Fist* to explore the question of how, in the face of fundamental differences of opinion, we can we recognize one another as human. Likewise, fragmentation makes it possible for Yehoshua to create scenes from simultaneous and opposing points of view through the often-misaligned perspectives of Jewish and Arab Israelis in *The Lover* to explore whether we can every truly apprehend the interior lives of others. And fragmentation

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allows Alharthi to create a narrative that spans decades and at the same time takes place during an international flight in *Celestial Bodies*, to investigate how individuals, and cultures, might move forward while haunted by traumatic past events that continue to impinge on the present.

All of the specific structural and temporal maneuvers listed above are made possible through the combined use of multiple narrators and narrative fragmentation. In addition to creating humane portraits of characters with vastly differing worldviews, in the novels discussed here fragmentation also helps to create story worlds that are not only credible but are also immersive and compelling. Finally, these novels demonstrate the value of multivocality and narrative fragmentation to enhance the synergy between form and content, which in the end, makes for captivating fiction, fiction capable of making lives previously unknown to us real and vibrant. And after all, isn’t that what we’re reading for in the first place?
CONCLUSION

Every character in every tale is displaced, a mis-shelved book, a mistranslated text. We are, like the characters we read, restless bodies obsessed with our misapprehensions and mistaken identities, elliptical and misaligned, spinning on axes of our own grinding.

— Shubigi Rao, *Pulp III*

Reflecting on *The Impersonation Artist* in light of the fiction and art presented the Critical Afterword, I’m struck by the complexity of the world into which these characters are thrust. To my mind, the texts examined in the Afterword point to the myriad realities and precarities that we are enmeshed in, whether social, environmental, political, or interpersonal. My goal with the novel was to send these fictional characters out into that precarious world and have them try, and often fail, at answering the essential question of “who am I,” in relation to our current moment, in which so much seems unsure and where the stakes often feel both intimate and global.

Sarah, Cam, and Francis are all, as Shubigi Rao writes, “restless bodies,” obsessed with their own “misapprehensions and mistaken identities.” Each flawed character is working through his or her own forms of displacement, their own elliptical quests of becoming or unraveling. Sarah, despite her own well-intended attempts to reveal hatred of women perceived as Muslim, also buys into western feminist myths of Muslim women—namely that their garments are oppressive, and that they are in need of
rescue.¹ That Sarah herself is misidentified as Muslim on the train and is often mistakenly perceived as “not white” complicates her position as a white performer impersonating ostensibly Middle Eastern women.

Cam, despite her passionate commitment to resisting environmental destruction, struggles to channel care for the planet into care for individual people, and she often fails to maintain lasting relationships. Cam’s position as a committed anti-fossil fuel activist is undercut by her own implication in practices that contribute to carbon emissions, particularly her frequent international travel, a situation that she is not unaware of yet feels powerless to change. While Cam laments the impact of climate change on citizens of the Global South, ironically, as a citizen of the Global North she is a contributor to the very emissions driving those changes.

To say that Francis is deeply flawed in many ways is something of an understatement—his white nationalist ideology and his delusional outlook lead him to take actions that are destructive, violent, and criminal. However, Francis is not born this way. Exposed to white nationalism in his family of origin and transnational white supremacy on the internet, Francis becomes an extremist over time. Raised in constant precarity in his polluted and impoverished hometown, Francis is all the more susceptible to indoctrination into white supremacist ideology. While this does not in any way excuse or justify Francis’ criminal actions, it complicates him as a character since it creates him as a fictional person who, in another environment, might have made different choices.

As the Critical Afterword demonstrates, we live in a contemporary moment full of contradictory worldviews and actions. On the one hand, creative endeavors to resist xenophobia can be successful in generating attention and empathy for ostensible others: *The Walk*’s “Little Amal,” a twelve-foot-tall puppet depicting a ten-year-old Syrian refugee, inspires millions and demonstrates the power of the figural displaced person to make the humanity and struggles of refugees tangible for a global audience. Likewise, Shubigi Rao’s *Pulp III: A Short Biography of the Banished Book* documents sustained resistance to oppressive actions, such as the willful burning of libraries as part of intentional destruction of Muslim cultural institutions during the Siege of Sarajevo. On the other hand, these creative interventions exist in the same global context as truly horrific actions, such as the actual livestreaming of a mass shooting at a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand, that Francis fictionally encounters in *The Impersonation Artist*, that has helped to spread hate and white nationalism across the globe. More limited in scope but also truly alarming, the real-world actions Franco A., a German officer arrested for impersonating a Syrian refugee with the intent to commit acts of violence to foment Anti-Arab sentiment, underscores the enduring threat of white supremacy as an ideology capable of generating worldviews completely divorced from reality.

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2 The video Francis fictionally encounters in the novel is based on the video circulated by mass murder and white supremacist Brenton Tarrant, who in 2019 gunned down fifty-one worshipers at the Al Noor Mosque and Linwood Islamic Centre in Christchurch, New Zealand, and livestreamed the killings on social media. See Daniel Byman, *Spreading Hate: The Global Rise of White Supremacist Terrorism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

Reading *The Impersonation Artist*, I’m left with more questions than answers. I find myself asking what Sarah’s fictional *Project Hijab*, inspired in part by the performance works of Tania El Khoury, *Maybe if You Choreograph Me You will Feel Better*, and *Jarideh*, accomplishes within the world of the novel. Does *Project Hijab* impact lives beyond Sarah’s own immediate circle, or does it in some ways reproduce the violence Sarah sought to reveal and intervene in, or does it have a different meaning that is relevant mainly to Sarah herself?

Likewise, I wonder if Cam’s willful withdrawal from the horrors of the COVID-19 Pandemic into the fictional collective, Terrain, explores a new social form, or if joining that community amounts to an escapist retreat from the realities of the world at large. As a reader, I wonder why Cam’s anti-fossil fuel protest actions of defacing art and a monument fail to bring her lasting fulfillment, or if these actions effect any measurable change. Finally, I wonder what Francis’ violent actions in the guise of Franco, modeled on the actual crimes of Franco A., reveal about the insidious, transnational creep of white supremacy, and the dangers posed by the desperate individuals who subscribe to such toxic ideologies.

Of course, these questions of the function of the novel and the fictional people it contains do not have straightforward answers, they are instead open to interpretation. It is my hope that the novel does, however, make apparent something of the complexity of the current situation, in which real environmental destruction as well as xenophobia and white supremacist violence exist in the same shared context with forceful creative endeavors and global protest movements that seek to address those problems. Readers of the novel will of course come to their own conclusions as to whether Sarah and Cam’s
attempts to intervene in these problems are worthwhile and impactful. However, it is my hope that together with the Critical Afterword, *The Impersonation Artist* asserts the value of fiction and art now, as resistive measures to inhumane conditions and oppressive worldviews, demonstrating that even in precarious times the arts can help us to imagine, and even perhaps to create, a more just future.
ABBAS, Basel and Ruanne Abou-Rahme. *If only this mountain between us could be ground to Dust.* Chicago Art Institute, Jul 31, 2021–Jan 3, 2022.


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ENGL 313 Creative Writing Fiction
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IDC 101 Film, Art, Fiction: East Asia
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Redesigned a section of ENGL 101 with a focus on narratives of displacement and belonging and current discourses on immigration.

Participated in genre pilot for First-Year Writing, implemented genre-based pedagogy and developed sequences of assignments.

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ENGL 111 English Composition
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ENGL 095 Integrated Reading and Writing for College
ENGL 111/095 English Composition with Co-requisite Reading and Writing
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PUBLICATIONS

Books

Megafauna: Stories & Screenplay. Fleur-de-Lis Press, Spalding University, Louisville KY, 2018.

Short Fiction

“Prairie,” (screenplay) The Louisville Review, Spalding University, Louisville, KY, Fall 2014.
*Nominated for a Pushcart Prize
“A Bad and Sinful Girl,” The Louisville Review, Spalding University, Louisville, KY, Fall 2014.
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Essays


RECENT AWARDS

Winner, Graduate Student Excellence in Teaching, College of Arts & Sciences, University of Louisville 2024

Outstanding Graduate in Humanities Award, Comparative Humanities, University of Louisville 2024

For exemplary graduate (PhD) work in and valuable contributions to Humanities.

The Osborne P. Wiggins, Jr. Award, Comparative Humanities, 2024

For excellence in graduate studies in Humanities, University of Louisville

Finalist, Graduate Student Excellence in Teaching, Graduate School, 2024 University of Louisville

Finalist, Graduate Student Excellence in Teaching, College of Arts & Sciences, University of Louisville 2023

“Violin Lessons,” Ten-minute Play Contest Selection; Mainstage Production, University of Louisville 2022

RECENT PRESENTATIONS

“Garments Shed by Ghosts’: Magical Realism, Trauma, and Displacement,” Lecture, International Conference on the Short Story in English, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technical University, Singapore 2023

Fiction Reading, International Conference on the Short Story in English, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technical University, Singapore 2023

“Annette Allen Poetry Prize Celebration Reading.” Presentation, The Louisville Conference on Literature and Culture, University of Louisville 2023, 2024

Invited Lecturer, Cross-Genre Creative Writing Workshop Arnow Conference, Somerset Community College, Somerset, KY

SERVICE AND RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

Annette Allen Poetry Prize Committee Chair, University of Louisville 2021-2024
Fiction Judge, Undergraduate Creative Writing Contest, Indiana University 2022
Playwriting Mentor, Undergraduate Capstone, Bellarmine University 2019, 2022
Oral History Interviewer, Kentucky Climate Consortium, University of Kentucky 2022
Oral History Interviewer, “Former Refugee Women of Louisville, KY,” University of Louisville 2022
Internship, Anne Braden Institute for Social Justice Research, University of Louisville 2021

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Graduate Certificate in Public History, University of Louisville 2023
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The Louisville Review, Associate Editor 2020-Present
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