

Dirt and Dust

A Lover's Letter

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This piece is part of a collective memory. I am quite fond of the elasticity of this term, 'collective memory': for one, this text draws upon, recalls and comprises a memory that I alone do not possess. At the same time, 'our collective memory' is a much larger project, one I take part in constructing with friends and strangers. Memory, for us, is not the ability to tap into a past impression. It is, instead, a faculty of the present moment, for each time we remember, something more current enters the picture. Thus, our memory is always changing its form, tone and colour. The content remains similar throughout – this past May, my partner and I travelled to Iran. We quickly found ourselves confronted with an urgent question: when did 'I' turn into 'we'? Much of this text has its origins in reports I wrote, attempting to understand what was taking place in Iran after the June 2009 presidential elections. I have realised that these reports no longer serve a purpose as static bookmarks of a time many of us have come to know only through media coverage. For us, whether in Iran or not, whether Iranian or not (and the definition of this particular identity can arguably be applied as a metaphor to anyone today who finds him or herself in love), to speak (and, by extension, write) about what 'happened' misses the mark: we should ask ourselves, 'what is happening'? The amorous convergence of me, my partner, my friends and those strangers amongst whom I silently marched, flashing victory signs in the air until our arms became sore, can only be described as an encounter of the people. It is not my role to depict the horrors of politically-sanctioned violence and torture, nor is it my place to imaginatively embrace a romantic notion of uprising and revolution. My romance continues elsewhere, with the everyday development of our collective memory, which in itself is our greatest treasure. I write to you, oh lover, as an 'I', with the desire that you begin to notice in every 'I' a 'we'. The Greek chorus, after all, brought with it a 'time outside time' – alongside the linear, accumulative narrative of the tragedy, the chorus staged the de-temporalised anxieties, fears and political realities of the time in its collectively subjective goat-song. Their response to the disaster? To sing and dance.

30 December 2009

Shall I talk about the weather?

The weather – the times – the winds of change, the breeze of forgetfulness, the breath of life, the gusts of chaos. Or a weather, *ein Gewitter* – “a tempest of dirt and dust has driven half of the nation to a standstill”.¹

What happens when the tempest clears?

*The hazy dirt and dust set, and from behind the mountains the sun rises, and with it reality's bounty of autoresemblant greys which, only until a few hours ago, were so entangled that it appeared fast impossible to distinguish 'right' from 'wrong', 'oppressor' from 'oppressed' or 'pure' from 'sullied'. Lo! Now the hour arrives to cut the Moirean thread apportioning the good and the bad of our times. Yet, if you look closer, you can still recognise a trace of white in every black, there lies a bit of grey in every white, and the greens, pale to deep, are inextricable from one another. However, it appears that, regardless of what happens, our tomorrow bears no resemblance to yesterday. In comparing today to 30 or even a thousand-three-hundred years ago, those who attempt to seek the path leading to tomorrow in yesterday are deeply misguided: this river will not repeat itself.*²

I am afraid. First, I am afraid that my words will hurt, confuse or displease you; for some reason, I am negative about all of this. You've always said that what may be my biggest strength, and yet also my biggest weakness, is that I am too quick to find words to describe something which has not been fully digested. My mind races when I experience something inspiring – and there are far too many inspirations in this world. And so, I develop ways and expressions to recount this experience, but my weakness, as you point out, is that then I take the additional step of formulating a position from what I have said. All of this implies a certain propensity to speak without fully thinking about the entire picture. I become obsessed with small fragments. And so, I am afraid that this attempt to write will alienate you once again, as I have done before. But I am trying, trying to not take a position, to leave my obsessive fragments open to interpretation. Most importantly, you should understand that my position is not stationary – in fact, it may be non-existent. It is aligned with many different strains of thought, at times it is idiosyncratically abstruse, other times it gives away its affinities readily. This is where my anxiety is most clear. As you are unsure, I am not sure.

I fear also that I cannot, as I have been demanded to do by others (and, at times, myself), try and show 'how it really was' or what 'the people' are seeing, saying and experiencing. My intimacy with 'the people' only remains through you. You and I are the people. I am afraid for us and, by extension, for the people. What was a combination of a beautiful sense of return to a land and an inclusion in its transformation has now become far more complicated. Not only have we been confronted by violence – not to say that we weren't before – but this violence has shown itself amongst us. It is *my* land, it is *your* fault, it is *my* right, it is *your* tyranny. I obsess over the memory of us standing at the corner of Valiasr Street (the

Messiah) and Enghelab Street (the Revolution), afraid of what we would see once we joined the masses marching past us, and also afraid of ourselves, of what violence we hold in our thoughts and speech. We both asked one another: why are you here? What do you want? Why do you take pictures? Why do you write reports? We both answered: I'm not sure. We then both declared that we were searching for a non-violent language, a way of relating, describing and translating our experience together into something that moves beyond the rhetoric of conflict, strays away from injecting messianic blindness into any notion of a 'revolution' we may be holding on to. The waters continue to flow past our cold feet: the river has changed since we last stepped into it. What I am afraid of is our future – and keep in mind that fear, in the sense of *trembling before God*, is not solely negative. It can mean that I respect the future. What I mean to say is that now, after violence proved inevitable, is it possible to work towards a future in which such violence doesn't have to repeat itself? A future in which we will not say "that was a time, which promised us heaven, but created a hell on earth"³

I am looking for the 'right word' to use at the 'right time' to unlock the poetry held in the prose: precisely that split-second before the arrow, *zärtlich gezielt*, pierces the surface. I'm afraid I have to piece together fragments of material I've written, reread and rewritten, like shards of sky and cloud put back together to recreate the storm. The puzzle, however, is not so easy to finish. Each time I visit these fragments, I obsessively move them around, break them apart, re-order them, like a witch doctor who hopes that with the proper rhythm of his invocative movements, the parched sky will finally open up to unleash the torrential, long-overdue rain. Everything I've been writing and will write about, that is, all that concerns our shared relationship to this land, is a love letter. Fragments of a love letter in a state of continuous composition. Although the amorous procedure with which we engage with one another (through which we engage with the land as we come to knowledge of our surroundings through the impossible encounter of you and me saying 'I love you') assumes that we are one and one and not two. The work we do together occurs on multiple levels. Our roles are constantly shifting. The perilous voyage through the situation repeats itself upon return. In the meantime, we are immobile, protecting ourselves either through distance, circumnavigation or an affair with our everyday lives, all of which ensure that the situation does not cause us to collapse fully and lose our respective positions. We tell stories to each other, stories which provoke us to wander again, to retrace our steps and to take new ones, allowing our 'knowledge' of the situation to develop in time. Yet, as we narrate, we also demand, an imperative voice that calls into the void. This demand only occurs when we find ourselves apart, confronted by the unknown absence of the other – and, in this case, the other may be you or it may be the land, as both have become indiscernible. I'm not sure.

Silence is betrayed by rumour; protest by violence.

In any case, I can say that where I am now, I can only see the surface. But that is the arrow's goal, after all, to graze against the surface ever so slightly.

*You are rabble / you are dirt and dust / you are the black halo, you suppress and are blind / I am the courageous hero, and this land is mine!*⁴

5 July 2009

Around noontime, a slowly simmering, sulfurous haze settled onto the Tehran skyline, approaching the city with an invisible stealth until it had fully infested the streets and alleyways of the capital. This strange air appeared to envelop Tehran in a suffocating embrace, radiating through the sky like steam in a sauna. Later I found out that this tempest of dirt and dust had arrived from Baghdad.

Only the previous day had the same air blown through the Western regions of Iran, crossing several mountain ranges until it encountered Tehran's formidable pollution. The wall-like Alborz mountain range, sheltering Tehran from the North and acting as a geo-meteorological separation barrier from the sub-tropical Caspian region only 60 kilometres over *hill and dale*, functioned like a terminus for the malarial Baghdadi air. Although Tehran may have been spared the intensity endured by the plague's initial contacts, the remaining wind blowing through from Iraq would slowly trickle its way to Tehran and stop flat-on-its-face before the height of the Alborz, forecasting a much longer period of suppression as the city became the weather's metaphorical garbage dump, or, more appropriately, the *event horizon* of a black hole.

6 December 2009

What happens when an outsider encounters an incomprehensible event?

I am not who you think I am. I am *neither East nor West*, I am simply elsewhere. What I am trying to say is that I am the non-unique product of a shared history of Diaspora that in my particular context can be described as 'Iranian', and which, of course, is related to specific circumstances that have historically shaped Iran and determined the movements of its people, but which is not especially noteworthy in relation to other Diasporic communities and their self-understanding. My self-understanding as an 'Iranian' or an 'American' (given the supposed multiculturalism of the United States, a hyphenated identity can flourish with ease – one would think!) was complicated by the fact that I felt myself scattered around the world; in thought and interest drawn specifically to the 'Middle East', but clearly conditioned by my own process of self-identification within the terms I picked up in a 'Western' social and educational context. It was perhaps later, maybe now, that I could begin to articulate the non-negative sense of displacement I had felt all along as I grew up, whether that immediately had to do with being 'different' (culturally, physically, sexually, etc.), or whether it pertained, in general, more to a feeling of dissatisfaction and scepticism whenever I encountered individuals completely sure of their identities as singular, dual or plural. To be sure, I have promised myself to not make a muddle out of identity, but to instead try and focus on themes and issues that the experience of being *here and elsewhere* brings to the table, if anything then as an attempt to envision how my own subjectivity, as a constant outsider (perhaps 'stranger-friend' is most appropriate), relates to events as I encounter them and try to comprehend.

15 December 2009

The sea today is boisterous, windy; white-tipped waves like dolphin fins pierce its slate surface and move along the water in a northerly direction. The weather here in Beirut is still gentle, even if it may be a bit chilly as a semblance of winter encroaches, not comparable (I am sure) to what you are experiencing. We have been separated by the challenge of time that will characterise the upcoming months as I try and stay here and you return there, where our love began.

11 November 2009

The sea is old. The sea carries away. I imagine how easy it is to venture 'across the sea'.

There was one, there wasn't one, except for someone there was no one. A man stood here a long time ago, when the beach was rocky and covered in dry grass, when cactus paths grew their way towards the shore, when aloe and herbs imbued the humid air with a warm fragrance. A man looked out onto the sea and felt guilty every day for not paying more attention to it. His friends and family would catch him straying from work, distracted, lost in contemplation. One day, the man disappeared. He had built a small ship overnight and at sunrise set out across the sea, content to spend the remainder of his days alone with the water. No one heard from him again – they lamented his loss. Over time, his story grew to myth – the disappearance became important, necessary, perhaps destined, not a tragic loss but a renewal of some sort of contract with nature. When will he ever return again?

The man disappeared to those who knew him but appeared, over the course of time, as the current pushed him across the sea and the wind blew him in spirals to somewhere else. Thirsty, hungry, sunburned, salt-wounded, he landed on an island. How far away from where he came, he did not know.

To those living on this island, the arrival of this man was a foundational event. Someone, the first one, a man, a god, a hero, a ghost, appears from the sea, what was thought to be a border of the end of the world for the island itself. Until that day, the islanders conceived of their world as a cloud floating on a flat table of water, the centre of creation, the only place under the sun where men and women lived. Above, below and around were the borders set by the gods and the creatures of the known world. And so, on this day, a creature that bore resemblance to them appeared from an *Other* world. He allowed them to imagine *somewhere else*.

The man's disappearance *across* and appearance *from* the sea allows for imagination to produce legend. It is a story of a primal encounter. His departure and arrival allow for others to come and go; he breaks the barriers that had kept the imaginative coordinates of reality, of here and there, of what is and what is not, stable and fixed.

6 July 2009

I'm beginning to find that the events of the day are less important than what that day offers to thought through its sensory phenomena: ah, the weather, which has so gracefully aligned itself to developments in the complex situation here ever since I arrived – as if Nature, whose 'side' remains ambiguous, were attempting to express its prophetic foreshadowing of human events. Perhaps, as if the distinction between the collected sum of strained mental and physical activity here has created some material rupture in the laws of physics, atomic particles were being realigned to create terrifying natural occurrences. For example, the torrential winds of the pre-election period; the thunder and lightning boiling in the sky as fights broke out in the city post-election; the quiet, amnesiac sun of the second week when hope seemed to diminish; the second coming of something unknown and unclear in the Baghdadi winds of the third week that demanded *disappearance*.

28 December 2009

I've started a good routine of reading 15 pages of a book everyday. Psychologically, this very manageable amount of pages comforts me and also instills in me a peaked enthusiasm for more. So when I finish 15 pages of one book and still feel the urge to read on, I visit another book and continue on the same process. This helps me juggle ideas, as I am prone to do, and to cross over thoughts I've grasped in my short-term memory in a productive way. D. bought me a copy of *A Lover's Discourse* by Roland Barthes for Christmas. I've been browsing through it the past days. One of the fragmentary entries in this book is on The Absent One, comparing the absence of the beloved to the anxiety of losing one's mother, to the encroachment of death, to the fumbling attempts of making meaning out of silence through language. I will share with you a quote:

Sometimes I have no difficulty enduring absence. Then I am 'normal': I fall in with the way 'everyone' endures the departure of a 'beloved person'... This endured absence is nothing more or less than forgetfulness. I am, intermittently, unfaithful. This is the condition of my survival; for if I did not forget, I should die. The lover who doesn't forget *sometimes* dies of excess, exhaustion, and tension of memory.⁵

10 September 2009

I had a very uncomfortable dream. I think it may have been lucid. I did not sense myself asleep, yet I was no longer aware of what was happening in the bedroom around me. It was more a feeling of hovering over my own body. More specifically, it felt as if my body were hovering in darkness, although the sun was shining brightly through the window and onto my white sheets.

I don't remember the full dream. I awoke with an atmospheric sense of confusion, but a concrete moment lingered. You are talking. You are sitting in front of me wearing your grey and blue checked jumper, the one that I've always thought was too big for you. You were clearly excited, recounting a story whose details I do not recall anymore. Afterwards, to my

exhaustion, you began posing many questions to me: “Do you remember when...?” “You read that article, didn’t you?” “Remember that day when we...?” These questions asked more from me than their immediate concerns. They depended on me. They depended on my memory of our shared experiences. They stressed a common bond between us. But there I stay, staring at you blankly: I didn’t know what you were talking about! I couldn’t remember anything you were referring to! I was overtaken by a sense of panic. Then, trying to cover up my discomfort, I forced a smile and a nod, pretending to remember. I knew immediately that you had figured me out. You looked me in the eyes, seeing they were empty and elsewhere. I wrenched in pain, struggling to remember, hoping you wouldn’t perceive my agony. You didn’t say a word. Instead, you laughed. I felt you move a far, far distance away, retreating in self-protection against a dangerous amnesia that had stripped me clean.

My eyes flashed open. D. was no longer home, he had left hours ago. Silence; only the gurgling of the Buddhist fountain in the neighbour’s backyard crept in through the window. I confess to losing my memory.

“But you were there? You were there! Don’t you remember?”

29 June 2009

A collective memory is being created.

I have decided to capture the moment.

What would I do if I were not Iranian?

Are my judgements of the current situation in Iran misguided?

My dreams do not narrate anything any more.

I have decided to collect ‘our’ dreams.

Our dreams articulate themselves as questions.

I have decided to collect our questions.

Our questions manifest as images.

What if these images are just fragments?

Our questions become images.

These images narrate the processes that build up our memories.

Our collective memory.

Finally, I fell sleep.⁶

24 November 2009

The sea is so close, a street away. It spreads itself across my line of sight, at a gentle angle from where I sit on my balcony. I keep thinking about last week, when you and I were in the South. The twilight hour we spent in Tyre together lingers deliciously in my memory. There – after the sun had set but before the darkness had fully crept in – sitting in the ruined amphitheatre of the agora, we were surrounded by a grounded silence that rooted our bodies into the stone. I felt that my legs were much longer than they actually were; as they dangled over the bleacher-style steps of the amphitheatre, my feet melted into the darkness emanating from the earthy grotto underneath. It was as if they were planted into the rich, black soil like arcane mandrake roots, suspiciously human. We were alone at the archaeological site. We didn't speak to one another; we sat next to each other. The sea and the cicadas were the only sounds that could be heard. There, unlike Beirut, where, ironically, the sea is so close yet so silent, we could hear the water as its waves broke rhythmically against the shore, sending the smooth smell of salt and plastic bottles into the air. The dull hum of its incessant movement, its laps back and forth, gave the sensation of a crisply cool blanket on a fresh bed, waiting for a sleeper to dive in, wrap himself inside, shiver in anticipation of the contradictory coming warmth.

Here, no sea-voice and no cicada-song. The twilight hour after sunset and before sunrise finds a peak in the cacophonous traffic, cars either coming home from work (on weekends, going out) or going to work (perhaps 'work' is not accurate in this city, let's just say these are the hours in which cars come and go, from and to places). This must be the *hour of the wolf*, as it is said, 'the hour when most men die and most children are born'. I can imagine such an hour when I remember that prolonged, grounded moment, sitting with you in the blue-dark, feet rooted into the black, embraced by the beckoning caress of the sea and the star-sparkle-welcome of the cicadas' sonic twinkles. Here I could die, here I can see inside me and around! You said to me: "I see history, I understand what it means to love a country, why men and women have fought and died to protect home, how they have suffered in exile, what distance means". What continues to live on, life itself, presents itself, unchanged in form. In content, however, life reveals itself as an irrational set of deviations, contortions and mutations. But when I wake up before sunrise to the honks and screeches, the sea cast invisible by the movement of the traffic (a blue, solid extension of the sky, the city becomes a highway floating on clouds), I cannot, in this moment of living bodies inside machines, confronting one another through will, metal and pitch, imagine that this dark hour exists as the threshold between this life and another-to-be. The hour of the wolf, in the city, is perhaps more the hour of hot coffee, alarm clocks, grumpy beginnings and elephantine thuds: *an elephant in the room* is a saying that means the truth is monstrously present although everyone attempts (and, arguably, fails) to ignore it.

28 December 2009

I am afraid of forgetting. I've been struggling with this fear ever since we left Iran in August. I have periods of time in which I am 'normal' – I find ways to reconnect with what is taking place there, where I can tap into the reservoir of my memory and make sense of the picture that develops in relation to my present distance. Yet, other times, the fear of forgetting gives me a sharp, pyramid-pointed headache, numbing me with its taunting persistence. It speaks to me, reminds me of one thing: without being there, I can not be a part of what is going on. I resist. As I've engaged with this fear, I have begun to understand the need for repetition. Why do people commemorate events yearly, repeat the narratives of a particular day, recite the same slogans or chants, perform the same gestures? Because they are afraid of forgetting. Or is it a greater fear – the fear of the ultimate forgetting, death, the still-mind state of cold, incommunicable otherness? The rest of the year, the symbolic moment of repeating what is on the brink of being forgotten fades away into the ordinary routine, making room for our everyday survival to continue on as it did. That's when we become unfaithful to one another: once we step outside of suspended reality and engage in an affair with life. What to do then? I'm thinking that once the commemorating event has come and passed, once we've come to terms with the day after, when the administration of things seems inevitable, we should recite poetry. It's like the 15 pages of a book a day – a poem a day – or, even more, it helps repeat, microscopically, the transient presence, that *thing* which risks slipping away from the hand that attempts to administer it. The poem makes sense as a tool, helping me at least to not forget. Its lines, rhythmically patterned, are meant to elevate language a step above, to make words hold more weight, if only by imposing a repetitive arrangement upon them. I will repeat myself, repeat many things – either I am writing a poem to you now or I am commemorating an event. Is there a difference? In any case, I repeat in order to join you in your fight against forgetfulness: against forgetting what our love means, what we shared, how we have been treated, how the news has passed us over to the periphery of its gaze in the past months, how the tyrants feel that if they ignore us, we will fade away. I repeat to assure myself that despite distance, comfort and distraction, I am an individual being-with, becoming-butterfly, intoxicated in you. Of course, I mean to say 'you' in the plural.

14 June 2009

They have guns. They pointed them at us. They are not afraid to shoot. They took down house numbers. For now, we are safe. But we can't be sure. There are four of us here: two filmmakers, an artist and a writer. We are not alone, but there are many of them and they are ready for violence. This is a coup d'état, and, if things get worse, there will be a crackdown. If that is the case, they may come back, and we may be arrested, questioned, put in jail, who knows? Let the world know our situation.

10 November 2009

There was and there wasn't...

Meaning: everything existed and nothing existed. How can there be nothing from everything? How does everything co-exist with nothing? What time or tense is taking place in this statement?

There was one and there wasn't one...

Now this statement is quite different. A subject has been introduced into the everything/nothing duality, meaning 'someone existed and no one existed'. But whether someone or no one, the subject, or its lack, occupies a general existence, not a nothingness of any sort. Either one is on scene, in the event, part of a becoming, or no one is there, no one has (yet) arrived, no one is participating. Somehow, this statement anticipates action – the one who was, is, but hasn't yet begun to do something, to articulate its being; the one who wasn't has yet to be, but may perhaps come later and take part. Therefore, in this statement, there are **two**, a pair, a conversation or dialogue – not a one and its lack, rather a double of the one who is (the double – perhaps death? the constant risk of disappearance? the Messiah: one who was [is] and the one who wasn't [isn't] *at the same time?*).

21 December 2009

I read the following in an article by Farnaz Fassihi entitled "The Doctor Who Defied Tehran":

Mothers of individuals killed in Iran's anti-government protests this year have formed a support group, Grieving Mothers, who march silently Sunday afternoons at Laleh Park in Tehran holding pictures of their dead children. This month, security officials arrested 15 members. They were freed a few days later when crowds gathered near the jail, demanding their release.⁷

I don't want to make any spectacular comparisons, but so much of what's going on there takes on, for me, the quality of Greek tragedy. I know you and I have talked about this extensively, the night you were at my apartment in Beirut; we sat on the balcony and ate custard apples together. That night, I fell silent while listening to your eloquence. I didn't feel as though I could respond to your sensitive thoughts, gracefully adorned with hesitation. I mentioned that I had been thinking about Greek tragedy, specifically the role that the chorus played, as representatives of the 'people', a form of running commentary with multiple perspectives, or a super-ego voice-in-the-head that appears onstage, collecting the voice of those who comprise, for lack of a better word, the 'common'. Later that night, after you had left, I received an email from you, apologising for your lack of clarity, saying that you felt as though you were quite inarticulate and that you were sorry if that had left me with a feeling of frustration. Ironic that it was exactly the opposite! In any case, did I ever tell you I was in a college experimental production of Euripides' *The Suppliants* (alright, it was more a multimedia theatre piece, a collage of *The Suppliants* with two short Beckett plays)? I was in the chorus of suppliant women, grieving Argive mothers who journey to Athens in order to beg Theseus to recover the bodies of their dead sons who had fallen at the hands of

Thebes' invading army. These mothers are driven by the belief that all Greeks, regardless of their sins, deserve burial. We had to say our lines in ancient Greek, quite an exhilarating challenge: a Classics professor and a dance choreographer taught us how to combine the tonal pronunciation with the rhythm and metre of the verse itself into a complete movement, uniting voice and body. We, the Grieving Mothers, may as well have been silent; delivering our lines in Greek emphasised the emotive and sonic qualities of our body-song, rather than fixating on the audience comprehending the 'meaning' of our lines. Indeed, *The Suppliants* is unique amongst Euripides' tragedies in that the chorus arrives on stage in silence, and remains silent for a significant duration of the play.

Why are they so afraid of the dead? When the Baghdadi winds shut down half the country this past July, the first thought that sprung into my head was that the ghosts of the Iran-Iraq War were invading. An army of blind ghosts, their vengeance turned foul air. Such an army would consist of not only Iraqis, but of all the weary souls who-do-not-lie-in-peace, foremost the Iranian child-soldiers used as 'human shields' in the final years of the Holy Defence, sent in waves to first clear the battlefield of mines and then as 'living grenades' thrown underneath invading tanks. Despite the elaborate martyrology that emerges from their little-known biographies and the ceremonies established by the Islamic Republic to honour them, such as the archival footage of the Iran-Iraq War shown daily on state-run television before the news begins, I have little faith that these souls have managed to cross the threshold from this world to the next. Instead, they are trapped in-between.

Could these Grieving Mothers be accompanied by the hundreds of thousands of those other grieving mothers who still bear the memory of their martyred sons and husbands? They both would gather to demand that their children be able to rest in peace, free from the propaganda that uses and abuses their memory – one group sees their children continuously tarnished as terrorists, rogues, vandals, criminals, who deserved to die and who do not merit a proper funeral or even a mourning ceremony; the other group does not cease to encounter their children lauded as heroes of the Revolution, painted effigies of their rosy-cheeked faces dotting murals across the country, their sacrificial actions praised repeatedly at yearly commemorations remembering those who fell during the war. In the combined supplication of the Grieving Mothers, similar issues at stake in *The Suppliants* come to the table. Some of these mothers are told their children are "dirt and dust". Other mothers are supposedly comforted by an empty insistence – your children gave up their lives for the Land! Whether dirt, dust or the motherland, these dead children have not yet been given up to the earth. They hover and whisper, words are spoken about them, tears are shed for them. The earth is the source of both life and death. It is and should be life's final resting place. It is, however, also the ground upon which politics is played, wars raged, revolutions unleashed. Maybe then, they are afraid of the dead, because they know they have depended on them for too long. Because they are guilty of that tragic sin, to not allow the dead to be buried: "The only writer of history with the gift of setting alight the sparks of hope in the past, is the one who is convinced of this: that not even the dead will be safe from the enemy, if he is victorious. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious".⁸

7 July 2009

A few nights ago, I was having a late conversation with R. He, in passing, briefly mentioned that one particular aspect of Shi'ite Islam is the capacity to imagine, as a constructive tool to deal with what is denied-as-disaster, and, in turn, claimed as 'disappearance'. According to him, unlike other religious traditions which claim distinction through what is witnessed, such as the revelation of the Ten Commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai or the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, Shi'ite Islam is, in terms of events, impoverished by its *lack* of witnessing, or, rather, it is afflicted by a series of losses: Ali's arbitration at Siffin giving Mu'awiyah the upper hand; Hossein's martyrdom at Karbala, leaving the Prophet's family scattered and hunted; the 12th Imam's mysterious Occultation, his resolve to be in this world without being noticed. The absence of visible 'results' in the development of a Shi'a 'consciousness' has, in turn, led theologians to rely heavily on the esoteric, intrinsic nature of God's revelation, a practice that colours the reading of the Qur'an as well as any approach to theological matters. A precarious balance between the visible and the invisible arises. I am reminded of Borges' Hakim, the Veiled Prophet:

First there came a trembling. The promised face of the Apostle, the face which had journeyed to the heavens, was indeed white, but it was white with the whiteness of leprosy. It was so swollen (or so incredible) that it seemed to be a mask. It had no eyebrows; the lower eyelid of the right eye dropped upon the senile cheek; a dangling cluster of nodular growths was eating away its lips; the flat and inhuman nose resembled that of a lion. Hakim's voice attempted one final deception: *Thy abominable sins forbid thee to look upon my radiance...*, he began. No one was listening; he was riddled with spears.⁹

During the course of Hakim's ministry, an insistence on the sacrosanct invisibility of his face kept him in a position of power – as long as his followers believed that to see would mean to no longer be able to see, Hakim remained in control. What I suspect was Hakim's greatest downfall was his inability to distinguish the balance between seeing and not seeing: he did not present *himself* as holy, only his *face*. Through this, he exposed the sight of his other-than-face to the knowledge engendered and demanded by vision. His only option, in my opinion, would have been to *disappear* at the moment that his followers acknowledged his holiness. Then, he would truly venture into the realm of *effect*, that is, the invisible, where he could continue his ministry undercover, perhaps to the point of success. Of course, such a move may have meant that he, sooner or later, would be superseded by another who would claim the *effect* of his holiness. This claim would have to be negotiated between the usurper and the occulted. Such a negotiation, concerned over a conflicting will-to-power, could only take place within the realm of the *alam al-khiyal*, the world of imagination, and not in the world of men. The veil passes from one face to another. It acts, somehow, as a screen upon which the imagination of its effect is projected. All that remains for a Shi'a subjectivity, if there is one, is to imagine. If this imagination is compromised by time, that is if a believer is given the

right opportunity to actually see and to gather knowledge from that act of such seeing, the illusion of the disappeared, the ghostly, the occulted and, ultimately, the Messianic *effect*, is shattered: Hakim's leprous face reveals itself.

27 December 2009

Today is 'Ashura. The day here began sunny and clear; outside, the usual congested traffic was noticeably absent. My ears were perked to attention. They were awaiting a signal from outside, confirming that today is the day that it is. I heard music from across the street, although I could not pinpoint from where it was playing. It was a dull chant, open to interpretation: was it a mourning-song in commemoration of the day, a prayer being broadcast or a melancholic tune, devoid of that symbolic reference I was seeking? My thoughts were with you, knowing you were already awake and, perhaps, out on the streets.

I didn't want to see blood. Knowing that in Beirut, the traditional bloodshed accompanying 'Ashura processions is banned, I had decided for some time now to go to Dahiyya, the Shi'a neighbourhood in the south of the city, to witness what today would offer. I felt nostalgia for those inconvenient summer visits to Tehran as a child (somehow, our trip always coincided in those years with the months of mourning). I remember when I was ten years old and had just been circumcised, my aunt took me to a gathering on the night before 'Ashura. That awkward image of me in a pink skirt (pink, by an amusing coincidence; a skirt, to avoid any uncomfortable pressure on my wounded-still, healing private parts), sitting in a sea of wailing women-in-black, bored and hungry, belonged to a register of impressions fuelling my expectations for the day. No, not that I imagined today would see me cross-dressing, nor that I would be, by virtue of a long-gone pre-pubesence, able to blend in once again amongst weeping women. Rather, I expected that same mixture of the awkward and the sensory, that banality of boredom and hunger tense in confrontation with the special otherworldliness of this day's accompanying rites and rituals. I sought to transpose my presence in Beirut, so distant from you, through imagining that today, in Dahiyya, I would encounter a tear in the fabric of space-time: upon entering the frenzy of the masses here, I could then join myself with you there. As you moved among the masses there, fighting to be with one another, I would throw myself here into the sea of black-clad bodies, hungry for rights and recognition.

What I found in Dahiyya was, literally, dirt and dust. The sun was bright and hot and the crowds were already dispersing, going home for lunch or picking up snacks on the street. As I imagined, everyone was in black. Groups of young men with green headbands walked barefoot while girls flirted from the sidelines. I think I arrived too late. The frenzy I sought after proved anticlimactic: the scene bore more of a resemblance to an eerie monochrome street carnival, complete with roadside trinkets, souvenirs and grilled hamburgers. I wandered around for half an hour and decided it was time to head back home. On my way back to the bus stop, I was attacked by harsh winds, clouds of dirt arising from the ruined houses left over from recent conflicts, accompanied by the fresh dust of concrete-laden construction sites.

29 December 2009

I've been following what took place in Tehran on 'Ashura. I can imagine the media's excitement about the day – *what a good story! This is gonna be great!* Isn't it amusing that the media coverage after the June elections stopped once Michael Jackson died? I suppose, in a post-spectacular landscape, whatever event ceases to serve as the basis for a Hollywood screenplay is simply dropped, another one offering itself almost immediately. Well, this isn't a *good story*. It's not a *story*. The danger of 'Ashura is that Hossein's murder at Karbala by Yazid is, after all, a *story*. Whether there was one or there was no one doesn't really matter – a story risks replacing our real and true witness to *life*. We tell each other stories late at night, to quell our fears from the dark figures and strange sounds creeping into the room. These stories help us to fall asleep.

*Fear succeeds by monopolising ambiguity; it casts its shadow on our capability to assess our time and condition. If we continuously remind ourselves of this, then we no longer have a reason to be afraid.*¹⁰

What is our time and condition now? Not what was our time and condition in some 'once upon a time', but where am I, where are you, right now? What do you want from this life? The story can be listened to before bedtime, but it shouldn't fill our waking days with its dreamy narrative. It seems the repetitions I've been employing in order to stave off the spectre of forgetfulness are no longer necessary. Somehow, I had become religious – my gestures of remembrance were similar to the neurotic fingering of prayer beads accompanied by an inner running monologue addressed to a fearsome god. I don't think we should pray any more. We won't forget, of this I am sure. I will continue writing to you, sensing your presence near, but this time I will focus on staying awake and clear-sighted. I will abandon my commemoration of the past, what I suppose has been keeping me distant from you. I will instead hold your hand firmly and walk with you into the day. Whether they beat us, arrest us or kill us, we have one another, and, as you are all I can truly know, that means we have the people. The people, whether dead or alive, remain: we march through a forest of stars, we blow in with the wind, we are made from dirt and dust and to that we will return, but, for now, we can only be the courageous heroes.

Notes

1. *Headline from an article published in the Iranian newspaper, Eteelaat, July 2009.*
2. *This is a quote from the introduction to an article written by Ebrahim Nabavi, "The Hour of the Wolf and the Lamb", Rah-e-Sabz website, 29 December 2009. Available at: <http://www.rahesabz.net/story/6579/> (accessed 30 December 2009). The last sentence in Farsi reads differently, translating literally to 'this river will not repeat itself'. The expression reminded me of the fragment from Heraclitus, normally translated as 'you cannot step twice into the same river'.*

3. Akbar Ganji talking to Afshin Molavi. *The Soul of Iran* (Norton, 2005, New York).
4. Chorus from the song, "Khak-o-Khashak", by the band, *The Abjeez*.
5. Roland Barthes. *A Lover's Discourse* (Vintage Books, 2002, London).
6. Extract from the video, *The Epic of the Lovers: God, the Mafia and the Citizens*, by Azin Feizabadi and Ida Momennejad, June 2009.
7. Farnaz Fassih. "The Doctor Who Defied Tehran". In *The Wall Street Journal*, 21 December 2009. Available at: <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB126118381849697953.html#articleTabs%3Darticle> (accessed 30 December 2009).
8. Walter Benjamin [1940]. "On the Concept of History". Available at: <http://www.efn.org/~dredmond/Theseson-History.html> (accessed 30 December 2009).
9. Jorge Luis Borges. "Hakim, the Masked Dyer of Merv". In *Collected Fictions*, (trans.) Andrew Hurley (Penguin, 1998, London), pp. 40-44.
10. Ebrahim Navabi. Available at: <http://www.rahesabz.net/story/6579/> (accessed 30 December 2009).