

Orderly Outsider

If space allows movement, place is pause.

—Yi-Fu Tuan [1]

The landscape has its formation and as after a play has to have formation and be in relation one thing to the other thing and as the story is not the things as any one is always telling something then the landscape not moving but always being relation.

—Gertrude Stein [2]

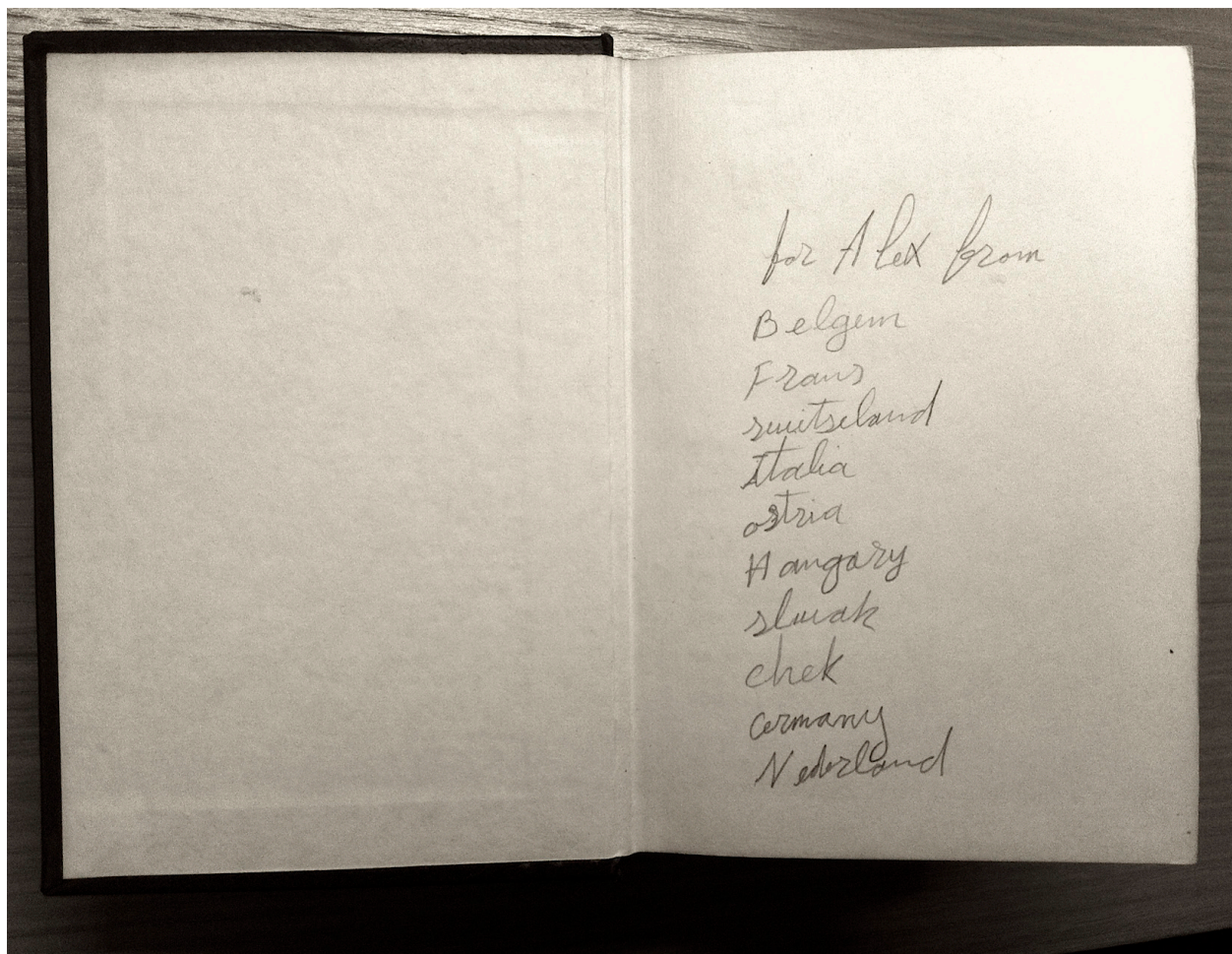
I.

On a clear night with full moon, a young man soundlessly boards a tiny boat and pushes off. Letting the water pull him far enough out of earshot, he picks up his oars and starts to paddle across the Persian Gulf, away from Iran and towards the United Arab Emirates. Once there, he begins his journey on foot to Europe.

I met Khosro in Amsterdam in the late 1990s when we were collaborating on a dance piece. He was a soft-spoken man of an indeterminate age with light brown eyes that would blink infrequently as they locked you in their gaze—making your eyes water if you tried to hold his stare. I had also been living in Iran with my family, in the years leading up to the revolution. We were airlifted out of Tehran in a cargo plane around the time that Khosro escaped. As we flew in a windowless plane towards a new life in Europe, Khosro set a different course, following the stars and moon in order to reach a distant shore where he then picked up a circuitous route on foot, to a new and very different life in Europe.

He told me his story in Germany one Spring afternoon, as we sat next to an artificial lake that was the site of an old limestone quarry.

That summer, he set out on one of his annual journeys, on-foot, through ten countries in continental Europe. He took with him a small, blue, hardcover English-Dutch dictionary and inside its pages he pressed wildflowers that he picked along the road. When he returned, he inscribed the book to me and wrote the list of names of the countries he had walked through. It reads:



The flowers stick to the paper in a suspended state of *forever-spring*. Their stems draw skewed, diagonal lines across the page between words, connecting them into found poems. Pollen and the occasional trapped insect create stray punctuation marks on the page. Purple poppies pressed onto the page become transparent screens through which words can be read. The pairings of words that mark the beginning and end of entries at the top of each page stand out as titles for the songs that each flower sings. Titles like: "Seldom Seventh," "Insomuch Interior," "Lend Lightness," "Magistrate Manners," and "Orderly Outsider."

II.

My family lived in Tehran from 1976 through 1979. My father was a Naval officer on orders to teach the Iranian Navy how to drive ships that the United States had recently sold them. The house we lived in was a modern concrete construction with bars on the windows and a high wall around the perimeter. Like cutting open a geode, the interior was delightfully surprising, as its colors and forms in no way resembled its outer form. The circular entrance hall had a tiled floor and a round glass atrium in its center, open to the sky above. Light poured onto the tall lush plants inside the column and the walls around the hall were mirrored, creating a dazzling play of light and colors. In this hall, I would ride my tricycle, circling the vitri-form column, while hundreds of my counterparts would ride as reflections across curved surfaces.

The nursery where I slept had a window that looked out onto the entrance hall, and it was there that I would stand in my crib watching the effulgent light on the plants and contemplate the rhythm of the tiles as the refractions of light would dart from floor to wall and back. The rest of my family lived in the back of the house, facing out onto a concrete yard. Cocooned and insulated from the noise of the street, I slept oblivious to the nightly annoyance of power outages and the loud protests after dark.

My eldest brother had an old school desk in his room where he would work on his homework. I have the most distinct picture of his room in my mind—and though I've not had my memory verified, I imagine his room as distinctly monastic and emptied of objects: white walls, a single bed, plain sheets, and an old desk against the wall next to the window. Just outside his window is the swimming pool where I almost drowned one afternoon when my middle brother left the child gate open and I ventured out to walk the perimeter of the pool, balancing along the edge like a tightrope walker, only to topple in after a few tentative steps.

In many of my dreams throughout my youth, my eldest brother's window composes the first wide shot of a filmic replay of this traumatic experience. In the dream I would move through this window and out past the concrete terrace to the pool. The shot would shift to a close-up of my feet, slowly cutting back and forth between my steps and the mesmerizing blue of the water. At once, my small form is submerged and I sink into the cold and airless embrace of water permeated with sunlight. I'm surrounded by space in all directions that offers no resistance to my body. I sink.

The story continues...

My middle brother—who had left the gate open—happens to witness my fall from his room, and he jumps into the pool and pulls me out. After saving my life he is scolded by my mother, only this is not part of my cinematic recall. I remember it as imagery that is generated by words. I've been told the end to the story, but the sun-filled water and the shots leading up to that moment are composed by *my* memory. Or so I like to think.

One night my eldest brother was reading on his bed when he heard the protesters in

Pagus

In *The Five Senses*, Michel Serres deploys the Latin word *pagus* as a way of talking about (local) landscapes. *Pagus* has the French derivations *pays*, and *paysage*. The word *pagus* refers to districts, countryside, or units of land, but as a close etymological root word to *page*, we can begin to imagine landscape as a *mode of writing upon*. The landscape itself becomes iconographic (a way of writing on image).

Michel Serres writes:

The *pagus*, canton, department, partition of ground or space, is a piece of the country, an element of the countryside: a patch of lucerne, vineyard, plot of land, small meadow, neatish garden and its enclosure, village square, tree-lined walk. Held in tenure by the peasant, the *pagus*—his age-old noble lineage—is where rustic divinities dwell. Gods repose there: in the hollow of the hedge, in the shadow of the elm.... Stop asking how one sees a landscape. This is the question asked by spoilt children who have never worked. Seek to know rather how the gardener designed it; how the farmer, for thousands of years, has been slowly composing it for the painter who reveals it to the philosopher, in museums or books.

He composed *pagus* by *pagus*. Now this same Latin word, from the old agrarian language, as well as the verb *pango*, dictate or give us "page"—the one that I am ploughing with my style in regular furrows this morning, a small plot where the writer's existence settles, puts down its roots and becomes established, where he sings of it. [3]



the street shouting. They were far away, but he could hear the sound of their pounding feet and the din of their cries in unison. To him they sounded distant yet immanent. He began to cry uncontrollably, terrified that they were marching on our house. He went into our parent's room to be consoled, but my mother couldn't hear what he was hearing and couldn't console him.

It turned out that there was no protest and no marching that night. No shouts from the rooftops. It was a quiet autumnal evening and only the sporadic sounds of passing cars or the lonely whine of a scooter could be heard on the street.

My brother insisted that our mother come to the room to hear the protest. They went hand in hand to the room. It was quiet.

Exasperated and sobbing, he asked once again, "Can't you hear them marching? They're coming!"

Still silent. Then, Mother heard a periodic and measured clicking sound. But from where was it coming?

Searching the room for sound sources, she opened the lid of the school desk. Inside were hundreds of tiny ants marching in single file.

[...]

The hyper-aurality of my brother instilled in me not only how great the imaginative power of a child's listening is, but also its darker side. Listening takes us out into the night of things unknown just as it also provides us intimacy and comfort when we can return once more to our breath under the blanket, finding a reciprocal pleasure in the warmth that it spreads under the sheets and the rhythmic certainty of selfhood that it sounds out.

Sound files by Alex Waterman can be accessed at thirdrailquarterly.org

[1] Tuan, Yi-Fu, *Space and Place, The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

[2] Gertrude Stein, "Plays," in *Last Operas and Plays* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), xlvii.

[3] Michel Serres, *The Five Senses*, trans. Margaret Sankey and Peter Cowley (London: Continuum, 2008), 236-7.

