

THERE IS A BLUE SKY TODAY AND NO RAIN  
INTERIOR LANDSCAPES OF WOMEN IN EXILE IN THE NETHERLANDS





*To you, my women, Randa, Zahra, Kimya, Nour,  
and Hellen, we aren't done yet, but I am happy  
that you are part of this beginning.*

*To Donald, four years ago I was in the dark; it  
takes just one person to believe in you!*

*To Shailoh, you made me realise how beautiful  
this mess was.*

*To Alexa, what else can we do with photography?*

*To Jamal, can we climb that hill, too?*

*And to my unborn, unnamed child, your mom is an  
ocean of trauma, but she's not afraid to taste  
the water. I promise I'll have a name for you  
by the time I hand in this project.*



*[E]xile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile's life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement.*  
— Edward W. Said (2002, 137-138).



## Prologue

### Tea and shisha at 4pm

It was autumn 2017. I was located in AZC Gilze in the southern Netherlands. I arrived at noon with a small handbag carrier, wearing an outfit that I picked the night before with a significant degree of intention. A short blue dress, sweater, and leggings. The dress works better without the leggings, but I couldn't afford to show my legs. It was not only that I had just broken free from the black abya in Yemen, but I also didn't want to be judged by the residents of the camp. The majority were men and came from my part of the world, where female bodies are a battleground.

While I was walking towards my room, I contemplated calling my family, showing them the big trees, the colorful leaves, and the buildings of the camp that took the shape of cottages.

"Look, look, I'll live in one of these cottaged houses. Isn't that beautiful," I said.

I walked into my room.

"It smells nice," I thought.

There were flowers in a vase on the wooden table. The flowers were fresh; some open, others in bud. The room had two shared beds, and I got the impression that my roommate was neat. She was the reason I made up my bed every day in the camp.

My roommate walked in and introduced herself. She was from Iraq with a strong Kurdish accent. It was so sweet that it reminded me of Ahmed Mattar, an Iraqi poet whose poems I read in high school in Yemen. He was also my first crush - especially given his young age - his face held all the beauty a man can possess.

"Where are you going," I asked my roommate as she was rushing out.

"Having tea with some women here. They are 'hababbt', translated 'sweet women' in English. Would you like to come," she asked.

"Yes."

Each day, the women of the camp and I would gather at 4 pm for tea and shisha. It had to be 4 pm, because dinner time starts at 6 pm in the camp, and we hated

<sup>1</sup> AZC refers to Asielzoekerscentrum in Dutch and translated as 'Asylum Seekers' Centre'. Residents of these centres, however, refer to them as camps.

to queue for dinner.

We don't put on any special outfits. Our options are limited anyway. Some of us have come with suitcases carrying clothes and memories, and others barely have survived with few articles of clothes.

Each day a woman invites a bunch of us into her room. If the woman is single, then it is a small room, and she mostly shares her room with another roommate. If the woman has a family, then it is a big room. Our tea room is a mother's room. She kicks her children out and we have the room to ourselves.

In this room, we sit in a circle around the table surrounded by double beds on each side. A woman stands near the sink, because that's where the boiling kettle is for tea. We lay out the goodies we each have brought from our rooms: chocolate, hummus, crisps, cookies, anything. We spread them all on the table in a nice, elegant manner.

During our teatime, we vent. We complain about the asylum process, talk about the unspoken, and the unspeakable. We share, grieve, and gossip. It is a safe space where we speak our minds, where we search for the light in the stories we share. A place where it's okay for us to feel vulnerable. Usually, Samar would complain about her husband.

*"He brought us here. He said that it was going a matter of a few weeks, and look, it's been 8 months here. We are stuck! He is a liar. If it weren't for the kids, I would have left him."*

Alia would share her list of purchases from the loan the government will give her upon leaving the camp to her house: *"I will get wallpaper for the kitchen, a big oven, enough to bake three giant tarts, a dishwasher..."*

Another woman would respond, *"This country is so stingy. It's not going to be enough."*

And I would share my frustration that the rooms had no keys, *"Imagine, ladies, yesterday we dared to have sex for the first time here. We were so quiet that I was almost suffocating, but some idiot knocked on the door, and we were terrified and jumped out of bed to*

*get dressed. It was Slawa after all, inquiring about something stupid."*

I was the youngest; 27 years old, and with no children. I have just reunited with my partner in the Netherlands. What else would I speak about if not the story of my adventures trying to have one single intimate night with my man in the camp? I also made sure to keep mental notes from our tea gatherings. I knew that one day I'd be revealing them to you, my dear readers.

During our tea gatherings, women get to go to colleges; they own houses; they travel the universe. The tearoom is a space where dreams and fantasy are accepted and expected.

We have our pasts to talk about as well. It isn't always colourful, but these stories are hardly forgettable. We use our imaginations - fantasy as a tool for resistance. As we all left the camps and settled into our new "homes", these tea gatherings have remained our shared space of joy. Everything I will reveal here comes from our conversations, confessions, and daily reminiscences. Sometimes these will sound like a cupcake on a sugared plate, sweet and delectable, and sometimes they will be bitter, but you will have a reason to swallow it all.

I assume you are, after all, a curious, open-minded, and compassionate reader. I trust you, and so I'd like to introduce you to the women who will accompany us in this journey, Randa, Zhara, Kimya, Hellen, and Nour. My name is Thana. I was born and raised in Yemen, a country that has been engulfed in a civil war since 2014. As a consequence of the war, I was forced into exile in the Netherlands in 2016. Sometimes I feel that I have lost the ability to have a sense of time and space. My emotions are never in one place, even if I am. In this place, however, I am not alone. There is my friend Hellen, who is stateless, and who has been in search of a home since she arrived in the Netherlands three years ago. And there is Haneen, who lost her emotional and sexual connection with her husband because they lived apart for seven years during the asylum process. Sometimes we feel like we are in a screenplay in an invisible space, an unsafe place where even the familiar becomes uncanny.





## Abstract

This thesis aims to explore the personal narratives and complex emotional landscapes of the lives of a small group of young women and girls living in exile here in the Netherlands. The work will reflect on our life journeys, and it will seek to project forward toward futures both the real and the imagined. Many of these women, including myself, are in phases of life where they are challenged to construct identities within new cultural contexts and geographies of power, as well as within their memories and the nostalgic representations of the past they possess. My goal is to explore our emotional interior landscape in the light of the changes that we go through. To explore them, describe them in vignettes of conversation, talk about them, and reveal them. In this process, I have come to a point of exhaustion and depression, a flat landscape. I aim to create an archive of memories of our emotions and the feelings that are often lost in histories of migration and displacement, including nostalgia, and not feeling much at all.

My thesis responds to these questions: How do women in exile cope with their emotions in the process of constructing a new identity? How does the changed social and familial context lead to new ways of managing novel emotional experiences? How can we explore this complex interior emotional landscape in a visual way?





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## Part One:

### *Back home is mango and sugarcane residue*

*on home, belonging, nostalgia, and unsettling interior landscapes*

## Introduction: A bathroom of one's own

My friend Randa sent me a voice message once telling me how she felt to have a private bathroom again for the first time since leaving Syria. Along the journey from her home in Damascus, she had experienced all types of shared bathrooms, broken toilets and clogged showers, as she passed her way to the culture of shared bathrooms, and using toilet paper instead of water in refugee camps in the Netherlands. You try to spend as little time as possible, holding your breath because of the stench, and not making a sound, listening for anyone else in there who doing the same. The shower was thick with the scent of other people's shampoos.

She told me the moment she had a private bathroom again was an absolute joy.

"I walked leisurely to the bathroom. I took a long shower. It was like standing under an everlasting waterfall. The steamy, hot water made me travel to the oceans and seas, and the smell of laurel soap took me back to Al-Sham."

"Sometimes you think that 'The Past' is asleep in your heart, but the slightest detail manages to wake him up," I told her. "I bet the smell of laurel is only the beginning. The scent evokes other scents: allspice, cumin, and thyme."

I have read that historians typically used soldiers' diaries and letters to validate battlefield experiences. They treat these diaries and letters not as texts, but as objects of memory and historical evidence (Luckins, 2010). Interestingly, it's often women who come into possession of dead soldiers' diaries and letters. However, historians have rarely recorded this aspect of the process of assembling historical memory, despite it offering a fresh understanding of women's lives (Luckins, 2010). Moreover, women's stories are often undocumented.

I felt offended to learn that (at least) half of the narrative has been left out. How can you neglect anger, love, guilt, shame, fear, anxiety, joy, and sexual desire? How can you neglect women's stories? It is impossible to look at any individual experience of war, migration, and displacement without thinking

about these emotions, especially when it comes to women.

One cannot help but wonder how these emotions are preserved under extreme circumstances of pain and trauma; how can they become visually accessible? In a post-disaster landscape, 'home' has the potential to be rendered "unheimlich", or uncanny<sup>2</sup>, which literally translates as being familiar but not at home, feelings of anxiety and discomfort are often attached to distorted visions of "home" in such circumstances (Morrice, 2014).

This makes my own project quite difficult. I am aware of that. But relying on my own autobiographical memory of war and displacement, and being actively involved in the lives of women who have had a similar path in life to mine, my task becomes easier. In this work, I try to re-create events, incidents, and conversations from my memories and my talks with my women. For the sake of privacy, I have changed some names of some individuals and places. I also re-identify and alter the details and characteristics of physical spaces. I might dramatise and creatively intervene in particular scenes. I will, however, only write about events that I directly experienced, and I will give context around every story and try to bring them to life using sensory details that remained in my memory, keeping my language true to particular times and places. I do not position myself as a scholar who can bring new knowledge to bear on a question; hence, I will leave conclusions, as such, unresolved.

I refer to the women I am depicting here as "my women." This is how we refer to each other, "our women". It's not only an intimate act, showing solidarity and unity, but it's an empowering one, especially when dealing with the constant violence being done to our emotions.

I write from a place of anger and trauma, and writing from trauma is an implicit act of hope<sup>3</sup>. The aim of this project is to provide a space for my women to be whomever they want. This project is my truth, and my attempt to reinvent the truth. It is my offering to you.

She takes the train.  
I load the film and wait.

She sends me a WhatsApp message:  
*I can't meet today.*  
Why?  
*I am too depressed to get out of bed she replies.*

She sends me a photo of her dinner.  
Crackers and cheese and cold coffee that has been sitting out.  
I write a note. I make it explicit and important:  
She had crackers and sad cheese for dinner. The coffee looked miserable, and sat humbly in the winter afternoon.

I read her the note.  
*It's beautiful.*

She shows me her family album.  
*Can you spot me?*  
This is you?  
No.

Here?

No.

I can't find you.

*Me neither.*

I get a letter from her.  
She sends back some photos I've taken of her with notes.  
She's ripped one image into confetti.  
I let it rain upon my knees.  
I imagined the sound of the ripping  
as she pulled the image apart.

*It's ugly.*  
What is ugly, I say, the photo, or you?  
*Does it matter?*  
Yes.  
*I am ugly.*  
*Are you disappointed?*

No, I am rather relieved.

<sup>2</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uncanny>

<sup>3</sup> Tamas (2012)



*What if I cheat on my husband?  
It's bad, right?  
No. I just hope that you are in love.  
I load the film.  
She stands still.*

*How do you say "غربة" in English, I ask her.  
I don't think there is an equivalent in English, but  
it does evoke feelings of absence, loss, yearning,  
banishment, and uprooting.*

*What do you think it means to you?*

*Emptiness.  
I load the film.  
She stands still.*

*And what does it mean to you?  
When Friday doesn't smell like Friday anymore.  
She stands still.  
I take the photo.*

### Can Memory Lie?

Can we have a false memory? How elusive can our memories be? Research indicates that under certain circumstances, we cannot be entirely sure about what we think we remember (Roediger & McDermott, 1995). This question reminds me of a similar one that I have often been confronted with: can photography lie? I have never had a strong desire to answer this question definitively. However, I was very conscious of whether or not I should depend only on my memory of the women's gatherings in the camps as a source to create an archive of memory of emotions. I trust my memory, but I do not trust my biases. We, as humans, like to create complete pictures for ourselves - even when it is impossible for us to have remembered all of what we claim to have remembered. We are amazing storytellers, especially to ourselves.

Accordingly, it is only fair to investigate our emotional interior landscape of "The Now" as well. How do these women get on with their lives during the transition? What happened to them emotionally? Have they reconciled with themselves and their circumstances? These questions are crucial during this journey of creating a memory vessel of feelings. I have become more curious about the nature of post-disaster homes, how feelings of loss, nostalgia, love, anxiety, and comfort influence these women's lives in their new spaces. Reconnecting with these women again through regular visits and WhatsApp messages has allowed me to reconnect with my memories, and to produce an accurate description of what we feel and felt. We talk about "The Now", but this concept is often tied to our individual experiences of the past. This has deepened my understanding of what I want to achieve as a photographer. I might visualise emotions, or I might hide them. We might be cruel or kind. We might be nice or nasty. We might be happy, or we might be angry. I can show and do whatever I want with photography, and that is what I love about it. The camera captures the full spectrum of emotional response.

## Unsettling interior landscapes

The concept of home is salient to migrant consciousness generally, and particularly to my women and me who are still navigating our way through space. Our experiences of landscapes here in The Netherlands are shaped in part by memories accumulated through everyday experiences: our struggles to settle in, to fit in, and to "integrate". Sometimes, we have dark thoughts, that we no longer have memories of childhood or places left behind. To me, memory is a way to construct a sense of temporal belonging. We want to remember things to create different ways of feeling at home, feeling safe, feeling whole. I remember when I traveled two years ago to the Markazi refugee camp, the world's only refugee camp for Yemenis, located near the border of Yemen and Djibouti. I remember people sharing photos brought from home, and how memories from a seemingly distant past flooded into space. Birthday parties, weddings, children playing, and social gatherings were all spread out in front of us. It transported me back home. It was the closest I could get to Yemen at that point. I wanted to document our collective trauma and memories. But, deep at the bottom of my heart, I aimed to connect my temporal belonging to a place that was half-remembered, and half-envisioned in my head: home.

But what exactly is "home"? The clear answer in the literature is that it may be physically or territorially marked, but also what constitutes its salience is more symbolic, i.e. its emotional, rational, and cultural significance. (Ben-Yoseph, 2005; Hoffman, 1999; Sarup, 1996; Silverstone, 1994). Home, thus, "comprises an emotional investment in a particular material space" (Kinefuchi, 2010).

This leads me to bring nostalgia into the discussion. Sometimes we need a rescuer to shape these symbolic forms of home and deliver us from a cruel absence of belonging. We sometimes have to turn to our memories of a past, or a place, or things, to seek a sense of belonging. We are in need of this bittersweet emotion that comprises "a personal contemplation of a valued experience in the past . . . that one does not expect to have again" according to Dickinson and Erben (2006).

## Does nostalgia work?

Zahra once said to me that she has fallen out of space. That home doesn't fit into any category: it is not rational, not spatial; it is not physical. Nostalgia doesn't prove to be a good technique for her to invoke her belonging to a specific place, desire, or memory. She belongs to the "things" of which home for her, which are shaped now through her interactions with the new. Like many women, she confronts the everyday struggle of being increasingly mobile, and fragmented. In short, Zara's relationship is shaped through what is not home.

*When mother lights Bakhoor in the house, I don't say it reminds me of Yemen. I just say it smells nice... Maybe this is bad, I don't know, but when you go through a lot, it becomes hard for you to have a strong attachment to a certain place or a memory.*  
- Zahra

Another important element that can lead one to fall out of place is the advent of new labels. It's worth mentioning that all the women here come from refugee backgrounds. As a refugee you have to confront this new label, one that can affect the process of identity re-formation. We never had to consider this while living in our countries of origin. I believe that the term "refugee" is problematic for the process of forming a sense of belonging, or creating a new home.

According to Ozkaleli (2018) the term "refugee", is imposed on individuals by a rational-bureaucratic formation of the territorial nation-state's legalistic contours. It blurs all personal differences, thereby stripping humans of their subjective experiences. The refugee label turns a human into a one-dimensional person. It conceptually separates her from the place where she originally belonged, and displaces her into a space unknown to her, a space that already belongs to another. Being a refugee becomes a reflection of her non-being, as she is situated in a land where she is considered not to belong. She is thrown into it by force. The only dimension left for the refugee is space – being in or out of it.

## Nostalgia sucks

A lot of scholars, academics and artists emphasise the idea of nostalgia as a productive device for the creation of a sense of place. As for me, I stand with the Pakistani visual artist and educator, Yaminay Chaudhri, in her idea that nostalgia sucks.

*"[n]ostalgia sucks when it sites comfortably in the past, sucks when it doesn't have anything to complicate the narrative, when it becomes an elusive experience of a romance with one-self, or a thinly veiled account of self-indulgence<sup>4</sup>."*

This idea that nostalgia sites the comfortable in the past troubles me. You are always captivated by the old bittersweet memories, and, as result, you end up living in your exile forever. You begin romanticising your exile, and fall in love with being out of place. You are too comfortable being not comfortable. You are too miserable, and yet you are happy with your misery (Chaudhri, 2013).

Earlier in this writing journey, I mentioned that in the post-disaster landscape, "home" has the potential to be rendered "uncanny"; feelings of anxiety and discomfort are often attached to distorted visions of "home". In the light of this argument, I am already challenged to photograph elements that are hard to grasp. I can leave it to the imagination, but, at a certain point, I am trapped with my own perceptions of home, or what I think the home might be, which is, in many cases, abstract and unapproachable though I could have chosen to leave it to the imagination, I felt trapped by my own perception and subjectivity towards home, making it increasingly abstract and unapproachable to myself, for example...). My solution was to photograph landscapes consisting of visible nature, and to document my conversations with my women. I realised they had representable value, too. They could stand as reminders of past places, people, or cultural values, a memory, or a desire.

*"This hill up there, you see it? Just like my village in Yemen."*

*"Why does this country have no mountains? It bothers me that it is super flat, like a tomato that has been crushed by a car."*

*"I was surrounded by mountains. My childhood memories consisted of drawings of mountains. I drew nothing else."*

*"Photograph me near the beach, where I belong."*

These might be simple visual triggers that promote recognition and a sense of comfort. They are useful tools for accessing nostalgia, elements that evoke their memories. Randa told me in a voice message that nostalgia is an active behaviour, and we live within an active process of remembrance.

*When we land, we don't just have suitcases for clothes, but a suitcase of memory. This consists of objects, and tools of remembrance. When you go to each one of our houses, you see them. We make an effort to make them visible.*

As I photographed, I decided to avoid the act, and the art, of remembering. I intended for my portraits of women not to zoom in and out of stories of the past. I deliberately wanted to reflect the idea of a distant home, because this is the truth. Nostalgia might have revealed desires to record their complex, imperfect homes as expressed by my women's memories, but it has not influenced the visuals. The photos, I feel, should remain neutral and give an accurate representation of my women's emotional interior landscapes, which is a huge container of nothingness. I loathe every nostalgic work in existence, every work that is unstable, absurd, sad, and incredibly sweet. I want the visual representation of my women to be unpredictable and alive.

I failed.

My photographs are currently unstable, absurd, melancholic, and incredibly sweet.

At least this is what I think.

<sup>4</sup> Chaudhri (2013)

## There is a Blue Bird in My Heart

Haneen felt uncomfortable opening her suitcase, a flow of overpacked clothes came out. They were mostly sac-like print dresses that come in gold and yellow with baby-blue flowers. Some dresses were big red roses that looked like an expensive wallpaper.

"You don't need all that. You gotta learn to be practical, like Dutch women. They could survive on one pair of jeans for an entire year," he said.

What does a practical woman mean?

"Is that one word," she asked.

The husband didn't respond.

"You said in one of your messages that you missed those dresses of mine," she said.

"What message," the husband asked.

"Never mind. It's hard to remember. We exchanged many messages during those days," she said.

They both rested in bed, inhaling deeply.

"Tomorrow I'll show you Utrecht, and if we are not tired we head to Amsterdam," the husband said.

Then he initiated a kiss, thoughtful and sweet, but not powerful enough to awaken her untouched vagina from six years of dormancy. She felt rather cold, detached, and she felt hungry. She jumped out of bed.

"Let's eat. I'll cook," she said.

She walked unsteadily, almost fainting. Her thoughts were scattered everywhere, everything seemed so unimportant. Maybe she misses home already, she thought. Sometimes we don't know what really goes on in our heads unless someone points it out to us. Our emotions are very complex. To question the implications of our unconscious emotions is particularly challenging, because it is impossible to access what is subjectively felt within individual minds.

She shared her dinner on Instagram. We are pressured to share our joy, or make it up if we have to. She filtered her dinner. She chose a smooth orange filter. We are also compelled to enhance our moments of pleasure so they look magical, unreal, with lots of sparkles.

Captioned: "First day with habiby in Utrecht, Netherlands, <3 <3 <3 #loveforever, #home".

After dinner, they sat on the couch. "We need a TV," she said. It would have been a perfect distraction if the TV were on. She would have switched the channels and become interested in the news, a music video, or a show of whatever kind.

He drew her near him, kissed her on the neck. She was still in her travel clothes. A fitted long shirt, loose with a neatly trimmed edge, blue jeans; a scarf sitting snug to her skin, and acted as a colourful flag in the wintry winds of the Netherlands. Her wedding ring, which was bigger than her tiny, bony fingers, was the only piece of jewelry that she wore. "I'll go change," she said.

He grabbed her by the waist, pulling her up close against his chest.

She had no thoughts, no focus, no desire. She came from a male-dominated society that forces women to adapt and to adjust to the husband's needs. She was there like a dead body; even the fake orgasms exhausted her. Her moans were loud and lonely, and, as they got louder, the husband kissed her longer.

Her eyes meandered around the half-furnished room. She even snuck a peek in the closet: he does not have many clothes, she thought. A brown leather jacket that had been obsessively worn-out lay in the chair. She glanced at the walls. They were empty and poorly painted, she thought.

"What is it like in the morning here," she asked.

The husband pretended not to care to answer. He put his fingers inside her. She moved her body towards the corner of the bed.

"What is it like the morning here," she asked again.

The husband drew himself away.

"You will see for yourself tomorrow."

*What if we all slept for 100 days and then got up fresh for one cup of coffee?*

*My body questions why I am still here.*

*Such a waste of space.*

*How do I escape these long nights?*

*I don't recognise this familiar song.*

*I can't seem to sing along; the lyrics seem strange all of a sudden.*

*What do I remember, and what do I forget? What do I feel, and what passes through me leaving no impression?*



"So how do you find the morning here," the husband asked.

"I can't hear the birds," Haneen replied.

1. I FED THE PIGEONS
2. I RAN OUT OF SUGAR
3. I DRANK THE TEA WITH NO SUGAR
4. I SANG IN THE SHOWER
5. I AM A SOUND
6. I MADE A PHONE CALL. NO ONE LISTENS TO THE DEAD
7. I SCRATCHED MY ITCH
8. I HAD A STROKE OF LUCK
9. I WALKED AT VARIOUS SPEEDS, MOSTLY SLOWLY
10. I MADE MYSELF INVISIBLE
11. I SLEPT
12. I TURNED THE LIGHT ON TO SEE WHERE IT HURTS
13. I STARED OUT THE WINDOW
14. I FED THE PIGEONS AGAIN
15. I WROTE A LETTER TO GOD, SHORT AND SWEET.
16. I WAITED FOR GOD TO RESPOND
17. I MADE A CHEESE SANDWICH. THE CHEESE LOOKED SAD AND OLD.
18. I HEAD OUT
19. I WORE A SMILE ON MY FACE, THE SAME WAY I PUT ON MY SOCKS.
20. I WATCHED MYSELF BREATHING IN, AND I WATCHED MYSELF BREATHING OUT.
21. I SMELLED TODAY'S HEAT.
22. I FLOATED STILL IN THE AIR.
23. I FELT THE WEIGHT OF MY DESPAIR
24. I AM THE PROBLEM



YOU ARE COMPLICATED.  
YOU ARE A MESS.  
YOU ARE FILLED WITH BRUISES.  
YOU ARE A DRAMA.  
EVERYONE WILL ATTEMPT TO FIX YOU, TO HEAL  
YOU, TO RE-SHAPE YOU, TO REBUILD YOU.  
DON'T BE SHY, DECLINE THE OFFER.







Part Two:

*All the women in me are tired*

*on emotional ambiguity, numbness, and healing*

### Emotional Ambiguity

"It is beyond the shock of being stricken, but nonetheless within the wound and from within the woundedness that the event, incomprehensible though it may be, becomes accessible<sup>5</sup>."

I often think of the doctors who decide to end a patient's life because there is no hope of recovery. I once read a story about a doctor who killed himself after ending so many patients' lives. He had one last glass of wine, shaved, and even put a diaper on, then went and hanged himself. When his wife found him, she made sure that this information was not made explicit to the children. I wondered if she did this because she was angry at him, or because she was upset to lose him? Or both?

Emotions are very complicated. Do you cry because something made you sad? Do you laugh because something was really funny? Where do emotions come from? What makes us feel a certain way at a certain time? When you weep, what makes you decide to stop weeping? Have you ever thought about what life would be if we were numb to our feelings?

Parents die, we blink,  
We lose friends, we blink,  
We win the lottery, we don't have the slightest reaction.  
Nothing happens.  
Congratulations, all: we are emotionally dead.  
We release urine and defecate, but we cannot expel emotions. Wouldn't it make life less complicated if we could?

I did wonder what that would look like during several incidences in my life:

When my father passed away when I was 10 years old.

When I was in a relationship with an abuser in my early 20s.

When I woke up to the sound of an airstrike pounding Sana'a on March 25th, 2015.

When I handed my Yemeni passport to the asylum seekers' centre upon arriving in Amsterdam.

I wished that I felt nothing; that I temporarily was disconnected from my body and emotions, and even the world around me. I go about my daily activities as

<sup>5</sup> Shoshana Felman, 1989. P.34

normal, with no emotional connection to what I am doing. This numbness would have served me well as a coping mechanism. It didn't work that way, however. I felt more than I could afford to feel. The Pain was deep and horrible.

But I needed to feel. We need to feel. It's hard to recognise trauma while we are living in it. When we feel pain, trauma becomes visible. You recognise it. You confront it. You challenge it on your own terms. You aren't afraid to say, "hey, I recognise you! You are awful!" You may continue living with it in peace, or heal entirely. Either way, you will survive, but with a lot of emotional scars and complexity.

Having complex emotions make it challenging for us to produce or to generate a solid idea of one another. One thing I keep observing in the lives of women I am photographing - although it is still hard for me to fully assimilate - is how their feelings are navigated through changing social and familial settings. Some studies indicate that each migrant creates a distinct sense of belonging or "feeling home" in a new country. These experiences are often ambiguous (Rapport and Dawson, 1998). This is, in part, because they experience transitions in their relationships with this "new". Through marriage, having children, losing their parents or husbands, they change their priorities, concerns, expectations, goals, and plans, all of which affect, and are affected by, emotional processes (Naoko, 2010).

It is only fair that I am challenged to try to access what is subjectively felt within the minds of my women. The only result I get on most occasions is a deserted view of their psyches and emotional processes. However, I believe that the ambiguity of emotions doesn't mean the absence of them. It just means that it is hard to describe them.

This is why I have been on a mission to create a memory archive of emotions (in case you haven't noticed). I am troubled by the complexity of emotions that arise in the aftermath of flight and which are born in the new "home".

When we were still in our countries, experiencing all kinds of atrocities, it was easier to describe the pain. My mother, who still lives in Yemen, is an

example. She knows exactly where it hurts:

*It bothers me that there is no water for three days, and a pile of dishes in the sink.*

*They cut off the road! We can't travel.*

*They bombed in the south. Hundreds were injured.*

*Fresh vegetables? Where are they? They are scarce.*

*I miss you. It's not fair.*

When it comes to us in the camp, or in new "homes", we don't know how to analyse our feelings. We thought that when we made it to our final destination that we would be on a date with happiness, and we would all sing: "Yesterday, all my troubles seemed so far away." What happened was that we have lost trust in language, place, memory, and connection. I blame it on trauma, and the events that involve confrontations with unbearable realities.

We never had time to process them. We were rushed into creating a new life, a new home, a new style of living, a new future. We have put our pasts on mute mode.

We became, as Sophie Tamas says:

*survivors, indelibly marked by devastating events that are unspeakable and inexplicable, and yet, given the ubiquity of trauma, almost banal. A host of emotional, physical, and cognitive pathologies often move in, like indeterminate, unwelcome guests* (Tamas, 2012).

Therefore, I decided to speculate, and make an attempt to describe what can't be put in words. This is more apparent in the making process of the photographs, where I play with portraiture, with the physicality of the photograph itself, its ability to cast a shadow of the emotions that lie beneath.

I FEEL YELLOW.  
I FEEL A DARK GREEN SWEATER  
I FEEL A LULLABY ON THE WIND  
I FEEL A DREAMLESS SLEEP  
I FEEL A KISS IN THE RAIN  
I FEEL GINGER TEA  
I FEEL AN OLD SONG AND OLD SHOES AND AN OLD DRESS  
I FEEL A DOORBELL SOUND  
I FEEL AN UNTRAVELLED ROAD  
I FEEL VANILLA WITH MARASCHINO CHERRIES  
I FEEL A RUG OF TREES  
I FEEL A WOUNDED CHAMPION  
I FEEL A BATTLEGROUND OF MUD AND BLOOD  
I FEEL A VOICE OF MUSIC, AND GRACE  
I FEEL A NATIONAL ANTHEM  
I FEEL A FISH TANK  
I FEEL A COLOURED MAP  
I FEEL A WAITING ROOM  
I FEEL A PICTURE OF A BEACH SPRAWLED ON TWO WALLS  
I FEEL ROLLING WAVES ON IDYLIC SAND  
I FEEL A PAGE WITH FOLDED CORNERS

## All The Women in Me Are Tired

Inspiration?

Where does it come from?

I haven't written for about a month and a half now. I haven't photographed for two months. I haven't spoken to anyone for a month. I am not inspired. That wasn't easy to say.

I am an image-maker whose creative nerves are triggered by the slightest actions in the world.

A kiss, sunshine, a walk among the soft synesthesia of trees, a fight, Coco Pops, grey scraggly clouds... All these insignificant details inspire me.

Yesterday, my cousin sent me a video of her mother on her deathbed. I wanted to send her a few words to lift her spirit, but nothing came to my mind. Her mother died the day after. I still have nothing to say. Even death doesn't inspire me.

"May she rest in peace," I eventually replied.

They tell you to look for your inspiration.

Where?

*Search for it in the inner self.*

What do you mean?

*Search for it in the less obvious.*

Like what?

*You will figure it out.*

Okay, this isn't working.

I had dinner with Randa. We talked about how, after living for quite some time independently, it becomes difficult to need a "Man". It's hard to recognise their absence. I have been photographing Randa for about three months now. She is a writer, a mother of two girls who are in their teens. Her husband didn't come with her. She applied for a family reunion so he can join them. He refused. I asked if she lives in disappointment.

She replied, "No, I am not disappointed. I am done with all these wife-husband things. We can stay friends on the phone. We are better off that way. I

have time for my art, time for myself." Usually, a deep confession like that will inspire me in my creative process, but it didn't. I carried on eating my pizza, thinking about what we should have for dessert.

We had strawberry pudding.  
'I have time for my art, time for myself.'

Usually, a deep confession like that will inspire me in my creative process, but it didn't. I carried on eating my pizza, thinking about what we should have for dessert.

We had strawberry pudding.

### Empathy and inspiration

Have I always been inspired because I have always had empathy? Because I had qualities of appreciation, sensitivity, and understanding?

Now, I've run out of it all.

I've become less interested in the topics of trauma, the memories, the marriages that fell apart, the journeys that began somewhere and haven't ended yet. My photography has been a container that shuffles everything in it.

This container is full now.

So, if my container is full, is there a point to carrying on photographing humans? Recently, I have become obsessed with photographing landscapes and still lifes. The stillness in things invites me to examine the untold within our emotions. A dead flower, a Cheeto crumb stuck between the cushions of a couch, the silent and straight grass, frozen lasagne. Strangely, they all have lead me to some answers, and some big questions.

### Women in bed

Behind their deeply inscribed emotional anguish, my women are achievers. They have impressive records of

education and careers; even those who weren't lucky enough to pursue education and jobs seek other ways to be empowered. But I am not in a position here to highlight their successes.

I am not planning to initiate the "Women of The Year" award.

Stories of my women are far too complex to be interpreted in a single narrative. Depression is a common ground that unites all the women I am photographing. Haneen called me the other day to say that she had decided to stay in bed until she stinks.

"Today I don't feel like getting out of bed. Tomorrow, too. And maybe after tomorrow."

As I heard her said this, a big fly was buzzing angrily in my room, up and down, up and down, trying so hard to get out.

"So what is up with you in bed? For days you've been in your bed? Make a good breakfast; it will make you feel better. A good day starts with a good breakfast," I said.

### So what do they want? What do we want?

I suppose the solution lies in starting to take emotions like "longing" seriously. When my women long for something that is no longer accessible to them, this is what they want. When you long for something so badly, it slows you down. Motivation becomes hard to grasp.

David Whyte writes:

Longing is the transfiguration of aloneness... like a comet's passing tail, glimpsed only for a moment but making us willing to give up our perfect house, our paid-for home and our accumulated belongings<sup>6</sup>.

He also says:

*Longing is nothing without its dangerous edge, that cuts and wounds us while setting us free and beckons us exactly because of the human need to invite the right kind of peril*<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> David Whyte, *Consolations: The Solace, Nourishment and Underlying Meaning of Everyday Words*, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> David Whyte, *Consolations: The Solace, Nourishment and Underlying Meaning of Everyday Words*, 2014.

Shafaa, a single mother from Syria, has lived in the Netherlands for four years now. I asked her once what she longs for. What cuts and wounds her?

She jokily threw the famous Mahmoud Darwish poem at me:

أحنُّ إلى خبز أمي  
وقهوة أمي  
ولمسة أمي..  
وتكبرُ في الطفولة  
يومًا على صدر يوم  
وأعشقُ عمري لأنني  
إذا متُّ،  
!أخجل من دمع أمي<sup>8</sup>

Seriously, what? Home? Family? Your old house?

*"Maybe I long for the old me, but I am just too tired to figure this out, and I am taking a break, and my break has no expiry date."*

What exhausts us? What are the things that we long for so much that living with their absence exhausts us? Ending wars? Reuniting with loved ones? Never having to escape from our lands?

These are easy answers.

Since their early childhoods, my women have been in a fight, on a battleground with themselves, and their societies.

A fight to be accepted.

To be understood.

To be appreciated.

Don't lick an ice cream cone in front of others.  
Don't lose your scarf; your hair shows.  
Don't be loud; a woman's voice is *awarah*<sup>9</sup>.  
Close your legs; you aren't a whore.  
Don't wear these jeans; they're too tight.

Your schoolmistress stops you from entering your

class. She examines you to see if you have put something on your face. "You look different. Have you put makeup on your face," she asks.

"No, I didn't. It's just a moisturiser," you say.

She doesn't believe you and aggressively washes your face.

When nothing comes off, she sends you to class unapologetically.

Don't rush down the icy roads; you will fall and your parts will show.

Don't spin around; it's *ayeeb*<sup>10</sup>.

Scrape your body; men like it soft.

Shave your vagina; men like it bald.

They will convince you that women are born with half a brain.

You will believe them.

Don't read too much.

Don't breathe too much.

Don't talk too much.

Don't laugh too much.

Don't exist too much.

Weren't these depressing streams of thoughts?

Don't blame it all on wars. They have lived a war with patriarchy and oppression since the day they were born. Their inner dragons never came to play.

"They hate us," as Mona Eltahawy said.

*"They hate us, because they need us, they fear us, they understand how much control it takes to keep us in line, to keep us good girls with our hymens intact until it's time for them to fuck us into mothers who raise future generation of misogynists to forever fuel their patriarchy"*<sup>11</sup> Mona Eltahawy

So this is what they long for, emerging out of the ashes.

This battle hasn't been easy.

<sup>8</sup> I long for my mother's bread / And my mother's coffee / And my mother's touch... / My childhood grows within me / Day after day / I love my life because / If I died, / I would be embarrassed by my mother's tears

<sup>9</sup> literal meaning: "Nakedness"

<sup>10</sup> disgrace

<sup>11</sup> Eltahawy, *Headscarves and Hymens: Why the Middle East Needs a Sexual Revolution*, 2015.



YOU ARE AN OLEAN  
OF TRAUMA! ADMIT  
IT TO YOURSELF AND  
LIVE WITH IT.



## Intermission

### Friendly Gossip

## "To Live is To Be Photographed"

My women very often talk about how they have aged in no time; that years went by in a blur. Years on the road, years in war zones, years in refugee settlements. Where did the time go? These wrinkles and folds of skin are now very pronounced, rendering their faces transfigured.

They are very conscious about the aesthetic of the images I make for them. Sometimes they dislike everything. Hallen once told me: "Don't take it personally, you are a good photographer. It's not you, it's me."

I look old. I look tired. I look different.

My women see strangers in these photographs, and they look at them with self-pity.

The camera doesn't lie, but sometimes I do. A bit of flirting won't hurt.

"You look gorgeous, habibi, are you kidding?!"

"OMG, how old are you? 18?"

This had me thinking of the photo booth. What if I become a photo booth machine? I don't spend time making you feel comfortable, and you don't feel obligated to act or perform for me. Wouldn't this be a nice way to see the real you? I won't lie to your face, or flirt with your wrinkles. You pay, you press the button when you are ready, and you pose. Here is your shot. If you don't like your photo, you have three chances to try again, or else pay for another three shots.

The machine isn't responsible for your emotional scars, or how you feel that day. It doesn't care about your life story, or what has passed through you over the years.

This mercurial relationship to identity that my women face has troubled me. My women can't seem to reconcile the changes that have erupted in their life. They are still in denial.

Maybe I should do what Anna Kavan did, insert many mirrors into our homes so we are forced to look at

our souls, and to get used to our presence. Anna Kavan was a writer, and, as is less widely known, a painter. The women of Kavan's novels are often deeply reliant on the presence of mirrors in their domestic spaces. This became true for Kavan herself:

*Life became impossible for me without at least two long mirrors in every room. Believe it or not, those mirrors were absolutely essential to me. I had one fixed up where the light was strongest and another so that I could view myself somewhat more leniently. I ask you, was that anyway in which to live? Can you require so many long mirrors in your life and remain a reasonable being<sup>12</sup>?*

Interestingly, before she died, she destroyed her personal archive, shirked notable correspondents, and, in doing so, she expunged every trace of her. Mirrors didn't help to reconcile her relationship with the self.

Such a terrible idea, wasn't it?

This problematic relationship with our self-images resulted in me producing unresolved portraits and uncanny images of liminal spaces. I played with the tactile quality and the physicality of the photograph to unpack the ambiguity of the emotions behind them. As a result, I ended up unintentionally producing an enigmatic impression of my women through my photographs. Just like Kavan's rare paintings, which are characterised by mental disquiet, you don't know who they are depicting, and what is happening with them. They are in a never-ending limbo. Viewing my photographs feels the same. It is like floating in a shapeless murk, a sensory deprivation tank that strips you of all meaningful sensations.



How did I get here?

I don't know.

Part three:  
*Ocean of trauma*

On mothers in exile, trauma, and my failure

IN MY HOUSE, I'LL PAINT THE WALLS:  
GREY FOR THE LIVING ROOM,  
LIGHT BLUE FOR THE BEDROOM,  
WALLPAPER FOR THE KITCHEN.  
A BIG OVEN, ENOUGH TO BAKE 3 GIANT TARTS.  
A DISHWASHER,  
AN EXTRA FRIDGE FOR THE MEAT, AND THE LEFTOVERS.  
A TV, MASSIVE.  
A DARK NAVY SOFA, RUSTIC AND COMFORTABLE  
A ROCKING CHAIR IN THE LIVING ROOM,  
A POLISHED WOODEN TABLE, ADORABLE AND OLD-FASHIONED.  
A CLUMSY SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY CARPET,  
CONVENIENT AND ORNAMENTAL, A VASE NEXT TO THE TV.  
DARKLY RESPECTABLE WARDROBES.  
SEXY MIDDLE-EASTERN PLATES.  
A HANDSOME AND LUXURIOUS DINING TABLE  
DELIBERATELY FLIMSY, EUROPEAN-STYLE CURTAINS  
A DELICATE AND EXPENSIVE SET OF CUPS FOR THE COFFEE

### My Failed Attempts To Make One Photograph

Today, I will make an honest photograph. I won't intervene. I won't object to anything that goes against my will. I won't aim to shed a light on human misery. I will leave my personal ambitions behind. I won't decide the fate of the universe in this photo. I won't claim that is true either. I'll leave it up to the viewer to decide. It will speak for itself. If I fail, it's fine. It's inevitable to fail to capture the essence of human survival.

In this part of my thesis, I attempt to explore the notion of truth in photography, and my failure in capturing an honest photograph. I define an honest photograph as an object that exists when there is an equal distribution of power between both the creator of the image and the subject in the photograph. It is an image wherein photography becomes the making of an image with my subjects, and not about them

My voice won't be the only testimony here. Through a series of conversations with Hafsa, I come to learn more about my practice, and why I keep failing. These conversations happen while we are walking in the park, when we are peeling potatoes, when we are smoking, when we are singing along to the TV, when I am photographing Hafsa, while we are washing the dishes, and while she puts her children to bed.

### Who is Hafsa?

A 31-year-old Syrian woman with dark eyes that shine stronger than the moon. A mother of two children. Her oldest child is named Layan, and we call her Lulu. Lulu lives with the condition Osteogenesis Imperfecta (OI), also known as 'brittle bone disease', which is a group of genetic disorders that primarily affect the bones. This means her bones can break from the lightest activity, and, accordingly, Hafsa spends most of her life at the hospital.

Hafsa has been an asylum seeker in The Netherlands since 2015. She has been denied refugee status several times, and, currently, she lives in Amersfoort AZC. It's a location for asylum seeking families who aren't permitted to stay in the

Netherlands. "When you end up living in the family location, that means that you are done. You are at risk of deportation at any time," Hafsa said to me.

### Hafsa and the idea of survival

The dictionary defines survival as "remaining alive, especially after the death of another or others. Or continuing to exist; remaining intact<sup>13</sup>." Hafsa firmly disagrees with this decisive definition that implies the continuity of something that doesn't even exist to her. For her, surviving means finding something solid to stand on and to remain standing still.

"But guess what, I don't even have that. You are taking photos of a woman who fights to exist," she says.

I question whether I contribute to her life in any way by photographing her. This idea brings delight to me. It gives me control, and I become in charge of making that happen. Pressing the shutter at that point becomes the most important decision in my life. *I will photograph you when you breathe in the rain. I will ask you to move closer to your children. I will ask you to cook. I will ask you to hug your children again. I will ask you to sing. I succeed in making her alive, and I fail to capture an honest photograph.*

### Peeling the potato session

Hafsa confesses to me that she writes.

"To be a writer is the most exhausting thing," she said.

"You need to have the courage to be a writer," said Hafsa.

"Why," I asked.

"Because I write about real events. Events that are not always pleasing. Most of the time they aren't."

Finally, I'll make that honest photo, I thought. She masters the art of self-expression. When someone is good with words, they can be good with anything, I thought. She will be able to articulate so well how

<sup>13</sup> Oxford dictionary ://www.lexico.com/definition/surviving

to photograph her. I will be emotionally close, and her words will be my guiding truth.

However, I found her writing doesn't uncover the hidden truth. This was clear when I questioned her relationship with hope. Hafsa's response to me was rather vague, which added to my misery. I thought I was at risk again of failing to produce even one decent, honest photo of her.

"I have no relationship with hope. Hope is for the ill people to cling to."  
"Then what makes you stand up? What makes you carry on," I said.

"My children need me, that's all. Hope is a privilege that not everyone can have," Hafsa said.

"This kind of approach in life doesn't appeal to me. I am an individual who survives on hope," I said to Hafsa.  
"Yes, but you stand on something, I don't. There is a difference," she said.

This was the most truthful thing I've heard.

As a photographer, I am obsessed with visualising humans' resilience, and their fighting spirit. She didn't possess these qualities, and, thus, I felt that I couldn't take a portrait of her.

Therefore, my photos of Hafsa looked rather ordinary. In a coercive manner, I strove for the narrative of hope to prevail. She didn't concede.

"The camp looks so beautiful in the photos," Hafsa said. "My room looks very good. The curtains look fancy."

"Is that a good thing," I asked.  
"Yes, but I don't see them that way," she replied.  
"Things look beautiful. I don't recognise them that way."

Hearing this was like a bullet to my chest. Here is me failing again. I am a failure. I had no intention of making her room look decent, or to beautify her suffering. How can I realise her vision? What is ugly and what is beautiful after all?

In the evening, we were both dizzy from smoking shisha (also known as "hookah"). It was too strong for me, but not for her.

"When I smoke shisha, I smoke out my frustration, my anger, my helplessness," said Hafsa.  
"You know what, Thana? How about you photograph me while I scream out loud in the air? Back home I used to climb the mountain and scream out loud for fun. I want a photo like that."

My eyes become wide: here is another golden opportunity for me to finally create an image that will speak to her wishes, and it will have nothing to do with me, or my vision as a creator.

"Photography has an amazing relationship with memory," Hafsa said to me, as if she were making an inquiry.  
"Yes, of course," I replied.

Sometimes the act of photography is about remembrance. It's not about proving a position, or expressing a point of view, like the one I wanted to prove, I thought.

"Okay, I'll photograph you while screaming," I said. I asked if the screaming meant something to her.  
"I hear my voice when I scream, that's all," Hafsa said.

For Hafsa, the act of taking photos is about reviving certain memories that she has had. She told me that hearing her voice out loud proves that she is still alive. She wanted that, but I had no idea how to visualise this loudness. We went out to the park, just me and her. Karam, her youngest, was at home, and Lulu would come at 5 from school. We had two hours to capture the screaming.

### Screaming in the park

In the park, I told Hafsa about an amazing discovery I read about a while ago. "Hafsa, do you know that there is a medicine for forgetting painful memories that has been discovered," I said.  
"What, where, when, and how can we access it," Hafsa said.

We were both charmed by the idea, regardless of whether it was true or not.

The park was empty. It fit our plan so well. Only the trees would witness what we were about to do. Hafsa screamed loud. I kept pressing on the shutter on a continuous mode. Hafsa didn't like the photos. We both didn't like them.

"I was too conscious," Hafsa said.

Hafsa is a woman of rhythms when she talks about feelings. She puts them in perspective. In this world where nothing makes sense in her life, she attempts to make sense of the small details surrounding her. She unpacks my thinking about a lot of concepts that I found tricky. The topic of surviving has been a central theme in every conversation I've had with her.

I keep asking her: what does it mean for you to survive. I hope that I'll find a straightforward answer that I can rely on to discover the method I should take when I photograph her.

She makes it a Mission Impossible for me to find out. "You cannot ask a drowning woman 'what does it mean to survive'. I was thrown into a place where hope was stolen, but this is not the only misery. The catastrophe was that my passion has faded away. Passion is what revives every dead feeling inside us. It's what revives hope. I am in a place where I don't belong. Coffee doesn't fill me anymore. I don't feel my stuff."

Hafsa made it clear that she lives for her children, for her sick daughter. She is, thus, at peace with whatever reality presents to her. The photographer Susan Meiselas said in one of her interviews that being connected to people is the most compelling aspect of life, and it's collaborative energy that sustains her (Azoulay, 2016)

I feel this too, quite often, with the people I photograph. It's so strange that I am sustained by people like Hafsa, who have no precise definition of survival except to say that this concept doesn't exist. I am failing to put her in the frame, to define her within a certain territory. She is a woman who doesn't belong to any territory. She doesn't belong to the past, or the present. She doesn't exist, and

neither does the idea of an honest photograph.

This is my honest discovery for today. I believe that an honest photograph exists in two separate dimensions. One where the photograph informs us about what has occurred, and another where it informs us about events that happened during the pre-creation process of the photo. In the case of Hafsa, this is where my failure stems from: there is so much going on behind the frame. There is her stolen hope. There is the threat of deportation. There is a lost passion. There is a sick child. My photographs of her don't convey the trauma of her life experiences. I ask myself whether I'll be able to make a photograph with one of my women, where I don't enforce my vision, where there is an equal distribution of power between me as a maker and her as a loyal participant. This is maybe where I make that impossible "honest" photo.





STOP WORRYING ABOUT  
THE VIRGINITY OF YOUR  
DAUGHTER IN THE HAPPY  
LAND. THE PLACE YOU  
COME FROM IS RANKED  
THE WORST IN THE  
WORLD FOR WOMEN.

## A mother to be

*Mama, how could you still love water after swallowing an ocean of trauma?* – Sarah Pham

There wasn't any bench for her to sit on, so she sat on a swing in the park. If a kid wanted to play, she would pretend to move gracefully, but then she'd likely say: "I am sorry, but I got here first." The parents give her a look and leave. It doesn't matter; their gaze seemed not to pierce through her.

Swinging back and forth gives her a sense of joy. It's only fair that she gets on the swing once a week.

She decides to manage the noise the kids make by putting her song on. She would then take hold of the swing's long-rusted chains, twisting them round and round. The chains make a quiet squeaking that cries for relief.

A few years ago, when someone would ask me if I wanted to have children, I would have responded: "Are you kidding? No! I don't want to bring a new refugee into the world."

No further explanations.

How could I have explained if I wasn't sure of my motives? It's difficult to welcome another being into a place I have not fully arrived in yet. This thought was frightening enough.

All I knew was that every time I has been asked this question, a projection of the time spent with mothers and their children in the camps came back into my memory. "I was like a cat with her kitties running from one border to another," her friend Nadin often said.

But today is very special. She decides to be a mum. What changed? She isn't sure, and she is exhausted trying to make sense of her motives, thinking this and that, feeling strongly a certain way and doing something completely opposite.

I don't like ice cream. It's too cold. It's too sweet, and you can't trust something that melts. But I can finish an entire container in one go. Sometimes I feel like a screenplay in an invisible space, an

unsafe place where ideas and conflicting thoughts reside.

## "No Roses from My Mouth"<sup>14</sup>

To my future daughter: I think it's time to write you this; the thought of conceiving you got me thinking that it is time to introduce you to the world you might come into.

I imagine you so pretty, like an actress in a movie. So smart, questioning the world all the time.

You will speak three languages at home, and not be sure which one will be your first. I will read you bedtime stories in Arabic. I will teach you about love in English. And we will converse about aesthetics and beauty in Dutch.

As for the cursing, it will be a combination of the three languages. That way, you'll never lose to the haters and bullies in life.

I'll give you love, and so much of it that you will explode, but I can't guarantee you stability, or a sense of comfort. Settling down hasn't been my strongest suit. My life is always crazy, full of chaotic turns.

You will ask me about home and I'll point my finger to your face, to your heart, and your small hands. "Here... here, this my home," I'll say.

You don't settle for clichés, so you will ask me again, where is home? I'll think again, and this time I'll respond with more consideration.

It's in the faces of the people I left behind. It's the smell of your hair when I mask it with olive oil and a twist of eggs, henna, and yogurt to make it shine. It's when I put you in bed and sing to you: "Yalla tnam, Yalla tnam."

If you aren't convinced, we will set ourselves on a journey to search for it. When it's time to go to the land where I come from, I'll take you with me. I'll be terrified to introduce you to the part of me that I left behind, and that only exists there. You will have a strong opinion about it. You will not keep it to yourself, because I will teach you to be loud,

<sup>14</sup> The title is a collection of poems by the Ugandan feminist Dr. Stella Nyanzi, published while serving an 18-month sentence for cyber-harassment of the Ugandan president, Yoweri Museveni.

transgressive, and to grow up not to please.

Recently, I came across a Ugandan feminist called Dr. Stella Nyanzi who is currently in prison in Uganda because she wrote a poem on Facebook wishing that the mother of the dictator of her country had poisoned him at birth. When she was taken to court and given her sentence, do you know what she did? You won't even guess.

She stood there and she took off her top. She jiggled her breasts, and said fuck you, fuck you, fuck you!!

Amazing, right?

This is the way to be, my dear. When they go low, we go low, too. Don't be afraid to be profane.

See you someday.

*So, here you are  
too foreign for home  
too foreign for here.  
never enough for both.*  
— Ijeoma Umebinyuo

My dear readers,

What a pity to finish this long note of mine.

You are probably puzzled. I understand how it feels to be mystified.

What did I learn? you might be asking yourself.

I'll save you time:

Nothing!

I don't write from habit, or from a sense of self-imposed duty. I write because I don't know things with absolute certainty, and I often find myself in a position of digging and unburying. This process leads nowhere sometimes, yet it's a noiseless experience, peaceful and powerful.

I wasn't claiming to bring a piece of new knowledge to the world. It's not my job to educate you, to enlighten you, or to even inspire you. These were not my goals. I am very confused myself, and what I aimed at, in this long read, was to figure out things myself. I took it as an opportunity to analyse the aftermath of one's resettlement in a new place, and the interior emotional landscapes of women in exile. Reckoning with the layers involved in shaping women's feelings and identities was a bigger task than I could afford to explain. It requires a lot of complexity in thinking and reflecting.

I tried.

I had a mission to investigate the changes that we go through as first-generation women refugees in the Netherlands. Have I done that? I wonder myself. Stories of migration and displacement are complex; there is no single narrative. I provided my own narrative, one that is infused with our resilient spirit – unbroken, unfailing, and devoid of self-pity.

I wanted to create a series of testimonials of our experiences, and I think it came out as a stick figure, the worst nightmare. Darrin M. McMahon's book, *Happiness: A History*, begins with the question: "How to write a history of something so elusive, so intangible – of this 'thing' that is not a thing, this hope, this yearning, this dream?" (McMahon, 2006).

I am going to answer him.

You can't.

You can't describe something so elusive, ungraspable, movable, changeable, unstable, and conflicted as happiness, let alone the interior landscapes of my women in exile. The sorrow of estrangement is indescribable. Each day is a multitude of tiny things.

Emotions are complex, and, at some point, it was difficult to approach one's own interior thoughts. At the end of the day, how do you access something that is subjectively felt within oneself? The ambiguity lies, in part, in the fact that we are still in the middle of our stories. It's not a past to reflect upon, and it's not a future to long for. It's a beautiful mess, our mess.

*When you are in the middle of a story, it isn't a story at all, but only a confusion; a dark roaring, a blindness, a wreckage of shattered glass and splintered wood; like a house in a whirlwind, or else a boat crushed by the icebergs or swept over the rapids, and all aboard powerless to stop it. It's only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story at all. When you are telling it, to yourself or to someone else.*

– Margaret Atwood<sup>15</sup>

I aimed, in the beginning, to share with you a space

of joy, one that makes you intrigued by our lives. I thought that if I expressed our secret life stories, we would be liberated. But what happened is that we all had our share of trauma, which became visible, and required contextual treatments. I don't believe that art heals, so I decided to leave those wounds untouched.

Discussing topics of home and belonging is exhausting. Each one of the women here is in the process of creating a sense of belonging or "feeling home", and each of these creations is being done differently and unsystematically. These experiences are often ambiguous, as there are a lot of transitions in their relationships with the "new". Family separation, divorce, absence of intimacy, having children, seeking jobs, completing education, falling apart, depression, loneliness - these change our priorities, our concerns and expectations, all of which affect, and are affected by, emotional processes.

I can't seem to relate to any singular theme or definition. Home might be in the memory, or, sometimes, it doesn't exist. We fall out of place, and, very often, we are stranded in between places, and in between homes, between war zones.

I had to ally myself with feminist figures in the Middle East such as Mona Al-Tahwi and Nawal Al-Sadwi to justify my snarky reflex on the topic of exile. I do believe that, after all, it has never been about physical exile. The emotional exile we experienced in our home countries under the misogyny and patriarchy contributes to where we are today.

Nawal Al-Sadwi said once:

"I am outspoken and speak loudly because I am angry<sup>16</sup>.

I am angry too.

What does it mean to present oneself?

I spent the last year documenting the aftermath that occurs after finding new soil to step safely upon. Physical belongings may not be ours anymore, but the emotional baggage that comes from the situational and physical process of relocation comes for free; sponsored by life itself. We are in a kind of

archaeological restoration programme, where we try to build and construct a new life over the ruins of our past losses. Our homes are under construction. Our bodies are under construction. Our finances are under construction. The paradigm of who we are consists of shifting waters and our quest is in the search for blue skies. Of finding shelter, not only in the security of a home, but belonging under the vast open sky.

Photography was a perfect companion in this process, providing us with an excuse to meet, to talk, to share, to reveal, to present, to be vulnerable. The act of creating became therapeutic and investigative. Through the making of portraiture, and playing with the physicality of the image itself, a women's gaze can be read as a mode of self-surveillance. I wanted to invite questions about how we choose to present ourselves, and the reality of that (re)presentation. I wanted my women to look a certain way inside the frame, beautiful, imperious, unbroken, and unfailing. The act of making gave me access to what I haven't perceived in words. My methods were conversational, and, since we are still in the middle of our stories, I decided to relinquish the notion of outcomes. Photography becomes particularly problematic when the ultimate goal focuses on achieving outcomes.

I focused on experimental work, and I engaged my women with the photos I have produced. My women were passionate companions, and they tolerated the changes in methods, locations, and propositions.

"What is your project about anyway," they'd ask after every photoshoot.

You.

"You are my project," I'd say.

I will not autotune your voices, nor polish your stories. Let us, together, create space for us to be whomever we want to be. Don't be apologetic, or feel ashamed. This is our truth, and my attempt to reinvent the truth. This is our offering to the world.



THIS IS THE WAY TO  
BE, MY DEAR. WHEN  
THEY GO LOW, WE GO  
LOW, TOO. DON'T BE  
AFRAID TO BE PROFANE



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Colophon

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*Interior landscapes of women in exile in the Netherlands*

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*Thana Farooq*

*Designed by*  
*Defrost Studio*

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