

ABRAQ
AD
HABRA
I
WILL
CREATE
AS
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SPEAK
YANARA
FRIEDLAND



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ABRAQ AD HABRA: I WILL CREATE AS I SPEAK

YANARA FRIEDLAND



#58

ESSAY PRESS GROUNDLOOP SERIES

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CONTENTS

Introduction	vii
Abraq Ad Habra	1
Author Bio	34

PREFACE

The border is an ambivalent space in its geopolitical reality, as well as in the realm of micro-level social interactions and cultural encounters. A space constantly shifting in meaning and purpose, occupying and abandoning landscapes; a zone of exception, of law enforcement and lawlessness, but also re-negotiated by the narratives, histories, interventions and descriptions that continue to shape its existence and visibility. I think of the border as an original space of encounter: a multi-vocal and asynchronous flow of impossible journeys. The poet Liv Lungren writes, “We have no other experience of living than through encounters, and in these meeting places language has evolved through a natural necessity of communication....A poetics of encounter offers a way of acknowledging the world and other people and might establish relationships expressing proximity rather than contemplative or legislative distance.”

I am grateful for Lungren’s reflections; a poetics of encounter has been a primary inquiry, circled by a writing for, through, and with others. And yet, even when the actual encounter bears moments of relational proximity, it is, in my experience, also always marked by the failure

to overcome the separating frequencies that haunt our relationship to the world. Failure equally communicates and seeks space, which the writing about, the contemplation thereof can begin to affirm. This stance is ultimately inward in orientation and can activate a kind of narrative humility towards the ultimate mystery of the other, our shared unknowability. And may also signal a reckoning with my own complicities, fears, compassions, alliances, delusions and motivations that accompanied the encounter. The complications of our positions and conditions as “irreparable” event, to speak with Agamben, do not free us from the consequence of those positions and conditions but can allow them to become clarified, porous, and open to subversion and reconfiguration.

The following writing, part essay, part poem, emerged from conversations with asylum seekers, refugees, immigration lawyers, expert witnesses and translators exploring the role of personal narrative or so called “home narratives” in the context of asylum hearings. The original inquiry primarily explored the narrative incompatibilities that occur during asylum hearings, between a migratory, idiosyncratic, personal account and the expectations set up by Western legal discourse for a claimant to establish credibility in the absence of physical documentation. Back then the writing was framed as documentary research, which did not speak to the primary experience of meeting and hearing these stories, my own subjectivity, or the actual narratives themselves.

Abraq ad Habra: I will create as I speak returns to the original documents, memories, voices, failure. Some of this writing is part of the book-length manuscript *Embraces the carrion*, which begins with a walk along Berlin’s former east-west division and ends on the shores of southern France, where people continue to invoke the story of an early refugee, a Palestinian saint woman, arriving by boat miraculously.

In early spring of 2009, I spent a morning in front of the Office of Immigration Services on Tooley Street in London. It was, as so often, a foggy and distant morning. I had time and didn't know why I had come. Or at least my plan was vague, a little sheepish. I wanted to talk to someone who was making an asylum claim or whose claim had been rejected. I wanted to meet people who had recently arrived here. In my backpack I had a list of questions, crossing Europe with a naïve pragmatism, never knowing my way but always getting there eventually. London was full, its buses resembling sweatshops, the underground a zoo of well-mannered animals squeezing their noses against each other while politely reading the newspaper. There was not a spot of space with a nothing in it. Children in the tight grip of their mothers' hands passed, looking shyly from below their hats. I had to signal my willingness to talk, otherwise I would be invisible. Sometimes I smiled first, sometimes they did. I watched families hush up the steps, veiled women, dark-eyed men, grandmothers and groups with members of various ages. They entered through the glass doors, and, I imagined, metal detectors before crossing the threshold between the bodies of Home Office officials. I felt I had no business entering, and no business watching these people enter. Even less noble seemed my objective to ask them to sit down with me and answer further questions. Why would they be interested in telling their complex story to yet another stranger?

Shortly after feeling at the point of excessive uselessness, a man hurried down the steps. He was well dressed and carried his head high, the first adult looking into my eyes. I motioned toward him. He slowed down his pace, and we met halfway between the bottom of the stairs and the sidewalk. I explained myself hurriedly and asked if he wanted some tea. He agreed, and we began to walk down Tooley. He spoke English well and was comfortable with my proposal, even when I asked if I could record our conversation.

The only thing I can do is write, now as then. Challenge usually begins with a mood. A nun was running down the street, and I remember thinking that it was a bad omen. But this was before I knew the difference between omen and augury. We sat down in a crowded café, and he began to tell me his story. Began to tell me how he had left Iran, how he could not go back, how he was unable to procure papers, and today he had received his last rejection. He said he was now officially an illegal in this country. I was going to take a train back to Brussels the next morning, and I thought momentarily to offer him my ticket. But being illegal in Brussels or in London makes little difference. He said he had some friends here and would live on their couches until he could get a lawyer. It occurred to me that he might have money, that he might be independently wealthy. We drank tea. I did not take notes, relying on my recording device.

Outside of the café moments and people passed without consequence. His political activity, which was never specified, forced him to leave, first on a student visa and later as one of the many seeking humanitarian protection. I had learned that the language of the Geneva Convention around humanitarian protection was both broad and impenetrable. To prove the likelihood of persecution upon return to their home country, claimants had to either provide documents or have a good lawyer present their future corpse convincingly to the courts.

He could have been a fellow student or a friend, very little was separating us, and it was making me increasingly suspicious. He said he might go to Amsterdam, Stockholm or Switzerland. Iran? No never. He could marry. I lingered on this thought while sipping my lukewarm tea. I would marry someone in great need but not someone who had once been able to get here on a student visa, I decided. We shook hands. I left before him, Tooley filling with rush-hour humans.

That night I had some wonderful Middle-Eastern food with my friends who let me sleep in their closet that they recently rebranded as bedroom. The room did not have any windows. The heaters were broken but jumped on for an hour, usually just before dawn, and we all woke soaked. The next morning I got on several buses that dropped me off at St Pancras Station, where I stepped onto the Eurostar train traveling below sea level coming up for air at Calais. Many months later, I would find myself stuck in this train below sea level for two hours due to repairs, after a fire had swept through the tunnel. When the Eurostar flew across northern France and into Belgium, the dogs came sniffing through the coaches. I had two passports at the time, two different health insurances and two bank accounts. The dogs never worried me.

Days later I sat down at my desk in Brussels, a similarly foggy and distant morning as the ones in London. I turned on my recording device, my hands positioned above the keyboard ready to transcribe. A long silence enveloped the room. Then a longer one. Then I realized, I could not even recall his name.

Over the course of that year, I spoke to many more asylum seekers, refugees, undocumented migrants, stateless people, and detainees. The conversations began with distances, their own language to mine, their country of origin to their country of refuge, crossing the Sahara desert, or between what happened and how they remembered it happening. At the center of these stories lingered the experience of their current legal status and the various interview techniques immigration officials had employed in eliciting their pasts, techniques mostly aimed at detecting inconsistencies and falsehood in their narratives.

They talked about their journeys by truck, on foot through the desert, through the corrupted border crossings to Libya and the Mediterranean. Most arrived without documents and were detained for a few months, sometimes years, and in one case a whole decade. Without any documents to prove their identity, a succession of interviews had to determine credibility. Their story had to serve as central evidence to their past, nationality, and trauma. They expressed their dismay at the disbelief with which officials met their stories. One young woman had to repeatedly relay her family tree in an attempt to prove that she was half Eritrean and half Ethiopian and that her sister, a minor then, was suffering from asthma and a heart condition. The political circumstances, at the time, granted asylum more easily to Eritreans than Ethiopians. The official suspicion was that the girls had met on a truck crossing the Sahara and were in fact unrelated, not Eritrean, capitalizing on the health issues of the younger woman.

We tell it differently each time; it depends on who is asking us;
it depends on the context;
on what we come to remember at that particular moment.
We all know there are things I can remember one day,
and then there are things I can't remember another day,
and the next day I can remember them again.

the court has this fiction
life's story stored somewhere

My family came from Mascar.
They traveled to Somalia in the '60s for fishing,
because Somalia was a rich country.
Many Nguni people come from the Emirates,
so they are not real Somali people.

Handed over in Galilee
barley gruels
unlucky camels
The gulf of Adnan each year

Unfortunately they didn't ask me any geographical details.
I say unfortunately because I know my country extremely well.
I know the north, the south, the west, and the east.
I can be peaceful, nobody can hurt me. I can be grateful, nobody can
force me.

He helped me to get on the boat. I got on the boat.

I once saw the human, the child at the beginning of the sea, which is a fire—
and the human, the child was not born but lay still within the water.

I believe one thing every day of my life,
I believe anything that you want
when the time has come no one can stop it.

I once saw the human, the child cross distances of ever growing spaces,
from here to here, from there to there.

Light wind
Before crossing count:

Take the route even if tired. Take the route and undress yourself.

This place is leaving

My father died when I was in detention,
with his death certificate
I could further prove that I was Zimbabwean.

A reasonable likelihood that they will be persecuted on return.

A reasonable likelihood that all the dead are dead.

Judges are human too.

She had forgotten the story,
her life memorized as it did not
exist otherwise.
There is a political climate.
There is rain all through July.

To relate directly to the territory as it really is.

You are reading for so many things.

You must learn to lose heart

I went there in the morning

I was married by the age

We say two plus two is four

If he says two plus two is six the next time

My birth certificate etc.

My death certificate etc.

You must learn to exist as foreign

as ritual

as malady

You must learn the nothing

that saves itself

To control the heartbeat that appeared to explode within their heads
they tapped and stomped.

As a woman you are
the innumerable

And none see me
Pitch-black nostrils

No foliage, descendant, only a only a only a
wing

When time has come no one can stop it
but when time hasn't come no one can give it to you
because it is not your time.

When time has come
I am going to have it.

When lawyers talk about truth and facts they are not actually making metaphysical
statements.

I was sleeping, he woke me up, my hair was in a mess.

Truth and fact have a special meaning for lawyers.

The truth is something told by a witness you have decided is credible within the
limits of that witness's competence.

I was 17.

There are four stages in life
birth, adulthood, maturity, death.

In this room there are three people sitting on boxes.

They just sit there when I wake up at night.

They appear to be watching the bed.

I stayed in detention for eight months.

I would like to rebuild my country.

Mogadisho is in the center.

I'm from the south.

360 days in a year, 360 great rivers, and in the human body,
360 segments of bone (like the mountains), 360 arteries (like the rivers),
360 epidermal tissues (like the days in the year).

Several years later, I visited an exhibition in Marseille, often called the mother of all port cities, and at the lapping waters of the Mediterranean sea. The exhibit was dedicated to the history and culture of Mediterranean civilizations. It moved swiftly across time, from Babylonian ramparts and palaces to the establishment of maritime trade routes, and a neon sign flashing, *The Weeping Wall Inside Us All*. The day before a taxi driver told me that Mary Magdalene had arrived on these shores by boat, a Palestinian refugee. "She not only miraculously survived the Mediterranean, she was later sanctified," he exclaimed. The exhibition ranged from the elusive dream the blue waters had inspired in artists and writers to the rivalry between Europe and the Ottoman Empire, Napoleon's expedition to Egypt and Saint Simon's vision of a symbiosis between West and East. Marseille, recently honored as cultural capital of Europe, strategically located the museum, a large concrete cuboid by the sea with small mosaic openings in its façade, between the new and old port. The museum faces south towards the water that at a certain point reaches Africa, the Maghreb. Six hundred sixty million euro were invested into the "unfinished" city. A renovated train station, a new national museum, port, and former tobacco factory turned cultural center are some of the ventures *La Bonne Mere*, patron mother, is now protecting alongside her traditional role as watchful eye over the many seafaring children that arrived and continue to arrive here.

The lullaby is one of the oldest song forms.
Its ancient refrain:
Move your legs.

The beaches of Djibouti littered with dunes
of abandoned migrant belongings.
Canoes bound for
The Strait of Grief
Yemen
Asa Fatma mountain
From the rift valley to the red seas.

I assume your face came from somewhere.
I assume it belongs to your neck.

We took the boat and got lost.
We floated for days
until police found us and took us to Malta.
I thought we were in Italy.
There were beaches.

the southern
vessels
carrying
movements

8000 in the Mediterranean
2400 in the channel of Sicily
3900 in the Straits of Gibraltar

The word "disgrace" comes to me.

Malta, a small country in the center of the Mediterranean
lies 93 km from Sicily and 290 km from Libya.

Give us the world, the kings begged

Six years of drought

Two hundred million people

Outside of their country of origin

Give us the world, the kings begged

The migration inflows

From the Maghreb

From Sub Saharan regions

The bone yellow floor

The rock badlands

Funerary markers

From the basement of time

Give us the world, the kings begged

Give us the road out of here

From the museum you could look out to the sea of pain, the sea of contact, the sea cemetery and its cruise ships, fishing boats and dancing nets of sunlight. All unrecorded conversations out there. All surviving history in here. The mayor of Lampedusa once wept at the shores where over three hundred people drowned after their frail barque caught fire. She then made a statement to the press: "All these bodies are speaking." We no longer have augurs as officials, interpreters of the "way of birds," those who listen to traces and the movement of waters. I could not decode the answers and silences, the stories and maps given to me, created by me. But his voice suddenly reached me through the fog, perhaps answering, perhaps whispering a prayer to himself: *Abraq ad Habra. I will create as I speak.*

THE
WEEPING
WALL
INSIDE
US
ALL

In Neolithic times borders were the three forces: mountains, seas, ice. Brenda Hillman laments, "everything has a border, doesn't it? / the edge where light cannot get in". In Marseille I realized everything is a where: Robert Capa's image, *On the road from Barcelona to the French border, 1939*. Hannibal's elephants crossing the Via Dolomitia. In stories to one another, as cardinal points along the fata morgana of memory. To say, this is where I begin and you end. Or to point to the horizon where earth, sea, sky appear to meet.

NOTE

The image on pages 26-27 (*The Weeping Wall Inside Us All, 2009*) is by Claire Fontaine and Karl Holmqvist and is available courtesy of the [POMERANZ COLLECTION](#).

AUTHOR BIO



Yanara Friedland is a German-American writer, translator, and teacher. She holds a PhD from the University of Denver, and recently completed a long walk across multiple border regions in Europe. Her novel *Uncountry: A Mythology* is the 2015 winner of the Noemi Fiction Prize. She is a member of the poets' theater group GASP: Girls Assembling Something Perpetual, and lives in the desert of southern Arizona.



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