I'm not here; this isn't happening.

Elnaz Talaei

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Elnaz Talaei Thesis Report

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"I'm not here. This isn't happening." Thom Yorke

On every strand of yarn, I migrate from one body to another: a journey on a burdensome rugged path. Yarns build up and split. And most of the times, I wish I never had to roll through all the knots and tangles. I wish I never had to leave in the first place, or maybe I had the luxury of being divided like my ancestral *cell*. Then I would nest in every body where I could feed my baby souls. *Souls that would never leave the bodies*. I would be omnipresent... or omniabsent, not in a limbo. I could even take a break from being presented in the gallery. I could take a stroll in the shadows of the exhibition on the wall; live in an illusion.

But at some point in the history, we stopped splitting. We stopped being able to live in shadows. We claimed both the eyes, a coherent brain, and unique fingerprints. In the present world, the gallery, my eyes follow the strand to seek the destination, my mind struggles to find the way out of this tangled maze, and my fingertips grope for a clue on the frail body of the wool. We species failed. I catch myself unravelling the knots, organizing the chaos, tidying up the mess. I meticulously design a western-style palatable-looking dish to conceal the salty undertaste of the eastern tears. But maybe I should let go off the yarn and cherish the clutter. Maybe that is how I should clothe the naked presence of my exhibition.



On the Soul Leaving the Body (2018)

وآن دل که با خود داشتم با دلسانم می رود پنهان نمی ماند که خون بر آسانم می رود دیگر میرس از من نشان کز دل نشانم می رود در سینه دارم یاد او یا بر زبانم می رود کرچه نباشد کار من نهم کار از آنم می رود من خود به چشم خویشتن دیدم که جانم می رود ای ساربان آهسته رو کارام جانم می رود کفتم به نیرنک و فنون پنهان کنم ریش درون او می رود دامن کشان من زهر تنهایی چثان با آن مهمه بیداد او وین عهمد بی بنیاد او صبر از وصال یار من برکشتن از دلدار من در رفتن جان از برن کویند مهر نوعی سخن

سعدی، غزلیات

(Foroughi 1997)

In a part of my practice, I explore the relationship among writing, mark making and sculptural forms, and how these elements converse with people. This communication is often reflected in the formal characteristics of my work too: I sometimes secure a space for the audience to immerse in, or alter, my work. However, I try to impose a distance between the two to convey the inherent notion of separation in any relationship, which is incomplete and imperfect by nature. And this imperfection carries over to the very human form of communication: language.

"Nothing is ever fully present in signs. It is an illusion for me to believe that I can ever be fully present to you in what I say or write, because to use signs at all entails my meaning being always somehow dispersed, divided and never quite at one with itself. Not only my meaning, indeed, but I myself: since language is something that I am made out of, rather than a convenient tool I use, the whole idea that I am a stable, unified entity must also be a fiction."

Terry Eagleton (1996, 112)

Just as words are inseparable from the human construct, so I let humans and words be entangled or interchangeable in my work. In that sense, the communication between words and audience perfectly captures the human relationship—and ironically its imperfection.

"خوشا به حال کیامان که عاشق نورند ودست منبط نور روی شاندی آنهاست و دست منبط نور روی شاندی آنهاست نه وصل مکن نیست

، مىشە فاصلداى هت" مىسى سىراب سىرى، مىافر (Sepehri 2007)

There is always a distance that is inborn in words as well as human relationships. Some people may last long with one's memory as do childhood songs, and some others be as ephemeral as ordinary words, but all are ultimately mortal. The substitutability of

¹ Lucky plants, who are in love with the light! And the spreading hand of light is on their shoulders. No, there exists no unity. There is always a distance.

language and humans is literal in *On the Soul Leaving the Body* (2018), where anthropomorphic bodies partly made of Persian poetries and words are drawn on the wall. These hand-drawn words are confined within, or flow out of, the life-size figures and occasionally pass through other bodies encompassing the audience. Interestingly, when I reflect on the Western audience's encounter with my work, I can replace the figures with my Persian-speaking immigrant self in many ways.

My practice is heavily influenced by Persian literature, poetry, and calligraphy, which are "innate in Iranian culture," as Shirin Neshat explains (Marse 2014). Considering the long history of tyranny in Iran, literature and poetry have developed to be extremely indirect, symbolic, and metaphorical, and "for us Iranians, metaphorical language is essential... because it provides the opportunity to *say what is forbidden to say* without being censored... in a country where we are forbidden from speaking out, especially women" (Marse 2014). The implication is that, even for an average Iranian audience, Persian poetry is often not simply interpretable and bears an intrinsic barrier. That is true to some degrees in relation to Persian language and calligraphy, which has undergone similar cultural influences.

In Zakhm (2019), the intrinsic barrier in Persian language and calligraphy is even starker as the non-Iranian audience interact with the words written in Persian. The word $i \in j$ (meaning wound) is written in various forms using salt, framed and laid out on the floor. The salt-made patterns are not necessarily recognizable as words, and do not even loosely follow any Persian calligraphic norms. The audience's interference can relocate the grains of salt, transform the words, and potentially erase the dots to alter them to $i \in j$, which translates into mercy or uterus.

In *THE CELL* (2018), marks and words—although still unspoken—flow from the audience to me. Passersby write or mark on a continuous strip of felt rolled into a big ball which I pull from to weave a skirt (or a cocoon-shaped shield) around me. Like Tiravanija's *Untitled (Free)* (1992) or Hamilton's *The Event of a Thread* (2012-2013), the audience not only contributes, but also becomes a part of *THE CELL*: one that *cocoons me to death*.

Years ago, I lost my glasses diving into the pool...

This isn't happening (2020)

Last night, I found them at the bottom of the ocean. And it seemed they hadn't been washed for years. As I walk through the buildings and in the streets, as I look at the walls and tables, I see faces. To me, objects have character. Apart from aesthetic aspects of objects, I tend to emotionally connect to them, often the way I connect to people. Things become nontradable parts of my life as I use them and live with them for a while. Perhaps this bonding is mutual; perhaps my childhood doll I left back home misses me; and perhaps the walls of my house look at me through their cracks.

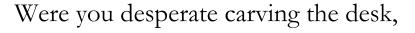
We leave our marks on our surroundings either intentionally or unintentionally in the same way our presence affects the people around us. In the Middle Eastern cultures, it is believed that the coffee residue at the bottom of one's cup reflects one's fortune. I see reflections of people's personalities, moods, histories, and intentions in the ashtrays they use, couches they rest on, and sweat stains on their dresses. To me, the imperfections in the objects have gradually become representative of the neighboring people. I recognize faces in the cracks of the walls, peeled off tables, and broken windows. I feel, as if I am an empath, I can travel into the vacuums of people's lives through these anthropomorphic voids and cracks surrounding me.

Signifying anthropomorphic imperfections in objects, I try to recreate a narrative through *Pareidolia* (2018): A narrative I do not know by heart, but have been exposed to; maybe as I watched my grandmothers weave rugs or my mother make clothes. In this recreation, I bring to the forefront the voids and imperfections, which my predecessors tried to elaborately conceal.

Although such works as *Insomnia* (1994) by Jeff Wall, *Red Room* (2001) by Sara Dobai, and *In Deeper* (1999) by Rut Bleese Luxemburg have been inspiring *Pareidolia*, the narrative in *Pareidolia* is unlike what Cotton (2009) describes. It is, at least in its original form, less dramatic than the narrative in the mentioned works, in the sense that my audience is overexposed to, but perhaps overlooks, it in the natural environment. Also, I have gradually shifted from a documentation that is loyal to the original narrative towards a more impromptu process. Pareidolia is the last work in a series of experiments that started with taking photographs of the face-shaped patterns I recognized in my environment, and then transformed into drawings and markings using paint, spray, glue, and stencils. These experiments eventually evolved into a weaving.

The Most Familiar Unrecognizable Faces (2018)





I don't recall!

Were you angry pounding your fist on the wall,

I don't recall!

I don't remember your name.

I don't even remember your face.

You are long gone,

only leaving many faces,

which are the most familiar to me.



Pareidolia (2018)





Zakhm (2019)

Dagger in the sore

See?

Snow-covered wounds

No blood comes out

It's just a sore

Softly blow the salt

Alone, the grains move together

Bruises from the cold

Words pouring out, stuck right there



Zakhm (2019)

This isn't happening (2020)

I work with fibers

-also, words, lines, and marks.

My practice may be social or personal

—but I often wonder if I could easily distinguish between the two.

I am interested in abstract art

—but reflecting on my own product, I can't help finding social references or narratives traced back to my relationship with my mother.

My childhood memories are saturated with sound and color

—and these memories seem as absent from me today as sound and color from my artwork.

As I grew up, my mother was always too busy making dresses for her customers, so not many words would normally be exchanged between us. Instead, while listening to the music of her sewing machine, I (literally) sat at her feet and occupied myself with colorful buttons, strings, and fabrics. And gradually, I felt I communicated with her through these things, and they served as unspoken words between us, manifesting as the woven *text and textile* (Hamilton, Making, and the Spaces We Share 2014). Over time, the residual fabrics on the floor of the tailor room grew further on me as if they were bodily remnants of my mother. As I wore a dress she made for me, I felt I carried with me a part of her. A part that made up my body's "architecture": protecting, concealing and revealing (Hamilton, The Event of a Thread 2013).

"Our heart is surrounded by the coronary plexus, the most vital of threads... Handling fiber we handle mystery. A dry leaf has a network reminiscent of a mummy... When the biology of our body breaks down, the skin has to be cut as to give access to the inside. Later it has to be sewn on like fabric."

Magdalena Abakanowicz (Rose 1993, 20-22)

Observing my mother endlessly cutting and sewing has shaped my work process in similar ways. However, as confined as she kept this routine to her private prison *cell* (making only the "product" accessible), "process" is the foreground of my practice. I attempt to expose the disguised drama within the repetitive patterns created, experienced or perceived by my mother, and in a more general sense, by humans. By dramatizing the routine, I seek to study the transformational aspect of repetition and

open a window to commonly ignored layers of life, particularly in the Eastern traditional societies—like the one I was raised in. As Shirin Neshat explains in reference to such societies, the public appearance of women should deemphasize their individual differences.

"[In these societies,] space and spatial boundaries are politicized and are designed to lift personal and individual desire from the public domain and contain it within private spaces. Ultimately, men dominate public spaces, and women exist for the most part in private spaces." (Bertucci 1997)

With my studio practice being focused on the process, I tend to take less responsibility for the outcome and embedded metaphors than the act of making, just as in Sol LeWitt's advice to Eva Hesse (Begleiter 2016). Where I am standing now is the start of my doubts, questions and uncertainties. The start of not understanding my own work, neither feeling obliged to (Corngold 2002). I let my process unwind and find its meaning. I let my audience weave my words into their clothing.

I inte of m Other chain T- och A cell to de

THE CELL (2018)

Unwinding the thread Lines come loose Pulling with one hand Chaining with the next Loop up and around Slip through Loop up and over Continue One loop of a hope Over a loop of a woe Slip through One loop of a joy Around the ache of a sore

Row after row after row after row

What's left at the end... Thousands of wishes Turned into a long teeth-edged sheet





Memories. Friends. High school. Hiding from my mom. Smoke. Cigarettes after sex. Cigarettes instead of sex. Jazz music. Rain. Haircut. Love. Breakup. Summer. Alcohol. Ordinary. Memories, I don't remember. Blue jeans. Vague memories. My only friend. Where do we go from here. Success. I should quit it sometime. Present. Hope. God. Sorrow. Emptiness. Death. Gheytarieh park. Friends. Smoke. Love. Breakup. Summer. High school. Cigarettes after sex. Hope. God. Sorrow. Haircut. Blue jeans. Rain. Emptiness. Vague memories. Death. Memories, I don't remember. Success. I should quit it sometimes. Death. I should quit it sometime. Where do we go from here. Rain. Alcohol. Hiding from my mom. My only friend. Gheytarieh park. Jazz music. Jazz music. Jazz music. Memories. Smoke. Breakup. Cigarettes after sex. Hope. Death. Vague memories. Sorrow. Alcohol. Present. Hope. God. Sorrow. Hiding from my mom. Smoke. Cigarettes after sex. Vague memories. Vague memories. Death. Friends. Smoke. Love. Memories, I don't remember. Success. I should quit it sometime. Alcohol. Hiding from my mom. My only friend. Memories. Friends. High school. Hiding from my mom. Smoke. Cigarettes after sex. Cigarettes instead of sex. Jazz music. Rain. Haircut. Love. Breakup. Summer. Alcohol. Ordinary. Memories, I don't remember. Blue jeans. Vague memories. My only friend. Where do we go from here. Success. I should quit it sometime. Vague memories. Death. Vague memories. Death. High school. Cigarettes after sex. Hope. God. Sorrow. Haircut. Blue jeans. Rain. Emptiness. Vague memories. Death. Memories, I don't remember. Success. Vague memories. Death. Friends. Smoke. Love. Memories. Death. Friends. Smoke. Love. Death. Love. Memories. Vague memories. Friends. My only friend. Cigarettes after sex. Cigarettes instead of sex. Hope. God. Love. Success. Sorrow. Death. Rain. Blue jeans. Jazz music. Alcohol. Death. Smoke. Memories, I don't remember. Ordinary. Ordinary. Hiding from my mom. I should quit it sometime. Where do we go from here. Emptiness. Sorrow. Alcohol. Death. Success. God. Hope. Memories. Memories, I don't remember. Smoke. Friends. My only friend. Friends. Ordinary. Love. Breakup. Summer. High school. God. Sorrow. Hiding from my mom. Smoke. Cigarettes after sex. Vague memories. Vague memories. Death. Friends. Smoke. Love. Memories, I don't remember. Success. I should quit it sometime. Alcohol. Hiding from my mom. My only friend. Memories. Friends. High school. Hiding from my mom. Smoke. Cigarettes after sex. Cigarettes instead of sex. Jazz music. Rain. Haircut. Love. Breakup. Summer. Alcohol. Ordinary. Memories, I don't remember. Blue jeans. Vague memories. My only friend. Where do we go from here. Success. I should quit it sometime. Vague memories. Death. Vague memories. Death. High school. Cigarettes after sex. Hope. God. Sorrow. Haircut. Blue jeans. Rain. Emptiness. Vague memories. My only friend. Where do we go from here. Success. I should quit it sometime. My only friend. Gheytarieh park. Jazz music. Gheytarieh park. Rain. Haircut. Love. Breakup. Summer. Cigarettes instead of sex. Hope. God. Love. Success. Sorrow. Death. Death. Memories, I don't remember. Success. Alcohol. Hiding from my mom. Cigarettes instead of sex. Jazz music. Rain. Haircut. Love. Breakup. Hope. Cigarettes after sex. Hope. God. Sorrow. Haircut. Blue jeans. Rain. Emptiness. Vague memories. My only friend. Where do we go from here. Success. I should quit it sometime. My only friend. Gheytarieh park. Death. Memories, I don't remember. Success. Love. Breakup. Love. Smoke. Love. Alcohol. Memories. Rain. Love. My only friend. Emptiness. Where do we go from here. Smoke. Death. Jazz music. Blue jeans. Death. Sorrow. God. Hope. Hiding from my mom. I should quit it sometime. Rain. Summer. High school. Sorrow. Haircut. Haircut. Breakup. Blue jeans. Cigarettes after sex. Cigarettes instead of sex. My only friend. Memories, I don't remember. I should quit it sometime. Hope. Sorrow. Death. Alcohol. Smoke. Emptiness. My only friend. Gheytarieh park. Friends. Ordinary. Love. Breakup. Summer. High school. God. Vague memories. Death. Vague memories. Friends. Smoke. Love. Memories, I don't remember. Success. Blue jeans. Rain. Emptiness. Rain. Haircut. Love. Breakup. Summer. Alcohol. Ordinary. Cigarettes after sex. Hope. God. Memories. Smoke. Breakup. Cigarettes after sex. Rain. Haircut. Love. Breakup. Smoke. Sorrow. God. Hope. Where do we go from here. I don't





The gravity of aim that sucks me down The tightness of relation that hurts to cut The separation of bodies to resurrect the love Loosen the ties to let free

Zipping the words together Knotting the lines to shape the flesh Pulling the threads to closen the thoughts

There I see a presence A collection of molds hanging around each other

Some sank in compassion recouping the missed parts Some in deep vengeance frowning upon rivals





In my practice, I think a lot about relationships and bonds, and thus, separation and alienation. I mend a tear with threads, and then cut a tie and leave a void. This has become my full-time career... to untie my roots in the previous life I lived a couple years back, and grow new roots in the life I am living for a couple years now. And somehow strangely, every time death comes around when I have not retired from this career yet... and then I am reincarnated into a new life with sparse strings still uncut. Look at me now: Who am I? I, who am chained to ages of people's sins years after Christ gave up this burden. Who am I? I, who still remember the *most unrecognizable faces* from my past lives. Am I whole, having left holes in my remaining self-portraits? Am I normal, having let in me this creeping *pareidolia*? Do I have a will, having hosted weavings of a prison *cell* around me? Do I exist, having seen my *soul leave my body* years after Noah gave up life?

Through my work, I recreate my experiences of death and resurrection. I reconstruct me in an alien world from my remnants of the past. I frame my imperfect recollection of my pre-immigration life, hang it on the wall, and re-root in it. I tally the marks I was inflicted when I made *myself* most vulnerable to the neighboring spirits. And I fabricate the scenes in which the lines of my childhood drawings extend into the threads of my mother's sewing... and into the words she sang to me... and into the words that soothed or hurt me.

As in Mona Hatoum's (1988) *Measures of Distance*, the kind of connection-alienation tension I investigate is subject to my background as a woman who has grown up in a conservative and patriarchical society and at some point left her home country and the loved ones. I feel alien to, and sometimes dismissive of, the cultural norms in the society I used to be a part of, just as much as I am attached to them; and I bear with me this self-denial. In *Uncover, Discover* (2018) I portray uncensored nude bodies for the first time in my life: An attempt to discover the sexuality that has long been veiled or to protest against the social oppressions I have long endured. These *clumsy* figures are fast, arbitrary, short-lived, and culturally repulsive, standing against pretentious, slow, labor-intensive, and elaborate weavings—which are traditionally considered women's job (Auther 2010).



Uncover, Discover (2018)

The extension of a hand to reach. Draw me longer. The wrapping arms to shelter. Tie me tighter. The weight of a leg to crush. The speed of a foot to run. Pull me closer. Swirling around hand in hand. Chalk-white walls spin around. Streaks of lines start to lash. Puddles of shadow, traces of ash.



Whipping my head in the jar of ink. Words circling around in my mind. Dying my hair with the pigmented juice. It tastes love, separation, sacrifice, devotion. It's not me drawing. It's my drunken brush chocking up. What I saw in the black ocean. What I found in the underwater. My memory doesn't belong in here. My residue is left somewhere else. What's remained is just an echo. Of a pregnant waterfall. Giving birth. To non-anthropomorphic figures. Whipping my head in the ink jar. Words circling around in my mind. What I saw in the infinite ocean. Dying my hair with black pigments. Poems of love, separation, sacrifice, devotion... is what I found in the underwater.





Social Sculpture (2018)

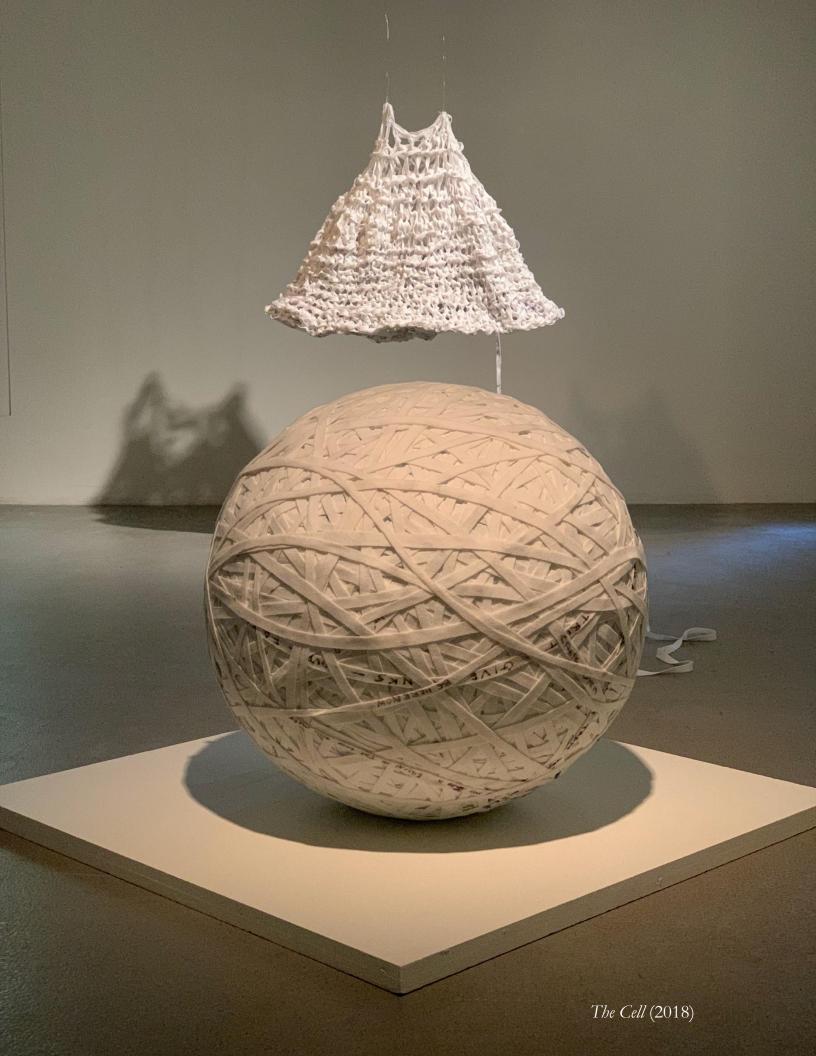
The United States of Threads: cotton, silk, nylon, wool, rayon, and embroidery. A society of tied feet and free will comes together *over* one flag, woven by itself.







THE CELL (2018)







تو یه سلول بزرگ، یه دو قطبی از آند و کاتده. یه دسته از ذرهها با هم رقابت می کنند تا یه چیزی رو که از اینجا حتی معلوم نیست از خودشون بندازن بیرون. بعد، از یه راه سخت و کوتاه، همه با استعدادهای مساوی سعی می کنند برسند وسط سلول. الکترونها از یه راه طولانی تر، بدون هیچ ترجیحی، میافتند تنگ یه گروه دیگه از ذرهها. کاتیونها دونه دونه میافتند تو زندان یه شبکه از بارهای منفی. همیشه یه دنبالهی مشخص از اتفاقها پشت سر هم میافته، و گاهی تصادفی. وقتی وزن یه مهرهی دومینو بیافته رو مهرهی بعدی، اونم به قاعده میافته... و به اندازهی کافی دور از اولین اتفاق، همه چیز فراموش می شه. وقتی که همهی حواس یخ زده، هیچ اتفاقی نه بزرگه نه کوچیک. همه چی فقط یه حلقه از زنجیرهی علت و معلولی تو طبیعته.

وسط طبیعت، با چشمای خیره به طرف شاخههایی که برای منظرهی آبی آسمون حاشیه ساختند دراز کشیدهم. نور خورشید اشکامو خشک میکنه و من میتونم آروم چشمامو بذارم رو هم. آرامش بعد از طوفان. شاخهها آروم میچرخند، و من مثل قناری زردی که صداش تا دوردست تو درختا پیچیده وسط نیمروز شیرین تابستون معلقم. پاروهایی که از دست من آزادند بدون تلاش تو آب شنا میکنند. صدای پای بچههایی که پاچههاشونو بالا نزدند تو گوشم شلپ شلپ میکنه. سایه روی آبی که آروم بالا و پایین میره دراز کشیده و شاخههای علف برای بچهها دست تکون میدن...

وسط جریان الکترونهایی که راه دورترو طی میکنند یه پمپ خلاء هست. مولکولهای آب بدون هیچ مزیتی پشت سر هم میپرند تو پمپ. از اون طرف ذرهها بدون هیچ خاطرهای، دونه دونه بیرون میان. دنیای به اون کوچیکی جاییه که رنگ خلق میشه. جاییه که موج و ذره یعنی همهی زندگی. یه قسمت از انرژیای که از واکنشها آزاد میشه با موج روی آب منتقل میشه. یه کم دیگهش موج مادی دیگهای به اسم صوت درست میکنه که پردههای گوش یه نفرو مرتعش میکنه. وقتی که همهی حواس یخ زده، تمام دنیا نه بزرگه نه کوچیک. دنیا فقط یه مجموعه از موج و مادهست، تو حصار زمان و مکان.

خارج از زمان و مکان، تخت من به سبکی باد روی آب شناوره. بید بیشتر دولا میشه تا سایه و عمیق تر کنه. خواب و بیداری پر از رویاست. روی صفحه ای که آب آینه می شه، واقعیت یه تصویر رنگی به قشنگی خودش داره. این قایق، هر چقدر هم کوچیک، برای تنبلی کردن به بلندی شیش تا دست و پا جا داره. اما ممکنه بید شاخه ها شو پایین تر بیاره؟ یا وسط درخت ها برق چشم های حیوونای وحشی تو آفتاب قایم شده با شه؟ و همین طور که من حرکت می کنم شب نزدیک تر بشه؟ پشت سرم قایقی هست که توش کسی دنبالم افتاده با شه؟ یا ممکنه اول رودخونه به آخرش وصل با شه؟ موجهایی که از محیط با فرکانس خاص وارد چشم می شند، بعد از یه عالمه واکنش تو مغز آدم دنیا رو رنگی جلوه می دند. «مولکولهای عشق» بعد از تولد بسته به وضعیت عصبی میزبان عمر متغیر دارند. گریه واکنش بدن به پیامهای عصبی مشخصیه. خاطره مجموعه یپیچیده ای از مولکول ها توی سلول های خاصی از مغزه. مخچه باید یه پیام برای شناور بودن داده باشه. لبخند، آخرین حلقه یز نجیریه که پر از هورمون و پالس عصبیه...





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