



### ***Open Letter to (My) Emotions Spring 2020***

The Lamont Gallery presents three texts that are included on walls of the Lamont Gallery in conjunction with the *Being & Feeling (Alone, Together)* exhibition.

Writers were welcomed to submit prose, epistolary poems, or other texts. The inspiration for this project stems in part from McSweeney's "Open Letters," which are texts "to people or entities who are unlikely to respond," but also from the broader literary tradition of letter-writing as a form of reflection, entreat, protest, apology, inquiry, or adoration.

From Rachel Eliza Griffiths' "Dear America," to Eileen Myles' *The Letter Q* collection (among many other examples), writing a letter, or evoking the act of writing (or reading) a letter, can be a powerful form of public or private address, as well as a way of seeking connections with others.

## Open Letter to (My) Emotions

*Contributions from community members as part of Being & Feeling (Alone, Together)*

Dear,

Remember when we watched that play we both hated and we spent that hate as words, a dime a dozen, and that made us both penniless? Remember when you told me I should (and could) write something better? I do, I write these things down and no, I'm not joking, I actually have a notebook of these things - \*things\* of intangibility I pretend to capture and fold between pages like spiraling, cracking, butterfly wings, maybe the ink'll finally take. So I did it. It - though - implies monolithic qualities and this is but a wee sliver of a 3Dimensional shape I have yet to uncover). I did

**Monologue:** a character, yet unknown; a Shakespearean \*aside\* (this character is yet a stranger, but we know that's not an excuse for poor/lazy writing - I am stalling).

Y'know, when observing creation I always- creation like an artwork, sculpture, carpentry, food - I always look for the seams, works that are seamless terrify me - infinite glass systems, spheres. Of all things - you can always find the seam; you know as well as I do that objects have a beginning and end, and seams are just their physical manifestations. Humans, really - a collection of seams,,,, you could draw the entire human body as a set of seams - and all that you would have would be a collection of lines vaguely resembling a humanoid. Skin and bones falling way to a cross-stitched pattern, a tattooed ink stain of a collection of words right where your nails meet skin, your eyes meet socket and teeth meet gums - reductionist deconstructivism! And I think my ability to see this - the threads of people - is indicative of the immigrant experience. That might be a stretch for you, who were born here and know yourself and understand all of the languages that come with inhabiting such a space, but even you can be extracted from the seamless glass sphere of society - even you have an invisible

seam, that which binds you to your surroundings, which absorb and fill the spaces you move from. You too, are seamless, fitting in perfectly within this, at least you think you are. And as you sit beneath your glass sphere- which you cannot see due to it's clearness, you ask us to join you, gayly beckoning. If only you walked a little to the side you would see the way the light refracts around the bend of the sphere, and then you would realize that what to you are outskirts are our daily realizations, and our always persistent field of view. Further - you cannot quite feel the longing that comes with wanting to join you - only certain molds of people can pass through the maddeningly perfect surface that is this sphere, only those with the 'right' purpose.

*We circle the glass globe we want to call home, but we cannot get past the surface, when we gain a footing, we slip, slip off. It is impenetrable, yet painfully there. We claw, howl, but we are not allowed in.*

*One day, someone puts up posters on the inside of the sphere - picture perfect society, masking life. We can now only see the smiling faces, fantasize about the perfect, clean streets, invent stories full of promises until it is all the younger generation is taught, until we mobilize, and we work, we invent, we create technology to allow us to scale the sphere, but we cannot stop until we are at the top, the only flat surface where one can rest. And we - grow heavier in our number, our fingerprints marring the once seamless, pristine surface, until the glass shatters - until we are finally let in, our seams ragged and torn, only to realize that this place? is exactly the same as back home.*

~

..... long pause. I was inspired by a pigeon.

As always,

Yours.

—Anonymous

# Open Letter (Fragments to Someone and Something)

## Contributions from community members as part of *Being & Feeling (Alone, Together)*

Fragments of a letter sent to me from a friend in 2009. They were handwritten and then later copied (by me in my own hand) before the destruction of the originals...

*That you are reading this fills me with boundless joy. I was told that after crossing the border, it will have traveled through many hands and lands of mutual friends and mutual strangers - Egypt, Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Switzerland, France, Ireland, Iceland, Canada - every intermediary and destination limited to only the immediately 'before' and 'after,' so to speak. The total chain secret to all except for the one who helped organize this arcanelly furtive network on my behalf. Solidarity moving in secret: such gives me a glimpse of belief in this world...*

*That you are reading this fills me with interminable jealousy. How these pages can journey such movement and itinerary, while our people are barred from such?*

*Promise me that after you've read these pages and looked at the enclosed photo, you'll destroy everything.*

*Before we left America, when your family and mine drove up the eastern spine of California, Highway 395, to Mammoth Mountain and Mono Lake then Yosemite; between the Sequoias and Death Valley, Sierras and Inyo; all of us packed into your family's metallic hunter green, faux-wood paneled Suburban; the loads of camping gear, backpacks, fishing rods, tackle boxes, igloo coolers. Your father coasting us on cruise control up that seemingly forever straightaway - Indian Wells through Big Pine and beyond...*

*To our right, the vast dried salt bed of Owens Lake: Can you still see the expanse of pinks and greys and whites, the veins of rust and black, those strangely glowing greens that didn't seem to be of Nature's cast? How we all awed at the sporadic dust storms that would burst up and spread about, then ever so slowly diffuse over minutes as ghostly vapors? I read later that these alkali dust storms were noxious and carcinogen-laden: inhalable cadmium, nickel, arsenic. And that Owens Lake was already coming to be known as the largest source of dust pollution in the entire country.*

*After Lone Pine, just as the Owens River on our right and the Los Angeles Aqueduct on the left began their snake dance with one another, how we turned toward one another noticing the liminal acceleration taking place through your father's foot, his beginning to readily speed up to slalom the few cars on the road, surging to a phantom race as there were eventually no more cars to pass. Then, as we began to approach the town named, Independence, he started to ease. At most a few blocks by few blocks, your father slowed almost to standstill as if there was something of great interest for us all to peer (our quizzical glancing as there didn't appear to be anything of note); and then, with Independence beginning to enter the rear-view mirror, we resumed to cruise - Big Pine . . . Bishop . . . Mammoth Lakes before dusk. Neither on road nor camp did anyone ask or comment about the afternoon's escalation and rubato. The next morning, arising at daybreak to feel the mountain chill, the unforgettable scent of pines and still smoldering embers of the night's campfire, we checked out the neon highlighted route to Yosemite on your father's map. You pointed at the southern stretch of the previous day's rush: between Lone Pine and Independence, a solitary name - Manzanar.*

For 1,500 years, the Paiute People settled the Long Valley caldera and Owens Valley, from Owens Lake in the south to Mammoth in the north. Until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, European American settlers did not impact life of the Paiute in the Valleys. Only after gold and silver were discovered in the Inyo and Sierra Nevada mountains did miners, ranchers, farmers come, destroying the Paiute's crops and instigating the ensuing ethnic cleansing - or at least, trying to. A third of the indigenous population of Owens Valley were forced to 'relocate' southwest over 175 miles away to Fort Tejon; others fled to the mountains, aiming to return to the Valleys over the coming months and years. Battles, intermittent peace talks, more battles, settlements, still more battles, more peace talks, even more settlements, yet more battles...

Somehow the orchards there survived. A town named Manzanar (Spanish for "apple orchard") would be established by ranchers and miners decades later, in 1910.

When your father and his family were imprisoned there, did they harvest from these orchards? Do you think they knew Independence was just up the road? How many other WWII concentration camps were placed upon the very sites previously home to indigenous sisters and brothers?

The invasion ended four months ago. When it began, I fled my home in Beit Lahia in the north to take refuge with relatives in Wadi as-Salqa in the middle of Gaza – a less populated, agricultural area where my cousins' families grow crops of squash, watermelon, peppers, cucumbers. It was for the most part safer; more so than Beit Lahia or any of the populous cities and towns being bombed, invaded, flattened...

As I returned to Beit Lahia, the late afternoon sun cast an unfathomable scene. The flat terrain where my neighbor's strawberry fields seasonally formed a smooth fabric of green and red upon the sandy soil, was upturned into giant mounds and cratered depressions, as if monstrous versions of our local *Spalax ehrenbergi* (the so-called Israel/Palestine blind mole-rat) had taken to it. Tracks of tanks and bulldozers left chaotic traversals of extirpations with only a few isolated traces of the cultivated straight rows of earth and water channels remaining un-erased. Entering the carnage of the field, my eyes were in the dirt as I stumbled the devastated topography and could not bear to cast my vision upwards – delaying with dread for as long as I could – to sight my home. Or, what used to be my home. "My home": I couldn't think these two words, let alone say them, without feeling totally unhinged from reality. "This is not my home" became my fevered, broken refrain in those moments and for days afterwards. Four concrete walls and a roof. Now, there is no roof, the rubble of the front wall and door vomited out emptying into the ravaged landscape, a disgusting joinery, archaeology in cruel present, gully of ruination. As dusk came, three walls stood, un-owned, bared, nude...somehow standing there motionless into twilight.

As I awoke to dawn, with lightest rain, there amidst the devastation of what was – This! The early shoots of an olive tree. Astonishing – as there are no olive trees in this area of Beit Lahia. How, during my months of refuge, did a seed arrive to plant itself? Was it blown from a grove miles away . . . maybe even by the turbulence of explosions and detonations that swept through our land? Did the seed hitchhike on a tank or bulldozer only to be flung into this once 'living' room? Could a bird from the West Bank or Israel have dropped it as it flew out to the Mediterranean Sea? I must have looked deranged beaming in delight on hands and knees within the morass – pondering the provenance of this my olive tree...

Rummaging the debris, I found shards of glass and warped bits of brass frame which had encased a poem that I had copied by hand onto parchment in Arabic. It used to hang on the front door's inner face. As my parents told you and your family many summers ago, sitting around the campfire in Yosemite, they named me after our 'national' poet, Mahimoud Darwishi. Every time I departed home, I had as ritual to touch the poem's frame, where there formed a patinated wear down its right side. Occasionally, I listened in to once again catch Darwishi's voice. Over the years, I found myself reciting it in my head whenever leaving. It slowed me. It became my ritornello, just like Deleuze used to describe the refrains of birds as they crossed some invisible territorial threshold... Let me translate it for you . . .

The earth is closing in on us / pushing us through the last passage / and we tear off our limbs to pass through. / The earth is squeezing us. / I wish we were its wheat / so we could die and live again. / I wish the earth was our mother / so she'd be kind to us. / I wish we were pictures on the rocks / for our dreams to carry as mirrors. / We saw the faces of those to be killed by the last / of us in the last defense of the soul. / We cried over their children's feast. / We saw the faces of those who'll throw / our children out of the windows of this last space. / Our star will hang up mirrors. / Where should we go after the last frontiers? / Where should the birds fly after the last sky? / Where should the plants sleep after the last breath of air? / We will write our names with scarlet stream. / We will cut off the hand of the song / to be finished by our flesh. / We will die here, here in the last passage. / Here and here our blood will plant its olive tree.

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*Contributions from community members as part of Being & Feeling (Alone, Together)*

When words return, the aches leave. I like talking about vocal progressions because I climbed into liberation through speech, too.

Now I can write exactly what it feels like to be in this library; such a storied and boring library, void of life and movement, full of many aching bellies and many tiresome people diseased by inaction and sitting. Oh, how I once wished to sprint away, or do as I imagine, how wonderful it would be - to swing from post to post on the road, traveling in leaps and clutching on to dear, dearest life. It is time to tell. It is time to stand, to speak, to breathe, to share, to feel a pulse other than mine. It is time to tell what is aching to leave my lips, what is aching to leave everybody's lips that I've ever seen through my jumping American eyes.

—*Jack Simon '20*