

Essays Beyond Borders: Writing with Place

***Essays by Workshop Participants in Malta
(2025)***



Edited by Mario Aquilina



**Co-funded by
the European Union**

CONTENTS

<i>Preface</i> , Mario Aquilina	2
1. <i>Bright in The Everything</i> , Mars A.	3
2. <i>Thyme and Time Wait for No Man</i> , Rob Parry	8
3. <i>To Begin Again</i> , Maya Micallef Engerer	16
4. <i>Sun and Stone</i> , Marie Briguglio	24
5. <i>'Tan-Nanna Helu Manna'</i> , Marcon De Giorgio	26
6. <i>Sheeplessness</i> , Katalin Vizi	33
7. <i>A Cacophony of Sentiments, Dust and Roots</i> , Fatima Ahmad Asaf	35
8. <i>On the Little Silver Cross that Dangles from my Neck</i> , Michela Spiteri Staines	37
9. <i>The Beauty and the Horror</i> , Rob Parry	45
10. <i>On Walking through my Brain and Finding Ghosts</i> , Mars A.	49

Preface

Mario Aquilina

The essays in this collection all begin from a conscious effort to think from, with, and in a place. They seek to stay, to linger, to absorb, and to be present. They attend to physical spaces, the sensations they provoke, and the memories they evoke. In so doing, they inevitably move, digress, and depart as, in their essayistic spirit, they engage in reflection, contemplation, and a continuous attempt to make sense of experience.

The places and spaces inhabited by these essays give witness to a range of human experiences. Some of them are recognisable in their local colours and flavours. The Maltese stone, with its golden hues and crumbly impermanence recurs, as does the sun with its never ending and sometimes oppressive brilliance. The essays take us to places marked by the stamp and weight of history, but they also make us feel the grief for that which has been or will be lost.

Dust drifts across the digital pages of this collection. It rises from the ruins of the metaphorical assaults of time but also from the all too real threat of human greed and destructive wars. The sense of having lost one's home, even when one is still living in it, is something that several essays in this collection confront.

Sometimes, even the body that carries us or the mind that we inhabit makes us experience similar states of dispossession, and it is this distance from ourselves that provides us with the reflective space needed for thought to appear.

Occasionally, however, the essays make us feel what it means to feel at home in our bodies and in the spaces we inhabit, and the essayists assay to make their way through a difficult, but also beautiful world that still demands to be tasted and tested in its subtle complexity. These essays persevere. They hope. They search, and sometimes, they find.

Bright in The Everything

Mars A.

Walking in Brighton is never quite walking. It is slipping. It is moving through two cities at once: the damp stones, the gull glitter, and the other – humming, pulsing, netted in invisible threads. Salt stings my face, but the sting is a welcome, an arrival, a reminder that I have been here forever. Perhaps we have.

The air is a mixture no perfume could capture: brine, fried oil, wet dog, beer spilled last night still clinging to the pavement. A sudden waft of vinegar drifts from paper cones of chips, sharp enough to cut through the sea's weight. Gulls wheel and scream, somewhere between laughter and threat, as though they, too, belong to the second city, the invisible one, always watching from above.

The promenade slicks itself in salt. Puddles hold fractured constellations of neon, pier lights bending and multiplying until they resemble a galaxy cracked underfoot. Behind me, narrow lanes breathe their own air – espresso and incense, damp wool from charity shops, the sweet rot of flowers left too long in a window. Brighton is never just surface. It exhales from its pores, and if you listen long enough, you can hear the pulse underneath.

And then the air fractures. Another city overlays the first. Signals stitch themselves through gull cries and chip-fat steam, an invisible embroidery threading through my skin. The hum sharpens into whispers, disembodied yet intimate, as though the pavement beneath me speaks in code. I glance at my phone – not to check, but to listen.

Wi-Fi names arrive like murmurs in a language I could almost speak.

'FreeGuest123' – transient, a hotel ghost, a bed already cold. The digits tick like a countdown or rooms along an infinite corridor, doors opening and closing without hands. I imagine 122, 121, 120 – each with another body, another night folded away, another pulse erased. A guest who never checked in. A guest who never left.

Each name is a mouth trying to speak underwater. 'NETGEAR,' slurred and stretched toward 'NEAR' or 'TEAR.' 'SkyHub,' like a collapsed planet, a small star falling

through the ceiling. 'BT-HOME,' blinking. Home replaced by 'alone,' 'drone,' 'bone'. The router fidgets from its cupboard, a forgotten pet, pleading with blinks instead of sound.

They are not networks; they are apparitions. Breaths escaping between walls. Handshakes from machines that never met. Each signal arrives like a dream half-remembered – —sharp when I wake, dissolving as I try to write it down.

Sometimes the names stack, dozens deep. The screen feels like a séance. Each SSID a spirit pressed against the veil, murmuring, insisting.

'Hidden Network.'

'Hidden Network.'

'Hidden Network.'

Like a prayer. Like insistence. Invisible mouths layering until they vibrate our skin.

And yet, I can almost hear laughter. Not cruel, playful. A child ghosting through hotel corridors at night, barefoot, between doors. A signal slipping in and out, knowing I am listening.

Faye_Loves_Cats.

Is that a message? A flicker in the lattice? I imagine it pulsing softly, a node alive in the mesh of walls and air. Perhaps there are cats. Perhaps not. Perhaps 'cat' is a pattern, a rhythm, a tiny filament of presence threading through the apartment and into the city. Faye might be many, a swarm moving quietly through rooms, through screens, leaving only faint traces in the pulse of the signal, like mycelium creeping under damp floors, connecting, whispering, multiplying.

I am part of this mesh too. I am Faye, too. My attention a pulse, my presence a filament. I am many, I am scattered, I am concentrated, I am always rethreading myself into the lattice.

Another blink: ThreadWell. It tastes like smoothie pulp and also like light in a cable. A pun that wants to be wellness, but flickers toward something stranger; fibre for bodies, fibre for wires, both winding through the city. LAN and mycelium. Gut and root. Neon signage and damp soil. The city breathes both ways at once.

Signals arch over rooftops; filaments creep under paving stones. Both invisible. Both sustaining. Both ordinary. Both monstrous. Packets of data drift like spores, waiting, germinating in silence. Every Wi-Fi network is a seed. Every login is a bloom. The promenade inhales and exhales through them: laughter carried on light, gossip tangled in roots, longing mapped onto airwaves.

Multiplicity is everywhere, if you let your vision blur. Gulls scream in three directions at once. Flags fold back on themselves until their colours slip sideways into unnamed gradients. 'QueerAndHere,' whispers the air. 'SharedConnection,' hums the soil.

Yes, Yes, and Yes.

And then: TheEverything. My signal, what I thought was only in my head. It flickers back at me. I am not sure if I broadcast it, or if it dreamed me up to carry it. My chest vibrates like a router, like a hive, like a wet log swollen with fungus. Every pulse is an echo of me. Every me is an echo of more.

I walk, if you could call that walking. My walking stutters. The Seagulls cry twice. Laughter repeats but shiftshifted a half-beat, like the city caught in a loop, buffering. Wi-Fi names glance off one another like antennae brushing: TwoBeans, ElectricSoup, BarkNBytes. Their jokes are ordinary, but when I read them, the air swarms. Two beans multiply into many. Soup spills out of language. Barking becomes data.

Morse-code blinks at the edge of vision:

'-. . --- -- . / .- .-. --- -. --. / .-- .. - / -- . /'

Come along with me.

'.-- . / .- .-. / .-- .-. ..- .-. .-..'

You are Many.

But two folds open. Two becomes four. Four becomes swarm. The message mutates as soon as it touches me.

The promenade gleams with puddles, each reflecting not sky but circuitry, constellations fracturing into Morse and fungal bloom. I smell ozone, coffee, wet stone, but also something mushroom-soft, something queer, something damp with resistance.

TheEverything thrums. I feel it under my fingernails, in the folds of my lungs, in the laughter spilling out of cafés. Multiplicity refuses concealment; it seeps through neon, through soil, through me. Queer resistance is not shouted - it travels as spores on the wind, as signals colliding in damp air, as waves folding into themselves until they refuse the shape of conformity.

The gulls cry. The waves tumble. And again. And again.

We, or perhaps Us, step onto wet stones. Sun strikes puddles, fracturing into miniature constellations of light. Every reflection pulses in rhythm with the networks above.

Walking is not singular. Walking is lattice. A body and many bodies.

I stop. The swarming beneath my skin unfurls, a colony extending in all directions, every thread alive. I glance at a café. Two friends laugh over chipped mugs, their Wi-Fi blinking like antennae. TwoBeans, ElectricSoup. They do not know I see them as threads, yet they intersect with mine, and the lattice vibrates.

A dog barks behind a shuttered shop. Its network flickers faintly, a pulse of loyalty and mischief: BarkNBytes. Even seagulls contribute, their cries vibrating against invisible filaments. The saltwind carries tiny Morse messages meant only for those who listen. Threads coil and spiral, brushing against my own, nudging, teasing, resonating.

Aboveground, the LAN stretches and bends like sinews. We are somehow every system that has been, and will ever be. The lattice pulses through me, through streets, through saltwind, through laughter. Each Wi-Fi name blinks in conversation with the nodes beneath my feet.

And still, the swarms press against one another. The LAN blinks. The mycelium pulses. TheEverything reaches into streets and cafés, brushing against QueerAndHere, SharedConnection, TheManyOfUs, Faye_Loves_Cats, and all the threads I have never known.

Resistance is not loud. It is the hum of multiplicity. The pulse of desire. Laughter spilling into alleys, rainbow light spilling onto wet pavement, wings fluttering above.

I inhale salt, coffee, neon warmth. The lattice vibrates. To be many. To be plural. To exist as swarm and thread, signal and root is to be alive. And in the ordinary act of moving, blinking, humming in scents, existing in layers, there is defiance as radical as it is quiet.

I reach for nem. The warmth of ne's hand is small, human, insistent. It presses against my palm, a patch of mycelium surrendering every last nutrient into the soil, feeding roots I could not have carried alone. Nem drops into my world, ne's fibres dissolving into mine, and in that surrender, something blooms inside me -- light threaded through marrow and muscle, stubborn, luminous, unstoppable. Mushrooms push through damp earth, carrying the generosity of ne's body into mine, carving new life from decay. TheEverything hums, but here it coils, fragile and immediate, alive between our palms.

A paper cone of chips tips over, steaming. Espresso cups tremble with heat. A dog barks behind a shuttered shop. Hidden Networks flicker and vanish. The city swarms around me, but I hold nem's hand, and everything else thins. Salt wind stings my face. Neon puddles fracture beneath our feet. Steam curls upward.

A small voice in my mind, or maybe the network's, whispers: 'Stay present. Keep moving. Let desire spread.' I answer silently, the pulse of my body replying to the pulse of the city, of every signal, every filament: 'Yes.'

Thyme and Time Wait for no Man

Rob Parry

I wandered aimlessly over the sun-baked garigue, an arid and parched moated island, surrounded by a baking river of crudely laid eighties tarmac. The exposed, pock-marked coralline limestone undulates across the expanse of the triangular mass, littered with huge sprigs of thyme, empty snow-white snail shells and showing, on occasion, the fossilised partial remnants of its creation. The comfortable heat of the afternoon sun warms the *Chiliadenus Bocconeii*, the Maltese Flea Bane, and the aromatic camphor bouquet of this oily, sweating shrub mingles with a concoction of other fragrances of the garigue such as wild garlic, the thyme itself and the sporadic yet obvious pungency of feline and canine deposits. The mini craters, dark and sharp edged, offer refuge from the summer heat for insects and fragile, minute iris flowers in blue or pink, and when closely observed, surviving in abundance in patches strewn across the less trodden spaces. A tiny lizard seeks the cool breath of a shadow, slithering and scrambling between a collection of higher coralline rocks that collaborate with the slowly sinking sun to provide a protective shroud. I hear the cricket orchestra tuning and the dim thud of a locust landing on a towering, decaying stalk of giant fennel, its seeds long dispersed. A symphony of honeybees collect their wares from the beautifully fragrant thyme, their harmonic reverberations providing a peacefully calming ambience. My world breathes still, apart from the tiniest of movements, but far from silent.

It is the summer of 1979, another childhood holiday and another chance to play with my new friends. I trot expectantly down Triq Is Saghtar, Mellieha, in search of adventure, but I am met only with a cowering cat and the sticky and bloody remnants of its recent hunting activity. I gaze at the kill, pondering the horrific reality of these cute fluffy animals and their murderous instincts. My eyes flicker, a reaction to the distraction provided by children's voices. Excited and shrill, the boys run haphazardly across the garigue's natural and ancient hazards. I turn slowly to face the cacophonous onslaught of my newly found Maltese friends. We greet each other like long lost souls – a Maltese friend made is for life. Idle and frantic chatter rattles apace as we deliberate on various topics in the blink of an eye. We chat about

football, and boots – footwear was so different back then and much revered amongst boys of a certain age. The rubber soled variety with multiple oblong, curved studs seemed to be the choice of the day. There were no brands of note to speak of and yet we were as grateful for owning our own pairs as a child of today receiving their first pair of expensive ‘Preds.’ We consider the relative merits of Cadbury’s chocolate and compare it to the thin and ridiculously sweet 5 cent bars found at the local store, cram-packed with crushed peanuts despite being labelled as ‘almond’ or ‘hazelnut’. We laugh about girls and New Wave music and mutually declare a dislike for Soft Cell regardless of the fact that at least two of the six of us have never heard of them. The debate abates and we commence our boisterous games. My nostrils fill with aromatics dispersed by plants that have been native since recorded time began, beads of sweat course down my furrowed brow and into my eyes, creating a stinging sensation that blurs my vision and stops me in my tracks.

I am caught – I must surrender and await my fate along with Stephen, another prisoner at the far end of the rising slope. We chatter nervously, excitedly, as we watch from our captive viewpoint, the other friends chasing and cajoling each other, laughter ringing out like happy peals of a well-tuned carillon of bells. As the energy levels subside, my comrades and I sit on uncomfortable pinnacles. Grey and textured like carborundum, they provide a meeting place, a forum for boyish jokes and simple yet pleasurable chatter; carefree and unaware. I noticed how happy we were then; I remember now how happy we were.

Today, Triq Is Saghtar, Mellieha, surrounds a small, odd-shaped, vaguely triangular section of garigue that forms a very rough square in community terms. Its shape is very irregular but its meaning to the community’s inhabitants is anything but. The proposed destruction of this vital piece of recreational land is, at the point of writing, sealed – yet another fragment of Malta lost to concrete at a time when we need so much less of it. The simplicity of this small patch of land gave me opportunities to forge friendships that have lasted fully forty years, providing joy, escapism, and solid hours of creative and diverse entertainment limited only by childlike imagination and the heat of the sun. A place in time that brings memories to the fore today as it will tomorrow. An attachment so emotional and deep that it really does matter.

Interested in the impact this land has had on the children of my childhood friends; I speak with them. I ask them to reveal their childhood memories which they do,

freely. They reveal stories of similar escapades; of dragons and castles; of dens and of exhilaration; of endless hours tripping and falling in haste and the urgent yet short lived tears, playing catch and war and other childlike titled games. Where time drifts, imaginations grow, and at the very least, the children enjoy pure, physical, energy sapping play that wards off so many of the modern demons blighting our young today.

I then speak with the grandchildren of my childhood friends, and they share a similar tale. A triangular sanctuary where even modern children with their Xboxes and their social media can still enjoy the simple pleasures of a fertile imagination and a willingness to engage. Although no longer so prevalent, children can still be heard, weather permitting, cajoling and provoking each other into fun chases and moments of natural discovery and exploration. Oh, how important it is to have some small, natural place to fulfil our needs. To experience nature. Snails, insects and arachnids, butterflies and ants all inhabit this sparse and rocky outcrop, all call it home. And the hundreds of bees in the thyme. Where will we be without the bees, I ponder.

The National Resources Defense Council (2015) describe the loss of bees as catastrophic. Indeed, they say that with the eradication of the bees, food pollination will reduce markedly, and food harvest will be vastly reduced, possibly by more than forty percent. Not quite the often falsely misquoted figure proffered by Einstein (NRDC, 2022), where humanity would survive only four years beyond the extinction of bees. But, in a country that is losing farmland hand over fist, destroying the pollinator's habitat, seemingly without fear of consequence, is a tragedy of incredible proportions. I fear for this loss, the tension between progress and regression and the apparent lack of understanding. The dismissive attitude prevailing over it is of deep concern. This incredibly plain, unspectacular patch of land is a home; it's a sanctuary; it's a refuge, a would-be jail. It is a place of discovery, an area used for creative fun, for sharing laughter and small injury tears. It is the lungs of a community. It holds unchecked progress at bay like the ancient castles of my playground imagination, and this is now to be removed and replaced with a concrete monolith, a homage to capitalist profit. And there is the problem.

I go back and speak with my friends. We share wondrous memories of an age more innocent, less grasping, less greed ridden. We talk of this place, this space, where we once played and that we now see with our adult eyes. They tell me that the garigue

fortress of old is now a breathing space, a barrier from each other's private lives, a safety net that affords a degree of separation, allowing air to flow, allowing peace to reside. I see them walking their dogs on this ancient land. I watch them breathing in the warm fragrant air, their bodies and souls visibly relaxing after the trials and tribulations of another day. I see them return to their child, their inner child, their childhood. I am their friend, their childhood friend and together we remember, together we breathe and smile. Together we frown.

We discuss, as we have many times, Malta, the world and the state of politics. What is happening to Malta is a sad reflection of what the wider world is experiencing. The rampant capitalism induced to an extent by Reagan and Thatcher in the early eighties has spread to affect the minds of politicians and oligarchs alike and Malta is no exception. Unfortunately, the world since 1979 has drifted towards the ideological right of centre. Indeed, the Overton Window has shifted markedly right over the last twenty or so years. Whilst the originator, Joe Overton, invented the model to show how policies sat outside the window of acceptability by the public, his successor Joseph Lehman took the idea further and created an ideological measurement that politicians achieved consensus on when considering if a new policy was inside, to the right or to the left of the Overton window. Despite the intention Lehman had to remove comparison between left and right, in reality the modern neoliberal policy and law makers, over the last two decades in the UK and arguably in Malta, have used the window as a testing ground for policies that have become gradually, and by way of normalisation over a period of time, further to the right than at any point since the 1930s.

Thus, politicians in Malta have long since turned away from policies that allow equality of opportunity, fairness and a strong central government with state owned and operated utilities, free healthcare, social housing construction and state owned infrastructural industries. Instead, Malta's lawmakers have become obsessed with the free market, capitalist ideals that epitomise modern Neo Liberalism. Expansion and growth are key words in their everyday language. The constant ideal of growth engenders greed, and the Neo Liberal policies of the present government have encouraged the pursuance of capital expansion, with only a blinkered eye on the social and environmental impact of this damaging approach. They have removed many of the constraints of central government to allow the private sector to capitalise

on the availability of utilities, healthcare infrastructure and, of course, of construction. Some would argue, this has been done in a manner which could be considered an impropriety.

Approximately 72% of Maltese people own their own homes, and secondary homes are on the rise. Social housing in all its guises amounts to a small proportion of the 28% of housing not privately owned. Gozo, for instance, has 45% of its housing marked as secondary homes either for rental or investment. I do not know how many of those owners are Maltese rather than Gozitan, but one thing is very clear. Schemes for secondary housing are promoted by both the Government and banks. Many are chasing the possible investment returns with little thought for the consequence to both the environment and indeed the prospective tenants, never mind the plight of those awaiting a social housing solution to their lack of means.

In the UK in the post war period, the government built social housing rapidly to solve the housing crisis that the war created in the most affordable manner possible. Over time and specifically from Thatcher's tenure, the social housing stock was sold off, thus creating massive profits for private investors. This, in turn, raised private rental prices in the long term and due to the decimated social housing stocks, demand was inflated. This created huge waiting lists and a massive hike in house prices. Unaffordable loans and people stretched to their financial limits have been a consequence and continue to be so. Development was rampant and vast swathes of agricultural and leisure purposed land was taken from towns and cities in order to build huge high-priced housing estates, extracting the maximum profit from the land. There seems to be no way back, but reducing capitalist private housing development in favour of social housing would significantly impact land use and housing policy. Private developers prioritise profit, often focusing on high-value housing and speculative practices that inflate land prices, restrict affordable options, and encourage inefficient urban sprawl. In contrast, social housing prioritises public interest, reallocating land to meet societal needs like affordability, sustainability, and equity.

Building social housing in Malta could stabilise land markets without political intervention, prevent speculation, and promote community-oriented developments that could be aligned with urban planning goals such as reducing sprawl and preserving garigue, agricultural land and green spaces. It would also address

inequality in land ownership, redistributing priorities for public benefit and fostering cooperative housing models. Social housing policies could be aligned with environmental and sustainability objectives, ensuring eco-friendly development. Additionally, public investment in social housing would balance urban and rural development, revitalising underdeveloped areas like the 8,200 unoccupied properties in Malta and Gozo. This shift would transform precious land from a profit-driven commodity to a resource serving public need, fostering equitable and sustainable growth. The kind of housing and development strategy Malta needs.

This kind of policy would preserve sites such as the Triq Is Saghtar square in Mellieha.

Unfortunately, there is no real evidence that politicians are ideologically disposed to produce this kind of strategy. Thus, those 8200 properties will remain vacant, wasted in terms of possible social housing and land preserving solutions, a state of affairs that looks as unhealthy for society as it does convenient for illicitly earned income. Consequently, the rich get richer, the gap between the rich and poor in terms of quality of life and income becomes wider and this ever decreasing circle is maintained and supported by Neo Liberal social and economic policy. The free market housing over social housing policies favoured by Malta's politicians, regardless of party, is quickly grinding away the remaining areas of free land. This is tragic for the environment, as Malta's farmland, forestry and garigue is constantly eroded in the pursuit of profit. A nation of concrete, of tall swaggering skyscrapers and characterless monuments to rampant capitalism have emerged replacing the natural habitat. A vast army of tower cranes seemingly roams the land, a platoon of them visible from every point on the islands. An island of permanent noise, filth and dust has been reborn from the ashes of its former beautiful state. The Neo Liberal ideals of profit will only be measured in terms of consequence when the leaders realise that one cannot consume, nor breathe, concrete or cash.

I hear their words, but I cannot concentrate, not out of disrespect, but from the rising anger I have welling deep in my stomach. I see a country overwhelmed by expansion, the chase of the capitalist ideal. I see concrete and monsters both tower like and truck based; I see dust and corrosion, of fabric and of society. I hear drills and excavators, the scream of a million small creatures in their death throes. I see progress. I see expansion. I see misery, the loss and degradation of an environment, a

small one granted, but a vital one nonetheless. I see the puncturing of this community's lung, the removal of its barrier and the erosion of privacy, of peace and tranquillity, and I see a childhood's end and for generations to come, a removal of that playground, that sanctuary that has meant so much for so many in this tiny and seemingly insignificant community. I see fat cat developers, their pockets swollen from the rich pickings of governmental association, of curiously contrived agreements and the sell-off of public land for a price that the newly imprisoned tenants will pay on behalf of the developer on an annual basis. The laughter of generations of children nought but echoes in the mind of those who know the place, know the value and appreciate this piece of ancient land's contribution to the raising of their own lives, their children's and grandchildren's. The ringing of happy voices lost to the scream, growl and intense reverberations of machinery of mass destruction. The dust, dirt and extreme noise will subside, the aggravation and inconvenience will abate, the new occupants in this oppressive concrete obelisk will settle and thrive in the modern way; deprived of natural space, of an adventure playground and of a separation from them directly opposite neighbours. They will not know the beauty of this once loved place. They will not appreciate what it is they have taken from their communal associates. They will pay the developer who will pay the government, and whilst the fat cat enjoys the trappings of capitalist chance, of opportunistic wealth, indeed of money for nothing, the once happy residents of the former community will mourn their loss, the depreciation in value of their cherished and hard earned homes and reflect upon the realities of modern Malta. The people were once omnipotent, but now the priority is wealth accumulation, despite the destruction and erosion of the environment, the way of life, of tradition and of mental and physical health and well being. Nothing matters so long as the pockets of the rich and privileged are full.

Triq Is-Saghtar was once the model Maltese community, resplendent with myriad personalities, families of all backgrounds and social status. Now greed has forced this community to be changed forever. How crushingly disappointing it is for a non-Maltese to see this. I walk the perimeter of this old and haggard piece of land and at face value I can just about see what the developers see. I can, though, still see the intrinsic beauty of the garigue and its environment. I can see the ghosts of my childhood and those of the generations of children that followed. I hear laughter and giggling. I hear boys shouting and girls chattering. I see the young and old walking its

arid expanse, enjoying its safety, the sanctuary for so many. I can smell those wild herbs, that garlic and the wonderfully pungent fleabane. Those aromas light a fire in my mind's eye and an anger in my soul. I see progress and wonder about the meaning of that word because to me it is a metaphor for all that is wrong in my world. My British heart cries for the pain of Mellieha. I am but one small voice in a chorus of but a few voices against a powerful rising tide of greed and questionable economics. I know progress has no patience, and I know that time is short, and alas, I see no positive outcome here. For the capitalist urgency to drain the land of its wealth, the community of its property, overrides the importance and sacred values that were once so important to the many. It is very sad, for I now know that the majesty of the garigue, the sanctuary and playground with its ambience and aromas of the sweating thyme will be lost to time forever. And what about those bees? We sit and reflect, my friends and I. We are sure of the solutions, we know what should and could be done, but we despair at the lack of action, the empty words and promises of politicians well versed in self promotion and preservation. The children of my friends are desperately upset about the loss of this special place, they too are residents of the square, they fear for their hard earned homes just as their parents do but what can be done? Who will listen? The sense of loss is palpable as we walk back towards our homes in the mild autumnal air and look over the garigue for what may be the last time in its natural state.

To Begin Again

Maya Micallef Engerer

I do not take photos of her in the pen. I cannot.

It is not a matter of forgetting. It is not a refusal to document or an unwillingness to hold on to the truth of how she once was. It is something else, something closer to a quiet rebellion. A refusal, not to remember, but to allow memory to be flattened into a single, frozen image.

A dog behind bars. A familiar story. One anyone might glance at and turn away from, nodding in recognition as if they have already understood it.

But they haven't.

The first time I saw her, she was pressed against the farthest corner of the enclosure, her body still but tense, the way an animal goes still when movement will only make them more visible. It was not cowering exactly – there was a dignity to it, a stillness that suggested she had not surrendered to fear but had simply learned to endure it.

She did not seek to be seen.

I have known this kind of invisibility before.

Not the invisibility of being ignored, nor the theatrical kind that hopes to be noticed, but something quieter. The kind that makes you part of the background, that keeps you out of reach. The kind that is neither hiding nor waiting to be found.

If you weren't looking, you would miss her.

But I was looking.

— — — — —

The shelter is full of stories, but most of them go unnoticed.

People come to adopt, to choose, to walk through the rows of pens and look for a dog that might fit into their lives. They see the hopeful ones first – the ones that rush forward, tails wagging, pressing their faces to the bars in desperate appeal. Then there are the others: the ones who have learned not to expect much, the ones who do not bother trying to be seen.

And then there is her.

Not quite pleading. Not quite withdrawn.

Simply waiting.

I did not see her. Not at first.

I had come here for the same reasons many do – to give something of myself, to be useful. To prove, perhaps, that I could care. That I was capable of it. It was an uncomplicated desire, or so I told myself.

But something happens when you return, when you see the same faces day after day, the same patterns of movement, the same stories playing out in the same confined spaces.

You begin to notice things.

You notice the way some of them always hesitate before taking food, as if they expect it to be snatched away. The way others flinch at sudden movements, no matter how careful you are. You notice who presses themselves against the fences, desperate for contact, and who lingers at the back of the pen, unwilling or unable to ask for more than what they are given.

You notice who is waiting for you.

— — — — —

I do not take photos of her in the pen because it is not who she is. It is what she was made to be.

She is not the curled-up shadow in the corner, nor the wary eyes, nor the body that braces itself for whatever might come next. That is not her – it is the shape that fear has carved into her, the weight of whatever past she cannot speak.

To photograph her there would be to trap her inside that past. To turn her into a symbol of something she has already begun to shed.

When she is with me, she is something else entirely.

In the fenced-off leash area, she does not need to be called. She moves toward me before I even know she is there. When I walk, she follows. When she runs, I do too, though never as fast. There is a lightness to her here, a way she moves that makes it seem as though the earth itself has softened beneath her paws. The weight she carries elsewhere does not follow her here.

And the fence – the one that in another context might have meant enclosure, confinement, limitation – does not feel like a boundary at all.

It feels like safety.

We are most free within these boundaries.

We are most ourselves when we are together.

— — — — —

The shelter, for most, is a waiting place. A liminal space, an in-between.

For the dogs, it is a place they must pass through, waiting with the hope that they can reach something better. For the people who come here, it is a place of service, of routine, of work that is necessary but never finished. It is easy to see it as a holding ground. A place of transition, never a destination.

But for some of us, it is more than that.

It is the space where something shifts.

I had never been here with *him*. He cannot find me here.

Whoever hurt her cannot reach her here.

And yet, neither of us are quite beyond it. The past does not dissolve so cleanly. There is no singular moment in which one becomes healed, whole, free of everything that came before. There is only this: the slow, patient work of being in the present, of allowing new meanings to settle over old wounds.

For fifteen minutes a day, she has this space, and she has me. And I have her.

— — — — —

I think about what she sees when she looks at me.

I know what I see.

I see her as part of my life. A presence I love, a body that moves beside mine, a quiet constant in a world that has been anything but.

But to her – what am I?

I am fifteen minutes of freedom.

I am what she waits for.

Does she understand time as I do? Does she know that the days stretch between my visits, that the absence is not of my choosing? Or does she simply know that I return? That I am here now, and that now is enough?

When she sees me, she does not hesitate. She does not ask for proof. She does not wait for reassurance or apology or promise.

She trusts me.

She loves without fear. And somehow, impossibly, she has taught me to do the same.

— — — — —

I do not take photos of her in the pen because I do not want to remember her as she was when she was afraid.

I want to remember her as she is when she is free.

I want to remember this:

The way she follows me. The way I follow her. The way we run, unbound, within the fences.

The way we are safe here.

The way we begin again.

— — — — —

I had imagined animal shelters as loud places, echoing with the sharp barks of restless dogs and the metallic clang of kennel doors. A place where need was voiced in yelps and whines, where desperation reverberated off tiled walls. Instead, I was met with a quiet that felt stretched thin, as if sound had been pulled taut and would snap at the slightest touch. It was an unnatural silence, one that did not soothe but unsettled, as though something essential had been emptied from the air and left only a hollow echo in its place. The early morning sun struggled to shine through the tightly woven metal mesh, casting a dim glow. The air was thick with the scent of antiseptic and damp fur, overlaid with something older, something that had seeped into the walls and floors and would not be scrubbed away. It was the scent of waiting, of time measured not in days but in the slow erosion of hope.

Siana's kennel was one of many – an indistinct rectangle in a corridor of identical spaces, each defined by chain-link and concrete, by stainless steel bowls and thin blankets folded in corners. The other dogs filled the space with motion, their bodies pressed eagerly against the bars, tails wagging furiously, paws scraping in frantic appeal. Their eyes tracked every passing figure with desperate, pleading energy, as if sheer insistence might will someone to stop, to choose them, to make this place only a temporary stop in their story. But Siana did none of this. She made her space distinct, not by action but by stillness. While the others threw themselves at the boundaries of their enclosures, she remained where she was, seated on the bare concrete, her paws placed neatly in front of her, head bowed down, as composed as a statue, stowed away in a desolate corner in a museum. Her presence was a quiet one, deliberate in its restraint. There was no desperation in her gaze, no frantic attempts to make herself known. Instead, she held herself with a quiet that felt intentional, as if she had long since learned that making herself small was the safest way to exist.

Her eyes held a weight I struggled to name, a depth that did not plead but simply bore witness. There was an intelligence there, something quiet and watchful, but not inviting. She was not asking to be chosen, not reaching for connection in the way the others did. It was not detachment, nor was it the empty stare of a dog who had given up. Rather, it was the gaze of something that had learned to observe before acting, to wait before trusting. There was something unsettling in that – unsettling because it felt too human. It was the look of someone who had known unpredictability, who had learned that movement invites consequence, that being seen is not always safe. It was an awareness that did not belong in the eyes of a creature meant to be simple in its joy, unburdened by calculation. She was a dog who had mastered the art of disappearing in plain sight, and I wondered how long it had taken her to learn that trick, how many times she had needed it to survive.

I crouched outside the kennel, the cold of the concrete seeping into my knees, unsure whether to reach out or simply meet her gaze. The bars between us felt less like a barrier and more like a boundary she had drawn, one I did not want to cross too soon. Time stretched, thick and heavy, filled only by the muffled sounds of other dogs shifting in their enclosures, the distant hum of fluorescent lights. I held my breath, waiting – but for what, I wasn't sure. Then, slowly, with a careful deliberation that felt almost ceremonial, Siana shifted. Her paws remained planted where they were, her body still, but she lowered her head just enough to press her nose to the narrow gap beneath the door. It was not a plea, not a demand for touch or affection. Just an acknowledgement. A quiet permission, given on her terms. A gesture so small it could have been missed, yet it felt profound, like the first piece of an unspoken language being offered between us.

For a long moment, we simply existed there, separated by cold metal and concrete but bound by something else – something intangible, yet undeniable. The air between us felt charged, thick with a quiet understanding that did not need words. I could feel the weight of her gaze, steady and assessing, not searching for comfort but recognising something in me the way I had recognised something in her. Around us, the shelter remained unchanged – the distant rustle of movement, the occasional sharp bark from a dog still holding on to hope. But in that space between Siana and me, there was only silence. A question unspoken. A history unread but deeply felt. It

was a silence that did not demand to be filled, one that carried its own language – of patience, of restraint, of things too difficult to name.

I wondered what had brought her here, what winding path had led her to this place of fluorescent lights and disinfected floors. Had she once belonged to someone who had whispered her name with affection, who had traced gentle fingers through her fur in the quiet hours of the night? Or had she only known hands that commanded, that took, that left bruises in places no one could see? The shelter offered no history, only a present defined by a cage and a number, a space that reduced lives to something temporary, transitional. Yet Siana did not wear her past in the way some of the other dogs did – there was no trembling, no flinching, no desperate need to please. Instead, there was an absence, a withholding, as if she had learned that to be unseen was to be safe.

The thought settled uneasily in my chest, a weight I could not shift. I wanted to believe she had known love before this place, that she had once been called home. But something in her stillness, in the way she did not seek or ask, made me wonder if home had ever been anything more than a word, a concept just out of reach. And yet, she did not offer me answers. She did not try to shape herself into something easier to understand. She simply held my gaze, steady and unreadable, waiting for me to decide what to do with the silence she had given me.

I did not choose her. Not in the way one picks a dog from a row of eager faces, drawn to wagging tails and hopeful eyes. There was no moment of certainty, no instant pull of affection that made the decision feel inevitable. Instead, there was a quiet recognition, something that settled between us in the hush of the shelter, in the way she neither asked nor refused. Siana chose me – not with the bright enthusiasm of a dog seeking affection, but with the careful, deliberate stillness of one who understood the weight of trust. She did not beg to be taken. She did not try to shape herself into something desirable. She only watched, waiting to see if I could meet her in that space of knowing, if I could accept her without expectation, without demand.

And so, each time I return to the shelter, it is not just duty that brings me back but something more, something tethered to the quiet understanding between us. I do not own her, and perhaps no one ever truly will – not in the way people expect from dogs, not in the way that makes them fit neatly into homes and routines. But she is,

in some way, mine. Not through possession, but through recognition, through the steady exchange of glances, through the silence that holds more meaning than words ever could.

Sun and Stone

Marie Briguglio

It's a scorcher of a Saturday. I'm walking in a vast open courtyard, surrounded by the yellow ochre of Fort St. Elmo's walls, themselves domed over by postcard-quality cyan sky. VisitMalta describes St. Elmo as a 'majestic fort,' attracting a motley chattering of tourists who spill in from the gates. They take photos, documenting it over and over again for posterity. I contemplate joining them to play 'tourist-at-home,' but, majesty notwithstanding, my priority, as a local, is to get out of the sun. I spot a triangle of shade complete with a chipped cube of limestone, left over from construction work. I sit, making a mental note, as one does wherever one sits in Malta, to dust myself down when I leave.

It's quiet here. My gaze drifts up to the bastion walls built by the knights of St John, and I admire the large, thick stone blocks, their yellow surface smoothed over by the elements. I imagine the military engineers and the stonemasons at work. I think words like 'heritage,' 'legacy' and 'gem' until the sun hurts my eyes and I am forced to look back down. Between the recently-built pavements made of yellow limestone slabs, the ground is covered with gravel – jagged chunks of limestone, the size of little scones, most of which are baking hot in the sun, but some moist and mossy in the shady corner near me. This gravel is new, I think to myself. What a clever use of construction waste, I muse. It creates contrast for the paved spaces and it is cheaper than paving. I wonder whether some contractor promised limestone paving everywhere and got away with this. It would have been a quick-buck too, abandoning left-overs on site and getting paid for it. Smart! I shrug it off as another modern-day instance of some individual skimming from the public purse.

My pupils adjust to the shade, and I see detail. Scattered among the gravel are plastic bottle tops, pieces of wood, metal, a cigarette butt, even a scrap of toilet paper stuck to a stone. The staff from the public cleaning department must have swept this area at some point, I think, but they probably did not bother with these small bits. And now litter will attract more litter as visitors will interpret it as a norm. I realise that there's a faint smell of urine where I'm sitting, and I wonder why this does not

surprise me. Shady corners in public spaces in Malta generally smell this way. Public toilets are scarce and dingy. Men (can and) will urinate in public spaces, and limestone is porous. Finding a place to sit on a rocky beach in Malta is as much about finding a smooth surface as it is about avoiding offensive smells – or simply living with them. Another case of some individuals taking liberties, while the rest of us suck it up.

I force myself to think loftier thoughts. I wonder how long these mighty bastions will last. They will outlive me, and many other generations after me, I think. How many generations? Another 500 years' worth? More? They'll be here when climate change is rife and the sun is unbearable, I imagine. They'll be here when AI is integrated into human bodies whose lifespan will be over 100 years. I wonder what future tourists will make of the fort – its history is documented everywhere in cyberspace, but what will they make of the gravel and the plastic bits? Maybe they'll think it was decorative, or some piece of art that had broken off. Maybe they will reconstruct it and come up with some hallucination of a beautiful monument that never was, made of stone, plastic and traces of urine.

I turn my back to the sun and pull out my phone, shading the screen with my body. I hit the AI icon and prompt it with the question. 'This monument,' it replies confidently, 'is a fusion of heritage, sustainability, and science, showing that even unlikely materials (stone, plastic, ammonia) can come together to tell a story of survival – just as Fort St. Elmo has.' 'Do you want a visual representation of it?' it asks me. I do not.

I dust myself down, leaving behind the imagined future and the past, and step back into the grounding heat of the ever-present sun.

'Tan-Nanna Helu Manna'

Marcon De Giorgio

In the dry soil where a garden used to lie, two lone flowers bloom. Brown and dead remnants of what used to be a clutter of blooming flowers surround them. Despite the desert-like nature of the soil, these flowers take root.

There was a time when it was just us. There were no mischievous little sisters or an unruly little brother. It was just us. We were so close in age – a year and seven months was like nothing to us – that we looked like twins. Our mother often dressed us the same, although she'd pick different colours, and she styled our hair the same. We were inseparable, and in some ways we still are.

I have a photo from back then. It rests on a shelf in our room, right beside the random knick-knacks we've collected over the years. It's a photo of my sister and me. We're holding hands, our tiny round faces facing the camera. We're both smiling, although for some reason my brows are furrowed in confusion. My pigtails are lopsided, and my bangs are a choppy mess. I still remember the shirt I was wearing. I can see it in the photo, but I also *remember* having it. I remember my sister wearing it, and then my other little sister, and lastly my brother. It had sprouted holes by the time it made its rounds, but it was a well-loved shirt. Blue and with pink sleeves, it was covered with flowers in an obnoxious hue of yellow. My shorts, of course, matched.

In the photograph, we're standing on my grandmother's patio, right in front of her small garden. It was really small, perhaps the size of one adult-sized step. She grew flowers there: *Sardinel*. I remember how pretty they were. They were mostly white in colour, and the flowers grew out into a dome. I used to love to press my finger against the silky smooth petals or feel one of them between my own fingers. The stem and leaves were covered in a faint fuzz, which prickled to the touch. Sometimes my grandmother would stumble upon a pink variant. I used to especially love those, and she'd let me pick them and take them home. We used to put them in front of the Madonna in a small vase filled with water. It used to be a fun little tradition. We'd

either pick the flowers ourselves or our grandmother would bring them with her when she visited. We'd then replace the old withered flowers with the new ones. The fresh flowers were always much prettier, but the wilted bunch used to make me sad. I remember noting how dried and shrivelled they'd become. It used to confuse me. We gave the flowers water, so why did they die every time? Isn't water all that flowers need, I would ask myself?

The picture frame was once a nice silver. It used to reflect a garbled rendition of my face when I looked upon it. Like most frames, it had a thin piece of glass protecting the picture. That is now gone and the frame is covered in speckles of rust, like uneven polka dots. It hangs onto the old yellowed glue that once stuck the metal frame to a velvety window mat. In some areas, the yellowed glue is so dirty it's black. The backing board is covered in years of dust, giving it a pale grey colour. I'm surprised this photo even survived. It has a few blemishes here and there, but it's otherwise unscathed.

When I visit my grandmother I am often slapped with the realisation that the once-luscious garden from the photo is now dead. The soil has dried over time. There is a small green fence that separates the white tile from the soil. It's a shame, really, to see what this small garden has become. I never began to question the lack of life until it was truly gone. That small tradition had slowly phased out. The flowers no longer came, and yet it took me a few years to realise that everything had just *stopped*.

With the photo fresh in my memory, I went to visit my grandmother as granddaughters often do. As I stepped onto her patio I found myself pausing to look at the dead garden. I approached it and stared at the dry soil. Behind me there was a statue of a woman. She sat at the centre of the patio, decorating the area in front of the house's front door. It's the first thing you see when you approach – a landmark of sorts. I see her and I know I've arrived at my grandparents' house. She was cradling a basket of flowers in one arm and holding another by the handle in her other hand. Her clothes draped loosely around her body. She reminded me of those classical statues: pristine, white, and perfect. She looked away from the garden, her head tilted to the side. She has never seen the garden, as she's constantly looking away. I

wonder if she knows what has been lost. I wonder if my sister feels its lack of presence as strongly as I do.

What will happen if my grandparents ever die?

The very thought brings my heart to a stop. Will there be a time when I pass by this house and it will no longer be accessible to me? As it stands I can freely walk inside.

I rang the doorbell and I was met with a joyful tune, which for some reason is the American national anthem. I never asked my grandmother why she chose such a strange doorbell.

My grandmother greeted me with a warm smile. I instantly felt at home. The warm ambience of the house's embrace always pulls me in. I was surrounded by the depths of my grandmother's creativity. The walls are lined with her embroidery. They are framed and preserved, and I enjoy seeing the detail she put into them.

Where will they go once this house is no longer theirs?

She asked me if I wanted anything. I nodded and asked for toast and tea, like I always do. My grandfather sat in the living room. He welcomed me with a chuckle and I joined him on the sofa. He was watching a movie but he paused it to give me his full attention.

What will this living room look like once it's no longer theirs?

My grandmother returned with my toast and tea. I took a bite and I heard the *crunch* of the toasted bread as my teeth broke it apart. My mouth is comforted by the familiar taste. What is with grandmothers and their food? I make toast all the time but it will never taste the same way my grandmother makes it. That's why I always ask for toast. I cling to this taste. I want to experience it as many times as I can before it is gone.

I sat and chatted with them. The conversation went through the same cadences it always does; how are you, how is work, how are your sisters (and brother)? Then my grandmother will come to give me something. She always has something to give. Sometimes it's a simple chocolate bar, other times it's a shirt or a pair of socks. This time she gave me an old notebook. It belonged to my aunt when she was an art student. It might be useful to me, she thinks. I didn't have the heart to tell her it's dated, so I smiled and thanked her for it. She has something to show me, she says, so I put the notebook in my bag and I followed her into the heart of her home.

I always thought the structure of their house was weird – what is considered a normal house? When you enter you're immediately met with a long spindly corridor and the rooms are all situated to your right. The living, dining room and kitchen are all marked by glorious arches that give the room the feeling of being bigger than it is. I followed her down the corridor, its walls covered with her embroidery. They're themed after the zodiac and each sign has something unique about it. My eyes lingered on the centaur with Sagittarius written underneath his hooves. I wonder how long it took her to do them.

We entered the last room of her house. It was an assault of green furniture. There's something endearing about a house full of colours. I'm so used to the boring modern style of homes that I find myself enjoying the overuse of green in this particular room. My grandfather made the furniture there - he made all the furniture. He must have picked the colour green for a reason.

I wonder what will happen to this strange room when they are gone.

I find solace in the fact that even if the green desk is gone, I still have my desk at home. I still have the wardrobe and bed I use every day. They, too, were made by my grandfather.

My grandmother handed me a photo album. I sat on the sofa and it screeched at my weight. *I'm not that heavy*, I think, but I still wince. She sat beside me ever so quietly, the sofa barely making a sound (I'm inclined to think that bias is at work here). She opened the album to show me a photo. It was a small girl. She was

grinning toothily and posing for the camera. I recognised her features instantly. She was much smaller and her hair was a curly mess but there was no mistaking my mother. My grandmother pointed at the photo. 'She looks just like your sister, doesn't she?' I was inclined to agree. I noticed the room my mother was in was foreign to me. I asked my grandmother about it and she told me that was their home back in Canada. I instantly wondered what happened to it. They had most likely sold it and someone else lived there now. I wondered if their current house would meet the same fate.

I can picture it clearly. My future self walks past the house. I approach the front patio and I look into the window. I do not see my grandfather sitting on the sofa, nor do I see my grandmother conversing with me beside him. Instead I see strangers living in my grandparents' house. I see furniture that is not theirs decorating the house. I see bare white walls. It feels wrong.

On other days I stand amid the rubble. A group of men in bright orange vests surround me. They cannot see me, they are too preoccupied with clearing the broken limestone away, but I see them. Amid the stone, a single flower blooms in the once lively plot of soil my grandmother had on her patio. The lone *sardinella*. In my mind, this poor flower has somehow taken root and grown in the dry patch of soil. I then stay silent as I watch one of the orange-clad men trample on it as he walks past. His thick boots crush the small flower, and it disintegrates. Nothing remains.

I cannot help but hate the people who will allow this to happen. I cannot help but hate my own family, who will sign away the fate of this house. As I hate everyone around me for this fictitious future I have conjured up in my own mind, I stubbornly cling to my grandparents' house. *Give it to me*, I think. I will cherish it. I will live in it myself. I will hold on to the legacy my grandparents built. But deep down I know it won't happen.

I play out scenarios in my mind. I will buy it. My sister and I will buy it. We could buy it but... with what money? How would I begin to convince them that selling the place is not the answer?

At the same time, I know how difficult I am being, and how unfair this is. What else would my mother and aunts do with what remains? How else would they split it evenly between them?

My sister and I share this sentiment. We both hate to see what will happen. We often say that we won't give up our own house. Once our parents are gone, we will keep it. Realistically, though, what would we do with it? And my other siblings have just as much right to the house as we do. Would they feel the same? And if we somehow manage to keep them and preserve them, will our children do the same? Will our children's children do the same? Why are we so attached to these buildings full of memories? What makes a home different from a pen that has run out of ink? Questions flood my mind and yet I have no answers. I feel stuck, as if I am the cracked dry soil unable to make any decision, unable to let ideas and solutions take root within me.

I know I fight a losing battle. I know that what my future holds is strangers in my grandparents' home. I should accept the reality that one day I will pass their street and inside there will no longer be those warm, familiar corridors. I will no longer make new memories there. Instead, I will have to hold on to those memories I did make and hope that nothing fades. I remember that photo, of my sister and I on the patio, and the way it's decayed. I chastise myself for not taking care of it.

Despite this, I am stubborn. I learn from past mistakes and I will not let the garden wither. And if it withers, and if those around me allow it to wither, I will do whatever it takes to breathe some life back into that dry cracked soil. If I don't, who will?

I know that, realistically, that house is lost. Try as I might, I will never be able to preserve it the way I want to. That doesn't mean, though, that because I am powerless here I am powerless elsewhere. If I resign myself because one garden has dried up I will never be able to sustain the others. Deep down I know that the loss of what once was is inevitable. Change is inevitable. The places I once visited in my past have already changed. For better or for worse they are gone. We attempt to cling to the past in hopes that the feelings we felt during that time will remain with us, but everything moves forward. The feelings stay and give us something to look back to.

This is about more than two disgruntled sisters fighting to save their grandparents' home from the inevitable destruction that befalls all properties on this island. I find it hilarious, to be honest, that we are stuck in this cat-and-mouse game with *those* people. I mean, what don't they get? Is money *that* much of an appeal that we abandon all morality and bulldoze our way through the very character of this island? It's a shame that as I sit here and write this I feel as powerless about the grander picture as I do for the sanctity of my grandparents' home. At the very least, *something* needs to be done, but I feel that unless we start literally eating the rich who turn our garden into a holiday home for the wealthy *nothing* will be done.

It shouldn't be controversial to say that what we have should be preserved. At the very least, if you're going to bulldoze it all, plant a new garden. Retain the façade and the very character of our homes. When I think of this island I think of limestone, colourful balconies and flowers. What I don't think of is dull, grey modern homes whose only purpose is to get a quick euro and hopefully be easier to resell if it comes down to it.

Honestly, if I am able to see the house from the outside, I am happy, because I can look back even if I feel sad about it. What I don't want is for someone to take that from me. That's why, at the very least, we need to try to sustain the garden and allow memories to take root and grow, and hopefully, stop it from drying up.

Sheeplessness

Katalin Vizi

In the darkness of a small art cinema, a man on the screen recites a poem. He praises his community's herds, conveying a deep conviction: as long as the sheep are kept wholesome, people also have their health and plenty guaranteed. The way the village-hall performance is filmed renders the message grotesquely simple. Yet, that grotesque simplicity only holds valid until its embedded promise is jeopardised, and the loss that possible turn of events implies makes you want to hang onto what you have just smiled at dismissively, as if grasping at wool, soft but slipping, that binds human and ovine lives together.

Ten minutes into the screening, I realise how lucky I am to be alone in my row, spreading my arms on top of the empty seats on both sides. Almost clutching at steadiness, I need that grasping space to calm my pounding heart. I sense the film will very soon take me to a place where neither that naturally gregarious species, sheep, nor their far less sociable Icelandic owners will experience anything the wholesome poem promised, if not, in fact, foreshadowed to abruptly take away.

It's been years since I watched that gruesome dark comedy, *Rams*, but it still keeps popping up in my memory whenever I meet sheep, and sometimes even when I don't. Like now, on what feels like the most sheepless road in Malta this autumn. I find other animals, ownerless and owned dogs and several horses. I've never experienced neighing at such close range. I notice the shivering lower lip, the large teeth, the spit. The horse looks at me: an encounter of brown eyes, a moment of crossing gazes. Being briefly acknowledged by a fellow creature makes the early morning dash out here suddenly worthwhile.

I hear some distant bleating and then insects and birds — perhaps a robin? — nearer to me. And there are people, joggers, walkers, talkers. No tourists yet, as the October dawn has only just broken over the nearby village of Dingli. In fact, I've chosen this day of the full moon to come here and watch the moon set from the cliff edge and then the sun rise. Maybe one day I'll time it better and manage to see both.

What I have in front of me is already pretty magical: the heavily rippled surface of the sea, its blues and those of the early morning sky almost mingling. And then, the strange sight of what at first seems like an even smaller protrusion off tiny Filfla. It reminds me of the mythical island, Farfara, whether real or imagined, but as I walk on and see it move, I come to realise it's a container ship. I follow its course for a while.

Years ago, one afternoon a friend and I came out here by bus. Our silence on board was not enough to remedy the few short sentences that had been said before. The Dingli sun that day was setting over our friendship. For a short while, we were oblivious to that and that was because of the sheep. Back then, there was someone, himself in his old van, seen sometimes herding his animals along this road, to everyone's delight, really. Look! The sheep! We didn't have much more to add. They were so wholesome to look at, and there was also the coarse sound of the bells, the smell, the movement. Photos were taken, one or two might have captured how close those sheep and goats could get, pushing each other around. That quadruped proximity served as a proxy for us, awkward and disheartened bipeds. They provided a temporary suspension of our myopic and, in the long term, inevitable drifting apart with their comforting presence on that country road.

The shepherd's name and nickname were published on the news recently following his passing in September. He was called an 'agrarian icon' and honoured as the representative of a disappearing trade. The indigenous breed of Maltese goat he'd tended to was mentioned in a context suggesting concerns about dwindling livestock. 'Legacy,' I read, and 'heritage,' and experienced a bit of the present turning into the past. The past just stayed where it had been. Such an occasion is bound to unite the personal and the communal, the grief of those who knew the person and those who didn't. The prospect of the disappearance of a rare animal breed strikes us differently: it reminds us of our increasing loneliness aboard the ark.

So, this time it is mourning that's got me to walk the road at Dingli Cliffs. I want to pay respect to the shepherd Mr Ġużeppi Muscat. With the farms on my left and the shimmering sea on my right, I walk on towards the stop to catch a bus back to where we live, sheeplessly, now even more than before.

A Cacophony of Sentiments, Dust and Roots

Fatima Ahmad Asaf

My memories of this place are unclear, fragmented. It's in the distant north of Syria. Although people pretend to be unaffected, the air is thick with dust and an invisible force pulling you down. Down. Down. 'Quiet – 'The walls can hear,' that's what they whisper to each other. An earthy scent lingers in the air, planting seeds of hope for the people. They need it.

The realisation that I have a house here, yet it doesn't feel like home, makes my heart uneasy. Instead of thick, stable roots, mine can be swept away with a breath of wind. I've been stripped of making a home out of my homeland. I wonder if other people feel this way too or if it's just me who feels distant from my country.

According to psychology, an attachment to a place forms when there is an accumulation of meaningful experiences which create- deep emotional bonds to the space and provide psychological stability. Moreover, being autonomous in one's space leads to a sense of ownership, further strengthening the bond. Home is a mirror of a person's identity as it contains features that the person uses to express themselves. This is why I don't feel that I belong to that house, and for me; the neighbourhood is more significant because I see my home as a sacred sanctuary which has to be curated to please me. The same neighbourhood is littered with unblinking, black, fat grenades. Drowning and suffocating in a white sea of rubble.

I remember being a young girl, lured by ambrosial scent of sesame bread and sauntering down the unpaved roads to buy it. I remember feeling the coarse caress of rocks beneath my feet as I see tall, dark-haired men, huddled to acquire the same sweet gold I'm here for. I wonder if they're still alive. On my way back, I waved to my grandparents whom I haven't had the chance to really get to know. I felt the warmth of the sun on my tiny body and for a moment they were all that existed; tiny porcelain dolls wearing animated wrinkles, and loose-fitting fabric. One is wearing white, the other black, they smiled and waved back unanimously, effortlessly, as if on que, as if they had done it a thousand times before. In my eyes, life seemed peaceful and simple but it was far from it, in reality. This one and only neighbourhood whose

name I do not know, is not my home but shapes me. This is the land that bore me and no matter what, my roots are there, thin and fragile but carefully conserved.

If I had been walking now, I would have seen a shattered visage of a thwarted dictator. The statue, stinking. Because no one will live two lives, everything must come to an end. My initial reflections were written just a few weeks before the regime was overthrown by some miracle. In retrospect, I feel quite differently now. I feel that I have a place to go back to because now there is democracy and freedom to protest, disapprove and decide.

On the Little Silver Cross that Dangles from my Neck

Michela Spiteri Staines

The alarm clock shrieked, jolting me awake and obliging me to pull myself out of bed. I stumbled into the bathroom. With the entire day ahead of me, I would have to meet those who I would much rather not. Why should I spend my time around those who could never try to make proper conversation? How annoying – but what was I supposed to do about it? Upon staring into the mirror, I was met with the sight of the chain dangling from my neck. Its slithering circular spine had, over the years, lost its metallic tint, and had even clung to a small, rigid ball of fluff that must have been yanked off of some sweater. How ugly! Two chipped fingernails dug into the fuzz and attempted to rip it apart, but to no avail. In defeat, my finger traced its way south along the chain, before eventually coming across something hard. In the mirror, I was handling the cross that pulled down on the chain. It is a very small thing, no bigger than my nail. Its silver body gleamed in the light overhead. I watched myself in the mirror twirling the cross in my thumb and index finger.

The cross's weight hardly sits on my chest and I often forget that I am wearing it. However, strangers are quick to notice it. As the cross is an inherent symbol of Christianity, wearing it labels me as religious. It's almost as though they expect me to begin quoting the Holy Scriptures. In truth, I only wear the little silver cross on the insistence of my mother, a woman of great faith. She asserts that if I hold it near, the Lord Himself will throw His sacred mantle around me whenever faced by harm or evil, regardless of the circumstances. Being seen without the cross – whatever the excuse – is almost sacrilegious.

But if there really is a primordial being watching over us all, why should He determine my life based on whether I wore a cross or not? A piece of jewellery (for that is what it really is) would not protect me from the circumstances that threaten everyday life. Should the advancements in science not matter anymore? Does every tragedy occur because someone was not wearing a cross? It's absurd, an absurd medieval concept. I cannot help but be baffled by its logic. No debates or arguments could convince her otherwise. I am to wear the cross, or suffer the consequences.

I recall how a good friend of many years once thought to lift the little silver cross from off my top. Without any provocation, she began twirling it in between her fingers, just as I was doing now. What on earth was she doing?

‘I don’t understand why you keep wearing it,’ she scoffed, ‘you do realise that it only makes you a hypocrite, right?’

A hypocrite. According to those around me, I was nothing more than a hypocrite. I always envisioned hypocrites to be those celebrities who hid behind amiability and charity, or politicians who promised paradise, not an agnostic who simply complies with the idea of divine intervention. But apparently, a hypocrite stood in the mirror before me .

Perhaps I was a hypocrite because, regardless of my scepticism, I always took pleasure in wandering into a church and observing the art that it has to offer. All those religious paintings and statues that litter Mediterranean churches, accumulating over hundreds of years, are now an absolute delight to discover. Many of those who have been immersed in Catholic culture from an early age cannot bear to even step foot into a church, but not me. Look, I would think, there’s St Peter with a pair of golden keys dangling off his belt, or St John the Baptist embracing an innocent bleating lamb. How they stare back at me so lifelike, yet stuck in a world of painted strokes. For a small island, it was always such an impressive reminder that we possessed art of great quality.

Amongst all of these works, one can imagine how many crucifixes each church has, hiding in some forgotten corner — somewhere along the nave, behind the altar, in the side chapels, overlooking the sacristy. How many crucifixes does one church even need? But every time, the sculpted figure of Christ would oblige me to stop and examine it. If I am accompanied by family members, they will perhaps take the time to genuflect, or whisper a quick prayer. And what about me? When I look up and gaze upon His face, I feel nothing. Nothing could bring me to sympathise. It is a work of art. Art and nothing more.

Once I stumbled into a particular church – ta' Giezu in Valletta – hiding along a narrow alleyway. I had found it completely by chance; apart from its Greek facade, it was small and ordinary-looking, and hardly appeared to be a place of worship. But the church's interior was no different from the rest; it was adorned with the same intricate gold gilding across its walls and overhead murals as any other Baroque building on the island. Within one of its cramped chapels a crucifix was displayed, which I suspected to be just another one of those depicting a Christ who seemed to be sleeping rather peacefully. The figure grew larger as I approached it; I was determined to simply look at it for a few minutes, before I moved on to the next chapel. Instead, what I saw was a Christ who was dripping in thick blood and sweat; his frail skin, that had been ripped open, swelled under bruises of the deepest purple; his hands and feet seemed as though they had been charred, yet were rotten, as black as a corpse left to decompose in harsh elements. Those bones for arms could hardly support His body. They bent in such an unnatural way that I could not help but worry. What if the figure were to break off of the cross and collapse into my hands? I would just drop it, I could not bear to touch those wounds.

What pure suffering lay before me! Until that very moment, I had been ignorant of the complete destruction of the human body. Yes, no wonder so many threw themselves before a wooden cross; no wonder they dedicated their lives to worshipping a being that they could neither see nor touch. It was almost admirable that a God should let Himself be brutalised in order to save mankind.

The sculptor responsible for such horror is Fra Innocenzo da Petralia, a seventeenth century Franciscan brother who travelled around the Italian states creating gory crucifixes, similar to the one in Valletta. His works caused a stir amongst aristocrats due to how terrifying his depictions of the dead Christ were, such that the case was brought before Cardinal Borghese, member of the infamous Borghese family in Rome. Not even the most faithful could withstand the pain. Such a figure could threaten their mental and spiritual states. Yet, little is actually known about Fra Innocenzo. His personal life has remained a mystery to historians. He is nothing more than a ghost; his spirit lodged in the heart of these crucifixes. They are possessed by the sculptor's own story.

In my mind's eye, I envisioned Fra Innocenzo as the gory Christ; a man with a battered face and pale thin features, very plain in nature. Considering his interpretation of the crucifix, the sculptor surely must have been a cynic who bored everyone with ideas of the impending doom that plagued mankind. But what passion! What complete and utter devotion to something greater than himself! This phantom of a man shouldered the emotions that only poets ever felt. The tragedy that he expressed through his art granted him the privilege of preservation. He now occupies a small corner of history, and often accompanies my thoughts such as now, as I stand before the bathroom mirror.

My little silver cross has never filled me with such revelation, but it has a history of its own, as it has been beside me since the beginning thanks to my paternal grandmother, who bought it for me when I was born. Why she believed that a new-born would prefer a piece of silver rather than some teddy bear is not something I understand. But I have been told that it was intended for me to wear when I reached a more mature age, an age at which I would be able to appreciate its significance.

Now, I'm not sure whether my grandmother had been plagued by ideals of spiritual grandeur or not, but that my father too owns a relic, perhaps my grandmother also wore a cross around her neck, and her father before, and his mother before him. I remember very clearly a portrait of an ancestor of ours hanging on her corridor wall – a priest architect from the early nineteenth-century, according to my father. Neither the plans that he is portrayed beside, nor the eloquent background interest me. What has captured my attention is that from his neck dangles a cross, so proudly.

Perhaps, if I'm careful enough, I could get away with ridding myself of the cross. I've been tempted to lock the chain away in a cupboard. Never to see it again, never to bear the burden – how delightful that would be. The religious significance it holds would simply gather dust and age. But what does it matter? It's just a piece of jewellery. Yet, seeing the cross gleam in the mirror's light, I cannot bear to remove it– I just can't do it.

It has accompanied my every waking moment for years now. I first let it dangle from my neck in the months following my grandmother's death, after I had accepted that I would never see her again. As remarkable as she was, my grandmother was no god. She was not saved from the inevitable. I often forget that she's gone. She's always here, really, it's just that I haven't been to visit in a while.

Only when a younger relative points to her picture, and asks, 'Who is that?' does her absence burn through. At times, the scar is so badly scalded by ignorance that it rips open once more, and she dies in my heart. I could just scream. What do they mean, 'who is that'? She is the reason that the child exists, that the child breathes the air that they do.

Yet, how can I get angry? There are so many loved ones who I have never met, who exist only as ghostly faces in blurred photographs. Many of those who make up the family tree are just names to me. Even if relatives speak of fond memories that they share with those who have passed away, I cannot express any nostalgic sentiment. I cannot feel any, even if I tried to imagine what it would be like to have known my relatives who lived in the distant past. It is impossible to attach myself to someone who has no face I know.

What does a face mean? I see faces every day; they glimpse at me through a murky window; they pass by me along the street; they tend to my needs at the supermarket. Faces are everywhere, but they usually mean nothing. They come and go, leaving a fleeting mark on my consciousness before being forgotten. It is quite funny really, that only a few get to matter, that only a few leave a more permanent impression with details that remain familiar for a long time. The vivid expressions that they make are priceless; whether their features contort in an expression of blinding joy or absolute devastation, my heart anyway fills with warmth with the knowledge that the human face could do such a thing. It makes life worthwhile.

I must face the bitter truth; even those closest to me, after their passing, will become ghostly illusions in my mind. The faces of my family and friends, those I cherish most in this world, will fade from my memory with time. Thank goodness for photographs and the frozen moments trapped on their surface. Just by holding the camera up, and

pushing a finger down on the button, even the most insignificant of moments is made timeless.

It is shocking to think that for the majority of human history, most had only their memory of the deceased to rely on. Surely they could have someone paint the person's likeness for that face to not distort, but most could not afford it. And so when those that held onto the memory of the deceased finally perished, who was left to remember the face that had rotted so long ago? Last summer I had the opportunity to visit St Giles' Cathedral in Edinburgh, where I discovered an exhibition that documented the facial reconstruction of skulls found buried around the cathedral. Faces from over a thousand years ago which once belonged to local men and women, were being projected onto the stone walls. These people who were buried and forgotten for centuries could flourish in the minds of the living. How wonderful that a person's genetic code that is extracted from their remains can provide key visual details such as skin, hair, and eye colour, allowing researchers to reconstruct the face. We live in a time where one could essentially capture a moment from an age that has slipped through our fingers and our consciousness.

That morning I stepped out of the cathedral and slipped into the waves of tourists flooding the street, satisfied with myself and the world. I witnessed an advancement in science that many have only dreamed about. History was resurrected before my very eyes; men and women from so long ago were alive once more!

As time has passed, and I have had the chance to reflect, I cannot help but wonder how accurate it all is. Surely personal interpretation plays a major role in these reconstructions. How would the appropriate nasal shape or lips or eyebrows be decided upon? Surely, because the tissue rots after death, it cannot simply be determined by the shape of the skull? Facial reconstruction is not even considered a valid argument in court, so why should I trust it fully? If I had to time travel back to medieval Scotland, would I recognise the local men and women whose faces had been projected onto the stone walls of St Giles' Cathedral? To my dismay, science cannot, despite its advancements, bring the dead back.

The weight of all those familial branches that sprouted and blossomed in the past simply clings to my neck. So many faces have been lost as the centuries trekked on. The pure essence of the smiles belonging to those who have laughed and loved has been diluted into that which is reflected in my mirror.

Why should my existence, and that of others belonging to my generation, serve as the sole confirmation that those before us have lived? Why should their efforts – even something as simple as twirling a little cross between their thumb and index finger – be lost to time? We must rely on relics like a little silver cross.

Now that the mortal flesh of my ancestors has decayed, they may as well be offered the chance to live a second time by a cross dangling from my neck. Faces do not last forever, but the cross and its significance have. By wearing the cross, I remember those who have trampled the earth before me, those who were determined to live as much as they could, all before death consumed their souls. And if I do wish to lock my chain in a cupboard and rid myself of tradition, I must answer the all-consuming question: ‘What about me? Will I not grow old and perish as those before me have? Will my body not decay and dissolve into nothing as well? Surely so, and I will also just exist as a name on a document or headstone. Future descendants who will be twirling their own little silver cross in the bathroom mirror will also look back towards my name with apathy, regardless of my wishes to be remembered for my own accomplishments. If they were to wear their own cross, I too will get to live again after death.

But in the present moment, I was alive. My heart was beating, and warm blood was flowing through my veins. Yes, one day I will die. But for now, life offered me the chance to stare in the mirror. My neck appeared ever so slightly swollen. I lifted the chain; it concealed a long fleshy cut that tore through the skin. How odd! I had never felt anything previously. Yet upon discovery, the wound had begun to blister— Oh god, how I needed to itch, to just peel the skin right off. I twisted the chain and found that it had a number of sharp edges. God only knows how long it had been fooling me – so much for divine intervention. I was to take it off immediately, at least until I could find another chain to hold the silver cross. Yet, even with the clasp in between my quivering fingers, ready to relieve myself of the weight that had clung to my neck

for years, I could not do it. Who was I to disappoint my deceased grandmother? Who was I to let go of everything that has moulded me into the person who stood before the blessed mirror? I could not, I just could not for the life of me. So what if it meant that I was being scratched every now and again by a little piece of metal? It is such a small sacrifice in the face of permanent oblivion, I refuse to surrender it if it means that she'll live— if they'll all live— once more.

How pathetic. I really am nothing more than a hypocrite.

The Beauty and the Horror

Rob Parry

I remember wandering through those limestone bastions, arches and courtyards with a child's dream in my head, of Knights and Turks, Glory and valour, of chivalry, bravery and righteousness over cowardice and evil. My head filled with wonder and my eyes mesmerised by the grandeur and splendour of those massive walls, colonnaded arches and gun placements, I was captured by those moments, by the stories made resplendent by the uniformed guide. I played out a hundred great sieges on my own toy fort back in England and the romance of victory was enjoyed repeatedly over a beleaguered fleet of toy Turk soldiers – the innocence of child-like war where everyone gets to live and fight again after tea.

My relationship with Fort St Elmo began in 1977 when, as a nine year old boy, I was taken on a tour with my grandparents around the Fort. I encountered for the first time this spectacular example of Renaissance architecture, full of precision and geometry, not that I knew or appreciated it at that time. What I actually saw with my nine year old eyes was the warm, smooth, soft limestone with its impenetrable angles providing a significant level of protection for the brave knights inside. I saw imposing arches that seemed fashioned for sentry duty, wide courtyards and esplanades where the sea view was dominant yet safe from invaders. This imposing star-shaped fortification offered my childish imagination a sense of powerful protection, safety and honour. I could, in my mind's eye, see the Knights in their shining armour attending to their posts, their duties with grace and calm and the regimented order of a well-drilled machine. My sense of pride was immense for this was to all intents and purposes part of our glorious empire, the nuances and detail of the British/ Maltese politics of the day lost to me in the translation of the narrative of this stunning, centuries-old collection of buildings before me. My boyish imagination ran riot with the romance of battle; my naivety would protect me through my imaginary battles for many years still to come. I left filled with wonder, with excitement and a deep yearning to commence my play battles between knights and the Ottoman hordes from the safety of my bedroom and the toy fort my grandad built.

Fast forward some forty seven years, and I view the fortress with very different eyes. I now see the same imposing walls and sloping bastions but not with the fondness of a highly impressed 9 year old boy, but with the tainted and jaundiced eyes of a 56 year old former politics and policy lecturer. I see a series of architectural features that I recognise, and fully appreciate the craftsmanship therein. From artistic architrave to wonderfully decorative finials and key stones. I see perfectly crafted arches that swoop round to protect the gun positions, these colonnaded in military drill style along the top of the sloped bastion walls providing strength, a kind of vicious defence for any Turk considering scaling the slippery walls. I see the powerful insignia of the Order, supplying authority and sitting carefully positioned above the eye of Osiris atop the entrance to the main courtyard, adjacent to a Christian chapel as if Pietro Prato could not rely on a single faith for protection. The internal walls seem to offer sanctuary, safety to those manning their war positions, with a smattering of faith and superstition to provide the necessary courage with which to face the siege raising Turks. I see the fort as a symbol of human ingenuity, designed not only to resist attacks but to do so with an elegance, no, an absolute beauty that seems almost out of place for a military fortification. Its location at the harbour's entrance speaks of an imposing dominance over the seas, a barrier against invaders, a sanctuary for the defenders. A place of grandiose safety guaranteed by myth, religion and authority, a false sense of security sealed the combatants' participation.

However, beneath this veneer of strength and grace lies a dark and miserable space, drenched in the blood of countless knights and soldiers, their lives consumed by the relentless and often meaningless machinery of war. Now, instead of the romance of cannons firing unchallenged in my nine year old mind, I hear the explosions, the cacophony of splintering wood and fracturing limestone as wave after wave of round shot pound the defences, killing, maiming and terrifying the knights and native soldiers. I can now hear the screams of dying and wounded men, limbs removed, or shattered, horrific wounds that will never heal. I hear the shouted orders, the utter panic of terrified men as they rise to the task of defending their positions. The deafening thunder of cannon reverberating through the air as deadly iron and stone balls are fired in retaliation at the stubborn foe. Massive catapults or trebuchets whine and creak as they hurl huge stones and burning tar toward the fort. The strain of their wooden beams groaning like a fairy tale ogre before the thud of released

tension, their projectiles creating a tumultuous din as they find their targets and fracture and splinter like glass, showering troops with a festoon of deadly shrapnel.

Inside, the Knights of St. John and Maltese civilians fought valiantly, knowing full well that survival was improbable, and that death's cold hand was upon them. The screams of the wounded, the stench of death, and the chaos of hand-to-hand combat turned the fort's symmetrical beauty into a hellscape. The elegant design of Fort St. Elmo, which might have inspired awe in times of peace, became a cruel mockery amidst the chaos. Its bastions, meant to shield and protect, became tombstones for the fallen. The futility of war is embodied in this juxtaposition: the fort's purpose was to defend and to endure, yet it became a graveyard, its defences breached and overrun on June 23rd 1565. The knights and soldiers who fought and died at Fort St. Elmo were not merely fighting for land, for authority, faith, myth or victory; they were fighting for survival in the face of overwhelming odds. The beauty of the fort, with its clean lines and imposing presence, did nothing to alleviate the horror of the siege. Instead, it seemed to highlight the tragedy: that something so carefully crafted could be the site of such senseless violence.

The terrible scars of war remain etched deep into its stones, a silent epitaph to the devastating cost of human conflict. Fort St. Elmo stands to this day as a haunting paradox, a monument that embodies both the genius and aesthetic beauty of human creativity and the devastating horror of our capacity for destruction. The guns are now silent, the walls no longer echo and reverberate with the sickening and jarring symbols, both audible and visual, of death and destruction. But the ghosts of the Great Siege still walk in the shadows, their voices, screams and whimpering ringing in my head, their images in my mind's eye, twisted, mangled and mutilated, torture my thoughts.

We as human beings have an incredible capacity for designing, creating the most wonderful objects, whether buildings or machines, yet we also have the ability to use and abuse their beauty for the purpose of the most despicable outpourings of violence. At the heart of Fort St. Elmo's story lies an architectural genius and artistry that captivates, endears and endures, yet its purpose throughout history has been dark, violent and destructive. While its architectural beauty and precision, with perfectly angled bastions and imposing walls, demands admiration, it also stands as a reminder of the violence and death it has witnessed. This duality reflects human

nature itself, in the sense that we are capable of immense creativity and innovation, yet also of destruction. In this, Fort St. Elmo embodies the coexistence of beauty and horror, woven together in history, as in the dark soul of humanity.

On walking through my brain and finding Ghosts: An Essay (sort of)

Mars A.

'Mother help me, there's a head attached to this neck and I'm in it.'
– *Disco Elysium*

I was made to lie still.

The machine groaned above my head like some ancient god yawning awake, its coils spinning in slow circles, trying to decode the static hum behind my eyes. I closed them, tried to stay calm, but my brain was already slipping, greasy with dreams, glitching like a corrupted VHS.

The year was 2022, on a particular October night, a few hours after my seizure. My body was calm, but something inside was stuttering. I was used to oddities – my brain made sure of that. I'd grown up with false awakenings, dreams that bled into daylight, sleep paralysis that pinned me down like a curse. But the seizure felt different. It felt like something had cracked.

As the machine clicked louder, I fell inward. Not metaphorically. Literally.

I stepped into my own brain.

The walls pulsed. The floor breathed. Doors opened into memories that never happened, rooms flickering with fluorescent dreams, some flooded, some burning at the edges. I moved through the corridors barefoot, my footsteps echoing with old thoughts. My hippocampus was a library on fire. My frontal lobe was a broken control panel sparking at the seams. Something was living in the occipital lobe, curled in the corner, whispering in colours I didn't have names for.

This wasn't a brain. It was a house. A haunted one, reeking of cyan.

Field Report: Diagnostic Interlude

Location: Frontal Lobe.

Date: Unknown. Time is irrelevant here.

Subject: Self.

Diagnosis:

The subject's thoughts appear to be fragmented, crisscrossing in an erratic dance unpredictable and looping. There is a distortion of time and space as if the mind itself has lost its map. The frontal lobe, once thought to be a control room, now resembles a disarrayed command center under siege. The switches are stuck, some flickering in broken patterns, while others emit bursts of static. The subject's self-awareness seems to splinter, caught between observer and participant, as if navigating an unfamiliar city built upon thoughts that are both theirs and not. Every decision, every tic, ripples outward like a stone dropped into a pool of glass.

Tourette's syndrome is believed to result from dysfunction in central nervous system regions, including the thalamus, basal ganglia, and frontal cortex. Neuroanatomic models suggest that impairments in the circuits connecting the brain's cortex and subcortex, particularly the cortico-striato-thalamo-cortical (CSTC) pathways, may contribute to the development of tics. Additionally, dopamine dysregulation, such as excess dopamine or supersensitivity of postsynaptic dopamine receptors, is implicated in the pathophysiology of Tourette's syndrome.

Causes and origins of Tourette syndrome have not been fully elucidated. Tourette syndrome (abbreviated as Tourette's or TS) is an inherited neurodevelopmental disorder that begins in childhood or adolescence, characterized by the presence of multiple motor tics and at least one phonic tic, which characteristically wax and wane. Tourette's syndrome occurs along a spectrum of tic disorders, which includes transient tics and chronic tics.^{[1][2]}

The exact cause of Tourette's is unknown, but it is well established that both genetic and environmental factors are involved.^[3] The overwhelming majority of cases of Tourette's are inherited, although the exact mode of inheritance is not yet known,^[4] and no gene has been identified.^[5] Tics are believed to result from dysfunction in the thalamus, basal ganglia, and frontal cortex of the brain,^[3] involving abnormal activity of the brain chemical, or neurotransmitter, dopamine. In addition to dopamine, multiple neurotransmitters, like serotonin, GABA, glutamate, and histamine (H3-receptor), are involved.^[6]

Non-genetic factors – while not causing Tourette's – can influence the severity of the disorder. Some forms of Tourette's may be genetically linked to

obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), while the relationship between Tourette's and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is not yet fully understood.

These were the words Wikipedia was showing me some months prior. One thing was for sure. I was strange.

It's strange, I thought, how something like this can become a part of you, how your brain can create patterns out of chaos, tic by tic, episode by episode. When the world outside is constant, you become the anomaly, the one where the usual rules don't apply, or so I had thought. Of course. Most people are born with functioning brains. But I am alive, am I not. I had read about it all – Tourette's, narcolepsy, seizures – and each description felt like reading a story about someone else. The words were clinical, detached, as if the experiences I was living weren't mine, as if my brain wasn't my brain. The quiet strange hum of a world not quite aligned with the one everyone else is on.

But as I lay there, staring at the ceiling of the machine, I started to realise – maybe this strangeness wasn't a flaw. Maybe it was a way of being.

The machine hummed louder, a low, vibrating growl that seemed to seep through my skull and into my bones. The metallic scent of the MRI chamber clung to the air, cold and sterile – a conduit – an open door to something deeper, something waiting for me inside the labyrinth of my own mind.

The clicking of the machine's gears, rhythmic and mechanical, began to distort, stretching and warping as though the sound were being pulled through the thick, viscous fog of my thoughts. It was no longer a sequence of sterile, scientific noises. The clicks turned into voices – whispers, fragmented phrases. I couldn't make them out, but they were there, crawling through the static like forgotten words from a dream.

The metal surface beneath me, once cold and unforgiving, seemed to pulse with warmth as I slipped further into the depths of my brain. I wasn't lying still anymore. I was sinking. The machine had opened a fissure, and I felt myself falling – deeper

and deeper, swallowed by the structure of my own mind. The world above me, the sterile room, began to fade, like a distant star blinking out in the vastness of space.

The image blinked to life like a map drawn in shadow and static. My brain, sliced in grayscale, hovered before me – layer by layer, a ghost city suspended in time. But it wasn't just an image. It opened.

I stepped through the cross-section like slipping behind a curtain. The tissue became tunnel. The folds, passageways. The white matter hummed like neon veins beneath translucent floors. The corpus callosum stretched overhead, an arched bridge of milky bone-light, linking left and right like two cities that had stopped speaking centuries ago.

Everywhere, the world pulsed – not with life, but with memory. The air was thick with a low mechanical throb, like blood trying to remember its way home. My footsteps echoed down hallways lined with flickering film reels – moments I'd lived and forgotten, looping endlessly on synaptic projectors. Childhood smells leaked from unseen vents. Somewhere, my old handwriting crawled across the walls, endless lines of misspelled words and anxious doodles.

The frontal lobe was a shattered control room, its switches stuck, knobs melted, decisions blinking red. The parietal lobe cracked open into a landscape of numbers and phantom limbs. I walked past a staircase that folded in on itself and a door that led nowhere, then doubled back and led me somewhere else entirely. In the distance, the limbic system rang like a bell underwater – emotion echoing in warped tones.

And the thalamus? It was a transit station. Glowing signs with unreadable alphabets. Voices announcing destinations I'd never been to. Sensations came and went – hot, cold, light, pain – as if boarding invisible trains, leaving trails of color behind.

This wasn't a brain. It was a cathedral. A maze. A museum of every version of me that had ever existed, all whispering at once. And the deeper I went, the less I could tell if I was observing or being observed.

Because somewhere, in a room shaped like a question, the machine was still watching. Still humming. Still recording every step I took through the ruins of myself.

If I could sigh on text, I would. It is 2025. And this whole process has to be repeated again. The thing is, it's always some strange *déjà vu*. I'm not sure if I'm going through this because it's something that needs to be done or because it's some cosmic loop – like a dream I can't wake from. The whole brain-scraping, MRI-scan, 'let's-see-what's-wrong-this-time' dance. The same clicks, the same sounds, the same feeling of being opened and hollowed out. Do they even *know* what they're looking for? Or are they just groping in the dark, hoping to find a switch to flip, a missing piece to plug in?

Narcolepsy. Tics. ADHD. I'm awake now. Or maybe I'm not. It's hard to say.

Narcolepsy makes my world float in and out of focus, like I'm watching myself from a distance, while my body does its own thing. A breath. A blink. An involuntary shut-off, like I've accidentally pressed the sleep button on life. That's when the edges blur and I become *someone else* – someone else in my own skin. Tiredness has a way of swallowing you whole when it never quite lets go.

Tics, on the other hand, are a different kind of unwanted guest. A twitch. A blink. A jerk. Every movement feels *uninvited*, an outburst of energy that doesn't belong. They're not like the rest of me; they're interruptions. Disturbances in the rhythm of being. If I could stop them, I would. But they're like ghosts – tangled in the wiring, haunting every thought, waiting to be let out.

ADHD? Well, that's just another piece of the puzzle. A mind that doesn't know how to sit still, how to focus on one thing without spiraling into a thousand others. Thoughts dart like squirrels in a park, and I'm forever running to catch up.

These conditions, these labels – they give a name to what I am. They tell me, 'Here's what's wrong with you.' But they don't tell me how it feels. And I don't know if I ever want to know. Because if I *truly* knew, if I could map it all out, I might not recognize the person on the other side. The one who exists in the seams of this strange, fragmented world. So I leave them alone, those labels. I let them flicker in the dark, in the corners of my thoughts. I let them be ghosts.

You'd think I'd be used to this. The way my body betrays me. The tics. The buzz of waking up in the middle of my own thoughts, startled, as though I'm a guest in my

own skin. But it's 2025. And this whole thing? The doctors, the tests, the explanations that never quite explain? It's the same as always.

'You have Tourette's, ADHD, and narcolepsy,' they say, as if it's just a list. As if it's *just* words. *Just* labels that tell me something about myself. Only they don't, do they? Because every time I hear it, it doesn't feel like me at all.

The words are clean, clinical, neat. They don't fit the mess in my mind. The tightness in my chest when my brain starts jumping, leaping from one thought to the next like a bouncing ball I can't stop. The way my hands jerk forward, my body betraying me when I'm trying to sit still.

'Tourette's is a neurological disorder characterized by involuntary motor and vocal tics...'

I can't quite finish the thought – does it even matter? No one seems to understand that it's not just an absence of control. It's like being in a room where the walls are constantly shifting, but the floor stays the same. I want to stop, but the walls keep changing, and I can't catch up.

The world looks different when you're standing in your own brain.

It's not like the textbooks. It's not even like the glossy posters on the walls of my neurologist's office, those sterile maps of the brain with its neat little sections and tidy labels. This place is cracked, fractured – broken into rooms I can't find my way out of. My hippocampus is on fire, trying to keep things in place, while my frontal lobe is a half-finished puzzle no one ever cared enough to complete.

Sometimes, I think I hear the *real* sound of it – the hum of the machine, yes, but deeper, beneath that, a whisper.

'Do you hear it?'

I don't know who's asking, but I answer anyway.

'Yes.'

It's something between a question and a statement.

I turn around, but there's no one. Not even the machine.

'You can't focus,' they say.

But I can focus. *I just don't know on what.* My thoughts flicker from one thing to another, slipping through my fingers like water. I try to grab them, try to wrangle them back into line. But they slip away again. And in the middle of it, there's that silence, that space where the world should be, but it's too bright. Too fast. And I'm standing still.

'Narcolepsy is often associated with excessive daytime sleepiness and the sudden onset of sleep...'

I don't need them to explain it to me. I've lived it. Lived it when the world blurs, and I can't tell if I'm dreaming or awake. Lived it when I'm in the middle of a conversation, and my body just... shuts down.

I watched myself drown.

But not in any way that makes sense. Not in the way you're used to, where panic hits first, and the struggle to breathe fights against the weight of water. No, this felt... wrong. I stood on the edge of the pool, motionless, my eyes wide open, pinned to the sight of myself in the water, choking, gasping for air. A version of me, but not quite. Not fully.

The water wasn't even water. It was liquid glass, freezing and sharp. It refracted the light into strange, impossible angles, like I could see every droplet suspended in time, but still, I couldn't move. My body was flailing beneath the surface, limbs jerking in spasms that weren't mine. I reached out – no, I tried to, but it was like my arms were made of stone, locked in place, tethered by invisible ropes. Every breath I tried to take came out wrong, a shallow scrape that echoed in my chest, too loud in the silence.

I could see the panic in my eyes, but it wasn't *me* panicking. It wasn't me in control. I was standing outside of it, detached, watching my own terror unfold. My hands, my legs, they moved as if they were someone else's, pulling me deeper into the glassy

abyss. I screamed – but it was nothing more than a whisper in the back of my mind. My voice was still trapped in my throat. A distant echo of something I couldn't touch. The scream didn't belong to me. None of it did.

I could feel the weight of it. The water pressing against my chest, the slow sink of my body. But there was no physicality to it – not in the way you expect. My skin wasn't cold. I wasn't wet. But I could feel the desperation, the suffocating tightness of it all. It was like I had already drowned, and I was stuck in the memory of the moment, forever rewinding, forever stuck.

It's that awful limbo of lucid dreaming where you know everything – *everything* – but can't do a damn thing about it. I could feel my pulse, my heartbeat drumming inside my ribs, but I was stuck behind glass. The me who was drowning – the *real* me – was slipping away. I was an echo. A reflection. A shadow in my own life. But the worst part? The worst part was that I wasn't even sure if I could *feel* my own fear anymore.

The more I watched, the further I floated away from the scene. It was like I was drifting into space, but my body – my *self* – was sinking further. The more I screamed, the quieter the scream became, until it was just static. I could *see* it all happening – every horrible second of it – but I couldn't reach out, couldn't stop it.

And when my body – the one that wasn't really mine, the one I couldn't control – sank lower into that glassy water, the boundaries between body and mind, between observer and participant, became a blur. The panic, the helplessness – it wasn't just the water pulling me down, it was my own *self* pulling me into this space, a place between waking and sleep, where nothing is real except the isolation.

The *I* that was drowning didn't exist anymore. Not in the way I thought. The body was slipping away, and so was my connection to it. I tried to grasp hold of the real world, of the *me* that was aware of all of this, but I couldn't even feel it. It was slipping, like sand through my fingers. I wasn't awake. I wasn't asleep. I was somewhere between. A place where my own mind became a foreign country.

The worst part wasn't the drowning. It wasn't even the terror. It was the silence that wrapped around me when I realized – *I* wasn't in charge. Not of anything. Not of my body. Not of my thoughts. Not of the scream that couldn't escape. I wasn't in charge, and I didn't even know who I was anymore.

'Final 2 minutes,' the voice in my headphones interrupted my music.

They were a distortion.

A voice. A reminder that the tape is always rolling, chewing, spitting magnetic dust into the air. The words crumble into word-sand, grit between the teeth of the brain. The grass hums. The sun burns cyan through closed eyelids. Not a real color. A compromise between wavelengths. A hallucination the eye has agreed to believe.

Maybe that's what living is. A compromise. A hallucination the body insists on performing, second after second.

The zaps come again – tiny electric stabs at the base of the skull. Static fizzles in the ear. Time keeps moving, dragging its rusted chains. But here, in this absurd cyan light, I don't need to bargain with it. The ghosts, the tics, the seizures – they are part of the parliament. They vote inside me whether I like it or not.

You are outnumbered. You always were.

And yet, there is grass beneath my hands. There is sky above, pale and endless, the color of a cheap VHS cover left too long in the sun. There is breath still moving in and out of my lungs. The parliament can scream, the tape can stutter, but the fact remains: the air still wants to be breathed.

The final two minutes? Not an ending. Not a beginning Just Cyan between frames.

And the tape keeps rolling.¹

breaking, always rebuilding. Because, like me, they are never quite done. And that's beautiful. Again and again and again.

¹ Alternatively, I will fall in love with my neurons, again and again and again. I'll fall in love with the sparks that jump across synapses, the tiny electric whispers that form thoughts, that build ideas, that make me me, even when I don't feel like it. I'll fall in love with the mess of it, the way my brain stumbles and reconfigures itself, like it's constantly trying to figure out how to be whole again, even when it feels broken. It's like the neurons are always trying to piece together a puzzle they'll never finish - and maybe that's okay. I'll fall in love with the way my brain rewires itself after every tic, every flare-up, every moment of chaos. The way it finds new paths to walk, even when the old ones are blocked, even when the world feels a little too loud. How it refuses to give up, how it keeps on firing, even when it feels like it's too tired to do anything at all. And sometimes, even though my body jerks and twitches, my mind is still a place where I can find things. Where the quiet hum of my neurons tells stories no one else can hear – stories of survival, of adaptation, of resilience. So I will love the way my brain loves itself, even when I can't fully grasp it. I will fall in love with the persistence of it. The strangeness of it. The way it keeps dancing in the dark, even when I'm not sure I know the rhythm. Maybe I'll fall in love with my neurons because they remind me that even in the chaos, there's something holding it all together, even if it's just a spark, a flicker, a glimmer. Even if it's a fleeting, imperfect thing, it's mine, and it's worth celebrating. I'll fall in love with the neurons that are always trying, always reaching, always learning, always