

Where Things Touch

A MEDITATION ON BEAUTY



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Bahar Orang

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For M

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Perhaps my project began when Solmaz Sharif wrote

My life can pass like this

Waiting for beauty

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Perhaps my writing, here, is the articulation of a series of ruptures—all the times I appeared to be waiting but was actually searching. My search has changed, though, because I hardly know anymore whether I can even articulate that aporia that is beauty, or if it even wishes to be expressed at all.

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And then there is your beauty, a beauty that appears to me rather like the sun, rather like the moon.

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And by this I mean that every lock of curly black hair extends from its root, reaching beyond itself, light and messy and stubborn. And we might say you have an olive complexion, a chromatic kind of fairness that glows into the night.

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And there is, somehow, the presence of beauty between us. A beauty that offers more than its playful glimmer; a beauty that opens its arms to us, considers stillness as its impermanent home. We could not rush to capture that beauty, such an impulse would be its opposite.

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But here I am idealizing beauty, purifying beauty, as though it's not wrapped up in the mess of desire and regret in which we live, as though beauty does not already reside in a home of fragmented language and memory.

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Because your ex, the person you dated before me, won't stop calling you. You say you once found them beautiful. You say this with your arm leaning against the windowsill, next to a potted purple hyacinth, a *sombol*, not quite in bloom, that lives free from doubt or withholding, that knows just what it needs, the sun.

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But before I go any further, I have this to offer, a touchstone:

There's a strangeness, for sure, but a sense of recognition, too—the moving image is like something that's escaped from the fissures of my own heart. I guess perhaps a wistfulness, but only the wistfulness of everyday life, the poet's feeling that all of us feel all the time. And a sunset, very slight, casting a yellowish glow over the street, small circles of light reflecting from the car's windows; we watch from a car driving behind two men on a motorbike, riding down the streets of Tehran, one man trying to steady a bouquet of crooked pink flowers and their too-long green stems.

The flowers might be dahlias, *kokab*. It's the final scene of Kiarostami's film *Close-Up*, and we've arrived, I'm sure, at one definition of beauty — a sort of lighthouse, somewhere to start.

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I'm sitting in a psychiatry clinic, on my first rotation as a medical student. I wanted to start with psychiatry because the sight of blood still makes me uneasy. It's too much redness at once, a colour too arresting, too unambiguous, without intimation or forethought. I can't find the words, there are no words, really, for a red that symbolizes nothing, that is only the thing itself. Red for red's sake.

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Instead of words for red, I have images. In particular, the moving image of the artist Ana Mendieta: her hands and arms coated with blood, pressing herself, her arched body, against white sheets of paper, and

then dragging the red, a slow descent, down the wall to the ground.

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This piece, *Body Tracks*, is not an abbreviation of the body, not a memory, not an imprint, neither imitation nor abstraction, but a new fragment of self, in which the palpable body—its bone, skin, and sinew—cannot be repressed or destroyed. Blood, or body tracks, seems to efface the limits of the body, and even in witness, or in spectatorship, we become linked to that body, in all its utter and abject materiality.

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Every colour is a kind of beauty, and Mendieta's red might insist on life, after all, on an embodied life, where only things felt can be known, can be beauty.

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Another red thing: poppies, *khash khash*. Poppies are not meant to be potted, they can never be kept by florists, they are wildflowers that resist any other kind of life. What happens to beauty when it's removed from its own dirt? If you pick a poppy, it withers within the hour. How simple a practice, then, to let flower, let flower, smelling its own earth.

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The poet Sohrab Sepehri: *As long as the poppies bloom, life must be lived*. I'll come to think of this line many times through the long and strange months of my training, imagining a poppy field at night, with quiet as the language and abundance the only course.

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There's a tall doctor sitting before me, removing an invisible fleck of dust from his suit. We're discussing a pregnant young patient whom we just met. He insists: this woman has borderline personality disorder. Borderline patients, he says, are afflicted with "chronic

feelings of emptiness,” with “unstable relationships,”
with “a shifting sense of self.”

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It's strange to sift through his language—sometimes they are borderline people, other times they have a borderline diagnosis, and still other times they have borderline traits. Which is it? Are they their personality or do they contain a personality? What is the structure of personality? This seems essential to know, because how else can we trace the borders that are dashed or wrecked, or know what's swelling at some seam? And how to test the hypothesis that personality, or person, should be an integer, fixed and immovable?

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I take notes as he speaks, but remain expressionless, resisting his gestures that beckon me to mimic, or share in, or forgive him for his exasperation, his amusement, his dismissiveness of our patient.

He will later write in my evaluation: *you appear very serious and stoic, and this will be misconstrued by patients.*

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At this clinic, the psychiatrists can be hesitant to take on so-called borderline patients. Of course, most of the borderline diagnoses are women, and the hesitant doctors are men. I try to suggest this obvious pattern to my supervising physician, and a knowing look crosses his face, like suddenly he has me figured out.

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But really, I'm thinking only of your ex-lover, another so-called borderline person, whose pain has become so present in our lives that I, too, am taken up by it, caring, by accident, for them, in spite of myself.

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Psychiatrists might name such a response to a patient as countertransference, an experience to acknowledge and keep in check. I admit, it's messy: a patient, someone I might one day treat, reminds me of my lover's ex-lover. But here, in my uncertainty and discomfort, where categories reveal their fallibility, I might enter the third space: neither hospital nor home, neither clinic nor street, but an unnamed, unclaimed place of possibility, where I might imagine new shapes for intimacy, new words for care.

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Beauty must be in conversation with care—there can be no alternative for me! So when I say beauty, I mean the slow approach of alive things, meeting each other in all their complexity and longing.

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The doctor talks drugs, but it's raining now and getting dark outside. The sound of the rain, a rhythm without a cause, permits me to think of other things. What are the

borders of care? Can we speak of borders even as we speak of entanglement? The doctor turns on the light, and I think of how it feels to write in the dark, how the words on the page become indiscernible, shapeless, the notebook itself barely different than my lap, meaning is here somewhere, unreadable, probably untenable.

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I write letters to you in the dark, hoping my latent desires, which I describe so unsuccessfully in the light, can look like beauty in the dark, not for the purpose of intelligibility, just to be apprehended as singular and strange.

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Can we imagine language as a sort of border of care? In which case my efforts here to describe beauty are acts of love. Though it's a project with its own perils, sometimes language is only omission.

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