

Stephanos Stephanides

I Land Home in the Waft of Sibyls with their Ruthful Smiles

To Kathy and Katerina for always bringing me home

Home like love is prone to disease, thinking of home can engender a pathological desire for somewhere when we know this is impossible. Medical wisdom in the eighteenth century designated the sickness for this impossibility of homecoming as the disease of nostalgia. Do we know that we will never return? If we do not go back, it is also true that we do not go forward either, or at least not straight forward. Medical science seems to have given up diagnosing it as a sickness but might yet suggest pills or other ways of alleviating the pain of a sense of loss. It is the task of writing to bring home what is lost or what we feel is lost to where we feel might be home. We are forever recreating Ithakes in multiple permutations, not simply in places of origin and end, but in the journey to somewhere we imagine we came from or might be destined to. To get there, we make infinite transgressions and digressions, not always fortuitously or freely in our imagination, but pressured and constrained by the dominant powers that impose their boundaries on the places where they want us to belong. Homesickness is still with us, with some new symptoms and conditions, looking for new words and stories. In recent years, there has been a surge in the poetics of migrancy, which has become a new literary cause célèbre. In the 80s Salman Rushdie excited me with his evocations of imaginary homelands. I found a voice for translated men like myself. Moving back and forth between languages and cultures of departure and languages and cultures of arrival, we are not just lost in translation, we may well find and bring something new in the process. Dorothy was relieved to get back to Kansas in black and white, Rushdie tells us, but in fact the magic and color of Oz beckons her to return to Oz, because the real meaning of this movie as a homily of home, Rushdie argues, is not that ‘there is no place like home’ but that in fact home is in no place. But this cannot tell the whole story. Home is in place and out of place, and as we move in and out there is erosion, attrition, and entropy at war within and without, in the crosscurrents, and in the metamorphoses. You do not even have to leave your house to feel this melancholy. Pamuk still inhabits the house in which he was born in Istanbul, but in his memoir of the city he shares in the communal melancholy of its transformations, of its debris and decay. Home moves even if the house remains in the same place. A plantation laboring guru descendant of Indian migrant indentured laborers in Guyana shared with me the wisdom of the elephant-god Ganesh sensing that I felt faraway from home. Home is in OM, which consists of –A-U –M- waking consciousness, dream consciousness, dreamless sleep, and the silence before and after.

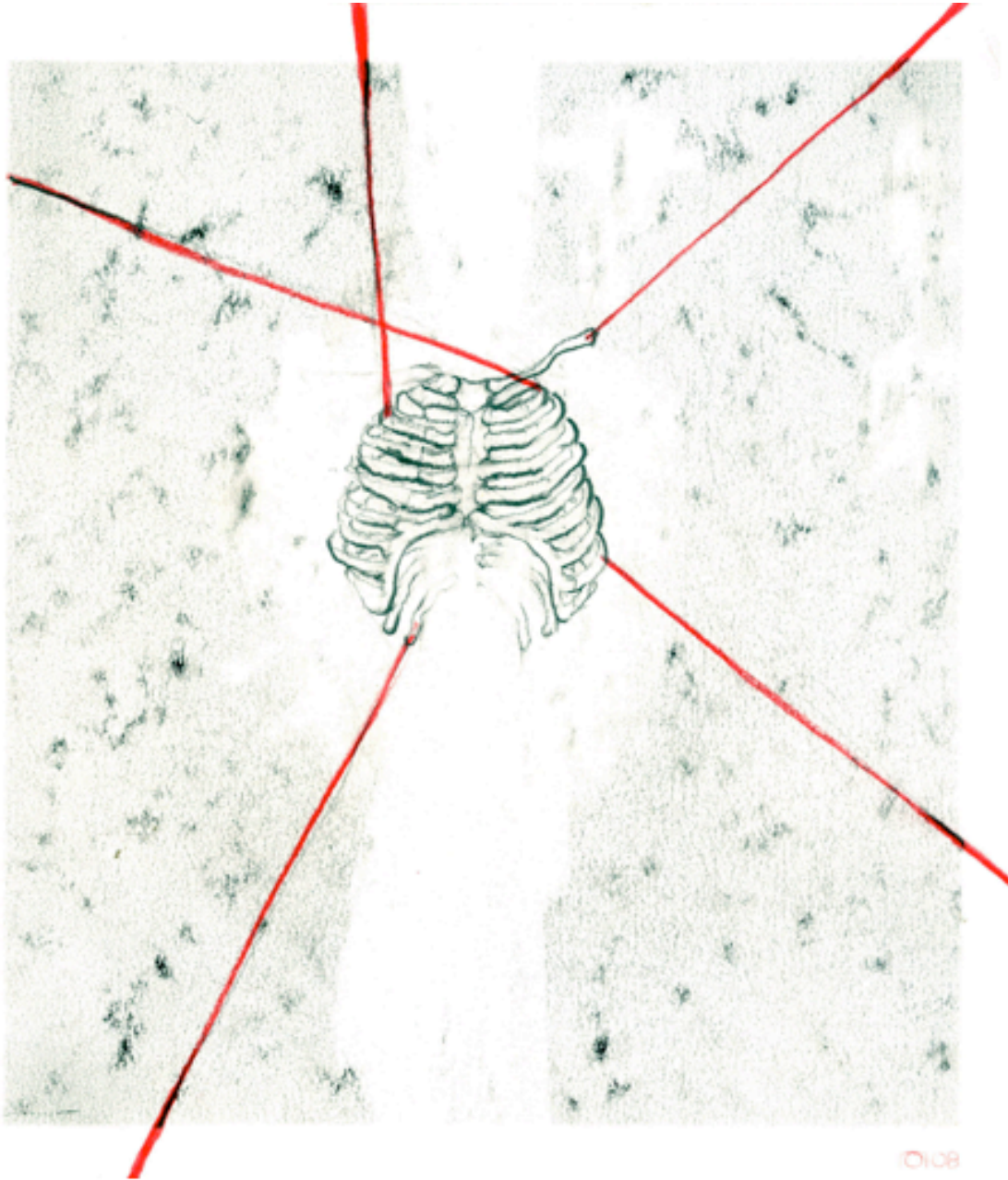
As poets of home, we may never return but we continually make turns, old turns and new turns in a chorus of strophes and epistrophes, from right to left through a multilayered melancholy with a bittersweet promise of an originary vision, not an ineffable origin, but a way of being in the world that we hope might not be forever lost. It tempts us yet with its possibility and elusive transience, our need to make it yield its fugacity and translate it into

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the sensuality of place where we realize our being and becoming in the world in the unforgetting words, images.

We create boundaries from its boundless meaning, bind it in and bind it out, make space a place, a room of one's own. And then if you bind it in too tightly it becomes inhospitable, inert and stultifying, or violently exclusionist for the privilege of one group whether it be ethnic or some other kind, and its original sensual mystery of home slips away and you feel out of place or a prisoner in your own place, if you have not already been violently displaced from that prison. Boundaries become alive where something begins, not where something stops, when a horizon of expectation opens, a dynamic unfolding, the gift of hospitality we



drawing by Elizabeth Hoak Doering

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give or receive by letting go. Or sometimes lose and find home in forced or involuntary movement, flight or eruption or a sudden dislocation. Then it is always more memorable for its aftershock, its post-memory. It leaves us wondering where we are or how we got there -- like our first dislocation pushing forward hopefully head first between two legs grateful for the midwifery ushering us forward when dispersion hits home in a sudden outburst, a big breath of air, a cry of light in the darkness with a lingering memory of rhythm and water and taste like almond milk, smell of blood and excretions. Do we remember that journey or how we made it out? In a distant echo of rhythm, water, light, and air? How did we get there in the first place before we had to force our way out? Is there a 'first place' anyway or is home just a transition - from nowhere to somewhere now here -- from the gestation from an unknown space into the vast and unruly plethora of differences that we weave into ourselves through layered dislocations?

Sudden eruptions and sedimentations, traumas and revelations, losses and expectations, anxieties and promises --- to which we bear witness in an infinite rehearsal of our memory, our forgetting -- an infinite rehearsal of home that is an imagined and unimaginable beginning before and after anything we can ever remember. We rehearse the possibility of home through its stories -- rehearse it both creatively and involuntarily, stories retold, withdrawn, withheld, revised like a palace of memory always in a process of construction with ghostly gestures of something might have come before and after the chain of our remembrance.

In this my island habitat the effort to shape a shared dwelling, a common habitation has to emerge from the ruptures of multiple dislocations and fragmentations of the continuum of place, its contested stories and the inability of the collective consciousness to absorb it all. This process of reconstruction is an eternal negotiation. The island is an implosion and breach of the surrounding continents like a fractured vessel on the permeability of the surrounding seas, which are always in contradiction with its dry dusty plains and its internal borders imposed by the powers that be resolutely dividing northern shore and southern shore. The island itself is like a womb distended by geology and history -- an asymmetrical mandala with five uneven promontories jutting out differently into the sea, different densities and intensities of life as if seeking an exit from insular containment, the image of the world in its imperfect reflexive circularity and liminality, to be seized in poetic turns that mark the eruptive discontinuities in the interplay of continents and seas. How to write the revelation that will take us from and between the experience of space to its transformation into place and home? I think about how I too have been transformed from one island to two then three, and then a multitude of scattered islands, an entire archipelago, how I have been metaphored and dispersed.

I was lifted from the island as a child in what felt like a precipitated second birth -- this time ushered with my father's midwifery as if pulled out by forceps from a malignant womb. A child in my new habitat, I became a denial of the past, a promise of the future, a perhaps unacknowledged incarnation of Mediterranean homesick blues, a rift in the soul joined by a hyphen, two islands separated by a continent (until I found an exit to a third). I now learnt the word home in another language, on another island -- home was always somewhere else in a dialect fading in my memory, another language whose traces were still with me that did not have a word for home, there were only houses, villages, genealogies, secrets still untold. Before I knew it I was subjected to a semiotic invasion, overrun with the new language with its own ideas of home, its idioms, and refrains, hit home, home sweet home, home grown,

home spun, home run, home base, home on the range, home on the prairie, home alone. The new language occupied me before I even knew it like a new set of clothes hanging comfortably on me that I was glad to flaunt but not quite fitting to my strangeness. It was some time before I realized that I could have or perhaps already had occupied it with my own strange habitat and made the language uncomfortable with itself, with its own sense of familiarity, and turned its seasons of mist and mellow fruitfulness into my months of dust and dirty sweetness. English became my home but I found strangeness before and after English, an otherness within its homeliness that I desired would somehow break through in a syncopated rhythm. To find home I had to seek its stories and its melodies. A few years later, during my early adolescence (was it 1965?) Bob Dylan Brought It All Back Home to me, a poet prophet of exit from home and a way home with no direction, on a road not taken, a way of turning my Mediterranean Homesick Blues into Subterranean Homesick Blues: ‘You don’t need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows, he sang.’ But there was other ways out and other ways in. I had to exit English and make a new entry from the other side. About the same time I heard Dylan, I chanced upon and was entranced by Tom Jobim’s ‘Chega de Saudade.’ Another way home, and another way out all the more sweet through the melody of another language I was yet to understand: Enough of blues, the title and rhythm proclaim, as nostalgia lingers in the melody and pulls you back: *não sai, não sai, não sai*: an emptiness that is brimming and about to overflow. Rhythm and melody work together and against each other stitching across the hyphen in the errantry of home. Without remembrance of the story, we would forget the way home.

Decades later I recognized this *saudade* in Orhan Pamuk’s vision and feeling of *hüzün*, which is not quite an illness, he says, but a poetic state of grace. For the Sufis, it is the spiritual anguish that causes the sufferer to plummet so far down that his soul will soar to its divine desire. The possibility of the impossible, a kind of Supraterranean Homesick Blues in the genealogy of angels of Paul Klee, Walter Benjamin, Wim Wenders – out-of-this-world creatures with panoptic views longing to salvage the centre of their beings in the ruinous human world as they hover around sensed and unseen .

Will I be touched by them at some time? Might they briefly lend me their wings? In the days following April 23, 2003 when history fortuitously opened the internal border gates of this island, many went rushing though not knowing what providence had in mind and if and when the gates might close. I hovered to the settlement that cradled my childhood. If this had been Ithake, it was gestating its demise without my knowing by the time I had already departed. It would and could not wait for the impossibility of my return. As I landed, the new settlers followed my drift. They found keys and opened doors. I floated up the stairs to a balcony hanging over rooftops and canopies of acacias and eucalyptus trees, drawn by the waft of the old village sibyls and their fading ruthless smiles. They wait for me to hear the fleeting sounds of their interrupted prophecies and stories. Only then will they say: ‘Now homeward, you have had your fill, eve’s star is rising.’

Requiem for Trikomo

For daemons and creatures roaming Mesaoria especially between Trikomo and Salamis:
those named and those unnamed but who are watching

Do I come to sing your requiem?
At the checkpoint
I do not see the five flags flutter
History has never been
Only creatures hovering
With the instinct of seven humming birds
Drawing me near
Light as an apparition

Forgive me if once you felt eternal
There were three towns here where three roads meet
And church between cinema and coffee shop
Hailing departures and arrivals
On old camel caravans to Karpas slow as buses
Above the Han Chrysanthi the old teacher
Reads my journey in the coffee cup

In my smallness I catch sight
Of fractured Aphrodites and redolent Madonnas,
And on screens wavering with night breeze
I filched glances of the sacred in ruinous passion
Melina's husky melody in black and white
Sophia wet and surging from the blue
Rescuing my totem the dolphin
And the boy ready to ride away
I stretched in all directions
Rolled off into the plains
Up to the mountain and the skies
Then the seas
Stole me away
Without warning nor farewells
Only stories
To carry with me
Eleni retelling
How she lured Stephanos of Alezandria
With her swing song
Bore him ten children
Milled the wheat on the day he died
Dissolved time in her longing

In his silence I traveled with the name

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Laid my body out in the immensity of the earth
Exposing it to oracles
Looking for a special divination
Voices saying don't forget
Let memory decompose
Spread like a virus
In the intent look of strangers
Filling crevices moistening protrusions
Rehearsing to absorb and expel the world
Experience its infinite flesh without words
Degenerate in the scattering
Seek ablution with the multitudes
In rivers lit with smell of camphor
Undress the deity
Smelling her secretions
And smothering her with multihued hibiscus
Probe the meaning of her residue
In the moaning of your excess

Today Kathy shoots photos for the post-mortem
To seize the lost house in my voice
Does it still breathe?
The last rite slipped through a hole and
I stand defrocked
Inert in my forgetting
Feeling the fingers breeze
Touching me with diesel and jasmine
And heat of stones
Sending me running
To the random sensuality of seas
Tanju and Jenan
In twin priesthood of intoxicated purity
Pass round the shell
And gesture its extravagant geometry and dream
Life exploding from the stones
While a friend looks on from faraway
Eyes green of lemon yellowing with the wheat
And Mesaoria wild flowers
Sprouting like hair from the belly to the neck
Desire of my body mourning
Stretching in all directions

CODA

No sooner do I write these words and images that they become a specter for rehearsal and reenactment as I project my imagination for the journey to Paros in the Cycladic islands where I will encounter other predications of home in the geopoetics of an archipelago. .Before setting off on that journey, Kelly, Chris and David, Natasha and Natasa, Deb and Jennifer alighted on this island solitary among three continents for a before song, a proem for flying and sailing off to a sea of islands. I heard poems of multiple Americas, old and new Americas, Creole and émigré Americas, while I re-turned with my homologue of home in the disjointed and fragmented symbolic order of my terrain, in the voices of its poets and storytellers, its checkpoint crossings and dead zones, in its frescoes, icons and ruins, palaces, courtyards, minarets, dust, hamam and wild Cyprian cyclamen, and the ficus sycamorus tree: the oldest living thing in Cyprus in front of the Lusignan cathedral of St. Nicholas. A final e(u)logy: the hauntology of Varosha overlooking the hopefully eternal and ancient sea still fresh and eager.

Twice Born

When I die, lay out the corpse
 You may want to kiss my lips,
 just beginning to decay. Don't be frightened
 if I open my eyes – Jelaluddin Rumi

Ölümü öp! Öp ki açelyalar açsın dudaklarında (Kiss my corpse Kiss it, so that azaleas bloom
 on your lips)
 - Gür Genç

Your beauty is a lonely as this island
 And in your body I smell the sea
 And taste the grape
 You tended for millennia
 Yet when I reach out to touch you
 You slip away
 And lead me through
 The road of twenty thousand ghosts,
 and a trail where statues crumble in the sand.
 In cement chasms
 Resilient cyclamen's grow
 in a fragile hope as tenuous
 as my touching the slither of the new moon
 on this Clean Monday.
 I too am dead you say
 To love me you must join the masquerade
 And kiss my corpse
 Yes, ölümü öp you say.

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But if I dare
Will your stone eyes open?
Or will you leave me cold
And let my desire sink to the bottom of the bay at Salamis?
Outside Saint Nicholas cathedral
The cümbez blossoms twice each year, you say
and the price of kissing is your life and mine.
Let's share this half loaf of bread
And each day light this candle of bees wax
If we do not embrace for the May feast
Our bodies will burn on a funeral pyre
And our ashes will scatter in the sea
Where even the phrase each other does not matter.

Clean Monday, Famagusta 2004

Note: The oldest living thing in Cyprus is the tropical fig tree, *ficus symamorus* (known in Turkish as cümbez) in front of St. Nicholas Cathedral, Famagusta. It was planted when the cathedral was built in approximately 1220 AD.



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In Paros, more voices joined in from other islands and continents, Jamaica, Ireland, Java, Africa and Asia, voices of Kei, Eiléan, Macdara, Nirwan, Amma, Kavery Xi Chuan, Nikos, Anastassis, Jeff, and Stephen seizing the moment with his camera. We came together in collective affect and in counterpoint within the overlay of the Odysseys that took us there. And a Parian proem from John Pack who led us to the descent into the darkness of a cave, plundering marble for illumination, and to the ascent up to the panoptic heights of a monastic holy madness, and falling into Thyme along the way. Thyme is still with me.

Every new I-land brings with it the promise of now--here. The nostalgia for the particularity of place in contradistinction to the resistance to (or of) place as home. Paros in dialogue with Antiparos across the water. Home as radical rupture. We conversed in a three-day fugue, the gift of encounter and exchange, seeking home in the performative promise of the mantra *neti neti*-- not this, not this: the homes of our dispossession; in the metaphors of the promise found in our textual aesthetics with our un(ful)filled languages or longings and their indeterminate materiality; the phantasmagoric looking for a place; the mourning of home and land passionately seeking redemption in a bid for the agency of human action and the transformative possibilities of ethical, ecological, and juridical consciousness worldwide. And once more we sailed from island to metropolis carrying with us the irreducible double of home in memory and place with the Otherness of the unanticipated future.