

## **You tell me**

They tell each other stories, back and forth, from behind their hands, the words slip like cherries, full and glossy. They pass them from one to another. They speak of an absent man.

*As a child, my movements followed the pattern of my father's work: Dubai, El Fasher, Kabul, Mekele. At the age of 11, I was told I was coming back to England with my mother and sister. 'Coming back', the phrase implied I was returning to a place I had already been. But I had never lived in England before, England might be my parents' home, but it was not mine.*

Along the horizon he paces, back and forth, a tiny figure, smoking, on the dry crust of the earth, lacerated with cracks, scarred by the sun. As the day shortens, his shadow grows longer.

*Once the women were back at home, my father continued to traverse the drier areas of the globe. He is a hydro-geologist, a man who looks for water to bring it to the surface. He does this in lands that are not his own, for people whose languages and customs he has to learn anew each time in each place.*

Lips part and then come together; words blow in gusts.

Hands flicker; the patterns they gesture echo the flutter of speech.

*She tells me **he** is a man with property: land and wives. Inside the walls of his house are sunlit orchards full of dark purple fruit; among the trees his wives sit. Dressed in shades of red, some of the women have covered their faces, others have painted*

*their toes nails pink. From a distance, these women watch the foreigners arrive, disappearing inside as they draw closer. The guests are taken upstairs to an empty veranda overlooking the garden. The only furniture here is a carpet laid out in a long line down the middle of the room. Men sit cross-legged in turbans around the edge of the carpet and eat from the dishes laid out in front of them. The only women: her mother, her sister and herself. After the meal, as they walk through the dark house to leave, she sees a pair of eyes watching her from behind a screen. The eyes belong to a girl whose hands glint with silver. Later she learns that this is his youngest wife, once a nomad, who carries her wealth in the jewels on her fingers.*

If you look at me, you will see only a curtain of black obscuring my face.

*She tells me she taught the Sheik's sister's daughter English, and because of this she was allowed to enter the harem. She saw that beneath their abbas, the women wore make-up, and they liked to listen to rock and roll. Once they asked her to teach them a dance; when, shyly, she declined, they all laughed: 'we heard that you danced the twist until early this morning'. When, for her labours, she was offered a gift, she asked for a black abba with a gold trim and a gold leaf burqua, the costume that only the wives of the sheik were permitted to wear.*

I drag my brush through the knotted strands again, and again, and again, and again, while you watch.

*She tells me that I was born on the eve of the haj. As a hajia I will never have to make the journey to Mecca. For my entrance, and my mother's labours, my mother received a second gift. This time, the sheik also sent his apologies. Sorry, he said, so*

*sorry. For a boy I would have sent you a watch, but here is a gift for the girl – a tiny gold coffee pot on a gold chain.*

You can't see me, but from behind the veil of my hair, I can see you.

I can see a man in the distance on the horizon. He approaches me to ask if he might be the odd man out. Why, I ask, do you think you are the odd man out, is it because you are only one man among so many women? No, he says, I think it is because I speak without words: objects have their own stories to tell; once found, they can speak for themselves.

You are not the odd man out, I tell him, two of these women also tell stories without words, they tell each other stories through spaces.

She tells me her story.

How she served you on her knees; buffed the curved wooden banister, brushed the stone steps, polished the tiled floor at the bottom of the staircase, until her hands bled.

How you took the smooth brown skin of her cheeks between your white hands and ripped at her flesh. In your too-tight crinoline, you held her down, and beat her until she crumpled. As she started to scream, you hacked off her hair. Clumps of black silk lay in tatters on the white tiles like slits.

She streamed out, escaped to far away, to the palace of her imaginings. The lilac winds of the laudanum desert blew her upwards. She hovered over ceramic scapes,

plates whose edges just touched, and tiles of blue, white and primrose. Soon this was all there was to see, endless surfaces smooth and empty: saunas, hospitals, prisons, and mortuaries – all that was outside was inside.

You tell me of a room awash with blood, where the tiles meet, the red seeps out, where **the** vividness floats, the water dilutes.

*I tell you of a hot tent, sweating, with sultry breath and a swollen tongue I gush headlong into red. Round and round, down and down, I am pulled into a world beneath the sand. And coming towards me, staggering out of the redness comes a soldier.*

You tell me of a room pristine in squares, but threatened with ragged tears. The walls run thick with flesh, squeezing in from the cavity through incisions sliced into the tile-work. The slits are deep and dark, alive to the touch and fit to burst, lined with the grease of torn limbs, laced with fat.

*I tell you of a floor of polished marble, black, interwoven with white veins, of how I anxiously trace the tiny cracks around the edge for those sinister intruders who might, at any moment, slither through.*

You tell me of a ruin where the walls have been turned inside out. Their patterned interiors laid bare to the wind, their edges torn open to expose **inner** rawness.

You tell me.

\*\*\*

In *On Histories and Stories*, writer AS Byatt examines her fascination with 'topological fictions', fictions where the term topological means 'both mathematical game-playing, and narratives constructed with spatial rather with temporal images'.<sup>1</sup> She names certain works by Primo Levi, Italo Calvino and George Perec as the most interesting examples of this kind of writing. For me, these authors have different ways of making topological fictions; while Calvino often uses combination and permutation as strategies for constructing the shape of stories, Levi draws on existing empirical structures, such as the elements, to determine the narrative, and Perec's detailed descriptions of actual spaces are organised to produce a fictional place.<sup>2</sup> In discussing his own interest in 'topological fictions', Calvino refers to a review by Hans Magnus Enzensberger of labyrinthine narratives in the work of Jorge Luis Borges and Robbe Grillet, where Enzensberger describes how, by placing narratives inside one another; these authors make places where it is easy to get lost.<sup>3</sup>

The theme of topological fictions is apparent in the works of Janane Al-Ani, Tracey Moffat, Adriana Verejao, Richard Wentworth selected here for *(hi)story* but in different ways. Wentworth's interest, made evident in *Making Do & Getting By* and *Occasional Geometries* (1975-2005), is in seeking out and paying attention to those animate objects that already articulate but which have somehow been ignored. In

---

<sup>1</sup> A S Byatt, *On Histories and Stories*, (London: Vintage, 2001), pp. 139-141.

<sup>2</sup> See for example, Primo Levi, *The Periodic Table*, (London: Penguin Books, 2000); Italo Calvino, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, (London: Vintage Classics, 1998) and Georges Perec, *Life: A User's Manual*, London: Collins Harvell, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> Hans Magnus Enzensberger, 'Topological Structures in Modern Literature', *Sur*, (May-June 1966) referred to by Calvino in Italo Calvino, *The Literature Machine*, (London: Vintage, 1997), p. 25.

works such as *List (15 months)* (1994) and *Spread* (1997) he positions combinations of things – buckets, plates, spades – in ways that allow them to communicate with one another and ‘speak’ directly to the viewer. Verejao also lets matter speak for itself, but in her work, stories are told through spaces not objects. In earlier works such as *Azulajaria Verde em Carne Viva* (2000) and *Parede con Incisao a la Fontana 3* (2002), seemingly endless tiled interiors tell, with their scars and flesh wounds, of repulsion and excess. In later pieces, the disturbances, like the spreading stain of *The Guest* (2004), are subtler, and in works such as *O Obsceno* (2004) or *O Obsessivo* (2004) the titles suggest an interest in the recurring relationship between spatial configurations and specific psychic states, particularly those associated with perversion and claustrophobia.

In Moffat’s work there is also an engagement in the emotional qualities of certain types of space, not the internal typologies that intrigue Verejao, but in juxtapositions of inside and outside, explored in *Up in the Sky* (1997) through the dialogue between a remote shack and the desert wilderness. There is also a central spatial motif in *Laudanum* (1998), in this case, a staircase, a metaphor of transition, whose circular form suggests a dynamic tension, allowing connections to be made between upper and lower levels, but also between physical qualities of materials and the altered mental space of drug induced hallucinations, as well as the charged erotic site of the sado-masochistic relationship between the two female characters in the scene caught somewhere between violent physical conflict and an opiated dream state.

There is an exploration of the spatial qualities of emotional tension too in Al-Ani’s work. *The Visit* (2004), relates *Muse* where an isolated male figure inhabits a flat desert plane to *Echo*, a fragmented conversation between five female figures, a place where he is referred to, yet absent from. In several other pieces, Al-Ani focuses on

spaces that bind and separate individuals, in *Untitled* (2002), a veil of hair brushed by the subject of the image articulates a visual boundary between the viewer and the brushing subject and in *Portraits* (1999) the women who cover their mouths with their hands sever communication between viewing and viewed subjects.

In postmodern feminism terms such as 'situated knowledges' and 'standpoint theory' have been used to examine the relations between location and knowledge.<sup>4</sup> *Where I am* makes a difference to *who* I can be and *what* I can know. Feminists in visual and spatial culture have drawn extensively on psychoanalytic theory to further understandings of subjectivity in relation to positionality, making connections between the spatial politics of internal psychic figures and external cultural geographies.<sup>5</sup> For example, for Rosi Braidotti, the figure of the 'nomadic subject' not only describes a spatial state of movement, but also an epistemological condition, a kind of knowingness (or unknowingness) that refuses fixity.<sup>6</sup>

In this increasingly globalised world, the stories many artists and writers have been telling recently concern travel: they tell us where they have come from, where they are going and what it is like along they way. These are stories about lives, yet despite the often powerful autobiographical elements, told as journeys, the

---

<sup>4</sup> See Jane Flax, *Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West*, Berkeley, (Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1991), p. 232 and Donna Haraway. 'Situated Knowledges: the Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Knowledge', *Feminist Studies*, 14: 3, (Fall 1988), pp. 575-603.

<sup>5</sup> See for example, Susan Stanford Friedman, *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies Of Encounter* (Princeto:, Princeton University Press, 1998); Diane Fuss, *Identification Papers* (London: Routledge, 1995); Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994); Irit Rogoff, *Terra Infirma* (London: Routledge, 2000) and Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (London: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> See Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1994).

narratives take spatial forms: actively referencing special places, generating situated dynamics through various voices, such as I, you and s/he, and inviting the reader or viewer to take up particular yet often ambiguous and changing positions.

My own fascination with topological fictions has focused on what I have called 'site-writings'.<sup>7</sup> My interest is in writing spaces rather than writing *about* spaces. In art criticism this approach demands that the critic investigates the positions we occupy in relation to works, the sites they represent and the spatial issues they raise, not only conceptually and ideologically, but also materially and emotionally, in order to produce texts that locate the themes developed in the art works in written form.

\*\*\*

This red book has been read in parts, read then left, left then read. Objects slipped in between the pages mark the pauses. How long will it be, I ask, before you open a page and tell me another story?

You tell me.

Jane Rendell

2005

---

<sup>7</sup> Jane Rendell, 'Architecture-Writing', *The Journal of Architecture*, (Summer 2005).