A House Without a Roof

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A House Without a Roof

by

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“I occasionally experience myself as a cluster of flowing currents. I prefer this to the idea of a solid self, the identity to which so many attach so much significance. These currents, like the themes of one’s life, flow along during the waking hours, and at their best, they require no reconciling, no harmonizing. They are ‘off’ and may be out of place, but at least they are always in motion, in time, in place, in the form of all kinds of strange combinations moving about, not necessarily forward, sometimes against each other, contrapuntally, yet without one central theme. A form of freedom, I’d like to think, even if I am far from being totally convinced that it is. That skepticism too is one of the themes I particularly want to hold on to. With so many dissonances in my life I have learned actually to prefer being not quite right and out of place.”

- Edward Said

*Out of Place*

My family history before the 1920s is unknowable. From an early age, my curiosity about my family’s experiences -- both in the Nazi Holocaust and before -- was largely responsible for the ethnic identification that I felt as a Jewish American kid in the suburbs. Like many refugees (and their descendants), geographical separation from one’s place of birth throughout history has engendered a feeling of impermanence, and “out of place-ness.

As a kid growing up in suburban Maryland, “Lithuania,” was nothing more than a sound signifying the past. It was another place, different from where I lived yet somehow connected. This invisible history was not entirely hidden from view. In the basement of my house, my mom kept a meticulously organized multi-volume family chronology comprised of ten photo albums. In the oldest album, there were three pages with tattered, stained images. I could see my grandmother as a child with her family, somewhere in the Lithuanian forest in the 1920s. My favorite picture was the most worn, and it showed my grandma Esther in a torn dress, looking
like Peter Pan. She stood with her two brothers (my uncles), parents (my great-grandparents) and a very old woman seated, with a head scarf (my great-great grandmother).

This was a silent past that I could see in photographs.

A sense of absolute uncertainty about history - often caused by violent and abrupt separation - is at the root of my work. As citizens of the world in the 21st century, we have a basic understanding of the flow of historical events (aligned in some way with the circumstances of our cultural upbringing); Event A leads to event B, and event B leads to event C, etc. But as is always the case, the official narratives of history are written by the victorious and not by the losers. Perhaps as a way to hold onto what people know to be true about themselves, communities throughout the world form their own origin myths and present these narratives in the face of alternative interpretations of history. These chronologies form the basis of cultural identity, with religious, ethnic and political histories spanning across hundreds and sometimes thousands of years.

My interests reside in the spaces between these historicized chronologies, where complexity and contradiction challenge the way we understand the past, the present and perhaps, the future. As an artist I operate from within this uncertain territory and my projects probe the sociological and psychological spaces between how events are recorded, refracted and retold. Through my video and photographic projects, I break down and rearrange chronologies to reflect on our understanding of the past, today. I am drawn to narratives that address histories of war, mass population displacement and the psychological aftermath caused by these traumas. Echoes of my
own family histories are often present in my projects, although the geography, time and place may be entirely different. I intertwine themes generated by my own subjectivity on an intimate scale, while simultaneously speaking to broader historical circumstances.

My projects set up impossible dialogues by piecing together seemingly unrelated subject matter as a collagist would. Individuals who should never meet are placed side by side, to provoke new relationships with one another and to the audience. Frequently, the conversations take place across time and space, between my collaborators and me, and between the layered histories that I parse.

My nineteen minute film, Router follows two individuals: Chris, a war re-enactor who takes on the role of a Nazi trooper, and Constance, a pianist and performance artist from New York. Both protagonists perform multiple versions of themselves for the camera. In each instance, the idea of identity serves as a seed to elaborate on and exaggerate, and becomes slippery. Edward Said’s definition of identity as the embodiment of past, present, fantasy and fiction, “…as a cluster of flowing currents,” is at the root of my work.

These embellishments are often fantastic in nature, and both characters perform dimensions of who they actually are while addressing the camera (“me”) directly. Chris’s experiences of re-enacting are demonstrated rather than explained. In the film, he resides on the fringes of a hobby which stages large scale battles involving hundreds of German, American, British and French “troops” on simulated battlefields in New England. The film cuts to Constance in her apartment
in New York. She improvises on piano and we hear fragments of conversations stating her lack of shame about being “a Jew.”

Throughout the film, I assert my presence from behind the camera and provoke Chris and Constance with questions. Meta-narration forms a definite link between my voice (and being) and the visual point-of-view of the camera. My consistent intervention in the ordeals of the protagonists dispels the myth of documentary objectivity. I am not simply observing but acting as a 3rd character. My subjectivity frames the film and implicates me in the fluid identities of Chris and Constance. Aspects of each of their lives are embroiled in the choices I make in regards to interview questions, filmic framing and persistent disruption of the cinematic illusion. While the two protagonists onscreen lead the scenes they appear in, my presence is spectral and allows the viewer to assume the uncertain boundaries and role of “me.” I am not interested in telling a simple story, and my presence guides the narratives in the work while distancing them from any definitive readings of the histories I grapple with.

In the beginning, my “character,” asks Chris where he was born. The camera walks with him through a field of tall grass. The first time I ask, he answers Connecticut, in 1973. There is silence as we continue to walk, and then my voice asks, again, “Where and when were you born?” This time Chris answers, “Kuchenheim, Germany” in 1918. The slippage in Chris’ identity frames his character from the beginning as existing somehow, “out of time.” He participates in living history demonstrations, in the garb of a Nazi soldier from the 1940s, but appears on camera throughout most of the film in contemporary clothing. It is worth noting that the birthdate and place of the second answer he gives is a direct reference to Willi Graf, a
member of the student anti-fascist resistance in Munich, who was executed in 1943. To further complicate things, later in the film, we see that Chris has a tattoo of Willi Graf’s face on his right bicep. This detail only adds to the multi-faceted identities embodied in Chris’ character.

Cutting back and forth between the two characters, the audience is left to draw connections between them. Contradictions about the two protagonists’ lives are brought to the fore. In one scene, Constance’s ambivalence about being Jewish is curiously addressed as she performs on an organ in a massive darkened cathedral. In another segment with Chris, the camera tracks him at a large outdoor re-enacting event, as audible gunshots and explosions are just beyond the viewer’s field of vision. These elements of unseen, fictional violence are present throughout the film, producing a subtle anxiety about what exactly we are witnessing.

Constance’s character appears to root the film in “reality.” She seems to exist as herself, practicing her instrument, performing in different concert settings and inviting us into her world. But as the film progresses, the degree of her performative presence is amplified. We follow her as she walks through her apartment until abruptly stopping to address the camera directly. She begins to tell a story about a family that goes out for a picnic and forgets the basket. Somehow the story doesn’t add up but we become aware that she is conscious of her role in the film and is toying with us. Although she appears to be simply going about her regular business, things are not necessarily what they seem.

Later on, we see Chris in his kitchen, preparing a German camping stove from WWII in order to heat up a can of chicken soup. He is in his element, calm and concentrating on the task, even
though a kettle is on the lit stove burning, blue in the background. A few minutes later, a scene of Constance performing with her vocal trio in an intimate concert setting cuts to Chris as he walks down a suburban street at night in full Nazi regalia. The sound of his boots appears out of sync with his steps and he pauses, suddenly aware of this.

Both characters inhabit multiple fictional planes, unknowingly drawing comparisons and connections to each other while referencing historical traumas that are never explicitly discussed.

Theoretical and real-world conversations - between the subject matter, the actors and myself, and in the stories that I explore - are the through-line that connects all of my work. This approach provides a platform for my exploration of the theme of the fluidity and complexity of identity - political and otherwise. By looking at the way historical narratives are mediated and canonized (by political entities, governing bodies, etc.) and simultaneously teasing apart and inserting my own subjective voice into these chronologies, my work avoids didactic, partisan ideologies while remaining critical in purpose. I combine documentary methodology with strategies of artistic criticality to undercut and comment on my own role in the act of making. This approach complicates the relationship between different, often contradictory modes of interpretation. The work presents ideas and critiques but the ambiguity of its “message” leaves it open to interpretation. The true political ideas lie in the subtexts and formal considerations of the mediums, but they are not visible on the surface.

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A House Without a Roof (AHWAR) is a book that scrutinizes the histories of violence and displacement connecting Europe, Israel, and Palestine. With photographs, appropriated imagery, and texts, I weave together fictions of my family history with representations from Israel’s founding and ongoing military occupation. Ethnic and national identities are ruptured and reassembled as the project interrogates contradictory histories and notions of selfhood. In a similar manner to Router, AHWAR questions how we understand global conflict and trauma in light of our individual experience.

The book considers the fractures of the multiple histories connecting the Jewish Diaspora out of Europe and forced mass migrations from Palestine following WWII in relation to the creation of Israel. I situate this inquiry by way of the triangular relationship between my grandfather who was a survivor of Dachau, my dad, who lived on a kibbutz in the early 1970s, and myself. AHWAR questions the way that an individual perceives interconnected conflicts that are simultaneously personal and global in scale. Histories and time fold into one another as the mythologies and memories of my family become entangled with the ongoing narratives of violence and trauma in Israel and Palestine.

In A House Without a Roof I function as a maker, a researcher, an archivist and a writer. Over the course of five years, I photographed and conducted fieldwork in Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Israel, Palestine, Britain and the United States. I focused on the historical strands connecting my own family’s post-war displacement, and the chronologies of Israel’s founding which led to the mass dislocation of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians.
I conducted research in archives and collected ephemera in every place I visited, interested in the way that states (in this case, Israel) construct and reflect on their own foundation myths. I focus on found images, films, documents and objects that symbolize the ruptures in history, and occupy a place where myth and fact blur together. Their incomplete-ness, irony, and poetic characteristics tell a different story than we are accustomed to hearing.

In addition to collecting and arranging images, my own photographs focus on landscapes of contention, from the Occupied West Bank to Dachau, to the Olympic Park where Israeli Athletes were murdered in the Black September Massacre.

My pictures interrogate the layers of history embedded within the geography. One example is Mamilla Cemetery in Jerusalem, a Muslim burial site dating to the 7th Century Rashidun Caliphate. For the past five years, the site has been the source of major contention, as it is being dug up to allow for construction of the Simon Wiesenthal Center’s “Museum of Tolerance.” Both Israeli and Palestinian groups have protested the exhumation of the site with regards to historical/cultural preservation, but after a long legal battle, the museum’s construction has continued unhindered.

Not unlike other countries with a colonial history, Israel’s official state narratives exclude recognition of the mass displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians that took place during it’s founding. As a result the institution of the state archive is used to privilege it’s own triumphs while simultaneously denying the legitimacy of the Palestinian people. The occupation of the Palestinian Territories continues to this day, and thus for Palestinians, the traumas of 1948 have never ended. This government strategy, to champion one version of events, while denying
the claims of native populations – who are often violently killed, enslaved or displaced – can be found throughout history. Certainly in the United States, compensation and reparations for slavery and the genocide of the Northern American Native populations has never been accounted for. For this reason, in A House Without a Roof, I have sought out historical materials that have been cast aside, and don’t necessarily match up with sanctioned, idealized representations of nationhood to challenge simplified readings of history, while implicating myself in the process. In both Israel, where my father felt connected, and in Germany and the Baltics, where the roots of my family exist, I am an outsider. My explorations in those places do not reconcile the fact that I will never be a part of them. But in AHWAR, I follow strands that extend from the aftermath of the Holocaust, where the trauma of the Nazi genocide led to Israel’s foundation and as a result, the mass Palestinian displacement.

In so doing, A House Without a Roof wrestles with the weight of traumas passed through generations amidst genocide, dislocation, and ongoing military occupation between peoples with deep attachments to land.

I stitch together intimate fictional texts to reflect on how we come to understand the ties that bind and tear apart people through generations of war and displacement.

The following texts are excerpted -- in order -- from the book.
A HOUSE WITHOUT A ROOF

Texts from the book

I. Tree stumps
II. The Archivist
III. Schindler’s List
IV. Prison Demonstration
V. The Blue Sofa
VI. 195 Vilnius Street
VII. Car to Efrat
VIII. Olive Tree
IX. People You Might Know
X. A Knock on the Door
XI. Leila
XII. The Enormous Room
I. Tree Stumps

They sit on tree stumps in the dirt.

II. The Archivist

In a small office with a tall fern, faded maps and two framed photos of David Ben Gurion, Amiel is searching for *A Simple Twist of Fate*. Religious talk radio is playing at a low volume from an old AM Radio on his co-worker’s desk.

Bob Dylan is such a fucker. He blocks all of his music on YouTube. I want to hear the classics and they were all taken down.

You want classics? Put on Sinatra. That was a man with class and style. There is a YouTube channel for him. I can show you. And you know what else? He smuggled money to the Haganah in 1947.

Yeah, yeah. I’m sure there are 500 YouTube channels of his music. And I’ve heard that story before. Sinatra is fine. But, with Dylan, every song is a classic. *Like a Rolling Stone.* *Tambourine Man. Times Are a Changin’*. These are classics. It wasn’t about style. It was about the words.

Then why does he block them? Maybe no one wants to listen.
Everyone wants to listen! That’s the point. If he can’t make money on the classics, he will keep them to himself. Greedy bastard.

I have been sitting quietly for fifteen minutes waiting for the archivist to choose the music so we can get to work.

I have dinner plans.

Do you want to know a trick? Search for, “Elston Gunn.”

El-stun Gahn? What is that?

It was one of Dylan’s stage names. He used to play secret shows to try out new material.

Wow. Really? I did not know that. Let’s see. How do you spell it?

E-L-S-T-O-N. G-U-N-N. Two N’s.

Hm.

Amiel types, presses ENTER, and two hundred results appear.

Wow. So cool. How did you know that?
I spend too much time on the internet.

Maybe so. But you solved it.

Amiel begins scrolling down the page. He pauses and smiles. Click, click. Guitar strums crackle out of the speakers.

Come here and sit in my chair. I’m making tea. Do you want? Lemon?

---

Upstairs in a tiny study room with fake wood paneling, they sit side by side. The fluorescent light is dim, but the screen is blinding. He strains to see the letters on the beige Hebrew keyboard. He recognizes their names but doesn’t understand.

So, tell me. What are you looking for exactly?

Well. Could you help me with the words? My Hebrew is not very good. I studied it a long time ago, but never really learned to speak.

But you can read it?

Sort of. Maybe like a 5-year-old would.
Of course. The American way. No problem. What are you searching for?

Hm. Well, I want to see pictures from the years just before and immediately after Israel was founded. Between 1947 and 1950.

This should be easy. Give me some key words and I will write them for you in Hebrew.

Okay. Try: Tel Aviv, Haifa, Independence, British, Jew, Arab, War. I think that is a good start.

Here they are. These are very broad. I am sure you will find many pictures. Good luck.

Thank you.

Alone, he stares at the screen. He turns off the overhead light. It is dark except for the white glow of the monitor. The cursor blinks. Off. On. Off.

He waits for something to happen.

With his index finger, he rolls the tracking ball of the mouse around. He rubs his eyes. He removes his hat and scratches his matted hair.

*What am I doing here?*
He turns and looks over his shoulder at the long tables of other researchers leafing through old yellowed documents. Everyone has glasses. No one is smiling.

He types ‘Palestine’ into the search box when he is sure that no one is looking.

A few hundred results appear. All are from before 1948, during the British Mandate. He shifts in his chair.

He looks over his shoulder again and makes eye contact with another researcher. She is sitting at a table across the room with a yellow legal pad and a number two pencil, squinting. He stares back at the woman. She immediately looks down. He reduces his font size to nine.

He looks at the four corners of the room where the ceiling meets the walls.

*Am I on camera?*

He thinks about *WikiLeaks*, the CIA and *Google*.

He thinks about Edward Snowden.

He types ‘Palestinian.’ Zero results.
III. Schindler’s List

The night before his parents sat down with him and said you are going to be afraid but we are here and you and your sister need to see. You both need to know that even though this is a movie, it is a very serious movie and it is going to show you what your grandparents lived through in the camps and we know that you think you know what they went through in the camps but this is different. This is going to scare you and it should because it was a very terrible thing that happened and it’s a miracle that they lived through it and your father is here today because they survived and you are here today because they survived, and the next time we send you to bed before The Simpsons is over and you get upset and you say that you hate us and that we are cruel, you should stop to think about how lucky you are and be thankful for what you have—what we have—and be thankful that you and your sister appreciate each other because you are each other’s best friends whether you like it or not.

No one else’s parents would let them watch, but they all knew what was on. They knew about it because in class his teacher said it would be on TV and he grew serious. When his mom said all of those things the night before he was already prepared because anytime the subject came up in school he felt heavy. Instead of having no idea where his family came from like most of his friends at school, he knew exactly where his family came from because there were photographs of it and he had telegrams and identity papers. The dates were not that long ago and that word, ‘Lithuania’, echoed in his mind in Math, in English, in History. He always heard about it but never understood what it meant to be from somewhere else. And Germany: the place where everything happened, that he was supposed to be afraid of, but was really just
curious about. Sometimes, he would look very hard at the small images in the World War II chapters to see if he recognized Eddie or Esther—even when the pictures were of Auschwitz or Bergen Belsen, which were camps that his family was never sent to. He still looked for their tiny blurry faces.

During the movie, when something violent was about to happen, his mom let him watch but warned him beforehand.

A naked woman flashed onscreen and he saw her naked body for an instant before his mom said close your eyes, Adam and he blushed and even though the lights were off, he felt that his dad and sister and mom could all see him red and nervous. For weeks afterward he thought of the naked woman in the movie and how he didn’t want to look away. Maybe it was the first naked woman he had ever seen in a movie; definitely the first in black and white. When his mom let him uncover his eyes, the scene had changed to a man on a balcony with a rifle looking out onto a large dirt courtyard with barracks. A cigarette was in his mouth and he held up the rifle to aim and BLAM and CLICK and a scream and BLAM and CLICK and dust rose from a body that fell and his face did not change. The beautiful woman was in the man’s bed and he didn’t know what to feel because he was attracted to her and scared of him and it was all very confusing to see a naked woman and a man shooting and know that they were romantic because that must mean that both of them knew exactly what he was doing.

---
IV. Prison Demonstration

I am running with the crowd towards the jeeps lined up in front of the prison. There are hundreds of people, mostly teens and twenty-somethings. As we get closer to the soldiers, the journalists hang back and take out their phones. I stay with them as they tweet. Everyone is waiting for something to happen, but nothing has happened. The soldiers beyond the burning tires look cagey and move around their trucks.

There is a deafening boom and the crowd surges back. Tear gas pellets hiss and people run covering their mouths and eyes.

I am wearing a keffiyeh and holding a camera, looking.

I am tired of waiting.

A group of teenagers climb up a small ridge among olive trees and I follow them. They have stones in their hands and are shouting in the direction of the soldiers, but I can tell they are nervous. I am nervous. I am running to keep up with them. I see their stones and they see my camera.

Hi, I’m Adam. Is it okay if I—

My voice cracks.
Yes. It’s fine.

They gesture towards the prison and we keep walking.

Stones rain down and clunk against the hoods and window cages of the army jeeps. The soldiers disappear behind the vehicles for cover.

The turret of the white military truck swivels erratically. The guys around me gather stones.

I run ahead of them and look back at the man in the red keffiyeh.

Click.

My back is to the soldiers as I face the men with covered faces.

BOOM.

I turn towards the sound and soldiers are shouting to one another and pointing at us with rifles. The air is whistling and white gas rises from the ground. I turn back around and the men with covered faces are scrambling through the trees up the hillside.

Come on, man!
My camera is thumping against my hip and my eyes are on fire and tearing up. Snot is running down my lip and the faster I move, the more my lungs burn. Someone puts a hand on my shoulder and we stop. We bend over spitting and coughing. The crowd is swarming back away from the soldiers.

BOOM. BOOM. BOOM.

There is gunfire and the demonstrators run back from the burning tires. Journalists are standing in clumps next to their cars shielding their faces, tweeting.

I am breathing rapidly but can’t catch my breath. I hear mom’s voice in my head. *Adam, what are you doing on this trip? Adam, where can I find you? Adam, you have asthma. Don’t forget your inhaler. Where are you staying? What is your phone number?*

I imagine suffocating to death and causing an international diplomatic crisis. Maybe that would help the situation?

**AMERICAN DIES AT PRISON DEMONSTRATION IN OCCUPIED WEST BANK.**

I am an asshole. Adrenaline is getting to my head. *What the fuck am I doing?*

A boy looks over at me and shakes his head laughing. He wipes away tears.
You are American?

Yes.

*CNN*? You work for *CNN*?

I look back at him blankly.

No, I don’t work for *CNN*.

Are you a journalist?

*How do I explain what I am doing?*


So, you come here on vacation? To see some action?

No, it’s not like that. I am working on a project.

A project? I don’t want to be your project. If my face shows up in a newspaper, my family will go to prison. This is not your war. You come here for a few weeks, a few months. You
wear a keffiyeh and you think you understand. But you don’t. You run ahead of us with your cameras and the soldiers see you. They think you are one of us and they shoot. You are not one of us. If I didn’t talk to you, I would think you are with them.

---

V. The Blue Sofa

They got on the trains without knowing where they were going. The sky was grey. The language they spoke was not his own, but he could pick out words. There was nowhere to sit so he stood pressed against the side of the car surrounded by men and women in heavy coats speaking low and nervous. When the train stopped, people flowed out relieved. He followed the masses outside. Men in uniforms were everywhere directing them, unsmiling. Moving as one, they walked.

An old man is staring at a vast open space where the cement foundations of long, slender buildings are visible in the dirt and grass. The man reaches into his wool coat and pulls out a small silver camcorder. He straps the camera to his hand and flips out the screen. He tilts the screen up, aims the camera at the dirt and begins to speak. I listen to the old man’s British inflected narration and follow him through the fence posts to the disinfecting rooms, across the gravel field and past the memorial. The camera man meanders, looking through his 3-inch screen, distracted. He zigzags through Dachau recording everything in his field of vision, narrating continuously.
This is what the sky looks like from a concentration camp.

This is the dirt that Jews walked on.

Here is a rock. Maybe a prisoner once threw this at a soldier? He would’ve surely been shot.

These are the fence posts where barbed wire once stretched. Now they are just naked posts.

Aha! This sign says “Krematorium.” We have reached the gas chambers. The Nazis never used them here, which explains why they are in immaculate condition. These buildings are some of the most preserved evidence of the systematic Nazi genocide that still stand—

I realize that I have been following the old man for a half hour.

*Is this guy completely oblivious? We’re in a concentration camp and he’s making home videos. Who is he going to show these videos to? His wife and kids? I just want some quiet to reflect. Yeah, I need some headspace. This is serious. Most of my family was murdered here. I deserve some quiet. I am supposed to feel sad here. That’s why I came here but all I hear is this idiot shouting excited descriptions of terrible things that are plain to see. I’m trying to have a genuine experience and this prick is ruining it. My family was imprisoned, starved and beaten in this place and I finally made it here only to have the experience narrated by an old man with furry ears.*
Click.

Hello? Who’s there?

Oh, hey. Sorry, I just took a picture.

Are you following me?

Me? Haha, no no. I just started wandering around here. I wasn’t paying attention, and then I looked up and you were the only person around. I heard some of your narration and it sounds great. Super informative.

Well, yes. This is a very serious place. I’m recording to remember the melancholy that looms over it. It’s very bleak. I hope you think about that the next time you take a picture.

Oh, yes. Of course. That’s why I came, to try to feel something that my family felt here.

Oh, your family was interned here? Fascinating. Do you mind if I ask you some questions on camera?

Actually, I’d rather not. It’s very personal for me to be here.
Oh, c’mon sport. You are a living, breathing descendant of men who were part of the Holocaust. This is history! We must record it! How does it feel? Do you see their spirits? I assume you are Jewish.

No, really, I don’t want to.

You really must. Think about the generations of children who will see. Never forget!

At this point, his camera is already recording.

Please don’t do that. Really, I need to go. I want to take pictures.

See? You’re documenting it too. In the end, it’s all for posterity. We are on the same side.

I don’t think so, but good luck with your video.

I duck into a bathroom, unzip my pants and begin to urinate. Steam rises and I drift off staring at the beige wall in front of me. I finish and, when I look up, a long line of malnourished men surround me on both sides with shriveled penises in hand. The chorus of liquid streaming against metal is barely drowned out by the groans of relief that echo through the room.

It smells like sour piss.
I wash my hands but the water is cold and there is no soap. I go to dry them but there are no paper towels.

I walk outside again and spot the man with the camera crossing the treeline and heading into the woods. Red tape stretches between a grouping of five trees denoting a restricted area. The old man stops, cranes his neck, stares and begins recording. He says nothing.

--

I am sitting on the blue sofa in Poppop’s house.

I am small and he is big, and I want to lean back but the armrests are wood and uncomfortable and why would they have a couch with wood? I sit up straight like Mom says and look at him. Mom and Dad are on the edge of their seats to my right and the sun is white and coming through the windows behind him. Where should I start and I say, where were you born? He begins to talk about Lithuania, but isn’t specific and I try to imagine what kind of clothes people wore and what Lithuanian sounds like, but I can’t. I keep thinking about the movie and covering my eyes and I can hear the words he is saying, but I can’t see.

I picture black and white and hear train sounds and music and the man with the rifle when suddenly the man with the camera turns to face me in front of the red tape.
I am 12 again in Maryland with Eddie and then a little boy alone hiding in a latrine in a film and then I am staring at a field where something happened but I can’t see it, so I close my eyes and ask Eddie where he met Grandma.

Mom and Dad are looking at me and Poppop is also looking at me. I am not sure which questions are the right questions. I know the story, but what did it feel like and how do I talk to him to understand how he was feeling? I would’ve been so scared I think, but do not say it. Dad leans in when Poppop begins naming his siblings, all who died, and I get stuck on his brother, Berel, because it sounds like Carol, my neighbor growing up, or “barrel,” which is something that you put things into—but isn’t either. I start to wonder what Berel looked like and sounded like, but before I can ask I am on a genealogy website searching for my surname, ‘Golfer’, and I register my email address and the words, ‘Golfer’ and ‘Lithuania’, as criteria and I hear a bing.

An email from Jgolfer52 appears in my inbox which must be a mistake because my dad is dead and how could I get an email from someone who is dead? This isn’t Borges, this is Gmail and it’s 2012. I click refresh 6 times, but it’s there in bold at the top of my inbox surrounded by order confirmations from Amazon and an email from Lauren about dinner tonight. I pinch my cheek and it hurts and I am awake and I click on the email and it says that Joe Golfer registered these search terms on this website in 2006 and I can see the findings if I click here. I click and two entries pop up: one for “Idel Golfer” with birth date, place of origin, and a second entry for “Berel Golfer.” I click on “Berel” and it says the name of his wife that I don’t recognize and that he was a painter.
I say his name out loud.

Berel.

Poppop pauses and looks up because he had been looking down and says yes that was my older brother. He looks at Dad and Mom leans in and says Adam are you okay honey and I nod but feel very hot and Dad isn’t sitting next to Mom anymore and Poppop isn’t on the blue sofa and Mom and I are in the kitchen at home and I am telling her about a book I am making.

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VI. 195 Vilnius Street

It is impossible to know which one it is exactly. They stand before a row of houses numbered 195.

Two tall entrance ways with arches are sealed over in a smooth layer of yellow cement.
There are no doors.

He knocks twice on the cement.
He presses his ear to the wall and hears muffled sounds from the street behind him.
He places his palm against the damp surface and waits for it to slide open.

He lays on the grey step under the arch.

Kat takes a photo.

Everything that was black becomes white for an instant.

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**VII. Car to Efrat**

The next night in Jerusalem, his cousin picks him up to drive back to their settlement. He feels uneasy but prepares to listen.

Ruti drives while her two sons sleep soundly in car seats—one with a binkie, one with a backpack. The road feels new and is blanketed in white light.

An overpass runs between two tunnels surrounded by a snaking concrete wall. The grey wall arches inward over the road like a pair of cupped hands.

A tunnel, a bridge, a wall.

Vehicles emerge from a hole in the hillside, crossing beneath Gilo, over the Walaja Valley and under Beit Jala. On the far side of the hill, they materialize once more in the Gush Etzion settlement block.
This road has made things a lot easier for us. It used to take 30 minutes to drive from Jerusalem to Efrat. Thirty minutes *plus* traffic. With the kids, it was a mess. Now this highway cuts straight to Efrat.

What’s below this bridge?

It’s an Arab village. If you see any areas that are poorly lit, they are Arab villages. See up there on the hillside? That is also a village.

Can Palestinians drive on this road?

I think some can, but there used to be a lot of attacks here. Stones and molotov cocktails would get thrown at cars. They built this road to bypass violent areas. I know you think it’s terrible, but it’s working.

I think it’s medieval. I find it disturbing that only Jews can drive on parts of this road. It’s reinforcing a culture of fear. Do you ever worry about your kids growing up in a place where they are taught to fear Palestinians? Or that they have to serve in the military?
I think about it every day and it does scare me. But what would you do? It’s easy to get philosophical about these things when you live in New York. You get your coffee and bagel in the morning. You don’t have to worry that someone is going to stab you or blow up the cafe.

Do you really think I eat a bagel every morning?

You are Jewish and you live in New York.

It’s true, my life in New York is different. But don’t you ever think about what causes this violence? To me, it’s a problem that you live in a settlement on land that is not part of Israel. When I visited you before, I could feel the tension in the air. You are surrounded by Palestinian neighbors on all sides. The only interaction you have with them is when day laborers come in to build your houses, to build your settlement. Until you recognize this, nothing can ever change. This is a political and a philosophical problem.

My god you sound like a self-righteous American. How long have you lived in New York?

Ruti—

Look. They want our land. They hate us and will do—

Wait—your land?
Please. I’m begging you. It’s so good to see you. The kids were so excited to see you. Do you really want to start with all of this now?

But you sound crazy, you can’t just generalize an entire—

I don’t mean to, but you have to understand. This is our life. Every day there is fear. I don’t like violence, but if there were no soldiers here and no wall, who knows what would happen.

What do you think would happen?

Well, to begin with the—

Mom?

Oh hey. Hi, sweetie. Did you have a nice schloofy? We are almost there. Close your eyes.

What are you talking about? Can Adam read us a story when we get home?
VIII. Olive Tree

Directions vary. We are told to watch out for the bend in the road, then for the house without a roof, then for the striped cat.

Eventually, I see a dirt path.

The tree is three stories tall with a trunk wider than ten men. It is surrounded on all sides by ten smaller trunks like guards.

These are her babies.

Thick oil oozes out of the trees and the air smells like olives. Children splash around in the yellow liquid, jumping and laughing, trying to stand up at the slippery roots. Ladders disappear into leaves and small dark orbs fall from the branches in a flurry. I bend down, pick one up and take a bite.

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IX. People You Might Know

Anne Frank was always young.

What?
She was always young. She never got old.

That’s sort of fucked up to say.

It’s true.

What does that really mean, though?

Well, she was killed. She died in Bergen-Belsen when she was 16.

But is she still young?

No, she’s dead.

So, that actually doesn’t make sense.

If you die before you get old, you will always be young.

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If she was alive now do you think she’d use Facebook?
From the attic? Probably. I would. I mean—we all do now. Why wouldn’t she? She was cooped up in that room forever. She’d want a connection with the outside world.

But she was hiding, that would’ve been suicide.

That’s assuming that the Nazis were also using social media.

Of course they would’ve used social media. Talk about control.

Can you imagine people hashtagging Nazi shit? #HeilHitler

Again. Very fucked up.

I’m sure some skinhead psychos somewhere are using that now.

But that’s not what I’m talking about. I’m talking about Nazis. Just saying it would’ve been a quicker way to spread the word.

You are a freak.

Wanna know something weird? On Thursday, she friended me.

What do you mean?
Well, she didn’t friend me, exactly. But she popped up in my feed. People You Might Know.

And it was her?

The profile picture was from the cover of her book. Well, her diary, anyway.

The one where she is smiling?

Yeah, but that was before—

Wait, so what did you do?

I couldn’t believe it. I was standing outside the diner on 18th Street waiting for Daniel, playing with my phone. I was just killing time. And then it popped up.

People You Might Know.

Daniel walks up and I’m like, “You won’t believe what just happened.” He says, “What’s wrong?” and when I show him my phone he slaps his forehead.

“Only you. This would only happen to you.”
Then, he snatches the phone out of my hands and sends her a friend request.

Wait. So now you’re friends with Anne Frank?

That’s the crazy thing. It’s been 3 days and she still hasn’t showed up as a friend. And when I search for her profile, there is no entry.

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X. A Knock on the Door

A knock on the door.

An old man answers looking tired and I say, this is my house, and he says something to me in a tongue I don’t understand. I say it again, insistent: this is my house. And he looks a bit more impatient the second time and says something that sounds just like the first time—only colder, so I pause.

I pick up my camera and click take a picture and now the man looks angry.

I look over my shoulder and the woman from the archive is standing there and her eyes say it all and I am in the streets in Riga but it looks like Kaunas, and I am in Haifa at a house knocking on the door with a fistful of keys but no one is answering.

I keep knocking.
I am thinking about the house that may have been mine or maybe someone else’s, and I am on the Amtrak and branches are clicking and clacking.

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**XI. Leila**

*When are you coming to Amman? Have you been here before?*

I write to her in July about doing a face-to-face interview. Our correspondence lasts half of a year.

*My plan is to be in Jordan the last week of January, as you said. Do you know which day you will be back in Amman?*

The exchanges primarily consist of logistical arrangements.

*Yes, I will be back on the 15th.*

*That’s perfect.*

We settle on the last weekend in January.
How much time will you have? Can we arrange an interview?

Well, it depends on which day you will be in Amman. I can arrange for one and a half hours.

Her voice is deep and rough. She is amused by my nervousness.

I like her instantly.

A few weeks pass and I begin to tell my friends. At first I refer to her in conversation, as ‘Leila Khaled, the infamous Palestinian hijacker/revolutionary.’ When people become familiar with my plans, a shortened, ‘Leila Khaled’ is sufficient.

Eventually she is simply, ‘Leila.’

---

At Ben Gurion Airport, I am directed to a windowless room with a bare bulb and a small metal table. A dark-skinned border agent is glaring at me, skeptically. She is very close to my face.

Do you know who Leila Khaled is? She’s a terrorist. She tried to blow up airplanes filled with civilians. You know how many people that is?
Aside from the interview, I'd like to film you doing things you would normally do in your daily life. Do you garden?

Maybe we can walk or drive to the market?

We will see. I think it is best to arrange meeting at my office and we will go from there. But tell me what is this film about?

310 people. 56 of them Jews. And yes, it’s true. Three planes were blown up. I can’t deny that. But only after the hostages had been evacuated. The PFLP wasn’t trying to hurt anyone. They were trying to make a statement. No civilians were harmed.

You don’t know what you’re talking about. This is a terrorist. She wants to blow up buses and stab people in the streets. She is the same as Bin Laden.

The project is sort of difficult to explain. It is about four different people who have each inhabited different versions of themselves.

A photographer, a Nazi reenactor, a performance artist, and you, a PFLP revolutionary.
You mean—you’re planning to have a documentary for all of these different personalities?

Yes. And find some things that are common.

Some things common and some things not.

Yes. Each of you have different and very complex relationships to your histories.

Whether the way or the goals.

Exactly.

And I am one of these four?

A fist slams the table.

The shape of the border agent’s mouth changes very fast. Her brow is furrowed. A long black hair creeps out of her nose. It curves back onto itself, resting on the space above her lip. She is half my size, but I am nervous. She gets very close to my face again, and the hair quivers in the draft of the A/C.

I don’t mean to change the subject, but you have a—
What? I have a what?

Well on your—um, well there’s a—

What?

She touches her cheek, concerned. She is red.

Don’t play games with me. We are here to talk about her. Not me.

Here. Let me just—

I lean across the table, staring into her eyes: two hopeful green orbs marred by a perpetual frown. Gently, I reach towards her face. The hair grazes the top edge of her upper lip. Her mouth slowly parts and a thread of saliva glints in the glow of the fluorescent dangling above our heads—

WHAM. My head slams against the cold table and my right arm is twisted painfully back over my head.

Ow! Hey!
What the fuck do you think you’re doing?! This is not a game.

Now tell me. Where is she?

My voice cracks.

She is in her 70s. She is an activist not a terrorist.

Do you know what happens to Americans who go to Jordan to meet terrorists? They disappear and are chopped into little pieces.

Does your mother know what you’re doing?

A bead of sweat emerges from my left armpit and rolls lazily down my side to my waist.

She doesn’t.

Ow!

She pulls my hair and WHAM my head is pressed against the cold metal table. She is holding me down with her palm.
Let me go! What are you doing? Why are you doing this??

I squirm, but when I try to wrestle from her grasp, she pulls my hair more. I am pinned. She steps up onto the table, and digs the sole of her boot into the side of my face. I imagine a distinct grid and dot pattern on my cheek.

The door bursts open.

I twitch violently and wake up seated on a packed airplane.

—safety belts, set your seats in their upright position and close your tray tables. We will touch down at Ben Gurion Airport in approximately 15 minutes. The local time in Tel Aviv is 7:56am. Thank you for flying with Delta. We hope to see you again soon.

I see.

[Cough]

We will meet in Amman and see if we like each other. And the rest...

Thank you, Leila. I am very excited to meet you and do the interview. I think this will be a very interesting project.

Mmmhmm.
Ok then when you arrive in the region, just email me please.

Bye-bye.

---

The day I land I email her to check-in.

No response.

Three days later, I am sweating in an apartment in Jerusalem without heat.

I binge eat. My stomach is bloated with dates.

A bing from my laptop.

Dear Adam, I am very sorry but I will not be back in Amman in time for our meeting. I hope you understand. –Leila

---
I am standing in an enormous room. The walls, floors and ceilings are white. In the corner, a cat is staring at me. She is black with a white belly. I blink and she is grey. I cock my head to be sure, and she is black and white again.

Through a window on the far wall, green palm leaves are swaying. It is night.

In the corner next to the window is a small kitchen. The shelves are wooden and the tile above the sink is beige. A small sepia toned photograph of three figures rests against the wall. The older man wears a keffiyeh and stands between two teenagers. All three have pencil mustaches and look happy.

I hear voices, and when I look over my shoulder, Dad and Poppop are sitting at a small square table in the corner of the room laughing. When they see me their eyes light up but they do not tell me to come over. They are playing cards. I walk towards them and notice a group of teenagers in olive uniforms lined up waiting for something. I can’t see their faces but there is an awkwardness about the way they are standing. One of them has an iPhone. We say nothing and I keep walking.

Dad and Poppop are far away but I move in their direction.

When I am almost there, I hear a voice.
A white marble bust of a man’s head rests on a low brown coffee table. The sculpture has a large forehead and looks concerned.

I take a step towards it but Dad and Poppop are waving and gesturing for me to hurry up.

As I walk in their direction, I look up and notice a plastic lawn chair suspended in midair, halfway between us. When I am directly beneath it, I stop.

I jump up to try and touch it.

Don’t touch that!

A girl with glasses in all black is standing behind a tall white desk looking at me sternly.

Oh sorry, I was just trying to see how this is being held up.

You can’t touch that. Read the sign.

She points to my feet. A small brass plate is screwed into the floor: Do Not Touch.

Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t see that. I was looking up, not down. I can’t reach it anyway...
I make my way over to Dad and Poppop and sit down.

That was so weird.

What’s wrong?

Oh, that girl just yelled at me for trying to touch the chair.

What girl?

I turn around to point her out, but no one is there. Just white.

I swear I just saw a group of men and a photograph on the wall. And the window. Where is the window? Did you see a chair floating in the air? I know it sounds stupid, but I just saw it.

Dad looks at Poppop and Poppop looks at me.

We are the only ones here. Anyway, you’re here now. Are you going to ask him?

There are cards on the table and it looks like they have been playing Bridge.

Well, I don’t really know what to say. You two are playing cards anyway.
Ask him.

I pause and look at Poppop. His sideburns are down to the bottom of his ears and his tiny reading glasses rest on the tip of his nose.

What is it Adam?

I look at Dad and he sort of nods at me to get on with it.

Well, could you tell me about what it was like? You know, when you were growing up back then. Before the war, in Kaunas. Tell me about Berel.

He looks down at his hands for a second and then up at me. He takes his glasses off and squeezes the space between his eyes. He looks at me.

Why would we talk about that? We are here now. Let’s just be here.

I look at Dad and he is laughing and then Poppop starts laughing too and I start laughing and I feel a bit embarrassed but somehow relieved. There is a roll of paper towels on the table, and I am not sure why, but I pick it up and throw it at Poppop. He catches it and laughs and then something clicks.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

A HOUSE WITHOUT A ROOF
Caption List
(Images from Thesis Wall Installations)

i. Coke Machine (Bethlehem)
   Archival Inkjet Print, 5x7”, 2012

ii. Scouts (Kuldiga)
    Archival Inkjet Print, 20x24”, 2016

iii. Israeli settlers in the illegal outpost, Migron, plant trees on the Jewish holiday, T’u
    B’shevat
    Archival Inkjet Print, 5x7”, 2012

iv. Paul Newman in Exodus
    Archival Inkjet Print, 8x10”, 2015

v. Mamilla Cemetery, a Muslim burial site dating to the 7th Century Rashidun Caliphate is being
dug up for construction of the Simon Wiesenthal Center’s “Center for Human Dignity - Museum
of Tolerance.” Construction of the museum faced fierce political opposition from both
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continues as planned.
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vi. Palestinian Construction worker in Efrat, an Israeli settlement in the Occupied West Bank
    Archival Inkjet Prints, 4x5”, 2015 (3 Images)

vii. Dachau (Red Tape)
    Archival Inkjet Print, 5x7”, 2008

viii. People You Might Know
     Digital C-Print, 11x14”, 2016

ix. Chimney (Latvia)
    Archival Inkjet Print, 11x14”, 2015

x. “Raising the Ink Flag” - March 1949, close to the border with Eilat, after territory was captured
   by the Israeli Defense Forces
    Archival Inkjet Print, 5x7”, Historical Photograph

xi. Toy Gun (Ramallah)
    Archival Inkjet Print, 5x7”, 2012
xii. Lifta, a former Palestinian village (Jerusalem)
    Archival Inkjet Print, 5x7”, 2015

xiii. David Ben Gurion’s Dish Towels (Tel Aviv)
    Archival Inkjet Print, 5x7”, 2015

xiv. Theodor Herzl posing for a photograph in *Mikve* Israel in 1898. A version of this image would later be composited into a separate photograph depicting Herzl’s historic meeting with Kaiser Wilhelm II in Jerusalem, after the photographer “Missed the shot.” Herzl viewed this meeting in Palestine as a legitimization of the Zionist cause from an eminent European leader, and arranged for a reenactment and composite photograph.
    Archival Inkjet Print, 5x7”, Historical Photograph

xv. Boy feeding horse in abandoned house in *Wadi Salib* (Haifa)
    Archival Inkjet Print, 16x20”, 2015

xvi. In Hebrew, the caption reads, “Haganah youth in Jerusalem on their way to protect Jewish property during the Arab Riots (1947).”
    Archival Inkjet Print, 11x14”, 2015

xvii. Public address system at the Muqata’a (Palestinian Authority Headquarters) in Ramallah. International media outlets set up microphones to record a joint press conference by Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas and the visiting UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon
    Archival Inkjet Print, 5x7”, 2012

xviii. Framed portrait of Yasser Arafat at the Muqata’a
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    Magazine, 1988

xx. *The Texas-Israeli War: 1999*
    Paperback Book, 1974

xxi. Dad in 1970. He moved to Haifa for a year after high school to live on a kibbutz
    Archival Inkjet Print, 11x14”, Family Photograph

xxii. Cars I, II (Haifa)
    Digital C-Prints, 16x20”, 2015 (2 Images)
A mask bearing the likeness of Khader Adnan, a Palestinian prisoner held in Israeli Administrative Detention without charges. In 2012, Adnan went on a sixty-six day hunger strike in protest of his incarceration. Pressured by the international community, the Israeli Military eventually released him. In 2015, Adnan was arrested again without charges and went on a second hunger strike, spanning more than fifty days.

Archival Inkjet Print, 5x7”, 2012

195 Vilnius Street, Siaulai (Lithuania). Birthplace of my grandmother

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Air-o-gram (Dad to Poppop)

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Staircase (Jerusalem)

Digital C-Print, 16x20”, 2015

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Stills from Router
Stills from the film *Router*