

Notes on another kind of suspension

You started with the ground, by digging a hole. It is only recently that have you spoken about grief as the feeling that the ground beneath you has fallen. Your words strike me: *falling flat, fallen, fallen woman, falling around, fall down, fall short, fall from grace, fall apart, fall to pieces, free fall.*

What happens when a fall is paused, the moment stretched out in suspended animation. The awareness of ground and air – and the distance between – becomes heightened. Breath is held. There's something of this in your work, like a slow-motion negotiation between air and ground: you dig down; you build fabric contraptions to hold wet earth aloft; you dangle paper-thin forms, reminiscent of body parts, which twist to and fro on currents of air pivoting on the axis of barely visible threads; you knot tights that are weighed down, stretched by clumps of earth; you turn gabions (usually used by civic planners to hold back the earth) into emptied cage-like monuments to something past. And where you stand now, in the Garw valley at the centre of the South Wales coalfields, is where it all began. You describe it as *landscape in limbo*.

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I felt my way, you said, making work that is bigger than me. But it is also *of you and from you and in you and around you*. Does that make it all *about you*? Not only that. Prepositions matter. You're not looking at yourself from the outside, but dwelling in (and on) yourself from the inside in relation to the outside, and in (and on) the outside in relation to the inside. These boundaries spill over. They're a leaky mouthful. 'The world and I reciprocate one another', David Abram says. 'The landscape', he goes on, 'as I directly experience it is hardly a determinate object; it is an ambiguous realm that responds to my emotions and calls forth feelings from me in turn'.¹ Such reciprocity is even more emotionally charged for your work which starts with a small rectangle of earth that, as you put it, *shares my DNA*.

I like to leave an impression, you say. You leave footprints and handprints, sloughing off your dead skin, sifting and sieving and stirring and rubbing an amalgam of oozing mud pies. This is your way of not just leaving your impression but seeking out ways to be impressed upon (it works both ways). The encounter collects under your fingernails, tracks along your fine lines and drips down your throat. These are mouthfuls of internalised and externalised bodily knowing.

Back to ground again.

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There is an intimacy in all this, but also, in its fragmentation, alienation. Body parts are only partly that. These abstracted resemblances are *belly-like, breast-like*: not fully belly, not fully breast. Your intimacy with this earth stems from your alienation from it, from experiences that happened here. Your body, I imagine, has for many years been *in limbo*.

A beautiful, painful, word that is neither here nor there. It comes from the Latin *limbus* meaning edge or border and is related to *limes*, meaning a path or border, and also limb ('with intrusive b', my dictionary of etymology reminds me). I hold it in my mouth and feel the vibration of my lips as the hum left by that 'intrusive b' lingers.

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In recent years something has changed. You no longer shy away from the intensity of all this. You've talked about the harm of over 40 years of what you call 'disenfranchised grief', a term you borrow from Melanie Klein. I'm taken by the etymology of this word too (how one thing leads to another): 'dis' denoting 'a lack of' and 'enfranchise' which comes from the French 'to set or make free' and means 'to grant someone the status or privilege of citizenship'. I'm stunned to think of grieving as a privilege – what choice do we have? But when the option to show your grief – to touch it, to enter it, to share it, to recognise it, to express it (like milk), to somewhat understand it – isn't made available by the people around you who hold more power than you, then what? We've talked about how it feels to make art that stems from such a difficult personal and ongoing experience, and how it feels to feel good about yourself and the work that you're making now. To find pleasure in difficulty isn't paradoxical though, or masochistic. You remind me of Audre Lorde who wrote 'The erotic is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing'.ⁱⁱ

The liberation of feeling fully stems from being able to speak of that which you feel and yet there is a long tradition of dismissing women who write or make work from their personal experiences. They've often been labelled 'over-sharers'. In the West we have been socialized to consider the rational and the cerebral as more valuable, more serious, than the emotional and the bodily. Work made in this latter mode is deemed confessional, as navel gazing (*what's wrong with looking at your navel?! you cry*). In a recent interview, sent to me by a friend, poet and writer Anahid Nersessian argues that artists and writers who are women, gender non-conforming, or of colour, are always being called on to declare their personal experiences as a statement of legitimacy. She says: 'there is often a demand made on [...] anybody who comes from a population that is not historically given a large or highly visible cultural platform, to produce their biography as an authentication of their right to speak, and preferably to give as much detail as they can about an experience, particularly if the experience has been hard or traumatic'.ⁱⁱⁱ But for you, the silence imposed on you over the years has generated a sense of disempowerment that you will no longer tolerate: as D.W. Winnicott tells us 'It's a joy to be hidden and disaster not to be found'.^{iv} The point is to have the power to decide.

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You'll notice that I have only circled around your story. This wasn't my intention but it's interesting to see it happening, of its own accord, since much of our conversation these past months has turned on how the difficult experiences that have precipitated your recent work make themselves known to us, your audience. How explicit and specific or indirect, even opaque, need those experiences be? Sometimes we've likened it to leaving the door ajar, an invitation for others to enter. But we've also talked about feeling a sense of responsibility to stay with the difficulty, to confront our discomfort. Is it about how we talk

about it? How we name it? It's not mine to name, though, so I continue to circle, tiptoe, inadvertently slip and slide as I witness grief gathered, distilled, and rehydrated. A series of *infinite ands*, you call it. Claustrophobic, contaminated, and reanimated, these *infinite ands* are alive with the promise of feeling fully.

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Lizzie Lloyd 2023

ⁱ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous. Perception and Language in a More-than-human World* (New York: Vintage Books: 1996)

ⁱⁱ Audre Lorde, 'Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power', originally presented at the Fourth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, Mount Holyoke College, August 25, 1978

ⁱⁱⁱ Anahid Nersessian interviewed by Hannah Zeavin, "I speak only of myself": Anahid Nersessian On Keats, Feminism, and Poetry', <https://www.publicbooks.org/i-speak-only-for-myself-anahid-nersessian-on-keats-feminism-and-poetry/> (accessed 23 March 2023). Thank you to Bryony Gillard for pointing me here.

^{iv} Quoted in Melissa Febos, *Body Work: The Radical Powers of Personal Narrative* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022)