

Dear Corrine,

I TOOK YOU IN AS A WORD.

(Rosmarie Waldrop)

What has it been – two weeks? – since I shared less than 48 hours with you in Paris, in the midst of the final installation of my MFA show. “Movies are made about weekends like that” you texted me the day after I left. Movies should definitely be made about friendships like ours. Those of writing and of loving, of language and of love.

WE CAN ONLY WRITE WHAT WE
HAVE BEEN GIVEN TO READ.

(Rosmarie Waldrop)

About a year ago I made one of those Facebook shout-outs where I asked for literature on the practice of translation. You were quick to respond, of course, and a link you provided me brought me to the book *Lavish Absence*, in which Rosmarie Waldrop makes a tangible connection between writing and loving; loosing and gaining; translating and mourning. Knowing you, I instantly bought the book. As it turned out, it came to be one that I filtered my entire MFA project through; one that changed not only my writing, but also my entire thinking and maybe even parts of my life.

I write to you this time to ask if you would like to talk to me.

I have been thinking lately on what it means to talk to one another, to utter words, to articulate thoughts in a shared space. On what bodily acts we perform when we participate in dialogue, and how rooms in which we execute them are organized, directed, choreographed.

The writer Sara Ahmed, who I know you to be as drawn to as I am, says that bodies acquire orientation

by repeating some actions over others. She states that gatherings – whether a family assembling around a dinner table or a group of people congregating in space to engage in a shared political matter – are not neutral, but directive. When gathering, we are required to follow specific lines.

LINES ARE BOTH CREATED BY
BEING FOLLOWED AND ARE FOLLOWED
BY BEING CREATED. THE LINES THAT
DIRECT US, AS LINES OF THOUGHT AS
WELL AS LINES OF MOTION [...] DEPEND ON
THE REPETITION OF NORMS AND CON-
VENTIONS, OF ROUTES AND PATHS TAKEN,
BUT THEY ARE ALSO CREATED AS AN
EFFECT OF THIS REPETITION.

(Sarah Ahmed)

As we know, lines can take many forms. Vertical, horizontal, circular, straight, bent. If we follow them; if we line up, we most often know where we are. We find our way when we turn both this way and that, we know what to do in order to get to that place or this. We are oriented; resided in space.

I WILL BEGIN WITH: **H**.
THIS IS WHAT WRITING IS.

I
ONE LANGUAGE, **I** ANOTHER
LANGUAGE, AND BETWEEN THE TWO
THE LINE THAT MAKES THEM VIBRATE;
WRITING FORMS A PASSAGEWAY
BETWEEN TWO SHORES.

(Hélène Cixous)

This fall you and I celebrate four years of friendship. Can you believe that so little time has passed, while so much has happened? I remember very well the first time you asked me out. I had just moved to New York and was very confused by cultural dating codes. We had met a couple of times to talk about poetry,



feminism and art, you kept bringing up a wedding and I kept suggesting outfits for you, while simultaneously telling you I had never been to a lesbian wedding, and eventually you asked me if I wanted to go with you.

We made a scene that night. That night was epic. Thinking back, that night the rest of my life began.



Sara Ahmed teaches me that in landscape architecture unofficial paths are described with the term desire lines. Those are imprints on the ground, where people have deviated from the paths they are supposed to follow. Leaving their marks, hollows in the ground, alternative and unexpected lines appear. “Such lines are indeed traces of desire, where people have taken different routes to get to this point or that point.” Ahmed calls the accumulation of those lines ‘queer landscapes’, shaped by paths we follow when deviating from the straight line.

Then, the question could be; what difference does it make what we are oriented toward? And what has all of this to do with my desire to talk to you?



I DON'T WANT TO YEARN FOR BLUE THINGS, AND GOD FORBID FOR ANY 'BLUENESS'. ABOVE ALL, I WANT TO STOP MISSING YOU.

(Maggie Nelson)

Another major issue in that MFA show of mine is the color blue. Blue is a fraudulent color. One of where you are not, one that speaks of depth and of edges, and always always about what can not be reached. The word *blue* derives from an old English word for melancholy, or for sadness, and as such it tracks back to 1555 in an etymological dictionary. But as a color it trails further, to the 12th century when it was carried over from Old French through the word *blo*, in its turn based on the root *bbel-*. And here,



again, blue becomes fraudulent. It turns out that blue actually didn't mean blue at all, but rather spoke of something lightly colored, sometimes of something in-between grey and blue or green, and occasionally even meant yellow. The root of the word carried such strength that it dispersed into numerous languages, spread across the world; engendering a multitude of meanings. Today *belyi* is Russian for white, *blavo* is Spanish for yellowish-gray, and *blawr* is Welsh for gray. And in some languages, blue lacks an obvious boundary. In Korea, *pureau-da* is the word for both blue and green and in Thai *kbiaaw* represents green but is also the color of the sky and the ocean.

Maybe you already know all of this, since you seem to be into to blue too. A few months ago, I read Maggie Nelson's *Bluets* in one day, and a couple of days later you wrote me an email saying you had just read that very book – the first book you have finished in a long time. At some point during the same weeks, you sent me a link to the documentation of a performance lecture you had done for *Center for Experimental Lectures*. The lecture – (*BLUE*) – was entirely mute, and you spoke only through written language on two parallel projected surfaces. The lack of sound made your voice brutally present. I realized, while watching you articulate one word after another; letter by letter; how sometimes the loss of something makes something else so much more tangible. How sometimes, the absence of you in my everyday life makes my proximity to you so much deeper.



Once I spoke on a panel on the topic of a 'feminist language'. The room was small and crammed with people, lined up on rows of chairs facing the front of the room where two other speakers, two moderators and I were placed. We, invited speakers and moderators, talked vividly for fifty-five minutes. I do not recall very much of our conversation, but what I do remember was the last five minutes of that hour. One of the moderators asked if there were any questions amongst the audience. A woman raised her arm. The





moderator made a gesture, declaring her right to speak out. The woman was furious. Her point: When we had gathered to talk about something called a ‘feminist language’, we had done nothing but to reinforce a hierarchy in-between those worthy of talking and those only of listening. For fifty-five minutes, five of us had possessed every space of articulation available in that crammed room, in order to provide five poor minutes for the rest of the sixty or so present. Her anger brought an uncomfortable energy to the room. Some grinned, some wriggled, some sighed. The moderator, quick in mouth and talented in argument, smiled to the woman and simply declared: This is a *panel*. If you would like to participate more interactively, I would recommend you to attend one of the workshops later this afternoon.

This moment stuck with me. It posed a question, still ringing in my head: Why do we so rarely break away from norms and conventions concerning *how* we talk about breaking norms and conventions?



Sara Ahmed asks us to think about the ‘habit’ that can be found in the ‘in-habit’, when she states that public spaces take shape through habitual actions of bodies.

THE BODY IS ‘HABITUAL’ NOT ONLY IN THE SENSE THAT IT PERFORMS ACTIONS REPEATEDLY, BUT IN THE SENSE THAT WHEN IT PERFORMS SUCH ACTIONS, IT DOES NOT COMMAND ATTENTION... IN OTHER WORDS, THE BODY IS HABITUAL INsofar AS IT ‘TRAILS BEHIND’ IN THE PERFORMING OF ACTION, INsofar AS IT DOES NOT POSE ‘A PROBLEM’ OR AN OBSTACLE TO THE ACTION, OR IS NOT ‘STRESSED’ BY ‘WHAT’ THE ACTION ENCOUNTERS.

(Sara Ahmed)

For Ahmed, it is not so much the bodies that acquire the shape of habits, but spaces that acquire the shape of the bodies that ‘inhabit’ them, which makes



some people feel in place, or at home, and not others. Hence, orientations affect what bodies can do – they are straightening devices. Phrased differently: spaces are oriented around the normative body, such as the straight body, the white body, the male body, which allows that very body to extend into space. *This* is the starting point, the point from which the world unfolds.

If we return to the room of the panel, a room of knowledge production and reflection, such lines, orientations, and habits become most noticeable. When we enter such a room; designated for artistic and political dialogue and termed as a ‘panel’ or a ‘seminar’ or a ‘lecture’, we know exactly which and what to ‘trail behind’. The room is organized according to linguistic acts, such as to speak or as to listen, and depending on which of these acts you have been assigned – prior to entering the room – you know what lines to move your body along with; what choreography to follow. Where to walk, how to sit, when to speak, how to be silent. When talking, you are expected to be clear and concise, to stick to the subject, to not be too personal or too explicit, to wait on your turn, to be engaged but not to be too emotional. Rules are rigid, choreography strictly hierarchical.

That woman, in the end of our panel on the topic of a ‘feminist language’, performed her body in a way that posed a problem. When questioning the format of our dialogue, a *panel*, her body did not only deviate from lines familiar in such a room, but also it commanded attention. It did not ‘trail behind’. And when things came out of line, the effect was uncomfortable, awkward, queer. In order for things to line up, the queer moment had to be corrected.



BLUE IS THE LIGHT THAT GOT LOST.

(Rebecca Solnit)

THE LIGHT COMES IN THE NAME OF THE VOICE.

(Joan of Arc, as quoted
by Anne Carson)





As you know, all of my thoughts concerning the color blue, silence and writing, translating and mourning, unfolds from a work I did together with my grandmother about an odd mountain where she spent most of her life. “The mountains cease to be blue when you arrive among them and the blue instead tints the next beyond”, Rebecca Solnit writes in her book *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*. My grandmother’s mountain was never blue, but Solnit’s book seems to be written entirely about it, about us, about losing my grandmother while gaining writing.

The last few weeks my grandmother and I spent together she had lost her language and approached the end wordless. I started writing my grandmother’s story while sitting by her side at the hospital; a history as occupied with utterings as with quietness. My entire life she had spoken to me, told me story after story and often the same story over and over. And there we were, her in a bed and I in a chair, two creatures of language both embedded in silence; in the loss of a voice.

“Lost really has two disparate meanings”. In that book, Rebecca Solnit repeatedly titles every second chapter “The Distance of Blue”, while writing a story about getting lost. She tells us that losing things is about the familiar falling away; getting lost is about the unfamiliar appearing. Either way, it is an experience of losing control. I read this book over and over while processing my work around the mountain, and while mourning my grandmother, and I learn – over and over – that finding oneself can only be achieved by losing oneself. “That the art is not one of forgetting but of letting go.”

One art I really do not master is the one of letting go.



IF WE BEGAN INSTEAD WITH DISORIENTATION, WITH THE BODY THAT LOSES ITS CHAIR, THEN THE DESCRIPTIONS WE OFFER WILL BE QUITE DIFFERENT.

(Sara Ahmed)

For the occasion to which I am inviting you to talk to me, I would like to talk about all and none of this, and especially about how one – we – can talk in other ways, when we talk to one another. Can we, and if we can how can we, take other directions when gathering for artistic and political dialogue? If we intentionally choose not to ‘trail behind’ modes of conversations oriented around the normative body, the ‘here’ from which the world unfolds, then what spaces can we generate?

What happens if the room is organized differently? If points for seating or standing are shaped in deviant formations; if bodies are choreographed not to sit or to stand but to walk or to lie down or to dance; if we are to discuss while eating or while cooking or while playing a game; if the dialogue lacks a moderator or if every one is asked to moderate; if lines are refused through proposing a room without guidelines or if lines are emphasized through explicitly rigid rules; if we must interrupt one another when we talk or if we are prohibited to talk at all?

Can we, and if we can how can we, document such an event, again in ways unfamiliar? What would happen if everyone present would document the event while it takes place; if documentation can only be based upon one’s memory; if the outcome of the event must be described before the occasion itself has taken place; if documentation must only be analogue, if hearsay can be the only source; if documentation can neither be text nor images but only audio?

How would we move, perform our bodies, in a room choreographed to such skew lines? Would we become disoriented, and if so what directions would we take?



LIKE RUINS, THE SOCIAL CAN BECOME A WILDERNESS IN WHICH THE SOUL TOO BECOMES WILD, SEEKING BEYOND ITSELF, BEYOND ITS IMAGINATION.

(Rebecca Solnit)



THE HOPE OF CHANGING DIRECTIONS IS ALWAYS THAT WE DO NOT KNOW WHERE SOME PATHS MAY TAKE US: RISKING DEPARTURE FROM THE STRAIGHT AND NARROW, MAKES NEW FUTURES POSSIBLE, WHICH MIGHT INVOLVE GOING ASTRAY, GETTING LOST, OR EVEN BECOMING QUEER.

(Sara Ahmed)

My purpose of posing all these questions is not to find a path to answers. Rather, I long for the simple act of how to go looking for it; of how to travel according to a map with the desire to get lost; of how to explore possible and impossible modes for artistic and political dialogue. In the company of you – and a communion of likeminded – I would like to stage a collective attempt to translate these questions into an unfamiliar mode for how a room, bodies and linguistic acts can be organized, designed and choreographed. The effects of disturbing the order of things are uneven; things might even get quite uncomfortable. Yet discomfort allows things and bodies to move. When talking we might fail, and when doing so me might also gain.

THERE IS SILENCE AND SILENCE.

(Rosmarie Waldrop)

Silence is the third dimension of all utterance, writes Waldrop in that book through which I filtered my work, my language, and my loss. Waldrop in her turn has written that book in order to filter her loss of a friendship of language and love with the writer Edmond Jabès, whose books she translated for more than 20 years. Quoting Jabès, Waldrop claims that writing can be defined as translation from silence into more silence. “We know he is also talking about our lives”. Words make silence perceptible. Silence is existential, the ground we write on.

THIS IS THE DYSFUNCTIONAL TALKING. THIS IS HOW MUCH I MISS YOU TALKING. THIS IS THE DEEPEST BLUE, TALKING, TALKING, ALWAYS TALKING TO YOU.

(Maggie Nelson)

I am not quite sure what we would talk about, on the occasion of talking that I am inviting you to, but I am guessing you might have suggestions. As I currently find myself, again, in the midst of that hovering in-between losing and gaining, I think I need our talk to be about loss. And about the lingual events in the shape of an absent voice; about breathings within language. Maybe, I also need it to be about blue; about light that got lost; about what cannot be possessed, cannot be owned, cannot be captured. And about just having a ton of blues.

Love,
Hanna

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