

בלויב אין

דער היים

ווען דו

ביסט

קראנק

[selected excerpts]

I found this Covid-19 warning sign from the Stockholm municipality at a bus stop in Vasastan. I was stumped. I could read the Hebrew letters, but they read like jumbled German, my mother tongue, *bleyb in der heim ven du bist krank*. It took a second to process that I was reading Yiddish, a language I am completely unfamiliar with. It was only much later that I learned that Yiddish is one of the official minority languages of Sweden and that you can find Yiddish books in every public library. At this time of global crisis, I was far off from friends and family, and this unlikely chance-moment of recognition from within the unfamiliar, produced by a strange confluence of the right kind of knowledge aligning with being in a particular place at a particular time, was oddly comforting.

It read, loud and clear, *stay home when you are sick*. But where to go home to?

My memory is loose and my patience weak, so the best chance I have at gleaming at least some form of meaning from it all is to work in fragments. In some ways, this might hint at a poetic form, an artistic choice. Or it's just the works of the mind and what I need to do to survive, to not forget absolutely everything in the throngs of fragmentation. Yet a fear that I'll end up adrift, lost too far between places and languages always lingers.

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*Notes written in German in September,
on a park bench near St. Eriksplan*

I write objectively bad poetry in order to retain some sense of the time I spend living.

Every evening I write onto a new post-it note size piece of paper—it's the maximum my mind feels capable of handling—and then file it away between the pages of a book.

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September, Berlin

In a conversation about heritage, the question is raised, why is all this value given (allotted) to permanency? Turning to conservation, we discuss moving away from “fossilizing” the past to actually already conserving the future. What role does always thinking about the future play in decision making?

Why is all the value assigned to permanency?

A. raises a point about the temporary: that as long as you have no grasp on permanency you will never see yourself as a political subject or agent in the now.

The issue of being outside of Palestine. This has both positive sides and drawbacks. One of the core issues of physical exile: having no clear state of “default” to go back to.

Some months later, in reflection on the start of the pandemic, having just left her parents’ house in China to return to the course, Y. will sit at her kitchen table in Stockholm and tell me that this is the essence of *in-between*. Once you leave, even if you go back, you won’t belong anymore, because you have changed and so has everyone else.

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August, Ekerö

Eventually, you are bound to meet German girls riding across Swedish fields in the sidecar of an old moped. Sweden from this point of view is a roadmap to childhood nostalgia.¹

Picking blueberries and chantarelles means crawling barefoot through the moss looking for trolls.

Travellers trying to avoid international lockdowns and restrictions at all costs.



¹ Astrid Lindgren lived just a few blocks away, in your landscape of Vasastan, near St. Eriksplan.

Back in Berlin for October, I have discovered that the studio apartment for Mejan students in Berlin is – completely by chance – not only in the approximate neighborhood of my new apartment, as I had thought, but directly in my building, across the courtyard from my kitchen window. I feel duped by myself.

Having commuted from Berlin to Stockholm every few weeks on the regular now, it does not say much about my awareness of how I move through space if I have not been observant enough to notice “Mejan” at the very bottom of the doorbell sign.

The apartment, on Brunnenstraße 45, is at a strange crossroads and as a result, not quite anywhere. One block North is Wedding. One block to the East is now-posh Prenzlauer Berg, my childhood home. Walk one block south and you are in Mitte. It is also a hotspot for Eastern European religious Jews.

Just down the street is the synagogue and a kosher grocery store. I see undercover Orthodox Jews everywhere, their *tfilim* peeking out from under their long parkas. It hurts to see that all the men and the little boys are wearing baseball caps to hide their kippas.

Just diagonally across the street is the nearest bakery, run by a Palestinian family.

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15 November

All I need is a backpack. I go home to New York for Thanksgiving. The first public event I go to is a Biennale event at my former college. There, at this small gathering in rural New York State, I see a Palestinian rapper doing a DJ set—I've never seen him before, but instantly recognize him, because I used his music to learn Arabic to years ago, when I went to the West Bank as a teenager.

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November, later, Vienna

A group of people, a mix of Europeans and Palestinians, sits on the street outside a bar. G., from Hebron, proclaims

You know what I don't really get? I grew up in Hebron, okay, so my whole life I'm trained to fear Israeli soldiers and settlers. And here I'm supposed to walk by a synagogue, and think that it's okay that they have armed police standing around outside for their protection?

I don't get it.

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برلين

Thursday, January 9

I get three hours of sleep and a bit more on the plane. It's stressful smuggling all my stuff through the airport controls.

After an afternoon in Jerusalem, I depart for Beit Sahour, where we huddle around the heater. I realize how freeing it must be to have a house in two of your home places. We talk, eat, play cards. M. and I talk some more til late at night though I'm ready fall asleep by 11.

بيت ساحور

Friday, January 10

After a falafel and *ka 'ak* breakfast and a rainy march in Issawiya, I take a bus to Qalandiya, and a shared taxi to Ramallah. In nighttime, Ramallah is foggy and can be the most magical nighttime place on earth.

I walk directly to Garage, a bar, to meet some friends and the first person I see there is the same musician I ran into in rural New York a month and a half before.

رام الله

Saturday, January 11

I am at a Russian pharmacy, to buy sugar wax. Chatting in a Russian-Arabic mishmash with the pharmacist, I learn about all the many Russian and Ukrainian women who married Palestinian communists...

—Oh you know, Arafat... we had to come!

القدس

Monday, January 13

I have tea with a German who I seem to meet every five months, either in Berlin or in Jerusalem. I sleep on the couch of a friend's boyfriend, in an apartment shared by American Jews.

Tuesday, January 14

I wake up early and leave. Above the couch, an angry Rabbi glares at me from his picture frame.

رام الله

I spend a very cold night on a couch in Ramallah under a pile of blankets that smell of old man's sweat.

Friday, January 17

I learn that a friend of a friend, S., will be on the same flight to Sweden as me. She used to live in Jerusalem and now she is in Stockholm for a Jewish studies program. It's drizzling. I chat with Sasha the Russian homeless guy as I leave the cafe. He shakes my hand and gives me a Christian Bible in Hebrew.

Sunday, January 19

This plane ride feels extremely social for me, like being on a school bus during a field trip. I connect with S. I feel drained from all the socializing this week, all that energy... and yet here I am having an extremely intense conversation with this person.

Polyamory of places, is among the things she says.

It seems like her heart is in Jerusalem and she's not found such great footing in Stockholm.

Back in Arlanda, it feels nice to hear Swedish, on the one hand. But my head is also spinning—I'm feeling overwhelmed. What should I do when this happens? It feels as though the five hour plane ride was insufficient to shed the Middle East and mentally arrive in Europe.

I needed some type of decompression chamber to process this cultural change, possibly.

It has been dawning on me more and more that Sweden is really a place carefully crafted from insider knowledge. It's one big really complicated inside joke running, and if you didn't grow up here, you don't have the "in-knowledge" to pass as someone who belongs. I heard that there is even a scale in the integration classes that measures numerically how "in" on Swedish culture you are.

Monday, January 20

I have a hot drink with S. at some random bar near Odenplan.

I still feel overwhelmed by the speed of everything. I feel the same stress that I feel when my languages become too much for me.

As we talk, we discover that we both lived in the same apartment in the Sheikh Reihan street Jerusalem at some point—only S. lived there seven years before me—and now it turns out that by chance, she lives just three blocks from the apartment I'll be moving into in Vasastan.

When the pandemic breaks out a few weeks later, S. will return to the UK and leave her bicycle for me to use.

Rosie Braidotti writes that, unlike the migrant and the exile, the nomad sets out into the world voluntarily to transgress boundaries. Becoming a nomad is a way of taking back control, to some extent. Could we say that?

Now in Stockholm, it is my Arabic that gives me an unforeseen “ticket” into Swedish society, which is not that easy to penetrate from the outside.

1. I navigate the streets as a white European woman with light brown hair. In public, I pass as a Swede—but only until I open my mouth. Then, it immediately becomes apparent that I am not one of the pack and I do not belong.² I do not have the special insider’s knowledge. A rift is created. I am one of those people who makes you speak in English.
2. In a place like Fisksätra, on the other hand, you could encounter people who might not speak any English. The options are Swedish and other languages. When these others include Arabic, I opt for that. Here, the fact that I want to communicate in Arabic coupled with my outward appearance brings a measure of surprise and mostly, joy. I get this reaction in Germany too. A diaspora-effect? It makes me feel welcomed in, welcomed to be a part of some particular slice of society, whereas the Swedish mainstream is friendly, polite, considerate and, ultimately, keeping a safe distance from one another.

² I have a game I play when I go into any store or cafe in which I use all of the simple Swedish I know and see how long I can keep it up without breaking the illusion of me being Swedish. I do the same thing in Russian stores.

Two days ago at a language cafe in Tensta, I sat across from E., an elementary school teacher from Tajikistan, who was teaching me basic Swedish through his immaculate *Classical Arabic*. E. also speaks Farsi and Turkish (he lived in Istanbul for nine years) and Russian (re: Soviet past and he lived in Moscow for a couple years). Later F., a Swedish guy started tutoring us properly, and whenever either of us got stuck, we helped each other in Arabic. F. is very impressed by E., and calls him a language genius. E. is definitely wired for these languages, but F.'s assessment kind of misses the mark. He excels at it and he clearly finds joy in it, but F. is forgetting that these languages also form the fabric of E.'s life. They are a part of his life like having a job.

They are a knowledge of necessity.

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May 12, Södermalm

Arabic gets me far. I learn Swedish at språkcafes, mainly with old ladies from Iraq. I spend Midsommar with a group of Lebanese friends. They invite me into their circle of friends, someone gets me a job doing voiceover and I end up making money by dubbing informational videos for new arrivals to Sweden, with titles like “Tjej och ny i Sverige.”

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لأن الفتاة عادةً لا تعرف شيئاً عن حقوقها.
عندما كانت تعيش في بلدها—



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