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EDEN GIRMA (ADEN)

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READER CONTRIBUTORS:

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**ISSUE PROJECT ROOM
CHOCOLATE FACTORY THEATER**

PERFORMANCE STILLS COURTESY
OF CHOCOLATE FACTORY THEATER

This reader was produced in conjunction with *Propositions from the deadWIP / tizita, from the feet up* at ISSUE Project Room and Chocolate Factory Theater on December 8, 2021.

Presented by ISSUE Project Room and 2021 Suzanne Fiol Curatorial Fellow Sami Hopkins: *Propositions from the deadWIP* is a multidisciplinary performance series that balances considerations of knowledge and fallibility, launching from the premise that creative knowing imbues the process of making as much as a work's eventual presentation or future iterations. By never claiming to reach finality, the works in this series accept the condition of being always "in progress," with the potential to reimagine the status of a work-in-progress (WIP) altogether.

NOTES FROM ADEN:

If we think of our bodies and selves as an ultimate creative project, always in progress,
— of memory, as what can never be fully formed of this project's residues,
— of music, as a unique vessel by which bodily knowledge and experience is translated,
...in songwriting is a brief tapping into that circular, endlessly remade dimension, of what it means to be — we take moments that come to us as triggers and ghosts; we play with them & dress them in different clothing. And in this process is both clarity and continued confusion, of not just sound but of self — both definition and diffraction of life experience into the many possible directions.

Using the folk traditions and practices of song which inhabit my own body, I seek to explore the open space of eternal semi-finality that that songwriting — and the relics left in its wake — carves out of the psyche. I will reconsider and reimagine various sonic memories, environmental and creative recordings accumulated through my past, wielding voice, piano, and electronics as technologies with which to unravel and be unraveled by this autoarchive.



COLLAGES COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

EDEN GIRMA (ADEN)

IN-CONVERSATION WITH →

MAYA KEREN

Maya Keren This is so funny. Okay let's, let's do it. I guess the first thing I was just going to ask is when I was reading your proposal or your description online, you were mentioning Azmaris and then also tizita. I Googled it, but I wanted to learn more about what that practice was and what inspired you?

Eden Girma So, I'll explain *tizita* first because I guess *Azmaris* kind of spill out of that. So *tizita* is an Amharic word—Amharic being one of the languages spoken in Ethiopia, where my family is from—which means nostalgia. I think kind of a similar word to *tizita* in other language is in Portuguese, *saudade*, which, saying nostalgia doesn't quite cut it—it's a kind of emotionally loaded term as well, in the sense of how memory fills you with a sense of longing and emotions associated with that longing. So that's what the word means, and in Ethiopia it also signifies this particular musical form. I've heard people describe it as kind of like an Ethiopian blues. So it is harmonically defined with a pentatonic scale—so a five note scale—but that has a flat third and a flat sixth. But [it's] also kind of flexible in the sense that, you know, that harmony is just kind of an open space in which *tizitas* are composed and played. So *Azmaris*, which are like traditional folk singers in Ethiopia who play in bars or restaurants or whatever, kind of serve as entertainment and often are playing these folk songs that are in the form of *tizitas* and are usually waxing about like love lost or, or like a homeland that they have left or wandering from one place to another.

So yeah, I've been thinking about how, I guess, that particular song form and the cultural history of that song form resides in my own embodied experience and how my connection to that also influences

the songwriting process or creative processes that I find myself going through now, and the harmonic spaces or the musical ideas that I explore now.

Keren I guess I'm also curious because the other part of your title is about the feet [laughs]. And I know we kind of started this conversation, but I don't think really got so deep into it—talking about maybe not specifically your feet but just kind of you feeling like you had this intense experience with your body and feeling the release of all this energy or memory in your body. I'd like to hear more about that too.

Girma Yeah. So I guess in this particular commission I'm trying to explore or re-interrogate songwriting and kind of looking at my own body and creative processes as a case study, or a testing ground in a way. So one aspect of this testing ground, right, being cultural influence and the other being kind of how I'm physically experiencing things. And I think the intention behind including that phrase “from the feet up” in the title was motivated I guess by, one, just a larger intention that I feel I have in terms of wanting to—in this investigation of the creative process—wanting to unseat the priority that maybe the mind might be given in how we talk about emotions or how we talk about ideas. Even just thinking about the way that perception is defined in a Western context, you know, “I think therefore I am,” I felt like that kind of assumption was something that I wanted to throw away and maybe work from a different premise—that premise being how the body itself [is] a site of a sensory experience and a way of processing things that maybe [aren't] cleanly or clearly processed through cognition. I guess that's a very general idea, but I guess I was finding specifically how that was translating to me was—

Keren [laughs]

Girma Yeah! These really intense, strange experiences that I've been having with my feet and my feet feeling like this energy sink—well, energy sink and an energy source—and just different experiences in, in the past few months—

Keren Wait, what do you mean by energy sink?

Girma Energy sink meaning that energy is being channeled and stored in that place? Like feeling that in the tension of my feet muscles. And then also energy source in feeling that energy radiate outwards at times, and just different experiences in both, yeah, my waking life

and my dream life—having really weird dreams about my feet. So that was the more personal connection. But I think I also appreciate the imagery that is something filling me from the feet up—kind of imagining, you know, the ground as a source and something from the core of the earth radiating outwards and the first point of contact being my feet.

Keren Also in reading your proposal and also the Jessie Cox reader, thinking about bodies—both our physical bodies and also songs or works of art as these kind of constructed bodies—as the ultimate work-in-progress, and also bodies as these kind of houses of these nonlinear timescales, and bodies as these small universes of echoes and premonitions and foreshadowings. And songs, you know, as—

Girma What do you mean by foreshadowings? What do you feel is foreshadowed in songs?

Keren Well, I feel like I've had moments of intuition, of apprehension or feelings of *deja vu*, but the opposite way—feeling like, “oh, I'm going to be in this place later,” you know, or, “this is something that will cycle back.” I remember being at my friend Akiva's house and going on a run in the rain and feeling like, wow, this is something that I will do far in the future—or even not far in the future, like next year, or feeling a certain groundedness in a place that you know you will come back to it. I'm also curious because I feel like there's kind of an equation of—is that the word? “Equate-ment”?

Girma An “equate-ment”? Yeah an equation [laughs]!

Keren An equation of time and space.

Girma An equating?

Keren An equating! Sure. An equating of time and physical space and then feeling the translation of these different nonlinear timescales as time-travel, and kind of feeling this strange dance of being in places far, far away from each other. And I'm just curious if you

feel that in your physical body at all, or how that manifests for you. I don't know, I'm trying to connect the feet and then also what you were talking about, about this folkloric tradition. I wonder how these two things collide in these different ways that our bodies feel and understand time and space and the screwing of those things.

Girma Yeah [pause], that's an interesting question. How do I physically experience the screwing of time? [laughs]

Keren [laughs]

Girma I feel like there are moments that oftentimes specifically art or engaging with art grants me—whether through reading a book or listening to some music or watching a film or whatever—where very suddenly I feel myself so aware of I guess just my connectedness to other people, both horizontally through this chunk of space-time that we all inhabit, you know, then also vertically through time to previous generations or people. I've definitely felt that way listening to old Ethiopian records, for example—just something in that music that I feel resonates in my bones and makes me experience, in a way, a memory of a home or a memory of a community even though maybe it's not physically present. Like, obviously relatives who have passed away who I've never met or—I, I don't know how they look, I don't know how they sound, but, but it's just kind of like a thickening.

Keren What do you mean by thickening?

Girma A thickening of what feels like my own muscle, I guess, or like the material that makes me up suddenly just feels thickened by all of this, all of this memory or all of this—like remnants of things that have passed. I think it's interesting also how experiencing time in a non-linear way through my body is always a very heavy experience. I don't think I feel it as a sort of release. I feel like I experience it as a loading of material. Though I would say maybe there is an exception in, when I sing or like when I take that energy and then channel it outward through singing or through playing piano. That exercise feels like an emptying exercise, like an exhale.

Keren It's just interesting that you mentioned the feeling of thickening. When I feel that feeling of awareness, like, all the things that had to happen for me to be sitting here right at this moment, I often feel bolstered or kind of protected or, I just feel the sense of, of padding. And maybe that's because it puts my current moment in perspective and just makes me feel like there's been so much time.

Hundreds and hundreds of years of almost care, you know, care that, that had to happen for me to get here. It makes me feel just like, wider.

Girma Yeah, and I feel so in awe of what manages to be passed on and live on and be transformed through all of that time. When I think of just folk songs in general, or like thinking of *tizita* as a song for that—who knows how long it's been around for or how long people in some corner of the world have been singing in a way that can all be traced back [to] the same family. But it's such a profound thing to listen to something or express something through that same shared musical term, and then be a part of that family or carry on that current, through my own, yeah, through my own expression.

Keren I also wanted to ask you how you feel about engaging with your songs as this other time scale. I know I was telling you about how—since I've had so little time to practice this year—each hour that I can practice every couple of days feels like dipping or submerging myself back into this river that's flowing. And since I have so little time, it feels like I'm kind of just moving at this glacial pace that feels natural and good but that is kind of this timescale that's moving maybe three times as slow as the rest of my life. I remember hearing somewhere, you only have one song or if you're writing poetry, it's all one poem. I definitely think of it as a river, like this kind of water imagery of just being in this flow that sometimes is shown or offered and sometimes that's very murky and sometimes it's like you step out of that. I'm curious how you feel—hanging out with your songs, does it feel like a different timescale? Does it feel like another method of time traveling? In your notes, I remember too, you wrote that listening back to old recordings you're like, “is this me? or is this still me? Where, where does it become old me into new me?” I'm so curious how songs work for you in your conception of time and growth of self and also how they've maybe made space for a new version of you or held parts of you that you want to continue, or maybe embody parts that you don't love.

Girma It definitely is a mode of time travel for me because I feel like

IT DEFINITELY IS A MODE OF TIME TRAVEL FOR ME BECAUSE I FEEL LIKE THE SONGS THAT I'VE WRITTEN HAVE ALWAYS BEEN INTIMATELY CONNECTED TO A PARTICULAR TIME AND PLACE

the songs that I've written have always been so intimately connected to a particular time and place or experience that I was going through. And always returning back to these things feels like a very tender exercise.

Keren Aw.

Girma It does, it's kind of like how—when I go back and read my journals and just feel a lot of tenderness towards the person who I was, and also tenderness and gratitude towards myself for giving myself space to even say things.

Keren Yeah, oh, totally yeah. I hear that. I know that feeling.

Girma Yeah, yeah. Especially, I mean, in a world where so many things are compelling us to be hard and there's just like so much brutality externally and also just placed upon bodies and—yeah I just feel a lot of gratitude for music as, as you know, as a channel of expression and, and capturing of moments, and—what was I going to say? I'm trying to think of all of those questions.

Keren I know I put too many questions.

Girma That was like five thousand questions [laughs].

Keren I know it's because I was so excited!

Girma But what were they?

Keren Maybe one that I'm specifically curious about is—I feel like when I write a song it's like a little room for me to just submerge myself in and feel so acutely the things that I'm feeling and to have that be okay. And that process of writing the song and then spending all the time with it and then oftentimes playing it over and over, listening to it over and over feels like it literally allows me to continue my life. Or it allows me to imagine a new possibility of a future, even if it itself is stuck within a certain time-space. I don't know. I'm curious if you feel that way, if you feel a similar way, a little different?

Girma I definitely feel a similar way, like when in the process of writing something I feel it has always emerged out of some current that felt necessary to express in order to be able to move properly. Even though I don't want to give the impression that that current moves particularly quickly. Like I've had, yeah you know, songs that spill

out in a matter of minutes, but I've also had songs that really stretch over the course of months, and also musical threads that started off very separate that after some time would merge. And I think actually revisiting something after it's been shaped in a particular way has felt really powerful and informative to me creatively. On one hand, just as a way of I think challenging maybe the occasional rigidity or expectation with which I can sometimes approach myself and my own creative process.

I FEEL LIKE THE TERM LOGIC IMPLIES SOME CLEAR SET OF PARAMETERS OR DEFINITIONS OR AXIOMS, LIKE STARTING POINTS, AND OPERATIONS BY WHICH THOSE STARTING POINTS CAN [...] CLEARLY FLOW INTO SOMETHING ELSE

I feel like returning to music that I've placed in a certain form and then unraveling that form and pushing myself to, to basically dismantle a house at times and like transform it into a pool—it just, I think, is such a generative activity and brings me into such an interesting and reflective space—not only about music in terms of the harmony or the form or whatever, but also just regarding what that music was about and thinking back to, you know, if I have like a song that I'm holding and transforming into this body of water that I'm submerging and swimming around in, like that body of water being connected to this stream that passes through like a town of memory [laughs]. And then I like take a walk through this town which is maybe active, maybe it's like a ghost town by this point. And it's just, it's really powerful to see, or to experience. Yeah it, I think it's its own, you know, embodied way of experiencing how time moves and also circles back on itself in a way, and how my being as a human, and as like, as a creative person is a processor of all of that.

Keren Wow [laughs]. That's just, yeah. That's so beautiful. Do any of these songs feel like they're taking on new inevitable meanings? Or going back and deconstructing them, is it like, "I was in this moment, but now just letting it unravel"? I just imagine seeing new clarity that almost feels like, "this is where it was and now I'm here and it was kind of coming this way" or does it feel kind of unexpected? Maybe my question is better phrased—does it feel that there's inevitable logic from taking apart these songs and bringing them into your present moment? Or does it feel more like this intentional

deconstruction and rediscovery of what these songs meant or mean?

Girma I would definitely say it's like a rediscovery, yeah. I don't even know how logic would apply to this, like, to any of this. Yeah, because I feel like the term logic implies some clear set of parameters or definitions or axioms, like starting points, and operations by which those starting points can be—or like can clearly flow into something else. Whereas I think my music and the songwriting is just as informed by unconscious sentiments or expressions as much as they are things I can consciously register. And I feel like there's the, yeah, there's the rediscovery that comes from obviously my conscious attitudes in the present being different from what they were in the past. And I think then there's also an additional layer of rediscovery coming from—maybe with the perspective I have now having a clear, I don't know, being able to maybe parse out unconscious things from the past. And then also having in the present still the unknown variable that is my own unconscious things now that I can't consciously name but are, in whatever way that they're working, influencing how I'm engaging with something.

Keren Knowing you as someone who both has a practice of playing—like playing music live and playing songs on the piano and improvising—and then also someone who deeply engages with producing sound and this longer-scale shaping and structuring of songs and sound, I'm curious how both of those practices connect with everything else we've been talking about. [How they] connect with your feeling of timescales and memory and body. Because I very much experience the feeling of dipping into that river, of improvising and going back to common sounds on the piano that I think are beautiful and having those emerge even years later, but I don't feel as familiar with what that feels like with recording music or live processing. So I'm curious what that feels like for you?

THE STATIC NATURE OF RECORDINGS IS SOMETHING THAT'S ULTIMATELY ENFORCED BY BOTH TECHNOLOGICAL CONSTRAINTS [...] AND BY CAPITAL

Girma So I guess there are three domains to talk about: the live acoustic music, so like me and just piano; the live electronic music, so me, feet, computer, in real-time [both laugh]; And, um, and then, yeah and the produced stuff.

Yeah. I'll start with the produced stuff, because I feel like

my ideas about that are coming to me more clearly. I think out of those three domains that I described, definitely the recorded music is the most fixed in terms of I guess form and expression. Because, you know, I spent whatever process that ultimately leads to a point of, you know, an MP3 file that—basically at some point I have to decide, okay, this is what I'm going to put on Spotify, you know? [both laugh]

Keren You could just keep updating it. That'd be crazy.

Girma I mean, that is an interesting thought because I do feel like, in a way, the static nature of recordings is something that's ultimately enforced by both technological constraints—like for example, you know, if you make a live recording of something, then okay, that recording is what you have—and it's also constrained by capital, I guess. And as a musician, you know, if I want to have concrete things that an audience can return to, a clearly defined, recorded product is a useful thing to have. But I mean, the more I think about it though, the more that that finality is really artificially imposed. And I mean, like we already know that through the fact that people remix things, like they take recordings of things and transform it into something else. So even that's not fixed. But I guess I would just say with respect to my own work, I haven't yet explored the process of taking, you know, recordings that I've—like produced recordings that I've made and pressing the play button again. But I think that it's something definitely to consider, and that I think I'm kind of dipping my toes in a little bit [by] engaging with these recordings that I have just of the songwriting process itself.

In terms of of live performance I feel like that is so contingent on the moment of sounding, meaning I think when I'm playing live my energy is so focused on being present and exploring how I'm bringing out sound in that moment and taking the songs that I have as like the starting point or maybe like a frame, but never something that's completely, you know, enshrined or completely formulaic. And I think that's something that I've kind of been growing into more. I would say when I first kind of started out writing music and performing music for the first time, I would say I used to have a very set form of the way that I would play songs, and I think that was actually informed a lot

by fear and anxieties that I had about my own playing.

Keren I hear you.

Girma Yeah, whereas I think now I feel like [pause] I feel like my playing is becoming less about me and more about exploring—opening myself to be able to explore moments deeply. Yeah, like, moments as emotionally charged and musically fast. I don't know. So I guess it's—I guess that is like present-oriented, but not just present-oriented because also in the midst of that, I feel I am—I don't know, like I'm pulling from connections to things that maybe I heard or experienced in the past that then give me an idea to try and in the present. It's that kind of internal conversation with time, I guess.

Keren This is reminding me of things and I'm trying to think of how to phrase it as a question, but I don't know if the question is formed yet so I'll just say what this is reminding me of. I've been thinking so much in my own way of being and improvising and thinking musically [that] what I'm reaching for is this ability to be, or to see, or observe multiple universes at once. I think about Ornette, like Harmolodics, and this idea of planets spinning all at the same time, or just having these whirring, orbiting things going all at once and somehow being able to span all of them. That feels for me, like something that I think is really beautiful, and something I can hear also in people's music, this quality. And it sounds like this process that you've created of having this recorded sound that's you from a long time ago and then manipulating that, improvising on top of that, manipulating then that in another meta way—this feels to me like doing that, this manner of existing in all of these different, whirring spaces. I'm wondering, how does that feel for you? Do you think too about this, this feeling of developing this muscle of being in multiple universes?

Girma Yeah. For sure. I mean, from a purely technical standpoint as well, I feel like operating the computer—

Keren The universe of tech [laughing].

Girma Literally! And just the process of—how do I wrap my head around all of these audio files being processed on this machine-ee-do [laughing]! On this machine. Yeah, it is a process of, I feel, all of these different universes running around and just having to find a way to touch everything or be able to grasp everything, which certainly I'm still learning how to do, and sometimes feels very [pause] sometimes

it feels, I don't know if transcendent is the right word. But I guess sometimes I feel the channels are just very clear and my peripherals are open, and that I am able to see and channel through the whatever many ideas and engage with all of these different musical spaces and universes. And sometimes I don't feel that way. Sometimes it feels—

Keren *Crazed.*

Girma Very hard and I feel very clunky and confused. Obviously there's the layer of me just growing in my own practice and skills and just gaining the technical skill of certain things. And then I think also sometimes, for whatever physical or emotional reasons, the conductivity is—or like the resistivity is decreased. Like my ability as a conduit is just clear and better. And then sometimes it's not, and that is just what it is.

Keren *And it's nice to also be kind to oneself. I feel like I used to beat myself up when I didn't feel connected.*

Girma Yeah, I feel like kindness and tenderness is always so important, but, specifically—sorry, just this idea just came in my head with respect to the phrase “proposition from the dead work-in-progress,” like what are the propositions that our deceased works in progress are asking of us? And I feel one of those propositions is kindness and tenderness towards the past and towards previous ways of our own being. Like tenderness in reconsidering and holding these things again, and opening our imaginations to things.

I'm just thinking the notion of death as applied to material things is often associated with this image of like, you know, these things [that] are just discarded. But what if we're working instead from, I don't know, the premise of these things having a life to them or previously having a life to them and when something of ours—or something dear to us with a life—when that being dies it's not just like discarded away. Like yeah, it has its own, it has its own “call from the beyond” kind of. And it has its own imprint on us, in a way, even if, even if it's not clearly registered.

It's been interesting to revisit all of these old recordings that were made in the process of making these songs. And, you know, I could have deleted them, like they could have been just thrown away, but I didn't. And I think the reason I didn't was because there was something of my life preserved in these things, and something in me wanting to recognize and honor the life embodied in that part of my

creative process. So it's, yeah, it's cool to then have that to be able to return to [it], and now in the context of this project, to be able to like, have a conversation with and engage with [it].

MAYA KEREN IS A PIANIST AND COMPOSER FROM PHILADELPHIA.



CASSIS BY GANAVYA DORAISWAMY



cassis, france. *provence-alpes-côte d'azur* region.

the deputy director of a festival I-still-cannot-pronounce came to my house by-the-sea, I asked him to take his shoes off and have some tea. I chanted *namu-myoho-rengo-kyo* a few times, and his kind eyes asked: is there something you haven't shown the world yet? well, "in my mind, I haven't done any work yet. I've just made a case for why my point of view is valid" virgil abloh had said sometime last year. there's a lot of things I haven't shown the world yet, I smile wordlessly, and he seems to catch what I thought I was keeping well-hidden. well, maybe I have already shown the world everything and just haven't realized, I think smiling even more, as his smile widens, mirroring mine. well, yes, I think out loud.

we are breaking open the category of opera, he says. well, I can't comment on that, but I can tell you this, I offer. I miss my grandmother's kitchen, and I am intending to recreate it with peter (sellars) and sivan (eldar). he nods, he smiles, he sips.

my grandmother's kitchen, a space within a space. i*ma had a call with the dean at ha*va*d a few months ago, where the dean asked what might the students of color need? i*ma responded: a place where just them can go, nobody else. rent out a room if you have to, but they need a place to go where they can rest and know that their kin will be there. this is one aspect of the kitchen, the fact that you knew who would be there— and you could bet that it wasn't the type of person who you were usually running away from. predictability, others call it consistency. it is useful when you are being hunted keenly observed for something.

this morning, i recounted a strange conversation with my mother to peter. I didn't know she had any secrets left, I said. my mother recently told me that the first year of my life, she used to dream of me wearing all white, a sign of someone leaving to go to monkhood. how that eventually became part of my life is another story in itself that I will leave for now, but it should suffice to say that I was just a hungry child asking a simple question that led to some people thinking I was a philosopher at 7, which led to a coveted imitation into an order— ordaining me as a disciple of a great monk, a mantra to the Goddess that I struggle to say as instructed every day. All I remember

of that day is not my presence, but that the room smelled of pizza, and I was hungry. This is all to say, this morning, I told Peter I was reading a book of this monk's, my teacher's, in the garden with rajna. It spoke of relatedness, that it is not possible to exist without relation. you could become a monk, my now transitioned teacher wrote in this book— but there is a common misunderstanding; you could leave back certain individual human relationships by becoming a monk, certainly, but you must then understand that leaving specificity behind in how you relate to all humans must then mean that you must relate to everyone equally— true monkhood is not about abandoning specific relationships, but by knowing how to find freedom while in the middle of it all.

oh, the men who would speak of service, while my grandmother cooked for them all despite age becoming a constant and heavy companion. she found compassion in the middle of it all, not running away from it. I know I've written about this before: i*ma taking out the image of elder geri allen with her child on her back during a soundcheck: doing it while in the middle of doing it all. this is unfragile *prakriti*, creation is not something that needs to occur only with the kind of show rider that circulates the internet years later as proof that artists are fragile, fragile creatures. (though, may all be blessed with the specificity they are moved by; jen shyu once said in a lecture that henry threadgill had said follow what is sacred to you, I am sure I am paraphrasing—but if having only yellow MnMs moves you, or if having hand-carved round ice balls gives you comfort while you are comforting many, the math seems to work out.)

back to my mother's dream: she forbade her older sister to dress me in white (a strange thing to do, to ask an elder to not do something), because of this recurring nightmare that I would give up all material realms to become a monk. this terrified her, she said. she began crying at the thought of it, nearly three decades later. I am at peace with whatever you choose now, she said, crying on to my shoulder. suddenly, many of the specific choices she made makes sense: for us to travel on the *vārakari* pilgrim path, a path that insists again and again that abandoning family life is not how the world changes; it is in the middle of it all that we must find love and freedom to make the most change in this world.

why would you invite your parents over to your residency in france, asks my therapist. because, I am of the belief that you cannot move too far away from those you love (and by this I do not mean literally, I mean spiritually and with regards to resources)— you must keep

those you love with you to stay grounded. And second, I am not interested in knowing what freedom is in isolation. I am interested in freedom in the middle of it all, I said. she smiled. last show, my parents sang with me. I intend to do this at least once every year.

anyway, this is all to say, I am still finding the freedom in the middle of relatedness. but while I am still doing that, I am going to recreate my grandmother's kitchen on stage, where we know how to bend the rules of reality in the ether to re-make worlds. i will summon back her kitchen, dust and all.

GANAVYA DORAISWAMY IS A TAMIL NADU-RAISED AND NEW YORK-BORN CRITICALLY ACCLAIMED VOCALIST. GANAVYA LIVES, LEARNS, AND LOVES FLUIDLY FROM THE NEXUS OF MANY FRAMEWORKS AND UNDERSTANDINGS.

(RE)BIRTH BY SYNTHIA ISAH

S This is an old, long struggle. It always has been. There have been peaks and troughs; there have been joys we repeated and joys we've forgotten. The struggle will not be resolved in our lifetime, it may never be resolved. I think our responsibility is to create space for new, unimaginable possibilities by the way we live. To be good ancestors. I think, on some level, we have to accept that this life simply is.

All of this pain and hurt and strife in the world and in our own lives, are all part of the process. Things may seem more urgent, but they have always been urgent. And jellyfish planet is neither a failure or a success. If we don't get it right. Honestly, I think the work is to enjoy life. To step out of the fear and reach for wholeness. Wholeness in ourselves and in our body, as one cosmic being hurtling through an airless ocean of mystery.

Many years ago, I died.

A prolonged illness, pain, longing—for months I dragged my coffin behind me. Dared anyone who got too close to place their fingers on my paper skin, push with reluctant hands, and lay me down to rest—to nail the lid down over me.

The day I died, I dug my grave with my bare hands, nails breaking, fingerprints stiff with mud—and shrouded in my funeral garb, sailed on to the hereafter.

For five years I lived underground—mouth sealed shut, fingers curled in rage, hallucinating revelations. Turned myself over to wet earth, worms, other dying things. Dissolved into something more conscious—less material.

My new body cannibalized those cells.

There was no crowd to witness my resurrection. No friends, just angels singing glory halleluiah in a celestial cacophony of light and chaos. The earth splitting open, volcanoes raging.

And though my blood had long ago run dry, my flesh decayed, my bones turned back to ashes and dust, I had been remade.

This has happened more than once.



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II

Three years ago, I returned home and found myself exactly where I left her.

I was not a happy child. Too pensive. Silent and prone to bad moods. Always grasping, seeking something deeper than my own face. Something heavy, more urgent. I felt it writhing from the first time I looked down at my own hands and knew with certainty that I was alive.

But it was always just out of reach.

With time, the feeling grew stronger. More painful. An ache in the pit of my stomach—a vision of what could be, what would be, some day.

So desperate to touch it, to know myself more deeply, too see it clearly, I pulled back layers of my skin to reveal stories, old words, primal sounds spilling out of me— meanings obscured.

Emptied out and scoured, I searched those caverns inside of me—the places where I made my home— and traced images of my own face onto the rock walls, swallowed poison, offered my whole body to the machinations of my ancestors. And there, without skin, without history, I broke down like a beggar, struck deaf and blind. And for years, I could not see.

I ran.

As far as I could imagine—to places that I could not find on a map. And made myself into something new. Plastered paint over that writhing, itching, burning in my bowels and became harsher somehow, more brittle. I traveled the world in search of freedom—yearning to know it, deeper still. To be rid of the pretense, the armor I had built to protect me from myself. Yet on every continent, across all corners of the globe, there was nothing to be found.

What was lost during those years? And what was gained? And what returned in me but that same burning, the same restless hunger.

And so I returned to this place. This land that built me, shaped me, formed me before there was a me to be changed.

Battered now, and world weary.

Wondering, who am I upon this return to the old home?

III

Desperate still, I feel my way through the darkness towards her.

And here, in the place where I grew, and lived those early years of silence and seeking. I meet myself again. Still seeking. Still trying to understand.

Memories come flooding back.

Habitually, I run into old versions of myself everywhere. Every new encounter brings with it a reminder of the time when I was younger, more naive. I feel her standing over me, her soft baby's breath on my neck, arms reaching, heart still aligned. Our shoulders brush and something rubs off on me—something catching. Days pass and I find myself blacked out again, always in the same places as she was, listening to the same songs on the radio.

Years have passed and still I am the same.

And yet everything is different.

My face is no longer the same. The body is different. I stand, entranced by mirrors, searching, trying to recall moments of insight, of clarity. Evoking the face of she who I once was, making offerings at her alter for oracles and wisdom of a bygone age.

And still I never see her. Know, with certainty, that she has died, cells cannibalized by the new me. That I am her at a cellular level, no longer the level of memory or thought.

IV

It is clear to me now that my own flesh holds the memory. Versions of myself I can no longer remember—moments in my own life that I cannot recall.

Here, the threads of this tapestry—this flesh—binds me, connects me to old versions of myself like parasitic twins in one sack of nourishing fluid. It permeates so deeply that she inhales from my mouth, I exhale into hers, and we are both consumed.

Yes, I am still the same.

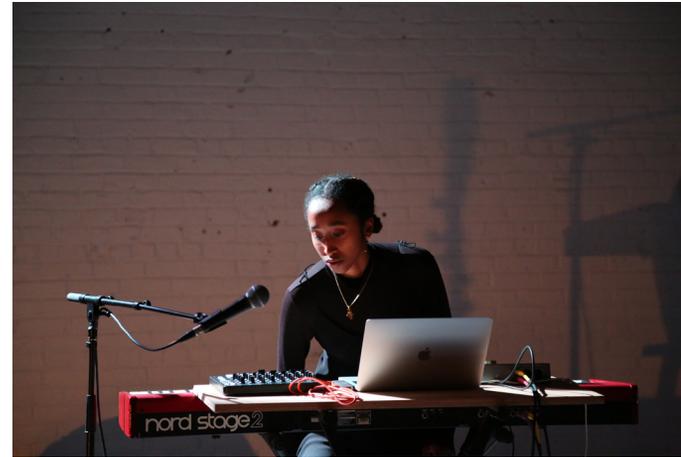
And she is a part of me that now lives in the underworld with a pantheon of different visions that emerged, bloomed, died back with a restless wildness like the few brief decades of my life.

The process is never ending. With every new bloom something dies off—something is pruned from my memory to make room for something more to emerge. The urgency wanes. What remains is the writhing potential, the constant becoming that catches me in moments of unrest, of transformation, always being something else.

There is no returning to the past and yet she lives here with me. Same self. Same friends. New home. New face. The composition is jarring—a mosaic of flesh—both dead and alive. The fragments of memories. Ashes from the everlasting burning. Something more brought to the surface to live it's own story. Something dead and reminiscing.

I am reminiscing. A mere witness. A spectator in the audience. Sometimes cheering, sometimes heckling, sometimes watching the evolution in silence. Knowing clearly now what I could not know then—that there is no past or present, of future—only the never-ending work progressing towards its own end.

SYNTHIA ISAH IS AN ARTIST, WRITER, AND ENVIRONMENTAL PLANNER BASED IN KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI. SHE BELIEVES IMAGINATION IS A GATEWAY INTO THE FUTURE. SHE BELIEVES ANOTHER WORLD IS POSSIBLE.



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This reader was produced in conjunction with *Propositions from the deadWIP / tizita, from the feet up* at ISSUE Project Room on December 8, 2021.

ISSUE Project Room's Suzanne Fiol Curatorial Fellowship program is supported, in part, by public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council, and the New York State Council on the Arts.



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