

We're having problems

Yes, we have them too. The June issue of this magazine didn't come out this summer. The reason, as we wrote to our subscribers, was that although it contained good material—much of which you'll find here—something was lacking. It lacked the sort of connections between texts—affinities, contrasts, echoes, or progressions—that would move readers to thought. And it also lacked the reflections that we thought some diary entries demanded.

The skipped issue is coming out now. Fine and good. But the episode has brought to the fore certain problems with the concrete and cultural task of creating the magazine.

We're not interested in just publishing a collection of first-person accounts, interesting as they may be. If you're familiar with "Here", you know that. We're interested in thinking and making people think (also "feeling" and making people "feel", and other things as well, along certain paths and in certain ways, etc. This isn't the right place for enlarging on the magazine's intentions, especially since they have always been a sort of "work in progress").

So, thinking and making people think. That's hard enough as it is, but putting out an issue every four months, with diary pages dating back six to two months (the last two months being primarily dedicated to translation, layout, and

printing) makes it even harder. Because what we want to “think” about, above all, is the diary entries we publish, which means asking our contributors to read them and to write something that enters into dialogue with them. And that takes time. In short, publishing the magazine on a tri-annual basis threatens to compromise the content.

For that reason: *enough with the fixed schedule*. Instead of every four months, “Here” will come out when it’s ready, and instead of four months, the diary entries may cover six, or five, or three...

But above all, we feel the need to talk more about the magazine ‘together’. At least with the readers and contributors who are closest to it. To talk about what it has been so far. About what it could be. About the questions posed by the many voices collected in it. About the ones we pose ourselves. To shed light on them. As a start, in the next few months, we’ll be trying to bring together the contributors and readers most interested in doing this.

Last of all, we feel the need for more assistance with the concrete creation of the magazine: translation, layout, proofreading, promotion, subscription management, envelope-stuffing, mailing... Some people already help us with this, and they have our gratitude. But it’s not enough. Nor is the money enough, despite the subscriptions. Should we look for a publisher? Try to create a working group, divvy up the tasks? Ask for contributions from subscribers and friends (maybe 10 euros a month from 30 people would be enough)? We’ll see. If we want to keep going, these are problems that will have to be solved.

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This review exists through the voices it gives expression to, in their variety. All contributions are welcome. Please write to **Here -notes from the present, via Bastia 11, 20139 Milano, Italy, phone-fax 0039-02-57406574, email: massimo parizzi@alice.it.**

“Here-notes from the present” is written so that it can be read “as a novel”: from the beginning to the end in sequence. This is **an invitation and an exhortation** to the reader: many diary pages make little sense if not read immediately after the previous ones and before those that follow.

Diary: January to August 2007

Here

notes from the present

Milan, Italy, January 1

Giorgio Morale

[...] New Year's Eve. I once believed that our future depended on our will; and its better or worse outcome on whether our wishes were more or less good. So I cherished them, I mean my wishes, and beautified them day after day. Especially on days such as today. [...]

Moscow, January 1

Veronica Khokhlova

Happy New Year, dear all! *Z Novym Rokom/S Novym Godom* from the three of us here in Moscow! Both Mishah and I managed to catch a cold last week, so it was a rather sneezy celebration, but we still loved it. [...] Marta stayed up till around 1 am and ate as much of that sweet Tatar thing—*cham-cham?*—as she wanted. In general now, she acts as if she's jet-lagged—goes to bed and wakes up really late. But Mishah's vacation is over, so we'll all have to switch back to a less relaxed schedule beginning tomorrow... [...]

Putin's address was on nearly every Russian channel, and we kept clicking until we reached the new favorite of mine, "Nostalgia", and they

had Brezhnev there, greeting the Soviet citizens with a really strong Ukrainian accent that I had no idea he had—and such a transition, from multi-Putin to Brezhnev, was funny as hell...

A few hours after, when it was still January 1, Marta took her two real first steps!!! Then she did it three times more! Mishah was there, stretching his arms towards her, asking her to toddle to him—so she did have enough motivation. And she looked very proud of herself, too! I'm so happy!

Gaza, January 28

Heba

On Friday, we decided to visit my sister-in-law's house. I dressed the girls, who were very excited to see their cousins, and we made sure to stop and buy some candy for the kids. Approaching the sea road, our car was stopped and we were told that the sea road was closed and we could not get there because of factional fighting. We had to return to our apartment twenty minutes after we left it and my eldest started crying and asking why we had to go back. "Mama... why won't we go to *amto's* (aunt's) house?" "Because people are fighting on the streets" I said impatiently. "Are they fighting over toys like me and Hala?" "Yes." "What toys..." "Authority." "Do we have a similar toy at home?" "I do not think so, sweetie..." "Do...?" Enough with questions, my husband interrupted, because we both know that she is at this stage where she asks you hundreds of questions a day. Of course, feeling afraid of the sounds of gunshots and shells made

The Fatah-Hamas conflict is called wakseh among Palestinians, meaning humiliation, ruin, and collapse as a result of self-inflicted damage.

us rush to our home where we listened to the news. My mind kept wondering how it got that bad. I do not even know. I feel that we slept for a while and then woke to this harsh reality of internal fighting and people dying for an unjust cause. I spent Saturday at home as well because I thought it was safer not to go out or just to spare the kids any disappointment. [...]

San Salvador, February 2

Maria Ofelia Zuniga

It happens, sometimes... and usually, as they say, after a period of war. It happened in Spain, for example, and in the USA after 1945. The high spirits of Peace boosted birth rates. And later on, those born in that period would be called “the baby boom generation”.

What I mean—maybe because of the age we have reached?—is that a real baby boom is going on all around me [...]. Between November 2006 and January 2007, I learnt that these people bought tickets to become fathers and mothers for the second or third time or as beginners (in the order in which they announced it):

Silvia and Edgardo (Santa Tecla, El Salvador), Jeannete and José (Los Angeles), Kath and Miguel Ángel (now living in Sucre, Bolivia), Víctor and Marissa (La Cima, San Salvador), Oscar and Gloria (Lourdes, El Salvador), Flor and Rebollo (Mejicanos, San Salvador); not considering those who announced they were doing their best to take advantage of this Age in which, it seems, babies are “on sale”.

I think that these new lives are still the greatest sign of hope we may be offered in times of such

worldwide chaos [...]; and that, as they come to inhabit our own individual worlds, they bring with them the responsibility (for us, of course) of being their travelling companions and of staying by their side in their successes and their failures, while they learn to become not what we dream they will be, but what they decide to be.

Guiding companions... as well as being responsible for them to a different extent, depending on factors such as: being their mother or father (whether biological or not), uncles and aunts, grandparents, friends, siblings, cousins, godfathers, guardians, mentors, solicitors (!), etc. etc. etc. In so far as we will take them on, such roles will, either completely or just partly, change our life as we have known it so far, and will allow us to experiment a bit of, let's say, everything: tenderness, laughter, sense of care, help in circumstances we have 'cancelled', the putting-off of passionate nights, while going back to childish fun which some of us have left behind... patience on the verge of an emotional abyss... a sudden feeling of identification and solidarity with fathers and mothers we see around with their small sons and daughters, changes in the subjects of our conversations, maybe changes in the way we see the world and its priorities... changes... changes... changes [...].

Durham, North Carolina, February 5

Laila El-Haddad

I'm still in Durham, but keeping up to date with much concern with the latest happenings in Gaza via my parents and their vantage point in Gaza City. They had a terrifying few days; last

week street battles swirled all around them, and my mother got stuck on her way back from Khan Yunis in southern Gaza where she was visiting my grandmother.

She heard gunshots and then people began to talk about another “clash”, so she stopped at my aunt’s house for a while. But then, for fear my father might be foolish enough to drive out to get her, as he’s done before (and subsequently found himself in the middle of a gun battle) she decided to take it by foot! Of course she doesn’t tell us of her (reckless?) heroics until later.

Halfway there, when it became too dangerous (“I heard gunshots and saw masked gunmen and just said ‘salaam’ to them but I couldn’t really see where the gunshots were coming from”), she called my father who came to pick her up from near the Islamic University, which was up in flames after Fateh forces had attacked it. “It was the saddest thing I’ve ever seen: a university burning.” Emblematic, perhaps, of the entire situation in Gaza.

To make matters worse, the electricity had cut off for a straight 40 hours, leaving them amidst the incessant ricochet of bullets in the dark. My father says things are once again “calm” now as ceasefire goes into effect. No one knows what tomorrow will hold. They struggle to get through each day and live as normal lives as they know how.

Gaza, February 4. A protest against the internal bloodletting was called yesterday, in Unknown Soldiers Square, near the parliament building, but few Gazans felt safe to venture out to join it.

Milan, Italy, February 5

Giorgio Morale

Too tired to think, ready for anything. To me everything is a hindrance, a halt: some dust, a

document out of place, empty bottles to be thrown away, Erin's questions about grammar, next week's engagements to be written down on the calendar. An ominous-looking phone bill. A stain on the handle, rice grains on the cooker. Days fly by. Job after job. I speed jobs up in order to finish them and get some free time. More and more hectically. I stop at the end of the day. Then I revise tomorrow's schedule. Bustle, ordinary untidiness. What distinguishes one day from another? One expects to get some rest from every break: from breakfast, meals, a night's sleep, awakening, a job, or from temporarily doing nothing. All is movement, even the skies.

Casablanca, February 5

Jihane Bouziane

In the past few days I haven't had time to do anything. Too much work. Too much. To the point of wondering if this is my place, if I'm cut out for the job, if a job is worth wasting a whole life on, or at least part of my own life. Last time I let myself be caught in a whirl of furious work I got seriously ill, and this memory is obsessing me as well as my family for the same reason. So, as I'm having a moment's truce, I've started pondering, analysing, looking for a logical reason to justify the fact that I let myself be used without hardly ever saying no I can't, or without telling my boss outright to find someone else if...

As I analyse, I realize there are several factors, which I could divide into two separate groups. Those that don't depend on me at all, and those for which I'm the one and only person responsible.

Those things I just can't change.

I knew that the status of being a married or engaged woman, or even just the daughter of strict parents allows one to enjoy some respect within our society. But what I had completely forgotten to take into consideration is that such a status is the very one that allows you to enjoy a privileged position in the eyes of your boss. A married or engaged woman is never late at night, the daughter of strict parents doesn't go to work at weekends, a young fiancé doesn't spend whole nights with her boss revising a job.

Where did I have my head to forget all this?!

In a matter of a few months I've found myself to be the only unmarried person in the group and, just look at that, I'm the one who has to take part in end-of-day meetings, the one who's asked to stay overtime to finish a project, the one who's accused of being immature when I falter under pressure! And when this damned pressure becomes too heavy, and even breaking into tears doesn't help, people quietly murmur that, on the other hand, I have nothing to lose: I have nobody in my life! As if I, as a person, weren't worth anything, even though only within a multinational.

Even if they cheer me up when I can't take anymore of it or when I feel I'm not cut out for this job and would surely be happier selling *meska fliyou* on a street corner, not being able to do the job I like with the efficiency my bosses expect from me, although humanly impossible, makes me sad. As the latest arrival, I'm always in a competitive frame of mind, and I'm well aware this is the key to my unhappiness at work. I want to be the best at everything and I tend to forget that the price to pay is often too high.

And, very simply, I'm tired...

Every time I blame myself because I can't say no, because I take all of my boss's abuses as a sign of trust and I regularly find myself late at night doing a job that two or three people could have shared without turning into doormats.

Some of the people close to me blame me for letting myself be used, for being after all a stupid girl, and I never answer back, but a little voice inside me tells me they're wrong, and I'm doing all this in order to build up a career of my own, and keep learning and fulfil part of my dream. Though recently this little voice has been getting fainter and fainter, and has been replaced by one telling me there are so many other things to do in life rather than spending it in front of a PC.

I think I've got to a point in my life when I have to make a decision! Either I should carry on where I am, or I should change, though to go where and do what? God only knows how I would react to the change...

traces 205-256

by Gherardo Bortolotti

Here

notes from the present

205. vanguards of the banking system.
206. watching television, while your attention reaches a deeper plane.
207. bars decorated to make you feel richer.
208. along the streets, among parked cars and

unemployed youth.

209. definitive conclusions about certain errors of judgement you made regarding investments in your future, in ambition, in the talent that was attributed to you in bad faith.

210. the illusion of getting something for nothing, of things on sale.

211. successive cycles of education, independent readings, various news agencies trying to put me in touch with reality, to open my eyes, to school me in the modes of existence of controversial metaphysical objects: the relation between cause and effect, the market, world history.

212. becoming very rich, entering a new cognitive framework.

213. watching your children, wondering what symbology they will entrust with their defeat.

214. evocative phrases in industrial quantities.

215. jumbles of tv drama and reportage that make up your days.

216. penchants for truism and cliché, incidental remarks with little bearing on the discussion, encouraged by the environment in which you live, the people with whom you exchange opinions about the weather.

217. in the grip of consumerism and a well-paid job.

218. bird's-eye views of your opinions, of what you take for granted.

219. traces of a world order in the incidental remarks of the people you are close to.

220. transitive nature of guilt and exploitation.

221. funded by your naive ideas about production.

222. in the capitalistic method of production, where anybody can win and get their reward.

223. coming home, counting on finding some object of affection, actually lost in some room of your youth, in some scene from an old tv show.
224. our march towards death, in intervals marked off by the world cup, by new tv shows, by the autumn/winter prêt-à-porter season.
225. the propaganda with facts about your co-worker's new car.
226. surviving the obstacles created by accumulation.
227. realms of human experience made obsolete by the development of industrial production, abandoned by the retail networks, left to the casual initiative of a few deviant characters.
228. full of significance and prospects for the future.
229. clusters of manufacturing and industry that affect your view of life.
230. losing parts of our lives, trapped in some particularly felicitous metaphor, in some advertising slogan that has pieced together the easiest bits for us.
231. at the sidelines of an endless process of production.
232. expressions that place you in thematic groups according to your taste in clothes and your buying habits.
233. an entire realm of my consciousness lost in the quagmire of a conversation, splintered off while the tv show a car ad.
234. memories of long-ago evenings in front of the television, when you were happy and the images came in a ceaseless flow, lighting up your face and breast with implicit meanings, metonymies, ideological models.
235. in some affluent part of your country.

236. sinusoidal conic sections, multiple-variable functions tracing the curves of my toothbrush.
237. a feeling of comfort and maturity at the moment of paying the bill.
238. a decisive success in your career as a consumer.
239. born to be happy, to effortlessly reap the fruits of industrial production.
240. moving into a more mature period of life, one of disillusionment with certain ideals of social justice, and greater buying power.
241. people who say hello, who remember you and your local colour.
242. looking for redemption, if such a thing is possible, at the end of the park behind the row-houses.
243. trusting in the waste of your opportunities, of your opinions.
244. while the issue of the Middle East, in the newspapers and in your opinions, goes through constant metamorphoses.
245. the outskirts of the city, the hinterland, a sort of desert of the psyche riddled with imperfect versions of fashion.
246. specializing in a kind of citizenship based on acquisition and on voicing opinions about tv programming.
247. political issues of international scope that are like immobile galaxies hanging over your current opinions.
248. positive about the hostility of things, of the cars on the street, of the puddles of beer and the broken glass in the subway.
249. lavishly expressing one's opinions and the kind of superficial judgements of which there is

usually no shortage.

250. levels of our civic life that are unknown to us, long usurped by the service-sector market and by television networks.

251. various republics underway within your nation.

252. middle-class love affairs, based on movie references and a limited canon of singer-songwriters.

253. loyalty to failure, to wrongheaded opinions about immigration or international finance.

254. with no moral lessons to be gleaned, we watch the news on tv, fascinated by the moving images.

255. far below our opinions, below the positions held by the republic and in the television debates: the wounds in victims' bodies, the rapes, the deaths of children.

256. different visions of things, some derived from recent ad campaigns.

Back to the diaries

Milan, Italy, February 10

Erin has now reached an age when she would do anything just to please her parents. If I say there is something to be done, she simply accepts my words without letting anybody see. I notice it and propose to give her a sign of my

Here

notes from the present

Giorgio Morale

appreciation. Then I forget all about it, or I can't find enough time, and her act remains ignored.

When Simone is at home, instead, it is me who follows him round picking up and tidying up what he scatters all over the house. His bedroom floor is like a sown field, and his desk looks like a stall at the flea market. He piles up knickers, socks and hankies, flat batteries and postcards, books and crackers, used tickets and Post-it notes, pens and photographs, plastic cups, comics, CDs and cassettes. "Leave that" he assures me. "I'll do it." And as he doesn't: "I like it that way. It's *my* bedroom".

Today he got up late in the afternoon, which is like evening now that it's winter. He barred himself in his bedroom, so as to put some time between getting up and showing up. I could hear him open a drawer, then sit at his desk as if to read; then listened to his persistent coughing and repeated nose-blowing.

"I don't want school to change me" he told me. "I don't know what I want, or what I'm doing. Or whether it is you or I who wants that."

At twilight the phone calls started. "What are you doing? Doing anything?" I sometimes eavesdrop on his conversations, with my ear sticking against doors or walls, weighing up what the best system for sound transmission is. Sometimes I open the window, hoping in air conduction. I can only hear an indistinct muttering of which I manage to decipher the least significant words. Or I catch the single word but not its context. "What a picture of dignity" Elle says to me.

When Simone goes out, she asks: "Are you going to be late tonight?". When Simone comes

back at night we are all in bed. He never goes into his room from the corridor, but from the terrace door. He leaves his shoes and clothes in the lounge. But my senses, once awake—because of him tripping, or coughing, or moving a chair—struggle to go back to sleep. They search for him around the house, they try to locate him, or to single out his movements.

Even though it may be dawn, he often has a snack or watches TV. The next day we find evidence of his passage between the sofa and the screen: crumbs, greasy smears, a glass on the floor. He keeps a toothbrush and some toothpaste in the kitchen to avoid being heard going into the bathroom. His alarm clock goes off at a reasonable time. Those who hear it appreciate his good will. He puts it off and all is quiet again. Too quiet. He's gone back to sleep.

San Salvador, February 11

[...] I sell women's clothes mainly. I buy them on the Guatemala-El Salvador frontier, the "Frontier of San Cristóbal" in the Santa Ana department. That's where a sort of market has been held every Monday for about twenty years. People from both countries meet there to trade their goods at very low prices, for those who buy things and sell them later, like myself ("Bargains!" the vendors shout to let people know they are offering bulk prices). What *do* they buy and sell then? Clothes, shoes, accessories, etc. Well, today, with things changing and lots of stuff coming from China, that etcetera may range from blinking pencils to ironing-boards...

From one of **Maria Ofelia Zuniga**'s e-mails to Massimo Parizzi

The “market” begins at three in the morning, when most people (some because they live there, some others because they have spent the night there) start displaying their products: food, men’s and women’s shirts, skirts, trousers, sportswear, shoes... Neither Customs nor Police Officers get any closer, but only check that the traffic of vehicles coming and going between one country and the other is not hindered. So the market turns into a Far West, although, as a lady pointed out a few weeks ago, all the traders get together for the same reason: because they are hungry. “We’re all hungry, let’s help one other.” Why did she say that? Because on Mondays and Fridays the frontier really is a no man’s land, or rather a place where only the fittest, the cleverest, or maybe those who get up first, survive and win.

It’s staggering... The other day my mother and I left San Salvador on the 4.00 am bus and got there at quarter past six. At that time there were lots of people around already, and some were even on their way back home with their shopping! My mother goes there to sell small handmade bags manufactured in a tiny workshop she set up thirty-two years ago; instead, I go there to buy clothes which I then sell to friends and acquaintances back home. In short, we got there at six, that is too late, and there was no room left for us to display our stuff, so my mother found herself about half a square yard near a girl selling clothes. They used some cardboard to block the drain covers—from where, I swear, smells came out which were rather unbearable at that time of the day—and settled themselves.

Opposite them, in about seven square yards, there was a shoe stall, and another one about two yards away selling shoes and owned by the same dealer, but run by people he pays. There are huge clothes stalls at the market owned by dealers who never show up, but can afford to pay people who sleep at the frontier or leave their homes in the middle of the night in order to be there on time... Then, in the middle of all this, there are the unfailing little stalls open twenty-four hours a day and selling food: *pupusas* (sort of *tortillas* typical of El Salvador), coffee, *tamales*, chicken, bananas, etc. [...] After five months coming and going, I can't honestly say I feel exactly like one of the market people yet: I keep thinking of my presence at the frontier as something transitory which helps me earn some money while I am waiting to find a job or trying to decide what else I want to do with my life. And I believe that the very idea of "being able to decide" is what makes me feel different. However, believe me, I respect the people I meet there more and more thoroughly as time goes by, not because they're particularly good or bad, but because I admire their fight to eke out a living 'in some way'. The very fact I do not feel completely as being either a seller or a buyer, who only lives for the sake of that market, may be what helps me look just beyond what things appear to be. Beyond those people who shout under the sun at one o'clock in the afternoon I can see lives, people with a story and, well..., it really is hard sometimes, when you find out these people are somehow "sentenced" to a life's fights and endless sacrifices, always working and never resting, without even

a decent pension to look forward to. Sometimes I look at them and ask myself: “How long can one live at this pace?”. At thirty-five women look as though they are fifty, at seventeen girls have already had incredible stories and two or three kids...

One day in January something happened which shocked me. It was Friday and Sandra was there; she is my age and has three kids whose father has gone ‘North’ (to the USA). She lives right on the frontier and sells food every day, though of course there is a greater amount and selection on market days. My mother and I always eat at her kiosk and after so many years one could say she has become a friend of my mother’s (although theirs is, let’s say, a trading relationship). Well, she never, I swear *never*, stops working. On Mondays and Fridays, when the market is on, she closes at midday, when there is no one left except those guarding their stuff. At that time she goes to the department capital city to buy products she will sell the following day, then gets back to her cooking... and so on, every day.

That Friday, around midday, my mother and I were about to leave and said good bye to her and her partner who had come there for lunch. The following Monday, when we arrived, we learnt that her partner, with whom she had been sharing eight years of her life, had died of a heart attack that very Friday, and the funerals had taken place on the Sunday. I found out all this half way through the morning. I had already noticed some flowers on the spot where Sandra usually cooked, but I would never have thought that that was the reason for them being there.

She had left at three in the morning, as usual, to sell her food... because life goes on and that's what informal trade is like: you sell, you eat; you don't sell, you don't eat. That's all. Only at the end of the day was she able to go to the cemetery and mourn her love... This made me wonder: do poor people not have a right to live through their mourning as others normally do? Does poverty entail a greater dose of resistance to grief? [...]

San Salvador, February 12

Maria Ofelia Zuniga

Let me introduce Hilda, a 38-year-old woman, selling alcohol-free drinks against the heat, with her ice-box on one side of the customs-house. At 15 she married a man who was 20 years older than her on condition that he didn't take her away from home until her mother was dead: in other words, they each stayed at home and only met for strict marriage purposes... All was fine until, four years later, the "villain" had an affair with another woman, who, instead, wanted to live with him in the same house. So he left our Hilda alone at 19 with some kids on her shoulders and a not-so-bright future ahead.

"Hilda," a fellow seller asked her as the sun was rising and the *pupusas* were roasting on the grill, "what are you doing on February 14? You don't have anyone to celebrate it with, do you?" "Don't know," Hilda justified herself "the fact is that business has not been so good lately; that's why I don't have a boyfriend to celebrate the 14th with. When you sell, you can put some

money away and you can afford to stop working for one day, go out with a young man and get engaged... but when sales go down, you can't stop for that." [...]

Gaza, February 14

Heba

I went from one office to another today chatting with my male and female colleagues, and everybody is saying Happy Valentine's Day to everybody. Few wore red and started joking about it. What attracted my attention is the sarcastic tone they had as if it is too much luxury to think of valentines in Gaza. Maybe it is due to the very unhappy events of the past year or because most of us are married for a period that exceeds five years, when you start feeling that you are overwhelmed by chores and responsibilities.

I thought last night that I have to do something special for today, like going out to a restaurant and buying that expensive perfume for my husband. I had also to smirk at him saying: you know it is Valentine's Day tomorrow (suggesting that he has to buy me a present: yeah, this is how things go after five years, you try as hard as you can to avoid the disappointment). He said ok, ok, I will buy roses, and smirked back.

Today I have been contemplating how to manage taking the kids to my parents and you know, dressing up, getting the house clean, and buying some candles and you know I am tired. It might be easier if I forgot about this Valentine thing and forgot about how it was at the beginning of my marriage. In this busy working day the only thing that hangs in my memory is that I

forgot to take the meat out of the fridge. How romantic! To those who can afford romance in a busy day: happy Valentine's day!

Gaza, February 27

Heba

I spent the last week reading a very interesting novel, by the name of *Bakaya Imra'a* ("Remains of a Woman"), by the Palestinian and Gazan writer Mr. Basil Nasser, for whom it is the first novel. The novel portrays a picture of Gaza between the two Intifadas, shedding light on the political, social, economic, and psychological changes that Gazan people underwent during this period. The protagonist of the novel, Salma, a widow who lost her beloved husband as a martyr, is struggling to bring up two boys in a society that is harsh on women in general and on husbandless women in particular. It really echoed the saying that Palestinian women suffer first being women in a patriarchal society and second having to endure all that men endure of the occupation, poverty, lack of security and internal chaos.

To make things even more complicated, Salma falls in love with her therapist, a younger attractive Christian. Imagine a widow with kids who loves a younger man from a different religion and the entire psycho-emotional struggle she deals with to repress her feelings towards him, knowing that the relationship is impossible. Then, she decides to get married to a different man in a desperate attempt to swim with the current. Her new husband turns to be a paranoid

misogynist who ends up beating her and raping her. Her ex-in-laws take the kids as a result of her getting married, which is a common scenario in Gaza, that the ex-husband or the ex-in-laws will take the kids from the woman if she gets married in case of divorce or death. Dealing with the loss of a beloved husband, the life with an abuser, and the unattainable love for a third man, Salma starts losing herself. She becomes estranged from her identity. Her life gets shattered into pieces before her own eyes while suffering silently—like all other Gazans—from the undeniable regression of Gaza at large.

Not only does the novel take us to the protagonist's stream of consciousness, but it also uncovers the core problems that all of a sudden erupted in our community—or may be gradually erupted without us noticing. It shows us the damage caused to the value system and most importantly to people's sense of well-being and mental health, which, without a doubt, were seriously affected by the persistent suffering and helpless attempts to survive in an environment that's ruled by the survival of the strongest.

I thought of Salma a lot the past couple of days and how many women like her I met while working for a women's organization for four years. How the pain of losing your husband does not end at the stage of accepting your loss. It rather begins after the loss, with all the choices you are presented with. The novel—with its in-depth portrayal of the internal and external problems and challenges in the Gaza society and maybe in Palestine at large—is imbued with wake-up calls for reform. It reminded me very much of W.B. Yeats at the beginning

of the twentieth century and his famous line: “*Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold*”. Although the novel opens a window for hope at the end, with the protagonist getting a divorce, getting the custody of her children back, and dedicating herself to community work, the ending kept some questions pending in my head. Should selflessness and sacrifice be always the escape for women here and when can they choose to be doers and yet get away with it with a happy ending? Is it a destiny for so many of them to be swept by *all* the doctrines of society, otherwise, turn into Salma at her rock bottom? And *Remains of a Woman* is related, one way or another, in my humble personal reading to the fact that not fitting into societal expectations as a woman means losing your social wholeness (how society perceives you as a whole person). I just want to say that Salma for me was a whole person, who did not need her deceased husband, lover, second husband, or children to establish her full individuality and womanhood.

Moscow, March 8

Veronica Khokhlova

Mishah had a day off, so he went for a walk with Marta, and I took a cab downtown (or is it uptown? it is...), to Chistiye Prudy, the area I hadn't been to yet, since my return from Kyiv. The driver was a 30-year-old Uzbek guy from Tashkent who has lived in Moscow for half a year. He complained about the loose morals of the local males; on average, he gets propositioned twice a week here, by “all those transves-

tites and gays”. A cute guy, a Muslim. The ride was over before we got to discuss xenophobia.

It was the first really warm, really sunny day, so wonderful, so I walked and walked and walked. Originally, I had been planning to have coffee and read a book at the coffee place on Pokrovka, but I just couldn't stop walking. It was nice seeing women with flowers (though so many had their men with them—and it was often the guys who were carrying the bouquets—as if flowers are such a heavy burden for a woman to carry herself). It was also nice saying “Happy March 8th” to those poor women who had to work on what was a day off for the rest of us: a kiosk woman I bought water from, a bookstore woman, etc. It felt nice to make them smile.

I didn't give up on the idea of having coffee, but when I was ready to pause, the place I went into on Tverskaya was chock-full. So I decided to walk past our former place on Bolshaya Bronnaya instead, across the street from the synagogue—the lousy weather of the past two months hadn't allowed me take this nostalgic walk. I was near the McDonald's on Pushkin-skaya, feeling pregnant again (because this was the area where I spent most of my pregnancy), when I saw one of those ugly buses, with curtained windows, and then a few more, and I had this click in my head right away, and I turned left, and yes, there was an awfully tiny rally near the square—which I wouldn't have noticed if it hadn't been for all the riot police around.

Just like in September 2005, two and a half months before Marta was born. There were only a dozen people or so, protesting Russia's in-

volvement in Chechnya. I walked by, read the slogans, accepted a leaflet from an eccentric-looking man, got reminded that March 8th wasn't just International Women's Day here but also the second anniversary of Maskhadov's death (a flash-back: dead Maskhadov on every TV channel, Ramzan Kadyrov's sick sick sick sense of humor—this corpse was his March 8 present to every Chechen woman). [...]

A leader of the Chechen separatist movement.

Deputy Prime Minister of the pro-Russian Chechen Republic.

Gaza, March 14

Heba

A conversation between me and my three-and-a-half-year-old daughter. “Mama, am I beautiful?” “Yes honey, you are...” “Are you beautiful?” I smiled and said I guess I am. “And Baba and aunt?” I kept confirming to her that they are all beautiful. “So the beast is also beautiful?” She was referring to the Beast in the marvelous Walt Disney's 1991 adaptation of the story, which we have on DVD and she keeps watching. I hesitated for a second then I said yes, the beast is beautiful, listening to the paradox of my own sentence and still wearing a meaningless smile. “Then why is he replaced with a prince?” “Because the prince is beautiful.” Here again the illogic of my answer surfaces. “No mama, the beast is beautiful and I love him and he should marry Belle and not the prince.” I went speechless. She fell in love with the beast because the movie focused so much on making Belle and others see the inner beauty of him, though he looks hideous on the outside. I could not explain to her the concept of internal and external beauty. [...]

I like the first warmth of Spring. For one second I am fascinated by the bright colours of an insect. Or by the overbearing gesture of a girl who sticks her arms out as if to fly when her motorbike starts. Or by the sympathy-searching look of a lady in a car making a reckless manoeuvre.

A ticking noise along the road. A worker stops working and forms a triangle of looks between himself, myself and a young woman. "That's what men are like. We hear the noise of heels and turn round to look."

The tram is packed. "Could we open the window?" an elderly woman says. "You know, at a certain age women need air." An attractive woman looks at her and smiles. "Don't worry, we need it even before then." She fiddles with the window, then gives up. A man helps her. "I get up at six in order to be at work by nine and every day I'm late" another lady says. "That's why work is flexi nowadays: no one knows when it starts." The tram brakes. A young man ends up on the lap of a woman sitting "Watch out, you've bumped into me." "I *am* sorry" he says. "This morning I thought I'd left home with just my soul, and instead I'd brought my body with me too".

I like the first warm days, and bodies getting undressed. Holding Elle's naked body gives me a great sense of freedom. I feel cheerful with my arm round her bottom which is full and round like the cheeks of an angel playing a trumpet.

For over a year now I've been taking the train from Tuscolana station and getting off at Trastevere station, just two stops and exactly ten minutes' away, to get to the bookshop where I work. During that ten-minute-journey the landscape I can see out of the window is an urban one, and yet there is a gap in that succession of walls and windows. Actually, at one point the landscape changes, because the railway runs along part of the Caffarella Park and it's like being in open countryside. The Roman Hills rise in the background, faint and liquid in the morning—sometimes they even become invisible, covered as they are by a milky blanket—while in the evening they regain their consistency, somewhere between blue and purple, and sunset rays glow on the distant window panes of a town I don't know the name of. And between my eyes and those mountains there is a succession of different shades of green: meadows, bushes, trees and flocks of dark birds suddenly flying up. It's an extremely short lapse, a reviving hiatus, which opens up my soul before the train plunges again among the high buildings along Cristoforo Colombo Street and stops at Ostiense station.

This morning, instead, it was my kids who offered me a break from my reasoning adult logic, and gave my day a fantastic beginning, when they came into the “big bed” as soon as they woke up, and Arianna, aged seven, begged Damiano, aged four, not to lie on that side of the bed because her bad dreams were there and he might be scared; he calmly replied: “but I won't get scared...”.

3.15 am. I left home to go to the frontier. The terminal, the journey, then I changed buses in Santa Ana and saw the sun rise and the fields become green over the shadows of the previous hours. It rained last night, and one could see the traces everywhere: puddles, wet earth, nature's brighter colours.

6.15 am. San Cristóbal de la Frontera. We arrived, everything was ready, and the place was packed with people. I only had fifteen minutes to find and buy the samples for the week; I had to get back to San Salvador by quarter past eight at the latest: there was a forum to which I had been invited. I purchased quickly and decided to go back by car, not by bus: it would be quicker. What a mistake! The cars that carry people back and forth along this route are kind of "pirate" means of transport and the police, eager to enforce the law, stop and check them more often than they do with buses.

6.45 am. First block. Driver: But, Mr. Policeman, you know that [...] I make some money driving my little car, that we're trying to get a licence, but they don't want to give us one because the bus owners are protesting. Police Officer: I know, but you do know it is forbidden to drive people around... come on, you, show me your documents... and you, sir, these goods are forbidden. (Why is it forbidden to buy them, but not to sell them? I ask myself. Why is everything sold freely on the frontier and with Police Officers there to "check"?) Fifteen minutes later they let us go. We drove on.

7.20 am. We passed a police car going towards the frontier. The driver complained: “It’s going to be a rotten journey back”.

7.25 am. I suddenly realized we were driving faster than usual. My travelling companions kept looking behind and I started to feel a bit worried. The driver speeded up even more and I realized *the police were chasing us!* They soon reached us, put on the siren and shouted out to pull in. They asked for our documents again, they took down something, they warned us again about this and that being forbidden, they wanted the driver’s licence, etc. Then they made us get out, checked the goods, fined the driver and let us go.

During the journey I asked the driver if there is no way to get licences because they do not harass them much... His reply: They will never give us a licence, because the bus owners are protesting with all their might (and since they are also in parliament...); however, well, there would be a way round it. There’s a man who owns a fleet of seven cars, and earns more than people like us who only own one. He pays the police so that they let him drive his cars around without any problems and, if you pay him, he gives you a document, with which, when the police stop you, you only have to say you work for so-and-so and they say nothing and let you go at once.

Honestly, every time I bump into all this mafia, and into the civil servants we are so unfortunate to have, I am disgusted... “Serve and protect first of all”, this is the motto of our Policía Nacional Civil... I can still remember the days when the peace agreements were signed,

and the old Policía de Hacienda and former National Guards were abolished: we were all so happy, so hopeful, and we believed things would change... *Lies upon lies*. Years have gone by, truth has prevailed over our dreams, and corruption over everything. As usual, those who have more can do more, and those who cannot pay are simply left out with no protection and no one to save them from the police themselves.

Casablanca, April 25

Jihane Bouziane

Last night, at home, a loud noise woke me up. I thought it was my drunken neighbour who had missed the toilet again... But then the racket started again, and very loudly. I began to make out two people's screams. A young woman begging a man to stop beating her up, a man shouting and carrying on the beating, the woman crying, the man insulting her... I had to do something. I called the police. (In the meanwhile she had come out of the flat, he had followed her and was still beating her just next to my door.) *Me*: Good evening, Allah yekhellik. There's a man beating up a young woman on the stairs of my block. It sounds really bad. *Policeman*: Is it his wife? *Me*: (why is he asking?) I don't know, but they're screaming and this is annoying me. (I felt disgusted with myself when I suddenly realized I had to complain about the noise, not denounce an atrocity being committed on my landing.) *Policeman*: You see, madam, if it's a husband beating up his wife, the police can do nothing, as it's a private mat-

ter; but if it's the noise you're complaining about, then we'll come and have a look. *Me*: I'm complaining about the noise... Come as soon as possible. (In the meanwhile she had come back up and into their flat, or he had made her come back in order to carry on with the beating in the intimacy of their love nest.) *Policeman*: We'll do all that is necessary. Please give us your address and telephone number. I hardly slept all night long. He was very energetic, and she was very patient... This morning when I left home I found some blood on the landing floor. It must have been a very long night for the two of them. I'd bet my life that our dear policemen did not turn up at all. Result: that woman should have let herself be killed; apparently, she had no other means to put an end to her ordeal.

Baghdad, April 26

R.

[...] We've finally decided to leave. I guess I've known we would be leaving for a while now. We discussed it as a family dozens of times. At first, someone would suggest it tentatively, because it was just a preposterous idea—leaving one's home and extended family, leaving one's country—and to what? To where? Since last summer, we had been discussing it more and more. It was only a matter of time before what began as a suggestion—a last-case scenario—soon took on solidity and developed into a plan. For the last couple of months, it has only been a matter of logistics. Plane or car? Jordan or

Syria? Will we all leave together as a family? Or will it be only my brother and I at first? After Jordan or Syria—where then? Obviously, either of those countries is going to be a transit to something else. They are both overflowing with Iraqi refugees, and every single Iraqi living in either country is complaining of the fact that work is difficult to come by, and getting a residency is even more difficult. There is also the little problem of being turned back at the border. Thousands of Iraqis aren't being let into Syria or Jordan—and there are no definite criteria for entry, the decision is based on the whim of the border patrol guard checking your passport. An airplane isn't necessarily safer, as the trip to Baghdad International Airport is in itself risky and travelers are just as likely to be refused permission to enter the country (Syria and Jordan) if they arrive by airplane. And if you're wondering why Syria or Jordan, because they are the only two countries that will let Iraqis in without a visa. Following up visa issues with the few functioning embassies or consulates in Baghdad is next to impossible. So we've been busy. Busy trying to decide what part of our lives to leave behind. Which memories are dispensable? We, like many Iraqis, are not the classic refugees—the ones with only the clothes on their backs and no choice. We are choosing to leave because the other option is simply a continuation of what has been one long nightmare—stay and wait and try to survive. On the one hand, I know that leaving the country and starting a new life somewhere else—as yet unknown—is such a huge thing that it should dwarf every trivial concern. The funny thing is

“The American invasion of Iraq and the war to follow caused an estimated four million Iraqis to flee their homes within four years, the largest exodus since the mass migrations associated with the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. As of August, 2007, deepening violence has displaced some two million Iraqis inside Iraq, and has driven another two million out of the country, largely to Syria and Jordan, but also to Lebanon, Egypt, Turkey and the Gulf. Few western countries have accepted Iraqis. Sweden has been the most welcoming, granting asylum to almost 9,000 Iraqis in 2006, almost 20 times more than the United States and about half the total for all of Europe that year.”
(The New York Times, August 10)

that it's the trivial that seems to occupy our lives. We discuss whether to take photo albums or leave them behind. Can I bring along a stuffed animal I've had since the age of four? Is there room for E.'s guitar? What clothes do we take? Summer clothes? The winter clothes too? What about my books? What about the CDs, the baby pictures? The problem is that we don't even know if we'll ever see this stuff again. We don't know if whatever we leave, including the house, will be available when and if we come back. There are moments when the injustice of having to leave your country, simply because an imbecile got it into his head to invade it, is overwhelming. It is unfair that in order to survive and live normally, we have to leave our home and what remains of family and friends... And to what? It's difficult to decide which is more frightening—car bombs and militias, or having to leave everything you know and love, to some unspecified place, for a future where nothing is certain.

Al-Hassa, Saudi Arabia, May 1

'Daisy'

He: The house is a mess, and I'm hungry. She: I'm so tired, I have a project I need to do. He: That's enough, I'm sick of always coming after your schoolwork. When was the last time you cooked? She: Buy something from outside, I've got too much stuff to do. I also need to get the kids bathed and put to bed so I can finish my work for tomorrow. He: If you loved me you'd cook me rice. She: That's the measure of love? Everyone else I go to uni with has maids, I'm

the only one who doesn't. He: So I'm supposed to get you a maid now? We don't have any money. She: That's not what I mean, can't you be patient and understanding a little? He: You've been going to school for six years already. I got married to have a wife, not to live like this.

This couple almost got a divorce last week. My husband was called in to intervene and talk to the man. I talked to the woman to get her side of the story so when my husband was talking to the man, he'd have more of the facts. We'd already gotten the CliffsNotes version from her father, who gave us the call, and we were discussing the issues in the car on the way to meet them. Being close to the woman I knew more background on the story than my husband did so I asked him to pass on a few morsels of counsel to the man. I wanted him to tell the man about our life when I was a student in England. We were both studying but of course (as is the way it is in most of the world, wrong or right) the housework and childcare were my responsibility. My husband's degree took precedence over mine because although we were both on scholarship, his career and consequently our future, depended on *his* doing a good job.

Remember my bouts of crying because I had too much on my plate? Remember how I wouldn't sit down to eat with my family because I had to start on the cleanup? Remember how I had to choose either attending lectures or studying, I didn't have time for both? Remember how I was the only Saudi female student we met who had small kids but no maid? Remember how I could only do my uni work after the

kids were fed, bathed, played with, sent to bed and the house cleaned? Remember how I had to base what lectures I chose on the timetable and how it fit around my kids being home, not on the quality or content of the lecture? Remember how when I had essays due, and there'd always be three or more due at the same time, I'd have to do a housework and children strike for almost a week previous to the due date, not sleep for three days previous to the due date, and once again cry because I can't do the good job that I wanted to and I know I'm capable of and I was so stressed out. Remember how skinny and sickly I became because of the pressure? I spent second semester of my third year in and out of the hospital with asthma; many attacks were triggered by stressful situations. Remember how we had to put off having more children because there's no way a baby could have fit into the chaos? Remember how I had to do my grocery shopping online because I could point and click and voila! It was delivered for a fiver. Remember how I'd go months without talking to some of my friends because I didn't have time? What beauty regime? Oh yeah, every week I'd clip my nails. I had an annual hair trim immediately after taking the year's last exam. Good thing I wore hijab *and* nikaab at uni! There were days I had on my PJ's under my jilbab.

I regularly talked with this woman about her struggles while trying to finish university. I already knew of her husband's attitude towards being "neglected". She confides in me since many stay-at-home old-school Saudi women don't understand the pressure she's under. She'd gotten married, had two babies, under-

gone a major health scare, and spent much time in the hospital with one of her children, all since starting her studies. This could be any couple, anywhere in the world. Although some Western men may help somewhat around the house, I've heard statistics which suggest that women in two-income families still do upwards of 80% of the housework in America and England. And even the 20% *some* of them do is praised unnecessarily! Don't be surprised a Saudi man sits around like King Farrouk waiting to be served by his frazzled wife because unfortunately, they're not the only ones. I remember some of my Eastern European relatives bitching because their son was washing the dishes after getting home from work: his wife had three kids under the age of five! Rather than relating more sad stories of female oppression via housework, I want my readers to feel how universal this situation is. Did it make any difference that it took place in Saudia, in Arabic, and with two Saudis in an Islamic marriage?

Casablanca, May 2

Jihane Bouziane

I think I am in that well-known period of life when all of your female and male friends have found their soul-mates and have decided to get married. Apart from one person who's very close to me and seems to be extremely happy to be getting married, so, when talking about her appointment with the guillotine, shows a great sense of humour, all the others who announced their weddings to me did not seem to be on cloud nine. A female friend told me: "I'm

twenty-seven. I want to have children, and he knows nothing about my past”. I’ll add that this friend is as pretty as a picture, that she cared about her condition as a single woman [...] and claimed no one would have got the upper hand of her bohemian spirit. In the end, she gave in to the maternity roll-call, and to the intense delight of ending up with a man she’s not madly in love with, but who she’s convinced will be the ideal husband. A male friend of mine has found another justification: “You know, I’ve had five women in my life, and each time I lost my head. With this one, whom I barely know, I will maintain myself *Zen* and will manage to be a responsible head of the family [...]. And I will end up loving her”. Another female friend met her husband-to-be in a pub at a moment when she could hardly say her name. Well, he promised her he would lead her back onto the right lines, and said he would make a good, respectable house-mother of her. She believed him and after going out with him, I mean “seriously”, for a month, she’s marrying him.

I understand that at forty you may end up getting married because your fear of not being able to have children starts to become very real, but not when you’re not yet thirty... I feel like an extraterrestrial as I cling to this spinsterhood which allows me to be myself, euphoric as well as melancholy, and which grants me the privilege of choosing almost everything concerning my life. [...] Those women who do not understand my decision think that I am too choosy [...] and, although they have some regrets regarding their own choice, that it is better not to end up as a spinster. And that, if the worst came

“I’m in a place in my life where I’m comfortable. I can do what I want, when I want, with whom I want. I was a wife and a mother. I don’t feel like I need to do that again.”

Carol Crenshaw, of Roswell, Georgia, Usa. (The New York Times, January 16, “Quotation of the Day”) For what experts say is probably the first time, more U.S. women are living

to the worst, if things did not work well with my dear husband, I could still become pregnant and will then know how to spend my time. [...]

without a husband than with one. (The New York Times)

Notes on family and work

by Massimo Parizzi

Here

notes from the present

1. Family. Home. The world that is born out of a choice, a decision. Unlike the world of work, which is already there waiting for us. No one “begets” it for themselves. And in the world of work, choice is often impossible. Even more dissimilar is the world of the public sphere: the state and the political regime. This is already there waiting for us, even more so than the world of work. We don’t beget it, we’re born into it. Sometimes luckily, sometimes unluckily.

Thanks to Jihane Bouziane, Maria Ofelia Zuniga, Veronica Khokhlova

2. In many expressions, the words “private” and “personal” indicate something that is inferior to “public”: something more restricted, something we shouldn’t be concerned with (“a private affair”), often of lesser value. That’s not inexplicable, yet it’s ambiguous, misleading.

Is it because the private sphere—the world of the family and home, for instance—is already free? Because it’s already a world where one can choose and decide, so much so that it is directly born out of our own choice, our own decision? Is that why, unlike the public sphere, there’s no point in being concerned with it?

That would be a good explanation, because it recognize the private sphere as a model for the public one. A goal that has already been reached in one, yet to be reached in the other: the ability to choose, to decide, to beget things; in other words, power, in other words, responsibility; whereas in the public world, what operates is a sort of predestination, subjugation, impotence, irresponsibility.

3. It's not true that the home and family are a world that is already free: we all know that, especially women. But—and here lies the ambiguity—nor is it true that they make up a world that is inferior, more limited, of lesser value. Anything but. They really are a model, for politics. Why? Because, aside from the reason cited above, they are the world where life is created and nurtured, and a world that is already universal.

To be able to say this, however, one must forget or overlook the fact—and one can't—that the home and family have been and often still are the world of the subjugation of women: the world in which Jihane's neighbour is beaten by her husband badly enough to leave blood smears on the landing [here, April 25]. It is the world of violence and child abuse. It is the world of neuroses and pathological disorders. It is a world that is narrow-minded, closed off, one that draws a boundary between family members and "outsiders" as if they were—as they sometimes are—accomplices on one side and enemies on the other.

4. The family as a model for politics, i.e., for the organization of society? The idea is ancient. And authoritarian: it sees the sovereign, or the head of government, as a strict patriarch or a

benevolent father. And overlaying relationships based on rights with relationships based on feelings, whatever they may be, like family relationships, is an idea that presages the political world's invasion of one's entire being.

5. Jihane is very uneasy. To the political world of her country, Morocco, she is, she says [in issue 16 of this magazine, October 3, 2006], completely alien. "The institutions don't speak to me, don't communicate with me." And she participates in it as little as possible, voting, "even if I don't believe in one party more than another", primarily to prevent the worst: the victory of the Islamist party, under which—she knows, and it frightens her—she would no longer be ignored as an outsider, but rather bossed about: "They would trample all over my freedom". She prefers to be ignored by the public sphere rather than bossed about, but what she wishes is something else: she wishes that (speaking of public television) "it represented me, and also the housewife out in the middle of nowhere". That it were in touch with her, it seems, that it were concerned, not with her, but with the things that she, and "the housewife out in the middle of nowhere", are concerned about.

6. As regards work, her job at a market research company, Jihane is more self-contradictory. "I like it," she says, and seems to see a place for personal growth, one that allows her "to become more responsible, more resilient, more mature, more intelligent, more ambitious..." [here, February 5, and issue 16, November 20, 2006]. But is this growth personal growth? Like all growth processes, it is also a test of one's own value. In the eyes of whom?

One's own and those of others, of course.

Own's "own value", whatever makes it up, is always one's value in the world; in this sense, growth is never personal, it is always public.

The eyes that are assessing Jihane's value, as is true for most of us at our jobs, are not just anybody's eyes, however. They are the eyes of power: "My bosses" [here, February 5]. That's why it's so hard, almost impossible, to elude them; so much so that the distinction between their eyes and Jihane's, or our own, could easily vanish: "Not being able to do the job I like with the efficiency my bosses expect from me makes me sad," writes Jihane. So it's her own eyes that Jihane, like many of us in our work, risks losing. Our own eyes: the only ones, in dialogue with those of others, that can judge our own value. That can judge us. There is the danger of shutting them, and letting them be replaced by the eyes of other people, other people who are more powerful: our "bosses", or a company's philosophy or objectives. The dialogue between our own eyes and the eyes of others becomes a monologue: only the bosses are doing the talking, even if it's with our own voice. It's a form of estrangement. It's a loss of one's self, the sense of one's own worth, the sense of one's job, one's fundamental relationship with others. Isn't that as much as one can lose? It's a form of obliteration, and that's what Jihane feels when she complains that her job consists in "projects that could get done with me or without me" [issue 16, November 20, 2006].

7. Are there really projects that without me—*me*, specifically—would not get done? Yes, some: a novel, or a poem or a painting or a

piece of music, an invention; maybe a new idea. In part, often for the most part, jobs which are based on the kind of relations that tend to get called “human”, even though they all are: the ones that demand such direct, wide-ranging, personal involvement that they almost become a different job when performed by someone else. Like many caring professions, teaching, etc. But not farming, or driving a bus, not the jobs that make up and probably always will make up the majority of “work”.

8. “Changes... changes... changes” writes Maria Ofelia [here, February 2]. That’s what she expects from new births, and from the role they give to those already alive: the role of “travelling companions”. “Maybe changes in the way we see the world and its priorities... changes... changes... changes.”

It’s a look at the world and its priorities, in a word, politics, starting with the creation and nurturing of life. With the family. With home. It is a gaze that is touched, then stunned, then exultant: as if it had found the answer and found out it was simple. There in plain sight. Where it had always been. But then it becomes disappointed, disheartened, confused. “I think that these new lives are still the greatest sign of hope we may be offered in times of such worldwide chaos,” writes Maria Ofelia. It is a hope that has always gone disappointed and yet has always existed.

How is it possible to always hope and always be disappointed and always keep hoping...? It’s sheer obstinacy. That’s what touches and stuns us. The obstinacy of this “subuniverse”, this “subhistory” in which life is created and nur-

tured. In which it is lived out. The motions of life that have been repeated for millennia and millennia, every moment, by hundreds of thousands, millions, now billions of people. As History changes, and the political regimes change. A repetition. As if it were always there, waiting, in case it should be called. Always ready to respond. To the call of History and Politics. And yet the call never comes. Why?

9. The indirect paths... It seems that the public position of what matters, "private" life, is always "underneath", to one side. To be looked at out of the corner of one's eye and arrived at indirectly. And this gaze, like all gazes, affects what is looked at and affects the person looking. When looked at askance by the public sphere, the private sphere is distorted. "Lateral aberrations" is the term used in the study of perspective for the distortions that occur at the edges of a three-dimensional image when it is depicted on a flat surface. It's a good metaphor. In the sidelong gaze of religion and politics, which have goals of their own, private life, life itself, almost always becomes unrecognizable.

10. If home and family are a distorted sphere even with respect to themselves, with respect to their role as the sphere where life is created and nurtured, if they are the sphere of the subjugation of women, of child abuse, etc., is it perhaps because they have adapted to this distorting gaze, and see themselves mirrored in it? No, that can't be true. But sometimes it is. In part. The view that Jihane's neighbour's husband has of his own family, and the view of family held by the officer who refuses to intervene when Jihane calls the police, because "if it's a husband

beating up his wife, the police can do nothing, as it's a private matter" [here, April 25], are more than just complicit. They're identical. Each of them mirrors the other.

11. Jihane seems to realize this. She has harsh, sardonic words for "female and male friends" who "have found their soul-mates and have decided to get married": they do not seem, she writes, "to be on cloud nine" [here, May 2]. They want to have children, to start a family, and prefer to find "the ideal husband", to be "a responsible head of the family", to be "a good, respectable house-mother", rather than to fall madly in love. Between two images of the family, one more "private" (love) and one more "public" (respectability), they opt for the second. Jihane doesn't see this as a choice, but rather, a form of surrender, and she clings to a "spinsterhood which allows me to be myself, euphoric as well as melancholy, and which grants me the privilege of choosing almost everything concerning my life".

12. Private life is and always will be in search of its own identity: of itself, of what it is. And in this state of uncertainty—which all of us have experienced, for instance, when we leave our parents' home—it seeks its identity, and always will, in the eyes of others. Just as we grow and test our own mettle both in our own eyes and those of others. Private life, like personal growth, is also always public.

13. A man who peers at things askance and takes circuitous paths. As if he were suspicious, diffident from the get-go. As if he felt threatened. As if he were afraid. Or is he ashamed of himself? Of what he's doing? That's how spies

act, in movies. But so do wanted men, fugitives. People who have to keep glancing around them. And who can't take the direct route. Sometimes, though, they aren't spies or fugitives. At least in the strictest sense. They are people who have been bowed. By "life"? They no longer know—perhaps they never have—how to look ahead of them, head held high, walking a straight path. Instead, they lower their eyes, glance sideways, slip into the alleys. That's the kind of person that is shaped by the public gaze onto private life. A bowed man.

14. In the first of her diary entries published in this journal [issue 15, June 10, 2006], Jihane wrote about a daylong trip from Casablanca "to the Moroccan countryside, to a small *douar* between Settat and Marrakech". About her encounter with the family waiting there for her. The women. The preparation of lunch. The children. She'd gone there "for work": market research, I would imagine. But at least in her diary, she doesn't say a word about this work. As if she had discovered, perhaps at that moment, in that *douar*, that what mattered to her was not the reason she had gone there, but something that was incidental to it, something peripheral: that encounter. Her gaze took it out of that peripheral area, and put it at the center, and stayed fixed on it. Then this leads to a question: "The children are running around, and yet they should be at school. When I ask him why, the head of the family gives me a brusque answer: It's not like in town here, there are lots of things to do at home. They waste their time at school". Then, vague and hesitant as it may be, an intention/an action: "I don't have the nerve to reply but, as if

to challenge him, I go and talk to some little girls looking at us from a window. They're adorable. They ask me to drive them around a bit and I immediately please them: it's my way of showing them... I don't know what...". And finally, the gaze that Jihane turned on that encounter made her write: a diary entry. And yet that's not why she went there; she went there for a job, which she must have done, and well.

So maybe when Jihane, like so many of us, complains that she has a job where she's replaceable—"projects that could get done with me or without me"—she's mistaken. Perhaps the problem should be turned around. It's not that she's replaceable in that job, but that job is replaceable for her. That she could do almost anything else. Because what seems to interest her about her job—the people she meets, “to become more responsible, more resilient” etc., the trust and respect of her “bosses”—is always something incidental, something peripheral to her job. It's a cross-eyed state. Like turning eyes that look to the side to the center, or eyes that look to the center to the side. Is it possible to live that way? Often enough, there's no choice. But knowing there's no choice is already a choice. It's the choice—through knowledge, awareness—to distance oneself from what one is forced to do. This distance opens up a gap that can become home to one's “good wishes” [see here, Giorgio Morale, January 1]. A place where, in the meantime, one can live.

15. This is the distance that Maria Ofelia puts between herself and her job at the Monday and Friday market at the San Cristóbal border: “I can't honestly say I feel exactly like one of the

market people yet: I keep thinking of my presence at the frontier as something transitory which helps me earn some money while I am waiting to find a job or trying to decide what else I want do with my life. And I believe that the very idea of ‘being able to decide’ is what makes me feel different,” she writes [here, February 11]. And she adds: “The very fact I do not feel completely as being either a seller or a buyer, who only lives for the sake of that market, may be what helps me look just beyond what things appear to be. Beyond those people who shout under the sun at one o’clock in the afternoon I can see lives, people with a story”. Without that distance, if her gaze were only the one related to her job, she wouldn’t see them. If she were completely present, as a buyer or seller, she would not be completely present.

16. How easy it is to feel Veronica’s joy over Marta’s first steps, and, reading her diary entry [here, January 1], to share it to some degree. How easy it is to feel her pain, her desperation over the disappearance and then the death of her father. Reading this account [here, from July 17] is anything but easy.

It’s strange. It’s strange at least to think that these are “private” joys and tragedies. And that what is “public”, on the other hand, is Putin’s televised speech (a few hours before Marta’s first steps). Strange, and normal. Normal, if you think that “public” is the place everyone watches, the place where they address everyone. Strange if by ‘public’ you mean the place where we all are. The place we are all isn’t Putin’s, it’s Marta’s. Private life is public.

Back to the diaries

Here

notes from the present

Al-Hassa, Saudi Arabia, May 3

‘Daisy’

A strange phenomenon occurs when you combine a city full of big butts, guts, and only one nice sidewalk: The Flirty-Go-Round. Many people here would like to walk for exercise, but the lack of sidewalks can make this unpleasant. Some neighborhoods also lack sewers and there is sewage leaking from overflowing septic tanks into the sidewalk-less streets. Also, walking on the road can turn you into a moving target for this country’s unskilled drivers. Only recently has the city begun to create actual sidewalks on some main drags. The first place to get a nice new brick sidewalk was the city hall building (Al-Baladiyya). It is very wide and completely encircles the city hall and its surrounding greenery. There aren’t any houses close by, only the maternity hospital and a big post office building. People began to flock to the new sidewalk, which resembles a track, to get their daily exercise. It’s popular because of its nice wide circular shape, nice green scenery, and central location; it provides a measurable distance for the walkers, and it’s just become a “thing” to do.

Pregnant women, fresh from seeing a doctor at the maternity hospital, would go walk-

ing/waddling there to bring on or progress labor. Other women, who work at some of the neighboring hospitals, also started going there and would walk while chatting with their friends after their shifts. Some men, in full jogging gear, also began going there, weaving around the slowly walking abaya-clad women. More and more people came to walk and it wasn't long before the young men of the town caught wind of this new place to go and potentially meet women on the move. Recognizing the "danger" posed by all this gender mixing, the people inside city hall came up with a rule to help curb potential flirting. The rule was: anyone walking around city hall has to walk in a clockwise direction. This would help to keep men from "bumping" into oncoming women or vice versa. It would also curb any flirty looks at oncoming walkers. So, the walking continued, in a more orderly fashion. One can come any day after Asr prayer and see the clockwise walking continue right into the night. There's usually a girlboy order to the walking: a gaggle of girls immediately preceding a flock of flirts in freshly ironed thobes and starched ghutras... Yeah, they are there to exercise... Sure. One determined young man decided to use his education to convince the government officials of their folly in deciding to keep everyone moving in a clockwise direction. He took an appointment with the highest minister in city hall and proceeded to argue logic. He quoted from his science books: "Sir, it's scientifically proven that if a human being continues to move in a clockwise direction, his heart will explode! The

rule that everyone has to walk in a clockwise direction will harm our health and should be revoked immediately”. The minister sat, and let the earnest young man complete his spiel without objecting or saying a word. Little did the young man know but this particular minister was a science major himself. After he was done the minister showed the young man out. He informed him it was doubtful any of the walkers could attain such a speed, only attainable in a centrifuge-like device, so as to cause their heart to explode and thanked him for his concern. I guess he’ll have to find another way to meet women.

Al-Hassa, Saudi Arabia, May 12

‘Daisy’

What have women been talking about in our *magellat* [women’s parlor, a room in a house used to receive female guests]? Here’s some insight from this weekend’s conversations. *Body Image*: It was being discussed how now when a wife gains a few pounds, husbands are dogging them to slim down. Some of these women there have taken to extreme dieting to lose weight. *Changes in Married Life*: Women were reminiscing about back in the days. These women are aged mid-20’s to mid-40’s and are all worried about getting older and appearing less attractive to their husbands. The influence of media on men’s perceptions of their wives was discussed heavily. Who can compare to TV women who never change poopy diapers or scrub a floor and have perfect make-up, hair and bodies? Their grandparents never had is-

and bodies? Their grandparents never had issues like this. *Misyar Marriage*: it used to be that a poor man's wife could relax when it came to one issue, her husband wouldn't be able to afford a second wife, so her position was secure. But now, with some unmarried professional women willing to give up their rights to support and housing just to get married, even the poor guys can get married again. Where Western women worry about their husbands having affairs with their secretary or taking on a mistress, women here worry about a second wife. I was a quiet observer during this conversation and just listened to what these average Saudi women had to say. Some are slightly more educated than others, none of them are professionals, they have never travelled except to Mecca and Bahrain, and the household income for all of them doesn't exceed SR6,000 (\$1,600).

Gaza, May 16

Things have been crazy in Gaza over the past two days. Very crazy. In between working and actually trying to keep our wits about us as we've been holed up indoors for two days now, I've had little time to blog. Things are tenuously calm at the moment with on-again-off-again gunfire, which is better than it was only a few hours ago. But things in Gaza have a way of changing very quickly—for better or for worse. Volatility is its defining characteristic.

We happen to be sort of be in the eye of the storm, as it were. Fierce battles employing mor-

Misyar marriage in Sunni Islam is a legal marriage contract carried out via the normal contractual procedure, with a negotiated understanding between the couple that the wife gives up various rights offered under the religion. She may relinquish the right to have the husband live with her in the same house and provide her with necessary living expenses, at times even forgoing support for any children resulting from the union.

Laila El-Haddad

May 16. About 200 Gaza residents tried to demonstrate for a ceasefire, marching in the center of Gaza City with Palestinian flags. But masked gunmen used the diversion to move toward different positions, and in the gunfire that followed, one demonstrator was wounded and the others fled.

tars, RPGs (rocket propelled grenades), and heavy machine gun fire were raging all around our house today, at times only a block away, interspersed with the thuds of Israeli gunships bombing areas of eastern and northern Gaza.

Yousuf became more and more concerned as the day passed, until I finally told him they were not firing, but rather making an enormous pot of popcorn outside that would fill the streets once it was done. At first he wasn't convinced, then he later remarked "Mama, I don't really like this kind of popcorn!" When the firing died down, he ran into my room excitedly shouting: "Mama, Mama! I think the popcorn is done!"

The city was literally transformed into a ghost town, and civilian life was all but paralyzed. Storekeepers kept shops closed and virtually all residents, including schoolchildren and university students, reminded penned up indoors. Most did not even dare to go to their balconies. The occasional shopkeeper who did stay open was harassed by gunmen patrolling the streets. "I don't understand—what are they fighting over, the trash in the streets?" lamented one shopkeeper to me. "We're in a maelstrom and I don't see a way out."

Impromptu checkpoints were set up along the major roads, cutting off access from Gaza City to the north and south of the strip. Unidentified snipers took positions on high-rise towers through the city, as both factions vied for strategic control of various locations. The victims of course in all of this were the residents, particularly those who lived in the towers. Many residents complained of having spend the past two days holed up in their kitchen without electric-

ity, and ambulances not being given access to the injured in the buildings. One woman told me gunmen searched apartments for armed men and set afire several flats. [...]

Gaza, May 17

Laila El-Haddad

We're used to things going from bad to worse very quickly here. But we never expected the situation to get as bad as it has over the past few days. After a terrifying 24 hours, we awoke this morning to sporadic gunfire, and ghostly streets.

It was a welcome change. Sleep-deprived and anxious, my colleague Saeed, on his first visit to Gaza, and myself, headed to Rafah in the southern part of the Strip to continue shooting a series of documentaries we are working on. Though the gunfire had subsided, the gunmen were still patrolling the streets, each this time casually manning their own turf, masked and fully armed. Impromptu checkpoints were still set up along the main Gaza-Rafah road, and we were stopped for ID and affiliation checks. As we approached Rafah, we received word that clashes had broken out there, too, following the funeral of four Hamas men killed in an Israeli air strike the night before. We decided to avoid the town centre, and headed instead to film near the border area along Rafah's edge.

Young children blissfully flew handmade kites above the iron wall separating them from the Egyptian Rafah. Their "atbaq" flirted in the infinite sky above with kites flying their way from the Egyptian side. "We play a game with the Egyptian kids" they explained of their un-

seen counterparts. “We meet here, through our kites, and see who can catch the other’s kites quicker by entangling. So far we’re winning—we’ve got 14 Egyptian kites” he announced proudly. The children are small enough that they can wiggle their way through the cracks of the large iron gates along the wall—where once Merkava tanks made their unwelcome entrance to battered camps here. And so they can call out to their Egyptian friends, and learn their names and new kite flying techniques. [...]

Gaza, May 20

Heba

I am not studying for my final exams. In the matter of fact, I am not because I am on annual leave! Strange, because I should be seizing the opportunity of having extra time to study and I am not. God, I hate staying at home! I know that there are lots of happy and perfectly satisfied stay-at-home moms who would not have it any other way but I feel imprisoned in the domestic sphere. I have to say that waking at 9 am, starting my day with house chores, watching TV, and taking care of the two girls 24/7 is not fun for me. I really need to feel pressured through the day. It is just how I can be productive. I bet if I were at work, I would be studying in the afternoon and not really hanging around. However, it is now amazing to me, as it always is, to just watch the development of my little kids. My eldest child, Saba, was singing some nursery songs, the ones they teach them in day care. And a song about a fish swallowed by a whale caught my attention. Saba was repeating that the

fish dug a hole in the whale tummy and fought her way out bravely. I really think that she does not understand the true meaning of all the words she sang but she did sing it joyfully. Then, she moved to another song in which she kept mentioning the freedom army that would protect one's country, and mingled the word "army" with the word "pocket" in Arabic, for they differ in one letter, and the silliness of the "freedom pocket" made me laugh my head off. [...]

Gaza now is back to serious internal fighting between Fateh and Hamas. The strike of municipality cleaners, because of not getting their salaries, is leaving Gaza full of garbage. The fact that our car, with me and the kids in it, got stopped in the street several times by masked armed men—which led my kids to panic—makes the internal Palestinian situation too depressing to write about. So I am not writing about it, and staying at home is not so bad after all.

Gaza, May 23

Laila El-Haddad

I was down in Rafah again this week. While inspecting the site of a future park project my friend Fida is working on (and which we are making a film about), we were disrupted every few minutes by the voracious sound of multiple F-16 fighter jets flying overhead in unison. Sometimes one or two; then four or five.

Children scurried about playing football with a deflated basketball on the sand lot. "Do you think I will be assassinated one day?" one child asked another. He didn't say this jokingly. [...]

Kyiv, May 25

Veronica Khokhlova

On May 8, I called my friend whose husband died of cancer six months before, on November 8, two and a half months before their daughter was born. She was on her way home from the church when I called, her precious little daughter asleep in a sling. The park near Mariinsky Palace, occupied by the Yanukovych [pro-Moscow Prime Minister of Ukraine] gang, happens to be the only decent place for them to go for walks—and there's no way they can go there now, she told me. When I think of the current situation in Ukraine, this is what I feel strongest about: not the meaningless politics of it all, but my friend's absolutely desperate situation, aggravated by a bunch of losers camping in the park. So heartbreaking. One family member in Kyiv preferred to watch the Simpsons this evening, instead of Victor Yanukovych's emergency press conference. Another family member says the weather's simply hellish, and everyone's melting in the heat and couldn't care less about politics.

Milan, Italy, June 3

Giorgio Morale

Sunday. June light and flocks of sparrows and swallows that use the silence as a sounding board. Thoughts bubble up one at a time, are scattered, dissipate. A cluster of bell-chimes. A radio broadcasts the mass at high volume. Then pots and crockery. Sumptuous smells construct a laden table that stretches between windows.

The cooking vapours waft up to the heavens, the meat drippings seep through the walls. Afterwards, the sporting news. There's a moment when the day becomes feverish, it quivers in anticipation: itching to extend on into the evening and beyond.

There was a time when I thought I'd be able to elude fate. I was too light to collide with it. The sky was much larger, back then. It started just over my head. Fate would pass higher, I thought, or to the side, until I had grown enough to take it on.

Moscow, June 7

Veronica Khokhlova

Called my mother, but she wasn't there: Papa picked up the phone and we spent half an hour talking. I don't understand about 90 percent of what he's saying. Absolutely heartbreaking. Of what I do understand, he is very happy for me, because of Marta and all that I'm doing and seeing (which isn't a lot, but still). He's still the kindest person in the world—his three strokes in one year weren't able to change that.

Gaza, June 12

Heba

Gaza is back to internal fighting between Fateh and Hamas. This time, it is very serious. It is in the form of civil war, and I tend to think that one faction is determined to get a military victory over the other. [...] A military group broke into our very secure and nice six-story building, where I live in the fifth floor, and used the roof

for gun shooting and firing missiles at another faction. Terrified, cornered and mute, I watched my two little girls; one clinging to the blanket covering her face with her doll attached to her in silence with a petrified look in the eyes—and the other thumb-sucking in anxiety, relaxing to my steady strokes in her hair. My neighbors, a spouse with three children, fled their apartment that was more in the direction of fire and stayed with us embarrassed, stressed and tongue-tied. We spent 24 hours in fear and the sounds of shells and bullets felt like coming from our own bedroom. Each time, the children startled and we said “it’s OK” till it was dawn. Imagine putting five children, all under four years old in the kitchen without allowing them to move for ten hours, having no words to answer a question like “Mama, will we die?” or unable to tolerate simple demands such as taking them to the bathroom, while bullets are very close to all of your house windows. In the early morning, as soon as we saw light, we fled the house to my parents’ house and took our neighbors with us, who also left to their cousin’s house. Currently, very little hope is left in me that factions will bridge their differences or will come to a stable consistent settlement. [...]

Gaza, June 21

Heba

Life is back to normal in Gaza or it seems to. I hit the road to Rafah yesterday and, thank God, I saw no armed men or signs of fighting. Compared to the past couple of weeks, the whole

June 14. Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip.

fresh scenery, while driving along the sea road, looked almost surreal. Gaza's night is so quiet without sounds of shooting or shells. Nevertheless, there is a great concern among people about all the other unresolved political issues of the duality of government, the legitimacy of the government in Gaza and the complete closure that might cut Gaza off from the rest of the world even more. The scenario of coming events is yet unwritten, and personally I do not have a positive vision for the future. Yet I cannot despair, and neither can the rest of good-hearted innocent Gazans who want to live a normal life and to have basic human rights, which they are denied now.

Yesterday, I went to al-Mawasi in Rafah right beside the Egyptian-Palestinian border. Al-Mawasi is a village that was occupied before the Israel withdrawal from the settlements, and it was disconnected from Gaza or had minimum contact with the rest of the Gaza strip for a long time. Now it is open for visits, and has the most amazing clean beach you can ever see. I went there to visit a newly established women's center. I walked into a room full of women of different ages; some are educated and some are not. They were looking at me, waiting for what I have to say. I went speechless for a couple of seconds and tried to say something, yet my voice was a bit rusty and strange. So I stayed silent, watching them, with all kinds of ideas racing in my head. I know that my organization can not offer them what they wait for, and I know that my next words do not hold the promise they hope. I know that each woman represents a

whole family where the husband is not working, and that each takes it on herself to try and make her reality a better one. I gathered my strength and made my little—in my opinion sugar-coated—speech; of which I did not know how much they believed or disbelieved and how far they were disappointed or satisfied. Their simplicity and instant positive feedback and reassurance made my eyes water with tears. I tried to look strong, though, for I know that if we need anything now we need our faith and hope; real or fake... It does not matter.

Gaza, July 8

Heba

I enjoyed a lovely weekend. My husband, the kids, and I went with my parents, brothers and sister to the beach. We had a nice barbeque, chatted and laughed for hours. Of course such trips to the beach in Gaza involve food, food, and... food! We took tea, the coffee, fruits, nuts, snacks, cold drinks, not to forget the meat and chicken for the barbeque. I got back home so full... I am full till now!

The situation in Gaza is very quiet and calm. People are on the streets till midnight and after, which makes us feel so secure. Of course I do have this tingling feeling in the back of my mind that nothing is resolved yet and that it might be temporary quietness, but I am quick in dismissing the feeling, to enjoy the present. I know that all the economic and political problems are still there, pressing and knotty, but people want to have fun a bit, for God's sake.

That is why it's like Gaza is alive again.

My husband bought a fishing rod. I do like to write this about him. He is the kind of person who always likes to experience something new, ranging from new types of chocolates and detergents to learning new skills and doing different activities. A while ago, he bought a lute and learnt to play on his own. Now he is into fishing. He went fishing for a whole day, the other day, and got back with two baby fish that you can hardly see with bare eyes. Now he makes all kinds of jokes about the meals I will be cooking and inviting people to, made with his fish. Next week he will give it another shot. I finished my exams with excellent marks this semester and I have field and office work that is endless.

Yawn... I know I sound very boring but isn't life boring most of the time? In my opinion, yes, it is boring and routine and we struggle just trying to make something special out of it!

My father's disappeared

by Veronica Khokhlova

Kyiv, July 17

1:46 am. My father's disappeared. They went for a walk with Marta and he wandered off while Mama was feeding her. There are too many places he could've gotten to from where

Here

notes from the present

they were. It's impossible to describe what horror it is. It's been six hours already, Mama has spent four hours walking around, looking for him, my dear friend Sasha and I were calling various police stations and other places, all in vain. It's a huge city, and he could be anywhere. He's 74 and had three strokes last year. He doesn't have any ID on him, nor does he have any money. He's not at any of Kyiv's hospitals—this is what we were told by the 003 folks. The 02 bastards—the main police number—hung up on me twice after I described the situation. Once, they told me to call the local police department. Most of the time, they just don't pick up the phone. At several district police stations, they sounded very polite and sympathetic, though, wrote down our number and info on Papa, but so far, no one's called back. If he had a cell phone, he could've been tracked down by a rescue service—but he unlearned how to use it after the last stroke. I can't believe this is happening to us. Such a nightmare.

1:02 pm. Papa's still missing. Mama has spent some time looking for him on her own early in the morning today. Then she took his picture to the police station at Moskovskaya St., only to discover that they were planning to begin working on his case *tomorrow*. "It's not some hooligan that's missing," she told them. "It's a person who is ill, and it's been 12 hours already." She also asked them quite decidedly whether they needed a kick in the ass from someone way up high to get them to do their job. That and some real intense crying seems to have helped, and now a young and rather attractive woman

(on really high platform heels) from that police station is calling places and walking around with Mama. She's contacted all the usual medical places, but they don't have anyone who'd fit his description. I'm staying home with Marta—because we still have a tiny hope that he may find his way back by himself.

Kyiv, July 18

00:38. Still no news whatsoever about Papa. The horror of not knowing, the horror of being totally helpless, the horror of trying not to lose hope.

Mama walked around Kyiv from around 6 am till around 8 pm, with a break for the police station. It was a very hot day. The police girl was very sweet, did her best to help Mama cope psychologically, and also worked real hard to locate someone who could've seen Papa. Mama had a large-format photo of Papa's smiling face with her—they were showing it to people. Back home, she placed it prominently in their room, and when I saw it, it totally broke my heart: he looked so happy in that pre-stroke picture.

I walked around Lipki in the evening—he used to work at a school there, up until last summer, and I hoped I'd run into him, hoped he'd be sitting on some bench there somewhere, waiting for me. If only Kyiv weren't so big. The irony is that I thought it was so small when I walked all the way to Goloseevo last week, taking pictures.

There was a portrait of Felix Dzerzhinsky [the founder of the Bolshevik secret police, the Cheka] in the office of the head of one of the

departments at the police station.

So strange how I can write all this here—while also going totally crazy inside. I can't fall asleep anyway. Mama seems sleepless, too. Has he had any food and water in all this time? This question keeps popping up in my head, but then I have to tell myself to stop thinking in that direction, because other obvious questions are just too scary.

9:50 am. They've found someone who may or may not be my father at a hospital near Paton Bridge. A police woman called at 1 am, Mama wanted to go there right away, but was asked to wait till morning. She is on the way there right now. The man has high fever and looks like he had fallen quite a few times. The Paton Bridge area across the river does seem like a logical route, too. Inshaallah, it's my father.

10:20 am. No, it's not him.

Kyiv, July 20

Still no news. It's been over three days already. Three unbearably hot days. Unbearable. I'm with Marta all the time, and that's why Mama does most of the searching: I don't even remember anymore all the places she's been to. Petrovka book market—he used to go there often. Baikovo Cemetery—where his family is buried, and also, people leave food and drink on the graves, and what if he's been surviving on that? Talking to drunks and bums at Kontraktova Ploshcha—he could've gotten there by bus. Useless. A few of them, for example, claimed they'd known him for fifteen years. Kyiv train

station, for the second time yesterday. I've been to the tennis courts where he worked for two decades or so, where I spent much of my childhood. No trace of him anywhere. The police told Mama they'd been making inquiries at Kyiv morgues—and he's not there, either. Thank God. I had the scariest phone conversation of my life tonight, with a very nice woman from the MVS's [Interior Department] missing persons department: she questioned me on my father's clothes, his teeth, his hair, his eyebrows, and his teeth again and again, comparing my answers to some description in front of her, and then we decided it wasn't my father that they had in their database. I didn't have the guts to ask her whether we were talking about a dead person or someone who's still alive. Unlike the previous "it's not him" situation, this one was such a relief. Tomorrow, we hope, NTN TV channel will air his picture and description in their *Svidok* ("Witness") program.

Kyiv, July 21

Another day without Papa. It rained in the morning, so the day turned out to be not as hot as the previous three. Mama checked a few hospitals—walked from floor to floor, looking inside rooms. She also walked through the Botanical Garden again. (Did I mention it here that this was where we lost Papa?) With Marta, I walked from Besarabka all the way to the War Museum under the Motherland statue, via all the parks and the tennis courts on Moskovska. And via Pecherska Lavra. There, I found a place where they feed homeless people for free, twice

a day. The guard I spoke to mentioned another place where they also feed the homeless, at the Left Bank, and Mama went there later and, quite miraculously, ran into the guard who used to work at the state committee for sports and knew my father. He took Papa's photo and promised to show it to the bums: many of them are very caring people, he said, and they'd definitely bring Papa along if they see him. A tiny little bit of hope. Mama really praised this charity place, and I've looked it up on the web: it's called *Stephania* and has been around since 1998. The homeless and the poor can eat there all day long, do their laundry, take a shower, see a doctor, watch a movie. Neither the cops, nor the drunks are allowed to enter the place. Mayor Chernovetsky has something (or a lot?) to do with it all—and if this is so, then for once I have something good to say about him. Also, thanks to at least one or maybe even a few phone calls from up high, the police is now going to open a criminal investigation case. Usually, they aren't too willing to do this, because an open case means something really has to be done to close it—or else the unsolved case is going to spoil their performance stats. And NTN ran a little info bit on Papa tonight. And now we're trying to get his photo printed in a newspaper.

And just like after 9/11, I've had trouble getting myself to cry. No matter how terrible I feel, I can't cry. Not a single tear since Papa's disappearance. Maybe it's because I realize that if I let myself cry now, I won't be able to stop. Or maybe this is what extreme shock does to me.

Kyiv, July 22

Nothing new. [...] It's 2:30 am and a terrible thunderstorm is raging outside the window. My poor father, I so hope he is safe and warm now somewhere.

Kyiv, July 23

Nothing new today, again. I've walked so much, my legs hurt. [...] I took a cab to the tennis courts in Svyatoshin, *Antey*, where Andrei Medvedev [Ukrainian tennis player] used to play ever since he was a kid. Then I took a cab back to the center, to *Oktyabrskaya Bolnitsa*, a huge medical compound near where we live. Papa was hospitalized there in December 2005, less than three weeks after Marta's birth, and one nurse at one of the buildings I checked out seemed to remember him from back then. When he had a stroke in December 2006, the third one in a year and the fourth one in general, Mama took him there right away, but they sent him back home, didn't tell Mama it was a stroke—because it wasn't their day to take in new patients.

I really believe that a good way to learn about how things really are in Ukraine is by visiting a few hospitals—if the very central one in Kyiv is such a mess, then imagine what it's like elsewhere, in more remote places. Politics is irrelevant: politicians—Yushchenko and Yanukovich alike—go abroad for their treatment. [...]

Mama was at the cemetery again, and then in the Botanical Garden neighborhood that we hadn't had the time to check before: the street

that goes down to the river. There, she talked to an elderly woman who was something of a guardian angel to the boat station for WWII veterans, which the Klichko brothers [Vitaliy and Vladimir, heavyweight boxing champions] wanted to take away and build something fancy instead: this woman met with the one I voted for in the city council election (can't remember if that was Vladimir or Vitaliy) and described to him some of the people who kept boats there—a 91-year-old man, for example, whose only remaining pleasure in this life was a weekly sail. She made Klichko change his mind. [...]

I can't describe the despair that we all feel after doing so much searching in vain. This hope thing, I don't know how it is still alive, but I also have no idea how it can possibly die while Papa is still missing.

A thunderstorm here, again. The one last night was really wild.

Kyiv, July 24

It's been a week: still no news. Mama has been to the dining place for the homeless at Lavra, then down by the river, and then across the river, at Trukhaniv Island. At Lavra, it costs 10 cents to order a single prayer, and \$2 (10 hryvnias) to order one daily prayer to be read for 40 days in a row. [...]

We called 272-0672 in the morning, and they said two drowned men my Papa's age had been found. They had more info in the evening—no, thank God, it wasn't him. Mishah took Papa's photo to them, because it was getting really tiresome to describe Papa over and over again on

the phone, as they compared him to those in their database. The young woman working there showed Mishah some terrible photos, to make sure it wasn't Papa. She was very sweet and it was after 8 pm when she met with Mishah—what a job...

Those phone calls to the police from up high last week proved to be inefficient—I'm not even sure there were any phone calls at all. But today we've managed to get someone truly "important" involved, and right away the head of a district police department called my Mama twice and reported on the work they were beginning to do. Who knows, maybe this will indeed change the situation for the better. [...]

Kyiv, July 25

Nothing new again, and I don't have it in me to write anything. I'll mention only one thing I've seen today: I stopped by at Hospital #10, near the central bus station, and one of the nurses told me I should check at the hospice in the building next door. After seeing what I saw there I sort of begin to understand why so many people aren't freaked out by hospital conditions here. Compared to this so-called hospice, most of the hospital rooms I've seen so far are like five-star hotels. The place was filled with old people, many of whom were in really terrible condition. The place stank of urine. There were old mattresses lying everywhere, and other junk. I saw two women who worked there—and I think they were the only ones. Their job is much worse than sorting photos of the dead all day. I gave 20 hryvnias (\$4) to the one who showed

me some of the patients who we thought could've been my father—and she seemed overjoyed.

Except for the lack of news about Papa, this was the strongest impression of today.

Kyiv, July 26

One of the cops complained today that most police stations were staffed with young village guys who didn't give a shit and didn't do shit: they'd made it to Kyiv and would move on to a better paying job as soon as they got a chance.

Until yesterday, one centrally-located Kyiv police station didn't have paper to print out the photo and description of the person they were supposed to be searching for all this time. Then they spent most of the day driving around Kyiv in a broken-down car, delivering this info to several other police stations and a few hospitals in person. They don't mind it when you offer to cover gas expenses. No use complaining to their superiors: that would mean that instead of working, they'd spend the next day having their ass kicked by the boss. [...]

An elderly woman called Mama at home in the evening, said she'd seen the poster, complained that old people were disappearing left and right in Kyiv, then asked if perhaps someone was after our apartment and kidnapped Papa to blackmail us or something. Crazy bitch, she really upset Mama with this bullshit.

A cab driver from Zhytomyrska District, from a place 30 km away from the Belarusian border, said they could watch Belarusian TV there: everything is very orderly there, he said, and most

people are driving foreign-made cars. He seemed to genuinely believe it.

I really have no idea what else could be done. I'm feeling so desperate.

Kyiv, July 27

Still missing, but there's some news. Mama called me around 7 pm, she was with the cops, in Obukhiv (about 45 km from Kyiv, population 30,000 or so). At the local hospital, they found an entry with my father's full name in their records: Khokhlov Igor Sergeevich. He was brought there by the police around 11 am on July 18, a day and a half after his disappearance. Amnesia was his preliminary diagnosis. They sent for a neurologist. But as they were waiting, my father just got up and left the hospital, and they didn't bother to stop him.

Mama was so hopeful at first. Especially because he was able to give them his full name. But then they looked around and found no trace of him, nor could they find the cops who brought him there and the nurse who let him slip away.

A week ago. He could be anywhere now. Again. He must've gotten to Obukhiv by bus. We had been thinking of this direction, but didn't really believe someone would agree to give him a ride for free. It's like looking at the stars: the light you see was actually there hundreds of thousands years ago, and by now the star may no longer exist at all, but there's no way for us to know. Mama and the cops will return to Obukhiv tomorrow morning and continue the search.

Kyiv, July 28

3 am. Nothing.

Mama drove with the cops to Obukhiv, where they interrogated the nurse who let Papa walk away from the hospital. The bitch yelled at everyone, including Mama. Then they drove around to some churches, and homes for the elderly, and a few other towns, inquiring and leaving info. [...]

I took a *marshrutka* [a share taxi] to Obukhiv myself in the afternoon—got off at the other end of the town and walked all the way to the hospital, via the town's center. It was a pretty long walk, during which I realized that even if Papa hadn't left Obukhiv, there're still too many places he could be at, and it's impossible to search them all. Because even though Obukhiv's population is like that of Iowa City during school breaks, when all the students are gone, it's nowhere near as orderly as Iowa City. It's a mess, just like most other places here are.

I was really shocked to discover that the hospital is located at the town's edge, and to reach it, you either have to take a *marshrutka* from the center, or walk up the road surrounded by the forest for about twenty minutes. And there are forests all around the hospital. A few residential buildings, too, a few dilapidated factory-like places, and a really fancy-looking Catholic monastery. And a big ad with Yushchenko making some promises about decent pensions.

I walked there in order to try to see it through Papa's eyes. I hoped I'd know right away which way he went after he'd left the hospital. But there are at least three directions—and there're

pine forests everywhere. And Obukhiv's center can't be the most obvious choice for someone who's in town for the first time: standing by the hospital, it's just impossible to figure out where the center is. [...]

So I was really upset, because instead of doing a thorough search around the hospital, the cops decided to move on to other places, comparatively remote, probably assuming that he did make it to the center, because it's easier to find food and drink there. I was even more upset when Mama told me in the evening that neither she, nor the cops had talked to the locals who lived or worked near the hospital. [...]

According to the cop who brought Papa to the Obukhiv hospital, he had been sitting on a bench at a bus stop in Bezradychi for two day, and finally some nurse called this cop. They fed Papa—a sausage, water—and then the cop drove him to Obukhiv. God bless him.

I'm feeling very depressed now.

Marta is such a joy, though. At night, she dreams of cats and cars: yesterday, in her sleep, she suddenly said “bee-bee” a few times (that's “a car” in babytalk here), and a few minutes ago, she said “dyadya maaaaa” twice, without opening her eyes (that's our cat Nur—I often call him “dyadya Nur” or “dyadya kot”—Uncle Cat—and she picked it up; “maaaaa” is her way of saying “meow”). I'm somewhat worried, though: isn't it a bit too early for sleepwalking? She must be stressed, too—because she's spending the summer in the city and because she sees how upset we all are...

Mama's cops have been promised a vacation if they find Papa. And they thought it would be an

easy case. Turns out it's not. And it looks like they aren't planning to work tomorrow: Mama overheard them talking about a fishing trip scheduled for 3 pm tomorrow. Such a slow beginning—and now this. But we'll see how it goes.

Obukhiv's center reminded me of Russia—there are lots of swastikas and skinhead writings on the walls, many of them crossed out by the Antifa [antifascist organization] guys. I really couldn't believe my eyes. DPNI (Movement Against Illegal Immigration) also has a branch here—which is kind of funny, because I don't think I've seen a single person who didn't look 100 percent local.

1:28 pm. A body has been found in a village near Obukhiv. The cops are now on the way there, but they've left Mama to wait in Obukhiv. My hands are shaking as I type now.

2:25 pm. That's it. Papa is gone.

Kyiv, August 1

Papa's funeral is today.

They put July 19 as the date of his death—but it could've been July 18 or 20. No one knows for sure. But it was *too late* for most of the time of our search.

I'm not myself now. Nor is Mama, I assume. Mishah has done most of the arrangements.

The finality of it and all the “if only we had or hadn't done this or that”—this is what hits me the hardest now. All the tiny things that could've averted such a terrible death. He was the kindest person in the world—why did it have to happen to him like this?

Kyiv, August 3

I drank a bit too much at the post-funereal get-together, and today both the funeral and those two horrible weeks seemed like a nightmare, like something I've just dreamed up. It's really tough to have to remind myself it's all for real.

I had never understood those post-funereal gatherings, where food, and drinks, and words seemed to suppress the grieving—but I'd never been to a funeral in my life: Papa's was the first one. And it's a good thing we decided to do it the way they do it here. A photo of him smiling, and a few dozen people remembering how kind he was, how he had taught them something about art, music, literature, and, of course, tennis.

At some point, it all started to feel a little like one of his birthday parties, which he adored, in a somewhat childish way. But his birthdays were always messy in a fun way, with Mama always late with food, with female guests always helping her out and me cutting my finders off while chopping veggies for the salads in a hurry. Yesterday, everything went without a hitch, thanks to Mishah, and Mama spent most of the evening crying.

The song we played at the farewell ceremony is *Gori, gori, moya zvezda*, by Anna German. It's beautiful, and I remember it from my early childhood. When she sings this part at the very end—"Umru li ya, ty nad mogiloyu gori, gori, moya zvezda..." ("Shall I die, you'll be shining over the grave, my star...")—I'm always reminded how as a child I had no idea what "umru li ya" ("shall I die") meant and how it sounded like one exotic word to me—"umruliya," like "magnolia"...

What else... The cause of Papa's death is "unknown"—but it was a "natural" death. Because of this "unknown" thing, we had to postpone the funeral till Wednesday, as they had to issue a permission for cremation and that took a lot of running around for Mishah. [...]

Kyiv, August 4

In those two horrible weeks, I got used to waking up in the morning feeling sort of optimistic, hoping that a new day would bring us some positive results. This habit is hard to break—and now it seems to be breaking me. I wake up with this silly hope and then remember that it's too late, that it's all over. I feel beaten, both emotionally and physically. I hope for this stage to pass soon or I'll go crazy.

There's a newspaper kiosk outside our window. Papa used to go there every morning to borrow his papers, up until his last day. Over the years, the woman working in this kiosk has become something of a family friend: sometimes, we would take her drinking water; once, we recharged her cell phone at our place; Mama used to talk with her about cats and about her son's problems caused by his political affiliation; and she's also given Marta a few presents. When Papa disappeared, she accompanied Mama to Kontraktova Ploshcha to speak to the bums there. [...] Every time I look out of the window, I see the kiosk, and I expect to see him there. It's such torture.

On the way to the Botanical Garden on that last day, Papa kept trying to offer his seat on the bus to some elderly women, and Mama—as

well as those women—kept trying to keep him seated. Me, I was so exhausted by the heat that day, that I never smiled to him when he and Mama arrived to take Marta from me. This is just one of the things I can't forgive myself for now. [...]

The cop who brought Papa to the Obukhiv hospital was a nice man. Mama gave him 200 hryvnias (\$40), and he wouldn't take it until she placed the money into his pocket. It wasn't a bribe, it was more like a reward—or charity. Not much, but a decent amount for a place like Obukhiv. [...]

The priest who read a prayer over Papa's coffin seemed like such a nice man. He let Mama cry on his shoulder, his voice was really beautiful, he told us we should be praying for Papa even if we didn't know any of the "proper" prayers, and he also said I should honor Papa's memory by talking about him to my kids, and to their kids, and on, and on, and on, and he also said we shouldn't get drunk at the *pominki* [wake].

After it was all over, Mishah paid him what the folks at the cemetery office had told him he'd have to pay: the same 200 hryvnias (\$40) that Mama had given to that cop in Obukhiv. "What? Is that it?" the priest asked. Mishah said he'd been told this was the fee, but gave the priest another 100 hryvnias (\$20). "Well, if you don't have much money, then this will do," the priest said. We've chosen not to tell Mama about it.

Back to other diaries

Here

notes from the present

Al-Hassa, Saudi Arabia, July 24

‘Daisy’

My readers from outside of the Kingdom cannot possibly understand the time and passionate debate that Saudis devote to this issue. Families quarrel over it, marriages dissolve over it, women have been damned to hell by clergy for it and signs have been hung in public about it [...]: should the abaya be worn from the head or shoulders?

Many non-Saudi people are now asking themselves, “why don’t they get rid of it all together”? Trust me, the abaya’s extinction ain’t happening any time soon. For well over a decade now, what kind of abaya a woman wears is like wearing a public advertisement of her moral values, level of religious dedication, and ethnic background.

I established from before the time I got here that I wasn’t going to wear a “head” abaya. I’d been forewarned by my “bad-girl” Saudi friends about how awkward and uncomfortable they are so my decision was made before I got here. To make matters worse, my mother-in-law bought me a head abaya and sent it with my husband preceding my leaving America. I gave this monstrous, heavy black tent a test run and it turned me sour.

Upon arriving here the first thing I did, while wearing that big ugly heavy abaya from MIL was go to the souk and place an order for a “shoulder” abaya to be made for me. I had to be advised as to what the local styles were so that I wasn’t pegged as a foreigner or weird-looking just by the sight of me. I never got one of the really skinny or showy abayas, I always had them cut very wide and flowy as well as forgoing all the sparkly crystals and embroidery. There was a catch... I was pregnant. After a few months my baby belly became really obvious so I decided to return to a head abaya so I didn’t look like a black python who’s trying to digest a whole rabbit. I went and had one made with lighter fabric than the one my MIL sent me, no zipper or snaps down the front (old-fashioned), and a slimmer design. I found out it wasn’t so bad. It’s actually cooler than the shoulder abaya. After wearing it awhile I was mostly unbothered by it (except getting in and out of the car with baby stuff). I cooled down even more by forgoing the rectangular scarf under it all, just wearing a three-piece face veil with no scarf under it all. Mmmm, breezy. Loved it. I found out some unexpected benefits: the flirts all but left me alone.

Perceptions of women wearing an abaya from the head: she is a religious woman; she is a traditional woman; she is not looking to flirt; she is modest; of course she’s Saudi. [...] Perceptions of women wearing an abaya from the shoulders: she is modernized; she’s a “bad” girl; she’s rebellious; she’s young; she’s irreligious; she *must* be looking to flirt. [...]

Considering I’ve had several Hijazi friends

that don't even cover their hair, I know that these issues may have already been dealt with long ago in other parts of Saudia. But here in Al-Hassa, the debate still rages on. Attitudes can vary drastically with regards to what's appropriate, even within the same family. My husband prefers for me to wear an abaya from my shoulders, although I'm the only woman in his family who does. Unfortunately, due to public perceptions, the choice is not necessarily one based on beliefs but rather, on what the neighbors are gonna say about them.

Durham, North Carolina, July 25

Laila El-Haddad

So much has happened since we left Gaza and in such a short period of time. It was mentally exhausting being there, it is even more overwhelming being away. And processing it all.

I was in Gaza during the months of May and part of June shooting a film (ok, two films) with my friend and colleague, one about the tunnels along Rafah's border, another about the remarkable story of Fida Qishta and her attempt to establish Rafah's only true recreation center amidst everything that is going on there. It was exhausting—but rewarding—work. We were traveling to Rafah from Gaza City almost every day, for the entire day, in the middle of internal clashes that gripped the city where we live.

We had planned to leave Gaza around the beginning of June, with tickets booked out of Cairo June 7. My parents were to come along with us for a visit. As is often the case in Gaza, things don't always go according to plan. Rafah

was open erratically during the month of May, and closed entirely in the week prior to our departure. We received word that the crossing would open around midnight of June 6. Wonderful, we thought, at least we could make our flight, if only barely.

We spent fourteen grueling hours at the crossing, along with thousands of other Palestinians, desperate to either leave or enter the Strip. Busload after busload, entire families and their children and spouses were clinging to the ceilings, crushed inside, or piled on top of the luggage in back. Some fainted. Others erupted in hysterics. Everyone had a reason to. There were mothers separated from their spouses. Students needing to return to college. The ill. The elderly. And those with nothing particularly remarkable to preface their reason for traveling with—it was their right, after all.

The Europeans “suspended” their operations as a result of the “chaos” for several hours. They eventually returned, but by the time the crossing closed at 2:30 pm, we were left stranded on the Palestinian side of the crossing, with the Egyptian side only metres ahead. It’s difficult to put into terms what it means when a territory of 1.4 million people’s only passage to the outside world is closed for the majority of the time, and open for only a few meaningless, infuriatingly slow hours when it is open at all.

We returned to our home in Gaza City exhausted, demoralized, dehumanized. We received word the crossing would open again the next day. We debated whether or not to attempt to cross after the day’s events. We had already missed our flights out of Cairo, and at-

tempting to explain Rafah to distant airline customer service representatives was never a simple task.

A few hours later, we were on the road again. We clung to the hope that at the very least, the crossing might be less crowded the next day. We were sorely mistaken. There was perhaps double the amount of people we saw the day before. This time, the packed buses extended way beyond the crossing. We waited till the afternoon. It was only then we began to hear—through the taxi drivers—that some skirmishes had broken out between Fateh and Hamas in Rafah, that the Fateh-led preventative security building there was surrounded. But we made nothing of it. “Same old cycle”. Never could we have imagined what would happen in subsequent days.

We waited until the late afternoon. The prospect of our crossing became grimmer with each passing minute, and each bus that didn’t pass. We felt like we were going backwards, not moving forwards. Demoralized, my father decided he wanted to go back to Gaza City—“let’s just wait until next week, maybe it will be less crowded. We already missed our flight.” “No, wait, let me try one more thing” I suggested, remembering the advice of one passenger the days before—”you have to find your own way across”. I had refused to give in to rule of the jungle the day before. But today, I realized if I didn’t do something quick, we would never get out.

We talked to a taxi driver we had met the day before—a sly, strong headed type you don’t want to get into an argument with, from the Abu Eid family in Rafah. He owned a beat-up Peu-

geot that had seen better days. He mentioned he knew a way around the crossing—a path reserved for vehicles belonging to the security forces. Desperate, I asked if there was any chance he could take us through that way. There were no guarantees we would be allowed through, but he could try. And so in a last ditch effort, he drove us to a security gate. We were met with staunch refusals, and “are you crazy—what will they do to us if we let you through!”... We pleaded with them, told them how we had waited fourteen hours the day before. But still no pity.

Then, an empty bus on its way back from the crossing drove through. Our driver negotiated with him. He too refused, until he heard our story, saw Yousuf, and finally said “what the heck, come on, I’ll see what I can do...” And so we crossed, albeit backwards. We drove into the Palestinian side of the crossing, passports already stamped from the day before. An officer saw us, remembered us from the previous day, and let us through hurriedly. As we were getting ready to depart, a European monitor greeted me. “Hello, how was your day?”. How was my day? Is this guy for real? “Difficult. The crossing is very difficult.” “Oh but at least, it’s better than yesterday, at least people are crossing.” It was then I realized these monitors were completely detached from the reality beyond the few square metres they... well... monitored in the sanitary confines of the terminal, and back again, one kilometre, to their headquarters in Kerem Shalom.

And so by evening, we were in Cairo. And slowly, in the following days, news began to filter through about what was happening in the

Gaza we had only just left behind, the Gaza whose gates were closed shut just after we had left it, and whose gates remain shut to over 6000 people, nineteen of whom have died so far. So maybe you can begin to understand what I mean by mentally exhausting, having left a place where I desperately long to be, even in the worst of circumstances, and yet where I would have been stuck against my will, away from Yassine.

My parents are with me. It is a mixed blessing. My grandmother passed away last week, and my mother couldn't be there to grieve with her family. Some Palestinians with foreign passports have been allowed through Erez into Gaza, but for those with Palestinian Authority passports (which we carry, and which Abbas has decreed null and void unless issued from his new dominion in the West Bank...) there is no alternative other than Rafah. [...]

Gaza, August 1

Heba

Parenting is difficult. It is a hard-to-master skill. When I had my kids, I thought "it is very easy, I will just tell them how to behave". The do and don't list was even discussed with my husband when my first daughter was in her crib. With the first child, it seems we think we know the answers till we are presented with the questions! It took me a while to realize that it is a two-way process in which the kid is as influential as the parent. Days like yesterday, in which my kids are super active and not really listening to me, throwing tantrums all the time, make me feel

ignorant and unable to figure it out!

My daughter said to me the other day, “You said we are going to go to Egypt and to the zoo—with the elephant—and you lied to me”. Yes, she used the word lie! And I did intend to take my kids to Egypt last summer, and of course was never able due to Gaza events and the continuous closure. How can one explain to a kid that you can not do what you want due to political limitations? Sometimes, tired and drowsy, I tell her Elmabar (Rafah Crossing) is closed. Then, I happen to hear her telling my sister, “We are not going to Egypt because Elmabar is closed”. Yes, that fast they learn, and that fast we transfer to them our helplessness and imprisonment. That fast we teach them that there are things beyond our control and that all that strong-toned assurance of us, as parents, can not alter our reality one bit. Of course she does not know what a crossing means or anything. She just knows that I broke a promise. So it is this small lesson that is Gaza-context-related that I learnt lately. Don’t make promises to your children that you can’t keep.

San Salvador, August 1

Maria Ofelia Zuniga

On Saturday (July 28), I finished up the prevention course I started last month with the students at Centro Escolar Altavista. As happens every time I leave a school, I have a sort of empty feeling: I’m sorry it’s over. On Saturday, among other things, we talked about dreams—daydreams, that is, that put us in touch with our

hopes and illusions, that take the place of the uncertainties we sometimes live with [...].

For me it was a wonderful experience to learn what these kids dream about. Their task was to picture themselves 5, 10, 15 years from now, and it was really fantastic. Here were the most common answers.

Family: "I see myself having a family already, with one or two children". Since these are kids who live in poor neighbourhoods where children seem to be born like flowers in a vase (in bunches), I thought that was interesting. Job training: "I see myself in a professional career" (also interesting, given the environment). Immigration: "I see myself living in another country" (Spain and the United States topped the list. The United States, I would imagine, for the prospect of "getting rich", even if that can cost your life, and Spain, well, just from love of football, I think). With the prospects that this country offers, there are a lot of people (starting in early youth, apparently) who see emigration as the only path to a decent life. A path that's anything but guaranteed, but honestly, what can be said? The facts speak for themselves.

Despite all the fairy tales they feed us, despite the Ministry of Finance's statement disagreeing with the report recently presented to the United Nations Development Programme [...], despite the fact that the law, under the pretext of avoiding public alarm, now prevents the media from reporting every episode of violence (only the most sensational, the ones that are impossible to hide), despite all efforts to deny the obvious, what can you do when reality is screaming at

you, when the facts speak for themselves?

The media show what they want to show [...], but those of us who live in this country (whether we were born here or not), who walk down its streets every day, are taking the bus or driving our cars (even if there's no sign posted to say so) "at our own risk". We pray to the gods, the saints, the cosmos, anyone at all, just not to be attacked—or if it can't be helped, then to come out alive. Of course, the police statistics say we practically live in paradise, and if anyone complains it's because they want to complain, but the truth is that anywhere you look the picture is bleak: where are we headed? where is this country headed? The answer is difficult, complex, and brutal. It chills my blood to think about it.

Here's the total for my neighbourhood in the last two weeks: a woman and her retarded nephew, shot dead; a sixteen-year-old boy riddled with bullets in broad daylight as he headed down to the boulevard; two boys killed the following night: in retaliation for the other one's death? Who knows... Then there were two drivers and a ticket collector on the bus line that takes me home (shot dead), and a whole family (mother, father, two small children) had to leave overnight (literally) under police protection because of death threats. They left everything, the house they had built while living in Spain and where the children were born a few years ago, the shop that earned them a living, their possessions, everything. They only took their clothes, forging ahead, as people in this country do, so courageous that they never give up the struggle.

They can never come back, not even to get the things they left; their lives are in danger.

They must have been mixed up in something, people say. I don't know. I really don't know. No matter what, I was deeply affected. I don't want to make conjectures, nor do I fancy that the fate of the world hangs on my thoughts. But it hurts to see lives turned upside down, or cut short from one moment to the next because someone else thinks he's boss, that he can decide who lives or dies.

That may be why, last Saturday, listening to those kids telling me their dreams, seeing them look towards the horizon and imagine themselves, alive, my heart leapt, my soul rejoiced with them, and [...] I hoped with all my heart that 5, 10, or 15 years from now these kids will at least be alive. That they'll meet people who will give them guidance, that they won't find themselves hanging around sketchy places at the wrong time of night. That they'll achieve their dreams, learn from their mistakes, experience love and estrangement, that hardship will make them strong, that creativity will help them find new paths, that they will travel and grow, that they will find friends to accompany them through life, that they will discover some passion worth devoting their lives to, that they'll start a family, that they'll become good, upright men and women. But above all, in this country where each of our days is marked by absurdity, I hoped that in 1, 2, 3, 5, 10, 15 years they'll still be alive: the way things are here, that's enough to hope for. [...]

Two brief items

by Franco Buffoni

Here

notes from the present

A place called Balzi Rossi, near Ventimiglia—familiar to anthropology scholars due to significant fossil finds—was often mentioned in pre-Schengen news items about illegal immigration between Italy and France. Along this arduous stretch, trains are forced to slow down, making it possible to jump off and enter French territory without passing border inspections; but then the way down is very steep and dangerous at night.

This short item was printed alongside another about a teenage boy who committed suicide by throwing himself off an overpass of Milan's eastern ring road. Tormented by classmates for his effeminacy, he left a note: "I hope to wake up in a gentler world".

Even today, these two brief news stories, so coincidentally juxtaposed, seem effective in describing the common ground between two forms of exclusion. This is the subject of my new book, *Croci rosse e mezze lune (Noi e loro)*, from which the three texts that follow, related to more recent experiences, are also drawn.

I

He wanted to overcome the solid the inevitable
Gouge the five hundred euros

Into the red wall
And steer along the gouge
Down between the crags where
The Riviera train brakes
The Kurdish illegal immigrant
Who plunged headlong yesterday
From the arduous path along the cliff face
Between Menton and Ventimiglia.

II
Gentle. Young fragile lovely
And gentle. It was your curse
Only one
Way out
Off the railing of the overpass
Hoping to wake up
You said so in the note
In a gentler world.

The two of them said tomorrow night

The two of them said tomorrow night
Together there was more
That they could do,
So long as you
Don't mind it's not a palace.
The bed will do.

And so scratching his neck, a finisher
And polisher of machine parts
Under the sign that was urgently
Seeking personnel with experience
In aluminum foundry
Met a milling machinist with two years' experience
Next to him there shaking his head coffee in hand.

As the five-a-side match began to summon back
The operators of engine lathes
And the welders with drafting experience
The little group drifted apart.

These days we tend to just talk to each other,
With them insulting us, but cagily,
Sometimes even I will only catch on later.

Piazza Augusto Imperatore

Closed for ages due to construction work
It's an illegal parking lot
Piazza Augusto imperatore
Around the mausoleum.
There are three Egyptians who are running the business
Plus a helper, a young nephew
Nabil Ali, on the midnight shift.
To get me to expound on Italian words
He'd flash a smile, for just stopping by I would be feted
With beer or ice cream, with a lighter. He'd wait for me
Going over the conditional tense
Written out in pencil on a notepad.
One evening the police cars
Broke the spell, the uncles arrested
And for him a warning to steer clear.
But he knew I might pass by
And so a plaintive call
Broke the silence of the cops on duty
"Down here... down here", coming from below,
Two lit embers in the darkness, his eyes gleaming
From the heart of Augustus.

Contributors and translators

Here

notes from the present

Lucianna Argentino was born in 1962 in Rome, where she lives. She has published several poetry collections. Her text was translated by Brigitte Ciaramella.

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Johanna Bishop (icchiojo@tiscali.it) was born in Chicago in 1974, and lived in Pennsylvania and New York before moving to Tuscany in 1998. She translates from Italian into English. In this issue she has translated the texts by Franco Buffoni, Gherardo Bortolotti, Giorgio Morale (June 3), Massimo Parizzi, Maria Ofelia Zuniga (August 1).

Gherardo Bortolotti, born in Brescia in 1972, works as a cataloguer. His text was translated by Johanna Bishop.

p. 12

Jihane Bouziane was born in 1982 in Tangier and lives in Casablanca. She works for a market research company. Her diary pages come from the blog *Jihane* (<http://jihaneducaire.over-blog.com>). We thank her for allowing us to publish them. They were translated by Brigitte Ciaramella.

pp. 10, 33, 39

Franco Buffoni, originally from Lombardy, lives in Rome. He is the author of many poetry

collections, two of which have been published in English translation with parallel text: *The Shadow of Mount Rosa*, Gradiva, New York, 2000, and *Wing*, Chelsea, New York, 2007. He has been translated in this issue by Johanna Bishop.

p. 92

Sebastiano Buonamico lives in Milan, Italy. A graphic designer and a photographer, his photographs have been shown in several exhibitions. He is the author of the covers of this magazine.

cover

Brigitte Ciaramella (brigitte.ciaramella@fastwebnet.it) was born in 1966 and was brought up bilingual Italian/English. She is a freelance translator with a special interest in literary works. She has translated the texts by Giorgio Morale (January 1, February 5 and 10, April 12), Jihane Bouziane, Lucianna Argentino, Maria Ofelia Zuniga (February 2, 11 and 12, April 23).

Daisy: “I’m a 30 year-old American-born, British-educated Saudi citizen, presently living and raising three children in the city of Al-Hassa in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia.” Her diary pages come from the blog *Saudi Stepford Wife* (<http://saudistepfordwife.blogspot.com>). We thank her for allowing us to publish it.

pp. 36, 51, 53, 81

Laila El-Haddad, born in 1978, is a journalist and divides her time between Gaza and the United States, where her husband Yassine, a Palestinian refugee denied his right of return to Palestine, resides. They have a son, Yousuf. Her diary pages come from the blog *Raising Yousuf*:

a diary of a mother under occupation (<http://a-mother-from-gaza.blogspot.com>). We thank her for allowing us to publish them.

pp. 8, 54, 56, 58, 83

Heba: “I’m a Palestinian woman born in 1979. I worked in different humanitarian NGOs in Gaza, which helped me come into contact with the general context of Gazan people. I struggle everyday to bring up my two young daughters in a very changeable environment. I’m fond of writing and maintain a blog: www.contemplating-from-gaza.blogspot.com.” Her diary pages come from this blog. We thank her for allowing us to publish them.

pp. 6, 23, 24, 28, 57, 60, 61, 63, 87

Veronica Khokhlova was born in 1974 in Kyiv, and moved from there to Moscow in December 2006. Her diary pages come from *Neeka’s backlog* (<http://vkhokhl.blogspot.com>). We thank her for allowing us to publish them.

pp. 5, 26, 59, 60, 64

Giorgio Morale was born in Avola (near Syracuse, Sicily) in 1954 and since 1972 has lived in Milan, where he has worked in the fields of journalism, theatre, and cultural promotion. Since 1989 he has been teaching high school literature. He is the author of a novel, *Paulu Piulu*. His diary pages were translated by Brigitte Ciarabella (January 1, February 5 and 10, April 12) and Johanna Bishop (June 3).

pp. 5, 9, 16, 29, 59

Massimo Parizzi was born in 1950 in Milan, Italy, where he lives. A translator, he is the founder and editor of this magazine. His text was translated by Johanna Bishop.

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R. “I am 27 years old, I’m a woman who lives in Baghdad. I have a degree in computer sciences. Before the war, I worked for a private computer company.” Her diary page comes from the blog *Baghdad burning* (riverbend-blog.blogspot.com). We thank her for allowing us to publish it.

p. 34

Maria Ofelia Zuniga Platero was born in 1973 in San Salvador, where she still lives. She had the experience of working as a volunteer on social programs aimed at helping children in poor Peruvian and Bolivian communities. Now back in El Salvador, while waiting for other opportunities in social service, she manages a shop. Her texts, except the one dated February 11, come from the blog *Enchufados estemos donde estemos...* (<http://estabocaesmiamo.blogspot.com>). We thank her for allowing us to publish them. They were translated by Brigitte Ciaramella (February 2, 11 and 12, April 23) and Johanna Bishop (August 1).

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Subscription

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The cost of a **subscription** to 3 issues, either the Italian or English edition, is 25 Euros in Italy, 30 in Europe and the Mediterranean area, 35 in the rest of the world. However, since these prices are too high for many countries, you may ask for a **reduced-price subscription**. You can subscribe by **credit card** providing us via fax or phone (0039-02-57406574), or email (massimoparizzi@ali ce.it), with its number, expiry date, and security code (or CVV2: the three-digit number printed in the signature space on the *back* of the card; or, in the case of American Express, the four-digit number printed, not embossed, on the front of the card); or you can send the money through a **postal money order** to “Qui-appunti dal presente”, via Bastia 11, 20139 Milano, Italy; or pay by **bank transfer** on the following bank account registered in the name of “Qui-appunti dal presente”: national bank code (BBAN) V 05584 01624 000000025101; international bank code (IBAN) IT 03 V 05584 01624 000000025101. Please, remember to indicate your name, address, the object of payment and which edition you wish to receive.

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Number 15, “away from home”, October 2006 - 2-21 May: diary pages from Ukraine (Veronica Khokhlova), Israel (Liza Rosenberg), the United States (Marc Ellis), and Italy (Germana Pisa) - **From Slovakia. No Tramps**, by Giorgio Mascitelli - **31 May:** from Iraq (R.) - **Football and the ‘dream of something’**, by Franco Toscani - **World (Cup)**, by Giusi Busceti - **4-10 June:** from the United States (Marc Ellis), Italy (Lucianna Argentino), Ukraine (Veronica Khokhlova), and Morocco (Jihane Bouziane) - **From Vietnam. Speechless glances for glimpsed words**, by Antonio Maconi - **14-19 June:** from Ukraine (Veronica Khokhlova), and the United States (Marc Ellis) - **From Thailand. A Couple of Days in Mer Awng**, by Ken Klein - **22 June-13 August:** from Ukraine (Veronica Khokhlova), Israel (Liza Rosenberg), Morocco (Jihane Bouziane), the United States (Laila El-Haddad and Marc Ellis), and Iraq (R.)

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