BEFORE WE GO HOME

'Mom, I am not coming back home.'

Looking back, it wasn't all the dramatic political events that changed everything, but a minuscule whisper. It was a one-minute phone call; half of it was silence. But that's all it took for me, in the autumn of 2016, to become homeless.

I despise telling this story. Talking about my homelessness, especially the reasons behind it, makes me cringe – politically, morally and emotionally. Even before I begin, the fear of appearing as *yet another whining exile* demanding recognition already fractures my dignity.

I had to leave my country to escape fascism to be able to write, think and simply be. The imprisonment of people like me – that is to say, critics of the regime – had already become a daily occurrence in Turkey, and I had grown weary of reading very detailed rape and death threats made against me. But more than anything, I left home because fascism is a funny thing. It makes you constantly think about pyjamas. The footmen of such regimes always come knocking on your door at around four in the morning. They not only imprison you, but also shame you based on your choice of nightwear. So, on the night of 6 November 2016, in Zagreb, the city where I had one friend and owned a tiny apartment, when I went to bed for the first time in years without worrying about how my nightclothes would appear to the police, I decided not to go back. The initial plan had been to stay there for a few days just to catch my breath, and that's why I had with me only one pair of trousers, two

shirts, and not a single idea about what to do next. But surviving in absolute uncertainty, turning from somebody to nobody at the age of forty-three, and starting everything from scratch in another language, seemed an affordable price to pay compared to being paralysed with fear or having to be brave all the time. Thus, the call to my mom.

Mom and I already had some practice with such calls. The first time was in 2011, when I lost my job as a columnist. I had written something against the dictator, his people got furious, my paper got scared, and I had to stay where I was at that moment, in Tunisia. My lawyer *strongly advised* me to take a *long holiday*, which eventually lasted a year. All of which I had to explain to my terrified mother. The second time was in 2013. The regime mouthpieces believed that I was behind a massive plot to bring down the government and that I had organised an uprising. Due to such bombastic allegations, I stayed in London and Greece for a few months. Mom still needed to hear the reasons then. But in 2016, it was the first time I didn't have to convince her. This time, she just stammered in a well-calibrated, serious voice, 'Right. It is dangerous. Right? Right! Stay there. Don't come back.' Then, silence on both sides.

When the voice imprinted in your memory as the one that always calls you back home falls silent, you experience a very specific ache – an orphaning, if you will. You become that child again, suddenly locked out, left in the cold, alone with the beasts. The heart, with its every beat, pumps out a mourning substance that floods the brain. It becomes impossible to survive.

And that is precisely why, as soon as I hung up the phone in the autumn of 2016, I made a decision. I put my heart in the freezer; I envisioned the organ in the fridge. It was to be dealt with *later*. To keep going, I

transformed myself into an unfeeling, tenacious creature, a survival automaton. My motto was simple: 'Zero self-mercy! Zero vulnerability!' There was no time for sentimentality. I developed a disgust for any kind of fragility and soldiered on, doing whatever needed to be done. All that I'd built back home was gone, and now, at this later age, it needed to be rebuilt again, this time in the strange language of English and in a foreign land.

I wasn't permitted to be human until my life could be deemed a *success*. But once you lose your home, *success* – like the word *later* – becomes ambiguous and infinite, always beyond reach. Without a home, you lose your command over time, and your worth becomes a matter of debate, decided either by the settled-down folk in the new land or some imagined, higher moral authority back in the old one. Life becomes a countdown without an end.

To fill the void of the heart, I produced ideas non-stop, writing and talking frantically about politics. Years passed as I kept touring the world, warning people that fascism was approaching and that they, too, would lose their homes.

After six years of talking about the logic, mechanisms and rationale of politics, I turned myself from that nobody who arrived on the shores of a foreign land into somebody: *that Turkish writer who speaks about fascism*. Some people listened to my words as intended – as a glimpse into their future. Yet some preferred to focus on my exiledom. They enjoyed the 'intellectual damsel-in-distress running away from the barbarians, taking refuge in the arms of the civilised people of the world' narrative too much – or perhaps believing their own home was a safe haven soothed them and allowed them to feel secure.

When I was finally supposed to be content, after writing two books and receiving some awards, I found myself

doing nothing except repeating a phrase: 'I am not tired, not much tired, but just exhausted.' Admitting I'd finally arrived at that *later* was unbearable, so I did what I knew best. I kept going, sustaining myself in survival mode. Until, finally, my body gave up.

One summer evening in 2022, in Hamburg, a woman is lying on a stretcher in an old-school doctor's examination room. The sense of *I* abandons the body, leaving me as a *she* whom I barely know. And this *she* is watching the IV drops entering her vein. The arm is mine, I guess, and that woman should be me. Yet, thanks to the disassociation that every survivor goes through, I watch *her* like a too-feeble-to-empathise-for minor character in a movie.

The doctor says, 'Your body is giving up. This is homesickness, meine Liebe. Now is the time to stop and take care of your heart.'

Loathing the vulnerability of the body, embarrassed by this meek quitter, I whisper, 'What a mess! What a mess!'

As life drips back into my veins, I gradually re-enter my body, only to think bitterly, *So that bloody organ has to defrost now, ah? That probably rotten piece of flesh. Who knows what kind of despicable state it is in.*

This was me in the summer of 2022. After six years of my homelessness, I was compelled to acknowledge my broken self. It was finally time to stop and think about home and all that had been lost.

Okay, now, enough about me.

How about you? Are you home? Do you feel at home?

Wait, don't answer. Allow me to guess. After all, in today's world, one can lose one's home in many ways.

Some of us become homeless one long, dark, wet evening. We find ourselves wearing an orange life vest

and hustling onto a boat with others. We begin to watch ourselves doing peculiar things: remembering long-lost prayers as we start to whisper them, calling out for our mothers like wounded soldiers, hugging the nearest stranger when a wave hits, suddenly cracking the darkest yet funniest jokes, and thanking a rescue volunteer in Italian, Greek or Turkish, in languages we would never properly learn. Upon arrival, we ask, 'Am I alive now?' Our faces break into two for good, half crying and the other half laughing.

Some of us, like myself, buy a plane ticket and convince ourselves that we are willing fugitives, privileged immigrants or nonchalant nomads, telling ourselves we have no right to feel pain. We repeat some proud lines: 'No, I don't consider myself an exile. Life is a long journey, and this is only a part of it.' We avoid the subject of home when possible. And when not, we plaster on a well-rehearsed crooked smile, hoping to look appealing enough to be welcomed in foreign lands. We use the same smile for such a long time that, eventually, our facial muscles forget their natural shape.

Some of us are evicted, suddenly, from our apartments, as if there is not a single room for us on the entire planet. As soon as we are on the street, our bodies suddenly provoke suspicion, disgust and fear. People never come close enough for us to prove otherwise. A day becomes longer, for our every bodily need requires strategising – having a coffee, finding somewhere to pee, looking for a safe place to sleep at night. The city turns into a terrifying jungle in which there are only very, very few people that we can depend on for survival. So, we wait for them, morning and night. And when they appear, we remind ourselves to show *enough* gratitude. We mechanically try to imitate the smiles of those who sleep at home.

Some of us sit down and calculate when the rising sea or another wildfire will swallow up our land to make us homeless. We watch the water or the flames creeping further every year, centimetre by centimetre. The planet, that ticking bomb, becomes our suicide vest to wear. We know that its loss is incomprehensible for the rest of the world, so we look for appealing ways to convey the truth to them. We have cramps in our cheeks while searching for the right kind of smile with which to tell them that the world is ending.

Some of us lose our homes through an invisible journey. One cosy, warm evening in our living rooms, a news presenter gives yet another update about the insanity in our country – some fascists, growing in number, claiming our homes to be only theirs. Or perhaps the radical immorality of a leader is suddenly normalised even by our friends. A tear opens deep down in our sense of belonging. The tear eventually articulated as an aching sentence: 'I don't recognise this place; this is not my country anymore.' We miss our country while still living in it. When we meet our fellow citizens who still believe that all will be back to normal soon, we smile a smile that is nothing but a polite, geometric shape.

We all read on our devices or follow the news on-screen that a new world is being built with renewed levels of barbarity. We realise that even the immense numbness we have reluctantly developed to cope with the ever-expanding inhumanity will no longer suffice. Our insistences that 'There'll come a time' or 'History will judge those who . . .' are shadowed by doubt. We fear there is not enough of a future left in the world for justice to be realised. A sentence brews inside our mouths: 'This is not a world I know, nor do I want to know it anymore.' From then on, our smiles become a tired half-thing.

Do you recognise your smile in the above faces? No? Not yet, perhaps. But still, you must have sensed that brand-new melancholy.

There is a sense of mourning in the air. It is thin still, but it is real.

It is as if we are mourning not for what we have already lost, but for what we know we eventually will. For the first time in history, humanity is mourning in the future tense.

All that is beautiful has not vanished yet. We still have things – lemon trees, the Mediterranean shores in spring-time, tipsy Sunday afternoons, a bit of the rule of law here and there, and many brave women who are still loud enough to become the nightmare of fascist leaders. The joyous, wondrous and magical are still here. But for a while now, it is as if a layer has been added to our retinas, an overlay of melancholy. Our eyes already sense it; everything that is beautiful has its future loss imprinted on them.

Still, we work, we act, and we even resist. But we know. Our basic joy and faith in life have been worn out. It is as if we all imitate our previous selves, which once felt at home in time and space.

A specific ache has taken over our times. We are all a bit like children – not called home, instead locked out in the cold, alone with the beasts. Every beat freezes the heart. That is why many, too many of us, decide every day to turn ourselves into unfeeling creatures so that we can function as survival automatons. These times are orphaning all that is humane. An uncaring world is in the making, and it will unhome humans like you and me.

This brand-new melancholy is the ache of losing home. The loss is happening on so many levels and in so many

ways. And that is why all of us, in myriad ways, are searching for a new home, sometimes almost unwittingly.

When our basic human values don't match up to the blunt cruelty of the new world order, we become morally homeless. Like rough sleepers do with their belongings in supermarket trolleys, we carry our moral values from one shelter to another, trying to find a temporary home for them during this long night of inhumanity. We build small communities that will protect our hearts. We weave intricate connections with people in order to have an emotional roof over our heads.

Since our political outrage is considered irrelevant by the conventional homes of realpolitik, the old political parties, we find ourselves politically homeless, too. We no longer know through which political medium we can unite our voices to be heard by the rulers. Like refugees, we stay in temporary places: protest tents, makeshift occupy-movement tents or strike marquees. In the cold or under the sun, we imagine and reimagine a new political home – like an exile who knows that the old home is impossible to return to but still misses *a* home.

And then, of course, thousands of us become physically homeless every day. War, economic inequality, climate catastrophe and the desire to be free – or simply *to be* – drive thousands to begin new lives in foreign lands. Scientists report that, by 2050, 1.5 billion people will have to leave their homes, and by 2070, 3 billion people will have become refugees. All those billions, similar to the morally and politically homeless, will be looking for a new home; and every day, they will learn new ways of standing tall before the indignities of our times.

Is it all right with you if I draw such parallels? I am asking because, well, nowadays, one cannot be too careful when navigating the electric fences of the new sensitivities.

For a while now, our view of ourselves and other humans has been shaped not by our similarities but by our differences. The proliferated uniqueness of every individual deems pointing out similarities offensive. Yet, in times such as these, when so many of us are out in the cold with monsters, we need to build new affinities not by celebrating our differences but by noticing our similarities.

That is why I will take my chances and say it.

We are *all* losing home in some way or another. We are *all* becoming homeless. We are *all* being unhomed. *Unhomed* . . . an almost forgotten English word from the nineteenth century that deserves a resurrection today, when one can be at home yet still feel outside of it – disassociated, unbelonging, like a stranger.

If you accept looking at the world and seeing such a 'we-ness', then the question becomes 'Who are *we*?'

What should we call ourselves?

I like the word *stranger*. When you are a stranger, you are both in and out. You are there but not really. You are nobody, yet have the endless possibilities of being anybody. Being a stranger is an antidote to the limits of being somebody. It is not a reducing and permanent brand, like *homeless*, *exile* or *refugee*. The term *stranger* immediately calls for a pure form of curiosity and, for those who are still not poisoned by the fear of the alien, a probability of a fresh greeting. So, shall we then say we are all strangers in one way or another? Stranger, as an idea, immediately includes all those to whom our time seems too strange to become complicit in its monstrosities, all those who feel somewhat homeless in this world at this point in history.

It is somehow painful yet still joyous to look at the world from this large lens of strangers. Because then, we can see how numerous we are. You and I, along with all

the others, may even be counted as one people, a growing population across borders. We are a nation in the making. A mobile nation of cut-out, scattered, mourning beings, every day remaking life out of nothing. We are many – so many that if we were to add up all of us, we might even form the majority. But then, if we don't say it out loud, as Breyten Breytenbach did, we will never be. Our floating, strange, silent existence will never take hold in time and space unless we call ourselves what we are: a Nation of Strangers.

A strange nation, we are – still in the making when the nation states are so fallen that they are considered real estate opportunities by the rulers of the world. And our population is multiplying in number as the new world order takes shape. Lost, broken, melancholic perhaps, but somehow we survive better than anyone else. We may be the people of half-smiles, yet we never stop looking at our old pictures to remember how we once laughed. We may have no riches, but we possess the reluctantly acquired yet unique power of believing in ourselves when nobody else does. We may be confused about who we have become after losing our homes, yet every day, we reinvent courage to keep on living as nobodies. We know what breaks a person – any person. It is not the loss of home but the loss of faith in building a new one. We may be a nation of half-frozen hearts, but we know how to survive without any bearings. And as the unhomed, who have developed the skill to sense minute changes in the air, we already know that many more will soon learn to live like us.

Today, when great populations are on the move, we, as the Nation of Strangers, can share what we've learned after losing our homes. As the entire world will soon be tested with the morality of survival, we can tell them what we have learned best: how to stay human even when