

‘The Exhibition’

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As they stared out the window, across the open field and through the blinding yellowish haze generated by the now all too frequent thermo-spheric disturbances, the last remaining members of the artist collective known as The Colourless thought about what had long been felt by all, but put in to words by no one.

Until now.

“We need to leave,” H said harshly and decisively, as if those four words had been stuck, gathering dust and momentum, in the deepest recesses of his throat for years. Without taking her eyes off the photo-luminescent field, O whispered “How? To go where?” “He’s right,” M said, moving away from the window and back to the canvas he was working on. “Maybe,” E said, peeling her gaze away from the bright pastel yellow sea that stretched beyond the horizon as she made her way across the room. They were in a section of the abandoned Coca-Cola factory in Bagrami Industrial Park that they had partially renovated and used as a workshop and art space.

It was the year 2016, and the people still living in the land god had forgotten were wondering what would happen to them now that the foreigners had also forgotten it, having diverted most of their money and themselves to countries in the Central Sands Region. The Colourless were among one of several artist collectives that sprung from what could be called a new era in contemporary artistic practice in the capital of The Republic. An era when foreign donors had been only too eager to fund and support artistic and cultural initiatives in the country that served as propaganda to convince The Citizens of the Republic, themselves, and the world how far The Republic had come since they invaded. These initiatives were led by Citizens of the The Republic and The Foreigners alike, and the members of The Colourless were young, motivated, artists working together to give birth to a new vision of what it meant to bring art to life in a land so full of death. But now, so many artists and others who had shared the same dream had already left.¹

“Do any of you have a passport?” M asked. There was no answer. “I didn’t think so,” he said, “me neither. We can’t afford professional fakes,” O said to no one in particular. “Which means we’ll have to go to The Directorate for real ones. Have you seen the lines outside The Directorate? They stretch for what seems like kilometres, and I hear they’re going to run out of passports soon. Then who knows how long it’ll be before they have more. Everyone’s getting out of here these days.” E’s words got caught in the yellow air and hung heavy between them, dripping slow like honey towards the floor.²

¹ Globally, Afghanistan is one of the main source countries of asylum-seekers, “In 2011 alone, over 39,000 Afghans sought asylum worldwide. Most of these applications were filed in industrialized OECD countries (mainly European countries, the United States of America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and the Republic of Korea)... The global total recognition rate of Afghan asylum applications in 2011 was 53 per cent.”

IOM-Afghanistan, Afghanistan Migration Profile, 2014: 234

² In 2015 “Afghanistan [...] remained the second main country of citizenship of asylum seekers in the EU Member States [with] 178 200 Afghans seeking asylum protection for the first time.”

eurostat, Asylum in the EU Member States, 2016:3

“We have to try,” O said firmly, a determined spark flashing quickly out of the corners of her eyes, “Besides, the line at The Directorate will be nothing compared to the line outside The Lands of the West consulate. It looks like half the city is trying to get a visa.” They let her words settle quietly, like dust on a windowsill. “But I have an idea,” she continued, “what if we’re invited for a residency or exhibition? A program in The Lands of the West that invites The Colourless to work and exhibit? I know it’s not original, but we could contact The Curator who came here and spent some time with us. She loved what we do, and she said if we ever wanted to do something over there that she would do everything she could to arrange it. Once we’re there, we put in our case for asylum. A part of me can’t even believe I’m saying all of this,³ but the other part of me knows that if we’re going to do it then we need to hurry, because if the way things are going is any indication, we don’t have much time.”⁴

The news reports had been coming in, of The Citizens of the The Republic and other asylum-seekers carrying out murderous attacks in The Lands of the West, some claiming an unconvincing allegiance to The Black Flag while others simply carried the flag of their own resentment, shame, anger, and confused identity. But it was enough to get the leaders of The Lands of the West to start talking about closing their borders; in fact, the open-armed welcome that once awaited the refugees coming into The Lands of the West was already replaced by fear and suspicion of anyone coming from The Republic or any neighbouring place, including geopolitical neighbours such as The Central Sands Region.

The Colourless agreed to send an email to The Curator, explaining to her that the conditions for creative freedom in The Republic had only worsened since she was there, that contemporary art was being funded less and less, and that they feared the country was on the verge of another ethnically driven civil war. Not wanting to lose the momentum that had been built up over the years, they hoped her offer to help them exhibit in The Lands of the West was still valid; and if so, then would she consider a group show of The Colourless at The Museum. They told her there were only four members

³ What many fail to grasp is that leaving one’s home, one’s family, one’s history behind is never a decision made lightly, nor one made without long deliberation. It is not only rooted in an array of contextually and culturally-relevant factors, but it is also nearly always the last option, the one taken when hope no longer exists except in the distant possibility of a better life somewhere else. But once that decision is taken, it very often leads to others following suit, thereby each migration out feeds subsequent out-migrations, “The Theory of Cumulative Causation argues that each act of migration changes the social context within which subsequent migration decisions are made, so that additional moving is more likely to occur... The theory incorporates the impact of socio-cultural community level changes on individual level motivations and behaviors... [it] is a promising concept in that it dedicates a substantial role to the context in which migration decisions are formed while it also stresses the importance of culture for analyzing migration decision-making.”

Project Paper 1: Conceptual & Theoretical Framework, EUMAGINE Research Project, University of Antwerp, Timmerman/Heyse/Van Mol, 2010: 5

⁴ We have to consider here the perception of time as it relates to the decision-making process of an individual or a group contemplating whether they should out-migrate, when or within what timeframe should they do it, and how time will exist for them during their journey, “There is... an emerging literature that acknowledges that migration is as much concerned with time as with space, and that all migration processes clearly have complex temporal dimensions. [such as the] sociological framework of the ‘times of migration’ ... the time politics of asylum regimes ... how travelling subjects take and make time... links between temporal order and the re-socialization of migrants in host societies... and the temporalities of displacement... However, the problem remains, methodologically, of seeing migration as an ‘event’: as a single act of mobility *in* time, rather than a complex and possibly fragmented process *across* time (italics original).”

Institute for Culture and Society Occasional Paper 5.1, ‘The Temporalities of International Migration’, Shanthi Robertson, 2014: 3-4

left, and requested an Invitation Letter with all their names listed, and assurance from The Curator that they could create and exhibit new works through a Residency at The Museum.

And although they were not sure whether they should trust her completely or not, they decided to end the email with, “Once we’re there, we’re going to try and stay.” They collectively inhaled as H’s pointer finger hovered above the laptop’s track pad and the click that would send their plea out of the rusty workshop, through a chilly cyberspace, and into the The Curator’s computer that sat quietly within the pristine white walls of The Museum.

In the meantime, waiting impatiently for The Curator’s reply, The Colourless got their paperwork together for their passport applications. Once this was done and the form was submitted, they would focus on their dossier for the visa. The form itself was tedious but straightforward. They each filled it out carefully and cleanly in black ink.

Day number 4 at the line. The living, breathing line that heaved and receded with every sun-stroked breath of the other applicants at The Directorate that loomed over them, like an ominous dark cloud seemingly ready to burst from the density of its own weight. Each day they arrived earlier and earlier, trying to get closer and closer to the front. Today they arrived well before dawn, but by 8am the cool morning yellow sunlight spilling across the waiting Citizens was already turning fierce. They stood there, staring at their own feet as they shuffled closer, centimetre by centimetre, toward The Directorate’s gate, trying to avoid the stares, at once guilty and accusatory, of the others in line. “Where are you going?” one young Citizen of The Republic asked them, his clothes smart but worn. “Just to India for a workshop,” M quickly said, shooting a glance around to the others that told them clearly not to say more. M had heard that The Directorate had informants mingling among the citizens in line, trying to weed out people who might share their plans for not returning. Once identified, the informants would call an Agent who would come and immediately take The Citizen out of line and lead him or her towards another door at the gate, one that led to certain denial of their passport or passport renewal and permanent blacklisting from ever having a valid passport again.

This was all part of implementing the bilateral agreements made between the federations of The Lands of the West and The Republic to try and stem the flow of asylum-seekers. The Lands of the West had started to see enough of The Republic’s citizens arrive at its borders, crossing them, and wanting to stay. And so now The Republic was given an ultimatum – try and control the situation or risk losing what little aid and development funds were still being given, as well as the currency backing they benefitted from, helping inflate their currency so it appreciated a higher value than neighbouring countries with less conflict and more industry.

They took turns going to buy water and snacks, bringing news of what was happening at the front of the line, and eavesdropping on the conversations of The Citizens in line around them, bundled like extensions of themselves in back, between them and the world they wanted to leave behind, and in

front, between them and the future home they have all imagined.⁵ It was going on 3pm now, and they began to worry about whether they'd make it inside to deposit their applications today, or would have to come back again the next day. They were close, could see the faded details in the heavy metal door of the gate just ahead, could almost even make out the hard wrinkles around the edges of the armed guard's eyes. But the heat and the swarm of other Citizens made the distance seem insurmountable in the time they had left. They were told no one else would be let inside after 3:45pm.

At 3:40pm they saw the heavy metal door slowly swing open and heard the voice calling out from the front of the line, "Pesh byeyen!" (Come forward!). They could see the heads of people beginning to wobble as they shuffled forward, then felt the surge of human weight pushing them from behind as The Citizens all pressed forward in hopes of making it inside. This was their last chance for the day. Caught up in the ebb and flow of the line as it swayed back and forth in one human mass, they found themselves at the door, and the next moment inside it, while the bright light filtering in from behind them was suddenly sealed off by the sound of the door closing on rusted hinges and the voice yelling out "Khalaas shud bareh emruz! Khaana buren!" (It's finished for the day! Go home!).

Inside, the windows were dirty, covered with dust and paint drips, and the lights were dim, creating a somber atmosphere that dulled the briefly excited feeling of having made it inside. But surprisingly, they were called almost immediately to a window counter where a disinterested civil servant sat filing her nails. "Formhaa" (Forms), she blurted out mechanically, scanned them with her eyes quickly, stamped them on every page forcefully, signed them in the ink of the stamp intricately, threw them on a pile of other applications haphazardly, and said to all of them bluntly, "Yak maa baad zang bizanehn" (Call in one month). Four days of waiting nervously amounted to a one-minute exchange, if you could call it an exchange as The Colourless never got a word in edgewise, and then they suddenly found themselves back outside beneath a sun that, after the dimness inside The Directorate, caused their vision to explode into blinding yellow flashes filled with spots floating every which way, like black daffodils blown in a golden wind.

And yet all they could do was keep waiting. This time for one month, thirty days exactly, before they called The Directorate. No answer. Redial. No answer. Redial. No Answer. Redial. No answer. Redial. No answer. It went on like this for three days, and then, "Baley?!" (Yes?!). E who had the task of calling that time was caught by surprise that someone actually answered, and stuttered and stumbled with her first words, "Baley, uh, salaam? Passport-haa? Er, tayaar? Anjuman-e-Berang?" (Yes, hello? Passports? Er, ready? Berang Collective?). "Aa, sabaa byeyen!!" (Yeah, come tomorrow!!), the woman yelled from the other end of the telephone and hung up. E put her mobile phone on the table and slowly sat down in the chair, almost missing it. "They're ready." she said to the others, a smile creeping unbelievably across her face.

⁵ The dream of a better life held by most all migrants crossing borders is always confronted with a much more complicated reality long before a migrant even reaches their intended destination. "Not since the Second World War has the continent faced refugee flows of such complexity and scale. Smugglers are exploiting the political vacuum in Libya to transport Africans across the Mediterranean to Italy. Refugees from Syria's civil war clamber into rubber dinghies at Turkish ports to reach Greek islands. Then they traverse the continent by the thousand, causing havoc at borders and leaving officials to choose between haplessness and brutality. Migrants who have endured the savagery of the Islamic State or the caprice of Eritrea's police state find themselves tear gassed by Macedonian police or evading the clutches of French security guards [...]" *The Economist*, "Looking for a Home," Brussels/Helsinki/Warsaw, August 29, 2015: 2 (Print Edition)

But this was only the first obstacle to overcome. They still needed to actually get the visas to The Lands of the West, and with the refugee and migrant crisis being what it was, the approval rate was at an all-time low. Now here they were seeking multiple visas for a collective of single, unmarried, unemployed artists. The approval rate for that profile may well have been below zero percent. But a crucial element towards helping them have an above zero chance, was the Invitation Letter from The Curator. They had already set their interview appointment at the The Lands of the West consulate, and were hoping that the Invitation Letter would arrive before that date, or else they would have to reschedule and it could take months to receive a new appointment. They received their reply 11 days later, 3 days before their appointment.

My Dear Colourless! How lovely it is to hear from you. I miss you all very much and remember our time together so fondly. In fact, I have been thinking about you and wondering how your different art practices were going. H, are you still making those lovely assemblages? O, do you still like graffiti and mural painting? M, how is the photography going? And E, what kind of installations are you working on these days?

It saddens me deeply to hear how the situation in The Republic has deteriorated since I was there, and that there are only four members left in The Colourless Collective. Though your letter could not have come at a better moment. As I said I was thinking about you, and what I was thinking was exactly that I want to invite The Colourless to come for a residency/exhibition at The Museum. And I have already the permission to do so! The good news is that we can provide Room & Board for you while you are here, plus a small stipend for expenses such as materials, etc. The bad news is that we do not have the budget for the plane tickets or visa fees.

However, regarding the visas, the other reason your letter was so perfectly timed is that my husband's sister has recently started working at the The Lands of the West consulate in the The Republic capital. And guess what department she's in? Visas! Of course, I will not tell her about everything you wrote in your letter to me (I'm so touched that you would trust me with everything, thank you), but I can explain to her the work we've done together in the past, the conditions you face today, and our plan for an exhibition. At the least she can try to speed through the process and maybe even waive the visa fees. In any case, I know she will do all she can to help us make this happen!

I will set the date for the beginning of the residency for two months from now, which will give her plenty of time to work on it. And then the exhibition will be two months after you arrive and last for one month, meaning you will be here for a total of three months. This gives you the

time-frame you need to fill out your visa applications and be prepared for the interview. I'll send your Invitation Letters, one for each of you and another one for The Colourless Collective also naming each of you separately by the end of the day. In it will be all the terms and conditions for the Residency so they know you'll be taken care when you're here.

In the meantime, I have something I'd like you to do. I'd like each of you to think about one thing that you would bring with you on your journey, one thing that would be, for you, the most symbolic of The Republic, of home, of your journey. Just one thing, and it can be anything, but keep in mind you'll have to travel with it!

Oh my dears I cannot wait to see you soon. Your Invitation Letters will be in your e-mailbox within a few hours.

Love & Kisses.
The Curator

The high-spirits stirred by The Curator's reply, her connection at the Consulate, and the Invitation Letter she agreed to send before the end of the day, were quickly replaced by thoughts of the airline tickets. "Where are we going to find that kind of money?" asked O, "Who can we ask?" H answered, "The only people we can ask for help is our parents, they're the only ones who know our plan and we shouldn't share it with anyone else at this point. My dad can definitely borrow enough for my ticket, and probably a bit more. In any case, I know my parents have been saving a bit here and there for my journey. I've also been putting whatever I can aside whenever I sell a painting, though I haven't done so since the last exhibition at the The Lands of the West Cultural Center. What about you?" The other three all agreed and replied similarly, saying that their parents were saving, as were they with whatever they could, and that their fathers could borrow money for the tickets if necessary. It pained them all knowing their parents would have to go into debt helping them, but everyone knew that this was for the future good of all the family, since as soon as they got asylum they would begin the process for bringing their families.

Just before midnight, and so the end of the working day at The Museum in The Lands of the West, The Colourless received their Invitation Letters as promised. They were perfect. They contained all the detailed information necessary that The Curator ensured they would contain, plus an appeal by The Curator for their voyage that made them feel not only grateful to have a friend speak of them in such a way, but happy that they trusted The Curator and were honest about their hopes and dreams for going to The Lands of the West; beyond the residency and exhibition at The Museum. "Okay, now we just need to fill out the non-immigrant visa form online and get through the interview," E said. "Yeah, JUST,"

said H, expressing what they all knew – that it was more complicated than that, and that there were no guarantees⁶.

The sun peeked one eye above the eastern hill and shot it straight through a cracked window in the factory where The Colourless had stayed up the entire night filling out their online visa forms. E's head, turned to the side facing the window, rested on the desk and she awoke to the warmth of the sunlight upon her cheek and a small puddle of drool on the desk beneath the corner of her mouth. She looked up and found the other three sleeping as well, H also at his desk, while O and M had settled on tushaks in their respective workspaces. She went over to the propane stove to put the kettle on for some tea and searched the fridge for any left over cake or biscuits but found none, and so had to settle for eating sugar cubes with her tea, which she normally did anyway. Once the others had awoken, they spent the entire day rehearsing the interview scenario. The questions that would be asked, the answers they would give. They took turns playing the interrogator and the interrogated, making sure that their stories all were the same and that boiled down to one simple scenario – they were invited by The Curator to The Lands of the West for a residency and exhibition at The Museum and would be there for three months. They had round-trip tickets (though they still needed to buy them!), proof of enough money to partially support themselves (though they still needed to secure the money and bank statements!), and the Letter of Invitation that clearly stated their Room & Board would be covered the entire time they were there. This would be easy they all seemed to think simultaneously, as the first butterflies began to flutter in the deeper recesses of their stomachs.

The day before their interviews, The Colourless agreed to meet at the factory to make sure everyone had all they needed and to go over any last minute issues. They all laid out their round-trip tickets, their bank statements, their individual and collective Invitation Letters, print-outs of their visa applications, and their passports. There were no more issues to resolve. All was a go. The day of their interviews they arrived at The Consulate at 8am and after going through security where they were relieved of their mobile phones, they were escorted to the waiting hall. There was not an empty seat to be found. What they did find was what appeared to be half of the capital's inhabitants, all with the same look in their eyes that flashed irregularly between utter hopelessness and extreme hopefulness. They were told to take one number as The Colourless and then they would be individually interviewed after the collective interview. They went to the digital screen, tapped the option that matched the purpose of their visit, and waited until the machine went "Vvrrrrrip" and a small white ticket with a black number came out. 257. They looked at the screen. 108. And their heads dropped in unison. "Don't worry, so many don't even make it through the whole interview before they're rejected that the numbers move pretty fast," said one of their hope-full eyed countrymen sitting next to where they stood. Four and a half hours later, ("He was sort-of right," they thought), The Colourless' number appears flashing on the screen alongside another number indicating that they should go to Window 8. The person behind Window 8 asked them to slip their documents through the narrow opening at the bottom of the glass and to go sit

⁶ Although not the highest refusal rate (%) among countries who applied for non-immigrant visas, in 2016, Afghanistan ranked 2nd out of 10 with a refusal rate of 73.08%. Of course, this percentage is not entirely representative without knowing the actual number of non-immigrant visa requests made during the year, but it does provide a small glimpse through the political window that sits between visa applicants and their approval or refusal. Table: *Table: "FY2016 NIV B Adjusted Refusals by Nationality,"* US Department of State-Bureau of Consular Affairs website, <https://travel.state.gov/content/dam/visas/Statistics/Non-Immigrant-Statistics/refusalratelanguage.pdf>

down. They would be called in a few minutes. But before they could actually find seats to sit, they were called, summoned through a door, and led into a back room of The Consulate where three interviewers sat along one side of a table and four empty chairs awaited them on the other side. They heard a loud, crisp “Click” as the door shut behind them.

The Colourless found themselves walking out of The Consulate four hours later. Everything was a blur and they stepped out in a sort of haze, as if a fog had settled over their perception of the world around them, clouding their ability to discern between reality and fiction. The ground seemed to flex beneath their feet as if it was made of soft rubber, and clouds raced through the sky as if playing on a screen in time-lapse. It was late afternoon, the end of the working day, and the streets were still choked with buses carrying civil servants towards their homes both near and far. The remaining sun could be seen slipping from the surrounding hillsides, as the cool veil of dusk began to drape itself across the city. E was the first to notice that they were all carrying their passports in their hand. She opened hers and began flipping through the pages until she saw it. Pasted into her fresh, new passport and covering an entire page, was a visa to The Lands of the West. “Look,” she managed to say, turning her passport towards the others so they could see what she saw. H, followed by O and M, also looked into their passports and each found their visa pasted in place on the last page, just like E’s. “We’re going,” H said nervously, his eyes scanning the nearest hill in search of where the sun was disappearing to, as if worried that once it was gone, it could not be found again.

The plane was full. Though this came as no surprise to them as this was by far, for this particular date, the cheapest ticket available. Of course, once on board, all snacks or food had to be purchased, but even if you ate and drank the entire trip before arriving in The Transit Zone, there was no way the cost could surpass the costs of the other airline tickets. The Colourless sat towards the front, in four consecutive seats that included a window seat. Having fought over who would sit by the window, it was O who finally suggested that they simply take turns. But in the end H and M did not really care where they sat, and O and E realised quickly why. The airline sold alcohol, and H and M planned on drinking their way to The Transit Zone. O and E chastised them the entire way, though with less and less effect as the two became more and more drunk.

On arrival in The Transit Zone, the two were horribly sick, and much to the enjoyment of O and E, spent the next hour in and out of the bathroom where they vomited up the residue of their drinking spree. “You deserve feeling the way you do now,” E said, “and you should both be ashamed of yourselves. Not only for acting so stupid, but for spending so much of your money on those drinks. Do you think your parents went in to debt so you could get drunk?” Both H and M hung their heads low, moaning deeply before rushing back to the toilet. Sitting in a cafe, they ordered tea and coffee and lots of water and opened a laptop to send an email to The Curator letting her know that they made it safely to The Transit Zone and that their flight to The Lands of the West seemed to be departing on time. The reply came quickly, with The Curator telling them that she would be sending a car, the driver would be holding a sign with The Colourless written on it, and that they would be driven directly to The Museum. If everything was on time and went smoothly, The Colourless should be at The Museum by around 5pm.

The second, longer flight was less eventful, with H and M sleeping off their intoxication most of the journey, while O and E watched films, napped, and talked about their potential ideas for pieces they

would like to work on while in residency at The Museum. When everyone was awake during the last hour or so of the flight, O asked everyone about the symbolic thing they brought with them to represent their migration journey as requested by The Curator. Funnily, in all the preparations they had made for the passports and visas, and all the stress of the trip so far, they had never actually spoken with each other about this; so no one actually knew what the other had brought, if they brought anything. In fact, they had each brought something, and it was in each of their carry-on pieces of luggage.

“I’ll tell you all first,” O said. “It’s a paintbrush I have used since I first started painting, so no matter what happens, I never forget what I am, an artist.” There was a pause as the others thought about this, subtle nods and smiles appearing and disappearing among them. H went next, “M, do you remember when you asked me why my carry-on bag was so heavy and I just laughed saying it was full of pistachios? Well, it’s actually because my symbolic piece is a handmade mud brick.” M laughed, “Why would you bring a mud brick with you H?” “It symbolises the new home I’m going to have to build for me and my family in The Lands of the West.” Noticing the moisture forming in H’s eyes, M stopped laughing, and he along with O and E gave soft, serious looks to H, followed by smiles. “Okay E” M said, “go ahead and I’ll go last. E reached in to her bag and pulled out a picture. It was old, faded, and worn on the edges. It was a family photo, her family, and pictured were her mother, father, older sister, younger brother, and M when she was maybe 7 years old. “It’s my favorite family photo,” she said,” and I’m taking it so that I always remember the ones I left behind on this trip.” Tears rolled down her cheeks, and O leaned over to her and gave her a sideways but long, tight hug. M, clearing his throat, then carefully pulled from his bag something wrapped in cloth. He unwrapped it to reveal another airtight plastic bag which he then opened and gently pulled out a golden-green wheat husk. “This wheat husk is meant to symbolise, no matter how much things change, the land where I come from.” With E’s object, all of The Colourless found tears welling up in their eyes, and each of them took several moments to him or herself, silently contemplating everyone’s contribution to The Curator’s request.⁷

The seat belt light went “DING!,” and there was the usual mad rush of passengers opening overhead compartments and trying to rush towards an exit that wasn’t yet open. The Colourless sat in their seats, frozen, thinking about the next steps they would be taking towards an uncertain future. They made their way off the plane and towards Immigration Control, their hearts pounding so loud in their chests, they were convinced the people around them could, and eventually the Immigration Officers would, hear them beating. They arrived in the large hall filled with people meandering through their respective roped-off lines, depending on whether they held The Lands of the West or foreign passports. E noticed a poster right at the entrance with images of patriotic landmarks and multiple faces from obviously diverse backgrounds that read “Living in The Lands of the West = Freedom.” She found it as equally disturbing as exhilarating.

⁷ The fundamental problem with symbolism, or the attitudes and perceptions of a thing’s symbolic value, is that it can be persuasively relevant often only at a cultural level, and furthermore this relevance often operates at the unconscious level, therefore rendering their “translation” into language (and very much less cross-culturally) fundamentally flawed. The idea that one culture can accept and comprehend, without foreknowledge and simply through discussion, the symbols of another culture is ambitious at its best, arrogant at its worst. Symbols must be understood to “carry messages that are by their nature radically different from the messages expressed in language, and thus are not only largely hidden from consciousness but translatable into language, if at all, only in partial or distorted ways.” *Keesing, Roger M., “On Not Understanding Symbols: Towards an Anthropology of Incomprehension,” HAU, Journal of Ethnographic Theory, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2012; <http://www.haujournal.org/index.php/hau/article/view/hau2.2.023/1036>*

“What brings you to The Lands of the West?” the immigration officer asks O, who hands him the official Invitation Letter from The Museum and explains the residency and exhibition project. The ignorant, all-powerful officer replies, “That’s great that they let you make art over there, as a girl I mean,” and as nothing in the computer system nor in O’s voice raises suspicion, he stamps her passport and while handing it back says “Welcome to The Lands of the West.” The rest of The Colourless pass through with similar official ease intermingled with personal discomfort. They proceed to Baggage Claim Carousel 3 and watch the variously packed suitcases and bundles spin surreally along the serpentine track, occasionally having to push a bag that’s leaning halfway off the belt, as if trying to escape before being claimed, back onto its course towards its owner. Once they all received their luggage they continued through the exit doors, nervously side-eyeing the Customs Police with their dogs as they left the baggage hall. M was particularly nervous as over half of his suitcase was filled with Seven Stars cigarette cartons. Having heard how expensive cigarettes were in The Lands of the West, he brought as much as he could fit in his suitcase, which was way beyond the duties exempted amount of 200 cigarettes. The crowd of people waiting outside the doors was immense, and they began searching all the signs being held up by any number of people with names written on them. Finally, they saw a man wearing a black suit, white shirt, and black tie holding a large black and white sign that read simply “The Colourless.” And as they approached him he gave them a big, warm smile in greeting.

They rode mostly in silence and without much motion, only occasionally pointing something out on the side of the road while commenting on it, usually a homeless person or a mural of some sort; neither of which they were accustomed to seeing back home. They entered into an industrialised area that reminded them of the Bagrami Industrial Park where The Colourless had its art space. They noticed amidst the brick, concrete, and steel, several glass facades that were other galleries and art spaces, their insides well lit and walls covered with paintings. They rounded a corner and suddenly before them was The Museum, exactly as they had seen it in the photos online. The massive cube of glass and steel seemed to tower above the surrounding buildings, and the light emanating from within gave it an otherworldly feeling. Before the last of them exited the car, The Curator came bursting out the front door of The Museum, squealing with delight and rushing towards The Colourless with her arms open wide. They all stood outside in a group hug for what felt like an hour, and when they separated they noticed that each of them had tears streaming down their cheeks.

It was closer to 6pm now, and The Curator was asking them about their trip, If everything was okay? If they were hungry? If they were thirsty? If they needed to rest? If they needed to use the restroom? The Colourless said they were fine, still trying to grasp the reality of their presence at The Museum. Immediately upon entering The Curator led them upstairs to her office where they could leave their luggage, but asked them to keep their symbolic objects with them. They did as she asked, and followed her back downstairs into one of the museum halls. There was artwork everywhere, on the walls, the floor, even hanging from the ceiling. It was beautiful.

They followed The Curator into a medium-sized room with white walls and a concrete floor, where four white plinths stood distributed unevenly throughout the space. The Curator turned towards The Colourless, “So, I’d like you each to now take your symbolic object and place it on one of the plinths. I leave it up to you to decide who should put their object on which plinth.” The Colourless began to

realise that The Curator wanted to exhibit the objects and they felt proud that even before the residency they would have something installed and exhibited at The Museum. They each carefully unpacked their object and began looking around the room at the plinths and discussing the layout. They asked The Curator if they could move the plinths. “Yes! Please!” The Curator joyfully replied. As they began moving plinths, setting and resetting the objects upon them in different patterns around the room, and arguing amongst themselves about the best layout, they failed to notice that The Curator was slowly backing out of the room.

What they did notice was the very loud “CLICK!” the door made when it shut, and the even louder “BANG!!” that came from the other side of it as if a metal latch or bolt had been set in place. H ran towards the door and tried opening it, but it was locked. He banged his shoulder against it while the others joined him in trying to open it but to no avail. They then heard, louder than even the metal bolt, a sustained, humming, “VRRRRRR!!!” and noticed that the white walls were sliding down from the ceiling revealing clear glass from behind them. The Colourless walked around the room frantically as the walls descended halfway down and stopped, so that the upper half of the room on all four sides was now clear glass. On the other side of that glass The Colourless saw a crowd of people, dressed mostly in black with glasses of wine and champagne in their hands, watching The Colourless from all four sides with looks of pity, awe, joy, and shock, speaking amongst themselves and gesturing as if commenting on a work of art that has just been revealed at a museum opening.

H, O, M, and E looked at each other with horror in their eyes, and realised that after everything they had gone through and after all the promises that had been made to them, that was exactly what they were - that the exhibition was them.⁸

⁸ This short story was originally written in 2016, and hence footnotes 1 - 7, including factual data regarding Afghan migration patterns, are from then. A more recent article with data for Europe states that “Since 2015, around 570,000 Afghans have requested asylum in the EU...44,000 in 2020 alone, making Afghanistan the second most important country of origin [that year]”

Reuters, “Six EU Countries Warn Against Open Door for Afghan Asylum Seekers”, August 10, 2021).

The above updated numbers go to show that little overall seems to have changed in Afghan migration patterns since ‘The Exhibition’ was originally written. However, one particular change that must be referenced here is the story’s resemblance to what took place after the events of August 2021, when the Taliban finalised their sweep through the country and secured control of Afghanistan by taking over the capital Kabul without firing a single bullet. This led to the evacuation of many artists who feared for their lives; a significant number of these evacuations facilitated by Western curators and cultural actors. Many of these evacuated artists in Europe and elsewhere are now, in December 2021, burning brightly under the Western white saviour spotlight, where they are profiled in the media, offered residencies or academic programs, and “exhibited” to the world in ways that resemble far too closely the colonial-era exhibitions of the scantily-clad indigenous brought from afar to Western lands. For now at least, the Western world closely watches these evacuated artists through parentalistic eyes, amazed and amused that the noble savages of today can create art...