

In the space between the *not* waiting and the *not letting go* of waiting lies the solitary life of exile. A limbo created out of an ambivalence towards waiting, exile grows inside you in intensity to affect the most banal aspects of your life despite its outward insignificance. It is perhaps out of this contradiction that some exile communities build simulacrum towns as monuments to their displacement, such as the one Iranians conceived for themselves on the westside of Los Angeles where I live. There, business signs refuse to be translated to the dominant language; and an abundance of TV networks and production studios, as well as services and commodities, ensure the advertisement and sustenance of a tightly-knit microcosmic economy; the ragged voice of the AM radio host, cutting under every bridge, tunnel or freeway ramp in your car is the reliable source of facts against the community's tabloid outlets when it comes to celebrity news; and beloved figures of the exile community's elite are buried not far from Frank Zappa and Marilyn Monroe in a cemetery tucked away between the US Bank Tower, the Oppenheimer Tower, and a museum of contemporary art.

The spectrum of exile lies somewhere between its often ungracious metaphoric use by itinerant artists who never land home, and a version of itself so drenched in nostalgia that it keeps one in a ceaseless production of a simulacrum of the past. Caught between domestic cruelties and imperial atrocities, some of us endlessly float in its orbits. As we rotate around our home and home—which, like two negative poles of a magnet, keep one another at a fixed distance—we write repeatedly, ad nauseam, of our ambivalent relationship to waiting. What can we share of the duration of that experience shaped by the impossibility of return and the impossibility of arrival? How do we talk about experiences that neither have a clear beginning nor end? What would it look like to try to make sense of these experiences while they morph your every sense of time and space, and of continuity? In more ways than one way, exile functions like a museum where objects and histories are memorialized without settling into a past.

You count every year, not to remember your age, but to count the years you have been away. You have said goodbye to some anticipating death. You skipped some goodbyes, which soon enough turned into saying hello through a computer screen. You wave your hand indiscriminately at all

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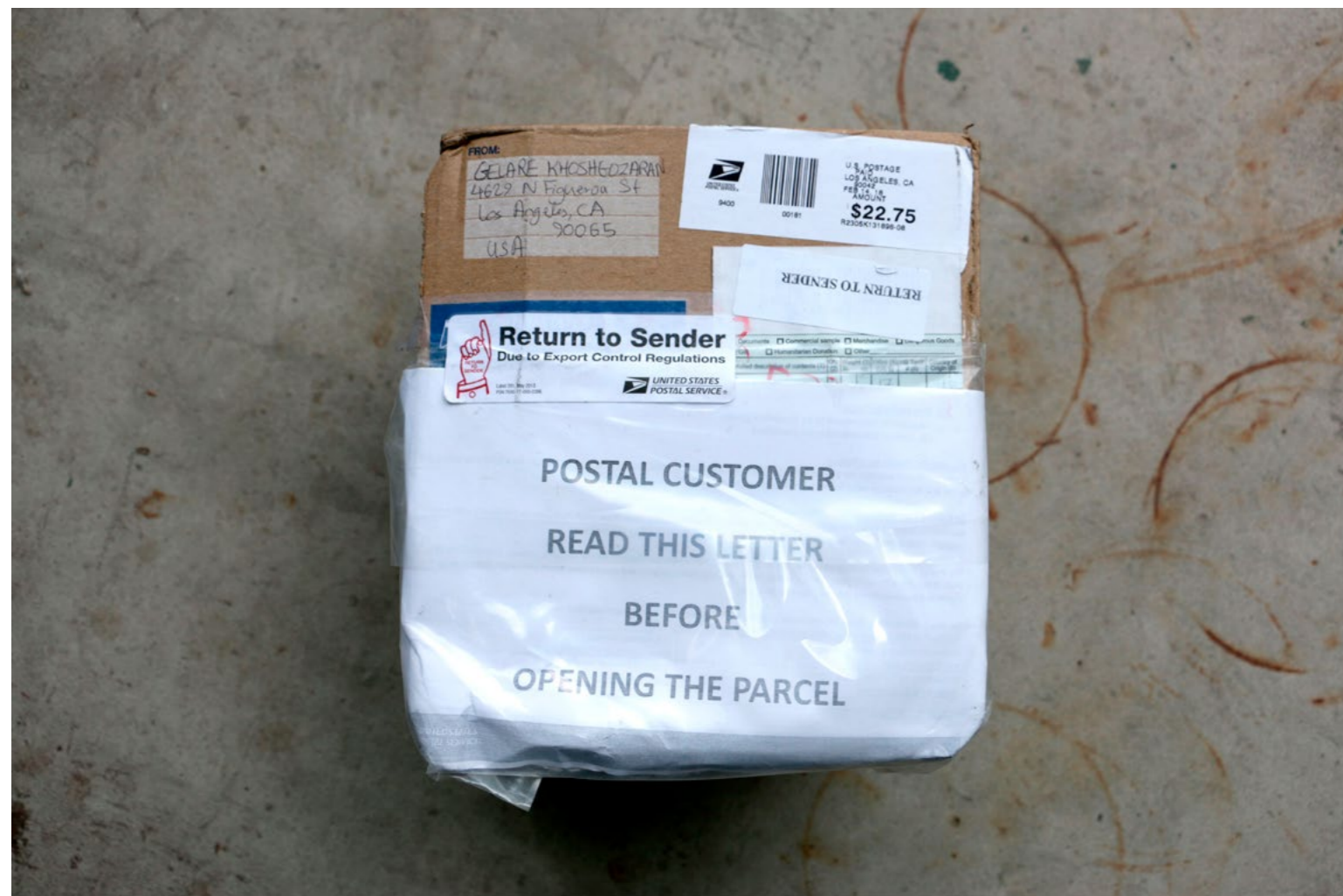


Image courtesy of the author.

the faces on the other side thinking: Which one of them would be alive by the time I go back? You think five years...then a decade...then never would be the mark of amnesia. After that, you either go back immediately or move forward with your life. Every year during Nowruz you promise your parents that one day you will celebrate together at home. Your mother gives you a tour of the house in the ancestral village. She points to where you'd be sleeping when you go, *inshallah*, before her finger accidentally covers half the phone's camera. The blur covers the shame you feel inside, as if being exposed for lying. And then the camera drops entirely, and the image fixes on the chandelier hanging from the ceiling before she picks up the phone again laughing.

You have already received that call, that one call that made you think you'll go no matter what happens. Your friend tells you how she was grateful to embrace her father before he passed away. You remember another friend watched her father's entire burial through WhatsApp, with her cousin holding the camera the entire time. You knock yourself out at night to sleep, knowing the nightmares would come where you're navigating the labyrinth of apartment buildings the size of a city, to arrive somewhere on time and never find your way around. The nightmare is episodic and architectural, it always picks up where it previously left things off, and has been recurring for thirteen years and counting.

You ask yourself which one of them is going to go first, and hate yourself for even thinking about it. You wish you could apply a blurring effect on the voice in your head. You are grateful for the wall erected by a language you can hide behind, that protects your parents from reading this thought. You ask yourself again which one of them is going to go first. You remember your friend still missing her mother because she could not be there when she departed. She kept insisting that it all happened so quickly. You convince yourself that you need to see your childhood home, you miss the streets of your city. You serially call your friends back home. They're rolling cigarettes and preparing to listen. You calculate the probabilities that (A) you'll go and never return, (B) you'll go and everything will be just fine, (C) you'll go and they'll just want to take you in to ask a few questions. It is a good time, you think to yourself, so long as these nuclear negotiations are happening. But it could also be tricky around the holidays. You think you should close all your social media accounts a few months in advance, and clear your record of anything deemed questionable on the internet.

If they interrogate me I'll show them how my work is anti-imperialist. You remind yourself this is not a funding application, that they will find a way to humiliate you, that your queer 'perversions' don't stand a chance of getting screened through a diversity function. You imagine your interrogation going logically and smoothly, as if conviction and reason are judicial tenets in the theater of forced confessions. You wish you could belong to a real cause or movement. You think if something happens it would be too much for your parents. You remember how annoyed your mother would get every time she had to go to your school to get you out of trouble. You see a tweet that reminds you of how your generation would go out as teenagers with their mothers' words in mind. *If they arrest you, I can't bail you out. It's your own responsibility.* You remind yourself how she raised you through a war and in the aftermath of a revolution. You don't take it personally, and process the sense of abandonment you still carry inside through therapy instead.

Your father has foraged some artichokes (کنگر), your favorite, and your mother tells you she is freezing it until you come and she is able to make you your favorite stew. You google how many years you can freeze vegetables before they'd lose their flavor. You look up tickets online and find an affordable one through Turkish Airlines. You tell yourself you're still waiting to hear back from all the applications, that you might have to work in September. But this flight via Istanbul gives you enough time to prepare before you're too close to the border, where trouble awaits. You look at the "fully refundable" ticket prices only. Maybe you don't *need* to see where you came from that bad!

You have a studio visit with your student who asks you if you consider yourself an exile. You both talk about how you live in the anticipation of *that one call*. He tells you he wants to go back before getting the second call. (He has already received one announcing the loss of his mother.) You think to yourself how you don't want to live in anticipation of any such call. You tell a friend you're going to plan really well. He says there is no planning for this. *If it happens it's going to change your life forever.* You think to yourself, how can one plan for the prospect of having their life changed forever? You wonder how they'd treat your injured knees in prison. Will they believe you when you tell them that you can't kneel? You decide it's better if you don't disclose your health conditions before getting interrogated, that it would make you more vulnerable. You imagine how you might pick up smoking again if it happens. You read about hunger strikes, watch *The Supper* by Pere Portabella again and listen to former political prisoners talk about how they viewed hunger strikes as a "last resort." The camera moves gently from one face to another as they sit around the kitchen table smoking. They all have gray hair, a visible sign of the anger they seem to keep out of that ostensibly intellectual discussion.

After work you drive around the city missing your exits with intent. You look at the map of Los Angeles and identify a map of exile. You have marked the apartment where German philosopher Theodor Adorno used to live on South Kenter Avenue. You think of driving toward his former residence to look at a place where exile is unmarked, and evidently in the past. You want to see how it has since aged. The footsteps of the post WWII German emigré intellectuals span from Bertolt Brecht's house in Santa Monica, and the Thomas Mann House in Pacific Palisades to Herbert Marcuse's teaching years at UC San Diego. The university is located not far from the southern US border constructed to make Mexicans exiles in their own home. You drive around

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looking at the high rises and luxury lofts out of your car's window. You fell in love with Kent Mackenzie's *The Exiles*, a classic of LA independent cinema. The film's non-actor protagonists belong to a young indigenous group who had been displaced from Indian reservations of the American Southwest to Bunker Hill. The once working class neighborhood depicted in the 1961 film has gone through seven decades of redevelopment initially marketed as a 'renaissance'.

You come home and take a shower thinking about the day and how you planned not to live your life waiting for that phone call. Your Iranian passport is valid and its American counterpart, which took you more than twelve years to get, is in the top drawer in your home office cabinet. You look up the plane ticket to make sure the price hasn't changed, you tell your partner you have to go for the sake of your mental health. You are supported. Your parents tell you it's a personal decision. That sends a shiver down your spine. You can't stomach another WhatsApp tour of your parents' house. You're getting older but the mountain facing their balcony in the village seems unscathed. You envy that mountain. You do more research and find out your second passport could get you in trouble. You feel like shit knowing you could end up as currency for a potential prisoner swap transaction. You learn from a friend that another friend who had just gone back was questioned about where she had been all these years. You don't have the nerve to call her and ask where she said she indeed had been all these years, the ones you spent being gay together in California.

You're here but you're somewhere else. You need to get away from this place to clear your head. It's been four weeks since you've last heard from a friend who decided she would face her reality because she couldn't "live with this" in her head anymore. That friend is the only one you talk to about exile. You write her another email, this time without sending it.

Dear ç,

You said the worst that could happen is they would not let you in, that they would deport you back to your 'home' because, with your American passport in [...] you would technically be a foreigner. You wondered how much easier that would be. I would come back to the US after being deported from my home, and then what?

I am writing to you without anticipating a response. I knew you would be traveling without your phone and computer for obvious reasons. You told me you would write me an email somehow. I told you to take your time, that I will be thinking about you all the time. In our last conversation we talked about our mothers, and about all that we couldn't share with our families. You recalled your own mother's exile. You said you had painfully realized how exile existed in your family for generations.

How can our homes be so far away from those places these passports are issued from, we both wondered. I'm sitting in a bus in Buenos Aires remembering how you said you can't just sit around casually listening to Arabic classics. It's just too heavy. I told you about how I run away from anything that gives me a sense of arrival, how I'm chasing new places and languages to be uncomfortable. To be alienated and out of place is my home. Remaining an immigrant is my assimilation. I will make many more exiles of myself with this new passport and all the borders it opens to me.

Last time we spoke we shared our love for Lebanese filmmaker Borhane Alaouie's *Letter from a Time of Exile*, and how we admire its simplicity. At the end of the day, we both agreed that experience is both personal and ultimately insignificant. We learn to write and record and appreciate our insignificant lives. What we have in common is time and space constantly, and quietly, morphing in our head. I play Sadoun Jaber, imagining us at a bar like the one Emmi Kurowski walks into in Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* to the voice of Sabah. That bar is our orbit, our refuge—children of too many and no homes, immigrants of the films of our lives.

Love,
Gelare

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