

OS TRA KON

Ahmad Moradi (ed.)

X-ist

Vol. 01/2022



Ostrakon – a small shard of broken pottery or stone used as a durable and convenient medium for writing scratched into the surface. Bound up with the notion of exile through its use in the voting process for ostracism in Ancient Greece, the ostrakon captures the spirit of this new imprint. With the more ephemeral notions of the chapbook or pamphlet in mind, *Ostrakon* welcomes multi- and interdisciplinary work, which explores and develops themes broadly related to mass mobility, forced displacement and exile brought about through conflict, climate change, and authoritarianism. *Ostrakon* welcomes contributions from a wide range of authors and artists that move beyond conventional scholarly presentational forms to alternative modes of creative and multimedia work. The intention is to attract both scholarly and general readers concerned about human rights, social justice, and the future of the planet and its inhabitants. Academic submissions will undergo a peer review process. Submissions in English and German are considered with a maximum limit of 25,000 words. *Ostrakon* will be published in both hard copy and online.

Referred to in the ancient sources as a just and honorable man, Aristides was nonetheless ostracized. At the behest of an illiterate voter who said he was tired of hearing Aristides constantly referred to as ‘the Just’, Aristides wrote his own name onto an ostrakon and took leave of the city (Plutarch. *Life of Aristides*, VII, 5–6).

OSTRAKON

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X-ist

Editor: Ahmad Moradi

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DEDICATION

To those who never stop imagining
elsewhere and otherwise

All *existence* is an imagination within an imagination.

Ibn al-‘Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*

Everything can happen, everything is possible and probable. Time and place do not exist; on a significant basis of reality, the imagination spins, weaving new patterns; a mixture of memories, experiences, free fancies, incongruities and improvisations.

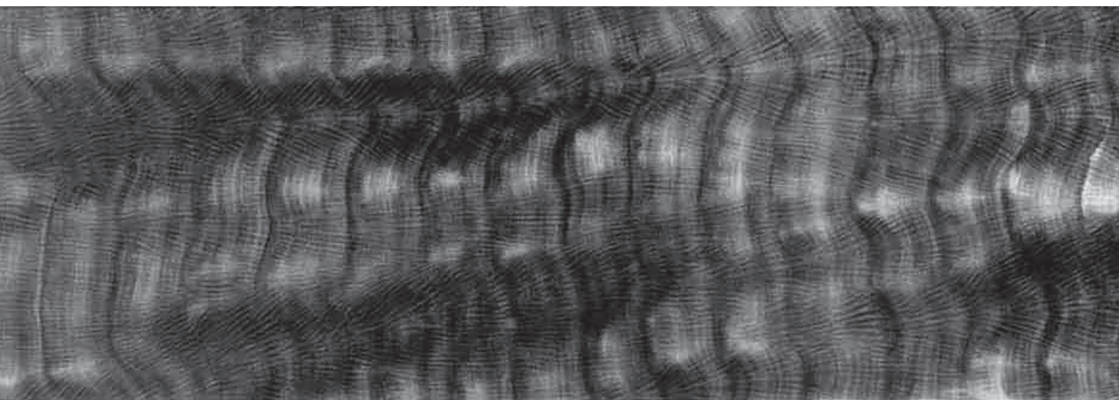
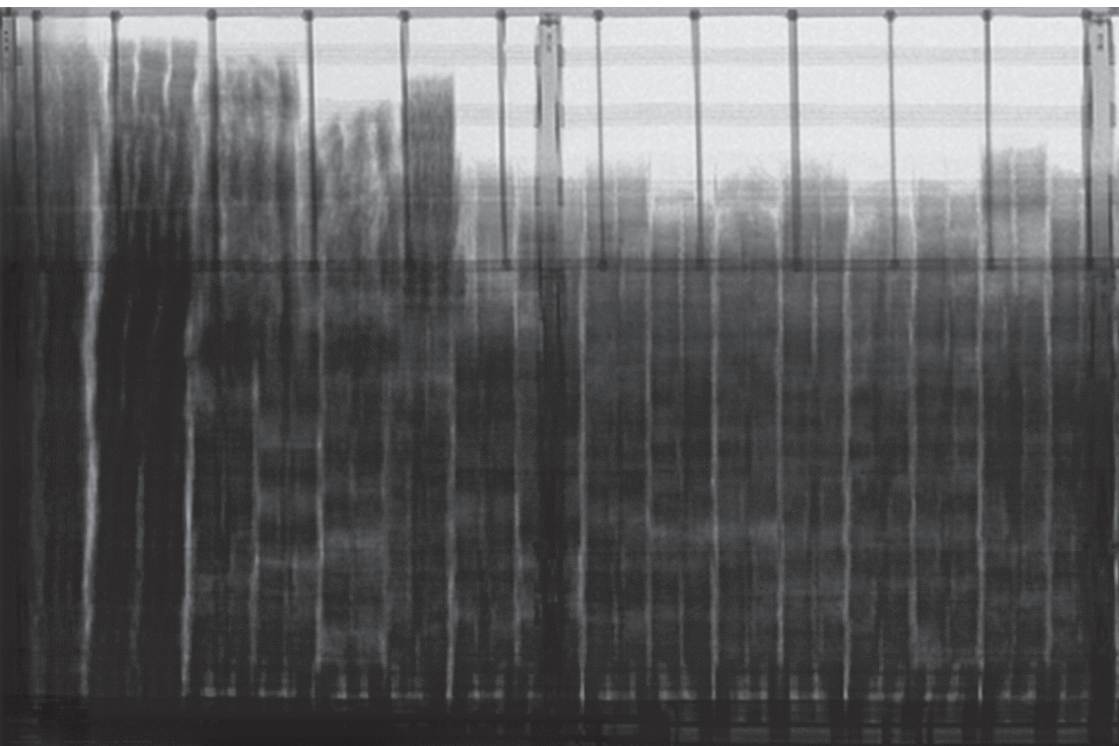
August Strindberg, *A Dream Play*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This volume is the result of collective reflection on *X-ist*, a collaborative art project between Ahmad Moradi and Mohammad Hassanzadeh. My collaboration with Mohammad on the visual project began in 2013, and we have come a long way since then. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the following individuals, without whom our visual project and this volume would not have materialized.

First and foremost, I would like to thank Reza Shojaei, whose fresh insights and immense understanding were indispensable to the formation and presentation of this art work. There are no words to fully express my appreciation for the time and effort he put into this project. I am tremendously indebted to the contributors to this volume: Stef Jansen, Madeleine Reeves, Juli Perczel, and Claudia Tazreiter. They generously agreed to share their thoughtful reflections on the issues of borders and migration. Their keen eyes and erudite commentaries will no doubt help readers engage more deeply with the art work and the topic.

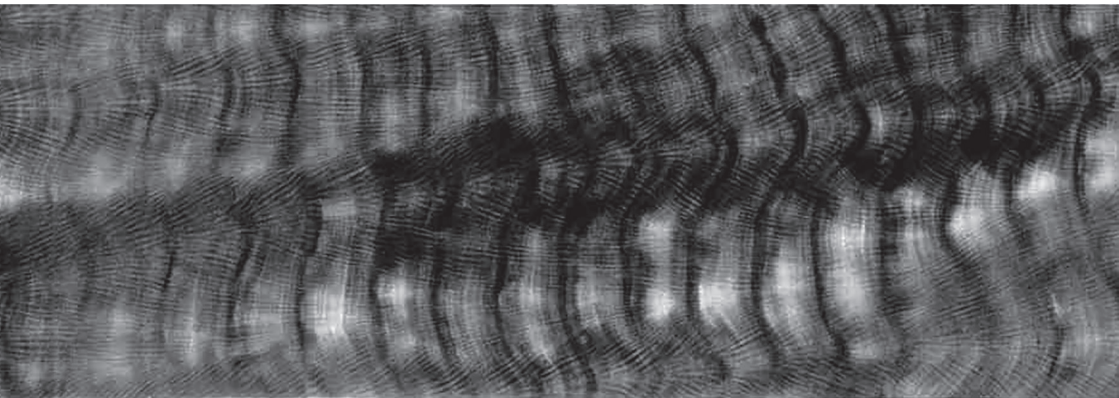
I am also indebted to the team of Academy in Exile in Berlin. Without them, this volume would never have seen print. It was the great encouragement of Vanessa Agnew and Kader Konuk that gave this work a new lease on life. I am also grateful to other members of the Academy. I thank Annika Roux for her patience and precision, and for her creative eyes and hands in designing the volume. I also thank Achim Rohde for his incredible help and support in all stages. Finally, my special thanks goes to Elaheh Habibi, our first interlocutor, whose gentle but constant nudges pushed us to complete this work.



Mohammad Hassanzadeh & Ahmad Moradi

X-ist

150 x 49 cm & 150 x 25 cm, 2017



INTRODUCTION

Ahmad Moradi

When Wilhelm Röntgen accidentally discovered the existence of a new wavelength of electromagnetic radiation in his laboratory, he used a mathematical sign of the unknown, X, to identify it. Thereafter, X-ray became a known phenomenon and has been used for myriad purposes ever since. This visual project provides a glimpse into a moment when the unknown eX-istence or remnants of “illegal” border crossers is discovered and revealed by X-ray images.

Seeking Refuge

Although globalization was supposed to herald the weakening of borders and the diminished power of nation-states, borders have remained critically important. The reinvigorated status of borders calls into question the notion of a globalized world in which national borders would be largely irrelevant. Indeed, it appears that many countries are reconstituting and reinforcing geographic and social divisions through border control practices, reaffirming the importance of “place”-based privileges and rights, as well as “insider” versus “outsider” identities. These border control practices are often

ideologically cloaked in the language of security and anti-terrorism. In fact, they frequently facilitate both old and new forms of national protectionism, upholding the policing of national borders that violates the very promises of globalization.

Concerned about the security of borders, Western countries in particular find themselves in the midst of two major upheavals: technology and mass migration. In this context, digital technologies are set to strengthen an already extant system of border control in managing the unwanted population. In this sense, the everyday struggles of asylum seekers to enter Western countries have led to unprecedented securitization and fortification of Western world borders. Exploring the techniques of border monitoring allows us to see the imagination and materiality of this acute state of securitization. Every year, EU member states pay agencies such as Frontex, neighboring states like Turkey, or even militias like the Libyan coast guard to stop asylum seekers from crossing the external borders of the Union. Yet the self-same member states are signatories to the United Nations treaty to protect the mobility rights of asylum seekers. This contradictory practice in the EU system has driven asylum seekers to pay smugglers to gain entry to the Schengen Area, and it has created a tense and conflict-driven process, characterized by a politics of (im)mobility versus struggles over the (in)visibility of migrants. Our project places readers at the heart of these struggles.

Based on the routes that asylum seekers take, we have divided the works in this volume into two sections:

land-based and sea-based migration. The first section is prefaced by the X-ray image of a truck carrying “illegal” migrants at a border. The second shows an X-ray image of a coral reef, used by scientists to measure the annual rain and water temperature of the Mediterranean Sea.

Land-Based Migration

To respond to the growing influx of migrants and to ensure additional capacities for barring access to Western countries, customs officials, particularly those situated in border zone countries of the European Union, have begun to use backscatter scanners equipped with state-of-the-art X-ray technology to image containers. These large mobile backscatter scanners are able to use dual-energy X-ray technologies in order to simultaneously capture two images from each side and two images of the top, providing six views that quickly reveal the contents of the trucks. The following images were retrieved from the Customs Administration of the Republic of Serbia. The Customs Office provided the following description for the image:

On December 31, 2011, at the exit side of the border-crossing point Batrovci, customs officers prevented six Afghan nationals from crossing the border illegally. Owing to the use of the latest mobile scanners, it was observed that there were human beings inside a truck with Turkish registration plates. The scanner, by means of its advanced technology, indicates whether the scanned object is animate or inanimate. The

aforementioned truck was transporting textile goods on the Turkey-Germany-Netherlands route, so it is assumed that the discovered persons were trying to cross the Serbian border illegally on their way to these European countries. The discovered immigrants were delivered to the border police for further processing. Over the last two months, the number of persons whose illegal border-crossing attempts have been thwarted has increased, including the case from today, to 117.

The X-ray images taken of trucks crossing borders depict the bodies of border crossers squeezed between different types of cargo. The images capture the moment of in-betweenness, dividing the life of the asylum seeker into two distinct moments of achievement or failure.

Sea-Based Migration

In recent years, it has become common to see images of capsized boats in the Mediterranean on our television screens and social media pages. These overcrowded boats carry passengers who set sail in hope of reaching the shores of European countries. The asylum seekers' journey is perilous, as exemplified by the drowned bodies washed ashore that demonstrate the lethal nature of such border-crossing attempts. Given the maritime conditions that lead to high death tolls at sea and the severe border control regime that presents migrants with the prospect of being unwanted in European countries, this method of border crossing seems to involve pure risk from the

outset. Nevertheless, despite the risk and hazards, migrants have not abandoned hope and still embark on their sea journeys. Rather than their victimhood, it is their assertiveness and resoluteness that have become the focus of our project.

In an attempt to go beyond the depiction of victimized migrants, we have turned our lens on the natural world and the ways the remnants of drowned migrants are recorded and preserved by living creatures in the sea. We have chosen to focus on coral reefs, whose mysterious life has long captured the attention of scientists, in particular marine biologists.

Corals are living sea animals, and their pattern of growth, known as banding, can reveal precise information about past events at sea, down to the day. X-ray images of a coral skeleton's cross section allow scientists to determine the sea temperature, rainfall, and stormy days hundreds of years ago. To understand when the rainy season began and ended or to determine the amount of rain in a given year, scientists look for traces of barium in the coral skeleton. Barium is found in soil, and when it rains, soil washes into the sea and gets absorbed by the coral. The traces of barium in the corals become visible in the X-ray images as fluorescent lines. Looking at the coral reefs in the Mediterranean Sea, we wonder how these shining lines may have recorded the precise stormy days and nights that asylum seekers spent in their boats hoping to reach land. Coral reefs may be thought of as a form of living diary, recording and continuing to record the anxious moments of asylum seekers at sea.

VISUAL AND SENSORY STIMULI, MEMORIES AND UNCANNY CONNECTIONS

Claudia Tazreiter

Today, images, photographs, artwork, film – indeed, all aspects of visual culture – are key forms of communication and interaction. Visual culture powerfully connects humans to convey emotions and meaning across time and space, beyond the constraints of language.

The sensory world gives complex feedback on the ebbs and flows of daily lives. The chains of connectivity between living entities defy the breaks and the disruptions. New digital technologies, together with the reach of social networks, amplify the role of the visual.

The images of the *X-ist* project echo these kinds of hidden qualities and reverberations, the ripples, sound-waves, shutter-speed re-articulations that the eye scans. The images have spectral qualities, hinting at what is not there. The images are evocative. Evocative of absences, presences and hidden qualities. Each viewer makes their own connections, *feels* the reverberations the image casts. Bodies, yes. Likely human bodies rather than another animal form, and yet they are transfigured, disfigured, seemingly weightless and floating in the network of strands the X-ray produces. The images are

deeply modern and sociological, generated through new and digitized technologies, with each hinting at relations and systems. What, or who, experiences the problems the images depict? What power relations are at play? Or, indeed, is there a cooperative system at play that does not rest on hierarchies of value?

Bordering practices, in all their polysemic qualities, are integral in nature and often essential to encapsulate, enfold, and keep safe an entity. At the right moment, a barrier or membrane may be crossed or ruptured to deepen a relationship with another entity, or even to make new life. In this vital sense of biological life, borders are rich and productive. Yet in the constructed world of the nation-state, borders raise anxieties, are utilized to create divisions and hatred, are politicized. Here the distinction I wish to highlight in the visual “reading” of the images is twofold. The well-known codes and systems of governing human migrations operate as regimes of power, surveillance, and the necropolitical projects of “death-making” so often applied to refugee populations. These dominant tropes are extensions of the logics and violence of settler colonialism and racial capitalism in lockstep with the neoliberal state. Refugees and irregular migrants suffer unspeakable deprivations through these systems of violence. A second reading is motivated by posthuman, “more-than-human,” and interspecies understandings and conceptualization. Observing and documenting the sentience of non-human animals and other living entities disrupts and denaturalizes previous assumptions. A potential follows to rearticulate and reimagine futures.

The first image demonstrates the capacities of surveillance through new technologies, the capacities of states to spot and intercept human bodies (refugees and other irregular migrants) en route to a place of safety. The image is disturbing, depicting bodies – as flesh – held by hard surfaces. It reveals little detail about the qualities and characteristics of the subject; indeed, it reflects in many ways the same “cold,” distant neutrality that state systems claim in “governing” those who cross borders.

The second image – a scientific scan of coral reefs – connects to the natural world. A repeating pattern seems to echo and change with each “move,” yet some underlying connectivity keeps the pattern repeating. This image is a reminder of the connectedness between all living things. The hierarchy that humans have assumed over the natural world and all other living entities is thoroughly challenged by our current lived experience of climate disasters, species extinction, loss of habitat and of clean drinking water, and a growing awareness that the human animal is using natural resources without regard to their limits and finitude. The traces of such human activities and crimes are held not only in the bodies and memories of humans, but also deep in ecological systems. Scientists and conservationists have long pondered the reasons for whale beaching, often of immature whales. Scientists have now learned that the toxic pollutants dumped into oceans over the decades since industrialization are stored in the fat of the mother whale and amplified in the fat-rich milk fed to her calves. The baby whale is poisoned

by our toxic dumps through its mother's milk as it seeks to grow and gain independence. Evidence of human activity thus remains in the residues of living systems. Just as the second image depicts, an archaeological "dig" or a scientist's scan reveals histories, practices, and values in the residue and dust of past actions.

Human/inhuman/posthuman are labels and experiences that describe and narrativize the complications of life and the hierarchies that apply differential "value" to life. The "more-than-human" and multispecies theorizations conceive of new possibilities for coexistence. These new and often challenging iterations work from multiple perspectives and lenses, showing how suffering and cognition are experienced by non-human animals and other entities. Such focus is not to eschew, sideline, or limit the "voice" and agency of human suffering. Quite to the contrary. Posthuman and "more-than-human" orientations pull the rug out from under the ideologies that fortify the "migrant border" – the ideologies of settler colonialism, racial capitalism, and the neoliberal state – working instead with the deep connections of all living entities. Such connections reverberate in deep time; they are also represented in the cosmologies of many First Nations peoples, such as the Australian Indigenous people, where the relationship to ecological systems is as custodian rather than owner/occupier. It is no accident that deep connections of understanding and "working through" of problems in open and discursive ways are taking place between Indigenous people and those with lived experience as refugees in the Australia context.

REGIMES OF (IN)VISIBILITY AT THE BORDER

Madeleine Reeves

“No mobile phones! No photographs!” The voice is bored, rather than aggressive. The woman in a purple suit and high heels whose job it is to shepherd newly arrived passengers has probably repeated the phrase a thousand times already today. The passengers await: bored, nervous, expectant, compliant. The verbal orders, like the signs posted on walls (“no loitering”; “no return after this point”), remind us that for all the commercialized anticipation of arrival, even the airport border is a place of circumscribed rights; of differential visibility; of prospective state violence.

International borders are place where we are seen, watched, *seen through*. We must render our histories and identities legible and accountable: “Here is my birth certificate, sir. Here is my letter of invitation.” We must submit ourselves to be scanned: our features, our fingerprints, our irises, our pasts. We become our data points, our biometrics, subject to algorithmic calculations of threat and risk: *this* body, with *this* surname, *this* passport, and *this* route represents a threat, requires an extra check, cannot be let in. They are places of scrutiny. But part of the power of the border, part of its mystique – its magic, even – is that the border is also a place of inscrutability, of differential visibility. We are seen, but we are not allowed to see what lies behind, to peer into the flickers on the screen. No mobile phones, no photographs: no seeing what shall not be seen.

Part of the affective force of the remarkable images in this collection is that they remind us powerfully of this differential capacity to see and be seen. There is the moment of revelation – “ah, so this is what *this* form of temperature sensing reveals; this is what the customs officer sees!” We are reminded of the suffocating darkness of so much undocumented travel: the waiting, the indeterminacy, the sense that hope itself is in someone else’s hands. But they also work through the uncanny sense of complicity we have as we look at the images. After all, when we look at them, we are being enrolled in the same regime of visibility as the border guard, the customs officer: we see the figures, ghost-like and abject. We scrutinize them for signs: is this male or female? An adult or a child? What did they feel in that place? Which shores were they trying to reach? Which loves and dreams were they leaving behind? We interrogate their circumstances, their motivations. We do as the border guard does: look for signs.

In a lecture delivered in 1991, Pierre Bourdieu commented that “to endeavor to think the state is to take the risk of taking over (or being taken over by) a thought of the state; that is, of applying to the state categories of thought produced and guaranteed by the state and hence to misrecognize its most profound truth” (Bourdieu 1991,1). We might replace “thought” by “sight” here and “think” by “see.” For part of the challenge of “seeing” the state is to recognize how our categories of legitimate (in)visibility have been authorized by the state itself. We don’t flinch when we are told that borders, like government buildings

or military installations, are places that cannot, indeed *must not*, be seen. We accept the CCTV in the interest of “public security.” We meekly switch off our phones as we stand in line, await the border guard’s interrogatory gaze (“are you really who you say you are?”), knowing that we cannot stare back or see what lies behind the screen. We accept the regalia, the rigmarole, the stripping of rights because, well, this is *the border*: it is space beyond rights.

What would it mean to interrogate this way of seeing and being seen? Part of the answer, perhaps, lies in recognizing the contingency, the arbitrariness, the violence, through which borders came into being. State sovereignty is a social construct; territory, as a political relation to physical terrain, is made, not given. Certain border crossings remind us violently and viscerally of this, but most of the time, we take the state’s categories for granted: we accept, we submit; we let ourselves through to pass all the quicker to the other side. The more we remind ourselves of that – each time we cross a border, each time we submit our data or turn away our gaze – the more, perhaps, we can cultivate a gentle reminder that the “illegal immigrant,” too, is the outcome of a political relation and is – beyond the state’s scrutiny and the camera’s fuzzy gaze – a living, breathing, feeling human being.

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WIRED BORDERLAND

Juli Perczel

Before the metal and wire and laws, there was nothing.

There was no object to stand in for the border, a substantial but vanishing feature of the nascent national consciousness of a child. I was born before the borders became freely navigable; I was brought up before the border crossings between Austria and Germany and Italy and the rest were brought down without a trace. It's only later that borders became where hills melt into hills and plains melt into plains without the rupture of uniforms and stop signs.

The vanishing of difference makers was announced to me by a father who grew up behind the Iron Curtain, as another step in the great march of progress toward a more just, liberal, and equal world.

Now, standing at any random point, the mind runs along the length of the 174.4 km of metal that undulates over the rising and falling Southern Plains. The four-meter-high chicken wire crowned by the messy coils of concertina wire makes a faint reference to walls and fences guarding the conscience of other nations, but still preserves its own aesthetics. Walls and fences could be anywhere and still make themselves recognizable to quell

and incite the fears of their own citizens. Our very own, now double, fence is no less tricky than its international brethren.

Our fence is quite a character. It talks in four languages and warns that damaging the wire and crossing illegally are crimes that are punishable offenses in Hungary: “*Intbah, intbah... tavajjoh, tavajjoh... khabardaar kha-bardaar...* attention, attention!”

Still the fence is not only metal. The border starts a very concrete 8 km away from the imaginary line. This line is immaterial for those who already live on the right side of the border. The 8 km law becomes concrete only for those who steal their way across, for they can be grabbed and pushed back to the other side. The Serbian authorities do not have to agree to take back these pushbacks. One and a half meters beyond the fence is still Hungarian territory; you’ve just found yourself on the wrong side again. This law made life easier for the police and the “field guards” in the pay of the border’s most bloodthirsty mayor. It made life easier, that is, until in March 2017 a new law makes pushbacks legal from the entire territory of the country.

In the minds of those on the wrong side of the border, the fence has become the only and most important obstacle to the ultimate fulfillment of their happiness. If only it could be crossed, a new life would await. The families, the young men, the women and children have crossed many dangers, walls, and more or less porous borders. The Hungarian border fence is not the first obstacle they

have had to cross, but rather the last one before their quest can be completed. There are fences and borders that hold in store for undocumented travelers even more horrors than that of the Hungarian border. So, why does this border become so significant?

There are plenty of people stationed in and around Subotica, in the now-infamous brick factory, the jungle, and other ad hoc shelters for those who have been deterred from registering and moving into camps. For single men and young boys, there is a constant threat of being pushed back against the current of their already completed miles. They live their days to survive and their nights to plot a way across the vertical sea of metal.

There are others who want to take the official route suggested by the loudspeakers perched atop the wire. They peg their names against numbers on an unofficial but official list whose power is all pervasive, and which is infinitely manipulated for money and sex like everything else related to the permeability of borders. The gatekeepers on the Serbian side live in makeshift tents, elevated above those who share their fate in the hope that they'll get a glimpse of freedom. When the great humanitarians, state and non-state funded, cross the locked gates of the transit zone, they stand on the 1.5 meters of excess land. Imagining the line, the beneficiaries of badly designed aid packages line up on one side, and the donors on the other. Stepping rashly into the opening fills everyone with dread. No one shoots, though this would happen in some other places.

The length of the Hungarian border is 2215.3 km. The stretch melting into the plains of Serbia, now fortified by iron, is but a small fraction of the border's length. Even if we do not get hung up on the impossibility of thinking in terms of length in the case of borders, it seems ridiculous that such a short stretch of wire should be ascribed such disproportionate significance. But this is the only part of the country's border that is coterminous with that of the EU. Such is the wiring of the geographical location that the Dublin Regulation, the EU-wide law on immigration, mandates the return of people to the countries where they were first registered and their fingerprints taken. One strand of the web that makes these 175.4 km what they are and elevates them to great significance.

True, the walls of the EU are great and long, but the roads that take you around the Hungarian fence are even longer and more treacherous. The brutality of the Croatian police is no less infamous than that of their Hungarian counterparts. Romania and Bulgaria are only emerging now as an alternative route. Still, the most logical and well-trodden path leads through the lands now only reachable at a high cost. For what do walls do to borders? They may make them less porous, but cannot seal them hermetically. It's only the smuggler's fees and the stakes involved in crossing that become higher.

One day outside the brick factory on the outskirts of Subotica, in plummeting temperatures and deep snow, three boys are kicking blocks of dirty ice to the side. When asked how old they are, one of them replies, "It doesn't matter how old we are, the police beats us anyway."

However, the imaginary line does not prevent police violence from leaking into Serbian territory. Violence and information are like the sky above, no matter whether you attempt to stop them with a wall or a fence. In a meeting between Serbia and Hungary-based civil society organizations, the following conversation was overheard:

A: “A family explained to us that often when they are planning on crossing the fence and are watching the police go by, the police happen to see them on the other side. The Hungarian police then come over to the Serbian side and beat them up even before they can attempt to cross.”

B: “Now we at least know what the category ‘prevented entries’ means in the police statistics.”

The main task of non-state actors who are officially present on the Hungarian side is not to notice the militarization of the border that becomes evident within a 20 km belt. The task is not to notice the increased police presence on the roads and the frequent checkpoints armed by military personnel. The task of the observer is to make a fool of herself by patronizing those who are not considered humans anymore by the authorities, and at the same time to make unseen the torn gashes in the fabric of society. The helpers think they know what those in transit may need and pack up a truckload, only to carefully avoid giving away much on the spot, for “you don’t want to feed into the black market in another country.”

Until recently the transit zone was where non-state actors could go near the fence and where the asylum procedure starts. But now the job of those non-state actors who have a paper that says they “should not go close to the transit zones,” as one of them proudly exclaimed, has been made difficult by the same concertina razor wire, the lack of internet, and a hostile government attitude.

Looking back through the distorting lens of time, one can discern the steps that pushed the unwanted from the pulsating hearts of the city in 2015 to the edges and beyond. Close the border, empty the camps close to Budapest, detain people at the border... these are the steps that keep the unwanted outside of the body of the nation. These steps keep us safe from having to encounter living proof of the multiplicities of life forms outside our little world.

It is the refugees and migrants searching for safer, better lives who give definition to our borders. Where does the mind go, having seen the wire and razor that stretches along the entirety of the 174.4 km border?

THOUGHTS OF A DOORMAN

Stef Jansen

doorman, noun: a person, usually a uniformed employee, who stands at the door of a building such as a hotel and helps people who are going in or out (*Collins English Dictionary*, category: “Specialist English: Hospitality”)

doorman, noun: a man who stands at the door of a club, prevents unwanted people from coming in, and makes people leave if they cause trouble (*Collins English Dictionary*, category: “Learner”)

I have been appointed Guardian of the Inside. I prevent Outsiders from going Inside. For now, my place too is Outside. Just Outside. I am a Doorman. That much I know.

It's the second of my four nights. Four nights a week on this godforsaken mud track, staring at the river. At least it's simple at this stretch: new as the border may be, here you can actually see where it is. There's not a soul around. In the patrol car we have long run out of conversation. Every now and then the radio crackles when the bosses from Doorman Service Headquarters check up on us. The window slightly open, the air in the car remains stale, a mixture of our damp uniforms, cigarette smoke, and the pine tree air freshener dangling from the rearview mirror. In the office, too, we still light up under

the “no smoking” signs that came with the new furniture, donated by our Friends from the Inside. Civilization Classes have not performed their full magic just yet.

Earlier on, like every night, we had a coffee break in Paradizo. Actually, we always call the place Fatso’s, after the two hundred kilo guy who runs it. He bought it when they sent him back from the Upper Inside a few years after the war. Eight years he was there. They say he worked as a cook. You wouldn’t know it from the stuff he serves, though. It’s a miserable place, Paradizo. Formica tables, dirty tablecloths, the TV always on, with the sound turned down except during football games. Tonight that show was on: Who Wants to Be a Millionaire? I don’t think any of the customers at Fatso’s are millionaires. A few long-haul lorry drivers, regulars, the waitress arriving with their food before they even sit down. Two prostitutes struggling for trade now that our Friends from the Inside only pass by for occasional inspection visits. Time was, business was roaring. Petty smugglers, men and women, middle-aged family types, sitting in grim silence only interrupted by complaints about their dropping profit margins.

The bosses tell us to go light touch on them. And on the whole, a Doorman prefers to be on good terms with them: everyone needs to make a living. At the center of the bar, a guy in clothes too colorful for his age, a clunky watch on his wrist and the large key fob for his car ostentatiously in front of him. Fancy car, Upper Inside number plates, I saw it in the parking lot. Keen to talk, too keen, and ignored by the regulars. Beaming now he’s

back down Just Outside, but emphasizing it's only for a few days. A busy man, he is. Probably nothing close to a millionaire in the Upper Inside, but getting to act like one every time he comes down here. Like my cousin, working night security in the Upper Inside for eleven months and ordering the most expensive item on the menu whenever he brings his family back down here in August. And a round for everyone. He doesn't even seem to realize that his daughters would much rather spend their holidays on the beaches in the Lower Inside where their classmates hang out. Idiot. He too drives a nice car, though.

Anyway, I'm sitting in the car, bored out of my skull, mud splattered on my boots and my uniform trousers. It could be worse, of course, a lot worse. It was worse, and I should know. When I started out working at the border, shortly after the war, I nearly got frostbite doing the night shift in a tiny, damp container. Before, it had just been a field, and they had planted a checkpoint in the middle of it. We shared a small gas heater with the people of the insurance and expedition firm, in the identical container right next to us. In winter months, we swapped the thing every hour or so. One of the insurance people used to make scalding hot herbal tea. She picked the herbs herself in her grandmother's fields in the mountains. Ethno-tea, we used to call it. In those days, ethno was all the rage. That was just after the war. We didn't think that much about Inclusion back then. We probably felt it was just a matter of time before we'd become part of the Inside. Anyway, we felt things could only get better. We thought the only reason for us to be Outside was the war. How naïve we were.

Then we had the Reorganization. We retrained, re-applied for our own jobs in the brand-new Doorman Service. We went through Civilization Classes. We dressed in new uniforms, with new logos. We became Multicultural. Some of the older officers, you could say, became Multicultural again. I was too young to fight in the war, thank God, but they've really seen it all. Adaptable, flexible – the Insiders who taught the Civilization Classes, especially the ones from the Upper Inside, kept banging on about that – and these older guys really proved to be. They trained together in the Former Country, swore loyalty and all that – say what you want about those days, but at least you knew what was what. There was respect for the police. That's what my uncle says.

Not a family gathering goes by without him giving us a sermon on what the Former Country could have been like today. If only, if only. If guys my uncle's age hadn't made such a mess of it, I should add. I don't tell him that, of course. Anyway, the old guys worked together in the same station for years. Then, when the shit hit the fan, they each went their own way and looked at each other through their rifle visors for three and a half years. And quite a few of the ones who didn't get shot, or didn't flee, or didn't behave too badly during the war, found each other working together again a few years afterwards. By then, they had regained the weight they had shed in the trenches, and they had difficulty squeezing their middle-aged bellies under the school desks while sitting through Civilization Classes. Quite a few of those who failed went on to become drivers or cooks for the Inside

Armies on their Civilization Missions in the Lower Far Outside.

Good money for a six-month tour – some keep going back there still today. As part of the Reorganization, those who passed the Civilization Classes got a certificate from our Friends from the Inside, and now they work our new borders together. Not so long ago, they could have shot each other, and now, as employees of the new Doorman Service, they're patrolling in the same patrol cars, sharing uniforms again. Remulticulturalized. Not that it's all idyllic, of course. Wounds are still fresh and all that. No lack of loud-mouthed idiots, especially after a drink or two. There might be little love lost amongst us, but, frankly, there is hardly ever a real problem. We just don't talk politics. What's there to say, anyway? Politicians... a bunch of thieves, all of them. It took my mother's best friend three years to get her brother-in-law to put in a good word for me with the commander. And then another three before he brought my application to the attention of the people who matter. Three years! Her own brother-in-law!

Anyway, as I was saying, it could be a lot worse. We got brand-new checkpoints, bright blue, nicely heated, some of them carpeted. There's electricity and water, a little kitchen and a decent toilet block. Twenty-four-hour floodlights. The new patrol cars are comfortable, and we have so much high-tech equipment that half of the time we don't know what to do with it. Almost all of it, of course, paid for by our Friends from the Inside, who always ran the trainings. Some of the older guys used to

grumble about being made Multicultural again, as if we had to take any lessons from the Inside on that matter. Not to mention that the same bastards bombed us just a few years ago, some said. There was a bit of a tussle about that with guys who used to be on the other side of their rifle visors during the war. Multicultural re-growing pains, shall we say. Mostly there's no problem, though. We learned on which side our bread is buttered.

Let's face it, with the way things are here today, most people would give an arm and a leg for this job. A decent salary, not like my cousin in the Upper Inside of course, but pretty good. Always on time. So far, I should say, because it's no good to tempt fate. Three times what my wife makes for ten hours at the till in the supermarket, six days a week. Of course, it's hard, being apart so much of the time and not seeing our little one. But what was I supposed to do? It was either a posting to this godforsaken station two hundred kilometers from home, or being stuck on the lower pay scale. The only way to get on in this job is to move around. Well, unless you've got friends in high places. With some luck, my next posting will be closer to home. Perhaps then my wife can leave her job and start that hairdressing salon she's always dreamt about. Finally make that training of hers pay. On the plus side, I get extra allowances for working away from home, and we put some money aside for the fees for our daughter's classes in The Language. She's only seven, but they say that's when they learn quickest. Upper Inside languages are worth gold, they say, especially The Language.

Seems silly not to invest in her Civilization. We want the best for her, what kind of parent wouldn't? In a decade or so, she'll be thankful for it. She'll get a good job here, or if things don't improve here, she'll have all the right cards to make a decent living in the Upper Inside. Hopefully not too far away, so she can come visit us regularly. These Insiders, eh, they're really something. Can't live with them, can't live without them. My wife's best friend started work in an old people's home up there just a month ago. Easier for her, of course, with no boyfriend and no kids to look after. She was worried that the Upper Insiders would look at her funny with her foreign name, but she says half of the staff have names that are even more foreign than hers. All sorts, from all over. I saw this item on the news, said some of the Upper Insiders are getting restless. Scared about bombs and stuff. And just, you know, worried. Worried there's just too many of our people, all kinds of people, coming over. I can understand that, although I have to say they are at least getting their bottoms washed. Anyway, they want their country back, it said on TV.

And that, of course, is why I'm sitting here in the patrol car, staring at the river. Our unit commander, and the minister on his visit, they talk loftily of rule of law, of the security of our country, of sovereignty and of standards of Civilization. It's almost touching to see the concern our Friends from the Inside show for the well-being of our citizens. But I know what I'm really here for. I am a Doorman. I attend the Door to the Inside. In principle, I am a uniformed employee who stands at the Door of the Inside and helps people who are going in or out. But let's

face it, I don't really do much hospitality work. Most of all, I am a man who stands at the Door of the Inside, who prevents unwanted people from coming in, and makes people leave if they cause trouble. I am a "Learner." Most of all, my job is to catch Lower Far Outsiders on their way to the Upper Inside. Because once they're Inside, even just across the river, there's little that will stop them en route all the way to the Upper Inside. And you've got to give it to our Friends from the Inside: they didn't pinch pennies when they donated this fancy patrol car and the expensive equipment. All set up for us to intercept guys with even funnier names than our own, ha! Some try to cross the river in a dinghy. Others try it to make it over the bridge in the back of a truck. We try to talk to them in The Language. But only some of them speak it, and, to be fair, most of us only know some basics too.

Actually, one guy in my unit can communicate quite well with some of them. He picked up some of their language on a six-month tour as a driver for the Inside Armies on their Civilization Missions in the Lower Far Outside. They're really surprised when he suddenly pipes up in their own lingo. Anyway, we don't actually catch that many. Most Lower Far Outsiders take a much more common route through the Just Outside which passes through the Neighboring Country. Their Doorman Service is struggling big time. There's thousands of them. It said on TV the other day that some NGO built shelters for them, with bathroom containers and all. And guess what, they refuse to sleep there. They'd rather camp in the mud!

Well, we have plenty of mud here too, but we don't get nearly as many Lower Far Outsiders coming through. Just typical, isn't it? Goes to show what has become of this place if even those desperate souls avoid us like the plague! But then, as I said, they basically want to get to the Upper Inside anyway. They don't want to linger anywhere Just Outside, and, from what I hear from the guys across, even when they do make it to the other side of the river, being Inside doesn't seem to make much difference to them. After all, over there it's only the Lower Inside. They're always in a hurry to move on. Whether here, Just Outside, or across, Lower Inside, they're not interested in any of us. I think they hardly know where they are when they pass through.

To be honest, sometimes I'm finding it hard to feel sorry for them. I mean, don't get me wrong. Some of them, I'm sure, must have been really desperate to get out of wherever it is they came from. We know about war; believe me. But some of the ones we get here can be right moody. You should see the mess they leave behind! And have you seen the fancy phones they carry!?! I mean... Well, fair enough, I suppose, my own seven-year-old nearly had a fit when I told her she had to wait until her birthday before we would buy her the same one as her best mate. My cousin will bring one from the Upper Inside. When they've got summer sales on up there, at least they're real sales. And you know you'll get the real thing and not some inferior variety destined for us in the Outside. It does make you wonder, though. These Lower Far Outsiders pay lots of money to travel all the way. And just when they think they're about to make it, they

run into us. Just one last river to cross, and our searchlight picks them out huddling in the mud behind a bush. Think of it like that, and you can't really blame them for being moody.

To be honest, sometimes I'm finding it hard not to feel sorry for them.

I mean what a place for the poor bastards to get stuck in! If anything, we Just Outside know about that! Could teach them a thing or two about being stuck, we could. In fact, even if we didn't know it already, Friends from the Inside certainly remind us how stuck we are during Civilization Trainings. We even get our nose rubbed into it by our colleagues from the other side of the river. We see plenty of them nowadays, all kinds of joint programs, trainings, software, patrols. When you get them on their own, they're nice enough, the colleagues from across. Most of them, anyway. But some of them really know how to make you feel like you're back in primary school and you're being called to the teacher's office. I guess it's not so surprising, really. It's not so long since they were Included themselves, after going through years of Civilization. Big We're Inside celebrations went on for days; we saw the fireworks over here. So there's a sense of achievement and all. And it's not like we don't envy them for having been Included.

I haven't given it much thought, but when you look at the state our country is in, it seems better to be In than Out, I say. Anyway, there doesn't seem to be anything on the menu but Inclusion. And as everybody keeps saying,

from the commander, to the minister, to that top brass guy from the Inside: if we want Inclusion, we need to control Our Door. Makes you wonder who the We is, though, doesn't it? Whose Door is it: Our Door or Their Door? They tell us there's no difference. When pushed, they'll admit there is a bit of a difference now, but they say that's only a matter of time. Anyway, I'm not a politician. I'm doing a job. That's what I'm here for. The better I do my job, we're told, the sooner things will improve. Our colleagues from across tell us the same, their voices full of goodwill. Perhaps there is some real sympathy – plenty of them have family down here – but they can be so bloody patronizing! Frankly, many of them always thought they were better than us, even when we lived together in the Former Country. It just seems to have gotten worse after their Inclusion. Recent Insiderhood breeds arrogance, I guess. That grates, and I do secretly enjoy reminding them that the Upper Insiders paid for much of their training and equipment too. They might be Inside, but, like it or not, they're definitely Lower Inside! And it's not just a matter of money either. I mean, in half of the bars across the river they're still smoking openly.

I have been appointed Guardian of the Inside. I prevent Outsiders from going Inside. For now, my place too is Outside. Just Outside. I am a Doorman. That much I know.

I am a Doorman who mans a Door so that it will be no more. I am a Doorman with twenty-three years to go until retirement. I spend my nights staring at the river until they decide it's time for Inclusion. I guess when we

complete our Civilization and become part of the Inside, they'll dismantle those brand-new border posts, those floodlights and that high-tech equipment. Probably put them to work somewhere else. I don't know if that will be before I reach my retirement. Come to think of it, I don't know if there will still be such a thing as retirement in twenty-three years' time. Sometimes I'm finding it hard to feel sorry for myself. Sometimes I'm finding it hard not to feel sorry for myself.

This is a fictional account. Any apparent similarity to real persons, experiences, processes and prejudices is fully intended by the author.

Conditions for asylum seekers and refugees are in a constant state of flux. Most of the contributions to this volume date from 2017.

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