

## As I Was Walking

The news of Pete Seeger, dead at 94, caught me by surprise. I didn't always know who he was and then he became a fact of life. The fact is, he was as good as man gets - indulging in art while saving the world, or the other way around. When Pete looked into the murky water of the Hudson river in his home town, he must have seen himself reflected, with a small cap on his head. He then stared deeper at years of pollution and waste and when his gaze resurfaced to meet his own eyes, he had resolved to clean up these waters. He sailed aboard the Clearwater up and down "the river that flows both ways" and like a prophet called to the people on the bank to join him in changing the world.

When Pete would lead a crowd singing This land is your land This land is my land, his voice would be drowned among his chiming followers. An all-inclusive America From California to New York Island. America as road-trip postcards of colors and textures: wheat fields, dust clouds, diamond deserts, endless skyway.

Woody Guthrie jotted these words on lined paper in a crummy hotel room a few days after he first arrived to New York Island. In early 1940 "God Bless America" was a hit song on the radio and Woody wrote his own "patriotic" number, ending every verse with an ironic "God bless America for me...". Only later he crossed out the irony and replaced it with the more sincere "This land was made for you and me". As years went by he altered lines, left out verses, added new ones and revised the title. Woody Guthrie's land was changing and morphing like a good ole folk song.

Several weeks after this land made it okay for Erin and I to get married, we packed our life in a car and made our way from New York Island to California. On either side of the road, corn fields

stretched to the horizon, the gaps between the rows appear and disappear at 65, 70 and then 75 miles per hour. Midday on day three, we passed a road sign pointing towards "Brooklyn, Iowa - A Community of Flags", so we took the next exit. In the center of a two-street town was a public square with a grid of poles bearing every state flag. Completing this tourist attraction was a gift shop selling the flags along with pins, mugs, crocheted dolls and secondhand housewares. As a patriotic Brooklynite (New York, that is) I was debating whether to get a Brooklyn, Iowa T-shirt. The big American flag printed beneath the boxy letters made it hard to imagine feeling comfortable wearing it but as it cost only 2 dollars I decided to take my chance. The volunteer shop attendant tightened her silver curls as she logged in a notebook the added 14 cents "we have to give to the governor".

Woody Guthrie got to see the panoramas of his lyrics through a car window when he went on the road with Pete Seeger. A short hillbilly from Oklahoma and a tall sophisticated yankee, together they were a portrait of America. They toured the country and stopped along the way to sing, but This Land is Your Land was not part of the repertoire yet. For a tune that would become a favorite for replacing the national anthem, it had a slow start to rise from the page. In the following decades Pete and his banjo lead the masses down The ribbon of highway probably more times than anyone else, but he rejected the idea of dooming the song to a "political straight jacket".

Pete Seeger sang This Land is Your Land with children in classrooms and with the half million who gathered on the Mall in Washington to witness the historic inauguration of Barack Obama. Often, few people in the crowd would know the words past the popular first four verses but Pete sang through: As I went walking I saw a sign there And on the sign it said "No Trespassing". You could

see on his face, and hear in his voice, that he truly believed in the following lines: But on the other side it didn't say nothing That side was made for you and me.

Even in an ideal world with no private property, nationalism is a form of ownership. This song makes my throat choke because I love swimming in the Gulf Stream waters and I wish to hug every redwood tree. But I still can't solemnly sing This land is made for...me. Perhaps I'm worried I could be uncovered by someone more American than me, whose ancestors immigrated to the country one or two or three generations ago. It would probably be an immigration officer turning my Israeli passport in their hand, weighing whether or not to grant me permission to enter the country. Or more likely I'm afraid news of my adopted national identity would reach a native of my homeland who would shake their finger at me saying: "that land is not your land, your land is this land!".

If I were to write This Holy Land is my land I too would repeatedly erase, cross out and rewrite my notes. I have now spent a third of my lifetime on foreign land but my relationship with Israel is forever shifting. At times I struggle with guilt over occupation, hypocrisy, racism, machoism. At times I pride in authenticity, directness, unrefined-ness, no-small-talk-ness. The anti-climatic landscape is etched in my DNA and calls me to come home. On Saturday mornings, when my weekend just begins, my parents call me. Ten hours ahead, it is already night time in Israel and the following morning is sunday - the beginning of their new week. They repeat news about grandchildren they had already told me and forget to fill me in on major national events. Before hanging up my dad performs his ritual countdown until the next time we'll meet.

The airplane approaches Israel from the Mediterranean, suspended over water until the last few moments when the

shoreline appears. We descend toward touchdown, coming closer and closer to the horizon. In a matter of seconds we zoom over a city that seems smaller than possible. I sit glued to the narrow airplane window, not daring to blink my eyes, and then it's over - I am here.

It is once again August and I can taste the dust in my mouth. A thin white layer has settled over every tree, shrub or rock. Mountains, valleys and fields, with the roads that cut between them, are all coated with dust. A dog, shaking its fur as if it just came out of the water, disappears for a moment in a cloud of dust. The blanket of dust is invisible. If you wake up every morning and open your eyes onto this landscape, you don't realize that slowly the colors have faded away. By the end of August the small particles have nowhere left to rest and they remain suspended, saturating the air. I arrived in the season of the days of yellow sky. On those days, I can't tell what position the sun is in the sky. From sunrise to sunset the sky glows in dreadful yellow as the sunlight hits the floating particles and bounces in every direction. When the night settles we all breath a sigh of relief for the radiating yellow is finally turned off.

I wish to take a feather duster and brush some dust off the silver leaves of the olive trees. With gentle stroking motions, work my way from one branch to the next. As the tree comes back to life, slowly resuming its shine, the remaining untouched dust suddenly becomes visible.

The dust finally comes into focus with the first rain, Ha-Yoréh. In preschool this word is an important part of the active vocabulary - although you get to use it only once a year, much time is spent in anticipation. Later in life weather events fail to call for celebration and poetry. Hundreds of years ago the community elders argued whether this word was uprooted from the verb direct as this rainfall

directs us to patch our roofs and bring in all fruit; or from a similar word meaning quench thirst. But I have to believe that Ha-Yoréh, with its arrow like drops hitting the dry hard land, shares meaning with its homonym the shooter. In any case, a few weeks usually go by between the first rain and the second and by that time you might forget that Ha-Yoréh has already happened and announce it again. This rain is never long enough to completely wash away the dust and re-saturate all the colors. Instead, it just mixes a muddy layer of splattered texture.

I first introduced Israel to Erin during spring time. Hundreds of species of flowers were blooming in the narrow window between the irrigating rains and the dry hot season. We natives never stop marveling at this outburst. My dad crouched over a delicate orchid with a giant macro lens and then switched cameras to photograph me, pointing my finger at this rarity. But Erin mostly took pictures of plain trees and shrubs: "Israel is green!" she exclaimed. We drove south to the desert to find the brown crumbly landscape she was expecting. And we returned many times in August, when most of the green has turned yellow and what's left is covered with a layer of dust.

On each visit, whichever one of my nephews or nieces happens to be around seven years old asks me how come I don't live in Israel. I regret missing their childhood - eventually they will all grow up and learn not to ask hard questions. Their inquiry is followed by silence and in my head I hear the question echo. Away from Israel I have the luxury of not tuning in to the hourly news along with the entire country. My heart no longer breaks and re-breaks when every step forward in the peace process is followed by two steps backwards. I am spared the "normal" reality in a nation where some are type A citizens, some are type B, and some are not citizens at all. I can occasionally forget about the traumatic history

that made my people into victims. Forever victims, never perpetrators.

In my absence, I missed my chance to cast a vote in four general elections. I show even less responsibility when I don't use my art to speak up. I could criticize with images, argue through objects, fight for a cause in a gallery. But away from Israel I have the luxury to indulge in aesthetics and worry about compositions, juxtapositions, art exhibitions.

Several mountains, some valleys and one made-up river did find their way from Israel to my studio. I was working on "Continental Drift", a celebration of the state of flux of This Earth which is my Earth. To re-choreograph the geological phenomenon I mounted the continents atop the round shell of six live tortoises. The animals were free to roam within a constructed diorama - a window to "nature" which I made sure didn't resemble one specific place but rather captured every place. And by every-where I mean everywhere in Israel. To contain the whole world I merged woods and desert - the northern and southern poles of the world I grew up in. How does landscape transition from one terrain to another? I cut apart and pieced together aerial views of the country to create a "seamless" gradient from green to brown.

Once upon a time I learned to pick up rocks and peek underneath. You place your fingers on the far side and pivot the rock up towards you. As the gap between earth and rock widens, sunlight beams into this dark universe. Startled critters, who might follow an instinct to escape, will aim towards the opening, carrying their stings or venom away from you. There is life underneath every rock - six-legged, eight-legged, ten, twelve, eighteen or hundreds of legs. Some are blind, others have compound eyes. When you're done looking, fit the rock back into its footprint in the ground.

Placing it down just as you found it, life underneath the rock will go on.

Presently, in California, Erin declares "An Ant!". She goes to get some tissue paper, a piece of tape, the vacuum cleaner. She keeps the cats out of the way while she attacks her nemesis and restores order. In my dictionary ants only come as plural, one ant is a non-event, a sole drifter, a lost soul. (A single ant is useful when you're trying to train your eyes to pan slowly across an object; normally, the human eye jitters around, unless it has something to follow - such as a crawling ant.) But Erin Battles these invaders one ant at a time. Never mind that it might be us who invaded their anthill when we moved into our wooden lodging. These little creatures, merely 1/8 inch long are part of the mega-colony of Argentine ants, a species which through fierce violence and zero-tolerance to other ants came to dominant great swaths of the world, with colonies on every continent except Antarctica. I know them from Israel, and I know to ignore them until they congregate to a critical mass. I recognize in California the dry weather or familiar plants, and I'm able to guide us in these new territories. Besides, I feel comfortably belonged whenever I un-fit in a new place or group.

Every once in a while, my phone rings on a weekday and I'm startled. A call from my parents outside of the ordinary time always fills me with dread. In a split second I picture scenarios of bad news that could be on the other side of the line. This gut reaction is a result of living a 15 hour plane-ride away from my tribe. They call to warn me of a local weather conditions or a minor tectonic event which was reported on their news. For my parents' generation Israel is a place of promise. A dream which they fought to make into a reality. How could anyone give up a dream? Why would anyone do so?

"This is an old song about an old dream" explained the rock star Bruce Springsteen to foreign audience in Paris. "It was written as a question everybody has to ask themselves about the land they live in, every day." This Land is Your Land folds into its verses optimism and disappointment. If you sing along, it resonates like a patriotic hymn. If you listen to the words you can detect condemnation. Woody Guthrie captured the promised land of America both as a magnificent reality and as the fiction of what it still needs to become.

I too contemplate politics and art in search of a voice that can be critical without being antagonizing. This might take me a lifetime so in the meanwhile I go back to the Israeli landscape. Non-glamorous, anti-climatic, just the way I love it. I pull out of a drawer the old green and brown collage. Looking at this round composition feels at once like peeking at the landscape through a peephole, or gazing at our planet from outer space.

In my installation "Domestic Astronomy" this circular image beams from a slide projector, bounces off a full-moon shaped mirror and reflects back down on the ground. Directly above it is a bright spot light, obstructed by half a lampshade so it can only cast half a circle of light. The bright semi-circle erases half the image on the ground while the other half is visible in the shadow. Read back these lines and try to imagine it. Slowly, almost unnoticeably, the lampshade rotates under the light, day and night revolving - revealing and concealing different parts of the earthly projection. Now you see woods, now you see desert, now you see two camels who wandered into this picture. Yourself, the viewer, orbits around this constellation like a stray celestial body.

After two weeks in front of the bright bulb of the Kodak Ektagraphic slide projector, my wholesome image of Israel has lost most of its green hues. The sunlight above keeps circling round and



round but all you ever see is a faded brown desert. I replace the slide with a backup one and the colors are immediately restored. When I hold the used up slide between my pointer finger and my thumb and squint through it, the sun-burnt image rings true. Every year, the drought in Israel is a newsworthy event and I, in my art, manage to dry out the arid landscape even more. This Landscape is My Landscape, This Landscape is Your Landscape. This landscape is just a bystander to a political conflict. This landscape is the land we endlessly fight over.

Back in my studio, I mount the slide in front of the eyepiece of a monacle and flip it around to look through the wrong end. Instead of bringing the landscape closer, the reversed sequence of lenses captures the vast distance between my present and my past. Indeed, it is Israel which gazes in the right direction, staring back at me, looking me straight in the eye.

