

Unfolding a Place

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At first glance you might giggle. As in an earlier encounter with its much smaller, paper prototype, you ask yourself: "Is it a boat or is it a hat?" I fabricated this overscale folded boat by following the steps for making a paper boat out of a sheet of notebook paper. It is a simple construction which is so familiar, being one of the first structures we are able to create by ourselves. The material list is as short as it can get: paper. It is not here to be treated as a clean slate, a surface to mark with dots, lines, scribbles and eventually words. Instead, please accept the material for its physical properties - bendable, with tensile strength - and learn a practical lesson in transforming the flat page into a three-dimensional object. Fold, crease, turn over, grab, refold, open until finally: ta-dah! You can man this boat with plastic toy figures and sail it across the bathtub; at least for a few minutes, until the paper becomes saturated with water and the fibers can no longer hold on to each other. As children we naturally accept size to be scaleable; we anticipate that with time what is small will grow large, and playtime will turn into lifetime. Literally fulfilling this potential, the eighteen foot long folded boat in my studio is a case of child logic that got blown out of proportion. No longer able to fit in your hand, it is now you, a fully-grown adult, who can fit in this boat. But in order to do so you will have to climb awkwardly over the just-a-little-too-tall edge. Another reminder of our time as children in a world scaled for adults, when we had to climb up to a seat or stutter down a set of stairs.

Yet the boat takes itself seriously. Like other vessels, its anatomy can be broken down into a bow, a stern, a sail. With its twin parallel hulls it can even qualify for the sub-category of catamaran. Presently it sits there, stranded in the middle of the floor, perfectly balanced as if it is comfortable on the hard, solid surface. But on either end, the two extremities float just an inch off the ground, leaving a narrow gap where air may flow, light seeping through like the water every boat longs for.

Instead of paper it is made of cloth, specifically burlap. I purchased the material in bulk from Hubco, Inc., a textile packaging manufacturer based in Hutchinson, Kansas for nearly one hundred years. A search on google maps reveals Hutchinson as a town woven from alphabet avenues and tree-named streets; a regular grid similar to the warp and weft of burlap. As I zoom out, expanding my view beyond the town line, the grid persists in the organized fields of beige and brown. In fact, if I just type "United States" into the search bar, google allocates the center of the

country to a tract fields just east of Hutchinson. The grain growing in these fields is likely to be packed into sacks cut from burlap of the same earthy tones. Grain and sacks may then leave the firm ground on which they were cultivated and embark on a sea voyage as they partake in the global traffic of supply and demand.

Originating from the center of the continent, as far as possible from any coast, the agrarian burlap must be shocked by the wet, fluid ocean; like a person who has never learned to swim being thrown into water for the first time. While in transit the cargo may provide shelter for some incidental stowaway. By the time we encounter it as consumers, at the end point of its journey, each sack of burlap must be brimming with sea legends. Shipped to me via UPS Ground, the material on the roll is an endless strip of fabric. I cut it to sections and sew them into a rectangle measuring 18 by 24 feet. Cascading from the sewing machine onto the studio floor this mass of fabric is as shapeless and fluid as water.

Looking at the burlap boat in its final state one can imagine the process of its coming to being. Instead of the common finger action, the folding is transformed to a whole body movement. The result of this crude choreography induces more skepticism than confidence. It looks fragile, absurd, bound to capsize and sink. But rather than a weakness, the homemade engineering is where the boat draws its strength, affirming precisely that - you too can make one at home. Do-it-yourself and play a part in the collective desire to set sail; a universal human longing to drift to some new place.

It calls to mind the aboriginal people who left the shores of Asia some six thousand years ago onboard canoes heading out into the Pacific Ocean with no land in sight. Over the next several millennia their population slowly expanded to set foot on previously uninhabited islands (leaving to our imagination the many boats that failed to ever reach land).

Fast forward to present day and think of Cuban refugees aboard makeshift vessels, struggling to cross the waters of the strait of Florida and reach the shores of the United States. These boats are sometimes improvised out of cars, made just barely buoyant, in defiance of their intended function for transportation on land. As such they embody the contradicting motivations of dream and despair, which they carry on board.

There were no boats necessary for the Sons of Israel to reach their Promised Land. Moses led his people out of Egypt via land and even the water barrier of the Red Sea parted before them so they could walk on dry ground. And yet the story of

the Exodus echoes sea migration with the twelve tribes meandering in the desert for forty years.

Normally on land we move on predetermined paths - highways, railroads, streets or trails. Traveling down a road, we can track our progress in relation to stationary landmarks along the way. On sea, I am told, there are also passages designated for catching certain winds or avoiding perilous currents. But for as far as the eye can see there is nothing but the two color fields of water and sky with a single horizon line stretching between them. In this middle of nowhere one is free to drift in whichever direction. and for days it can seem like you're coming from nowhere and heading anywhere.

My own personal history is grounded with few boat tales. In one that comes to mind I was sailing with my wife and parents to the island of Monhegan, one hour by sea from the coast of Maine. Our journey out was on stormy waters amidst thick fog and the four of us kept quiet as we struggled with sea-sickness. Later, on the island, both my parents remarked about the path of colorful buoys that signaled the boat's route on its left and right. Being the terrestrial beings that they are, my ancestors found the "marked" path reassuring and it didn't occur to them that the fog obscured the sea of buoys floating around us in every direction, each an indication of a single lobster trap.

I have now joined the race of ship builders, contemplating the potential of the vast, open-ended ocean: a non-place, an anti-landscape, a transitory realm. Yet every boat sets out to sea destined for land. No matter how long the voyage, as it teeters across the water, every craft is land-bound. The "first" boat was built by Noah, without a particular harbor in mind. He built the Ark and stowed it with a natural history museum of sorts, meant to float up with the flood's rising water and eventually land back on dry ground once the water receded. Noah boarded his vessel with no intentions to relocate.

On our round globe, traveling away from a place is at once a journey towards it. Every line, if stretched long enough, ends up as a circle. Christopher Columbus implemented this when he went west in search of the far east. And so I wonder: is the place I left behind, my port of origin in Israel, the place I am ultimately bound to?

(At this point in the narrative I pause. I let out a sigh as I exhale completely all the air out of my lungs, in preparation of the deep breath to follow. I am about to plunge into the water, keep my eyes wide open and pump air through my ears in

order to equalize the pressure as I dive deeper. Any air I let go now is held together in a tight bubble, making its way through the liquid, urgently reaching upward, where it would cause a slight disturbance on the water surface. A ripple effect - but no stone was tossed into the water, no visible cause for this turmoil.)

If I were to summon the senses of place of Israel I would shut my eyes to view grey hills dotted with limestone rocks, each an individual figure eroded by the elements. Between the rocks, resilient shrubs hold on to the arid land. Their color is closer to the stone's grey than to the green spectrum, making the absence of water far more visible than its presence. Camouflaged against this background are stone ruins overgrown with vegetation. It is a fleeting view I would often see from the back seat of my parents moving car. A few structures, no longer inhabited, which have lost their roofs and with them their sense of indoors versus outdoors. Stacked one on top of another, the stones are no larger than a human can lift. The masons who built them gathered their materials from the surrounding hills and did little to civilize them into bricks. I witness these houses in their long disintegrating journey back to the land from which they came. There is no sign by the side of the road with a place name or clue for how far back its history dates.

The sense of sound echoes in the language. For nearly two millennia Hebrew lay dormant as the language of scripture, until it rose from the page and became once again spoken, voiced, uttered by lips, fleeting words of mouth. Just one century later, I call my family, across ten time zones, and converse in my native tongue. As I get off the phone, my wife asks me "what's wrong? what happened?" For a non-speaker the foreign sound is inherently aggressive, the sound of a rolling argument.

It is hard to pinpoint what Israel tastes like. Going back for a visit there is no single dish that I crave. Instead what I long for is the reassuring sense of knowing what's for dinner. All across the nation families gather around a similar spread of chopped tomatoes and cucumbers salad, fried egg and a selection of spreadables - cheeses, hummus, tahini on sliced bread. Far from a culinary extravaganza but this monotony feels like home.

To the touch Israelis trigger a repellent reaction, a swift withdrawal. A person born in the land is nicknamed "prickly pear" because the species, like the fruit of cacti, is sweet on the inside but thorny on the outside. A walk down the street is a sequence of brushing, rubbing, bumping with other pedestrians. It is a public attired in sandpaper and any social interaction leaves the individual either chafed or polished.

The fifth sense of smell goes past the nostrils and straight into my guts. It's the nauseating stench that rises from the news headlines. The realities of occupation and discrimination are left unattended like heaps of refuse rotting in the open. One short-lived government replaces another, occasionally poking at the "situation" but ultimately leaving it unturned, devising instead yet another wall of defense. After all, the power of habit dulls the senses, making even the most powerful aroma, as long as it's constant, palatable.

The folded burlap boat has none of these senses of place. Instead it is charged with a sense of displacement. By repeating the simple folding instructions I turn my back to the place I came from and seek asylum in no man's land. But the final step is a tricky one; it requires flipping open a tight paper diamond and in a single maneuver transforming it into the recognizable boat. What was on the inside is now out. The backside of the paper inked with news coverage, in a language that leaps across thousands of years, is brought back to light. What I thought was behind me is staring me straight in the face.

And so I think back to the Promised Land and the epic journey that the Israelites accomplished in order to reach it. Forty years of wandering and wondering - about the place they left and the place they're headed to. During those four decades the elders must have died, adults reached their golden age, children matured into eminent positions and many newborns joined the community. A new generation had risen; the people who reached the land of Israel were different than the ones who left Egypt.

I now consider what difference a generational shift makes. My parents are children of Holocaust survivors and immigrants from Eastern Europe. Born only one year after Israel gained its independence, their youth was interrupted every few years by a war, casting a cloud of doubt over the future of their homeland. Thirty years later, I was born to a pair of "prickly pears," taking for granted what once had to be fought for. My school text books were written by people of my parents' age; Holocaust Day, Memorial Day for the fallen soldiers and Independence Day are still intertwined within a single week in May. But I am also aware of the Nakba Day, commemorated by Palestinians the day following the Israeli Independence Day as the "Day of the Catastrophe." One generation later I can ask questions that were once taboo and express objections to policies that were handed-down through the years. I can remark about how Israel which surrounds the occupied territories, holding almost two million Palestinians in the Gaza Strip under siege, paradoxically feels enveloped by Palestine and "the conflict." For the Jewish majority in Israel to

view itself as perpetrators of occupation rather than victims of antisemitism, would require an act of flipping inside-out the folded boat of its self-concept.

The story of the deserted stone village by the side of the road is the story of the Palestinian displacement; the people who built it, inhabited it and fled away from it. Today, the remaining structures are both surrounding and surrounded by native oak trees and domesticated prickly pears that have gone wild. In their unoccupied state, the houses speak little of present day occupation. From the point of view of the pastoral village, cars ceaselessly speed by in opposite directions. The stone houses must think to themselves: 'How come all these people go from point A to point B while other people go from point B to point A? Why all this going back and forth? What if you people stay here while you others stay there?' From the geological perspective of these heaps of stones, men, inside their wheeled machines, are in a constant state of motion but making little progress.

The burlap boat should be viewed as an emblem of freedom. Liberty to move without restrictions; independence from authorities; absence of ties or obligations; the power to do as one wants. But it didn't come without constraints - I built the boat to fit through my studio doors - 75 inches tall and 70 inches wide. Rather than a boat, it has come to be my anchor, a large object to weigh me down. In just a few months I will complete my studies at Stanford and wrap up the California chapter of my life. Perhaps I should grant my boat wheels, load it on a truck and tow it across the continent to the East Coast, back to my previous home in New York.

Aboard the truck the boat will be cruising the asphalt veins of the country at 65 miles per hour, (that is statute miles not nautical). Traversing the string of landlocked states, it would be a sight for sore eyes. A short detour from Interstate 70 would allow for a rest stop in Hutchinson, Kansas. On the last leg of the trip I could unload the truck and launch the boat on the Erie Canal, with me walking alongside it, hauling the vessel afloat this obsolete shipping way. I have a vivid concept of this journey, yet I am not sure how to end it. Because as much as the boat communicates a sense of displacement, it is a large object I must find a "place" for.