

Private conversations with history

Sunila Galappatti

Journal-keeping is a waiting game. It takes time to accumulate the recorded life that makes up the form. It takes time before the journal is most rewarding to read, reflecting the period in which it was written, and time before the diary inevitably exceeds any intention its writer may have had while writing it. Eventually, it reveals its elasticity as a medium, as we read it both in real-time and looking back.

I find myself able to recall moments from diaries I don't have to hand (because I moved to London in suitcases two years ago, leaving my books in Sri Lanka). Invariably, I go first to Virginia Woolf, from whom I learnt the suppleness of the form; her diaries are immediate, fiercely insightful and vivid with life. The published diaries span the final quarter century of Woolf's own life and take in the whole of the First World War and half of the Second. *Twentyfive minutes ago the guns went off, announcing peace*, Woolf writes when the Armistice is signed in 1918. She serves her irony dry but there is also a mournfulness in the scene she observes, perhaps from a window, in which she sees little that is meaningful to mark a moment that means so much. I think it is the next day Woolf takes the train

to London, where again we take in scenes of celebration through her eyes. She writes of other people with a class condescension that is unmistakable when we read her words now, but which is itself part of the picture: a portrait of a moment that the people in it can't yet see. A few days later she seems to mourn a sense of common purpose she feels evaporating. Indirectly, it makes the point that we are lucky Woolf left us these bits of ephemera: a personal exchange with history.

In the early days of the pandemic, I set up an open journal online to which anyone anywhere could contribute accounts of daily life in lockdown. I hesitated: those of us with the inner and outer resources to write at that time would inevitably be shielded from frontlines of the pandemic; surely, we were not the story. But I pressed on, urged by Virginia Woolf and other diarists – perhaps the detail of better-protected lives would also be revealing, for better or worse, looking back. The journal is offline now, waiting for retrospect to come round, but in it 75 writers from six continents wrote over 200 entries between them. Perhaps the opportunity to put the moment into sentences brought the writers some personal relief but there was also a generosity in their entries I had not anticipated. Diligently recounting their days in detail, the writers invited strangers into the intimacy, anxiety and untidiness of their lives at home, offering companionship. The tagline of the journal was 'solidarity from at least two metres away'.

Sure, it isn't always this way. No sooner have I described a journal as an offering than I'm distracted by the solipsism of James Boswell, that most self-conscious and performative of diarists, writing in the eighteenth century. Boswell is evidently

both reader and writer – *Upon my word my journal goes charmingly on at present!*

Yet even Boswell's enthusiasm sometimes falters: at its heart, journal-keeping is a repetitive ritual, too pedestrian to be glamorous. One must not only live the life but also write it down. We know enough about Virginia Woolf's life and death to recognise the depths even her diary could not plumb. A diary's minutiae have a paradoxical effect: they remind us it is only ever a fragment.

The writers included in this guest edition of *WritersMosaic*, along with sixteen others – all women – were members of a writers' group in Afghanistan, working with Untold Narratives' translators and editors, who were based elsewhere in the world. In August 2021, they were polishing short stories for an anthology of new fiction by Afghan women when rumours reached them that the Taliban were approaching Kabul; the Taliban had already re-captured most of the country from the Afghan army and retreating international forces. The writers came online in their WhatsApp chat group, initially to worry aloud and ask each other for news. Within hours, it was confirmed the Taliban had taken the capital and therefore the country. With this news, the writers' tone changed: through that night, they began to re-tell the story of the day as it unfolded, while they were at their offices, or teaching students, attending lectures, or on the way to the bank. They described people untangling themselves from knotted crowds, neighbourhoods emptying, birds hushed.

Over the course of the subsequent year, the writers kept returning to the makeshift refuge of their WhatsApp group to record the changes taking place in

their own lives and in the landscape of life around them – sometimes feverishly, sometimes with quiet, searching reflection. The thread in their chat group eventually grew into a collective diary of some 200,000 words. The diary's form shifts as the writers address each other, their fellow women, their fellow men, their country, their world. At times they rage, at others they pray. They have all the range of a Greek chorus, moved by generations of tragedy in their homeland. (I think this is why their diary sometimes begs to be spoken aloud.) Sometimes, overwhelmed, they write as though no one else is there at all. And as they disperse across the world, sometimes no one really is there – no one familiar, no one from home. There is only the self – that most exacting audience – to find words, to read as it writes, to write as it reads, to persevere.

This diary has just been published (*My Dear Kabul*, Coronet 2024), translated into English from the original Dari and Pashto and documenting one year of its writers' lives after the most recent fall of Kabul. In the run-up to publication, we asked five of the writers if they would write a journal entry from their lives now, two years after the book ends, to be collected in this guest edition. The contributors to this edition are currently making new beginnings in exile, in Oxfordshire (UK), British Columbia (Canada), California (USA), Siegen-Wittgenstein (Germany) and Nairobi (Kenya). They did not hesitate: already in the habit of keeping a diary, they would be adding to an ongoing conversation. What they sent in is just a day's excerpt from a life. Yet, in their short journal entries, Batool, Fakhta, Freshta, Marie and Zainab offer more nuance and thoughtfulness about the meanings of migration than we often hear in public conversation, possibly anywhere in the world. Batool

is relieved to be in the UK, but she feels policed by those around her, expected to conform to cultural strictures she thought she'd fled. Zainab, in Canada, wonders how a fellow Afghan arrival might ever learn to greet his neighbours trustingly, while carrying inside himself the history of conflict with which he came. Fakhta does not want to be ungrateful so edits her account of arriving in Kenya, telling the better parts. Freshta looks for ciphers of her original culture, wishing to keep it alive for her young daughter. Marie writes home of how she has changed.

I read these accounts first amid a General Election campaign in the UK, political parties vying to outdo each other in denigrating people seeking safer lives. Then I read them again, as far-right groups in the UK launched wanton and violent attacks on people they perceived to be outsiders. As I write now in August 2024, the attacks are ongoing and have already affected Southport, Manchester, Hartlepool, Aldershot, Middlesbrough, Sunderland, Liverpool, Leeds, Nottingham, Stoke-on-Trent, Blackpool, Bristol, Hull, Belfast, Rotherham, Bolton, Weymouth, Tamworth, Solihull and Plymouth. After (we hope) the situation is contained and the people being attacked are given better protection, I dare to hope we will also begin the process of changing, over the months and years to come. It is past time to turn our attention to the vast numbers of people who are a bit racist and who enable the small numbers of people who are extremely violently so. The momentum-shifting middle ground is found in that packed crowd; if you like, the largest focus group in Britain.

Of course we've had it with the ugly, racist, scapegoating conversations about migrants and asylum seekers that led us here. But we are weary too of the simplified opposite standpoints they wrought from the rest of us. When people shouted that immigration is bad, we shouted back but it is good! It's a stupid conversation: it gives the impression that we are in a position to judge, to choose. We can't have a world that is global in everything but the people; we can't wear cheap clothes, eat more than our fill, wage wars and destroy environments without other people needing to flee, needing to arrive somewhere else. We can't colonise for centuries without facing the consequences for centuries. Perhaps unsurprising when we haven't faced our history that we imagine being able to have everything we want. Our lack of insight reduces us and makes us feeble minded – I mean we who live and vote inside the imperial core. We lose the capacity to engage with the earth and grit of what it means to live in the world that we have made; to explore what it means to change and be changed as people and communities. And to do so in ways that are painful and ways that are renewing, ways that are minute and continuous.

For these writers of this edition, there are no conclusions. Their journeys did not begin with the changes that came to Afghanistan in 2021. Many had been in exile before, some from childhood, and had returned to build new lives in Afghanistan before they were forced to leave again. There has never been a singular departure or arrival. Their journeys are their lives and the lives of so many others they know: an endless account of leaving and arriving, of beginning and ending, of loss and

renewal. No one is sure how long they'll be where they are, and they are forced to live as they write here: one day at a time.

In much of the world, these truths are commonplace. In private conversation, they are never far from the surface. Many of the translators we work with at Untold Narratives are themselves from Afghanistan but left at different points in its history and migrated through different parts of the world. They include Parwana Fayyaz and Dr Negeen Kargar who translated the entries in this edition as well as the writers' collective diary. Sometimes, Parwana will help to translate something to me by telling a story about her own family that echoes what a writer is saying. Negeen is often moved to tears by the writers' words, remembering her family's journeys, decades and wars ago. I often think about 'Companion', a story by Maryam Mahjoba (published in *My Pen Is the Wing of a Bird*, MacLehose Press, 2022) in which an older woman in Kabul struggles to fill her days with conversations on Skype with her children in other parts of the world. When we read the first draft of the story, one translator said, 'Basically it's about my mother.' I remember her words because the story invoked all our mothers.

I am reminded yet again that personal interactions underpin our work and social rituals give us shelter. Perhaps especially when the context is conflict and the content of the work is wracked with grief. When you aren't sure where you are going, sometimes you just repeat and wait for form and meaning to emerge. I remember working with a small group of women in eastern Sri Lanka, searching for memorial forms that could hold what they had lived through in wartime.

Soundari Amma, the eldest of the women, was tickled by the very idea her life might be of interest to others. She remarked mischievously to her neighbours, 'I go to Batticaloa every week to talk about my childhood.' The banality of the ritual journey she described was also its strength. Some weeks we met together in the garden of the women's organisation that had brought us together. In other weeks, each of the women received members of the group in their homes, scattered across the district. It was a crucial part of the process that the women received us in their own homes and in their own ways. Children hung around, hoping they would receive a share of the fizzy drinks and biscuits that had been bought for the visitors (they did). The warmth of customary hospitality gave ballast to an exploratory process. Repetition made it familiar, and helped the conversation grow.

Put another way, the ordinary acts as a rudder. The changes that came to Afghanistan in 2021, for all they were anticipated, upended the lives of the writers Untold works with. In retrospect, it seems obvious that what felt possible to write was something as personal, ordinary and elastic as a diary. All the more so as women were erased from public space: recording their days was also an act of defiance, a sign of persisting life. The writers' published diary, *My Dear Kabul*, takes its title from a passage in which one of the writers, Maryam, soothes her troubled city: *My dear Kabul, give me your hand, put your head on my shoulder and don't be afraid*. The outwardness of this direct address is as striking as its intimacy: here is a voice defiantly asserting itself in the public square, enveloping

the city even as it is forced into seclusion. Despite all the oppression it has faced, it does not commit arson but kindness.

Note: Some of the names given in this account are pseudonyms.

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