

15 October 2021, 8:16 AM

P¹, the cold and gray weather has come again in Amsterdam. Or, maybe, it never left and I am just in denial—a special skill I have honed while being here. How is it up there? Are you warm enough? Is the silence comforting, or has it become suffocating?

It's a rare privilege, you know, to be able to see the majesty of the universe. Only a chosen few get to do it. Do you still feel lucky, P, or has it become a curse to be chosen?

I wasn't even aware you existed until M², the artist I ended up working with for Other Futures³, told me your story. She is from the country that sent you there, that told you to sit tight, that things are going to be fine, and that you're going to bring honour to everyone at home. Serendipitously, we met here in the Netherlands, where they say anything is possible for anyone and everyone who does the necessary work. In our case, work happens in the 'free' and 'liberal' creative field called visual arts.

As nations go, as I'm sure they briefed you before your launch, this was all about power as usual. I'm sure you know you aren't the first monkey to be sent to space, not even the first creature to be doing this. Nor is Iran the first or the only country exploring that great beyond. (Oh, the obsession of humans to conquer everything they lay eyes on!) But why not, right? Not everyone gets such an opportunity.

Did you by any chance bump into Albert II, Ham, Sam or Enos? All of them primates sent up there decades before you; all of them Americans. Or perhaps the French Felicette? The only feline ever to be launched to orbit around the earth. Her name refers to the cartoon character, Felix the Cat. Did you meet Laika, the dog aboard Russia's Sputnik 2? Please tell her she ended up on a stamp. It's nice to call all of you by your names.

It was in 2013, eight years ago, when they said you arrived safely. M said you were on TV and you were the talk of the town for a good amount of time. She was at Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten then, a prestigious art residency here in the Netherlands, and she watched you via livestream of a local Iranian TV station. Speculations on whether it was really you that had come back also filled the airwaves, especially because you looked significantly different: different hair colour, different face structure and your mole had apparently disappeared. A wayward part of me thought: "What if space just changed you?" When you leave a place, especially for an extended period of time, you never come back the same—I should know. It was, of course, wishful thinking that you would be able to come back to earn that badge of honour—something to bashfully show off to your family, friends and loved ones every time there was a gathering.

M has been thinking about you, as I have in the last few weeks of hearing and reading more about your story. This morning, for instance, I literally jumped off my bed, finally having found the best way to go through with this letter. The day began like any other. I was doing what I usually do when I wake up: checking my phone for the time, and then for messages and news from home. Today, there was nothing out of the ordinary, which is good because this means there have been no deaths; this means things are 'normal' and 'stable'. Then, a thought came to mind, that this routine felt as though I am checking every morning to see if my fingers and toes are still complete, if I am still myself. I'm not sure why I wanted to share that with you. Maybe because it's such a rudimentary, primal and childlike process to be fascinated that all of your fingers and toes are still intact, which is somehow very...grounding and 'humanizing'—whatever that means.

I hope you still have all your fingers and toes, P, as the cold there is said to be inconceivable. Did they teach you how to count before your flight? Did they tell you how special you are to have fingers and toes—at least in the grand evolutionary sense of humans? Don't you also recognize home when you look at your skin, your hair, the

¹ 'P' stands for 'Pioneer', the name of the monkey that was sent to space by the Iranian government in 2013. It is not clear if the monkey came back safely to earth. The monkey in the press conference was different from the one who left.

² *Pioneer 2021, in memory of the monkey that was sent to space by the Iranian government in 2013* is a new installation by Mehraneh Atashi, produced by Other Futures.

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tiny creases and folds on every joint? Or have you forgotten that you have them because it's simply a functional appendage, a given?



In one of M's videos, she includes a family video of herself dancing at a party, interlaced with an audio clip of her mother singing on repeat an Iranian pop song that says, "you are the night that stays awake; you are repetition of me everywhere". M is chewing gum as she lets the music take her. Throughout its run, you can see her fingers daintily pulsing the air in front her face before slowly closing them into fists by her sides. M was 12 or 13 then,

three years after the Iran-Iraq war, and unaware that she was being filmed. M said it was one of the instances where she felt hypnotized, when she felt unencumbered and free. On days like those, I don't think anyone would be checking whether they still had ten fingers and ten toes...or that such childishly basic things even mattered.

M also told me about her trip to Kuala Lumpur, where she saw a turtle with Chinese characters written in gold on its back saying 'let it go'. It wandered slowly through the busy streets. This freeing of old turtles this was apparently a Chinese ritual—'free' meaning to let them go out in the streets on their own. I don't think I fully understand what freedom really means anymore, P. Did you, for instance, feel free when you were chained to your seat when being sent to space? I guess it was better than all the experiments that you had to go through here on earth, right?

M uses chains a lot in her work, too, did you know that? In the project we're working on together, she made a couch of two deer 'paired as one', meaning connected and without a clear beginning or end. She incorporated it in a way that the print of her torso on the couch had visible chains hanging on it—chains from her past, chains from her present, chains of the future—which unchains and transforms her person into narratives that she has written herself. She has been using these two deer as a constant motif in her pieces, an image that haunts and perhaps also protects her imaginings. M encountered this image in a sand painting in Myanmar. She said that they 'become my eyes on your body'—a gaze that can be both good and bad, as in to be seen but also to be observed. M said these deer collect memories. She has asked them to tell her more about the sky. P, what can you tell us about the sky from up there? What do you see? I wonder what memories have been collected in your eyes. Maybe this time you can be our antenna, sending out signals from there.

P, I write you because I thought it might be nice to receive a message from earth. M hopes you won't just be a footnote somewhere, and I have grown to feel the same. When you get this, my wish is that you stop whatever space thing you are doing and hold your hand up to your face—maybe pulse the air like M, or just count your fingers one by one like I did this morning. Feels strangely nice, right? To be somehow reminded that you belong to a certain place and time, and not just floating around...Or maybe that's not so bad either.

Keeping your story safe in my back pocket,

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