

RILKE and ME

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Flames

"One should think of poetry as something that is not about objects but rather themselves, a poem that can raise its objects and fill the space with them." — RILKE

My journey as an artist began with literature. I embarked upon this path as a self-taught seeker of artistic vision in Iran in the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq war. I began this journey by re-reading the ancient poem, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. This guided my search into fundamental queries on life and death, our origins, purpose, and destiny. During this period in the late 1980s, there was a resurgence of previously banned works. Novels from renowned authors like Bohumil Hrabal, José Saramago, V.S. Naipaul, Mikhail Bulgakov, Virginia Woolf, Haruki Murakami, and Irvin Yalom, to name a few, were translated and published and came flooding into my life. Amidst this torrent of literary treasures, one particular work emerged that would come to be central to my artistic vision: Rainer Maria Rilke's *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. This work offered itself as a companion in my search for artistic truth. Its rich use of metaphor and its lyrical prose fueled my imagination and inspired me to go deeper into my craft. Rilke helped me confront my existential dilemmas and contemplate the mysteries and tragedies of existence. Through Malte's eyes and his struggle for creativity, I discovered a new perspective on life, death, and everything in between. To this day, Rilke's timeless work resonates with my vision and informs my understanding of human experience, a mirror reflecting my innermost thoughts, fears, and aspirations.

For 25 years, I was married to a veteran of the Iran-Iraq war. He lost a limb during his mandatory military service in 1981 and became another victim of another useless war. We had already been together for more than ten years when I started my anti-war art project, *War Collection*. It took me almost four months to do the first drawings of his prosthesis. It was like opening Pandora's Box. After ten years of marriage and caring for my wounded husband, a variety of emotions collided in my heart and mind. I worked in solitude when no one was home. I did not intend to share my paintings with anyone. I did not want to treat his prosthetic leg as an object only for still-life painting. I moved it around wherever it was left at home, under his chair or by the bedroom door. It needed to be mobile; it needed to reflect the restlessness in my heart that inspired my art. Although I had become skilled at painting from observation, it was only through the experience of looking deeply at my partner's prosthesis that I started to "see" as Rilke's Malte saw.

"I am learning to see. I don't know what it's about, but everything is registering in me at a deeper level and doesn't stop where it used to. There's a place within me that I wasn't aware of. What's going on there, I don't know." — RILKE

I dedicated eighteen years to drawing and painting the wooden prostheses worn by my veteran partner, imbuing my work with symbolism to underscore the enduring consequences of war. His prosthetic limbs underwent a transformative metamorphosis. Each became a poignant metaphor for my partner's experiences. Each represented his solitude, pain, disappointments, and emotional distance as he navigated the life that I was observing. What began as a solitary soldier's body part evolved into a symbol of memory, emotion, stillness, and action. Over time, the prostheses in my paintings took on different characters and genders, reflecting the fluidity of identity and the complexity of human experience. Some

morphed into feminine objects, reminiscent of the gendered imagery found in Farsi poetry, where words like *moon* or *earth* are personified as “she.” These figurative portrayals captured the essence of our relationship as well as the intertwined experiences of my artistic growth. I replaced the word **poetry** with **painting** in Rilke’s text, reading “Notebooks” over and over and quoting it to my students.

“To write a single line of verse one must see many cities, people, things, one must know animals, one must feel birds flying and know the movements flowers make as they open up in the morning. One must be able to think back to roads in unfamiliar regions, unexpected encounters, and partings that one saw coming long before; one must be able to think back to those days in one’s childhood that are still unexplained, to one’s parents whom one could not help offending when they brought a delightful gift and one didn’t appreciate it (it was a delight for someone else), to those childhood illnesses which arose so peculiarly and with so many profound and difficult changes, to those days in peaceful and secluded rooms, and to those mornings by the sea, to the sea anywhere, to seas, to nights of travel that swept along high above, flying with the stars; and it’s still not enough, even when one’s allowed to think of everything one can. One must have memories of many nights of love—no two nights the same—of the cries of women in labor and of pale, white, sleeping women who have given birth and are now closing again. But one must also have been with the dying, one must have sat in a room with the dead with the window open and random noises coming in....” — RILKE

Movements

Following family tradition, I cultivated a deep connection with nature by making regular journeys across my beautiful country as well as to Africa, Europe, and India. Through these travels, I forged bonds with people, animals, and plants. I immersed myself in a spectrum of cultures discovering their rich heritage and architecture. As I matured, I experienced moments of profound connection and inevitable disconnection. Witnessing the tumultuous changes in our world—the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the USSR, and the end of the Cold War—I found myself grappling with the same existential mysteries that have plagued humanity for centuries. Namely politicians who invoke their “God” but have no mercy for their people. I had seen war and its costs and could not help but question the seemingly endless cycle of conflict and suffering. These reflections continued to fuel my artistic exploration, driving me to seek more understanding of the human condition and our collective encounter with history.

After 25 years, my marriage peacefully came to an end. It was time to begin a new journey. In 2015, I left Iran for the United States to pursue my formal educational aspirations. Adjusting to a new culture and environment in adulthood was another transformative experience. Amidst personal belongings, cherished books, family souvenirs, and rolls of paintings that encapsulated memories spanning over forty years of life. In my luggage, only one talisman accompanied me; that wooden prosthesis remained integral to my journey. In my memory’s ears, I still heard the distinctive sound of my partner’s footsteps echoing through our apartment as he returned home from work each day.

In 2013, I had initiated my *Peace March* project, transforming used artificial arms and legs into sculptures. The inaugural piece was that same wooden prosthetic, a presence in our home since the beginning of our marriage. It became my first three-dimensional canvas, which I adorned with a gold-painted surface and the illustration of two women in an intimate embrace. Titled *Manijeh*, it marked the inception of sculptures inspired by the stories of women affected by war. Through solidarity and interactions with both Iranian and Iraqi women, I became an audience to their personal stories. I named my sculptures after these brave,

proud women. Each one was imbued with unique faces, narratives, and characters that I can still vividly visualize. During my formal art education in the United States, I focused on projects exploring the female body, gender equality, displacement, and trauma. Some of these works were displayed in my exhibition at the University of Hartford, Hartford Art School Galleries, curated by Carrie Cushman.

While completing my BFA and MFA degrees, I took on the arduous task of deconstructing and reconstructing my accumulation of social and academic skills, seeking a sense of belonging, and forging connections within new communities. I harbored the hope of reconciling my dual identities: that part of me that perceives philosophy through the lens of poetry and advocates for female equality, and that part of me that endeavors to articulate my artistic vision through essays in a non-native language and navigate the intricate landscape of cultural nuances to prevent misunderstandings. My memories grew more insistent. I grappled with the mental and emotional toll of being separated from familiar communities, family, and everything ingrained in my being. Mere courage was insufficient. In a profound moment of realization, I knew that I had to heed Rilke's call to forget.

"Having memories is still not enough. If there are many, one must be able to forget them, and one must have the patience to wait until they return, for the memories are not what's essential. It's only when they become blood within us, become our nameless looks and signs that are no longer distinguishable from ourselves—not until then does it happen that, in a very rare moment, the first word of a verse rises in their midst and goes forth from among them." —RILKE

Poetry from Ashes

I vividly recall Carrie Cushman's initial studio visit in early 2023, when I shared my unconventional project idea to burn my *War Collection* paintings. The concept of burning my paintings had first germinated in 2009, after the suppression of the Green Movement in Iran, another dark period that marked my nation's isolation and despair. Carrie's calm response, "Let me think about it," made me happy, but I doubted the project's practicality in a university setting. Nevertheless, through Carrie's commitment and perseverance, we overcame every logistical hurdle. My live performance *A Fire for Peace* was held at the University of Hartford on November 11, 2023. Over the span of a month, I created *Body Quilt* in the Hartford Art School's Silpe Gallery by sewing together 22 of my *War Collection* paintings made from 1997 to 2014. Throughout the process, I shared stories of Iranian people and families with students and faculty who visited me while I was working on my quilt of paintings. In the spirit of inclusion, I taught them how to mend small cuts in the paintings using red thread and a surgical suture technique.

Collaborating with esteemed faculty members and fellow female artists from diverse backgrounds, we solemnly carried my 21' x 26' quilt to the public courtyard in front of the Joseloff Gallery. In a choreographed performance, we sang, mourned, and honored the myriad faces, tongues, narratives, and names of those touched by war and conflict, past and present. Then, in a symbolic gesture of sacrifice and renewal, I set fire to the quilt, bidding farewell to its physical form.

As the flames rose, I turned away from the fire and toward the audience, cherishing each individual's presence. Yet, even as I walked away, my gaze lingered on the remnants and ashes. They evoked memories of my return to my parent's bombed house in our hometown on the Iraq border. I searched through these tangible remnants of my history, hoping to catch a glimpse of, in Rilke's words, *"the first word of a verse rising in their midst and going forth from among them."* I gathered burnt fragments of my

paintings salvaged from the ashes. These charred fragments will always remain as a remembrance from my journey. These same fragments have become the source of a shared pursuit of artistic expression and sisterhood under the new collective project, *Rising Phoenix*. This endeavor has brought together fifteen women artists from ten countries, each drawing inspiration from these burnt remnants to create deeply personal artworks celebrating life and resilience. These pieces take on various forms, including poetry, text, photography, sculpture, video, installation, ceramics, and print. This project holds a special place in my heart, binding our creative community across the globe, from the United Arab Emirates to Ukraine, Turkey, Bulgaria, Tunisia, and the United States. *Rising Phoenix* is a reminder of that first poem in multiple languages, a rising testament to our creativity, care, and support for one another, transcending borders and barriers.

While the flames danced, I felt the poignancy of the live performance; the essence of my journey and the stories I carried were symbolically released into the ether. The burning of the quilt marked not an end, but a beginning—a phoenix rising from the ashes, igniting a collective movement of artistic expression and solidarity. In revisiting the ashes, I found not only remnants of the past, but also seeds of hope for the future, where art becomes a beacon of light in the darkest of times.