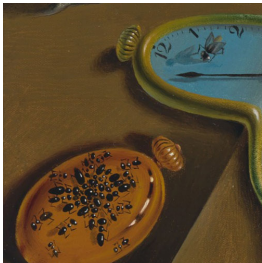


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This Vast Conspiracy of Memory

Khalid Warsame

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Google has this handy and terrifying feature called Timeline, which shows you everywhere you've ever been, how many times you've been there, and how long you've been there each time. It collects data from your phone, constantly if you have an Android, and if you have an iPhone, it logs your location every time you open the Google Maps app. Nothing disappears: your every movement is a collection of data points, fed into algorithms that use this information to do everything from alert you to traffic jams in your area to notify you when you're running low on nappies for your newborn.

I've been thinking about the relationship between time and place and the body. I think there's a certain precarity to the notion of flesh and blood and skin and the way we are accustomed to think of our bodies as containers. One thing I certainly have struggled with throughout my writing life is reckoning with the limitations of marshalling coherence into what is just blind emotion. I feel a certain way about my body, and I feel a certain way about how my skin and my flesh and my memories and time and place crash into and against one another; and the only thing I know to be true is my own inadequacy in the face of it all. James Baldwin once remarked that history, as no-one seems to know it, is not merely something to be read, and I think a corollary to this thought is that our bodies are not merely vessels to be read, and that the boundaries of our bodies are coterminous with our capacity to consider them. But here is what I know: there are some things that I remember and some things that I do not, and time as I experience it is not the same as time as it happened: I've shed far too many cells and memories and gained nothing in return for it except for some fading memories. Perhaps that's what is so obscene to me about the idea of an app or website telling me things about myself that I know to be true.

Google shows me that I am a creature of habit. I return to the same places over and over again; a thick red line made up of countless red lines traces the path of the buses and car journeys; to the beach on the occasional weekend; to the pub more often; to work and back every weekday. Other lines trace the familiar paths of my itinerant lifestyle: the frequent moves, the occasional trips to Sydney and Newcastle for work. One line crosses the globe and terminates in a cluster of points in places that I've visited on trips. Those lines are outliers though. Most of the time I get up, go to work, come home, and do the same thing again the next

day. I could see my body moving through those points, flying above streets and traffic and signs and symbols familiar to me — the park at the end of Beaudesert Road, the shopping centre where I used to work, the basketball court on Arden Street where Abdullahi, Farah and I played basketball during the summers of our teenage years, all through the night. I feel contained, my body held tightly in space, as if I were a locomotive on rails. If our bodies are the first site of significance, then perhaps the places where our bodies most frequently rest are just as significant? We are constantly shedding bacteria and skin and scents and cells, so much so that we are each of us surrounded by a cloud of our excretions and expulsions.

To extend the previous metaphor, think of us as locomotives, disintegrating slowly, spraying viscera and juices as we hurtle from point to point. Forensic scientists hope, with practice, to learn to trace the path of our biological footprints with enough accuracy to be able to tell a day or even a week after the event if a person has entered a room or was present in an auditorium. We shed about 600,000 particles of skin every hour — about half a kilogram a year; almost 1000 new skins in a lifetime. There is enough of ourselves lying around to rebuild ourselves completely, or close to completely, if we gathered it all.

Think about your sofa: How long have you had it? Think about your mattress. Your home. I return to the same places over and over again, each time depositing and shedding skin and bacteria and scents and cells. Some of my cells are in Tokyo or Newcastle or Nairobi, but most of me, the particle vastness of me, is in one of a dozen places that over the course of a lifetime I've called home. They're all there, in servers scattered throughout the world: bright red points, each of them full of pieces of my body. You could rebuild the whole of me from those pieces, I'm sure of it. Nothing really dies, and wounds don't heal: you just continue to revisit them, each time adding to them and changing in the process, like memories.

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On my Google Timeline profile, there is no entry for Cuttagee, or Bermagui. That week I didn't use my phone at all. It's almost like I was never there. Here's a memory from that week: some friends and I went to a beach near Cuttagee, where the sand was especially fine. The sound of the waves crashing against the beach, the rocks, was rhythmic and un-soothing. The sun was bright and warm, the wind was kind, but the sea itself was just as unsettling as it always had been to me. There was a terror to the waves; they were fathomable in a way that the sun wasn't, the power behind them, the expanse of ocean rushing to the shore. 'I think you are a bumblebee,' said Annabel. We were all lying in the sun, drying off after a swim. She looked up at me, her chin resting on her palms, her stomach flat against her beach towel. 'Think about it,' she said.

We were playing a game, trying to figure out which animal we would be. Someone had sunk gull feathers into the sand just ahead of us, arranged in a circle. It was seeing those feathers that made me think of flight, that perhaps flight was in my nature. I wasn't a creature of the sea like Annabel, who declared herself to be a porpoise. I thought about what she said — a bumblebee seemed just right. I was contemplating a kind of courage that day; I felt it in my liver. I walked over to the rocks and navigated the slippery footholds. My feet were cut up a little, and the salt water stung. The rocks were covered in a kind of slime that I knew to be a

living creature of God. Small animals darted in the pools between the rocks, their food sources replenished gently by the tide despite the violence of the waves crashing against the beach like a beast capable of selective acts of gentleness. Such clarity in those pools of water. I considered the ground with such fascination that it led to a momentary lapse in attention and my foot slipped and I almost twisted my ankle. It was a sharp, cruel moment, in a way that recalled old injuries: the pain, the discomfort.

Some years ago, I fell off my bike and fractured my ankle. The pain was severe, and it took many weeks before I was able to walk again. The injury is long healed now, but the shadow of it remains, such that the way I move about the world is a little more hesitant, my footing a little more careful. Old wounds linger in this way, and it is not all in the mind. I withdrew and made my way back to the sand, all courage gone. Later that night I had a brief, dizzying vision of running into the water only to emerge a bleeding, bloated wreck, split open at the seams, my body a living catalogue of wounds. I collapsed in the sand and looked up. The expanse of sea, the distant cliffs, the narrow trees looming above the sand dunes, the squat ferns with leaves like open hands.

In the introductory essay to David Maisel's photobook *Black Maps: American Landscape and the Apocalyptic Sublime*, the critic Geoff Manaugh briefly details the peculiar way that scurvy ravages the body. 'Without vitamin C we cannot produce collagen, an essential component of bones, cartilage, tendons and other connective tissues. Collagen binds our wounds, but that binding is replaced continually throughout our lives. Thus, in advanced scurvy old wounds long thought healed will magically, painfully reappear.' In this way even old injuries mark us permanently — our bodies never truly heal. Manaugh points out the poetry in this palimpsestic vision of our bodies. 'In a sense, there is no such thing as healing,' he writes, 'from paper cuts to surgical scars, our bodies are mere catalogues of wounds: imperfectly locked doors quietly waiting, sooner or later, to spring back open.' The body is the first site of significance. Every injury I ever had is a site of significance, waiting to reappear in flesh and in mind.

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I'm interested in the way we tell stories about ourselves. For instance: I could write about my childhood, my upbringing, about being a first-generation Somali immigrant in a country that never truly had the imagination to make space for families like mine. Whenever I retell or recall these memories, I always feel as if I am engaging in a con: I don't really remember things very clearly, and the limitations of my perspective are apparent to me. I talk about myself in a new way every time I open my mouth.

I've changed, I think. I used to be able to reconcile things, but over the past year or so I've come to believe that the instinct to narrativise my life will always start from a suspect position, which is that of this moment in time. And here we come to the fundamental dodge: there are things I am capable of writing about and things that I can't quite bring myself to write about. In any attempt at building a narrative essay around a stable sense of self, I'll inevitably find myself in open water. On the subject of wounds, both psychological and physical, I have very little to say except in such a prolix and discursive way that it almost seems like bad manners even to make the attempt.

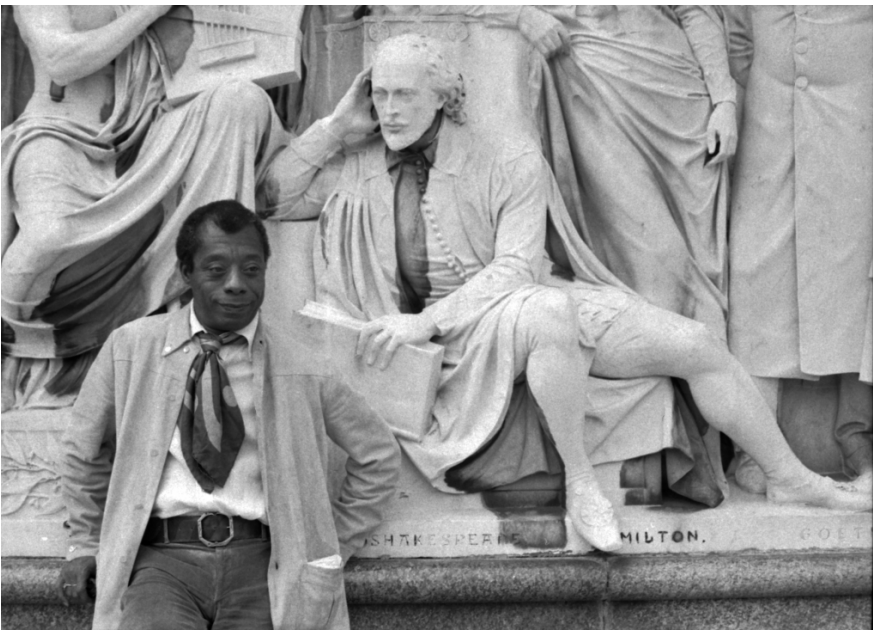
What can I say about the fact that I remember every single beating I received as a child, that my instinctive aversion to conflict is a learned response, that I have an intense and confusing relationship with open water, a complicated relationship with my masculinity, with sex, a fear of dark and deep woods, a fear of living too long, a fear of roads that never end, of people who seem to disregard norms and limitations, of things too far from the ordinary, of loving, of being loved, of loss, of causing others harm, of hurting others inadvertently, of replying to long emails, of answering the phone at night, of being aware at every point in telling and retelling sanitised versions of events that it's almost as if I'm telling someone else's story altogether. In these circumstances and in many others, silence is a slow-acting poison but so is the truth.

The most unstable thing I can think of is time: where does the past go? It's there, I can feel the ghost of it, and I can even see its effects on both my body and the world around me, but how do I place that which slips out of my grasp continuously, and even when it appears to rest, it's gone in the morning, and my phone is buzzing to tell me it's time to get up, or in the form of a dream that fades upon waking, or in the form of lying still in bed, contemplating everything I said wrong the night before, and I bury my headache in my pillow and before I know it, it's midday, and then evening, and then the day is gone, just like that.

The paradoxical elasticity and rigidity of time is fascinating and all consuming, especially during long, hot summer days, where the light seems to stretch on forever, when the sun dips low and casts long shadows that seem as endless as the heat and the air. The days become this vast conspiracy of memory, where everything is heightened, and I don't know where to point to and how to allow myself to say: this is a moment of significance. It's strange that when you are taken by a metaphor, your whole life is pulled into its orbit, and I have been taken by two metaphors over the past few years that each relate to moments in time as sites of significance: the first is water and the second is memory. Or perhaps those two metaphors are one, since my only true possession is my memory, which is itself an unstable proposition born of an adaptation that seems to hinder and hurt me just as much as comfort me and remind me that I exist.

The curious thing about writing is that, in the act of it, everything in your life becomes significant and seems to have some relevance to whatever it is that you are writing. As Louise Rosenblatt outlines in her reader-response theory, the lines on a page are just squiggly ink until the reader interacts with it. In that way, the reader acts upon the text itself to create meaning that is highly individual to their own experience and context.

In the novel I am reading right now, Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*, there is a moment when the narrator, the Reverend John Ames, remembers the birth of his first daughter who died shortly after she was born. He focuses on how she looked up at him with her new eyes, and reflects that, 'Memory can make a thing seem to have been much more than it was,' which as far as sentences go is perfect. And before that I was doing the washing while listening to a podcast on the subject of epigenetics, which is doubly significant, because here I was, trying to cleanse my clothes of my secretions (I was doing the washing by hand, since the apartment in Nairobi that I am staying at right now does not have a washing machine) while learning about how significant moments in one's life (a traumatic event, or a period of famine, or even drug dependencies) can alter your own DNA such that your children and their children's very genetic heritage is altered.



James Baldwin at the Albert Memorial in Kensington Gardens, London. Photograph by Allan Warren, c.1969

They might be predisposed to heart condition or die 20 years earlier than they would have or, in the case of the children of smokers, become shorter or fatter than they otherwise would have, controlling for all other factors. Had the electricity in my apartment not cut off this morning, which I'm beginning to learn is a daily reality in Nairobi, I probably would have researched this further, and probably would have spent the rest of the day contemplating the potential of this science in service of this essay.

In the time that I have been working on this essay, I have also been slowly making my way through the entire works of James Baldwin. I have a photo of him on the wall above my desk back home — from a postcard I found in an Edinburgh bookshop, tucked in between the pages of a manual for librarians. It's a photograph I've seen often — Baldwin resting his head on his palm as he looks to the side, contemplating something. Above all, I love the texture of his skin in black and white: the shades of grey, darker grey and black, the shadows and the light. This is a man who taught me a lot about my skin, who taught me a lot of the things I am learning still about writing with integrity, generosity and openness.

I quote him early on in this essay, which I didn't really need to do, but I wanted to because sometimes writing touches us in such a way that we contort ourselves to accommodate it into our lives. I think about this a lot whenever I quote a passage in my writing. It always seems as if I am borrowing the writer's authority to bolster my own, as if I am saying: 'look, it's not only me who says these things,' or, 'here is what I wish I could have said so elegantly.' Or sometimes just to say, 'look who I have read'. I almost always cut those out in the final draft. In any case, I hope to begin reading *The Fire Next Time* soon, which I haven't read in its entirety yet but is nonetheless a book I am intimately familiar with, not least because Baldwin writes with such clarity that you read him and realise, in retrospect, that things are exactly as he describes them, but also because that book looms large over anyone who thinks and reads and writes while in possession of a black body. And it is the inheritance of this black body that is the central concern of most of my writing, and most of my life, and it is through exploring the political anxieties of my body that I come to understand it. I have heard an argument that most anxieties are political, in so much as their common source is the abject condition of our bodies under capitalism, but that has always seemed to me to be a terminal thought. A friend of mine and I have this running joke, where we end every thought with,

‘But of course, the real problem is capitalism,’ and it is applicable to almost any discussion, from talking about our dating lives, to our jobs, to our respective grievances with our landlords, to the Western Bulldogs’ frequent losses, to the fact that it’s becoming harder and harder to find a bulk-billing doctor in Melbourne.

The central concern of this essay is really about the problem of the body under capitalism, or to put it another way: the problem of being alive and having a body and remembering some things and forgetting others, and the mechanism that governs that, and how to move about the world in a way that is sensitive to the fact that living and breathing is actually quite a fraught thing, and being aware of this is frightening and fascinating.

I use the word ‘frightening’ literally here because it is the truth: I have always been just as frightened by bodies as I am fascinated by them. It is why I can’t stand the eyes and mouths and wet noses of animals, why I sometimes have trouble maintaining eye contact, why I’m so compelled to tweet about my bowel movements. I didn’t like touching people or being touched for most of my childhood. A memory I feel is significant here: I remember the first time I ever saw Francisco Goya’s painting *Saturn Devouring His Son*. It made my head spin: I was alone, at home, and I saw it on my computer. Or it came to me. I remember how it filled me with clarity, like those pools of water at Cuttagee beach. Such fine clear water, so holy even a godless fool such as I could appreciate it.

Now I look at that painting and I feel as if I am witnessing a murder — and I’m not being fancy here: I mean, the literal murder in the image disturbs me. Of course, sometimes the act of looking can make you complicit in a more abstract sort of murder. You know: when the act of looking is the final link in a chain, the tension gets pulled taut, and the image resolves itself and it becomes known to you. In paintings and photographs I have come to recognise this familiar sense as a con. I’ll go further and say: isn’t aesthetics just manipulation? Just as a cliché is a manipulation of a familiar phrase (be that a literal phrase, or an image, or even a gesture) to shortcut a more involved and laborious method of translating an idea, so can the notion of tension be just as manipulative. That is not so bad a thing, but it is, of course, unethical to consider something apart from itself, apart from the gesture towards specific and generative meaning as well as its motives and larger context. Nonetheless I have also come to believe that it can be a kind of death for the possibility of stability: once you start considering reflexive notions in art, you begin to realise that nothing interesting is ever truly as it seems, or stays that way for long. To return to Rosenblatt: what are the implications of reading a text or an image when making meaning is a primarily self-generative task, and one that inherently eschews a sense of stability? Rosenblatt’s answer is to stress that the relationship between reader and author is an ethical one that implies certain obligations and responsibilities, while also rejecting a simple understanding of meaning that is pure or static in any way. For me, this relationship has always been characterised by a feeling of instability around my ability to parse images and text, which mirrors my sense of precarity when it comes to parsing my own memories, my own body.

When I first saw *Saturn Devouring His Son*, I saw myself dying, being eaten alive, and this feeling overwhelmed me. The size of the child and the size of Saturn, the father, reached into my awareness of my body, which until then I had only suspected was permanently located in a period of time where I was at my smallest, my most vulnerable. My father is not so much taller than I am now, but there was a time he could have picked me up like that, sideways, and I would have been helpless. One frightening moment in my life was during a childhood game, where a

boy older and stronger than me picked me up and held me, and despite how I struggled against his grip, I could not shake him loose, and my powerlessness and his complete physical dominance over me burned itself in my mind. I still remember his face — he was laughing, and I was laughing too, but mine was the laughter of the powerless.

There's something undeniably formative about the shame I attach to that memory. For a long time I saw it as proof of my physical frailty, a weakness in body and in character. Nowadays I level my adult brain at that memory and think about it in more complicated ways, but the child's instinctual reaction is the moment that created the memory. I think it is a good thing overall to identify with the powerless, to sink oneself into it. Perhaps it is even ethical, in that old Christian way, but it can also be a burden, because once you accustom yourself to that position, you lose the capacity for a kind of creative thought. While it is true that the bourgeoisie, as a class, are generally artless, they are perfectly capable of creativity. One of the many crimes of capitalism is how it unfairly allocates excess energy to those with the most destructive uses for it. Think of Western civilisation: 500 years of war-making and theft and murder and for what? A barren hothouse of a planet to show for it.

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On a plane, while hurtling across the Indian Ocean, I found myself thinking again about this essay — the original title of which was 'Sites of Significance'. Sitting next to me was my friend Izzy. We were on our way to Scotland, on a small trip funded by the Melbourne City of Literature office to meet our Edinburgh counterparts in the literary arts industry. I'd never been to Britain before, and I was finding it hard to affect a studied disinterest in the birthplace of all the unpleasantness of this modern age (the hope was that the British would notice my indifference to their elaborate cities and quaint towns and thus feel embarrassed about centuries of colonialism — a futile and naive hope in retrospect). I told Izzy that I was trying to write an essay about the relationship between place and my body, and she asked me why I chose the phrase 'Sites of Significance'. I thought about it for a moment. I can't remember. It's a very clinical term, and perhaps that's what drew me to it in the first place. 'I don't know,' I said. She then explained to me how the phrase is most commonly used in a very specific way by the government to denote places that are historically or spiritually important to Indigenous people with the aim of identifying and preserving them.

I thought about the phrase and its importance to this essay in the context of this new information. There's another thread that I've been following, one about wounds and memory and forgetting. A dear friend of mine passed away last year and he took a whole chunk of my childhood and adolescence with him. I remember specific events and cling to them, but there's so much of our shared memory ('remember that time when ...' or 'funny, I remember it completely differently ...') that's gone now. I won't ever have another chance to argue with him about whether a specific thing happened the way I remembered it happening. So I only have my own memories, which I carefully curate, telling and retelling them in ways that, over time, write over the memories, unreliable as they are. Sometimes I let my memories deteriorate to minimise the impact of a wound, other times I just forget. The ethics of remembering have always sat unwell with me in this way: it all seems so futile and offensive.

Take the Australian Government, for instance. Perhaps the act of narrowly delineating specific locations as sites of significance elides something larger: that erasure isn't solely the act of wiping the slate clean and pretending nothing was ever there, but that erasure is often accompanied by its sibling, which is strategic and deliberate acts of preservation. There are more than 65,000 known Aboriginal sites of significance in New South Wales alone according to the state's Office of Environment and Heritage. A big number, sure, but as small as a mustard seed when you compare it to the theft of a continent, the murder of millions and the dispossession of generations. I think about the fact that the vast majority of Aboriginal 'sites of significance' (a white phrase — it reeks of detachment, a heinous dodge) are lost: destroyed, built over, buried, covered. One could easily imagine that where there was once a story site there is now a car dealership, a courthouse or an Ikea. One could imagine the bodies.

If I can let my own memories deteriorate to minimise the impact of a wound, imagine the ends to which the efforts of an entire nation can be put towards? Imagine inflicting a wound and then rearranging the very fabric of a society solemnly to preserve its memory while pretending it doesn't exist; it is a grotesque and criminal synecdoche. So maybe the act of remembering and the act of erasure are inextricably linked? Maybe it is a violence just as colonisation and murder is a violence? Is there an ethical form of remembering? There is, I think, but not here: not in this endeavour.

There is moment in a Kahlil Gibran poem where a man hears a deep voice calling out: 'This is the sea. This is the deep sea. This is the vast and mighty sea.' The narrator follows the voice to stretch of coast where he runs into several people trying to understand the deep voice that they all heard. He eventually comes across a man whose back is turned to the sea, who is holding a shell to his ear and listening to its murmur. The narrator realises that this man with his back to the sea is 'turning his back on the whole he cannot grasp and busying himself with a fragment'. The narrator walks away from the man in disappointment, which makes me wonder: is it disappointing? Or is it the only way to contemplate something as vast and unknowable as the sea? •

Khalid Warsame is a writer who lives in Melbourne. His essays, criticism and fiction have appeared in The Lifted Brow, Overland, The Big Issue, The Saturday Paper, Cordite Poetry Review, and LitHub.

Essays



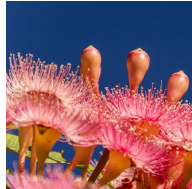
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