

Becoming More-than-Human

When my son was born, I transformed into a more-than-human being. Let me explain. Before his birth, I cared about the world around me *in theory*, insofar as it suited my needs. A 'progressive' person, I considered myself enthusiastic about social and environmental justice. I even protested now and then in front of Parliament before hopping for drinks at the Mercury Lounge. I was the centre of my life, enduring the Corporate 9-to-5 voluntary jail, thinking always of the weekend, when I'd be unburdened and free from obligation. After all, I'd been through hell. I deserved a

strong drink. *Rakija*, preferably.

I was born in a communist country in Eastern Europe that no longer exists—Yugoslavia—in a city that refuses to die: Sarajevo. I was seven years old when Tito, Yugoslavia's benevolent dictator, passed away. First, the region of Slovenia demanded independence, and then Croatia, followed by what was to become my new country: Bosnia & Herzegovina (Bosnia for short). But while Slovenia had the economic, political and military strength to amputate itself from the dying body of ex-Yugoslavia, Bosnia was much more vulnerable, much more volatile. Because Bosnia, and Sarajevo in particular, was a genuine bazaar of cultures where Muslim Bosniaks lived alongside Orthodox Serb Bosnians, Catholic Croat Bosnians, marginalized Roma people and a barely visible Jewish community, it had always been a place of fragile co-existence.

After failed attempts to retain Serb-claimed lands in Croatia, Serbia's Slobodan Milosević and Croatia's Franjo Tuđman made a deal: they'd split Bosnia & Herzegovina in two, ethnically cleansing Muslim Bosniaks who stood in their way. Beyond redrawing political borders, Milosević and his allies, including Bosnian Serbs, wanted to uproot Islam from the Balkan map forever, purging the land of its Ottoman heritage. That's why, in 1992, one of their first targets during the Siege of Sarajevo (which was to become the longest siege in modern history) was the Oriental Institute—thousands

of rare books burned to ash.

The genocide was gruesome. I lost family members, including my beloved *nena*, the Muslim matriarch in our family who smelled of cigarette smoke—she chain-smoked Drinas, Sarajevo's oldest brand—and taught me how to recite the *Bismillah* in Arabic. I recited it over and over, *Bismillah ir-Rahman ir-Rahim*, running around her garden, chasing butterflies. My *nena's* way of life, her connection to nonhuman beings including animals, the land and the elements, was lost to me when a Serbian soldier killed her as she was preparing *pita krompiruša* (my favourite) for a group of hungry children. She had dared to leave the basement of a workers' cabin turned refugee-shelter and go upstairs to the kitchen where a soldier targeted her because a passer-by asked her for a smoke and she couldn't say no: *nena*, a good Muslim woman and a fervid believer in Allah, who smoked and drank *Rakija*, cared for everyone, always, until her last breath.

Maybe that's why, years later—after five years running around Europe as a refugee with my brother and mother, unwanted wherever we went—I consciously chose to enjoy the privileges that had befallen me. Canadian citizenship, with its deep navy-blue passport, signalled freedom after so many years living in life-and-death situations: crossing borders with fake passports, hungry, tired and poor. The move to Canada was a move to safety until 9/11 struck and my family, who had been so violently exiled because of our Muslim her-

itage, stopped saying *salam alaikum* and *alaikum salam*, and replaced these traces of our past with brief hellos, *zdravo*, bye, *ćao*.

My family, silenced by fear, never spoke about the war and entered a state of benign amnesia, eroding our memories of Bosnia. I forgot about *nená* and actively hid my communist beginnings and Muslim heritage, preferring to focus on my years as a refugee in Switzerland, where I learned French, an asset in bilingual Canada. Everyone loved my accent; it had a certain *je ne sais quoi*, and while I told stories about how difficult it had been to finish primary school in a system that demanded oral presentations in front of the classroom, I didn't mention that my family lived in a cockroach-infested apartment for refugees in precarious legal and economic conditions, dreaming of stability and citizenship.

Given this background, you understand why at the age of 23 I bought my first condo on blueprint and my first car a year later. I had done everything that was expected of me: finished a university degree with high honours, landed a great corporate job, found a partner, invested my money in mutual funds, diversified my portfolio, and other such idealized Western etceteras. It was only natural, then, that I would have my first child—carried by my partner, a woman I had met while in Paris. Coming out as a lesbian to my Muslim parents was an emotional storm not without its moments of comedic relief, especially my father's comments about how Angelina Jolie liked women. *And Angelina Jolie is very*

attractive. She could have any man so if she chooses to be with women, then maybe there's nothing wrong with that? I've been through many storms in my life, and all things considered, coming out was a minor one, but of course I say that only now, in retrospect.

And then he was born. He was the sun, and we, like planets existing in some dark void, rotated around him in cosmic unison, mesmerized by the light. I did not become his mother overnight. But the shock of his presence, the love that it drew out of me, left me aghast. It ripped through all the lies in my life—the 9-5 job that didn't inspire me, pretending climate change wasn't my problem, and so on. It peeled my heart to such an extent that it opened all the wounds I had neglected until now. Not only was I severely deprived of sleep, I was feeling all the fear, grief and pain that I had numbed for so long. The more I fell in love with him, the less I could tolerate my will to power and pursuit of social status, money and accumulation of material things when compared to the extraordinary responsibility for my child and his future.

The first signs of my malaise manifested on the dinner plate. Before food was just a means to an end, eating as sustenance, or social encounter or pleasure in restaurants; it suddenly became synonymous with life itself—the quality of my son's life. We are what we eat. I began to educate myself, to buy organic, to care about how the meat lived before we consumed it. At the same time, I grew increasingly dissatisfied with the pettiness

and pressures of office life. I had always put my salary on a pedestal, but I began to notice the relationship between the hollow words I spilled on the Corporate page and the hollow feeling in my chest. I wanted to write words that mattered. Ethical words. Because—and this may sound crazy: *I began to realize that words were doing things to me.* That, although it appeared I was writing them, in fact, they were writing me. Just like we are what we eat; we are what we write and say—what we do with words matters and in turn, I became sensitive to what words were doing to me. I craved truthful, communal and healing words.

In my darkest moments, on the verge of tears, standing on the threshold of ecstasy and suffering, I turned to literature. To Audre Lorde, Virginia Woolf, Angela Davis, Isabelle Eberhardt... When I went back to work after a few months of parental leave, everything had changed. Or rather, I had changed. I could no longer tolerate the oppressive architecture of my office, which, to be frank, was better than most, with large windows. I could no longer tolerate the silences that fought to be heard, the tensions between employees and the employer. I wanted to quit but this desire was always met with paralyzing fear and tremendous resistance to change, intensified by a genuine fear around sudden poverty. I went on leave to care for myself—my ‘self’ which seemed to be disintegrating, becoming liquid, non-central, amorphous. At first I thought it was just fatigue, but quickly realized it was much worse.

Time no longer moved forward, like an arrow; I experienced time as a forest. As my son grew, memories of my own childhood came out of the shadows, demanding my attention. Everything turned into an opportunity for me to clarify my feelings and values. Basic questions knocked on the door of my consciousness: where did I come from? Who was I becoming? What was important? The words did things to me; they were a form of self-care and their vitality led me to different forms of healing, to write without instrumentalizing my words for corporate agendas.

As my son began to walk, I started to cultivate a garden. Tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers and even strawberries offered themselves to us. The dirt under my fingernails reminded me of *nena*: the beautiful floral motifs on her head scarves and her long robes, the way she talked to her cows, how she touched the plum trees in her big garden. I recall looking at my tiny pile of dirt on the terrace one morning and in a sudden state of frenzy, emptying all the kitchen drawers of processed food. There was barely anything left to eat in the apartment. I stopped eating meat just as suddenly. I began to walk around the city, refusing to drive my brand-new car. I took off my shoes and felt grass with the soles of my feet in a neighbourhood park.

The questions kept gnawing me. Who was I becoming? What was important? And like a humble snowball rolling down the hill, growing bigger and bigger, life took me to Gatineau Park, Charlevoix, Algonquin Park,

the Laurentian Mountains; back to Bosnia's mountainous terrain, rivers and forests who had witnessed my first breath. I began to recognize nonhumans as kin, deserving of care and respect—began to remember my *nená's* teachings. How wooden, rooted veins coursed with the same pulsing life that flowed through me, animals and riverbeds. Since I had not carried my child, and was therefore not related to him genetically, I knew that familial ties could transcend the narrow view of kinship as bloodline.

But to experience the forest surrounding Sarajevo as *my people* was a shock even to me. I was surprised when, in the summer of 2018, I kneeled by my *nená's* grave and thanked the land and the trees for holding her spirit. I knew she was happy I had opened my eyes to what mattered: the world around me in theory *and practice*.

I was given a name not of my choosing the day of my birth, just as I was born into a country whose borders were not my doing. If country borders can collapse, so can the borders between humans and nonhumans. My skin is a porous border, entangled with the toxic muck of wastelands and the life-giving stuff of the world. "I" is a process of becoming coextensive with others, including nonhuman others. The shock of loving my son disillusioned the idea that "I" is separate and autonomous from "you." When I became a mother, a slow process of becoming more-than-human followed, calling these words into being.



Matthieu Laca, *More than human*

Oil on linen, 92cmX122cm