

Introduction

By Marek Sullivan

I first experienced Asmaa Jama's work at a Spike Island event organized in 2019, to celebrate and respond to Imran Perretta's film *the destructors*. Asmaa recited from memory, drawing the audience in by the directness of their words and the seductive playfulness of their performance. The audience was transfixed, hanging on each carefully curled and dropped syllable. It is a rare talent to be able to speak words as though they are the first sounds the world has heard.

Asmaa was a natural choice of respondent to 'Class Criticism', being themselves from a working-class background. Asmaa also has one foot inside the university system (they went to university) and one foot out (they quit university before finishing their course). When I approached Asmaa, I kept the brief as open as possible – the response could take any form, including fiction/non-fiction, prose, poetry and poetry-prose. I think the resulting text, which draws several formal elements together, is a gripping mix of personal, spiritual and critical threads. It is an example of how writing can be confessional and theoretical without lapsing into the verbal ticks and exclusionary esotericisms of standard art talk.

A few specific points. It's beautiful to see how Asmaa connects the idea of "layering" labour developed in 'Class Criticism' to their father's skill with motors ('I think of the ways our bodies remember, layer by layer, how even in his sleep, awoowe could fix engines'). I'm always amazed by the complexity of mechanics' know-how – a know-how that can only be achieved through time, by layering up over the years. Recently I saw an argument on Twitter that the only way to measure working-classness is to understand the relation between the worker and the owner: if you sell your labour to someone who owns the means of production, you are working class. From this perspective, it does not matter what my background or history are. Even if I went to Eton and have parents who bankrolled my London flat, I am working class if I now work for Deliveroo.

I understand how this line of reasoning can be useful for building alliances between blue-collar workers and a newly-disenfranchised middle class that may not have considered its situation in this light before. And it is true that the owner-worker relation must be at the centre of revolutionary politics. But I don't think this means we can disregard the history of people who have been working class for all or most of their lives and whose entire historical being is different to the *nouveaux pauvres*. Lifeworlds are not made and lost overnight, and although we can argue over whether being working class is an identity or an economic position, I think it is an oversimplification to assume that questions of class can be settled simply by focusing on one's current occupation. Class is through-and-through a historical fact, and it is through history that it will be abolished. This aspect of class struggle is part of what is meant by the term 'layering'.

Asmaa's text is about their father and how he lived life as malleable, combustible plastic, "there to be burnt up, to be used". When I think of my own dad I think of something both similar and completely different. He was a granite sculptor working near Dumfries on the West coast of Scotland where stone is easy to come by. He battered himself using a mixture of hand and power tools to carve imperfect spheres which he arranged in patterns determined by mathematical set theory. He worked from dawn until dusk every single day, and died of cancer in 2007.

Unlike Asmaa's father, mine chose to leave the family when I was three years old, mainly to focus on his work. He was a caricature of an artist, someone who lived in an unheated shack on the edge of a quarry and gave up everything for the sake of an ideal. He was never "used" – any burning that took place was the result of his own decisions. It was my mother who shouldered the labour of bringing us up, my mother who "worked like an oil lamp" to keep us fed, clothed and safe. In this respect, she is probably closer to 'aabe' than my father. She was never celebrated by art critics or her local community. Throughout my childhood, she toiled in relative silence, first teaching English as a foreign language, then caring for elderly people at the end of their lives. I don't want to say too much about her here, because I don't want to reinforce her silence by speaking in her place. I only mention her because I think this silence is an important motivation behind the argument of 'Class Criticism'. I think Asmaa explains it better than I ever could.

When my father goes I will inherit only plastic

By Asmaa Jama

1.

i wanted to write again about my father, i wanted to write again about his body
i wanted to cover him with words, i wanted to fill him with utterances
+ make his heart run smooth as motor oil again
i wanted him to be an engine
i wanted him to live long enough for us to finally see where he laid his first car to rest
i wanted to light his path with lamps, my father, who worked like an oil lamp, spluttering till the last
moment, i wanted,
his body, and its soft skin, to be refashioned, embroidered,
aabe who sang his own exits and interludes
who when we are together
sang songs the writers have forgotten the names for
watches the melody
arc the sky gilt, watches with his mouth folded open

2.

Someone asked me why I speak so often about him. And I think of his body, and all the ways it is
fragile. I think how our bodies are gasoline, loose and / liquid / ever immolating, there to be burnt up,
to be used.

3.

Recently I've been writing a lot about plastic.-How what we don't love, is still sacred, makes itself
sacred. I think of the way plastic gather together sometimes. + insist they are still wanted, if only by
themselves.

Sometimes I want to refashion my father in silicon. I want to replace his joints with plastic.
I see how he also gathers with the other disposable people at makhaayads. How amongst them, they
are more than the work they do. More than their bodies and its limitations. They are people again,
with histories and futures, who have stakes elsewhere, in a past time, when a singer passed they
gathered together at the makhaayad, when the country began burning, they pooled there.

Of course, time is sacred, + by this I mean finite. Of course if my father spent his whole time at a
makhaayad, we wouldn't eat. Of course, sometimes this means working for so many hours I can't bear
to repeat it here.

Maybe, I write about my father out of guilt, or because I can see the lines of his sacrifice. When I pull
out the knots in his spine, it is tangible. Or I write because of his body, the way it slips out of his reach.
Sometimes I feel like we are transient, only passing through. I feel it most, when I see his hands
glistening with scar tissue, or when he sighs I have already reached half a century, I have crossed the
peak.

Maybe each time, I write to him / I am writing elegies that I don't need yet but will. Or I am re-
fashioning our lives, folding in more pockets of time. This *time*, when the sky darkens + my father
stays home and when I ask him to sing baladweyne again, he does, running through the notes with
his fingers.

4.

And in another life plastic begins as crude oil

/ as gasoline and kerosene as things that can be poured + dipped into / fluid / flammable / i think of the elder who stood dripping in kerosene / who renamed himself / exiting / i think of how hard staying is / with a body / made jagged with toiling / made into a tight scar /

/ once i made models of hydrocarbons / and dreamt of moving to a gulf state / dreamt of putting my arm into the earth / and pulling out its insides / wet and heavy / i wanted to build my father a refinery / i wanted to say rest now /

/ when we were children we poured kerosene / on money and watched the paper evaporate
/ now i want to swallow
/ the bills
/ still alight

5.

/ i've written about plastic as memorial before / i've written about plastic as a marker of time/
, we don't often mark the world in tangible ways, we don't leave things behind / when i was younger i understood this as the earth folding in our bodies / us becoming of the earth again / when my grandfather left / i imagined holding my palms over the land trying to detect for him/ not to exhume him / but to make where he was a site / to circle / to remember / i was young + i wanted something to hold , a bone, an empty blasphemy /
I think of the ways our bodies remember, layer by layer, how even in his sleep, awoowe could fix engines, coaxing out their spoilt insides + letting the motor breathe again. I think of his hands, moving phantoms silent + furious.
How even without meeting, my hands knew to move this way. // In the car home from a show, I tell my father about epigenetics, how porous our bodies are, how our genomes leak + we inherit transience. The car stalls, and we press our palms against the engine + soon, we are moving again, stars bone-bright + heavy.

6.

When aabe first trained to be a taxi driver, I remember him, reciting the names of the intersections, until he could vivisect the city, he could tell you every way, the roads met each other. Sometimes, I think of the ways he stumbles over language, how the letters collapse against his tongue. Even in Somali, he reads phantom words, ghosting behind the text.
I close my eyes, but his crestbroken face leaks through bright anyway / attempting to sort through language attempting to transcribe, the motorways and their junctions, faltering.

7.

I try to translate what I write to him, but every version is broken. I write about his wrists. I write that he is fading / I write instructions to stay/ and find no equivalent phrases. I write of his scars + call them records + he asks *'how can you transcribe my body / what are you recording it for ?'*
On stage, slick with sweat + aliveness, I speak of his bones ^ + offer his body to the audience. I tell him, *'you won't be consumed. I am using words, not limbs'*.
I finish speaking and the audience applauds, knowing I gave him away for nothing worth having.

8.

I tell myself, I did it because I wanted us to last. I wanted to stitch our every action into a legacy / for there to be a trace of our presence in this world / I wrote so we could remain, somewhere.
I meet my father, outside, at the end of his night shift. I enter the car, with my still evaporating words. We drive home, both of us, small, earth-made, alone.