

I could not sleep for three nights now.

Insomnia was always close to me, but our relationship has not been this intimate in a while.
Anxieties creeping in the air; does this sound familiar?

Perhaps I have been over pressuring myself to produce an account that would do justice to the dreams made tangible by these magical humans.

“You okay?” “I guess so.”
“Hot?” “Not really.”

Hitting my head over and over onto some surface.
That useless part of my mind says to light another cigarette.
Sure, that will certainly save the day.

There are two heartlines to this narrative.¹

The first arises from the performance nights. How they produce the space in which a queer body experiments, or where a queer body is disentangled from a language that tries to stabilize all bodies.

The second line comes from last year’s Pride march, and how the march itself revealed that the coordinates of time and space in which everybody is asked to exist in – or everybody is convinced that they exist in – are not singular. We can and do dislocate ourselves from this particular plane and move both in the dominant understanding of the present – we are still visible, we can still be seen – and at the same time, we move in a space that feels closer to another future with a different past.

I emphasize these lines in the face of our realities under fascism, particularly in the Middle East: the blaming of an “other,” in this context a queer other, for the failures of political leadership within deteriorating late-capitalism – a recurrent strategy, from the heydays of empire-craft, to distract and mobilize a politics of fanaticism.

One of the relentless schemes employed by the Turkish government is to try to erase the queer presence – erase the presence of the queer. And what I feel comes across from these two heartlines is that their attempts are *doomed* for failure.

On the one hand, as a queer body is dislodged from essentialism, it floats, and floats freely, and ceaselessly, in such a way that when they make claims against the queer body, the body that they are talking about is already gone. It may have been present at a point, it may come back there, we do come back there, but we are not *just there*.

¹ I didn’t know what heartlines meant – it just felt right. I looked it up, and apparently “heartline” is the line of the palm that reveals one’s emotional state – and that feels like a perfect match.

And the second line is complimentary, because when they try to reach towards and grab us, or attack us in *this* physical real, the real in which they are immersed, a fantasy they have immersed themselves in, we float away in a wave of trust. We claim alternative configurations of time and space, which cannot be defined through their language, or the way they utilize language.

So, what the two heartlines create are continuous, naughty, ever revolving spaces of possibility. They render the queer uncatchable.

And as I have experienced it, these lines become most tangible in Istanbul's Istiklal Street.

To spot me in the crowd of Istiklal Street, look for a queer in a ho-top, camera dangling in the front, perhaps flaunting a low rise that cheekily reveals a G-string. These gems would surely have been hidden under a baggy sweater as I was saying goodbye to my mother earlier in the night. "I don't understand why you go to that filthy district" she would declare each time. "There is no life left in there" she would press, referring to the myriad, oppressive policies that caused stellar hubs of nightlife to shut down in the past decade. "Just an obsession of mine," I may have brushed off...

Throughout her history, Istiklal has been the home of the immoral, the corrupt, the queer – the beautiful monsters of all shades and intensities. And however much the government tried to erase our presence, such as through banning the Pride march for the fifth year in a row, they could not disappear the memories nor the bodies in which stories are edged, recorded, and transformed into their future iterations.

Since January of 2018, queer performance culture has been carving out spaces across Istiklal to play with forms of being, through relating, which resurrect creative capacities of bodies.

Dudakların Cengi, which may be translated as the epic war of the lips (though this is falteringly unfulfilling as any move between languages), is the name of the first event series that has grown over the past two years and forged the path for various others.

It was started by the mother of all, Madır Öktiş.

When I first met her, Dudakların Cengi followed an open-mic format.

The rules of her game were not perfection, but simply to allow yourself to take whatever disposition of gender, sensuality, and transitory identity your body fancied in the moment. The performed selves would arise from the in-between of oppositions – a space of fluid experimentation that unearthed the

much-feared improprieties of a human. The stage would shake from last minute drunk showdowns to gothic choreographies practiced in bathroom windows, from nostalgic Turkish songs to the everlasting Lady Gaga, with the crowd living each moment in screams, moans, snaps, and cheers...

A night could only end with a group performance.

After this finalé, the coats would be drawn over sweat-drenched combinations of lace, latex, and leather, while the enormous shades were pulled over magnificently elaborate eye make ups. As the outside world set up to continue living their perceived-to-be inevitable real, arm-in-arm, we would leave the club, an insurgent embodiment, awaiting to take over.

The Pride ban enacted by the municipality was predictability not the final word.

Hundreds of queers of all ages, identities, and alignments, performed the games we knew too well to *pass* through the police barricades, which had been erected to identify and keep out the undesirables. We gathered in Mis Sokak, where trans women had built homes, sewn relationships, and cared for the streets for decades.

The cops announced: read your press release, then everyone will disperse. Of course, nobody dispersed, so the pigs do what they do the best: violence.

As screams and swears replaced songs and chants, we slowly disappeared behind the wall of gas. Yet what the police saw was simply an illusion. We left in small, mischievous pacts and traversed alleyways we knew like the backs of our hands. In moments of intersection, a recognition arising from meeting of the eyes, we would whisper to one another the coordinates of the next action.

Do not let my romance fool you – violence remained continuous. Some shop owners attacked us of their own accord, pointed our directions to the police; a friend who ran into a hotel to hide from the gas was kicked back onto the pavements by a receptionist. But their hate is old news; our power was lodged in what they would never feel – a loving togetherness that birthed a marching underground, while the tourists, fascists, and normies thought it was a day as any other.

And when we physically united again at the far end of Istiklal, an explosive collapse of realities would take place.

The police? They were always late to the party. By the time their monotonous sounds arrived, we had sung, drunk, and smoked our joy into the air – ready to transform once over into ephemeral forms.

As the word and fame got carried around, hundreds started attending performance nights, with a clear demarcation of who would come up on that stage: the *queens* of Dudakların Cengi. The content and

form of what was to be experienced, however, remained utterly unpredictable. Shia songs forsaken by the government may ring across the crowd, piercing through unnamed silences. Bodies may be transformed in bloody scenes of birth, freeing the erotic capacities of the human animal. The grotesque may be pushed to its limits, with dead fish and piss covering the audience.

And the utopian crawling out of these nights would not be limited to the magnetizing stage. The walls became porous as alleyways came to life, with cigarette smoke, wet lips, and strategy talk.

At each night of Dudakların Cengi, just as through the day of Pride, we disqualified the western telos that defined existence *against* an other. What we were creating could only persist as we committed to holding one another, shifted our forms to make room for each other – an act defining of love.

I perceive the queens, alongside the countless creators of queer art, as rendering irresistible these arduous processes of becoming, and offering paths washed in hope even when the weight of the present may mark a complete sense of loss.

The narratives of fascism are all too familiar by now.

As policies of neoliberalism have dried the country of its resources, the state is increasingly branding marginalized groups as the true cause of the collapse. Their latest favorite target stands as the immoral others, america's offspring, the queer kin who flaunt their sensuality and destroy the family.

Targeted street violence against the queers has risen in the past months, with some establishments starting to post signs announcing queer people would not be allowed in their premises.

A consorted effort to *erase* the queer out of their present.

What they do not understand is – say it with me! – *queer is uncatchable*.

Our bodies will always exceed the cages they try to enact, for what embodies change cannot be controlled.

Our loves, memories, and creations will scream out new collectivities, engrained in a time that is persistently arriving.

Wet with desire, indulging the utopia,
calling out to all: “come on in; the water is, *oh so good*.”