



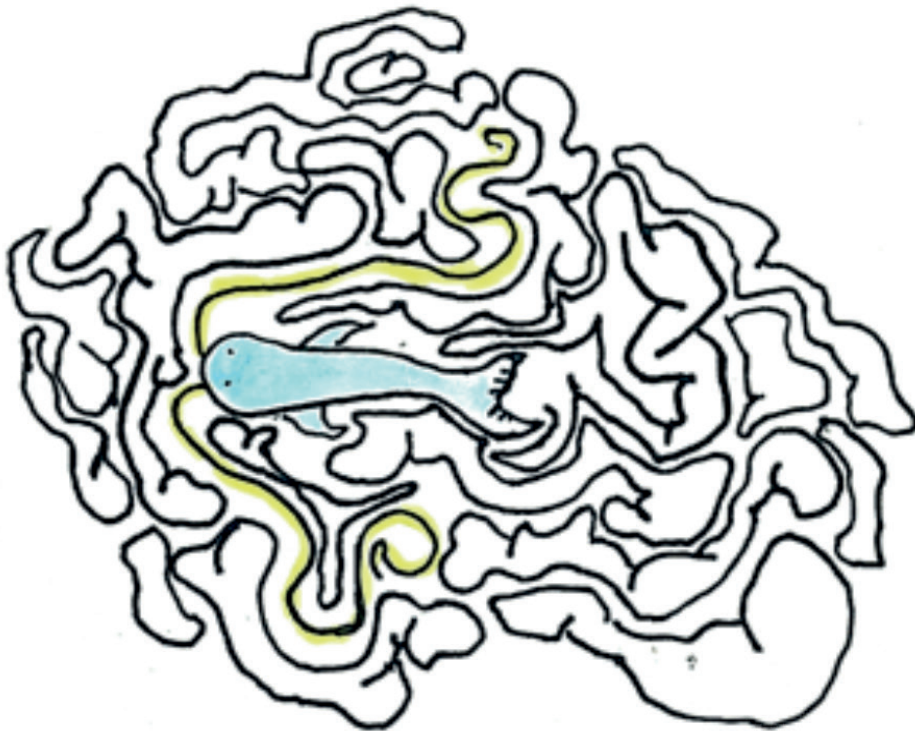
30.5.19

# CatFish

ORNA KAZIMI

## 'I' as a space for occurrence

This writing is resulting of the movement of a CatFish with red fins through my brain. It is a CatFish growing up, there, in my mind. I call this writing that of someone inhabited by a CatFish because when the CatFish moves in between the cracks of my mind its long narrow 'moustaches' pass through the tiny cracks of my mind very smoothly. The moustaches touch what I have forgotten like the red door of our house, the image of my mom's eyes, sounds from where I am not anymore.



It goes into the cracks between my memories. The memories without any voice to unfold any story. This catfish is too slippery that once it touches the walls of memories it then faces the impossibility of comprehending them. Thus, I am not capable of holding or locating the CatFish and it keeps slipping away. But when the moustaches trigger the past my memories come to life; if I can call them memory. I am diagnosed with a Cat-Fish moving in my mind. When I heard the word "CatFish" for the first time, I did not know what it is. The first thing I noticed was it is set together of "Cat" and "Fish", simple. I was confused by idea behind this strange juxtaposition. I thought there should be a cartoon called CatFish about a creature half cat and half fish the cartoon I watched when I was a child called "CatDog", about an animal half dog and half cat.

This is a confrontation with the CatFish in my mind which constantly drags me to the past which I cannot or do not want to reach.

Baaboo, meaning grandfather in Hazaragi language, once told me that he feels something moving in his mind and which does not allow him to sleep. He said that it is trauma. Since then no one has seen him. I started to read about trauma. It does not surprise me that people assume that Afghanistan, where I am from (though I do not know where I am from), is my trauma. This link between trauma and Afghanistan has the power to stretch the corner of peoples' lips downwards. And with a raised eyebrows and light in their eyes they usually say with a soft voice: "I understand".. Therefore, what people expect from this CatFish is war. Or as they read this they are waiting for a descriptive section about a horrible catastrophe that I have witnessed. To explain how Afghanistan and trauma relate in my life, I always add the information: "I am from Afghanistan despite being born in Iran, Mashhad, Gholshahr". In fact I spent almost my whole life in Gholshahr (a district in the outskirts of Mashhad). People normally get disappointed. However, it is satisfying for me to see how I could blur the apparently obvious link between me, Afghanistan and trauma.

I am struggling: can my memories be categorised as traumatic memories, or not. What can be considered as trauma?

The American Psychiatric Association has defined PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) as "a response to an event outside the range of usual human experience" (Caruth, 1995, p. 3). But how can I distinguish a 'usual experience' from an 'unusual experience'? Who does make the decision to divide these two and how? Once I went to a mental clinic to ask about CDAT (complex depression, anxiety and trauma). The man who was working at the reception had a quick look at me and kept on working on what I interrupted saying: "You should be refereed by a doctor".

So the psychiatrist asked me: "What specifically does frighten you?" While I said nothing I was thinking of the CatFish.

At the end, it turned out that I have been just a spoiled slob who does not have any understanding of either Hiroshima or concentration camp that is a trauma. Well, that is right, I was neither in Hiroshima nor a concentration camp. I even have not been in Sefid-sang camp (A camp located in an isolated part of Mashhad built for Afghans who come to Iran).

Are traumatic symptoms in the event or in the person experiencing it? The horror of a massacre for sure can be traumatising for everyone, although the level of effects would



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be different based on their personality and sensitivities towards what they experience. I suggest that an event can be traumatising without being catastrophic at all, in fact, it might be quite normal for others involved. Trauma cannot be defined by the event itself but rather by its personal importance and the way you experience it. Each person experiences the same event differently and thus the impact differs for each. What about horror? What makes horror horrific? I am interested in how our perception can turn a “usual experience”, not necessarily a bloody and/or obviously violent event, into a trauma. The incomprehensibility of “traumatic neurosis” is like the slippery feature of the CatFish between the cracks of my mind. I try to understand and it slips out and the CatFish keeps on moving and growing inside of me.

Experiencing trauma is dealing with something your body went through: your body experienced it. While trauma and its cause can lie in the past, symptoms are part of the present. An unfinished experience in the past, and as Freud explains during which the person seems unharmed, leads to the development of “traumatic neurosis” (Freud, 1895, quoted in Caruth, 2016, p.72). Something taking place outside your body in the past, turns into something inside you in the now and future without being mediated and agreed on. You continuously re-experience the past through the present. The time that this external happening began to store itself inside of you is a hidden process with no symptoms. This period is called “incubation period” (Freud, 1895, quoted in Caruth, 2016, p.72). The difficulty of finding the roots for intrusive images, sound or event is that they demonstrate a truth from the past that now might be distorted in the mind and the possessed person no longer can recognise them or locate them. You are exposed to the haunting sounds, images or events inhabiting your mind against your explicit wish. However, the possessed person is not even aware that she has been occupied by something at the time. Sometimes the return of the image or event takes years. This CatFish is possessive. I do not know since when this CatFish has formed itself and started to grow.

There is a contradiction about trauma and what is supposed to be an “experience” which is traumatic: the failure of living the experience consciously when it occurred. It is a delayed experience. While the event is happening, the mind refuses to fully experience it. Although the event happened in the past and you survived, it begins to be experienced in the present. Therefore, the event stores itself inside of you unconsciously waiting to be experienced gradually or out of the blue. The CatFish makes me relive moments and I do not understand why.

These moments are slippery and I have not caught them in order to analyse them. The more I try to understand it, the more I am convinced that there are limits for understanding. I should not confuse knowing the facts of what happened with understanding what has happened to me.

Reading about trauma made me think whether a trauma has different types. Can this CatFish in my head be a type of trauma as it has been for Baaboo?

I think that those like me who have not faced death just as a matter of chance are still a survivor. In Afghanistan I came to believe that every moment of my life is just a matter of chance and I saw how people turn into such an instant nothingness as if they have never existed. In such a geography of death, I suppose everyone is a survivor. A survivor who has been part of a horrific event and a survivor of a violent geography have some things in common: both encounter the question of why did I survive. Why should those people be dead and I am alive? Can someone suffer from a catastrophe which has happened to others? But not to her as matter of fate or chance? I did not experience an explosion or bombing but I did experience the horror of it: that it might happen every moment for me, like a shadow. Can I be traumatised? I have noticed after each catastrophe almost all my friends on social media think of themselves as the next one to go. It seems like I have survived death for now. I was waiting for it to come and to happen, but it did not. Instead I have to carry this CatFish now.

Being a survivor of a specific event or having survived a life full of fear, poverty and no rights confronts me with the problem of feeling guilty for being alive. I believe that a survivor of a hostile space, as opposed to a lethal and bloody event, has to deal with two kinds of struggles: first, is getting along with the feeling of guilt, because you did not have to witness other peoples' death. Second, is to stay alive after the death of others elsewhere. This feeling of betrayal makes me fall silent. I rather suffer in silence, because talking would be a way of becoming free from the past, which brought the CatFish into me and there is no after the CatFish. I must feel guilty and suffer. I never saw what they saw. I, a survivor, rather carry the burden of guilt in solitude.

The CatFish moves through me and forces me to remember. This is my attempt to write about the CatFish as it goes into the past through the dark cracks of my mind. It is an investigation into my own mind and the way I experience the CatFish.



# The taste of dust

It is during my first days in Kabul in 2013. People are rushing to work and all roads are occupied with overcrowded old buses and cars. Men stand in the open door of the driving van; they do not want to be late for work waiting for the next overfilled van. There is a creamy haze everywhere that limit the visibility. On the bus in the morning, I am watching bicycle drivers who appear from dust as their mouths are covered with a scarf. I notice the presence of a few blurry shapes on the road while all vehicles are careful not to overrun them. I am not able to see clearly until I get closer and the shapes turn out to be ragged people, some of them were sleeping and some begging on the roads as if they are weeds grown out of the ground in the middle of the roads. They are humans as worthless as dust on the road. It seems to me that they are dressed up to play a pile of soil. One of the shapes walks from under layers of dust towards me saying that very soon no one would remember me. The bland taste of dust has become a reminder for me of that oblivion.

I am back in my room in London and hold my head tightly hoping that CatFish would stop moving. However it does not.

Like a wavering grain field, Baaboo is conjured in a mirage. It has possessed my long shaking fingers now. I have become the empty content attached to the image. The image of him is detached from any dimension. Time and space are as abstract as my gaze. However, I do not remember when I was drained and poured by the scene. Maybe when I was drinking black tea staring at the neighbour's pine tree in Golshahr. I have been possessed by a sound that does not say anything. The empty space of the image (which I am attached to) giggles and the catfish slips through the throat of the image from which the sound comes.

The doctor prescribes me some pills in order to not let the CatFish grows more. I think the small pills are likely to kill all sounds wandering behind my eyes. I say to myself that I will get rid of the sounds I see. The pills start to make layers on top of each other in front of me. The cornea of my eyes is getting thicker to keep the outside out and everything seems blurry and far away from me. It sounds like nothing from outside no longer can touch me. A couple of months later on, the pills stopped working and now I am too distorted. I find myself in a dream. I am not real. I am just happening in a dream. I come to reality like an intrusive sound, like a sound that wakes me up frightened in the morning.

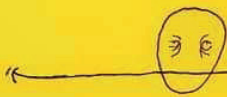


The CatFish was growing and I began to see memories coming out of a lamp silently like gas. Like smells that sneak into my room through the hole of my door.

The CatFish is taking over my body. It wanders through my fingers. I have got a constant shake as if my fingers were the branches of a weeping willow. The CatFish sounds like a delicate poem which is not readable. A poem as touchable as the dust in my mouth in Kabul. Thus, it can last for ever. I am possessed and filled by the dust. I have become an empty space in order to be inhabited by dust. Those events no longer exist outside of me. I have seen the long roots of these events. Their roots start behind my eyes and go reach deep into somewhere in this world.

Baaboo had gone when the CatFish began to move. He left because Baaboo's smile was too wide.

The CatFish is growing up and keeps moving smoothly in my head. I hit the head on the wall while I can hear that the CatFish is eating my mind to make more space. My eyelids are drawn towards the ground and I see nothing but the back of my eyes. The CatFish keeps taking me back to home where my mom is sitting outside in front of our red door in 25 Golbu, Gholshahr, Mashhad, Iran. She always has been waiting for something to happen at the end of the road. Mom does not know neither which part of Baaboo was true: the deepness of the line in between his lips or the heaviness of all his cells on the payment? Mom heard a sound coming from a mirage asking her to prepare for a funeral. But she did not listen to it. So no one read the Qur'an for the immortal Baaboo who lives in a mirage.



*Baaboo's smile was too wide to fit into the streets of Golshahr.*

## Where do sounds go?

I am just a sound now and detached from myself and my body. I look at myself as the separation happens. As the CatFish moves it leaves a sticky liquid behind in my mind. I happen like a sound, which has lost its body. Like me, sounds of missing bodies are haunting through the air looking for their bodies.

It is 2016, she is at home and hesitates whether she should say to the neighbour, whose sons have been lost on the way to reach Europe, that sounds do not get lost. That their sounds just have exceeded the limit of hearing. They still are there somewhere. “The poor neighbour does not have a voice anymore and stopped talking”, mom mumbled. When it was called “refugee crisis” the sounds’ intensity in the air had reached its highest although at the time I still was a part of her, a part of a body and CatFish still was small. Sounds and images are lingering on her eyeball as if they have escaped from the black abyss in which the words begin to lose their meaning. Perhaps it is the gap that Lanzman (1995, p.206) locates between understanding and not understanding.

Come, here in the mute lightness of incomprehension. She is listening to the CatFish. It sounds like a round stone. Memories are sounds trapped in the roundness of a stone. She is trapped in the roundness of herself. Mom always carries her stare to the mosque. She never forgets to kiss the greenness of the mosque’s door. As she adjust her position on the stairs of the mosque, CatFish repeats this so that mom stood in front of the mosque’s green door for days. And the world stopped there. There are fragmented and displaced memories wandering in her eyes. This is not merely an act of remembering but being there in an event, a submerged event under the layers of years. While the body is still the stubborn, CatFish is moving continuously inside her mind.

As a haunted sound, I saw her becoming a sack filled with moments. She was constantly living in the past through the present. She was not dead but completely still left on the bed. Things were occurring inside her mind because of the CatFish. She stopped fighting and the CatFish took over of her gradually. The CatFish was the only thing left in the body and she was conjured in the past in Kabul and Golshahr.

The whiteness of this paper...

The whiteness of this space inside her body...

The whiteness of this paper is the mirage in which she saw Baaboo. There is not any space left inside her mind. I am detached from 'she'. She has left her body to travel in her past. She is a child and lives in Golshahr where old men are used to stare at the asphalt of the roads. Maybe they try to remember something related to asphalt.

Inside a traumatised community the lines between what distinguishes "usual" from "unusual" become blurry. They are all drained and become fate. Next-door the mosque is dressed in bright green and Fridays it welcomes the coffins coming from a long trip from Syria. She never could get used to this greenness of that door. It was like the dustiness of dust in Kabul. She left the open door of the mosque behind and went further back in times, long years before the time when the mosque's door was not painted green yet. Baaboo was living with them in their house. Baaboo still was staring at the asphalt like all his old friends when she came. She sat beside him and listened to his stories about his own land in Ghor. This was the only thing that he liked to talk about. But she knew that this is going to be the last time that she is listening to him, that he was going to go to find his land. When CatFish took her to Baaboo time, she had learned about Sefid-sang camp where Afghan refugees were taken to in Sefid-sang camp in the Razavi province of Khorasan. It was a mute memory that nobody wanted to talk about. Just mom whispered in her ear that they all, all Afghans in Golshahr, were in that camp before. Although she could not remember whether she was born by then or not. The word "Sefid-sang" was surrounded by a usual silence. No making sense machine is able to reach it. Sefid-sang was as old as Baaboo.

A deadly earthquake happened in 2017 in Sefid-sang city which left many Iranian civilians killed. In Golshahr, Sefid-sang became a popular word again and all agreed that it was a curse for the mass killings of Afghans which happened in the camp in 1998. So one said: "Finally, God has woken up". It had taken God years to wake up and Baaboo was gone by then. He left to find his land. The name of the camp means a white stone although no one was interested to hear her interpretation because it was self-explanatory. It was a solid name buried under asphalt. A name that made Baaboo always sigh after hearing it. It was no longer a word but such a huge amount of trapped air that comes from the deepest part of the body. It was something that all Afghan refugees of Golshahr have in common. Baaboo folded his hand behind his back. She looked like a five year old girl realising that Baaboo is preparing for an important event.

God has woken up and said: "They (Afghans) tried to disobey the rules and the wardens of the camp called for help. It did not take so long until helicopters arrived in the sky and shot everybody. Anyway, they buried them and covered the hole with asphalt in 1998."

There was no line between the “usual” and “unusual”. Each Friday in 2016 was an old wooden coffin on its never-ending way towards the mosque in Golshahr.

It is Friday and the voice of the Qur’an lingers on in dead ears.

She is now 25 years old trying to ignore the presence of her neighbour in their home. The neighbour does not sob. She lets the material of her scarf suck the tears wandering in wrinkles so slowly and in silence down her face. As if they are not in any rush for ages. She sniffs quickly and sighs so deeply that I can chase its roots in her right big toe: ‘Heey God, what can I do..’

Mom has sat so close to her friend saying nothing. She has had enough time to learn the language of grief in Iran.

“What if he goes to enrol for Syria’s war”?

It was a muffled voice that is doubtful of its audience.

The tears are switched off.

Someone should have turned on the tears tap so that the wrinkles of her cheeks would become filled again.

“God curses them”. The voice has a sense of confidence this time.

I am just a mute voice tracing her in the past. I could find easily her gaze staring at the cream coloured flower of hand-made carpet at home, Golshahr.

Her words went off like a fire alarm and as suddenly as her tears created a harmony.

“Today he came back home from Golshahr Square at noon and smashed his lunch pack into the wall”, saying:

“I go to Syria, they pay a huge amount of money!”

The stacked plates are making a fragile song in the next-door mosque. It is lunch time now for funeral participants and I can still hear the Qur’an crying out: “In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful” “(Quran 1:1).



It is silence.



## Death starts from toes

She has been lying down on the bed motionless in London for days and does not need to read any newspaper to know what is going on in Kabul. Her body is on the bed, but it is empty and she is elsewhere talking to her landlady in Kabul. The landlady came to her in order to ask if the sound had woken her up last night, or not. She had not heard anything and the landlady was amazed how that was possible. The Landlady held her breath for one moment and continued: "The sound was that strong that everyone was woken up. Her son who was holding her hand shook his head up and down and said: "It was so hot and the air became solid like meat and started to smell". She said no one goes to work today and closed all windows. She knows the autumns of Kabul very well. When the slices of red meat start to fall down on the streets, it is autumn. It smells like burnt meat. She was familiar with the perpetuity of Kabul's autumn.

It has been weeks now that I am watching the body lying on the bed holding itself tightly. She was facing her life after others' death. The body was inhabited completely by the CatFish. She could not make her way back to her body after that anymore. She was lost. She stayed in times of the past. I am mourning for her and her endless roundness.

Now that she has lost her body, her mom would meet her constantly in the intimacy of her ear space. Mom will stop talking so that she can hear her daughter's constant sound. In this whiteness, you cannot count all the weeks that she had been being drained of herself. The body she used to inhabit is solid like an object now with occasionally tiny shakes around eyes. However, she tried to come back but the CatFish had become much bigger than she could control. So, she was no more present and the CatFish had taken her to one of the deepest cracks of her mind. She got lost and not capable of seeing herself in the present. There was no time but past. While she was running away from her neighbourhood, her chest became like a hot brick and incapable of exchanging the air between inside and out. There was a hole in her lung and its colour was going dark red. She is running away while an obscure thing terrifies her.

I just could watch her body in the present and her in the past. After all I will be the only thing that will last and remain from her like dust in the air. I got close to her as she barely was able to breath and was sitting with mom in front of the greenness of the mosque. I said to her: "There is no way to get away of the roundness of the past which you are trapped in". I insisted: "There is neither present nor future for you". She just slowly leaned her head against the wall and closed her eyes.

I got distance from her and just watched the CatFish which has become the same size as the whole body. The only function of the body was providing an empty space for the Catfish. While her head was resting against the mosque's wall I said: "The CatFish is going to rip your body apart very soon from within." She smiled and thought that she would become free from time and the CatFish very soon. It seemed that the time she was waiting for was coming. And the CatFish smashed her body to the floor and stretched the skin of the body from inside. Her world in the past was about to stop and she felt a huge sense of calm. She kissed Baaboo and said there is no longer a past, present and future, nothing. It was late night and the CatFish kept smashing the body to the floor so madly that a neighbour noticed noise.



20. August. 2017

## Yellow room

They kept the body in a “Crisis House” somewhere in London. The body was quite empty and drained from her presence but very heavy because of the CatFish’s weight. Nobody understood where she was. Mental health workers used different ways of talking to her and poured medication down her throat to find her. Every day they came and checked the size of the CatFish. They were obligated to employ music therapy twice a day. Two weeks went by, the CatFish started to shrink. They understood that she needed their help to recognise herself again after the CatFish. They kept talking to the body about the life she has in London in order to bring her back from the roads between Golshahr and Kabul. At times, the body seemed to be shaking. She was resisting and was trying not to come back. She was too scared and thought if she could recognise herself, she would go through the past again and again. Thus she shouted that leave her alone. She believed that she pisses the past off for ever. Nobody could hear her. Therefore, they kept trying to shrink the CatFish. She was kept in a room called “yellow room”. There were only six rooms breathing in silence on the second floor. On the right side of the yellow room there was a blue room. Once someone, who they say is dumb, put a foolish note in front of the blue room. Rebecca, in the blue room began to scream loudly as soon as she read it and got a panic attack. The dumb person had asked: “Hey, Rebecca. What are you doing?”

Rebecca got too anxious and upset. They had to change her room to the green room, which was far from the dumb person. All this happened while a petite female’s body was shaking in the yellow room. The CatFish got smaller and smaller until it had shrunken to the same size it had when she began to write. They could not take the CatFish out though. She is back in her body now in London. She needs to accept the CatFish as a part of herself. Somehow she was able to take over the space the CatFish had conquered. So finally one day she opened her eyes in the Crisis House. They reported: Petite female, brown hair, olive skin. Appropriately dressed in blue jeans, grey trainers, oversized red chequered shirt. Poor eye contact throughout, often looking away or down at hands. Fiddling with buttons through conversation, swaying back and forwards.

## Ordinary words

I think it is time to talk about a normal day. This is a normal day in November. I have an appointment with a GP at 11:30 am. I have one hour and half left for writing until my appointment.

By this page probably you have got a sense of intimacy with me. So I can tell you that I am drinking the fourth cup of green tea which has lime flavour. I just ate a date with my tea and still two dates are left on my table. However, I am going to eat them with my fifth cup of tea.

I told you that this is a normal day and I can see the red bus passing by from where I sit. It is the bus number 390 towards King's Cross. I know it because it is the only bus passing this road.

While I am sitting straight on my chair in my room by the window I feel a strong desire to become horizontal; parallel with the lines of my bed. Usually I write about a normal day, when I sit in a brown coffee shop. The coffee shop is painted brown and located in Archway. I like its lamps and I spend my normal days there.

I am not sure if it is the brown coffee shop that makes a day normal. They are too tied to each other and I cannot say which one comes first; the normal-ness or brownness of the coffee shop.

I am sitting in the brown coffee shop on a normal day. The air that I am breathing belongs to the present. Everything makes sense; even watching people passing behind the big windows of the coffee shop.

No sound No space.

I woke up and found the morning decorated by the green leaves of trees outside the windows.



July 2017

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