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LIVING INQUIRY IN HIGHER EDUCATION: NOMADIC INTERBEING

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Abstract

This paper provides insights about the problems of finding oneself at home in the neoliberalized international Higher Education sector through a visual autobiographical narrative. Within an increasingly mobile sector, I reflect on my experience as international lecturer in the UK to generate a dialogue between text and image through the sequential art of comic. I acknowledge the problematic aspects of a displaced migrant subjectivity. The story proposes meditation as the mental training to find a stable home in oneself instead of making oneself feel at home depending on uncertain changing circumstances. With a transdisciplinary approach, this proposal takes theoretical elements from political and social studies, Art Education, postfeminist theories and Buddhist philosophy to merge them in a creative narrative. To do so, I apply aspects of the arts-based educational research methodology of a/r/tography and living inquiry. The paper takes the invitation of a/r/tography to live between the coexistent and interdependent practices of the artist/ researcher/ teacher. A/r/tographers become involved in processes of inquiry that recognizes subjectivity, autobiography, reflection, meditation and story-telling as valid forms of constructing meaning through art making. I commit to the process of embracing both the personal, the professional and the spiritual, where the professional-personal are in a continuous process of becoming. The struggle to belong to the new place-culture might point to an awareness of the network of interdependent relationships that challenges the modern notion of the individual self. Therefore, relationality and Buddhist concept of interbeing can lead to the proposal of meditation as a methodology of inquiry. Following this approach, the comic narrative aspires to construct an emergent dialogic space with the reader that allows me to embrace my vulnerability, pain and discomfort of searching for one's place in the world. There is a strong communicative potential in graphic narratives to engage with readers-viewers and generate a meaningful subjective connection. This connection has the potential to allow the singular-plural to emerge, with no intention to provide generalizable universal truths. The limitations of the study rely on the limited ability of the narrative to touch the reader-viewer. The success of the work depends on its ability to disrupt previous conceptions of "being at home".

Keywords: Living inquiry, meditation, a/r/tography, interbeing.

1 HOMELESS AND REST-LESS IN THE INTERNATIONALISATION OF NEOLIBERAL HIGHER EDUCATION

"It is particularly important not to confuse the concept of subjectivity with the notion of the individual or individualism: subjectivity is a socially mediated process of entitlements to and negotiations with power relations. Consequently, the formation and emergence of new social subjects is always a collective enterprise, "external" to the individual self while also mobilizing the self's in-depth and singular structures." (Braidotti 2011, 18 [1])

In this paper, I pay attention to the impact of the neoliberal economy on Higher Education in the UK and how it might push international students and staff towards becoming nomadic subjects.

The impact of the neoliberalization of Higher Education has diverse aspects that affect scholars, students and societies in different ways. As Shore and Wright (2000 [2]) point out, universities have reinvented themselves as quasi- or pseudo-marketised entities competing for quasi-customers (such as students). With the recent introduction of fees of fees in the UK system, students could become high demanding “clients” and higher education is increasingly reduced to a consumer good. The analysis of Watermeyer and Olssen (2016 [3]) of the Research Excellence Framework and the New Public Management system in the UK, criticize the instrumentalization of research with the subsequent loss of academic freedom and criticality. In this regard, Canaan (2010 [4]) stresses that the main value has become competition as higher education becomes a competitive market and universities are restructured and managed to control and direct what academics must perform. Canaan refers to the work of Judith Butler (1993 [5]) to invite us to become aware of the process through which the self becomes subjected to the dominant order and becomes submissive to the neoliberal ideology and imperatives. Canaan stresses how as academics we are disciplined by hierarchies of power that might make us more insecure about our critical positions.

The neoliberal game has no innocence regarding the pressure on lecturers. Some scholars have affirmed that this competition and pressure contributes to a bullying culture (Watermeyer and Olssen 2016, 20 [3]). In some instances, the pressure of work is becoming unsustainable resulting in academics quitting their positions. For Coin (2017 [6]), the quitting phenomena might be an act of resistance and renunciation to neoliberal values. Quitting might not be just a political decision but a desperate attempt to protect one’s own mental and physical health from the exhaustion of the frenetic activity required to keep up with university “demand of efficiency and functionalism” (Coin 2017, 705 [6]). Some scholars do not fit the neo-liberal set of values and therefore live alienated and conflicted by “their ethical ideals and the array of measured, meaningless and bureaucratized tasks that fill their lives” (Coin 2017, 707 [6]). Universities are becoming “de facto exploitative labor market” (Collier, 2013 [7]). In this neoliberal context, well-being and mental health are at risk: “commitment, judgement and authenticity are sacrificed for impression and performances” in the benefit of an ongoing intensification of academic workloads (Ball 2003, 221 [8]). We might feel homeless at work in the midst of bureaucratization, competition and the expectation to demonstrate excellent practice. We might become homeless and restless trying to do everything and trying to be everything: artists, researchers and teachers. Our identities are fragmented into multiple pieces that try to fulfill multiple pressures, expectations and demands.

Identities are rendered as fluid, fragmented, complex and multiple in poststructuralist, postcolonial and feminist theories. The subject is rendered as a non-unit that is rhizomatic (Deleuze, 2004 [9]), singular plural (Nancy, 2000 [10]), and nomadic (Braidotti, 2011 [1]). Nomadic theory (Braidotti, 2011 [1]) aims to construct a political cartographic figuration of mobility in a globalized world. The author points out that the flexibility and dynamism of the subject is forced, among other factors, by exploitative capitalist neoliberal economies and the precariousness of work. World economies generate a flow of transnational capital and labor workforces that feed flows of migration and mobility. This “perverse” force of nomadism privileges the free circulation of data, commodities and goods while restricting the mobility of human subjects such as refugees, asylum seekers and illegal migrants. Braidotti (2011 [1]) uses the metaphor of the two sides of the global coin where one side is the global city and the other side is a refugee camp; both coexisting interdependently. I intend to respond to Braidotti’s political critique of Eurocentrism and nationalism through a visual narrative that explores the embodied spiritual dimension of a nomadic subject looking for home into herself through meditation.

Non-British workers become nomadic subjects in the UK regarding the uncertainty about the new citizenship status. Changing place demands opening the heart and the mind to loss and new learning opportunities. Becoming international involves learning to live between places, languages, cultures and affective territories. It involves loss, change and discomfort. Being international involves learning

to deal with the fear of being seen as inadequate, excessive, and insufficient regarding the new unknown hostess culture's parameters. Depending on the intensity of one's otherness, this fear might involve the threat to be punished, prosecuted, or becoming disposable. Becoming a nomadic international worker might involve feeling restless trying to follow a deep purpose while pleasing the demands of the hosting institution-culture. It is a challenge to align administrative duties with what Giroux identifies as the purpose of higher education: critical insight, imagination and a sense of responsibility that struggles for social justice (2015, 6 [11]). Nomadic theory might overlook the exhaustion trying to conciliate the opposite demands of the neoliberal values of competition, exploitation and accumulation of academic merits with personal and spiritual Buddhist notions of merit associated with generosity, wisdom and deep understanding. Nomadic subjects can become homeless and restless in the midst of neoliberal international academia: how to feel at home with an "inter-national" identity?

"International" can have contradictory meanings in the midst of the Brexit process of separation of the UK from the European Union. On the one hand, the Government aims to control the flow of people and products from other nations. On the other hand, there is an emphasis on the "internationalization" of Higher Education to attract student from overseas and prepare students for a global market. Green and Whitsed (2015 [12]) stress that in the past, Europe and North America have directed their efforts towards outward-bound student mobility, in contrast with the British, Australian and New Zealand strategies to use higher education as an export industry and attract incoming international students. The annual study of internationalization of the organisation Universities UK (2017 [13]) shows a 30% increase in the enrolment of international students in the last ten years in British Universities. While the UK government aims to control the flow of migrants and limit the stay of foreigners, it also struggles to attract international students as sources of capital during their studies. Universities are concerned with making students feel at home (The Guardian, 2016, [14]). International staff members might be able to make a contribution in this regard. This study states that the 29% of academics in the UK are from overseas: "the number of EU academics in the UK has more than doubled in the last decade". British Higher Education is increasingly international and therefore it is relevant to address the challenge of generating a sense of belonging to a global community. Braidotti (2011 [1]) stresses that the point is not to deconstruct the identity of the nomadic subject but to relocate the identity on a new ground that accounts for multiple belongings. How to generate a sense of belonging within multiple and diverse socioeconomic and symbolic locations?

2 MEDITATION AS AN A/R/TOGRAPHIC METHOD OF LIVING INQUIRY

"Living inquiry includes ways of knowing that have traditionally been excluded from academic epistemologies such as the emotional, intuitive, personal, spiritual, and embodied, where there is no strict line drawn among the private, public and professional self."

(Springgay, Irwin and Kind 2005, 903 [15])

The methodology of a/r/tography proposes that researchers become involved in a process of living inquiry generating embodied encounters created through visual and textual understandings that might reflect on their lived experiences. A/r/tography describes living inquiry as an aesthetic encounter where the processes of making and being are inextricably connected to the awareness and practice of visual arts and creative writing. I embrace this challenging integrative proposal to dissolve strict frontiers between the territories of theory and practice. I take the invitation of a/r/tography to expose myself as artist/ researcher/ teacher and become involved in process of inquiry that considers memory, subjectivity, autobiography, reflection, meditation, story-telling, interpretation and representation "in an evocative way, suggesting meaning rather than communicating facts" (Springgay, Irwin and Kind 2005, 903 [15]).

Inspired by a/r/tography, I get involved in a meditative process of living inquiry that pays attention to the diverse responsibilities and roles of the artist/ researcher/ teacher in relation to the multiple academic identities, the spiritual and the personal embodied experience. Therefore, relationality is a key rendering when we get involved in an a/r/tographic process of inquiry. Being an artist, researcher and teacher may have a strong creative potential but it entails many challenges. Becoming a nomadic subject moving from one identity to another has the potential to require an energetic cost that might be frequently overlooked. A/r/tographer's nomadic subjectivity can have two paradoxical potentials. While a/r/tographers have the potential to resist the tensions of neoliberal demands generating meaningful encounters with others through the arts, there is a risk of becoming homeless and restless within the unsustainable demands and desires attempting to address too diverse a range of tasks and roles, wanting to be everything: artist, researcher and lecturer. The aim of the paper is to generate a relational creative meaningful space of meditation, understanding, compassion and transformation. This welcoming space of all aspects of our multiple identities might be useful to set our own limits and direct our actions towards a deep meaningful purpose that can be sustainable in terms of energetic and emotional cost. This is a relational compassionate space among the different aspects of ourselves, so that we can relate in a loving way with others in the midst of the tensions of working places.

Relationality suggests that our process of interpretation and understanding is embodied, it happens in connections to ours and other's bodies, and in connection to other beings (Springgay, Irwin, Kind 2008 [16]). The relational (e)pistemology proposed by Thayer-Bacon (2010 [17]) stresses the transactional nature of knowledge with its social, personal, holistic, ecologic and scientific dimensions. Thayer-Bacon (2010, [17]) mentions American indigenous traditions and Buddhist philosophies as examples of epistemologies that may connect with our essential experience and develop the concept of knowers in relation to others, including the natural world and other non-material realms of existence. The rendering of relationality can resonate with the concept of interdependence and "interbeing" in Buddhist philosophies: *"to be is to inter-be with every other thing. You cannot just be by yourself alone. You have to inter-be with every other thing."* (Thich Nhat Hanh 2009, 3 [18]). Living inquiry and meditation share the aim to reflect on the lived experience. Buddhist philosophy and research aim for reflective practice. Within Buddhism, it is not possible to acquire experience of the notion of "interbeing" without some awareness of the interconnection of causes, effects and conditions. This awareness requires training our attention to perceive and learn how phenomena exist.

Zen Vietnamese Buddhist author and Master Thich Nhat Hanh holds a very poetic approach of the rendering "interbeing" (2009 [18]). In the section "Interbeing", Thich Nhat Hanh invites the reader to see a cloud floating in the sheet of paper. He traces back the relationships of interdependence between the paper, the tree, the rain needed for the tree to grow and therefore the cloud that contains the rain. He also invites the reader to see the sunshine in the sheet of paper that allows the forest to grow; and therefore, acknowledge that the sun and the paper inter-are. He also invites us to see ourselves in the piece of paper as if the observer was part of his/her object of perception. Finally, Thich Nhat Hahn invites us to see that everything in the universe is contained in the sheet of paper. This meditation process invites us to acknowledge the interdependence in the succession of causes and conditions that make life possible. For example, this paper is the result of the struggle of finding an "inter-national" place in the world, the process of developing resilient strategies within neoliberalised Higher Education institutions, and the vital drive to make work meaningful through research. The struggle becomes the mud that feeds the lotus (the compassionate mind). The training of attention, or mindfulness, can facilitate a learning process to deal with obstacles so that we can produce something out of suffering that is beneficial for us and for others.

There are diverse types of meditation in which the training of our attention is a starting point. Thich Nhat Hanh (1993 [19]) describes the fundamentals of meditation practice as a training in four methods: mindfulness of the body, mindfulness of the feelings, mindfulness of the mind and mindfulness of the objects of the mind, as it was stated by the Buddha in the sutra of the Four Establishments of Mindfulness. As it is stated in the Mahayana tradition, "all is just mind. All things are just consciousness" (Thich Nhat Hanh 1993, 124 [19]). Meditation can be a practice of awareness that can help us deal with our condition of nomadic inter-beings subject to constant change in professional vital situations. Nomadic inter-being implies an awareness of interdependence, impermanence and radical relationality in Higher Education. The practice of meditation within a scientific context has the aim to provide a space and a time to relate to phenomena differently. Meditation can acknowledge what is arising in the mind and the body and offer strategies to transform ourselves, change what we do and how we do it. Our continual and contiguous becoming as researchers, mentors and humans, as it is referred by a/r/tography, resonates with the Buddhist philosophy of impermanence and constant change. Breathing consciously allow us to focus on the constant subtle shifting experience that resonates with our mortality. If we expand the scope of being nomadic subjects within one live span to the possibility of multiple rebirths, the notion of nomad opens to the possibility of rendering ourselves as transmigratory beings from life to life. The notion of rebirth and bardo in Buddhist philosophy highlights the relevance of in-between spaces of becoming.

3 TRANSMIGRATORY INTER-BEINGS: IN-BETWEEN SPACES AND BARDOS

"There is only one law in the universe that never changes – that all things change, and that all things are impermanent."

(Sogyal Rinpoche 2002, 29 [20])

A/r/tography has a specific focus on *in-between* places, where the undetermined, the transitional and the unknown emerge. Dealing with the unknown is a constant challenge for migrants who enter a new territory and culture. The experience of "coming and going" from the culture and place of birth to the hosting culture and place of work might open opportunities to think about where is home. In Buddhist traditions, one takes refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha when there is a conscious decision to follow the spiritual Buddhist path. In Buddhist philosophy, the mind is a continuum that has no beginning or end. This understanding of the mind informs the notion of rebirth. If the mind is not material and does not depend on the body, it cannot be inherited from our parents. As Sogyal Rinpoche states, "the great majority of scientists continue to reduce the mind to no more than a physical process in the brain, which goes against the testimony of thousands of years of experience of mystics and meditators of all religions" (2002, 13 [20]). Therefore, the mind can be considered a continuum that might have its own trajectory after leaving the body through the process of death. What follows death is conceptualized as the bardo, defined as an in-between state. Sogyal Rinpoche (2002 [20]) states that bardos do not happen just after death but in any transitional situation. Since life is constant change, life is full of bardos or situations of deep uncertainty with transformational potential. Sogyal Rinpoche (2002 [20]) define bardos as particular powerful opportunities charged with potential, when whatever you do has a crucial far-reaching effect. Sogyal Rinpoche extends the understanding of the bardo as the "moment when you step toward the edge of a precipice" (2002, 11 [20]). This moment might have a great potential for learning and for transformation. Actually, in Tibetan, the word for body means something you leave behind. Sogyal Rinpoche shares the Tibetan notion of the body as baggage that reminds us that we are only travellers, taking temporary refuge in this life and in this body (2002 [20]).

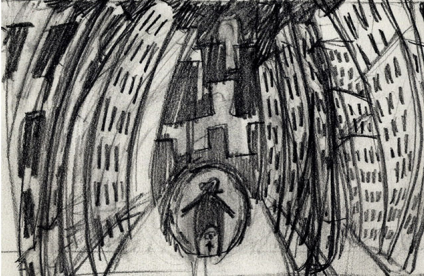
4 MY STORY

Braidotti (2011 [1]) encourages us to use transformative and inspirational imagination to construct horizons of hope in the future. Inspired by Buddhist philosophy and practice, my graphic

story proposes meditation as a process to look for a sense of belonging inside ourselves, opening the heart and the mind to interdependence and impermanence. As it can be seen in figures 1-6, meditation can give us the stability and confidence needed to live situations of constant change. As Sogyal Rinpoche states: “meditation is bringing the mind home” (2002, 60 [20]).



Where is home?



Is home in your town?



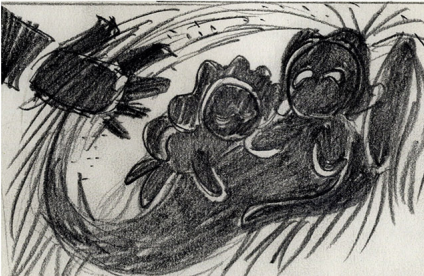
Is home your region?



Is home owning a house?



Is home protection and safety?



I found home in mother's arms.

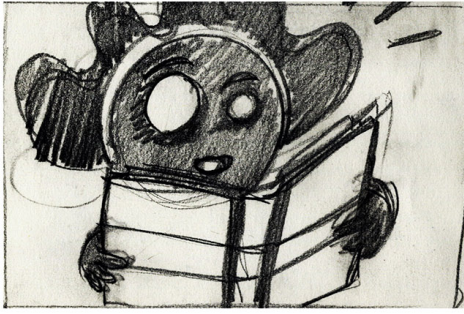


How to find home as an adult?



I found home in learning places.

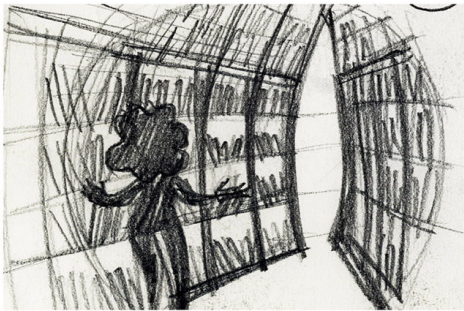
Fig. 1: page 1 of story (sketches).



Some books became my refuge



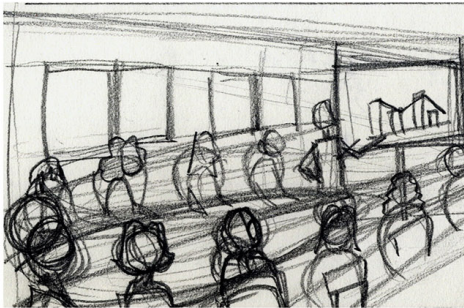
I wanted to become a writer



Until I started a PhD...



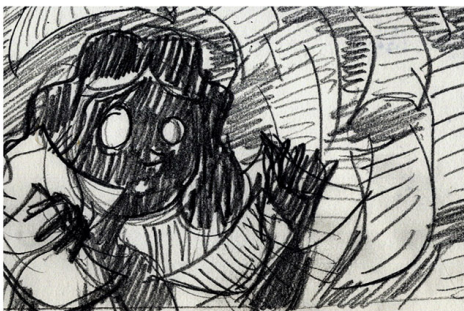
And aimed to work in the Academy



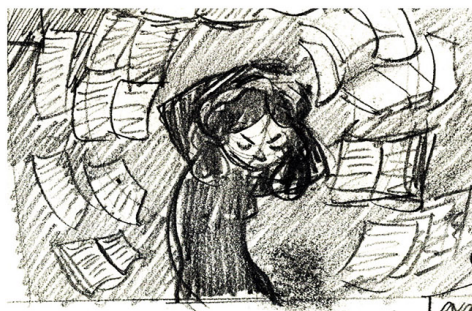
Where is home in competition?



What is my deep motivation?

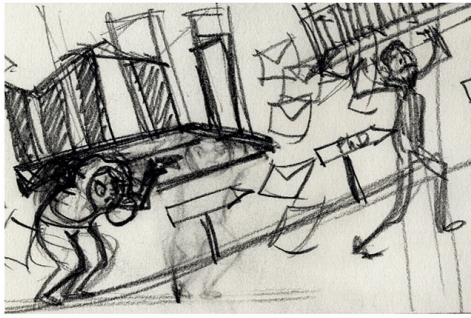


What is the price of doing everything?

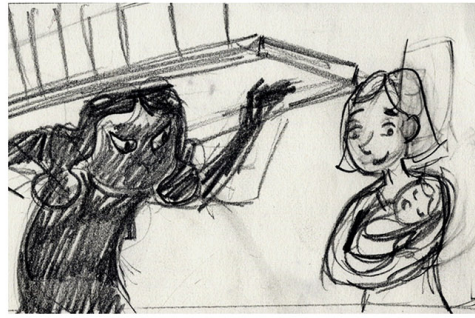


How could I set healthy limits?

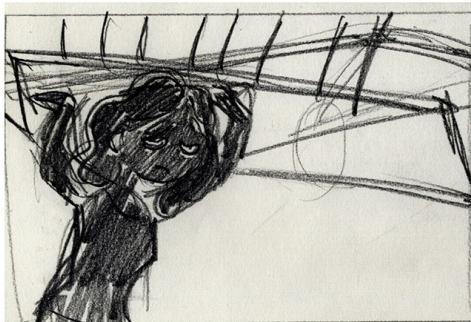
Fig. 2: page 2 of story (sketches).



Homeless in a lonely competition



Jealous about those who were happy



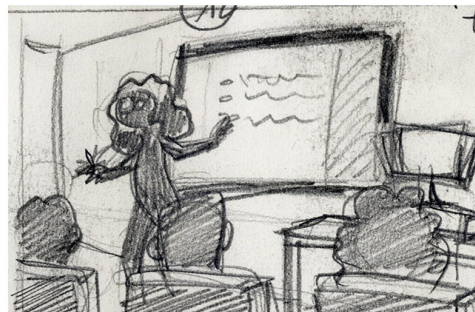
The pressure for merits was unbearable



Then I met him



He made life worth it



I discovered the joy of teaching



Work was now just a part of life



He became my refuge

Fig. 3: page 3 of story (sketches).



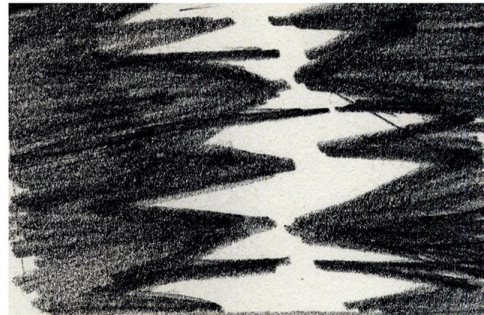
He was my home until we broke up.



Something shook and trembled inside.



My self broke into pieces.



In the midst of chaos I started a search.



Where was I? Where was home?



I only found noise, confusion, pain.



I kept searching a way out of suffering.

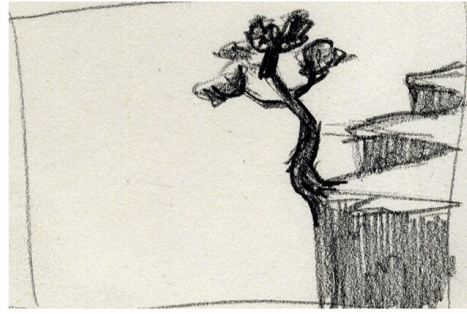


Pain was relieved when I embraced it.

Fig. 4: page 4 of story (sketches).



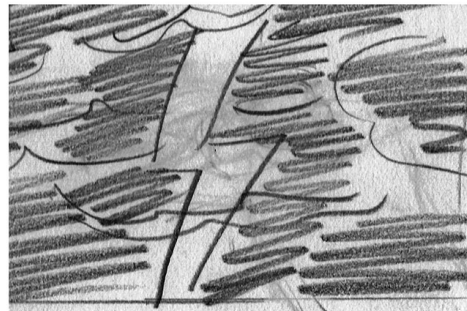
I learnt to be by myself.



My scholarship ended, but not my PhD.



Spain was entering an economic crisis.



My family had to support me financially.



With no future, I became a doctor.



There were no academic jobs any more.



My map of affection trembled again.

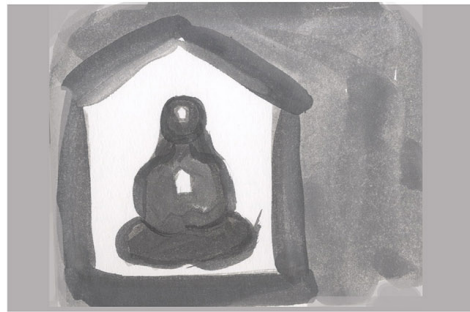


No professional future unless migrating.

Fig. 5: page 5 of story (sketches).



Where is home in the unfamiliar?



What is my pivot point in this dance?



Where do I belong in the midst of pain?



Rooted in love, wings of compassion.



Among the family of sentient beings,



Can I make my mind home?



Shared suffering; wanted happiness,



I found refuge in the Three Jewels.

Fig. 6: page 6 of story (sketches).

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