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*Title: Faith in the darkness of being. ξ*

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## *Disclaimer*

*Due to the limited word-count, some footnotes have been isolated. You are welcomed and encouraged to read everything for extra clarity, however, the value of the text holds in either case.*

- The non-highlighted footnotes are part of the final word count and should be read alongside the main text.*
- The footnotes highlighted with a \* are optional and are not part of the final word count.*

*Additionally, the title translations in Arabic are stylistic and aid in the integrity of the text, however, they do are not part of the word count.*

*Lastly, the final words “Thank you” are merely a gesture for the reader. If considered, the count amounts to 6,011 words — my birth date.*

*If not, this leaves the word count at 6,009 — a gesture to the one that guided me greatly along this process.*

*Enjoy.*

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## *Abstract*

The following thesis text discusses the manifold aspects of mysticism inspired by a personal inner journey through a relevant artistic viewpoint. Utilizing practices termed as occult, the research focuses on traditions of islamic faith, the tarot, numerology and astrology through meaning-making. The themes are derived from personal experiences stemming from an upbringing where parental figures of different cultures combined inspired the creation of a personalized belief system.

The necessity of bringing forth such a research to the Dutch contemporary art scene stems from the apparent resurgence in interest with practices such as astrology and the tarot in the western world. This need, possibly derived from a hyper-awareness towards the darker sides of human nature across the globe, has to be critically examined. The aim is to give credit and value to the eastern cultures that brought about this knowledge to Western Europe, such as those of the islamicate world that the thesis heavily references. It is also an invitation to explore the creation of a belief system that offers guidance through each one's personal journey towards healing and psychological well being. By way of assigning meaning to existence, one is able to give a greater purpose to experiences and the overall state of being. This same methodology shows itself in the act of art-making, hence allowing the practices of faith and the occult to merge with the artistic method.

Amidst times of crisis, trauma and even doom, faithlessness has turned into a luxury. The text will further explore the themes that drive this inquisition such as those of death, pain and rebirth from a subjective viewpoint.

*Where are we now and we are we headed?* \_\_\_\_\_ أين نحن وإلى أين ذاهبون؟

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*Part 011: The past – الماضي*

*I grew up with fear by side. I learned to talk to fear, to give meaning to fear, to befriend it, despise it, overcome it, cope with it; and saw its many facets. Fear is anxiety, uncertainty, that lurking feeling that everything will change and everything will end.*

I was born in Beirut, Lebanon on November 6, 1996. Up until recently, I lived in Lebanon, my father's home country, occasionally visiting a small village in Ukraine, my mother's home country. My father is muslim and is an active practitioner and believer of Islam. He prays, fasts the month of Ramadan and participates in other such practices. According to Islamic teachings, and my dad; the Qur'an<sup>1</sup> is sacred text, the names of God are holy, God is protective.

My mother believes in these teachings and respects them. She also believes, in some way, in astrology and various esoteric rituals and ideas stemming from Eastern European and Ukrainian superstitions. They each engage in their own practices, lending my sister and I some of their knowledge.

As a family, we participate in certain practices that derive from Islamic beliefs. If my sister and I ever woke up from a nightmare as children, my father would put his hand on us and say a few verses from the Qur'an then have us drink water from a copper bowl with beautiful sacred words engraved on it<sup>2\*</sup> to heal and sooth us. I always appreciated these rituals my parents engaged us in to keep away evil, to protect us and our home. I really enjoyed these ceremonies at night, it made the nightmares and the fear go away, it made it easier to deal with scary thoughts and dark feelings. And simply, it felt magical.

While my parents tend towards belief systems that use practices from non-scientific sources, both finished their Masters and PHD degrees in Physics. My father is in fact a professor and head of the Maths and Physics department at the Lebanese University. My mother, on the other hand, has stopped working in this domain and now spends a bulk of her time

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<sup>1</sup> The sacred book that contains the word of God in Islam

<sup>2\*</sup> طاسة الرّعية

working with textile, fabrics, embroidery and other crafty material that have roots in Ukrainian culture and aesthetics.

As for me, I ventured into design with no objection from them. Recently however, after the pandemic of COVID-19, the world was shifting and so was I. Lebanon was seeing the biggest economic crisis to date and alongside personal experiences, the world as I knew it was falling apart. I then made the choice to leave to a country where I could build a better future for myself as well as my family.

In September 2021, I moved to the Netherlands. Exposed to a new world, that of the West, I felt my life begin from zero. I left a full life behind to begin anew and here I saw a drastic shift in perception which signaled this transition. Coming from a place where I would hear the Islamic call to prayer echo through the streets or the church bells ring in the distance, I could not figure out what were the dutch beliefs and practices. This made me question my skin, who I was in relation to this new territory. I peeled it back<sup>3</sup>. In the moment, it hurt. Then it ended and I was relieved. I looked at the peeled skin and saw where I had been, *what* I had been.

I inspected it, and within I saw mountains I spent so much time with. I touched their rocks in my mind, placed myself into their smallest crevices and sat there, feeling myself part of the micro-ecosystem that resides within them, stained by an organism all too familiar to the Netherlands<sup>4</sup>. I tried to feel at home but I could not. The land is flat and I felt myself growing bigger and bigger as I saw no mountains bigger than me, no rocks to remind me of the beauty in roughness, in the sublime. I took two perfectly rectangular rocks and broke one as if setting it free. I juxtaposed the rocks with my fabricated imagined islands and created two universes.<sup>5</sup> One of my previous life and one of a life that could be, unsure yet where I was headed.

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<sup>3</sup> Shedding (Assaad, 2021) - Video performance, liquid latex, my face

<sup>4</sup> The lichen; a symbiotic organism that forms from algae or cyanobacteria and fungi

<sup>5</sup> Lichenscape (Assaad, 2022) - Video, soundscape, mixed media print, sculpture

*If I died, where would I go?*<sup>6</sup>

I stayed long enough within these rocks and found myself observing all the insects that hid from the giants that tread the earth. I saw creatures with hundreds of legs preying on smaller insects. They were spending a lot of time underground. I often wondered what they did there. Spring came and they sprung out into the light, they hunted and crawled and I saw them grow, limb after limb. I began mirroring their behavior, not sure of what I was doing. I wanted to live my life the way they did. I created my own cocoon, my own slime, I laid inside until I was ready to crawl out. I was cold, uncomfortable. I crawled out, I was relieved.<sup>7</sup>

Whether I was prey or hunter in those rocks, I saw a lot of what was unsightly. Heads being ripped and limbs being formed. I ripped some myself, I grew some myself. Still I wanted to merge with the creatures there, we could become one, but we weren't. I was bigger. I was much bigger in fact. Or so it seemed. I could control their fate. What a scary thought for them, did they know?<sup>8</sup>

I left the rocks, crawled out of the crevices and realized there is more to me than an animal. I looked back at the peeled skin and saw far into the past.

I saw a child, a child so fearful of the dark sleep did not prove restful. Darkness is an unknown, it is void, loneliness and all of this little girl's unsightly thoughts coming to life, thoughts that attacked with unkind words and disturbing images. Darkness is the silence in a home when everyone falls asleep.

Stuffed plushies made up the image of this child. She wanted to feel held as if hundreds of soft, delicate toys hugged each other tight enough to make

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<sup>6</sup> "i will go to heaven after i die" (Assaad, 2022) / "i will go to hell after i die" (Assaad, 2022)

<sup>7</sup> Morph into meta-centipede (Assaad, 2022) - Video performance, sound

<sup>8</sup> A fair game: Slime mold experiment (Assaad, 2022)

up her entire body. The word عٍ resonates asking for a higher awareness.<sup>10</sup> I tell her; “nothing can guide you out but yourself.” She will soon find all the ways to help her with her fears. For now, parents with different values and traditions will give her a few tools, rooted in religion and ancient rituals. These will open doors for new ways of seeing the world and herself.

“the fear of darkness, like the fear of death, belongs to the ego. The ego loves the light just as the unconscious loves the dark.”

*Rachel Pollack, Seventy-eight degrees of wisdom (1998, p. 89)*

### *Part 202: Terms – عِازَاتٌ*

The following text will utilize words and expressions that require clarification. This section will define the terms and my intentions behind using them.

*Tarot:* Originating in Italy, it is a deck of 78 playing cards, with 4 minor suits; swords, cups, pentacles, wands and a suit of 22 trumps representing, typically medieval, archetypes. This text references the Pamela-Colman Smith - Waite deck. The tarot has been used as a form of divination as well as a journey for personal growth. I myself use the tarot to reference my own growth journey which I will discuss later on.

*Occult:* Includes practices such as the tarot, alchemy, numerology, astrology, divination, magic and many such things that fall under the category of hidden and obscure. “The occult realm is invisible to the physical eye but can be seen by an inner ‘spiritual’ vision and/or grasped by psychic intuition.” (Shepard, 1984, p. vii) In this text, the terms occult, occult practices and esoteric practices are used to refer to practices I engage in and that guide this research.

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<sup>9</sup> 3i - Ar. be aware, one letter word stemming from the word for consciousness/awareness: وعي

<sup>10</sup> 3i/ع (Assaad, 2023) - Plush toys, sculpture, sound, projection, typography

The authors of *Islamicate Occult Sciences in Theory and Practice*, use the term ‘occult sciences’ to reflect the “Arabic, Persian and Turkish terminology used in historical sources up to the modern era” (L. F. L. Saif, 2020, p. 2)

It is important for me to clarify my standpoint on these practices. There is indeed a world beyond the visible, within us and within everything else. This invisible world is what I am engaged in. God, being a part of that invisible realm, plays a role in occult practices due to their mere presence in the world. If God is the creator, then God created the possibility for occult practices.

*Islamicate:* In the following text I will also be referencing the occult fields that were practiced during Islamicate times. While Islam is a vast and layered religion, these facts that I share come from an islamicate perspective. The use of the word suggests that the research is based on a historical context rather than a theological one. This is because these topics are quite controversial in Islam and many thinkers and philosophers of the time had various opinions on the matter which I do not explore in depth.

### *Part 333: Magic – سِحْرٌ*

The fear of the “supernatural” within the islamic community that I grew up with was quite apparent as magic and other such things were seen as beyond God. In Islamic Hadith<sup>11</sup>, it is said that “sorcery is one of the seven major sins” (L. Saif, 2015, p. 27), however, if it can be proven that it is a case of hidden yet natural<sup>12</sup> forces then it is separate from the magic of devils, demons and Jinns.

What is then *magic (sihr)* in Islamicate terms? The boundaries of what is considered magic and what is seen as divination is not fully clear.

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<sup>11</sup> Sayings or stories told by the Prophet, PBUH

<sup>12</sup> Not supernatural



According to Savage-Smith, *sihr* could apply to wonders such as elegant poetry, tricks, the healing properties of plants and invocations to God for assistance or to jinns, demons, the spirits of planets, and on occasion, the divinatory art of astrology. (2021, p. 22) In the early Islamic world, magic was protective in nature, asking for God's beneficence. (2021, p. 27)

I recall occasions in which I prayed onto my plush toy as a child to protect me through the night as I transferred God's healing power by reciting verses from the Qur'an. Faith helped me cope with the darkness of the world<sup>13\*</sup> and while religion was accessible to me, I was veering towards various practices that helped guide my faith.

Initially, I got intrigued by astrology which I later learned was prevalent in Islamic culture<sup>14\*</sup>. But it wasn't until years later, when established systems fell apart – social as well as personal – that I began experimenting with the tarot and it put life in a more divine perspective. There was more happening in those crevices than I was aware. I was in the dark, everything buried in an unconscious itching to crawl out.

The unconscious lives in one's own darkness. One can be as unaware of its happening as it is important to the psyche. It is no easy feat to try to comprehend it, for this reason we have symbols, myths and religions. According to Carl G. Jung, in *Man and his symbols*, human consciousness has been developed by Man over a long and tedious process which took ages to reach its current state. Still, this evolution has yet to be completed and "large areas of the human mind are still shrouded in darkness". (2021, p. 23) Occult practices, however, like the tarot and astrology alongside religious practices can aid such unveiling.

Oberman argues that adding meaning and purpose to life is not only a rational pursuit but an art form in of itself. Meaning making allows for the synthesis of experiences and impressions that in turn form a complex

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<sup>13\*</sup> There were phases of disbelief, nihilism and cynicism but they did not last long, their longevity frail and tolerance low

<sup>14\*</sup> In fact, the astrologer Abu Ma'shar Ja'far ibn Muhammad ibn 'Umar al-Balkhi (born in Balkh, Khurasan on 21 Safar 171 AH/10 August 787 AD – died in al-Wasit, Iraq on 29 Ramadan 272 AH/9 March 886 AD) was one of the most influential astrologers in the Middle Ages and the early modern period, in the Islamic world and Europe. (Saif, 2015, p. 9)

understanding of one's reality. He uses the term *overbelief*<sup>15</sup> to address this framework of meaning-giving which one projects onto reality. (2014, p. 696) The tarot, after all, is but a series of images, symbols and archetypes that have their meaning assigned in a way to encompass the entirety of human experience. Interpretation is key and in this way the tarot sets itself up as an art form.

For this reason, it is natural for my work to merge the practice of tarot reading or numerology for example alongside religious belief with an artistic practice utilizing a framework based largely on meaning-making and overbelief. This method that I have established solidified itself in a country such as the Netherlands where I found an overbelief grounded in systems of law, of order and not far beyond the already established structures of the country.

*Part 4.4: Faith, occult and mental health – الإيمان، السُّحْرِيّ وَالصِّحَّةُ النَّفْسِيَّةُ*

While there exist some issues regarding the manifestations of religion in Lebanon for example, it still holds benefits rooted in traditions, values and the sense of belonging. There, I see many religions<sup>16\*</sup> and their various expressions. While religion's merger with politics proved problematic to say the least, I saw the positive effects<sup>17\*</sup> faith has offered for those suffering a great deal of instability, discomfort and struggle, including my own family.

This fact holds true to practices largely associated with religion, yet what is then the relation between faith and the occult? If the occult is a world hidden, is faith any different? What attracts me to the occult is similar to what draws me, and many others, to faith. Humanity has long searched for meaning beyond the material and our world contains much that we as humans find difficult to describe or even grasp. Our minds are inherently

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<sup>15</sup> First coined by William James. Oberman implies with it the surplus of meaning and experience one brings to their mental consciousness and their experience of reality (2014, p. 690)

<sup>16\*</sup> Religions in Lebanon include: Muslim (Shia, Sunni), Druze, Christian (Maronite, Greek Orthodox, other) and a small number of other religious groups

<sup>17\*</sup> Acts of prayer and meditation proved effective through clinical research studies where the reduction in stress was apparent. This in turn led to beneficial physiological changes. (Classen & Oberman, 2014, p. 705)

made to search for forms of meaning, value, and achievement that transcend the material realm. (Classen & Oberman, 2014, p. 697) My argument is to utilize knowledge from past traditions and beliefs to build a system of belief that can guide and help psychological distress and unease.

Today's society witnesses an extreme awareness of all the horrors that existed throughout history and is constantly made aware of horrors occurring in the same moments one simply exists during. Doom is looming, so is it the end? How to cope with such overwhelming thoughts and feelings? With globalization and cyber connectivity comes "the deconstruction of 'absolute values,' such as the modernist belief in human reason, purpose and progress." (Classen & Oberman, 2014, p. 692) How can one go forward if hope disappears?

Hope is the attachment to what could be better. If one does not seem to need a "better", is hope necessary? If religion offers hope, is it not needed when there is no desperation for something greater to be a guide, to offer hope? If rates of agnosticism and atheism globally relate to a country's GDP, does this make faithlessness a luxury? (Classen & Oberman, 2014, p. 692) It definitely felt that way in the Netherlands, a culture shock I had not expected.

Nowadays, we find a resurgent "western"<sup>18\*</sup> fascination with the occult such as astrology and the tarot. An opinion piece in *The New York Times*, states that "29 percent of Americans say they believe in astrology."<sup>19</sup> (Brooks, 2019) For this reason, it is crucial to not turn away from the historical, cultural, religious and spiritual contexts of these practices. Be it of western or eastern origin, it seems that this propagation either revived them or lessened their meaning by popularizing them in a simplified format<sup>20\*</sup>. The necessity of such exploration however, seems to be apparent through this resurgence, whether unconscious or stemming from a place of awareness.

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<sup>18\*</sup> As opposed to many eastern cultures that still utilize and believe in these practices

<sup>19</sup> According to a 2018 Pew poll

<sup>20\*</sup> e.g. Astrology meme accounts

My own moments of crisis and feelings of doom have urged my quest for a belief system that guides me as I build on my values and expand on my growth. Such a state of awareness has been dictated by life as I befriend the beast within, or try, as I take it out of Darkness into Light. This, for example, can be through engaging in certain Islamic practices such as fasting the month of Ramadan<sup>21\*</sup> or drawing cards from the tarot as a guide.

This brings me to discussing the controversy of magic being *haram* (forbidden) or *halal* (allowed) in Islam. Religious scholars considered forms of magic that appealed only to God were legitimate, “but not the illicit forms addressed to jinn and demons.” (Savage-Smith, 2021, p. 33) In fact, “one can say that the theories of astral influences were first articulated by Muslims in works on astrology and magic.”<sup>22\*</sup> (L. Saif, 2015, p. 27) These practices and theories<sup>23\*</sup> traveled to Europe and were then utilized in practices of healing and medicine.

The most notable form of islamic mysticism is Sufism<sup>24</sup>, still practiced today. Sufism stresses the psychological importance of one’s inner journey. “Psychological work is a necessary preliminary stage on the path, in particular the work on the shadow, the purification of our lower nature and inner darkness.” (Vaughan-Lee, 1998, p. xiv) The inner journey is a process (*tariq*) where one is guided and directed by a spiritual mentor (called a *shaykh* or a *pir*) with a goal of eventually being unified with God (*Allah*).

We find a similar concept in the tarot. The tarot is a journey exemplified in the 21 (+1) archetypes of the Major Arcana. Similarly to the *Tariq* in Sufism,

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<sup>21\*</sup> e.g. I recently fasted during the holy month of Ramadan as a form of discipline in order to give myself the space to explore my desires and addictions

<sup>22\*</sup> “The notion that objects emanated rays that could influence anyone who came in contact with them was most likely assimilated into Western medieval philosophical thought through Al Kindi’s ninth-century text on optics, *De Radiis Stellarum*, wherein the author stated “everything in the world . . . emits rays in every direction which fill the whole world.” (Classen & Leopardi, 2014, p. 496)

<sup>23\*</sup> Such as those of Avicenna and Al-Kindi and many others

<sup>24</sup> Sufism, an expression of islam, can be highly controversial in Islam, however, it has highly influenced the muslim world. (Cook, 2015)

the first archetype of the tarot, The Fool, numbered 0, holds within him<sup>25\*</sup> all possibilities as he passes through the journey of the 21 cards. Wherever you place The Fool, his position would make sense between the cards. Whether to be closer to God or closer to a higher self – a self worthy of being near God – one must go through a journey of many trials with peaks and lows.

As a result of my combined practice with the tarot alongside my research on islamicate mysticism, I have found a relation between the act of unveiling as mentioned in Sufism as well as in the tarot imagery and concepts.

In Sufism, *Kashf*, is “the act of lifting and tearing away the veil which comes between man and the extra-phenomenal world. [...] *Kashf* means to take away the veil”, but in technical terminology (*iṣṭilāḥ*) it makes appear the “mysterious senses and the realities which are behind the veil.” (Bosworth, 1998) It is said in Sufism, that there are 70,000 veils between us and God and with each spiritual struggle one goes gradually past the veils.<sup>26\*</sup>

The first time we see mention of the veil in the tarot is with the card numbered 2; the High Priestess. As she sits between two pillars, we see behind her a veil, covering the waters of the unconscious. These waters are, up until this point in the journey, still inaccessible and guarded by the calm and passive Priestess. “To enter behind the veil would be to know consciously the irrational wisdom of the unconscious. That is the goal of the entire Major Arcana.” (Pollack, 1998, p. 39) Simultaneously, that is the intention behind the 70,000 veils; to pass through the veils and reach the ultimate Light of God.

There is quite a misunderstanding within any occult practice, whether eastern or western, about the purpose of these practices. As Pollack argues,

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<sup>25\*</sup> Gender in the tarot, especially the Smith-Waite deck, is a mere archetypal depiction and does not assume active gender roles for the one using the deck

<sup>26\*</sup> One Hadith states that the nearest creatures to God are Gabriel, Michael, and Raphael, and between them and Him are four veils: a veil of fire, a veil of darkness, a veil of cloud, and a veil of water.

the aim is psychological unification. “The 'base metal' that the alchemist wishes to change to gold is himself.” (Pollack, 1998, p. 16)

At a doctor’s clinic near my home in Beirut<sup>27\*</sup>, I found on the wall in the waiting area a wise and reassuring quote by Ibn Sīnā<sup>28\*</sup> — a renowned alchemist, astronomer, physician and philosopher from the pre-modern era — that conveyed something along the lines of; half the cure lies in reassurance. This shows his legacy amongst these communities and the alchemy-like state of mind present in religious terminology such as the use of the word “purity”<sup>29\*</sup>.

Ibn Sīnā presented an organization of the components of *ḥikma*<sup>30</sup> which he divided into three branches; lower sciences, middle sciences and high sciences (Ar. *al-ilāhiyyāt*). (L. F. L. Saif, 2020) He suggested that what is corporeal can never be separated from the psychic powers in them.<sup>31\*</sup> This notion of body on body action leads Ibn Sīnā to discuss about metals on metals and the possibility of changing one of them into another<sup>32\*</sup>, while stating that “some of them are called bodies (Ar. *ajsād*) and some are called spirits (Ar. *arwāḥ*). This science, he says, is called alchemy.” (L. F. L. Saif, 2020, p. 45)

For most occult and esoteric practices, the goal is discovery, growth and progress yet it seems for a moment we have neglected that goal. The current post-capitalist and post-enlightenment era we live in has shifted our perspective and narrowed it to one that harbors and welcomes feelings of inadequacy, faithlessness and anxiety. Arguably, we see many beliefs and traditions getting neglected and “the influence of the Enlightenment dichotomy of reason versus superstition, [...] delegitimized the study of the

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<sup>27\*</sup> The area is a rural area mostly populated by Shiaa muslims

<sup>28\*</sup> In latin: Avicenna, d. 428/1037

<sup>29\*</sup> طهارة

<sup>30</sup> Wisdom or philosophy

<sup>31\*</sup> There is a necessity in “operating with them at the right time and in the right place and with the right elements and natural combinations of elements.”

<sup>32\*</sup> Transforming lead to metal

occult sciences” (L. F. L. Saif, 2020, p. 5) which in turn has marginalized many of such practices, even in countries where these practices originated. Yet the westernization of the East runs deep and what is challenging today is the emergence of a new concept for spirituality. (Classen & Oberman, 2014, p. 706)

Through my background and personal rituals, I find myself searching for a belief system of my own, curated to benefit my personal growth journey. I bring forth meaning-making into the process of art-making hoping for it to echo. Conversely, this artistic method has offered insight into discoveries and proved to be an outlet for the unconscious.

*Part 066: Death and a Rose – الموتُ ووَزْدَةٌ*

As I dig deeper into parts of myself, I find myself thinking about death often. The fear of losing those I love and care for, the discomfort of change, the curiosity about God, all drive me into thinking about death.

Death is the most enigmatic unknown, and I fight hard to not grasp onto every piece of information I can get about the future. Yet life makes no promises, neither does death.

I recently got a crippling fear take hold of me regarding the inevitable death of my father. During such moments, when fear eats away at my brain, I try to understand where my fear could be coming from. I talked to my sister<sup>33\*</sup> She reasoned with me and explained that my fear isn't here as a psychic premonition but a psychological manifestation of what I am currently experiencing. Simply, it was change; a great change in my life and my sense of self.

But why my father? The father archetype in the tarot is represented by the Emperor. This card stands for the rules of society, laws and social order as it is the father who teaches us these concepts. According to Pollack, the self cannot bring itself to destroy the father. The psyche then identifies itself with the Father image as a new guide for the self. (Pollack, 1998, p. 49) The

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<sup>33\*</sup> My sister is four years older than me. She is my only sibling and we have been close since childhood. I expressed how I could not stop crying due to this fear.

father is not meant to oppress, but protect, and for many fathers, enforcing the rules of society and/or religion offers a sense of safety and protection from the harsh reality of the world. Growing up, the child internalizes this and creates an inner-father, something I now find difficult to set aside.

Ultimately, this experience brought about appreciation for the man that taught me everything I am today. He taught me generosity, love, kindness and especially, he taught me how to believe, how to pray, he introduced me to faith and to God.

While researching the manifestation of these topics in the contemporary art scene, I have discovered Igshaan Adams, a practicing Muslim artist<sup>34\*</sup>. He draws on his faith and the various sides to his identity to produce labor-intensive, woven works that include hanging tapestries, rugs, and standing sculptures. (Adams, 2022)

In an artist talk he had at The Art Institute, Chicago with curator Hendrik Folkerts, Adams (2022) shares with the audience a period during his early 20s when he got introduced to Sufism. He was, at the time, conflicted about the different parts of his identity as someone whose sexual orientation is queer but raised muslim<sup>35\*</sup>. He met a Sufi master named Ma Rukea who had taught him much about Sufism. His goal was to look inward and find inner peace, especially since he grew up with a lot of chaos and violence.<sup>36\*</sup>

In his exhibition, two works begin and end the show, two large roses woven with thread dripping from them. They are titled *Al-Mu'id (The Restorer of Life)*, 2020 and *Al-Muhyee (The Giver of Life)*, 2020. He explains the symbolism of the rose in relation to Ma, the Sufi master, and his time with her; Ma Rukea used the rose to explain the importance of pain plays in one's life. To demonstrate, she took the rose and removed one petal. It was her way of saying that whatever Adams experienced until this point, was like

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<sup>34\*</sup> Igshaan was born in apartheid-era South Africa to a muslim father and a christian mother. He was raised by his christian grandparents, yet his grandmother loved Islam and wanted to offer him a muslim education.

<sup>35\*</sup> As in many religions, it is interpreted in Islam that homosexuality is sinful

<sup>36\*</sup> He grew up in the township of Bonteheuwel in Cape Town during the last decade of Apartheid in South Africa



removing one petal. (Adams, 2022) This imagery resembles that of veils in Sufism, removing a veil, a petal, to get closer to where we want to be.

Where does one truly want to be? Indeed there is a quest to get past the veils, to get past the hidden, one at a time. Before passing through one of the veils, we stand before it and we see visions.<sup>37\*</sup> What is asked of us when these visions appear?

The path of enlightenment requires removing the veils one at a time in order to see things that had always been there but we only see clearly for the first time. Past the darkness, we find light. To never get past the veils, one would hold onto the darker side, even hide behind it, until eventually, it takes over.

To realize the part of me that was dying so painfully, slowly ripping itself away from me as if sown into my innards for years that the stitches morphed into my own membrane, I had to fear and sense the inevitable; Death. It is quite painful to experience those moments before death, mostly because we resist, but much of it is simply difficult enough to be painful, regardless.

When asked about this idea of a symbolic death<sup>38\*</sup>, Adams opens up about his relationship with his father, a toxic one. Later on in life, he faced this trauma by doing a performance where his father washed and prepared his body in the Islamic burial ritual as if Igshaan had died. He says; “something died in that process. In that performance, I think I really understood the power and effectiveness of ritual and why it has played such a role in human societies across the world.” (Adams, 2022)

To come to the Netherlands and find a place so far into the future that it becomes the image of “progress and development”, I find myself holding onto traditions and knowledges past. I go backwards, to go further beyond the idealistic image created by a “progressive” West.

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<sup>37\*</sup> As Pollack puts it in the Hermit card: “the unconscious speaks to us from behind the veil, through symbols, dreams, and visions.” (1998, p. 80)

<sup>38\*</sup> According to Adams, Ma Rukea spoke about the importance of a symbolic death. In Sufism they speak of the body’s desires and the denial of these desires to the point where you kill them off and a certain aspect of your identity dies.” (2022)

*Part 717: Pain and a thorn – الأَلَمُ وَشَوْكَةٌ*

A new self was born as a result of moving to a new country, away from a place and people that held me for so long. I needed to be let go, and I let go as well. The detachment hurt so I explored this pain through the pain of metamorphosis. I was not an insect, but I felt like one briefly. I could not peel off my skin but I attempted to. I watched myself through a camera and sat with these recorded self reflections. Performing growth through insectile and animalistic behavior<sup>39\*</sup> guided my understanding of what I was achieving on a personal level.

These performances got recorded, never performed live. This allows the viewer to get close enough to watch but not enough to be present during the process. The process itself is intimate, and I bring forth the vulnerability in recording as if one is only watching, without being looked back at. I have adopted this system unconsciously and found it mirrors the gaze of an omnipresent being. For the sake of this research, it is the gaze of God.

I recall a story that guided this latest installation. My father was once explaining to me why we recite a certain Āya five times whenever we feel the need for safety, a habit my mother had got us accustomed to.<sup>40\*</sup> Simultaneously, the *Adhan*<sup>41</sup>, was heard over the city alongside the sound of my father speaking through the traffic surrounding us. The moment was special in its nostalgia as I leave a life I had been so accustomed to. But it was also significant in its timing, as my parents send me off yet again to go live life on my own that past dies and transforms into a new, more mature, relationship with my family and myself.

In creating the work, I relive this moment of being let go, of detaching those sewn parts that are ready to die. Adams during the talk had said; “Everybody has to make their own Islam in a way because we would focus and attract things that are most meaningful.” (2022) Thus creating

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<sup>39\*</sup> Such as shedding old skin and crawling out a gelatinous cocoon as if new limbs have been formed

<sup>40\*</sup> According to islamic Hadith, each time it is recited one gets an angel to protect them. By the fifth time, God is the one protecting them.

<sup>41</sup> Islamic call to prayer, usually echoes through the city from the nearest mosque, occurring 5 times from dusk to dawn

meaning and finding it in all that we do and all that we bring towards us and into the life we lead.

My mediums and themes remain rooted in what is the most meaningful to my journey in the moment of creating the work. My mother has inspired much of this endeavor. I collaborated with her on creating 13 pieces of stuffed fabrics in the shape of symbols from the tarot. Thirteen being, as she has learned, to be a golden number. Synchronically, she began by working on the white rose of the Fool (numbered 0).<sup>42\*</sup>

She finished by working on the symbol for the thirteenth card, Death. On the far end of what seems to represent life, nature and purity, we find death. I could not bring myself to relate to the skeleton riding a white horse on the Smith-Waite depiction of the archetype<sup>43\*</sup>.

Islamic burial rituals consist of the body being wrapped in a rectangular white cloth with 100 verses mentioning the 100 names of God. The symbol for death had to echo this ritual, if only for the sake of harmony with the other white pieces. Therefore, the 13th object made was a sort of pure white flag. It hung above a piece of clay, “بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم” (*In the name of God, the most gracious, the most merciful*) carved on it. Adam, the first human, was born from clay after all, and in that sense, so were we.

If one distinguishes the path from the rose up until the cloth, and call that a spectrum of Life and Death, then it is notable to see this spectrum as a circular cycle and not as a straight line. While Death and Life represent two ends, Death brings about Life, and Life brings about Death, inevitably for both. While I began the arduous process of my own death during my move to the Netherlands, I cannot deny the self that was born as a result of being in a new, unexplored territory. Luckily for me, my mother’s wisdom and lived experiences stand as a reminder about the malleability of life and the wonders that exist within change, beyond the pain.

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<sup>42\*</sup> The white, pure, elegant and beautiful rose of the Fool felt much like her: dressed in cozy shades of white, her striking pearly white hair was glowing as she sat in front of the cream colored sewing machine — an angel.

<sup>43\*</sup> The figure holds a black flag with a white rose drawn on, possibly the rose the Fool holds.

Accompanying my mother's 13 sewn symbols was a sound collage of that very moment I described with my father while driving me to the airport. Sound works find their way into my practice often. Sound engulfs a space and puts one in a bubble made up of its elements. I admire its hidden physicality and the emotions it brings out. It requests endurance as well as maintains patience. I look towards sound design to build a setting, to recall a memory and it adds a layer to the work that plays into the hidden. It might be due to Lebanon's dense soundscape, especially that of Beirut, where I had lived all my life before moving to the mountains a few years ago.

Beirut's soundscape has created a high tolerance level for whoever lives there. With the noisy streets and shifting intensity levels, there is almost always an element of surprise. My bachelor's thesis was entirely centered on Beirut's soundscape and our ability to reside in it as it surprises and disturbs. While I researched and recorded the streets I frequented often, I found that even moments of silence and quiet come as gifts.<sup>44</sup>

What remains a reassuring constant in the soundscape is the *Adhan* echoing through the streets and into our home. It has been a reminder of greatness, a grounding moment throughout the hours of the day. Leaving that sound behind as I leave the city and the country will never be easy I believe.

One of my inspirations for sound art is the multidisciplinary artist O11668, whose art uses myths, rituals and a play on comfort and discomfort to convey sides of human nature. Whenever they perform, they are often dressed in a constructed costume of a somewhat mythological squid-like creature that moves in an insectile and alien way. The animalistic and mythological references might allow us to dwell on our humanity.

Second hand animal skin sits on my shoulder<sup>45</sup> and hangs on the wall of an installation in process. Symbols hang from the ceiling, white and pure. All

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<sup>44</sup> Sonic Veer (Assaad, 2017)

<sup>45</sup> Untitled I (Assaad, 2023) - Video performance

that is heard is a collage of sounds, a journey through a moment, complex and significant<sup>46</sup>. What is expected of me, of you?

*Parting – مُرَاقٍ*

Dwell not long in the dark, spiraling into trauma, succumbing to crisis. Look towards stories and undying myths, dissect the images of a prophetic dream, perform rituals dearest to you; give meaning.

Through the resurgence of certain occult practices, essentially within the western cultural sphere, we find a move towards creating a new belief system. However, it is crucial to look towards the source of these teachings, namely deriving from the eastern and even Islamicate traditions and knowledge. In an era where faithlessness has become a luxury, let us look back at what faith can offer us in a time when luxury becomes more and more scarce and we find ourselves struggling to navigate the manifold complexities of human emotions and being.

I look to bring towards the Dutch cultural scene what seems to lack in terms of questioning belief and possibly faith. Simultaneously, I see what the Netherlands could offer me when it comes to creating a belief system guided by each meaning I come across in the process of creating and being created.

This is a call to search within, to no shy away from the beastiality of Man. It is time to assert overbelief, guided by reason alongside intuition. Make meaning and let that shape a practice, an art form. Let yourself be guided into an existence where the light doesn't seem too far out of reach, one veil at a time.

*Thank you*

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<sup>46</sup> Untitled installation (Assaad, 2023)

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